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Offensive art exhibit

The National Endowment for the Arts has made a wise decision in withdrawing its sponsorship from an exhibition held at a gallery called the Artists Space in Tribeca. The exhibit, which is set to open next week, is entitled "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" — it is about AIDS.

NEA president John Frohnmayer noted that though the exhibit contained many artistic representations of homosexual acts, his decision was made on the basis of the catalogue, which contained, along with attacks on Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-Calif.), a description of New York's John Cardinal O'Connor as a "fat cannibal in a black skirt."

The question here is identical to that which emerged during the controversy over Andres Serrano's photograph "Piss Christ" and Robert Mapplethorpe's celebration of homosexual sado-masochism: Should taxpayers be required to subsidize "art" of this sort?

We share the view of NEA president Frohnmayer who — noting that Congress has passed legislation directing the NEA not to promote material that is obscene or lacks serious artistic, political and literary value — withdrew the NEA's sponsorship of the exhibit and asked that its \$10,000 grant be returned.

The show, it's clear, will go on; the NEA grant is but a small percentage of its budget. (Yesterday's announcement that the gallery director means to refuse to return the money leaves us baffled: It would surely be a waste of everyone's time if the NEA had to go to court to get its own money back).

The point, of course, is one of principle. There is absolutely no reason that taxpayers — Catholic or not — should be forced to pay for a vicious and puerile attack on New York's cardinal. This is asking a bit much. The fact that Car-

dinal O'Connor personally urged the NEA not to withdraw the grant — while a comment on his generosity of spirit — seems to us entirely irrelevant.

The cardinal — whose personal commitment to helping AIDS-afflicted patients is a source of profound moral inspiration to the entire community — says he doesn't consider himself "above criticism."

But "criticism" isn't the issue. In this instance, Cardinal O'Connor — and, by extension, the Roman Catholic Church — has been subjected to obscene mockery at public expense. This represents an abuse of public funds.

Needless to say, some members of the artistic community — so fond of asserting its independence, even as it relies on public subsidy — will rise to declare that the NEA is engaging in "censorship."

Some will present themselves as victims of government repression, just as they have in the past.

Let's remember that no one is preventing them from writing, producing and exhibiting anything they wish. The sole question is whether the general public should be obliged to underwrite everything and anything an artist wishes to create.

We think not. After all, should the taxpayer — via the NEA — be obliged to fund a work of art glorifying, say, Adolf Hitler? Even most artists, we hope, would answer in the negative.

But the difference between such an effort and the description of the cardinal as a "fat cannibal in a black skirt" is a matter of degree, not kind.

Let these artists — whose record of work with AIDS victims couldn't possibly exceed the cardinal's in terms of compassion, devotion and inspiration — call him anything they wish: but not on our dime.

A time for parents to go to school

Taxpayers can pour billions into public education and teachers can give it their all, but if parents don't get involved, not a lot is likely to happen.

what's going on in the classroom.

Each of the city's schools is setting aside at least two days for parent-teacher confabs — one in the daytime, one in the evening. Parents should call schools for details.

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