

Understanding the NEA Crisis of 1990 through the Work of Tim Miller

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Introduction

Censorship of the arts has a long history. The issue returned to the center stage of American politics in 1989-1990, when controversy raged over the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Lawmakers, angry that government money had indirectly been used to support “offensive” art, proposed that restrictive language be included in the 1989 NEA appropriations bill. The ensuing *mêlée* had conservatives questioning the very constitutionality of government funding for the arts and artists up in arms over what they perceived to be the government’s violation of their constitutional right to free speech. This paper will examine the case of choreographer Tim Miller, who along with fellow performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes, sued the NEA in March 1991 alleging that his grant application had been rejected for political reasons. It is helpful to view the NEA crisis using Miller as a lens because he embodies and responds to several issues at the center of the controversy. As an arts presenter, Miller was intimately acquainted with the financial difficulties facing the arts and the role that prejudice played in sustaining those difficulties for lesbian and gay theatre. He was a direct recipient of attacks on homosexuality and personally experienced the tragedy of AIDS. His work offers both a commentary on these issues and a call to action, characterized simultaneously by despair and by hope. My examination of Miller will

attempt to uncover how conservatives' attitudes toward homosexuality and AIDS augmented the politicization of his work.

Summary of the NEA Crisis

The National Endowment for the Arts was created in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson. Its purpose was “to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.”¹ The NEA is subject to re-appropriation every fiscal year and reauthorization every five years. As its budget grew from 2.5 million dollars in 1965 to 169 million in 1989,² the number of professional dance and theater companies in the United States grew from about 90 to over 600.³ In spite of the evidence of progress, by 1989 hostility toward the NEA had been simmering in Congress for years.

Visual artist Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix submerged in urine, gave conservatives their rallying cry. Reverend Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association informed Congress in April 1989 that the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, an NEA grant recipient, had awarded Serrano a \$15,000 fellowship.⁴ Conservatives were outraged at the perceived denigration of the cross. Senator Alphonse D'Amato (R-NY) denounced *Piss Christ* as “a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity,”⁵ while Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA) asked, “is there anyone who

¹ *A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*, <<http://www.nea.gov/about/Chronology/NEAChronWeb.pdf>> (27 November 2005).

² *Ibid.*

³ John Frohnmayer, “An Open Letter to the American Family Association,” *Update Dance/USA* 7, no. 4 (1990): 14.

⁴ Philip Brookman and Debra Singer, “Chronology,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 343.

⁵ Richard Bolton, Introduction, *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New York Press, 1992), 3.

will declare that this is not religious bigotry?”⁶ Conservatives argued that for the government to endorse an idea offensive to a broad section of its citizenry violated the Constitution. Said D’Amato, “If this is what contemporary art has sunk to...some may want to sanction that, and that is fine. But not with the use of the taxpayer’s money. This is not a question of free speech. This is a question of abuse of taxpayer’s money.”⁷

The senators became further incensed when the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Art, also an NEA grant recipient, presented *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, an exhibition of photographs by Mapplethorpe that included images of “explicit homosexual acts or nude children.”⁸ More than one hundred politicians, keenly aware of the offense taken to Mapplethorpe’s work by many of their constituents, endorsed a letter to the NEA expressing their disapproval of its conduct. The politicians stood to gain politically from such a show of outrage. Said Hugh Southern, acting chair of the NEA at the time, “many people voting one way are confident that [their protest] will disappear under subsequent amendments or in conference or somewhere else; so a vote, which may please some conservative constituents, doesn’t have to have a practical effect. And they know when they’re voting that it won’t.”⁹ Thus the battle for freedom of expression in the arts became interwoven with the intricacies of congressional politics.

Some argued that merely to withhold funding does not amount to censorship. S.D. Travs, writing in *Reason*, argued that “thousands upon thousands of non-NEA supported

⁶ Slade Gorton, “On the Official Funding of Religious Bigotry, Statement to the Senate, May 31, 1991,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New York Press, 1992), 36.

⁷ Bolton, Introduction to *Culture Wars*, 3.

⁸ Brookman and Singer, “Chronology,” in *Culture Wars*, 344.

⁹ Quoted in Joseph Wesley Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis: the National Endowment for the Arts versus America* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1994), 73.

artists make thousands upon thousands of non-NEA supported pieces of art every day...equating ‘not funding’ with ‘censoring’ is a fallacy.”¹⁰ Still, for fringe artists struggling to make ends meet and with few sources of support, denying funding did in fact amount to censorship because it silenced their viewpoints. This was essentially lawyer Kathleen Sullivan’s argument: because government money has a “democratizing and redistributive force,”¹¹ to fund any artist at all is to require that all artists be eligible for funding regardless of the content of their work. Furthermore, because NEA money has a “leveraging effect,” whereby one dollar of NEA funds can elicit over three dollars from private sources, the disadvantages to censored artists were even greater.¹²

In July 1989, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) introduced an amendment to the NEA appropriations bill that intended to limit the kind of art that could be financed with government money. Known as the Helms Amendment, it stated:

None of the funds authorized to be appropriated pursuant to the Act may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce – 1) obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or 2) material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of adherents of a particular religion or non-religion; or 3) material which denigrates, debases, or reviles a person, group, or class of citizens on the bases of race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin.¹³

¹⁰ S.D. Travs, “Angry at Daddy,” *Reason* 32, no. 5 (2000): 52.

¹¹ “Arts Funding and Censorship: The Helms Amendment and Beyond,” *Columbia-VLA Journal of Law and the Arts* 15, no. 1 (1990): 40.

¹² National Endowment for the Arts, *Raising the Barre: The Geographic, Financial, and Economic Trends of Nonprofit Dance Companies* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2003), 34.

¹³ Brookman and Singer, “Chronology,” in *Culture Wars*, 347.

The amendment was enormously restrictive. As Senator John Danforth (R-MO) asserted, the prohibitions it set forth were so limiting that they would have banned even celebrated masterpieces of Western art, including works by Shakespeare.¹⁴ Art by its very nature is open to interpretation and invites some group to take offense. Therefore, no list of restrictions could ever be fully satisfactory to all parties, and hence the amendment, had it been passed, would have been tantamount to banning government sponsorship of the arts altogether. Though the Helms Amendment was eventually defeated, its language set a precedent for the final appropriations bill that was passed by Congress in October 1989, Public Law 101-121.¹⁵ This law revealed a fundamental opposition by certain members of Congress to gay culture, an opposition that was further evidenced by outrageous statements made by right-wing political commentators.

In March 1990, the NEA began requiring grant recipients to sign an oath, or “obscenity pledge,” stating that they would not use their grants to create work that violated Public Law 101-121.¹⁶ Several artists, including the veteran choreographer Bella Lewitzky, refused their grants rather than sign the oath.¹⁷ Lewitzky, among others, filed suit against the NEA, claiming that the oath violated the First Amendment. John Frohnmayer, NEA chairman from 1989-1992, wrote that he instituted the so-called loyalty oath “as an invitation to a lawsuit, which I hoped would lead to a finding that the language was unconstitutional.”¹⁸ He got his wish; in January 1991, the oath was found to be unconstitutional by a federal district court in Los Angeles, ruling in favor of the

¹⁴ John Danforth, “Statement to the Senate, September 29, 1989,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New York Press, 1992), 105-106.

¹⁵ Brookman and Singer, “Chornology,” in *Culture Wars*, 350.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹⁷ Bella Lewitzky, “Lewitzky Rejects Grant,” *Dance/USA* 8, no. 1 (1990): 10.

¹⁸ Quoted in Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis*, 106.

Bella Lewitzky Dance Foundation in *Bella Lewitzky v. John Frohnmayer*.¹⁹ By that time, the oath had already been rescinded under the recommendation of a bipartisan commission and after the passage in October 1990 of compromise legislation reauthorizing the NEA for three years without content-based restrictions on funding.²⁰ The legislation also called for a significant number of “laypersons” to be installed on NEA peer-review panels, presumably to reflect the public’s interest more effectively. Though it only appeared on the scene for a brief period of time, the oath “created an atmosphere of distrust and misinformation” that widened the divide between lawmakers and the arts community, the scars of which remain today.²¹

In spring 1990, NEA peer-review panels recommended eighteen performance artists for a Solo Performer Fellowship.²² Among them were Tim Miller, Karen Finley, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes. The National Council on the Arts (NCA) convened in May 1990 to make the final recommendation on the applications.²³ With Congress in an uproar over Serrano and Mapplethorpe, Frohnmayer faced ever-increasing political pressure. He later wrote that “because [Hughes, Miller, and Finley] were boldly and confrontationally taking on social issues about which there was tremendous societal debate (abortion and AIDS, for example), our actions were not likely to go without notice, regardless of what we did.”²⁴ On July 29, 1990, Frohnmayer publicly announced that Miller, Finley, Fleck, and Hughes would not be funded.²⁵ Political pressure undoubtedly

¹⁹ Brookman and Singer, “Chronology,” in *Culture Wars*, 358.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

²¹ United Arts Group, “Artistic Freedom: Our American Heritage,” *Dance/USA* 8, no. 1 (1990): 9.

²² Barbara Gamarekian, “Arts Agency Denies 4 Grants Suggested by Advisory Panel,” *New York Times*, 30 June 1990, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ John Frohnmayer, *Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Arts Warrior* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 152.

²⁵ Gamarekian, “Arts Agency Denies 4 Grants,” 1.

played a role in the fate of the rejected applications, as evidenced by inconsistencies in statements made by Frohnmayer himself. Frohnmayer later acknowledged that he had determined prior to the NCA meeting that Finley's work was "artistically supportable,"²⁶ but insisted that "in this political climate,"²⁷ he needed more evidence to approve her grant. Frohnmayer justified his actions by claiming that if he had not placated the desires of conservative politicians, Congress might have done away with the NEA altogether.

The arts community reacted with outrage to Frohnmayer's announcement. Many perceived the rejection of the grants to be an attack on gay people. Said Hughes, "I think the reason my work was overturned is because it is chock-full of good old feminist satire and secondly, I am openly lesbian."²⁸ Echoed Miller: "my work explores my identity as a gay person and as a person dealing with the AIDS crisis in an active, political way. So much of this is a homophobic attack on gay people and the visibility of gay people."²⁹ In March 1991 the "NEA Four" filed suit in Los Angeles under the representation of the American Civil Liberties Union.³⁰ They argued that their grants had been rejected for political reasons and that the wording of Public Law 101-121, which allowed the NEA to take "general standards of decency" into consideration when awarding grants, was unconstitutionally vague. In June 1992 Judge A. Wallace Tashima ruled in favor of the artists, and in 1993 the NEA agreed to pay them the amount of their grants plus court costs.³¹ However, the Clinton administration appealed the portion of Tashima's ruling that struck down the decency clause. The Supreme Court ruled in 1998 that the decency

²⁶ Frohnmayer, *Leaving Town Alive*, 152.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁸ Quoted in Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis*, 112.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁰ Bonnie Brooks, "Confronting Government-Imposed Limits to Free Expression," *Dance/USA* 8, no. 5 (1991): 12.

³¹ "Endowment to Pay Four Artists It Rejected," *New York Times*, 5 June 1993, L13.

clause was in fact constitutional.³² In the spring of 2000, Hughes premiered *Preaching to the Perverted*, a performance piece chronicling her experiences during the eight-year dispute. She exposes the government's hypocrisy in attempting to suppress homosexuality under the guise of standards of decency, claiming that "Everyone is pretending that the definition of decency isn't clear / Everyone is acting as though that word / Weren't a big pink neon sign flashing: / "No Queers! No Queers!"³³ Lawyers have pointed out that by a strict interpretation of the wording of *Miller v. California*, the Supreme Court case that provided the legal definition of obscenity, no work of art with "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" can ever be considered obscene.³⁴ The 1998 Supreme Court decision stood in contrast to that interpretation and therefore significantly altered the way that the NEA could evaluate grants. As scholar Judith Lynne Hanna writes, "in essence [it] changed the NEA's purpose and imposed a kind of censorship."³⁵ Thus, though the noise had long since died down, eight years after the crisis the statutes at its core were still being upheld.

Tim Miller and the Financial Vulnerability of the Queer Arts

Tim Miller received his early dance training at the California State University-Fullerton³⁶ and in Seattle with the former Merce Cunningham dancer Joan Skinner.³⁷ A self-described "gay kid from Whittier on Planet Earth," Miller moved to New York in

³² Richard Meyer, "Have You Heard the One About the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?" *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 4 (2000): 543.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Arts Funding and Censorship," 27.

³⁵ Judith Lynne Hanna, "Ballet to Exotic Dance – Under the Censorship Watch," *Proceedings of Dancing in the Millennium: an International Conference, Washington, D.C., 19-23 July 2000*, 230.

³⁶ Tim Miller, *Shirts and Skin* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1997), 56.

³⁷ Kate Regan, "Choreographing His Life on Stage," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 March 1987, 46.

1978 at the age of nineteen and began creating performance art pieces.³⁸ Scholar Sally Banes defines performance art as “linking traditional/oral performance with avant-garde performance, [with] an emphasis on action of process...the role of the spectator and his or her relationship to the performer is altered.”³⁹ The altered role of the spectator is characteristic of Miller’s work, and will be discussed in connection with his pieces *Stretch Marks* and *My Queer Body*. Banes notes that performance art is often small in scale, involving only a handful of performers and relying on minimal sets and costumes. With the exception of his 1984 piece *Democracy in America*, Miller’s work almost always reflects this model, though it is unclear whether the motivation for this is artistic or practical. Miller expresses distaste for *Democracy* in several writings and clearly does not look favorably on the extravagance that characterized it. But one gets the sense that a more immediate reason for keeping his pieces sparse is that it is more practical for him to do so. In 1985 he incorporated his partner Douglas Sadownick into *Buddy Systems* because it was impossible for the two men to sustain their relationship with Miller touring for months at a time.⁴⁰ Thus Miller demonstrates a willingness to mold his art according to practical realities. Working within a relatively simple framework, Miller came to depend increasingly on grants rather than ticket sales to sustain him economically. In a 1982 segment of the dance interview show *Eye on Dance*, Miller explained that he was able to make a living as an artist by relying on teaching gigs and grants.⁴¹ Thus the loss of NEA money had the potential to severely cripple his ability to make work.

³⁸ William H. Honan, “Endowment Gives Grants to 2 Artists Rejected Last Year,” *New York Times*, 6 Nov 1991, C19.

³⁹ Sally Banes, *Subversive Expectations: Performance Art and Paratheater in New York, 1976-85* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 3.

⁴⁰ Lewis Segal, “A Private Life Reshaped Into Performance,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1986, 56.

⁴¹ *Eye on Dance*, dir. Celia Ipiotis, 27 min., ARC Videodance, 1982, videocassette.

Miller notes that his economic situation is characteristic of the queer arts in general. In his 1995 essay “Preaching to the Converted,” which he wrote with David Román, he argues that “the participation of...presenting institutions in the development of lesbian and gay performing artists is a crucial and often unacknowledged factor in the history of lesbian and gay theatre.”⁴² Miller co-founded two of these key institutions, Performance Space 122 (PS 122) in New York and Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, California. PS 122 opened in the early 1980s, soon after Miller arrived in New York. Controversial artists such as Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle presented their work there, involving Miller in the NEA crisis indirectly even when his own work was not the subject of debate. Miller co-founded Highways with Linda Burnham soon after he moved back to California in the late 1980s. Highways was dedicated to “interdisciplinary performance, saving the world, and a kinder and gentler America.”⁴³ Its mission was to foster “social action and cultural democracy,”⁴⁴ demonstrating how Miller’s artistic odyssey was inextricably linked with his calling as a political activist.

“Preaching to the Converted” responds to the accusation that the audience for lesbian and gay theatre consists almost entirely of people who already share the artists’ beliefs. Miller finds this problematic because he feels that the homosexual experience is complex, and to insinuate that it can be encapsulated by a single point of view is insulting. He argues that “to claim that artists are only preaching to the converted implies a fixed position for the audience assembled that trivializes the ever-changing and never

⁴² Tim Miller and David Román, “Preaching to the Converted,” *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (1995): 175.

⁴³ *Wired: A Benefit for Performance Space 122*, 1 hr. 45 min., Character Generators/Video, 1989, videocassette.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

immediately apparent needs and desires of queer spectators.”⁴⁵ In addition, Miller points out that the label “preaching to the converted” allows opponents of lesbian and gay theatre to marginalize the form by characterizing it as the perpetuation of a shared idea:

Mainstream theatre reviewers [...] often dismiss queer artists who address queer issues for queer audiences for having a limited scope of address. Generally these critics see community-based work not as theatre but as propaganda; queer theatre, from this perspective, has little or no artistic value and queer audiences have little or no critical acumen.⁴⁶

Thus the phrase “preaching to the converted” makes it difficult for gay artists to defend lesbian and gay theatre artistically, impeding their ability to lobby for financial support. Miller argues, however, that he is in fact interested in dialoguing with diverse audiences and that a more accurate label would be “preaching to convert.” He posits that “if all those tentacles start going,”⁴⁷ some day more people might actively support the queer arts. This leaves unresolved the issue of how to engage with people who do not want to accept his ideas.

Bella Lewitzky argues that this is not necessarily a problem. The point of art, she says, is to challenge the observer, meaning that offensive art is useful and necessary. She says that a play “might irritate you and you say, I don’t like that play. I don’t like what Tim did. You go home and think about it. You challenge your own precepts. Unless somebody makes you do that, there’s only regression.”⁴⁸ Miller’s opponents apparently didn’t see the opportunity for growth that his work presented according to Lewitzky’s

⁴⁵ Miller and Román, “Preaching to the Converted,” 177.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Brooks, “Confronting Government-Imposed Limits to Free Expression,” 15.

theory. For them, his work did not function as community building, but rather as confrontation. Frohnmayer, for instance, called Miller's work "aggressively homosexual."⁴⁹ As it is hard to conceive of someone labeling a work by a straight artist "aggressively heterosexual," such a statement suggests that prejudice did in fact come in to play in Frohnmayer's evaluation of Miller's work. A closer examination of Miller's performance pieces will reveal what "offensive" themes conservatives attempted to identify. *Stretch Marks*, Miller's most recent work at the time of the crisis, played an important role in the peer-review panel's evaluation.

Stretch Marks: Defending Relationships and Addressing Indifference

Stretch Marks premiered at Highways in 1989. The piece chronicles the various forces that "stretched" Miller at that point in his life: "friends dying of AIDS, planes crashing, heroes being assassinated, hometowns having earthquakes, right-wing cabals becoming ascendant,"⁵⁰ and Miller's growing realization that he could respond as an artist to those forces in a powerful way. Miller's involvement with AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), a "diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis,"⁵¹ provided the driving force behind that realization. Miller has called ACT UP "the single most influential thing in my life,"⁵² and his descriptions of how his responsibilities to the organization interweave with his duties as a performer illustrate how fully fused his identity as an artist is with his sense of civic duty. Miller's involvement with the AIDS movement no doubt influenced

⁴⁹ Frohnmayer, *Leaving Town Alive*, 152.

⁵⁰ Tim Miller, *Body Blows* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 36.

⁵¹ <<http://www.actupny.org/>> (2 December 2005).

⁵² Steven Durland, "An Anarchic, Subversive, Erotic Soul: An Interview with Tim Miller," *The Drama Review* 35, no. 3 (1991): 174.

the public's perception of his work; Frohnmayer called Miller's work as "as cold, ugly, and full of pain as the AIDS crisis."⁵³

Stretch Marks was informed by Miller's life in California, both as an adolescent and after his return to the state in the late 1980s. It opens on the beach, a place of many beginnings for Miller. As he says, "the Pacific Ocean is where my life has taken place...where I learned to swim...where I kissed my first boy on a church outing."⁵⁴ The ocean is a place of constant flux, and it embodies the changes in Miller's life that have transformed him. Critic Dan Sullivan interprets this moment as narcissistic, writing that "there is the slight suggestion that a plaque on the site would not be amiss."⁵⁵ Miller's work is autobiographical in nature – and he admits that that's the point. "I have a deep belief in autobiography and in creating identity and representation. It's the main job of performance," he has said.⁵⁶ However, it is soon clear that though *Stretch Marks* is largely autobiographical, it speaks to much larger issues as well.

Miller establishes himself as a victim of persecution in the very next line. He muses that he will probably be buried in the Pacific Ocean, "unless...I get lined up against a wall and shot and bulldozed into a mass grave."⁵⁷ Referring to his relationship with Douglas Sadowick, Miller describes how a massive earthquake might cause the ocean to "pour right down my street, Venice Boulevard, head straight for my driveway covering up me, my garden, my boyfriend and my dog."⁵⁸ In statements such as these, Miller represents himself as the direct recipient of violence. It is very telling that even

⁵³ Frohnmayer, *Leaving Town Alive*, 152.

⁵⁴ Tim Miller, "Stretch Marks," *The Drama Review* 35, no. 3 (1991): 143.

⁵⁵ Dan Sullivan, "Miller's Life Behind the 'Stretch Marks,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 8 Aug 1989, 1.

⁵⁶ Durland, "An Interview with Tim Miller," 176.

⁵⁷ Miller, "Stretch Marks," 143.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

the ocean, as a supposedly neutral arbiter of nature and an object of great significance for Miller, specifically targets him. It seems that Miller has no allies. Also telling is the fact that Miller includes such details as his garden and his dog when describing his relationship with Sadownick. This evidence of domesticity in his private life stands in contrast to charges made by conservatives of “sexual excess” in homosexual relationships. Miller had previously made works that challenged perceptions of homosexual relationships, such as *Live Boys*, his 1981 collaboration with then-partner John Bernd. That piece showcased Bernd and Miller in their daily life together, participating in such ordinary activities as ordering a pizza, grocery shopping, and building snowmen. Critic Robert J. Pierce pointed out that “the piece could as easily be about a straight couple. But it isn’t, and that’s the point.”⁵⁹ By stressing the normalcy of their relationship, Bernd and Miller were able to depict the intimacy of it, implying that homosexual and heterosexual relationships are not so different. This statement, from just before the dawn of the AIDS epidemic, was not interpreted as being overly political. Pierce writes that “*Live Boys* is not political theater... [it] doesn’t preach, doesn’t address any of the issues of the gay movement.”⁶⁰ But that same sentiment, as expressed in *Stretch Marks* within the context of the discourse surrounding gay relationships in the wake of AIDS, had strong political connotations.

Miller describes “a place where there are no lifeguards...a place called Zero Beach.”⁶¹ Zero Beach is a place of death, and for Miller it is everywhere. He talks about his fear of flying, how as a child he used to read stories about disasters and was secure in the thought that such horrors would never happen to him. It is possible that this sense of

⁵⁹ Robert J. Pierce, “Between Stromboli’s and Bed,” *Soho News*, 11 March 1981, 30.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶¹ Miller, “Stretch Marks,” 145.

security stemmed from Miller's not yet having realized his identity as a gay person. Now, says Miller, danger confronts him everyday. Too terrified to fly, Miller takes the train, which leads him through a series of vignettes from his life and leaves him in front of the Los Angeles County General Hospital.

The next segment, entitled "Vigil," was developed from a 1989 ACT UP demonstration in which Miller and other activists camped out in front of the hospital for a week in protest of the poor medical care received there by AIDS patients. Miller performed this segment of *Stretch Marks* at Performance Space 122 in April 1989.⁶² The piece opens with Miller sitting on a soapbox in the center of the stage. The lights come up so slowly that the audience remains in conversation, unaware that the performance has begun. The bare skin of Miller's arms comes into view first, contrasting with his dark tank top and jeans. The pedestrian nature of his costume is reflected in his movement. Gradually the outline of his body becomes perceptible, and Miller matter-of-factly stands up and begins pacing. The simplicity of his movement and the evenness of his rhythm are reminiscent of the early postmodern works. Miller jumps up and down, circling his arms in tight coils. He begins to speak in a low voice, setting the scene of the ACT UP demonstration: "There is a building behind me. Over here is Los Angeles." He gestures as before with taut arms, vibrating them outward in tiny circles. His movement seems constrained. It has a weary, urgent quality. Miller's focus is deliberate, yet he seems to be acting out of habit. One gets the sense that he has told this story before, perhaps too many times. This is underscored by the repetition that characterizes his movement. Miller moves the soapbox to the front of the stage, saying "this is the performance

⁶² *New Stuff: the Spring Collection*, dir. Kevin Duffy, 1 hr. 10 min., Character Generators/Video, 1989, videocassette.

space.” His tone is almost pedantic. He is breaking down the elements of the performance into their most simplistic components, as if the audience would not be able to digest them in a more complex form. Finally, Miller removes his glasses, signaling that the “performance” is about to begin. He jumps on the box with a loud stamp and begins his monologue as the light quickly changes to a spotlight.

There is a lack of clear boundaries surrounding the performance, no marker to signify when reality is suspended and pretense begins. This is emphasized by Miller’s interaction with the audience, which he addresses directly. The performance takes on the character of a communal project. Miller begins to speak: “We’re here to demand proper care, programs, and an AIDS ward here at the biggest hospital in the world!” He breathes heavily, which reveals his effort and humanizes him. He is very clear and direct in his words and movement, which often serves to support the text almost in the manner of mime. Even when Miller is just speaking at the microphone and not traveling around the stage, his body is full of motion, an incessant rocking back and forth that conveys his agitation. He stabs a bag full of sand with a knife. In his memoir he recalls, “the sand flowed past my eyes, every grain seeming to stand for a person who had died of AIDS.”⁶³ His tone is full of sadness, yet the violence of the gesture reveals his anger. The flow of his speech clashes with the cadences of his sentences, creating an uncomfortable rhythm. This seems to be the point: the audience shouldn’t be comfortable when persons with AIDS have to “sit in a public hallway on a hard bench getting their chemo and throw up from the side effects in view of all.” Miller asserts that “it’s time for art to be...useful.” When his monologue is over, he abruptly jumps backward, and the lights dim. He says, “then it was over and I walked back into the crowd.” The anticlimax reminds the

⁶³ Miller, *Shirts and Skin*, 214.

audience that what they have just seen is merely art, and leaves the door open for them to take action. To understand why the need for such action was so pressing, a closer examination of the AIDS epidemic is necessary.

My Queer Body: Confronting Dangerous Perceptions

AIDS first appeared in 1981, nine years before the NEA crisis. Doctors initially referred to it as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID).⁶⁴ Miller remembers when in 1981 his then-partner John Bernd learned that his blood had mysteriously lost the ability to clot: “‘I’m sure it’s no big deal,’ I lied, vaguely aware of some disturbing rumors that had been afoot about some gay men who were sick.”⁶⁵ By 1982, those rumors had become national headlines. Because AIDS first crept into the public consciousness as a gay-related disease, it was long associated with homosexuality, even after the science behind it became more fully understood. Scholar David Gere eloquently states that “we were caught in the clutches of two epidemics: an epidemic of HIV and an epidemic of signification, a proliferation of viral disease and a proliferation of unwanted meanings.”⁶⁶ Alleged “government indifference” toward AIDS was met with campaigns to bring humanity to AIDS victims, such as the 1987 NAMES quilt, which intended to show that “it was nice boys, mother-loving boys...who were getting sick.”⁶⁷ The NAMES quilt was part of a larger movement to deconstruct the link in public perception between homosexuality and AIDS. This ill-conceived notion of the disease reappeared during the NEA crisis, with right-wing political commentator Pat Buchanan declaring, “the gays

⁶⁴ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 40.

⁶⁵ Miller, *Shirts and Skin*, 147.

⁶⁶ Gere, *How to Make Dances*, 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

yearly die by the thousands of AIDS, crying out in rage for...medical research to save them from the consequences of their own suicidal self-indulgence.”⁶⁸

In reference to controversial works of art, Congressman Dana Rohrabacher’s press secretary wrote, “we’re not talking about artistic nudes.”⁶⁹ However, peer-review panels consisting of arts professionals were responsible for making the determination on what constituted good art, not politicians. And certainly some artistic nudes are highly erotic – Grecian sculpture, for example. This indicates that the underlying problem was not really the artistic value of the works in question, but the attitudes that people held toward them. With Miller it was the alignment of the male homosexual body with something dangerous and dirty. *My Queer Body*, created in 1992 after the NEA crisis had turned Miller into a cause célèbre, necessarily responded to this phenomenon.

Like *Stretch Marks*, *My Queer Body* uses the body as a text, examining the scars that life leaves on the body and soul. For Miller, most of these scars result from society’s cruelty. He wrote that the show “explores the stories that our bodies carry and how systematic homophobia challenges our deepest selves.”⁷⁰ Near the beginning of the piece, Miller gives an example of how homophobia has challenged him. He imagines the moment of his conception, the meeting of a sperm and an egg: “And...ECCE HOMO! Behold the fag.”⁷¹ That Miller identifies himself as a homosexual from the very first moment of his life reveals how fundamental that identification is to his existence. Additionally, the prejudice against homosexuals did not spare him even in the womb,

⁶⁸ Patrick Buchanan, “Where a Wall is Needed,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New York Press, 1992), 138.

⁶⁹ Quoted in C. Carr, “War on Art,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New York Press, 1992), 230.

⁷⁰ Miller, *Body Blows*, 79.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

making him seem almost destined to realize his current life of activism. By bringing up negative attitudes toward homosexuality in conjunction with the body, Miller outlines the thematic structure of the piece.

Miller opens the performance with a “psycho-sexual scavenger hunt,”⁷² asking the audience to call out their favorite body parts and coaxing them until they feel comfortable yelling out the “naughty stuff.”⁷³ This creates an atmosphere of acceptance, where love of the body is met with appreciation rather than shame. The piece is full of explicit descriptions of sexual acts. Notably, Miller does not shy away from talking about AIDS in conjunction with homosexuality. When he recounts the sexual encounters he has had with men who are now dead of AIDS, he clearly does not mean to elicit shame. Rather, Miller humanizes victims of the disease by depicting them with very real and natural desires, desires that the audience has just admitted to harboring. Miller addresses the notion of the dangerous male homosexual body by physically touching members of the audience. He grabs their fingers and “whatever else strikes his fancy during this section,”⁷⁴ his light attitude indicating that physical contact with another human being does not hold any kind of stigma for him. Even though Miller was HIV-negative, and by this time researchers had determined that casual contact held no risk for contracting the virus, the residue of stereotype remained and many people still feared touching gay men or someone known to be HIV-positive. At another point in the performance, Miller sits nude in someone’s lap. He discusses a powerful moment from that part of the performance in his essay “Preaching to the Converted”:

⁷² Ibid., 85.

⁷³ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

At a certain point, I sit on one of the audience members [sic] laps and look in their eyes. My butt naked on their laps. I try to speak clearly to them: [...] Right now sitting with you, whatever I do is gonna be wetter and messier and more human and more complicated than when I stand up there on the stage [...]. I said these words as I sat on the lap of a young man who was sitting on the aisle [...]. [...] He was trembling intensely but he was present in his gaze and really making contact with me. I was scared too. I wasn't sure what was going on for him. How intense was this for him? What unknown boundary had I crossed?⁷⁵

Miller is again playing with borders. Whereas in *Stretch Marks* he distorts traditional elements of performance, in *My Queer Body* he challenges each individual's limits of comfort. He is unapologetic about and even welcoming of the wet and messy nature of sitting on someone's lap and does not question whether that person feels the same way. John Frohnmayer of the NEA had stated that people should have the option to avoid confronting art that makes them feel uncomfortable. Presumably because of the notoriety of Miller's work, the people who attended his performances knew what they were getting themselves into. Yet the incorporation of physical contact into performances such as Miller's still troubled some individuals.

Miller makes an effort to universalize his sufferings. When he talks about getting beat up by a police officer at an ACT UP demonstration, he suggests that the audience somehow shared that experience: "Your fingers were smashed by a horse's hoof when hundreds of LAPD cops on horseback trampled through us hurting a lot of people. Your

⁷⁵ Miller and Román, "Preaching to the Converted," 169-170.

beautiful arm struck with a cop's nightstick."⁷⁶ Notably, Miller places an emphasis on the word "cop," aligning the act of violence with the state. This underscores the direness of the situation; Miller truly has nowhere to turn if even the people charged with keeping the peace act violently toward him. By inviting the audience to imagine what this must feel like, he encourages them not only to feel greater sympathy for his cause, but also to assume some of the responsibility for enacting change. Suddenly the audience's naming of body parts at the beginning of the piece takes on a new significance: objects of desire become objects of pain. Miller's reference to AIDS in the next line brings the subject of the disease into the shared realm. He does not allow the audience to distance themselves from the problem the way he feels that conservative lawmakers do.

Miller sees his work as a kind of therapy for his audiences. He writes that "As a theater artist, I look at an audience and assume that each person has just been to a funeral, or just had delicious sex, or was queer-bashed and carries some wounds and some pleasures very close to themselves as they take their seats,"⁷⁷ and that "for many of them, their presence is *literally* a matter of life or death."⁷⁸ But here Miller does not address the issue of what people who are not experiencing those things are supposed to draw from his performances, almost contradicting his argument in "Preaching to the Converted." There is a sense that the public puzzled over this issue as well; a critic referred to Miller's work as "single minded" and "emboldening," but only "for those who share his orientation."⁷⁹ This is why Miller's efforts at universalizing his experiences are essential to the defense of his work as artistically valid and important, not just for a specific community, but for

⁷⁶ Miller, *Body Blows*, 102.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁹ Mel Gussow, "Being Gay and Naked in America," *New York Times*, 11 Dec 1992, C14.

all of humanity. By demonstrating that the problems of AIDS and homophobia affect not only the direct victims of these tragedies but society as a whole, Miller makes his work relevant to those who do not identify with him.

Though the same issues inform both *My Queer Body* and *Stretch Marks*, *My Queer Body* addresses those issues more confrontationally. It is peppered with explicit political references such as “I will not be cast out of Paradise by Jesse Helms.”⁸⁰ Miller compares the election of Ronald Reagan as president to his first serious sexual experience, which he implies was violent and traumatizing. By directly naming the political figures who led the charge against homosexuals, Miller implicitly calls for the public to hold them accountable for their actions. When it comes time to outline a plan of attack, Miller doesn’t merely suggest as in *Stretch Marks* (“maybe it’s time for art to be...useful”); now he commands. The overall tone of the piece is markedly full of anger, as critic Jack Anderson observed: “[Miller’s] body language always matched his prose. He gestured harshly and forcefully in his responses to homophobic jibes.”⁸¹ Here one can see the effects of the NEA crisis on Miller’s work. As he confessed in an interview with Steven Durland, “[the crisis] gives me more confidence and the belief that it matters to be doing it and that you need to speak louder and clearer.”⁸² Thus the crisis only served to strengthen Miller’s resolve, much to the dismay of conservatives.

After-effects of the Crisis and Conclusion

Miller puts the events of 1990 into perspective by remembering that only three days prior to learning that his grant application had been rejected, he was almost killed in

⁸⁰ Miller, *Body Blows*, 121.

⁸¹ Jack Anderson, “Portraits of Gay Men, With No Apologies,” *New York Times*, 10 Jan 1993, H6.

⁸² Durland, “An Interview with Tim Miller,” 175.

a skirmish at an ACT UP demonstration.⁸³ This suggests that, even though an ACT UP mantra is “silence = death,”⁸⁴ Miller does not equate censorship of the arts with present physical danger. The practical issues that characterize Miller’s work are manifested here. He is mindful of all the people who have died of AIDS, refusing to take his art too seriously in light of the perils threatening so many of his comrades. For Miller, art must always be subordinated to a grander cause. The sense that Miller’s art was really about something and for something is what set him apart from an earlier generation of postmodernists and made him an innovator.

Miller bristles at the suggestion that the NEA crisis helped his career. While the ordeal undoubtedly earned him a certain amount of notoriety, it also subjected him to death threats and other verbal attacks. Miller’s performances were often met with demonstrations, making it difficult for him to tour. As he says, “Whole swaths of the country that I used to perform and teach in became off-limits for years. I lost a great deal of work, and the brave arts organizations that did bring me in to their communities often faced ugly scenes at their theaters.”⁸⁵ Miller staunchly refuses to censor himself in the face of controversy, keeping nudity in his programs even when “it doesn’t seem like the best idea.”⁸⁶ However, he notes that for other artists, “the ‘chilling effect’ is as cold as the polar ice cap!”⁸⁷

Even though Miller’s work didn’t undergo a significant evolution, public perception of it did. Miller claims that no review ever described his work as

⁸³ “Buddies, Bodies, and Gay Identity,” *New York Times*, 5 Jun 1994, 81.

⁸⁴ <<http://www.actupny.org/>> 9 Dec 2005.

⁸⁵ Miller, *Body Blows*, 82.

⁸⁶ Durland, “Interview with Tim Miller,” 175.

⁸⁷ Miller, *Body Blows*, 81.

pornographic before the crisis.⁸⁸ After the crisis, however, most critics instantly focused on the sexual content of his performances. When he went on tour, people expected him to do something shocking, creating a bit of a dilemma: “Do I do [a performance that] fulfills everyone’s expectations of this anarchic, subversive, erotic universe? Or something [...] which frustrates people’s expectations?”⁸⁹ Thus the NEA crisis caused Miller’s work to lend itself to a single interpretation, creating the trivializing effect that he argued so furiously against in his essay “Preaching to the Converted.”

Miller’s artistic career survived in the end, though he retained his share of adversaries. Some had reasons for disliking him that were artistically founded, and some did not. The crisis demonstrated that some individuals will not let the Constitution prevent them from exercising their prejudices. John Frohnmayer used the argument that Miller’s work was not artistically supportable in order to skirt the larger issues of intolerance. Any art that deviates from accepted standards is vulnerable to this attack. Thus without the perseverance of individuals like Tim Miller, controversial ideas would not have the chance to develop in this country. Certainly Miller’s work makes some people feel uncomfortable; however, it is essential to the development of their character that those people reflect on why that discomfort arises. As the NEA was an essential means of support for fringe artists in the early 90s, it provided a voice to underrepresented viewpoints. We must continue to allow those viewpoints the freedom to exist in our society – we must continue to support the arts.

⁸⁸ Durland, “Interview with Tim Miller,” 171.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 171-172.

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