

# Does the NEA Need Saving?

*Sarah Wilbur*

## Executive Call

16 March 2017

On 16 March 2017, US President Donald J. Trump's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released "America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again," a document that outlined his administration's basic plan to reengineer the US federal bureaucracy through the massive and historically unprecedented defunding of government departments, agencies, and programs (OMB 2017a). As an instrument of institutional power, the budget blueprint is skeletal and strategically vague. It highlights discretionary spending (roughly 25 percent of all federal spending) while making no mention of specific tax proposals or revenue plans. Budget blueprints chart general directions that future policies might take, sketch an administration's particular views on the role of federal government, and serve as symbolic placeholders for a more comprehensive budget yet to come.

Contingencies aside, Trump's "America First" blueprint was different for the arts for one important reason: for the first time, a President used the budget blueprint to demand the outright elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the lone arts philanthropic arm of the US federal government (est. 1965). The accompanying narrative, penned by OMB Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, justified the elimination of the NEA alongside nearly 20 other institutions as a "cost-savings" measure to offset proposed spending boosts in areas like the military (Department of Defense) and homeland security (Department of Justice) without growing the federal deficit. Since annual appropriations to the NEA are a tiny drop in the \$3.9 trillion US national budget, it is more plausible that Trump's effort to decimate the NEA—and many Executive Branch agencies—aligns with his broader political agenda, an agenda described by then chief presidential strategist Steven K. Bannon as the total "deconstruction of the administrative state."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Bannon detailed Trump's deconstruction of the administrative state within and beyond the confines of the Trump Cabinet at the Conservative Political Action Conference/CPAC. (ACU 2017).

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## NEA Response

16 March 2017

On this same day, the NEA published on the arts.gov website an official response that acknowledged staff “disappointment” with the blueprint and the proposed defunding. NEA Chair Jane Chu assured readers of the agency’s intention to operate under the assumption of “business as usual” while the budget appropriations process continued its snail-like course through Congress (NEA 2017a). Chu reminded citizens that NEA staff, as federal employees, must refrain from political advocacy. She also said that the NEA was working with the OMB to provide requested information in a timely manner. The NEA’s response also reinforced the important fact that the agency was not at risk of being immediately defunded; Trump’s full FY18 budget proposal, its amendments, and a Congressional vote were all far down the road. At this time, federal agencies were operating under a continuing resolution (P.L. 114–254) that carried over the FY16 appropriations levels because Congress had not approved a FY17 budget on schedule. In short, the agency’s fate was stalled because legislators were stuck waiting for the fiscal year 2017 Consolidated Omnibus Budget. Given the NEA’s checkered history of conflict with elected officials during the so-called “Culture Wars” of the late 1980s and 1990s,<sup>2</sup> this narrative deference to bureaucratic demands and apolitical tone suggest that institutional preservation remains the NEA’s #1 policy job.

## Legislative Response

2 May 2017

On 1 May 2017 Congress broke the budget stalemate and answered Trump’s threat to the NEA by passing the 2017 Omnibus, which earmarked increases of \$2 million for the NEA and NEH, respectively. The NEH had also been targeted for elimination. This growing of the NEA’s 2017 budget from \$148 to \$150 million brought relief to arts advocates.<sup>3</sup> Still, those who understood the appropriations process knew that Trump had not exercised the extent of his control over the NEA’s fate. Trump’s Comprehensive Budget Proposal was slated for announcement in late May.

## Executive (Re)Call

24 May 2017

On 24 May 2017, Trump’s OMB unveiled “A New Foundation for American Greatness,” the President’s 62-page Comprehensive Budget Proposal for FY2018. Buried on page 1191 of its 1288 pages of appendices, under the plan for the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies (where both the NEA and NEH reside), was President Trump’s plan to fully defund the National Endowment for the Arts over the next two fiscal years—2018 and 2019 (OMB 2017b). Processually, Trump’s proposal cuts 80 percent of existing appropriations for FY18, and leaves just \$28,949,000 million for remaining staff to “conduct the orderly closeout” of NEA

2. A difficult period to summarize, this historical flashpoint is linked by many to public outcries on the part of religious and moral conservatives against visual and performance artists who engaged counterhegemonic religious and sexual themes and who were subsidized, however indirectly, by the NEA. Challengers in Congress included Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who wrote and passed decency clauses for NEA-funded artists, and Representative Philip Crane (R-IL), who issued bills calling for total agency elimination each consecutive year from 1990 to 1997. The Crane amendments ultimately failed, but the NEA was significantly disempowered by negative publicity, litigation brought by censored artists, and a 39 percent budget cut issued in December 1995 by the Republican-majority 104th Congress.

3. The \$2 million increase remains economically trifling when compared to the \$517.1 billion Trump earmarked for defense, a figure that has since grown in the House subcommittee, whose bill (released 29 July 2017) amends this figure to \$584.2 billion, \$18.4 billion above the President’s defense request (see HAC 2017a and 2017b).

operations; the fate of the NEH would take the same course (DoI 2017). If this budget passes in Congress without amendment, then next year's budget proposal would take the NEA's budget to a zero balance for FY2019, effectively ending the NEA's 54-year history of granting federal subsidies to state arts agencies, nonprofit artists, and organizers.

It is useful to remember that Trump's Comprehensive Budget Proposal is not a binding document. Presidential budgets are flexible mechanisms that legislators adapt, reject, and amend heavily in subcommittee during the appropriations process.<sup>4</sup> As a dance, the appropriations process is filled with very boring legislative steps: elected officials busy themselves drafting bills, introducing bills in assembly, debating them, rewriting them, reintroducing them, and debating them again before wrangling a majority vote that writes some restructured version of the budget into law. These steps are discursive, and they take time. And at the time of this writing (July 2017), we have no new bills and no new news on the NEA's fate as a federal budgetary priority. By the time this essay is published, the fate of the Arts Endowment may have changed. But what we do know from this bureaucratic call and response is that the battle to save the NEA is still on.

So what is at stake in waiting for a life or death sentence for the NEA at this historical moment? Given the massive programmatic decimation outlined in Trump's FY18 budget, it is very tempting to spend energy engaging in much bigger fights right now. Rather than deny the severity of the situation or try to predict what may lie ahead, I want to narrow the question, "Does the NEA Need Saving?" to the context of *TDR*, a journal that contributors have used to debate the NEA's impact on art and artists for decades. How might *TDR* serve (today, once again) as an instrument for expanding critical discourse about federal arts policy?

In 2013, when I began provisional research for what is now a book-length history of NEA funding instruments and their practical implementation by decision-makers in dance (1965–2016), I noticed two kinds of risks in looking at the NEA's impact strictly from the purview of artists. The first risk was sociocultural. Talking with a wide geographic and cultural range of NEA dance grantees, I quickly learned that no two artists experienced funding exclusions and affordances in the same way. A second risk I'll call "infrastructural," in that it involves the hidden or taken-for-granted ways that mechanisms of federal funding are put together and used by NEA decision-makers. In 1996, coincidentally the year that I entered the nonprofit dance field, the NEA saw a significant dollar decline and a reduction in employees. Not surprisingly the architecture of its institutional narratives, grant programs, and procedures changed dramatically. As an artist, I was ill-informed about the history of these restructurings. I had inherited a sea change, but I had few tools to navigate it.

Today, I study the NEA by way of its funders—the armies of intermediary agents whose decisions govern NEA operations. By looking at institutional cooperation and the kinds of pressures that NEA decision-makers face, I have a better grasp of the political engineering of the massively redistributive,<sup>5</sup> highly leveraged, and *hyper*-instrumental system of today's federal arts grant programs. For cultural and infrastructural reasons, I cast funders as my research protagonists.

In the spirit of *TDR*'s enduring advocacy for public support for the arts, I will use the remainder of this essay to underscore the NEA's current achievements and show how NEA funding blueprints have changed over time. Drawing upon my recent attendance at the 31 March 2017 meeting of the National Council on the Arts at the Constitution Center (NEA headquarters), I excerpt portions of the agency highlights narrative delivered by NEA Chair Jane Chu and insert responses drawn from my archival and ethnographic research to provide historical context. My responses animate the labor and cooperation of NEA administrators and

4. For a list of appropriations subcommittees and status of FY18 amendments and bills, see the websites for the US House of Representatives and the US Senate Committees on Appropriations (HAC 2017b; USSCA 2017).

5. Since 1996, 40 percent of NEA annual appropriations go immediately to state arts agencies by Congressional mandate.



Figure 1. NEA Chair Jane Chu seated (center) at the 31 March 2017 meeting of the National Council on the Arts, with the presidentially appointed advisors to the chair. Constitution Center (NEA headquarters). (Photo by Sarah Wilbur)

highlight the political pressures that shape the agency's ever-changing instruments of supporting the arts. My purpose in "over-reading"<sup>6</sup> Chu's agency highlights narrative is not to take direct issue with Chu or with the NEA: NCA meetings are not forums for debate on policy issues nor do they historicize the NEA's inner workings. These governmental convenings are principally *procedural*—Council members vote on rosters of recommended grantees and policy adjustments; and *informational*—the meetings educate the public about the NEA's achievements and functions. Through historically informed commentary, I hope to join Chu's efforts to draw attention to under-recognized conditions and structural changes that underpin the agency's operations, somewhat by design.

## NEA Call

### 31 March 2017

CHU: *Good morning! I'm Jane Chu, Chairman of the NEA and the 190th meeting of the National Council on the Arts is now in session. [She strikes the gavel.] I want to welcome everybody here this morning, council members, NEA staff, colleagues here in person, and everyone watching online at ARTS.GOV, and so, for the record, council members who are present are [...; she lists the names of NCA members].<sup>7</sup> Let's get down to business: may I have a motion to approve the minutes from the October 16th Council meeting? [Member: "So moved."] Thank you. Do I have a second? [Member: "Second."] All in favor say "Ay." ["Ay" response from members.] Any opposed? [Silence.] Thank you.<sup>8</sup>*

6. I am indebted in my effort to understand the NEA's official "text" in its historical context to Randy Martin's (1996) effort to "over-read" NEA policy conditions through the choreography of Bill T. Jones, one of the few dance studies projects to directly engage the NEA as a shaping influence on choreographers.

7. NCA members listed by Chu: Bruce Carter, Aaron Dworkin, Lee Greenwood, Paul Hodes, Maria Rosario Jackson, Emil Chang, Mas Masumoto, Ranae Ramaswamy, Diane Rodriguez, Tom Rothman, Olga Viso; joining by phone, Deepa Gupta, Maria Lopez de Leon. Barbara Ernst Gray, Charlotte Kessler, and Rick Lowe were not in attendance.

8. All excerpts from Jane Chu's address at the 31 March 2017 meeting of the National Council on the Arts at the Constitution Center (NEA headquarters), are transcribed from the NEA's video of the event (NEA 2017e).

The first 30 minutes of NCA meetings are procedurally heavy, as the Chair and senior staff conduct business that requires Council action. Members are asked to review and approve minutes and to vote on policy changes and grant recommendations made by review panels that met in previous months. Members mark paper ballots, place them in red folders, and hand the folders to staff to tally, announcing the results when the meeting draws to a close. Discussion is minimal. NCA members have reviewed the information online in advance. Once voting concludes, the proceedings turn again to Chu, who recites notable agency developments since the last NCA meeting.

*CHU: Now I'd like to update you on a few agency highlights, since we met last October. On Thursday March 16th the President released the FY2018 budget blueprint that proposes the elimination of the NEA. The President's budget request is a first step in a long budget process, and the agency continues to operate, as usual, and it will do so until a new budget is enacted by Congress. Specifically, our Fiscal Year 2017 operations remain unchanged. We continue to make Fiscal '17 grant awards and we continue to honor all obligated grant funds made to date, including application recommendations that are before the current NCA for the NEA's normal grant process. And, in addition, we will continue to accept grant applications for Fiscal Year 2018 at our usual deadlines.*

This “business as usual” message assures would-be grantees that awarded or prospective funding will not be compromised, despite Trump’s proposed elimination of the NEA. Chu underscores the agency’s obligation to current grantees and to federal bureaucrats who control the NEA’s tightly ordered grant-making process. As an independent agency of the Executive Branch of the US federal government, the NEA’s operations are OMB-regulated. Management protocols underwent significant reformation during the administration of former President Barack Obama (2009–2017). As part of Obama’s Open Government Platform, which sought to undo the “culture of secrecy” about government comportment under the Bush II administration (see McDermott 2010), Obama’s OMB required all federal agencies to publicly communicate procedures and managerial goals clearly and transparently through four-year strategic plans for 2014 to 2018 (NEA 2014).

Looking at the management objectives stated in the NEA’s “Strategic Plan, FY2014–2018,” we can start to understand Chu’s suggestion that grant operations remain “unchanged.” Operating under “business as usual” at the NEA means that federal staffers will continue to go to work in order to maintain efficient internal control of the agency’s online grant system, NEA Grants Online, known as NEAGO. A system piloted in 2012 and fully implemented in 2014, NEAGO was part of Obama’s efforts to use digital technology to streamline government operations across the Executive Branch. “Normal” operations require NEA staff to scroll and click their way into application timetables, check grant applications for compliance, undertake phone and email communication with various constituencies, and oversee the final reporting and data collection required to close NEA contracts. Staff offer technical assistance to grant seekers and online grant reviewers who struggle to navigate the system, and they spend a lot of time drafting descriptions of grant program criteria and application instructions to upload to the NEA website. They also schedule and implement live-streamed webinars ([www.arts.gov](http://www.arts.gov)) designed to make NEA operations more user-friendly. Once an online grant period closes to new applicants, staffers mediate the grant review process, now conducted entirely in the virtual realm, to save travel costs and time. Such ordinary and discursive labor would take a discernable turn, of course, were the Trump budget and defunding for FY18 to pass in Congress.

How does an abstract document (like a budget blueprint or a strategic plan) steer the comportment of federal employees? How would FY18 defunding change the daily behaviors of NEA employees, in particular? The NEA’s Open Government page responds to the Trump FY18 full budget by showing how administrative practices would adjust to the agency’s elimination. To facilitate total institutional shut down, the NEA would keep its 155 current staff positions in place until 31 March 2018 and then conduct a reduction in force (RIF) to approx-

imately 70 employees. These staffers would oversee closing out the Arts Endowment's 5,000 active grants to date and its 36 cooperative agreements. Administrative energies would shift from opening new projects to all kinds of closing: closing communication with awardees, final payment processing, and interim and final report reviews. As the size of operations shrinks, staff would begin "orderly shutdown" of technical systems, issue final editions of existing publications, and close interagency and organizational agreements to future action.<sup>9</sup> OMB mandates are choreographies that discipline the NEA's actions, impacting what Chu terms the agency's "normal" grant-making process. She continues:

*CHU: A little bit of a highlight: Every year the NEA awards grants to more than 2,400 applicants to a range of arts programs, and they range from music, to dance, to theatre [...]; she lists all of the agency's discipline-specific divisions], sparking economic vitality in communities of all types and sizes not only in large cities, but also in small and midsize populations, rural areas. Last year, half of the NEA grants—that's 50 percent—went to midsize communities, of a size of just over 250,000 in population, communities of under 250,000 received 10 percent of NEA grants, and then an additional 13 percent of NEA grants went straight to the rural areas. I believe the smallest population we currently fund is a rural community of 56 people.*

Chu's numbers reflect the broad geographic expanse of current NEA-funded projects. Taking the longer view, this promotion of rural outreach is a sign of the agency successfully meeting charges of urbanism and elitism. As Donna Binkiewicz's vital history of the NEA (2004) shows, many rural legislators had an allergic reaction to the formation of a dedicated domestic arts agency, seeing the NEA as an instrument of urban intellectual and cultural elites. Early NEA chairs confronted legislative and citizen protests of the agency's "expert" peer review system; these challengers saw peer review as a nepotistic system that disproportionately drew its ranks from and favored artists from large urban epicenters.<sup>10</sup>

In dance but hardly exclusive to it—I use the Dance Program as my example, but what happened to dance also happened to other NEA programs—the NEA's subsidies in the early years (1965–1980) went overwhelmingly to artists and organizers from larger US cities: New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Boston.<sup>11</sup> It is no coincidence that these areas were heavy with artists, private arts patrons, and philanthropic foundations that could match newly available NEA funds. NEA annual reports from 1966 to 1980 reveal the frequency with which New York-based choreographers and dance companies secured support through NEA individual Choreography Fellowships and the Dance Touring Program, in particular.<sup>12</sup> While much critical attention has been paid to the congressionally mandated elimination of the Individual Artist Fellowships in 1996, a legislative act that estranged many artists, the smoke of the "Culture Wars" masked structural changes in the NEA Dance Program that began over a decade earlier, with the election of President Ronald Reagan.<sup>13</sup>

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9. For the NEA's plan to implement FY18 Trump Budget workarounds see NEA (2017b:3).

10. These criticisms are well rehearsed in Arian (1989).

11. To notice this geographic representation, NEA dance grants are listed in NEA annual reports from 1966–1997 (see NEA 2017c); and from 1998–present grantee rosters are housed in a digital archive and search engine (see NEA 2017d).

12. To show one of many examples: in 1976, 19 of the 26 Choreography Fellowships were awarded to New York artists, and 39 percent of panel advisors hailed from New York (see NEA 1976).

13. Of the many publications that address the "Culture Wars" debacles, Richard Bolton's edited collection *The Culture Wars* (1992) documents the turbulent and oppositional assumptions at play in the NEA's reauthorization and censorship battles by including articles, editorial commentary, legislative transcripts, congressional arguments and testimony from citizens on all sides of the debates (Bolton 1992). For a transcript of the ruling on the "NEA-Four" case see *NEA v. Finley* (1998).

Reagan's 1980 election catalyzed a massive economic streamlining process of the federal bureaucracy as a whole. The NEA was not immune to pressures to reduce cost-heavy areas of funding and administration. Such pressures from Reagan's OMB compounded charges of urbanism and nepotism already at play from NEA challengers and forced strategic programmatic overhauls. Seeking both a more equal distribution of resources and cost savings, Dance Program staffers began a slow and steady dismantling of the Dance Touring Program (DTP), whose coveted grants initially encouraged dance companies, presenters, and regional funders to coordinate touring from companies generally based in large cities like New York to regional theatres and venues across the US. In 1983, the NEA folded the DTP and replaced it with a program jointly administered by the Dance Program, the Inter-Arts Program, and the State and Regional Arts Program to share costs. A key change enacted through this programmatic restructuring was that the new touring program cut dance companies out of the eligible applicant pool entirely. Only presenters (a geographically diffuse group) were hailed to apply for funds and state arts agencies were newly tasked with shouldering the administratively heavy burden of tour coordination that NEA staffers used to perform. With these small but significant changes, Dance Program administrators at once improved the appearance of geographic democracy and reduced a costly area of NEA spending.

While the reengineering of dance touring funds clearly alienated artists by removing dance companies from direct contact with the NEA Dance Program, one practical counterpoint is worth noting before I return to Chu: former NEA dance staffers whom I've spoken with suggest that many formerly federally funded dance companies from large cities continued to receive NEA support, albeit indirectly, by networking with presenters who won the new funds. Jennifer Sciantarelli (2009) has also shown the consistency with which NEA Dance staffers channeled resourcing to concert dance artists even after the agency did away with discipline-specific funding from 1996 to 2005. So while restructuring improved the appearance of democratic distribution, it protected the NEA's enduring promotion of concert dance—ballet and modern dance—as the professional gold standard. I mention this caveat to suggest that in practice, geographic democracy does not equal cultural democracy. Back to the NCA:

*CHU: And then the return on investment of NEA dollars leverages up to \$9 in other outside funds, so every dollar that the NEA awards directly to organizations is matched on average by up to nine other dollars from other sources. So, last year, in 2016, this resulted in \$500,000,000 of other outside funds for the same arts projects. So, instead of taking away from outside giving, NEA funds spark more outside giving from other sources.*

Claims that federal arts funding “primes the pump” for increased nonfederal arts philanthropy are as old as the NEA and not exclusive to the arts sector. It is useful to understand Chu's invocation of the so-called “multiplier effect” as a tacit promotion of the institutional mechanism of the matching arts grant as a strategic instrument of federal investment. A funding tool forklifted by the NEA from private foundations like Ford, matching grants are economically partial and temporally contingent “seed” funds that require grantees to secure a minimum of one-to-one cost share from nonfederal sources. Matching grants appeal to legislators as a tool to recruit new donors and to redistribute the burden of cultural subsidy across a broader swath of investors.

Structurally speaking, leveraged funds are designed to protect funders by guaranteeing that no single philanthropic body is fully funding a proposed project. To quell legislator suspicion about “rent seeking,” as it's called by NEA agnostics, or overt dependency on state subsidies by artists, NEA matching criteria have historically forbade repeat applications for a single project. NEA matching grants are also time-stamped to expire after a fixed award period (generally one to two years). By hardwiring material and temporal contingencies into its funding instruments, the NEA stimulates nonfederal cost share and insures that the state's obligation to particular cultural workers will always come to an end. Chu's important point about philanthropic stimulus, above, must be understood as an effect of this structural engineering.

I want to make one other point about leveraging that pertains to the NEA's current portfolio of national grant programs. To gain support from the NEA today, arts organizers must not only secure counterbalanced monies but also counterbalanced relationships with non-arts partners in policy areas like agriculture, economic development, science and technology, health-care, the military, transportation, urban planning, housing, and education. Of the NEA's four main grant programs (Art Works, Challenge America, Our Town/Creative Placemaking, and Creativity Connects) the two newest—Our Town (2010–present) and Creativity Connects (2016–present)—both require applicants to secure institutional partnerships with non-arts collaborators as a criterion of eligibility.<sup>14</sup> These programs reflect creative workarounds to budgetary stalemates and efforts by the NEA's senior leadership to satisfy legislators and citizen constituencies. In the absence of substantial NEA appropriations increases over the past two decades and the politically savvy efforts of NEA Chairs Landesman (2009–2013) and Chu (2014–present), the NEA partners today with dozens of federal agencies and departments. Importantly, these interagency partnerships were incentivized by Obama's OMB, which rewarded increased appropriations points to federal institutions that could demonstrate cost sharing and reduce programmatic redundancy across policy areas. Programs like Our Town (coordinated in depth with partners at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD]) and the Creative Forces initiative (mentioned by Chu below, and organized with the Veterans Health Administration [VHA] and the Department of Defense) variously reward arts organizers who can deploy art as a tool for economic development. Chu's closing pair of comments underlines the results of strategic partnerships with non-arts partners in education and defense:

*CHU: We've also seen first hand transformational roles that the arts play in equalizing educational opportunities. Because when it comes to children and youth, especially those living in inner cities, especially those from households with minimal opportunities, the NEA is there. Forty-two percent of NEA grants were specifically designed to reach high poverty neighborhoods. And students who have an education that incorporates the arts have a strong relationship with higher academic performance increased standardized test scores, and lower dropout rates, and they have eager and responsible attitudes about community service and civic engagement. And so these are benefits reaped by students from all walks of life regardless of any socioeconomic status. The NEA grants have played a role in closing the education achievement gap.*

Chu's education success story signals cultural gains made through NEA-funded arts programs in US schools and flags the political role that NEA grants play today as neoliberal instruments of "soft power," what Wendy Brown (2015) describes as tools that grow human and economic capital by entangling ethical gains and economic losses together. This structural and rhetorical "braiding," to use Brown's verb, at its worst, masks the decimation of already beleaguered public infrastructures. Part of the NEA's success in staying out of the political limelight in the aftermath of the Culture Wars has been to re-engineer grants to produce measurable economic deliverables in non-arts policy areas, areas that the state no longer robustly protects. While I support the integration of art, cultural expression, and education at all stages, Chu's attention, above, to ethical gains made (i.e., the "transformational roles that the arts play in equalizing educational opportunities") risks obfuscating the ongoing defunding and/or redistribution of federal resources to low-income neighborhoods, a problem that no infusion of small, time-stamped nonprofit arts "seeds" is equipped to support. Such positioning of art as a *solution* to problems that federal aid once more directly addressed is, in and of itself, a policy issue.

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14. The Thornton Wilder-themed pet project of former NEA Chair Rocco Landesman, a Broadway producer and theatre buff, Our Town grants promote urban and rural community revitalization projects and require mandatory partnerships with at least one government agency (see NEA n.d.). Creativity Connects distributes grants to projects that connect the arts "with other sectors that want and utilize creativity" (see NEA n.d.).

And, while the NCA meeting is admittedly not the place for Chu to weigh in on the structural factors (wage disparities, suboptimal housing, food insecurity, lack of healthcare) that exacerbate low test scores, academic achievement, and quality of life in low income communities, disproportionately communities of color,<sup>15</sup> the NEA's promotion of art as a tool "to close the education gap" ignores microadjustments to social policy programs that impact the most vulnerable US populations. Cultural policy should compliment and not supplant federal funds for education, labor, health, and social programs. Rhetorical obfuscation of this sort is worth watching as we inch closer toward a vote on the FY18 budget. Chu's final comments press these instrumental claims a bit further by detailing the NEA's growing collaborations with agents in the Departments of Defense, Health, and Veterans Affairs.

*CHU: And now the NEA is at the forefront and we're honored to be at the forefront nationally in our work with US military service members and veterans. At this point, I want to give you an update about developments to our Creative Forces initiative, which we announced just this week. Creative Forces is such a great partnership with our Department of Defense, serving the unique needs of our active duty and veterans who've been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and other psychological health conditions. And so this program provides that important link between clinical patient treatment—where service members work with certified art and music therapists—and those great arts programs that are happening in local communities.*

Today, the US healthcare system and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) are overburdened by a growing number of service members returning from the US's multiple theatres of combat. Arts-based health programs have exponentially expanded through outpatient health services that respond to this burden in various ways. As I listened to Chu, I reflected on my own involvement as an artist in health- and military-oriented dance programs since 2003 as complicit with the veritable explosion of art and healing interventions that accompanied the wars the US has waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also in 2003 George W. Bush issued the President's New Freedom Commission Report on Mental Health, a report that effectively deinstitutionalized mental health in the VHA (Hogan 2003). Just as local gains made by dancing veterans do little to acknowledge or assuage the American role in conflicts abroad, the NEA's Creative Forces partnerships do little to recognize how these wars have destabilized the VHA, the largest mental healthcare provider in the United States. NEA-funded or otherwise, artists that commit to applying art as a means to "celebrate the creativity of our troops" are right to reflect on their participation within a system that bolsters the creative expression of military service members while simultaneously stripping resources from mental healthcare for US veterans. Chu's mention of health and economic deliverables here signals the force with which health policy discourse has infiltrated the NEA today. Given Chu's power as NEA Chair to disburse discretionary funds, it would be exhilarating to see the NEA sponsor a national convening for funders, artists, and healthcare providers to debate these kinds of entanglements. The NEA's power to convene a national discourse is among the agency's most potent political functions as a federal funding body.

### **TDR Response: Does the NEA Need Saving?**

*We hope this will be the start of many dialogues—both public and private—concerning federal aid to the theatre. Unlike the foundations, the Endowment is a public agency. This means that it is susceptible to political pressure, both good and bad. It also means that theatre people have a right (perhaps an obligation) to involve themselves in the planning, policies, and operations of the Endowment.*

—Richard Schechner, *TDR Comment* (1966)

15. For examples of policy maneuvers exacerbating the longstanding socioeconomic disenfranchisement of communities of color in the US see O'Connor (2001).

Without question, renewed citizen interest in the inner workings of the US federal government and increased advocacy for the NEA are invaluable byproducts of the 2016 presidential election. In 1966, Richard Schechner wrote with promise about the possibility of the NEA as a new institution and of the role of “theatre people” to engage critically with NEA blueprints and enactments. Using *TDR* as a site for convening critical discourse and social power, Schechner limited his own ideas to this lone paragraph and devoted the remaining space to five regional theatre-makers he charged with making policy suggestions directly to the NEA’s then-director of the Theatre Division, Ruth Mayleas. Schechner’s productive instrumentalism reminds *TDR* readers that academics have durable and flexible mechanisms at their disposal, tools that they can use to advocate for salvaging public infrastructures within and beyond the arts that are currently under siege.

As an artist and critical humanist, I believe that the government of a political democracy is obligated to protect the cultural expression of its citizens as an affirmation of their humanity. Given the historical reality that oppressive strategies have routinely involved stripping vulnerable populations of the right to express their worldviews, the US federal government is uniquely and ethically obliged to create and implement policy that recognizes and resources cultural expression in plural and equitable ways.<sup>16</sup>

Saying that I support the democratic ideal of government arts subsidy, however, is not the same as saying that the NEA has successfully achieved this ideal either in policy or in practice. In practice, I commit my energies and leverage my privileged position as an arts researcher to challenge the NEA’s structural and embodied articulations on concrete historical terms. As a choreographer, maybe I’m a bit obsessed with the politics of institutional plans and their practical translation. But saying *that* the NEA has distributed funds ineffectively is just not the same thing as showing *how*.

As instruments that steer the conduct and aspirations of artists and organizers, NEA grant mechanisms merit expanded scrutiny by humanist scholars. By sharpening our analytical skills, performance scholars are uniquely equipped to identify disjunctions between official policy and its enactment. I am strongly in favor of “saving” the NEA and, with it, federal support for art and culture in the US. But we can only change institutions that exist.

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16. In this rationale for culture as a policy issue, I am indebted to Maria Rosario Jackson, current NCA member, urban planner, and institutional insider whose research into cultural vibrancy in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods was instrumental in the engineering of the NEA’s Our Town grant program and the rapid ascension of “place-based” philanthropy across the US (see TEDx Talks 2012).

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