

Strange Summer

Hosting the Mapplethorpe exhibition can change your life.

BY DAVID A. ROSS

On October 4, The Institute of Contemporary Art (The ICA) in Boston closed its presentation of *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, a retrospective of the work of an important American photographer. Ironically, on the same day Dennis Barrie, director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, was acquitted on charges of displaying obscene materials and pandering for presenting the same exhibition.

Five months earlier, I had routinely returned a phone message from a Dorchester woman whose name was unfamiliar to me. Her name was Rita Burke and—as I would later discover—she was the head of an amorphous group of Bostonians affiliated with the national Christian watchdog organization *Morality in Media*.

“How would you like it if I put a Torah in a jar of urine?” asked Mrs. Burke.

“Why are you asking me that?” I replied, wondering if I should go into crank-call mode.

“Well,” she huffed, “aren’t you J-J-Jewish?”

“I might well be, but I fail to see what this has to do with me, or The ICA.” I went on in an attempt to see if maybe she was kidding. “And besides, you’d need a very large jar and a great deal of urine.”

She pressed on in a voice I thought only existed in second-rate comedy clubs. “We know you are planning to show that ‘Piss Christ’ in that Mapplethorpe show . . . aren’t you?”

I knew I had to bring this little talk to a quick close. “I can assure you, Mrs. Burke, that I have no intention of including Andres Serrano’s work in the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective, but thank you for taking the time to call.”

She spat out a hasty “I can see I won’t get anywhere with you” and hung up. I was stunned.

Despite all of the conversations I had with friends and colleagues as the Mapplethorpe exhibi-

tion wound its way through a national tour of seven museums, it was at this point that I first knew we were in for a strange summer.

We remained confident that Boston would behave in a dignified and tolerant manner, but like others in the museum community we were aware of the resurgence of long-standing right-wing hostility toward the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). As early as May 1989 it seemed clear that an alliance of conservative and Christian fundamentalist groups would use the NEA’s support of the Mapplethorpe exhibition and Andres Serrano’s equally controversial NEA fellowship in a concerted attempt to destroy what was generally thought to be a progressive federal agency on the eve of its Congressional reauthorization hearings.

In response, artists and arts institutions organized in a fashion similar to their Vietnam opposition 20 years earlier. Recognizing that their social and political responsibilities were quite distinct from their diverse individual aesthetic bearings, many American artists stood in solidarity not just out of enlightened self-interest, but in emphatic recognition of an inherent threat to all speech.

Many saw through the attack on the creative community to what lay at the center of

this controversy: an attack on the gay and lesbian community, using fear and misunderstanding of AIDS as a disease and an agent for the social transformation of gay life.

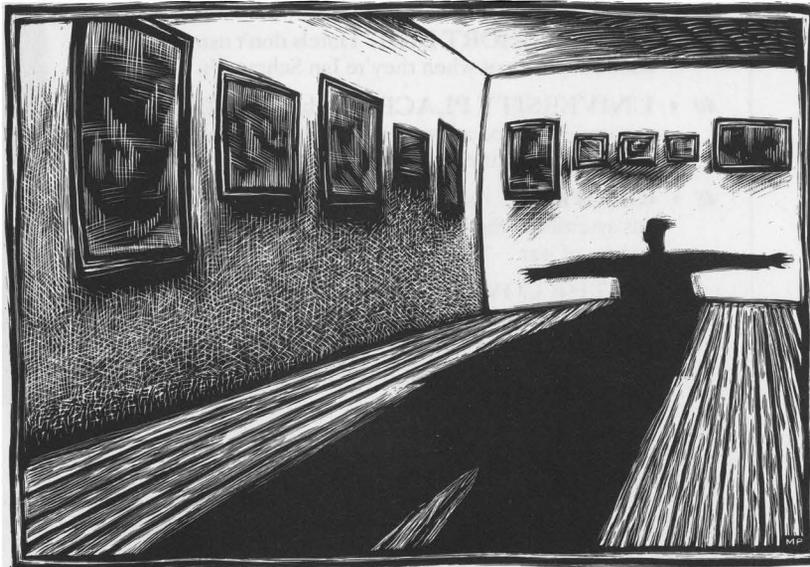
But we had a comparatively simple job to do: present the Mapplethorpe exhibition as the artist had intended it presented, honor his memory, and enforce the right of our institution to work free from the constraints of self-appointed or even government-appointed art police. We owed our community no less. We owed ourselves no less.

As spring 1990 continued, we all experienced the media-borne persecution and police prosecution of Dennis Barrie and the Cincinnati Arts Center. As the next (and final) stop on the exhibition tour, The ICA was dragged into press coverage of the censorial circus. Though we found ourselves philosophically primed, in nearly all other ways we were barely prepared to cope with the reality of a political streetfight.

After my appearance on ABC’s *Nightline* the fundamentalist calls and letters began to escalate. Hundreds of calls a day would jam our low-tech reception desk, tying up phone lines for hours at a time. In the mix of run-of-the-mill hate-mail, and rather welcome letters of support (running about 70/30 in our favor), we perceived the pattern of direct-mail attack techniques, with many letters bearing identically worded threats or rebukes.

And though I found the few anti-Semitic notes odd and upsetting, the most vile sentiment was the explicit gay hatred imbedded in words of the crank phone callers, who would calmly inform us that Robert Mapplethorpe deserved to die of AIDS, which is the Lord’s way of cleansing the world of homosexuals.

We knew we had to deal with what some might call a “real situation” by taking and maintaining the high road. In a move designed to provide crowd control, we decided to employ a re-



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served, timed-ticket entry service for the exhibition. We would do whatever was necessary to provide a normal context for the exhibition, so that our opponents could not indirectly convolute our presentation of Mapplethorpe or his work.

By late June we had to add new phone lines and hire additional publicity staff. As a result, the exhibition was now being attacked in the local press as overly commercialized and exploitive. That presented a different sort of problem as it became quite apparent that the preservation of the exhibition's dignity would be more difficult than we had imagined. The day-to-day strain was real, and the fear and anger was palpable. The final effect was to pull us all closer together as a staff and board.

The controversy found its way onto page one when a publicity-hungry state legislator, Thomas Finneran, apparently fearful of imminent moral collapse, introduced a bill calling upon the Commonwealth to forever deny Arts Council funding to any institution that presented any work of art that offended any ethnic group, religion, or non-religion. In a press release, Finneran specified The ICA as his target, because of his mistaken belief that we planned to bring "Piss Christ" to Boston. His legislative colleagues passed the bill with a unanimous voice vote. That was a clear educational victory for Rita Burke and company.

The next day, legislator Byron Rushing stood before his colleagues and challenged the Finneran bill. The first politician to stand up for The ICA, Rushing cited common sense and a civil libertarian outrage, and finally read aloud from Leo Steinberg's ground-breaking critical work "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion." Needless to say, this was not a regular occurrence on the floor of the Massachusetts State House. That day, the Finneran bill was repealed.

As the opening approached, the volume and tone of press attention and the public response increased in pitch at a steady pace. The *Pilot*, the influential newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese, editorialized against The ICA. The *Globe*, *Herald* and *Phoenix* weighed in on our side. The Boston Coalition for Freedom of Expression and directors of nearly every cultural institution in the city stood with us in the fight against what we felt was an organized effort to suppress the exhibition. The groups opposing the exhibition, failing to find any legitimate political support, banded together in a group they called First Amendment Common Sense (FACS).

On July 4, with slightly less than a month before the opening, Attorney General James Shannon issued a statement that would turn the tide for us. In a page-one statement in the *Globe*, he made clear his firm opinion that the state has no right or responsibility to second-guess a museum's assessment of art. The

next day, the first of a series of mailed bomb threats arrived at The ICA. The police bomb squad combed the building. In consultation with the officials and our staff, we kept the threat secret but began arranging for heightened security measures.

Word began to filter back to us that FACS planned a major demonstration on the first day of the exhibition. That rumor fueled planning by the Freedom of Expression Coalition, the AIDS activist group ACT UP, and the gay activist organization Queer Nation. Next to bashing Governor Dukakis, the Mapplethorpe show became the favorite topic of the talk radio community. Finally dropping their misdirected attack on "Piss Christ," our opponents now claimed that Mapplethorpe's portraits of children—one clothed, one naked—were kiddie porn. To make matters worse, Rita Burke told the *New York Times* that, after looking at Mapplethorpe's photos, the viewer became addicted, got AIDS, and died.

The week before the opening, we were notified that we must have two city police officers on the premises until they were assured there would be no violence. They planned to close Boylston Street and barricade the sidewalks, keeping opposition demonstrators at shouting distance. I was told they had learned a great deal from weekly demonstrations at abortion clinics.

FACS made a last-ditch stand. At a press conference at the State House, they announced they would issue a citizen's criminal complaint against The ICA and against me personally. They stated that rather than protest on the streets they would try to use the municipal courts to shut us down.

We installed the exhibition without incident and readied ourselves for the opening. The *Phoenix* had agreed to sponsor the exhibition, allowing us to divert our concern about properly promoting the exhibition to maintenance of a secure facility. The exhibition opened to enormous crowds on August 1, following a high energy private opening on the previous evening.

To gather evidence the FACS folks bought tickets, waited in line, and toured the exhibition. As they left the exhibition and prepared to address the press, elements of the exhibition's proponents staged a loud action while two men staged a kiss-in, much to the consternation of the outraged FACS group.

On the second day, the flamboyant city councilor Albert "Dapper" O'Neil attended the exhibition wearing a wireless mike and trailed by several reporters. He walked up to the informal portrait of young Jesse McBride, stuck his nose up to the glass, and was photographed by the press wrinkling his brow in consternation. He loudly declared his disgust at the photograph of two men kissing.

I was at the door to see him leave the exhibition. "You'll have to remove some of these disgusting pictures," he said to the cameras

(and to me). "Otherwise, the exhibition is quite beautiful." I informed him that he had neither the responsibility nor the authority to make such a demand. "I'll show you what rights I have," he thundered. "This is a city-owned building."

For all the fuss, the exhibition went ahead without serious incident. More than 104,000 people made their own decisions about viewing the exhibition and visited. No one was hurt. As best as we can tell, the moral fabric of the city remains relatively intact. "Dapper" O'Neil was easily defeated in his attempt to have our long-term lease with the city cancelled. Almost immediately, progressive forces within City Hall moved to sell us the building for a very reasonable price.

After painstaking preparation on our part, the FACS court challenge was tossed out of court by a municipal clerk without requiring so much as a word of testimony on my part.

Barrie's acquittal provided a great excuse for a closing celebration, but we had already chosen to observe the tour's conclusion by collaborating with the Mapplethorpe Foundation and the Harvard Medical School/Deaconess Medical Center to co-present a gala benefitting the Robert Mapplethorpe AIDS Research Laboratory. (Mapplethorpe had died at the Deaconess while awaiting the start of a promising experimental treatment.)

The poignant fact was that, with the close of the exhibition Mapplethorpe's death became all the more real. His old friend Philip Glass performed a solo piano piece he dedicated to Robert's memory, and the artist's friends and admirers came to Boston from all over the country. One of them, Robert Raushenberg, donated \$300,000. As a result, the benefit closing raised more than \$600,000—nearly half of what the lab needed to propel its critical research.

Four months have passed. Dennis Barrie and the Contemporary Arts Center were left with legal bills of nearly \$250,000. The NEA seems to be attempting to re-establish its credibility. The courts seem unwilling to curtail creative freedom. Our year of living dangerously has passed. I think I speak for all of my colleagues at The ICA when I say that we would do it all again, gladly.

► **DAVID A. ROSS**, a 1971 graduate of SU's Newhouse School, was until February 1 director of The Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, where he was responsible for hosting the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*. He has since been named director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

Ross, who has donated his fee for this essay to the Dennis Barrie defense fund, encourages readers to help defray remaining defense costs for Barrie and the Cincinnati arts center. For information call the CAC at (513) 721-0390.

