LECTURE 3

Moral in Itself: Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy

IN MATTERS OF VISUAL ART, the American "culture war" officially started on May 18, 1989, on the floor of the U.S. Senate in Washington, when Senator Alfonse D'Amato (Republican, N.Y.) tore up a reproduction of a photograph and threw the pieces on the floor. He had been sent it by the Rev. Donald Wildmon, a religious activist whose pressure-group, the American Family Association, had been formed to combat the spread of pornography, indecency and irreligious sentiment in America. Wildmon's specialty is finding bad messages, overt and subliminal, in media and the arts, and then bringing write-in pressure to bear on sponsor companies. In the past he had campaigned against such things as David Wolper's TV adaptation of Colleen McCullough's best-selling religious weepie *The Thorn Birds*, Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Ma-

donna's music videos. He managed to pressure CBS into removing a 3.5-second sequence from a Ralph Bakshi cartoon in which Mighty Mouse was shown sniffing a flower: what the devious rodent was *really* sniffing, Wildmon insisted, was cocaine.[1]

The image reproduced a photograph by an artist, Andres Serrano. It showed a cheap plastic crucifix, of the kind sold everywhere in devotional stores and religious-kitsch shops, submerged in an amber-colored fluid streaked with bubbles. The title of the artwork, *Piss Christ,* made it clear what the liquid was. It was the artist's own. *Piss Christ* was in every way an autograph work.

If Serrano had called his large and technically splendid Cibachrome print something else—*La Catedral Ahogada,* perhaps, or more prosaically *Immersion Study (I)*—there would have been no way of knowing that it was pee. But Serrano wanted to make a sharp, jolting point about two things: first, the degradation of mass religious imagery into kitsch (inescapable in America, as any thoughtful Christian is aware), and second, his resentment of the coercive morality of his own Hispanic-Catholic roots. Serrano is a highly conflicted lapsed Catholic, and his work—particularly images like *Piss Christ*—is about those conflicts. No image is without a history, and Serrano's is a fairly old strain in modern art—Surrealist anticlerical blasphemy. *Piss Christ* has a number of remote ancestors, including Max Ernst's famous/infamous painting of the Virgin Mary spanking the Infant Jesus and the blurred photo, ancestor of the modern "happening," of a Surrealist poet cussing out a priest on a Paris sidewalk in the 1920s.

Not all of Serrano's work seeks its effects through blasphemy. But *Piss Christ* certainly did, and there was no way around it.

Of course, after the event, you can historicize and demur all you like. You can point out that the plastic crucifixion wasn't actually Christ, but a *representation* of Christ—but this Magrittean sophistry, *ceci n'est pas un Dieu,* doesn't work. The image is too strong.

You can also remark that crucifixes are commercially produced for all sorts of weird reasons, without causing moral storms: thus in the same month that the politicians began to do their stuff over Serrano, I received a catalogue from a mail-order cutlery firm, specializing in hunting and fishing knives, which advertised a little weapon worthy in conception, if not in craftsmanship, of the Borgias: a stiletto concealed in a crucifix, made in Taiwan, and selling for $15.99. This, one might think, was not without its blasphemous aspect too. And last Easter, the local drugstore in the part of eastern Long Island where I live was selling chocolate crucifixes with a vague lumpish figure of Jesus molded into them: "Eat this in memory of Me." Why it should be OK for some Americans to eat an image of their Saviour and turn it into feces, while other Americans were convulsed at the idea of taking another image of the same Saviour and dunking it in urine, seemed a riddle fit to stop a modern Tocqueville in his tracks. But not in the American heartland, where the religion industry is immune to criticism or doubt.

However, neither the stiletto-crucifix nor the chocolate Jesus had been rewarded with money that came from the U.S. government, and the author of *Piss Christ* had been. Shortly before Donald Wildmon sent his complaint to Senator D'Amato, Serrano had received a prize of $15,000 from the

South-Eastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem. SECCA had received the money for this award—before its jury decided to give it to Serrano—from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). It came without strings, and nobody in the NEA had the least role in choosing Serrano as winner. Nevertheless, Serrano had indirectly wound up with government money, a situation which Wildmon declared in a circular letter to mean that "the bias and bigotry against Christians, which has dominated television and movies for the past decade or more, has now moved over to the art museums," and that it presaged an era of "physical persecution of Christians"—if not by feeding them to the lions of the Colosseum as in Roman antiquity, then maybe by flinging them to sharks circling in huge tubs of urine in SeaWorld. Thus cued by Wildmon, Senator D'Amato rose in the Senate to denounce the NEA. "This is an outrage, and our people's tax dollars should not support this trash, and we should not be giving it the dignity." He then read into the record a letter signed by some two dozen (mostly conservative Republican) senators, protesting that the work "is shocking, abhorrent, and completely underserving of any recognition whatsoever. Millions of taxpayers are rightfully incensed . . . There is a clear flaw in the procedures used to select art and artists deserving of the taxpayers' support . . . This matter does not involve freedom of artistic expression."

But it did; and the proof of that unfolded during the scandal that next arose over the work of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

To me, the interest of the Mapplethorpe affair lies in its stark display of colliding American values—but not much

else. Despite the enthusiasm of his fans, I have never been able to think of him as a major photographer. I first visited his New York studio in 1970; at the time his work, such as it was, consisted of fetishistic but banal collages of beefcake photos with the addition of things like a leopardskin jockstrap or a gauze patch with a pus-stain on it. "That," I told myself as I was going down the stairs forty minutes later, "is a talent we're not going to hear much about." If you had told me then that Robert Mapplethorpe would be as famous as Jackson Pollock within twenty years, and that the scandal produced by his work would threaten the equilibrium of the whole relationship between museums and government in America, I would have said you were crazy. So much for the critic as forecaster.

I saw quite a lot of his work, though not of Mapplethorpe himself, over the ensuing years: the heavy, brutal S&M images of the X portfolio, the elegant overpresented photos of Lisa Lyons, the icy male nudes in homage to Horst and Baron von Gloeden, the Edward Weston flowers. It was the work of a man who knew the history of photographs, for whom the camera was an instrument of quotation. As Mike Weaver, editor of the forthcoming Oxford *History of Photography,* pointed out to me much later, "his best work . . . is the group of somewhat formalist, indeed geometric, nudes based on an 1890s' taste for ritual magic of the kind expressed earlier by another great gay photographer, Fred Holland Day. [His] use of the pentangle in human form comes from his mock-Satanic commitment to the inverted pentagram of Eliphas Lévi, master of Aleister Crowley . . . Never a Post-Modernist, not even a Modernist, he was a real reactionary. This, of course, is why he is so popular. Like Simeon Sol-

omon and Beardsley before him, Mapplethorpe was a Symbolist with a Mannerist style." One image in particular from the X portfolio confirms this analysis—Mapplethorpe's self-portrait posing as Satan himself, the tail supplied by a bullwhip jammed up his ass, the lash trailing on the floor.

In the X portfolio, the mannered chic of his images was slammed back into immediacy by the pornographic violence of his subject-matter. But I don't think chic is a value, and I felt at odds with the culture of affectless quotation that had taken over New York art, and my notions of sexual bliss did not coincide with Mapplethorpe's, and so when he asked me to write a catalogue introduction to his show—the show that was to cause all the trouble—I had to tell him that since the X portfolio was obviously a key to his work and (I thought at the time) his main claim to originality, and since I found the images of sexual humiliation and torture in it (fistfucking, heavy bondage, and a man pissing into another watersporter's mouth) too disgusting to write about with enthusiasm, he had better find someone else. Which he did. Several, in fact.

Now most of us know, at least in outline, what happened to Mapplethorpe's retrospective in 1988–90, *The Perfect Moment*. It was shown in Pennsylvania and Boston without the slightest incident, and at the Whitney Museum in New York to scenes of enthusiasm rivaling the palmiest moments of his mentor, Andy Warhol. But when the show was about to appear at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, it came under heavy attack from conservatives on the ground that the display was partially underwritten by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and that the government had no right to be spending taxpayers' money on supporting work so

repugnant to the general moral sensibility of the American public.

In point of fact the Corcoran had received no NEA funds to mount the Robert Mapplethorpe show, although it had received them for other projects in the past. The NEA support money for Mapplethorpe went to the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, which had curated the exhibition in the first place. The sum involved was $30,000, representing about one-sixtieth of one per cent of a copper penny for every man, woman and child in America; but still, as Hilton Kramer and others were at pains to point out, it was public money all the same. There had been no protest, let alone "public outrage," over the display before it headed for Washington. Nevertheless that tribune of the people Senator Jesse Helms saw in Mapplethorpe a golden opportunity to raise right-wing consciousness about obscenity and filth, and when the dewlaps of his wrath started shaking outside the Corcoran, it caved in and cancelled the show. Helms and other conservatives, including Senators Alfonse D'Amato and Orrin Hatch, then tried to push an amendment through the Senate, preventing the NEA from underwriting such anti-social stuff again. The Helms amendment proposed that no government funds should be given by the NEA to "promote, disseminate or produce," in its exact words,

> (1) obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or
>
> (2) material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion; or,

(3) material which denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin.

The most obvious and curious feature of the Helms amendment was that, if it had not issued from a famously right-wing Republican senator, you could have mistaken it—especially its last two clauses—for any ruling on campus speech limitations recently proposed by the nominally left-wing agitators for political correctness. It was hard to know exactly what Helms meant by "a particular religion or non-religion" but certainly clause (3) made it clear that he was against racism, sexism, ableism, lookism and any of the other offences against social etiquette whose proscription by PC was already causing such mirth and laughter among the neo-conservatives. Thus extremes meet.

The other peculiarity of the Helms amendment was to be so broadly drafted as to become virtually meaningless. It would, as I pointed out the following week in *Time,* have created a loony parody of cultural democracy in which every citizen became his or her own Cato the Censor. All that a work of art would need to be de-funded, or (if shown in a museum under NEA auspices) removed from view, would be to "offend" anyone for practically any reason at all. The amendment was thus a crystalization of our Culture of Complaint into law. It would have made the NEA hostage to every crank, ideologue and God-botherer in America. A grant for an exhibition of, say, Gothic ivories could be pulled on the grounds that the material was objectionable to Jews (much medieval art is anti-Semitic), to Muslims (what about those scenes of false prophets boiling in hell with Muhammad?), or,

for that matter, to atheists offended by the use of government money to insert any sort of religious propaganda, including ancient ivory carvings, into a museum. Some Stalinist feminist could complain that a 13th-century depiction of a patriarchal God, or the sexism implicit in a subservient or tempting Eve, was repugnant to her "religion or non-religion." Under the Helms amendment, a fire-worshipper might even claim that the presence of extinguishers in the museum offended *his* god.

Helms and his supporters were at pains to deny that the amendment had anything to do with censorship. Where could those liberals have got such an idea? Censorship: that meant repressing works of art (or "so-called 'art,'" to use the correct locution) that people made on their own time and with their own money. Refusing government money to "promote" indecency wasn't censorship. Decadents like Mapplethorpe, and blasphemers like Serrano, could do what they wanted with their own time and money. But let them not come skulking and sniffing after that one six-thousandth of one penny of the average decent American's tax dollar. (Generally, the fact that neither Serrano nor Mapplethorpe had applied for, or directly received, any money from the NEA tended to get lost in the rhetoric. None of Mapplethorpe's or Serrano's photos were made with NEA support; all the same, due to the successful propaganda of the religious and political right, millions of Americans still imagine that the NEA came chasing after them both, stuffing dollars down their shirts to help them do their worst.)

Nevertheless, one would have needed to be remarkably naive to think that censorship was *not* the root of the controversy. The efforts to cut off government money from "offen-

sive" art were only the tip of a general effort growing on the right to repress *all* "offensive" art, subsidized or not. The wisest analysis of this problem was offered, some months later, by a Jesuit: the Rev. Timothy Healy, the president of the New York Public Library. "The debate is about censorship," Father Healy declared to a House Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education in November 1989,[2]

> and any effort to pretend it is not is misleading. Given the prestige of the Federal Government, the accolade that any grant from either national endowment bestows, and the artistic integrity and impartiality of the juries who work for the endowments, any canons of content-based condemnation are simply a priori restraint. Against the argument that the artist is free to write, to paint or to compose as he pleases without federal subsidy, [we] must urge that to deprive an artist of that subsidy because of the content of his work is a clear and strong kind of censorship. The counter-argument is really a dodge that does not take into account the realities of the artistic marketplace or, indeed, the rights of the artist himself . . .
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> The course of the debate shows a definite confusion between law and morality . . . Once law and morality are confused it is easy to arrive at such statements as "whatever is good ought to be legislated." That premise is bad enough [but] the mixing up of the realm of law with the realm of morals, is deadly . . . Law can tolerate evils that morality condemns . . . We have a good law if it will be obeyed, if it is enforceable, and if it is so prudently drafted that it avoids most of the harmful effects that could flow from it. If a law does none of these things it is a bad law, no matter what the logic or the moral intensity behind it.

Though none of the arguments heard on the Senate floor attained the clarity and sophistication of this priest's words,

the Helms amendment was voted down, by 73 votes to 24. The Senate decided that the definition of pornography should be left to the courts.

And into court it went. The Mapplethorpe show moved on to Cincinnati, where the conservatives decided to make a test case out of it, arraigning the director of the Contemporary Arts Center for public obscenity.

There was much pessimistic hand-wringing in the artworld over what would happen when the X portfolio was shown to a bunch of, well, rubes in the Midwest. But once again a kind of natural American common sense, maybe more common in Cincinnati than in Soho, prevailed. Largely because the prosecution could not find any credible expert witnesses against the work, the director was acquitted and the Mapplethorpe circus rolled on; the dead photographer was by now either a culture-hero or a culture-demon; but either way, everyone from Maine to Albuquerque had heard of him, and the net economic result of Senator Helms' objurgations had been to push the prices of X portfolio prints from about $10,000 to somewhere around $100,000.

But the Mapplethorpe debacle had two broad cultural results. First, it caused paranoia in the relations between American museums and their funding sources. It produced an atmosphere of doubt, self-censorship and disoriented caution among curators and museum directors, when it came to raising money and facing the political demands of pressure groups.

And second, it marked the demise of American aestheticism, and revealed the bankruptcy of the culture of therapeutics which had come to dominate the way so many cultural professionals in this country were apt to argue the relations

between art and its public. To argue what I mean I am going to have to leave Mapplethorpe, leave our fin-de-siècle, and circle back to a much earlier time. But the first result needs to be looked at first, in the context of the highly charged—and, for high culture, increasingly toxic—political atmosphere that envelops the relations between government and the arts in America today.

II

By the end of 1991 it was clear that the agenda of American conservatives, depending on their IQ and cultural backgound, was either to destroy the National Endowment for the Arts altogether, or else to restrict its benefactions to purely "mainstream" events. The latter seemed more likely, given political realities: too many rich Republicans (and Democrats too, of course) have a stake in the kind of prestige that cultural good works confer in their home cities—such as support of the local museum or symphony orchestra—to allow the NEA to perish altogether. Nevertheless it was symptomatic of the present panic over state cultural funding that Patrick Buchanan, not so much neo-conservative as neolithic in his cultural views, could have forced George Bush to fire the head of the NEA, John Frohnmayer, in order to appease the know-nothings and fag-bashers on the right of the GOP. The religious right's attacks on this issue are not likely to taper off now that Bill Clinton has replaced George Bush. Indeed, since Clinton is seen by the Bible-thumpers as a demonic liberal, and since religious conservatism has lost so much of its power base in Washington, it is far more likely that the pressures for cultural censorship will increase: it is the easiest of all buttons to press, and the right has been leaning on it too long to ease off now. Attacks on the NEA have become part of the standard background noise of politics by now, just like attacks on the Public Broadcasting System. They are part of an escalating war over cultural issues, and they will not go away.

For the 80s brought a rising conflict over the "ideological ownership" of popular culture in America, an issue to which the content of TV broadcasting is ineluctably bound. Given the present atmosphere of intolerance, one could hardly expect the right—especially the religious right, and those politicians who either are in it or fear its votes—not to wade into this with their hobnails on.

No area of our institutional culture was more vulnerable to this than broadcasting, a favorite target of Republican attack-politics. The mandated independence of the Public Broadcasting System, particularly in public affairs programming (news and political commentary) has always stuck in conservative craws. PBS is 40 percent government-financed through annual "appropriations" passed by Congress, and efforts to de-fund and if possible kill it have been a feature of the political landscape for the past twenty years.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon was furious at the appointment of two "liberals," Sander Vanocur and Robert MacNeil, to anchor a PBS program in Washington; he directed his staff to ensure that "all funds for public broadcasting be cut immediately."[3] Thwarted in this, Nixon's staff decided, in the words of one internal memo, that the best way to "get the left-wing commentators who are cutting us up off

public television at once, indeed yesterday if possible" was to stack the board of the controlling body, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), with "eight loyalists to control [it] and fire the current staff who make the grants."

This was done by 1972, and both the inquisitiveness and the range of PBS's public-affairs programming nosedived. The new board voted to discontinue funding the networking of all news and political analysis on the PBS system. Conservative political pressures on PBS lightened after Watergate, during Gerald Ford's brief Presidency; and they relaxed during the Carter administration. But Reagan brought them back with redoubled force. On the suppression of PBS, Reagan's ideological stance was exactly the same as Margaret Thatcher's on the BBC. He saw it, essentially, as a rogue cell of liberalism, staffed by malcontents and fellow-travelers—a dirty pinkish-grey blotch on the American Morning, a block to government. Why shouldn't the content of TV be controlled entirely by market forces? A President who had worked for years as a busker on TV for General Electric was not going to pay much attention to arguments about the need for "controversial" programs. In 1981 and again in 1982, Reagan tried (but failed) to get Congress to cancel all federal funding for PBS; learning his lesson, like Nixon before him, he packed the CPB board with conservatives like Richard Brookhiser of *National Review,* and appointed Sonia Landau, who had run a political action committee called "Women For Reagan/Bush" in the 1984 election, as its new chairman. The result of Reagan's intent, as interpreted by the board, was to cast a new chill on current-affairs broadcasting and place PBS more in the hands of corporate sponsorship than it had been before. Corporate underwriters on the whole refused to write

checks for current-affairs material, preferring reliable, non-controversial shows like *Masterpiece Theater* or that inexhaustible genre of nature films, electronic wallpaper for the ecologically concerned, known to skeptics in the trade as "bugs fucking to Mozart." There was no way of injecting much liberal "bias" into *those,* since Nature is, from a conservative standpoint, irreproachably competitive in behavior.

Though the conservative campaign for restraint on PBS has a longish history, it has been given a lot of recent impetus by the example of Margaret Thatcher's assault on the independence and funding of the BBC, by competitive-market dogma, and by the religious right. Political and moral reformers, ranging from the Rev. Donald Wildmon to *Commentary* writer David Horowitz, chant in chorus that PBS should be demolished because it's a pinko-liberal-anti-Israel bureaucracy suffused with radical agendas. One wonders how many PBS programs such people have actually watched; PBS's dependence on corporate sponsorship has made it so apolitical or carefully middle-of-the-road that its image as a den of government-subsidized lefties is a joke, especially if you compare its programming content with that of BBC-2 or to Australian, Spanish or French state television.

The conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington has a full time "point man" named Laurence Jarvik, whose job it is to provide ideological ammo for the view that public TV has outlived its use. According to Heritage, there is no worthwhile TV devoted to cultural discussion or political issues that could not be underwritten by American corporations, through an expanding cable system or perhaps some analogue to Great Britain's Channel 4, without using a cent of government money.

Anyone who believes this is (a) dreaming, (b) ignorant of the realities of corporate taste when it sniffs gingerly at program underwriting proposals, or (c) not admitting to his or her agenda. With Heritage, it seems to be a combination of the latter two.

The feasible way to relieve PBS from the onerous fate of being a political football is to finance it, not from annual appropriations by Congress, but with a modest license fee levied on all owners of television sets—as in Great Britain. Or more "radically," as John Wicklein proposed in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1986, there could be a 2 percent tax on the profits of commercial broadcasting companies—who enjoy the use of public airways free. This, Wicklein argued, could generate $400 million a year, a sum which "would end the need for direct appropriations, greatly reduce the need for corporate underwriting, and provide the funds necessary for a first-rate national program service." In fact, something very like this has been tried in England, and has proven a resounding creative success—Channel 4, a particular focus of attack from English conservatives. Though Channel 4 was described by Heritage's Laurence Jarvik as "a private commercial channel supported by advertising sales," it is nothing of the kind. It does not depend on direct advertising revenue. It is, in fact, financed by money siphoned from commercial producers on the private channels.

But Niagara will probably run backwards before any such financing systems for non-commercial TV are tried in America—and for two reasons. The first is that Americans, though among the lightest-taxed people on earth, are notoriously resistant to the adage that there is no civilization without taxation. The second is that politicians *want* to retain the

appropriations system—it offers control over the content of broadcasting. Just as the far right, at the end of the eighties, wanted to assert moral controls over art.

III

Senator Helms and his allies on the fundamentalist religious right had gone after Mapplethorpe—and Andres Serrano too, and others—for two basic reasons. The first was opportunistic: the need to establish themselves as defenders of the American Way, now that their original crusade against the Red Menace had been rendered null and void by the end of the Cold War and the general collapse of Communism. Having lost the barbarian at the gates, they went for the fairy at the bottom of the garden. But the second reason was that they felt art ought to be morally and spiritually uplifting, therapeutic, a bit like religion. Americans do seem to feel, on some basic level, that the main justification for art is its therapeutic power. That is the basis on which the museums of America have presented themselves to the public ever since they began in the 19th century—education, benefit, spiritual uplift, and not just enjoyment or the recording of cultural history. Its roots are entwined with America's sense of cultural identity as it developed between about 1830 and the Civil War. But they reach down to an earlier soil, that of Puritanism. If we are going to understand what happened at the end of the 80s we have to go back to the very foundations of Protestant America, and not in some facile spirit of ridiculing the Puritan either.

The men and women of 17th-century New England didn't have much time for the visual arts. Painting and sculpture were spiritual snares, best left to the Catholics. Their great source of aesthetic satisfaction was the Word, the *logos*.

In their sermons you glimpse the preoccupations of a later America: the sense of Nature as the sign of God's presence in the world, and the special mission of *American* nature to be this sign and to serve as the metaphor of the good society, new but everlasting, precarious but fruitful. Here is Samuel Sewall (1652–1730), preaching in Massachusetts in 1697, handing down the convenant:

> As long as Plum Island shall faithfully keep the appointed post, notwithstanding all the hectoring words and hard blows of the proud and boisterous ocean; as long as any salmon, or sturgeon, shall swim in the streams of Merrimack . . . as long as any Cattle be fed with the grass growing in the meadows, which do humbly bow themselves down before Turkey Hill; as long as any free and harmless Doves shall find a white oak within the township, to perch, or feed, or build a careless nest upon . . . *as long as Nature shall not grow old and dote,* but shall constantly remember to give the rows of Indian corn their education, by pairs:—so long shall Christians be born here; and being first made to meet, shall from thence be translated, to be made partakers of the Saints in Light.

Words like Sewall's still have immense resonance for us today. The perception of redemptive nature, which would suffuse 19th-century American painting and reach a climax in our time with the environmental movement, was right there in America from the beginning.

There was as yet no art in America that could rival the

spiritual consolations of Nature, or be invested with Nature's moral power. Almost all Americans before 1820 breathed a very thin aesthetic air. They were short of good, let alone great, art and architecture to look at. We tend to forget, when we visit the period rooms of American museums and admire the fine furniture in them that the general aesthetic atmosphere of the early republic was much more like Dogpatch. Most Americans saw no monumental sculpture; few great churches, and none on a European scale of effort and craft; no Colosseums or Pantheons; and as yet, no museums. And everything was new. The public monuments of American classicism, like Jefferson's State Capitol in Virginia, were islands in a sea of far humbler buildings. Average Americans lived not in nice houses with foundations and porches and maybe pediments, still less in permanent edifices of stone or brick, but in makeshift wooden structures that were the ancestors of today's trailer home, only far worse built.

American beauty resided far more in nature than in culture. Thus the intelligent American, if he or she got the chance to visit Europe, could find his taste transformed in a sort of pentecostal flash by a single monument of antiquity, as Jefferson's was by the sight of the Maison Carrée at Nîmes, the Roman temple that created his conception of public architecture. One hour with the Medici Venus in Florence or the Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican could outweigh all one's past aesthetic experience, as the raw child of the new republic. One's own inexperience endowed the English or European work with a stupendous authority.

Today, with mass tourism and mass reproduction to cushion the shock in advance, it is more difficult for us to imagine that state of mind. An American arriving in Europe had no

preparation, except maybe from some inaccurate prints, for what he was about to see. To the culturally starved Yankee the arrival in Italy or France seemed like an admission to Heaven, a place reached after an initiation by suffering, the purgatorial voyage across the Atlantic. Four weeks of vomiting, and then . . . Chartres. "We do not dream," one New Yorker wrote in 1845, "of the new sense which is developed by the sight of a masterpiece. It is as though we had always lived in a world where our eyes, though open, saw but a blank, and were then brought into another, where they were saluted by grace and beauty."

IV

To this frame of mind was added a very important component: a general admiration, among the thin ranks of American artlovers, for John Ruskin, whose work began to appear here after 1845. Ruskin never went to America, but he cast a powerful spell over its art-values: you might say that his rolling, supple, irresistible prose afforded the link between (on one hand) the rich ground of religious oratory inherited from the Puritans, and (on the other) the way midcentury Americans were schooling themselves to think about the visual arts and what role they ought to play in a democracy. To overcome Puritan resistance to artificial richness and the sensuous ordering of sight, one had to stress—indeed, wildly exaggerate—the moralizing power of art. You cast your reflections on exalted emotion in religious terms: benefit, conversion, refinement, unification.[4]

Particularly so, since many of the writers were ministers themselves. On their modest tours of Europe they felt art overwhelming them with proof that man was made in God's image, that the soul was immortal, and above all that man-made beauty was part of God's inbuilt design for moral instruction. When Henry Ward Beecher, the top pulpit speaker of his day, went to France to see the cultural sights he spoke of "instant conversion," not mere enjoyment or edification. Of course, one had to choose. One did not like, for instance, Brueghel and Teniers, with all their gorging and puking peasants. One felt somewhat uneasy at the fleshy Madonnas of Titian. Too much model, not enough Virgin. The truly elevating artists were Fra Angelico, the blessed monk of Florence, and of course Raphael. The desire to bring back authoritative spiritual icons of memory naturally condemned the American visitor to disappointment, some of the time. Beecher's sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* "Positively ran," as she recounted it, into the Louvre to find pictures "that would seize and control my whole being. But for such I looked in vain. Most of the men there had painted with dry eyes and cool hearts, thinking little of heroism, faith, love or immortality." The real artist, she went on, went without explanation straight to the heart; his work was not an acquired taste; one did not need to learn to read it.

The idea that it was within the power of the visual arts to change the moral dimension of life reached its peak between the death of Monroe and that of Lincoln. One sees it in full bloom in the weekly editorials in *The Crayon,* New York's main art magazine in the 1850s. It was the voice of the American artist's profession and, as such, held strong views

on artists' character and conduct. As the editor bluntly put it in 1855, "The enjoyment of beauty is dependent on, and in ratio with, the moral excellence of the individual. We have assumed that Art is an elevating power, that it has *in itself* a spirit of morality." The first form of the American artist as culture-hero, then, is a preacher. He raised art from being mere craft by moral utterance. God was the supreme artist; they imitated His work, the "Book of Nature." They divided the light and calmed the waters—especially if they were Boston Luminists. They were a counterweight to American materialism.

What was art for?, the *Crayon* asked, in what it called "this hard, angular and grovelling age," the 1850s. Why, it was to show the artist as "a reformer, a philanthropist, full of hope and reverence and love." And if he slipped, he fell a long way, like Lucifer. "If the reverence of men is to be given to Art," warned another editorial, "especial care must be taken that it is not . . . offered in foul and unseemly vessels. We judge religion by the character of its priesthood and we would do well to judge art by the character of those who represent and embody it." One can almost hear the shade of the late Robert Mapplethorpe rustling its leather wings in mirth.

But this proposition, one may be fairly sure, would have been news to most artists—let alone patrons—of the Renaissance. Nobody has ever denied that Sigismondo da Malatesta, the Lord of Rimini, had excellent taste. He hired the most refined of *quattrocento* architects, Leon Battista Alberti, to design a memorial temple to his wife, and then got the sculptor Agostino di Duccio to decorate it, and retained Piero della Francesca to paint it. Yet Sigismondo was a man of such callousness and rapacity that he was known in life as Il Lupo, The Wolf, and so execrated after his death that the Catholic Church made him (for a time) the only man apart from Judas Iscariot officially listed as being in Hell—a distinction he earned by trussing up a Papal emissary, the fifteen-year-old Bishop of Fano, in his own rochet and publicly sodomizing him before his applauding army in the main square of Rimini.

That is not the way trustees of major American cultural institutions are expected to behave. We know, in our heart of hearts, that the idea that people are morally ennobled by contact with works of art is a pious fiction. Some collectors are noble, philanthropic and educated; others are swindling bores who would still think Parmigianino was a kind of cheese if they didn't have the boys at Christie's to set them straight. Museums have been sustained by some of the best and most disinterested people in America, like Duncan Phillips or Paul Mellon; and by some of the worst, like the late Armand Hammer. There is just no generalizing about the moral effects of art, because it doesn't seem to have any. If it did, people who are constantly exposed to it, including all curators and critics, would be saints, and we are not.

V

Under the influence of the Romantic movement, the desire for art as religion changed; it was gradually supplanted by a taste for the Romantic sublime, still morally instructive, but more indefinite and secular. The Hudson River painters created their images of American nature as God's fingerprint;

Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt made immense landscapes that gave Americans all the traits of Romantic art—size, virtuosity, surrender to prodigy and spectacle—except for one: its anxiety. The American wilderness, in their hands, never makes you feel insecure. It is Eden; its God is an American god whose gospel is Manifest Destiny. It is not the world of Turner or Géricault, with its intimations of disaster and death. Nor is it the field of experience that some American *writing* had claimed—Melville's sense of the catastrophic, or Poe's morbid self-enclosure. It is pious, public, and full of uplift.

No wonder it was so popular with the growing American art audience in the 1870s and 1880s. For this audience expected art to grant it relief from the dark side of life. It didn't like either Romantic anguish or realism. There is a strange absence from American painting at this time, like the dog that didn't bark in the night. It is the refusal to deal in any explicit way with the immense social trauma of the Civil War. American art, apart from illustration, hardly mentions the war at all. The sense of pity, fratricidal horror and social waste that pervades the writing of the time, like Walt Whitman, and is still surfacing thirty years later in Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage,* is only to be *seen* in arranged battlefield photographs like those of Mathew Brady—never in painting. This is a curious outcome, particularly if you believe, as I do, that the best strand in 19th-century American art is not so much the Romantic-nationalist one of Bierstadt and Church, but the line of virile, empirical sight that runs from Audubon through Eakins and Homer.

By the 1880s the function of art as quasi-religious uplift was beginning to modulate into a still more secular form, that

of art as therapy, personal or social. This deeply affected the character of that special cultural form, the American museum. By now, in its great and growing prosperity, America wanted museums. But they would be different from European ones. They would not, for instance, be stores of imperial plunder, like the British Museum or the Louvre. (Actually, immense quantities of stuff were ripped off from the native Indians and the cultures south of the Rio Grande, but we call this anthropology, not plunder.) They would not be state-run or, except marginally, state-funded. Because state funding, in a democracy, means tax—and since one of the founding myths of America was a tax revolt, the Boston Tea Party, the idea of paying taxes to support culture has never caught on here. Other countries have come, with many a weary groan, to accept the principle that there is no civilization without taxation. Not America, where the annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts is still around 10 percent of the $1.6 billion the French government set aside for cultural projects in fiscal 1991, and less than our governmental expenditure on military marching bands.

Here, museums would grow from the voluntary decision of the rich to create zones of transcendence within the society; they would share the cultural wealth with a public that couldn't own it. For as the historian Jackson Lears has pointed out in his excellent study of American culture at the 19th century's end, *No Place of Grace,* it is quite wrong to suppose that the Robber Barons (and Baronesses) who were busy applying the immense suction of their capital to the art reserves of old Europe were doing so from simple greed. Investment hardly figured in their calculations at all—this wasn't the 1980s. Some of them, notably Charles Freer and

Isabella Stewart Gardner, were deeply neurasthenic creatures who looked to art to cure their nervous afflictions and thought it could do the same for the less well off. The public museum would soothe the working man—and woman too. The great art of the past would alleviate their resentments. William James put his finger on this in 1903, after he went to the public opening of Isabella Stewart Gardner's private museum in Boston, Fenway Court. He compared it to a clinic. Visiting such a place, he wrote, would give harried self-conscious Americans the chance to forget themselves, to become like children again, immersed in wonder.

The idea that publicly accessible art would help dispel social resentment lay close to the heart of the American museum enterprise. In Europe they thought: well, we already have all these paintings and drawings and sculpture, now let's do something with them: put them in museums. In America they thought: we don't have anything, no art comes with the territory of American identity, so let's acquire art purposively, make it part of what we want to do with a democratic society. We'll refine ourselves along with others. The European museum was by no means indifferent to public education, but the American museum was much more actively concerned with it.

The search for the masterpiece was a vehicle of reconciliation. No other country had sharper cultural contrasts. On one hand, the raw, booming, ruthless, Promethean nature of American capitalism, with the possibility of class war always waiting in the wings. On the other, the idealized past—a past not America's own, but now vicariously within its reach, the Middle Ages and Renaissance that Bernard Berenson and Joseph Duveen were selling to the rich of Boston, Chicago,

New York. These were locked together, because one provided relief from the anxieties of the other. Profiting from the Dynamo, Americans now turned to the Virgin; and, as Dorothy Parker jotted in the visitor's book of San Simeon after noticing a Della Robbia over the entrance to Marion Davies's bedroom:

> Upon my honor, I saw a Madonna
> Standing in a niche
> Above the door of the private whore
> Of the world's worst son of a bitch.

America's search for signs of spiritual value in art was not confined to the European Renaissance. It embraced Japan and China too; hence the powerful effect of the so-called Boston bonzes like William Bigelow and Ernest Fenollosa, whose collecting efforts in Japan in search of their own satori would give Boston its unrivalled collection of Japanese art in the 1890s, a time when the Japanese themselves were shedding it off under the early stress of Westernization.

And this emphasis on the therapeutic increased greatly after 1920, between the Armory Show and the time when modernism really started becoming the institutional culture of America. If cultivated American taste resisted modernism at first, it was as much as anything because, in its disjunctiveness and apparent violence to pictorial norms, it didn't seem spiritual enough. Could it deliver on the inherited promise of art, to provide avenues of transcendental escape from the harsh environment of *industrial* modernity? Could you reconcile the Ancients and the Moderns?

The museum answer, right from the moment the Mu-

seum of Modern Art was founded, was yes. The American museum had to balance its sober nature against the basic claim of the modernist avant-garde, which is that art advances by injecting doses of unacceptability into its own discourse, thus opening new possibilities of culture. The result was a brilliant adaptation, unheard of in Europe. America came up with the idea of therapeutic avant-gardism, and built museums in its name. These temples stood on two pillars. The first was aestheticism, or art-for-art's sake, which decreed that all works of art should be read first in terms of their formal properties: this freed the art-work from Puritan censure. The second was the familiar one of social benefit: though art-for-art's sake was right to put them outside the frame of moral judgment, works of art were moral in themselves because, whether you knew it or not at first, they pointed the way to higher truths and so did you good. You might be offended at first but then you would adjust, and culture would keep on advancing. Which brings us back to Robert Mapplethorpe's X portfolio, there in the museum.

VI

For the truly amazing thing about the defenses that art-writers made for these scenes of sexual torture is how they were all couched in terms either of an aestheticism that was so solipsistic as to be absurd, or else of labored and unverifiable claims to therapeutic benefit. The first effort depends on a willingness to drag form and content apart that is, quite simply, over the moon. An old acquaintance of mine, dead now,

used to relate how she once went in a group around the National Gallery in London led by Roger Fry, the English formalist critic. He stopped to analyze a triptych by Orcagna, featuring God the Father, terrible in his wrath, flashing eyes and streaming beard, pointing implacably to his sacrificed Son. "And now," Fry would say, "we must turn our attention to the dominant central mass." Now, seventy years later, one gets a critic like Janet Kardon, in the Mapplethorpe catalogue and in her testimony in the Cincinnati trial, reflecting on one photo of a man's fist up his partner's rectum, and another of a finger rammed into a penis, and fluting on about "the centrality of the forearm" and how it anchors the composition, and how "the scenes appear to be distilled from real life," and how their formal arrangement "purifies, even cancels, the prurient elements." This, I would say, is the kind of exhausted and literally de-moralized aestheticism that would find no basic difference between a Nuremberg rally and a Busby Berkeley spectacular, since both, after all, are examples of Art-Deco choreography. But it is no odder than the diametrically opposite view, advanced by such writers as Ingrid Sischy and Kay Larson—that Mapplethorpe's more sexually extreme images are in some sense didactic: dionysiac in themselves, they have the character of a moral spectacle, stripping away the veils of prudery and ignorance and thus promoting gay rights by confronting us with the outer limits of human sexual behavior, beyond which only death is possible. This, wrote Larson, is "the last frontier of self-liberation and freedom." The guy with his genitals on the whipping-block becomes the hip version of the Edwardian mountaineer, dangling from some Himalayan crag: below him the void, around him the rope, and the peak experience above. I find this dubious, to put it

mildly. If a museum showed images of such things happening to consenting, masochistic *women,* there would be an uproar of protest from within the artworld: sexism, degradation, exploitation, the lot. What is sauce for the goose is, or should be, sauce for the gander. And in any case, as Rochelle Gurstein pointed out in an excellent piece in *Tikkun,*[5] the Mapplethorpe affair reveals "how many cultural arbiters, like many political theorists, are straitjacketed by a mode of discourse that narrowly conceives of disputes over what should appear in public in terms of individual rights—in this case the artist's right of self-expression—rather than in terms that address the public's interest in the quality and character of our modern world." I would defend the exhibition of the X portfolio on First Amendment grounds, as long as it's restricted to consenting adults. But we fool ourselves if we suppose the First Amendment exhausts the terms of the debate, or if we go along with the naive idea that all taboos on sexual representation are made to be broken, and that breaking them has something to do with the importance of art, now, in 1992. It is a measure of the heat generated by the Mapplethorpe controversy that many of his enthusiasts feel that merely to raise such matters "plays into the hands of" the censorious right.

I have dwelt on the hullaballoo over a part of the work of one somewhat overrated American photographer because it feeds directly into the issue of politics in art, and how American museums treat it. It seems to me that there is absolutely no reason why a museum, any museum, should favor art which is overtly political over art which is not. Today's political art is only a coda to the idea that painting and sculpture can provoke social change.

Throughout the whole history of the avant-garde, this hope has been refuted by experience. No work of art in the 20th century has ever had the kind of impact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did on the way Americans thought about slavery, or *The Gulag Archipelago* did on illusions about the real nature of Communism. The most celebrated, widely reproduced and universally recognizable political painting of the 20th century is Picasso's *Guernica,* and it didn't change Franco's regime one inch or shorten his life by so much as one day. What really changes political opinion is events, argument, press photographs, and TV.

The catalogue convention of the 90s is to dwell on activist artists "addressing issues" of racism, sexism, AIDS, and so forth. But an artist's merits are not a function of his or her gender, ideology, sexual preference, skin color or medical condition, and to address an issue is not to address a public. The HIV virus isn't listening. Joe Sixpack isn't looking at the virtuous feminist knockoffs of John Heartfield on the Whitney wall—he's got a Playmate taped on the sheetrock next to the bandsaw, and all the Barbara Krugers in the world aren't going to get him or anyone else to mend his ways. The political art we have in postmodernist America is one long exercise in preaching to the converted. As Adam Gopnik pointed out in the *New Yorker* when reviewing the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, it consists basically of taking an unexceptionable if obvious idea—"racism is wrong," or "New York shouldn't have thousands of beggars and lunatics on the street"—then coding it so obliquely that when the viewer has re-translated it he feels the glow of being included in what we call the "discourse" of the artworld.[6] But the fact

that a work of art is about AIDS or bigotry no more endows it with aesthetic merit than the fact that it's about mermaids and palm trees.

In any case, much of the new activist art is so badly made that only its context—its presence in a museum—suggests that it has any aesthetic intention. I know that such an objection cuts no ice with many people: merely to ask that a work of art be well made is, to them, a sign of elitism, and presumably some critics would theorize that a badly made work of art is only a metaphor of how ratty the rest of the world of production has become, now that the ethic of craftsmanship has largely disappeared, so that artistic ineptitude thrust into the museum context has acquired some kind of critical function. But that's not what one really thought when looking at the stuff in the last Whitney Biennial: a sprawling, dull piece of documentation like a school pinboard project by Group Material called *Aids Timeline,* for instance, or a work by Jessica Diamond consisting of an equals sign cancelled out with a cross, underneath which was lettered in a feeble script, "Totally Unequal". Anyone who thinks that this plaintive diagram contributes anything fresh to one's grasp of privilege in America, merely by virtue of getting some wall-space in a museum, is dreaming.

Europe in the last few years has produced a few artists of real dignity, complexity and imaginative power whose work you could call political—Anselm Kiefer, for instance, or Christian Boltanski. But the abiding traits of American victim art are posturing and ineptitude. In the performances of Karen Finley and Holly Hughes you get the extreme of what can go wrong with art-as-politics—the belief that mere expressiveness is enough; that I become an artist by showing you

my warm guts and defying you to reject them. You don't like my guts? You and Jesse Helms, fella.

The claims of this stuff are infantile. I have demands, I have needs. Why have you not gratified them? The "you" allows no differentiation, and the self-righteousness of the "I" is deeply anaesthetic. One would be glad of some sign of awareness of the nuance that distinguishes art from slogans. This has been the minimal requirement of good political art, and especially of satire, from the time of Gillray and Goya and Géricault through that of Picasso, John Heartfield and Diego Rivera. But today the stress is on the merely personal, the "expressive." Satire is distrusted as elitist. Hence the discipline of art, indicated by a love of structure, clarity, complexity, nuance and imaginative ambition, recedes; and claims to exemption come forward. I am a victim: how dare you impose your aesthetic standards on me? Don't you see that you have damaged me so badly that I need only display my wounds and call it art? In 1991 there appeared in *Art in America* a gem of an interview with Karen Finley, in which this ex-Catholic performance artist declared that the measure of her oppression as a woman was that she had no opportunity, no chance whatsoever, of becoming Pope. And she meant it. One could hardly find a more vivid epitome of the self-absorption of the artist-as-victim. I am an ex-Catholic myself, and the thought of this injustice struck a chord in me. But mulling it over, I came to see that there is, in fact, a reason why Karen Finley should be ineligible for the Papacy. The Pope is only infallible part of the time, when he is speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals. The radical performance artist, in her full status as victim, is infallible all the time. And no institution, not even one as old and cunning

as the Catholic Church, could bear the grave weight of continuous infallibility in its leader. This, even more than the prospect of a chocolate-coated Irishwoman whining about oppression on the Fisherman's Throne, is why I should vote against her, if I were a member of the College of Cardinals, which I am not likely to be either.

The pressures of activism are putting a strain on museums, as they are meant to, and they are very quickly internalized by the staff. Two systems of preference about art come into play, and they produce a double censoriousness.

A dramatic example of this happened in Washington in April 1991. The National Museum of American Art put on an exhibition called *The West as America,* a huge anthology of images meant to revise the triumphalist version of the white settlement of America in the 19th century.[7] What did the painters and sculptors of the time tell us about Manifest Destiny? The show began with history-paintings of the Pilgrim Fathers and ended with photos of Californian redwoods with roads cut through their trunks. It was quite frank about choosing works of art as evidence of ideas and opinions, and as records of events, rather than for their intrinsic aesthetic merits. Nothing wrong with that, as long as you make it clear what you're doing, which the curators did. Often quite minor, or aesthetically negligible, or even repellent works of art will tell you a lot about social assumptions. And "masterpieces" are thin on the ground in 19th-century American painting anyhow. What one saw, for the most part, was the earnest efforts of small provincial talents whose work would hardly be worth studying except for the clarity with which it set out the themes of an expansionist America. The show set

out to deconstruct images, and this too was fair enough, since if anything in this culture was ever constructed, it is the foundation myth of the American West.

I thought it was an interesting and stimulating show, and said so in a review. What I did not like so much were the catalogue and especially the wall-labels, which were suffused with late-Marxist, lumpen-feminist diatribes. These labels used to be a great feature of Russian museums. "This Faberge egg, symbol of the frivolous decadence of the Romanoffs . . . ," and so forth. They have vanished from Russia, and migrated here. Here, folks, is a picture of a Huron. Lo, the poor Native American! See, he is depicted as dying! And note the subservient posture of the squaw, an attempt to project the phallocentricity of primitive capitalism onto conquered races! And the broken arrow on the ground, emblem of his lost though no doubt conventionally exaggerated potency! Eeew, gross! Next slide! One of the catalogue authors even turned her attention to the frames around the pictures, claiming that "rectilinear frames . . . provide a dramatic demonstration of white power and control." A little of this goes a long way, and *The West as America* had a lot of it.

Nevertheless I was amazed by the vehemence of the reaction to the show. Starting with Daniel Boorstin, the former Librarian of Congress, a whole crowd of politicos and right-wing columnists put on their boots and started kicking. It occurred to none of them that the legendary history of the American West had been under attack from social historians for years, and that the argument of the Museum's show was neither unprecedented nor particularly new, except insofar as it was transferred into the field of art. Nor did they think it proper that the John Wayne version of the frontier should be

questioned at all. And of course the wall-labels played right into their hands. The charge was led by Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, a Republican pipeliner who had his own reasons for not wanting the Smithsonian to put on shows of what he called "perverted history," that mentioned conquest, development and the fate of Indians. He accused the secretary of the Smithsonian of "having a political agenda," as though he himself did not.

So the message was clear enough: we'll be back, get into line or we'll cut your funds off. This message has filled the ears of American institutions ever since the Mapplethorpe mess. And so the director of the National Museum of American Art, Elizabeth Broun, received quite a lot of goodwill from critics, museum professionals and the like: *The West as America* wasn't a perfect show, it had defects of rhetoric, but it posed real questions about the uses and meanings of American art and seemed, on the balance, well worth doing. And in any case, my enemy's enemy is my friend.

But no sooner had Ms Broun emerged from the murk of rightwing censoriousness, than she decided to do a little correcting of her own. The month after the West show closed, the NMAA opened another, organized by another museum and traveling to Washington, which contained a work by the noted American miniimalist Sol LeWitt. LeWitt is mainly known for his modular grids, but this work was an early one from the 1960s—a box into which one looked at images, repetitious serial enlargements of a full-frontal photo of a naked woman. In a transport of political correctness Ms Broun decided that Mr. LeWitt was causing the viewer to focus in a prurient and sexist manner on the lady's pubic bush, and forthwith banned the work from the show. The

curator who'd put the LeWitt in there in the first place immediately launched a press campaign, alleging censorship; the work was put back. Good censorship—no, let us call it intervention-based affirmative sensitivity—is therapeutic and redounds to the advantage of women and minorities. Bad censorship is what the pale penis people do to you. Here endeth the lesson.

VII

Am I alone in finding something rather narrow-minded and stultifying about this? Clearly not: political pressures have in the last few years become a grim encumbrance for American museums, and a topic of obsessive worry for their professional staff. There is a right jaw of the vise, and a left one, and between the two the museum is painfully squeezed and may in the end be distorted out of useful shape. These pressures are far more extreme in the United States than in any European country I know of. They are the result of a totalization of political influence, a belief—common to both left and right—that no sphere of public culture should be exempt from political pressure, since everything in it supposedly boils down to politics anyway. This is the outcome both of the PC belief that the personal is the political, acts of imagination not exempted, and of the conservative view that any stick that you can beat liberals with is a good stick, and never mind what else gets flattened in the struggle. The American museum was never designed to be an arena for such disputes, and thus is proving decidedly awkward and even

inept at responding to them. And its response is complicated by the claims of activist art to constitute an avant-garde.

For the last quarter-century it has also been obvious that the idea of an avant-garde corresponds to no cultural reality in America. Its myth, that of the innovative artist or group struggling against an entrenched establishment, is dead. Why? Because new art has formed our official culture ever since we can remember. America is addicted to progress; it loves the new as impartially as it loves the old. Hence the idea of an avant-garde could only survive here as a fiction, supported by devotional tales of cultural martyrdom; the context of these tales has now moved from style to gender and race, but the plot remains much the same. Today, nobody uses the term "avant-garde" any more—it's a nonword. Instead, dealers and curators say "cutting edge," which still conveys the warmly positivist impression of hot new stuff slicing through the reactionary opposition, leaving the old stuff behind, shaping something, forging ahead.

Unfortunately this model was trashed in the eighties and cannot be revived. The idea of therapeutic soulcraft through art sank when the artworld became the art industry, when the greed and glitz of the Reagan era started riding on that "cutting edge," when thousands of speculators got into the market and the junk-bond mentality hit contemporary art. As the artworld filled up with sanctimonious folk who under other circumstances would have been selling swamp in Florida or snake-oil in Texas, the more elevated its language became. Every asset-stripper with a Salle on his wall could prattle knowingly of hyper-reality and commodification. You cannot have an orgy like the eighties without a hangover, and now we have a big one. The population of the artworld expanded

enormously in the eighties, thanks to overpro
school degrees in the seventies and the sudde
market. No conceivable base of collectors was
to support them, not even in the seven fat year
with the art market crash of 1990, let alone in
that presumably lie ahead. Since the decay of A
education has been steady for the last three decad
them, like most people who do creative writing
ill-trained and unlikely to produce anything mem
not their fault: the art education system let them
promoting theory over skill, therapy over appr
strategies over basics. In an overpopulated artwo
depressed market, you are going to hear more
about how artists are discriminated against—endl
plaints about racism, sexism and so on; whereas the
lem is that there are too many artists for the base to
There are probably 200,000 artists in America, and
that each of them makes forty works a year that yield
million objects, most of which don't have a ghost of a
of survival. Maybe what we need is a revival of the WPA
projects of the 1930s, not that there's the slightest likelihood
of that. But certainly most of this surplus and homeless work
isn't going to find a home in the museum.

The sense of disenfranchisement among artists has led to a stream of attacks on the idea of "quality," as though it were the enemy of justice. These, above all, the serious museum must resist. We have seen what they have done to academic literary studies. Quality, the argument goes, is a plot. It is the result of a conspiracy of white males to marginalize the work of other races and cultures. To invoke its presence in works of art is somehow inherently repressive.

A great deal of conventionalised complaint has been spun around this thesis. It has become the New Orthodoxy and, to an increasing degree, art critics and art historians seem unable to resist it. As one example from a possible myriad, consider this passage from an essay by Eunice Lipton, in the catalogue to the exhibition called THE DECADE SHOW, held jointly at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in 1990. "One of the most powerful ways art history produces insiders and outsiders," Lipton writes,[8]

> is through its notion of "artist-geniuses" . . . Near-requirements for this artist-hero are his impassioned tirades, his Old Testament fervor, his uncontrollable sexual drives, his competitiveness (set on the stage of Freud's Oedipal complex), and most of all, his single-minded obsession with work. Just think about Michelangelo, van Gogh, Rodin, Picasso, Pollock. Could these artists be lesbians, Asian Americans, Native Americans? White discourse shudders to contemplate such chaos, so potent a threat do these transgressions pose.

Well, I suppose that the first answer to Ms Lipton's burning question is: No, these artists couldn't be other than what they were, because, for a start, they are all dead. No effort of the imagination—or none that makes any sense—is going to give van Gogh a Chinese mother, or turn Rodin into a Cherokee: it is too late for them to undergo such "transgressive" changes, no matter how desirable the project may seem to critics like Ms Lipton. At least Michelangelo was homosexual, if not a full-fledged lesbian, though I guess this doesn't get his admirers off the hook. But the remarkable thing about

this passage is, I think, the way in which it sets up a caricature of what Ms Lipton calls "white discourse." Her description of modern art history's idea of the Romantic artist-hero is an Aunt Sally, a crude pasteboard effigy which no art historian uses and no serious critic would do more than laugh at. It is a journalistic fiction—and low-grade journalism at that. The stereotype of the artist as a sort of phallocratic demiurge, creating arbitrary marvels in a social void, continues to have an appeal to mass culture, but it's Judith Krantz's territory, not art history's. Anyone with half a grain of sense knows that to get to Michelangelo we have to start by getting past the picture drawn of him in *The Agony and the Ecstasy,* and that *Lust for Life* is not where you begin if you want to grasp something about van Gogh. And has anyone ever written about Chardin in terms of his "uncontrollable sexual drives," or Piero della Francesca in terms of his "Old Testament fervor," or Watteau's "impassioned tirades"?

Actually, it now seems that the pseudo-heroics and biographical panting that critics like Lipton deplore in the treatment of the likes of Michelangelo or van Gogh, however repressive and hegemonic when applied to whites, are positively desirable for blacks. Such "reinforcement" criticism is now increasingly fashionable in America. It's bad to use words like "genius" *unless* you are talking about the late Jean-Michel Basquiat, the black Chatterton of the 80s who, during a picturesque career as sexual hustler, addict and juvenile art-star, made a superficial mark on the cultural surface by folding the conventions of street graffiti into those of *art brut* before killing himself with an overdose at the age of twenty-seven. The first stage of Basquiat's fate, in the mid-80s, was to be effusively welcomed by an art industry so trivialized by fash-

ion and blinded by money that it couldn't tell a scribble from a Leonardo. Its second stage was to be dropped by the same audience, when the novelty of his work wore off. The third was an attempt at apotheosis four years after his death, with a large retrospective at the Whitney Museum designed to sanitize his short frantic life and position him as a kind of all-purpose, inflatable martyr-figure, thus restoring the dollar value of his *oeuvre* in a time of collapsing prices for American contemporary art. In the course of this solemn exercise in Heroic Victimology, all the hyperbole of the artist-as-demiurge was revived. One contributor to the catalogue proclaimed that "Jean remains wrapped in the silent purple toga of Immortality"; another opined that "he is as close to Goya as American painting has ever produced." A third, not to be outdone, extolled Basquiat's "punishing regime of self-abuse" (sic) as part of "the disciplines imposed by the principle of inverse asceticism to which he was so resolutely committed." These disciplines of inverse asceticism, one sees, mean shooting smack until you drop dead. The kid died for *your* sins. Through addiction, wrote a fourth catalogue essayist, Basquiat "parodied, and sought to heal a disturbed culture." As if this cultural Newspeak wasn't enough, one had the opinion of the Whitney's director, David Ross: "Racial and ethnic division remains a central problem in American life, and lingering racist presumptions seriously cloud the ability of many to understand Basquiat." You cannot "understand" him, apparently, and still find him trivial; hence, by wetly-breathing implication, if you don't love Basquiat's work, it's because you hate blacks. It is a sign of our times that a major New York museum could resort to such emotional bribery.[9]

Lurking behind this drivel is a barely concealed longing

for cultural segregation. It corresponds to one of the most corrosive currents in the American polity today—corrosive, I mean, to any idea of common civic ground—which is to treat the alleged cultural and educational needs of groups (women, blacks, Latinos, Chinese-Americans, gays, you name it) as though they overrode the needs of any individual and were all, automatically, at odds with the allegedly monolithic desires of a ruling class, alternately fiendish and condescending, of white male heterosexual capitalists. More and more, it is assumed that one's cultural reach is fixed and determined forever by whatever slot one is raised in. One can imagine the contempt with which a great Mexican artist like Diego Rivera would have reacted to this. Rivera never thought he was "not empowered," and neither did Frida Kahlo, although God knows she fitted every category of outsiderhood in the current litany of complaint: a bisexual *Latina* who spent most of her life in severe physical pain. Rivera probably gave more to Mexico, in terms of self-knowledge and cultural pride, than any artist in its history, but he was only able to do so because he had absorbed and completely internalized the great tradition of Renaissance fresco-painting, which combined with his absorption in French modernism, pre-Columbian Mexican art and living folk-art to produce the tremendous results we see on the walls of the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City. If you had told Rivera that quality didn't matter, he would have laughed in your face.

Now you can't deny that, at any time in the history of art, there have been inflated reputations and wrongly ignored artists. That happens in the short term, but in the long term the injustices tend to be corrected. Twenty years ago, the American art system was wholly phallocratic. Today there

remains little institutional bias against women artists, probably even less than there is against female writers or editors in American publishing. Against blacks there is more, but even that is rapidly fading.

Part of the hangover of the 80s, however, is the vertigo that comes when you realize how many of the eagles of the time were turkeys. The cultural feeding frenzy was hard on artists who develop slowly, on those who value a certain classical reticence and a precise accountancy of feeling over mere expressiveness or contestation. It also presented difficulties for those who believe that art based on the internal traditions of painting and sculpture may achieve values which simply aren't accessible to art based on mass media. In some ways, such people face barriers of taste and museum practice today that are quite as formidable as the crust of received ideas a century ago. The American artworld is in gridlock today. Its museum curators are still in thrall to the market; its supposed variety is a myth, since it clings to the 80s star-system; its institutions march in lockstep, imposing a uniformity of taste that has few parallels in American cultural history.

And now, the cherry on this stale cultural sundae is that artists must contend with the deadening sentimentality that American-style institutional multiculturalism breeds. Those who talk about multiculturalism as a "radical" program fail to see how conventionalizing, soothing and altogether consoling to middlebrow taste its effects on art may turn out to be. This is already visible in one area: that of publicly funded art, where "multicultural" programs serve to get the embattled National Endowment for the Arts off the hook of making any discriminations at all. If the philistines are baying for an end

to government support to "high"—which is to say, difficult and possibly controversial—art; if the moralists are yelling for the blood of any poet or performer whose work doesn't accord with "family values" and might raise hackles in some golf-club in Tulsa—then what could be a better refuge than remedial multiculturalism? Just turn the already meager trickle of government money towards stuff that nobody could quarrel with: "Hmong needlework, coastal sea-grass basketry, south-east Alaska native dance, American Indian basketry and woodcraft, Pacific Island canoe building, and Appalachian banjo-playing," to quote from a recent brochure issued by the NEA to show just how warm and cuddly the relation of government to nostalgically valued pockets of local culture has become after the *tsuris* of Mapplethorpe and Serrano. Is anyone going to bash the NEA for subsidizing some village craftsman outside Seattle to form a "community outreach program" in order to inculcate "self-esteem" in schoolchildren by showing them how to carve Kwakiutl-style beavers in cedar? Of course not. Multiculturalism and "cultural diversity," as interpreted by federal funding agencies and an increasing number of private foundations, shade over into pious hobbyism. They produce little that might, in aesthetic terms, challenge, refine, criticize or in any way extend the thinking of the status quo. They are designed to appease a populist mentality that contents itself with the easy task of "supporting ethnicity and gender differences in the arts" instead of the hard one of looking for real excellence. Most of the "art" that results from such programs is affirmative, prolix kitsch. People like it for much the same reasons that they like Hallmark cards with *sumi-e* herons and New Age verses on them. It just makes them feel . . . good. You can certainly

run a feelgood cultural program on sociological and statistical criteria, backing it up with the usual pieties about "empowerment." This conforms very well to the evangelical tradition of American cultural life—the idea that one is morally improved, uplifted, turned into a better citizen, by either producing or consuming art. But the art it fosters may be, and often is, quite banal. Populist multiculturalism can also swiftly turn into a form of reverse racism, as any white male artist who has lately applied for a grant in southern California now knows. What happens where government arts money and populist multiculturalism intersect? Moral blackmail, with one gimlet eye on the pork-barrel.

This might not matter if government gave lots of money to the arts, so that everyone got a share. But as is well known, government does no such thing. The American pork-barrel is not full. It is more like a sandwich bag. The American taxpayer contributes $0.68 to the support of the arts every year, compared to $27 in Germany and $32 in France. In Holland for the last twenty years they tried populist pork for everyone. The government set up a fund to buy work by artists almost irrespective of how good it was. All that mattered was that they should be alive and Dutch. About 8,000 Dutch artists are represented in that collection. None of it is shown and as everyone in Holland except the artists involved now admits, about 98 percent of it is rubbish. The artists think it's all junk except their own work. The storage, air-conditioning and maintenance expenses are now so high that they have to get rid of the stuff. But they can't. Nobody wants it. You can't give it away. They tried giving it to public institutions, like lunatic asylums and hospitals. But even the lunatic asylums insisted on standards—they wanted to pick and choose. So

there it all sits, democratic, non-hierarchical, non-elitist, nonsexist, unsalable and, to the great regret of the Dutch government, only partially biodegradable.

Now there are lessons from this. The first is that if Dutch lunatic asylums can discriminate about art without being accused of antidemocratic elitism, so can American museums. Democracy's task in the field of art is to make the world safe for elitism. Not an elitism based on race or money or social position, but on skill and imagination. The embodiment of high ability and intense vision is the only thing that makes art popular. Basically, it's why the Rijksmuseum is full of people and the remedial art-basements of Amsterdam are not. The greatest popular spectacles in America are elitist to the core: football games, baseball games, basketball, professional tennis. But nobody is going to pay to watch Hilton Kramer and me swim the 800-meter freestyle in 35 minutes flat, despite our privileged position as not-quite-dead white European males. Like sport, art is an area in which elitism can display itself at a negligible cost in social harm.

The second lesson is that if a scrupulous participatory democracy like Holland spends twenty-five times per taxpayer what America does on culture, choosing art on sociological grounds in the name of complete cultural egalitarianism, and ends up with a garbage-disposal problem, what guarantee is there that we can do any better here? None, that I can see.

It is in the nature of human beings to discriminate. We make choices and judgments every day. These choices are part of real experience. They are influenced by others, of course, but they are not fundamentally the result of a passive reaction to authority. And we know that one of the realest experiences

in cultural life is that of inequality between books and musical performances and paintings and other works of art. Some things do strike us as better than others—more articulate, more radiant with consciousness. We may have difficulty saying why, but the experience remains. The pleasure principle is enormously important in art, and those who would like to see it downgraded in favor of ideological utterance remind me of the English Puritans who opposed bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators.

For instance, my hobby is carpentry. I am fair at it—for an amateur. That is to say, I can make a drawer that slides, and do kitchen cabinets to a tolerance of about three thirty-seconds of an inch, not good enough to be really good, but fair. I love the tools, the smell of shavings, the rhythm of work. I know that when I look at a Hepplewhite cabinet in a museum, or a frame house in Sag Harbor, I can read it—figure its construction, appreciate its skills—better than if I had never worked wood myself. But I also know that the dead hands that made the breakfront or the porch were far better than mine; they ran finer mouldings, they knew about expansion, and their veneer didn't have bumps. And when I see the level of woodworking in a Japanese structure like the great temple of Horyu-ji, the precision of the complex joints, the understanding of *hinoki* cypress as a live substance, I know that I couldn't do anything like that if I had my whole life to live over. People who can make such things are an elite; they have earned the right to be. Does this fill me, the woodbutcher whose joints meet at 89 or 91 degrees, with resentment? Absolutely not. Reverence and pleasure, more like.

Mutatis mutandis, it's the same in writing and in the visual

arts. You learn to discriminate. Not all cats are the same in the light. After a while you can see, for instance, why a drawing by Pater or Lancret might be different from one of exactly the same subject by Watteau: less tension in the line, a bit of fudging and fussing, and so on. This corresponds to experience, just as our perception and comparison of grace in the work of a basketball player or a tennis pro rise from experience. These differences of intensity, meaning, grace can't be set forth in a little catechism or a recipe-book. They can only be experienced and argued, and then seen in relation to a history that includes social history. If the museum provides the ground for this, it is doing its job. If it does not—and one of the ways of not doing it is to get distracted by problems of displaced ideology—then it is likely to fail, no matter how warm a glow of passing relevance it may feel. Likewise, museum people serve not only the public but the artist, *whether that artist's work is in the collection or not,* by a scrupulous adherence to high artistic and intellectual standards. This discipline is not quantifiable, but it is or should be disinterested, and there are two sure ways to wreck it. One is to let the art market dictate its values to the museum. The other is to convert it into an arena for battles that have to be fought—but fought in the sphere of politics. Only if it resists both can the museum continue with its task of helping us discover a great but always partially lost civilization: our own.

Notes

Lecture 1

1. See Cathy Young, "Victimhood Is Powerful: Both Feminists and Antifeminists See Advantages in Keeping Women Down," *Reason,* October 1992.

2. Nat Hentoff, "What Really Happened at Betty's Oceanview Diner," *Village Voice,* January 7, 1992.

3. See Adam Redfield, letter to *New York Times* dated 11/22/91.

4. Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Democratic Left,* July/Aug. 1991; repr. in Paul Berman (ed.), *Debating P.C., The Controversy over College Political Correctness on Campuses,* 1992, p. 336.

5. Reported by William Henry III, "Upside Down in the Groves of Academe," *Time,* 4/1/1991.

6. Nat Hentoff, "'Speech Codes' on the Campus and Problems of Free Speech," *Dissent,* Fall 1991, p. 546.

7. Ibid., p. 549.

8. Tom Wicker, "The Democrats as the Devil's Disciples," *New York Times,* 8/30/92.

9. Michael Thomas, "The Money Game," catalogue introduction to *Culture and Commentary, An Eighties Perspective,* Hirshhorn Museum, 1990, p. 147.

10. William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy,* 1992, p. 25.

11. Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970,* p. 103.

12. Ibid., p. 114.

13. Ibid., p. 239.

14. See Berman (ed.), Introduction to *Debating P.C.,* 1992.

15. Carol Gruber, *Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of Higher Learning in America;* William Summerscales, *Affirmation and Dissent: Columbia's Response to the Crisis of World War I;* both cited by Cyrus Veeser, in a letter to the *New York Times,* 6/23/91.

16. Daniel J. Singal, "The Other Crisis in American Education," *The Atlantic Monthly,* Nov. 1991, p. 67.

17. Eugene Genovese, "Heresy, Yes—Sensitivity, No," *New Republic,* 4/15/91.

18. Louis Menand, "Lost Faculties," *New Republic,* 7/9/90.

19. Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself,* Chicago, 1979, pp. 96–97.

20. Daniel Harris, "Make My Rainy Day," *The Nation,* 6/8/92.

Lecture 2

1. Andrew Riemer, *Inside Outside* (Sydney, 1992), p. 157.

2. Les Murray, "The Human-Hair Thread," in *Persistence in Folly: Selected Prose Writings* (Sydney, 1984), p. 4.

3. David Rieff, *Making Sense of Multiculturalism,* unpublished essay, 1992.

4. Katha Pollitt, "Canon to the Right of Me . . ." *The Nation,* 9/23/91.

5. Frederick Crews, Introduction to *The Critics Bear It Away: American Fiction and the Academy,* New York, 1992, p. xv.

6. Edward Saïd, "The Politics of Knowledge," *Raritan,* Summer 1991.

7. Jorge Amado, "El embeleso colonial." *El Pais,* 8/23/1992.

8. The "African-American Baseline Essays, in reprint form, are obtainable from Supt. Matthew Prophet, Portland Public Schools, 501 N. Dixon St., Portland, OR 97227.

9. Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology,* New York 1991. Originally published as *Civilisation ou Barbarie,* Paris, 1981.

10. Basil Davidson, *Africa in History,* London, 1984 ed., p. 38.

11. Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism,* Introduction, p. 3.

12. For a leading black scholar's summary and rebuttal of the "new anti-Semitism" in Afrocentrist circles, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Black Demagogues and Pseudo-Scholars," *New York Times,* 7/20/1992.

13. David Brian Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress,* Ithaca, 1984, p. 33.

14. See Harold Brackman, *Farrakhan's Reign of Historical Error: The Truth Behind "The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews,"* Simon Wiesenthal Center Reports, 1992.

15. See Roland Oliver, *The African Experience,* London 1991, especially—for a discussion of enslavement of Africans by Africans—chapter 10, "Masters and Slaves," *passim.*

16. E. Hobsbawm (ed.) et al., *The Invention of Tradition,* Cambridge, 1983.

Lecture 3

1. Richard Bolton, Introduction to *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts,* New York, 1992, p. 9.

2. Healey's testimony: ibid., p. 130 ff.

3. John Wicklein, "The Assault on Public Television," *Columbia Journalism Review,* Jan./Feb. 1986, pp. 27–29. The Nixon memo was released in 1979 under the Freedom of Information Act.

4. For the evangelical background to American art-appreciation in the 19th century the most valuable discussion, on which I have drawn heavily here, is Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790–1860,* 1966.

5. Rochelle Gurstein, "Misjudging Mapplethorpe: The Art Scene and the Obscene," *Tikkun,* Nov./Dec. 1991.

6. Adam Gopnik, "Empty Frames," *New Yorker,* 11/25/91.

7. See catalogue to William Truettner (ed.), *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920,* with essays by Nancy K. Anderson . . . [et al.], Smithsonian Institution, 1991.

8. See Eunice Lipton, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for a Dismantling," in catalogue to *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s,* New York, 1990.

9. See, *passim,* catalogue to *Jean-Michel Basquiat,* Whitney Museum, New York, 1992.