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Is 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?

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

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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The late Robert Mapplethorpe, in a 1982 self-portrait.
Is Everything and Anything To Be Permitted as Art?

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acres of overflowing Minimalist sculpture in which representational elements are portrayed.

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

The National Women's History Museum in the United States has a collection of women's lives, which were considered "unworthy" of being recorded in history. However, this collection is not just a collection of women's lives; it is a collection of women's struggles and achievements.

In fact, the Washington Project for the Arts immediately appropriated the idea of the Women's History Museum to the arts world, and the Women's History Museum was a victim of its own success. In this context, it is important to consider the role of the arts in society. The arts have always been a way for people to express themselves and their views on the world around them. However, in recent years, the arts have been used to support political and social agendas, and this has led to a controversy over the role of the arts in society.

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