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The Sun (Wednesday) 7-28-89

Artless Senate

Chafee lone voice of reason

THE U.S. CONGRESS has lost its ability to deal rationally with troubling issues.

Both branches -- the House several weeks ago, the Senate Wednesday -- decided to define art and what is acceptable to the public.

In one of the most outrageous steps taken in years, the Senate eliminated funding for two art organizations for the next five years because they showed photographs considered by Sen. Jesse Helms to be offensive. The total value of that funding was about \$1 million.

The House took the lesser step of taking \$45,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, the equivalent cost of the two offending shows.

John Chafee of Rhode Island was one of only two senators with the courage to tell their tarnished colleagues they had no business judging the merits of art. The other was Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio.

There is no doubt that a majority of Americans would be offended by the work of the two artists, Andres Serrano and the late Robert Mapplethorpe. Mr. Serrano took a plastic crucifix, submerged it in his own urine, and took a photograph of it to express his feeling that the essence of religion has been all but destroyed by American culture. It is an angry disturbing work, misunderstood by most and shocking to all. Robert Mapplethorpe died of AIDS this year. The show that so frightened the homophobic Mr. Helms is one depicting men, some making love some having sex. It is shocking in its stark frankness. It is also a true and artistic representation of a way of life.

But art has always offended. And it is not the role of government to limit artistic expression because it offends some people, even a majority of people. This government censorship has a name. "The ultimate end is fascism," said artist Robert Motherwell.

According to the wording of Mr. Helms legislation, any museum showing any "individuals engaged in sex acts" will lose funding. This would include every great art museum in the nation. And who is to be the judge of when an Expressionist work contains a sex act? I may see it and you may not.

Censorship of the arts is wrong. The Senate has done something that will need to be undone.

Liberty is crying, "Don't touch me there." Can't the Senate hear?