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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 13

Claiborne Pell

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July 10, 1989

Right Reverend John S. Higgins
62 Benefit Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02904

Dear Reverend Higgins:

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 met with the Acting Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts to discuss this very troubling situation with him. As an agency of the federal government, the Arts Endowment simply does not have the license to spend taxpayers' dollars in such an irresponsible manner.

I learned that the National Endowment for the Arts was one of three sponsors of the Awards in the Visual Arts Program, along with the Rockefeller and Equitable Foundations, which are both highly respected private foundations.

As the Acting Chairman told me, the 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.

In this case, ten artists including Mr. Serrano were selected for recognition by a jury of five artists and curators selected by the Southeastern 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.

Nevertheless, I regard the jury's selection as insulting and offensive. I am glad, at least, that the Federal government had no role in selecting this outrageously offensive photograph.

Page Two

To help insure that a similar incident does not occur in the future, I have followed up with a letter to the Acting Chairman requesting a full report on Endowment review procedures. I have asked that every effort be made to correct the flaw in the review process that permitted this situation to happen.

With deepest regard and respect, I am

Ever sincerely,

Claiborne Pell
Chairman
Subcommittee on Education,
Arts and Humanities