

University of Rhode Island

DigitalCommons@URI

Obscenity: News Articles (1989)

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

8-7-1989

Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 14

Elizabeth Kastor

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58

Recommended Citation

Kastor, Elizabeth, "Obscenity: News Articles (1989): News Article 14" (1989). *Obscenity: News Articles (1989)*. Paper 32.

https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_58/32

This News Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Obscenity: News Articles (1989) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

Cautious Response by Arts Council

Resolution Does Not Address NEA Bans

By Elizabeth Kastor
Washington Post Staff Writer

Fearing that a rhetorical clash with congressional critics might weaken their influence, the 20 presidentially appointed artists and arts supporters who advise the National Endowment for the Arts responded over the weekend to the agency's current crisis by avoiding an assault on Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and others.

Instead, the National Council on the Arts issued a painstakingly crafted statement in support of the NEA's goals and history that made no specific mention of sanctions against the NEA now working their way through Congress.

"You are going to get nowhere by being confrontational," council member Bob Johnson, a Florida state senator, told his colleagues Saturday. "If you think you're going to get into a street fight and win, I have to tell you you're not. Any adversarial point you take, you can say, 'Gee, I went home and I had guts,' but I guarantee you, you're not going to win."

During lengthy discussions, most council members condemned congressional attempts to limit NEA support of controversial art, in particular a five-year ban on NEA grants for two groups that supported work by artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano and an amendment by Helms that would prevent the NEA from funding "indecent" art.

But when it came to giving NEA

See NEA, B2, Col. 1

NEA Response to Helms

NEA, From B1

supporters on the Hill what several council members called "a weapon" for the continuing fight, the council chose to write a four-page resolution that recalled congressional intentions when it created the NEA in 1965, but did not discuss the current controversies.

The council statement read: "From [the NEA's] inception, the Congress of the United States sought to protect the freedom of artistic expression as an essential condition for the artist and found that 'in proportion as freedom is diminished so is the prospect of artistic achievement.' . . .

"The National Council on the Arts recognizes its obligation to serve the public in a responsible manner," the statement continued, but ". . . the National Council on the Arts nonetheless respectfully conveys to the Congress its deep concern with any contemplated alteration in the landmark objectives of artistic quality coupled with artistic freedom so eloquently set

forth in the pioneering legislation of 1965."

"We're saying we're not arrogant, self-serving twerps who know it all," council member Roy Goodman, a New York state senator and longtime arts patron, said after the resolution was passed. Goodman and Johnson, the two politicians in the group, led the movement for a restrained response. "We're saying we're public servants and we're trying to balance freedom of artistic expression with accountability."

At least one member of the council disagreed with the cautious approach. Brooklyn Academy of Music President Harvey Lichtenstein called for the council to condemn the five-year bans, the Helms amendment and the Senate's diversion of \$400,000 from the NEA visual arts program (which funded the group that in turn funded Serrano) to two other NEA programs, a move that NEA officials saw as punitive.

"I think it's cowardly" not to comment on those actions, said Lichten-

stein, who introduced a motion to write an additional statement. "I think it's a retreat from our position."

But in the end the council decided not even to vote on Lichtenstein's motion, thus avoiding a situation in which members who shared Lichtenstein's distress might have been forced to vote against him for tactical reasons.

Much of the impetus for the resolution came in response to a statement on Friday by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), a longtime arts supporter and chairman of the Senate subcommittee that will consider the NEA's reauthorization legislation next year. Pell called for a "careful" review of NEA procedures rather than "hastily" adopting the Helms amendment, and said he hoped the council would "reaffirm the Endowment's congressional mandate to support artistic excellence," which is essentially what the council did.

Until now, most council members had not taken a public role in the furor. The council meets four times a year to review NEA policy and recommend final approval or disapproval of grants made by the agency's staff. Often, the meetings are largely occu-

pied with revising the language governing NEA programs, and with extensive debates over the definition of words like "innovative" or "community." Such discussions can end up in what NEA acting chairman Hugh Southern this weekend called "deep semantic minestrone." Because the council is only an advisory board—and can be overruled by the chairman—there is occasional tension over whether the members serve merely as a rubber stamp, as several suggested over the weekend.

In contrast to what have been years of quiet, sparsely attended meetings, the weekend's event came complete with television crews and a table full of reporters. Council members punctuated their opinions with expressions of concern over potential media coverage. Several referred to the kind of headlines they would like to see—and the politically charged sort they would like to avoid seeing—after the meeting, and there was a general concern with how the NEA is perceived by the public and the Hill.

Council member Jacob Neusner, a Brown University religion professor, warned that by invoking the word

"censorship" in the current debate, the agency and the arts community risks giving the impression to the public that "we will tell you what the art is and you put up the money and we will not respect the fact that we are a government agency and part of the political process. It is very easy to beat up on Senator Helms . . . but what his message is—as I read it—is you are part of the political process and if the endowment is identified in the public mind as indifferent to the sentiments of large parts of the public, in five or 10 years there won't be an endowment."

The council also had a lengthy debate over whether the panels of artists who select grant recipients should hold open meetings, as many state arts organizations do.

The panels that chose to support the Mapplethorpe show—and the organization that then funded Serrano—made their decisions behind closed doors, and some arts supporters have suggested that open meetings might counteract the impression that NEA panels have made irresponsible choices.

Several council members said they thought public discussions would inhibit debate, would make it more diffi-

cult to find qualified panelists and could injure those applicants who are rejected, but there was so much interest in the subject that NEA staff members said they would explore it and raise it again for council discussion in the future.

Throughout the meeting, many members spoke of their frustration with the congressional actions and criticisms of the NEA for two grants out of the more than 85,000 the agency has given.

"The message is being sent," said council member and theater director Lloyd Richards. "Over the past 24 years, there has been a message the National Endowment has sent to the nation concerning the arts and freedom of the arts and the importance of the arts." The five-year bans are a warning, he said, to "those who would support freedom of expression, that you can be hurt by supporting it."

Although the House and Senate are now in recess, the arts community has begun lobbying the two dozen senators and representatives who will most likely serve on the House-Senate conference committee that will next take up the NEA budget legislation.