

PERFORMINK "ARTS & POLITICS" COLUMN -- DECEMBER 26, 1991

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## FIVE BAD EXCUSES FOR NOT GETTING INVOLVED

I have been talking to a lot of artists and arts workers over the past two years about the need to get involved in the civic life of our communities. For most of 1990, I was the advocacy consultant to the League of Chicago Theatres, working on the campaign to reauthorize the National Endowment for the Arts and the elimination of the Helms Amendment. For the past year, I have been pushing for people to become active in electoral politics. I have heard a number of bad excuses for not wanting to become involved.

Here are the top five bad excuses:

(1) "It doesn't affect me" -- When the government starts to devise rules of "official" art and begins to regulate speech, rights are in jeopardy. Senator Helm's "official art" funding measures have been aimed at gay and lesbian artists. He has been joined in his anti-NEA diatribes by the American Family Association, the Christian Coalition and, most recently, the more mainstream American Conservative Union. These groups seek the end of all public funding of the arts. Period. Their rhetoric preys upon the public's ignorance and fears by labeling artists as "un-American, pornographic, leftist, feminist and homosexual." Earlier this year, the Supreme Court upheld an Executive ban of the discussion of abortion in federally funded health clinics. Congress recently attempted to overturn this so-called "Gag Rule," but President Bush vetoed their effort. The Justice Department argues that if the government funds a program, it has the right to decide what gets said in that program. Government funds touch every aspect of our lives. So the fight to preserve freedom of expression is not just the worry of people who get NEA funds, or people who are gay, or people who are performance artists, or people who are health clinic workers. This is your fight, and you better get into it now.

(2) "I work for a nonprofit organization" -- Some people believe that lobbying by nonprofit groups is illegal and endangers their nonprofit status. This is not true. Nonprofit, federal income tax exempt organizations can lobby and are actually encouraged to do so by Congress and the IRS. Under the law, a nonprofit can spend a good deal of its resources (there is a formula based on budget size) to lobby for or against legislation. If you work for a nonprofit, or are on the board of one, you absolutely can and should aid in lobbying efforts aimed at protecting freedom of expression and support for the arts. Your organization may not endorse a candidate for public office or make a campaign contribution, but you, as an individual, may. Nonprofits may sell, trade, or rent their mailing lists to candidates so long as a fair value is received and all candidates have the opportunity to access the list.

(3) "I don't believe in government support for the arts" -- Public funding is used to support many services which benefit the citizenry, but which can not pay for themselves and which we do not wish to turn over to the commercial sector. The nonprofit arts and culture sector has a legitimate claim for public support because, like the material portion of a nation's infrastructure, it benefits the public good, is part of the basic fabric of community life and can not be paid for solely by its users at any one given moment. So much has been written about the "return" given to the community by the arts. Unfortunately, we have little hard, quantifiable data about these impacts. So, while we may talk about how the arts impacts economic development, the educational process, community revitalization, tourism, and cross-cultural understanding--ultimately, it is a matter of values. Civilizations are remembered by what they create and the quality of human life must be evaluated with spiritual and humanistic, as well as

economic measures. In 1990, the average Chicago household paid \$2,539 in federal taxes. Of that, \$1,275 went to the military, \$71 went to education, \$40 went to housing, and \$0.70 went to the arts (the NEA budget). That spending does not reflect my values or priorities. Does it reflect yours?

(4) "I don't have time" -- If you, who live to practice free expression, will not work to protect and defend freedom of expression, who will? Will you leave it up to lawyers working for the ACLU? Will you leave it up to a few arts activists? Will you wait until your own work is censored or your organization is the object of a vicious, right wing attack? You have a responsibility, regardless of what type of art you practice, to practice your role as an informed and active citizen.

(5) "What I do doesn't make a difference" -- More elections in America are won by one vote than anywhere else in the world. In 1968 Richard Nixon was elected President by a margin of about 500,000 votes out of 63 million -- a margin of 0.8% or one vote per precinct. People can make a real difference in the life of their communities, if they want to. We all know of people who, through their actions, change things for the better. We just never think of "that person" as ourselves. You absolutely can make a difference -- with one vote, with one hour of your time, with one dollar to a worthy cause.

Those are the five worst excuses for not getting involved. I hope you haven't got any more.

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You can get involved in the fight to promote freedom of expression and support the arts right now by picking up the phone and calling one of these organizations:

- American Civil Liberties Union (427-7330), fighting for Constitution-al rights via educational and legal means for over 70 years.
- Illinois Arts Alliance (855-3105), our state wide arts lobbying organization, primarily focused on the Illinois Arts Council.
- Committee for Artists Rights, Chicago Artists Coalition (670-2060), particularly concerned with fighting censorship in the visual arts.
- Greater Chicago Citizens for the Arts (280-1025), dedicated to working for the election of candidates who support the arts and freedom of expression.

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Tom Tresser is a consultant, producer, educator and trainer who can help individuals, companies and communities leverage and amplify their creative assets in order to solve problems, create economic value and trigger civic engagement. Tom has been a long-time advocate for an increased appreciation for the role of creativity in the life of the community. In 1991 he started an organization that organized artists and cultural workers for political activism and taught "Arts and Public Policy" at Roosevelt University, where he organized a center for the study of cultural policy. Tom was Director Cultural Development at Peoples Housing, a nonprofit community development corporation operating in northeast Chicago, where he organized a community arts program that combined culture and economic development. Tom served as lead organizer for the Chicago Park District for two years in a pilot project that transformed a major regional park into a community cultural center. In April 2004, Tom was elected to a two-year term for the Local School Council for the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. He lectures on "The Politics of Creativity" and conducts leadership training sessions for artists and creative professionals. He teaches classes on arts and civic engagement at DePaul University and Loyola University.



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