

Public deserves to see art, form opinions

By Bryan Peterson
Staff Reporter

Last week I witnessed a remarkable performance by the dance company Momix. The performance was amazing and I did not think until afterward about the significance of what I had seen.

In several of the pieces, the female performers were partially nude. The dance pieces were artistic and erotic but not flagrantly sexual.

Here was an internationally renowned dance troupe giving five performances involving partial nudity in Lincoln, Neb. And with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Nebraska Arts Council and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

There are many who would condemn state funding of potentially objectionable works. I know very little of the artistic and aesthetic components of dance and am not one to judge the artistic merit of nudity, but many ques-

tions come to mind.

Did the nudity add particular feeling or content to the piece? Could the same effects have been achieved without it? How would complete nudity have affected the performance?

These questions arise not because of the nudity itself but because of its acceptability in this context. Some would be offended by the performance, but the attending audience showed overwhelming approval.

Why does the state support some performances which might be considered objectionable yet neglect others? The ability to endow or provide funds for the arts is a powerful one. Exercise of this power is vital to the survival of the arts but carries with it tremendous weight in shaping the thoughts and morals of the audience.

Certain potentially objectionable performances gain credibility and acceptance through recognition of their artistic worth, and these performances are more likely to receive funding.

But recognition of artistic worth is a fragile, fleeting condition. Public favor is granted quickly and sometimes more quickly withdrawn, and standards of artistic value, even among the art community, always are changing.

Think of all the artists who have died in poverty whose works now sell for fortunes. Or consider the number of composers who are lauded today but who were neglected in their own eras.

This underscores the importance of funding for the arts. Without external support, there is great risk of allowing classics to go unnoticed, whether in the fields of art, dance, music, drama or elsewhere.

Yet a work of art need not be a classic to be valuable. Support or neglect of any work may be of greater consequence than we know.

Art can be a powerful force in stimulating thoughts and feelings among both artists and audiences. The arts have inherent aesthetic qualities, but other qualities can be of even more value to society.

Some performances or pieces express sentiments which are clearly objectionable or even threatening to the public. These are the most likely to generate controversy and are in some ways the most important to our society.

The government needs to allow the expression of controversial or threatening ideas. Free and unrestricted expression of opinions is the foundation of a free society. When artists use their works to express opinions or feelings, these need to be accessible to the public.

Yet this does not place an obligation upon the state to encourage or subsidize such works, only to tolerate them. Recently the limits of government tolerance have been tested in several instances such as Scott Tyler's display at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In Tyler's exhibit, an American flag was placed on the floor to make people "confront their feelings" about patriotism," according to the Des Moines Register (Aug. 13). Viewers also were asked to step on the flag as they wrote opinions in a book.

Last year, the school also met controversy over the display of a picture of the late Mayor Harold Washington in lingerie (ibid).

Congressional storms have brewed over the use of federal funds in the display of "homosexual" photography by Robert Mapplethorpe and the infamous "Piss Christ" of Andres Serrano, a photo of a plastic crucifix immersed in a jar of the artist's urine.

Whether or not it is a valid distinction, the controversy stems from efforts to separate the content of the works from their artistic value.

I will not comment upon the artistic value of these works, having never seen them and lacking sufficient knowledge of things aesthetic. Nor is my opinion of the content of these works relevant. The issue is the standard which condemns these works based on their content rather than their artistic value.

Whatever the artist creates is "art," but it is the public who creates judgements on the value of the art.

Works widely judged to have no artistic value likely will go unnoticed and are perhaps not deserving of public funds.

There is a notion that the artist must struggle, must meet and overcome resistance before gaining acceptance. Overcoming obstacles challenges and stimulates them in the pursuit of excellence.

Herein lies the importance of criticism and the value of struggle. Sadly, too often the success of artists is determined by factors other than their artistic merit.

The problem lies in deciding which works have artistic value and to what degree. This standard is vague at best and reflects the endless tension between creation and convention described by Hugh Ottaway in his essay "Prospect and Perspective."

The general public has a role in judging the worth of artistic efforts, misinformed and misguided as it tends to be. The artistic community

has more knowledge of things artistic and thus has a greater role in making judgments, but it must rely on the public to support its works.

Ultimately, artists and performers themselves will create standards of artistic value. Standards will be challenged and conventions redefined, all under the glaring eyes of tradition.

Every work of art or performance is of value, but it is we who decide which works are supported, through our attendance, discussion and funding.

In our decisions about which artists to support, we must be guided by an ideal of tolerance rather than judgmental rejection.

Those works which challenge us may be found objectionable or threatening, but audiences and state alike must allow the presentation of such works.

The greatest value of some works lies in their very threat or offense. They serve to keep us thinking, to prevent us from drifting into cultural complacency, and to help us strengthen or redefine our beliefs.

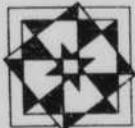
The disruption or turmoil caused by such works strengthens those who tolerate, experience, and learn from them.

Opinions will vary on their relative artistic worth, but it is essential that all works be available to the public. The connection between availability and state funding is tenuous but must be considered.

When available, members of the public then can view such works and form their own conclusions. Surely it is better that the community risk offense or turmoil than enforce cultural sterility and mediocrity through neglect.

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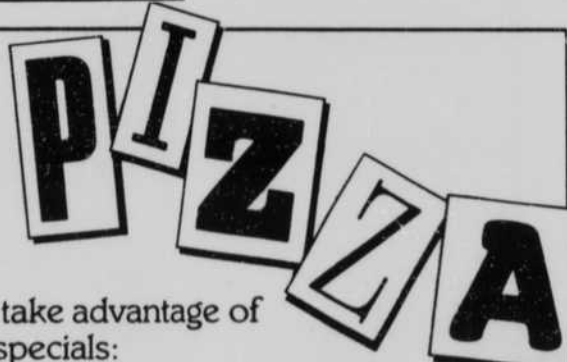


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