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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 10

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June 26, 1989

ROBERT F. LONGLEY

Senator Claiborne Pell
Room 335, Senate Russell Office Building
Constitution Avenue, between Delaware Avenue
and 1st Street NE
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

I am writing about the outpouring of criticism of the National Endowment for the Arts for its support of recent exhibits at the Corcoran and at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, and to support the idea of free expression in our society.

I, too, am repelled by the works which have caused this criticism. I find in them little redeeming value. But I think few of us are competent to judge what is and what is not art, and more importantly, I do not think I am able in this society to tell artists what they may and may not paint, sculpt, write, or perform.

Such control can only hurt free expression in a society which defines itself by the nature of its freedoms. As soon as we try to limit what people may see or hear -- particularly through government intervention -- we begin the slide toward censorship, thought control, and the ultimate elimination of those freedoms we hold most important.

We all see societies in which such expression has been muted through punishment, law, repression, and other enforced restraints on artists' license. It never works. The death threat against Salman Rushdie is only the latest and most repulsive example. Book burning, exile, and police control of performances are too well documented and too frequent to be taken as isolated and unimportant incidents.

Clearly, we are a long way from such repression. But every step we take to limit artistic expression is a step closer to limiting our freedoms in an unacceptable way. It does not become our elected representatives to cast themselves as censors and to threaten members of this society who are behaving in a legal and legitimate manner, no matter how offensive their actions may be viewed by some of us.

23 Wall Street, New York, New York 10015

I hope you will speak out for such freedom however repugnant a particular work of art may be. I do not want my elected representatives telling me what I may or may not see or hear. I can make that decision myself. I do want my government to show its respect and support for freedom in every legitimate way.

The NEA has a good process for making its awards. Perhaps it can be improved. And certainly the NEA should be held accountable for its use of public funds. But it must be allowed the freedom of wisdom and judgment to support artists whom the process has adjudged to be worthy of such support. The spectre of decision-making under the watchful eye of the censor is chilling indeed.

This is a time for more, not less, support of the NEA, and your record as a statesman can only be enhanced by such support. I hope you will give it.

With kind regards,

Sincerely,