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The New York Times

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May 17, 1990

BACKGROUND / TALKING POINTS

America's Art, Smearred

To listen to all the angry commotion surrounding the reauthorization of the National Endowment for the Arts, you'd think the Endowment was in the business of funding smut. That's exactly what some far-right activists would like the American public to think.

They couldn't be more wrong — or more destructive to a program of inestimable value to the entire spectrum of American artistic activity.

In its 25 years, the Endowment has sometimes been described as too elitist and other times as too folksy, and at no time has it pleased all of the people all at once. But not until last year was it ever hit with an obscenity rap.

At that time the Endowment partly financed a retrospective of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, some of which depicted a sadomasochistic male homosexual subculture. And last year the Endowment awarded \$15,000 to Andres Serrano, one of whose photographs was of a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. The work of both men is confrontational, and unnerving. It has also become the weapon of those determined to smear and trash the Endowment.

Never mind that the N.E.A. has nourished an astonishing range of creativity: small museums and great art institutions; hundreds of theater and dance companies across the country; a 92-year-old maker of bobbin lace in South Dakota; thousands of film, radio and television ventures; countless artists, some of them famous now, who might never have been heard from otherwise.

Never mind that the \$119 million in grants the Endowment made in 1988 encouraged citizens to contribute \$1.3 billion of their own money so those projects could be completed.

No, the only things that people like Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina and an organization

that calls itself the American Family Association are able to see is those two controversial photography grants. The shining record of those 25 years of accomplishment is lost in the tumult. Worse than tumult; hysteria.

"To my mind it's like the story of Chicken Little," says Representative Sidney Yates, the Illinois Democrat who has long been such a spirited champion of the N.E.A. "When an acorn fell on his head he shouted, 'The sky is falling, the sky is falling.' Those who are criticizing the N.E.A. claim pornography is rife there. But ask them where and they've only two answers. Mapplethorpe. Serrano."

Six weeks ago the Bush Administration refused to endorse Senator Helms's proposal to stifle the N.E.A. by restricting the content of programs it supports. Since then, however, the American Family Association has become even more inflammatory and misleading. It falsely claims, for instance, that an allegedly pornographic show had N.E.A. funding. Representative Philip Crane, Republican of Illinois, once a far-right candidate for President, has introduced a bill to abolish the agency.

And now, smelling blood in the water, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies shamelessly proposes that most of the Endowment's money be given directly to local arts councils. To do that would truly plunge national arts policy, and funds, into just the political pressures that Congress has worked so carefully to avoid.

The N.E.A. has, by someone's standards, made misjudgments in its lifetime, and if it is doing its job of fostering creativity it will make more. But it has made no mistake as great as that which will be made if good men and women in Congress, in the arts community, in the White House and across the country don't now stand up for an institution that has benefited thousands of artists — and millions of Americans.

The Budget: Late and Ugly

Gov. Mario Cuomo tries to disown it. So do Senate Republicans, led by the majority leader, Ralph Marino. In truth, neither side can escape blame for the \$1.4 billion package of new taxes and fees agreed to this week by New York state

er, or an increase in the gasoline tax, proposed but never pressed by Mr. Cuomo. Instead the public will pay more for dozens of goods and services, including soda, liquor