

*Nothing Like the Son*ON ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE'S *X* PORTFOLIO

I spent five minutes at the outside glancing through his images for defensible allusions to other works of art. I came up with Leonardo, Correggio, Raphael, Bronzino, Caravaggio, Ribera, Velázquez, Chardin, Reynolds, Blake, Gérôme, Fantin-Latour, and a bunch of photo guys. An art historian could doubtless do better, but would probably come to the same conclusion: These images are too full of art to be “about” it. They may live in the house of art and speak the language of art to anyone who will listen, but almost certainly they are “about” some broader and more vertiginous category of experience to which art belongs—and that we rather wish it didn't.



Consider Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601). With its background cloaked in darkness and its space pitched out into the room, the painting recruits us to be complicit spectators as the resurrected Christ calmly grasps the incredulous Thomas by the wrist and guides the saint's extended forefinger into the wound in his side. Two other disciples crowd forward, leaning over Thomas' shoulder to observe more closely; and we are lured forward as well, by the cropped, three-quarter-length format of the painting that, like a baroque zoom, or like Christ's hand on our wrist, gently but firmly draws us into the midst of the spectacle. So, just as Christ opens his wound to Saint

Thomas, Caravaggio (presuming to persuade us from our doubt and lack of faith) opens that scene to us, in naturalistic detail. And we, challenged and repelled by the artist's characterization of us as incredulous unbelievers (and guilty in the secret knowledge that, indeed, we are), must respond with honor, with trust, by *believing*—and not, like Thomas, our eyes. (*To look* is to doubt.) So, to free ourselves from guilt, and from Caravaggio's presumption of our incredulity, we transcend the gaze, see with our hearts and acquiesce to the gorgeous authority of the image, extending our penitential love and trust to Christ—to the Word—to the painting—and ultimately, to Caravaggio himself.

Thus do the “religion of Christ” and the “religion of Art” erotically infect one another in our complex encounter with the image and the Word. For, just as Christ trusts Saint Thomas and suffers himself to be intimately touched, we trust the image and suffer ourselves to be touched as well—taking beauty as the signature of its grace and beneficence. And just as Christ, by his submission, ennoble his disciple and controls him, so we, by our submission, ennoble the image and control it. In doing so, we demonstrate that, even though we may be, in all other respects, nothing like the Son, we may still, like him, give ourselves up, trust ourselves to be humbled—by God, by art, by others—and, full of guilt, contract the conditions of our own submission—and in that submission redeem our guilt and dominate, triumph before the arrested image of our desire, in an exquisite, suspended moment of pleasure and control.



Or so Robert would have had you believe, he who began in the bosom of the Church and left it to rig out his own language of redemption on the street—a sleek patois of “classical” and “kitsch” that flirted with the low and disarmed the high with charm. Over the years, he would cultivate this dialect of tawdry beauty, refine it to the point of transparency and extend the fran-

chise of his work beyond the purview of the art world and its institutions. Then, at last, when those institutions of culture deigned to gather him in, those transparent images overrode all institutional disclaimers and continued to make accessible that which they had been making accessible all along. Very straightforwardly. People were shocked, and Robert died, leaving us with a repertoire of images that are as hard to ignore as they are impossible to misconstrue.

The images were all about transgression, of course, about paying for it in advance with the suspension of desire—and loving it. But they were not about transgression for its own sake. Those whom the world would change must change the world, and Robert's entire agenda, I think, derived from his understanding that, if one would change the world with art, one must change a great deal of it. Thus, the axiom that *the meaning of a sign is the response to it* had, for him, a quantitative as well as a qualitative dimension. He wanted them all—all those beholders—and wanting them, he saw the art world for what it was—another closet.

It was not enough for him that his images meant well—that they enfranchised “the quality” (although he hoped they would)—they must also mean *a lot*, for good or ill—because when push came to shove, the actual power to tip the status quo could only be bestowed upon images by representatives of that status quo, in the street and in the corridors of power. So he embarked upon a dangerous flirtation, but he was a man for that, and sailing as close to the wind as Wilde, he embraced the double irony of full disclosure and made the efficacy of his images a direct function of their power to enfranchise the non-canonical beholder—to enfranchise, ultimately, that Senator from North Carolina and insist upon his response—because, in truth, if the Senator didn't think an image was dangerous, it wasn't. Regardless of what the titillated cognoscenti might flatter themselves by believing, if you dealt in transgression, insisted upon it, it was

always the Senator, *only* the Senator, the Master of Laws, that Father, whose outrage really mattered.



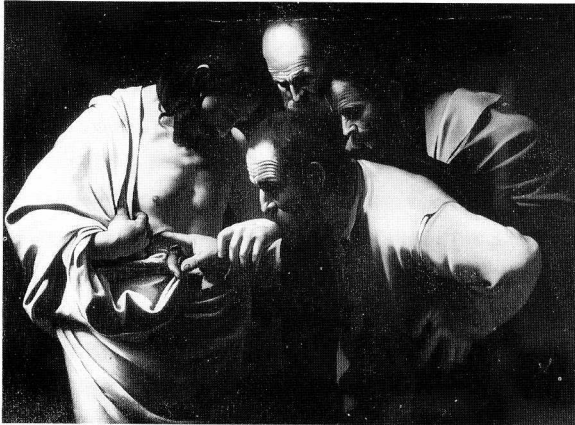
I saw Robert's *X* images for the first time scattered across a Pace coffee table at a coke dealer's penthouse on Hudson Street, and in that context they were just what they would be—a sheaf of piss-elegant snapshots, mementos and naughty bits—photos the artist made when he wasn't making art, *noir* excursions into metaphysical masochism and trading cards for cocaine. As long as they existed in private circulation, they would



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Lou, N.Y.C., 1978

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CARAVAGGIO

The Incredulity of St. Thomas (copy)

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, NY

remain so: handsome and disturbing images, to be sure, but clandestine artifacts, nevertheless, and peripheral texts at best—like Joyce’s diaries or Delacroix’s erotica. Today the images in *The X Portfolio* are “fine photographs” and better for it. They hang as authorized images in the oeuvre alongside their pornological predecessors and ancillaries, and that work is richer and rougher for their company.

Even so, hanging there on the wall amidst their sleeker siblings, these images seem so contingent, their “artistic” legitimacy so newly won that you almost expect to see sawdust on the floor. They seem so obviously to have come from someplace else, down by the piers, and to have brought with them, into the world of ice-white walls, the aura of knowing smiles, bad habits, rough language, and smoky, crowded rooms with raw brick walls, sawhorse bars and hand-lettered signs on the wall. They may be legitimate but, like my second cousins, Tim and Duane, they are

far from respectable, even now. Family and friends divide along lines of allegiance to them and will doubtless continue to; and it is this family feud, I think, rather than any parochial outcry over their content, that defines the difficulty of *The X Portfolio* images. For the real, largely unarticulated questions surrounding them, I would suggest, derive less from what they show about sex than from what they say about art—if they *are* art—and even Robert's putative supporters seem willing, on appropriate occasions, to assign them to second-class citizenship in the oeuvre.

It is an antique quarrel, really, dating from the dawn of the Baroque—and if I may draw a comparison without implying an equation, let me suggest that these *noir* photographs bear the same relationship to the rest of Robert's work that Shakespeare's *Sonnets* do to the body of his endeavor. Certainly *The Sonnets*, like the *X* images, have persistently served as a watershed for criticism, separating the sheep from the goats, as it were—and, if we believe (as there is every reason to) that the Quarto edition of *The Sonnets* was indeed suppressed, they have done so from the outset. In any case, throughout their four-hundred-year vogue, these poems have been cited alternately as Shakespeare's crowning laurel or as evidence of his feet of clay—with no lesser lights than Dr. Johnson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, and Bernard Shaw opting for the latter and offering some version of Henry Hallam's famous plaint that "it is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had not written them"—a sentiment with which anyone who has been privy to discussions of *The X Portfolio* among "connoisseurs of fine photography" is doubtless familiar.

Both *The Sonnets* and *The X Portfolio*, it seems, suffer and benefit in equal parts from their taint of marginal legitimacy. The fact that both projects are bastard children, initially conceived in the intimacy of private discourse and only subsequently elevated in status, has persistently aroused suspicions that their formal exigencies and perfervid intensities are less the product of "artistry" than a by-product of their suboptimal secular agen-

das, which—on the candid evidence of the texts and images—involved some thoroughgoing, non-fictional sexual improprieties on the part of the Artist and the Bard. Depending on the commentator, of course, these candid disclosures have either illuminated the more public production or infected that production with an extra-textual aura of feverish disquiet. So the quarrel continues. But it would not continue quite so strenuously, I think, nor the issues of legitimacy and sexual impropriety seem quite so critical, if the works in question were not so self-enclosed—if there were some “outside” position, some discrete “cultural” vantage-point from which we might attend them. But there is not. Like *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, both *The Sonnets* and *The X Portfolio* compel our complicity, and characterize us, in the act of attention, in some relatively uncomfortable ways.

In a typical sonnet, for instance, the actual William Shakespeare addresses his actual mistress (of whatever gender) and characterizes their relationship in one of two ways. He either describes his mistress to “herself” (“*For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,/ who art as black as hell and dark as night.*”) or he describes himself to his mistress (“*Being your slave, what could I do but tend/ upon the hours and times of your desire?*”). As a consequence, the binary roles that the sonnet makes possible—those of speaker and spoken to, beholder and beheld, describer and described, dominant and submissive—are all spoken for. They are exhausted and enclosed in the primary, binary transaction between the poet and his mistress, an enclosure whose rapt obsessiveness is succinctly demonstrated by a quatrain from *Sonnet XXIV*:

Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
 Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
 Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.

Here, excepting the Caravaggesque light-source, there is no external reference, no neutral position outside the transaction

from which we may attend it. The words we hear are being spoken by a real person to a real person; the images we see are being shown by someone Other to someone else more Other still, and both are intertwined in the act of beholding. There is simply no allowance made in the rhetorical situation for an “objective cultural auditor”—which is not to say, of course, that we cannot *invent* one, only that it is nearly impossible to do so without entering into uneasy complicity with one participant or the other in the actual, factual narrative of desire of which the language is a trace. In other words, we have to trust someone, give ourselves up somehow to one position or the other.

What I am suggesting, of course, by this little discourse on the contingent rhetoric of *The Sonnets*, is that our relationship to the photographs in *The X Portfolio* is easily as problematic. The role of “objective cultural auditor” that we presume to inhabit—on account of the physical presence of the photograph in the gallery—may not indeed exist, since there can be little doubt that the arrested images in these dark photographs, like those in *The Sonnets*, are traces of lost erotic transactions in which the lover describes his mistress to his mistress, or describes himself to “her,” and freezes that moment of apprehension as a condition of their intercourse. Thus all of the rhetorical positions implied by the photographs are exhausted in the suspended transaction between *beholder* and *beheld*—and the comfortable role of “art beholder” is written out of the scenario, as we are cast in roles before the image that we are unaccustomed to acknowledging—at least in public.

All of which would tend to confirm the veiled suspicions of those commentators who have approached *The X Portfolio* like church ladies at La Scala, exuding sophistication but wary of seduction, anxious about their pleasure and fearful of being manipulated to sexual rather than cultural ends by the flagrant ornamental display, suspicious that the “formal armature” of the imagery has been tainted somehow by its origins in situa-

tional erotics. This anxiety, it seems to me, is perfectly justified, although the offending double-entendre is hardly deplorable. It is, in fact, absolutely irremediable and, more or less, the point. The erotic and aesthetic potential of Robert's images derive from *exactly* the same rhetorical language and iconographic display, just as they do in Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*, and beyond the proclivity of the beholder, there is no way of sorting them out. They amount to no more (or less) than alternate readings that are as inextricably intertwined in our perception of them as are the spiritual and aesthetic rhetorics of *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (which are intertwined as well with a rather queasy, necrophilic subtext).

Simply put, the rituals of "aesthetic" submission in our culture speak a language so closely analogous to those of sexual and spiritual submission that they are all but indistinguishable when conflated in the same image. Or, to state the case historically: we have, for nearly a hundred years, hypostasized the rhetorical strategies of image-making and worshipped their mysteries under the pseudonym of "formal beauty." As a consequence, when these rhetorical strategies are actually *employed* by artists like Caravaggio or Mapplethorpe to propose spiritual or sexual submission, we are so conditioned to humbling ourselves before the cosmetic aspects of the image that we simply cannot distinguish the package from the prize, the vehicle from the payload, the "form" from the content. So now, in our culture, the scenarios of dominance by submission that characterize our participation in "high art" and "high religion" and "classical masochism" as systems of desire, all intersect in the topoi of the "arrested image," which is their common attribute, and the centerpiece of their ritual theatre. Once we acquiesce in the reification of formal values, questions of whether one manifestation is "better" than another, derives from another, is displaced by another, or transforms itself into another, become inexplicable and irrelevant.

All these scenarios, perhaps, should be considered equally redemptive and perverse, and, certainly, given the “arrested image” and the proclivity of the beholder, they are all possible—although usually, in any given context, one is more probable than the others. Images like Robert Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* and texts like Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, however, tilt the altars at which we worship by making them *all* seem probable. In doing so they collapse and conflate our hierarchies of response to sex, art, and religion—and, in the process, generate considerable anxiety. So we may, according to our want or desire, read *The X Portfolio* in the language of religion, of sexuality, or of formalist aesthetics, but we must do so knowing that the artist himself positioned his images exactly at their intersection. The categories are our own, and our culture’s—so, finally, the images themselves, under the pressure of our categories, don’t seem to be *anything* in particular. They just seem to be *too much*. And we are left asking, “Why do I submit to this gritty, baroque image of a man’s arm disappearing into another man’s anus? And choose to speculate upon it? And why must Robert have submitted to the actual, intimate, aromatic spectacle? And chosen to portray it? And why, finally, did the supplicant kneel and submit to having a lubricated fist shoved up his ass? And choose to have himself so portrayed?”

And the answer, of course, in every case, is pleasure and control—but deferred, always deferred, shunted upward through concentric rituals of trust and apprehension, glimmering through sexual, aesthetic, and spiritual manifestations, resonating outward from the heart of the image through every decision to expand the context of its socialization, suspending time at every point, postponing consummation, and then, suddenly—at the apogee of its suspense—swooping back down, circling rapidly inward upon an image now flickering in wintry glamour at the intersection of mortal suffering and spiritual ecstasy, where the rule of law meets the grace of trust. It is a nothing

image, really—not even an idea, but so palpably corporeal on the one hand, and so technically extravagant on the other, that it seems on the verge of exploding from its own internal contradictions. Or just disappearing when we look away.



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Helmut and Brooks, N.Y.C., 1978
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