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The Corcoran Art Gallery's effort to avoid a brewing political debate by canceling a potentially offensive photography exhibit touched off its own controversy yesterday as a number of artists advocates condemned the move, and the Washington Post for the Arts considered booking the show so the work can be seen in Washington.

At least one member of the Corcoran's board of trustees said he was "embarrassed" by the decision and heard about it only after it was made.

Corcoran Director Christina Orr-Cahall said she had cancelled the exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe, announced Monday, in order to prevent the museum from getting entangled in a fight over National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding of artistic work that may offend political, moral or religious sensibilities.

"I am appalled," said the director of the Washington Post's arts section.

"I am amazed that people are so fearful of art and the way they make the decision to cancel a work of art of an institution dedicated to art—and that's what the inscription says on the Corcoran building—should be so fearful of supporting individual artists' work in a situation like this,

Orr-Cahall said Monday that the move had the support of the board and staff, but board member Marvin Gerstl said yesterday that he heard of the decision at a dinner party Monday night, after it had been announced. He said he was not told that the issue would be discussed at a Monday board meeting and so did not attend, and believed that other board members were similarly dissuaded.

About half of the museum's board of trustees said they would have opposed the decision at a dinner party in March at the age of 42.

"I don't approve of the political practice of art," Gerstl said yesterday. "I know there are other board members who feel as intensely as I do.

But board member Elinor Farnsworth defended the decision. "There was very strong unanimity" among board members attending the meeting, she said. "If you are an art museum you would like to show art on the cutting edge," she said. "But we felt it was not an artistic decision, it was a political decision.

"The Mapplethorpe's move comes at a time of considerable tension in the federal art community. The NEA faces criticism from Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and a number of other senators and representatives for funding a fellowship program in North Carolina that in turn funded an artist whose work many find religiously offensive.

Some arts advocates fear that the controversy may harm the NEA during the budget process, and perhaps a federal fund that directly supports major District arts organizations.

Mapplethorpe's work, which has been criticized by critics, is often frankly sexual, and the show that was scheduled to open July 1 at the Corcoran, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," includes a number of homoerotic images as well as nude children. The 130-piece retrospective was already seen in Philadelphia and Chicago (a Philadelphia Inquirer reviewer called the works "among the most compelling photographs created in our time"), and a major retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work held at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art last year received very favorable reviews.

A spokesman for the Whitney Museum yesterday speculated that the Corcoran decision would have done anything but go ahead with the show. A spokesman for Helms yesterday speculated that the Corcoran's decision may have overreacted to the situation, others said the mood on the Hill is such that controversy can easily explode into crisis.

"Twenty years ago no arts institution would have done anything but go ahead with the exhibit," said Anne Murphy, executive director of the American Arts Alliance. "But when you've got a climate of accusation by innuendo, as we have in this country right now..." Murphy did not finish the sentence.

Southern, who went to the Hill yesterday to discuss the NEA's other controversy with concerned members of Congress and said the NEA will examine its funding procedures, said he does not understand the serousness of the situation.

"I think it's very serious when a large number of seniors are upset at the way a federal agency is spending funds. I think we should be concerned about the way our processes and our attention to quality, and the fact that the overreaction is that the endowment does meet with the approval of the public.

"I also think we can say it's a very difficult and unremarkable dilemma, and that when federal funding is involved in supporting the arts and we are advised by panels of artists—these will be subjective decisions. Once in a while they will make a recommendation that will be offensive to some people, and sometimes to many people.

"I think this is the price in the end of living and working in an open and contentious society in which honest people can disagree radically.

And the controversy is expected to continue. "It's only the first of many more to come," he said. The fact that the Corcoran is not going to open the show is not the end of the matter.

The spokeswoman said Orr-Cahall had received phone calls from colleagues in other museums and that "we've received as many calls in support [from members] as calls of the opposite.

Although the North Carolina program and the Mapplethorpe show have no direct relationship, and the Corcoran received no NEA funding for the Mapplethorpe show, the NEA did fund that show's organizers at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art. Arts supporters on the Hill reportedly said yesterday to discuss the NEA's own funding procedures, said Clark.

"To make a statement that the Corcoran has ceased to exist as a vehicle of the art community," said lawyer Aaron Levine, president of the District of Columbia Arts Alliance. "But when you've got a climate of accusation by innuendo, as we have in this country right now..." Murphy did not finish the sentence.

"There's no one who's ever going to see it [the show]. Of course, this is the full artistic freedom which we all support," said the spokeswoman.

"I heard about it only after it was seen in Washington. But on the other hand, be-