Twelve High School Students, a Teacher, a Professor and Robert Mapplethorpe’s Photographs: Exploring Cultural Difference Through Controversial Art

Terry Barrett
Sharon Rab

This is a descriptive study of a student field trip to the controversial Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibition, The Perfect Moment. The study is constructed from the perspectives of a high school English teacher, some of her students, and an art education professor serving in the capacity of a visiting art critic. Implications are forwarded for educating about controversial art of subcultures and educating for understanding cultural differences through art.

Introduction

A dozen high school students, an English teacher, and an art education professor serving as art critic-in-residence had intense, educationally significant experiences as they crossed cultural boundaries when considering the controversial photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, an artist who was a homosexual and died of AIDS in 1989. The students and teacher are from a suburb of Dayton, Ohio, not far from Cincinnati where Mapplethorpe’s travelling exhibition, The Perfect Moment, was shown. They and the professor from a university in the state visited the exhibition one afternoon after school. In doing so the participants crossed cultural boundaries. Mapplethorpe’s art tests the tolerance of people within mainstream culture. His photographs explicitly depict a gay sadomasochistic sub-culture and were foreign to these students of a predominantly white, conservative, working class community. Art such as this is usually not acknowledged in schools, and much less an object of study. The first part of this article provides contextual information about the exhibition, the school setting and students. Narratives of the students, teacher, and professor about their experiences form the main body of this study. Contextual information and content of the narratives are discussed with implications for education that would examine the art of a subculture that strongly challenges dominant cultural values.

Context of the Mapplethorpe Controversy

In the summer of 1989 photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe became the center of national political turmoil. The director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. cancelled its showing of The Perfect Moment for fear that the exhibition’s proximity to legisla-
tors would endanger future government funding of the arts at a time when the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts was scheduled for Congressional review. The exhibit was partly financed by funds from the endowment. The decision to cancel the exhibition came amidst furor over another piece of art financed by endowment funds — *Piss Christ*, a Cibachrome photograph by Andres Serrano of a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine.

Merely describing Mapplethorpe’s photographs was made controversial by a prominent art critic. In a Sunday issue of the *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer (1989) declared: “I cannot bring myself to describe these pictures in all their gruesome particularities, and it is doubtful that this newspaper would agree to publish such a description even if I could bring myself to write one” (p. 7). In the same paper one week later, however, Grace Glueck (1989) described the exhibition with no apparent difficulty:

The Mapplethorpe show is a retrospective of the artist’s work that contains images depicting homosexual and heterosexual erotic acts and explicit sadomasochistic practices in which black and white, naked or leather clad men and women, assume erotic poses. Along with these photographs are fashionable portraits of the rich and trendy, elegant floral arrangements and naked children—images that might not necessarily be considered indecent if viewed singly but that in this context seem provocative. (p. 1)

Potentially offensive pictures that neither of these two critics mention in detail are a man urinating into another’s mouth, a close-up of a fist and forearm penetrating an anus, a close-up of mutilated male genitals, and a portrait of the artist with a bull whip protruding from his anus. These particular pictures are from the X, Y, Z Portfolio. It is displayed in three rows, each with thirteen photographs presented in a long grid on a table that angles up from an adult viewer’s waist. These black and white photographs are smaller (c. 8” x 10”) than the rest of the photographs in the exhibition. They are accompanied by finely printed, poetic text that is hung on the wall. In Cincinnati the portfolio was in a room of its own behind a red velvet rope.

Controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe’s work was particularly heated in Cincinnati. During the opening of the exhibition, sheriff’s deputies and Cincinnati police officers shut down the exhibition for ninety minutes to make videotapes of it for evidence. As they did, protesters chanted, “Tianmen Square!,” “Fascists!,” and “Gestapo go home!” The center and its director were indicted by a grand jury on two counts of pandering pornography. The first count cited a photograph of a nude boy and one of a partially nude girl. The second count cited five
photographs from the X, Y, Z Portfolio. After eight months of legal battles in this landmark obscenity case, the director and the center were acquitted on October 5, 1990.

Context of the Museum Visit

The excursion to the Mapplethorpe exhibition was part of a year long, after school arts program for which high school students received academic credit. They had seen other exhibitions during the year. This was the final trip, and included a visit to an artist’s studio after the exhibition and dinner. Because of the nature of the Mapplethorpe exhibition, the teacher made this trip elective. The art center placed an age restriction of eighteen years to enter the exhibition. Because of the age restriction, the juniors and some of the seniors in the group were not allowed to attend.

To familiarize the students with Mapplethorpe’s work so that they could better decide their level of involvement, the teacher had books containing the artworks discreetly placed in the school library. Some of the parents knew about the trip, but since the students were eighteen, parental consent was not necessary. The son of the president of the Parent Teachers Association was part of the group, attended the exhibition, and later discussed it with his parents.

The professor had an hour-long session with the students and their teacher during an afternoon class period the day they went to the exhibition. He began the session by introducing himself as a visiting art critic. He said that he would lead them in a discussion of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, but that he was not there to convert anyone to a position for or against the photographs, and encouraged them to choose their own positions regarding the controversy. He stressed, however, that he was there to facilitate an open and rational critical discussion, and hoped that all would be respectful of each other and tolerant of differences of opinion.

Prior to the class he had removed the spine of The Perfect Moment catalogue (Mapplethorpe, 1988). He handed one photographic page to each member of the group including the teacher. Anyone could exchange an image for another if they were too uncomfortable with the one they received. Since they had previously, on their own, seen Mapplethorpe’s books in the library, and since he had only an hour of discussion with them, he chose the most controversial images so that they would be better prepared for the exhibition. He led them in an organized discussion, asking each to first describe the photograph he or she was holding. Then as a group they interpreted the photographs, answering the question “What are these about?” Finally they judged the photographs, discussing their value and whether they should have been

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made and shown. The discussion at first was subdued and tense, but soon became spontaneous and lively, with a friendly tone.

At the arts center, the Educational Projects Director guided the group in a touring lecture of the exhibition. The students knew her from earlier visits. She is an artist and the group visited her studio later that evening after eating at a fast food restaurant. All returned to the high school parking lot at about 11:00 that night.

The teacher asked the students to record their impressions and feelings about the Mapplethorpe exhibition in a journal and asked that these be shared with the professor on a voluntary basis. Eight of the 12 students complied with the request. More might have complied but their spring days were also filled with the excitement of prom and graduation. Their journal entries were written in the days immediately following their visit. Excerpts from their journals are quoted below with their permission and under fictitious names. The teacher wrote an account of the experience that was accepted for publication in the Ohio Journal of the English Language Arts (Rab, in press). Portions were adapted and edited for this article. She met with the students during the summer, shared her written report with them and asked if they had any problems with it. They did not. The professor's account was written from notes six months after the event.

Participants

The student group was composed of twelve high school seniors from one of several suburbs outside of Dayton. Dayton's population is predominantly black, secondarily Appalachian. At the time of this study the suburban public high school had about 1800 students, about 1700 of whom were white. Five of the students in the participating group were male and seven were female. Eleven were white and one was Chinese-American. All of the students who participated in the Mapplethorpe experience are currently in college.

The teacher is a white female in her mid-forties. She holds a B.A. in English and a M.A. in Education and has accrued about forty hours in arts education. She teaches courses in English literature methods at the University of Dayton. At the high school where she has been employed full-time since graduating from college, she teaches honors classes in English literature, composition, comedy and satire, and creative writing. She advises an extra-curricular fine arts club with more than 250 student members who attend arts events and exhibitions. She is also advisor to the school's literary magazine. She taught all of the students in the group in at least one course and is advisor to all of them in either or both the club and the literary magazine. She met the professor during a summer media institute where he was teaching
criticism. When the opportunity arose to take students to the Mapplethorpe exhibition, she invited the professor to become part of the educational experience as a facilitator of art criticism.

The professor is a white male in his mid-forties. He is an associate professor in a large department of art education where he teaches criticism courses, writes art criticism, edits a critical newspaper, and researches the teaching and learning of criticism. He serves as an art-critic-in-education for the Ohio Arts Council, engaging school and civic populations in critical discussions of contemporary art (Barrett, in press). In the capacity as art-critic-in-education, he was invited to the high school by the English teacher for a two-day residency. He met with three classes and led critical discussions of contemporary paintings, met with the student travel group to discuss Mapplethorpe’s photographs, and conducted a session about the photographs with about fifteen teachers who voluntarily attended an after school discussion. His fee was paid by the arts council, and the school system paid his lodging and travel expenses.

The Teacher’s Account

I did not arrange the trip to the Mapplethorpe exhibition to be sensational. A series of circumstances led us to it. This was to be our fourth scheduled trip to the center. Many of the students had previously seen Serrano’s photographs, a small number of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, and other sexually explicit material on previous trips. But Mapplethorpe was different for them and for me.

As an English teacher and a fine arts sponsor, I saw this exhibit as a good opportunity to confront issues of censorship in the arts and literature. Since we had scheduled the Mapplethorpe exhibition well before local controversy about it arose, I felt that if I had cancelled the trip, I would have been censoring my students’ experiences. However, I was uneasy about taking them into such a difficult situation without preparation. I remembered my own discomfort when I was originally confronted with the images.

At my request, the high school librarian brought two Mapplethorpe books from the public library into the school library. One book included a series of photographs of women, some nude, none erotic. The other depicted black men, most of them nude, some in homoerotic poses. As I sat in the writing center in the library during a lull between students, I surreptitiously turned the pages of the erotic poses. The principal, a friend, entered; I started, hid the book, and blushed.

The librarian kept the books in the back room of the library and I alerted the students: If they had any hesitations about going to the exhibition, they should quietly take a look at the books. I confessed to
them that I had not behaved very maturely when I had first seen the pictures—I had giggled and blushed and while I was not shocked, I was obviously nervous. When we met to discuss whether we should attend the exhibition, I asked what they thought about the photographs. Steve raised his hand and said, “We think that you lead a sheltered life.”

When Terry (the visiting critic) came to school in May, I had him meet the students going to the Mapplethorpe exhibition in a separate group. They sat in a circle in my room while Terry distributed photographs. The students wanted me to go first. I described Mapplethorpe’s self-portrait with the bullwhip. I spoke evenly, oddly unembarrassed—perhaps because the students and I had already established a relationship built on trust.

Susan was next. She calmly described the hotly-contested picture of a little girl with exposed genitalia. Brian held the photograph of the man in the three-piece suit, a depiction of a black man from shoulder to knee, mid-stride with penis protruding well beyond the length of the zipper placket. Brian described the photograph using an elaborate series of polite euphemisms. Karen had the most difficult picture—difficult in all respects. She at first could not decipher the sick riddle of male genitalia wrapped in wire and bleeding. Once she understood it, she described it, although she cringed as she spoke. When I asked each of them if they still wanted to see the exhibit, all of them decided to go and two hours later we headed for Cincinnati, a small caravan of vans and cars. By the time we entered the Contemporary Arts Center, I think that these eighteen-year-olds were better prepared than most of the older adults viewing the exhibit.

The gallery was crowded and people stared at the cluster of students. The students stared back. As our group slowly made its way around the walls of the open portion of the exhibit, we noticed that most of the patrons entered the center, paid their admission fee, and immediately headed for the separate room housing the X, Y, Z Portfolio. When they returned to the main gallery, they tended to quickly scan the walls and leave.

At last we came to the room reserved for the X, Y, Z Portfolio. Sandy (our tour guide) encouraged the students to enter and examine the photographs behind the red velvet rope strung between brass stanchions. The students slowly moved the length of the table. They were quiet and serious. I stayed behind them, wondering at the arrangement and relationship of these difficult pictures. The men, most in leather and bound by chains or caught in mechanical devices, were constricted in pain. The vise was there. The self-portrait with the whip was there. Another man, bound by leather, had been beaten, his mouth bled and safety pins pierced his nipples. I had to look away. The students
had the same reaction.

Terry and I stood behind the velvet rope as Sandy discussed the portfolio with the students. She asked them if they noticed a relationship among the series. The students frowned and studied. With almost panic, I saw what she was alluding to. The shape of the flowers repeated the shapes of the torture, repeated the shapes of the organ. "X" related to "Y," "Y" related to "Z" in each vertical trio of pictures. The flowers took on a sexuality. The orchids were distended, the lilies contorted, the chrysanthemums exploded. And, yet, the flowers were still beautiful, still part of a natural world amidst all this that is labeled unnatural.

As Sandy continued, a strange process began. Bill left the group of students still huddled around the portfolio and gently leaned against me. I reached out and touched his arm, sensing that this is what he wanted. Louie soon followed and quietly stood behind me. Then slowly, even as Sandy continued talking, the entire group, without really being aware of their actions, moved behind the protective velvet cord, behind the teacher and the professor, and out of sight line of the exhibit. I wanted to leave, too.

We shared fast food, and these young adults who had been so quiet and serious as they absorbed a world they had not known, were giddily discussing the prom as though the world were all lace and no leather. We talked in the van on the way home, but we talked of school, their dates, and lives. We made passing references to what we had seen, but the power was still too strong. We needed to talk the next day. And to write. I was not at all sure of the reactions that would come from this. Terry was curious, too, and we spoke on the phone several times in the next few days.

We discussed the experience in the writing center and in August we had a pre-college reunion at my home. The students cooked the hamburgers while we sat on the front porch and I shared the paper I had written (Rab, in press) on our experience with Mapplethorpe. I asked them if I had adequately captured the moment. One of them said "perfectly" and we all laughed. They accepted my views as valid, but were once again preoccupied with their lives and their plans.

Most of them have dropped by school since they started college. Heather came back to tell me that her philosophy professor, a priest, had discussed the Mapplethorpe controversy in class and had asked if anyone had seen the exhibition. Heather eventually had raised her hand. "Mrs. Rab, he was impressed that I knew so much about it. I have thought about it a lot in philosophy. I'm glad that I went." So am I.

The Professor's Account

I drove my car from the high school to the arts center with Susan,
one of the students. As the others were going off to vans in the school parking lot, Susan offered to keep me company on the trip. Not wanting to make the trip alone, I gladly accepted. The trip was about an hour and a half, and during that time we had a discussion which colored all of my experiences with the group.

Susan revealed that she had not seen the Mapplethorpe photographs before our discussion and was quite shocked by the one I had handed her (I don’t remember which) and the others we discussed. I told her that I felt badly that I had introduced her to the work so abruptly and apologized, explaining that I thought everyone had seen the work in the library. She had not. After much private consternation, and consultation with two of her teachers, she had just decided to take the trip. She is a religious person, actively involved in a teen church group. She feared the exhibit might “corrupt” her. She said that the only male nudity she wanted to see was her husband’s when she eventually married. She decided to come on the trip to expand her knowledge, but as we drove she expressed doubts about going, saying that she didn’t know if she had to know about homosexual people because they were not part of her life.

I was very impressed with the seriousness with which she decided to see the exhibition and it countered any tendency I had to minimize the students’ experiences and my responsibility to the group. On the drive back the long day, Susan brought along Sophia. The three of us talked a little about the intensity of the exhibition, but the conversation turned to their after-school jobs, Sophia’s family’s Chinese restaurant, and how her brother cooks her special dishes to surprise her when she comes into the restaurant. The two girls exchanged concerns about the colleges they had chosen, and what they would major in—nuclear engineering for Susan and pre-med for Sophia. Their talk eventually settled on their upcoming prom, and appropriate flowers for the color of their dresses. I was struck by the emotional ranges of their lives, from their sobriety with the Mapplethorpe photographs and their excitement and anxiety about colleges and the prom.

Early in the group discussion at the high school that afternoon, I remember how Tod had talked so articulately about Man in Polyester Suit. Tod did a fine job describing the photograph’s subject and form, artfully employing several euphemisms for the man’s sex organ, unable to utter the word “penis.” Several in the group noticed this, were amused, and gently chided him about it. He finally said the word and everyone laughed in good spirit. It made the rest of the discussion easier.

At the art center, I watched the group react to the photographs, to the guide, and to each other. The mood in the main gallery was one of aesthetic awe. I am very familiar with the photographs, but I loved
seeing them anew through the students’ reactions, noticing where they paused, which ones quieted them, and by which they were amused. I wished they’d had more time to meander the exhibit on their own. Our tour guide, however, was in firm control.

The guide had much interesting anecdotal information about the artist, recent art history, and the hanging of the show, but I wished she’d had less to say in her own analyses of some of the images. I would rather have heard the students than her. I noticed the students fidgeting as she spoke at length about some photographs. She seemed not to notice or not to care. I mentally and silently objected to the “right answers” to the rhetorical questions she posed and then answered. She did not seek the students’ responses—this was her tour, not theirs, her occasion to passionately plead her defense of the embattled exhibition.

She reached the peak of her emotional defense at the X, Y, Z Portfolio. She directed the students to look closely at the images, some of which are very gruesome. I watched one of the girls flinch and turn away. Aside from some whispering and grimacing, the students were very quiet. The guide, however, became louder, her tone seemed shrill to me as she became more insistent about the goodness of the work. We were being preached to. As we became more silent, she seemed to become more insistent. The students physically backed away from her. Some turned their bodies toward the door. I found myself very anxious, wanting to step between them and her. I felt hostile toward her and protective of the students. I made eye contact with Sharon (the teacher), and her face reassured me that the situation was okay.

As we left the center, some of these mature, bright and sensitive young adults instantaneously turned into children noisily sliding down railings, and walking down the up escalator. At the fast food restaurant no one wanted to talk about the exhibit. Some gave glib comments about how it was all “fine.” But a boy and a girl left the restaurant abruptly, the girl crying. Sharon reassured me the situation was all right and later told me that Emily was upset by the sadomasochistic images because they reminded her of the sexual abuse of her younger brother.

Beneath their glibness and avoidance of discussion, I sensed strong but inchoate feelings in the students. I was very concerned that they be given a chance the next day to express themselves and decompress in an emotionally safe environment, but no time was scheduled for them to meet. I felt sorry that I would not be available to them. I trusted their teacher, but strongly encouraged Sharon to arrange a meeting with them, to give them a chance to talk with her if they needed. I promised to call her the next day. When I did, she told me how she had not been able to schedule a meeting, but that they all, individually and in small groups, sought her out throughout the day. I was happy about that.
The Students' Accounts

Sophia. Terry showed us what I thought to be the worst pictures of the bunch. Well, not the worst, the most controversial would be a better word. Most of the pictures I couldn't even look at without squirming—a lot! However, I am glad Terry went through this process to prepare us in Cincinnati... I think seeing without preparation a life size blow-up of a penis coming out of a business suit would be a big shock to me. Down there I noticed a woman's expression when she passed by that picture; it was like "Oh my God, I can't believe this photo at all!" I thought it very funny (her face, that is). I do agree that they are art. The lighting and shading bring out the beautiful blackness of the skin on the black men. I am glad that I attended. This exhibit showed me Mapplethorpe's experiences as a person living a homosexual lifestyle.

Kristy. Mapplethorpe's final artwork for college was interesting [Tie-rack, 1969, a bas-relief sculpture utilizing a Madonna image]. I have been raised Catholic (actually had it forced down my throat by my father), but I don't really believe in it—but I have to because of Dad. The idea of playing with Mary with the different shapes—the dissection of the Virgin Mother—was to me saying "Ha! Ha!" to the church—your religion takes me apart, so I'm going to take the Mother apart. The "X, Y, Z Portfolio"—especially "X" and "Z"—was the worst. YUCK! I wish that Sandy could have allowed us to just walk around the exhibit and been quiet.

Emily. One thing I found interesting about the whole experience was in Mrs. Rab's room and at the art center it seemed like we were all nervous about looking at one picture too much. I could be wrong, but I think if we were by ourselves—OK—if I was by myself—I would have looked at them longer, or more closely. Am I making sense? But when we were all together there was some pressure to appear like you didn't really want to look at it. But we were all probably as curious as the next person.

Susan. I have a hard time evaluating the Mapplethorpe exhibit for myself. I saw the pictures and listened to the tour, but I just pushed the pictures I couldn't deal with out of my mind. I suppose that I am offended by the "unnatural" shots, as I would call them. I have seen them and now know stuff like that goes on, but because of my apathy towards them, I suppose I'm just not ready to process an analysis. I viewed them objectively and am glad that I made the trip to see the rest of the show. My morals make me think of them as "dirty pictures." I see hate and violence in the X Y Z questionables. I think that's OK. Art is good because it meets the viewer where he is in maturity, knowledge, and morality.

Brian. There's no doubt that the pictures are harsh and revealing,
and had I not been prepared in some way, I might have had a harder time dealing with the subject matter. It's important to know a little bit about the artist and where he was coming from with the photographs before actually seeing them. I guess this is true for all art. I had the hardest time with the X, Y, Z Portfolio. I agree that it is an important part of the exhibit, but these were the pictures I found most offending. On the same note, however, I didn't feel threatened. The subjects weren't violent and Mapplethorpe isn't trying to lure anyone into his lifestyle through his work. He's only presenting his lifestyle, a documentary of the times, his "Perfect Moment." Morally I find homosexuality sickening and Mapplethorpe's work repulsive. But why should I close my eyes to reality? And what right do I have to impose my morals on anyone else? I guess that's the root of the controversy.

Louie. I'll admit at the beginning I was very excited about going to this show because of all the outrage over it. I love controversy. But when the day came and Mr. Barrett talked to all of us about the work I started wondering why I was going to see this show. Then I remembered it is because I don't believe in censorship of the arts and I had to go and find out what the fuss is all about. Well, I found out. I found out that with each passing photo I came to an understanding of how and why Mapplethorpe could do such a thing with his camera. Finally after much thought I had it: He is showing us pictures about how he feels about his world and showing us his world at the same time. His work is different, but it's art. Mrs. Rab, I'm glad we saw some of this and had the conference with Terry Barrett first. Especially for some of the others' sake. It would have shocked me tremendously if I had not have known anything about his work. If I was shocked, imagine what some of the others would have said.

Chad. A few of the Mapplethorpe pictures revolted me. The picture of the man urinating into another man's mouth, for example, was almost too much. As a whole, his work was great. He's got some great concepts, and the way they were presented made me think. I assume that's what he's trying to do. . . . He didn't create what he did to incite arguments or hostility. He did it because it's art. To make us think about our society and who we are in it.

J. D. At eighteen, I feel as though I've formed a solid set of values about sex. I've either read about or seen any form of sex on T.V. and in magazines, so any curiosity or fear concerning sex has been cleared away through my knowledge. I've had close relationships with girls for the past couple of years and I'd like to think that my most recent relationship is based on common respect and compassion for each other before being based on sex. I'm sure homosexuality, sadomasochism, incest, rape, biracial relationships and any other kind of widely unaccepted

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sexual behavior exists all across America as well as in Cincinnati. To deny its existence is an injustice. Many accepted authors and artists have dealt with the covering up of these human behaviors. Harper Lee deals with incest, rape and biracial relationships and injustice in To Kill a Mockingbird, to name one work. In the future, as homosexual behavior becomes more prevalent in our society, then perhaps artwork that deals with the questions it raises will become accepted. Perhaps this was “The Perfect Moment” to bring this subject matter, the convergence of both sexes, the convergence of painful and pleasurable sexual experiences, and the convergence of races into mainstream America.

Discussion

As educational leaders of the group of students, the authors of this study were very impressed with the maturity of students’ reactions to difficult art from a sub-culture foreign to them. Their parents, some of their teachers, and many of the contemporary older adults in their community reacted to the exhibition with emotional violence, mounted a strong but eventually failed effort to censor the exhibition, and explicitly expressed bigotry toward gays during the controversy. The students in the group emerge from within this community and seem to share some of its bigotry toward gay and black people, as evidenced in some of their casual conversations overheard by their teacher earlier in the school year.

Race is probably a silent issue in the controversy over this exhibition. For example, many people traditionally have not approved of black men being with white women, and there is the stereotype of sexual prowess of black males. Some Mapplethorpe photographs directly confront such stereotypes (e.g., Man in Polyester Suit) however we did not spend much time discussing racial issues that the show raised. Some in mainstream society express disapproval of “homoerotic” art because they fear viewers will be enticed into homosexual activities or be converted to homosexual orientations. The only student comment in this regard was to the contrary: Mapplethorpe “isn’t trying to lure anyone .... He’s only presenting his lifestyle.”

Mapplethorpe’s work can be viewed as a contribution to new knowledge. Susan initially wondered if she needed this knowledge, but the rest of the students seemed to feel it was valuable as information of a culture or subculture unfamiliar to them. Heather had the value of her knowledge of the controversial art praised by a priest and professor of philosophy at the Catholic university she is attending.

Many of the students expressed distaste and strong disapproval of the homosexual acts depicted in the exhibition. However, they also expressed tolerance of a sub-culture with sexual orientations different
than their own. Although they called some of the photographs "sickening," and "repulsive," they did not want to suppress depictions of them. J.D. is particularly eloquent in his refusal to deny the existence of different values and practices, and saw the controversy in a larger context in referring to battles over the censoring of literature that deals with controversial subject matter.

At certain times, before and after seeing the exhibition, the students denied, often through humor, that it might be troubling to them. Thus it is notable that several of the students, after seeing the exhibition, explicitly mentioned the importance of having been prepared to see it. We believe that a crucial component of the preparation was the teacher's honesty with her students, that her admission of her own embarrassment with some of the photographs, for example, allowed them freedom to own their reactions, and to talk and write about them. Establishing a psychologically safe environment is crucial to having honest discussions, especially about difficult topics. We also believed it was important to explicitly invite students to honestly express their views about controversies and differences, and then to avoid overtly or subtly censoring their views. We believe indoctrination is not a desirable means of teaching, and efforts were made to avoid that.

The English teachers at the high school were better prepared to deal with controversy than the art teachers. The English teachers had formulated and written policies to defend their use of controversial literature in their classes. The art teachers were not similarly prepared. Moreover, they seemed reluctant to become involved with controversial art. All teachers of the school were invited to the after school discussion, and the four art teachers were invited to the exhibition. One of the art teachers came to the discussion, none accompanied the students to the exhibition. The art teachers passed up opportunities to assume leadership with their students and their communities regarding art that was headline news in their daily newspaper for several months.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the belief that art provides knowledge of other cultures. It also reinforces the belief that through the study of art, when combined with caring education, we can increase understanding of differences among people. The study of differences, cultural or otherwise, commonly takes us into realms where people's values, beliefs, and behaviors are not aligned with ours. Questions will always include: What differences do we study, how do we study them, and what benefits or other outcomes can come from knowledge about others? The Mapplethorpe exhibit provided an opportunity to confront these ques-
tions by viewing and discussing photographs which portray some aspects of a subculture rejected by most of society. Further, it confirmed, at least for us, that the artwork cannot be effectively studied or analyzed without understanding what was represented in the photographs. That is, to study or defend these photographs for their formal qualities alone rejects the relationship of subject matter, context and meaning. This educational experience with the students, teacher, professor, and Mapplethorpe's photographs is unique. Nevertheless, it provides a real, public school example of addressing controversial differences of groups of people through sensitive teaching about controversial art.

Terry Barrett is an associate professor of art education at The Ohio State University. Sharon Rab is a high school English teacher in Dayton, Ohio.

References


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