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DOCUMENTS

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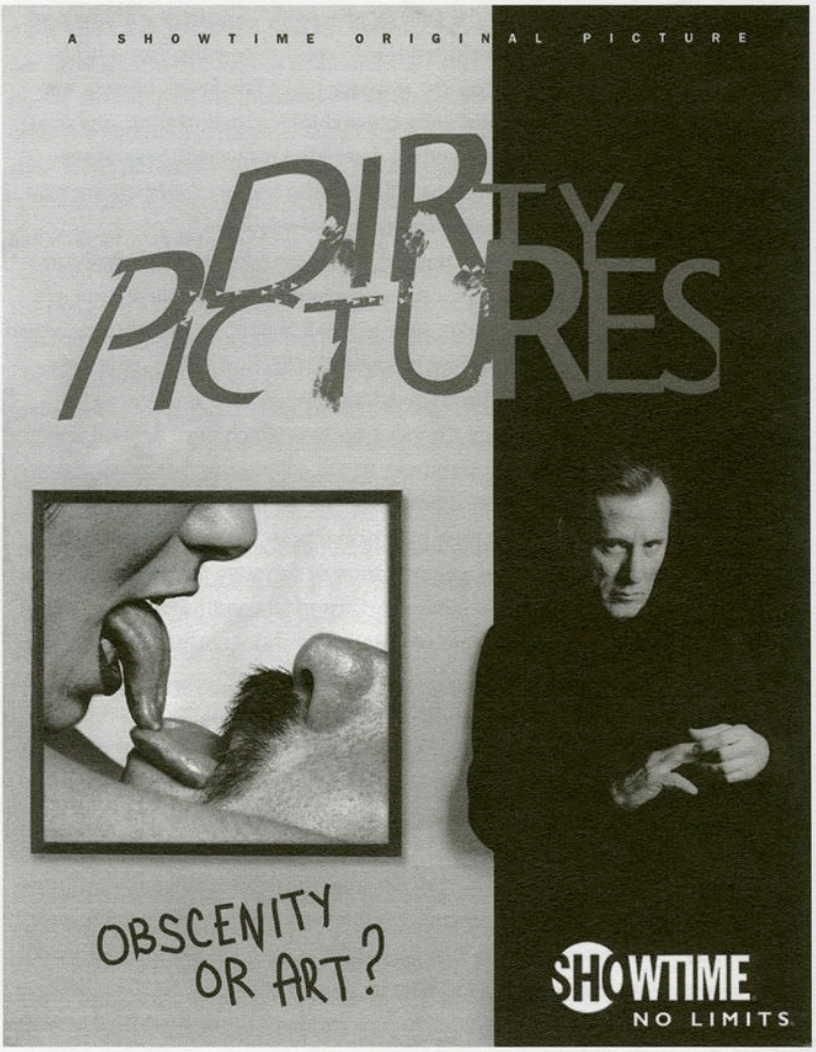
Michael Minelli

Dirty Pictures, a Showtime Cable Television movie, May 27, 2000
Produced by Michael Manheim
Written by Ilene Chaiken
Directed by Frank Pierson
Starring James Woods, Diana Scarwid, and Craig T. Nelson



At what point does the old adage "art imitates life imitates art" become more than a pathetic cliché? Well, when it imitates "life" again, Gracie. The recent made-for-cable TV release of Showtime's *Dirty Pictures* and the Santa Monica Museum of Art's concurrent re-presentation of Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photo exhibition "The Perfect Moment" seem poised to reexamine both the photos and issues which were at the center of a free speech firestorm one decade ago.

Dirty Pictures tells the story of Dennis Barrie, former Director of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati (CAC) and his heroic struggle to exhibit the by-then demonized Mapplethorpe exhibition. Ten months earlier in June 1989, The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. had withdrawn the scheduled exhibit due to political pressures concerning the show's sexually explicit content. The Corcoran

voiced concern that showing such a politically volatile exhibit might endanger future funding of NEA supported artists. On April 7, 1990, Barrie and the CAC were charged with two counts each of "pandering obscenity" and "the use of minors in nudity-oriented materials" (i.e., child pornography). The big question is "Why would Showtime, at this particular moment, choose to make a movie about the political spectacle which threatened freedom of expression and the government's thirty-year record of supporting the National Endowment for the Arts?" Sorry to say, from the looks of this production, the only appropriate answer is "pure politics."

There are really no surprises in this made-for-cable special. Somewhere between *James at 15* and *Nightline*, *Dirty Pictures* might rightfully serve as a two-hour advertisement for the Mapplethorpe exhibition if it weren't for the fact that the folks at Showtime trucked the naughty pix all the way to Hollywood to shill for the movie. In the film's opening scene, we see Dennis Barrie, played by the ever-squirrelly James Woods, roughhousing with his two pajama-clad sons. The boys are firing their oversized toy guns at Barrie when he suddenly grabs one of the kid's guns and fires back, knee capping one son and subduing the other child. This innocent, domestic drama foreshadows Barrie's own fight for his life as the Director of Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center. Dennis Barrie, the film's dutiful champion of contemporary art, holds the moral high ground when faced with threats to both his private and professional life. His nemesis, the big bad Sheriff Leis, played by Craig T. Nelson (TV's *Coach*), is as predictably dim-witted and conservative as Barrie is articulate and progressive.

The film's strictly two-dimensional handling of the shit-storm that must have been Dennis Barrie's life felt cheap and insensitive. Allegory is one thing, but that does not preclude believable, compassionate character development. When well-written and incisive cable shows like *Oz* and *The Sopranos* are produced and, indeed, have found a significant audience, it's not unreasonable to expect a made-for-cable movie addressing the issues surrounding Mapplethorpe's work to do so with the same smarts. If not for the actual news footage of Jesse Helms drawling on to Congress about artworks that are not only "crude and depraved," but "anti-family and anti-American," or Alfonse D'Amato fitfully tearing up Andre Serrano's Piss Christ, one would be hard pressed to garner an ounce of sympathy for either Dennis Barrie or free speech at all.

In the rumor-filled landscape that is Los Angeles, James Woods is reported to have both the highest I.Q. and reigning biggest dick in Hollywood (sorry, Uncle Miltie). Now, whether this ironic duo was a deliberate casting consideration or not, the mind reels at the irony of how sexual innuendo and hearsay continually play a part in the politics of representation. Although James Woods (as Barrie) was billed as the star of the film, he was handily upstaged by the "dirty pictures" themselves. It was pointed out to those of us at the screening that showing these photos (especially the six or seven most debated images) was a main concern for both Showtime and Mr. Woods. To Woods' credit, he only agreed to take part in the project under

the condition that all of the photos would be included in the movie. And kudos to Showtime as well, for their creative and thoughtful use of Mapplethorpe's images in the film.

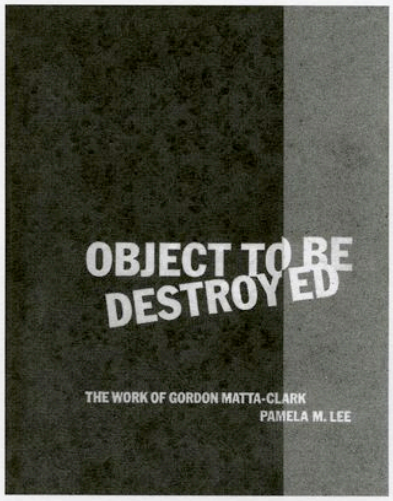
"Another Perfect Moment" (the restaging of "The Perfect Moment" at the Santa Monica Museum) presents Mapplethorpe's photographs to a Los Angeles audience at a point in time when one would hope there'd be some critical distance between the images and the heated debate that surrounded them ten years ago. Some could argue that *Dirty Pictures* may do the photos an ultimate disservice by, once again, linking them to the controversy which so clouded their initial viewing. However, I would argue that it is precisely through the photos' relationship to the political right that Mapplethorpe's work remains provocative. Without the oppressive political interpretation of the right, the juxtaposition of flesh and fauna comes off as clichéd and, in the words of interviewee Fran Liebowitz, "sophomoric."

That conservatives were so outraged by this work speaks not only to the paranoia surrounding homophobia and AIDS during the 1980s, but also to the power of image manipulation in the public sphere. The success of Mapplethorpe's work lies in his appropriation of the familiar. By co-opting the genre of classical, black-and-white still-life and portrait photography, Mapplethorpe's content introduced homosexual desire into culturally sanctioned notions of "the beautiful." This strategy, however effective, ultimately wound up serving the agenda of the right because it so messed with the public's ability to describe that classical canon. In other words, in the media-dominated debate, mass culture flat-out refused to publicly discuss a gorgeously photographed fisting in the same way that one would discuss an image from, say, Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (and for the most part folks, you still can't).

For all of its shortcomings, *Dirty Pictures* does hint at how meaning is linked to context. Mapplethorpe organized "The Perfect Moment" so as to juxtapose particular images. The film clearly shows how Christian conservatives sought to isolate certain images from the whole. By seeking to dismantle the artist's strategy, the right was suppressing information from the git go. Their adeptness at editing and then manipulating Mapplethorpe's imagery caught the left with their proverbial pants down and it wasn't until Clinton showed up that the left regained its understanding of media/image politics.

Dirty Pictures is certainly not going to rock anyone's world. However, for all of its simplistic stylings, this docu-drama *does* succeed; but not on the level of groundbreaking television. Its *raison d'etre* lies more appropriately in the role of a two-hour public service announcement; a "deja-vu-all-over-again" of the political influence that the Christian right had (and arguably still has) on the current political climate. One needn't look past the recent poop over Chris Ofilli's work at The Brooklyn Museum to see how ready conservatives are to rid the culture of blasphemers and infidels. Ten years after Reagan/Bush, George Jr. is now the Republican

candidate for the presidency. And no matter how much spin gets put on his "reformist" plank, G. Dubya's apple ain't fallin' far from Daddy Bush's tree. The right is organized and gets off on circling the wagons. *Dirty Pictures* should serve as a not-quite-stark-enough reminder that the left would be well served to consider a similar strategy as well.



Mark Linder

Pamela M. Lee
Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2000)

Like many people who have read Pamela Lee's writings, I was anxious to get my hands on *Object to be Destroyed*, and not only because of its clever and exquisite cover which reworks the typical look of a MIT Press book. Displaying a logic similar to Matta-Clark's reworking of ordinary buildings, about half of the binding is wrapped in a gray, velvety, flowered fabric that recalls faded wallpaper or upholstery, while the leading edge of the front cover is left uncovered, exposing raw cardboard that is cut with crisp edges and corners that no doubt will soften and fray from use. Judging by its cover (despite the proverb) this is indeed an object to be destroyed, or at least a smart simulation of one.

At its best, Lee's writing is no less smart. The book's introduction opens with a brief italicized passage that recounts the story of *Splitting*, Matta-Clark's most famous project from 1974. Encountering this evocative parable at the outset, the reader begins to understand that this book's remarkable binding is not only an homage to Matta-Clark, but is emblematic of Lee's multi-faceted historiographic approach which, as one reads further, does not sustain (but who could?) the craft and charms of its beginnings. The introduction soon shifts from descriptions of her subject to explanations of her own motives and concerns, and Lee's writing becomes less enticing and much more explicit, even didactic. This movement between wry implication and comparatively dry explication continues through the first half of the book, as Lee strives to take on and get close to Matta-Clark's often obscure intentions and what she calls the "workless character" of his art.

Object to be Destroyed is both fueled and encumbered by the author's clear admiration for and sense of obligation to her subject. She is a conscientious historian as well as a partisan proponent. Quite intentionally, she brings these two roles close together. She sees each as sympathetic, and sometimes necessary, to the other. The result is fascinating, but uneven. Her writing is at once measured and flattering, careful and risky, technical and intimate, credible and dubious, seductive and labored. To a certain extent, this is to be expected, because the effort to write the history of "an artist whose principal body of work no longer exists presents a peculiar set of methodological dilemmas for the art historian," (xvii) a concern that underwrites Lee's sophisticated approach to Matta-Clark. Except for the brief narrative at its beginning, Lee's introduction takes less pleasure in the pro-