

Melancholia and Moralism

Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics

D O U G L A S C R I M P

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THE BOYS IN MY BEDROOM

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In 1983, I was asked to contribute to the catalog of an exhibition about the postmodernist strategy of appropriation organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia—a museum now placed on probation by the National Endowment for the Arts.¹ I chose as a negative example—an example, that is, of old-fashioned *modernist* appropriation—the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. Here is part of what I wrote:

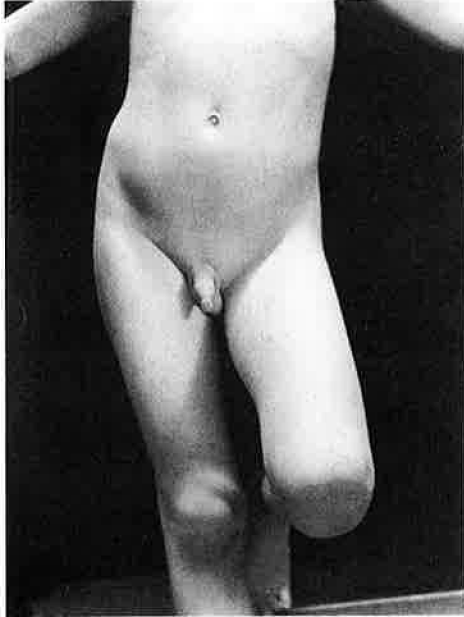
*Mapplethorpe's photographs, whether portraits, nudes or still lifes (and it is not coincidental that they fall so neatly into these traditional artistic genres), appropriate the stylistics of prewar studio photography. Their compositions, poses, lighting, and even their subjects (mondain personalities, glacial nudes, tulips) recall Vanity Fair and Vogue at that historical juncture when such artists as Edward Steichen and Man Ray contributed to those publications their intimate knowledge of international art photography. Mapplethorpe's abstraction and fetishization of objects thus refer, through the mediation of the fashion industry, to Edward Weston, while his abstraction of the subject refers to the neoclassical pretenses of George Platt Lynes.*²

In contrast to Mapplethorpe's conventional borrowings, I posed the work of Sherrie Levine:

When Levine wished to make reference to Edward Weston and to the photographic variant of the neoclassical nude, she did so by simply rephotographing Weston's pictures of his young son Neil—no combinations, no transformations, no additions, no synthesis. . . . In such an undisguised theft of already existing images, Levine lays no claim to conven-

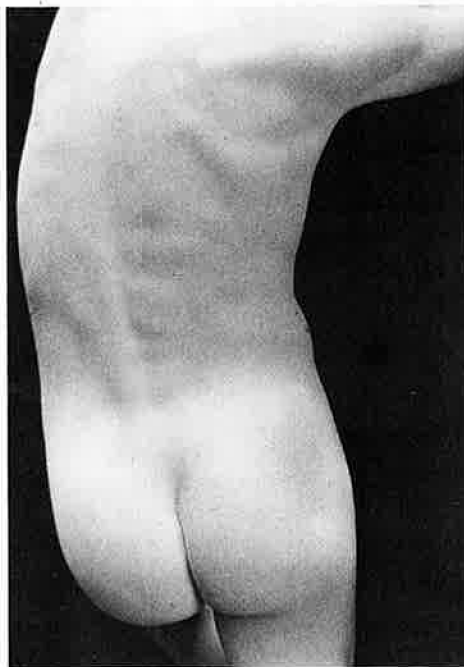
1. As punishment for having organized *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* with funding approved by the National Endowment for the Arts, the ICA was subjected, through an amendment to a 1989 congressional appropriations measure, to a five-year probationary period during which its activities would be specially scrutinized by the NEA.

2. Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in *Image Scavengers: Photography* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1982), p. 30.



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Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (After Edward Weston)*, 1981.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Michael Reed*, 1987

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Robert Mapplethorpe, *Torso*, 1985

(© The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe. Used with permission).

*tional notions of artistic creativity. She makes use of the images, but not to constitute a style of her own. Her appropriations have only functional value for the particular historical discourses into which they are inserted. In the case of the Weston nudes, that discourse is the very one in which Mapplethorpe's photographs naively participate. In this respect, Levine's appropriation reflects on the strategy of appropriation itself—the appropriation by Weston of classical sculptural style; the appropriation by Mapplethorpe of Weston's style; the appropriation by the institutions of high art of both Weston and Mapplethorpe, indeed of photography in general; and finally, photography as a tool of appropriation.*³

For several years I had hanging in my bedroom Levine's series of Weston's young male nudes. On a number of occasions, a certain kind of visitor to my bedroom would ask me, "Who's the kid in the photographs?" generally with the implication that I was into child pornography. Wanting to counter that implication, but unable easily to explain what those photographs meant to *me*, or at least what I *thought* they meant to me, I usually told a little white lie, saying only that they were photographs by a famous photographer of his son. I was thereby able to establish a credible reason for having the pictures without having to explain postmodernism to someone I figured—given the nature of these encounters—wouldn't be particularly interested anyway.

But some time later I was forced to recognize that these questions were not so naive as I'd assumed. The men in my bedroom were perfectly able to read—in Weston's posing, framing, and lighting the young Neil so as to render his body a classical sculpture—the long-established codes of homoeroticism. And in making the leap from those codes to the codes of kiddie porn, they were stating no more than what was enacted, in the fall of 1989, as the law governing federal funding of art in the United States. That law—proposed by right-wing senator Jesse Helms in response to certain of Mapplethorpe's photographs—directly equated homoeroticism with obscenity and with the sexual exploita-

3. Ibid., p. 30.

tion of children.⁴ Of course, all of us know that neither Weston's nor Mapplethorpe's photographs would be declared obscene under the supreme court's *Miller v. California* ruling, to which the appropriations bill pretended to defer; but we also know that NEA grant applications do not come before a court of law.⁵ For those considering whether to fund arts projects, it is the equation itself that would matter. As Jesse Helms himself so aptly said of his victory: "'Old Helms will win every time' on cutting Federal Money for art projects with homosexual themes."⁶ And indeed he will. As I hope everyone remembers, in 1987, when gay men still constituted over 70 percent of all reported cases of AIDS in the United States, 94 senators voted for the Helms amendment to prevent safe sex information directed at us from being funded by Congress.⁷

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Given these assaults on our sexuality and indeed on our lives, what are we to say now of the ways we first theorized postmodernism? To stay with the parochial debate with which I began, what does the strategy of

4. The compromise language of the notorious Helms amendment to the NEA/NEH appropriations bill read:

None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce materials which in the judgment of the National Endowment for the Arts or National Endowment for the Humanities may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. (*Congressional Record—House*, October 2, 1989, p. H6407)

5. Moreover, in flagrant disregard of their own inclusion of the *Miller* language, the new law declared a Sense of the Congress, clearly referring to photographs by Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, "that recently works have been funded which are without artistic value but which are criticized as pornographic and shocking by any standards" (*Congressional Record—House*, October 2, 1989, p. H6407). For an illuminating discussion of *Miller* in relation to the Right's attack on the NEA, see Carole S. Vance, "Misunderstanding Obscenity," *Art in America* 78, no. 5 (May 1990), pp. 39–45.

6. Maureen Dowd, "Jesse Helms Takes No-Lose Position on Art," *New York Times*, July 28, 1989, p. A1.

7. See my discussion of this other notorious Helms amendment in "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," this volume.

appropriation matter now? My answer is that we only now know how it might really matter.

In October of 1989, the third annual conference of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale began with violence unleashed on the participants by the Yale and New Haven police forces.⁸ The trouble started with the arrest of Bill Dobbs, a lawyer and member of Art Positive, a group within New York's AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) that was formed in response to the Helms amendment. Dobbs was presumed to be responsible for putting up a series of what the police claimed were obscene posters around the sites of the conference. The 11x17 xerox posters—showing various images of and texts about sex appropriated from such sources as old sex education manuals, sexology texts, and pulp novels, and accompanied by the words “Sex Is” or “Just Sex”—were produced by the anonymous San Francisco collective Boy with Arms Akimbo, also formed to fight the Helms amendment. The collective's goal was to get as many people as possible involved in placing in public places imagery showing various cultural constructions of sexuality. Four thousand of the “Sex Is” posters were wheatpasted around San Francisco, and they also appeared in Sacramento, on various Bay Area college campuses, in Boston, New York, Tel Aviv, and Paris, as well as, of course, New Haven. For the month prior to the Yale lesbian and gay conference, the “Sex Is” xeroxes were shown in the city-sponsored San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, situated across from San Francisco City Hall, in an exhibition entitled “What's Wrong with This Picture? Artists Respond to Censorship.”

But it is precisely the censorial intent of the Helms amendment, to which Boy with Arms Akimbo's pictures were intended to call attention at the Yale conference, that was effaced in the reporting of the events of that weekend. While charges against others arrested in the fracas were quickly dropped, those against Dobbs were not. And Yale president

8. The conference, entitled “Outside/Inside,” was held on the weekend of October 27–29, 1989. The police-instigated violence occurred on Friday evening, October 27.

Benno Schmidt adopted an uncompromising stance. Rather than apologize for the homophobic actions of his police, he sought to exonerate them through an “impartial” investigation, conducted as usual by the police themselves, to adjudicate the obscenity call and to consider possible police misconduct.⁹ Moreover, Schmidt was quoted in the *New Haven Register* as saying that he thought at least one of the posters would be considered obscene using the supreme court’s definition. The court’s caveat regarding “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value” was simply disregarded by this so-called expert in First Amendment law, since the serious *political* value of Boy with Arms Akimbo’s posters—that they constitute a form of political speech about Helms’s equation of homoeroticism with obscenity—was never even admitted as an issue.¹⁰

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9. On November 30, the *New York Times* reported that “charges against Mr. Dobbs were eventually dropped,” and that “two Yale police officers will be disciplined for using ‘poor judgment.’” Thus, for the violence many of us protesting the initial arrests experienced at the hands of both Yale and New Haven police, the officers’ disciplining will consist of a reprimand for one and three days without pay for the other. This accords perfectly with a number of recent cases in which the police have investigated their own abuses, as well as with a general failure to take attacks against gay men and lesbians seriously.

10. I wrote an open letter of protest to President Schmidt, the text of which I reproduce here:

As the keynote speaker for the third annual conference sponsored by the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale last weekend, I am writing you to express my outrage at the homophobic violence unleashed against us on Friday evening, violence initiated by the Yale police and escalated by the New Haven police. In addition, I write to protest the Yale administration’s wholly inadequate response to this violence. When we gathered for that response on Saturday morning, we were treated to a series of insults: first, that you did not consider homophobic violence against us as requiring your presence; second, that the very people who suffered or witnessed this violence were told that “the facts were not yet known”; and finally, that the violence itself could not even be named. We were told merely that Yale University supports freedom of expression—a vague and easy claim—and that an impartial investigation would take place.

Gay men and lesbians have very little reason to have faith in “impartiality” in these matters, especially after having experienced the atmosphere at Yale. Throughout the weekend, conference members were subjected to homophobic remarks wherever we went. My own speech Saturday night was deliberately disrupted by students

Boy with Arms Akimbo is only one example of how the postmodernist strategy of appropriation has been transformed through its shift from a grounding in art-world discourse to a grounding in movement politics.

squealing their car tires outside the Whitney Humanities Center. Since apparently no one in an official capacity at Yale attended my speech, I want to reconstruct for you some of my opening remarks.

Participants in the Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference this past weekend included some of the most distinguished and committed gay and lesbian scholars and activists working today. Among them were members of the international community of people fighting against the AIDS epidemic, including people living with AIDS. It is my opinion that until all of us are satisfied with Yale University's support of our work, including substantial financial commitments to the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, we should no longer lend credibility to Yale's pretense of upholding free expression by our presence at Yale. The University's claim to respect free speech will remain hollow until you, as president, issue an unambiguous public statement condemning all forms of homophobia—named as such. This condemnation must also extend to labeling representations of our sexualities as obscene. Moreover, we expect a statement of positive support for all forms of expression by gay men and lesbians of our sexualities.

I was deeply impressed and moved by the Yale students and faculty who organized and participated in the Lesbian and Gay Studies conference. They deserve all the credit for the success of the conference—success in the face of the university's variously expressed contempt for us. In the past you have belittled the strong presence at Yale of a gay and lesbian community by catering to, rather than countering, homophobic charges and fears. In light of that injury, and of the added insults of this past weekend, it is now imperative that your gay and lesbian scholars be given not only protection in a clearly homophobic environment, but every encouragement to carry on with their courageous work. This is not to be accomplished by your occasional chats with an openly gay professor, but rather by meeting directly with the full gay constituency at Yale to hear their grievances and to follow their guidance, and by taking a strong public position.

The international community of lesbian and gay scholars and activists will not let this matter rest until the demands issued at the conference are met to the letter.

After a version of the present essay appeared in *Art in America*, Benno Schmidt wrote a letter to the editor, to which I was given the chance to reply. After seeing my response, Schmidt withdrew his letter, claiming that it had not been meant for publication. I include here the text of my letter, from which some of the contents of Schmidt's letter may be inferred:

Benno Schmidt's letter only reiterates his uncompromising stance regarding homophobic actions at Yale during the third annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference

Within the AIDS activist movement, and especially within ACT UP New York, a certain savvy about this narrow aspect of postmodernist theory has been especially enabling. The graphic work of the Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, and many others, the video activism of DIVA TV (for Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) grows very directly out of propositions of postmodernist theory. Assaults on authorship have led to

last October. He confirms my charge that he sought to exonerate his police force by ordering them to investigate themselves (if he could not anticipate the conclusions, he must be ignorant of the usual results of self-investigations by police in this country). Schmidt's order was in flagrant disregard of the demand by the conferees that "the university panel reviewing the actions of the Yale police include significant representation of the university's lesbian, gay and bisexual community." Moreover, Schmidt fails to mention that, even under the biased circumstances of the investigation, two police officers were disciplined for infractions of procedures and serious errors of judgment. Schmidt also withholds the information that a Yale graduate student has officially challenged the accuracy of the police investigation and that the Yale Police Advisory Board has commenced an independent investigation.

What Schmidt refers to as the "views of the conference organizers" are in fact only the views of five Yale faculty members (all of them male)—explicitly so stated: "the 'we' of this letter should be understood only to include the undersigned faculty members." A very different position is held by other conference organizers, especially graduate students, who did the bulk of the work. Schmidt appears to be indifferent to their views. And what of the views of those of us subjected to the police violence? Not a single one of the demands drawn up by conference goers in response to the actions of the Yale and New Haven police has been met.

If Schmidt thinks "judgments in the area of obscenity are notoriously subtle and difficult to make," why was he so easily able to assert the probable obscenity of "at least one of the posters," as was reported in the press?

It seems odd, too, that postering in a university building where conference sessions would take place the following day, and this at 8:30 in the evening, should seem to Schmidt an obvious security threat. Rather the police action is to be explained by the remarks of the Yale law professor who phoned the police to complain about what she called "gay and lesbian crap"—this from the police transcript of the phone call.

Benno Schmidt's attitude toward gays and lesbians at Yale was made clear in 1987, when he wrote a letter to Yale alumni reassuring them that Yale was not nearly as gay a place as they might have read in the press. In other words, gays and lesbians are for him a public relations problem. When, as keynote speaker of the conference, I wrote Schmidt a letter abhorring the homophobia variously expressed against us, including the disruption of my own speech by students squealing their car tires outside the lecture hall, I received no response. Only now that I've written in a more public forum does the president have the "courtesy" to reply.

anonymous and collective production. Assaults on originality have given rise to dictums like “if it works, use it”; “if it’s not yours, steal it.” Assaults on the institutional confinement of art have resulted in seeking means of reaching affected and marginalized communities more directly.¹¹

But finally, I want to say something about what was excluded from post-modernist theory, which made it considerably less enabling—excluded not only from the aesthetic theory I’ve been addressing, but also from more global theories. My own blindness in the Mapplethorpe/Levine comparison is symptomatic of a far greater blindness. My failure to take account of what those men in my bedroom insisted on seeing was a failure of theory generally to consider what we are now only beginning to be able to consider—what, in fact, was being variously considered at the Yale lesbian and gay studies conference: the dangerous, even murderous, ways in which homophobia structures every aspect of our culture. Sadly, it has taken the horror of AIDS and the virulent backlash against gays and lesbians that AIDS has unleashed to teach us the gravity of this theoretical omission. What must be done now—if only as a way to begin rectifying our oversight—is to *name* homophobia, the very thing that Yale’s President Schmidt so adamantly refused to do, the very thing that the entire membership of Congress refuses to do.

Returning once again to the comparison with which I began, but this time taking into consideration what the boys in my bedroom saw, the photographs by Mapplethorpe and Levine no longer seem definitional of postmodernism through their opposition. Appropriating Weston’s photographs of Neil, Levine claimed them as her own. Seen thus in the possession of a woman, the nude pictures of the young boy no longer appear, through their deployment of a classical vocabulary, as universal aesthetic expression. Because Levine has “taken” the photographs, we recognize the contingency of gender in looking at them. Another consequence of that contingency is made explicit by Mapplethorpe. Appropriating Weston’s style, Mapplethorpe puts in the place of Weston’s child

11. See Douglas Crimp, with Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

the fully sexualized adult male body. Gazing at that body, we can no longer overlook its eroticism. That is to say, we must abandon the formalism that attended *only* to the artwork's style. In both cases, then, we learn to experience Weston's modernist photographs not as universal images, but as images of the universal constituted by disavowing gender and sexuality; and it is such deconstructions of modernism's claims to universality—as well as its formalism—that qualify as postmodernist practices.

What made Boy with Arms Akimbo's posters a provocation to the Yale police and its president was perhaps after all not their imputed obscenity, but rather their *variety*, their proliferation of different ways of showing *Sex Is . . . Just Sex*. Or rather, as Jesse Helms has made clear, difference, in our culture, *is* obscenity. And it is this with which postmodern theory must contend.

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