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HEAR No EVIL...

**The Helms
Amendment
has politicized
the art world
from rock 'n' roll
to modern
dance**

**The Twin Cities are learning
that art, politics and money are
no longer inseparable.**

By Michael Fleming, Staff Writer

But is it art? That question, no longer merely a cocktail-party line, hangs over many heads these days: composers, choreographers, performers; presenters of cultural events; government agencies and private foundations that provide the money to keep artists in business.

Consider three Twin Cities events in which art, politics and money all played, or will play, new and unaccustomed roles:

First, the appearance in January by performance artist Karen Finley. Presented by Walker Art Center, the event came to the attention of people without a cultural bone in their bodies when a local radio talk-show host professed outrage over it. In the audience on opening night, Jan. 11, were three members of the Minneapolis vice squad.

Next, the appearances of gay dancer and choreographer Stephen Petronio — a co-presentation of Walker and the Minnesota Dance Alliance. Petronio's dances, though hardly obscene under any definition, would have made homophobes seethe. And after the concert, Petronio made a plea for political involvement by the audience. One of the most important things he did with his body over the past year, he said, was to lie down in the street, taking part in an act of civil disobedience by Act Up, the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power.

Yet to be seen, a new work by choreographer Bill T. Jones, with the provocative title "The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin." The final section, "The Promised

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Censorship/ Artists will still wade into political waters

Continued from Page 1D

"Land," draws parallels between the oppression of blacks and the oppression of gays.

After a decade in which high culture was seen chiefly as an expensive commodity, the equivalent of a Porsche or a Rolex, art has lately become as politicized as it was in the 1960s. On one hand, women, blacks, gays, Latinos and Asians — to mention only some — have been creating art that embodies their own experiences; their own images, their own visual or verbal language. On the other, the white, male, heterosexual, religious establishment has begun to tighten the strings on non-mainstream art.

The controversy began in earnest last year, when Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) launched a campaign against an exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe scheduled to be shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. Helms contended that the federal government, through the National Endowment for the Arts, was funding "obscenity." The Corcoran canceled the exhibit, and Helms and his allies went for blood.

Last August, Congress passed an amendment banning NEA funding of certain categories of art. That amendment's prohibitions are now incorporated in all NEA grant applications. To quote from the December 1989 "General Terms and Conditions for Organizational Grant Recipients" published by the National Endowment of the Arts:

"None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts ... may be used to promote, disseminate or produce materials which in the judgment of the National Endowment for the Arts ... may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value."

As this regulation was being debated, then enacted, Walker Art Center was planning its "Cultural Infidels" series for January 1990. The series was proposed before the Helms amendment became law, and plans for it proceeded against a background of confusion. What a year ago might have been an esoteric endeavor suddenly became the province of a radio talk-show host and the Minneapolis vice squad.

The event that precipitated all the furor was a series of appearances by Karen Finley, a performance artist who appeared onstage clothed only in panties, or body smeared with chocolate sauce. A Minneapolis newspaper article previewing the event stirred



The Twin Cities will be involved in another potentially controversial event when choreographer Bill T. Jones comes to Northrop Auditorium in April.

some local opposition, and by the time WCCO Radio's Charlie Boone took up his cudgels on Jan. 12, the sides were drawn. Boone, outraged without having seen the show, urged listeners to cancel their Walker memberships. During a show four days later, he partly changed his tune and gave Walker Director Martin Friedman a chance to present a more reasoned point of view. But before Finley ever stepped on the stage of Ruby's Cabaret in Minneapolis, the scene was set for controversy.

At the first performance, three plainclothes Minneapolis policemen showed up, requesting seats for the show. According to a Walker staff member on duty at the concert, the three seemed like "nice guys, trying to be on their best behavior."

Their mission, they explained, was to see whether the show violated city obscenity codes, then to submit a report to the police department. According to the Walker staffer, two stayed about an hour, and the third one stayed until the end. The show ran two more

nights, with no further contact by the police. Subsequently, the Walker representative said, it was discovered that the police had overstepped their bounds. Walker Art Center was not obliged by law to provide complimentary tickets to the police at a sold-out show. And it was not obliged to admit them at all without a search warrant.

"Shocking as this was, I now find it just fine," said John Killacky, Walker's director of performing arts. "Arts organizations should be held to the same standards as the rest of the community. The focal issue for us is: Do we establish age limits for admission to such events, and if so, by what criteria?"

Art or obscenity? And who decides?

Part of the solution, Killacky said, may lie in a sort of cultural truth-in-labeling. To the original series title "Cultural Infidels," Walker Art Center later added the subtitle "Film and Performance for Consenting Adults."

"We didn't want anyone to be surprised," Killacky said. "But we probably wouldn't have thought of doing this [adding the subtitle] five years ago."

"In the case of the Karen Finley show, people were reacting to perceptions of what she would do or might do. It was easier after they saw the show and could talk about it."

Killacky said that he saw only three people leave the show before the end. There were some disapproving letters and phone calls, but the art center lost no members on account of the controversy.

None of the other "Cultural Infidels" events raised quite such a furor. But during and after the festival, Killacky says, "We spent a lot of time talking about it. How do we market this? There is no question about why these artists were here. But there is a question about how to present them in a politicized climate."

Prepare, explain, talk — those were the lessons that came out of "Cultural Infidels." The box office and Walker bookshop staff — those "on the front lines when people were upset," Killacky said — were provided with "cheat sheets" explaining the events and the reason for their being presented.

"We might have overprotected people," said Killacky, referring specifically to the Finley performance. "but no one walked in and was surprised."

Coming up next month is another potentially controversial event, "The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin," choreographed by Bill T. Jones and co-sponsored by Walker and Northrop Auditorium, where the work will be seen April 21. Jones is an openly gay choreographer who founded his company with his lover, Arnie Zane. Since Zane's death from AIDS, Jones' work has grown more explicitly political, and "Last

Supper" will touch several hot spots: race, religion, sex.

Gay-themed dance is nothing new for Walker Art Center, which recently co-sponsored the Stephen Petronio company. Included in that program was an erotic duet for two men, and, after the concert, Petronio spoke about his own gay identity and encouraged audience support for Act Up. The time is past, Petronio said, when artists can hide their messages and audiences be mere consumers.

The Petronio performances passed without opposition, and at one concert, the audience cheered the choreographer's post-performance remarks. In dealing with any possible backlash against the Bill T. Jones piece, Killacky said that the main effort will be to introduce Jones to the Twin Cities, to give him as many chances as possible to talk about himself and his choreography. "Bill has his own personal vision," Killacky said, "and people will have to face his aesthetic vision in music, choreography and scenery."

"Last Supper" is scheduled for a yearlong tour after it makes its debut here. To explain the issues behind the piece, Killacky has written an article for a national newsletter aimed at arts presenters. Forewarned will be forearmed, he hopes.

In any case, he said, there is no longer any escaping the connection between art, politics and money. For the National Endowment for the Arts, there is a possibility that the Helms restrictions, now effective only for fiscal year 1990, will be made effective for five more years when the endowment comes up for congressional reauthorization later this year.

An NEA spokesman, on the basis of discussions with other staff members, said that there had been no direct test case of the new provisions. "But unlike in years past, conversation on the peer panels is addressing it [the issue of censorship]. There is a sense that some self-censorship is going on now by people who don't to see their grant applications jeopardized."

Whatever the outcome at the National Endowment, Killacky said, the controversies will go on. Funders will demand to know more about what their dollars are paying for. Ticket buyers will want advance notice about material they might find objectionable. And artists, meanwhile, will continue to wade into political waters — damn the torpedoes.

"When I go through a museum and look at a Rothko or a Rauschenberg," Killacky said, "I might not like it or understand it, and I might leave it for the experts to talk about."

"But everyone can respond to works by Keith Haring or Jenny Holzer. People are using words and images with meaning in the performing arts now, and you can't just be bored or dismiss them."