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National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): Article 10

Paul DiMaggio

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Read

November 30, 1978

Senator Claiborne Pell
325 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Senator Pell,

I am enclosing an article which is for your information and self-explanatory.

I know of your interest in the subject addressed in the article and consider it a good summation of the problems which the National Endowment for the Arts must face squarely and honestly in the very near future.

Would be interested in your thoughts on the subject.

Ever sincerely,

Paul J. Ascioolla

Please respond to:
6205 East Halbert Road
Bethesda, Maryland

*Hope you are fine.
Would like to
chat when you
have a moment -*

September/October 1978

\$2.50

WORKING PAPERS

FOR
A NEW
SOCIETY

HIGHBROWS & POPULIST

Paul DiMaggio



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Quebec's Cautious Cultural Revolution
The New Left Grows Up
The Business of Organized Crime

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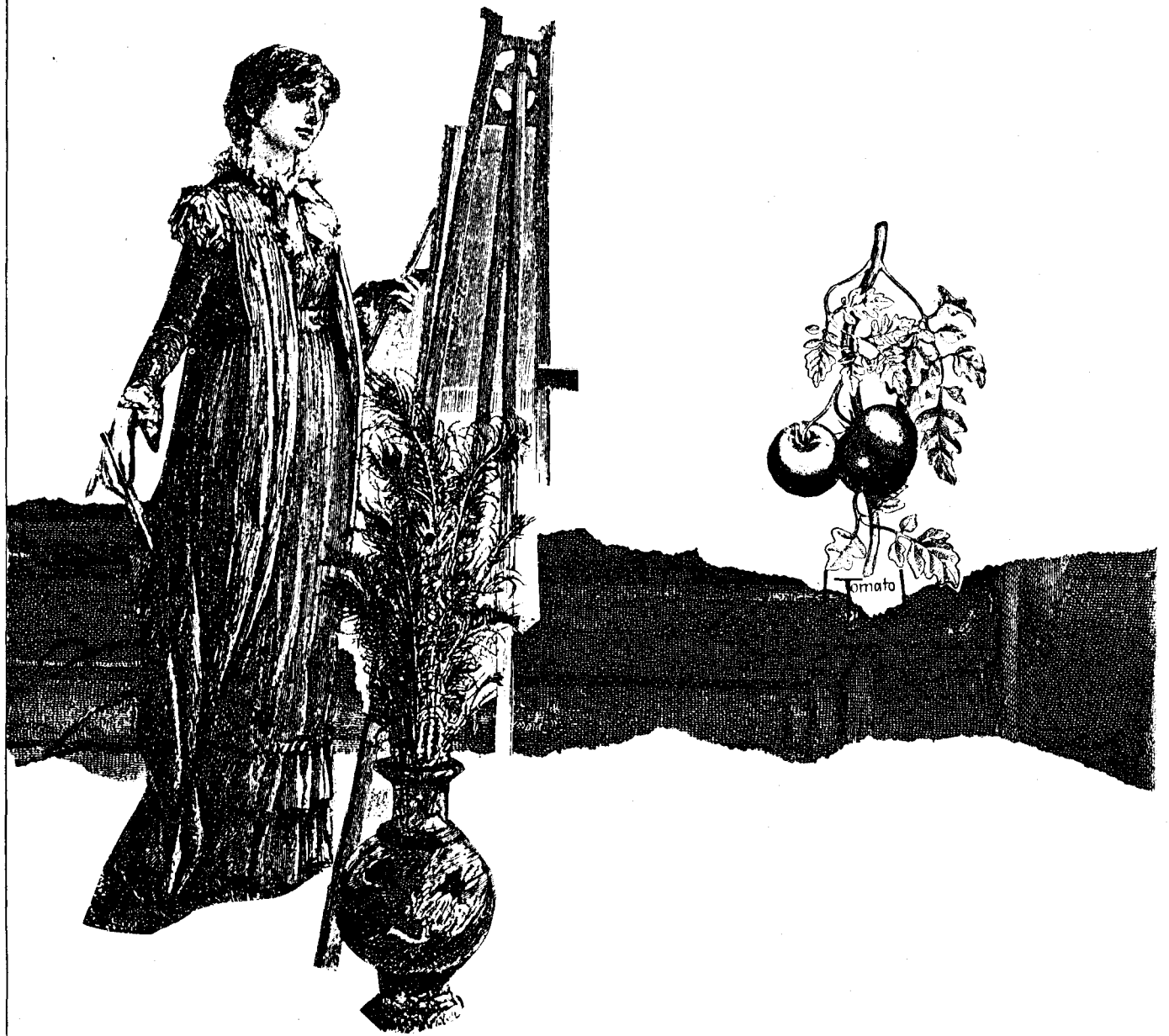
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Watson

ELITISTS & POPULISTS

Politics for Art's Sake

by Paul DiMaggio

The government is paying the piper, but who will call the tune?

In March of 1887, a homesick correspondent for the *Boston Traveler* reported on the Boston Symphony Orchestra's second New York City performance:

Many surprises marked the evening, not the least of which was the character of the audience; in place of the faces of foreign types which accompany one everywhere in cosmopolitan New York, here right alongside was one of the loveliest old New England grandmamas, with a bevy of nephews and nieces; in the next row a group of fine fellows, New Yorkers it may be, but Harvard men undoubtedly. . . . It was such a pleasure to see all about the faces with which one felt a kinship.¹

For nineteenth century elites—marooned, so they felt, in a sea of immigrants and laborers—such was the comfort that encounters with the arts could provide. The symphony, the opera, art museums—all were established by leading citizens, nurtured at the bosom of the most prestigious social clubs, funded and attended by the best people. To be sure, the founders of some of these bastions of high culture had philanthropic preoccupations. But for the most part these institutions simply provided the well-born and well-to-do with an environment in which they could be themselves and feel good about it. Exclusiveness required few visible barriers. Culture itself was enough, and best of all it needed little justification.

At least until recently. If the *Traveler's* correspondent were to return to a symphony concert today, he would find nearly as exclusive an audience—allowing for the growth of the middle class and the expansion of higher education—as

\$20,000. Two-fifths of the audience would have education beyond the college level. Three-quarters would come from professional or managerial families; fewer than 3 percent would be found in blue-collar occupations.² But though the working class and the lower middle class continue to shun the temples of culture, their absence has become—in some quarters at least—more a cause célèbre than a cause for celebration.

The most obvious reason for this change is the increasing importance of government subsidy to the arts, which began on the federal level only in 1965. Government aid still accounts for a small portion of total arts spending, dwarfed by income from ticket sales and private donations. But it is the most rapidly growing category of support, and it is up for grabs. As the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) new chairman, Livingston Biddle, put it recently:

I think we have to realize that the Arts Endowment is funded by the government. That means the arts are fundamentally involved in the political process and they have been since the beginning of this program.¹

For a while, thorny questions about what art and which artists the government should subsidize were subordinated to the development of a workable institutional system for making decisions and dispensing funds. But now there is a stable infrastructure of state and local arts councils, and the National Endowment's budget (which includes special matching grant programs) is over \$120 million for fiscal 1978. With so much at stake—and

between "populists" and "elitists" has heated up. At root, the conflict about funding for the arts is an argument about what art should be—how it should be defined, what purposes (and what publics) it should serve. For the elitists, art means "excellence," "civilization," "culture." It is what the major or "beacon" institutions—the Metropolitan Opera, the Cleveland Symphony, the New York City Ballet, the Museum of Modern Art—do. Elitists draw sharp distinctions between amateur and professional levels of performance, and between traditional high culture (painting and sculpture, drama, ballet, opera, and classical music) and such art forms as crafts, photography, architecture, and jazz. For elitists, in art as in other fields, it is up to professionals, not the public, to decide what to do. Thus Lincoln Kirstein, founder and director of the New York City Ballet, writes:

The gross consumer body forming our potential audience is indolent in thought, lukewarm in desire, and only exceptionally generates enough energy for a will strong enough to gain its desires. . . . With the first hitch, inconvenience, or discomfort, it abdicates and abandons the struggle toward the ideal or the more difficultly superior, the elitism of perfection which is the artist's main existence.¹

Rather than pander to the public's atrophied taste, public subsidy should encourage "the highest professional levels, sustained by metropolitan audiences alone," without which "there are few standards of quality left by which the face of a nation's culture can be estimated or, indeed, displayed."

"Populists," in contrast, criticize government support of major high-culture institutions as a form of indirect subsidy to their prosperous patrons—who, in theory at least, reap the benefits in reduced ticket costs. For those in the populist camp, art connotes creativity, spontaneity, individual expression; the rallying cry is participation, not excellence. Boundaries between amateur and professional levels and between traditional and nontraditional forms are seen as arbitrary or inconsequential; in this view, chamber music and fiddle festivals are equally deserving of support. And programs that attempt to use the arts in such pursuits as education, therapy, even prison reform are accepted as valid and important recipients of government subsidy.

The contest between populists and elitists is more than just an academic exercise. Each position implies not only a set of values but a particular pattern of public funding. Funding patterns, in turn, affect the chances of different arts

organizations to survive and grow. They also help determine what purposes are seen as legitimate by arts organizations, and what activities get included under the rubric of art. In short, the refined dialogue between elitists and populists that graces the pages of the *New York Times* reflects an impending bitter conflict over limited financial resources. The outcome of that conflict may shape the social role of art for years to come.

From a distance, the populism/elitism controversy looks like a fundamental clash between two clearly defined sets of values. Up close, the dispute is a collection of loosely associated struggles on a variety of fronts. Elitists are easy enough to identify: they are in and around the most prestigious and powerful museums and performing-arts institutions. But there are at least three breeds of populism, each with its own set of backers.

The *populism of geography* pits the richest, most prestigious high-culture institutions—located in Chicago, California, and the Northeast (above all New York City)—against smaller companies and museums across the country. For example, the United States has five internationally known symphony orchestras and twenty-six other full-time, professional, large-budget ensembles. These must contend for funds with 711 lesser orchestras. The situation is similar for ballet, art museums, and particularly opera, where the Metropolitan's \$30 million annual budget dwarfs that of its nearest competitor.

Not surprisingly, the "majors" in all the arts lay claim to the bulk of government support on the grounds that they uphold the standards of excellence. Their smaller counterparts—many of whom owe their survival if not their very existence to government or foundation support—contend that they serve audiences who would otherwise lack access to the arts. In fact, no one knows precisely what share of the public arts dollar finds its way to the large elite institutions. Dick Netzer, a New York University economist who has conducted the most thorough study of public funding, estimates that organizations with budgets of more than \$100,000 received 30 percent of all NEA support in 1974, while organizations with budgets of less than \$100,000 got 15 percent. (The rest went to state arts agencies, individuals, arts service organizations, and beneficiaries of miscellaneous function.)

At times the conflict between big and small merges with regionalism to take on a flavor of New York City against the world. Indeed, the New York metropolitan area is graced with more than its share of cultural riches: it houses most of the pre-eminent organizations devoted to dance (over half of this country's troupes), ballet, opera, theater, and modern art. Almost a third of all employed actors in the United States live there, as do 17 per-

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In the populist view, chamber music and fiddle festivals are equally deserving of support.

cent of the authors, 15 percent of the painters and sculptors, and 14 percent of the dancers. What is more, the city's arts institutions benefit both from substantial foundation and corporate giving and from the largesse of a state arts council whose budget of almost \$29 million surpassed, until 1978, the combined budgets of arts councils in the other 49 states and the District of Columbia. Since state aid can be used to match federal contributions, New York institutions are thus doubly advantaged. New York State receives 18 percent of the Arts Endowment's grants, perhaps less than its share based on existing arts activity, but considerably more than it would get based on population alone.

Some decentralization is written into the Endowment's appropriations: 20 percent of its funds must be allocated to state councils, with at least three-quarters of that amount divided equally among them. Decentralization, of course, only changes the locus of conflict to the state level; there, limited funds often make compromises more difficult to reach. In Pennsylvania, for example, the influential boards of six major institutions in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia lent their considerable political weight to the state arts council in return for a generous share of the council's funds. When this agreement broke down, the big six successfully lobbied the legislature for line-item grants, which were deducted from the arts council's budget.

In New York, the arts council faced both a set of strong and sophisticated major institutions and a coalition of upstate legislators with their eyes on an increasingly ample money trough. Legislative action earmarked 50 percent of the council's funds for a specified list of "primary" institutions, and much of the rest for per-capita distribution by county. That policy spawned a rich variety of arts programs throughout the state. But it has also launched a frantic search for recipients in areas too poor to support eligible arts organizations (some remote rural counties, for example, or the Bronx) and in wealthy bedroom suburbs whose residents always looked to New York City for their culture.

The populism of geography has certain virtues. It is undoubtedly easier to see a good play, hear a decent symphony, or watch a ballet in many communities than it was ten years ago, and public subsidy deserves some of the credit. Yet decentralization is a lukewarm sort of populism at best. For the new or revitalized cultural institutions in the hinterlands maintain the same notions of art and

draw their audience from precisely the same sectors of the population—the well educated and well-to-do—as the Chicago Symphony or the American Ballet Theater.

Conflicts of a different sort pit defenders of high culture, large and small, against organizations whose activities redefine the arts' content, purposes, or publics. Such groups include those devoted to art forms like crafts, jazz, or photography; a wide variety of "expansion arts" organizations, dedicated to involving low-income groups in the arts, often as participants; and programs that use the arts to educate children, improve prison conditions, conduct therapy with the retarded, or cheer the handicapped, ill, or aged. Representing the *populisms of diversity and participation*, supporters of the unconventional, instrumental, and expansion arts represent what may grow into a significant challenge to the interests of the arts establishment.

Public funds already support a wide variety of such activities. The Endowment's Jazz and Folk Music program aids touring jazz musicians and aficionados of old-time fiddling. The Folk Arts program takes an interest in everything from Cajun music to Philadelphia streetcorner narratives ("toasts"). The Expansion Arts program, the only one with an explicit primary mission to reach low-income groups, supports such activities as black-history musicals, the training of teen-age poets and puppeteers, and theater presentations in remote Native American villages. The Artists-in-Schools program sends resident poets and painters into hundreds of schools across the country to enliven classrooms and stimulate the imaginations of pint-size Picassos. At least 21 separate grants send not-quite-resident artists into state and federal prisons to work with inmates.

In addition, other Endowment programs include education or social service components. For example, touring dance companies are encouraged to give master classes and lecture/demonstrations in addition to their regular performances. And significant portions of state arts funds go to unconventional but politically prudent projects like Chicago's Polish cultural festivals, or to instrumental or predominantly avocational applications of high-culture genres, like art therapy for the aged or theatrical workshops for low-income youth.

The precise percentage of public funds spent on such activities is difficult to calculate. Despite

the number and visibility of such programs, their per-project cost is usually low in comparison to typical subventions for major museums or performing-arts institutions. Netzer estimates that the purpose of nearly 43 percent of all NEA grants is to expand the arts' availability.⁸ But much of this total, which includes touring programs and the diversely spent 20 percent of the budget allocated to the states, represents support for professional organizations in the high arts and for political efforts aimed at building constituencies. The percentage going to unconventional art forms, instrumental or amateur applications, and presentations in nontraditional settings is probably considerably smaller.

While such spending is relatively slight, the ire that unconventional programs arouse in the arts establishment is immense. The populism of geography makes many elite artistic directors queasy, but it is palpably good politics and has had some undeniably salutary results. By comparison, programs based upon new definitions of the nature and purposes of art are perceived as sacrilegious. Thus Robert Brustein, until recently head of the Yale Drama School, grouched in the pages of the *New York Times* that the Endowments are:

...now preparing to spread their relatively meager moneys among educationalists, audiences, and amateurs as well, on the essentially political assumption that any resources generated by the people should benefit all the people immediately and simultaneously. Nothing else could account for all the attention being lavished on such extra-artistic, extra-intellectual concerns as advocacy, arts appreciation, geographical distribution and dissemination through the media.

He went on to note an anonymous Endowment officer's complaint that only six of the agency's twelve divisions are concerned with the arts. "The rest include such marginal endeavors as folk arts, handicrafts, inner-city community activity, social and ethnic programs, and the like."⁹ In the same vein, W. McNeil Lowry, until 1975 head of the Ford Foundation's pioneering arts program, recently decried what he believes is the Endowment's acceptance of the proposition that "populism and democratization are ensured if the aid is pushed only partially to existing groups and institutions in the arts and more heavily to educational, community, and avocational activities."¹⁰

If current funding patterns are far more conser-

vative than such forebodings would imply, there is nonetheless much evidence that public arts agencies no longer believe that traditional high-culture fare defines the range of meritorious—and fundable—cultural activities. Imagine the discomfort, for example, of an opera fund raiser confronted with this rhetorical question from an article in a recent Arts Endowment newsletter:

Is it true, as many of us believe, that a Grecian temple is more beautiful than a well-built barn? That Birgit Nilsson sings better than "Granny" Almeda Riddle? That the poems of W.H. Auden are more noteworthy than those humorously obscene narratives called "toasts" recited by young black males on street corners?¹¹

Indeed, opposition to elitism has become some organizations' stock in trade. From page one of a proposal for a New York youth theater institute:

The dismal state of the arts as part of the education of American young people has existed for too many years and has prompted too many artists to adopt an elitist attitude toward their endeavor. . . . To combat this unfortunate and recurring mistake, the elitist philosophy attached to the arts must be abandoned so the arts can be made a vital part of childhood.¹²

Unlike the populism of geography, the populisms of diversity and of participation suggest a new role for the arts in society and an attenuation of the traditional position of art as the cultural property of the upper and upper-middle classes. What is more, such perspectives are coming to have a solid organizational base. The reason for this can be found in two related developments, one in the arts themselves, the other in the realm of politics.

Many observers trace current changes in the conception and administration of the arts to the beginnings of public subsidy in the early 1960s. They are partly right: there is no doubt that federal support in particular has had and will continue to have important consequences for the definition and control of art. Yet an equally significant trend was already underway by 1965, when the National Endowment for the Arts was founded. This trend is the growing importance to arts organizations of professional arts managers.

The term "professional manager" connotes a great deal in the art world. Managers of museums and performing-arts groups are more autonom-

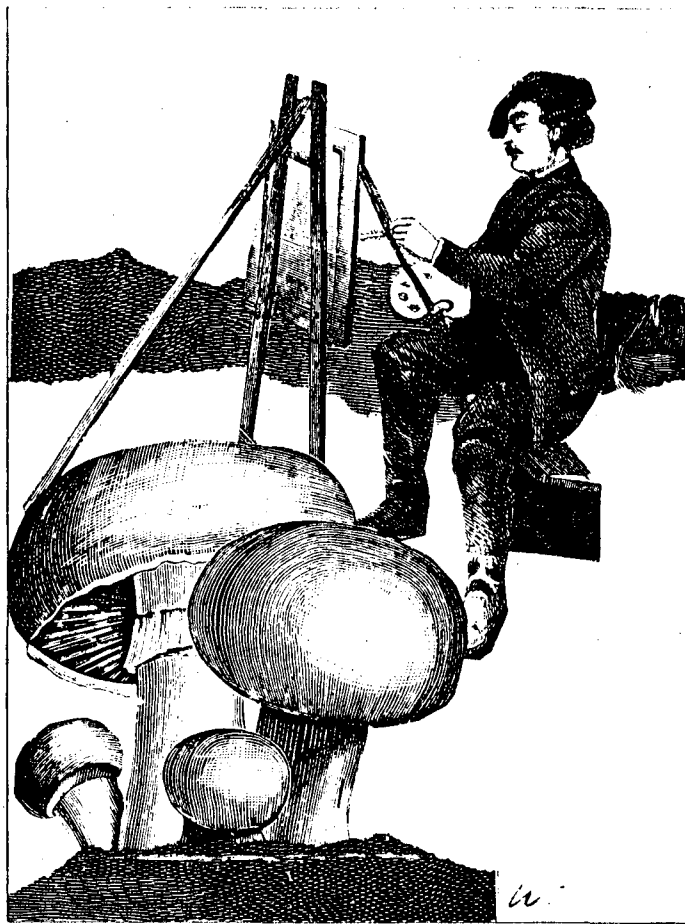
Congress nearly always wants the same thing: an agency that is both popular and populist without deserting the artistic elite.

than they used to be in relation both to artistic directors and to trustees. Arts organizations are increasingly likely to emphasize institutional expansion as well as artistic quality, and they are willing to go beyond traditional patrons for legitimation and financial support. These trends—combined with the fact of growing public subvention for the arts—are what has made possible the current struggle between elitists and populists of various shades.

One way of understanding this is to see government subsidy as a wild card thrown into a poker game between two distinct principles of organization, each with its own logic. For most of this century, what was called art was organized as a sort of aristocratic fiefdom maintained for the benefit of the upper and upper-middle classes. Museums and performing-arts organizations were (and still are) governed on the same model as the corporation—managed by executives chosen and overseen by a board of trustees. In most institutions, the director's background was in the arts. He (or occasionally she) either started the organization or was selected on the basis of training and breeding, not necessarily in that order. The key to this aristocratic mode of organization was exclusiveness. Unfamiliar fare, alienating environments, and lack of information were sufficient to exclude working people and most of the lower-middle class. Because of its association with economic elites, art was endowed with—and thus could confer—its own halo of prestige.

To a great extent, the situation remains the same today. But during the 1950s and 1960s, elements of the market crept into this aristocratic Eden. Full-time arts managers—artists who had ceased to aspire to artistic careers, or nonartists with business backgrounds—introduced business values to the art world. Their watchwords were “business-like management practices,” and they were often applauded by trustees grown weary of too many outstretched hands. As inflation pushed up the cost of maintaining arts organizations, interest in careful financial management flowered. New blood infused old organizations like the American Association of Museums or the American Symphony Orchestra League. The organizations in turn became advocates of greater efficiency.

The new managers were less willing than the old to suffer the meddling of intrusive trustees. Their social backgrounds might be as distinguished as those of their predecessors, but their ties with local elites were less direct. They could not, of course, demand the sort of independence expected by executives of large corporations. But they saw boards as bodies to be manipulated, not simply obeyed. Managers rise with the fortunes of the organizations they control. Thus expansion, a deadly threat to aristocratic culture, became a priority. But growth taxed revenues further, particularly in



the 1960s, when it was often spurred by one-shot foundation grants. That led to greater demands for business practices, and it required the hiring of more personnel, some of whom shared the new managerial perspective. By the early sixties, many were calling on the government to provide aid.¹³

It is easy to overstate the drama of this transformation. The changes were only straws in the wind. The position of the artistic director remained strong. Managers might speak wistfully of new audiences, but the idea of deciding what to perform or exhibit on financial grounds—or with an eye to expanding markets—remained anathema in most quarters.

Public subsidy was never intended to change this state of affairs, but it may be doing just that. Government funding has its own logic. The Endowment and the state councils exist to dispense money to the arts. To do this they need the allegiance of the arts establishment, and the support of Congress and state legislatures. Congress nearly always wants the same thing: an agency that is both popular and populist without deserting the artistic elite. Congressmen and women support the populism of geography because they want projects in their own districts. And they want at least the appearance of democratization—a sufficient number of socially oriented programs to counteract charges of welfare-for-the-rich. To this extent, they support the populisms of diversity and participation.

The arts community is equally important: artists may have little political influence, but trustees have a great deal. Unlike the demands of Congress, though, the interests of the arts community change over time. Programs that spread the arts around also develop new organized constituencies, like expansion-arts organizations or the beneficiaries of Artists-in-Schools, and thus affect the balance of power in the arts. Such constituency building has been a major priority of the Arts Endowment since its inception and is perhaps the *raison d'être* of the state councils.¹¹

Meanwhile, arts managers have become more independent of the boards that employ them. They change jobs more frequently. The percentage of managers with business or arts-management degrees has risen. Managerial careers now often include stops in local or state arts councils, in a profusion of new arts-service organizations (including several management consulting firms), in trade or professional associations, or in the Endowment itself. If some managers remain faithful to the ideology of elitism, many others are open to the blandishments of funding for populist programs or positions in unconventional arts organizations. Whatever their positions, managers as a group wield considerable influence.

In their efforts to please every sector of an increasingly vocal constituency, public arts agencies have embraced programs with diverse and sometimes contradictory purposes. The same agency that with one hand funds programs to attract low-income audiences to high-culture events, with the other pays the salaries of marketing directors trying to target advertising to high-income professionals. The Arts Endowment, its state counterparts, and their supporters in the arts and in Congress are beset by the fundamental contradiction of classical progressivism, attempting to accommodate both democratization and the technocratic rationality of modern business practice. Only rapid and significant budget hikes have so far made it possible to accomplish both ends. To the extent that the Arts Endowment's budget levels off, an agency that has been all things to all people may become a site of bitter contention.

It is too early to predict what the future will bring for the Arts Endowment and public subsidy. But we can consider at least two possible scenarios.

If its budget stagnates too severely, the Endowment may attempt to minimize its political losses by cutting off new and less traditional organizations and giving the majors a greater share of total grants. Embracing the populism of geography, the Endowment may abandon the populisms of diversity and participation, reducing support for such areas as expansion arts, crafts, and arts in education to cosmetic levels. Such a retreat could occur

at least in part within the confines of standard operating procedures. The Dance Touring program, which in the past provided support on a first-come, first-served basis for any company able to find a sponsor, next year will fund only those troupes approved by its reviewers. The decision is bound to benefit the more established companies at the expense of small organizations. Yet any serious retrenchment of this sort, though conceivable, would cause a bloody public battle that the Endowment could ill afford.

Right now it seems more likely that the Endowment will continue to do what it has always done, albeit in an increasingly rancorous political atmosphere. Budgetary expansion will not proceed at the breakneck pace of the Nixon years, but the budget will not stagnate either. (The House in May approved a \$20 million increase, making the total \$149 million for fiscal 1979.) Such an incremental growth may permit the Endowment to satisfy its constituents and dodge its critics in the manner to which it has become accustomed.

In the traditional art forms, the majors will try to resist pressure from apostles both of the market and of social responsibility, and will resent public support for less hallowed activities than their own. The Endowment should succeed in purchasing their silence, however, with new infusions of earmarked aid, perhaps edging into open operational support for the performing arts in the next decade. On the issue of standards, the Endowment will probably move in both directions at once, raising quality and solvency requirements in some fields, like dance, and lowering them in others. Next year, for example, it will reserve several million dollars (at congressional insistence) for such "small" organizations as orchestras with annual budgets of less than \$100,000.

The traditional arts themselves will be pushed inexorably toward the market and business values. Theater and opera companies, large dance troupes, even orchestras will—if they have not done so already—cultivate budgetary expertise of the sort necessary to control spending and keep both an optimistic and a pessimistic set of books. Marketing will continue to grow in importance. Performing-arts organizations will emphasize subscription sales. Museums will more and more seek to compete with other forms of entertainment, upping promotional budgets and even (as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts did for its recent Pompeii exhibit) initiating paid advertising campaigns. Some managers will be drawn from business backgrounds, and many of those who are not will take arts administration courses at their local universities. Such managers will continue to become more independent of trustees and will make increasingly bold incursions into the authority of artistic directors. In some cases, marketing or accounting considerations will shape

Traditional high-culture organizations deserve support precisely because they do not follow the market's dictates.

program decisions. This will dismay observers in public agencies, even as their programs indirectly lead in this direction.

Museums will remain a relatively small part of the Endowment budget, although they may do better at the state level. Operational aid has been taken over by the new Museum Services Institute, now part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. This precedent—giving a major constituency its own separate agency—makes many at the Endowment uneasy; but it may free the museum program from its ambivalent concern with science and history museums. Endowment support will continue to aid innovative exhibitions, preservation efforts, and attempts to rationalize museum management. It may also beef up the traditionally downtrodden education departments, and strengthen some museums' commitment to outreach.

The fate of other objects of public support will vary depending on the strength of political activity organized on their behalf. Artists themselves will continue to get short shrift from public agencies because they are insufficiently organized and therefore have less clout than museums or performing-arts trustees. Indeed, some states forbid direct support to artists. Areas like film, photography, literature, and fashion design—all part of the Endowment's congressional mandate—will remain marginal, in some cases because they meet with legislative disfavor, in others because they lack strong advocates, in still others because of ambiguity regarding their nonprofit status. We may see the Endowment retreat from education, with major support restricted to Artists-in-Schools. Arts-in-education supporters will struggle to carve out a turf in the new Department of Education.

States will continue to get more money from the Endowment, but none shows any inclination to rival New York's massive commitment to the arts. Some states will devote most assistance to traditional elite institutions, some will funnel dollars to the boondocks, and all will devote considerable staff time to monitoring their political fortunes.

The Folk Arts program, now representing about 2 percent of the Endowment's budget, will grow. A jazz touring program is planned for 1979. And the Expansion Arts program, the Endowment's most visible commitment to the populism of participation, is likely to grow as well. Even minor funding hikes in areas like jazz or expansion arts will, if

sustained, be politically significant: they will nurture new organizations and provide an impetus to political mobilization.

Ideally, public support should accomplish at least three objectives. First, it should maintain major institutions in traditional high-culture art forms, and attempt to maximize their independence from market forces. This is not to say, as do some traditionalists, that any "primary" institution should receive enough money to operate as lavishly as its managers wish. Managers of nonprofit organizations must optimize deficits, not maximize profits, if they are to remain attractive to patrons. Their cries of financial distress should therefore be evaluated skeptically. Even genuine crises need not elicit aid in every case. And recipients of public support should be encouraged to do what they can to make their services available to a broader cross section of the public.

But traditional arts organizations will probably always cater to a socioeconomic elite. That fact has troubled political progressives and has made them queasy about advocating support for the bastions of high culture. Aid can be justified, however, not only because high culture appeals to a great many middle-class people, but also on the basis of cultural pluralism. If high culture were forced to obey the logic of the market (existing, say, on ticket sales alone), it would either become more exclusive (small, very expensive performances) or it would become more like commercial popular culture. And while popular culture has its good points, we already have a lot of it.

Traditional high-culture organizations deserve support precisely because they do not follow the market so closely. They thus offer not only unique genres and styles but also alternative models for the organization of artistic production. If the art forms of high culture are worth preserving, then traditional arts organizations should be supported, for they are the most effective vehicles for doing so.

Second, public arts agencies should embrace the populism of geography. That is not self-evident to everyone in the arts: those who believe, for example, that the proper functions of arts organizations are to preserve old artifacts, maintain academic conceptions of excellence, and contribute to American foreign policy by impressing Communists and Europeans, will care little about symphony orchestras in Des Moines or Nashville. But

people there too like to listen to Beethoven, and simple fiscal justice dictates that cultural presentations be more widely distributed.

Public agencies have built up a respectable record in pursuit of these two goals. They have been more reticent in promoting the populisms of diversity and participation. These populisms are based on assumptions that run counter to the conventional wisdom upon which the practice of high culture has always been based. Support for the populism of diversity rests on the radical notion that the prestige of an art form, the extent to which it is considered high art, has nothing to do with qualities inherent in the form itself. Rather, in this view, an art form's status depends on the social prestige of its practitioners and audience, and on the way in which its production and distribution are organized.

The classic illustration of the relationship between social status and artistic legitimacy is the case of jazz. Jazz artists, at least from Charlie Parker on, have gone about the business of developing serious music at least as successfully, on both aesthetic and intellectual grounds, as those "serious musicians" huddled in self-imposed academic exile. But only in this decade has the alliance of jazz artists with some university music departments, the evolution of serious jazz criticism, and the recognition of jazz as art by public agencies begun to consecrate jazz as a legitimate art form. Similarly, as sociologist Howard Becker has shown, people who make handicrafts can be involved in folk, mass, or high culture depending upon where they work, how they talk about what they do, and where and to whom they sell the things they make. Thus ordinary craftspeople speak of utility and virtuoso skill, and produce their wares to satisfy client or customer. "Artists" working in craft media, by contrast, emphasize the beauty and uniqueness of what they make, and are "enmeshed in a world of collectors, galleries, and museums."¹¹ While there are standards of quality in all art forms—a dancer whose performance is graceful and imaginative is certainly better than one who pants audibly or drops a partner—traditionalists have been notably unpersuasive in their attempts to deem one art form inherently "more artistic" than another. Nontraditional art forms, then, should be supported partly for the same reasons as traditional ones, and partly because they in effect challenge the "cultural hegemony" of socioeconomic elites. If jazz is defined as serious

music, then the range of people who will listen to, understand, and appreciate "serious music" is suddenly much broader than it used to be.

Support for the populism of participation is predicated on a different but no less controversial set of premises. High culture has traditionally been a rather passive affair for most people who encounter it. But if creative activity is good for people—if it broadens their imaginations, stimulates their critical faculties, or simply makes them happier—then public money for the arts should be used to provide facilities and opportunities for lots of people to create art, not just to observe it. Since such opportunities already exist for most of those who can afford them, the bulk of such initiative should aid poor and working-class people. And since most of the latter evince little interest in traditional high culture, a variety of amateur activities deserve support. Thus the populism of participation tends to merge with the populism of diversity.

Such perspectives are not warmly embraced within the arts world or within public agencies—which are, after all, staffed by representatives of the arts. They not only violate deeply embedded, centuries-old ideologies; they also threaten the concrete interests of 95 percent of the agencies' clients. What is more, open support of populist principles, if it is not accompanied by equally fervent adherence to elitist slogans, is probably suicidal for agencies dependent on legislative funding. The California Arts Commission, which the Brown administration filled with artists of an assertively antielitist stamp, currently faces severe budget cutbacks, and it has gained the enmity of major arts institutions and performing artists unions alike.

If public subsidy promotes the populisms of diversity and participation, it will be less a consequence of conscious choice than of the logic of the political marketplace. As unconventional art programs receive public funds—and the legitimacy, organizational continuity, and ability to raise further revenues that such support brings—they may come to constitute a small but important constituency.

What will all these developments mean for the arts? Certainly no revolution can be expected. Despite cries of alarm from conservative sectors of the arts establishment at his appointment, Endowment chairman Livingston Biddle shows few signs

A dancer whose performance is graceful and imaginative is certainly better than one who pants audibly or drops a partner.

of dramatically changing the Endowment's goals or strategies. The debate between populists and elitists will continue, gaining new fuel whenever a constituency that can identify with either side seeks higher levels of support; and the Endowment will continue to evade it. Voicing the official attitude, chairman Biddle has stated, "If elitism applies to the best and populism can mean access, you can join those two words together and get 'access to the best.' The Endowment must aim at doing both things. . . ."¹⁶ The same line worked for Biddle's predecessor, Nancy Hanks, and is echoed by the agency's supporters on Capitol Hill. Arts advocates in and out of government will continue fastidiously to avoid defining the object of their advocacy. They will assure us that "the arts are everybody's business"; that art, in David Rockefeller's phrase, "opens up the learning pores"; and, in states and cities, that the arts contribute to the health of local economies.¹⁷

If this strategy promises to do little for the quality of public discourse about culture, it may not be all that bad for the arts. The Arts Endowment has been, and continues to be, a reactive agency. It does little without carefully testing the political waters and is thus more an arena of conflict than a source of brash or innovative policies. In many ways, that is fortunate, because government patronage of the arts is fraught with dangers. If state patrons have broadened availability and encouraged creativity in some eras in some countries, in others they have quashed initiative or bolstered aristocratic systems of cultural privilege. Critics have bemoaned the tendency of Endowment programs to go off in a multitude of directions and have called on the agency to implement serious policy planning on the basis of explicit values and objectives. In the absence of a consensus on the purposes of the arts, and in the absence of any criteria for reaching such a consensus, such suggestions may have little but an illusory efficiency to recommend them. In fact, behind the illogic of the Endowment's apparently contradictory programs has been a political logic that has permitted it to prosper and expand. The interaction of this political logic with developments in the arts management profession promises to lead to a broadened and more democratic working definition of the arts. Whether or not this is a strongly felt objective of anyone in the arts, it may nevertheless be the result of public subsidy's current course. ■

1. M.A. DeWolfe Howe, *The Boston Symphony Orchestra*, Houghton Mifflin, 1931.

2. Paul DiMaggio, Michael Useem, and Paula Brown, *Audience Studies of the Performing Arts and Museums: A Critical Review* (Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, Research Division, 1978).

3. *Cultural Post*, no. 15, January/February 1978, p. 13.



4. "The Performing Arts and Our Egregious Elites," in W. McNeil Lowry, ed., *The Performing Arts and American Society*, Prentice-Hall, 1978, p. 186.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

6. Netzer, personal communication to the author.

7. Edward Arian, "The Problems of a State Arts Council in Achieving Equality in the Distribution of State Art Funds: the Case of Pennsylvania," paper presented to the UCLA Conference of Professional Arts Managers, March 2-4, 1978.

8. Dick Netzer, *The Subsidized Muse*, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

9. Robert Brustein, "Whither the National Arts and Humanities Endowments?" *New York Times*, December 18, 1977.

10. "Conclusion" in Lowry, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 207.

11. Barre Toelken, "The Merit of Folk Art," *Cultural Post*, no. 17, May/June 1978, p. 8.

12. "Empire State Youth Theatre Institute: An Overview" (Albany: Empire State Youth Theatre Institute, 1975), p. 1.

13. For an insightful and illuminating discussion of change in the role of managers in one institution, see Vera Zolberg, "The Arts Institute of Chicago: The Sociology of a Cultural Organization," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1974.

14. Netzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-93.

15. Howard S. Becker, "Arts and Crafts," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 83, no. 4, pp. 862-889.

16. *Cultural Post*, no. 15, January/February 1978, p. 13.

17. See Paul DiMaggio and Michael Useem, "Cultural Property and Public Policy: Emerging Tensions in Government Support for the Arts," *Social Research*, vol. 45 (Summer 1978), pp. 356-389.