



NEA Funds In Stimulus Package

It has come to our attention that President Obama intends to work with the Senate to cut some excess spending passed by the House as part of the economic stimulus package. He will maintain increased funding for the National Endowment for the Arts stating that "If singers, actors and dancers can stimulate audiences, they can also stimulate the economy." Authors of the current stimulus package seem to agree and have included \$50 million for the National Endowment for the Arts and \$150 million for infrastructure repairs at the Smithsonian.

President Obama noted that "Arts groups large and small are hurting, just like every other industry. The Sacramento Ballet has canceled performances; the Virginia Symphony Orchestra took a 20 percent pay cut; and the Austin Museum of Art is postponing plans for a beautiful new museum downtown. We can't let that happen."

We know that President Obama has one chance here. One chance. If the package fails and the recession deepens, many more will hurt even further, including Obama in the early stages of his new administration.

Last week, the House Appropriations Committee took notice and approved a plan to include the arts in the proposed recovery package, formerly known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan, with a provision for \$50 million in supplemental grants funding for the National Endowment for the Arts along with other provisions to benefit arts organizations. However, the Senate Appropriations Committee has not included arts jobs funding in their version of the bill.



Self Portrait by Benny Andrews

Bill Ivey, former chair of the NEA and a member of President Obama's transition team, told NPR's All Things Considered in an interview this week, "A healthy arts community is important, especially during hard times." Americans for the Arts estimates that for every dollar the NEA doles out to arts groups, another \$7 is generated in additional support through local, state and private donations. They estimate that the proposed \$50 million in the economic stimulus recovery bill could actually leverage \$350 million of investments and prevent 14,422 jobs from being lost.

So what is the problem and why is there opposition for this stimulus package line item? Perhaps a little history lesson may shed some light on the issue at hand.

In 1965 the federal government created the National Endowment for the Arts, with the expressed idea of advancing the arts, artistic freedoms and creativity free from government approvals. To make its desires perfectly clear, Congress wrote into the NEA law that, "It is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating this release of creative talent."

Congress recognized that America did not have the long tradition of support and public assistance for arts as in Europe. It also realized that the best art, many times, can be very controversial and radical in style as well as in substance. We all know that art is supposed to question the status quo, to 'shake things up' and elicit strong reactions from the viewer. Congress also recognized the many risks to "freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry" in a federal arts funding program.

The 1965 Senate report on the bill to establish the NEA specified that "the fullest attention" must be given "to freedom of artistic and humanistic expression," and added: "Countless times in history artists who were vilified by their contemporaries because of their innovations in style or method of expression have become prophets to a later age."

Congress found a way to prevent the kind of political interference or censorship that could easily destroy the integrity of public arts funding. They created an elaborate "peer panel" review structure to insulate decisions made by the Endowment from partisan pressures. The peer

panels, committees of experts in the field, were to review grant applications and make recommendations. The Council relied on the experts.

The system worked well for the first twenty-four years. Periodically there were questions raised about a theatre production, a best-selling novel or scandalous dance production, but the NEA managed to deflect criticism and maintain its position. In a rather public episode, Congressman Mario Biaggi in 1984 objected to a performance of the Verdi opera *Rigoletto* because ads for the opera showed an Italian looking man in a black suit and white hat emerging from large letters spelling the words RIGOLETTO riddled with bullet holes. He felt the ads were insulting to Italians. The NEA agreed that the ads were in “poor taste”, but would not interfere; the endowment’s integrity depended on avoiding any appearance of attempting to influence or control artistic content. Representative Biaggi’s proposals to censor the ideas found in NEA-supported works eventually died a peaceful death.

Through the leadership of the early chairpersons of the NEA, the endowment managed to create a wonderful presence for live theatre, classical music, dance, and the visual arts throughout America. The agency was able through its grants, which required matching funds, to create a catalytic effect. NEA approval became a “Seal of Approval” for the arts, and Corporate funds began to flow into arts organizations with NEA approval.

Then in 1989 the system went awry and it seems not altogether clear what really happened. Some feel that the emergence of America’s fundamentalist right which stressed the “social” issues of sexuality, the proper place for women, patriotism, and preserving Judeo-Christian cultural values were a factor. The NEA chair at that time felt the real issues for NEA resistance revolved around “the nature of tolerance and the unwillingness of people to encounter differences.”

Dirty words, nudity, homosexuality in art and eroding American values became the

buzz words for the battle cries from NEA protesters. Fundamentalist leaders generated thousands of letters and postcards to Congress, the White House and the NEA protesting “pornography” or “blasphemy” in particular works of art that most protesters had not even seen. The “fear of art” made the NEA an appealing target. It became increasingly clear that the goal of many of the agency’s critics was to abolish arts funding altogether. So the NEA became an easy object for government control and decreased funding.

Another factor in the success to erode NEA funding, are the feelings many Americans have toward the arts as being “elitist” or “snotty”. Despite the many successes of the NEA, Public Broadcasting and other arts agencies, there is still a large gap in America between popular culture and high art culture such as ballet. A suspicion of artists whose work may be different, difficult, obscure or “avant-garde” is still prevalent in the land. President Obama will have an uphill battle restoring National Endowment funding to the levels it once enjoyed.

Alpo is asking all of its member agencies to have their members support this stimulus package funding item as good for the American way of life. Send a postcard to your elected officials and tell them not to remove the NEA funding.

For further information Contact:
ALPO Congressional Lobby
Ms. Lola Falana Jones-Newton
202 H Street, Washington, D.C. 20500



Xenobia Bailey



(above) Robert Mapplethorpe
(below) The Penny Dance Ensemble

