

OAC takes on censorship

TORONTO – The Ontario Arts Council (OAC) has adopted a broad policy opposing censorship that, in part, takes aim at movie censorship by the province's film review board.

A statement from the OAC also says that the provincial practice of having movies and videos reviewed sets filmmakers apart from all other artists in the province.

Robert Sirman, director of operations at the arts council, said the policy was adopted last summer by the 12 members of the council's board.

The policy was approved for several reasons, Sirman said. The OAC, the government agency that funds many of the province's artists and art groups, wants to raise public consciousness about the issue, he said.

As well, the council wants to identify itself with the arts community as being opposed to prior restraint (censorship performed before public release or distribution) and as opposed to censorship in general, he said.

Sirman said the council hopes it will have some influence on the Ontario government in terms of changing censorship policy or legislation.

Although the policy adopted is broad and could be aimed at any number of groups or agencies which could potentially censor art in various ways, Sirman said the arts council is most opposed to prior restraint of artistic practice.

"Our first priority is that artistic practice should not be an area of prior restraint. As it is not at the moment with painting and theatre and publications, etc., so to it should not be with the artistic practice of filmmakers and video artists."

He said the arts council would support classification instead of censorship.

Sirman was asked if the approval of the policy pitted one part of government against another part of the same government.

He said just as other segments of the government take positions that are "inconsistent" with the arts council, the OAC feels it must support or promote the artistic community. He said the arts council's mandate is different from the mandates of other agencies of the government.

"We have had no negative feedback from the position that we have taken on this subject from any part of the government."

Former OAC executive director Walter Pitman met with Ontario Film Review Board chairman Anne Jones at the

end of December, 1986 to discuss the issue. Sirman, who also attended, termed it a courtesy meeting.

He said during the meeting it became clear that Jones was most interested in commercial sector filmmaking and wasn't aware of the arts community's concerns about the censor

board which had gradually become more involved in censorship of artistic films and videos.

The OAC statement reads: "The Ontario Arts Council is opposed to censorship. Censorship is the imposition of prior restraint whereby a government or government

agency reviews artistic creation for the purpose of altering content which it deems to be objectionable, or prohibiting its distribution to the public.

Ontario's current practice of reviewing films and video materials distinguishes artists who work in these media from all others. The Ontario Arts Council

opposes this practice, which discriminates against certain artistic constituencies, and also supports the right of all artists to create and exhibit work."

Sirman said the arts council's interest in censorship issues has been continuous since 1980.

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