First published in Andrew Buchwalter, Ed. *Culture and Democracy: Social and Ethical Issues in Public Support for the Arts and Humanities* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Government Support for Unconventional Works of Art

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My aim in this discussion is to argue, not only that government should provide funding for the arts, but *a fortiori* that it should provide funding for unconventional, disruptive works of art.

A frequently voiced objection to government support of the arts is that government subsidies may subordinate art to political exigencies. This objection is often voiced by those who believe that political art is not legitimate art at all, and that supporting it is merely a tactic of advocating for certain special interest groups or advancing a certain "leftist" political agenda, for example to combat racism or misogyny, or to provide adequate support for people with AIDS or the homeless. I believe such beliefs are part of the lingering backlash of McCarthyism, and express fear of political repression as much as they are collusive examples of it. But interestingly, the most recent, egregious case of the manipulation of government funding for the arts in the service of a political agenda has come not from the left but from the right, with former NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer's politically expedient veto of four intermedia applications after they had been recommended for funding by a committee of experts, on the grounds that funding them would antagonize particular members of the House and Senate into retaliatory action against the Endowment.[1]

It has been rightly observed that this evil may be even greater without governmental support. Governmental support insures that publicly accessible works of art will not be confined to those which respond to popular market demand. In a culture such as our own, market demand is manipulated by advertising, which in turn is the tool of corporate pressures to enforce public acceptance of the political and cultural *status quo*. Part of this enforcement procedure involves *passive censorship*, i.e., withholding institutional recognition or representation of views that compete with or criticize the *status quo*. Passive censorship occurs when democratic institutions responsible for informing the public of diverse views and values (such as museums, theatres, or the print or electronic media) renege on that responsibility, by ignoring such alternatives as though they did not exist - thus effectively denying the public access to them. Without governmental support, work that questions that *status quo* and the power relations that lie behind it may be subject to passive censorship by institutions as well as individual consumers.

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[1] See Elizabeth Hess, "Backing Down Behind Closed Doors at the NEA," *The Village Voice*, Sept. 24, 1991.

For example, the Philip Morris Tobacco Company is a major source of support in the museum world. It also contributed significantly to the re-election of Senator Jesse Helms. It obtains market credibility and social status through advertising that blatantly associates it with the "high culture" projects it supports. As a condition of exhibition funding, Philip Morris has often required that the exhibiting institution distribute free cartons of Marlboro cigarettes at the opening of such exhibitions. Perhaps it goes without saying that Philip Morris has never funded exhibitions devoted to health issues, or that explore the issue of institutional racism. If this were the only *sort* of funding source available, such nonconventional exhibitions would receive no funding at all. And without such exhibitions and other public venues for cultural dissent and criticism, the conventional sensibilities represented by such figures as Jesse Helms or the Philip Morris Tobacco Company might prevail even more widely than they already do.

Governmental funding for the arts has, at least up to now, meant a peer review process. Responsibility for evaluating applications and selecting funding candidates is delegated to a jury or committee of individuals selected for their recognized professional competence, experience and achievement in the field. On the one hand, this has meant that such individuals are familiar with most of the kind of work for which funding is sought, and often with the artists or institutions that seek it. This degree of familiarity, and the prior professional relationships it presupposes, is the natural consequence of having a working knowledge of the field. It does not imply any conflict of interest.

On the other hand, the peer review process requires that the individuals making these decisions do so anonymously, and that they are compensated only minimally for their participation in the selection process. The outcome is a selection of candidates for funding which is *disinterested* from the perspective of personal or political advantage, and expresses the committee's best attempt to evaluate the work on its aesthetic merits. I can personally attest that these sessions are often lengthy and contentious, and that widely disparate opinions must be reconciled through the process of discussion and information-gathering before a consensual evaluation can be reached. This is a paradigm example of debate on the issues, untainted by considerations of personal or political advantage. An artist who receives such funding receives, in addition to the palpable good of financial support, the purest expression of disinterested peer respect and appreciation it is possible to receive in a largely market-driven economy.

By contrast with the peer review process as it functions in governmental funding, that process as it functions in the distribution of funding by private foundations is often - although not always - subject to the ideological, political, or corporate constraints imposed by the patron. So, for example, Hans Haacke, an artist whose work investigates the issue of corporate control of the arts, cannot be expected to receive funding from Philip Morris; nor has his work been purchased by major art institutions whose programs depend on such corporate support. The public and ideologically transitory nature of government makes it the most appropriate source of funding in the arts, insofar as such support is supposed to express disinterested aesthetic evaluation rather than personal, political or market bias. A government committed to the democratic values of freedom of expression and the free competition of ideas has a particular obligation to support works of art that offer critical alternatives to prevailing power relations.

One might object to the peer review process on the grounds that it subverts democratic values rather than promotes them, by putting the evaluation of art in the hands of "experts" who then legislate "aesthetically correct" art for the "masses." But this falsely represents the trained professionals who serve on those panels as distinct from the "masses" rather than their most informed representatives - as though there were no working class artists, former scholarship students among the critics, or self-made millionaire collectors. Art professionals come to the peer review process from all social classes, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and aesthetic orientations within our society. On the other hand, it is true that trained professionals are *trained* to an extent that the general public by definition cannot be. The idea that informed judgments of aesthetic quality should not determine what art is funded for public consumption is a peculiar sort of populism indeed. It is a populism that views with suspicion the possibility that art might have a beneficial educational effect on the general public; that it might tell the viewing public anything that it does not already know.

Only since the McCarthy era of the 1950s has art retreated from the social and didactic role it has always had in the history of Western art, as a source of information and new forms of perception and thought for its public. Only since then, when it was made very clear to artists as well as other intellectuals by politicians that art should be, as it were, seen but not heard, has the artworld made a virtue out of social impotence: for only since then has art retreated to the role of an abstract, esoteric discipline devoid of content or social impact; and only since then has it been possible to level the charge of elitism at those whose work does, like so much other intellectual work, require specialized skills and information. Specialization is an unavoidable consequence of the division of labor between those who are art professionals and those who are not. Elitism and esotericism are avoidable consequences of the political censorship of "subversive" artistic ideas. Art professionals are qualified to serve on peer review panels because they are qualified by their training to make, show, and evaluate works of art. It is hard to see how anyone could quarrel with that.

Art as a pedagogical tool is one thing. But what about works of art that disrupt stable social norms, or offend the conventional moral or social sensibilities of citizens? Does government have an obligation to fund work that undermines social foundations? In the Editor's Introduction to this volume,[2] Andrew Buchwalter distinguishes between public goods and public interests as follows: A *public good* is the aggregate sum of at least most citizens' individual preferences; examples would include a public library, health care, or an opera house. A *public interest*, by contrast, is something that serves the ends of public life, i.e., the community itself. Examples might include an equitable sales tax or an adequate police force. Whereas a public good expresses the aggregate of individual preferences, a public interest may but need not do so. Instead it may embody something that would be good for society in general, independently of what individuals prefer for themselves. Now it might be argued that unconventional works of art are neither a public good nor a public interest. Clearly they are not a public good, since they violate most individual preferences, by definition of "unconventional." It might be claimed that they are not a public interest either, because they undermine the most basic end of public life, namely the preservation of social stability through a system of normative conventions that coordinate behavior among individuals, from all levels from the personal to the social.

Consider the performance work of Karen Finley. Finley violates conventional images of women by, for example, adopting the pornographic masculine vernacular in some of her performance monologues, as well as by smearing her body with various foods, and by naming and depicting acts of sexual violation. These in addition to many other disturbing elements are woven together in a hypnotizing drama that is often as painful as it is assaultive on conventional sensibilities. There are many arguments that can be given regarding the importance of Finley's work: its release into a shared social sphere of a subconscious and subterranean level of experience often considered inaccessible to women; its cathartic effects on an audience socialized to repress painful experiences of an intimate nature; its importance as a political strategy of naming, depicting and confronting the systematic and daily violation of women's bodies; and so forth. Rather than developing any of these arguments, I want to address the question of how it can ever be in the public interest to publicly display such works of art that disrupt or violate stable social conventions - of behavior, social or political roles, or aesthetic practices.

The answer is obvious: It is in the public interest to disrupt those conventions which are unnecessarily restrictive for some, such that those restrictions serve the interests of others who unfairly compete with them for

[2] See also Andrew Buchwalter, "Philosophy, Culture, and Public Policy."

the resources, power, and social status necessary to gain public support for a favored ideology. So, for example, a work of art that disrupts the prevailing image of corporate sponsorship as beneficial and politically neutral, as Hans Haacke's work does, is in the public interest, even though it undermines the convention of personal and social compliance with corporate demands in the workplace. Similarly, a work of art that disrupts conventional expectations of women as passive receptors of sexual and social violation, such as Karen Finley's work does, is in the public interest, even though it undermines conventional behavior by and toward women in personal and social relationships. It is *because* these works assault oppressive conventional attitudes that empower institutions at the expense of individuals and men at the expense of women respectively that they are in the public interest, even if they cannot be, by definition, objects of personal preference for most individuals.

This is to suggest that unconventional works of art are in the public interest because they promote - rather than require or presuppose - tolerance; and because they conduce to the evolution of social norms that maximize autonomy and individuality, rather than conformity and self-censorship. No one would argue that social disruption is a good in itself. However, social stability is also not an end in itself. Social stability may serve the harmful function of entrenching the repression of personal sensibility, individual self-actualization, or social self-determination; or it may serve the beneficial function of coordinating expectations among those recognized to differ in their personal, social or aesthetic values - as, in fact, we all do. Moral relativists argue that, in the last analysis, all coordinating conventions are arbitrary means of insuring social equilibrium, including moral ones. Nevertheless, some such conventions are more arbitrary than others. Social conventions that repress individual self-expression *merely* because it takes an unconventional form are harmful because they protect provinciality and philistinism at the expense of individuality. And they are arbitrary because there is no justification, beyond the stabilizing function of the convention itself, for enforcing it.

By contrast, there is a nonarbitrary justification for enforcing fundamental moral conventions - specifically, those moral norms that prohibit physical harm to others. Calibrating degrees of harm from the physical to the psychological and from the physically to the intellectually assaultive is to start down a treacherously slippery slope, and I will not attempt it here. But to agree that art should not inflict physical pain or desecrate the dead (say) is not thereby to support censorship or governmental repression of such work. Any marginalized individual or group knows how effective a community's nonofficial social sanctions can be in discouraging such work: Through ostracism, neglect, or social disapproval we discourage a great deal of potential social benefit. We would do better to turn these potent, nonofficial forms of social punishment to discouraging work that is genuinely morally harmful.

But is there not something hypocritical, or disingenuous at best, about demanding government support for works of art that then subvert the very social order that supports them? I think not. There is an important distinction to be made between government (or the state) and the social community (or civil society). Demanding government support for unconventional works of art that question the social order is not asking government to cut off the branch it's sitting on, because government and the social order are not the same. In a democratic society, the function of government is legislative, executive and judicative of norms that not only reflect but also influence and shape the development of the social community that elects it. A democratic government has a responsibility, not merely to permit but to promote the democratic values of tolerance, diversity of opinion and values, and freedom of speech, thought and information in the society it governs. To demand that the government fund unconventional works of art is to demand that it fulfill its responsibility to the community to encourage the democratic values it purports to represent.

Works of art that question prevailing ideologies or power relationships may be disruptive and offensive because they disturb the settled presumption that prevailing social roles, practices and power relationships are natural and inevitable. They thereby call into question whether the particular form democracy assumes in our troubled society is the most fully realized form democracy can take. In questioning the social power relations that define our prevailing conception of democracy, unconventional works of art thereby conduce to the evolution of social norms more appreciative of the questioners, respectful of the powerless and tolerant of the unconventional; and thereby reaffirm the ultimate value of democracy itself. Unconventional works of art are in the public interest - hence deserving of government support - because they promote coordinating conventions for the inherently unconventional, i.e., for fully realized individuals whose preferences and tastes are peculiarly their own.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Convention in New York City on 30 December 1991, as comments to Andrew Buchwalter's "Philosophy, Culture, and Public Policy." I am grateful to him and to members of the audience to that colloquium for discussion that has considerably improved the current version.