

Essay on Government-Supported Art

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Government support of the Arts is ultimately destructive of free expression and of the unfettered ability of the culture seen through the artifact of a period's artworks to express itself. Unless all support is changed to a completely unbiased random selection system, where anyone - regardless of "qualifications" or past work - can be chosen for a grant, artists who are truly concerned about Art should refuse to participate in any grant process.

Selection systems, no matter what level of government they are at, are inherently biased; in addition, they establish the principle of allowing bias to determine grants. US Federal Grants are given out by several different agencies; an artist is advised that "If you already have an idea of what might be a good fit for your program, this list will connect you to information on the various funding opportunities within the given agency", and given a list of various agencies whose mission the artist might advance (<http://206.161.133.195:591/federal-opportunities/b-federal.html>). Given this principle, there is ultimately no reason why the Congress should not completely ban certain types of artwork, especially given that its members are the direct representatives of the people whose money is being spent on the selected types of artwork.

Obviously, selection based on specific content will be biased. Not as obviously, but just as importantly, selection based on the artist's experience will be biased in the minds of the representative of the grantor agency. This is similar to the warning given on securities, such as stocks and bonds, that "past performance is no guarantee of future performance". However, grantor agencies who have reviewed a portfolio of past works by an artist will be expecting that work done for them will be of a similar vein, even if that expectation is not explicitly expressed. The artist will probably be aware as well that if he goes off on an entirely new track, his chances of getting funded again will be slim. In this way, grants given on a supposedly non-biased basis will have a built-in bias - all the better for the way the bias is hidden, for this allows the artist to claim 'independence' and the government to claim 'unbiased support for the Arts'.

Ideally, a random-selection system - a lottery, if you will - should be open to all comers from throughout the world. However, I believe it could be a reasonable concern of a funding Government to have as a basic 'theme' or intent of all funded artwork to indicate to generations to come that this Government, and culture, was wealthy enough to fund artwork. If this were accepted as a reasonable case, entries to the lottery - consisting only of an applicant submitting their name and other unique identifier to the process (so as not to permit multiple entries by the same person) - would be restricted to residents of the country funding the artwork. (I believe that residents would be more appropriate under the country-limiting scheme than citizens or subjects, as a citizen may be totally outside the geography and immediate culture, whereas someone may be a resident for twenty years and even have contributed in a significant way to a nation's culture without having become a citizen of that nation.)

The resultant artwork might well be a better expression of the intent of the culture than the current artifacts produced. Right now, artwork is constrained both by the agency providing the funds as well as by the ability of the artist to present proposals to the granting agency. Art that is more appropriate to the culture may be prevented from getting funding both by the inability of an artist who is not at home with words to word a proposal properly, as well as by artists who are more 'in tune' with the culture being too out-of-tune with the boards in the granting agencies.

Arts as an expression of a democratic culture, when funded by the Government on any sort of content-based basis, are ultimately flawed as an expression of that culture. Rather than advancing the communicative ability of the culture, they advance the aims of the current Government - sometimes in ways that are not clear to the artists themselves. For Government funding to continue without harming the nature of Art as a cultural communication, content-based restrictions must be removed.