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NYT 6/21/89

Proposal Made to Limit Arts Endowment Grants

By BARBARA GAMAREKIAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 20 — The chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees arts appropriations offered an amendment today that was intended to insure that Federal grants do not finance what some members of Congress consider to be unsuitable works of art.

The amendment offered by the chairman, Representative Sidney R. Yates, Democrat of Illinois, stipulated that no grants made by the National Endowment for the Arts be subcontracted.

The proposal was voted unanimously in a budget session of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior and Related Agencies. The language of the legislation is to be worked out by the full committee.

The Offending Photo

The amendment is an attempt to address the case of a controversial work, a photograph by Andres Serrano of a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine, that was indirectly financed by the endowment's Awards in Visual Arts Program.

In 1987 the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C., received an endowment grant of \$75,000. In turn, Mr. Serrano was awarded a fellowship of \$15,000 from the center. In floor statements and in petitions to the endowment, a number of legislators have expressed concern and even outrage about the endowment's financing of such works.

Representative Ralph Regula of Ohio, the subcommittee's ranking Republican, congratulated Mr. Yates, saying: "I want to commend you for addressing that question. It will alleviate some of the concerns of members of Congress for it puts the responsibility where it belongs."

"Since we are dealing with an amendment that we have not seen, we can only surmise how it will affect our grant-making process," said Joseph Slye, the director of public affairs for the endowment. "From what we hear the intention of the amendment might be, we think about 200 of our grants, totaling \$13 million, might be affected out of the 4,500 grants we make. If the amendment includes our grants to the states, we would be talking about much more. Twenty percent of our money goes to the states."

Some of the Affected Programs

Some of the programs affected, he said, would be the arts in education program and such programs as the Rural Arts Initiative, Folk Art and Meet the Composer program.

"I don't know quite what to say, because I am not sure what this solution is meant to do," said the executive director of the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Ted Potter. "Is it meant to appease some political elements that might want to put more serious strings on the endowment and how it supports artists? We all know there is a lot of pressure right now."

"The ramifications of this will affect quite a few grantees," he added. "For example, the endowment has a regional grant program where they work with state agencies in supporting regional artists."

In a brief interview after the budget session, Representative Yates elaborated on the intention of his amendment.

Some legislators are concerned about financing of art.

"What I have done in this bill is to require that the endowment itself be in charge of all of its grants," he said, "that it cannot sub-grant, cannot retain organizations for the purpose of sub-granting, providing a large sum of money to these organizations and giving them the power to make grants."

"We are seeking to end that sub-granting process and the endowment itself becomes responsible for all grants that are made. Under this process there would be no such thing as sub-grants." Mr. Yates added that the amendment would not prevent grants to state or regional arts councils.

Asked if the legislation would also apply to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Congressman replied: "It does not. I think perhaps I was remiss in not having it apply to the Humanities, but I may offer it in full committee because I think the Humanities, too, should be responsible for all grants."

It is his hope, Mr. Yates said, that the amendment will spare the endowment from any dispute over its budget when it comes to a floor vote. "I would hope so," he said, "for it places responsibility directly on N.E.A., which had that with respect to grants of its own before, but now has it for all grants."