

"IMAGINARY NEEDS: CREATIVE SUPPORT FOR THE CREATIVE ARTIST"

A REPORT ON THE CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE NEW YORK FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS MAY, 1986

In early May, a group of arts administrators, foundation officers, representatives of government agencies, and artists gathered to think about and discuss the role of the artist and the systems that support the creation of art in our society. The three-day conference, ambiguously entitled "Imaginary Needs: Creative Support for the Creative Artist," took place in Montauk, at the tip of Long Island, and was organized by the New York Foundation for the Arts, an organization which provides fellowships, project grants, residencies and other services for artists in New York State. The conference was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Dayton Hudson Foundation, the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, the British Arts Council, Philip Morris Inc., and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

This gathering was notable not merely because it brought together artworkers (one third of them artists) from 36 states, Canada, and Europe, but because it sought to create a forum for thought. To this end, the meeting was not structured by panels, lectures, the recitation of prepared papers, and the requisite question and answer periods; rather, the 150 participants convened as a whole, broke into smaller discussion groups, and reconvened to question, compare notes, testify, and wrestle with the issues of support systems for creative artists. In addition to the participation of artists, art was an integral part of the conference structure—a participatory "Sonic Meditation" conducted by composer Pauline Oliveros; performances by Timothy Buckley and "Blue" Gene Tyranny, Anthony Davis, Bob Holman, and Dana Reitz; film and video screenings carried into each room on the hotel's in-house television channel; and a closing anthem by Seattle composer, David Mahler who entwined the hortatory sonorities of The Star Spangled Banner and Take Me Out To The Ballgame.

This unique structure, or lack of it, made for an extremely involving, and often frustrating, conference. Conference participants were denied the possibility of settling into the role of passive audience—agenda and format had to be determined within the framework of a loose schedule marked by such necessities as meals, coffee, and art. Participants had, however, been given excellent springboards for thought in the contributions of eleven artists and administrators: Robert Ashley, Thulani Davis, Leslie Fiedler, Mary MacArthur Griffin, Ann Hawley, Owen Kelly, Howard Klein, Ruby Lerner, Jim Pomeroy, Martha Rosler, and Ursula Von Rydingsvard wrote "letters to the conference," which were included in the package of preconference materials.

These letters ranged from concise pleas for more money to histories of the struggles of individual artists to make art and ends meet to histories of the struggles of arts organizations servicing artists to histories of the funding of the arts. Most writers agreed that support systems for the creation and distribution of art are necessary; most agreed that cultural plurality and diversity are essential to a healthy environment for art-making. And, although the essays were not addressed directly during the public sessions of the conference, many of the underlying assumptions about the importance of information dissemination, communication between artist and audience, and systems of support other than fellowships informed the conversations that did take place.

The conference began with a dinner (with assigned seating that mixed artist and administrator), welcoming remarks by Theodore Berger, Executive Director of the New York Foundation for the Arts; Mary Hays, Executive Director of the New York State Council on the Arts; and conference organizer Mary MacArthur

Griffin. As the food and these remarks were being digested, Pauline Oliveros led the group in a performance of her 16-year-old composition, "Sonic Meditation," in which the performer/listeners found their own note(s) to hum, resulting in a soft blanket of sound that hovered above their heads.

The diners then settled back into their seats while Francis S. M. Hodson, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts gave the opening address. He spoke of the "hardship and deprivation with which thousands of outstanding contemporary artist must cope": a median income of \$9,000 and a 37% decline in income since 1980. Recognizing that artists themselves are the greatest source of subsidy for the creation of art, Hodson went on to describe what the NEA has done (750 fellowships were awarded to artists last year) and what the Endowment strives for: to assist artistic excellence; to support the distribution of work through exhibition, publication, sound recordings, etc.; to encourage the recognition of the value of artistic creation to society; and to find ways to develop sources of support in the private sector.

After dinner, at the first plenary session, participants plunged immediately into a discussion of a range of topics: money; need; the role of the artist in society; the consumption of art and the mechanisms of getting art to the people; the financial, structural, and psychological obstacles an artist must overcome in order to make art; the need to create social and cultural environments that stimulate and support art-making; the efficacy of the panel system as a method of selecting grant recipients; and money. This hour and a half discussion was necessarily somewhat fragmented, but it indicated the range of issues troubling those involved in making art and supporting such endeavors.

The next day's schedule called for "nuts and bolts" practical discussions at breakfast, a plenary session in the morning, a break to smaller discussion groups, lunch, and then a reprise of the morning's structure. However, by the end of the afternoon's plenary, the momentum of the group's conversation was such that the participants decided not to break into small groups again.

Rather than try to chart a strict chronology of the day's discussion, this report will outline those questions and problems that were returned to again and again in the "formal" sessions—in effect, the agenda for action that was discovered by the participants as they talked and thought together.

During the first morning session, one of the central preoccupations was the question of the role of art and artist in our society, and the relationship between artist and community. Although one could not expect consensus from so large a group, there seemed to be general agreement that art is essential to the creation and sustenance of social meaning, but that this is not widely recognized, nor well rewarded in our culture.

This lack of recognition stems in part from the attitudes of some artists and arts administrators, a divisive emphasis on excellence which in its most discriminate meaning fosters an elitism in the marketing and funding of the arts. The participants were reminded that artists suffer from the same snobbery and fastidiousness with which they sometimes treat the amateur, the non-professional; that ethnic and minority art expressions are formative influences which are rarely credited even though as valid as those of the academic or accepted. A fruitful analogy was drawn between professional artists and professional athletes—and the status enjoyed by sports versus the status of the arts in our society. Professional athletes and the sports industry do not express contempt for amateur athletes; in fact amateur participation in sports is encouraged and recognized as being of value to the amateur as well as to the industry. Artists and administrators, however, are often guilty of valuing only the "major leagues," while sneering at "Sunday painters" and community theater players.

This elitism and isolation from community was cited by conference participants as being one of the major obstacles to imagining and developing new sources and systems for funding art-making. However, the point was also made that there are many artists who are not in the grant/fellowship/funding system, but who are working within their communities. This led to a discussion of the importance of solutions that come from communities and regions and the fact that there can not be a single solution to the problems faced by individual artists.

When the plenary of 150 broke into seven "working groups," more focused discussions were able to take place. Some of these tended toward the practical, while others pursued more abstract ideas. All groups spent some time again discussing the interaction between artist and society: drawing analogies to research and development in the scientific community and to think tanks in the world of politics and economics; considering the social utility of art; the posi-

tion of artist as outsider, artist as criminal. But some also went on to more practical issues: How can artists and administrators best lobby legislatures? How can administrators best get information about existing funding mechanisms to artists? What kinds of support systems other than cash grants are needed? (Residencies, artist colonies, commissions, health care, housing, and distribution systems were mentioned.) How and where can new sources of funding be found? (Developing a United Fund Drive for Artists, approaching state agencies that deal with tourism or attracting industry to the state, and taxing the for-profit entertainment industry to benefit the nonprofit arts were among the suggestions.)

Although upon reconvening some frustration was expressed with the format of the plenary sessions (no possibility of deep dialogue, important issues introduced but then abandoned), the afternoon's conversation was as wide-ranging as had been the previous plenaries.

During the session it became apparent that administrators and artists generally work in isolation from each other. Administrators who run programs for artists often feel beleaguered in the larger scope of their agencies; they can't hope to satisfy all their constituent artists' needs and often get discouraged by hostility from disappointed artists on one hand and neglect or bewilderment from their agencies or legislative bodies or board of trustees on the other. Artists on their part felt that they had little control over the programs which were supposed to help them and rarely get to meet those high-level officials in foundations or government agencies who make policies.

There was a shift, continued from the working group discussions, towards considering more practical issues. After a reminder that art is part of a wider social process, that artists work within the dominant cultural, political, and economic systems, attention returned once again to money and how to get it to artists. While agreeing that artists should respond to their communities, most participants also expressed discomfort with the distorting effect the marketplace has on art. Recognizing the irony of this tension, the need for increased and alternative opportunities for communication between artists and audiences was stressed. Many of the representatives from foundations voiced their desire to find new ways to fertilize the environment for art, particularly since so many foundations are legally prohibited from making cash grants to individuals.

After this long day of talk, the conference was energized and enlightened by the evening's performances: dance by choreographer and performer Dana Reitz; poetry performance by Bob Holman; a selection from "X," an opera based on the life of Malcolm X, on piano by composer Anthony Davis; and dance by Timothy Buckley improvising with composer "Blue" Gene Tyranny, on piano. This return to art was a potent reminder of the fundamental reason for the conference and participants found themselves staying up very late, continuing the conversations of the day and watching video tapes programmed by video artist, Ed Bowes.

The next morning the final plenary opened with a call for consensus and closure, as well as a call for those who had not spoken to speak. Most affirmed the importance of a group representing so many different constituencies gathering as equals to confront common problems; most expressed renewed energy and determination to return to their communities to develop support for individual artists; some mentioned areas that had not come up for group discussion (arts in education, artist-run spaces); one group of self-designated "power brokers" from state agencies, the National Endowment for the Arts, and foundations reported that they had met, and had plans to meet again to find ways to convince each state to create individual artist support programs, and to develop mechanisms for multiple-year support programs for artists. All agreed that the conversations begun during the day and a half conference should be continued, both at the national and regional levels.



The above report of the discussions during the formal sessions is necessarily condensed, abbreviated, and abstracted. But it is also incomplete because it does not include the hours and hours of conversations that took place during meals and every other interstitial moment. Such discussions, though impossible to report, were an invaluable part of this conference. Thus, necessarily missing are the contributions of those who chose not to speak in the public sessions.

In conclusion, this report recapitulates those concerns that ran throughout the conference, as well as some of the issues that might constitute the agenda for future meetings. Although one of the benefits of this conference was that participants had the chance to meet colleagues from across the country dealing with similar

problems, both artists and administrators emphasized the importance of decentralized programs to support artists. Lobbying at the national level and national attention is crucial to developing such programs, but a single national remedy is unlikely to serve the needs of our culturally, ethnically, and politically diverse society. Thus a number of participants indicated that they hoped to initiate conferences on the support of individual artists in their own regions. (As many of the administrator participants voiced frustration at not being able to get down to "nuts and bolts" issues at Montauk, it is likely that these problems will be on the agendas of many regional conferences.) However there was a consensus, strongly expressed that artists and administrators had a lot to learn from each other; that the mix of private, public and international funders allowed a rare exchange of ideas and information; and that a meeting designed to focus on some of the major concerns raised in Montauk should become an annual impetus towards national efforts to improve the status of artists in all regions of the country.

The more general discussions of this conference brought to light five broad, key areas for future work:

- 1) the need to take a wide-ranging view of the practice of art, to encourage it in all its forms and social contexts and not to confuse excellence with elitism;
- 2) to develop new sources of funding from the private and public sectors, particularly to encourage states and regions to establish fellowship programs; to seek the partnership of more private funders; and to be aware of alternative resources untapped in the community;
- 3) the need to increase communication between artists and audiences;
- 4) the need to develop strategies to create social, economic, and organizational environments that foster the creation and presentation or distribution of new work; 5) the importance of promoting conversation and information sharing between artists and administrators.