

1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 06

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Senator Claiborne Pell
U S Senate
Washington D C

Dear Claiborne,

I am in the position of a prophet who sees his prophecies fulfilled — but never wanted to. My two principal concerns at the NEA have been [1] private meetings for the discussion of public policy, which I have refused to attend for nearly five years now; and [2] poor Council scrutiny of individual grants. Both are matters I have pressed, patiently, every meeting, meeting in, meeting out. Now I find I was right.

1. The "Piss-Christ" (forgive me for the language) exhibit has become a public scandal. The last Council meeting, May 12-13, did not discuss this scandal in public. I knew it was discussed in private, though I was not present, and I had planned to ask for a public statement and discussion of it. But we began Friday morning with the commemoration of the 100th meeting of the Council, and there was no occasion on which I could raise the issue and ask for people to address it. As a result, the Council has no public position on the subject and has not given the Chairman and the public the benefit of a thoughtful discussion of what has happened. I personally would have introduced a motion to say, "we goofed and we're sorry." There surely would have been other positions taken by reasonable people. But the discussion had been held in private.

2. The Mapplethorpe issue: Here I was puzzled as to how we could have voted for such an exhibit without discussing the pros and cons of it, and I remembered no exhibition of the description that would seem to have been called for. I asked the senior staff to give me a copy of the page of the Council book that we had in hand, and I enclose a copy. I no longer feel like such a dummy for voting for such an exhibitionist exhibition, since I see no language in the marked passage that would suggest in any way what we were voted for (or against).

I have already made concrete suggestions for the reauthorization process on both issues — no more private Council meetings, much more Council scrutiny of the process and of the actual grant recommendations. It's what a Council Member can do. At any rate, I can now say, I surely was not talking about nothing.

These are not issue of right vs left or of the cultured vs the barbarians. These are issues of the intelligent use of public funds, the public discussion of public policy, the use of the Council for the purposes for which the Congress created the Council.

I still feel I didn't do a good job in either matter; I should have been more attentive and alert than I was, and more aggressive than I was, on Mapplethorpe and "Piss Christ" (forgive me) respectively. But surely we can improve the rules and the process.

Sincerely,

