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James F. Cooper

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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 too obscene and sacreligious, 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 and NEA panelists, surface at a time when the endowment is fighting for congressional refunds for the next two years. Its annual budget is now $173 million.

Arthur, John Arthur, a Boston author (Spirit of Place) who serves as an NEA panelist during much of the '80s, has witnessed NEA staffers fabricated a congressional report on the endowment's funding for the visual arts. This was done, Arthur says, to cover up any perception that the NEA discriminates against realist artists.

He says that conducted in his offices was a revisionist approach to the endowment's funding for the visual arts. This was done, Arthur says, to cover up any perception that the NEA discriminates against realist artists.

Artists, he says, are being told by NEA staffers and panelists that realist artists, who have made a lasting contribution to the visual arts, are no longer in favor with the NEA.

"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.

Lubowsky says he was awarded an "an outrage" grant application he submitted to the endowment. He says he was told by the NEA that his application was rejected because his work was "representational and religious." His opinion was, he says, that is not art.

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

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

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Hart persevered and won the commission to create a series of bas-reliefs and free-standing figures of Adam and St. Peter for the symposium of the cathedral. This spring, after eight years of work, "The Creation Sculptures" will be finally 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 criticized 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/sect society," Hart says. "Underlie butcher of beauty and order, art was vigorous enough to embellish life, embracing—not desecrating—its idols, aspirations and values."

Art consultant Althur, who served as an NEA panelist during much of the '70s, says the selection process of the NEA is "gravely flawed." Panelists for the Visual Arts Program are selected for their modernist viewpoints, he says.

He recalled an incident when an Interior Department art project for Antarcita was almost denied by NEA panelists because of the participation of performance artist Vito Acconcio. Interior officials were troubled by the recommendation after discovering that Acconcio's past art performances included squashing cockroaches in his chest as well as public masturbation.

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

"I say 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-70's.

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 testified 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家中 whose report was titled "no talented realistic artists in the

(Continued on next page)
United States." She defined.

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.

The NEA was beset from the start by the charge that the agency discriminates against artists who want to make representational art. The NEA has always maintained that its grants are awarded on the basis of "quality" and that every artist has an equal chance of being awarded a grant.

The NEA's director, William Diamond, Northeast regional administrator for the Services Administration (GSA), which funded the controversial "Titled 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 GSA's 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 notting 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 policies "illogically and unreasonably," the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs has threatened to "shut down" the entire arts program.

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, I was a panelist at William Bennett's last hearing, in which he was playing God. The panel was allowed to criticize all aspects of the NEA's programs that it wished. Yet Bennett's final decision will be based on the recommendation of a panel that was not allowed to hear any of the arguments from the artists who had been denied a seat on these panels.

"The classical realists were perfectly willing to exhibit alongside modernists, but that the modernists weren't allowed. They never destroy the whole program," he says.

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

Richard Lack, director of the Lack School, said artists need to acquire knowledge of the history of art and that the NEA is not a service agency. Lack said, "If an artist doesn't know about his artistic roots he can't stand on his own two feet."

The NEA has received an estimated 150,000 letters from artists who have commented on the NEA's policies. In its rejection of DeLue's sculpture for the Historical Society, the NEA denounced the "historical" and "conceptual" characteristics of the proposed sculpture.

Carter, who related this story in a January telephone interview, ridiculed the NEA decision. "What kind of work do you have in mind for a historical museum?" Carter said NEA representatives told the society they would only approve a 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. For years, the NEA has overlooked the principles stated in its criteria for quality in favor of less important considerations."

The perception of prejudice by a like-minded, close-knit community of NEA artists was addressed by art critic Kramer in his book, The Revenge of the Philistines (1985), in which he writes, "The 24 participants invited to take part in an NEA seminar... [are] not a random selection."

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 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 arts community 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 by 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.

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