

LETTER FROM MIAMI

BY LEIDA SNOW

Fact: Unless the arts community gets involved in the political process, public arts funding in this country will likely disappear. Fact: The major artists and arts institutions aren't affected in ways that inspire them to act, and the smaller groups are under siege and can't.

Over the past several months, the National Endowment for the Arts has held a series of regional and community events called American Canvas, an initiative meant to elicit solutions to the ongoing crisis in the arts. At the sixth and final forum in Miami, Patrick Moore, director of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, spoke tellingly about how the arts document our lives, using the AIDS quilt as an obvious and powerful example; and Penelope McPhee, chief program officer of the Knight Foundation, explained that it is public funding that makes art accessible, and that many of the programs that build audiences, those that were in our schools and communities, have been eliminated.

Also on that panel about access was the founder and producing artistic director of Teatro Avante and the International Hispanic Theater Festival. In an extended telephone conversation after the forum, Mario Ernesto Sanchez spoke about the realities for smaller arts organizations since the congressionally mandated appropriations cuts at the NEA.

"Look," he said, "the Extension Arts Program has been closed down. That was the program that was for us, the groups that get the \$10,000 and \$15,000 grants, the minority groups." Sanchez does not fault Jane Alexander, the beleaguered NEA Chair. "They mean well at the NEA," he said, "there is good heart there." Unsaid was his conclusion that there is not much the agency can do in the face of the hard reality imposed by the draconian cuts in staff and programs.

"No matter what else I do," he continued, "I always come back to the theater, but how many people will do that?" He spoke without bitterness of the on-the-edge existence of the small-

er groups. "Being in the theater is like taking a vow of poverty, of charity," he said. "Most of us are starving. We don't know what will happen next month."

It's no wonder so many people in the arts, and especially the theater groups, are becoming burned out and depressed. They've heard it before—well-meaning people, like McPhee, speaking truthfully about the government as "the only institution that has the mandate for access." She was not the only one at the NEA forum to point out that "corporations and foundations have private agendas."

On another panel, New York Congressman Jerrold Nadler said that government is the public expression of the will of the people, and that "people who care about the arts have to learn to express that in a political way."

Sanchez is cognizant of that reality; he also freely acknowledges the crucial support that federal funding has provided, not only in direct grants, but in "dignity and status" when groups go before other government agencies or corporations and foundations. But, he says simply, "Artists have to pay their rent and eat first, before they can become politically involved. Some of the groups don't even have the 32 cents for the postage stamp to write to their member of Congress, much less the time to write the letter."

This kind of siege mentality is understandable, and many groups are looking to private and foundation support. In fact, the NEA itself is doing that—the American Canvas forums were all privately funded. But a recent study concluded that corporate and foundation giving has not increased since the precipitous drop in public funding.

A telling example of the limits of private funding is the fascinating, and meticulous, Miami Beach-located Wolfsonian Museum, which houses over 9000 decorative arts objects, paintings, sculptures, and books from 1885-1945. Privately funded when it was established in 1993, it has recently had to restructure and downsize as that funding dried up. Peggy Loar, president of the Wolfsonian Foundation, says its

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NEA Chairman Jane Alexander with Congressman Jerrold Nadler.
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very survival now depends on a pending merger with a university.

Recent surveys have shown that the majority of Americans support government arts and humanities funding; many people say they would even be willing to spend more in taxes to pay for government funding. But, as Congressman Nadler said, "support" is an amorphous concept. It has to be "translated into direct political action."

The NEA has said that American Canvas was not about problems, but about solutions. Next spring, the Endowment plans to publish an analysis of the information gathered at the forums, recommending strategies to help artists and arts institutions integrate into their communities.

Alexander announced in Miami that the NEA "sees no increase in federal funding" on the horizon. Rethinking the mission of the agency, she now hopes it

can provide the leadership that will "inspire communities to get behind the arts, in the same way that the conservation movement has emerged from the grass roots level to protect our environment."

Nadler said that in order to build a solid infrastructure for the arts, "it is crucial we find ways to involve that majority of Americans who say they care about the arts in the political world as it exists."

True, but in a world where mega mergers of media giants influence what we know, and big money talks in the political arena, how can people in the arts mobilize support when many are fighting a daily battle for survival?

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