

## The Cultural Policy Studies Project

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# TEN GOOD REASONS TO ELIMINATE FUNDING FOR THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

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As the U.S. Congress struggles to balance the federal budget and end the decades-long spiral of deficit spending, few programs seem more worthy of outright elimination than the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Indeed, since its inception in 1965, few federal agencies have been mired in more controversy than the NEA. Nevertheless, steadfast partisans of “welfare for artists” continue to defend the Endowment, asserting that it promotes philanthropic giving, makes cultural programs accessible to those who can least afford them, and protects America’s cultural heritage.

In fact, the NEA is an unwarranted extension of the federal government into the voluntary sector. The Endowment, furthermore, does not promote charitable giving. Despite Endowment claims that its efforts bring art to the inner city, the agency offers little more than a direct subsidy to the cultured, upper-middle class. Finally, rather than promoting the best in art, the NEA continues to offer tax dollars and the federal seal of approval to subsidize “art” that is offensive to most Americans.

There are at least ten good reasons to eliminate funding for the NEA:

### **Reason #1: The Arts Will Have More Than Enough Support without the NEA**

The arts were flowering before the NEA came into being in 1965. Indeed, the Endowment was created partly because of the tremendous popular appeal of the arts at the time. Alvin Toffler’s *The Culture Consumers*, published in 1964, surveyed the booming audience for art in the United States, a side benefit of a growing economy and low inflation.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Alvin Toffler, *The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Affluence in America* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 188.

Toffler's book recalls the arts prior to the creation of the NEA—the era of the great Georges Balanchine and Agnes de Mille ballets, for example, when 26 million viewers would turn to CBS broadcasts of Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. In fact, nearly all of the major orchestras in the United States existed before 1965, and will continue to exist after NEA subsidies are ended.

In spite of the vast splendor created by American artists prior to 1965, partisans of the NEA claim that the arts in the United States would face almost certain demise should the Endowment be abolished. Yet Endowment funding is just a drop in the bucket compared to giving to the arts by private citizens. For example, in 1996, the Metropolitan Opera of New York received \$390,000 from the Endowment, a federal subsidy that totals only 0.29 percent of the Opera's annual income of \$133 million—and amounts to less than the ticket revenue for a single sold-out performance.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of private-sector charitable giving in recent years has rendered NEA funding relatively insignificant to the arts community. Overall giving to the arts last year totaled almost \$10 billion<sup>4</sup>—up from \$6.5 billion in 1991<sup>5</sup>—dwarfing the NEA's federal subsidy. This 40 percent increase in private giving occurred during the same period that the NEA budget was reduced by 40 percent from approximately \$170 million to \$99.5 million.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as conservatives had predicted, cutting the federal NEA subsidy coincided with increased private support for the arts and culture.

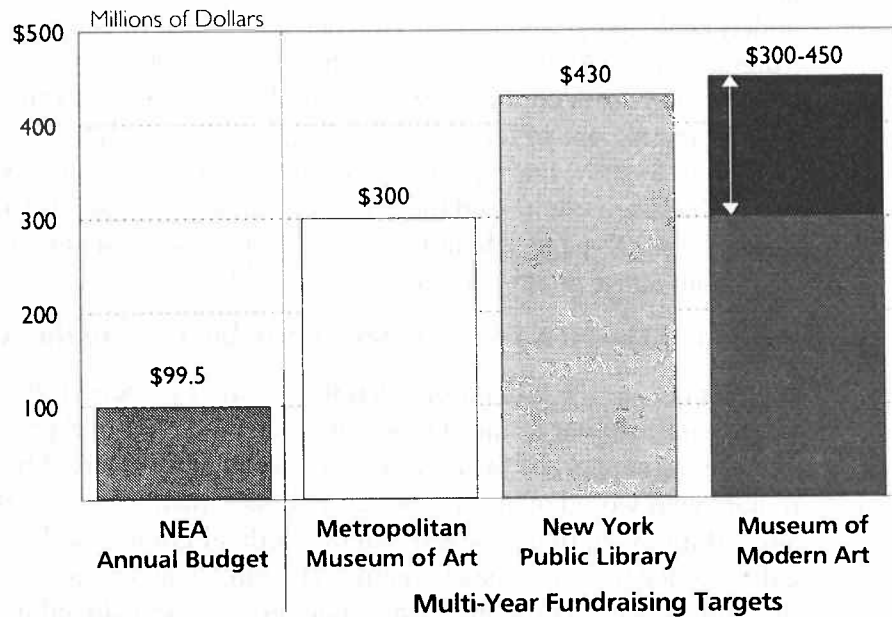
That many major cultural institutions are in the midst of successful fundraising efforts belies the questionable claim of NEA supporters that private giving, no matter how generous, could never compensate for the loss of public funds. As Chart 1 shows, many of these institutional campaigns have fundraising targets many times greater than the NEA's annual federal appropriation of \$99.5 million. In New York City, the geographic area which receives the largest relative share of NEA funding, the New York Public Library is raising some \$430 million (with 70 percent already completed), the Museum of Modern Art, \$300 million–450 million (with 30 percent raised), the Metropolitan Museum of Art some \$300 million (with 80 percent already obtained).<sup>7</sup> In fact, philanthropist Frederick A. O. Schwartz, Jr., recently told *The New York Times* that “we've entered a period of institutional excitement comparable only to that which occurred after the Civil War until World War I when several of the city's great civic and cultural institutions were built.”<sup>8</sup>

In Great Britain, economist David Sawers's comparative study of subsidized and unsubsidized performing arts concluded that major cultural venues would continue to thrive were government subsidies to be eliminated. According to Sawers's calculation, 80 percent of all London theater box office receipts, including ballet and opera, went to unsubsidized theater.<sup>9</sup> (Britain's renowned Glyndebourne opera, for example, relies entirely on private funding.)

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- 3 A typical sold-out performance at the Met brings in nearly \$485,000 in ticket revenue, given the average ticket price of \$125 and a seating capacity of 3,877.
  - 4 *Creative America: Report of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities*, Washington, D.C., February 1997.
  - 5 Joseph Ziegler, Testimony before House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, March 5, 1997.
  - 6 *Giving USA 1996* (New York: AAFRC Trust For Philanthropy, 1996).
  - 7 Judith Miller, “Big Arts Groups Starting Drives for New Funds,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1997, p. 1
  - 8 *Ibid.*
  - 9 David Sawers, “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” *Current Controversies* No. 7, Institute for Economic Affairs, London, 1993, p. 22

Chart 1

## Major Cultural Institutions Do Not Need NEA Funds



Source: Judith Miller, "Big Arts Groups Starting Drives for New Funds," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1997.

Even smaller organizations can succeed without depending on the federal government. As Bradley Scholar William Craig Rice argues cogently in *The Heritage Foundation's Policy Review*, "The arts will flower without the NEA." His survey shows that many arts venues can easily replace NEA funding, and suggests a number of alternative strategies for those who might find the disappearance of the federal agency problematic.<sup>10</sup>

### Reason #2: The NEA Is Welfare for Cultural Elitists

Despite Endowment claims that federal funding permits underprivileged individuals to gain access to the arts, NEA grants offer little more than a subsidy to the well-to-do. One-fifth of direct NEA grants go to multimillion-dollar arts organizations.<sup>11</sup> Harvard University Political Scientist Edward C. Banfield has noted that the "art public is now, as it has always been, overwhelmingly middle and upper middle class and above average in income—relatively prosperous people who would probably enjoy art about as much in the absence of subsidies."<sup>12</sup> The poor and the middle class, thus, benefit less from public art subsidies than does the museum- and orchestra-going upper-middle class. Sawers argues that "those who finance the subsidies through taxes are likely to be different from and

- 10 William Craig Rice, "I Hear America Singing: The Arts Will Flower Without the NEA," *Policy Review*, March/April 1997, pp. 37–45.
- 11 Derrick Max, "Staff Briefing on the National Endowment for the Arts." U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, p. 29.
- 12 Edward C. Banfield, *The Democratic Muse* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); as cited in "Cultural Agencies," *Cato Handbook for Congress: 105th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1997).



poorer than those who benefit from the subsidies.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, the \$99.5 million that funds the NEA also represents the entire annual tax burden for over 436,000 working-class American families.<sup>14</sup>

As part of the Endowment’s effort to dispel its elitist image, Chairman Jane Alexander has led a nationwide campaign painting the NEA as a social welfare program that can help underprivileged youth to fight violence and drugs. In congressional testimony, she has trumpeted her “American Canvas” initiative “to gain a better understanding of how the arts can transform communities.”<sup>15</sup> But despite the heartwarming anecdotes, claims for the therapeutic use of the arts are not supported by empirical scientific evidence. Studies that claim to show the arts prevent crime are methodologically questionable, due to problems of self-selection. And the arts offer no cure for alcoholism either: Tom Dardis devotes his 292-page scholarly work, *The Thirsty Muse*, precisely to the high occurrence of alcohol abuse among American writers.<sup>16</sup>

### **Reason #3: The NEA Discourages Charitable Gifts to the Arts**

Defenders of the NEA argue that the much of its benefit lies in its ability to confer an imprimatur, similar to the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval,” necessary to encourage private support of the arts. NEA officials have asserted frequently that by persuading donors who would otherwise not give, Endowment support can offer a financial “leverage” of up to ten times the amount of a federal grant award.<sup>17</sup> There is little or no empirical evidence to support such claims. The only available study of “matching grants”—those designed specifically to stimulate giving—concluded that matching grants did not increase total giving to the arts. Instead, “matching grants” appear to shift existing money around from one recipient to another, “thereby reducing the private resources available to other arts organizations in a specific community.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, a study by the Association of American Cultures (AAC) revealed that private funders found major museum exhibits, opera, ballet, symphony orchestras, and public television to be “attractive” for donors without an official government stamp.<sup>19</sup>

Economist Tyler Cowen also sees an ominous effect to government arts programs: “Once donors believe that government has accepted the responsibility for maintaining culture, they will be less willing to give.”<sup>20</sup> This analysis is consistent with recent public statements from foundation executives that the private sector will not make up the gap resulting from decreases in NEA funding, despite record levels of private giving in recent years. Cowen’s conclusion: “The government can best support the arts by leaving them alone, offering background assistance through the tax system and the enforcement of copyright.”<sup>21</sup>

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13 Sawers. “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” p. 22.

14 Heritage Tabulations from 1993 IRS Public Use File.

15 Jane Alexander, Testimony to the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, March 13, 1997.

16 Tom Dardis, *The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American Writer* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1982).

17 See Jane Alexander, Testimony to the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, May 8, 1996.

18 David B. Pankratz, *Multiculturalism and Public Arts Policy* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), p. 55.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

20 Tyler Cowen, draft ms. for Chapter 6, “Market Liberalization vs. Government Reaction” in *Enterprise and the Arts*, forthcoming from Harvard University Press, pp. 22–31.

21 *Ibid.*

#### Reason #4: The NEA Lowers the Quality of American Art

NEA funding also threatens the independence of art and of artists. Recognizing how government subsidies threaten artistic inspiration, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that “Beauty will not come at the call of the legislature.... It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men.”<sup>22</sup> Recent critics echo Emerson’s creed. McGill University Management Professor Reuven Brenner has declared: “The NEA’s opponents have it right. Bureaucratic culture is not genuine culture.... It was the unsubsidized writers, painters and musicians—imprisoned in their homes if they were lucky, in asylums or in gulags if they weren’t—who created lasting culture.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, to many of the NEA’s critics, the idea of a federal “seal of approval” on art may be the “greatest anathema of all.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, to maintain its editorial independence, *The New Criterion*, a journal edited by former *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer, has rejected NEA funding since its founding some 15 years ago. In 1983, Kramer was a vocal, principled critic of an NEA program offering subsidies to art critics; his opposition forced the agency to scrap the grants.<sup>25</sup>

When government gets in the business of subsidizing art, the impact upon art is often pernicious. According to Bruce Bustard, author of a catalogue for the current retrospective on art funded through President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Public Works of Art Project,” notes that the “New Deal produced no true masterpieces.” Instead, as *Washington Post* columnist James Glassman declared, the PWA “stifle[d] creativity,” producing works “that are dreary, unimaginative condescending and political.”<sup>26</sup>

Cowen notes that the “NEA attempts to create a mini-industrial policy for the arts. But governments have a terrible record for choosing future winners and losers, whether in business or the arts.”<sup>27</sup> Government subsidies often can hurt the quality of art by promoting a new cult of mediocrity. Rice has pointed out that the NEA helps the well-connected and the well-established at the expense of less sophisticated—and possibly more talented—outsiders.<sup>28</sup> The NEA thereby reduces the importance of popular appeal for the arts, substituting instead the need to please a third-party government patron, and thus driving a wedge between artists and audiences.

In his major comparative study of subsidized and unsubsidized art in Great Britain, Sawers noted that government subsidies actually work to reduce choice and diversity in the artistic marketplace by encouraging artists to emulate each other in order to achieve success in the grants process. Privately funded venues, thus, are more artistically flexible than publicly funded ones. (For example, it was private orchestras that introduced the “early music” movement into Britain.<sup>29</sup>) In addition, such favoritism endangers funding for otherwise worthy arts organizations merely because “they do not receive a public arts agency matching grant.”<sup>30</sup>

22 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Art,” in *Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), p. 342.

23 Reuven Brenner, “Culture By Committee,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 1997.

24 Laurence Jarvik and Nancy Strickland, “Forget the Speeches: The NEA Is a Racket,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 22, 1995.

25 Hilton Kramer, “Criticism Endowed: reflections on a debacle,” *The New Criterion*, November 1983, pp. 1–5.

26 James K. Glassman, “No Money for the Arts,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1997, p. A17.

27 Cowen, “Market Liberalization vs. Government Reaction,” pp. 2–22.

28 William Craig Rice, *The NewsHour*, debate moderated by Elizabeth Farnsworth, March 10, 1997.

29 Sawers, “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” p. 39.

The threat to quality art from federal subsidies was already crystal clear to Toffler in the 1960s: "Recognizing the reality of the danger of political or bureaucratic interference in the process of artistic decision-making, the principle should be established that the United States government will make absolutely no grants to independent arts institutions—directly or through the states—to underwrite operating expenses or the costs of artistic production. Proposals for a national arts foundation that would distribute funds to foster experiment, innovation...are on the wrong track. They ask the government to make decisions in a field in which it has vested political interests."<sup>31</sup>

### **Reason #5: The NEA Will Continue to Fund Pornography**

In November 1996, in a 2–1 decision, the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a 1992 ruling in the "NEA Four" case of Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes—all "performance artists" whose grant requests were denied on grounds their art lacked merit.<sup>32</sup> The Court ruled that the 1990 statutory requirement that the Endowment consider "general standards of decency and respect" in awarding grants was unconstitutional.<sup>33</sup> The congressional reauthorization of the agency in 1990 had added this "decency provision" in keeping with recommendations of the Presidential Commission headed by John Brademas and Leonard Garment.

Without such a "decency" standard, the NEA can subsidize whatever type of art it chooses. As a result, attorney Bruce Fein called the Court of Appeals decision a recipe for "government subsidized depravity" that must (if not reversed by the Supreme Court) force Congress to "abolish the NEA, an ignoble experiment that, like Prohibition, has not improved with age."<sup>34</sup> Literary critic Jonathan Yardley, writing in the *Washington Post*, declared: "Only fools—of whom, alas, in the 'arts community' there are many—would argue that the federal government is obliged to underwrite obscene, pornographic or otherwise offensive "art."<sup>35</sup>

There is no shortage of examples of indecent material supported directly or indirectly by the NEA. Nevertheless, Jane Alexander has never criticized any of these NEA grantees publicly. And the Clinton Administration has yet to file an appeal of the Ninth Circuit's decision. Moreover, no Member of Congress has yet attempted to provide a legislative fix that would require NEA grant recipients to abide by general standards of decency in their work.

On March 6, 1997, Congressman Pete Hoekstra (R–MI), Chairman of the Education and Workforce Subcommittee that has oversight over the NEA, complained about books published by an NEA-funded press called "Fiction Collective 2," which he described as an "offense to the senses." Hoekstra cited four Fiction Collective 2 books and noted that the publisher's parent organization had received an additional \$45,000 grant to establish a World Wide Web site. According to *The Washington Times*, the NEA granted \$25,000 to Fiction Collective 2, which featured works containing sexual torture, incest, child sex,

30 Pankratz, *Multiculturalism and Public Arts Policy*, p. 55.

31 Toffler, *The Culture Consumers*, p. 200.

32 Diane Haithman, "Did NEA Win Battle, Lose War?" *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1996, p. F1.

33 Affirming opinion of Judge James R. Browning, U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, filed November 5, 1996, in *Karen Finley, et al., v. National Endowment for the Arts*.

34 Bruce Fein, "Dollars for Depravity?" *The Washington Times*, November 19, 1996.

35 Jonathan Yardley, "Art and the Pocketbook of the Beholder," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 1997, p. D2.



and sadomasochism; the “excerpts depict a scene in which a brother-sister team rape their younger sister, the torture of a Mexican male prostitute and oral sex between two women.”<sup>36</sup> Pat Trueman, former Chief of the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the United States Department of Justice Criminal Division, characterized the works as “troubling” and said the NEA posed a “direct threat to the prosecution” of obscenity and child pornography because of its official stamp on such material.<sup>37</sup> Incredibly, the NEA continues to defend such funding decisions publicly. “Fiction Collective 2 is a highly respected, pre-eminent publisher of innovative, quality fiction,” NEA spokeswoman Cherie Simon said.<sup>38</sup>

The current controversy is nothing new for the NEA. In November 1996, Representative Hoekstra questioned NEA funding of a film distributor handling “patently offensive and possibly pornographic movies—several of which appear to deal with the sexuality of children.”<sup>39</sup> He noted the NEA gave \$112,700 over three years to “Women Make Movies,” which subsidized distribution of films including:

- “Ten Cents a Dance,” a three-vignette video in which “two women awkwardly discuss their mutual attraction.” It “depicts anonymous bathroom sex between two men” and includes an “ironic episode of heterosexual phone sex.”
- “Sex Fish” portrays a “furious montage of oral sex, public rest-room cruising and...tropical fish,” the catalog says.
- “Coming Home” talks of the “sexy fun of trying to fit a lesbian couple in a bathtub!”
- “Seventeen Rooms” purports to answer the question, “What do lesbians do in bed?”
- “BloodSisters” reveals a “diverse cross-section of the lesbian [sodomasochistic] community.”

Three other films center on the sexual or lesbian experiences of girls age 12 and under. “These listings have the appearance of a veritable taxpayer-funded peep show,” said Hoekstra in a letter to NEA Chairman Alexander. He noted that the distributor was circulating films of Annie Sprinkle, a pornographic “performance artist” who appeared at “The Kitchen,” a New York venue receiving NEA support.<sup>40</sup> In response, *The New York Times* launched an *ad hominem* attack on Hoekstra (while neglecting to mention that *The New York Times* Company Foundation had sponsored Sprinkle’s performance at one time).<sup>41</sup>

Another frequent response supporters of the NEA make to such criticism is to claim that instances of funding pornography and other indecent material were simple mistakes. But such “mistakes” seem part of a regular pattern of support for indecency, repeated year after year. This pattern is well-documented in the appendix to this paper.

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36 Julia Duin, “NEA Funds ‘Offense to the Senses.’ Lawmakers Lip Arts Agency for Aiding Prurient Publications,” *The Washington Times*, March 8, 1997, p. A2.

37 Patrick A. Trueman, Director of Governmental Affairs, American Family Association, Testimony before the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, March 5, 1997.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Representative Pete Hoekstra, letter to NEA Chairman Jane Alexander, November 16, 1996.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Frank Rich, “Lesbian Lookout,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1997, p. A27.

## Reason #6: The NEA Promotes Politically Correct Art

A radical virus of multiculturalism, moreover, has permanently infected the agency, causing artistic efforts to be evaluated by race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation instead of artistic merit.<sup>42</sup> In 1993, Roger Kimball reported that an “effort to impose quotas and politically correct thinking” was “taking precedence over mundane considerations of quality.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the most prominent case of reverse discrimination was the cancellation of a grant to the *Hudson Review*, which based its selections on “literary merit.”<sup>44</sup>

More recently, Jan Breslauer wrote in *The Washington Post* that multiculturalism was now “systemic” at the agency.<sup>45</sup> Breslauer, theater critic for *The Los Angeles Times*, pointed out that “private grantees are required to conform to the NEA’s specifications” and the “art world’s version of affirmative action” has had “a profoundly corrosive effect on the American arts—pigeonholing artists and pressuring them to produce work that satisfies a politically correct agenda rather than their best creative instincts.” NEA funding of “race-based politics” has encouraged ethnic separatism and Balkanization at the expense of a shared American culture. Because of federal dollars, Breslauer discovered, “Artists were routinely placed on bills, in seasons, or in exhibits because of who they were rather than what kind of art they’d made” and “artistic directors began to push artists toward ‘purer’ (read: stereotypical) expressions of the ethnicity they were paying them to represent.”<sup>46</sup> The result, Breslauer concluded, is that “most people in the arts establishment continue to defer, at least publicly, to the demands of political correctness.”<sup>47</sup>

Aside from such blatant cultural engineering, the NEA also seems intent on pushing “art” that offers little more than a decidedly left-wing agenda:

- Last summer, the Phoenix Art Museum, a recipient of NEA funding, presented an exhibit featuring: an American flag in a toilet, an American flag made out of human skin, and a flag on the museum floor to be stepped upon. Fabian Montoya, an 11-year-old boy, picked up the American flag to rescue it. Museum curators replaced it, prompting Representative Matt Salmon (R–AZ) and the Phoenix American Legion to applaud the boy’s patriotism by presenting him with a flag that had flown over the U.S. Capitol. Whereas the American Legion, Senator Bob Dole, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich condemned the exhibit, NEA Chairman Alexander remained conspicuously silent.
- Artist Robbie Conal plastered “NEWTWIT” posters all over Washington, D.C., and sold them at the NEA-subsidized Washington Project for the Arts.<sup>48</sup>
- And the NEA still has not fully answered a 1996 query from Senator Jesse Helms (R–NC) for details of its support to the (now defunct) Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts in San Francisco, which had received an estimated

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42 See Pankratz, *Multiculturalism and Public Arts Policy*.

43 Roger Kimball, “Diversity Quotas at NEA Skewer Magazine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 1993.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Jan Breslauer, “The NEA’s Real Offense: Agency Pigeonholes Artists by Ethnicity,” *The Washington Post*, March 16, 1997, p. G1.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, p. G8.

48 Laurence Jarvik, “Committing Suicide at the NEA,” *COMINT: A Journal About Public Media*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1996), p. 44.



\$30,000 per year from the NEA since the early 1980s. The reason for the inquiry was to determine what the NEA knew about the activities of one of the leaders of the center, Gilberto Osorio. Osorio co-founded the center in 1977, and since had been exposed as a commandante in the FMLN guerrilla command during the civil war in El Salvador by San Francisco journalist Stephen Schwartz.<sup>49</sup> One of the FMLN missions undertaken while Osorio had been chief of operations was a June 19, 1985, attack on a restaurant in San Salvador that killed four U.S. Marines and two civilian employees of the Wang Corporation. In 1982, Osorio reportedly had ordered that any American found in San Vicente province be executed. Schwartz concluded, “some of their [NEA] grantees may be guilty of more than just crimes against good taste.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Reason #7: The NEA Wastes Resources**

Like any federal bureaucracy, the NEA wastes tax dollars on administrative overhead and bureaucracy. Anecdotes of other forms of NEA waste are legion. The Cato Institute’s Sheldon Richman and David Boaz note that “Thanks to an NEA grantee, the American taxpayers once paid \$1,500 for a poem, ‘lighgt.’ That wasn’t the title or a typo. That was the entire poem.”<sup>51</sup> In addition to such frivolities, the Endowment diverts resources from creative activities as artists are lured from producing art to courting federal grant dollars and even attending demonstrations in Washington, D.C.

There are other ways that the NEA wastes tax dollars: Author Alice Goldfarb Marquis estimates that approximately half of NEA funds go to organizations that lobby the government for more money.<sup>52</sup> Not only has the NEA politicized art, but because federal grant dollars are fungible, they can be used for other purposes besides the support of quality art. In addition, approximately 19 percent of the NEA’s total budget is spent on administrative expenses—an unusually high figure for a government program.<sup>53</sup>

As noted above, Sawers’s comparative study of British fine arts noted little difference in the quality of art between subsidized and unsubsidized venues. Sawers did uncover one major difference, however, between subsidized and unsubsidized companies: unsubsidized companies had fewer, if any, performers under contract, relying instead on freelance staff. Fixed and total costs for unsubsidized companies were, therefore, substantially lower than those of the subsidized companies. Subsidized venues kept “more permanent staff on their payroll” instead of lowering ticket prices.<sup>54</sup> Subsidies, thus, result in higher ticket prices to force the public to subsidize bloated arts bureaucracies.

### **Reason #8: The NEA Is Beyond Reform**

In 1990, the Presidential Commission on the NEA, headed by John Brademas and Leonard Garment, concluded that the NEA had an obligation to maintain a high standard of decency and respect because it distributed taxpayer dollars. The recent record of the agency, and the November 1996 appellate court decision in the case of the “NEA Four,”

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49 *Ibid.*, p. 46

50 *Ibid.*

51 “Cultural Agencies,” in *Cato Handbook for Congress, 105th Congress*, (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1997).

52 Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Art Lessons: Learning from the Rise and Fall of Public Arts Funding* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

53 Max, “Staff Briefing on the National Endowment for the Arts,” p. 27.

54 Sawers, “Should the Taxpayer Support the Arts?” p. 33.

make it unlikely that the Endowment will be able to ever honor that recommendation. NEA Chairman Alexander has not condemned the continued subsidies for indecent art nor explained how such grant requests managed to get through her “reorganization.” Unfortunately, not a single Senator or Representative has asked her to do so.

Recent history shows that despite cosmetic “reorganizations” at the NEA, the Endowment is impervious to genuine change because of the specific arts constituencies it serves. Every few years, whether it be by Nancy Hanks in the Nixon Administration, Livingston Biddle in the Carter Administration, or Frank Hodsoll in the Reagan Administration, NEA administrators promise that reorganization will bring massive change to the agency. All these efforts have failed. It was, in fact, under Mr. Hodsoll’s tenure in the Reagan Administration that grants were awarded to Robert Mapplethorpe, known for his homoerotic photography, and to Andres Serrano, infamous for creating the exhibit “Piss Christ.”

Recent changes in the titles of NEA departments have had little effect. In the words of Alice Goldfarb Marquis, “All Ms. Alexander has done is, to coin a phrase, re-arrange the deckchairs on the Titanic.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Alexander has retained veteran NEA executive Ana Steele in a top management position to this date. Steele approved the payment of over \$250,000 to the “NEA Four” while serving as acting chairman in 1993.

The NEA claims to have changed, no doubt in hopes of mollifying congressional critics. Yet the NEA has continued to fund organizations that have subsidized materials offensive to ordinary citizens while attempting to recast its public image as a friend of children, families, and education. It is a “two-track” ploy, speaking of family values to the general public and privately of another agenda to the arts lobby. For example, Chairman Alexander has defended NEA fellowships to individual artists, prohibited by Congress after years of scandals. In her congressional testimony of March 13, 1997, she declared: “I ask you again in the strongest terms to lift the ban on support to individual artists.”<sup>56</sup>

To send its signal to the *avant garde* arts constituency, the NEA continues to fund a handful of “cutting-edge” organizations in each grantmaking cycle. The NEA has even maintained its peer-review panel process used to review grants, by changing its name to “discipline review”; The Heritage Foundation cited this process in 1991 as riddled with corruption and conflicts of interest, and as a major factor in the Endowment’s selection of offensive and indecent proposals.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the rhetoric of reform issuing from its lobbyists, and five years of reduced budgets, the reality remains defiantly unchanged at the NEA.

### **Reason #9: Abolishing the NEA Will Prove to the American Public that Congress Is Willing to Eliminate Wasteful Spending**

President Clinton proposes to spend \$1.7 trillion in his FY 1998 budget. Over the next five years, the Administration seeks to increase federal spending by \$249 billion.<sup>58</sup>

55 Alice Goldfarb Marquis. letter to author, February 7, 1997.

56 Jane Alexander, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies, U.S. House of Representatives, March 13, 1997 .

57 Robert Knight, “The National Endowment for the Arts: Misusing Taxpayer’s Money,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 803, January 18, 1991; Robert Knight, “The National Endowment: It’s Time to Free the Arts,” Family Research Council *Insight*, January 1995, p. 1.

58 “The Era of Big Government is Back: Talking Points on President Clinton’s Fiscal Year 1998 Budget,” Heritage Foundation *Talking Points* No. 17, February 24, 1997, p. 1.

Further, Clinton also proposes to increase the NEA's funding to \$119,240,000, a rise of 20 percent.<sup>59</sup> These dramatic increases in spending come in the age when the federal debt exceeded \$5 trillion for the first time and on the heels of a 1996 federal deficit of \$107 billion.

In this era of budgetary constraint, in which the need to reduce the federal deficit is forcing fundamental choices about vital needs—such as housing and medical care for the elderly—such boondoggles as the NEA should be among the first programs to be eliminated. Representative Wally Herger (R-CA), citing a recent NEA grant to his own constituents (the California Indian Basket Weavers Association), pointedly said that he “does not believe that in an era of tight federal dollars, basket weaving should have a top priority in Congress.”<sup>60</sup> Whenever American families have to cut make cuts in their spending, non-essential spending—such as entertainment expenses—are the first to go. If Congress cannot stand up and eliminate the \$99.5 million FY 1997 appropriation for the NEA, how will it be able to make the case for far more fundamental budget cuts?

### **Reason #10: Funding the NEA Disturbs the U.S. Tradition of Limited Government**

In retrospect, turmoil over the NEA was predictable, due to the long tradition in the United States of opposing the use of federal tax dollars to fund the arts. During the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, delegate Charles Pinckney introduced a motion calling for the federal government to subsidize the arts in the United States. Although the Founding Fathers were cultured men who knew firsthand of various European systems for public arts patronage, they overwhelmingly rejected Pickney's suggestion because of their belief in limited, constitutional government. Accordingly, nowhere in its list of powers enumerated and delegated to the federal government does the Constitution specify a power to subsidize the arts.

Moreover, as David Boaz of the Cato Institute argues, federal arts subsidies pose the danger of federal control over expression: “Government funding of anything involves government control.... As we should not want an established church, so we should not want established art.”<sup>61</sup> As Cowen notes, “When the government promotes its favored art, the most innovative creators find it more difficult to rise to the top.... But the true costs of government funding do not show up on our tax bill. The NEA and other government arts agencies politicize art and jeopardize the principles of democratic government.”<sup>62</sup> The French government, for example, tried to suppress Impressionism through its control of the Academy.

The deep-seated American belief against public support of artists continues today. Public opinion polls, moreover, show that a majority of Americans favor elimination of the NEA when the agency is mentioned by name.<sup>63</sup> A June 1995 *Wall Street Journal*-Peter Hart poll showed 54 percent of Americans favored eliminating the NEA entirely versus 38 percent in favor of maintaining it at any level of funding. An earlier January 19, 1995, *Los Angeles Times* poll found 69 percent of the American people favored cutting the NEA

59 Appendix to the Budget of the United States, p. 1080.

60 Judith Miller, “Federal Arts Agency Slices its Smaller Pic,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 1997, p. B6.

61 David Boaz, “The Separation of Art and State: Who is going to make decisions?” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, Vol. LXI, No. 17 (June 15, 1995).

62 Cowen, “Market Liberalization vs. Government Reaction,” pp. 2-22.

63 Pro-NEA pollsters tend to ask about “the arts,” not the federal agency and its record.



budget.<sup>64</sup> More recently, a poll performed by The Polling Company in March 1997 demonstrated that 57 percent of Americans favor the proposition that “Congress should stop funding the NEA with federal taxpayer dollars and instead leave funding decisions with state government and private groups.”

## CONCLUSION

After more than three decades, the National Endowment for the Arts has failed in its mission to enhance cultural life in the United States. Despite numerous attempts to reinvent it, the NEA continues to promote the worst excesses of multiculturalism and political correctness, subsidizing art that demeans the values of ordinary Americans. As the federal debt soars to over \$5 trillion, it is time to terminate the NEA as a wasteful, unjustified, unnecessary, and unpopular federal expenditure.

Ending the NEA would be good for the arts and good for America.

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64 Jarvik, “Committing Suicide at the NEA,” p. 44.

## APPENDIX

The NEA has used tax dollars to subsidize pornography, sadomasochism, and other forms of indecency. Here are some selected examples:

- In 1995, the NEA-funded “Highways,” a venue featuring a summer “Ecco Lesbo/Ecco Homo” festival in Santa Monica, California. The festival featured a program actually called “Not for Republicans” in which a performance artist ruminated on “Sex with Newt’s Mom.” The artistic director was Tim Miller (of the “NEA Four”). Former Clinton adviser Paul Begala agreed that items in the published schedule were obscene.<sup>65</sup>
- NEA grants announced in December 1996 included \$20,000 to the “Woolly Mammoth Theater” venue for Tim Miller, one of the “NEA Four” performance artists. He had stripped twice, talked about picking up homosexual prostitutes, and asked members of the audience to blow on his genitals in a 1995 production entitled “Naked Breath.” The NEA also awarded \$25,000 to “Camera News, Inc.,” also known as “Third World Newsreel,” a New York distributor of Marxist revolutionary propaganda films.<sup>66</sup>
- In June 1996, Representative Hoekstra raised questions about “The Watermelon Woman.” The film was funded by a \$31,500 NEA grant. It contained what one review described as the “hottest dyke sex scene ever recorded on celluloid.” “I had high hopes that Jane Alexander would forbid further outrages by the NEA, but apparently even she—nice lady that she is—lacks the power and the will to put an end to the NEA’s obsession with handing out the taxpayers’ money to self-proclaimed ‘artists’ whose mentality is just so much flotsam floating around in a sewer,” said Senator Jesse Helms.<sup>67</sup>
- Hilton Kramer, in a March 1996 issue of *The New York Observer*, noted a new “disgusting” Whitney exhibition he characterized as a “jolly rape of the public sensibilities.” The Whitney was showing the work of Edward Kienholz, and “it almost goes without saying that this America-as-a merde [French for excrement] show is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.” The Whitney Museum recently received the largest grant issued by the NEA thus far in 1997—\$400,000.
- *The Sunday Maine-Telegram*, reported on March 3, 1996, that William L. Pope, a Professor at Bates College, received \$20,000 grant in the final round of NEA grants to individual performance artists. He intended to use the money for at least two projects. In one, he would chain himself to an ATM machine in New York City wearing only his underwear. In the other, he “plans to walk the streets of New York wearing a six-foot-long white tube like a codpiece. He’s rigged it up so he can put an egg in one end, and it will roll out the faux, white penis.” The *Maine-Telegram* noted that the NEA individual fellowship program “will go out with a bang, at least with this grant.”

65 *Ibid.*

66 Julia Duin, “NEA makes grants as fight for life nears. Agency conducts ‘business as usual’ with its selections,” *The Washington Times*, December 19, 1996.

67 Julia Duin, “Black lesbian film likely to rekindle arts-funding furor NEA defends graphic comedy,” *The Washington Times*, June 14, 1996.

- “Sex Is,” a pornographic video displaying the NEA credit, is still in distribution.
- Bob Flanagan’s “Super Masochist,” featuring sexual torture, and an Andres Serrano exhibit featuring “Piss Christ” were shown at the NEA-funded New Museum in New York City. Flanagan (now deceased) was recently the star of a film at the Sundance Film Festival entitled “Sick,” which showed him nailing his male organs to a wooden plank. “Sick” is also on the 1997 schedule of the New Directors/New Films series co-sponsored by the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Both institutions have been NEA grant recipients, and Lincoln Center chief Nathan Leventhal is one of President Clinton’s nominees for the National Council on the Arts. His nomination is pending in the Senate.
- Ron Athey’s video of his ritual torture and bloodletting, subsidized indirectly through tour promotion at NEA venues like Walker Art Gallery and PS 122 in New York. (Walker Art Center grants actually increased in the year after the museum booked Athey.)
- Joel-Peter Witkin, a four-time recipient of NEA individual fellowships whose photograph of severed heads and chopped up bodies were displayed by Senator Helms on the Senate floor two years ago as evidence of the moral corruption of the NEA (Helms discussed one featuring a man’s head being used as a flower-pot). Witkin was honored with a retrospective at New York’s NEA-funded Guggenheim museum. Even *The New York Times* condemned the show as “gruesome.”
- Karen Finley, also of the “NEA Four,” brought her new “performance piece” to an NEA-funded venue in Boston.
- Holly Hughes, another of the “NEA Four” (and recipient of a 1994 individual fellowship), brought her act to an NEA-funded institution in suburban Virginia.
- New York City’s New Museum, an NEA-funded operation, hosted a retrospective of the work of Andres Serrano, which once more included an exhibit of “Piss Christ.”
- New York’s Museum of Modern Art, funded by the NEA, hosted an NEA-funded exhibit of Bruce Nauman’s work, also displayed at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum, which included neon signs reading “S--- and Die” and “F--- and Die.”
- The NEA literature program subsidized the author of a book entitled *The Gay 100*, which claims that such historical figures as Saint Augustine were homosexuals.

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