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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

To Earn Subsidies, Must Art Be Useful? Must It Be Sweet?

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

"All art is quite useless," wrote Oscar Wilde, but of course he never encountered the National Endowment for the Arts, which is predicated on the premise that the arts are the most useful thing in the world. They solve social problems, they keep people happy, they make communities shine with enthusiasm and, best of all, they inject a shot of money into sagging economies. The arts establishment in the United States operates on a nearly messianic certainty that the arts are not merely good, but good for you.

Is it really so? Surely the economic impact of the arts is real. The explosion of interest in culture in the United States over the last generation has turned the arts into a potent industry. Study after study shows the multiplier effect of arts dollars, sowing prosperity all through the economy. The Metropolitan Museum is now the most popular tourist attraction in New York, where big exhibitions fill not only its own coffers but also those of hotels and restaurants. People clamor to get seats for major events at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. The arts are for everyone, and everyone seems to be for the arts.

Except, of course, on Capitol Hill, where the new Republican majority, building on years of discomfort among conservatives about Federal support of the arts, seems increasingly hostile to keeping the National

which is a mere fly speck in the Federal budget, is given such overwhelming symbolic importance by both sides. The endowment's minuscule budget, less than half of what it costs to keep Lincoln Center going for a year, less than a quarter of what the city of Berlin spends on arts subsidies annually for a population that is less than 2 percent of that of the whole United States, is often portrayed as the crucible for the future of the arts in this country.

End the endowment and we will stop the free ride for unpopular artists and get back to the good kind of art that pays for itself, goes the conservative argument. We end the endowment at our peril, retorts the other side; without it, the arts will be finished and we will become a nation of philistines.

The likelihood is that the sky will neither fall nor rise if the endowment's modest appropriation disappears. Art will go on, as it always has. But if the endowment is sharply cut or eliminated altogether, the nation will be sending an important signal about its attitude toward

A debate in which both sides are entangled in a web of paradoxes.

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Except, of course, on Capitol Hill, where the new Republican majority, building on years of discomfort among conservatives about Federal support of the arts, seems increasingly hostile to keeping the National Endowment in business. The endowment's entire appropriation is only \$167 million, but no \$167 million anywhere in the entire Federal budget is debated with such intensity. To the endowment's opponents, this comparatively tiny sum of money is a vast boondoggle, a pork barrel for the cultural elite. To the endowment's supporters, it is anything but a gift to the elite; it is money that spreads the pleasures of art around and assures that the experience of culture will be accessible to all.

The situation is rife with paradoxes, not the least of which is the way in which the arts establishment has tried to save its skin by portraying art as sweet and lovable, leaving to the endowment's opponents a much more realistic view of art as challenging and difficult. Both sides claim to represent the democratic ideal, which is why \$167 million,

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ture, which is that it expects it to play by the rules most other things do, and pay for itself.

It sounds, on the surface, as if it couldn't be more fair. Why shouldn't culture do what other things do, and take care of itself? The only problem is that it doesn't work, as history proves. Culture has never been able to support itself. There is a reason that the popes and the Medicis hired Michelangelo, that royalty paid Mozart to write concertos, that the histories of creativity and of patronage are intimately intertwined. The marketplace has never been a testing ground for artistic validity; history shows few correlations between what is popular enough to pay for itself and what is good enough to last.

Subsidizing art runs against the

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