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NEA: new boss, old attitude

Any hopes for reform of the notorious National Endowment for the Arts have been dashed by its new chairman, Jane Alexander. After years of protest, the NEA still doesn't get it.

Interviewed last week on the CBS program "Face The Nation," Alexander confessed she doesn't understand what all of the fuss has been about. "We don't fund obscenity. That's against the law," the former actress sniffed.

As for the process by which the NEA doles out \$175 million annually in taxpayers' money to arts projects — why, nothing could be more "democratic," said the NEA chief. Recipients are chosen by peer review panels, which Alexander described as functioning like a jury.

In fact, the NEA's grants process is controlled by insiders. The agency itself selects review panels, generally composed of people with the same tastes as the applicants they judge. There is a long history of logrolling at the NEA, with panel members voting to give money to artists who in turn sit on other panels and return the favor to their friends.

There is an even longer

history of NEA giving money to support exhibitions and publications whose manifest purpose is to outrage, insult or offend.

Not a year goes by without the revelation of a new NEA scandal. The latest was its subsidy for a show at New York's Whitney Museum last spring. The in-your-face exhibit — titled "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire" — included a 3-foot mound of simulated excrement, a film depicting Jesus as a woman exposing her breasts and a photograph depicting "Testicle Stretch With the Possibility of a Crushed Face."

There may be artistic merit to such works, though you couldn't prove it by us. What ought to be clear to all is that government should not be in the business of funding art at all. Artists and arts organizations seeking financial support should win donations from voluntary givers and willing audiences — not from taxpayers whose money is extracted by force.

One expects both the Hollywood crowd and the bureaucracy to be out of touch with reality. Jane Alexander is both, so the condition is aggravated in her case. That does not bode well for the future of the NEA.