

“THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE ARTS: WHAT SHOULD IT BE?”

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by

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I was delighted and honored to receive Ron Rogowski's invitation last January to deliver the Bollens-Ries Lecture this year. Chuck Ries, after whom this program was also named, was a mentor of mine, and I had a bit to do with the creation of the new Public Policy School, so this invitation was something of a homecoming for me. I was looking forward to it, that is, until I began to contemplate the topic Ron suggested: The Role of Government in the Arts: What Should It Be?

It was then I realized I had made a mistake. My resistance to the preparation of this presentation began to grow, for several reasons. First, as you know, I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It is a public/private institution. It sits on county land and receives one-half of its operating budget from the County of Los Angeles every year, a little over \$14 ½ million dollars annually. It would take a \$350 million dollar endowment to generate that amount of annual operating funds, and LACMA has only about \$55 million dollars in endowment. Without county support, the museum as we know it would have to shut down. I would be crazy as the CEO of such an establishment to do anything but advocate a position on the topic of government and the arts that protects my institution. In fact, part of my job is to advocate and lobby for resources from the government. But this is the Bollens-Ries lecture at UCLA, and you expect and deserve a thoughtful, objective analysis of the issue, not a stump speech (which I deliver regularly).

A second major misgiving I developed as I thought about preparing this talk came from my slow realization that if approached thoughtfully, this topic is really hard to contain. It touches on a huge variety of issues and values: patronage, the role of government in a free society, economic markets, power, prestige, freedom of expression, patriotism, creativity, symbols and meaning, hierarchy of needs, religious and social values, the artist and democracy, truth and beauty, and on and on. The various positions around this topic are essentially value-based; they are fundamental to one's world view and, as such, endlessly arguable.

Which leads me to the third reason I was sorry I accepted the honor of being here with you to discuss this topic. I began to gather materials related to government and the arts, and I plunged headlong into the rhetoric of the "Culture Wars," wars that seem always to be with us, at some times more intensely than others.

I find much of the historical and current arguments around the issue of government and the arts to be endless, tedious, convoluted, self-serving, light on substance, heavy on abstraction, platitudinous, sometimes ugly, often mindless, politicized, demagogical, and ultimately absurd. Value arguments around any subject have this propensity, but the art and government debate seems to generate an especially potent blend of foolishness and name calling.

I would be less than honest though if I didn't confess that some of the epithet hurling is entertaining. *Time Magazine* art critic Robert Hughes has elevated such invective to an art form itself. He calls the latest Republican congressional attack on the NEA, NEH, and PBS "cultural defoliation," "an attempt to destroy the 'liberal' habitat." He characterizes the 1994 freshman

congressional class as “Jacks-in-Office,” filled with “smug Philistinism,” as “freshmen ideologues” “squealing with Newtish zeal.” He suggests they are not “cultural Neanderthals,” they are “Jurassic.” With regard to culture, he suggests their “limbic forebrain can hold only one sound bite at a time.” He gives, as examples, their characterization of the PBS as “elitist welfare for the rich,” the NEA as “State subsidized porn,” and the NEH as “P.C. revisionist history.” It reminds me of the good old days of “nattering nabobs.”¹

Such characterizations give us a pretty clear view of the depths to which these discussions and positions can plunge. On the most negative side, the foes of government support feel no subsidy should go to art, artists, or arts institutions because:

- (1) The arts are not important enough to the welfare of citizens to merit government support, and/or
- (2) The arts are not only not important, they are wicked, created by agents of the devil to corrupt and pervert society and Christian values.

On the other far and equally intense side of the argument are those who demand full government support of the arts because the arts are sublime, essential to human development, and merit government support as a matter of right. No further justification is needed.

These extreme positions have left many caught in the middle of these debates in odd and unfamiliar positions and alliances. The far right has called the liberal supporters of government subsidy “elitist” for trying to use government dollars to support programs that only a “handful of liberal intellectuals” care about. The liberals have called the far right “elitists” for not supporting government programs that provide access to the full population to enjoy the country’s artistic contributions. The “real” elite, that is, the very wealthy of society who traditionally have been the major patrons of the arts in the United States are not in the center of this debate, and to the extent they form consequential alliances, they tend toward the liberals -- their political opponents but cultural allies.

Recently, in Charlotte, North Carolina, a town aspiring to be the South’s Second City, the County Commission passed a new law that plunged the community into a culture war. In response to the Charlotte Repertory Theater’s production of “Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes,” the Charlotte County Commission approved a measure to stop funding organizations that expose the public to “perverted forms of sexuality.”² This was seen as both an attack on homosexuality and on downtown business interests that wanted to modernize the city and its culture. As the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out: “the mere posing of these questions already is causing startling new political and social alignments...in an unlikely alliance, starched-shirt bankers and business executives have joined with artists and gays to battle Christian conservatives over the soul and image of the city.”³

These cultural debates have heated up in the last few years and are bubbling pretty fiercely at this very moment, making my topic of this evening timely. Before I tip my own hand, however,

I'll describe the existing state of government support of the arts as well as some of the pervasive mythology that confuses an already muddled set of issues.

There are essentially four categories in which government funds subsidize the arts. The first is creation: the actual paying of the artist to create art, be it a painting, a musical composition, a play, or some other art form. This kind of subsidy receives much attention and causes heated arguments over government's appropriate role. The second area of support is the preservation of art, which includes the processes of collecting and conserving works of art deemed worthy to pass on to future generations. This tends to be a less contentious area for government investment. A third category is presentation (or distribution), and this category is called upon frequently by liberal supporters of government subsidy to the arts to justify such support on democratic grounds -- accessibility not only to the rich but to all citizens. And finally, there is the category of interpretation and/or scholarship in the arts and humanities. Like the category of creation, this area of funding also generates considerable controversy. We need only remember how Bill Bennett and Lynne Cheney turned on the NEH, the very agency each had served as director, to see how fickle and political government support can be.

Direct support in these categories comes from many agencies and levels of government. At the federal level, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Public Broadcasting System, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the Federal Indemnity program provide assistance to a wide variety of arts activities and institutions. At the state level, there are state arts councils, and at the local levels there are more councils, grants programs, and outright government operating support for civic cultural institutions. While most of the publicity and debate seems to focus on federal spending, some major institutions receive much more subsidy from their local governments -- for example, last year LACMA received \$14,215,099.00 from the county and \$450,000 from the federal government. The Metropolitan Museum of Art received \$9,200,000 from the City of New York and only \$225,000 from the federal government.

There are also indirect forms of government support of the arts in the form of tax incentives for philanthropic support. Issues around capital gains taxes and inheritance taxes with regard to charitable gifts have significant impact upon the health of all non-profit institutions, and especially upon arts organizations that depend on donations of art.

As the arguments rage, artists and arts organizations still continue to receive support through thousands of rivulets bringing resources to a wide variety of activities in a myriad of ways. These flows are erratic, and generally undependable, making arts activities and organizations long on opportunism and short on planning. Which leads us back to our topic of what should be the government's role in the arts?

Misinformation and confusion characterize the debate. Confusion regarding the artist's role and rights in a "free society" (or free market democracy), confusion regarding the respective values and histories of government support of the arts in Europe and in America, and confusion

regarding the real history of government support of the arts in the United States. Clearing up some of this confusion may help focus the issue.

Let's start with the artist in America. Victoria Alexander of the University of Surrey outlines the confusion when she states: "We Americans have institutionalized a romantic view of the artist, struggling in a garret to produce true art. The best art, this view says, is unbiased by outside influences. This is fiction. Throughout most of history, most great artists have produced their work within restraining patronage systems of one kind or another. Outside influences shape all art."⁴

Somehow, many of us, including myself, thought direct grants from the government to artists to create must have no caveats -- any strings would be un-American and violate the First Amendment. Upon reflection, we were delusional. As Robert Hughes says: "Government is almost by definition a poor patron of the avant-garde. Artists who call themselves sociopolitical subversives, and then ask for state handouts, are either fools or hypocrites."⁵

Patronage of the arts and the artist has been a universal phenomenon across time, culture, and class. Its manifestations differ, but its existence is ubiquitous.⁶ It existed in subtle ways in Athenian Greece and in full blown ways in ancient Rome. It existed in India and the Far East. And, all patrons, whether individuals or governments, expect something other than a bitten hand from the artists and poets they support. In Greece, artists were regarded as manual laborers along with doctors and architects. They did not have freedom to choose themes, styles, and materials.⁷ Even geniuses like Michaelangelo and Bach endured patronage control until they became successful. If they eventually were able to assert independence, it was due entirely to the early support they had received from patrons.⁸ Insofar as kings, city-state princes, and popes could be considered governments, there has been a long tradition of government support of the arts and artists and the exercise of control and some *quid pro quo* in the relationship. In fact, the only periods of history to which the romantic notion of the starving artist struggling to retain his artistic freedom and integrity might apply is late 17th century Holland and 18th century England, essentially periods of democracy within a strong mercantile culture. In the absence of royal patronage, the artist had to be marketable; most were not. Some, like Vermeer, became dealers to support their art, others married wealthy women. Whether controlled by royal patronage, government policy, or market demands, the artist has always worked within constraints and compromise and always will. With regard to the culture wars, it has been the art world's hypersensitivity to any hint of government censorship coupled with the conservative right's outrage at the work of certain artists presumably underwritten by the NEA that has re-kindled the controversy. In fact, some have recommended that eliminating direct grants to artists might be the kind of compromise that would save the NEA.

The issue of artists and the NEA controversy again is wrapped in confusion. Direct grants to artists represent only 4% of the NEA's budget. In fact, the two artists and their works that most angered the NEA critics, Mapplethorpe and Serrano, were, in fact, not recipients of any direct NEA grants. The exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photography was funded by an NEA grant to the Contemporary Art Center of Cincinnati. Mapplethorpe himself received no funds from the

NEA. Ironically, however, he did die a millionaire, not from NEA support, but, as Hughes points out "...because of the ranting queer hatred of Jesse Helms, Pat Buchanan and the religious right."⁹ Serrano, who was condemned for his photo of a crucifix in urine, actually was granted his \$15,000 from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art which had received a discretionary grant from the NEA. Unfortunately, clearing up these facts is unlikely to persuade the NEA opponents that the NEA does anything but give handouts to sodomites and blasphemers.

With regard to direct government grants to artists, there is even disagreement among those who favor government support of artists. In an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, poet and essayist William Craig Rice attacks the NEA for not being democratic enough. He says: "I have come to believe that the best thing that could happen is to phase out the NEA and instead support all artists by more democratic, less selective methods."¹⁰ He recommends a major overhaul of the tax system to favor the artist more and recommends lobbying "for changes that would help all artists, without regard for our credentials..."¹¹ Rice seems to advocate the position of government support as a matter of right for every self-proclaimed artist. This postmodern bohemian fantasy throws more oil upon the fire of the culture wars.

Choreographer Bill T. Jones, a major NEA grants recipient, of course supports the NEA and acknowledges, unlike Rice, an implicit obligation to his government patron. He explains:

The NEA arranges a sort of contract between society and artists. I respect this contract. The NEA acts as the public's representative, making an award to me as a choreographer and my organization as a group of dedicated professionals, saying "take this and do your best." I accept the award and strive to create something meaningful, perhaps beautiful.¹²

Finally, Robert Hughes, like William Gray Rice, criticizes the NEA grants to artists but for totally opposite reasons. He wants the NEA to eliminate all of what he calls "its bogus democratic criteria." "... in art," he says, "there should be no ... entitlements." He urges the NEA to be more, not less, elitist, and hand out fewer but larger awards. "It should wholeheartedly embrace the dreaded *Q* word: quality."¹³ So, with regard to the appropriate role government should play in support of artists, all remains confused. There is no agreement as to policy, there is no agreement as to the facts.

Another set of confused arguments frequently surfacing in the culture debate relates to the high value of art and culture held by European governments compared to the lack of such values in American government. Advocates for government subsidy for the arts in America frequently point to European models such as France. An analysis and comparison of per capita expenditures on the arts in European countries and the United States does suggest the United States is rather stingy in support of the arts compared to European countries, except for Great Britain. The United States spends approximately \$13.00 per capita on the arts.¹⁴ We are outspent by Germany (\$22.30), France (\$26.50), Italy (\$22.30), the Netherlands (\$34.10), Belgium (\$27.80), Luxembourg (\$22.20), Denmark (\$36.00), and Spain (\$14.70). We do outspend Great Britain at \$10.00 per capita expenditure.¹⁵

At first glance these figures really do suggest that the United States truly is culturally Jurassic compared to European countries. A more careful analysis of the respective histories of art and cultural patronage of these countries, however, explains the disparity of expenditures in less pejorative terms. In the more distant past, major European cultural institutions were supported by royal or noble patronage. In fact, many great institutions, such as the Louvre, were the actual palaces and belongings of royalty, which became public properties in the 19th and 20th centuries, when republican governments and municipalities took them over on behalf of the population. State sponsorship was a natural evolution within the emergence of these democratic governments. Several consequences resulted from this evolution. The role of government in support of the arts and as a replacement for royal patronage was less controversial than in the United States, and a tradition of private patronage and voluntary charitable support never fully developed in Europe.

The history of arts patronage in the United States is exactly opposite that of Europe. Arts patronage from any source started slowly in the United States. There were no royal palaces or art collections that fell to a public charge as a result of a royal unseating. In fact, rather than by transference as in Europe, art institutions in the U.S. had to begin from scratch. And they did so through the interests of the wealthy classes and through private philanthropy. The art museum world in the U.S. grew out of the post Civil War hobby of the wealthy to collect art, preferably European art, in an attempt to elevate themselves by collecting art along a classical European model. Some of these collectors established art museums themselves. Some museums were run by their founders and reflected the patron's art preferences and upper class taste.

So, Americans were guided by their history to seek private patronage for the arts; Europeans, who assumed government would continue to support their nations' art and cultural enterprises, developed no traditions of private philanthropy for the arts. Great Britain fell somewhere in between. Royal patronage of the arts in Britain came to a halt with the execution of Charles I in 1649, and his art collection was auctioned by the Puritans. So while they have a royal history, they also have a puritan history, which resulted in an ambivalent attitude.

There is an irony in all this comparison and finger pointing about America's lack of cultural values. European countries, now unable or unwilling to support cultural activities at the same high level, have begun copying American tactics of private philanthropy. European cultural institutions, including the British Museum, can even be seen in major cities of the United States, poaching on our private philanthropic sources. So, you see, the use of European standards and values with regard to government support of the arts is becoming less and less an effective piece of evidence for those who argue in favor of preserving or increasing America's governmental contribution to the arts.

Another area of confusion in these culture wars is the argument with regard to the history of governmental support in the United States. Some claim that government support of the arts as a cultural policy only began with the Kennedy and Johnson administration. They would argue that the advent of the NEA and NEH was a bursting forth of elite liberalism representing an

anomalous moment in American history, a moment which has passed. Others point to the founding fathers or even the WPA to prove government support of the arts is a seminal and enduring American value. Hughes quotes John Adams in a letter to Abigail Adams to prove the tradition: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study...navigation, commerce, and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music and architecture."¹⁶ John Quincy Adams stuck pretty close to the old apple tree when he said in his *First Message to Congress*: "For government to refrain from 'promoting the improvement of agriculture, commerce, manufacture, the cultivation and encouragement of the mechanical and of the elegant arts, the advancement of literature...would be treachery to the most scared of trusts.'"¹⁷

Further evidence of this long tradition is presented in Jefferson's offer to sell Congress his personal 6,500 volume library after the British burned the Congressional library in 1814. Despite the misgivings expressed by the early Jesses and Newts, Congress did buy the books for \$23,950 and, according to historian David McCullough, this " 'may be seen as the beginning of federal involvement in the arts and humanities to the everlasting benefit of the country.' "¹⁸ As further evidence, American history painter John Trumbull is cited for receiving \$32,000 (an outrageous sum to detractors) to paint the four scenes of the American Revolution, including the *Declaration of Independence* (1818) that presently are located in the Capitol rotunda.¹⁹

I am not exactly certain what these examples are designed to prove or support, except to point out to us that there were "lowbrow fools" who protested these expenses then, they were overridden, as should the present fools who are prepared to gut the NEH and NEA.

Another American experience to which supporters of government funding of the arts point as a precedent for present government subsidies is the WPA. Federal Project One began in 1935 and contained an appropriation of money earmarked for assistance to professional people employed on federally sponsored projects. Federal One set up programs in art, music, theater, and writing, each with a national director. The use of the WPA as an example of enlightened government support for artists and the arts is an unfortunate one. WPA and Federal One were not created to support high art nor to select and support great artists, though some of that happened as an unintended outcome. Federal One was created to provide jobs to the unemployed; it was a form of general relief and helped white collar workers, manual laborers, and artists alike. The enlightened part was the creating of art projects to employ artists so they did not have to become ditch diggers. These projects were not of the sponsorship variety that allowed the artist freedom to create without artistic constraint. Federal One sought to fund a place for every starving artist, even those with marginal talents. Financed in part by appropriations for federal buildings, these artists painted murals, worked in poster shops, established community centers, gave free lessons, and other social welfare activities. Likewise, Federal One writers on work relief were not free to create their own poetry and fiction; they were assigned the compilation of travel guides to describe the local history of major cities and to create tour guides for each state. There was also a Federal Music Project and a Federal Theater Project. All these programs were attacked at the time by anti New Dealers who saw most of these activities as boondoggles for communists and anarchists. Eventually, these programs were

decentralized and moved to states and localities, where they vanished as other local priorities rose in importance and America prepared to enter the Second World War. So, while the New Deal launched the most extensive program of government support for the arts that the nation had ever seen, it did so unwittingly. It was not the love and value of art that drove that policy; it was work relief and a full employment policy. It is a rhetorical mistake to use the WPA and Federal One as evidence to support continued government support of the arts. With its provision of full employment for even incompetent artists and the sense of entitlement it promotes, the WPA projects would not find the same public support today, even from those who, like myself, favor some government subsidy for the arts.

Finally, we come to the establishment of the NEA and NEH. While federal support for the arts may have some historical antecedent in American history, the creation of the NEA and NEH in 1965 was a major event; it plunged arts policy into the limelight and thus created it as an issue for public debate at the national level. The debate persists, 32 years after the inception of these agencies. Beginning with the Kennedy Presidency and reinforced by the Johnson Presidency and his even larger congressional majority, a majority consensus created this national policy. Bill T. Jones describes the NEA mission succinctly: “to foster the excellence, diversity, and vitality of the arts in the U.S. and broaden public access to them.”²⁰

Was it successful? Depending on one’s criteria for success, I would say yes. Since 1965, through NEA support, public arts agencies have been established in every state. Leveraging agency partnerships, the NEA has been able to garner a \$12 private donation for every NEA dollar granted. And art and art education were introduced into thousands of communities. Arts attendance now surpasses that of professional sports events. In California alone, during the 27 years of federal and state support in the arts, the number of performing arts companies, museums, art centers, and other arts organizations grew from 650 to over 1400. The number of community-based arts agencies grew from 56 to 230.

If this federal effort has been so successful, why are the present debates concerning the future of these agencies so vitriolic?

The reasons are many. The political climate in the United States has changed since the idealism of the mid-sixties when the Democratic controlled Congress and White House jointly began this cultural policy. The conservative dominance in Congress has eroded support for art subsidies over time. On fiscal grounds, the right wing opposed government spending on ‘non-essential’ programs (which certainly included the arts). On moral grounds, these powerful fundamentalists forces in Congress relentlessly clubbed the NEA and the NEH, rallying particularly around the Mapplethorpe, Serrano, and History Standards episodes. The real heat has come from this conservative group, and it has been aimed at the Achilles heel of the Democrats as the two forces wage war as to which party is actually the more supportive of “real American family values.”

While the political forces have changed since the ‘60s, the attitude and tactics of the art world and NEA have not. The art world saw the ‘60s and the NEA/NEH as a messianic event.

They had been delivered, their value to society forever established. They became inward looking. As they tried to avoid becoming politicized, they focused on the status quo and fended off partisan challenges to their priorities and programs. The defensive rhetoric of “art for arts sake” began to fly in the face of the trend toward accountability to the taxpaying public. The art world assumed the large-scale investments of the NEA in the ‘70s would be a permanent condition. As such, the agency and its participants became resistant to change and adaptation. They ignored negative feedback. They did not count the newer political players and left the field to the right wing to negatively characterize NEA projects. They resisted change in their own procedures, much like academic institutions. They generally ignored issues of accountability to the public. They resisted having public members of panels, and it took a congressional directive to make them do so; it took a press challenge to go to court to force the National Council of the NEA to open its meetings to the public. Further, in confusion over its real mission, the NEA seemed to place an emphasis on programs supporting creation and production which favored the artist and gave less support to stimulating public demand or appreciation.²¹

Sadly, the NEA became like other bureaucratic agencies created in an era that tolerated deficit spending, entitlements, and special interest spending. The times have changed. The emphasis now is on fiscal responsibility, productive public investments, greater government accountability and effectiveness, and outcome performance standards. For its lack of flexibility and agility in adaptation, the NEA is a perfect target, low-hanging fruit, a sitting duck.

With all that said, and with all the congressional warfare regarding public funding of the arts, what does the American public want? As taxpayers, they are the real patrons.

Louis Harris has been measuring American attitudes toward government funding of the arts for years, and his recent study in June of 1996 has interesting results. First, it shows that the relentless political and rhetorical bludgeoning of government support in the arts which the Right has been conducting over time has had some impact on public opinion. In 1987, Harris found that 74% of Americans were willing to be taxed an additional \$5 to support federal arts funding; in 1992 that percentage had fallen to 69%; and by 1996 to 61%. This represents considerable erosion of public support; however, by any measure 61% is still a solid majority of Americans willing to sustain an extra tax of \$5. 56% are willing to pay ten additional dollars, and it isn’t until we reach an additional \$15 and \$25 that we see major resistance. According to Harris, when asked if they support government spending in the form of federal, state, and local councils for the arts, a whopping 79% say yes, 19% say no, and 2% are undecided.²² So, even with the right wing hysteria over what it perceives to be the politically correct, scatological, anti Christian, and sexually perverse art supported by the NEA, the general public in a general way seems to believe the arts are a good thing for Americans, and the government is an appropriate sponsor of some of these activities and the taxpayer is an appropriate patron, at least at a \$5 or \$10 contribution. That represents quite a taxpayer commitment to government support, since the NEA now costs the taxpayer only 32 cents per year at present.

There go the American people, again, being reasonable in ways their political representatives frequently are not.

What conclusions can we draw so far? First, of course, is that the culture wars seem to go back almost to the beginning of the nation. They have been fought repeatedly and probably will be with us always. Second, that the debates surrounding these issues are short on facts, long on misinformation and hyperbole. Third, that while politicians use government support of the arts as a political football to lob value-laden epithets at each other, the general American public pretty much likes the arts and approves of some government participation in subsidizing these activities. Fourth, that the public, no matter how supportive and reasonable, is still influenced by cleverly structured sound bites. And finally, the agencies in question and the art world in general have not been effective in communicating their value or mission to the general public.

Now, to answer the question as to what should the role of government in the arts be?

It is time for me to dive into the middle, and I do mean literally the middle, of this debate. I reject the extreme positions I have outlined. I am with the mainstream of Americans in believing the arts are “a good thing.” I do believe that the arts and access to the arts constitute a significant enough component of the welfare of our citizenry to have a call upon government support and, though I do occasionally feel some art is really bad, it is not because I believe it was devilishly inspired. However, that being said, I believe government support, on all levels and in all categories, must come with explicit obligations placed upon recipients. It should never be considered an entitlement to artists or arts institutions. It should be much more of a contract, a social contract. That contract should include the following requirements:

- (1) Government support should help the organization or artist raise additional monies through private philanthropy. It should not be the sole source of support on an ongoing basis.
- (2) Government investment in the arts should be aimed at supporting quality and excellence and not equity among artists or organizations. The only government equity considerations that should guide support is equitable access to the full population of the nation as an audience or consumer of the arts. The responsibility for such access should be placed firmly on the shoulders of the grant recipients. Public support should require public access and public accountability.
- (3) Recipients of government support must demonstrate accountability in terms much more discernible and measurable than in the past. This suggests that the mission of any recipient needs to be more than a statement of program activities. In other words, a claim for public support must be based upon what the institution does, not upon what it is.

This leads me to my fundamental point with regard to the government’s role in support of the arts. The government, on any level, should not be funding arts organizations as “establishments” or artist subsidies as entitlements. It must fund and evaluate recipients as “social enterprises.” Let me explain. Professor J. Gregory Dees of the Harvard Business School refers

to the term “social enterprise” to define a non-profit institution that has shifted from a kind of “secular establishment” to an institution that can actually be evaluated by results achieved.²³ I will use the art museum as an example since it has become very familiar to me.

Stephen Weil of the Hirshhorn Museum has adapted the concept “social enterprise” specifically to museums. I’d like to read several paragraphs from a paper he delivered last year because I cannot say it better. Imagine his references to “museum” as it could be applied to any arts organization. Better yet, imagine his references as applying to a research university.

If you think of the museum as an “establishment,” what you might well imagine is a kind of rock-solid institution, historically inevitable and in all likelihood permanent in nature, an institution that is all but opaque in its inner workings and one that addresses its audience with an awesome and disembodied authority, an institution that ought properly be highly valued simply for being what it is, one that is entitled to public support as a matter of right, and one that is fully justified in treating its own survival as one of its highest institutional priorities.

If you think instead of the museum as a “social enterprise,” what you are likely to imagine is, in each instance, almost exactly the contrary. It is not historically inevitable — every museum begins with the hope of some person or group of persons to accomplish some particular purpose or other — and, regardless of the intentions with which it was begun, nowhere is it a given that it will necessarily be permanent. Neither is it any longer opaque — in fact, it has been required by law to become increasingly transparent with each passing decade — nor does it any longer carry the immense authority of its establishment predecessor. Rather than utter pronouncements from on high, it speaks in a variety of human voices, serves as a stimulus, and offers opportunities for dialogue. Whereas the museum as establishment may be inwardly focused, stately, solemn, and remote, the museum as social enterprise may be outwardly focused, accessible, unpretentious and lively.

More important still, though, is that the museum as social enterprise bases its claim for public support upon what it does, not upon what it is, and it understands that this claim for support may be valid only so long as those who provide that support perceive the public to be receiving fair value in exchange. Most important of all, the museum as social enterprise is — in the nature of every enterprise — driven by the desire to accomplish its purpose, not merely by an instinct to survive.²⁴

This paper struck me, because when I went to LACMA, I entered an “establishment,” described perfectly by Weil. Without having the term in mind, I set about trying to mold it into a “social enterprise.” I did so not only because I believed it was the right thing to do. I did it

because, you should excuse the expression, it was politically correct, that is, it was the politically smart and maybe the only legitimate way to keep the museum afloat in these days of wrangling over the tax dollar. The future taxpaying public of Los Angeles will be extremely different from the base that first founded and supported the museum. Unless something is done, the taxpayers of tomorrow will not know or care about art museums. They will have had no art education and will not come from families who took them regularly to museum programs. If we don't do something now, we will have defaulted on our implicit social contract. If we fall back upon our "establishment" reason for being (just because we are), we will have little resonance with this new public and the future Board of Supervisors. Some of you who know me well know that I'm prone to putting my money where my mouth is. And, so I have.

LACMA has changed its mission. When I came to the museum, the mission statement read: "The purpose of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is the collection, conservation, interpretation and display of art of the highest quality."

There was no mention of "for whom" or "why." It was a statement of activities, not of purpose. After considerable discussion and debate, we created a new broader mission, more worthy, I think, of the public support we receive.

To serve the public through the collection, conservation, exhibition and interpretation of significant works of art from a broad range of cultures and historical periods, and through the translation of these collections into meaningful educational, aesthetic, intellectual and cultural experiences for the widest array of audiences.

We placed the burden back upon the museum. We need to reach out to the community, to bring our value to them; they are our patrons. We are a social enterprise with a measurable mission to carry out, not an aloof "establishment" accountable to no one. And so with the university and so with the NEA.

Will turning ourselves inside out to serve the public with public support put an end to the culture wars? No, the arts, by their nature, are always in danger, especially if they are vital and innovative. So, the ultimate answer to sustaining great achievements in art is not by winning enduring government support. Too much dependence on government can create and has created lazy, self-indulgent, and "entitled" art institutions and artists. On the other hand, too much dependence upon private philanthropy can and does compromise quality and vision for the sake of "donor relations." And, of course, too much dependence on entrepreneurial revenue generation leads to screams and accusations of crass commercialism.

So, what is the answer? It is, of course, the same answer any sound investment advisor would give: diversify. The future success of arts institutions and artists will depend, first, on their ability to solicit and receive the right kind of government support for the right kind of purpose; second, to solicit and obtain substantial private philanthropic support without convoluting the purposes of the art or the institution in pursuit of the donor dollar; and finally, to

create revenue generating mechanisms to help fund the enterprise without losing sight of the dog or its tail. Government support is a key component in this difficult and delicate balancing act, but not the only component. The successful arts institutions and artists of the future will be creative balancers; they will be skilled weavers of strands of financial support from a variety of appropriate sources. They will not be the “aloof” or the “entitled” or unproductive beggars at the public trough. In fact, I believe the mere act of deliberating and planning as to that proper balance of support will elevate the quality of the arts in America, to the ultimate benefit of the ultimate public patron, the American taxpayer.

Thank you.

Research conducted by Helen Singleton, MPA, and Kate Winegar.

¹ Robert Hughes, “Pulling the Fuse on Culture,” *Time*, 7 August 1995, 62.

² *Ibid.*

³ Eric Harrison, “Showcase City of the South Rebels at Anti-Gay Arts Vote,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, 20 April 1997, sec. A, pg. 12.

⁴ Victoria Alexander, “They Know What They Like,” *Advancing Philanthropy*, winter 1996-97, 29.

⁵ Hughes, “Pulling the Fuse,” 66.

⁶ J.M. Bourne, *Patronage and Society in 19th Century England* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 9.

⁷ Barbara Gold, ed., *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), xiv.

⁸ Anne-Imelda Radice, review of *Paying the Piper: Causes and Consequences of Art Patronage*, by Judith Higgins Balfe, *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 4 (spring 1994): 80.

⁹ Hughes, “Pulling the Fuse,” 66.

¹⁰ William Craig Rice, “Change the Tax Laws to Aid All Artists,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 April 1997, Metro section.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Bill T. Jones, “NEA: Vital Link between Society and Art,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 April 1997, Opinion section.

¹³ Hughes, “Pulling the Fuse,” 66-67.

¹⁴ James Heilbrun and Charles M. Gray, *The Economics of Art and Culture: An American Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232.

¹⁵ Martin Feldstein, ed., *The Economics of Art Museums*, National Bureau of Economic Research Conference Report (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 284.

¹⁶ Hughes, “Pulling the Fuse,” 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jones, “NEA: Vital Link.”

²¹ Margaret Wyszomirski, “Federal Cultural Support: Toward a New Paradigm,” *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 25 (spring 1995): 74.

²² Louis Harris Poll, *Americans and the Arts VII*, June 1996.

²³ Stephen Weil, “Museums in the United States: The Paradox of Privately-Governed Public Institutions,” April 1996, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-9.