

## Celebrity Culture & Politics

Richard Meyer's "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art"

October 13, 2000

Notes by Johanna Blakley

### Background<sup>1</sup>

Richard Meyer's paper was presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art on the occasion of the museum's "recreation" of The Perfect Moment, a retrospective of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe.<sup>2</sup> Originally organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and partially funded by a \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Perfect Moment was cancelled just before its scheduled opening at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in June of 1989. In April of 1990, The Perfect Moment opened at the Contemporary Art Center (CAC) in Cincinnati. On the first day of the exhibit, police temporarily closed the museum in order to videotape the show as evidence for an obscenity indictment. That same day, both the CAC and its director, Dennis Barrie, were indicted on charges of pandering obscenity and child pornography. In September of 1990, their case was brought to trial. Barrie and the CAC were ultimately acquitted on all counts.

The recreation of The Perfect Moment at the Santa Monica Museum of Art was sponsored by Showtime cable network to coincide with the premiere of Dirty Pictures, a television movie about the Cincinnati trial starring James Woods as Dennis Barrie.

## **The Jesse Helms Theory of Art**

The paper focuses on “the ways in which attempts at censorship tend to publicize, reproduce, and even create the very images they seek to suppress.”<sup>3</sup> Jesse Helms made Mapplethorpe’s name a household word, and “by refusing to show his work, the Corcoran Gallery of Art introduced that work into the far more powerful flow of mass culture. With the recreation of The Perfect Moment at the Santa Monica Museum earlier this year, something like the opposite occurred. Having traveled from the museum to mass culture, Mapplethorpe’s photographs now make the reverse journey. As a result of a cable television movie (and of the funding provided by the network that produced it), The Perfect Moment returns to the space of the art museum.”<sup>4</sup> While the paper currently does not discuss Dirty Pictures and the recreation of The Perfect Moment , Meyer asked us for “ideas and input about the issues raised by this exchange between television production and museum practice.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Respondent, Professor Mark Kann, Political Science: The Jesse Helms Theory of Politics**

Professor Kann supplied an historical overview of the evolution of punishment in the United States. In its earliest period, punishments were often public events and they were usually aimed at the criminal’s body. It was believed that law-breakers should be punished in public spectacles, deterring others from following in the criminal’s infamous footsteps. In fact, notions of “infamy” and “deterrence” were often yoked together.

Major John André's public hanging changed the course of this history. André was discovered to be a British spy and was imprisoned by George Washington. André wished to avoid a low-class execution and demanded that he be shot instead of hanged. The American public applauded his request and André received even more positive attention when the government refused to honor it. By the time he was hanged, the public considered him "honorable" for wanting to die a gentleman's death. Thus, his celebrity eclipsed his infamy.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, was instrumental in ending public executions. He saw how easily public indignation could turn to praise, and he wanted to prevent criminals from becoming celebrities. His proposals included the use of solitary confinement, and he argued that executions should take place behind closed doors, inside the walls of the penitentiary. Anonymity itself became a form of punishment.

Kann provided this historical overview in order to pose a question: are the Jesse Helms of the world really dangerous to free speech and the first amendment? In the end, he argues that no, what the Helms of this world succeed in doing is bringing to public consciousness issues that might not otherwise have been considered or discussed in a public forum. This dynamic is good for democracy and fosters healthy debate, protest, and the creation of counter cultures. Kann finds more worrisome censorship campaigns that happen behind closed doors.

## **The Discussion**

Professor Kann's comments sparked several responses about Helms' effect on the NEA and the effects of the Barrie trial on museums around the country. While Professor Meyer agreed that the "the only thing worse than a censorship controversy is no censorship controversy," he mentioned that Helms' crusade against Mapplethorpe certainly helped Mapplethorpe's career but caused terrible damage to the NEA; not only does the NEA no longer provide grants to individual artists, which is ironic since Mapplethorpe never received a grant from them directly, but its funding has been cut significantly. Others mentioned as well the chilling effect that the Barrie trial had on museums. The recent debacle surrounding the Sensation exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (with Mayor Giuliani taking on the Helms' mantle) has brought to the fore once again the ways in which museums can become venues for political power-plays. Professor Dana Polan reminded us that some *museums* actually campaigned against the Sensation show. Professor Selma Holo, Director of the Museum Studies Program, pointed out that the Smithsonian bowed to pressure to cancel the Enola Gay exhibit in 1995, and she argued that museums have become much more self-censored in the wake of the Barrie trial. One of the problems is that, with the demise of the NEA, patronage has become even more crucial to museums, and any shows that may alienate donors are bound to be regarded with fear.

## **The Celebrity of Jesse Helms**

Professor Tom Hollihan and Professor Robert Fliegel both pointed out that Helms may not have intentionally bolstered Mapplethorpe's celebrity, but he was

intentional (and effective) in beefing up his own public profile. Hollihan pointed out that when political controversies are launched, it is not unusual for politicians to develop fund-raising strategies at the same time. Focus groups are used to hone the message that will eventually bring in money for future political campaigns. In fact, Helms ended up setting fund-raising records for the amount of out of state money he raised for his two senate races following his censorship campaign. Helms became the public face for a “moral majority” across the nation, and he sufficiently strengthened his name-recognition and his power in the Senate. He later used this power to his advantage in other conservative moral battles. In particular, Meyer pointed out, Helms was able to raise money to squelch safe-sex funding.

### **Celebrity by Association: Dennis Barrie**

I think it’s safe to say that we all found it intriguing that the Showtime movie cast Dennis Barrie as the hero of the Mapplethorpe story. The movie begins after Mapplethorpe has already died from AIDS, and although Mapplethorpe’s self-portraits had become the “face” of the controversy, the movie rarely displays his image. Reminiscent of a Greek tragic hero, Barrie is portrayed as a man dragged against his will into a battle he didn’t intend to wage. The tragedy of this movie is that Barrie’s nuclear family crumbles because of the trial: Barrie’s children are ostracized at school, and Barrie and his wife are socially rejected and eventually divorce. In one climactic scene, Barrie’s wife snaps and begins screaming at her husband, accusing him of siding with “his friend Mapplethorpe” and the artworld instead of his family. Professor Leo Braudy

sees her angry speech as a powerful critique of the artworld, which she implicitly defines as a place where images are more important than people.

Professor Polan felt that the gender dynamics in this scene were typical of a tragic narrative. A tragedy requires not only a hero (Barrie) but an obstacle; in this instance, a person who doesn't recognize that this is a tragedy (Barrie's wife). Polan argues that this is typically a female character who does not grasp the scope or the importance of a grand historical moment and feels compelled to stop the hero from meeting his tragic destiny. This scene also reinforces the movie's focus on Barrie (a heterosexual family man) instead of Mapplethorpe (a homosexual man who died from AIDS).

Barrie was a safe central character for the movie for several reasons. Professor Braudy described Barrie as a surrogate for the audience at large; Barrie is the average guy who gets sucked into the fray and must decide what he needs to do. Professor Terry Anzur suggested that Barrie was made the central character because he played the middle; he was a stand-in for neither Helms nor Mapplethorpe so he gave audiences the chance to watch him find his own position in the battle. Professor Fliegel argued that Barrie's role in the film was to present a very safe "affirmation of inclusiveness:" i.e., because the obscenity charges against Barrie are dismissed, Mapplethorpe is affirmed as an artist who deserves a museum show, but the audience doesn't have to look (for any significant length of time) at the art itself, nor does it have to spend the whole movie with Mapplethorpe, who is dead before the movie (and its production) begins.

Professor Martin Kaplan, who spent twelve years as an executive in the entertainment industry, spoke about the marketing perspective that Showtime likely adopted when its team put this movie deal together. Much like the movie Cry Freedom, which was lambasted for focusing on a white man even though the story was purportedly about Steven Biko, Dirty Pictures was probably the result of a carefully conceived compromise. Here's the scenario: use Mapplethorpe to attract attention, but make the story about Barrie so that straight viewers aren't alienated. Show some of the sexual photos, but do it so quickly that people won't be offended. Attract attention to the good intentions of Showtime by sponsoring a museum exhibit and lend the effort more intellectual heft by asking academics (like Meyer!) to speak. Advertise it as a movie about Mapplethorpe to the gay community and advertise it as a movie about the first amendment to the rest of the world.

Professor Meyer happened to have on hand a flyer for the movie that seemed an excellent example of Showtime's duplicitous marketing strategy. The flyer features a close-up photo of two mouths with tongues entwined. Although anyone looking at the flyer would assume that the picture is a Mapplethorpe, Meyer has not been able to find such a photo anywhere in the Mapplethorpe *oeuvre*. He also doubts it's a Mapplethorpe because it is clear in the photo that one mouth belongs to a man, but the other mouth is not clearly gendered. Ambiguity of this sort is not a typical feature in Mapplethorpe's work. One could argue that Showtime went to some length to procure a sexually ambiguous photo

that allows both straight and gay viewers to feel that the image (and consequently the movie) is speaking to them.

Whatever its marketing package, Professor Steven Ross thought the movie was successful at depicting the link between celebrity and infamy. The movie charts Barrie's descent by focussing on his willingness to give up his family in order to play the celebrity. By putting his ego ahead of his family, Barrie falls prey to the machinations of fame. Far from being empowered by his celebrity, Professor Braudy argues that he becomes limited by it – in the end losing his family and his artworld career.<sup>6</sup>

### **Censorship by Association: The Richard Meyer Story**

As an epilogue to our conversation, Professor Nancy Troy, chair of the Art History Department, told us a little bit about the troubles that Meyer faced in publishing his book about censorship and twentieth-century art. Meyer was put in a very difficult position when Oxford University Press informed him that it would not include in his book Mapplethorpe's photo of Jesse, a young nude boy. Meyer refused to censor the picture though he offered to leave the photo out of international editions if he would be allowed to include a statement in the spot where the picture should appear. This offer was initially accepted but eventually refused. As a result, Meyer's book will contain the photo, but it will only be available in the United States.



## **Suggestions for the Paper**

- Further develop the role AIDS played in the controversy.
- Instead of assuming that the audience agrees with the views in the paper, present the position more clearly and make explicit the implications of this case. Express in more detail what the link is between art and politics, fame and infamy. Weigh in on whether Mapplethorpe or Helms were guilty of misusing their publicity.
- Look at the demographics of the Showtime audience; find out more about how Showtime targets its content.
- Emphasize the intentionality behind Helms' campaign.

## **Participants**

Terry Anzur, Journalism  
Johanna Blakley, The Norman Lear Center  
Cathy Borum, The Norman Lear Center  
Leo Braudy, English  
Geoff Cowan, Annenberg School for Communication  
Richard Fliegel, General Studies  
Tom Hollihan, Communication  
Selma Holo, University Galleries  
Mark Kann, Political Science  
Martin Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center  
Jim Loper, Journalism  
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology  
Tim McKeon, The Norman Lear Center  
Richard Meyer, Art History  
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television  
Steven Ross, History  
Marita Sturken, Communication  
Nancy Troy, Art History

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The material in this section is excerpted from Richard Meyer's "Note to the Reader."

<sup>2</sup> The Santa Monica Museum of Art used the term "recreation" rather than "revival" in all press releases and published materials about the exhibit.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> From Meyer's "Note to the Reader," p. ii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Barrie is currently the Director of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum in Cleveland, Ohio.