

CENSORSHIP & VISUAL CULTURE

Ruling Images, Shaping Societies

PANEL IV

CONTROVERSIAL CENSORSHIP

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Art, Science, Sociology, Pornography? Jean Straker's Gynaecography in the Dock

Jean Straker [1913–1984] was a prolific producer of photographs of nude women in the 1950s and 1960s via his Visual Arts Club (established 1951) and Academy of Visual Arts (remodelled 1961) in London's Soho district. With a permanent exhibition of prints for sale, and nightly classes where amateur photographers could study nude models, Straker saw himself as a populariser of artistic photography and a pioneer for liberal approaches to bodily visibility. His refusal to conceal pubic hair and genitals in his photographs led to high-profile prosecutions under the Obscene Publications Act; his soapbox trials made him an anti-censorship figurehead; his 'Freedom of Vision' teach-ins united MPs and university students, artists and publishers, nudists and models.

Straker argued that his photography was 'decorous, imaginative, artistic, enlightening and wholesome' and that it offered a British parallel to the Kinsey Institute as 'sociological, psychological, anthropological enquiry'. He styled his photographs of women as 'gynaecography'. Whether he used these framings only for protection from British obscenity law remains uncertain. Photographic historian Bob Pullen (2008) states it is incorrect to read Straker's work as 'erotica hiding behind a pseudo-academic shield'. Straker's contemporary supporters felt the same way. As journalist Paul Doncaster put it, 'He is not one of those camera technicians who set blatant poses of synthetic allure for the half-

crown back-street bookseller.' Straker, he argued, 'holds a unique position in the British contemporary scene as originator of the most exhaustive library of photographs of the nude produced by any one photographic artist in the world'. It is true that Straker has left an abundance of material to evaluate, with 10,000 studio negatives across a range of styles, court papers and anti-censorship publications. To this corpus I have added new interviews with family members to put Straker's photography in the dock, once again, to see what evidence it might provide for understanding nude photography as art, obscenity, science and sexology in censorious 1960s Britain.

Annebella Pollen is Professor of Visual and Material Culture at the University of Brighton, where she studies the lives and afterlives of objects and images across a range of periods and case studies. She is widely published in the history of photography. Her books in this area include *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life* (2015); *Photography Reframed: New Visions in Contemporary Photographic Culture* (2018, co-edited with Ben Burbridge) and *Nudism in a Cold Climate: The Visual Culture of Naturists in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (2021).