

# ARTISTS' PLENARY

This section contains an edited transcript of the first plenary session. With Alberta Arthurs, Director for Arts and Humanities at The Rockefeller Foundation, as moderator, this plenary gave the floor to artists. In the interests of space, the ideas of some speakers have been summarized. These appear in italic. Other artists have been quoted extensively to give an idea of the flavor of the discussion.

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**Alberta Arthurs, moderator:**

Thanks. I suspect this is not going to be one of the easier things that I've done in my complicated career. I've taken on Sam Lipman, raised three children, two of them artists. I once tried to run a small college. But I think this is going to be almost as hard as any of those things.

I see ourselves from having moved from *plein aire* to plenary. And now, almost without a plan, we're going to plunge in to what is the first, note, only the first, plenary of this gathering. There will be others. And this one I think, really ought to be to carry the pun of it further, an airing, because I think many people who haven't yet had a chance to speak may want to address us at this time. I'd like to remind us that the purpose of this meeting, indeed it's name is creative support for the creative artist. I think we could usefully remind ourselves of that this morning and use this hour plus about 15 minutes to bring ourselves back to that central topic.

Please, identify yourself by name, by institution if you've got one, and by part of the country, which I assume everybody's got.

I would like to ask that we begin with the artists. We probably all feel that we haven't heard enough from the artists in our midst. Since this is about creative support for the creative artist, we ask those of you we care most about to comment on what you've heard, what you think, what you think is missing, where you think we should be going, what is concerning you at this point, and what we might be able to work on as a conference. We invite you to speak up.

I'm David Mahler. I'm a composer, I live in Seattle. These mentally prepared, but "no notes" remarks are entitled "The Drinks Are On the House, But So Is the Pigeon Shit," or "The Artist's Last Resort."

Maybe, since I'm the first artist speaking just as an artist here, I'll just tell you a little bit about myself—what I do and where I come from. I sort of assumed that I would be asked that at some point, so I'll ask myself. The answer is that since about 1973 or '74 I've been working independently as a composer. I also put in time helping other people get their music done. I spent about six years of time working at *and/or* in Seattle, producing concerts for a whole bunch of people at the same time I was doing my

own work. A year and a half ago, I suddenly and inexplicably stopped doing anything other than music or music related work. That is to say, I have no little outside jobs to help me hold things together. I'm doing OK, I think, but I haven't done my taxes for the last two and a half years so I don't know yet. We'll see soon. I haven't done them because I'm afraid don't have the money to deal with them, but I'll overcome that fear soon. I also owe a lot of money from borrowing for projects, which, thankfully, now are of coming to fruition.

Well, here's my grant history. In '78 or so, Pauline Oliveros talked to me and said "You know you ought to apply for a NEA composer fellowship, I'm on the panel." So I did. And I got one. The reason I knew I got one was Pauline sent me a post card saying she was going to be in town and at the end she said "congratulations on your grant," which was nice. Then a month or so later I found out from the NEA that I did indeed get the money. Pauline asked me how much I got and I told her, \$1250. And she said, "Hmm, apply again next year." And I did, and I got another grant that was for twice that amount. Those were the days when few people on the composer fellowship panel at the NEA treated composers who were doing exploratory work as though they were real composers. That has since stopped and though I have applied a number of times I haven't received anything; indeed, lots of other composers I know are in the same boat.

Several years ago I received a wonderful grant through the NEA/Rockefeller Interdisciplinary Program that was administered by Langton Arts. That grant saved me for a summer, really allowed me to do a project and was very useful to me. I've gotten a few other little things including a number of public projects, one of which is a big thing I'm working on right now through the Washington State Arts Commission.

What I really want to say is this, that there's been a lot of big "G" grant talking here. In fact, to my mind it has been the grants conference so far, and I don't like that.

A number of artists from Seattle here have wonderful, creative ways of holding themselves together and finding ways to get money that don't involve applying for grants. I get tired of trying to say who I am and what I do by putting it down on paper and sending it 3,000 miles. And I get tired of being demeaned by rejection slips that come back in the mail. I get especially tired when I'm encouraged to apply and then get turned down. I feel like Charlie Brown

with the football being pulled away from me, and I won't do that anymore. I'm being pretty selective now, I'm not playing the crapshoot quite as much. I try to apply only when I've got a pretty good chance; I guess that's only smart. What I'm especially trying to do is find ways to get money that don't have to do with grants and granting agencies. In all seriousness, I think granting agencies need artists more than artists need granting agencies in the long run. A goal for me—and it's probably the right goal for everybody involved in this conference—is eventually to make it possible for artists to exist in society without relying on special groups that give artists money.

I'll tell you one little thing that I'm doing and then I'll stop. I contacted about 60 or 70 people in Seattle. A lot of them neighbors, some friends, some acquaintances, some were referred to me. I invited them to participate in a project called "New Songs" that a singer, Ann Obery, and I are doing. We asked these people to do a concert of 20th century American songs for voice and piano, including a piece of mine, a piece of Lou Harrison's, some Charles Ives, and so on. Then we said to everyone, "If you give us at least \$100, we'll take that money and commission a couple of composers to write songs for us to perform."

About 40 people responded positively. Some of these commissioners are my neighbors. For example, a man who runs a bookstore a block away from me gave us \$100. So we've been able to tap a couple of composers on the shoulder and get some new pieces. One is a composer from Seattle, Thomas Peterson; the other is a composer from Berkeley, Maggi Payne.

My name is **Carl Chew** and I'm also an artist from Seattle. I'm just going to try to take my cue from Michel and what he said yesterday (*a metaphor of the artist as fool*). This is something I don't normally do, but ....

*(He lept from his seat into the middle of the room and while darting across the floor said in a taunting, cackling voice)*

HA, HA, HA, OH YOUR MAJESTY, HA, HA, HA, ARE YOU HAVING A GOOD TIME THIS MORNING? OH AND WOULDN'T WE BE VERY DESIROUS OF THE TIME THAT TOBACCO COMPANIES AND CORPORATIONS QUIT WASTING THEIR TIME ON ADVERTISING AND PERHAPS GIVE THAT MONEY TO MORE CREATIVE PROJECTS, ALL OF IT. HO,

HO, YES. AND, PERHAPS WOULDN'T IT BE NICE IF WE HAD A CONFERENCE WHERE THE ARTISTS WERE ASKED TO DELIVER THE PAPERS AND THE GRANTERS WERE THE ENTERTAINMENT? AND, LASTLY, YOUR MAJESTY, I HAVE A LITTLE DISK HERE THAT IS EITHER GOLD OR ASHES. BUT, IN A NUMBER OF YEARS AT YOUR NEXT CONFERENCE YOU MAY BE ABLE TO TAKE YOURSELVES HOME ON THIS. SO PLEASE, THINK, COMPACT DISK, CD ROM. THANK YOU.

**Adrian Piper**, an artist who teaches philosophy at UC San Diego, believes that in giving money to artists the biggest problems arise not in finding appropriate strategies, which seemed to be the focus of the conference so far, but in making judgments about who deserves support. As a result she felt "there aren't enough artists here. There should be a lot more talk about art and judgments about art." She focussed especially on political art and on the judgments that keep money from getting to artists who work in the political arena.

**Rachel Vaccaro**, an artist who works with the Pennsylvania Radio Theater, made a plea for increased understanding of audio art. When "media arts" are supported, support goes to film and video. She learned from conversations at the conference that people from foundations often don't know much about audio. She suggested that workshops be organized, perhaps by someone at her state arts council, with audio artists playing examples of the work and explaining their enthusiasm for the art form.

I'm **Michael Anania**, I'm a writer from Chicago. For a good long while I've been one of those collaborators in arts administration—a panelist. I've been a panelist everywhere in the country, including Washington. The advantage for me is that I've finally figured out what I'm doing. And I've begun to wonder about it.

A number of us over the years have offered ourselves as intermediaries for the anxiety that arts agencies have about the question of quality. That is to say, we go to meetings and receive our federal allowance six months later and carry the interest burden ourselves in order to relieve arts administrators of the

headaches of quality. So when the nightmare legislator holds up a piece of work he despises and threatens the agency's ultimate funding, the arts administrator can say, "I didn't do it, they did." Well, I'm one of them.

The anxiety probably is the message. The secrecy, the secret nominating panels, the secret panels of judges, the elaborate conditions of conflict of interest—all are measures of the degree to which we've institutionalized an arts community concern over the thing it's supposed to be sponsoring. That's wearying and, I think, dispiriting.

The other thing that I've noticed at the conference is this: the first wave of American philanthropy was conducted by industrialists who supported artists whose idealized products were versions of what the industrialists made, but at a higher, more religiously iconographic level. What's happening now is that you, the arts administrators, are rewarding us for behaving in your image. Yesterday, the most exciting and applauded solutions to the problems of art came when artists-hyphen-administrators talked about the committees they put together in various towns to solve problems. This is wonderful and community-building, and all that nice stuff, except that it draws us all away from art and it makes life easier for state arts councils, community arts councils, the National Endowment, because now they deal with things that behave exactly as they behave—through committees, meetings, minutes, recordings, budgets, five-year plans, projections, "interfacing," as you all say, with organizations.

Those of us who are here as artist representatives feel slightly alienated from the proceedings, which is quite appropriate—we don't belong here. I don't know why you asked us. I'd like to talk about the communities I've been involved with. I hesitated to do that all day yesterday because I simply would be changing myself into you and I think that's an unfortunate thing to do.

I will confess something here that I haven't before—ten years ago I stopped applying for grants as well. I have not filled out a form since. It's an inappropriate use of my time. Finally, it is so dispiriting that that \$20,000 doesn't pay me well enough to do it. So, I think the title of this conference is the wrong title. We don't need creative solutions to the problems of support of artists. We need uncreative, simple, direct, uncomplicated solutions. Let's stop having meetings. Thank you.

**Ruby Shang**, a choreographer who "pays a lot of rent to say I'm based in New York," made a simple plea; programs to fund artists must start at a higher amount than \$3,000. To survive in any urban or any rural city, "to make a dent in our economic structure as an artist," requires more money than that.

**Ed Shay**, a visual artist from Illinois, agreed with much that other artists were saying and while he feels that one of the roles artists play is to complain he also wanted to express another point of view, "and that is simply to say thank you." He stated that he had received grants at a time when his life was very difficult and the support was "absolutely crucial."

My name is **Jo Carson**. I'm from Johnson City, Tennessee and I'm not paying much rent, simply because I'm from Johnson City. Being from Johnson City has made an exotic out of me; it's not often that people show up on Orcas Island from Johnson City, Tennessee.

I have not had much history with grants, myself. I have had one major grant, from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. It was \$10,000 and what I did with it was spend a year and write a play that has since been, or seems to be doing fairly well for itself.

Prior to that I worked with organizations that have received small grants, and I've lived below the poverty line for the past 20 years. OK, I am still below the poverty line; \$10,000 is not particularly good money.

Grants: I have applied for grants and I probably will continue to because the community in Johnson City does not particularly support people very well. There's no place in Johnson City to work in the arts without grant funding.

I would suggest a couple of things. I wrote them down. A priority for funding might be those things that seem dangerous in some fashion or another. Another priority might be to fund things between the cracks in the disciplines, because too often those folks who are not working in a single discipline or who are trying to cross disciplines don't fit categories. Often, it seems to me, the most exciting things being done are not in one single discipline or another. There's probably more to say, but that's all I think of at the moment.

**Tony Petracca**, a painter, described himself as "a strange animal because I'm an artist from Upstate New York." He discussed the importance of regionalism and pointed out that New York is a big region that stretches 300 miles beyond New York City. "Certain regions in the state get overlooked because they're overshadowed by the Mecca of the art world." In the state's artist grant programs, he feels that artists living throughout the state are judged against artists from around the world because of the internationalism of New York City and he finds this unfair. He'd like to see funding concentrated in smaller cities and rural areas. "It's great that artists in New York City, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington DC get funding, but why not artists in Dayton, Rochester and a small town in Tennessee?" He also had a "real uncreative idea for small grants to artists" and suggested that artists be paid for their time and materials in the application process.

**Margaret Fisher** from Emeryville, California, started by saying, "I'm a choreographer and I get real nervous talking. I can dance in front of you but I can't talk easily." She reinforced things that other artists had said: money should go directly to the artist and the cycle of repetitive (and expensive) applications, rejections and more applications should be broken. She expressed her discomfort in approaching corporations where she feels people are removed from an artist's experience. She also had specific suggestions for creative approaches to supporting artists:

Yesterday (in the session on national arts policy) when we were asked "What do artists need for national policy?" I said, "an affiliation with science." I watched the leader of the workshop and wondered, "Is he going to write it down?" But, no, he didn't write it down, so I'm going to say it again. Artists want a high level of dialogue with people who are sincerely interested in the artist and in the artist's process, and we will seek out these people. There are plenty of crazy, eccentric and also rational scientists whose dialogue with artists could be expanded on. In Emeryville, at one end of the block are three artists' warehouses. At the other end of the block is Cetus (a genetic engineering firm). We should be taking advantage of this relationship. As an individual choreographer, if I got on the phone to Cetus and said, "Could I speak to so and so; I'm a choreographer living down the street, you know, 500 yards away, and I'd like to set up a dialogue with scientists at Cetus," it would be rather absurd. I could send them my

resume or something and maybe it would be a little less absurd, but still absurd. I need an affiliation; I need a title. "This is Margaret Fisher calling from the XYZX 3 Association and I represent da ta da ta da and we're creating a program that does this and that."

Also, creative support for the creative artist should not mean just looking at what's experimental. That's what I want for my own work, but I come from a family of traditional oil painters. What they're doing is tending the flame and keeping things moving. But, they're working on canvas with oil paints and that should not be denigrated. Perhaps this is where regionalism is the most pertinent topic; artists like those in my family are keeping the arts alive all throughout the country. Maybe the really bold, quote, unquote, "exciting" events are happening in urban centers, but it's misleading to focus only on urban centers as the emphasis of funding programs.

**Kris Parker**, a visual artist from Philadelphia, found the experience of showing her slides at the conference disheartening; the room was tiny and hot, showings of video artists ran concurrently and drew her back and forth between the two, and no one except other visual artists saw the slides. "I guess you look at slides in your work all the time, so it's really boring to come here and do it."

**Inverna Lockpez**, a sculptor and painter from New York, told a story of personal attention that came with a grant she got at the very beginning of her career. Two panelists came to her studio to see her, to talk about her work, and to tell her that she had gotten the grant. Even though the incident took place 15 years ago, she still has a relationship with these two people. The human quality shown by bringing the news to her personally meant as much as the money.

Lockpez also raised the issue of quality and stated that the evaluation of quality has to be redefined, reevaluated. She then suggested alternative methods of support — supplies ("an account in a paint store"), institutional affiliations, facility access and multi-year support. "For a grant to enable us to grow it has to have continuity and development over a couple of years."