

The National Endowment for the Arts: NEA Grants Shift from Censorship to Propaganda

By Meghan Keane

Summary: For decades the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been caught up in controversy over its mission and its grantees. But this year for the first time artists themselves are questioning whether they are being used by the agency to foster a political agenda.

It's amazing how quickly artists' fear of government censorship evaporates when a candidate they support takes office. In the late 1980s and 1990s the arts community vigorously protested when conservatives questioned whether the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) should fund art works that many considered acts of blasphemy, obscenity and pornography. That was during the days when Andres Serrano dunked a crucifix into a jar of urine and photographed it. The public was outraged to learn that the NEA provided a portion of the funding for a North Carolina arts group that celebrated Serrano's work and awarded him \$15,000. The arts community responded by screaming "censorship" over efforts to cut funding for these displays. It was equally outraged at the suggestion that government policymakers should have a say in the content of their art work. Left-leaning arts groups said bureaucrats and congressmen should play no role in artistic decisions made with taxpayer money. They should *pay* but not *play*.

After a spate of similar controversies embarrassed the George H.W. Bush administration, the NEA made an effort to require grant recipients to sign an anti-obscenity pledge. (The pledge lapsed and was later ruled unconstitutional). The NEA budget reached \$176 million at the end of the first Bush administration. But when Republicans



Wearing an "Obama is my home boy" tee shirt, former NEA communications director Yosi Sergant chats with President Obama. Sergant presided over a conference call in which he pushed artists to produce pro-Obama propaganda.

took control of Congress in 1995 they cut the Clinton administration's NEA budget to below \$100 million for five years from 1996 to 2000. Unfortunately, during the George W. Bush administration NEA's budget slowly rose until it reached \$155 billion authorized for this year. The attempt to end federal grants to the arts was abandoned. The NEA survived by eliminating potentially controversial grants to individual artists. Instead, it channeled more money to state arts agencies that support popular school and community projects in music, folk arts, museum preservation programs and the like.

Today the Obama administration is moving rapidly to increase next year's federal funding for the NEA. The administration

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began its pitch early this year by arguing that increased arts funding was necessary to stimulate the economy and help artists and arts institutions recover from the recession. As soon as \$50 million in arts funding was included in the stimulus package, arts lobbyists went looking for even more money. In this respect, backers of the arts are no different from any other interest group that feeds at the public trough.

However, the NEA and its backers recently took a disturbing step beyond funding its constituency group. They have been eager to promote government involvement in setting the arts agenda—especially in creating art that promotes the Obama administration. NEA supporters seem more than happy to use the agency to encourage artists to create political advocacy artwork. In other countries this is called propaganda.

NEA: Propaganda Agency for the Obama Administration

In September Patrick Courrielche, a filmmaker who has worked to create arts initiatives, exposed an Obama administration attempt to use the NEA to build support for the president's agenda. Courrielche said he was invited to participate on an Aug. 10 conference call organized by the NEA, the White House Office of Public Engage-

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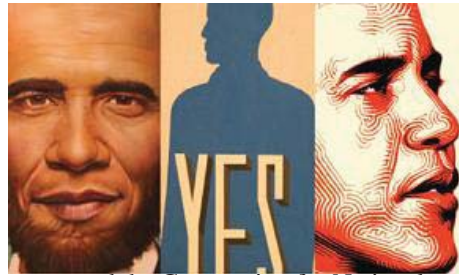
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ment, and the Corporation for National and Community Service. The invitation asked a handpicked group of 75 “artists, producers, promoters, organizers, influencers, marketers, taste-makers, leaders or just plain cool people to join together and work together to promote a more civically engaged America and celebrate how the arts can be used for a positive change!” The intent was to encourage the artists to think about ways to create arts-focused projects to support the President’s policies in four areas: healthcare, environment and energy, education, and community service.

During the call, Buffy Wicks, deputy director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, addressed the group. She explained that she worked for Obama senior adviser Valerie Jarrett, and her job was to reach out to constituency groups [i.e. special interests]. Wicks reminded the callers that “we won” and stated her purpose: “I’m actually in the White House and working towards furthering this agenda, this very aggressive agenda.” She added, “We’re going to come at you with some specific ‘asks’ here.”

On June 22 the Obama administration had kicked-off a 91-day “United We Serve” campaign promoting volunteer community service. The campaign would culminate on September 11th, when the president planned to declare a National Day of Service and Remembrance. The federal government was asking citizens, nonprofits and localities to come up with community service projects. Now it was the artists’ turn.

Patrick Courrielche was disturbed by the content of the conference call. In a blog posted on Andrew Breitbart’s Big Hollywood website and later excerpted by the Wall Street Journal (Sept. 1, 2009), Courrielche admitted that there was something wrong with government officials asking artists to promote the White House policy agenda.

Why did the NEA think its mission was to create a “message distribution network” for issues not related to the arts? Was the agency about to create a “machine” to corral artists into promoting its agenda? NEA grants are often valued for their ability to generate matching grants from private donors. Wasn’t there a potential conflict of interest in promoting the president’s agenda using government grants to artists who would then be more likely to receive private grants?

Later in the call, Yosi Sergeant, then the NEA’s communications director, told the artists what the administration expected of them: “I would encourage you to pick something, whether it’s health care, education, the environment, you know, there’s four key areas that the corporation has identified as the areas of service.... And then my ‘ask’ would be to apply artistic, you know, your artistic creative communities utilities and bring them to the table.” Sergeant added that it was no accident why those invited were in on the conference call: They were selected because they “know how to make a stink.”

Neil Abernathy, outreach director for the administration’s United We Serve community service campaign, said he wanted artists to get with his program. The campaign was part of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that supports Americorps and other government-funded “volunteering” programs. He noted that United We Serve was different from Organizing for America (OFA), another Obama effort, which is run out of the Democratic National Committee.

How different? Abernathy said United We Serve emphasized service and volunteering while OFA advocated for policy change. “*We have to, for these legal reasons, remain really really separate [in] what we do here from what OFA is doing, and so they’re basically two separate goals with the same idea. We use the same techniques, organizing strategies, because basically they’re both run by people from the campaign.*”

At one point, NEA’s Sergeant reminded the artists: “This is just the beginning. This is the first telephone call of a brand new conversation. We are just now learning how to really bring this community together to

“speak with the government. What that looks like legally, we’re still trying to figure out the laws of putting government websites on Facebook and Twitter...So bear with us as we learn the language so that we can speak to each other safely.”

Arts journalist Lee Rosenbaum listened in on a second conference call a few weeks later, which again invited artists to enlist in the government’s social service brigade. This one was organized by the White House and United We Serve, but it lacked NEA representatives who sent their apologies because they were “tied up in meetings.” Rosenbaum reported that her reaction was “more than a little uneasy.” She writes that the discussion left her “creeped out.” (See http://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl/2009/09/united_we_serve.html.)

Pointing Fingers

After Courrielche broke the story, NEA’s Sergant denied that his agency sponsored the conference call, telling the Washington Times the invitation “didn’t come from us, so I don’t have it [the participants’ list] to distribute. The corporation who [sic] set up the conference call and who conducted the conference call is another federal agency.” Trouble is, Courrielche had an email copy of the invitation. Not only did it come from the NEA, it came from Sergant’s mailbox.

United We Serve also was hit by an attack of amnesia. It denied that its support for community service was in any way linked to the Obama policy agenda. Further, its spokesperson Siobhan Dugan told Fox News that it didn’t organize the call either. She said an “individual interested” in the group was responsible, apparently meaning hip hop music mogul Russell Simmons. In a transcript of the conference call Simmons representative Michael Skolnik welcomes the participants this way: “I have been asked by the folks in the White House and the folks in the NEA about a month ago in a conversation we had. We had the idea that I would help bring together the independent artists’ community around the country.”

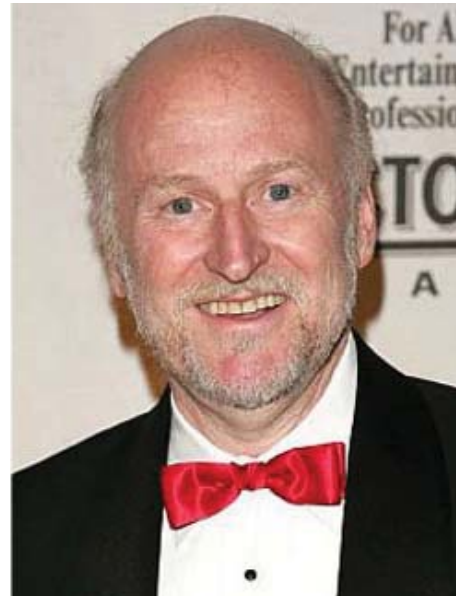
Then there’s the audio of the hour-long conference call. Sergant reiterates NEA’s involvement with the call, saying: “Again, I’m really, really honored to be working with you; the National Endowment for the Arts is

really honored. You’re going to be seeing a lot more of us in the next four — and hopefully eight — years.”

In late September Sergant resigned as communications chief for the NEA after 10 Republican senators wrote NEA chairman Rocco Landesman seeking assurances that no taxpayer money was used on efforts to enlist artists to promote the administration’s healthcare proposal.

Why Should Government Fund the Arts?

Since it was established by the Johnson administration in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts has distributed 125,000



NEA chairman Rocco Landesman

grants to artists and arts institutions. Yet the NEA has always occupied a difficult and ambiguous position as a disburser of federal money. Many arts supporters think the U.S. government should imitate governments in Europe and heavily fund the arts, but that it should have no influence over the sorts of artwork produced with its funding. Many taxpayers agree that the government should not dictate to artists, but they don’t think it’s the federal government’s responsibility to fund art. In fact, they think it’s unconstitutional. There are other taxpayers who may support federal arts spending, but oppose government grants for artwork they find morally objectionable.

Because of these differing views, the NEA is always skating on thin ice. Arts advocates like to argue that NEA budget is too small

and constitutes a tiny fraction of the \$65 billion spent on the arts each year in America. However, the NEA is the largest single donor to the arts in America, and many feel that arts organizations receiving funding from the government should carefully watch how grant recipients use taxpayer money.

That hasn’t always happened. The NEA was negligent in the early 1990s when it funded displays of the work of Andres Serrano and homoerotic photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and made individual grants to nude performers Karen Finley, Tim Hunter and others. The resulting public outcry and the threat of budget cuts caused the agency to change its priorities. Rather than fund individual artists and controversial exhibits, the agency began pouring money into local institutions and projects promoting community interest in the arts. Touring theater programs like “Shakespeare in American Communities” and a poetry recitation contest called “Poetry Out Loud” brought the arts to Middle America, to schools and rural communities across the country.

Artistic decision-making was shifted away from grant selection panels in Washington, D.C. where representatives of elite East and West Coast arts institutions handed out taxpayer money to each other. More and more decisions were made instead by state and local arts agencies that each received slices of the arts funding pie. There was less chance of controversy and more chance of holding onto political support when the NEA could tell state officials and politicians that their constituents would be getting grants to support a local symphony or an arts program for senior citizens or children.

But that is all changing with the Obama administration. Rahm Emanuel, the president’s chief of staff, has said of the recession, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” The administration has taken that message to heart. This winter, Congress passed the \$787 billion stimulus plan, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, loading it with government spending programs. The NEA received \$50 million to distribute to nonprofit arts organizations. That may not look like much compared to the \$1 billion going to Amtrak or the \$650 million earmarked to help the technologically inept switch from analog to digital televisions, but it testifies to

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the free-for-all money-for-everyone mentality that spurred the bill's passage.

Major artists and arts advocates voiced support for the stimulus funding, observing that the arts were gravely injured by the recession. Lobbyists explained how lost arts jobs affected the wider economy. William Ivey, who led President Obama's transition team on arts-related spending, noted that it's a mistake to say "an arts worker is not a real worker, and that a carpenter who pounds nails framing a set for an opera company is a less-real carpenter than one who pounds nails framing a house."

Robert L. Lynch, president of Americans for the Arts, was adamant that the stimulus showed that an "artist's paycheck is every bit as important as the steelworker's paycheck or the auto worker's paycheck."

Rep. David Obey (D-Wisc.), who sponsored the stimulus bill, explained: "There are five million people who work in the arts industry. And right now they have 12.5% unemployment — or are you suggesting that somehow if you work in that field, it isn't real when you lose your job, your mortgage or your health insurance? We're trying to treat people who work in the arts the same way as anybody else."

In March, performing artists Wynton Marsalis, Linda Ronstadt, and Josh Groban went to Capitol Hill to lobby Congress for more taxpayer money for the arts. They said the country's economic problems were threatening some five million jobs in the arts. Painters and actors, musicians and sculptors, stage managers and box office ticket-sellers were losing their jobs or about to be laid off.

Wynton, Linda, and Josh pleaded their case with a friendly group of congressmen, including Obey and Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.)

They had come to Washington to ask Congress to increase the annual budget for the NEA from \$155 million in fiscal 2009 to a proposed \$200 million for 2010, arguing that while the extra money was a pittance compared to the government's total annual budget, the increase was needed and essential.

These appeals evaded the fact that Congress had only one month before given the NEA the extra \$50 million in stimulus funds. "It seems like a drop in the bucket when we're shoving billions at companies in Detroit," said Roger Kimball, editor of *The New Criterion*, a conservative cultural journal. "But the larger principle is about the place of the state in the lives of the citizens in this country. It sets a bad example."

Arts advocates care less about the political

sion programming and shows on National Public Radio. For fiscal 2010 there will be individual grants of \$10,000 and \$20,000 allocated to scholars to translate plays and poetry collections by foreign artists into English. In 2009 40 \$25,000 grants were awarded to individuals for creative writing fellowships.

Several grants went to groups that would have been ripe for attack during the height of the 1990s culture wars. A San Francisco group



Patrick Courrielche (right) with Andrew Breitbart of BigHollywood.com and BigGovernment.com

philosophy than they do about the money. True to form, as soon as the stimulus funding was awarded, they were out looking for more. Broadway theater producer Rocco Landesman, the newly appointed chairman of the NEA, made it his goal to increase funding. "If it were up to me," he told *The Chicago Tribune* this summer, "The NEA budget would double... To some extent, I will be graded on whether funding comes up, and I think we have a president who is sympathetic."

Who Gets the Money?

Just how sympathetic President Obama is became apparent during the first months of 2009 as the NEA began to dole out grants. State arts councils continue to receive the lion's share of funding. They have seen their funds renewed or increased. There is also money set aside for touring arts exhibitions, chamber music festivals, dance ensembles, and museums. There are special programs for seniors and funding for public televi-

called CounterPULSE received \$25,000 in federal stimulus funds for employees' salaries. It hosts a "long-running pansexual performance series" called "Perverts Put Out," which asks its audience to "Join your fellow pervs for some explicit, twisted fun." Another \$25,000 in stimulus funding went to the Buffalo-based Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Arts, which put on a play called "Deviant Bodies," "presenting work through the multiple lenses of Transgender, Gender-queer and Gender Variant perspectives."

The NEA defended its recent funding choices in a letter to Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) "The NEA did not use [stimulus] dollars to fund any of the projects," wrote Patrice Powell, the agency's acting chairman. The grants "can only be used to provide salary support for staff positions or fees for previously-engaged artists and/or contractual personnel that are critical to an organization's artistic mission and in jeopardy of being eliminated as a result of the current economic climate."

Bill Ivey, NEA chairman during the Clinton administration, also brushed off complaints: "I feel that [our] society has moved beyond that. Any agency is going to do things that bother citizens and members of Congress. The NEA wasn't allowed any missteps. It has learned from that and is now able to navigate the challenges of supporting arts activity that can be controversial."

Government Sticks and Carrots

Last year candidate Obama had many fans in the arts who are being duly rewarded now that he is president. The Washington Examiner reported in August that at least seven of the groups receiving NEA funding this year are run by people who served on the Obama campaign's Arts Policy Committee in 2008:

"Among them is Obama's law school classmate, Nancy McCullough, whose California Lawyers for the Arts received a \$50,000 grant. CLA is an advocacy organization which takes government money and, among other things, uses it to urge people to write their elected officials and ask for more government money."

There's more to come. Once upon a time the NEA explained that it could not interfere with artworks created by artists who received grants from the agency. During the controversy surrounding Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" photo it issued a statement:

"The Endowment is expressly forbidden in its authorizing legislation from interfering with the artistic choices made by its grantees. The National Endowment for the Arts supports the right of grantee organizations to select, on artistic criteria, their artist-recipients and present their work, even though sometimes the work may be deemed controversial and offensive to some individuals. We at the Endowment do, nonetheless, deeply regret any offense to any individual."

And only two years ago, Dana Gioia, NEA chairman under George W. Bush, clarified the difference between the NEA and the culture ministries of Europe, writing that "the NEA does not dictate arts policy to the United States."

But the controversy over the NEA conference



Michael Skolnik
aide to music mogul Russell Simmons

call suggests that those days may be over. President Obama's friend Quincy Jones, the famed music producer, is circulating an online petition (240,000+ signatures so far) urging the president to create a cabinet-level Secretary of the Arts. Jones emphasized that the arts bring money and jobs to communities and education and culture to children.

If the U.S. has an "arts czar" isn't it likely that there will be more pressure tactics like those used by the NEA in its August conference call—more 'asks' made of artists by government political appointees? Won't artists be tempted to seek government grants to celebrate government programs and win matching private grants from political friends of the Administration? A U.S. Department of Culture may seem far-fetched, but according to former Clinton NEA chief Bill Ivey: "There's every opportunity for the NEA, the NEH, and other cultural institutions to have an elevated role in this administration... And somewhere down the line, there will be a department of cultural affairs."

Arts in America: Personal Choices or Political Mandates?

Artists used to celebrate their "adversarial" role in challenging the powers that be. It's different now. Oprah Winfrey's production company Harpo recently produced a video

of Hollywood celebrities urging Americans to take the "presidential pledge" by volunteering to make a difference.

The video begins with the popular Shepard Fairey "Hope" painting depicting Barack Obama and the voiceover announces: "They say the job of the president is the loneliest job in the world." It then tells the president, "You are not alone." At one point Anthony Kedis, the lead singer of The Red Hot Chili Peppers, turns to the camera and says: "I pledge to be of service to Barack Obama." In the video, actress Demi Moore, her husband Ashton Kutcher, and many other celebrities take the pledge to "be of service to our president and all mankind," to make America a better place, and to use less plastic, not buy bottled water, end slavery and other noble causes.

Oprah Winfrey's 2009 net worth is \$2.3 billion (down only \$400 million from a year ago) and she is one of the 400 richest Americans, according to Forbes, so she can produce as much Obama idolatry as she wants. The confusion arises when artists are given federal funds to promote the president's agenda.

Federal organizations that pay artists to create propaganda is a genuine problem. Even if they don't realize they're doing it.

Meghan Keane is a writer living in New York City.

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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon
President

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Capital Research Center's **Matthew Vadum** was a guest on the "Glenn Beck Program" months ago and that was the moment at which Beck said he "got" the **ACORN** story. The segment from June was replayed on the program on Sept. 18 to show Beck's 'eureka!' moment as Beck explained on live TV. Capital Research Center has been pursuing ACORN since 1998.

Now that everyone has seen the undercover sting videos, ACORN has become the butt of jokes on TV comedy shows. On the animated TV series "South Park," the characters go to an ACORN office to seek a loan for a "kissing company." Comedian **Jay Leno** produced a hilarious fake ACORN TV commercial: a graphic with the group's logo is shown with the slogan, "We'll help you get away with stuff." The liberal **Jon Stewart** also attacked ACORN. He pretended to be an ACORN employee: "You're a prostitute and a pimp, and you'd like to work through the tax implications of said relationship? Tanja, get me Form 7D."

Disgraced ACORN founder **Wade Rathke** visited the nation's capital to promote his new book, *Citizen Wealth*. Rathke said the attacks on ACORN were happening because "there are many who believe low-income people should not have a voice in the political life of our communities." He added, "I think there is a neo-McCarthyism at work in the country." Rathke was fired as chief organizer at ACORN last year after national board members learned he had covered up his brother \$948,000 embezzlement for eight years.

Left-wing entitlement super-group **AARP** released a video called "How To Spread The Truth About Health Care Reform" that instructs viewers on how make government-run rationed healthcare sound appealing. The video encourages viewers to write letters to the editor and call in to radio talk shows to spread the word about why all Americans should want their medical doctors turned into government bureaucrats.

A new **Washington Legal Foundation** monograph, "Public Philanthropy?" challenges advocates of more government control of philanthropy (WLF Working Papers Series, #167, 14pp.). Left-wing groups say tax-exempt status and the tax deductibility of charitable gifts constitutes a "tax subsidy," which means private foundation assets should be treated as "partially public dollars" subject to government control. Nonsense, say the authors. Common sense and American case law rejects this insinuation. The WLF paper is available at http://www.wlf.org/Upload/legalstudies/orig/092509Garment_WP.pdf.

After disappearing from the Internet for years, the youthful **Hillary Clinton's** Wellesley College thesis on the "father" of community organizer, **Saul Alinsky**, suddenly reappeared. The thesis is available at CRC's blog at <http://tinyurl.com/yzpzjg7>. President **Obama** too was inspired by the writings of Alinsky.

Billionaire **Melvin Simon**, who started what became America's largest shopping mall company and who was part owner of the NBA's Indiana Pacers, died Sept. 16 at 82. He is survived by his wife, **Bren Simon**, who is a member of the **George Soros-led Democracy Alliance**. The Democracy Alliance is a donors' collaborative that funds think tanks, media outlets, and activist groups on the left.