

ART BY AGNES FIELD

THE OBSCENITY OF CENSORSHIP

BY ARTHUR NERSESIAN

Rarely do I get out of New York. So when I was finally able to take a three-day vacation in January, I disconnected my mind from the city and took off, leaving behind no information on where I'd be, and certainly not intending to check in with my answering machine. When I returned, I gathered the strength to play-back my phone messages. This is usually a tedious prospect because, as managing editor of the semi-annual journal the Portable Lower East Side, I normally receive an endless flow of detail-oriented requests that require hands-on follow-up. A few weeks earlier we had shipped to the distributors of our latest issue "Queer City," a collection of photos and short pieces by gay and lesbian writers. I expected a lot of clerical mixups, invoice follow-ups, minor queries — nothing pressing or dramatic. After the first message, though, I realized that something was wrong.

All I immediately knew was that Ed Taylor, a good-natured and ordinarily calm man who heads the literature program at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), desperately needed to get in touch with me. Listening further, I found that, in a three-day span, he had called me a half dozen times. Each message sounded increasingly more urgent, "Please call as soon as you can" . . . "I need to get ahold of you" . . . "Call immediately, please. I need to speak to you." When I finally did call him back he had calmed down a bit. "Can you please send us your last two issues?" he asked. He was re-

ferring to "Queer City" and the spring '91 issue, "Live Sex Acts," an examination of the sex industry — phone sex, prostitution, pornography — in poetry, essays, and photography.

Every year PLES comes out with two issues, each focusing on either a theme (crime, drugs) or a literary community (Latin American, Eastern European, Asian); themes for issues tend to address aspects of society that are in crisis. Ten issues have been produced since Kurt Hollander, the magazine's founder and editorial director, brought out the first issue in 1984.

Two weeks after I sent Taylor the requested issues, I received a letter from the NEA pointing out that there was a discrepancy between our grant proposal and the grant product. We had proposed a "non-thematic" issue and had indeed produced a theme issue "Live Sex Act." That decision was made by Hollander because he felt that the rise of the sex industry was too significant to ignore. The NEA requested that we indicate that it had not funded the issue; to accommodate their request, we printed an errata.

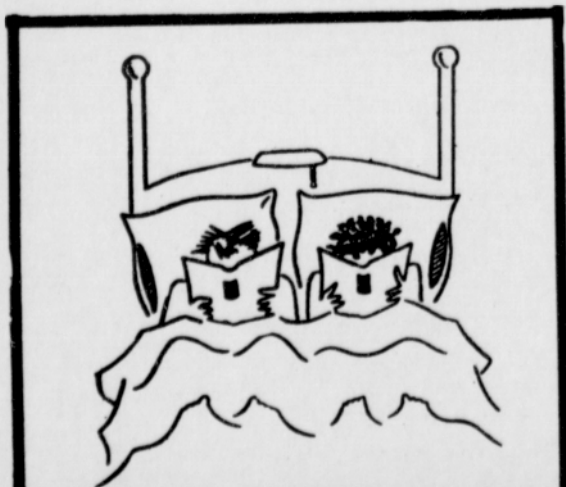
When Taylor had originally called, PLES had already submitted the '92 proposal. Our greatest concern was that we would lose funding. I phoned Taylor to inquire about this and he explained that a "response was being prepared" by NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer and the Peer Review Panel. This is a group of about a dozen people chosen for their expertise in whatever fields they were overseeing. It wasn't until later that I learned that another group, called the National

Council of the Arts, was also at work making defunding decisions. These people were appointed by members of the Bush administration. Some of them had no experience or credentials in the arts.

Eventually we learned that the probable outcome of this proposal discrepancy would be a "retro-circum-funding" of the issue. But since our greatest fear was that we'd lose future funding, this was an acceptable compromise. So we waited for a letter to confirm this outcome. In the interim, we received a phone call from Jim Sitter, head of the New York-based Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, who had just returned from Washington, where he learned of choices for '92 grant reissuance. New York's Franklin Furnace and the Southeast Center for Contemporary Arts in Los Angeles had both initially been granted funding but subsequently lost it due to decisions made by the National Council of the Arts.

"Your magazine," Sitter revealed, "was not on the list of journals that got funding this year." This was disconcerting, to say the least. Quite simply, the funding is our life blood. After several calls to Washington, however, we were assured that the upcoming year's grant was safe and secure. (I'm still not sure what list we weren't on.) For roughly a couple of days, it was business as usual.

Toward the end of that week, I got another phone call from Sitter informing me that Frohnmayer had just resigned. Initially this struck



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