

The Children of John Adams  
A Historical View of the Debate Over Art Funding

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It was May of 1989, and Andre Serrano's "Piss Christ" had been troubling the sleep of New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato. Taking to the floor of the Senate, he tore up a reproduction of Serrano's photograph, and told his colleagues:

If this is what contemporary art has sunk to, this level, this outrage, this indignity--some may want to sanction that, and that is fine. But not with the use of taxpayers' money. This is not a question of free speech. This is a question of abuse of taxpayers' money. If we allow this group of so-called art experts to get away with this, to defame us and to use our money, well, then we do not deserve to be in office.  
[Bolton 28]

There were many ways to respond to such hectoring--more subtle discussions of free speech, more nuanced views of what the work was about, and so on--but at the height of our recent debates over arts policy, they seemed to carry no political weight. The touchstones of this opening broadside--a shocked indignity and mockery of "so-called experts"--resonated in the press and among other legislators. A month later, for example, we find a columnist for the Washington Times writing: "...The artistic community has its own 11th commandment: Thou shalt grant federal funds to art that's too intellectual for you to understand, you rube." [Bolton 45] And soon we had Senator Jesse Helms defending an amendment he offered which would have prohibited the National

Endowment for the Arts from funding "indecent materials": "It simply provides for some common sense restrictions on what is and is not an appropriate use of Federal funding for the arts." [Bolton 74] And here is Mr. Helms in May of 1989: "...The National Endowment's procedures for selecting artists and works of art deserving of taxpayer support are badly, badly flawed...." [Bolton 31] And here he is that July, playing the trump card in any discussion of American values: "...No artist has a preemptive claim on the tax dollars of the American people; time for them, as President Reagan used to say, 'to go out and test the magic of the marketplace.'" [Bolton 76]

Why did these attacks on public funding work so well? Their demagogary aside, what was it about the way that critics of the NEA pitched their claim that caught the ear of Congress, while the art community's responses seemed so easy to ignore? The fusillades in question were often enough aimed at some particular work of art, but what I'm curious to understand is not the targets so much as the surrounding language, the coating on the bullets. What is it in the mythology or history of America that makes this rhetoric so effective? What portion of our tradition or self-image makes it easier to criticize than to defend patronage drawn from the public purse? And--if a look toward history offers any answers--what hope is there for the kind of collective cultural support the NEA was meant to embody?

I spent a month last summer letting two historians be my initial guides to the territory I hoped might hold answers to such questions. I turned first to Richard Hofstadter's 1963 Anti-intellectualism in American Life, my assumption being that the forces that have regularly empowered themselves by scorning the life of the mind in this country might share ground with those

that have scorned the arts. After Hofstadter I turned to one of his students, Neil Harris, whose 1966 The Artist in American Society has become our classic description of the tensions that accompanied the rise of American cultural institutions before the Civil War. I emerged from the company of these writers with my own short list of themes whose roots are very old but whose fruits we still seem to be harvesting. We clearly have a surviving ethic of Protestant simplicity, for one thing; we have as well a strong suspicion of anything that doesn't seem practical and useful; finally, from our early emphasis on the value of voluntary association, we have inherited a particular sense of what it means to contribute taxes to any common enterprise.

To begin with the issue of simplicity, Harris argues that it was not the early Puritans who engendered American hostility to the arts (the Puritans weren't suspicious of art, they were merely indifferent), it was, rather, the "enlightened rationalism" of founders such as John Adams and James Madison.

Their brief had the following logic. First, they associated art with luxury. (Having toured the great English estates and seen the great cathedrals, Adams thought of "art" as meaning the aristocratic and ecclesiastic opulence of Europe.) Second, they believed that luxury corrupts character by appealing to and gratifying the senses. In their psychology, character was founded upon reason (steady and unchanging), and reason was threatened by the passions (volatile and shifting). More than that, this was a political psychology, the final link in this chain of thought holding that if the character of the populace were to be corrupted, republican government would fail, for in a republic the virtues of the government derive from the virtues of the people.

From "the dawn of history," Adams wrote, the fine arts "have been prostituted to the service of superstition and despotism." [Harris 36] His wife Abigail once wrote to Jefferson saying that she thought Shays's Rebellion was the result of "luxury and extravagance, both in furniture and dress." [Harris 31] A contemporary, the moral philosopher Richard Price, summed up the issue nicely: "The character ... of popular governments depending on the character of the people, if the people deviate from simplicity of manners into luxury, the love of shew and extravagance, the government must become corrupt and tyrannical." [Harris 30] Thus does freedom itself demand that the healthy republic forego the pleasures of fine art.

To this matter of the citizen's character Adams himself added an analysis of the social structure he thought the fine arts would bring with them. It wasn't just the built opulence of Europe that put him off, it was the hierarchies of wealth that the stuff implied. If we had that sort of grandeur in America, who would pay for it, and how? As Adams put it in a 1817 letter to Jefferson:

How it is possible [that] Mankind should submit to be governed as they have been is to me an inscrutable Mystery. How they could bear to be taxed to build the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Pyramyds of Egypt, Saint Peters in Rome, Notre Dame at Paris, St. Pauls in London, with a million Etceteras..., I know not." [Adams-Jefferson 510]

Adams had visited Blenheim in England, a palace that had taken twenty-two years to build: did Americans wish to repeat the class system required for that kind of project? If so, then the nation would soon have deep divisions of labor and either a huge national debt or the burden of taxes, all in service of soft leisure for some and hard sweat for the rest. For John Adams, as Harris puts

it, works of art, "like other luxuries..., were superfluous..., for they served no real need; they could not grow, be planted, or reproduce their own kind." [34] Instead of crops they produced dukes and duchesses, and thus any touch of luxury seemed suspiciously like the beginning of the end of the Great Republic. It overstates the case only a little to say that Adams believed, as a likeminded Frenchman had put it, that even "wallpaper could ruin Revolutionary courage." [50]

Adams' concern with the fine arts and their supposed corruptions had religious as well as political dimensions. "Luxury, wherever she goes, effaces from human nature the image of the Divinity," he wrote to Abigail during his first diplomatic tour in France. [Garrett 247] Years later he asked the painter John Trumbull

please to remember that the Burin and the Pencil, the Chisel and the Trowell, have in all ages and Countries of which we have any Information, been enlisted on the side of Despotism and Superstition.... Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, and Poetry have conspir'd against the Rights of Mankind: and the Protestant Religion is now unpopular and Odious because it is not friendly to the Fine Arts. [Garrett 251]

The nation that John Adams was helping to imagine into existence was not a Catholic republic, or a pagan republic, or even a secular republic. It was a Protestant republic in which the character of the people and the state depended upon Protestant simplicity in all things. To avoid joining the lineage of despotic powers, this was to be a land in which the good citizen would resist all "show and extravagance," while the state in turn would resist levying the kind of taxes needed to build monuments to its own magnificence.

This wariness before art and its supposed luxuries repeats in

American politics, though it most often appears not as an aversion to art but as an attachment to the useful, the practical, and the down to earth, these in turn being linked to an egalitarian ideal. Hofstadter's discussion of the rhetoric of Jacksonian democracy makes a fine illustration of how the utilitarian style got turned into an American political virtue. The actual campaigns that pitted Andrew Jackson against John Quincy Adams are his prime example.

The younger Adams was not quite his father's son in terms of how he imagined a government's relationship to art. His excellent education and interest in science had not lead him away from an interest in fine art. He was, Hofstadter says, "the last nineteenth-century occupant of the White House...who believed that fostering the arts might properly be a function of the federal government." [158] And exactly on such terms he was attacked by the Jackson camp, which painted Adams as an aristocrat able to quote law but not make it, write but not fight. Jackson, on the other hand, appeared in the popular press as having "escaped the training and dialectics of the schools." He had "that practical common sense" which is "more valuable than all the acquired learning of a sage." Such a man could be "raised by the will of the people...to the central post in the civilization of republican freedom" exactly because his mind had not tarried on "the tardy avenues of syllogism." [159-60]

The Adams-Jackson campaigns may have been the first national event in which "common sense," that is a lack of interest in the arts and intellect, was connected to the freedoms of "the common man," but that correlation has been with us ever since. To take one last example, Hofstadter rehearses the late nineteenth-century fights over civil service reform. Yankee blue bloods, weary of

having civic offices filled by the spoils system, hoped to institute competency tests, whereupon they were attacked for demanding useless knowledge when only the useful was needed. On the floor of the House a congressman from Mississippi spun out the following fantasy:

Suppose some wild mustang girl from New Mexico comes here for a position, and it may be that she does not know whether the Gulf stream runs north or south, or perhaps she thinks it stands on end..., yet although competent for the minor position she seeks, she is sent back home rejected.... [183]

A Senator from Wisconsin worried that a businessman, his mind "long engrossed in practical pursuits," would be rejected for public service in favor of a "dunce who has been crammed up to a diploma at Yale." [183] Another member of Congress, unfamiliar with those "tardy avenues of syllogism," was happy to conclude that civil service reform would be "the opening wedge to an aristocracy in this country." [181]

Hofstadter revisits this debate, and the Adams-Jackson campaign, in order to address anti-intellectualism in America, but the stories speak as easily of anti-aestheticism. If we are to have art at all it too should be practical and common, not a wedge for aristocracy. In the very early days of the republic, as Harris explains, we had neither fine arts nor fine artists (before 1816, there wasn't even a shop where an artist could buy a paint brush). In that sparse environment, portrait painters "were also house painters, sign painters, blacksmiths and cameo cutters. They decorated furniture, designed family crests, engraved calling cards and incised tombstones." [56] Painters were given artisan-like instructions ("I wish the drapery to be white") and were paid in an artisan-like fashion ("Americans would ask only how long it

took to paint a painting, and then divide up the price by the number of days." [59] Moreover, Harris explains that many painters "accepted the notion...that the artist's life was not basically different from any other craftsman's, nor deserving of special favor." [57] A lack of "favor" was the crux in an emerging republic. "In a society based upon equality of opportunity..., artists were forced to make stilted pleas for special privileges...." [58]

My point here is that all of these anecdotes contain the same logic. They yoke together practical intelligence, the common citizen, and republican government; by inference the opposites are also joined, so that artistic talent, the citizen of special favor, and the inequalities of aristocracy become one and the same. The common citizen needs character and nothing more to participate in government (even at the highest levels), and though character must be developed, it can be developed from materials that nature has given to all men and women. If, on the other hand, nature has given a man or woman some special endowment, that gift should not be put into play politically, not if we wish to be the Great Republic.

My final historical theme suggests yet another reason why, among all the industrialized nations, the United States has been the most resistant to institutions of public patronage. Following the work of Sidney E. Mead, Hofstadter suggests that "a new and distinctive form of Christianity" emerged in early nineteenth-century America [81]; now called "denominationalism," its essence was voluntary association:

The layman...felt free to make a choice as to which among several denominations should have his allegiance. In the



older church pattern, the layman was born into a church, was often forced by the state to stay in it, and received his religious experiences in the fashion determined by its liturgical forms. The American layman, however, was not simply born into a denomination nor did he inherit certain sacramental forms; the denomination was a voluntary society which he chose to join often after undergoing a transforming religious experience. [82]

Early in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the country had been swept by "great awakenings" in which established clergy were regularly out-shown by itinerant preachers whose authority came from neither tradition nor learning, but from their enthusiasm, and from the conversions they produced, one by one, in the population. Moreover, Hofstadter connects such evangelical denominationalism to democratic ideals, for in both the actor is an individual, freed from inherited obligation. By way of illustration he describes Gilbert Tennent--a minister active in Boston in the 1740s--and his writings on the dangers of unawakened ministers.

What [Tennent] was advocating could be called religious democracy. If, under existing church organization, a congregation had a cold and unconverted minister, and if it was forbidden to receive an awakened one except with the consent of the unconverted, how would the congregation ever win access to "a faithful Ministry"? Like a true Protestant, Tennent was...addressing himself to a major problem--how the faith could be propagated under conditions of religious monopoly. [67]

Later, in the nineteenth century, the revival movement happened to coincide with Andrew Jackson's presidency, and that Awakening, Hofstadter concludes, "quickenened the democratic spirit in America....by achieving a religious style congenial to the common man...." [74]

But if it was this historical contingency that quickened our spirit, then democratic practice has inherited a particular style,

one linked to the Bible, and to the aggressive individualism that will regularly undercut any kind of collective action not in accord with its beliefs. Thus I found that reading about this "evangelical democracy" set me to thinking of tax resistance, both the twentieth-century resistance to the income tax on principle, and the periodic tax resistance that has addressed itself to specific items in the list of public expenditure.

Henry Thoreau comes to mind, not for his more famous resistance to the poll tax, but rather for an earlier incident in which he found that he was being taxed as a matter of course to support the Congregational church. It was the custom in Massachusetts to have town tax officials collect a church's assessments on its members, and when Thoreau first got such a bill he went to the tax office and demanded that his name be eliminated from the lists. He then filed a statement with the selectmen saying that "I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined" (adding wryly that if the town would give him a list of all the societies he had not joined, he would be happy to sign off, one by one).<sup>1</sup> [Harding 199-200] We here have a man withdrawing from the church rather than signing up, but the spirit is still denominationalist, for there is no voluntary association without the possibility of voluntary dissociation. My point, however, is to note the three things that nicely converge in this instance. First, there is the American understanding that groups form from willing individuals (not, say, from tradition, location, family ties, occupation, or an obligation to the state); second, in

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<sup>1</sup> The Congregational Church was the established church of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts until 1834. The date of Thoreau's refusal is apparently 1838, so the town of Concord seems to have been slow to drop its establishmentarian habits. [Canby 231]

America the prototype of such groups is the denominational Protestant church; and third, the payment (or withholding) of a tax turns out to be the outer sign of inner conviction.

Thoreau is usually taken to be a left tax resister, but tax resistance itself can be either left or right, depend on what is being resisted. Thus in this same lineage we find William Jennings Bryan during the Scopes trial, attacking the teaching of evolution in the public schools by asking

What right have the evolutionists--a relatively small percentage of the population--to teach at public expense a so-called scientific interpretation of the Bible when orthodox Christians are not permitted to teach an orthodox interpretation of the Bible...? They have no right to demand pay for teaching that which the parents and the taxpayers do not want taught. [cited in Hofstadter 128-29]

It is not a long leap to get from Bryan's question to the current debates over cultural policy, where the question became "Why should my Aunt Molly have to see her tax dollar spent on art she doesn't like?"<sup>2</sup> Nor, I'm arguing, is it that long a leap from the Great Awakenings to this question about art and taxes. Ours was a Protestant republic at its inception, and our history of evangelical Christianity suggests that even today when someone asks about the fate of "my tax dollar" we are hearing a religious question.

In closing this survey of themes from our history, let me say

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<sup>2</sup> This kind of tax resistance always centers on matters of belief and culture, and not so much on practical matters (or those supposedly practical). "I have never declined paying the highway tax," says Thoreau, "because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject...." During all the recent tax revolts and complaints about big government, one never heard of a town that refused federal disaster relief after an earthquake or hurricane. And taxes were easy to raise for the space program because it was one part Patent Office and two parts Cold War.

that most of the ones I've touched on--our love of the practical, a suspicion of luxury, an ethic of voluntary association, and so on--share a common concern with egalitarianism. Though there is a tradition of political thought in which republican government would empower and benefit from differences in talent, in its popular form the republican ideal imagines democracy as a homogeneous space filled with citizens, each equally empowered. For that to be the case it would be best if citizens themselves were made of some homogeneous material. Material that takes time, money, and talent to develop will not do, but an inborn, practical wit and a ready heart (the kind that can find Jesus without going to school)--everyone has these, and if they are the common currency of public life, then democracy can flourish. With such logic behind it, an aggressive egalitarianism has periodically set itself against the experts, professors and creative artists, and against a learned or established clergy--against all the supposed patricians of culture, preferring, in rhetoric at least, the Patent Office over the painter's studio, homespun over silk, the revival tent over St. Paul's Cathedral, and that "mustang girl" over the man from Yale.

I say "in rhetoric" because in actual cases the egalitarian appeal is typically more snare than promise, so narrowly focused as to be not egalitarian at all. Politicians often bring out the rhetoric of equality in the early fall, hoping to garner votes to support the inequalities they actually represent. Take that fantasy of the poor girl denied her job: what was at stake in the debate over civil service reform was the system of political patronage; civil service reform was a step toward equality of opportunity, and away from the inequalities of the spoils system. The appeal to the "common" man and woman is there to preserve a

set of privileges already in place. More broadly, let us not forget that during the heyday of Jacksonian democracy, one fifth of the population was enslaved, women were not allowed to vote, and Andrew Jackson, well, Jackson's policy toward Native Americans was hardly a model of homogeneous democratic space.

To this excavation of older themes in American history I want to add a note about several more recent events that lent their energy to the attack on public funding of the arts. After all, the issues I have enumerated may be part of our tradition, but traditions lie dormant most of the time, and we must wonder what current matters have managed to wake them, and borrowed on the passions they arouse.

A first answer might be that something new was in fact happening in relation to the content of the art being called into question. The complaints were, after all, quite narrowly focused; only a select group of artists found themselves honored by Congressional scrutiny. Representative Pete Hoekstra, republican from Michigan, for example, went after an NEA-supported film, "The Watermelon Woman," attacking a single lesbian sexual scene that "shocked" him. Frank Rich describes the film in a New York Times column as "a charming...mock documentary by Cheryl Dunye..., [who] retrieves the lost history of the title character, a gifted black gay actress of the 30's whose career was relegated to 'mammy' roles in Hollywood and ghettoized 'race pictures.'" Rich then wonders why Mr. Hoekstra was upset by this movie and not something else:

If you're against Federal arts funding, that's one thing, but Mr. Hoekstra is selective in his opposition. Were his real purpose to impartially investigate errant NEA grants--as opposed to creating scapegoats--wouldn't there be at least

one mediocre, NEA-supported provincial orchestra on his hit list? They exist. [March 13, 1997, p. A19]

They exist, but no one cared. What we were asked to care about made for a rather short list, and this one example can almost stand for the whole, containing as it does most of the scapegoaters' favorite items: feminism, homosexuality, and race. (The one goat not in Ms Dunye's film is an artist like Serrano, who I think of as a Catholic bad boy out to bother the Protestants). Put more fully, the targets are the rights, freedoms and empowerment of women, homosexuals, and minorities. And perhaps the debate broke out because there were changes in the land having to do with the expanded civil entitlements of these groups.

Probably so, but is this a sufficient explanation? It would be hard to find a decade in our history in which we didn't have mud slung in the name of the white race and patriarchal marriage. (Late nineteenth-century civil service reformers were called "the third sex"--"effeminate without being either masculine or feminine; unable either to beget or bear; possessing neither fecundity nor virility; ... doomed to sterility, isolation, and extinction." [Hofstadter 188]) Women, gays, blacks (even Catholics)--these are the usual suspects of American demagogery, which is to say that the complaint about the NEA may not be about the stated targets at all, but about issues harder to see and understand, for which the usual suspects have been rounded up and forced to suffer their symbolic duty.

In areas unrelated to sexuality, gender, and race this country has gone through profound disruptions. A lot of new wealth was created in the 1980s, but essentially all of it went to the rich (before 1976, the upper class--the top one percent of our

population--controlled one-fifth of the wealth of this nation; by 1992 they controlled two-fifths.) [Wolff] Over the last few decades the growth rate of the United States economy slowed to historically low levels. Perhaps the 1973 Arab oil embargo started the decline, or perhaps changes in technology did, or changes in the global economy--but whatever the cause, the effects are measurable. As a recent essay in the New York Review of Books explained, if the growth rate we knew from 1900 to 1980 had prevailed into the 1990's, every family in this nation would have \$50,000 more than it now has. That's a nice amount of money. Having lost it to unknown forces could easily lead to some free-floating resentment. [TC]

There are other striking shifts in our body politic (such as the unprecedented gap between rich and poor bequeathed to us by Reagan's tax policies), but the point is simply that none of this has much to do with race, sexual preference, or women in the workplace. Moreover while these changes may be hard to explain, the anxiety they produce is real, and it is a classic political trick to take the uneasiness and resentment aroused by complicated problems, and focus them onto easy to see but unrelated targets. Moreover, as it has traditionally been the task of artists and intellectuals to help a community cope with complex changes, we might say that the attacks on the endowments amount to an attack on change itself, or modernity itself (figured as blacks, gays, and "so-called experts"), a 1990s version of the Scopes trial, but lacking Clarence Darrow and a competent jury.

During the 1990s there were, in addition to these domestic matters, some dramatic changes beyond our borders that may have influenced our debates over cultural policy. Specifically,

the break up of the Soviet Union coincided significantly, I think, with the debate about the NEA. It was the Cold War that had energized much of the public funding devoted to art and science between 1965 and 1989. [Harris] These were the years when it was important to our leaders to show off the liberal, capitalist state, and contrast its vitality with the banality of the Eastern block. Neutral nations, and dissidents in the Eastern block, were meant to see the remarkable energy and innovation our freedoms produced. Thus would the U.S.I.A. send Dizzy Gillespie to Europe. Allen Ginsberg may well have been a suspicious character to our own FBI, but having him crowned King of the May in Czechoslovakia in 1965 (and then deported by the Czechs) was fit demonstration that capitalist democracy was where the action was. Not that Ginsberg got any federal coin for that trip, but--like black jazz musicians--his style and actions were of a piece with the pattern of underlying propaganda: the West is hip, the East is square. The West supports artists, the East puts them in jail. (Imagining the rise of the endowments as part of American Cold War self-fashioning dovetails nicely with one of the odder facts about the origins of those institutions: it was under Richard Nixon that they came into their own. Kennedy was interested in them, Lyndon Johnson was not, but Nixon the Cold Warrior doubled and redoubled their budgets. [Benedict 53])

But in 1989 the Cold War was over. Before that, conservatives may well have disliked seeing federal dollars spent to export African-American music, or honor argumentative poets, but it was not an apt moment to act upon that dislike. Once the Berlin Wall came down, however, there was no one very important to show off to, and older, domestic reservations about supporting



culture surfaced.<sup>3</sup> The Berlin Wall, it would seem, wasn't confined to Berlin; it ran through the halls of Congress, keeping at bay old suspicions about spending public money to support the arts.

Which brings me to a final issue that shaped the NEA debate, and that is the tax revolt that began in California in 1978. Certain conservatives, most notably Howard Jarvis, the author of California's Proposition 13, had started out simply arguing against a range of government programs. A wide range: Jarvis himself wanted to end public financing of parks, libraries, garbage collection, schools, social security, and Medicare. The problem is that if you show up at the city council meeting and say "Let's get rid of the library and the garbage trucks," you get no support. Having done that for a fruitless decade, Jarvis realized that if he went after taxes themselves he could just sit back. The trick was to separate the money from the programs it supports. Cutting taxes rather than programs meant that within a few years the city council would find itself low on funds, forced to decide by itself whether to close the library or cut back on garbage removal.

This strategy worked very well, first in California and then nationally. It also left the nation \$3 trillion in debt when Reagan and Bush left office (versus \$914 billion when they entered), and soon Congress found itself arguing not just about

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<sup>3</sup> A similar story was played out in basic science, which was well supported during the Cold War, but abandoned once the Soviet Union fell. In a recent interview Leon Lederman, the particle physicist who won the 1988 Nobel Prize, said: "We always thought, naïvely, that here we are working in abstract, absolutely useless research and once the cold war ended, we wouldn't have to fight for resources. Instead, we found, we were the cold war. We'd been getting all this money for quark research because our leaders decided that science, even useless science, was a component of the cold war. As soon as it was over, they didn't need science." [NY Times, July 14, 1998, p. C3]

shutting libraries, but about cutting food stamps to the poor, closing down legal aid, cutting back on Medicaid and Medicare, and so forth. When the question "Why should my tax dollar go to art I don't like?" is raised in that context it seems even harder to answer. In a climate of scarcity, created or not, people will always put food and medicine before opera and painting. [Brinkley passim]

No wonder, then, that the cause of public patronage found such thin support in the last decade. The immediate situation made it hard to argue for supposed luxuries, while shifting world politics cleared the way for older prejudices to surface. The conservative assault, moreover, found the rhetoric to activate those more traditional biases. They began, first of all, by describing "this group of so-called art experts," "too intellectual for you to understand, you rube," an elite who select artists by "procedures [that]...are badly, badly flawed." This is patent anti-intellectualism of ancient lineage in this land, and it is set up to invoke its opposite, the notion that decisions about art require only "common sense" that all citizens have and could exercise, were they not being shouldered out by the snobs.

This supposed standoff between Everyman and the Art Expert was played out in terms of how art grants were awarded. Senator Helms regularly complained about the "panel review system," [Bolton 75] by which he meant peer panels set up so that artists might be judged by professionals in the field. Here it should be noted that peer panels were originally designed not only because it is right that artists judge artists (as scientists judge scientists, and educators judge educators), but because the panels provided a buffer between the art world and the politics of the Congress.

This separation was a conservative concern when the endowments began in the 1960s, the fear then being that liberals in the Congress would force their agenda onto traditional scholars and artists. As Senator Kennedy remembered it in a 1989 speech, the institution of peer panels "was a conscious effort ...to separate the review process from political interference.... We have heard a great deal in recent months about several controversial grants.... Without the peer system, there would have been persistent and chronic controversies of grant awards throughout the last 24 years." [Bolton 79]

That is to say, peer review has egalitarian goals; for years the NEA's individual grants were awarded on merit through blind competition, a system that gave many unknown artists a start, artists who never would have been singled out in a system more political or commercial. It should be a badge of honor that the endowment could find and reward a film-maker like Cheryl Dunye, or a writer like Garrison Keillor, for that matter, whose "Prairie Home Companion" had NEA support long before it could earn its own way.

The wider point, however, is that the rhetoric of the NEA attacks depends heavily on an old American suspicion of artistic and intellectual elites who are portrayed as usurping rights and insulting the beliefs of common citizens. Which brings me to a second point about the way the attacks are framed--the way in which they connect Christianity, voluntary association, and tax-paying. Because Serrano's work actually featured a Christian icon, it became the perfect tool to use in arousing evangelical Christians. But what made the attack effective was not the work alone but wedding it to "the use of taxpayers' money." This seals the trick because, with crab-like logic, it makes the nation into

a church and makes the payment of taxes the outer sign of an inner conviction that has led the citizen to join this particular flock. All of which makes unquestioned sense in communities where evangelical Protestantism and the United States are felt to be one thing, not two.

Finally these attacks also call out the voters' affection for things that are clearly useful, practical, and productive. Posing the attack in terms of taxes removes it from the arena of cultural or aesthetic values, and the freedoms needed to foster them, and sets it down in the land of scarce dollars. Limits on the public purse always haunt policy debates, but more urgently so after "tax reform" had severed the means from the ends, then decimated the means. Who is going to support the arts, whose uses are vague, when we have been set to arguing about Medicare, whose uses are clear?

More subtly, the American love of utility gets roused by the gay bashing in these attacks. Allan Sekula suggests how the hidden logic works:

According to conservatives, gays and lesbians are suspect because they don't reproduce 'normal' family life. They supposedly don't have children, and they often work in 'frivolous' fields on the fringe of the GNP. In other words, conservatives project their own fears of both unfettered desire and an impotent economy onto gay and lesbian people, who are easily scapegoated in a society obsessed with productivity.... [A] conservative intellectual, Gertrude Himmelfarb, recently suggested a connection between the (supposed) spendthrift shortsightedness of Keynesian economics and John Maynard Keynes' personal life as a homosexual. [Bolton 119-20]

As I mentioned early on, Neil Harris has it that John Adams was cautious before the arts because "they served no real need; they could not grow, be planted, or reproduce their own kind." [34] By

these conceits, productivity and utility are heterosexual virtues, and any argument in favor of art turns out to be an argument against heterosexual love and its social embodiment, the family. This is nuts, but that doesn't mean it carries no political weight, especially in a land with a forebear like Adams, who believed that the republic would fall if the passions were ever enjoyed as ends in themselves.

One final thing needs to be said about the framing of these attacks, and that is that they present the marketplace as the true and final court of opinion and value. "I have fundamental questions about why the Federal Government is supporting artists the taxpayers have refused to support in the marketplace," says Jesse Helms [Bolton 91], blind to the fact that asking most artists to survive in the market is like asking most senators to live on their salary. For complicated reasons, artists have almost always needed patronage; in this nation, one of our on-going tasks is to find the form of patronage that will accord well with democracy. Simply to send American artists back to the marketplace is at best a misunderstanding of the nature of artistic value.

What are we to make of this survey and analysis? What especially might we do now, those of us who still seek ways in which this nation might, collectively, foster the arts? If there were to be such a thing as "democratic patronage," how would we build it, and what would it look like?

First of all, let us call by their right name the more strident of those who have attacked the Endowment, and by extension the community of artists. They are demagogues. Demagogues are those who simplify complex issues, make emotional appeals to the people, and arouse animosities that divide us one

from another. Rather than seeking to understand and lead us through the complicated changes this nation is undergoing, and rather than healing the divisions we suffer, demagogues call out fear and anxiety, and transform them into resentment and intolerance (and votes). In this nation, demagoguery takes particular forms. A demagogue in China would attack the bourgeoisie and the landowners; in Iran the targets might be Christians and the Bahai. Demagogues in the United States stir up intolerance toward blacks, immigrants, gays, and women who don't conform. More subtly they activate resentment toward professionals, intellectuals, and artists, the supposed mandarins in a supposedly egalitarian republic.

Demagogues cannot be fought on their own terms. At best we can recognize them for the bullies that they are, then return to the principles and issues that their pandering ignores.

Second, we need a fuller discussion of what it means to pay taxes toward democracy's common ends. We need to remember that it is adult, civilized, and honorable to contribute toward our collective enterprises.<sup>4</sup> It is an old truth that no civilization can grow and thrive without self-taxing. Put differently, groups tax themselves in order to empower themselves. That being the case, an attack on taxes is often an attack on collective action, especially those collective actions that cannot arise from market forces alone. In this country, taxes paid into the public purse allow the collective of the public, as opposed to the collective of the corporations, and as opposed to the non-collective of

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<sup>4</sup> The financial collapse of Orange County, California, was another late fruit of Proposition 13, by the way. Finding itself short on funds, and hoping to continue collecting the trash, the county officials decided to go gambling in the derivatives markets. That is the opposite of an adult and honorable action; it is what happens to people who will not tax themselves.

individualism. Arousing tax hostility allows the last two of these to trump the first, and all those things that the market cannot support, nor individual action create, are consequently weakened.

And what shall we say to those who do not want their tax dollar to go to programs they do not believe in? Arthur Danto, art critic for The Nation, suggests one answer:

It is imperative to distinguish taxpayers from individuals who pay taxes, as we distinguish the uniform from the individual who wears it. As individuals, we have divergent aesthetic preferences.... But aesthetic preference does not enter into the concept of the taxpayer, which is a civic category. What does enter into it is freedom. It is very much in the interest of every taxpayer that freedom be supported, even--or especially--in its most extreme expressions.... The taxpayer does not support one form of art and withhold support from another as a taxpayer, except in the special case of public art. The taxpayer supports the freedom to make and show art, even when it is art of a kind this or that individual finds repugnant. [The Nation, August 21/28, 1989; in Bolton 97]

There are cultural programs that have emerged from the NEA that I myself find silly and insulting, just as there are members of Congress I find silly and insulting, but as a citizen I support both institutions, and would hesitate to destroy the whole simply to register my complaint about the part.

Third, if the goal is to develop democratic patronage, we will need to articulate a better rationale or ethic of that patronage, one that combines political egalitarianism, aesthetics, and an understanding of the economics of art. One of the striking things about John Adams was that, having seen the opulent arts of Europe, he could not imagine that democracy might have arts of its own, arts not "prostituted to the service of superstition and despotism." It would be some time before Walt Whitman, Frederick

Law Olmstead, Isadora Duncan, Frank Lloyd Wright and others would concern themselves with imagining such an art.

The NEA was originally heir to that kind of imagining, I think. While allowing that "no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence," its enabling legislation nonetheless spoke of the high hope that democratic governments might "help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent." We clearly need to do more to make such an ideal part of common understanding. (As one portion of that effort we need to work to preserve the NEA. Like seed corn preserved through a punishing winter, it has not disappeared, and the seasons will change. It would be very difficult to recreate the endowment from scratch; better to be patient, and, in the fullness of time, work to repair an existing institution.)

Continuing to have broadly-based public patronage of the arts in this country would, in many respects, amount to a break with tradition. It has probably been some time since we thought that "deviating in simplicity" would call tyranny down upon our heads, but it would be nice to know, as well, that our attachment to practicality and common sense could now be leavened with touches of beauty, or pointless play, or uncommon speculation. It would be nice to find ourselves supporting cultural life for its own sake, not merely in order to show it off to our enemies. It would be nice to find this nation, so rich in material things, confidently transforming a portion of the commonweal into a commons of culture. We have old ways of thinking to overcome, but even their earliest spokesmen knew they would not, and should not,



last. In a 1780 letter to his wife, John Adams wrote what is perhaps his most famous remark on art in America:

I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy..., in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain. [Garret 255]

Adams clearly imagined a changing America, one in which republican simplicity would not always be the rule, and painting and poetry would come to have their place. The institutions of public patronage are still very young in this country--only three decades old, and embattled for a third of that time. But that does not mean that we cannot build them if we are patient. As Adams indicates, these changes require generations to unfold.

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