

Censorship and Art

Shout Freedom! **Educator Resource** **Grades 9-12**

The New York Photo League disbanded in 1951 due to the pressures and repercussions of being blacklisted by the United States government. When the Photo League was first accused of being a Communist-affiliated organization, Walter Rosenblum, a member of the group, responded by saying;

"We aren't interested in slums for their picturesque qualities. The people who live in them are our fathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters. The kids are our own images when we were young. The inhumanity of watching a woman drag a big sack of coal up four flights of stairs hurts us because our mothers did it too. How can one be censured for being interested in one's fellow man?"

The discussions and activities on this sheet address censorship in photography.

Join the Conversation

The Photo League disbanded after it had been blacklisted by the United States government as a subversive organization that was a threat to national security. First, have the students critically look at and discuss some of the images from the exhibition using the ODIP process (refer to the ODIP quick guide handout). Then discuss the following questions as a class:

1. Why do you think the United States government blacklisted the Photo League?
2. Was there anything subversive about their work? If so, what? Or if not, why do you think they were targeted?
3. Is it right for the government to be involved with the activities of artists in the United States? Why or why not?

Activity: Censorship Debate

With your students, watch the blacklisting video provided on this website. In this video, Photo League artists discuss their views on McCarthyism and the blacklisting of the league. Next, divide the students into two groups. Assign half of the students to assume the role of the United States government and half to assume the role of members of the Photo League. Give each group ten minutes to assume their assigned roles and discuss and prepare a stance on the questions on the next page.

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Next, arrange an in-class debate between the two groups of students discussing their responses to the assigned questions.

1. Why was the government so concerned with Communist activity in the United States? What threat was perceived?
2. Why was being associated with Communism a negative perception? Why was Communism considered a threat?
3. Was the government's reaction to this threat justified?
4. Is censorship ever acceptable in a country where free speech is considered a fundamental human right?

Quotes from Walter Rosenblum:

When the Photo League was first accused of being a Communist-affiliated organization, Walter Rosenblum, a member of the group, responded. Here are some quotes from his reaction. A full text version can be found here:

<http://legacy.www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/art/photo/league/text.html>

"The League has been attacked not because of the few resolutions we have passed [...] but because reaction in this country knows that artists can be a very potent force for progress."

"Scare the artist now and you might shut him up when 1948 rolls around. But we will not be frightened by this flagrant attempt at thought control. We will continue to speak up when and how we please."

"A membership, united in indignation, rejected the smear technique he used as being completely unfounded in fact and certainly in violation of the basic law of the land. Shades of Tom Paine! Who ever thought the day would come when the Photo League would be called upon to defend the Bill of Rights?"

Thinking about Photography: Ethics, Laws, and Censorship

For further discussion, lead a conversation with your class on the following questions. Ask the class to consider if and how these points are relevant in their lives today.

- Even though pictures show real moments, do they always depict the truth or how the world really is? How might a photograph depict a distorted view of reality?
- What control does the photographer have over the subjects he or she photographs?

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- What rights should subjects of photographs have? What rights should photographers have?
- Should photographers get permission from the subject before taking a picture or before publicly displaying a photograph?
- What should photographers consider when photographing a person or object? What effects might a photo have on a person's life?

Some Important Photography Laws:

<http://photojojo.com/content/tips/legal-rights-of-photographers/>

<http://www.rcfp.org/photoguide/>