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Hilton Kramer

s Art Above the Laws of Decency?

By HILTON KRAMER

A critic argues that the controversial Mapplethorpe show raises questions about Government underwriting of pornography.

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.

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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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The late Robert Mapplethorpe, in a 1982 self-portrait

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genre of overscale Minimalist sculpture in which representational imagery of any kind is entirely absent.

What proved to be so bitterly offensive to the community that "Tilted Arc" was commissioned to serve was its total lack of amenity — indeed, its stated goal of provoking the most negative and disruptive response to the site the sculpture dominated with an arrogant disregard for the mental well-being and physical convenience of the people who were obliged to come into contact with the work in the course of their daily employment.

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When the General Services Administration, the Federal agency that had commissioned "Tilted Arc" through its Art-in-Architecture program, conducted a public hearing over the fate of this work, a number of art-world eminences claimed, predictably, that the removal of the offending sculpture from its site on the plaza of the Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan would constitute an act of cultural barbarism no different in spirit from the campaigns waged against artistic freedom in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. My own view of the matter, if I may paraphrase a famous observation by George Orwell, is that you would have to be an art-world intellectual to believe a thing like that. At the very least, such a belief betrays a woeful lack of understanding of the categorical differences — political and moral differences — that distinguish acts of violently enforced totalitarian repression from the inevitable disagreements of taste and value that are a legitimate and indispensable feature of democratic societies.

In the case of Richard Serra, moreover, it was certainly possible to admire him as a sculptor while thoroughly approving the decision to remove "Tilted Arc" from its site. This was, in fact, my own position. As a member of the prize jury for the 1985 Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh, I did not hesitate to award the top prize that year to the sculpture that Mr. Serra created for the plaza of the Carnegie Museum of Art. While I found "Tilted Arc" to be repulsive in every respect, I found the Carnegie's sculpture to be a very beautiful work of art. Which proves what? Only that we are not obliged to accept, either as critics or as citizens, every judgment rendered by the art-world establishment as inviolable or irreversible writ, especially where the public has an urgent and legitimate claim to a grievance. To suggest that such grievances and the need to address them are in any way comparable to acts of totalitarian repression contributes nothing but an element of demagoguery and intimidation to what ought to be a serious debate about what standards are to be observed in spending the taxpayers' money on public financing of the arts.

Getting the Issue Exactly Wrong

In the case of the Mapplethorpe exhibition, which the Corcoran Gallery found it prudent on June 13 to cancel prior to its opening, even in the face of what everyone knew would be the inevitable uproar, we are once again being asked to accept the judgment of the art-world establishment as absolute and incontestable. (The fact that the Washington Project for the Arts immediately appropriated the right to show the exhibition in Washington only serves to underscore this point.) We are being told, in other words, that no one outside the professional art establishment has a right to question or oppose the exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work even when it is being shown at the Government's expense. In this instance, to be sure, the Government did not cause the photographs in question to be created. Mercifully, they were not commissioned by a Government agency. But such an agency did contribute funds to support their public exhibition, and by so doing it gave the public and its elected representatives the right to have a voice in assessing the probable consequence of such an exhibition — a task that the art establishment has lately shown itself to be utterly incapable of performing in any disinterested way.

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

Here again, to suggest that the public's legitimate interest in this matter amounts to political repression is to get the whole issue exactly wrong. The public's right to have an interest in the fate of this exhibition began on the day that tax dollars were allocated for its public display. There was no public outcry, after all, though there was a certain amount of private outrage, when Mapplethorpe's pictures were exhibited in commercial galleries. Some of the people who went to the galleries to see the photographs, unaware of what it was they would be seeing, had plenty of reason to be shocked at what they saw depicted in the work. This was especially the case, as I myself witnessed on one occasion, with parents who are in the habit of making the rounds of the art galleries in the company of their young children.

Public Money For Pornography?

What is it, then, about some of these photographs — the ones that are the cause of the trouble — that makes them so offensive? It isn't simply that they depict male nudity. There are male nudes in the Minor White retrospective now on view at the Museum of Modern Art that no one, as far as I know, has made any fuss about. In today's cultural climate, in which it has become commonplace for schoolchildren to be instructed in the use of condoms, it takes a lot more than a museum exhibition of pictures showing the male genitals to cause an uproar.

What one finds in many Mapplethorpe photographs is something else — so absolute and extreme a concentration on male sexual endowments that every other attribute of the human subject is reduced to insignificance. In these photographs, men are rendered as nothing but sexual — which is to say, homosexual — objects. Or, as the poet Richard Howard wrote in a tribute to Mapplethorpe, "The male genitals are often presented . . . as surrogates for the face."

Even so, these homoerotic idealizations of male sexuality are not the most extreme of Mapplethorpe's pictures. That dubious honor belongs to the pictures that celebrate in graphic and grisly detail what Richard Marshall, the curator who organized a Mapplethorpe retrospective at the Whitney Museum last summer — not the same exhibition as the one in dispute at the Corcoran, by the way — identified as the "sadomasochistic theme." In this case, it is a theme enacted by male homosexual partners whom we may presume to be consenting adults — consenting not only to the sexual practices depicted but to Mapplethorpe's role in photographing them.

The Issue Is Not Esthetics

I cannot bring myself to describe these pictures in all their gruesome particularities, and it is doubtful that this newspaper would agree to publish such a description even if I could bring myself to write one. (There can be no question either, of course, of illustrating such pictures on this page, which raises an interesting and not irrelevant question: Should public funds be used to exhibit pictures which the press even in our liberated era still finds too explicit or repulsive to publish?) Suffice it to say that Mr. Marshall, who presumbly knows what he is talking about in this matter, assured us in the Whitney catalogue that Mapplethorpe made these pictures "not as a voyeur but as an advocate" and "sympathetic participant."

Even in a social environment as emancipated from conventional sexual attitudes as ours is today, to exhibit photographic images of this sort, which are designed to aggrandize and abet erotic rituals involving coercion, degradation, bloodshed and the infliction of pain, cannot be regarded as anything but a violation of public decency. Such pictures have long circulated in private, of course. They belonged, and were seen to belong, to the realm of specialized erotica. In that realm, it was clearly understood that the primary function of such images was to promote sexual practices commonly regarded as unruly and perverse, or to aid in fantasizing about such practices. The appeal of such images for those who were drawn to them lay precisely in the fact that they were forbidden. They belonged, in other words, to the world of pornography.

It may be asked whether the disputed Mapplethorpe pictures really differ from earlier works of art that, owing to their violation of conventional taste, caused the public to denounce them, only to embrace them later as treasured classics. The example that comes to mind is Manet, whose two most famous paintings, "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" and "Olympia" (both 1863), were attacked as indecent when they were first exhibited in Paris.

For a true counterpart to Mapplethorpe in 19th-century art, however, it isn't in a master like Manet but in graphic artists who specialized in pornographic images that we will find an appropriate parallel, and we still don't see much of that art on public exhibition in our museums even today.

What has turned these Mapplethorpe photographs into a public controversy is not that they exist. We may not approve of their existence, and we may certainly regard both the creation and the consumption of them as a form of social pathology. But so long as they remained a private taste, they could not, I believe, be seen to be a threat to public decency. What has made them a public issue is the demand that is now being made to accord these hitherto forbidden images the status of perfectly respectable works of art, to exhibit them without restriction in public institutions, and to require our Government to provide funds for their public exhibition.

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Ostensibly, these are demands that are being made in the name of art. That isn't the whole story, of course — it never is where art is made to serve extra-artistic purposes — but before looking into the extra-artistic aspects of this matter, a prior question must be addressed. Are these disputed pictures works of art? My own answer to this question, as far as the Mapplethorpe pictures are concerned, is: Alas, I suppose they are. But so, I believe, was Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" a work of art. This is not to say that either "Tilted Arc" or the Mapplethorpe pictures belong to the highest levels of art — in my opinion, they do not — but I know of no way to exclude them from the realm of art itself. Failed art, even pernicious art, still remains art in some sense.

Writing some years ago about the Marquis de Sade, to cite a relevant example, Edmund Wilson observed that "the Marquis constitutes, unquestionably, one of the hardest cases to handle in the whole history of literature." Yet Wilson felt obliged, however reluctantly, to include Sade in the history of literature, and for similar reasons I believe we must accord Mapplethorpe a place — though not the exalted place being claimed for him — in the annals of art photography. It doesn't solve any of the problems raised by the Mapplethorpe pictures to say they aren't art. It is only a way of running away from the difficult issue, which doesn't lie in the realm of esthetics.

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What has to be acknowledged in this debate is a fact of cultural life that the art-world establishment has never been willing to deal with — namely, that not all forms of art are socially benign in either their intentions or their effects. Everybody knows — certainly every intelligent parent knows — that certain forms of popular culture have a devastating effect on the moral sensibilities of the young. Well, it is not less true that certain forms of high culture are capable of having something other than a socially desirable impact on the sensibilities of young and old alike. How we, as adult citizens, wish to deal in our own lives with this antisocial element in the arts should not, I think, be a matter for the Government to determine, for systematic programs of censorship are likely to have consequences that are detrimental to our liberties. (The question of protecting children is another matter entirely.) It is when our Government intervenes in this process by supporting the kind of art that is seen to be antisocial that we as citizens have a right to be heard — not, I hasten to add, in order to deny the artist his freedom of expression, but to have a voice in determining what our representatives in the Government are going to support and thus validate in our name.

A Dedication To Pernicious Ideas

Unfortunately, professional opinion in the art world can no longer be depended upon to make wise decisions in these matters. (If it could, there never would have been a "Tilted Arc" controversy or the current uproar over the Mapplethorpe pictures.) There is in the professional art world a sentimental attachment to the idea that art is at its best when it is most extreme and disruptive. This is the point of view that prompted an art student in Chicago to think he was creating a valid work of art by spreading out an American flag on the floor and inviting the public to walk on it, and then recording their responses to what was at the time a proscribed practice (now that the Supreme Court has ruled in its favor, I suspect that this particular idea will lose some of its appeal to "advanced" taste). It was this notion of equating artistic originality with sheer provocation that also led the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art to give a grant of the Government's money to Andres Serrano, now famous for the work that consists of a photograph of Christ on the Cross submerged in the artist's urine. This is the kind of thing people mean when they talk about the so-called "cutting edge." Basically, it is a sentimentalization as well as a commercialization of the old idea of the avant-garde, which everyone knows no longer exists — except, possibly, in the realm of fashion design and advertising. The phenomenon of the avant-garde in art died a long time ago, and now lies buried under the millions of dollars that have been spent on the art that bears its name.

In lieu of an authentic avant-garde in art, we now have something else — that famous "cutting edge" that looks more and more to an extra-artistic content for its fundamental raison-d'être. In the case of "Tilted Arc," the "cutting edge" element consisted of the sculptor's wish to deconstruct and otherwise render uninhabitable the public site the sculpture was designed to occupy. In the case of the disputed Mapplethorpe pictures, it consists of the attempt to force upon the public the acceptance of the values of a sexual sub-culture that the public at large finds loathsome — and here I do not mean homosexuality as such but the particular practices depicted in the most extreme of these pictures. In both cases, we are being asked to accept the unacceptable in the name of art, but this is sheer hypocrisy, and all the parties concerned know it is hypocrisy. What we are being asked to support and embrace in the name of art is an attitude toward life, which nowadays is where the real cutting edge (no quotation marks required) is to be found.

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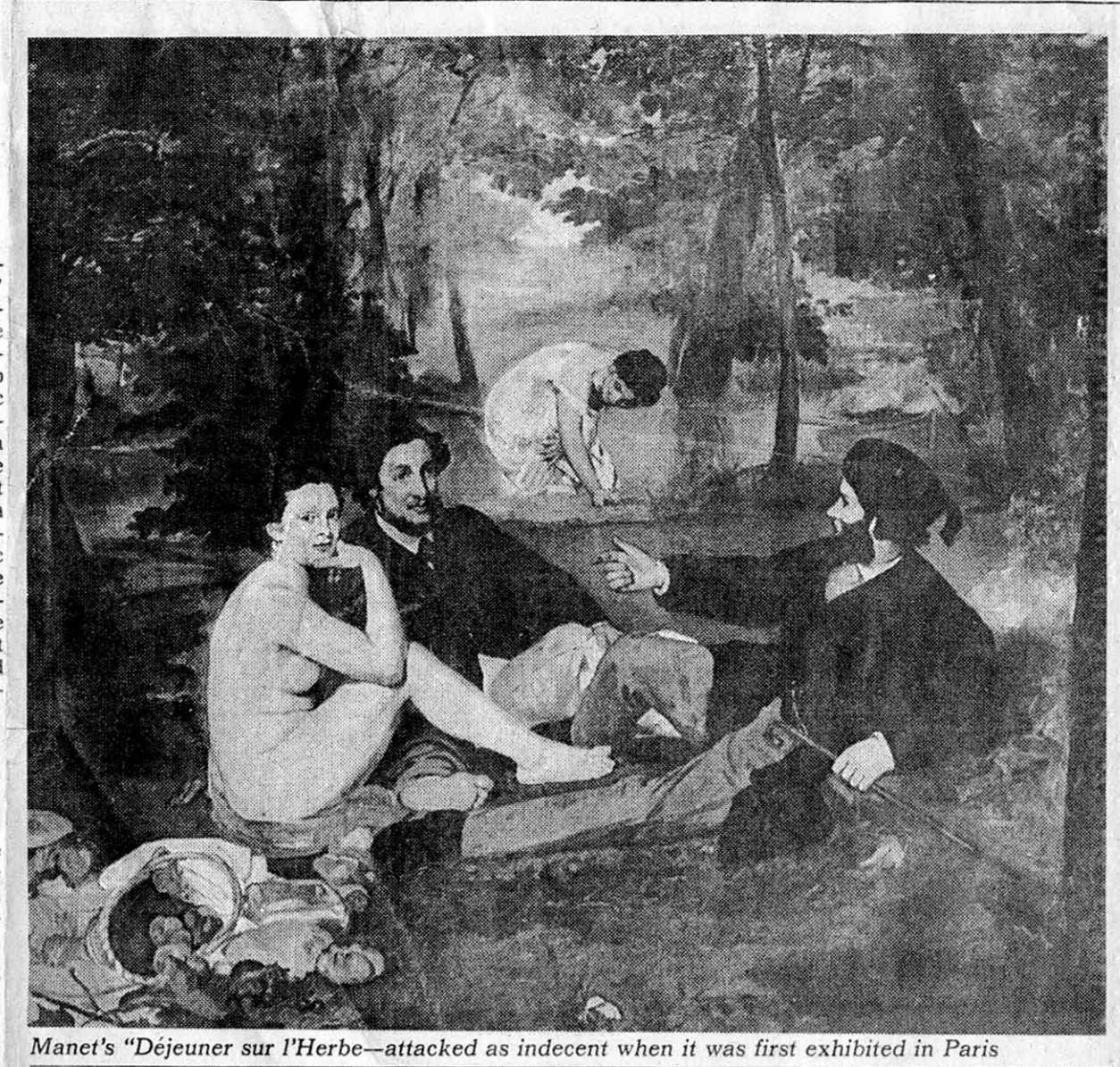
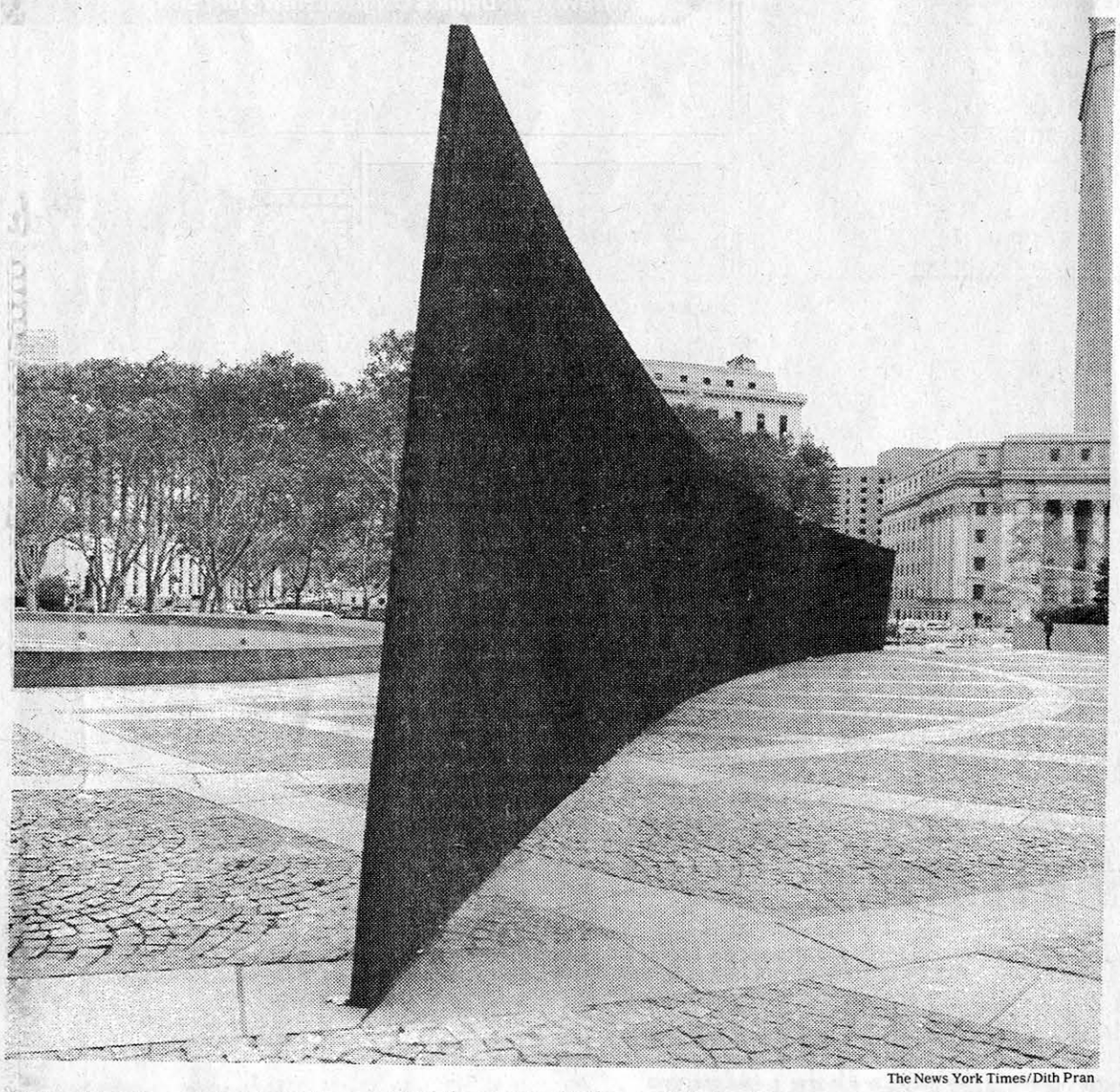
If our agencies of Government are incapable of making this distinction between art and life, the public will have more and more reason to be concerned with the way tax dollars are being spent in the name of art. The problem won't go away, and it can't be argued away by cries of repression or censorship. Much of what the Government spends on the arts still goes — and ought to go — to supporting the highest achievements of our civilization, and it would be a tragedy for our country and our culture if that support were to be lost because of a few obtuse decisions and a dedication in some quarters to outmoded and even pernicious ideas. But if the arts community is not prepared to correct the outrages committed in its name, there will be no shortage of other elements in our society ready and eager to impose drastic remedies. This is a problem that the art world has brought upon itself. □



Manet's "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe—attacked as indecent when it was first exhibited in Paris



The News York Times/Dith Pran

"Tilted Arc"—a stated goal of provoking the most negative and disruptive response to the site