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NEA FUNDING

Here we go again

In what has become a tiresome annual ritual, Jesse Helms and an assortment of the usual suspects have mounted another attack on funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. They want to penalize the endowment for "offensiveness" by reducing its funding 5 percent. Remaining determinedly in character, NEA opponents have again seriously and shamelessly distorted the issue.

Outfits such as the Christian Action Network relentlessly comb through NEA grants searching for "offensiveness." Since Jane Alexander took over the chairmanship of NEA, such searching has produced fewer and fewer results. The best the taste police could come up with this year was a March performance at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis before an audience of 100 people.

In a letter to congressmen, Alexander described the performance: Ron "Athey and a three-member cast performed excerpts from his ritualistic work exploring modern-day martyrdom as it relates to AIDS. Athey is HIV-positive and his work includes scarification and the use of acupuncture needles."

A report three weeks after the performance in the Minneapolis newspaper by a reporter who proved not to have been in attendance alleged that the audience had been exposed to towels dripping with HIV-positive blood.

This was wonderful ammunition for NEA opponents, except for a minor detail: It wasn't true. Alexander again: "There was absolutely no risk to the audience, the performers or the crew backstage. The Walker Art Center took all health precautions necessary, and the Minnesota Health Department concurred. . . . There was no blood dripping from towels. . . ."

Another charge made by NEA opponents about the performance was that it caught the audience unprepared. That charge is altogether spurious as well. The Walker — probably Minnesota's leading cultural institution — was careful to describe the performance in some detail in all advance material. Given the subject matter, the performance might undoubtedly have been offensive to some. But NEA naysayers have used that fact to distort both the NEA's funding record and their own position.

An organization designed to fund arts projects is bound to support programs some people don't like. What is remarkable about recent NEA funding is how few objections have been raised. In fiscal year 1993, Winston-Salem alone received more than $700,000 for more than a dozen projects from NEA. None raised an eyebrow's worth of objection.

Helms and friends say that they don't object to public funding for art, just indelent nonart. If art were ice cream, NEA detractors would be demanding that vanilla be the only flavor available. Art is not ice cream. One thing art does is hold a mirror up so that we can see ourselves. It's not always a pretty sight. Even less appealing is the prospect that people such as Helms will determine what is and what is not art. Based on what criteria?

There may be a legitimate public debate to be had about public funding for the arts. This just isn't it. The NEA under Alexander has done a tough job well. Its opponents make more noise than sense.