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Hilton Kramer

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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 yet 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 Mapplethorpe show raises questions about Government underwriting of pornography.

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 Continued on Page 7

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.

Hilton Kramer is the editor of The New Criterion, a monthly review, and art critic of The New York Observer.
Is Everything and Anything To Be Permitted as Art?

Continued From Page 1

nence of several minimalist sculptures
in which representational elements
were almost entirely eliminated. At
the time, such a radical departure
from traditional sculpture was consid-
ered to be a new form of art that
defied conventional aesthetic norms.

The article goes on to discuss the
impact of modern art on society,
exploring themes such as the
rejection of traditional forms and
the embrace of new, abstract expres-
sions. It highlights the challenges
that artists faced in trying to
establish their work in the public
eye and the influence of art fairs,
which provided a platform for new
artists to showcase their work.

The text also touches on the
role of museums and galleries in
promoting contemporary art,
noting their efforts to represent a
diverse range of artists and
movements. It emphasizes the
importance of public engagement
in the art world and the need for
education and dialogue to
promote a greater understanding
of contemporary art practices.

The article concludes by
acknowledging the complex
nature of the art world and
highlighting the ongoing
debate about what constitutes
art and what does not. It
reminds readers that the
definition of art is not static and
continues to evolve as new
movements and ideas emerge.