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READERS' FORUM

No one ever asked the Arts Council

The Corcoran Gallery of Art's cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe's show on grounds of political pressure involving the National Endowment for the Humanities puts on center stage the politics of culture. Two questions require attention.

First, once a gallery has made a commitment to the artist, can it renege on grounds of pressure? No, the decision of the Corcoran's board was pusillanimous, and its public explanation utterly disingenuous.

Second, was the Arts Endowment support for the project well-conceived? No. As a matter of fact the National Council on the Arts never discussed either the North Carolina exhibit, which was a regrant, or the Mapplethorpe one, which the staff slipped by us by concealing its controversial aspect. So we never got to debate the issues.

I would have voted against both, simply because, whatever their artistic merits, wisdom suggests that there are far more important projects in the arts, in support of which a solid consensus can be formed. Projects deeply offensive to principal parties to that consensus, as the North Carolina exhibit, "Piss Christ," and the Mapplethorpe one, erode that consensus. If, after all, public funds cannot support any religion, then how can one justify spending tax dollars for blaspheming Christianity?

The National Endowment for the Arts and for the Humanities both are advised by councils meant to serve as a balance to the necessary work of the staff, on the one side, and the panelists and reviewers, on the other. Right now the Arts Council is not used in the way in which Congress intended it to serve. Most of the council's time goes into serving as an admiring audience for artists' and staffs' exercises in show-and-tell. Interminable presentations of this, that, and the other artist and his or her work take the place of serious discussion of public policy, which takes place around the fringes or in back rooms.

When we met in May, for example, with the "Piss Christ" controversy already glowing, not one minute of council time was spent on the matter. The first hour of the first day was devoted to vacuous speeches celebrating the 100th meeting of — the National Council on the Arts itself! The upshot is that we engaged in a rite of self-celebration. And the blaspheming of Christianity in an endowment-supported project merited not a single word.

Ours is a system of checks and balances, aimed at governing through broad consensus. Clearly, the current controversy alerts us to problems in the system, for the Arts Council should have discussed the issues and advised the chairman in an informed way. The season of re-



"Self-Portrait, 1980"
Robert Mapplethorpe

authorization of the endowments has come again, as it does every five years. In the revised legislation for the Endowment for the Arts there should be these provisions:

- The council must hold all discussions of public policy in public; no more closed meetings.
- The council's recommendations to the chairman, if adopted by a two-thirds vote, may not be rejected by the chairman.
- The council must supervise the panel process and undertake ongoing scrutiny of the panels, instead of serving mostly as a rubber stamp to whatever the staff tells the council that the panels recommend.
- Council members who never come to meetings must be replaced by people who want to do the work.
- The two endowments may not support projects that defame any national, ethnic, racial or religious group.

These are some of many suggestions to strengthen the Arts Council as a public body formed to nurture consensus, and to secure a long future for the National Endowment for the Arts as the one federal agency created to serve the public interest in the arts.

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Senator ✓
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