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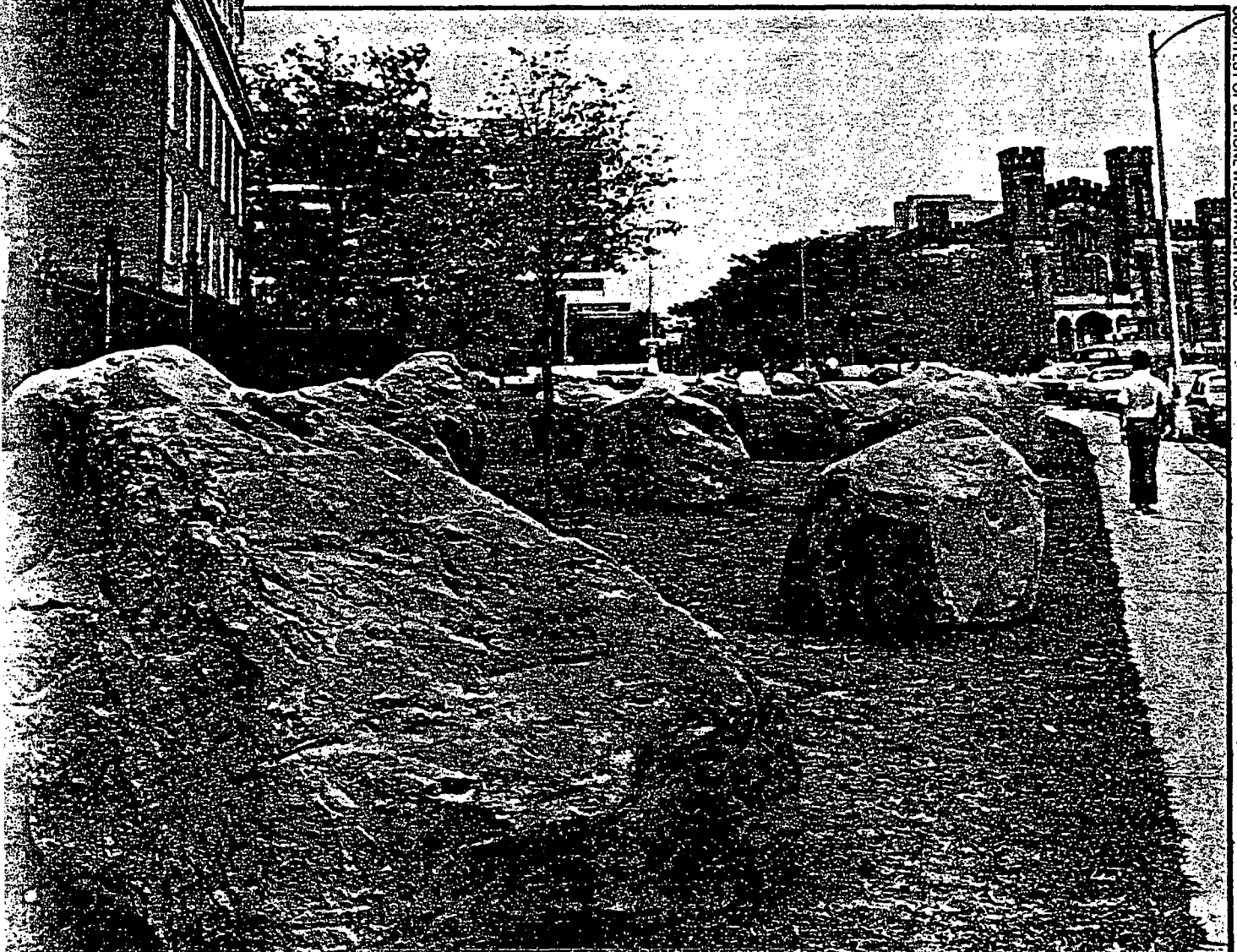
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Uncle Sam as Impresario: Are We Funding Junk?

by Ben Yagoda



COURTESY OF SPERONE WESTWATER FISCHER

Carl Andre's NEA-funded *Stone Field Sculpture* in Hartford, Conn.

Last fall a short piece of videotape looped so as to repeat itself over and over—for a total of 30 minutes—was aired on a New York City cable TV channel. The tape showed a tethered dog being shot in the head. The entire enterprise, according to its architect, Tom Otterness, “was an execution. It presents itself.” The piece was no more bizarre, really, than many works perpetrated in the name of conceptual art; what made it controversial was that the project that produced it received one-third of its budget from the National Endowment for the Arts.

When the NEA—the federal agency charged with promoting the arts—makes the papers, it’s usually because of misguided ventures like this one. But such fiascos give a one-sided picture of the NEA’s activities. Its scope is vast.

The Endowment—which had appropriations of \$154 million for fiscal 1980—is small for a federal agency, but it is by far the largest single contributor to the \$2 billion spent annually on the nonprofit arts in this country. Moreover, while the Endowment’s spending is now temporarily (it hopes) holding steady thanks to the budget-balancing sentiment in Washington, it has hitherto grown at an astounding rate—from an appropriation of \$2.5 million in its first year, 1965. And Chairman Livingston L. Biddle Jr. expects it to reach the \$500-million level before its annual allotment from an increasingly sympathetic Congress finally plateaus.

The NEA was created 15 years ago because Congress found it “necessary and appropriate” for the government to help “create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.” Washington had not subsidized American artists (except indirectly by allowing tax write-offs for cultural contributions) since the short-lived WPA programs of the 1930s; the legislators who created the Endowment were no doubt aware that other countries had long traditions of such support. The Swedish government, for example, spends more than \$7 per capita on the arts; in the U.S. the figure is even now only about \$1.

Under the chairmanships of Roger Stevens, Nancy Hanks, and Biddle (who was an assistant to Senator Claiborne Pell, the man responsible for drafting the NEA’s original enabling legislation), the main business of the Endowment is making grants to artists and nonprofit institutions—nearly 5,000 of them every year. The NEA’s philosophy of appropriations rests on two pillars. All grants are awarded by rotating panels of experts in the 12 programs (Architecture and Design, Dance, Education, Expansion Arts, Folk Arts, Literature, Media Arts, Museums, Opera/Musical Theater, Inter-Arts, Theater, and Visual Arts). Among the current theater panelists are

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people like actor Len Cariou, *New Yorker* drama critic Edith Oliver, and Lloyd Richards, head of the Yale Repertory Theater and the Yale School of Drama. Assuming a petitioner fills out his forms correctly, the panels, which meet for several days several times a year, make all decisions—thus, theoretically, guarding against federal intervention in the conduct of the arts. And all grants to organizations have to be *matched*, dollar for dollar, by private donors. Thus the arts are promoted, not merely subsidized, and have to prove outside support.

By most accounts—in the government and in the arts world—the Endowment has been a remarkable success. Professor Milton Cummings of Johns Hopkins University has said, “No other agency has made a dollar go further and had so much impact.” That the Endowment continues to receive even symbolic funding increases at a time when most Great Society programs—even food stamps—are long gone or are being cut back, is in good

measure testament to that record.

Something known as the Baumol-Bowen thesis has notably helped the Endowment. Formulated by two economists in a 1966 book called *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* the thesis holds that because nonprofit arts institutions are labor-intensive and, beyond a certain point, increases in efficiency can never take place (a string quartet can’t be performed by fewer than four people), they will always need contributions just to break even. Moreover, in inflationary times those contributions have to increase. The BBT has been seized on, enthusiastically and profitably, by institutions in quest of grants and by the NEA in quest of appropriations.

Dramatic growth is rarely an unmixed blessing, and it has not been one for the Endowment. Expansion has highlighted whatever structural and philosophical problems the agency started out with: Matters that can be overlooked when the budget is \$20 million a year have to be confronted when it septuples.

We begin with that all-time favorite elitism/excellence vs. populism/access/lowering of standards. Particularly under the Carter/Biddle administration, it has been charged, the Endowment has neglected the country’s major cultural institutions, many of them located in New York City, and the tradition of artistic excellence. Now, former Yale School of Drama dean Robert Brustein has written, it spreads its “relatively meager moneys among educationalists, audiences, and amateurs as well”—funding murals for ghetto day-care centers, community craft programs in Iowa, Tut-style blockbuster exhibitions, and the like.

Nevertheless, staff members call elitism/populism a “false issue” and are quite defensive about allegations of an anti-New York bias. (When I called Phillip M. Kadis of the Policy and Planning office, his first words were; “You haven’t been told to write about how bad we are to New York, have you?”) New initiatives—like the Expansion Arts and Inter-Arts programs, which make grants to community-oriented and unconventional applicants—have not, it is pointed out, come at the expense of the old. The Metropol-

itan Opera still gets its money.

A related issue is politicization/democracy. Brustein and former NEA deputy director Michael Straight have led the charge here, Brustein contending that "politicization went much deeper than the intervention of pressure groups, vested interests and meddling politicians" for a slice of the NEA pie. The move toward populism, he wrote, was made "on the essentially political assumption that any resources generated by the people should benefit all the people immediately."

Biddle, as befits his congressional background, takes a different view. "I equate the words political and the political process with the process that runs our government and our democracy," he told an interviewer. "Therefore, I look upon that as a strength rather than as a weakness."

Strength or weakness, it has clearly helped the Endowment in its congressional appropriations efforts. The agency's budget must be approved annually by the House Subcommittee of the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies, chaired by Sidney Yates (D.-Ill.); and as a Yates staff member says, "The new direction has answered the complaints of a number of constituencies within Congress—urban, ethnic, non-New York."

A third controversy is boom/proliferation. The figures here are familiar and indisputable. Between the Endowment's creation and 1978, the number of symphony orchestras eligible for funding increased from 58 to 144, opera companies from 27 to 65, theater companies from 22 to 270, and dance companies from 37 to 200. What is disputable is, 1) whether the boom represents a genuine flowering of the arts or merely a flowering of second-raters; and 2) how responsible the Endowment is for the proliferation.

To answer number two first, it depends on the field, but in some the Endowment has been a decisive presence. Dance is a striking case. The NEA's Dance Touring Program, inaugurated in 1967, paid local sponsoring groups one-third the cost of presenting dance performances by approved companies. Troupes began

starting up because the DTP was an easy way to get bookings; and virtually every company that asked to be included was. By 1977 The List of approved companies had become The Book—167 companies in all, many of them mediocre or worse. The Dance Program has since realized the error of its ways and tightened eligibility.

As to the value of proliferation, there is undeniably a glut of undistinguished performers and creators. *New York Times* art critic Vivien Raynor says, "There are too many artists around.

Once there are funds to be had, people begin to think more about how to get them than what to do when they arrive.

You can infer that from the emptiness of the art and the emptiness of the writing about it."

Still, even so unreconstructed an elitist as Raynor's colleague Hilton Kramer sees good signs in the boom: "Anybody can get a crowd into a museum by shrewd advertising. But people keep coming back. It's because they're finding spiritual nourishment in art that they can't find elsewhere."

Equally problematic is the question of whether the NEA should effectively bring arts institutions into existence, provide operating (as opposed to program) support or funding without which the institution couldn't survive. In theory and by law, no, no, and no; in practice, it does all three.

Such unresolved questions point to the final, and probably most serious, cluster of code words: indirection/freedom vs. planning/dictation. The Endowment, it has been charged, has characteristically reacted rather than acted. Instead of leading, it has merely handed out more and more grants. Whatever programs it has initiated, the argument runs, have been hampered by an absence of planning and evaluation—the result being a host of unconsidered and unintended effects, ranging

from the spawning of "service organizations," like the American Symphony Orchestra League, which seems to exist largely to lobby for still more money, to proliferating dance companies.

The Jose Limon Dance Company was one of those stricken from The Book of approved companies, and artistic director Carla Maxwell feels that the DTP shakeup was ill-conceived and mismanaged. "They cut us off without any explanation," she says, "but it's clear to me that 80 percent of it is politics. The worst thing is that losing the NEA seal of approval hurt us more than being included helped us—and that's no way for an agency that's supposed to support the arts to work." Choreographer Senta Driver, whose HARRY company has been a frequent NEA beneficiary, says, "They encourage companies to lie about their budgets, to say they are paying union salaries and then not do it. The NEA says matching figures are all-important, but then never checks up on them."

Many artists complain about the tangled web of forms and bureaucracy they must confront before even sitting down to create. Claudia Weill, whose film *Girlfriends* was subsidized by the NEA, recently talked about her strategy: "Once you've written a proposal or a treatment, you just keep filling out forms and handing the proposal in over and over again. You develop a "grant cant," a way of presenting something so that it seems eminently fundable and serious. Even if you're not eligible, you think of a way of defining yourself as eligible. It's a way of life."

The Endowment's response to such charges has two parts. First is an admission that things may have proceeded a little too quickly and carelessly in the past, and a promise to do better in the future. David Searles, former deputy chairman for Policy and Planning, says, "We've always been good at bringing people together to discuss their problems and feelings—it was the 1960s reduced to a science. That's about to come to a halt. We're channeling a lot more of our resources into research and evaluation."

The second defense is that the Endowment's perceived lack of leadership is actually a correct interpretation

of its mandate: that too much intervention would be an attempt to dictate the arts.

Indisputably, the NEA has done good. In the 15 years of its existence, corporate giving to the arts has risen from less than \$22 million annually to more than \$265 million—and it can be assumed that a good many of those contributions, like the \$1 million the Ledler Foundation recently gave to the New York City Opera, were direct results of the Endowment.

The NEA can also claim credit for the renaissance of particular art forms, like dance and the regional theater. Cleveland Morris, of the Delaware Theater Company, says, "Thanks to the NEA, regional theaters can afford to use the finest artists of the American stage. Without it we would be forced into the pattern of summer stock—revivals of tired musicals, touring stars, and shoddy productions."

The NEA's self-definition struggles and still-unresolved policy questions are ultimately, however, functions less of the Endowment itself than of problems inherent in the idea of publicly subsidizing the arts in America today. One characteristic of those arts is their strongly antithetical, often *in*-accessible or destructive, nature—made more dramatic by the fact that so many easily digestible cultural activities turn a profit and are thus outside the NEA's purview.

If this darker side of the arts is to be recognized by the NEA, as it must, it will inevitably clash with the agency's blue-skies, arts-boom public pronouncements, which give the impression that the typical American artist is Thomas Hart Benton or Agnes DeMille. It will also clash with the Endowment's non-dictation stance.

A second difficulty is that aesthetics and politics do not mix. As Robert Brustein noted, the political sponsors of the Endowment quite naturally want

tangible results, especially as the budget enters eight-figure territory. Art does not work in those terms.

A final unavoidable factor is that money changes everything. Once there are funds to be had, people begin to think more about how to get them than what to do when they arrive. Service organizations appear, grantsmanship flourishes, and a high-powered arts establishment comes into existence.

Have any masterpieces been produced by NEA grantees? That's an unfair question, because it takes time for masterpieces to be recognized and because you can't audit art. Still, I found it significant that whenever I asked the question at the NEA press office, all I was told was Twyla Tharp, Twyla Tharp. I am sure that Tharp's grant helped her progress; but I am equally sure that eventually she would have made her mark no matter what. The NEA unarguably aids the dissemination of culture; with creation, with genius, it has far less to do. The arts, it is worth remembering, will survive the National Endowment. ■

Ben Yagoda, a freelance writer living in New York City, has contributed to many national publications.

TONY RUSSELL



Twyla Tharp's dance company blossomed under NEA grants.