

1989

Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 49

Anne Farrell

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Anne Farrell
1150 Cuchara Drive
Del Mar, California 92014

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July 29, 1989

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

Dear Senator Pell:

I am writing as an outraged individual citizen, voter, and passionate art appreciator, to vehemently protest and oppose the shocking action that the Senate took last week in its punitive legislative amendment against the National Endowment for the Arts, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in North Carolina, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

Perhaps you thought that this action would go unnoticed by the public. Or perhaps you assumed that it was an "easier" position to take -- instead of defending the more abstract issue of freedom of expression, you chose to oppose individual artists and arts organizations because they presented works which so clearly would not please mainstream America. But don't you see how very dangerous this first step is? Haven't you studied history enough to know that governmental opposition to and control of artists is the hallmark of the most repressive of societies -- Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, today's China?

I have heard a self-righteous Senator D'Amato on T.V. (perhaps trying to deflect some criticism of his own relationship to the H.U.D. scandal?) insisting that these legislative actions are not squelching free expression -- that artists and museums that wish to offer non-"sanitized" work are free to do so ... but without taxpayers' funds. This is a specious argument. The arts in the United States have a hard enough time surviving. In comparison to most civilized nations, our federal support of the arts is absolutely piddling. Few museums receive more than a few percentage of their budgets from the NEA, NEH, and IMS combined. But the real issue here is the legislative criticism and its wish to dismantle the NEA panel system -- the peer panels which judge grant applications on merit and quality and professional judgments far outside of the realm of the knowledge of most senators or representatives.

A secure government should have nothing to fear from artists. Artists illuminate life; they challenge our precepts; they lead us to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world. Sometimes we might not like what artists present. But that is the small price we pay for a vital and free flow of cultural ideas in a democracy. Yet the actions of last week, under the near-hysterical leadership of Senator Helms, show a government full of fear and sadly ignorant of the implications of its actions. The most shocking thing to me was the fact that only two Senators had the guts to speak out against Helms' amendment. Where is the courage of you conviction? Where were you when that vote was taken?

Believe me, although I can only vote for two Senators and one Representative, I can certainly continue to make my feelings known -- through campaign contributions as well as letters of protest, such as this one. I may be only one small voice, but behind me are many, many voices, and we will be heard. Please, use your influence and your intelligence to assess the issues surrounding this controversy, and act accordingly. When the NEA's budget comes before you again in September, I urge you to support the full NEA appropriation, as it was originally presented by the House of Representatives. And, for the sake of our democracy, oppose any punitive measures against individual artists or organizations.

Sincerely yours,

