

Ignore the arts at a nation's peril: Why we need the NEA

“The arts are essential to any complete national life. The State owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them... Ill fares the race which fails to salute the arts with the reverence and delight which are their due.”

– Winston Churchill

by Sara Schroerlucke

In 1938, Winston Churchill described art as an important characteristic of a nation because of the ways that art reflects the ideals of a society and can transform a nation entirely. There is truth to this statement, as art has the innate ability to serve as a powerful medium of expression and act as a tool for communities to relay powerful messages about sociopolitical topics and cultural practices, both cross-culturally and internationally. The arts have the capability to capture and educate an audience, which can then initiate a dialogue about imperative and pertinent issues that encourage growth, development, and unity between peoples, communities, and nations.

As a dance performance major on the cusp of entering the professional dance realm, it is easy for me to articulate from my own experiences the great impact of all forms of art within communities. Yet the arts have recently been in peril due to the potential defunding of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which has been considered America's chief supporter for arts funding since its establishment in 1965. Other independent cultural agencies have also received funding from the federal government in past years, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, all considered to have a recognizable and lasting impact on communities in the United States.

More specifically, the NEA receives about \$148-million dollars per year from the Federal government and supports in every congressional district thousands of organizations, performances, and activities that provide Americans opportunities to engage with the arts within their communities. From this budget, the NEA has awarded over 145 thousand grants since its inception, in which every NEA dollar is matched by up to seven dollars by private and other public funds. Consequently, this amounts to about 600-million dollars worth of funding annually that is dispersed amongst congressional districts across the nation. The NEA's grants have reached underserved populations, low-income audiences, and high-poverty neighborhoods, especially within metropolitan areas. As communicated through the NEA's website, this cultural agency “supports arts learning, celebrates America's rich and diverse cultural heritage, and promotes equal access to the arts in every community across America.”

Despite the incredible activities of the NEA, President Trump proposed a budget that considers eliminating the art and humanities agencies and defunding the public broadcasting corporation (National Public Radio), accounting for a total of 741-million dollars annually. This is less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the United States' annual federal spending, a small cut with a lasting impact on communities.

So what are these lasting impacts on communities?

The answer to this question lies in the various ways art can inspire and transform a nation's people. Art is firstly a reflection of society, an embodiment of a culture. Art communicates a nation's history and the peoples' concerns about the present. It is a representation of society, where culture is never static, but is "constantly under going a process of transformation" (Schramm 345). Ultimately, art serves as a vehicle for societal development. It is an imperative detail in the transformation of a society because it serves as a medium to discuss and inquire about change, and then to use creativity to construct this change. When the living and working conditions of a people change, culture, and consequently its art, hold a responsibility to reflect these changes. Ananda Breed, author of *Performing the Nation: Genocide, Justice, Reconciliation*, writes specifically about the impacts of dance:

Dance technique offers more than protocols for reading the body; it is also a technique of subjectivity, a template organizing sociality and an archive that links subjectivities and consequently to history. As archive, technique contains and organizes the traces and residues dance leaves behind, and out of which forms again: injuries, vocabulary, relationships (Breed 30).

Therefore, art demonstrates reconciliation and resistance between the perpetrator and the survivor, and provides the people of a nation with a united energy to not only resist but to progress towards an ideal future filled with endless possibilities for improvement, especially in regards to human rights, social justice, and community development.

Art, through both of its participatory mediums, performance and education, is most successful at acting as a vehicle for societal progression when there is a relationship between artists, their work, and their communities. As Kim Berman writes in her article, "Facilitating Social Change through the Visual Arts," artists are invited to "imagine a future, to embed possibility to visualize human rights and justice" through the work they create and the message that this work inspires within communities. In doing so, artists aid in the creation of a space that facilitates growth and creativity for all citizens (Berman 3). Artists that create work that promotes self-actualization can motivate citizens to recognize their role within their communities and their ability to generate change.

Artists serve as an educational resource for citizens to become more knowledgeable for how they too might use their own creativity to enhance their voices and their visibility within their nation. Where art is a medium of expression for artists, artists serve as a resource to citizens, and are responsible for fostering a sense of collaboration with citizens of communities in order to promote creativity and change that can come from it. Art most successfully serves as a vehicle for development when citizens of a nation are encouraged to create and involve themselves with an artistic process that fosters collaboration, community engagement, and empowerment.

This is where the existence of the NEA and other arts and humanities organizations comes into play. The NEA believes that the arts are a priority within the United States, a nation firmly built upon the creativity of its people. "The arts are a fundamental part of American lives and American education," and for this reason, the NEA strongly promotes community engagement and collaboration between artists and

their communities and funds arts education as well as working and healing artists in every congressional district in America (www.arts.gov). The NEA expresses the ways in which arts education not only transforms the greater community but has a lasting impact on individuals because it develops creative thinking skills and inspires self-expression. The NEA believes that at-risk youth who have access to arts education within or outside of school will set higher career goals and contribute to greater success within the creative economy (www.arts.gov).

Nearly 5.4 million dollars and 353 NEA grants support lifelong learning within educational institutions, and fifty percent of these grantees are located in high-poverty neighborhoods. As noted on the NEA website, ten thousand dollars was granted to produce an opera in Anchorage, Alaska based on the true story of the longest held American POW during the Vietnam War. In another grant, the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra was funded, providing citizens with exposure to classical music. These projects, of the many that are funded by the NEA, provide citizens opportunities to better understand their history as well as their dreams for the future. Ronald Radosh of *The Daily Beast* writes, “taking away theater in schools, music, dance and jazz festivals as well as programs for veterans and museum exhibitions may rank below Meals on Wheels, but many citizens will view it as a loss for their communities” (Radosh).

It is because of the NEA that people of all ages ultimately have the opportunity to experience art and to learn more about how creative expression can enhance their lives and promote a better future for their communities.

Perhaps the reason that funding of arts and humanities agencies is continually threatened is because the administration fears the ways in which art empowers people to unite together to demand change. Especially with the many controversies summoned by the new administration, silencing the people starts with the defunding of the many mediums of expression that promote cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. If there is truth to this theory, the administration should also note that artists and writers paint the legacies of history and its leaders. Furthermore, if we, as a people, are going to continue to promote and fight for a society that deems peace, unity, and collaboration an imperative between communities and within the melting pot of cultures that defines the United States, then the arts must be involved. These goals are attainable when a government favors a country where artists are supported and arts education is provided and guaranteed to all.

A nation will only find clarity and purpose within continual transformation when the arts are involved. The arts must be involved. Always.

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