

Public Support of the Arts

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“But is it art?” That question, so often voiced by anxious museumgoers, plainly reveals our collective state of aesthetic confusion. We may congratulate ourselves on living in artistically exciting times, or we may secretly envy our ancestors, who worried mainly whether what they were viewing was good or bad art, and not whether it was art at all. Only on rare occasions does our characteristically modern anxiety take on an air of urgency. Yet urgent it became in September when members of the U.S. Senate debated, and finally rejected, Senator Jesse Helms’s proposal to bar federal funding for “indecent” or “obscene” art works.

At the eye of the storm stood the National Endowment for the Arts, surrounded by a collection of highly controversial photographs. One, by Andres Serrano, showed a plastic crucifix immersed in urine. Upon learning last May that NEA funds had gone to a North Carolina arts center, which in turn gave a grant to Serrano, Senator Alfonse D’Amato denounced the endowment for subsidizing “filth.” Soon afterwards Representative Dick Armey discovered that NEA funds had also gone to the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, which organized a traveling exhibition of (now notorious) photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe.

The Mapplethorpe show included pictures that some called “homosexual” and “sodomasochistic.” Armey’s description was far less restrained. In June he fired off a letter to the NEA declaring that “the interpretation of art is a subjective evaluation, but there is still a very clear and unambiguous line that exists between what

can be classified as art and what must be called morally reprehensible trash."

Like-minded critics rejected Mapplethorpe's pictures as "pornography." Serrano's photo of the crucifix was attacked as "blasphemy." On the other hand, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Representative Sidney Yates, and many other members of Congress were quite prepared to regard the photographs as art. The pressing question for them was not "Should government subsidize morally reprehensible trash?" but "Should government censor the arts?" At its most general, the debate ranged beyond censorship into freedom of expression. Now that the dust has settled, let's take a closer look at this dispute.

A Red Herring: "Is It Art?"

In the first place, "Is it art?" was never the heart of the matter. Whether the unsettling photographs were judged good art, bad art, or merely so much tasteless sensationalism, the sticking point was public money. If our tax dollars are going to support the arts, it stands to reason that we, or at least our elected representatives, should have some say in determining just where those dollars go. This is the basic assumption of the Helms proposal. And whatever objections might be made to its wording—whatever potential for abuse one might see lurking in such vague notions of obscenity and indecency—there is still a certain bedrock of common sense in the Helms proposal.

On the surface, though, there remains ample room for objection. More than a few of our elected representatives saw the proposal as a dangerous attempt to censor the arts. Artists naturally agreed: the flame of creativity would be extinguished if the Helmsian threat weren't stopped. As one might expect, the news media made capital of the censorship angle. "Should Congress censor art?" ran a particularly blunt headline in *U.S. News & World Report*.

Those familiar with the NEA's history must have watched this storm of protest with a sense of *deja vu*. In 1985 Congressman Armey and several colleagues charged the endowment with subsidizing both pornography and politically offensive poetry. They wanted to bar NEA funding for any work "patently offensive to the average person." The wording of that proposal was just as vague, and just as worrisome in its vagueness, as the wording of the recent Helms proposal.

Of course, congressional opponents didn't cry "Vagueness!" They cried "Government censorship of the arts!" The charge of censorship worked its usual magic. After impassioned political debate, the proposal to stop NEA funding of "offensive" art was defeated.

Another Red Herring: "Censorship!"

"Censorship" alone is a powerful accusation. We Americans are justly proud of our freedom of speech, and proposals to limit that freedom should certainly be regarded with suspicion. "Censorship of the arts" is an even more powerful accusation. If the First

Amendment cannot protect artistic expression from government control, how can it possibly safeguard our right to political protest? If any form of expression should be unfettered, it must be artistic expression. Better to permit offensive or obscene art than to open the door to blacklists and Big Brother.

The argument, then, is that any conditions attached to public funding of the arts amount to, or at least can easily lead to, government censorship. But the argument is a bad one. To say that the government may refuse funding for certain kinds of art is not to say that the art may not be produced and even publicly exhibited. It is only to say that the production and exhibition will not be supported by public money. "The people giveth and the people taketh away," observes William A. Galston, research scholar at the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy. "The idea that the First Amendment protects not only personal expression but also public approval—in this case, in the form of federal funding—is ridiculous on its face."

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If charges of censorship can be justified, they can only be justified by an appeal to consequences. Say, for example, that the government's refusal to support an artist's work makes that artist anathema to gallery directors, so that her work will no longer be exhibited. Or say that the impressionable American public inevitably follows its government's lead, so that even if the work is exhibited, the exhibition will go unattended. Say, too, that American artists aren't stupid: knowing the disastrous effects of a government rejection, they drift gradually towards *self-censorship* and so become less creative.

If these apocalyptic visions had any foundation in fact, the refusal of government funding might indeed work to restrict free expression, and we might well fear that the flame of American creativity would ultimately flicker and die. In reality, though, the refusal of government funding has no such repercussions. The Mapplethorpe show is a case in point. When the exhibit was dropped by Washington's Corcoran Gallery, it was picked up by the Washington Project for the Arts. Washingtonians reacted to the flap on Capitol Hill and the flurry of media interest just as most Americans would—by going in droves to view the forbidden photographs.

Congress ultimately did approve legislation barring NEA funding of "obscene" materials. What counts as obscene, however, was left to the agency's own judgment. The NEA is prohibited from supporting only

those works it believes that, "when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

The closest approach to censorship was a provision added by the Senate Appropriations subcommittee but omitted from the bill that eventually became law. The subcommittee wanted a five-year ban on federal funding of the two institutions that sponsored the Mapplethorpe and Serrano exhibits. While that ban would not have constituted censorship, it could have had some of the same effects. To impose such heavy penalties on institutions, rather than simply refusing to support specific projects, is a step in the direction of blacklists that Congress was wise to resist.

To Pay or Not To Pay

The idea that conditions on NEA funding invariably threaten First Amendment rights should, therefore, be dismissed. What remains is a far more difficult issue: whether our government has any business funding the arts in the first place. The claim that "if government subsidizes the arts, it may rightly attach conditions to the funding" still leaves open to question whether government should be subsidizing the arts at all. Does the expenditure serve some public purpose or promote some public good? Even if it does, is the subsidy necessary?

Though subsidies of the arts might well produce some public benefit, it doesn't follow that public expenditures are necessary, for the same public benefit might conceivably be secured through private expenditures. Public expenditures in this area might even be worse than unnecessary. If public funding of the arts turns out to violate principles of justice, or to do more harm than good, then it hardly matters what public benefit it produces. Under such circumstances, the subsidies would best be stopped.

The question of public purpose is especially ticklish, for some of the arts' strongest supporters embrace the doctrine of "art for art's sake." That doctrine suggests that art's sole purpose is to give us aesthetic experience. At any rate, so says Edward Banfield, who contends that the NEA only makes people more confused about the nature of art than they would be otherwise. In *The*

Democratic Muse Banfield writes: "Public funding encourages arts agencies to emphasize activities that have little or nothing to do with art properly understood: instead of making aesthetic experience more accessible, they turn attention away from it in order to present art as entertainment, psychotherapy, material for historical studies, and so on." The obvious conclusion: government should stop subsidizing the arts.

The virtue of this position is its distinction between art and the various uses we make of art. There are even more potential uses than Banfield lists. In fact, one argument for public funding of the arts is that theater, opera, art museums, and such like are all sound investments. By attracting tourists and enriching the leisure industry they produce an economic payoff.

There is, however, a weakness in Banfield's argument. It assumes that when public funding of the arts does anything beyond making aesthetic experience more accessible—say, by presenting art as entertainment—the public becomes confused about the nature of art. Moreover, that confusion supposedly shows the public to be ill served by subsidizing the arts. But what evidence do we have that the NEA and like agencies have muddled the public mind? Even if there were such confusion, wouldn't it be better, rather than worse, that publicly funded art produce benefits above and beyond aesthetic experience?

Public Benefits

Beneficial side effects should not be discounted, for they might turn out to be just what we aim at in supporting art. In other words, we might distinguish between the purpose of art itself and our purposes in subsidizing art. Public expenditures could be justified because art, or rather increased public access to art, produces. . . what? What public benefits can be claimed?

At this point, advocates of subsidies for the arts can easily win the battle but lose the war. If they cite public benefits entirely extrinsic to art, their opponents will reply that government support for the arts is not needed to produce those benefits. We can find another, more cost-effective way of producing the same benefits.

Entertainment, for example, is a side effect of art that some might count as a public benefit. But if the point

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of funding art is to provide American citizens with more entertainment, why not subsidize rock concerts and football games? A poll of the general public would surely prove those to be more popular forms of entertainment than opera and ballet.

The same sort of objection can be made to other publicly beneficial side effects of increased public access to art. If what's wanted is a boost to the tourist trade, why not demand government subsidies for amusement parks? A first-rate amusement park would attract tourists, provide the American public with entertainment, and yield a good return on investment. Why not subsidize amusement parks as well as the arts? Why not subsidize amusement parks instead of the arts?

Because art helps make a society worthy of the pride of its citizens, answers Amy Gutmann, professor of politics at Princeton University. Americans view art as an important part of their common, cultural heritage, and public subsidies are justified because they help make that cultural heritage accessible to a greater number of citizens. (Of course, amusement parks, rock concerts, and football games may be as American as apple pie, but they don't need subsidies.)

Another defense of government-supported art, inspired by David Hume, takes culture to be essential to a thriving democratic society. Widespread reasonableness, temperance, and moderation in public debate (the argument goes) are not acquired in isolation from the general level of culture in society. This cast of mind is developed in concert with the refinement of sensibilities in feeling produced by appreciation of music, art, drama, and literature. The reason for supporting (say) orchestras is thus the same as the reason for sup-

porting schools. Both aim at sufficient liberal learning, including continued learning in adulthood, to fit citizens for self-government.

Opponents of publicly funded art could challenge both Gutmann and Hume on several grounds. The most obvious objection is economic. Even if increased access to our cultural heritage produces such public benefits, why spend taxpayers' money on it? Private patrons would do more for the arts if the flow of government funds were cut off. Besides, private support would free art from the strings that might be attached to public funding.

While the case against subsidies sounds persuasive, its claims are impossible to prove. No one knows whether private contributions would fill the gap if government funds were withdrawn. By the same token, the danger of government control might be no greater, and could well be less, than the danger of control by a coterie of well-heeled private citizens.

A more thoughtful criticism of Gutmann and Hume is this: in neither case is there obvious reason for government to support the creation of new art works. When we speak of increasing public access to our cultural heritage, we mean established art works. The same rationale would extend to new productions only if subsidies were needed to keep our culture alive and flourishing.

The Question of Justice

We turn at last to charges that cultural subsidies are unjust. There are three grounds for the accusation: (1) The subsidies operate like Robin Hood in reverse. Since Archie Bunker keeps watching the ball game while yuppies troop off to the opera, Archie's tax

Drawing by Lorenz, ©1989
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.



"Damn! There goes our funding."

dollars only go to support those who least need them. (2) Government has no business funding art exhibits while many Americans remain homeless. Public funding of the arts must wait until basic needs for food and housing are met. (3) High-minded arguments for culture mask an antidemocratic paternalism. A liberal state would not favor Puccini over Prince, Shakespeare over Spielberg, or any set of personal preferences over any other.

The first charge ignores an important fact: Archie has greater access to the opera than he would without government subsidies. He may choose not to attend, just as many choose not to attend government-supported educational institutions; but Archie's preferences don't establish that the benefits produced by arts subsidies are reserved to a select few. What they do suggest is that cultural preferences tend to reflect one's income bracket.

We cannot make the audience at the opera more representative of the general population without making our society more economically egalitarian. Scrapping government art agencies won't help. As Gutmann points out, "Poverty is the most common source of cultural discrimination, and the source least amenable to correction by cultural institutions. Lowering the already modest admissions prices to museums is unlikely to increase attendance by the poor. Lowering the substantially higher ticket prices of concerts, theater, and opera is more likely to increase middle-class attendance, an important but incomplete accomplishment."

The second charge of injustice can be seen as a variant of the first. If funds now appropriated for the arts would otherwise be devoted to the poor, reverse Robin Hoodism might again be in evidence. Of course, the arts subsidies can be defended on purely practical grounds. We may doubt, for example, that the poor would actually benefit from the small amount of money saved on arts subsidies. Even if the funds were pumped directly into public assistance programs, they would be the proverbial drop in the ocean. The gain to the poor would be miniscule, the loss to the arts substantial.

The related policy question is whether public support of the arts should be postponed until all citizens' basic needs are satisfied. On the one hand is the seriousness of basic needs; on the other is the social cost of entrusting our cultural heritage to the free market and private philanthropy. The public benefits of funding the arts, along with the social costs of not funding them, do not prove that justice requires arts subsidies. They do prove that justice permits them.

We reach at last the charge of antidemocratic paternalism—a rallying cry for liberals convinced that the state must be neutral regarding conceptions of "the good life." In practice this means that all personal preferences are created equal; and, in the eyes of the state, equal they should remain. The government, then, would seem to have no business subsidizing opera but not rock concerts.

Leading liberal theorist Ronald Dworkin, professor of jurisprudence at Oxford and professor of law at New York University, offers an intriguing argument purporting to show that a liberal state *can* support art without committing the crime of paternalism. We need only accept the thesis "that people are better off when the opportunities their culture provides are more complex and diverse, and that we should act as trustees for the future of the complexity of our own culture."

In other words, a liberal state can and should increase the range of cultural options. It should *not* favor any particular preferences regarding those options. For that reason Dworkin recommends aid "in the form of indiscriminate subsidies, such as tax exemptions for donations to cultural institutions rather than as specific subsidies to particular institutions.... When discriminations are made, they should favor forms of art that are too expensive to be sustained by wholly private, market transactions."

This doggedly nonpaternalistic program may succeed in disguising its values, but the values are there nonetheless. Why fund art museums but not drive-in movie theaters? Drive-ins are a cultural institution now threatened with extinction. If steps are not taken to preserve them, our future culture will be less diverse. Both art museums and drive-ins represent actual preferences. The difference between them is merely the difference between high and popular culture.

Conclusion

The truth is, public funding of the arts is paternalistic, and nothing is gained by pretending otherwise. Because government cannot support all citizens' preferences, it must decide which are most valuable to society as a whole. It must choose those aspects of our culture most worthy of being preserved.

This paternalism remains harmless so long as it operates through the usual political processes. As long as politicians must debate publicly which aspects of our culture to subsidize, and as long as they must convince constituents that their decisions are sensible, paternalism poses no threat to democratic society. As Galston argues, "Politics is not just purposive or instrumental; it is also expressive, both on the collective and on the individual level. Through it we express our conception of who we are and who we want to be."

If we take collective pride in our cultural heritage—if we want our children and grandchildren to share in that heritage—we should go on subsidizing the arts. And Congress should go on debating which conditions, if any, our tax dollars will carry with them.

The sources cited in this article are William A. Galston, interview; Edward C. Banfield, *The Democratic Muse: Visual Arts and the Public Interest* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Ronald Dworkin, "Can a Liberal State Support Art?" in Dworkin's *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).