

AEQAI

Review of Celant Lecture at Opening of FotoFocus

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On Friday evening, October 23, FotoFocus invited about one hundred people to dinner and to a kick off lecture by Italian curator/critic/thinker/museum professional Germano Celant, widely regarded as one of the first and finest independent curators in the world. The event was the precursor for the one day Symposium organized by New York FotoFocus Curator Kevin Moore (see aeqai, June 2015, for my conversation with Moore and thoughts on the original Mapplethorpe show at CAC here in 1990). Aeqai was also represented that evening by critics Jonathan Kamholtz and Zack Hatfield; I'd asked them both to cover the symposium for this November issue of aeqai, partly because they represent two totally different generations (I think that one might fairly say that Hatfield could, in theory, be Kamholtz's grandson). So both of their essays/reviews of the symposium are in the current issue of aeqai, and our readers can get a glimpse at the differing worlds in which both men have lived and matured, and how the original Mapplethorpe exhibition and pursuant trial affected them and their generations differently.

I'd like to talk a little bit about Celant's lecture on Mapplethorpe, the man and the exhibition; he spoke for just over an hour, after the drinks/networking period before dinner, and before the dinner itself. All possible differing perspectives on Mapplethorpe the man, and Mapplethorpe the artist/photographer, may well have been touched upon in Celant's brilliant lecture, a kind of blend of art history and criticism that was erudite, creative, and, more than anything else, melancholy. Celant had been a friend and colleague of Mapplethorpe for decades, and his infusion of personal anecdotes and thoughts from studio visits over the years hung over Celant's lecture, as if Patti Smith's aura from her spectacular memoir *Just Kids* was hovering in the air in that room at the CAC (lower level auditorium). All of the new energy brought into the first and lower level gallery spaces by the new paint and wallpaper drove all the guests down into the lower level, almost mirroring the levels of life/death about which Celant would speak so eloquently. (The CAC's new redesign of the spaces showed to great effect that evening, making the first floor and ramp down to the lower level bristling with urban energy and a kind of abstract alternative energy source. Members of the dance troupe PONES danced on the first floor through most of the evening, and their presence kind of connected the guests, the CAC itself, architect Zaha Hadid, and the ghost of Robert Mapplethorpe himself, the night's missing guest of honor.)

Celant was determined to prove how much Mapplethorpe was a classical artist, particularly in the figurative/portraiture work (way less was discussed about either the celebrities or the flowers, tho the evening's exercise/exorcise was to attempt to redefine Mapplethorpe's influences after twenty five years, since the original exhibition, Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment, was opened and shut down by the Vice Squad/Sheriff Leis, and The Center and its then Director, Dennis Barrie, sent to trial on charges related to pandering obscenity. But rather than sticking to the tiresome defense of Mapplethorpe's work as series of brilliant compositions, wherein/whereby light falls on particular angles /diaganols and the like, Celant went directly to the content of the Mapplethorpe male nudes/bodies/body parts in his brilliant commentary on the work itself. I'd been very disappointed way back in 1990 about the near complete failure of anyone to attempt to address what Mapplethorpe's oeuvre is about, particularly the work's relationship to either the artist's Catholicism/fallen away Catholicism, and/or the artist's fascination with The Devil, whom Mapplethorpe created/reincarnated as a specific 'man'/person/angel emerging at a specific time and specific place (New York City in the early 1970). I mentioned images of the devil in my June essay in aeqai, and Celant made the imagery/iconography of The Devil in Western Art History the keystone of Mapplethorpe's work and ideas. (Contrary to many leftists' /liberals' ideas, The Devil remains a potent and living force in contemporary Catholic belief and thought, and makes appearances of a sort in many evangelical/fundamentalist denominations and metaphysics.)

Where Celant and I may differ is a matter of degree and/or intentionality on Mapplethorpe's part: Celant sees the artist as deliberately examining the 'dark'sides of Catholic/religious life and thought in Western culture, and Mapplethorpe's work as reflection upon the dark side (most religious iconography deals with The Light, or coming to The Light, the redemption brought by and ongoingly offered by Jesus Christ. So Celant interprets Mapplethorpe's toughest work as examination of dark forces, dark ritual, the Devil's lair, if you will, and I see it more as Mapplethorpe offering himself, gleefully at that, as The Devil, and enjoying said role thoroughly, more consistent with the fallen angel, the fallen away Catholic; Celant wouldn't have Mapplethorpe as an acolyte, but he would have the artist on the side of Light, ultimately, as redemptive, if I follow Celant's arguments logically (and I may have failed to do so). But whether or not Mapplethorpe represents The Devil Incarnate or symbolizes the presence of The Devil in and throughout Western art is a matter of degree, not of difference, and these are the kinds of issues we all missed back in 1990 or so and may still be missing as Mapplethorpe evolved from mid-career photographer to a celebrity of the first rank, replete with glamour, the sexualized New York City beckoning and beckoned by him, youth corrupted/taunted/tainted by the work and/or by the rituals played out in the work: the props, if you will. And since The Catholic Church has based so many of its tenets/dogma on the evil represented by the body and its fall from Grace, so brilliantly interpreted by events like The Spanish Inquisition—that inventor of waterboarding, for example—that Mapplethorpe may either represent or symbolize The Church's obsession in its dogma with the evil of the physical body and its desires as played out through and by sex. Sex, itself, then, became The Devil that Mapplethorpe—what, worshiped? Examined? Portrayed? Made into a series of Sadeian tableaux vivants in photographs that seem so three dimensional as to become sculptures,

If one were to remove all the Mapplethorpe self-portraits from his entire oeuvre and show them alone as a series, we'd see the absolute brilliance and prescience of this photographer both as a classicist and as a religious force, of sexuality unleashed, of Camille Paglia's dionysian forces exploded upon New York City in the 1970s, of youth tempted/corrupted/fallen. Many of Mapplethorpe's self portraits as devils look uncannily like the Greek god Pan, with those tiny little horns rather than the large ones we more commonly associate with The Devil in art history and in religious practice. Think of the pied piper, of all those children following all those god Pans over the years, and you see the full implications of Mapplethorpe's genius, dark though it was. "Self Portrait with Whip" is the most obvious image of the Devil; that's the Devil's tail, clearly, the Devil's might face, and over on the windowsill adjacent, there's the skull, that death's head that Mapplethorpe associated with sex and death, with Thanatos and Eros: perhaps those are the forces at play/unleashed in Mapplethorpe's work. If so, the artist's classicism thus becomes another means towards the perfection the artist demands in his work, and thus uses classicism as the main tool in The Devil's workshop, as seductive a tool as any in the art historical canon, luring all those young men into the rituals of sado-masochism which Mapplethorpe either celebrates or pictorializes as what happens after The Expulsion from The Garden of Eden: we enter into the front door, not the back door, of overpowering Desire itself, which Mapplethorpe equates with The Devil's work in this go-round on This Earth at That Time.

Celant touched on many of these ideas, and, in doing so, justifies the current view of Mapplethorpe as a great artist, not just a competent one. He may have been a visionary, and like most visionaries or seers, hated/despised in his own time and own home: the payment due was his own death to AIDS, and as Celant showed Mapplethorpe's last brilliant self-portrait, of his now ravaged face, decomposed from his body, headed toward the light in the upper left corner of the photo, and his hand leaning on the top of a cane with death's head (at the feast) ready to consume him, the entire audience went absolutely silent, and Celant's voice dropped nearly a register, as we all realized that we were in the presence not of death per se, but of great art, of one of the most iconic images of the last hundred years.

-Daniel Brown