

**Alliance for the Arts
The Arts Forum at The New York Times**

**“Thoughts on the Future of the
New York State Council on the Arts”**

**January 23, 2008
The Times Center at The New York Times**

Acknowledgements

Every time I listen to Tony Kushner speak, it’s a revelation. Tony, thank you so much for taking the time to make this introduction. You are a national treasure.

Many thanks to the Alliance for the Arts and especially Randy Bourscheidt, first, for bringing us all together in this beautiful building and for all of that you do in support of the arts. The Alliance’s recent publication, *Arts as an Industry: Their Economic Impact on New York City and New York State* is a resource I find myself consulting often.

When people learn that I accepted Governor Spitzer’s invitation to become the chair of the New York State Council on the Arts, I usually get one of two reactions: how do you run the council and still manage to run the Tisch School of the Arts? Or did you give up your job at NYU? The answer is I don’t run the state council and no I didn’t give up my job at NYU. Lucky for all of us, the New York State Council on the Arts has a fantastic new executive director, who does run the council day to day and that is the former president of Meet the Composer, the very talented, Heather Hitchens (please stand). Heather is supported by an exceptional staff and I would like the NYSCA staff members to stand. As if that were not enough, the council also has the good fortune of being able

to count on 19 other extraordinary citizens of the state of New York - including five new members -- who volunteer their time and with whom I have the privilege of serving as a member of the council. May I ask members of the council to stand.

My predecessor as chair at the council served for eight years, three of which he actually did serve not only as chair but miraculously as executive director as well, Richard Schwartz. Dick is still on the council but I do want to mention that he stepped down as chair, leaving the council with more funding than when he came and in this day and age of challenge to public support of the arts, that is a real accomplishment. Thank you Dick.

As for my day job as the dean at the Tisch School of the Arts, being surrounded by thousands of aspiring young artists and scholars of the arts, their faculty, many of whom are working professionals and alumni like Tony Kushner who are active members of the Tisch community has had a profound impact on my thinking about artists and the role of the arts in our day to day lives. Some of my colleagues and students from the Tisch School of the Arts and New York University are here. My thanks to them for coming this evening.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the most important person in my life who is also my colleague, confidante, most honest critic and love of my life -- a scientist, not an artist - but a very creative person -- my husband and President of Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, Dr. George Campbell.

This evening I would like to take a moment to share with you some thoughts about the future of the New York State Council on the Arts. I'll begin with a disclaimer. None of what I present is any way official New York State Council on the Arts policy. What I present tonight, however, are my very personal reasons for deciding to accept Governor Spitzer's invitation to Chair the council on the arts and -- without the benefit of the strategic planning process which NYSCA plans to undertake in the coming months - I want to think out loud about the possibilities presented by this governor's administration at this particular historical moment.

Why did I decide to take on the assignment? First and foremost, I believe in the mission of the New York State Council on the Arts. It's a mission that is stated confidently and with great pride in Governor Rockefeller's 1960 enabling legislation.

Introduction

Origins: Enabling Legislation

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of the state to join with private patrons and with institutions and professional organizations concerned with the arts to insure that the role of the arts in the life of our communities will continue to grow and will play an ever more significant part in the welfare and educational experience of our citizens and in maintaining the paramount position of this state in the nation and in the world as a cultural center."

From the outset individual artists were identified as an integral part of the state's cultural assets:

“... this policy shall be directed toward encouraging and assisting rather than in any ways limiting the freedom of artistic expression that is essential for the well-being of the arts.”

Consider for a moment the cultural landscape as it existed in New York city, for example, back in 1960: There was no Delacorte Theater in Central Park; Lincoln Center, was only one year old; the Brooklyn Academy of Music still in its pre-Harvey Lichtenstein days, was presenting karate demonstrations and drawing classes on its stages; the Elgin Theater in Chelsea, was the site of a revival film house, that is before it lapsed into showing porn in the 1970's, and long before it became the Joyce Center for Dance, as it is now; on the Grand Concourse, there was no Bronx Museum; Snug Harbor, was a refuge for retired sailors on the north shore of Staten Island, and Flushing Meadow Park, was the soon to be designated site of the 1964 World's Fair. Neither Snug Harbor nor Flushing Meadow had any plans whatsoever for museums, theaters, or a botanic garden. Institutions like Alvin Ailey's dance company, assembled in 1953, which represented artists and/or communities of color, were few and far between. Grant support for individual artists was meager.

Rockefeller introduced the idea of public funding for the arts at a time when the very idea of the public sphere was about to undergo cataclysmic change in this country.

In 1960 an ever accelerating Civil Rights movement was challenging separatism in all aspects of American life from lunch counters to water fountains, from universities to museums. Public funding for the arts opened up the possibility of changing what the essayist Lewis Hyde refers to as the cultural commons, that is the “creative wealth of the past” that now “exists in the present” and on which we build artistically and intellectually. Public funding created the means to transform the American cultural commons.

As sophisticated New Yorkers, we have become so accustomed to the densely packed, and richly diverse cultural offerings not only of New York City but of the entire state of New York that we soon forget that, when the council on the arts was born, most of the cultural institutions we enjoy today did not even exist. Bold and innovative, Rockefeller’s blueprint for state support of the arts, the first public agency created for the support of the arts since the short-lived WPA during the days of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, quickly became a national model. Within years, state and local arts agencies sprung up all over the country, and by 1965, the national endowments for the arts and the humanities were established.

The partnership between the public and the private sector, explicitly stated in the enabling legislation is not new. Public/private partnerships date back at least to the 19th century when great urban centers provided land for institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, with the understanding that private citizens would run those institutions for the benefit of the public. What was new and what would become the core function of the council on the arts was its grants-making and

re-granting to individual artists and local arts councils. With a granting process open to any eligible 501 c (3), this core function widened the circle of recipients exponentially. Critical leadership from major private foundations like Ford and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, turned the public/private partnerships into a source of transformative innovation that shaped everything from the development of regional theater to the creation of a culturally diverse institutional landscape. Joining an institution with such a pioneering legacy was an exciting prospect.

This brings me to the second reason I accepted Governor Spitzer's invitation and that is my own experience with the council and the potency I believe we have not yet begun to tap. When I came to New York City to assume the role of executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1977, large sections of the five boroughs, Harlem included, were in ruins. New York City, on the verge of bankruptcy, could no longer support the infrastructure of public life at all. You took your life in your hands to go into city parks. Subways worked sporadically. Public libraries, at best, were open two or three days a week.

Studio Museum, like dozens of newly minted cultural institutions tucked away in store fronts, garages, church basements and abandoned public school buildings, was struggling to stay alive. In those days the New York State Council on the Arts grants provided over 1/3 of the museum's \$300k annual operating budget. NYSCA was our life blood. While we were looking for ways to realize our long term plans, NYSCA funding kept us alive. A predictable source of general operating support made it possible for the museum to

broker a deal with a federal agency for a major economic development grant. Although, at the time, I fought with program officers at NYSCA all the time, in retrospect, I realize that NYSCA's deep commitment to young institutions, new leadership, communities that could not financially support their own cultural institutions but which needed them desperately, created something fundamentally vital to a culture of democracy. What NYSCA has done over the years and continues to do is keep the door open. They keep the door open and they bring new voices to the table. Having lived that experience and having benefited from it, I felt obliged to take a shot at contributing to sustaining those values.

My experience at the Studio Museum was not atypical. Countless other cultural organizations in the city, in the middle of the city's worst financial crisis were re-inventing themselves and the city with them. Ambitious and visionary cultural leaders and their plans introduced new private and public funds into communities as diverse as Astoria and Long Island City in Queens, downtown Brooklyn, the south Bronx, Chelsea, Harlem and elsewhere. The Museum of the Moving Image, P.S.1, BAM, the Bronx Museum, Bronx Council on the Arts, the Joyce Theater, El Museo Del Barrio, Studio Museum and many other institutions were all essential to the re-invention of their respective neighborhoods.

So, here's the irony.

In spite of the fact that what, by any account, is a spectacular track record and although economic development is one of the Governor's priorities and the Empire State Development Corporation has developed regional blueprints for the economic

development of the state, no where in these blueprints, is there a role for culture. No where is the Alliance for the Arts' observation that the annual impact of the arts on the state's economy is \$25.7 billion dollars. No where is there an acknowledgement of the dramatic examples of the impact of the arts on the renewal of communities not only in New York City but throughout the state: Dia Beacon converted into one of the state's most desirable locations; Patchogue Theater for the Performing Arts in Patchogue, New York, Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, the Center for the Arts in Homer New York or the Community Folk Art Gallery, now part of Syracuse University. In spite of the fact that an argument could be made that arts have been central to all successful plans for economic renewal, until recently, the New York State Council on the Arts has not been part of the economic development conversation.

And that brings me to the most compelling reason I decided to take on the responsibility of chairing the council. Why not take the opportunity of a new administration to re-think the role of the New York State Council on the Arts? Why not begin to ask how we might relate to other areas of state government, how we might relate differently to the field, how we might more effectively support individual artists? How we might do business differently, spend our money differently? Don't worry, as I said out the outset, none of this is official policy and we still have our strategic planning process ahead of us.

Future of the NYSCA: Some Possibilities

But let me suggest some possibilities:

On the subject of economic development, Heather Hitchens arrived as executive director in August of 2007, and immediately connected with the Empire State Development Corporation, which also includes the “I Love New York Campaign,” suggesting to them that each regional blueprint should contain a cultural blueprint as well.

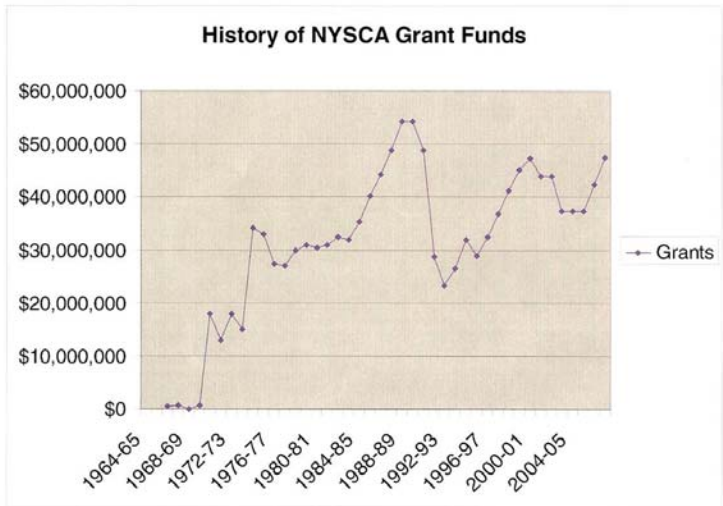
Another example of a possible alliance is with the New York State Department of Education. Thanks to Regent and Cultural leader, Karen Brooks Hopkins, we have begun conversations with the State Education Department to map a role for NYSCA that has us working closely with them as they develop cultural programs.

The road goes both ways, NYSCA can also introduce ideas about arts and education to the State Education Department. I believe we should restore training in the arts permanently to the public schools. Cultural programs that serve the schools can be excellent and certainly better than nothing, however, like the study of mathematics, or social studies, the study of art is fundamental to development of the whole person. In the 1950’s, as a nation, we responded to the Soviet launch of Sputnik by focusing intensely on the incorporation of math and science in K-12 and higher education. Today, the demands for innovation, creativity and original thinking in confronting everything from the environment to energy to our future survival should call for the same intense focus on restoring a permanent place for art, ideas, creativity and vision in our public schools.

A third possible strategic alliance is with the first lady’s “I Live New York Campaign.” For over a decade, New York State has been experiencing a serious brain drain. A study

conducted by the New York State Department of Economic Development and Cornell University found that between 1995 and 2000, Upstate New York attracted a total of 235,000 young adults. Over the same period 303,000 young adults left Upstate for other locations. In the year 2000 11,000 young adults under age of 28 moved into Upstate while in the same category the number moving out was nearly 47,000. Spearheading an initiative to stem the tide of migration out of the state, the First Lady is looking for solutions and looking for partners among cultural centers and colleges and universities, which are magnets for attracting young people. A question which the council might ask is how can the state make New York a more attractive place for artists to live and work? We know that young people are coming to study fine art, music, dance, theater, film in the state of New York in record numbers. How might colleges and universities working in partnership with cultural institutions create exciting opportunities for young artists to live and work in a particular area?

As I am ticking off all of these possible alliances, don't think for a minute that I think that we should ignore the grant making function of the council. First and foremost, the New York State Council on the Arts is a grants making organization. In FY 2008 Governor Spitzer included in the executive budget a \$5M increase bringing NYSCA's budget to \$47.5 M. To that figure the Senate added \$1M and the assembly, another \$.5 for stabilization for a total of \$49M. (On behalf of everyone here, I thank the governor, the senate and the assembly for those increases.) By comparison, however, twenty years ago, NYSCA funding in 1988-89 and 1989-1990, reached a high of \$54M.

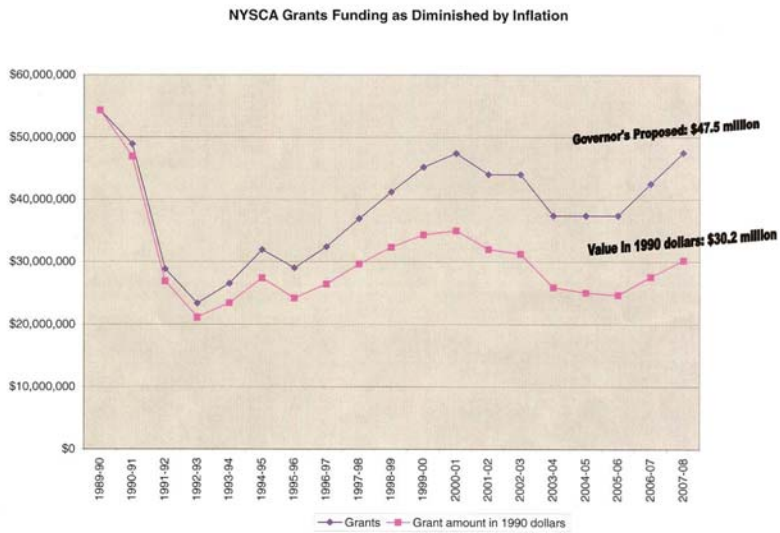


With Governor's Proposal for 2007-2008

Prepared by Alliance of NYS Arts Organizations, Feb 2007

(Chart A: NYSCA Funding from 1966/67 to the Present – courtesy of Judith Weiner at NYS Alliance of Arts Organizations).

When you correct for inflation, you can see that as a grant making organization, the NYSCA has declined.



Prepared by Alliance of NYS Arts Organizations, Feb. 2007

(Chart B: NYSCA Funding Corrected for Inflation - courtesy of Judith Weiner at NYS Alliance of Arts Organizations). What neither of these charts illustrates is that if you were to show the increase in the number of grantees, the grant figures per organization, no doubt, would decline as well. The two charts do demonstrate that, despite recent gains, over the past two decades, the state arts council has experienced a slow and steady decline in the impact of its core function - grants making. Why has this been the case?

There is no question that the culture wars of the late 1980's had an impact on public funding for the arts. I was cultural affairs commissioner for the city of New York from 1987 to 1991, at the height of Jesse Helms attack on the National Endowment for the Arts. To seriously misquote one of the presidential candidates, "we couldn't find our voice." Opponents of public funding, unfortunately, found theirs and mobilized against public funding for the arts. Public funding agencies and the private sector retreated. Since that time -- though there have been recent increases -- overall the decline in support of the arts, public and private, has been slow and steady.

To turn around that decline, retreat won't work. Quite the contrary, there needs to be a bold reclamation of the council's legacy and an unabashed embrace of our value to citizens of New York State. That means reclaiming the spirit of innovation and openness that characterized the council at the outset.

As Heather and I travel in the state and meet with legislators, we have been consistently surprised by the fervent support for not only for the arts in New York State but the work

of the council. There are legislators who are thinking of bills to increase support for the arts; others who envision transforming derelict resources into resources for artists; and still others who consider the arts as important priorities in their legislative agendas. We believe that the state council has to find an effective way to connect these scattered impulses to create a more coherent legislative presence and continue to build legislative support for the council's core function.

Finally as I look out at the audience, I am reminded why the state council succeeds. We depend on your leadership and council on the arts needs to take advantage of the collective wisdom represented by the people like you, the people sitting in this auditorium. Among you there are artists who have created alternatives to the not-for-profit business model. There are institutions which have figured out to take their intellectual property and make it work for them. There are colleges and universities that have been change agents in their communities, working with cultural institutions. What are the wisdoms that we can share among ourselves? What can you as a field tell us? How can we challenge each other to think differently as we think about the future?

As I said at the beginning, I have no plans or policies to offer, just yet, only a lot of questions, the prospect of some exciting conversation during our strategic planning process and, the prospect of unimagined possibilities. Thank you for coming tonight. I look forward to working with you.