The New Criterion

Notes & Comments January 1990

The NEA since Frohnmeyer

The last two or so years have not been kind to the National Endowment for the Arts, the Federal agency charged with support of the arts on a national level.

First, in the spring of 1988, there was then-chairman Francis S. M. Hodsoll's ill-considered attempt to subject the peer panel considerations of grants to an undefined amount of computer-assisted qualification. After an outcry amongst grant recipients who were afraid of the replacement of human judgment by arithmetical formulas—and the resultant outcry in Congress—panel procedures were frozen by law, to the accompaniment of Mr. Hodsoll's humbled acquiescence and the arts advocacy community's open glee.

Then there was the Serrano/Mapplethorpe scandal, in which it transpired that nea funding was making possible the exhibition of material—in this case photographs—that many found a profound violation of public decency. The Corcoran Gallery's cancellation of the Mapplethorpe photographs exhibition in Washington, d.c., failed to ward off the storm of protest against the nea, and in the end only succeeded on the one hand in intensifying the battle between conservative forces in and out of Congress determined to pass legislative restrictions on nea grants, and on the other in stiffening the determination of visual artists and their advocates to see continued funding for the avant-garde. Though the exact meaning of the muddled compromise between nea friends and foes that resulted from behind-the-scenes dealing in a Senate-House Conference Committee is as yet unclear—and will probably remain so indefinitely—there can be no doubt that the agency now occupies a kind of legislative limbo, with Congressional intent regarding its activities at once vague and contradictory.

It is into this pretty bureaucratic kettle of fish that Portland lawyer John Frohnmayer was thrown last summer, as President Bush's nominee to replace Mr. Hodsoll, who had resigned as NEA chairman in February to become a high-ranking official at the Office of Management and Budget. Though some years previously Mr. Frohnmayer had been chairman of the Oregon Arts Council, and though he had amateur musical interests (as a singer of musical comedy) and was something of a collector of the visual arts of the Northwest, he was little known outside Oregon at the time of his nomination. It was widely rumored that his qualifications, in addition to a strong Republican Party background and his legal training, very much included his West Coast origins

and his complete lack of ties to the hitherto powerful Northeast arts establishment.
From the moment of his nomination, Mr. Frohnmayer sedulously refused to commit himself on whether the nea had acted properly or improperly in the matter of the Serrano and Mapplethorpe grants. His attitude seemed to be that, as the whole episode had taken place on someone else's watch, it was not his duty as the new kid on the block to comment on the past. Unfortunately, this refusal to take a position only intensified the difficulties in which the agency and its staff found itself. For the person on whose watch the questionable grants had been made was, of course, Mr. Hodsoll, the previous chairman—and Mr. Hodsoll, despite repeated entreaties from the press, wasn't talking.

As a result of this game of bureaucratic buck-passing, the burden of defending the nea between Mr. Hodsoll's resignation in February and Mr. Frohnmayer's confirmation at the beginning of October thus fell on acting chairman Hugh Southern, a holdover from the Hodsoll administration well aware, as anyone in such a position must be, that his tenure would be short; indeed, it was announced in September that Mr. Southern would become general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. In any case, in defending the agency against charges of the support of indecent art, Mr. Southern saw fit to take the side of the arts lobby against the political opposition, stressing the role of the nea in supporting what he saw as difficult and provocative new art, without at the same time making judgments on content.

Given the level of debate across the country about nea grants policy, it might have been thought that Mr. Frohnmayer's confirmation hearing would have been contentious, but it was in fact serene. The major interest in his sworn palaver with an elite group of senators, including Bob Packwood of Oregon and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, arose not from his thoughts on nea grants policy, but rather from his agreement that the agency needed more money if it was to do its job adequately. This hardly oblique request for increased funding came against a background of Bush Administration policy, seemingly enforced on other agency heads, of holding budgets flat or even—horrors—of cutting them.

The reaction to this reversal was predictable.

The first untoward event of Mr. Frohnmayer's term became public on November 8, when it was announced that he was withdrawing nea funding from an exhibition at Artists Space in New York City that was devoted to images of aids and its sufferers. Entitled "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," this artistically meager but nonetheless controversial exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue containing angry material excoriating religious and political figures for their alleged homophobia and for their equally alleged direct responsibility for the aids crisis. Mr. Frohnmayer's initial reason for the cancellation of nea funding specified the political content of the material; as

the storm broke, he changed his reason, on November 13, to what he called "an erosion of the artistic focus" of the exhibition; on November 16, he restored nea funding to the exhibition, stating that, by agreement with the sponsoring Artists Space, nea money would not be used to pay for the catalogue. The reaction to this reversal was predictable: outrage from conservative journalists, and, from arts spokesmen (a category very much including those responsible for an editorial in *The New York Times*), what might best be characterized as menacing praise, or what the Trotskyists used to call "critical support."

The fact of a Federal agency head who first avoids taking any position at all on a difficult matter and then, on a closely related matter, takes not one but several positions, hardly promises well for the conduct of public business. Furthermore, it was disquieting when, as quoted by Grace Glueck in the Times, Frohnmayer could do no better in explaining his reversal on the Artists Space grant than remark:

> Certainly the last thing I want to do is to be crosswise with a major part of the Endowment's constituency. . . . The word political means something quite different in Portland, Ore., than in Washington.

But perhaps most disquieting has been Mr. Frohnmayer's expression of what might be called his philosophy of art. In a press conference at the Endowment offices in Washington on October 18, the very day that he was first informed of the existence of the Artists Space exhibition in New York City, he responded in the following way to an inquiry about his own view of what the nea should be supporting:

> The finest old-time fiddler is probably as much an artist as the concertmaster. . . . Long needlework is as much a part of what we should be endowing—it is looking for excellence—as is the finest visual artist working in oils and painting in the great tradition.

This view, which William H. Honan called "a broad, populist view of the arts" in the *Times* article from which the above quotation is taken, signals a return at the nea to the discredited yearnings of the Carter Administration, yearnings which came close to destroying both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Moreover, it suggests a resumption, after the interregnum of the Reagan years, of the trend immanent in Federal cultural support since the beginning of the Endowments in the mid-1960s: the lowering and cheapening of great works of art, the concomitant blurring of distinctions between great art and folk art, and, above all, the use of public support to respond to vocal and organized constituencies, rather than to the reclusive and vulnerable masterpieces of civilization.

Taken together with Mr. Frohnmayer's divagations on the Artists Space grant, this approach to funding presages the ultimate mediocritization of Federal cultural support, and the shipwreck of a once not-ignoble dream on the social provocations of the avant-garde, the inflated claims of local crafts, and the exigencies of party politics. Taken together with Mr. Frohnmayer's assorted

difficulties, this approach goes far to suggest that the always difficult argument for Federal cultural support is now becoming, for many once favorably disposed, well-nigh impossible.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 8 Number 5 , on page 1

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1990/1/the-nea-since-frohnmeyer