Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You

“Money Talks”: October 1989

I

The fierce controversy over the role and purpose of public funding for the arts has been sensationalized and obscured by the charged content of the art which has incited the debate. The homoerotic aspect of much of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography and the photographic juxtaposition of a plastic crucifix with Andres Serrano’s urine has caused the debate to take some strange turns. Politicians feel compelled to speak of the sanctity of Christ for believers and nonbelievers and there has been much righteous talk in the Senate about the evils of child molestation. The central question of the relation between public funding and artistic accountability is worth considering seriously. First though, it is useful to trace the immediate history of the current controversy. The Corcoran’s decision to cancel the Mapplethorpe show occurred within a particular context, a context that reveals the long arm and political clout of the New Right.

The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC agreed to mount a retrospective exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s photography entitled “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment,” scheduled to open 1 July 1989. Organized by Judith Tannenbaum, the show originated at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and was approved by Michael Stout, executor of the Mapplethorpe estate. (Stout is also a member of the Mapplethorpe Foundation, one of the funding sources for the show.) Funding for the travel and exhibition costs of the show were partially covered by a $30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The grant was for the display of, as opposed to the making of, these photographs. Between the time the agreement was made with the Corcoran and the time the show was to open, four photographs were added by the Institute for Contemporary Art. These photographs employ sadomasochism props and iconography, a prominent aspect of Mapplethorpe’s photography in the ‘70s. To claim, as the Corcoran’s director Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall did in the early moments of the “spin” process defending the museum’s decision to cancel the show, that the decision was motivated by these late-arriving photographs is absurd. Not surprisingly, this explanation was quickly abandoned.

Within days, Orr-Cahall was claiming that the “political climate” in DC made it impossible for the show to be seen on its merits; she, and presumably the board of trustees, believed that the Mapplethorpe show would be used to denounce the N.E.A. and perhaps jeopardize their own funding. Hostility toward the N.E.A. was running high due to the political furor
Serrano was one of ten artists awarded a $15,000 fellowship from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art Awards for the Visual Arts, which held a juried contest under the financial auspices of the N.E.A. The SECCA exhibited the work of the winners in a three-city show which closed in January 1989. Carol Vance, in *Art in America*, described the show as "uneventful" (1989:39). In April, the Reverend Donald Wildmon, who directs a fundamentalist organization called The American Family Association and who engineered the widely publicized protests over Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* last summer, began a crusade against Serrano and the N.E.A. Writing in the American Family Association's newsletter (circulation 380,000 of which 178,000 are churches), Wildmon urged his readers to express their displeasure over the Serrano photograph and the N.E.A.'s support of it by contacting their congressional representatives. The politicians, egged on by the somewhat paranoid reading of the New Right, seem to find the image offensive because they believe it suggests that Christ is no better than excrement. The image itself does not bear out this kind of interpretation—although part of the problem stems from the title. The image of the crucifix, which is lit from the top left side of the frame, appears to float in a vast and lonely galaxy. The image of

1. Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 60" × 40" cibachrome. (Photo courtesy of Stux Gallery)
Christ is difficult to see: he is submerged, "veiled," and his eyes are downcast. Christ seems to be suspended under the skin—enclosed within the body—of the photographic print. (A pun perhaps on the twin inaugural pleas of the book of Genesis and photography: "Let there be light.") At least as much a comment on the alienation of the physical body in the age of AIDS, as a comment on religious alienation, it seems quite possible to find in this image a devout reading of a modern Resurrection—although again the title makes such a project considerably more difficult.

On 18 May 1989 Senator Alfonse D'Amato (Republican–New York)—in a hot seat from the evolving stories of the nightmarish management and nepotism at HUD—attacked the photograph in a speech before the Senate. Feeling alliterative, D'Amato declared Piss Christ a "deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity." In a follow-up letter to Hugh Southern, the Acting Chair of the N.E.A., D'Amato demanded that the N.E.A. develop new guidelines to ensure that no more "shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving art" be awarded a red dime of the noble taxpayers' money.

On 9 June, Pat Robertson attacked the N.E.A. and Serrano on his Christian Broadcasting Network, and urged viewers to pressure Congress to eliminate the use of taxes to support the Endowment until it provides...
"absolute" assurance that "patently blasphemous" art will never again be funded. On 12 June, Representative Richard Armey (Republican—Texas) argued in the House that the issue was not about censorship or about freedom of speech. It was instead about money. He was quoted in the 14 June issue of the Washington Times: "We're not saying Serrano can't have bad taste and bad manners if he wants to. We just don't want to give him taxpayer money to be a tasteless boor." (Try as I might I cannot see how Serrano's "manners"—good or bad—enter into this at all.) On 13 June the Corcoran announced its decision to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhibition, scheduled to open on 1 July. On 18 June, Southern met with several members of the House and Senate to defend the N.E.A. and to try to protect its budget, frozen at $170 million since 1981 and scheduled for review this term. Armey, who was present at this meeting, was quoted in the 20 June issue of the New York Times: "[I]f I go down on the floor with an amendment, and while the debate is going on, the Mapplethorpe catalogue is left in the leadership table for members to come by and look at, I win. I could devastate that budget by taking that thing to the floor. I could blow their budget out of the water." These kinds of statements, which were flowing freely after the Corcoran's decision, seemed to be exactly the kind of thing the museum was trying to avoid. But since the argument had already begun with Serrano, and the catalog from the Mapplethorpe show was readily available anyway, their decision did not suppress debate, it inflamed it. Orr-Cahall (who, not irrelevantly, was a former chair of the N.E.A.), emphatically asserted that the Corcoran's decision was not the result of censorship, but the perception remained that the museum was bowing to the worst kind of political pressure, was operating in bad faith, and chose cowardice and avoidance over belief in the quality of Mapplethorpe's work. A demonstration against the Corcoran took place on 16 June and included slides of Mapplethorpe's work projected on the outside wall of the museum that evening. The Washington Project for the Arts, an alternative gallery, quickly negotiated with the Institute for Contemporary Art and Michael Stout to mount the show in Washington. The show opened there 21 July and closed 13 August; the gallery was reportedly packed throughout the three weeks—an estimated 40,000 people saw the show (Gamarekian 1989:b:C16).

Senator Jesse Helms (Republican—North Carolina), is leading the attack against the N.E.A. Late in the day on 26 July, he introduced an amendment to the Fiscal Year 1990 Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations bill that the nearly empty Senate approved in a voice vote. The bill would cut $400,000 from the N.E.A.'s visual arts budget and prohibit endowment grants for the next five years to the Institute for Contemporary Arts and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Arts. It would also require that an outside consultant review the entire grant process. Helms' amendment goes even further. It reads:

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.
As Catharine Stimpson and Victor Brombert point out in a 9 August letter to the members of the Modern Language Association, "although Senator Helms aimed the amendment at the N.E.A., its provisions will apply to all agencies funded under the bill, including the N.E.H., the National Gallery of Art, the Institute for Museum Services, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars" (1989).

A more modest proposal, one far less Swiftian, has been recommended by the House. They would only cut the budget by $45,000, largely due to the efforts of Representative Sidney Yates (Democrat—Illinois). Additionally, in a committee report, the House recommends that the director of the N.E.A. and the National Council on the Arts review all sub-grants, thus prohibiting the situation which allowed the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Arts to award federal money directly to Serrano. As of this writing, the Helms amendment is still under consideration and the budget of the N.E.A. remains uncertain. By the time this appears in print, a "solution" to this particular crisis will have been achieved. But the lesson in this for the New Right is that they have found a new arena in which to flex their muscles, and surely they will continue to protest so called "offensive" art. It is not sufficient for champions of "freedom of expression" in art to find protection in the First Amendment or to accuse the government of "censorship" if it bows to the pressures of the New Right.

Armey is right when he says the issue is about money. There are excellent positive reasons for a government to spend money on the arts, and to insist that the money be granted to promote diversity in the art world. By taking the mealy-mouthed approach that the government should fund the arts in order to avoid "censorship" misstates the connection between public funding and artistic production. It is essential that the art community make a much broader argument, an argument that insists that the health of art influences in a direct way the health and wealth of the nation. The art community must articulate the connection between vigorous artistic expression and the values of democracy. It must return again to some unfashionable but powerfully felt connections between artistic images and the moral imaginations of their viewers, and it must stress that every piece of art is part of an ongoing conversation with the history and future of the human imagination. Writing this I feel the righteous tone, the loud voice of The Preacher, the accents of The Citizen, the strategies of The Orator. There are problems with the hortatory mode, and I employ it now only to counter, or to imagine a way to counter, the bellows of Wildmon, Armey, Helms, Orr-Cahall.

II

The New Right has enormous faith in the link between art and the public imagination, much more than the art community itself seems to have. Vance, perhaps our best commentator on the intricate orchestrations of the New Right, ends her Art in America article with an impassioned call to the Left to formulate a response to the attacks of the New Right:

[T]he fundamentalist attack on art and images requires a broad and vigorous response that goes beyond appeals to free speech. Free expression is a necessary principle in these debates, because of the steady protection it offers to all images, but it cannot be the only one. To be effective and not defensive, the art community needs to employ its interpretive skills to unmask the modernized rhetoric con-
servatives use to justify their traditional agenda, as well as to deconstruct the images the conservatives use to set their campaigns in motion (1989:43).

I think, in the main, Vance is correct, but I would go further. Using interpretive skills and deconstructing the rhetoric of conservatives will continue to keep the art community on the defensive. The art world needs to face some tough questions—questions about its own plurality, inequities, and political contradictions. But it also needs to find the areas in which some consensus can be reached and respond from that position.

1. Individual artists need to consider carefully their own response to “offensive” images. In the Serrano and Mapplethorpe cases it is clear that the New Right is after (at least) the suppression of sexual difference and religious freedom. It is easy for most “leftist” artists (of which more later) to be against that kind of “censorship.” (It is not literally censorship, but as all the unfunded artists know, it amounts to censorship.) It is useful to consider two more difficult cases than these. Suppose for example the N.E.A. funded six artists working on pro-Hitler and neo-Nazi art. Subsequently, the Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai Brith denounced the N.E.A.’s financial support and asked the art community
to join their protest. What should the art community’s response be then? Or, say the National Gallery decided to mount a show, funded by tax payers’ money, chronicling the history of pornographic images in painting and the National Organization of Women asked the art community to join their protest?

If the art community can categorically come up with a firm response, fully on the side of “freedom of expression” it will have come a long way. The art community must assert the conviction that the best response to offensive art is different, stronger art. The art community protests best by doing their artwork, by bringing their political and personal beliefs to their work. Of course, as an “individual” one can march or yell or do whatever helps, but as a block of people or as “representatives” of a cause, artists need most to counter offensive art with better art. Linda Nochlin tells an instructive tale:

On March 10, 1914, [ . . . ] a feminist suffragette, Mary Richardson, alias Polly Dick, took an axe to [Diego] Velázquez’s Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery in London. [ . . . ] Richardson declared that she had tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who was the most beautiful character in modern history. [ . . . ] We may find Mary Richardson admirable for acting courageously, engaging in a punishable act for a political cause she deemed worth fighting for, and attempting to destroy a work she believed stood for everything she, as a militant suffragist, detested, yet it is clear that she was also wrong. Wrong because her act was judged to be that of a vicious madwoman and did the suffrage cause little or no good; but more than that, wrong in that her gesture assumes that if the cause of women’s rights is right, then Velázquez’s Venus is wrong” (Nochlin 1988:27).

Nochlin goes on to read Velázquez’s painting “against the grain,” and finds in it, if not a prototypical feminist painting, a canvas which has much of value to suggest about female sexuality and its perception. For critics, the best response to “offensive” art is good writing. A good reading of “offensive” art is as valuable, perhaps more valuable these days, than a praise piece on the “nonoffensive.” By scrutinizing the difficult and the disturbing we find out how the “normative” works—and this is an increasingly useful thing to understand.

2. The art world must come to terms with the contradictions of its “Leftist” image and the conservative structure of its own community, especially in terms of money. This bears directly on the structure of “public” funding with its inevitable hierarchies and politics.

Critics as diverse in political orientation as Vance and Hilton Kramer assume that the “art world” is leftist (see Kramer 1989). “The left,” according to Kramer, “can exert a tremendous influence on the cultural world and on the media, but the one thing they can’t do is elect a president. That’s because there is a real split between the common sense of the American voter and the privileged illusions of educated liberals” (in Beem 1989:17). Certainly the predominant voice and attitude of the New York art world is left-leaning—and yet the economic structure of that community makes Wall Street look like a socialist kibbutz. The
economic and critical stratification of the art world must be confronted. With the prices of some contemporary art setting ever-dizzying records, the “unknown” artists’ plight gets more and more desperate. Somewhere in this debate about public funding it is necessary to keep in mind that the majority of artists are not funded. Serrano’s fellowship was one of ten chosen out of a pool of some five-hundred applicants (Vance 1989:39).

It might be a good idea to investigate the possibility of a wide-scale credit union to augment the grant situation. Public funds have been increasingly rare, yet funding of some sort remains crucial. The credit union would solicit wealthy artists to donate a percentage, or a fraction of a percentage from the sale of their art. Loan requests would be made on the feasibility and value of the art work proposed, with preference given to the proposals of lesser-known artists. Repayment of the loan could either be in money—either the artist’s own money or by the “sponsorship” of new donors she brings to the union. Or the loan could be “repaid” by completion of the proposed work with documentation of the process. The documentation would then belong to the credit union which would be entitled to sell it to a museum, library, or collector.

This is not a proposal to eliminate federal funding. Our government should be giving generously to the arts. But this kind of “alternative funding source” would give the art community more control over their own economic livelihoods. The availability of money would not depend so heavily on the whims of our elected officials. Who can trust the government to ensure the vitality of art? Survival takes many forms, and this is a front I believe is worth pursuing.

3. The art world needs to think through what it gains from the posture of cynicism toward the power of the image, a cynicism which has fueled interest in word-centered, as against image-centered, art. The success of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer—both artists who use language as the image—is a reflection of this interest. The art community needs to consider what it loses and to whom, by declaring “faith” in the power of the image in contemporary culture.

By citing Kruger and Holzer I’m not suggesting that they are the only artists doing this kind of work. One sees an uneasiness in the power of the image reflected in “public art” and on Madison Avenue. The Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial with its ghostly roll call of the names of the dead is a beautiful sculpture which portends the loss of faith in the seductions of heroic images, of the sublime call to battle which masks the stark litany of dead names. Looking back to the depictions of the Book of the Dead and toward an apocalyptic Judgment Day, the Vietnam memorial sits across the lawn from the Washington Monument and coolly enforces the bleak words of John Ashbery, “but up ahead, in shadow, the past waits” (1989:48). On Madison Avenue, the mania is for typeface rather than costume, for short words rather than lush living rooms. Television beer commercials froth with imperatives, “Drink It Dry.” No voice-over, just bold white letters hurtling across the screen, begging the eyes to drink, daring them to blink. The image of the word has replaced the belief that the image of the commodity is stronger than the copy. This reflects a surprising comfort with and willingness to indulge the skitters and skirts of words. Rap musicians, deconstructionists, and postmodern artists have, in different ways, lent a certain cachet
to the thrills and spills of language. But we have become less certain about the dimensions of the image in our political and psychic imaginations.

The New Right understands something crucial about the relationship between the image and public behavior. Art really does expand the imagination and release new forms of the possible. We must stop finding this truth embarrassing, retrograde, nostalgic. Sure, it sounds corny—but so does “I love you” and I wouldn’t want to eliminate that from my imagination either.

4. Instead of always being on the defensive, the art world must demand that politicians put their cards on the table. If Jesse Helms can denounce “offensive” art and call Serrano “a jerk” on the floor of the Senate, he must also be able to define what “good” art is. I for one would love to hear Helms tell the nation why Michelangelo’s David is magnificent, or why Manet’s Olympia is glorious. We have allowed politicians merely to attack art; we must force them also to defend it. If they are the ones who will be legislating what art should be funded, they must be able to prove they know how to think about art. For if we could hear or read what they think the function of art is, rather than endless diatribes about what it is not, we might be able to gain some important insight into how the current controversy happened, and what we can do to fix it.

Update: December 1989

Congress eventually defeated Helms’ amendment and in a compromise enacted legislation which prohibits the endowment from using funds to “promote, disseminate, or produce materials considered obscene, including sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” While at first this seemed to be a victory, its punitive potential was made manifest in November. Artists Space, a nonprofit New York gallery, had received a $10,000 grant from the N.E.A. in May to help fund a $30,000 show entitled “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing.” Curated by Nan Goldin and featuring the work of 23 male and female, straight and gay, racially diverse contemporary artists, the show was designed to illustrate the impact of AIDS on the art community.

Susan Wyatt, the executive director of Artists Space, alerted John Frohnmayer, the new director of the N.E.A., about the show to forestall any punitive action and to put him on guard for an attack by Helms and his supporters. Frohnmayer responded to Wyatt in a letter dated 3 November 1989 requesting that the gallery return the $10,000 and remove the N.E.A.’s name as a sponsor. The money however had not yet arrived. The 23 members of the board of directors met on 7 November and unanimously voted to keep the grant. When Frohnmayer was notified of the board’s decision he attempted to “suspend” payment and turned the matter over to the Justice Department. The following week Frohnmayer met with Wyatt and the board at Artists Space and changed his mind and allowed the grant to go through. Artists Space opened the show as scheduled on 16
November and added documentation of the controversy. A series of press releases from Frohmayer and Wyatt, and eloquent defenses of the show written by Goldin and several of the artists were pinned to the wall of the gallery. Additionally, downstairs “a wall of controversy” displayed copies of the press coverage and several letters from supporters and detractors. The catalog for the show contains a disclaimer from the N.E.A. Thus, part of “Witnesses” provided powerful testimony to the on-going and messy politics of looking at art.

It must be noted that a pernicious homophobia is operative in all of these debates. The artistic celebration and documentation of homosexuality which focused Mapplethorpe’s lens and motivated the entire “Witnesses” exhibition is severely threatening to the New Right. Not only does this art make homosexuality, death, and anger visible, it admits that these experiences can be beautiful and worthy of artistic meditation. Framed as art, homosexuality audaciously enters the cultural landscape. The New Right wishes to obliterate homosexuality and will tolerate a public admission of it only as “the cause” of AIDS and death. These artists refuse that narrative and the ideologies which support it; and thus since the New Right continues to control the money, these artists are refused “public” funding.

The argument about art funding then is actually an argument about sexualities and their expressions. The New Right wants to curtail these expressions, while these artists want to expand them. This is not an argument which is going to fade away in the current climate of frustration, paranoia, and anguish which both sides feel, for such different reasons, so intensely.

In the face of tragedy, a knee-jerk response is to look away. Those who have not had the luxury of looking away, and those who know too well the price of aversion, are determined to make us see. By insisting so emphatically that we not look away, Mapplethorpe and the artists of “Witnesses” insist that we acknowledge the visibility and power of homosexual love. That is precisely what some people would prefer never to see. It is no accident that it is art which alludes to or documents homosexuality that has become the catalyst for these debates. Homosexuality will be tolerated in this culture only to the degree that it remains invisible. Art, even in the post-Everything ‘gos, still is married to vision and visibility. The cultural tension between aversion and tolerance of homosexuality is exploded in Mapplethorpe’s art—not because of its “high status” or because of its expense—but for a seemingly more banal but actually more potent reason: it makes this tension visible and thereby forces us to acknowledge our hypocrisies. Thus, his art—and the art of those who would claim him as their mentor—is read as “accusatory” even when it is memorial and testimonial.

Finally, it is necessary to note another layer of the sexual politics operative here. The issues raised by these debates are, at bottom, issues about men’s relationships with one another. And yet some of the most eloquent defenders of these artists are women—Ingrid Sischy, Grace Guleck, Karen Finley, Carol Vance, Nan Goldin, Susan Wyatt. While I cannot speak for the feelings or beliefs of the other women who have spent so much time writing and talking and thinking about these debates, I must admit that for me there is something odd about it. The invisibility protested by these artists is much the same invisibility I face as a woman in relation to contemporary representation and part of my defense of this art comes from my visceral experience of the sickening sense of erasure which dominant
culture executes so well. And yet I also know that the entry into "the visible" is still, fundamentally, easier for (white) men, than it is for women or people of color (straight or gay). Mapplethorpe's success as an artist is tied to his aesthetic as a white gay man. I believe that homophobia underlies these debates about funding but I also believe that misogyny and racism do as well. (It is not irrelevant to note that Serrano is black.) Gay men implicitly "feminize" all men which is why they arouse so much hatred. Lesbians are not as overtly hated because they are so locked out of the visible, so far from the minds of the N.E.A. and the New Right, that they are not acknowledged as a threat. The deaths of Latino drug addicts and Afro-American prostitutes are not likely to be memorialized in a show in downtown New York funded, however begrudgingly, by the N.E.A. Perhaps the saddest legacy of these funding debates is how limited and censored they are from the outset. We are still not really fighting about "the disenfranchised's" relation to visibility and power. We are rather arguing about the range of male sexuality we will acknowledge on the white walls of our still elite museums. Our faith is that by expanding the visible range of male sexuality we protect, we will expand the range and visibility of all sexuality. But that's quite a leap. And we must remember we haven't even started to measure it.

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Notes

1. For a critical treatment of Mapplethorpe's career see my forthcoming TDR essay, "The Penis, The Disguise, The Ear."

2. The following timetable is condensed from and indebted to the June 1989 NAAO Flash, the newsletter of The National Association of Artists Organizations, Washington, DC. Unless otherwise cited, all quotations are from this publication and originally appeared in various newspapers. This time line was written before I read Carol Vance's remarkably similar one in Art in America.

3. The very integrity of the museum is now at stake. Annette LeMieux, a contemporary artist, withdrew her art from the museum in protest. A retrospective of her work was scheduled to open 28 October 1989. All six sculptors have independently withdrawn from their group show scheduled for installation from 3 February to 19 April 1990. A third show may also be withdrawn (see Gamarekian 1989a:CI9). The Corcoran is thinking of replacing one of these shows with an exhibition on censorship in the arts.

4. Helms has long been opposed to funds for sex education and has fought especially hard against providing funds for AIDS education in particular.

5. While there are many particular examples from the recent past I could employ here to make a similar point, I am deliberately constructing these cases in a speculative mode. I am not, however, unaware of the similar confusions raised by the relationship between pornography and feminism, to take just one among many possible examples.

6. Law students have recently started a similar kind of fund to enable lawyers who want to go into public law to be able to do so without suffering major losses in salary. Law students pledge a percentage of their salary over their first five years of practice in private law firms to a fund which will be used to supplement the income of their classmates who become public sector lawyers.
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