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Censors and sensibility

An image of Brooke Shields was removed from a gallery last week on the advice of police. Does the art world think it can get away with anything, or are we too sensitive about images of children?

Richard Woods

If you want to see cultural prostitution in action, head for the Tate Modern gallery in London where an exhibition opened last week called Pop Life: Art in a Material World. There, if you can bear the tedium, you can watch an hour-long video of a female artist having sex with a stranger who paid \$20,000 for the privilege.

If that doesn't stir your aesthetic sensibilities, there's also a giant close-up of sexual penetration. This comes courtesy of the American artist Jeff Koons, who had himself photographed with his former wife, the porn star La Cicciolina.

Elsewhere in the exhibition another female artist, Cosey Fanni Tutti, displays pictures taken when she posed years ago for pornographic magazines such as Knave and Park Lane.

Or if animal cruelty is more your thing, another room displays a dead horse with a wooden stake driven through its flank.

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Amid the sex and gore, however, what you won't see is a photograph of a young girl standing in a bath. That would be far too depraved for public exhibition, so last week it was removed from view.

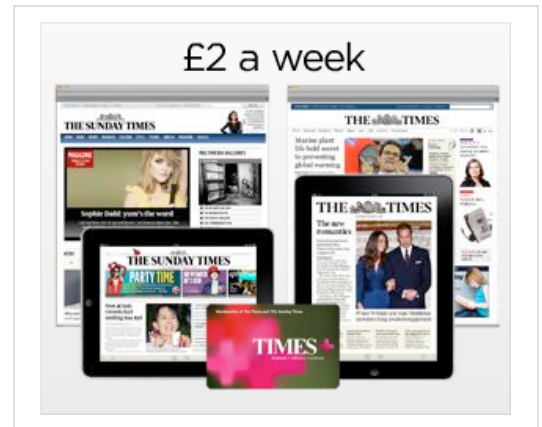
At this point, spare a thought for the Metropolitan Police Obscene Publications Unit. Although they don't teach much about contemporary art at Hendon police college, officers of the unit arrived at Tate Modern last Wednesday to give their critical appreciation of Pop Life just before it opened.


Their task, according to the Met, was to "work with gallery management to ensure they do not inadvertently break the law or cause any offence to their visitors". Tricky. Still, Koons: tick. Fanni Tutti: tick. Sex video: tick. Impaled horse: tick.

Spiritual America, a photograph taken 26 years ago by the artist Richard Prince, was another matter. The image shows the actress Brooke Shields as a child standing naked in a bath, her hips turned sideways, her face made-up.

If it expresses a worrying sexuality, it is more implicit than explicit. In fact, the image is a photograph of a photograph. The original was taken when Shields was 10 or 11, shortly before she appeared in a film called Pretty Baby. Directed by Louis Malle, it told the story of a prostitute and her daughter in the New Orleans of 1917.

The photograph, one of a set, appeared in a book called Sugar and Spice, produced by Playboy's publishing arm, and passed almost without comment. As an adult Shields, whose mother had given permission for the picture, fought lengthy court battles to







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try to block further use of the photographs. She lost, with the courts ruling the images were not pornographic. Enter Prince, who was carving out a career as an artist re-photographing existing images.

His works have been widely exhibited and Spiritual America has been on public display in the US. But apparently it is not fit for Britain.

The decision to remove it from an exhibition as trashy and sexually graphic as Pop Life raises awkward questions. Are we confused about the line between art and pornography? Are such images of children always beyond the pale? And are the public the ones who are really being exploited by contemporary art?

ON THE face of it, the art world has a weakness for special pleading. Consider Roman Polanski, the film director, who was arrested in Switzerland last week for the rape of a 13-year-old girl in California 32 years ago.

After admitting unlawful sex with a minor, Polanski fled the US to avoid a prison sentence. He has lived in exile ever since and faced the threat of arrest if he returned.

Yet when Swiss police nabbed him, at the request of US authorities, many in the artistic community leapt to his defence. Film directors such as Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese called for him to be freed. The British writer Ronald Harwood, who won an Oscar for the screenplay of Polanski's film *The Pianist*, also defended the director, saying: "It seems to me very odd that America, which calls itself a Christian country, is so entirely lacking in the ability to forgive."

Would they say the same if the guilty man were a politician or an ordinary citizen, of no artistic merit, who had drugged and sodomised a 13-year-old?

Some critics detect a similar double standard in the Tate's approach to works such as Koons's *Exaltation* 1991, showing oral sex in close-up, and *Glass Dildo* 1991, which is self-explanatory. If you buy the Tate's blurb, such works are a "watershed moment in the interaction between the art world and celebrity culture".

An ordinary viewer is more likely to think Koons is boasting: "I bagged a porn star and now I'm laughing all the way to the bank."

To Roger Scruton, the philosopher and author of the book *Beauty*, the emperor has no clothes. "Jeff Koons is a complete charlatan, utter empty rubbish," he said. "It's kitsch in inverted commas. All he's managed to do is put inverted commas around it. It's without any aesthetic merit at all."

The Tate describes the pornographic images of Fanni Tutti, who was co-founder of a band called *Throbbing Gristle*, as "rooted in a highly personal and mediated form of performance, enabling her to move from the porn and music industries to the equally reified context of the art world".

Have the pictures moved beyond porn? Some viewers doubted it. One woman said to her husband as he grappled with the "reified context" of the artist's genitalia last week: "Do you have to look so closely?"

Further along, the Tate says of Andrea Fraser's video of her having sex with a stranger in a hotel room: "By offering 'herself' up for sale, she pushes ... the viewer's desire for intimacy with the artist to the logical extreme."

Judging by the embarrassed and bored reactions of exhibition visitors last week, they had zero desire for further intimacy with the artist.

By comparison, Prince's work — in particular the photograph of Shields that the gallery has removed — has the merit of

significance. It addresses a subject of real concern and moral difficulty.

“If all art is doing is being provocative, that’s not very interesting,” said Matthew Kieran, professor of philosophy and the arts at Leeds University. “There is a kind of puerile tendency in some contemporary art where being shocking for its own sake is thought of as quite valuable.”

Purpose and context are vital, he argues. It would be morally repugnant to post a picture like that of Shields on a paedophile website because the intention would be to excite sexual interest. By contrast, argues Kieran, the same image in an art gallery invites the viewer to confront and explore issues of child sexuality and morality.

“It’s the visual equivalent of the novel *Lolita*,” he said. “Do we think *Lolita* shouldn’t be read? No. Do we think it is deeply morally troubling? Yes. Why is it so good? Because it is deeply morally troubling.

“It starts to explain it and then you have a much richer understanding.” Such understanding, he says, can be beneficial in our broader approach to the problem the art addresses.

“Instead of treating these people [with paedophile tendencies] like freaks and monsters — of course they are ill and it’s morally problematic — you start approaching them as human beings.”

In fierce battles about the Shields picture online last week, public comments appeared fairly equally divided. Some saw it as pornographic, others as innocent, and some as instructive. One female contributor, on a site that carried several pictures of Shields as a girl, summarised the divisions with a telling question.

“If you see this as art, then you are seeing them from the viewpoint of an artist,” she wrote. “If you see these as pictures of childhood, then you are seeing them from the viewpoint of a parent. If you see this as pornography, what viewpoint do you have?”

WITH the spread of the internet and the revelation of horrific cases of paedophilia, including that of a nursery worker in Plymouth last week, the viewpoint of the authorities has shifted. Sensitivity to images of children that might be construed as sexual has heightened.

In 1995 the newsreader Julia Somerville and her boyfriend were arrested after sending family photographs to be developed that included one of her seven-year-old daughter in the bath. They were released without charge.

In 2001 police raided the Saatchi gallery in London even though its exhibition, *I Am a Camera*, had been open for eight weeks without complaint. The police threatened to seize photographs by an American photographer showing her own young children; they also demanded the withdrawal of a book containing the photographs.

In 2007 the Baltic gallery in Gateshead consulted the police about a picture by the American artist Nan Goldin showing a couple of small girls dancing happily and nakedly in a kitchen. The gallery withdrew the images.

Waldemar Januszczak, the Sunday Times art critic, said of the Baltic row: “The entire affair was pathetic. The gallery staff were pathetic for showing excess caution ... *Knacker of the Yard* was pathetic for finding anything other than appropriateness in the image ... And the rest of us are pathetic for allowing our society to get into such a confused state.”

At the same time, other art has pushed further and further at the boundaries of taste — and done so with the help of public money. The Tate, for example, received £53.9m from public funds in 2008-9. It’s a moot point whether Koons and others are worth any of it.

Scruton has no qualms about setting limits, at least in public offerings and especially those funded by taxpayers. "I take the view that obscenity in all its forms is perfectly identifiable by the ordinary eye," he said. "The provocative, the titillating, the thing in which the primary purpose is to excite sexual interest rather than a love of the human form — this is a distinction we can all make and it should be made.

"It should be a criterion of public decency which is enforced against public galleries, though not against private people.

"We stopped [doing it] because we have taken in all the crap that artists and their apologists have said about this. We didn't have to take that stuff in."

Kieran takes a more cautious stance. "The idea that you should have only safe, domestic art is pernicious," he said. "Sometimes artworks work really well because they elicit from you, the viewer, desires or responses that are troubling."

Last week many critics gave Pop Life a poor reception. "This is a deeply superficial show," began one review. "Tate Modern seems to be promoting the measurement of art-world success by the prices achieved and gossip-column inches secured," said another.

The irony is that a work relevant to a serious moral issue of the moment was removed from the exhibition, while works that many might regard as provocative for little purpose are in your face.

There's no easy answer, concedes Kieran. "You can't just legislate against bad art. There's just going to be lots of bad art lots of the time."

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