Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1976): Speech 01

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Ann Vermel

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ANN VERMEL: The state arts council in R.I. is entering into its planning process, and wants a sense of your feelings about (these) two issues: what is the place of a state arts agency in terms of the national picture these days; and what would be good directions for them to take a strong look at for their own agency?

SEN. PELL: My own view is that the portion of the money spent on the state agencies - about a fifth of the total - is being spent, so far, very, very well by the state arts councils. In general I think - looking at it from the Washington viewpoint, the overall viewpoint - I've been absolutely pleased with the way they've spent their money, and with the results. Now, as far as the kinds of projects go, I think my own objective has always been to try to get the help as much to the individual - onto the personal level, as possible. The more help that can be given to individuals, and through the individuals to institutions in which they participate - but to the individuals - the happier I am. I realize it's difficult, institutions that really do need help, they come to you for help... and you are right. I would also hope you would not lose sight of the fact that a substantial portion of the funds you receive should be awarded to individual artists or small projects - and as diversified as possible. It's tough because you have, as I said, the institutional groups that need help and may dissolve without it. At the same time what we're trying to do is to introduce art - as well, to people - new people - the people who have not yet been touched by it... and if it gets into a neighborhood or to a community where it hasn't been before, it may have a more igniting effect; that is, it continues to fuel an institution that's already going.

VERMEL: The RISCA is presently doing a great deal of active community programming. We administer the program; we design and staff the programs. It's very different from most state arts agencies, which subcontract that kind of activity to groups that are established; but there are no such groups in R.I. We find this has been the most successful generative part of our program. But we're uncomfortable with it, because it does put us in competition with other organizations.

PELL: Could you give me an example of what you are outlining?

VERMEL: Yes. What I'm saying is: assuming that the arts council is doing - as we are - a fairly extensive program in the prison, we are putting $6,000 of our money, which is not very much but which is still important in our total budget, into that program. We are also extracting other state funds from the department of corrections, and we have an Endowment grant. The total program comes to something $27,000. The feeling
of a number of our constituents is that that $6,000 is their money, that it really is better spent, that we are in fact competing with the theatres and the museum and the children's theatre groups because we are spending money on our own designed programs. For a state agency or any government agency, that's a serious problem - although those programs are all hiring individual artists.

PELL: It's a tough problem, and it's one you have to wrestle with as a council, because you the ones in the front line, perceiving these cries of anguish from the institutions that also want to be fed this necessary fuel for them to go on. But I still like the idea of the programs that you're doing. The one you cited is obviously a wonderful one - the one in the prisons where the amount $6,000, as you point out, is not a great deal - substantially less than one percent of what you're spending in the state. Yet both from the viewpoint of the impact on people's lives, and the example to other states, (the program is) substantial and I would hope that that would be continued.

Are you giving any money directly to individual artists?

VERMEL: We have one very small grant program which gives five grants of $2,500 each, each year. This last year we had 200 applications.

PELL: I can quite imagine that, and I think that shows the importance of these individual applications and these individual grants. You may have to make, as a matter of judgment, the commission policy as to whether just as the federal government makes sure that 20 percent of (their) funds are divided (equally) by the states, and their entities you decide, on a state level, that a certain percentage, 20 percent, for the sake of argument, would be (allocated) for individuals. This would be a matter of policy, as you decide.

VERMEL: If one counts the amount of our budget that is spent on hiring artists to work as artists in the program, the percentage goes up very significantly. But these are, in fact, monies that are spent for services and not for the creation of new work. You are suggesting that we should be dealing with both?

PELL: I'm suggesting that ... exactly, and that there should be some interface between the individual artist and the council in R.I., just as there is some interface between the individual artist and the federal council on the Arts. I don't know what the percentage of funding is that the federal council distributes directly to individuals. It's very small, but it's quite significant - it's about 5 percent of the total - and I would like to see that 5 percent expanded, and I would like to see the state council with more or less the same rule of thumb ... maybe 5 percent ... maybe expanded.

VERMEL: We are going to be dispatching, in the next few weeks, a public policy statement which will identify the goals and objectives ...
of the Council's programs. Then after that, we will begin to shift our priorities through a total policy statement as the years go by. I hear you putting a good deal of emphasis on support of the creation of new works, and also on audience development. Maybe you could spend a little time just talking about ways in which that awareness - that new awareness of art - could be implemented.

PELL: I think the street theatre. . . . I'm not sure - I think we did it several years ago - I'm not sure we've done it since the long, hot summers at the end of the Vietnam war . . . A theatrical group might go out into the inner cities and the other poor areas of cities . . . or diversified area groups. I remember for some time I used to send out a collection of paintings that would be hung in different city halls around the state, and at that time there was no support - (those were) very, very early days in the development of the arts. I used to have to pay for that out of my own pocket at times. But I think that is the kind of project that would be helpful (I should say - out of my own pocket - but fine friends who would have a station wagon would contribute and move the collection around). This is the kind of program about which I'm thinking. While, as you know, the National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian, I believe, have some visiting exhibits, some exhibits that can be toured and sent around, it's rather unlikely that local communities will get in touch with the Washington level, and they're more likely to get in touch with your level. Maybe it would have a substantial effect in our state if you (used) your money for just that purpose - for a station wagon and a driver and a sort of rotating collection of R.I. artists, or some copies of great masters from Washington - something of that sort. When I say great masters from Washington, I mean great masters from the National Gallery or the Smithsonian .

VERMEL: There is . . . one other programmatic question. The Council has begun giving operating grants to the arts organizations - not tied to program ideas; but simply if you have done well and are doing well and making a significant contribution, we fund you. This seemed a terribly appropriate idea at the time, but it's begun to develop some wrinkles. What we're running into is the development of a dependency on the part of the arts organizations. I wonder, since you have a background knowledge (of) a number of agency problems, if you can give me an idea of how we can combat that.

PELL: It's very, very difficult. I think the best person to talk to about it is Miss Hanks, because she sees it on the national level, where the New York Philharmonic will become dependent on some national grants for its very continuation, and on the state level you will find again this will occur. You'll be faced with some very tough choices: whether you should adopt a self-denying resolution that, as a matter of policy, no grant will be extended for more than x-number of years - say, three years - to run an institution, unless every member of your council votes
In that event, could affirmatively to continue it - and one person can stop its continuing, doing that. I would add, I think by secret ballot. You would find that this would have some very rough effects, but would remove this dependence on the state council. On the other hand, you might find that you would cut off too much if you did that. You might want to set aside a portion of your budget for these continuing processes, accepting the fact that your help is accepted by these institutions just as much as the daylight or any other matter that comes to them on a regular basis. But again, these are questions which I would not want to see spelled out from Washington. For the very reason for the varying council on the arts is that each state, each council, will adopt its own methods. Then, I would hope that some day we will get some kind of a study will be made, perhaps by the National Council, of all 50 states, seeing at the end of a period of time which of these techniques seems to be responsible for the greatest exposure of the development and consciousness of art in those communities, throughout the nation.

I think we all find ourselves in a very highly experimental situation. We try one thing for quite a while and see if it will go - sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. We lose track of long-range potentialities in the face of short-range crises. Is it fair to suggest that the arts organization will rapidly become like the school or the educational institution - dependent on a measure of public support, always?

PELL: Yes, I think you'll find as a general rule the certainly more expensive forms of art - ballet, opera or orchestra - will probably have to have some kind of public support, some patron. In the old days it was the Medici, and then there were more recently very rich families in our state who contributed a great deal to the development of art in our state, now their number is being drastically reduced. You will find that the state as a whole will have to replace the Medici and be the patron.

VERMEL: The question of research. I know you and I have discussed the future planning for the arts in the past, and I'm very interested as a matter ... Of course, we're now involved in planning, but I'm concerned about the basic research and the larger extensions of that in the future. First, I'd like to know: what kinds of information consistently would the Congress like to receive from all state arts agencies, so that you would have some kind of a continuing basis of assessing what such information would be most helpful during our I'm not sure we're capable of absorbing much information on an individual basis. You see, (in) Congress ... this view consists of Senate side, at least - Senator Jaunito and myself, and we have many, many responsibilities. We have a staff with no full-time person running it. Livingston-Biddle runs it, and he's supposed to spend about 30 percent of his time on the arts and humanities - rolled together, when the arts or the humanities programs are to be reauthorized, we try to be as prepared as possible.
In terms of future planning for the arts: from that
answer, I get the feeling that you feel the National
Council is the place at which all the conceptualizing
in planning should come together.

PELL: Right. I think the Congress, if they have a specific
interest, it will be expressed, and I would hope that
some honor and serious attention would be given to their
thoughts. I think there's nothing wrong with individual
members of Congress from a particular state having
some input into that particular state's council, in the same
way that the council itself is - and I'm very glad it is - elected or chosen to the political processes by
the governor, usually with the Congress and the state
legislature. Their wishes also should be taken into
account. If the Governor and the state legislature have
strong views on something, even if we don't like their
ideas, I think they should be very carefully considered
and weighed into your decision, and if at all possible,
honored.

VERMEL: Now I want to ask you if you have any questions for me, of
Rhode Island's arts council.

PELL: No, I think what would be of interest to me - maybe to
the other members of Congress - would be if each council
made a one or two page report - no more - at the end of
the year, detailing the amounts (granted) and the names
of the recipients, and just any general questions of
philosophy that they've developed. Literally, two pages,
single-spaced, and if each council did this to their mem-
ers of Congress and senators, it would be helpful.

Another question of which I'm concerned is the joint
development of the arts and humanities because on the
one hand, while they're separate, I think it was
Barney Gittings who said: If you can do it, it's the arts;
if you study it, it's the humanities - or words to that
effect. They still are under the joint roof, and they're
still somewhat tied together like Siamese twins. In this
regard, we in R.I. are particularly lucky because we have
a chairman of the committee on the arts (humanities) who
has come out of the political process, understands the
political process, and has her group plugged into the state
in a remarkable way. Here I'm speaking of Judge Florence
Murray. There are other states - and this is the vast majority
where the situation is not that well-chosen. I would like, per-
haps, to see more interplay between the arts committee and
the humanities committees than has been the case in the past.
For instance, in our own state, do you have any joint sessions together, or any interplay?

VERMEL: We've had no joint sessions, and we have, on occasion, combined in funding a project. I meet regularly with the director of the humanities committee but, in fact, no. That's a very interesting idea - to have joint sessions.

PELL: I would think sometime it might be a good idea. I know how hard it is to get busy people to give up time. How many meetings a year do you have, do your Council members come to?

VERMEL: Well, we have a monthly Council meeting, and we usually have interim committee meetings.

PELL: What percentage of your Council members comes to the meetings?

VERMEL: It's a good percentage; we have a quorum most meetings. We've had to re-schedule one - maybe two - meetings a year because of lack of quorum.

PELL: What is a quorum?

VERMEL: Seven out of twelve.

PELL: Out of twelve ... that's pretty good, and as I recall, our Council members are all designated by the Governor. Are they all approved by the legislature too?

VERMEL: Yes, by the senate.

PELL: They're confirmed by the senate. Is there any insurance that the names will rotate - in other words, are they permitted to serve more than one term, or not?

VERMEL: They're permitted to serve two consecutive terms, and then they may not serve again until, I believe, two terms have gone by.

PELL: A term is how many years?

VERMEL: Three years.

PELL: I'm not sure if the humanities committee has the same rules or not.

VERMEL: I'm not familiar with their rules.

PELL: I don't think so. I think those sound very sensible and very good.

VERMEL: It's very hard holding onto our talent, though, because this is a council that works, and works very hard.
PELL: Right. By the same token, it's a small council - it's a small state - but it's a small council. It should be possible to find, on a rotating basis, a different 12 people or a different four people, the way it works out, each year.

VERMEL: Right. It's very interesting ... we grew from nine to twelve last year by a legislative amendment, and also picked up nine new Council members because appointments had been allowed to lapse for so long. That meant that for the first several months last year, we were working with people who were virtually unknowing about the activities of the Council. They've come together magnificently. It's a very, very enterprising, hard-working, thoughtful group of people, and I enjoy working with them.

PELL: When and where do they meet?

VERMEL: All over the city of Providence, mostly, because we don't have our offices in Providence right now. Therefore, we don't have a conference room. We're hoping to move very soon.

PELL: But do you have a more regular place, or do you just meet in different members' offices?

VERMEL: Well, more or less regularly we're in the Old Stone Bank conference room ...

PELL: And now that you've been in existence for some time, have some of the people who have been off for two consecutive terms come back on?

VERMEL: No, they haven't as yet....

(HERE THERE IS A GAP IN THE TAPE. THE SENATOR MADE A STATEMENT TO THE EFFECT THAT GOOD PEOPLE IN THE FIELD SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO RETURN TO IT WHENEVER POSSIBLE).

PELL: I would think that would be well worth considering. Someone who has served the council well and then been away from it for the required time period could return with new perspectives and enthusiasm. It's a good thought with which to conclude.
Arts council taking grant applications

The Rhode Island Council on the Arts announced that applications are now being accepted for grants to help fund arts organizations, artists, and arts projects in the state.

In fiscal year 2017, the council awarded $38,000 to 39 recipients. The deadline for applications is Aug. 1. Grants are available for general operating support, project support, and capital projects.

For more information, visit the council's website at www.ri.gov/cultural-affairs.