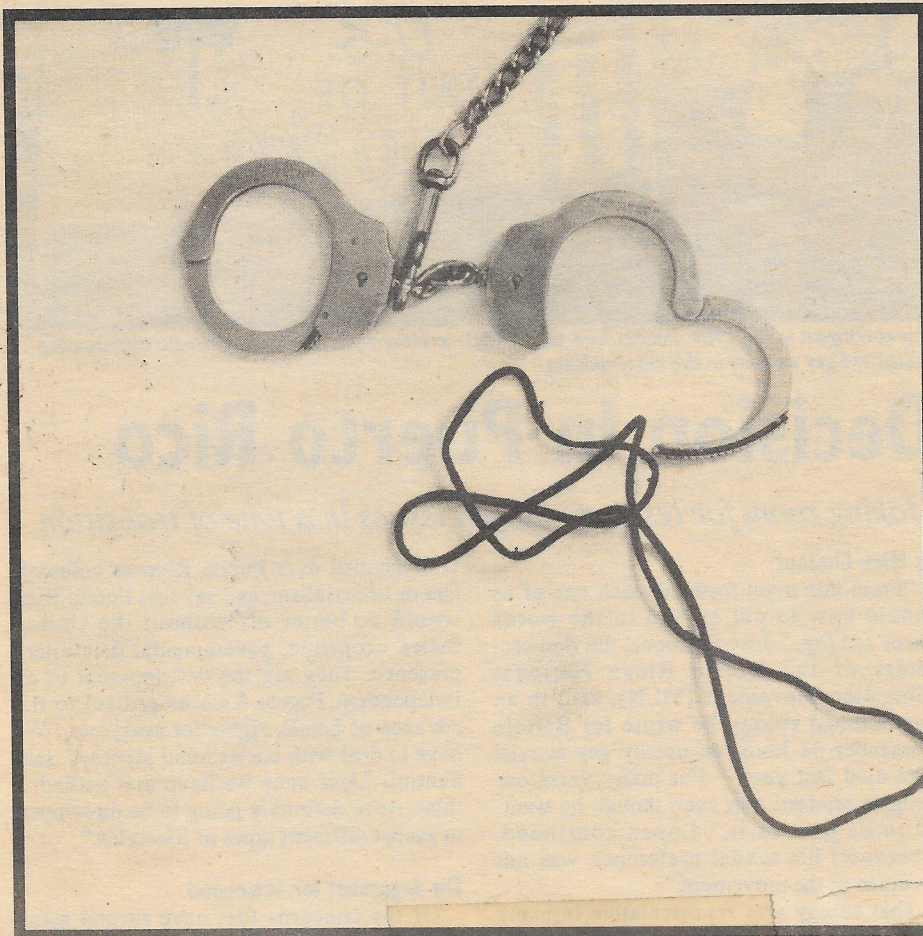


On the edge, under the gun

A Boston symposium examines the right-wing attack on radical sexuality



Mapplethorpe and the Body.

A symposium with Gayle Rubin, Carol Vance, Carrie Mae Weems, Kobena Mercer and others. Presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Sept. 23.

By Wickie Stamps

At a recent symposium called "Mapplethorpe and the Body," sponsored by Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, feminist theorists asserted that the attack on the works of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe is more than an assault on art, it is an offensive against radical sexualities.

Gayle Rubin, author of *The Traffic in Women and Thinking Sex* and an anthropologist who has studied SM and leather communities, said, "The SM content of Mapplethorpe's work has made people squeamish. While the SM images have played a significant role in the controversy, defenders of Mapplethorpe and the National Endowment for the Arts have, for the most part, ignored those images and their role. SM images have served as a vehicle with which to attack the NEA and sexually explicit art and at the same time, the NEA has helped worsen the political and legal climate for SM

images and communities." She went on to assert that "there is a growing tendency toward defining SM images as obscene."

Rubin, who has fought for years against the feminist anti-pornography movements, further suggested that the "brawl over Mapplethorpe's work is an ironic consequence of the way in which feminist anti-porn rhetoric has been appropriated by the right-wing. "In the late 1970s, SM images were used by the anti-porn movement for shock value and to sell their critique of porn-as-violence-against-women. Since the late '70s, there has been a convergence between the Right-wing and feminist anti-porn goals.

"Stripped of their feminist content, much of the language and many of the tactics of persuasion developed by the feminist anti-porn movement have been assimilated by the Right-wing. Where the feminist anti-porn movement failed, the Right-wing has been partially successful in including SM within the legal definition of obscenity through the language of the funding restriction on the NEA."

Carol Vance, editor of the feminist theoretical work *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* and contributor to *Caught Looking*, a collection of feminist anti-censorship writings, agreed with Rubin's perspectives. She stated that the "campaign against images" must be understood within the context of the present "sex panic" encompassing abortion rights, gay/lesbian liberation and teen pregnancy.

"Due to the intricate weaving of sexuality throughout our society this assault is incredibly potent," Vance said. "Right-wingers, who assume that sex is polluting and endangering, feel that if they can regulate sexual images, which they see as a first step towards controlling behavior, they can therefore regulate sexuality. The Right wants to cordon off sex and reestablish the traditional link between sex, procreation and marriage. They assume that by curtailing sexual passions and any images of passion such as seen in Mapplethorpe, they can reestablish this conservative link."

Both Vance and Rubin assert that conservatives are now targeting visual materials such as photography and film. Vance later stated that although the Right justifies its actions through a feminist model based on deterring violence against women, it is enforcing conservative values and models that are inherently anti-woman.

During the discussion, Vance and Rubin concurred that the right-wing's censorship campaign is also going after feminist works such as the performance theater of Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finley. They both stated that low-budget lesbian erotica publications such as *On Our Backs* are extremely vulnerable to assault due to lack of financial resources necessary to fend off right-wing attacks. Another Achilles heel for such publications is the disdain in which segments of the women's anti-porn movement also holds them.

The discussion moved to a different arena when artist and teacher Carrie Mae Weems and professor Kobena Mercer addressed the repression and distortion of Black sexuality perpetuated — not by the Right wing — but by Mapplethorpe himself. According to Weems, "Mapplethorpe's aestheticization of Black men for the gaze of white men leaves Black male sexuality tamed, docile and cooperative. The Black body becomes something to be acted upon." Mercer, who concurred that "Mapplethorpe does not rise above the racial stereotypes," further asserted that "What is at issue is that Black men do not have access to the control of the means of production, and the images of themselves that do exist are often distorted, invisible or marginalized."

Regardless of individual perspectives, all who spoke encouraged listeners to take action against the growing right-wing assault on alternative sexualities. Vance concluded her talk by asserting that in its battle against censorship, the arts community — and all coalitions against censorship — must embrace not only the right to artistic freedom but the sexual minority communities who are actually under siege.