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*Sumi Howe*

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I've been asked to comment on the state of the field from a public policy perspective, so let me start by saying three things. First, any snapshot from a national or international perspective is going to smooth out the texture of real life: from the moon, Mount Everest looks like a bump on a log. The generalizations I'm going to make are mostly negative, but they shouldn't mask the fact that even in very tough times, some groups have found approaches that work for them. Nothing any of us knows about our own experience can be invalidated by describing general trends. The reverse is also true: the fact that one group has found language or connections that led to substantial success does not prove the validity of that strategy for everyone. One group's lucky break can be disaster for another, and vice versa.

Second, what can be said about community-grounded cultural organizations has to be cast largely in individual impressions and stories, because throughout the time period under consideration, no one has supported solid research into such organizations nationwide. The kind of arts support research done by groups like Americans for the Arts lumps all organizations together, producing generalizations that really don't tell the story of community-grounded groups. One of the indications that this work is respected and valued on its own merits will be an interest in and willingness to study it by its own lights. As you hear some of the numbers I am going to use, adjust them in your mind to allow for the economic realities of your field.

Third, public cultural policy includes a great many types of public action and initiative: regulation, education, cultural exchange, immigration, communications media and so on. The clearest indicator (and generally the topic that draws the most interest) is funding), so that will be my main focus. But before I turn to funding, I want to note that over the last nearly three decades, since Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency, the most problematic trends in public policy have worsened. Instead of mandating the type of arts education many of us advocated forty years ago, when I worked in San Francisco's Neighborhood Arts Program, many policymakers have been happy to let it erode. There is less support for cultural exchange, and visiting artists from other parts of the world have a much harder time being admitted to the United States. Unprecedented numbers of people who took to the streets to protest immigration policies speak for themselves. The public presence on our airwaves is anemic, and instead of introducing more diversity into broadcasting, government's role has been to privatize, resulting in the commercialization of absolutely everything. All of this can easily be reversed, of course, with goodwill and the big-hearted, open-minded policymakers. I hope and trust all of us will see that day.

So, turning to funding, I want to draw a big picture. Now, in 2007, we are seeing what I hope will soon be the last, feeble performance of a set of conditions and strategies that claim to be the best ways of increasing funding, but have actually reduced support for the arts, especially community-grounded cultural organizations. From my perspective, we have been surrounded by a big cloud of hot air, and we need to say so.

First, there is a pervasive political reality in this country that except for rare individual officials who have a personal interest, we cannot get a meaningful hearing for cultural policy questions from Congress or elected federal officials. Beyond a few simple yes/no questions (Should the NEA be funded? Should NPR be funded?), in the money-driven culture of electoral politics today, no one sees culture as involving enough donations, votes or other signifiers of power to bother with. When cultural policy has entered the electoral arena, as in the anti-freedom of expression campaigns of the late 1980s, it has been almost incidental; in that case it was no more than a clever fundraising tactic by the American Family Association and Moral Majority to show shocking pictures funded by the NEA. Almost no one votes on the basis of cultural policy positions. When we have so many major issues before us—war, disaster, unemployment—even few of the direct beneficiaries are likely to condition their own votes on whether a senator or representative supports arts funding. Before the last election, more than 1600 artists and organizations supported the Artists Call for Cultural Policy, a platform offered to all presidential candidates (you can google it if you want to read it). But none of us who worked on it could get either political party to even acknowledge it, and in our heart of hearts, we knew that even if they did, what they were almost certain to say was “we have more important things to worry about.” I’m not advocating giving up on electoral strategy. Someone who works hard for a winning candidate and has the ear of that person’s advisors could probably influence the new president’s cultural policy the way the Heritage Foundation influenced Reagan’s cultural policy. But when it comes to horse-trading, we don’t have a horse in the race.

The conventional response to this mostly unspoken reality is to try to convince public policymakers and private funders that arts support reaps benefits that are worth their attention. Usually, the attempt has been to portray those benefits in language people believe decision-makers will understand, such as touting art’s economic multiplier effects, trying to substantiate its secondary effects (such as trying to prove that arts participation increases graduation rates), or trying to generate scientific-sounding proof, such as proposing sets of “cultural indicators” that can measure art’s contribution to community development.

There is a name for this approach, and it is *scientism*, which means taking methods and ways of thinking that work very well in the physical sciences and misapplying them to highly complex human endeavors, where they don’t work at all. There is quite an industry nowadays in making these arguments to private funders, legislators and other officials. Nearly every arts advocate in the country pledges allegiance to this line of argument.

What is so crazy about this approach, which people keep trying despite all evidence to the contrary, is that it hasn't worked at all. Consider the NEA's annual appropriation: if it had held steady in constant dollars from the \$158.79 million 1981 appropriation at the beginning of the Reagan era—is no increase in real value, just holding steady—that would translate into over \$361 million today, nearly 3 times the agency's current \$124.5 million. In 1981, the NEA's Expansion Arts program gave 697 grants totaling \$8,735,001. In steady-state dollars, that would have amounted to \$19,861,000 today. Although some states have maintained public arts funding levels, many have declined in the last decade, especially in the budget-cutting frenzy after 9/11, with a huge impact in places like California, which went from a nearly \$32 million annual budget in FY 2001 to \$2 million in FY 2006.

Or look at private sector funding. Just since 1992, the arts share of private giving (and this includes all arts grants, including capital funding) declined from 8.4% to 5.2% in 2005. We see this reflected in the diminishment or abandonment of arts initiatives that supported at least some community-grounded organizations at major private foundations such as Rockefeller, Lila Wallace and Pew. Even without major cutbacks, some funders have internal policies that have them change officers and initiatives every few years, making continuity almost impossible. Events like 9/11 and the flooding following Hurricane Katrina have also absorbed large portions of grant funds that might have gone to cultural organizations elsewhere.

In this environment, community-grounded cultural organizations have often been made use of by arts advocates, because they produce the best-sounding statistics and sound-bites in terms of cultural and income diversity. It sounds a lot better at a public hearing to say that so many low-income kids were served by a group that fosters cultural pride and has been deeply involved in meaningful community development efforts than it does to say so many rich people bought so many expensive tickets, generating so much in ancillary limo revenues. Being part of the “the arts community” as a whole and signing on to the scientific strategies it has adopted has not benefited community-based artists and groups. Losses of grant funds, programs and jobs have hit them hardest, and so far, no one is stepping up to remediate those losses. If we look at these organizations with the same eyes as the NEA budget, thinking back thirty years to their potential for growing in size, power and number, we see some groups that have died and some that have survived and sometimes even flourished on a starvation diet. We should also see what might have been if policymakers and resource providers had exercised decent care.

I'd say it was time for a new strategy, or rather a new, coherent understanding of the many different tactics and approaches groups use to survive and the skills they could bring to the task of enacting truly democratic cultural policy. I think the criteria for that strategy should be at least these three: choosing partners instead of being used by them; abandoning the scientism that has kept people spinning their wheels while decision-makers miss the point, instead using the creative skills of art-making to enlighten and activate people; and telling true stories of what is and what might be in people's own voices and own ways.

