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Artists Protest Corcoran Cancellation

By BARBARA GAMAREKIAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 14 — Some 5,000 members of the Corcoran Gallery of Art received invitations in the mail this week to a June 30 reception for the exhibition "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment."

It was an ironic footnote to the museum's decision Monday, at a hastily called board meeting, to cancel the photographic retrospective, saying its contents could offend people on Capitol Hill who monitor Federal financing of the arts.

But the cancellation, and the valuable invitations, did not end the matter.

A Protest and a Plan

A coalition of local artists, arts writers and art institutions has formed a National Committee Against Censorship in the Arts, and is circulating petitions of protest among the city's art galleries. The Corcoran has received a number of telephone calls, said a gallery spokesman, "some in disagreement, some in support." And the Washington Project for the Arts, an artists' organization, says it is seeking to bring the Mapplethorpe show to Washington this summer.

"Our artists and board members voted unanimously last night to take the show," said Jock Reynolds, the director of the Washington Project. "We have figured a way to schedule it

from mid-July to mid-August, and members of our board have pledged money for loan fees."

"They say they will let us know by Monday," Mr. Reynolds added. "They're checking with lenders, their own board and University of Pennsylvania attorneys who have to look at the contract that was broken by the Corcoran."

Mr. Reynolds has been in touch with the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, the organizers of the exhibition that is traveling to a number of other cities. The show of 150 photographs, some of them homoerotic and sado-masochistic, was partly financed with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency currently under fire from some members of Congress for the nature of its artistic grants.

In explaining the cancellation, which was supported by the board, the director of the Corcoran, Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall, cited fears that the content of the exhibition would touch off a political storm on Capitol Hill.

Not all board members agree. "I don't understand how killing the show is saving the artist," said Marvin Gerstin, a board member who did not attend the board meeting, he said, because discussion of the Mapplethorpe show was not listed on the agenda.

"I was in the embarrassing position of having dinner that evening with Jacob Kainen, the artist, and the person who represented the founda-

tion that funded the show," Mr. Gerstin added. "They told me it was canceled and I didn't believe it. I am totally opposed to this kind of thing happening. I would have spoken against it, voted against it."

Some board members cite the inclusion of what is referred to as "the XYZ portfolio," as the reason for cancellation.

"As the show was originally presented, this material wasn't in it," said Gilbert H. Kinney, an art collector, chairman of the Corcoran's Finance Committee and acting director of the Corcoran in 1978. "These things are planned a couple of years in advance and the XYZ material was not in the catalogue, but obviously in the show. It is strong material and our curators didn't want to edit the show, and we trustees agreed that you just don't do that."

"The atmosphere right now is pretty poisonous for arts funding in general," he said. "The arts are kind of an easy target and we just didn't want to do anything to make it harder."

Hugh Southern, the acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has been meeting this week with members of Congress who have objected to another work funded indirectly by the endowment, a photograph by Andres Serrano of Christ on a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine.

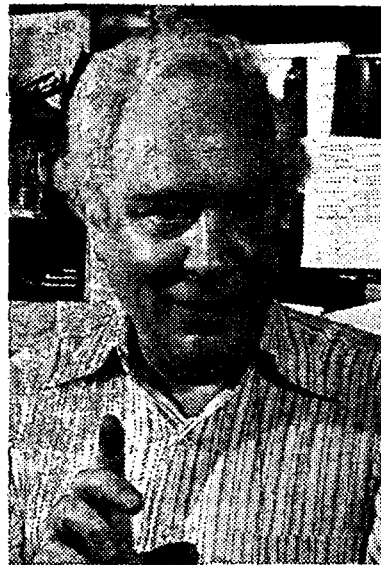
In discussing guidelines for grant recipients with members of the House Appropriations Committee, Mr. Southern said he believed the endowment could craft "something that's agreeable to all parties that doesn't get into any kind of chilling of expression."

The National Museum of American Art has purchased several Mapplethorpe photographs for its permanent collection; two Serrano images are included in its current show, "Photography of Invention."

"We received one comment card from a viewer who found one of the objects insulting to their religion," said Elizabeth Broun, the acting director of the museum. "But that has been the only negative response."

Recognizing that the work was provocative, museum curators had put an explanatory label on the Serrano work pointing out, she said, "that a lot of the artist's work addresses the co-existence in the world of good and evil."

Her concern with the cancellation of the Mapplethorpe show, she said,



The New York Times

Hugh Southern, acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

was that it is illustrative of "just how fragile the arts community feels its position to be and how concerned they are about the future of the arts. I think this action underscores that."

"Art does not set out to be acceptable," said Stephen E. Weil, deputy director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, as he discussed the action taken by the Corcoran. "It often deals with the extremes of the human condition. It is not to be expected that, when it does that, everyone is going to be pleased or happy with it. Particularly museum art which people are free to come to see, or not see. Many museums show things that are not palatable to everybody."

One reason for the need of a National Endowment for the Arts, he added, is that "art is not entertainment."

Janet Kardon, who was curator of the show while director of the Institute for Contemporary Art, is now director of the American Craft Museum in New York. "What is falling between the cracks here," said Ms. Kardon, "is what is the institutional responsibility to the artist. I think one of the things we have to think about is what is the obligation of the artist when certain promises are made, and I am concerned about that."

Mr. Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in March. "The very week before he died," said Ms. Kardon, "I assured him I would keep my eye on this project and follow it through, so I feel a little disappointed for the artist."