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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)

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6-22-1989

## Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 01

Harvey Lichtenstein

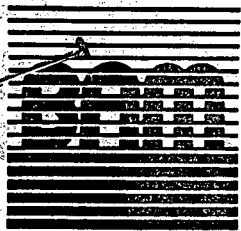
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**HARVEY LICHTENSTEIN**  
President and Executive Producer

89 JUN 26 AM 11:29

June 22, 1989

Senator Claiborne Pell  
Room 335, Senate Russell Office Building  
Constitution Avenue, between Delaware  
Avenue and 1st Street, NE  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

I am sending you a copy of a letter I have written to Senator Armstrong in response to his letter to me, a copy of which is also enclosed. I believe it clearly states my views on the Serrano issue.

I cannot stress too strongly the depth of my feeling. I am truly concerned that artistic freedom is being threatened in this country. I urge you to defend the National Endowment for the Arts, and to condemn the forces that are seeking to impose censorship on artistic expression.

Yours sincerely,



HARVEY LICHTENSTEIN

HL/EC  
Enclosures

bcc

**HARVEY LICHTENSTEIN**  
President and Executive Producer

June 22, 1989

Senator William L. Armstrong  
Colorado  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Armstrong:

As you know, the National Endowment for the Arts sometimes grants funds to other agencies, which then make the specific choices. This sub-granting procedure recognizes the fact that in some instances there are other entities which are better able to achieve the objectives of a specific program, hence the sub-granting. This is true of grants to states and regions, and other organizations with more specialized knowledge in the field. It remains a very small part of the grant process at the N.E.A., but is, I believe, an important option.

Andres Serrano was not awarded an N.E.A. grant, rather he was awarded a fellowship of \$15,000 by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston Salem, N.C., in 1987. The N.E.A. had granted the Southeastern Center \$75,000 to support its fellowship program, but the N.E.A. was not involved in the choice of the fellowship recipients.

My information is that the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art is a reputable organization; that its track record substantiated to the N.E.A. Panel and Council its worthiness to be awarded the grant for the purposes specified.

I disagree with the Senator's assessment of the N.E.A. in this instance, but I hope that the Senator can agree with me that the record of the N.E.A. is quite extraordinary in keeping favoritism and amateurism at arms length, by its use of the peer panel system. Whatever one thinks of the Serrano work, the record of the N.E.A. in awarding hundreds of thousands of grants, has been exemplary. On the basis of the N.E.A.'s sterling record of arts' support in the United States over the past years, I believe that the views expressed in your letter are unwarranted. And I would strongly support the sub-granting procedure as a useful and valuable option in some selected situations, the Serrano affair notwithstanding.

Senator William L. Armstrong  
June 22, 1989  
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What I find disturbing is the problem of censorship. When you say "Piss Christ is a travesty; it is not art," whose judgment is that? Is one allowed a different opinion? The history of civilization is full of instances of artists being castigated and indeed suffering severe calumny because of their work. Indeed, the martyrdom of scientists, philosophers, and theologians, as well as artists, fill our history books. Was not Jesus Christ villified and martyred for his beliefs, which offended officialdom at the time?

Let us be fair about it. The N.E.A.'s record of impartiality and good judgment is written large through the years of its existence. It has served American artists and arts institutions with great distinction. That is not to say that I haven't disagreed, sometimes vehemently, with the Council's decisions; nor do I think that there have not been errors in judgment. But the process has been painstakingly fair and aboveboard; no influence peddling, no skimming, and no empire building. It is about as clean and as responsive a government agency as I could imagine.

I do not believe that the Endowment has committed any error in this case. In making the grant to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, it was acting with due process and in a proper manner. I would hope that we would all be more concerned with creeping censorship and threats to artistic freedom, which are the true issues in this situation, and which are the real threats to a free society.

Most respectfully,



HARVEY LICHTENSTEIN

HL/EC

WILLIAM L. ARMSTRONG  
COLORADO

## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 31, 1989

Mr. Harvey Lichtenstein  
Member  
The National Council on the Arts  
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Mr. Lichtenstein:

It has recently come to my attention the National Endowment for the Arts supports, in the name of art, work by Mr. Andres Serrano that denigrates Christ.

I'm appalled!

As you may know, respect for religion, its beliefs, and its symbols constitutes one of the deeply held principles of our country. The search for religious freedom drove people to America and caused them to fight for a government tolerant of religion. In turn, people's faith in their country stems from the protection the government provides their freedoms. So, now, why is the government supporting the desecration of revered religious symbols?

I believe people understand the need for artistic expression, even if it might at times be perverse, when the artist is acting on his or her own. But, government sanction for as offensive an expression as Mr. Serrano's does not make sense. "Piss Christ" is a travesty; it is not art.

The Endowment's error is only compounded by its failure to admit a mistake and issue a full apology to those offended. Furthermore, it is critical to know what steps are being taken to prevent this from happening again.

I look forward to your response.

Best regards.

Sincerely,

  
William L. Armstrong

WLA/cr