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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 10

George Weissman

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August 2, 1989

Honorable Claiborne Pell
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

As Chairman of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. I am very concerned about the action taken by the Senate. Senator Helms' amendment to the \$10.9 billion Interior Department appropriation bill chokes the National Endowment for the Arts with language which will have profound negative affects on the cultural life in this country, and pierces to the core of our fundamental First Amendment protection of free speech.

Many of our most cherished works of art in the visual and performing arts are provocative and received harsh criticism upon their unveiling, years and even centuries ago. But history is the best critic and works that withstand the test of time and vagaries of popular opinion will persevere. Given the language of Mr. Helms' amendment it is doubtful if many operas and works for the theater would be allowed. Are "Rigoletto," "Don Giovanni," or "Il Trovatore" never to be performed because of their "shocking" plots? I doubt that even Mr. Helms would dare to question the genius of Mozart and Verdi or their contribution to the quality of national life.

Much of art is beautiful, but art is also metaphor and provides a personal reflection on society's current belief patterns or actions, many of those provocative and graphic. These shocks to "sensibilities" are no less important to our national conscience than are the "blue sky" works of which Mr. Helms approves. The problems are many in this country. Our nation's artists have repeatedly proven that at their best that they serve as a touchstone for our feelings about problems long before anyone seems able to articulate verbally or in print the nature of that problem.

Do not silence this valuable societal weather vane. It is our early warning system for the problems, conflicts and concerns of a multi-cultural nation struggling to make a place for many viewpoints and sensibilities.

History and even events today prove that totalitarian governments will exert control over free expression of dissent, beginning with its artists and writers. We, as a nation united, must resist all attempts to compromise our constitutional rights of free expression. They have served us well and are the envy of many nations who just now are attempting to move their ideologies closer to the American ideal.

Senator Pell
August 2, 1989


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History and even events today prove that totalitarian governments will exert control over free expression of dissent, beginning with its artists and writers. We, as a nation united, must resist all attempts to compromise our constitutional rights of free expression. They have served us well and are the envy of many nations who just now are attempting to move their ideologies closer to the American ideal.

On behalf of the eleven constituent companies who make their homes here at Lincoln Center, please protect the National Endowment for the Arts funding and stand with us for the rights of artists and all Americans to express themselves freely and openly through the medium of their choice.

Any attempt to discourage unpopular artistic expression by punitive action on the NEA is a radical revision of our basic Bill of Rights. It will surely backfire and create further distance between our country's talented artists and the people.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "George Weissman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

George Weissman