Commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Mapplethorpe The Perfect Moment exhibit at Penn’s Institute of Contemporary Art, this panel discussion used the conflict surrounding the exhibit as a launching off point to consider artist expression in our present moment of heightened reactiveness about the (false) incompatibility of free speech and safe spaces.

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment, ICA, Philadelphia (Meyerson Hall)
December 9, 1988 - January 29, 1989

From Judith Tannenbaum Presentation, February 5 2019. Institute of Contemporary Art.
From Kaja Silverman Presentation, February 5 2019. Institute of Contemporary Art.

From Judith Tannenbaum Presentation, February 5 2019. Institute of Contemporary Art.
Ken Moody, 1984

Philip Prioleau, N.Y.C., 1979

American Flag, 1977

From Judith Tannenbaum Presentation, February 5 2019. Institute of Contemporary Art.
Panelists and works

Amy Sadao, Daniel W. Dietrich, II Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art

Judith Tannenbaum, former curator, associate director, and interim director of the Institute of Contemporary Art
The Beginner's Guide to Curating: Judith Tannenbaum Revisits ICA

Kaja Silverman, professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania
Kaja Silverman Publications

Sophia Wallace, interdisciplinary artist
CLITERACY, 100 Natural Laws, 2012 © Sophia Wallace

Zach Blas, artist, filmmaker, and writer
Contra-Internet Installation

Wayne Modest, head of the Research Center of Material Culture
WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MODERN: Museums, Collections, and Modernity in the Caribbean

Key terms & concepts

Freedom of Expression:
The power or right to express one's opinions without censorship, restraint, or legal penalty.¹

Censorship:
The suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.²

More on The Perfect Moment

Whipping up a storm: how Robert Mapplethorpe shocked America
Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment at the ICA

Robert Mapplethorpe Guggenheim Profile

Why Mapplethorpe's Photographs Remain Subversive, Even without the Shock Value
How a Museum Cancelling a Controversial Mapplethorpe Exhibition Changed My Life

¹ 2019 Oxford University Press
² 2019 Oxford University Press
A demonstration against the decision to censor Mapplethorpe’s work. Photograph: John Stamstad/Contemporary Arts Center.

Important Readings:

Welcome to the jungle: new positions in Black cultural studies by Kobena Mercer

Reading racial fetishism: the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe by Kobena Mercer

That words and norms around language are constantly in transition can cause confusion and discomfort to those accustomed to these words; this is also true within museums. But society changes, and language changes with it. Our objects may be timeless, but the ways we speak about them are not. But precisely which words are these? And, more importantly, why are particular words understood as derogatory or offensive, and by whom?