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Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 39

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PEN Center USA West

An International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Editors, Novelists, Historians, Critics, Journalists, and Translators with 86 centers in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas

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July 4, 1989

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Senator Claiborne Pell
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

I write to express our profound concern over recent threats to the National Endowment for the Arts, threats spurred by over-zealous politicians bowing to uninformed opinion and pressure from extremists. These deeply disturbing developments threaten basic American constitutional tenets of freedom of expression and raise the specter of censorship and repression, at a time when we are witnessing the most drastic kind of repression and censorship in China and elsewhere in the world.

As you may know, PEN Center USA West is one of two United States centers of the international organization that includes among its membership those writers generally considered to be at the zenith of their profession. In our center alone, there are 600 members. According to our charter: *"In all circumstances, ... works of art and libraries, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion. The PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong."*

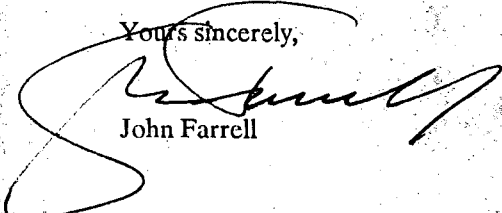
Though the immediate issue at hand concerns freedom of expression in the visual arts, NEA has long supported the literary arts in general and in particular the efforts of PEN. Whether in the literary, the visual, or any other form of art, freedom of expression is essential. No nation that denies to its artists such freedom can ever hope to nurture great art, which is to say, great ideas compellingly (often provocatively) expressed. Failure to adhere to this standard -- however offensive its product may sometimes be -- guarantees the banality and ultimate demise of the nation and the culture that sustains it. Indeed, it is the nature of great art to risk intellectual and emotional provocation. Such risks are understood and valued by informed opinion, such as that institutionalized in the peer review process of the NEA. For more than 20 years, this procedure has served our nation and its artists with distinction. No system is beyond improvement. However, to tamper with the essential autonomy of the National Endowment for the Arts is to undermine the cornerstone of American democracy -- that is, the First Amendment of our Constitution.

Although in a democracy the people hold ultimate political wisdom, informed opinion must sometimes supersede in areas that call for expertise. In this regard, it is worth noting that many American taxpayers find offensive, if not pornographic, the allocation of the majority of their taxes to a superfluity of death-dealing weaponry. (Certainly, violent death may be considered equally as offensive as provocative sexual imagery.) Nonetheless, the informed opinion of defense experts supersedes these taxpayers' wishes, toward what is considered to be the greater good of the Republic.

At PEN, we believe that -- with the exception of child pornography -- there is no justification for allowing the State to decide what words and images citizens may or may not expose themselves to. Censorship is ultimately more offensive and destructive to our fundamental American values than any pornography. Please record our opposition to these threats to the autonomy of the National Endowment and to the freedom of all American arts organizations that receive NEA support.

Executive Director
Richard Bray

Yours sincerely,


John Farrell