NEA Pulls Grant to ‘Political’ Exhibit

N.Y. AIDS Art Show
First Test of New Law

By Elizabeth Kastor
Washington Post Staff Writer

The National Endowment for the Arts yesterday withheld a $10,000 grant to a New York gallery for a show of art about AIDS because the NEA believes the exhibit is too political to receive federal support, endowment Chairman John E. Frohnmayer said.

"We still have the funds and we are not going to relinquish them," Frohnmayer said of the grant to Manhattan's Artists Space. "I thought the nature of the show had changed to a political statement as opposed to an artistic one over the time since the grant was reviewed in February."

Frohnmayer's decision comes only weeks into his tenure in Washington and marks his first official skirmish in a continuing national battle over NEA funding of contemporary art.

He said NEA regulations allow the agency to suspend a grant "when the applicant has not complied with the terms of the grant, which I think is the situation we're in right now, where they have quite consciously changed the nature of the show from one that is about AIDS and the problem of AIDS to anger about the controversy we have been through."

Artists Space Executive Director Susan Wyatt said yesterday that she disagreed with Frohnmayer's interpretation of the show's development. "I think we portrayed the show accurately in our application. I talked to Mr. Frohnmayer about the show's evolution in the course of a year and how things in that area have developed over the last year. This show is about AIDS and I would see NEA, F18, Col. 1

Reagan: Sorry, Hollywood

tument
Last Friday, Frohnmayer wrote to Artists Space asking the gallery to voluntarily relinquish the grant and make it clear in written material that the agency did not endorse the completed exhibit, but the artist organization’s board voted unanimously yesterday not to give up its claim to the money. “We just feel very strongly about the principle involved about public funding of the arts,” Wyatt said yesterday.

In a Nov. 3 letter to Wyatt, Frohnmayer said, “Because of the recent criticism the endowment has come under, and the seriousness of Congress’s directive, we must all work together to ensure that projects funded by the endowment do not violate either the spirit or the letter of the law. The message has been clearly and strongly conveyed to us that Congress means business. On this basis, I believe the endowment’s funds may not be used to exhibit or publish this material.”

Like many NEA grants, this one was given on the basis of a proposal rather than the finished product, so the NEA did not see the works that would be included in the show. The application said the show, curated by

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NEA Withholds Grant

NEA, From F1

be extremely surprised if there are any references to this recent NEA controversy. That’s not the intent or purpose of this show. It does not deal with this specific controversy. Certainly politics is an issue that enters into a discussion about AIDS.”

Neither Wyatt nor Frohnmayer would describe in detail the works included in “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing,” which cost $30,000 and includes the work of 23 artists. But an essay by artist David Wojnarowicz that appears in the show’s catalogue attacks Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), who led the congressional fight against NEA funding, as well as Cardinal John O’Connor of New York. Both Helms and O’Connor have been criticized by AIDS activists for their positions on the AIDS issue.

The congressional debate over the NEA centered on grants that supported works by artists Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS, and Andres Serrano and resulted in legislation that prevents the agency from funding art that it deems “obscene” or “homeroetic” and lacking in artistic value. Although it was originally reported that the NEA’s objections to the AIDS exhibit had to do with work that might be seen as homeroetic, Frohnmayer said yesterday it was the show’s political element that was his major cause for concern.

“We all live in the real world here and we have been through an exceptionally difficult time,” Frohnmayer said, “and I think the last thing we need is for public funds to be used to try to rub it in the face of the critics.”

Although the Artists Space grant was approved last spring, before the restrictive legislation went into effect, Wyatt contacted Frohnmayer late last month to warn him that the show might prove controversial and to invite debate over the effect the new funding restrictions will have on such exhibits. “I thought it would be a good idea to engage in a bit of discussion on this issue, just as a responsible act,” she said yesterday.

Last Friday, Frohnmayer wrote to Artists Space asking the gallery to
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