Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 15

Frances D'Souza

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01.08.1989

Senator Clairborne Pell
S.R. 335 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510-3901
United States of America

Dear Senator Pell,

Enclosed please find a copy of a letter ARTICLE 19 has sent to Senator Jesse Helms protesting the Senate's recent decision to cut funding to two arts institutions. Similar letters have also been sent to members of the Appropriations Committee, the Secretary of the Interior, and selected Senators.

ARTICLE 19 condemns the Senate's action as a form of artistic censorship.

We urge your support in fighting this proposal.

Yours sincerely,

Frances D'Souza
Director
31.07.1989

Senator Jesse Helms
Senate Dirksen Building, Room 403
Washington DC 20510
United States of America

Dear Senator Helms,

ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned with the Senate’s recent decision to restrict National Endowment for the Arts funding. The legislation would bar the use of Federal arts funds to "promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials..." and specifically prohibits funding for two art groups for the next five years.

Not only does the action by the Senate indicate a disturbing movement to determine artistic merit on political grounds but it also acts as a punitive measure against art establishments which have supported unpopular works. To the extent that the Institute for Contemporary Art and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art depend on the NEA funding to mount exhibits, the five-year ban on funding constitutes a form of prior censorship. Other organizations in the future may be more cautious in supporting certain artists in order to maintain federal funding. This denial of expression to these artists is inimical to the spirit of the First Amendment.

The bill would prohibit grants for art that "denigrates, debases or reviles a person, group or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin." The question this condition immediately raises is who will determine if a work falls into this range? Such a restriction presupposes that there is only one way of classifying art, but anyone who has taken an art history class knows that this is not so.

Democracy is founded on the principle that a vital society is formed by people with different and distinct views, a premise which is increasingly under attack. In England, there is still a common law offense of blasphemy, and it has been used recently to attempt the prevention of publication of Salman Rushdie’s book, The Satanic Verses, as offensive to Muslims. I enclose a copy of our report on the Blasphemy Law.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:
"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and
ARTICLE 19, the International Centre on Censorship, is working to promote freedom of expression and to oppose censorship in all countries. Taking its name and mandate from the nineteenth article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ARTICLE 19 holds that freedom of expression is a universal right, defined and guaranteed by international law.

We urge you to reconsider your support for this measure.

Frances D'Souza
Director

cc: Manuel Lujan
Senator Robert Byrd
Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan
Senator John Chafee
Senator Clairborne Pell
Senator Howard Metzenbaum
Senator Daniel Inouye
Senator Ernest Hollings
Senator J. Bennett Johnston
Senator Quentin Burdick
Senator Patrick Leahy
Senator Jim Sasser
Senator Dennis DeConcini
Senator Dale Bumpers
Senator Frank Lautenberg
Senator Tom Harkin
Senator Barbara Mikulski
Senator Harry Reid
Senator Brock Adams
Senator Wyche Fowler
Senator Robert Kerrey
Senator Mark Hatfield
Senator Ted Stevens
Senator James McClure
Senator Jake Garn
Senator Chad Cochran
Senator Bob Kasten
Senator Alfonse D'Amato
Senator Warren Rudman
Senator Arlen Specter
Senator Pete Domenici
Senator Charles Grassley
Senator Don Nickels
Senator Phil Gramm
Hugh Southern