

1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 04

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Address August 28, 1989-June 30, 1990
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Senator Jesse Helms
Senator Alfonse D'Amato
U. S. Senate
Washington D C 20510

Dear Senator Helms and Senator D'Amato:

I am a Member of the National Council on the Arts, the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Arts, by appointment, 1984-1990, of President Reagan; I served from 1978-1984 on the National Council on the Humanities, by appointment of President Carter. I am the only person ever to serve on the Councils of both Endowments. I am writing in response to your statements in the Congressional Record on May 18, 1989, which were sent to the Council Members by the NEA. My purpose is to express complete agreement with the statements you made there and to identify myself with your position. Our most recent Council meeting was the second weekend in May, which is to say, May 12-13. The subject of this scandalous project was not raised for discussion. If it had been raised, I would have introduced a resolution expressing pretty much the same attitudes as you two expressed in the Senate just now.

I don't know the right mechanism that will insure that all the grants we make are artistically excellent; we are going to make mistakes in an imperfect world. I do know that we should impose on our regrant agencies (as was the case in the present grant) the rule that no Federal funds are to be used to support art that violates the canons of public decency, including, after all, respect for the religions of diverse groups of Americans. Not funding religions surely should mean also not funding attacks on religions.

My impression is that we have yet another disaster on our hands in an exhibition at the Corcoran. That is not a regrant but a direct NEA grant, and that means we on the Council are responsible. What I am trying to find out is how the project was represented to the Council, meaning, how in the world did I personally commit such a stupid mistake as to vote for, or not oppose, a project of this character. Since we see only the staff recommendations and descriptions of projects, my guess is that it was not described in a way that would have portrayed the actual character of the exhibition. If that is the case, then we have an instance in which the staff did not serve the Council well and so did not allow the Council to give informed advice to the Chairman. Here the system we have clearly is at fault.

At any rate I wish the Endowment leadership would simply say, as NEH did some years back through both Chairman Bennett and later on Chairman Cheney, "We goofed and we're sorry. Because we *did* goof, and I for one am sorry and also, I personally am enormously chagrined. I did write to The American Family Association in Tupelo Mississippi 38803, which raised the question originally, and got back a very civil and constructive reply with which I could easily identify. I plan at the August, 1989, Council meeting to carry forward your request that the Endowment "comprehensively review its procedures and determine what steps will be taken to prevent such abuses from recurring in the future." I hope you will make clear to your colleagues, who joined you in writing to Mr. Southern, that Council Members are on their side. This much we can contribute to strengthen the arts in the proper way.

Kind regards.

cc: Hugh Southern

