

1994

Appropriations (1994-1995): Editorial 03

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Recommended Citation

"Appropriations (1994-1995): Editorial 03" (1994). *Appropriations (1994-1995)*. Paper 18.
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Sense and Nonsense About Art Funding

Artist's stunt may have been off base, but so was the congressional attack it provoked

The Tailhook scandal was a disgrace to the Navy. The drunken debauchery and sexual exhibitionism that occurred on that occasion put the participants far outside the American mainstream. But would anyone propose that because of Tailhook the Navy be disbanded?

Rep. Philip M. Crane, an Illinois Republican, recently proposed something almost that ridiculous for the National Endowment for the Arts. Because of a minor scandal at the NEA-assisted Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Crane proposed abolishing the NEA.

It seems that in a performance at the Walker, an HIV-positive artist used a razor blade to carve a pattern into the back of another (HIV-negative) artist, blotted the pattern with a towel and then dangled the blood-stained towel above the heads of the audience on a clothesline.

We have our doubts—let us say—about the artistic merit of the performance, and we reiterate our view that when federal arts money is at issue the public will always expect and want that public money to be used sensibly. Those who accept and use public money, whether museums or major arts centers or even individual artists, have to understand and accept this expectation.

But let's put the Walker incident in perspective. The artist received only about \$125 of the \$104,500 the Walker Center received from the NEA in 1993. And the Walker Center money is itself a tiny fraction of the NEA's \$171-million budget. Crane's amendment deserved the 313-113 trouncing it received on June 24. In the end the House voted 98% of the funds originally appropriated for the NEA's 1994 budget.

There was no reason, however, for

even a token reduction. The NEA chairman cannot answer for every offensive artist any more than the secretary of the Navy can answer for every drunken sailor. Crane and the relatively small number of conservatives who agree with him are free to oppose the public funding of art on principle, though their arguments have not convinced Congress, that's democracy. But they are not free to distort the record of the NEA every time its budget comes under review.

Congress should focus on what the NEA typically supports: Body-carving is no more typical of the NEA than Tailhook is typical of the Navy. Pretending otherwise, Crane in his misguided efforts has wasted far more than the \$125 the NEA spent on the object of his indignation.

No one likes to see public money wasted—not in an arts center, but also not in the halls of Congress.