



THE ARTS NEED TO GET INTO POLITICAL ACTION - A CALL TO ACTION

The arts are under attack. Politicians, pundits and preachers are calling for a wide range of crippling and poisonous restrictions on the arts granting process. Many are calling for a total end to public funding of the arts.

What are we going to do about it?

Simple. We, as an arts community, must organize, fight back and create a compelling vision of how the arts are an integral part of American civic and social life.

If we believe that the arts offers some essential benefit to the American people and that the not-for-profit arts sector deserves a public subsidy, then we must be prepared to make our case powerfully in several arenas.

In the political arena:

We must elect pro arts candidates to all levels of government. We must seek out pro arts candidates and give them our dollars and our votes. Every city should have a pro arts candidate endorsement organization similar to the San Francisco Democratic Arts Club. A local arts PAC would also be useful—perhaps organized by the more affluent arts patrons. It naturally follows that all artists and arts workers should be registered to vote. Every arts organization should see to it that one of their staff is trained as a Deputy Registrar and that all artists (or for that matter, anybody who walks into the office) is registered to vote. For theaters, a Deputy Registrar might also be advertised and present at auditions. The arts community of a given city might even try coordinating a weekend long, industry wide voter registration drive for patrons in all arts facilities, using the expertise of the local League of Women Voters. We should run artists for office and lobby aggressively for their appointment to various governmental bodies and commissions. We should also work to defeat anti arts elected officials and create a “Dirty Dozen” list of the most anti-creativity, anti-freedom, anti-diversity politicians.

In the media:

For a sector that is so creative the arts community has been unimaginative in its efforts to powerfully and persuasively communicate our side of the NEA Wars debate. It may be that the skills that we use to create our work and the skills we use to market that work are not the same skills we need to convincingly lobby for that work. We need to marshal the full power and speed of the political public relations arsenal. We need much more information about how to speak to our patrons about our issues and how to speak to the much larger population who is not our patrons. This means taking polls and conducting focus groups. We need to positively frame our issues and then sell that message vigorously. If our opponents mail post cards and action appeals, so must we. If they run full-page ads, so must we. If they plant stories, activate telephone networks, and generally raise hell around their point of view, then so must we. Each city or appropriate region should have a cultural coalition that crosses all disciplines and which should conduct the arts advocacy for that region. It should be funded by its members through dues, a voluntary ticket “tax,” direct mail appeals, advocacy based grantsmanship, or other means. Arts organizations should build advocacy into their operating budgets and regard such activities as basic as grantwriting, marketing or personnel development. Every board of directors should have an advocacy or public policy committee.

In the neighborhoods:

One of our secret weapons is the fact that our arts organizations and our artists are very widely scattered through the body politic. We have access to thousands of places of congregation and millions of people pass through the doors of arts groups annually. We need to first of all break down the barriers that exist between our arts organizations and the communities in which they operate. Artists and Artist Directors should invite leaders of other neighboring community based organizations into their spaces and start a dialog on shared problems and concerns. Our organizations should become aware of what is happening in the human service and social action sectors of our communities. We should dedicate some lobby space to educating our public about issues which impact the cultural sector but which are not, in of themselves, arts issues. AIDS, community development, and educational reform come immediately to mind. We should communicate ongoingly and aggressively to our patrons about those issues that directly impact the arts and regularly ask them to take some action in relation to those issues. A city or region may use its cultural coalition to draft a quarterly "newsletter" or educational flyer that is stuffed or distributed to all cultural organizations at the same time.

On our stages, in our spaces:

We must create more art that is political and which directly speaks to conditions of inequality, prejudice, fraud and governmental corruption. Let us create an endowment of our own to fund controversial, original political works. 1992 is a Presidential election. What a great opportunity for the arts sector to participate creatively in civic life. The arts community of America should launch a nation-wide campaign for 1992, "The State of the Art, The Art of the State," where arts organizations devote some part of their 1992 season to a provocative examination of the American scene. We might produce community forums and collaborative efforts with a wide range of citizen participation and educational bodies. Let the arts community develop its own platforms and hold candidate forums around the country to get candidates to address those issues. Start with a convention of our own in August 1992 and let the work roar right up to election eve in November.

This is only part of the work we must engage in. A long-term strategy to place the arts and arts workers at the public policy table must embrace a wider vision that addresses the liberating of every citizen's creativity and seeks to remove all artificial barriers to achievement and a person's ability to express their talents to the utmost.

So what do you say? Shall we attend more conferences about the sorry state of arts funding and whine to one another that no one loves or respects us – or -- shall we engage in creative strategic action and fashion a new political environment for the arts?

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