

The Business of the Arts

New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 23, 1980; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 20

The Business of the Arts

The arts produce not only prestige for New York. They are a business, sustaining the city — and, in very special ways, all of America. Locally, the culture industry yields each year an estimated \$3 billion in direct revenues, taxes, service spinoffs and real estate values. Nationally, it enriches an entire people. In the words of the City Opera's Beverly Sills, that's "meat and potatoes." Yet the arts are still treated like mere frosting on the economic cake.

New York's budgets for the arts are the first to be cut in times of financial crisis, and they are cut deeper than others, even though relatively small subsidies are involved. It is not easy, in days of tough priorities, to argue for culture over cops, but the price of such cuts should be recognized as disproportionately high. If the reduced funds that remain are not used to support the most essential cultural activities — rather than those that are politically popular — the New York art business can be badly hurt.

In short, New York needs to make some hard cultural decisions. The Department of Cultural Affairs came close to being killed; it has survived with a minimum capacity to function. The priorities that it now needs to set are bound to be controversial. Providing public concerts and other visible entertainments, for example, is far less important than sustaining the city's major institutions for the arts; displaying fashionable art is not as necessary as underwriting unfashionable borough arts councils. Festivals in Central Park are less vital to the city's cultural life than ethnic and community activities in underserved areas.

The choices should be weighed on a scale of social

and economic values — and against alternatives. A recent study by the nonprofit Cultural Assistance Committee concludes that New York has not been doing enough to capitalize on its cultural resources. Programs scattered around city agencies have been poorly coordinated. Some of the subsidized city institutions do not know about, or do not apply for, grants from other sources.

The one place to which New Yorkers should be able to turn is the Federal arts program, which has requested an 8.8 percent increase in its fiscal 1981 National Endowment budget. But changes in Federal priorities are threatening New York's fair share. False arguments of populism versus elitism have been used to achieve a more palatable geographical spread of Federal funds. That yields too much to politics and neglects artistic values. The stress now is on grass roots grants to small institutions with poor esthetic credentials, including zoos and nature museums. These may recognize community values but distort the meaning of the arts and the national purpose in subsidizing them.

The Government should be helping to strengthen the country's best creative effort, according to quality and need, not equality and location. In most of the arts, New York is a testing ground for the highest critical standards, a unique concentration of innovative and artistic power. It feeds regional effort in so many ways that New York really has a special claim to being a national cultural resource. The city needs to get its cultural act together, set the priorities it can afford and make its voice heard in Washington.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.