

TAKE 6

POP CULTURE BABIES AND THE WOMEN WHO LOVE THEM

A Chronology of Censorship

“Women...beautiful creatures of grace...”
—Stephen Sondheim, *A Little Night Music*

Women introduced, created, mentored, nurtured, and maintained Robert Mapplethorpe in life and in death. Singer-poet Patti Smith accompanied him rhythmically and faithfully from start to finish. Manhattan gallery owner Holly Solomon launched his career with his first two exhibitions in 1977. Lynn Davis, Lisa Lyon, Susan Sontag, Sigourney Weaver, Tina Summerlin, and other women touched his life.

Janet Kardon, once director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Art, was a longtime enthusiast of the Mapplethorpe work. It was Kardon who inspired the quintessentially named exhibition, “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment.”

Those drop-dead beautiful photographs played, without incident, in the last ninety days of Robert’s life, at the University of Pennsylvania (December 1988) and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art (February 1989).

On March 9, 1989, Robert died.

Mid-March 1989, the Reverend Donald Wildmon saw a museum catalog featuring Andr s Serrano’s *Piss Christ*.

In April, conservative Republicans discovered that the NEA had funded \$15,000, through the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to the hugely overrated Andr s Serrano for an installation that included *Piss Christ*.¹

¹ In 1987 Serrano had submerged a photograph of a crucifix into a twelve-by-eighteen-inch Plexiglas tank filled with more than three gallons of what Serrano said was urine. He was like a man crying “Fire” in a crowded theater. Serrano’s urine looked red as blood: he was making sacrilege of the major icon of fundamentalist Christianity and flaunting body fluids at a society obsessed with the AIDS peril of bodily fluids.

In May 1989, Republicans in the U.S. Senate denounced federally subsidized art-filth. Immediately, both political and fundamentalist crusaders licked their chops and their stamps to solicit money through the mail to fight the NEA's "spending taxpayers' money on perverted, deviant art."

In June 1989, Christina Orr-Cahill, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, claimed the Serrano case had made the \$30,000 NEA funding of the posthumous Mapplethorpe show a political issue.

She did not defend art; she surrendered to pressure and canceled "The Perfect Moment" exhibition. She lost a three-month battle, a strategic first battle, in an art-religion war that would rage for years.

Christina Orr-Cahill failed the principles of freedom of expression and the separation of church and state. She let a knee-jerk issue, incited by avowed heterosexuals, trample the constitutionally perfect moments of principles that override the money-driven, hissy-fits of some preachers.

Worse, some women say, Christina Orr-Cahill may have hyphenated her surname, and she may have been favored to direct the Corcoran because of her gender, but she was no feminist hero. She caved in.

Once again, the serpent entered Eden.

Orr-Cahill bit the apple.

Republican politicians began the heaviest assault on art and artists in America since the McCarthy-Nixon witch-hunt of the early 1950s.

Mapplethorpe's mother, Joan, died two months after Robert.

All these women, and all these men, all have their own Mapplethorpe, as do all his friends and surviving father and siblings.

One person's fact is another's unknown.²

² Something, however, separates biography from fiction, or else my *à clef* novel of the Dream Time of the Seventies, before AIDS, would have been definition enough of that time.

Some Dance to Remember, completed in January 1989, appeared February 14, 1990, cued by no more than coincidence into publication by Tom Wolfe's searching request for nonfiction novels in *Harper's* magazine, September 1989: "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel." Tom Wolfe called for the involvement of the New Journalism, wherein the writer becomes part of the story and the story flows through the writer, and the writer jams all of a story between two covers. "Who needs more books by the Absurdist, the Neo-Fabulist, the K-Mart Realists? What we need is a novel about Jim and Tammy Bakker." *Some Dance* was a work of fiction that pressed the essence of gay popular culture of the seventies, without tears, between the covers.

What really happened in the gay pop seventies has the best objective correlative in mainstream popular culture. Robert, seven years younger than I, had basically the same cultural experiences growing up, especially as regards women. The perception of women by young white males in the fifties and sixties was created significantly by the still camera and motion pictures.

In 1966, when Robert was twenty, NOW, the National Organization for Women, was founded. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was in its third year as best-seller. And *Newsweek* declared, "In five years, Pop has grown like The Blob, from a label for what appeared to be a minor phase of art history to a mass psyche."

Robert and Patti, clerking at Brentano's bookstore, were aware of every fad and personality in the escalating pop world of women, drag queens, and gays as interpreted by trend-setting artists like Warhol, the Pope of Pop.

Five years earlier, in 1961, JFK had founded the President's Commission on the Status of Women to study formally the social and economic condition of women. What JFK, himself an instant 11/22 /1963 Pop Icon, intended to study formally, pop culture, scaring the horses, ran away with.

For instance, Mapplethorpe's eventual Saint Joan of Didion wrote in *Mademoiselle* in February 1961 an insightful process analysis that enabled young women of the sixties to live the kind of life Patti Smith dared to live around Robert.

"Girls who come to New York are, above all, uncommitted. They seem to be girls who want to prolong the period when they can experiment, mess around, make mistakes. In New York there is no gentle pressure for them to marry, to go two by two, to take any indelible step; no need, as one girl put it, 'to parry silky questions about what everyone at home refers to as my *plans*.' New York is full of people on this kind of leave of absence, of people with a feeling for the tangential adventure, the risk adventure, the interlude that's not likely to end in any double-ring ceremony."

The great women's director, George Cukor, who happened to be a Hollywood homosexual, floated in and out of the New York crowd who adored him as inspirational camp. The Warhol women, and the drag queens, all Warhol superstars, descended from Cukor's larger-than-life presentation of Hollywood actresses.

Tennyson said, "I am a part of all that I have met."

Cukor said, acknowledging the pastiche of pop eclecticism that would become Mapplethorpe's, "All these things accumulate and other people's visions become a part of you."

A perfect definition of the genesis of pop.

You're a strange new mutant....A scholar of American Popular Culture. You're a vulture feeding on your contemporaries. It used to be, when things were what they used to be, that scholars would wait a decent fifty years at least before daring to dissect people and their behavior....Do you know the difference between a vulture and a pop culture scholar?...A vulture waits till you're dead to pick on you.

Actually, if I could write the things I wrote in my 1967 Ph.D. dissertation about the greatest women's dramatist in American history, Tennessee Williams, if I could write about his psychology and theology, about his exploration and application of life and death and women in American culture, to earn that Ph.D., perhaps I am qualified to make similar esoteric and curiously interesting pop observations about Robert Mapplethorpe, whom I knew personally and intimately far better than I knew Tennessee Williams.

I make no apology for my vocation. I make my living as a dispassionate observer. I believe one must study culture quickly before it melts. Memory and memoirs only make the past glow. I love the firsthand immediacy of another of my interviews, Sam Steward, the Father of Gay Erotic Writing. He was a joy telling his merry tales of Gertrude and Alice and Thornton and the rest of the Charmed Circle. Who but the living, breathing Sam, the last survivor, could tell the intimacies of Bilignin, how he, one night, stumbling into the bathroom, caught sight of Gertrude, one hand trying to cover her mastectomy that only Alice had ever seen. No one had even known that Gertrude had cancer. But Sam knew. That's the kind of firsthand reportage that is the essence of pop culture: get it while the source is alive and kicking; poke at it while it's fading; perform an autopsy while it's still warm; keep to the immediate evanescent facts and feelings that will evaporate before they can be recorded; leave the eulogies to historians studying the world through the rearview mirror....Writing history is dead and distinctly different from the vicarious adventure of witnessing a whole people being carried away by history.

I admit I'm a fame-and-failure junkie. Not mine. Others. I entertain an almost perverse curiosity about the ironies of American culture. I want to know why the postmodern craze for derivative pastiche, quotation, and appropriation succeeds seamlessly.... Especially, I want to know in all their infinite variety all about American women and American men. America...is a wonderful country that has yet to be discovered.³

In 1967, against the roar of the Vietnam War, I finished graduate school and began university teaching, which allowed me five months a year in New York.

Robert was twenty-one and I was twenty-eight in 1967, the year of *The Graduate*, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and the Summer of Love celebrated in the Haight-Ashbury and Berkeley as well as the East Village and Columbia.

By 1969, the year of Kenneth Anger's underground *Scorpio Rising* going Hollywood in *Easy Rider* (the trip), *Medium Cool* (the camera), *Midnight Cowboy* (the hustler in New York), *Hair* (the communal youth rebellion), and *Interview* (the self-conscious magazine of pop), Robert finished his matriculation in the graduate school of NY Pop Art.

The sixties ended August 9, 1969, when the Manson Family entered, of all places, the home of Doris Day's son, and murdered the pregnant actress Sharon Tate and five others, including coffee heiress Abigail Folger and hairstylist Jay Sebring, whose car trunk, in cruel irony, contained whips and leather.

Robert hated murder of the rich and famous, because it cut into his model and client list.

He was not being cynical.

Warhol's spinning *Interview* had memorialized Sharon Tate. Edward Brooks De Celle, owner of the Lawson De Celle Gallery in San Francisco, showed Mapplethorpe early on and recalls a luncheon at which Mrs. Folger discussed quite movingly the murder of her daughter.

Everything is connected to everyone by smoke and mirrors, beauty and privilege, drugs and money, sex and death.

In 1967, I met Mario Amaya, who towed me along one afternoon to Warhol's Factory, where everyone seemed to wear black so they didn't clash with the art. I had seen Gerard Malanga and Nico appearing with the Velvet Underground in Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, but I was not ready for Warhol, under his wacko shock of albino wig.

³ From *Some Dance to Remember*, Stamford, CT: (Knights Press, 1990), pp. 19, 20, 21.

I had come out sexually on May 15, 1967, and was pleasantly impressed how having sex with people opened doors one could otherwise never walk through without all kinds of introductions and appointments.

Gayness was, back then, endorsement, not issue. It was instant entree and credential for me, for Robert, for any aspirant willing to come out.

Later came the question: "What are you besides gay?"

Mario Amaya was a one-man tutorial in dealing with film folk whose underground movies were as meaningful to me as Hollywood once had been.

The only person I spoke to that afternoon at the Factory was a woman, Brigid Polk, who was heavier than Mama Cass, but I had admired her zaniness of running around to Laundromats and appliance stores to shoot multiple images of the washing machine, *Speed Queen*, which was the tide of her only work known to me outside of her starring roles in Warhol's movies.

By 1969, the Village was my home away from home. For ten years, from fourteen to twenty-four, I had been the toy of "sadistic" priests, one of whom wrote a letter saying I was not a homosexual. By twenty-nine, the other end of the whip came to hand. Circles other than Warhol's opened up after gay liberation raised its hand at the June 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in the Village.

Gay photography studios legitimized themselves out of the sexual underground after the 1969 rulings regarding adult materials handled by that arbiter of taste, the U.S. Postal Service.

The age of legit leathersex photography was born. New York photographers Lou Thomas and Jim French founded Colt Studios.

In 1970, Lou Thomas hired me as a photo model for a leather shoot with a Forty-second Street hustler. That year, Warhol's *Trash* appeared and *Myra Breckinridge* rode slap-saddle across screens double-billed with the British hit *Performance*, in which rock star/pop icon Mick Jagger plays an Anger/Brando leather boy with sexual ambiguity: a perfect model for Mapplethorpe emerging in black leather.

That autumn, after shooting many "underground films," I shot my first leather film on super-8 starring the particular New York star X, whose premiere in underground screenings in Manhattan and San Francisco was a success. Were it to be rereleased on video, the title might be: *X Having His Buttocks Whipped*.

We are all the sum total of popular culture.

Pop culture has invaded the national bloodstream.

The Pop Couple, Robert Pop and Patti Pop, moved through their Pop Adolescence in the Pop Art World, influenced by the invasion of British Pop.

In the Pop Speak of the sixties and seventies, Pop People often played, “What movie am I now?”

Pop Urchins living at the Popularly Priced Chelsea Hotel, Robert Pop and Patti Pop (not their real names) Popped Pills and listened to Pop Music (to make Pop Music) and watched Pop Movies (to make Pop Movies).

Imagine Robert Pop and Patti Pop at a rocky horror triple-feature picture show.

Consider that the Pops are tropes turning in tandem periodicity to the light of the movie screen.

Robert Pop and Patti Pop appear first in playwright Shelagh Delaney’s drama and Tony Richardson’s 1961 movie, *A Taste of Honey* depicting the relationship of a homosexual who lives with pregnant girl.

They pop up again in 1965’s *The Leather Boys*: leather-jacketed Rockers versus mod East End Teddy boys, while “hero” takes in gay boarder and “heroine” tries to win the “hero” back.

A Taste of Honey and *The Leather Boys*, both as female-focused as was Mapplethorpe, feature, as *Time* called her, “that unblushing ham,’ Rita Tushingham.”

Finally, with the female predominant, Robert Pop and Patti Pop thrill the Paparazzi in 1965’s very uptown *Darling*: Julie Christie won the Oscar portraying an empty fashion model whose plea for a relationship to the homosexual photographer, finally, is, “We could do without sex. I don’t really like it that much.”

Was this a “high concept” or what?⁴

Turn the pop trilogy of *Honey/Leather/Darling* into a quartet with that quintessential photographer’s movie, *Blow-Up*, (1966). Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* plays like a Warhol *Polaroid noir*, spinning as it does, as Mapplethorpe finally did, on the blow-up of a single frame.

The physically enlarging blow-up of a photograph matches pop culture’s blow-up of traditional art, of men’s idea of blow-up women, of the emotional blow-ups in the human condition, of the overblown egos that control images.

4 In 1961, long before Mapplethorpe, one of my first pop culture articles appeared in print, sorting out the persona of the late James Dean, who then was not that late and not yet really a candidate for pop sainthood. In 1965, another pop culture film essay examined the moral relativism and social meaning of John Schlesinger’s classic *Darling*. Not in the pop pages of *Interview*, which hadn’t been created yet, but in the theopop of *Catholic Preview of the Arts* magazine.

Blow-Up, not to be confused with Warhol's portraiture-film *Blow Job*, is either objective correlative or coincidence the way that John Lennon and Yoko Ono, posing naked in bed for photographs, are correlative or coincidental to the Famous Pop Couple of Mapplethorpe and Smith.

In Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*, sociologist Orrin Klapp said, "One of the functions of popular favorites is to make types visible, which in turn make new life styles and new tastes visible."

In 1965, British artist Gerald Scarfe penned a caricature of Lord Snowdon, nude, with the camera hanging in his groin pointing out long, hard, and quite phallic.

Blow-Up, shot in London, was part of the pop British invasion of the United States led by the Beatles in 1964.

Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* was a brisk, dark, pop culture mystery about sex, death, and the all-important presence of the camera. Antonioni's spiritually empty hero anticipates every wannabe with a Hasselblad.

Fashion photographer David Hemmings shoots the London world of fashion models, using his camera as phallus, substituting f-stops for the F Stop, virtually cam-fucking supermodels, until he is confounded by the mystery of Vanessa Redgrave's aristocratic silent self-identity.

Nothing happens.

Everything happens.

And then you die.

Patti Pop had to become a writer and singer.

Robert Pop had to become a photographer.

What duet else could they do?

Pop!