Art Throb

June 1, 2000 By Robert Bedoya and William Wooby

Robert Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in March 1989. He was 42. That summer, a retrospective of his photographs was set to open at Washington, DC's Corcoran Gallery of Art. But with the religious right and congressional conservatives railing against his "obscene" gay and S/M imagery—and Sen. Jesse Helms threatening the gallery's NEA funding—the Corcoran abruptly aborted the show.

On June 30, some 2,000 demonstrators—queer activists, free speechers, angry artists—descended on the museum to protest "the real obscenity"—censorship, homo- and AIDSphobia. Organizers struggled with a generator to power the rented movie projector…Success! Suddenly in the dusk, Mapplethorpe's offending images materialized on the gallery's exterior.

This action marked the beginning of a broader artistic response to AIDS, as well as the beginning of the end of federal arts funding, as the right wing took the NEA hostage. But this ongoing battle still reminds us of the power of art to make claims upon society: that when you are silenced because of your identity, you must respond not as an "I" but as a "we." As Mapplethorpe's images flickered on the walls of the Corcoran, this lesson slid into focus, illuminating the work of a generation of artists.

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