

1994

Appropriations (1994-1995): Note 04

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The arts

Don't distort NEA record in political fray

The senators' letter to Jane Alexander, chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Arts, was couched ob-sopitely. It ended "With kindest regards." Yet its threat was unmistakable: Unless she responded with assurances that the agency would change its ways, "NEA funding for FY1995 is in serious jeopardy." Here we go again.

Sens. Robert Byrd and Don Nickles may well feel that they're on a moral mission, but their careless crusade is worse than unfortunate. When single examples of provocative, on-the-edge art are distorted and used as tools to destroy the NEA, an organization with a stellar record, citizens in every corner of every state are the potential big losers.

This time around, the art that landed in the political arena was a March 5 Minneapolis performance by Los Angeles artist Ron Athey — a performance sponsored by the Walker Art Center. Both the Walker and the NEA say that less than \$150 of the Walker's NEA grant was used to support the show. Among other themes, the performance explored AIDS, martyrdom and religious rituals. A scarification ritual apparently shocked some of the audience members — at least one of whom worried about potential health risks (discounted by health officials but exploited by senators) because some blood was involved. Such art is ripe for discussion, and members of Congress have every right to question public expenditures. But senators peddling fears as facts are totally out of line.

Those who would cut or eliminate federal support for the arts on the basis of a

very few controversial expenditures threaten a solid and elaborate mechanism that leverages each dollar spent by up to 20 times through matching gifts and grants. The endowment brings art to rural areas starving for it, to inner cities struggling to see and hear it, to suburban children whose school systems long since relegated the arts to the realm of the extracurricular.

The arts speak to the soul. They have the power to create tremendous controversy precisely because they touch us emotionally as well as intellectually. They delight and inspire, yes. They also confront and confound. That ability is central to their power, and that is at the root of the NEA's vulnerability. Because the arts do elicit in those who partake of them the most profound of reactions, the arts are quite naturally thrust into the public debate.

There is nothing wrong with a spirited debate over particular works of art; it can prove stimulating and instructive. Star Tribune reporter/critic Mary Abbe entered into such a debate in a column involving the very work that worries the senators — a performance that some audience members found moving, and others found repellent. But when such debates are seized upon and distorted for use as ammunition in politicians' culture wars, the result is destructive.

By now, the NEA's processes are among the most scrutinized, most second-guessed, most argued-over in Washington. Its peer-review system provides a sound process for providing public support to a broad range of arts programs. It does not deserve this threat.