The Jesse Helms Theory of Art*

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After thirty years in the United States Senate, Republican Jesse Helms of North Carolina retired in January 2003. On the occasion of that retirement, I would like to recall the central role Helms played in the American culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s and sketch some of the ways in which his political legacy continues to reverberate today.

As part of his largely successful effort to impose content restrictions on federally funded art, Helms exploited public fears and fantasies about male homosexuality. The name to which he most frequently assigned those fears and fantasies was “Mapplethorpe.” “This Mapplethorpe fellow,” Helms told the New York Times, “was an acknowledged homosexual. He’s dead now, but the homosexual theme goes throughout his work.”¹ As he would throughout the ensuing controversy, Helms collapses Robert Mapplethorpe’s homosexuality and AIDS-related death and then projects both onto the thematics of the photographer’s work.

Later in the same Times article, Helms tries to clarify his own criteria for artistic judgment by making the following aesthetic distinction: “There’s a big difference between The Merchant of Venice and a photograph of two males of different races [in an erotic pose] on a marble-top table.”² One of the things that

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² An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in conjunction with the reconstruction of Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment mounted by that museum in May 2000. Sponsored in part by the Showtime Cable Television Network, the exhibition was timed to coincide with the premiere of Dirty Pictures, a docudrama about the Mapplethorpe controversy produced by the network. Parts of this text have previously appeared in two works by the author: Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Mapplethorpe’s Living Room: Photography and the Furnishing of Desire, Art History 24, no. 2 (April 2001).


² Ibid. The Helms quotation as it appeared in the New York Times is as follows: “It’s perfectly absurd. There’s a big difference between ‘The Merchant of Venice’ and a photograph of two men of different races” in an erotic pose “on a marble-top table.” The words “in an erotic pose” are the only ones that are paraphrased rather than quoted directly by the Times. This peculiar recourse to paraphrase raises the question as to what words Helms actually employed to describe the so-called “erotic pose” of the two men on the table.
interests me about this statement, but which was not mentioned by the *Times*, is that no such photograph by Mapplethorpe exists. Three photographs of interracial male couples, including *Embrace* of 1982, appear in *The Perfect Moment*, the Mapplethorpe exhibition catalog that Helms not only saw firsthand, but also selectively photocopied and distributed to his colleagues in Congress. None of the couples in *The Perfect Moment*, however, is posed on a marble-top table. Marble-top tables appear nowhere, in fact, within Mapplethorpe’s published oeuvre, though tables of different materials do surface in explicitly homoerotic contexts, most famously in a 1976 portrait of a gay porn star, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)*. Like *Embrace*, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)* was reproduced in the catalog on which Helms based his descriptions of Mapplethorpe’s work.

3. By way of lobbying for his proposed amendment restricting the content of federally funded art, Helms photocopied four Mapplethorpe photographs and sent them to each of the twenty-six members of the joint congressional committee which was to decide the issue. The four photographs copied by Helms were *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)* (a photograph of a man in leather chaps displaying his penis on a table); *Man in Polyester Suit* (a photograph of a black man, seen from the neck down, whose penis drapes out of his unzipped suit pants); *Rosie* (a photograph of a partially naked little girl); and *Jesse McBride* (a portrait of a naked little boy). According to the *Washington Post*, “The letters and pictures were sent marked ‘personal and confidential’ and ‘for members’ eyes only.’” See Kara Swisher, “Helms’s 'Indecent' Sampler: Senator Sends Photos to Sway Conferences,” *Washington Post*, August 8, 1989, p. B1, and “Helms Mails Photos He Calls Obscene,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 9, 1989, p. 11A.

The irony of this incident, whereby Senator Helms sent through the mail pictures he had himself deemed indecent, was underscored by the *Post* when it asked the Office of the Postmaster on Capitol Hill to clarify its policy on obscenity in the context of Helms’s mailing. “We will deliver anything and we never censor mail or open it,” Joanna O’Rourke, executive assistant to the Postmaster, said when asked about policies on obscene materials. “When certain skin magazines were sent here, a lot of members [of Congress] did not want them, but courts ruled that we deliver it anyway,” she said. “They said the members are here to represent the people—all the people, I guess.” Cited in Swisher, “Helms’s ‘Indecent’ Sampler.”
Now, it is not that I would expect Helms to be a particularly careful viewer of Mapplethorpe’s photographs. But the way in which Helms gets the pictures wrong reveals how the language of censorship summons its own fantasies of erotic transgression and exchange. Within a psychoanalytic context, fantasy has been defined as a “purely illusory production” or again as an “imaginary scene . . . representing the fulfillment of a wish.” Yet, as the philosopher Judith Butler argues, fantasy functions by bracketing its status as illusory, by “postur[ing] as the real.” Helms’s fantasy of “two males of different races [in an erotic pose] on a marble-top table” clarifies Butler’s point. This phrase is cited by Helms as though it were a description of the real, which is to say, a real photograph by Mapplethorpe. The description is, however, of an imagined picture that has been worked by Helms across the body of Mapplethorpe’s photography and, in this sense, produced as much by the senator as by the artist whom he attacks. The literary critic D. A. Miller has suggested that the phrase “marble-top” functions for Helms as a surrogate for the word “Mapplethorpe.” “Marble-top” provides Helms with a means, however unconscious, of inserting Mapplethorpe into a sexualized scene of interracial male coupling.

Alongside the misrecognized image of the “marble-top table,” I would like to consider a slightly later moment in which Helms described his own art collection so as to dramatize, by way of contrast, the supposed indecency of Mapplethorpe’s work. In an interview published in the November 1989 issue of Museum and Arts magazine, Helms discussed the art in his Arlington, Virginia, home, singling out for particular praise a painting by an artist from Helms’s home state of North Carolina that depicts “an old man, sitting at the table, with the Bible open in front of him, with his hands folded in prayer . . . And it is the most inspiring thing to me . . . We have ten or twelve pictures of art, all of which I like. But we don’t have any penises stretched out on the table.” By avowing his admiration for a painting of a pious old man at a table, Helms means to counter other pictures, half-remembered and half-imagined, of other men (e.g., Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)) and other tables (e.g. marble-top ones). Notice how Helms’s assertion that “We have ten or twelve pictures of art . . . But we don’t have any penises stretched out on the table” unwittingly confuses the distinction between artistic representation and corporeal presence, between pictures and penises. At such moments, Helms does not describe a particular photograph by Mapplethorpe so much as he conjures a forbidden space of homosexual difference and depravity, a space of tables and tabletops on which indecent pleasures unfold. And to this perversely luxuriant space of homosexuality, Helms opposes the righteous respectability of his own home and art collection.

Helms’s public discourse on Mapplethorpe might best be understood as an attempt to cordon off the visual and symbolic force of homosexuality, to keep it as far as possible from the senator and the morally upstanding citizens he claims to represent. In trying to suppress homosexuality, however, Helms continually returns to it, whether by photocopying *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 1/2)* for his fellow senators, by repeatedly describing Mapplethorpe’s pictures to the press, or by bringing *The Perfect Moment* catalog home to show his wife, Dorothy, who would memorably respond, “Lord have mercy, Jesse, I’m not believing this.” Helms’s fixation on Mapplethorpe reveals the paradox whereby censorship tends to publicize, reproduce, and even create the images it aims to suppress. Far from a solely restrictive force, censorship generates its own representations of obscenity, whether in verbal, written, or visual form. Like Helms’s descriptions of Mapplethorpe’s photography, such representations often correspond less to actual works of art than to the imagined scenes of indecency those works provoke in the mind of the censor.

The psychic contradictions at the heart of censorship have been deftly analyzed by Butler in terms of what she calls “the force of fantasy.” Drawing on the example of Helms, Butler argues that censorship cannot but reenact the illicit scenes it aims to snuff out:

Certain kinds of efforts to restrict practices of representation in the hopes of reigning in the imaginary, controlling the phantasmatic, end up reproducing and proliferating the phantasmatic in inadvertent ways, indeed, in ways that contradict the intended purposes of the restriction itself. The effort to limit representations of homoeroticism within the federally funded art world—an effort to censor the phantasmatic—always and only leads to its production; and the effort to produce and regulate it in politically sanctioned forms ends up effecting certain forms of exclusion that return, like insistent ghosts, to undermine those very efforts.9

Helms’s attempt to restrict homoerotic art operates, however unwittingly, to provoke homoerotic fantasy, not least the senator’s own. Insofar as such fantasies shape public policy, however, their effects could not be more real. We need only to consider the changes imposed on the National Endowment for the Arts since the Mapplethorpe controversy—the elimination of nearly all grants to individual artists, for example, or the insistence that every work of federally funded art meet “general standards of decency”—to appreciate the material and legislative force of Helms’s anxious fantasies.10

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Before delving any further into the nature of these fantasies, I would like briefly to recall the historical circumstances that gave rise to them. By the time Helms first encountered Mapplethorpe’s photography in the summer of 1989, a public conflict over federal funding to the arts was already under way. That conflict had begun the previous April when a conservative religious group called the American Family Association (AFA) sent out one million copies of a letter denouncing an art work entitled *Piss Christ* (1989) by Andres Serrano. The work, a large-scale color photograph of a crucifix submerged in a luminous bath of urine, had been awarded a $15,000 prize by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, an institution partially funded by the NEA. Shortly after receiving the AFA’s letter, Republican Alfonse D’Amato ripped up an exhibition catalog featuring *Piss Christ* on the floor of the Senate. In cheering on D’Amato’s gesture, Helms announced, “The Senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation. . . . I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk.” If the worst accusation Helms could muster against Serrano was that of being a jerk instead of an artist, the senator and his colleagues would find a rather more graphic set of charges to level against Mapplethorpe a few months later.

Building on the momentum of the *Piss Christ* controversy, religious groups and Republican politicians proceeded to target *The Perfect Moment*, a full-scale retrospective of Mapplethorpe’s work scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in July 1989. As attention moved from a single image by Serrano to Mapplethorpe’s entire career, the rhetoric of attack shifted from charges of religious desecration to those of homosexual degeneracy.


*Andres Serrano. Piss Christ. 1987.*
*Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.*
Moment, which had been partially funded by a $30,000 grant from the NEA, featured approximately 175 works by the artist, including collages, photographic portraits, self-portraits, still lifes, and nudes. Also featured in the show was Mapplethorpe’s “X” portfolio of thirteen photographs of gay sadomasochism. The “X” portfolio was displayed in The Perfect Moment on a slanted wooden table alongside its companion series of flower photographs (the “Y” portfolio) and black male nudes (the “Z” portfolio). The table was designed such that small children would not be able to see its contents unless they were lifted up by someone else, presumably an adult.

On June 12, 1989, Christina Orr-Cahall, the Director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, canceled The Perfect Moment, citing an overheated political environment as her justification. Within a month of the cancellation, Helms persuaded the Senate to pass an amendment that imposed content restrictions on NEA-sponsored art and a

14. No money was awarded to the Corcoran Gallery of Art by the NEA in conjunction with The Perfect Moment. Rather, the museum that organized the retrospective, the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, was awarded $30,000 by the NEA to help cover the costs of the show. Prior to its scheduled exhibition in Washington, The Perfect Moment had been mounted in Philadelphia and Chicago without incident. The show was displayed at the ICA from December 9, 1988, to January 29, 1989.

15. In a striking rhetorical twist, Orr-Cahall would describe the decision to cancel The Perfect Moment as a staunch defense of artistic freedom: “We decided to err on the side of the artist who had the right to have his work presented in a nonsensationalized, nonpolitical environment. . . . If you think about this for a long time, as we did, this is not censorship; in fact, this is the full artistic freedom which we all support.” This argument persuaded virtually no one, including the Corcoran’s own staff, which collectively urged Orr-Cahall to resign as a result of the incident. After issuing a statement of regret
punitive reduction of the Endowment’s annual budget. Although later modified by the House, the so-called “Helms amendment” ushered in a series of legislative acts that restructured and dramatically restricted federal funding to the arts.\footnote{16}

In April 1990, the Contemporary Art Center (CAC) in Cincinnati mounted \textit{The Perfect Moment}. The day the exhibition opened, both the CAC and its director, Dennis Barrie, were indicted on charges of pandering obscenity and child pornography. The resulting trial marked the first time a museum in the United States had been prosecuted as a result of the art it displayed. At the conclusion of the ten-day trial, a Cincinnati jury acquitted Barrie and the CAC of all charges.\footnote{17}

At the core of both the Corcoran cancellation and the Cincinnati trial was the claim that Mapplethorpe’s photography constituted a form of obscenity.\footnote{18} And underwriting that claim was the insistence, often made explicit, that Mapplethorpe’s work was shot through with the dangerous force of his own sexuality.\footnote{19} During Senate hearings on the Helms amendment, for example, Helms mentioned Mapplethorpe’s “recent death from AIDS” and then declared of his photography:

\begin{quote}
There are unspeakable portrayals which I cannot describe on the floor of the Senate. . . . Mr. President, this pornography is sick. But Mapplethorpe’s sick art does not seem to be an isolated incident. Yet another artist exhibited some of this sickening obscenity in my own state. . . . I could go on and on, Mr. President, about the sick art that has been displayed around the country.\footnote{20}
\end{quote}

In denouncing Mapplethorpe’s art as “sick,” Helms suggests that it is not an “isolated incident” but a spreading “obscenity” which must be contained and eradicated. HIV infection is thus displaced from Mapplethorpe’s body to the body of his work as his photographs are said to contaminate an otherwise clean American culture. Homosexuality, sickness, and the symbolic link between them are summoned as the frame through which Mapplethorpe’s photographs—as well as the artist himself—are now to be seen.

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\item On the changes imposed on the NEA since 1989, see Wallis, Weems, and Yenawine, \textit{Art Matters}.
\item Armey, “People: Art, Trash, and Funding,” p. 20.
\item \textit{Congressional Record}, May 18, 1989, p. S595.
\end{enumerate}
The vehemence of Helms’s attack on “sick art” was consistent with the tenor of his public policies regarding AIDS at the time. In June 1987, Helms appeared on national television to call for a federal quarantine of people with AIDS, a proposal nearly as frightening as the spread of HIV infection it sought to ward against. Four months later, he successfully sought to prohibit the federal funding of any healthcare information that might “promote, encourage, or condone homosexual sexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs.” Helms censored the depiction of safer sex and clean needles from the materials in which those representations were most necessary—AIDS prevention posters, booklets, and other forms of public information about the crisis. In the course of introducing this amendment on the floor of the Senate, Helms would offer his own theory of HIV transmission: “Every AIDS case,” he said flatly, “can be traced back to a homosexual act.” For all its terrible ignorance, Helms’s statement bespeaks the phantasmatic force of the association between gay male sex and epidemic sickness, an association that Helms would repeatedly summon in his attacks on Mapplethorpe.

If the figure of Mapplethorpe as virulently homosexual was thrust onto the national stage by Helms, so too was the power of Mapplethorpe’s work to inflame the Christian Right, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the city of Cincinnati. The vilifications to which Mapplethorpe was subjected provoked a counterdiscourse in which the artist’s work came to symbolize freedom of speech and self-expression. A protest rally held outside the Corcoran on the evening of June 30, 1989, the night before The Perfect Moment was to have opened, marked a key moment in the political reclamation of Mapplethorpe’s work. During the protest, several Mapplethorpe pictures, including Embrace (1979), American Flag (1977), and Self-Portrait (1980) were projected onto the museum. Mapplethorpe’s work thus appeared, in radically oversized format, on the facade of the institution from which it had been denied access. To draw out the irony of this moment, the photographs were projected near the Corcoran’s main entrance, which is crowned by an inscription reading “Dedicated to Art.” The projection of Mapplethorpe’s pictures onto the exterior of the museum effectively symbolized their banishment from the interior space of legitimate display. The protest indicted the Corcoran’s cancellation of The Perfect Moment by reenacting the museum’s official function—the exhibition of art before a public audience.

23. See Congressional Record, October 14, 1987, p. S14200 ff. (Discussion of amendment no. 956: “To prohibit the use of any funds provided under this Act to the Centers for Disease Control from being used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote, encourage, or condone homosexual sexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs.”)
24. The rally was organized by the Coalition of Washington Artists and cosponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Association of Artists Organizations. The artist Rockne
Although ten Mapplethorpe photographs were projected onto the Corcoran during the protest, *Self-Portrait* was the picture most often reproduced in the press. The projected *Self-Portrait* was reprinted, for example, on the cover of the September 1989 issues of both *Artforum* and *American Theatre*. On the cover of magazines devoted to contemporary art and theater, the image both reports on the culture wars and encourages readers to join in the political struggle for artistic freedom. These covers also attest to the ways in which censorship generates the publicity and reproduction of the works it seeks to suppress. In canceling an exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, the Corcoran provoked the recirculation of those photographs in newspapers and magazines, on television broadcasts, on the floor of the U.S. Senate, and, not least, on its own architectural facade. In this last instance, the reproduction of Mapplethorpe’s work by protesters was itself reported and reproduced in the press. Censorship functions, then, not simply to erase but also to produce visual representation; it generates limits but also reactions to those limits; it imposes silence but also provokes new forms of responding to that silence.

Beyond recirculating Mapplethorpe’s work, the projected *Self-Portrait* might be said to revive the figure of the artist himself. Mapplethorpe, who had died three months prior to the Corcoran controversy, now reappears, flickering, yet monumental, to answer to the censorship of his art. With his knit brow and tightly focused gaze, his lit cigarette and leather jacket, Mapplethorpe seems to defy the terms of the Corcoran’s cancellation. As part of his broader attack on federal funding to the arts, Helms projected his own fears and fantasies of homosexuality onto the figure of Mapplethorpe. By summoning the specter of Mapplethorpe into shimmering visibility, the projected *Self-Portrait* forces such fantasies into public view. The figure of the artist returns “like an insistent ghost” to haunt those who denounced his work and demeaned his life. As the critic Denis Hollier has noted, large-scale projections onto monuments and museums “give a dreamlike quality to public space . . . leaving, with the lightness of what can be seen only at night, their message on walls they expose without touching.”

If, as Helms contended, Mapplethorpe posed a sexualized threat to censorship, Krebs projected Mapplethorpe’s photographs onto the facade of the museum. According to Krebs, “We went down to the Corcoran to honor a fine artist whose name had been damaged by their [the museum’s] actions—to touch the first museum in this country dedicated to American art with his light. It was beautiful.” Rockne Krebs, “It Was Beautiful,” *Gadfly: The Journal of the Coalition of Washington Artists*, special edition (July 1989), p. 2.

25. Although Hollier has the work of the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko in mind here, his description of

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*Top: Artforum, September 1989.*

*Bottom: American Theatre, September 1989.*
the sanctity of American culture, the projected *Self-Portrait* offered an image of just how audacious that threat might be. It conjured up the photographer in the form of a fifty-foot phantasm that could not be expelled from the official precincts of art.

Throughout *The Perfect Moment* controversy, Helms and other conservative leaders often extended the link between Mapplethorpe’s homosexuality and sickness to include an accusation of pedophilia. Republican Congressman Robert Dornan of California, for example, asserted on the floor of the House that “Robert Mapplethorpe took pictures of little children... He was a child pornographer. He lived his homosexual, erotic lifestyle and died horribly of AIDS.” Dornan’s statement collapses the distinction between “pictures of little children” (which Mapplethorpe did, on occasion, shoot) and child pornography (which he did not). What Dornan neglects to mention is that Mapplethorpe’s “pictures of little children” were taken with the consent and in the presence of the children’s parents, and that none of the pictures portray any form of sexual activity. Rather than attending to the social and professional conditions under which Mapplethorpe’s work was produced, Dornan moves freely between attacking the photographer’s “erotic lifestyle,” recalling his “horrible” death as a result of AIDS, and denouncing him as a “child pornographer.” The links between homosexuality, sickness, and child pornography happen so quickly, and with so little explanation or elaboration, that they are made to seem self-evident.

The association between homosexuality and pedophilia would surface as well in the precise wording of the Helms amendment that prohibited the use of federal funds to “promote, disseminate, or produce obscene or indecent materials, including, but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex

Wodiczko’s public projections as a means by which “the excluded ones come back as ghosts to haunt the places that expelled them” seems especially germane to the Corcoran protest. Denis Hollier, “While the City Sleeps: Mene, Te quel, Parsin,” in *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Instruments, Projection, Vehicles* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies), p. 27.

26. “Mapplethorpe was a talented photographer. He took some good photographs. But the ones we are talking about, and the ones we have been talking about, are pictures that deliberately promoted homosexuality and child molestation, and other activities that I cannot even discuss on the floor of the Senate.” Senator Helms, *Congressional Record*, October 7, 1989 (Legislative day of September 18, 1989), p. S12967.


28. One week later, Helms would explain the need for content restrictions on federally funded art in a similar fashion:

And that is what this is all about. It is an issue of soaking the taxpayer to fund the homosexual pornography of Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS while spending the last years of his life promoting homosexuality. If any Senator does not know what I am talking about in terms of the art that I have protested, then I will be glad to show him the photographs. Many Senators have seen them, and without exception everyone has been sickened by what he saw [Senator Helms, *Congressional Record*, September 28, 1989, p. S12111].
acts.”29 By sandwiching the term “homoeroticism” between “sadomasochism” and “the exploitation of children,” the Helms amendment both describes and inflates the kinky threat of same-sex desire. As the feminist scholar Carole Vance has argued, “the purpose of this sexual laundry list was to provide specific examples of what Senator Helms and, more generally, conservatives and fundamentalists find indecent.”30 I would push this point further to suggest that Helms’s list of indecencies correlates with his own view of Mapplethorpe’s photography, with the sadomasochism of the “X” portfolio, the homoeroticism of the male nudes, and the exploitation of children allegedly entailed in the portraits of youth. From Helms’s perspective, Mapplethorpe’s work stands as the very picture of that which must be prohibited by Congress, as the catalog of indecencies the federal government must ward against.

In this context, I want to consider a photograph that was repeatedly denounced as child pornography during The Perfect Moment controversy—Mapplethorpe’s 1976 portrait of Jesse McBride. In a July 1989 fundraising solicitation, the American Family Association describes this portrait as “a shot of a nude little boy, about eight, proudly displaying his penis” and further claims that the photograph was produced “for

29. “Helms Amendment,” reprinted in Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, “Chronology,” in Richard Bolton, ed., Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts (New York: New Press, 1992), p. 347. Although the Senate approved the “Helms Amendment,” it was rejected by the House of Representatives (264–53) on September 13, 1989. See William Honan, “House Shuns Bill on ‘Obscene’ Art,” New York Times, September 14, 1989, pp. A1, C22. Although it did not include all of the restrictions that Helms had sought, the Senate-House compromise appropriations bill that eventually passed into law did stipulate that art works in any media may be denied support if they include “depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.” The compromise bill, which was signed into law by President Bush, marked the first content restrictions ever imposed by the U.S. Congress on the NEA. See Brookman and Singer, “Chronology,” p. 348.

homosexual pedophiles.”\textsuperscript{31} The AFA does not reproduce the portrait it so graphically describes. If it did, viewers might notice that Jesse McBride appears rather matter of fact about his nakedness and no more self-conscious—or proud—of his genitals than of any other part of his body. The AFA’s letter fixates on the boy’s penis rather more insistently than does either Mapplethorpe or Jesse McBride. The letter distorts a photograph it claims simply to describe so as to align it with an audience of “homosexual pedophiles” that it likewise invents for the occasion.\textsuperscript{32} Like Dornan and Helms, the AFA exploits the sensational stereotype of the male homosexual as child molester.

How might the force of this stereotype be countered through the production of visual images? In the summer of 1990, \textit{The Village Voice} published an article titled “The War on Art,” which focused on the upcoming Mapplethorpe trial in Cincinnati. In a sidebar to the article, the \textit{Voice} ran a photograph by Judy Linn of a now eighteen-year-old Jesse McBride. In it, McBride appears nude, seated on the back of an armchair, and looking down with a smile at the portrait Mapplethorpe had taken of him, in virtually the same pose, some thirteen years before. According to Linn, it was McBride’s idea to remove his clothes for the shoot, an idea with which she was happy to comply.\textsuperscript{33} Linn’s portrait of McBride mounts


\textsuperscript{32} The photograph was produced not for “homosexual pedophiles” but for Jesse McBride’s mother, Clarissa Dalrymple, a friend of Mapplethorpe’s and an admirer of his work. In a deposition taken for the Cincinnati trial in 1990, Dalrymple states, “I asked Robert, being a close friend and top photographer, to take a photo of my son.” Cited in Kim Masters, “Jurors View Photos of Children; Mothers Approved Mapplethorpe Works,” \textit{Washington Post}, October 2, 1990, p. C1. See also Affidavit of Clarissa Dalrymple, April 24, 1990, State of New York, County of New York, which was entered into evidence in the case of State of Ohio v. Contemporary Art Center and Dennis Barrie. In her affidavit, Dalrymple states, “In or about 1976, I expressly authorized and commissioned Robert Mapplethorpe to photograph my child, Jesse McBride, and to include these photographs for use in exhibitions, publications, or otherwise.” I am grateful to Louis Sirkin, the lead defense lawyer in the Cincinnati trial, for furnishing a copy of this affidavit.

\textsuperscript{33} Judy Linn, phone conversation with the author, May 2, 2000.
what might be called a mimetic protest against those who seek to position the earlier picture as an example of child pornography. Now an adult in the eyes of the law, McBride both displays and reenacts the nude portrait for which he sat as a child. In doing so, he aims to belie the charges of sexual exploitation that have since attached to the earlier picture. In the text that originally accompanied the Voice photograph, McBride recalls his encounter with Mapplethorpe in the following terms: “No one forced me into anything. I would run around naked a lot at that age. I’d stop and he’d snap a shot. He didn’t ask me to do anything obscene. . . . It never occurred to me that it would be big deal. It’s sick to equate it with pornography.” McBride here turns the accusation of sickness, so often leveled against both Mapplethorpe and homosexuality during the culture wars, against those who claim to see child pornography when they look at his boyhood portrait.

The Jesse Helms Theory of Art teaches us that censorship cannot resist the images it claim to despise, and that efforts to suppress art are typically fueled by its recirculation. Yet the censor is not the only one who may exploit the power of the forbidden image in this fashion. As both the Linn portrait and the Corcoran demonstration illustrate, the restaging of suppressed pictures may provide a powerful means of protesting that suppression. Censorship is not overcome in these instances, but something of its own reliance on the imagery it aims to snuff out is revealed.

In attacking Mapplethorpe’s work, Helms positioned homoeroticism as a form of obscenity. By doing so, however, Helms drew even more attention to the link between art and homosexual desire. This contradiction is encapsulated by a cartoon published in the Philadelphia Daily News on July 28, 1989, two days after the introduction of the Helms amendment. The cartoon depicts the senator and an assistant in the midst of cutting paintings out of frames and otherwise destroying works of art that have been deemed offensive. The assistant tells his boss, “Great idea, getting rid of all the fag art, Mr. Helms.” Plaques beneath the now absent works of “fag art” identify the men who made them: Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, Michelangelo. As this cartoon suggests, neither the category of the homosexual artist nor the pictorial force of homoeroticism can be confined to our contemporary moment or to the culture wars of the recent past. Homosexuality registers even, and perhaps especially, within some of the most beloved and canonical works of art in the Western tradition.

Although I doubt the cartoonist was aware of it, the caption he has put in the mouth of Helms’s assistant echoes a comment once made by Mapplethorpe.

34. Ibid. According to Linn, the framed Mapplethorpe portrait on the floor is the copy of the picture owned by McBride’s mother.
36. This cartoon is reproduced in Wendy Steiner, The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in the Age of Fundamentalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 23. I am grateful to Steiner for bringing this image to my attention.
In a 1979 interview published in the short-lived magazine *Manhattan Gaze*, Mapplethorpe declared, “There’s all this energy now around faggot art. It would be nice to see something legitimate as art come out as well. I don’t see why it couldn’t.”

Mapplethorpe’s comment, with its distinction between “faggot art” and “something legitimate,” signals his own ambition to bridge the gap between the emergent gay art scene of the late 1970s and the established art market of uptown galleries, museums, and auction houses. As the number of museum exhibitions devoted to his work, the prices of his photographs at auction, and the degree of critical and interpretive attention he has received all attest, the “energy” around “faggot art” to which Mapplethorpe refers was demonstrated most directly in the emergence of gay-male-owned and -oriented art galleries in New York in the late 1970s. By 1980, five such galleries were operating in Manhattan, including one, the Robert Samuel Gallery, in which Mapplethorpe exhibited both his flowers and S/M photographs. In a 1980 article in the gay literary magazine *Christopher Street*, the writer George Stambolian praised these galleries as being not “about cruising or therapy, but about sharing a culture by looking at works that tell us something, whether positive or negative, about our identity and purpose.”


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38. The “energy” around “faggot art” to which Mapplethorpe refers was demonstrated most directly in the emergence of gay-male-owned and -oriented art galleries in New York in the late 1970s. By 1980, five such galleries were operating in Manhattan, including one, the Robert Samuel Gallery, in which Mapplethorpe exhibited both his flowers and S/M photographs. In a 1980 article in the gay literary magazine *Christopher Street*, the writer George Stambolian praised these galleries as being not “about cruising or therapy, but about sharing a culture by looking at works that tell us something, whether positive or negative, about our identity and purpose.” George Stambolian, “The Art and Politics of the Male Image,” *Christopher Street* (1980), p. 18. On the rise of gay galleries in New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see also Stambolian’s foreword to Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homosexual Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. xv–xix.
Mapplethorpe has indeed achieved “something legitimate” within the history of art insofar as such legitimacy is marked in economic, scholarly, and curatorial terms. It is Jesse Helms, more than anyone other than Mapplethorpe himself, who has highlighted the social and political power of this photographer’s work and who has, however unwittingly, helped secure a place for that work within the history of art.

Postscript

This essay flows directly from research I undertook while writing Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art, which was published by Oxford University Press in 2002. Shortly after the book went into production, I was informed by my editor in New York that a lawyer retained by the main office of the press had determined that the publication of Mapplethorpe’s Jesse McBride would likely violate two different criminal codes in England, the Protection of Children Act of 1978 and the Criminal Justice Act of 1988. My request to see a written copy of the legal opinion in question was denied on grounds of confidentiality. Requests to speak with the lawyer and to learn his name were likewise denied. The only additional information my editor would offer me about the lawyer was that his concern for Oxford’s potential liability was so acute that he had advised the English office to destroy any copies (including photocopy reproductions) of Jesse McBride it had on the premises.

Toward the end of this conversation, I was asked to remove the portrait of McBride from the manuscript. In refusing to do so, I noted the irony of such a request given the core concerns and argument of my book. Apparently unimpressed by such irony, my editor informed me that the book might not be publishable by Oxford unless the portrait were removed. In the extended negotiations that ensued, I pointed out that Jesse McBride had been one of the seven photographs at issue in the 1990 Cincinnati trial and that the defendants in that case had been acquitted of all charges of pandering obscenity and child pornography. There was thus a legal precedent for defining the portrait as art. This was irrelevant, I was told, since the laws at issue here were British, not American. I further pointed out that Jesse McBride had been reproduced in several other books published by university and trade presses in both the United States and England, and that no legal incident had ensued. Irrelevant, I was informed, because the risky behavior of other presses would not inoculate Oxford against the possibility of criminal prosecution.

A compromise of sorts was ultimately reached: The American branch of Oxford University Press would publish the book with the portrait of Jesse McBride intact. The English branch of the press would not distribute the book, nor list it in any of its catalogs, nor permit any of its European, Canadian, or Australian subsidiaries to sell it. “As far as England is concerned,” my editor told me, “your book doesn’t exist.” No defense of Mapplethorpe’s art could overcome the force
of the association between homosexuality and pedophilia. No insistence on the social and professional conditions under which the portrait of McBride was actually produced could block out the scandalous pairing of naked little boy and dead homosexual artist.

Prior to this episode, I had thought of Jesse McBride as rather marginal to my scholarly work. It is discussed in one paragraph of *Outlaw Representation* and then set aside.\(^39\) As a result of concerns I did not anticipate by an unknown British lawyer, the portrait has become symbolically central—not to mention legally salient—to my thinking about art, censorship, and intellectual freedom. By publishing *Jesse McBride*, I wanted readers to see that a photograph of a naked body does not automatically constitute pornography, even when the body at issue is that of a child. To allow the portrait to be removed because of a concern about legal liability would have been tantamount to labeling it obscene.

Throughout my negotiations with Oxford over *Jesse McBride*, I insisted that there was no connection between this portrait and the sexually explicit photographs elsewhere produced by Mapplethorpe and reproduced in my book. Confronted with legal concerns about obscenity and the threat of nonpublication, I repressed any possibility of eroticism, any hint of sexuality, that might register in the photograph. By sanitizing the image in this fashion, I attempted to cordon it off both from the rest of Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre and from the charge of child pornography. Yet, as I have suggested throughout this essay, no such attempt can ever be wholly successful.

Censorship traffics in phantom images that it adduces as evidence of “real” obscenity. Fueled by its own hardcore fears and fantasies, censorship has created the image of Mapplethorpe as child molester. Once mobilized, this image cannot simply be argued away by recourse to historical fact or material reality. This is not to say that Mapplethorpe’s interaction with Jesse McBride in 1976 was anything other than the appropriate and nonsexual exchange that McBride has recalled. It is, rather, to acknowledge the force of censorship in shaping our response to visual images. Having encountered the insistent fantasies of Jesse Helms, Robert Dornan, and the American Family Association, I can no longer sustain my faith in the innocence of *Jesse McBride*. I know that the picture has sparked hotly imagined scenes of sexual exchange between adults and children.

In preparing an earlier version of this article for submission to *October*, I made photocopies of its illustrations in the art history department office at the university where I work. As I was doing so, one of the department administrators approached the copy machine. Immediately and all but involuntarily, I turned over the photocopy of *Jesse McBride* so that she would not see it. The administrator in question has always been supportive of my scholarly work on art and homosex-

\(^39\) In that paragraph, I address how conservative religious groups and politicians exploited the charge of child pornography to discredit Mapplethorpe’s life and work. *Outlaw Representation*, p. 211.
uality. But she is also the mother of a child who is about the age of Jesse McBride in the Mapplethorpe portrait. In flipping over the photocopy, I was imagining that the charges of pedophilia leveled against Mapplethorpe might now come to incriminate me, that the photograph might provoke a suspicion, however fleeting, about my sexual or professional propriety. In the midst of preparing an article on the anxious fantasies that fuel censorship, I had unintentionally submitted to their demands. Analyzing the Jesse Helms Theory of Art cannot exempt us from being caught up in its contradictions.