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Style Plus: The junk mail
demographic data keeper

Senate Votes to Expand NEA Grant Ban

Helms Amendment Targets 'Obscene' Art

By Elizabeth Kastor
Washington Post Staff Writer

The congressional battle over National Endowment for the Arts funding took a surprise turn on the floor of the Senate yesterday evening when Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) introduced an amendment that would prevent the NEA from supporting "obscene or indecent materials." The amendment to the Senate appropriations bill was adopted on a voice vote by the handful of senators present, but was greeted with outrage by the arts advocates who heard of it last night.

The proposed legislation would not allow NEA support for: "obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sado-masochism, homo-eroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion; or material which denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group, or class of citizens on the basis of race, creed, sex, handicap, age, or national origin."

The Senate action comes after months of debate over NEA funding of controversial

See NEA, C4, Col. 1

NEA

NEA, From C1

art, a debate ignited by the photographs of artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. The Senate legislation already included a ban on NEA funding for two arts organizations that supported work by Mapplethorpe and Serrano, as well as several other items intended to send a signal of disapproval to the embattled agency.

The NEA-funded exhibit of pictures by Mapplethorpe, a highly praised photographer who died of AIDS earlier this year, includes a number of images depicting sado-masochistic and homoerotic acts. A photograph by Serrano of a crucifix submerged in a container of urine was included in a traveling exhibit organized by an NEA-funded group, which also gave Serrano a \$15,000 grant.

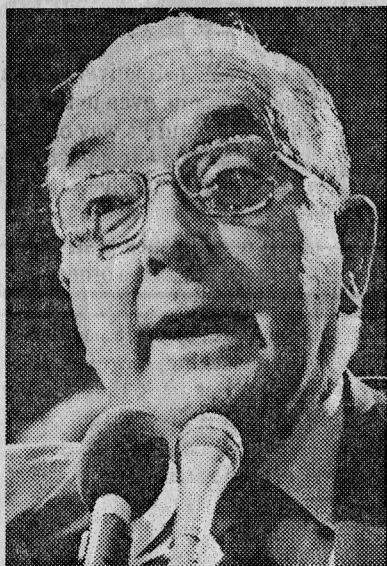
Sen. John Chafee (R-R.I.) opposed Helms's amendment on the floor. "I suppose with your amendment, matter that reviled Hitler—that would be prohibited," he said. "I have great reservations . . . we're getting into a slippery area here."

Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio) also criticized the amendment, although he made a point of saying he would neither oppose nor support the politically sensitive measure officially.

"I want to rise to indicate my concern about an amendment that in essence reads well," he said. "Nobody thinks you ought to be using funds to promote or disseminate pornography. . . . I do have a concern about the United States Congress deciding what is or isn't art. . . . I'm not going to oppose it because it's hard to oppose an amendment of this kind because it sounds so right."

Anne Murphy, executive director of the American Arts Alliance, said Helms's amendment "would not allow political art. It would not allow political cartoons. It wouldn't allow creation of art that promotes any religion because that might denigrate any other religion. We would not be able to do most Shakespeare. I would doubt you could do 'Rigoletto.' You certainly couldn't do a play that was anti-communist."

Helms said on the floor that he introduced his amendment in response to "the art world's refusal to recognize that a difference exists between an artist's right to free expression" and the right to public funding. Calling the Mapplethorpe and Serrano works "garbage," he said later that he expects the amendment to the appropriations bill for the Interior Department and related agencies to make it past the House-Senate con-



SEN. JESSE HELMS

ference committee and into law. "I'd like to see anybody oppose it," he said.

Before Helms introduced the amendment, he came on the Senate floor holding a catalogue from the Mapplethorpe show, which is now appearing at Washington Project for the Arts after being canceled by the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Corcoran officials withdrew from the traveling show last month, saying they feared being pulled into the political storm and were concerned that the presence of the show could harm the NEA.

Helms presented Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) with the catalogue "and showed him three or four [pictures] right there on the floor," Helms said later. "He said, 'Good gosh! I'll take your amendment' and he asked if he could have [the catalogue], so I gave him a copy. He hadn't seen it before."

Arts advocates on the Hill and elsewhere said yesterday that they hoped the Helms amendment would be removed by the conference committee and suggested that the absence of a roll call vote on the amendment was a deliberate move by Byrd to spare senators from having to register an official vote on the delicate subject of pornography.

Helms's decision to take some action on the NEA was not unexpected, although arts supporters on the Hill had no advance warning about what he would propose. Helms has assailed the NEA on the Senate floor before, and has become the favorite target of artists protesting attacks on the agency.

As passed by the Senate last night, the appropriations bill would provide \$170 million to the NEA. Helms's amendment was supported by both Byrd and Appropriations ranking minority member James McClure (R-Idaho). "We'll take it to conference," McClure said on the floor, "and see what we can work out."