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Corcoran: Courage or Cowardice?

Say No To Trash

By Samuel Lipman

In canceling the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition last week, Washington's Corcoran Gallery did more than refuse to show a few raunchy photographs of what the press, unable to print them, primly called "explicit homoerotic and violent images." Because the exhibition was supported in part by public funds from the Congressionally embattled National Endowment for the Arts, the Corcoran doubtless considered financial self-interest in arriving at its decision. One hopes those responsible are aware that in saying no to Mapplethorpe, they were exercising the right to say no to an entire theory of art.

This theory assumes, to quote an official of the neighboring Hirshhorn Museum, that art "often deals with the extremities of the human condition. It is not to be expected that, when it does that, everyone is going to be pleased or happy with it." The criterion of art thus becomes its ability to outrage, to (in the Hirshhorn official's words) "really touch raw nerves."

Despite its occasional usefulness, this theory ignores the vast corpus of great art that elevates, enlightens, consoles and encourages our lives. The shock appeal of art is questionable when it encompasses only such fripperies as displaying inane texts on electronic signboards in the fashion of Jenny Holzer; it becomes vastly more deleterious when it advances, as Mapplethorpe does, gross images of sexual profligacy, sadomasochism and the bestial treatment of human beings.

In a free society, it is neither possible nor desirable to go very far in prohibiting the private activities that inspire this outré art. People have always had their private pleasures, and as long as these pleasures remain private, confined to consenting adults, and not immediately injurious, the public weal remains undisturbed. But now we are told that what has been private must be made public. We are told that it is the true function of art to accommodate us to feelings and

'Images of sexual profligacy.'

actions that we — and societies and nations before us — have found objectionable and even appalling.

In evaluating art, the viewer's role is thus only to approve. We are told that whatever the content of art, its very status as art entitles it to immunity from restraint. There are certainly those who will claim that the Mapplethorpe photographs are art, and therefore to be criticized, if at all, solely on esthetic, never on moral, grounds. Are we to believe that the moral neutrality with which we are urged to view this art is shared by its proponents? Can it, rather, be possible that it is the very content so many find objectionable that recommends

the art to its highly vocal backers?

Further, there are those who would have us believe that because we are not compelled to witness what we as individuals find morally unacceptable, we cannot refuse to make it available for others. Taking this position not only ignores our responsibility for others; it ignores the dreadful changes made in our own lives, and the lives of our children, by the availability of this decadence everywhere, from high art to popular culture.

It is undeniable that there is a large market for the hitherto forbidden. Upscale magazines trumpet the most shocking manifestations of what passes for new art. A rampant media culture profits hugely from the pleasing, and the lowering, of every taste.

Just as it is neither possible nor desirable to do much about regulating private sexual behavior, little can be done legally about the moral outrages of culture, either high or popular. But we can say no, and not only to our own participation as individuals in this trash. We can decline to make it available to the public through the use of our private facilities and funds; this, the Corcoran, acting as a private institution, has now done.

There is still more to be done. Acting on our behalf as citizens, our Government agencies — in particular the National Endowment for the Arts — can redirect their energies away from being the validators of the latest fancies to hit the art market. Instead, public arts support might more fully concentrate on what it does so well: the championing of the great art of the past, its regeneration in the present and its transmission to the future. This would mean saying yes to civilization. It is a policy change that deserves our prompt attention. One hopes that the Corcoran, by saying no to Robert Mapplethorpe, has begun the process. □

Don't Punish the Arts

By Robert Brustein

The decision of the Corcoran Gallery to cancel a retrospective of the works of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe has caused a firestorm.

The action was not based on a curator's objection to the material, which might have been a tiny bit more defensible (one photo showed a black man urinating into a white man's mouth.) It was a pre-emptive maneuver, amid growing Government intervention in the arts, to protect the museum's \$292,000 in Federal funding from Congressional retaliation.

The threat is real. In another flap, a photo displayed in North Carolina of a crucifix dipped in urine prompted the estimable Representative Sidney R. Yates, usually a friend of the arts, to propose limiting the freedom of the National Endowment for the Arts to award grants to independent arts groups, who might sponsor works that Congress finds objectionable. The same photograph inspired Senator Alfonse D'Amato and 26 Senators to sign a letter assailing the Endowment for funding "anti-Christian bigotry" — even while acknowledging that the Endowment had no direct hand in sponsoring the event.

Apparently freedom of expression remains a Federal guarantee — unless supported by Federal subsidy. A

Robert Brustein is artistic director of the American Repertory Theater.

staff member to Senator D'Amato said that the Senator was "absolutely opposed to censorship, but we are talking about taxpayers' dollars." (Half dollars would be more accurate: the Endowment's funding has been frozen at \$170 million for eight straight years.) But Senator D'Amato's concern is touching in one so deeply implicated in the burgeoning Federal housing scandal.

It is typical of our new age of ethical purity that the accusers are often more tarnished than the accused. Still, the issue of artistic freedom and Federal subsidy is knotty. Senator Slade Gorton of Washington has said that "if art and religion are to be free of state influence . . . they cannot depend on subsidy." His colleagues are proving him right. Certainly the history of arts funding — beginning with the scuttled Federal Theater in the 30's — is clouded by coercion and suppression masquerading as concern for our moral and political well-being.

Quality, not morality, is history's test.

But Federal subsidy of the arts in our country accounts for only about 5 percent of the total budgets of established arts institutions, as compared to between 60 and 100 percent in more civilized nations. (West Germany gives \$6 billion to theater alone.) Still, in the mean-spirited climate bequeathed us by the Reagan legacy, in which the arts are impoverished along with the poor, in which philanthropy is discouraged by the new tax laws and in which corporate and foundation giving usually goes to special projects designated by the donor, the Endowment's unrestricted 5 percent contribution remains indispensable.

The Endowment is designed by charter as a buffer between art and government, to prevent politicians from voting directly on artists or projects. Grants are made on the advice of professional panels, which are rarely, if ever, overruled.

During the Carter Administration, this policy was undermined from the left by considerations of race, sex, ethnicity and geography. This social agenda still influences funding — consider the recent decision in Michigan to withhold grants from the Detroit Symphony until it hired a black musician. But today these liberal pressures have been joined by pressures from the right, with artists being subjected to standards of religious piety.

Granted, some artists like to flout prevailing codes. But to cut off the sponsoring agencies in retaliation is to impose punitive moral constraints on independent esthetic activity. It is on the basis of quality, not morality, that posterity judges art. While awaiting that verdict, arts organizations must not cave in to political intimidation for fear of losing grants.

Many taxpayers unwillingly contribute to a lot more unpleasant projects than the arts; people offended by provocative photos, unlike those who live near nuclear installations, can comfortably stay home. Once subsidized artistic activity becomes subject to Government manipulation, we resemble the official culture of Stalinist Russia. Once we allow lawmakers to become art critics, we take the first step into the world of Ayatollah Khomeini, whose murderous review of "The Satanic Verses" still chills the heart of everyone committed to free expression. □

Samuel Lipman, publisher of *The New Criterion*, was on the National Council on the Arts from 1982 to 1988.