

SPEAKEASY

by CONNIE SAMARAS

Each month the New Art Examiner invites a well-known, or not-so-well-known, art world personality to write a "Speakeasy" essay on a topic of his or her choice. The ideas and opinions expressed in the "Speakeasy" are those of the writer alone. Connie Samaras was recently a visiting assistant professor in photography in the School of Art at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Currently she's a visiting lecturer in photography and art at UCLA. She's a recent recipient of an interdisciplinary artist's grant funded by NEA, Rockefeller Foundation, and Randolph Street Gallery.

Armed with language appropriated from sources like sixties liberation movements—"what I'm calling for is a new kind of ra-di-cal-ism"—and from ad campaigns for products like laxatives—"a kinder, gentler America"—George Bush and his administration are carrying on, at an alarming rate, the Reagan administration's agenda of legislating our private lives. In the past few months we have witnessed a severe blow to women's rights in the recent Supreme Court ruling on abortion and a chilling assault on free speech in the proposed constitutional amendment which, in essence, elevates the flag to the status of a religious object. In addition, speeches rivaling Representative George A. Dundero's 1949 assault before Congress on modern art as a communist plot ("Leger and Duchamp are now in the United States to aid in the destruction of our standards and traditions") are being delivered to Congress by right-wing politicians attacking the National Endowment (NEA) for moral turpitude.

Critics of the NEA have assailed the agency for partial funding of an exhibition that included work by photographer Andres Serrano, as well as for its support of a national touring show of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. The Mapplethorpe exhibit includes images of gay male sadomasochism and portraits of nude men, reflecting the artist's openly sexual appreciation of the male body. In a July 2 full-page article in the Sunday *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer (who in the mid-'80s launched venomous attacks on the now-defunct NEA fellowship program for critics) explains to us that Mapplethorpe's work violates "public standards of decency and morality" and queries the reader as to "what standards are to be observed in spending taxpayers' money?" Grudgingly, Kramer accords Mapplethorpe's photographs—pictures of flowers and

fist-fucking alike—a place in the "annals of fine art photography." However, when compared to Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, another work which created a similar stir in its day, Kramer declares Manet's work the "highest order of art" while consigning Mapplethorpe's work to the realm inhabited by "graphic artists who specialized in pornographic images." Kramer, as usual, does not

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question his ideological assumptions in constructing this ranking; rather, he assumes, as do most representatives of the dominant culture, that his order is the "natural" one. Unable to bring himself to describe Mapplethorpe's S and M photos in "all their gruesome particularities," and ignoring the fact that taxpayers include such people as sadomasochists, lesbians, gays, sex radicals, artists, curators, educators,

civil libertarians, and the intellectually curious, Kramer suggests that these images represent a "social pathology" which "the public at large finds loathsome." To Kramer these photos represent both a "threat to public decency" and the "morality of our children."

At an early point in the feminist debates on sexuality (which in fact began almost a decade ago in response to feminist campaigns to limit or ban pornography), anthropologist Gayle Rubin warned anti-porn feminists that the easiest way to initiate a crackdown on civil liberties is first to attack those groups whose sexual practices are most marginalized. Although he insists otherwise, Kramer seems to find overt displays of homosexuality just as repellent as S and M. This is evidenced by his comments on Mapplethorpe's "extreme concentration on male sexual endowments" and his comparison of Mapplethorpe's male nudes (homosexual pornography) to those of a closeted Minor White (good, old-time transcendent art). It is politically easy for Kramer to make an emotional appeal for censorship through uninformed frothing about a sexual minority—i.e., those engaged in marginal sex practices—about which most people know little or nothing. Whatever one's feelings about S and M and young people's sexuality, I think any serious discussion on these topics should challenge participants to question such things as one's basic assumptions about sexuality, the complicated manner in which public and private overlap, and the ways in which definitions of gender and the family are culturally constructed. Art, far from being functionless, is a potential arena in which to spirit dialogue about complex political issues. But as Kramer and his legislative counterparts have it, any such dialogue, with its threat of change and contamination, is best kept behind closed doors and out of public spaces like museums, galleries, and classrooms.

Although it's a well-documented fact that Kramer's publication *The New Criterion* is subsidized, in part, by right-wing money, it's not accurate to suggest that he, like Senator Jesse Helms, for example, sees stringent legislative control of the NEA as a solution to policing "morally incorrect" art. To do so would undermine Kramer's Cold War, liberal posturing—that he is deeply opposed to totalitarianism. Rather, the central point of his essay is to blame us, the victims, because we are simply not doing a proper job of censoring ourselves and are thus jeopardizing our climate of "freedom." Ominously, Kramer warns: "if the art community is not prepared to

PHOTO BY SUZANNE PRITH

correct the outrages committed in its name, there will be no shortage of other elements in our society ready and eager to impose drastic measures." No doubt this is a reference to the repressive days of McCarthyism, when congressional hostility toward abstract art was so intense that it took the "heroic" efforts of the Rockefellers and the CIA to recognize the political utility of exporting Abstract Expressionism to demonstrate the "openness and tolerance" of the American political system.

Of the many velvet-gloved mechanisms used in our society for social control (for example, medicine and psychiatry), self-censorship is among the most insidious and compelling for artists. Repressive laws, such as the current federal and state sex laws, which essentially deem anything outside of heterosexual procreative sex as illegal and which date back to the Comstock Act and nineteenth-century moral crusades, are enforced selectively. Given the extreme difficulty one encounters trying to earn a living in art and related fields, the increasing reliance of museums on dwindling corporate and government support, the significant cutbacks in art education, and the presence of an ongoing politically conservative climate, self-censorship has remained a dangerous problem for some time.

Many people, including Grace Glueck, who wrote a rejoinder to Kramer in the following week's *Times* (July 9), believe that museums and their attendant institutions, like the *Times*'s "Arts and Leisure" section, are "neutral sanctuaries" of free expression. However, as coverage of the Mapplethorpe controversy shows, this is not the case. For example, one could say, at first glance, that the *Times*, in the best spirit of open journalism, took it upon itself to print opposing viewpoints. Yet the only visual information accompanying either text is a lone self-portrait of Mapplethorpe which, in this context, reads like a mug shot of a sexual outlaw. This is not to say that it would be a total impossibility ever to encounter one of Mapplethorpe's "questionable" images in the arts section of a daily paper, even in something like the conservative *Washington Times*. But it is to say that, in this case (despite the *New York Times*'s liberal posturing), the paper's decision to absent all the images under discussion (even the innocuous, rather corny flower images) only serves to underscore conservative claims that sexual imagery of any kind is unprintable and best kept out of the public eye.

Another example of how sexual imagery is marginalized in public art contexts is the way in which Mapplethorpe's work was installed for the

exhibition "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment." I saw the show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, a leg of the tour which took place before the Capitol Hill attacks on the NEA (the impetus behind Corcoran Gallery of Art Director Christina Orr-Cahall's decision to cancel the exhibit, announced June 12, thus, in her mind, protecting the NEA from being further penalized and the artist from being "censored"). This was also the period in which the School of the Art Institute of Chicago was determining new exhibition policies based on the controversies created by student David Nelson's politically illiterate painting of Harold Washington in the spring of 1988 and this past spring by student Dread Scott Tyler's thought-provoking flag "desecration" piece. Because I had traveled to Chicago specifically to see Mapplethorpe's S and M photos, I looked for

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these first, assuming that they were hanging on the wall. After walking around the entire exhibit once, I realized my mistake and walked back to the far side of the first room where, tucked in the corner in the kind of case reserved for viewing decaying texts, were the photos I was looking for. Hindered by my less-than-towering height and the glare coming off the slanted glass, it took me a bit of time to locate the "forbidden" images, since they were sequestered in the back of a three-row deep grid of eight-by-ten photos. In addition to the less-than-optimum viewing conditions, randomly interspersed among the pictures of S and M and erect penises were small flower studies—no doubt placed there in an O'Keeffeian gesture to assure us that what we were viewing were simply repetitive forms (i.e., Art), not sexual politics. The location of the work did have one convenience. Situated at the end of a hallway-like area where museum tour groups were being funneled, docents were able to position their

respective crowds into a gridlock and, after delivering euphemistic warnings similar to those proposed for record labels, they would allow the throng to swarm forth and squint at the "difficult" images.

I suppose some would argue that I should simply be grateful that the MCA even provided me with the opportunity to see these images. But as critics such as Douglas Crimp have pointed out, the way in which a museum chooses to place work within its space reveals an ideologically constructed hierarchy. In the case of this exhibition, the placement of those images only reaffirms the moral authority of conservative opponents to both a sexually diverse society and the ability of art to shape a pluralistic culture.

The NEA has been the target of conservative politicians for some time, particularly since Reagan's election as president. Because peer reviews and subgranting systems do offer some oppositional arts visibility, it is these aspects of the endowment's structure which conservatives routinely go after. Currently the NEA faces a severe crisis this October when it comes up for its four-year reauthorization review. It is doubtful that Congress would entirely dismantle the NEA because to do so would potentially rekindle international perceptions of the United States as an inhospitable climate for creativity. But should the NEA be reauthorized, it would be impossible, because of its bureaucratic size, for it to centralize decision-making completely. Thus, expanding the role of self-censorship (for example, scapegoating institutions like SECCA) becomes a crucial component in the right's agenda to maintain moral authority.

But our concern as artists can't only be focused on the NEA. Anti-abortion and anti-civil rights rulings, frenzied flag-waving, and funding cutbacks for artists are all interrelated events. At the last conference of the Society for Photographic Education, the keynote speaker, anthropologist Carole Vance, discussed her research on the Meese Commission's hearings on pornography. One point she emphasized was that image-making, in particular, is the target of proposed legislation. However, despite the threat to visual artists and the visual illiteracy of commission members, Vance stated that, unlike the National Writers Congress, there was no organized lobbying or educational effort by visual artists/photographers. Given the steady erosion of civil liberties, this sort of apathy and capitulation doesn't seem to be a viable position for any of us to continue to take. One hopes that recent events will force those numbed into complacency to snap into attention and *act*. ■