

TAKE 14

MERCHANDISING THE MAGICAL, MYSTICAL MAPPLETHORPE TOUR THAT'S COMING TO TAKE YOU AWAY

“Robert ran himself like a department store.”

—George Dureau

1

I AM A CAMERA

Robert Mapplethorpe's Bond Street studio in Greenwich Village was a one-man-band cottage industry.

He was a hardworking photographer. His photographs, as much as he cherished their reputation as art, were pure product—a beautiful means to an end.

Basically a commercial photographer with fine art aspirations, Robert, when he is good, is magnificent. Only history, after the brevity of his life and the media blip of controversy, can sort out the lasting importance of his total work.

Robert had great instincts, was a good shooter, and was more surprised than anyone else that he was better than even he imagined.

The camera, in the right hands, sucks up an incredible amount of information in one click. In addition, Robert had an aesthetic and analytic IQ to match.

He had the touch for the schmooze, the take, the shoot, the edit, the print, the presentation, and the sale.

Born with an artist's temperament into a middle-class Catholic family, he saw no conflict between art and commerce. One, in fact, supported the other. H. L. Mencken said, “Virtue equals money.” Cynical by birth or baptism, Robert's spin on commerce was cynical commercialism. He gave good product. He loathed the public taste. He openly “fleeced” the well bred, the well known, and the well heeled. He believed in his talent, which was real, but he was amazed, until he wasn't, that critics and clients paid him so quickly and so easily so much notice and cash.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

He was a cynical innocent. For all his ambition, he was a true artist, sometimes overwhelmed by what he caught on film, by what the camera and the gods gave him at the moment when everything that rises converges.

“Look at this. Look at this!” he would say in amazement.

“From his work,” photographer Joel-Peter Witkin said, “Robert must have felt, if I die now, I’d be happy. Robert must have felt that. Every artist does when he stands back and looks at something he’s made, and on the most honest, no-bullshit level, realizes he’s transcended his own physicality, and has tapped into something of the spirit, and he looks at it, and thinks, ‘My God! How did I do that?’”

Robert’s first work was impotent collage. No fusion took place. Fusion, that blinding integration of everything the artist is, intuitively, and knows, is transcendently important if art is to move from personal to universal planes. When I first met him at the Chelsea, the very young Mapplethorpe’s creativity was in bud, not in bloom. He was just another demimondaine in search of his talent. The early Picasso and the early Hockney both had a certain buoyant fizzing talent from the start. The early Mapplethorpe did not fizz. Robert, however, had Acquired Creativity Syndrome. He studied, absorbed, and pushed himself to bloom. As a formalist, he finally experienced artistic, transcending fusion. His fisting photograph is a fusion remake of Weston’s palm tree. Because they are beholden only to Robert’s internal vision, and not to any fashion account or celebrity, his penis-crucifixion [Number 14, *Untitled*, 1978, in *Ten by Ten*, titled *Richard*, 1978, in the Whitney’s *Robert Mapplethorpe*] and his *X Portfolio* are really his best work.

—Edward Lucie-Smith conversation with Fritscher, December 20, 1993

Robert, as much as his determined model, Arnold Schwarzenegger, willed his destiny.

Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler’s photographer of preference, was a Manhattan personality at the time of the Herr Schwarzenegger shoot. The beauty of her approach to the human body was not lost on those two Aryans. Robert always spoke highly of Arnold.

From childhood, Robert felt stardom in his guts. As an adult, he paid the dues required to achieve media recognition that he was a star artist. He was as bright and intelligent as he was industrious and genuinely “nice.”

He worked; he studied; he schmoozed; he plotted; then he worked some more. He designed his cool formalist art and networked his ambitious life the way rock stars and politicians work a room selling their personality. He pursued fine art goals to achieve his fiscal mission of invading and conquering the rich and famous. With exact deliberation, he chose for friends people who could be useful to him. To his credit, for every door opened to him, he rose to the occasion with grace and talent, delivering the goods with the petulant upper-lip smirk of a Presley.

Robert understood the X ray of his time. The seventies were the golden age of fast food, fast talk, fast drugs, fast friends, and faster sex.

Click! Click!

Photography is the fast-take scion of art.

Never ambition's self-defeating fool, Robert hit the on-ramp to the fast lane with a pocket full of skill, timing, persistence, and luck.

Intent on immediate gratification, he exchanged the slow process of sculpture he had studied at Pratt for the faster expression of photographic collage. Immediately, he felt limited by pictures clipped from the male skin magazines he bought in Times Square.

Subsequently, he decided to shoot his own images.

Robert's first photographic power tool of choice was the Polaroid Instant Land Camera. When he and Sam Wagstaff wed, he took quite a few choice honeymoon pictures. In fact, his interest in photography began with shooting their sex life: Polaroids of genitalia, most likely Sam's, tied up to small boards. Sam, who was no fool, encouraged the photography to increase the frequency of lovemaking and prolong his affair with the much younger, ambitious *artiste*. "No sex tonight? Then how about some photographs?" Which was the same thing. Others, less clever than Sam Wagstaff, have used the same ruse to keep the kick in a declining sexual relationship.

The early instant portraits of Patti Smith, and his own first self-portraits, often incorporate the Polaroid commercial film-packaging as part of the image. Robert, adopting such a pop art trick from Warhol, announced instantly that he was a mixed-media pop artist presenting his photographic concept from subject to framing.

"Did you ever go to Max's Kansas City?" he asked me. "Did you ever *have* to go to Max's Kansas City?" Night after night, out he trekked, buoyed by drugs, supported financially by Patti, hoping the doorman would judge them cool enough to enter and mingle among the other wannabes rubbing tushes with the celebrities: Mick, Bianca, Liza, Halston, and Warhol.

Robert, educated in the rigorous morality of *The Baltimore Catechism*,¹ hoped to God his nude work was obscene and blasphemous. He worried his early portfolio was not erotic enough to sell. He asked the famous homoerotic artist Rex, who draws with a Rapidograph pen while listening to tapes of the Third Reich, “How do you do it? How do you make your drawings so erotic?”

In 1980, I interviewed Rex on Mapplethorpe’s exact question.

1980

ART AND PORN AT THE END OF THE 1970s

REX: By the term “gay artist,” I don’t mean the window dresser at Macy’s creating flower pastels on weekends, or the tidy lesbian making abstract sculpture in her garage. I mean people who have directly undertaken the terribly difficult chore of portraying the human form engaged exclusively in homosexual acts or the homosexual lifestyle. These are the artists to whom I direct my criticism.

JACK: The marketplace here in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Europe, seems suddenly flooded with these “gay artists” of whom you speak. Nude and copulating forms seem everywhere.

REX: Yes. And I find most of them have everything going for them but one vital ingredient: no real sense of real male sexuality! Much of their work is heavy in technique and low on originality, content, and realism. Erotic art without sex is like light without heat! Porn needs sex! If an artist lacks the facility to communicate real sexuality, then he should go into interior decorating, or portrait work, where his skills—and feeling—can be put to better use.

JACK: You use the terms *erotic art* and *porn* interchangeably.

REX: I prefer *porn*. There are no doubts about its intention. It’s like coining a four-letter Anglo-Saxon word from the Greek....*Porn* makes you stand up and be counted! Also, fanatics don’t attack *erotic art* with the same verve they’ll censor *porn*. Of course, the word *art* intimidates most Americans. We all know we’re supposed to “revere art” and “hate porn.” Aren’t labels convenient? People naturally get confused when one is the other, so I like to interchange them frequently when discussing

¹ *The Baltimore Catechism* is the Torah of Catholicism. Every Catholic child must memorize its questions and answers in order to receive First Communion. *The Baltimore Catechism* has become a camp reference.

my professional work. Ambiguity keeps people guessing, and, hopefully, open-minded.

JACK: As an artist, are you a pornographer?

REX: I certainly hope so! Otherwise, I've got a lot of explaining to do where the 1970s went. Still, porn—like beauty—is in the eyes of the beholder. In reality, much of the sex in my drawings is more ritually suggested than actually portrayed. But the end result should cause a hard-on. For men who like men. Really like men.

JACK: You very often load whole feature-length movies into the content of your single-frame drawings. Your realism, intensity, content—all these turn some guys on and others off.

REX: Yeah. Just like real life.

JACK: But for some guys aren't you possibly too rough . . . too masculine?

REX: One can never be too masculine in my book. But make sure you have the right definition for real masculinity.

JACK: Why have you so defiantly devoted your considerable talent to porn as opposed to art?

REX: I wanted to contribute something I felt men needed. To me, the world doesn't need more portraits, still lifes, automobile ads, or clown faces. It seems to me there's never enough porn. Then, too, I like to think that porn separates the homosexual adult men from the gay boys. Art for me is more than entertainment, which merely intends to amuse—not change—you. Art, even when it's porn, can shake you up, by attracting or repelling you. True art has the ability to move you, to change you; but, on the whole, I think people dislike art because in reality they fear being changed.

Porn, on the other hand, asks nothing other than that you enjoy yourself, so powerfully that it actually changes a physical portion of your body from soft to hard. Perhaps porn is a kind of Super-Art.

Robert knew—he always knew—his nudes were not erotic except by intellectual classification. The blistering, raw eroticism he hungered for, he never achieved.

Except for my take on Robert for *Drummer*, the gay press never sought him out to illustrate their masturbatory pages with his photographs. As

George Dureau commented, “Even the book *Uncommon Heroes*, purporting to represent gay legends, ignored Mapplethorpe.”

His work has the trappings of erotica, but he was too cerebral for passion, which he envied in others, especially in blacks. He never evolved beyond the anthropology of erotica into the action-heat of porn.

Robert’s own sexual psyche was cold. Intellectual.

Few admit bedding him. Some who do, say it didn’t work, usually because of the drugs. He was very affectionate, but he wasn’t emotional sex; he was intellectual sex. Accepted for that novelty, he was a stimulating partner, if one likes to have rational sex, which to some is not as torrid as passionate sex. Robert used every sexual fetish and gimmick he could find to try to ignite real heat and passion in himself and his work. That’s why he turned to leather, and that’s why he turned to black men, in his quest of passion’s soul.

Leather fetishists found his documentation fresh because he brought the leather world out of the closet. While S&M leathermen lionized his work for a time, they did not buy it. They themselves took hotter pictures of their own sex style. Perhaps his inability to achieve real eros, personally or on film, was the price fate charged Robert for his careerism.

Ironically, he used eros as a tyro when he needed a gimmick to knock on the doors of patronage. To get the attention of gallery owners, he affected a black leather jacket and black clothing. Black was *de rigueur* at Warhol’s Factory. Black does not clash with displayed artwork. He calculated his presence. He knew he bore a striking resemblance to Eric Roberts in *King of the Gypsies* (1978). He had the satyric face of a falling angel. He smiled and introduced himself as “Robert Mapplethorpe, the pornographic photographer.”

He wanted to be perceived as provocative.

In his jokey bullwhip-up-the-butt *Self Portrait*, Robert wore the popular leather chaps favored by Harley-Davidson owners. Robert’s art history reference may be lost on the chic, but Robert, who dressed like everyone else in the leather bars, was sculptor enough to know he evoked Donatello’s bronze sculpture *Attis-Amor*.

Most leather fetishists have no clue as to the roots of the leather-bar costume of chaps and vest. Donatello’s bronze “biker” has the leatherstream’s requisite mustache, long hair, and shirtless torso. His leathery chaps tighten around his legs and scoop open to emphasize his crotch. His wings even prefigure the biker wings in the trademarked Harley-Davidson motorcycle logo.

“Attis” has strutted around leather bars from the mid-sixties and shows no sign of flagging.

“If I were a movie,” Robert told model Mark Walker, “I’d be *I Am a Camera*.”

His model was the character Sally Bowles in Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* which, adapted as a Broadway play by John Van Druten, became the 1955 Julie Harris film, *I Am a Camera*. Next churned by popular culture into a 1960s Broadway musical, Isherwood’s vehicle became *Cabaret*. Robert’s Studio 54 friend, Liza Minnelli, won an Oscar for her successful portrayal of divine decadence.

If Sally Bowles’s take was good enough to transform Liza into a major star, the take was good enough for Robert.

Provocation and decadence, he figured, could make him a superstar.

“My God!” said British critic Edward Lucie-Smith. “Robert was introduced to me by a psychoanalyst as ‘the most polymorphously perverse person I have ever met in my life.’ What a come-on! We hated each other instantly. He knew I knew he had small talents for sale.”

Undaunted, Robert plotted how to market himself up from the anonymity of the Pratt brat pack. He created his own luck. He hung on to the more successful Patti Smith when she performed her poetry readings. Then, portentously, he met the godmother of the young underground, Holly Solomon, who was the first gallery owner to promote him in two 1977 exhibits.

He styled his personal image and his social quips. As much as his nascent talent, he honed his wit. When millionaire art maven Sam Wagstaff walked up to the young Robert in 1972 and said, “I’m looking for someone to spoil,” Robert didn’t drop a beat.

“You’ve found him,” he said.

The favor was in himself and his stars. Astrologically, Robert and Sam were born on the same day twenty-five years apart. November 4. Both Scorpios. Trivia, perhaps, left over from the Age of Aquarius, when the first question asked was “What’s your sign?” Not so trivial to discover other Scorpios: Pablo Picasso, Claude Monet, Rock Hudson, and Katharine Hepburn. Even before the Reagan White House sought out astrologers, Robert milked astrology (the pentacle) as much as Catholic theology (the crucifix) and fascism (the guns, knives, swastikas), always trying to assert his free will against all the forces of philosophic determinism.

He gathered symbolism where he found it.

From the Wagstaff merge came “The Mapplethorpe.”

As bold as Robert was publicly, personally he was quite shy. At exhibition openings, the ingratiating public Robert could barely conceal the boyish Robert, who nervously fondled Kool cigarettes, champagne glasses, or beer bottles whose labels he peeled off with his fingernails.

His contradictions endeared him. He worked even his insecurities into an appealing sell.

According to photographer Miles Everett, Robert barely tolerated the gallery fans who assailed him, fawning, "Oh Mr. Mapplethorpe, OH Mr. Mapplethorpe, OH MR. MAYYYPLETHORPE!"

At openings, he impersonated James Dean mixed with a lot of The Doors' lead poet/singer, Jim Morrison, whose look Robert had, somewhat by physical resemblance, more by affectation. His public persona hypnotized eager patrons. He could turn it on and turn it off like a method actor.

Susan Strasberg once said that she and her friend Marilyn Monroe were walking down Fifth Avenue and no one noticed them.

Marilyn, who was studying at Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio, said to Susan, "Do you want to see me do *her*?"

The private Norma Jean, standing on the street, adjusted her posture, her walk, and her face.

Suddenly, she was mobbed.

Robert was similarly facile at creating on-cue "The Mapplethorpe."

He stood, enigmatically silent, among the chattering classes at openings, fielding small talk, double-talking, hoping someone interesting might pop up, saying one thing to a person, and then bolting for a taxi where he said quite explosively the opposite. Robert was instantly judgmental. Most people dissatisfied him because they fell short of their potential as perceived by him.

"So why do you do it?" I asked.

"The secret"—he spoke very precisely—"is to kiss their ass until they end up kissing mine with a check."

Robert, for all his sex-and-society playboy wildlife, was as much an artist-workaholic as he was a careerist totally absorbed with concept, design, technique, and subject matter. It all came together in inspired fusion when he stepped behind his camera, totally focused, to create moments perfect.

"His real thrill," according to painter-photographer George Dureau, "was the kill, the sale."

2

I ADSORB YOU IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY GHOST

Robert Mapplethorpe's high profile as a singular talent, as an American original, made him seem at first devoid of influences. In fact, Robert was an excellent student who absorbed the history of photography, reviving and refreshing existing work with his own personal sensibility.

Robert's images are original enough, but many of his photographs carry the influence of other photographers' work. No artist creates *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Robert's personal character becomes more interesting when his work reveals that even The Mapplethorpe was, like Tennyson, a part of all that he had met.

Robert had the gift of creative absorption.

Many of Robert's photographs reveal their source material in cultural myth, in religion, in art, in sex. Joseph Campbell would have approved Robert's apperceptive mass approach to the history of culture. His scholarship was sometimes homage, sometimes satire, but never outright pillage. He reshot the content, with his own pictorialist style, of sculpture, painting, and literature as well as antique and contemporary photographers.

His camera eye took in everything.

His pleasantly derivative work references the Bible, Baudelaire, Beardsley, Rimbaud, George Platt Lynes, and George Dureau, but all reimaged through the identifiable Mapplethorpe Spin—that confrontational edge to render his sources more controversial and commercial.

Always fascinated by Catholicism and the crucifixion of Christ, which he openly copied in the exaggerated arm extension of his *Self Portrait*, 1975, Robert flipped a spin on the blasphemy of the Decadents, those Beardsleyan provocateurs of Art Nouveau. Anything they could do, he would do.

Gustave Moreau, himself quoting Delacroix, set the pattern for Félix Rops, who illustrated *Les Sataniques*. Robert's very early crucifixion and torture of a penis, Number 14, *Untitled*, 1978, owes a direct debt to Rops, who, in the previous century, showed phallic images crucified, as well as a penis itself crucified for the masturbatory pleasure of Mary Magdalene.

Robert, as a collector of historic photography, was well aware of the work of F. Holland Day, the photographer who dieted himself down to emaciation to play the Christus in his own 1898 self-portrait hanging on the cross, *Crucifixion*.

Mapplethorpe was also a collector of the work of his friend Joel-Peter Witkin, whose 1982 crucifixion photograph, *Penitente*, Robert greatly admired.

David Fahey, owner with Randee Klein of Fahey Klein Gallery in Los Angeles, is the authorial force behind *Masters of Starlight*, the definitive book on Hollywood glamour photography that grew out of an article Fahey wrote when he was a contributing editor to *Interview* magazine. *American Photographer* magazine, January 1994, named the genial Fahey among “The 100 Most Important People in Photography.” An early champion of Herb Ritts, Fahey represents Mary Ellen Mark and Bruce Weber. Fahey defends Robert’s borrowings: “All artists learn from one another, and borrow, consciously or unconsciously. This shared consciousness of particular artists working at a particular time in a particular culture is not at all plagiarism.”

Studying the independent Robert’s work for derivation simply makes him all that more interesting. His originality is not demeaned because he had sources.

Warhol was the biggest proponent of borrowing.

Flipped 180 degrees, Robert was also the source-influence for many other photographers. “The student,” Whitman wrote, “who most honors the teacher is the student who outstrips the teacher.”

Sam Wagstaff was the first noted curator to collect historic photography; he gifted Robert with thousands of original prints. In addition to an enormous amount of “anonymous” fine-art antique photography, Robert pored over Edward Weston’s vegetables, Cecil Beaton’s fashion studies, Julia Margaret Cameron’s portraits, the African-American work by George Dureau and Miles Everett, and male physique work by Eadweard Muybridge, Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, Fred Holland Day, George Platt Lynes, and Leni Riefenstahl.

Robert, incidentally, sold most of his antique photography collection in 1982, when his need for cash intersected the going rate of market demand.

Robert was ravenous to learn everything, digest what he wanted, and dump the rest.

A parallel metaphor is Robert’s interest in sexual scatology. Mapplethorpe photographs of this “last taboo” will take years to surface. Private prints exist, even if the negatives have been destroyed. The Vatican’s art collection is rumored to have more than one “forbidden” Mapplethorpe. Far nastier than his leather work, the scatological shots have about as much chance of being identified as did the Grand Duchess Anastasia.

More than one *derriere* photograph deliberately suggests his literal interest in through-put. He asked me to find him a well-built scatologist, someone really into the specific scene, whom he could shoot.

I introduced Robert to Jerry Paderski, lover of Thom Morrison, the Scatology King of San Francisco. At a modest hotel near Powell and Market streets in San Francisco, Robert shot, face occluded by back and shoulders, this famous scatman's butt confronting the camera.

The confrontation quotes Robert's whip up his own ass, but with Jerry, straddling the porcelain toilet ass backwards, ready to deliver his dark communion.

A dirty jockstrap frames the buttocks.

The result was fashion photography that would do print ads for "facial quality" toilet tissue proud.

Rear nudes, which have long been socially acceptable, were made very shocking by Robert, especially when one knows the existence of the scatological photographs. One surviving, particularly literal photograph depicts a set of buttocks straddling a man's shaved head: the anus and the mouth in covert connection.

Mention also might be made of the Mapplethorpe portrait of hyper-masculine author Norman Mailer, who, besides his literary success and antiestablishment antics, appealed to Mapplethorpe because Mailer (the omniscient novelist of *The Naked and the Dead*; the participatory New Journalist of *The Armies of the Night*) had dared to dump scatologically as public metaphor against the U.S. war in Vietnam.

Bob Mizer, whose *Physique Pictorial* magazine influenced Robert, photographed young men since World War II at his Athletic Model Guild Studio in Los Angeles. Mizer, in January 1970, reacted to the full nudity allowed only the year before in print in the U.S. mails. Mizer, who died in 1992, was a civil libertarian who editorialized in his magazine: "How Dirty Can Pictures Get?"

No more nudity can be shown than is now available, unless we consider split beaver and anus shots. When does a picture become anatomically instructive instead of sensual? In trying to outdo their competitors, many photographers in both the girl and boy fields have had their subjects pull protective flesh out of the way to graphically and minutely display the mucous membrane areas of the vagina and anus.

After virgin eyes overcome the initial shock to such intimate revelations, one can settle down to study the intricate anatomical detail formerly only available in expensive medical textbooks.

If the pornographer fails to stimulate us sensually, at least he is providing intellectual stimulation. But soon the public will tire of such medical views. Many people who bought the much touted book, *The Phallus*, which contains page after page of penises at full 8.5 X 11 page size, found themselves bored after the first dozen pages.

At the very time pioneer Mizer was writing, Robert, age twenty-four, was leafing through the pages of *Physique Pictorial*, studying what shock might be. In fact, he was quite pleased when I managed an interview with the usually reclusive Mizer in 1981. Robert Mapplethorpe venerated Bob Mizer as an elder statesman.

Robert was facile at chimerically absorbing the photography of others, putting the spin of the design into his version, which, more than theirs, spoke directly to the taste of the specific avant-garde New York market whose commercial values he courted in the 1970s and 1980s.

“Robert played to his audience,” George Dureau said.

Some photographers and critics, not as kind as David Fahey, are beginning to assess Robert’s appropriation of images as some kind of grand larceny. Hardly. Robert was competitive, but not that aggressive. Certainly, he posed in a self-portrait as a gangster, but he was too moral in character and too talented in his own right to copy others. I witnessed his act inside out. He liked one-upping his peers. He enjoyed the performance art of carrying his Hasselblad like a six-shooter, but that was merely the affectation of a rising young star acting the part of the fastest *nouvelle* gun in town.

By the seventies, paparazzi and hitmen came to share the name “shooters.” Would-be assassin Sara Jane Moore, crowded in with media photographers, took a shot at President Ford in San Francisco. Ex—New York photographer, Harvey Milk, who had emigrated to San Francisco to open a camera shop, was elected as a city supervisor. He was shot to death in his City Hall office in November 1978.

John Lennon was gunned down in 1980 (the night of the afternoon Annie Leibovitz shot the duo of the naked Lennon curled fetally onto his reclining wife/muse). Later, Robert shot Yoko Ono alone, the world’s second-most-famous widow-by-gun.

Her photograph in *Some Women* almost closes the circle.

Robert’s ultimate cultural-terrorist comment on the deadly equation of guns and cameras as assault weapons in an age of terrorists is his cerebral 1982 *Self Portrait* of the photographer as a leather-coated hitman holding a machine gun in front of a pentacle star.

Robert anticipated Madonna and her photographer, Steven Meisel, in his facile self-image changes. Evoking the Bogart-Belmondo gangster mystique, dragged up in a Gestapo-like raincoat, Robert, in this stylized autoshot, also lays claim to the famous Symbionese Liberation Army photo-poster of Citizen Kane's granddaughter, Patty Hearst, as the urban guerrilla, Tonya.

The pentacle, of course, symbolizes his interest in the occult and is matched in symbolic shock in other "secret" S&M photographs by his purposeful use of a Nazi swastika as a back-drop as a naked obese Jewish man is tortured and humiliated by men in full leather.

Jamie Wyeth's 1971 painting of a blond leatherman inspired Robert as much by subject as by Wyeth's pedigree.

"Anything he can do, I can do better."

Robert may have been a hold-up artist, holding up other photographers' work to see how he might make it his own, but he never, ever, not even in his misinterpreted consensual-action leather photographs, condoned violence, which S&M is not.

In fact, the S&M photography, film, and videography of the period are more literally graphic than any of his sanitized single frames. His leathersex photographs relate to the actual leather genre the way staid lobby posters relate only obliquely to the movie.

The leather scene in the seventies was so wild that Robert's work looks like still-life studies when compared with such classic period films as *Erotic Hands* (three-way handballing), *Sebastiane* (Derek Jarman's S&M version of the homoerotic martyrdom of St. Sebastian; a British film, dialogue in Latin, with English subtitles), Wakefield Poole's *Bijou* and *Moving*, and Dave Masur's *Skulls of Akron Fisting Ballet*, which was shot at the Mine Shaft in New York.

Robert deliberately tried to clean the leather scene up to acceptability to push his avant-garde following. He thought the genre legitimate. In fact, he envied director/porn star Fred Halsted, whose films *Sextool* and *L.A. Plays Itself* (with the S&M and fisting sequences intact) were purchased for the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art.

Halsted was top star in the stable of featured guest writers when I began editing *Drummer* in 1977.

Halsted was the S&M Leather King of the West Coast.

Halsted had a drop-dead handsome face, a rugged muscular build, an iconic penis, and an Original Case of LA Attitude.

Halsted didn't care that the editor of *Drummer* wanted him to write a feature profile on Robert. Halsted was not at all interested in meeting

the New Yorker who was, according to Halsted, “a nobody on the make, an opportunist.”

Halsted was one of the first strict arbiters of masculine-identified homosexual taste.

Halsted, an A-list star of the Los Angeles leather scene, wrote erotica, made films, sold drugs, hustled torture-sex for money, starred in porn films, used the word *nigger* erotically, and published his own magazine titled *Package: Fred Halsted's Journal of Men, Fact, and Opinion*, which often featured black bodybuilders. He also owned the LA bar called “Halsted’s.” His staff photographer was the pre-Mapplethorpe Robert Opel. Halsted’s blond lover, business partner, and co-star, Joey Yale, died of AIDS in 1988. Fred Halsted, himself HIV-positive, committed suicide in Los Angeles in 1990.

Halsted, a founding father of the leather culture, dismissed Mapplethorpe in the same way Mapplethorpe dismissed those who were of no use to him. I learned early on never to mention Fred Halsted to Mapplethorpe or Robert Mapplethorpe to Halsted.

Robert, envying Halsted, would have shot Halstedian moving images of S&M, but the leather scene was too active for him to control it the way he needed to exert directorial control.

Robert could not sell the gristly reality of leather.

The reality of leather would be too radical.

He had to formalize leather to sell it.

Once the leatherstream saw Mapplethorpe’s perceivedly exploitationist take, they, following Halsted’s lead, by 1982, turned on him.

Robert, coincidentally with the onset of AIDS in society, abandoned any real walk on the wild side. He had earlier decided to smarten up his leather take to make his foray into leathersex more commercial. He left the faces and personae of whole men behind, settling for the still life of *Finger Inserted in Penis*, and *The Fist*. He further gentrified leather in the photograph of Lyle Heeter and Brian Ridley posed in leather and chains, stylized in their chic Manhattan apartment as if they were a noble couple in an eighteenth-century portrait.

Robert was as incapable of shooting action pictures as was Warhol, whose infamous *Blow Job* (1963) was no more than one sixteen-minute take of the face and shoulders of a piece of rough trade leaning against a wall.

Between 1979 and 1980, Robert was the “official” Mine Shaft photographer. Wally Wallace asked Robert to shoot a party at the club. Robert worked dutifully but he was unable to shoot in the paparazzi style

required so he hid or destroyed the party negatives. Robert, in an uncontrolled environment, could not shoot from the hip. In October 1979, he shot David O'Brien, that year's Mr. Mine Shaft, at the bootblack's stand where inferiors shined the shoes and worshipped the boots of superiors. Actually, the missing "Mapplethorpes" of the Mine Shaft Period as well as the Scatology Period should be of as much interest to historians and critics as the officially released Mapplethorpe photographs.

Robert wisely stayed with the Genre of Masochism that suited his talents. His ultra-Catholic moral vision of the big picture of the human condition empowered him to stretch his aesthetic vision in the small picture of his viewfinder. He was not violent or evil. He had actually a sweet personality. He was intellectually curious by nature. Violence and evil interested him the way they interest theologians, psychiatrists, and sociologists.

Catholicism had made him a "scholar" of good and evil. He was a dualist who saw that bad things happen to good people. This causes problems to viewers who see only one-half the photograph that contains within its literal self a reciprocal mirror. Never lose sight of the mirrors that Robert designed into the elegant frames of his early photographs: the viewers of those photographs see themselves caught in the single frame of the mirror set amidst the photographs.

BANG! YOU'RE DEAD!

The internal evidence for reading a Mapplethorpe is all in each frame. Silent as he was, he made his images speak volumes. Art achieves meaning two ways: by what the artist puts into it and through what the viewer brings to it.

Robert's images, because they are so literal, are often perceived as endorsements of the subject, when, in fact, the single frames are actually also potent question marks asking, "Have you thought about *this*?"

His aesthetic assault was provocation to thought. Same as his sexual seductions. "What if we did *this*?"

The photographer, whom everyone claims to understand, was a journeyman/pilgrim whom few knew. For one so verbally shy, Robert left open the nuances of his inner self to those who knew how to read his personality and his intellect. Everyone who knew Robert has a different take on the person, the man, the artist they knew. Robert carefully kept his confidants separate.

Robert's art must be read with that same empathy. So subtle is his art, that when it is good, it's the best kind of art: the art that, as much as it is

ars gratia artis, presents subliminal truths about the human condition to people in denial about those truths.

Reality changes with time as one's perceptions change. One day a person discovers he *can* read Shakespeare, and that becomes his reality. Shakespeare has always been there, but the reader couldn't accept the artist as part of his reality until his perceptions matured to a point where he could appreciate him.

Robert was what he termed a "prolapsed" Catholic, much encouraged by the coven of ex-Catholics at Warhol's Factory

"You know what a prolapsed Catholic is?" he asked. "It's when, after a night of great sex, your asshole and your soul both fall out on the sidewalk."

A survivor of Catholicism, he arrived in Manhattan from Long Island, knowing that "if he could make it there, he could make it anywhere." He became, long before Tama Janowitz, a slave of New York.

He was intense about his ambition, but he acted cool about his escalating talent. He was improving in visible stages, like a flower going from bud to bloom in time-lapse jumps. He was not vain. He was not temperamental so much as petulant. He was extremely controlling of himself and others, always with the motive of creating public mystique while sometimes inviting real personal intimacy.

"Robert would never talk about his craft," George Dureau said.

Photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, who chatted often with Robert, said, "He should have written about what he was doing. A monograph, at least."

Robert hated writing. He was virtually dyslexic. To compensate, he took on writers as friends. In fact, he worshipped writers: Patti Smith, Jim Morrison, Ed White, Joan Didion, William Burroughs, and Nick Bienes, who appears in a famous Mapplethorpe photograph with a tattooed forehead.

Bienes wrote best-selling Jackie Collins—style novels—*Sins*, *Love-makers*, and *Dazzle*—under the pseudonym Judith Gould. At least one was made into a successful television mini-series. I witnessed Robert salivating at Bienes's New York apartment, which was decorated like a subway car: industrial-rubber flooring, light-rail-vehicle lighting, and video monitors, like windows, recessed into *faux* steel walls, gray carpeting, track lighting, mini-blinds.

Often silent among the talkers, he was a canny artist in the business of art. He merchandised what he could get away with, what lie could pass off, what he could redefine as avant/underground/fashion quality in those early days. He was in pursuit of his own career. He knew fame's value. He

knew its price. Nothing, not even his personal shyness, stood in the way of his sales pitch.

He was no Picasso famous for constantly doodling on napkins and tablecloths, but he was a prodigious producer of product. In his lifetime, he shot thousands of photographs. He virtually “extorted” money from some of his famous clients, so says the 1989 BBC video, insisting his subjects be shot by him at his going rate. Leather friends he cadged for free in exchange for drugs, and, often, a print of themselves.

He licensed his work for greeting cards. He created more than twenty exhibition catalogs and books. Ultimately, he achieved the pinnacle of American success: he was incorporated. He protected his art as product by initiating the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Inc. Not an unusual move for artists.

Robert needed someone to take charge of his studio, as he had no head for the details of business: filings, bookings, billings, cataloging, and archival protection. His Bond Street apartment was an intellectual mess. One afternoon, I found his kitchen table on fire from one of his cigarettes. We stomped the fire out, and he threw everything away, Con Edison bills included, without even looking at what he discarded. In the eighties, the foundation reportedly discovered he had saved few letters, travel dates, or other records from the seventies.

He was smart to hire art-and-business-wise managers.

A multi-million-dollar empire is not easy for a working artist to run. Robert was no mogul. After his death, magazine mail-order advertisements offered an edition of collectible “dinner” plates printed with his signature calla lily. T-shirts are sold in museum shops along with posters and greeting cards. His photographs appear on refrigerator magnets manufactured in places where copyright means nothing.

For the sexually liberated consumer, designer sheets and pillow cases of *Man in a Polyester Suit* may likely be licensed by popular demand to better stores everywhere.

“Robert ran himself,” George Dureau said, “like a department store.”

Robert had American values. He was Sammy Glick turned into Jay Gatsby. “This whole market-driven impulse,” Edward Lucie-Smith said, “to turn Robert into a saint parallels the impulse to canonize Warhol. In my view, this is all bullshit. Robert and Andy were both climbers, and those who facilitated their progress are now trying to justify, not the dead, but *themselves!*”

Robert knew how to read a market. In an age of sound and video bites, when people were famous simply because they were famous, when

arrivistes were applauded for their gall, he assertively generated his own mystique: a heady mix of personality, money machine, sex, drugs, and some truly fine art.

Robert was always on the make to widen his market.

But he kept his photographs central.

Take notice of the furniture and jewelry, the collages and frames, that he designed. Start with the photographs. Consider his printing processes on paper, platinum, and textiles. Look at his frames, which received more critical attention at first than the Mapplethorpe photographs they enhanced.

Robert's inspiration for "important" framing derived as much from his early interest in collage as it did from David Fahey's famous frames that predated the Mapplethorpe frames in New York.

Robert envisioned his photographs hanging in rooms of a certain style. He might even, as Cecil Beaton had, have moved into costume and set design for stage and film. Add a decade to his life and see Robert Mapplethorpe, an auteur director of videos and movies.

By 1977, he was director-videographer of poet-singer Patti Smith. At the last, he was directing and shooting exquisite art video footage of Lisa Lyon, for whom he acted as coach for her "Next Wave of American Women" muscle-and-art nude posing at Laforet Museum Harajuku, Japan, in March/April 1984.

Only two Mapplethorpe photographs of Lisa appear in the Laforet catalog. Most of the photography was by Kishin Shinoyama. An additional two photographs each were provided by Marcus Leatherdale and Helmut Newton.

Robert did not like sharing pages, or exhibits. In 1979, Edward De Celle said, "Robert was scheduled to do a show, 'Trade Off,' with Lynn Davis and Peter Hujar. He refused to participate unless Hujar was dropped. He got his way. He did not trade off."

Robert was child of the mixed-media sixties and seventies. He was protege of Warhol, who spanned photography, painting, underground filmmaking, and designer rock shows. Andy produced, what to me in 1965 was very hip, *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, a touring multimedia happening that featured Nico, Lou Reed, and the Velvet Underground. That was cue enough for Robert to work with Patti, shooting her in stills and video and creating her record covers.

In 1987, "The Mapplethorpe" appeared, for pay and publicity, in a magazine print ad selling Rose's lime juice for Schweppes, Inc.

How odd, in a print ad for lime juice, to discern the self-assured, handsome Robert who was beloved—one time for a long time—when we were chronologically correct and passionately in sync, Robert was loved because he was “Roberto, *caro* Roberto,” because he was sensitive and wild and so very talented, glib, and seductive.

“I’m besieged,” Manhattan collector Joseph Vasta explained, “by acquaintances jumping on the sex-and-photography bandwagon. They misunderstand. Mapplethorpe was about fine art first, and about sex second.”

Making love with Robert was always uncommon erotic sport, and his openness, purposefully displayed to me as his then current court chronicler, afforded opportunity to witness something of his creative process: how he practiced and played with mirrors—and partners’ eyes—to pull together, in this case, the image that he was rehearsing for his self-portraits.

More than once, he honored me, as he also entertained other intimate friends, as his test market.

The snap of Catholicism, art, and fetish focused us, for three years, as two of a kind. For us, each separately, the notorious Mine Shaft, the Everhard, the Slot, and other back rooms and baths of late-night desire were anonymous playgrounds we both enjoyed, but found fruitless when we patronized them together, because each was so judgmental about the tricks the other cruised.

The best of those tandem nights was watching Robert work the after-hours bars, the endless corridors of the baths, keeping his marketing priorities straight, looking for models first, and partners second.

“I feel like a vampire,” Robert said. “I am a vampire.”

He photographed Lisa Lyon with vampire fangs in 1986.

Those nightspots, in New York, plus The Gauntlet Bar and the Manspace bath in LA, and The Brig and The Ambush bars in San Francisco, where he also auditioned talent at baths such as The Slot, The Handball Express, and The Hothouse, were, for Robert, gliding like Gide, Genet, de Sade, Sacher-Masoch, and everyone’s favorite, French philosopher Michel Foucault, through the nightblooming scenarios of sophisticated sensualists, the *source* of both his Rimbaud leathersex and Baudelaire flowersex photographs.

Threeways were never a consideration.

When alone *à deux*, at his place in Manhattan or mine in California, where calla lilies filled the yard with splendid bloom, we cavorted most personally, away from the pleasure gardens of anonymity, away from the lens of personality, tripping twisted tricks of the soul only Catholic boys

seek to discover if what works sexually as mortal sin might work aesthetically as immortal art.

Danger here lies in revealing too much privacy.

Most often in the conjuring bed, his “there” had a “there there,” often enhanced by his baggies of white powders he always kept next to his black cowboy boots with the pointed toes.

Sometimes, however, this man who was always in control of his recreational drugs was physically present in the sheets, while the artist in him had taken the off-ramp to Alpha Centauri.

Robert luckily always made round-trips.

Sometimes, his real persona drifted from the room, leaving behind the curious mix of photographer as model, spinning from within some fantasy image he wanted me, the writer and editor, to critique with erotic, aesthetic, and potential marketing response.

“You’re from Peoria,” he said to me. “Tell me what you think. If it plays in Peoria, it will play anywhere.”

I reminded him I had fled Peoria the way he fled Long Island. For the same reasons.

There was no stopping his enthusiasms. His bed was not so much casting couch as it was rehearsal hall. Many of his photographs remind me of our nights together when I sometimes felt more like an audience of one than a sex partner.

Robert in heat was a cast of thousands.

His self-portraits reveal his pursuit of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Robert learned to give face and attitude from Warhol.

Working as a staff photographer for Andy’s *Interview* magazine, Robert bonded with Warhol in mutual admiration. At Warhol’s knee, he learned the brevity of fame and the tricks of commercial marketing.

Andy taught Robert a thing or two about chasing money and celebrity. Warhol, more cynical about his art than Robert ever was about his, often induced other artists into creating his paintings, prints, and films, which he then signed as his own. This Tom Sawyer–fence attitude toward authenticity was accepted, not as a scam, but as yet another artful Warhol quirk of eccentric genius.

To Robert, Andy’s take on authenticity justified—in a kind of retospin—Robert’s own habit of reprising other artists’ work to give it the Mapplethorpe treatment, because they hadn’t fully formalized their style. What he meant was he could make the material more commercial.

Robert received no substantial cash from Warhol for his work in *Interview*. He traded his photographs for Andy’s endorsement. Never

underestimate the power of the “gay mafia.” Gallery owners, magazine editors, and the insular Manhattan art crowd were delighted by Robert’s person, his credentials, and, most importantly, his obvious talent. And not without reason.

Robert’s early work in collage and photography displays had virtually the same power as the mature Robert. Vasta said he was stunned by the early date (1969) of two brilliant collage box sculptures by Robert, one of which sold at Sotheby’s in 1990 for \$22,000.

Amusing, ingratiating, always climbing, Robert catered to the Famous Who Were Famous for Being Famous by giving them the opportunity to do something famous, by appointment, with the famous photographer consecrated by High Priest Warhol.

Nouvelle photographie.

Co-conspirators, the FBF’s ran to his studio, where fame could collide in the nuclear accelerator of personality. Candy Darling, the Warhol superstar whom Robert shot in 1973, once complained to Robert that it was so dreadfully boring and difficult to find something famous to do everyday.

Life in Manhattan, to the boy from Long Island, was a dream come true, and a game, which he won long before he died, because his purpose was to make art, gain celebrity, and make money.

On cue, he could play Puck, Hamlet, or Faust.

3

BLIND PARENTS RAISE INVISIBLE CHILD

Shock was Robert’s medium in the shocking seventies: the shock of burning bras, the shock of abortion, the shock of sexual liberation, the shock of losing Vietnam, the shock of terrorist Olympics, the shock of Watergate, the shock of Americans hostage in Iran, the cumulative culture shock that led to the aftershocks in the eighties’ shock of AIDS, Iran-Contra, the Republican deficit, the destruction of the middle class, the meltdown of the nuclear family, the epidemic of drugs, the homeless, the savings-and-loan scandals, the blasphemy of television evangelists, the rise of shock-rock music, shock-trash television, and shocking U.S. policies in the Mideast.

Every item in this litany is more obscene than any Mapplethorpe snapshot ever.

To be noticed, Robert responded in kind.

He had to shock the shell-shocked.

Shock was all that commanded attention.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS WORK

Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Theater of Assault, based on Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, responded to the age of lies and liars on stage. Ken Russell directed shockingly beautiful sexual biographies of artists and musicians and clergy on screen. Tennessee Williams said, "We must yell 'Fire!' in the burning straw-house of the world." Flannery O'Connor wrote in defense of her shocking gothic-grotesque stories: To the almost deaf you have to shout. "To the almost blind, you have to paint in very large letters."

Ezra Pound put it right: "Artists are the antennae of the race."

Robert was no more shocking than his times.

In fact, no one really noticed he was all that shocking until his controversial photographs were more than a decade old.

When the style changed, politicians, with no more ability at art interpretation than literal fundamentalism, could not comprehend the metaphor that art is to literal life. It's good art, when its uncomfortable revelations tweak our personal and cultural psyches out of comfortable states of denial and reveal dysfunction.

Unless they are propagandists, evangelists, or entertainers, artists tell the truth. Essentially, with subversive neo-classicism, Robert sexualized death.

If he couldn't find personal passion, he could mix eros and thanatos intellectually in his work. Love and death catch people's attention.

When an artist equates love with death, two taboos are broken.

When that artist himself begins dying of an erotically transmitted disease, the themes he always played become more insistent.

Robert's work was not pornographic. Robert's work is all about love and death.

He had no answers. He had only increasingly intelligent questions. That was his assault on society.

When Mapplethorpe became a political issue, everyone discussed sex. (That was good.) What they really feared in his work was his cold intimations of their own mortality. (That was scary.)

In an age of plague, with AIDS spreading unchecked and indiscriminately through the world's population, Robert gave face to death.

Robert instinctively tripped the circuits of the exact American psyche that Ernest Becker so brilliantly diagnosed in *The Denial of Death* (1976).

Part of the joke was on Robert. At first, he was a tease, a bubble dancer, a stripper of psychosexual clothes. It was fun to be naughty. He had little idea at the start that his camera was Pandora's box. The career

that started as a lark to make money elicited from critics and connoisseurs a reaction more serious than Robert ever intended to achieve.

The camera, that stealer of souls, that all-seeing Third Eye, revealed to him a shocking existential vision.

David HersHKovits, in his introduction to the 1987 Japanese edition of *Robert Mapplethorpe*, from Parco publishing, gets it: "Careful and reverent, he humbles himself before the subject and allows it to be."

"A poem," Robert Frost had said, "need not mean but only be."

Robert, indeed, as Witkin hoped, bowed to the power of his medium. What began as fun turned into philosophy.

Sort of.

The proof lies in his self-portraits. Lay them out in succession from the laughing boy to the dying *eminence grise*.

In his final autobiographical self-portrait, Robert changed the sharp focus on his face in his earlier autopix to a soft focus. In his *ave atque vale*, (hail and farewell) the skull-cane pulls the focus. And Robert's beloved, ravaged face drifts away from the camera like the ghost, the spirit of an ancient Irish story teller.

As with the occult, one can't fool around with art and not eventually get into deep shit. Especially when the art, turned confrontational, questions middle-class fundamentalist perceptions, not just of eros and thanatos, not just of nudity and violence, not just of gender and race and class, but of the human condition.

Photography changed Robert. Its discipline pulled his intellectual focus together. Film developed his interior life. Always the expansion of one life expands the culture in which it is lived. Robert expanded responsibly: morally, aesthetically, and commercially.

The mature Robert kept mastery of his early glib gifts for superficial glamour even as he introduced more serious material. He came to grips with himself as a person who was an artist. At the beginning, he had no notion that he would transcend himself and master the perfect moment.

The perfect moment of a single frame cancels time.

