

University of Rhode Island

DigitalCommons@URI

Obscenity: News Articles (1989)

Education: National Endowment for the Arts
and Humanities, Subject Files II (1962-1996)

6-16-1989

Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 17

Elizabeth Kastor

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58

Recommended Citation

Kastor, Elizabeth, "Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 17" (1989). *Obscenity: News Articles (1989)*. Paper 29.

https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58/29

This News Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Obscenity: News Articles (1989) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

...at last night's party.

W. Post 6/16/89

Gays, Artists to Protest at Corcoran

Groups Take Action Against Mapplethorpe Cancellation

By Elizabeth Kastor
Washington Post Staff Writer

Three gay-rights groups plan a protest today against the Corcoran Gallery of Art's cancellation of an exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs, and a group of Washington artists say it will register its disapproval by projecting slides of the controversial pictures on the museum facade June 30.

"If they can't be on the inside of the museum," said Bill Wooby, owner of the Collector Gallery and Restaurant, "they're going to be *on* the museum."

Today's protest, scheduled to begin outside the museum at noon, is led by the D.C. Gay and Lesbian Activist Alliance, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and Oppression Under Target (OUT).

"The censorship issue is real and transcends all boundaries, but it's particularly galling when this is directed at a gay artist," Urvashi Vaid, a spokeswoman for the Task Force, said yesterday. "Mapplethorpe was one of the best-known openly gay artists. It also points out to us that what we've been saying all along is true—gay art, gay publishing, gay media, is all extremely vulnerable to attack by people who don't agree with its content."

The Corcoran announced Monday that it was canceling "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment" to

See CORCORAN, B6, Col. 1

Protests Planned

CORCORAN, From B1

avoid getting pulled into a possible congressional assault on National Endowment for the Arts funding of work that may offend moral, religious or political sensibilities. Mapplethorpe's work, which has been exhibited in major museums around the country and extolled by critics, includes many homoerotic, sexual and violent images, as well as traditional portraits and still lifes. Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in March at the age of 42.

Corcoran Director Christina Orr-Cahall was out of town and could not be reached for comment. A spokeswoman said the museum "had heard rumors" of planned protests and had taken minimal security precautions to protect the exterior of the building. She said she expects Orr-Cahall to meet with representatives of the gay-rights groups when she returns next week.

Wooby said yesterday that Mapplethorpe's New York dealer, Robert Miller, has agreed to lend more than 100 transparencies of Mapplethorpe's pictures for the artists' protest. The show had been scheduled to open at the Corcoran July 1.

There is still a possibility that the show will come to Washington. Wednesday night the board of trustees of the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) voted unanimously to request it. Several members of the WPA board also sit on the Corcoran board, which on Monday voted to cancel the show. The WPA trustees pledged \$30,000 to pay for the show, and promised to raise the remaining costs. One of the sponsors of the Corcoran show has also promised to switch a \$20,000 grant to WPA if it gets the exhibit.

The show, which has already been seen in Philadelphia and Chicago, was organized by Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art. ICA acting director Judith Tannenbaum said her museum is now contacting lenders and discussing options with its lawyers before deciding whether it will go to the WPA. A decision is expected by early next week.

Gilbert Kinney, chairman of the Corcoran's finance committee, supported the decision to withdraw the show. His wife, WPA board member Ann Kinney, said she finds some of the images in the Mapplethorpe show "in extremely bad taste," but nevertheless voted to bring it to WPA.

"WPA is a very different organization from the Corcoran and has a different role to play," Ann Kinney said yesterday. "WPA is an organization dedicated to shows that are really selected by artists, and it is much more of an avant-garde, cutting-edge institution. . . . The artists on the board very much wanted to present the show at WPA, and as a board member I support their prerogative to do so.

"I just think the Corcoran has done the right thing for the Corcoran. I think it's sad, but I think they've done the right thing. From the WPA perspective, it's a very different problem."

News of the Corcoran's extraordinary decision has spread throughout the art world, including to Europe.

"The European dealers can't believe it," former Washington photography dealer Harry Lunn said on Wednesday from Basel, Switzerland, where he is participating in an art fair.

"We're talking about a world-class artist. Not only do I have 10 Mapplethorpes on my walls here, but there are at least 10 other galleries that have Mapplethorpes here at Basel. . . . It's not an easy situation, and I recognize that, but I'm embarrassed for Washington and the Corcoran. And there's no way I or anyone else can explain it to anyone over here."

The Corcoran's action came during a brewing debate over NEA funding procedures. The NEA has been criticized for funding a group that gave a \$15,000 fellowship to photographer Andres Serrano, whose fellowship work included a picture of a Christ figure submerged in the artist's urine. The Corcoran received no NEA funding for the Mapplethorpe show (although it did receive nearly \$300,000 in direct federal support last year), but the ICA in Philadelphia got a \$30,000-NEA grant for the show. Sens. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) spoke out against the Serrano grant on the Senate floor, and 25 Republican and Democratic senators signed a letter of complaint to the NEA.

Earlier this week, Rep. Dick Armey (R-Tex.) sent a letter to the arts endowment, signed by more than 100 members of Congress, that condemned both the Serrano and Mapplethorpe grants. Helms, Gorton and Armey have all threatened to take legislative action against the NEA if its funding procedures are not revised. NEA acting chairman Hugh Southern has promised to address the concerns.

A number of the participants involved in the current debate are familiar with artistic controversy. Washington artist Rockne Krebs and several other artists involved in the planned protest outside the Corcoran have long been vocal critics of the Corcoran, claiming the museum has failed to exhibit and support local artists adequately.

Armey has taken on the NEA before, too. In 1985, during the endowment's last reauthorization process, he and two other members of Congress charged that the NEA was mispending public funds by subsidizing pornographic and politically radical poetry. The congressmen tried to include language in the authorizing legislation that would have prevented the NEA from giving money to artists whose work was deemed to be "patently offensive to the average person." After a debate over how to define the "average" person, the attempt was rebuffed.

"We're not saying that we want you to repress your expressive self," Armey said yesterday. "We're just saying if you want to do things that are on the outer fringes and really pushing the public tastes to the limit, do it on private money, not on the public money."

Corcoran Director Orr-Cahall has said she feared the show could exacerbate an already tense situation. "We really felt this exhibit was at the wrong place at the wrong time," she said. "We really feel that that discussion belongs with the NEA and Congress to resolve. We could not and would not allow ourselves to be drawn into the debate."

At least one Corcoran board member has spoken out publicly against the decision, and yesterday another member disturbed by the move said he was trying to address his concerns within the privacy of the board of trustees. "An unfortunate decision was made in the attempt to do the right thing, not only for the Corcoran, but—perhaps more importantly—for the upcoming arts funding debate," he said.