

The Straight Stuff

How the mainstream press sees it

B Y W . C . M c R A E

The media had a picnic during the opening month of the *National Museum of Women in the Arts*. The museum, brainchild of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay, opened in Washington with a permanent collection of 500 works by women since the 16th century, and an inaugural exhibition on American women's art from 1830-1930. The press hounded out feminists who thought the works not "feminist" enough, and male art critics who thought the works not professional enough. This left media anchor-people the happy task, *a la* Koppel (thesis/antithesis/synthesis), of cheerfully concluding that the museum is an idea whose time has come.

In a generally admirable article in *Vogue*, critic Barbara Rose adds another consideration to the debate: crafts. How, she frets between the lines, will men ever take women's painting and sculpture seriously if it is housed with quilts and beadwork? The whole notion of "crafts" strikes me as inherently sexist: If an untrained male artist whittles, it is folk, or primitive, art and therefore collectible. If an untrained female artist tats lace, it is craft, and relegated to second hand stores.

AIDS and parents of gays was the subject of an article in last month's *Psychology Today*. Researchers surveyed 402 members of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and came up with pretty unsurprising results (71% of the parents fear their child might "catch" [sic] AIDS). The article, complete with graphics of a crying mother, and two men arm-in-arm, whose shadow spells A-I-D-S, is mainly a collection of survey findings — cold statistics stacked end to end. But the article paints a pretty chilling portrait of our parents. Most parents revealed that they went through the five proxy stages of mourning — from shock to acceptance — when they first discovered their children's sexual orientation; they re-experienced the same anxieties after the "AIDS outbreak"; and presumably they will go through the same steps of mourning when and if we die of AIDS. Who would have thought our folks were such throughfares of psycho/social constructs? The question remains, though, that if AIDS is not a gay disease, why shouldn't all parents be equally concerned? If parents felt differently about their gay children with AIDS than they do about their straight children with AIDS, then there would be a story.

The cultural jungle drums were booming that the **Baby M** case had great relevance for the future of the family, motherhood, and therefore America (drum roll). In general, the mainstream press held its finger to the wind and decided the legal claim of *Stern Pere* was ascendant. It was left to ritual iconoclasts like the *Village Voice* to promote the mysterious obligation of motherhood by championing *Whitehead Mere*. It was hard, finally, to decide what, if any, significance the case had. It seemed, start to finish, an exercise in classism, a rich-rents-poor story. My perplexity arose in trying to decide: What's politically correct here? Is there a feminist perspective in this

case? It was difficult to sympathize with either side when the *New York Times* reported the wrangling over who has the book and movie rights to Baby M's story.

And speaking of miniseries, did anyone else fall for the same *trompe l'oeil* as I? For a headline about "Televangelist Ministeries" I prophetically read "Televangelist Miniseries." With Jimmy and Tammy Bakker's sex-drugs-and-merger scandal now opening up to include allegations (from fellow evangelists, of course) of Jimmy's gay way with boys, the eventual miniseries will have to be aired on cable to avoid the censor. But after all, the greater the sin, the greater the salvation.

CBS stopped its self-censorship on positive gay themes long enough to air a one hour mid-afternoon special, directed at a high school audience, on the subject of gay youth. As part of its *CBS Schoolbreak* series, on March 31 the network broadcast "What if I'm gay?" It was a generally positive, if not uplifting, treatment of the confusion of a male athlete who faces personal and social trauma as he acknowledges his sexual orientation. On distant British shores, the BBC canceled *Mates*, a two-part drama on the subject of teenage gay life, due to pressure from the Thatcher government. The *Times of London* reports that *Mates* was to have aired as part of the BBC's *School TV* educational series.

The *New Republic*, in one of its occasional win-a-subscription contests, recently queried: If the Reagan administration, despite its protestings, allowed the Iranamuck story to leak out, what must this smokescreen hide that's really going on behind the scenes in Washington? National Public Radio (NPR) may well win the contest and the subscription with its April 9th story on the gay leadership of the National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty (NEPL), a cover organization for cash-running to the Nicaraguan Contras. NPR revealed that the principal fund-raisers for the Reagan administration's illegal war in Nicaragua are widely-known gay men in Washington; that NEPL leaders, such as Carl "Spits" Channell, diverted money from the funds collected to male companions; and that Oliver North worked very closely with the group. They even had a code name for North, "Green," though NPR allowed the listener to ponder whether he was so called for his money, his beret, or his sexual ineptitude. What is germane here is the response of the media. To my knowledge, the story did not break immediately in any of the major dailies, and only some days later was picked up by the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*. Moreover, the story itself was accompanied by hand-wringing on the part of the reporter, Frank Browning. He said that he didn't think it was improper to report on the sexual preferences of the NEPL organizers. The story was legitimate journalism, he said, because the administration, which is publicly hostile to gays, and certainly has the support of rabid homophobes, knowingly used a largely

gay organization to head one of its most secret initiatives. NPR and Browning need not have worried: The inner Reagan circle has always included gay men, though indictments for perjury have broken up the gang a bit of late.

The *New York Times* reported that President Reagan and Prime Minister Chirac of France have reached an agreement ending the row between the US and France concerning who "owns" the AIDS virus. France's Pasteur Institute had alleged in a lawsuit that Robert Gallo of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in essence filched the virus from samples given by the French to the CDC, and then claimed the virus discovery was his, and by extension, America's. The agreement acknowledges a dual French and American role in the discovery of HIV, with most of the royalties from the resulting blood test being funneled into a new foundation for AIDS research and education. The Pasteur Institute agreed to drop its suit. However, earlier this year, the British

New Scientist (2/12/87) effectively tried the suit in its pages. The results ought to be required reading for anyone interested in AIDS research, and will astonish anybody concerned with the integrity of our medical establishment. The *New Scientist* produces evidence that Gallo and his cohorts at the CDC all but stole the virus from the French researchers by refusing to acknowledge that Gallo's HTLV-3 is almost certainly derived from the LAV viruses obtained from the French. Equally troubling is the picture painted of the shifty ineptitude of Gallo himself.

The road to Gallo's appropriation, as the *New Scientist* clearly details, was lined with greed and pettiness. It is no coincidence that Gallo sleazed to his position under this administration: He merely takes his place among the other opportunists who have risen to the top under Reagan.

And it's not just medical ethics that were compromised. The *New Scientist* estimates that Gallo's tergiversations have cost about a year of AIDS research. •

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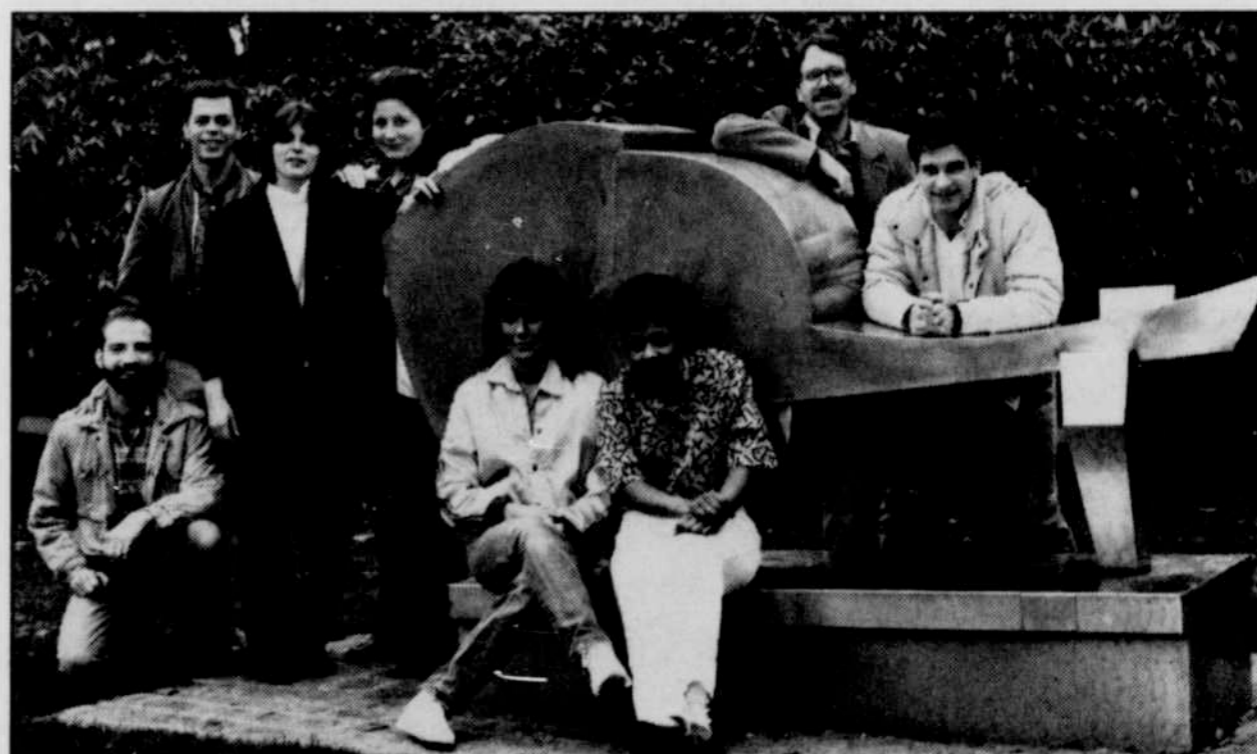
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