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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Displaying Three Decades of LGBTQ Art Censored by Museums

by [Allison Meier](#) on January 19, 2015



Alma Lopez, "Our Lady" (1999), digital print, 17.5 x 14 in (courtesy of the artist, all images courtesy Leslie-Lohman Museum)

In [*Irreverent: A Celebration of Censorship*](#), opening next month at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York, all of the art has previously been censored from major museums. The 17 artists represent the "controversial" perception of LGBTQ work

over three decades, from Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in the 1980s to the expulsion of David Wojnarowicz's "A Fire in My Belly" from the National Portrait Gallery [in 2010](#).



Zanele Muholi, excerpt from 'Being' series (2007), digital print, 48 x 39 in (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

"On the one hand, some museums and gallery spaces are beginning to recognize the value of queer art for its own sake, and yet, major museums continue to censor queer artists from their walls," curator Jennifer Tyburczy told Hyperallergic. Tyburczy is an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina and the author of the upcoming book *Sex Museum: The Politics and Performance of Display* from the University of Chicago Press. While she emphasized the high-profile nature of the 2010 Wojnarowicz removal after pressure from Republican elected officials, she said censorship "takes many forms, occurs all the time, and more often than not, happens behind the scenes." Mostly, she explained, these stories of censorship "live in the memories of the artists whose work was deemed 'controversial,' 'obscene,' 'offensive,' or 'pornographic,'" and could easily be lost.



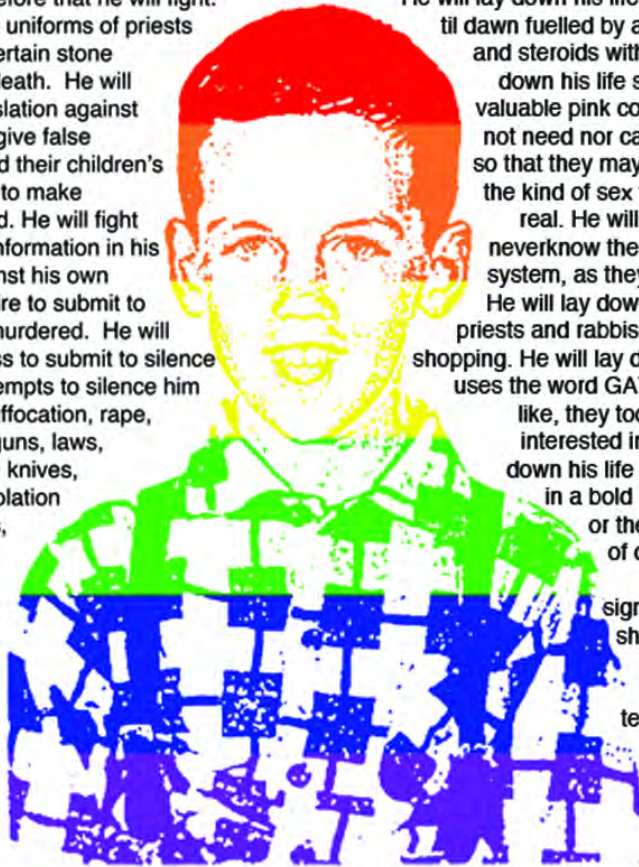
Kent Monkman, "Duel After the Masquerade" (2007), acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 in (collection of Jennifer Dattels)

The exhibition therefore will not just be about showing the art; the stories of censorship will be a major focus. They include the [brutal vandalism](#) of Andres Serrano's *A History of Sex* photograph series in 2007, in which four masked and still anonymous men ravaged a Swedish gallery with axes and crowbars. There were also the [intense protests](#) against Alma López's "Our Lady" digital print that transformed Our Lady of Guadalupe into a nearly nude, proudly standing woman draped in flowers displayed in a group exhibition at Santa Fe's Museum of International Folk Art in 2001. The work sparked violent threats against the artist, museum, and curator for its supposed sacrilegious content. More recently there was the [removal of Michelle Handelman's "Dorian: a cinematic perfume" video](#), which reinterpreted the gay undertones of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, from the Art House in Austin in 2011. Then in 2012 in Turkey, officials with the İzmir Art Center [removed photographs](#) including one by Barış Barlas of two men kissing in Mexico City, another by Seray Ak of two women in headscarves also kissing, and one by Damla Mersin of a woman confidently posing with an embrace of her sexuality in a headscarf.

"By reflecting on the ways in which queer sex has been displayed in museums, this exhibition exposes museums and art galleries as spaces where some of the most volatile and informative battles about sexual identity, sexual practices, and the history of sexuality have been and continue to be waged in the public sphere," Tyburczy explained.

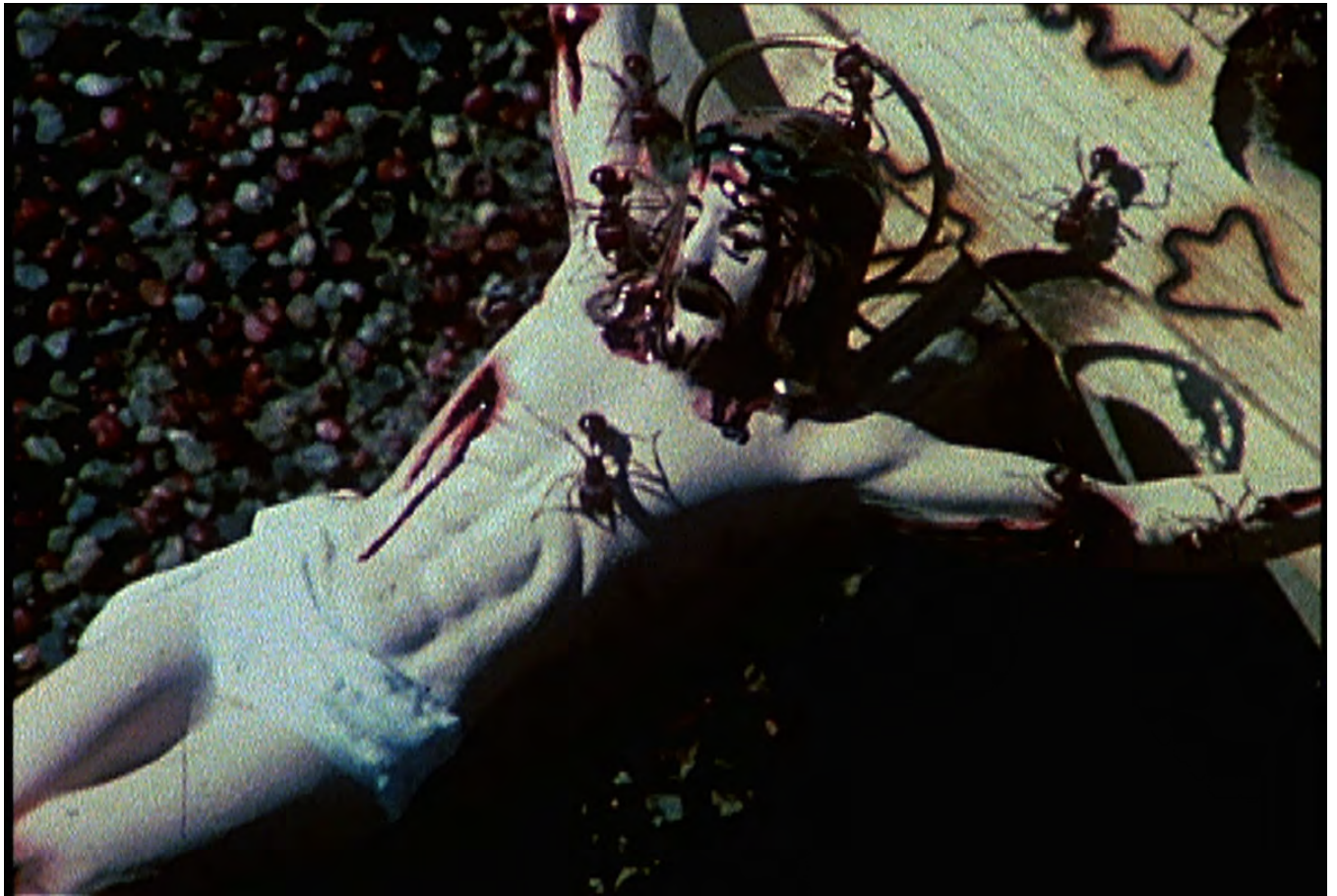
Below are some selections from *Irreverent*, each representing an individual moment of expulsion which is part of this greater narrative of censorship.

One day this kid will die. But before that he will fight. He will fight men who wear the uniforms of priests and rabbis, men who inhabit certain stone buildings, who will call for his death. He will fight politicians who enact legislation against him. He will fight families who give false information to their children and their children's children, information designed to make existence intolerable for this kid. He will fight against all of this activity and information in his environment. He will fight against his own suicidal impulses, his own desire to submit to danger in the hopes of being murdered. He will fight against his own willingness to submit to silence and invisibility. He will fight attempts to silence him with strangling, fists, prison, suffocation, rape, intimidation, drugging, ropes, guns, laws, menace, roving gangs, bottles, knives, religion, decapitation and immolation by fire. He will fight the doctors, psychologists and research scientists who pronounce this kid curable as if his brain were a virus. He will fight despite being subjected to loss of home, civil rights, jobs and all conceivable freedoms. He will fight and he will die for all of the boys, who like him, discover they desire to place their naked body on the naked body of another boy.

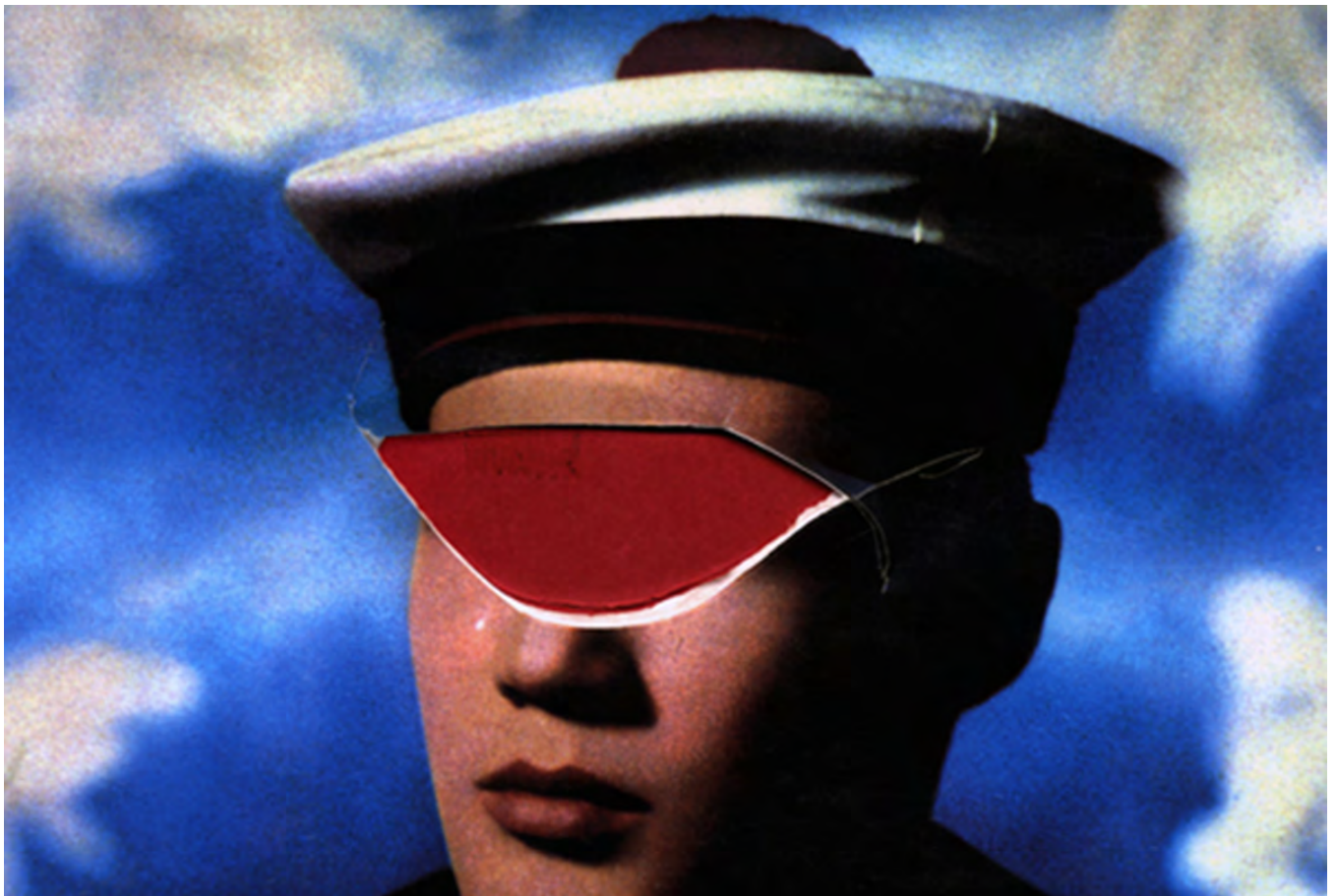


He will lay down his life so that one day they may dance til dawn fuelled by a heady cocktail of drugs, alcohol and steroids without fear of the police. He will lay down his life so that they may be considered a valuable pink commodity and sold things they do not need nor can afford. He will lay down his life so that they may enjoy watching and partaking in the kind of sex that killed him and call it raw and real. He will lay down his life so that they will neverknow the fear of the virus that invaded his system, as they will think themselves invincible. He will lay down his life so that when those new priests and rabbis call for their deaths, they can go shopping. He will lay down his life so that when society uses the word GAY to describe anything they don't like, they too can announce that they are not interested in fats, fems or Asians. He will lay down his life so that they may take their place in a bold new society as the bitchy queen, or the drama queen or any other form of comedic royalty. He will lay down his life so that their Pride will be signified by the sound of a thousand shrill whistles as they step over the unconscious bodies of their brethren on their way to the next tea dance. He will lay down his life for all of the boys who like him, discovered they desired to place their naked body on the naked body of another boy and they will forget him.

Jason Woodson, "This Kid – 20 Years On – A Tribute to David Wojnarowicz' Untitled – This Kid" (2010), framed giclee print, 23.386 x 33.110 in (collection of Jason C. Woodson)



David Wojnarowicz, Still from "A Fire in My Belly (A work in progress)" (1986-87), color and b&w, silent, Super 8mm film on video, 20:55 min (courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and PPOW)





Harmony Hammond, "A Queer Reader" (2010), archival inkjet print on Museo Silver rag paper, mounted on Di-Bond with UV laminate, 43 x 29 in (courtesy the artist)



Corrine Bot, "Jack & Jill Underwear" (2009), digital photograph, 11.8 x 7.9 in (courtesy the artist)



Michelle Handelman, "Dorian: A Cinematic Perfume," video still (2009), 63 min (courtesy the artist)



Michelle Handelman, "Dorian: A Cinematic Perfume," video still (2009), 63 min (courtesy the artist)

[Irreverent: A Celebration of Censorship](#) will be on view at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art (26 Wooster Street, Soho, Manhattan) February 13 to April 19.