

TAKE 18

1982: EXCLUSIVE PROPHECY! MAPPLETHORPE ON CENSORSHIP!

**“We will have Fascism in America,
but we will call it Americanism.”**

—John Dos Passos

By the summer of 1982, Robert Mapplethorpe had already felt the sting of censorship. Within the homosexual community, he found censorship of his work and the work of other photographers not only intolerable, but inexcusable.

When photographer Jim Wigler’s “Black Leather Death” show was hung at the very popular bar, The Eagle, in San Francisco, Robert was furious when queenstream gays pulled the Wigler exhibit down from the walls of The Eagle.

He empathized with Wigler because that summer Mapplethorpe was already experiencing problems of censorship as he entered his high period of international gallery, museum, and book presentations.

Robert confided that he expected some resistance to his leatherstream photographs from artstream straights, but he never expected it from within his own gay fraternity.

Robert was infuriated by judgments of his work when the judgments were not aesthetic, but were “moral” or “politically correct.”

He foresaw that the censorship of Wigler was virtually the same as censorship of his own work:

That summer of 1982 was strained and anxious.

Gay politics had produced a *faux*-Nazi group who ruled pontifically about what was or was not politically correct.

The trashing of the Wigler exhibition was their Kristallnacht: very like the unexpected night Hitler’s Brown Shirts attacked Jewish shops all across a surprised Germany.

The irony to Robert and to me was that gay liberation was supposed to set people free.

He resented this new level of repression: gay art censored by gay politics.

To him, it was a maddening irony.

Four years before, at San Francisco's Fey Way Gallery, before Robert Opel was murdered, the gay crowd had adored Mapplethorpe.

He did not like the fickle turn of the queenstream against the masculine-identified leatherstream. In addition, that summer of '82 marked the end of the liberation celebration of the seventies. Ugly whispers had turned to uglier talk and the talk was fanned by the media.

Gay men were sick and dying from an unnamed plague. Before acquired immune deficiency syndrome was called AIDS, it was singled out as gay-related immune deficiency (GRID). That summer of 1982, the nameless dread was dubbed, simply, gay cancer. People were beginning to be scared sexless. Death, unrecognized previously by gay men, was the stuff of novels, movies, and photographers like Wigler and Mapplethorpe.

Denial of death, of course, ran rampant. And no one denied it more than Mapplethorpe. He had resisted me on health matters since 1979, and he was not about to cave in "because a few faggots had sex with aliens."

That summer, a tsunami of a sea change surged through the tidal basins of gay pop culture in New York and San Francisco. A real, palpable fear of death led to the censoring of actual sex acts into what would later be called "safe sex." As physical sex was circumscribed, so was the expression of sex in art.

What shifted so quickly on the fault line in San Francisco on a physical level shifted even faster on the aesthetic.

If AIDS had never appeared, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jim Wigler, and the entirety of the gay arts and politics movements would never have suffered censorship in bars, galleries, or the U.S. Congress.

Who knows to what heights of acceptance gay liberation, born at Stonewall, June 27, 1969, would have reached in art and politics by century's end, had a virus, conveniently biblical, not spread a plague that fundamentalists exploited for their own ends?

Robert, always encouraged me to write about him and about what interested him, because he himself was no writer. He insisted that I defend Jim Wigler in print because he was seeing yet another alter ego in Wigler.

I had been writing about censorship for years. Robert never asked a writer, not even Patti Smith or Eddie White, to write without trying to manipulate. Mapplethorpe's sudden interest in censorship seemed self-absorbed, but it was one of the only times he ever really flexed himself inside a social problem.

Actually, that summer of 1982, seven years before he died, Robert gave some clue as to how he would have handled the posthumous trial of his work in Cincinnati.

Never forget: (1) that exhibition and famous trial occurred *after* Mapplethorpe died; and (2) Mapplethorpe himself *never ever* received a penny from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 1982, I was editing for Michael Redman, a straight publisher, a tabloid I created for him called *The California Action Guide*. Redman, successful with his straight Bay Area tabloid, *The Pleasure Guide*, thought he might enter the fray of gay publishing by presenting a homomale editorial view alternate to the queenstream of the *Advocate*, the feminist take of the *Sentinel*, and the lesbianarama of the *Bay Area Reporter*.

The straight Redman was more courageous than gay publishers who had caved in without a fight to feminist gay men driven by radical lesbians demanding that gay male culture correct its course politically.

Redman welcomed my controversial Mapplethorpe-inspired piece on the censorship of photographic art in the once-united gay community.

In the August 1982 *California Action Guide*, I presented Robert's thoughts combined with mine, using five of Wigler's black-and-white photographs as Exhibit A.

Robert was expert at damage control.

He knew the fight against censorship would raise tempers. It was safer for him to fight censorship using the photographs of Jim Wigler, because any backlash would hit the beleaguered Wigler, not Mapplethorpe. Robert the publicity hound deplored anything that would hurt his sales.

I had to juggle the needs, agenda, and egos of both Wigler and Mapplethorpe.

Before the article was printed, I read it over the phone to Robert, who allowed his name to be mentioned only once, as a kind of internal signature.

This was the way he had me front for him from the beginning of our relationship. Every artist, to remain beloved by the public, and not to seem temperamental, needs agents of various kinds to front for him. As a writer, I have always enjoyed championing individual rights. In light of the global fame, controversy, and trial that happened after Robert died and was unavailable for comment, I am thankful that I had been able to engage him on the subject of censorship. Did anyone else?

If he was using me, he could use me till he used me up, because we were lovers and then friends, and he gave me as good as he got.

My feature defending Jim Wigler was called “Take It to the Limit One More Time.” That title, like the title of my novel, *Some Dance to Remember*, came from the Eagles’ album *Hotel California*.

The Eagles were, to my mind and Robert’s, the group that best articulated California’s 1970s life-in-the-fast-lane style.

Anyway, next to the “Take It” title in bold print, I laid in a very aggressive photograph of Gunnar Robinson in full leather, holding in his black-gloved hand a long knife. I intended the article to be as aggressive as the photographs of both Wigler and Mapplethorpe.

The text itself wound around photographs of Robinson holding the point of the knife against the belly of a man wearing a black leather jacket and hood, and tied with rope to a fence in a deserted place.

Robinson’s gloved hand pushed on the man’s throat, forcing his head back and his belly out very vulnerably.

The other three photographs were execution poses: Robinson using a gun pointed at the bound and hooded man.

The hood made the victim seem very universal.

These purposely *True Detective* magazine type tableaux of a leatherman killing another leatherman were provocative: many gay men were victims of killers from their own kind during the seventies.

William Friedkin caught the fear quite accurately in his virtual documentary, *Cruising*.

Wigler has indicated that while these photographs could be considered an homage to Friedkin, they are more truly inspired by real gay fears and fantasies.

No one in the straightstream should be surprised that Terminal-Sex, Death-Talk, Snuff-Trip FANTASIES provide continuing Erotic Edge to a subculture whose very lives have historically always been threatened.

“Kill the fags!”

When heard often enough, that phrase causes counterphobic behavior: a person acts out in psychodrama the things he fears most.

Robert, himself always fascinated by the erotic connection between love and death, related to Wigler’s photographs on both sexual and aesthetic levels. Mapplethorpe very much approved of Wigler’s work, despite its level of literal melodrama.

Actually, Robert enjoyed Wigler’s work with leathersex the same way he liked *Mandingo*’s take on interracial sex.

Robert seemed in his appreciation of Wigler a bit like Cocteau’s getting off sexually on Ken Russell. But, then, Robert was a New Yorker through and through, and Wigler was Californian.

Robert always gave us all that slightly superior East Coast edge, as if we others were living on the American frontier.

Robert knew how to push people's buttons.

I pushed his back.

That's why we liked each other.

I could tell him no, enough, or yes.

So when Robert was leery about my printing one of his leathersex photographs with my Wigler article, I called him chicken.

Instead of a Mapplethorpe shot, I printed a full-page photograph by his New York rival, Arthur Tress, which I titled *Industrial Sex*.

The Tress image exhibits a man, blindfolded and gagged, sitting naked in a deconstructing factory amidst gauges, electric wires, and a big Bulova clock reading 3:45.

By the time I sat down to write "Take It to the Limit," the voice every writer hears in his head was a duet led by Robert Mapplethorpe.

A decade after the article appeared, the fight over Wigler was an uncanny foreshadowing of the Great Mapplethorpe Controversy in Cincinnati.

The "politically correct" queens of San Francisco behaved not unlike Jesse Helms and the Mapplethorpe prosecution.

The California Action Guide

August 1982

Take It to the limit One More Time!

**Cutting Through the "Politically Correct" Bullshit
About Wigler and Robinson's Consensual S&M
As New-Wave Performance Art-gasm...**

By Jack Fritscher

Enough of the queenly bullshit about the art of photographer Jim Wigler and his partner/model Gunnar Robinson! Righteous editorials in local "politically correct" gay rags have, indeed, gasped at the masculinist Wigler-Robinson images recently shown at The Eagle Bar, South of Market. It's not The Eagle's fault that some of their patrons have naugahyde minds under their leather caps. The Eagle was at first daring enough to exhibit the Wigler photographs. Too bad The Eagle knuckled under to the screaming minority who demanded that the "offensive" photographs be taken down.

Something is afoot in San Francisco that smacks of censorship by "Naugahyde Nazis" who figure that just because they take it up the ass they automatically qualify as critics of what's art and what's not. Have you

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ever met a know-it-all queen who didn't have a critique to dish out about "absolutely everything"?

VICTOR/VICTORIA VS. WIGLER/ROBINSON

Pauline Kael, in her May 3, 1982, *New Yorker* review of *Victor/Victoria*, found the movie rather repugnant: it pretended to be a broad-minded howl, but in fact was an insulting piece reaffirming standard middle-class sexual cliches. Kael finds it difficult to believe that homosexuals, who during the years we were despised, and developed for ourselves the compensatory myth that we had better taste than anyone else, could fall for so bad a film. Homosexual enthusiasm for *Victor/Victoria* by itself "should help debunk that myth": that being gay automatically makes a man a critic.

The lady's right: we've got a lot to learn about the essential differences between art and morality, between homosexuality and homomascularity, and especially between escapist entertainment that leaves your values alone and the intensity of art that changes you and your values by its mere existence.

SOCIETY'S OUTLAWS AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Homosexuals have traditionally been society's outlaws and the art world's avant-garde. What's happened to that wonderful, daring sensibility? Has the art of our subculture succumbed, the way the Marxists, etc. would have it, to the service of politics? MGM's logo, *Ars gratia artis*, art for art's sake, says it all: art is superior to politics and religion, and any bending of art to pump for politics or morality is a betrayal of art. Art is apolitical and amoral. Now that we are no longer outlaws, and that "gay is good," have we become so upscale middle-class that we begin to censor the S&M part of our subculture the way straights would censor our whole subculture (if they had their druthers, and if they could)?

Why must we prove to anyone that we're good little homosexuals?

Homosexuals used to experience shame. Now shame has shifted over to pride, if not outright, outrageous vanity. The shame, Kael says, was a snare; the vanity can be, too. And damned if it doesn't snap its petulant little wrist here at Jim Wigler's photographs, which depict real, valid, male sexuality boldly interpreted both through Robinson's docu-role and Wigler's aesthetic vision.

WIGLER'S STUDIO AIN'T CALLED RAW GRAPHICS FOR NOTHIN'

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In the 1980's, the world lives on the dark side of the moon: nuclear annihilation, urban terror, and "gay" cancer, wherein the word *gay* is enunciated by the media to sound like we invented it and are getting our just biblical desserts. The media also specifies distinctly "homosexual murders," but never uses the term *heterosexual murders*. Like it or not, we'll always be in a class by ourselves. "They" know we are. And we should be smart enough to stay distinct, making our "fine" distinctions a contribution to the wider society that seems capable of only obvious distinctions.

If homosexuality does not give us a freewheeling, parallax view on life, then we're failed faggots, for whom our sexual distinction is nothing more than genital calisthenics. We are set aside from the society at large for reasons more than sexual. For centuries, the philosophers, warriors, and artists who have shaped the "straight" world's history and tried to direct its stodgy mind-set have almost all been in our camp!

We will never be, and should never want to be, assimilated, except insofar as our human rights are concerned, into the homogenized vanilla of middle-class America. If we do, then we are lost, and they are more lost without us. No one knows what causes the gift of homosexuality. I suggest, in a Fundamentalist Nation, where people have Jesus whispering personally in their ears all the time, that we tell them that homosexuality is a vocation, a divine calling to a particular kind of life—no matter how you define "divine." Its rites and rituals, including especially the catharsis of S&M, are to be protected and nurtured, as all religions in America are.

Our rights include our specific right to be different. We are, in essence, philosophically, definitive existentialists running contrary to the sentimentalized sexual/parental morality of the American middle class. Naturally, if a homosexual does not understand that our different mode of body-sex inspires a different mode of head thought, then he's not going to be capable of understanding the Wigler-Robinson aesthetic statement.

GUNNAR THE BARBARIAN

A homosexual trying to pose in the drag of middle-class values is a traitor to homomascularity, which is as barbarically primitive as it is tenderly pure in its consensual code of things masculine. The art of homomascularity, which is homosexuality theorized and put into practice on a man-to-man level, becomes increasingly difficult in an increasingly feminist society.

It is the very virtue of the Wigler photography that angers and frightens brainwashed feminist men. The Wigler view is too butch.

The word *virtue* comes from the Latin *vir*, the masculine noun for *man*. Homomascularity's specific virtue is the same virtue as the Wigler

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photographs: a manly daring to exhibit the existential vision of eros and thanatos, of love and death, in ways politically correct feminists haven't the balls to acknowledge.

As long as there is a feminist movement, which ironically creates that contradiction in terms, a feminist man, then we need a masculinist movement, with statements like Wigler's, until the day when there are not feminists and masculinists, but only humanists.

Let model Gunnar Robinson murder his "victim." Beauty, unlike morality, which is relative, is absolute. Murder, which is usually immoral, can still be performed as an aesthetic act to be judged by the rules of art: is the ritual, actual murder beautifully executed or not?

One thinks of the pure performance art of the suicide of leathermanwriter, Yukio Mishima. The Japanese film *In the Realm of the Senses*, with full Oriental rather than Occidental sensibility, tackles murder as a beautiful act of artful, ritualized passionate love. Pasolini's *Salo*, an artistic film that soared beyond conventional morality, received the same queenly drubbing as the Wigler photographs. Few perceived Pasolini's powerful death images as a metaphor of fundamentalist fascism. Instead, their literal minds watched the screen and they ran to the exits with their shit coming between them and their Calvins.

DEAFENED BY DISCO AND BLIND IN THE DARK

Flannery O'Connor defended her southern gothic grotesque vision of the world in this way: "To the almost deaf, you have to shout; and to the almost blind, you have to write in very large letters." Under the din of disco and The Eagle's low lights, the fact that Wigler succeeded in getting a rise out of his audience is proof positive that his raw graphics are more art than jerkoff entertainment.

Entertainment photography, such as the sentimentalized work of Colt Studios, has a definite and pleasing place in our subculture. And precisely because of the sugary finesse of Colt's Barbizon—*Gentleman's Quarterly*—muscle mag subjects and airbrushed style, we must also look at our subculture's other, darker side to bring in the balance. Wigler's daring advent has received much the same reception as the first showings of Robert Mapplethorpe's evil leather photography, or the first critical reactions to the gritty masculinist pointillism of the incomparable artist Rex.

Artists, because they *are* what avant-garde *means*, are always ahead of their times. Wigler, in the eighties, clues us in that the riotous nineties are almost here. Artists are the Road Warriors of tomorrow today.

Entertainment photography, say, fashion entertainment *à la* Bruce Weber, is a valid, but cozy-safe experience. Entertainment reinforces our values, makes us feel good about the way we are and the way our world is. Nothing wrong with that; but it's limited and limiting. Art, on the other hand, disturbs us from smug ideas about ourselves and others. Entertainment reinforces who we are. Art challenges who we are and what we might become. Entertainment makes us more of the same. Art changes us. But when people are afraid of change (and that is most of us most of the time; and death is the Big Change), we kick and scream and try to censor the alternate vision thrust upon us when we would rather not acknowledge or accept its truth, but remain rather supposedly safe as we are. Entertainment plays to the superficial self. Art surprises the self by peeling back the layers of the deeper soul.

Our seers are also our soothsayers. Our photographers tell us their truths. What Wigler sees in his visions he speaks in his photographs.

LOVE AND DEATH AND THE WHOLE DAMNED THING

Art is love and death and the whole damned thing. The murderer in me has wanted to kill my lover in the heat of blissful passion, so that in the mix of eros and thanatos, we could transcend out of finite time together forever. The murderer in me has also wanted to kill my lover out of jealousy. The first is a grand, operatic, passionate motive. The second, cheap and petty. There, in premeditated print, it's said. But haven't all of us committed little murders in our hearts? Haven't we all enjoyed, at least as spectators, voyeurs, connoisseurs, the sports and the adventures that put life at risk of death? We don't like to acknowledge the outlaw, disobedient, unbridled side of ourselves. We don't like to live on the existential cutting edge of truth when we can retreat, like young colts, into sentimentalized romanticism. We pretend we're Butch and Sundance, when we're really Frankie and Johnny.

We don't like to be reminded of our own mortality. We live our lives spending and getting, only to be reminded by a larger-than-life character like Tennessee Williams's Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, who says, "We traipse around buying up everything in the hope that by chance we'll buy eternal life." The denial of death causes a great deal of dysfunction when it comes to confronting art that is about mortality. Resurrection is what makes Christianity such a big corporate franchise.

Wigler, in the best tradition of "The Artist as Seer," is leading us into forbidden territory: levels of passion we know exist, but don't want to

acknowledge, because *mommie dearest* always forbade the wire hangers of stylized S&M ritual. This is not to say that the Wigler-Robinson entente is a pair of murderers. They may not, as individual, private persons, even agree with any of this. The point is that an artist's work also exists, really and viscerally, independent of the artist. Art is a mirror. Art means as much, or as little, as the viewer or reader is able to absorb. At any rate, Wigler keeps his fine art photography, raw as the stylized subject matter may be, far from cheap-shot sensationalism. Only the fundamentalist, retrosensitive, literal mind could object to his artfulness. His "look" is one of ritualized confrontation with the concept of death-as-orgasm, *le petit morte* of French existentialism.

DEATH AS A HARD-ON

Sexual activity has two sides to it: flavors of attraction and flavors of repulsion, flavors of hard and soft, love and aggression, personal and impersonal, anima and animus. There is the same reciprocity with mortality. Does not denial heighten feeling and curiosity? Does not the inevitability of death heighten the excitement of the stakes of the daily game? Is there a person alive who isn't deeply curious about what dying will be for him? Is there a man alive who would not like his dying full of excitement?

Is there a man out there who really wouldn't like a date with Gunnar Robinson?

Wilhelm Reich pointed out that the culmination of sexual excitement peaking in orgasm is a way of getting out of ourselves and into the universe. Orgasm, like art, takes us from the world of the known into the world of the unknown, experiencing our unboundedness for a brief time (even though tied in heavy bondage), giving us a hint of what our dying might be.

When we have orgasmic experiences, we are saying, "I let go. I give. I risk. I die. I melt. I become one. I go to the cosmos. I surrender for a few moments to the unknown." Too many people have learned not to say, "I love you" or "I wish I could die" or "I feel this love as a melting into the universe, like dying."

When was the last time you crawled out of bed on all fours, exhausted with lovemaking, saying to yourself, "I could die happy right now." Orgasm of this kind is obviously different from garden-variety ejaculation.

CENSORS EXPOSE THEIR OWN INNERMOST HEARTS

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Wigler and Robinson dare to bare themselves, at least in their personae as artists, with their strong images of orgasmic love and death. Liberation has let them learn to know how to feel it, to say it, to communicate to us in the photographs the very essence of orgasmic bonding between homomale men, for whom sex is not play, but is rite and right. For this, they should be censored by the very retrograde, politically correct, gay fundamentalist minds who need to receive the message of their artful point the most?

Censors, if the truth be known, should be very careful what they censor. Censorship is a very self-revealing thing. People always tend to censor in others the thing that in their secret heart-of-hearts they fear is the real truth of their hidden selves that they think nobody knows. After Anita Bryant came out so strongly against homosexuality, was it ironic or what that a few years later she divorced her husband allegedly because he was gay? Was the lady seeking to control in society what she could not control at home?

Once a man is not afraid to confront his own self, he can recognize the aesthetic, human, amoral validity of the artist's images. He also begins to understand that a man can deal, not dysfunctionally, with an essential passion—such as his literal curiosity and fear of eros and thanatos—only after he has fulfilled that journey, that fantasy, that rite of passage on some psychologically authentic level, such as is triggered by a grab-ass photo that knocks him out at The Eagle Bar.

Wigler should be congratulated for opening one of the last closet doors. The Eagle Bar, perhaps, should not listen to the laddies who protest a bit too much.

Robert liked the article, but the experience of intramural censorship soured him on the gay community and its ignorance of art. He was getting enough grief from straight gallery owners and publishers who wanted him to clean up his act.

“Besides,” Robert said, “gays never buy art anyway. All they want is something pretty or something nasty to jerk off to.”

For all the controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's media recognition as an erotic artist, I doubt if anyone has ever really masturbated to a Mapplethorpe photograph.

