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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 07

Claiborne Pell

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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND
HUMAN RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

August 18, 1989

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

DRAFT REPLY
w/CHANGES

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 \$70,000~~ ^{75,000} ~~towards the costs of the program. The other two~~ ^{along with} ~~sponsors,~~ ^{which} 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 ^{is} ~~did an awful, offensive job.~~ *selection was insulting and offensive.*
However, I am glad, ^{at least,} that the Federal government ~~involvement in this~~ *had absolutely*
~~matter has been minimal.~~

*no role in selecting
this offensive photograph.
outrageously*

Warm regards,

Ever sincerely,