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Peter Coyote

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Senator Clairborne Pell  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Senator Pell,

I remember your efforts on behalf of the arts from the time that I was the cultural advisor to Jerry Brown in California and Chair of the State Arts Agency there. At that time I was credited with devising the strategy and policies which raised the budget from 1.4 to 13 million dollars annually during the Proposition 13 furor.

I have sent you a copy of testimony I recently delivered to the California legislature because I believe it advances arguments for increased arts funding that have never been advanced before and are particularly appropriate to fiscally pressed times.

The argument in a nutshell is that art is highly concentrated intelligence, and the most efficacious tool for raising general cultural intelligence and skills available to policy makers. It is no accident that the Asian cultures whose formidable standards of quality are threatening our world markets, are cultures which thoroughly indoctrinate their citizens in aesthetics. To quote myself, "It is not an accident that a populace with degraded standards in one area produces inferior goods in another."

I deeply appreciate all that you have done for the arts over the years, and offer this as one small piece of ammunition for your arsenal in the pending struggle.

Sincerely,

Peter Coyote

6 Wild Dog Production
816 Miller Avenue
Mill Valley, CA 94941
Mr. Peter Coyote  
Wild Dog Productions  
815 Miller Avenue  
Mill Valley, CA 94941

Dear Mr. Coyote:

Thank you very much for your recent letter and for sharing a copy of your excellent testimony before the California State Legislature with me.

I am delighted to have your comments which are tremendously thought-provoking. They are particularly welcome in light of the upcoming legislative reauthorization of the National Endowment for the Arts which we will begin in earnest later this year. In this process it will be imperative to explore new ways both to support the arts and to enhance the cultural intelligence of American citizens.

I appreciate your getting in touch and sharing your good thoughts on this important issue.

With warm regards,

Ever sincerely,

Claiborne Pell  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Education, Arts & Humanities
TESTIMONY OF PETER COYOTE TO THE LEGISLATIVE JOINT
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE ARTS

STATE CAPITOL

SACRAMENTO

APRIL 5 1989

Members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the invitation to discuss arts programs and policies. None of the suggestions which follow should be particularly alarming, but they are predicated on unusual views of art and culture. Therefore, I would like to first establish some general premises so that these suggestions can be understood in context.

The basis for all art is the play of the mind. We call this imagination. It is intangible and therefore difficult to grasp, but discussing Arts Policy without speaking of imagination is like discussing birth-control without mentioning sexual intercourse. A concrete metaphor for imagination would be useful and I suggest that the appropriate metaphor is "wilderness".

Imagination is like wilderness in a number of important ways. They both spring from the same source; are both fertile and mysterious, and both follow their own innate directives. Neither is man-made. Both are primary resources for society. Imagination is the warehouse of intangible impulses that precedes creation of the tangible, just as wilderness is the material from which societies are fashioned.
Both are essentially diverse. In natural systems, diversity provides long-term stability and defense against systemic collapse. It also ensures high standards of excellence through competition, and this competition promotes adaptive change.

Imagination manifests itself as artifacts but also as culture. As culture, it has taken numerous forms in the last 50,000 years, each with a specific genius expressed as highly developed human capacities and encoded not just in the survival skills, but also the art forms of these cultures. It is useful to remember that our present market-oriented culture represents only a fraction of available human possibilities and that its long term utility to the species has not been finally proven. Alternate cultural forms are reservoirs of knowledge that may one day be as critical to our species as wild plants in which we discover medicinal value.

Diversity functions in culture much as it does in wilderness, allowing the conflict of ideas and value systems to counteract uniformity which weakens a system’s resistance to assault. It also fosters excellence and adaptation for culture as it does in the wild.

Government policy can enhance or retard these processes. Cultural bias for instance, represses diversity. Arbitrarily determining that a German Symphony or a Russian ballet is a more valuable form than a North American jazz orchestra or Native American tribal dancing, and creating a system which favors the former at the expense of the latter, diminishes the catalogue of human skills available as adaptive capacities for unexpected problems in the future. A good builder does not abandon odds and ends, which in this case are acquired skills and cultural practices which can never be recreated.
An important manner in which both Imagination and Wilderness contribute to their appropriate realms is inherent in the concept of *marginality*. The place where two eco-systems meet is called an ecotone or margin and it is usually a richer area than either one individually. A wetlands is usually a more diverse system than the dry land it springs from, or the deep water it leads to. *Change comes from the edges— in nature, in politics and in art.* The center usually takes care of itself. In a disaster, when the dominant species can no longer survive, new species are always drawn from these edge zones.

This is true culturally as well. One may go to an avant-garde performance where the artists cover themselves with garbage and allow themselves to be eaten alive by pigs. We may be revolted or bored or we might applaud the pigs. What we can never predict is the effect this performance will have on someone elses sensibilities, what it may catalyze in them to produce a work of transcendent importance.

Humans have learned to protect and defend certain natural areas no matter how muddy, swampy, unsightly or smelly they may be, for we have learned that they are important even though we may not fully understand them. Sound ecology demands the same consideration for marginal zones of culture if we want the center to stay healthy.
We know that failure is a fact of life at the cultural fringes. We know too, that it is difficult to categorize what occurs there, but just as losing the wetlands would cause the demise of San Francisco Bay, so will loss of cultural margins cripple the forces which are the mainstays of California's creative contributions to the world. Allowing market forces to be the primary influence on cultural expression is like assassinating one's children because they have no readily marketable skills.

Having established these perspectives in the context of culture, let me examine them in the context of commerce. The commercial arts represent values and ideas of the contemporary mainstream. Because popular entertainment is a commodity, the "mainstream" usually indicates "the largest market" which is often a sump for the lowest common denominator of available products. This downgrades natural selection and diversity. Even where the commercial arts do represent excellence, their size alone makes them a force for monoculture, and social diversity needs to be protected from this undue influence.

The antidote is infusions from the margins. The non-profits arts, in all their messy diversity, are the research and development laboratory for the culture as a whole. It was the inheritors of the television and tape-recorder, not the scientists who invented it, who fostered the cultural impact of those new inventions; the artists whose play generated the products which fueled the consumer demand later filled by industry. On the other hand, no one knows if any CPA has ever applied for a patent.
An audience that is educated demands more of its performers. Americans all know how to play baseball which is why our teams are so good. The demanding Japanese consumer has been shaped by a culture which trains its members assiduously in aesthetics as one variety of intelligence. Tea-ceremony, flower-arrangements, Kabuki, even the wrapping of eggs in a bamboo leaf, contribute to high standards of performance.

If Americans all knew how to paint, play music, dance, sing, or perform, to some degree, we would laugh at the pedestrian standards of mass entertainment. A competent person will not settle for shoddy performance in any sphere of life. It is not an accident that a populace with degraded standards in one area produces inferior goods in another. I submit that such intelligence will determine our success or failure in global competition and that the arts are the most effective mechanisms for developing such intelligence in a society.

Let me exemplify the manner in which marginal and central sectors might communicate and contribute positively to each other. My example selects the film industry, but is applicable generally.
A major film studio contributing to a non-profit theater or theaters, and using them as its own research and development would create a spectrum of beneficial consequences. A pre-tax, hundred thousand dollar contribution (a couple of development deals that could fizzle anyway) would be a substantial portion of that theater's budget. Having that money would stabilize operations and broaden the range of experimentation and risk that company could support. It would also stabilize income to the attendant community of artists and technical staff. In return for that money the studio might trouble-shoot problematical scripts, train promising but untutored actors and technicians, and experiment with new technology more inexpensively than they can at present. Even without such tangible benefits, the studio would be investing in the pool from which its talent develops, fortifying itself with margin-rich information as a means of protecting its own future.

Economic and regulatory difficulties which force Hollywood studios to seek alternatives to California locations will eventually force the artistic and technical support communities to follow. Consequently it is not far-fetched to suggest that investments to secure and stabilize the margin communities from which an industry's skilled labor is drawn are not fanciful uses of capital, even without immediate benefits.

There are a spectrum of interventions and assistances that State government can provide to service both the marginal and central arts industries. None are particularly radical, but they work.

* facilitating the zoning of live-work sites that artists can afford.
*Identifying and training promising young artists to keep the standards of intelligence high through demanding programs in the school curriculum, and programs like the Summer School for the Arts.

*Streamlining permits, and zoning regulations for the commercial industry and offering State authority as an umbrella to facilitate union-management and apprentice relationships which are appropriate to the arts and responsive to their special needs. This is a touchy area, but not impossible.

*developing tax incentives to facilitate communication and support between the two sectors of the arts, to heighten mutual contributions.

* Stabilizing the state pool of creative workers by facilitating community employment of artists. This not only serves communities with a valuable resource, but also upgrades both the artist's insights through feedback and the community's skills through acquisition from the artist.

Some of this will cost money, but there is a compelling reason to spend it and not shunt the arts aside as an impractical use of scarce resources. It is precisely because pressure on resources is a dominant contemporary issue that the arts are so necessary.
In his book, *The Next Economy*, Paul Hawken observed that the way one conserves matter (and incidentally increases value) is to add intelligence and skill to a product. He points out that the Japanese added intelligence and skill to cars, cameras and electronics which already existed. Consumers voluntarily flock to where value is the most concentrated and this is why, according to Hawken, so many small businesses and new enterprises are effectively challenging the once impregnable dominance of huge corporations.

The arts are supreme concentrations of intelligence and skill. They herald coming social and political formulations. The Walkman and ghetto blasters and MTV have created the global-teenager and the attendant global fashion industry. The playful use of technology trains the culture in the pending realities and one might argue that without the general availability of computer games and arcades, our Nation might not be producing fighter pilots and computer designers of such outstanding ability. The arts are the mouth through which we nourish the body of the culture. They are the *most* efficient means of recapitalizing our most underinvested resource --imagination and physical skills, because they approximate nuclear fusion in the magnitude to which they amplify modest inputs.

Even without money, there is a spectrum of decisions which you, as Legislators can choose as public policy.

* It should be a policy that the Arts in California be attended and developed as a growth industry of vital importance to the State.
*It should be understood as a basis of policy that art is education which enhances problem-solving, motor-skills, intellect, and imagination in a utilitarian and documentable manner.

*It should be policy to declare Arts issues as a peer concerns to all considerations of health, safety and welfare and considered as an adjunct to such expenditures. This should be facilitated by an Arts Level Cabinet position to insure that creativity and imagination become factored into all State problem solving.

If these ideas appear speculative, I ask you to consider the alternatives. A gloss of the headlines shows a culture under siege. Who can assert unequivocally that people today are healthier, and less anxious today than in their own youth? Who can assert that the world we are bequeathing the next generation, is as safe, and full of promise as the one they received? It is past time to tap our deep wells of human cultural genius as the most viable response to current challenges. The mechanism to do that cheaply, effectively, and joyously is the creative process. Facilitating that mechanism and insuring that results meet the hopes of the citizenry and the needs of the Planet is the art of government.