

Why I want to head the National Endowment for the Arts

by Richard Kostelanetz



Having received from the National Endowment for the Arts the whopping sum of ten (yes, ten) individual grants between 1976 and 1991, I feel a certain obligation to give back, as we say. If we accept the principle that cultural funding should make happen what would not otherwise occur, we'd agree that some of these grants to me were worth public funds.

One, from the Visual Arts Program for “services,” enabled me to prepare an anthology of American sound poetry that, once finished, was accepted for publication as *Text-Sound Texts* (William Morrow, 1980). This book is still regarded as classic. Another grant from the NEA Visual Arts department supported my book-art, which I continue to this day. In this latter genre I subsequently produced work distinguished enough to be acknowledged in critical histories of the genre.

From the Media Arts program of the NEA, I received a grant to compose a radio program of and about the sound of the language of prayer. *Invocations* (1981, 1984) was later broadcast around the world before becoming a lp record still in print, now as a cd, from Folkways-Smithsonian. One hour long, elaborately produced, *Invocations* has been acknowledged in some critical histories of contemporary electronic music. Another Media Arts grant supported another hour-long audiotape of and about the sound of New York City. It too was broadcast by public stations around the world, initially as part of the Metropolis series at Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

My NEA-funded audio fugues about the first two books of the New Testament, *The Gospels* and *Die Evangelien* (both 1984), likewise had a distinguished history. Whereas the latter was broadcast and then rebroadcast over German and Swiss-German radio station, the former became a cd that the renowned art collector Peter Norton distributed as his Christmas gift in 1990. Another NEA grant supported the composition of *Americas' Game*—another hour-long electro-acoustic composition of and about the sound of baseball; but it, to my surprise, has less public history.

As none of these works would have happened without NEA support, I remain indebted. Over the past three decades I've also written critically of the NEA, mostly of its literature program. Need I add that no previous chairman of the NEA ever received a single grant prior to assuming the position; none had ever published criticism of its operations or its results.

Indeed, more than one chairman seemed barely familiar with how the NEA worked, let alone what it had done and thus could do.

While a few stupid foolish grants two decades ago provoked Congressional ire, the NEA survived, only to become, however, increasingly invisible and inconsequential, unfortunately and unnecessarily. One reason is that the individual grants (like the ones I've received) were abolished in all departments except literature, oddly. This absence presently denies younger artists (people like myself three decades ago) opportunities that might otherwise be realized. An admonitory history of its decline could be written; but since the NEA has become so invisible, may I doubt if it would be published and thus doubt if it would ever be written, certainly not without support from a donor expecting benefits.

Much as Donald Trump would like "to make America great again," so would I like to do likewise by the increasingly decrepit NEA. Were I its chairman, I would simply encourage on every level the support of excellence, greatness, and the best. Given the importance of those key values for the survival of art in any culture, all other claims should be set aside, especially when some of them, say on behalf of legitimate social minorities, are better served by other government agencies.

On behalf of these principles of excellence, greatness, and best, I would try to conduct every judicial meeting possibly open to me if only to repeat those crucial principles to everyone within earshot—administrators as well as panelists. On behalf of the best in American culture, a leader must instill direction and encourage cultural class, which have been two qualities recently absent at the NEA.

Years ago, certain self-defined activists spoke of "culture wars," usually on behalf of one or another supposedly disadvantaged social interest. By rejecting grants that the panels had legitimately awarded, the NEA chiefs stupidly gave

some second-rate artists an opportunity for more publicity than they deserved, eventually to the detriment of the NEA. (I would joke with colleagues that flacking for lousy artists was not appropriate for the NEA.)

However, in truth, in the history of art, especially in America, the only true and continuing conflict has been between excellence and its enemies. Now that the distribution of culture has become ever more commercialized, to the unfortunate neglect of excellence that is often lost, public funding should focus upon supporting the highest noncommercial quality, again making happen valuable work that would not otherwise happen, as it did for me. The enemy is censorship by commerce, which is no more acceptable than censorship by any state. While the first is obvious and readily exposed, the results of the second are hidden and thus its social costs less obvious.

Simply, with this goal of making the NEA great again clearly in mind, the NEA would benefit from a leader with a history of advocating excellence and nothing less. My record on this level is strong, dating back to the anthology *On Contemporary Literature* (1964, 1969) and including *American Writing Today*, which I organized in the early 1980s for the Voice of America, among other books since. If not me, perhaps someone else similarly working at the highest cultural levels. Need I add that giving the job to sometime movie stars, producers of commercial art, veteran cultural bureaucrats, political hacks, or retired military pros probably won't turn around the NEA.

First of all, I would restore the individual grants. Even if the NEA was designed by Nelson Rockefeller to subsidize large institutions controlled by rich people (like himself)—literally to socialize their costs—support for new work by strong individuals gave the NEA credibility within the arts community.

Secondly, I would recommend that panelists in various

departments be appointed to serve for six years, much as the NEA Counselors are. The recurring problems when panelists serve only for one year, particularly in the literature department, is that they tend to reward their students-lovers-protégées before safely returning home, Transient panelists thus accounting for the sense, particularly in the NEA literature fellowships, that the winners appear to be those supplicants that senior people like best.

Having been the victim of NEA administrative high-handedness (that I've exposed in print), I would want to examine personally the exclusion of every applicant disqualified by the staff.

I would question applications from the grants hustlers, as I call institutions that exist primarily to solicit public funds without much public produce, let alone much visible excellence.

Given the increasing presence of writing in Spanish in the US, some of it very good, I would also rule that the literature program could accept applications in Spanish, with or without English translations, in Americas' other language, which was incidentally spoken by my own maternal grandparents.

If this move is successful, the NEA should consider supporting American literature in yet other languages, such as Russian (spoken by my paternal grandparents) and French (favored between both sets of my grandparents). One historic truth that should be recognized by the NEA is that many great books were written in the United States in languages other than English.

The commitment to the best notwithstanding, I would also support the establishments of website in which every writer, every artist, and every composer, say, satisfying minimal standards of professional seriousness, could make publicly available a self-chosen sample of his or her work along with a statement of intentions; so that any colleague or possible

sponsor could quickly glean basic information. These individual web pages could also be indexed to facilitate connecting American artists to possible audiences and sponsors.

I would reverse certain policies, some of them imposed a dozen years ago, to make NEA more superficially "acceptable" to newspaper writers and Congresspeople. One unfortunate move changed the preference in film documentaries from those more likely to be artistically excellent (and this remembered by discriminating people) to those more likely to be broadcast over public television, where the lifespan of most new documentaries is only a little longer than Hollywood's.

My favorite *bête noir* was the NEA's support Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* (2005), which was produced from interviews and other footage supplied by Bob Dylan's manager Jeff Rosen. I cannot think of a distinguished arts documentary in history in which the subject controlled so much, even if a celebrated film impresario—literally, a brand-name—took credit as "director." Controlled publicity is what hired flacks do.

I would also discourage support of such secondary cultural activities as the distribution of books already published or, say, the teaching classic English literature here. Support for performing Shakespeare in American high schools should, in my judgment, be the job of the British external cultural agency, much as the dissemination of American literature abroad has been a function of the USIA (for which I once organized *American Writing Today* [1981]). Certain efforts, though intrinsically laudable, really belong to other federal agencies that are better funded. The NEA should not be in the biz of either educational enhancement or social affirmative actions; both are distractions from any effort to make great again its efforts toward American excellence.

On the wall of my NEA would be three icons. The first would honor Nancy Hanks, whose name already graces the NEA office

building, because she realized that an American arts agency should support artists as well as institutions, her friend Nelson's designs notwithstanding. This is the practice is nearly all other first-world countries, if not the measure of a first-world culture, beginning with our next-door neighbor Canada. I know because my work received support there and in Germany and Sweden for three. Only an American-hating subversive would want the USA to be culturally less than first-world.

My second hero is Brian O'Doherty, an Irish artist and writer long resident in America. Previously a critic and editor of art magazines who'd also published books, he headed first the visual arts program and then media arts from the 1970s into the 1990s. In the former O'Doherty typically instituted more sophisticated arts categories for individual fellowships that acknowledged more than painting and sculpture (such as book-art and artists' services, both of which rewarded me). By contrast, say, in the literature program, to the traditional categories of poetry and prose has been added only translation. Credit O'Doherty also with initiating NEA support of art in public places which incidentally made NEA's name permanently visible across the country. He understood profoundly what a government cultural agency could do, again making happen excellence that otherwise would not be.

For his second position a chief of Media Arts, an individual Wikipedia entry credits O'Doherty with, among other activities, initiating the public television series *Great Performances* and *American Masters*, the latter incidentally taking the title of a 1973 book he wrote only about American painters. Many programs from both these series are rebroadcast years later, for one measure of their lasting value. His achievements illustrate a rule I learned while working in Europe: One measure of the best cultural administrators is that they had, like O'Doherty, all published real books.

My third hero is H. R. Gross, the Iowa Congressman who between

1949 and 1975 was the most prominent government cost-cutter, for instance famously refusing to grant Jackie Kennedy a federal pension because "she didn't need the money." For that good reason alone, I would have opposed the NEA's funding of Scorsese's Dylan, as, apart from issues of ultimate quality, neither it nor they needed public money. Tis said that Gross saved tax-payers millions of dollars not only in opposing executive extravagance but also in putting his colleagues on notice that in their proposals he would spot unjustified superfluous costs.

Simply, a government agency entrusted with an important cultural mission on a modest budget can't afford to be either distracted or wasteful. The first goal is making the NEA great again, the equal of comparable agencies in the great Western cultures, incidentally reflective of a country that is truly first-world rather than, as it has unfortunately become, second- or third-. The second goal is making American art greater. Given these purposes, may I further suggest that only someone who has received NEA grants, who understands their significance, should be entrusted with directing the NEA, much as only a sometime fireman should be a fire chief.