Arts and Humanities: Background (1975-1995): Speech 02

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WASHINGTON -- National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Jane Alexander announced today that the Federal arts agency was suspending the awarding of subgrants in three programs and clustering the management of five programs. The moves come primarily in response to a two percent cut in the agency’s 1995 fiscal year budget and a government-wide mandate to streamline management.

Seven categories within the Music, Media Arts, and Presenting & Commissioning Programs that support arts organizations which subsequently regrant -- or subgrant -- Federal funds to other organizations or individual artists will be suspended indefinitely. Many will continue to be eligible for direct Endowment support, and some, as well for state, regional and local support. Attached is a list of the categories, some of which will not be affected until the agency’s FY 96 budget.

Subgrants within the following programs will continue: State & Regional and the Local Arts Agencies Programs, which had been exempted by Congress from earlier restrictions on subgranting; International Program, which involves projects supported by multinational, public and private funding; and the Arts In Education Program, which involves special teacher enrichment projects, similar to those supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation.

"We trust that these decisions, while difficult and necessary, will allow the Arts Endowment to work more effectively and efficiently, while continuing to serve the evolving programming needs of the arts community," said Ms. Alexander.

On the administrative front, the Chairman announced the formation of two program "clusters." The Museum and Visual Arts Programs, while maintaining their separate identities, budgets and grantmaking mechanisms, will be overseen by Jennifer Dowley, who has over 20 years of experience throughout the country in managing public and visual arts programs. Similarly, Omus Hirshbein, whose background in producing, directing and presenting spans three decades, will oversee the Music, Opera-Musical Theater, and Presenting Programs. All programs will remain intact, with no elimination of any staff.
The Presenting & Commissioning Program will be called the Presenting Program. The name of the Design Arts Program has been changed to the Design Program.

The Expansion Arts Program, which supports arts organizations that are deeply rooted in specific communities such as ethnically distinct neighborhoods, inner-city barrios, rural hamlets and Native American tribes, will be transferred from the Deputy Chairman for Programs to the Deputy Chairman for Partnership.

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS:
SUSPENDED SUBGRANTING CATEGORIES

MEDIA ARTS PROGRAM

American Film Institute/National Endowment for the Arts Film Preservation Program ($355,000) Effective FY 95.
Subgrants to organizations to preserve and restore films of artistic and cultural value. Although the Arts Endowment regretfully will no longer continue subgranting with AFI, it recognizes the long and distinguished history and the importance of this film preservation program. The agency will continue to support AFI on other preservation projects, as well as training, new technologies, and exhibition activities through its ongoing programs. The Arts Endowment also will work to encourage private sources to help financially in future preservation efforts.

American Film Institute/Independent Film and Videomaker Program ($350,000) Effective FY 95.
Subgrants to outstanding media artists working in any form of film or video.

Regional Fellowships ($315,000) Effective FY 95.
Subgrants to regional arts media centers to support independent film and video artists.

National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture/Media Arts Fund ($170,000) Effective FY 95.
Subgrants to organizations to promote the growth and stabilization of the media arts field.

MUSIC PROGRAM

Meet the Composer, Inc. ($125,000) Effective FY 96.
Subgrants to consortia of presenting and producing music organizations to help commission new works.

PRESENTING PROGRAM

Artists Projects Regional Initiative ($250,000) Effective FY 96.
Subgrants to organizations that support the creation of experimental or interdisciplinary arts projects.

Rural/Inner City Arts Presenting Regrant Initiative ($90,000) Effective FY 96.
Subgrants to organizations to support community groups that present arts events in rural areas and inner cities.
NEA budget cuts aimed at controversial art projects

The agency defends its actions as "monetary," not political.

By Stephen Salgebury

In the wake of budget cuts imposed by Congress for next year, the National Endowment for the Arts has announced the indefinite suspension of several grant programs aimed at individual artists, small arts organizations, and film and video projects.

The announcement this week provoked immediate charges that the endowment was playing politics with art and paying more attention to congressional critics than to the nation's cultural needs. The decision also upset two large private foundations that are partners with the endowment in one of the terminated programs.

Jane Alexander, endowment chairwoman, defended the agency decisions.

"We trust that these decisions, while difficult and necessary, will allow the arts and endowment to work more effectively and efficiently, while continuing to serve the evolving needs of the arts community," Alexander said in a prepared statement.

During debate this summer over the endowment's appropriation for the next fiscal year, several members of the House and Senate again lambasted the agency over grant decisions. The Senate sought a 5 percent reduction in the endowment's budget, with most of the money coming out of agency programs that have sparked controversy in recent years.

That effort was stifled by endowment supporters, and eventually Congress approved a 2 percent budget reduction, to $167.4 million.

Arthur J. Kropp, president of People for the American Way, a civil liberties group, said the NEA's decision to drop programs appears "clearly political and is surely not evenhanded."

"The NEA budget cuts show that the message Congress sent this summer has come through loud and clear," said Kropp.

"A disproportionate burden will be borne by NEA programs that have been at the center of right-wing attacks in the past few years. Sadly, this budget-cutting decision will punish the NEA's most loyal constituency most — individual artists across the country who have kept faith with this agency though thick and thin and who have served as its strongest advocates."

"That's patently absurd," said endowment spokeswoman Cherie Simon.

Specifically, the endowment has "suspended indefinitely" seven "re-grant" programs — programs that distribute endowment funds in blocks to organizations that, in turn, choose other arts organizations and artists as final recipients.

For instance, the endowment will no longer fund the Oakland, Calif.-based National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture's Media Arts Fund, which received $176,000 this year. Over the course of four years, the NEA has funneled about $1 million to the fund, which has distributed about 50 grants a year to film festivals and media projects — video and film work — all over the country.

In November 1992, this re-grant program became the center of controversy when Anne Radice, the endowment's acting chair, vetoed its support for three gay film festivals.

"We've been trying to develop media arts activities in a number of communities and this program was a big part of that — and now it's curtailed," said Julian Low, director of the Oakland media organization.

The end of the program, he said, means that smaller organizations would find it "difficult to compete" for federal arts dollars. "Where they go from here is a big question," said Low.

Another program ended by the endowment is the $250,000 Artists Projects Regional Initiative. This program started a decade ago in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation. The Warhol Foundation joined in four years ago. Under the program, each of the partners kicks in money for distribution to regional arts centers. The centers convene panels of artists who recommend proposals for funding.

The endowment's decision to end its participation in the program was unilateral, although the possibility that it would pull out had been the subject of discussions with Rockefeller and Warhol officials in recent months.

"We're distressed," said Pamela Clapp, program officer at the Warhol Foundation. "The program was originally beautiful crafted by the two partners [the NEA and Rockefeller] and expanded to all 50 states. It's not a rigid program. It's a flexible program that responded to the needs of the different regions."

Clapp noted that the program tended to serve artists whose work was of a "boundary-pushing nature."

Alberta Arthurs, director of arts and humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, said, "I regret the end of the program ... I think the most unfortunate thing about this is that the program was working well and it isn't going to be in place anymore. A lot of good people won't get grants."

Sources involved in the program said that endowment officials were not only concerned about the costs, but were also nervous about "accountability" — the endowment's ability to monitor the artists and projects being funded.

"In general," said one of the re-grant program administrators, "there's a mood evolving in some areas of the endowment away from funding individual artists and things that can't be controlled beforehand."

Simon, of the NEA, denied that. "This was a monetary decision," she said.

The Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia is one of the centers that provides money through the re-grant program. This year, the Bride's panel recommended 15 grants totaling $45,000 to artists from seven states. One of the grants involved a project to collect and display used condoms from city streets, an experimental piece reflecting city life and problems. Endowment officials held up the proposal, according to administrators at the Bride, first requesting additional aesthetic information, then exploring possible medical risks, and finally requiring the artist to obtain certification from the city health department.

The artist hasn't determined what to do yet.

"These are programs that affect an enormous number of artists who won't be served in any other way," said Helen Brunner, executive director of the National Association of Artists' Organizations, a Washington, D.C., group.

(Cont.)
D.C.-based service organization.

In Brunner's analysis, about $1.4 million of a total of about $3 million the endowment must cut to meet its budget will be absorbed by "artists, artists organizations and media centers."

"We're finding areas that fund new work cut, we're finding areas that fund risky new work cut, i.e. performance art, visual arts and media," Brunner said. "It's extremely depressing."

By far the biggest cuts come in media arts, which loses over $1 million in re-grant funds.

"That's just staggering," said one arts administrator.

The endowment has ended two sub-granting programs involving the American Film Institute and, a regional fellowship program for independent film and video artists; also terminated are a music program that helped commission new work and a program that supported performance in rural and inner-city areas.

All sub-granting programs run by local and state arts agencies are unaffected by the cuts, as are international programs and arts-in-education programs. With the exception of media arts fellowships, so-called regional programs are unaffected as well.

The endowment this week also announced that its opera-musical theater program and its presenting and commissioning program would merge under the auspices of the music program. The visual arts program and museum program will also be merged, or "clustered," in the endowment's terminology. Officials said all programs will retain their separate identities.

Visual arts and presenting and commissioning programs that have spawned controversy in conservative circles in recent years, were both targeted for crippling cuts by the Senate this summer.