

FROM:
Douglas Crimp, Melancholia and Moralism.
Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics
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16 PAINFUL PICTURES

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Been Artistic? A Seminar on Artistic Practice and
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A few years ago I gave a lecture in which I criticized the ways in which museum officials sought to defend Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs against the criminal charges brought against the Cincinnati Art Museum and its director for exhibiting them in *The Perfect Moment*.¹ I was concerned about the evacuation of the photographs' sexual contents through an insistence on their purely formal aesthetic qualities. To score my critical points, I played my audience for laughs, first showing them Mapplethorpe's self-portrait with a bullwhip shoved up his rectum while reading Janet Kardon's description of the work, which she called "a figure study": "The human figure is centered," she testified. "The horizon line is two-thirds of the way up, almost the classical two-thirds to one-third proportions. The way the light is cast, so there's light all around the figure, it's very symmetrical, which is very characteristic of his flowers. . . ."² I followed this excerpt from Kardon's defense with a statement by Robert Sobieszak, who sought to redeem Mapplethorpe's S&M photographs by suggesting that they portray a difficult psychological quest. Sobieszak claimed, "[The *X Portfolio* photographs] reveal in very strong, forceful ways a major concern of the artist. . . ."³ At this portion of his life that he was trying to come to grips with. . . ."³ At this moment I switched to a slide of the *X Portfolio* picture titled *Helmut and Brooks*, a photograph of fist fucking. I thought it would be funny to accompany the phrase "trying to come to grips" with the image of a fist thrust up a rectum. Except for when I gave the lecture to predominantly gay audiences, though, I didn't get a lot of laughs at this point. Indeed, after I first presented the lecture, one of my university colleagues told me that she had found it almost unbearable to look at that photograph, in which she could see only excruciating pain. At the time, I didn't know how to respond, perhaps because I hadn't really thought enough about the photograph. It had served my purposes merely as the punch line of



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Helmut and Brooks*, 1978
 (© The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe. Used with permission).

a joke and, I thought, to show both how inoffensive and how beautiful the photographs on trial really were. The pleasures of fist fucking are not something I necessarily take for granted, but neither are they entirely foreign to me (indeed, I used to be regularly approached in gay bars because my hands are so visibly larger than most—some people just can't resist a challenge).

Looking again at *Helmut and Brooks*, I feel a bit more charitable toward Janet Kardon and Robert Sobieszak. One cannot begin to describe the photograph adequately without mentioning its compositional symmetries, its tonal subtleties, its sheer formal beauty, and, at the same time, the photograph's impact surely resides in the contrast between those qualities and the challenge of its subject matter. Whether we see fist

1. The lecture derived from "Photographs at the End of Modernism," the introduction to my book *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); see also Janet Kardon, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988); and Richard Bolton, *The Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1988).

2. Quoted in Jane Merkel, "Art on Trial," *Art in America* 78, no. 12 (December 1990), p. 47.

3. Quoted in Merkel, "Art on Trial," p. 47.

fucking as painful or pleasurable—or pleasurable because painful—we cannot but be impressed by the photographic staging of this extreme sexual moment in a spare, well-lighted studio, a set-up where we have come to accept a bell pepper or a nude body, perhaps, but not a sexual act whose intensity cannot be faked for the camera.

Another argument proffered by the defense at the Cincinnatti trial was that the offending photographs should properly be seen in the context of Mapplethorpe's work as a whole. This would have allowed the jury to see the same studio setting and the same formal beauty as it appeared in classically posed nudes, exquisite flower arrangements, and glamorous portraits. In one of a number of highly prejudicial rulings, the judge in the case disallowed that contextualization. But there is another contextualization, more interesting to me, that no one thought worth arguing for—that of the sexual subculture in which Mapplethorpe participated at the time he made the *X Portfolio* pictures. Clearly no one thought any advantage could be gained by describing the sexual pursuits of the gay leather scene and analyzing Mapplethorpe's restaging of those pursuits for studio pictures of striking beauty and originality. That task was left to queer theorists such as Richard Meyer, Paul Morrison, and Gayle Rubin.⁴

I am, of course, aware that arguments are made in courts of law in order to win cases and that arguments are made in academic arenas for other purposes entirely, but I think the discrepancy in this instance can be instructive. If we begin by admitting that many of the pictures in Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* depict gay male sexual practices that we cannot hope to defend in front of a jury, then we might understand that there is something about these practices that is inimical to American democ-

4. See Richard Meyer, "Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 360–380; and Paul Morrison, "Coffee Table Sex: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Sadomasochism of Everyday Life," *Gender* 11 (fall 1991), pp. 17–36. Gayle Rubin's argument was presented at a conference in conjunction with the showing of *The Perfect Moment* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, in 1990.

racy as presently constituted, something whose defense would therefore be, at the same time, a contestation of the limits of our democracy.

I don't want to claim that fist fucking is something every gay man does, or wants to do, or even approves of. But I do want to claim that what we do *sexually* is the root cause of the hatred directed at us and, moreover, that many arguments for tolerance of gay men and lesbians attempt to obfuscate that sexuality. Here is an example of what I mean, drawn from a very different context: In the made-for-network-TV movie *Serving in Silence*, produced by Barbra Streisand and starring Glen Close and Judy Davis, Close, playing Colonel Margaret Cammermeyer, is asked by her military interrogator to clarify her statement that she is a lesbian. "You are currently active as a lesbian?" he asks. "I am in a relationship with a woman," she responds. "A sexual relationship?" he inquires. "It's not about that," Cammermeyer replies. "It's about who I am. I am a lesbian."

This film is unlike most social-issue films made for American television in that it makes no attempt to give a so-called balanced view. No one is allowed to defend the military's anti-gay policy; it is presented as the result of blatant prejudice. Cammermeyer is shown to be a great soldier, a perfect mother and daughter, a model citizen, a true American hero. But I would submit that her perfection is entirely dependent on the idea that her lesbianism is a matter of identity, not sexuality, of identity not in any way even based on sexuality. Indeed her lesbian identity is something that, according to the movie's narrative, can be known to her husband and children even before Colonel Cammermeyer acknowledges it to herself, much less acts on it.

The absurdity of this nonsexual lesbianism could perhaps be accounted for by the strictures of American TV, or for that matter by the simple repetition of a prejudice whose most famous proponent was Queen Victoria, except for the fact that it so exactly reproduces the arguments made by various gay and lesbian activists during the struggle, in 1993, to rescind the ban against gays and lesbians in the U.S. military. The distinction between status and conduct, identity and behavior, was the linchpin of those arguments. And the predictable result was that homo-

sexual conduct is still punishable with separation from the military. But the military further outsmarted its lesbian and gay antagonists by insisting on the basis for identity that we ourselves felt better left unspoken. In the military's new policy, a gay identity freely admitted to automatically presumes that the soldier has either committed homosexual acts or intends to do so and is therefore subject to separation in any case.

The TV movie *Serving in Silence* also illustrates rather well the political conditions in which queer cultural politics now operate in the United States. President Clinton's feeble attempt at lifting the military ban against gays and lesbians met with fierce resistance articulated in the most clichéd and vicious homophobic terms and resulted in virtually total defeat. At the same time, gay and lesbian military personnel became so visible during the debates and were so generally admired for their patriotic service that a film entirely sympathetic to their cause has now aired on national television. This political paradox derives, I think, from the fact that the visible image so readily admired always ultimately gives way to another that is just as readily vilified.

The dramatic increase in queer visibility did not begin with the gays-in-the-military issue, of course, but with AIDS. For all our attempts to become visible in the years after Stonewall, nothing we were able to do for ourselves ensured our visibility so much as the horrible crisis that beset our communities in the early 1980s. It goes without saying that that visibility came at a terrible cost, the cost of hundreds of thousands ill, dying, and dead. But the cost is not only in lives but in the sort of visibility we achieved. On the floor of the Senate in 1987, arch-homophobe Jesse Helms stated that "every AIDS case can be traced back to a homosexual act."⁵ Some four years later, on the tenth anniversary of the first official reports of what is now called AIDS, an editorial in New Hampshire's right-wing *Manchester Union Leader* repeated Helms's opinion: "Homosexual intercourse is the genesis of every single case of AIDS in that every case is traceable—either directly or indirectly—to that practice. However the disease is transmitted, the sexual perversion that is anal

5. *Congressional Record*, October 14, 1987.

intercourse by sodomites is the fundamental point of origin."⁶ In other words, what has really become visible is not queer subjects but a fantasized, phobic image of anal sodomy. Even if the quoted statements are those of extremists and completely false, I think we must take seriously the idea that this image haunts every image of a gay man that comes into public view.⁷ And the fact that lesbian sex cannot even be spoken might well also be a function of the force of this phobia about gay male sex. It is instructive in this regard that opponents of lifting the military ban almost entirely ignored lesbians in the military, even though lesbians are five times as likely as gay men to be drummed out of the service because of their homosexuality. Their arguments focused instead on male soldiers worried about their backsides in combat situations or being afraid to enter the shower in the barracks.

My sense is that gay men and lesbians rushed into the battle to lift the military ban, and away from the battle against AIDS, because they thought that, by separating identity from behavior and focusing on images of model citizen-soldiers, they could for once leave sex out of the equation. And I think we lost that battle precisely because we underestimated the degree to which, reinforced by AIDS, the phobic image of anal penetration haunts every image of homosexuality: Even the picture of a healthy homosexual or a patriotic lesbian is always already contaminated with that image.

What I am arguing is that images have a psychic component that cannot be negated by simply making that component invisible. In his own way perhaps even Jesse Helms realized this. It has always been curious to me that, in attacking Mapplethorpe, Helms did not much concentrate on the S&M images of the *X Portfolio*. He was far more intent on stirring up fears about two rather innocent portraits of children. But a single

6. Quoted in Andrew Merton, "AIDS and Gay-Bashing in New Hampshire," *Boston Sunday Globe*, June 9, 1991, p. 2NH.

7. Leo Bersani made this point in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 197-222, esp. 211-212.

statement might suffice to explain his tactics: "This Mapplethorpe fellow . . . was an acknowledged homosexual. He's dead now, but the homosexual theme goes throughout his work."⁸ Helms absolved himself of the necessity of having to speak about fist fucking or any other of the terrifying acts of sexual perversion depicted in Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio*. Mapplethorpe was a homosexual and he died of AIDS. Enough said—enough said, because that picture of anal penetration is already firmly in place.

I wonder now if my university colleague's sense of excruciating pain on seeing a slide of Mapplethorpe's *Helmut and Brooks* was not in fact the pain of recognizing—at least unconsciously—that struggles for gay visibility and rights will always be stopped short by such an image. For the torment registered in that image is not, after all, that of the body of the receptive participant, who we might well suppose is loving his submission, but of every gay man—and every lesbian—who will suffer because of the image's force in the homophobe's unconscious.

I will conclude by saying that, in my view, two things are now inescapable for queers in the United States: the AIDS epidemic, which appears to be something all of us will live with, in one way or another, for the rest of our lives; and a fear and loathing of homosexuality based on straight men's phobic fantasies of anal penetration. And if these things are inescapable—and inescapably related to each other—we cannot afford to engage in a politics that denies them, obfuscates them, or downplays them in any way. Rather we must make them the very grounds of our political struggle. Sometimes even a formally beautiful photograph can make that clear to us.

8. Quoted in Maureen Dowd, "Jesse Helms Takes No-Lose Position on Art," *New York Times*, July 28, 1989, p. B6.

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SEX AND SENSIBILITY, OR SENSE AND SEXUALITY

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