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The Helms Process

It looked like another Parade of Yahoos: Led by Senator Jesse Helms, the Senate Wednesday inveighed against "obscene or indecent" art. Shades of "Madame Bovary" or "Tropic of Cancer" or "I Am Curious — Yellow." But the question here is harder than whether politicians should censor art. It's whether public funds should subsidize art that offends public taste.

The North Carolina Senator and his colleagues are not yahoos but legislators, few of whose constituents are likely to prize artistic boldness. Isn't it thus justifiable for the senators to deplore images that outrage taxpayers' sensibilities? Deplore? Of course. But not to destroy the process carefully legislated to insulate art from crude politics.

Since 1965, the Federal Government has played Lorenzo de' Medici to thousands of artists and art councils — with varying success. Some years, the National Endowment for the Arts has been described as elitist; sometimes its grants have been defined as too folksy; at no time has it pleased all the people all the time.

That being so, it's scarcely surprising that Congressional hackles have risen over the endowment's partial funding of a retrospective of the late Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, and its award of \$15,000 to another photographer, Andres Serrano. Mr. Mapplethorpe's documentation of a sadomasochistic male homosexual subculture can evoke disdain, even disgust. Mr. Serrano's image of a crucifix submerged in his own urine seems calculated to give offense.

But being willing to take a risk with perceptions is part of the artist's baggage. In the end, only time can separate the superb from the sophomoric. Meanwhile, who is to decide what work deserves

Federal support and what doesn't? "The issue," Arthur Schlesinger wrote in a cogent article recently in *The Wall Street Journal*, "is the integrity of the process by which grants are made."

So far, Congress has wisely relied on a peer-review process by which members of the arts community pass on grant applications in their respective fields. Now Senator Helms & Co. insist on what could be called the Congress-as-connoisseur process. The senators would bar use of Federal arts funds to "promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials" and bar grants for artwork that "denigrates, debases or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin."

Who is to decide if a painting of a woman suckling a child, say, is obscene? Or if a Picasso satyr caricatures male sexuality? Jesse Helms, that's who, along with his colleagues. Only Senators Metzbaum and Chafee had the wisdom to demur.

Nor did the Senate stop there. It also voted to punish the two art groups that had supported Mr. Serrano and the Mapplethorpe exhibition by proposing to ban new grants to them for five years. Undoing the damage now depends on a Senate-House conference committee.

The peer-review process is fallible; the juries have made mistakes and will make more. But in a confident, civilized society, these mistakes are tolerable. The price the Helms Process would impose on publicly subsidized art is intolerable.

The Helms Process would drain art of creativity, controversy — of life. The Helms Process would reduce discovery to decoration and supplant the surprising with the approved. And the Helms Process would plunge one esthetic question after another into the boiling bath of politics. That's unlikely to be good for politics; it would surely be fatal to art.