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THIRTY CENTS

Besieged by Demands for More Money, Taxpayers See Funds Descending Into Cesspool of 'Art' Filth

SPECIAL REPORT

NEA Paints Veil Of Secrecy on Art Works Felt To Be Obscene

BY WALTER SKOLD
New York City Tribune Staff

EDITOR'S NOTE: Some of the material in this series of articles may be considered offensive. We apologize. However, without accurately describing and quoting the programs and people who are the focus of this report, the nature of their art might be obscured.

First of 4 Parts

"We are not the nation's official pornographer, and it's important that the country know that," said National Endowment for the Arts Chairman John Frohnmayer when he took control of the beleaguered agency last October.

Despite that proclamation, Frohnmayer may have a lot of house cleaning to do if critics have their way. A special investigation by the *New York City Tribune* has discovered that for at least a decade, the NEA and the New York State Council on the Arts have consistently funded artists and institutions who create what critics are now calling "obscene" art.

Far from boasting about its support for controversial performance art, the NEA has tried to maintain a veil of secrecy by refusing to respond to reporters' queries and by asking at least one playhouse to avoid causing the agency any "trouble with legislators."

The nationwide turmoil over "ob-

The *City Tribune* has now learned that the NYSCA approved funding for a performance by Johanna Went, a performance artist, who has a reputation for using such stage props as "giant, bloody tampons," "satanic bunnies," "three-foot turds," and "dildos" in her shows.

Another performance artist who has benefited from federal largesse is Karen Finley. Her provocative shows were described recently by *Village Voice* art critic Elinor Fuchs as "a toxic landfill of throwaway bodies" which creates a "theatre of disgust filled with obscene fantasies."

According to the text of a 1986 Finley performance at the Kitchen — a performing arts and video playhouse in the Chelsea section of Manhattan — which was published in the *Drama Review*, she talks about cutting off men's testicles, putting them in her mouth and mixing them with her excrement — she says "dung" — because she is "The Queen of the Dung Dynasty."

"Using tax dollars to fund this type of trash is an absolute outrage," said Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., who used the example of Sprinkle last Thursday when he attacked the NEA publicly for some of the ways in which it spends

presently boasts the largest collection of art in book form in the United States.

Foundation Grants

Besides government grants, the Furnace receives funding from more than 30 foundations, including the Hugh Hefner Foundation, the New York Times Company Foundation, Con Edison, the Swedish Consulate General, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

The amount of sexually explicit experimental art the gallery has sponsored over the years has only been a small percentage of its total product, but many of the female performance artists whom they have accommodated have been at the extreme cutting- and controversial-edge of the art world.

In the critical artistic community that reviews this genre of work, the women are labelled "post-porn modernists," "feminist artists" or simply "avant-garde."

Kitty Carlisle Hart, chairwomen of the NYSCA, adamantly denied last week that state funds had been allocated specifically for *Sprinkle*, but the approved 1990 contract with the Kitchen did include four performances by Went.

Whether or not the Kitchen actually received direct state funding this year for the recent *Sprinkle* performance is open to interpretation, but in early 1984, the NEA sent four officials scrambling to the City to avert a publicity nightmare because of a show called *Second Coming*.

The month-long exhibition, which was developed by a feminist/activist group called Carnival Knowledge, also included a 1-night performance by

state Senator Frank Padavan, R-Corona, denying any specific funding of the show. The Furnace had received \$73,370 from NYSCA and \$208,390 from NEA that season.

She also told Padavan that "we fund groups based on their administrative capability to spend the taxpayers' money in a prudent manner and upon their artistic track record."

Padavan was not impressed with Hart's denials; he wrote back that "monies being given to the Franklin Furnace obviously makes it possible for them to accommodate this type of despicable presentation."

"When you state that you make your determination regarding funding based on the totality of their efforts without taking into consideration any component, the reason being the free expression of artistic endeavors," he wrote, "I am only compelled to say 'baloney!'"

Wilson, who also directs activities at the Furnace, told the *City Tribune* that the NEA officials' message to the board was; "Please don't put our name on anything that is going to cause us trouble with legislators."

Wilson is quite proud of all of the various Furnace productions and feels she has nothing to hide.

"We are heavily supported by the NEA for doing experimental work," said Wilson. "That is our cultural mission."

"There is no doubt about it, they pay for risky art," she added. "If they fund the whole series, I will put their name on it."

Based on newspaper reviews, NYSCA funding records and material about the shows kept in the Furnace archives, which the *City Tribune* has examined, it is probable that in recent years New Yorkers' taxes have partially or fully funded shows, which have depicted the following:

- Bodily excretions.
- Sexual intercourse and masturbation.
- Shamanistic and new age sex-religion rituals.
- Graphic tales of incest and sexual assault.
- Transvestism.
- The striking mixture of sacred and erotic images.

More than 10 days ago, the NEA was asked by the *City Tribune* to provide funding details for various artists and performances, but it was only after Rohrabacher spoke out about Sprinkle Feb. 1 that officials began supplying some answers, albeit sketchy ones. While the exact funding details are fuzzy, the *City Tribune* has learned the following facts:

In 1987, the NEA gave a \$40,000 grant to the Furnace for its visual arts program. Included in the year's series was one performance by Went and an undetermined number of performances by Frank Moore and Cheri Gaulke.

'Hyena of Performance Art'

The 1987 Furnace press release for Went's show, *Twin Travel Terror*, described her as the "Hyena of Performance Art," whose shows "have never

ARTIES



FRANKLIN FURNACE'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY ALBUM

Award presentations to 20th century avant-garde artists who have contributed to popular culture.

THE ARTIES were the honors bestowed upon avant-garde artists by the Franklin Furnace in 1986. Lily Tomlin hosted the event.

government funds.

"Miss Sprinkle is manipulating herself with toys and selling opportunities for audience participation in her act with the assistance of tax dollars," he said on the House floor, "generously provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, which receives half a million dollars in unrestricted funds each year from the National Endowment for the Arts."

Went was supposed to perform at the Kitchen next month, but curator Scott Macaulay said she canceled her scheduled performance for personal reasons.

This would not have been Went's first tax-funded performance in the City, however. In 1983, '85 and '87 she appeared at the Franklin Furnace, in Tribeca, Manhattan, as part of series that were partly funded with grants from both the NEA and NYSCA.

Like the Kitchen, the Furnace is an avant-garde, experimental theatre, founded in 1977 by Martha Wilson, to, she wrote in 1986, "fill a void in the art world" and to nourish the 20th Century's avant-garde tradition. It serves as an archive for hundreds of artists and

"The NEA officials' message was: 'Please don't put our name on anything that is going to cause us trouble with legislators.'"

—Martha Wilson

Sprinkle and other women called *Deep Inside Porn Stars*. The whole exhibit was supposed to explore the possibility of "a new definition of pornography, one that is not demeaning to women, men and children."

Among the exhibits displayed were:

- An 86-year-old woman boasting about her sexual activities with teenagers.
- A refrigerator decorated with inflated condoms.
- Pictures of lesbians inserting dildos into each other.

In the controversy that ensued after a 1984 *City Tribune* article about *Second Coming*, Hart wrote a lengthy letter to



scene" art exploded last year when the NEA partially funded the exhibits of works by photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. Included in their works were pictures of a crucifix submerged in urine, a fist in a man's rectum, and a little girl exposing herself.

A similar situation was uncovered 2 weeks ago when this paper reported that \$25,000 of state money had been granted to support a series of shows that included 12 performances by Annie Sprinkle, a self-proclaimed sex goddess and former prostitute, who has starred in 150 pornographic films.

In the show, *Annie Sprinkle: Post-Porn Modernist*, Sprinkle masturbated repeatedly, urinated in a stage toilet, performed what she called a "ballet" with her very large breasts, and invited the audience to come inspect her open vagina with a flashlight.

failed to challenge, amuse, frighten and stimulate audiences."

Cindy Carr, an art critic for the *Village Voice*, who has covered such risque artists extensively, described the actual show more explicitly:

"Her pieces erase identity, embrace the unspeakable and value the irrational," wrote Carr, who added, "the biggest crowd-pleaser, though, was Went's giant" vagina "head-dress, which she squeezed as white liquid gushed from her mouth."

On the application upon which the NYSCA based its 1990 funding for Went, she is described as "a West Coast legend... well known for her explosive performances, which mix shamanistic ritual, raunchy humor and dynamic movement."

In 1985, one of the years Went was featured at the Furnace, the gallery received at least \$200,000 from the NEA. NYSCA also granted \$5,000, out of \$10,950 requested, for the 31-performance season by 19 artists.

Frank Moore, along with Sprinkle and other local performers, performed his *Intimate Cave* show at the Furnace in May 1987. He had received an NEA fellowship in 1985. He also performed *Journey To Lila* at the Furnace last June.

Moore calls himself a "shaman" and his performance technique "Eroplay." He describes it as: "Intense physical playing and touching of oneself and each other," and "the happy, playful attitude towards life that comes from such play."

At his performances, the audience is invited into his "cave" on stage. Those who come forward then shed their clothes and pair up to touch each others' bodies under his guidance.

Last July, along with Sprinkle and 15 others, he signed a *Post-Porn Modernist Manifesto*. The signatories all "celebrate sex as the nourishing, life-giving force," and they proclaimed that "we use sexually explicit words, pictures and performances to communicate our ideas and emotions."

Also performing in 1987 at the Furnace was three-time NEA fellowship recipient, Cheri Gaulke. Her show, *Virgin*, was part of an ongoing series of programs during which she used her often nude body to "explore female sexuality in relation to religion, myth, fashion and eroticism."

In this series, which she calls "part Christian worship service, part pagan ritual," her clad and unclad body has represented Eve, the serpent, a preacher, a witch and Jesus Christ.

Finley, who once claimed she was banned by Scotland Yard, also performed at the Furnace in 1985. She claims to have been boycotted by various institutions, because "sponsors are really scared that their funding is going to be taken away."

In her 1986 Kitchen performance, according to *The Drama Review*, Finley simulated incestuous trances during which a son sucks "my own cum juice outta my own mama's ass," and another where a father puts a girl in a refrigerator and "starts working my little hole."

Many people outside the avant-garde community consider this contemporary "sexual" art to be sacrilegious trash, and a few think its performers should actually be charged for violating federal and state obscenity laws.

When Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., introduced legislation last year aimed at restricting public support for "obscene art," his office was deluged, he said, by thousands of citizen-letters of support.

Under the Senate appropriations bill passed last year, the NEA is prohibited from funding materials that "depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual or excretory activities or organs, including but not limited to obscene depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sexual intercourse."

Last week, the NEA was asked whether this law can be applied to future performances; agency spokesmen have yet to respond.

These new examples of publicly-funded controversial arts come at a time when the battle over "obscene" art is heating up in Congress again, as the time for the NEA reauthorization hearings nears.

Last week the conservative weekly *Human Events* reported the NEA had recently awarded approximately \$60,000 in Creative Writing Fellowships

"Using tax dollars to fund this type of trash is an absolute outrage."

—Rep. Dana Rohrabacher

to three lesbian writers. They were among 97 American poetry and prose writers given grants for 1990.

Human Events criticized the NEA for awarding the grants because Minnie Pratt, a Native American lesbian poet, included "homoerotic" passages in her application.

According to the *Blade*, a gay weekly in Washington, the submitted passages describe lesbian lovemaking and the "touching of lips or tongue... to a woman's genitals."

A similar flap occurred here in 1988 after Frederic Dicker of the *New York Post* wrote that tens-of-thousands of NYSCA dollars were going to projects promoting transvestism, lesbianism and homosexuality.

Hart was summoned before the state Senate and Assembly committees responsible for the arts, but one assemblyman told the *City Tribune* that nothing happened, because Assembly Speaker "Mel Miller is a patron of the arts community."

That same elected official, who asked that he not be named, said, however, that these latest revelations could blow the top off the issue again, and that there are plenty of assemblymen who want to see serious reforms in NYSCA's funding procedures.

VIRGIN

an art performance about virgin birth

by Cheri Gaulke with Christine Papalexis

Thursday, April 2, 8:30 p.m.
Friday, April 3, 8:30 p.m.

Franklin Furnace
112 Franklin Street, NYC, NY 10013
(212) 925-4671



IN VIRGIN, CHERI GAULKE considered 'how to have a baby without a man.' The printed program acknowledged 'gratefully' funds from the NEA, the NYSCA and the Jerome Foundation paid for the performance.

According to a Rohrabacher aide, representatives on Capitol Hill are considering asking that New York state loses, or has drastically reduced, its large NEA grants.

Even though many of the artists mentioned here were funded in years past, and were therefore not the responsibility of Frohnmayer, the aide said the examples will help to document a pattern of irresponsible giving.

One congressional staffer told the *Washington Post* last week that a series of rumors about possible NEA-funded grants that could become controversial has the arts community "pretty hysterical."

The *Post* reported about Sprinkle's performance, but neglected to mention any of the sexually-explicit scenes. Instead, quoting Kitchen director Bobby Tsumagari, it merely reported that the show fought "gender stereotypes and examined the ways in which sexuality is portrayed in the media."

Next: Reporter Skold interviews Annie Sprinkle.



BEHIND THIS NONDESCRIPTIVE W. 19TH STREET DOORWAY
in Chelsea, a ticketholder can enter a rather unusual continent in the world of performance art.