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Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Editorial 02

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6/29/89

The Corcoran: We Did the Right Thing

The decision of the director and board of trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art to withdraw from the tour of the Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibition created a sharp reaction by the press and the museum community, some condemning and some supporting the decision. Because of the scope and intensity of the criticism, the Corcoran management and the board of trustees have reviewed our action in depth. The conclusion reached is that the decision to withdraw was prudent and sound.

Opinions may differ about the propriety of items in contemporary art exhibitions. Under universally respected principles of artistic freedom of expression, a museum would not censor controversial items within a generally meritorious artistic presentation. In certain circumstances, however, a public exhibition of controversial items may be so inflammatory and provocative as to invite consequences that negate its educational and aesthetic value. In the opinion of the director, supported by the board of trustees of the Corcoran, the Mapplethorpe exhibition was precisely such a case.

The exhibition was to be held in Washington, the seat of the federal government. In another photographic exhibition shown earlier this year at museums in Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and Richmond, one photograph was considered to have transcended the limits of bad taste. Approximately 106 members of Congress contacted the National Endowment for the Arts to question the \$15,000 grant made to the artist, while 36 senators expressed outrage, calling for reform of the NEA's grant-awarding process.

We deplore any attempt by government, directly or indirectly, to censor the artistic judgment of artists and museums, and indeed the NEA is forbidden by law from interfering with the content of the exhibitions it supports. Nevertheless, the basic freedom of the agency to award grants according to the best judgment of its experts and the size of its annual appropriation are being severely examined in both houses of Congress to determine whether restraints on the operations of the agency or budget cuts should be imposed.

The Mapplethorpe exhibition contains

a number of photographs that some may deem shocking and past the bounds of artistic license. Others may consider them acceptable within the context of the exhibition and in the light of the artist's traditional freedom to express himself. It is not our function to mediate such an issue nor to delineate the boundary between artistic freedom and institutional responsibility.

But in the circumstances of a particular situation, it is very much our responsibility to exercise our best judgment as to the best interests of our institution, however difficult the choices may be. It is indeed our function to ensure that the Corcoran does not damage itself or the NEA and the greater arts community. Weighing these considerations, and being fully aware of the public controversy about the propriety of our action, the director and the board of trustees on June 26 reaffirmed the Corcoran's withdrawal from the tour of the Mapplethorpe exhibition as the prudent and wise course of action at this time.

FREEBORN G. JEWETT JR.
President, Board of Trustees
DAVID LLOYD KREEGER
Chairman, Board of Trustees
Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington

The Cox Study Is 'Baloney'

The National Rifle Association's "baloney" ["Assault Guns as Crime Weapons"]

per study that merely demonstrates how military-style firearms are more likely to be traced than ordinary-looking firearms.