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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 03

Hugh Southern

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NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
THE ARTS

WASHINGTON
D.C. 20506



A Federal agency advised by the
National Council on the Arts

NEA reply
✓

June 6, 1989

Honorable Alfonso M. D'Amato
U.S. Senate
SH-520 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator D'Amato:

I am writing in response to the May 18, 1989 letter that you and your colleagues sent to me concerning the work of Andres Serrano. I am grateful to you for bringing to my attention your serious concerns, which I share, and for giving me an opportunity to respond.

I most certainly can understand that the work in question has offended many people and appreciate the feelings of those who have protested it. I personally found it offensive. Please be assured that the Endowment would never intentionally insult or belittle the beliefs or values of any of our citizens nor would we knowingly offend anyone's religious beliefs. We take our obligation to serve the public very seriously.

As you are aware, the Endowment's fundamental purpose is to benefit the American people by supporting the arts in their varied forms. In order to assure that the government neither promotes nor suppresses particular points of view, the Endowment and its staff are forbidden by its authorizing legislation and substantial legislative history from interfering with the content of the work it supports. In virtually every instance, grant decisions are based on a panel review system which leaves judgments of artistic quality to respected professionals in the arts. With only the rarest exceptions, this system has served the arts and the public extremely well. In 1981, the Presidential Task Force on the Arts and Humanities strongly endorsed the panel review system, which leaves funding decisions largely to those outside the government, "as a means of insuring competence and integrity in grant decisions."

Every year the Endowment receives some 18,000 grant applications which are reviewed by over 600 panelists who come from all over the country and represent various types of artistic expertise. They recommend approximately 4500 grants; these in turn are reviewed by the 26 members of the presidentially appointed National Council on the Arts who advise the Chairman, and final decisions are made by the Endowment's Chairman.

Let me explain for the record how Mr. Serrano was funded. In 1987, Mr. Serrano received a fellowship from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, as a part of its "Awards in the Visual Arts Program 7" (AVA 7). The Arts Endowment, together with the Equitable and Rockefeller Foundations, has supported this program since 1981. The Endowment's 1987 decision to award a grant to the Center was based on a peer panel review of the Center's past work; the panel did not evaluate the work of the artists who eventually were selected (e.g. - Mr. Serrano) by the Center. Rather, the selection of those artists was made by a jury convened by the Center after it received the Endowment's grant.

Each year the Southeastern Center receives nominations of as many as 500 artists from a national network of approximately 100 professionals in American art. Of these nominees, ten artists are selected by a five member jury of distinguished artists and curators to receive fellowships in the amount of \$15,000. In addition, each artist's work is subsequently featured in a catalog and travelling exhibition organized by the Southeastern Center. In 1987, Mr. Serrano, along with nine other artists, was selected by the jury which judged him and other awardees on the basis of slides of past work submitted by each artist. As we have noted, Mr. Serrano's work was never reviewed by the Endowment. The decision to include the work in question in the AVA 7 catalog and exhibition was made by the Center, working with the artist. The AVA 7 exhibition appeared at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, at the Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery in Pittsburgh and at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond, where it closed on January 29, 1989.

In response to your concerns, we are discussing this issue with our National Council, and other concerned groups and individuals. Since receiving your letter, we have been in touch with our Congressional oversight committees on this matter and have agreed that together, we will review our process to ensure that Endowment processes are effective and maintain the highest artistic integrity and quality.

We hope that this instance will not be allowed to overshadow the Arts Endowment's overall record of accomplishment throughout its nearly twenty-five year history. Over the years, we have made over 80,000 grants which have supported an extraordinary variety of excellence in the arts enjoyed by millions of Americans, men women and children. For instance in your state of New York, the Endowment has recently supported the New York Philharmonic, Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Ollantay Center for the Arts, as well as substantial support for the numerous arts activities of the New York State Council on the Arts.

The Arts Endowment is proud to have assisted artists and arts organizations in New York and elsewhere who are making the arts available to people from all walks of life. Let me reiterate that the Endowment would never intentionally insult or belittle the beliefs or values of our citizens, and we deeply regret the offense that the situation in question has caused.

I am, of course, available to discuss this matter with you at your convenience. Please feel free to contact me on my direct line at 682-5414.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hugh Southern", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hugh Southern
Acting Chairman

*photo hanging at
Smithsonian now....*

Heaven and Hell, 1984

Cibachrome print

40 x 60 in.

Stux Gallery, New York

ANDRES SERRANO

