The National Endowment for the Arts: transitions and restructuring in response to Congressional oversight

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Abstract Since its founding in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been one of the most supportive grant making organizations for the arts in the United States. In the years following its inception, the NEA grew within the values and traditions of its founding mission, yet that mission has been challenged, forcing the government agency to adapt due to oversight and budget fluctuations. This paper explicates the history of the NEA through the 1990s, noting that the agency remains under threat of termination to this day.

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Introduction Since its inception in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been one of the most supportive grant making programs in the United States, offering artists and arts organizations the opportunity to create and present new work, fulfilling its mission “dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established; bringing the arts to all Americans; and providing leadership in arts education.” In the past fifty years, the NEA has supported diverse artists, arts organizations, and arts education initiatives: writers, poets, dancers, theaters, museums, musicians, visual artists, etc., across all fifty states, but has struggled to fulfil this mission due to Congressional doubts, questions of censorship, public outrage, and challenges from the media. Such challenges remain today.

The NEA: 1965 to the 1980s
On September 29, 1965, United States President Lyndon Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, establishing the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Founded by Congress one year after the start of the Vietnam War, the NEA is a unique and independent agency of the federal government “whose funding and support gives Americans the opportunity to participate in the arts, exercise their imaginations, and develop their creative capacities.”

1 Congress established the NEA to sustain and preserve America’s artistic legacy, and to spread artistic prosperity nationwide. At that time, the spread of communism concerned the U.S. government, and Congress sought to confront communism “through an expanded public sector.”

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wanted to affirm the nation’s economic power across all fields, including the arts, yet the NEA was not founded to deliver a political message or align with a socio-political message.

In 1967, the NEA’s first complete grantmaking year, the agency had an $8 million budget. Initial museum grant recipients included the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art (Fort Worth, TX), and the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, MA). Metropolitan Museum of Art (NY) curator Henry Geldzahler sat on the first review panel that made grants to visual artists. That panel not only supported established artists, but made grants to emerging and young artists. As early as 1968, the NEA faced Congressional scrutiny and questions regarding appropriate oversight, perceived censorship, and whether government-subsidized arts is an appropriate use of federal funds.

The NEA budget expanded under the second NEA chairman, Nancy Hicks, who ran the agency from 1969-1977. Hicks was knowledgeable in national arts funding and public policy having lead the Arts Councils of America and worked for the Rockefeller family, who helped to found the Museum of Modern Art (New York). She believed that “A great orchestra or a fine museum is a natural resource, like a park. It must be maintained.” Congress and the American public witnessed the tangible results from the NEA’s work under Hicks, which funded numerous arts organizations across all 50 states rather than serve as a funding body for national or state-sponsored groups. Distributing funds widely generated numerous and diverse supporters who lobbied for budget increases on the NEA’s behalf. Hicks “prevailed upon members of symphonies, museums, and state arts councils to lobby Congress for higher budgets,” prompting Congress to expand the agency’s budget. During Hicks’ tenure, funding multiplied “twelvefold, from $8,456,875 for fiscal year 1969 to $99,872,000 for fiscal year 1977.”

The budget increases did not go unnoticed and drew concern regarding possible politicization of the arts. Livingston Biddle, NEA chairman from 1977-1981, noted that during his confirmation process, “there [had] been suggestion that the arts may be subject to politicization... mean[ing]... subject to inappropriate governmental pressures.” Biddle instead sought to restrict government intervention in selecting grantees, and insisted that private citizens sat on grant selection panels. The advent of the Reagan administration ushered in threats to the NEA, which commenced on the Reagan campaign trail. “During the campaign, Regan issued a statement on the arts and humanities: ‘I will end as soon as possible the politicization of the National Council on the Arts so conspicuous during the Carter-Mondale Administration.’” David Stockman, President Regan’s director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), sought to downsize the NEA, initially with a 50% budget cut, believing that arts funding represented undue government influence in the public arena. This foreshadowed the liberal and conservative culture wars to come in American public life. “People assumed that the Stockman OMB move was a first step toward eliminating the Endowment – and they answered it with calls for protecting and preserving the agency.”
The proposed NEA cuts created a shockwave in the arts community. Calls of public support from artists and legislators alike commenced on behalf of the NEA. An actor himself, Reagan’s former colleagues and close friends lobbied the President, prompting him to establish a presidential “Task Force on the arts and Humanities, [which would consist of] a blue ribbon panel of thirty-six citizens to advise him on three issues: (1) expanding private support for the arts and humanities; (2) involving more nongovernmental opinion (from individuals and private-sector groups) in federal arts and humanities decisions; and (3) restructuring of federal arts and humanities funding, including the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, the two endowments, and the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.” This team was under scrutiny from the beginning, yet brought balance to NEA budget discussions. The budget was not cut by 50%, but Congress appropriated $143.5 million for the 1982 fiscal year, roughly a 10% cut from $159 million budget in 1981.

Culture Wars
The NEA faced expanding culture wars in the late 1980s due to grants it administered to artists and arts organizations, which led to additional questions of Congressional support for the agency. Two controversies defined the NEA’s culture wars era in the 1980s: the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition at the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), and a photograph by Andres Serrano included in a juried exhibition. ICA received a $30,000 NEA grant for a large retrospective of Mapplethorpe’s work, which included graphic images. The exhibition traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Wadsworth Atheneum (Hartford, CT), Berkeley’s University Art Museum, and the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston. The Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.) cancelled its exhibition participation in June 1989, prompting a 60-person protest outside the museum, and widespread discussion over the appropriate use of federal funds for controversial arts projects. The second incident, sprung from the NEA’s $75,000 grant to support the 7th annual Awards in the Visual Arts (AVA-7), a traveling juried exhibition curated by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA). The exhibition opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and traveled to the Carnegie Mellon University Art Museum (Pittsburgh) and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond, VA). Andres Serrano’s photograph in the exhibition, entitled Immersion (Piss Christ), depicted small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s own urine. “When Immersion (Piss Christ) was included in a touring exhibition that traveled the length and breadth of the country, journalists, curators and Christian fundamentalists joined forces to have the work withdrawn because it vilified Christ.” Notably, the NEA did not select the artists included in the AVA-7 exhibition, nor did it curate the Mapplethorpe exhibition. The ICA “suddenly became a key player in the congressional debate of what taxpayers’ dollars should and should not be spent on, and the related issues of censorship and artistic freedom.” These exhibitions created a stir of emotions concerning the appropriate use of taxpayer funds.

In response to these exhibitions, four funding amendments were proposed in Congress to the NEA’s appropriations bill, each of which threatened NEA funding. One amendment threatened to eliminate all funding for the NEA, another proposed to cut funding by 50%,
and a third amendment proposed cutting funding by 10% for one fiscal year. The fourth proposed amendment passed, cutting the NEA’s funding by $45,000, the total amount granted to the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the AVA-7 exhibition that included the Serrano work of art. “For a time, the question was even raised of introducing a law forbidding the NEA from providing any support to organizations displaying any works of a homosexual character.” 13 When the NEA budget came up for review in the U.S. Senate, Senator Jesse Helms added language that “not only restricted funding for ‘obscene or indecent materials’ but included another clause prohibiting ICA and SECCA (the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina) from receiving NEA funds for five years.” 14 In response, some of those who disagreed with Helms’ censorship “cited the small number of ‘objectionable’ grants it had made. It was, they inferred, only a small portion of art that was troublesome.” 15 The final appropriations bill prevented the NEA from supporting artworks deemed indecent, and required that Congress be informed of any grants up for recommendation to either the ICA or the SECCA. “Helms offered his reasons: ‘A difference exists between an artist’s right to free expression, and his right to have Government, that is to say the taxpayers, pay for his work... there is a fundamental difference between government censorship, the preemption of publication or production and government’s refusal to pay for such publication and production.’” 16 Helms’ statement echoes the original values and mission of the NEA.

In 1990, twenty-five years after the NEA was founded, “the agency had lost support in Congress, the White House, the media, and from the public.” 17 Congress mandated that an Independent Commission assess the NEA’s grantmaking procedures and determine the appropriate standards for making grants to publicly funded art. Do those standards differ from privately funding art? In the course of its assessment, the Independent Commission determined:

> the standard for selecting publicly funded art ‘must go beyond’ that for privately funded art. With regard to aesthetic or artistic quality, both should be judged only on the basis of excellence. Government support, however, must bring with it criteria beyond artistic worth; publicly funded art must not ignore the conditions traditionally governing the uses of public money, and must serve ‘the purpose which Congress has defined for the National Endowment for the Arts.’ These must include meeting professional standards of authenticity, encouraging artists to achieve wider distribution of their works, and reflecting the cultures of minority, inner-city, rural, and tribal communities. 18

With this statement, the Independent Commission deemed that NEA-funded art must fall within the bounds of public appreciation. To verify that it meets this criteria, the grant review process must be executed by industry professionals.
Restructuring the NEA

In the shadow of the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Congress again threatened the NEA with elimination in 1996. During the 1994 election season, many Republican candidates ran on a political platform entitled the “Contract with America” that included the NEA’s termination. At the time, the Republican Party held both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate, so “the threat facing the Arts Endowment was no longer simply more budget cuts, but the threat of total elimination.”19 Legislation was introduced in May 1991 that would reduce appropriations for both the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1996, again in 1997, and again in 1998. Yet Senate Republicans identified the NEA’s value and revenue it brought to individual states. They were “much more positive about the endowment, recognizing both the multiplier effect and the appeal, for their statewide electorates, of boosterism in federal art expenditure.”20 Rather than terminate the agency altogether, Senators sought to adjust grantmaking from individual artists to organizations, schools, and universities that created cultural programming for the public.

The Committee on Labor and Human Resources, chaired by Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS), supported the NEA and worked to reauthorize its funding. “At one of four hearings, Chair Kassebaum declared, ‘there is support for the work of the National Endowment for the Arts’ and added ‘clearly we have to answer some constituent concerns that really do still question whether this is a function of federal government.’”21 Upon NEA reauthorization, the Senate required an operational overhaul and a changed grant approval process. Seventeen discipline-based grant programs were reorganized into four divisions: Heritage and Preservation; Education and Access; Creation and Presentation; and Planning and Stabilization. The NEA no longer made grants to individual artists. “Of the grant-making changes undertaken during her tenure, none was more painful for [NEA] Chairman [Jane] Alexander than the Congressional mandate to eliminate all individual artist grants, with the exception of the Literature Fellowships.”22 Jazz musicians and folk and traditional artists also retained grant funding due to the typically uncontroversial material each produced. In creating the four divisions, the NEA limited the opportunities for controversy and stabilized discussions about the misuse of taxpayer money. The NEA and grant seekers found these radical changes taxing. The agency’s mission had been changed from its original ideology.

The Arts Endowment had previously functioned as a compartmentalized grantmaking body, with financing awarded through specific arts disciplines. Under the old structure, for example, symphony orchestras competed with each other for grants from the NEA’s symphony budget. Under the new reforms, a symphony orchestra would compete against a dance company or a literary magazine, whose project fell under the same division, such as Education and Access.23

The shift was, in part, dictated by the House Appropriations Committee that cut the NEA’s budget by 39% from $162 million to $99.99 million for the 1996 fiscal year. As a result, the
NEA reorganized and cut its staff by 47%. Following the budget cuts and employment losses, the NEA also had to restructure its grant approvals process. The agency added “combined arts panels – a new layer of review – over the four funding divisions.” This allowed for varied perspectives to be included in the review process proposal.

Congress made additional changes to the NEA. Grant applicants were no longer permitted to seek funding for general operating expenses, because Congress believed this to be within the purview of private funders. With regard to grant making, Congress required the NEA to cap funding to any one particular state at 15 percent (excluding multi-state projects). It also reduced the number of NEA members from 26 to 14, plus 6 ex-officio seats for members of Congress who were appointed by House and Senate leadership, providing an additional layer of government oversight. By October 1998 when NEA Chairman Alexander stepped down, the NEA was a completely new agency.

Despite these changes, Congress continued to work to eliminate the NEA. “In April [1997], [House Speaker Newt] Gingrich told a Washington news conference that rich celebrities and entertainment executives should donate their own funds to establish a private endowment, or ‘tax deductible private trust.’” Appalled by this statement, members of the entertainment industry and its lobby pushed back. Yet the June 1996 appropriations bill “was voted out of the House Appropriations Committee with $10 million for the NEA, just enough money to shut the agency down.” This limited budget would have not been sufficient for the NEA’s survival, and would force the agency to end grant support for the arts. U.S. President Clinton, however, came to the NEA’s defense, “promising to veto the appropriations bill if it did not contain at least $99.5 million for the Arts Endowment.” The $99.5 million would allow the NEA to continue its current mission. The final appropriations bill funded the agency, and included a new provision that permitted the NEA to solicit and accept private funds. While the NEA survived the storm of political and media turmoil, the many changes forced upon the agency begs the question, does the NEA still maintain an important role for the arts in the United States?

The New NEA
Stepping into the 2000s, the NEA changed its mission statement to coincide with its new requirements: “The National Endowment for the Arts, an investment in America’s living cultural heritage, serves the public good by nurturing human creativity, supporting community spirit, and fostering appreciation of the excellence and diversity of our nation’s artistic accomplishments.” Blending the agency’s original ideology with the new Congressionally imposed requirements, the NEA was poised for 21st century success, and its budget has remained relatively steady for fifteen years:

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<th>Year</th>
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Fifty years after its founding, the NEA again faces a threat from lawmakers who wish to eliminate the government agency. The National Endowment for the Arts has consistently faced this threat through its productive history, and has adapted to the vagaries of political and public opinion over that time. The U.S. museum community has benefited significantly from NEA grants, which not only provide financial support, but also act as a stamp of approval for the high quality of work done across the museum sector today. The NEA is a well-established agency with a clear mission to serve the American public by supporting the diverse arts industry.32

Notes


5 Saunders, 595.

6 Bauerlein, 55-56.


8 Ibid, 47.

9 Ibid, 48.

10 Ibid, 49.


Routex, 125.

Tannenbaum, 71-72.


Zeigler, 79.

Bauerlein, 108.


Ibid, 117.


Bauerlein, 117-118.

Ibid, 119.

Ibid, 120.

Ibid, 119.

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Ibid, 120.

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Ibid, 123.


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