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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Memorandum 05

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PRIORITY

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Senator June 14, 1989
FROM: ADC
RE: Followup to Meeting with Hugh Southern

Hugh Southern has let me know that you should go ahead and send him whatever letter you feel is politically necessary. He is going to have problems with the National Council on the Arts no matter what comes from you. He would prefer that you DIRECT the Endowment to do the two things we discussed in the meeting rather than SUGGEST these actions.

We discussed that you would write Southern to ask that the Endowment 1) deny future Endowment support for the Awards in the Visual Arts Program as administered by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art and 2) blacklist the 5 jurors who were responsible for selecting Andres Serrano from serving on any Endowment review panel for 5 years. This was the proposal that the meeting ended on.

As I have thought this line of response over, I have grown more troubled by it and am going to suggest an alternative that is less spectacular but hopefully safer for you in long run. First of all by calling for grants to be denied and for individuals to be blacklisted puts you right in the middle of a major censorship issue. It may appear decisive to the American Family people but to anyone else who cares about the Endowment (to say nothing of free speech), it would appear to be a petty punitive reaction to something that really is much larger than just the PISS CHRIST photo. While the RI and national arts community might understand your political predicament, they are apt to regard this punishment approach as near-sighted and as a betrayal by their champion. This approach opens a bottomless can of worms for you. It would be a quick fix that does not address the flaw that allowed PISS CHRIST to happen.

Since it is very likely that more Serrano-like situations are going to occur, you have got to address the process not the most recent offensive photograph. The actions outlined above speak only to the PISS CHRIST controversy. What happens when a new campaign is mounted against the next picture? Will it be the Serrano photo now hanging in the Smithsonian? Or a Mapplethorpe at the next stop on its tour? I can't see you putting these band-aids on every issue that is going to come along. The big picture here is an ominous one - as the last paragraph in today's POST article implies. (Attached) A Helms spokesman is quoted as saying "The fact that the Corcoran is not going to open the show is not going to end the matter."

By addressing the process I mean asking the Endowment to impress upon all panelists - even ones used by grantees like the Southeastern Center - that they must take into consideration the most basic views of decency and good taste when allocating taxpayer's money. This provision could be added to the guidelines that NEA panelists already receive. Second, you should urge the Endowment to put its National Council to better use. The Council should get fuller information on recommended grants before they vote on them. Potential problem grants could be flagged by staff so that the Council is forced to discuss them. Once they have discussed one of these and decided to fund it, then they are on the spot and would be expected to defend their action. This puts added burden on staff but it also gives the Republican Council members a more central role in Endowment decisions - something Jack Neusner is asking for. There is no reason why they should not be more accountable for their actions. The debate would be in the Council where it should be. The number of grants that would have to be flagged would not be more than 1% probably.

With this approach, the Endowment is asked to look carefully at its procedures and take steps to reform a process that obviously has flaws. This is what most of the intelligent critics are asking for - procedural review and reform. Helms is asking for blood and will continue to do so it seems.

On a personal note and for the record.. since you raised this yesterday, the PISS CHRIST photograph does not personally offend me. It is after all only a picture which one is free to look at or not look at. The only kind of picture that might truly offend me is one depicting genuine human violence and cruelty. My faith as a Christian is not tied up in symbols.

1. Draft letter stressing review and reform with stronger role for Arts Council (as above)



2. Draft letter directing NEA to deny funding to Awards in the Visual Arts Program and blacklist the jurors

3. Discuss

I strongly recommend the first option.