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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 20

Jonathan Katz

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NATIONAL ASSEMBLY of STATE ARTS AGENCIES 1010 VERMONT AVENUE, N.W., SUITE 920, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005 (202) 347-6352
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June 23, 1989

The Honorable Sidney R. Yates
Chairman, Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations
2234 Rayburn Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman,

On behalf of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies I am writing to offer encouragement and reflection in your task of drafting 1990 funding legislation for the arts. Under the current circumstances, your responsibility is enormous.

We applaud your steadfast support for the National Endowment for the Arts and your dedicated concern toward improving the Endowment's process to ensure more accountability and to respond to its critics and their dire threats to federal support for the arts.

We realize that this is a most difficult undertaking. In the context of your current deliberations to adjust the regranting activities at NEA, I would like to share with you some of the collected thoughts from discussions I have had over the past couple of days with individuals in the field of public support for the arts.

First, while unintentional, the proposal could have the effect of limiting support to artists. It would restrict their points of access to public funding and reduce the multiplicity of perspectives by which their work is now judged. At the same time, the public would run the risk of reduced access to the broad range of the best art. Also the question arises of whether the Arts Endowment itself could handle administratively the burden of judging a much increased and centralized adjudication process.

Second, the regranting of federal funds serves as a catalyst to generate private and other public dollars in support of the arts. In addition, technical assistance is often provided in regranting by the staff of arts organizations, public agencies and arts service agencies receiving NEA grants. Some of that would be lost by withdrawing a significant measure of federal grants from the process of regranting.

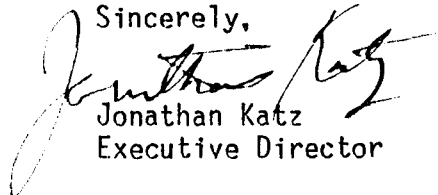
Mr. Chairman, we recognize your genuine concern for the future of federal support for the arts and we appreciate especially your understanding of the particular relationship of federal funding to the state, regional and local arts councils in these deliberations. We wholeheartedly agree that the proper approach should focus on ensuring a process at NEA which has sufficient public accountability and appropriate checks and balances.

State arts agencies have wrestled with many of the same issues currently commanding the attention of Congress. Many have chosen to address issues of accountability through the institution of a more open process of panel discussion and council review.

In many states, the entire grantmaking and policy development process is in full public view. In some states, there is time scheduled at council meetings for public presentation and sometimes open discussion. Another strategy might be to invite individuals to serve on panels who have avocational knowledge of a field, but who represent the public interest in experiencing the best art. Such individuals might be representative of teachers, educational administrators, parents, mayors, state legislators, the business community, sociologists, historians, and political scientists. The list of choices could go on because the general public has an interest in experiencing the best art. We observe that making the operation of the Endowment more public would increase its accountability without compromising the basic peer panel review principle.

In your own deliberations, we stand ready to offer our assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jonathan Katz". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Jonathan Katz
Executive Director