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Twelve High School Students, a Teacher, a Professor and Robert Mapplethorpe's Photographs: Exploring Cultural Difference Through Controversial Art

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This is a descriptive study of a student field trip to the controversial Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibition, The Perfect Moment. The study is constructed from the perspectives of a high school English teacher, some of her students, and an art education professor serving in the capacity of a visiting art critic. Implications are forwarded for educating about controversial art of subcultures and educating for understanding cultural differences through art.

Introduction

A dozen high school students, an English teacher, and an art education professor serving as art critic-in-residence had intense, educationally significant experiences as they crossed cultural boundaries when considering the controversial photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, an artist who was a homosexual and died of AIDS in 1989. The students and teacher are from a suburb of Dayton, Ohio, not far from Cincinnati where Mapplethorpe's travelling exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*, was shown. They and the professor from a university in the state visited the exhibition one afternoon after school. In doing so the participants crossed cultural boundaries. Mapplethorpe's art tests the tolerance of people within mainstream culture. His photographs explicitly depict a gay sadomasochistic sub-culture and were foreign to these students of a predominantly white, conservative, working class community. Art such as this is usually not acknowledged in schools, and much less an object of study. The first part of this article provides contextual information about the exhibition, the school setting and students. Narratives of the students, teacher, and professor about their experiences form the main body of this study. Contextual information and content of the narratives are discussed with implications for education that would examine the art of a subculture that strongly challenges dominant cultural values.

Context of the Mapplethorpe Controversy

In the summer of 1989 photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe became the center of national political turmoil. The director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. cancelled its showing of *The Perfect Moment* for fear that the exhibition's proximity to legisla-

tors would endanger future government funding of the arts at a time when the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts was scheduled for Congressional review. The exhibit was partly financed by funds from the endowment. The decision to cancel the exhibition came amidst furor over another piece of art financed by endowment funds — *Piss Christ*, a Cibachrome photograph by Andres Serrano of a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's urine.

Merely describing Mapplethorpe's photographs was made controversial by a prominent art critic. In a Sunday issue of the *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer (1989) declared: "I cannot bring myself to describe these pictures in all their gruesome particularities, and it is doubtful that this newspaper would agree to publish such a description even if I could bring myself to write one" (p. 7). In the same paper one week later, however, Grace Glueck (1989) described the exhibition with no apparent difficulty:

The Mapplethorpe show is a retrospective of the artist's work that contains images depicting homosexual and heterosexual erotic acts and explicit sadomasochistic practices in which black and white, naked or leather clad men and women, assume erotic poses. Along with these photographs are fashionable portraits of the rich and trendy, elegant floral arrangements and naked children--images that might not necessarily be considered indecent if viewed singly but that in this context seem provocative. (p. 1)

Potentially offensive pictures that neither of these two critics mention in detail are a man urinating into another's mouth, a close-up of a fist and forearm penetrating an anus, a close-up of mutilated male genitals, and a portrait of the artist with a bull whip protruding from his anus. These particular pictures are from the X, Y, Z Portfolio. It is displayed in three rows, each with thirteen photographs presented in a long grid on a table that angles up from an adult viewer's waist. These black and white photographs are smaller (c. 8" x 10") than the rest of the photographs in the exhibition. They are accompanied by finely printed, poetic text that is hung on the wall. In Cincinnati the portfolio was in a room of its own behind a red velvet rope.

Controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe's work was particularly heated in Cincinnati. During the opening of the exhibition, sheriff's deputies and Cincinnati police officers shut down the exhibition for ninety minutes to make videotapes of it for evidence. As they did, protesters chanted, "Tianamen Square!," "Fascists!," and "Gestapo go home!" The center and its director were indicted by a grand jury on two counts of pandering pornography. The first count cited a photograph of a nude boy and one of a partially nude girl. The second count cited five

