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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)

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Helen Frankenthaler

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7 July 1989

When I was appointed to the NEA I understood that the Council received its charter from the Federal government. It functions as an autonomous body devoted to the pursuit and support of quality in art and culture of America, past, present, future. Now, two incendiary issues (involving the exhibition of work by Andres Serrano, and Robert Mapplethorpe) have brought an avalanche of reaction. I for one would not want to support the two artists mentioned, but once supported we must allow them to be shown. With all the fuss, I think a number of crucial points have to be made.

Granted, we are "fed" by government permit and budgets, but censorship and government interference in the directions and standards of art are dangerous and not part of the democratic process. A country depends on its culture and its cultural freedom - is lost without it. If that healthy atmosphere is censored or dictated, the life of every citizen is at stake. Witness throughout history the results in Germany, the Soviet Union, China, etc. We must not smother the expression of art anymore than we should suppress or annihilate protests and parades, all part of our unique and precious democracy. These facts are what continue to make our country as great as it is, it's our insurance; fragile, to be cherished. We must be proud of it and defend it.

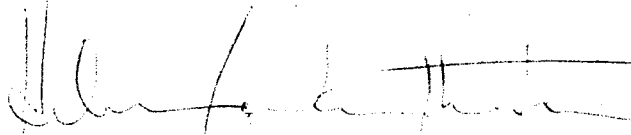
But there are other issues in this particular case. It is heartbreaking both as an artist, *and* as a taxpayer(!) for me to make these remarks, and as a painter on the Council I find myself in a bind: Congress in a censoring uproar on one hand and, alas, a mediocre art enterprise on the other! Sad, indeed.

By "mediocre art enterprise" I mean, has the Council run its course in terms of doing a necessary quality job? Should it change its course from within? Is it possible? I myself find the Council, the recommendations of the panels and the grants given of increasingly dubious quality. Is the Council, once a helping hand, now beginning to spawn an art monster? Do we lose art along the way, in the guise of endorsing experimentation? From my point of view the Council is in trouble; in my eyes as well as in the eyes of many of the public. *But this should be handled as an in-house (small "h") matter. As*

conceived, the peer panel system is ideal, but frequently no longer functions for the Council board in its job of "quality sifting". Despite the deserved grants I see more and more non-deserving recipients. I feel there was a time when I experienced loftier minds, relatively unloaded with politics, fashion, and chic. They encouraged the endurance of a great tradition and protected important development in the arts. I recall spirited productive discussions and arguments. Naturally, it is assumed that many of us often feel aghast at some of the awards, but I feel that way more and more and I am not alone. Have we "had it" -- like many now defunct, once productive, agencies? I hope not. There are too many benefits to individuals and institutions and to the cultural life of the entire nation. Realizing that we are a government agency, can we now get at our problems and make quality changes? Can we?

The House Appropriations Committee is now trying to "punish" the subgranting level within our budget. Perhaps we have to work out a better subgranting system. Quality control is the issue, raise the level. Institutions must not be intimidated and run scared once publicly committed to supporting their beliefs. To cancel out because of intimidation is something we must fight.

Sincerely (half-sanguinely) yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Helen Frankenthaler', written in dark ink.

Helen Frankenthaler

HF:wo