

UNDER ARREST: PHOTOGRAPHY, CENSORSHIP AND  
THE MAPPLETHORPE CONTROVERSY  
AN ABSTRACT  
SUBMITTED ON THE FIRST DAY OF APRIL 2021  
TO THE NEWCOMB ART DEPARTMENT,  
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OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS  
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FOR THE DEGREE  
OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how the Mapplethorpe Controversy – a term used here to signify the broader curatorial, artistic, intellectual, political and social issues that led to and arose out of the now notorious 1989 retrospective, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* – changed photography. I situate the controversy as a flashpoint within the Culture Wars and explore how institutions explicitly and implicitly create and circulate myths. I argue that the Mapplethorpe Controversy, along with the intense political and public responses in Congress, the national media, Supreme Court and academic press indicate that at stake was not the art, per se, but the deep-seated social fears posed by the bodies, real and imaginary, represented in this art and their explicit relationship to the terms of alternative identity politics and its potential disruption to the traditional social order.

This dissertation contributes to the existent scholarship that surrounds Robert Mapplethorpe and his work, and uses the controversy it generated as an anchor for exploring questions about the social and political stakes of cultural representation. What does American culture look like? What *should* it look like? Who does American culture represent and who *should* it represent? These were the questions of the Mapplethorpe Controversy, the questions of the Culture Wars. They are the questions we face. What the Mapplethorpe Controversy exposed was that art participates in public life and "art people" - artists, critics, art historians, curators - *must* acknowledge rather than deny this exchange.

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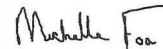
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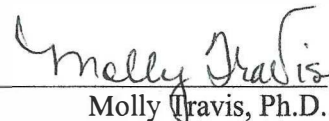
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## INTRODUCTION: The Story

I still remember the first time I saw Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait, N.Y.C.* (fig. 1.1). An alluring image with the ability to challenge and disrupt, it is a photograph that represents everything I love about the study of art history. The photographic self-portrait invites readings of authenticity, indexicality, and truth, as only photographs do. His body is twisted and echoes the shape of the whip that he holds. His gaze, turned directly at the camera, is both authoritative and awkward, as he strains to look over his shoulder. He is both subject and object, photographer and sitter. He is anally penetrable by the bullwhip, defying the sexual and gender taboos that render him vulnerable, and yet he is simultaneously in control. He inserted the bullwhip. He chooses to keep it there. He orchestrates what we see. He captures the image. It is a piece that is formally satisfying, culturally controversial and resolutely confrontational. It is the piece that I, like many others, associate with the artist that the Culture Wars and its actors made famous. An artist defined, postmortem, by a moment where gender, sexuality, photography, politics and religion intersected and collided on the national stage against and shaped by the backdrop of a country engaged in a Culture War, debating what it means to be American.

Likewise, this dissertation's aim was never to create, construct, or imply the logical connections that monographic studies precipitate, but to use the work and the controversy it generated as an anchor for exploring questions about the social and

political stakes of cultural representation.<sup>1</sup> When I initially proposed the topic, I felt it would be meaningful. My aim was never to create a writing of the past, but a writing of the past for the present, not to uncover whether certain narratives are “true,” but to establish the political, epistemological, and ontological work they actively participate in producing. I could never have anticipated what would occur while this project was in progress.

In terms of Robert Mapplethorpe, it should be noted that as this dissertation was in process, so too was the work that culminated in the two-part exhibition, *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now*, held at the Guggenheim Museum. The first part, held in the early half of 2019, was filled with Mapplethorpe’s Polaroids, collages and photographs. The second half of that show, spanning July 2019 through mid-January 2020, pared and paired a more focused selection of Mapplethorpe’s work, showcasing it alongside the work of artists who engage with Mapplethorpe formally, aesthetically, as well as subjectively. While I had no part in that show, it very much had a part in this dissertation. *Implicit Tensions* introduced, explored, and tested some of the tensions I too was working through. In a response to that show, *The New York Times* critic Arthur Lubow argued that “the photographer’s once-taboo images have lost their power to shock, and feed into outworn stereotypes,” before concluding that Mapplethorpe’s work “aligned perfectly with the historical moment, but that moment has passed.”<sup>2</sup> This dissertation is a counterargument.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, as throughout this dissertation, I am very much engaged with Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that the value and the meaning of a work of art is not fashioned by the artist (“the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality”) but by “the entire set of agents engaged in the field.” See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 201–10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/431276>.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Lubow, “Has Robert Mapplethorpe’s Moment Passed?,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/25/arts/design/robert-mapplethorpe-guggenheim.html>.

I situate the Mapplethorpe Controversy— a term used to signify the broader curatorial, artistic, intellectual, political and social issues that led to and arose out of the notorious retrospective, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (1989) - as a flashpoint within the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and the AIDS crisis and, in doing so, explore how institutions explicitly and implicitly create and circulate myths. I argue that the Controversy was never truly about representational art, but the bodies that act in public as vehicles of that representation, whereby photographic portraiture was understood as a re-presentation of embodied action and thus endowed with extreme political power. The intense political and public responses in Congress, the national media, Supreme Court and academic press indicate that at stake was not the art, per se, but the deep-seated social fears posed by the bodies, real and imaginary, represented in this art and their explicit relationship to the terms of an alternative identity politics and its potential disruption to the traditional social order, only further exacerbated by the AIDS crisis.

Writing this amid the current global pandemic, I cannot help but see the overlaps, congruencies, and frictions: wars on what constitutes truth; who controls our bodies; how bodies should navigate public space; how bodies should interact with other bodies; the role and power of government; socioeconomic disparities that lead to health disparities; institutionalized, systemic oppression; whose health matters and whose does not. These are the lessons of the AIDS crisis, only now it is not just purported to be affecting gay men, intravenous drug users, and hemophiliacs, but the world-at-large. Yet, like the AIDS crisis, while COVID-19 is not confined to any border, gender, sexuality, race or age, the toll of its effects, risks and consequences are; it disproportionately affects marginal populations. After accounting for preexisting health conditions, in America,

black and brown people are far more likely – with current research suggesting 2.1 to 2.4 times more likely - to die from COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> It should also come as no surprise that, while black people account for roughly 12% of the population, they account for 42% of people living with HIV with estimates suggesting that 1 in 7 are unaware of their status.<sup>4</sup>

While thinking of the Mapplethorpe Controversy and the host of corresponding issues, allegations and associations that frequently – in Congress, popular media, and academic press – conflated homosexuality, disease, obscenity and pedophilia, what largely was not at issue, barring a handful of cultural critics, was race. To be clear: while this dissertation is very much an exploration into the unresolved, dynamic categories of gender and sexuality and how these identities are constructed, reconstructed and mythologized, this dissertation is being written at the end of a presidency that has frequently, explicitly and consistently reinvoked, restoked and capitalized on the idea of an America under threat, after a summer filled with a renewed focus on racial equity and amidst a global pandemic. The racism that girds the heinous murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbury, and Breonna Taylor are, horrifically, nothing new. The only thing (relatively) recent about these murders is the photographic technology that facilitates mass dissemination, as was the case with the televised, violent beating of Rodney King on March 3, 1991, another fever pitch moment amidst the Culture Wars. One of the foremost claims this dissertation proposes is that the tensions the Culture Wars stoked, the positions it emboldened, the rhetorical strategies its actors instrumentalized have not

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<sup>3</sup> While I am sure this data will continue to be updated as time goes on, this is the most current information available. “COVID-19 Deaths Analyzed by Race and Ethnicity,” APM Research Lab, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>. “COVID-19 Deaths Analyzed by Race and Ethnicity,” APM Research Lab, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

<sup>4</sup> “HIV and African Americans | Race/Ethnicity | HIV by Group | HIV/AIDS | CDC,” June 4, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/raciaethnic/africanamericans/index.html>.

only not been resolved, but, if anything, have intensified with very real social, political, and economic consequences.

This dissertation attempts to balance, examine, and pull from these concerns by shifting between the art-historical, social and political. The first two chapters are very much contoured by art historical methodologies, both in its exploration of medium and critical landscape which pulls largely from voices identified with and from the art establishment. In terms of methodology, Chapter One is the most art-historically driven. This first chapter takes up the medium that was central in the Culture Wars: photography. It goes without saying that photography is everywhere. It is circulated digitally; captured democratically; constitutive of “truth.” With the advent and seemingly constant advancement of smartphones, we have all become amateur photographers who effortlessly capture everything from major historical events to our sleeping dogs. Yet photography’s history is more tenuous than its ubiquity may imply. This chapter sets out to establish its terrain to not only address how photography was instrumentalized as *the* medium at the center of the attacks on the art establishment but, as the majority of histories of photography have been written exclusively in terms of photography per se, this chapter works to position photography in conversation with other major art and art critical trends.

Chapter Two shifts this art-historical lens to Robert Mapplethorpe. Inevitably, like innumerable artists caught in and shaped through controversy, the Mapplethorpe that exists today is not the one that existed before he made national headlines. This chapter focuses on the early portion of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic career during the mid-to-late 1970s and works to recover, analyze and complicate the Mapplethorpe that

existed before the Controversy to further expose the ways that his work has been repeatedly (re-) positioned and framed by multiple art world views. This chapter explores the complicated circuits Robert Mapplethorpe navigated that were shaped by the intersection of the competing and, at times, overlapping institutions of the art world, of the photographic community, the gay community, and, of course, the normative community.

The final portion of this dissertation attempts to balance these voices, concerns, and positions, drawing upon the fields of feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory in Chapters Three, Four and Five. This is, in other words, an interdisciplinary project in conception, methodology and articulation. Chapter Three both begins and ends with the trial of Dennis Barrie, a museum director, who was charged with a criminal offense for exhibiting Robert Mapplethorpe's work. Between is an exploration into the institutional, social and political forces that culminated in Barrie's criminal indictment through the analysis of the countless syndicated columns and mailings that circulated across the United States, in tandem with Congressional records and debates. In short: Chapter Three is the Mapplethorpe Controversy. If the central actors of Chapter One were critics, gallerists, and curators, and the central actor in Chapter Two was Robert Mapplethorpe, this chapter's cast includes Senator Jesse Helms, Patrick Buchanan, Reverend Donald Wildmon, and Pat Robertson. The events involve a trial, allegations of censorship, an exhibition cancellation, mass-mailing campaigns, and retaliative legislature. The context is the Culture Wars and the AIDS crisis. It is in this chapter that I most explicitly argue that while Mapplethorpe and his photographs were at the center of the Controversy, analysis of the mass circulating rhetoric exposes how these photographs

were understood and reproduced as symptomatic re-presentations of what many in Congress and around the country perceived to be an urgent societal threat: homosexuality.

Rather than attempt to enumerate the effects of the Controversy, Chapter Four explores the reconsiderations, reversals and reverberations that followed the Controversy through a series of four case studies, grouped into two sections. The first section explores how the Controversy incited a critical reconsideration of Mapplethorpe's work and focuses on Douglas Crimp and Kobena Mercer. The second section shifts registers, as it moves away from Mapplethorpe, directly, and towards other practicing artists who were immediately impacted by the fallout from the Controversy. It explores Nan Goldin's show, *Witness: Against our Vanishing*, whereby, in response to a proposed catalogue essay by artist David Wojnarowicz, the NEA retracted their funding, only eventually to partially restore it, and the "NEA Four" where NEA funding was revoked from four performance artists, despite the unanimous approval they had all initially received. In doing so, this chapter not only revisits and explores the effects of the Mapplethorpe Controversy but expands the lens past a single artist or community to glimpse how it affected the American art community more broadly and dynamically, especially in regards to those whose work dealt with the bodies and identities that were perceived to pose a significant threat to the dominant social order.

As this dissertation began with photography, so too it ends with it. While the actors of the Culture Wars may have instrumentalized Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs for diverging ends - as an emblem of free speech to a sign of America's moral degeneration - Chapter Five investigates the silence that surrounded race in



Mapplethorpe's work in the Controversy, the critical reception, the conservative backlash, as well, up until this point, this dissertation. Rather than attempt to establish a monocausal relationship or neat explanation, this chapter looks at artworks that work within, in between and, at times, against racial politics, art institutions, white nationalism, history, subjectivity, and theory. Rather than propose some sort of white patrilinear model between Mapplethorpe and the following artworks, thus reproducing the sort of racist, colonizing view that has been dominant in American society and art, I hope to point out the critical dialogues that - in various ways – resist and critique this very omission. As I argue in Chapter One, it is not coincidental that photography was *the* medium of the Culture Wars. As I argue in this final chapter, it is also not coincidental that after the Culture Wars, photography was *the* medium instrumentalized by these artists to stage critical interventions.

These final three chapters are, perhaps, the most inflected by our present moment. While this dissertation is inevitably anchored around particular art objects, its questions hover around spectatorial reception, the representation of marginal communities, the physical and social components of looking, and the politics of representation. Undergirding these questions is the foundational assertion that meaning is a dynamic culturally contingent situation that is always in production. If at times, these situations read as though they could (and perhaps do) occur in our present moment, that choice is not accidental. What I hope to suggest is the unresolved relevance of these issues. In other words, while Mapplethorpe may have “aligned perfectly with the historical

moment” these issues are not neatly tucked into our past but are defining our present and future.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lubow, “Has Robert Mapplethorpe’s Moment Passed?”



Figure 1.1 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, N.Y.C., 1978

## CHAPTER ONE: The Edge of Glory

My friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America

Patrick J. Buchanan, Address to the Republican Convention, August 17, 1992

When Patrick Buchanan took the stage at the 1992 Republican Convention and proclaimed war, his audience knew what he was talking about: the Culture Wars. A period in American history dominated by hot-button issues like abortion, affirmative action, censorship, education, feminism, sexuality, race and religion. It was and very much remains a contentious struggle over the profound social changes that have given way to new identities, ideas and articulations of what it meant and means to be American. Central to that war, as its name so indicates, is the understanding that culture, often, defines our reality and creates meaning. Cultural control is power. The fundamental questions were and remain: what does American culture look like and, perhaps more importantly, what *should* it look like? Who does American culture represent and who *should* it represent?

It may come as no surprise that central to this war on American culture is art. Senate hearings, accusations of censorship, government funding reversals, obscenity trials, protests, Oprah Winfrey interviews, Sunday sermons, and mass mailing campaigns are typically not what comes to mind when we think of museum exhibitions. Yet, in the

late 1980s and early 1990s, those were just some of the events that *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* precipitated. In attempting to define what American culture *should* look like, the late 1980s were marked by controversies that hovered around what state-sponsored American art *should not* look like. Amidst the growing AIDS crisis and Culture Wars, Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs (re)presented individuals who many believed *should not* represent America. The intense political and public responses that surrounded – in Congress, the Supreme Court, popular media and academic press – indicate that at stake was not the art, per se, but the deep-seated social fears posed by the bodies, real and imaginary, represented in this art and their explicit relationship to the terms of alternative identity politics and potential disruption to the traditional social order. While the chapters that follow explore Robert Mapplethorpe's work, reputation, controversy and consequences, this chapter aims to explore and establish the stakes of the medium at the center of the Culture Wars. It is not coincidental that in the battles against "high culture" the terrain was photography.

Even as Robert Mapplethorpe began his photographic career in the late 1970s, photography's status was undergoing profound critical, theoretical, and art historical changes. Historically speaking, photography has been a relatively less privileged medium because of its mechanical reproducibility and ubiquity - in mass media, everyday life, photojournalism, advertising – which has made it both much more difficult to shelter under the umbrella of high culture and more vulnerable to attacks from those outside of it. Photography does not have the status of painting or sculpture. Originality and authenticity are replaced with replication. Its institutions have less prestige. Its artists less power. Its market less lucrative. Subjectivity is replaced with (supposed) objectivity, the

artist's hand with mechanical reproduction. Creation with replication. And, unlike any other artistic medium, photography tenuously straddles low and high culture. It is at once the medium of pseudoscientific documentation, mass culture, pornography, art and everything in between. Because of its mechanical realism, photography is especially susceptible to conservative analysis of representation, which would be repeatedly employed in the attacks on and instrumentalization of the Mapplethorpe photographs as a sign of the American art establishment's moral degeneration.

What would be central to the attacks on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs as well as the ripple effects these attacks precipitated were the position these works occupied both within and outside the art establishment. While photography has been widely practiced since its invention in 1839, it was not until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, really the late 1970s, when photography ascended into and secured a position within and by high culture as an aesthetic object. Throughout the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (the dematerialization of art in the late 1960s and 1970s has forever complicated this) for an object to be considered "art," it had to circulate within four conventional economies of power: it had to be produced by someone with institutionally recognized professional accreditation, art dealers had to invest in it as a valuable product, it had to be evaluated within the frameworks of current art theories, and it had to be put on display in some sort of exhibition space. When, in the late 1980s, the religious right and conservative politicians took aim at the art establishment during the Culture Wars by exploiting and (re)producing an increasingly alienated relationship between a "high culture" liberal elite and the general, tax-paying public through the critical instrumentalization of photography, photography uniquely occupied these economies of power. Photography

may have still been the medium of documentation, popular media, and pornography, but it was also a medium of art. Robert Mapplethorpe was an established artist. His photography had market value. His work was discussed and evaluated within frameworks of current art theories and, at the center of the Mapplethorpe Controversy, his work was displayed in art museums, in part due to financial backing from the federally-funded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which too imbues the work with state-sponsored recognition and affirmation of status.

Despite photography's early popularity and the status the medium began to achieve in the late 1970s – a status that was fundamental to its use and role in the Culture Wars - early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century photography failed to meet these standards. It failed to be recognized as high art. Those who rejected photography, or at least the concept of an art photography, were largely powerful cultural elites such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's director, Edward Robinson (1853-1931), and Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), the critical modernist tastemaker.<sup>1</sup> Not only did these individuals who managed the museum and critical spaces of the high art echelon reject photography as a medium of high art, but they frequently defined their respective spaces in opposition to popular cultural forms, in which photography was regularly positioned within.<sup>2</sup> So what changed? How did the medium once described by Greenberg as “the most transparent of the art mediums” that “proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable

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<sup>1</sup>As far as Clement Greenberg goes, I use “tastemaker” ambiguously given the various enterprises – theoretical, discursive, material, economic, critical – he contributed to. Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Photographs | The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/photographs>.

<sup>2</sup> Anne McCauley, “Overexposure: Thoughts on the Triumph of Photography,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 159–62.

function as document and act as [a] work of art,” do just that?<sup>3</sup> How did photography become *the* medium of the Culture Wars, *the* medium at the center of the attacks on the art establishment, and *the* medium that generated so much controversy?

Photography’s critical ascendance in the 1970s can be traced through its inclusion within institutions: publications, museums, markets, and art criticism.<sup>4</sup> Photographs became institutionalized aesthetic objects, shaped by and through constellations of artists, collectors, dealers, curators and art historians. These inclusions have not only altered the economic status of photography as well as the social status of its practitioners but have shifted, altered and expanded the discursive formations through which photography is both an active and embedded participant within. As will be sketched out in this chapter, photography’s ascendance was, in part, a function of larger cultural conditions and pressures, including the collapse of modernism and rise of postmodernism. Within the art world, at the same time that photography was being consolidated into an autonomous modernist art form, what has frequently been described as a “postmodern” and/or oppositional practice emerged, often challenging and critiquing the very same power structures that were simultaneously working to consolidate art photography into an institutionalized aesthetic doctrine. The following chapter works to sketch out the multiple discourses in which photography participated within, as well as the critical terrain from which art photography emerged from. While this is not meant to

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<sup>3</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose 1945-1949*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 60.

<sup>4</sup> I take this sort of organizational methodology, in large part, from Pierre Bourdieu, who, in his discussion of so-called autonomous art notes its reliance upon the “signs of the autonomy” and the “specific institutions which are a necessary condition for the functioning of the economy of cultures goods. These include: places of exhibition (galleries, museums, etc.), institutions of consecration or sanction (academies, salons, etc.), instances of reproduction of producers and consumers (art schools, etc.), and specialized agents (dealers, critics, art historians, collectors, etc.)” see Bourdieu, “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” 204.



be an exhaustive history – that, itself, would, could and very well should be another book project - it is meant to give shape to the emerging critical, social, and artistic terrain of art and photography in the late 1970s; a complicated terrain that Robert Mapplethorpe not only actively sought to embed himself within, but within which he was discursively constructed and then reconstructed as his work was appropriated, disseminated and instrumentalized as a warning sign of America's moral degeneration, for some, and as a champion of free expression, for others.

Given the exhaustive availability of discourse that focuses specifically on the practicing artists across these periods, this chapter sketches the larger institutional terrain – publications, markets, and museums – that photography participated in. In terms of organization, this chapter is broken into the aforementioned sections and culminates by sketching out the broader socio- and art-historic terrain of the 1970s when art photography began to securely enter the American art establishment and Robert Mapplethorpe's career began. While no institution ever exists autonomously, this organizational methodology is used both to allow a clearer reading of the institutions from which art photography emerged, as well as imply the increasingly fractured, overlapping nature of the period. The aim is to not only develop an understanding of the context from which art photography emerged – an emergence that was fundamental to Robert Mapplethorpe's career and how that output was instrumentalized throughout the Culture Wars – but the competing and contradicting discourses it participated in which contoured the debates and defenses both inside and outside the art establishment as discussed in the following four chapters.

## Applause

Fundamental to this dissertation is the understanding that, as is true with any artist, the artist we call “Mapplethorpe” is a product of and exists only within discourse. While his art generated an immense amount of critical and popular debate, it was, first and foremost grounded as such: art. As will be discussed at length in Chapter Three, amidst the growing Controversy and courtroom hearings, by-in-large, the art world’s justification for Mapplethorpe’s presence, prominence and place was through a formal celebration sutured to the legal context that had created a mutual exclusion via the 1973 Supreme Court case of *Miller v California*: Mapplethorpe’s photographs were either obscenity *or* art.<sup>5</sup> The underlying presumption was that photography *could* have “serious” artistic value.

While photography was, by all accounts, beloved by the public – one just need to glance at the widely circulated carte-de-vistes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or the picture magazines from the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century– institutional acceptance lagged and so did institutionalization of the medium’s “serious” artistic value. That is not to say there were not early proponents who anticipated and actively participated in photography’s ascendance into the art establishment. Rather than art photography, as art historian Ulrich Keller argues, what really emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an “elitist” strand of photography built around and by wealthy individuals who, rather than seeking

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<sup>5</sup>As will be discussed again in Chapter Three, the Miller ruling introduced a three-part test for evaluating obscenity: (1) whether “the average person, applying contemporary community standards” would find that the work, “taken as a whole,” appeals to “prurient interest” (2) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (3) whether the work, “taken as a whole,” lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. Part three would prove the most useful, legally speaking. If the work in question has “serious” artistic value, it cannot be considered obscene. “Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973),” Justia Law, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/413/15/>.

to make art photography into a means of living, instead, exchanged photographs to lend themselves verifiable value and prestige.<sup>6</sup> This (proto) art photography was a social rather than business-oriented enterprise based more on affiliation than any sort of coherent aesthetic style. While these photographers sought the prestige that accompanies the recognition of artistic genius, as Keller writes, "the amateur movement itself lacked any inbuilt authority which could confer credible art status to a picture. Moreover, since the 'high art' establishments (academics, museums, critics) rejected photography as a legitimate art form" photography could not and was not accepted by these preexisting institutional authorities.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the only possibility was to "fill the authority vacuum with institutions of their own making" which they did through the establishment of independent enterprises.<sup>8</sup> "Independent" in that they received no state or government funding, nor were they supported symbolically or financially by any preexisting art institutions.<sup>9</sup> These late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century independent institutional circuits were

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<sup>6</sup> It's not difficult to glean a sense of elitism even in contemporaneous reflections on the implications of the medium's developing technology. Technical advancements – such as the advent of the dry plate (1871) and Kodak's hand camera (1888) – gave way to three broad strands of photographers: the professionals, who took photographs for economic means; the (art-)amateurs, who often did have artistic aspirations; the casual photographers (amateurs), advancers of the popularized recreational photography. This popularization and democratization of the medium was threatening to many amateurs and professionals. George Sperry, writing on the effects of the relatively new technology of the dry plate recounts "technical excellence has become so common, thanks or otherwise to the dry plate, that the *better class* can no longer depend upon the superior finish of their work for their custom" see George Sperry, "Art or Technique," ed. Edward L. Wilson, *Photographic Mosaics: An Annual Record of Photographic Progress* 26 (1890): 253–55.

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich F. Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis," *History of Photography* 8, no. 4 (October 1, 1984): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.1984.10442233>.

<sup>8</sup> Keller, 253.

<sup>9</sup> One of the most influential and notable examples is, perhaps, Alfred Stieglitz's photo-secession group, which claimed "to advance photography as applied to pictorial expression." Even in title, the group's name both points to European models as a form of legitimization, as well as its own aims to pull away (to secede) from other trends in photography. The invitation-only group was formed in response to the National Arts Club invitation to Stieglitz to put together a photography exhibition, which Stieglitz agreed to under the condition that he, alone, would select the works shown. While this exhibition may suggest photography's inclusion into a preestablished art institutions, the Photo-secessionist's work found no sponsors in the United States (despite its European success) and the group quickly turned to the establishment of its own

created by photographers for photographers, complete with social rituals, exhibitions, publications and aesthetic doctrines molded after the example of the established mediums of paint and sculpture, yet completely independent from them.<sup>10</sup>

In the history of American photography, this is, perhaps, an impulse most notably captured by Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), the so-called “father of modern photography.”<sup>11</sup> Writing contemporaneously, critic Sadakichi Hartmann, who would be one of the most frequent contributors to Stieglitz’s *Camera Work*, muses that “artistic photography, the Camera Club and Alfred Stieglitz were only three names for one and the same thing.”<sup>12</sup> America’s “leading photographic club,” as Hartmann described it, Stieglitz’s influence hovered around his Club’s four conditions: monthly public exhibitions; the publication of *Camera Notes*; the club-room’s equipment; the club’s goal, as listed in its constitution, to achieve the “cultivation and advancement of the science and art of photography.”<sup>13</sup> Fundamental to Stieglitz’s notion of art photography was the air of elitism, a social tactic carefully constructed to endow its participants with a sense of legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> As Keller describes it, this sort of “elitist Art Photography was

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gallery, “291”, which is briefly discussed in this dissertation. For a complete overview of the group, see William Innes Homer, *Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Keller, “The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis.”

<sup>11</sup> There was, undoubtedly, a spectrum of strategies employed that are far more complicated than one individual. That being said, art historical discourse often focuses on and champions Stieglitz as the insular progenitor of art photography. Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Modern Photography from 1839 to the Present* presents Stieglitz as the singular champion of art photography from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Szarkowski’s *Photography Until Now* continues the tendency to discuss Stieglitz in a vacuum. Both of these highly influential curators, both of whom had a role in constructing photography’s place in the art museum, will be discussed later in this chapter. Here, I select Stieglitz as a brief case study not because of the historical accuracy of these sorts of claims, but because of the disciplinary and discursive weight these claims continue to hold.

<sup>12</sup> Sadakichi Hartmann, “The New York Camera Club,” in *Photographic Times: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Interests of Artistic and Scientific Photography*, vol. 32 (New York: Photographic Times Publishing Association, 1900), 60.

<sup>13</sup> Hartmann, 60.

<sup>14</sup> It is important, additionally, to consider the broader trends in photography. According to photographic historian, Sarah Greenough, this consolidation of an “elite” strand of photography occurred against the backdrop of a growing number of photographic societies from fewer than ten in 1880 to over fifty in 1889

more or less a cosmetic proposition, one which stressed questions of appearance at the expense of substantive issues. Its ultimate goal was not the production of meaningful pictures, but the display of photographs in 'real' art museums."<sup>15</sup> Instead of concern for a well-articulated style or theory, the elitist trend embraces "social and spiritual exclusiveness." As far as Stieglitz goes, Keller suggests that his "main contribution to the history of photography was not in the production of pictures, but in the construction of an institutional framework which certified these pictures as 'art'."<sup>16</sup> This marks a very different status than what would implicate the Mapplethorpe photographs in the late 1980s; the exhibition was partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and held at 8 established art institutions across the country. In other words, the Mapplethorpe Controversy was about the pictures; the photographs' accepted status within the institutional frameworks that certified them as "art" – within art magazines, criticism, the market and museums - was not in question, but taken as evidence of the American art establishment's dire moral degeneracy.

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and, by 1895, to over 150 with more than 5000 members. Until the 1880s, these societies were primarily professional in nature, directed towards photography as a trade and addressing the needs of these commercial photographers with a stress on techniques, materials, and business practices. Furthermore, as Gillian Greenhill demonstrates through close formal analysis, even within this warring groups that sought to establish an art photography – such as the Salon Club of America and the Photo-Secessionists – the difference was less about a difference in style or technique, but philosophy. Democracy versus exclusivity, as Greenhill repeatedly describes it. See Sarah Greenough, "Of Charming Glens, Graceful Glades, and Frowning Cliffs": The Economic Incentives, Social Inducements, and Aesthetic Issues of American Pictorial Photography, 1880-1902," in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Director of the Mead Art Museum and Associate Professor of American Studies Martha A. Sandweiss and Alan Trachtenberg (Amon Carter Museum, 1991). Gillian Barrie Greenhill, "The Outsiders: The Salon Club of America and the Popularization of Pictorial Photography" (Ph.D., United States -- Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University, 1986), <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/303520192/abstract/8F0C323263E4512PQ/17>.

<sup>15</sup> While the complicated history of the photo-succession is not within the purview of this chapter or dissertation, it is worth briefly considering the ways and work this identity performs in allying itself with a preformed institutional identity that, in many ways, points to a more exclusive international identity. Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis," 260.

<sup>16</sup> Keller, 256.

Early photography magazines posed as art discourse, musing over photography's artistic potential, were hermetically oriented; if art criticism is (supposedly) oriented towards the anonymous public, these early photography magazines were largely geared towards other photographers, often including manuals and technical advice.<sup>17</sup> The more "serious" and luxurious American publications, such as Stieglitz's *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work*, came closest to genuine criticism. Despite the existence of these photo-critical publications, the photographers reviewed in them were, more often than not, part of an interconnected social group that organized exhibitions, wrote for photography magazines and were in constant personal contact.<sup>18</sup> They were linked to each other as artists, promoters, and critics of their own pictures and functioned as an international echo-chamber, mimicking the structures and institutions of high art, but existing outside those systems.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See articles such as John Moran, "Thoughts on Art, Nature, and Photography," *The Philadelphia Photographer* 12. June 1875, pp. 179; 180. F. C. Lambert, "Imagination," *The Photographic Times and American Photographer* 22. December 30, 1892, p. 675. James Wells Champney, "Composition in Photographic Pictures," *The Photographic Times and American Photographer* 17. January 14- February 4, 1887, p. 19. J. S. Hodson, "Artistic Photography," *The Photographic Times* 26. February 1895, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> This holds true even for intra-journal discussions. *Camera Work*, for instance, was discussed and reviewed in the pages of other photographic magazines of the time including the *Photographic Times*, *The American Amateur Photography*, *Photo-Miniature* and *Camera Craft*, all of which often remarking on its luxuriousness, attesting to its status as a unique object, in and of itself. *Camera Work* rarely mentioned other photography publications except in its fourth issue which, as Stieglitz writes, that "while there is often much of the 'yellow' to be found in many photographic magazines, edited and owned by individuals to whom the profit is all, accuracy of statement and the cause of photography of picayune importance, we feel that we can recommend with safety the following journals to our readers." Yet another indication of both Stieglitz and his circles' insistence on their status and priorities (which he clearly notes is not about profit). Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work*, no. 4 (1903), [http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1427125984512993&view=mjp\\_object](http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1427125984512993&view=mjp_object).

<sup>19</sup> As Hull notes, while *Camera Work* was frequently mentioned in the photographic press, it was not mentioned nearly as often in the art press. For example, one of the most widely circulated (fine) art publications of the same period, *American Art News*, which still circulates today as *Art News*, appears to have never mentioned *Camera Work* once. Again, the indication is these photo-publications existed outside the art establishment. Roger Piatt Hull, "'Camera Work,' an American Quarterly" (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, Northwestern University, 1970), <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.tulane.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/302442042/citation/516C1CD164454326PQ/1>.

The most well-known photographic publication of the era, *Camera Work* (1903-1917), has been taken as a sign of photography's ascendance into the art world based on the publication's aim and materiality. Its legacy proves far more significant than its immediate impact. Founded by Alfred Stieglitz, *Camera Work* was in-part a response to *Camera Notes* (1897-1903), a photographic journal published by the Camera Club of New York that Stieglitz had been editor for until he declared that the organization was "incompatible with the ideas and principles for which [I] have striven," as the journal consisted largely of technical and scientific text, rather than critical.<sup>20</sup> These aforementioned "ideas and principles" revolved around his systematized desire for a certain grade of photographs to be judged by the same criteria that connoisseurs used to measure older art: the mastery of materials and the artist's ability to communicate feeling through the knowledgeable control of form.<sup>21</sup> He left *Camera Notes* and founded *Camera Work*, an independent venture that often operated in tandem with his notorious "291" gallery, which regularly included announcements for upcoming exhibitions and reviews of past shows.<sup>22</sup>

Despite its title, Stieglitz's interests were not in photography alone. As has been well-documented, Stieglitz not only exhibited photography, but also introduced European modern art to American audiences, being the first to exhibit Cezanne, Picasso, Picabia, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, Brancusi, Rodin, Braque, and Rousseau, among others in the United States. These broadened interests can be evidenced within the varying content of

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<sup>20</sup> *Camera Notes* 6 (July 1902), as cited in Christian A. Peterson, *Alfred Stieglitz's Camera Notes* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts/W. W. Norton, 1993), 52.

<sup>21</sup> McCauley, "Overexposure: Thoughts on the Triumph of Photography."

<sup>22</sup> The gallery, itself, was not an economically-sound venture. The gallery was made possible, in part, due to the financial backing of wealthy individuals within Stieglitz's circle including Paul Haviland, the son of the director of the Haviland china company. Phyllis Rose, *Alfred Stieglitz* (Yale University Press, 2019).

the publication as well. While *Camera Work* was exclusively devoted to photography between 1903 and 1910, as Stieglitz's interest in exhibiting contemporary European art increased, so too did the publication's content. By Issue 31 (1911), content split between photography and other mediums, including a special issue that featured the work of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso exclusively.<sup>23</sup> While some have perceived Stieglitz's multi-medium interests as a careful attack launched on the categories and mediums of art to define and secure photography's place among pre-established fine art mediums, others argue that Stieglitz interest in painting was actually motivated by his fear that there was not enough "good" photography to fill his magazine pages or gallery.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of intention and legacy, if his aimed to propagate photography, or, at least, a type of photography into the field of high art, he was largely unsuccessful in his time. He was unable to create and sustain a commercial enterprise, as will be discussed later in this chapter. He was also unable to create a critical enterprise that extended past photography's independent circuits: the sustained debate into photography's artistic merits and consequences within established artistic discourse did not consistently occur until the early 1970s with the rise of so-called postmodern aesthetics, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Carillo, "Camera Work," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008): 46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20205622>.

<sup>24</sup> Hull, "'Camera Work,' an American Quarterly."

<sup>25</sup> That is not to say *Camera Work* did not feature critical essays. Charles Caffin, who at the time was the art critic of *Harper's Weekly*, and Sadakichi Hartmann, who cofounded the short lived *The Art Critic*, were *Camera Work's* most frequent critical contributors. Both critics had expressed enough previous interest in photography to have caught Stieglitz's eye and were consequently invited by Stieglitz to contribute to his publications. While these sorts of invitations further attest to Stieglitz's desire to elevate photography to the status of art and as revolutionary and prescient at *Camera Work* was, as indicated in its demise, it was not a successful catalyst for photography's ascendance into the fine art world.



In terms of *Camera Work*, the publication's materiality speaks both to Stieglitz's aspirations and realities. The material quality of the publication, which consists of 50 regular issues and several special issues, is strikingly sumptuous. Clean and plush, with its simple, yet commanding hardcover designed by Edward Steichen, it announces itself as a luxury good. The cover, comprised largely of an art nouveau typeface, immediately brings with it a connotation of an established and popular contemporaneous art perspective. It offers the title of the publication along with a subtitle that delivers imminent information: its purpose as a photographic quarterly, its editor, and place of publication. On average, each issue consists of approximately 80 pages and ten hand printed illustrations on Japanese paper usually taken from the original negative or print (gumbichromate, platinum print, etc.), mounted on colored card, often covered with protective tissue and frequently placed between blank pages, thus set apart from the letterpress.<sup>26</sup> The accompanying essays – ranging from poetry to photo-critical essays – are given large, uniform margins. In some issues, the first letter of a unit of text is decorative, resembling woodblock prints, further contributing to the magazine's lavish look and suggests the magazine itself was a collectible object - a small, privately held exhibition.

Given its sumptuous quality, current market value, advertisements, and 50+-issue mark, the inclination is to assume that there was a large demand for *Camera Work*. In its first year, a year's subscription to the quarterly publication cost four dollars. It rose to five dollars in October 1903 and to six in April 1905. In addition to the subscription fees, fifty cents was charged for packaging and registering. These costs were included by

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Frizot, *A New History of Photography* (Köln: Könemann, 1998).

October 1908, raising the annual subscription to \$6.50. By 1911, the subscription was eight dollars a year or, after accounting for inflation, \$220 in 2020. Individual issues were initially priced at two dollars and rose to four dollars. Special issues, such as the one dedicated to Rodin (1911) and Steichen (1913) cost up to eight dollars per issue.<sup>27</sup> Compared to the annual subscription rates of the majority of other American photographic magazines – which were usually monthlies instead of quarterlies and ranged between one and three dollars per year - the cost of *Camera Work* was extraordinarily high. In his memoirs, Stieglitz recounts the New York Public Library's alleged inability to afford the magazine. He urged libraries and museums to purchase the publication and argued that “the time will come when *Camera Work* will have become so rare that one will not be able to complete sets at any price.”<sup>28</sup> While Stieglitz was right – in a 2016 Sotheby's auction the *Camera Work* complete set sold for \$187,500 - in its own time, *Camera Work* did not have a large audience.<sup>29</sup> In 1929, Stieglitz sold the 8,000 remaining copies of the publication to a rag picker for \$5.80, gave a number away to friends and burned the rest, since he lacked storage space.<sup>30</sup>

The back cover of the *Camera Work* is revealing. Almost identical to its front cover, the title of the publication is replaced by “Eastman-Kodak” – the publication's weightiest and most frequent advertiser. Given that a publication's revenue comes from sales and advertisings, and *Camera Work* lacked a large consumer base, advertisements were fundamental to *Camera Work*'s quality. The final 12-20 pages of each issue were

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<sup>27</sup> Hull, “‘Camera Work,’ an American Quarterly,” 38–39.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Lori Cole, “Camera Work: Forming Avant-Garde New York,” in *The Aesthetics of Matter: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange*, ed. Sarah Posman (DeGrueter, 2013), 186.

<sup>29</sup> Another testament to the rise in the photographic market: since the 1970s, the sumptuous accompanying illustrations have been purchased as artworks in and of themselves. Many are now held in prestigious museums such as the Whitney American Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. See Cole, 186.

<sup>30</sup> Cole, 186.

dedicated to advertisements, mostly from photographic suppliers and manufacturers.<sup>31</sup> In other words, rather than the result of a large demanding audience, the luxuriousness of *Camera Work* was the product of an economically motivated photo-industry.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the relatively inexpensive traditional arts supplies – brushes, canvas, oil paints, pigments, etc. - photography was a mass-manufactured, expensive good produced by relatively concentrated, major, industrial companies like Eastman-Kodak. In seeking to expand their market, the photo-industry's financial support of exhibitions and publications provided the still-developing art photography field the much-needed capital that they were not accruing from sales or subscriptions alone.

By most accounts, American “serious” photo criticism largely declined after the end of *Camera Work*. Photo historian Joel Eisenger has convincingly argued that this decline resulted from the loss of Stieglitz's central position in the photographic community in tandem with a broad demand for objectivity, which reached its peak in the 1930s and 1940s with the rise and popularity of governmentally-sponsored documentary photography projects.<sup>33</sup> As more photographic projects were couched within the terms of objectivity and “truth”, the medium was increasingly removed from the subjective terms that framed the traditional arts. Rather than contend with the critical possibilities of the medium, the majority of “critics” focused on photography's truth-telling ability. Put another way, the focus was on the “truth” a photograph captured, rather than how that

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<sup>31</sup> I say “mostly” because there was also advertisement space allotted to *Camera Work*, itself. These pages advertised available back issues, another indication of both the quarterly's limited circulation, as well as Stieglitz's intent of presenting the magazine as a collector's item. Hull, “‘Camera Work,’ an American Quarterly.”

<sup>32</sup> Keller, “The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis.”

<sup>33</sup> Joel Eisenger, “The Renaissance of American Photographic Criticism” (Ph.D., United States -- Indiana, Indiana University, 1989), <https://search-proquest.com.libproxy.tulane.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/303769799/abstract/318EDA251EA5419APQ/12>. 80

“truth” was constructed.<sup>34</sup> While this may have resulted in a decline in photographic criticism – or, at least, criticism that interrogated the critical and intellectual potential of art photography – this widely popular enterprise led to increasing demand for the medium and the development of a new popular photographic press.

With expanding technology, the late 1930s saw a boom in popular magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, launched in 1936 and 1937 respectively.<sup>35</sup> These popular magazines were significant routes for the dissemination of photographs to a growing American audience. With its emphasis on pictures rather than words and peak circulation of 13.5 million weekly readers in the 1940s, *Life* magazine was not only the most popular and widely read magazine in America, but it was also the single largest conveyer of photographic images to the public. This further contributed to the construction of photography as a democratic medium of objective communication employed in a variety of discursive functions: photography as information, illustration and documentation. Often, whether through these popular publications or government pamphlets, as was the case with the (now infamous) photographs taken for the Farm Security Administration, these works did not include a credit line. They were distributed as images, not works by artists.<sup>36</sup> It would not be until the 1970s, when, as Douglas Crimp notes, there occurred a

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<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed account of individual critics and photographers see Joel Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation: American Criticism of Photography in the Modernist Period* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=22730>.

<sup>35</sup> This expanding technology includes the advent and commercial availability of the 35 mm camera and the flash bulb. Smaller, faster and lighter, 35mm cameras facilitated more precise and spontaneous in-field photography, while the flash bulb reliably expanded when and where a photograph could be capture. The relatively new rotogravure process meant that images could be quickly, efficient and effectively printed (compared to the former half-tone printing) and by 1935, the Associated Press (AP) made it possible to transmit photographs through telephone lines, which allowed for “breaking news” to be visually conveyed. Nadya Bair, *The Decisive Network: Magnum Photos and the Postwar Image Market* (Univ of California Press, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> This marks the other major photographic contribution of the 1940s and 1950s: the pin up.

major discursive reorientation that (re)classified such photographs by artist rather than by subject.<sup>37</sup>

The popular photographic press increasingly positioned the medium in opposition to the elitism of earlier publications. Magazines like *Popular Photography*, *Mini Cam* (what would become *Modern Photography*), and *U.S. Camera* all began in 1938.<sup>38</sup> Though they played a significant role in the distribution of information on photography – exhibitions, lectures, techniques – they (successfully) targeted a larger audience than their predecessors. These new publications, in conjunction with the photo-industry, aimed to frame photography as a fun, simple activity for everyone. While *American Photography*, the largest photographic magazine that catered to amateurs and salon participants, maintained a circulation of 18,600 in 1937, by 1939, *Popular Photography* which aimed to “spread the gospel that photography is a lot of fun” - had a circulation of over 164,000, which rose to nearly 400,000 by 1955.<sup>39</sup> This trend occurred in preexisting publications as well, another signal of the medium’s expanding audience. In the early 1940s, the *New York Times* began to include Jacob Deschin’s column specifically dedicated to photography. While the column largely lacked photo-critical intentions in its earliest iterations, it directly addressed amateur photographers through columns filled with tips, advice, and announcements regarding the technical components of photography ranging from how to photograph in the tropics to the arrival of Kodak’s color roll film.

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject,” in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (Sage Publications in Association with the Open University, 1999), 213–23.

<sup>38</sup> Eisinger, “The Renaissance of American Photographic Criticism,” 148.

<sup>39</sup>Part of this can be attributed not only to the rise in phototechnology, but postwar economic boom that not only reintroduced consumer products but celebrated them. Quoted in: Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A Social & Aesthetic History of Photography* (Taylor & Francis, 2017).; Eisinger, “The Renaissance of American Photographic Criticism,” 151.

By the 1950s, photographic criticism began to return to its critical edge. Publications like *Aperture*, founded in 1952, offered serious discussions of photography and individual photographers, resituating photography within subjective terms and away from the objective frame documentary photography had been couched in. Though *Aperture*'s audience was relatively small, with an annual circulation of 600 copies in 1957, they were not the only critical discourse. In their 1957 spring issue, *Art in America* – the major art magazine described by critic Craig Owens as “a good barometer of what is going on” - introduced a reoccurring section entitled “Photography As Art.”<sup>40</sup> While the short section was positioned at the end of the magazine, the inclusion signals that the question of photography's artistic value was not only being considered, but this consideration was taking place within an established “art” magazine, rather a specialized photography magazine. As opposed to the construction of photography as an objective, truth-telling mechanism of communication, from the section's first essay on, photography was couched within terms of subjectivity, and, critically, in relation to painting, modernism's highest medium. While this inclusion and discussion signals a shift, it is not a signal of photography's secured ascendance into the high art world. The question of photography as art was still tenuous at best.

In the section's inaugural essay, Howard Dearstyne, pointing to photography's mechanical nature, argues that unlike painting, whereby the painter “*must* create each element which enters into his work,” the photograph is an automated process bound by its mechanical and chemical nature and concludes that “the photograph is a mechanical, not

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<sup>40</sup> Anders Stephanson and Craig Owens, “Interview with Craig Owens,” *Social Text*, no. 27 (1990): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466307>.

a creative act.”<sup>41</sup> In the very next issue, Beaumont Newhall, the first photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art, at once disputes this comparative tendency (between photography and painting) and argues that photography’s inherent qualities not only distinguish the medium from painting but allow it to “do what painting cannot,” concluding that “photography in the hands of a master becomes the peer of painting, we feel justified in according to its maker the name of artist.”<sup>42</sup> Photography could be art, photographers could be artists. In the third issue, photographer Ansel Adams situates the medium within a crisis-moment, whereby a photograph should “stand alone as a work of art, and not as a mere conveyor of subject.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, as will be discussed in relation to curatorial programs of the time, that is exactly how photography was predominately situated in the 1950s – as “conveyor of subject.”

Turning attention away from photographic criticism and towards art criticism, one of the most critical hurdles art photography faced was Clement Greenberg. Greenbergian modernism, which reigned between the late 1940s until the late 1960s and early 1970s, stressed singularity and authenticity.<sup>44</sup> Photography’s inherent multiplicity, ubiquity and equivalence were irreconcilable. Modernism was predicated on two central concepts: medium specificity and autonomy which revolved around ideas of purity and abstraction.

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<sup>41</sup> Howard Dearstyne, “Painter and the Photographer,” *Art in America*, Spring/Summer 1957, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Beaumont Newhall, “Photography: Not Art But...,” *Art in America*, Fall 1957, 46.

<sup>43</sup> Ansel Adams, “Creative Photography,” *Art Journal*, Winter 1957, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Again, Clement Greenberg’s role cannot be underestimated. His distinct ability to consolidate critical, artistic and commercial spheres helped New York capture a place, if not *the* place, in the international art scene. In terms of his critical and theoretical body of work, Greenberg’s modernism because *the* defining modernism and was codified as a critical approach and mode of art-making. Originally a pejorative term, formalism – which would very much structure readings of Mapplethorpe’s work, including in criminal court - became institutionalized in American art writing only through Greenberg’s practice. Whether striving to meet his criteria or work against it, for decades, Clement Greenberg has been a touchstone for critics and artists, alike. Even American postmodernism, in its supposed radicalness, is dependent on Greenberg’s modernism as its referential foil.

Descending from neo-Kantian critiques, the corresponding modernist criticism claimed to lack interest in the cultural and ideological engagements of art, guising itself within the terms of universal subjectivity.<sup>45</sup> Quality was measured by the degree to which a work of art criticized, defined and upheld the particular, intrinsic elements of its respective medium. As Greenberg wrote, it “criticizes from the inside [rather than from the outside], through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized.”<sup>46</sup> He championed and historicized a modernist art that evolved along formal lines with a commitment to the conventional aesthetic mediums – painting, sculpture, drawing and architecture – and the formal, medium-specific boundaries that separated them.<sup>47</sup> Modernist art, according to Greenberg, purged all extrinsic, unessential, unspecific elements from the respective medium including elements from other mediums and especially from life and popular culture.<sup>48</sup>

Photography was the medium of life and popular culture. For Greenberg, photography was “the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for this reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document and act as work of art as well,” serving, instead, as a possible replacement for the representational roles of genre and historical painting.<sup>49</sup> If characteristics considered extrinsic to the medium – such as literary or theatrical qualities like narrative, realism, description, subject matter, or drama – were

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<sup>45</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85.

<sup>47</sup> Greenberg, 85.

<sup>48</sup> As Greenberg notes, the difference between the avant-garde and kitsch is that “the aim of the avant garde” is “not to sublate art into life but rather to purify art of life.” Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.”

<sup>49</sup> Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye,” 60.



detrimental impurities to Greenberg's modernist art and photography was simultaneously embedded within these very terms, the modernist doctrine foreclosed the possibility of photography's inclusion within it. Not only was photography doomed to fail as a modernist medium, but it would be precisely on these same terms that, by 1989, Robert Mapplethorpe's work – due to subject matter – would come under fire by conservative critics and the religious right, while academics and art critics largely tried to resituate and rescue the works on their formal merit.

By the late 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s, Greenberg's influence diminished. A number of critics and artists challenged these modernist tenets, rejected the key concepts of medium specificity, autonomy, authenticity, and singularity, and worked to demythologize originality. Given modernism's foreclosure on photography and photography's inherent characteristics – as a highly reproducible, mechanized output - photography occupied a central position in what would be called "postmodernism" so much so that for critics such as Douglas Crimp and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, photography's ascendance into high art signaled the end of (Greenbergian) modernism. It is also throughout this period where, increasingly, photography entered into an expanding discursive body. Books on photography steadily increased in publication.<sup>50</sup> The cultural critic and historian A.D. Coleman began to write regularly on photography for the *New York Times*. Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," translated into English in 1968, was widely read and debated. *Time-Life* issued their Library of Photography venture in 1972, which consisted of 17 printed volumes about the history and art of photography. In the same decade, other

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<sup>50</sup> Using the Cumulative Book Index under the heading "Photography, Artistic", one sees 9 books issued by American publishers in 1970; 16 in 1972; 18 in 1974 and 31 in 1976.

major magazines including *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone* did cover stories devoted specifically to photography. An article reproduced in *Image* in 1971 reports on a visit to Lee Witkin's Gallery in New York where photographs were "booming even with price tags from fifty to one hundred and fifty dollars per print!"<sup>51</sup> Starting in 1973, Susan Sontag began to publish a series of essays on photography in the *New York Review of Books*. Later revised and published into the seminal *On Photography* (1977), they examine the aesthetic and moral problems raised by the authority of the photographed image in everyday life through a consideration of the relation between photography, art, and epistemology. Photographic criticism received renewed interest in established art journals as well; *Art in America*, *Artforum* and *Art News* all began to consistently publish exhibition reviews and articles on photography.<sup>52</sup> As will be discussed in this chapter's final section, photography became a central medium in the discussion, theorizations and articulation of postmodern art during the late 1970s and 1980s.

### **Poker Face**

While it might be crass (or perhaps too obvious) to state, money matters. While we may have fantastical notions about art's function in society, one way to begin to quantify value is in economic terms. When, in 1989, Senator Jesse Helms took aim at Robert Mapplethorpe's photography on the Senate floor it was, ostensibly, due to the \$30,000 in taxpayer money that went to support the exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photographs and, in turn, Helms' legislative counterattack was to prohibit funding for such work. Yet, just 30 years prior, in the 1950s, decades after Stieglitz's gallery and publications, even the most renowned artist-photographers could not make a living off

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<sup>51</sup> W.G. Gaskins, "Photography and Photographic Education in the USA," *Image* 14, no. 5-6 (1971), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Eisinger, "The Renaissance of American Photographic Criticism," 11.

their work. At the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Christmas print sale of 1951, photographs by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Berenice Abbot and others were listed between \$10 and \$25. Harry Callahan, at the time of his retirement in 1962, could expect to receive five dollars for each print purchased by a museum.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, contemporary painters saw much higher prices. Auction prices for painting ranged as high as \$20,000 for a George Bellows painting to the “surprisingly low” sum of \$600 for a small Jackson Pollock.<sup>54</sup> Often, photography was not even included as a category in auctions. One just needs to glance at Sotheby’s records from the period. Objects are categorized into paintings, sculptures, engravings, tapestries, needlework, glass, furniture, ceramics, coins, armour and “objets d’art,” ranging from chandeliers to fans to appliances.<sup>55</sup> Photography is not listed. Nor is Sotheby’s the exception. When *Art in America* began to offer a *Collector’s Guide to the Art Market* in 1957, meant to serve as an informational bulletin about prices paid for paintings, furniture and “objets d’art” in US auctions compared to European auctions, again, photography is not included.

*New York Times* critic Jacob Deschin’s 1954 article, “Galleries needed: Many Good Pictures with No Place to Show Them” explicitly addresses the lack of the market, which he connects to the lack of museum shows, noting that MoMA had not had a photography show in so long that “it almost seems the museum has abandoned photography altogether.”<sup>56</sup> While the Camera Club of New York, an organization built around the cause of championing photography as art, did put on a number of one-man

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<sup>53</sup> Newhall, “Photography: Not Art But...”

<sup>54</sup> Dorothy Gees Seckler, “Auctions Here and Abroad,” *Art in America*, Fall 1957, 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Art Prices Current*, vol. XXVIII (London: Art Trade Press, 1953).

<sup>56</sup> Jacob Deschin, “Galleries Needed: Many Good Pictures with No Place to Show Them,” *New York Times*, 1954, sec. Arts & Leisure.

and group shows, the gallery was only open to the public on Tuesday evenings and Sunday afternoons. The only gallery, according to Deschin, “with a truly responsible attitude toward the medium related to a continuing program for showing photographs” was Helen Gee’s Limelight Gallery.<sup>57</sup>

Helen Gee's Limelight Gallery, the gallery with a so-called “responsible attitude” operated from 1954-1961 and was the only New York gallery for photography, but faced sustained economic difficulties due to the virtual nonexistence of a market for the medium.<sup>58</sup> In her memoir, Gee recounts that in the 1950s, “Photographs were a poor investment; it was not as it was in the art world, where if you bought a few paintings and called yourself a collector, you had dealers (and artists) eating out of your hand. Collecting photographs was an act of love.”<sup>59</sup> Given the less than lucrative economic conditions, Gee’s solution was to subsidize the gallery: the majority of her space was dedicated to coffee and food and able to seat nearly 200 customers, while the gallery was in the back.<sup>60</sup> Given the lack of precedent, Gee recounts frequently facing pricing issues: “There was no precedent; no one knew what to charge. Julien Levy had asked only ten dollars, and Stieglitz's business practices had been too whimsical to go by. He'd ask what he thought the client could afford, or however he felt at the moment - and there were no

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<sup>57</sup> Deschin.

<sup>58</sup> Gee sold Limelight in January of 1961 to new owners. As part of that condition of sale, the gallery was supposed to be shut down, but, despite the agreement, the new owners decided to keep it going, possibly due to the closing announcement published by the *New York Times*, which attracted an audience. That being said, the following shows seemed to have been failures and were no longer discussed in important periodicals like the *New York Times*. Ultimately, the gallery was closed and was used as additional seating for the coffee shop in Helen Gee, *Limelight a Greenwich Village Photography Gallery and Coffeehouse in the Fifties: A Memoir*, 1st ed.. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), <http://libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/login?url=http://www.netLibrary.com/urlapi.asp?action=summary&v=1&bookid=22621>. 289

<sup>59</sup> Gee, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Gee, *Limelight a Greenwich Village Photography Gallery and Coffeehouse in the Fifties*.

records of how many, if any, he sold."<sup>61</sup> The closest thing to competition Gee's Limelight Gallery faced was A Photographer's Place, opened by Roy and Anna DeCarava in their apartment as a means to reduce overhead costs given the low value of photographic prints and scarcity of sales. The gallery, which sold prints between \$12 and \$25, opened in March of 1955 and closed just 2 years later. As Gee recounts, "one thing was clear: It was still too early to depend on sales, and a gallery for photography could only survive when subsidized in other ways."<sup>62</sup>

During the early 1970s, as photography was more frequently discussed in publications, it is not shocking that more photography galleries or, at least galleries that sold photographs emerged. In 1969, Lee Witkin opened the first commercially successful photography gallery in New York City. Witkin stocked a number of photographers' work including that of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston with prices ranging between \$25 and \$200, indicating a substantial rise in value given the Museum of Modern Art's inability to sell prints by the very same artists for \$10 in 1941.<sup>63</sup> Following Witkin's success, Tennyson Schad's Light Gallery, which specialized in contemporary photography, opened in 1971.<sup>64</sup> In addition, several established galleries including two of the most powerful dealers in painting, the Leo Castelli Gallery and the Marlborough Gallery, began to exhibit and sell photographs.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Again, while Stieglitz, undoubtedly, has left a tremendous impact and legacy on the medium, in his own time, not only was he unable to immediately and successfully establish a commercial enterprise for art photography, but even his own commercial business was not a useable model for future gallerists. Gee, 87.

<sup>62</sup> Gee, 148.

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Alexander, "Photographic Institutions and Practices," in *The New History of Photography*, by Michel Frizot, n.d., 697.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe would go on to have his first exhibition here in 1973. Alexander, 698.

<sup>65</sup> The Leo Castelli Gallery dealt exclusively with contemporary photographers including Gianfranco Gorgoni, Hans Namuth, Richard Landry, Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams with prices ranging between \$175 to \$500 per print. While the Marlborough Gallery did sell 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography, its entrance into the photography market was with Richard Avedon's first full one-man show in New York (1975).

Photography's monetization was a noticeable and growing phenomenon within the market, a phenomenon Douglas Crimp has attributed to the economic recession of the 1970s, which led buyers to seek out less expensive alternatives. While photographs had not even been listed as a category in the 1950s, the first photography auction in the United States was held at Sotheby's, New York in 1970.<sup>66</sup> Yet, the market was still tenuous at best. In a 1973 discussion published by *The Print Collector's Newsletter* and moderated by art historian Peter Bunnell, the six participants discuss the contemporaneous modes and tensions surrounding the rising field and market of art photography.<sup>67</sup> The discussants are quick to make note of museums entering into the field of photography as a result of the relatively new "response" to the medium; people are buying it, colleges are teaching it, and, importantly, contemporary photographers, taking explicit stands as "artists" are being recognized. Yet, according to these discussants, even in 1973, the market and museum had not yet fully matured nor been codified, with gallerist Ronald Feldman going so far as to conclude that "photography's in its infancy...Now is the time to set standards."<sup>68</sup>

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"Exhibition List - Exhibition List - Past - Exhibitions - Castelli Gallery," accessed January 12, 2021, <https://www.castelligallery.com/exhibitions.>; Enid Nemy, "Avedon Show: The Place to Be Seen," *New York Times*, 1975, sec. Real Estate.; Richard Blodgett, "Blow Up--The Story of Photography In Today's Art Market: Photographs Boom On the Art Market," *New York Times*, 1975, sec. Arts & Leisure.

<sup>66</sup> Sylvia Wolf, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Whitney Museum of American Art, *Polaroids* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2007), 62.

<sup>67</sup>The six participants include Bunnell, who, in 1972 was named the first McAlpin Professor of Photography and Modern Art at Princeton (a testament to the ways the medium was being consolidated within the discipline), four art dealers (Ronald Feldman, of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Lucian Goldschmidt, of Lucian Goldschmidt Inc., Harold Jones, of the Light Gallery, Lee and Witkin) and one photographer, Aaron Siskind, who was working as an adjunct professor at the Rhode Island School of Design. Interesting to note is of the four dealers, Feldman specialized in contemporary painting, sculpture, and prints; Goldschmidt in master prints and drawings and rare books. Only Jones and Witkin specialized in modern photography and photographic prints and books, respectively. Aaron Siskind, who had been working as a photographer for more than forty years, was represented by the Light Gallery. Peter Bunnell et al., "Photographs & Professionals: A Discussion," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 4, no. 3 (1973): 58.

<sup>68</sup> Bunnell et al., 60.

Setting those standards very much involved addressing photography's nature as an infinitely reproducible medium, both on the conceptual and practical level.

Conceptually, the discussants insert photography into the same framework as old master prints and note the same institutional tendency; when museums begin to collect and exhibit photography, often, they turn to their curator of prints and drawings. In terms of practical considerations, Lee Witkin notes the tension in the market. Collectors want insurance that the prints they purchase are limited, often desire the destruction of the negatives, but are only willing to pay a small price. Aaron Siskind, the only photographer included in the discussion, notes that not only does he only garner between \$150 and \$200 per print, but the only photographer he knows who was making a living on photography is Ansel Adams.<sup>69</sup>

The rise in photography's market value cannot simply be dismissed. Just over two decades after the MoMA Christmas sale that (unsuccessfully and at most) sold prints for \$25, a Julia Margaret Cameron photograph of Virginia Woolfs' mother sold for \$775 in 1973. One year later, in 1974, another Cameron portrait of the same sitter went for \$3750.<sup>70</sup> In 1975, Ansel Adams's "Moonrise, Hernandez, N.M." (1941) sold for \$500. 4 years later, a medium-format of Adams's photograph sold for \$8000, a large-format version went for \$22,000.<sup>71</sup> By September 1975, *Art in America* presented an all-day symposium, "Collecting the Photograph," at Lincoln Center, which, despite its admission fee of \$50, attracted nearly 400 people. Speakers included museum directors John Bullard

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>70</sup> Gene Thornton, "Prices of Modern Photographs Zoom: Prices of Modern Photographs Zoom," *New York Times*, 1975, sec. Arts & Leisure.

<sup>71</sup> Helen A. Harrison, "The Lucrative Alchemy of Photography Art Market," *New York Times*, May 30, 1982, sec. The Week in Review.

and Peter Bunnell, curators John Szarkowski and Weston Naef, dealer Harry Lunn and collector Sam Wagstaff Jr., a notable influence in Robert Mapplethorpe's life and career.<sup>72</sup>

It should come as no shock that as the photography market grew, regulations that directly addressed the medium's reproductive nature were established. By the 1980s, photographs and photographers increasingly engaged in marketing techniques "most notably, the introduction of signed and numbered 'limited editions' of photographs," as a means to secure the photographic prints' place in a market that, for so long, had been dominated by the notion of authenticity.<sup>73</sup> By 1981, New York State Legislature would enact a law that went into effect in June 1982 that requires, at the time of sale, that a seller disclose information such as the size of the edition, envisioned sizes, as well the origin and prior uses of the negative. Photography was becoming a regulated medium governed by laws meant to maintain and uphold its artistic and market value.

### **Bad Romance**

In October 1990, after a ten-day criminal trial where a jury of eight heard hours of expert testimony, Dennis Barrie, the director of the Cincinnati Center of Contemporary Art, awaited a verdict. Another flashpoint in the Mapplethorpe Controversy and Culture Wars was the institutional sponsorship and support the photographs received. In tandem with the financial support for *Robert Mapplethorpe: A Perfect Moment* was its institutional acceptance: the exhibition was to be shown at eight art institutions across the United States. While the backlash would lead to protests, cancellations, Senate hearings,

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<sup>72</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Boom in Art Photography Poses Problem in Expertise," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1975, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/09/22/archives/boom-in-art-photography-poses-problem-in-expertise.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Harrison, "The Lucrative Alchemy of Photography Art Market."



and Dennis Barrie's trial, the assault on the art establishment by conservative critics and the religious right was fundamentally interlinked with the very existence, acceptance and insistence on the Mapplethorpe retrospective as an art exhibition. To instrumentalize the photographs as a sign of the art world's moral degeneration, as the religious right did, the photographs had to be shown as art within art institutions. Yet, in terms of museums, the history of photography's institutional acceptance is tenuous. Even just glimpsing at major New York exhibitions on photography held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Modern Museum of Art (MoMA) indicates, from the very beginning, the very same uncertainty that gives shape to the medium's status: what is more important – content or form?

In terms of museum practices, on the one hand, institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art were hesitant to accept photography as art. While they began collecting photographs in 1928 with Stieglitz's first gift to the museum, this physical acceptance was not paralleled with symbolic embracement. The museum did not honor a living photographer, Stephen Shore, with a solo exhibition until 1971 and did not establish an independent department of photography until 1992.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), repeatedly reevaluated and resituated photography from the 1930s on. MoMA's early recognition of photography, argues Christopher Phillips, was in large part due to its director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., who was aware of the European avant-garde's photographic activity.<sup>75</sup> MoMA's, *Photography 1839-1937* (1937), was the first large-scale historical survey of photography anywhere in the United

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<sup>74</sup>Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Photographs | The Metropolitan Museum of Art."

<sup>75</sup> Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October* 22 (1982): 27–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778362>. 30

States. The show was curated by the (then) museum librarian and resident photographer, Beaumont Newhall, who trained as an art historian at Harvard University and, twenty years later, would continue to wage the debate over photography's status as art in the pages of *Art in America* (1957). The exhibition celebrated the medium's centennial anniversary and is often cited as a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as art. As Christopher Phillips has established, the exhibition functioned within the parameters of MoMA's "four great didactic exhibitions" – including Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936) and *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (1936), and *Bauhaus: 1919-1928* (1938) – that marked the museum's much larger pedagogical shift away from "joy, not knowledge" and towards its refined, educational orientation that included collection building and extended scholarly commentary in exhibition catalogues.<sup>76</sup> These "four great didactic exhibitions" were part of this reorientation, as demonstrated through their immense installations, documentation, and ambitious catalogue scholarship.

In terms of the exhibition's installation and documentation, as far as *Photography: 1839-1937*, Newhall's aim appears to have been much less concerned with pronouncing photography's place among the other fine arts and much more interested in the medium's use in a plurality of discourses. This includes viewing photography through its technological advancements, as well as its relatively wide-reaching, democratic applications and cultural practices. The exhibition, which consisted of over 800 catalogued items, was grouped and arranged according to technical process (daguerreotype, calotype, wet-plate, and dry-plate) and contemporaneous applications such as press photography, infra-red and X-ray photography, astronomical photography,

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<sup>76</sup> Phillips.

and “creative” photography. Put differently, the medium was categorized by the discourses it participated in – media, scientific, informational, as well as aesthetic – rather than by the artists who produced it. Though that is not to say the exhibition was not formative. As with the other “four great didactic exhibitions,” Newhall’s catalogue scholarship was ambitious. Reissued as a comprehensive history of the medium of photography, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* has “shaped thinking on the subject more permanently than any other.”<sup>77</sup>

When Newhall was named MOMA’s curator of photography in 1940, not only was he the first curator of photography in the museum’s history, but it marked the first major American art museum to establish a curatorial department dedicated exclusively to the medium. The question of how photography should be presented was of particular concern. Newhall’s initial curatorial project situated photography as a broad, cultural phenomenon that participated in a number of discourses ranging from scientific to creative, in part, perhaps, due to the advisors he had solicited while planning it. Newhall had initially reached out to Stieglitz, who harbored intense animosity towards MoMA, but he refused to participate. Instead, Newhall turned to a number of men whose photographic philosophies were antithetical to Stieglitz’s, including Edward Steichen, who would later replace Newhall as curator.

In Newhall’s “Program of the Department” (1940) – his first publication as MoMA’s newly named curator of photography – Newhall distinguishes the vast amount of photographs produced by the millions of practicing hobbyists, “the art of the people,”

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<sup>77</sup> Douglas R. Nickel, “History of Photography: The State of Research,” *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (2001): 550, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177242>.

from the very few photographs he qualifies as “works of art” on the basis of quality.<sup>78</sup> He sets the agenda of the newly formed department as one dedicated to the study of quality, photographic “works of art” created by “artist[s] who [have] chosen the camera as his medium,” to be modeled along the same lines as literature, thus asserting both the medium’s and museum’s didactic function and intellectual potential.<sup>79</sup> Newhall’s interest in “the art of photography” has largely been accorded to the influence of Ansel Adams, who he had corresponded with since 1939 and was the department’s co-founder and advisor. For Adams, like his mentor Stieglitz, there was a quintessential, formal difference that separated art photography from mass photography, and he spent a considerable amount of time defining what he understood to be “straight” or “pure” photography in contrast to the other, lower (popular) uses of the medium.<sup>80</sup> Under the guidance of Adams, Newhall and his wife, Nancy - who served as acting curator when her husband enlisted in the army during World War II - emphasized the same principles of aesthetic quality that had been applied to traditional art mediums. Not only did Newhall propose photographic study to take place within the museum as another art medium, but, just two years later, in his 1942 *College Art Journal* essay, “Photography as a Branch of Art History,” he calls for the inclusion of the medium’s “neglected field” as

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<sup>78</sup> Beaumont Newhall, “Program of the Department,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 8, no. 2 (1940): 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4058045>.

<sup>79</sup> Newhall, 5.

<sup>80</sup> The term “straight photography” was popularized by Sadakichi Hartmann, the critic and frequent contributor to *Camera Work*. In “A Plea for Straight Photography” – which was originally published in 1904 and was republished in Newhall’s *Photography: Essays and Images* (1980) – Hartmann argued against the painterly and expressive manipulations photographers were making, pointing to a number of artists, including Steichen, who participated in this dominant mode of photography at the moment – pictorialism. Hartmann argued that if “we expect an etching to look like an etching, and a lithograph to look like a lithograph, why then should a photographic print not look like a photographic print?” It is a line of argument that would be echoed, later, by Stieglitz, who Hartmann points to in this essay, and Adams, among others. Newhall – who had turned to Stieglitz, consulted Adams, and republished Hartmann – can be located in this sort of conceptual approach. See Sadakichi Hartmann, “A Plea for Straight Photography,” *American Amateur Photographer* 16 (March 1904): 101–9.

an “essential” means to develop a “fuller understanding of the development of other nineteenth and twentieth century graphic arts.”<sup>81</sup>

Newhall’s Department of Photography held nearly thirty exhibitions between 1940 and 1947, ranging from historical surveys such as *100 Years of Portrait Photography* (1943) and *French Photographs – Daguerre to Atget* (1945) to solo exhibitions like *Paul Strand: Photographs 1915-1945* and *Edward Weston* (1946). These exhibitions created both a history of the medium and a canon of its leading practitioners by framing photography within a preexisting curatorial template – prints were matted, framed, placed behind glass, organized linearly and hung at eye level, often selected and arranged by artist, rather than content or technique. Newhall’s aesthetic program ended in 1947 when he resigned from the museum.

As curator and critic Christopher Phillips argues, Newhall’s departure can partially be explained by the failure of his exhibition program: he “failed equally to retrieve photography from its marginal status among the fine arts and to attract what the museum could consider a substantial popular following.”<sup>82</sup> While Barr’s *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition was seen as instrumental in generating a thriving market for painting and sculpture, Newhall’s exhibitions lacked the equivalent. Not only were there no photography galleries, but there was no market.<sup>83</sup> Even MoMA’s “American Photographs at \$10” (December 1941), a self-described “experiment to encourage the collecting of photographs for decoration and pleasure,” which offered limited-edition,

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<sup>81</sup> Beaumont Newhall, “Photography as a Branch of Art History,” *College Art Journal* 1, no. 4 (1942): 90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/773040>.

<sup>82</sup> Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” 39.

<sup>83</sup> As previously mentioned, Helen Gee’s Limelight Gallery did not open until 1954, 7 years after Newhall’s departure and, even then, there was no real self-sustaining market.

framed prints by many of the photographers Newhall exhibited including Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Walker Evans was unsuccessful.<sup>84</sup> Of the 90 prints available, only 14 sold, including 3 to the museum and 2 to David McAlpin, the department's chairman, who had volunteered to pay for exhibitions and acquisitions.<sup>85</sup>

Another explanation for Newhall's resignation can be explained by the photography community's reception to his program. One of the more significant criticisms leveraged against Newhall's program was what the popular photography press saw as its elitism and "snobbish" character, as described by one writer for *Popular Photography*.<sup>86</sup> As discussed, in terms of the critical landscape, popular photography was the most powerful voice in the mid-twentieth century American photographic community. If Newhall's self-proclaimed interest in "the art of photography" both guided his curatorial program and was the target of its criticism, the alternative was the popular press – photography as a democratic means of communication.

The museum named Edward Steichen as the next curator of photography. While Steichen's early interests in art photography and European modern art had aligned with Stieglitz's (Steichen, after all, designed the cover for *Camera Work*), Steichen's interests expanded into popular photography during World War I, where he served as the head of the photographic section of the Army Air Service Corps.<sup>87</sup> After the war, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Steichen had a very successful career as a portrait and fashion

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<sup>84</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, "Museum of Modern Art Opens Two Small Exhibitions: American Photographs and American Silk Screen Prints," Press Release (New York: Museum of Modern Art, December 1, 1941), [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_325282.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325282.pdf).

<sup>85</sup> Peter Galassi, *American Photography, 1890-1965: From the Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; H.N. Abrams, 1995), 38.

<sup>86</sup> Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," 40.

<sup>87</sup> Malcolm R. Daniel, *Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand: Masterworks from the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010).

photographer for popular magazines including *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. Steichen's interest "in the illustrative use of photography, particularly in the swaying of great masses" was the foundation to his curatorial program, guided by the conception of photography as posed by the popular publications that had not only criticized Newhall's program as elitist, but that Steichen had worked within.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast to Newhall's interest in securing photography's autonomy and place amongst other mediums, Steichen was, by his own account, not inclined to give a "hoot in hell" about the medium's status among the other fine arts.<sup>89</sup> This shift – away from Newhall's art photography program and towards Steichen's popular photography program – was a deliberate institutional decision. Announcing Steichen's appointment, Nelson Rockefeller, president of the museum's Board of Trustees, stated:

Steichen, the young man who was so instrumental in bringing modern art to America, joins with the Museum of Modern Art to bring to as wide an audience as possible the best work being done throughout the world, and to employ it creatively as a means of interpretation in major Museum exhibitions where photography is not the theme but the medium through which great achievements and great moments are graphically represented<sup>90</sup>

From the very beginning, Steichen's curatorial program was explicitly focused on photographs that expressed "great achievements and great moments," rather than Newhall's concern regarding its medium-specific achievements and tradition. Or, in other words, Steichen's program was about bringing photographs *of* something to a mass audience, rather than presenting that audience with photographs *as* something.

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," 40.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas F. Brady, "At 90, Youthful Sparks of Revolt Glow in Steichen," *New York Times*, March 28, 1969.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Christopher Phillips, "The Judgement Seat of Photography," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), 45.

Not only did the governing museum body know Steichen's resume, but they had also glimpsed his strikingly different curatorial approach. Lieutenant Commander Edward Steichen of the United States Navy Reserve, as his name was published in the corresponding catalogue, had curated *Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War* in 1942 at MoMA, six months after Pearl Harbor and five years before Newhall's resignation. "An important contribution to the war effort," the show was part of a series of exhibitions executed through 38 contracts for the Coordinator of InterAmerican Affairs (C.I.A.A.), the Office of War Information (O.W.I.) and other governmental agencies with clear propagandistic aims.<sup>91</sup> As opposed to the preexisting curatorial template employed by Newhall – linear rows of framed, matted and glassed photographs attributed to artists – *Road to Victory* consisted of approximately 150 photographs, including free-standing and hanging life-size enlargements to create what MoMA's press release described as a "spectacular installation" with a "dramatic sequence."<sup>92</sup> *Road to Victory* not only stood in stark contrast to Newhall's curatorial program but was an early predecessor to what would become Steichen's, if not the museum's, most popular show – the extensive 1955 thematic exhibition, *Family of Man*.

Hailed as the major photographic event of the 1950s, *Family of Man* featured 503 photographs taken by 273 photographers from 68 countries, arranged and exhibited around the overarching theme of "the universal elements and emotions and the oneness of

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<sup>91</sup> René D'Harnoncourt, "The Museum 1929-1954," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 22, no. 1/2 (1954): 17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4058203>.

<sup>92</sup> Museum of Modern Art, "Two Famous Americans Arrange Road to Victory Exhibition at Museum of Modern Art," Press Release (New York: Museum of Modern Art, May 13, 1942), 1, [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_press-release\\_325317.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325317.pdf).



human beings throughout the world.”<sup>93</sup> During its relatively brief tenure at the Museum of Modern Art that spanned between January 26 through May 8, 1955, over 270,000 visitors viewed the exhibition, the largest attendance to a single show at the museum in 15 years. Arranged by the United States Information Agency and cosponsored by companies like Coca-Cola, the show was viewed by an estimated 9 million people through 85 exhibitions across 69 countries, often selected, as Allan Sekula has argued in his canonical essay, “The Traffic in Photographs,” as a result of Cold War political and economic motivations.<sup>94</sup> The exhibition also appeared in a variety of book forms, which sold at least 4 million copies by 1978 and remains MoMA’s bestselling publication of all time.<sup>95</sup> Rather than photography as art, Steichen’s program situated photography in line with popular press photography –as a medium for communication, as content, as literary. Thus, as Greenbergian modernism continued to disavow photography as a medium of high art, Steichen’s exhibition played into, took up and celebrated photography along the terms of this exclusion. What would come to play out at the center stage of the Mapplethorpe Controversy is this very tension: on the one hand, a conservative body that reads photography as communication of content and, on the other hand, an art establishment that had, only recently, accepted photography as art and celebrated Robert Mapplethorpe’s work through a formal vocabulary.

Grouped into subthemes including love, birth, nature, children and family, the exhibition presented a universalized humanity that transcended national boundaries. Like

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<sup>93</sup> Museum of Modern Art, “New Documents (Press Release),” February 28, 1967, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/3860/releases/MOMA\\_1967\\_Jan-June\\_0034\\_21.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3860/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0034_21.pdf).

<sup>94</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (1981): 19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/776511>.

<sup>95</sup> These include a paperback, mass-market edition which sold for \$1 and a deluxe edition for \$10. Sekula, 20.

*Road to Victory*, the *Family of Man* photographs were displayed in varying sizes and ways, according to theme. Some were flush-mounted on thick backing board, unmated, unframed and without glass resembling an oversized magazine layout, ideal for rapid scanning rather than a typical fine art display that calls for individualized contemplation.<sup>96</sup> At times, they were placed on the floor, hung at eye level, blown up to huge proportions, suspended from the ceiling, mounted on poles, or free standing. As one critic put it, the exhibition was so “elaborate that the photographs became less important than the method of displaying them.”<sup>97</sup> An “editorial achievement rather than an exhibition of photography” as Jacob Deschin described it in the *New York Times*, the exhibition’s effectiveness derived from its sheer physical presence and arrangement.<sup>98</sup> Like a magazine editor, Steichen decided upon the scale, layout and context to create and deliver meaning. Not only did the popular magazine influence the exhibition, but the exhibition legitimized popular magazine photography. The individual artist and autonomous artwork almost completely disappear within the theme and subthemes of the exhibition; rather than the artist, the museum emerged as what Christopher Phillip has described as the “orchestrator of meaning.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Phillips, “The Judgement Seat of Photography,” 31.

<sup>97</sup> Rollie McKenna, “Photography,” *The New Republic*, March 14, 1955, 132 edition.

<sup>98</sup> Jacob Deschin, “Family of Man: Panoramic Show Opens at Modern Museum,” *New York Times*, 1955, sec. Arts & Leisure.

<sup>99</sup> In terms of the exhibition, there was no wall text or attribution. The images are presented as a cohesive body of work, with no sort of differentiation or attribution of artist. This is only reemphasized and repeated in its catalogue. The reproduced images are organized place then artist: New Guinea, Laurence LeGuy; U.S.A., Robert Frank; Mexico, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, etc. Yet, very few of the photographs have titles, further emphasizing their classifications as factual images rather than creative outputs. In fact, in his introduction, Steichen refers to these image-makers as “photographers...amateurs and professionals”. Nowhere in the catalogue does the term “artist” appear. Phillips, “The Judgement Seat of Photography,” 28.; Edward Steichen, ed., *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955).

Despite its popularity, contemporary art critics were ambivalent. In *Art News*, critic Edwin Roskam describes the exhibition as a “performance” casting Steichen as the “composer, arranger, and conductor.”<sup>100</sup> Though Roskam balked at the exhibition’s “stunts,” he concludes that there was legitimacy to Steichen’s underlying assertion that photography is a language which can be used to “talk about things of interest to everybody” standing in stark contrast to the intense hermeticism of Abstract Expressionism, one of the leading artistic movements of the 1950s.<sup>101</sup> In this way, argues Roskam, Steichen was “...identifying the special characteristics which give that medium its own and individual potential, and putting his finger on its peculiar and most current function in its time.”<sup>102</sup>

The ideological, if not propagandistic, orientation of the exhibition was kindling to other critics. Hilton Kramer questions the respectability of the show, where “art abandons itself to journalism” and argues that the exhibition took on ideological aims, rather than aesthetic questions.<sup>103</sup> Roland Barthes includes an essay on the show in his seminal, *Mythologies* (1957). He argues that Steichen’s show creates a myth of humanity by flattening differences and complexity while emptying truth and history.<sup>104</sup> Kramer’s and Barthes’ reflections are indicative of a larger critical body that discursively locates *Family of Man*, in particular, and photography, more broadly, through the medium’s social roles, which exist antagonistically with the terms of modernist art.

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<sup>100</sup> Edwin Roskam, “Family of Steichen,” *Art News* 54, no. 1 (March 1955): 34.

<sup>101</sup> Again, it is this sort of institutional discourse that continues to reinvest and reaffirm the (increasingly, solidified) diametric terms of Greenberg’s modernism as the museum constructs and celebrates photography for its popular appeal.

<sup>102</sup> Roskam, “Family of Steichen,” 65.

<sup>103</sup> Hilton Kramer, “On the Horizon: Exhibiting the Family of Man,” *Commentary Magazine* 20, no. 4 (October 1955): 365–67.

<sup>104</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 100–102.

In the 1960s, the Museum of Modern Art attempted to discursively reconstruct photography within the framework of modernism as evidenced by Steichen's successor, John Szarkowski. Szarkowski's curatorial program was more closely aligned with Newhall's than Steichen's. In the catalogue introduction to *The Photographer's Eye* (1964), Szarkowski establishes five formalist categories to read selected photographs through: the thing itself, the detail, the frame, the time, and the vantage point. It is an attempt to institute the vocabulary of "photographic vision" to establish, define, and categorize formal attributes particular to photography to position the photograph as autonomous aesthetic object in the modernist sense.<sup>105</sup> He attempts to construct and systematize an ontology of photography as a *modernist* medium, which by the mid-1960s, at the time of this exhibition, was codified as both a critical approach *and* a mode of art production. Szarkowski's attempt to lodge photography into the framework constructed to reject it – the framework of modernism – by mobilizing its medium-specific vocabulary is telling of both the shifting status of art photography, as well as the status of modernism by the mid-1960s.<sup>106</sup>

John Szarkowski's well-known *New Documents* (1967) exhibition, which included the work of Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, a group described in both the exhibition's press release and wall text as "a new generation of

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<sup>105</sup> Autonomous, in that they are to be judged solely on an aesthetic basis without reference to their context, requiring no supplementary text and/or images such as what one would obtain via popular magazines. Aesthetic in that he specifically exhibits the works as products of named "artist photographers" within the space of an art museum.

<sup>106</sup> It is this moment and attempt that Douglas Crimp has explicitly described as a "complete perversion of modernism" and what Abigail Solomon-Godeau has described as a sign of the "[t]he eclipse – or collapse, as the case may be – of modernism. See Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (Sage Publications in Association with the Open University, 1999), 213–23.; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Art Photography," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, Media & Society; 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 103–23.

documentary photographers,” signals the shift in exhibitions and the museum-going public’s interests.<sup>107</sup> A revision, if not end, to the 1930s tradition of the documentary photographer as an impartial, objective recorder, is the recognition of a “new” documentary photographer as a subjective, participant-observer who directs their approach “to more personal ends.”<sup>108</sup> Where previously these photographs may have been classified as visual documents of urban life, instead what emerged, through the institutional apparatus of the museum, was Arbus, Friedlander and Winogrand. Artists. The exhibition was arranged accordingly. Held on the museum’s ground floor, the show occupied one room and hall that opened into a second, larger room. According to Szarkowski, “[e]arly on it is decided that Diane’s work will occupy the first room, while Friedlander’s and Winogrand’s photographs are to be hung in separate areas of the larger one.”<sup>109</sup>

While Arbus’ reputation (as “freak photographer”) was not fully solidified until the 1970s, her work was the most frequently discussed.<sup>110</sup> *New York Magazine* called her work “brutal, daring and revealing” and *Newsweek* credited her with “the sharp crystal-clear generous vision of a poet,” while critic Deschin described her works as responding “to the grotesque in life” though it “sometimes . . . borders close to poor taste.”<sup>111</sup> The first major retrospective of her work, held at MoMA in 1972, a year after her death and the same year her work was shown at the Venice Biennale – the first time photography was included - was the best attended photography exhibition since *The Family of Man*.

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<sup>107</sup> Museum of Modern Art, “New Documents (Press Release).”

<sup>108</sup> Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>109</sup> Frederick Gross, *Diane Arbus’s 1960s: Auguries of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 108.

<sup>110</sup> For more information on the ways in which Arbus’ reputation/ego was constructed and revised see Frederick Gross, *Diane Arbus’s 1960s*.

<sup>111</sup> Jacob Deschin, “Photography: People Seen As Curiosity,” *New York Times*, 1967, sec. Arts & Leisure.

Consisting of nearly 125 prints, the posthumous exhibition attracted 250,000 visitors during its two-month display at MoMA.<sup>112</sup>

Where *Family of Man* presented a dramatic visual spectacle, Arbus' work, both in *New Documents* and in her retrospective, was arranged within the preestablished curatorial template afforded to art objects – linear, matted, framed, attributed work.

Where *Family of Man* used photography to communicate a hegemonic vision of humanity, Arbus' work focused on its opposite – the individual, the outsider. The Arbus retrospective signals a museum-going public that was attracted to an individual artist, which, after all had all but been completely been erased from *Family of Man*. What is crucially evident within photography's discursive function in the museum is how the retrospective not only adhered to the notion of, but was built around the idea of the photographer as artist and the photograph as art. While Arbus had throughout her career worked for popular publications, within the space of the museum, her work was isolated from any narrative function and reclassified as art objects.

Photography's consolidation and reclassification in the 1970s was partially spurred by the new intellectual and economic discourses it circulated within; it was in this period where art critics and publications began to increasingly discuss and theorize the medium as galleries and auctions sold it for rising prices. It was also at this time when museums began to increasingly assemble significant collections. Some museums created separate photography departments such as that at the Art Institute of Chicago (1974) and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1975), which were both led by curators, who had recently graduated with M.F.A.s in photography – a result of the burgeoning interest and

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<sup>112</sup> "Click!: Her Camera Captured Individuality," *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 1973, sec. 2.

opportunities in the university system.<sup>113</sup> Others, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Museum, significantly expanded their collections, while new institutions specifically devoted to the collection and study of photography were created, including the California Museum of Photography, Riverside (1973), the International Center of Photography, New York (1974) and the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson (1975).<sup>114</sup>

There was tremendous consolidation and reclassification. In his “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject” (1981), Douglass Crimp illustrates the case of Julia van Haaften, a librarian in the Art and Architecture Division of the New York Public Library (NYPL). Interested in photography, she noticed that the library’s collection contained a number of books with vintage photographic prints, which prompted her to organize an exhibition of the material she culled from the various collections. The library soon realized it owned an extraordinarily large and valuable collection of photographs. The result was, as Crimp writes:

... what was once housed in the Jewish Division under the classification "Jerusalem" will eventually be found in Art, Prints, and Photographs under the classification "Auguste Salzmann." What was Egypt will become Beato, or du Camp, or Frith; Pre-Columbian Middle America will be Desire Charnay; the American Civil War, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan; the cathedrals of France will be Henri LeSecq; the Swiss Alps, the Bisson Freres; the horse in motion is now Muybridge; the flight of birds, Marey; and the expression of emotions forgets Darwin to become Guillaume Duchene de Boulogne.

What Julia van Haaften is doing at the New York Public Library is just one example of what is occurring throughout our culture on a massive scale. And thus the list goes on, as urban poverty becomes Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine; portraits of Delacroix and Manet become portraits by Nadar and Carjat; Dior's

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<sup>113</sup> Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject.”

<sup>114</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art did not establish an independent curatorial department for photography until 1992. The Getty did not establish its Department of Photographs until 1984, with the acquisitions of several private collections including Sam Wagstaff Jr.’s. Wagstaff was Robert Mapplethorpe’s longtime lover, friend and benefactor. Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Photographs | The Metropolitan Museum of Art.”; “Photographs | The J. Paul Getty Museum,” Getty Museum, accessed January 12, 2021, <https://www.getty.edu/art/photographs/>.

New Look becomes Irving Penn; and World War II becomes Robert Capa; for if photography was invented in 1839, it was only discovered in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>115</sup>

While van Haaften is the particular anecdote, Crimp's use of her is guided by his interest in the particular epistemic shift in consolidating photography into a singular aesthetic field, as well as an institution's role in the production and structuring of meaning, specifically via the epistemological effects of classification. He uses the materialization of New York Public Library's photographic collection – a collection built by extracting and reorganizing photographs - to indicate how institutions succeeded in divorcing photographs from their previous functions within a multitude of discourses and consolidated the medium into a singular aesthetic field, as evidenced by their reclassification according to their newly acquired value attached to the “artists” who made them.

### **Perfect Illusion**

If, as historian Andrew Hartman argues, American society in the 1950s was largely animated by conventional boundaries whereby “an unprecedented number of Americans got in line – or aspired to get in line...even those Americans barred from normative America by virtue of their race, sexuality, or religion often felt compelled to demonstrate compliance” – the 1960s gave way to a pluralistic culture that articulated competing conceptions of itself frequently catalyzed by notions of “universalized fracture.”<sup>116</sup> This generation, the first to grow up with television, was inundated within a disillusioned America, marked by the Vietnam War, Watergate, the race riots,

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<sup>115</sup> Crimp, “The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject.”

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.



assassinations, the sociocultural shifts brought on by the commercialization of rebellious stances once held by the counterculture, the disintegration of the nuclear family and the reorganization of traditional gender roles resulting from the feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1970s.<sup>117</sup> This generation's attitude towards media culture was productively schizophrenic and, by the late 1980s, these values would pose a serious potential disruption to the traditional social order.

While Hartman's analysis is largely sociohistoric, the effects of this fractured pluralism can be observed in the arts. If, as Ted Lawson argues, the art of the postwar period was interested in the ontology of modernism couched within terms of objectivity, medium-specificity, purity, and autonomy, by the mid-1960s and early 1970s, modernism had become institutionalized aesthetic dogma. What the Culture Wars and Mapplethorpe Controversy would help expose is the latent value imposed on the (supposed) neutrality of this modernist aesthetic, which became increasingly defined as *the* American aesthetic. The Controversy would further expose the ways the proliferation, and deployment of this so-called "objective" set of artistic criteria that organizes and disseminates knowledge through its institutions – museums, galleries, the market – has largely worked to elevate white, straight, men.<sup>118</sup> What emerged were responsive art practices that, to varying degrees and often through the use of commodity culture, leveraged critiques against the fundamental tenets of modernism and its respective cultural position, transforming the conception of art away from the modernist teleology of stylistic innovation to an art founded on and within culture.

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<sup>117</sup> I will be returning to a broad, sociohistoric sketch of gay culture in Chapter 2.

<sup>118</sup> I say "help further expose" because I am in no way trying to discredit the immense amount of social, political, theoretical and economic work other responsive art practices, including but not limited to feminist art, environmental art, postmodern art, have done.

Starting in the 1960s, as well-known artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg began to mechanically apply silkscreened photographic images onto their canvases, often pulled directly from preexisting mass cultural sources, the lines between art and non-art, high art and low art, as well as art and life, became increasingly transgressed. This challenge to the modernist doctrine was taken even further by performance and earthworks artists, whose ephemeral works were not only based on the use of mixed media but occurred through and in the spaces of life rather than the museum, where they were, often, only reproduced through photographic documentation. This critical denigration of modernism's insistence and celebration of art's autonomy continued as artists broadly responded to the theoretical, social and political revolutions and events that marked the period. It is within these broader artistic, cultural and intellectual shifts, in addition to new movements – Pop art, Conceptual art, Minimalism, Happenings, body art, Land art, photography, experimental film and public art – where a specific feminist critique emerged. Catalyzed by second-wave feminism and prompted by a growing body of feminist discourse, this critique was tied to the idea that visual culture is a principal site where gender relations are produced and reproduced. Lucy Lippard has productively defined feminist art as “neither a style nor a movement” but rather “a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life” that consequently can be applied to a broad range of works that may look radically dissimilar.<sup>119</sup> This feminist critique shifted art writing; if art criticism and history was traditionally concerned with what was inside the frame, feminist critique turned attention to what lies outside the frame - patriarchal

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<sup>119</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Sweeping Exchanges: The Contributions of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s,” *Art Journal*, Fall/Winter 1980, 362.

logic, representation, history, politics and the body. This translated to an interrogation of the discipline's construction, subjects, institutions and value systems.<sup>120</sup>

These practices were not only inherently at odds with the high modernist paradigm, but consequently, as Craig Owens points out, to view these practices within the modernist framework “was only to see them as somehow degenerate, perverse, corrupt, as representing the loss of purity, the loss of purpose, the loss of high culture.”<sup>121</sup> These practices – with their sweeping, radical de-emphases on medium purity and art's autonomy – both participated in and contributed to the formation of new epistemological constructs within artistic discourse, which was part of a much more complex redistribution of knowledge taking place throughout American culture. Along with the powerful social and political movements of the period, one of the most immediate triggers was the massive boom in college education during the late 1960s and 1970s in tandem with changes in these institutions' missions and offerings. In terms of art and photography, this led to a substantial expansion in course offerings dedicated to the medium.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Linda Nochlin's seminal essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971) which played a major role as “progenitor” for the first phase of feminist art criticism, theory and inquiry in art history.

<sup>121</sup> Stephanson and Owens, “Interview with Craig Owens,” 56.

<sup>122</sup> It's also worth noting that the trajectory that has been traced in this chapter – as, at first, a professional, rather than creative enterprise – was paralleled in higher education. While schools had increasingly offered courses in photography since the late 1930s these courses were primarily offered at night, available at times when photographic amateurs could take advantage of them see. After World War II, photography courses expanded in offerings and appearance, but the photography degree-granting programs, such as those at the University of Houston and the University of Southern California, were housed, respectively, in the science and cinematography departments rather than fine arts departments. It was not until 1949 when photography was first formally recognized as a fine art at Ohio University, the first American college or university to offer a bachelor's and a master's degree that combined photographic instruction with a liberal arts training and housed the program within their School of Painting and Allied Arts. By 1968, a survey shows, about 14,000 students were enrolled in photography courses across 440 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. By 1970-1971, there were 627 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada reported to offer one or more courses in Motion Picture, Still Photography and Graphic Arts. Three years later, in 1974, this institutional number had jumped from 640 to 690, or 10%, compared to the 6% jump in total enrollment from about 79,000 students to 83,000. In other words, not only did the demand for

The generation of artists and critics that came of age in the mid-to-late 1970s were not only the first to be raised with television and afforded the opportunity to enroll in university courses, but were also reading and responding to a broad body of critical and theoretical work – the Frankfurt School, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julie Kristeva, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Lacan, and Continental feminist theory – that was, itself, interrogating modernism’s operations and culture, along with its corresponding divisions and hierarchies through an interdisciplinary examination of the dynamics of representation and relationships: the function of cultural myths in representation, the construction of representation in social systems, and the perpetuation and function of these systems through representation, in tandem with the underlying power relations that naturalize these dynamics. Analyses drew from a number of philosophical, critical and interdisciplinary perspectives including literary criticism, semiotics, Marxism, feminism and psychology to deconstruct the illusion of neutrality to reveal underlying historical, economic, social, and ideological dimensions. The result was a renewed emphasis on the situation and position of the viewer, which was no longer assumed to be the modernist universal viewer (white, straight, male, western) but instead, a critical, bodied viewer that questioned the roles of the audience and the institutions that construct meaning. As Crimp has pointed out, frequently, this redistribution of knowledge

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photography courses grow, and with it an expanding number of teachers and practitioners, but the demand outpaced the growth in student enrollment. Photography had mass appeal. See Charles Henry Martens, “A College Major in Photography in the Fine Arts” (United States -- New York, New York University, 1966), <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.tulane.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/302212817/citation/2CCF3AB2D30340BBPQ/3>; Jacob Deschin, “Fine Arts Degrees: Photography Is Taught as a Cultural Subject,” *New York Times*, 1949, sec. Arts & Leisure; Donald Peter Lokuta, “Instruction in the History of Photography in Higher Education: The State of the Art.” (Ph.D., United States -- Ohio, The Ohio State University, 1975), <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.tulane.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/302779473/citation/2CCF3AB2D30340BBPQ/2>.

is associated with the term *postmodernism*, although what that term meant at the time often depended on the people who employed the concept.<sup>123</sup>

Within art criticism, the publication, *October*, was at the forefront of this unresolved debate regarding the terms and definitions of postmodernism. Founded in 1976 by Rosalind Krauss, and as explicitly stated in its inaugural issue, *October* was formed in response to the existing “archaic enterprises” that have disregarded the innovative “interrelationships between most vital arts” including the *Partisan Review*, a publication Greenberg frequently published in and had been editor for. *October*’s stated intention was to articulate with “maximum directness the structural and social relationships of artistic practice in this country...possible only within a sustained awareness of the economic and social bases of that practice, of the material conditions of its origins and processes.”<sup>124</sup> Edited at one time or another, by Krauss, Crimp, and Hal Foster, the journal was at the forefront of the postmodern turn, offering essays that fused art, theory, criticism *and* politics, a significant reorientation in criticism. It was in *October*’s pages where Krauss argued that the signal of postmodernism was an expanded field of art, whereby an art practice is not defined in relation to a given medium, but in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium may be used.<sup>125</sup> Where Douglas Crimp articulated a postmodernism that was a return to theater, in which artistic practice is not concerned with modernist autonomy, but with the “strata of representation” beginning “when photography comes to pervert modernism.”<sup>126</sup> Where Craig Owens’ positioned postmodernism as an eruption of language, a new impulse that

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<sup>123</sup> Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject.”

<sup>124</sup> “About October,” *October* 1 (1976): 3–5.

<sup>125</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, no. Spring (1979): 30–44.

<sup>126</sup> Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject,” 220.

is “allegorical” and deconstructive in nature, whereby mediums collide, as do levels of representation and reading.<sup>127</sup> As opposed to modernist art criticism, with its insistence that the meaning of work depended on its formal qualities – that which is in the frame – these postmodernist critics’ concerns were largely outside the frame. They emphasized context, exhibition spaces, inclusions and exclusions, rhetoric of display, and how power naturalizes and neutralizes. Despite the radical potential of this approach, *October* largely emphasized postmodern strategies – appropriation, collage, allegory – rather than content. It was broadly theoretical, rather than socially specific.<sup>128</sup> It is also within this emerging body of critical rhetoric, that photography was the subject of a number of foundational essays written, published and circulated in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>129</sup>

Retrospectively, photography’s crucial place within postmodernism appears to have been logical, if not inescapable.<sup>130</sup> In terms of art production, if modernism celebrated autonomy, originality, authenticity, opticality and authorship, postmodernism was concerned with fragmentation, readership, subject matter, appropriation and reproducibility. Photography was *the* medium that had these very concerns built into it.

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<sup>127</sup> Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2,” *October* 13 (1980): 58–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778646>.

<sup>128</sup> Looking back to his contributions on AIDS to *October* throughout the 1980s, Crimp notes that “it wasn’t what *October* was about...it’s about a retrenchment around a traditional notion of high modernism. In the 1980s, *October* was thought of as the journal of postmodernism. But the commitments of Krauss and Michelson and the people now connected with the journal have always been more high modernist in their orientation. But I wouldn’t have been able to articulate that at that time.” “Mathias Danbolt: Front Room – Back Room: An Interview with Douglas Crimp,” accessed March 20, 2019, <http://trikster.net/2/crimp/1.html>.

<sup>129</sup> These include Rosalind Krauss’s “Notes on Index: Seventies Art in America I & II” (1977), essays on Nadar and Stieglitz (1979), Irving Penn (1980), “Reading Photographs as Text” (1980), “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism” (1980), “Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” (1981), “Photography’s Discursive Spaces” (1981), “A Note on Photography and the Simulacra” (1984); Douglas Crimp’s “Pictures” (1979), “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism” (1980) and the aforementioned, “The Museum’s Old/The Library’s New Subject” (1981) in addition to, a special issue organized by in 1978 by Krauss and Annette Michelson dedicated to photography

<sup>130</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Playing in the Fields of the Image,” in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, Media & Society; 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86–102.

The photographic image – the dominant form of representation created, used, and circulated by the media – was identified as a central site into the critical and theoretical examinations of the politics of representation.

Art historians often retrospectively point to the *Pictures* exhibition of 1977 as a critical turning point in photography, the history of art and postmodernism. The show, curated by Douglas Crimp, was held at the New York's Artist Space and featured five artists: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. These artists were united by their strategies of taking or producing a picture of a preexisting picture, though for different reasons and toward different ends.<sup>131</sup> While the show itself did not make much of a splash nor did they exhibit together again, Crimp republished the exhibition text in *October* in 1979, where he expounded upon the themes and methods of the participating artists, and included other artists who had not participated in the exhibition including Cindy Sherman. In part a response to Michael Fried's now-canonical attack on the theatrical and temporal components of minimalism, Crimp argues that not only can the characteristics of a medium no longer tell us much about an artist's activity, but he reorients contemporary art practices away from the traditional modernist teleology and reroutes it to 1970s performance art, with strategies grounded in literal temporality and theatricality.<sup>132</sup>

What became known as the Pictures Generation artists – those who participated

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<sup>131</sup> Even semantically the postmodern plays between high and low culture can be gleaned. Crimp notes that he chose the term "pictures" for both the exhibition and essay to convey the selected works' most salient characteristic – the recognizable image – and the ambiguities of it; not only is "picture" not specific to any single artistic medium but in its verb form, picture "can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object." See Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (1979): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778227>.

<sup>132</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood - Artforum International," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 116–47.

in the 1977 *Pictures* show, as well as artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince – were first described by Crimp as "a group of younger artists [that] sees representation as an inescapable part of our ability to grasp the world around us."<sup>133</sup> He would go on to claim that, for these artists, "[re]presentation is understood as the only possibility of grasping the world around us."<sup>134</sup> Instead of being concerned with conferring aesthetic autonomy onto their photographs – as Robert Mapplethorpe was understood to - they were, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau has described them, “infinitely more concerned with photography as such; that is to say, as a mechanically reproducible image-making technology entirely assimilated to the apparatuses of consumerism, mass culture, socialization and political control.”<sup>135</sup> They recognized the often-normative preexisting sign systems and structures that photographs participated and circulated in and, in response, rather than a passive, contemplative gaze, their practices encouraged an active, analytic engagement that often incited institutional critique.<sup>136</sup> Their work interrogated representation as a site of construction – of representation, identity, authorship, and society.

The Pictures Generation also contributed to the burgeoning theoretically inflected discourse that was circulating in art journals and magazines. Take, for example, Cindy

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<sup>133</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Pictures” (New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977), 5.

<sup>134</sup> Douglas Crimp, “About Pictures,” *Flash Art*, no. 88–89 (April 1979): 35.

<sup>135</sup> Solomon-Godeau, “Playing in the Fields of the Image,” 88.

<sup>136</sup> This too is reflective of the times and shifts in higher education. A number of them had participated in the massive college boom – several, including Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman, studied at Buffalo State College, where they were introduced to Conceptual Art and encouraged to experiment. Others, including Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch and David Salle (who later dated Sherrie Levine and introduced her to his friends from CalArts), studied at CalArts, where they were led by the photoconceptualist John Baldessari, who began teaching in 1970, with an unconventional pedagogical program that eliminated grades and hierarchies between student and teacher, placed a premium on originality as opposed to techniques/skills, and began to replace craft-based instruction with art theory and philosophy. See Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York; New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2009).



Sherman, the de facto representative of the Pictures Generation who, time and time again, would serve as a discursive counter to Mapplethorpe, a relationship that will be explored in Chapter Five. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) were cited to illustrate the psychoanalytic theories of the male gaze laid out in Laura Mulvey's iconic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which, though published two years before Sherman's series, has become one of the foundational texts for the critical approach and writing Sherman's work launched. For Craig Owens, Sherman's strategy illustrates the overlapping discourses of feminism and postmodernism and offers a critique of the media's construction of femininity, where her "women are not women but images of women, specular models of femininity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification; they are, in other words, tropes, figures."<sup>137</sup>

While *October*'s pages and the Pictures Generations' prints may have seemingly set out to confront and unravel the politics of modernism, Robert Mapplethorpe's work was, early on, understood as a continuation of this modernist tradition. As has been established, the Mapplethorpe Controversy was dependent on photography's newly, yet still tenuous, status as an intuitively recognized high art. As will be explored further in Chapters Three and Four, the very formalism that allowed for his work to be so readily legible and thus susceptible to conservative attacks was, in large part, initially viewed by leading art critics as nostalgic, derivative, and conventional and yet, at the same time, the legal justification for the work's "serious" artistic value when put on trial in criminal court.

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<sup>137</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," 33.

If the Pictures Generation was changing art criticism and history, Robert Mapplethorpe was - at least before the Controversy - not. When on July 12, 1989, Christina Orr-Cahall, the director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., canceled *The Perfect Moment: Robert Mapplethorpe*, citing the intense, political environment surrounding the show and its contents, “Robert Mapplethorpe” – the artistic ego, legacy, and work – shifted. Over the next year and a half, there would be protests, senate hearings, mass mailing campaigns, a criminal trial, Oprah interviews, funding reversals and allegations of censorship, as Mapplethorpe’s photographs increasingly became a focal point in the Culture Wars. Instrumentalized by the religious right and conservative forces to exploit and (re)produce an increasingly alienated relationship between a “high culture” elite and the general, tax-paying public, *The Perfect Moment: Robert Mapplethorpe* exhibition provided the perfect medium and the perfect artist: photography and Robert Mapplethorpe.

As has been established throughout this chapter, photography’s position remains tenuous. This unique status – as a medium of documentary, popular culture, *and*, by the 1980s, of high art – lent itself to the religious right’s and conservative’s assault on the art establishment. As will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three, in terms of the two most significant development photography practices, the aestheticized modernist art photography and the critical, often politicized, postmodern art that frequently employed photography, Robert Mapplethorpe found himself at odds, for varying ways, with each enterprise. If, on the one hand, the late 1970s marks art photography’s ascendance into and institutionalization within high modernism, Mapplethorpe’s formalism was very much in line with this practice and his status, as an artist with institutional accreditation,

was dependent upon it. On the other hand, his photography, which he used to explore, capture and level seemingly disparate subjects, had taken on a renewed social imperative amidst the growing Culture Wars and AIDS crisis. What followed not only changed Robert Mapplethorpe's place in art history but art photography, more broadly. The Mapplethorpe Controversy brought the debates over high art into households throughout the country. If a nation's artistic legacy is an accurate barometer of its national identity, whose identity deserves to be represented?

## CHAPTER TWO: A Star Is Born

Arthur Danto begins his book, *Playing with the Edge*, with the following lamentation: “Against what had become the standard agony of putting oneself in the presence of Mapplethorpe’s art in 1989, the experience of seeing it at the Whitney, in 1988, before anyone much knew about the artist, has, in retrospect, the uncanniness of a dream.”<sup>1</sup> It is a thought that reflects the phenomenon that engulfs artists, like Robert Mapplethorpe, whose careers, reputations and work have been widely overshadowed and critically informed by the social, political and economic circuits they have been caught and (re)produced in. Entangled within the battles of the Culture Wars, Mapplethorpe’s prior reputation – the Mapplethorpe that existed before the Controversy – was replaced by a newly constructed Mapplethorpe: the photographer of the infamous BDSM photographs. Not only was Mapplethorpe discursively reconstructed by and within the Controversy, but this has given way to the narrative that few knew of the photographer before the Controversy and even fewer knew of what became his most publicly controversial works. This chapter focuses on this early period, when he began his photographic career in the mid-to-late 1970s, and works to recover, analyze and complicate the Mapplethorpe that existed prior to the Controversy. This chapter argues that while censorship, or perhaps more accurately, *censure*ship, characterized certain

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto, *Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (University of California Press, 1996), 5.

episodes of Mapplethorpe's career, his early reputation was often defined in varying relation to his sexual work rather than solely by it or through its total exclusion.

As discussed in Chapter One, Robert Mapplethorpe began his career as a photographer in the 1970s at the same time photography became an institutionally accepted medium of high art. As will be argued in the first section of this chapter, despite the array of subjects he photographed – from flowers to sadomasochism – Mapplethorpe's early career was shaped by and actively participated in this institutional transformation of the medium. He promoted his photographs as unique art works, most notably through the strategic incorporation of elaborate wooden frames and pristine prints. In terms of his career, he not only found success but an audience. Before the Controversy brought the name "Mapplethorpe" into American households through hundreds of syndicated newspaper articles and televised features, Robert Mapplethorpe was an active and known member of the art establishment, who made a living as a successful photographer. While his sources of revenue changed – from selling work in fine arts galleries to more financially lucrative commercial contracts, which will be the focus of the second half of this chapter - he began his career with the same photographs that, a decade later, he would be defined by in the conversations and debates that reverberated across the country outside of the art establishment.

What follows is a work of recovery, not a linear narrative. I argue that rather than having been completely censored or universally accepted, Robert Mapplethorpe navigated complicated circuits that were shaped by the intersection of competing and, at times, overlapping institutions of the art world, of the photographic community, the gay community, and, of course, the normative community. What would become his

“controversial” works were critically analyzed and circulated. Sometimes they were censored, sometimes they were shown, but they were known and, often, provided a tantalizing transgressive appeal.

### **Act I: Watch Closely Now**

In 1970, Robert Mapplethorpe bought his first camera, a Polaroid, to take photographs to incorporate into what, at the time, was his preferred artistic medium – collages. He ultimately abandoned the mixed-media format in favor of photography, the basis of his first solo exhibition, *Polaroids*, held in January 1973 at the Light Gallery in New York City.<sup>2</sup> In his biography, the show usually occupies minimal space – a footnote, when and if mentioned – given its seemingly ineffective outcome and, in comparison to later works, the uncharacteristic medium and form.<sup>3</sup> By most standards, the show was a disappointment; it received no critical attention and failed to sell a single piece. The gallery, which was the only space exclusively showing the work of contemporary photography in New York, would not go on to represent him. Within Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre, the early Polaroids are, in some regards, anomalous. The 1972 *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* captures a seemingly spontaneous and fleeting moment (fig. 2.1). The image is blurry and lacks the refined formalism that would become a hallmark of his mature work. Yet, while Mapplethorpe would soon replace the polaroid with a more conventional camera, the exhibition marks the beginning of the themes that would come to define him. The Polaroids contain early indications of the composition and content that echo

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, Lee Witkin opened the first commercially successful photography gallery in 1969. The Light Gallery, which specialized in contemporary photography, opened two years before Mapplethorpe’s show, in 1971. Alexander, “Photographic Institutions and Practices,” 698.

<sup>3</sup> The major exception to this being the 2007 show, *Polaroids*, curated by Sylvia Wolf and held at the Whitney Museum. This show offers the most comprehensive overview of this early body of work. For more information, see Wolf, Mapplethorpe, and Whitney Museum of American Art, *Polaroids*.

throughout his oeuvre: nude studies, flowers, portraits and self-portraits. Indeed, some sixteen years later, only months before his death, Mapplethorpe insisted, “I had my own vision right from the beginning. If you look at my early Polaroids, the style was then what I have now.”<sup>4</sup> I argue that these early Polaroids and specifically his invitation to this first show, not only are indicators of a sustained vision, stylistically, but one that invited and, at times, capitalized on the contemporaneous appeal of transgression.

Mapplethorpe drew attention to the show through an invitation he ideated, created and mailed out (fig. 2.2). The gallery invitation – his first – functions in many as the announcement of the start of his photographic career and was a practice he took quite seriously: “An exhibition doesn’t begin when you enter a gallery,” he said, “it begins the minute you get an invitation in the mail.”<sup>5</sup> Invitees opened cream-colored Tiffany envelopes to find the protective paper that came with Polaroid film, on which was printed “DON’T TOUCH HERE.” Yet the invitation – a gelatin silver print self-portrait slipped inside the protective paper – appears to work against this proscription. The embossed “Robert Mapplethorpe” on the lower right corner, invites touch, while the artist’s dated signature on the back functions as a record of his. The invitation for touch is further complicated by the photographic content of the invitation: the self-portrait. As a self-portrait, the image is constructed and motivated by the desire to define oneself and, as one that he selected to be reproduced on 300 gelatin silver prints and circulated as an invitation, this self-definition has an explicitly public orientation.<sup>6</sup> Through the centrally-

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<sup>4</sup> Dominick Dunne, “Robert Mapplethorpe’s Proud Finale: The AIDS-Stricken Photographer’s Last Interview,” *Vanity Fair*, accessed September 4, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1989/02/robert-mapplethorpe-aids-dominick-dunne>.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Morrisoe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, Mapplethorpe, and Whitney Museum of American Art, *Polaroids*, 54.

composed picture, captured by positioning a Polaroid camera at his groin across from a mirror, he defines himself through camera and body. His gaze is inseparable from the camera's which rests just atop his groin, the physical embodiment of male desire and sexuality. Yet his penis is covered by an adhesive dot – red or white – placed atop the print, drawing attention to that which it veils. Like his embossed name, the textural component of the dot invites touch, but it is one complicated by governing taboos. It invites its recipient to transgress formal and cultural rules – not only to want to see where sight has been arrested but to touch where touch has been forbidden.

Mapplethorpe's self-portrait is reminiscent of his earliest published and circulated work, *Bull's Eye* (1970), a collage that was reproduced for the 1970 cover of *Gay Power*, a gay liberationist publication that called itself "New York's First Homosexual Newspaper" (fig. 2.3).<sup>7</sup> Richard Meyer has keenly situated this aesthetic strategy within the contexts of the what-is-often constructed as the competing ideological aims of Pre-Stonewall homophile activism and post-Stonewall gay liberation and argues that the increasing forms of gay visibility fueled Mapplethorpe's early work.<sup>8</sup> Not only was Meyer one of the first to mention this cover art, but as he notes, no information in the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation archives can explain the momentary alliance between the avowedly apolitical Mapplethorpe and the radical politics of the gay liberation movement. For Meyer, works such as *Bull's Eye* visualize the central contradiction that is

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Meyer, "Barring Desire: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography," in *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 160.

<sup>8</sup> I word this as such because, as Meyer demonstrates, the two groups – homophile activists and gay liberationists – are far more complicated and less rigidly opposed than teleological histories tend to present. Instead of the pre-Stonewall assimilationists giving way to Post-Stonewall radicals, Meyer argues that these activist strategies not only coexisted but despite their respective public strategies, the internal realities of the groups were filled with ideological contradictions.



at the core of his book, *Outlaw Representation*: “the prohibition of homoerotic imagery serves not only to suppress but also to provoke and produce that imagery.” In what follows, I seek to complicate this argument. While Mapplethorpe’s early work gives visual form to what Meyer describes as “the censorship of sexual imagery and the erotics of discipline,” it did so in a complicated terrain, whereby the social, political and economic circuits Mapplethorpe navigated within and was informed by were shifting, as sexuality increasingly entered into the public (heteronormative) economy and gay sexuality not only became increasingly visible, but commercially alluring to a broader public.

As a result of the “sexual revolution” – or, perhaps, more aptly, revolutions, given the ways that phrase has been used to describe everything from the impact of the newly invented birth control pill on the behavior of white, middle-class women to the sweeping repudiation of censorship and regulation by the U.S. Supreme Court - the 1960s and 1970s not only witnessed (hetero)sexual life being brought increasingly into public view but also experienced a growing sexual economy.<sup>9</sup> Pornography grew into a multi-billion dollar industry. As obscenity laws were relaxed, sex shops, X-rated movie houses, and adult bookstores popped up throughout the country. *Deep Throat*, one of the first feature-length pornographic films, garnered mainstream attention as it ran in theaters nationwide, inciting what Ralph Blumenthal called “porno chic.”<sup>10</sup> Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex* and other “how-to” manuals became bestselling books. By 1973, *Roe v. Wade* had been

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<sup>9</sup> For example: *Griswold v Connecticut* (1965) the court found that state laws forbidding the use of contraceptives by married couples to be unconstitutional; *Memoirs v Massachusetts* (1966) which reduced and restricted the scope of obscenity laws; *Loving v Virginia* (1967) which found laws prohibiting marriage between people of different races to be unconstitutional; *Eisenstadt v Baird* (1972) that struck down a state law barring the distribution of contraceptives to unmarried people. For more, see Marc Stein, “Boutilier and the U.S. Supreme Court’s Sexual Revolution,” *Law and History Review* 23, no. 3 (2005): 491–536.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, “Porno Chic,” *New York Times*, 1973.

decided and birth-control pills were available at women's health centers across the country. While these sexual revolutions were often deeply gendered (male) through commercial and exploitative iterations, as the growing feminist movement quickly pointed out, and overtly heterosexual in character, the effect was twofold. On the one hand, in celebrating and legitimating pleasure - rather than procreative intent - the resulting sexual economy was, ideologically, far less at odds with the gay community's than ever before. While the gay community grew its commercial and activist economies, as will be discussed next, the sexual revolution fostered a (relatively) less homophobic society, where artists like Robert Mapplethorpe could succeed as a gay artist, rather than be forced into the closet. On the other hand, this cultural moment helped give shape to a powerful backlash; the second incarnation of the religious right, which eagerly welcomed evangelical Christians outraged with the culture of the 1970s and its protentional disruption to the traditional social order. In other words, it helped shape the forces and arbitrators of the Controversy that would engulf and shape the Robert Mapplethorpe that exists in discourse today.

Urban gay life experienced major shifts throughout the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, the normative imagination often understood gays as what sociologist Martin Hoffman described as “perhaps the *most serious undiscussed problem* in the United States today,” in his popular book, *The Gay World* (1968).<sup>12</sup> In these earlier conversations, “homosexuality,” almost always gendered male, was not only perceived to

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<sup>11</sup> I specify urban because, as has been well-documented, “gay liberation” was not a standardized development throughout the United States and, as far as gay rights, equality and acceptance goes, remains a pressing social issue almost 50 years after Stonewall. Instead, I focus on these urban centers (such as New York) given Mapplethorpe's personal and professional history here.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Hoffman and Lynn Hoffman, *Gay World* (Basic Books, 1968), <https://archive.org/details/gayworldmalehomo00hoffrich/page/n17/mode/2up?q=undiscussed>.

be a threat to masculine norms but a pathologized condition, as listed in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM).<sup>13</sup> It also must be pointed out that while the Supreme Court was redefining its sexual doctrine throughout the 1960s, it was overtly heterosexual in nature. While *One, Inc v Olesen* (1958), the first Supreme Court case to deal with homosexuality, is often remembered for its ruling that homosexual content in a publication did not automatically equal obscenity, in the less-remembered, *Boutilier v Immigration and Naturalization Service* (1967), the court ruled that "homosexuals" could be excluded and deported from the country under the "psychopathic personality" provisions of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, an indication of science's critical role.<sup>14</sup> Internally, gay economies, described by Jeffrey Escobar as the "the Closet Economy," were defined by segregation, both personal and spatial. Gay men often lived "double lives," where gay sociability was organized as an illicit – if not completely illegal - stigmatized peripheral activity, kept separate and secret from their public lives.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Given the historicity of the term "homosexual" with its clinical associations, I use it here purposefully. For a more substantive account, see Jack Drescher, "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality," *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (December 4, 2015): 565–75, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs5040565>.

<sup>14</sup>As suggested previously, these cultural shifts helped give shape to the powerful backlash that, in the late 1980s and 1990s, would be central actors in the Culture Wars. While, for example, *One, Inc v Olesen* established that homosexuality was not, in and of itself, obscene, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) would not only try to (re)equat homoeroticism with obscenity, but with sadomasochism, obscenity and child pornography in an amendment. Stein, "Boutilier and the U.S. Supreme Court's Sexual Revolution."

<sup>15</sup>While it was not illegal to be gay, it was illegal in some cities, including New York, to act gay. Liquor licenses were frequently revoked from bars and clubs that served gays, as authorities cited "indecent behavior." Prior to the Mattachine Society's "sip-in" of 1966, the New York State Liquor Authority prohibited bars from serving "suspected" gays, since their presence was considered a "de facto" sign of disorderly conduct. It's also worth noting here that, despite the legal shifts that occurred across heterosexual doctrines, "sodomy laws" were still constitutional. The legality of such laws were upheld in *Bowers v Hardwick* (1986), whereby the United States Supreme Court deemed a Georgia sodomy law that criminalized oral and anal sex between consenting gay adults constitutional. This decision would not be reversed until *Lawrence v Texas* (2003). Edward Alwood, "The Role of Public Relations in the Gay Rights Movement, 1950–1969," *Journalism History* 41, no. 1 (April 2015): 11–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2015.12059117>.

Yet, after the political revolutions of the 1960s that included the Civil Rights movement, feminist movement, and student protests, and alongside the growing normative sexual revolution, in the 1970s, following the now-infamous Stonewall Inn Riots on June 28, 1969, and the national gay-liberation movement, a concurrent revolution intensified within the gay community.<sup>16</sup> The history of the gay community during this period has, often, been tethered to a narrative of hypersexual gay men engaged in unrestrained, promiscuous sex; a narrative many use(d) to explain and/or rationalize the AIDS crisis that followed. It is also a narrative that, amidst the Mapplethorpe Controversy, was used by right-wing conservatives to emphasize the fatal moral indecencies of Robert Mapplethorpe and his art. However, it is a period that historian John D’Emilio recounts as one that “for someone of my generation and experience living in New York City, gay liberation was inescapable.”<sup>17</sup> As mentioned, by 1973 homosexuality had been removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM. Gay economies were increasingly characterized by a “coming out,” that ultimately led to consumer and entrepreneurial activism, engagement with local politics and, to a relative degree, destigmatization. It was a period that saw the development of new political and social organizations including the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Pride Week, as well as the overlapping wave and expansion of gay commercial activity: from the formation of new periodicals such as *Gay Power* and *Come Out!* to the publishing of

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<sup>16</sup> The history of the Stonewall Riots has been the subject of a number of discourses – scholarly and popular, thus I do not focus on it here. In addition, it should be noted that I am using pre- and post-Stonewall as a symbolic marker, given its centrality in the mythology of gay history. In no way am I using it to signify an immediate and definitive break in the lives of gay individuals. For more information see John D’Emilio, “Stonewall: Myth and Meaning,” in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics and Culture* (Duke University Press, n.d.), 146–53, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383925>.

<sup>17</sup> John D’Emilio, “Still Radical After All These Years: Remembering Out of the Closets,” in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics and Culture* (Duke University Press, n.d.), 47, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383925>.

political literature like Kara Jay's *Out of the Closet: Voices of Gay Liberation* (1972) and Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971) to commercial establishments, including New York's first gay cinema, the Park-Miller on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, which opened in the summer of 1969, as well as numerous sex clubs, bars, bathhouses, and dance clubs.<sup>18</sup> While sexual experimentation and drugs were often the raw materials that helped generate sexual subcultures and create a new, distinctively gay male lifestyle, this period gave rise to an economy that not only was developing but widening. Wakefield Poole's film *Boys in the Sand* (1971) was previewed by *Variety* and advertised in the *New York Times*, becoming the first gay pornographic film to receive crossover attention and widespread success.<sup>19</sup> *That Certain Summer*, a made-for-television movie about a father revealing his sexuality to his teenage son, one of the first to explicitly deal with homosexuality, was broadcasted as one of ABC's *Movie of the Week* (MOW) in November of 1973.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the disco phenomenon, which primarily began with gay men, spread across gender and sexual orientation lines and into popular culture. In other words, it was a period of "widespread commercialization of gay culture," as Gavin Butt has described it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For an in-depth analysis see Christopher Adam Mitchell, "The Transformation of Gay Life from the Closet to Liberation, 1948-1980: New York City's Gay Markets as a Study in Late Capitalism" (Ph.D., United States -- New Jersey, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey - New Brunswick, 2015), <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.tulane.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/1676475679/abstract/E517195BC12440D0PQ/1>. Mitchell argues the historical significance of markets, information and consumption in the creation and transformation of queer subjectivity, focusing on the period between 1950 through 1980.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, 122.

<sup>20</sup> Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Duke University Press, 2005), 62.

As previously mentioned, while Mapplethorpe was avowedly apolitical, his reputation and work were seen, constructed and understood within these shifting political, social and economic terrains. He worked in a moment where the urban gay community was not only becoming increasingly visible, but that very visibility had commercial allure, for perhaps the first time, to individuals who existed outside that community. In returning to *Polaroids* (1973), the exhibition that was a critical and financial failure, it is, perhaps, not shocking that Harold Jones, the gallery's director, remembers the exhibition opening filled with uptown collectors, downtown hustlers, artists, celebrities and musicians. Mapplethorpe had appeal.

The solo exhibition often remembered as Mapplethorpe's first, occurred in 1977, the same year as Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition discussed in Chapter One. Like *Polaroids*, Mapplethorpe's exhibition was announced through an invitation of his design (fig. 2.4). On the front of the Hallmark-card-like announcement is a photographic portrait of his hand, adorned with a Cartier watch that falls under the cuff of a striped shirt, having just finished writing "Pictures" – the term he too used to describe his prints - with a fountain pen. Upon opening the invitation, one finds that it is actually announcing two very different, yet concurrent shows; on the left side of the bifold, the backside to the portrait of his hand, is the announcement of a show at the Holly Solomon Gallery in SoHo. On the right side of the bifold is an announcement of a concurrent show at the Kitchen, an alternative performance space located a block around the corner from the Solomon gallery. Upon closing the invitation, on the back of the Kitchen-side announcement, one finds another portrait of the artist's hand, posed almost identically. His hand, again, appears to have just written the word "Pictures" with a fountain pen, but

the luxury watch and striped button-up cuff are replaced with studded leather and metal bracelets.

The invitation signaled what many have come to regard as Mapplethorpe's related yet distinct artistic enterprises. While the show at the Holly Solomon Gallery, like the pictured hand that announced it, was composed of conventional portraits – including Princesses Margaret and Diane de Beauvau, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Patti Smith, David Hockney and Henry Geldzahler - the show at the Kitchen included about a dozen photographs from Mapplethorpe's now-notorious X Portfolio, a series of careful studies of gay BDSM acts and participants, many of whom are dressed in leather and studded garments that resonate with the hand pictured on the back of the show's invitation.<sup>22</sup> This division of the invitation portraits and exhibition spaces is reflective of not only the division in his body of work but that of his life and the contemporaneous art world. It is a testament to his simultaneous acceptance and participation in what would appear to be two seemingly disparate social groups; that of the elite - of the British aristocracy, accomplished artists, and popular culture celebrities – and that of the far more marginal gay BDSM community. Though the invitation announced both shows, the more conventional show was held at an established fine arts gallery and was announced in the *New York Times*, while the other show, not mentioned in the *Times*, was held at an alternative arts space that was not only conveniently located, but, possibly one of the few venues that would allow such strong sexuality to be shown to a broader public.

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<sup>22</sup> Over a decade later, these photographs would be at the center of the Mapplethorpe Controversy.

Though not being shown within the same viewing space, the BDSM pictures were not being hidden. The shows were held at the same time, were within walking distance from one another and were simultaneously announced by Mapplethorpe through his invitation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, while certain structures separated and hierarchized the work, there was a conscious synchronicity put in place for accessibility. Invitees could choose to transgress the seemingly disparate structures - of high art gallery versus alternative arts space, high society portraiture versus gay sadomasochistic portraiture – and view both bodies of work. Comment sheets made by visitors to the opening of the Kitchen show attest to the array of viewers the show attracted, which included art historians like John Richardson, museum directors like Mario Amaya (the director of the Chrysler Museum) and artists such as Mick Rock and Pierre LaRoche.<sup>24</sup>

Turning attention to the works exhibited at the Kitchen, a few issues must first be clarified in terms of exhibition space and coverage. While the Kitchen is often remembered as “an alternative arts space,” it was a space that, in the 1970s, showed work by artists like Keith Sonnier, John Cage, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, David Salle, Nancy Holt, Sherrie Levine, and Troy Brauntuch. It was also a space that received critical attention within the pages of publications like *Artforum*, a publication that curator Michael Auping considered to be one of the “biblical sources of information regarding the New York art community.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, while the Kitchen was an “alternative arts space,” it was a space that resided, however marginally, within the structures of the art establishment. Like other exhibition spaces, it issued press releases for exhibitions,

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<sup>23</sup> “Photography,” *New York Times*, 1977, sec. Arts & Leisure.

<sup>24</sup> Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive* (Getty Publications, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Auping and California State University Fine Arts Gallery, *New Work/New York: October 4 through October 28, 1976* (Los Angeles: Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, 1976).



including Mapplethorpe's (fig. 2.5), which not only discloses the show's sexual subject matter but positions the show in dialogue with the one at the Holly Solomon gallery.<sup>26</sup> The Kitchen was also a recognized institution that regularly received financial support. Mapplethorpe's exhibition was made possible with a \$21,500 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the organization that, a decade later, would come under intense social and political scrutiny for its financial support of *Robert Mapplethorpe: A Perfect Moment* and its exhibition of the X Portfolio.<sup>27</sup>

While the *New York Times* may not have included the Kitchen show in its calendar of art events, the show was not omitted from all critical publications. In *Arts Magazine*, critic David Bourdon gave equal weight to the "complementary exhibitions."<sup>28</sup> His full-page review includes two reproductions: *Patti Smith*, (1975), a diptych that includes the highly recognizable *Horses* album cover and, perhaps the less expected, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)*, identified in the review as a porn star (fig. 2.6). *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)* would become one of the photographs used by Senator Jesse Helms amidst the Culture Wars as evidence of the art establishment's moral degeneration. In including the reproduction, Bourdon makes visible and circulates one of Mapplethorpe's "erotic pictures" to a much broader audience than would or could have attended the Kitchen show and, notably, is allowed to do so. The review was not censored. He is at once rhetorically attentive to Mapplethorpe's range of subjects - Bourdon names celebrities

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<sup>26</sup> Again, this harkens back to Robert Mapplethorpe's promotion of his works as unique pieces of art. As has been established in Chapter One, photography by 1977 was increasingly becoming marketable as it underwent profound discursive, institutional and theoretical considerations and transformations.

<sup>27</sup> "1976 Annual Report" (Washington D.C: National Endowment for the Arts, April 1976), 114, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Annual-Report-1976.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Yet another indication of photography's ascendance, given that the review was published in *Art Magazine* rather than a photo-specific publication. David Bourdon, "Robert Mapplethorpe," *Arts Magazine*, 1977, 7.

and porn stars, formally analyzes “trussed-up penises” and Mapplethorpe’s “Vermeer-type side lighting” – and equitable, never hierarchizing subject or show. Rather than a marginalized, shocking artist, Bourdon discursively constructs and situates Mapplethorpe in relation to the respective medium, field, and time: Mapplethorpe’s photographs “update the sleek, high-fashion of Horst and George Platte Lynes”; he “favors and excels at, Vermeer-type sidelighting”; he is “informed by the put-on perversities of younger photographers like Helmut Newton and Deborah Turbeville.” In other words, Mapplethorpe’s work carries on a photographic and artistic tradition that is, even in subject matter, of its time.

In Bourdon’s review, the disparate exhibition spaces and how they structure and (re)enforce the difference in subject-matter dissipates. Aside from the first paragraph, which names the two exhibition spaces and describes the invitation, Bourdon makes no other mention of space. Instead, he describes the body of work as “uncommonly kinky” portraits that include “a drug dealer, a composer, a transsexual, dissolute princesses, tops and other types who obviously relished arranging themselves for the camera,” that share formal qualities, including attention to and use of elaborate framing, described in the Kitchen’s press release as an “integral part of their presentation.”<sup>29</sup> While a number of the Mapplethorpe frames have been replaced with more traditional frames, Bourdon’s early detailed account is highly informative. He explains that *Charles and Jim Kissing* (fig. 2.7) consisted of “three photographs, arranged vertically to suggest a film strip and framed in wood that was stained violet,” while another work, *Joe Hart*, “showed a handcuffed, blindfolded young man trussed up with ropes and chains, had its pair of

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<sup>29</sup> “Robert Mapplethorpe: Pictures,” Press Release (New York: The Kitchen Center for Video and Music, February 1977).

framed photographs connected by X-shaped crossbars.” Other works are bound by “odd” frames with “eyecatching mattes of various colored silks...they came to look no more kinky than the leather and metal costumes worn by the people in the photographs.”<sup>30</sup> While Bourdon suggests how frames connect the two shows, Bob Colacello is more explicit.

In *Interview*, Andy Warhol’s magazine nicknamed “The Crystal Ball of Pop,” Bob Colacello notes:

there are clues that suggest a single, and singular, sensibility is at work here, not the least being the fact that all the pictures in both shows are matted with silk, elegant pastel silk, white on white silk, black on black silk. They are all, finally, princesses and penises, very precious objects carefully composed, meticulously print, beautifully framed.<sup>31</sup>

According to Holly Solomon, “each frame was \$1200 to \$2000 and you sold the photograph for \$150. If someone bought it framed, I would charge \$150 for the photograph, plus the cost of the frame. So Robert got \$75 and I got a big \$75 for all that work.”<sup>32</sup> While original receipts culled from the Robert Mapplethorpe Archive are unable to corroborate the steep framing costs of these early works –the receipts from the mid-1970s tend to hover around \$80 per frame – the message is clear: not only did the elaborate framing and matting aesthetically link the two venue’s seemingly divergent subjects, but they also functioned on a practical level. The unique, elaborate frames played an integral role in establishing *all* of Mapplethorpe’s photographic prints, regardless of content and venue, as unique art objects, which not only speaks to both his

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<sup>30</sup> Bourdon, “Robert Mapplethorpe.”

<sup>31</sup> Bob Colacello, “Robert Mapplethorpe: Photographer,” *Interview*, February 1977, 29-31, quoted in Terpak and Brunnick, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Gfelter, *Wagstaff, before and after Mapplethorpe: A Biography*, First edition. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 227.

ambition – to produce art, not just photographic prints *or* pornographic prints – but his understanding of both his medium’s and content’s tenuous place in the art market.<sup>33</sup>

If the central issue in photography’s relationship with the art market is the medium’s inherent reproducibility, Mapplethorpe’s sustained attention to materiality can be understood as a strategic tactic that insists on the works’ objecthood. These custom frames assert originality and authenticity; they are part and parcel of unique art objects, in-line with Mapplethorpe’s self-conceptualized art practice. From the beginning of his career, Mapplethorpe understood and presented himself as an artist, rather than as a photographer. He repeatedly describes his artistic vision and subjects in sculptural terms, with photography as a means to reconcile his drive with his impatience: “Photography is just, like the perfect way to make a sculpture. You can do it in an afternoon, put all this concentration into it and then you’re on to something else.”<sup>34</sup> The ambitious desire to use photography to make a fine art object that was highly valued by art collectors - which, as established in the previous chapter, had been tenuous at best - was a repeated, articulated aim for Mapplethorpe. It is, perhaps, why he never learned the technical side of the medium and never printed his work. He used a commercial printer until, in 1979, he hired Tom Baril, a master printer, who would print all of Mapplethorpe’s subsequent work. The use of unique frames and sustained insistence on perfection, both through his

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<sup>33</sup> Frames would also be used as a framing device for *The Perfect Moment* exhibition. In the NEA application, the exhibition was described as “a mid career-summary of the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Although all aspects of the artist’s work – the still-lives, nudes, and portraits – will be included, the exhibition will focus on Mapplethorpe’s *unique* pieces where photographic images interact with richly textured fabrics within *carefully designed frames*” (emphasis mine). Quoted in “Congressional Record,” July 26, 1989, 16277.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Horton, “Robert Mapplethorpe: Interview January 11, 1987,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe 1986* (Berlin: Raab Gallery, 1987), 12.

lens and print quality, further points to an artistic vision that at once offers cohesion between seemingly tense, disparate subjects and points to his ambitions.<sup>35</sup>

Following a 1979 Robert Miller Gallery show that included a warning that “Some of the material is not appropriate for children” with works such as *Cowboy*, *Ron Simms*, and *Jim, Sausalito*, Ben Lifson, a critic for the *Village Voice*, questioned Mapplethorpe about this elaborate framing practice. Mapplethorpe responded, “You really have to work at selling photographs to art collectors ... and that is what I want to do: sell to people who collect art, instead of just to people who are in love with photography only...I guess even part of why I do this framing is that I want it to be seen first as an image, then as a photograph.”<sup>36</sup> Reviewing the same show for *Artforum*, Jeff Perrone notes that when he first saw Mapplethorpe’s work some three years earlier, despite the subjects, “all [he] could see were the frames” and, even with an array of different subjects, “it doesn’t change [his] first impression. Mapplethorpe is into frames: each image is meticulously framed and matted, so perfectly as to suggest the ultimate repression, the limit and binding element, the restrictive edge from which the image cannot move.”<sup>37</sup> These excerpts not only speak to the success of Mapplethorpe’s strategies – the frames not only made an impression but were an integral component in how his work was being described to a broader art audience - but also crucially establishes the discursive networks that Mapplethorpe was being circulated within.

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<sup>35</sup> As will be discussed later in this chapter, this insistence on perfection – of his sitters, subjects, and print quality – would actually devalue his status as a “serious” photographer. While Mapplethorpe may have been striving for perfection, for many the works appear slick and devoid of subjectivity. This would stand in stark contrast to the critical and deconstructive impulses of the more progressive art practices of the period.

<sup>36</sup> Ben Lifson, “The Philistine Photographer: Reassessing Mapplethorpe,” *The Village Voice* 24, no. 15 (April 9, 1979): 79.

<sup>37</sup> Jeff Perrone, “Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Miller Gallery,” *Artforum* 17, no. 10 (Summer 1979): 70.

Writing in the catalogue for the 1976 exhibition *New Work/New York*, an exhibition held at the Fine Arts Gallery at California State University, Los Angeles that included Mapplethorpe's triptych of Holly Solomon, Michael Auping laid out the impetus for the show. At the time, only one major museum in Los Angeles regularly exhibited contemporary art and it was largely regional. To access information, trends, and news about contemporary art shown in New York, "one of the most significant centers of visual arts," those outside New York depend on the "professional art press for communication. *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Avalanche*, *Art-Rite*, etc., [which] have become biblical sources of information regarding the New York art community."<sup>38</sup> In other words, these major publications were the foremost way art news, trends, and topics not only circulated but were constructed for national and international audiences. Robert Mapplethorpe's name was circulating in these publications as representative of the contemporary trends.

While David Bourdon was reproducing images of *Mr. 10 ½* in *Arts Magazine* and Jeff Perrone was discussing Mapplethorpe's frames and subjects in *Artforum*, in *Art News*, Gerrit Henry describes Mapplethorpe as "best known for his work in portraiture...and his work in pornographic photography."<sup>39</sup> While there certainly are reviews that focused on Mapplethorpe's more "conventional" photographs, such as Hal Foster's discussion of Mapplethorpe's flowers in *Artforum*, there are also reviews like Rene Ricard's, who, in *Art in America*, wrote that "his portraits, I must confess never give me the charge that his S/M fetish icons do. For this we must turn to the four collaborations in the show where we get to see the mutilated genitals and leather bondage

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<sup>38</sup> Auping and Fine Arts Gallery, *New Work/New York*.

<sup>39</sup> Gerrit Henry, "Outlandish Nature," *Artnews*, April 1977, 118.

gear that are his signature”<sup>40</sup> These reviews, early in Mapplethorpe’s career, reveal not only the important discursive networks he was circulating in but how he was being established in connection to his “pornographic work,” as Gerrit Henry described it, rather than through the omission of that body of work. Not only were these publications the principal way for the art world to receive information about current art trends, but they constructed the very information they transmitted. In other words, from the very beginning of his career, Mapplethorpe was discursively constructed in proximity to his erotic photographs.

## **Act II: Everything**

Aside from publications, Mapplethorpe’s early exhibition history speaks to the range of institutions his work was being exhibited in both in New York and elsewhere. While this does not compare – in range or construction - to the recognition Mapplethorpe would achieve near the end of his life and after, it does evidence the reputation that existed before the Controversy and Culture Wars. From solo exhibitions in spaces like the Holly Solomon Gallery, the Kitchen, the Robert Miller Gallery, and the Chrysler Museum to group shows such as the 1978 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, curated by John Szarkowski and the traveling *Photographs From the Collection of Samuel Wagstaff*, Mapplethorpe’s work reached a range of audiences through varying institutional structures. Considering that his first solo exhibition was in 1973, by the late 1970s, he was showing frequently and often outside of New York.<sup>41</sup> Though he had not yet shown in a museum, overseas, he was

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<sup>40</sup> Rene Ricard, “Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe at Miller,” *Art in America*, October 1978, 126.

<sup>41</sup> John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 86.

represented by Holly Solomon at Documenta 6 (1977), the first to include artists' books and historical photographs from 140 years of photographic history, as a means to establish the medium's history as a rich artistic source.<sup>42</sup> There, four of his photographs were shown alongside work by deceased photographers like Stieglitz and Steichen, as well as the well-known Lee Friedlander, the only other living American photographer included in the exhibition.<sup>43</sup> The sort of discursive and symbolic weight of this inclusion is revealing. *Documenta* is a well-respected, international exhibition that, in its first real foray into aligning photography with the other fine arts, positioned Mapplethorpe as both inheritor of the 140-year history of photography and as one of two living representatives of the medium.

Despite finding commercial success and an audience, Mapplethorpe's erotic images were not universally accepted or praised. In 1978, Mapplethorpe secured a solo exhibition at the Simon Lowinsky Gallery in San Francisco. Of the original photographs offered, nineteen of the BDSM photographs were "edited" out by the gallery, as they were declared "unfit for commercial exhibition."<sup>44</sup> In response, another NEA-sponsored alternative exhibition space – 80 Langton Street, right outside San Francisco's gay leather scene – put on a concurrent exhibition of these "edited" works on the proviso that they

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<sup>42</sup> Documenta 6 actually became quite controversial for the way this was conceptualized. Rather than focus on the development of contemporary art, this turn to photography, the medium that was experiencing major conceptual shifts in the 1970s, prompted the exhibition's curatorial team to attempt to "retell" the medium's history alongside painting and sculpture, as a means to legitimize photography's entrance as an independent art form. Since little historical or theoretical on the medium existed, interestingly enough, starting points for the exhibition included Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, discussed in Chapter One. For more on the curatorial approach of Documenta 6 see Mona Schubert, "How Photography (Re-)Entered Documenta," *On Curating*, Contemporary Art Biennales – Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency, no. 46 (June 2020): 442–53.

<sup>43</sup> These works included *David Hockney & Henry Geldzahler* (1976); *Fire Island* (1975); *Brice Marden* (1976) and *Mattress in Two Parts*

<sup>44</sup> Richard Meyer, "Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography," *Qui Parle* 4, no. 1 (1990): 62.



would not be sold via the exhibition. As with earlier exhibitions such as *Polaroids* (1973) and his *Pictures* (1978), Mapplethorpe designed the gallery's announcement (fig. 2.8). While the earlier invitations only hinted at Mapplethorpe's relationship with and participation in the gay sadomasochistic communities he photographed, this is made explicit in *Censored's* exhibition announcement. The announcement is compositionally dominated by the self-portrait that would become infamous nearly a decade later. In *Self-Portrait, N.Y.C* (1978), Mapplethorpe's body is twisted, echoing the shape of the whip that he holds. He gazes at the camera directly, yet awkwardly, as he strains to look over his shoulder. Mapplethorpe is both object and subject, photographer and sitter. He is anally penetrable by the bullwhip, defying sexual and gender taboos that render him vulnerable, and yet he is simultaneously in control. He inserted the bullwhip. He chooses to keep it there. He meets the viewer's gaze, with his own active, confrontational gaze. For Richard Meyer, it is a work that announces Mapplethorpe's own participation in sadomasochistic pleasure while it also "articulates a certain tension between sexual immediacy and photographic intervention," in its insistence on the difference between actual sadomasochistic pleasure and the studio performance of it.<sup>45</sup> Meyer's argument centers on the narrative self-reflectivity that, in this work, both counters the discourse of documentary photography and maps the power dynamics of the artist/sitter onto the active/passive, dominant/submissive roles that constitute sadomasochistic sex. I want to suggest that, in addition to these functions, *Self-Portrait* not only defies the codes of visibility – as Mapplethorpe is simultaneously artist and sitter, active and passive, dominant and submissive - but like the *Polaroid* and *Pictures* invitations that beckoned

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<sup>45</sup> Meyer, "Barring Desire: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography."

physical transgressions – this self-portrait also implicates an embodied viewer. The bullwhip extends out of his anus, down to the floor and snakes its way to the bottom edge of the frame. It thus shifts the narrative scene to encompass the viewer, whose position appears to begin where the bullwhip ends. In other words, Mapplethorpe uses the whip to collapse the boundary between the fictive space in the photograph with the very real, physical space the viewer encompasses. Beneath the self-portrait, is the show's title: CENSORED.

It is a show that, for Richard Meyer, is a “pre-history” to the Controversy that would shape and (re)write Mapplethorpe's reputation. It is also an index of the appeal that, for some, defined Mapplethorpe's career long before the Controversy. As Meyer aptly notes, the surrounding circumstances lent the exhibition a “transgressive *frisson*.” It invited a diverse crowd of artists, curators, art historians, and gallery-goers to, as *The San Francisco Art Dealer's Associated Newsletter* described it, rub “shoulders with the men in black leather,” as Mapplethorpe straddled the high culture of a gallery-goers and the wild, subculture of gay sadomasochism, to capture, tame and arrest the latter for the viewing pleasures of the former.<sup>46</sup> It was, in other words, a strategic invitation for viewers to engage in yet another form of the transgressions that were elicited by earlier exhibitions. In terms of internal circuits, it should be noted that while it was Simon Lowinsky's refusal to show Mapplethorpe's more explicit work that led to *Censored*, Lowinsky was in attendance at opening night. As gallerist, he benefited from the transgressive quality and consequent allure these works produced, while avoiding his own implication in its commercial viewing. For Mapplethorpe, it meant he could preserve

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Meyer, “Imagining Sadomasochism,” 64.

his show and relationship with Lowinsky's gallery, while also capitalizing on the transgressive aura these works and his own reputation were accumulating. In other words, the gallery's attempt to repress and "edit" the work helped amplify their attraction and Mapplethorpe knew it.

As has been noted by scholars and discussed more thoroughly previously in this chapter, Mapplethorpe's works both reflected and benefited from the increased commercialization of gay life in the 1970s. Given such, these controversial photographs received much of their early critical attention from these developing gay publications. While no "major" news or arts publication reviewed *Censored*, though it is also important to note that the concurrent show at the Simon Lowinsky gallery was not substantially discussed either, the *Censored* exhibition was reviewed in *The Advocate*, where Robert McDonald noted that while Mapplethorpe was, as early as 1978, "internationally renowned for his society ("Jet Set") portraits and fashion ads, Mapplethorpe has experienced many difficulties in finding an exhibition space for his most recent works: images of the gay S&M scene."<sup>47</sup> Not only does the description reestablish Mapplethorpe's developing reputation – "internationally renowned" – but it points to the hurdles he faced in showing the work. Yet, included in the review is a photograph of Mapplethorpe from the exhibition; clad in a leather jacket and pants, he stands in front of two of his photographs, reemphasizing that which the invitation made clear; he is part of the gay leather community he photographed (fig. 2.9). The show was also featured in a

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<sup>47</sup> *The Advocate* began as a newsletter published by a gay activist group based in Los Angeles. *The Advocate* remains the longest running, continuously published gay magazine with some estimating an audience of nearly 400,000 people in the mid-1970s. Robert McDonald, "Reviewing Censored, an Exhibition of Photographs at 80 Langston Street, San Francisco (March 21- April 1, 1977)," *The Advocate*, June 28, 1978, 224 edition, Career: Catalogs, Reviews, Articles, Ads, Etc., Bio Material., 1977-79, box 225, folder, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

special edition of *Drummer*, a gay leather and BDSM periodical. This special edition, *Son of a Drummer*, not only confirms and legitimizes Mapplethorpe's participation in the gay leather community for that community, but, perhaps, most succinctly described the paradox of his career and life:

He lunches afternoons at One Fifth Avenue. He maneuvers after midnight at the Mineshaft. He photographs princesses like Margaret, bodybuilders like Arnold, rockstars like his best friend Patti Smith, and nighttrippers nameless in leather, rubber, and ropes. He's famous for his photographs of faces, flowers, and fetishes.<sup>48</sup>

Mapplethorpe was always, from the beginning, defined in relation to the photographs that would be at the center of the Controversy and these photographs existed, circulated, and were discursively constructed within the rhetorical terrain of censorship and censure, often substituting the former for the latter. Yet, it was also, for some, part of his appeal.

*Jim, Sausalito* (1977) provides an interesting case study (fig. 2.10). It is a photograph that was shown at the 1977 New York Kitchen show and at 80 Langton Street after having been edited out of the Simon Lowinsky Gallery's show in 1978. That same year, *Jim, Sausalito* was also exhibited as part of the Sam Wagstaff Collection at the Gray Art Gallery, New York University. The collection was described in *The New York Times* by Gene Thornton as a body of photographs that "spans the history of photography from William Henry Fox Talbot to Robert Mapplethorpe." Thornton makes it clear: Robert Mapplethorpe is part of "the history of photography."<sup>49</sup> The collection toured North American museums for three years, without incident. Reviewing its last stop in

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<sup>48</sup> Jack Fritscher, "The Robert Mapplethorpe Gallery," *Son of a Drummer*, January 1978. Quoted in Jack Fritscher, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Interestingly enough, the article was on the 10 photography shows of 1978 that Thornton thought the reader should see. Shows that, according to Thornton, not only gave the most pleasure but "seemed to have added most to an understanding of what photography is." Of the 10 shows, Mapplethorpe was represented in 2 of them. Gene Thornton, "Photography View: Deepening the Definition of the Art Photography View," *New York Times*, 1978, sec. Arts & Leisure.

Hartford at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Vivien Raynor, writing for the *New York Times*, described *Jim, Sausalito* as “Greenwich Village on an average Saturday night. Naked to the waist but decked out everywhere else in leather, the demigod crouches beside a ladder in a pool of sunlight, his face concealed by a zippered mask”.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the subject is at once nothing too shocking, part of a larger (and identifiable) subculture, which is partially veiled by Mapplethorpe’s formal handling.

*Jim, Sausalito* was also part of the X-Portfolio, Mapplethorpe’s series of BDSM photographs published in 1978, the same year as the Y Portfolio, a series of flowers.<sup>51</sup> Both the X and Y Portfolios were produced in an edition of 25 and contained thirteen 7 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 7 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inch photographs, mounted on 13 x 13 inch rag board and signed by the artist. The X Portfolio, cased in black cloth, included a poem by Paul Schmidt in which he refers to the frankly sexual images as “images of our modern martyrdom,” while the *The Print Collector’s Newsletter*, described it as “men, presumably homosexual, usually in pursuit of pleasure, whether sadistic, masochistic, or good old-fashioned exhibition.”<sup>52</sup> The Y Portfolio, cased in gray, was accompanied by a poem penned by Patti Smith in which she characterized Mapplethorpe’s flowers as “victim[s] of seductive powers that lead to ultimate sacrifice.” At the time of their publication, each portfolio was priced at \$1500, relatively expensive for a portfolio. By 1981, when the Z-Portfolio, his series of black male nudes, was published the list price would be \$2500 each.<sup>53</sup> The portfolios indicate Mapplethorpe’s desire and strategy of delivering his work more economically to a

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<sup>50</sup> Vivien Raynor, “Photographic ‘Feast’ Ending 3-Year Tour: Art Hartford Photo Show A ‘Feast,’” *New York Times*, 1981, sec. Connecticut Weekly.

<sup>51</sup> Published Cooperatively with Harry Lunn Gallery, Washington, D.C., Robert Miller Gallery, New York, and Robert Self, London

<sup>52</sup> “Prints & Photographs Published,” *The Print Collector’s Newsletter* 10, no. 2 (1979): 54–57.

<sup>53</sup> “Prints & Photographs Published,” *The Print Collector’s Newsletter* 13, no. 4 (1982): 134–37.

broader public. You could buy the portfolios directly through the *Print Collector's Newsletter* and, as a bound portfolio, are meant to be viewed privately.

*Jim, Sausalito* was also included in Mapplethorpe's first solo exhibition, *Contact*, held in 1979 at the Robert Miller Gallery, the gallery that would come to represent Mapplethorpe for the rest of his career. Echoing the emerging bipartite structure that one could use to characterize the Holly Solomon/Kitchen and Simon Lowsinki/80 Langton St shows and announcements, the Robert Miller Gallery's *Artforum* advertisement juxtaposes two formally similar photographs (fig. 2.11). Both works are centrally composed. Both emphasize a spare-studio setting. Both exemplify Mapplethorpe's interest in and mastery of the formalist play with light and shadow. What differs is subject. On the left, centered above an X – a reference to the photograph's respective portfolio – is *Helmut, N.Y.C.* (1978), a portrait of the back of a man dressed in a leather jacket and boots, squatting atop a pedestal. On the right, centered above a Y – this work's respective portfolio – is *Carnations* (1982). The show was comprised of portraits, flowers, and sex pictures, including the thirteen X Portfolio photographs. Again, Mapplethorpe's reputation was linked to these BDSM images however tense.

Two reviews for two different shows by one critic elucidate a key tension in Mapplethorpe's early reputation. In response to *Trade Off* (1979), an exhibition held at the International Center of Photography that paired twenty portraits of the same subjects by Mapplethorpe and photographer Lynn Davis, Ben Lifson praised Mapplethorpe for his "technical virtuosity" and for "describing how, in the social world, clothes, cosmetics, hairstyles, glances and facial structure conspire to form the mask we call character."<sup>54</sup> In

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<sup>54</sup> Ben Lifson, "Games Photographers Play," *The Village Voice*, April 2, 1979, 79.

fact, Lifson notes Mapplethorpe's "gay sensibility" and the "epicene" quality and "fey affectations" of his subjects, conceding that a new style of man was "impressing his style on the standards of male beauty."<sup>55</sup> Yet, just one week later, in his review for *Contact* (1979), Lifson criticizes Mapplethorpe for "exploiting" his outsider status to sell art. Lifson calls the show "hostile," whereby "Our middle-class guilt obliges us to stand still when someone our class has pushed to the edge of society turns against us."<sup>56</sup> Lifson was not alone in his criticism of the tense relationship between Mapplethorpe's "technical virtuosity" and transgressive subject matter.

What could be interpreted as Mapplethorpe's transgressive allure was interpreted by others as his calculated invocation. Reactions ranged from ostensibly angry to ominously silent in that the specifics of the offensive photographs went largely undiscussed. Jon Friedman, writing for *Arts Magazine*, attacked Mapplethorpe for his "calculated" manner, asserting that "instead of photographs, we are asked to look at tacky-chic decor." In *ArtForum*, Jeff Perrone's suggests that Mapplethorpe's "calculated attempt to show the unshowable so that, coerced by his images, I would be forced to speak (write) the unspeakable (unwritable), was to resist the manipulation."<sup>57</sup> *New York Times* critic, Hilton Kramer, challenges those that celebrate what Lifson, just a week prior, described as Mapplethorpe's "technical virtuosity." Kramer insists that these people who focus on a photograph's formal qualities "are going to have a problem with some of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. Their concentration on male

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<sup>55</sup> Lifson, "Games Photographers Play."

<sup>56</sup> Lifson, "The Philistine Photographer: Reassessing Mapplethorpe."

<sup>57</sup> Instead, as previously mentioned, Perrone focuses on Mapplethorpe's frames, ultimately concluded by asking, "Can't someone find [Mapplethorpe] a nice job doing ad work for a well-paying, exclusive department store, fast, please?" in Perrone, "Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Miller Gallery," 73.

homosexual themes of sadomasochist nature do not readily lend themselves to a formalist interpretation,” instead, argues Kramer, “the real interest of this show lies not so much in ‘art’ as in the way it somewhat redraws the boundaries of public taste.”<sup>58</sup> While even Kramer notes the frames, describing them as “posh,” with their “use of colored glass and mirrors in some of these photographic works give them a very ‘artistic’ look” other photographs “gives one the creeps”<sup>59</sup>. Yet, by the end of the 1970s, Mapplethorpe’s photography had been the subject of one-person shows in New York, Los Angeles, Paris and Amsterdam and was represented by the Robert Miller Gallery in New York; he had made his passage from alternative art spaces to commercial art galleries and museums and, as he did so, he would abandon the BDSM subject matter.<sup>60</sup>

### **Act III: Hellacious Acres**

Reflecting on the Controversy, Howard Read, the former photography dealer at the Robert Miller Gallery when it represented Mapplethorpe from 1978 until his death, recalled that for Mapplethorpe, the “turning point came in 1980-81. The audience had grown and the work was just that good.”<sup>61</sup> While his reputation continued to expand and commercial success grew, in comparison to emerging photographic practices, Mapplethorpe, often, paled in critical evaluations. What increasingly emerged was a “bad-boy” artistic persona who was transgressively fashionable to a more popular

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<sup>58</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Art:Jean Dubuffet At Pace Gallery,” *New York Times*, 1979, sec. The Weekend.

<sup>59</sup> Kramer.

<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that the Robert Miller Gallery was not a photography gallery. Opened in 1977, the gallery represented a number of painters including Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner and became known for exhibiting the work of female and gay artists. While, on the one hand, the economic sustainability of that – the gallery was in operation until 2016 – speaks to a shifting market that could/would support these artists, on the other hand, it signals less prestige.

<sup>61</sup> Grace Glueck, “Publicity Is Enriching Mapplethorpe Estate: Furor Benefiting Mapplethorpe Estate Proceeds Will Go to AIDS Research and to Promoting Photography,” *New York Times*, 1990, sec. The Arts.



audience, yet highly conventional to the art establishment.

In a conversation held between Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Ben Lifson in 1981, the two discuss the contemporary photography scene. Published in *October*, the conversation marks the first real critical contemplation Mapplethorpe received in perhaps the most highly influential and theoretically sophisticated art publications of its moment. In contrast to what they frame as the prevalent problem in art photography – photography that cites pictorial strategies of painting - they turn their attention to the 1981 P.S. 1, *New York/New Work* exhibition that Mapplethorpe was part of. It was a show that Lifson describes as “fashion photography” and one that Peter Schjeldahl, writing for the *Village Voice*, proclaimed Mapplethorpe “the master” of. It is, in many ways, another tension of Mapplethorpe’s career at that point and, appropriately, the basis of Lifson and Solomon-Godeau’s conversation. Solomon-Godeau’s remark about Mapplethorpe’s ubiquity is revealing: “You can’t open a newspaper or magazine anymore without being confronted by one of his pictures.”<sup>62</sup> Yet, is Mapplethorpe merely a fashion photographer, an “illustrator,” who lacks feeling, and simply “reduces photography to a recording device” as Lifson argues?<sup>63</sup> Or is he “making ‘autonomous works of art’” as Solomon-Godeau contends, pointing to the masses of “collectors, dealers, and museums” who, through their purchasing power, seem to confirm this categorization? Lifson and Solomon-Godeau never arrive at a definitive conclusion.

Addressing this same concern, Douglas Crimp, the curator of *Pictures* and *October* contributor, situates Mapplethorpe within the terrain of fashion with:

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<sup>62</sup> Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene,” *October* 16 (1981): 110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778377>.

<sup>63</sup> Lifson and Solomon-Godeau, 111.

compositions, poses, lighting, and even their subjects (mundane personalities, glacial nudes, tulips) recall *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* at that historical juncture when such ‘artists’ as Edward Steichen and Man Ray contributed to those publications their intimate knowledge of international art photography. Mapplethorpe’s abstraction and fetishization of objects thus refer, through the mediation of the fashion industry, to Edward Weston, while his abstraction of the *subject* refers to the neoclassical pretenses of George Platt Lynes.<sup>64</sup>

This is part of a larger comparison Crimp stages between Mapplethorpe and Sherrie Levine, the latter of whom he celebrates for her “instrumental” use of photography.<sup>65</sup>

Crimp ultimately situates Mapplethorpe’s photographic practice as the “repressive” node to Levine’s “progressive” variant. Where Mapplethorpe refers to tradition, Levine’s disrupts it. Tellingly, it is a critique that Crimp would revise in response to the Mapplethorpe Controversy and will be returned to in Chapter Four.

In terms of exhibition spaces, by the early 1980s, Mapplethorpe’s work was still shown at the Robert Miller Gallery but had entered into institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>66</sup> With the expanded audience came an expanded reputation. In his review of *George Platt Lynes, Photographs 1931-1955*, *New York Times*, critic Andy Grundberg situates Mapplethorpe as the retrospective reference for Platt Lyons, rather than vice-versa, aligning his “strong taste for homoerotic subject matter” to make Lynes into the “Robert Mapplethorpe of his generation.”<sup>67</sup> Gene Thornton, in his review of the exhibition *Face Photographed* (1982), held at the Grey Gallery, noted that among the

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<sup>64</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation,” in *Image Scavengers: Photographers* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1982), 31.

<sup>65</sup> Sherrie Levine is most well known for her appropriation work. In this article, “Appropriating Appropriation” Crimp contrasts Levine’s *Untitled (After Edward Weston)*, which is a wholesale appropriation of a reproduction of Weston’s work (she photographed Weston’s image from an exhibition catalogue) with Mapplethorpe’s appropriation of Weston’s formal grammar. Ultimately, Crimp concludes that Levine’s appropriation questioned the institutional structures that celebrated artists like Weston, while Mapplethorpe merely adopted Weston’s style. See Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation.”

<sup>66</sup> “Photographs,” *The Times*, 1981, sec. The Guide. ((BLACK NUDES)); Hilton Kramer, “Article 1 -- No Title,” *New York Times*, 1982, sec. Weekend.

<sup>67</sup> Andy Grundberg, “Photography,” *New York Times*, 1981, sec. The New York Times Book Review.

participating photographers – which included Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar and Cindy Sherman, “well known to gallery goers” - that “perhaps the best-known photographer in this show...is Robert Mapplethorpe.”<sup>68</sup> Remarking on the transition away from the BDSM work of the 1970s, Thornton remarks: “In the past few years Mr. Mapplethorpe has achieved international celebrity by photographing bizarre sexual behavior in the clear, cool style of a high-fashion Vogue illustration.”<sup>69</sup> While the Mapplethorpe of the early 1980s still existed in relationship to his sexually-natured photographs, he was gaining an international reputation anchored to fashionability rather than subversive sexuality.

Mapplethorpe was an increasingly common feature in New York Galleries with, at times, held shows concurrently. Such was the case in 1983 when he held three shows across the city. At the Robert Miller Gallery, following his show of black male nudes, Mapplethorpe exhibited his geometrically-shaped sculptural wall pieces with mirrors and carpeting, which included stars and crosses along with only four photographs.<sup>70</sup> It was a show that, Andy Grundberg demarcated as the one of the three “for those who find Mr. Mapplethorpe’s sexual frankness too forbidding” this was the “less explicit show of his photographs and sculpture.”<sup>71</sup> At the same time, but at the Hardison Fine Arts gallery (formerly the Robert Samuel Gallery), he exhibited “pornographic imagery,” which, Grundberg described as charting “more familiar Mapplethorpe territory: erotic images of both males (primarily black men) and females, as well as six still lifes of flowers...the

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<sup>68</sup> Gene Thornton, “Portraits Reflecting a Certain Sensibility: Photography View,” *New York Times*, 1982, sec. Arts and Leisure.

<sup>69</sup> Thornton.

<sup>70</sup> Again, we see here a return to more sculptural forms, which I suggest is evidence of Mapplethorpe’s sustained interest in materiality and objecthood. Andy Grundberg, “Is Mapplethorpe Only Out to Shock?,” *New York Times*, 1983, sec. Arts & Leisure.

<sup>71</sup> Andy Grundberg, “Photography: Old and New Masters,” *New York Times*, 1983, sec. Weekend.

first color photographs Mapplethorpe has ever exhibited”<sup>72</sup> And, at the Leo Castelli Gallery, the third of the three concurrent shows, Mapplethorpe exhibited his photographs of Lisa Lyon, part of the project that comprised his more commercially-oriented *Lady: Lisa Lyon* which was published by Viking Press in 1983.

Andy Grundberg’s *New York Times* review of the three shows - “Is Mapplethorpe Only Out to Shock?” - describes Mapplethorpe’s work as “undeniably and intentionally distasteful,” noting the “religious, racial and sexual taboos” his work transgresses.<sup>73</sup> Grundberg wrestles with the set of dilemmas at the heart of Mapplethorpe’s work: the “discomforting nature of his subject matter” captured through a conventional, formalist lens. Yet, ultimately, he is unable, like Lifson, Solomon-Godeau, and Crimp to securely place Mapplethorpe in any specific critical category. In attempting to fit Mapplethorpe in the postmodernism of the Pictures Generation, this “quickly breaks down, because any evidence of a critical distance from his material is lacking in this for-adults-only exhibition.” Ultimately, he concludes that the work seems more interested in the “explicit depiction of the sexual parts and acts of men and women than with the cultural biases by which we know them.”<sup>74</sup> They don’t educate, they “titillate.”

I focus on these three shows not only because they indicate the sort of gallery activity Mapplethorpe was securing, but because the surrounding discourse is indicative of the commercial appeal he maintained. In addition to Grundberg’s review in the photography section, the shows were also discussed in the *New York Times*’ “Notes on

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<sup>72</sup> Barry Walker, “Subversive Classicism,” *New York Native*, April 28, 1983, Reviews (international), 1983-198, Box 195, folder 7, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>73</sup> Grundberg, “Is Mapplethorpe Only Out to Shock?”

<sup>74</sup> Grundberg.

Fashion.” John Duka positions Mapplethorpe’s “opening of the show of mirrored, cross-shaped sculpture at the Robert Miller Gallery, and downtown at the opening of his sexually explicit photos at Hardison Fine Arts” as another event in line with the opening of *Comme des Garçons*, where everyone seemed to be wearing black.<sup>75</sup> The inclusion suggests that Mapplethorpe’s work and exhibitions had become, themselves, a fashionable outing. It is perhaps not coincidental that in the same year, 1983, Mapplethorpe retained the Art + Commerce Agency to obtain editorial and advertising projects. He thus coexisted within two institutional circuits – the commercial art world and the high art establishment – that were, as discussed in Chapter One, at odds with one another.

By the mid-1980s, Grundberg declared Mapplethorpe the “best portrait photographer to emerge in the last 10 years, and his penchant for the perverse and risqué has made him also one of the best known.”<sup>76</sup> In a two-page article published in *Vanity Fair*, Carol Squiers named him “one of the most successful young artist-photographers in America”<sup>77</sup> Describing him as “a role model – the artist-photographer who makes a good living and has a fashionable, slightly sinful social life to boot.” Squiers recounts that he has “managed to have it both ways at once, high culture and low, publishing his work in everything from small-circulation gay magazines to glossy art journals and Italian *Vogue*, and exhibiting in peripheral galleries and nightclubs as well as in prestigious museums.” Success she ties to his work’s ability to “move as easily through the culture as other

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<sup>75</sup> John Duka, “NOTES ON Fashion,” *New York Times*, 1983, sec. Style.

<sup>76</sup> Andy Grundberg, “Photography: Photography Christmas 1985,” *New York Times*, 1985, sec. Book Review.

<sup>77</sup> Carol Squiers, “Mapplethorpe Off the Wall,” *Vanity Fair*, January 1985, 88, Miscellaneous press, 1986, box 225, folder 7, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

photographic images do. And by refusing to make the museum wall its ultimate and only goal.”<sup>78</sup> The word choice and publication circuit is telling. On the one hand, Squiers description of Mapplethorpe having it “both ways at once,” transgressing “high culture and low,” could be easily applied to moments throughout his career. From “hav[ing] it both ways” in content ranging from society portraits to BDSM participants; in exhibitions at spaces from the Kitchen to the Metropolitan Museum of Art; in publications ranging from theoretically sophisticated art magazines such as *October* to popular fashion magazines like *Vogue* to gay, leather pornography magazines like *Son of a Drummer*. He may have been everywhere, but not securely anywhere. As noted, in *October*, Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon Godeau were unable to conclude whether Mapplethorpe was making autonomous art objects or fashion images. In *Vogue*, Squires notes how he has it “both ways at once,” and in *Son of a Drummer*, Jack Fritscher recalls:

He lunches afternoons at One Fifth Avenue. He maneuvers after midnight at the Mineshaft. He photographs princesses like Margaret, bodybuilders like Arnold, rockstars like his best friend Patti Smith, and night trippers nameless in leather, rubber, and ropes. He’s famous for his photographs of faces, flowers and fetishes.<sup>79</sup>

These terms, transgressions, and tensions were present since the start of his career. He is, as Squiers describes him at once “fashionable” and “slightly sinful.”

By the late 1980s, Mapplethorpe had abandoned serial the themes of explicit sexuality to more conventional subjects: nudes, floral stills, and celebrity portraits. With the assistance of Tom Baril, he enlarged his print sizes and introduced new printing techniques into his vocabulary.<sup>80</sup> He increasingly found financial success in commercial

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<sup>78</sup> Squiers, 90.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Henry Abelow, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2012), 370.

<sup>80</sup> Again, evidence of sustained interest and fetishization of materiality.

photography, obtaining one contract with a secured base rate of \$2500 per day for doing the still photography for the movie *Breathless*, starring Richard Gere.<sup>81</sup> Critics questioned whether or not he had “‘sold out’ by switching to tamer subject matter, thereby abdicating his role as chronicler of gay themes.”<sup>82</sup> By 1988, he was described as “the most old-fashioned of today’s successful photographers...whose style has veered from half-hearted conceptualism toward highly charged fashion photography.”<sup>83</sup> According to Richard Woodward, Mapplethorpe’s work is “unabashedly decorative,” in his use and combination of photographs, mirrors, and precious wood frames to create “unique \$15,000 prints on linen with inlaid panels of silk.”<sup>84</sup> Going on, Woodward concludes that “Like Sherman, he sometimes makes pictures – in his case, portraits and self-portraits glamorizing sadomasochism – that only daring collectors would hang on their walls.”<sup>85</sup>

The Mapplethorpe that existed just moments before the Controversy began existed relatively comfortably in the commercial art world. As demonstrated here, it was a Mapplethorpe that never existed in isolation from his earlier BDSM works though, in the 1980s, it was a Mapplethorpe that certainly was not fundamentally defined by them. Instead of the narratives that perpetuate either a relatively unknown artist made famous through controversy or an artist whose most controversial works only surface through Controversy, what I have sought to demonstrate here is that, instead, Mapplethorpe occupied a shifting artistic terrain both in terms of content and institution.

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<sup>81</sup> “Schub and Bear, 1982-1984,” n.d., Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>82</sup> Christine Tamblyn, “Poses and Positions,” *Artweek*, June 27, 1987.

<sup>83</sup> Richard B. Woodward, “It’s Art but Is It Photography?,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1988, sec. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Woodward.

<sup>85</sup> Woodward.



Figure 2.1. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled* (Self Portrait), 1972



Figure 2.2. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled*, [Invitation to Light Gallery Opening], January 6, 1973





Figure 2.3. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Bull's Eye* front cover from *Gay Power*, Volume 1, Number 16



Figure 2.4. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait* [Invitation to *Pictures* held at the Holly Solomon Gallery and the Kitchen], 1977

## The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

Public Entrance at 484 Broome Street, Between Wooster and West Broadway

PRESS RELEASE  
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CONTACT ERIC BOGOSIAN  
925 3615

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

PICTURES

FEBRUARY 5-19, 1977  
Tues-Sat 1-6 pm

Opening February 5 and continuing through February 19, Robert Mapplethorpe will exhibit Pictures- a show of photographic images taken over a period of three years dealing with sexual subject matter- explicit and implied. The framing of these pictures is an integral part of their presentation.

The exhibition runs concurrently with a show of the same name at the Holly Solomon Gallery.

Mapplethorpe was educated at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. The Light Gallery presented his solo exhibition in 1973, and his work has been included in shows at The Gotham Book Mart, The New York Cultural Center, Bykert Gallery and the Baltimore Museum.

This exhibition made possible in part with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

Haleakala, Inc. 59 Wooster Street, New York City 10012 212 • 925 • 3615

Figure 2.5. Press Release from *Pictures* held at the Kitchen Center for Video and Music, February 5-19, 1977

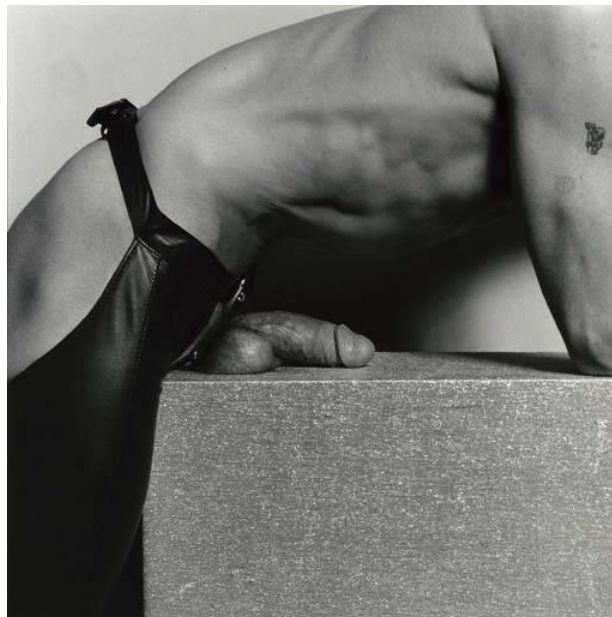


Figure 2.6. Mapplethorpe, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)*, 1976



Figure 2.7. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Charles and Jim Kissing*, 1974

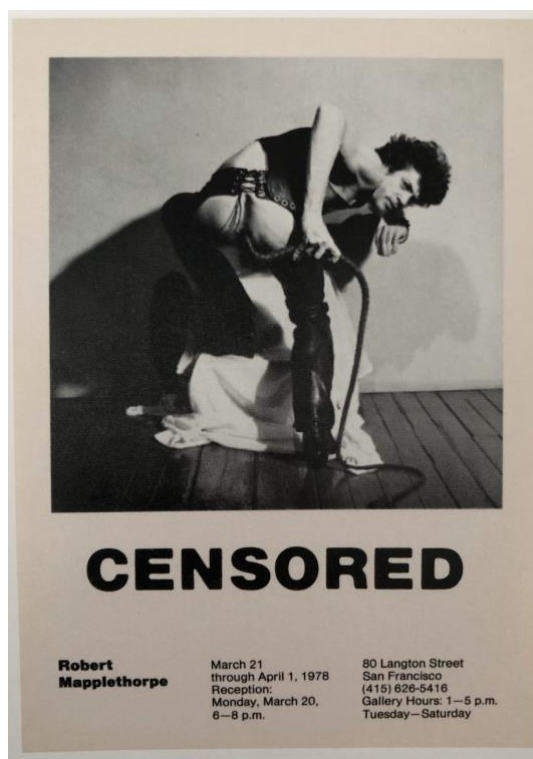


Figure 2.8. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait (with Bullwhip)* [Invitation for Censored Exhibition held at 80 Langton Street, San Francisco] March 1978



Figure 2.9. Review of Censored, published in the *The Advocate*, 1978

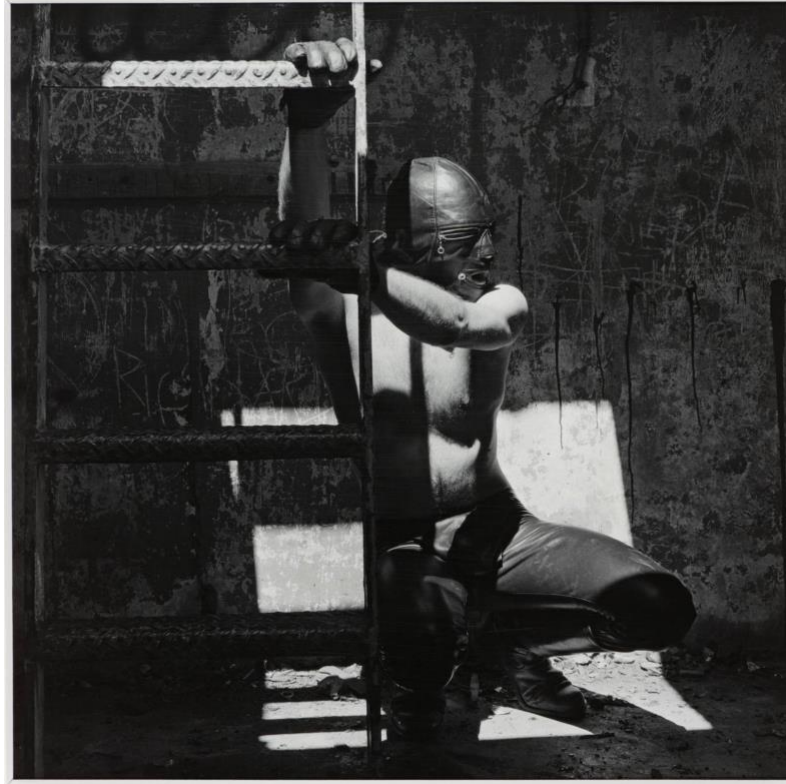


Figure 2.10. Mapplethorpe, *Jim, Sausalito*, 1977



X

X and Y by Robert Mapplethorpe—two portfolios of 13 prints each in an edition of 25.  
Published by Harry Lann, Washington. Robert Miller, New York. Robert Self, London.



Y

An exhibition of new photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe at the Robert Miller Gallery  
724 Fifth Avenue, New York, March 21 through April 12.

Figure 2.11. Advertisement for Robert Miller's X and Y Portfolios, Robert Miller Gallery, New York; published in *Artforum* magazine, vol. 17, no. 9 (April 1979)



### CHAPTER THREE: In the Criminal Justice System...

On October 6, 1990, Dennis Barrie awaited his verdict. After a ten-day criminal trial where a jury of eight heard hours of expert testimony, deliberations lasted for two hours. If found guilty, Barrie faced a \$2000 fine and up to one year in jail. The charges? Barrie, along with the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center (CAC), the institution he served as the director of, had been charged with pandering obscenity. The case marked the first time in the United States a museum and its director were charged and criminally prosecuted for the art they showed to the public. The work in question was a handful of photographs – 7 out of roughly 175 - from *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, a retrospective that had already been exhibited across the nation and opened at the CAC six months prior on April 7, 1990.

So how did Dennis Barrie, a well-respected museum director and art historian, find himself facing the threat of prison? While countless exhibitions open each year without much fanfare, opening day in Cincinnati had not been quiet. By April 1990, *The Perfect Moment* had developed a national reputation stemming from debates over art and obscenity, sex and sickness, representation and politics. It is easy, especially for those of us who were not present, to look back and be shocked that in the United States, a museum professional would face charges for displaying photographs that, today, are magnified and projected before dimly lit art history students. As Jayne Merkel mused in the pages of *Art in America*, “even though modern art has been successfully – and often intentionally – unsettling the public for more than a hundred years, museums under non-

totalitarian regimes have generally been free from governmental interference.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, in hindsight, combing through all the pieces, voices, issues and concurrent debates, it becomes increasingly evident that the trial marked a culmination in the growing controversy that, as the chapter argues, was not only fundamentally bound to the Culture Wars, broadly, but, more specifically, the homophobia exacerbated and emboldened by the AIDS crisis.

While the following chapter does sketch out the chronology of the overlapping institutional, social and political forces that culminated in this trial, it emphasizes the disruptions and flashpoints. It starts and ends with Dennis Barrie’s criminal indictment. Sandwiched between is a glimpse into the growing national conversation that was occurring in Congress and households across the nations that, more often than not, crossed the imagined boundaries between church and state. Spotlighting the flashpoints of *The Perfect Moment*’s context in museums, congress, and the media, what I work to show – through the analysis of the countless syndicated columns and rhetoric circulated across the United States, material often excluded from art historical discourse, in tandem with Congressional records and debates – is that the terms of the Mapplethorpe Controversy and the surrounding Culture Wars were fundamentally entrenched in the homophobic rhetoric of the AIDS crisis. In other words, while Mapplethorpe’s photographs were at the center of the uproar, the uproar was less about Robert Mapplethorpe and much more about what many in Congress and everyday Americans understood as one of *the* urgent societal threats: homosexuality. If federal funding for the arts was and remains a signal of state-sponsored affirmation, the issue was not merely

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<sup>1</sup> Jayne Merkel, “Art on Trial,” *Art in America* 78, no. 12 (December 1990): 41.

Robert Mapplethorpe, but the stakes of what American culture looks like and, perhaps more importantly, *should* look like. Who American culture represents and who it *should* represent.

As I look at the myths and realities this discourse manufactured, I argue that the Controversy was never truly about representational art, but the deep-seated social fears posed by the bodies, real and imaginary, represented in this art and their explicit relationship to the terms of an alternative identity politics and its potential disruption to the traditional social order, only further exacerbated by the AIDS crisis and, with it, the recasting of homophobia as sound public policy. In doing so, I also argue that the Controversy exposes the social embeddedness and political potential of not only art but its criticism as well. In other words, it exposes that art participates in public life and art people – artists, critics, art historians – must acknowledge, rather than deny this exchange. As discussed in Chapter One, the so-called postmodern turn was primarily aesthetic in orientation, countering modernist claims of authorship, originality and authenticity, yet remained broadly theoretical in approach, emphasizing formal strategies over social context. As the Controversy catalyzed a critical reassessment of Mapplethorpe by left-leaning critics such as Douglas Crimp and Kobena Mercer and shifted how the art world explains Mapplethorpe's inclusion into the category of high art, the Mapplethorpe Controversy exposed how art discourse reflects shifting cultural attitudes. In other words, it exposed the untenability of the art establishment's insistence on pure, formal aesthetics.



Art and its discourse always enter into and produce meaning within a politically determined time and place.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Tale of Two Cities**

As discussed in the previous chapter, while Mapplethorpe had successfully inserted himself into the New York art scene in the late 1970s, he was not a household name. His professional reputation had steadily grown through the 1980s with numerous solo exhibitions across the country, commercial magazine and album commissions, along with his first retrospective exhibition, which opened at the Whitney Museum in 1988. Yet, in terms of his health, Mapplethorpe had been diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, the year before President Ronald Reagan made his first public comments on the crisis, before the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued its recommendations for prevention, before it launched its first AIDS-related public service announcements, and before the United States Senate adopted the Helms Amendment, which required federally funded educational materials about AIDS to stress abstinence and forbid any material that “promotes” homosexuality or drug use.<sup>3</sup> By the time of the 1988 Whitney retrospective, Mapplethorpe’s health had significantly deteriorated. He died of respiratory failure on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989.

Around the same time – also in 1988 - the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awarded the Philadelphia Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) a \$30,000 grant to

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<sup>2</sup> This issue will be taken up further in the second half of this dissertation. Chapter 4 looks at how art institutions and critics performed responsive revisions and Chapter 5 investigates the critical silences that largely surrounded Mapplethorpe’s work, especially in regards to race.

<sup>3</sup> I mentioned this here because it begins to lay out the players and stakes of the Controversy. Senator Jesse Helms would lead the charge against Mapplethorpe in 1989, but, as will be argued, it was never about Mapplethorpe. Jill Lawrence, “Senate Says Federal AIDS Education Material Can’t Promote Homosexuality,” AP NEWS, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://apnews.com/65c596e0514c81b20536d9cbf33c066f>.

support the production of another Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective - what would become *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*. The exhibition contained nearly 175 different works, mostly photographs, including the flowers, celebrity portraits, and the X, Y, and Z portfolios largely organized into what the curator, Janet Kardon, described in the exhibition catalogue as the three “classical themes” - the nude, still life, and portrait. Like the critical landscape described in Chapter Two, *The Perfect Moment* rhetorically worked to frame Mapplethorpe’s work within formalist terms. In the exhibition catalogue’s introductory essay, Kardon repeatedly describes Mapplethorpe’s “formalist imperative,” his “seamless and unique vision,” and his “perfect symmetry”:

There is a drama in each photograph; edges are used as the perimeters of a proscenium, with subjects strategically sited within those boundaries and caught at a moment of absolute stasis. Most sitters are portrayed frontally, aligned with the camera lens, in direct eye contact with the photographer and, in turn, the viewer. Nudes generally assume classical poses.<sup>4</sup>

Kardon unites Mapplethorpe’s body of work and links it to the “classical” through structure, rather than the content of the aforementioned “drama.” Of the sadomasochistic images, Kardon notes that “although his models are often depicted in uncommon sexual acts, the inhabitants of the photographs assume gestures governed by geometry, and they are shown against minimal backgrounds.”<sup>5</sup> His photographs are primarily governed by what she terms an “underlying formal imperative.” Form is first. Content is secondary. While in the catalogue’s second essay, critic Kay Larson does describe the photographic content, mainly regarding his black sitters, the discussion still occurs in relation to form: “Mapplethorpe is, to my mind, the best classicizing photographer of his generation...He

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<sup>4</sup> Janet Kardon et al., *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1989), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Kardon et al., 10.

has proven that classicism and eroticism are not contradictory, that they are two poles of the same experience.”<sup>6</sup> The catalogue’s third essay, “Robert Mapplethorpe’s Poses,” by then-curator David Joselit would prove to be the most prescient. Eschewing any mentions of formalism or classicism, Joselit notes that Mapplethorpe’s popularity is “often explained (or explained away) as a form of sophisticated naughtiness...It is Mapplethorpe’s broader relevance that is typically denied to him.”<sup>7</sup> Mapplethorpe’s “broader relevance” would soon be exposed.

Though *The Perfect Moment* went on an 8 city tour, this chapter focuses on the flashpoints, the most famous of those stops – two cities, two institutions, two different outcomes: the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington D.C. and the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. While scheduled to open at the Corcoran on June 29, 1989, the third stop of its tour, Christina Orr-Cahall, the gallery director, recognizing that some of the photographs might impact Congress’s consideration of NEA funding for the next fiscal year, canceled the exhibition on June 12, 1989, just over two weeks before its scheduled opening and three months after Mapplethorpe’s death.<sup>8</sup> Hoping to prevent controversy, Orr-Cahall sparked it. Accusations of censorship began almost immediately. As Richard Meyer has argued in his seminal *Outlaw Representation*, perceived censorship is

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<sup>6</sup> Kay Larson, “Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, by Janet Kardon (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1989), 15.

<sup>7</sup> David Joselit, “Robert Mapplethorpe’s Poses,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1989), 17.

<sup>8</sup> The Perfect Moment first opened on December 9, 1988 at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania. It was scheduled to travel from Philadelphia to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where it would be on display February 25-April 9, 1989; the Corcoran Art Museum in Washington, DC from July 1-September 3, 1989; the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut from October 8 – December 24, 1989; the University Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley from January 17- March 18, 1990; the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati; and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston from June 14-August 31, 1990. Barbara Gamarekian, “Corcoran, to Foil Dispute, Drops Mapplethorpe Show,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1989.

productive as it engenders the publicity and recirculation of the very thing it seeks to suppress. Likewise, the cancellation sparked debate and the press, as protestors quickly gathered outside the museum and projected Mapplethorpe's images onto its outer walls (fig. 3.1).

*The Perfect Moment* was ultimately exhibited in Washington D.C., roughly three weeks later, when it opened on July 12, 1989 at the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA), an alternative arts venue. Like the Kitchen, which had shown Mapplethorpe's BDSM photographs a decade earlier, the WPA was part of an alternative arts scene that existed within the margins of the art establishment and had been previously awarded NEA grants so substantial that the WPA's director, Jock Reynolds, mused: "We've been funded in the past, I'm sure, for a lot more by the NEA than the Corcoran."<sup>9</sup> The success of *The Perfect Moment*'s previous stops in tandem with the hype growing from controversy and widespread media coverage became an allure, drawing record attendance and attention from supporters and detractors alike, including members of Congress as well as those of the right-wing religious organizations such as the American Family Association and Christian Coalition. To this growing religious right, Mapplethorpe almost immediately replaced another photographer caught in controversy, Andres Serrano.

### **The Perfect Political Pony**

On the legislative side, the debates being waged in Washington D.C. over the boundaries between art and public funding would not only soon consume and restructure

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Kastor, "WPA to Exhibit Controversial Photographs," *Washington Post*, June 27, 1989, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/06/27/wpa-to-exhibit-controversial-photographs/62b6cae6-50b9-46a8-917c-42dbd591c1f9/>.

Mapplethorpe's photographs and reputation, but federal funding for the arts more broadly. While Mapplethorpe took center stage, the conflict began around another photograph - Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a large-scale image of a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine (fig. 3.2). In 1988, a juried panel appointed by the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) had selected Serrano and nine others to win \$15,000 fellowships and appear in the show *Awards in the Visual Arts 7*. SECCA was, in part, supported by the NEA.<sup>10</sup>

The funding was publicly criticized by Christian conservatives. On April 5, 1989, roughly three months before the Corcoran canceled *The Perfect Moment*, Donald Wildmon, a fundamentalist minister and head of the powerful conservative religious group, American Family Association (AFA), sent a letter to over a million people, including every member of the United States Congress.<sup>11</sup> Wildmon decried *Piss Christ* as a despicable illustration of the widespread "bias and bigotry against Christians" running through American culture while scolding the letter's recipients for not standing up to such bigotry. As Representative Sidney Yates (D-IL), Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior and Related Agencies would later recount, "I think Wildmon more than anyone else initiated the furor that enveloped the NEA."<sup>12</sup>

The letter caught the attention of Senators Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-NY) and Jesse Helms

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<sup>10</sup> The NEA had granted \$75,000 to SECCA, which then awarded Serrano \$15,000.

<sup>11</sup> Wildmon, along with the AFA, had already gone after and been outraged by Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Madonna's "Like a Prayer" music video. As the story goes, Pepsi released an advertisement with the singer and song in April 1989. Wildmon threatened that his 380,000 members would boycott the company if they did not pull the ad. Pepsi pulled the ad, as well its plans to sponsor an upcoming tour of hers. "Pepsi Cancels Madonna Ad," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1989, sec. Business Day, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/05/business/pepsi-cancels-madonna-ad.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Selcraig, "Crusade to Purify America - How the Non-Issue of Individual Expression in Art Became a Cultural Bonfire for the Religious Right," *Daily News of Los Angeles*, September 2, 1990, sec. Viewpoint.

(R-NC). They took to the Senate in May 1989 to lead the congressional battle against this so-called blasphemous type of art. D'Amato tore up a reproduction of *Piss Christ* on the Senate floor: "This so-called piece of art," he argued, "is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity."<sup>13</sup> Cheering him on was Helms, who declared that "The Senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation...I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk." He accused the artists and the NEA of "taunting the American people" through the use of "blasphemy and insensitivity toward the religious community."<sup>14</sup> What was perceived to be at stake was not art per-se, but American values. As one senator put it, "holding up this work as that which our Government rewards, is denigrating the values which are the foundation of our democracy."<sup>15</sup>

The terms of the debate were formed on and around the creation of an imagined community and, likewise, enemies of that community. Us versus them. The antagonistic "them" was comprised of the liberal elite, who, according to those like Helms, included the "arty crowd," "art establishment," "art experts," and "the knee-jerk papers" such as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, who were "denigrating the values" of American society.<sup>16</sup> Conservative commentators and the religious right perceived this to be part of a growing cultural threat. At stake was American cultural identity. Conservator commentator and columnist, Patrick Buchanan warned of a "tiny clique, out of touch with American's traditional values, [that] has wormed its way into control of the art bureaucracy," guided by their "anti-American, anti-Christian" agendas.

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<sup>13</sup> Jesse Helms, "Congressional Record," May 18, 1989, 9788, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>14</sup> Helms, 9788.

<sup>15</sup> Jesse Helms, "Congressional Record," May 10, 1989, 8809, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>16</sup> Helms, 8809.

This “art bureaucracy” had a specific political identity, as it was frequently understood as a “hypothesized *homosexual community*” which was not only complicated by the growing AIDS crisis, but took on an increasingly threatening presence.<sup>17</sup> In July 1987, PBS’s *McNeil/Lehrer Newshour* devoted part of its episode to the issue of “AIDS in the Arts.” The segment repeatedly notes that “homosexuals” are “the lifeblood of show business and the arts.” While some, such as Jan Zita Grover, have pointed to this close association between the gay community and the arts as establishing the gay community “as the powerful and, crucially, the *active* community,” Douglas Crimp has pointed out that this association not only reinforces the equation of AIDS and homosexuality but assigns the art establishment a (homo)sexuality.<sup>18</sup> The ideological work of this association triangulates the art establishment within the perceived cultural threat to the normative social order posed by the gay community and amplified amidst the AIDS crisis. The simplified logic is as follows: if the art establishment is controlled by *them*, the physically and mentally “sick” homosexuals “out of touch with American’s traditional values,” *we* must take back the arts for our society. While the terrain was culture, the real threat was the potential disruption to the traditional social order posed by these bodies, real and imaginary, and their explicit relationships to terms of alternative identity politics. Buchanan’s “tiny clique, out of touch with America’s traditional values” that were “promoting their dangerous anti-family and anti-American agendas,” as Senator Jesse Helms warned, included the “the homosexual ‘community’” as well as the “intellectuals, blacks and feminists” that were looking to, as Reverend Donald Wildmon

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<sup>17</sup> Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1987), 25. 25

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Introduction,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987), 4.

cautioned, “run our society, while Christians and military would have very little influence.”<sup>19</sup>

For many in the liberal art world, at stake was the freedom of expression. The terms and stakes of the debate appeared relatively quickly. “If this is permitted to happen we shall lack the free expression necessary to protect our other freedoms,” wrote art historian Joshua P. Smith, “to give our society vision and inspiration for the next century.”<sup>20</sup> Any restriction of the NEA was, ultimately, a violation of the First Amendment; art is a genre of free speech that merits constitutional protection. Yet while the liberal art community decried the Mapplethorpe cancellation and NEA funding attacks as attacks on freedom of speech that amounted to censorship, conservatives and the religious right in Congress and the media were leveraging an attack on a completely different register: their aim was not censorship, though they did engage with that argument, but biopolitics.<sup>21</sup>

In regards to the censorship argument, according to the right, artists were not the ones being censored. Who was? “Every day” according to Helms “the national media censor religious and conservative viewpoints.”<sup>22</sup> Artists were free to create what they wanted to create, as the Conservative rebuttal went. What was at issue was who should

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<sup>19</sup> Again, we see the confluence of rhetoric in the media (Patrick Buchanan), in Congress (Jesse Helms) and in massive religious organizations (Donald Wildmon). Richard Bolton, ed., “Introduction,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992), 3–26.

<sup>20</sup> Joshua P. Smith, “WHY THE CORCORAN MADE A BIG MISTAKE,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1989/06/18/why-the-corcoran-made-a-big-mistake/7f6a81e1-624c-4e8c-8e48-56fdecf80fd5/>.

<sup>21</sup> As has been well documented, regarding the issue of censorship, conservatives displaced the issue from censorship to government funding. Whereas liberals avoided the art’s obscenity by placing it under the First Amendment, the counterargument was that art that is not socially edifying or morally uplifting should not be funded with government dollars. Obscene work could not, by virtue of its obscenity, be art.

<sup>22</sup> Jesse Helms, “Congressional Record,” July 26, 1989, 16278, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.



fund these projects. As Helms put it, should “the vast majority of American people who are disgusted with the idea of giving the taxpayer’s money to artists who promote homosexuality insidiously and deliberately” be financially responsible?<sup>23</sup> According to him and others, the answer was a resounding no. If the “us” was the good, taxpaying, Christian Americans opposed to the “artists who promote homosexuality,” not only was this “vast majority” insistently heteronormative and resoundingly homophobic, but the concern was not leveraged at the art object, per se, but the intense fear surrounding the belief that its imagery could “promote homosexuality insidiously and deliberately,” as Helms warned the Senate.<sup>24</sup> In other words, these photographs were identified as both an actively viable mechanism and acutely symptomatic representation of a real societal threat – homosexuality.

It should not be surprising then that the vilification of Serrano paled in comparison to the demonization of Robert Mapplethorpe. While the religious right and conservatives saw Serrano’s single photograph, *Piss Christ*, as an attack on Christianity, Robert Mapplethorpe – the artist who had recently died of AIDS and produced photographs attesting to his participation in gay sadomasochistic life - represented something far more insidious. As I have already indicated and will further work to show is that the question and controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe’s work was not merely a question of federal funding for the arts. Rather, it was a national response grounded in the homophobic discourse of the AIDS crisis. The photographs – really the bodies that the photographs picture – challenge the institutions of state and church, which, in the Reagan

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<sup>23</sup> Jesse Helms, “Congressional Record,” October 7, 1989, 23905, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>24</sup> Helms, 23.

era, were intricately linked.<sup>25</sup> The Controversy was a symptomatic enactment of what Michel Foucault coined as “biopower” in which “life as a political object...more than the law...became the issue of political struggle” and cultural warfare served as the technology through which power could speak “of sexuality and *to sexuality*.”<sup>26</sup> If, as Foucault argues, the ultimate aim of biopower is normalization - traditional, heterosexual, Christian, monogamous family units - Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs made visible a challenge. What does American culture look like and, perhaps more importantly, what *should* it look like? Who does American culture represent and who *should* it represent?

### **...But No One Should Die of Ignorance**

With today’s mainstream depictions in movies and television like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *Bohemian Rhapsody* - especially for those of us who did not live during the AIDS crisis - general remembrance of the period is skewed. As someone born in 1988, AIDS activism in my immediate cultural memory has a global orientation. Rather than ACT-UP posters or the Silence = Death logo, my memory queues images of the (RED) campaign’s shirts, ads, iPods and ribbons. I am not alone. During the early and mid-1990s, as the baby boomer generation came to occupy prominent leadership roles in evangelical organizations, they rearticulated the AIDS crisis and shifted its terms, framing it, largely, as a third world disease with innocent victims, opening the potential for missionary work while maintaining a heteronormative agenda. In doing so, the crisis

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<sup>25</sup> There are a number of scholarly works on the intersecting institutions of church and state in this period. For examples see Jason C. Bivings, *The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Anti-Liberalism and the Challenge to American Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 145–47. 145-147.

in the United States has largely been written out of the narrative and/or sequestered as a historic event. Resolved. On the rare occasion it is articulated through mainstream channels, these articulations are sanitized of their politics and perpetuate the myth that the virus was a problem for white, gay men, rendering invisible the people who lived with HIV/AIDS who did not fit that profile.<sup>27</sup> In the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which inaccurately instrumentalizes Freddie Mercury's diagnosis in service of a plotline, the stigma of his diagnosis and sexuality is almost completely erased, while films like *Dallas Buyers Club* evoke a certain nostalgia, assuring viewers that the crisis is one of the past. Given these movies' widespread critical and box office successes, I argue that these cultural imaginings maintain prominent weight. That cultural memory is grossly and unjustly incorrect.

From its initial diagnosis, AIDS was almost immediately constructed through raced, gendered, and sexualized terms. For almost four years, until 1982, AIDS was known throughout the United States as GRID – Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Disorder.<sup>28</sup> Early medical and mainstream media coverage was intertwined with homophobic sensationalism, especially in regards to gay male sexual practices, and almost immediately construed the mysterious disease to be a “gay plague.”<sup>29</sup> As Deborah

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<sup>27</sup> For more on how race shapes images of the AIDS crisis, see Thurka Sangaramoorthy, *Treating AIDS: Politics of Difference, Paradox of Prevention*, (New Brunswick, 2014); Peter C. J. Vale and Brett C. Stockdill, *Activism Against AIDS: At the Intersection of Sexuality, Race, Gender and Class* (Boulder, 2003); Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago, 1999); Evelyn Hammonds, "Race, Sex, AIDS: The Construction of 'Other'," *Radical America* 20 (1987): 328-40; Evelyn Hammonds, "Seeing AIDS: Race, Gender, and Representation," in *The Gender Politics of HIV/AIDS in Women: Perspectives on the Pandemic in the United States*, ed. Nancy Goldstein (New York, 1997), 113-126.

<sup>28</sup> Dennis Altman, "HIV, Homophobia, and Human Rights," *Health and Human Rights* 2, no. 4 (1998): 15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4065184>.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 60.

Gould recalls “it might be easy to forget the bafflement, terror and panic that surrounded the first years of the epidemic...hundreds of previously healthy gay men were suddenly being diagnosed with mysterious and rare diseases that indicated a breakdown in their immune systems,” with no available testing or successful treatment options known.<sup>30</sup>

Within the gay community, Kendall Thomas, an ACT UP/New York member, remembers that “People were terrified...There was a palpable sense of anxiety...Death, or dying, was literally all around me...There were moments of utter terror which would descend upon me without warning.”<sup>31</sup> Outside the gay community, responses were a volatile mix of fear and hate. As Priscilla Ward has pointed out, “HIV ma[d]e sex visible; it showed that people’s desires [were] not bound by either the social sanction of marriage or the social classifications of race, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>32</sup> Not only did it bring conversations of sexuality, sex and morality into the public sphere, but it challenged normative notions of those boundaries amidst the backdrop of a changing American political climate, when in the 1980s through the early 1990s, repressive movements ascended and converged: the rise and rule of Neoliberalism under Reagan, the ascendancy of the religious right, and new forms and mechanisms of biopower.<sup>33</sup> As death counts and diagnoses rose amidst widespread institutional neglect, terror and discrimination, gay and lesbian communities organized in response, forming the initial

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<sup>30</sup> Gould, 59.

<sup>31</sup> As quoted in Gould, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 240.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Weiner, “Disposable Media, Expendable Populations – ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 1 (April 2012): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412911430584>.

wave of AIDS activism, becoming the public face of AIDS and AIDS activism, further reinforcing the view that AIDS was a white gay man's disease.<sup>34</sup>

By the mid-1980s, especially after the death of actor Rock Hudson in 1985, theories that AIDS would not move into the normative, heterosexual public shifted.<sup>35</sup> While, on the one hand, the mainstream media began to increasingly acknowledge that the virus was not exclusively confined to gays and drug-users, on the other hand, in conjunction with the uncontrollable spread of AIDS within the gay community as well as the media attention given to activist groups such as ACT-UP, the presumed sexuality accorded to AIDS exponentially exacerbated preexisting homophobia, hatred, fear and anxiety.<sup>36</sup> The massive amount of misinformation and disinformation, along with the thousands of gay men rapidly being killed by AIDS incited a socially and politically backed collapse between the virus and gay identity that led to an institutionally supported homophobia. In the normative public imagination, homosexuality was a disease and threat to human survival; a belief that not only collapsed AIDS and gay identity but, importantly, pitted gay identity further into a highly stigmatized peripheral position that was portrayed as both a significant moral and medical threat to society. As the AIDS crisis continued so too did the serious consequences of state-sponsored and socially

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<sup>34</sup> For one of the most complete, compelling and extensive accounts, see David France, *How to Survive a Plague: The Story of How Citizens and Science Tamed AIDS* (New York: Knopf, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Randy Shilts, in his now-classic *And the Band Played On*, notes that the diagnosis and death of Rock Hudson, a popular film star, incited a fundamental shift in the public awareness and response to the Crisis: "there was AIDS before Rock Hudson and AIDS after." For more information see Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin Press, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Richard Poirier, "AIDS and Traditions of Homophobia" *Social Research*, Vol. 55, No. 3, (Autumn 1988): 461, Accessed January 12, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970515>.

sanctioned homophobia and non-recognition, whereby homophobia became disguised as sound public policy.<sup>37</sup>

As demonstrated in the landmark case of *Bowers v Hardwick* (1986), whereby the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of a Georgia sodomy law that criminalized oral and anal sex between consenting adults, even basic privacy rights were denied.<sup>38</sup> The Supreme Court decision, along with President Ronald Reagan's prolonged silence on the crisis – he did not mention the word “AIDS” in public until 1985 just weeks before Rock Hudson's death, which was explained by his administration's perception that the disease “hadn't spread into the general population” - accentuated the increasingly stigmatized, disvalued, and unrepresented position the gay community was confined to.<sup>39</sup> While this gave rise to what cultural critics like Simon Watney have described as “an epidemic of signification” or a “crisis of representation,” surrounding what Thomas Yingling describes as the “discursive explosion around the question of homosexuality,” leading to the activist contributions of ACT-UP and the Silence = Death

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<sup>37</sup> Such policies include the ramifications of the Supreme Court Case of *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) that upheld the constitutionality of sodomy laws, as well as travel bans. Until 1990, the US did not allow visitors and potential migrants on the grounds of sexual orientation. Additionally, Jesse Helms' travel law banned people who had tested positive for HIV from entering the United States. While *Bowers vs. Hardwick* was overturned through *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), the travel ban was not overturned until 2009 by President Obama. Additionally, there were a number of efforts to prevent HIV-positive students from attending school, to prevent HIV-positive teachers from teaching, as well as widespread discrimination in employment and housing. See Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*; Julia Preston, “Obama Lifts a Ban on Entry into U.S. by H.I.V.-Positive People (Published 2009),” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2009, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/31/us/politics/31travel.html>; Mary C Dunlap, “AIDS and Discrimination in the United States: Reflections on the Nature of Prejudice in a Virus,” *Villanova Law Review* 34 (1989): 909–32.

<sup>38</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Government inaction was unique to the AIDS crisis. As has been well-documented, the government's almost immediate response to two other health crises of the 1980s – toxic shock syndrome and the Tylenol tampering case – stands in stark contrast to the non-response to the AIDS crisis. As Thomas Yingling has argued, this is because homosexual men were not recognized as constituents of the “general population.” On the same note, President Regan did not mention the word “AIDS” in public until 1985, after the death of Rock Hudson and did not make any major speeches on AIDS until April 1987 in Grover, “AIDS: Keywords”; Thomas Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*.

project, this activism occurred in tandem with growing national conversations surrounding identification, testing and quarantine.

In an editorial published in *The New York Times*, William F Buckley, founder of the conservative magazine the *National Review*, argued that “everyone with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper-forearm to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals” while others, including government officials, debated mandatory testing and contended that the “logical outcome of testing is a quarantine of those infected.”<sup>40</sup> This chapter is located in this discursive terrain; rather than attempt to answer what *really* happened at the intersection between art, the AIDS crisis and the Culture Wars, instead, I explore *how* that story was told and accepted both in Congress, on the legislative terrain, and outside Congress through popular media channels. Rather than search for the “facts,” I look at the myths and realities this discourse manufactured. As will be suggested throughout, these very same rhetorical strategies are still in play today.

It is also not coincidental that some of Mapplethorpe’s most ardent detractors – in Congress and the media – were not only responsible for the overridingly apathetic response to the ever-intensifying AIDS crisis, but were actively contributing to and forming the public imagination against the purportedly pathological dangers presented by homosexuality and homosexual bodies.<sup>41</sup> Senator Jesse Helms, who would lead the charge against Mapplethorpe and the NEA, launched numerous homophobic campaigns. In March 1987, he appeared on CBS’ “Face of the Nation” to call for a federal quarantine

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<sup>40</sup> William Buckley, “Identify All The Carriers,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1986.

<sup>41</sup> Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body*, 22.

of people with AIDS.<sup>42</sup> Helms successfully proposed an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act which sought to add AIDS to the list of “dangerous contagious diseases” that could be used to reject potential immigrants from America.<sup>43</sup> In October of the same year, he successfully campaigned against federal funding of any healthcare information that might “promote, encourage, or condone any sexual activity outside a sexually monogamous marriage (including homosexual sexual activities) or the use of illegal intravenous drugs.”<sup>44</sup> What sort of healthcare information was he specifically against? A sexually-explicit comic book, *Safer Sex Comex*, created and distributed by the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York, an organization that received federal funding for AIDS education and information. The comic was developed as a means to engage gay men to alter the way they had sex with other men, to practice safe sex. Helms not only took the comic book to the Senate floor, describing it as “so obscene, so revolting...I may throw up,” but he sent out copies in brown envelopes marked “Personal and Confidential, for Senator’s Eye Only.”<sup>45</sup> The ideological work done here is critical. In sealing the contents away in the brown envelope and marking them as such, Helms presents *Safer Sex Comex* as manifestly explicit, obscene material.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> United Press International, “Helms Calls for AIDS Quarantine on Positive Tests,” *chicagotribune.com*, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-06-16-8702140384-story.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Rona Morrow, “AIDS and Immigration: The United States Attempts to Deport a Disease,” *The University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* 20, no. 1 (1988): 131–73.

<sup>44</sup> “Limit Voted on AIDS Funds (Published 1987),” *The New York Times*, October 15, 1987., “AIDS Booklet Stirs Senate to Halt Funds,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1987 edition, accessed March 19, 2019, [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-14/news/mn-9370\\_1\\_helms](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-14/news/mn-9370_1_helms). Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” *October* 43 (1987): 237, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397576>.

<sup>45</sup> “AIDS Booklet Stirs Senate to Halt Funds.”; Crimp, “Introduction,” 159.

<sup>46</sup> It is also worth noting the alliance between conservatives and anti-pornography feminists here. In their complete disavowal of all sexual imagery, theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon not only align with conservative attacks but also offered no exception for this type of imagery used in service of activist aims. For more on the limitations of leftist censorship proposals, see: Amy Adler, “What’s Left?: Hate Speech, Pornography, and the Problem for Artistic Expression,” *California Law Review* 84, no. 6 (1996): 1499–1572, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3481093>.



Helms' attack on the *Safer Sex Comex* campaign anticipates the strategy that would repeatedly be employed against the Mapplethorpe photographs. Underpinning Helms' senatorial dramatics was a fundamental acknowledgment of the power of representation. He instrumentalized the visual, or in this case, the homovisual, to represent the myths being discursively manufactured around the equation of homosexuality, obscenity, and AIDS. In his selection of homovisual material and presentation of such imagery as objectively "so obscene, so revolting," Helms exerts control and power over the realm of representation. Building upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument that the principal apparatus of homophobia is not representation, *per se*, but epistemology, I argue here that Helms's tactic effectively collapsed the two into a visual epistemology instrumentalized to further the state-sponsored, socially-imperative rhetoric of homophobia. Helms selects imagery to (re)present preexisting (mis)conceptions surrounding gay sex that not only makes "the homosexual act" visible but simultaneously frames the act manifestly obscene. Not only would Helms, a year later, repeat the tactic during the Mapplethorpe Controversy when he declared the photographs so obscene that the "ladies" and pages were ordered out of the chamber, but it would be the same strategy repeatedly used by the religious right.

As demonstrated above, the common thread running through Helms' platforms was not high art, *per se*, but the AIDS crisis and the active bodies engaged in activities (sex) that were not only purported to be responsible for the disease but were construed to be patently obscene: "We can talk about condoms and clean needles until we are blue in the face," Helms told the Senate, "but until we are ready and willing to discourage and do our dead level best to *eliminate* the types of activities which have caused the spread of the

AIDS epidemic, I do not believe we are ever going to solve it.”<sup>47</sup> Helms was clear in which activities needed to be eliminated: “Every AIDS case can be traced back to a homosexual act.”<sup>48</sup> The activity that needed to be eliminated was gay sex. The root of the AIDS crisis, then, was not a virus, but (homo)sexuality. This was not just an issue of public health, but morality: “We have got to call a spade, a spade, and a perverted human, a perverted human,” he cried.<sup>49</sup> AIDS was interchangeable with gay, which was interchangeable with obscenity. Helms was certainly not alone in his homophobia.<sup>50</sup> The amendment – a blatantly discriminatory ban on federal funding for any material that might “promote, encourage, or condone” homosexual activity - was passed in the Senate by a vote of 94 to 2.

It is within this climate that Robert Mapplethorpe became the perfect vehicle for an increasingly homophobic national campaign. He was a visual artist with photographic work that documented his participation in non-normative, gay sex practices before the AIDS crisis; he died of AIDS; he was part of and lauded by the art establishment. He was a “them” and he quite quickly became the face of a growing cultural call to arms. While his vilification certainly provoked a counterdiscourse saturated with terms of artistic freedom, as Richard Meyer has argued, the vilification was built around a projection of apocalyptic fears that collapsed homosexuality and AIDS, not only with each other but with pedophilia and moral uncertainty to culminate into *the* urgent social crisis of its

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<sup>47</sup> Jesse Helms, “Congressional Record,” October 17, 1989, 27754, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>48</sup> Helms, 27754.

<sup>49</sup> Edward I. Koch, “Opinion | Senator Helms’s Callousness Toward AIDS Victims (Published 1987),” *The New York Times*, November 7, 1987, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/07/opinion/senator-helms-s-callousness-toward-aids-victims.html>.

<sup>50</sup> William Dannemayer (R-CA), writing in the AFA Journal uses the same line “spade a spade” see Carol Vance, “The War on Culture,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Julie Ault et al. (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999), 230.

moment, both articulating and advancing the growing polarity between the *us* (read: white, heteronormative, Christians) and the enemy, *them* (read: gay). “The moral infrastructure of our country has been eroding at an ever-increasing pace over the last 20 years,” cried Representative of Robert Dornan (R-CA) in September 1989 on the House of Representatives floor.<sup>51</sup> His evidence? “This Mapplethorpe pederasty child molestation type of child pornography,” was just one example of “something so insidious, so inherently evil.”<sup>52</sup> Again, the terms of the debate are explicit; *our* country is being threatened, it is eroding, just look at Mapplethorpe, who Dornan uses to further fulfill longstanding fears and fantasies – that of the gay, child predator. It was not a one-time mistake either. One week later, Dornan told Congress:

Let us go back to the beginning of this whole ugly mess. Robert Mapplethorpe, God rest his soul, was a child pornographer. He just did not pass out child pornography. He took the pictures. I saw the child pornographer in the Speaker’s lobby hidden behind the curtains because we did not want to offend some of the Members of this Chamber or anybody who might be walking through the lobby [...] He lived his homosexual, erotic lifestyle and died horribly of AIDS.<sup>53</sup>

As will be discussed later in this chapter, Dornan was not the only one doing this sort of work. It was repeated in the media, as well as by the emerging powerful religious right.

Helms, similarly, conflated Mapplethorpe’s sexuality, artwork and AIDS diagnosis. He repeatedly described the work as “sick,” “sick art,” “sickening obscenity” which, as Meyer argues, displaces HIV infection from Mapplethorpe’s body to the body of his work, whereby his photographs are, themselves, contaminates.<sup>54</sup> As Allan Sekula

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Dornan, “Congressional Record,” September 13, 1989, 20364, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Dornan, 20364.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Dornan, “Congressional Record,” September 21, 1989, 21191, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>54</sup> “Congressional Record,” 16277.

contends, work like Mapplethorpe's was perceived by right-wing conservatives, including Dornan and Helms, as a very real social and political threat, read by detractors as promoting and advocating a gay lifestyle:

Since Mapplethorpe fully implicated himself in the subculture of sadomasochism, it has not been difficult for critics to regard his visual description of sadomasochistic acts as a form of 'advocacy,' ...Where a liberal might see in Mapplethorpe's supposed 'advocacy' a call for the tolerance of sexual difference, a conservative might see a recruiting campaign."<sup>55</sup>

A recruiting campaign is exactly what was seen by some. "The art critics acknowledge that Mapplethorpe's obscene photographs," proclaimed Helms "were an effort to gain wider exposure of, and acceptance for, homosexuality – which happens to be the stated political goal for all homosexual pressure groups."<sup>56</sup> Despite some of Mapplethorpe's "good photographs" others "deliberately promoted homosexuality and child molestation."<sup>57</sup> Again, the underlying equation is clear. If all AIDS cases can be traced back to the homosexual act, then all AIDS cases can be traced back to the homosexual subject, whose body so defies normative ideations of sex and sexuality that the association with child molestation does not lag far behind. HIV may have been the virus, but homosexuality was the pollutant and the (homo)visual was its recruiting ground.

As has been noted extensively elsewhere, Helms' rhetoric did have very real funding consequences. Just five days after *Perfect Moment* opened at the Washington for the Arts, the Senate accepted a \$45,000 cut to NEA appropriations and added additional clauses that banned funding to SECCA and ICA for five years, shifted \$100,000 from the

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<sup>55</sup> Allan Sekula, "'Independent Photography in the Context of Enterprise Culture" Delivered in February 1990," *Art in America*, February 1990, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/issues-commentary-some-american-notes-63146/>.

<sup>56</sup> Helms, "Congressional Record," October 7, 1989, 23905.

<sup>57</sup> Helms, 23905.

Visual Arts Program to the Local and Folk Art Programs, and designated \$200,000 to fund an independent commission's investigation into NEA granting procedures. While the NEA was authorized through September 1990, the appropriations for the 1990 budget year were still being debated. Helms offered an amendment to this appropriations bill – the first content restriction in the history of the NEA – to stop what he considered to be the funding of “obscene” and “immoral trash,” as he described it on the Senate floor.

What would come to be known as the ‘Helms Amendment’ read as follows:

None of the funds authorized to be appropriated pursuant to this Act may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce--(1) obscene or indecent materials, including, but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or (2) material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion; or (3) material which denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to categorizing “homoeroticism” as manifestly obscene, important to note is the rhetorical leveling that occurs in Section 1 through the definition of obscenity which includes “sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.” Helms, in the amendment, on the Senate floor and elsewhere, repeatedly and consistently equates sadomasochism with homoeroticism, homoeroticism with child pornography.<sup>59</sup> The amendment sailed past the Appropriations Committee and was offered to the Senate with the following from Helms:

Federal funding for sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and child pornography is an insult to taxpayers. Americans for the most part are moral, decent people and they

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Richard Bolton, ed., “Debate in Senate over Helms Amendment, Including Statements by Senators Jesse Helms, Howard Metzenbaum, John Chafee, Dan Coates, Edward Kennedy, Timothy Wirth, James Jeffords, Claiborn Pell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, John Heinz, and Text of Helms Amendment, July 26, 1989,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992), 73–74.

<sup>59</sup> Though not in the scope of this dissertation, which focuses on the rhetorical strategies of the controversy rather than the psychoanalytic dimensions of these strategies, there has been work done on it. For more information, see Judith Butler, “The Force of Fantasy: Mapplethorpe, Feminism, and Discursive Excess,” *Feminism & Pornography*, edited by Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: University Press, 2000): 487-508.

have a right not to be denigrated, offended or mocked with their own tax dollars. My amendment would protect that right.

Mr. President, if Senators want the Federal Government funding pornography, sadomasochism, or art for pedophiles, they should vote against my amendment. However, if they think most voters and taxpayers are offended by the federal support for such art, they should vote for my amendment.<sup>60</sup>

On July 26, 1989, the Helms amendment passed in the Senate on a voice vote by a few senators present. While Congress ultimately rejected the amendment in October 1990 – after the acquittal of Dennis Barrie and the CAC - realizing the extensiveness of Helms' amendment and the difficulty of enforcement, they did pass a version of it.<sup>61</sup> In leaving the Senate floor, Helms warned: “I say to those in the arts community, and all of the homosexuals, and all the rest, who are upset about this amendment, what is past is prologue - You ain't seen nothing yet.”<sup>62</sup> Helms was not wrong.

### **Under Arrest**

It is important to note the complicity between the media, religious right and United States government during this period, which created a reactionary matrix of power that was purposefully apathetic to the intensifying AIDS crisis, if not completely antagonistic. Given the surrounding terms of the Mapplethorpe discussion – obscenity, sex, sadomasochism, homosexuality, censorship - it is not surprising that his controversial photographs were never published in newspapers or shown on television. For the vast majority of Americans, those who did not attend one of the seven *Perfect*

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<sup>60</sup> Helms, “Congressional Record,” July 26, 1989, 16278.

<sup>61</sup> As will be discussed further in Chapter Four, this version was the melding of Helms' amendment with language taken, verbatim, from *Miller v California*, which defines obscenity as lacking “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value” “Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).”

<sup>62</sup> Jesse Helms, “Congressional Record,” October 24, 1990, 33463, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

*Moment* exhibitions, Robert Mapplethorpe entered their houses and minds primarily through television segments, newspaper articles, advertisements and press releases.

While Helms led the attack in Congress, the war of words spread far past those government walls. Patrick Buchanan, a Conservative commentator and consultant to Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan, launched one of the most sustained public attacks, instrumentalizing rhetorical strategies similar to Helms'. Buchanan, who had served as Reagan's White House Communications Director between 1985 and 1987 and later ran for President in 1992, represented the growing polarity of the Culture Wars. Commenting on the topic of the AIDS crisis in the *New York Post* in 1983, Buchanan wrote, "The poor homosexuals – they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution." A champion of Helms' "Valiant War Against Filth in Art," Buchanan believed there was a struggle for the soul of America. On the one side, there was a very small ground of artists and gay rights radicals, the so-called "poisoners of culture," out of touch with most of society, suffering from "infantine disorder" who promoted filth, degradation and a "suicidal lifestyle," and on the other side were national defenders like Helms. Us versus them. In Buchanan's view, the goal of this cultural war was to overturn tradition and create a pagan society. In an analogy terrifyingly reminiscent of Nazi cultural metaphors, Buchanan wrote, "As with rivers and lakes, we need to clean up our culture: for it is a well from which we must all drink. Just as a poisoned land will yield up poisonous fruits, so a polluted culture, left to fester and stink, can destroy a nation's soul." <sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Vance, "The War on Culture," 226.

In a nationally syndicated column from August 1989, Buchanan described “poor, pathetic Robert Mapplethorpe,” as the man who “photographed ...the degraded acts by which he killed himself.”<sup>64</sup> Again, the terms of the equation are clear. Mapplethorpe, always constructed in relation to his sexuality, is not only immediately equated with AIDS, but it is an equation sutured to suicide: “the degraded acts by which *he killed himself* [emphasis added].” Buchanan describes *The Perfect Moment* as “a photographic exhibit by Robert Mapplethorpe, recently dead of AIDS, featuring men engaging in violent homosexual sex, with nude children thrown in.”<sup>65</sup> Like Senators Dornan and Helms, Buchanan’s Mapplethorpe was not only the personification of the AIDS crisis but the personification of heteronormative, white Christian right fears: homosexuality, perversion, pedophilia. Yet, rather than for Senators, this discourse was circulated amongst the millions of readers of his nationally syndicated columns, the majority of whom never attended *The Perfect Moment* and only new Robert Mapplethorpe through rhetoric like Buchanan’s.

While Buchanan may have been the loudest singular voice, he was not alone. The Controversy became part of a much larger, public discourse. While this discourse grew disembodied and far more significant than the individual voices that gave it expression, some soundbites are worth examining. Throughout July and August 1989, amidst the exhibition’s cancellation at the Corcoran, its showing at the Washington Project for the

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<sup>64</sup> This article was also read aloud on the Senate floor, per request of Steven Symms (R-ID) “this article says some very well deserved good things about our distinguished colleague, Senator Jesse Helms.” In the article, not only does Buchanan describe Mapplethorpe as quoted, but he warns against the “poisoners of culture, the polluters of art.” As far as Helms goes, Buchanan writes: “God bless Jesse Helms!...tell Jesse to hold down the fort; help is on the way.” Patrick Buchanan, “Pursued by Baying Yahoos,” *Washington Times*, August 2, 1989; Steven Symms, “Congressional Record,” August 2, 1989, 18025, Congressional Record Permanent Collection.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Buchanan, “First Battles Fought in the New Kulturkampf,” June 19, 1989.



Arts and growing senatorial debates, Mapplethorpe entered millions of homes through nationally syndicated, as well as local, news outlets. In many columns, Mapplethorpe's photos were described as "shocking," "vile," "repulsive," "sickening," "obscene," "crude," "savage," "nihilistic," "sacrilegious," "filthy trash," "disgusting," and "unspeakable." In the *New York Tribune*, the Mapplethorpe photographs were pronounced as "degenerate," the NEA as a "disgrace" with severe, apocalyptic consequences reminiscent of Patrick Buchanan's warnings: "our nation is in decline because we have embraced a nihilist, amoral culture."<sup>66</sup> Some confused Mapplethorpe and Serrano. "The poor starving artist," wrote Peggie Luman, "had the misfortune to contract AIDS, as his dying gesture he used his contaminated bodily fluid, namely urine, as a comment to the society who infected him....instead of praying for salvation, he chose to defame the symbol of Christianity."<sup>67</sup>

Others reiterated the leveling claims that collapsed homosexuality, AIDS, and pedophilia, making it clear the writer had not actually seen the show. In Ohio, a newspaper reported that "the photographs in question are by Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS. They are said to graphically show homosexual and sadomasochistic activities, some involving children."<sup>68</sup> In South Carolina, one contributor wrote: "Robert Mapplethorpe's 'art' involves nude photos of children fondling themselves" (misspelling original). In a column published across a number of states, Jeffrey Hart, a member of the

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<sup>66</sup> James Cooper, "After the NEA Firestorm, What Happens Then?," *New York Tribune*, June 27, 1989, Very negative editorials, 1989 June-September, box 263, folder 1, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers<sup>511</sup> (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>67</sup> Peggie Luman, *The Republic*, August 31, 1989, Very negative editorials, 1989 June-September, box 263, folder 1, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>68</sup> *News Journal*, July 23, 1989, Very negative editorials, 1989 June-September, box 263, folder 2, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

faculty at Dartmouth and former speechwriter for Richard Nixon, described Mapplethorpe's work as "sodomasochistic and kiddie porn subject matter," that "may raise legal problems involving sex with minors."<sup>69</sup> In the *Washington Times*, Judith Reisman, a leading antipornography crusader and research director at the American Family Associations, published an article entitled "Promoting Child Abuse as Art," where she equated further Mapplethorpe's *Rosie* with child abuse: "Mr. Mapplethorpe's eye, and camera, peep under the child's skirt to expose her hairless genitalia provocatively to the world – just as thousands of other child molesters/pornographers before and after him" (fig. 3.3).<sup>70</sup> Again, for the vast majority of average Americans who had not attended the exhibition, their "Mapplethorpe" existed solely through these (often fictitious) circulated claims.

These same critics often cast Mapplethorpe's photography not only as evidence of child abuse and racism but the AIDS crisis with Mapplethorpe's biography always in view. "Would his own death from AIDS, (commonly an 'anal recipient' disease) not preclude (in a national museum) 'encouraging' the sadistic acts which, on the evidence, facilitate AIDS?" asked Judith Reisman, who would serve as an expert witness for the prosecution in Dennis Barrie's criminal trial. Jeffrey Hart notes that Mapplethorpe "has died of AIDS, appropriately enough."<sup>71</sup> The sentiment was echoed in the *Washington Times* when, Welsey Pruden wrote "Mr. Mapplethorpe was a homosexual, and indeed,

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<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey Hart, *Leader-Herald*, August 14, 1989, Very negative editorials, 1989 June-September, box 263, folder 1, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers<sup>[1]</sup> (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that critics and, at times, scholars seem to use the titles *Rosie* (1976) and *Honey* (1976) interchangeably. Both feature two young children, but as currently titled, *Honey* captures the face and shoulders of a girl laying on a flowery lawn, while *Rosie* captures a young girl, sitting on a bench with her dress raised. When writers discuss the controversial photograph, they are referring to the latter.

<sup>71</sup> Hart.

his obsession with external male plumbing in all likelihood contributed to his death at 35.” Photography, AIDS, homosexuality, pedophilia, and death.

The same mythmaking was occurring on television as well. On CBS, Harry Smith discussed the “collection of photographs... many of them depicting homosexuality and sadomasochism.”<sup>72</sup> On NBC, host Deborah Norville warned viewers that the “segment this morning deals with artwork that is considered very controversial and erotic and may not be appropriate for children.”<sup>73</sup> On ABC News Nightline, a nationally syndicated program with an average of 11.7 million viewers, host Jed Duvall was sure to mention Mapplethorpe’s AIDS and described his work as some that would “make people flinch, homoerotic photographs portraying, celebrating homosexuality, mostly male genitals in a manner far too graphic to be seen on television even at a late hour.”<sup>74</sup> In Philadelphia, Phyllis Schlafly, the conservative political activist, appeared on the morning news speaking out against *The Perfect Moment* before she admitted that while she had not seen the exhibition, she had “read detailed descriptions.”<sup>75</sup> On the Oprah Winfrey Show, itself a litmus test of popular relevancy, M. Rita Burke, the president of Morality in Media of Massachusetts, warned that “when one has been exposed to stimuli that is pathological, that is leads to...abhorrent behavior and repressive behavior.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *CBS This Morning* (CBS, July 31, 1989), Television News Transcripts, 1989-1991, box 289, folder 2, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers<sup>[SEP]</sup> (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>73</sup> Deborah Norville, *NBC Today* (NBC, July 20, 1989), Television News Transcripts, 1989-1991, box 289, folder 2, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers<sup>[SEP]</sup> (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>74</sup> “ABC News Nightline,” August 2, 1989, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>75</sup> *Morning News* (Philadelphia: Channel 6, Station VPVI, August 10, 1989), Television News Transcripts, 1989-1991, box 289, folder 2, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers<sup>[SEP]</sup> (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

<sup>76</sup> *Oprah Winfrey Show*, July 27, 1990, Television News Transcripts, 1989-1991, box 289, folder 3, Robert Mapplethorpe Papers<sup>[SEP]</sup> (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

And of course, there was the growing religious right, a branch of American conservatism that was decidedly anti-abortion, anti-feminist and anti-gay, viewing lesbians and gay men as a stain upon family values and a threat to the stable social order. Throughout the 1980s, the religious right had experienced major transformations in power and influence, as religious television's reach grew in the early 1980s to with estimations ranging from 13 to 61 million viewers.<sup>77</sup> As sociologist Tina Fetner recounts, "Evangelical Christianity and biblical literalism moved from the margins of political discourse to the center, integrating effectively with the Republican Party of the 1980s," with political candidates in over 500 state and national races.<sup>78</sup> Reagan's landslide victory in 1984 was viewed as an expansion of the political power of Evangelical Christians and on television, the Moral Majority's Reverend Jerry Falwell quickly claimed credit for Reagan's win and announced that he would push forward with his pro-family, anti-gay, legislative agenda.<sup>79</sup>

Robert Mapplethorpe did not go unnoticed by these growing religious forces. As previously mentioned, Representative Sidney Yates, Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior and Related Agencies recounted that "[Donald] Wildmon more than anyone else initiated the furor that enveloped the NEA," when the fundamentalist minister and head of the powerful conservative religious group, American Family Association (AFA) – the group that Judith Reisman was the research director of - sent a letter to over a million people, including every member of the United

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<sup>77</sup> Tina Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (U of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Tina Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (U of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiii.

<sup>79</sup> Even this group, the Moral Majority, indicates the deep-seated alliances between conservative politicians and religious groups. While fanaticized by Falwell, the group was really the brainchild of Paul Weyreich, Ed McAteer, and Richard Viguerie, who wanted to extend the influence of the Republican Party to and with Falwell's religious network (on television and across the country). See Fetner.

States Congress about the NEA's funding ties to Serrano's *Piss Christ*.<sup>80</sup> Serrano's photograph had not been the first piece to come across the AFA's radar. Wildmon had been outraged by Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Madonna's "Like a Prayer" music video. As the story goes, Pepsi released an advertisement with the aforementioned singer and song in April 1989. Wildmon called upon the AFA's 380,000 members to boycott Pepsi if the company did not pull the ad. On April 4, 1989, the day before Wildmon issued his letter on Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Pepsi removed the ad as well its plans to sponsor an upcoming tour of hers. The AFA had power.

In a press release dated July 25, 1989, less than two weeks after the Corcoran's cancellation of *The Perfect Moment*, Wildmon went into detail over a selection of Mapplethorpe's photographs including *Mr. 10 ½* and *Rosie*, described as a "photograph of an innocent little girl's vagina," to illustrate the ways the "American taxpayer is being forced to help fund such pornography through the NEA."<sup>81</sup> According to the press release, artists like Serrano and Mapplethorpe are part of an "elite group" of artists eligible to receive \$171 million tax dollars through the NEA paid for by the average American "working artists," described as "truck drivers, factory workers, carpenters and sales clerks," whom the government deems as undeserving of the aforementioned funds. Us versus them.

The AFA continued to increase its political calls. On February 13, 1990 – just two months before *Perfect Moment* would open in Cincinnati – the AFA took out a

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<sup>80</sup> The sort of financial backings of these religious organizations are pretty astounding. For her research, Reisman made over \$700,000 working for the AFA in 1989 or, after accounting for inflation, what would be close to \$1.5 million in 2020. Merkel, "Art on Trial."

<sup>81</sup> American Family Association, "Press Release on the NEA, July 25, 1989," in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 71–72.

fundraising advertisement in the *Washington Times*. The ad began with a quote from “Porn star” Annie Sprinkle - “‘Usually I get paid a lot of money for this, but tonight it’s government-funded!’” - before moving into a description of the “pornographic, anti-Christian ‘works of art’” funded by the NEA, including the Serrano and Mapplethorpe exhibitions, which the ad reports “had this not been supported by the NEA, the exhibitor could have been charged with distributing child pornography.”<sup>82</sup> The ad then went on to list other supported works, speculate on future funded projects and conclude with a call for action, listing the names of the Congressional representatives who voted against Helms’ amendment to explicitly encourage its supporters to use their voice to object to the “abuse and misuse” of tax dollars.<sup>83</sup> The NEA prepared and released a fact sheet in response.

While the AFA may have begun as a church organization, though the aforementioned campaigns indicate their active political orientation, the Christian Coalition was explicitly political in formation, created to not only “force America to face the moral issues that threaten to destroy us,” but “register God-fearing Americans to vote and insist that candidates for every office tell us their views on religious freedom, abortion, prayers in school, sex education, pornography, and other issues important to the moral fiber of our nation.”<sup>84</sup> In response to the Congressional debate over NEA funding

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<sup>82</sup> American Family Association, “Is This How You Want Your Tax Dollars Spent?, Fundraising Advertisement, *Washington Times*, February 13, 1990,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 150–52.

<sup>83</sup> American Family Association.

<sup>84</sup> Along the same lines, so too was the Concerned Women for America’s (CWA). Formed in 1979 as an alternative to the feminist National Organization for Women (NOW), CWA explicitly situated itself as a cultural campaigner, declaring itself the nation’s largest women’s public policy organization aiming to “educate other women in our communities on the issues that were destructive to the family, such as ERA, homosexuality, abortion, parents rights, etc.,” and “preserve, protect and promote” Christian values. They had a magazine – where they often quoted Wildmon as an expert - radio programs, a legal defense foundation and yearly national conventions with invitees and speakers that included President Ronald

hovering around Andres Serrano's and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, the relatively well-known Reverend Pat Robertson began the Coalition in October 1989 though it was not his first foray into politics. In 1981, Robertson had founded the Freedom Council, a nonprofit group to educate voters on Christian issues that was, as Tina Fetner puts it, "successful beyond anyone's imagination."<sup>85</sup> Though the Freedom Council dissolved in 1986, Robertson announced his bid for the 1988 presidential election shortly thereafter. It was, perhaps, Robertson's preexisting national exposure that helped launch the bid. As host of *The 700 Club*, Robertson had access to the show's 27 million viewers, many of whom were highly responsive to Robertson's "calls for action," providing much of the Christian Broadcasting Network's annual income through call-based donations.<sup>86</sup> The financial underpinnings and respective power the CBN generated must be understood through its relative context. According to political scientist Duane Oldfield, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) rivaled the Republican Party's fund-raising apparatus, raising \$230 million in 1986 versus the \$298 million raised by Republicans and \$98 million raised by Democrats in 1984. The religious right's power – in terms of people and money – helped successfully politicize a religious identity. As has been well-documented, while George H.W. Bush may have been elected president, Robertson's

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Reagan, Senator Jesse Helms and Reverend Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition. Rev. Pat Robertson, "Christian Coalition Direct Mail, October 25, 1989 (Excerpt)," in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 123–25.

<sup>85</sup> As Fetner recounts, the Freedom Council received millions of dollars from the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), successfully targeted a number of states including Michigan, where it poured millions into recruitment and volunteer training, as well as Idaho and North Carolina, where presidential candidates are selected by caucus, rather than primary elections. In states with primaries, the Council aimed to stack the delegate pool with its supporters. Overall, it directed most of its money mobilizing supporters to become Republican Party volunteers and delegates. The group dissolved in 1986, facing pressure from the IRS in regards to its tax-exempt status. Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*.

<sup>86</sup> According to a 1988 Nielsen report, 16.3 million homes tune into the "700 Club" each month, reaching 27 million viewers, making it the top-rated daily program. Robert Abelman, "Motivations for Viewing 'The 700 Club,'" *Journalism Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 112–19.

political ascendance marks a flashpoint in the influential development of a religious voting bloc, whose numbers and financial sway became a formative component in the American political arena.<sup>87</sup>

The Coalition introduced itself publicly through its “red envelope” campaign, a direct mailing signed by Robertson. The “red envelope” in question was actually enclosed within a separate white envelope, which contained a letter dated October 25, 1989 – roughly one week after a modified version of the Helms amendment was passed – warning its recipients of the enclosed “graphic descriptions of homosexual erotic photographs that were funded by your tax dollars.”<sup>88</sup> Why “graphic descriptions” instead of reproductions? Because, according to the logic, the “Photographs [were] Too Vulgar to Print.” “I’d never send you the photos,” read the letter, “but I did want you to know about the vile contents of your tax funded material.”<sup>89</sup> Like Helms’ brown envelope, where the enclosed images were construed as patently obscene, the ideological work done by Robertson’s strategy is paramount. Not only do the descriptions allow the campaign to capitalize on the supposed blatant obscenity of the aforementioned photographs but allows its readers to invent and advance their own fantasies and fears.

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<sup>87</sup> While Robertson lost, the Bush administration adopted much from the religious right’s agenda. Additionally, Robertson used the infrastructure his campaign created – the mailing lists, resources, and mobilized networks – to form the Christian Coalition. While it is not in the purview of this dissertation to examine the political complexities, strategies and techniques instrumentalized by the Christian Coalition, a number of texts offer a vivid account. See Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*.; Chris Bull and John Gallagher, *Perfect Enemies: The Religious Right, the Gay Movement, and the Politics of the 1990s*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996).; Sara Diamond, *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, (New York: Guilford Press, 1998).; Lienesch, Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).; George Madsen, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); Duane M. Oldfield, *The Right and the Righteous: The Christian Right Confronts the Republican Party*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

<sup>88</sup> As will be discussed further in Chapter Four, this modified version is that which combined the language of Helms’ original amendment with language taken verbatim from *Miller v California*. Robertson, “Christian Coalition Direct Mail, October 25, 1989 (Excerpt).”

<sup>89</sup> Robertson.



The perceived social and moral violations derive their force from the perception rather than factual data. The list was comprised of nine descriptions, eight of which reference images from the Mapplethorpe retrospective, including “a photo of a man urinating in another man’s mouth” and “a photo of a man’s arm (up to the forearm) in another man’s rectum” (fig 3.6).<sup>90</sup> Inserted between descriptions of existing work is a description of a photograph that is not by Mapplethorpe or by any other federally funded artist: “a photo of naked children in bed with a naked man.”<sup>91</sup> As Meyer has argued, not only did this campaign introduce Mapplethorpe’s name into circulation to its thousands of recipients but did so by inventing some of the supposed evidence against the artist – as had others like Senator Dornan, Judith Reisman– to fulfill the longstanding fears of the gay, child predator.

While the Mapplethorpe photographs are all but specifically named, Robertson extends the conversation, vowing to “organize chapters in every state” in order for “God-fearing Americans” to be able to “insist that candidates for every office tell us their views on religious freedom, abortion, prayers in schools, sex education, pornography, and other issues important to the moral fiber of our nation.”<sup>92</sup> The rhetorical strategy aligns with that of political leaders such as Helms and D’Amato. Robertson is speaking to the same discursive collective, an imagined public to engender a visible body politic that is

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<sup>90</sup> The full list is as follows: “1. A photo of a man with a bull-whip inserted into his rectum. This piece of “art” is listed as a self-portrait of the photographer 2. A close-up of a man with his ‘pinkie’ finger inserted in his penis 3. A photo of a man urinating in another man’s mouth 4. A photo showing one man holding another man’s genitals 5. A photo of a man’s arm (up to the forearm) in another man’s rectum 6. A photo of a young preschool girl with her genitals exposed 7. A photo of naked children in bed with a naked man” [this photo doesn’t exist, collapsing/picking up on the idea that gay men are pedophiles.] 8. A photo of a man in a suit exposing himself 9. A photo of a man with his genitals laying on a table. See Robertson, 124–25.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 3–5.

<sup>92</sup> Robertson, “Christian Coalition Direct Mail, October 25, 1989 (Excerpt),” 124.

conservative, Christian, and insistently heteronormative. In other words, at stake in the Mapplethorpe photographs is not just aesthetics, but the “moral fiber of *our* nation [emphasis added]”. Who is the *us* and who is the oppositional *them*? Whose nation are we talking about? If the *them* is sequestered inside the red envelope - those of the “Photographs Too Vulgar to Print” - Robertson situates himself as the outspoken champion of *us*, leading the “fight for *our* freedoms” for “*our* nation.” How to join the fight and become one of *us*? The envelope contained membership forms to join the Coalition.

In June 1990, roughly two months after *The Perfect Moment* had opened in Cincinnati and Dennis Barrie had been indicted on obscenity charges, a full-page advertisement paid for by the Christian Coalition appeared in the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* (fig. 3.5). Run in tandem with this national newspaper campaign, the ad was mailed to 500 leading supporters around the nation to be placed in local newspapers, as well as national cable television and radio spots. Addressed to the United States Congress, it publicly warns that votes in favor of refunding the NEA will force government representatives to face angry taxpayers for “wasting their hard-earned money to promote sodomy, child-pornography, and attacks on Jesus Christ,” ends with a threat:

There may be more homosexuals and pedophiles in your district than there are Roman Catholics and Baptists. You may find that the working folks in your district want you to use their money to teach their sons how to sodomize one another. You may find that the Roman Catholics in your district want their money spent on pictures of the Pope soaked in urine.

**But maybe not.**

There is one way to find out.

Vote for NEA appropriation just like Pat Williams, John Frohnmayer, and the gay and lesbian task force want.

And make my day.<sup>93</sup>

The stakes are clear. This was not a question of formal aesthetics or mastery. Like Senators Helms and D'Amato, the religious right perceived and (re)constructed the Mapplethorpe as a contaminate: as “an effort to gain wider exposure of, and acceptance for, homosexuality – which happens to be the stated political goal for all homosexual pressure groups.”<sup>94</sup> Yet, unlike the conversations occurring in Congress, these conversations were staged nationally and framed as a call for action. Art photography was merely a mechanism of the real pathogen.

### **Law & Order: The Obscenity Episode**

By the time the *Perfect Moment* reached Cincinnati, Mapplethorpe and his work were situated within this national framework of controversy and obscenity where secondary knowledge strongly shaped nearly everyone's viewing experience. Headquarters to the National Coalition against Pornography, as well as a local morality organization, the Citizens for Community Values (CCV), Cincinnati was the perfect grounds for more controversy. The CCV launched a campaign to prevent the CAC from showing the Mapplethorpe retrospective long before the exhibit was even scheduled to open, sending mass mailings of the photographs and included descriptive details, the same tactics used by Helms, the AFA, and Christian Coalition, among others. In the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Monty Lobb Jr., the president of the CCV, both repeated the already discussed rhetorical counterarguments against censorship - it is not censorship, but a matter of who is paying and who is allowed to criticize - and similarly worked to frame

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<sup>93</sup> Christian Coalition, “To the Congress of the United States,” *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File), June 20, 1990.

<sup>94</sup> Helms, “Congressional Record,” October 7, 1989, 23905.

the issue within the terms of morality. In a call to arms, he described the Mapplethorpe photographs as “unconscionable and cruel,” portraying the “wounds of the abused”:

You can stop the man from urinating on his brother and give them both back their humanity. You can take the exposed children and return their childhood. You can take the little girl, pull down her dress, and restore her modesty. Please, for the love of humanity, why not side with virtue and dignity?<sup>95</sup>

On a television segment, “Mapplethorpe in Cincinnati,” *The Perfect Moment* was described as the “kind of show [that] belongs in the old back alleys of sideshows for the circuses or you know the people where they have half man and half woman.”<sup>96</sup> In another interview, a local woman expressed how degrading the work is, fearing that it will only lead to child pornography. She admitted she had not actually seen the show.

Threatening phone calls were made to the CAC’s directors, one of whom resigned when the bank he was president of also received protest calls. The CAC posted warning signs about the graphic nature of some of the work and refused admission to anyone under the age of 18. In fact, on the advice of its attorneys – the same ones who had defended Larry Flynt on obscenity charges – the CAC had, in March 1990, filed a request to have a jury trial to determine the issue of obscenity in hopes of settling the issue before the show opened. The request was denied. Instead, on opening day, amongst a record number crowd, the show was paused as police entered to document its contents. Soon thereafter, 7 photographs – five from the X Portfolio, and *Rosie* and *Jesse McBride* (fig 3.4)- were the premise of a grand jury’s four-count criminal indictment issued against Barrie and the CAC; two against the institution and two against Barrie for pandering

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<sup>95</sup> Monty Lobb, “The Side of Virture and Dignity, Cincinnati Enquirer, March 30, 1990,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 161–63.

<sup>96</sup> Tom Brook Hunts, “Mapplethorpe in Cincinnati,” n.d., box 196, v17., Robert Mapplethorpe Papers (2011.M20), J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

obscenity displaying nude children.

Dennis Barrie, along with the CAC, was represented by H. Louis Sirkin, a lawyer who had built his reputation defending Cincinnati's frequently targeted adult book and video stores. As previously mentioned, the indictment and trial marked the first time in America a museum and its director were put on trial for the art they exhibited. During the evidentiary hearing, Sirkin argued that the exhibition should be presented in court and to the jury as a whole, rather than just isolating seven photographs out of roughly 175. The prosecution prevailed. Judge David Albanese ruled that each of the five photos from the X-Portfolio would be treated as a "whole" and tried separately, the other 168 photographs would not be allowed in the trial.<sup>97</sup> In other words, the jurors were *only* shown the offending photographs.<sup>98</sup> To prove these photographs met the legal definition of obscenity, thus denying their First Amendment protection, they would be tried against the standards set by the Supreme Court case of *Miller v. California* (1973), which defined obscenity as the following:

(a) whether 'the average person, applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest. . . (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Regarding *Rosie* and *Jesse McBride* the prosecution had to demonstrate "lewd exhibition" or "graphic focus on the genitals" and without the consent of their parents.

<sup>98</sup> As has been noted elsewhere, jury selection was contentious. Only one juror was a college graduate. There was a warehouse manager, electrical engineer, radiology technician, shoe salesperson, telephone repairman, secretary, data processor and export coordinator. A few had never been to an art museum; none had been to the CAC or had any interest in art. One juror thought homosexuality ought to be illegal. For more on the jury selection process, see Merkel, "Art on Trial."

<sup>99</sup> In the case of *Miller V California*, the court ruled that "free speech" – that protected by the First Amendment – must not be obscene. "Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973)."

The key word is “and.” If an object has “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value” it could not, according to this legal precedent be considered obscene. In other words, the crucial question was whether or not the Mapplethorpe photographs were art.

The trial began on September 24, 1990. “The pictures speak for themselves,” claimed the prosecution, “This is not art.”<sup>100</sup> The obscenity was so obvious, they did not have to prove it. Or so they assumed. Three of their four witnesses were the police officers that had arrested Barrie, who proved that the show had taken place and that these photographs were exhibited. Their one expert witness was Judith Reisman, the antipornography crusader and researcher for the Christian Coalition who had classified Mapplethorpe’s photographs of *Jessie* and *Rosie* as child abuse in the *Washington Post*.<sup>101</sup> Rather than testify to the work’s lack of artistic value – again, the lack of artistic value was assumed to be obvious – Reisman’s concern was that “with the absence of pain, even of joy, the absence of distress, of any human emotion, one receives information that this is an appropriate activity.”<sup>102</sup> Her testimony echoes the concerns that were circulating in and through congress and the religious right; that the work would, as

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<sup>100</sup> Merkel, “Art on Trial,” 44.

<sup>101</sup> Judith Reisman was largely called to testify against the images of *Jessie* and *Rosie*, which she reassessed as public displays that legitimized child abuse. As far as her “expert credentials” go, she had written lyrics for *Captain Kangaroo* and, notably, conducted research for the Wildmon’s American Family Associations, which she had received over \$700,000 for. As noted in footnote 80, the equivalent of nearly \$1.5 million in 2020. As previously asserted, these religious right organizations had a tremendous amount of social, political and financial sway. In regards to the *Rosie* and *Jessie*, for a conviction, the prosecution, as according to Ohio law, had to prove that the images, aside from being focused on the genitals, constituted a performance of a “minor who is not the person’s child or ward of the state.” The defense presented sworn affidavits from both of the sitters’ parents, who also articulated dismay at the use of the images by political and religious leaders. Jesse, who was nineteen by the time of the trial, agreed with his parents and went on to allow a reshoot of himself in the same pose for the *Village Voice*. Steven Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (Psychology Press, 1992).; Merkel, “Art on Trial.”

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Merkel, “Art on Trial,” 45.

Jesse Helms put it, “promote homosexuality insidiously and deliberately” and, as the Christian Coalition warned, “teach their sons how to sodomize one another.”<sup>103</sup>

In contrast, the defense compiled a list of over 50 experts, namely curators, willing to testify to the artistic value of Mapplethorpe’s work.<sup>104</sup> It was a two-pronged strategy. First, in their testimony, these authorities asserted the work’s artistry – therefore a denial of its obscenity – based on their own status. We are the authorities; it is art if we say it is so. The second strategy, which emerged during cross-examination, was to call upon these authorities to explain the photographs strictly in terms of their formal qualities and technical perfection, the same rhetorical strategy that had framed Mapplethorpe’s work throughout his career. Janet Kardon, the curator who had written the exhibition essay discussed earlier in this chapter, called Mapplethorpe “one of the most important photographers working in the 1980s in the formalist mode.”<sup>105</sup> Kardon was asked by one of Barrie’s lawyers to explain each of the indicted photographs, to which she expounded on her formalist interpretation. Kardon described them as “figure studies”, in as an “almost classical” composition; she pointed to the “opposing diagonals” in *Jim and Tom, Sausalito* (fig. 3.6); the “centrality” of the forearm in *Helmut and Brooks* (fig. 3.7); the “very symmetrical, ordered, classical composition” of *Lou, N.Y.C* (fig. 3.8); the “classical two-thirds to one-thirds proportions” of *Untitled, N.Y.C.*<sup>106</sup> Jacquelyn Baas, director of

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<sup>103</sup> Helms, “Congressional Record,” October 7, 1989, 23905.; Christian Coalition, “To the Congress of the United States.”

<sup>104</sup> For a first-hand account of the defense’s strategy, see Marc Mezibov, “The Mapplethorpe Obscenity Trial,” *Litigation* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 12–15, 71.

<sup>105</sup> Andy Grundberg, “Critic’s Notebook; Cincinnati Trial’s Unanswered Questions,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1990, sec. The Arts.

<sup>106</sup> Ellen Goodman, “A Warning From the Mapplethorpe Trial,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 1990, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/10/09/a-warning-from-the-mapplethorpe-trial/ed531ed0-e7c4-44fe-ac8a-cbd488b89e01/>; Grundberg, “Critic’s Notebook; Cincinnati Trial’s Unanswered Questions.”; Merkel, “Art on Trial.”

the University Art Museum at Berkeley, commented on the works' texture, technical skill and effectiveness in expression. Robert Soieszek, curator of the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House testified to the "lighting, composition, et cetera" aligning Mapplethorpe's work as a "search for meaning, not unlike Van Gogh's."<sup>107</sup> When asked how he recognized a photograph as a work of art, he told the jury: "If it's in an art museum, it is intended to be art, and that's why it's there."<sup>108</sup> In regards to the Contemporary Art Center's status, John Walsh, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum and president of the American Association of Museum Directors, testified that the institution was a museum and both it and its director, Dennis Barrie, were highly respected.<sup>109</sup>

After a ten-day criminal trial and hours of expert testimony, jury deliberations lasted for two hours before they returned a "not guilty" verdict. The defense won because the prosecution failed to present a case that challenged the works' "serious artistic value." Jurors later confessed that they were unconvinced by the testimony but felt unqualified to judge the works' artistic merit. It was simply the weight of the art-world witnesses that prevented a conviction. As one jury member said after the trial, "If the prosecution could have come up with one credible witness – a sociology, psychologist, somebody, anybody, maybe we would have voted differently."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> This, itself, is worth reflecting on. In aligning Mapplethorpe with Van Gogh, Soieszek both relates him to, perhaps, one of the most recognizable and popular artistic personas, but also to Van Gogh's basis for notoriety: the "mad" artist/genius. It suggests that, like Van Gogh, Mapplethorpe too suffered with his mental health. Merkel, "Art on Trial," 46.

<sup>108</sup> "Jurors View 7 Photos by Mapplethorpe," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, October 2, 1990, sec. Nation/World.; Grundberg, "Critic's Notebook; Cincinnati Trial's Unanswered Questions."

<sup>109</sup> Merkel, "Art on Trial."

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Dubin, *Arresting Images*, 189.



Symbolically, the trial was a success. Dennis Barrie and the CAC were found not guilty. But it is not as simple as that. Institutionally, the experience was a nightmare. Even with a substantial amount of pro bono work, the museum faced legal fees of \$325,000-350,000. Corporate giving decreased by roughly \$110,000; while the arts and museums were once a safe place to donate money, the Culture Wars shifted that into the realm of politics.<sup>111</sup> Barrie was fired a year or so after the trial, as was another CAC administrator, Amy Bannister, primarily because of the costs incurred amidst and due to the controversy. And then, of course, there is the legal precedent. In the cases made by the Culture Wars, reaffirmed in this trial, the two principal defenses of Mapplethorpe's photographs had, as we will see, long term repercussions. In terms of the legal community's input: the artist's generalized right to freedom of speech was argued, not the inherent value or meaning of their art. In this way, the art world actually allowed some of the most passionate, personal, and transgressive artists of the 1980s to be demonized, protected solely by the thin veil of free expression. Their work multiplied in meaning beyond their intent and control, and they were seldom invited to represent or defend themselves. This was only reaffirmed by the art establishment's defense: Mapplethorpe's work was art as proven by his technical, aesthetic mastery. In doing so, the art world miscalculated. In failing to redeem and/or stand up for transgressive, aggressive and critical content, the art world implicitly denounced the legitimacy of such work. Legitimacy was still bound to technical mastery. Furthermore, in its attempt to reinscribe the Mapplethorpe photographs within its own disciplinary discourse of formalism, the art

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<sup>111</sup> "Victory, but No Relief: Dennis Barrie Tells of the Price He and the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center Paid for Displaying Robert Mapplethorpe's Photos," Los Angeles Times, November 4, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-11-04-ca-5339-story.html>.

world failed to recognize the ways art participates in public life. While Chapter Four will examine some of these immediate repercussions through selected case studies, Chapter Five will turn to practicing artists who instrumentalized photography to critically challenge the silences these strategic missteps highlighted.



Figure 3.1. Protest of the cancellation of *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, June 30, 1989, Washington, D.C.

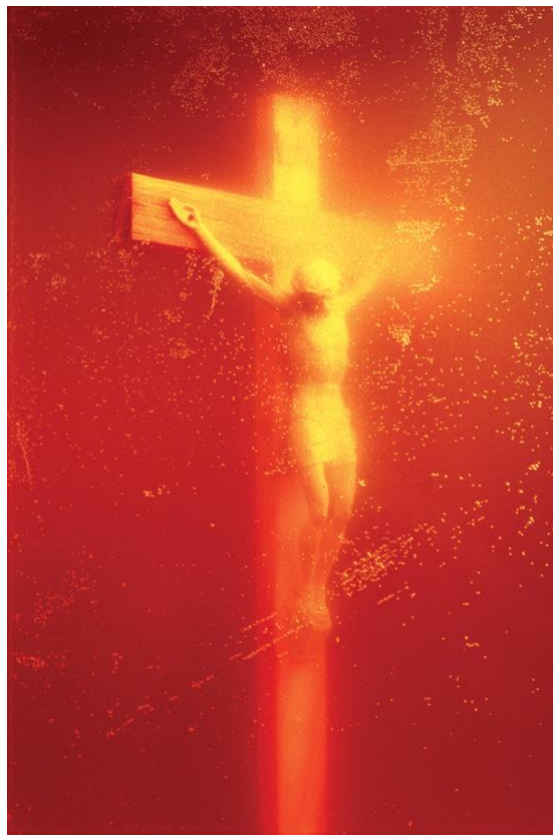


Figure 3.2. Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987



Figure 3.3. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Rosie*, 1976



Figure 3.4. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jesse McBride*, 1976

# TO THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You are being asked to appropriate funds taken from the American taxpayers in order to continue the National Endowment for The Arts.

In recent years the NEA has used funds provided by you to pay for exhibitions of paintings and photographs depicting:

- Two naked men engaged in anal intercourse
- Little children with exposed genitals
- One man urinating in the mouth of another
- Jesus Christ immersed in a jar of urine
- The Roman Catholic Pontiff immersed in a vat of urine
- Jesus Christ shooting heroin into his arm

This November you will face an electorate:

- Furious at being forced by you to pay for the greed of savings and loan manipulators
- Disgusted with your handling of your pay raise
- Shocked at the revelation that you have been looting the Social Security Trust Fund for years
- Discouraged at your inability to balance the federal budget

Do you also want to face the voters with the charge that you are wasting their hard-earned money to promote sodomy, child pornography, and attacks on Jesus Christ?

You could choose to fund the NEA while refusing public funding for obscenity and attacks on religion. But the radical left wants you to give legitimacy to pornography and homosexuality. So you are being asked to vote like sheep for \$175,000,000 with no strings attached.

Of course, when you vote, you may not have any risk.

We may not be able to give out 100,000 copies of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano "art" to registered voters in your district.

There may be more homosexuals and pedophiles in your district than there are Roman Catholics and Baptists. You may find that the working folks in your district want you to use their money to teach their sons how to sodomize one another. You may find that the Roman Catholics in your district want their money spent on pictures of the Pope soaked in urine.

But maybe not.

There is one way to find out.

Vote for the NEA appropriation just like Pat Williams, John Frohnmayer, and the gay and lesbian task force want.

And make my day.

Sincerely,



Pat Robertson  
President, Christian Coalition



**Christian Coalition**

815 Greenbrier Circle, Suite 102, Chesapeake, VA 23320 (804) 434-2630

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Figure 3.5. The Christian Coalition, "To the Congress of the United States," *The Washington Post*, June 20, 1990



Figure 3.6. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jim and Tom, Sausalito*, 1977



Figure 3.7. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Helmut and Brooks*, 1978

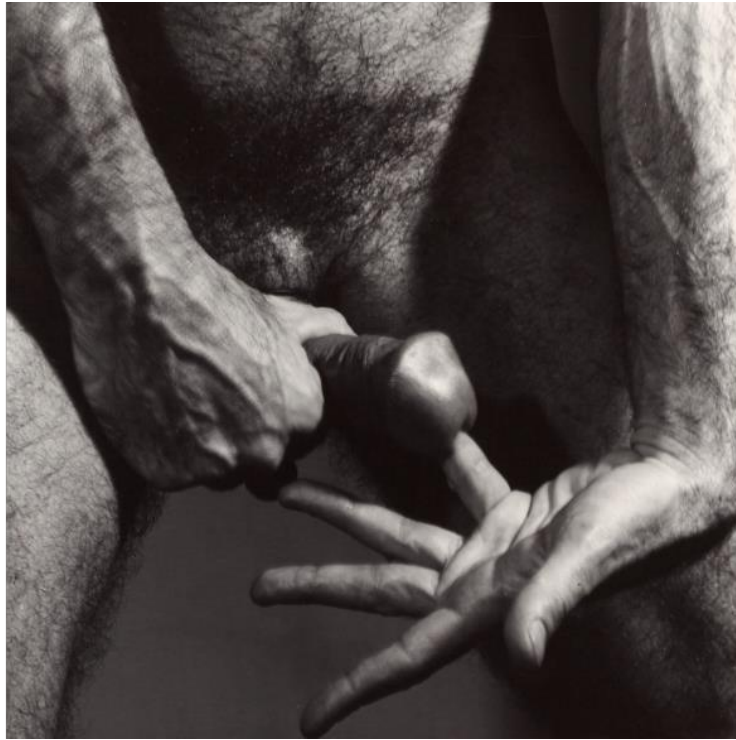


Figure 3.8. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Lou, N.Y.C.*, 1978

## CHAPTER FOUR: Reputation

“I am now involved in a partial revision of arguments made in earlier reading of Mapplethorpe’s work. This revision arises not because those arguments were wrong, but because I have changed my mind” wrote Kobena Mercer.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Mercer, writing three years prior, had initially positioned Robert Mapplethorpe’s fascination with black men as unequivocally racist, by 1989 not only had the greater political and cultural landscape changed amidst the ongoing Culture Wars, but so too did the terms and immediate implications of the conversations. For Mercer, instead of reaffirming Mapplethorpe’s unequivocal racism, his reevaluation, still predominately aesthetic in orientation, highlights what he perceives to be Mapplethorpe’s ambivalence: “do photographs like *Man in Polyester Suit* re-inscribe the fixed beliefs of a racist ideology, or do they problematize them by foregrounding the intersections of difference where race and gender cut across the representation of sexuality?”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately and pointedly, Mercer makes his intentions clear. As the religious right began to appropriate leftist and feminist critiques of pornographic work, “For my part, I want to emphasize that I have reversed my reading of racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe not for the fun of it, but because I do *not*

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<sup>1</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Things: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary,” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 189.

<sup>2</sup> Mercer, 192.



want a black gay critique to be appropriated to the purposes of the New Right's antidemocratic cultural offense."<sup>3</sup>

While the previous chapter sketched out and explored the institutional, social and political forces that culminated in Dennis Barrie's criminal indictment and trial, the fallout from the Culture Wars and the Mapplethorpe Controversy reverberated throughout the art community, immediately, and for years to come. As the final chapter in this dissertation investigates the ways in which some of these echoes can be detected in the working practices of artists, this chapter, rather than attempt to enumerate the effects of the Controversy, explores the reconsiderations that followed through a series of four case studies organized into two sections.

The first section of this chapter considers the ways the Controversy elicited critical reappraisals of Mapplethorpe's photography. The first case study is very much a reflection on and a reconsideration for the ways Mapplethorpe's work had been repeatedly framed by formalist terms indicative of larger discursive shifts occurring in art criticism within the context of the Culture Wars and AIDS crisis. Specifically, we return to Douglas Crimp, the influential critic and curator, to explore how he repositions Mapplethorpe's artistic enterprise after the fallout from the Controversy. The second case study focuses on the critical revisions made by Kobena Mercer and explores the ways the Controversy exposed the politically charged potential not only of photography but of art criticism as well. This section contends that despite the art world's historic reluctance to situate high art within the social and political field, the Controversy exposed the

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<sup>3</sup>For a closer look at the various ways such, seemingly leftist politics often worked in service of and parallel to conservative strategies, see Adler, "What's Left?"; Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Things: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," 192.

untenability of these such claims. In other words, if Dennis Barrie's criminal indictment and the religious right's national campaign expose the ways art can participate in public life, this section explores the ways this exchange – between art and public life – prompted two critics to revisit and reconsider their previous readings of Mapplethorpe's photography.

The second section of this chapter shifts registers, moving away from Robert Mapplethorpe and towards other practicing artists who were immediately impacted by the fallout from the Controversy, specifically through the terms of retraction. The first case study explores *Witness: Against our Vanishing*, a group exhibition curated by Nan Goldin. In response to a proposed catalogue essay by the artist and photography David Wojnarowicz, the NEA retracted funding for the show, only to (eventually) partially restore it. The second case study takes up the so-called "NEA Four"; four performance artists, who had all individually received NEA funding through unanimous approval only to have that funding revoked due to the fallout of the Controversy.

This chapter examines the consequences of the Mapplethorpe Controversy through and past Robert Mapplethorpe to glimpse how it affected the American art community more broadly and dynamically to further the argument that the Mapplethorpe Controversy and its consequences expose the latent value imposed on the (supposed) neutrality of modernist criticism and aesthetics, discussed at greater length in Chapter One.<sup>4</sup> In glimpsing how the Controversy affected the American art community, this

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally, despite claims of universal subjectivity and interest in the cultural and ideological engagements of art, as has been well-documented, the (supposed) neutrality of modernist criticism and aesthetics, the lauded "triumph of American painting," as Irving Sandler described it, was instrumentalized as a political tool. This modernist art - couched within the terms of neutrality, formalism, and universality - became highly valued by the American political state. During the Cold War, for example, Abstract Expressionism was mobilized as a sign of America's democratic ideals, placed in stark contrast to Soviet art. Within this cultural logic (and Cold War cultural war), Soviet social realism explicitly worked in

chapter explores the lengths conservative critics, commentators and politicians went to try to reverse the course of an art steeped in the terms of subjectivity and sexuality. The intense political and public responses – in Congress, the national media, Supreme Court, academic press, etc. – indicate that at stake was not the art per se, nor Robert Mapplethorpe’s art, in particular, but the deep-seated social fears posed by (re)presented bodies, real and imaginary, and their potential disruption to the traditional social order.

### **Everything has Changed**

As discussed in Chapter One, despite various attempts – by those ranging from Alfred Stieglitz to Beaumont Newhall – photography’s ascendance into the art world as an aesthetic object did not occur until the late 1970s; a moment when Clement Greenberg’s modernism, built around hermetic notions of aesthetic autonomy and medium specificity, was increasingly challenged by oppositional practices, frequently described as postmodern.<sup>5</sup> Retrospectively, art historians point to the emergence of what

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service of the state – realistic, readily legible scenes aimed at the proletariat – while Abstract Expressionism showed America’s promise of individualism and freedom. Not only was there an extreme value placed on Abstract Expressionism, culturally speaking but as this dissertation continues to contend, culture and politics are not separate. For more on the Cold War and Abstract Expressionism see Jane de Hart Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (1976): 762–87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864779>; Joan M. Marter, *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context* (Rutgers University Press, 2007); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New Press, The, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> While I classify it as postmodernism, it should be (again) noted that what “postmodernism” was and/or is in debate. For example, Rosalind Krauss argued that the signal of postmodernism was an expanded field of art, whereby an art practice is not defined in relation to a given medium, but in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium may be used. Craig Owens’ positioned postmodernism as an eruption of language, a new impulse that is “allegorical” and deconstructive in nature, whereby mediums collide, as do levels of representation and reading. Douglas Crimp, early on, articulated a postmodernism that was a return to theater, in which artistic practice is not concerned with modernist autonomy, but with the “strata of representation” beginning “when photography comes to pervert modernism.” He was, along with Krauss and Owens, an active contributor and one-time editor of *October*. Yet, looking back to his contributions to *October* throughout the 1980s, Crimp notes that “it wasn’t what *October* was about...it’s about a retrenchment around a traditional notion of high modernism. In the 1980s, *October* was thought of as the journal of postmodernism. But the commitments of Krauss and Michelson and the people now connected with the journal have always been more high modernist in their orientation. But I wouldn’t have been able to articulate that at that time Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New

became known as the Pictures Generation – those artists who participated in the 1977 *Pictures* show, as well as others including Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince – as a pivotal point in the turn against modernist claims. Rather than a unified aesthetic, these artists were grouped together by shared a sensibility. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has described them, they were “infinitely more concerned with photography as such; that is to say, as a mechanically reproducible image-making technology entirely assimilated to the apparatuses of consumerism, mass culture, socialization and political control” and instrumentalized the medium to subvert modernist notions of authenticity, originality, and formalism.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Mapplethorpe was understood and discursively constructed within these modernist terms. He instrumentalized original, unique frames that insisted on their objecthood. He employed a master printer, Tom Baril, to ensure and produce “perfect” prints that celebrated photography’s material excellence in tandem with formal perfection. In many ways, Mapplethorpe’s work could be read through John Szarkowski’s vocabulary of “photographic vision,” which was constructed to establish, define, and categorize formal attributes particular to photography to position the photograph as autonomous aesthetic object in the modernist sense.<sup>7</sup> Mapplethorpe’s

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Subject”; Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”; Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2.”

<sup>6</sup> Solomon-Godeau, “Playing in the Fields of the Image,” 88.

<sup>7</sup> Mapplethorpe’s work could be read through the five “formal” qualities that Szarkowski explicated in *The Photographer’s Eye*, discussed at length in Chapter One: “the thing itself,” “the detail,” “the frame” “time” and “vantage point”. A Mapplethorpe photograph “evokes the tangible presence of reality”; it “isolates the fragment document” rather tells a story; through framing devices; it is the output of “choosing and eliminating, forc[ing] a concentration of the pictures edge”; it “describes a discrete parcel of time,” what Mapplethorpe repeatedly referred to as “the perfect moment.” In regards to Szarkowski’s aim – to position the photograph as autonomous, in that they are to be judged solely on an aesthetic basis without reference to their context, requiring no supplementary text and/or images such as what one would obtain via popular magazines and aesthetic in that they are products of named “artist photographers”, exhibited within the space of an art museum – Mapplethorpe worked to meet (and did achieve) these goals. In *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (1978), Szarkowski explicitly attempts to create a critical

adherence to and insistence on the perfection of traditional, formal modes was *the* consistent and unifying thread that ran throughout his discussions of his work, as well as the critical landscape he precipitated. Whether discussing his BDSM works or flowers, not only did those who championed his artistic enterprise frequently and repeatedly employed these formalist terms, but it was *the* legal defense that, ultimately, proved his works' serious "artistic value" in a court of law.

As opposed to modernist art criticism, with its insistence that the meaning of a work depends on these formal qualities – that which is in the frame – many concerns posed by postmodernist critics were largely outside the frame. They emphasize context, exhibition spaces, inclusions and exclusions, rhetoric of display, and the ways power naturalizes and neutralizes. Given how Mapplethorpe's photography was repeatedly bound by and to formalist terms, prior to the Controversy, it was often dismissed by these leading postmodernist critics, when and if it was taken up at all.

In the early 1980s, Douglas Crimp dismissed the critical potential of Mapplethorpe's photography. In "Appropriating Appropriation," a catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition *Image Scavengers* (1982), he discusses the cultural ubiquity of appropriation, noting that while it "*did* at first seem to entail a critical position" that

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thesis on the state of contemporary photography highlighting, in his view, the fundamental dichotomy between the modernist photograph explicated in *The Photographer's Eye* and the other major trend in contemporary photography: Self-expression versus exploration; private versus public; art photography versus mass photography; a mirror of the artist versus a window into the world. As Szarkowski describes it, those who follow the legacies of individuals like Alfred Stieglitz, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston exhibit "a love for the eloquently perfect print" and the insistence on the "existence of a universal formal language" (17). These descriptions could easily be applied to Mapplethorpe prints and are reoccurring in the surrounding critical landscape. In regard to this exhibition, Szarkowski exhibited Mapplethorpe's *Tulips* (1977) and placed it within this modernist legacy. The print was owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, acquired with funds by director David H. McAlpin and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). See John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*. (New York: Boston: Museum of Modern Art; distributed by New York Graphic Society, 1966); Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*.

“reading was altogether too simple.”<sup>8</sup> To illustrate the “regressive/progressive character of the uses of appropriation” in photography, he turns his attention to Mapplethorpe:

Mapplethorpe’s photographs, whether portraits, nudes or still lifes, appropriate the stylistics of prewar studio photography. Their compositions, poses, lighting, and even their subjects (mundane personalities, glacial nudes, tulips) recall *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* at that historical juncture when such ‘artists’ as Edward Steichen and Man Ray contributed to those publications their intimate knowledge of international art photography. Mapplethorpe’s abstraction and fetishization of objects thus refer, through the mediation of the fashion industry, to Edward Weston, while his abstraction of the subject refers to the neoclassical pretenses of George Platt Lynes.<sup>9</sup>

Crimp’s Mapplethorpe exists in and through this modernist lineage.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Mapplethorpe’s “regressive” appropriation is Sherrie Levine “progressive” critical variant.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Mapplethorpe is understood to be “naively” appropriating Weston’s “mediation of the fashion industry” to constitute this “synthetic ‘personal’ vision,” Levine’s complete appropriation “lays no claim to conventional notions of artistic creativity” rather it “reflects on the strategy of appropriation itself”: the strategy of Mapplethorpe’s conventional appropriation of Weston’s style, of institutional appropriation, of photography’s use in appropriation and of photography, more broadly.<sup>12</sup> While the ascendance of photography was, for Crimp, a crucial distinction between modernism and postmodernism, Mapplethorpe’s photography attempts to participate in the modernist schema – however unattainable that may be – that Levine’s practice works to critically deconstruct through the tool of photographic appropriation.<sup>13</sup> Mapplethorpe

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<sup>8</sup> Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation.”

<sup>9</sup> Crimp, 30.

<sup>10</sup> This celebration of a “personal vision” is, itself, perhaps another reference to the modernist celebration of and claim to the individual, artistic genius. See Crimp, “Appropriating Appropriation.”

<sup>11</sup> Crimp, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Crimp, 30.

<sup>13</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, Crimp sees the emergence of photography within high art/as a museum art and the discursive reconsiderations and repositioning it incited as a pivotal moment in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. So, on the one hand, while Mapplethorpe’s work frequently was constructed

refers to and continues the very tradition that Levine interrupts and scrutinizes.

Mapplethorpe is regressive. Levine is progressive.

By the early 1990s – after Dennis Barrie was indicted, after the religious right launched their national campaigns, after Jesse Helms stood on the Senate floor warning about Mapplethorpe’s “sick art” - Crimp reversed his reading. In “The Boys in My Bedroom” written in 1990, Crimp returns to his earlier essay to examine the inadequacy of his postmodern assumptions spurred on by the Helms Amendment, “the law governing federal funding of art in the United States” which “directly equated homoeroticism with obscenity and the sexual exploitation of children.”<sup>14</sup> For Crimp, the inadequacy of these postmodernist assumptions –symptomatic of aesthetic theory and global theory, more broadly – was a “failure” to see “the dangerous, even murderous, ways in which homophobia structures every aspect of our culture.”<sup>15</sup> As has been contended throughout this dissertation, the Mapplethorpe Controversy was not only tied to the Culture Wars, but the AIDS crisis, which is precisely what Crimp recognizes as having “unleashed to teach us the gravity of this theoretical omission.”<sup>16</sup>

In his (re)assessment of appropriation, postmodernism and what he had initially constructed as the oppositional practices of Mapplethorpe and Levine, Crimp realizes he failed to consider Levine’s gender and Mapplethorpe’s sexuality. If Levine “claims” Weston’s images as *her* own, “we recognize the contingency of gender in looking at

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within modernist terms, on the other, it is a construction that, to use Crimp’s words, is a “complete perversion of modernism”, given modernism’s foreclosure on the medium’s inclusion. Douglas Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins,” *October* 13 (1980): 41–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397701>; Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject.”

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Crimp, “The Boys in My Bedroom,” in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 156–57.

<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster makes a similar and far more sustained argument in *The Return of the Real*. Crimp, 162; Hal Foster et al., *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Crimp, “The Boys in My Bedroom,” 162.

them”; likewise, if Mapplethorpe claims Weston’s formal vocabulary as his own, “we can no longer overlook its eroticism.” Rather, in Levine and Mapplethorpe, “We learn to experience Weston’s modernist photograph not as universal images, but as images of the universal constituted by disavowing gender and sexuality.”<sup>17</sup> Not only does this critical revision point to the ways in which (seemingly external) social and political pressures exert pressure on art criticism – Crimp’s revision is a reactive move staged against events occurring on the national (public) stage - but it reorients the criticism to and from the artists’ and viewers’ respective bodies and identity politics.<sup>18</sup>

By 1993, “Debates over contemporary art,” wrote Crimp, “could no longer be the same, however, after the national furor over Mapplethorpe’s photographs.”<sup>19</sup> Given the uproar and fallout from the Controversy, Crimp revises his understanding of Mapplethorpe once again. In “Photographs at the End of Modernism” (1993), Crimp returns to Levine and Mapplethorpe; in 1982 they were understood to be carrying out oppositional practices; in 1990, their practices were leveled, one revealing the stakes of gender, the other sexuality. By this 1993 revision, Mapplethorpe emerges the more radical of the two photographers: “What I failed to notice in 1982 was what Jesse Helms could not help but notice in 1989: that Mapplethorpe’s work interrupts tradition in a way that Levine’s does not.”<sup>20</sup> Crimp realizes that unlike Janet Kardon who classified

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<sup>17</sup> Crimp, 163.

<sup>18</sup> This is, in part, a larger critical shift he makes. Increasingly, throughout the mid 1980s and on, in tandem with his growing activism, Crimp makes reference to his own physical presence. In “The Boy in My Bedroom”, the “boys” are Sherrie Levine’s series of Weston’s young men. In “Photographs at the End of Modernism”, he references a Louise Lawler photograph behind him. It is not coincidental that this physical self-consideration was occurring against the backdrop of the rampant AIDS crisis that brought into view a dire, emanant, physical threat.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Photographs at the End of Modernism,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Crimp, 7.



Mapplethorpe's work into the three traditional genres of still lifes, nudes and portraits, Jesse Helms saw Mapplethorpe's BDSM photographs in the context of the *X-Portfolio* or, in other words, in the context of overtly gay imagery. While museum culture may have attempted to reinscribe these photographs within the vocabulary of aesthetic formalism, as was the case in Dennis Barrie's trial, Crimp now recognizes that the Controversy was generated, in large part, due to how Helms and others read the photographs through the contexts of the sexualities (re)presented and of the artist, which, in the late 1980s was rendered particularly powerful amidst the AIDS Crisis.

It is precisely in, through and due to this specific cultural context – amidst the AIDS crisis and the growing political power of the religious right - that Crimp recognizes the radical potential of Mapplethorpe's work in “momentarily rendering the male spectator a homosexual subject.”<sup>21</sup> It is here where Crimp explicitly admits that “a significant lesson of the controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs is that their social effects far exceeded their formal” attributes.<sup>22</sup> Crucially, this reevaluation is not limited to Mapplethorpe. Crimp reveals: “the creating subject was a fiction necessary to modern aesthetic understanding and what took its place in postmodern knowledge was the institution, if by institution we mean a discursive system.”<sup>23</sup> Crimp's critical revaluation is part of a much broader discursive shift with crucial implications. In his recognition that art historical-contexts, alone, are not sufficient enough to register the

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<sup>21</sup> It is this rendering that Crimp points to as underlying the ruckus surrounding *Rosie* and *Jesse McBride*. They are no longer just “innocent” nude children, but children read through the context of the artist's sexuality. “The ‘scandal’ of *Jesse McBride* is that it was taken by an openly gay man, a man who also took explicit pictures of ‘perverse’ sex acts, a man who subsequently died of AIDS.” See Crimp, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Crimp, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Crimp, 13.

effects of art, he both points to inadequacies of that methodology and calls for art to be read through the various “discursive systems” it participates in, including public life.

While Crimp contends with the issues surrounding modernism, postmodernism and sexuality during the AIDS crisis, focusing primarily on the photographs Dennis Barrie faced trial for, Kobena Mercer turns his attention onto Mapplethorpe’s images of black males and racial difference. In “Imaging the Black Man’s Sex,” published in Britain in 1986 prior to the Controversy, Mercer positioned Mapplethorpe’s fascination with black men – in works like his *Z Portfolio* (1981) - as unequivocally racist. Applying Michel Foucault’s seminal “What is an Author” along with Laura Mulvey’s work on the gaze, Mercer concludes that Mapplethorpe’s black males reflect the sociopsychic image of black male sexuality and:

Facilitate the public projection of certain sexual and racial fantasies about the black male body. Whatever his personal motivations or creative pretensions, Mapplethorpe’s camera-eye opens an aperture onto aspects of stereotypes – a fixed way of seeing that freezes the flux of experience – which govern the circulation of images of black men.<sup>24</sup>

While, as Mulvey establishes, normative visual objectification takes place between a presumed male gaze that exerts its hegemonic dominance over an objectified, aestheticized, eroticized female nude, therefore on the grounds of gender difference, Mercer argues in these images – taken of gay black men by a gay white man - dominance is no longer asserted around gender or (homo)sexual difference, but racial difference.<sup>25</sup> Mapplethorpe’s photographs are thus an utterance of colonial racist fetishization.

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<sup>24</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Imaging the Black Man’s Sex,” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 172.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

In his subsequent reading of these images, “Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homosexual Imaginary” (1992), Mercer reverses the argument that Mapplethorpe’s images of black males trafficked negative racial stereotypes. In this post-Controversy rereading, Mercer argues that Mapplethorpe’s depiction of racial stereotype belongs to a larger strategy of reverse discourse whereby an oppressive racist visual regime is appropriated and reinscribed in ways that undermine the coherence and force of the original ideological construct: “do photographs like *Man in Polyester Suit* re-inscribe the fixed beliefs of a racist ideology, or do they problematize them by foregrounding the intersections of difference where race and gender cut across the representation of sexuality?”<sup>26</sup> In this rereading, Mapplethorpe’s sexuality becomes a key element in Mercer’s interpretation of the work. The inclusion of the homoerotic, according to Mercer, adds a potentially subversive element to the work which, when coupled with Mapplethorpe’s flawless photographic techniques, disrupts any clear interpretation and stability of the supposed discrete genres of high art’s classical male nudes and pornography’s fetishized bodies.

Mercer’s critical reversal is reliant upon ambivalence, which he suggests provides productive ways to challenge the terms surrounding the debate on Mapplethorpe’s work. Like Crimp, Mercer recognizes and searches for meaning “not as something that occurs ‘inside’ the text (as if cultural texts were hermetically sealed or self-sufficient) but as something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers- in relations that are always contingent, context-bound, and historically specific.”<sup>27</sup> Yet,

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<sup>26</sup> Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Things: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary,” 192.

<sup>27</sup> Within the context of his essay, Mercer locates Mapplethorpe’s images within the AIDS crisis – which includes Mapplethorpe’s death, as well as the impact AIDS had on the black male community – the Culture Wars, right-wing and neoconservative attacks on federal funding for the arts, Mapplethorpe’s possible

while Crimp's critical reversal emerges from his reflection on the shifting socio-cultural context that the Mapplethorpe Controversy was both a product of and producer in along with his recognition of the ways in "which homophobia structures every aspect of our culture," Kobena Mercer's intentions are explicitly political: "For my part, I want to emphasize that I have reversed my reading of racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe not for the fun of it, but because I do *not* want a black gay critique to be appropriated to the purposes of the New Right's antidemocratic cultural offense."<sup>28</sup>

These critical reversals signal that not only can art participate in public life – as exposed in the Mapplethorpe Controversy - but that "art people" (artists, critics, art historians, curators) must acknowledge rather than deny this exchange. While Mercer's concerns in the racial politics of Mapplethorpe's work and his own vulnerable position as a black gay male critic were never shared by the "antidemocratic cultural offense," the final chapter will take up that omission by exploring the work of artists who were not only responding to the Mapplethorpe Controversy, but were staging these responses in dialogue with race in America. As will be explored in the second half of this chapter, the immediate repercussions that followed the Mapplethorpe Controversy were directed at artists whose words and bodies disrupted the traditional (white) social order. In other words, artists challenging gender and sexual taboos by staging debates about culture, within culture.

### **Look What You Made Me Do**

Nan Goldin's group exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* became another

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position in the developing urban gay counterculture, as well as the art historical context (or total lack thereof) of black gay male bodies in art museums. Mercer, 169–70.

<sup>28</sup> Crimp, "The Boys in My Bedroom," 14.; Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Things: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," 192.

rallying point for conservative politicians and the religious right. The exhibition, one of the first to focus solely on artists' responses to the AIDS crisis, was held at the Artists Space, a nonprofit gallery in Manhattan.<sup>29</sup> It was slated to run seven weeks between November 16, 1989 and January 1990, scheduled to coincide with the first-ever Day Without Art held on December 1, 1989. Conceived of by the organization Visual AIDS, the day was to be "a metaphor for the chilling possibility of a future day without art or artists."<sup>30</sup> As Susan Wyatt, the Executive Director of Artists Space, explained in the *Witnesses* catalogue, Day Without Art included hundreds of museums and galleries that all symbolically shut their doors to "mourn those who have died of AIDS" as well as those who were living with the virus.<sup>31</sup>

Looking back, *Witnesses* was both of its moment and ahead of it, given it was the first exhibition devoted solely to artists' responses to the raging AIDS crisis. For an exhibition that otherwise might have existed predominantly within the confines of the downtown New York art scene, it gained national attention as it became increasingly steeped in controversy, entrenched in terms similar to that surrounding Mapplethorpe. Yet, unlike the Mapplethorpe Controversy, where contention was directed at specific works of art, the reaction was not against Goldin's curation, per se, but her selection of essays - specifically, the catalog inclusion of David Wojnarowicz's essay, "Post Cards From America: X-Rays From Hell."

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<sup>29</sup> This is also the same venue that hosted Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition in 1977.

<sup>30</sup> "Day Without Art," Visual AIDS, accessed October 27, 2019, <https://visualaids.org/projects/day-without-art>.

<sup>31</sup> David Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ed. Susan Wyatt (New York: Artist's Space, 1989), 6–11.

Of the four catalogue essays – by Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz, Cookie Mueller, and Linda Yoblanski - Wojnarowicz's essay is, by far, the most substantial. In it, he describes his life as a person living with AIDS, recounts the loss of friends and his accompanying rage. He points to public figures who ignored the crisis or made homophobic statements about it: Jesse Helms, "the repulsive senator from zombieland," as well as Cardinal Joseph O'Connor, the "fat cannibal from the house of walking swastikas," who had, among other things, adamantly opposed laws forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation, fought against teaching about condoms in AIDS education programs, which had been created as a means to combat New York City's rising death toll, and urged health care workers "to focus on what he described as its immoral causes."<sup>32</sup> Wojnarowicz was also critical of the art world's selective erasure and practice of making "invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies."<sup>33</sup>

When Susan Wyatt read Wojnarowicz's piece, she was alarmed. Artists Space had received a \$10,000 NEA grant for the exhibition and catalogue. Given the ongoing debates surrounding art, obscenity, homoeroticism, and Mapplethorpe, as well as Helms' amendment discussed in the previous chapter, Wyatt anticipated backlash. She sent Wojnarowicz's essay to a lawyer on the Artists Space board and went so far as to contact the NEA in October of 1989 to see if they would be willing to change the wording of their grant so the money could be used to cover the exhibition, not the catalogue.

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<sup>32</sup> Art Goldman, "Catholic Leader Rebuts O'Connor on Condom Issue," *The New York Times*, December 30, 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," 10.

According to Wyatt, her goal was to avoid “embarrassing” the NEA and Artists Space with another Mapplethorpe-like Controversy.<sup>34</sup>

The following case study sketches out the reverberations that surrounded the anticipated and, ultimately, precipitated backlash. In doing so, this case study examines the NEA’s response to the *Witnesses* catalogue and contextualizes it as both part and effect of their developing institutional policies, which were responding to the national landscape. It explores the complicated ways in which Wojnarowicz was, to put it simply, correct in his critique of not only the apparent enemies – Helms, D’Amato, etc. – but the ways in which they “only follow standards that have been formed and implemented by the arts community itself.”<sup>35</sup>

As previously mentioned, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, was both of its moment and ahead of it, given it was the first exhibition devoted solely to artists’ responses to the AIDS crisis. As an alternative art space, Artists Space fulfilled what critic Roberta Smith later observed as its role: “to catch what falls through the cracks, between larger public institutions and commercial ventures such as art galleries; there is a kind of art on a certain scale that doesn’t get shown in New York’s major museums.” If, as Wojnarowicz alleged in his essay, the art world’s selective erasure makes “invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies,” the “alternative” status of Artists Space opened up the ability for this type of work to be shown, as evidenced by *Witnesses*. Or, at least, it should have. As George Yudice has argued, Wyatt’s actions and the NEA’s response demonstrate that even these so-called

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Atkins, “Black Thursday: Frohnmayer Fiddles, Artists Burn,” *The Village Voice*, November 28, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> Wojnarowicz, “Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” 10.

alternative institutions, like Artists Space, were unable to reliably press the political-aesthetic claims of contestatory groups and movements, given their reliant status within the art world, situated between the two complementary systems by which the art world actively functions – the market, on the one hand, and the museum, overseen by panels of so-called “experts,” on the other.<sup>36</sup>

In a letter to Wyatt, dated November 3, 1989 – a little over a week after Pat Robertson sent out the Christian Coalition direct mailing that fallaciously misrepresented the Mapplethorpe photographs in question by inserting a fictitious description of a “photo of naked children in bed with a naked man”<sup>37</sup> – John Frohnmayer, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, remarked on “the recent criticism the Endowment has come under” and went on to say that the *Witness* funding “may not be used to exhibit or publish this material” before asking for the exhibition funds to be completely returned.<sup>38</sup> While Frohnmayer had been appointed chairman of the NEA in 1989 after the initial wave of the Mapplethorpe Controversy – after, that is, the funds had already been granted to the Mapplethorpe retrospective and the initial backlash had somewhat subsided – his NEA tenure was shaped by the consequences, as he inherited an institution embroiled in political turmoil. By the time Frohnmayer took his position, Congress had assembled the Independent Commission, a task force charged with questioning the NEA’s governmental processes and funding pathways.<sup>39</sup> As Brea Heidelberg argues, this Commission was not

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<sup>36</sup> George Yudice, “For a Practical Aesthetics,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 129–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466244>.

<sup>37</sup> Brea Heidelberg, “Learning from Negative Space: Categorizing Success in Arts Policy Entrepreneurship,” *Artivate* 8, no. 1 (2019): 23–44, <https://doi.org/10.34053/artivate.8.1.0023>.

<sup>38</sup> John Frohnmayer, “John Frohnmayer, Letter to Susan Wyatt, November 3, 1989,” in *Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 125–26.

<sup>39</sup> Heidelberg, “Learning from Negative Space,” 26.



only a response to the Mapplethorpe and Serrano controversies, but to the mounting pressure coming from congressional members of the oppositional advocacy coalition, as well as the religious right groups, which according to Reverend Donald Wildman, saw at issue “not dirty words and dirty pictures” but a “moral cancer in our society, and it will lead us to destruction if we unable to stop it.”<sup>40</sup> Given the context, Frohnmayer’s focus was on avoiding more controversy, dealing with the ramifications of what had been a highly publicized debate on what publicly funded art *should* look like, and, administratively, the consequences of the modified Helms amendment.

### **Blank Space**

As discussed throughout Chapter Three, the Helms Amendment of 1989 included language prohibiting the NEA from funding “obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.” It was ultimately rejected in the House of Representatives in favor of “compromise legislation.” This “compromise” – which was sent to the President to be signed on October 7, 1989, almost a year before the Cincinnati jury would acquit Barrie and the CAC of obscenity charges- was a melding of Helms’ amendment with language, taken verbatim, from the Supreme Court case of *Miller v California*, the legal basis of Dennis Barrie’s defense.<sup>41</sup> Despite the legal precedent this modified amendment referred to, this was no victory.

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<sup>40</sup> This sort of sweeping view against the dangers of (what was perceived to be) pornographic imagery is a space of momentary alliance between the religious right and anti-pornographer feminists like Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Donald E. Wildmon, *The Case Against Pornography* (Victor Books, 1986), 8.

<sup>41</sup> The entirety of the compromise language read as follows: None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce materials which in the judgment of the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals

The modified version of the Helms amendment added an “obscenity pledge” into the terms and conditions of all NEA grants. This “pledge” required applicants to certify that they would not use government funds to promote materials which could be considered obscene, which included “...depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”<sup>42</sup> As Douglas Crimp has noted, “for those considering whether to fund arts projects, it is the equation [of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and the sexual exploitation of child] that would matter,” rather than the additional language on serious artistic value.<sup>43</sup>

On the Senate floor, Warren Rudman (R - N.H.) praised Helms: “The Senator from North Carolina...he has won his case...the language that is in here specifically says to them, you better watch what you fund.”<sup>44</sup> According to the *Congressional Record*, Helms reported that in a private meeting, Frohnmeyer had pledged that no more Mapplethorpe-style grants would occur “on my watch.”<sup>45</sup> While the Barrie trial would prove that art, such as Mapplethorpe’s, would not be declared obscene under *Miller v California*, NEA grant applications do not occur in a court of law.

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engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. *Congressional Record* – House, October 2, 1989, p. H6407)

<sup>42</sup> Specifically, grant recipients were required to sign a “Request for Advance or Reimbursement” which included a new section certifying compliance with “General Terms and Conditions for Organizational Grant Recipients” and the language of Section 304(a) – the modified Helms and *Miller* guidelines. . Michael Wingfield Walker, “Artistic Freedom v. Censorship: The Aftermath of the NEA’s New Funding Restrictions,” *Washington University Law Review* 71, no. 3 (January 1, 1993): 937–56.

<sup>43</sup> Crimp, “The Boys in My Bedroom,” 156.

<sup>44</sup> Carol Vance, “Misunderstanding Obscenity,” *Art in America* 78, no. 5 (May 1990): 57.

<sup>45</sup> This too signals another victory for Helms and company and reinforces Crimp’s argument that the language taken from *Miller v California* provides no substantive change to Helms’ original language. Vance, 57.

Many in the arts community considered the obscenity pledge to be a “loyalty oath” and quickly began to accuse the NEA of failing to defend their freedom of speech.<sup>46</sup> Organizations including The American Poetry Review, Gettysburg Review and the Paris Review returned grants they were awarded. UCLA considered asking approval from the University of California system to reject NEA money, which, at the time, averaged \$1 million a year. Leonard Bernstein declined the National Medal of Arts Award. New York Theater director Joseph Papp turned down a \$50,000 grant for his New York Shakespeare Festival and criticized Frohnmayer for “out-Helmsing Helms.”<sup>47</sup> The New School in New York went so far as to sue the NEA in 1990, seeking a ruling that would ban the NEA from asking grant recipients from having to sign the aforementioned “obscenity pledge” while artists reported a high level of self-censorship as a result of the amendment language.<sup>48</sup>

The obscenity clause was removed by the NEA in November 1990 – just after Dennis Barrie was acquitted in Cincinnati - and was replaced by the addition of a “decency clause” which directed the NEA Chairperson to guarantee all funded works incorporate “general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public.”<sup>49</sup> This clause required grant recipients to file reports certifying that their work complied with this standard. Violation could result in suspended grant payments, ineligibility for future funding, and even require artists to pay back already received money.<sup>50</sup> Not only does this provision, with its punitive sanctions, discourage

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<sup>46</sup> Kathleen M. Sullivan, “NEA Oaths: Grants with Strings Attached,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995); *Los Angeles, Calif.*, September 10, 1990, sec. San Diego County.

<sup>47</sup> Grace Glueck, “‘I Couldn’t Have Handled It Worse’ - The New York Times,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1993, sec. Section 7.

<sup>48</sup> Walker, “Artistic Freedom v. Censorship.”

<sup>49</sup> National Endowment for Arts v. Finley, U.S. (U.S. Supreme Court 1998).

<sup>50</sup> Walker, “Artistic Freedom v. Censorship.”

certain artists from engaging in and/or applying for funding for certain types of art, but it consolidates an immense amount of power in the NEA chairperson, John Frohnmayer, as the final arbitrator of what constitutes “general standards of decency.”<sup>51</sup>

As Richard Meyer has highlighted, when read in tandem with the text of the original Helms amendment, as well as considering the language surrounding the Mapplethorpe Controversy - including Helms’ labeling of them as “indecent” when he xeroxed and distributed them to Congress as a means to push his amendment - it becomes increasingly apparent that even “general standards of decency” is far more pointed than one might assume.<sup>52</sup> In effect, it frees the chairperson from the *Miller* standards and allows him to deny funding to a project like Mapplethorpe’s even though it does not fall within the constitutional definition of obscenity, because, it could be argued, it offends “standards of decency.” When considering the “standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public” the obvious responsive question is: who constitutes the American public? Is the American public “the vast majority of American people who are disgusted with the idea of giving the taxpayer’s money to

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<sup>51</sup>While previous grantmaking decisions were reviewed and approved by a panel of experts, this new statute bestows final authority on the chairperson - John Frohnmayer. This statute gives the chairperson unambiguous power to veto approved applications. In regard to future grants, Mapplethorpe’s work had demonstrated enough “serious artistic value” for a criminal court to acquit Dennis Barrie, yet in his conversation with Helms, Frohnmayer pledged he would not be approving similar grants. Taking these two things together, it again becomes apparent that “decency” and “serious artistic value” were not the same thing. The ideological work of Helms’ equation was still in place: “depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts” were the issue and grounds for defunding. This was not a question of “serious artistic value” but content, as well be evidenced by the NEA Four, whose grants Frohnmayer rescinded. Vance, “Misunderstanding Obscenity,” 57.; Owen M. Fiss, “State Activism and State Censorship,” *The Yale Law Journal* 100, no. 7 (1991): 2087–2106, <https://doi.org/10.2307/796816>.

<sup>52</sup> Helms’ original amendment stated that “none of the funds authorized to be appropriated pursuant to this Act may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce – (1) obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts...” As one may recall, when Helms sent out xeroxes of the Mapplethorpe photographs to each member of Congress, he labeled them as “indecent.” Richard Meyer, “Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?": Holly Hughes and the Case against Censorship,” *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 4 (2000): 543–52.

artists who promote homosexuality insidiously and deliberately,” as Jesse Helms argued on the Senate floor?<sup>53</sup>

### **All Too Well**

It was fitting that in John Frohnmayer’s first official act as chairman of the NEA, he revoked the NEA grant from *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. In response, Artists Space director, Susan Wyatt, informed him that the Artist Space board had met and decided not to relinquish the federal funds, a denial described in the *Washington Times* as “a gesture of astonishing arrogance, even lawlessness.”<sup>54</sup> On November 8, 1989 – one month after President Bush signed the “compromise” legislature with the aforementioned obscenity clause - the NEA announced that the grant would officially be withheld.<sup>55</sup> “What had been presented to the Endowment by the Artist Space application was an artistic exhibition,” wrote Frohnmayer, “We find, however, in reviewing the material now to be exhibited, that a large portion of the content is political rather than artistic in nature.”<sup>56</sup> “Any show that is primarily intended to make a political commentary must be privately funded,” Frohnmayer told Robert Atkins, a reporter for the *Village Voice*. “Isn’t any exhibit about AIDS political?” “No, it’s a question of tone.”

The story does not end there; the withheld grant would, ultimately, be restored a week later with specific conditions put in place. On November 16, the day after a meeting

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<sup>53</sup> Helms, “Congressional Record,” October 7, 1989.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Gibson, “‘Art, Morals, and NEA Taken for Granted’ from the Washington Times, November 21, 1981,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 134–37.

<sup>55</sup> Atkins, “Black Thursday: Frohnmayer Fiddles, Artists Burn.”

<sup>56</sup> As Frohnmayer recounts in his autobiography, *Leaving Town Alive*, President Bush’s Chief of Staff told him that “we simply couldn’t fund art that was political.” Allan Parachini, “NEA and the Arts: The Turmoil Continues: Endowment: The National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Will ‘Reflect’ on the Agency’s Position after Canceling \$10,000 Grant to Fund Manhattan AIDS Art Exhibit.,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1989, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-11-16-ca-2170-story.html>.

held between Frohnmayer and numerous New York institutional representatives and artists, a delegation of four local members of the National Council on the Arts - the presidentially appointed, 26-member body that advises the NEA chairman - led by New York State senator Roy Goodman, toured the exhibition and called Washington to urge Frohnmayer to fund the show. In midafternoon the "good news" was made official. Yet, as Robert Atkins noted in the *Village Voice*, the decision was not necessarily good for any party involved. While funding was restored, the catalogue was not funded by the NEA. It would eventually be funded by a grant from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

When news of the reversal spread, Jesse Helms expressed concern: "I do hope that Mr. Frohnmayer is not retreating from his voluntary commitment to me, and I will not assume that he has done so until I hear from him," further emphasizing how the battle of funding did appear to have very clear "sides" though the coherency of these sides was questionable. Conservative critic Hilton Kramer noted that "One thing that one has a right to expect from the head of such a Government agency is some kind of coherent position and policy...And if you don't have that, then what do you have?"<sup>57</sup> Good question, Hilton.

The incident not only implicated the NEA, but Artists Space and its director for their acceptance of the funds on the condition that Wojnarowicz's essay be declared financially separate from the rest of the show. Looking back, the reversal and conditions could almost be anticipated. As Wojnarowicz wrote in the essay that was at the center of

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in William Honan, "National Arts Chief in a Reversal, Gives Grant to AIDS Show," *ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power: Series X. Published and near Print Material*, November 17, 1989, Published and near Print Material, Media, November 17-24 1989, Box 136, Folder 8, Archives of Sexuality, <http://tinyurl.gale.com.libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/tinyurl/CUyQs5>.

this discussion: “Jesse Helms is, at the very least, making his attacks on freedom public; the collectors and museums responsible for censorship do theirs at elegant private parties or from the confines of their self-created closets.”<sup>58</sup>

The publicity surrounding the exhibition did not quite live up to the work exhibited and the opening helped dampen the surrounding rhetoric. Regarding the question of whether or not the artworks were obscene, most answered with a clear, resounding “no.” As critic Eric Gibson, writing for the *Washington Post* put it, the exhibition “proves to be unremarkable...most of the work in it is average at best.”<sup>59</sup> What could have been an exhibition known to the relatively few who walked through those Artists Space doors not only caused controversy in Washington D.C., but put David Wojnarowicz on the radar of the religious right.<sup>60</sup>

Wojnarowicz was required to sign a waiver accepting financial responsibility in the case of any legal costs arising from the publication of the catalogue, by which the gallery was simultaneously held harmless. To Wojnarowicz, the message was clear: the division of the fundable show and the unfundable catalogue sends the message “to every space in the country that they should never touch work of this kind or the work that I do.”<sup>61</sup> As is the contention of this dissertation, that what was under attack was not so much the art, per se, but the respective bodies and their identity politics, emboldened by the ongoing AIDS crisis, that threatened to disrupt the traditional social order. He noted that the “The NEA's action legislates the silence of gays and lesbians, the silencing of

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<sup>58</sup> Wojnarowicz, “Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” 10.

<sup>59</sup> Gibson, “‘Art, Morals, and NEA Taken for Granted’ from the Washington Times, November 21, 1981.”

<sup>60</sup> Sophie Junge, *Art About AIDS: Nan Goldin's Exhibition Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (Berlin: DeGrueter, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> Atkins, “Black Thursday: Frohnmayer Fiddles, Artists Burn,” 34.

PWAs [persons with AIDS], and the denial of safe sex information for people to protect themselves."<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, this organizational policy, the consequent threat of controversy or “embarrassment” - as Susan Wyatt had described it - and defunding, in many ways, gave museums an “out.” Writing for *The Nation*, Paul Mattick notes that:

for art institutions...the struggle over the NEA provides a comfortable spot to take a stand. One museum curator remarked to me how handily protesting the threat of NEA censorship obviated paying attention to the everyday censorship that goes on in the bulwarks of culture. Every choice of an exhibition ... implies a decision not to show or play something else. Such choices are powerfully subject to forces emanating from donors and potential donors, corporate sponsors and the sought-after audience.<sup>63</sup>

On the one hand, the critical stakes of this funding reversal – in this specific case-study, funding the exhibition, but not the catalogue essays – was not merely a result of the NEA’s organizational policy, but a replication of the same silencing, oppressive, institutionalized systems that shaped the state-sanctioned homophobic policies that exacerbated the AIDS crisis. On the other hand, and perhaps far more nefarious, is how the sole attention to this NEA reversal - suggesting that what many alleged to be “censorship” was the direct result of a homophobic government’s institutional policy carried out through the NEA - not only reproduces the same binary logic of “us versus them” constructed by conservative voices, but, in doing so, completely negates the implicit censorship of the art world’s most influential institutions. As previously mentioned, *Witnesses* was one of the *first* exhibitions to focus solely on artist responses to the AIDS crisis and, as such, was held at an “alternative” arts space that, as already discussed, was unable to consistently press the political-aesthetic claims of contestatory groups and movements given these spaces’ reliant statuses. In other words, as easy as the

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Atkins, “Black Thursday: Frohnmayer Fiddles, Artists Burn.”

<sup>63</sup> Paul Mattick, “Arts and the State,” *The Nation*, October 1, 1990.



“us versus them” logic may seem – the moral majority versus the liberal elite, as the religious right often framed it, or the art world versus the government – there were far more commonalities than one may initially suspect.

Two months after the NEA had revoked and then returned funding for *Witness: Against Our Vanishing*, the lack of consistency in enforcing the NEA’s new obscenity guidelines were highlighted. On January 23, 1990, David Wojnarowicz’s “Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell” was reprinted, along with five other prose works, in the catalogue for *Tongues of Flame*, a retrospective of his work held at University Galleries of Illinois State University.<sup>64</sup> The catalogue, related programming and exhibition - described by Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) as “an orgy of degenerate depravity” and Wojnarowicz’s art as “sickeningly violent, sexually explicit, homoerotic, antireligious and nihilistic” - had received a \$15,000 NEA “Specials Exhibitions” award, which was approved in the same grant cycle as the Artist’s Space for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*. In other words, the same essay that had been denied NEA funding two months earlier was now being shown with NEA funding two months later. These inconsistencies did not go unnoticed.

The controversy surrounding *Witnesses* extended the exhibition’s reach past its New York audience; caught in a post-Mapplethorpe Controversy sociopolitical climate, Wojnarowicz’s words were circulated amongst audiences that extended far past the typical museumgoer. He quickly became “the iconic Angry Gay Man” and landed on the radar of conservatives and the religious right.<sup>65</sup> Reverend Donald Wildmon of the

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<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Carr, “Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds,” in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. Dan Cameron, Mysoon Rizk, and Cynthia Carr (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 85.

<sup>65</sup> Carr, 85.

American Family Association (AFA) scoured the catalogue of Wojnarowicz's *Tongues of Flame*. He photocopied all instances of sexual imagery, isolating and fragmenting them from the contextual imagery. The first attack used one of the fragments - the upper right corner, about an eighth of the total image, of Wojnarowicz's *United (Genet)* - in a full-page anti-NEA advertisement in *USA Today* published on March 28, 1990 (fig. 4.1-2). The advertisement called for an end of "support [for] pornographic, anti-Christian 'works of art'" and went on to describe fourteen instances where the NEA funds had been allegedly misused, including the grants for the Serrano and Mapplethorpe exhibitions, along with a list of the 252 members of Congress who had voted, effectively, to strike down the Helms amendment. The AFA also created pamphlets entitled "Your Tax Dollars Helped Pay For These Works of Art" enclosed in envelopes marked: "Warning! Extremely Offensive Material Enclosed!" 90 percent of the "extremely offensive material" was work pulled from the Wojnarowicz retrospective; fourteen fragmented images, consisting of roughly 1 to 16 percent of the original pieces. Wildmon and the AFA went on to mail these pamphlets to 523 members of congress, 3,230 Christian leaders, 947 Christian radio stations, 1,578 newspapers and 178,000 pastors.<sup>66</sup>

Wojnarowicz responded. On May 21, 1990, he sued Wildmon and the AFA for defamation, breaking of the Lanham Act, copyright infringement, and the New York Artists' Authorship Rights Act, asking for a total of five million dollars in damages.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association," accessed October 20, 2019, <https://h2o.law.harvard.edu/cases/5222>.

<sup>67</sup> To prove 1. copyright infringement: "(a) the artwork must be altered, defaced, mutilated or modified; (b) the altered, defaced, mutilated or modified artwork must be attributed to the artist, or displayed in such circumstances as to be reasonably understood to be his work; and (c) this attribution must be reasonably likely to damage the artist's reputation." Copyright law does permit the use of an author's work for comment and critique. 2. Defamation requires the plaintiff to prove an "intent to distort plaintiff's work and to represent the fragments as complete composite works of art" 3. The Lanham Act (also known as the Trademark Act) protects owners of federally registered (trade)marks against the use of a similar mark if

The lawsuit marked the first time since the controversies over the NEA began that an artist pursued legal action against one of these religious right organizations.<sup>68</sup> On May 26, 1990, Judge William Connor of the United States District Court in Manhattan granted a preliminary injunction against further publications of the brochure, finding that it “could be construed by reasonable persons as misrepresenting the work of the artist, with likely damage to the artist’s reputation and to the value of his works,’ a violation of Wojnarowicz’s rights under the New York Artists’ Authorship Rights Act.”<sup>69</sup>

Ultimately, the court found that malice had not been proven, “the pamphlet was not employed in the ‘advertising or promotion’ of goods or services within the meaning of the Lanham Act; and the (3) copying fell within the definition of fair use of copyrighted material.” In other words, Wojnarowicz’s claims of defamation, violations of the Lanham Act and copyright infringement were dismissed. He won based on a violation of the New York Artists’ Authorship Rights Act, which prohibits anyone except the artist (or someone working with the artist’s consent) from reproducing more than “three hundred copies by that artist or a reproduction thereof in an altered, defaced, mutilated or modified form if the work is displayed, published, or reproduced as being the work of the artist.”<sup>70</sup> The AFA was ordered to send a corrective mailing stating: “This correction is to

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that use would lead to consumer confusion. For a mark to be considered a trademark it a) has to be in use in commerce and b) must be distinctive. 4. The New York Artists Authorship Rights Act prohibits attribution to an artist if the work has been significantly altered and limits distribution. For the full case ruling see *Wojnarowicz v. American Family Ass’n*, 745 F. Supp. 130 (S.D.N.Y. 1990), No. No. 90 Civ. 3457 (WCC) (US District Court for the Southern District of New York August 8, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Some have described Wojnarowicz’s suit as the first to pursue legal action against a(n attempted) censor. I stray away from that language because, as discussed in detail throughout Chapter Three via Richard Meyer’s and Michel Foucault’s work, censorship is often productive. Here, Wildmon’s attempts at “censorship” inadvertently included the mass distribution of Wojnarowicz’s name, as well grossly edited selections of his work. Additionally, the major counterclaim – that this was not a question of censorship, but a question of who pays for it – undercuts the usefulness of the designation of “censor”

<sup>69</sup> Paula Span, “Judge Blocks Anti-NEA Pamphlet,” *The Washington Post*, June 26, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

<sup>70</sup> “*Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association*.”

advise you that the images were not reproductions of complete works of Mr. Wojnarowicz. They were fragments or parts of larger artworks and do not constitute the entire work from which they were reproduced.”<sup>71</sup> According to the ruling, the “Plaintiff presented no evidence that he has been harmed in any other specific, quantifiable way.” The AFA was ordered to pay damages amounting to one dollar.<sup>72</sup>

### **Bad Blood**

The scrutiny, compromises and fallout surrounding David Wojnarowicz’s catalogue essay and work were not the only reverberations stemming from the Mapplethorpe Controversy. In June 1990, the summer after the Controversy erupted, almost four months after *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* closed, nearly a month and a half after the American Family Association took out their full-page anti-NEA ad and distributed thousands of pamphlets with highly selective pieces of Wojnarowicz’s work and weeks after Dennis Barrie and the Cincinnati Art Center were indicted for “pandering obscenity,” four performance artists - Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck - felt the direct consequence of the engulfing storm. The four would soon become known as the “NEA Four”, a grouping that would likely not have occurred were it not for the NEA controversy that they were part of and that (re)produced their artistic legacies.

All four had received unanimous recommendations by the NEA’s panel of peer reviews. John Frohmnayer, ignoring these recommendations, rejected their grant applications and reversed the funding decisions. Given the cultural climate, it should come as no surprise that these four artists were not traditional, white, straight men nor did their work take up conventional, hegemonic subjects. Rather, they all dealt explicitly

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<sup>71</sup> “Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association.”

<sup>72</sup> “Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association.”

with issues of sexuality, three of the four were lesbian or gay, and they all participated in political discourse, with two explicitly participating in political activism. Like the photographic work caught in the Mapplethorpe Controversy, as performance-based artists, their work documented real bodies and experiences that fall outside the traditional norm of white, straight, able-bodied men, often, working in various ways to deconstruct this sort of traditional, heteronormative regulation and expose its violence. In other words, the critical outrage and allegations of indecency were not aimed at aesthetics, but content.

At the time, Frohnmayer offered little public justification for the reversal, retrospectively noting that “I’m not saying that there wasn’t a lot of political pressure; what I’m saying is, I tried very hard to avoid it.”<sup>73</sup> As the story goes, he could, and he did not. In early 1990, Frohnmayer went ahead and asked the Peer Review Panel to reconsider three of the four aforementioned grant recommendations – Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and John Fleck- but they, again, unanimously recommended funding. So what changed? How did this group gain notoriety and become the so-called “NEA four”? How did Karen Finley enter the conversation? What fueled not only a national debate but an eight-year court battle? On May 11, 1990, syndicated conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak published “The NEA’s Suicide Charge” in *The Washington Post*. Evans and Novak, urging Frohnmayer to veto controversial grants, highlighted Karen Finley as “the Mapplethorpe case of 1990,” which they recounted “generated more

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<sup>73</sup> “Artists Claim \$252,000 Settlement Is a Victory : Arts: NEA Says the Award Is Not a Concession of Wrongdoing or Endorsement of the Controversial Works. - Los Angeles Times,” accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-06-06-me-353-story.html>.

angry mail than the abortion issue.”<sup>74</sup> Evans and Novak went so far as to issue a call to President Bush to “side with Congress and the voters or be swayed by the spurious charge of betraying freedom on the arts.” Six months later, the NEA added their decency clause.

Following Evans and Novak’s column, Frohnmayer polled members of the National Council of the Arts, “a group of Presidential appointees with more-or-less distinguished careers in the arts [that] advises the chair and usually rubber-stamps peer-panel decisions.”<sup>75</sup> As one Council member, artist Helen Frankenthaler, put it she longed for “a time when I experienced loftier minds, relatively unloaded with politics, fashion and chic.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps Frohnmayer did “try very hard to avoid” political pressure, but politics still ruled and the *Washington Post* editorial shifted Finley’s work into the national spotlight.<sup>77</sup> Succumbing to the political pressure and ignoring the recommendations of the Peer Review, Frohnmayer officially rejected the grant applications of these four performance artists – Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck - on June 29, 1990. Looking back on the decision, Frohnmayer, writing in his 1993 biography recounts: “President [George Bush] wrote saying that...he didn’t

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<sup>74</sup> “The NEA’S Suicide Charge - The Washington Post,” accessed October 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/05/11/the-neas-suicide-charge/cfcd4b77-c0b6-4cb5-937c-0e804f3920a0/>.

<sup>75</sup> Cynthia Carr, “Artful Dodging: The NEA Funds the Defunded Four,” *Village Voice*, June 15, 1993, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Frankenthaler was very much a representative of the (supposedly neutral) modernist strain of art. A painter who was highly influenced by the work of Abstract Expressionists and criticism of Clement Greenberg, whom she dated for five years, she is perhaps best known as “the bridge from Pollock to what was possible.” Helen Frankenthaler, “Did We Spawn an Arts Monster?” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 64.

<sup>77</sup> John Frohnmayer, *Leaving Town Alive: Confession of an Arts Warrior* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 161.

want censorship, but he didn't want a dime of taxpayer's money going to art that was 'clearly and visibly' filth,'" or any "patently blasphemous material."''<sup>78</sup>

### **Mad Woman**

What did such "'clearly and visibly' filth" look like? The most publicly controversial of the four, as identified by name in the aforementioned *Washington Post* article, was Karen Finley. Of the NEA Four, Karen Finley, perhaps received the most sustained attention in popular media. Like Mapplethorpe, this media-attention was both part and producer of the fictitious caricature of an artist that entered into the rather contentious national conversation surrounding obscenity, representation, art, politics and funding. Given such, while the following section explores the work of all four artists, it does so primarily in relation to Finley's performance and the corresponding media storm it precipitated. While Mapplethorpe may never have had the chance to respond to the Controversy his work generated, these artists did, both in formal statements and their practices. Additionally, while there has been a tremendous amount of scholarship that historicizes, contextualizes and theorizes the medium of performance art, it is not in the purview of this dissertation to do so nor it is in this dissertation's purview to comprehensively survey these artists' larger bodies of work. Rather, in exploring the considerations, characterizations and reversals these artists experienced and situating them in relation to the Mapplethorpe Controversy, this section explores the commonalities – in critical responses, media outrage, politics, and the bodies central to the work – to further open the effects and stakes of the Controversy, expanding it past

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<sup>78</sup> Frohnmayer, 161.

one particular artist or medium, and expose the deep-seated social fears posed by alternative identity politics and their potential to disrupt the traditional social order.

Finley's performances, for which she had received two NEA grants prior, typically feature her naked body covered in various items, presented before the audience as a conventional object for the male gaze. She challenges hegemonic, sexed power structures by, initially, appearing to participate in them. She quickly subverts this participation through her monologues – staging herself as the authorial subject – as she addresses topics such as abortion, AIDS, violence against women, and sexual abuse.<sup>79</sup> These topics resist the traditional values created and systematically sustained by the dominant power structures. In other words, Finley presents the female body, her body, as contingent, whereby her subject is the basic abasement and abuse of women in patriarchal society. Describing her performances to *People* magazine in the summer of 1990 – which, in and of itself, is a telling indicator of the sort of national attention controversy allotted to these four artists, given that *People*, a magazine devoted to celebrity love, life and lust, interviewed four performance artists whose work was typically viewed and received by relatively small, self-selecting audiences at local and alternative arts venues – Finley explained that her work was “the opposite of entertainment...Instead of escaping, people are confronted with their problems.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> It's also worth noting that the development of women's performance art, in America, very much coevolved with the feminist movement as performance allowed women to position themselves as speaking, authorial subjects, foregrounding their experiences and subverting the patriarchally-girded expectations of women on stage. See, for example, Peggy Phelan and Lynda Hart, eds., *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>80</sup> “Bending to the Political Winds, the NEA Cuts Off Grants to Four Artists Amid Charges of Censorship | PEOPLE.Com,” accessed April 28, 2020, <https://people.com/archive/bending-to-the-political-winds-the-nea-cuts-off-grants-to-four-artists-amid-charges-of-censorship-vol-34-no-5/>.



The NEA controversy was not the first time her work had been sensationalized. Her 1986 performance of *Yams Up My Granny's Ass* quickly became a cover story for the *Village Voice*, which introduced her work to a larger public. Critic Cynthia Carr not only recounted the performance but described Finley's monologues as "obscenity in its purest form."<sup>81</sup> At the time of the Controversy and funding reversal, Finley was performing *We Keep Our Victims Ready*. First performed at San Diego's "Sushi Gallery" in 1989, it was nominated for best play by the San Diego Theatre critics before it toured the US and Europe. In the performance, Finley poses a call for action and awareness to those who have been victimized. As with most of her work, the performance was a solo show, presented in a series of vignettes with few props. According to Finley, the work was inspired by a real event: a 16-year-old girl, who "was found alive in a Hefty bag covered in feces near her home in upstate New York," was accused of staging her abuse.<sup>82</sup> Finley's piece explicitly deals with rape, abortion, abuse, incest, and homophobia, analogizing what happens to marginalized members of society with what happened in Nazi Germany, from which the work takes its title though, as Finley alleges, "our ovens are at slower speed." In addition, and what was most remarked upon in the national media – such as in Novak and Evan's syndicated column – was her use of food, which she selected to visualize a corresponding psychological condition: covering her body in chocolate as a metaphor for those times she "was made to feel like shit," bean sprouts over the chocolate to symbolize sperm, topped with tinsel because "no matter how bad a woman is treated, she still knows how to get dressed for dinner" – a layering

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<sup>81</sup> C. Carr, "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts: The Taboo Art of Karen Finley," in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>82</sup> Beth Potier, "Karen Finley Provokes, Reveals in Lecture," *Harvard Gazette* (blog), February 14, 2002, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2002/02/karen-finley-provokes-reveals-in-lecture/>.

effect that buries her body beneath the images projected onto it by patriarchal society.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, Finley washes away the accumulated layers, telling her audience: “I wish I could relieve you of your suffering, your pain, your death,” but there was only a “silence at the end of the phone.”<sup>84</sup>

As in the case of Mapplethorpe’s and Wojnarowicz’s work, not only were selected portions of the Finley’s work isolated, decontextualized, and widely circulated, but the majority of media sources that reported on and described the piece had never actually seen her perform. The misinformed descriptions of her actions and text prevailed with pronounced regularity in the popular and academic press. Though the work aimed to disrupt an erotic male fantasy, the message was lost as Finley quickly became known as the “nude, chocolate-smeared young woman.”<sup>85</sup> Like Mapplethorpe’s classification as a pedophile, Finley’s reductive designation as a “chocolate-smeared young woman” was extremely effective in both publicizing her name and work, and in continuing to provoke and sensationalize the national discussion surrounding the NEA, art, obscenity and, of course, propriety. Concise yet distorted, trivializing and evocative, the description had little to do with the actual performance, and instead evoked traditional heterosexual pornography. In fact, based on these descriptions, Finley received a letter from *Playboy* magazine asking to film one of her performances. They eventually changed their minds: Finley’s performances were not mainstream sexuality.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Potier.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Lisa Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Politic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 263.

<sup>85</sup> “The NEA’S Suicide Charge - The Washington Post.”

<sup>86</sup> Interestingly enough, Finley would go on to pose for *Playboy*, covered in chocolate, in 1993.

The efficient phrase captured the popular imagination and further galvanized increasingly intense public debates surrounding obscenity, art, and American culture. Many of the responses presented Finley's work as pornographic and included demeaning language and inaccurate descriptions. In *US News and World Report*, David Gergen's "Who Should Pay For Porn?" not only defined Finley's work as such but disseminated misinformation, claiming she "openly rubs canned yams across her vagina." In *Newsweek*, Finley, described as the "'chocolate-smear'd woman' who paints her body in the angry hues of militant feminism," was framed as just one example of the artists caught up in the collision between "old-fashioned moralists and the avantgarde" which included Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, and David Wojnarowicz.<sup>87</sup> Christopher Rapp titled his *National Review* column "Chocoholic," and sneered, "With or without government funding, Karen Finley will bravely smear herself with chocolate."<sup>88</sup> In the AFA's journal, Finley appears on "stage smeared with chocolate and screams, 'God is Dead.'"<sup>89</sup> In *Time Magazine*, Andrew Ferguson sarcastically described Finley's work as that which "thrilled audiences by coating herself in chocolate and doing highly inventive autoerotic exercises with sweet potatoes... So pass the chocolate and sweet potatoes, and let the good times roll."<sup>90</sup> As was the case of the discourse surrounding Mapplethorpe, the inaccurate descriptions of Finley's performance arise in large part because the writers had not actually seen the work. Neither had Frohnmayer. His decision was based on second-hand accounts.

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<sup>87</sup> Newsweek Staff On 7/1/90 at 8:00 PM, "Fine Art or Foul?," *Newsweek*, July 1, 1990, <https://www.newsweek.com/fine-art-or-foul-206652>.

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Rapp, "Chocoholic," *National Review*, July 20, 1998.

<sup>89</sup> "Congress Votes to Continue NEA Funding for Pornographic, Anti-Christian Art," *AFA Journal*, December 1990, 27–28.

<sup>90</sup> Newsweek Staff On 7/1/90 at 8:00 PM EDT, "Fine Art Or Foul?," *Newsweek*, July 1, 1990, <https://www.newsweek.com/fine-art-or-foul-20665>.

## I Knew You Were Trouble

Like Finley's, Holly Hughes' work foregrounds sexuality, challenges expectations and incorporates overt political commentary, though, unlike Finley, Hughes is "interested in talking about sexual pleasure and what it could mean for women."<sup>91</sup> Hughes specifically and explicitly aligned her methodology with the autobiographical, as "It's very much related to an American political tradition in which the first-person narrative is so important."<sup>92</sup> A tradition that, even more recently, had taken on a dominant feminist politic: the personal is political. Her work often concerned her experiences as an out lesbian, navigating the world in search of love, relationships and sex. It is not surprising that her sexual identity, important in her work, would ultimately become a key concern within the NEA controversy. Speaking to the National Council on the Arts, Frohnmayer advised that "Holly Hughes is a lesbian and her work is very heavily of that genre. That is what is going to be in the press if you fund it."<sup>93</sup>

Having been awarded a \$15,000 grant in March 1989 after the NEA sent observers to see her monologue *World Without End*, in February 1990, Hughes was recommended for a second grant by the review panel. At the time, she was still performing *World Without End*, which denounces people, particularly men, who appropriate feminist discourse in service of oppressive campaigns: reproductive justice – or lack thereof – sexual puritanism and art. In the piece under question, Hughes says things such as:

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<sup>91</sup> Carol Martin, *A Sourcebook on Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage* (Routledge, 2002), 252.

<sup>92</sup> Martin, *A Sourcebook on Feminist Theatre and Performance*.

<sup>93</sup> Cynthia Carr, "NEA 4 Events Timeline," Franklin Furnace, accessed November 3, 2019, <http://franklinfurnace.org/research/essays/nea4/neatimeline.html>.

But what's this antiabortion fever gripping the nation, huh?...I know what you're thinking you're thinking there's women in the antiabortion movement. Well, that's what they want you to think. Those are not women. Nancy Reagan isn't even human, she's a hand puppet...

Oh, I know! This is not art! Believe you me, I wish I could be whipping out a haiku, or doing a little macramé demonstration – I wish I could be sharing some art with you right now...

Oh I know the difference between politics and art! I went to art school...and the first thing they said when they saw me coming through the door was: "Holly, don't hit them over the head. Art is not supposed to hit them over the head!"<sup>94</sup>

Like Finley, Hughes then goes on to recount a real event, in which a newspaper columnist blamed an abused mother for the death of her daughter, not the father who killed the girl. As the selected passage from the performance suggests, Hughes sees performance as an appropriate medium for overtly political work. In large part, she sees it as political because, as according to her, it renders lesbian sexuality visible; itself an act of transgression and resistance staged against heteronormativity, hegemonic gender roles and conventional constructions of female sexuality.

On July 28, 1990, in an op-ed essay that first appeared in *The New York Times* one month after Frohnmayer's reversal, Holly Hughes noted that Frohnmayer's decision was an "attempt to appease the homophobia, misogynist and racist agenda of Senator Jesse Helms and Company."<sup>95</sup> Hughes understood the decision within "the context of the Government's continued indifference to the AIDS crisis and inaction toward it" and went on to raise a call for action. While this indirect form of censorship – the withdrawing of funding to artists who had been validated by a community of their peers – was seen by

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in David A. Schlossman, *Actors and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange Among Social Worlds* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>95</sup> Holly Hughes and Richard Elovich, "Homophobia at the N.E.A.," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Julie Ault et al. (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999), 233.

some in the art community as another attack rooted in homophobia and misogyny, like Wojnarowicz, Hughes decried the art institutions and called for their support because, as she too notes, “anything less would be complicity.” Looking back, like Finley who saw herself engaged in what she described as a “public sexually abusive relationship with Jesse Helms,” Hughes would later recount that “Two years of my life were just ruined. I couldn’t work with Jesse Helms looking over my shoulder. I got death threats, my lawyer got death threats. I lived in a state of terror.”<sup>96</sup>

While Hughes and Finley foreground female sexuality in their work, Tim Miller’s work most directly and explicitly combines performance and politics. Describing his work in a deposition for the lawsuit filed against the NEA, Miller explains that he “consistently tried to explore the connection between my personal story as a gay person and activism...My art cannot be divided from my identity as a gay person and AIDS activist.”<sup>97</sup> Widely known for his political activism in ACT-UP, Miller’s performances are highly audience-oriented and, like Finley’s, employ transgressive tactics that violate social taboos.<sup>98</sup> Breaking the fourth wall, his audience becomes part of the performance through the body, real and referential.

Like Hughes, Miller’s work links the political to the autobiographical, as the titular pronoun “my” in *My Queer Body*, a piece he created shortly after his NEA

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<sup>96</sup> Potier, “Karen Finley Provokes, Reveals in Lecture.”; “Artists Claim \$252,000 Settlement Is a Victory : Arts: NEA Says the Award Is Not a Concession of Wrongdoing or Endorsement of the Controversial Works. - Los Angeles Times.”

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Schlossman, *Actors and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange Among Social Worlds*, 236–37.

<sup>98</sup> For example, in *My Queer Body*, a piece he created shortly after his NEA defunding, Miller strips naked, announces he “needs to gather a few things” and then begins to grasp various body parts of individuals in the audience, at one point sitting in an audience member’s lap, repeating the mantra “get hard because the world can be a fine place” to his penis. For a greater explanation and analysis of this piece, see Peggy Phelan, “Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*: An Anatomy in Six Sections,” *Theater* 24, no. 2 (May 1, 1993): 30–34, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-24-2-30>.

defunding, suggests. The performance is an account of a young, gay, white man's coming of age in the United States amidst the AIDS crisis. It's explicitly queer, making real the bodies affected by the AIDS crisis, and explicitly political, often analyzing personal stories – such as his first date – to expose the politics that structure an ostensibly personal memory. Like Finley, Hughes draws parallels between the AIDS crisis and Nazi Germany, recounting that “Reagan and Bush smiled their Holocaust smiles” as his friends died.<sup>99</sup> The piece concludes with the creation of a utopic “alternative reality.” He is named Performance Laureate by the first black lesbian president, who asks him to create an exorcise of homophobia from the United States to be performed at the Kennedy Center at her inauguration.

As with some of the other artists, portions of *My Queer Body* attracted criticism from both the right and left. In response to one sequence, “Get Hard,” Peggy Phelan, a feminist theorist and critic, argues that Miller concentrates too narrowly on the “white male penis.” She expresses reservations about how he describes himself as a sperm out-running other homophobic sperm (including one that looks like Jesse Helms) to achieve his conception; a biological conception that Phelan warns would have been more hilarious had it not sounded similar to the rhetoric of anti-abortion activists who “speak for” the “preborn children.”<sup>100</sup>

John Fleck, comparatively speaking, is perhaps the least likely to identify his work as having a specific politics. Looking back, nearly 20 years later, he recounts “it became political – I never thought of my work as political.”<sup>101</sup> His performance works –

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<sup>99</sup> Phelan, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Phelan, 31.

<sup>101</sup> “The NEA Four Revisited: Crossing the Line with John Fleck,” Hyperallergic, June 19, 2013, <https://hyperallergic.com/73678/the-nea-four-revisited-crossing-the-line-with-john-fleck/>.

which include *Psycho Opera* and *A Snowball's Chance in Hell* – are typically characterized by a campy examination of popular icons and social norms: consumerism, violence, the media. In his deposition in the NEA case, he states “It is my intent, through my work, to confront cultural, environmental, and psychological issues –to demythify cliched notions of masculinity-femininity, AIDS, death, birth, religion, capitalist consumption and mass media; to name a few...[my] work seeks to challenge certain socially accepted attitudes and values.”

The performance in question, *BLESSED Are All the Little FISHES*, had been performed a number of times before his funding was rescinded. In it, Fleck performs a stream-of-consciousness monologue paired with props and movements in what appears to be a random, yet purposeful exploration of themes that include family, alcoholism, religion, and sexuality. In the first “act,” he traces “a man’s binge – the beginning of a drunken man’s deluded & dysfunctional journey through his life” as he stumbled through a “surreal, nightmarish, environment.”<sup>102</sup> As an orchestra plays, Fleck’s character emerges dressed as a mermaid. He begins drinking, smoking cigarettes, stumbling, as the sound of changing television channels take over – “an anti-drug & booze commercial, the voice of Jimmy Swaggart condemning man to hell ‘cause of his wicked ways.”<sup>103</sup> Fleck’s character hears “the voice of god” originating from the toilet bowl, mixing the same sort of religious and scatological themes central to the controversy surrounding Andre Serrano’s *Piss Christ*. This moment leads to the most controversial element of the performance – Fleck urinating on stage. He then pulls items out of the toilet, including

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<sup>102</sup> John Fleck, “Blessed Are All the ‘Little’ Fishes,” *TDR* (1988-) 35, no. 3 (1991): 179, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146142>.

<sup>103</sup> Fleck, 179.



bread and a goldfish. He transfers the goldfish to a bowl and feeds it, in an increasingly fanatic manner, the bread, before an audience member – a planted actor – storms the stage protesting the treatment of the fish, further blurring the lines between real and fiction, actor and audience. In the second act, Fleck appears in a suit and lei, delivering a monologue on alcoholism, therapy, his family, androgyny and, of course, the AIDS crisis. He talks about being afraid of getting tested, his penis, condoms. He reflects on the state of art, reflecting on the current Culture Wars, wondering aloud “where all are the artists gonna go if Jesse Helms has his way & cuts funding to any artist who makes fun of his god?”<sup>104</sup>

Like all of the aforementioned artists – David Wojnarowicz, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller - Fleck faced immediate repercussions aside from the withdrawn funding. After appearing on the “Oprah Winfrey Show” in August of 1990 – a barometer of popular appeal - he began to receive intimidating phone calls.<sup>105</sup> Fleck recounted he felt he had been used, “People were calling me a pervert...It was a freak show and I was the freak.”<sup>106</sup> There were the immediate, individual consequences: it’s “‘great, people are becoming aware of your performance and they’ll want to see it.’...then you start seeing that you’re never gonna get any funding again, that none of these places are going to allow you to perform. There is a definite attempt at blacklisting.”<sup>107</sup> And then, of course, there’s a reputation: his portrayal in the media both gave him a sort of leverage, given the

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<sup>104</sup> Fleck, 190.

<sup>105</sup> As Fleck recalls, one person would call non-stop for 6 hours a day and would “play songs like, ‘We are fascist, fag-bashing skinheads.’” see Linda Frye Burnham and John Fleck, “An Unclassified Number: An Interview with John Fleck,” *TDR (1988-)* 35, no. 3 (1991): 193, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146143>.

<sup>106</sup> Burnham and Fleck, 193.

<sup>107</sup> Burnham and Fleck, 194.

notoriety it created, as well as a pigeon hole – “All of a sudden I was a gay performance artist. Even though I’m gay, I never labeled myself as a “gay performance artist.””<sup>108</sup>

### **...Ready for It?**

In September 1990, the NEA Four sued Frohnmayer and the NEA for violating their First Amendment rights, challenging the NEA’s decency clause. U.S. District Judge A. Wallace Tashima ruled the clause unconstitutional in 1992. In his decision, he wrote, “the right of artists to challenge conventional wisdom and values is a cornerstone of artistic and academic freedom, no less than the rights of scientists funded by the National Institutes of Health.”<sup>109</sup> The Justice Department appealed – under the Clinton Administration – arguing that content restrictions are acceptable based on the precedent set by the Supreme Court case of *Rust v. Sullivan* (1991) which prohibited federally-funded health and/or medical professionals from providing counseling and/or information about abortion, thereby, effectively, limiting freedom of speech of those receiving government funding.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, amidst appeals, on June 4, 1993, the Justice Department did settle with the NEA Four - each artist received \$6000 for the violation of their privacy as well as the amount of their requested grants. Fleck and Miller each received \$5000. Finley and Hughes each received \$8000. The NEA also paid to cover the

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<sup>108</sup> “The NEA Four Revisited.”

<sup>109</sup> William H. Honan, “Judge Overrules Decency Statute For Arts Grants,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 1992, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/10/arts/judge-overrules-decency-statute-for-arts-grants.html>.

<sup>110</sup> If anything, this further points to the underlying connection between the Culture Wars, Mapplethorpe Controversy, NEA debates, and other national political discourses. *Rust* held the constitutionality of a law that allowed the Federal government to restrict clinics receiving Federal funds from discussing abortion as an option with their patients. This “gag rule” even banned these clinics from referring patients to other clinics. In effect, it basically imposed an anti-abortion script on healthcare workers. President Clinton did overturn the gag rule when he took office, but the precedent remains: the federal government can regulate the speech of entities it funds. See *Rust v. Sullivan*, 500 U.S. 173, U.S. (U.S. Supreme Court 1991).

artists' legal fees: \$202,000.<sup>111</sup> On June 25, 1998, the Supreme Court, in an 8-1 margin, ruled in favor of the NEA; the NEA could use "general standards of decency" in making funding decisions.<sup>112</sup> Today, the NEA no longer recognizes or funds individuals.<sup>113</sup>

### **So it Goes...**

As exposed in this chapter through the selected case studies, the Mapplethorpe Controversy did not just revisit, revise, and (re)present Robert Mapplethorpe, but the effects of the Controversy reverberated through the artistic community. Immediately speaking, in terms of Robert Mapplethorpe's work and legacy, the Controversy exposed the art world's situatedness as an active participant and producer in public life. Critics, scholars, and academics like Kobena Mercer and Douglas Crimp could not ignore the social and political imperatives that undergird their own critical practices. Their critical reversals signal that "art people" (artists, critics, art historians, curators) must acknowledge rather than deny this exchange. Institutions like Artists' Space had to contend with the very real pressures of political, legal and financial consequences which led to conflicting decisions. At the same time, artists like David Wojnarowicz, Karen

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<sup>111</sup> "Artists Claim \$252,000 Settlement Is a Victory : Arts: NEA Says the Award Is Not a Concession of Wrongdoing or Endorsement of the Controversial Works. - Los Angeles Times."

<sup>112</sup> As stated in the decision written by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, "decency" and "respect" are "unlikely...[to] introduce any greater element of selectivity" than "artistic excellence" already does. Justice Souter offered the lone dissent: arguing that the government "wholly failed to explain why the statute should be afforded an exemption from the fundamental rule of the First Amendment that viewpoint discrimination in the exercise of public authority over expressive activity is unconstitutional." Quoted in Lackland H. Jr. Bloom, "NEA v. Finley: A Decision in Search of a Rationale," *Washington University Law Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (1999): 1-52. For a more detailed account of the trial and funding debates see Schlossman, *Actors and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange Among Social Worlds*.

<sup>113</sup> The Mapplethorpe Controversy, as well as its consequences, ushered the once quiet NEA into public scrutiny. During reauthorization debates, Congress resurrected the arguments regarding the value of publicly funded art, with many calling for the complete elimination of the NEA. By 1996, Congress cut the NEA's annual budget by 39 percent. In response, the NEA restructured and reduced its grants to four categories: Heritage and Preservation, Education and Access, Creation and Presentation, Planning and Stabilization. For more on the shifts that occurred within the NEA, see "The National Endowment for the Arts: Transitions and Restructuring in Response to Congressional Oversight," *The Museum Review*, March 9, 2017, [http://articles.themuseumreview.org/tmr\\_vol2no1\\_parra](http://articles.themuseumreview.org/tmr_vol2no1_parra).

Finley and the rest of the NEA Four, were caught in a nexus of government-funded agencies, conservative backlash, and a shifting social world, where the attention given and the publicity accrued both advance reputations – though the question of *which* reputation is always in revision - while often necessitating legal recourse, itself a lengthy and financially-draining process.

While, broadly speaking, modernism may have proclaimed art's autonomy and postmodernism was critical of these very institutional structures, the national attention the Mapplethorpe Controversy accrued brought high art into the public sphere so that even those writing about art could not escape the social and political imperatives. As will be discussed in the final chapter, not only did the Mapplethorpe Controversy lead to these sorts of revisions, reversals, and reconsiderations, but the terms of the political and social debates, largely on the grounds of gender and sexuality, as outlined in these previous two chapters, was taken up by practicing artists who, through the medium photography, exposed the oppressive silences still in operation.

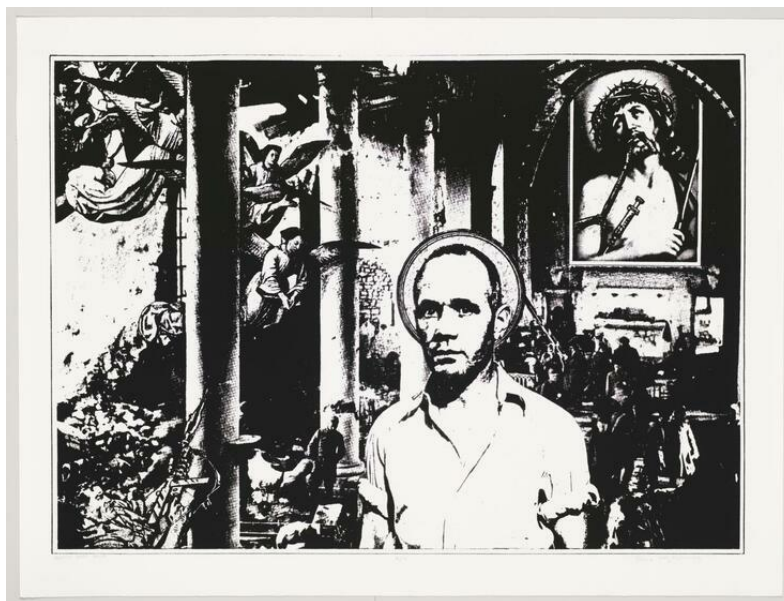


Figure 4.1. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Genet)*, 1990

USA TODAY - WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 1990 - 7A

## Is This How You Want Your Tax Dollars Spent?

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is a federal agency which provides taxpayer-funded grants, many of which support pornographic, anti-Christian works of art.

Last year Congress established legislation prohibiting grant recipients from receiving funds if they did "depictions of sadomasochism, homosexual acts, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sexual acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific merit."

Artist Adrian Denning took an NEA grant. She said, "Like a lot of writers, I was in a financially desperate situation...so I signed, but not without a lot of outrage. The NEA is giving us freedom from economic stress, but they're saying... 'Feel free to create as you wish.'"

But the NEA is sending a message to those who receive taxpayer-funded grants which, in our opinion, tells them to ignore the restrictions. Spokeswoman Virginia Fackel said, "Our stance is 'Don't let this intimidate you... Feel free to create as you wish.'"

Ms. Fackel says that the NEA does not have a procedure for checking up on the thousands of photographers, dancers, urban designers, painters and other artists who receive tax money.

The NEA has a current budget of \$171,000,000, which comes from your tax dollars. The list below is a sampling of "art" projects which the NEA has supported with tax dollars.

- The NEA helped fund "Degenerate with a capital D" in New York. The exhibit was advertised with posters that depict U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms nailed to a cross. (Exhibitor Shawn Eichman said several copies of the poster were sent to Sen. Helms' home.) It also gave to walk on the flag. —New York Post, December 6, 1989
- In Phoenix, Arizona, the NEA gave MARIS Art-Quest \$5,000 which helped fund an exhibit featuring Cactus Jack's "H-Helms," a photo of Sen. Jesse Helms in a large jar of what appeared to be urine. —The Washington Times, September 12, 1989
- The NEA spent \$20,000 to fund the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. The exhibit included photos of homosexual activity and perversions so offensive that some family newspapers will not allow us to describe it. Time magazine noted that some authorities believe Mapplethorpe could have been charged with distributing child pornography in connection with this exhibit. —Time, July 2, 1989
- Andrea Speranza received \$15,000 in tax dollars from the NEA. Speranza's works include a photo of Christ on a cross submerged in Speranza's urine. He named the work of art "Christ." —The New York Times, August 16, 1989
- The NEA gave money to the Sunshine Press, a homosexual publication, which published sexually explicit stories. —The Congressional Record, page H-3627, July 12, 1989
- In New York, NEA funds helped pay for an exhibit which included booklets depicting one woman inserting an object into another, a photo album of group sex, a collection of crude drawings including one titled "Jesus B—" in which a woman is breast-feeding an infant. Another photo is of a man saying, "Is it a sin to — a priest?" —New York City Tribune, March 2, 1990
- With NEA help, PADD (Political Art Documentation Distribution) and Carnival Knowledge co-sponsored entertainment including a number called "Tapping and Talking Dirty" in which two women casually chat about various oral and coital sexual behaviors. —New York City Tribune, March 2, 1988
- The organizers of the annual San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival are cynically optimistic they will be given at least part of a \$25,000 grant by the NEA for their 1990 showing. The NEA gave them \$10,000 in 1988 and \$5,500 in 1989. The film festival features films for and about homosexual lifestyles, sexual activities and practices. —The Washington Blade, December 1, 1989
- In Houston, the NEA helped fund the exhibit "At Home with Themselves: Gay and Lesbian Couples" at the Houston Center for Photography. —Houston Center for Photography brochure, 1990

**"Usually I get paid a lot of money for this, but tonight it's government-funded!"**  
—X-rated film star Annie Sprinkle, speaking about her government-funded "art" exhibit

- In January, 1990, the NEA Creative Writing Fellowships gave \$25,000 to three lesbian writers to help fund their homosexual writings. —Human Events, February 17, 1990
- In New York, the NEA provided \$10,000 in tax dollars to pay for an exhibit which denounced Catholicism. The catalogue for the exhibit described St. Patrick's Cathedral as the "house of worship nestled on Fifth Avenue." One artist, David Wojnarowicz, fantasizes about causing Helms to gasp and setting him on fire. Wojnarowicz's catalogue entry also describes throwing Congressman William Danaher "off the Empire State Building." —National Review, December 31, 1989 and Human Events, November 26, 1989
- NEA helped fund an exhibition including a bust of what appears to be Jesus with 180 X-rated movies. Like that of Mapplethorpe, Sprinkle's "art" was so sexually explicit and offensive that some family newspapers cannot show us to give a detailed description. At one point during Annie Sprinkle's performance, she smiles and says to the audience, "Usually I get paid a lot of money for this, but tonight it's government-funded!" Annie's main writer and only actor in the exhibit was Annie Sprinkle. A "Post-Porn Modernist Manifesto," printed in the show's program and signed by more than 20 people, states, "We utilize sexually explicit words, pictures and performances to communicate our ideas and emotions." —New York City Tribune, January 22, 1990
- The NEA recently gave \$15,000 to the University Galleries at Illinois State University to help fund a "Tongues of Flame" exhibit. Included in the exhibit was a photo of Christ in the process of injecting drugs into his arm using a needle and a syringe, a photo of the Christ child wearing a pistol, scenes of men performing perverted sex on each other. Congressman Dana Rohrabacher called the exhibit "vicariously violent, sexually explicit, homophobic, anti-religious and nihilistic." —Human Events, February 24, 1990 and Washington Times, February 21, 1990

Last year, Senator Jesse Helms introduced an amendment in the Senate which would have prohibited the NEA from using your tax dollars to support such exhibits as those listed above. The Senate passed it overwhelmingly. However, when the amendment was brought up in the House of Representatives by Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-GA), Congressman Ralph Regula (R-OH) offered a motion which refused to allow the House to vote on the Rohrabacher amendment. Using a tactical parliamentary move, Rep. Regula refused to yield the floor to Rep. Rohrabacher and thus kept the amendment from being voted on. Rep. Regula's action succeeded in its intent, that of allowing the NEA to continue to receive tax dollars to fund such "works of art."

Listed below are 282 Congressmen who voted for Regula's motion, thus supporting the NEA in its abuse and misuse of your tax dollars. Their address is: House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515.

Figure 4.2. The Christian Coalition, "Is This How You Want Your Tax Dollars Spent," *USA Today*, March 28, 1990

## CHAPTER FIVE: Homecoming

"I confess I was never a big fan of Robert Mapplethorpe's work, and I think it's because I saw him as much more commercially oriented than I am," wrote Cindy Sherman.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1980s, Sherman's work was not only the de facto representative of the so-called "Pictures Generation," but was often discussed in relation to and representative of the overlapping discourses of postmodernism and feminism. Frequently described as one of the most important and influential artists of all time and listed alongside artists such as Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, by the early 1990s, not only did Sherman have an immense amount of influence over working artists, but an immense amount of theoretical and critical weight. As Arthur Danto, perhaps jokingly, wrote: Sherman "became the focus of so much neostructuralist, radical feminist, Frankfurt School Marxist and semiological hermeneutics that one is convinced there must be whole programs of study in institutions of higher learning in which one can major, even earn a doctorate, in Sherman Studies."<sup>2</sup>

In terms of Cindy Sherman's practice, generally speaking, her work is marked by a simultaneous presence and absence. Present, in that she is the model. Absent, in that she typically costumes and disguises herself. Sherman is both the artist and sitter, yet as a sitter, she is rarely "Cindy Sherman." Her identity is always in flux. In comparison to

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<sup>1</sup> Amei Wallach, "Art/Architecture; Finding Mapplethorpe's Inner Cindy Sherman," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2003, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/14/arts/art-architecture-finding-mapplethorpe-s-inner-cindy-sherman.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur C. Danto, "The State of the Art World: The Nineties Begin," *Nation* 251, no. 2 (July 9, 1990): 65.

Robert Mapplethorpe's work, even upon a casual glance, though the two share the medium of photography, their approach is strikingly different. While Mapplethorpe's compositions are meticulously and discernibly studio-ized – with no difference in formal approach in content ranging from flowers to sadomasochism - Sherman's works are highly orchestrated performance pieces, centering on and around the body, encoded with signs that deconstruct social structures, often gender. Throughout the 1980s, Cindy Sherman's work was one of the foremost examples of a critically inflected, deconstructive, postmodern "Pictures Generation," which had been frequently positioned against the derivative formal work of artists like Mapplethorpe. In other words, while Mapplethorpe was seen as reaffirming tradition, Sherman was seen as disrupting it. It is thus a rather interesting reversal whereby, as discussed in Chapter Four, by the early 1990s, as a result of a Mapplethorpe Controversy, critics, including the leading critic of this "Pictures Generation," Douglas Crimp, had revised their earlier readings of Mapplethorpe.<sup>3</sup> Largely speaking, Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, at least critically, were no longer examples of conflicting practices – modernism versus postmodernism – but of complementary practices that worked to subvert preexisting modes of representation. It is thus even more interesting that by 1992, Cindy Sherman directly engaged with the ongoing controversy and Robert Mapplethorpe. The Mapplethorpe photographs generated criticism and controversy, the controversy generated a critical revision, and this critical revision helped generate even more photography, but with a revived goal: politics and critique.

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<sup>3</sup> See Crimp, "Photographs at the End of Modernism."

Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures* (1992), her most controversial project to date, was a critical and deliberate reaction, in part, to the uproars, reversals, and reconsiderations that hovered from and around the Mapplethorpe Controversy.<sup>4</sup> Begun amidst the national debates over propriety and obscenity in art - which as this dissertation contends was about the bodies that were (re)presented in that art, not the art as had been understood, formally and theoretically, by and within the art world - Sherman turned to medical dolls. The use of dolls, which she orchestrated through a visual vocabulary mined from hardcore pornography, was one way to make a political statement that other, less secure artists were forced to avoid largely due to fears surrounding censorship and the sort of political embroilment that could lead to financial ruin and/or legal devastation. One only has to think of Jock Sturges or George Dimock to be reminded of what was at stake.

Jock Sturges, whose work has been shown throughout the United States and can be found in the collections of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a photographer whose black and white portraiture typically features young women, often nude. While Sturges undoubtedly occupies a position of power, given the acclaim his work has received and where it has been collected, this power is relatively less than that of an artist like Cindy Sherman. On April 25, 1990, Sturges returned to his home to find it teeming with FBI agents and San Francisco police officers after a photographer Sturges had hired to print some images for him went to law-enforcement, believing the photographs violated a California statute the required film labs to report images of children that might be considered "sexually

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<sup>4</sup> They have also, unsurprisingly, received an immense amount of critical and theoretical attention, especially in regard to the construct of the abject see Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic," *October* 78 (1996): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778908>; Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-1987," in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 65–76.



stimulating.”<sup>5</sup> Sturges faced child-pornography charges. In August of 1991, even after the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a nonbinding resolution requesting the federal and local authorities cease and desist their persecution of Sturges – another indication of the type of privilege he did possess - the case was brought to a federal grand jury that, ultimately, found insufficient evidence to indict Sturges on felony counts of child pornography. As Lawrence Stanley notes, “Had Sturges been an ordinary photographer with no ties, or only tenuous ones, to the art world, he would undoubtedly have been indicted, convicted, and sent to prison.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite his position and ties, federal authorities still spent nearly fifteen months combing through all of his correspondences, diaries, business associates, friends, former models and their parents, alerting these numerous acquaintances to Sturges ongoing “child pornography” charges and urging them to supply information on his “sexual proclivities.”<sup>7</sup>

Sturges is just one example. George Dimock, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Rochester, did not have the same status. On July 3, 1990, Dimock took two rolls of film to a local lab. The film was part of his ongoing project to document his family, including his 2 ½-year-old son. When he returned to pick up his prints, he was met by a police officer and detective, who questioned him about his relationship with his son and wife. A few weeks later, Dimock returned to the lab with another roll of film. Detectives and a social worker came to his house later that day to search for child pornography.

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence A. Stanley, “Art and ‘Perversion’: Censoring Images of Nude Children,” *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (1991): 20–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/777319>.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Stanley is an attorney who specializes in obscenity law. Stanley, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Shapiro, “The Art Cops,” *Nation* 251, no. 2 (July 9, 1990): 40–57.

Dimock faced losing custody of his son and serving jail time. Ultimately, he and his wife agreed to investigation and supervision by social workers.<sup>8</sup>

These two case studies emphasize that what was at stake was not just a publication or exhibition, but real material, practical life consequences: jail time, fines, custody, reputation. To be clear, these are just two examples of known cases of attempted censorship and are cases against relatively privileged individuals – an artist with ties to elite institutions and a Ph.D. candidate. History tends to forget those with less privilege who face similar situations. It also goes without saying that, perhaps, one of the most longstanding and dire consequences of this social and political environment brought on and exacerbated by the Mapplethorpe Controversy was self-censorship, largely spanning from fears of political and legal reprisal.<sup>9</sup> These multifarious forms of censorship – ranging from externally enforced censorship to internally policed – will be addressed later in this chapter. What Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures* help make clear is how it takes preexisting power and status to (successfully) critique these systems within preexisting institutions. Unlike many, Cindy Sherman had this sort of power and status. To this point, she notes:

The censorship issue is important...I felt that my previous show...was so commercially successful that it made sense to go out on a limb in these difficult times. Since I really don't expect people to buy my art anyway, and because I don't have to worry about funding or being censored at this point, I thought I might as well try to pull out all the stops and make something that directly deals

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley, "Art and 'Perversion,'" 21.

<sup>9</sup> This is the side of censorship that, in their discussion of censorship as a productive and generative force, those like Richard Meyer and Michel Foucault tend to dismiss. While censorship was highly productive for, for example, Robert Mapplethorpe (his work and name was disseminated across the country, leading to a revised historical status and rise in market value) censorship occurs on multiple levels including the internalization of censorship norms and self-censorship. In other words, censorship doesn't always take place *after* the speech act. Yet, even the notion that one is "entitled" to this speech is fraught, as will be returned to later in this chapter. Richard Meyer, "The Red Envelope: On Censorship and Homosexuality," in *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 3–31; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*.

with sexuality and censorship without compromising my values.<sup>10</sup>

Comprised of prosthetic penises, vaginas, breasts, sex toys and limbs, ordered from a catalogue of medical dummies, Sherman reflects that “I had already been collecting fake tits and asses for years...because I thought that at some point I could do really explicit nudity, but not of myself.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, she uses these mannequins to push the boundaries between sex and pornography, beauty and violence, real and fictive bodies. *Untitled #263* (1992) is comprised of two naked lower torsos, one male, one female, that have been bound together at the waist (fig. 5.1). Spread out on a silk cloth, the upper (male) torso is adorned with a cock-ring; the lower (female) torso has the string of a tampon dangling from it. In *Untitled #250*, a familiar pornographic type is grotesquely altered, as the male gaze is subverted, or, at the very least, confronted (fig. 5.2). Sherman replaces the archetypal beautiful, blond, nude woman with a mannequin; its face is that of an old man, its stomach is distended, and its vulva excretes sausages. In picturing sex, Sherman’s *Sex Pictures* picture a sex devoid of all intimacy, pleasure, and eroticism. Rather, amidst the growing AIDS crisis and in the wake of the Mapplethorpe Controversy, Sherman uses her relative power to offer a photographic mediation on the fundamental issue at stake: the body.

The *Sex Pictures* was not Cindy Sherman’s only engagement with the Mapplethorpe legacy. In 2003, she went on to curate a show of Mapplethorpe’s photography, *Robert Mapplethorpe: Eye to Eye*. Amei Wallace, writing for *The New*

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Eva Respini, “Will the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up?,” in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Eva Respini, Cindy Sherman, and Johanna Burton (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 37–38.

<sup>11</sup> Sean O’Hagan, “Cindy Sherman: ‘I Enjoy Doing the Really Difficult Things That People Can’t Buy,’” *The Observer*, June 8, 2019, sec. Art and design, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/08/cindy-sherman-interview-exhibition-national-portrait-gallery>.

*York Times*, describes Sherman's understanding of Mapplethorpe as "detrimentally revisionist."<sup>12</sup> According to Wallace, Sherman's Mapplethorpe is not the notorious photographer who "made raw sex chic and flowers as provocative as frontal nudity." Rather, Sherman's Mapplethorpe - yet another discursively constructed iteration of an artistic ego that, depending on who you ask, continues to shift between formal genius, sadomasochistic pedophile and everything in between - is, in fact, Cindy Sherman: theatrical, ironic, narrative, attuned to cues about social condition. Sherman selected 57 Mapplethorpe photographs, 31 of which had rarely or never been exhibited. At that point, prices for Mapplethorpe prints ranged from \$7,500 for unknown photographs to \$150,000 for the "popular classics."

Cindy Sherman's direct engagement with Robert Mapplethorpe's work indicates just one example of how his work and his revitalized mythology had taken on momentous weight in terms of artistic engagement, legacy and market-value by the early 1990s, due in large part to its ensnarement within the Culture Wars. By the early 1990s, American art was increasingly political and increasingly focused on the issue of identity; a "turn from a politics of the signifier to a politics of the signified" as Hal Foster described it.<sup>13</sup> It cannot be underestimated just how critical the AIDS crisis was for the art world with many artists creating work in response. As has been contended throughout this dissertation, the Mapplethorpe Controversy foregrounded these issues and brought them onto the national stage. What was once a relatively niche group of society - artists and the art world - was discursively constructed and nationally disseminated into a liberal

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<sup>12</sup> Wallach, "Art/Architecture; Finding Mapplethorpe's Inner Cindy Sherman."

<sup>13</sup> Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial," *October* 66 (1993): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778752>.

elite that stood against everything America was supposed to be. Framed as a “war for the soul of America” and clustered under the terms of “family,” “values,” “patriotism,” “American,” “principles,” “free,” and “morality,” was the ideal: white, Christian, conservative and heteronormative. With regard to Robert Mapplethorpe, this final chapter sets out to investigate how some of the echoes of the Controversy can be detected in the working practice of photographers – both explicitly and implicitly. Yet, foundational to this dissertation is the understanding that discourse creates discourse; our vision is always historically, socially, culturally and politically contingent.

At the time I initially planned this chapter, the case-studies seemed fairly obvious: Cindy Sherman and the *Sex Series*; Jack Sturges’ legal case; Sally Mann’s *Immediate Family* (1992), which had been criticized and censored for child nudity;<sup>14</sup> Catherine Opie and her *O Portfolio* (1999), which in many ways a response, in title, content and formal considerations to Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio*.<sup>15</sup> These ties, echoes, and parallels seemed

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<sup>14</sup> In 1992, Sally Mann created controversy when she published her book, *Immediate Family*, which contains photographs of her young, nude children. While her work was being shown in Milwaukee, a broadcast evangelist created a wave of backlash. Some political and religious groups called her work child pornography, which led to a police investigation of the show. While, unlike Mapplethorpe, whose exhibition was closed, or Jack Sturges, whose equipment and photographs were confiscated by the FBI, Mann was aware of the child pornography laws in various states, and knew she could be brought up on felony charges of child endangerment and obscenity if her work was to be shown there. In a letter to a friend, she wrote that she felt the constant “surveillance and protection of children still in force.” The accusation that she was endangering children was promoted in the media. After this series, Mann stopped published photographs of her children.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Opie’s “O” Portfolio was both very much a reaction to and riff on Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* (1978), which she first saw in a gallery while she was a photography student at the San Francisco Art Institute. As Opie reminisced at the 25h anniversary of the Mapplethorpe Controversy in Cincinnati, “I had never seen the leather community represented that way before. You certainly had other artists working with that subject, but it was never ‘mainstream’ art, it was always on the fringes, staying within the gay community. – embodied lesbianism, rejecting the traditionally handmade craft tradition and narrative tradition and journalistic tradition of lesbian photography – studio photography squared, almost formalist in nature. There’s an inherent political quality in how this work functions as representation. Like Mapplethorpe’s work, Opie’s work relies upon decontextualization and employs the grammar and syntax of formal portraiture to provocative subject matter. For the “O” Portfolio, this subject matter, rather than Mapplethorpe’s gay man, is an embodied lesbianism. For more information, see “Generation X: Catherine Opie on Robert Mapplethorpe,” *ARTnews.Com* (blog), March 31, 2016, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/generation-x-catherine-opie-on-robert-mapplethorpe-1-56449/>.

like the obvious choices. That being said, three contemporaneously events inflected and changed this chapter's selections, evaluations and organization, as our world revealed my own blind spots.

### **Formation**

As noted in the introduction, while this dissertation was in progress, so too was the work that culminated in the two-part exhibition, *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now*, held at the Guggenheim Museum. The first part, held in the early half of 2019, was filled with Mapplethorpe's Polaroids, collages and photographs. The second half of that show showcased artists like Catherine Opie, as well as Lyle Ashton Harris, and Glenn Ligon, who engage with Mapplethorpe formally, aesthetically, as well as subjectively. While I had no part in that show, its premise and critical reception were very much on my mind. If, as *The New York Times* critic Arthur Lubow wrote, Mapplethorpe "aligned perfectly with the historical moment, but that moment has passed," this dissertation is a counterargument<sup>16</sup>

While Chapter Three was, perhaps, the most inflected by the current global pandemic in its consideration of the overlaps, congruencies, and frictions between the AIDS crisis and COVID-19 – thinking of the wars on what constitutes truth; who controls our bodies; how bodies should navigate public space; how bodies should interact with other bodies; the role and power of government; socioeconomic disparities that have led to health disparities; institutionalized, systemic oppression; whose health matters and whose does not – this chapter has very much been informed by the renewed national discussions on racial equity. Thinking of the Mapplethorpe Controversy and the hoist of

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<sup>16</sup> Lubow, "Has Robert Mapplethorpe's Moment Passed?"

corresponding issues, allegations and associations that frequently – in Congress and the media, both academic and popular – conflated homosexuality, disease, obscenity and pedophilia, what largely was not at issue – barring the critique of a handful of critics such as Kobena Mercer, who later revised his initial statements – was race.<sup>17</sup> To be clear: while this dissertation is very much an exploration into the unresolved, dynamic categories of gender, sex, sexuality, race and how these issues are constructed, reconstructed and mythologized, this dissertation is being written in a moment where the nation is swept by the conversations, protests and riots surrounding a renewed focus on equity, justice, systemic racism, police brutality, and black lives against the backdrop of an on-going global pandemic that is adversely and disproportionately affecting this same population.

While the Mapplethorpe Controversy functioned as a rallying point in which the aforementioned liberal art establishment alleged censorship, as Carol Jacobson has aptly argued, this “is actually a conservative brand of censorship based on the ideological

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<sup>17</sup> If anything, this is only reemphasized on the policy-side. Thinking to the Helms Amendment, the amendment banned federal funding for, in the following order: 1) representations of “sodomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; 2) “material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or nonreligion” and *then* 3) “material which denigrates, debases, or revues a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin. Whether turning attention to Dennis Barrie’s criminal trial, the religious right’s mass-mailing campaigns, or the conversations occurring in syndicated columns across the country, the terms consistently were homoeroticism, sodomasochism, and child pornography *not* racism. That said, while Helms’ sustained attack was directed at Mapplethorpe’s sexuality and diagnosis, he did briefly address race. As noted, while Kobena Mercer initially perceived racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe’s imagery, Helms’ concerns differed. Talking to *The New York Times*, Helms made the following distinction: “There a big difference between *The Merchant of Venice* and a photograph of two males of different races [in an erotic pose] on a marble top.” Yet, no such picture exists. Helms seems to be conflating *Mark Stevens* (*Mr. 10 ½*) with *Embrace* (1982), a photograph of two shirtless men, both wearing jeans, hugging. It, again, is a piece of evidence manufactured by Helms. While Meyer launches into a psychoanalytically-inflected reading of this conflation, I want to suggest that this piece of manufactured evidence, like the “photo of naked children in bed with a naked man,” which works to fulfill the long-standing fear of the child predator, works to fill another longstanding fear: miscegenation. Maureen Down, “Unruffled Helms Basks in Eye of Arts Storm,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 1989; Richard Meyer, “The Jesse Helms Theory of Art,” *October* 104, no. 104 (Spring 2003): 131–38.

assumption that public expression is a ‘natural’ entitlement of the dominant (i.e., white, heterosexist Western male) perspective.”<sup>18</sup> This conservative brand of censorship understands censorship as external, repressive and authoritative. Chapter Three explored how this brand of perceived (external) censorship can be a productive force in how it popularized, circulated and introduced “Mapplethorpe” into a growing national conversation. Chapter Four continued this exploration through the NEA Four but also touched on the more implicit, commonplace censorship that occurs through exclusionary practices, such as those explicitly denounced by David Wojnarowicz. Yet, the terms of these chapters revolved around the debates on gender and sexuality. Race was, largely, left out of the Mapplethorpe Controversy.

It is productive to consider this through the lens of what Lucy Lippard describes as Cultural Amnesia: what is dismissed often reveals as much about the zeitgeist as what is canonized. Events, artists and artwork forgotten by art-world power structures – and, as discussed in Chapter Four, even alternative art scenes are often part of these power structures, however marginally - can, when recalled, evoke something alien, perhaps even threatening to a high-cultural identity.<sup>19</sup> While this dissertation does not claim to reveal any hidden truth or expose some newly discovered moment of this cultural amnesia – racism in America and American art is a well-documented, longstanding social injustice - this chapter is very much contoured by the silences on race that typify the critical

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<sup>18</sup> Carol Jacobsen, “Redefining Censorship: A Feminist View,” *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (1991): 42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/777322>.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Too Political? Forget About It,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999), 39–61.



discourse on the Mapplethorpe Controversy. My aim in this chapter is not to find something “new” but place these moments in dialogue.

In revisiting the Mapplethorpe Controversy, how this “Cultural Amnesia” has been rectified in the academic landscape on Robert Mapplethorpe - including in this dissertation - has been through the incorporation and attention paid to sexuality. In remarking on the shift in theoretical considerations from the 1960s and 1970s to the late 1980s, Douglas Crimp notes:

What was excluded from postmodern theory, which made it considerably less enabling was the dangerous, even murderous, ways in which homophobia, in rendering us blind, structures every aspect of our culture. Sadly, it takes the horror of AIDS and the virulent backlash against gay people that it has unleashed to teach us the gravity of this theoretical omission.<sup>20</sup>

While Crimp was undoubtedly correct – we can see how homophobia was recast as sound public policy amidst the AIDS crisis and led to the death of tens of thousands – race is left completely out of view. One could (and perhaps should) add racism into Crimp’s admittance: one can see the “dangerous, even murderous, ways in which homophobia [and racism], in rendering us blind, structures every aspect of our culture.” It goes without saying, perhaps, that in 2021, we increasingly understand how race and implicit racism, largely via the invention of “colorblind conservatism,” structures American culture, policy, economy and life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Crimp, “The Boys in My Bedroom,” 162.

<sup>21</sup> While the post-Civil Rights era ushered in a new “normal” with the relative demise of the Jim Crow, explicit type of racism, we know that systemic injustice continues to be pervasive social, economic, and financial facets of American life and culture. Yet the majority of white people report being “not racist.” The perception, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s was that the playing field was level, racist attitudes and behaviors had been purged. See Richard Herrnstein and Murray Charles, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, n.d.); Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990); Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: London: Free Press Paperback; Simon and Schuster, 1995).

Writing about the Culture Wars, scholar Michelle Wallace remarks: “I first heard the term ‘culture wars’ in the late 1980s, around the same time I discovered Robert Mapplethorpe’s extraordinary photographic nudes... Given this particular context, I wondered what ‘culture wars’ meant for black people.”<sup>22</sup> For Wallace, Mapplethorpe’s work and the Culture Wars exist side-by-side, one informing the other. Within the history of art, what has largely been constructed as the Culture Wars, including in this dissertation, was (and is) the ongoing battle between the religious right and conservative politicians versus the NEA and artists over the grounds of gender, sexuality and the representation thereof.<sup>23</sup> The Mapplethorpe Controversy is a case-study that exposes how identity, really the discourse of identity, circulates and makes it more visible, both in terms of the country, broadly speaking, and the art world, in particular. In doing so, it also helps expose the oppressive and discriminating structures of artistic criteria, itself a form of censorship: which artists show, what art is shown, where that art is shown, who it is shown to and what the art market deems valuable.

In this way, the Mapplethorpe Controversy, was a battle against and between hegemonic white insiders – the so-called liberal elite versus conservative voices construed as the “silent majority.” As the story goes, the Mapplethorpe Controversy was central to the uproar that ended government funding for the arts. That sentence equalizes and, in doing so, omits the underlying racial inequities of that decision. As Wallace points out, black artists have been especially dependent on public findings since they

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<sup>22</sup> Michelle Wallace, “The Culture War Within the Culture Wars: Race,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>23</sup> While Chapter Four certainly problematized the alliance between the NEA, the art establishment and artists, the actors and axes of identities taken into consideration – gender and sexuality – were relatively constant.

tend to lack the sort of private sector funding more frequently afforded to white artists and have historically worked to gain entrance into institutional spaces that work to disavow them. Thus, while both the religious right, conservative politicians *and* the liberal art establishment were debating the terms of censorship – demarcating censorship from public funding, censorship and free expression – this debate was largely grounded in a conservative conception of censorship as that which is overt, repressive, authoritative and external.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the debate over overt censorship was staked in the same terms as had been the debate over overt racism. What critics, curators, scholars, and artists such as Michelle Wallace, Thelma Golden, Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems and Lyle Ashton Harris among others, recognize and draw attention to is how this focus on overt censorship masks the multifarious ways in which implicit censorship operates on a much more subtle, more ostensibly consensual level. Throughout the history of art, this typically has been organized and perpetuated through the aforementioned establishment, proliferation, and deployment of an “objective” set of artistic criteria that organizes and disseminates knowledge through its institutions – museums, galleries, the market – and has worked to elevate straight, white men.

This chapter sets out to investigate how the silence surrounding the politics of race in Mapplethorpe’s work has been exposed by practicing black artists. Rather than attempt to establish a monocausal relationship or neat explanation, the following artworks are complicated. They work within, in between and, at times, against racial politics, art institutions, white nationalism, history, subjectivity, and theory. In situating them against, in relation to and within the Mapplethorpe Controversy, rather than illuminate some

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<sup>24</sup> For a concise and informative overview of New Censorship Theory, see Matthew Bunn, “Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After,” *History and Theory* 54, no. 1 (2015): 25–44.

untold “truth,” I hope to further complicate its history. Rather than propose some sort of white patrilinear model between Mapplethorpe and the following works, thus reproducing the sort of racist, colonizing view that has been dominant in American society and art, I hope to point out the critical dialogues that - in various ways – resist and critique this very omission. The trajectory of this chapter follows this exploration. While it began full circle, returning to the work of Cindy Sherman from here I look to how artists like Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems and Lyle Ashton Harris – three artists who explicitly and aesthetically engaged with the Mapplethorpe mythology - used photography and Mapplethorpe as a foothold into an effective form of aesthetic resistance and critique against the surrounding intuitional, symbolic and political violence of misogyny, heterosexism and racism.

### **Forward**

What has been, perhaps glaringly, missing from this dissertation and its discussion of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work and its surrounding discourse, mythology and legacy is the issue of race. While Kobena Mercer’s critical revision explicitly notes how his initial take on Mapplethorpe - as racial fetishist - had been revised to account for ambivalence as a means to resist the religious right’s potential appropriation of his words, race was not involved in the large-scale, national debates on obscenity, homosexuality and AIDS as they pertained to the Mapplethorpe photographs. According to the religious right and conservative politicians, Mapplethorpe was a homosexual, a pedophile, and a sexual deviant. But a racist? No mention. The photographs circulated – in Congress, the national media, religious right organizations – were primarily photographs from Mapplethorpe’s X Portfolio and the two images of children: *Jesse McBride* and *Rosie*.

The debates that arose and that forever changing public funding for art were entrenched in the terms of obscenity, which, as argued throughout the previous two chapters was never really about the photographs, proper, but the bodies that were (re)presented and the perceived threat those bodies posed to a white, patriarchal, heteronormative society that was collapsing homosexuality with disease and using the AIDS crisis as evidence.

While Jesse Helms may have raised a considerable fuss around *Man in a Polyester Suit*, none of the images on trial in Cincinnati included any black men.<sup>25</sup> The trial and the surrounding national discourse seemed largely unconcerned with the issue of race. As discussed, the trial very much became the fever pitch amidst the already raging Culture Wars and, simultaneously, the public platform where Mapplethorpe's defenders—art historians, critics, curators, along with other art world ambassadors — attempted to (objectively) demonstrate the artistic value of Mapplethorpe's work and, in terms of the legal outcome of the case, did so successfully. While the prosecution assumed that the works' supposed obscenity was blatant, the defense's two-part strategy of establishing Mapplethorpe as part of a classical art historical canon with which the working-class jury was largely unfamiliar and, in turn, situating the questionable photographs within what was constructed, by both the prosecution and defense alike, to be diametrically opposed genres of “art” and “obscenity” was successful.

The majority of the revisions, reversals, and reconsiderations discussed in Chapter Four, barring Mercer's which was explicitly motivated by a desire to *not* be appropriated

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<sup>25</sup> In early August 1989, Helms had sent four Mapplethorpe photographs to twenty-six congressmen: *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980), *Rosie* (1976), *Jesse McBride* (1976) and *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 ½)* (1976). Additionally, Patrick Buchanan did reference “an elephantine penis hanging out of a pair of pants” in various articles, but neither explicitly disclosed explicit indications of race. Kara Swisher, “Helms' ‘Indecent’ Sampler,” *Washington Post*, August 8, 1989, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/08/08/helmss-indecnt-sampler/d4cb78d2-f09d-4c77-9b04-f2489d948f59/>; Buchanan, “Pursued by Baying Yahoos.”

by right-wing conservatives, were all tethered to notions of propriety and obscenity and the perceived threat marginalized bodies posed to the status quo – a cosmos of issues that revolved around gender and sexuality. What was circulated was the argument surrounding homosexuality as disease, the displacement of AIDS onto and as a sign of a morally-repugnant disorder. What was not at issue were the images of black nudes, which is precisely the point here. While right-wing critics saw Mapplethorpe’s work as indicative of the “war for the soul of America,” as Patrick Buchanan had described it, that war – as far as the art establishment was concerned - was about sexuality and gender, not race.<sup>26</sup> Yet race was a central political, social and economic issue. It still is. While politicians and religious leaders may have been explicitly decrying the “homosexual community,” race was far more coded.<sup>27</sup> As far as Reagan, who had been notably silent on the AIDS crisis, he frequently discussed race in guised terms; welfare reform dominated his discussions on policy at almost every campaign stop in his failed 1976 presidential bid. The “welfare queen,” a persona popularized by Reagan, was frequently invoked in his speeches on welfare abuse perpetuated by single women.<sup>28</sup> As one study

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<sup>26</sup> I specify the art establishment here because race was “caught” in the Culture Wars but in music. Members of 2 Live Crew became subjects of national debate as many of the same voices firing against Mapplethorpe’s work were also casting the group’s music as a form of obscenity, a charge for which they were arrested for.

<sup>27</sup> Reagan’s discussions on race can best be described as colorblind conservatism. “Welfare queens” evoke black women, “states’ rights,” in the context of the Southern United States where Reagan endorsed them, was coded resistance to desegregation. As Richard Primuth notes, during George Wallace’s Alabama gubernatorial inauguration (1963), he demanded “‘Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!’ He later wished that he had moderated his refrain to ‘States’ rights now! States’ rights tomorrow! States’ rights forever!’” Reagan had done exactly that. Reagan and Wallace were no exception; there’s a considerable amount of scholarship focused on the “Southern Strategy,” the racially-based tactic Republicans employed (and continue to employ) to gain white, southern voters. Richard Primuth, “Ronald Reagan’s Use of Race in the 1976 and 1980 Presidential Elections,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2016): 36–66; Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1996); Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> The “welfare queen,” whom Reagan repeatedly referenced on the campaign trail was a Chicago women, Linda Taylor, who the state had charged with welfare abuse in a truly bizarre case: the woman was accused

put it: “in the popular imagination, the stereotype of the “welfare queen” is thoroughly raced — she’s an indolent black woman, living off the largesse of taxpayers. The term is seen by many as a dog whistle, a way to play on racial anxieties without summoning them directly.”<sup>29</sup> Reagan’s coded rhetoric was far from exceptional.

American life in the late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by the post-Civil Rights repackaged racism that, frequently, hid under the guise of colorblindness. While, on the one hand, there was a half-hearted embrace of multiculturalism and diversity, with increased representation and visibility for people of color, on the other hand, it was a period shaped by attacks on affirmative action, the rise of the New Jim Crow and the 1992 Los Angeles Race Riots. It was also a period when the (typically, marginalized) body became a central locus point in some of the fiercest debates and controversies over propriety and power. While the AIDS crisis brought the gay male body under national spotlight and censure, and conservatism continued to try to chip away at women’s bodies through debates surrounding gender and abortion, black bodies garnered a particularly new type of attention: Jesse Jackson’s bid to run for Democratic president; the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas televised, sexual harassment case; the beating of Rodney King and consequent Los Angeles riots; the emergence of Critical Race Theory; the spread of

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of defrauding the government hundreds of thousands of dollars through dozens of aliases, addresses, husbands, and identities as well as robbery, kidnapping, bigamy, and insurance fraud. Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “‘The Crime of Survival’: Fraud Prosecutions, Community Surveillance.; Original ‘Welfare Queen,’” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 2 (2007): 329–54.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the raced and gendered coding of “Welfare Queen” see Gene Demby, “The Truth Behind The Lies Of The Original ‘Welfare Queen,’” NPR.org, accessed December 20, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen>; Carly Hayden Foster, “The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, Class, and Public Opinion,” *Race, Gender & Class* 15, no. 3/4 (2008): 162–79; “Dethroning the Welfare Queen: The Rhetoric of Reform,” *Harvard Law Review* 107, no. 8 (1994): 2013–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341766>; Premilla Nadasen, “From Widow to ‘Welfare Queen’: Welfare and the Politics of Race,” *Black Women, Gender + Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 52–77.;

colorblindism; the widespread popularity of *The Bell Curve*; and the strengthening of the prison-industrial complex.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of the Mapplethorpe Controversy, the art world's sterilization of Robert Mapplethorpe via the emphasis of form over content, which had largely begun as a critical academic project, as discussed through Chapter Two, but had successfully coalesced into the narratives and justifications constructed by and through the *Cincinnati v. Contemporary Arts Center* defense and ruling, reveals a critical misstep made by the art world amid the Culture Wars. To reduce Mapplethorpe's "controversial" photographs, with their blatant content on queer and sadomasochistic sexualities to formal studies in light and symmetry was both a failure to advocate for the legitimacy of controversial content and a failure to recognize content's potential. To unequivocally hail Mapplethorpe as the bad-boy purveyor of free expression and formal aesthetics erases not only a considerable body of his work, but the corresponding social and political complexities and exchanges. The continued insistence on formal qualities over the import of social content worked to delegitimize the responses of viewers who sensed — quite correctly—the sexual lure which many of Mapplethorpe's images offer, as well as the racial politics of others. This sort of revisionism smooths out the difficulties that arise from the content of these images and limits their meaning. It also dramatically shifts the stakes of the national argument. While the art world may have legally codified Mapplethorpe's art as such given its celebrated formal attributes, as Carol Vance noted in

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve* (1994) ignited debate about the relationship between race, intelligence and poverty, explaining that the driving force of poverty and crime is a gap in cognitive ability. The authors argued that IQ was mostly genetic and that blacks as an "ethnic" group were innately less intelligent than whites. See Herrnstein and Charles, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*.



*Art in America*, the assault on art being waged by conservative politicians and the religious right had very little to do with light and symmetry or an object's "serious artistic merit," and much more to do with its content and messaging "to restore traditional social arrangements and reduce diversity."<sup>31</sup> The conversation, controversy and censorship was a means to control the bodies represented, not the aesthetic modes of that representation.

In terms of the conversation and debate on race and Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, it remains rather ambivalent. In addition to the formalist celebration of Mapplethorpe - the so-called "aestheticization of social taboos" as it was described on the *Black Book*'s dust jacket - are voices like Kay Larson, who in a catalogue essay from *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, declared that his "black men are the first, in my memory of photographic history, to be given full dignity and equal stature asexual beings," or Mapplethorpe, himself, who noted that the photographs "were taken because I hadn't seen pictures like that before."<sup>32</sup> In addition to Kobena Mercer's 1986 critique and his 1989 revised critique of the photographs' racial fetishism, there is an array of preexisting scholarly and critical discourse produced over the past 15 years that examines the way Mapplethorpe's black male nudes fit into, defy and, for others, reify long-standing racist traditions and tropes.<sup>33</sup> These include Thomas Yingling's complex defense of Mapplethorpe's practice in which he argues that due to the absence of sexual difference between sitter and photographer, Mapplethorpe must rely on racial difference to figure

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<sup>31</sup> Vance, "The War on Culture," 229.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe, *The Black Book*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Schirmer-Mosel, 2010); Kardon et al., *Robert Mapplethorpe*.

<sup>33</sup> Kobena Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 171–220; Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Things: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary".

desire.<sup>34</sup> Peggy Phelan's essay in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, which not only situates portraiture as a fundamentally performative act but Mapplethorpe's use of the black male body as a psychological screen for his own artistic subjectivity.<sup>35</sup> José Esteban Muñoz's investigation into the possibility of an anti-racist disidentification with Mapplethorpe's images through his understanding of the works' textual ambivalence.

These critiques are predominately structured around the photographs, themselves, and were staged through academic modes that, largely speaking, limit the scope of the conversation: Kay Larson aestheticizes; Yingling defends; Phelan psychoanalyzes; Muñoz complicates. All of these mark formative and substantial contributions to a body of academic discourse that sutures Robert Mapplethorpe's work into larger conversations about art, photography, and representation throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At times, these critiques are critical. Often, they are redemptive. Barring those like bell hooks, Essex Hemphill, and (initially) Kobena Mercer, the critical consensus formed by mostly white critics was that to question the racial politics of the work was to work in service of Mapplethorpe's pundits.<sup>36</sup> Rather than attempt to situate the photographs within this sort of critical landscape and stake a claim on these grounds, this chapter both draws upon how the issue of race and Mapplethorpe was largely negated from popular discourse and explores the sort of privileging the Mapplethorpe Controversy imparted to his work to examine the corresponding possibilities that silence opened up through the exploration of

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Yingling, "How the Eye Is Caste: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Limits of Controversy," *Discourse* 12, no. 2 (1990): 3–28.

<sup>35</sup> Peggy Phelan, "Duplicating the Negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor and Sherman," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, ed. Ann O'Day Maples Professor of the Arts/Professor of English Peggy Phelan (Psychology Press, 1993), 34–70.

<sup>36</sup> See bell hooks, "Representing the Black Male Body," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), 202–12; Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, 1st ed (Washington, D.C: Redbone Press, 2007); Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe."

three artists' interventions: Glenn Ligon's *Red Portfolio* (1993) and *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-1993); Lyle Ashton Harris' *Constructs* (1989); Carrie Mae Weems' *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995).

This chapter in particular is very much informed by black feminist thought. Writing about the dominance of Mapplethorpe's images of black male nudes, bell hooks notes their relative privilege as *the* quintessential images of this genre not only in the art world but popular culture. As previously noted, they were described by Kay Larson in the *Perfect Moment* exhibition catalogue as "the first, in my memory of photographic history, to be given full dignity and equal stature as sexual beings" and by Mapplethorpe, himself, who noted that the photographs "were taken because I hadn't seen pictures like that before." Due to the Mapplethorpe Controversy, these photographs were endowed with privilege given their increased circulation, (relative) popularity and as products of the artist at the center. hooks views the consequences of this privileging as a sort of pressure other artists face in a need to reference Mapplethorpe's work in their own. As a result, according to hooks, this public response "subordinates all other image-making of the black male body both by insisting that it reference or mirror this work and by continually foregrounding these images in ways that erase and exclude more compelling oppositional representations," itself "a colonizing process that recentralizes Mapplethorpe's work and reinforces its prominence/dominance."<sup>37</sup> Rather than (re)centralizing Mapplethorpe's work, as has been the case throughout this dissertation, this chapter works to destabilize any notion of a static body of work, looking more at the mythology that surrounds it; the social discourse that created, sustained and circulated various "Mapplethorpes" and

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<sup>37</sup> hooks, "Representing the Black Male Body," 210.

polyvocal readings of these photographic source materials. hooks goes on to identify artists – including Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems and Lyle Ashton Harris, among others – who employ a “revolutionary visual aesthetic ...[that]... *appropriates, revises, and reinvents*, [emphasis added]” a strategy she endorses as a means to overcome the “the visual hegemony of these nonprogressive white male-owned and -operated images of the black male body.”<sup>38</sup>

If these sorts of controlling images, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, oppress, ideologically, by defining and regulating what it means to be black and reveals the dominant group’s interests and justifies political and economic oppressions by encoding stereotypes into all aspects of society thus making economic and political oppression appear natural, this chapter is situated in that juncture, exploring direct interventions – by these three artists – that took up these silences to stage conversations about through the medium and use of photography.<sup>39</sup> Collins’ framework helps illuminate not only how the aforementioned artists use Mapplethorpe’s images to complicate and destabilize the pathologizing way his work conforms to stereotypes, but, how the Mapplethorpe Controversy (mis)constructed and consolidated a mythology of Mapplethorpe based on two competing types - Mapplethorpe as the sign of America’s moral degradation and Mapplethorpe the champion of free expression – both of which were largely constructed and asserted around his artistic persona. For the following case studies, I assert that these artists both capitalize off of the Mapplethorpe legacy as such, but also work to dismantle this artistic persona, leaving the viewer with a complex nexus that works to critically

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<sup>38</sup> hooks, 210.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition (New York: London: Routledge, 2000).

assess how (racial) identity is a continually (re)constructed, negotiated, filtered manifestation of power.

### **Hold Up**

As Cherise Smith has noted, artists like Glenn Ligon, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Carrie Mae Weems had the advantage of growing up during the Civil Rights Era within society both where disenfranchised people had more educational and financial opportunities than previous generations and one that is completely media-driven, whereby ethnic-, racial-, gender- and sexual- prejudices still prevail in all realms, especially the visual.<sup>40</sup> At the center of their respective practices is fundamental questioning of how media – mass and fine art – participate in the creation, dissemination and circulation of stereotypical information. While Glenn Ligon’s work typically does not fit this list, as his work is largely text-based rather than photography-based, I add him here because of the ways his work inherently engages with the visual, such as in projects like *Red Portfolio* (1993) and *Notes on the Margins of the Black Book* (1990-1993). I consider these artists’ work in terms of the similarity in their approaches, source material, and modes of representation.

Robert Mapplethorpe died on March 9, 1989; three months before the Corcoran canceled *The Perfect Moment* and a year and a half before Dennis Barrie was indicted on obscenity charges. While Mapplethorpe was never able to respond to the very public attacks on his work – the Mapplethorpe Controversy occurred after his death - other artists did. Glenn Ligon’s *Red Portfolio* (1993) is one of these direct responses. While not

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<sup>40</sup> Cherise Smith, “Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Willie Robert Middlebrook at The Art Institute of Chicago,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 24, no. 2 (1999): 19.

a photographer, per se, Ligon's practice is by all accounts conceptually driven and consists of photography, as well as painting, printmaking and installation. *Red Portfolio*, one of these installations, consists of nine framed silver gelatin prints that, from a distance, look nearly identical (fig. 5.3). Arranged linearly, each print is dominated by a black monochromatic field upon which white text has been centered and printed so small, they require the viewer to approach them to be read. The surfaces are reflective enough that, depending on one's angle, one can see their own reflection on the text's surface, further implicating the viewer in viewing (fig. 5.4). Each print contains one of Reverend Donald Wildmon's one-line descriptions of the Mapplethorpe photographs, text which was originally written on the American Family Association's (AFA) postcards and pamphlets and disseminated across the country to politicians and supporters in the attack on the National Endowment for the Arts in October 1989. One reads: "A photo showing one man holding another man's genitals" while another says: "A photo of a man with a bullwhip inserted in his rectum" and of course the notorious "A photo of naked children in bed with a naked man," the fictitious description Wildmon included that has no known referent.

Taking its name from the AFA's red envelope campaign, discussed in Chapter Three, Ligon's work reenacts the same sort of performative quality of the AFA's in that, without the corresponding photographs, the descriptions are not illusory, but constitutive. They enact an imagining that may or may not match the actual photographs being described and, in doing so, they (re)create an image in the viewer's mind, while they also work to destabilize authorial autonomy. Who is the author of this work? Ligon? Or Wildmon? Wildmon is supposedly describing Mapplethorpe's photographs, but it is

Wildmon's descriptions that become the object of Ligon's installation, not Mapplethorpe's photographs, per se. Not only does Ligon's work reveal the contradictions of censorship in that, as Richard Meyer has argued, censorship productively incites our desire to see what it seeks to hide, but Ligon's work further shifts and interrogates the stakes and consequences.

If Donald Wildmon's campaign appropriated Mapplethorpe's photographs through a textual transformation (photographs to descriptions of photographs) to bring the work outside of the museum and into the hundreds of thousands of homes the descriptions were mailed to, Ligon's direct appropriation of Wildmon's returns the transformed objects back into the museum. Now, rather than viewing these descriptions in the privacy of one's home, Ligon's work restructures that relationship in that the viewer has now returned to the public sphere; they revel in the descriptions, imagine their referents, and they are therefore implicated in the public space of the museum, at times, seeing themselves in and on the very works that they are imagining.<sup>41</sup> In an installation that very much replicates how the (at times, supposed) Mapplethorpe photographs circulated the national conversation, the content of the work is inherently reliant upon its viewing. Without the viewer, there are merely descriptions, no images. Imaging is imagining. Ligon's installation suggests that it is viewership that creates content.

This was not Ligon's only direct intervention and dialogue with Mapplethorpe's work and legacy. Ligon's *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-1993), another work created amidst the backdrop of a critical landscape that, while celebrating Mapplethorpe's representation of gay desire - a landscape that, notably, included Kobena

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<sup>41</sup> Meyer, "The Red Envelope: On Censorship and Homosexuality."

Mercer's reevaluation of the work – largely ignored the racial difference between the white photographer, black models, and all-but-assumed white audience. Ligon's intervention is both direct and ambivalent. Direct in that, for *Notes on the Margin of the Black Books*, one of Ligon's most well-known works of the 1990s, he appropriates ninety-one images from Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* (1996). Ambivalent in that Ligon blows up the images, places them on gallery walls, and again, stages a departure from how the photographs would have been typically viewed in the private, intimate space one fills while combing through a book (fig. 5.5). Like *Red Portfolio*, Ligon's appropriation transforms private consumption into public contemplation. The viewer no longer looks at the photographs in a book at home, seated, but stands before the images in a museum with countless other people. Unlike in the private space of one's home, in a museum, the viewer increasingly becomes aware of themselves as objects to be seen in the act looking.<sup>42</sup>

Ligon arranges these enlarged photographs into two long rows. Sandwiched between the photographs are seventy-eight framed cards. In comparison to the enlarged photographs, as in *Red Portfolio*, the size of the text requires the viewer to approach the work. The text cannot be read from afar. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the text is actually quotations appropriated from a diverse variety of voices – academics, queer theorists, Christian commentators, drag queens, politicians and authors – articulating a multiplicity of opinions with no one response outweighing another. The arrangement of the text evokes conversations which, at times: obscure the content; align

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<sup>42</sup> For more on this type of transformation, see Tony Bennett's essay, "The Exhibitionary Complex" in which Bennett draws parallels between Michel Foucault's panopticon and the modern museum. Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *Grasping the World*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019), 413–41, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429399671-27>.



with the work and each other; contradict; refer to specific images from the *Black Book*, but are not always arranged proximally; argue for the integrity of the photographs; argue against the integrity of the photographs; open conversations on race and representation, artistic power and privilege, sexuality and identity, AIDS, and death. In one early version of the installation, a card with Ligon's statement, which distills the conflicting and contradicting responses the work brings together - "Mapplethorpe's relation to Warhol includes an ability to mirror the desire and prejudices of his spectators, to make them see what they do not want to see" - was next to a quotation from Rita Burke, president of the Massachusetts branch of Morality in Media, from news coverage of the *Perfect Moment* controversy that read, "People looking at these kind of pictures become addicts and spread AIDS." By the very act of viewing then, in this moment, the viewer is implicated both as desiring subject and as a possible addict and spreader of AIDS. The stakes of viewing are in constant negotiation. In other words, Ligon's appropriation and reinvention of the *Black Book* decenters the author and viewer; it can no longer be read in terms of pure formal aesthetics, as Kay Larson had seen it, the racial difference between sitter and photographer, as Thomas Yingling had framed it, or about the photographer's use of a psychological screen, as Peggy Phelan had argued. It is all of these and none of these. Ligon's work reveals the situational indeterminacy in its suggestion that author, subject, content and meaning are always in flux.

In terms of the AIDS crisis, Ligon's 1993 appropriation of Mapplethorpe's 1986 *Black Book* implicitly interrogates the racial dimension of the crisis and the cultural capital that undergirded Mapplethorpe's practice. While the American AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s was often embodied by the image of an urban, white, gay

male – something consistently recreated in contemporary depictions of the crisis - the crisis devastated and continues to devastate the black community.<sup>43</sup> By 1989, Mapplethorpe told a reporter that because his black sitters often could not afford the very expensive AZT, “they all died quickly...if I go through my *Black Book*, half of them are dead.”<sup>44</sup> To this end, Ligon’s incorporation of bell hooks’ quote – “Isn’t it interesting that the photographs always come just when the tribe is dying out? So too with the ‘celebration’ in these Mapplethorpe pictures of black men. Better catch them before they die out” – draws attention to Mapplethorpe’s relative privilege as a white man with insurance, who could buy AZT and reminds the viewer how power and privilege operate on various, interlocking axes.

Without revising, focusing on, or championing a singular perspective, voice or reading, Ligon brings, blends and takes stock of the corresponding debates that, on the one hand, existed within the confines of art journals and scholarly conferences and, on the other hand, within the heightened national conversation all into the “public” space of the museum. As Christopher Reed suggests, “the provocations and contradictions

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<sup>43</sup> As noted in the introduction, more recent films and documentaries of acclaim that represent the American AIDS crisis both reaffirm the notion that it is purely historical and replicate the dominating stereotype of it being something that ravaged the white, urban gay community, alone. *Philadelphia* (1993), *And The Band Played On* (1994), *Angels in America* (2003), *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), *The Dallas Buyer’s Club* (2013), *The Normal Heart* (2014) and *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018). Studies indicate that one in two black gay or bisexual black men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime, compared with 1 in 11 for white gay and bisexual men. Yet, historically speaking, black men were often left out of the popular imagination. A lot of this, perhaps, has to do with the faces most associated with ACT-UP white, affluent gay men, which has led to charges that paint the entire organization as racist. As Deborah Gould has pointed out, this totalizing distortion masks actions that necessitate a more multifaceted understanding. As ACT UP/NY member Robert Vazquez-Pacheco recalls, when issues of race would come up, “everyone would just sort of like go into that stunned, ‘Don’t call me racist, don’t call me racist’” As many recall, ACT-UP, was painted not only with rage, but feelings of desperation. See Linda Villarosa, “America’s Hidden H.I.V. Epidemic,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2017, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/magazine/americas-hidden-hiv-epidemic.html>; Deborah B. Gould, “ACT UP, Racism, and the Question of How To Use History,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 54–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2011.638661>.

<sup>44</sup> Dunne, “Robert Mapplethorpe’s Finale.”

engaged by *Notes on the Margin of the 'Black Book'* perform an expansion of gay identity to include black men occupying a diversity of positions: seen and seeing, erotic and intellectual, inspired and outraged,” as Ligon’s work works to unsettle notions of fixed identity, what Reed describes as “among the most thoughtful manifestations of ‘queer sensibility.’”<sup>45</sup> Ligon’s work creates space around these images for alternative commentary that requires the viewer to acknowledge and consider the racial tensions and how their own bodies navigate these circuits. Ligon’s inclusion of these, at times, radically dissident voices not only unsettles Mapplethorpe’s position as *the* authorial voices, but the notion of *any* singular authorial voice.

First shown at the now infamous and highly controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial, which occurred just a year after the Rodney King riots and four years after the Culture Wars reached a fever pitch with the Dennis Barrie trial, the institutional discourse informs the work’s viewing. Describing the Biennial as political is perhaps an understatement. While the Whitney had, for decades, been criticized for maintaining a collection and sponsoring exhibitions that privileged white, male artists, the 1993 Biennial was a radical departure. It was a show “less about the art of our time than about the times themselves,” as Roberta Smith put it.<sup>46</sup> Glenn Ligon’s work was part of an enormous assemblage of art that addressed politics: George Holliday’s ten-minute video of the 1991 Rodney King beating; admissions buttons, designed by Daniel J. Martinez, that read “I CAN’T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE”; Nan Goldin’s brightly colored photographs of transgender people; Kiki Smith’s corporeal, gory

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 253.

<sup>46</sup> Roberta Smith, “At the Whitney, a Biennial with a Social Conscience,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/05/arts/at-the-whitney-a-biennial-with-a-social-conscience.html>.

sculptures; Nancy Spero's drawings of torture and war crimes; Cindy Sherman's *Sex Pictures*, another direct engagement with Mapplethorpe discussed earlier in this chapter; as well as work from other artists with explicit political orientations including Nan Goldin, Spike Lee, Alison Saar, Lorna Simpson, Nancy Spero, and Fred Wilson.

In tandem with the politics of the aforementioned artists and their work was the perceived politics by viewers and critics alike. Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times* writes: "It has brought various New York critics of usually discordant opinions into rare harmony: at the least, they dislike it. I hate the show." He goes on to describe the art as "grim," "political sloganeering and self-indulgent self-expression."<sup>47</sup> Critic Robert Hughes called it "a fiesta of whining" comprised of work where "the aesthetic quality is for the most part feeble. The level of grievance and moral rhetoric, however, is stridently high."<sup>48</sup> Christopher Knight, writing for *The LA Times*, described it as "awful."<sup>49</sup> Deborah Solomon positioned the Biennial as "the most disturbing museum show in living memory," "a showcase for political correctness," "a theme park for the oppressed."<sup>50</sup> Jed Perl argued the show was calculated as a mean to get "white male critics into ... [a] sweat of guilt and remorse and accommodation." In *The Village Voice*,

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "ART VIEW; At the Whitney, Sound, Fury and Little Else," *The New York Times*, April 25, 1993, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/25/arts/art-view-at-the-whitney-sound-fury-and-little-else.html>.

<sup>48</sup> "Art: The Whitney Biennial: A Fiesta of Whining," *4VF News - Daily News Channel* (blog), accessed June 24, 2020, <http://www.4vf.net/art-the-whitney-biennial-a-fieta-of-whining/>.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Knight, "Art in Review: Crushed by Its Good Intentions Under the Banner of Opening up the Institutional Art World to Expansive Diversity, the Whitney Biennial Has in Fact Perversely Narrowed Its Scope to an Almost Excruciating Degree.," *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-03-10-ca-1335-story.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Deborah Solomon, "A Showcase for Political Correctness," *Wall Street Journal (1923 - Current File)*; *New York, N.Y.*, March 5, 1993.

Peter Schjeldahl called the art angry, portentous, condescending, and left him “grouchy.”<sup>51</sup>

Steven Dubin situates the 1993 Whitney Biennial within the contexts of what he describes as the revisionist exhibition trend of the 1990s. In his book, *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum*, Dubin examines a number of controversial exhibitions contending that many of them were actually displays of power, influenced by the new social history which, according to Dubin, forced museums to question their truth claims, taxonomies and presentation. Put another way, through these episodic investigations of controversial exhibitions, Dubin suggests that museums have become increasingly understood as produces of knowledge rather than shrines to objects, a shift away from the museum as a “sacred spaces” into “hotly contested battlegrounds,” from “sanctuary” to “a site for the contest of values and ideas, as David A. Ross the director of the Whitney, put it in his catalogue introduction to this 1993 Whitney Biennial.”<sup>52</sup> Central to these controversies, as Dubin argues, is the time in which they occur – always at moments when power is shifting and the relative status of certain groups is in question. Thus the Whitney’s 1993 Biennial, which perhaps could not have existed without the Culture Wars, brought identity politics – specifically an identity politics grounded in and on the body, which, as Thelma Golden wrote in her catalogue essay to this 1993 Biennial “provides an immediate sites for discussion of cultural, gender, class, and sexuality specificity”<sup>53</sup> - to the forefront as artists addressed identity,

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<sup>51</sup> “A Brief History of the Whitney Biennial | The Village Voice,” accessed August 12, 2020, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/03/15/a-brief-history-of-the-whitney-biennial/>.

<sup>52</sup> Steven Dubin, *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Thelma Golden, “What’s White,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 28.

not through autobiographical representation, but through the understanding of representation as central to an understanding of contemporary cultures.<sup>54</sup>

The echoes and ties to and from the Culture Wars were not lost on critics. In the *National Review*, Roger Kimball, managing editor for conservative *New Criterion*, described the Whitney “as yet another casualty of the Culture Wars. Like so many other institutions entrusted with preserving and transmitting culture, the Whitney has responded to the tide of cultural radicalism by total surrender...a symptom of cultural degradation.”<sup>55</sup> If one of the consequences of the Culture Wars was this so-called “surrendering” of the Whitney, then the Mapplethorpe Controversy and the work behind it clearly functioned as critically positioned art that had helped achieve a progressive political goal. While Mapplethorpe’s work was not part of the Biennial, perhaps rather fittingly, Cindy Sherman’s and Glenn Ligon’s responses to it were.

While Sherman uses her status and privilege to push boundaries, Ligon’s *Notes on the Margin* activates not only a shift in the formal experience of Mapplethorpe’s work, but continuously (re)activates a disharmonious web of textual and contextual readings of the works and how these (con)textual backdrops produce and reproduce the political, sometimes discordant, meaning of the work. For example, if one were to remove what is known about the original artist – that Robert Mapplethorpe was a gay, white man - there is not much formal evidence within the respective photographs that would indicate an

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<sup>54</sup> This sort of shift that, in many ways, marks the ascendances and acceptance of what Michel Foucault termed the “author-function” has been discussed by a number of art critics and theorists including Douglas Crimp, Rosalind Krauss and Amelia Jones, as well as cultural theorists and literary theorists. It’s also indicative of the broader shift in the discipline as the 1990s really saw the emergence of the new art history, which was heavily influenced by Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973). In terms of the art history, see Ann Gibson, “New Approaches to Art History,” *American Art* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 2-5. On methods of art history, see Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Roger Kimball, “Of Chocolate, Lard, and Politics,” *National Review* 45, no. 8 (April 26, 1993): 55.

absolute sexual identity of the subjects. Rather, it is only when they are re-contextualized through the use of quotes on queerness and blackness, that their sexual identity can be read.

It is this disharmonious network of readings and meanings, itself a refusal to focus and/or construct a sustained and univocal definition of (racial) identity, that Ligon offers one of his most important critiques on the narrative(s) of blackness and, perhaps, black sexuality. Rather than reviving, redeeming or uniting the black body, *Notes on the Margin* (re)constructs and maps the dynamic contours that inform the understanding of one's corporeal experiences as it is constantly de-and re- contextualized, filtered, and disseminated through conflicting voices. In terms of source material, as Ligon has noted, he is "much more interested in borrowing and reframing what already exists."<sup>56</sup> His appropriation and reframing of Mapplethorpe's photographs helps, as Huey Copeland describes it, to "give shape to nothingness--to the lack of voice, autonomy, and personhood that characterizes the position of the black subject" and allows Ligon to "model tactics [...] that are "aimed at disrupting the logic of the image."<sup>57</sup> In other words, if, as according to literary critic Homi Bhabha, "an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness," Ligon's installation works to not only subvert the fixity of the black subject but destabilizes the notion of fixity itself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Byron Kim, "An Interview with Glenn Ligon," in *Glenn Ligon: Un/Becoming*, ed. Glenn Ligon et al. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1997), 97.

<sup>57</sup> Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 110; 126.

<sup>58</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K. M. Newton (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1997), 293, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2\\_54](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2_54).

Less than a year after the controversial 1993 Biennial, Thelma Golden, the first black curator in the Whitney's history and one of the co-organizers of the Biennial, curated the groundbreaking *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. The exhibition received a great deal of attention precisely because of its ambition in covering representations of Black masculinity through a number of mediums including painting, video, photography. While it is not in the scope of this dissertation to explore the critical, artistic and theoretical ramifications and issues of this exhibition, two issues stand out within the context of this dissertation. First, the exhibition further marks the complicated ways in which the art world was dealing with and responding to the nationally debated intersection of art, politics, and (re)presentation, which the Mapplethorpe Controversy helped parade in. Not only was the show explicitly – in title and content – constructed around the issues of race and gender, but it was organized by a black female curator working in one of the most established art institutions in the United States, not an “alternative art space,” following a controversial biennial that was critically castigated for these very same political commitments, which critics connected to the fallout of the Culture Wars. Secondly, while *Black Male* included 29 artists, Golden included more than twice as many works by Robert Mapplethorpe as by any other artist. In many ways, the greater number of works by Mapplethorpe, a white artist, not only suggests a telling strike against the diversity of images of Black masculinity that could have been a priority for *Black Male*, but, as bell hooks points out, is another instance that both reaffirms and foregrounds the Mapplethorpe photographs' centrality in the canon of representations of black males.



Lyle Ashton Harris's contribution to the *Black Males* exhibition was *Constructs* (1989), a series of black male nudes that references Robert Mapplethorpe's series of black nudes, conceptualized and created prior to the Mapplethorpe Controversy (fig. 5.6). Rather than pure appropriation, as Ligon had done, Harris' series responds to Mapplethorpe's, stages a dialogue and critiques them. While the perceived problematics that surround the racial politics of Mapplethorpe's work were, in large part, due to the social relationship between the (relatively) privileged white artist and the captured, objectified black body, which as bell hooks suggests, is a body that reaffirms the racist stereotypes that configure the black male body as inherently carnal, physical, and sexual, a "penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion," Harris asserts his identity, as both artist and subject through his self-representation.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to Mapplethorpe's program, Harris' series interrupts conventional portrait viewing and exposes the studio environment as such; an artificial, constructed environment. Portraits like Mapplethorpe's *Charles Edward Bowman, N.Y.C.*, from his *Z* Portfolio appear monolithic, ahistorical, and sculptural (fig. 5.7). The black male is "aestheticized to the abject status of thinghood" as Kobena Mercer put it, through Mapplethorpe's instrumentalization of formal tools like light and cropping.<sup>60</sup> Harris' portraits reverse these terms. Throughout *Construct*, Harris includes the explicit studio setting as part subject. The sitter/photographer stands before the black, draped background. Rather than a sculptural body captured within a seemingly timeless moment, Harris makes apparent the artificiality and constructedness of place.

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<sup>59</sup> hooks, "Representing the Black Male Body," 205.

<sup>60</sup> Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," 173.

In terms of subject, it is productive to not only stage Harris' work in dialogue with Mapplethorpe's, but Cindy Sherman's as well. While Mapplethorpe's black bodies, arguably, picture an abstracted and embodied masculinity -often focused on and around, perhaps, the most culturally powerful image of the black male body, the penis - Harris challenges these raced and gendered stereotypes through a queer sensibility. *Construct #10* features Harris, penis exposed, but rather than defined solely by and in relation to his penis, he is dressed in a white tulle tutu-like skirt, a tight black cropped tank top, wig and mole reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe's (fig. 5.8). Like other works from this series, Harris uses props – skirts, veils, and wigs - that not only feminize the body but theatricalize it as well. Like Sherman's work, Harris' challenges the prevailing, cultural notion, in this case, of a fixed Black masculinity - the "penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion" as hooks describes it— as he confronts, destabilizes and subverts the hypermasculine portraits of the black body in Mapplethorpe's work.<sup>61</sup> In doing so, Harris challenges the depiction of the black male body as an object of a highly raced, gendered, abstracted, fixed fantasy and exposes photography as an apparatus that constructs the reality of subject and object.

Harris takes control over his objectification and makes his identity as a gay black male and gay black male artist who is engaged with the history of the representation of Black masculinity visible on and through his own terms. Yet, like Sherman's practice, Harris' is marked by absence and presence. He (re)performs an identity that is not only entrenched in camp but constantly in flux, which, like Glenn Ligon's work, destabilizes the notion of fixity, albeit on different grounds. Where Ligon's work investigates and

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<sup>61</sup> bell hooks, ed., "Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 127–41.

deconstructs how power mediates, constructs and filters racial identity, Harris' work call into questions what "we take to be 'real', what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of [*a raced*] gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality."<sup>62</sup>

These sorts of disruptions, resistances to fixity and the interrogation of "naturalized knowledge" are also emblematic of Carrie Mae Weems' intervention into the Mapplethorpe legacy, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-1996). The installation was originally part of a project commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum, yet another major institution grappling with the politically-loaded issues of race, as a means to create a dialogue with *Hidden Witness: African Americans in Early Photography*, an exhibition of mid-nineteenth-century daguerreotype, ambrotype, and tintype portraits of anonymous slaves and freedmen from slavery through emancipation, the first exhibition devoted to this time period.<sup>63</sup> If *Hidden Witness* was a recuperative project that sought to utilize photography as a means to represent and recover the labor that African Americans performed as slaves to disrupt historicized notions of white society's development and highlight its dependence on racialized labor, Weems' project insists that this dependence is not a foreclosed project of the past, but a constitutive force of the present. Weems' installation argues that these photographs – and visual representation more broadly speaking - are deeply implicated as both product and producer within the histories of race as a visually knowable "identity" via the transformation of sitter into type rather than individual.

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<sup>62</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Thinking Gender (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 426.

<sup>63</sup> Jackie Napoleon Wilson, "African Americans In Early Photography," *The Historian* 57, no. 4 (1995): 713–20.

In “The Discourse of Others,” Craig Owens discusses the ideological work of photographs, noting how in the work of Cindy Sherman, there is a meeting of feminist and postmodernist critique. He argues, “It is precisely the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting, or invalidating others.”<sup>64</sup> Weems’s photographic series, in this particular case, *From Here I Saw*, not only exemplifies the confluence of postmodernism and intersectional feminism, as discussed by Owens, but by using these controlling images, she subverts the narratives that are promoted through them and exposes how they define and regulate what it means to be black. In other words, not only does she expose the systems of power that artists like Cindy Sherman were being celebrated for, but, like Ligon and Harris, Weems exposes the institutions of art and the medium of photography as one of these systems of power that authorizes, validates, and, conversely, prohibits what it means to be black.

In Weems’ dialogue with *Hidden Witness*, rather than use her own original photographs, she appropriates a disparate array of archival work spanning across the history of photography, from the mid-nineteenth century through the twentieth century to interrogate what already exists. From its inception, the installation is about the photographs, not the photographer. While, in *Notes on the Margin*, Ligon’s appropriation, revision and magnification implicates the viewer in looking and stages a dialogue between the photographic bodies, the viewer’s body, and the 78 different competing voices and Lyle Ashton Harris uses his own body to trouble stereotypes and expectations

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<sup>64</sup> Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernists,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 59.

of raced gender, Weems too addresses the issue, stability and construction of identity, but positions us all as implicit witnesses.

Weems selects and re-presents thirty-three photographs, including works that, like those that comprised *Hidden Witness*, were not originally conceived of as “art” but commercial publicity and/or (pseudo)scientific documentation. In doing so, Weems artistically and theoretically explores the intersection of photography, (pseudo) scientific discourse, Western visual culture and white supremacy, as she, like Ligon, interrogates the racial divide between the (original) white photographer, black models, all-but-assumed white audience, as well as the array of discourses these photographs participated in. At the beginning of Weems’ installation are J.T. Zealy’s slave daguerreotypes, which were also included in *Hidden Witness* (fig. 5.9). These daguerreotypes had been commissioned by the famed naturalist, Louis Agassiz, to “objectively” analyze the physical difference between whites and blacks as evidence to support theories of white superiority and “separate creation,” the contention that different races were actually different species of human.<sup>65</sup> The effects of this sort of photographic project have been enumerated before: the historic function of such so-called “documentary” photographs is to convert documentary specificity into aesthetic generality to reaffirm social fears, convictions, and inequities while pretending to contribute to objective, scientific discourse. Critically, not only does Weems appropriate these often anonymously

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<sup>65</sup> This has been subject of recent debate and lawsuit as Agassiz’s “famed” status has very much derived from Harvard University, an institution that accredited him, elevated him to their ranks and supported his projects, often based on his polygenesis hypothesis. In 2019, Tamara Lanier, who claims to be a direct descendant of the enslaved people pictured in Agassiz’s daguerreotypes, filed a lawsuit, asking for Harvard to hand over these daguerreotypes. For more on these daguerreotypes, see Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9, no. 2 (1995): 39–61. For more on the lawsuit, see Anemona Hartocollis, “Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, Not Harvard, a Lawsuit Says,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/us/slave-photographs-harvard.html>.

authored 19<sup>th</sup>-century works, but she also appropriates more contemporary works by artists who, unlike Agassiz, conceptualized their practice as art. Included are pieces by Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand and Robert Mapplethorpe, notably his now infamous, *Man in a Polyester Suit* (fig. 5.10).

Weems' insertion of these contemporary *artworks* within the context of recovered historical imagery that had been conceived of as pseudo-scientific documentation sets up a logic of equivalency.<sup>66</sup> She places these artists, including Mapplethorpe, within the history of photographing racial "types" that, through their uniformity in size, shape, tint and font, assert their dominant power in meaning-making. Mapplethorpe serves as a contemporary example of photography's categorization and classification of subjects, as his images of a sexualized black body can be read as a kind of (now celebrated) postmodern extension of this colonial archive. In other words, Weems' work refutes the claim that distinguishes between America's pre- and post-Civil Rights eras as one that has moved from overt racism to colorblind equality. Rather, *From Here I Saw* demonstrates the contemporary function of a sustained, dominant, colonial gaze on the black body as a site for sexual and racial fetishization.

Unlike Ligon who enlarged the Mapplethorpe photographs and placed text outside of them, Weems enlarges these selections, tints all but two in red, frames them in circular mattes and inscribes small Roman typeface text onto their glass panes (fig. 5.11-12).

*From Here I Saw* begins and ends with the mirrored profiles of a bare-breasted black

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<sup>66</sup> In terms of art historical discourse, Weems' logic of equivalency deconstructs many of the binaries discussed in Chapter One: between art and non-art, art photography and popular photography, subjective expression vs objective recording. Here, so-called recovered historical objects (once categorized as evidentiary documents) are conceptualized and curated alongside recognized *artworks*, all operating within the walls of an art museum for the purposes of an art exhibition.

woman, posed like Queen Nefertiti in tribal regalia. Tinted a cool blue that visually distinguishes them from the other images, these inverted gazes look upon and frame the 32 blood-red tinted images between them. The small lettering etched onto the glass and printed across the sitter's bare chest: "FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED," is in the same position on the final frame: "AND I CRIED." Not only is it the only use of first-person, which when coupled with its imagery suggests a distant historical perspective, but it activates a number of dialogues, including with the concurrent *Hidden Witness* exhibition. The decision to hold *Hidden Witness*, the invite Weems to stage a response and to execute of both exhibitions simultaneously indicates the Getty's recognition both of its own status as a knowledge-producing actor and the sort of potential social and political embroilment its show, *Hidden Witness*, presents. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted in its coverage of these co-exhibitions, "in the last decade or so, photo-text has emerged as the preeminent medium for politically motivated art."<sup>67</sup> In selecting Carrie Mae Weems, the Getty invited an artist known for this sort of photo-textual, political practice to engage in a critical, responsive conversation with socially and politically charged historical content.

*From Here I Saw* can be understood as staging an explicit, responsive dialogue with and between various witnesses: the Getty, *Hidden Witness*, viewers, as well as the archive, more broadly. Yet, unlike Ligon's work which resists authorial control through the inclusion of disparate and at-times contradictory voices and *Hidden Witness* which exhibited its small daguerreotypes "as-is" in a dimly lit room and paired with personal, poetic musings and historical informatic about these 19<sup>th</sup>-century individuals, Weems

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Kandel, "Art : 'Witness' at the Getty: Black Lives Considered," *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1995, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-03-06-ca-39327-story.html>.

instrumentalizes text to pose an authorial voice that forces viewers into a determined type of reading.<sup>68</sup> Between the two blue-tinted witnessing women is a sequence of 32 portraits, all tinted a hot blood-red, with small text inscribed onto their glass surfaces in an accusatory second-person: “You became a scientific profile . . . A Negroid Type . . . An anthropological debate ... & a photographic subject ... anything but what you were.”<sup>69</sup>

Weems’ use of text was controversial. In *Frieze* magazine, critic David Pagel argued: “The main difference between the exhibitions is that ‘Hidden Witness’ gave viewers something to look at and ‘Carrie Mae Weems Reacts’ downplayed the open-ended uncontrollability of the visible in favor of the determinism of the word.”<sup>70</sup> For Pagel, Weems’ use of text, asserts authorial control; she limits the installation’s meaning and prevents viewers from imagining their own relationships to these images of black

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<sup>68</sup> David Pagel, “Hidden Witness: African Americans in Early Photography, Carrie Mae Weems Reacts to ‘Hidden Witnesses,’” *Frieze*, August 9, 1995, <https://www.frieze.com/article/hidden-witness-african-americans-early-photography-carrie-mae-weems-reacts-hidden-witnesses>.

<sup>69</sup> The full text reads as follows: FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED...YOU BECOME A SCIENTIFIC PROFILE...A NEGROID TYPE...AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE...& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT ... YOU BECAME MAMMIE, MAMA, MOTHER & THEN, YES, CONFIDENT – HA ... DESCENDING THE THRONE YOU BECAME FOOT SOLDIER & COOK ... YOU BECAME UNCLE TOM & CLEMEN’S JIM ... DRIVERS ... RIDERS & MEN OF LETTERS ... YOU BECAME A WHISPER A SYMBOL OF MIGHT VOYAGE & BY THE SWEAT OF YOUR BROW YOU LABOURED FOR SELF FAMILY & OTHERS...FOR YOUR NAMES YOU TOOK HOPE & HUMBLE...BLACK AND TANNED YOUR WHIPPED WIND OF CHANGE HOWLED LOW BLOWING ITSELF - HA – SMACK INTO THE MIDDLE OF ELLINGTON’S ORCHESTRA BILLIE HEARD IT TOO & CRIED STRANGE FRUIT TEARS...BORN WITH A VEIL YOU BECAME ROOT WORKER JUJU MAMA VODOO QUEEN HOODOO DOCTOR...SOME SAID YOU WERE THE SPITTING IMAGE OF EVIL...YOU BECAME PLAYMATE TO THE PATRIARCH...ND THEIR DAUGHTER...YOU BECAME AN ACCOMPLICE...[musical score to “God Bless the Child”]... OUT OF DEEP RIVERS MIXED-MATCHED MULATTOS A VARIETY OF TYPES MIND YOU – HA SPRANG UP EVERYWHERE...OUR RESISTANCE WAS FOUND IN THE FOOD YOU PLACED ON THE MASTER’S TABLE – HA...YOU BECAME THE JOKER’S JOKE &...ANYTHING BUT WHAT YOU WERE HA...SOME LAUGHED LONG & HARD & LOUD...OTHERS SAID “ONLY THING A NIGGAH COULD DO WAS SHINE MY SHOES”...YOU BECAME BOOTS, SPADES & COONS...RESTLESS AFTER THE LONGEST WINTER YOU MARCHED & MARCHED & MARCHED...IN YOUR SING SONG PRAYER YOU ASKED DIDN’T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL?... AND I CRIED

<sup>70</sup> While Pagel’s entire critique revolves around Weem’s use of text, his text is not without problems. Not only does he go on to characterize Weems’ exhibition as racist, but warns against “Putting forth a monkey-see, monkey-do argument” as the Getty did, seeing in these co-exhibitions a detrimentally revisionist history. Pagel.



people. Perhaps that is exactly the point. Weems' use of text forces and implicates the viewer as witness to a roughly chronological accumulation of character-types that build into a subject-creating narrative. This so-called subject-creating narrative rests upon understanding the ways controlling images oppress by defining and regulating what it means, in this case, to be black. Not only do these controlling images reveal the dominant group's interests but they justify political and economic oppressions by encoding stereotypes into all aspects of society; they make economic and political oppression appear natural. In her appropriation of portraits from daguerreotypes through contemporary photography, Weems – a black woman - extends, traces and hijacks the sustained hegemonic gaze of the white male/image maker to resist the suggestion that it is something of the distant past. Instead, not only does Weems argue the colonial, exploitative gaze continues, but she disrupts the tendency within these institutional settings to understand looking as passive and innocent. We, the viewers, continue the colonial, exploitative gaze.

In her own discussion of the piece, Weems states that “When we’re looking at these images, we’re looking at the ways in which Anglo-America, white America, saw itself in relationship to the black subject.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, as already implied, I suggest that through the inclusion of contemporary works, like Mapplethorpe’s *Man in a Polyester Suit*, Weems allows us to look not at the way America saw itself, but the way it continues to *see* itself. Rather than something placed in the past – “the ways in which Anglo-America, white America, saw itself in relationship to the black subject” – Weems’ work

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<sup>71</sup> Carrie Mae Weems, *Audio Interview for MoMA 2000: Open Ends* (The Museum of Modern Art and Acoustiguide, Inc, 2000), <https://www.moma.org/multimedia/audio/207/2012>.

suggests that this sort of controlling imagery and the corresponding oppressive structures that embolden, champion and allow it, are still in full operation.

We are all witnesses. We are all accountable.

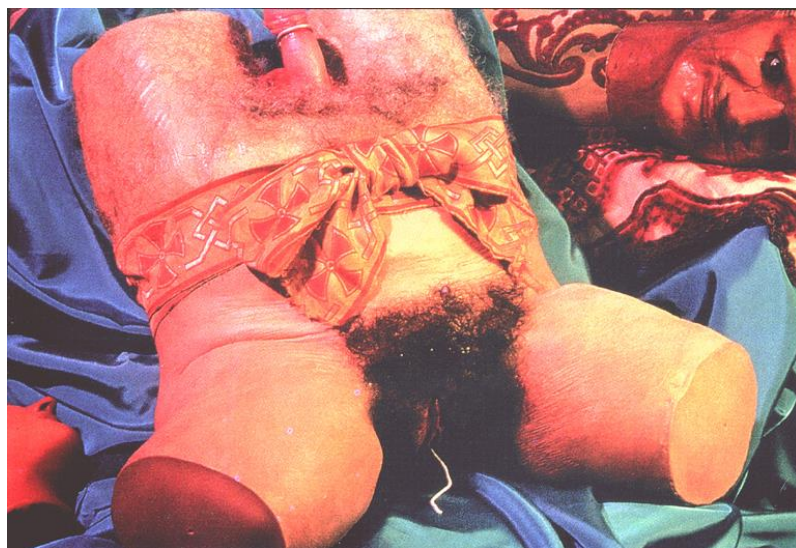


Figure 5.1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #263*, 1992



Figure 5.2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #250*, 1992



Figure 5.3. Glenn Ligon, *Red Portfolio*, 1993



Figure 5.4. Ryan McWilliams, "A photo of a man urinating in another man's mouth. Glenn Ligon Red Portfolio #shameless #selfie #newmuseum #art #nyc". May 16, 2013.  
<https://twitter.com/rhmrpanic/status/335240913183969280>



Figure 5.5. Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*, 1991-1993



Figure 5.6. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs*, 1989

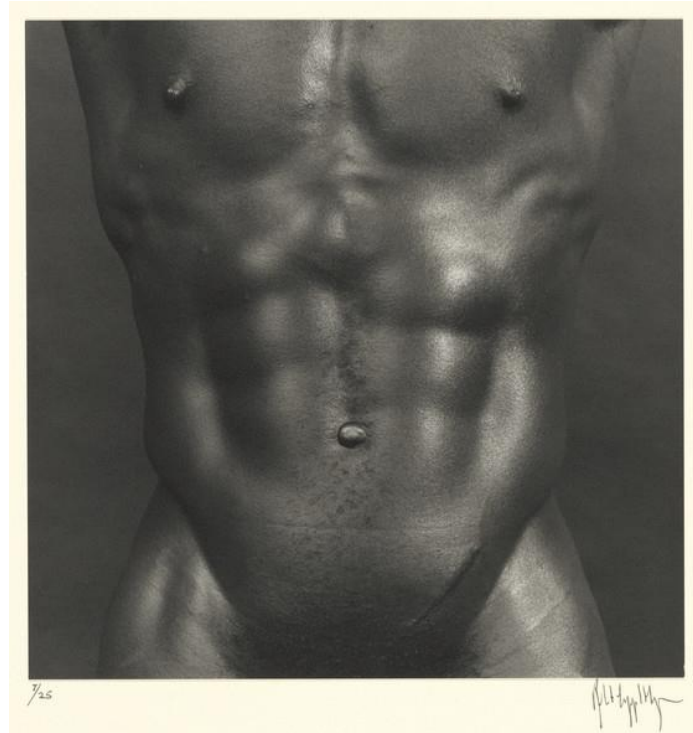


Figure 5.7. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Charles Edward Bowman, N.Y.C.*, 1980



Figure 5.8. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs #10*, 1987-88





Figure 5.9. Carrie Mae Weems, *From Here I Saw and I Cried*, 1995-6

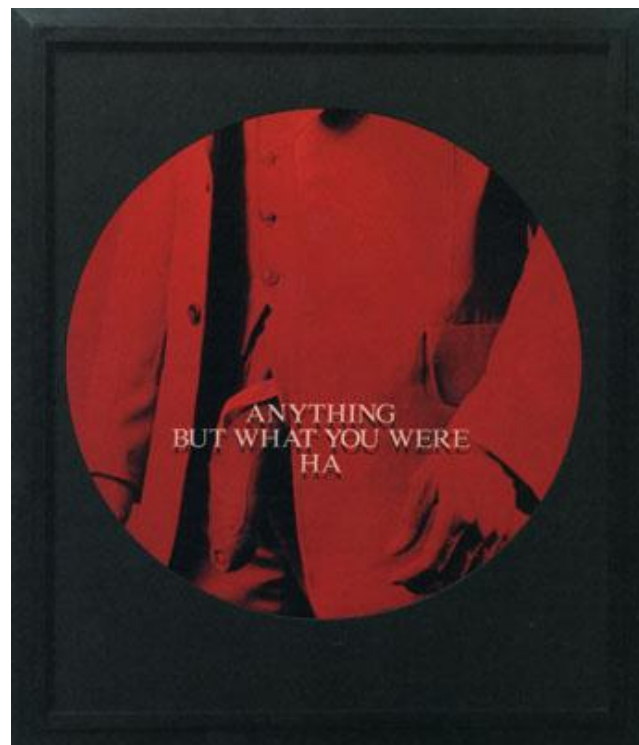


Figure 5.10. Carrie Mae Weems, "Anything but what you were ha" from *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996



Figure 5.11. Carrie Mae Weems, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996. Installation view, First Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, Tennessee, 2012.



Figure 5.12. Carrie Mae Weems, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996



## CONCLUSION: At Last

It has been over 30 years since the Mapplethorpe Controversy erupted. Almost 30 years since Patrick Buchanan stood before the 1992 Republican Convention warning of the war “for the soul of America.”<sup>1</sup> As has been the contention of this dissertation, the intense political and public responses in Congress, the national media, Supreme Court and academic press indicate that at stake was not the art, per se, but the deep-seated social fears posed by the bodies, real and imaginary, represented in this art and their explicit relationship to the terms of alternative identity politics and its potential disruption to the traditional social order. If anything, these debates, fears, and threats have only grown. The top three candidates of the 2020 presidential election were as ideologically opposed as the self-proclaimed democratic socialist, Bernie Sanders, to incumbent Donald Trump, who has emboldened an increasingly active and violent white nationalist base.

Writing this at the end of a presidency that has frequently, explicitly and consistently reinvoked, restoked and capitalized on the idea of an America under threat, after a summer filled with a renewed focus on racial equity and amidst a global pandemic, the overlaps, congruencies, and frictions remain ever-present: wars on what constitutes truth; contentions on what America really is; who controls our bodies; how bodies should navigate public space; how bodies should interact with other bodies; the role and power of government; socioeconomic disparities that lead to health disparities;

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Buchanan, “*Address to the Republican National Convention*” (Houston, TX, 1992).

institutionalized, systemic oppression; whose health matters and whose does not; who is represented and how. This dissertation has been informed by the past as much as it is by the present. The tensions the Culture Wars stoked, the positions it emboldened, the rhetorical strategies its actors instrumentalized have, if anything, intensified with very real social, political, and economic consequences.

The Culture Wars. The metaphor that, within America, there is a battle over who America represents, who it should represent and how it represents is still being waged. It has, perhaps, come to its ultimate convergence: the merging of America's most formative forces - cultural conflict and capitalism - with the election of Donald Trump. A figure who rose to economic power through capitalist exploitation and social power through pop-culture notoriety. As president, these concerns have been evident in his 34,000 tweets that range from economic nationalism, xenophobic policy and the "Radical Left" to N.F.L. protests, *Roseanne*, and Taylor Swift. Emblazoned across a sea of red hats (always available for purchase, of course) has been "Make America Great Again" a belief that the America of the past – the *true* America of right and wrong, of law and order, of respected authority, of hard work, of one nation under one God - has been lost, corrupted, stolen.

The Culture Wars never ended; we are living in a moment where they are raging. If the Culture Wars that the Mapplethorpe Controversy arose from were (supposedly) directed at the doorsteps of institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, mobilized by religious and political voices like Reverend Donald Wildmon and Senator Jesse Helms, we are seeing a new type of

identity-themed mobilization that has proved remarkably powerful.<sup>2</sup> On one side, it has played out in the Women’s Marches that began the day after President Trump’s inauguration, the #MeToo movement that has transformed feminist resistance and the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the nation in the summer of 2020. On the other side, it has played out in the political ascendance of Trump: a man with a confessed history of sexual assault, who questioned the legitimacy of America’s first black president’s citizenship (and consequently, the legitimacy of his presidency), who banned transgendered individuals from serving in the military, who promised to build a wall to keep out the Mexican immigrants he frequently describes as rapists and murderers, who put a Muslim ban in place, who created a “1776 commission” to counter the “decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools,” who referred to the white supremacists in Charlottesville as “very fine people” and who incited what can only be explained as a coup on January 6, 2021, when the Capital was breached by “Stop the Steal” protesters, flying confederate flags into the halls of *the* architectural symbol of America. The list could go on for pages. Donald Trump may have lost the 2020 election, but he still secured the vote of over 74 million Americans.

What does American culture look like and, perhaps more importantly, what *should* it look like? Who does American culture represent and who *should* it represent? These were the questions of the Mapplethorpe Controversy, the questions of the Culture Wars. They are the questions we face. What the Mapplethorpe Controversy exposed was

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<sup>2</sup> “Supposedly” because, as this dissertation contends, what really was at issue were the deep-seated social fears posed by the bodies, real and imaginary, and their explicit relationship to the terms of an alternative identity politics and its potential disruption to the traditional social order. Rather than explicitly champion straight, white, Christian values, these battles and corresponding fears were often guised under the seemingly neutral terms of public health, morality and family values. What we have seen through Trump’s ascendance is a complete break with this sort of coded rhetoric.

that art participates in public life and "art people" - artists, critics, art historians, curators - *must* acknowledge rather than deny this exchange. Now is the perfect moment.

“...I said we were in a battle for the soul of this nation. And we are.”

Joe Biden, Address to the Democratic Convention, August 21, 2020

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