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6-13-1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 05

Bob Carr

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Carr, Bob, "Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 05" (1989). *Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)*. Paper 1.

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Congress of the United States
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Washington, D.C. 20515

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Rhoda Glickman
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Legislative Counsel

June 13, 1989

Dear Arts Caucus Colleague:

Some of you may have heard recently from your constituents about an artwork by Andrea Serrano which many of them find offensive. The artist allegedly received grant money from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for creating this controversial piece.

Enclosed is a fact sheet explaining the problem and the course of action by the NEA.

I hope this information is useful to you. If you need further information, please call Rose DiNapoli, Congressional Liaison at the NEA, at 682-5434.

Sincerely,

BOB CARR
Member of Congress

Enclosure

FACT SHEET

PROBLEM: Complaints about federal spending on artwork by Andrea Serrano entitled "Piss Christ" deemed to be offensive by some.

BACKGROUND: In 1987, Mr. Serrano received a fellowship from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, as 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. 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.

ACTION TAKEN: In response to the concerns of the Congress and the public, the NEA is discussing this issue with its National Council, and other concerned groups and individuals. The NEA has been in touch with its Congressional oversight committees on this matter and has agreed that together, they will review the process to ensure that Endowment processes are effective and maintain the highest artistic integrity and quality.