

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN: CENSORSHIP, GAY HISTORY, & MAPPLETHORPE

by Jack Fritscher, Ph.D.

Robert Mapplethorpe (November 4, 1946-March 9, 1989)

Not knowing that seven of his photographs were about to be put on trial by a joint-venture of political and religious-right iconoclasts, Robert Mapplethorpe died March 9, 1989, approximately 100 days before the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. pressured by the the illegal mix of church and state, canceled his exhibition *The Perfect Moment* in July, 1989. The 175-photograph solo show, organized originally by Janet Kardon when she was director at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, had played successfully at The University of Pennsylvania (December 1988) and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art (February 1989). The seven photographs that would cause the arrest on April 7, 1990, of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center director, Dennis Barrie, had been publicly displayed for twelve years in museums, galleries, and books before they were put on trial in Ohio in September, 1990. In mid-March, 1989, about a week after Mapplethorpe died of AIDS at age 42, fundamentalist marketer of the self-styled "American Family Association," the Protestant Reverend Donald E. Wildmon, saw a museum catalog featuring Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* which was a photograph of the Crucifixion, the highest icon of Christianity, immersed in a yellow liquid.

In April, conservative Republican politicians, largely from tobacco states, and hungry for fresh election issues, discovered that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had funded \$15,000, through the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to a group installation that included *Piss Christ*. In May, 1989, Republicans, led by conservative Jesse Helms, the elderly Inquisitional senator from North Carolina, denounced on the Senate floor any grant of an NEA federal subsidy that was not censored according to a "national arts policy" against elitist blasphemy, sex, and violence. Proscriptive censorship rules: "Thou shalt not look." Descriptive censorship says: "Decide if you want to look." Proscriptive censorship regards art as a cultural barometer of moral decline.

Also at play in this religious censorship of Mapplethorpe's particular art is the traditional antipathy of Protestant Calvinism and American Puritanism against the iconography and art of Roman Catholicism. Though Mapplethorpe was for a long-time non-practicing, he was a life-long Catholic as was his intimate peer, Andy Warhol. Both were very much influenced by western culture's Catholic-identified sculpture and painting. Mapplethorpe died a Catholic, and his photographs which he designed, he said, as "little altars" fall distinctly in matter and form within Catholic traditions of incarnation (his faces), transubstantiation (his flowers), martyrdom (his figures), mysticism (his fetishes), and ritual (his formalism).

Demonizing the NEA, the lucrative fund-raising televangelism of censorship stimulated visceral politicizing among the "religious right" who typically worship through the television screen at home. The "secular" Helms was the model for the religious take-over fight against the NEA's spending taxpayers' money on "perverted, deviant, pornographic art." In June, 1989, Christina Ohr-Cahill, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, suddenly claimed the Serrano case had made the \$30,000 NEA funding of the first posthumous Mapplethorpe show a political issue. Christina Ohr-Cahill did not use her position to defend art against the *reich* of the right nor did she explain why her board at the Corcoran agreed to censor Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of faces, flowers, figures, and fetishes. She surrendered to pressure from the constitutionally forbidden mixed forces of church and state and canceled *The Perfect Moment*. She lost the strategic first battle in the revival of the art-religion culture war that would escalate from Mapplethorpe's single-frame photographs to new censorship ratings of movies, television, audio recordings, and attempts to censor the neonate Internet where thousands of Mapplethorpe

photographs exist on CD-Rom and cyberspace.

Ohr-Cahill permitted avowed heterosexuals to trample the constitutionally perfect moments of principles set in the 45 words of the First Amendment added to the United States' *Constitution* in 1791. Ohr-Cahill was virtually lynched by the art world and sent to exile in Florida. American censorship, in particular, thrives on hot burning issues such as abortion, homosexual human rights, school prayer, and assisted suicide at the expense of the cool principles of free speech, free choice, and universal human rights. The artist Mapplethorpe was a homosexual whose career was created, mentored, and maintained by many women before and after and despite Ohr-Cahill.

If the esthetic Mapplethorpe photo-documentaries of leather culture and male-male sadomasochism had been shot by a woman or a heterosexual male, the exact work would not have been integrally censored *per se*. The artist's homosexuality was keystone to his work's vulnerability. Censorship has a pecking order. While women are censored more than men, homosexuals are censored more than women. If Mapplethorpe's work had reinforced nonthreatening straight stereotypes of sissy-identified homosexuality or female-identified drag, he would never have been denounced on the floor of the U.S. senate. Senator Helms objected most specifically to Mapplethorpe's aestheticizing 1970s' images of ancient, traditional, and finally uncloseted homoeroticism that revealed a culture of desire, sensuality, beauty, and--most shockingly--of a homomascularity, deeper than straight American pop culture had imagined.

In the 1980s, HIV-driven fear--on the right, on the left, straight and gay--censored, silenced, revised, and denied virtually every word, image, and thought quintessential not only to traditional masculine-identified homosocial culture but also to the historically correct and true nature of the golden age of gay liberation in the 1970s. The Reagan regency (1980-1988), continuing into the Republican presidency of George Bush (1988-1992), perceived any Lincoln-esque freeing of gay human rights as antithetical to the slogan "family values."

The fall of the Berlin Wall and of communism in the autumn of 1989 happened on a time-line half-way between Mapplethorpe's death and the homophobic art trial in Cincinnati. With the cold-war enemy suddenly evaporated on the outside, U.S. politicians, religionists, and the politically correct searched for new villains on the inside of American society as Nixon-aided McCarthyism had done in the 1950s. Within days of a shocked, suddenly disarmed President Bush (televised slack-jawed, live, on CNN) watching the Berlin Wall come down, the quiet little June-to-October blip over Mapplethorpe and the NEA hit the media radar. Conservative television talk-show host, and virtual presidential candidate, Pat Buchanan directly equated the new culture war to the old cold war. Liberal television talk-show host Phil Donahue exemplified the media charge against the scarifying clans of anti-intellectual censors protecting the all-purpose mantra of "family values." (Soon after, Donahue's intelligent 30-year television career was canceled.) All sides invoked Mapplethorpe's name as rallying cry in a culture war bigger than Mapplethorpe.

In June, 1989, on the night *The Perfect Moment* was canceled, the Washington, D. C. arts community projected Robert Mapplethorpe's most explicit photographs, including self-portraits of the artist, to billboard size on the outside walls of the Corcoran. The person who was Robert Mapplethorpe disappeared into an anti-censorship symbol. *The Perfect Moment* exhibition itself opened a few days later at The Washington Project for the Arts near the nation's Capitol building and the office of Senator Jesse Helms. (The controversial photographs were displayed--in a positive act of "descriptive censorship"--separately in the "Blue Room," the final gallery at the upstairs rear of the WPA.) Mapplethorpe's symbolic fame may have come from "the perfect enemy," censorship; but his esthetic reputation rests on his work. Ironically, Robert Mapplethorpe himself, in life, never received a cent of NEA money.

Martin Mawyer, President of the "Christian Action Network," nevertheless, in his anti-NEA agenda tried to set up a display of sexually explicit "offensive" art by Mapplethorpe, Serrano, and mystic-photographer Joel-Peter Witkin in the Capitol Building. Mawyer was banned from the building before he opened, and then was closed down by House Speaker Thomas Foley after fifteen minutes of fame in another location. Mawyer claimed he was being censored; Foley ruled Mawyer was violating house rules on lobbying in the Capitol.

The masculine-identified homosexual, Robert Mapplethorpe, was never politically correct, nor accepted by the dominant lesbian and gay culture. Gay pop culture, which never considered the elegant Mapplethorpe an erotic photographer, usually censored and censored him on issues of race, sex, gender, capitalism, and esthetics as well as his refusal to live within the gay-male ghetto which was becoming an HIV-positive and Marxist-positive lesbianizing commune in the 1980s even as communism was collapsing. The gay "artist whose vision is too peculiar or offensive," gay-photography journalist Dick Hasbany wrote in *The Advocate* in 1983, "is as suspect to the gay community as to any convention-ridden culture with things to lose." The more successful Mapplethorpe became in the straight international art world, the more the gay world of politically-correct conventions prevented the expression of his images in its neo-puritan culture. The morning after the all-night party of the 1970s, the gay press, in an HIV frenzy of reactionary *post hoc ergo propter hoc* censorship, "silenced" Mapplethorpe, the unrepentant photo-documentarian of the 1970s, by "black-listing" his images, and him as a personality, from its 1980s and 1990s magazine and newspaper pages.

The power-grid of "covert censorship" in the homosexual press which is perceived as the "gay male press" is--when vetted through real names and code names on mastheads--largely owned, published, and printed (ie. quite literally censored) by conservative straight white business-men and women with families; its words and images are mostly edited by feminists of several genders, races, classes, and agenda who took over gay-male publishing during a personnel gap caused by AIDS; its reporting and reviewing is written primarily by ghetto-identified homosexual males defined by little else than their heterophobic anti-masculinity. Such tripartite "Silencing," as a form of censorship, "occurs," Jacqueline Frost writes, "when speech is repressed by mechanisms other than the state." For instance, the self-styled "national American gay and lesbian news magazine," *The Advocate*, on the time-line of February 13, 1990, dismissed the lightning-bolt censorship of gay-shunned Mapplethorpe as no more than a "brouhaha."

What the diverse political, religious, and heterosexual censors of expression and art share worldwide with the politically-correct lesbian, gay, and feminist censors is a common fundamentalism that absolutizes that what seems literal to them cannot or should not be transcended in text or image by alternative ways of being human. In the U.S., local community censorship as a knee-jerk maneuver is standard as a folkmoot in southern states that lost the American Civil War which was fought over human rights and states' rights. Local battles in an age of high-tech communications sometimes quickly enter national debate. In spite of reactionary regional community standards, the United States Supreme Court, recognizing that regional isolation is technologically less and less defensible, in June, 1997, ruled to protect the national community standards of adult rights to the entirety of the First Amendment, especially in its protection of U. S. adult rights to the international community standards of the Internet.

The NEA was founded by an idealistic Congress in 1965 with an annual budget so tiny that it equaled the cost of one hour of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The NEA budget for 1989 was \$171 million--\$22 million less than what the Pentagon spends on military bands--and figures out at \$1.08 per American taxpayer per year. Philanthropic endowment of the arts has always been a ritual with its own discrimination, silencing, or censorship. Consumer boycotts are censorious acts against corporations that support controversial art through grants or sponsored advertising.

In 1992, in the New York exhibition titled *Scandal, Outrage, and Censorship*, Mapplethorpe, the American, was included with Austrian and German artists censored by the Nazis. Two of four Mapplethorpe *Perfect Moment* photographs carried in portfolio by North Carolina Senator Helms are "Man in Polyester Suit, 1980" showing a black man's uncircumcized penis protruding from his unzipped fly, and "Honey, 1976," a two-year-old child with her smock raised above her vagina. Mapplethorpe was renowned for his relaxed portraits of society children and celebrity children, yet the "Honey, 1976" outfall helped lead to the U.S. "Child Protection and Exploitation and Obscenity Enforcement Act of 1988," Public Law 100-690, section 7501-7526.

"The Child Protection Act" directly impacted adult entertainment generally through increased record-keeping which has forced into invisibility many *noir* photographers and *verite* videographers whose subjects are of legal age but are not the kinds of subjects who have multiple pieces of photo identification in their interesting, outlaw, underclass lives. Witness the censorship problems of the drug-and-HIV-themed feature film, the fictional *Kids* (1995). Through an over-zealous protection of children, who require common-sense protection, the art, the sociology, and the inherent eroticism of the camera is censored, because censors, like prohibitionists of, say, alcohol, never admit to the principle of *abusus non tollit usus*, that "the abuse of a thing should not take away the use of a thing."

All seven Mapplethorpe photographs put on trial in Cincinnati in 1990 were defended successfully by art scholar Janet Kardon and Jacquelynn Baas, director of the University Art Museum at Berkeley. They interpreted the images out of fundamental literalness into a formalist analysis as art understandable to the mythic "average American." (Absolutely analogous to American hetero culture not comprehending the legitimacy of Mapplethorpe's consensual sadomasochistic homosexuality was the infamous British prosecution of several men--in the the same period as the Mapplethorpe trial--for participating in consenting acts of male-male sadomasochism in the Spanner Case resolved in 1997.)

In late 1989, NEA Chair John Frohnmayer, to hold off the threatening censors, withdrew a \$10,000 grant from an AIDS art exhibit because the artist David Wojnarowicz wrote an essay for the show that Frohnmayer judged too political in the anti-Mapplethorpe climate. Frohnmayer also denied recommended grants to performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller. President Bush fired Frohnmayer because of pressure from viewers of the cable and satellite TV service "National Empowerment Television" which cross-fertilizes the religious right and the political right organizations and issues.

The NEA "loyalty oath," instigated by Senator Helms, which potential grant artists are required to sign, defines homoeroticism itself as obscene, thus effectively censoring gay or gay-related material from NEA funding. In 1994, the NEA was virtually dismantled by the conservative Republican congress which in July, 1997, proposed a final NEA budget of \$10 million dollars to be used to shut down the National Endowment for the Arts forever. Censorship is always a cautionary tale. For instance, both the NEA controversy and the financial and stress costs of the Cincinnati art trial of Dennis Barrie can lead other museum directors to self-censorship: why dare show a Robert Mapplethorpe when a photograph by a George Dureau or a Georgia O'Keefe is so safe.

Famous among other modern art trials, the 1990 Mapplethorpe case in Cincinnati was the first such prosecution of an art gallery in U.S. history. On April 7, 1990, the Contemporary Arts Center and its director, Dennis Barrie, were charged with two misdemeanor counts: pandering obscenity and the use of a minor in nude materials in a suit fueled by the "National Council Against Pornography" and its Cincinnati connection "Citizens for Community Values." The indictment cited, out of the 175 Mapplethorpe photographs in *The Perfect Moment*, two portraits, one of a boy nude ("Jesse McBride, 1976") and one of a girl with her genitals exposed ("Honey,

1976"), and five photographs depicting typical late 1970s homoerotic or sadomasochistic images: the signature self-portrait of Mapplethorpe with a whip inserted in his anus ("Self Portrait, 1978"), a duo of a man urinating in another man's mouth ("Jim and Tom, Sausalito, 1978"), a fisting shot of a man's arm inserted in another man's rectum, a close-up of a man with a finger inserted into the head of his penis, and a shot of a man with a cylinder inserted in his rectum.

Each mother of each child testified she was present when Mapplethorpe photographed her child; both mothers very much approved of him and his work. The prosecution's rebuttal witness, Judith Reisman, not only proved to be no art expert, but she also turned out to be the former research director of the "American Family Association" whose director, the Reverend Donald E. Wildmon, who began the Serrano-Mapplethorpe controversy, had paid her more than \$23,000 in 1989. The jury of four men and four women declared Mapplethorpe's work valid and serious art thus ending the trial on October 5, 1990. Cincinnati was the first and only legal challenge against Mapplethorpe's photographs which have shown in more than 100 solo exhibitions around the world.

Robert Mapplethorpe's many books of photography, as well as books written about the artist, continue to endure the bellweather censorship acted out privately in book stores and libraries. To counteract censorship and to protect his own work, Mapplethorpe founded The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation which in turn makes critical and criticized grants to the arts and to AIDS research. Hundreds of Mapplethorpe's photographs are in the permanent collections of more than 30 major museums throughout the world. In a BBC interview, Mapplethorpe said, "I captured a certain feeling about a certain time in a certain place--New York. And now it's gone." Some of his photography books are: *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, essays by David Joselit and Kay Larson; *Robert Mapplethorpe*, Whitney Museum essays by Ingrid Sischy and Richard Howard; *Some Women*, foreword by Joan Didion; *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Black Book*, foreword by Ntozake Shange; *Black Males*, preface by Edmund White; *Lady Lisa Lyon*, foreword by Bruce Chatwin; *Robert Mapplethorpe: Ten By Ten*, text by Els Barents; and *The X Portfolio*.

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Further Reading

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June 30, 1997

Dear Derek Jones,

Enclosed are both the disc and the double-spaced hard copy of the **Robert Mapplethorpe** entry for your *Censorship - An International Encyclopedia*.

The text is written in discrete paragraphs which can be easily deleted or moved to suit your length and emphasis. Feel free to edit this entry.

In mid-August, after some time in Dublin and at Oxford, I will be in London for a few vacation days. It would be nice if we might meet for coffee. Edward Lucie-Smith, and my friend, the producer, Mark Henry, will also be around at that time.

Regarding *Censorship*, thanks for including my writing about my friend, Robert Mapplethorpe.

Best regards,

Jack Fritscher

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June 30 is here. So is the **Robert Mapplethorpe** entry for your *Censorship - An International Encyclopdedia*. Feel free, of course, to use as much as you see fit. In presentation, I constructed the entry on the premise that it is easier to edit out what's too much rather than try to patch in what's missing at a later date....So, have at it!

Tomorrow, hard copy and disc will be sent by overnight post to you.

This fax is simply to assure you that the entry is complete.

Thank you for this opportunity to bring once again my friend, Robert Mapplethorpe, back to life--at least on the page.

Best Regards,

Jack Fritscher