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Cultural Affairs Chief Defends City's Support of Pornography Exhibition

By JACOB GERSHMAN Staff Reporter of the Sun

The commissioner of the city Department of Cultural Affairs yesterday defended the agency's financial backing of a Brooklyn art studio that hosted an exhibition featuring soft-core pornography.

"It is not surprising that of the city's thousands and thousands of exhibits and performances, someone will be offended by something," Commissioner Kate Levin said. "New York City has a long history of funding nonprofit culture in recognition of the essential role that the arts play in sustaining our local quality of life and our unique place in the world."

The taxpayer-funded department gave \$6,000 in fiscal year 2004 to the Smack Mellon Studios in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn.

The studio just wrapped up its "Multiplex" exhibition that included a mock 1970s-era rec room with an assortment of vintage Playboy and Club magazines. Visitors are encouraged to browse through the magazines while watching a 58-minute video of Mr. Borg playing a fictional match against a cross-dressing Borg look-alike. Chris Sollars, the artist who resembles Mr. Borg, created the video by splicing images of himself on a tennis court and wearing a short skirt. The screening room, titled "Bjorn Again," also features a wall with illustrations of naked women and Mr. Borg.

The department says it didn't fund the particular exhibit but paid for a program organized by Smack Mellon that provided studio space inside their gallery.

The National Endowment for the Arts spent \$20,000 on the studio in 2004, money that provided artists with studio space, equipment, and technical support.

The NEA's reputation among conservative critics has risen recently, prompting New York Times columnist William Safire to say the NEA "has raised a banner of education and accessibility to which liberal and conservative can repair."

A spokeswoman for the NEA, Victoria Hutter, said, "We fund many organizations for many kinds of projects and we are very careful...to follow up on their requested projects. We can't be responsible for everything that we do."

Ms. Levin called any concerns about the funding of Smack Mellon "moot" because the show closed on Sunday.

For fiscal year 2004, the city gave the department \$17.5 million to spend on cultural programming, spread among more than 500 art organizations. The agency's total budget is \$118 million, most of which goes toward subsidizing the city's museums.

The department's review process came under fire during the Giuliani administration when Catholic groups complained about an art show at the Brooklyn Museum that included a portrait of the Virgin Mary festooned with elephant dung. Its funding has come down slightly since 2001, when its budget was at \$133.5 million.

Officials at Smack Mellon could not be reached for comment.