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## Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Article 02

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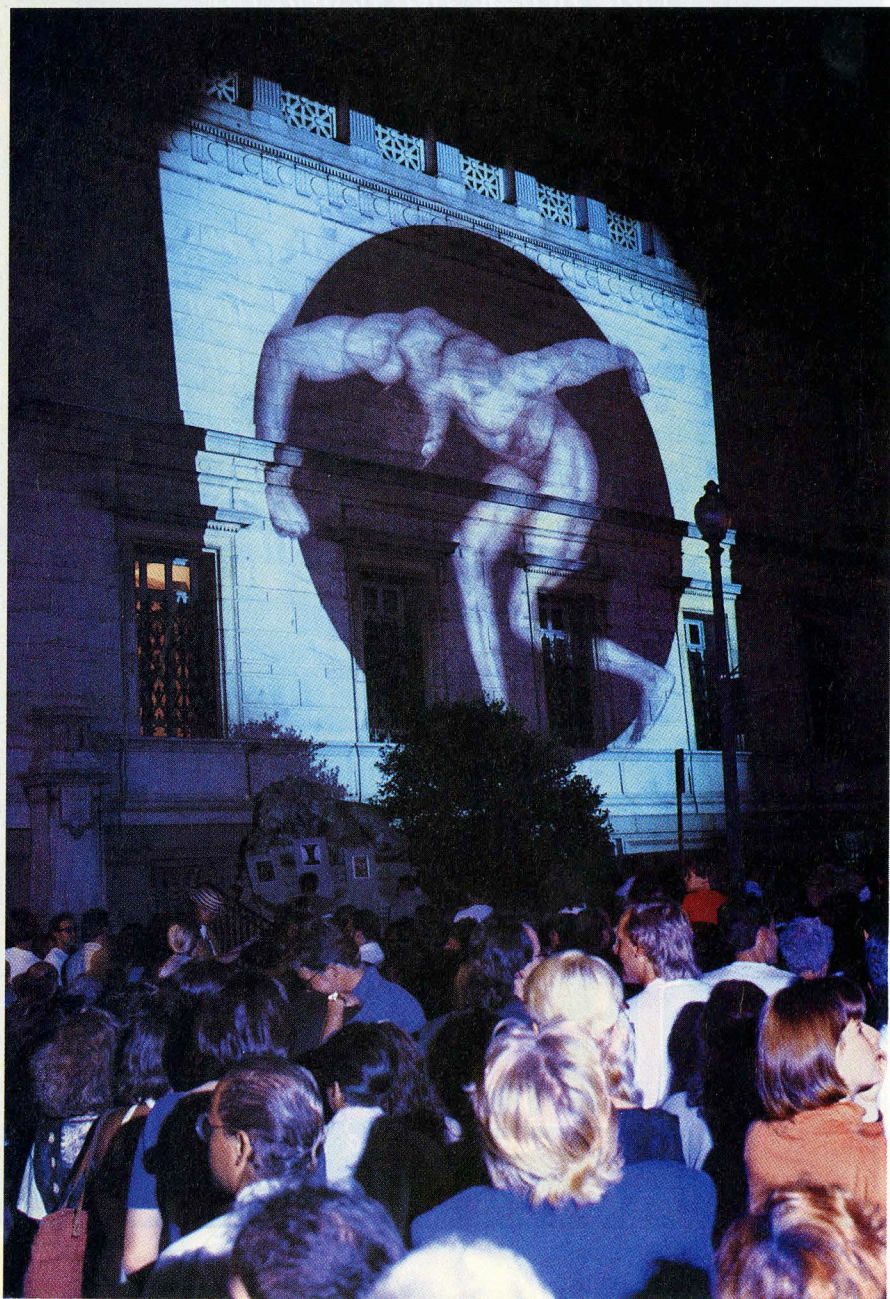
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# The Cultural Politics of Controversial Art

**SUMMARY: Sadomasochism, blasphemy, homosexuality — such themes in federally funded artworks have prompted a public outcry and brought action criticized by the artistic community as censorship. Caught in the middle is the National Endowment for the Arts, the government agency which supports many of the groups that sponsor such exhibits. Some on Capitol Hill say the issue is whether taxpayers should foot the bill for works offensive to the American public.**

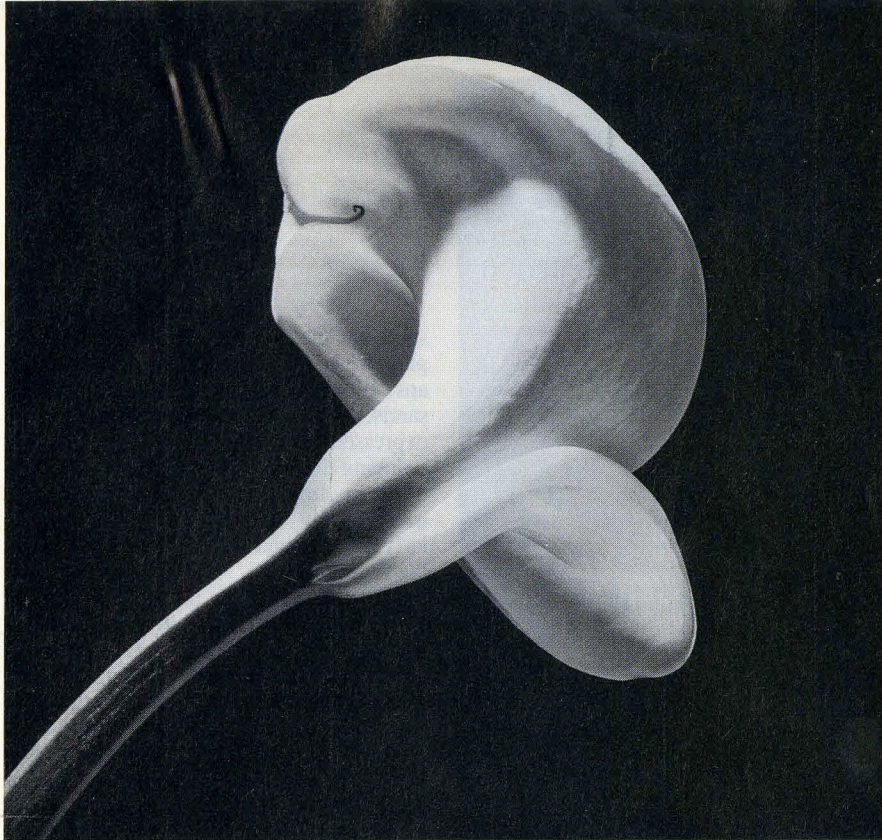


As the country heads into the heart of summer — beaches crowding with tanned bodies, pages of summer novels flapping gently in the breeze, blockbuster crowds lining up for days and nights to catch the first showing of movies like “Batman [I],” “Ghostbusters II,” “Indiana Jones III” and “Star Trek V” — one might be excused for thinking that the principles of higher art would not be the topic most likely to occupy the public mind.

But let no one say that modern American art has lost its capacity to shock and astonish. This was recently demonstrated decisively when New York photographer Andres Serrano decided to capture his feelings about the state of contemporary Christianity by photographing a plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of urine (his own, in fact), descriptively calling the picture “Piss Christ.” It was part of the work for which he was awarded a \$15,000 grant by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C., an institution partly funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The case provided the focal point for a passionate public debate that has been building in recent years. At issue are questions such as the freedom of expression, the role of the government in arts funding and the relationship between the artist and the community.

The Serrano photo, part of a series that includes “Piss Pope” and “Piss God,” came to the attention of the public in April as a result of protests by the American Family Association, a grass roots organization based in Tupelo, Miss., dedicated to the restoration of spiritual values in art. This was some four months after the end of the traveling exhibition of which it had been a part. While Stefan Stux of the Stux Gallery in New York, which handles Serrano’s work, has called the picture “pleasing, poetic and spiritual,” some U.S. senators were not so appreciative. “Serrano is not an artist. He is a jerk,” stated Jesse Helms, a North Carolina Republican, with customary bluntness. A letter originating with Al-

**Protesters of cancellation projected Mapplethorpe works on Corcoran wall.**



©ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE 1984 / COURTESY ART & COMMERCE NEW YORK

**“Calla Lily,” one of the flower studies by Mapplethorpe in his later years**

fonse M. D’Amato, a New York Republican, and signed by 24 other senators registered outrage on behalf of taxpayers.

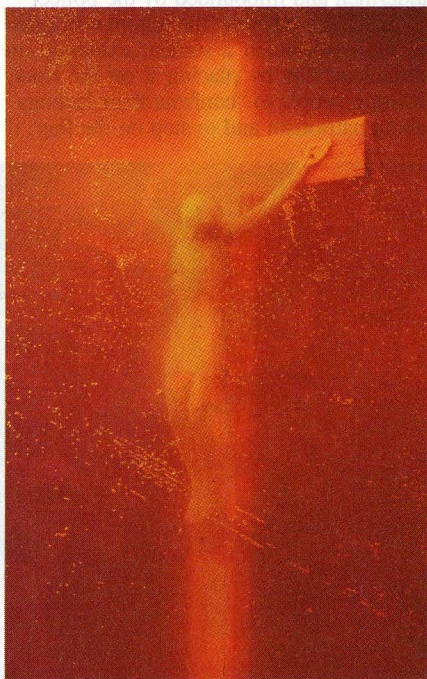
“There is absolutely nothing in the First Amendment that says blasphemy is to be paid for at the taxpayers’ expense. We don’t have to have it,” says Fahey McCann, a spokesman for the Christian Broadcasting Network Inc., which has been equally outspoken in its criticism of the use of NEA funds. “The government should cut out the funding of this organization [the National Endowment for the Arts] entirely until they have a statement that says, ‘We absolutely will not fund pornography and we absolutely will not fund material that is patently blasphemous and offensive to any religious group in this country.’”

Andres Serrano has expressed surprise at the uproar over his work, but he seems undeterred. For years, he photographed parts of dead animals. More recently, having experimented with brains, blood and urine, he is reportedly exploring semen.

Partly as a result of the Serrano dispute came an even bigger debacle. In themselves the works of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe stood in no need of public funding. At the time of his death from AIDS at age 42 in March, he commanded \$10,000 per sitting for his portraits, and his one-of-a-kind prints sold for \$20,000 each. Though he in his early career made himself famous — or notorious — as the bad boy of photography, lavishing his skill on subjects normally associated with homosexual pornography rather than art, the establishment had long since gathered him to its bosom. At the last exhibition he attended, at the Whitney Museum of American Art

in New York in July 1988, he received the tribute of New York’s rich and famous.

In the Mapplethorpe case, controversy came by way of another exhibition of his work, “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment,” assembled by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (which received \$30,000 from the NEA for this purpose). Running without incident in Philadelphia and later in Chicago at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the show



STUX GALLERY

**“Piss Christ” shows Serrano’s feelings about contemporary Christianity.**

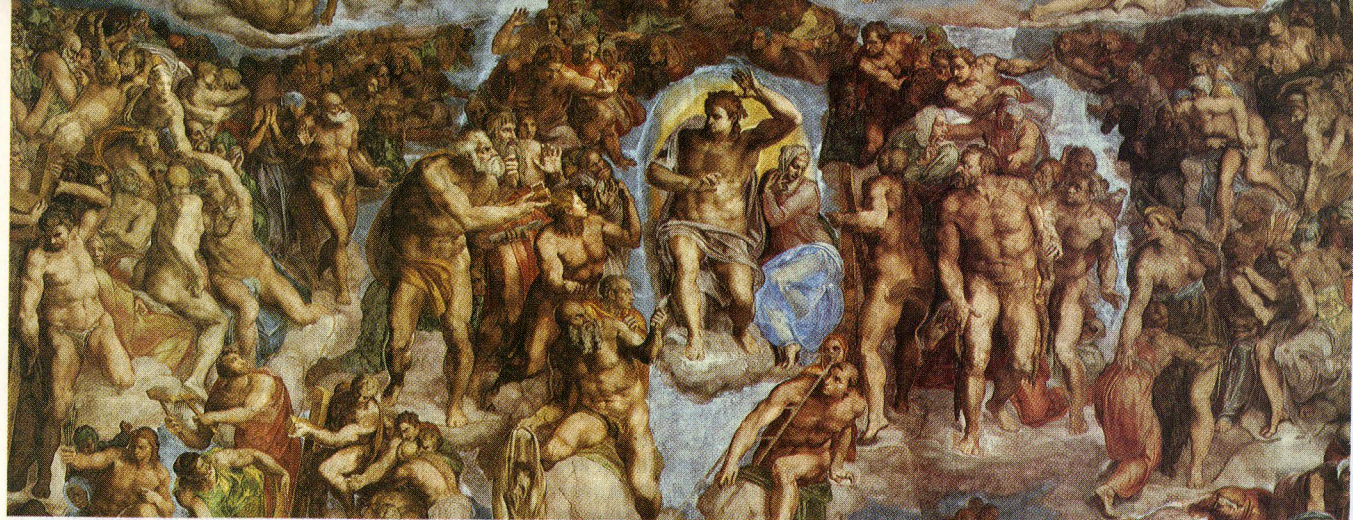
turned out to be a hot property once it reached Washington, where it was scheduled to run at the Corcoran Gallery of Art from July to September.

Though Mapplethorpe’s work in his later years had moved away from the violently homoerotic to include portraits, some of them radiantly ethereal, still lifes and flower studies, it has always been the presence of the works from his so-called X Portfolio that have attracted attention at his shows. Art critics have hailed Mapplethorpe’s honesty and courage in portraying the outer reaches of sexual experience — sadomasochism, male bondage, leather fetishism and sodomy. “He has proven,” writes critic Kay Larson in the introduction to the exhibition catalog, “that classicism and eroticism are not contradictory, that they are two poles of the same experience.”

In the company of such works as Mapplethorpe’s remarkable self-portrait from 1978 — showing the photographer scowling at the viewer with a bullwhip painfully protruding from his rear end — conventional celebrity portraits and pictures of children and flowers take on a more than slightly surreal aspect. And as Larson also points out, the heavy sensuality of Mapplethorpe’s flower and fruit pictures remind the viewer that they are indeed “botanical organs of reproduction.”

In May, an exhibition catalog found its way to Capitol Hill, as did invitations to the opening of the show, featuring one of Mapplethorpe’s tamer photos showing two male models, one black and one white, embracing. At which point things really started moving. In a June 8 letter addressed to Hugh Southern, who has been the acting NEA chairman since the resignation of Reagan appointee Frank S. M. Hodsoll in February, 108 House members led by Texas Republican Richard K. Armey denounced the works of Serrano and Mapplethorpe specifically, urging that a clear line exists between “what can be classified as art and what must be called morally reprehensible trash.” The letter suggested that funding practices at the agency be revised in conjunction with the five-year reauthorization hearings that were coming up before Congress last month to prevent a recurrence and ended with a threat as subtle as a sledgehammer: “If the NEA has enough money to fund this type of project, then perhaps the NEA has too much money to handle responsibly.”

An immediate result of the outcry was the cancellation of the Mapplethorpe show, announced by the Corcoran June 12. Gallery Director Christina Orr-Cahall cited



ART RESOURCE

Several figures in Michelangelo's "Last Judgment" will be restored to their nudity, which had scandalized Pope Pius IV.

rent cleaning of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, which will restore a number of the figures in "The Last Judgment" to the original nudity that had scandalized Pope Pius IV in the 16th century to the point of ordering painter Daniele da Volterra to superimpose loincloths on the most offending. That artist has ignominiously gone down in history as Il Braghettone, the breech-maker. Even so, New York art critic James Cooper sees an important difference. "We have spent more on public art than they spent on the entire Italian Renaissance, but the popes and the Medicis got works by Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo. Americans have been shortchanged with 'Piss Christ,' 'Bat-column' and 'Tilted Arc.'"

Others, including the outraged members of Congress, insist that the primary issue is public funding rather than censorship — public funding, particularly, for works that a large part of the American public would consider morally and aesthetically offensive. Says Richard Arney, "These are clearly and obviously extreme examples. Any reasonable person could have predicted that this would be offensive to the public and therefore should not be funded with public money." It is not the first time Arney has called into question the use of NEA funding. In 1985, he and fellow Texas Republican Tom DeLay managed to cut some \$10 million from an appropriations bill for the endowment, protesting the funding of poets who were "little more than highbrow pornographers, publishing lewd poetry at public expense," as Arney put it at the time.

"The point we made in 1985 and that we have made today is that you cannot spend public money without exercising some responsibility and responsiveness to the public's sensitivities and preference. They can make any art they want on their own time and their own dime. The NEA and the national arts community are privileged people and should be recognized as such, but they don't get a blank check."

Helen Delich Bentley, a Maryland Republican and one of the signatories of Arney's letter, is even more blunt: "Giving

grants to this type of art would be enough to make me vote totally against any appropriations for the National Endowment for the Arts. It is an insult to Christianity, it is an insult to normal human beings and an insult to the taxpayers of this country, too."

**A**rney says the public reaction to his initiative has been overwhelmingly positive. "We do have a few people who have called in to say that I am a mindless twit who has no taste and that I am outrageous for wanting to give this oversight. These are generally the same people who are so afraid that we are not giving proper surveillance to defense expenditure and other agencies."

Among those who have expressed concern is the Association of Art Museum Directors, an organization representing 150 larger museums in the United States and Canada. On June 20 the group issued a statement deploring the recent emergence of "a pattern of intimidation in which a museum, an art school, a state service organization and the National Endowment for the Arts have been threatened in ways amounting to de facto censorship." The letter notes that these are exceptional cases that must be seen in the context of the 80,000 grants the NEA has distributed over its quarter-century of existence.

Trying to head off any congressional demands that all funding for the agency be cut off, Sidney R. Yates, an Illinois Democrat and chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior and Related Agencies, which oversees arts appropriations, has proposed an amendment to increase NEA control and accountability for subgrants.

According to the language proposed by Yates and approved by the House Appropriations Committee June 29, the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities must exercise "the power of final approval" over subgrants that have previously been given at the discretion of local and community-based groups. The change has had a positive reception from Southern as

well as NEA Director Lynne Cheney.

The agency estimates that such an amendment could affect about 200 of its 4,500 grants annually, though not the state arts agencies that were mandated by the endowment's authorizing legislation. At the NEA, the fear is that folk arts and education programs in particular could be hurt. However, according to Neal Sigmond, an aide to Yates, the proposal is more than a simple response to the current situation. "He has been concerned about the subgranting process long before this issue arose. That does go back a long way."

The history of public art in the United States also goes back a long way. Under the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1934 established the Treasury Department's Section on Painting and Sculpture. It was the first U.S. government agency for the arts, its purpose to decorate the nation's federal buildings. Across the country murals mushroomed on schools, post offices and administration buildings, celebrating the spirit of the New Deal in the images of social realism. They showed people being brave, strong and productive farmers and steelworkers, but probably not many investment bankers, notes historian Samuel McCracken. "Imagine a Mexican mural," he says. "Tone it down, take out Lenin and the gun belts, and you get the idea."

The following year the Works Progress Administration took action on behalf of unemployed artists with such programs as the Federal Art Project, Federal Music Program, Federal Theater Program and Federal Writers' Project, which among other things produced guidebooks to the states.

When Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 signed into being the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities, which established the NEA and the NEH, there were already those who feared that any state intervention in the arts would in and of itself represent a threat to the arts it was supposed to help. "The federal government has the power to control that which it subsidizes," argued Republican Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, "and experience proves that when the federal government has that power, that power is eventually exercised."

considerably more visible than any exhibition of photographs is the use of public funds for artworks to beautify the urban landscape, often in connection with federal and state buildings. Many such works are funded through the Art-in-Architecture Program administered by the General Services Administration, which allocates 0.5 percent of the funding for all federal building projects to the commission of fine art. The commission of artists is guided by the recommendation of expert panels provided by the NEA.

Horror stories abound. Unsuspecting citizens wake up one morning to find that they have been blessed with a public work of art — often one that manages to combine the apparent opposites of minimalism and gargantuanism and equally often one that, on the whole, they would much rather do without. Claes Oldenburg's sculptures have regularly been objects of attack: "Clothespin" in Philadelphia, "Crusoe Umbrella" in Des Moines, Iowa, and "Batcolumn," which, looming in front of the Social Security Administration building in Chicago, received Sen. William Proxmire's Golden Fleece award for governmental waste in 1982. Last year, Massachusetts artist Michael Thompson refused to remove his work, a ring of toilets — sparkling clean, but toilets nonetheless — funded by the Massachusetts Artists Foundation for the atrium concourse of the State Transportation Building in Boylston. This despite the pleas of the Boylston Properties Association, which felt bullied by the bowls and which had hoped the area would be used for restaurants and entertainment.

But the days when such paeans to post-modernism went unchallenged are over. Conservatives have gone on the attack, not only deploring the aesthetic standards of what is being funded but also pointing to the connection between the erosion of traditional American values and the kind of public art that is being produced today, which many consider nihilistic and destructive. It is important, says Herbert London of New York University to understand the relationship between culture, politics and economics. "The left is far more sophisticated about this than the right, and I think that by and large we have made the wrong kinds of concessions. We don't understand that symbols are important. We don't understand that the people who are given money for the arts from our government receive legitimacy for these actions."

Conservative syndicated columnist Patrick J. Buchanan wrote, "Part of the motivation for these girders, slabs of stone and



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

### Moses Soyer's "Artists on WPA" (1935), itself a product of Federal Art Project

petrified dinosaur feces standing outside so many public buildings, is *épater les bourgeois*, i.e., to offend the middle class, for the snobbish delight of offending the middle class. If Mr. Bush wants an easy ovation, he should tour downtown D.C., point out the worst of the junk and sell it to anyone willing to truck it off."

And increasingly, the beneficiaries of public art are taking active measures to have it removed from sight, causing the artists to contend that their First Amendment rights to freedom of expression are being violated. This spring the 1,300 federal employees at the Javits Federal Building in Lower Manhattan were successful in their years-long quest against Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," the \$181,000, 120-foot-long, 12-foot-high, 73-ton black metal wall that since 1981 has "cut a gentle swath across the plaza," as admirers liked to put it.

Critics, including federal office workers and citizens guided by nothing more exalted than their common sense and taste, said that far from being a thing of beauty, the wall destroyed the space in front of the building and provided a shelter for muggers and bag ladies. Four years of litigation, during which the artist argued against having his masterpiece moved, ended this spring when a U.S. District Court permitted the moving of the wall, which has found a new, if less conspicuous, home at a motor vehicle compound in Brooklyn. "If they ever use the name 'Tilted Arc' or my name in connection with those three steel plates [the three parts into which the arc was

cast]," Serra has threatened, "I'll sue them."

The least one could ask of these public monuments, says Maryland sculptor Hamilton Reed Armstrong, is that they reflect the values of the community they are supposed to honor and beautify. Pointing to the Jim Sanborn monument that is in the process of being installed at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., a series of rocks and crystals that cost \$250,000, he notes that in terms of spiritual expression, if anything it is a tribute to New Age philosophy and Gaea, the earth mother — not normally things closely associated with the CIA. "Now that is again perfectly legitimate in this country. You can worship sticks and stones. But again, do we the taxpayers have to put up with it? We have to explain to them that yes, it is revolutionary, let's get it out in the open. We must decide what do we want to commemorate; what do the American people want to commemorate?" — particularly considering that intelligence agents have died in service of their country, he adds.

Ensuring freedom of expression for all, but particularly trying to nourish those arts that celebrate the American nation and its values, says Cooper, would be a mission for which public funding would be appropriate. "If you want people to be constructive and to work hard and to rebuild America, then you have got to inspire them. That is what the purpose of culture is. At the very least, that could be one of the functions of culture."

— Helle Bering-Jensen