

Arts Wire Current, May 28 2002

Lead Story

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Arts Wire CURRENT is a project of Arts Wire, a national computer-based network serving the arts community. Arts Wire CURRENT features news updates on social, economic, philosophical, and political issues affecting the arts and culture. Your contributions are invited. Contact Judy Malloy, Editor.

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ARTS COMMUNITY URGES GOVERNMENT TO RESTORE INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS FELLOWSHIPS, SUGGESTS WAYS TO IMPROVE THE PROCESS

In 1996 Congress prohibited the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from awarding Fellowships to individual artists.

Literature Fellowships, American Jazz Masters Fellowships, and National Heritage Fellowships in the Folk & Traditional Arts were retained, and the Arts Endowment indirectly supports visual artists through grants to arts organizations and through partnership programs such as Continental Harmony which fosters community-based music commissioning.

The National Medal of Arts -- this year awarded to the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Rudolfo Anaya, Johnny Cash, Kirk Douglas, Helen Frankenthaler, Judith Jamison, Yo-Yo Ma, and Mike Nichols -- continues to honor (but not fund) individuals and organizations who, in the President's judgment, deserve special recognition for their contributions to the excellence, growth, support and availability of the arts in the United States.

But six years after Congress stripped individual artists of direct support by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Congressional ban on individual artist fellowships for this country's

artists remains. Artists working in most disciplines in dance, design, media, music, theater, and visual arts are no longer able to look to the National government for direct support of their contributions to our culture.

In the May 7, 2002 issue, Arts Wire CURRENT asked its readership to comment on the impact this continuing lack of recognition has had on American artists.

The responses -- available in toto at <http://www.artswire.org/grants.html> -- affirmed a compelling need to support individual artists on a National basis.

Some courageously brought to light the problems which have inhibited individual artists from effectively lobbying for support -- from the observing that when NEA Individual Artists Fellowships were available, insider panels gave some artists repeat grants while ignoring many of equal stature and accomplishment who repeatedly applied; to delineating a lack of individual artist representation in National arts lobbying organizations.

Some proposed creative approaches, including rotating regional panels and issue-focused fellowships.

Some strongly urged the reinstatement of National recognition of individual artists while at the same time they affirmed local and community funding of individual artists.

"Fellowships supplement or provide complete funding for working artists. Individual artist fellowships permit artists to work with full focus," filmmaker and musician Sharon Berman observed. "Fellowships bestow upon artists culturally acceptable proof of their worth and respectability. In a country where art is considered a luxury and artists encounter tangible oppression, a fellowship is a passport into areas where artists are not often able to travel."

"The soul of this country suffers without artists with freedom to work with support and validation from community," said composer/musician Pauline Oliveros "The NEA before its political rearrangement assisted individual artists to great effect. I was one of those artists."

Paul J. Rickey, Jr., an art instructor at Linn-Benton Community College in Oregon, stressed that Congress has committed economic censorship in removing Federal funding for individual artists. He believes that "the right wing in Congress is out to stifle the free expression of individual artists."

Lawyers should attack this in court "because Congress is abridging the freedom of speech of artists. That clearly is unconstitutional," he stated.

"AFTER MORE THAN 40 YEARS OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT THE ARTS WE STILL DO NOT HAVE A NATIONAL PROGRAM THAT EVEN COMES CLOSE TO MATCHING THE CREATIVE STRENGTH, FORWARD-LOOKING VISION OR LEADERSHIP THAT IS PRACTICED BY OUR INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS." - Paul Skiff.

At the heart of many responses was a sense that the message which Congress' action in depriving individual artists of direct National support was one that not only impacted the stature of American artists but also the stature of our Nation. Although many State Art Agencies and some foundations give fellowships directly to individual artists, this continuing support -- very much needed given the many artists in this country deserving of grants -- should augment rather than replace a National recognition of America's creative citizens.

Linda Frye Burnham, who founded HIGH PERFORMANCE magazine and co-founded the 18th Street Arts Complex and Highways Performance Space in California, Art in the Public Interest in North Carolina, and the Community Arts Network on the Internet, emphasized that "Without this vote of governmental confidence in individual artists, the U.S. is a throwback to the days of patronage and private control of culture. The policy of granting funds exclusively to organizations is a shabby one, by default painting artists as irresponsible, untrustworthy and undeserving."

She also observed the effects of the withdrawal of National funding for artists fellowships has had on artists, saying that "This policy infantilizes creativity, making it a job for hire. It is demoralizing, and I have seen it demoralize the artists around me to a devastating degree."

New York City-based artist, writer and producer of cultural events Paul Skiff strongly stated that "The U.S. government operates with practically no awareness at all about the relevance and importance of individual examples of high achievement in the arts. After more than 40 years of government programs to support the arts we still do not have a national program that even comes close to matching the creative strength, forward-looking vision or leadership that is practiced by our individual artists."

Skiff, who currently assists the College Art Association with the production of an annual conference for over 5,000 artists and scholars, pointed out that in 2002-2003 the total arts funding in the United Kingdom will be approximately 600 million dollars, and in 1999 the United Kingdom allocated 1.5 million British pounds to individual artists grants -- just for the categories of new work, experimentation and risk.

"Compare these resources to the 115 million dollars talked about as the total NEA endowment," he stated. "Each U.S. taxpayer gives approximately 30 cents of their tax money to government arts programs. In the U.K. the government spends approximately 15 dollars per each citizen on arts and culture. The government of the United States is so far out of line with what most leading nations do to support the arts that its attitude amounts to an example of American backwardness."

Artist Diane Torr, who grew up and went to college in the U.K., but has been living and making art in New York for over 25 years, confirmed that "When comparing the U.S. and Europe, in terms of support for individual artists, I would say there is more support from the U.K. via the Arts Council as there is more money available, less competition and deadlines twice a year. It is also possible to access funding through the European Union."

Artist Debby Kline, Board President of COVA, (Combined Organizations for the Visual Arts) pointed out that "By disallowing individual artists the opportunity to request and receive governmental funding, our leaders have happily disassociated themselves from work that could be critical to our government or from work that could be considered subversive by certain individuals or groups. While that may be understandable on an immediate basis, as a result, the United States is no longer the global, cultural leaders that we once were."

She suggested that as a mutual trust building measure: "if our government cannot directly support freedom of expression then perhaps they could support individual artists or artist groups who would address problems that face our country. Artists have the ability to think critically about situations from all sides, so the NEA could create some grants to artists to solve national problems or crises using art as a common language."

Indeed, in England, The Arts Council of England has lead the way in integrating artists into post 911 discussions of public policy. In a speech at the National Portrait Gallery this Spring, Peter Hewitt, Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England, argued for a strong central space for the arts in the post 911 climate -- with artists playing a pivotal role in conveying the meaning of September 11 and its aftermath to future generations. Art, he said is "the focal point around which we can share and dispute meanings that help to populate and energize an open public space for reflection, expression, empathy, dissent and disagreement.. a bridge to coax the private and intimate into a shared public setting."

"INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS FELLOWSHIPS CAN BE REINSTATED IF INDIVIDUAL ARTIST LOBBY THEIR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES FOR THE FELLOWSHIPS AND AT THE SAME TIME INFORM THE GENERAL PUBLIC ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS FUNDING" -- Paul Lamarre and Melissa Wolf

"As producers/directors of a documentary and archive on the subject of arts funding 'the nea tapes', (which was started 1995 in response to the crusade to eliminate the NEA), we observed first hand the politics behind the abandonment of the individual artists fellowships," wrote artists/videomakers Paul Lamarre and Melissa Wolf, who collaborate as Eidia.

"Individual artists fellowships can be reinstated if individual artist lobby their elected representatives for the fellowships and at the same time inform the general public about the importance of this funding," they emphasized.

Filmmaker/musician Sharon Berman also urged the arts community to lobby on a large scale for direct funding for artists. "Consult with as many different kinds of agencies as possible to see how they have successfully worked with the government -- what works, what doesn't work, and what they have learned over the years. Also consult with governmental agencies to find out what prevailing perceptions about Art are," she advised. Additionally, she suggested that a series of PBS public service announcements could help contradict popular opinion that Art is a luxury and not a necessity.

Strongly stating that "Artists are the voice of individual free speech in this county and it is economic censorship to not fund artists with public moneys," Paul Lamarre and Melissa Wolf

also cautioned that artists cannot rely on large arts advocacy organizations, foundations and the museums to do this for them and that much foundation-sponsored research concerning the needs of artists in this country is now being done by corporations, such as Rand -- without individual artist input and concern for the individual artist.

Artists "must fight for what they deserve, an equitable federal arts funding agency and reinstatement of individual artists grants," they emphasized

However, Paul Skiff pointed out that the diversity and lack of cohesiveness of the "arts community" make effective lobbying difficult.

He also described the difficulties in persuading Congress that grants for individual artists are important. He noted that art education and access to the arts have been stressed over creativity in much recent arts lobbying efforts, and he suggested that effective lobbying will begin with demonstrating that support for individual artists is also important.

"As a participant representing one of the co-sponsors of the 2002 Arts Advocacy Day, my experience with making office visits on the Hill is that most elected officials are currently not persuaded this is an important matter deserving much attention," he said. "So, in part, the task of gaining a re-instatement of grants for individual artists is to first of all educate the government officials about the gravity and consequences culture has for national self-interest."

He emphasized that "It must be established that examples of individual achievement are absolutely necessary for the cultural credibility of this society. Without the promotion of leading individuals in the arts there are no positive foundations on which to base any emphasis put on educational standards or access. Furthermore, without examples of high individual achievement in the arts there can be no international respect for, nor impetus to understand as well as respect, the importance of the nation's culture."

Florida-based photographer Joel B. McEachern observed that a lack of inclusion of working artists on the process has been detrimental in advocacy and funding decisions.

"I'd like to see more working artists actively involved in the 'process' so to shift and expand the group decision-making dynamic and protect their interests as artmakers," he said. "Simply, art decisions should be made with artists -- not for them. Last year, I corresponded with a major foundation who was doing a research project on the state of the arts in America. Working artists were nearly absent from their blue-ribbon panels. I likened it to the horse racing industry. Everyone's opinion, from the jockeys to the bettors, seemed to matter; everyone's except the horses, explaining why many artists feel the industry rides at their expense."

"WHILE I SHARE THE CONVICTION OF THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT IT WOULD BE IMPORTANT TO RESTORE A FULL RANGE OF INDIVIDUAL ARTIST FELLOWSHIPS AT THE NEA -- BENEFICIAL NOT ONLY FOR THE ARTISTS INVOLVED, BUT ALSO FOR THE LARGER CULTURE IN WHICH THEY OPERATE -- I WOULDN'T WANT TO MAKE THAT CHANGE UNCONDITIONALLY -- Gary O. Larson

Although the majority of the responses shared the conviction that restoring direct National funding of American artists was an important goal for this country, some suggested reasons why the arts community hasn't in the past rallied to restore NEA Individual Artist Fellowships.

Artist Clayton Campbell (Santa Monica, CA) observed that the mechanism for selecting recipients was, at the time when Congress deprived artists of fellowships, perceived "as closed shop so its own community wasn't prepared to vigorously defend it".

That needs to be changed, he emphasized. "The most egregious examples," he noted "are not about censorship, but artists and their circles who year after year would be pulling down grants, 'living' off the NEA while 95% of applicants never stood a chance and followed the strategy conveyed to them by the NEA that 'if you apply year after year you will eventually, maybe, receive a grant.'"

He suggested that in bringing back grants to artists, rotating regional panels and restriction on repeat grants would be key in broadening the program, saying that "It is most important that grant recipients not be panel members for at least five years after having received a grant, and that any individual receiving a grant would not be able to reapply and be awarded another grant for at least five years."

Oakland, Ca -based writer Gary Larson, the author of *THE RELUCTANT PATRON THE US GOVERNMENT AND THE ARTS, 1943-1965* and a former staff member of the NEA in the 1980's and early 90's, shares "the conviction of those who believe that it would be important to restore a full range of individual artist fellowships at the NEA -- beneficial not only for the artists involved, but also for the larger culture in which they operate," but he wouldn't want to make that change unconditionally.

"The agency itself, and the manner in which it is administered, need some attention, too, having drifted pretty far off course in recent years," Larson observed. "Admittedly painted into a corner by an unsympathetic Congress and an unenlightened White House, the NEA and its partisan leadership have often exacerbated that situation by relying more on their political instincts than on the advice and expertise of the peer advisory panels entrusted with reviewing grant applications."

Among continuing problems with the Arts Endowment granting processes, he also cited a "steady decline in the quality of the membership of the National Council on the Arts (related, not coincidentally, to the arrival of six ex-officio members from the House and Senate a few years ago)"

In conclusion, Gary Larson stated: "So yes, let's turn back the clock to the good old days of individual fellowships at the NEA, but while we're at it, let's turn that clock all the way back (to the period before the arrival of Frank Hodsoll as chairman under Ronald Reagan, if truth be told) to a time when political considerations were not so likely to undermine the peer-review process."

"I ALSO OFTEN WISH THAT SOMETHING LIKE THE WPA STILL EXISTED THAT GAVE SO MANY ARTISTS AND ARTISANS OPPORTUNITIES TO USE THEIR ART FOR THE SERVICE OF THEIR COMMUNITY." - Amy Molinelli

Affirming a community arts approach, others who responded to Arts Wire Current's call for input on restoring NEA fellowships for individual artists suggested ways to broaden access to local funding and offered concrete examples of funding for artists in communities -- as well as a role for the Arts Endowment in continuing to stimulate such programs.

From Ohio, Thomas Mulready, Founding Director of the Performance Art Festival+Archives, reported that:

"We had our first ever Arts and Cultural Summit at City Hall here in Cleveland last weekOur community is talking about forming a regional arts funding agency since Cleveland is the largest city of its size that doesn't have one. So artists have not had access to local funding in our region except at the State level (Ohio Arts Council), and at the national level (National Endowment for the Arts, which no longer funds individual artists.) Needless to say, this situation has been challenging to area artists.....We are studying issues such as cultural tourism, the role that artists play as urban pioneers, and the economic and intangible return on investment that the arts offer. Wish us luck."

Amy Molinelli, a Southern CA-based musician and dancer, originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, works with troubled youth and in the public schools.

She lauded the Bay area's artist-residency programs in the schools, saying that "To me this seems a natural area where government sponsored programs and the arts can work together. I also often wish that something like the WPA still existed that gave so many artists and artisans opportunities to use their art for the service of their community. I do not see this occurring now."

Pauline Oliveros, (Kingston, NY) whose retrospective, *SOUNDING THE MARGINS A RETROSPECTIVE OF THE MUSIC OF PAULINE OLIVEROS*, opens at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater in San Francisco on May 31, also encouraged the NEA to revitalize communities and foster the seeding of artist community relationships by directly stimulating communities to support individual artists who enhance their quality of life.

Paul Skiff, who has produced cultural events with a wide range of organizations -- from local community based groups, the commercial music business and educational institutions, to foreign government secretariats -- pointed to the Expansion Arts grants, (which focused on the arts in underserved communities) as another huge loss in NEA funding programs.

He said: "...in 1995 while working as manager of productions for the Olatunji Center of African Culture I took a phone call from the NEA offices informing me there would no longer be any grants given out under the category of Expansion Arts. The Olatunji Center was used as a model organization years before in constructing the Expansion Arts category. The center had received numerous grants over the years in this category. Each year the center produced and presented

with a very wide range of local, national and international sponsors, education programs that reached a combined audience of over 100,000 people. Not any more."

Supporting underserved constituencies, the NEA Expansion Arts program focused specifically on inner-city cultural organizations which provided access for low-income communities and on rural organizations which supported indigenous artists. Projects for older Americans and persons with physical and mental disabilities were also supported under this under this program.

Interdisciplinary artist Diane Torr described how in Europe artists from different countries can apply together for collaborative projects, and she suggested this as a potential national funding strategy.

"It would be as if I, in New York, have a project I would like to do with an artist in Oregon and an artist from Maine. (or any other States) We would get substantially more funding than if I was applying for funding for a project alone. The effect in Europe is to bring artists from different countries together - to share a common art project and ultimately to share a common culture, which is an amalgam of ideas from three different countries."

Singer/songwriter, producer of international and American music David Goldman thinks it will be hard to turn back the clock to restore individual artists fellowships

"what might be time better spent is to put together regional directories of those organizations that receive grants and what they receive for or what their needs are," he proposed. "If I know that a library or arts council needs such and such programming each year, I might be able to fit my program or art to theirs. As is it now I rely on ads in let's say the Westchester Arts Council promoting some programs they have, but I haven't seen a central Internet source."

He suggested building the reputation of each region's arts presenters by combining great programming with great attendance or innovation and by encouraging arts presenters to have open meetings with artists in their community "to get to know them, etc. and then work with the artists to get the grants for the artists' projects, thus giving the artist a de facto individual grant."

However, noting that she is very supportive of artists connecting with their communities, and of communities supporting their artists and working with them in collaboration, Linda Burnham, Saxapahaw, NC, delineated the difficulties for individual artists in gaining this support.

"...it is clear to me that gaining such support requires a huge administrative and public-relations art machine, and even then, some of the greatest artists who mean the most to their communities are suffering, facing 2003 with nothing in their coffers," she said. "Artists in their 50's, at their very peak, with incredible treasures to offer from their stores of experience, are reduced to begging from diffident foundations.

"WHEN THE NEA GRANTED INDIVIDUAL FELLOWSHIPS, IT WAS A VOTE FOR PERSONAL CREATIVE FREEDOM. AT LEAST THERE WAS HOPE OF NATIONAL HONOR, RECOGNITION AND A TINY WINDFALL. NOW IT BREAKS MY HEART TO SEE THE DESPAIR AND HOPELESSNESS IN ARTISTS' EYES. WITHOUT A NATIONAL

POLICY THAT HONORS INDIVIDUALS IN THE ARTS, WE ARE LEFT WITHOUT A COHERENT STANDARD, A DEMONSTRATED BELIEF AS A PEOPLE THAT INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY IS VITAL TO OUR NATION." - Linda Burnham

It is clear from the responses which Arts Wire Current received that Individual Artists Fellowships are important not only to the arts community but also to the country's image as a whole.

"Art is a good investment," said New York-based artist Ethel Lehenkoff. "Art or Enron that is the question. Artists provide a multi dimensional view of society alternative ways of thinking, a non commercial view."

When the NEA granted individual fellowships, Linda Burnham stated, "it was a vote for personal creative freedom. At least there was hope of national honor, recognition and a tiny windfall. Now it breaks my heart to see the despair and hopelessness in artists' eyes. Without a national policy that honors individuals in the arts, we are left without a coherent standard, a demonstrated belief as a people that individual creativity is vital to our nation."

Sources/resources

The complete responses are available at <http://www.artswire.org/grants.html> This article references all responses received by Saturday May 25. Arts Wire Current invites further response and will add all responses received to the complete responses. (Note that email is not always completely reliable so if you sent a response and it is not posted, we apologize. Please resend it!)

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS -- <http://www.arts.gov>

U.S. SENATE MEMBERS -- <http://www.senate.gov/contacting/index.cfm>

U.S. HOUSE MEMBER CONTACT INFORMATION --
<http://clerkweb.house.gov/mbrcmtee/mbrcmtee.htm>

ARTS COUNCIL OF ENGLAND - <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk>
