8-6-1989

Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 07

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The New York Times

Sunday, August 6, 1989

Arts & Leisure

NR

Section 2

Blaming a Medium for Its Message

By ANDY GRUNDBERG

IT IS NOT ENTIRELY HAPPENstance that photographs are at the center of the stormy political dispute brought on by indirect Federal support of works by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. Much more than paintings, sculptures, plays, novels and poems, camera images seem to bring the world directly to our doorstep. When the world they bring is distasteful or repugnant, it is easy to blame the medium for the message.

Like it or not, photography's seemingly inherent realism makes it especially vulnerable to a criticism based solely on the contents of an image. It is the most stylistically transparent of the visual arts, able to represent things in convincing perspective and seamless detail. Never mind that advertising has taught us that photographic images can be marvelous tricksters: what we see in a photograph is often mistaken for the real thing. More to the point, the subject matter of photographs is often mistaken for their meaning and value.

This may help explain why it is photographs — specifically those by Mapplethorpe and Mr. Serrano — that have prompted North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms to propose that any art that is "obscene and indecent," or that "denigrates, debases or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin," be denied money from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Though it poses a real threat to the arts, the Mapplethorpe affair is nothing more than a pseudo-controversy. A commentary by John Russell. Page 31.

Magnum

Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Alicante, Spain" (1933)—always chafing against the limits of esthetic doctrine

A contributing factor is photography's status as a newcomer to the art world. Only recently accredited by the arbiters of art — and still suspect in many eyes — it represents the soft underbelly of the visual arts. Politicians may have complained about the obstinacy and obtrusiveness of Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," but no one asserted that the sculpture was not a work of art, or that its maker suffered some moral defect. Yet according to Senator Helms, photographs like Mr Serrano's image of a crucifix seen through a veil of urine are "so-called works of art," and Mapplethorpe, who died earlier this year, was less an artist than "an acknowledged homosexual" whose pictures are marred by "the homosexual theme."

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What no one has mentioned in all this tempest is that photographers have long doted on the off-color, the outlaw and the outré. Indeed, there is a well-established sub-canon within the art of photography consisting of images that violate conventional taste and, yes, even community standards of decency.

In 1971, for example, the Museum of Modern Art mounted a controversial ret-

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PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW

In Photography, the Medium Is Blamed for the Message

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rospective of the photographs of Diane Arbus. Arbus's subjects — men dressed as women, an angry child clutching a toy hand grenade, a group of mental patients dressed in Halloween costumes — are tame by today's standards, but at the time her bitterly pessimistic view of the world seemed intended to offend. John Szarkowski, the director of the museum's photography program and the curator of the Arbus exhibition, recalls that at the end of each day museum employees had to wipe spit from the pieces of glass covering Arbus's images.

Offending conventional sensibilities is not the exclusive province of photography, of course. Modern art is replete with attempts to épater les bourgeois. Edouard Manet did it in the 19th century with his painting "Olympia," an odalisque that scandalized his contemporaries because its nude model dared look directly out at the viewer. The conceptual artist Vito Acconci has done it in our times by reportedly masturbating underneath a false floor while gallery visitors walked above him. Nevertheless, photography's special purchase on reality seems to prompt disproportionate passions.

In the cold-war anxiety of the 1950's, the photographs in Robert Frank's book "The Americans" were largely perceived as an affront to the country and its citizens. The landmark volume was published first in France, and when it appeared a year later in the United States, critics complained that Frank's biting images, which used the American flag as a symbol of false hopes and unfulfilled dreams, were unpatriotic. More recently, Richard Avedon's portrait series "In the American West" prompted a litany of complaints that the photographer had recorded only convicts and drifters.

In short, photographs have long been problem children in the world of art. They are not quite socialized or refined enough to qualify entirely as things of beauty, and they are always chafing against the limits of esthetic doctrine. This is one reason why commentators since Charles Baudelaire have argued against mistaking photographs for art. True, it has been commonplace in the 1980's to assume that this argument no longer holds water, thanks primarily to the success of photographs in the marketplace. But Senator Helms has given it a new spin.

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One cannot presume to know what the Senator's artistic taste may be. But no doubt he would need a wide broom to sweep photography clean of all the images he might find obscene, indecent or offensive.

He could start with the pictures of prostitutes taken by Eugene Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Brassaï, three of modern photography's most imposing figures, and work his way up to Joel-Peter Witkin's perverse version of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. (One of the figures in Cartier-Bresson's "Alicante, Spain" is not only a prostitute but a transvestite.) Perhaps Edward Weston's photograph of a toilet bowl should go as well, along with his many nudes in which pubic hair figures prominently.

It could be argued, of course, that Senator Helms's point is not photography's penchant for the outer limits of taste, but Federal financing. Here, however, things can get quite sticky. The photographers mentioned above, and several of the images cited, were recently included in Federally sponsored exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art and the National Museum of American Art.

Worse, most of these potentially offensive photographs have appeared countless times over the years in exhibitions financed by the National Endowment, and at numerous institutions that receive endowment support. Should we now penalize all of them? As with any attempt to corral free expression, the Helms amendment does not know when to stop.

Mapplethorpe, who wanted badly to be famous and seems destined to be infamous, would probably be amused.

(Nor, apparently do some of Senator Helms's associates. According to Joshua Smith, the curator of "The Photography of Invention: Images of the 1980's," an exhibition that appeared this summer at the National Museum of American Art, the Senator's office recently called him to ask why the show included an image of convicted Communist spies. Nonplussed, Mr. Smith explained that the image in question, a blow-up of a vintage newspaper photograph of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, was an integral part of an outdoor bus shelter environment created by the New York artist Dennis Adams.)

One solution to the problems photography poses for Capitol Hill would be to exclude it categorically from the Federal till. But any exclusion would only serve to undo the years of favored treatment that photography has received from the National Endowment. Once considered a special case in need of nurturing, along with such categories as "artists' forums" and "expansion arts," photography has benefited greatly from the endowment's attentions. So intertwined has it become with the art world at large that it would be impossible to imagine contemporary art without it. Photography is a clear and as-yet-unstudied example of how Federal dollars can affect what the art public sees and buys.

Robert Mapplethorpe, who in his lifetime wanted badly to be famous and who now seems destined to be infamous, would probably be amused by the fuss his photographs are now making. He might even be pleased, since his work is predicated on trespassing the boundaries of conventional mores. That trespass is, one could say, the ultimate subject of his art, and it is what makes even his most unsettling images something more than pornography.

Mapplethorpe worked diligently to erase the distinctions we commonly draw between heterosexual and homosexual desire, between female and male appearances, between what is accepted as beautiful and what is not. His method was to achieve a kind of overriding elegance, which for him had the force of a moral imperative. He was a Platonic idealist whose energy was focused on redeeming precisely what conventional moralists find offensive.

This crucial aspect of Mapplethorpe's career is much more clearly drawn in "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," the exhibition that is at the center of the Helms controversy, than it was in a retrospective organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art a year ago.

The Whitney show, which attracted much attention but little outrage, presented the photographer as a sculptor manqué, obsessed with framing and finish as much as with his subjects. "The Perfect Moment," which was organized by Janet Kardon of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, concentrates much more on what he chose to photograph — including, in addition to faces, flowers and perfect physiques, graphic tableaux of sadomasochism and homoeroticism.

("The Perfect Moment" was originally scheduled to be shown in Washington at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which changed its mind at the eleventh hour, citing fears of political fallout. The show currently is on view at the Washington Project for the Arts, an artist-run exhibition space.)

Mr. Serrano's now-notorious image of a crucifix floating in a field of yellow can be interpreted as an attempt at exorcising the artist's Roman Catholic upbringing. Whether this is blasphemous is arguable, but it does bring together the sacred and the profane in an economical, confrontational way. Lacking the pristine elegance of Mapplethorpe's pictures, the crucifix image cannot pretend to be beautiful independent of its content. It is a work of art in part because it is so uncomfortable to look at, and because it bears the stamp of an authentic conflict.

The urge to make visible what society at large would prefer left unseen is manifest throughout the medium's traditions. Lewis Hine, for example, is included in the histories of photography not as a stylist but because he used his camera to reveal social conditions that were all the more appalling for being ignored. His images of children working in textile mills and coal mines helped persuade Congress to pass legislation outlawing child labor. Before Hine, Jacob Riis created a groundswell of support for urban reform with his pictures of life in New York City slums.

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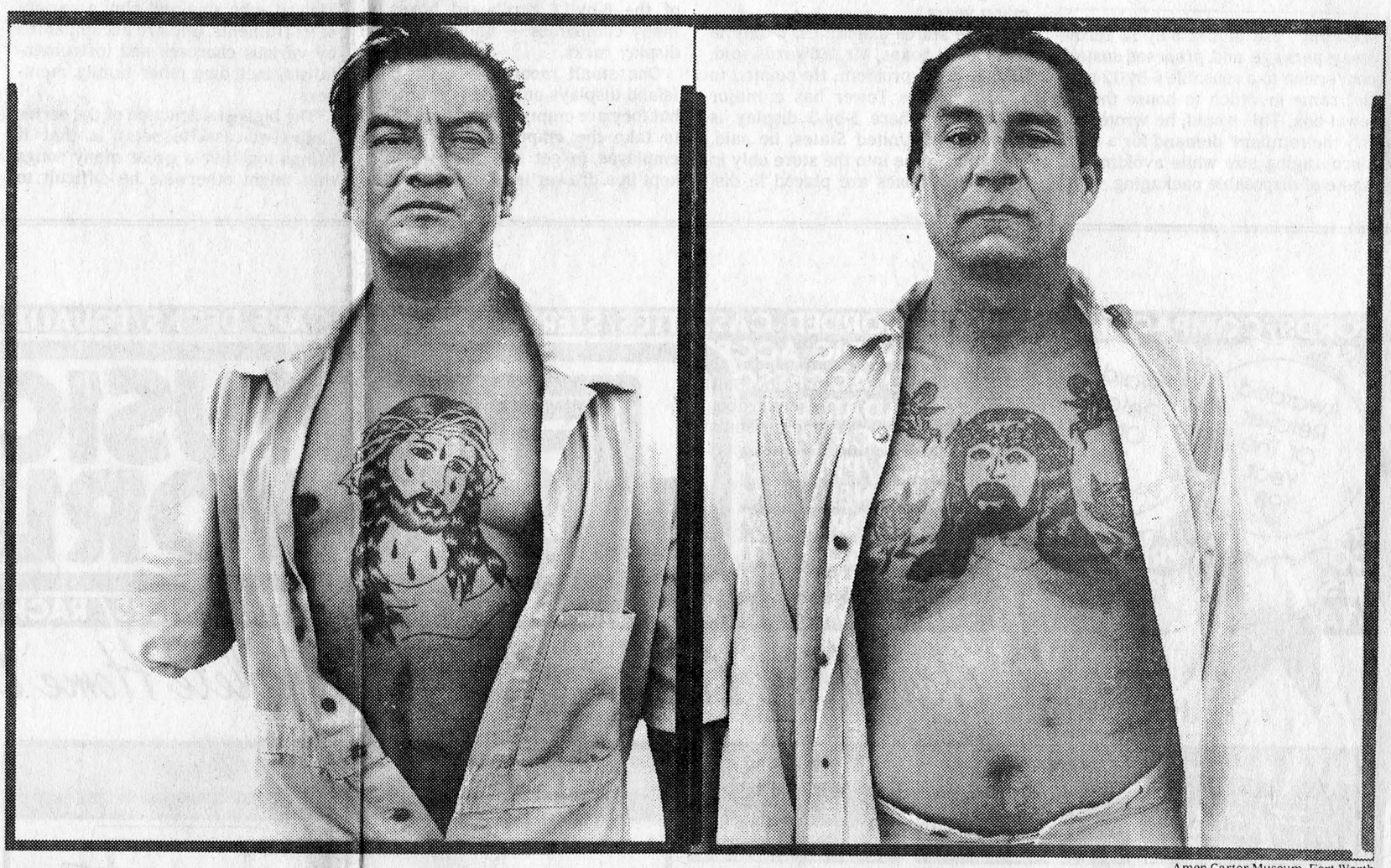
Photography also functions to reveal things we may not wish to know. During the years of the Vietnam War, photojournalistic images of that conflict's cruelty and suffering shocked American consciousness. Eddie Adams's image of a street-corner execution, Nick Ut's picture of naked Vietnamese children fleeing a napalm assault, and Larry Burrows's color record of haggard and wounded Marines helped sway public sentiment against the war, much to the dismay of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations. Only days ago, a terrorist group in Lebanon provided yet another gruesome example: an image of a hanged American hostage, Lieut. Col. William R. Higgins, that was reproduced on newspaper front pages and shown on television.

Admittedly, photography has also been a manufacturer of the dreams and myths societies live by — witness advertisements, fashion magazines and the enduring popularity of Ansel Adams's pristine landscapes, which call up the country's long-vanished frontier past. But it has never been merely a medium of civic boosterism. There will always be another Robert Frank to stick pins in our complacent self-image, another Larry Burrows to remind us that life is not a John Wayne movie.

This is a sign of health, not sickness, for the medium as well as for society. And it is what makes art like Robert Mapplethorpe's significant, even if it is not immediately likable. Members of Congress may well object to certain photographs on grounds of moral outrage or political expediency, but they risk losing a vital part of our cultural heritage when they seek to punish museums and other arts institutions for showing them. □



Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth

"Prisoners, Bexar County Jail, Texas," from Richard Avedon's portrait series of the American West—a litany of complaints

Lent by Doon Arbus

One of Diane Arbus's photographs of mental patients taken in 1970-71—tame by today's standards