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## Art Funding: The Fight over Sex, Money and Power

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# Art Funding: The Fight over Sex, Money and Power

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## **Abstract**

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**KEYWORDS:** sex, money, power

## Art Funding: The Fight over Sex, Money and Power\*

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In February 1989, the attention of the Rev. Donald Wildmon was directed to a photograph in an exhibition in Richmond, Virginia, which had closed a month earlier.<sup>1</sup> The photograph was of a crucifix seen through an amber haze. That amber haze was urine—the artist's own urine—and the work was entitled "Piss Christ." The artist who created the work was Andres Serrano and he had received a fellowship of \$15,000 through the Awards in the Visual Arts Program. Some of that money had come from the federal government through the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Wildmon, hearing of the photograph, began urging the readers of his American Family Association newsletter to write letters to Congress protesting the use of tax dollars to support such blasphemy, and write they did.<sup>3</sup> And Congress reacted—with vehemence. Senators rose to the floor and in floods of peroration denounced the work as garbage and blasphemous. Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, a Republican senator from New York, in an emotional and hotly worded speech, said the work was a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-two senators signed a letter expressing their outrage and suggested in the strongest terms that the procedures used by the endowment to award and support artists should be reformed.<sup>5</sup>

None of its critics in Congress challenged the right of the work to exist, merely its right to be funded with public money. The funding in

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1. Atkins, *Conscience*, *The Village Voice*, May 30, 1989, at 87.

2. Buchanan, *Losing the War for America's Culture?* *The Wash. Times*, May 22, 1989, at D1.

3. Atkins, *supra* note 1, at 87.

4. Honan, *Congressional Anger Threatens Arts Endowment's Budget*, *N.Y. Times*, June 20, 1989, at C15, col. 1.

5. *Id.* at C20, col. 1.

question was that received by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA). In its most recent funding year it was granted \$75,000 for the Awards in the Visual Arts Program (AVA), now entering its eighth year. The AVA program received funding—almost twice as much—from two other sources as well: The Equitable Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, AVA is carefully designed, as many endowment programs, to ensure broad geographical representation and to identify outstanding artists. Each year 500 artists are nominated by 100 arts professionals. A jury of five arts professionals chosen by SECCA selects ten artists from the pool of 500. Each receives \$15,000, as well as the opportunity to exhibit. The artist then selects the work to be shown in the exhibition.<sup>7</sup>

This brouhaha in Congress over the Serrano photograph appeared to be a spontaneous outburst of emotion; but the endowment had known trouble was brewing for a long time. In fact, the endowment has been in trouble almost from the moment of its birth twenty-five years ago.

Government funding for the arts began in 1964 with the appointment of a Federal Advisory Commission on the Arts. The next year saw the creation of the arts and humanities endowments by an act of Congress. The art endowment was to have a chairman and a National Council on the Arts, a presidential-appointed board of twenty-six art experts who would advise the chairman on the distribution of funds. Principles embodied in that act include a commitment to excellence, professionalism, independence, decentralization, and, from Congress, non-denomination and non-intervention. Says Michael Straight, who served as deputy chairman of the endowment for nine years, "The Act makes it plain that the council is not to be a means of injecting partisan political considerations into the endowment's decisions."<sup>8</sup>

Clearly concerned about the possibility of censorship, Section 4(c) of the Act stated: "In the administration of this Act, no department, agency, officer or employee of the United States shall exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the policy determination, personnel, or curriculum, or the administration or operation of any school or other non-federal agency, institution, organization or association."<sup>9</sup> Thus,

6. Atkins, *supra* note 1, at 87.

7. *Id.*

8. M. S. STRAIGHT, *THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES ENDOWMENTS FOR AN EAGLE'S NEST* 26 (1979).

9. 135 CONG. REC. S12107-01 (daily ed. Dec. 26, 1989).

SECCA was perfectly within its rights to make its own decisions as to how it awarded the money it received from the endowment.

But this disagreement is not necessarily about money; or if it is about money, it is not especially about tax-payer money. It is about money as power.

There has never been total agreement in Congress that the arts should be funded in America. At the time of the birth of the endowment, not only was public support for federal funding of the arts at a high level, according to a Gallup poll, but the arts were in dire need of that support. New operas were not being performed because of the enormous costs of production. Symphonies had problems paying their musicians living wages. Museums were finding it difficult to raise money for such unsexy items as conservation of their collections, and artist's spaces as we know them today simply did not exist.

The endowment was created out of a simple desire to support and encourage culture and creativity in America at a time when enthusiasm was high but funds were low, and we were following on the heels of—in fact, several laps behind—most European countries.

But despite its legislative protection, the endowment has had to perform a tricky balancing act trying to maintain its commitment to art and, at the same time, to please an occasionally skeptical Congress. From the beginning, the endowment foresaw the scrutiny its funding would receive from Congress and the pressures that would be brought to bear on its procedures. Those who established the process for distributing funds devised elaborate systems specifically designed to prevent government officials from dominating decision making and to turn those responsibilities over to acknowledged and respected experts in the field—with the obvious benefit of being able to point the finger elsewhere when the plan backfired. Funding old art would have been easy—funding new art would be as difficult as making a good living at the tracks, and as risky. But even as the endowment understood that art funding—especially funding for the visual and literary arts—came shrink-wrapped with danger, it also acknowledged that to censor—or in any way impose the standards of the government upon what was being sponsored—would render the entire enterprise pointless. Government art—art officially sanctioned and inoffensive, totally apolitical and capable of pleasing all those voters who make a practice of writing their representatives—is virtually guaranteed to be the art that history quickly forgets. The endowment knew that by attempting the essentially dangerous undertaking of supporting and encouraging the best the arts had to offer, it was courting trouble, and trouble came.

Explaining its grants has not always been easy. In its infancy, the endowment funded George Plimpton's American Literary Anthology which paid \$500 for a one word poem: "L-i-g-h-g-h-t."<sup>10</sup> When "Fear of Flying" was published, Erica Jong, who had received a \$5,000 fellowship, dutifully thanked the endowment on the first page. The next page listed the title of a chapter "En Route to the Congress of Dreams, or The Zipless Fuck."<sup>11</sup> More recently the endowment has had to defend homoerotic poetry, an exhibition of pornography entitled "The Second Coming" and now Mapplethorpe and Serrano. Representative Sidney Yates has said, "In 85,000 grants, less than twenty have been found to be objectionable. That's one-quarter of one-tenth of a percent. Actually, the endowment has done kind of a remarkable job."<sup>12</sup>

The endowment has done a remarkable job, but not for that reason. Actually, an arts endowment that had only twenty controversial grants in 85,000 would have some very serious explaining to do. New art is not and has never been safe. In fact, if Congress took it upon itself to examine minutely everything the endowment funded it would undoubtedly find many opportunities to complain. Strict constitutionalists, for example, might worry that the District of Columbia Commission on the Arts, which receives money from the national endowment, sponsors thirty or more gospel groups. Separation of church and state is pretty difficult in a field where religion has been an inspiration to art for much of its history.

Thus, for all of its twenty-five years, the endowment has been operating by a kind of slight-of-hand, understanding its own vulnerability and intent upon keeping a high enough profile to get funding and a low enough one to avoid detection.

Last summer the endowment was especially vulnerable. In keeping with an extreme conservative position which historically views any funding activity of the federal government beyond defense with considerable suspicion, Reagan began his first term in office by calling for a fifty percent cut and eventual de-funding of the endowment. Only when he discovered that many of art's strongest supporters were also major Republican contributors did he back off. But for eight years the budget of the endowment has stayed at virtually the same level—around \$160 million a year. It has held its ground—nothing more.<sup>13</sup>

10. STRAIGHT, *supra* note 8, at 28.

11. *Id.*

12. Honan, *supra* note 4, at C15, col. 3.

13. Honan, *Arts Dollars: Pushed as Never Before*, N.Y. Times, May 28, 1989, 4

When the situation began to heat up in early June of 1989, the endowment was without a chairman, its appropriation for 1990 had yet to be voted on and its once-every-five-year reauthorization process was about to begin—a stage at which its empowering legislation could be rewritten. The endowment expected to be challenged—potentially embarrassing works have traditionally come to light around budget or reauthorization time—but, as Livingston Biddle, chairman of the endowment during the Carter Administration said, “A confluence of factors has made this the worst firestorm for the endowment in the twenty-five years of its existence.”<sup>14</sup>

However, it is not been simply the endowment which has been at stake, but contemporary American culture. Teaming up, New York City Tribune art critic James Cooper and conservative columnist Patrick Buchanan used recent exhibitions as a hook from which to hang federal funding for the arts in particular, and leftist Modernist culture in general. Buchanan said,

The downhill slide of American culture gathers momentum. . . . America's art and culture are more and more, openly anti-Christian, anti-American, nihilistic. . . . While the right has been busy winning primaries and elections, cutting taxes, funding anti-communist guerrillas abroad, the left has been quietly seizing all the commanding heights of American art and culture.<sup>15</sup>

He quotes critic Cooper:

Conservatives and the religious community that comprise the vast Middle American population should actively support those artists that advocate the same values and ideas as they do. They should also choose to withdraw support and funding from the Modernist culture they profess to despise. In short, they should do what the liberals did long ago—capture the culture.<sup>16</sup>

And Buchanan added, “Surely the place to begin is with the National Endowment for the Arts.”<sup>17</sup>

In the May 25th, 1989, issue of the *Village Voice*, writer Robert

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§ 2, at 1, col 1.

14. Honan, *supra* note 4, at C1.

15. Buchanan, *supra* note 2, at D1, col. 1.

16. *Id.* at D4.

17. *Id.*

Atkins said, "An outright assault on the independence of the Endowment itself may be in the making."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he has been proven right.

Clearly the work of Andres Serrano was tailor-made for the show that was about to begin. Not only was a religious symbol immersed in a substance considered foul, the title of the work was extremely provocative. The sacred and the profane were juxtaposed in such a way as to both shock and surprise. Who would have thought it?

But no one asked Mr. Serrano what he meant with this work. As critic Jane Addams Allan pointed out, even the inquisition invited Veronese to testify.<sup>19</sup> Serrano, a well-established and widely exhibited artist who previously won an artist fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1986, says his work is an ongoing investigation of such bodily fluids as milk, blood and urine.<sup>20</sup> Marcia Tucker, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, who nominated Serrano for the AVA, says that his use of bodily fluids is discomfoting because it indicates the extent to which we are unable to deal with our humanity. That is no doubt, she says, part of the power of his work—"to render the sacred secular and vice versa."<sup>21</sup> Serrano himself says very little; he prefers to leave the interpretation to others. But previously he said, "Complex and unresolved feelings about my own Catholic upbringing inform this work which helps me to redefine and personalize my relationship with God. For me, art is a moral and spiritual obligation that cuts across all manner of pretense and speaks directly to the soul."<sup>22</sup> A clear interpretation of the work is to see it as a protest against the profiteering of sacred imagery—to say, in effect, our society has submerged the Christ figure in urine. In fact, Serrano's work is just the latest in a religion, Protestantism, built upon iconoclastic expressions. It was provocative beyond the artist's wildest dreams. And it may be the Christian symbol of our time. But that will be for others to judge. What is very certain is that Jesus Christ is perfectly capable of defending himself and does not need the assistance of Congress.

But the outrage over Serrano was not an isolated incident. It had to be seen in context. The previous autumn a work showing the late Mayor Washington of Chicago in women's lingerie had been forcibly

18. Atkins, *supra* note 1, at 87.

19. Interview with Jane Addams Allan, former art critic for the Washington Times, in Washington, D.C. (October 15, 1989).

20. Serrano issued this statement on April 24, 1989.

21. *Id.*

22. Statement, *supra* note 20.



removed by two irate aldermen from the gallery where it hung. Last winter a cartoon of president elect George Bush, was removed from a print exhibition at the IMS.<sup>23</sup> Later, in Chicago, a work incorporating an American flag on the floor where it could be walked on was challenged.<sup>24</sup> An exhibition at a community art center on the Eastern Shore of Maryland was, a few months later, termed satanic and was protested. Two works, one showing exposed male genitalia, were removed from an airport exhibition in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>25</sup> This summer "about an inch" was trimmed off the exposed penis of a sculpture in Arlington, Virginia; and an exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, some of an explicit homosexual and sadomasochistic nature, was cancelled by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in mid-June.<sup>26</sup> In all, it was a year of censorship. Our country, as if rediscovering her puritanical roots, was lifting her skirts and with a squeal of indignation saying, "No sex please, we're American."

Throughout this period, a firestorm has raged in Congress. In both houses of Congress, members have risen to their feet to complain about the federal funding of works termed blasphemous and obscene. If the cancellation of the Corcoran exhibition had not fully focused the attention of the art community on what was happening in this, the land of free expression, an amendment to the appropriations bill which would fund the national endowment for the next year, proposed by Senator Jesse Helms, did the trick. Already the house had proposed deducting \$45,000 from the endowment budget, the combined amounts that had gone to support the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the AVA awards which selected Serrano. The Senate had matched them and raised them two by switching money away from visual arts and by proposing a five-year ban on funding to SECCA and to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. Then, late one evening, Senator Helms introduced an amendment which passed—and one which would prohibit the funding of obscene or indecent art or art which offended on the basis of religion or ethnic origin.

It was simply a matter of seeing that tax dollars were not spent on obscene, indecent or offensive art, said Helms and those who supported

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23. Swisher, *Protest at IMF Print Show*, Wash. Post, Dec. 10, 1988, at G1, col. 5.

24. Vance, *The War on Culture*, ART IN AMERICA, Sept. 1989, at 39.

25. Baltimore Sun, May 1, 1989.

26. Kastor, *Corcoran Cancels Photo Exhibit*, Wash. Post, June 13, 1989, at C1, col. 5.

him. A simple proposition, perhaps, and one most people would agree with—seemingly basic to what we stand for as decent, upright, taxpaying Americans. Yet something was wrong. In the end, despite threats to label in forthcoming elections those who failed to vote for the amendment as favoring tax supported obscenity, a compromise was reached. Congress agreed not to try to determine what offends on the basis of religion or national or ethnic origin, but simply to avoid the pornographic—and to do so by applying a 1973 Supreme Court ruling which would allow even blatantly offensive works to be redeemed if they demonstrated literary or artistic merit.<sup>27</sup> Despite Mr. Helms' cries of triumph at getting the attention of the nation and having sent a warning shot across the bow of the endowment, clearly the winner was freedom of expression and the right of art to do what it feels it needs to do. . . or was it? No one could be sure. The answer would come from the National Endowment as it decided what course it would take. Members of the arts community watched and waited. They would not have to wait long. In November, the freshly confirmed chairman of the National Endowment, John Frohnmayer, announced that he was withdrawing \$10,000 that had been granted the New York gallery Artist's Space, because the exhibition it planned on AIDS art had changed and was now too "political" to receive federal funding.<sup>28</sup> The NEA is entitled to withdraw funding, he explained, when the original terms of the grant have not been followed.

The problem, however, seemed not to be so much with the art—although neither Frohnmayer nor Susan Wyatt, the gallery's director, would describe precisely the contents of the exhibition—as with an essay in the exhibition catalogue by artist David Worjarnowicz. According to Wyatt, it contains strong language. It is highly critical both of Senator Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina) who led the fight in Congress, and Cardinal John O'Connor of New York who is opposed to condom use and is unpopular with AIDS activists.<sup>29</sup>

Wyatt herself brought the exhibition to the attention of the endowment, pointing out its controversial nature and hoping to create an opportunity for discussion on the subject of censorship. Although she concedes the exhibition has evolved, she maintained that it focused was AIDS and not the controversy over art funding. Wyatt said, "I have no problem with anything in the show or in the catalogue. I didn't want

27. See *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).

28. Kaster, *supra* note 26.

29. Interview with Susan Wyatt, Director of Artists Space, Nov. 12, 1989.

this work distorted and twisted and used as a tool."<sup>30</sup>

The arts community was shocked and dismayed. Not only did Frohnmayer appear to be eager to please Mr. Helms—and indeed, Mr. Helms was so pleased at Frohnmayer's "good faith effort to live up to the commitment he made to Helms" that he decided "not to stir the pot"—but he went far, far beyond anything Mr. Helms had envisioned.<sup>31</sup> The legislation mentioned nothing about political art being unfundable. Indeed, political was listed right along with artistic and scientific as one of the qualities which might redeem even obscenity.

Two days later John Frohnmayer corrected himself. He had meant to say that there had been an "erosion of the artistic vision" of the exhibition.<sup>32</sup> But his slip hurt, and it was a slip. Politics has been a standard used to deny grants for some time. It has just never been admitted before, and it made clear what many had suspected all along. While Senator Helms may want to avoid having the public offended, Frohnmayer simply wants to avoid having the endowment de-funded.

Says Representative Pat Williams, chairman of the House subcommittee which is in the process of reauthorizing the NEA's legislation, the move was a further "bruising of freedom of artistic expression," by extending the limitations beyond pornography to "anything which is seen as affecting political discourse."<sup>33</sup> If [the cancellation,] he said, "was because the work is political discourse then he made a terrible decision. If it was because the nature of the work had changed from the time of the grant approval, then there is doubt as to his political judgment. Either way he has made a mistake."<sup>34</sup>

If the endowment was in danger before, it was now truly in danger from its own clients, so to speak. Word was spreading that some artists who made up the peer panels that award the grants planned to boycott the endowment. Demonstrations and protests were being organized. One group planned to erect a "Berlin Wall" in front of endowment offices. Leonard Bernstein announced that he would not accept the National Award for Art. Artist Robert Motherwell offered Artist's Space

30. *Id.*

31. Honan, *Arts Endowment Withdraws Grant for AIDS Show*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 9, 1989, at A1, col. 2.

32. Kaster, *NEA Chief Defends Grant Cut*, Wash. Post, Nov. 11, 1989, at C1, col. 5.

33. Interview with Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.), chairman of the House subcommittee which is writing reauthorization legislation and is presently holding hearings to prepare for this legislation (Nov. 12, 1989).

34. *Id.*

\$10,000 to compensate for the lost NEA funding. Says Phillip Brookman, the Program Director of the Washington Project for the Arts, the artist's space that hung the controversial Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition after it was canceled by the Corcoran Gallery, "Most artists feel that it is better not to deal with the endowment—not to apply—as long as they know the process has been subverted."<sup>35</sup>

Feeling the heat, and thinking perhaps that to bask in the sunshine of Mr. Helm's approval was no great achievement for the head of the endowment, Mr. Frohnmayer changed his mind again. After taking a look at the exhibition and discussing the matter with a group of artists in new York City, he decided to award the grant after all.<sup>36</sup>

The problem, however, is far from over. Reauthorization hearings have begun, and other controversial grants are sure to come to light; but the endowment has been seriously weakened by its own chairman. Despite his rewording of his original objections to the AIDS exhibition, the suspicion that political content may be a reason for denying or perhaps even giving a grant, has been confirmed; and the endowment's highly praised peer panel system has been severely undermined. A precedent has been established whereby the panels recommend a grant, the National council confirms it, the chairman approves it, the chairman then pulls back and withholds the money, then takes a look at it and changes his mind. Those who serve on the panels and the council might well wonder why they bother.

But it is only reasonable to stop at this point and ask, What is going on here? For instance, are we experiencing censorship? To censor is to examine material and to remove or suppress anything considered objectionable. Certainly the Helms amendment would have done precisely that. Whether Congress would undertake that effort, whether they would delegate it to the to the National Endowment or to the National Council or to the grantees themselves is immaterial. The intention was to suppress, whether through direct action, indirect action or intimidation.

The confusion as to whether this attempt to dictate what art can and cannot be is censorship exists because our definition tends to be dramatic. We think of documents with blackened or cut out sentences and editors imprisoned or publications banned. We know we do not do things that way in America. We do not stand people up against the

35. Telephone interview with Phillip Brookman, (Nov. 12, 1989).

36. *Brookman, National Arts Chief in a Reversal, Gives Grant to AIDS Show*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 17, 1989, at A1, col. 1.

wall or imprison them for saying what they want to say—quite the opposite. What we do is simply encourage people to censor themselves by threatening to take away their money, and in a capitalistic society that is a very real threat. Despite the momentary reprieve, the threat is with us still. The endowment is feeling the heat, museums are nervous, arts organizations are sweating, and it may well be that individual artists will think twice before they act. The result might be a period of timid self-serving reactionary art, or it might result in intentionally provocative revolutionary art—depending upon how individuals react to the possibility of being told what they could and could not do. Knowing artists, I tend to think the latter.

But is this not simply an issue about tax dollars and what we can expect our taxes to pay for? Hardly—first of all the federal dollars spent on the arts in this country are minuscule. The endowment's budget is \$160 million a year—about one third the cost of one B-2 bomber—and the defense department is asking for 132 of those for a total cost of nearly seventy four billion dollars. On a per capita basis, we pay seventy seven cents a year for art—which means that each of us contributed one thousandth of a cent to the Mapplethorpe exhibition. No, this isn't about tax dollars. In any case, since when have we taxpayers had a great deal to say about where our tax cents, not to mention our tax dollars go? There are many of us who would protest the production of nuclear weapons or biological weapons or even the billions we are expected to cough up to correct the inability of those we have elected to represent us to correct the blatant abuses in the Savings and Loan industry or the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Helms amendment would also affect much more art than federal dollars actually fund. The endowment has long arms. Even though it has very little money, it distributes that money broadly in small amounts. It is doubtful that there is a serious arts organization in the country that does not receive some federal money, perhaps as little as \$1,000. An artist's space or museum, for instance, which received a grant to help hire a curator or professional administrator or to pay for the installation of new lighting would have all the art shown in that space under scrutiny—regardless of who funded the exhibition. Thus, the influence of the legislation would extend far beyond tax dollars to anything associated with tax dollars—which has become virtually every non-profit arts organization in the country.

Is this controversy even about art? Generally in this country we view art as a kind of interesting frill activity indulged in by the mildly

eccentric and of consequence only to culture vultures and namby-pambys—of little real importance in the scheme of things. And yet the state of the arts is causing real debate among people who until now have given it only a passing thought if any thought at all.

We have an enormous deficit. We are facing a crisis in medical care and in the welfare of our children; but is Congress seriously taking on these problems or medicare expenses or waste in the defense department? No, it is going after the vulnerable National Endowment whose entire budget could be eliminated without causing so much as a scratch in the deficit. Could there be at work an effort to appear to be doing something? Is art being used as a canard to divert attention from things that are not being done or are too difficult to tackle?

Columnists such as Patrick Buchanan and James Cooper and Frederick Hart have ceded to art enormous powers—the power to influence and change culture. They are blaming the ills of society on Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, if you will—as if art produced society instead of the other way around. Art is the mirror we hold up to our society, whether we like the reflection or not.

We have a drug-ridden, crime-plagued society. We are in the midst of an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases. Teen pregnancies are at an all time high. There are homeless in the streets, and our jails are overflowing. And who do we blame? Art.

In a way, that is a compliment. The arts have never been given so much credit before. But it is unrealistic in the extreme. Funding the descendants of Norman Rockwell and Winslow Homer, if we could find them, is not going to bring back the days we all wish we could really remember. Art has become a handy target, an easy answer to a touchy problem. It has become a way of expressing the uncertainties and uneasiness we are experiencing collectively. We can sense we are in trouble as a nation. We are rapidly discovering that the gods of instant gratification and individual satisfaction and materialism are empty, and we are looking for something to blame.

Playing on our uncertainties are those who would grasp at obvious symbols for the fulfillment of their own ambitions. Jesse Helms needed to boost his fund raising for his next campaign. Some members of Congress simply needed an issue—something obvious and simple, something easily grasped and almost irrefutable. Spend tax dollars on obscenity—who could vote for that? The wonder is that our Congress has enough strong members to do just that—to say this is not an issue simply about tax dollars or even about obscenity. This is an issue about censorship. It may be that we do not want to fund art in this country.

But if we decide that we do, then it is pointless to fund only that art that would please every member of Congress. It is not art's task to simply please our society. It is hard to imagine anything more boring—a kind of chocolate pudding culture of which we should all grow very weary very quickly.

The final question comes down to this: Is this country capable of funding the arts? Is it mature enough to understand that a culture under orders is no culture at all—it is an instrument of the state? When the endowment was created 25 years ago, its independence—its right to carry out its mission of funding excellence without interference from Congress—was made into law. That independence was understood to be critical.

Why do we have to fund art with federal money? It is because our society has changed. The old coalition of church, royalty and private money has been made redundant. Those of immense wealth who in the past supported the works of artists and composers now prefer Lear jets and cellular telephones to sonatas and frescoes. Once we could have left it to the bourgeoisie—to groups like those in Holland in the 17th century who brought us Dutch flower paintings and seascapes. Today the middle class has opted for the medium that brings you *Family Feud* and *Rosanne*, Madonna and Cher and a steady stream of sex, violence and inanity—our favorite art form, free television. We cannot leave it to the intellectuals and the cultured. They cannot afford it.

We are left with asking government to do what we can no longer do for ourselves. The purpose of the National Endowment for the Arts is not to give us what we want, but to give us what we did not know we wanted so we will have it when we need it. Is the endowment always right in its choices? I should hope not. If they were, art would become more of a commodity than it is today. The endowment is there to take chances. The endowment is there to be wrong every once in a while. As always, serious art—that produced with the intention of expanding aesthetic frontiers or challenging the conventional wisdom—must struggle. It is out of respect for those things which do not fare well in the market place—at least not in their own time—that we have chosen to lend the support of government to the arts. But if this support is to produce anything of value, that art must be free to pursue whatever it chooses.

It is axiomatic that what it chooses may intrigue, challenge, provoke, irritate, or even offend; and for all those we can be grateful. Something essential was left out of the Bill of Rights: a right we should nurture and cherish—the right to be offended. There is no reason to be proud of defending from censorship that which pleases you. You must

defend that which offends you. That is what this country is about at its most basic level.

On the night of June 30, the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe was seen *on* the Corcoran Gallery of Art, not *in* it. More than 1,000 protestors gazed upward in near-silence as giant projected images turned the outer stone face of the museum into gallery space for works judged too controversial to hang inside.

As his own portrait hung eerily in liquid blue-gray shadows above the crowd, there was triumph in the air. It was, in a sense, "The Perfect Moment" Mapplethorpe had spent his life and art looking for. But it had the transitory and illusory nature of all gestures. In thirty-five minutes the images were gone. Time and history will remember what did not happen at the Corcoran rather than what did.

Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in the spring of 1989 at the age of 42, was extremely successful and widely known for an oeuvre which went beyond classic portraiture and sensual photographs of flowers to frank images from the homosexual and sado-masochistic world in which he traveled. Black and white men intertwining their unclothed bodies, wearing exotic garments of leather and performing unusual sexual acts, become, despite the evocative nature of the subject matter, coolly stylish under the direct and sharply focused gaze of his lens.

After the Corcoran cancelled the exhibition, it was shown at the tiny WPA. When it closed, over 49,000 people had filed through the gallery. Many came out of frank curiosity. Some of them seemed remarkably ordinary—not the sophisticated gallery goer but Mom and Pop from Iowa, came to see what all the fuss was about.

The photographs Jesse Helms likes to pull out of a plain brown envelope on his campaign trips to shock little old ladies were grouped in a back room clearly marked with warnings that the material could be offensive to some. It was offensive to many—it shocked. But of those I personally interviewed, not one—not even those who admitted to being shocked—objected to federal tax money being spent for the exhibition.

I was shocked. More than that, there were several photographs that turned my stomach—quite literally. But I knew I had felt that sensation before, and after a moment I remembered where. There was a photograph during the Vietnam war—impossible to forget—of a child running naked down a road, covered with napalm, screaming and one of a man whose head was resounding from the impact of a bullet. They shocked in the same way that a photograph of a bullwhip up a man's rectum shocks. We know that something has gone profoundly amiss. But is it not *our* mess? We did not make this mess. We did. All of us



share some corporate responsibility for the society we live in. Let us put the blame right. In any case, whatever is wrong is more likely to be changed by seeing these photographs, whether the ones from Vietnam or the ones from Mapplethorpe's camera, than by not seeing them. To be offended by harsh reality is not only our right, but our responsibility.

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