

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

The New York Times

Border Skirmish: Art and Politics

Grace Glueck

November 19, 1989

The recent skirmish between John E. Frohnmayer, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and Artists Space, an alternative gallery in Manhattan that is one of the Endowment's constituents, over a \$10,000 grant for an art show about AIDS throws into sharp relief the increasing struggle in this country between artists who are straining the boundaries of what is acceptable and lawmakers voicing concern about standards of morality.

The struggle is heightened by homosexual militancy and a rage and despair over the AIDS crisis that have led artists to translate their feelings into sometimes shocking visual imagery. The controversies embroiling the once-tranquil Endowment have brought to the surface basic questions about the relationship between artists and government - questions that will persist no matter how the current dispute involving Artists Space is resolved.

Will a government that - unlike those of many other nations - has been ambivalent about giving financial support to art continue to provide such support without legislative intervention?

Should the Endowment's role be to support all voices, controversial or not?

As a result of government pressures, will artists and arts organizations become timid and censor themselves?

How much of a part does uneasiness about homosexuality play in Congressional involvement with the content of artists' work?

Some of these questions were raised after earlier incidents involving Endowment-financed exhibitions that also aroused the wrath of Congressmen and their constituents: a show of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe containing homosexual and sadomasochistic images that was canceled by the Corcoran Gallery in Washington last summer, and another show earlier this year containing a photograph of a plastic crucifix in a jar of urine by the artist Andres Serrano, at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Arts in North Carolina.

Prodded by Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, the Congress acted last month to restrict Endowment grants. Senator Helms said he was responding to the art world's "refusal to recognize that a difference exists between an artist's right to free expression and his right to have the Government, that is to say the taxpayers, pay him for his work."

Congress ruled that Endowment money may not be used for work the agency considers "obscene, including sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts," and that is not deemed to have "serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value." The last clause makes for some difficulties: although literary, artistic and scientific value can be measured in varying degrees, who is to say what constitutes "political" value?

The questions about government's involvement in the arts are being raised with increasing force now. Not only is the Artists Space incident the first test of the restrictions imposed on Endowment grants by the Congress; it is also the first challenge for Mr. Frohnmayer, who took office last month.

In revoking a \$10,000 grant for "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," mounted by the respected nonprofit gallery in downtown Manhattan known as Artists Space, Mr. Frohnmayer at first characterized the show as political, saying that "political discourse ought to be in the political arena and not in a show sponsored

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

by the Endowment." What prompted his decision about the grant, he said at the time, was not the erotic imagery in the show but the catalogue, which contained an essay by an AIDS victim highly critical of Senator Helms, Representative William E. Dannemeyer, Republican of California, and John Cardinal O'Connor, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, for their views on homosexuality and AIDS.

Later, Mr. Frohnmayer backed away from the label "political," saying instead that he thought there had been an "erosion of the artistic vision" of the show between the time the grant was awarded and the time the show coalesced. "If you came to us and said, 'I want to create a political polemic,' we would not fund that," he said in an address to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies in Washington. "If you on the other hand said, 'I want to paint a "Guernica," ' we would fund that. And the difference is we make our decision on the artistic content." For Frohnmayer, Unwelcome Controversy

"Certainly the last thing I want to do is to be crosswise with a major part of the Endowment's constituency," Mr. Frohnmayer elaborated in an interview. "The word political means something quite different in Portland, Ore., than in Washington." Before coming to the Endowment, Mr. Frohnmayer was a lawyer in Portland. "I didn't mean it in the sense of ideology. The show at Artists Space as originally conceived was an information show about AIDS, and I felt that purpose was lost, or substantially changed, in the process of bringing the show to fruition."

It was highly important to preserve the integrity of the Endowment's process, he added. "If the panel passes on one thing and the show turns out to be something else, we have to have an opportunity to review what is actually going out under our auspices. But I'm horrified that the whole thing has turned into a cause celebre about the Endowment's control of content."

Certainly Mr. Frohnmayer's initial characterization of the show as political pressed some alarm buttons in the arts community. There were fears that the struggle would be carried into rockier terrain, where criteria other than esthetic merit were used for evaluating art. What makes the present situation so conspicuous is that for most of its quarter-century of existence, the Endowment has remained for the most part happily free of political entanglements.

To many artists, curators, critics and others involved with the visual arts the lines are clearly drawn. The opposition in Congress is not saying that artists cannot make controversial work, but rather that if they do, they should not expect taxpayer dollars to support them. Yet if the government has committed itself to subsidizing art, does it have the right to reject that which is controversial or displeasing to certain legislators?

"That government funding should not be used for artists to make controversial statements is not a good argument," said Vartan Gregorian, president of Brown University and former president of the New York Public Library. "If you carry that over to science and the humanities, then government funding agencies should not exist. Government money is not the government's; it's the people's. It needs checks and balances to be spent wisely, but that is why the peer-review panels are there. My view is not to silence people but to establish dialogue and resolve issues, not to hide them."

His opinion was endorsed by Ted Berger, director of the New York Foundation for the Arts, a state-sponsored agency that gives grants and other help to artists. "Artists are always probing boundaries and they always will," Mr. Berger said. "But government support is supposed to be about freeing ideas and opinions. Public schools and libraries are about that too. So it's not just a question of artists doing what they want but not with public money." Good Art or Bad, It Doesn't Matter

Susan Wyatt, the director of Artists' Space, upheld the show's content as artistic, adding, "I don't know what Mr. Frohnmayer means by saying the show represents an 'erosion of the artistic vision.' Whether it's good or bad doesn't matter. It's art and there's no question that it is. That's the root of the issue."

Whatever their source, the chairman's objections to the show were viewed by some as an erosion of the relationship between the Endowment and the artists and arts organizations that are its beneficiaries. His

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

action, made in compliance with what he perceived to be Congress's wishes, is regarded by many in the art world as likely to have a chilling effect on all arts institutions, whether large or small, obliging them to practice self-censorship by curtailing experimental or potentially controversial programs.

"I've had an Endowment grant twice, and been on an Endowment peer panel awarding grants," said the painter Ross Bleckner, whose work has reflected contemporary issues, including the AIDS crisis. "The system was unencumbered then. What's happening now is deplorable. It's tantamount to a state-sponsored system of correct art. A lot of the great art has not seemed politically correct at the time it was made. The point of art is that it must attempt to be provocative, and for the government to try to undermine that is wrong."

But Mr. Bleckner also seemed to welcome the challenge provided by the Endowment move. "It may inspire artists to be more provocative," he said.

Two artists who have actually been subjected to some form of censorship lean more heavily toward this view. Alexander Melamid, a Soviet artist now living in New Jersey, whose satirical, anti-government work was part of a now famous show bulldozed by officials in Moscow in 1974, said: "The government is always the guardian of tradition, and art is the guardian of innovation. If there's no friction between the government and artists, it's abnormal."

And Chuck Close, whose paintings and drawings of male nudes were removed by campus police in the 1960's from his show at the University of Massachusetts because legislative visitors were arriving the next day, contrasted the Endowment's stance with current events in Eastern Europe.

"It's really incredible that they're moving toward freedom of expression, and in this bicentennial year of the Bill of Rights, we're moving toward officially sanctioned, state-supported, state-approved art," said Mr. Close. "It will ultimately affect the kind of art that's made, because organizations will not invite artists to show whose work is problematic. But it could also have an opposite effect, that of making more artists go out and do controversial things."

It was Ms. Wyatt who alerted the Endowment to the possibility that the "Witnesses" show might be viewed as offensive. Mr. Frohnmayer was quick to respond to her initiative. But when he asked Artists Space to return the grant, she refused.

"Instead, I went public," she said, "hoping to encourage other organizations who are also checking out their shows with the Endowment to do the same. I hope to give Mr. Frohnmayer empowerment to show the Congress that we are a strong voice, too. I want to muster Congressional support for the Endowment and turn the tide. I want both the Endowment grant and freedom of expression, and I think the American taxpayers should want that, too." *Uneasiness About Homosexuality?*

In some minds, the Congressional action in restricting Endowment grants has a good deal to do with a profound uneasiness with homosexuality, borne out by the fact that both the Mapplethorpe show and the current show at Artists Space deal directly with that subject. In 1987, an amendment introduced by Senator Helms would have prevented the government from paying for information about safe sex for gay men on the grounds that it would promote homosexuality, and Representative Dannemeyer, also actively opposed to such financing, is the author of a current book arguing that homosexuality is "curable."

Samuel Lipman, publisher of the conservative monthly, *The New Criterion*, and from 1982 to 1988 a member of the National Council on the Arts, advisory body to the Endowment, said, "My own guess is that artistic and political issues are serving as a surrogate for sexual issues. People find it difficult to discuss the sexual issues, and so they use the artistic and political issues as a pretext."

Said Douglas Crimp, an art critic, AIDS activist and editor of *October*, a magazine of cultural criticism: "One thing that discouraged me in discussions of the Mapplethorpe affair was that people talked of censorship as a broad issue. No one talked very specifically about whose rights were abridged. The real

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

people who are being oppressed are gay people. Many members of the art world accepted the Helms language, which equates homoeroticism with obscenity."

"If an artist represents women in overtly sexual ways, like Courbet or Picasso, he can get away with it," said Linda Nochlin, Distinguished Professor of Art History at the City University of New York. "But when male sexuality is represented in an overt way by a gay male artist, that's considered very bad. When people deal with male sexuality, politicians feel threatened." What's the Future Of the Endowment?

Whatever the outcome of the Artists Space contretemps, the Endowment has, in the view of much of the art world, been hurt by it and by the earlier Congressional assaults. "We're seeing erosion after erosion," says Ted Berger of the New York Foundation for the Arts. "How many battles can we lose?" In fact, some in the art world have even raised questions about the survival of the Endowment. Pondering that last week, Representative Pat Williams, Democrat of Montana, who is chairman of the House committee in charge of reauthorizing the agency's existence every five years, said: "There may be two irreconcilable forces here. One is the right of taxpayers to determine how their money is spent. The other is the absolute necessity to protect freedom of expression, particularly in the arts. If those two forces are irreconcilable, then the future of the Endowment is in doubt."

"Vittorio," by Philip-Lorca de Corcia, in the exhibition "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing"; **Ken Tisa's** "Why Not Now," also at Artists Space gallery in Manhattan (pg. 1); detail of Allen Frame's photograph "Rescue," from a show related to AIDS at Artists Space; Darrel Ellis's "Self-Portrait After Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe," ink on paper (pg. 25)