

# Repression of ART

by Jim Roche

*The following column addresses the federal government's restriction of funds to the National Endowment for the Arts based on two artists' works. Andres Serreno for his depiction of a crucifix in a jar of urine and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe known for his portraits and for photos containing homoerotic images and overtones.*

Jesus in a jar of piss? Well, I'll admit it's hard for some to defend, but believe me, we as a community and as individuals had better defend it. Regretfully the gay community doesn't seem to realize yet that this threat Jesse Helms has made to art through his punitive legislation isn't just limited to curtailing the freedom of speech of artists. It's a direct attempt to establish a national code of decency which, in Helms' own words, would restrict funding to any organizations that "promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or materials which denigrate the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or nonreligion." In other words: any museum, gallery, arts, dance, theatre or similar program that gets federal funds would have to ask itself if whatever project it is involved with promotes or disseminates homoeroticism. If it did, or might be seen to, is it worth the risk? There are a lot of questions here: what is art? Should the government be involved in the arts? Who makes these decisions? But all of them can be put aside because it comes down to this: few arts programs would exist without some federal aid and if your aid is threatened because of your program's connections with homosexuality, homosexual art, artists, directors, themes, topics and sensibilities then your whole program is threatened. If only on program is hurt by this legislation the result is censorship for all. Fear will see that Jesse Helms has found yet another weapon to use against his favorite target. This time, unashamedly, the rest of congress, a good portion of the American public and even some conservative religious gays and lesbians, are following along.

The answer to why Helms finally chose to attack the endowment is clear. Art has always been seen as a hiding place for homosexuals and what has become known as "gay sensibility." There are homosexuals everywhere in the arts, in opera, dance, painting, music, sculpture. Besides being a safe haven for homosexuals it's also a launching point for homosexual sensibili-

ties to make their way into mainstream culture. The arts are where we are often at our best because we can be ourselves and where we can, to some extent, say who we are without fear of retribution. Try to find a play on Broadway that isn't either written, directed, produced or for the most part acted out by gay and lesbian people. You won't find many. Go to a museum and try finding a gallery without works by gay men or lesbians or works without homoerotic overtones. That's not too easy to do. And Helms, I suppose, is just fed up with all this "queer art." Maybe we could get rid of all social realist paintings and poverty wouldn't exist either? Censorship of reality has never worked.

Helms is worried about the breaking down of what he calls western culture and the destruction of the American family. The weakening of religion. He sees people like Andres Serreno and Robert Mapplethorpe as two artists who want to do just that.

The battle between the mainstream culture, the status quo, and the input of artists and the threat they represent to that status has gone on for a long time. We are again fighting that battle. Sure, two small exhibits don't matter much. These artists will be picked up by other museums and galleries that won't use federal funds. Look at what happened to Mapplethorpe's retrospective, the censorship by the Corcoran only led to more people seeing the show than ever would have. Well, it's not that

simple. Understand what Helms is up to this time. He wants to silence and punish anyone who might give homosexuals and homosexuality a box to stand on or a voice with which to be heard. He knows that art in general threatens the status quo, that art is part of the pattern of people thinking, questioning and experimenting. Helms is worried, not that these bits and pieces of art reflect and spread "the word" about homosexuality. Not that these photos are examples of art imitating life. He's worried that life might start imitating art. And that means that his final solution will be to purge all art that permits and reinforces our gay and lesbian visibility.

A few photos. A jar of piss. This may not all seem to serious or personal to you, but wait till Helms tries to take away the fourth class mailing rate from your favorite gay magazine, or your local gay and lesbian paper, or takes away the tax exempt status from your local community center, stops a gay pride parade or refuses to let you have your picnic in a public park because all these activities, one way or another use federal funds. That's where Jesse Helms is going with this. Make no mistake about that. And he has to be stopped. Now. Write to your representatives in Washington. Speak out. Helms wants to run another phobic piece of legislation up the flagpole to see who salutes, and with the help of George Bush, if we aren't careful, everybody might because it will be illegal not to.

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