

1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): News Article 01

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Recommended Citation

Gamarekian, Barbara, "Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): News Article 01" (1989). *Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)*. Paper 16.

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Juggling Money, Taste And Art on Capitol Hill

By BARBARA GAMAREKIAN
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 29 — Representative Bob Carr, the Michigan Democrat who is chairman of the Congressional Arts Caucus, thinks it odd that the Bush Administration has requested an appropriation of \$193 million for military bands but only \$170 million for the National Endowment for the Arts.

"It doesn't seem right that the Pentagon gets more money for its musical purposes than we budget for support of the arts in the whole rest of the country," Mr. Carr said. "I'm not quarreling with military bands, as some of our country's best musicians are in uniform, but it graphically demonstrates our screwy priorities."

This is the point the caucus has been making since it was founded in 1981 by Representative Frederick W. Richmond, a Brooklyn Democrat.

The primary purpose of the 250-member caucus is the support of

The Congressional Arts Caucus is pushing for funds without strings.

three Federal agencies: the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum Services.

These days, the arts endowment in particular needs all the friends it can get. It has been criticized by legislators for the nature of some of its artistic grants, specifically for underwriting an exhibition of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, known for his homoerotic images, and a photographic piece by Andres Serrano showing a crucifix submerged in urine.

"This happens every two or three years," said Representative Thomas J. Downey, a Long Island Democrat who is a former chairman of the caucus. "N.E.A. or N.E.H. endows some group or artist that members find offensive — the last flap was over pornographic poetry — and there is a routine call for a cut of endowment money. Normally we can withstand that, and we hope we can this time as well."

Several senators took to the floor to denounce the Serrano work. More than 100 House members directed a letter to the National Endowment for the Arts criticizing a planned exhibition of Mr. Mapplethorpe's work beginning this week at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The show was can-

celed by the gallery on the ground that an uproar over the next appropriation for the arts endowment might result.

The uproar came anyway, over the cancellation as well as the financing. The House Appropriation Committee today approved new guidelines to make the endowment more accountable for where its money goes. The proposal now goes to the floor of the House.

"I've talked to some members and urged them not to get too excited," Mr. Carr said. "Not that they aren't entitled to be offended, but if we get into a situation where a Congressman or some group in society takes offense at something some artist does and that is used as a reason not to fund the endowment, or limit its funding, or require that some sort of censure board on what is good art and what is bad art be set up, then I think we are going down a very troubled road."

As Mr. Downey noted, the arts caucus has been witness to other attempts to cut endowment financing. Early on, caucus members successfully fought a proposal by the Reagan Administration to cut the arts budget by almost half for the fiscal year 1982.

But this year, the arts endowment has been officially leaderless since the resignation of Frank Hodsoll last February to take a position with the Office of Management and Budget and Mr. Carr laments the delay in the appointment of a new chairman. "We are losing time," he said. "It's too bad, especially at such a sensitive time."

An Artist on the Caucus

Some caucus members have a personal interest in the arts; others have an arts constituency that needs tending, like New York's two Senators, Alfonse M. D'Amato and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Bill Green, Charles B. Rangel and Ted Weiss, all Congressmen from New York City.

Representative Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, who designs and creates contemporary Indian jewelry, is the caucus's only recognized artist. "For years and years I earned a full-time income from my work," Mr. Campbell said. He said he joined the caucus "because when budgets are tight the first thing they want to cut are what they call 'the frills.'"

As for the endowment's current difficulties, he said: "I don't believe in Congressional micro-management. We should not go back and try to second-guess everything the endowment does. The people on their grant-making panels have more background and qualifications than anyone in Con-



The New York Times/George Tames

Representative Bob Carr going through entries in the annual high school arts competition sponsored by the Congressional Arts Caucus.

A panel acts to make the arts endowment more accountable for where its grants go.

gress."

The caucus staff monitors legislation that could affect the arts, like tax policy, copyright laws and immigration matters as they pertain to artistic exchanges. A weekly newsletter on arts issues and legislation goes to all members.

The caucus also sponsors an annual high school arts competition, and 256 schools participated this year. The winning entries are displayed in a yearlong exhibition in a tunnel between the Cannon House Office Building and the Capitol. More than 140 of the winning artists were on hand for the exhibition's opening and reception today, sponsored by General Motors.

Exhibit Without Objectors

This is one art exhibition no one could object to, as safe for legislators

as apple pie and motherhood.

On Friday night, which was to have been the grand opening of the Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran, Rockne Krebs, the laser artist, will project Mapplethorpe photographs on the facade of the gallery that would not permit their showing within its walls because of fears of financial penalties from Congress.

"The arts caucus has traditionally not gotten out front on issues," said Anne Murphy, executive director of the American Arts Alliance, a lobby group for the arts. "Its most valuable function has been as a conduit for information, and they really do help get information into their members' offices very quickly, but the caucus as a whole has not served in a leadership function."

Mr. Carr said: "Ours is a subtle role. Our officers and board members think we can influence the course of legislation and support the endowments better if we keep to a study function. Some think we should be taking positions on issues and be militant on this or that or the other thing. The reason we don't is because we want to have the broadest base participation as possible."

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