

The Endowment vs. the Arts: Anger and Concern

By WILLIAM H. HONAN

Prominent members of the arts community reacted with anger and concern yesterday to the decision by the National Endowment for the Arts to withdraw the agency's sponsorship of an exhibition about AIDS. The criticism came as the agency's new chairman elaborated on why he had withdrawn the endowment's support on the ground that the exhibition was more political than artistic.

On Wednesday, John E. Frohnmayer, the new chairman, announced that he had suspended a \$10,000 Federal grant approved by an endowment panel in May and asked that the endowment not be listed as a sponsor of the AIDS exhibition, which is to open Thursday at a nonprofit Manhattan art gallery, Artists Space.

Mr. Frohnmayer said he took the action against the exhibition, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" because of derogatory references in the show's catalogue to political and religious figures. It was the first such decision by the endowment since legislation was passed this fall by Congress to curtail Federal financing of certain artwork.

Effort to Limit Politics

"I'm doing my best to make my position clear," he said in an interview yesterday. "I hope it's coming through that it's because I care so passionately about the endowment that I think it's essential that we remove politics from grants and must do so if the endowment is to remain credible to the American people and to the Congress.

"Obviously, there are lots of great works of art that are political. Picasso's 'Guernica' and the plays of Bertolt Brecht are strongly political. But the question is, Should the endowment be funding art whose primary intent is political? The N.E.A. has always steered clear of that."

Reminded that a recent endowment grant helped to support the original production of Larry Gelbart's "Mastergate," a satire on the Iran-contra affair, at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., Mr. Frohnmayer said: "It's a question of degree. The endowment supports some works which have a component of politics in them, but what it comes down to is what is the primary intent of the piece."

Going Beyond Congress

This view was challenged by many people in the arts community who felt that he had gone beyond the language of the legislation curtailing Federal aid to the arts.

The measure approved by Congress states that money appropriated by Congress for the endowment may not be used to "promote, disseminate or produce materials considered obscene, including sadomasochism,

homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts." The language also includes the words "and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value." This was adopted by Congress in preference to a much broader restriction proposed by Senator Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican who led the campaign this year against Government financing of art considered obscene.

The show's sponsor, Artists Space, denies that its exhibition is political, saying it is an attempt to depict the emotions and spirituality felt by AIDS patients and their friends.

The exhibition presents work by 23 painters, photographers and sculptors and includes some images of homosexual acts.

A Very Angry Protest

Mr. Frohnmayer said that while he considered some of the images in the show in "questionable taste," his principal objection to the grant was to the catalogue.

"The catalogue to this show," he said yesterday, "is a very angry protest against the specific events and individuals involved over the last eight months in the most recent arts legislation in Congress. It's very inflammatory."

Floyd Abrams, the constitutional lawyer, said: "To withdraw funding of artistic works because the catalogue for those works criticizes public officials and other prominent figures is an appalling surrender of First Amendment principle."

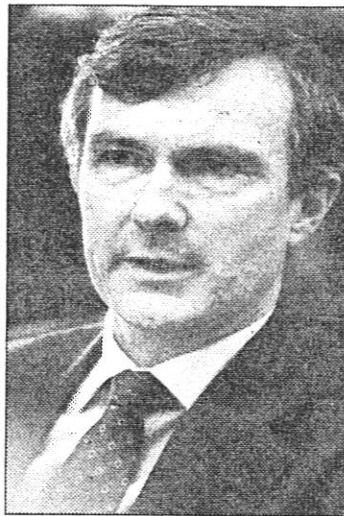
Susan Wyatt, the executive director

The agency's head says he wants to "remove politics from grants."

of Artists Space, declined to release the contents of the catalogue until the show opens. But she said that among those criticized in an essay in the catalogue by David Wojnarowicz, a New York photographer who has AIDS, were John Cardinal O'Connor, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York; Representative William E. Dannemeyer, Republican of California, and Senator Helms.

Others the Author Attacked

In an interview yesterday, Mr. Wojnarowicz also declined to release his essay because he said he feared portions of it "would be taken out of context." But he acknowledged that he had assailed public figures because of their positions on AIDS, although he



The New York Times/Michael Geissinger

John E. Frohnmayer, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, withdrew funds from an art show in New York.

did not elaborate on his objections.

Among those he attacked, he said, were Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, the New York Republican; Mayor Edward I. Koch of New York, and Stephen C. Joseph, the New York City Health Commissioner.

Commenting on Mr. Frohnmayer's actions, John Mashburn, a spokesman for Senator Helms, said: "Senator Helms said he was much more pleased by this than he was by the N.E.A.'s reaction under the former acting chairman to the Mapplethorpe exhibition."

Representative Dannemeyer is the author of a current book, "Shadow in the Land: Homosexuality in America," published by Ignatius Press, which argues that homosexuality is "curable" acquired behavior. He commended Mr. Frohnmayer yesterday "for doing what I think Congress told him to do."

Yates Says He's Disturbed

Cardinal O'Connor issued a statement saying, in part: "Had I been consulted, I would have urged very strongly that the National Endowment not withdraw its sponsorship on the basis of criticism against me personally. I do not consider myself exempt from or above criticism by anyone."

Representative Sidney R. Yates, the Chicago Democrat who engineered the defeat of the Helms amendment in its original form this year, said: "I have great respect for Mr. Frohnmayer, and he's new and we have to give him a chance." But he added he was "somewhat dis-

turbed" by the chairman's objection to so-called political art.

"I'm not sure what that means," Mr. Yates said. "What do you do with Daumier? Or Goya's 'Disasters of War'? What if a gallery wants to put up the cartoons of Thomas Nast against Boss Tweed? In itself, political statements are not a barrier to grants."

Papp Criticizes the Move

Joseph Papp, producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival, said his organization received more than \$400,000 this year from the agency. "Everyone should be upset about this, whether they get money or not, because it is an assault on the principles we think of as fundamental in our society," he said. "There is no question that this will have a widespread impact on all the arts," he added.

PEN American Center, the 2,400-member writer's group, condemned the endowment's action "in the strongest terms" in a statement that was issued by its president, the writer Larry McMurtry, and signed by E.L. Doctorow, Jerzy Kosinski, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, Susan Sontag, Robert Stone, William Styron, Gay Talese, Kurt Vonnegut and others.

Anne G. Murphy, executive director of the American Arts alliance, a Washington-based arts lobbying group, said: "I'm dismayed that Mr. Frohnmayer is reacting to the dialogue of the Congressional debate as opposed to the outcome, and we continue to feel that the decisions of the endowment must be based on artistic quality, not content."

A Hunting License

"We could see immediately that the compromise arts funding bill passed by Congress was a hunting license for the ultra-conservatives, but we didn't expect the first shot to be fired by the N.E.A.," said Ted Potter, director of the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C.

The center and another organization, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, organized the exhibitions, including works by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, that led to the Congressional restrictions.

The endowment's action, Mr. Potter said, "takes the compromise amendment one step further than the amendment itself." He said, "The objection is that it's too political — yet the amendment only speaks of obscenity and explicit sex acts."

William F. Buckley, the conservative columnist, supported the new director. "Mr. Frohnmayer is off to a good start," he said, adding that it was laudable that "there remain public representatives who don't believe in the copulative imperative, that art and-sex necessarily merits public support."