NEA Vetoes Funding of List Exhibit, Bringing Art Controversy to MIT

By Joanna Stone

On Dec. 12, the exhibit, "Corporal Politics," opened at MIT's List Visual Arts Center. It is currently on view through Feb. 14. "Support for this project was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. And therein lies a tale," writes Katy Kline, director of the List Center in the catalogue for the "Corporal Politics" exhibition.

"It's as if there are brush fires going off. This is a case where the government will not be politically motivated," said Posner, noting that she would "rather, from the record itself" modify the NEA application and said that the government will not be motivated. "If you are going to tell the government that it's not doing what it should be doing, your actions can only serve to detract from the government's credibility of the peer review process."

All of this followed Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Stegner's rejection of a National Medal for the Arts and the resignation of an NEASolo Theatre peer panel.

On May 12, Aimee-Irfa Wells, director of the List Center, submitted two NEA applications for the Catalogue for the "Corporal Politics" exhibition.

"I feel the government has betrayed us," said Posner, noting that she had simply remade an exhibit. "I feel absolutely another reason to further elaborate on the reasons behind her decision."

In a statement to the press, Radice said, "Grant applications are evaluated on the basis of artistic excellence and artistic merit." According to Radice, the applications of MIT and Virginia Commonwealth "did not measure up to these criteria and, therefore, are unlikely to have the long-term significance necessary to merit endowment funding." Posner said she believed Radice's decision to be politically motivated. "I feel absolutely another agenda here — to have the NEA serve as a political watchdog — to reject any projects that are controversial and that's censorship."

List Center responds

The great irony of the matter, according to Posner, is that "Corporal Politics" was rejected for its sexual nature and yet the exhibit is not sexually explicit. In a letter to Radice, responding to her decision to deny funding to the List Center, Posner and Kline, director of the List Center, wrote, "As a careful examination of the artist's supporting visual materials would indicate, the sculptures included in this exhibit are not 'sexually explicit'; the sexual organ and other body parts are metaphorical expressions of a spiritual malaise and disinclination which is a widespread topic in contemporary art."

Posner and Kline's letter expresses their own strong emotions on the matter: "This arbitrary and politically motivated action is an absolute decision-making process which had served the NEA well over many years."

Posner and Kline's criticisms were later echoed in a May 19 letter to Radice on behalf of the members of the Special Exhibitions Panel B which approved the M1T proposal. The committee wrote: "Had you simply said what it is — the sexual subconscious two years earlier, that you would veto sexually explicit art, then your actions, although regrettable, would be more understandable. However, by giving the false impression that these exhibitions did not meet our panel's standard of artistic quality, your actions can only serve to polarize public opinion and unfairly damage the credibility of the peer review process." Posner said Radice's reaction came as a great surprise to her. "I knew the NEA was becoming more and more conservative — I thought it might be discussed in the review process," said Posner. However, the project was approved by the National Council of the Arts on May 1, with concern for its possible sexual nature, as far as Posner was aware.

Private sector encouraged

Following her original decision, Radice came out with several official statements in response to the protests which had ensued. Radice issued a series of statements expressing her regretthat the two panels could not suspend their deliberations. In a statement of a different tone, the NEA said it was pleased that Aero- smith was planning to go forward with the exhibition. "We always encourage private sector funding of the arts," said Josh Dare, spokesman for the NEA.

According to Dare, NEA funding is given on a "one-dollar-for-dollar match basis. Had "Corporal Politics" been granted the NEA funding, the List Center would have been required to match the endowment's $10,000 with money raised from the private sector. Currently, the List Center is not planning on soliciting further private donations.

"It has been our opinion that artists should seek private sector funding for controversial exhibits," he said. "We are concerned about not having wide distribution by American taxpayers who essentially write the checks for these exhibits. We are concerned about not having wide distribution by American taxpayers who essentially write the checks for these exhibits."

According to Dare, soliciting such funding is not quite as easy. "To say the funding would have been available without the controversy is untrue," said Posner, noting that if she had simply sought out private funding originally, she would not have gotten $10,000 from Aerosmith.

A week later, on May 29, New York playwright John Robin Baitz announced he would donate the equivalent of his NEA fellowship to the List Center for "Corporal Politics" and to the Anderson Gallery in support of "Anonymity and Identity," the exhibit at the Virginia Commonwealth University, which was also denied funding by Radice.

According to Helaine Posner, curator of the List Center, Bates legally accepted money from the NEA and then gave the donations from his own account. "[Baitz] wrote us a letter basically saying that he did it to protest restricting the freedom of expression," Posner said.

The overwhelming public outrage was inspired by "an end to the NEA?" according to Posner, soliciting such funding is not quite as easy. "It's as if there are brush fires going off. "I feel the government has betrayed us," said Posner, noting that she had simply remade an exhibit. "I feel absolutely another reason to further elaborate on the reasons behind her decision."

In a statement to the press, Radice said, "Grant applications are evaluated on the basis of artistic excellence and artistic merit." According to Radice, the applications of MIT and Virginia Commonwealth "did not measure up to these criteria and, therefore, are unlikely to have the long-term significance necessary to merit endowment funding." Posner said she believed Radice's decision to be politically motivated. "I feel absolutely another agenda here — to have the NEA serve as a political watchdog — to reject any projects that are controversial and that's censorship."

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