Arts and Humanities: Background (1975-1995): Article 02

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This gives a pretty good background on Waple thorpe
But doesn't address as fully as I'd do today
The issue of responsibility
as we discussed at lunch.

The text is from essays I'm collecting for publication some day.
Washingtonese -- a language often as complex as Arabic, though not as often written backward -- contains refinements which the inexperienced ear does not detect.

For example, "a little concerned" means that the arrow on the barometer has gone from Fair through Unsettled and on into Storm. "Concerned" means the arrow is veering further. "In trouble" means that the hurricane already indicated is on the approach. And "in deep trouble" means that the funnel-shaped cloud of the tornado is now visible through the window and bearing directly toward one's own shingle roof.

Its funds provided for a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography in 1989 placed the National Endowment for the Arts squarely, front and center, in deep trouble. The exhibit was called "The Perfect Moment." Those who are fans of the endowment, its history and work, can think of better titles.

Political leaders have found ample opportunities to discuss all aspects of the weather involved, and the issues.
Religious leaders, leaning into high winds, have found increased audiences. Representatives of both areas have discovered that in the very eye of the storm the sun can shine and light up new sources for financial support.

In all seriousness -- another Washington phrase that in this case simply means a particular emphasis on what it ways -- obscenity, prurience, sadism, homo-eroticism, pornography have been elaborately described. The Supreme Court has been invoked. Lower courts have been put to unique testings. Batteries of lawyers have been summoned. The media has brought forth a whole panorama of viewpoint from pundits of high reputation to the man, or woman, in the street. Meanwhile, standing almost in the wings so to speak, but visible to the objective eye, are those most precious possessions of a democratic society: freedom of expression and freedom from censorship. Ultimately these are at stake. Tempests continue to howl.

How did it happen that, after twenty-five years of remarkable growth and, compared to this, relatively tornado-free time, the National Endowment for the Arts became so embroiled?

Was this an isolated case, exploding without enough warning? Partly true, I think -- in terms of attention provided, damage done and numbers of actors, but not so much in terms of isolation or a lack of precedent.

The arts, the whole panoply of them, have never been immune from controversy. They are subjective. The eye, ear and mind of the beholder or the creator are both strength and enemy, today, tomorrow and yesterday. I can easily imagine a prehistoric critic, deep in the caves under what is now French
soil, saying to the artist at work on the walls: "You think that looks like a bison? Listen to me, friend. The neck's too thick, see, right here -- and you call those legs? I got better sticks outside last night. And horns? You think those are horns?"

A millenium of so later Michelangelo's magnificent work in Rome's Sistine Chapel was once the object of critical edict when painted concealments were added to offending areas.

As the Mapplethorpe controversy grew intense, my artist-wife, talking quietly with an outraged Washington dowager, inquired: "Did you know that in his huge mural, "The Last Judgment," Michelangelo painted eighteen nude male organs?" After a pause, and not one whit put off, the lady replied, "I never counted them."

Controversy and the essence of the arts go together. They are inseparable companions. Without controversy the arts can be stale, static, without imagination, and without the transcending magic the true artist bestows.

When I was preparing the fundamentals for creating a National Endowment for the Arts, to become the first agency of its kind in our history, I was particularly aware of possible controversies to come.

All legislation is accompanied by a "Report." It interprets the findings of Congress as they apply to the language of a proposed law. I studied my lessons carefully, mindful of legalities but seeking to give them latitude and scope. Some, indeed, have said they were pleased the basic act was written by a novelist and not by a lawyer. But I wanted to be most exact about freedom of expression and the safeguards for it.
I remember writing the Senate "Report" as June, 1965, approached. I had graduated from my months as neophyte. The words spoke for my chairman, Claiborne Pell, for his Subcommittee on the Arts and Humanities. If the bill passed they would speak for the United States Senate, and on into future times. I believed they were the most important words I had written.

At the farm I still owned outside of Philadelphia I wrote on weekend nights. It was quiet in the house and relatively cool.

A new partnership was being described between government and the private community, with government serving as a catalyst to encourage private philanthropy, not dominate it, and in no way its substitute.

In part the Report said: "It is the intent of the committee that in this Act there be given the fullest attention to freedom of artistic expression. One of the artist's great values is the mirror of self-examination" raised "so that society can become aware of its shortcomings as well as its strengths.

"Moreover, modes of expression are not static, but are constantly evolving. Countless times in history artists who were vilified by their contemporaries because of their innovations in style or mode of expression have become prophets to a later age.

"Therefore, the committee affirms that the intent of this Act should be the encouragement of free inquiry and expression..." So was the legislation explained.

The basic principles include: a full disclaimer against government interference or control over cultural activities;
an emphasis on the significance of local and private initiatives; stress on the private citizen membership of a guiding National Council on the Arts (with another such council for a Humanities endowment, included in this law), and on panels of private citizen experts to bolster the process. The necessity of cooperation at all levels, private and public, was emphasized -- and especially the importance of freedom of expression.

A principal fear at the time, expressed in Congress and by the arts community, was that this new and untried legislation might create "a cultural tsar." An arbiter of taste. A ruler, benign or not, with the power of single authority.

That would be tantamount to the death of the program, I believed. And, in fact, the legislation came close to death several times. It survived ridicule. It emerged after a twisting and turning journey lasting three years. But it emerged unscathed in its basic language -- the language in this case of law.

As mentioned earlier members of the National Council on the Arts were experts -- Isaac Stern, Leonard Bernstein, Agnes de Mille, Gregory Peck... Rene d'Harnoncourt, head of the Museum of Modern Art, George Stevens, the maker of award-winning films. They and their colleagues set a pattern for style and for a respect both national and international. The press gave the new endeavor its praise.

In my time as chairman I sought further to strengthen the National Council, to involve it deeply in planning and in articulating and reaffirming our goals, just as I tried to make the private citizen panel system of peer review always more responsive to the growing diversity and needs of the arts. As
our programs grew and became, with added resources, more innovative, so did controversy arise. A Congress, never fully committed to the arts, inately suspicious, was ready to pounce.

 Early on, the endowment helped fund an anthology of both prose and poetry. It was a weighty volume of contemporary writing, elegantly prepared.

 One poem, however, read as follows: LIGHT. Just that, in capital letters.

 Those represented in the anthology, regardless of length of work, were each awarded $500. The one-line poem was said to represent an extension and expansion of light itself. The press first reported the award at $5,000. Then it was expanded to $50,000.

 The question asked in Congress: How could it be that the American taxpayer was paying $50,000 to a poet who couldn't even spell?

 By the time we reached the Appropriations subcommittee in the House, the Endowment was in trouble. "Concern" had been bypassed.

 The subcommittee was chaired by Sidney Yates -- as valorous a defender of the arts as there is. However, when asked if he would yield for a comment by Clarence Long, Congressman from Baltimore, Sid Yates looked abruptly apprehensive. Clarence was noted for a tart tongue, on occasion, and for sarcasm of a high order. One could see critics of the endowment on the subcommittee preparing to relish the upcoming exchange and ready to mount their own attacks.
It was a very uneasy moment, awaiting the weapon of ridicule Congress can use with such devastating effect. The new agency was vulnerable. That is not a good thing to be in Washington. Thoughts of demise were not far away.

Said Clarence Long: Mr. Chairman, I don't pretend to be a poet, or to know much about poetry, but...

He paused while all others watched him and waited. But, he continued, this is the only poem I have ever been able to memorize.

In the surprise, in the sudden gust of laughter, the issue vanished.

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When Erica Jong wrote her famous "Fear of Flying," she put inside the cover, without help from the National Endowment for the Arts this book would not have been possible. The statement was repeated in the U.S. House of Representatives. Although he was constrained from reading directly from the book's pages, because women were present, said the Representative, he'd be happy to share the text at his desk with any interested parties. The desk suddenly resembled a beehive when the queen is astir.

Nancy Hanks was endowment Chairperson. I was her Congressional Liaison. When friends from the Hill telephoned with inquiries and asked what was this "Fear of Flying," I answered,"Why, it's the autobiography of an astronaut, isn't it?" and hung up. These explanations did not last.

Erica's controversy boiled up violently, and with a lethal intent toward the program.
I helped devise new language for the legislation. It was adopted. Henceforward the endowment was mandated to support only "artists of excellence." Such artists were assumed to be beyond the kinds of controversy Erica Jong had unleashed. For a number of years Congress was satisfied.

In my time as chairman the potentials of a greatly serious controversy arose once, with respect to a specific program. I had signed a small grant to a small television organization in New York. The endowment chairman must always be responsible for funding provided, he may not delegate it. In turn, however, the TV group subgranted the funds to a young experimental film-maker. He brought a little white dog into his camera's range. Then he took out a gun and shot the dog in the stomach, so that the film could run for some five minutes before the dog died.

I was told it portrayed man's inherent cruelty, man's inhumanity not just to man but to other living creatures. There were some who praised it as a masterpiece of graphic art.

I might have said that the sub-grant was an important step removed from the endowment, but I felt this was evasion. I cancelled at once all endowment involvement and made it all public. For several days I was bitterly criticized as a deluded censor of artistic values. I said this was not a matter of art, it was a political statement. It was the only time I acted in this unilateral manner. In a sense it went against principles I had so often expressed about the chairman's role and the counsel of others. This did not seem a time for consult-
consultation. It seemed to me a time for immediate action. I would do the same thing again. Very few recall this episode, because the controversy did not last.

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It has lasted with Robert Mapplethorpe. It will not be forgotten as was a small white dog, or an anthology, or a book -- which, as levels of acceptance and understanding have changed, and in comparison to latest problems, might almost apply to a Sunday school picnic.

No like image was anywhere about when Christina Orr-Cahal, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, called me about the retrospective. It originated from the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. It was scheduled next for the Corcoran. I was told the particulars in detail. I asked for an hour or so to think.

She called me seeking confidential advice. I had admired the Corcoran for years. I had often consulted with its leaders, had helped in its substantial contributions to the arts under earlier directors, Peter Marzio and Michael Botwinick. Just as I had in their cases, I admired Christina -- a feisty and very bright young woman, with talent and knowledge, building, developing experience with one of Washington's and the nation's traditional cultural assets.

I knew Robert Mapplethorpe's work had been shown at the "Whitney Museum in New York, but I had not seen it. Just a few nights before Sidney Yates had expressed his "concern" about the scheduled Corcoran show. He had seen a catalogue.

"Why does it have to be so big?" he had asked,
referring not to the catalogue's size but to an anatomical feature he had found, to say the least, arresting.

I knew that Senator Jesse Helms from North Carolina was reported on the warpath. I made a few more calls. "Liv," I was told, "this is the worst firestorm brewing in the endowment's whole history." It was, and is. The source was impeccable.

The catalogue, "Robert Mapplethorpe, The Perfect Moment," contains this excerpt from writings of a no-holds-barred Edward Lucie-Smith: "Mapplethorpe confines himself to a world which some people might find emotionally crippled -- one of sexual deviation, homosexual sado-masochism and the more extreme varieties of leather sex."

In an introductory article David Joselit discusses "Robert Mapplethorpe's Poses." He writes: "The message that Mapplethorpe delivers is that the experience of any masculine or feminine identity is the sensation of an unstable, constantly readjusted succession of poses. In his work, the crossing of boundaries between aggression -- or phallic drive -- and submission is not simplistically developed as an opposition between masculinity and femininity, it is experienced as a drama that takes place within the entire range of sexual identities -- in man and woman, and in homosexual and heterosexual alike."

This statement does not appear ideally tailored for Congressional debate. It suggests that Mapplethorpe may be difficult to understand. A majority in Congress reached a more direct and easier conclusion:
Mapplethorpe was a menace.
A powerful array was lining up with this in mind.

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Robert Mapplethorpe was brought up in Floral Park, Queens, New York. He has said, "I came from suburban America. It was a very safe environment. And it was a good place to come from in that it was a good place to leave." He received his formal art education at New York City's Pratt Institute. It has a nationally high reputation. He began taking his photographs with a Polaroid for instant reactions. He mastered a complete range of sophisticated photographic techniques. He consorted with the rich and famous, members of the Kennedy clan among them and Andy Warhol. His portraits include the notables of our time, especially those notable in the arts. They are studies both in character and composition. A number are self-portraits, striking, complex, enigmatic, erotic. He was recognized by the Whitney as "one of the most important figures in contemporary photography."

Before the exhibition Robert Mapplethorpe died of AIDS. The retrospective covered two full decades of his work, ending in 1988.

One self-portrait depicts Mapplethorpe in leather vest and boots -- bushy-haired, with small moustache and beard and a Satyr-like expression, bending over, looking back toward the camera, fingering a long leather whip emenating from within his behind. Three small photos showed two men, one kneeling, one leaning slightly back to urinate in the other's mouth. "Man in Polyester Suit" shows a torso and upper legs, clad in conventional trousers, vest and coat, and with a huge phallus protruding from the open fly.
There were two photos of children without many clothes but with looks of cherubic innocence, and a great many flowers. "Mapplethorpe," writes Janet Kardon, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, "portrays flowers not as benign, pretty objects, but powerful sensuous presences..."

The major part of the show portrayed the human nude in poses that appeared deliberately to evoke a Grecian style and essential simplicity and power. One was reminded of Eros, the dark force of the id, of Freud, of Nietzsche, of those who have probed tunnels of darkness and images of light. A possibly intended whimsy seemed at times apparent. Of a total of well over a hundred photographs, five could be said to be extreme -- which, as anyone in Washington knows, means out the window with it.

I proposed a plan. I believe it would have worked to defuse the energies of confrontation. At the time the endowment lacked a chairman. Frank Hodsoll, who succeeded me, had moved to the Office of Management and Budget. An "acting" chairman, Hugh Southern, was in Frank's place, while the Bush Administration sought a new nominee. Hugh could not be expected, on his own, to make momentous decisions. Yet the endowment, because of its support and funding, was at the center of it all. Said the catalogue from the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), as had once Erica Jong, "This exhibition and publication have been made possible in part by... the National Endowment for the Arts."

My proposal began with the ICA of the University of Pennsylvania, and placing the $30,000 from the endowment into an escrow account, the sum neither returned nor unreturned. Step
two was for either the Corcoran Gallery or the ICA, or both, to request endowment advice. Here was the worst firestorm in the history of the agency igniting ... what should the Corcoran do -- cancel the show? Should the ICA make possible a return of federal funds?

Step three was fully anticipated: the endowment would say it could not advise, and rightly so; the disclaimer against federal interference was clearly written into the original enabling legislation. In step four, and this was key, the endowment would convene a special assemblage of its existing National Council, and of members from the past going back to earliest times. At this gathering all related issues would be fully ventilated.

Isaac Stern, Lenny Bernstein, Agnes de Mille, Gregory Peck could be called. I had a list of over thirty-five others, gifted articulate artists of international reputation. They would meet. They would discuss. All aspects of the media would be invited. Special legal briefs, dealing with the law and the Constitution, would be independently prepared for the Council and its reaction. Then this body would go home. A statement would be circulated. I could have drafted it then, or now. It would be signed by the great artists of the USA, and of the world. I know it would have emphasized freedom of expression. The timing? Enough for all concerned, very possibly enough to last into the fall, and beyond that year's Congressional session.

The proposal was not greeted with cheers. After all, I was from a different Administration. No one seemed eager to consider the possibility of returning federal funds. The old phrase "a tempest in a teapot" was heard. The ostrich in danger puts its head in the sand.
I felt the capturing of initiative was essential to the endowment's future. Who could maintain that it was not taking appropriate action -- using the very private citizen expertise Congress had itself established? Who would oppose, in these circumstances, the opportunity for the leading voices in the world of art to come together and speak out? Who would seek to second-guess a strong, unified, respected opinion, properly reached? Time would be a friend.

Instead, very little was done. The Corcoran cancelled the exhibition, creating another kind of controversy, tangential to the first. In my view a vacuum developed. Into it came the endowment's principal foes, Senator Helms in the Senate, Representatives Richard Armey and Dana Rohrabacher in the House. They took possession of ground undefended, as did religious leaders and supporters of what is known in Washington and elsewhere as the Far Right.

They pointed chiefly to Robert Mapplethorpe, but also to Andres Serrano. His work had been part of an exhibit funded by the endowment in Richmond Virginia's museum of art. It was a photograph of a crucifix in a bottle. The contents seemed murky and had escaped close scrutiny until the artist announced that the murkiness came from the bottle's contents, his own urine. "Piss Christ" overnight became as notorious as Robert Mapplethorpe's suggestive flagellation.