

University of Rhode Island

DigitalCommons@URI

---

Obscenity: News Articles (1989)

Education: National Endowment for the Arts  
and Humanities, Subject Files II (1962-1996)

---

7-31-1989

## Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Editorial 09

Jonathan Yardley

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell\\_neh\\_II\\_58](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58)

---

### Recommended Citation

Yardley, Jonathan, "Obscenity: News Articles (1989): Editorial 09" (1989). *Obscenity: News Articles (1989)*. Paper 39.

[https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell\\_neh\\_II\\_58/39](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58/39)[https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell\\_neh\\_II\\_58/39](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58/39)

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files II (1962-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Obscenity: News Articles (1989) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

JONATHAN YARDLEY

## Helms and the Art of Pragmatism

**T**hose members of the Senate who had the misfortune to be on the floor of that chamber last Wednesday may have had little choice in the matter, but they certainly allowed Jesse Helms to make fools of them. The Republican from North Carolina, as wily and contemptible a character as one could hope to meet in public life, came in from the blue with just the kind of legislation that politicians dread: a bill they can scarcely afford to vote against, yet one that makes them look foolish, and even philistine, for supporting it.

This was, of course, the by-now-notorious amendment to a \$10.9 billion appropriations bill the beneficiaries of which include the National Endowment for the Arts. The Helms amendment, it will be recalled, prohibits NEA support for "obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion; or material which denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group, or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin."

Naturally, the amendment passed by voice vote. What politician, presented with a thumbs-up-or-down decision and no time to contemplate its subtler ramifications, could be expected to vote against it? Like a quarterback deploying his receivers in every area of the secondary, Helms had all his ground covered: Not merely did his amendment force his fellow senators to vote against obscenity and indecency, but it also put them foursquare against child exploitation, blasphemy and—this coming from a senator who has reaped political hay from the Negrophobia with which many in North Carolina (and, for that matter, other states as well) are still afflicted—racial prejudice.

By the senators' own testimony, Helms left them no choice. Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio, who usually can be counted on to mouth the day's liberal pieties, rose "to indicate my concern" about "the United States Congress deciding what is or isn't art," but then confessed: "I'm not going to oppose it because it's hard to oppose an amendment of this kind because it sounds so right." Thus was another fly caught in Jesse's spider web.

So the amendment passed, in

the heat of the moment. No doubt once the temperature goes down and House and Senate meet to iron out the differences between their bills—the House version is far less punitive than the Senate's—something approximating a reasonable compromise can be reached. Within hours of the amendment's approval, people were beginning to realize that it is open to interpretations so broad as to forbid NEA funding for just about anything; by the time the arts lobby and its friends on the Hill have finished explicating all the amendment's self-evident weaknesses, Congress is likely to approve a bill that the NEA and its constituency can live with.

But that will not be the end of the matter. The Helms amendment, shabby though it certainly is, has supporters not merely because it endorses motherhood and apple pie; it also appeals to a legitimate concern about the kinds of art that public funds are allocated to underwrite, and the way that allocation is undertaken. There is a widespread sense, by no means restricted to irresponsible or demagogic politicians, that the arts community wants it both ways—generous public support for the arts, but no public voice in how this support is used—and that this is patently unacceptable.

In responding to this public sentiment, the arts community has been both arrogant and naive. The sense of entitlement among artists and museum directors is, when you get right down to it, astonishing. The director of the Brooklyn Museum told the *New York Times*, evidently with a straight face, "A hands-off posture for the endowment is vital," which is to say: Give us taxpayers' money via the NEA, but keep their dirty hands off our spending policies. If a defense contractor demanded carte blanche over its expenditure of federal funds, the public outcry would be ear-splitting, and no one would howl louder than the limousine liberals in the art galleries; yet those same people actually expect taxpayers to nod approvingly while tax dollars go to projects approved by no one except artists and their janizaries.

Ah yes, the arts community says in response to public objections, but the public interest is protected by "peer review." NEA grant applications must be approved by panels of "experts" in their artistic fields—the same is true at NEA's twin, the National Endowment for the Humanities—who, we are to believe, represent the broad

public interest. Nothing could be further from the truth. People who know the workings of the NEA and NEH say that the single most formidable obstacle to responsible allocation of grants is peer review. Rather than represent the public's interests, too many of these panels represent those of their own artistic and scholarly cliques; they dole out money to allies and proteges, feather their own nests and keep it all in the family.

This most certainly is not what Congress had in mind when it stipulated peer review; presumably it expected that expert opinion could separate the deserving from the undeserving, not that it would be used to circle the wagons around the arts and humanities establishments. But that is precisely what has happened, and the system is now so thoroughly entrenched that prospects of reforming it seem dim at best; Congress can huff and puff as much as it likes about the "obscene" art of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, but the machinery is firmly in place to produce more such controversies in the future.

The truth is that much though it bleats about the Helms amendment, the arts community has had things pretty much to its own liking, if not the public's, at NEA. This surely has contributed to the arrogance with which it greets any and every suggestion that the public should have a voice in how the public's money is spent; it's been slopping at the trough long enough to have developed a habit, and it's not about to let anyone else tell it what, or how much, it should eat.

This arrogance is compounded by the naivete with which the arts community enters the political arena. It seems genuinely to believe that its affairs are "above" politics—that because it deals in what it likes to believe are the exalted precincts of art, it is unaccountable to anyone except itself for its actions. The hard truth, though, is that anyone who deals with politicians does so on their terms: He that lies with the dogs riseth with fleas. Accountability is the sine qua non of politics, and none can escape it: the representative accountable to his constituents, the appointee accountable to his patron, the grant recipient accountable to his donor. It is a rule to which there are no exceptions, as any defeated politician will tell you, and the sooner the arts community accepts it, the sooner it will be able to cope with reality. But of course, reality may be as alien to it as accountability.