

# **A Vision for the National Endowment for the Arts**

**NEA**

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## **A Vision for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)**

### **The NEA and Its Role in Cultivating An Engaged Citizenry**

#### **A Learning Institution Built On A Solid Foundation – The Theorem**

Throughout my long career in the arts - as a musician, poet, professor, pioneer in the field of artistic cultural integration, administrator, and fundraiser - I have seen the vital role that education plays in the success of all arts related activities. The Italian word that we use to address a great conductor, Maestro, translates in English as ‘master’, but it also encompasses the concept of teacher, as well. The success of any artistic craft depends on both the transfer of knowledge and a very highly refined skill set from one generation to another. This is a natural process in any discipline, but in the arts, the intellectual conversation happens not just between fellow artists, but between artist and audience. Artists strive to express themselves through their craft, but always with the ultimate goal of making a connection with another. That connection is dependent not only on the skill of the creator, but on the knowledge and awareness of the audience. If we wish to foster an arts culture in our country that is vital and engaged, we need to encourage the same traits in our citizens, who are, after all, our audience.

In the particular case of the NEA, we owe a debt of gratitude to Chairman Gioia for his work in strengthening the National Endowment of the Arts as a viable institution within the national government. He has rightly recognized that the NEA has as its constituents every American, so he has worked hard to extend the reach of the agency to every region of the country. The NEA now enjoys bipartisan and bicameral support in Congress, and there is a consensus that national support for the arts is crucial for maintaining a healthy society. The NEA-initiated study “Reading at Risk” has provided indisputable evidence of the positive social aspects of reading, showing the connection between readers and heightened community involvement. Or, as Chairman Gioia puts it in his most recent forum on the NEA website, “...reading is an invitation to activism.” Through tireless effort and great enthusiasm, he has helped make the NEA a well-administered institution that is positioned to make a positive change in society.

He also correctly frames the challenges facing us as arts administrators in the 21st century. As he asks: “How do we take the next generation of Americans and bring them to their full potential so they are active, productive citizens?” I’d like to address this question in some detail and discuss how I feel the NEA can best accomplish this mission in its role as an educational institution.

#### **Demystifying the Creative Process – The Strategy**

We need to demystify the creative process for our citizens and, in doing so, invite them into the craft. I agree with Chairman Gioia when he says: “Artists and art administrators have done a poor job of reaching out to the rest of society and making them understand

that arts are not luxuries, they are an essential part of a full education.” I would argue even further that the arts and creative expression in general is a human birthright, and one that the NEA should try to cultivate in every American.

In celebrating the unique and often highly personal vision of artists, we have unwittingly made them a separate and often exotic group within our society. The funding controversies of the ‘90’s at the NEA stemmed in part from this ‘us versus them’ chasm concerning artists and their relationship to society as a whole. Part of this disconnect is a natural result of the wonder that we feel when we experience profound art. We are touched deeply by a performance or a painting, or dazzled by a display of craft that makes us conclude that we could never do anything like what we’re seeing or hearing. Often, the artistic community is just as guilty of perpetuating this distance with its audience. Many of us have met artists who seek validation for their work while at the same time remaining aloof in discussing or sharing their craft.

While only a small segment of the population decides to pursue a professional career as an artist, we all share the desire to create. A young married couple who buy their first house and argue over what color to paint their living room are engaged in the design process. A man who puts together a music playlist on his i-pod for a party is making the same types of decisions about musical flow as a composer working with original themes. Our daily lives are filled with creative activity; we often don’t notice because it’s such a natural human expression. We sing with the radio, forget lyrics and invent our own. We read a book and imagine ourselves as the main character. We alter a recipe to emphasize a particular taste. They are all examples of the creative mind at work.

In this light, artists are not a separate group somehow removed from ordinary people. They are simply those who have chosen as a career to hone their creative skills to the highest possible level over the course of a lifetime. Their vision and the refinement of their work is as much a result of consistent effort and discipline as it is of talent and inspiration. We are amazed and perhaps intimidated by the scope and depth of a play by Shakespeare, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that a human being just like us labored many hours to find the perfect words to convey his sentiments.

### The “Hands-On Approach” - The Need for Active Participation – The Tactics

Much has been written about the dumbing down of America, and we can clearly see evidence of this in falling test scores and rising drop out rates in high school. It’s easy to blame the entertainment media for much of this, but they are simply serving the needs of an increasingly passive, non-engaged population.

Thousands of children are now diagnosed every year with attention deficit disorder, but I would argue that our entire society suffers from it. In a way, the pervasive presence of media technology has made this inevitable. With cell phones, texting, and the internet,

our society is awash in media chatter, much of it pure noise, and all of it packaged in the smallest digestible portions. We snack on one bit of entertainment kibble and then move on quickly to the next one. We're slaves to our flatscreen TV's and all of their magic images, perfected by computer animation and presented in crystal clear high definition. It's easy for us to sit back and enjoy the visual ride. As long as we're entertained, we'll stay put.

This world of rapid-fire images and information is the only one that our youngest generation knows, and yet any skilled teacher will tell you - this is not the most effective way to learn. In this country, we celebrate innovation and individualism, and yet we do very little in our school curriculum to encourage these traits in our students. We still reward those who memorize best, those who can process new data and information fastest. These are valuable skills, but they are only part of the learning picture.

The arts can challenge our children in ways that no textbook can, because they are often embodied activities. They literally depend on the body, as well as the mind, for their success. Watch a young dancer complete a spin without getting dizzy, as she learns to focus on a stationary point in front of her. Or experience the joy of a young artist whose drawings spring to life as he begins to see perspective correctly. Listen to a young musician who recreates a popular tune on his or her instrument for the first time.

They are all examples of subtle shifts in awareness that develop as a student learns an artistic craft. And unlike information memorized for a test and quickly forgotten, arts learning tends to stick, because these gains are the results of focused repetition involving the whole body. Add to that the feeling of accomplishment and the joy of being able to do something new, and you have a powerful engine for learning. Focus and the discipline to remain focused are skills that develop with time, experience and patience. An active, participatory arts education encourages and requires these skills, and can act as an effective counterbalance to a world of fragmented stimuli.

#### A More Comprehensive View of Arts Education – The Logistics

On its website, the NEA has as its motto, "A great nation deserves great art." At the risk of being presumptuous, I would suggest that this slogan is inadequate in a number of ways. As we've seen, art - or more generally, the creative impulse - springs naturally from the human condition. It is not a luxury that is somehow separate from us. Though we can own objects of art like paintings or sculpture, art itself is not an object. Nor are our citizens passive vessels into which we pour culture, thus edifying or rewarding them. Certainly, one of the primary missions of the NEA is to expose Americans to art with which they may not be familiar, be it contemporary and native or classic and European. As arts administrators, our hope should always be that this exposure leads to active reflection on the part of our audience, not simply entertainment through high culture. But for art to realize its potential as a transformative force, its relationship with its audience needs to be more interactive.

Live art demands our attention, because it needs an engaged audience for its success. A live orchestra performance requires that an audience sit still in a concert hall and focus primarily on the music. You may love classical music, but your experience of it will be much richer in a live setting than it would be as background music in your home, no matter how good your stereo system. The magic and power of art is not simply the quality of the product but the interaction with its audience in a supportive environment. Realizing this, we need to expand what we mean by arts education. For children in particular, we see how useful the creative process can be as a general educational tool. For adults, we need to make the experience of live art as vibrant and timely as possible.

One of the NEA's National Initiatives, Operation Homecoming, is a great example of a program that exposes regular citizens - in this case our soldiers - to a type of arts education. Through workshops conducted at military installations, distinguished writers have helped troops and their families tell their unique stories. These wartime experiences are captured in a diverse range of writing forms, including journals, poems, emails, short stories and letters. They not only personalize the distinctive sacrifice made by our military, but they treat ordinary men and women as artists and creators, giving them the tools and the forum to express themselves. In turn, we as audience are drawn into their lives and confronted with the human dimension of war. If we judge successful art by its ability to make an empathetic connection between artist and audience, surely Operation Homecoming exemplifies this.

#### Getting the Job Done – The Process

For me then, arts education has three components. The first and most basic is general exposure, making our citizens aware of not only individual artists but of artistic forms as well. This is the narrowest and most traditional view of arts education and still central to our mission. Whether a child or an adult, many Americans have never seen a live dance concert, or attended a performance of Shakespeare. How can they be edified by art if they are not aware of it? To a large extent, we exist to publicize the arts.

The second component of an arts education is the cultivation of an informed arts audience, which necessarily springs from our first role. If we are skilled in presenting art to a new audience in a favorable light, they will want to repeat the experience, and in doing so, they will begin to develop a knowledge base that will make them more engaged. Just as a sporting event is more interesting if you understand some of the rules, so too an artistic performance becomes more nuanced if you have some prior experience with the art form. An informed audience also tends to be more passionate about supporting the arts.

The final component of an arts education, and the one, which I've given greatest focus to here, is the use of the creative process as a tool in the general development of the individual. The line between artist and audience blurs, as the artist demonstrates the nuts and bolts of his or her craft and invites the audience to become participants and even co-creators. This is particularly effective with children, who are naturally curious and open

to new experiences, but as we've seen with Operation Homecoming, this approach can prove equally rewarding and even cathartic for adults as well.

### **The NEA as the catalyst for arts education**

Given its position as an arts funding source with national reach, the NEA has a unique opportunity in the coming years to help redefine arts education in this country. Whether through its national initiatives, its relationship with state and regional arts agencies or any of the myriad programs it supports, the NEA should lead the discussion of arts education by asking the following questions: "In our presentation and support of the arts, are we developing programs that examine the creative process as well as the result? Have we made every effort to engage our audience in a way that allows maximum interaction with an artist or with an art form? Have we conceived of our programs as a stimulus for learning, particularly for children? And most generally, is our work as arts administrators informed by the same creativity and flexibility of thought that we celebrate in the works that we champion? Each of these questions will be a topic of senior NEA staff periodic progressive views.

Every mature artist eventually comes to realize that the best way to learn, is to learn to teach yourself. Great art springs from a combination of discipline, training, inspiration, passion and most importantly, curiosity. Not surprisingly, these are the traits that characterize all learning at the most successful level. If we are serious about our belief that the arts can act as a transformative force in our society, we need to train our citizens to be better students. The arts and the creative process give us a multidimensional way to cultivate a nation that is both active and curious about the world around them.

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