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6-23-89

Mapplethorpe Aftermath

Focus Shifts From Corcoran to Larger Arts Issue

By Elizabeth Kastor and Carla Hall

Washington Post Staff Writers

After weathering 10 days of harsh criticism over her decision to cancel a controversial photography show, Corcoran Gallery of Art Director Christina Orr-Cahall said yesterday she believes that the artistic community has begun to sympathize with the museum as the debate over federal funding for the arts shifts to Capitol Hill.

"Our contemporary artists have called to confirm that they are participating in our upcoming exhibitions," Orr-Cahall said, "and we're

starting to get some greater support from our colleagues as the whole story has come out, so we're feeling a bit better over here."

Last week, Orr-Cahall announced that to avoid being pulled into a battle over National Endowment for the Arts funding of art that some find offensive, she was canceling "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," which includes homoerotic, violent and sexually explicit pictures. Mapplethorpe, who was gay, died of AIDS last March.

The scheduled July 1 opening of

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Space (1985). In the conclusion, Pope

John Carmody is away. His TV Column will resume when he returns.

Corcoran Controversy

CORCORAN, From F1

the show, Orr-Cahall said, would have coincided with a crucial stage in the congressional appropriations process. By canceling on June 12, Orr-Cahall said, the museum hoped the fuss over the show would blow over before the appropriations legislation was drafted.

"We at least put the correct issues forward," she said, "which is part of what we wanted to do, and we did it so we allowed the NEA and the Congress and the arts world to speak about federal funding for the arts, which we think—if we had opened it [July 1]—might not have happened."

Merry Foresta, a National Museum of American Art curator, said yesterday, "I think the feeling is that the wrong decision was made. I think the sense of outrage has been replaced by sympathy for the institution having made the wrong choice."

But Foresta agreed that "the argument has shifted, as it should, to larger issues . . . to the whole issue of government support for the arts, and what is art, and what should they support—all those questions nobody wants to answer."

Last week some Corcoran staff members told friends and colleagues that they were embarrassed and distressed by the cancellation, especially because they believed Orr-Cahall had misrepresented their position by saying the decision had been reached with full support from the staff and the board of trustees.

"I've talked with them a lot, and I've gone from office to office," Orr-Cahall said. "We're upfront about this, and we really do try to function as a family, and people are always going to have personal viewpoints, but I think they recognize you're entitled to a personal viewpoint but it's not always going to be the same as an institutional viewpoint."

What one Corcoran curator calls "the Mapplethorpe extravaganza" actually began several months ago, when Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) took to the Senate floor to criticize a photograph funded by a Winston-Salem, N.C., arts organization. The picture, which shows a Christ figure submerged in urine, was created by Andres Serrano, who received a \$15,000 grant from a program that in turn was funded by the NEA.

Although a number of members of Congress have condemned certain NEA grants they found offensive, there was no congressional ac-

tion until this week. On Tuesday, Rep. Sidney Yates (D-Ill.), chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees NEA funding, proposed an amendment designed to make the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities more accountable for the grants they give.

In the already nervous arts community, phone calls last week from a summer intern in Helms's office about an art installation on the steps of the National Museum of American Art fueled rumors that Helms had plans to launch a broader assault against the NEA. A constituent had told the senator's office that Dennis Adams's "Bus Shelter II"—a bus stop featuring photographs of convicted spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg—"deified the Rosenbergs," according to intern Phil Skillman. "I called to find out (a) did this piece of art exist, (b) why would it be described that way and (c) is it federally funded."

According to a high-ranking Helms staffer, the office was only responding in the routine way it follows up complaints about anything.

"I felt it wasn't the use of federal funds for partisan politics and therefore did not merit further inquiry," said the staffer, who asked not to be quoted by name. "The call was a waste of time."

Over the last few days, several arts organizations have issued statements that support the NEA and the concept of artistic freedom without directly discussing the Corcoran's move. At a lunch on Tuesday, National Gallery Director J. Carter Brown said, "I really think it would be improper for me to comment on the decision of a sister institution," then added, "There is a principle involved here which is at the heart of what it means to be an American. . . . We have to keep the First Amendment rights apart from any controversy."

Although many members of the artistic and gay communities remain outraged at the Corcoran's move, Orr-Cahall said yesterday that she was reassured by some of the responses she received at the Association of Art Museum Directors' meeting at the end of last week.

"That was part of the turning tide," she said. "When I was able to really sit down and chat with them, when I was really able to spend 45 minutes or an hour explaining the issue, most people came to realize it was not a clear-cut decision, and I think they came to realize it was not really a free-speech issue."

"Now, realizing that and saying that to me privately is different from standing up and saying that publicly in the New York Times or The Washington Post. But I do think they became more understanding, and became less quick to criticize the Corcoran specifically, although they don't want it to become a pattern—as we don't want it to become a pattern."