

EDITORIAL

This issue arises out of a conference held at the ICA, London in July 1992. The conference was entitled 'Preaching to the Perverted: are fetishistic practices politically radical?'¹ The aim of the conference was to discuss those issues surrounding 'perversity' which centrally inform current cultural debates. Issues such as: What is perversity and who has defined it? Are cultural definitions of perversity and fetishism, largely formulated in the nineteenth century, still relevant? Does a celebration of sexual diversity automatically entail an acceptance of notions of 'perverse practices'?

In response to the tendency to view the perverse as politically challenging and to celebrate all acts of transgression, there are those who voice concern about this celebration of all transgression. Critical perspectives from psychoanalysis and branches of feminist theory raise real qualms about the uncritical celebration of the 'perverse'.

Yet the vast array of activities and debates currently exploring possibilities for reformulating notions of sexual identity and desire frequently involve an endorsement of more positive, non-prescriptive definitions of perversity. Furthermore, there is a growing celebration of sexual subcultures and acts of transgression, not only within the subcultures themselves, but also in the dominant culture. Mainstream culture has always plundered imagery and ideas from those in the margins of society – sexual minorities and 'bohemians'. But recently, there has been a quantitative change. Perversity is becoming a commodity which sells films, fashions, CDs, books and magazines. Given this, is 'perversity' still subversive? Was it ever? What does it work to subvert and why?

Creating a space for the exploration and celebration of diversity and desire is part of the agenda of this volume. A related project is the recognition that crossing the boundaries of gender, identity and desire raises complex issues in the fields of representation, perception and legislation, as well as in ethics. From photography and performance art to sculptural installations and body decoration, theories and practices of representation are exploring the perverse in fascinating new ways: ways which demand legal, ethical and aesthetic reflection.

Judith Squires
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1. This was the first in a proposed series of New Formations Conferences. It was programmed by Lorraine Gamman (of Central St. Martin's College), Helena Reckitt (of the ICA) and myself. It was supported by *Skin Two*.