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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 44

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Senator Claiborne Pell
Room 335, Senator Russell Office Building
Constitution Avenue, Del. Ave and 1st STreet, NE
Washington, D.C., 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

The recent attack on the National Endowment for the Arts threatens the concept of artistic freedom in the United States. The artist, as an individual, expresses opinions through his or her work that may sometimes be offensive to some. In our democracy, this is not only to be tolerated, but protected. The proposed changes in the the authorization legislation of the Endowment can only weaken that organization and reduce artistic -- that is -- individual freedom in our country.

I am the former Director for Arts at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, where I served for 19 years, and prior to that was for five years a music critic with the New York Times. I have served on numerous National Endowment panels during which time I was able to observe the agency at close range. And I led a discussion of this issue at the May 31 meeting in New York of the Independent Committee on Arts Policy, of which I am a member.

I support the April 25 statement by Acting NEA Chairman, Hugh Southern, which said in part, "The National Endowment for the Arts supports the right of grantee organizations to select, on artistic criteria, their artist-recipients and present their work, even though sometimes the work may be deemed controversial and offensive to some individuals."

I deplore any move to seek to make changes in the National Endowment for the Arts that could be dangerously undermining and that could damage an agency with a record of accomplishment or any move to reduce its funding.

It is through the vision of great artists that we are given insights into the human condition, the light and the darker sides. Not all artists qualify as being great. In defending what has been done by the photographer Andres Serrano, I find myself defending a less than great artist. But we frequently must go to bat precisely for those for whose work we have no sympathy but whose right to produce that work we must defend with our own blood. In order to safeguard the rights of significant artists, we must protect the rights of lesser ones.

In a pluralistic society many points of view may be held. Citizens have the right to accept or reject ideas as they choose. They can turn their back on art that offends, just as they can deplore a weapons system that offends them, but which their taxes support

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nonetheless.

The idea of artistic freedom is inseparable from that of pluralism; public access to ideas and works of art is also part of artistic freedom. The process of selecting art and artists for support is best handled by a jury of peers, just as in other fields it is a peer review process that maintains objectivity and balance in making judgments. No system is infallible; the peer review panel system is infinitely preferable to a politicized process. The distinguished work of the National Endowment for the Arts and its staff is vital to the continued cultural development of our nation.

The issue is one of artistic freedom and not the misuse of tax dollars. If the Endowment cannot support artists and organizations who are free to experiment then freedom has been impaired. Politicizing the Endowment will have only negative effects. It will seriously weaken and bully our most innovative arts institutions. The example is the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, in Winston-Salem, which is under attack along with Serrano and the Endowment. It is an important resource in North Carolina and it will be seriously weakened by any withdrawal of Endowment support. Not because the Endowment's funds are large, they are not. Proportionally, the National Endowment provides a very small percentage of the nation's cultural dollars. But withdrawal of funds daunt other donors. The Southeastern Center should not penalized for exercising artistic freedom through a highly democratic selection system.

The result will be chilling to the organizations and to the artists. Artists may continue to work in freedom, but the organizations that complete the circle of taking their work to the public will become increasingly fearful of reprimand through funds withdrawal. It is a dismal scenario.

Please, Senator Pell, help preserve the National Endowment for the Arts as it is. Do not hobble it with decisions that will politicize its selection processes and thereby render it a less open and effective agency. What the Congress will be saying if it proceeds with restrictive and or punitive measures is, "No matter how democratic your selection process might be, we do not trust it." And where do we go from there, but to politicized selection processes that are anathema to our country's highest ideals.

Yours truly,

Howard Klein

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