

Mr. Koch Views the Arts

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In a position paper and recent interview on the arts, Mayor-elect Koch has shown that his heart is in the right cultural place while his mind has acquired only a limited grasp of the subject. His proposals range from the harmless—display more art in public places—to the redundant—create a New York City Council on the Arts. It would be a great mistake to set any of this in motion without a good deal more solid study.

What is conspicuously lacking in Mr. Koch's discussion of the arts is any evaluation of existing programs and of the larger municipal and cultural context into which even the most well-intentioned city arts activities must fit. It is not surprising that Mr. Koch has not had time for the subject, only that he should have rushed to comment on it.

The Beame administration, which stands accused of total philistinism, actually took a giant step forward by detaching cultural activities from their subsidiary, fun-and-games position in the Parks Administration. It created a Commission and a Department of Cultural Affairs, fully recognizing the central position of the arts in New York life and commerce.

The Koch proposal would add an as yet undefined Arts Council to this structure, overlapping the commission (an independent advisory body) and the department (a city agency). A more logical first step for a new mayor would be an analysis of their first year of operation.

The year was devoted to creation of these bodies and to coordinating the financing of cultural institutions with the city's fiscal overhaul. Through their efforts, a

proposed cut in the city's arts budget of 10 percent was reduced to 2½ percent, \$15 million in Federal public works money was obtained for cultural uses, and more than 700 jobs were provided for artists under the Federal employment training program. The city's public grants procedure was revised. Other projects found space for arts groups, mobilized a response to the flood damage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and supported the bid for Federal subsidies for performing artists' housing at Manhattan Plaza. The Cultural Affairs Department has become a clearing house for both public and private programs.

The creation of an Arts Council would be not only redundant but also heedless of a prior failure. An Arts Council was tried during the Lindsay administration and allowed quietly to expire. The Cultural Affairs Commission will have ample vacancies to let the new Mayor broaden its membership, if that is the goal. Mr. Koch was right to hope for a closer working relationship with the Office of Economic Development, but experiments are needed to learn how this could be attained.

That Mr. Koch is committed to cultural development is clear. As a \$3-billion-a-year business, the arts have achieved political status. But the city's cultural priorities are hardly the trivia on his list of recommendations, such as art in the subways, or financial gimmicks like a \$1 tax check-off for culture. The arts are no more suitable for such financing than garbage collection. New York's cultural policies and programs must be integrated in governmental activity, broadly conceived and professionally managed.

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