

Oppressive Algorithms & Digital Surveillance: The New Age Censorship of Queer Artists

Harrison Brennan Kallner
Occidental College

Amy Lyford
Occidental College

I. Introduction

Who are the arbiters of what is acceptable art? How has the censorship of queer art evolved over time? What machines hinder queer visibility? Which bodies are being erased from history? Throughout the twentieth century, during the time of the Lavender Scare and the AIDS crisis, queer subjectivity in art was blooming from art-hubs and queer diasporas like New York City and San Francisco. Queer trailblazers such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, and David Wojnarowicz experienced rejection, cancellations of their shows, withdrawal of funding, and public accusations of sinfulness from homophobic public figures. Conservative Christian groups such as the American Family Association and far-right politicians such as Jesse Helms and Patrick Buchanan campaigned against these artists who aimed to display their queer art and pressured gallery owners to censor and reject their work (Meyer, 2002).

Based on my observations on the status of queer censorship in a contemporary lens, I hypothesized that queer censorship has not gone away, it has evolved. Though queer art has achieved milestones in visibility within the past two decades, there has emerged a new monster of censorship. As we become adapted into a digital society with the rise of social media as a rapid image-producing machine and capitalist structure, queer artists are faced with oppressive algorithms that police strict community policies on what users are allowed to post. The arbitrary community guidelines restrict nudity, sexual content, and “offensive” material attack artists that deal with queer subjectivity in their work. The algorithms are engineered to remove posts, shadow-ban accounts on the platform, and even permanently ban them from the platform.

II. Methods

Interviews were conducted with working artists who are either based in Los Angeles and/or have shown work in Los Angeles that display queer subjectivity in their work. The demographic of these artists reflects a diversity of queerness (consisting of various ethnicities, gender identities, ages, and classes) and a diversity of art mediums. All of these artists have experienced agitation with Instagram and Facebook for some form of censorship such as having their content removed, becoming surveilled by the platform, or permanently banned.

1. Stuart Sandford, multidisciplinary artist
2. Karlo Martinez, collagist
3. Suzanne Shifflett, photorealistic painter
4. Sebastian Hernandez, multidisciplinary artist
5. Zackary Drucker, photographer and producer (fig. 2)
6. Rubén Esparza, artist and curator of Queer Biennial
7. Gio Black Peter, multimedia (fig. 3)

Topics discussed were the significance of Facebook and Instagram as useful tools for artists, personal experiences with censorship on these platforms and personal experiences with censorship in gallery spaces, what it means to have queer affinity spaces for showing art, the evolution of social media becoming a capitalist machine, and imaging how social media would operate without functioning algorithms that censor posts. Other text-based sources used for research were *Algorithms of Oppression* by Safiya Umoja Noble, Gio Black Peter's artist statement for his 2018 exhibition "The Violators," *Outlaw Representation* by Richard Meyer, and *Queer Curating and Covert Censorship* by Jonathon D. Katz.

Figure 1 – Violator message by Instagram. @stUARTsandford, 2020.



III. Results

1. “Amateur artists” can benefit from using Instagram as a way to bypass institutional obstacles of the art world. Buying and selling on Instagram can become a main source of income which is why it is an important tool.
2. Algorithms search for images that violate community guidelines (fig.1). Posts are removed when the algorithm notices your image as a violator, which targets images of the nude body, intimacy, body hair, etc. Black, brown, plus-sized, femme, and transgender bodies are most at-risk of this censorship.
3. If a user can benefit the platform monetarily (i.e. Influencers, celebrities, corporation accounts) their images will not be censored even if they violate the same guidelines.
4. Some artists choose to self censor their art in order to post their work on Instagram or Facebook. Some artists have used self censorship as a way to enhance their work.
5. Repeat violators can become “shadow banned,” where their account remains active but is no longer searchable on the interface, or have user experience privileges revoked such as commenting, sharing, or posting.
6. Repeat violators can also have their accounts erased from the platform where they either have to create a new account or accept being banned.
7. All seven artists used in this research expressed a distaste for using the platform because of its censorship and surveillance of their work and identities.

Figure 2 – Zackary Drucker, BEFORE/AFTER, 2009.



Figure 3 – Gio Black Peter, The Warming Pool, 2017.



IV. Conclusions

Out of seven diverse artists interviewed for this research, all of them have experienced censorship of their work on Instagram and Facebook.

The censorship of queer subjectivity in art has not dissipated. It still exists in physical spaces such as galleries or museums, and has evolved into the digital surveillance of images of queerness on social media by algorithms that are engineered by Facebook.

Queer artists face exile from a digital community that serves as an extremely useful tool for the betterment of their career and livelihood.

Facebook's algorithms are engineered with the same prejudices that exist in society: racism, transphobia, queerphobia, fatphobia, and the idea that queer sexuality is a danger to society.

The censorship of queer art and the ostracizing of queer artists from digital platforms is a direct form of erasure.

