

CAA Newsletter

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Winter 1989

CAA Makes Statement on Corcoran Decision

At the October 14, 1989, meeting of the Board of Directors of the College Art Association, Judith Brodsky, on behalf of the Artists Committee, of which she is chair, proposed a motion that CAA make a statement on behalf of its membership directed to the Board of Trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The committee urged the Corcoran's board to respond to the Corcoran's cancellation of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. The following letter was sent to the Corcoran's Board of Trustees on November 12, 1989:

As chair of the Artists Committee, I am writing on behalf of the Board of the College Art Association.

We represent over 10,000 members—artists, art historians, and curators—teaching in colleges and universities in North America or employed in museums. Our mandate as a professional organization includes promoting ethical practices in the arts, as well as upholding artistic and intel-

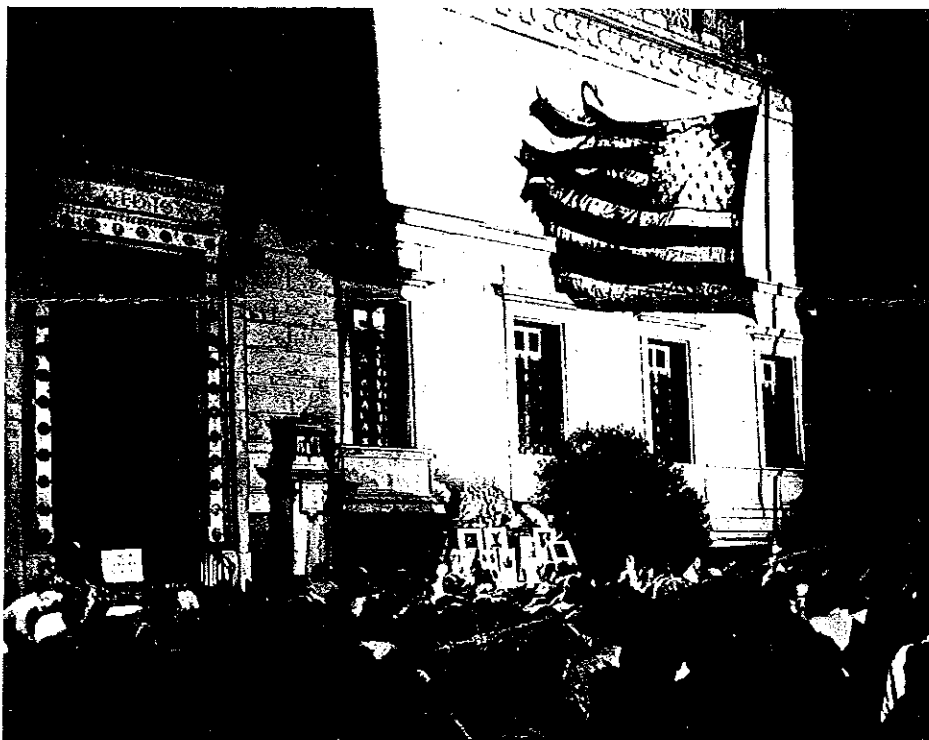
lectual self-expression. It would be a breach of faith to our constituency if we did not now speak out in support of the artists who have over the past few months withdrawn their work from Corcoran-sponsored exhibitions in protest over the cancellation of the Robert Mapplethorpe show.

We also want to go on record in our own right as expressing our deep disappointment over the revocation of your commitment to mounting that exhibition. We hope that in the wake of subsequent events, you are in the process of developing a policy of noncensorship.

The College Art Association is currently planning an annual national conference to take place in Washington in 1991. In the past, we have worked cooperatively with the Corcoran Gallery to mount events in conjunction with the conference. These joint projects have benefited us both. We will be talking with the Corcoran School of Art, which played no part in the decision to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhi-

bition, but we must refrain from approaching the Corcoran Gallery with proposals for events in conjunction with the 1991 national conference until such time as you make progress in rethinking your goals and policies to develop guidelines based on the right to self-expression which has nourished the art of our country. We want to express our encouragement for you doing so. We also offer any expertise that might be helpful to you.

We realize the difficult nature of this situation, but we are confident that you will once again find your way back to the principles of freedom of expression that have enabled you to be of such great service to contemporary artists over the years.



On June 30, 1989, the evening that the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition had been scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Coalition of Washington Artists projected images of Mapplethorpe's work on the Corcoran's facade. (photo © Frank P. Herrera)

78th CAA
Annual
Conference
New York
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CONTENTS

Letters to Washington, DC	2
Annual Conference Update	4
CAA News	7
Placement Review 1988-89	8
One-Person Shows by Artist Members	9
Grants/Awards/Honors	10
Opportunities	12
Conferences/Symposia	15
People and Programs	18
Information/Ads	19
Miscellaneous	20

Letters to Washington, DC

From Nicholas Fox Weber, Executive Director, The Josef Albers Foundation

I would like to give you an example of what happens when the government begins making qualitative judgments about arts funding.

It was the city of Dessau, in Germany, that paid faculty salaries at the great experimental school, the Bauhaus. This remained their obligation even after the Bauhaus moved from Dessau to Berlin. One of the faculty members receiving a salary paid in this way was the great painter and color theorist Josef Albers, who at the time taught the Bauhaus's renowned preliminary course and was also working extensively in the field of stained glass. On June 15, 1933, Albers received the following letter from the Oberstadinspektor of the Dessau City Council:

Since you were a teacher at the Bauhaus in the Dessau, you have to be regarded as an outspoken exponent of the Bauhaus approach. Your espousing of the causes and your active support of the Bauhaus, which was a germ-cell of bolshevism, has been defined as "political activity." . . .

The Oberstadinspektor informed Albers that for these reasons he would no longer receive a salary. About a month later as a result of this sort of move and of increasing harassment from the National Socialists, the Bauhaus faculty, at a meeting in which Albers was one of seven participants, voted to dissolve the school. Mies van der Rohe, Director of the Bauhaus, notified the Gestapo accordingly.

The claim of bolshevism was, of course, ridiculous. There were some communist sympathizers at the school, but that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that the artists of the Bauhaus had points of view that made people like the members of the Dessau City Council uncomfortable. Their challenge of tradition, even their faith in abstraction, seemed threatening. And so, because this art did not suit their tastes, they stopped funding it.

For the National Endowment for the Arts to cease funding art that does not conform to the tastes of all our senators is equally disastrous. By imposing official taste, they will deprive our culture of its ability to nurture artistic achievement and inspire new and lasting forms of beauty in much the same way that the totalitarian government of Nazi Germany halted the pioneering achievements of the Bauhaus.

When artists like Albers were forced into exile, they came to America for the freedom to pursue new and daring art in an atmosphere of sympathy and generosity. At its best, our country has indeed provided extraordinary cultural hospitality. It is a legacy that we cannot afford to drop.

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From Edward J. Sullivan, Chair and Associate Professor of Fine Arts, New York University, to Christina Orr-Cahall, Director, Corcoran Gallery of Art

I am writing to express my shock at what can only be considered irresponsible behavior on the part of the Corcoran Gallery of Art at canceling the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. As an academic, I find that in doing this you are betraying the trust placed in you as the director of one of our capital's most prestigious art institutions. This exhibition is certainly the most important retrospective of the career of one of America's most gifted photographers. As someone long concerned with museums and museum policy, I feel that in catering to your own unsubstantiated fears of possible friction with the Congress you are setting a most dangerous precedent in times of increasing conservative feeling by willingly diluting your institution's programs to suit (as Lillian Hellman once said in a different context) today's fashions.

Even more importantly, however, as a gay man I am outraged by your having made, in effect, institutional policy of your own prejudices. Indeed, much of the work in the show is "strong" but, as everyone knows, many aspects of the most important works of art produced at any given time in history have been objectionable to many people. The fact that many of Mapplethorpe's photographs have a homoerotic content is certainly not grounds to cancel the exhibition. This should be perfectly obvious to anyone with a modicum of political (to say nothing of human) sensitivity.

From Cynthia Carlson, New York

I am an artist who has been individually awarded NEA grants, as well as having sat on a number of different panels over the last ten years. I am enormously proud of my past affiliations with the Endowment as a government agency which has absolute integrity and concern for the democracy of its policy execution. I always felt a particular patriotic pride in representing a government agency of a country which is confident, free, and assured enough of its constitutional assumptions to award grants to individuals who make, and organizations that exhibit, works which are polemical, controversial, difficult to understand or like, and sometimes even critical of the very government which funded them. To me, that is the most fantastic evidence of a government truly dedicated to the idea of free speech.

From Willem Volkersz, Director, School of Art, Montana State University

The NEA has been an extremely important force in the visual arts in this country during the several decades of its existence. Without it, the School of Art at Montana State University would not have been able to sponsor its Visiting Artists series, which has brought to the campus and the community five or six important artists and designers annually. The NEA also supports many fine exhibitions and lectures in Montana—most of which could not have been mounted without its assistance. I do not need to remind you that there are very few foundations and corporations which have a viable interest in our state to which we can appeal for funding to support such projects. It is thus crucial that maximum funding be allocated to support the NEA.

However uncomfortable the ideas expressed by some artists, I like to think that our society condones the free and open exchange of ideas. Under some of the censorship guidelines which are being discussed, it would be easy for anyone to condemn almost any creative act which displeases them, for whatever reason.

From Katharine Lee, Deputy Director, The Art Institute of Chicago

The NEA, more than any other single source of funding, has created incentives, set professional standards, and stimulated exploration and creativity in ways that other sources of funding rarely do. The system of peer review developed over several decades is, by and large, extraordinarily effective in stimulating a sense of responsibility in the profession, as well as arriving at fair and credible decisions. The small number of problematic grants awarded versus the almost 80,000 grants awarded during the history of the Endowment is testimony enough to the effectiveness of the peer-review system.

From Thomas W. Lyman, Professor of Art History, Emory University

I wish to express in the strongest terms possible my objection not just to the wording but to the thrust of the amendment. It discriminates in favor of institutions and individual artists with the financial means to exercise First Amendment rights and against those who depend on government help to do so. It also indirectly denies public access to any art considered objectionable to particular minorities or individuals. By taking decisions about the worthiness of an art project out of the hands of qualified peers and leaving them to federal agencies and ultimately to the courts, a double standard is created that amounts to censorship.