

Blocking porn perverts women's demands

by Richard Banner

Censorship cannot stop sexism, a Toronto feminist activist told 125 people in Vancouver's Robson Square, and would not work even if it were enforced by feminists.

Varda Burstyn, artist and editor of Women Against Censorship spoke as part of a panel presented by the BC Civil Liberties Association to attack censorship by Canada Customs directed particularly at Little Sister's bookstore, a Vancouver shop specializing in lesbian and gay books and magazines.

Burstyn said that because censorship officials do not have a "feminist world view" they cannot be expected to protect feminist values through the censorship process.

"But censorship cannot work on the most pragmatic level," Burstyn argued. Sex is a subjective experience, she said. If you put twenty feminists in a room and show them a film about sex, one third would say that it was erotic, and one third would say that it was offensive. One third would say that they had no response to the film. If even people sharing a common perspective cannot agree on the meaning of a film, it would be impossible to form a social consensus on which films should be allowed and which should not.

In response to a question after her presentation, Burstyn said that because of her feeling that society simply cannot form a consensus on what films to allow, she would not want to see even a censorship board composed entirely of feminists.

Instead, she said, feminists who are concerned about the way women are represented in media should be fighting for change in Canada's economic and cultural institutions. They should demand support for alternative forms of arts and culture.

Most important, she said, people should fight to ensure that broad and positive sex education programmes are available.

"The struggle [around sex education] in BC is important," she said, "and feminists should be involved."

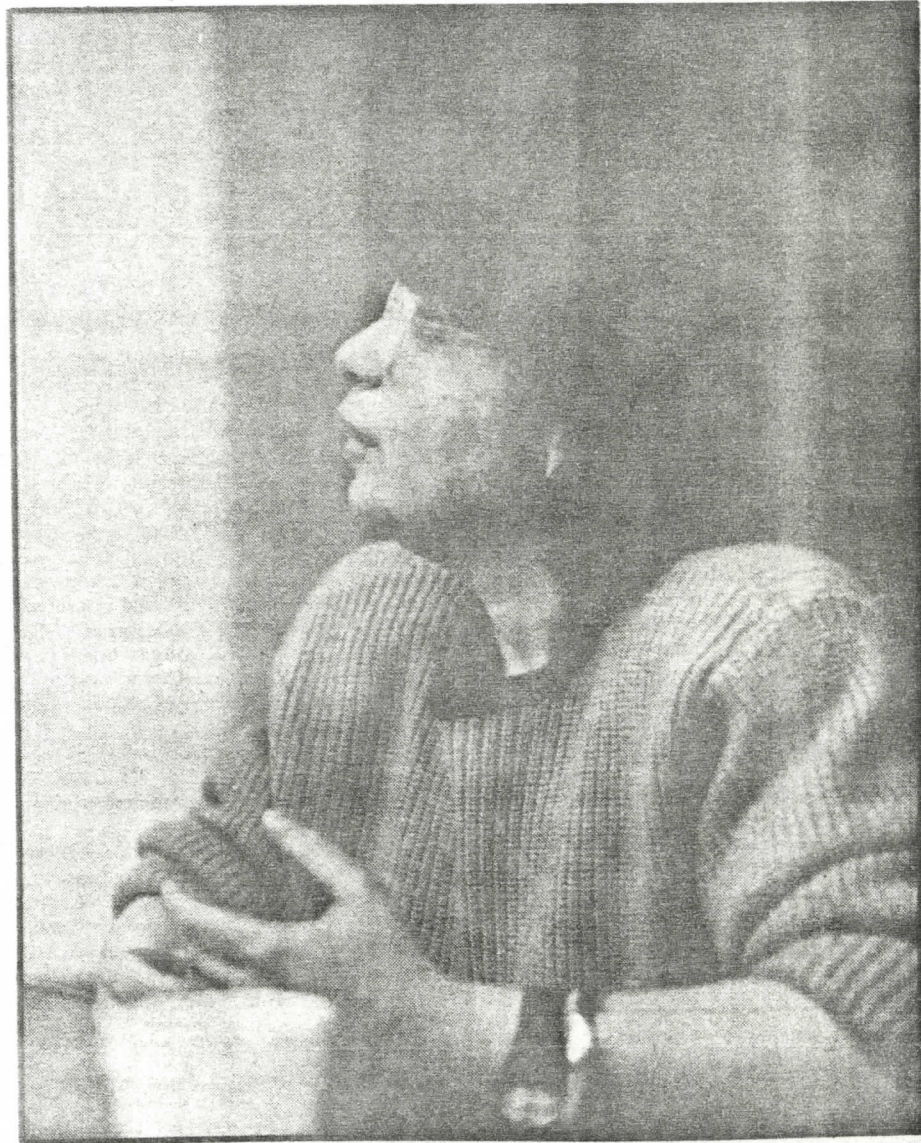
Speaking earlier about the sex education controversy in BC, Sara Diamond, a Vancouver video artist, pointed out that the Coalition for the Right to View has called for resources for sex education and resources to support the rights of women and children, rather than censorship.

The anti-pornography crusade, she said, wants to give us information about AIDS without sex. They want to make pictures responsible for social ills, and the recent action by Canada Customs to block even safe sex information

from books and magazines destined for Little Sister's bookstore simply fits the pattern.

Jim Deva, co-owner of Little Sister's, says that Canada Customs will destroy the business. The federal government has no intention of changing the current customs regulations, and the bookstore cannot order more stock if it will be seized again.

The bookstore will have to go to court to get justice, he said. With the assistance of the Civil Liberties Association, Little Sister's intends to challenge Customs' regulations.



Varda Burstyn. Photo by Richard Banner.