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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 22

John H. Hammer

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The **NHA** National Humanities Alliance

14 June 1989

The Honorable Pat Williams
U.S. House of Representatives
2457 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

COPY

Dear Mr. Williams:

David Hoekema and the other members of the Alliance's Policy Planning Committee very much appreciated the opportunity to meet with you last week to discuss issues of concern to the members of the National Humanities Alliance in the process of reauthorizing the National Endowment for the Humanities. We will be writing to you shortly with more information on the issues we identified during the meeting.

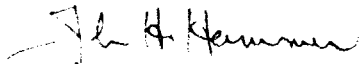
The problems you are grappling with in connection with the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art award to Andres Serrano are extraordinarily difficult. Without doubt, it is regrettable that federal funds were awarded for artwork that, based upon the descriptions in the press, seems intended to offend the religious beliefs of Christians. Subject matter like this is offensive to most Americans and certainly to many of the members of the National Humanities Alliance. My colleagues and I empathize with you and your colleagues as you seek to respond to the outrage of your constituents. Certainly, the tension between the need to preserve artistic and intellectual freedom on the one hand and the demand for careful stewardship of the taxpayers dollars on the other, is one of the major fault lines for our democracy. Fortunately, the award in question is miniscule within the context of the tens of thousands of direct and indirect federal awards in the arts and humanities that have so enriched our cultural and educational life over the last quarter century. While from time to time inappropriate awards have and will emerge from the awards process, the cost of seeking to control the subject matter would be unacceptably high -- for the freedom that would thereby be ceded is both the central strength of creativity and of our democracy.

Finally, I am including with this letter a copy of the testimony delivered last month on behalf of the Alliance by Lowell Livezey during the NEH's field hearing on reauthorization issues. I believe that you will find Dr. Livezey's perspective on research and teaching in the humanities in the context of a university targeted on less affluent and often minority students to be insightful and useful when thinking about the present and potential roles of the NEH.

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My colleagues and I look forward to continuing to work with you and the Postsecondary Education Subcommittee on federal issues affecting research, teaching and other humanities activities.

Yours sincerely,


John H. Hammer
Director