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James J. Kilpatrick

Bad art or good, we shouldn't pay

Let me return, if I may, to the business of the crepe paper, the sky divers, the sizzling senator and the six thousand dollars. Michael Straight has some further reflections, and his further reflections prompt my further reflections.

To refresh your memory:

A year or so ago, a Pittsburgh artist, Le Ann Wilchusky, obtained a grant of \$4,025 from the National Endowment for the Arts for the production of a 20-minute film. Part of the grant financed a week in the Caribbean for the artist and her husband, where he photographed her at work. Most of the balance paid for a short flight in a small plane over El Paso in August of 1976. It was during this flight that four rolls of crepe paper were unrolled

while a camera recorded the interesting scene.

Word of this expenditure eventually floated back to Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin. The senator hit the ceiling, all splattered out, and some time elapsed before he returned to the floor. Then he denounced the award as "outrageous," and awarded the National Endowment for the Arts his Golden Fleece of the Month.

Now Michael Straight, acting chairman of the Endowment, has come forth with a useful suggestion: The Endowment itself, he says, should stop making direct grants to individual artists, composers, poets and the like. Such grants lay the Endowment open to attack, and cause more trouble than they are worth.

Mr. Straight asks: How is artistic excellence to be determined? It may be possible to reach a consensus in some areas. If 30 young pianists compete in a blind competition, playing the identical work, a competent jury usually will arrive at agreement on their talent. The same thing is true, Mr. Straight believes, of works of literature. But what of the visual arts? Here agreement comes hard.

"There are Anti-Object Artists, and Earthwork Artists, Conceptual Artists and

Performance Artists; Minimalists and Minimal-Systematicists; Traditionalists committed to form, and Iconoclasts, whose sworn purpose is to annihilate all form in the visual arts. Given this range, standards become meaningless; no consensus can be assured."

Mr. Straight's idea is to increase the public funds available for individual artists, but to change the grant procedures. He would halt direct "handouts," which perpetuate the alienation between the artist and the taxpayer. Instead, he would have the government match purchase awards by art museums, publishers and local symphonies. By dispersing the "patronage power," he feels, a major obstacle to the continued growth of public funding for the arts could be removed.

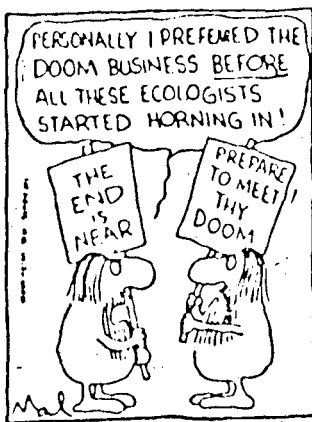
The gentleman's proposal makes sense; it ought to be promptly approved by Congress. If some state or private museum had been willing to put up \$3,000 toward Ms. Wilchusky's crepe paper epic, at least the National Endowment could have ducked half its responsibility. But Mr. Straight's temporizing suggestion begs the fundamental issue.

What is the fundamental issue: What is the federal government doing in the arts business in the first place? You can search the Constitution from Article

One through Article Seven and find not one shred of authority for Congress to spend the people's money in this fashion. The power simply is not there. Only by stretching the general welfare clause to its utmost limit can even a tenuous rationalization be found for these expenditures.

Even if the Constitution permitted such outlays, federal subsidies would remain a poor idea. At any given moment, thousands of artists, sculptors, poets, novelists, playwrights and composers are at work. If public funds are given to Poet A, the funds must be denied Poet B. If the government smiles upon Sculptor C, whose art is to smash tin cans, such financial aid must be denied Sculptor D, who carves on classic themes. Erica Jong got \$5,000 of the people's money in order to write a dirty book, "Fear of Flying." Is this what we have to pay taxes for?

No, sir. Artists, writers and composers should make it on their own, or not at all. Once the government stamps its imprimatur on their works, the government makes the race unfair. Congress is forbidden to make any law respecting an establishment of religion; by the same token, it ought to be prohibited from funding an establishment of art.



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