

## **The Declining Value of Art in America: How Arts in Memphis Continue to Thrive**

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Memphis has traditionally been known for its lineage of talented musicians, but the city's visual arts scene has recently gained national attention. On April 22, 2011, Memphis was named among seven other cities worldwide including Dresden, Hong Kong, and Jakarta as the world's best cities for young artists.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, on July 12, 2011, the city of Memphis and the Hyde Family Foundation announced that Memphis was a recipient of a \$100,000 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant to help ArtSpace<sup>2</sup> renovate a downtown building into approximately 70 artist spaces and studios.<sup>3</sup> When examining the local arts agency Memphis Arts Council (currently known as ArtsMemphis), one would see that the annual campaign for revenue steadily increased from its founding in 1963 through the period of the cultural wars and the NEA funding crisis. On the heels of volatile debates on American values, the NEA suffered a budget reduction by approximately 40 percent in 1995. This marked the largest budget cut to the agency throughout its history.

Thus on the surface, it appears that funding for the Memphis arts survived the controversy and the budget cut and has since continued to thrive. Yet the narrative is not that

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<sup>1</sup> Annemarie Dooling, "The Best Cities for Young Artists," *Flavorwire*, April 22, 2011, [http://flavorwire.com/169898/the-best-cities-for-young-artists/7#post\\_body](http://flavorwire.com/169898/the-best-cities-for-young-artists/7#post_body).

<sup>2</sup> ArtSpace is a Minneapolis based organization whose mission is to "create, foster, and preserve affordable space for artists and arts organizations." "ArtSpace USA – About ArtSpace," accessed July 26, 2011, <http://www.artspace.org/about/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bianca Phillips, "ArtSpace Project Wins Grant Funding," *Memphis Flyer*, July 12, 2011, <http://www.memphisflyer.com/NewsBlog/archives/2011/07/12/artspace-project-wins-grant-funding>.

straightforward. The Memphis Arts Council, while receiving both direct and indirect funds from the NEA, continually increased its local basis of support and thus coped with the funding crisis by continuing to develop independently from federal funds. However, due to the agency's original funding structure, its funds were chiefly directed toward the city's professional institutions. As a result, the city's larger institutions have traditionally experienced secure funding, whereas the contemporary arts, specifically visual arts, scene did not. Beginning to really flourish in the late 1980s, the contemporary visual arts organizations felt isolated from the local arts funds and, as a result, were forced to develop in a more grassroots manner. Despite the perceived inaccessibility to local funds, the willingness and dedication to continue cultivating contemporary visual arts helped this community increase its visibility, gain legitimacy, and ultimately contribute vitality to Memphis culture.

Initially, the National Endowment for the Arts was conceived as an organization that would both foster and help express the culture of America, yet this conception is a consequence of the specific time period of its origination. Signed into law by President Johnson on September 29, 1965, the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act resulted in the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and its sister organization, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). There are several reasons the endowments began at this time. As WWII was coming to an end, the artists with their new forms of art—Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism—were producing a distinct image that postwar America easily absorbed:

By offering an unmistakably and conventionally American image of themselves, and by producing paintings of radically unconventional beauty and imagination that other postwar artists around the world had to think about, they helped create

the basis for a postwar American art that American institutions could consider truly American.<sup>4</sup>

This new era of art became cherished, especially as the country found itself in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Both the Kennedy administration's formal support for the arts and the subsequent decision to establish these endowments were ways of using the United States' culture as a weapon against the enemy.<sup>5</sup> Following the official ceremony for the NEA, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions held a two-day meeting to discuss the purpose, function and goals of the NEA. A paper by Gifford Phillips, which was read during this development stage, is one example of the Cold War rhetoric. Phillips presents the idea that "the artist has a special need to live outside of society . . . whenever there is an official attempt to destroy this detachment, as there has been in the Soviet Union, for example, art is likely to suffer."<sup>6</sup> It is evident that the rhetoric about the NEA specifically juxtaposed the liberation of the United States against the limitations of the Soviet Union. The paper goes on to claim that artists, as they live "in a generalized estrangement from society," must be supported in their independence.<sup>7</sup> Thus, by establishing the National Endowment, the artists of society would receive monetary support and, therefore, be able to remain and thrive on the outskirts of society while helping to fuel the culture of the nation.

The Cold War motive also connects to the United States' desire for self-preservation. At the founding ceremony in 1965, Johnson expressed in his speech that in order for America to leave a lasting legacy, art was essential:

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Brenson, *Where Do We Go From Here? The Place of the Artist and the NEA* (Chicago: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Brenson, *Where Do We Go From Here? The Place of the Artist and the NEA*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

. . . countless empires and nations have come and gone. Those which created no lasting works of art are reduced today to short footnotes in history's catalogue. Art is a nation's most precious heritage, for it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.<sup>8</sup>

At this time, American art and artists were declared worthy of both national recognition and federal funding – an idea unprecedented in the United States. President Johnson recognized the traditional placement of the artist as he said, “. . . the scientists always seem to get the penthouse, while the arts and the humanities get the basement.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the NEA, or even just the notion of federal support, placed arts on the same rank as other respected professions. Thus, while the NEA and NEH claimed to foster the art and culture of the United States, their founding both reflects the time that the act was signed into law and reveals a more political motive.

As the war against Russian Communism came to a close, the national recognition of arts was no longer politically backed. Accordingly, art, specifically the federal funding of art, grew to be the center of political debate. The success that stemmed from the prior attention drove artists and those involved with the arts to believe that the majority of Americans “had embraced its avant-garde viewpoints . . . as with modern technology, the positive value of the ‘new’ was regarded as a given.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, there was still disconnect between artists and the masses of society—an aspect that was exposed as new, more challenging art trends developed:

The advent of AIDS had prompted much new, angry, and challenging art. And when the ‘real world’ caught sight of art that chronicled life at the receiving end of sexism, racism, and AIDS, or that addressed sexual experience (especially

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Yenawine, “Introduction: But What Has Changed?” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 10.

homosexuality), or that questioned hallowed religious beliefs, the controversy referred to as the ‘culture wars’ began for real.<sup>11</sup>

This challenging art was seen, mostly through the eyes of the conservative Right, as anti-American and as an attack on the morality upon which the United States had been founded. Thus, when work from artists such as Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe became known to the public as being partially funded by the NEA, there was absolute uproar.<sup>12</sup> Whereas artists had previously been seen as healers of the material-driven nation, new opinions emerged that they were, in actuality, poison to the American culture.

With the peak of controversy over the NEA erupting in 1989, subsequent years were saturated with efforts to change the way in which the agency operated. On the Senate floor on May 18, 1989, Senator Alfonse D’Amato erupted in anger over Andre Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ* as he claimed, “this so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity;” D’Amato further emphasized his opinion by ripping up a copy of the exhibition catalogue with the artist’s work.<sup>13</sup> Within twenty minutes of his public denunciation, several senators came together to formulate a letter to acting chairman of the NEA demanding that the agency take steps to change its grants procedures.<sup>14</sup> Similar attacks on other contemporary artists followed from the political Right, and their argument may best be summed up in the words of the conservative political commentator, Patrick Buchanan: “As with our rivers and lakes, we need to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>12</sup> Serrano’s most controversial work, *Piss Christ*, consisted of a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine. Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* contained black and white photographs that depicted a homosexual subculture of which Mapplethorpe was a participant.

<sup>13</sup> Carole S. Vance, “The War on Culture,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 106.

<sup>14</sup> “Debate in Senate over the NEA, statements by Sen. Alfonse D’Amato and Sen. Jesse Helms with letter of protest to NEA’s Hugh Southern,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 29.

clean up our culture: for it is a well from which we must all drink. Just as a poisoned land will yield up poisonous fruits, so a polluted culture, left to fester and stink, can destroy a nation's soul. . . . We should not subsidize decadence.” This argument was defended by those of the political Left, who argued under the principle of freedom of speech and expression. Nichols Fox, a former editor of *The New Art Examiner*, expresses this opinion:

The current wave of hypersensitivity is an acknowledgement of the incipient power of art to shape the culture . . . Christianity is being used as a cover for conservative paranoia . . . This effort to censor and control the arts, which are an expression of the creative and free human spirit, amounts to authoritarianism and in effect is the beginning of the end of all that we have meant by our civilization since its Judeo-Hellenic beginnings.<sup>15</sup>

The debate over the National Endowment for the Arts was not constrained to two specific pieces of artwork; rather the question of federal funding of the arts became highly politicized and contested.

Ultimately a compromise between political viewpoints concluded in the passing of a public law which mandated the insertion of a clause to NEA guidelines. The addition states that none of the NEA's appropriated funds can be used to produce material that

may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.<sup>16</sup>

However, this clause, known as the Helms' clause or the decency clause, was not the end of the battle. Rather, the events of the late 1980s merely set the tone for further debate and actions taken against the agency.

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<sup>15</sup> Nichols Fox, “NEA Under Siege,” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 47.

<sup>16</sup> “101<sup>st</sup> Congress, Public Law 101-121, October 23, 1989 (excerpt),” in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 122.

Though it began several years after D'Amato's outrage on the Congressional floor, the Clinton administration is crucial to understanding the complexity of federal support for the arts. In the arts community, there was trust that President Clinton, a musician himself, would restore the nation's support for the arts. It soon became clear that his support for the NEA was, at times, surface-level. Consequently, when the Republican Revolution of Congress occurred in 1994, Congress passed legislation that severely crippled and demoralized the National Endowment for the Arts.

While those involved with the arts believed that the federal attitude was changing as President Clinton stepped into office, his fight for the arts remained politically conservative. To some, Presidential support for the NEA and the entire arts community manifested as soon as Clinton stepped into office. For instance, in his 1993 inauguration, Clinton commissioned a series of six fine arts posters in order to commemorate the event; the posters were intended to represent the diversity of American culture, and thus were designed by artists from various cities. In an article from the Memphis periodical *NUMBER*, Lisa Kurts, an owner of a commercial gallery in Memphis and one who was involved with the NEA during the Bush years, recalls that Clinton was the first President who included the fine arts in an inauguration.<sup>17</sup> From this display, there was a sense of hope that a president was again embracing the arts. On the other hand, some measures Clinton took in the beginning of his presidency suggest a more fickle attitude towards the arts.

As of May of 1993, Clinton had yet to name a new candidate to be the NEA chairman; this delay led to concern, and eventually the National Council on the Arts, which advises the

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<sup>17</sup> Emily Yellin, "The Calm Before the Storm: Can the NEA survive—Helms or Highwater?" *NUMBER: an independent quarterly for the visual arts* (19), Summer 1993, 16.

NEA, passed a resolution urging the President to make up his mind. An *LA Times* article describes the discontented response this situation caused within the arts community. In the article, Harvey Lichtenstein, president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, claimed that the culture wars were not over, and the NEA and the arts community needed a voice to help advocate: ". . . we need someone (at the NEA) who is good and persuasive, who will make the case to Congress and to the country and do battle with these people. It's been four months; I think this is ludicrous."<sup>18</sup> When Clinton finally nominated Chairman Jane Alexander on August 7, it had been eight months since his administration began. Therefore, though Clinton was perceived as a president who eagerly supported the arts, his timid political actions for the agency were detrimental as they helped to pave the road for a Republican Congress to pass legislation that severely destabilized the NEA.

In 1995, Republican Newt Gingrich took the position as Speaker of the House and legislation against the NEA reemerged from the 1980s with an invigorated strength. The Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 1996 proposed a 40 percent funding decrease for the NEA, making the total budget \$99,494,000 (from the previous \$162.3 million) and included the initiative to phase out the entire endowment near the end of 1997.<sup>19</sup> Showing disapproval for Congress's fiscal plan, Clinton vetoed the entire Appropriations Act. In his explanatory statement, the final reason for vetoing the bill directly responded to the proposed NEA cuts. Clinton stated that the bill represented a "dramatic departure from our commitment to support for the arts and the humanities. It cuts funding . . . so

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<sup>18</sup> Anei Wallach, "Arts Partisans Angry at Clinton Administration : Politics: They are criticizing the President for a perceived lack of support, particularly over the failure to name an NEA chairman." *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1993, [http://articles.latimes.com/1993-05-28/entertainment/ca-40741\\_1\\_clinton-administration](http://articles.latimes.com/1993-05-28/entertainment/ca-40741_1_clinton-administration).

<sup>19</sup> 104<sup>th</sup> Congress 1<sup>st</sup> Session, "H.R. 1977," accessed July 29, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-104hr1977rs/pdf/BILLS-104hr1977rs.pdf>.

deeply as to jeopardize their capacity to keep providing the cultural, educational, and artistic programs that enrich America's communities large and small."<sup>20</sup> These words, however, were not enough. Congress did not concede to Clinton's requests, and the Senate-House conference committee reached an agreement later in 1995 that still cut the budget.

Along with the 40 percent funding decrease, the NEA's staff was reduced by half, a cut that had a damaging effect on the agency. Scott Shanklin-Peterson, the agency's deputy chairman throughout the Clinton administration, explains that the staff cut was done in such a manner that those most recently hired were the ones forced to resign, thus causing the agency to lose vibrancy and energy:

Other than people who were political appointees . . . we lost basically all of our younger staff, so we were left with people who had been at the agency quite a long time, which really creates a different kind of working environment because . . . a lot of vitality comes from the younger people with their energy and vision.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Shanklin-Peterson found that even people protected from losing their jobs were depressed due to the fact they lost those coworkers who were companions. Since the staff was reduced to around 150 members, the agency had to restructure itself in order to successfully operate. For instance, rather than granting funds under the category of a general art form (i.e. performance art, visual art), the agency created new categories that focused on the intent of the program (i.e. Creation and Preservation, Access to the Arts, Arts Education); moreover, organizations were only allowed to submit one grant per fiscal year. These internal changes were also paired with external Congressional actions. To ensure that the NEA was not supporting controversial art, Congress eliminated all the individual artists' fellowships

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<sup>20</sup>William J. Clinton, "Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1996," in John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed July 29, 2011,

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=50912#axzz1ThgnZTVN>.

<sup>21</sup> Scott Shanklin-Peterson, telephone interview by author, 6 July, 2011.

(excluding literature and honorific scholarships).<sup>22</sup> Though the NEA managed to survive, the budget decrease, staff reduction, and agency reorganization significantly changed the way in which art had the ability to be funded at a national level.

With the 1995 budget in mind, Clinton formally acknowledged a need to push for the protection of the nation's only federal arts agency. However, his efforts were minimal and, according to those at the NEA, ultimately ineffective. Entering into his second term, Clinton, in his State of the Union address, made statements to show that despite the recent cutbacks his support of the arts had not changed:

. . . the enduring worth of our Nation lies in our shared values and our soaring spirit. So instead of cutting back on our modest efforts to support the arts and humanities, I believe we should stand by them and challenge our artists, musicians, and writers, challenge our museums, libraries, and theaters . . . so that we can remain the world's beacon not only of liberty but of creativity . . .<sup>23</sup>

While Clinton's words were full of optimism, he ultimately lacked the capability to inspire new political policy for the arts, and Congress continued to push the NEA to its demise. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997, a 217-216 vote confirmed that the House had elected to eliminate the NEA entirely and disperse its remaining budget among each of the states.<sup>24</sup> The following day, however, conservatives in the House proposed to strip the NEA of its \$10 million shutdown costs and rejected the idea of distributing the remaining budget of \$99.5 million to the states. Ironically,

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted, however, that the most controversial and debated artists—Serrano and Mapplethorpe—were not funded by individual artist grants. The NEA gave a \$75,000 grant (matched 2 to 1 with private donations) to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, and the Center chose Serrano through a panel selection process. In Mapplethorpe's case, the NEA gave \$30,000 to the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania to support an exhibition of 120 works by Mapplethorpe. "National Endowment for the Arts, Fact Sheet on American Family Association Fundraising, Feb. 1990," in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 152.

<sup>23</sup> William J. Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," in John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=53358#axzz1TEb3cQuq>.

<sup>24</sup> Jerry Gray, "House, 217 to 216, Votes to Replace Arts Agency With Grants to States," *The New York Times*, July 11, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

due to the split between Republican moderates and conservatives, the House could not settle the dispute and efforts to eliminate the NEA were unsuccessful.

These persistent attacks on the NEA resulted from a poor relationship between the agency and Congress; in addition, the demoralization of the agency diffused from Washington into the arts communities around the country. For his second term, Clinton nominated William Ivey to the position of the NEA chairman, and following Congressional-approval Ivey entered the agency in 1998. In order to move the agency forward from threats of elimination, Ivey found it crucial to improve both staff morale and the working relationship with Congress. Ivey recalls walking into the staff that, due to incessant scrutiny, was working in an environment of fear:

There were lots of people in government and out of government that were looking at every single move it made, every word that was written, every grant that was made for some little problem that could be highlighted, and you had all these right-wing groups just looking at it that way . . . You had interns in congressional offices, who their only job was to read everything that the NEA did . . . there was kind of a feeling of paranoia.<sup>25</sup>

In order to combat the negative work environment, Ivey found that “budget increases were critical.” However, for the agency to be allotted a higher level of funding, the NEA needed to clear its negative reputation from the Congressional floor.

To improve the relationship between the agency and Congress, Ivey continually met with members of Congress to reconstruct a more positive image of the NEA; in his time, he met with a total of 225 members on a one-to-one basis. Ivey wanted to prove to Congress that the agency was “a part of government that was making a real contribution to the quality of life in America and that Congress could trust the agency, and actually trust it with more money.” In order to persuade members of Congress of this reputation, Ivey, who is a native of Nashville, used his

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Ivey, telephone interview by author, 12 July, 2011.

country music background to dispel the elitist charge against the arts. His pitch was similar to this: “We’re gonna be doing something in your district, you can trust us. I’m from Country Music, I’m not an elite art guy, I’m just a regular fellow.”<sup>26</sup> And while Ivey admits that these meetings didn’t necessarily change an individual legislator’s vote, they were effective in discouraging denouncements of the entire agency on the Congressional floor. Additionally, Ivey took this same non-elitist argument past the reparation of relationships and into the actual design of his new program, which he used to increase funding and support for the agency.

Known as *Challenge America*, Ivey’s main initiative during his tenure with the NEA, was a small grant program designed with two goals in mind: to reduce the stigma surrounding the arts, particularly in Congress, and to increase the budget of the agency, keeping it in a forward-moving direction. Before starting the program, Ivey recalls that the structure of the agency was not sustainable; over a third of the entire NEA budget was directed toward New York. Therefore, in order to gain Congressional support, the new grant program’s pitch was that this money would be directed toward more districts. By drastically broadening the range of recipients, the idea was to also expand the overall significance of the NEA. By acknowledging that the funding needing to be more widespread, this program won favor in Congress and, in due course, funding to the NEA was increased specifically for the program.<sup>27</sup> As the Clinton administration progressed through its second term, the NEA was successful in repairing some of its scarred reputation, yet this was due more to individual arts administrators rather than presidential initiative.

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<sup>26</sup> Bill Ivey, telephone interview by author, 12 July, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Despite the hope that a Democratic president would foster the support necessary for the NEA to continue to develop, the Clinton administration's defense was disheartening. Ivey found that though President Clinton was an artist himself, he did not aspire to combine the arts and federal government. Thus, though he supported the arts nominally, his actions did not distinguish himself from previous presidents detached from art:

His connection with the arts and the endowment was similar to almost every other president, which is he saw the arts as an amenity . . . He did not see the arts as an essential function of government or as an essential aspect of quality of life, it was sort of like the frosting on the cake and not the cake.<sup>28</sup>

Due to this mindset, Clinton, while he spoke about supporting the arts, did not hold out long enough in order to enact change. In the words of Ivey,

[Clinton] was not willing to fight very hard for the agency. The first year I was chairman, the entire federal budget came down to just two or three issues . . . and then the final thing was the NEA and the money involved was insignificant in the federal budget, but the president caved on all those issues.<sup>29</sup>

Ivey remembers his angered reaction to the announcement of the unchanged budget: "I remember I was at home and . . . Bill Clinton's Chief of Staff called me and said, 'Well we thought we were gonna get you \$20 million dollars, you didn't get anything.' I was pretty mad."<sup>30</sup> Though the NEA did not receive increased funding that year, the budget did increase over Ivey's tenure (as Ivey prepared to leave the agency in 2001, the budget was around \$120 million).<sup>31</sup> Working through the discouragement in the agency, arts administrators of the NEA like Ivey were able to continue to grow and expand the organization in new directions. Individual dedication like this was essential to the survival of an agency in a time where

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<sup>28</sup> Bill Ivey, telephone interview by author, 12 July, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Congress was still wary of previous controversies and where the President's support was present in words, but absent in action.

Though a confluence of factors—such as the heated culture wars of the late 1980s and the Republican revolution of 1994—made a defense for the NEA strenuous, Clinton's own response is still discouraging due to the unfilled hope of renewed support for the arts. In his first term, Clinton was unable to prevent the NEA from budget reduction, and in his second term, though most of the controversy had settled, he was incapable of holding out for more funding. And while Clinton was not supportive of cutting the NEA in principle, his timid actions and unwillingness to push for more financial support ended with Congress overrunning the agency and enacting the conservative Right's social agenda.

On August 17, 1995, Memphis's local newspaper *The Commercial Appeal* ran the article "Local arts groups will feel it when Congress cuts NEA" which included statements from arts professionals within the city. Kate Gooch, the president of the Memphis Arts Council (MAC)<sup>32</sup> at the time, estimated "that if the NEA cuts its funds across the board by 30 or 40 percent, that the net loss to the Memphis area will be somewhere between \$150,000 and \$175,000 annually."<sup>33</sup> In a later issue of *The Commercial Appeal*, Bennett Tarleton, executive director of the TAC, determined that the budget cut would potentially result in the commission "drop[ping]

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<sup>32</sup> The Memphis Arts Council, currently ArtsMemphis, is an United Arts Fund, which by definition is a "community-specific fundraising [organization] that distribute[s] earned funds to the arts organizations in their communities." "Arts and Business Partners: United Arts Funds," accessed July 27, 2011, [http://www.artsusa.org/information\\_services/arts\\_business\\_partnerships/united\\_arts\\_funds/default.asp](http://www.artsusa.org/information_services/arts_business_partnerships/united_arts_funds/default.asp).

<sup>33</sup> Whitney Smith, "Local arts groups will feel it when Congress cuts NEA," *The Commercial Appeal*, August 17, 1995, accessed July 27, 2011, [http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggddocs/NewsBank/0EAF9517CF55CC50/0F07EA120EE7A86C?p\\_multi=CMAB&s\\_lang=en-US](http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggddocs/NewsBank/0EAF9517CF55CC50/0F07EA120EE7A86C?p_multi=CMAB&s_lang=en-US).

back to where [they] were 10 years ago in federal funding,” which was about \$500,000.<sup>34</sup> These estimations were not far off, and in fiscal year 1996, Memphis only directly received a combined of \$19,600 NEA grants, and, in addition, between the years of 1997-1999, no direct grants were bestowed to the city.<sup>35</sup> In regards to the TAC budget, the amount of total NEA monies dropped from \$742,360 to \$426,500.<sup>36</sup> Though federal support severely lessened, Memphis’ larger institutions were only mildly damaged, if at all. Due to the fact that local support was steadily growing, the reliance on the federal government was slowly diminishing.

Founded in 1963, The Memphis Arts Council was, much like the NEA, born into a period where the value of art was at an all-time high. From its start, MAC depended on corporations, businesses, and individuals within the community that valued art to fund the council. And during the Reagan-era, it became all the more evident that local support was the best method: “The Memphis Arts Council was approaching maturity just at the time the Reagan administration slashed support for the NEA. Funding to local arts groups by this national resource was cut by a record 10%.<sup>37</sup> Yet, due to an already developing independence from federal funds, the Memphis Arts Council was not deeply affected during this time; rather, the condition of the arts scene in the Reagan-era was one where “Memphis Arts not only managed to survive, but they thrived!”<sup>38</sup> When tracing the evolution of Memphis local arts funding, a huge impetus for this substantial local support was, ironically, a grant from the NEA.

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<sup>34</sup> Whitney Smith, “NEA cuts mean leaner ’96 for local arts groups,” *The Commercial Appeal*, December 7, 1995, Section Appeal, C1, Final Edition.

<sup>35</sup> David Low, Web Manager for the National Endowment for the Arts, e-mail message to the author, June 14, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Nancy E. Bogatin, “The Memphis Arts Council: 1963 – 1988,” in *The Memphis Arts Council: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Between the years of 1976 to 1983, overall donations to MAC doubled and corporate support quadrupled; ultimately these increases made up half of the Arts Council's total income.<sup>39</sup> Sally Thomason, executive director starting in 1978, attributed the growing support to the Council's leadership and their ability to "convince business and government that an investment in the Arts was as critical to Memphis' economic well being as it was to its cultural development."<sup>40</sup> Once securing such significant local support, the agency attempted federal grant applications: "[The MAC] was able to point out that something extraordinary was happening in Memphis that merited both attention and the award of a grant . . . [In] 1984 . . . a challenge grant of \$250,000 was received from the NEA."<sup>41</sup> By its nature, this grant presented a challenge to both the local government (including city and county) and the local businesses to match the federal money for three years. An incredible catalyst for the MAC, this grant helped to almost double the financial base for the Arts Council, from \$717,181 in 1983 to \$1,315,690 in 1986.<sup>42</sup> With this increased budget, the MAC possessed the capability to more fully support the larger institutions, thus making these institutions much less reliant on federal support and helping them further stabilize and develop. Furthermore, the MAC financial base did not dissipate after the three years were finished, but instead it only continued to grow.

Here, it is essential to understand the funding structure of the MAC. The Arts Council was historically outlined to fund the core performing and visual arts institutions of the city, such as the Memphis Orchestral Society, the Memphis Ballet Society, the Memphis Academy of the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Bogatin, "The Memphis Arts Council: 1963 – 1988," 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 24-27.

Arts, Memphis Opera Society, Front Street Theater, and the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, to this day, these larger institutions are the ones to receive the bulk of funds. Though some of these institutions had also received NEA grants over time, substantial amounts of operating support have consistently come from the MAC. The MAC slowly developed into a locally-sustained organization which supported and provided for the city's art groups. Additionally, funding that came from the Tennessee Arts Commission was used to fund the local grants that the Arts Council awarded and not for the general operating support of the larger institutions. As the TAC is an authorized state arts agency, it has historically had an official partnership with the NEA to receive funding. Consequently, the 1995 funding crisis only truly concerned MAC in the amount of money the TAC would lose.

Despite this dependent relationship on government support, the TAC was not affected by the 1995 budget cut in a way which it could not recover. This was due to a convergence of factors: during the Reagan-era, the TAC learned that federal funds consistently changed with politics, and thus ongoing efforts to produce a new, stable source of creative funding began. Bennett Tarleton, acting director of the TAC from 1990-2001, explains that the Reagan administration was adamant about his disapproval of the NEA and made efforts to cut the funding, and while Reagan was only mildly successful in cutting funding and programs of the NEA, the hostile atmosphere surrounding the arts prepared the TAC for later threats of lower funding, both at the national level and state level.<sup>44</sup>

Tarleton remembers that though the major cut came during the Clinton administration, the TAC suffered more during this time from the state funding: "The huge cut to \$99 million did

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>44</sup> Bennett Tarleton, telephone interview by author, 5 July, 2011.

affect Tennessee Arts Commission to some extent but our real problem in those years was the tight state budget.”<sup>45</sup> Both the decreased national and state budget for the arts forced Tarleton to find another source for the TAC. Therefore, Tarleton, along with former State Senator Steve Cohen, began an initiative to find a major source of alternative funding. The efforts were successful when in 1998 the TAC passed state legislation to receive a higher percentage of the sale of all Tennessee specialty license plates and vanity tags: “I and others worked hard during those years to get revised legislation re[garding] specialty and personalized license plates because that would be a more secure, relatively, funding source than getting more General Fund dollars from the state.”<sup>46</sup> This alternative source of funding has been crucial to maintaining the working budget throughout the years: “That money has really been the source of funding for grants across for arts organizations across the state of Tennessee.”<sup>47</sup> Awareness that art is often a lower priority in the country and state budget has strengthened the commission in they way that it forced administrators to secure alternative sources of funding.

Furthermore, when the 1995 budget cut appeared inevitable, NEA Chairman Jane Alexander held meetings with local businesses and corporations to encourage continued support for the arts in their city. Kate Gooch recalls that “[Alexander] came to Memphis and did some workshops . . . talked with donors . . . and we had a big event down at First Tennessee Bank downtown . . . [she] encouraged them to give.”<sup>48</sup> With this encouragement, the TAC’s success with the license-plate legislation, and the consistently growing local support, the Arts Council

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Bennett Tarleton, telephone interview by author, 5 July, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Kate Gooch, interview by author, 28 June, 2011. Memphis, TN.

and the operation of the large institutions were protected from virtually any harm from the NEA funding crisis.

Throughout this continued success of the MAC and TAC, there was mounting tension between the artist-run organizations of Memphis and the structure of funding, specifically that of the MAC. While most understood that the MAC was established to fund the larger, professional institutions of the city, there were still objections to the fact that it never shifted. Consequently, there was hostility as these artists and their organizations were endlessly at competition with the MAC for local support.

Growing in national recognition, Memphis, Tennessee's contemporary arts scene is now grabbing headlines and attention. This national recognition directly opposes its condition nearly two decades ago. In late 1987, Rob McGowan, co-founder of the regional art journal, *NUMBER*, recounts the isolation and subsequent dissatisfaction that Memphis artists felt with the composition of arts funding within the city:

Memphis has the potential—a strong potential—to become a significant presence in the national-level art world and many of us are working very hard toward the realization of that potential. We can “make it happen” – but only if a fair share of the funding is devoted to the organizations we’ve put into place to seek that objective.<sup>49</sup>

Contrasting this lack of support with present day headlines raises the question of how the contemporary visual arts scene in Memphis developed from a position where organizations could not gain access to adequate funding to a point where the city possesses a thriving artistic reputation.

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<sup>49</sup> Rob McGowan, “Human Energy and Money: What they’ve done so far and why it’s going to take just a little more of each, PLEASE...,” *NUMBER: an independent quarterly for the visual arts* (9), 1989, 10.

A healthy arts environment, as defined by McGowan, includes seven components: artists, art schools, art collectors, commercial art galleries, public art institutions (such as museums or other non-profit exhibition spaces), journals of art criticism and commentary, and a concentrated arts community “where creative activities of various kinds are energized by close proximity.”<sup>50</sup> In the late 1980s many involved with the local visual arts recognized a certain imbalance in Memphis; while University of Memphis and the Memphis College of Art were both producing a considerable number of young, educated artists, there was not a vital arts environment in which they could prosper. Consequently, the art journal *NUMBER* began with the intention of increasing the level of communication amongst artists within the city. Upon graduation from the University of Memphis, Cory Dugan, co-founder of *NUMBER*, realized the weak state of the city’s visual artist community and opted to change it:

*NUMBER* is intended to be a vehicle for communication among producing contemporary visual artists and other visual arts professionals in the Memphis area. For too long, the voice of the art community has been unheard. One reason for this situation is the ignorance and indifference of the larger community, its government and its media. The visual artist is viewed as being on the fringe of that society, as a non-productive and eccentric member.<sup>51</sup>

Acknowledging the controversy that was surrounding the NEA in the late 1980s, Dugan was initially against the idea of requesting funds:

We started it purposefully with not asking for any government, partially because of these things . . . it was started in ’88 and there were already some rumblings going on . . . [but] soon realized we weren’t going to be able to fund it any other way. And went for the non-profit . . . and got accepted as a 501(c) 3, and then I quit.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Rob McGowan, “Specifics: The Elements of a Healthy Visual Arts Environment,” *NUMBER: an independent quarterly for the visual arts (1)*, 1987, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Cory Dugan, “Is There Power In *NUMBER*?” *NUMBER: an independent quarterly for the visual arts (1)*, Summer 1987, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Cory Dugan, interview by author, 5 July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

Even after becoming an official non-profit, Dugan recalls not wanting to deal with the MAC; he describes it as a “clearing house” which received funds from various sources, NEA included, and then granted them according to its own perceptions of need: “[the MAC] dispersed according to its criteria, and that’s why I didn’t want any use for it.”<sup>53</sup> Dugan, while highly critical of the way in which MAC operated, was not the only one to experience grief in locating arts funding.

Around the same time as *NUMBER*’s creation, McGowan opened the Memphis Center for Contemporary Art (MCCA) in June of 1988 in order to provide a space for local artists to be recognized:

At that time . . . there was really very little, very, very little decent opportunity for the people doing advanced, difficult, new art to show here in town in decent circumstances . . . That was really the primary thing . . . I had had an exhibition of my work at Brooks, a solo show at Brooks, in . . . ’85, and the show, you know, was just handled so dismally in terms of promotions and everything, it was just so unprofessionally handled . . . and that was just part of what put a fire under me to do something to create a better situation for artists here in town.<sup>54</sup>

Due to this negative experience with the Brooks Museum, McGowan sought to provide an environment where local artists could be treated professionally. Yet his experience with attaining funds reflects a similar struggle to what *NUMBER* went through:

We began the effort in ’85 . . . we started out by printing a little brochure that had a form on it for people to make a contribution. So, our first source of funding was individual contributions of about \$25 to \$50 range. I applied to the MAC and the TAC . . . for funding; that was an enormously frustrating effort dealing with, especially, MAC. Enormously frustrating because they had their rules, and nobody at the MAC was remotely associated with . . . producing, working artists doing contemporary art. These people . . . were people who are well-meaning, but are mostly socialites and business people . . . those people had no idea what we were doing . . . [MCCA] was an artist-run organization and the MAC didn’t know what do with it.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Rob McGowan, telephone interview by author, 13 July, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

And while the MCCA received some funding from the MAC, McGowan was angry that not only was he unable to break through the Arts Council's traditional funding structure, but the center was also unable to contract serious funding from other donors present in the city:

The MAC really had a monopoly on funding for the arts in town, and I can understand that in a way . . . but the problem is, if an organization like MCCA could not get an appropriate amount of funding from the MAC, we were prohibited from going anywhere else to seek funding.<sup>56</sup>

Eventually understanding that MAC was not designed to be a major source of funding, the MCCA sought other sources, and in 1991 the center became eligible for NEA funding and was awarded a grant. Yet, due to the center's instability at the time, it actually had to decline the grant and close its doors. Ultimately, one finds that the historical mission of the MAC did not adapt, at least in a major way, to include the contemporary arts efforts that were started at this time; while those who started these organizations came to terms with it, they still point out a sentiment of irony:

Whether you like it or not, [the large institutions] are the ones who are actually doing the most and doing it at a regular basis. They're the most stable organizations in town. Now, there's part of you that says, "They don't need it, they're already stable. Give it to someone else and help them stabilize." But that's not the way it works unfortunately . . . you almost have to not need the money to get it.<sup>57</sup>

Visual arts organizations, which began in the late 1980s, almost felt a sense of betrayal as they were secluded from the large amount of financial support available in the city, yet those that followed in their footsteps built on that knowledge and, therefore, developed accordingly.

Following the MCCA, the next effort to make the contemporary arts scene more visible in Memphis was in 1992 through Delta Axis. James Patterson, a cofounder and president of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Cory Dugan, interview by author, 5 July 2011. Memphis, TN.

Delta Axis describes their main goal as creating an arts dialogue between Memphis, the national arts scene, and the international arts scene. Thus, in one way, Delta Axis picked up the vision of MCCA yet succeeded in going a step beyond<sup>58</sup>; they wanted to “seek out and look at the local arts, but also make a national and global strategy. [Delta Axis was] very interested in linking Memphis to other parts of the country and world . . . [They] were always about a global link.”<sup>59</sup>

While funding was a consistent struggle, Delta Axis was eventually able to achieve regular operating support from the MAC and, unlike the MCCA, felt supported in their efforts.

Katherine Huntoon, former curator of Delta Axis, recalls that

. . . it was sort of like a Catch-22 . . . they wanted you to be established before they would . . . underwrite operating expenses . . . Operating expenses were really, really hard to get money for . . . We tried the first year, and went to MAC and got denied, and then I went and met with them a lot, they had a really good advisory board. They would meet with you and say, “Well try this, try to do more of this, and do this certain kind of thing.” And so we applied again in '94 and we did get operating expenses . . . Once you get your foot in the door, that's really, really good. Gives you a lot of credibility.<sup>60</sup>

Despite securing some percentage of operating funds from the MAC, Delta Axis survived largely due to the dedication of those who ran it and their success in finding other creative sources.

Patterson recalls the sense of endurance present in the organization: “We would try to raise the money, and there was no money. And when we were short money, they could depend on me and a couple of other people just to write a check and cover that, and that's how we would survive.”<sup>61</sup>

Huntoon adds to this, “I think it's really important to look everywhere . . . look to your peers and collaborate . . . look to individuals for funding, look to businesses for funding and local arts

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<sup>58</sup> With McGowan and Dugan, there was recognition of Memphis's “insularity in the visual arts” and efforts were made to get Memphis art acknowledged in art journals outside of the city, such as Chicago's *The New Art Examiner*. McGowan, “Specifics: The Elements of a Healthy Visual Arts Environment,” 4. Thus, Delta Axis picked up this challenge but in a new way.

<sup>59</sup> James Patterson, interview by author, 8 July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

<sup>60</sup> Katherine Huntoon, telephone interview by author, 18 July, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> James Patterson, interview by author, 8 July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

councils and organizations, and the national ones too. . . And the other thing you have to do is target funders for certain shows.”<sup>62</sup> This perseverance to continue finding funds allowed Delta Axis to achieve their mission of elevating the visibility of the arts scene in Memphis to a national and international level. Using the distinctive nature of Memphis as an appeal, Patterson brought contemporary international artists to exhibit artwork in Memphis:

You have to understand Memphis is sexy. You go to an artist in London, and you say once again, ‘Do you want to go Vienna and show in a palace or do you want to come to Memphis and show in a powerhouse.’ . . . Memphis has grit, it’s rough.<sup>63</sup>

Besides building the contemporary visual arts scene, Delta Axis also founded other organizations within the city during their 16 year tenure, such as Indie Memphis, in order to continue reaching new crowds of people. Unfortunately, a confluence of factors—two multi-year grants terminating, the economic upset, and Patterson’s own health—caused Delta Axis to shut down its final visual arts venue, Power House, in 2009.

The fact that funding for Delta Axis was a struggle and that donors for each exhibition had the potential to be different became, in some ways, advantageous for the contemporary arts scene. Since their money was not necessarily accountable to any one organization’s reputation, at least in a great way, there was a certain freedom in the shows that they could do. In Huntoon’s words, “there was kind of a general mindset at the time that an organization like ours . . . could do pretty much whatever we wanted to.”<sup>64</sup> This lessened caution was even true when dealing

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<sup>62</sup> Katherine Huntoon, telephone interview by author, 18 July, 2011. One example of this targeted funding was a show that incorporated a Swiss artist. For this exhibition *Body and Soul*, Delta Axis contacted the Swiss arts agency for funding aid, and the foreign agency ended up funding the entire exhibition. Additionally, they sent an ambassador over to make a speech at the show’s opening.

<sup>63</sup> James Patterson, interview by author, 8 July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

<sup>64</sup> Katherine Huntoon, telephone interview by author, 18 July 2011. Memphis, TN.

with the MAC because, according to Huntoon, the principle of funding an organization like Delta Axis was something MAC supported:

[Delta Axis] filled a niche for them. I think arts organizations like that sort of have to have a portfolio where they fund the . . . the symphonies, operas, ballets, . . . the big museums and stuff like that, but then they also have to look good to the community and fund little, independent, artist-run organizations, like Delta Axis . . . It was kinda one of those rolling their eyes or looking the other way kinda things.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, the exhibitions were in a private space, thus not forced onto the public, and were virtually all well-received by the community.<sup>66</sup> Despite whether or not Delta Axis felt absolutely understood by the MAC, it should be noted that they did feel supported. Patterson recalls:

Greater Memphis Arts Council always supported [Delta Axis], they supported us through our entire history. And then they tried to get more money to us . . . they did work on special grants, special projects . . . and we had a very good working relationship with them.<sup>67</sup>

From Patterson's quote, one sees that from the beginning of *NUMBER* through the close of Delta Axis, the relationship between the MAC and contemporary visual arts organizations drastically improved.

Due to continual efforts of dedicated members of the arts community to build communication—within the city, the region, the country, and the world—and due to a persistent effort in seeking the MAC for support, individuals succeeded in building a better environment for contemporary visual art and artists. Dugan, while he accredits his organization as a sort of pioneer on the arts front in Memphis, finds that there has been a constant flow of ground-level

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> When interviewing Huntoon, she mentioned the only show that caused controversy was the Elvis exhibition shown in the MCA gallery. The exhibition was picketed by fan clubs, and even attracted national press. Members of the fan clubs threatened the president of MCA that if the show was not removed, they were going to tear down the building. Information about the content of the show can be found in a San Francisco Chronicle article “Outraged Fans Shut Down Elvis Show” at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1997/08/13/DD21858.DTL>.

<sup>67</sup> James Patterson, interview by author, 8, July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

effort. In his understanding of how the arts scene has survived despite the challenge of remaining funded, Dugan states, “I think mostly do-it yourself, I think a lot of the groups helped that came along, but I think there’s always continued to be a lot of do-it yourself in the arts scene here . . . there’s been a steady succession of them over the years, moving from one area of the town to the next.”<sup>68</sup> In addition, the constant influx of young, educated artists from schools such as University of Memphis and Memphis College of Art have helped to retain the energy and vitality of the arts scene; Patterson believes that Memphis is “very fortunate because we have two arts schools . . . and you can’t negate that, that’s a very important issue.” With the movements of *NUMBER*, *MCCA*, and *Delta Axis*, the imbalance of Memphis was a little closer to being counteracted; starting with communication, moving to exhibition, and concluding with national and international exchange, these grassroots efforts made a serious influence on the contemporary visual arts scene of Memphis.

More recently, the Memphis Arts Council suffered a substantial loss of local government funding, therefore causing new initiatives to widen their basis of individual support. At one time, the MAC received more than \$500,000 in a combined city and county effort. Due to tighter government budgets, though, all financial support was retracted in 2005.<sup>69</sup> Realizing that a large resource was no longer available, ArtsMemphis, then the Greater Memphis Arts Council, developed a strategy to rethink its image. Karen Spacek reports that the organization

. . . had some research done, qualitative and quantitative, and then we brought in a branding strategist who did a lot of research in terms of, “What is the perception

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<sup>68</sup> Cory Dugan, interview by author, 5 July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

<sup>69</sup> Karen Spacek, interview by author, 6 July, 2011. Memphis, TN.

For further clarification, the funds that I discuss at this point are funds that the city and the county provided to MAC for general re-granting; the money was not tied to a specific grant or program. The county government, whose funding reached as high as \$400,000, was the first to cut funding in 2003 and the city government, whose funding reached as high as \$205,000, discontinued funding completely in 2005.

of ArtsMemphis? How do people value it?" . . . People believed we were a government organization . . . and we are a United Arts Fund, and so that started us down this path of changing our name . . . and from there we started our whole image strategy. . . So our collateral became not, and our image and our website is the same, about ArtsMemphis, but what we fund. It's about our arts groups.<sup>70</sup>

With the redesign of the Memphis Arts Council, the agency was successful in widening their basis of support. In other instances, this internal reflection shows evidence of a burgeoning relationship between the arts agency and the local artists. ArtsMemphis is currently undergoing a new initiative to set aside a fund solely for local artists to do work within the city: "We [at ArtsMemphis] always believed our monies were indirectly supporting artists in Memphis through the arts organizations . . . but there's not an artist fund, and we think that it's really needed." Optimistically, this new direction will aid ArtsMemphis to both maintain a high level of monetary support and incorporate new grant programs that make a substantial difference to groups of people outside of the large institutions. This helps combat the claim made over two decades ago that Memphis was headed toward merely a pretense of an arts city:

Obviously it is important to fund our major arts institutions, but without adequately supporting and encouraging vitality at the *producing and developing* levels of the arts community, there is the very real danger of creating a façade of arts vitality, at the expense of a vitality that is genuine, creative, and productive.<sup>71</sup>

Juxtaposing the clear separation that artists felt with the future artists' fund, there is chance that ArtsMemphis can form a more symbiotic relationship with the contemporary arts scene. Thus, with both the new program and the ArtSpace grant there is evidence of a conscious movement to further diminish the "imbalance" and better incorporate the contemporary visual arts into the arts scene as a whole.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Rob McGowan, "A Few Final Thoughts," *NUMBER: an independent quarterly for the visual arts* (5), Summer 1988, 9.

Since the 1995 funding crisis, the NEA has yet to restore its working budget to the level it was at before the legislation. Yet ArtsMemphis, due to being subsidized locally, has only continued to thrive and widen its basis of support. It was the success of this arts agency that fueled discontent within the contemporary arts scene and their distribution of the funds that fueled the perception of a dichotomy of ‘art’ within the city. But once Delta Axis secured a foothold in the MAC, the contemporary arts scene gained a sense of local legitimacy. There was also success in continuing to locate alternative sources of funding that allowed operations to continue for some time.

Beginning with the inception of *NUMBER*, the Memphis visual arts scene saw the development of several organizations that built upon the achievements of the existing ones. Thus, though the antagonism present two decades ago required the contemporary visual arts community to creatively seek funding, it ultimately allowed them to independently construct their presence. Now with the city-recognized arts district on Broad Ave. and the existence of partially city-funded organizations such as the Urban Art Commission, it is evident that the contemporary arts community persevered through the struggle and has become more visible and more widely embraced. Due to the persistent efforts by both the Memphis Arts Council and those involved with the contemporary visual arts, Memphis has both preserved the strength of the city’s professional institutions and continued to develop in the contemporary arts scene. According to John Weeden, the current director of Urban Art Commission, “You’ve got this kind of cultural imperative that this stuff is important to people and important to the city overall.”<sup>72</sup> The arts administrators within the city have counteracted the decreasing attention on the arts on

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<sup>72</sup> John Weeden, telephone interview by author, 27 June, 2011.

the national level and worked to sustain the energy, vitality, and culture that the arts bring to their community.