



INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

NEWS RELEASE

PHILADELPHIA EXHIBITIONS INITIATIVE
AT THE PEW CENTER FOR ARTS & HERITAGE



IMPERFECT MOMENTS: MAPPLETHORPE AND CENSORSHIP TWENTY YEARS LATER

A TWO-DAY SYMPOSIUM COMMEMORATING ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE'S LANDMARK RETROSPECTIVE CO-PRESENTED BY THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE PHILADELPHIA EXHIBITIONS INITIATIVE AT THE PEW CENTER FOR ARTS & HERITAGE

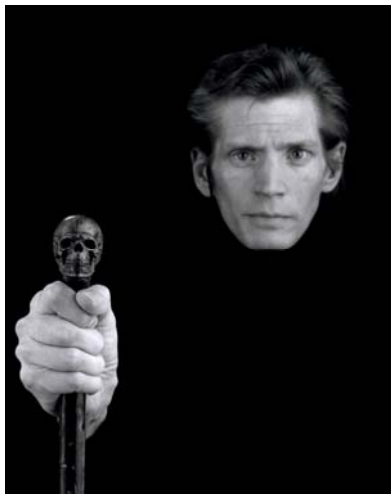
FEBRUARY 12–13, 2009

PHILADELPHIA, PA

It has been two decades since the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania organized *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*. The traveling retrospective was curated by Janet Kardon, who was the ICA Director from 1979 to 1989 and who organized many pioneering exhibitions for the institution. The show fell victim to public outcry against government sponsorship of "obscene" art when Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled its stop on the tour for fear of negative repercussions, especially its possible impact on NEA appropriations. The Corcoran's decision sparked a controversial national debate: Should tax dollars support the arts? Who decides what is "obscene" or "offensive" in public exhibitions? And if art can be considered a form of free speech, is it a violation of the First Amendment to revoke federal funding on grounds of obscenity? To this day, these questions remain very much at issue.

The United States continues to have no clear or official cultural policy; the federal government does not grant fellowships to individual artists; and obscenity-based censorship persists, along with other content-based restrictions. Co-presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative at The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, this two-day symposium at the University of Pennsylvania commemorating the 20th anniversary of Mapplethorpe's exhibition brings together world-renowned artists, critics, and scholars to examine the legacy of the culture wars of the 1990s on the arts in the United States, as well as the issues that artists and art institutions face today.

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment opened in Philadelphia on December 9, 1988, four months before Mapplethorpe's death at age 42, and remained on view through January 29, 1989. It was the largest Mapplethorpe exhibition organized to date—including celebrity portraits and still lifes as well as homoerotic and sadomasochistic scenes—and the first exhibition to travel extensively, scheduled to go to eight venues nationwide including the ICA. Among them: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (February 25–April



Self portrait, 1988

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Orchid, 1988

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

118 South 36th Street at the
University of Pennsylvania

For more information,
call 215-898-7108/5911, or visit
www.icaphila.org/Mapplethorpe

Founded in 1963, the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania is a leader in the presentation and documentation of contemporary art. Through exhibitions, commissions, educational programs, and publications, ICA invites the public to share in the experience, interpretation and understanding of the work of established and emerging artists.

PHILADELPHIA EXHIBITIONS INITIATIVE AT THE PEW CENTER FOR ARTS & HERITAGE

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Opened in November 2005, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage (Center) is dedicated to stimulating a vibrant cultural community in the region. The Center is the home of Dance Advance, Heritage Philadelphia Program, Pew Fellowships in the Arts, the Philadelphia Cultural Management Initiative, Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Music Project and Philadelphia Theatre Initiative.

9, 1989); Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (July 1 – September 3, 1989); Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C. (July 21-August 13, 1989); Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut (October 21 – December 24, 1989); University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley (January 17-March 18, 1990); Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio (April 8 – May 21, 1990), and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts (June 14 – August 31, 1990) .

After an enthusiastic reception in Philadelphia and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the show was scheduled to open at its third venue, Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art, on July 1, 1989, but on June 12 the Corcoran cancelled its showing of *The Perfect Moment* for fear of negative publicity and its possible impact on NEA appropriations, even though the first two venues had received no complaints from the public about the work on view.

Throughout the spring of 1989, a coalition of Christian groups and conservative elected officials had been waging a media war on government sponsorship of "obscene" art, at first specifically targeting Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, which was included in an NEA-funded exhibition organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, but soon expanding their polemical rhetoric to include contemporary artists dealing with sexuality, gender, or politics.

The Corcoran's decision sparked a national debate on public arts funding and censorship and engaged Americans in broad-ranging questions. Should the federal government use taxpayers' money to support the arts? Who decides what is "offensive" in public exhibitions? If art is considered a form of free speech, is it a violation of the First Amendment to revoke federal funding on grounds of obscenity?

On opening day at Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), seven works were deemed by the police to be obscene. These works were seized and the Director, Dennis Barrie, was arrested. Barrie and the CAC were tried on obscenity charges. At the end of the trial, the jury made a decision that had important implications for the distinction between art and obscenity. They determined the works that were on trial were "obscene," but they could not determine that the works had no artistic merit. For this reason, Barrie and the CAC were acquitted.

Twenty years later, many of the same questions remain unanswered. The United States continues to have no clear cultural policy. The government no longer awards individual fellowships to artists, so as to avoid accusations of supporting any "obscene" art the artist might create. Meanwhile, artists continue to be censored for making "offensive" art, and arts organizations continue to be censored for exhibiting it. While high-profile cases make national headlines—as when New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani condemned the Brooklyn Museum's 1999 show *Sensation* (which included Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*)—censorship in small-scale venues happens frequently across the nation and goes largely unreported.



K. Moody and R. Sherman, 1984

PROGRAM:

Thursday, February 12

Meyerson Hall B1, 201 South 34th Street
5:30pm

Introduction: Janet Kardon

1989: The Perfect Moment

Judith Tannenbaum

Keynote: Mapplethorpe's Beauty

David Joselit

Performance:

Patti Smith

Friday, February 13

Annenberg School 110, 3620 Walnut Street

Introduction

9:45am

Claudia Gould and Paula Marincola

1989: Battleground Year

10am

Michael Brenson

Panel: Artists-The Question of Freedom

10:30am-12:30pm

Moderator:

Richard Meyer

Panelists:

Karen Finley

Tim Miller

Andres Serrano

Panel: Institutions-The Question of Courage

2-4pm

Moderator:

Robert Storr

Panelists:

Michael Brenson

Sheldon Hackney

Kathy Halbreich

Raymond Learsy

No pre-registration required but seating is limited and available on a first come, first served basis.

For more information:

www.icaphila.org/Mapplethorpe

www.philexin.org



Thomas, 1987

PARTICIPANTS

Michael Brenson is an author and art critic who was a staff writer at *The New York Times* during the Mapplethorpe censorship controversy.

Karen Finley is a performance artist who successfully sued the federal government for the restoration of her vetoed NEA grant.

Claudia Gould is the Daniel W. Dietrich, II Director at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

Sheldon Hackney is the Boies Professor of U.S. History at the University of Pennsylvania. He was president of the University of Pennsylvania during the controversy and later became chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Kathy Halbreich is Associate Director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and former Director of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

David Joselit is Chair of the Department of the History of Art at Yale University. He is author of *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (1998), *American Art Since 1945* (2003), and most recently, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (2007). Joselit contributed an essay entitled "Robert Mapplethorpe's Poses" to the 1989 exhibition catalogue for *The Perfect Moment*.

Janet Kardon curated *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* and was the Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art from 1979 to 1989.

Raymond Leary has been a collector of contemporary art for over 35 years. During the Reagan administration he served as a Presidential appointee to the National Council of the National Endowment for the Arts. He is a graduate of The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania and currently serves on the Board of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Paula Marincola is the Executive Director of The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage and also Director of the Center's Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative.

Richard Meyer is Associate Professor in the Department of Art History and Director of the Contemporary Project at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002), *Warhol's Jews: Ten Portraits Reconsidered* (2008) and co-author, with Anthony Lee, of *Weegee and Naked City* (2008). His forthcoming book, *What was Contemporary Art?* will be published by MIT Press.

Tim Miller is a performance artist and one of the "NEA 4" who successfully sued the federal government with the help of the ACLU for violation of their first amendment rights. His most recent book *1001 BEDS* won the Lambda Literary Award for best book in Drama-Theatre.

Andres Serrano is an artist who was a central figure in the culture wars when his work *Piss Christ* was labeled “obscene.”

Patti Smith is an influential singer-songwriter and poet. She was a lifelong friend of Mapplethorpe, whose art influenced her musical development and artistic sensibilities.

Robert Storr is Dean of the School of Fine Arts at Yale University, as well as an artist, critic and curator. He was the senior curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, has been a contributing editor at *Art in America* since 1981, and was the Director of the 2007 Venice Biennale, the first American invited to assume that position.

Judith Tannenbaum is the Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art. Tannenbaum was the Associate Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art during the planning of *The Perfect Moment*, and was the interim Director during the ensuing controversy.

All Mapplethorpe works © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by Permission.

This program is co-presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative at The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. Support also provided by The Honickman Foundation, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Emily and Jerry Spiegel Fund to Support Contemporary Culture and Visual Arts, Harvey S. Shipley Miller/The Judith Rothschild Foundation and Christie's.



ALL PROGRAMS SUBJECT TO CHANGE. PLEASE VISIT THE ICA OR PEI WEBSITE, WWW.ICAPHILA.ORG/MAPPLETHORPE OR WWW.PHILEXIN.ORG, FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PROGRAMS IN CONJUNCTION WITH IMPERFECT MOMENTS: MAPPLETHORPE AND CENSORSHIP TWENTY YEARS LATER.