

Public Support of the Arts

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“But is it art?” That question, so often voiced by anxious museumgoers, plainly reveals our collective state of aesthetic confusion. We may congratulate ourselves on living in artistically exciting times, or we may secretly envy our ancestors, who worried mainly whether what they were viewing was good or bad art, and not whether it was art at all. Only on rare occasions does our characteristically modern anxiety take on an air of urgency. Yet urgent it became in September when members of the U.S. Senate debated, and finally rejected, Senator Jesse Helms’s proposal to bar federal funding for “indecent” or “obscene” art works.

At the eye of the storm stood the National Endowment for the Arts, surrounded by a collection of highly controversial photographs. One, by Andres Serrano, showed a plastic crucifix immersed in urine. Upon learning last May that NEA funds had gone to a North Carolina arts center, which in turn gave a grant to Serrano, Senator Alfonse D’Amato denounced the endowment for subsidizing “filth.” Soon afterwards Representative Dick Armey discovered that NEA funds had also gone to the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, which organized a traveling exhibition of (now notorious) photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe.

The Mapplethorpe show included pictures that some called “homosexual” and “sodomasochistic.” Armey’s description was far less restrained. In June he fired off a letter to the NEA declaring that “the interpretation of art is a subjective evaluation, but there is still a very clear and unambiguous line that exists between what