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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 07

Claiborne Pell

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Ms. Janice O'Donnell  
Director  
The Children's Museum  
of Rhode Island  
58 Walcott Street  
Pawtucket, RI 02860  

Dear Ms. O'Donnell:  

Thank you very much for writing me with your thoughtful comments about the current controversy facing the National Endowment for the Arts.  

I recently drafted the enclosed statement for the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD which addresses some of the broader issues involved in this debate. I thought you would be interested in having a copy.  

When the Congress returns in September a House/Senate conference must resolve the differences between the two versions of the Arts Endowment's FY 1990 appropriations bill. I am hopeful that the Helms amendment and the ban on funding for two arts organizations will be dropped then in favor of the House position. I have indicated my thoughts on these provisions to the conference chairman, Senator Byrd.  

With warm regards,  

Ever sincerely,

Claiborne Pell  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Education,  
Arts & Humanities
Thank you for your postcard about the recognition given artist Andres Serrano by the Awards in the Visual Arts Program.

You and I have the same view of this so called work of art. I find Mr. Serrano's work entitled "Piss Christ" to be vulgar, repulsive, and grossly offensive.

After hearing from you I checked with the National Endowment for the Arts to learn exactly how this federal agency was involved in the support of Mr. Serrano's work. I would like to share with you what I have learned.

The National Endowment for the Arts was one of three sponsors of the Awards in the Visual Arts Program, providing a total grant of $700,000 towards the costs of the program. The other two sponsors, the Rockefeller and Equitable Foundations, are both highly respected private foundations.

The National Endowment made the grant to the Program before any of the artists or any of their works were selected for participation in the program. Thus, no federal government employee or official played any part in selecting Mr. Serrano or his works for recognition.
Indeed, the Endowment is forbidden by law from interfering in the artistic choices made by recipients of its grant money. While this "hands-off" policy runs the risk of occasional selection of highly controversial artists or works of art, it avoids the danger of government officials, politicians or bureaucrats choosing our art for us.

In this case, ten artists including Mr. Serrano were selected for recognition this year by a jury of five artists and curators selected by the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art, a nationally known art center in Winston Salem, North Carolina, which has administered the Awards Program since it was established nine years ago.

As I said, I think the jury did an awful, offensive job. However, I am glad that the federal government involvement in this matter has been minimal.

Warm regards,

Ever sincerely,