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# Design Arts: National Academy of Design (1994): Editorial 10

Graham W.J. Beal

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## ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

Monday, July 4, 1994

*The writer is director of Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum.***'Arts Endowment Record Enviably'**

BY GRAHAM W.J. BEAL

The World-Herald has done it again, re-printing inaccurate information about an event subsidized by funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and using the sensationalized description to characterize the agency as "approving art that glorifies perversion and ridiculous religious beliefs."

RESPONSE  
TO JUNE 25  
EDITORIAL:  
'BLOODY CLOTH  
NOT ART  
TO MANY  
TAXPAYERS'

Regarding the performance (held at an alternative space in Minneapolis, under the auspices of Walker Art Center), the individual whose blood was blotted with paper towels had tested HIV negative, and the Minnesota state health authorities have confirmed that there was no risk to the public. Previous publicity had described the nature of the performance, and the audience did not part, Red Sea-like, when the lightly stained towel passed over their heads.

Some audience members walked out early in the performance and, having already made up their minds, were not around for the question-and-answer session that followed. Had they stayed, they would have learned that the cuts symbolized the scarification process common to many cultures and which, in some African societies, signifies ennoblement. Not exactly Norman Rockwell stuff, I grant you, but hardly the irresponsible happening inflicted on an unsuspecting audience as reported in some parts of the press.

The details of such events notwithstanding — and I completely understand why government support for

certain aspects of contemporary art does not sit well with many taxpayers — I would like, by citing examples from Joslyn Art Museum's experience, to draw attention to overwhelmingly positive contributions that the Endowment makes to the arts in the United States.

Two years ago, Joslyn was awarded an NEA grant of \$30,000 toward our exhibition, "David Nash: Voyages and Vessels." the total cash budget for which was more than \$100,000. It is especially difficult to get sponsorship for contemporary art — even when it is as positive and enhancing as David Nash's — and I can state categorically that, without this early support to build on, it would have been very difficult for us at Joslyn to proceed with such an ambitious project.

The exhibition recently closed here and opens soon in San Diego. It then goes to the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu and, probably, to museums in Vancouver, B.C., Madison, Wis., Houston and Tampa. As each participant pays Joslyn an "organizational fee," what started life as a risky and expensive venture ended, through early NEA commitment, as a prestigious project that drew cash and kudos to our state.

Other recent NEA support to Joslyn includes grants totalling more than \$29,000 to restore works in our collection, including the Paulanship sculptures in our East Foyer, our Greek Vases and much-beloved 19th-century French paintings, as well as support for both of our Midlands Invitational exhibitions (\$30,000 each), and Stuart Davis and "The Day of the Dead" (\$10,000 each). Thousands of similar examples can be cited every year for

institutions all over the country, but when Joslyn and other Nebraska institutions receive generous subsidies from the NEA, mention in The World-Herald is limited to a small factual report. Why no full-blooded editorials (no pun intended) praising the agency?

"If symphonies and operas are all that important to the NEA," the editorial asks, "why does it, again and again, risk its ability to provide support?" Again and again? The agency is being held hostage over a handful of grants out of 100,000 given over a 30-year period. We should be talking about an extraordinary and consistent effort to support institutions across the country and to bring high-quality art to the communities and schools they serve.

What a record! It should be the envy of every other government agency in the country. Instead, the NEA is remorselessly held to standards higher than any other agency.

Think about it. An art center 400 miles away spends \$150 of NEA money on a performance, and the Jesse Helmses of this world are finally successful in getting rid of the agency. The American taxpayer can now go to bed each night secure in the knowledge that not a single penny of his or her hard-earned money can, even indirectly, be used to support what The World-Herald characterizes as "'art' that ridicules the very values they live by."

Great. But exactly who is being punished here: The NEA? A few "risky" artists? Or institutions like Joslyn? The answer, it seems to me, is all of the above, and that, I think, is not so great. Where I come from, it's called "throwing the baby out with the bath-water."