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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 20

Claiborne Pell

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Draft

May 8, 1989

Dear Laramee Family:

Thank you very much for contacting me about the Awards in the Visual Arts Program and its recognition of the artist Andres Serrano. After hearing from you I checked with the National Endowment for the Arts to learn exactly how this federal agency was involved in the support of Mr. Serrano's work. I would like to share what I learned with you.

The Awards in the Visual Arts Program is a national annual artists award program that was set up nine years ago to honor the achievement and talent of our working American artists. Each year up to 500 artists are nominated by a national network of 100 professionals in American art. Of these nominees, ten artists are selected by a distinguished five-member jury of artists and curators to receive fellowships and an exhibition of their work. Mr. Serrano was selected through this process along with nine other artists, all chosen by the jury for the quality of their work.

The Awards in the Visual Arts Program is administered by the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art, a nationally known art center located in Winston Salem, North Carolina. The program is jointly funded by grants from The Equitable Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. The Endowment's participation in funding the program went forward only after the proposal was carefully scrutinized by outside review panelists and the National Council on the Arts, the Presidentially-appointed advisory board of the Endowment.

I am relieved to know that no one at the National Endowment for the Arts had a direct role in selecting Mr. Serrano for this award. Instead the Endowment was contributing funds to what had been deemed to be a worthy effort set up to assist American artists - a cause which I would endorse.

I find it very unfortunate that a certain work by Mr. Serrano was selected by the jury last year. You and I certainly agree as to the offensive nature of this piece. The Endowment, however, is expressly forbidden in its authorizing legislation from interfering in the artistic choices made by recipients of its grant money. This is done to avoid government

intervention in the substance of artistic projects and the possible creation of officially sanctioned artistic styles.

I appreciate hearing from you on this matter and trust that these points will provide you with a clearer understanding of this situation.

With warm regards,

Ever sincerely,

Claiborne Pell
Chairman
Subcommittee on Education,
Arts & Humanities