

The Editorial Notebook

'Percent for Art'

To be against anything that appears to benefit artists is like being against virtue. But it is possible to care for the arts and still be unhappy about the "Percent for Art" movement, which has been remarkably successful at getting public authorities to set aside up to 1 percent of the cost of public construction for the purchase of works of art.

The practice has been allowed for construction in New York City since 1965 and Mayor Koch now proposes a law that would make it mandatory. Art would have to be bought for all new or remodeled public buildings, at a cost of 1 percent of the first \$20 million of construction costs and one-half of 1 percent of costs beyond that sum, to a limit of \$400,000 for any one building. A committee of art professionals and representatives of city agencies and community boards would select the works.

"Percent for Art" programs have been operating long enough to see what they do for the arts: not much. They are obviously good for artists. Some of the work thus bought or commissioned seems fine, but some of it is dreadful. The objections that tend to get the most publicity concern extreme or "difficult" art, but they are quite beside the point. The value of

It Is Better Called A Dreary Percent For Politics

such a public policy goes to questions that transcend style.

Bad art is in no sense better than no art. For example, the boneyard and scrap metal heap in front of the Federal Office Building on the Mall in Washington merely adds a tangle of sculptural banality to architectural mediocrity. Not all public spaces are crying for art; sometimes the best thing that can be done for a building is to leave it alone.

More important still is whether this is an appropriate way to support artists. Although the program is sold as "enhancing the urban environment" through "the integration of the arts and architecture," it is still a subsidy. Subsidizing art is an honorable, established and often desirable procedure. But except through the Work Projects Administration, which was used as a buyer of last resort during the Depression, Government has not normally mandated the buying of work or services in this blanket fashion.

Painters and sculptors are not the only talented people who have problems making a living. Writers, composers and other worthy professionals also have trouble selling their products in a commercial world. The best grants made by the National Endowments for the Arts have tried to reward creativity and scholarship on the basis of excellence, interest, usefulness and promise, taking care to cover the widest range of individuals and undertakings.

Artists do have special requirements: They need places to work and to show their work. Government patronage can assist them through zoning and subsidies for studio space, galleries and individual grants and awards, the sponsorship of appropriate exhibitions and competitions for significant building projects.

But the best support for the arts would be selective and far-reaching; public money should be used to encourage opportunities and options essential to the creative process. The kind of artwork that will come out of those politically constructed New York committees is predictable — and dreary. The marriage of art and architecture should not be a shotgun wedding, with government holding the gun.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE