

Counterpunch

Who Should Choose Art Shown to the Public?

By CHARLES DESMARAIS

The Times' report that the Laguna Art Museum "rejected" a work of art by Mark Heresy titled "Freedom of the Press," an American flag "constructed of photos from porno magazines" implied that the rejection was the result of fear that the museum might lose funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The simple facts of the matter do not support such an implication. The Heresy exhibition is not supported by arts endowment funds, and thus is invulnerable to endowment action. Moreover, the museum is exhibiting 19 works from among 21 (not 19 of 20, or 20 of 21, as reported in various editions of The Times). They were selected in consultation with the artist, who respected our curatorial decision and never felt he was censored. The two Heresy flag works



Charles Desmarais

not chosen were "Freedom of the Press" and a collage made from Christmas wrap and flashing lights.

The article, however, raised larger issues.

Ironically, one of these is exactly the same as that raised by conservative attempts to dictate restrictions on artistic content, for the current debate over federal funding of the arts is not only about the very important principle of freedom of expression. It is also about who will choose the art our museums and theaters and symphonies present and to which our communities have access.

I have said publicly and repeatedly that I will not allow government interference in that process as long as I am director of the Laguna Art Museum. Perhaps I should have also said that I will not allow press interference. The museum's highly trained and experienced curatorial staff takes very seriously its responsibility to carefully and fairly select works of art and assemble them into exhibitions that educate, edify and challenge the museum's audience.

As I told The Times last week, "we select what we believe to be

valuable and important" to share with the public as part of each exhibition. In the process, we always leave out much more than we select, for each artist may have hundreds of works, and there are thousands of artists in California alone.

Others may agree with our choices or not. But to imply that such choices are driven by cowardice and fear is to hit below the belt.

Correct or incorrect, it was our call that "Freedom of the Press" was not essential to the exhibition we were assembling. As for most exhibitions, works were borrowed from a number of lenders around Southern California—not excerpted from a pre-existing set. We had 19 flags—enough to give the sense of the work without unduly diverting viewer attention to the strong sexual content of "Freedom of the Press" (or, for that matter, to the flashing lights of the other flag not selected).

Apart from this practical consideration, though, I would also argue that just as the museum has the right to exhibit challenging or difficult work, it also has the right to consider community values in making its choices.

Whoever said that all the works exhibited in museums must be controversial, or that all potentially controversial works must be shown? This is not to say that it would be illegal or improper to exhibit "Freedom of the Press"—indeed, I reserve the museum's future right to exhibit it if there is a compelling curatorial reason to do so—and it is far from saying that the museum won't continue to exhibit challenging work on adult themes, as it has in the past.

Finally, I resent the underlying assumption of this and other Times articles that funding from the National Endowment for the Arts has in some way tainted the Laguna Art Museum and the other institutions nationally that have earned and accepted some 4,200 grants this year (according to the endowment 16 grants have been turned down).

The application process for arts endowment grants is a rigorous one. A successful application is a badge of honor and achievement, awarded after thorough review by peer panels of nationally recognized experts in the field. I am very proud that the Laguna Art Museum this year received the largest grant ever awarded in Orange County, as

Laguna Museum Shows 20 Flags, but Waives 21st

■ Art: Orange County's largest NEA grantee excludes a controversial piece from Mark Heresy's 'Flags' exhibit.

By JOHN PENNER

LAGUNA BEACH—The Laguna Art Museum, whose director has vowed to "abide by the rules" to secure a hefty sum of National Endowment for the Arts grants, has excluded a potentially controversial work from one of its current installations. The exhibit, "Flags," includes 20 of 21 American flags that political artist Mark Heresy has fashioned out of such materials as bullets and buckshot shells, cut currency as bullets and human hair. But the 21st flag, "Freedom of the Press," a Stars and Stripes replica constructed of photos from porno graphic magazines, has been left out. The Laguna Art Museum is Orange County's largest NEA grantee, having been awarded \$222,500. Rejected grants have been resubmitted.

well as five other awards. This will provide a total of \$222,500 for education programs, exhibitions, preservation of irreplaceable works of art and other projects that will greatly benefit the people of Southern California.

Along with most other arts leaders, I object to the endowment's

current requirement that grantees sign a promise not to present obscene works. I see the certification as unnecessary, perhaps unconstitutional, and an affront to the dignity of arts professionals akin to the loyalty oaths of the 1950s. However, the certification amounts, in the end, only to a promise that we will abide by the Supreme Court's definition of obscenity—something that all citizens must do.

As a member of the government and art committee of the Assn. of Art Museum Directors, I have had the opportunity to discuss this issue at length with the directors of the nation's largest and most prestigious museums.

The vast majority are accepting the grants they earn from the National Endowment for the Arts, while expressing their concerns about the certification to their representatives and endowment officials. I applaud any institution that chooses other methods of protesting the regulation, as a few have by bringing suit or turning down the funds. And I have seen nothing but support from such institutions for the method the majority of arts groups have chosen.

Desmarais is director of the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach. The exhibition "Mark Heresy: Flags" continues through Dec. 16.