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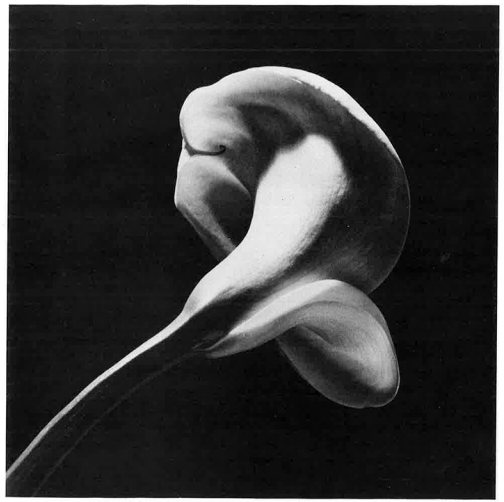

Karen Wirth, *Nude Youths: 1508–1510. Sistine Chapel Ceiling*, xerox (3-3/4x16-3/4 in.) with 3-1/2x2-in. brown wrapper, 1990. Courtesy the artist.

overtaken by events. And perhaps, more ominously, the "chilling effect" of which so many commentators speak—the sometimes unconscious self-censorship that always attends organized repression—has begun to take effect.

That said, there are at least a half-dozen new publications that confront these problems head-on. Beuyscouts of Amerika is a collective organized by the veteran correspondence artist Norman Conquest to do just that. Formed over the summer to express anti-censorship sentiments, Beuyscouts now has roughly 20 members, male and female. Each artist has pledged to produce six multiples over the course of the year, and each has contributed $120 toward a "handbook" in which these will be assembled. Beuyscouts, so far, has produced witty and stylish Fluxus-type ephemera. A matchbook across whose matches are printed an American flag comes in a little zip-loc bag with a genuine Boyscout-issue card certifying that the bearer is qualified to handle matches (card and matchbook are signed by Norman Conquest, in a numbered edition of 100, 1990, $10; a cover slip says "profits from the sale of this work fund the fight against censorship," meaning proceeds will go to the organization, which for obvious reasons will solicit no public support). Beuyscouts has also produced several decals guaranteeing that the art on which they are placed is clean and safe; the catchiest mimics the Good Housekeeping seal of approval, substituting Good Helmskeeping for the older institution's name ($3 for each decal).

Other militant ephemera come from ArtFBI (Artists for a Better Image), established two-and-a-half years ago to examine the means by which stereotypes about artists are sustained. The most effective of three bumper stickers it has issued reads, "I'm an artist and I vote"; the others, no less direct, are "Ask me about being an artist," and "Fight art censorship" ($3 each). Baltimore-based lecturer and performance artist Jeff Gates, who founded ArtFBI and remains its only member, has become increasingly involved with questions of censorship, emphasizing the artist's role as social reformer in the many discussion groups he leads. According to Gates, the belief systems of most minority groups are passed on through the family, while those of artists are promulgated by the media—which is where they must be renovated. The positive outcome of the recent conservative attack on the avant-garde, he says, is that it forces such a rehabilitation.

As many congressmen demonstrated during the NEA's reauthorization hearings, one of the best defenses against restrictive new legislation is to enumerate established masterworks that would fail to meet its standards. This is the tack taken by Karen Wirth, an artist who has been making books for ten years, and whose work in other media has recently focused on AIDS and domestic abuse. Her diminutive new untitled publication is wrapped in brown paper and sealed with a sticker that reads "Parental Advisory: might be objectionable because of sex, violence, suicide, drug abuse, bigotry or satanic worship" (self-published, 1990, numbered edition of 585, $3). Inside is an accordion-fold, xeroxed reproduction of the nude youths in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes. Typed over a black bar that runs across the youths' genitals is the notorious amendment to NEA guidelines proposed unsuccessfully by Helms, prohibiting the funding of "obscene" work.

Veteran book artist Janet Zweig takes a complementary approach with an equally unpretentious, and telling, publication. The self-explanatory *The 336 lines currently expurgated from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" in ninth grade textbooks* is meant to be xeroxed, cut apart, and inserted where necessary. To that end, the offending passages are printed in blocks separated by dotted lines. Self-published in 1989 and still available for $4, this consummately simple book got the jump on others addressing the same issue.

Scott McCarney's *Painter, Face and Smilin' Joe* is a more complex and visually engaging publication (and, at $50, more expensive; dedicated to the 1991 bicentennial of the Bill of Rights, it is self-published in 1990 in a signed and numbered edition of 30). Rochester-based McCarney has been active in alerting the local community to present attacks on the arts, but this is his first edi tioned work on the subject. Its hand-cut, back-to-back black folder contains two digitized photoportraits, one of Helms and the other of McCarthy. Both are divided by grids into nine units, each unit xeroxed onto a separate 11x8-1/2-in. sheet, and each sheet further stenciled with a red X or O. When assembled, the portraits double as tic-tac-toe boards. Two accompanying "maps" showing the composite images are headed by the insidiously incomplete lyric, "He's makin' a list, checkin' it twice. . . ."

Though the spring 1989 controversy over the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the ensuing debate over reauthorizing the NEA initiated a new chapter in the free-speech story, several times over the preceding decade censorship was featured in exhibitions and their catalogues. *Illegal America*, a 1982 exhibition curated by Jeannette Ingberman and Papo Colo that inaugurated the organization Exit Art, brought together work by 32 artists and collaborative groups, from Louis Aragon to Komar & Melamid. Shown at Franklin Furnace, it was accompanied by a catalogue *cum* artists' book of 26 artists' statements. These are printed on folded sheets loose in a corrugated cardboard box, which is sealed with a dollar bill. Opening the book requires ripping the bill in half—and thus breaking the law. Published in an edition of 500 and originally sold for $10, the catalogue is now a collector's item; several of the few remaining copies were recently sold for $500, whereupon the price was raised to $1,000.

Exit Art revived the exhibition in March 1990, adding several contributors and issuing a brochure that contains Ingberman and Colo's original introductory essay. In the light of current events, it seems both prescient and frighteningly obsolete. Eight years ago it was quite accurate to say that "most illegal art actions are never prosecuted. . . . making [them] banal and thereby ineffective," and that it was the gallery setting that insulated them against the law; alas, such is no longer the case. But it remains profoundly true that when, in art, "an illegal action is translated into the language of the law or the media. . . . It is usually exaggerated to make it seem like more than it is, in order to make it less than it is."

The year 1984, consecrated to totalitarianism by George Orwell, also provided an occasion for reflection on threats to open expression. *Censorship: 500 Years of Conflict* launched an ambitious new exhibition program that year at the New York Public Library, which also finds cause, in recent events, to reexamine the subject. In April 1991 the library will present *Censorship Redux*, focusing on 20th-century censorship and featuring original artwork by Czech artist Jiří Anderle from a forthcoming book about the "velvet revolution." This exhibition will be accompanied by a brochure; the original show's substantial catalogue is still available at $11.95. Though much has been written since about censorship, the observation made by Henry James more than a century ago, and quoted by Stephen Spender in the 1984 catalogue, would have done nicely as the last word on the subject. "There is a traditional difference," James wrote in 1884, "between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know."

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