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6-9-1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Memorandum 04

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Recommended Citation

Crary, Alexander D., "Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Memorandum 04" (1989). *Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)*. Paper 22.
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M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Senator June 9, 1989
FROM: ADC
RE: More Background on PISS CHRIST Controversy

Hugh Southern, Acting Chairman of NEA, has requested an office appointment with you which is set for Monday at 5PM. He wants to bring you up to date on the Endowment's position in the controversy over PISS CHRIST.

Your letter to the concerned RI'ers is now going out. You could share a copy of this letter with Hugh on Monday. We received about 110 pre-printed postcards from RI members of the right-wing American Family Association protesting the use of federal funds in this regard. The Endowment has been under siege with over 200 inquiries from Congressional offices - more than on any other issue in its history. They are understandably concerned about negative reaction from the Hill - first in regard to their pending 1990 appropriation and later in connection with their reauthorization. Senators D'Amato and Helms added a great deal of unnecessary fuel to the fire with their dramatic floor statements; D'Amato even tore the catalogue up as he spoke.

A letter initiated by D'Amato and Helms and co-signed by 24 Senators was then sent to Hugh Southern. This letter and Southern's reply are attached for your review. The Endowment is looking to its supporters in Congress to back them up and I believe we should do this up to a point. Some very fundamental issues are at stakes here - such as the integrity of peer review free of government intervention. Some say that without the "hands off" review of grant applications, the Endowment should cease to exist. Others say that since so much controversy is generated by the Visual Arts Program that the Program should be the sacrificial lamb and be shut down. No more artists fellowships because the works produced are often too "hot" for the government to sponsor.

The fact is that the Endowment has been funding art for years that someone somewhere is going to find objectionable. This is the nature of art - to be provocative. If the Helms faction used Freedom of Information access to look through Endowment files, they would find unlimited examples of funded art that the American Family Association would go nuts over.

One current example of this is the Robert Mapplethorpe photo show that is due to open at the Corcoran in early July.

Mapplethorpe is a very important contemporary photographer whose work is in many museum collections. He is so important that the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania decided to organize this major traveling show in the year that many museums are holding large photo exhibitions to celebrate the 150th anniversary of photography. This show has already been seen in Chicago and Philadelphia without incident and goes on to 3 other museums after Washington. The Corcoran has been considering canceling the show but now seems to be going ahead and will have signs warning of the content. (Some of the photos are of a sexual nature). It remains to be seen how this chilling effect will impact on future Endowment decisions as well as on what museums will and will not show in order to get federal support.

Another ironic point in all this is that there is currently a photograph by Serrano hanging in the Smithsonian's Museum of American Art that the American Family Association would find as blasphemous as PISS CHRIST. A xerox of this photo is attached. So far no one has raised a stink about this one but what would they want? A cut in Smithsonian funds or the firing of Secretary Adams? Where does it all stop?

My hope is that the Endowment can ride out the storm as their critics get bored with this one and move on to something else. The Endowment would be wise to show their Congressional critics, however, that they are undertaking a serious review of the procedures used by juries such as the one that selected PISS CHRIST. As you know this jury was selected by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art which administers the Awards in the Visual Arts Program with support from NEA. I hesitate to say that such juries should be given guidelines on what to select. What guidelines would they be? Who is to say what is blasphemous and what isn't? On the other hand, does the government in cases like this have the responsibility to say "Do what you want but not with taxpayer's money"? There is no easy answer.