

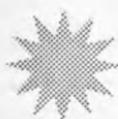
*About
the
Author*

Dr. Richard Grupenhoff has taught film production and film history at Rowan College for the past fifteen years. He has written and directed numerous screenplays, documentaries, and industrial films.

In addition, he is the author of the biography *The Black Valentino: The Stage and Screen Career of Lorenzo Tucker*, and is a nationally recognized historian of independent African-American filmmaking in the United States.

He has recently appeared in a series of poetry performances in San Francisco, sponsored by the Institute of Disemboweled Poetics, of which he is co-founder.

An Open Letter to Jesse Helms



Richard Gruperhoff

Dear Senator Helms:

I can't thank you enough for your attacks these past two years on the funding policies of the National Endowment for the Arts and, by extension, creativity. By making those attacks, you have exercised your right of freedom of expression under the protection of the First Amendment, and I am always pleased when I see people practicing their constitutional rights, even when I disagree with what they have to say.

So even those of us who disagree with your views can be thankful to you for opening up a discussion that has long been needed and is central to the health and vitality of our culture. Art and creativity are topics that have been marginalized for too long, yet you have helped to bring them center stage, so a discourse on them can command the attention it deserves. Our society can only benefit from your work.

The abolition of the NEA is certainly worth considering. I'm not sure myself anymore if the federal government should have anything to say about art, which is far too important to be controlled by politicians and obsequious bureaucrats. Yet

the NEA remains part of our government structure, and, until it is repealed by law, moneys will continue to be disbursed through it, hopefully to a wide variety of artists with a wide variety of themes.

Discussing the life of the NEA is one thing, but blocking the distribution of tax funds for artistic enterprises on moral grounds is quite another thing altogether, because what you are really attacking is the freedom to express creative ideas and thoughts, particularly those that are at odds with your beliefs and values. But free expression of creative moments is essential to the health of our society. The suppression of creativity, of feelings and desires that struggle to be voiced, leads to self-doubt, depression, anger, social discontent, and cultural schizophrenia.

Free artistic expression does not erode the values of our culture; censorship does. Feelings are as important as ideas, and emotions as important as reason. The truly healthy psyche is the one in which emotion and intellect are blended in a symbiotic relationship. Unfortunately, for a long time our culture has denied emotion in favor of reason, feelings in favor of logic—so much so that we continue to deny ourselves the full integration of individual personalities that could make our culture flower.

You might dismiss my ideas as idealistic or nonsensical. Yet I, like you, have the right to express them, if only to offer them as alternatives to the bleak and colorless world your position dooms us to.

But there's something more insidious here. What is at stake when you attack the merit of Mapplethorpe's photographs, or Serrano's "Piss Christ," or Holly Hughes' performance art is far more than a minor issue of taste and morality. What you really seem to want is a public trial and testimony of how it is our society is to view things, how we are—and are not—supposed to express ourselves and, ultimately, how we are supposed to think.

Freedom of expression in an open society implies the freedom to think and to express any thought that comes to

mind. Thoughts and ideas are the very essence of our humanity. Each person's thoughts are as important as any other person's thoughts. To impose one's thoughts on others or to deny the expression of thoughts is simply intellectual and self-righteous chauvinism.

Thoughts and ideas are the raw material of an individual's personality, and, as such, they are sacred. To deny a person the forum or occasion to express his or her own creative impulses, therefore, is to commit an obscenity far greater than any creative act could express. Until we understand this, we understand nothing.

Not that what you are attempting to do is anything new. History is replete with examples of censorship. At the college where I teach, there are annual attempts by those in power to stifle students' creative work, especially that which appears in student publications. Certainly some of that work is crude and unpolished, but the students, to their credit, most often resist pressure to conform to more "acceptable" standards of taste, and continue to practice their creative urges.

As I see it, my role as a teacher is to encourage and permit my students to explore and express the full range of their personalities in an open atmosphere where no ideas are censored, even if—or especially if—I don't agree with them. Only then will students have the opportunity to achieve their potential and lead full lives and be productive citizens.

I teach my filmmaking students that in the realm of the creative imagination there are no rules. Yet, while there are no rules, there is no chaos; rather, there is a kind of controlled anarchy where all is permissible, and where all is essential to the spirit of the creative act. I tell them also that art happens when what were once only vague feelings become the conscious expressions of choice and will. Dreams, hopes, desires, fears, frustrations, and emotions are the well-spring of creativity. The emotions engage the raw materials of experience on an unconscious level at first, and through the imagination they are combined and tested in a series of

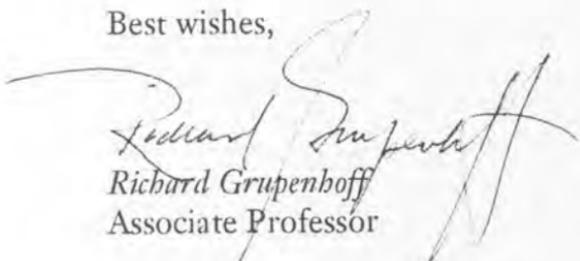
unrestricted mental calculations governed by the cool logic of intuition. When the process is completed, the creative solution presents itself to the artist's consciousness and says, "Here I am." This vision is what is known as inspiration.

And this vision, this moment of inspiration, is as sacred as any other moment you can name. It springs from the private contemplation of the individual mind and therefore has an ethic all its own. The ethic is unassailable and unbending in the face of the "truth" of those who would seek to curtail it. All art is a testament to its strength.

So do what you will, Senator, but what we do with our creative thoughts is no business of yours, even though you might like to think so. You may be successful in dismantling the National Endowment for the Arts, but tomorrow there will be another Mapplethorpe, another Serrano to contest your pathology of emptiness, substituting instead vivid desires, creative willing, and decisive action.

Throughout America today there are people who are not practicing artists and do not submit grant proposals to the NEA. Nevertheless, they lead very creative lives—creative in the ways they build and furnish their homes, in the ways they prepare their food, in the ways they dress, in the ways they express themselves in conversation. In short, there are many out there who exercise daily creative options. Their urges to create manifest themselves in choices taken by individuals to construct meaning out of daily existence in a search for self-realization and self-fulfillment. Your position, Senator, works to erode their gains. We urge you to support all the creative people of our society. Anything less is un-American.

Best wishes,



Richard Gruppenhoff
Associate Professor



On Creativity

Shooting a film is organizing a universe....

— *Ingmar Bergman*

Life is as the sea, art a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course, a series of swells, tides and wind currents inscribed on a chart.

— *Ralph Ellison*

The only technique worth having is the technique you invent yourself.

— *Jean Cocteau*

Works of art are indeed always products of having been in danger, of having gone to the very end in an experience, to where man can go no further.

— *Rainer Maria Rilke*

One Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision.

— *William Blake*

There is no royal path to good writing; and such paths as exist do not lead through neat critical gardens,... but through the jungles of self, the world, and of craft.

— *Jessamyn West*