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How an Agency Is Able to Celebrate the Absurd

Realist Artists Need Not Apply at the NEA

By JAMES F. COOPER

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), stunned by congressional investigations into its funding for artworks that critics have labeled overly obscene and sacrilegious, is now being accused by art experts of censorship and falsification of government reports about its activities.

NEA-funded entities that have made headlines over the past year include Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" photograph, the stage production "Annie Sparkle: Post-Porn Modernism," the Artists Space gallery in Lower Manhattan and homoerotic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe.

In addition, the New York City Tribune has learned in the course of a lengthy investigation that steps have been taken to launch a class-action legal suit against the NEA for its allegedly illegal, long-term discrimination against artists and educational institutions that fail to conform to NEA-approved modernist styles.

These charges, brought by artists, educators and NEA panelists, surface at a time when the government is fighting for congressional refunds for the next two years. Its annual budget is now $173 million.

Art critic John Arthur, a Boston author (Spirit of Place) who served as an NEA panelist during much of the 1970s, has witnessed NEA staffers falsifying a congressional report on the endowment's funding for the visual arts. This he said, to cover up any perception that the NEA discriminates against realist artists.

Arthur says he was present when NEA staffers fabricated the records for a report requested by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), who wanted an accounting of proportions of NEA funds allocated for realist art versus modernist art. "If an abstract artwork contained a feather or an automobile tire," Arthur recalled, they would put it under the "Realist" column, with the justification that it was "recognizable," and therefore "realist" in nature.

Arthur, a noted New York art collector and chairman emeritus of the New York Academy of Art, has made a similar charge against the arts endowment.

Arthur, Pivar and others interviewed, say the NEA regularly employs a secretive but highly effective system to assure that government funds will go overwhelmingly to modernist art projects.

Last year, as a result of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano art controversies, over a hundred members of Congress signed a petition criticizing the NEA selection process.

Some of the endowment's critics believe there may now be a call for an investigation of what the NEA has refused to fund during the last 24 years of its existence. Specifically, the offices of Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) and Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), who are currently investigating NEA funding, have expressed interest in the latest findings.

"Is it time the public realized what's going on," said Pivar. He says that Ray Kingston, a member of the National Council on the Arts, an advisory board to the NEA, informed him that Visual Arts Program Director Susan Lubowsky revealed that NEA staffers regularly censor applications on the basis of artistic style.

Pivar says Lubowsky admitted this to Kingston when he asked, "How come all these applications are only for avant-garde art? Don't realist artists apply for NEA grants?"

Lubowsky reportedly replied, according to Pivar, "Silly, don't you know that realist art is not presented to the panels? Only ground-breaking art is!"

Lubowsky, in a telephone interview, denied she made the comment. "That's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard," she said.

She also emphatically denied charges that NEA panelists discriminate against realist art. "The NEA has funded many representational artists," she asserted.

When asked to give an example, she cited a recent award made to Alex Soyatewa, a Zuni Indian muralist. Kingston could not be reached for comment.

Pivar believes NEA prejudice against realist art explains why the New York Academy of Art was refused a Challenge III grant by the endowment. Central to the academy's curriculum is the study of the human figure. Pivar is still fuming over an NEA memorandum initiated by Lubowsky, dated Dec. 20, 1989, that denounced the academy's emphasis on figure drawing as a "rigid... revisionist approach that would stifle creativity in young artists."

Dr. Gregory Hedberg, director of the academy, was incredulous over the reason cited for denying the grant. "How can the mastery of figurative drawing stifle the creativity of a young artist?" he said during an interview conducted in his offices at the academy.

Pivar has denounced the NEA memo as "an outrage" and charges the NEA with enforcing a "national style of [modernist] art, which now dominates our art institutions."

Frederic E. Hart, creator of "The Three Servicemen" bronze statue for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., says that NEA discrimination against realism led the agency to reject a grant application he submitted to the endowment.

"I was working on a sculpture proposal for the facade of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The NEA turned me down flat, basically because my work was representational and religious. Their opinion was, this is not art."

A decade later, Hart is still rankled by the rejection. "The sketches took me two years. I almost starved to death getting them done," he said during an interview conducted last November. Hart persevered and won the commission to create a series of bas-reliefs and free-standing figures of Adam and St. Peter for the tympanum of the cathedral. This spring, after eight years of work, "The Creation Sculptures" will be finally unveiled.

Now a very successful artist and a member of the prestigious national Commission on Fine Arts, Hart charges he is still being "blacklisted" by the NEA, particularly since he criticized the endowment in an open letter published by the Washington Post.

In that letter, Hart scolded the NEA for wasting taxpayers' money...in its cynical aggrandizement of art and artist at the expense of sacred public sentiments.

Government-funded art programs of the NEA, Hart states, have bullied the public into accepting "any idiozy put before it that calls itself art." Hart feels that his artistic objective to create spiritual works that emphasize "beauty" is diametrically opposed to the goals of the NEA.

"Once, art...served society," Hart says. "Underflee beauty of order... art was a rich embellishment of life, embracing—not desecrating—its ideals, aspirations and values... (Alas...)

Art consultant Altherr, who served as an NEA panelist during much of the 1970s, said the selection process of the NEA is "gravely flawed. Panelists for the Visual Arts Pograms are selected for their modernist viewpoints, he says.

He recalled an incident when an Interior Department art project for Antarc rctica was almost denied by NEA panelists, who argued on the participation of performance artist Vito Acconci. Interior officials were troubled by the recommendation after discovering that Acconci's past art performances included squashing cockroaches for sheer delight as well as public masturbation.

Arthur says his conscience wouldn't allow him to go along with the other panel members. Although he was able to block Acconci's involvement, he now believes his panel could play the NEA game "If he was being excluded from further participation on NEA panels..."

He says he has no regrets. "I just couldn't go along... and approve the awful stuff they wanted to fund with public money."

As an example of NEA efforts to camouflage its allegedly overwhelming preference for modernist works, Arthur points to the case of artist Richard Estes, who was awarded an endowment grant in the mid-1970s.

Estes protested he hadn't applied for the grant and suggested the NEA give the award to a young realist who might need the money. The NEA insisted either he take the grant or they would cancel it. Estes took the money. In 1978, Estes confided to Arthur he believed the NEA had given him the award to dispel rumors of discrimination against realist artists.

Arthur also charges that a group of NEA staffers and panelists tried to convince then-NEA Chairman Nancy Olson that there were "no talented realist artists in the United States."

(Continued on next page)
United States." She defined.

Realist artist Jack Beal flatly states the NEA "discriminates" against representational artists, even though he is one of the few to receive an NEA commission.

Responding to the 97 visual arts commissions by the Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., he says, "94 are modernist." Beal says the only reason he received a commission was because an official from the Labor Department vigorously opposed the NEA panelists who wanted an abstract work.

Beal says that abstract sculptor James Rosati, one of the NEA panelists, announced, "There is no good representational artists in America."

This sort of blanket condemnation of realism is believed to be the prevailing attitude of the NEA, according to an overwhelming number of people interviewed for this story. One such person, New York realist painter Burt Silverman, attributes the apparent resistance to realism to a "reactionary" and "elitism" of the art establishment.

This is a perception also expressed by William Diamond, Northeast regional administrator for the General Services Administration (GSA), which funded the controversial "Tilted Arc" sculpture. The 120-foot-long, 73-ton rusting steel wall was torn down after the GSA was besieged by complaints and petitions from the 7,000 federal employees at the Javits Federal Building in Lower Manhattan, where the artwork was located.

When the proposed dismantling of the wall was announced, Diamond recognized the grass-roots demand for its removal by noting that for "too long public art has been the exclusive do-main of elitists." NEA panelists serve on GSA-funded arts-in-architecture programs.

Besides the immediate effects on a realist artist of an NEA grant rejection, patrons of realism point out, there are long-term consequences regarding career prospects. Calling the NEA's response to its applications "inconsolable," the New York Academy's Pi var said: "Our academy is approved by the New York state Department of Education. The NEA decision is a terrible blow to our students who have earned a master's degree in fine arts. Who will hire them as teachers now that the NEA has ruled our curriculum 'revisionist'?

Academy Director Hedberg is equally angered by what he calls the "discriminatory bias" of the NEA against representational art education. The NEA panel ruled that works by students like Randolph Melick, now a member of the academy faculty, were "not of professional quality...and are basically unbelievable." Melick's art, Hedberg points out, has been singled out for praise by such connoisseurs as Charles Ryskamp, director of New York's prestigious Frick Collection.

Pi var says his faculty is composed of some of the finest artists and teachers in the country, including Milet Andrejevic, Walter Ehrlich, Edward Schmidt and James Lecky.

"The NEA ruling not only hurts their credentials, but their ability to earn a living," Pi var said. "What happens to the students, he asked, "when they go to the NEA for individual artists' grants? Will the NEA say they don't have a good education because they studied at the New York Academy of Art?"

Critics of the NEA, such as Arthur, point to its "flawed selection process" as the primary source of the current controversies surrounding the endowment. NEA panelists, for example, who judge applications for the federal arts-in-architecture programs, Arthur explains, "have no understanding what constitutes public art."

Pivar and Hedberg charge that the NEA's financial support of such artists as Serrano's "Piss Christ.

Republican congressmen have complained that the makeup of the hearings is part of Democratic strategy to bypass questions about NEA financing and eventually bring the endowment's budget to a vote without having to entertain Republican amendments to restrict its funding.

Anne Hausman, legislative aide to Williams, told the New York City Tribune that the hearings examine how "the NEA is promoting creativity." She declined to name any of the artists who will be testifying before the committee.

Pivar says that studies of "creativity" in the Los Angeles hearings are "ridiculous" and self-serving, and accuses the NEA of conducting a "one-party system of art education."

The NEA's notoriety for seemingly favoring modernism is not limited to the East Coast. In Minneapolis, the Richard Walker, executive director of the Minneapolis School of Art has been repeatedly rebuffed by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Programs, which is funded in part by the NEA.

Stephen Giertson, associate director of the Lack School, states that rather than allow realistic art to be exhibited among its group shows, panelists of the Minneapolis Studio School have threatened to "shut down" the entire arts program.

Giertson explained, during an interview in New York: "There are several examples of each year sponsored by the Minnesota Artists Program, which is held at the Minnesota Institute of Art. The artists' works are selected by a panel composed of local artists. "Most of these artists are modernists. For years, members of the Lack School have been denied a seat on these art panels. When one of our members was finally elected, the other panelists blocked all of his nominations."

"The classical realists were perfectly willing to exhibit alongside modernists, but that the modernists wouldn't allow. They will destroy the whole program," he says.

Cyd Wicker, a member of the Lack School, says she has been "told to my face that realism is not art and has no place in the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program."

"The lack of traditional art training in the secondary schools is evidence of why the nation is suffering in the practical sciences," Pi var charges. "Two years ago, at the behest of William Bennett, then secretary of education, the NEA issued a report called 'Towards Civilization.' This report called for a need for Basic Education in the Arts. In order to fulfill this charge, the only way the 24 participants invited to take part in the NEA seminar...to advise the NEA on the future of its fellowship programs...a clear majority had been either beneficiaries, consultants or panel members on one or another program of the NEA."

In the opinion of some of the artists interviewed, current NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer had an opportunity to establish new guidelines for the endowment when he announced last November the cancellation of NEA funding for an AIDS art exhibition at Art East in New York.

Frohnmayer said he was doing this because the exhibition, while worthy in its sentiments, lacked "artistic quality."

Frohnmayer also said the NEA was committed to "seek excellence in arts."

A day later, he withdrew his objection. In doing so, according to art critic Kramer, Frohnmayer sent out a signal that said the criterion of the NEA is not one of artistic excellence, but business as usual.

While the NEA presses its case for more competitive funding, disgruntled members of the art community have been looking at active measures to respond to what they perceive as NEA discrimination. Pi var of the New York Academy has indicated he is considering some form of demonstrations in front of NEA offices by members of his academy and student body of his institution.

Others are exploring legal avenues. There are reports that some of the top legal minds in the country have been working on a potential class-action suit against the national endowment.

Among those reportedly participating in the discussions are a state Supreme Court judge and a renowned expert on constitutional law.