

1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 05

Lloyd Richards

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Richards, Lloyd, "Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 05" (1989). *Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989)*. Paper 5.

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89 JUL 18 AM 11:07

July 12, 1989

Lloyd Richards
O'Neill Theater Center
305 Great Neck Road
Waterford, CT 06385

Senator William L. Armstrong
Colorado
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Senator Armstrong:

Please forgive my not having responded to your letter of May 31, 1989 before this but I have been away from my office and at times out of the country and although I have received your letter the opportunity to thoughtfully respond has eluded me.

I have not seen the art in question so I am unable to say either that I personally agree or don't with your assesment of the work, but I can relate to the degree of pain that you seem to have suffered, I know a great deal about that and I can and do empathize. I'm sorry.

I can, however, comment on the principles that are involved in your letter and will without being unnecessarily verbose.

I, like you, and like many, many others in this country have been or have felt abused as a consequence of the strict upholding of the rights of the first amendment and each time I would like to have deprived the offender of those rights or in some way directly or indirectly to punish him for his utterances. But each time I have been relieved and gratified that I have either thought better or been denied my impulse. The act to deprive or punish would have been an act against myself because it would also have limited my freedom to respond or to express.

The impulse to get back, to punish, to exact our "pound of flesh" is so organic that it is hard to deny or resist. How wise of our forefathers to make it so difficult for us to erode that basic right. How wise of the framers of the Arts legislation twenty some years ago to confront the possibility of governmental control of the arts, the most feared prospect at the time of the Endowment's creation, and take arts judgment out of the hands of government and place evaluation in the hands of peer panels.

I hope that in our personal pain we do not move to undo the wisdom of those wise and perceptive men.

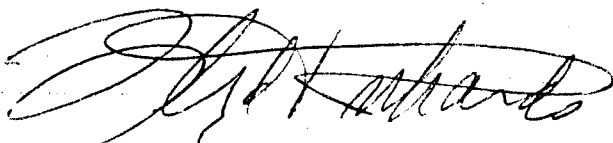
A work of art is a thought, an idea, a series of thoughts, often deep and hidden ones expressed through a form. We, each of us, through our own form have the same right of expression or response, regardless of whether that response is measured or outlandish. We, however, have no right to deprive or punish.

Our nation has broad shoulders and wide arms and historically has supported and sustained from many areas strong villification and only become stronger.

The National Endowment for the Arts has not supported work that "denigrates Christ". It has supported an Arts organization that selected to display the work of a artist one of whose works was interpreted, correctly or incorrectly, by one politically active organization to "denigrate Christ". Others have joined them in their assesment. Their position and their expressions are perfectly valid for them and must also be endured.

I do think, however, that to in effect substitute the artistic judgment of peer panels with the artistic judgment of the council is to open up a Pandora's box that has unforeseen possibilities. One would hope that in our zeal to be "accountable" we found wise definitions for "accountability" and formulas that did not lead to the obvious extremes that one vote or even a 51 percent negative vote would render an artwork unworthy. We would then truly be in the position of one country referred to by one of their famous artists in the following manner: "A good writer is as a second government in his own country. And that is why no great writer is supported by his own government--only mediocre ones."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Lloyd Richards', written in dark ink on a light background.

Lloyd Richards

cc: Senator Claiborne Pell
Benno Schmidt
Hugh Southern
Representative Sidney Yates