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6/29/89

... And the Corcoran Mess

THOSE SHOUTING "censorship" and declaring the very fabric of a free society to be endangered by the Corcoran's handling of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition are having it the easy way. Much tougher and more interesting questions are raised in this episode than are reflected in the simple cries of protest about government repression and homophobia and the rest. For instance: Is there any art, certified to be such by other artists, that is not suitable to be shown in an open, generally accessible exhibit by an institution like the Corcoran? If so, who is to make the judgment on suitability? And what kind of an institution is the Corcoran, anyway? To whom does its responsibility run? What are the claims on it of the museum-going constituency it has assiduously cultivated and enlarged over the years with its permanent collections, outreach programs, school-related educational projects and well-advertised open tours? And does the relatively small amount of taxpayers' money that goes to support it give the taxpayers a say in the art shown?

The reason we think these questions are relevant is that we think the assumptions of many of those protesting are flawed. One of these is that only the unspeakable Jesse Helms and his kind would oppose showing those particular Mapplethorpe photographs that have caused the controversy and that this fact alone is sufficient to discredit any reservations other people have about them. But, as is so often the case, Sen. Helms, America's Number One Yahoo, is being used as a foil and an excuse. For the truth is that a number of those photographs scheduled to be in the show strike a lot more people than Jesse Helms as wrong for the kind of showing in the Corcoran that was planned—and very different people, who are zealous about protecting First Amendment freedoms and generally on the other side of arguments concerning art and other forms of expression that someone or other is trying to stifle on grounds that they are "shocking," "offensive," "explicit," "erotic" and the rest of the familiar litany.

The second wrong assumption is that homophobia is what has generated the protest. The fact is that comparable photographs of comparably adventurous and/or sadistic heterosexual practices would have prompted the same response. The journalistic formulation that holds the problem to be that certain of these photographs "may be offensive to some people" is a triumph of understatement.

Elsewhere on this page today, officers of the Corcoran make the case for what they did. We don't buy it. Our feeling is that the people there bungled the thing from beginning to end—first in the way they scheduled the show and then in the way they called it off. This was never the right collection for the Corcoran's main summer show, or probably for the Corcoran for that matter. It was right for showing in other kinds of galleries such as the Washington Project for the Arts, which will be picking it up now. The Corcoran, which affects to be not so much a gallery for the display of avant garde art as a museum, a main stop on tourist central and a setting for programs for the city's kids was never going to be comfortable with the complete Mapplethorpe show. The people responsible for these decisions at the Corcoran were awfully slow in figuring this out and world-class inept in dealing with it once they had.

From what we have been told by Corcoran officials, the several photographs that have predictably caused the ruckus were not all clearly understood to be in the show when it was

contracted for. Some consternation was expressed by both the curator for educational programs and some others when the full range of the pictures became known. At this point, it seems to us—and without any help from Jesse Helms or anyone else and without compromising any important principles—those officials had an obligation to do one of two things. On their own motion and for the institution's own reasons they could either have tried to assist in its placement somewhere else—a gallery where it could be more appropriately shown—or they might have contrived a way to go ahead with it that would have at once made all the photographs available for those who wished to see them and yet met the gallery's obligations to the kind of larger constituency it has worked at creating. We don't mean editing out the particular offending photographs, but rather, finding a logistical way to make the Mapplethorpe show accessible more as a matter of choice, than of chance encounter or of routine docent-led tours. The human mind has found means of making accommodations in the name of individual taste, tact and free choice in other arts and media. Apparently the show already came with a little cautionary labeling and special casing for some photographs and so forth. It's not as though the principle would have been either novel or destructive, and surely it could have been elaborated by the Corcoran if its officials decided to go ahead with the show.

Instead, they scheduled the show without adequate understanding of what was in it, planned to put it on without any special consideration of its impact and then, at the first sign of trouble on Capitol Hill, panicked and canceled with much handwringing about not wanting to get into politics or to give government an excuse for cutting funds for the arts in general and so forth. Thus: the worst of all possible worlds—the institution itself, though claiming in one breath that it is not merely doing the politicians' will, in the next begs understanding on the ground that it must do their bidding.

It has long seemed to us that in the arts and in science and in academic enterprises of other kinds many recipients of federal (and state) monies have been guilty of a combination of arrogance and naivete in failing to recognize that once they have taken the money they have, at least to some degree, legitimized the intervention they so deplore. They have entered the essential, age-old patron-client relationship, and no less than other government-assisted enterprises, they will be subjected to certain standards and demands in the name of those whose money they have taken. Money has been the point of access of the federal government into the affairs of various institutions all over the country in the enforcement of civil rights and other policy demands. It has been, if anything, remarkable that the inflow of federal funds to the arts in the past three decades has not created more conflicts than it has.

We persist in believing that the government has not censored the Mapplethorpe show: it will be shown elsewhere. And even in the Corcoran's case, it was not censorship but a bit of pressure that came the institution's way. The Corcoran should have been ready to stand up to that if it meant to have this show—both to be knowledgeable about what was being offered and to make a good case for its choice of the Mapplethorpe photographs and its method of presenting them. But it wasn't ready. Instead, it cried: "Oh, dear!" and canceled. The institution was careless in the first instance and craven in the second.

SH. POST EDITORIAL 6/29/89