

Freshman Papers 2002 Winner Maren Pedersen

Words from Maren

As a child growing up in the western suburbs of Chicago, I had a plethora of cultural outlets at the tip of my fingers. My mother thought it extremely important for her children to have a solid base in the fine arts, so we often accompanied her to museums and theatre events. I always enjoyed the Art Institute because of its vast collection of paintings, sculptures, and photographs. As the years went by, I developed a fond appreciation for impressionist pieces such as Degas' dancers and Monet's water lilies. I attended Interlochen Arts Camp for five summers, and my love for classical art forms thrived. Eager to see what else the art world had to offer, I visited Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art during its 2001 Summer Solstice Celebration.

To be honest, upon entering the museum I observed the art with disgust. In one corner was a chair made entirely of raw meat. In a separate room, a television continuously played a shrieking clown. I could not fathom who would ever consider this art, let alone art created by an exceptionally gifted artist. Revolted by what I had seen, I quickly left

the museum. After reflecting on the experience, however, I realized that I had no right to insult the talent of the artist. Who am I to judge? I am not an art critic, yet I am still a member of the viewing audience. Do I have the right to challenge the integrity of the art

world? When asked by my freshmen studies teacher, Siobhan Moroney, to examine

an aspect of civil disobedience or political obligation, I decided to investigate the decency standards of art as well as the government's role in funding it and the protection of the artistic expression that accompanies it. By examining this issue, I was forced to confront pieces I would otherwise never want to see. After careful contemplation and extensive research, I concluded that art of all forms is necessary to provoke and sustain an intriguing and diverse culture.

Provoking Judgment

American government dabbles in everything these days. If it were a living entity, it would be the paragon of the Renaissance man. It sees to the nation's health, security, economy, technology, and art. But this last combination of government and the arts creates a highly volatile mixture which again and again explodes in the midst of societal pressures. The very nature of American society and art prevents government from effectively subsidizing the arts. The recent controversies over indecent or offensive art perfectly illustrate the way in which a piece of art is churned through the internal machinery of preconceived notions, principles, and democratic ideals inside the viewer's head. This existence of controversies, along with the already ambiguous nature of art and its perception, creates a national debate over the meanings of words such as "decency" and "artistic excellence" and their correlation with merit and worth when judging art. When the nation was founded, art was considered to be a factor of social well-being and in the country's cultural interests; however, it was decided by our forefathers that support of this particular social well-being was not a federal concern. Our first and third presidents, Washington and Jefferson respectively, stressed the need for arts in developing a cultural heritage in American society. No actual support or funding was given because Congress generally felt that funding the arts was not in their job description.

According to Stanley Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies: "If one looks at the whole history of the arts in America, what is

