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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

photographs from the X, Y, Z Portfolio. After eight months of legal battles in this landmark obscenity case, the director and the center were acquitted on October 5, 1990.

Context of the Museum Visit

The excursion to the Mapplethorpe exhibition was part of a year long, after school arts program for which high school students received academic credit. They had seen other exhibitions during the year. This was the final trip, and included a visit to an artist's studio after the exhibition and dinner. Because of the nature of the Mapplethorpe exhibition, the teacher made this trip elective. The art center placed an age restriction of eighteen years to enter the exhibition. Because of the age restriction, the juniors and some of the seniors in the group were not allowed to attend.

To familiarize the students with Mapplethorpe's work so that they could better decide their level of involvement, the teacher had books containing the artworks discreetly placed in the school library. Some of the parents knew about the trip, but since the students were eighteen, parental consent was not necessary. The son of the president of the Parent Teachers Association was part of the group, attended the exhibition, and later discussed it with his parents.

The professor had an hour-long session with the students and their teacher during an afternoon class period the day they went to the exhibition. He began the session by introducing himself as a visiting art critic. He said that he would lead them in a discussion of Mapplethorpe's photographs, but that he was not there to convert anyone to a position for or against the photographs, and encouraged them to choose their own positions regarding the controversy. He stressed, however, that he was there to facilitate an open and rational critical discussion, and hoped that all would be respectful of each other and tolerant of differences of opinion.

Prior to the class he had removed the spine of *The Perfect Moment* catalogue (Mapplethorpe, 1988). He handed one photographic page to each member of the group including the teacher. Anyone could exchange an image for another if they were too uncomfortable with the one they received. Since they had previously, on their own, seen Mapplethorpe's books in the library, and since he had only an hour of discussion with them, he chose the most controversial images so that they would be better prepared for the exhibition. He led them in an organized discussion, asking each to first describe the photograph he or she was holding. Then as a group they interpreted the photographs, answering the question "What are these about?" Finally they judged the photographs, discussing their value and whether they should have been

made and shown. The discussion at first was subdued and tense, but soon became spontaneous and lively, with a friendly tone.

At the arts center, the Educational Projects Director guided the group in a touring lecture of the exhibition. The students knew her from earlier visits. She is an artist and the group visited her studio later that evening after eating at a fast food restaurant. All returned to the high school parking lot at about 11:00 that night.

The teacher asked the students to record their impressions and feelings about the Mapplethorpe exhibition in a journal and asked that these be shared with the professor on a voluntary basis. Eight of the 12 students complied with the request. More might have complied but their spring days were also filled with the excitement of prom and graduation. Their journal entries were written in the days immediately following their visit. Excerpts from their journals are quoted below with their permission and under fictitious names. The teacher wrote an account of the experience that was accepted for publication in the *Ohio Journal of the English Language Arts* (Rab, in press). Portions were adapted and edited for this article. She met with the students during the summer, shared her written report with them and asked if they had any problems with it. They did not. The professor's account was written from notes six months after the event.

Participants

The *student group* was composed of twelve high school seniors from one of several suburbs outside of Dayton. Dayton's population is predominantly black, secondarily Appalachian. At the time of this study the suburban public high school had about 1800 students, about 1700 of whom were white. Five of the students in the participating group were male and seven were female. Eleven were white and one was Chinese-American. All of the students who participated in the Mapplethorpe experience are currently in college.

The *teacher* is a white female in her mid-forties. She holds a B.A. in English and a M.A. in Education and has accrued about forty hours in arts education. She teaches courses in English literature methods at the University of Dayton. At the high school where she has been employed full-time since graduating from college, she teaches honors classes in English literature, composition, comedy and satire, and creative writing. She advises an extra-curricular fine arts club with more than 250 student members who attend arts events and exhibitions. She is also advisor to the school's literary magazine. She taught all of the students in the group in at least one course and is advisor to all of them in either or both the club and the literary magazine. She met the professor during a summer media institute where he was teaching

