INSHORT

By Joel Bleifuss

Culture crusade—a new world coming

The arts in America are under attack, and news from the front is not good. Last week the Senate passed a bill that would: implement the House's July 12, 361-to-65 decision to cut $45,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) budget to punish the agency for supporting exhibits by the late erotic photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, creator of the photo *Piss Christ*; ban for five years NEA funding for both the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which organized the Mapplethorpe exhibit, and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C., which provided a grant to Serrano; transfer $400,000 from the NEA visual arts program to programs that support folk and local arts; ban the NEA from funding "obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion"; and allocate $100,000 for an "outside party" to do a study of the NEA grant-making system. What Congress members are supporting this legislation? Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-CO) is one. She voted to cut $45,000 from the NEA. Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) is another. She sat by silently as the Senate's attack on the arts passed through the Appropriations Committee on which she sits. Meanwhile in Illinois, Republican Gov. Jim Thompson stood by the flag and all it now flies for. He decided not to veto the Illinois legislature's decision to abolish public support for both the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Illinois Arts Alliance, a Chicago-based group that went on record defending the school and the First Amendment. So, what's going on? Are these random expressions of reactionary zeal? Or do they harbinger a cultural inquisition? *In These Times* asked the following members of the art world for their thoughts.

Leon Golub, artist, New York. "It may not have started this way, but this cultural crusade becomes potentially an agenda of the right. We've had the right's economic agenda, and we've had the right-to-life movement. First it was economics, then biology, and now here comes the cultural agenda. Certain types of people on the right have always resented and feared the implications of modernism, especially its more libertarian attitudes, its belief in freedom of expression. The current controversies over artworks have allowed right-wing demagogues to make emotional appeals that play to these fears. As a result, the right is now one leg up in its attempt to develop a cultural attitude that is in line with their other agendas. These guys are all ready to go. They leap into it, not just to win elections, but as as part of a whole ideological fight. Like this Andres Serrrano piece *Piss Christ*; it arouses, or at least is used to arouse people in such a way as to get them upset. This is hard to counteract, especially in Congress. I've noticed how cautious and even frightened liberal Congress members have gotten. Not too many were willing to stand up on this issue. They are afraid of losing their jobs."

Barbara Gladstone, gallery owner, New York. "The whole thing is totally reprehensible. Rep. Dick Armey (R-TX) said National Endowment for the Arts funding should be cut because the people were not consulted on how money was spent. But I wasn't consulted on how our money was spent to aid the contras, to bankroll HUD developers and build a nuclear arsenal. The hypocrisy is incredible. This is an attempt at censorship, and any attempt at censorship is a threat to everyone. Totalitarian regimes always attempt to suppress images. And they always use the same word, 'degenerate.' In 1937 at the Kunstverein in Munich, the Nazis sponsored a show of degenerate art that they considered detrimental to the state and dangerous to look at. It was a sign of what was happening at the time. The current attack on the arts is symbolic of wider repression. The right is very well organized. People aren't perceiving how threatening this all is. For example, while the first inroad may not disturb a particular individual, the next instance of censorship does, but by then you can't stop it any more."

Susan Wyatt, executive director, Artists Space, a non-profit gallery and artist service organization in New York. On July 11, the day before Congress voted to cut $45,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, more than 400 artists gathered at Artists Space to write letters and discuss how best to respond to the current inquisition. "This has escalated in a very frightening way. I don't know what the implications are for the National Endowment for the Arts. The $45,000 cut is not a large cut, but it does

Ochoa and North: peas from a pod

The U.S. Marines and the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces have a problem—where to find a few good men. Their stars—it seems—have self-destructed in midcareer.

In his recent trial, Cuban Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez was linked to a rotogravure of unsavory characters—including Panamanian Gen. Manuel Noriega and Medellin cocaine magnate Pablo Escobar. But no one stooped so low as to publicly connect Ochoa to Lt. Col. Oliver North. Although the two men may never have been closer than the same page of the *New York Times*, their paths have crossed. Ochoa and North coached opposing teams in Nicaragua and Angola. And the rise and meteoric disintegration of their careers followed the same script. Both men operated in an atmosphere of nebulous ends and nefarious means.

The two officers rose through the ranks on parallel waves of patriotism and military valor. Their superiors recognized their talents and rewarded them. Both mucked around in increasingly tainted waters. Both got dirty.

The anti-communist and fundamentalist Christian North joined the armed forces and served in Vietnam, where his courage and take-charge attitude got him promoted to lieutenant colonel.

Ochoa, a teenager when he joined the struggle against military dictator Fulgencio Batista, became a dedicated communist. He volunteered for internationalist duty in Angola, Ethiopia and Nicaragua.

Both young officers earned reputations for implacability, resourcefulness and concern for the troops under their commands.

When the Reagan administration set up secret networks in the National Security Council, North was the natural point man. And when Castro approved special operations, he trusted Ochoa to deliver. Like Reagan, Castro—unwittingly or not—provided Ochoa and others the perfect cover to establish secret, self-financing business networks.

The autonomy and discretion that characterize covert operations tested the moral mettle of communist and capitalist alike—a test both Ollie and Arnie flunked.

Reagan's see-no-evil attitude allowed North and his pals to sell arms to an avowed enemy of the U.S. and channel the profits to mercenaries. At home North knocked on doors, selling the Founding Fathers for ammunition to shoot at Nicaraguan troops advised by Ochoa. The channel leaked, and North's cohorts pocketed thousands and thousands of dollars.

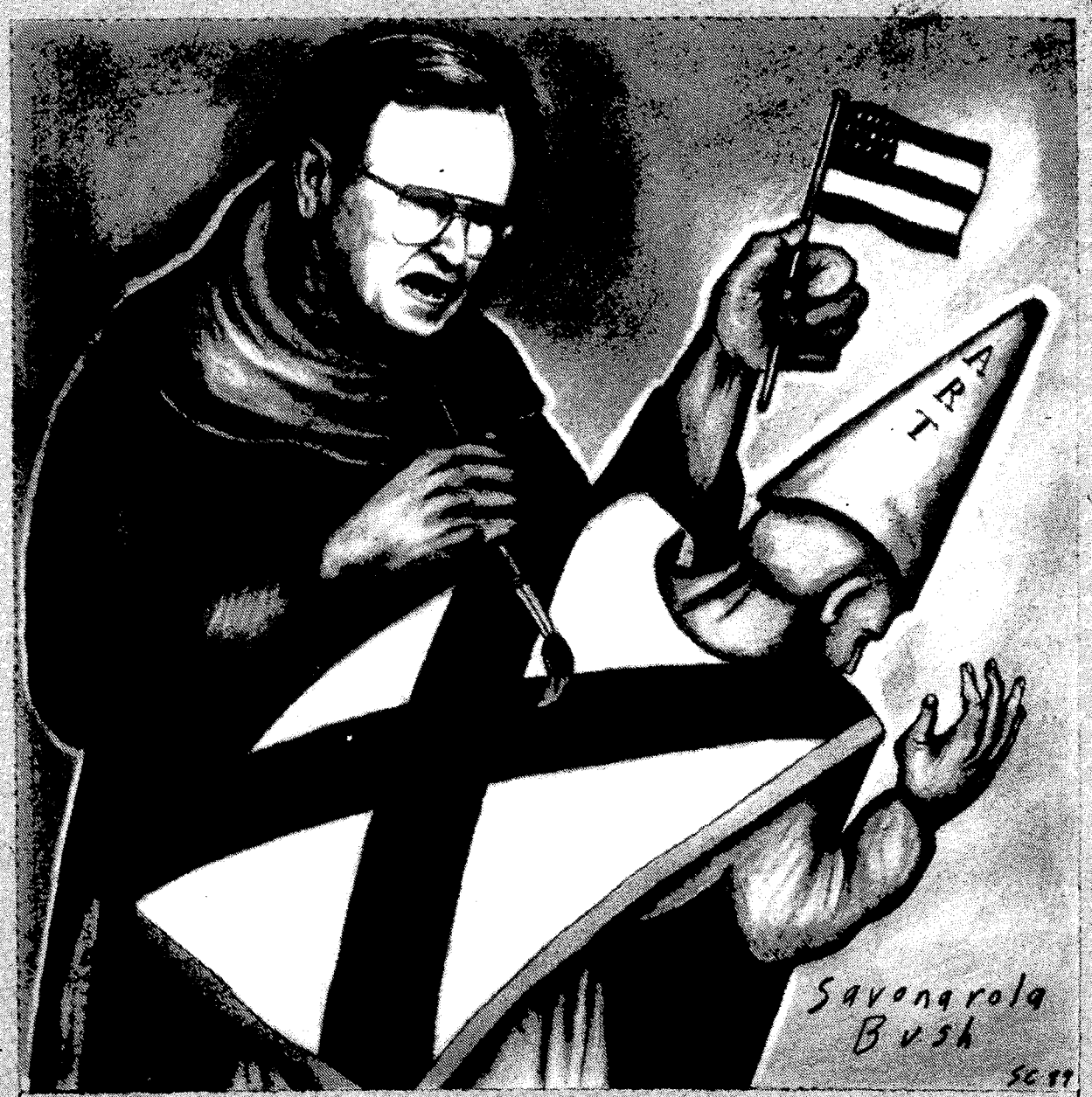
Ochoa used the Cuban intelligence network to smuggle diamonds and ivory out of Africa, short-change Angola and Nicaragua, two of Cuba's staunchest allies, and do $3.4 million worth of business with the Medellin cartel.

Castro had repeatedly, vehemently denied that drugs flowed through Cuba on their way from Colombia to the U.S. And Castro, like Reagan, was caught in the uncomfortable position of either asserting ignorance or admitting duplicity. Castro and the Cuban Communist Party opted for a prompt, uncompromising and highly visible response. Cuba's 47 generals and 29 members of the Council of State convicted Ochoa of "betraying" the revolution and sentenced him to be shot. The Cuban public definitely does not consider Ochoa a hero.

In contrast, North lost the right to appear in public dressed in heavy medal. U.S. District Judge Gerhard Gesell said he didn't want to increase North's already jaded view of the Constitution and sentenced him to a three-year suspended sentence, two years of probation, a nominal fine and 1,200 hours of community service. A well-heeled and vocal minority still revere North as their hero, paying him big bucks to grace their podiums.

Neither Gesell nor Cuban Chief Justice Escalona accused the commanders in chief of these wayward soldiers. Neither fingered the shady operations and secret systems that spawned North, Ochoa and their cohorts in crime.

—Nan Elsasser and Nelson Valdés



Sue Coe, artist, New York.

Closing the door on death

The 23-year-old author of the following story left Vietnam in 1975. He is an editor at Pacific News Service.

When someone dies in the convalescent home where my grandmother lives, the nurses rush to close all the patients' doors. As a policy, death is not to be seen at the home, but she can always tell when it visits. The series of doors being slammed shut remind her of the firecrackers during Tet.

The nurses' efforts to shield death are more comical to my grandmother than reassuring. "Those old ladies die so often," she quips in Vietnamese, "everyday's like New Year."

Still, it is lonely to die in such a place. I imagine some wasted old body under a white sheet being carted silently thorugh the empty corridor on its way to the morgue. In America a person may be born surrounded by loved ones, but in old age one is often left to take the last leg of life's journey alone.

Perhaps that is why my grandmother talks mainly now of her hometown of Bac-Lieu, its river and rich green rice fields. Having lost everything during the war, she can now offer me only her distant memories: life was not disjointed back home, one lived in a gentle rhythm with the land, people died in their homes surrounded by neighbors and relatives. No one shut the door.

So it goes....The once gentle, connected world of the past is but the language of dreams. In this society of disjointed lives, we are swept along and have little time for spiritual comfort. Instead of relying on neighbors and relatives, on the river and land, we deal with the language of materialism: overtime, escrow, stress, down payment, credit cards, tax shelter. Instead of going to the temple to pray for good health, we religiously pay life and health insurance.

My grandmother's children and grandchildren share a certain pang of guilt. After a stroke paralyzed her, we could no longer keep her at home. And although we visit her regularly, we are not living up to the standard of filial piety expected in the old country. My father silently grieves, and my mother suffers from headaches. (Does she see herself in such a home in a decade or two?)

Once, a long time ago, living in Vietnam we used to stare death in the face. The war in many ways had heightened our sensibilities toward living and dying. I can still hear the wails of widows and grieving mothers. Though the fear of death and dying is a universal one, the Vietnamese did not hide from it. Instead we dwelled in its tragedy.

American popular culture translates death with something like nauseating humor. People laugh and scream at blood-and-guts movies. The wealthy freeze dead relatives in liquid nitrogen. Cemeteries are places of business, complete with colorful brochures. There are even drive-by funerals where you don't have to get out of your car to pay your respects to the deceased.

This does not, however, assist us in evading suffering. The reality of old age is apparent in the convalescent home. An old man, once an accomplished concert pianist, is now rendered helpless by arthritis. Every morning he sits staring at the piano. One feeble woman who outlived her children keeps repeating, "My son will take me home." Then there are those mindless bedridden bodies kept alive through a series of tubes and pulsating machines.

But despair is not newsworthy. Death itself must be embellished or satirized or deep-freezed in order to catch the public's attention.

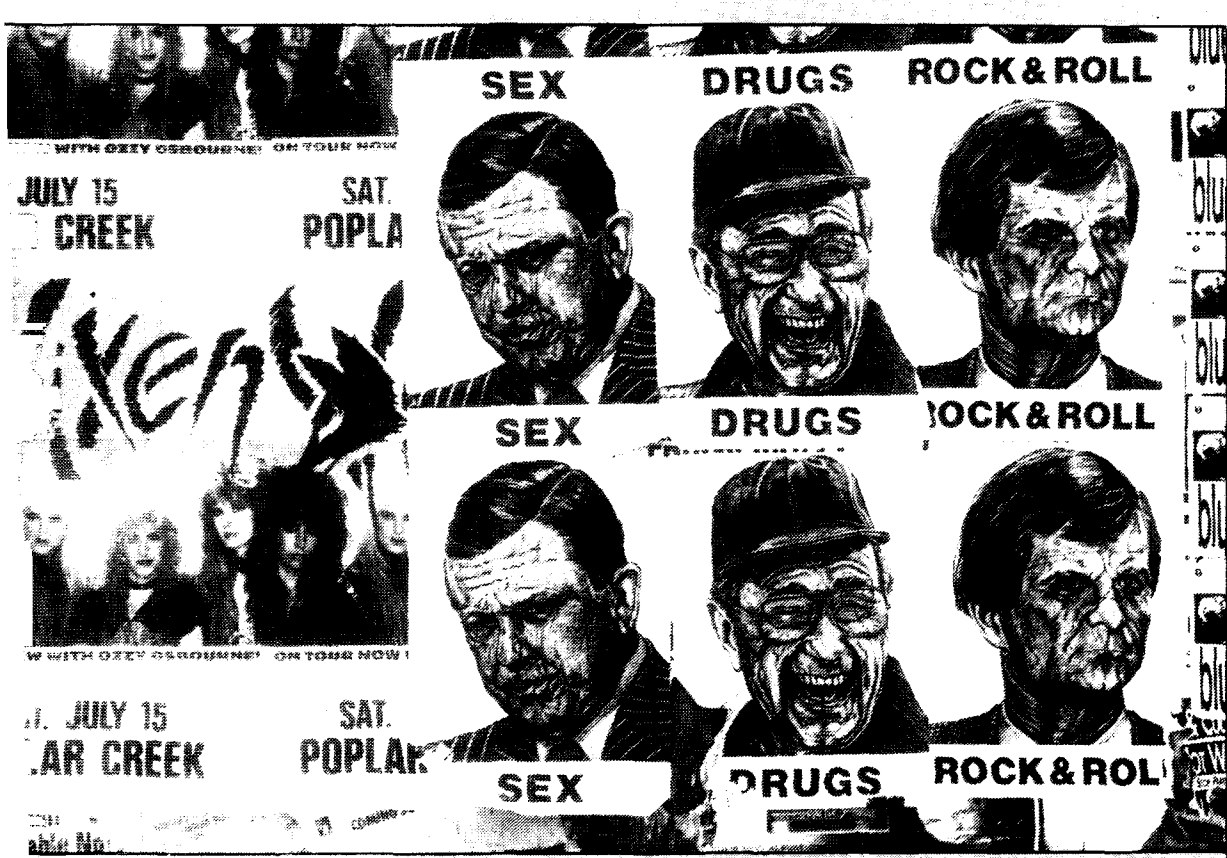
Last week on her 82nd birthday I went to see my grandmother. She smiled her sweet sad smile.

"Where will you end up in your old age?" she asked me, her mind as sharp as ever.

The memories of monsoon rain and tropical sun and relatives and friends came to mind. Not here, not here, I wanted to tell her. But the soft moaning of a patient next door and the smell of alcohol wafting from the sterile corridor brought me back to reality.

"Anywhere is fine," I told her instead, trying to keep up with her courageous spirit. "All I'm asking for is that they don't shut my door."

–Andrew Lam
Pacific News Service



Posters by Robbie Conal; photo by Miles DeCoster

Robbie Conal for the past week has been plastering Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Washington and San Francisco with his latest contribution to the urban landscape. The portraits shown here can be found on Chicago's "New Wave Rush Street" at the corner of Sheffield and Roscoe. Says Conal, "Republicans are the party animals of the '80s—sex, drugs, rock & roll. Bush presents himself as the yuppie president and his administration as a gray flannel business-as-usual bureaucracy. It's smooth water, but you have to look at the sharks that are breaking the surface and what's going on underneath. When I think of John Tower—his unpleasant totalitarian personality, his sex and his booze scandles—it's like a safe sex poster. On the other side of Bush is the undersea creature of the deep South, Lee Atwater. He's a David Duke-style, three-piece-pinstripe-suit, gentler, kinder shark. And Bush, lest we forget—there is his relationship with Noriega and what we are never going to find out about how much he knew about Iran-contra." As for the current culture war, "In the long run this is going to be good for the arts, in the sense that it brings the art institutional establishment down to earth where it can't pretend that it's above the political realities of our time, down to the streets where it belongs."

set a precedent for Congress intervening with specific grants. That is a bad precedent. I also think the particular works in question, Mapplethorpe's and Serrano's, are difficult to defend for people who don't understand contemporary art. The way they have been described in the press gives people who haven't seen the work incorrect impressions. They don't understand that art is a form of speech and that this is basically a free speech issue. I find it scary. I also find it scary that not too many of the major art museums are doing anything about it. And I wonder why PEN [the writers' organization] and the actors' unions haven't come out more strongly. This is not only a visual arts issue. Of course part of the problem is that the visual arts community is poorly organized."

Mary Jane Jacob, chief curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. "I think museums should take a position. The most effective approaches to dealing with this have not yet been defined. This is something that we are going to be struggling with for a long time to come, even after the visibility dies down. The issues and reactions that have come about in the last few weeks should not be quickly forgotten. Some artists will take these up as subjects for their work. Supporting them and providing a forum in which thay can pose their point of view on this situation is one way museums can become active. I am outraged and disturbed by grouping together different types of work—political and sexual—into a single moral argument that demands as its only resolution censorship. It is being done with a great deal of ignorance as to the actual intention of works of art, the history of the role of art, not to mention basic definitions of art. The works of these particular artists have become scapegoats of an agenda that has as yet not been fully revealed to us. It is a very unfortunate position for us as Americans to have our culture presented in such reactionary terms."

Catherine Edelman, gallery owner, Chicago. "My fear is not only for the moment, but for the future as far as the quality of artwork that will be produced. The Serrano and Mapplethorpe controversy will not only affect who gets grants in the future but the quality of younger artists' work. They may see this as a guideline for what is now acceptable to the NEA. This kind of censorship certainly doesn't promote the highest quality art and will obviously translate into the type of work that gets submitted for these grants. Further, the Mapplethorpe controversy stems from deep-rooted homophobia. There is a generation of people who don't understand what is going on in America. Their actions aren't limited to the arts. They support pro-life legislation, sodomy laws, military funding—it is all being done by in my mind a right-wing male-dominated hierarchy."

Robert Storr, art critic, New York. "The long-prepared backlash against the experimental arts that developed in the '60s and '70s and art made by people who operate outside the commercial art world is on the verge of becoming official policy. You are seeing a very dramatic break, artists like Helen Frankenthaler who sits on the NEA taking sides with conservative politicians against other artists. Since the beginning of the Reagan era Hilton Kramer, editor of *The New Criterion* and a longtime *New York Times* critic has been leading the charge, attacking museums, artists, critics and the NEA in the name of culture. Kramer is a right-wing populist. The author of the book *The Revenge of the Philistines*, he ostensibly defended high culture against uninformed taste. Increasingly, however, it is evident that *he* is the revenge of the philistines. The line of *The New Criterion* crowd has been that art should be above politics, but that it is not a political statement to say that. Kramer belongs to a generation of people who view the separation of high and popular culture in extremely narrow-minded terms. He has consistently opposed people involved in socially responsive art, including community arts projects that have given voice to blacks, Hispanics and women. Like many intellectuals who championed high culture against middle-brow culture in the '30s and '40s—in particular those people associated with *Partisan Review*—Kramer's arguments have devolved into a defense of conservative culture against anything that moves. The arts community has to prepare itself for a very long struggle. It will be trench by trench. Take the case of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which made its reputation on art that was transgressive and regularly violated standards of good taste. Now the school won't even let student work show inside the confines of the school unless it is approved by the administration. Yet schools are the very place where art students are to test limits and debate results. If you can't do that even in art school, things are pretty serious."