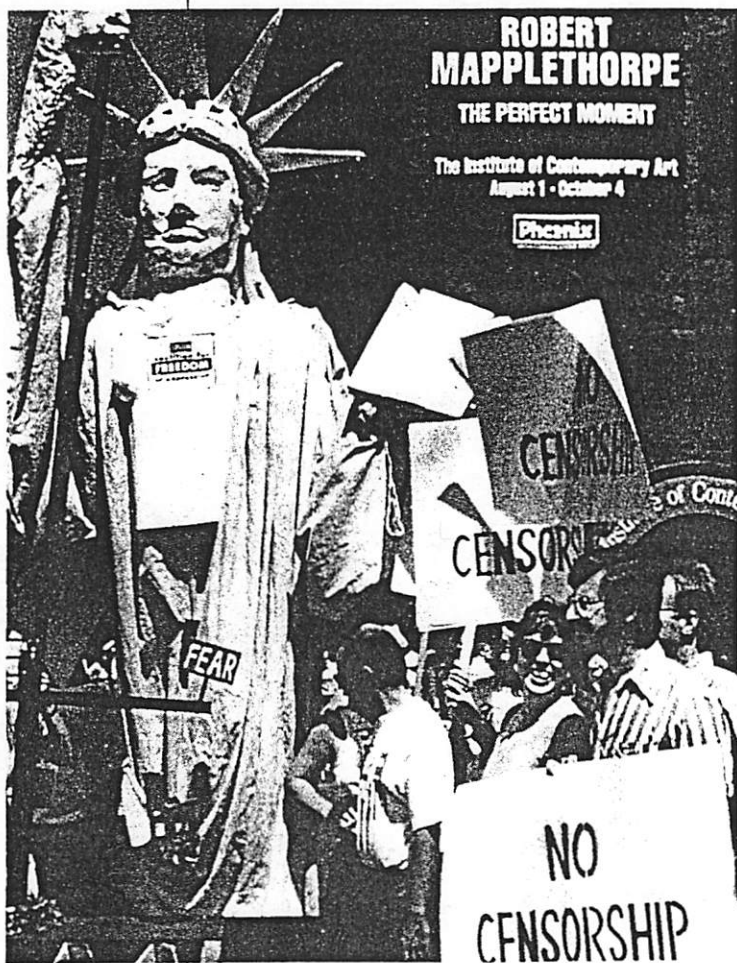


What Do Artists Want From Us?

Some want our tax dollars, of course, but also our complete acceptance of their radical, destructive work.



A crowd rallied outside a Cincinnati museum earlier this year to support the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs.

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by Irving Kristol

Once upon a time, when the idea of a National Endowment for the Arts was under consideration, I had some lively arguments with my conservative friends. I supported the idea, they opposed it. Their opposition was based on the simple and straightforward principle that the state had no business involving itself in this area, which should be left to private philanthropy. I argued that it would be good for our democracy if it showed an official interest in educating the tastes and refining the aesthetic sensibilities of its citizenry.

I won the argument and now wish I hadn't. They were more right than, at the time, they could know.

In retrospect, I can see that my error derived from the fact that I really had only a superficial understanding of what was happening in the arts world and no understanding of what this portended for the future evolution of what we now call "the arts community." I was raised in a generation that was taught to appreciate the virtues of modern art, from Renoir to Picasso and even to Jackson Pollack and "abstract expressionism," though I had to admit that this last stage had no appeal to me. "Pop art" and "minimalist art" I tended to dismiss as trendy fads.

But what I was utterly unprepared for was the emergence of what is now called "post-modern art," which is a politically charged art that is utterly contemptuous of the notion of educating the tastes and refining the aesthetic sensibilities of the citizenry. Its goal, instead, is deliberately to outrage those tastes and to trash the very idea of an "aesthetic sensibility."

It is very difficult to convey to people who do not follow the weird goings-on in our culture an appreciation of the animating agenda of the "arts community" today. An ordinary American reads about a woman "performing artist" who smears chocolate on her bare breasts, and though he may lament the waste of chocolate or nudity, it does not occur to him that she is "making a statement," one that the "arts community" takes seriously indeed.

Even museum trustees in Washington, D.C., or Cincinnati—an elite, educated and affluent group of arts philanthropists—had no idea what Mapplethorpe was up to in his photograph of a bullwhip handle inserted into his rectum. All they knew is that Mapplethorpe was a very talented photographer (which he was), that no such talent could ever create obscene work (which is false) and that any discriminating judgment on their part was a form of censorship that verged on the sacrilegious. Those trustees are there to raise money and watch the museum's balance sheet. They may or may not know what they like, but they would never presume to assert what is, or is not, "art." To qualify to become a museum trustee these days one must first suffer aesthetic castration.

To reach our current condition, it took a century of "permanent revolution" in the arts, made possible, ironically, by a capitalist economy that created affluent art collectors and entrepreneurial art dealers. "Patrons" of the arts were replaced by "consumers" of the arts, giving the artist an intoxicating freedom.

It was the artist, now, who told us what was and was not "art"—not the patron, or the philosopher, or the public. The function of the spectator was to welcome revolutions in taste by permitting himself to be intimidated and indoctrinated by

the "arts community," consisting of artists themselves but also and especially (since artists are not usually articulate) art critics, art professors, art dealers, museum directors, etc. The most important spectators who were so intimidated and indoctrinated were the media, which now automatically approach anything declared to be "art" by the "arts community" with the kind of deference, even pseudo-piety, once reserved for the sphere of religion.

As with most revolutions, some impressive creative energies were released, some enduring accomplishments were achieved. But, again as with most revolutions, the longer it lasted the more the destructive impulse began to dominate over the creative. Yesteryear's creative contributions were, after all, what the latest revolutionary phase had to subvert and overthrow.

After World War II, it became ever more difficult to distinguish artists from publicity-hungry pseudo-artists, from people "making statements" of one kind or other, such "statements" being the essence of pop art, minimalist art, environmental art, and now post-modern art. That practically all of this activity was infused by an anti-bourgeois ethos was unsurprising, since it was simply mirroring the literary and academic culture in this respect. The bourgeois way of coping with this situation was to purchase and "consume" this art as a commodity, to inventory it and then at some point to expel it from its system into an underground sump, usually located in the basement of museums. Co-optation, not censorship, was the strategy.

But this strategy does not work with the last and, one suspects, final phase of the revolution we are now witnessing. Today, the destructive element has almost completely overwhelmed the creative. What the "arts community" is engaged in is a politics of radical nihilism; it has little interest in, and will openly express contempt for, "art" in any traditional sense of the term. It is no exaggeration to say that the self-destruction of "art" is a key point in its agenda, accompanied by the "deconstruction," not only of bourgeois society, but of Western civilization itself.

"Deconstruction" is an intellectual-ideological movement that is enormously popular in the humanities departments of our universities, which seek to free themselves from the "hegemony" of

"Post-modern art" is a politically charged art that deliberately outrages the tastes of our citizenry.

Dead White Males (DWMs is the common reference) such as Shakespeare or Dante so as to justify offering a university course on, say, the TV program *The Simpsons*. There are no standards of excellence other than those we improvise for ourselves, which is why members of the "arts community" can solemnly believe and assert that whatever they do is "art." The public has the

right—nay, the obligation—to support it, but not to question it.

What they do, in fact, is powerfully shaped by certain radical ideological currents: radical feminism, homosexual and lesbian self-celebration and black racism are among them. This explains why, though it is *de rigueur* to insult public figures, no one in the "arts community" would ever dare insult the Rev. Louis Farrakhan. Any such painting would promptly be vandalized, to the applause of an "arts community" opposed to censorship. It also explains why there is so little pornography, in the traditional sense, in post-modern art. Such pornography evokes lust for heterosexual engagement, which post-modern art disapproves of since it is thought to debase women. Only homosexual and lesbian sex are allowed to be celebrated.

Where will it all end? One does have the sense that we are witnessing either a final convulsion in the history of modern art (and of modern culture) or, perhaps, a final convulsion of Western civilization itself. Most of us would credit the first alternative. But where does that leave the National Endowment for the Arts, founded in a different time and on quite different assumptions about the role of the arts in American life?

The most obvious response would be to abolish the NEA—perhaps over a period of a few years to mitigate the financial shock. This is not going to happen, however. After all, many major institutions—symphony orchestras, for instance, and large museums—have inevitably become dependent on NEA grants. The trustees of these institutions have considerable influence with members of Congress, who are much happier opening funding spigots than closing them. And the media, it goes without saying, would be horrified at such an effort at "censorship," now redefined to include the absence of government funding.

A more limited response would be to move the NEA away from involvement with the most active and turbulent sectors of the "arts community" by requiring that it makes only grants of more than \$50,000 or \$100,000. The institutions receiving this money would be held responsible for any regrants they make.

Most of the controversial grants one hears of are small-to-modest. But they do serve an important role in legitimating the activity that is being funded. With \$10,000 from the NEA, an "experimental workshop in the arts" can approach foundations and corporations with a plausible claim to respectability. That is precisely why they will fight tooth and nail for the continuation of the small-grants program—grants made by other members of the "arts community," their "peer groups," to their friends and allies. Just how Congress will respond to such a reform, now being bruited, remains to be seen.

But one interesting and important fact has already become clear: Our politics today are so spiritually empty, so morally incoherent, that—except for a few brave souls—liberals have been quick to dismiss as "yahoos" anyone who dares to confront this assault on the foundations of liberalism and conservatism alike. A great many conservatives, for their part, having long ago been ideologically disarmed, are more embarrassed than interested at having to cope with this issue at all. Something is definitely rotten in the vital areas of our body politic. □



The late Robert Mapplethorpe.

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