

University of Rhode Island

DigitalCommons@URI

Briefing Book: National Endowment for the Arts
(1994)

Education: National Endowment for the Arts
and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996)

7-6-1993

Briefing Book: National Endowment for the Arts (1994): News Article 07

Joyce Price

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_14

Recommended Citation

Price, Joyce, "Briefing Book: National Endowment for the Arts (1994): News Article 07" (1993). *Briefing Book: National Endowment for the Arts (1994)*. Paper 21.

https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_14/21https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_14/21

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Briefing Book: National Endowment for the Arts (1994) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

Art turns heads, stomachs

'Repulsive' show revives NEA flap

By Joyce Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

As Congress considers bills to reauthorize the National Endowment for the Arts, an NEA-funded museum in New York is displaying an art exhibit featuring images of excrement and homoerotic acts.

A catalog for the "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire" exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art says the show is intended to "confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality" using subject matter offensive to conservatives.

The catalog's introduction explains that "abject art" is a "body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood and rotting food."

Martin Mawyer, president of the Christian Action Network (CAN), viewed the show last week.

"The goal of the exhibit was to repulse, and I was repulsed," Mr. Mawyer said. "I guess that makes me an art connoisseur."

The NEA, which has endured several battles over its funding of controversial artists and artworks, has given \$302,000 to the Whitney Museum since 1990.

Since 1991, the federal arts endowment has provided \$65,000 to the Whitney's Independent Study Program, which mounted both "Abject Art" and a second exhibit, "The Subject of Rape." The two exhibits currently are the only ones on display at the museum.

Whitney spokesman Steven Schlough said the "Abject Art" exhibit has not received funds from the NEA or any other government source.

"Of the Independent Study Program's \$350,000 annual budget, the \$20,000 received last year from the NEA was allocated entirely for operating costs of the museum's studies programs," Mr. Schlough said.

CAN officials this week hand-delivered letters to the 114 freshman members of Congress and Republican congressional leaders urging them to abolish the NEA. The letter cites "Abject Art" as a prime reason

ABJECT ART

The following is taken from the introduction of the catalog accompanying the "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire" exhibit on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art through Aug. 29:

"Abject art . . . describes a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood and rotting food in order to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality."

"This work also includes abject subject matter — that which is often deemed inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture."

"The attempt to censor art, which reached its greatest intensity at the end of the eighties and in the early nineties, is connected to the attacks on multiculturalism, "political correctness" (a slogan of the right), the reproductive rights of women, the pathologizing of gay men and lesbians, and the patriotic campaign against flag desecration."

"Verbal attacks on artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, David Wojnarowicz . . . Annie Sprinkle, and Karen Finley, among others, resulted in a climate of fear, with the suppression of free speech, comparisons with Nazi Germany abound."

"By 1990, certain aggressive reactionaries — supported by conservative trusts — were arguing that 'barbarians' were taking over the museums, 'putting on shows that are trivial, vulgar and politically repulsive.' The same rhetoric was employed by the likes of Jesse Helms, Patrick Buchanan, and David Duke, not to mention Presidents Reagan and Bush."

The Washington Times

Mr. Mawyer blamed the depictions in the exhibit on the Clinton administration.

Although the Whitney's Independent Study Program was last awarded an NEA grant in 1992, during the Bush administration, Mr. Mawyer charged that "the fact that no one is at the helm of the NEA is exactly why these types of grants get abused at museums."

In the absence of a permanent chairman, the NEA is being run by Anna Steele, a senior deputy director.

"I feel that if Anne-Imelda Radice were still at the helm of the NEA, she would have denounced the exhibit and demanded the money back," Mr. Mawyer said.

Miss Radice took over as NEA chairman after President Bush fired John Frohnmayer. She won the support of many conservatives by insisting that art supported by the endowment should reflect the values of the majority of Americans.

NEA spokeswoman Ginny Terzano said the CAN president's comments "indicate how Mr. Mawyer's organization and other special interest groups spread misinformation about this agency."

"The [Whitney] grant was awarded by the previous administration. For him to blame it on the lack of a

Clinton-appointed head of the endowment makes absolutely no sense," Ms. Terzano said.

As for "Abject Art," the museum catalog says the exhibit was "deemed urgent" because of recent American politics.

The introduction decries the "art censorship" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the "verbal attacks on artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, . . . Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finley" and the "rhetoric" of "Jesse Helms, Patrick Buchanan, and David Duke, not to mention Presidents Reagan and Bush."

"Employing methodologies adapted from feminism, queer theory, post-structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis, our goal is to talk dirty in the institution and downgrade its atmosphere of purity and prudery," wrote Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones and Simon Taylor, all participants in the Whitney's Independent Study Program during 1992-93.

"Abject Art" includes depictions of:

- A 3-foot mound of "synthetic" excrement.
- A dismembered sculpture of two women engaging in oral sex.
- A film showing one man pushing his head into another man's rectum.

(CONT.)

• A film titled "A Spy," which depicts Jesus Christ as a woman standing naked with her breasts exposed.

• A film by porn star Annie Sprinkle titled "The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop or How to be a Sex Goddess in 101 Easy Steps."

• Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," a photo of a crucifix standing in a jar of urine, and the late Robert Mapplethorpe's "Self-Portrait," a photo showing him with a bullwhip in his rectum.

In the CAN letter, Mr. Mawyer tells freshman House members they "have been elected to Congress to reform a government fraught with waste and fraud. The NEA is a classic example. ... There exists no principled reason for allowing the federal government to fund art — especially when that art may not reflect the values and culture of the taxpayers footing the bill."

He also points out that the Serrano and Mapplethorpe works included in the show ignited the political controversy that has surrounded the NEA since the late 1980s. The Serrano and Mapplethorpe works are the "same two pieces of art which the House chose to defund in 1989," he says in the letter.

The House cut \$45,000 — the total amount the NEA had provided in

grants for two exhibits that included the Serrano and Mapplethorpe photographs — from the endowment's budget in fiscal 1990.

One freshman House member, Peter T. King, New York Republican,

said Thursday he "opposes the NEA" and will vote to strike the \$174.59 million in funding being sought for the agency in fiscal 1994. That amount is \$130,000 over current funding levels.