

1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 09

Ted Potter

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SOUTHEASTERN CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (SECCA)
AWARDS IN THE VISUAL ARTS (AVA)
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FAX COVER SHEET

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NAME: Senator Chiborne Pell DATE: 6/26/89
COMPANY: US Senate FAX NO.: 202-224-4680
ADDRESS: _____ TEL. NO: _____

(including cover sheet)

FROM: Ted Pottier

SECCA/AVA

FAX NO.: 919-722-6059

WINSTON-SALEM, NC 27106

TEL. NO: 919-725-1904

SUBJECT: See Attached

Ed. Sub.

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June 26, 1989

Representative Sidney Yates
U.S. Congress
Washington, DC

Dear Congressman Yates:

I write to you as a long standing admirer of your leadership on behalf of the National Endowment for the arts.

With your permission, I would like to comment on your proposed amendment to NEA granting procedures. First, the existence of the amendment itself suggests that you sincerely feel that this is the best way to diffuse the current controversy over Endowment grants. I also understand that, without an amendment of some type, the NEA would face a stern test during it's upcoming appropriations hearing.

However, I am also extremely concerned about the ramifications of your proposed amendment as it was outlined in the Washington Post last week. As now designed, the amendment would deny critical funding for 200 to 300 significant programs that are currently nurtured through Endowment support. These programs touch every state, enriching us immeasurably.

All this, we are to understand, because of one photograph taken out of context, exploited and willfully misinterpreted. By not allowing the Endowment to subgrant to visual arts institutions, artists and programs that the NEA could not possibly assist by itself will now suffer.

Apart from the issue of subgrants, comments of late by the NEA acting chairman give me considerable cause for alarm as well. His assurances that future peer panels will be advised to award grants to artists or exhibitions that meet certain "acceptable" standards of content (standards acceptable to congress and taxpayers) may irreversibly harm the Endowment's standing within the field.

The issue here, with both the subgrants and peer panel control, seems to be the Endowment's accountability. Indeed, accountability has been a major concern at the Endowment since its inception. That's why a system of peer panel grant overviews was developed and implemented. Because the most respected members of our arts community serve on these panels, their recommendations have given the Endowment a legitimacy and prestige which few government agencies enjoy. This, it seems to me, is accountability at its best.

And it's an accountability that will now be seriously compromised if peer panels are made to conform to predetermined government standards instead of the high artistic standards that the Endowment has set. Endowment grants awarded under government accountability rather than peer accountability would become a sad joke, creating a chilling effect on the entire national arts community. Better no Endowment at all than one gutted of its artistic integrity.

Rep. Sidney Yates
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If it is deemed by you and the leadership of the NEA that it's fruitless to confront the accusations of the the opposition--and that a pound of flesh must be extracted--then SECCA alone should be the institution from which subgrants are withheld. Not the 200 to 300 worthy programs that have offended no one.

Restraints, control and legislative censorship of the NEA should be avoided at all cost. The Endowment should be defending its very legitimacy with all the strength it can engender.

Sincerely,



Ted Potter
Executive Director
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
The Awards in the Visual Arts

P.S. Please refer to the enclosed statement on Andres Serrano

Andres Serrano

In a June 23 interview on the NBC television affiliate in Winston-Salem, NC, Andres Serrano stated (as he has on numerous occasions): "It ("Piss Christ") is not meant to be an attack on Christ. It is questioning organized religion and the commercialization of Christ."

The issue Andres Serrano is addressing in "Piss Christ" has saddened and concerned people of conscience down through history. Abuse, exploitation and profiteering of sacred imagery was one of the main tenants of the Protestant Reformation. And no credible religious historian would deny that such debasement still exists (even thrives) in contemporary society.

Serrano, in the long tradition of art that confronts and protests social conditions, attempts to raise our level of awareness by making the problem visible. Serrano's "Piss Christ" is saying, LOOK at what we have allowed to happen; SEE what we continue to do.

Andres Serrano is an outstanding artist and a reasonable young man. It is an honor to know him and to count him among the 80 exceptional American artists who have received the Awards in the Visual Arts fellowships over the program's last eight years.

Ted Potter
Executive Director
The Awards in the Visual Arts