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NEA Chief Endorses Artistic Freedom

BY JACQUELINE TRESSCOTT
WASHINGTON POST STAFF WRITER

Sometimes it is an artist's job to be controversial, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Jane Alexander said yesterday. She added that she opposes any attempt to guide artists toward noncontroversial subjects.

"We are not pressuring artists to tone down," Alexander said in a speech at the National Press Club reviewing her first year on the job. "It is important for artists to create what they need to, to create in response to the society they find themselves in."

She continued: "We're an easy target, after all. The arts are visible, and because they often tap into the very issues that society is grappling with, the arts can cause outrage, fear and anger. They're only doing their job—they can also cause peace, contentment and a feeling of the sublime."

Alexander said she had expected her job to be "contentious." In recent years, one component of the chairman's job has been facing the criticism when grants wind up in the hands of artists and institutions doing work that some viewers find offensive; Alexander said some of the agency's harshest critics are well-organized disseminators of misinformation.

She warned that critics of the endowment should be on guard because they are only hurting themselves and their communities:

"When one of our opponents in Congress calls for abolishment of this agency or even cutting our budget, he's robbing his own community, after all—his own home state," she said. "As we lose more and more of our capacity to provide seed money for arts projects nationwide, what gets overshadowed are the people who cannot participate in the cultural life of their communities."

"Fewer children receive arts education. Theaters, museums, symphonies cut back on outreach, they cut back on touring," Alexander continued. "It's not the people who can afford the arts who are hurt, it's the people who have so little to begin with. I have met those people and I will fight for them."

From the time of her confirmation hearings a year ago, Alexander has adopted a cautious approach to her hot-button agency, including a vigorous schedule of travel: She has toured arts projects and stumped for her cause in 43 states and 80 cities.

The array of experiences she has had in those travels, she said, underscores the need for NEA funds as "venture capital for the arts." She estimated that each taxpayer contributes 85 cents annually to the NEA appropriation—"the price of a cup of coffee," she commented. She claimed that every dollar spent by the NEA generates between $11 and $26 in the community that receives the grant.

Alexander only obliquely mentioned the crisis that began last spring and stirred up enough wrath in Congress to threaten a 5 percent cut in the NEA budget. A small amount of NEA money—$150—was spent by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis for a one-night performance by an artist who carved a design into the back of another artist. Whether scarification is art became a subject of hot debate, and the NEA drew fire from the powerful appropriations boss Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.).

After intense negotiation, the agency's budget was cut 2 percent to $167.4 million. But though she endorsed the need for artists to range into controversial territory, at least one critic felt Alexander had sidestepped the issue in yesterday's speech. "The way she addressed the issue of controversy by not addressing it is unacceptable," said Tom Kilgammon, the communications director of the Christian Action Network.