

Fast Times at the Arts Endowment

Still Speeding under the Reagan Administration

James Bovard

The National Endowment for the Arts received \$144 million this year (FY 1984) to help improve America's cultural life. To this end, the NEA recently funded the "Touch Sanitation Show," which included a barge with the work gloves of sanitation workers from the five boroughs of New York City. Other NEA projects included the taping of noise emanating from the Brooklyn Bridge; an art show entitled "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art"; and an Art-on-Billboards project to place contemporary art on billboards around the country.

The Reagan administration came into office promising to reduce government waste, yet the NEA continues to allocate money for projects that have little if anything to do with art. The NEA in 1982 funded a documentary on high school football in Texas, a revival of the old radio comedy shows of Bob and Ray, and a compilation of rapidrail transit maps from all around the world. The NEA is financing an environmental art project entitled "Dance of Machines"; according to the *New York Times*, it involves cranes and heavy equipment that "'dance' at a large construction site in a performance featuring video projections and original music." The NEA even spent \$5,000 for clown workshops in New York City.

The Reagan administration attempted to cut the Endowment's budget in half in 1981. Congress rejected this cut and the Reagan administration has since increased its budget request for the NEA each year—from \$88 million

for FY 1982, to \$101 million for FY 1983, to \$125 million for FY 1984, to \$144 million for FY 1985. Frank Hodsoll, Mr. Reagan's NEA chairman, has tightened some of the day-to-day operations of the NEA, but he has not reformed the basic grant-making process. Grants are

distributed according to the decision of panels composed of artists, many of whom are former grant recipients.

National Council on the Arts (the presidentially appointed board that oversees the NEA) member Samuel Lipman notes that, in reviewing grants, "nobody has enough information to know what the hell anyone is talking about." Ruth Berenson, the NEA's associate deputy chairman for programs, says that the NEA "doesn't know what [grant recipients] are trying to do . . . can't tell what they're going to do" in many cases. The federal government has little or no control over how money is spent once the chairman signs the check.

In 1982, the NEA gave a New York City artist

\$4,500 to make videotapes of a baker, a butcher, a grocer, and a fishmonger to play in front of their stores to help them stay in business. The application explained that these stores in the SoHo area were an "endangered species" because of the rise in property values and the arrival of "'uptown' doctors and lawyers."

The NEA funded the "Extended Sensibilities: Homo-



The Kiss, inspired by the artist's dog, Cindy. Shown at NEA-funded exhibit, October 1982.

JAMES BOVARD is an investigative journalist living in Washington. He wrote this article for the *Fund for Objective News Reporting*.

sexual Presence in Contemporary Art” show in October 1982 at the New Museum in New York City. The show catalog introduction announces, “Being a gay American inevitably bestows upon one a need to create one’s own roots before accepting a group identity.” The show explicitly sought to promote homosexual perspectives and included a “twelve-foot-high, black porcelain-glass-coated steel monument to Lesbianism.” The catalog described one lady’s work as follows:

In a painting like *The Kiss* (1981), Cindy is an animal goddess lying prone on her back, completely defenseless. She appears part dog, goat, and fish on top with her delicate ribcage tapering to an attenuated belly and waist. As goddess, Cindy is aware of her vulnerability and more than happy to extend her elongated pink tongue (with a discernible smile on her snout) to Fran’s [the artist] face, which is dwarfed by her own.

The catalog notes, “Within the realm of lesbian cultural history, animals take a special place.”

One sculpture at the show, “Lying Man,” “placed a detail of a promiscuous gay mating process literally under the viewer’s nose.” The catalog explained, “The body language of [the model’s] lower regions is saying that he is equally receptive to anal or genital sexual exploration.” Another work by a male artist in the show included “Self-portrait in Slip,” commemorating “a private moment between a man and his mirror.”

Among other recent grants, the NEA gave \$15,000 to Henry L. Hills, a self-employed house painter who sent in an untyped, half-legible letter requesting money for a series of films “exploring the relationship between sound and image.” One part of the film series will involve “cutting [poets’] words into syllables and restructuring them into ‘zaums.’” (The word “zaum” was not defined.)

Another \$15,000 grant went to Cecelia Condit of Mayfield Heights, Ohio, for “an experimental video drama exploring the lurking fear of violence, cannibalism, and contemporary phobias in the minds of two suburban women.”

Despite Ronald Reagan’s promise to depoliticize the Endowment, the NEA is still funding things like “Bread and Roses,” a touring play that idealizes the 1912 textile strike in Lowell, Massachusetts. The Endowment gave \$7,500 to the Alternate Energy Resources Organization to produce the *New Western Energy Show*, which lectures school children on “solar energy and energy conservation” through cartoons, poems, and puppets.

The NEA is funding several theater and dance groups involved in the nuclear-freeze movement. The *Village Voice* reported last year that Mabou Mines theater company, recipients of a \$150,000 NEA grant, “will soon perform its federally funded piece, *Dead End Kids*, as part of a seven-city tour sponsored by Performing Artists for Nuclear Disarmament.”

Despite attempts to economize, the NEA still gives many grants that are just unnecessary. The NEA gave \$3,000 to support a bluegrass festival in Nashville—subsidizing bluegrass in Tennessee is as necessary as

subsidizing bullfights in Madrid. The activity will occur with or without government aid. The effect of many NEA grants is not to increase the amount of artistic activity, but to increase artists’ pay for doing what they would have done anyway and to reduce admission prices for people who could afford to pay more.

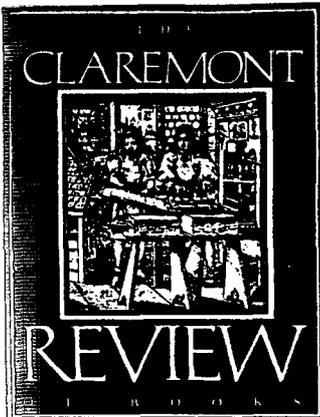
The NEA gave \$75,000 for New York City’s Free Shakespeare in the Park program. If festival organizers had charged a small fee, the program could easily have managed without a federal subsidy. An NEA research report in 1979 found that attendees at NEA-subsidized ballet, dance, and orchestra performances had median incomes \$4,000 higher than the national median. The main beneficiaries of these NEA-subsidized events are middle- and upper-class people.

Two political action committees now operate to rope contributions for pro-NEA congressmen. One committee, ART PAC, recently held a \$250-a-head reception for Senator Robert Stafford to honor and reward him for being the first Republican senator to publicly oppose President Reagan’s proposed NEA budget cuts. It appears that the arts have become just another pork barrel.

Aside from increases in the number of performances and subsidized publications, the NEA has little to show for its billion dollars’ of cultural aid distributed over the last decade. A recent *Washington Post* article on the decline of poetry quoted poet-editor Peter Davidson: “We have developed an entire educational system of poet-think, of schools and graduate schools, and workshops, and conferences, and residencies, where bards link up like chains of algae, funded by state councils and federal grants and half-suspecting taxpayers.” Art critic Alan Rich observed in *California* magazine, “Looking back over the history of NEA support to specific projects or individuals, I find very few whose stability is any more assured after 17 years of handouts than it was when the Endowment began.” Council member Samuel Lipman added that the NEA has had “very little effect on creative culture of enduring value.”

When asked whether the Endowment would continue funding projects like the “Touch Sanitation Show,” with its barge of garbagemen’s gloves, Mr. Hodsoll replied, “Absolutely—where it’s serious and it’s demonstrated that the effort is to push the edges of the art form towards something.” Mr. Hodsoll said that he had raised questions about the Touch Sanitation grant, but the Arts Council was enthusiastic about it and the panel that awarded the grant was composed of “distinguished artists who thought this was a serious attempt to explore these kinds of relationships.” Mr. Hodsoll feels that, as chairman, he “should stay out of making aesthetic judgments.”

The Arts Endowment funds so many absurd, useless, and unnecessary projects because there is no sound place for government in the arts. Government can either fund traditional, popular art—which need no subsidy; or high culture—which primarily appeals to the well-off; or experimental art, which appeals largely to the transvestites and sanitation glove collectors of America. Abolishing the Arts Endowment would have little or no long-term effect on quality art. ■



A Distinctive Quarterly

Published by The Claremont Institute
for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy

For the past three years *The Claremont Review of Books* has been quietly building an audience of readers at The Claremont Colleges and in other select circles, nationwide. Now the *Review* seeks an even larger national circulation. Not simply another conservative or neoconservative journal, the *Review* stresses the importance of understanding the world in light of political and moral first principles.

This focus informs the wide range of subjects we cover — from Cicero to Churchill, from Aristotle to George Will; Saul Bellow and Walker Percy, John Hart Ely and Michael S. Perry, Richard Rodriguez and Thomas Sowell, Herman Melville and William Shakespeare; art criticism and film reviews, contemporary theology and liberal education. Our analyses of current politics will not be found in any other journal; examples include our annual “book review” of the *Supreme Court Reporter*, and essays on the strategic significance of Grenada, and the 1984 elections.

Past and future contributors to the *Claremont Review* include John Alvis, George Anastaplo, Herman Belz, William J. Bennett, Peter F. Drucker, Edward J. Erler, Martin Gilbert, Harry V. Jaffa, Leonard W. Levy, David Lowenthal, Robert Middlekauff, Thomas G. West, and John A. Wettergreen.

To receive the next four issues, return this completed form with your check for the appropriate amount.

General and Library* Rate\$10.00

Students\$ 6.00

Add \$2.00 for overseas rates.

Ask for a free sample issue.

*Please ask your Librarian
to order the *Review*.

Name (Please print) _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Mail to: Subscriptions
Claremont Review of Books
480 N. Indian Hill Blvd.
Claremont, California 91711

Supply-Side Demands

The Supply-Side Revolution: An Insider's Account of Policymaking in Washington, by Paul Craig Roberts (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).

Paul Craig Roberts succeeds in a task that few economists even undertake—to make an eventful period of economic history come alive and thus to attract the interest of a broader audience.

The major theme of his book is that a revolution occurred in economic policy in the United States when Congress passed the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, “a revolution brought about by the unstinting efforts of a few people.” That emphasis on the valiant few permeates this description of the events that led up to and followed the passage of the 1981 tax cuts. Thus, the book portrays the author himself as the keeper of the flame, and from the outset it bemoans the fact that President Reagan, in filling economic policy positions, reached out beyond supply-side economists.

Mr. Roberts served as assistant secretary of the Treasury for economic policy in 1981–82. He now holds the William E. Simon chair in political economy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University.

Scattered throughout this well-written book are useful insights into the policy process. Mr. Roberts explains the many reasons why formal economic analysis has limited effect. He points out that most decision makers cannot recognize careful statistics and sound analysis, and that they will choose on the basis of personalities or how it will play in the press. His overall conclusion is commendable: “Once the public policy process is understood, people will expect less from it.”

Yet the analysis of supply-side economics, although extremely readable, is substantively disappointing. Ignoring the literature of public finance, Mr. Roberts writes as though he and his friends discovered that taxes can adversely affect incentives to work, save, and invest. He contends that supply-siders have unearthed a “broad definition of the tax burden” to include production lost as a result of the disincentives imposed by taxation. Such “excess burdens” of taxation have been a staple of traditional economics for almost a century.

Mr. Roberts also oversimplifies the economic process by promoting the view that “fiscal policy works by af-

fecting incentives rather than demand.” The Keynesians surely can be faulted for overemphasizing the role of demand, and supply-siders such as Mr. Roberts have made an important contribution to public policy by emphasizing the role of supply. But both viewpoints overlook what the great neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall taught the profession: There are two blades to the economic scissors—supply and demand.

The economic policy of the Reagan administration was, of course, far broader than the tax cuts, important as they were. The development of Reaganomics will undoubtedly make a fascinating chapter in American economic history. Unfortunately, in this book the central character is not President Reagan but the author. A few excerpts illustrate the point: “I estimated that I could help keep the President out of the establishment’s cage for a year.” “I made a last-ditch effort to get the President’s men back on board with the President’s policy.”

These are odd statements, considering that the only meeting with the president that he describes as having attended was a mass breakfast with all presidential appointees. In fact, Mr. Roberts laments that “I would have liked to sit down and talk things over with him, but the breakfast was a social affair.”

The author’s position was an assistant secretary of the Treasury; such subcabinet appointees normally do not participate in top-level meetings. Thus, this “insider’s account” relies heavily on secondary sources, such as newspaper articles.

An example of this is the report of the meeting at which the president decided not to initiate a proposal to reduce the top bracket on the federal personal income tax from 70 percent to 50 percent. The meeting was hardly the conspiracy against supply-side economics that Mr. Roberts describes. Rather, President Reagan made his decision on the basis that such a desirable but potentially contentious change would more likely be adopted if the Democrats in the Congress took the lead—and he was right.

Ronald Reagan’s economic policy deserves a broader-based exposition than these kiss-and-tell (or rather kick-and-tell) memoirs. A historian less concerned with justifying his own position might focus directly on the substance of the economic white paper of February 18, 1981, the first major exposition of the President’s economic program.

In this document, and in innumerable subsequent statements issued by the administration, the emphasis was on the four pillars of the program to reduce inflation and encourage economic growth: tax cuts, spending cuts, regulatory reform, and monetary restraint.