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## Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 26

Elizabeth Kastor

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## Washington Ways: T a vice presidential p

Today's schedule of  
at the Folklife Festival

POST June 27, 1989

# WPA To Exhibit Controversial Photographs

## Corcoran Board Backs Mapplethorpe Decision

By Elizabeth Kastor

Washington Post Staff Writer

The Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibit canceled by the Corcoran Gallery of Art is scheduled to come to the Washington Project for the Arts July 21 through Aug. 13, pending resolution of final details and the signing of a contract, the show's organizers confirmed yesterday.

Corcoran officials said they pulled the exhibit, which includes a number of sadomasochistic and sexual images, to avoid exacerbating a congressional battle over National Endowment for the Arts funding. But WPA Director Jock Reynolds said he was not worried about ramifications from showing "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment."

"I'm very confident that when people see the show itself a lot of these issues are going to die down," Reynolds said. "It's a really beautiful exhibition, and the way the work is presented is done very sensitively."

Yesterday, Corcoran Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin voiced distress with the museum's decision to cancel, and at an afternoon board meeting trustees were read a letter signed by a number of teachers at the Corcoran School of Art who opposed the decision.

The trustees met in an emotional session and reaffirmed their contro-

See EXHIBIT, B8, Col. 1



Christina Orr-Cahall, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

# WPA to Show Controversial Mapplethorpe Exhibit

EXHIBIT, From B1

versial decision to cancel the show. But the voice vote of two weeks ago, which Director Christina Orr-Cahall had said was unanimous, was retaken in a show of hands, with a final count of 26 in favor of cancellation and five opposed, with five abstentions.

The board did vote unanimously yesterday to support Orr-Cahall. "She delivered a very stirring message, and she obviously was in deep travail, and the board certainly was not in a punitive mood," said one trustee who disagreed with the decision to cancel and voted against it yesterday. "They gave her a standing ovation and told her to keep her spirits up."

The discussion, which several board members said was wider-ranging than that in the original meeting two weeks ago, included expressions of concern that the Mapplethorpe show might have gotten the Corcoran into legal trouble if some pictures were found to be pornographic. The board member, who asked not to be named, said the meeting was "very healthy—there was a lot of questioning and opposition and anxieties voiced, but even though the trustees voted overwhelmingly not to have the show, it still opened the thing up."

Chief Curator Livingston, who is on leave but was instrumental in planning the Mapple-

thorpe show, declined to comment after it was canceled, but said yesterday, "I've come to the point of deciding that it's not going to help the institution if people of different opinions don't express them. To have a party line is not useful—although I do think you have to have a sense of unity, you don't have to agree with it."

"Obviously, from the beginning I felt very unhappy about the necessity to cancel a show I had brought to the museum. . . . It's a decision I absolutely would not have made if I had been in a position to make it," she said. "But it was not my decision to make, and I am a part of the institution. . . . My concern is for the institution, for the health of the institution. I was not going to contribute to the agony at that time by dissenting."

The Mapplethorpe show ran into trouble because of a brewing congressional debate over federal funding of potentially offensive art that many arts advocates feared would hurt the NEA budget appropriation this summer. Although the Corcoran received no NEA funding for the show, it does receive other NEA money, as well as other direct federal support. And Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, which organized the traveling exhibit, got \$30,000 from the NEA for the show. Several senators, including Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), took to the floor to denounce NEA funding proce-

dures, and more than 100 House members signed a letter to the NEA criticizing the Mapplethorpe show for exhibiting "morally repugnant materials of a sexual nature."

Corcoran Assistant Curator Fralin, who specializes in photography, said yesterday, "I cannot in good conscience support" the cancellation of the Mapplethorpe show. "It goes against everything I've experienced and learned in 20-odd years in museums. It's just something you don't do—you just don't back down on issues like this. The Corcoran should have confronted Jesse Helms and his advocates rather than single-handedly attempting to save the NEA."

Some Corcoran board members and staff have said they felt frustrated at Orr-Cahall's statement that her decision had their unanimous support. "I think the mood [among the staff] has been very tense and probably very unhappy," Livingston said yesterday.

The majority of the pictures in the 150-piece show are floral still lifes, portraits and traditional nudes, but there are also a number of explicitly sexual images, many of them homoerotic. The exhibit includes a notice warning visitors about the nature of some of the pictures, and many of the most explicit—the "X portfolio"—are shown in library cases that separate them from the rest of the show, making them less accessible to children.

WPA will keep the the show open seven days a week, and plans a symposium on Mapplethorpe's work during its run and an AIDS fund-raiser the night before the exhibit opens. Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in March at age 42.

Reynolds said that over the years, WPA has received two substantial NEA "challenge" grants, one for \$85,000 and another for \$200,000, as well as a number of smaller grants. "We've been funded in the past, I'm sure, for a lot more by the NEA than the Corcoran," he said, but added he does not believe the exhibit's presence in Washington will harm the NEA.

"I think it's going to really backfire on the conservative guys in Congress," said Reynolds of the Corcoran cancellation. "People are going to come in and say, 'What are you really talking about? This is terrific!' Artist Joe Shannon, who teaches at the Corcoran School, signed the letter read at yesterday's meeting. "It's the worst," he said of the cancellation. "I think if the faculty didn't stand up to it, it would be a bad thing. I really think as artists everyone on the faculty will stand up to it."

Board member Michael A. Wyatt, who heads the committee overseeing the art school, said yesterday that if the school had been in session he would have expected the students to be angry at the decision.

"They are a lively, relatively young bunch," he said. "If they aren't concerned about that sort of thing, freedom of expression, at this stage of their life, they never will be. . . . The faculty largely wasn't pleased with that either because they have the same concerns as the students—they're all working artists. But I'm not looking for any resignations or anything from the faculty, but I do hope there's an environment in the school to express themselves freely."

Wyatt said that at yesterday's meeting, "the issue was not, if any one of us were making the decision, what would we have done. Some of us would have decided to stick with the show, others would have dumped it. The issue, I felt—and I think a number of other board members felt—was that once having made the decision and having withdrawn from the show, would we support the director."

"I think we'll be all right. It's a bubble, it's a blip. It's a learning curve—we may have learned a few things about how you make these kinds of decisions and we may do better handling those things in the future, but that's life."

Wyatt said that one of the things learned may have been the need for greater discussion. Board member Marvin Gerstin said he did not attend the original meeting because he did not know the Mapplethorpe show would be discussed, and another said the discussion had been inadequate. Wyatt said yesterday, "You're always in favor of more information. That's one of the things that's on the learning curve."