

Assembly 2007
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Executive Director's Report
Jonathan Katz

Thank you, John (Rohman, NASAA president).

During our time together at Assembly 2007, we have explored the value of the arts in American society. We have explored the ways that state arts agencies work to ensure that the public benefits of the arts are shared by all, as befits a healthy, democratic nation. In a few minutes we will be informed and inspired by our final speaker, an artist. We have a few minutes now for reflection—on who we are, on what we stand for, on why our work is important, on what we should do.

What is at the heart of the mission shared by state arts agencies?

Peter Hewitt, chief executive of Arts Council England, summarized his mission as “getting the arts into the core script.” By that he meant getting as many people as possible to see the arts as central to a healthy, creative and exciting modern day nation. Former NEA chair Bill Ivey put it a little differently at the National Press Club. He said he would like his job to be considered important enough that if he committed murder, the news coverage would not only be in the “Lifestyle” section.

Our mission of “getting the arts into the core script” requires us, first and foremost, to broaden and deepen participation in the arts. In a democratic society committed to equity of opportunity, we, as public sector leaders, must remove the barriers to participation—barriers of education, barriers of cost, barriers of geographic isolation, barriers of race, ethnicity, language, national origin, belief, gender, age, physical and mental disability—any barrier that limits Americans from realizing and drawing upon their artistic potential. Our programs must demonstrate that our public sector mission makes a difference in the freedom people have to live as they need to and want to, and to pursue happiness. We must also communicate the value of what we do to those who control our resources. This is largely a matter of

advocacy—of leading those who benefit from participation in the arts to act on their interests, especially in relationship-building with decision makers. But that is another conversation. This is about who we are.

We state arts agency leaders are not the only ones who hold a stake in getting the arts into the core script, but, what is that particular stake we hold? Who are we? We are those who have accepted the responsibility to make the arts available as a public good—we are responsible for those aspects of the arts that everyone benefits from but that can not be provided by the market place or by individuals acting alone. What do we stand for? We stand for fair access for every child and adult to the full range of the expressive and persuasive powers that will enable them to inhabit and defend a life of liberty. We stand for fair access to knowledge of the diverse heritage of cultures and values that defines us as Americans. We stand for the sensory and imaginative powers that enable us all to apply creativity to our most important tasks, such as educating our young people, earning a living, and building our communities. We stand for that artistic and uniquely human quality of empathy, which is essential to maintaining a democracy, which we learn by creating and by communicating, and which provides us the ability to understand not only our neighbors, but people beyond our borders whose artistry and cultural expressions differ from ours, but whose prosperity and destiny are increasingly entwined with our own.

Why are we important? Let's look at what our movement—the state arts agency movement—has accomplished and what we have learned since 1965 when six state arts agencies had \$2 million total and fully half of that belonged to New York. Most of our agencies were created in the following five years in response to incentives from the new National Endowment for the Arts.

In the 1970's, we demonstrated that through the convening, planning, grant making and staff services our agencies were experimenting with, state government could play a leadership role in democratizing participation in the arts throughout the United States and its territories. By 1980, our total state appropriations exceeded \$100 million, in 1985 surpassed the budget of the NEA, and by the end of the 1980's we were close to \$300 million when recession hit and we lost 30% of our funding.

We really matured as a field in the early 1990's as our budgets plummeted and we studied what was happening, what it really meant to be integrated in state government—with budgets that had become visible. We learned that the states that lost the most had gained the most only one year before, that our support had to be

broad and deep beyond our vocal champions, that we could not be identified with a political party, an administration, or a branch of government. We learned how important it was for all of our advocates to speak with one voice about a shared vision—our major groups, our smallest and our individual supporters, in all regions of the state, in the largest cities and most rural areas. The words “political” and “marketing” were finally embraced in the world of cultural policy and arts administration.

In the late 1990’s, with a boom economy and in the aftermath of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano controversies, we learned to explain the public benefits of the arts in terms of economic development, education, youth at risk, cultural tourism and strengthening community life. Congress stabilized political support for the NEA by doubling the percentage to the state arts agencies, showing us in a new light the importance of our federal-state partnership. Our advocacy was so effective that our appropriations grew faster than state government overall, everywhere except in the West, and we topped \$400 million.

Then, with the new millenium, came devastating state government shortfalls and the process of losing again a third of our appropriations. But we have surfed the counter-current of the new knowledge-based economy, synergizing initiatives and messages: creative economy, creative class, creative industry clusters, cultural economy, social capital. In the past three years of a churning economy lurching into a global market place in the midst of a war on the other side of the world, some of our agencies are having a difficult time, many are recovering and our combined funding has risen each year. What a roller-coaster we ride as cultural leaders in state government!

And from this vantage point in our history, we can see the rough terrain over which we have advanced as public sector arts agencies in America. We can see our national suspicion of centralized authority, our preference for small government and low taxes, our emphasis on the marketplace as a source of both private and public benefits, our materialist traditions, our lack of a perceived common culture, our frontier utilitarianism, the top-down evolution of both our state and our regional arts organizations, the reduction by 50% of arts teachers between 1970 and 1990, the dominance of our film and music industries in the global market place that distracts from the poverty of our arts education in public schools, our various traditions that embrace art when it celebrates beauty but shrink from art that celebrates inquiry, that embrace art when it reinforces our beliefs but shrink from art when it challenges them.

Over this terrain, we can now see the path of community development, decentralization and re-granting that helped local arts agencies grow to 4,000 in number. We see our desperate attempts to save arts education with our limited resources, which we have debated for 40 years because this should be primarily the responsibility of education decision makers. These attempts have been leaderly, downright strategic, and are without an acceptable alternative.

In the aftermath of major controversies, as the foundation world has trended in their grant making to project support and the corporate world to cause-related marketing, state arts agencies, facing the most rigorous standards of public accountability, continue to distribute 40% of our grant funds as general operating support, the kind of support that gives cultural groups the greatest flexibility in choosing the means by which they provide public benefits. We have innovated many revenue schemes including fees and taxes and tax credits and endowments.

We have developed partnerships with leading foundations that have put a spotlight on our roles in making public policy, that have given us insight into how we can improve our public service, and that point to ways in which we can strengthen our public support. We meet here, having completed our 2007 fiscal year entrusted by state and federal government with over \$425 million to provide public benefits through the arts. We've come a long way from \$2 million in 1965.

We can take pride, too, in seeing that our pioneers immediately created NASAA as a means to speak with one voice, to learn from each other and to support each other, professionally and personally. As we celebrate the accomplishments of the state arts agency movement, as we note the strength and extent of our partnership with the NEA, our collaborations on issue briefs with the National Governors Association and on focus groups with the National Conference of State Legislatures, the inclusion of public arts agencies as full members of Grantmakers in the Arts, NASAA's co-management of the Arts Education Partnership, which is the nation's forum for advancing learning in the arts, as we see the arts and humanities groups of the United States forge a unified Congressional agenda through the Cultural Advocacy Group, which our lobbyist, Tom Birch, currently convenes, as we share ideas with cultural leaders from across our borders and around the world, and as we rely on our data system, the National Standard for Arts Information Exchange, to provide us with knowledge that gives us the potential for wisdom, as we celebrate all these things that our field has accomplished collectively through NASAA, we are celebrating the vision and remarkably good instincts of our pioneers. Thanks to those who built this

association, all of us learn when any of us has a set-back and all of us advance when any of us has a success.

Public service through the arts still requires state arts agency leaders to be visionaries and missionaries, both in their own states and in their work through NASAA to shape their larger environment. As we ask what we should do now, one of our greatest challenges is how to balance our investments strategically in these changing times. People participate in the arts through three major avenues: the not-for-profit cultural community, commercial arts and cultural industries, and amateur cultural engagement. Not-for-profit cultural groups continue to make enormous contributions to the nation's diverse artistic legacy, to its communities and to the economy. New ones are starting all the time, and their collective expenditures grew by 75% over the 14-year period ending in 2005. Meanwhile, commercial film, music, entertainment and publishing industries also continue to grow.

We have reason to collaborate with the travel and tourism communities, and with the full range of corporate entities that contribute to a creative economy. Public-private initiatives can expand participation in the arts, sustain jobs and boost tax revenues. How should our agencies relate to the world of digitized communication, which offers unlimited creative opportunities to well-trained amateur and professional artists, and which represents a wild-card factor in the future of our traditional grantees? Arts education, which represents a gateway to all participation in the arts, is suffering cutbacks at exactly the time when it is most needed to help stem the catastrophic drop out rate and when the global work force is dividing into those workers with and those without imaginative skills. Given the ways participation in the arts is changing, how do we stay true to our public sector mission? We will need all our collective experience and ideas to make wise and strategic decisions.

It would not surprise me if in 40 years from now, maybe much sooner, we could hardly recognize the activities of state arts agencies. I am sure that our means of expression and communication, of sharing experience between individuals and among vast groups of people will be radically changed. I don't think we will recognize what a financial transaction looks like, though I expect vast commercial and extensive non-commercial networks to have evolved, along with a variety of relationships between them.

I expect that bionic advances will connect our bodies, our brains, our thoughts and our emotions in ways we can perhaps imagine but certainly cannot predict. Future

media, corporate entities, delivery systems for objects and ideas, our very sense of space and time, might be unrecognizable to us. I am sure everything will seem to be in a state of flux, seeming to move faster than it ever has.

I am equally confident, however, that our need, as individuals, as community members and as a nation, to dramatize our issues, to understand ourselves and how we relate to the world, to our past, to our present and to our future, will continue. As long as we call ourselves human, comedy, tragedy, triumph, defeat, heroism and cowardice, virtue, vice, honesty, deception and self-delusion will all be meaningful terms. Sex will still have many meanings, some of them new, all of them confusing. Adolescents will have discovered bold new behaviors and fashions to disgust their elders. And love . . . love will still have as many meanings as there are pairings and groups of people in the world.

So it seems highly likely that, whatever forms participation in the arts takes, there will be a uniquely public sector role, and that role will have as its goal fair access for all, and the people who accept responsibility for advancing participation in the arts through public service will need each other, and what they will need from each other, will be representation and knowledge and community, just as it always has been - just as it says in NASAA's strategic plan.

That, my friends, completes my executive director's report at NASAA's 40th convening.

And on that note, I want to thank our president, John Roman, the NASAA executive committee and board, our standing committees, task forces and advisory groups, every member agency, our partners and colleagues, our host agency and sponsors, and each of you here today, with my own special, special thanks to the fantastic NASAA staff. Thank you for inspiring me with your public spirit, for the good work that you do, and for allowing me to serve another year as your chief executive officer.

Thank you.