

## **Toward a Coherent National Arts Policy**

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*Abstract: A greater degree of visibility for the arts in the White House would be most welcome, and so would a greater degree of coherence in arts policy. This paper outlines some low-cost, high-impact steps that arts and cultural leadership in the Obama White House might take towards a more coherent national arts policy: (1) lead through stimulus and diplomacy; (2) follow private, state and local programs that work; and (3) eliminate harmful regulations.*

President-elect Obama has recently called for a more prominent role in the White House for the arts and culture.

A greater degree of visibility for the arts in the White House would be most welcome, and so would a greater degree of coherence in arts policy. Currently, arts and culture fall under the fractured jurisdiction of Departments of State, Interior, Treasury, Education, Transportation, Homeland Security, and the Internal Revenue Service, in addition to the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities.

Following are some low-cost, high-impact steps that arts and cultural leadership in the Obama White House might take towards a more coherent national arts policy: (1) lead through stimulus and diplomacy; (2) follow private, state and local programs that work; and (3) eliminate harmful regulations.

**Lead through stimulus and diplomacy.** In addition to their intrinsic value – to express, inspire, console and delight – the arts have much to contribute to the nation’s top priorities, particularly economic recovery at home and improving relations abroad.

Many studies document the economic impact of arts centers on their local economies. For example, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts stimulates the entire region's economy to the tune of about \$1.5 billion a year. An arts component to the recovery package could create good jobs, not just for artists but also for workers in construction, operations, hospitality and IT, among other fields.

American arts should also work hand in hand with national security. Targeted cultural diplomacy efforts, such as tours of American performers abroad through the US Agency for International Development, could help win us friends worldwide. National security know-how and funding can help shield cultural facilities at home from terrorist attack.

**Follow private, state and local programs that work.**

The economic climate makes it unlikely that governmental funding of the arts will increase anytime soon. And mixing art and government can spell political trouble, especially at the federal level.

Despite good work by recent leadership of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities to rehabilitate their stature after the culture wars of the post-Mapplethorpe era, their budgets are infinitesimal, and their activities are marginal to the work of the nonprofit cultural sector.

State and local governmental arts councils and commissions have more arts funding muscle, collectively control and disburse 5-10 times as many grant dollars as the NEA. The localities are excellent laboratories and conduits for public arts funding and stewardship, grappling with how best to support worthy activities while assuring accountability to local constituencies and managing political relationships.

The nonprofit cultural sector has figured out a lot on its own about art's relevance to public concerns, including public health, improvements to public school curricula, aging, veterans' affairs, assimilation of immigrants, and even corrections. The Cleveland Clinic is exploring the therapeutic benefits of the arts for sick patients and their families. Veterans Affairs medical facilities incorporate creative arts into their recreation therapy programs. Several dozen organizations nationwide, including Teacher's College, Columbia University, are exploring the ameliorative effect of the arts on the aging and aged, including in treatment of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Disease. The Lincoln Center Institute works in underprivileged public schools nationwide to stimulate imagination among schoolchildren through arts in education, the better to prepare the next generation of American workers to create and innovate. There is tantalizing early work being done on the beneficial effects of art therapy for children with autism and other spectrum disorders. A women's prison in Alaska has incorporated an orchestra into its recreation program, supported by ticket sales and homemade crafts, inspiring new self-discipline, teamwork and pride within and among inmates. Among immigrants and the neighborhoods in which they live, the arts have long served an assimilative and community-building function. Imagine the world of good that could be done by arts leadership in DC just by publicizing and commending the best of these efforts, stimulating more private donor dollars and sharpening the spade of others who might undertake similar efforts.

Private nonprofit arts organizations have learned a lot of other lessons – some learned the hard way – that are worth sharing more broadly: about audience-building at a time of shifting demographics; about board-building at a time of heightened attention to corporate governance; about partnering with for-profits, with one another, and with local governmental entities; about building and operating new facilities and renovating old ones, and obtaining grants and loans to do so; about leveraging their real estate and intellectual property assets and managing new lines of business; about exploring the possibilities of the rapidly evolving technological and media environment, including labor relations and copyright law implications; and about fundraising, particularly through economic hard times. Visible arts leadership within the Obama White House could do well at minimal cost just by convening the conversation and facilitating communication among these varied sources of expertise.

Arts-friendly policies need not be expensive. The federal government could follow the example of enlightened states and municipalities that use dedicated revenue streams to fund arts and cultural programs. Some 40 communities nationwide dedicate a portion of hotel/motel taxes to arts and cultural programs, acknowledging that cultural activity attracts tourism. Florida dedicates a portion of its budget from corporate filing fees to the state's Cultural Affairs Division. California dedicates the extra revenue collected for arts-related specialty license plates. Alabama provides for voluntary contributions to the arts through an income tax check-off. Following this lead, tax laws at the federal level could be adjusted in inexpensive ways to benefit both the sector and public as a whole. For example, tax laws should be rearranged to incent artists to donate their artwork to charity auctions in support of PTAs, hospitals, and community centers; to encourage wealthy taxpayers to contribute more; and to reward taxpayers for increases in year-over-year charitable giving.

**Eliminate harmful regulations.** The nonprofit sector is heavily regulated, with the IRS and state Charities Bureaus overseeing many aspects of governance and fundraising. This regulation is the necessary counterpart to the valuable tax exemption that charities enjoy. But there appears to be momentum toward greater regulation of the sector by both IRS and immigration officials, and someone in a coordinating role might give some thought to the impact on the arts specifically.

President-elect Obama is right that art and our culture are the essence of what makes America special, and worthy of an expanded role in the White House. Now is the time to unleash their power to move, to help get our country's most important work done.

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