

Mapplethorpe's Beauty

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Censorship is indefensible. The 1989 cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition, "The Perfect Moment," by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, and the subsequent 1990 prosecution of Dennis Barrie, director of the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati for exhibiting allegedly obscene images in the same exhibition, are among the most shameful episodes in twentieth century American culture. And yet we must acknowledge Jesse Helms' shrewdness. The senator and his Radical Right allies inflamed a homophobic sex panic to tap deep into populist suspicion of art world elitism. As on the dance floor of Studio 54, fashionable worlds of power and explicit gay sexual expression did indeed rub shoulders during the 70s and 80s, and Helms understood that it was much easier to attack the former with the seemingly indefensible practices of the latter. I will take it for granted that everyone here this evening feels nothing but contempt for Helms and his tactics. What is harder to acknowledge is our own failure in defending Mapplethorpe's art properly during that epoch—and probably ever since. The preferred mode of justifying his explicitly sexual photographs during the censorship affair is what I wish to call the "Beauty Defense." Sadly, while well-intentioned, this defense played right into the hands of the Radical Right.

The "beauty defense" was much on display in the 1990 obscenity trial of Dennis Barrie. An article in the *New York Times* published on October 3, 1990 quotes certain symptomatic statements:

During the cross-examination, Frank Prouty, the lead prosecutor, questioned whether photographs of men with various objects inserted into their rectums would fit the definition of art. “Would you call these sexual acts?” Mr. Prouty asked. “I would call them figure studies,” Mrs. Kardon said. Mr. Prouty then asked her, picture by picture what was artistic about each work. “What are the formal values of the picture where the finger is inserted in the penis?” Mr. Prouty asked in a straightforward manner.

“It’s a central image, very symmetrical, very ordered, a classical composition,” she said, noting that Mr. Mapplethorpe once commented on how “beautiful” the hand gestures were.

“It’s the tension between the physical beauty of the photographs and the brutal nature of what’s going on in it,” she said.ⁱ

There are two points I wish to make with regard to this testimony: first the language of formalist art history is completely implausible when it comes to discussing images that possess such a high degree of affect. As Isabel Wilkerson, author of the *Times* article points, the testimony proceeded in “hostile exchanges between people speaking completely different languages”ⁱⁱ It’s hard to imagine, for instance, that anyone outside academic art history (and very few within it) will be convinced that the meaning of Mapplethorpe’s photograph representing a urethra penetrated by a finger, lies in its being a “classic composition” or a “figure study,” let alone a demonstration of beautiful hand gestures. The second important thing to note is that when content *is* alluded to, it is

hastily characterized as “brutal.” Kardon declares, “It’s the tension between the physical beauty of the photographs and the brutal nature of what’s going on in it.” I am well aware that most men (and probably most women) who see this act will have a visceral response, but I cannot accept that the act is “brutal.” Brutality carries the connotation of savage violence, but this act is neither savage nor violent. We must remember that there is absolutely no evidence that the man in the picture is acting against his will or doing anything beyond fulfilling a desire. In Kardon’s good faith testimony, then, the form of Mapplethorpe’s art is identified as an all-purpose species of compositional beauty, and its *content* is associated with brutality. What this “beauty defense” does is exactly what Helms sought to do: demonize and marginalize the queer content of Mapplethorpe’s photography as *brutal* while subsuming his singularity as a gay artist, recently deceased from AIDS in a definition of art so bland and capacious that it could include practically anything.

While Kardon’s testimony was particularly explicit, by no means was it exceptional—in fact most iterations of the “beauty defense” are remarkably consistent and they were very widespread. In the same article I have just cited, the eminent photo historian Robert Sobieszek, then at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, was quoted as testifying that the photographs “reveal in very strong, forceful ways a major concern of a creative artist, a major part of his life, a major part of his psyche, his mental makeup.... And some troubled portion of his life that he was trying to come to grips with.”ⁱⁱⁱ Few gay men would accept that placing something in their rectums is evidence of a “troubled portion of [their] life” which requires coming to grips with. To my mind this diagnosis

comes very close to associating homosexuality with pathology. Let me be clear: I do not believe that either Kardon or Sobieszek was the slightest bit homophobic—quite the opposite, they were both committed and courageous allies. What I do wish to point out is that in the face of censorship, these well-intentioned curators unconsciously link homosexuality with pathology and find its redemption in “beauty.” Even Jock Reynolds who, as director at the Washington Project for the Arts, exhibited “The Perfect Moment” in Washington after the Corcoran censored it, conforms to the beauty defense when he says to the *Washington Post* “‘I’m confident that when people see the show itself a lot of these issues are going to die down,’ ... ‘It’s a really beautiful exhibition, and the way the work is presented is done very sensitively.’”^{iv} I agree that the Mapplethorpe photographs *are* beautiful and sensitive but these qualities are not the *antidote* as Reynolds, Sobieszek and Kardon suggest, to the affective queer content that fueled the Mapplethorpe controversy.

As it turns out, the “beauty defense” belongs to a long tradition of European aesthetics, originating in the Enlightenment and experiencing its last explicit efflorescence in the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg during the mid-twentieth century. Immanuel Kant’s notion of beauty, however, has not disappeared, but merely gone underground. Despite the efforts of 1980s postmodernists to bury Greenberg’s Kantianism in a tsunami of critique, the logic of Mapplethorpe’s expert defenders is fully consistent with Kant’s definition of beauty as established in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* published in 1790. This is not the occasion to offer a nuanced analysis of Kant nor am I the person to do so. However, I can point to two fundamental qualities of the beautiful, as influentially

and enduringly theorized by the Enlightenment philosopher that shed light on the “beauty defense.” First, for Kant, the sensation of beauty is a *disinterested* pleasure. In aesthetic judgment, through the exercise of taste, the human mind engages with an object (ie, an art object) with no practical objective in sight. This is the real significance of disinterestedness: there is no worldly or even cognitive goal in experiencing beauty, which is why Kant further posits that it cannot be captured through concepts. The second quality of Kantian beauty relevant to what I’m calling the “Beauty Defense” is its universality or communicability. Since the free play of imagination and judgment is an a priori quality common to all humans, the paradox of beauty is that while it is deeply subjective, it can be, and even *must* be, universally recognized. This is because human judgment is fashioned through a priori structures shared by everyone.

It is clear, then, that the expert defenders of Mapplethorpe were good Kantians: for them beauty, in its disinterestedness and its universality, furnished a justification for the singularity of Mapplethorpe’s queer sexual content. Helms and his radical right supporters on the other hand had different ideas about disinterestedness and universality—ideas that are in fact more nuanced and up-to-date in many ways than those of Mapplethorpe’s mainstream defenders. As Carole Vance has shown in her important work on the Culture Wars of the late 80s and early 90s, the first criterion for finding a work is obscene under American law is that “the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest.”^v If Kant’s definition of beauty posits an abstract universal community, obscenity law establishes a very concrete local one. Obscenity law transposes Kantian universality by asserting that beauty (or at least aesthetic value) is defined by the

judgment of an average citizen. In theory this is consistent with the philosopher's assertion that beauty is universal, because the "average" citizen is presumed to represent everyone. But in practice the universal is thereby made a political (and statistical) concept—which by definition can no longer be disinterested—in which the universal is identified with a *majority*—and a moral one at that.

Just by taking place, then, the Cincinnati obscenity trial invalidates the "beauty defense," because it presumes that Mapplethorpe's work cannot be beautiful (or universal) since it is far from disinterested—linked as it is to the *special interest* of gay sexuality. What seems to have won the case in the end was the spectacle of expertise itself, given that the third criterion for obscenity is that "the work taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value."^{vi} The very presence of credentialed curators and historians defending Mapplethorpe's art no matter how implausibly, sufficiently demonstrated such artistic value. But even if the "battle" of the obscenity trial was won, the broader Culture Wars hinged precisely on the notion of community standards being elided with universal standards—or what Kant conceived of as beauty. The argument consistently launched against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) by its congressional opponents was that minority citizens--such as gay and lesbian artists or those like Andres Serrano whose art was taken as anti-religious—should not be supported by public funds. Such a position explicitly disenfranchises queer people and those who criticize organized Christianity—they are not accepted as part of the American public and acknowledged as citizens who pay taxes. In other words, the Culture Wars sought, and largely succeeded in applying the notion of "community standards" fundamental to

obscenity law to overall public funding for the arts. The difference was, that this effort took place outside the impartial framework of the rule of law furnished by a courtroom, but rather through aggressive intimidation. Helms and his Radical Right allies reminded their congressional colleagues how difficult it would be to justify their support of an agency funding “gay” art or “scatological” art or “anti-Christian” art to their constituents. And the “beauty defense,” which itself conceded that gay content was “brutal” or “troubling” provided them with no cover.

It is twenty years later, but I’m not sure that we’ve left behind the issues raised by the Mapplethorpe affair (which is why this symposium seems particularly significant and timely). Let’s return to the Kantian notion of “disinterestedness.” The Culture Wars were supposedly conducted by politicians on behalf of a universal American public against what the Right likes to call “special interests.” Claiming rights for those of us who aren’t considered normative (such as, for instance gay and lesbian people) is dismissed as a form of “special” pleading precisely because of the enduring association of “disinterestedness” with democracy just as “disinterestedness” is fundamental to Kant’s notion of beauty. This is still true for us queers when it comes to the struggle for marriage rights, but it is endemic to many other political issues in the United States ranging from immigration policy to ethics rules on congressional lobbying where the lively commerce in “special interests” is veiled by an ideology of disinterested public service. Aesthetics, as ideologically encoded in art and the art world, are not innocent. On the contrary, as the Mapplethorpe affair demonstrates, they can offer a justification for marginalizing the non-normative. The “beauty defense” indirectly acknowledges that

the sexual subject matter in Mapplethorpe's art could never be considered "disinterested" because any assertion of a minority reality was considered at that moment (and still to this day) pressing for a *special* interest. This is why the "beauty defense" attempts to elide content into form. What was needed in 1989 and what is still needed today, is a theory of beauty that is not *disinterested* but can accommodate "special interests." In short an explanation for why a photograph of a urethra penetrated by a finger can and even should be exhibited and discussed as art.

It is worth noting that the "beauty defense" was by no means the only option in 1989 and 1990 for justifying the legitimacy of "special interests" in art. After all, a sophisticated aesthetic and political discourse on multiculturalism had been developing since the 1970s. The premise of this movement, whose art world corollary in the 1970s was "pluralism," is that unlike beauty as Kant defines it, aesthetic value is neither disinterested nor universal. Or, to put it more explicitly, a democratic state and its cultural expressions should not be conceived of as a "melting pot" but rather as a plurality of cultural communities joined together (and mutually enriching one another) through the rule of law. It was precisely this opposition between a "universal" public and one characterized by multiple differences that was at stake in the Culture Wars. I would venture to say that Helms and his cronies had no real interest in particular *works* of art, but rather that they recognized that for the general public aesthetics remained a concept rooted in the universal. In other words, a good proportion of the American public beyond the art world still believed that *art transcended difference*, and even annulled difference, while within politics, in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and

subsequent 1960s liberation movements, such a position had become untenable. Since art was a preserve of disinterestedness, Helms needed *art*. But even more he needed Mapplethorpe. For while I firmly believe that no further defense is required—nor perhaps possible—of Mapplethorpe’s photography than that a democratic society should use its public funds to foster the expressions of *all* of its citizens, practically speaking the case was much harder to make. In 1989, at the height of the AIDS crisis, it required the courage and dedication of an organization like ACT-UP to defend an artist like Mapplethorpe who had recently died of AIDS and whose outlaw sexuality was unapologetically thematized in his art. It’s not hard to understand the appeal of the “beauty defense,” to Mapplethorpe’s expert allies, but as I’ve tried to show, adopting it was to fall right into Helms’ trap. Therefore I will use the rest of my time tonight in making a case for *Mapplethorpe’s beauty* that seeks to move beyond the empty formalist categories of the “beauty defense.” I will do so by launching two further defenses of my own.

Mapplethorpe’s public career in the late 70s and 80s flourished during a period when displays of male beauty underwent a dramatic transformation on at least three fronts: the commercial, the social, and the sexual. In 1980 the very masculine, very handsome, and very straight baseball player Jim Palmer began to be featured in a series of underwear ads for Jockey that proved that public displays of beautiful male bodies could sell. Here was a straight sports star whose frank erotic presence was as unthreatening to other straight men as it was appealing to heterosexual women (who according to industry statistics were then buying a great percentage of male underwear). The appeal to gay men of

Palmer's ads, and particularly to gay boys with little easy access to images of such pleasing physiques goes without saying. While Calvin Klein's underwear ads are now synonymous with the introduction of male beauty into advertising, Palmer's Jockey spreads preceded them by two years. And while Klein's images have famously become gay icons (without it seems, being at all bad for business), he too began by choosing a sports hero, a decathlon athlete in training named Tom Hintnaut.^{vii} Bruce Weber, the photographer who fashioned this image for Klein, and who also worked during the 80s for Ralph Lauren, told the *New York Times* in 1982, "When I started taking pictures of men 12 years ago, I was told that no one would want them, that I would never make any money." Clearly the intervening decade had made the space for Weber's ambition "to shoot a guy in underwear in the same way women had been photographed all these years.... With voluptuousness."^{viii}

During the same period of the late 70s and early 80s Studio 54 emerged as a new kind of disco that marked a new social caché for gay subcultural nightlife. The club opened in 1977 on West 54th St in Manhattan in a building that had once housed both a theater and a CBS television studio. This media legacy persisted in Studio's own brand of participatory performance where patrons were famously outrageous in their behavior, and equally willing to let loose for the camera, at least during the nightclub's golden era, when celebrities ranging from Andy Warhol to Bianca Jagger and Dustin Hoffman burnished their reputations by posing for (or submitting to) delirious pictures published in the gossip rags. Studio 54 was a machine for attracting and perpetuating celebrity—in part because of the notorious door policy whereby only the most famous and the most

fabulous could gain admittance. In Studio 54 figures from the worlds of entertainment, art, or good society, partied cheek by jowl with an exuberant and flamboyant gay world. The disco's frisson derived in part from the sex, both gay and straight, that famously and very openly occurred in the balconies, but not only were gay men having sex at Studio 54, but their camp sensibility was the reigning aesthetic of the disco. Presided over by a gay man, Steve Rubell, Studio 54 was sometimes accused of turning the tables on the straight world. Indeed, here in the most celebrated nightclub in the world, a fabulous gay look could trump all but the most famous.

The two phenomena I've identified as emerging in the years between the opening of Studio 54 in 1977 and Calvin Klein's first underwear ads in 1982—namely, the heightened visibility of eroticized male bodies in advertising, and the caché of gay sociality in New York's *beau monde*—are probably the social spores of a new gay lifestyle that emerged in the 1970s: the clone. Clones lived and played in highly visible and unapologetically proud gay neighborhoods in major American cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, but their sartorial style, based on the macho codes of construction workers, bikers, or cowboys spread to gay enclaves throughout the country, and eventually into mainstream fashion. As Martin P. Levine argues in his 1998 book *Gay Macho*, clones not only exemplified *gay* masculinity, but in a post-Stonewall and pre-AIDS world, they fashioned themselves into a particularly concentrated form of *heterosexual* masculine ideals. The clone represented himself through a powerful physique enhanced through assiduous workouts and dress codes approximating the virility of outlaws, workers, or soldiers. He is characterized by a gruff non-verbal

demeanor (particularly during posing and cruising); and a high sexual appetite that was freely and unsentimentally satisfied through anonymous or nearly anonymous sexual contact. It should go without saying that the image of the clone and the reality of particular men drawn to its lifestyle are certainly not identical, but as Levine argues, after gay liberation, a certain very visible subculture of gay men appropriated the dominant codes of masculinity for themselves, and made them over into a celebratory gay world that eventually found its way into glamorous nightclubs like Studio 54 as well as billboards over Times Square. In the 70s and 80s, gay masculinity *was* masculinity.

My point is that Robert Mapplethorpe's photography encodes a seismic shift in male beauty. Like Bruce Weber's advertisements for Calvin Klein, Mapplethorpe applied a highly formalized aesthetic refinement to subjects previously confined to soft-core pornography. As in the revels of Studio 54, the photographer mixed up high society portraits with an explicit gay erotics, and finally Mapplethorpe memorialized the denizens and practices of a newly visible urban gay clone culture. In "The Painter of Modern Life," his justly enduring essay published in 1863, Charles Baudelaire claimed that works of modern art establish a ratio between the ephemeral manners of contemporary life and the persistence of timeless forms and values. As he famously declared, "Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions."^{ix} Mapplethorpe's work satisfies this acid test for modern art by performing a visual calculus of male beauty that renders contemporary mores—and explicitly *minority*

practices--in idioms that are classical and even sculptural. But unlike Kant's notion of beauty, Mapplethorpe's beauty is neither universal nor disinterested. Indeed we might associate his work with a politicized tradition of feminist body art spanning the 70s, whose important practitioners range from Carolee Schneemann to Cindy Sherman. Each of these artists denaturalized the gender codes of femininity in her own way. And because masculinity has traditionally been the dominant or "unmarked" gender position in our culture, it has almost always fallen to gay or queer artists ranging from Jack Smith and Paul Thek through Andy Warhol to David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, and yes, Robert Mapplethorpe, to explore the structures and limits of masculinity.

I have thus far adduced two defenses of Mapplethorpe's beauty. First, his art is inherently fit for public display and support based on the fundamental principles of American democracy that recognize the existence of difference among its citizens and residents. Second, Mapplethorpe's art meets Baudelaire's primary criterion for modern art as a ratio between the contemporary and the timeless. But the real crux of the issue—and what made Mapplethorpe such an easy target for Helms and the radical right—is the incredulity with which a great many people met representations of a penis penetrated by a finger or a rectum penetrated by a fist *as art*. My third defense will thus directly address this skepticism. I will do so by arguing that in Mapplethorpe's photography, two different logics of self-fashioning intersect—a manic hyper-dynamic of *posing* and a countervailing frozen moment when the body is rendered as a still life composed of organs. Posing was the theme of my essay for *The Perfect Moment* catalogue, published

twenty years ago. I will indulge in self-quotation since the observations I made then still seem valid to me:

In *Lady, Lisa Lyon*, a book of photographs of the bodybuilder Lisa Lyon [published in 1983], the interplay between phallic drive and passiveness—or guilt—is enacted not on the body of the male photographer but on the body of a woman. In *Lady*, Mapplethorpe organizes sequences of images with a filmmaker’s narrative precision. Explosions of implied or potential violence alternate with calm, classical images; kinky costumes and suggestive poses are succeeded by high-fashion shots such as Lyon standing with her head thrown back, in which she poses in an Issey Miyake dress. Lyon’s persona (it is hard to think of this book as anything but a work of fiction)... is disturbingly bifurcated: she goes from ‘good’ to ‘bad,’ passing through various states of potential goodness and badness along the way.”^x

Posing is a rhetoric of *surfaces*. Mapplethorpe, like so many artists of the late 70s and 80s, understood that persons, when transformed into *pictures* (to use Douglas Crimp’s famous term), exhibit a dizzying mobility of projected identities. Indeed, the unstable relationship between identity (which is associated with interiority) and pose (which is linked to surfaces) occupies an entire spectrum ranging from exuberance to psychosis in 20th century art.

No single photograph of Lisa Lyon may thus claim to capture her true self—what we might call her interiority. But photographs like *Lou, N.Y.C.* (1978) and *Helmut and Brooks, N.Y.C.* (1978) do approach the question of interiority, albeit from an entirely

different direction—one that couldn't be further from Kant's understanding of a transcendent *a priori*. These pictures represent a desublimated interiority redolent of the wet suck of mucus membrane against fist, arm, or finger—interiority as the literal movement inside the body—a logic of *plugging* which is not unique to Mapplethorpe in post-war art, but which he has expressed more forcefully and explicitly than any artist I know. These images suggest that the body can only be penetrated literally—handled like a “piece of meat”—rather than plumbed psychologically (and indeed, Mapplethorpe spent a great deal of time in places known in gay subculture as “meat racks,” or cruising grounds devoted to anonymous pick-ups). My point is this: that the manic insubstantiality of the pose—what, after Guy Debord we have come to call the spectacle—is inextricably linked to a remainder of *meat*. Indeed, such an intimate connection is acknowledged in the early parlance of cyberspace where “meat life” could refer to the residual physical agency of the body at a keyboard. In other words, the body as a still life is the irreducible remainder of the body as a manic relay of poses. And this conjunction of spectacular projection and absolute desublimation tells us something profound about human experience in the late 20th century—an age of AIDS, of struggles over abortion rights, and of “wars” on drugs and immigration all of which projected ideologically reductive identities onto populations whose bodies were under minute physical control by both the medical and legal establishments.

Would such a defense of Mapplethorpe's art have convinced Jesse Helms? Of course not. Indeed, the only real defense that could have played in a courtroom (and which did so successfully) is the two-pronged assertion that 1) all experts agree that Mapplethorpe's

work passes the threshold of art; and 2) that all citizens of a democracy should have equal access to government support. The “Beauty Defense” was therefore superfluous, but also counter-productive in its use of “beauty” to justify the false universality dear to conservatives. This political failure is matched by our critical and theoretical failure to capture the value Mapplethorpe’s art. I don’t think we should give up on him, or in art in general, so easily. An image of fisting is not worth looking at because it is beautiful, even if it is. Mapplethorpe’s art is powerful because it expresses the double objectification of bodies—through their transposition into pictures and their subjection to pleasurable and/or coercive manipulation as “meat.” It is powerful because it makes us *feel* the taboo of a body entered and stopped up, while it freezes this visceral response in a chilly gorgeousness that, as he himself often stated, is interchangeable with his arch and sinister pictures of flowers. And finally it is powerful because it represents queer practices of intense trust and bodily experimentation that are positively refreshing in a world hemmed in by the simpering and cynical images of intimacy that Hollywood feeds us daily. There are many ways of being in a body. Robert Mapplethorpe showed us several, and by doing so he expanded the possibilities of what it means to be a person.

ⁱ Isabel Wilkerson, “Clashes at Obscenity Trial on What an Eye Really Sees,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1990.
[accessed on-line]

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, unpaginated.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, unpaginated.

^{iv} Elizabeth Kastor, "WPA to Exhibit Controversial Photographs," *The Washington Post*, Tuesday June 27, 1989, p. B1

^v Carole S. Vance, "Misunderstanding Obscenity," *Art in America* 77 (May 1990): 49.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 49.

^{vii} See John Duka, "Notes on Fashion," *New York Times*, July 13, 1982 [accessed on-line]

^{viii} John Duka, "Weber's Naturalistic Eye on Men's Fashion," *New York Times*, July 20, 1982 [accessed on line]

^{ix} Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans and ed by Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964), p. 3

^x David Joselit, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Poses," in Janet Kardon, ed, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988), p. 20