

Censored Sexuality: The Motivation Behind Betty Tompkins' Artwork and Censorship

Critical Cultures

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1. Introduction

The 1960s brought minimalism, pop art, conceptual art, performance art and feminist art. This was a liberating time as the contraceptive pill was introduced and the 'free love' movement occurred. In the late 1960s, America was recovering from the cold war and a great deal of cultural trauma. At this time pornography was illegal, unlike today, we have access to it as long as we have internet. In advertising and films the female body was portrayed from a masculine 'male gaze' point of view.

"'Male gaze' is a term coined by film critic Laura Mulvey to describe the cinematic angle of a heterosexual male on a female character. As fiction imitates life, and vice versa, the male gaze has become a familiar cultural perspective. Yet, research finds that the male gaze has significant and pervasive psychological costs for women that they might not even be aware of." Tara Well Ph.D., 2017.

From 1969 to 1970, artist Betty Tompkins was producing her first body of work which was unseen by the public until the early 2000's. She painted eight large scale close ups of heterosexual intercourse from cut outs of illegal pornography she had found in her first husband's things. This body of work entitled 'Fuck Paintings' was declared pornographic and was not allowed to be shown. Later, Betty produced a collection of at least 1,000 paintings of words, phrases and stories describing women, the most common four words being: bitch, slut, cunt and mother.

We will look at Betty Tompkins' artworks in detail and what techniques she used. Betty had interesting motivation when creating her work as it was not allowed to be shown. We will also look at her first husband Don Tompkins and their marriage at the time her first major body of work was created. Don was Betty's tutor at college, about fifteen years older than her and was married when they met. Around the time 'Fuck Paintings' was created, it is suggested that Don and Betty were having difficulties in their marriage before their divorce in 1975.

Betty Tompkins dealt with a great deal of censorship in her career as an artist. We will look at the meaning of the word censorship in this essay as well as its definition. We will look at the reasons it is used in terms of protection for the public. We will also look at how censorship is favoured and is used in the classroom to scaffold and shape young people's ideas. Censorship is an interesting topic. Shielding eyes of the public for the greater good has been done for many years but there is an

ongoing debate as to where the line of censorship should be. We will explore the artwork of Betty Tompkins as well as its background and how censorship became a part of it.

2. Early Artwork of Betty Tompkins

“My work compared to an actual photorealist is lame. They’re interested in getting everything. I’m interested in getting just enough.” Betty Tompkins, 2019. Betty Tompkins describes herself as an ‘abstract expressionist’. She was born in 1945 in Washington D.C and grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1969, Betty moved from her isolated student housing to the neighbourhood known as SoHo in Manhattan, New York. She had received a B.F.A in art education at Syracuse University.

During her time at Syracuse University, when Betty held her maiden name as Beitscher, she fell for her tutor Donald Paul Tompkins, she said “I became a cliché and married one of my teachers” Tompkins, 2018. When Betty told one of her professors of her intentions to be an artist after graduation she was told ‘The only way you’re going to make it is on your back.’ Traumatized by sexual threat Betty was reluctant to show artwork. Her studio space was merely a gap between her bed frame and the wall of her bedroom in her six by four-foot apartment which she shared with her husband, Don. The neighbourhood was run down and had a high crime rate due to economic neglect. Betty says many artists lived there at the time, so if you were in trouble and whistled, help would come.

Between 1969 and 1974 Betty created her first major collection of works entitled ‘Fuck Paintings’. She had gone through her first husband’s illegal pornography collection which he had smuggled into the country from Asia through a P.O box. The small two by three-inch black and white images were photographs of male and females engaging in vaginal, oral and anal sex. Betty described these images to be ‘charged’, relating to the moment of action and energy, in an interview ‘Longform: Betty Tompkins Makes You Call Mommy’. She also expressed interest in the lack of identifiers and humanisation in the pornographic images.

'Fuck Paintings' series consists of eight large scale black and white photorealistic paintings of close-up crops showing male and female genitalia performing vaginal and anal sex. No characterisations of figures are present in paintings as all that is shown are their sex organs in the moment of intercourse. Betty held onto the vintage photographic style when creating these grisaille works. 'Fuck Paintings' are eighty by sixty-four inches and were painted this size for no other reason than the scale trend of painting at the time of the late 1960s.



Betty Tompkins, *Fuck Painting #1*, 1969

An example of Betty Tompkins first painting from her body of work 'Fuck Paintings' is titled 'Fuck Painting #1' and is painted in acrylic on a seven by five-foot canvas. The large-scale image shows a close-up, rectangular cut out of a pornographic image painted in greyscale style. In this painting, two figures are shown performing heterosexual intercourse with the female straddling the male. The view is a close-up of meeting genitals from the rear. The way in which Betty has painted these works involves optical mixing, showing more detail from far away and looking directly at the paintings. With this expressionist painting style, the image is only clear if seen from a distance whereas up close,

it can look like a blur. Betty describes this in an interview with Artsey Magazine:

"This is the distance where painters normally paint. It's an arm's length away plus a couple of inches, but there's nothing there. The image dissipates, you have no idea what you're looking at. And as you step back, the image starts to cohere. It's a different painting wherever you're standing." Betty Tompkins, 2015.

Whilst working on this body of work, Betty Tompkins was disappointed with the art world in New York. She describes one single street of art galleries which could be seen quickly, and no other space dedicated to the art world at the time. In speaking to art collectors and exhibition curators she was told 'we don't show artists who are so close to their degree, come back when you've found your voice' and 'we don't show women'. Betty understood this to be liberating, allowing her to create whatever she wanted.

In an interview with Joan Semmel and Rachel Middleman for 'Bad Feminism?: A discussion on the art of sexual politics', 2016, Betty describes her experience with trying to have her work shown in the early 70s. The collection was acquired for the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou/CNAC in Paris in 1973. Betty picked two paintings and sent them to Paris but as pornography was illegal at the time, the paintings were held up at customs and denied entry to the country. In a time before internet and phones, all communication was made via mail and Betty could only write to the art director in Paris about her paintings being held up at customs. In an attempt to retrieve her work, the paintings were sent back to the U.S, where they were held up at customs and denied entry for the same reason. After about a year of trying, the paintings were finally returned to her. At this point Betty thought her paintings would never be shown.

By now, Betty and Don Tompkins had moved to Ellensburg, in 1972 where Don had been teaching. The pair returned to New York City when Don took a lower position as assistant professor at Columbia University 's Teachers College. Betty wanted so much to be a part of all that was going on in New York at the time and Don loved the city, so they moved together.

In 1974, Betty Tompkins' work had not been shown to the public and very few people knew of its existence. Betty felt oppressed by the government censoring her artwork as her work was not allowed to be shown and appreciated. But she did not stop there.

3. Censorship

"Censorship occurs when individuals, groups or government officials decide that certain images, information, or ideas are so objectionable that no one should have access to them." ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2009. Censorship can occur in books, magazines, films, videos, artworks, music, literature, and other methods of expressing creativity. Images and ideas that are most often censored are of nudity, sexuality, violence, offensive language, LGBT+QIA content or political and religious beliefs.

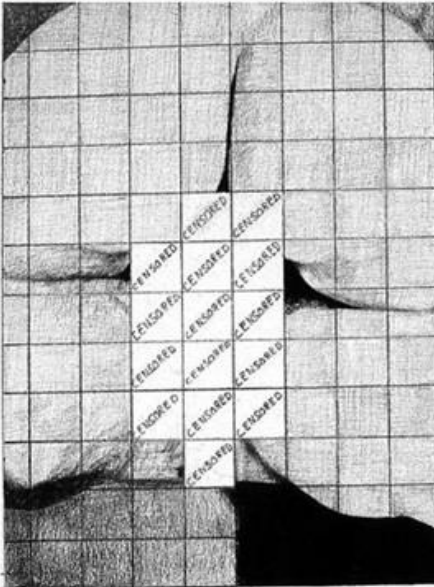
David Shanks is the chief censor for New Zealand and talks about censorship as a method of protection. He spoke for a TED talk "When censorship becomes necessary | David Shanks | TEDxChristchurch" on September 30, 2019. Along with the benefits of his job such as watching the latest Netflix series or Avengers movie, he speaks of dark images found on the dark web which he

must see and possibly censor to protect the public in New Zealand. David Shanks described examples of material that must be censored such as child abuse and pornography, live streams of mass murder, shootings, torture-kill videos, and other images found on the dark web. He mentions processes in his decision making and how hard it can be to decide what a nation has access to view.

David Shanks Mentions how “censorship is a blunt instrument that can only limit human rights” Sanks, 2019. He makes it clear in his speech that he only censors content when he absolutely has to. An example he used was a live stream video showing mass murder at Christchurch uploaded by terrorists. The video contained violent imagery and striking content. David Shanks explains how this is propaganda and should not be shown to the public of New Zealand as he censored it. He says, “only censor to prevent or limit harm” Shanks, 2019.

Dr. Yvonne Chiu (Ph.D., UC-Berkeley; A.B., Stanford University) is Assistant Professor of Politics & Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong and did a recent TED talk “Censorship and controlling ideas in the classroom: Dr. Yvonne Chiu at TEDxHongKongED”, June 20, 2013. Dr. Yvonne speaks about censorship in the classroom being an especially important tool when educating young minds. She mentions the theory of scaffolding (Berk, L.E. and Winsler, A., 1995) ideas for children, building the framework of their mindsets as an educator and letting their ideas grow from there. She says it is possible that children can receive ‘too much information too soon’ and that we must ‘filter and control ideas’.

4 Betty Tompkins & Censorship



Censored Grid #1, 1974
Pencil on paper
14 x 11 inches

 Betty Tompkins, *Censored Grid*, 1974

Betty decided to let the word 'censorship' become a part of the artwork. She said, "I thought if someone's going to censor me, I bet I can do it better" Betty Tompkins, 2016. At first, Betty gridded out pages and sketched the pornographic images like her first body of work. Then either writing by hand or using a harsh lettering stamp, she blocked out sections of sexual imagery where genitals met. Betty incorporated the word censorship into her pieces of work. She also experimented by reversing the idea, blocking out and 'censoring' the area around where the detailed genitals meet. Some pieces are made solely from multiples of prints from the stamp, while others contain sections of her 'Fuck Paintings'. As Betty was still creating, her husband Don was still teaching, but sadly their marriage was falling apart.

Betty Tompkins' 'Fuck Paintings' were only known by a handful of people until they were exhibited together in New York 2002. Jerry Saltz offered her a solo exhibition, the first in almost 15 years and this helped restore her career. Her work was then offered to be exhibited at the 7th Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Lyon in 2003. She then sold a painting a year later to Centre Pompidou for their permanent collection.

In 2002 and again in 2013, Betty sent out an email reading "I am considering doing another series of pieces using images of women comprised of words. I would appreciate your help in developing the vocabulary. Please send me a list of words that describe women. They can be affectionate (honey), pejorative (bitch), slang, descriptive, etc. The words don't have to be in English but I need as accurate a translation as possible. Many, many thanks, Betty Tompkins." She received about 3,500 responses with words and phrases describing women. This project then fuelled work on at least 1,200 canvases. The most common words she received were "bitch" and "mother". Betty then wrote and painted these words over coloured backgrounds on canvases of all shapes and sizes.



 Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Artemisia Gentileschi #3)*, 2018

history textbooks books by artists such as Caravaggio, Angelica Kauffman, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Francis Benjamin Johnson. Each painting has a similar format showing pink text written over the female figures. All the phrases are taken from public apologies that Chuck Close, Matt Lauer and other figures made in response to scandals. Betty covered female figures in these paintings with text, creating a ghost-like figure and leaving the shape alone, making a statement about gender equality.

Betty Tompkins' works now range from \$3,250 USD to \$28,750 USD and she is a recognised and respected feminist artist. When asked about young people today Betty said "I'm happy to have lived long enough to see my work embraced by a younger generation" Tompkins, 2016. Although Betty is an established artist, she is still dealing with censorship and showing her artwork. Due to rules of Instagram, her account has even been deactivated and retrieved again, causing censorship issues on the social network site.

The concept of 'women's words' was revisited when the #metoo movement began in 2018. This movement was in response to sexual harassment in the workplace. Many women came forward and accused their male bosses of exploitative and inappropriate behaviour which resulted in a number of court cases. Betty incorporated apologies made by those accused onto famous paintings in art

5. Don Tompkins

Betty's first husband Don was an accomplished abstract jewellery artist from Everett, Washington. Born in 1933, he was fifteen years older than Betty when he met her. He also had a wife, Marilyn Tompkins and two children, whom he left to be with and marry Betty. With having his excellent mentor Russell Day, Don spent many years in education and received his B.A in art education as well as his M.F.A in design (metal, jewellery, and sculpture). Marilyn Tompkins, told metalsmith magazine that Don always adored Henry Miller, an American writer who particularly wrote about sex. Don was passionate about teaching and he carried a strong reputation with his students, inviting them round for casual drinks and barbecues. His sister Merrily explains him as a teacher for Metalsmith Magazine.

"He was a great teacher. Loved teaching, loved his students, and they loved him. He was always available to them; he had students hanging around his place all the time, eating barbecue, drinking beer. In addition to top-notch jewellery technique instruction and guidance through the creative process, his students were also constantly exposed to philosophical ideas... and intellectual discussion of anything under the sun." Merrily Tompkins, 2015.

Don was diagnosed with type one diabetes at a young age, meaning alcohol and cigarettes would damage his health further. In 1975 he was drinking excessively and his life was deteriorating as a result. He was fired from his position at Columbia University after showing up to work drunk a number of times. The first time his students had banded together and signed a petition to bring him back but, nothing could be helped the second time, and he lost his job as a result. Drinking eventually broke up the marriage as well. Betty told Metalsmith Magazine "When I first met Don, he told me that when he was twenty-one he drank a whole six-pack of beer one day and liked it so much that he decided that he was going to drink at least one a day for the rest of his life."

After their divorce, Don tried and failed in starting businesses. Heavily depressed, he returned to the northwest and took a teaching position in goldsmithing. Not a large amount of artwork was produced from 1975 onwards and just before turning fifty, Don died of a heart attack in 1982. Don did not leave a large body of work with him, it seems his main passion in life was teaching. According to Betty Tompkins, "He really only made jewellery so that he could keep his teaching job or get a new one."

6. Conclusion

We know very little about Betty Tompkins' past and childhood, but she continuously shows us through challenges in showing her artwork that she is a survivor. She has repeatedly worked with negativity that was thrown at her and fought back, providing a positive response. With Betty's artwork not being shown, she was liberated and felt she could do what she wanted. When her work was censored, she made censorship a part of the artwork and refused to give up.

We know that Betty's first husband Don was considerably older than her and was indeed her tutor. We also know that he left his wife and family to be with Betty and move to New York City. Betty created her first major body of work based on what she had found in Don's illegal porn collection which he had shipped into the country undetected. From looking at Betty's first marriage one can imagine her husband, Don, had a huge influence on her. What is interesting is the homelife Betty had at the time her first body of work was made with Don being a diabetic who tragically fell to alcoholism and in turn, depression. Don's health was already unstable with having been diagnosed with diabetes at a young age and he made this worse by drinking heavily and smoking. It is understood that Betty's first body of work was an expression of her feelings about being a female artist in the 1970's and how she was treated. With these 'loud' artworks Betty was making, it's also possible that she was expressing feelings from her deteriorating and difficult marriage with Don at the time. It is interesting to imagine what made Betty Tompkins want to make such a statement and why she produced such a striking body of work in the first place.

What is interesting about the title 'Fuck Paintings' is the entirety of the word 'fuck' and not 'love making', implying little emotional connection during such an act. Indeed, these paintings capture a great deal of intensity and are painted 'in the moment' but have no personal indicators. The angle of view in Betty's 'pornographic' paintings presents a close up of the mechanics, a view which cannot be seen by those performing the act. Betty also uses the technique 'optical mixing' used by many impressionist and expressionist artists throughout history. She is a very skilled painter and produces this imagery in a very artistic way.

Although the eye can see sexual acts and pornographic images, the size, concept, time and setting all say something else. Perhaps, Betty is exposing the male gaze's objectification of the sexual act and of women. This point suggests her large sexual statement paintings have little to do with sex itself but more to do with social commentary. Although she is showing us this sexual subject matter, it can be seen as a metaphor and is saying something else. Indeed, 'Fuck Paintings' was produced at a time

when females were presented in media for the 'male gaze'. It seems Betty is exploring this when showing such passionless sexual scenes without any human identifiers or emotions and objectifying the characters in the paintings. Expressing such a point could be a result of her treatment from males in the artworld, her marriage and possibly the treatment of women in America at the time.

Betty Tompkins did not stop with her first body of work 'Fuck Paintings' and has since produced many more paintings in a similar 'exposing the male gaze' context. Betty worked with her rejection when her artwork was refused to be shown and incorporated censorship into her artwork. She bravely said "if they're going to censor me, I bet I can do it better" Tompkins, 2016. With this, she continued to create and produce work in response to how she was treated as an artist and a woman.

Betty Tompkins indicates to us she is a feminist in many of her artworks. She took this further when she produced at least 1000 canvases with words and phrases describing women which she had received by email in response to her request. Betty empowers women by showing the public these words and phrases, positive and negative. Again, we can see an element of reaction to the 'male gaze' in her artwork. When the #metoo movement began, she was inspired further to continue this body of work. She expressed her lack of belief in the sincerity of apologies given from sexual harassment cases in her work. Betty painted apologies over female figures of historical paintings, taking her feminist art to another level.

There are many who believe censorship is criminal, toxic and is used unnecessarily to control what the public has access to see. Some believe that the state should be able to see what is out there and leave it up to the individual to decide what to do with it. Others believe that it is important, that ideas need to be filtered and controlled to a certain degree. When looking at censorship, we can see the clear benefits of protecting a nation from disturbing images and ideas. David Shanks delivers this very sensitively and states the importance of banning these images to prevent and limit harm. Dr. Yvonne Chui tells us that we can also see the importance of censorship in a classroom to scaffold young people's ideas and to prevent them from access to what they might not understand. In this context, censorship can be seen as useful and, in some cases, imperative.

In Betty Tompkins' case, her artwork was declared pornographic and was censored to protect the eyes of the public. It is understood that today her work can be appreciated but, in an age-appropriate setting and not made public for all eyes to see. When looking at censorship in a context of the ideal greater good, one can question whether her artwork needed to be censored or not. Today, because content is easily accessed, nudity and pornography are more common than ever.

People are looking at porn and have access to other graphic imagery deemed 'adult material' such as drug misuse, alcohol abuse etc. This adult content is also common in media, films and music today, making people, and young people in particular, desensitised to it. In the 1970s people had little access to pornographic imagery, unlike now. Betty Tompkins' work exposed the pornographic content and made an artwork out of it. Her work is not violent and does not spread harmful ideas or propaganda, but she was censored on the basis that her paintings had illegal content. What is interesting is that her work was seen as pornography rather than art at the time. It is possible that those who saw it did not appreciate what it was saying or that it was not only images of sex, but a message. Through all the negativity and censorship towards Betty and her artwork, she never quit and her voice only grew louder. Today, Betty's artwork can be acknowledged and appreciated as art and activism, an expression of her core beliefs.

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