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Art on the Firing Line

By GRACE GLUECK

WHEN, AT THE PROSPECT of Congressional disfavor, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington canceled a touring show of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe, financed in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the action raised issues about artistic freedom and censorship that bear directly on public support for the arts in this country.

Should such support include the right to sanitize art? Should a museum be subject to political pressures, or should its role as a protector of art entitle it to immunity from them? Should the public be kept from seeing a show it has helped pay for? What does a museum owe an artist to whose work it has committed itself? And who should decide how taxpayers' dollars are used — legislators, panels of esthetic experts or the "public," whoever that constitutes?

The Mapplethorpe show is a retrospective of the artist's work that contains

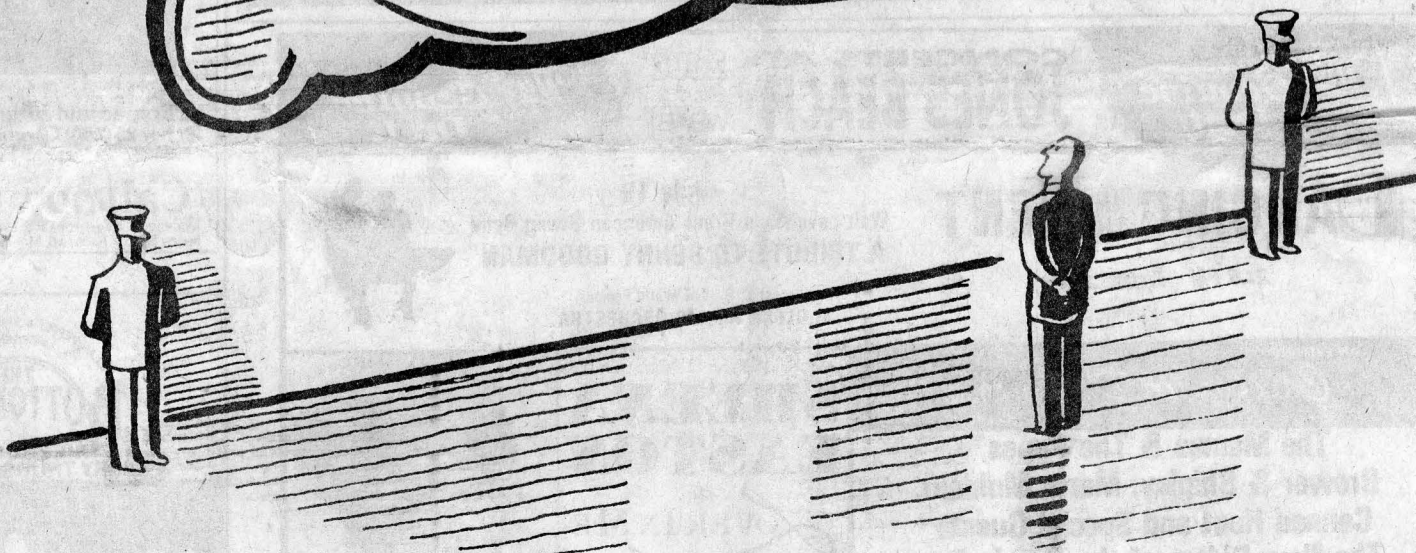
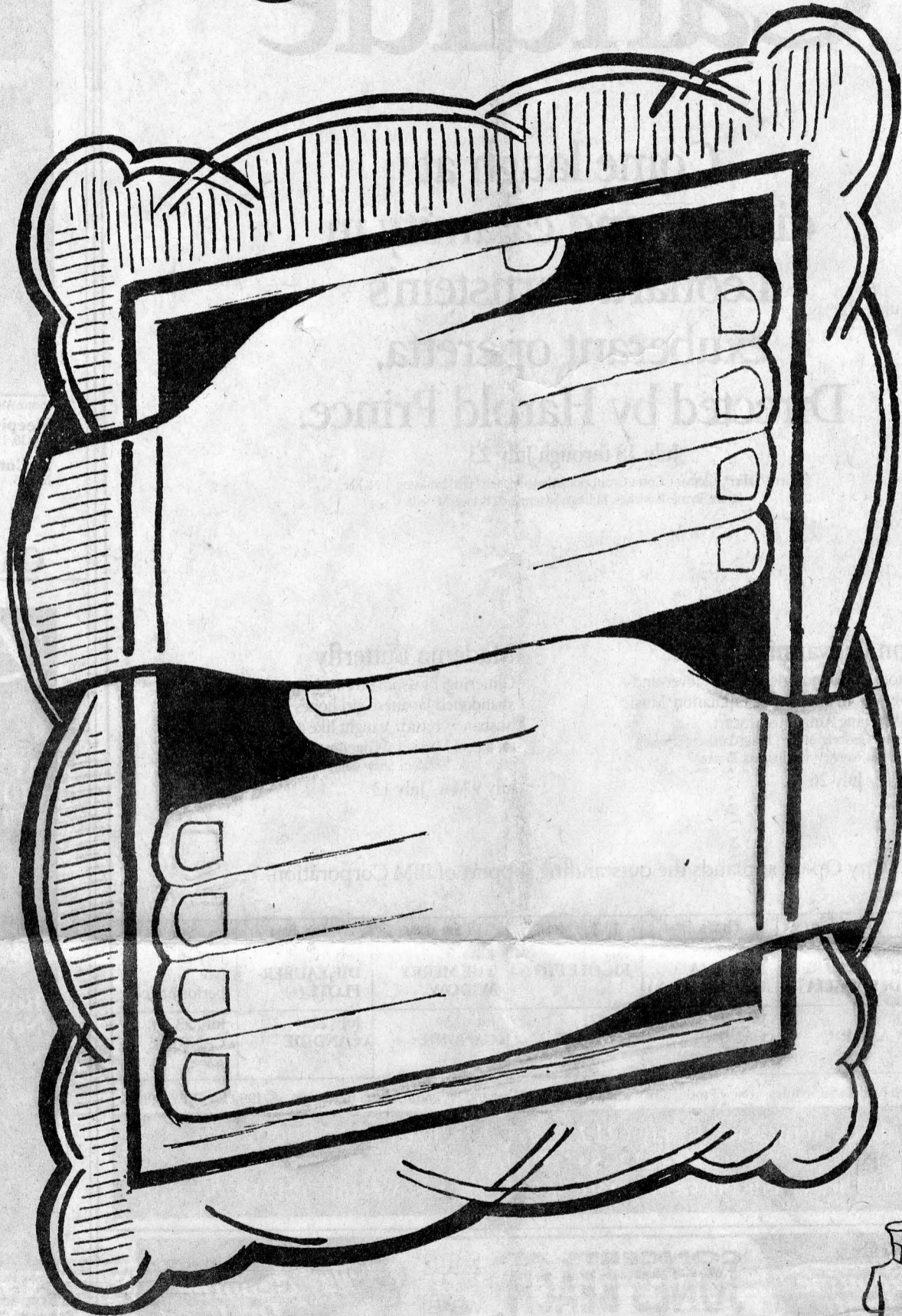
The issues raised by the cancellation of the Mapplethorpe exhibition go to the heart of public support for the arts in America.

images depicting homosexual and heterosexual erotic acts and explicit sadomasochistic practices in which black and white, naked or leather-clad men and women assume erotic poses. Along with these photographs are fashionable portraits of the rich and trendy, elegant floral arrangements and naked children — images that might not necessarily be considered indecent if viewed singly but that in this context seem provocative. (Signs accompanying the show on its tour suggested that it might be unsuitable for children.)

Opposition to the exhibition by members of Congress, among them, Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, and Representative Dick Arme, Republican of Texas, has focused on the question of whether Government money should be used to support art that can be considered by some to be blasphemous or pornographic.

"I clearly know offensive art when I see it," said Representative Arme in a recent statement. "And there ought to be a way for the endowment to establish procedures where they can clearly deny funding for art like that. The arts do serve a role of probing the frontiers, but I would say let that be funded from the private sector."

In the simplest terms, the Mapplethorpe case could be called a tug of war between two hallowed elements — the First



Continued on Page 9

When the Worlds of Art and Politics Collide

Continued From Page 1

Amendment guarantee of free speech and the community perception of what is pornographic or indecent. Yet to put it that way ignores the symbolic role of artists and museums in our culture. Artists are important to us, among other reasons, because of their ability to express what is deep or hidden in our consciousness, what we cannot or will not express ourselves. And museums are traditionally the neutral sanctuaries — entered voluntarily by the public — for this expression. What we see there may not always be esthetic, uplifting, or even civil, but that is the necessary license we grant to art.

A New Furor And a New Initiative

Cancellation of the Mapplethorpe show last month — coming after recent incidents involving artists criticized by elected officials and citizens' groups for works in which a flag was provocatively spread on a floor and a crucifix was submerged in urine — has not only created a new furor but has now prompted a specific legislative initiative that would make the National Endowment for the Arts more accountable for the nature of what it finances.

Recently, Representative Sidney R. Yates, the Illinois Democrat who heads the House subcommittee that authorizes the annual budget for the arts endowment, has proposed that the endowment itself be in charge of all of its grants, with subcontracting organizations no longer allowed to make grants in their own right. But Representative Yates remains a firm believer that the endowment, not legislators, should be the judge of its grantees.

To some people, the Corcoran's cancellation of the show was censorship, despite the protestations of Dr. Christina Orr-Cahall, the museum's director. "After all," she said in an interview last week, "the institution has a right to make a choice, too, right up until the exhibition goes on the wall. Canceling it is certainly preferable to the censorship of taking things out."

In the Corcoran case, the public was prevented from seeing a scheduled exhibition because the museum anticipated that certain Congressmen would judge its content as unsuitable and, in Dr. Orr-Cahall's opinion, penalize the National Endowment.

"The very notion that Government pressure has resulted in the inability of people to see an art exhibition is distressing and threatening," said Floyd Abrams, a lawyer specializing in First Amendment cases.

The Corcoran's action is not the first time a museum has canceled a controversial show. In 1982, for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York bowed to anticipated Arab pressure and canceled a scheduled exhibit of biblical artifacts. Some of these were from a museum in East Jerusalem, an area whose control by Israel is disputed by the Arabs. The Met finally presented the show in 1986, after protests from Jewish leaders and the securing of indemnification from the State Department against prospective lawsuits.

'A Dangerous Precedent'

In the opinion of Dr. Jacob Neusner, University Professor at Brown University and a Reagan-appointed member of the National Council on the Arts — an advisory body to the endowment — the Corcoran's decision "set a dangerous precedent in canceling an artist's show because it was controversial."

"It was pusillanimous and dishonest in the extreme," Dr. Neusner continued. "There was absolutely no pressure on them from the endowment, and to say they were defending us is ridiculous. It is our job to take the heat, and our process knows how to deal with controversy. But they betrayed the process by acting as censors. In doing so, they raised the stakes. Had they not, the whole thing would've gone away. A Congressman or two might have visited the show and complained, and that would have been the end of it. Now it will never go away."

The decision to cancel, Dr. Orr-Cahall said, occurred against a background of Congressional dismay over

'We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time,'

said the

Corcoran's

director, Christina

Orr-Cahall.

National Endowment financing for an earlier exhibition in North Carolina. The show included a photograph by Andres Serrano, an artist, of a plastic crucifix submerged in his urine. The decision to cancel was also influenced by newspaper stories reporting that the endowment planned to review its grant processes, presumably because of the Serrano and Mapplethorpe issues.

"We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time," Dr. Orr-Cahall said. The Mapplethorpe show "was scheduled for July 1, to run during a month when the endowment's budget would be under consideration at various levels of Congress. We had the institutional responsibility to decide if this was the right environment in which to present the show."

"There would have been a lot of folderol about it, with attention directed away from substantive issues, such as the effort in Congress to emasculate the endowment. It would be a three-ring circus in which Mapplethorpe's work would never be looked at in its own right. We knew that certain Congressmen were just waiting for us to open the show, and we felt we shouldn't bow to that pressure. It was a no-win situation. We decided we wouldn't be anyone's political platform."

In planning for the show last March, Dr. Orr-Cahall wrote a letter to one of the museum's board members, Betsy Frampton, asking for a grant to cover the \$25,000 that the Institute of Contemporary Art — which organized the show — charged each participating museum. The letter made a point of the show's importance to the Washington community, and said among other things that the Corcoran also intended to contact members of Congress and enlist their help in enlightening the public about the impact of AIDS. Dr. Orr-Cahall said the fact that Mapplethorpe died of AIDS last March, on the day the letter arrived, played a part in Ms. Frampton's decision to give the money.

"We never questioned the importance of the show," Dr. Orr-Cahall said. "Our decision wasn't about the esthetics of the work, but about the circumstances in which it was to be shown. It was a matter of time and place." She also confirmed reports that the Corcoran's lawyers had



"Self Portrait (With Gun and Star)," a 1982 Mapplethorpe work—Was the Corcoran the right setting?

raised the issue of child pornography in connection with the show, pointing out that some of the images might be in violation of local laws. "But we certainly didn't use that as an excuse not to mount it," she said.

In the wake of the Corcoran's decision, the Washington Project for the Arts, an artists' group that also receives Federal financing, has undertaken to bring the Mapplethorpe show to Washington from July 21 through Aug. 13.

On Reflection After the Vote

But although a majority of the Corcoran's board voted to support the decision, there was a feeling among some board members that it was wrong for the museum to disavow the artistic judgment it exercised — under a previous director, to be sure — in committing itself to the show in the first place, that it would have been

more exemplary to go ahead with it and let the chips fall where they may.

"I'm disappointed that external pressures, political or otherwise, have caused the Corcoran to second-guess its artistic judgment and in the process relinquish our responsibility to be, as is carved in stone over the entrance, 'Dedicated to Art,'" said Robert Lehrman, a Corcoran board member who has also served on the board of the Washington Project for the Arts.

"I'm deeply concerned," he said, "that this signals a willingness to be bullied and pressured by outside factions whose interests are not those of the Corcoran."

According to Tom Armstrong, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, "When an art museum reverses a decision based on professional judgment because of outside pressures, the integrity of the museum is severely impaired." The Whitney mounted a separate Mapplethorpe exhibition of photographs last

summer. However, it contained fewer of the most provocative Mapplethorpe images than the show scheduled for the Corcoran.

Except for a few letters, no public or legislative protest attended the Mapplethorpe show at two prior stops on its scheduled six-museum tour, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Both institutions receive financing from their state arts councils. The Mapplethorpe show organized by the Whitney came and went also without incident.

Homosexuality is a subject that has deep emotional resonance for many people. For some, the show was certainly distasteful. The fact that it was photography rather than painting, with identifiable subjects, made the erotic confrontations more uncomfortable. Yet would anyone argue that the hideous, even depraved imagery of Goya's "black" paintings — the most famous of which shows an act of cannibalism — not be exhibited in a

museum? Or that the public should be "saved" from viewing Picasso's late paintings and etchings with their graphic, highly charged erotic themes (heterosexual, to be sure)?

Whatever one thinks of Mapplethorpe as an artist — and there are critics on both sides — his images are intended as art, presented as such and are judged to be art by those qualified in such matters. They have been chosen for exhibition by well-established art institutions (the next stops after Washington for the show are the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, the Art Museum at the University of California at Berkeley, the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston).

The Public Role And Tax Dollars

To pre-empt the public's chance to make its own judgments — ironically the very public whose tax dollars helped finance the show is, in the opinion of Jock Reynolds, an artist and director of the Washington Project for the Arts, "an insult to that public's intelligence."

If the Corcoran acted in bad faith toward the public, it did so toward the artist as well, according to Mr. Reynolds. "The Corcoran made a commitment to Mapplethorpe," Mr. Reynolds said. "When an institution says it wants to work with an artist, it creates a bond both with the artist and with the larger artists' community. By breaking the bond in the Mapplethorpe case they broke their commitment to the artistic community as a whole. Their action would give other artists real pause as to how they might deal with others kinds of work."

At the height of the controversy last month, J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, was asked at a National Press Club luncheon to comment on the question of artistic expression versus community standards raised by the Mapplethorpe matter.

"There's a principle involved here, which is at the heart of what it means to be an American, and that is freedom," Mr. Brown said. "All of us in this country emigrated here, and a great number for a reason, which was to achieve the kind of freedom denied under other systems. And as we watch the other systems and historically look at them in the degenerate art show that Hitler had, or what the Soviets did to suppress their artists, and what is happening in capitals in the Far East, we have to recognize how fragile our freedoms are and how important it is to defend the process and to keep a sense of our First Amendment."

Although some Congressmen have argued that taxpayers' money should not be used to support exhibitions containing material that many might find offensive, what some consider offensive is not regarded as such by all. Taxpayers include arts professionals and many others who would favor the freedom of cultural expression that would allow a Mapplethorpe show.

The money given to the arts by the Federal Government through the endowment — about \$170 million in 1988 and not substantially increased for many years — is certainly a token sum compared with government arts expenditures in other countries and, say, the vastness of Federal subsidies to such applicants as, for example, the savings and loan industry.

Yet it is highly important money, not merely because it confers prestige but because it provides support for unpopular or controversial projects that other fiscal sources shun. Most of the grants given by the endowment, except for individual fellowships, have to be matched locally, and thus such projects have the additional weight of community support.

The review processes of the endowment are carried out by professional peer panels in which esthetic judgments are made by those with expertise in their fields. They may not be perfect. The essential question raised by the Mapplethorpe and Serrano disputes, however, is whether that approach will endure and whether the endowment, which in its nearly 25 years of existence has remained remarkably free from political interference, will continue to be so. □



Protesters outside the Corcoran Gallery of Art on June 30—Was the cancellation censorship or prudence?

The New York Times/Michael Geissinger