

An Insider's Look at How NEA Awards Its Grants

This month, recommendations for three artists' grants were denied by the National Endowment for the Arts, causing a new wave of controversy for the embattled arts agency. Calendar asked Andy Grundberg, chair of the photography panel that recommended the grants, to provide an insider's view of the proceedings and current state of affairs at the endowment. Grundberg is a former photography critic for the New York Times and is currently director of Friends of Photography in San Francisco.

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As one who has admired the National Endowment for the Arts for its commitment to artistic excellence and cultural equity, I find it hard to believe that the agency's putative conscience, the National Council on the Arts, decided on Aug. 5—after an informal lunchtime slide show—to deny fellowships to three deserving photographers. As a member of the "advisory peer panel" that had recommended that the three artists receive the fellowships, I find it even harder to believe that the council acted purely on aesthetic grounds.

The three artists—Merry Alpern, Barbara DeGenevieve and Andres Serrano—were selected from among 1,700 applicants for the photography fellowships that the endowment awards every other year. They are photographers whose work I have followed, respected and often (though not always, as is my critic's prerogative) admired during the course of my 20 years in the field.

The six other panelists who were convened by the endowment last spring included five nationally known artists and one "layman" from outside the field. All of us agreed that Alpern, DeGenevieve and Serrano deserved to be among the 30-odd candidates we ultimately recommended to receive endowment funds. But the National Council, which includes no one

with a background in the art of photography, saw fit to overrule our recommendation. Never before had the council rejected a fellowship peer panel's judgments.

At least superficially, the council's action was within the rules under which the endowment operates. All grants applications go through the same exacting process: They are reviewed by an advisory panel of experts, which recommends them to the National Council. The council then recommends them to the chair of the endowment. Only when the chair approves does a grant become official. But, if the council disapproves, as it did in this case, a grant cannot be awarded. (This little-known wrinkle was put into effect by Congress in 1990.)

However, the National Endowment for the Arts has long honored a higher mandate: that decisions be made not on the basis of favoritism, political expediency or influence, but solely on the basis of artistic quality. As a panel, we observed this mandate scrupulously. Unfortunately, the National Council did not.

As the transcript of the council's public session reveals, the discussion about the photography fellowship began with citations of Congress' eagerness to see that the council not be a "rubber stamp" of peer panel decisions. One member alluded to the fact that Congress is about to decide how much to cut the endowment's budget for the coming fiscal year. Other council members then expressed doubts about whether the pictures they had seen in slide form represented the best the field of photography had to offer.

Artistic quality? Let's not kid ourselves. The name "Serrano" on the list of fellowship recommendations set off alarms among the council's 26 members well before they arrived in Washington for their meeting. They knew, as we on the panel knew, that Serrano's work had touched off a political crisis for the endowment five years ago—a crisis that has seemed to abate only recently. But as panelists we abided by the instructions given us: We were to decide only

on artistic merit. And the work Serrano submitted with his application was among the strongest we had the privilege of seeing.

The same was true of the works of Alpern and DeGenevieve. Like Serrano, who had photographed dead bodies in powerful fashion, Alpern and DeGenevieve focused on powerful, sometimes disturbing, subject matter. Their sin, however, was to include images that revealed the human body, and human foibles, in unflinching fashion.

Alpern's documentary images of sex and drugs being traded in an urban office building and DeGenevieve's crafted image/text works about gender and sexuality apparently pushed more than half the council members over the edge. Either that, or they felt that singling out Serrano would look too calculated.

So the council did the expedient thing, late enough on a Friday so that virtually no press coverage emerged until several days later. What amazes me, and makes me intensely angry, is the casualness with which the council members took their responsibility to consider the aesthetic issues raised by the images they chose to view. For one, not every member of the council actually saw the slides submitted by the three photographers; they were shown first to a subgroup of eight members and again during an unofficial session during a lunch break, when attendance was entirely optional. For another, no one had the wisdom to refer to critical expertise in a field outside their ken; no reviews were read, no references made to the artists' exhibition records or other achievements.

Anyone who has participated in an endowment peer panel can testify to the fairness of the arduous, sometimes exasperating process by which grant recommendations are made. In my case, five days were spent looking at, by my estimate, 25,000 slides. First we looked at 17,000 slides submitted, then at the first-round survivors, then again at a second cut, and once again to select the finalists. We argued and agonized, asked to hear the artist's statement and exhibition information, looked at the slides again, and finally agreed without dissent. By the end of the week we were all fast friends, and we knew more about the state of contemporary photography than we could have imagined.

The National Council operates quite differently. Its decisions, although binding on the chair of the endowment, are made quickly and across a wide range of disciplines. The council's members cannot see the thousands of slides culled early on. They cannot debate the stature of an artist who is totally unfamiliar to them. Ultimately their decisions come down to two factors: personal taste and politics. Neither belongs in the process.

The council's recent actions suggest that the process is now fundamentally flawed. Congress has interfered with the endowment's procedures to the extent that they no longer ensure excellence and equity.

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I do not know if this is the inevitable result of legislative meddling, or a conscious wish to subvert the agency over the long term, but it seems clear that we need to return to the original language of the authorizing legislation for the endowment, or at least to a pre-1990 version. Until this happens, two dozen political appointees constituting the National Council for the Arts will continue to be national arbiters of what art is good enough to be recognized and rewarded.

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