

TAKE 11

ROBERT OPLETHORPE: STREAKING THE ACADEMY AWARDS

Robert Mapplethorpe
+ Robert Opel
=Robert Oplethorpe

In the Sodom-Oz mecca of San Francisco, the Fey Way Gallery, invented by Robert Opel, opened its arty-party doors in March 1979, at 1287 Howard Street to an SRO crowd. Leather and art combusted in the high-octane vapor of the seventies. Owner Robert Opel had a knack: right person, right place, right time. Five years before opening Fey Way, Robert Opel created a standard for performance art that in the extremis of the 1970s was rarely equaled. He was the man who streaked the 1974 Academy Awards. A billion people, live, around the globe, were shocked by the most naked man in the whole wide world.

Opel's timing was perfect. He hid inside the Oscar scenery until two absolutely quintessential movie stars stood at the podium waiting for the envelope, please.

Elizabeth Taylor and David Niven were about to be telecast in an Oscar Moment that will be replayed forever in the history of Hollywood.

Opel burst naked from the scenery.

Elizabeth Taylor turned with a look strictly from *Suddenly Last Summer*.

David Niven arched his best British eyebrow.

The audience went silent, then howled, applauded, roared, fell back to stunned yammer.

Security police grabbed Opel and hustled him away.

Taylor put her hand to her elegant bosom.

The quick-witted Niven leaned into the microphone and said, "There's a young man who will long be famous for his shortcomings."

Opel's appearance shock-locked into the collective media consciousness: the comic equivalent to the tragic live shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald. If you saw it, the scene was etched. Sort of. The Global Village, sour on Vietnam and the 1972 break-in at the Watergate, had a big laugh.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

“That night was such a rush,” Robert Opel told me. “I remember climbing inside the scenery and taking my clothes off. There were so many thick electric cables under me I was afraid I’d be electrocuted. But I stuck to my plan to wait for Taylor and Niven, because they were so perfect. When I jumped out and started running, I don’t remember anything until the cops grabbed me. It was so fast it was a blur.”

“You made headlines,” I said.

Opel laughed. “No one even remembers who won the Oscar that year!”

Robert Opel used up sixty seconds of his fifteen minutes of fame. He didn’t know he was on a countdown to his murder.

Robert Mapplethorpe, of course, had to meet Robert Opel.

In several ways, they were Doppelgangers inevitably meant for each other.

Opel had fled from Los Angeles, where in one of his famous run-ins with then notorious police chief, Ed Davis, he had been arrested for appearing naked at a Los Angeles City Council meeting debating the closing of nude beaches.

He sought refuge in more liberal San Francisco, where he began to create his niche in the leather and art crowd. He drew attention to his work as performance artist, writer, and photographer.

Robert Mapplethorpe was simultaneously on a quieter, more refined trajectory of fame.

Andy’s dictum, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes, was a standard to live by in the seventies, when huge sex parties, hosting thousands, declared on the invitations, “Everyone is a star.”

The only thing more dangerous and life-threatening than being homosexual is being a Kennedy. Actually, no state of being in America is more genuinely terrifying than being a homosexual or a lesbian.

On the way to stardom in the liberated seventies, few ever considered the party couldn’t last forever. My instinct was that nothing lasts forever. So I wrote copious journals and magazine articles, took photographs, shot super-8 movie epics, saved pertinent news clippings and gallery and party invitations, and made audio recordings of interesting people. Video, unfortunately, made its consumer debut too late for the seventies. Had video been readily available before 1981, the nineties might not have so misunderstood the seventies.

The seventies were a different world, and should be judged by the standards of no other decade than the seventies.

It was *carpe diem* from A.M. to P.M.

In all of liberated sexual history, there has probably never been—and this is a seriously considered notion—a decade like it. The Roaring Twenties were a tea party by comparison.

Robert Mapplethorpe insisted he had to meet Robert Opel.

Robert Opel felt the same about Robert Mapplethorpe.

Neither was sure he'd like the other.

Both of them, snatching at celebrity, noticed that people were confused about who was who. There seemed to be one too many Roberts. Working their way up separately, Mapplethorpe and Opel both were outraged that each was getting lost in a third person everyone was talking about.

That person, getting all the credit, did not even exist.

His name was Robert Oplethorpe.

Blame it on drugs, gossip, and loud rock 'n' roll.

Everyone in the seventies was who they were unless they weren't. When individuals are creating a new liberated identity for themselves individually and as a group, confusion is inevitable.

The meeting of the two Roberts occurred, by appointment, in Summer 1978 at my home, which was then 4436 Twenty-fifth Street in San Francisco. Mapplethorpe was out on a visit. Opel was bouncing around the city pumping support for two projects: one a magazine he would publish, the other, an alternative gallery space that he was pulling together quickly.

Mapplethorpe arrived first and was making one of his many telephone calls from 415 /285-5329 when Opel rang my doorbell. We were three men and a multiple agenda. They wanted to lay eyes on each other. Mapplethorpe was interested in Opel's gallery as yet another venue. Opel was interested in Mapplethorpe's joining a group exhibition. As editor of *Drummer* magazine, I had journalistic interest in witnessing a possible clash of titans. In art and publishing, sooner or later everybody pimps for everybody else.

The two Roberts stood in my kitchen. Mapplethorpe paced nervously, filling the air with secondhand cigarette smoke. Opel sat at the table, sprawled in a chair. A joint was based around. Some beer was popped. Mapplethorpe offered whiffs of MDA. Such amenities loosened the tension. Each Robert finally saw the other. The sizing up was a sight.

"So," Opel said to me, "do you have the story for me?"

"What story?" Mapplethorpe asked.

"Robert's starting a new magazine."

"I'm calling it *Cocksucker*," Robert said. "It's a monthly."

With both Roberts talking, and neither willing to be called “Bob,” “Robert Oplethorpe” was materializing in my kitchen. Their age, build, body movements, and accomplishments began to meld like a trickster created by smoke and mirrors.

Always thinking of the sale, Mapplethorpe told Opel, “You won’t be able to sell it on newstands calling it *Cocksucker*.”

“Watch me,” Opel said.

I handed Opel my double-spaced story manuscript in a manila folder. He looked at me quizzically. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I came over so you could read it to me.”

I was taken aback. “I don’t do auditions,” I said.

Mapplethorpe laughed.

“Really,” Opel said. “I want you to read it to me.”

I looked at Mapplethorpe. I was a bit embarrassed about what he might think. “Erotica is best read privately, alone,” I said.

“Come on, Jack,” Mapplethorpe said. “You’re talking to a performance artist.”

“Right,” Opel said.

I sensed an alliance forming between the Roberts. That was good. I wanted them to like one another.

“Okay.” I gave in. I began to read the seven-page short story, watching Opel across the table sitting in the chair, and Mapplethorpe leaning against the refrigerator. By page two, Opel unbuckled his belt, popped the buttons on his Levi’s, lifted his butt, and pulled out his flaccid critic’s ruler.

Mapplethorpe grinned his Mapplethorpe grin.

By page four, the critic’s ruler was hard; by page five, the pumping picked up, faster on page six, and then, near the end of the last page, seven, shot its judgment in an arc that splattered on the kitchen floor.

Mapplethorpe and I stared, silent. Opel came down from his rush, tucking his professional judgment back in his shorts.

“Does that mean you like it?” I said.

Opel reached into his leather jacket, pulled out his checkbook, and wrote while he said, “Will a hundred and twenty-five dollars do?”

We all laughed.

Mapplethorpe said, “I thought I was the master of the quick-buck sale.”

“Let’s you and I talk,” Opel said to Mapplethorpe.

The group show at Fey Way was a hit. In fall 1978, Opel’s gallery was the first to open in the light-industrial area south of Market near the

Miracle Mile on Folsom, where the leather bars and baths ruled the night. By the eighties, South of Market gained the sobriquet SoMa, in imitation of New York's SoHo.

The Roberts, appearing together at openings and swell parties, together stamped out the identity of the mythical "Robert Oplethorpe." They enjoyed a utilitarian, nonsexual, slightly competitive relationship that was profitable to both.

Life is stranger than fiction, especially when women enter stage left. Mapplethorpe had his singer/poet/muse, Patti Smith. Opel lived in quarters behind Fey Way with his singer/poet/muse, Camille O'Grady. Maybe no one's noticed, but homosexual men compete for women as much, maybe more, than heterosexual men compete for their ladies.

With Robert Mapplethorpe off somewhere in the world, I drove to Fey Way to interview Camille O'Grady, who was making quite a splash of her own, on Opel's arm, in the leather set. I planned to interview Patti Smith as well. I had been faculty adviser to the first Women's Awareness Week at Western Michigan University in 1970. All the liberation movements of blacks, women, and gays fit together before they didn't.

Armed with my audio recorder, I dragged along my companion, David Sparrow, who was to shoot 35-mm black-and-white of the interview. (David and I frequently collaborated on photographs for magazines, using the one name "Sparrow Photography." My byline was on so many stories and articles in the seventies it was too much to have my name on the photographs as well. The collaboration worked until 1981, when Sparrow could no longer be nudged into commercial shooting. He died of AIDS in 1992.)

Camille O'Grady was a raven-haired beauty, fair skin, great bone structure. She was a poet, singer, painter, and performance artist. Opel adored her. Mapplethorpe called her "a second-rate Patti Smith." There was a certain ambitious, creative tension, but all very subliminal, among the four people in the two famous art couples—depending on who was talking.

RECORDED LIVE JUNE 1979

CAMILLE O'GRADY: When I was seventeen, I was all over Manhattan. I knew Robert Mapplethorpe very well. We went to school together. I went to Pratt Institute for eighteen months. We were running around in motorcycle jackets doing art things. I used to make huge drawings and then burn them in public. People would ask, "Are you a witch?"

JACK FRITSCHER: You do dabble in the occult.

CAMILLE: I wasn't occult, exactly. Actually, I was so psychic as a child, I had no idea other people weren't. So I had trouble communicating. Like, I'd sit with someone and I'd say, "I know all this about you. Why don't you know this about me?" My parents were very careful not to let me know I was bizarre. I went to Catholic school and freaked out the nuns.

JACK: I know that experience.

ROBERT OPEL: 'You're a Catholic?

JACK: Once upon a time.

CAMILLE: Almost everybody I know who is a lapsed Catholic is really interesting. Robert Mapplethorpe was raised Catholic.

JACK: I did a survey on people selling drugs in San Francisco, and almost every dealer was, or is, a priest or was in the seminary. Amazing what religion does to people.

CAMILLE: It's the ritual. Catholics used to have fabulous ritual, but they've blown it. Robert [Opel] and I went to Mass just to see what a mess they made of it. When I was a kid, I used to sit in the library and get off reading about the martyrs. This one was burned at the stake. This one had her teeth pulled out by Roman soldiers. I used to play games with other kids. We would play "Martyr." We would tie some kid up to a tree and pretend we were burning him up.

JACK: *The Roman Martyrology* was my introduction to S&M. I was in the seminary for ten years. I went in when I was fourteen.

OPEL: Oh, my God! We should sue the Catholic Church in a class-action suit for what they did to you all.

JACK: Scratch a faggot these days and get a Catholic.

CAMILLE: Well, the more esoteric ones, people like you and Mapplethorpe and me who are into more exotic trips.

JACK: I think of myself as a progressive Catholic, not lapsed. Modernized. Catholicism actually taught reincarnation until the fourth century, when Rome decided it was too complicated for people to understand.

CAMILLE: The Church used sex as a handle. By taking sex away from people, they gained power over them.

OPEL: Control freaks.

JACK: What I find ironic is that the Church suddenly jumped ahead four or five centuries from the past and tried to contemporize itself in 1962. Here it's 1979, and they're still stuck in 1962 singing "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore," which isn't contemporary anymore.

OPEL: Like the pope should have Camille come in and perform during High Mass.

JACK: What kind of poetry are you writing these days?

CAMILLE: I have a musical background. I do poetry readings. I write poetry with melody, with structure.

OPEL: She writes lyrics.

CAMILLE: I have a tape you should probably hear. (*Inaudible aside to photographer*) My hair looks hideous today.

OPEL: You know how weird you are about pictures.

JACK: David, get some shots from the other side.

CAMILLE: Some people photograph fabulously. I have a traveling eye.

OPEL: You have a roving eye.

CAMILLE: Ha! I work my eyes during a shoot. I wrote a poem about being photographed. It's called "A Moment Embodied." I have a friend in New York who used to take pictures of me when I was doing drawings and he got fabulous stills out of it because I was moving.

JACK: Jim Stewart has taken great photos of you. We knew each other in the Midwest and then moved out here. Not together, though he lived with me. He's really bloomed in San Francisco.

CAMILLE: He's good to work with. I can't believe how many gay photographers there are now

OPEL: My God, we're all sitting in the middle of a happening.

JACK: Revolution. Liberation.

OPEL: Celebration.

CAMILLE: Sex in the sheets. Sex in the streets. All photographers have to do is aim and focus, there's so much happening that's never been seen before.

JACK: Fill me in some on your career as a woman performing for gay men.

OPEL: Fags and fag hags.

CAMILLE: Shut up, Robert. I liked Jim Morrison a lot. My attitude on stage has been compared to him. Gay men are fabulous audiences. Bette Midler and Liza Minnelli both had great success singing at the Continental Baths in some hotel. In New York. Where was it?

JACK: The Ansonia Hotel. Midler's piano man was Barry Manilow.

CAMILLE: The first band I played in was at St. Mark's Church, Folk City. We were prepunk. Because we wore leather jackets, they billed us as a fifties revival group. I'm not punk. Punk is done by kids. I try to take a point of view of someone who knows something instead of all that posturing kind of shit. I played at the Bottom Line, and also at the Mineshaft.

OPEL: Everyone's "played" at the Mineshaft.

CAMILLE: I was way ahead of everybody. That's why gay men like me. They're very progressive. In New York, I wasn't making much money, but I was like the pioneer. I broke ground for other performers. I opened CBGB's. Patti Smith had never set foot in there. She's very big now Hit records.

JACK: Perhaps Patti is more mainstream, like Mapplethorpe, while you and Opel here are performing within the gay subculture.

OPEL: We're going commercial, too.

CAMILLE: Robert is the gentleman who's now managing my career. I've got a new single due out and I've also published a book with my drawing and writing.

JACK: You're being managed by the guy whose dick has been seen by more people...

OPEL: Isn't that a strange compliment to pay, a very interesting comment about our society, where a man can become a celebrity by taking off his clothes.

CAMILLE: Everyone has a funny story about their reaction that night.

OPEL: It's like a Möbius. I'm destined to be always running nude past the TV screen forever and ever and ever.

JACK: You're being beamed, all scrambled, out into space, right behind *I Love Lucy* reruns. No wonder other planets won't contact us when we keep sending them signals like this.

OPEL: You're very good.

CAMILLE: I've read other interviews you've done. That's why I'm letting you do this.

OPEL: I'm convinced all this is going to have a space ending. That space-men are going to land. I get this way when I get dusted.

CAMILLE: Anyone want some more wine? Some more grass? I probably never will be mainstream. People are not ready for me. Well, gay men are. As a matter of fact, a lot of straight guys are more uptight sexually than gay guys, because there are more taboos and shit that to them threatens their "masculinity."

OPEL: We're just more open to outrageous stuff, and we always want more.

JACK: Right here in Fey Way you give everybody more than they bargain for. Drawings, paintings, photographs, performance art. I thought displaying Larry Hunt in a cage as a living sculpture was a nice touch.

OPEL: As long as it's erotic.

CAMILLE: That's the thing about gayness. It's like part of a super ability to be open and receptive. The ability to go beyond what you're told. That's why I can communicate with gay men. With straight people, it's like I pick up the phone and there's nobody to talk to. It's very definitely the actual sexuality that makes gay people more open about their feelings than straights.

OPEL: You can fuck your way to a higher consciousness.

JACK: Do you get much flak from women about your behavior?

CAMILLE: You mean because I have sex with gay men in places like the Mineshaft? (*Laughs.*) It's a very odd thing about me, my personality, and my work. I'm surprised I have so much backing from women who see me perform. They seem to understand what I'm doing. I think women who are running around being "liberated" are going about freedom in a dumb way, with no sense of humor about it. Those women's groups are soon deadly serious. They're missing the party. I like to share things with people. Artistic interaction is very important. I like Paris in the twenties, when people inspired one another the way Robert and I inspire each other.

JACK: The way Mapplethorpe and Patti inspire each other, and Opel and Mapplethorpe inspire each other.

CAMILLE: Symbiosis. We inspire each other. Then writers and critics come along and mix it all up some more.

OPEL: What Camille is singing about is the celebration, which is now, not about the revolution, which would be political rhetoric, but about the celebration which is, in fact, sexual and very innocent, so gay people—gay men, particularly—relate right away to that kind of celebratory art. They are fans, because they understand the message right away.

JACK: So all the gay art that is happening now really has a lot of support from within the community that sees itself in art, out of the closet, legitimized by art, finally, at long last?

OPEL: Exactly. And once gays get it, then it can go out to the straight mainstream culture.

JACK: Like disco. EVERYBODY: *Ughh!*

OPEL: Camille's message is it's okay to sing and talk about men fucking in celebration of themselves.

CAMILLE: Right. Actually, the sex I sing about is sex mostly men do now, but anybody could do that kind of sex. Here I am, a woman, a case in point. I can do anything a man can do, except get a blowjob in the john.

JACK: And I thought a kiss on the hand was quite continental.

CAMILLE: Very good.

JACK: So you don't get much feminist flak?

CAMILLE: No. They seem to like the way I swing free. A couple of women did fabulous interviews with me. They also saw me perform. They understood exactly what I was doing. I said on the radio the other day, some straight guys get real upset, other straight guys get real turned on. A lot of gay women really like my stuff.

JACK: David, can you get a couple more shots?

CAMILLE: My hair looks awful. No one in New York understands San Francisco. They know something is happening out here. They think I came out West to become an Earth Mother and wear granny gowns and flowers in my hair.

OPEL: There's so many New Yorkers migrating out here.

JACK: That's causing a problem.

CAMILLE: What's that?

JACK: The Manhattanization of San Francisco. New Yorkers are not popular here. Mapplethorpe runs up against that a lot.

OPEL: Because he's so New York. His work is more approachable than he is.

JACK: He's shy.

CAMILLE: I'm not. What I should do now is play my new single for you.

Robert Opel's openings at Fey Way, displaying new Mapplethorpes, drew ever larger crowds. To this date, in all the listings of Mapplethorpe's shows, the very important Fey Way exhibitions are omitted, most likely by oversight.

Mapplethorpe made sales through Opel.

Edward De Celle, one of Robert Mapplethorpe's main gallery representatives in San Francisco, attended all the shows at Fey Way. "I can't fathom," De Celle said, "why the Fey Way shows were not listed. The shows in Chicago, at about the same time, at the gallery called In a Plain Brown Wrapper, which was avant as Fey Way, are listed. Opel's was a legitimate, alternative gallery."

And ultimately a killing ground.

As a performance artist, Robert Opel “did” San Francisco the way he had “done” Los Angeles. He appeared outrageously costumed controversially whenever and wherever he might make a social comment. When former supervisor Dan White was tried and found guilty of manslaughter in the assassination of San Francisco’s mayor George Moscone and gay supervisor Harvey Milk, the city erupted, on the evening of May 21, 1979, into the White Night Riot. Thousands of gays, angered by the light sentence given to Dan White, a job jumper who had been both a fireman and a cop, stormed City Hall and burned several police cars in a battle that ran till dawn.

White’s defense was that he was high on junk food and was not fully responsible for shooting the mayor and the supervisor, both of whom were shot, sources say, deliberately in the crotch as well as the body. White’s “Twinkie Defense” earned him a slight prison sentence. In October 1985, Dan White committed suicide sitting in his car in his closed garage.

Or was it suicide?

Robert Opel, while the White trial was front-page news, costumed himself as a character called “Gay Justice.” In front of City Hall, Opel performed a mock trial with another performance actor garbed as an undercover cop. Opel called the piece, “The Trial of Dan White.”

The meter was running down on Opel’s fifteen minutes of fame.

On Sunday evening, July 8, 1979, three weeks after the audio recording, two white gunmen walked into the Fey Way Gallery, 1287 Howard Street, SoMa, and demanded money from Robert Opel, Camille O’Grady, Anthony Rogers, and a fourth, unidentified person. The gunmen carried a sawed-off shotgun and an automatic weapon. Opel said none of them had any money. The man with the shotgun pointed it at Camille’s head and said, “Give us the money or I’ll kill her.”

Opel, the man who had streaked the 1974 Oscars said, “Fine. Kill us au

The guy with the automatic fired a shot into a painting.

Opel yelled, “Get out of my space!”

They dragged him to his apartment behind the gallery.

Camille heard the shouting

Opel, always fast of tongue, argued with them.

“We’ll blow your head off.”

“You’ll have to. There’s no money here.”

Camille heard the shots.

She heard Opel’s body hit the floor.

The gunmen fled.

The robbery began around 9:00 P.M. Opel was pronounced dead at San Francisco General at 10:40 P.M.

Round up the usual suspects.

Speculation has never stopped.

Were the murderers really robbers? Were they after money? Did they think Opel sold drugs out of Fey Way? Were they undercover cops fed up with Opel's constant performance assault? When everybody's fucking everybody, who knows exactly who's getting fucked?

"I think," Robert Mapplethorpe later said, "Opel was shot by critics disguised as gunmen."

"That's not funny."

At least it put an end to Robert Oplethorpe.

Look at Robert Mapplethorpe's startling 1985 photograph, *Der Schuss*, a close-up of a hand firing a Smith and Wesson revolver.

The photographer shot at the same instant the finger pulled the trigger.

Gunfire spews like ejaculation.

The moment is so perfect that the viewer's senses short-circuit.

The eye can hear the gunshot.

Mapplethorpe, ever obsessed with guns, banging for bucks, regarded Opel's exit, in a mix of awe and envy, as a hard act to follow.

At the height of AIDS terror, when a New York couple tied themselves together, naked, and jumped from their high-rise apartment, gay men thought uncivilized thoughts and played out alternatives nice safe people keep to themselves.

If the public watches public dying then why not public sex?

SCENARIO: Interior. Night. Establishing shot. Two men, naked, kneel kneecaps to kneecaps. Mirror images. Bodies oiled. Erect. Grunting noises. One hands the other a pistol and then picks up a pistol himself. They grunt and mirror. The camera moves in slowly, as slowly as the two men, each stroking the other's body, moving the pistols up between them, intertwining arms the way a bride and groom intertwine arms to drink their wedding champagne, gun barrels provoking grunts, huffs of breath, eyes wide open, cold steel barrels, each equally parting the other's lips, parting the other's bared teeth, looking down the barrels at the other's hand, into the other's eyes, biting down, sucking the barrel, fingers on the triggers, hands on rampant cocks, eyeball to eyeball countdown, the click-click of the unloaded pistols metallic under the animal roar as both shoot their loads up the belly and chest of the other.

Sex.

Death.

Art.

“Never let’s become ordinary to each other.”

“THIEVES KILL GALLERY OWNER, GET \$5.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*, Tuesday, July 10, 1979