

Where a Democracy and Its Money Have No Place

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EARLIER THIS YEAR, JANE ALEXANDER, THE DEPARTING chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, wearily spoke of recurring Congressional attempts to "drive a stake in the heart of Federal funding for the arts." She called these exorcistic rites a "nearly debilitating annual Sturm und Drang that threatens to suck the life out of all arts advocates."

It is too soon to say if the annual Sturm und Drang will achieve its threatened goal, but here is a working critic's confession: if this perpetual drama actually reaches its final wrenching cadences, it will be a relief. Andres Serrano's urine-soaked crucifix, Robert Mapplethorpe's penile photographs,

Jesse Helms's outrage and invocations of family values — all will become quaint memories. So will endowment reports like the one released on Oct. 15 that accuses the arts of the sin of elitism.

Finally, we will be able to pay attention to the real problem — something that might be called the "ideology of democracy." In this vision of the world, not only are all people created equal but so are all ideas and all cultures. Even art — an essentially undemocratic achievement by extraordinarily gifted individuals — is thrust into a marketplace marked by clamorous demands for democratic distribution. How can a national agency

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act as a patron in such an atmosphere? It can't. And it shouldn't. R.I.P.

Before the grave is dug, it might be worth reviewing the all-too-familiar N.E.A. debate. The endowment began in 1965 as part of the same Great Society enterprise that declared war on poverty; that utopian spirit still characterizes its defense. N.E.A. supporters point out that all great nations help finance the arts — France spends \$32 a person and Germany \$27 — but the annual costs of the endowment have been no more than 38 cents per capita. That small amount, though, has large repercussions.

Endowment Money Talks, But Interpretations Differ

According to the endowment, each N.E.A. dollar inspires \$11 more in matching grants. Since its founding, the number of orchestras has quadrupled; there are eight times as many theaters; annual audiences for the arts exceed those of all sports events combined. The arts also create \$37 billion in economic activity and support 1.3 million jobs. Finally, less than 40 of the 110,000 grants ever given by the N.E.A. have been controversial.

The organization's opponents see a very different picture. The controversial grants, with their provocative sexual, political or religious imagery, are viewed as just extreme examples of the N.E.A. helping to pull the fringe closer to the mainstream. Endowment-inspired matching grants are part of the problem, not solution: they further institutionalize the N.E.A.'s attitudes.

And if the endowment has helped increase the quantity of art, it is debatable whether the quality has improved. Economic benefits are also beside the point: if the goal is fiscal health, there are more efficient methods. Countries like France and Germany hardly offer a model for American patronage; they are too different in character and history. The government should get out of the business of art criticism.

Underlying these arguments, though, is a more fundamental issue. In the political arena, where deals are made and budgets determined, the N.E.A. is debated with little understanding of what art is all about or what the function of a patron is; among politicians and, indeed, within the endowment, major decisions are being influenced by the ideology of democracy.

That ideology begins with one of the great liberal ideas that defined this country: equality is not something attained or purchased or inherited. It is simply possessed, universally, at birth. Failures to realize this ideal have done nothing to weaken its strength: when we stand before the law as citizens, we are supposed to stand equally.

But as de Tocqueville realized, such a revolutionary idea could not be applied in the political realm without also resonating in all other aspects of American life. In fact, it has now become the defining aspect of American culture. We are so loath to make distinctions (except to correct earlier distinctions) that we now doubt whether any are worthwhile or even possible. We ask democracy to be the moral, spiritual and esthetic compass by which our culture evolves.

The problem is that art is incompatible with this ideology. It is engaged in constant acts of discrimination. Moreover, the ability to create it is no more distributed according to democratic principles than is the ability to play basketball like Michael Jordan or chess like Gary Kasparov. There are differences between us at birth that the civil order must ignore but the esthetic order is beholden to. Even the evaluation of art is guided by such undemocratic gauges as cultivated taste and extensive experience.

Can Democratic Ideals Be Used to Judge Art?

So there is a tension at the very heart of the N.E.A.: How can a national agency in a democracy make decisions that are, in their very essence, anti-democratic?

This was an issue raised during the initial debates about whether a Federal arts agency should even be established. Initially, many major arts institutions were opposed to a Federal arts program. In 1953, a survey by the American Symphony Orchestra League, the service organization for American orchestras, showed that 99 percent of orchestra board members opposed Federal aid. Aside from the leaders of community orchestras, members of the league remained lukewarm on Federal aid even into the 1960's. Orchestras and the fine arts, many organizations argued, could only be sullied by the interference of politicians who were neither trained nor inclined to make proper decisions.

The skepticism did not disappear once the N.E.A. was established. Who, after all, would be given the power to make judgments about grants? By what right would anybody's tastes, values and standards prevail over anybody else's? The way such elite activities were reconciled with democratic aspirations was to create an institutional hybrid: the main decision-making was seemingly removed from the realm of democratic politics and ceded to professionals. An elite jury of peers would evaluate each application.

This created a new style of artistic patronage. The panel system rejected the idea that we are all equal in judging art, but still turned the judging of art into a "democratic" process. A larger bureaucracy was required to administer the panel system, to assess results "objectively" and to justify the judgments to those holding the purse strings.

The panel system also strengthened the ideology of democracy within the N.E.A. The composition of panels became politically important. Panels were treated as if they should be representative bodies, their members speaking for different constituencies.

While politics has always been a handmaiden to patronage — older models of arts support by court and church involved notorious quantities of infighting and favoritism —

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the emphasis on accountability created a new kind of bureaucratic politics. Artistic patronage was thrust into the public marketplace, to be buffered about by conflicting claims. Forget individual taste; the demand was for representation.

During the last two decades this demand has become even more fervent as democratic ideology has taken root in the art world itself. The very idea of artistic quality has become open to question. Many artists have become preoccupied with making ideological statements. And advocates of multiculturalism have questioned the priority of Western standards and styles.

In such a landscape, what sort of patron of the arts has the N.E.A. become? It takes equitable distribution as a principle of its patronage. It is preoccupied with the size of audiences. It focuses on insuring equal participation by different interest groups. It retains a notion of "excellence" but makes that idea contingent on the opinions of its constituencies. And nothing can be excluded. The endowment boasts that it "reaches Americans of every race, class, ethnicity and geographic region" and "supports community festivals, rural chamber music, art exhibitions in libraries and town halls, lawn concerts."

The N.E.A. has tended to treat financial

support of the arts as if the money had to be distributed according to various formulas of representation — calculating, to a tenth of a percentage point, funds distributed to each state and ethnic group. Its judging panels in recent years have been created using something resembling an ethnic quota: about a third have consistently been "minorities" — American Indians, Asians, blacks or Hispanics — and about 48 percent have been women.

The result is that the N.E.A. has ended up becoming a multicultural clearing house. When the agency was criticized recently for a grant to the California Indian Basket Weavers Association, Ms. Alexander defended "this world-renowned form of traditional art mastered by Native Americans." No other distinctions were necessary.

As a consequence, there appears to be no central vision, simply the clamor of political forces. This is evident in the recent revisions of grant categories, established not according to discipline, like theater or music, but according to principles, like Access, Heritage or Preservation. Such categories give more emphasis to the political benefits of support than to the arts themselves.

If the N.E.A. Is Not Elitist, Why Is It Needed?

So without a homogeneous culture, without an education system that creates a deep understanding of artistic traditions, without a realization that art is more than entertainment, public patronage becomes a market phenomenon, responding to confining demands, competing bids, promises of influence. We have a democratic society; we demand democratic arts.

It is astonishing how thoroughly this idea has been accepted in Washington, without any linking that it might conflict with the very essence of traditional patronage of the arts or artistic accomplishment. Newt Gingrich and the Republicans thought they were making an incisive criticism of the N.E.A.

when they called it "elitist." The agency's allies responded with outrage at the supposed insult. On Oct. 15, the endowment went a step further in its report, "American Canvas, an Arts Legacy for Our Communities," blaming arts institutions for being elitist. Each group thought the word a slur rather than a matter of pride. But if the N.E.A. is not elitist, what do we need it for?

Attempts by Republicans to create a test of artistic "dececy" also ended up revealing an aesthetic vacuum. The arts were treated as if their function was to communicate proper "values" to the public. Washington liberals took a similarly vulgar view, focusing on their own versions of "values" and treating art as a form of social therapy doled out to interest groups. As much as the right's opposition, the left's defense has tended to plecty and religious fervor.

Even the courts have got into the act. When the endowment's "dececy" test for determining the financing of artworks was struck down earlier this year, the court argued that the Government could not deny a work support because of ideas or point of view. This was hailed as a triumph for free speech. But if a patron cannot decide whether or not to financially support a work because of its ideas or point of view, on what grounds can it decide? Form? Style?

So the ideology of democracy leaves us with a vision of the arts that is pure pork barrel. At this moment, there are few Congressional Democrats or Republicans with any deep understanding of cultural life apart from television or movies. There is nothing to temper the ideology of democracy, only opinion to support it. And this, of course, affects the kind of "art" being created. One criterion for the authenticity of democratic art is that it stir "controversy"; controversy means that it is noticed by the most people and justifies its cost. Immediate sensation becomes important. So do practical benefits and notions of "relevance."

Paradoxically, though, the ideology of democracy may suggest a means for develop-

ing a national artistic culture. It is not to be found in democracy itself but in the intellectual, religious and esthetic traditions that led to its development. If those traditions were really at the center of the N.E.A., there might be some chance for national patronage; they might encourage a more healthy artistic diversity, free from democratic demands.

There Is a Model For an Arts Paradise

Prime examples of institutions that have offered such alternatives are the great museums — like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Here many esthetic universes coexist, with each culture's most elite and extraordinary objects on display. But they are housed in an enterprise unmistakably based on Western traditions of knowledge and judgment. The museum is made possible by combining Western-style scholarship with multicultural expertise. The Met could evolve in that fashion because it didn't have to answer to democratic constituencies, only to its curators, who shared common goals.

A contemporary public patron like the N.E.A. could have similar ideals, but that would mean declaring independence from democratic ideology and being ready to withstand the righteous outrage that would follow. It may be that at this moment of cultural and political fragmentation, a public patron could best serve the public by educating it in the cultivation of educated eyes and ears. This would turn the patron into a conservator rather than a supporter of new works — a role with risks and restrictions, but with far fewer than democratic dilettantism. The more effective grants of the current N.E.A. could then be built upon.

Optimism, though, may be uncalled for. The sad aspect of modern American culture is that we created a National Endowment for the Arts we deserve. The even sadder aspect is that the way things stand now, what we really deserve is no N.E.A. at all. □