Beyond criticism

A Senate panel goes too far in trying to curb the NEA

A committee of the U.S. Senate has recommended that the National Endowment for the Arts appropriation be cut 5 percent because of one questionable grant. That is as ludicrous as it would be for Congress to slash the Pentagon budget 5 percent because of one questionable defense contract.

The action of the Senate Appropriation Committee is made the more draconian by the fact that the panel has stipulated three specific programs in which the overall reduction must be achieved.

As a result, the funding the NEA got last year for theater, visual arts and for presenting and commissioning would be cut in half. Were these reductions to be distributed in direct proportion to allocations made this year by the NEA, 43 Pittsburgh organizations, including the Public Theater, the Mattress Factory and the Pittsburgh Dance Council, would lose $560,000.

The House of Representatives had already passed a measure cutting the NEA appropriation funding by 2 percent when the Senate panel decided to slash even further, reducing NEA support to $134 million. The action followed a letter being sent to the NEA by committee chairman Robert Byrd, a West Virginia Democrat, and Don Nickles of Oklahoma, the ranking Republican, in which they chastised the NEA for giving some financial support to a presentation in Minneapolis by an HIV-positive performance artist in which spilling of his blood was simulated.

However objectionable the senators may have found his presentation, it was the recipient of but one of 4,000 grants the NEA made this year (and one of more than 100,000 it has disbursed since its founding). The number of grants that have been questioned on artistic grounds by politicians (such as the Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibit) has been infinitesimal in relation to the volume of projects evaluated.

In this instance, the endowment had given the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis $104,000 to fund 100 performances of which this was but one. The artist himself received but $150 in federal funds. These are flimsy grounds for such a punitive response.

The NEA's artistic judgment is always fair game for criticism and second-guessing. But there is no fairness in punishing other artistic endeavors financially because of an occasional lapse by the disbursing agent. Nor does it stimulate artistic experimentation to so intimidate the NEA that it will lend its support only to "safe" projects.

The cuts the Senate Appropriations Committee has recommended can be restored by the congressional conference committee and, if there is no stronger basis for sustaining them than has been articulated, they should be.