

Colacello, Bob. "When Robert Mapplethorpe Took New York," *Vanity Fair*, March 2016.

VANITY FAIR

When Robert Mapplethorpe Took New York



Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith, photographed by Norman Seeff at a friend's apartment on New York City's Upper West Side, 1969.
Photograph by Norman Seeff.

Robert Mapplethorpe's posthumous art-world apotheosis, heralded this spring by a two-museum exhibition in L.A. and an uncensored HBO documentary, had its seeds in 1970s downtown New York. It was there Mapplethorpe shared his dreams with *Vanity Fair*'s Bob Colacello (then editor of Andy Warhol's fledgling *Interview* magazine) as he headed down a path toward death—and immortality.

A few days apart in mid-March, the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) will open their joint retrospective, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium." This unprecedented double exhibition, which will run until the end of July at both institutions, is all the more remarkable given the controversial—not to say scandalous—radical sadomasochistic content of much of Mapplethorpe's best-known work. One could see it as a sign not only of how far the idea of photography as a fine art form has come over the past four decades but also of how far the boundaries of American culture and taste have been pushed and expanded during that same period.

Both museums will include related works and materials from Mapplethorpe's extensive archive, which they jointly acquired in 2011, largely as a gift from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, but with some support from the David Geffen Foundation and the Getty Trust. In addition, the Getty will exhibit a selection of works from the mammoth photography collection of Sam Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe's patron and lover. Under Mapplethorpe's influence, Wagstaff, a former curator from an old New York family, had voraciously bought up thousands of vintage prints by everyone from Julia Margaret Cameron and Edward Steichen to Diane Arbus and Peter Hujar when the photography market was still in its infancy. He sold his collection to the Getty in 1984, three years before succumbing to AIDS. Mapplethorpe died in 1989, also of AIDS.

As if to enhance the sense of historic occasion surrounding the Getty/LACMA extravaganza, on April 4 HBO will air its highly provocative documentary *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, produced by Katharina Otto-Bernstein (whose most recent film was on avant-garde theater guru Robert Wilson). As the directors, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, themselves have made clear, "even his most shocking and forbidden images are included without blurs, without snickers—in other words, exactly as the artist

intended.” Indeed, after the fourth or fifth appearance of Mapplethorpe’s most notorious self-portrait—the one in which he has inserted the bottom end of a leather whip into the rear end of his body—I began to wonder if this is what we really need to see, to contemplate, to memorialize in the age of ISIS.

All this and more was revealed at a lunch in New York last November, hosted by Getty director Timothy Potts and LACMA C.E.O. and director Michael Govan to announce their joint venture. As a large part of the city’s art press faced a first course of kale-and-carrot salad in the Martha Washington Hotel Ballroom, Potts declared Mapplethorpe “one of the great artists of the 20th century,” whereupon everyone applauded, perhaps none more fervently than the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation’s astute and charming president, Michael Stout. Detailed descriptions of the parallel exhibitions by the Getty’s and LACMA’s curators of photography, Paul Martineau and Britt Salvesen, respectively, followed in the same reverential mode.

My mind wandered back to the early 1970s, when I came to know Mapplethorpe when he was the literally starving young artist—now undergoing art-world beatification. Of course, Robert would have been thrilled—though not amazed, because his ambition even then was limitless. But I could also imagine him chuckling quietly to himself over the absurdity of it all, the incongruity and officiousness, not to mention the choice of venue for the luncheon. I could envision him looking at me with that glint of mischief in his emerald-green eyes, that facility for complicity that would take him so far up, as well as so far down.

SCENE AND HEARD

Robert was 24 when I first saw him, in February 1971, at his girlfriend Patti Smith’s first public poetry reading, at St. Mark’s Church, on East 10th Street. He was slouched against the wall, in a black, belted trench coat, a purple-and-white silk scarf tied around his neck, his hair a crown of angelic Pre-Raphaelite curls. But I realized right away that he wasn’t pure angel. He was pretty but tough, androgynous and butch. I found it hard not to look at him, even as Patti manically seduced a crowd that included her other boyfriend, the (married) playwright Sam Shepard, and such New York poetry stars as Anne Waldman and Gerard Malanga with her rock-like odes to Bertolt Brecht and James Dean. I was half a year younger than Robert, having been made managing editor of *Interview* magazine (print run 5,000) the previous fall by Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol, and still very new to the ultra-hip downtown scene. I was also writing film reviews for *The Village Voice*, and, as with so many journalists before and after me, that’s how I came to befriend the object of my desire: by writing about him.

That November, the Museum of Modern Art, as part of its Cineprobe underground-film series, screened a short color film directed by Sandy Daley, Robert and Patti’s neighbor at the Chelsea Hotel. The title said it all: “Robert Having His Nipple Pierced.” As Robert, in black leather pants, swooned into the arms of his boyfriend, David Croland, a tall, dark, and sultry fashion illustrator and model, while the delicate operation was performed by the Chelsea’s doctor-in-residence, Patti, in her thickest New Jersey accent, explained on the soundtrack why she had mixed feelings about homosexuals: because she felt left out and “they use their assholes.” I gave the film a rave and was rewarded with a phone call from its star, proposing we meet for coffee. “I thought your article was funny,” he said, “but you got it, too.” *The Voice*’s headline was taken from my text, SOME MIGHT CALL IT DEGENERACY.

We were two of a kind: rebel Catholic boys who had fled middle-class Long Island suburbs, Robert from Floral Park, on the Queens/Nassau County line, I from nearby Rockville Centre, and come to “the city”—Manhattan—to make it. We started spending long afternoons wandering around the Village, trading childhood stories, sharing dreams of success over endless cups of black coffee in empty tourist cafés. Robert loved hearing about how I spit out my First Communion wafer because the nuns had done such a good job of convincing me that it really was the actual flesh and blood of Jesus. “Protestants believe in *consubstantiation*,” I would intone, mimicking the mother superior who had terrified me, aged seven, in catechism class. “But we believe in *transubstantiation*.” Robert, who had been an altar boy, would giggle and point out that if you grew up in the 1950s the only place you ever saw a naked male body was at Mass: Christ on the Cross, hanging over the altar. “And he had a crown of thorns, and there was blood,” he’d say. “No wonder we’re perverse.” He would listen intently as I held forth on Kierkegaard’s belief that the spiritual, aesthetic, and erotic were closely related, one of the few bits of knowledge I retained from the required philosophy courses at the Jesuit Georgetown University.

Robert had left Pratt one course short of a B.F.A.; his college education was almost entirely visual, and what he knew of literature came mostly from Patti. Fortuitously, her favorites were also mine: Rimbaud, Cocteau, Genet, William Burroughs. In any case, I talked much more than he did. Like many visual artists I have known, Robert was not loquacious.

Robert didn't consider himself a photographer then, nor did he own a real camera. His very early artworks often used photographic images he culled from gay porn magazines, over which he airbrushed a fine mist of paint, usually lavender or turquoise, transforming the blatantly sexual into something more romantic and mysterious. In 1970, he had started taking portraits of himself and Patti with Sandy Daley's Polaroid. Robert couldn't afford to buy a camera of his own and scrimped on food to buy the \$3-a-pack Polaroid film. Sometimes he would manipulate the developed picture's image, using a Q-tip to lift the emulsion and twist it into curvaceous shapes. He gave me one of those not long after we met: a self-portrait of his crotch in psychedelic bikini briefs. There were other small gifts over the next couple of years, always signed, "To Robert love Robert" in his spidery, barely visible script.

After Robert and I showed up a few times together in the back room of Max's Kansas City, that hotbed of Factory intrigue, Candy Darling, the most bourgeois of Warhol's drag queens, warned me not to get romantically involved with him. "Everyone knows he's a sicko," she said. Andy started giving me a hard time, too. "You don't have a crush on Robert Mapplethorpe, do you? He's so dirty. His feet smell. He has no money ... " For his part, Robert was both fascinated by and afraid of Warhol. Robert thought Warhol was the most important artist of our time, but he was wary of getting caught up in Andy's entourage and losing his creative identity, which he felt I was in danger of doing.

Things came to a head one day in May 1972, when I brought Robert along with Andy and me to see Rudolf Nureyev rehearse with the Royal Ballet at Lincoln Center. The cab ride uptown was agony, as neither Andy nor Robert uttered a word, because, each told me later, he didn't want to have his ideas stolen by the other. The scene that followed was a kind of duel by Polaroid as Andy and Robert took competing pictures of Nureyev in action, and Nureyev grabbed the pictures from their hands and tore them to pieces, declaring that he hadn't agreed to a press conference. Andy was on the phone that night, berating me: "We would have got a real interview out of Nureyev if you hadn't brought that awful Robert Mapplethorpe along." "But Nureyev asked me to bring him," I countered. "But it's your fault they even met, because you got him invited to Sam Green's dinner for Nureyev. Robert's just using you, Bob. Did you ever think of that?"

CAMERA MAN

Robert was definitely interested in the glamorous social life that came with my job as editor of Andy Warhol's magazine, both as a means of career advancement and because he was attracted to the world of fashionable society, as was I, to be honest. One of our favorite afternoon pastimes was to make guest lists for his first gallery exhibition and my first book party, including socialites and stars we had met or hoped to meet, though neither event was about to happen anytime soon. He had already made inroads into that world through David Croland, who had introduced him to Loulou de la Falaise, the Yves Saint Laurent muse and daughter of Maxime de la Falaise, whose second husband, John McKendry, was curator of prints and photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The McKendrys lived in a sprawling pre-war apartment on Riverside Drive at 91st Street, where they frequently held dinners mixing the beau monde and demimonde, the Rayners and Erteguns with Factory transvestites and Halston mannequins. In fact, Maxime was the star of *Vivian's Girls*, a combination soap opera/talk show directed by Factory kid Vincent Fremont and Andy in one of his first attempts at, as he put it, "doing something peculiar with video."

John McKendry was madly and unrequitedly in love with Robert, and Maxime played along because it added to their bohemian, bisexual image. ("Bi" was much more "in" than gay or straight among this group.) She hosted a tea for Loulou's girlfriends—Marisa and Berry Berenson, Marina Schiano, Pat Ast—to meet Robert and buy the jewelry he was making out of black string, blue and purple glass beads, and rabbits' feet bound in black mesh, which he sold for \$50 apiece. I also remember a Patti Smith reading in the McKendrys' exotic lair of a living room that did not go over so well with the Kempners and de la Rentas, though Kenny Lane thought the proto-punk performer was onto something. No matter, through the besotted Met curator, Robert was getting to know influential art-

world figures, including David Hockney and Henry Geldzahler. And when Robert and Patti were flat broke, not an unusual situation, John and Maxime would send a taxi downtown with a \$20 bill in an envelope so that they could eat for a few days. The fall before I met Robert, John had invited him to London, where he had been taken up by the most far-out branch of the English aristocracy, including the Tennants, Guinnesses, and Lambtons, all of whom were also very friendly with Andy and his Anglophile business manager, Fred Hughes.

Our friendship, which took off in early January 1972, continued apace into the spring and early summer, when I was diagnosed with severe anemia, the result of burning my candle at both ends. After securing my first commissioned portrait for Andy, of the wife of the Italian ambassador in Mexico City, I decided to take a month's vacation in Puerto Vallarta. Upon returning to New York, Robert was the first person I called after Andy. I told him I was continuing my recuperation at the farm of Peter Beard's rich uncle in Bridgehampton, and invited him out for the weekend. I remember sitting in my guest room on our twin beds that first night as Robert told me that he found himself increasingly attracted to the downtown S&M club scene, where he would meet men, who, among other things, would beg him to lead them around on a dog's leash. "It's kind of weird," he explained, "but I can get into it. It's sort of like theater—or Mass. It's not really real, but at the same time it is."

That was the summer Robert met Sam Wagstaff and fell in love with his good looks, charisma, intelligence, lineage, and money. By October, Sam had bought him a large loft on Bond Street, where he lived and worked. We continued to be friendly, but mostly on a professional level. I asked Robert to contribute a picture to *Interview's* November 1975 "PHOTO ISSUE" and he sent over a sharply focused, black-and-white close-up of a banana with a leather key chain hanging from it—an S&M twist on Andy's famous banana album cover for the Velvet Underground. The following year, Robert told me that he had been invited to Mustique by Colin Tennant, the owner of the small Caribbean island, for his "Gold-on-Gold" birthday party, which would be attended by Princess Margaret and Mick Jagger, among others. I suggested he photograph the festivities for *Interview* and we ran two of his pictures. On a previous trip to Mustique, he flew on the same private plane as Reinaldo and Carolina Herrera, who found him, in her words, "beautiful, charming, and with such good manners." The Herreras agreed to sit for their portraits after returning to New York, Reinaldo wrapped in a cape, Carolina in a hat with a veil.

Every so often Robert would call and invite me to his loft to see "the new pictures I've been making." He'd start by offering me a few lines of cocaine in the offhand way art and fashion people did in the late 1970s. Then he'd show me some things he knew I'd like: portraits of socialites, artists, and actors; exquisitely sensuous close-ups of orchids and lilies; black male nudes in the manner of Ingres. Finally, he would bring out the hard-core stuff, most unforgettably the "X Portfolio," a set of 13 formally impeccable black-and-white photographs documenting the gruesome sexual practices of what by then had become a flourishing far West Village saturnalia, centered on such all-night leather bars as the Anvil, the Toilet, and the Mineshaft. It was as if in the course of an hour Cecil Beaton had metamorphosed into Tom of Finland—and kept going.

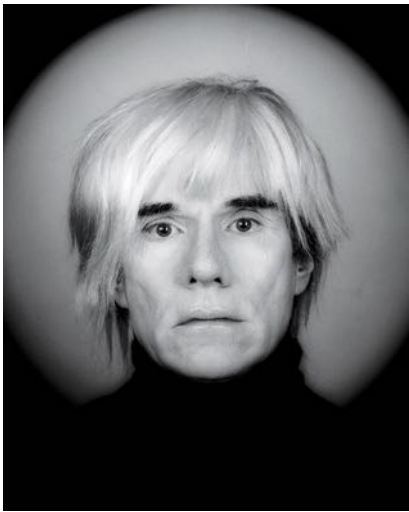
Both sides of Robert's personality and art were on view at parallel 1977 exhibitions in two SoHo galleries, "Portraits" at Holly Solomon and "Erotic Pictures" at the Kitchen. The first featured the Archbishop of Canterbury, Princess Diane de Beauvau-Craon, Lady Anne Lambton, Philip Glass, and David Hockney, among others. The second focused exclusively on sex acts, mostly of the bondage-and-discipline school. I tape-recorded Robert for *Interview*, asking him why he chose such sexual subject matter. "Because I think it's the hardest thing to do, to make pornography into art and still keep it sexy." We ran four pages of his photographs, all from the portraits show.

As Robert's prices climbed, and his rich lover Sam's collection grew, Andy's attitude toward the boy he used to call a creep softened considerably. In the 1980s they did each other's portrait. Robert turned Andy into a saint, his white wig encircled by a glowing halo cutout. Andy was not as nice: his off-register black-and-white silkscreen suggested the fleeting glamour of a fallen angel blitzed on coke.

The last time I saw Robert was at his Whitney Museum retrospective, in 1988. He was in a wheelchair, holding a gold-topped cane like a scepter. He was wearing a tuxedo with a broken-collar formal shirt; his hair was slicked back, his temples and cheeks sunken, a living memento mori. "Hi, Robert," he said. He hated the nickname Bob. "Hi, Robert," I said.



A 1980 self-portrait.
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A 1986 Mapplethorpe portrait of Andy Warhol.
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Mapplethorpe's 1977 portrait of Sam Wagstaff.

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Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe.
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Mapplethorpe at the opening of his 1988 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition.
Photograph by Jonathan Becker.



Bob Colacello on a bus in New York City, circa 1971.
Photograph by Pat Hackett.