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The Show of Support

Crowded for a Cause at the Benefit Opening

By Roxanne Roberts

Special to The Washington Post

There were so many people packed into the gallery that no one could see the art. The rooms were stuffy, the wine mediocre and there wasn't enough food. Just cause for mutiny at your average art opening.

But this wasn't your average opening and not a word—not even a whisper—of complaint came from the more than 500 people

who paid \$250 each last night to attend the opening reception for the controversial exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs at the Washington Project for the Arts.

After six weeks of debate, demonstrations and denunciations following the Corcoran Gallery's decision to cancel the show, they were just thrilled to be there at all:

"Tonight, finally, the art itself is going to speak," said Jock Reyn-

See WPA, D5, Col. 1

WPA Opening

WPA, From D1

olds, executive director of the WPA. "What was potentially going to be lost in this political debate was the art. It's here—so the people themselves can come and decide what they think of it."

"The press would have you believe that it's like going over to a 14th Street porno shop," said Michael Bell. "That's not the case at all. It's really beautiful stuff."

Bell is co-chairman of the local chapter of the Design Industries Foundation for AIDS (DIFFA), comprising interior, fashion and graphic designers and other members of design industries. Last night's benefit reception, which raised more than \$35,000 for care of people with acquired immune deficiency syndrome, honored the artist, who died of AIDS in March at age 42.

If there wasn't room to appreciate the art, there was plenty to display solidarity.

Rep. Ted Weiss (D-N.Y.) dropped by because "I think I should see this. I'm a supporter of the arts, my wife is an artist and there are a lot of artists in my constituency who are bothered by the attack on the NEA." The National Endowment for the Arts has been criticized for funding the Mapplethorpe and other sensitive exhibitions.

Nap Rosenthal, a curator at the National Gallery of Art, and the Hirshhorn Museum's chief curator of exhibitions, Ned Rifkin, came to lend their support to WPA.

Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), despite what is called "not ideal viewing conditions—people are bumping into each other and there are reports everywhere," said he came to support DIFFA but was "very impressed" with Mapplethorpe's work. "But I'll probably come back another time."

Even Gregory "Joey" Johnson made an appearance. Johnson, the center figure in the recent Supreme Court decision on flag burning, as in Washington for Senate hearings on the proposed constitutional amendment to ban flag desecration.



BY HARRY NALCHUYAR—THE WASHINGTON POST

From left, Jock Reynolds, Ned Rifkin and Harry Lunn at WPA last night.

"If this was a gallery of pictures of Rambo or Oliver North, we would not be seeing this kind of censorship going on," he said, "even though they would be deeply offensive to millions of people."

Judith Tannenbaum, executive director of the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which originated the Mapplethorpe show, flew in for the opening.

"I think most people would be surprised how classical his work is," she said. "He really treats traditional subject matter—portraits, still lifes, figure studies. The work that is the most explicit belongs to a particular period of his career. It's unfortunate if that's the only part of his work that gets focused on."

"Let's not mistake it: All the pressure came around the representations of male sexuality," said Reynolds. "It's not Mapplethorpe's depictions of flowers or female figures or blacks and whites or any of the other things you see in this show. It's really a response to his representation of homosexuality that produced this furor. To attack a minority as a part of a cultural agenda is something that's very distasteful."

"The irony is that any time you have movement to restrict or repress the accessibility, it always backfires—particularly in the art world, where freedom of the individual to express himself or herself is paramount to the very notion of the arts," he added. "If it hadn't been us, certainly someone else would have come to the fore to ensure this show would be seen in Washington."

Robert Lehrman, one of the Corcoran board members who voted against the gallery's cancellation, said, "Seeing this show only confirms my sense that it would have been a wonderful show for the Corcoran."

"The sad thing is that it's going to hurt the Corcoran for a long time," said Chris Middendorf, owner of the Middendorf Gallery. "They could have used this to garner national attention."

WPA board President James Fitzpatrick was confident about its choice to exhibit the Mapplethorpe photographs. "We won't suffer any backlash," he said. "If there is ultimately some negative impact, the principle was worth any sacrifice."