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8-6-1989

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Russell, John, "Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 20" (1989). *Obscenity: News Articles (1989)*. Paper 26.

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ART VIEW/John Russell

Getting High on Moral Indignation

SHORT OF UNHOOKING THE telephone, canceling the newspaper, taking an ax to the television set and hiding under the sofa, it would by now be impossible not to have heard of the pseudo-controversy about the photographs of the late Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, the intervention of Senator Jesse Helms on the floor of the Senate and the possible effects of it all on the future of the National Endowment for the Arts.

As often happens with pseudo-controversies that in some way involve the arts, this one has been blown up as if with a bicycle pump to the size of a Goodyear blimp and is by now way up in the sky and heading no place in particular. It is time that it should be ballasted, and perhaps brought down to

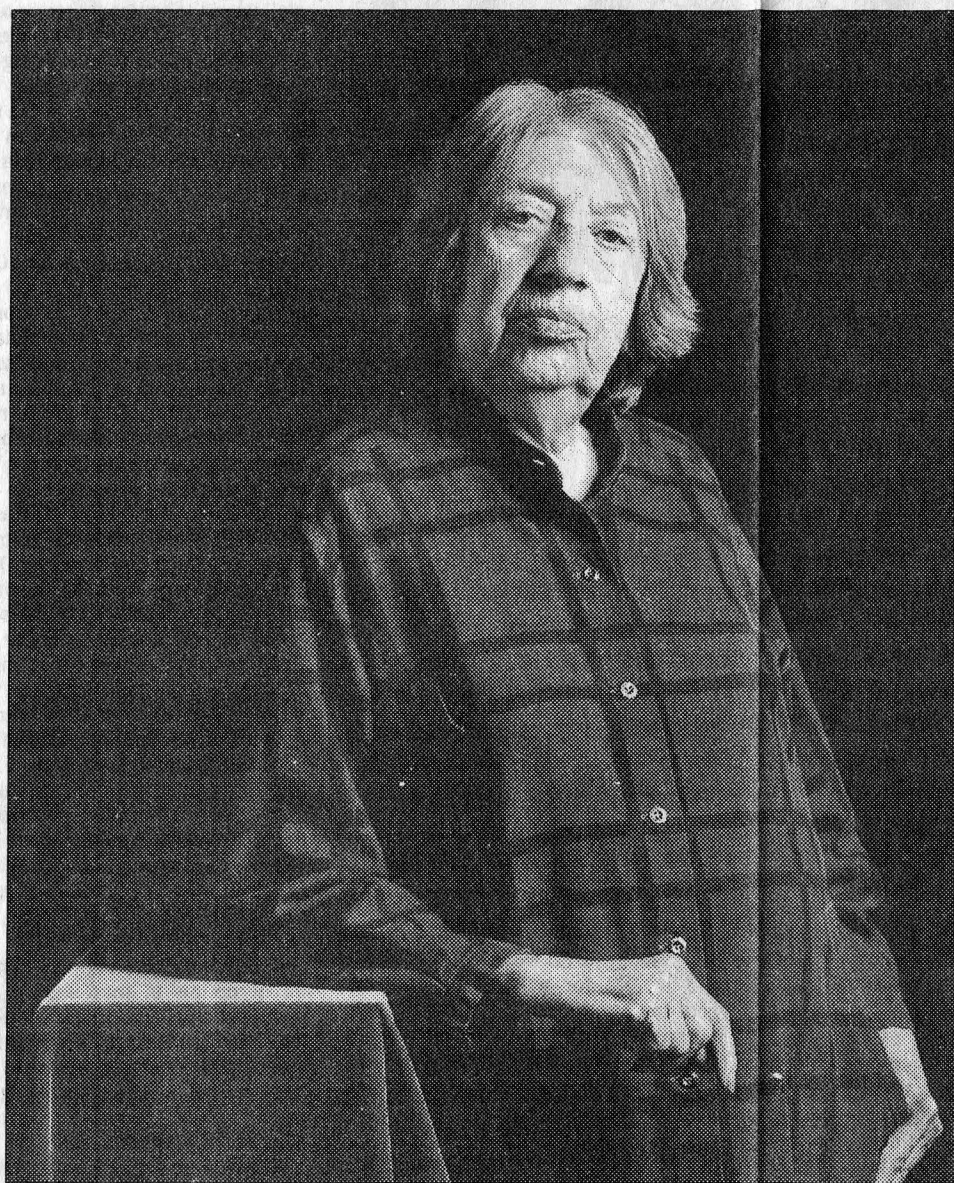
The Mapplethorpe controversy is the size of a Goodyear blimp by now and heading nowhere in particular.

earth, by some rudimentary but essential facts.

Contrary to what has been said — not least by present and former panel members who should have known better than to dump on their colleagues — the National Endowment for the Arts is not in the business of blasphemy, pornography and the wholesale propagation of sadomasochistic and homoerotic activities.

In the year 1987, 4,699 grants were made by the endowment, and in all \$151.4 million was spent on them. In the year 1988, grants once again numbered above 4,600, at a total cost in Federal awards of \$163.3 million. Of the more than 9,000 grants that were made in those years, precisely two have been called in question on grounds of indecency.

The awards cover the entire spectrum of artistic and para-artistic activity. They range from small-press publishing to the Glimmerglass Opera Theater in Cooperstown, N.Y., from the department of prints and drawings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to grants in 1988 to more than 200 theater companies through the country, and from film, radio and television in all their ramifications to a salute to the lifetime achievement of a 92-year-old bobbin lacemaker in South Dakota.

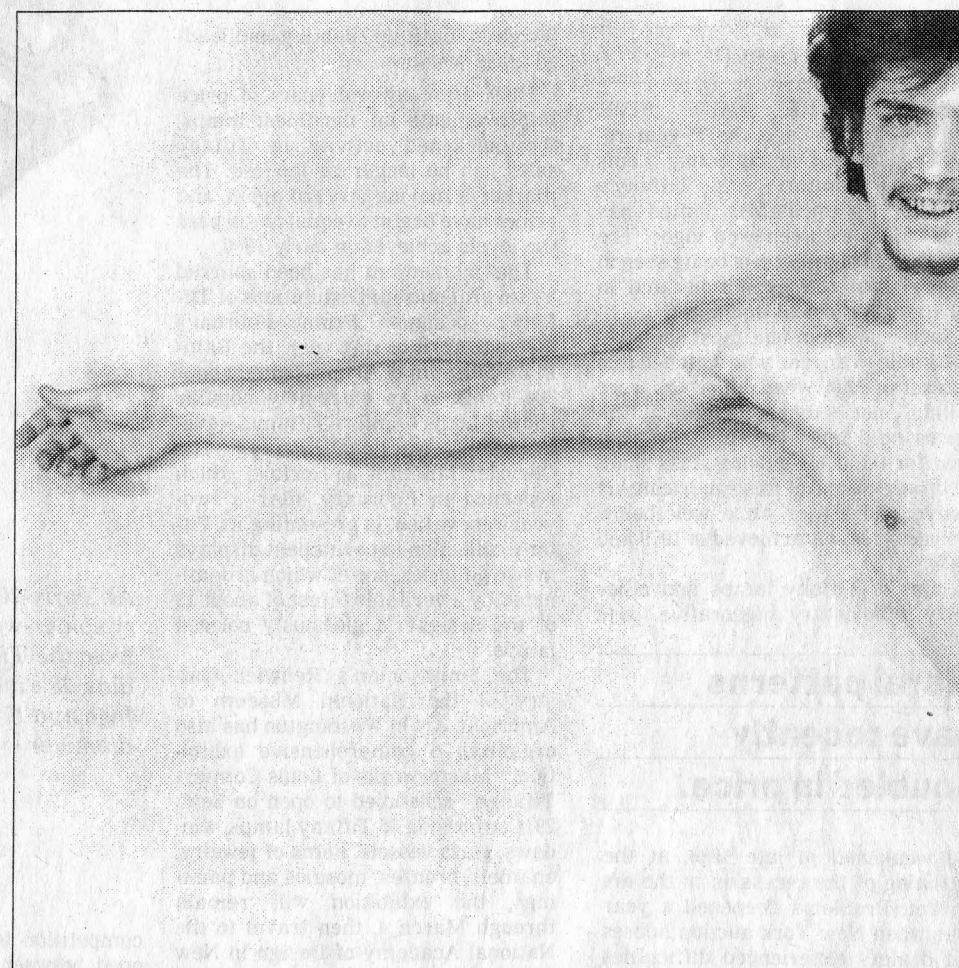


Given that every one of these 9,000 and more grants was bound to annoy somebody, somewhere, it seems to this critic that the level of recorded outrage is amazingly low. From what I know at first hand of the frenzies of often misdirected rage that are aroused by governmental support for the arts in Britain, France, West Germany and elsewhere, I can only say that the National Endowment for the Arts has to have been doing something right.

And if sometimes people are disturbed, disconcerted and emotionally wrung out by something that the endowment has favored, what of it? It is the role of art to make us run barefoot through the fire, from time to time, and come out unscathed at the other end.

The words "e pluribus unum" may well come into our minds as we read the endowment's annual report, page by page, and note the evenhanded steadiness with which a new potential for free expression has been given to every state in the Union. We need to be very careful before we allow that freedom of expression, with all it involves in the way of an occasional exasperation, to be diminished.

Every reader of those annual reports — and I wonder how many such readers there really are among those who have rushed to do dirt on the endowment — can disagree with this or that emphasis in its bounties. But it remains an astonishing fact that in the close on 25 years' life of the National



The painter Lee Krasner, left, and a high-flying self-portrait by the late Robert Mapplethorpe—as a portraitist, he could reach into the depths of the human being before him and set out what he found there in a spirit of affectionate compassion.

Endowment, the total number of cases of moral or other outrage has had trouble crawling into the low double figures.

Current hostility against the endowment dates from the day, just a few weeks ago, when the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington reneged on its agreement to present the exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. (The exhibition had been shown without incident in Philadelphia and Chicago, and is slated to go on to Hartford, Berkeley, Calif., and Boston after its improvised showing through Aug. 13 at the Washington Project for the Arts, 400 Seventh Street, N.W., Washington.)

The work of Robert Mapplethorpe was anything but an unknown quantity at the time when the Corcoran Gallery decided not to show the exhibition that was scheduled to open on July 1. Nor was the endowment its

prime sponsor. It had had the financial support of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the City of Philadelphia, neither of which is in the business of pornography and both of which must be assumed to have known what was in it.

Mapplethorpe had been shown in private galleries the world over since the late 1970's. Liked or loathed, he was a key figure in the dissemination of a certain sensibility. To a degree that is taken for granted by some, but arouses surprise and revulsion in others, that sensibility is widespread. In a more furtive, not to say roundabout and money-grubbing way, it is present in images that we now accept as a matter of course in movies, on television and in advertising.

It is a part of the world around us, and of the mores for which this generation will be

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remembered. Many people will find it convenient to regard Mapplethorpe as the fallen angel, the Lucifer who stands at the head of an infernal troop.

He had exhibitions last year at the Whitney Museum in New York, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the National Portrait Gallery in London. With credentials like those, who would have begrudged a relatively small grant of public money for a show that was due to go to five prestigious locations in the United States?

It had long been a matter of universal knowledge in the art world that homoerotic subjects played a large part in Mapplethorpe's work. But those who went to his museum exhibitions in search of titillation were often surprised to find that, as a portraitist, Mapplethorpe could reach into the depths of the human being before him and set out what he found there in a spirit of affectionate compassion.

■
If posterity wants to know what Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Alice Neel and Louise Nevelson looked like in old age, Mapplethorpe will be

its best guide. With younger people, likewise, he could deploy an unfeigned tenderness that was remote from sentimentality. We remember the sweet shrewdness with which he portrayed his lifelong friend and contemporary, the poet and performer Patti Smith. That came out, too, in the giddy, ecstatic, high-flying portrait of himself as a young man as yet untouched by illness in 1975.

But of course it was not those images that caused the Corcoran to cut and run. Nor was it the photographs of flowers, or even the photograph of a big flat fish on a sheet of newspaper. It was the erotic subjects. Predilections entrenched since antiquity were bodied forth in Mapplethorpe's photographs with a power, a candor, a directness and a simplicity of expression that many found disgusting. To them, a visit to a major Mapplethorpe exhibition was a season in hell.

In matters such as this, moral indignation is a leaded fuel that fires up fast. It is also a pollutant that can fouls the air and cloud the brain. This critic has not seen the photograph by Andres Serrano that shows a crucifix drowned in the photographer's urine. The idea of that image has understandably caused deep offense to peo-

ple for whom the crucifix is the most sacred of all symbols. If a grant of public money was knowingly made to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C., on the sole strength of that photograph, it was an imbecility.

But it was not an imbecility that threatens the moral stature of the Republic. In the huge general context of the endowment's activities, it was an error of judgment. But it is one thing to regret that error, and quite another to talk of fining the endowment, penalizing the grantees, cutting the endowment's budget, padding its panels with moralizers and submitting future grants, one by one, to political supervision. That, too, would be an imbecility, and one that eventually could make life less rewarding for virtually every citizen of the United States.

■
Not to see this is to put intelligence on hold. Nothing could be farther from the truth than that the endowment has routinely promoted obscenity, sadomasochism, homoeroticism and what Senator Helms calls the "denigration of the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular reli-

gion or nonreligion." What it has done is to put together, piece by vulnerable piece, a program that brings help and comfort to a vast range of activities, almost all of which are designed "to give delight, and hurt not."

It is our duty not to side with those who are alarmed by the idea — well known since Plato's day — that changes in the arts may be followed by changes in the laws of the land. What was once regarded as inadmissible — in the theater, in music, in painting, in the novel, in poetry and in sculpture — has often marked a decisive turn in human affairs. The French Government not so long ago subsidized performances of plays by Jean Genet that would once have been closed by the police. The British Government has smiled upon the portrayal of the present Queen of England at the National Theater in a way that would have been a criminal offense even 30 years ago. Neither nation has regretted these things.

We do not need a bunch of politicians to tell us what we can read, what we can listen to, what we can see on the stage and what we can look at in our museums. We are perfectly capable of judging that for ourselves, just as we are capable of knowing how rarely there has been a tribune of the people who did not sometimes get too high on the leaded fuel, the sanctified pollutant, of moral indignation. □