

1989: Battleground Year

**For “Imperfect Moments: Mapplethorpe and Censorship 20 Years Later”
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For me 1989 is the undeniable and unmanageable year. It’s more unwieldy than 1968, whose outlines have been clearly delineated. Even though the world has changed three or four times in the last 20 years, *this* year has never stopped feeling decisive. Every year is obviously a construct, neither origin nor end, but 1989 still feels to me like a thing, in front of and around me, sculpture and environment, as much as any of the images with which it has become identified immediate, slippery and intact.

Positions were sharply drawn. A sense of emergency was constant. The stakes could not have been higher. One incident after another required committed and sometimes ferocious response. I’m proud to share this symposium with men and women who took unflinching stands, without which art and university institutions would have been damaged. But looking back 20 years, it’s fair now to ask how we would define success? And, are we ready for the next crisis provoked by artists and images? One advantage of revisiting a historical watershed is that it is possible to be more circumspect, to put on the table doubts that may have then been only dimly articulated, to allow into focus the gray zones, of which, for me, 1989 and the entire multicultural period of 1989 to 1995, were full. If I am to have any chance to contribute to an attitude, and ultimately a language, that could one day provide an

alternative to the same old scripts, I have to make room for confusion and limitations.

The 20th anniversary of the ICA's Mapplethorpe exhibition is the perfect moment in which to revisit that year. Whenever I've mentioned Mapplethorpe to curatorial and artist students, they were instantly alert. They may not have known much about him or his work, or that 1989 exhibition, but they sensed that something about all that back there belonged to them. The controversy around the exhibition raised enduring curatorial issues – including funding and content, funding and audience, artist and museum, art museums and the changing personas of the deviant and forbidden. The controversy also raised enduring esthetic issues -- content and form, the mysterious versus the incontrovertible, provocation and reaction, provocation and transformation, image magic and image power.

Mapplethorpe would not have remained present if he had not been a cross-over figure. He was a hero of the multicultural struggle to bring from margin to mainstream, and its questioning of race, class and gender boundaries. But he was also a hero of The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty, the influential 1993 book in which Dave Hickey devoted a chapter to Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio" – with its 13 photographs, several of hardcore sado-masochistic homosexual acts, without which there would not have been a Mapplethorpe controversy. Hickey reveres the art market, whose system of confirmation multiculturalism distrusted, and, more than any other art critic has been identified with a belief in the danger to

art of multicultural pieties and prohibitions. At the end of the first paragraph of his Mapplethorpe chapter, he wrote: These images “may live in the house of art and speak the language of art to anyone who will listen, but almost certainly they are ‘about’ some broader and more vertiginous category of experience to which art belongs – and that we rather wish it didn’t.”

To me 1989 belongs to “some broader and more vertiginous category of experience,” one this symposium has encouraged me to re-enter. I cannot catch up to that year. I cannot resolve it, whatever this might mean. I think I can evoke its difficulty and bigness.

It goes without saying that the perspective I’m offering is mine. I have too much ground to cover in 30 minutes to be comprehensive and for all my characterizations to be just. I have tried to be true to my experience of 1989 as I lived it at The New York Times, in the seventh of my nine years at the “newspaper of record,” as one of its two staff art critics.

II

On March 9 Robert Mapplethorpe died of AIDS at the age of 42.

On March 15, in the dead of night, Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc was dismantled on its site in Federal Plaza, in downtown Manhattan, and trucked to a

warehouse in Brooklyn, where it was stacked behind barbed wire. Ten years earlier the 120-foot long and 12-foot tall bend of Cor-ten steel had been selected by a panel of art experts as part of the General Service Administration's Art-in-Architecture program. It was made with the promise of permanence, for a very particular site, not far from the South Ferry, alongside a new office building and a small park, near city and state buildings, including courthouses.

In 1985, after expressions of discontent with the work, William J. Diamond the regional administrator of the GSA, organized hearings. Well over a hundred people from the art world, including prominent museum directors, dealers and scholars, provided a spectacle of expertise on behalf of the sculpture. Several dozen others, including people who worked in the Jacob Javits office building, testified against it. Many of the criticisms, like many of those that would soon be leveled against certain artists who received NEA funding, identified the work with dirt and decay. "The Berlin Wall of Foley Square" is probably the signature epithet of the discontent. Tilted Arc's fate was itself decided by a panel, this one appointed and chaired by Diamond, who before the hearings had made clear his objection to the sculpture. Two of the other four panel members worked under him at the GSA. In other words, it was a show trial. The fix was in.

After the hearings I defended the sculpture in The Times. After reading the 600-page transcript of the hearings, I was disturbed that the fate of an ambitious sculpture by a great artist could be understood to have been decided by the kind of dismissive invective that had made life miserable for many other great artists since the mid-19th century. During the next four years, however, as Serra was making

every legal effort to save the work, I changed my mind. The curve and lean of the steel had the ability to connect the sculptural movement to basic human gestures like standing and walking and tipping so that people in its presence could experience the weight and extensiveness of their bodies in relation to that environment. Since the sculpture refused to accommodate itself to its environment, that relationship was first of all critical. I came to believe that even with its suggestion of the romance of trains and boats, and the remarkable sense of refuge it provided from its concave side, the sculpture provided too little possibility for transport, for a lyricism that could inspire in those who lived with it everyday a shared sense of ownership and potential. While believing the sculpture had to go, its destruction pained me and I saw the sham legal process as a terrible precedent. I still like much about my April 2 Arts & Leisure article, “The Messy Saga of Tilted Arc is Far from Over,” but I could not resolve the dilemma, and I knew it.

In April the attacks began on Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ and on the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. SECCA organized the touring 1988 Awards in the Visual Arts exhibition that included the 60-by-40-inch 1987 photograph with the golden haze in which a 13-inch plastic and wood crucifix was immersed in a vat of Serrano’s urine. Serrano was one of 10 artists in the show; Piss Christ was one of his 10 photographs. The exhibition received \$30,000 each from the NEA, the Equitable Life Assurance Society and the Rockefeller Foundation. Each participant, selected by a national

jury, received \$15,000. The NEA did not give Serrano money with which to make that photograph. When he received the award, the photograph existed.

Earlier in 1989 the catalogue for the exhibition landed on the desk of the Reverend Donald Wildmon, a United Methodist minister and the executive director of the American Family Association in Tupelo, Mississippi, which was part of a burgeoning and then largely-unknown movement that would become known as The Christian Right. It became a movement, and a campaign, partly by skillfully using images to dramatize what it saw as the anti-Christian emphasis in culture and government and the accompanying disrespect for the values on which it believed America was built. In his April 5 fund-raising letter, Wildmon wrote that “The bias and bigotry against Christians, which has dominated television for the past decade or more, has now moved over to the art museums.” After writing that the Endowment officials responsible for permitting tax money to subsidize the Serrano photograph “should be fired,” he received letters of apology from the heads of Equitable and the Rockefeller Foundation. On May 5 on the floor of the Senate, New York Senator Alfonse d’Amato said that “this so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity. This work in question is a photograph of the crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine... if we allow this group of so-called art experts to get away with this, to defame us and to use our money, well, then we do not deserve to be in office.”

The aggressiveness of the distortions could be terrifying. Dana Rohrbacher, the California Congressman and the leader of the House fight against the Endowment, said: “I totally identify with a truck driver who stood up in my town hall meeting and heard that \$15,000 of his tax money had been spent putting a crucifix of Jesus Christ in a bottle of urine, and then had had some artist there trying to tell me that I was a censor for trying to stop that thing. He stood up and he was so outraged, so livid, he couldn’t speak. I identify with that man. And the American people would be just as livid if they really understood what was going on.”

The correspondence between the symbol and what it represented was characteristic of conservative descriptions and an indication why many people found the photograph painfully offensive. In the May 18 Senate debate about the NEA, North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms said: “The piece in question is a large and vivid *photograph of Christ on a crucifix* [italics mine] submerged in the artist’s urine.” Not a photograph of a cheap mass-produced crucifix but of Christ Himself. In his May 22 article in the Washington Times called “Losing the War for American Culture?” political columnist Patrick Buchanan began with the words: “As Altarpiece of his exhibit, Andres Serrano has a photograph of a crucifix, a replica of Christ dying on the cross.” A 13-inch plastic and wood crucifix as a “*replica of Christ on the Cross!*” In his July 2 New York Times Arts & Leisure article, “Is Art Above the Laws of Decency?” art critic Hilton Kramer referred to the “*photograph of Christ on the Cross* [italics mine] submerged in the artist’s urine.”

These descriptions jolt me but I don't feel superior to them. The conflict about the nature of the image tore apart the Catholic Church in Byzantium and has never disappeared. Belief in the image and its attachment to people, animals and manifestations of spirit life has been an essential and often a marvelous creative factor since prehistory. Everyone has had photographs on their walls that they revered and through those images felt connected to the people in them. I can't imagine anyone who in mentioning, even silently, the name of someone they love does not feel in speaking the name that the essence of the person is in it. I take myth and magic seriously. Where does the conversation begin?

On May 18 the "Magicians of the Earth" opened in Paris. This, too, was an enormously contested cultural event, one that helped usher in the spate of multicultural post-colonial identity-based exhibitions that over the next five years would challenge curatorial thinking so profoundly that they required the emergence of curatorial studies programs, like the one I taught in at Bard for nine years, to come to terms with their implications. Installed in the Pompidou Center and in a former slaughterhouse at La Villette, the exhibition was located both at the center and, more expansively, at the periphery of the city. Its curator, Jean-Hubert Martin, brought established American and Western European artists, informed about avant-garde practices and veterans of large international exhibitions, together with artists from Africa, Asia, Australia and New Guinea who had never been included in such exhibitions and whose works were steeped in ancient materials and rituals.

The exhibition reflected the postmodern challenge to the word “quality,” which had been identified with the preeminence of a particular disinterested modernist critical emphasis that came to be accompanied by a relegation to a subaltern position of art guided by other approaches to art and life. The exhibition was also intended to challenge the notion of “the contemporary” so that this word, like “quality,” would become more inclusive and not automatically bestow on the privileged few with which it was aligned a sense of entitlement to the present.

My first review was rejected, which did not surprise me. The next day, also in The Times’s Paris bureau, I wrote the review that was published. It was quite negative. I was critical of the selection of known artists, and with the watering down of what I felt to be the vast differences between the gallery- and museum-supported artists and the more vulnerable unknown artists, whose perceptions of the show and circumstances as a result of being in the show I could not begin to figure. But I remember that show. I see in the review an emerging consciousness of the conflict between private experience and public language. The pleasure I felt walking through the exhibition before it opened, looking at the art in process, speaking with many of the artists, particularly those from cultures with which I had had little or no first-hand contact, encouraged extended receptivity, a process of relinquishing. In contrast, the institutional requirements of art criticism, upon which notions of critical “seriousness” and authority depend, demanded control and contraction.

From June to December, in conjunction with the New York City public art organization Creative Time, Act Up's 12-foot-long-by-three-feet-tall poster, "Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do," appeared on the sides of dozens of New York City buses. Under the words were images of three amorous couples -- gay, lesbian and interracial -- kissing.

On June 4 people television viewers around the world saw images from Tiananmen Square in Beijing, then Peking. A democracy movement had gone into the streets and the state crushed it. The young man refusing to budge in front of a tank holding his ground and plastic bags of groceries became, instantly, an iconic image. My sense is that we still don't know who he is, what he thought he was doing -- had he just had enough! -- or whether he is alive or dead.

On June 12, less than three weeks before its opening, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington cancelled "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment." Philadelphia's ICA had been given \$30,000 by the NEA to help organize the exhibition. The Corcoran, a block from the White House, was heavily dependent on government money and about to begin a new fund-raising campaign. Christina Orr-Cahall, its director, made the decision shortly before Senate appropriations hearings on 1990 arts funding. As a result of her decision, protests were mounted against the museum, a number of artists withdrew from exhibitions planned there, other exhibitions were cancelled, and in September Jane Livingston, the Corcoran's most respected curator, resigned.

The Washington Project for the Arts, whose director, Jock Reynolds was himself an artist, took the exhibition. It opened July 20, was widely praised, and as a result of the controversy drew nearly 50,000 people, an unheard of number for an exhibition at an artist's space.

Over the next few months political conservatives attempted to punish SECCA and the ICA, for example by legislating that they would not receive government funding for the next five years, and to put limits on what kind of art could receive government support. Public Law 101-121, passed October 23 – which is included in Richard Bolton's indispensable anthology of the culture wars -- asserted "That recently works have been funded which are without artistic value but which are criticized as pornographic and shocking by any standards. ... That the National Endowment for the Arts must find a better method to seek out those works that have artistic excellence and to exclude those works which are without any redeeming literary, scholarly, cultural, or artistic value."

On November 4 the Berlin Wall came down. This was the event of the year, if not of the decade, but no one saw it coming. Everyone knew the world changed that day, but in my experience of the year, the event came too late to define the year as we were living it, in part because its destruction of the wall between people seemed at odds with the proliferating walls at home. It would take me several years to

conclude that once the Cold War had been won, the United States Government had no more need for artistic freedom or artists.

A week later, “Witness: Against our Vanishing” opened at Artist’s Space in Manhattan’s TriBeCa. The curator was the photographer Nan Goldin. In art critic Janet Kraynak’s words: “The exhibition’s aim was to explore the impact of AIDS on the lives and work of a small community of artists centered on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The work on display, much of which was made by Goldin’s friends and closer associates, some of whom were themselves afflicted with the disease – sought to commemorate those who died from HIV/AIDS, as well as to call attention to the dire effects of what was still an emerging disease.” First the NEA funded this show, then it rescinded its funding, then it decided again to fund it while insisting that none of the \$10,000 would go toward its catalogue because of its extraordinary, and in Richard Meyer’s word “incendiary” essay by the artist David Wojnarowicz, himself sick with AIDS, called “Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell.”

Wojnarowicz wrote: “I scratch my head at the hysteria surrounding the actions of the repulsive senator from zombieland who has been trying to dismantle the NEA for supporting the work of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe.” Wojnarowicz wrote that Helms and d’Amato were in fact following museum standards in the practice of making “invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies.” Toward the end of the essay, he wrote: “I find

that when I witness diverse representations of “Reality” on a gallery wall or in a book or a movie or in the spoken word or performance, that the more diverse the representations, the more I feel there is room in the environment for my existence; that not the entire environment is hostile.”

In December Orr-Cahall resigned and SoHo’s Stux Gallery opened a Serrano exhibition that included the infamous photograph. After I filed my review, the problem of the photograph’s title was debated at the top of the paper. The Times would not print the title until 1998.

III

When the Corcoran canceled the Mapplethorpe show, I was angry but uncertain. I was a believer in the NEA but as a Times critic had not been faced with controversy about an individual project that had received government money and did not know if the government should fund a show that included extreme sexual images that could remain the face of NEA funding, regardless of what was said or written about them. It would soon be clear to me that in order to be viable, a national program of arts funding *had* to go where the necessity was, where the pressure was intense to make visible what artists believed had to be seen and thought. Throughout modernity, the bringing into visibility -- of idea, intuition, belief, people, practice, plight, story – had been a bringing into possibility, a bringing to energy and voice, a bringing into contact with. A bringing into history.

If a national arts agency did not fund certain projects because they could offend, then the agency would become a bastion of the officiousness that at its inception the NEA saw as the enemy of creativity. But if it did fund projects that included images that once publicly circulated could frame the national perception of the agency, the agency might never re-seize the initiative and could actually cease to exist.

Convinced, as I still am, that the NEA's selection process was admirable, badly wanting the agency, artistic freedom and respect for artists to survive on a national stage, I pushed aside my concerns and concentrated on the art in question.

I'm not sure how long I remained uncertain how to write about the spring events; I think it was two weeks. For years I would reproach myself for this hesitation. In the meantime The Times cultural section had commissioned Hilton Kramer to make its first institutional statement on the emerging culture wars. Kramer had been a critic with The Times from 1965 to 1982. His departure opened up the staff position that I filled. He had real strengths. He could write with elegant clarity and had a special feeling for early American and European modernism. He had left The Times to found The New Criterion and to make it the most influential neo-conservative cultural organ, which it became. When they asked him to write, they knew what they were getting.

“What has to be acknowledged in this debate is a fact of cultural life that the art world establishment has never been willing to deal with,” Kramer wrote, “namely, that not all forms of art are socially benign in either their intentions or

their effects. Everybody knows – certainly every intelligent parent knows – that certain forms of popular culture have a devastating effect on the moral sensibilities of the young. Well, it is not less true that certain forms of high culture are capable of having something other than a socially desirable impact on the sensibilities of young and old alike ... It is when our Government intervenes in this process by supporting the kind of art that is seen to be antisocial that we as citizens have a right to be heard.”

So when I went to Washington on July 20 to review “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment,” I had a lot on my mind. The Corcoran’s fear of Mapplethorpe was a catastrophe. D’Amato, Helms, Rohrbacher and their Senate crew were an obscene and deadly pack. I hated the ease with which The Times bought into the image of Mapplethorpe as an outlaw, which played into an age-old American fear of artists as outcasts and misfits. I understood the invitation to Kramer for what it was, an expression within my culture section of a lack of confidence that neither John Russell nor I would do the right thing by reasserting aesthetic and moral boundaries. Whatever I might feel about “The Perfect Moment,” and I had seen Mapplethorpe’s toned-down 1988 exhibition at the Whitney without having strong feelings either way, I knew I was on the side of Mapplethorpe’s work. By that time the history around it was already in it. It was no more possible for me to see the work apart from its social and political context than it is for me to see Manet’s Olympia apart from its social and critical history.

I flew to Washington Thursday morning, flew back Thursday night and got to the paper the next morning at 8. I turned in the review around 3, received editing queries, responded, then sat beside the copy editor to finish up. The moment the review was finished, the tension broke and my body turned cold and started shaking. The 1,100- word review appeared Saturday. For anyone interested in understanding the complexity of forces within The Times, it's worth mentioning that I was given a publisher's award for that review. Every month the publisher singled out three articles, wrote a few words about it alongside a photo of the writer and placed the announcement at the entrance to the newsroom. The award carried with it \$500. I think the paper was more uncomfortable with Serrano than with Mapplethorpe, who believed totally in the power of the image. Media institutions depend on this belief for the authority of their profession and brand.

IV

Since 1989 I've considered often, occasionally in public, the consequences of that moment for *the forms* of art criticism. Here, in ending, are some thoughts/questions.

Is it possible to imagine viable art criticism in which, particularly when considering cultural events of great complexity, parts veer off, in which one or more sections jut out – criticism that leaves no doubt about its concern for readers and the written word but which allows for disjunction and irresolution, that respects the

value of coherence without always being obsessed with integration, or with whether everything in the text fits?

Is it possible for criticism to bring in other voices in ways that oral histories do, which could finally make it possible for all the people who cannot get to international biennials to actually get a sense of the impact of those exhibitions on the non-art professionals who live with them everyday?

Can art criticism rigorously explore the problems and possibilities of back story, for which this culture has created a huge market, perhaps for legitimate as well as venal and trivializing reasons? In the artist's studio, back story exists as both fact and question. What does an artist need to know about him- or herself to ground and take responsibility for his or her work, and what does he or she believe the visitor needs to know of that back story in order to have the most meaningful experience of it? In the studio the movement between private experience and public language is fluid, unstable and perpetually negotiated. Every artist who was stigmatized as a result of being funded by the NEA insisted on the urgency of this process. Maybe this is where the conversation can begin.