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An Oeuvre Shaped by the Buyers' Tastes? The Impact of Compromises on the Reception of Robert Mapplethorpe's Work

ABSTRACT

Available for scholars at the Getty Research Institute since 2013, the "Robert Mapplethorpe Archive" belongs to the institution's most noteworthy additions of the last decade. The gift made two years earlier by the R. Mapplethorpe Foundation was significant on at least two counts: for the amount and diversity of the material granted, and for the presence of many unique, rarely seen artworks. The archive notably includes many polaroids but also collages, hand painted photographs, as well as photo transfers by emulsion. The material held in Los Angeles makes thus one thing clear: the noto-

rious Robert Mapplethorpe – a photographer who, as one might think, needs no introduction – can still be considered as an understudied artist.

His choices regarding the art market might explain a few things. This article proposes to study the compromises that Mapplethorpe made, and their incidence on the reception of his art. Based on his archive, but also on interviews and on his private correspondence, this paper argues that the changes operated in the late 1970s to please art dealers and art collectors impacted not only the way he worked, but also the way his achievement was to be read.

Available for scholars at the Getty Research Institute since 2013, the "Robert Mapplethorpe Archive" belongs to the institution's most noteworthy additions of the last decade. The gift made two years earlier by the R. Mapplethorpe Foundation was significant on at least two counts: for the amount and diversity of the archival material granted, and for the presence of many unique, rarely seen artworks. Hence, researchers (as well as

the readers of a dedicated publication, released in 2016¹) are struck by the quality of the original work contained in the archive. The latter notably includes many polaroids but also collages, hand painted photographs, as well as photo transfers by emulsion. Within the 4000 art pieces created between 1969 and 1989 (having died at the age of 43, Mapplethorpe had a career that spanned only two decades), less than half proves to consist of the monochrome silver-gelatin prints the artist is known for. Thus, the material held in Los Angeles makes one thing clear: the notorious Robert Mapplethorpe – a photographer who, as one might think, needs no introduction – can still be considered as an understudied artist.²

What could possibly explain the fact that so many pieces have rarely seen the spotlights of galleries? Mapplethorpe's choices regarding the art market might explain a few things.

This article offers to consider their incidence as he tried to adapt to the difficult reception of his earlier work. Discouraged by several unsuccessful attempts to commercialize his art in the early 1970s, he decided to change the content of his exhibitions to better match with the art dealers' and collectors' expectations. Based on statements made in interviews and in his private correspondence, this article proposes to study the corresponding compromises and their effect on the reception of his art. It argues that the move he operated in the late 1970s changed the way his achievement was to be read – becoming the expression of a so-called “formalist” who, as the artist George Dureau put it, “ran himself like a department store”.³

An oeuvre difficult to market

Today remembered as a provocateur and as an artist whose work raised controversies (the most notable one being the polemic surrounding the presentation of a comprehensive, traveling survey in the United States in 1989-1990⁴), Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) is also famous for having built a career with tame photographs made to please art collectors. As a matter of fact, floral still-lives and portraits of celebrities, artists or

1 *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive* (Eds.: Frances Terpak & Michelle Brunnick, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016).

2 I've had the opportunity to discuss this in the June 2017 issue of *Études Photographiques*. The paper, entitled Rediscovering Robert Mapplethorpe [Redécouvrir Robert Mapplethorpe] is available in French (in the printed version of the journal) and in English (online).

3 Dureau quoted by Jack Fritscher in *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (Mamaroneck: Hastings House, 1994), 175.

4 In the context of the so-called “Culture Wars” in the United States, a retrospective presented first at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia, entitled “The Perfect Moment”, became the target of lobbyists and politicians who wished, through the polemic, to draw the attention of the use of public funding for the arts (their goal being the shutdown of the national agency, which happened to have granted the ICA funding for the show). A two years controversy, involving a national public debate in the media as well as at parliament, followed.

friends, now represent more than half of the content displayed in institutions and galleries.

It hasn't always been like this. The changes occurred gradually and can be spotted in three specific exhibitions. After his studies at Pratt Institute in New York City between 1963 and 1969, Mapplethorpe had his first solo show organized in 1970. Simply entitled "Robert Mapplethorpe", it was presented in a small venue located in Manhattan, the Stanley Amos Gallery. Giving an account of his current practice, it included twelve drawings and collages. Mapplethorpe hadn't been working with a camera yet: the images that he used weren't his, but those found in magazines. Save for some drawings (delicate monochrome sketches which, sometimes included cut images), his first artworks were made with the material he had been collecting in news periodicals – such as *Life* – and in pornographic publications. What characterized these early artworks weren't merely their content (Mapplethorpe worked with sexually explicit images just like he did with pictures of actresses or animals), but the way the used images had been transformed. They were cut and rearranged, often covered with several layers of spray paint, and sometimes hidden behind a thin piece of colored paper or plastic mesh. Mapplethorpe made those pictures visually "out-of-reach", forcing the viewer to focus in order to know (or imagine) what they were actually showing.⁵ When he started using his own photographs around 1971, he continued working in the same fashion, transforming his polaroids according to the exact same methods. Until 1974, he created a great deal of unique artworks which were recurrently exhibited in special frames that he had designed himself. When choosing to surround a picture of a man wearing a leather, fetish outfit with different colorful velvet patches, for instance (as in *Leatherman #1*, 1970⁶), his wish was, clearly, to highlight a contradiction between the presentation and the subject of the framed photographs.

These hand-made pieces weren't going to be exhibited again later. After his first solo show at Stanley Amos, it took two decades for them to briefly reappear. Some were presented and sold in the early 1990s (at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York); but the vast majority wouldn't be presented anew until the mid-2010s. The reason why Mapplethorpe's unique artworks "disappeared" (they were excluded from the commercial shows as well as from almost every institutional exhibition and publication) was that he didn't manage to sell them, nor to persuade art dealers to present similar artworks. After another show organized in 1973 (in the backroom of an art gallery⁷, where he presented a few polaroids), it took him four more years to be granted a new solo exhibition in a com-

5 See for example this spray-painted picture from approx. 1965-1975:
http://rosettaapp.getty.edu:1801/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE56980. A slideshow with a selection of early artworks can be found on the Getty Digital Collection's website under:
http://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/notable/mapplethorpe_slideshow/slideshow.html.

6 Illustration available here:
<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/254478/robert-mapplethorpe-leatherman-1-american-1970/>.

7 The exhibition, entitled "Polaroids", was presented in January 1973 at the Light Gallery (NYC).

mercial venue. To that end, changing the medium that he worked with wasn't enough. After having left magazine pictures and his own polaroids for mid-format prints made with a Hasselblad camera, he also had to dedicate his exhibitions to a restricted selection of pieces.

Mapplethorpe's second solo show, "Portraits", opened in New York City in February 1977 at the Holly Solomon Gallery. Since 1974, he had been producing silver gelatin prints in an edition of three, and then of ten. If the subject of his work remained unchanged at first – Mapplethorpe took very different kinds of pictures at the time, including still-lives, portraits of friends, nudes, and sexual acts – one sees that the exhibition at Solomon's was mounted with a very uniformed set of photographs. As announced by its title, it was arranged around portraits (which often correspond to 3/4 frontal photographs), exhibited next to strict flower compositions. All those monochrome pictures enhanced an interest for a clean, formal aesthetic, making them almost the opposite of the earlier work, which clearly conveyed the idea of an experiment. The only remaining characteristic was the geometric aspect of the compositions, the pictures of bouquets being made, just like his collages, so as to highlight graphic forms and clear lines...

The selection's homogeneity was due to Solomon's refusal to exhibit Mapplethorpe's explicit photographs. Arguing that they weren't his most relevant pieces ("I never thought the 'dirty pictures' were his best work," she later stated⁸), Solomon accepted to represent the artist on the condition that he would limit his exhibition to a collection of soft photographs. In order to give an exhaustive account of the actual stand of his art, Mapplethorpe had therefore to organized another show. In conjunction with the exhibition mounted in Uptown New York, he set up a second event at The Kitchen, a non-commercial venue located in the trendy SoHo district. Entitled "Erotic pictures", it focused on Mapplethorpe's main interest at the time: sadomasochism (SM) and, on a more general level, sexuality.

Although he considered the different types of photographs as being part of a whole (as we will show later, the experience of his art was meant to confront the viewer to seductive and provoking images simultaneously), Mapplethorpe was forced, as in his second show already, to abandon the idea of a mixed presentation. By doing so, he gave up on what the art critic and theorist Arthur Danto later called an "organic unity", "destroying" the "connection" between his photographs.⁹ Even if Mapplethorpe saved face by introducing this dual presentation as being a chosen concept (he sent a unique invitation card to announce both exhibitions; showing two pictures of his right hand, dressed chic on one side and trimmed with a fetish accessoire on the other), this episode led him to strongly reconsider the way he would conceive his future commercial shows – at the expense of the initial concept his mixed installations were meant to serve.

8 Holly Solomon quoted by Patricia Morrisroe in *Mapplethorpe: a biography* (London: Papermac, 1995), 171

9 Arthur C. Danto, Looking at Robert Mapplethorpe's Art; two moments in history, in A. Danto, ed., *Playing with the edge: the photographic achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 12.

The still-lives and the portraits exhibited at Solomon's were two genres that only owed their existence to Mapplethorpe's difficulties in making a living. In the mid-seventies, he often complained about art dealers reluctant to show his work because of its content.¹⁰ He therefore started taking pictures for magazines (*Interview*, for instance), accepting commissioned portraits of artists and celebrities. And since those portraits were already printed, he decided to include them in his exhibitions... As far as the pictures of flowers are concerned, they came about by happenstance: Mapplethorpe started taking them in 1976 in order to test new lightings.¹¹ As he figured out that people liked his floral still-lives, he decided to produce many more to later sell them as artworks. "Flowers are not hard to sell, in a way", he pragmatically noted.¹² In his private correspondence, Mapplethorpe wrote: "I think I should be a little less concerned with the bizarre aspect of any work if in fact I'm interested in having my work catch on. One must ease the public into it – that's art in itself... – Sell the public flowers... things that they hang on their walls without being uptight."¹³

As a consequence, many art critics started interpreting the presentation of artworks that weren't produced to please art collectors (essentially everything that wasn't a portrait or a still-life) as a way to attract attention. Yet as a matter of fact, it worked the other way around: the portraits and the flowers were the images that Mapplethorpe wanted to use to draw the audience closer to the x-rated pictures that he displayed right next to them. Nevertheless, for many his choices with respect to his commercial exhibitions seemed to be primarily shaped by the urge to create a market for his photographs.

This is how the exhibition "CENSORED" was understood. Opening in February 1978 in San Francisco at the 80 Langton Street (a non-commercial art space), the show was born out of necessity. It was the "Plan B" that allowed Mapplethorpe to exhibit eighteen "sex pictures" which his Californian art dealer, Simon Lowinsky, had just refused to display. According to Mapplethorpe, the exhibition at Lowinsky's was initially planned to include all type of photographs – the portraits and the flower pictures, but also the series dedicated to SM. Yet, when receiving the final selection of prints, the dealer told him that he couldn't show the most explicit, violent and provocative pieces. In a letter available in Mapplethorpe's archive, Lowinsky argued that their agreement was based on the seven pictures that were shown at Documenta 6 in Kassel a few months before (a selection of artworks made by Holly Solomon at the time...) and that the new portfolio wasn't true to the idea (the dealer mentioned, among the too "intense" pictures, a photograph named

10 "He complained to [his friend Patti] Smith that dealers were loath to exhibit his work [...], and that several privately advised him that if he wanted to become successful, he had to soften the gay themes". (Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: a biography*, op. cit., 78).

11 Mapplethorpe said that he tried his new Lowell Quatz lights by taking pictures of the flowers he happened to have in his studio at that moment (Kelly Wise, ed., *Portrait: theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1981), 134).

12 Mapplethorpe quoted in an interview by Inge Bondi in her article The Yin and the Yang of Robert Mapplethorpe, in *Print Letter* 19, 4/1 (1979), 11.

13 Mapplethorpe quoted by Patricia Morrisroe in *Mapplethorpe: a biography*, op. cit., p. 136.

“Helmut”, where a man wearing a leather outfit sits next to a swastika¹⁴). Lowinsky explained that he preferred to keep eighteen photographs in reserve, making them available *on demand* only.

Consequently, Mapplethorpe had to organize a parallel event if he were to make every type of image visible simultaneously. But the organization of an exhibition at 80 Langton Street – located in the underground South Market district – was to be interpreted as a strategic maneuver meant to serve his reputation. One could argue that this was only partly true: being unable to present his art the way he had always intended, for the second time in a year, Mapplethorpe was mostly trying to make the best of the situation. Later, he insisted to be introduced as a victim by the media, as a “censored” artist (the title of the show, written in capital letters, leaving no doubts as to how he considered the opportunity). Yet this quick move had, still, been a reaction to censorship. No matter what, the dual show mounted in early 1978 was to be regarded as fitting with what seemed to become a marketing trick at the time. For his biographer for instance, what happened in San Francisco wasn’t a surprise and corresponded to “a clever strategy”; Patricia Morrisroe says that Mapplethorpe “could not have realistically expected a straight photography dealer with an upscale gallery on Grant Avenue to jump at the opportunity to exhibit [sexual] pictures [...]”¹⁵. She therefore assumes that what he did was calculated: “by giving Lowinsky the chance to reject his photographs, Mapplethorpe raised his public profile another notch and incited curiosity about the pictures that were ‘banned’ in liberal San Francisco.”¹⁶ Two decades later, Simon Lowinsky declared that he was also convinced that Mapplethorpe did want his show to be edited at the time: the art dealer said that the artist “was well aware of the P.R. effect that calling it ‘CENSORED’ would have... he knew that a controversy would only create more interest in the picture.”¹⁷ Thus for the art critic Hal Fischer, those two exhibitions “demonstrate” “how the photographer can play both avant-garde *enfant-terrible* and respectable artist at the same time.”¹⁸ In this context, the pairing of a commercial and a non-commercial show, and the complementary goals they seemed to serve (the presentation in an art space helping the art dealer’s and the artist’s businesses, and *vice versa*), had the appearance of a well-thought approach to different problematics.

14 Contradicting the content of Lowinsky’s letter, Mapplethorpe recounted later this episode in different terms: “I did a show in San Francisco, I went out with a bunch of pictures supposedly for Simon Lowinsky. When I was out there initially I showed him some pictures, like the cock on the slab, and I said, this is the area I’m interested in working in, doing a show out there [...]. So he said ‘fine’ and I worked in that direction for the next six months. I brought the pictures out there and – well, he didn’t have as many objections as his partner did. [...] Anyway, they said no, you can’t do it.” (Mapplethorpe quoted in an interview by Elsa Bulgari in: Robert Mapplethorpe, in *Fire Island Newsmagazine* (3 July 1978), 7.)

15 Mapplethorpe quoted by Patricia Morrisroe in *Mapplethorpe: a biography, op. cit.*, 204.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Simon Lowinsky quoted by Richard Meyer in *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 201.

18 Hal Fischer, The New Commercialism, in *Camera Arts*, 1/1 (1981), 10.

The impact of thematic presentations

Despite Mapplethorpe's actual intentions (was he looking for censorship or cleverly adapting to it? It is hard to tell), the separation between the soft- and hardcore work did have negative consequences. If, for the artist, the good attendance those dual exhibitions were greeted with confirmed that he shouldn't be concerned about having to present thematic exhibitions (with the flowers and portraits on the one side and the sexual pictures on the other), the reception among art critics was clearly affected by the loss of the "organic" unity of his art. The presentation of a polished body of work, whose main subject was bouquets and portraits, thus inspired Hal Fisher to entitle his dedicated reviews in *Artweek* "The New Commercialism" or "Calculated Opulence". Indeed, the pictures left "alone" in Mapplethorpe's soft-core exhibitions were to be appreciated for their formal aesthetic and their fancy presentation only. Yet, having lost its *raison d'être* once used for academic subjects (since the formalist codes and the rich, custom-made frames were initially used to offer a strong contrast with the content of the x-rated material), Mapplethorpe's solemn and formal approach, as well as what he called the "extravagance of presentation",¹⁹ were interpreted as redundant and pompous. As far as the aesthetic of his work was concerned, some critics described him as belonging to the "coterie" or "contemporary court" photographers, whose pictures were regarded as "glossing-over" the subject in order to fit with the collectors' and art dealers' preferences (a growing trend in the early 1980s).²⁰ Regarding the way his pictures were presented, Richard Whelan, writing for *Christopher Street Magazine*, criticized the "fancy woods, silk mats, and mirrors surrounding or beside the photographs [that] let us know we're looking at luxury goods"; "Blatantly tailored to appeal to interior decorators with vulgar tastes, these presentation pieces [...] usually come off as silly and tacky," he said.²¹

As the art historian Richard Meyer later pointed out, the separate presentation of the explicit material also had a negative impact on how the most challenging body of work was to be interpreted. Meyer explains that once set apart, the x-rated pictures were appreciated as *documenting* sexual practices. "Mapplethorpe's SM work would here seem to fulfill the traditional function of documentary photography, namely the construction of an Other (victim, freak, or specimen) for consumption by a culturally dominant, implicitly normative audience."²² Instead of calling upon role plays and the theatricality of photography (once presented next to each other, the staged SM sessions appear as artificial as the portraits of celebrities), the sex pictures became the sole expression

19 Mapplethorpe quoted in an interview by Parker Hodges in: R. Mapplethorpe Photographer, in *MANhattan Gaze* (10/12/1979—06/01/1980), 5.

20 Ben Lifson, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Photophilia: A Conversation About the Photography Scene, in *October*, 16 (spring 1981), 110-111.

21 Richard Whelan, Robert Mapplethorpe: hard sell, slick image, in *Christopher Street Magazine*, 3/11 (1979), 17.

22 Richard Meyer, Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography, in *Qui Parle*, 4/1 (1990), 64.

of "otherness". Other possible arguments (according to which the disguised photographs, customized and shown in fancy frames, were the equivalent of the costumes worn by SM practitioners) became impossible to examine. Mapplethorpe's interests and goals seemed as narrow as the set of subjects his thematic shows were dedicated to. Besides, the simple interpretations that the sex pictures called once shown alone (for art critics, their formalism serving as a way out not to address what they actually depicted) tend to empty out the work from its content. Even Arthur Danto – who later became one of Mapplethorpe's best advocates – was initially in a quandary about what to think about the artist, since the reviews gave the impression that his oeuvre was all about form.²³

The compromises made by Mapplethorpe for his exhibitions also had an impact on the way many upcoming shows were going to be conceived. Even those including every type of prints were designed around a thematic compartmentation. The x-rated material was sometimes reserved in a spare room (such as in 1979 in the exhibition "Contact", organized at the Robert Miller Gallery), whereas the rest of the work was displayed in mixed installations.

In an attempt to keep a balance between the different bodies of work, Mapplethorpe decided to support the presentation and the sale of the x-rated images with the production of a dedicated series. In 1978, he published with art dealer Robert Self the *X Portfolio*, a set of thirteen mid-format silver gelatin prints featuring SM scenarii, neatly presented in a signed, black case. Like a ready-made exhibition (Mapplethorpe assigned an order which had to be considered when installing the prints on a wall), the portfolio also counted as a sum-up of his practice at the time, covering a spectrum of different sexual practices but also artistic attempts in "capturing" the essence of sadomasochism. Alas, the series wouldn't be considered as a unique, representative production for very long once other art dealers (Harry Lunn and Robert Miller) persuaded the artist to edit two other albums in the same vein. The *Y Portfolio* dedicated to floral still-lives was published the same year; in 1981 came out the *Z Portfolio*, consisting of pictures of black male nudes (reflecting Mapplethorpe's growing interest for the subject at the time). The trio was thus later acknowledged as a whole, the *XYZ Portfolio* being regarded as a manifesto. The fact that the two last portfolios were actually a complement to the initial project was ignored. And if the first album came out so as to ease the presentation of the challenging work (as well as to transform a series into a collectible object that buyers might have been more interested in acquiring²⁴), the experiment Mapplethorpe undertook in order to put back the attention on his actual interest – sexuality – didn't pay off. In some cases, from the three

23 Danto later wrote: "It became pretty clear to me that one of the reasons I had been initially indifferent to the idea of Mapplethorpe was that there had been a pale of silence in regard to the sexuality of the work: none of the show's energy or excitement was described in the critical press. It was as if critics were reviewing a show of Weston." (A. Danto, Looking at Robert Mapplethorpe's Art [...], in A. Danto, ed., *Playing with the edge [...]*, op. cit., 14).

24 "We [R. Mapplethorpe and R. Self] worked that out together, because sex pictures are hard to sell; people cannot deal with it on a wall, so I thought maybe a book would work", said the artist (Mapplethorpe quoted in an interview by Inge Bondi in: *The Yin and the Yang [...]* art. cit, 11).

series, the pictures belonging to the *X Portfolio* became the ones that would be omitted by art critics when mentioning the series...²⁵

The artist *versus* the businessman

In the late 1970s, the growing importance of the still-lives and the portraits in Mapplethorpe's shows didn't speak for the artist's initial interests. If the flowers and the portraits only existed in order to make a living, the pictures dealing with sexuality were the reason why he decided to take photographs.

In the late 1960s, Mapplethorpe started working with photos in order to foster his nostalgic relationship to *explicit* material. He was interested in photography to recreate the "feeling in the stomach" he perceived when he saw the cover of erotic magazines for the first time (as a teenager²⁶). For him, the "discovery" of those publications formed a sexual trauma. Despite the fact that they were censored (their most sensitive parts staying hidden behind recovering materials), they were the pictures that he considered as having revealed himself to sexuality. His work was thus supposed to arouse and "retain that feeling", he stated.²⁷ Hence the images that he worked with (and later produced himself) were selected for their propensity in sending back the viewers to their own primary sexual experience, the one that might have led to a comparable, visceral feeling. "I thought that if I could somehow bring that element into art, [...] I would be doing something that was uniquely my own",²⁸ making "a powerful statement",²⁹ he said. This is the reason why, as Ingrid Sischy once put it, the explicit pictures have to be considered as the work's "underbelly", even though "they don't make up a huge proportion of his work".³⁰

If Mapplethorpe's art was aimed at creating an overwhelming experience, his unadventurous prints (the flowers, for instance) can be understood as working as an escort, providing an accompaniment for the most explicit material. Indeed, if the presentation

25 This is what happened in an article published in 2011. The journalist mentioned the *XYZ Portfolio* to describe it as "a set of images featuring his highly sculptural flowers and his powerfully sculpted male nudes". (See: Jori Finkel, LACMA, Getty to share R. Mapplethorpe artwork, in *Los Angeles Times* (08/02/2011), <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/08/entertainment/la-et-lacma-mapplethorpe-20110208>).

26 "My initial attraction to pornography – as a kid I was obsessed with it – was when I was 16 and went to college and discovered the whole 42nd Street thing. Oh God, the feeling I had. This was before they showed full nudity. I remember thinking that if I could get that feeling in a piece of art it would be so perfect." (Mapplethorpe quoted in: Robert Mapplethorpe talks to Paul Taylor. Transcript from the interview (Oct. 1985) available in the archive held at the Getty Research Institute; unknown source, page 2).

27 Mapplethorpe quoted by Ingrid Sischy in: A Society Artist, in Richard Marshall (ed.), *Robert Mapplethorpe* (New York / Boston: Whitney Museum of American / New York Graphic Society Books / Little, Brown and company, 1988), 81.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Mapplethorpe quoted by Gerrit Henry in: Robert Mapplethorpe – collecting quality: an interview, in *Print Collector's Newsletter*, 13/4 (1982), 129.

30 Ingrid Sischy, That feeling in the Stomach, in Dimitri Levas, Mark Holborn, eds., *Robert Mapplethorpe – Pictures* (Santa Fe: Arena, 1999), n. p.

of challenging images implies the setting up of an installation that mostly incites the viewers to keep their distance and look away, the addition of many attractive, nicely presented pictures would perhaps make them consider to come a bit closer and, eventually, dare to have a look. What's more, the use of a formal aesthetic and of art historical references (Mapplethorpe being also famous for having quoted his peers by reproducing academic codes in his photographs), made his oeuvre look more familiar than its content would have otherwise suggested. Thus, every aspect of his work that could be seen as a contradiction to his initial concept (what could possibly be less challenging than a nicely composed image of a bouquet?!) has to be understood as easing an experience that Mapplethorpe knew would be rejected. Presented together on a single wall, his photographs could be appreciated at first for their aesthetic qualities, allowing a picture of partners engaged in a fetishist act to be regarded *at all*. In consideration of a psychoanalytic reading of his work, one could even assume that the flower pictures alone (and more generally, all pleasing images) were meant to foster a *derived* sexual pleasure, since, as conceptualized by Sigmund Freud, "Beauty' and 'attraction' are originally attributes of the sexual object"³¹ (art offering a "sublimated", unconscious sexual satisfaction)...³²

These kind of readings have been very rarely considered. Already in the 1970s, when Mapplethorpe presented his work at Solomon's and then at Lowinsky's, the apparent duality of his work was appreciated as being a matter of a sale strategy. As evidenced by afore quotations, the sex-pictures were seen as eye-catchers and, eventually, as the material that helped him to be granted the status of the censored artist. Even if some art critics, such as Ingrid Sischy, insisted on the fact that "his decision to involve sex in his work went beyond calculation",³³ his most provocative work was often interpreted accordingly to the argument such as that of Hal Fischer for instance, who wrote that Mapplethorpe's work became "important by insinuating that it had been censored elsewhere", which is "a tried and true avant-garde tactic", he stated.³⁴

When critics and art historians considered the way Mapplethorpe presented his photographs in commercial venues, they also saw in the special framing and the customized mats a way to please art buyers. Richard Whelan, for example, concluded that Mapplethorpe's work was meant to "flatter the rich", to "titillate the art world with pornography", assuming that the artist "kn[e]w where the money [was]" and "how to get it".³⁵ The

31 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (trans. James Strachey; New York: Norton & Company, 1961), 30.

32 As for a lack of space, I won't be able to develop this argument any further. Those interested in such reading may be interested in a paper that I wrote for the December 2017 issue of the academic journal *L'Atelier*, entitled *L'image, piège à regard: obsessions et illusions dans l'œuvre de Robert Mapplethorpe* (the article is available in French, online).

33 Ingrid Sischy, *That feeling in the Stomach*, in D. Levas, M. Holborn, eds., *R. Mapplethorpe – Pictures, op. cit.*, n. p.

34 Hal Fischer, *The New Commercialism*, in *Camera Arts*, 1/1 (1981), 10.

35 Richard Whelan, *Robert Mapplethorpe: hard sell, slick image*, in *Christopher Street Magazine*, 3/11 (1979), 17.

custom-made frames were interpreted as a way to earn more money, since, as from the late 1970s, the pieces sold with a special frame were more expensive (the artist asking for \$1800, instead of \$1500). Apparently too certain that it was a matter of business to consider another reasoning, no one among Whelan's peers noted the resemblance of Mapplethorpe's presentation methods with those used in the past for Daguerrotypes. As for the unique, fragile pictures that were displayed in nicely decorated cases in the nineteenth century (with their inside covered with velvet or silk), many of Mapplethorpe's early pieces were made with methods that aimed at quoting the history of photography. Moreover, the nice presentation (and the catchy materials) can be seen as allowing an experience which wouldn't be possible if the pictures weren't pleasingly displayed. The nice presentation was meant to balance the content of his most challenging images, just like the formal aspect of his photographs did.

Unfortunately, Mapplethorpe himself didn't help the critics to see his work differently. He for instance stated: "you really have to work at selling photographs to art collectors, and that is what I want to do: to sell to people who collect art, instead of just to people who are in love with photography only [...] I guess even part of why I do this framing in that I want it to be seen first as an image, then as a photograph."³⁶ While tactlessly saying that he regarded photography as art (at a time when even vintage prints were still suffering from under-consideration), Mapplethorpe also let the critics think they spotted the acknowledgment of a well-thought selling concept in such statements.

Compromises setting standards both in galleries and in institutions

What one learns in studying Mapplethorpe's early exhibitions in commercial galleries regards both the reception of his art and the institutional work that has been delivered since then. Hence, with respect to the surveys organized in museums, it is interesting to note that the concept born of necessity in the late seventies became the pattern according to which almost every show and publication have been conceived since then. Thus, in the exhibitions presented in institutions, the different materials wouldn't be shown together – the curators putting back thematic boundaries where Mapplethorpe saw only one single practice. Yet, if the editing characteristic of the shows mounted by art dealers can be partly explain by a commercial logic, the conception of a thematic presentation in institutions is harder to comprehend. Why would a venue free from the constraints that shape the work of a commercial gallery put up a show according to the same arrangements? As examples, one can mention here the exhibition organized in 1991 in Lausanne, or in 2011 in Athens, with barely any explicit material presented. In shows including it, one spots installations by themes (as in 2010 in Berlin, for instance), with galleries strictly organized according to subjects such as "flowers", "portraits", and "sex". In Japan, all the exhibitions organized in 1992, 1996 and 2002 didn't display any explicit content. Shows organized with a faithful, mixed presentation have also been mounted (in Washington D.C. at the Corcoran Gallery, in a group show presented in 1978; at the

36 Mapplethorpe quoted in an interview by Inge Bondi, in: *The Yin and the Yang* [...], art. cit., 11.

Whitney Museum in 1988; at LACMA in 2016); yet they remain, if not an exception, at least a minority.

There are different ways to interpret this phenomenon. Firstly, one thinks about the fear of a potential public protest or lawsuit since the uproar caused by the presentation of his work in the late 1980s (with the aforementioned controversy from 1989-1990³⁷). The famous polemic has, most certainly, led many museum professionals to keep the challenging work apart – avoiding to present a portrait of a child in the same room as a sexually charged photograph, for instance. Yet since those arrangements were also made before the controversy occurred, one can read the gaps in institutional surveys as reflecting the scholars' difficulties in studying an oeuvre which calls for concepts and readings that they might not be equipped for. If the formal aesthetic of his prints, as well as his use of art historical conventions, instinctively speak to every art historian, less is true for what is the core of his work – notably, the revealing aspect of images in terms of sexual drive (photography being for him the substitute for a primary sexual emotion); the nostalgic relationship one fosters with the visual signs of a trauma; or the impact of censorship on the iconography produced for an emerging queer community in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁸ Thus, instead of presenting Mapplethorpe's work according to the concepts he initially referred to, institutions tend to mirror the thematic splitting in order to stick to the themes and thinking patterns they are used to – producing a limited reading of his work which, itself, turned to be a factor of exclusion (since only the pieces that could be read formally are then considered).

Is this the reason why the early artworks stayed in the drawers, giving the scholars “discovering” them at the Getty Research Institute the feeling that the surveys that have been presented so far gave a false impression? Indeed, one can explain the disappearance of those pieces as corresponding to the ample movement described here since, as a matter of fact, the explicit artworks were also those produced with complex methods between 1969 and 1976 (a period which, it is important to note, corresponds to one-third of his career's span). In other words, when the x-rated material is ignored or segregated, it also makes the most original pieces disappear, the hand-made artworks happening to be very often sexually explicit. It is thus possible to argue that the editing of surveys according to a “soft” selection of artworks led to the exclusion of the unique pieces as well.

Their presence in exhibition is yet essential. Elaborated according to processes that transformed the final print into a unique piece, they convey the idea of a “fabricated” photographic object. This mirrors the creation of a new iconography at the time, by individuals who, like Mapplethorpe, didn't identify with the only sexual explicit pictures that were available, namely: the ones circulating in reports published by the police, baring a negative overtone. With his hand-made artworks, Mapplethorpe thus hinted at the making of his own image, symbolically taking back the right to be the one shaping the image-

37 See footnote 4.

38 On the subject, read Richard Meyer's *Outlaw Representations* (2002), as in note 17.

ry related to *his* sexuality. The presentation of his unique pieces in exhibitions therefore allows to explain that he used his inventiveness to fabricate the iconography he deemed fitting – just like Pictorialists did before him, adding painting on pictures that had been initially produced with a camera.³⁹

If things have changed recently,⁴⁰ the archetypes that have defined the way Mapplethorpe's achievement has been read since the early 1980s still have a remaining effect. His work is widely regarded as “formal”, not as expressing an interest for experimentations and customization, for instance. One can thus only hope for a better integration of the early work in future surveys, museums professionals having now the opportunity to leave behind the compromises that had more to do with the way the art market functions, than with Mapplethorpe's art itself.

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39 Pictorialism can be described as a movement whose members were interested in “elevating” photography to the status of painting or drawing. In his attempt to transform images into unique artworks (with the help of experimental and technical processes), Mapplethorpe can be regarded as having worked with a similar goal in mind.

40 With, notably, the several projects organized in 2016 with his archive. The aforementioned, dedicated publication from the Getty Research Institute, as well as the joint exhibitions mounted at LACMA and at the Getty Museum (the show at LACMA containing many unique, early artworks), paved the way for a new reading of his work. The presentation of a solo show at the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Salzburg can also be mentioned here (“Robert Mapplethorpe: Objects”, 29 August –19 November 2016).