

NEA suspends critics' fellowship program

By Hunter Drohojowska

The National Endowment for the Arts has made the controversial decision to suspend its biennial critics' fellowship program in the visual arts for 1985 and 1986.

The decision was made against the recommendations of a seminar of art critics, an overview panel of art officials and an independent analytical study, all sponsored by the NEA. It actually appears to be the decision of one man, NEA Chairman Frank Hodsoll, an appointee of President Reagan.

To many, the decision is a shock, especially given the nature of the decision. The NEA is organized along democratic lines, with policy generated by panel recommendations.

New York art dealer Ronald Feldman, a member of the NEA overview panel, wondered why the panels had bothered to meet at all, since their suggestions were completely ignored. "It was a slap in the face of the peer-review panels. I wonder if the chairman doesn't have in mind other notions of how to (award) grants," he said. "I hope this doesn't portend a politicization of the endowment. I fear for (its) integrity under this chairman."

The critics' fellowship, which began in 1972, was suspended once by Hodsoll, when he took office in 1981. Benny Andrews, director of the NEA's visual arts program, had it resurrected, recommending studies of its effectiveness. The NEA organized a seminar of 23 art critics from around the country last September, and while opinions varied, the majority overwhelmingly favored continuing the fellowships. Their position was endorsed by an overview panel, which recommends policy to the NEA board.

There was one exception: Hilton Kramer, editor of

the neo-conservative arts journal *The New Criterion*, who published a scathing attack on the critics' seminar and the fellowships in the magazine's November issue.

On Feb. 21, Catherine Fox, art critic of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and a participant in the review seminar, wrote to Hodsoll objecting to Kramer's article and claiming bias in his summary of the seminar. All but two of the seminar participants signed the letter.

The exceptions were Alan Bunce of the *Christian Science Monitor* and John Beardsley, adjunct curator of the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. (Kramer was not invited to sign.) Beardsley was not a seminar participant but had authored a lengthy NEA-commissioned study that was critical of the fellowship program. Beardsley sent his own letter February 23, stating firmly that although the program needed improvements, the fellowships should continue.

However, Hodsoll's reply to Fox, which stands as the NEA's official position on the subject, cites the Beardsley study as the principal reason for ending the fellowships. He denies that Kramer's article had any effect but writes that the decision "was also influenced by doubts expressed by the National Council on the Arts about this area of funding." The council, composed entirely of Reagan appointees, is the policy-making board of the endowment. The council's most vocal opponent of the critical writing fellowships was Samuel Lipman, publisher of the *New Criterion*.

A disappointed Fox said she didn't believe that funding was the reason. "It's such a small amount of money, I think it's a lame excuse when you compare it to grants awarded other categories." (The critical writing fellowships constitute just 1 percent of the total visual arts program's budget.)

In the letter to Fox, Hodsoll wrote that he was appointing an "internal task force" to review the issue of criticism in all disciplines, not just visual arts. Associate Deputy Chairman for Programs Ruth Berenson will be charge of the "agency-wide exploration of fellowships." Neither she nor Hodsoll was available for comment.