

INTRODUCTION

The National Endowment Arts is a mere blip on the radar screen of the federal government. While the agency's budget grew rapidly from \$2.5 million in its first eight months of operation in 1965 to its peak of almost \$176 million in 1992, its funding has dropped to \$98 million for the 1998 fiscal year (see *Readings*). By contrast, the United States is spending \$26.7 billion on secret intelligence activities this year, and ten times more on the overall military budget.

But despite its modest size and clout in the scheme of American government, the N.E.A. became a battlefield in the "culture wars" of the 1990s. Its funding of controversial artists like Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano provided the flash point. The consequent backlash rendered the N.E.A. an attractive target for conservative politicians interested in tying the aesthetics of postmodern art, "protest" art and sexually daring art to the values and politics of liberalism. As several discussants in the pages that follow observe, the result has been a mess of a debate into which are mixed the complexities of topics like elitism, multiculturalism and aesthetics, along with demagogic rhetoric and base political conspiracy theory.

Last fall, Congress lambasted the N.E.A. and cut its funding yet again, and conservatives evidenced their intent of killing it once and for all. In the midst of this annual rite, *The New York Times* published a sharp critique of the N.E.A.'s ideological premises and practices in the field in recent years entitled "Where a Democracy and Its Money Have No Place," by the paper's cultural critic at large, Edward Rothstein. Rothstein's essay aroused much comment pro and con. It seemed to us at the National Arts Journalism Program a timely starting point for an informed discussion about funding for the arts today, and tomorrow.

Joining Mr. Rothstein, our NAJP Fellows and guests at Columbia University on February 6, 1998 to reflect on the state of arts funding were art critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto, art dealer and President's National Council for the Arts member Ronald Feldman and New York University Graduate Arts and Sciences Dean Catharine Stimpson. Former Lincoln Center Festival Director and recently named *New York Times* Sunday Arts editor John Rockwell moderated the panel.

We offer this report from the February proceedings as the first in a series of papers designed as a resource for working arts and cultural journalists, and for the benefit of a broader audience of those concerned with challenging issues in arts and culture today.

Following the transcript of the panel discussion are selected readings on the N.E.A. and the arts funding debate.

THE FUTURE OF ARTS FUNDING: A PANEL DISCUSSION

This is an edited transcript of a National Arts Journalism Program panel on the future of funding for the arts held at Columbia University on February 6, 1998. Panelists were:

Arthur C. Danto, Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University, art critic of *The Nation*, and author of many books on art and philosophy, the most recent of which is *After the End of Art*.

Ron Feldman, founder of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, a SoHo gallery representing important artists working in Europe and Asia as well as the United States. Among other roles, Feldman co-authored a transition paper on the future of the N.E.A. for the Clinton Administration and serves on the President's National Council for the Arts.

Edward Rothstein, cultural critic at large for *The New York Times*, writes about a sweep of disciplines from music to other performing arts, literature and technology. He is the author of *Emblems of Mind: The Inner Life of Music and Mathematics*.

Catharine Stimpson, University Professor and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University. Stimpson's distinguished career in higher education included a period teaching at Barnard College and as founding director of the Women's Center at Barnard. Before coming to N.Y.U., Stimpson was Director of the MacArthur Foundation Fellows Program. She also served as Chair of the New York State Council for the Humanities, the National Council for Research on Women and the Modern Language Association.

Moderating the discussion was *John Rockwell*, author of several books including *All-American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century*. Rockwell served as popular and classical music critic for *The New York Times* as well as that paper's European cultural correspondent before becoming Director of the Lincoln Center Festival in 1995. He recently returned to *The New York Times* as editor of its Sunday Arts section.

Opening Remarks

ROTHSTEIN: A few years ago when I started looking more closely into the N.E.A., I was down in Washington and I sat in on a panel meeting with arts administrators from around the country, not judging individual works but discussing overall policy.

One very distinguished impresario told the story of his experience in another country, where controversies such as have developed over the N.E.A. are relatively unknown. He was trying to bring over to New York a theater production from France by a distinguished director. The fund-raising, which involved money from the N.E.A. and from corporate sponsors, had come up \$100,000 short. He talked to the French director about this problem. The director called the French Culture Ministry and a few days later had a substantial check in hand.

At this moment there was a sort of gasp of envy, surprise and admiration. There was some discussion about why this sort of thing would be possible in France and not here; why we have these controversies over everything, and what the differences are between the N.E.A. and the French Culture Ministry.

One could see why such a scenario as the French director's would be impossible here. If somebody called up the head of the N.E.A. and said, "Well, look, I have this great offer to go bring this theatre production over to Paris, and I need \$100,000," and somehow somebody had the ability to write a check for this, there would be an immediate uproar. "Well, why this director? Why this production? Why this place? Why this style? Why this area? Why not? What are the plans being made for access, and what other regions are going to be served by this?" There would be an immediate, huge bureaucratic dispute.

Such a controversy touches on the key cultural issue about the N.E.A.: the ideology of democracy being applied to the arts.

We are living in an unusual country that evolved out of a set of ideas. This set of ideas has had tremendous influence and importance and is central to all of our lives. It has to do with the fact that, at least as far as the political process is concerned, ideally there is to be no distinction between individual rights and choices in public policy.

What happens when one has a democratic view of the polity and then tries to apply it to an area that is not democratic at all, namely, the distribution of artistic talent, ability, discipline, etc.? What if we then multiply this tension by saying, "Well, not only is the creation of art an elite activity and non-democratic, but we have multiple cultures living in a democracy?" In a massive marketplace of competing demands and requests for recognition of the artistic enterprise such as ours, if one has an agency, a patron, that is supposed to make choices, what criteria are to be used for these choices?

These issues are very current. They came up when the N.E.A. was first founded in the debates that took place in Congress. This may be a unique historical situation for an artistic patron: to have to deal with issues other than the act of applying taste to art. Instead of making decisions either on the basis of art or on the basis of some idea of a social good, or creating some sort of official art of a country, the artistic patron has to deal with this other force, the pressure of the democratic demand.

THE N.E.A. ENDED UP SAYING,
"WE'RE GOING TO BE MAKING ELITE
DECISIONS, BUT IN A DEMOCRATIC WAY."

The N.E.A. ended up saying, "We're going to be making elite decisions, but in a democratic way. We're going to be setting up panels, and these panels themselves will be representative. Whatever kinds of discussions happen in these mini-representative Congresses will affect the direction of arts patronage as a whole."

It seems to me that this is also a unique new form of artistic patronage: a bureaucratic patronage that has come to exist through the N.E.A., and through various models that have imitated the N.E.A. over the past generation.

What is odd is that, actually, the democratic ideology is so strong that the very word "elite" has turned out to be a negative word. At the same time, education as an induction into a tradition of arts – that is, treating art as a discipline, not just a matter of self-expression – has become secondary.

The idea that no distinction is really possible, that one taste is as good as another, and one assertion is as good as another, now prevails. In fact, in Washington and in Congress, I very much doubt there is anybody who has a view of art as anything other than popular entertainment, or else as something that has to serve some moral purpose. This is open to qualification, but certainly the debates in Congress about art have concerned either the entertainment value or the moral aspect of art.

STIMPSON: Although I am not totally in agreement with Rothstein's article, I found it very provocative, and it made me think again about the function of Federal funding.

I do want to say I think we are living in a marvelous period for the arts and culture. It is a period of multiple voices, great fertility, and, if you'll forgive the

cliché, border crossings. It's messy, and we're not quite sure how to judge it, but there are enormous energies, enormous confluences of history at the contemporary moment. I hate some of it, I love some of it, but I do not find this a period of decline. I find this a period of great fertility.

Two experiences have helped shape my perspective, the first at the New York Council for the Humanities and the second at the MacArthur Foundation.

What did I learn at the first experience, as Chair of the New York Council for the Humanities? The humanities and the arts are different, but they have resemblances. As you all know, the N.E.H. and the N.E.A. were born joined at the hip, and the lessons from N.E.H. I think are applicable to the lessons for N.E.A. The lessons are that state and federal government funding works, but only if it is seen as support simultaneously of the aesthetic and the anthropological. If people are going to fund cultural activities – and I think they should – they should fund cultural activities in the artistic sense and the anthropological sense of the term. For example, they might fund folklore and a meditation on folklore, a poetic meditation on folklore.

GENUINELY POWERFUL AND CREATIVE ARTISTS ARE DIFFERENT FROM US.

And the second experience, working from 1994 to 1997 at the MacArthur Foundation as Director of the Fellows Program? What I learned from this is exactly what Rothstein tells us – yes, the genuinely powerful and creative artists are different from the rest of us. And the genuinely powerful and creative brain surgeons are different from the rest of us; and the genuinely powerful and creative cooks and teachers and generals are different from the rest of us.

However, unlike Rothstein, I think support of some individuals is compatible with a political democracy. It's compatible under the rubric that a political democracy sustains individuality. It sustains individuality in the voting booth. It sustains individuality in the marketplace. And it should sustain individuality in creative activities as well. So, paradoxically, I would suggest to you that it's under the rubric of individuality that we can see a defense of state and federal support of the arts.

I had a third experience today that's helped to shape my comments. I reread a play that is 2,400 years old: Richmond Lattimore's translation of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. Might I commend it to you all? It is a wickedly comic debate between Aeschylus and Euripides about which one of them is the better poet, which one

of them serves the state, and who decides who best serves the state and poetry, Aeschylus or Euripides.

In a passage about peer review, one of the characters said he thought it was pretty silly for anyone but poets to judge poets – here we have Athenian peer review. If we go back to Aristophanes, we will be reminded that our debates about the arts, unlike the cloned lamb Dolly, were not born yesterday. Our questions about relations among artists, patrons, and judges are historically contestatory. We should not commit the arrogance of presentism and think we are the only ones who have ever debated whether Karen Finley or her equivalent should receive government support.

These contests exist about the whole great circular chain of being of the arts. First comes the individual artist, who, like Euripides, is often grumpy and iconoclastic, or, like Aeschylus, often just a tiny bit smug. The next link is made up of arts institutions, and the third link in the food chain is arts education. The fourth link – what the N.A.J.P. represents – is comprised of institutions of judgment and criticism. Funding for all of them is contestatory. I think funding for all of them will be a combination of public and private.

A story I would recommend that cultural journalists follow is whether there will be a rise in private funding. When I was in philanthropy, I was told that Foundations were going to rise like beautiful gladiola, and some of them would be interested in the arts. I would be interested to know if this was a utopian dream or a reality. I would hope you would do is not only follow the money but also provide a stage for the contest to take place.

I was at first, like Rothstein, appalled that the Senate was debating these issues. Now I'm rather more sanguine about it. The Senate debate about these issues was important because it was a contribution to these millennium-old contests about the relationship of the arts to each other, the arts to aesthetic judgments, and the arts to power.

FELDMAN: As we entered the building today we were welcomed by a beautiful curved wood decoration. It said that this building was erected and endowed by Joseph Pulitzer in memory of his daughter, Lucille, to uphold the standards of excellence in journalism and to educate the next generation of journalists. Talk about public-private partnership. Our history is that history, and it's not going to go away. What culture doesn't have a like intersection of competing entities fighting for recognition, fighting to prevail, fighting over morals and values?

The problem that we have exists on many levels, but the reason we're discussing this now is because the N.E.A. is in trouble. Last year it just barely survived extinction. The reason the N.E.A. is in trouble is not because of Ed Rothstein's article or the elitist arguments that he may put forward. It's because there's a movement politically in this country that would like very much to eliminate federal funding for the arts. That movement has an agenda and political power.

THE ENEMIES OF ART HAVE SIGHTED IT CORRECTLY.

Federal funding for the arts is a political issue about morals, values, and beliefs. Culture has grown dramatically. More people are participating. The “other” is more feared than ever before: economically for jobs and culturally because of competing beliefs about God and an afterlife. The Endowment has become the center of this debate. That makes a lot of sense, because these issues are really what art is about. The enemies of the art have sighted it correctly.

The argument about elitism is interesting. I always have trouble with it because I never know which side I’m on. Am I defending all artists as a group, who are generally poor and tired and working hard? Or am I defending an artist who’s better than the others? Democracy is about making choices. We are always burdened with making the choice, and privileged to make that choice. So when I find that some days I am an elitist and some days I’m not, I think I’m comfortable with that. I don’t have any trouble serving all those roles.

Arthur Danto’s article in *The Nation* tackles this from another viewpoint. Ed Rothstein’s article says if we’re not elitist, what else is the N.E.A. for? Danto doesn’t buy into that, but he does say that the difference between having cultural values in our everyday life and using them on some normal, day-to-day level is not the same as elevating them to the difficult, complex subject matter that art can rise to. I think that’s an important distinction. It’s a little bit like what Joseph Beuys was saying: “Everyone an artist.” Everyone is an artist, because everyone has creativity within. Whether you participate in a basketball game by being Michael Jordan or as a spectator, everyone is a basketball player in some broader sense. And yes, we should hope for a society where everyone is an artist.

We’ve got to be a society that’s mature enough to understand that when art gets to the complex issues it often discusses, we can face them, deal with them, and not be afraid of them. Are we ready for that? Not in the land of the “Murdochization” of journalism and the media.

DANTO: I think that I’m coming to the view that if Alexis de Tocqueville said it, it was wrong. He had a tin ear for this culture, as far as I can make out. He sounds more like he’s describing twentieth century France than twentieth century America, where the artists are among the deepest, most contemplative and intellectual in the history of the subject.

I want to take up some of what Ed Rothstein said about France, which I've been reading about lately. *L'art contemporain* has become a politically charged description in France today. How did that happen?

Well, in France the state is about the largest patron of art that there can be. In connection with painting, there's the somewhat limp acronym of F.N.A.C, the *Fondation Nationale d'Art Contemporain*. The F.N.A.C. is a body of elected officials who make three kinds of decisions: decisions about which young artists merit support, and hence the cultivation of new talent; decisions about the enrichment of the national patrimony, that is, which paintings are to be purchased from presumably more advanced artists; and then decisions about the democratization of art, by a program of public art. And these officials are supposed to be quite ordinary people, *hommes honnêtes*, as Descartes would say.

What all this means for contemporary art is that wherever you are in the French art world as a contemporary artist, you're going to feel the breath of F.N.A.C. in your life and in your well-being. At the present moment, with unemployment in France where it is and the government looking for all kinds of places to cut costs, when somebody publicly denounces contemporary art, that person really raises powerful difficulties for artists and is unlikely to generate sympathy in the art community.

"WHAT WOULD YOUR VIEW BE, SENATOR
HELMS, ON ANDY WARHOL'S
PORTRAIT OF CHAIRMAN MAO?"

I read in a piece by a young French sociologist, Nathalie Heinich, that controversies in America are mostly moral, while controversies in France are aesthetic. When she means fundamentally by "aesthetic" is that there are tendencies both on the part of people in government and people in positions of power to constantly raise the question, "Is it art? Is it art? Is it art? If it's not, then let's get rid of it." There gets to be a symbiosis between the artist who tries to push boundaries forward and these who try to hold art into a certain closed area.

I can't imagine an American politician taking an excited stand about contemporary art, and I think that's one of the virtues of our politicians. There is that deep structural difference, whatever de Tocqueville might say, between the two systems. I find it a little frightening how government debates happen in France, and discouraging.

I'd like to see an expansion of the N.E.A., but I would hate to find the kinds of issues that I like to discuss as a philosopher coming up on the floor of the Senate. "What would your view be, Senator Helms, on Andy Warhol's portrait of Chairman Mao?" It's wonderfully left out of the political arena here. So France isn't necessarily a place one wants to envy. In France, if the state should pull out, the entire economy of art would just collapse, it seems to me, entirely.

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The question is how one could enlarge the N.E.A. without it becoming conceptual in that way, not like the bureaucracy that Edward Rothstein describes, or what Jack Lang in France exemplified in just writing checks.

At the time of the Mapplethorpe debates, as they were called, I was a guest on the McLaughlin Report as an outsider. Congressman Dick Armey (R, Texas) was there, and he said, "There has to be accountability; we don't do anything in government without accountability." I thought that was a respectable position if you're buying artillery or tanks or subsidizing projects in the National Science Foundation. What's really difficult is to give money to somebody who's not accountable except to what one might picturesquely call his muse. If we could do that, if we could think of doing that, then what we would be subsidizing would be an exemplification of one of our virtues: that is to say, we would be celebrating freedom in a national governmental bureau.

That's a bit of a pipe dream, probably, but I'd like to have the artist not be accountable to anybody, but simply produce art in conformity with whatever drives people to be artists in the first place. Most of the artists that I know of go into art as a high calling. They're not out to swindle or to cheat. And occasionally they come in conflict with their values. I would have a lot of respect for leaving them alone and finding some way to subsidize them, maybe on the basis of need – I'm not altogether sure how that should go.

Patronage vs. Democracy

ROCKWELL: It would seem to me that we're dealing here really with two linked but not directly connected issues. One is the higher philosophical or political argument as to the compatibility of democracy and art. Then, there is the slightly more nuts-and-bolts issue within the current political context of America today: what is the future – based on our perceptions of its past – of the N.E.A. in particular and public art support in general?

On the philosophical issue, I must say I'm sympathetic with Ron Feldman. The immediate crisis here is caused by a direct political attack on the N.E.A. The philosophical considerations radiate outward from that, as do the budget cuts. If we were in a climate that was more sympathetic or perhaps benignly indifferent to the arts, the minuscule amount of money allotted in the federal budget to arts support would go unnoticed.

I'm also sympathetic to Catharine Stimpson's notion, and others who mentioned this as well, that choice is essential in a democracy. All kinds of political decisions are made, and it doesn't seem quite clear to me why choices can't also be made in intellectual and aesthetic areas.

THE IMMEDIATE CRISIS HERE IS CAUSED BY A DIRECT POLITICAL ATTACK ON THE N.E.A.

Leveling equality is not the only historical basis of democracy. I don't think anybody believes equality of opportunity is the same as equality of achievement. Therefore, even if you single out equality as the simple, central fact of democratic ideology, I think it's slightly wrong to extrapolate theoretical notions of equality of opportunity to the idea that "anything goes."

Ed Rothstein, how do you respond to the various gently implied criticisms of your central thesis here about artistic patronage being inimical by definition to the idea of democracy?

ROTHSTEIN: I think the central idea isn't equality so much as representation. That is, part of the clamor is, "What about *my* view of things? What about *my* style? What about *my* way of doing things?"

In this democracy choices are made, but there is also a reluctance to make certain choices. The N.E.A. has been very clear over the years about its attempts to distribute funds according to various criteria, either ethnic or geographic or stylistic. Their reports have been figured out to the tenth of a decimal point about

the extent to which each constituency in this series of requests is satisfied. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the N.E.A. is that it is a sort of pork-barrel patronage in a democracy.

ALMOST NOTHING IS AESTHETIC AT ALL IN THIS DEBATE.

With respect to what Arthur Danto said about the way in which artistic debates here might tend to focus on moral issues, I agree in that I think that both the left and the right, in debating the N.E.A., tend to talk about what values and what social goods are being put forward by the arts. On the right, you have a certain view of what perspectives art is supposed to put forward. On the left you have another. And the left's defense of the N.E.A. is often based upon arguments of the libertarian or critical view of the arts and the impact that this can have on society. These are very highly politicized positions about the function of art. Almost nothing is aesthetic at all in this debate.

Why has this right-wing attack on the N.E.A. become the central issue? Again, I think it's related to this idea of the democratic ideology. One of the issues involved in left-right politics right now is the issue of to what extent we are part of a national culture. Is there a privileged culture or a privileged point of view? Should there be one, in this country, in terms of our interpretation of events or in approaches to art? These questions relate to the multicultural debate. Supporters of multicultural ideas tend to be on the left, and opponents tend to be on the right. One of the aspects of the right-wing opposition to the N.E.A. has been an unarticulated opposition to multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism

FELDMAN: I think that the issue of multiculturalism is important, and it swings both ways. The demographics prove that the country is changing. We have a growing minority composed of various minorities, and in this city we may have reached the point, or will soon reach the point, where "minorities" are a majority. The N.E.A. has taken very careful but not calculated policy studies on this and has come to the conclusion that probably the N.E.A. over the years has not been reflective, flexible and open enough to begin to include voices from all of these minorities. The attempt to do so has been quite good, but not good enough. There's even more to do.

Why does the right wing object to multiculturalism? The right wing doesn't want "the other" to have a voice. The arts are a place where you get that voice. You can have that voice, and the N.E.A. is helping people get that voice. The N.E.A. is under attack because it's the forward edge of that. The right wing doesn't want it

for basically very narrow reasons, and a lot of fear. The arts are more forward thinking and not fearful.

People say, "Not with *my* dollars are you going to fund this poem." No one says, "Don't spend *my* money on that bomber."

The arts are under attack because the arts are the forward and leading edge of the future of this country. Art also shows us all our blemishes. Being a strong advocate for reinstating funding to individual artists, I see this attack against the arts being focussed especially on the visual arts and literature, areas where no one likes what living artists do. The debate on the right has always been, "We have standards; we already established them; just don't fund this current stuff; we don't like it." There's the elitism: "*We* don't like it; don't fund it." The peer panel may like it, they may even say, "Well, this is an experiment that may backfire, but we're willing to take the risk, the same as we do to find a new vaccine." But the right's response is, "No, no, we're not gonna take a chance on *these* guys. They're too far out for us. They're not following the standards of the past."

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To hell with the standards of the past. You always have to kill the father to go on to the future. But you don't give up quality or excellence in doing that. Each generation talks for itself. A country that doesn't give voice to that and doesn't recognize that is in trouble.

STIMPSON: I hate using the word "multiculturalism" without definition. When we're talking about multiculturalism, are we talking about it simply as a reference to the structure of majority/minority racial relations in the United States? In that broader sense, I think Ron Feldman is absolutely right.

What gave the right its ammunition? Visual images, gay themes, and apparently blasphemous themes. These were the flash points. So I think when we talk about "multicultural," we have to ask what definition of multiculturalism we are using.

On the question of constituency politics in cultural funding, we must never forget that the constituencies have some values. For the most part, the people who are asking for a place at the table and are called "special interests" or

“constituencies” are not idlers who wish to read *The Reader’s Digest* out loud to each other, or *The American Legion* magazine. They have cultural histories and cultural visions. They have things to say, things to paint, things to write, things to dance. If the organization into constituencies has sometimes been overdone, nevertheless, without that organization, I doubt there would have been expanded cultural funding.

WHAT GAVE THE RIGHT ITS AMMUNITION? VISUAL IMAGES, GAY THEMES, AND APPARENTLY BLASPHEMOUS THEMES.

On the question of accountability, I disagree with Arthur Danto, at my peril. Unless you’re on a trust fund, there is no free lunch. People who do have federal money should be held accountable, even if all they say is, “I did what I said I was going to do when I applied for the money.” We need some standards of accountability, even if they’re only the artist saying, “Look, you gave me \$20,000 to do a piece of work; here’s the piece or part of the piece of work.” Although you can’t always predict what’s going to happen to an artistic piece of work, a minimal reporting requirement does not seem to me to be a dreadful assault on integrity or imagination.

Accountability

ROCKWELL: But surely there is accountability no matter what. If you take the most “elitist” possible patronage model, an absolute monarch of refined aesthetic tastes who chooses to commission someone to create something, the accountability rests in the fact that if the artist does not complete the commission, or if he completes it unsatisfactorily, he won’t be commissioned again. I suppose in the complete model he would be thrown into irons and killed, but let’s leave that option out. The accountability ultimately rests in the ability of the artist to get another commission, does it not?

DANTO: I think what Congressman Armey meant by “accountability” was accountability to the prevailing moral standards of society. If somebody is content with a two-line summary of what they’ve done in their tenure, I suppose nobody would have objected much to that. I don’t think that multiculturalism is a subtext in this at all. I really do think they feel about the N.E.A. that it can sponsor work that is going to lead, or has a disposition to lead, to the production of images that clash with the moral values of the taxpayer.

As to multiculturalism, we’re living in a city where the politics are totally multicultural. It’s a deeply multicultural system, and all these interests and

claims are represented in political debate. The art world, too, is a similar set of institutions. It's not a multicultural set of institutions, but there's one set of institutions with a certain flexibility and ductility, like the museum. They'd like, as it were, to be politically sympathetic to giving other groups a place, but they don't do it automatically. People are making not just judgments and decisions, but aesthetic judgments and decisions all the time. And I think that's why, rightly, our congresspeople have not managed to bring into the forum multiculturalism at all.

But the moral question's a really serious question. Incidentally, of course, they always turn out to be sexual, and what that's about is probably for cultural journalists to nail down. Just one last point on this: I got a letter from a teacher in Cincinnati or in Akron, and she was taking her class for a field trip to the Cincinnati Museum. When the time came, she discovered to her horror that it was to the Mapplethorpe exhibition that she had committed herself to taking this group of high school kids, Middle West high school kids.

She met this challenge in a creative way. There's a guy who wrote a book called *Criticizing Photography*, and she called him up and asked him to speak to her class. He handed out some of Mapplethorpe's images, which are pretty difficult images for anybody to take, and started discussing them and asking the students to discuss them. And that was very hard for them to do. But they were not willing to call off that trip. They really felt that they had to see the exhibition.

WE DON'T WANT OUR CONGRESSMAN TO
MAKE UP OUR MINDS FOR US
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I think that's a very American attitude, and it explains why museums are flooded with people. They have to see for themselves. And they went there, and they came back almost in silence. They weren't sure what they wanted to say, and one thing emerged. What they didn't want to hear were docents yammering about freedom of expression. They really felt that something about the metaphysics of a body was being transacted here, and it was important for them to deal with it.

I believe that that is the reigning attitude in the United States. We don't want our congressmen to make up our minds for us as to what we can confront. But I think that educational institutions have got a lot to do to catch up with this teacher in Ohio.

Models and Mechanisms

ROCKWELL: This discussion was meant in part to consider the future of public funding in this country and whether there is a future, and if so, what kinds of mechanisms might be appropriate. What kind of a future for public-- and especially federal -- art support do we see here on this panel. Are there alternate models besides that of the N.E.A.?

ROTHSTEIN: My view is that the N.E.A. at this point should not exist. As a culture we are unprepared for the existence of a public patron.

One of the reasons why arguments about the future of the N.E.A. are so heavily politicized is that the major view of art that has evolved is that art is the leading edge, that it does represent something about the future, that it is essentially an act of dissent. Another view of art, elitism, relates to ideas that would be considered somewhat retrograde, but that have to do with discipline, education, tradition, context, and influence. Elitism is a counterbalance to what has become a dominant view of what the artistic enterprise is all about.

AS A CULTURE WE ARE UNPREPARED FOR THE EXISTENCE OF A PUBLIC PATRON.

The Metropolitan Museum is an example of an institution that has created a context by which one experiences the works of many different cultures in such a way that one comes to hear conversations between these works, between cultures. This is not something that we expect now from patronage.

FELDMAN: The Metropolitan Museum is a wonderful example of a successful organization, a cultural institution that has furthered its charter and its mission. It's funded by the state, the city, the Federal government, private donors, corporations. It's a perfect example of something good that works – not that it's without criticism.

The one component it doesn't have – its weakest component – is contemporary art. It's definitely not anywhere in the forefront, or even laggard, in contemporary art. It's basically not there, and in many ways it's not a proponent. And it shouldn't be. That's not its mission right now. They do collect art after it's a certain age, and that's really great, and no one's going to fault any of that.

But the issue remains a funding issue. At the moment there's an attempt to kill the N.E.A. completely, and they're still using the issue of "taxpayer dollars going to fund pornography." They're willing to throw out symphonies, all the history that Rothstein is talking about, all of the issues that concern us that are our

culture. We shouldn't allow that, period. We must stand united at least against that. The N.E.A. must stand because it does a good job in that area, and it can do more. It's the national convening center, a national policy center. It's the one that has the most respect, whose imprint matters the most. Why would we want to eliminate that?

I believe that there is a place for the government and private resources in funding contemporary art and all its aspects. Possibly what we need is a hybrid organization, part federally funded and part privately funded. So the parts the N.E.A. is running into trouble with, the parts that we're not ready to deal with in society, and which are admittedly very difficult, are funded by a real endowment coming from private citizens and corporations, which works in tandem with government funds. The government part of the hybrid organization can fund the pieces that work well and are the least controversial, that preserve our heritage and work in many wonderful ways.

One of the problems we encountered early on under the Reagan administration was the issue of bringing the private sector into this. Just look at the 1997 N.E.A. report, *American Canvas*, the book that started a lot of art discussions today. An article in *The New York Times* improperly characterized what that was about, making the arts the victim of themselves when they're really the victim of other forces in our society.

POSSIBLY WHAT WE NEED IS A HYBRID
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AND PART PRIVATELY FUNDED.

One of the *American Canvas* sponsors was Coca-Cola. Andy Warhol did a print in the 1980's which was found in his drawer when he died. It was a series of different color variations on a Coca-Cola can that is tilted over and spilled – spilled Coke. He did it as a commission for Coke to popularize something that Coke wanted to do. Of course they rejected it, because the disaster of the 1980's was spilled Coke. Traditional Coke was spilled because they brought out new Coke. Andy recognized it immediately. Of course Coke rejected it. If our politicians can't tolerate contemporary art and some of the issues that it tackles, some of the images it makes, corporations certainly can't tolerate that. It's not good for business.

STIMPSON: In terms of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we have to remember that it is supported through tax policy by federal financing of a sort. Some of us still have to continue the battle for N.E.A., and not just as a hybrid organization. We have to make the case in the way that Americans understand it: individuality,

freedom, and creativity. And under the rubric of “creativity”: form, history and the interdependence of creativity and history.

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THAT AMERICANS UNDERSTAND IT:
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DANTO: The Metropolitan Museum is not the best paradigm. It really calls things out of the hall of history, with a curatorial policy that treats art as treasures to be stored. It has very little to do with the hurly-burly of the production of art and the consumption of art in everyday society.

But the institutional fabric of the art world is highly ramified. You’ve got Kunsthallen; you’ve got Biennales; you’ve got several different models. If I had to choose one, I suppose the Kunsthalle would be one. It doesn’t have a permanent collection. The curator is there putting works together for a single show. You’ve got to continue to create enough interest so that people will come there. And being shown in a Kunsthalle is a stage in one’s life as an artist. I think that there are more flexible and accommodating models to be drawn from the art world itself than the Met.

Questions and Comments from the Audience

CARLIN ROMANO (NAJP Senior Fellow; Literary Critic, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*): My question is mainly for Edward Rothstein, and I wanted to preface it by saying that I think you are a very thoughtful cultural journalist, and I think you’re wrong also, but I do appreciate your writing.

Would you be as opposed to the National Endowment for the Arts if it were named the National Endowment for Aesthetic Education? The real flaw, it seems to me, in your thinking is that you seem to see the N.E.A. as a critical establishment, when it’s more of an educational establishment. The point of having public money go there is to enable a representation of different types of arts and attitudes, so that the critical establishment – which is an elitist establishment, and should be – can develop the kind of synoptic taste by which it makes judgments.

It’s interesting that John Rockwell is on the panel, because it seems to me that twenty years ago it would have been impossible for the former rock critic of *The New York Times* to become the editor of the Sunday Arts section. Now, anybody who’s read him over the years knows that he has a very broad education, but I think that kind of credential would not have been a credential twenty years ago.

One of the reasons attitudes have changed – that the *Times* has changed and has a much nicer balance now – is that there has been this kind of synoptic view of high art and low art that a lot of support and subsidy has provided.

ROTHSTEIN: I don't consider your distinction between the N.E.A. as an educational institution or a critical institution a contradiction to what I'm saying. My problem is that the N.E.A. is adopting an educational view of itself as a sort of "here's what we are, and this is what we want to represent us." When people end up getting excited in opposition to particular works, it is in opposition to the sense that somebody is trying to teach them or show them something that they don't want to be taught or shown. My problem is that what is being educated here is really not a sense of taste, but really a sense of distribution and representation – a democratic ideology.

WE HAVE ELIMINATED ART AND MUSIC
EDUCATION. HOW, THEN, DO WE CREATE A
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WAY.

One problem facing art in America is that we have eliminated art and music education from the curricula of schools. You can get a university degree and have absolutely no sense of the history or evolution of any art in the West. How, then, do we create a citizenry that is going to react to art in anything other than a journalistic, political, or ideological way, when one has never learned a language of art in any particular depth, when no aesthetic education takes place?

A few years ago, there was a group in Washington that came out with a set of standards for arts education from kindergarten through grade 12. Now, these were absurdly idealistic standards. I think that by grade three or four a child was supposed to be proficient on an instrument and know all the technical terms used in ballet. But something like this should be a national project. We need an education in the language and discipline of the arts. This can be a multicultural activity even if one is grounded in the vocabulary of the West, because it is through Western reflection on the arts that much of the vocabulary of analysis and reflection about meaning in the arts has evolved. So, yes, I think the future of the N.E.A. would be a great thing as a Center for Aesthetic Education.

Strategies

AMY NEWMAN (writer, former editor, *ArtNews*): I'm curious if anybody thinks that some of these issues would be defused if the budget of the N.E.A. were doubled or tripled or quadrupled. Is the focus so intense because the amount is so small that the distribution is so much scrutinized?

STIMPSON: If you were to quadruple the budget, the right wing opponents that Ron Feldman has analyzed succinctly and well would have an even bigger target. They'd be carrying on even more about "bloat."

I don't think these issues can be defused. These issues about the relationship of the arts to each other, to history, to the state and to power are always going to go up and down in intensity. If art is doing its job, these issues will always be with us. They'll be more intense at one time, less intense at others. The specific issues will be different. But the appetite for dispute on these issues is unquenchable.

A DEGREE OF SELF-INTIMIDATION HAS TAKEN PLACE, AND SELF-CENSORSHIP.

ROCKWELL: On the other hand, the current stunted and mutated form of the N.E.A. is in part a response to its low budget and to the peeling off of its funding to go as block grants to the states. It is also, in part, a result of desperate and perhaps ill-considered responses to various attacks. These attacks are to some extent yahoo populism on the left, but they come mostly from the right as desperate attempts to shore up the supposed elitism. I always wondered what would have happened if Jane Alexander just said, "Dammit, full speed ahead," rather than trying such an accommodating role. Probably, she would have been blown away.

ROBERT FITZPATRICK (Dean, Columbia University School of the Arts): I don't think the panel has addressed the fact that a degree of self-intimidation has taken place, and self-censorship. Jane Alexander went around the country to every congressional district talking about the arts as good for curing diabetes and rickets and keeping the elderly occupied. That was quite literally the level of discourse, even as reported in *The New York Times*, avoiding totally what art is about. If the N.E.A. were going to continue in this fashion, I don't care what its budget is. I would disagree with the reasoning but come to the same conclusion as Ed Rothstein. I'd like to hear the panel's evaluation of the N.E.A. and the likelihood of its continuing in its present self-intimidating and rather useless format.

FELDMAN: You want to eliminate the N.E.A. because you perceive that this institution has turned on itself and it is not functioning. I'll give you one example from thousands: I recently had the opportunity to hear an elder of a very small Native American tribe play the drum, his drum, and with it he chanted in his

language. He is the last native speaker of this language. The N.E.A. had no trouble, didn't find it elitist, to fund this drummer so that he could teach young members of his tribe how to drum and teach them their language.

IT'S NOT AS THOUGH CONGRESS
IS WAITING FOR A REALLY GOOD IDEA ON
HOW TO FUND THE ARTS.

From my point of view, even if there's fighting in the N.E.A. or dialogue or discussion, it is far from immobilized. It functions well. It functions less well because it has less expertise and a smaller staff. It's become politicized because we're putting politicians on the National Council in an effort to show them that it really does work and to prove the point that it's not bad. Will that work? We don't know. It's an ongoing experiment.

DANTO: I thought that *The American Canvas* was a disgraceful performance and that any organization that would commission a report like that deserves to die. But I think that if it did in fact die, it would be very difficult to put something better in its place. It's not as though Congress is waiting for a really good idea of how to fund the arts. And so my feeling is that you work on it piecemeal, the way you work on most institutions. You try to get more accommodating to the right kinds of values and hope people learn from criticism.

ELIZABETH DRIBBEN (Adjunct Professor, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism): One of the things that I have noticed as a member of an audience going to live performing arts is that it's a question of inclusion and exclusion. Demographics is a word I'm not in love with, because it's used as a way to secularize and segment the population. In terms of funding and the idea of inclusion and exclusion, what idea can be put forth where you can include and not exclude?

STIMPSON: I think it's not an either/or, it's a both/and. There will be some ideas and some performances that will be far more inclusive in terms of the number of voices and ideas they're dealing with. But there's also a strong argument to be made for delving into a particular experience. One reason why I am such an extraordinary admirer of Toni Morrison is the way in which she balances the large, inclusive themes and the particularities of African-American experience. If we're going to talk about excitement in a nation of 200 million people, I think we have to look at a lot of different stimuli.

SUMNER ROSEN (Professor Emeritus, School of Social Work, Columbia University): The N.E.A. has presumably made a lot of mistakes and made itself vulnerable, but it's not the only government agency at risk. There are forces that would like to dismantle the Department of Education, and there are others that want to put HUD out of business. There's a connection I haven't heard today that I want to test, namely, that the forces that are out to get the N.E.A. are the same forces that are out to get government as a concept. They wish to diminish, dismantle, shrink, marginalize, and weaken the role of the state in the life of this country, and in fact elevate privatization and market values without control and accountability.

FELDMAN: To put it provocatively, if we had done a better job of defending the state when Reagan first said, "Government is the problem, not the solution," this panel would have a very different agenda today

The Critic's Role

KIA PENSO (Student, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism): My question has to do with the attack on the arts as an attack on the differentness of new art, the strangeness of it. Even if there hadn't been a Mapplethorpe or a Serrano, there would have been attack on contemporary art just on the basis of its own questioning of aesthetic canons. You don't have something like the old Soviet writers' union that said, "This is what's good art, and that's not." There's no official voice like that here. But there is an unofficial movement to define what's acceptable.

Here's this panel of extremely privileged and influential critics. As critics you're in a wonderful position to be heard. What can you tell the critic to do to be a better advocate for the activity – the weird activities – of artists? Harold Rosenberg was really great at defending odd artists. Who's doing that job now? Who's really talking to that and not just saying, "Well, it's trying to make them feel included," but instead saying, "Well, you're making a mistake; you're looking at it the wrong way."

STIMPSON: I think that's a very good point, and I think Jane Kramer's book *Whose Art Is It?* was a real attempt to look at those problems. Kramer's essay was an attempt to look at why people who may think government's okay elsewhere find certain contemporary art offensive.

HAROLD ROSENBERG WAS REALLY GREAT
AT DEFENDING ODD ARTISTS.
WHO'S DOING THAT JOB NOW?

So often we talk about art within a closed circle, and we do need people to go out and say, “This is what it’s about; this is why it may upset you; this is why it’s important; this is the history of it.” And there has been, paradoxically, ironically, and embarrassingly, a failure of popular criticism, popular critics, and popular histories. And I use “popular” here in a serious sense of the word.

ROCKWELL: Is that really true? The question is if you mean popular critics of the popular arts or if you mean popular critics of the high arts. There have been a fair number of serious movie critics. I would say Siskel and Ebert are serious guys, and they are widely heard around the country. I don’t know whether they’ve ever addressed the issue of the N.E.A. specifically on their program, but they have certainly done a pretty good job of talking intelligently about popular arts.

STIMPSON: I think more broad reaching criticism of so-called “high arts” has been lacking.

ROCKWELL: I reviewed experimental work, especially in the ‘70’s and early ‘80’s, at *The Times* not because it was weird, but because I was passionately interested in it. Other critics can have perfectly legitimate roles being interested in opera performance practice in the 19th century. There’s no rule as to what you have to be to be a critic.

FELDMAN: I would just like to tie this together a little bit and be very practical about what this is about. In the 1980’s, very shortly after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as President of the United States, an attack began against the N.E.A. The first attack, the first salvo – think how brilliant this was – was to eliminate critics’ grants. There was a battle, and do you know what happened at the peer panel? Hilton Kramer was there. He represented the other side. He had just been funded by the right. Big numbers, millions by now, literally millions. His magazine, the *New Criterion*, today survives; it’s at the airports. He was against federal funding for critics. The journalists in the room and critics from local newspapers around the country said, “No one understands us; they don’t want to print us; we can’t get serious; they think the readers aren’t interested.”

We voted unanimously to reinstate critics’ grants. The Chair of the National Council eventually eliminated them for further study. We have not heard of them since. The same group that eliminated critics’ grants is fighting the battle against voluntary standards for arts in the schools. Let’s be very real here.

Whose Standards?

GWENDOLYN FREED (NAJP Fellow, former editor, *Chamber Music America*): I’m just wondering if the N.E.A. had given us some Beethovens in the last couple of decades, if we would really be here today. As a musician and as a music

journalist who's gone to so many concerts – with notable exceptions, of course – in general I've been concerned at the level of mediocrity that sometimes comes out of the peer panel process. I'm concerned that because of the interest that colleagues have in each other's work, the kind of interest they take, the actual art is compromised a bit. If the panels were comprised of anything but peers, would we be in better shape now?

STIMPSON: I think you're asking several questions at once. Beethoven did not become Beethoven until the passage of time. Over the passage of time, Beethoven, like Shakespeare, like Michelangelo, acquired a rich and luscious patina of generations of approval. My hunch is that if you and I did what we cannot do now, and we just went through the individual grants when there were individual grants, we would see a high proportion of exceptional talent.

THERE'S AN ENORMOUS CONTEMPT FOR BOTH
ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS AS PEOPLE WHO
CAN'T MAKE IT IN THE MARKETPLACE.

You don't make choices among living people without making some mistakes. It's like falling in love. You always make a mistake or two. You can't do this in a hundred-percent perfect way. And a quick point about the conditions of creativity: There has to be the ground from which the Beethoven rises.

ELLEN WILLIS (Professor of Journalism, New York University School of Journalism): Part of the context of what we're seeing is that we're now in this enormously business-oriented culture where every activity is supposed to operate like a business. We're all supposed to meet a payroll. The values of the bottom line are not only the only thing in a practical way, but are culturally being valorized. There's an enormous contempt for both artists and intellectuals as people who can't make it in the marketplace and have to find some source of funding other than the market. The attitude toward artists is very similar to the attitude toward people on welfare. It's "throwing money away on this bunch of profligates who are enjoying themselves and don't want to do an honest day's work."

I think also the cutbacks in government funding have to be seen in the context of publishers who used to subsidize writers who lost money or made very modest money, and now increasingly don't do that. Universities are cutting back on full-time faculty, which is another way of subsidizing the arts. How do we address this larger problem of the cultural *zeitgeist* in this way?

ROTHSTEIN: The relationship between art and business is complicated. There are many corporations that use art as a way of giving themselves a persona. Phillip Morris is instrumental in the support of Brooklyn Academy of Music, for example. I don't think one would argue that when corporations go into major support of the arts, as they have, that this is not strictly an idealistic enterprise. But it does end up being of value to the artists involved. And it also points out another aspect of art, which is that people fund and not fund things based on their portrait of themselves.

FELDMAN: We've been talking about funding artists who have at certain moments a difficult time making ends meet, and these days it's a real problem, because you can't buy the sorts of materials that contemporary artists typically use at Pearl Paints. The material of the artist has become engulfing in that way, and costly. But there is this other side: that the moment you've gotten your bonus from Wall Street, you're going to be in the galleries and beginning to be a collector. And that's important. It's not a bottom-line mentality at all.