

DENNIS ALTMAN

BEYOND THE REALM OF THE SENSES

Dennis Altman was invited to open the exhibition *In the Realm of the Censors* at its launch in February 2004. Curatorial Researcher Liz Bradshaw spoke to him about his work; the cultural, political and sexual shifts that have taken place in Australian society since the 1960s; and contemporary forms of censorship. Following is an edited extract from that discussion



4
Dennis Altman has been a writer, academic and commentator on gay rights, sexual politics and political and community responses to HIV/AIDS from the 1970s to the present. He investigates the intersections of sexuality and politics through texts that range from acutely observed accounts of gay life to analyses of sexual exploitation in the era of globalisation.

Examples of his early writing are part of the collection from which *In the Realm of the Censors* is drawn, and tackle some of the issues and themes with which the exhibition is concerned. His texts include 'Gay Lib', a speech delivered at what is considered the first gay liberation meeting in Australia; an interview in *William & John* magazine after the publication of his influential book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*; and an article on 'The Counter Culture', published in the alternative newspaper *The Old Mole*.

Liz Bradshaw: What are your first responses to the exhibition?

Dennis Altman: What is striking is the number of books worth reading that were censored; really significant fiction was banned. But the exhibition is telling a much bigger story than what was or was not censored.

It's about the real shift in the dominant culture in Australia. Our political culture in the 1950s and 60s was one of the most wowserish cultures in the Western world. The exhibition shows how small groups emerged from within that culture to challenge it. In 2004 we can think how quickly it has changed, because we are no longer that society.

The strength of this exhibition, it seems to me, is the way it draws attention to the fact that censorship was a very important part of how Australia defined itself and developed. The battles over censorship of that period are bound up with bigger issues. Even someone not interested in censorship will start making those connections.

LB: Rereading examples of your own early writing found amongst the censorship records, what changes do you see in your work and the political climate, then and now?

DA: I think I have been boringly consistent. Unlike some people who have been through enormous political shifts, I haven't. When I read some things I cringe a bit because it seems naive. There was an optimism in what we call the 60s, although I have always said that the 60s came

very late to Australia — not until 1968. And I don't think any of us would have predicted the rapidity of social change going on in Australia. In terms of attitudes to sexuality I think that there have been huge shifts — much greater than any of us ever imaged. We may have been hopeful, but I don't think any of us could have possibly foreseen the reality.

Neither do I think we would have predicted the extent to which certain sorts of economic assumptions in Australia would be abandoned. Part of the reason people were more optimistic and hopeful then, I would argue, was that there was actually a greater sense that the State would provide basic services. The sheer struggle to survive economically has ironically got much worse as we have apparently become much richer.

LB: What are your views on the way definitions of censorship have evolved?

DA: What is interesting is the way in which we've moved from pretty tough censorship to living in a society where it seems that virtually nothing is too explicitly sexual to be depicted. But if we talk about censorship we have to remember that censorship, historically, for most people, is about political ideas.

↑ *Dennis Altman, William & John, vol 67, no 6, 1970s; from the censorship archives; NRS 16734*

Although political censorship — government's stopping political views being published — has not been a major issue in Australia, if you take a more sophisticated analysis and look at media ownership and what ideas can get into public discourse, we do live in a world with political censorship in a complicated way.

Look at what information is available to kids in sex education courses. It is a bizarre situation where it seems everything goes if it is commercialised and attached to entertainment, but how is sexuality talked about in schools to 10 year olds?

LB: I would like your opinion on the political impact of images. How do you view so-called 'gay TV'? Do you think images make a difference?

DA: I think programs in which sexuality is both depicted and discussed make a difference. It is interesting in Australia that we see things like *Queer as Folk* on free-to-air TV; that would have



↑ 'That's right, spoil it for me. I don't care if he's queer or not!' cartoon, *Man* magazine, vol 67 #6, May 1970; from the censorship archives; NRS 16733

been absolutely unimaginable 30 years ago. In the US it is only available on cable. Compare *Queer as Folk* or *Sex in the City* to the historical material in the exhibition and you see an extremely big shift.

Television programs like these have an impact, but can also be sucked into creating market niche. Diversity is tied to the market, turning people previously seen as outsiders into a market niche. There's no doubt that gay men are the best single example of that — the 'pink dollar', which I suspect is largely an illusion, if a very seductive one for business and advertisers.

LB: A thread throughout your writing has been a real striving for ways to combat inequality and disenfranchisement. How can we reconcile an understanding of how sexuality, health and politics intersect in an increasingly globalised culture, and our local or personal sexual politics?

DA: What was interesting about being asked to open the exhibition was having to think about where there is still a genuine issue of censorship around sexuality. At the exhibition opening I talked about the fact that

a lot of basic information about contraception, sex and abortion is being quite deliberately taken out of development programs under the influence of the conservative right wing.

People don't often think about the gap between what we know of in Australia and what is happening in the other parts of the world. One has to come to terms with the fact that most of the people in the world live shitty lives and we don't. The great majority of people don't know where the next meal is coming from. Large numbers of people live in countries where they face a huge amount of violence and the collapse of any sort of social, political and economic stability. In some places HIV is central to that.

We couldn't possibly function if we spent our time being depressed about it, and in that sense it is legitimate that we think about our own society and what has changed. The point I would make to try and pull those contradictions together is: think about what we do in relation to the greater majority of people in the world who don't have our privileges.

Dennis Altman is currently Professor in the School of Politics, Sociology and Anthropology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and President of the AIDS Society of Asia and the Pacific. In 2005 he will take up the position of Harvard University Chair of Australian Studies

Liz Bradshaw is an artist and writer, who was curatorial researcher for *In the Realm of the Censors*

Books by Dennis Altman

Homosexual: Oppression And Liberation, 1973

Coming Out In The Seventies, 1979

Rehearsals for Change, 1980

The Homosexualization Of America:

The Americanization Of The Homosexual, 1982

AIDS And The New Puritanism, 1986

A Politics Of Poetry:

Reconstituting Social Democracy, 1988

The Comfort Of Men, 1993

Power And Community:

Organizational And Cultural Responses To AIDS, 1994

Defying Gravity: A Political Life, 1997

Global Sex, 2001