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Art Above the Laws of Decency?

By HILTON KRAMER

The fierce controversy now raging over the decision of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington to cancel an exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe was an event waiting to happen. If it hadn't happened at this time and at this institution, sooner or later it would surely have erupted elsewhere. The wonder is that it didn't occur earlier, for it involves an issue that has haunted our arts institutions, their supporters and their public for as long as government money — taxpayers' money — has come to play the major role it now does in financing the arts.

The issue may be briefly and in the most general terms stated as follows: Should public standards of decency and civility be observed in determining which works of art or art events are to be selected for the Government's support? Or, to state the issue another way, is everything and anything to be permitted in the name of art? Or, to state the issue in still another way, is art now to be considered such an absolute value that no other standard — no standard of taste, no social or moral standard — is to be allowed to play any role in determining what sort of art it is appropriate for the Government to support?

The Corcoran Gallery's decision was prompted by the special character of Mapplethorpe's sexual imagery and a quite reasonable fear on the part of the museum's leadership that a showing of such pictures in Washington right now — especially in an exhibition partly financed by the National Endowment for the Arts — would result in grave damage both to the Corcoran itself and to the whole program of Government support for the arts.

Yet it may help to put this controversy in perspective to be reminded that it isn't only in relation to the exhibition of provocative sexual images that this issue has lately arisen. In the storm caused by Richard Serra's now legendary sculpture, "Tilted Arc," which came into existence as a United States Government commission, the question of sexual imagery played no part. "Tilted Arc" consisted of an immense and completely abstract steel wall, and thus belonged to the

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Is Everything and Anything To Be Permitted as Art?

The what we are being asked to support and embrace in the name of art is an attitude toward life.

As the Washington Post for the arts immediately appropriated the term “art total” from the New York Post, so the Post may serve to underline the value of this point. We are being led to believe that there is not only no morality in art, but that the pictures that create in greater or greater degree what Richard Kalish calls, the creator who organizes a subconscious recreation. I have made a number of subconscious experiences in the last three or four years that show this to be a true statement.

The Issue Is Not Esthetics

I cannot bring myself to discuss these pictures in all their grotesque particulars, and it is doubtful that this newspaper would agree to pick such a description even if I could bring myself to write there. There is something in the nature of art that makes it difficult to discuss pictures such as these. This is a book in which art is the dominant theme and where the concept is presented without the fluff of discussion.

Public Money

What is it? What is it, then, that we mean by the expression “public money,” when we refer to the sums of money that are paid out by the government to the arts? I think we mean the sums that are public money, and that the government would not be justified in paying out if it were not for the fact that they have been authorized to do so.

Government grants to the arts are a means of supporting the arts, and they are a direct way of supporting the people who are engaged in the arts. They are a means of supporting the artists, and they are a means of supporting the public.

If we are to become a nation where the arts are to be supported, we must have a public money grant to support the arts. It is a means of supporting the arts, and it is a means of supporting the people who are engaged in the arts.

A Dedication To Pernicious Ideas

Unions are professional. It is the world of art that we are discussing, and the world of art is not a place for unions. The world of art is a place for artists. Artists are not to be unions, and unions are not to be artists.

The issue is not esthetics. The issue is not whether art is moral or immoral. The issue is whether art is to be supported or not.

Our view of art is that art is an idea, and that the idea is not to be supported. The idea is to be respected, not to be supported.

Do you agree?

The King's Sons: A revue by Philip Green, director, and Bill Havel, stage manager, at the New York State Theater, Lincoln Center, New York City.