

# A CROWN OF SCORNS

Our Vice President's Foray Into The Cultural Forest The Far Right's Quest For Control of the American Mind, and Other Pressing Dilemmas

By Mark Hall Amitin

Is it simple sophistry versus sophistication or merely another "red herring" on the road to a new McCarthyism? The seizure of the so-called moral high-ground by the mouthpieces of the Conservative movement was first enunciated by Senator Jesse Helms two years ago with the enormous brouhaha over the Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibitions. This was followed immediately by the axing of grants to artists of non-traditional sexual preference or expression (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes) and in-your-face art by the National Endowment on the Arts and their subsequent "loyalty oath" requirements (that no grants be given if the work of recipient artists reflected a positive voice on drugs or homosexuality). This was first supported, then waffled on, by former N.E.A. Chairman John Frohnmeyer, which ultimately cost him his job when he was summarily dismissed this spring by the Bush White House following the broadsides hurled by Patrick Buchanan out on the campaign trail. Only early this June did a Federal judge in Los Angeles rule in a suit brought by the artists denied their grants that the "decency standard" violated the First Amendment, and thus was unconstitutional. The judge stated that "artists have the right to defy convention."

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The recent Quayle attacks come as a subterfuge from the nitty-gritty of the real moral problems of the homeless and hungry, the hands-in-our-pockets S & L scandal, the AIDS crisis and a myriad of other horrific American tragedies. There is no real value in the Murphy Brown question. It is merely a headline seizer and strawman. It has succeeded by raising the present issue of the media's responsibilities to inspire its audience. Such a dutifully posed question of whom the culture belongs to and what is the responsibility of those who mold and shape it, begs an appropriate reply. If the administration is meant to be a bully pulpit, meant to delineate for the populace a manner of proper existence, then it would seem apt that it first address those clothed in rags, the women and children with their hands out for a meal, fathers who would like to pay for their children's education but are on the unemployment line, teens and young adults with T-cell counts at 20 who cannot afford \$8,000 a year for AZT, the crumbling roadways and bridges, peeling paint on classroom ceilings and walls and their call of "what about me?" The reply, if one is forthcoming at all, seems to be, "go to hell."

This sudden awakening to the power of art (we will for the sake of expediency refer to the popular culture and television under that banner, though it may be stretching it), comes somewhat late to the fore. Since the end of the Second World War, European governments have had Ministries of Culture, devoting extremely large sums of money to the upkeep of all artistic forms and visions. The Socialist countries' ministries also include departments of propaganda which promote the concepts of Socialist Realism in their

artistic work. Were we to look at the prime example of censorship in art not meeting the approval of a government in power, we'd examine Hitler's "Degenerate Art"; the ban on all forms of music, painting, theatre, and literature created by Jews, homosexuals, Communists, and of those not promoting the absolute values of the politicians in power. This is truly the closest comparison to be drawn by the recent efforts by our government to control what culture we consume.

If we are to espouse market capitalism as our American household deity, then, indeed, what our people tune in to, line up for or hang on their walls is to be applauded.

Truly radical artists wouldn't dream of taking a government grant or support from one of the many corporate sponsors such as those who front the Corporation for Public Broadcasting or even so-called experimental art at many of the hot spots who present 'degenerate art'. The list of such donors is a veritable who's who of market capitalism: Exxon, Mobil, Texaco, AT&T, Chase Manhattan and Phillip Morris, among many others.

There really is no such thing as dangerous art, though by nature all art is inherently political. Even a show like *Hello Dolly* is political because it personifies a particular view of social life. Art touches those parts inside us that help us to feel and think but it does not, cannot, tell us what or how to feel or think. No work of art is going to turn someone into a homosexual, rapist, drug addict, traitor, murderer, cannibal, heterosexual, moron, intellectual, liberal, conservative, fascist, communist. No movie or television show is going to incite a riot or turn a crowd into vegetarian-pacifists. But it might - just might - touch a visceral place that allows the heart and brain to repose and respond. That old canard that jungle music made my little girl get pregnant holds no more water than when I heard the Gospel choir sing, I saw the Lord. Sister Soulja and Ice-T may rap about shooting cops and whites but it is neither insight or incitation; it's expression. As for the rest, what most of the so-called dangerous art seems to say is, "I'd rather caress your balls than kick you in them." Which would you rather have? As for the Supreme Court, they have just confirmed that our First Amendment states that you can burn the flag or a cross. Thus you can surely snuggle a little crotch or wear "E Pluribus Unum" on your backside.

We are all misfits. From those on high whose fall has been heavy: Nixon, Agnew, Bakker, Swaggert, Milkin, Boesky, Helmsley, who either had their hands in your pockets or down your pants or both, to those on low, whose cry it is to be risen; theirs is a pride in the outrageous, in what they can get away with. The bible thumpers and podium stumpers forewarn to beware of the different, but truly beware of the closed mind, the fearful eye, the petulant heart, and those who lie, cheat, and steal.

How is it possible that all these aberrations exist amongst those having grown up with the best, in "one nation, under God," most having gone to church or temple, attended and graduated parochial or private schools and fine universities, come from Mom and Dad homes, were boy or girl

scouts, watched *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet*; but turned out to be Ronald and Nancy Reagan's kids, or Betty Ford, or Kitty Dukakis? How can you measure or predict how anyone will turn out, whatever their primary circumstances? Ozzie and Harriet's grandsons aren't exactly the picture of Young Republicans. But what about Martin Luther King's children? Jesse Jackson's? Mario Cuomo's? (The Kennedy clan is too mixed a bag to deal with). Ethel and Julius Rosenberg's youngest son became a corporate lawyer and I don't think it was Roy Cohn who inspired him.

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Schwarzenegger, Eastwood and Stallone will continue to blast the guts out of anyone who crosses their path on screen with the tacit approval of our leaders because they have American flag pins in their lapels. It's o.k. to pick up a gun and blow someone's head off, just keep your hands off our genitals (and your own). It has become a war only because someone else declared it, thus, you have a choice: Become a partisan or hide underground and try to wait it out.

We are not a synergistic singular culture; we are a vastly pluralistic society made up of many others in addition to Christian, heterosexual, married, Caucasian parents and children. Maybe what we really need is for every special interest group to have its own network show, magazine, and newspaper. What do these people want or expect from their culture? Do they have anything truly in common? How many really ever go to a museum to see the great works of art or the dinosaurs? How many really have any interest in or can afford to go to the opera or ballet? That's where most of the National Endowment monies go anyway, so, fine, do away with the N.E.A. and close the museums, the regional theaters, and the Met; let alone PS 122 or Dixon Place.

There was always art. There always will be art because artists are compelled to make it. They can't help it. Nothing can stop them. Short of locking them up, or of creating a thought police, there is really no way to defeat the voices of creativity. Art and expression is not the business of the government. Not in America. It may be business, though, and we who crave the degenerate stuff, we're always going to find a basement or garret somewhere to create it in and to view it. But, if the scion of the Indiana newspaper conglomerate doesn't serve as the posterboy to help prevent illiteracy in America, then a true moment for popular art will have been missed. ▲

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