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Prohibited Imports (2003)

The Prohibited Imports exhibition project is a starting point for a critical examination of the extensive and constantly changing legislation, jurisdiction, and ordinances relating to press freedom and freedom of speech and curtailment of those freedoms. It refers specifically to the Japanese customs authorities' practice of submitting imported books to censorship.

Between 2000 and 2002, several parcels of books were sent from Berlin to Tokyo on the assumption that the Japanese customs would open and censor them. A selection of these books was shown at the Masataka Hayakawa gallery in Tokyo in May–June 2003. They were:

Act up/NY, Women & Aids Book Group (ed.), Women, AIDS & Activism, Boston 1990
David Lynch, Images, Munich 1994
Douglas Crimp (ed.), AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism, Cambridge MA 1988
Douglas Crimp, Adam Rolston (eds.), AIDS Demo Graphics, Seattle 1990
Fémininmasculin: Le sexe de l'art, Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1995
Lucy R. Lippard, The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society, New York 1997
Mapplethorpe: Die große Werkmonographie, Munich, Paris, London, 1992
Mary Kelly, Imaging Desire, Cambridge MA 1996
Naomi Campbell, Naomi, Munich 1996
Philippa Kennedy, Jodie Foster: A Life on Screen, London 1995

Mapplethorpe's works have triggered enduring debates about censorship, especially in the United States and Japan, though for different reasons. Therefore it is not surprising that in the present case this particular book was subjected to censorship in Japan as recently as 2002.

The customs authorities at Tokyo's Narita Airport censored Mapplethorpe: Die große Werkmonographie. None of the other books were censored. The Mapplethorpe book was sent twice from Berlin to Tokyo. One copy was censored but not the other.

The two copies of the Mapplethorpe book were laid open on the upper shelf of a wall-mounted display case designed specially for the presentation, with the censored copy on top but offset by approximately the extent of the censored section. This revealed the details of the same photograph in both censored and uncensored form so that they could be compared. The picture in question is Mapplethorpe's 1977 photographic work *Patrice, N.Y.C.*

Eighteen other pictures in the book were censored:

Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 ½), 1976
Helmut, N.Y.C., 1978
Lou, N.Y.C., 1978
Jim and Tom, Sausalito, 1977
Ken, N.Y.C., 1978
Man in Polyester Suit, 1980
Cock, 1985
Cock, 1985
Untitled, 1980
Self-Portrait, 1981
Christopher Holly, 1980

Bob Love, 1979
Gregg Cauley, 1980
Jimmy Freeman, 1983
Cock, 1982
Thomas, 1986
Man in Polyester Suit, 1980 and Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 ½), 1976

All the censored pictures could be compared with uncensored versions in the second copy of the Mapplethorpe book as described above.

Censorship techniques in print media. Addition, leveling, subtraction. The well-known methods of censoring images and text in print media and books are blacking out the relevant parts with a black felt pen or using sandpaper to erase them. Blacking out tends to be used for texts since it is easy to trace over the lines of text with a felt-tip pen. The sandpaper method is used for illustrations, as it is more suitable for removing areas of objects in pictures and for tracing irregular contours. Both censorship techniques are applied manually. Blacking out is additive, applying concealing black ink to the printing ink and thereby leveling the black of the letters and the white of the paper into a black bar or strip. The sandpaper method subtracts, removing both printing ink and paper fibers. In the case of Prohibited Imports, involving images, the subtraction method was used. To remove sexual elements from the pictures, the Tokyo customs authorities apparently used a kind of sandpaper pen or eraser pen to rub off the layer of color from the offset print, along with part of the paper's surface.

Hatching replaces details of pictures. The faded-out areas. Abrasion or erasure produces slight white indentations in the censored illustrations on the pages of the book. Elements of pictures that have been erased seem blurred and somewhat ghostly, and their outlines look frayed. While the outlines of the blank white spaces roughly follow the contours of details that have been removed, the soft hatching overflows into the surrounding area and affects it too. Details within censored areas are partially spared erasure, as is clearly visible on the page of the open book in the upper exhibition display case showing the censored picture Patrice, N.Y.C. This partial omission (within the censored detail) and the context of the particular picture make it possible still to evoke and imagine the details that have been removed. The bright whiteness of the consistently elongated blank spaces in the pictures (all parts erased from the Mapplethorpe book are details from pictures of male genitalia), further emphasized by the contrast with the dark black and white pictures, fades out the unwanted, prohibited places.

Reproduction, original. Deleted information becomes information. The manual erasures assume the form of "originals" or "unique works" that contrast with mass-circulation printed pictures and with reproductions. The "original" collides with the reproduction and draws attention to the processes of photographic techniques (shooting, developing, printing). The pictorial information that has been removed becomes information about the processes associated with forms of production (photograph, book, the work described here) and reproduction, and simultaneously information about censorship. Censorship is the method or procedure employed by a state or an organization to control content published via media, to suppress and ban unwanted content and statements, and to ensure that only wanted content and infor-

mation are propagated and distributed. The aim is to control and determine the intellectual life of a country, politically, morally, and as regards religion. The main objects of censorship are news, artistic works, and expressions of opinion.

Censorship also means evaluating and appraising a piece of work, awarding it a grade. In psychoanalysis the term is used to denote the control function of personality on the border between conscious and unconscious that controls and regulates desires and impulses. It is also related etymologically to the German loan word "Zins" meaning "interest" (from the Latin "census" meaning assessment, assessment of property, property tax) and to "rezensieren," meaning "to review."

Excerpt from an e-mail dated April 14, 2003, from Masataka Hayakawa: Today I went to the Tokyo Customs Headquarters to ask about obtaining a list of prohibited imports under the Freedom of Information Law. My discussion with three people lasted two hours. They said that this was the first time anyone had asked for such a list and they seemed a bit bewildered. They said if they were to show me a list of prohibited imports they would first have to erase the name and address of the importer and the titles of books mentioned in Notices of Prohibited Imports in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act. So even if we were to obtain a list we would only know whether an item was a DVD, a magazine, or a photograph. We would not know the name of the book, magazine, photograph, etc. Do we still need this list? I myself am interested in obtaining such a list even with this information blacked out, even though it might be meaningless.

This case of censorship highlights the whole contradictory nature of legal regulations and ideas of morality in Japan and leads one to think that this practice is only kept up to preserve and maintain a semblance of morality, legality, and security.

The censorship procedure. At the customs authority. It was not possible to observe the act of censorship, let alone record it. Consequently, the questions as to who actually does this work and specifically how it is done remain unanswered. Is it done quickly in a factory-like routine, perhaps even in the form of piecework? That not a single picture with a sexual content was overlooked leads one to conclude that inspection was rigorous. Nor was it possible to gain an overview of all the censored imported books within a specific period. In response to a request for an overview of this kind, the customs authority in Tokyo said that it might be possible to obtain one but that all relevant data such as detailed descriptions of the imported goods, titles, names, etc. would be blacked out.

Notice of Prohibited Imports. On November 17, 2002, the Director of the Tokyo Customs sent the recipient to whom the books were addressed, the Masataka Hayakawa gallery, a completed Notice of Prohibited Imports that was later used as an invitation to the exhibition. The information about the exhibition (title, dates, venue) was printed on the back. The notice read:

You are hereby notified under the provisions of Item 3, Article 21 of the Customs Tariff Law that the importation of the article(s) given below 1 and 2 shall not be permitted as it is (they are) found, by the reasons shown below 3, to fall under the Provisions of Item 1-4 of the same article.

In case you are not satisfied with this Notice, you are entitled to file a protest with the Director of the Tokyo Customs within two months from the day following the date of acknowledgement of this Notice.

Customs Tariff Law, Article 21 (Goods Prohibited for Import), Paragraph 1 (3) reads:

"Any goods specified in any of the following subparagraphs shall not be imported: [...] Books, drawings, carvings and any other articles which injure public security or morals."

According to this, the imported goods are articles that "injure public security or morals." Books thus designated can either be imported after censorship or, if the recipient does not agree to their being censored, must be returned to the sender. Since the idea of the project was for the customs authority in Tokyo to censor the books and, by censoring them, become a "co-producer" of the work, the gallery had no choice but to agree to censorship. In addition, it had to pay the authority an administration fee to receive the censored books.

Law on freedom of speech. Publications. At the exhibition, the two Mapplethorpe books were displayed on the upper shelf of the display case in the manner described above, while the other books listed were lined up in the lower part as if on a bookshelf, along with books on legislation, the state of the law and jurisdiction, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech in Japan. These books, mainly in Japanese, include works by committed and critical authors such as Yasuhiro Okudaira and Masayuki Uchino, law journals and

essays dealing with current cases of censorship, standard works such as *The Japanese Legal System: Introductory Cases and Materials* edited by Hideo Tanaka, and the *Official Guideline for Customs (Annual Book)* that serves as a guide for customs authorities. Some places in the books and journals were marked to make it easier for visitors to the exhibition to home in rapidly on the parts relevant to the project.

Start of a critical examination. The project was intended to be the starting point for an examination of the extensive, constantly changing legislation, jurisdiction, and ordinances relating to press freedom and freedom of speech and curtailment of those freedoms. The idea was to continue with further applications and appropriations of various media and further cases of censorship capable of revealing the sediments of the superstructures of law that both conceal and mirror the economic and political interests of the dominant social forces.

Other projects of mine with a similarly encyclopedic design are: *Curtain (Denim) / Lectures* by Yuko Fujita, Mika Obayashi, (1989/1997/1998), Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu, 1998; *Filmlexikon sexueller Praktiken / Film Lexicon of Sexual Practices* (1999), and *Architekturführer / Architectural Guide* (1999), both projects published in: Maria Eichhorn, *1. Mai Film Medien Stadt / May Day Film Media City*, Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2003.

