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Reshuffling the NEA

IN THE YEARS after the National Endowment for the Arts got in trouble over the infamous Mapplethorpe and Serrano photo exhibits, two prescriptions were heard with contrapuntal regularity. The first was that the NEA ought to farm more of its decision-making work out to the state and local arts agencies, the "real people" in touch with community values, and thus break the deadlock of the (it was said) elitist, ingrown, backbiting peer panels. The second piece of advice, of course, was just the opposite: The NEA should get a grip, centralize, take its decision-making apparatus firmly in hand and increase the chairman's accountability by eliminating the messy system of grants and subgrants. No one ever proved the case that either of these steps would be satisfactory, maybe because neither would have necessarily had any effect on the decisions that produced Serrano and Mapplethorpe.

Now that NEA Chairman Jane Alexander has gone a few steps down the second route, announcing the elimination for money-saving purposes of several programs that made "subgrants" to their own artists, NEA-watchers on all sides of the issues are assiduously trying to trace the likely

political effect. But despite the agonized response of defunded and likely to be defunded artists, there's no reason the politics of this should cut either way. Just as the Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano photo displays grew out of ordinary grants to museums assembling exhibits of completed works they liked—not out of any funding of these men's work in progress—so with this year's micro-flap, the \$150 that went to a theater festival featuring the razor-wielding Ron Athey. Mr. Athey never got a "regrant" or a "subgrant" at all; he just appeared at a festival that had gotten some NEA money for operating costs.

No change in the patterns of in-house book-keeping will keep opponents of the NEA from finding pennies here and there devoted to art that will set somebody's teeth on edge. About all the cutting of programs may do is tighten the procedures and eliminate some outlays in an agency that, for the above inexorable reasons, keeps getting little bits chopped out of its budget by Congress. The NEA is in fact, by all indications, engaging in financial management. There are worse things for an endowment chair to do.

not about
consensus