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James F. Cooper

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What we talked about!

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How an Agency Is Able to Celebrate the Absurd

Realist Artists Need Not Apply at the NEA

By JAMES F. COOPER

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), stunned by congressional investigations into its funding for artworks that critics have labeled grossly obscene and sacrilegious, is now being accused by art experts of censorship and falsification of government reports about its activities.

NEA-funded entities that have made headlines over the past year include Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" photograph, the stage production "Annie Sprinkle: Post-Porn Modernist," the Artists Space gallery in lower Manhattan and homoerotic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe.

In addition, the New York City Tribune has learned in the course of a lengthy investigation that steps have been taken to launch a class-action legal suit against the NEA for its allegedly illegal, long-term discrimination against artists and educational institutions that fail to conform to NEA-approved modernist styles.

These charges, brought by artists, educators, art consultants and former NEA panelists, surface at a time when the arts endowment is fighting for congressional refunding for the next five years. Its annual budget is now \$173 million.

Art consultant John Arthur, a Boston author (*Spirit of Place*) who served as an NEA panelist during much of the 1970s, says he witnessed NEA staffers falsifying a congressional report on the endowment's funding for the visual arts. This was done, Arthur said, to cover up any perception that the NEA discriminates against realist artists.

Arthur says he was present when NEA staffers fabricated the records for a report requested by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D.-R.I.), who wanted an accounting of the proportions of NEA funds allocated for realist art versus modernist art. "If an abstract artwork contained a feather or an automobile tire," Arthur recalled, they would put it under the "Realist" column, with the justification that it was "recognizable," and therefore "realist" in nature.

Stuart Pivar, a noted New York art collector and chairman emeritus of the New York Academy of Art, has made a similar charge against the arts endowment.

Arthur, Pivar and others interviewed, say the NEA regularly employs an artistically biased jury system to assure that government funds will go overwhelmingly to modernist art projects.

Last year, as a result of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano art controversies, over a hundred members of Congress



NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer (left) and Rep. Sidney Yates (D.-Ill.) seek to increase taxpayer-funding of the controversial agency.

signed a petition criticizing the NEA selection process.

Some of the endowment's critics believe there may now be a call for an investigation of what the NEA has refused to fund during the last 24 years of its existence. Specifically, the offices of Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R.-Calif.) and Sen. Jesse Helms (R.-N.C.), who are currently investigating NEA funding have expressed interest in the latest findings.

"It's time the public realized what's going on," said Pivar. He says that Ray Kingston, a member of the National Council on the Arts, an advisory board to the NEA, informed him that Visual Arts Program Director Susan Lubowsky revealed that NEA staffers regularly censor applications on the basis of artistic style.

Pivar says Lubowsky admitted this to Kingston when he asked her, "How come all these applications are only for *avant-garde* art? Don't realist artists apply for NEA grants?"

Lubowsky reportedly replied, according to Pivar, "Silly, don't you know that realist art is not presented to the panels? Only ground-breaking art is."

Lubowsky, in a telephone interview, denied she made the comment. "That's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard," she said.

She also emphatically denied charges that NEA panelists discriminate against realist art. "The NEA has funded many representational artists," she asserted.

When asked to give an example, she cited a recent award made to Alex Sowatewa, a Zuni Indian muralist. Kingston could not be reached for comment.

Pivar believes NEA prejudice against realist art explains why the New York Academy of Art was refused a Challenge III grant by the endowment. Central to the academy's curriculum is the study of the human figure. Pivar is

still fuming over an NEA memorandum initiated by Lubowsky, dated Dec. 20, 1989, that denounced the academy's emphasis on figure drawing as a "rigid . . . revisionist approach that would stifle creativity in young artists."

Dr. Gregory Hedberg, director of the academy, was incredulous over the reason cited for denying the grant. "How can the mastery of figurative drawing stifle the creativity of a young artist?" he said during an interview conducted in his offices at the academy.

Pivar has denounced the NEA memo as "an outrage" and charges the NEA with enforcing a "national style of [modernist] art, which now dominates our art institutions."

Frederic E. Hart, creator of "The Three Servicemen" bronze statue for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., says that NEA discrimination against realism led the agency to reject a grant application he submitted to the endowment. "I was working on a sculpture proposal for the facade of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The NEA turned me down flat, basically because my work was representational and religious. Their opinion was, this is not art."

A decade later, Hart is still rankled by the rejection. "The sketches took me two years. I almost starved to death getting them done," he said during an interview conducted last November.

Hart persevered and won the commission to create a series of bas-reliefs and free-standing figures of Adam and St. Peter for the tympanum of the cathedral. This spring, after eight years of work, "The Creation Sculptures" will be officially unveiled.

Now a very successful artist and a member of the prestigious national Commission on Fine Arts, Hart charges he is still being "blacklisted" by the NEA, particularly since he criti-

cized the endowment in an open letter published by the Washington Post.

In that letter, Hart scolded the NEA for "wasting taxpayers' money . . . in its cynical aggrandizement of art and artist at the expense of sacred public sentiments."

Government-funded art programs of the NEA, Hart states, have bullied the public into accepting "any idiocy put before it that calls itself art." Hart feels that his artistic objective to create spiritual works that emphasize "beauty" is diametrically opposed to the goals of the NEA.

"Once, art served society," Hart says. "Under the banner of beauty and order, art was rich and meaningful embellishment of life, embracing—not desecrating—its ideals, aspirations and values."

Art consultant Arthur, who served as an NEA panelist during much of the 1970s, says the selection process of the NEA is "gravely flawed." Panelists for the Visual Arts Programs are selected for their modernist viewpoint, he says.

He recalled an incident when an Interior Department art project for Antarctica was almost derailed by NEA panelists who insisted on the participation of performance artist Vito Acconci. Interior officials were troubled by the recommendation after discovering that Acconci's past art performances included squashing cockroaches on his chest as well as public masturbation.

Arthur says his conscience wouldn't allow him to go along with the other panel members. Although he was able to block Acconci's involvement, he now believes his refusal not "to play the NEA game" resulted in his being excluded from further participation on NEA panels.

He says he has no regrets. "I just couldn't go along and approve the awful stuff they wanted to fund with public money."

As an example of NEA efforts to camouflage its allegedly overwhelming preference for modernist works, Arthur points to the case of realist artist Richard Estes, who was awarded an endowment grant in the mid-1970s.

Estes protested he hadn't applied for the grant and suggested the NEA give the award to a young realist who might need the money. The NEA insisted either he take the grant or they would cancel it. Estes took the money. In 1978, Estes confided to Arthur he believed the NEA gave him the award to dispel rumors of discrimination against realist artists.

Arthur also charges that a group of NEA staffers and panelists tried to convince then-NEA Chairman Nancy Hanks to issue a report that there are "no talented realistic artists in the

(Continued on next page)

Mr. Cooper is the art critic for the New York City Tribune, from which this article is reprinted by permission. © 1990, New York City Tribune.

United States." She declined.

Realist artist Jack Beal flatly states the NEA "discriminates" against representational artists, even though he is one of the few to receive an NEA commission.

"Out of the 97 visual art works commissioned by the Department of Labor in Washington, D.C.," he says, "94 are modernist." Beal says the only reason he received a commission was because an official from the Labor Department vigorously opposed the NEA panelists who wanted an abstract work.

Beal says that abstract sculptor James Rosati, one of the NEA panelists, announced, "There are no good representational artists in America."

This sort of blanket condemnation of realism is believed to be the prevailing attitude of the NEA, according to an overwhelming number of people interviewed for this story. One such person, New York realist painter Burt Silverman, attributes the apparent barriers against realism to the "snobbery" and "elitism" of the art establishment.

This is a perception also expressed by William Diamond, Northeast regional administrator for the federal General Services Administration (GSA), which funded the controversial "Tilted Arc" sculpture. The 120-foot-long, 73-ton rusting steel wall was torn down after the GSA was besieged by complaints and petitions from the 7,000 federal employees at the Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan, where the artwork was located.

When the proposed dismantling of the wall was announced, Diamond recognized the grass-roots demand for its removal by noting that for "too long public art has been the exclusive domain of elitists." NEA panelists serve on GSA-funded arts-in-architecture programs.

Besides the immediate effects on a realist artist of an NEA grant rejection, patrons of realism point out, there are long-term consequences regarding career prospects. Calling the NEA's response to its application "unconscionable," the New York Academy's Pivar said: "Our academy is approved by the New York state Department of Education. The NEA decision is a terrible blow to our students who have earned a master's degree in fine arts. Who will hire them as teachers now that the NEA has ruled our curriculum 'revisionist'?"

Academy Director Hedberg is equally angered by what he calls the "disturbing bias" of the NEA against representational art education. The NEA panel ruled that works by students like Randolph Melick, now a member of the academy faculty, "were not of sufficiently high quality." Melick's art, Hedberg points out, has been singled out for praise by such connoisseurs as Charles Ryskamp, director of New York's prestigious Frick Collection.

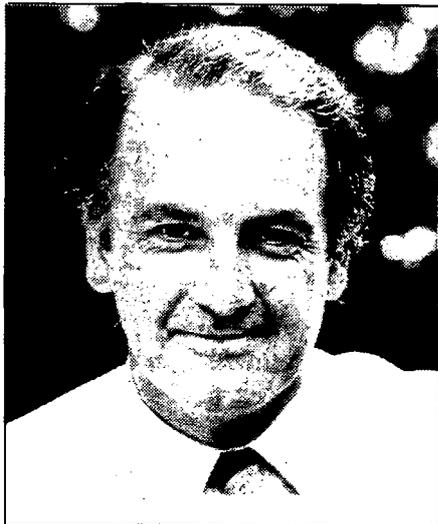
Pivar says his faculty is composed of some of the finest artists and teachers in the country, including Milet Andrejevic, Walter Erlebacher, Edward Schmidt and James Lecky.

"The NEA ruling not only hurts their credentials, but their ability to earn a living," Pivar said. What happens to

the students, he asked, "when they go to the NEA for individual artists' grants? Will the NEA say they don't have a good education because they studied at the New York Academy of Art?"

Critics of the NEA, such as Arthur, point to its "flawed selection process" as the primary source of the current controversies surrounding the endowment. NEA panelists, for example, who judge applications for the federal arts-in-architecture programs, Arthur explains, "have no understanding what constitutes public art."

Pivar and Hedberg charge that



Rep. Pat Williams (D.-Mont.) is one key congressman who has consistently voted against NEA budget cuts and restrictions.

panelists selected by the NEA to review the educational programs of the New York Academy of Art lacked expertise in art education. The panelists included a photographer, a Japanese printmaker and a video artist.

Pivar characterized the panel decision-making process as "absurd" and NEA policies "hypocritical."

He says the NEA approach to arts education is particularly suspect and questions the endowment's sincerity to substantially explore the subject since the congressional hearings on the subject—which were held in March in Los Angeles—were closed.

"The lack of traditional art training in the secondary schools is evidence of why the nation is suffering in the practical sciences," Pivar charges. "Two years ago, at the behest of William Bennett, then secretary of education, the NEA issued a report called 'Towards Civilization.' This report called for a need for Basic Education in the Arts."

Instead, Pivar charges, the March 5 hearings, conducted by the Subcommittee on Post-Secondary Education of the House Education and Labor Committee, headed by Rep. Pat Williams (D.-Mont.), were meant to discourage inquiries.

Pivar holds Williams responsible for the closed agenda, and points out that the congressman has consistently voted against any cuts in the NEA budget as well as opposed any restrictions on NEA funding despite a host of concerns raised in the last year over the endow-

ment's financial support of such artworks as Serrano's "Piss Christ."

Republican congressmen have complained that the makeup of the hearings is part of Democratic strategy to bypass questions about NEA financing and eventually bring the endowment's budget to a vote without having to entertain Republican amendments to restrict its funding.

Anne Hausman, legislative aide to Williams, told the New York City *Tribune* that the hearings examine how "the NEA is promoting creativity." She declined to name any of the artists who will be testifying before the committee.

Pivar says that studies of "creativity" in the Los Angeles hearings are "ridiculous" and self-serving, and accuses the NEA of conducting a "one-party system of art education."

The NEA's notoriety for seemingly favoring modernism is not limited to the East Coast. In Minneapolis, the Richard Lack Atelier School of Classical Art has been repeatedly rebuffed by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Programs, which is funded in part by the NEA.

Stephen Gjertson, associate director of the Lack School, states that rather than allow realist art to be exhibited among its group shows, panelists of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program have threatened to "shut down" the entire arts program.

Gjertson explained, during an interview in New York: "There are several exhibitions each year sponsored by the Minnesota Artists Program, which is held at the Minnesota Institute of Art. The artists' works are selected by a panel composed of local artists.

"Most of these artists are modernists. For years, members of the Lack School have been denied a seat on these art panels. When one of our members was finally elected, the other panelists blocked all of his nominations.

"The classical realists were perfectly willing to exhibit alongside modernists, but that the modernists wouldn't allow. They'd rather destroy the whole program," he says.

Cyd Wicker, a member of the Lack School, says she has been "told to my face that realism is not art and has no place in the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program."

Richard Lack, director of the Lack Atelier, said artists need to acquire basic art skills. "We do a profound disservice if we don't teach both mastery and self-expression in the visual arts. Otherwise, art becomes a plaything, a self-indulgent game in which everyone loses. We are now reaping what we have sown, a one-sided art, an *avant-garde* academy which dominates our educational system and our culture."

The New Jersey Historical Society Museum, located in Middletown, N.J., was denied a grant from the NEA until it caved in to pressure to cancel a work by realist sculptor Donald DeLue, according to American sculptor Granville Carter, a close friend of DeLue, who died in 1988.

DeLue, who is responsible for several Civil War memorials erected at Gettys-

burg during the 1970s, is also featured prominently at the BrookGreen Sculpture Gardens in South Carolina.

In its rejection of DeLue's sculpture for the Historical Society, the NEA denounced the "historical" and "commemorative" characteristics of the proposed sculpture.

Carter, who related this story in a January telephone interview, ridiculed the NEA decision. "What kind of work would one expect for a historical museum?" Carter says NEA representatives told the society they must choose an NEA-approved modernist if they wanted funding.

Two art critics who have commented on the flaws in the NEA selection process are Hilton Kramer and John Beardsley.

Beardsley was invited by the NEA in 1984 to evaluate what its Art Critics Fellowship Program had achieved. He reported that the NEA program had been a "disappointment."

"The problem... is a lack of clarity within the NEA's Visual Arts Program. ... Panelists overlook the principal stated criterion of quality in favor of less important considerations."

The perception of prejudice by a like-minded, close-knit community of NEA panelists is addressed by art critic Kramer in his book, *The Revenge of the Philistines* (1985), in which he writes, "Of the 24 participants invited to take part in an NEA seminar... [to] advise the NEA on the future of its fellowship programs... a clear majority had been either beneficiaries, consultants or panelists in one or another program of the NEA."

In the opinion of some of the artists interviewed, current NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer had an opportunity to establish new guidelines for the endowment when he announced last November the cancellation of NEA funding for an AIDS art exhibition at Artists Space gallery in New York. Frohnmayer said he was doing this because the exhibition, while worthy in its sentiments, lacked "artistic quality."

Frohnmayer also said the NEA was committed to "seek excellence in arts."

A day later, he withdrew his objections. In doing so, according to art critic Kramer, Frohnmayer sent out a signal that said the criterion of the NEA is not one of artistic excellence, but business as usual.

While the NEA presses its case for more congressional funding, disgruntled members of the art community have been looking at active measures to respond to what they perceive as NEA discrimination. Pivar of the New York Academy has indicated he is considering some form of demonstrations in front of NEA offices by members of the faculty and student body of his institution.

Others are exploring legal avenues. There are reports that some of the top legal minds in the country have been consulted for a potential class-action suit against the national endowment.

Among those reportedly participating in the discussions are a state Supreme Court judge and a renowned expert on constitutional law. ■