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## Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 06

Elizabeth Kastor

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# Art and Accountability

## Yates Proposes Changing NEA Grant Procedure

By Elizabeth Kastor  
Washington Post Staff Writer

In an effort to head off a fight over federal funding of controversial art, Rep. Sidney Yates met yesterday with the heads of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities to discuss how to make the two endowments more accountable for the work they support.

Yates (R-Ill.), chairman of the

House subcommittee that oversees arts appropriations, on Tuesday proposed an amendment to the appropriations bill that would prevent the endowments from subcontracting grants.

"We're still working on the language," the longtime congressional defender of governmental funding for the arts said yesterday. "What I did was to offer this amendment because I think the [arts] endowment

See NEA, C8, Col. 1



REP. SIDNEY YATES

ART DISCUSSION

## Yates's Proposal

NEA, From C1

should review the grants more closely than it has in the past."

The proposal was unanimously approved in subcommittee.

Yates's action comes after weeks of debate over NEA-funded art that many members of Congress said they found offensive and unworthy of federal support. Congressional critics have called for changes in NEA funding procedures, and arts advocates fear that NEA appropriations will suffer if the issue is not resolved.

"I felt very good about [Yates's proposal]," said Rep. Dick Armey (R-Tex.), who earlier this month sent a highly critical letter signed by more than 100 representatives to the NEA. "I think it's a really good first step and Sid and I are working together, and I think we're working quite effectively. Unfortunately, we've seen congressional action in the past that didn't translate into behavioral change by the endowment."

Both NEA acting chairman Hugh Southern and NEH Chairman Lynne Cheney declined to comment. "We are working with Mr. Yates to provide information," NEA spokesman Joe Slye said.

The NEA controversy began over a photograph by Andres Serrano that showed a Christ figure submerged in a jar of urine. Serrano had received a \$15,000 grant through a program at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C., which had in turn received \$75,000 from the NEA for that program. If "subgranting" was forbidden, the Winston-Salem program couldn't have been funded; the NEA itself would have to choose the artists.

Yates said he has long been concerned about the NEA funding organizations that in turn give grants to artists. He said he has also worried about the speed with which the artistic peer panels select NEA grant recipients, and with which the National Council on the Arts, the NEA's advisory group, then reviews those grants.

"The impression I had was they were rushing the grants through without the thorough consideration I think is necessary in order to insure fairness to the applicants and to the council itself," Yates said.

NEA acting chairman Southern agreed, according to Yates. "In the course of discussions we discussed the problems that might be inherent with subgranting, and I told him I'm still

working on the language."

Because Yates's amendment is not written and must eventually travel through several levels of congressional approval, the exact effect it would have on the endowments and their grantees is not yet clear. The NEA estimates that an end to subgranting could affect about 200 of its approximately 4,500 annual grants. It is not expected to affect grants to state arts agencies, which were mandated by the endowments' authorizing legislation. But according to NEA staff members, there was considerable consternation yesterday over the proposal, which some fear could curtail a number of programs in areas like folk arts and arts education.

In response to such concerns, Rep. Ralph Regula (R-Ohio), the subcommittee's ranking Republican, said, "There's nothing perfect in life. We can only try. I think [the amendment] is an attempt to inject accountability, maybe not in a perfect way, but to give a degree of comfort to my colleagues that by funding these programs, they aren't going to be embarrassed."

The original controversy over the Serrano grant grew recently when several congressmen criticized a planned Corcoran Gallery of Art show of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs, which included sadomasochistic and homoerotic images. The traveling exhibit was organized by Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, which had received a \$30,000 NEA grant for it. Last week, Corcoran officials canceled the show, saying the museum wanted to avoid becoming entangled in a political debate.

If it is restricted to subgranting, Yates's amendment would not prevent the NEA from making such a grant, because the ICA Mapplethorpe show was selected for funding by an NEA peer panel.

"Sid's action yesterday was good action but wouldn't have changed the Mapplethorpe decision," said Armey, whose letter to the NEA criticized the Mapplethorpe show as well as the Serrano grant.

Earlier this month, Southern promised the NEA will review its granting procedures and report back to Congress.

"I would hope their written word will be sufficiently reassuring that we would not have to do anything else," Armey said. "We don't want to tie people's hands in respect to legitimate and productive artistic ventures, but we do want to stop waste, fraud and abuse, as we would anywhere in government."

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