

# THE ART *of* DEMOCRACY

*Creative Expression  
and American Greatness*

Darren Walker,  
President of the Ford Foundation

March 20, 2017

The Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy  
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts





The Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy is a leading national forum for arts policy intended to stimulate dialogue on policy and social issues affecting the arts. Presented by Americans for the Arts, the lecture is held each year at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

The annual lecture is named for Nancy Hanks, former president of Americans for the Arts and chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, who devoted fifteen years of her professional life to bringing the arts to prominent national consciousness.



The Ford Foundation is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization. For more than eighty years it has worked with courageous people on the frontlines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has offices in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.



## MY STORY AND THE ARTS

Good evening, everyone. Thank you, Thelma Golden, for your gracious introduction—and, more importantly, for your groundbreaking, visionary leadership at the Studio Museum in Harlem. And thank you, all, for this extraordinary honor: the privilege of delivering this 30th annual lecture in tribute to the incomparable Nancy Hanks.

Unfortunately, I never met Nancy in life. I was a senior at the University of Texas the year of her death. But it was around that time when I was exposed to her remarkable legacy—when I first experienced the Dance Theater of Harlem; when the company stopped in Austin on a national tour, a tour funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The beauty of their performance astonished me. To see people who looked like me, dancing and expressing themselves in a way that was so dynamic, kinetic, and new—that night moved me deeply.

Once I picked my jaw off the floor, I became a lifelong lover of dance, from Alvin Ailey to the New York City Ballet, where I'm honored to serve as vice chairman of the board. And this performance was just one of the many times in my life when an experience of the arts broadened my perspective and expanded my world.

When I was growing up in rural Texas—in the era before Nancy—our democracy had yet to make a *public* commitment to the arts. There were no state art councils. No broad commitments to funding the arts in rural communities. So I was exposed to art as a matter of circumstance—a happy accident.

As a little boy, I lived with my mother and sister in a little shotgun house—in an African-American community in rural Liberty County, Texas. My grandmother worked as a maid in the home of a wealthy Houston family. And every month, she would bring me old art magazines and programs from arts events the family attended.

I remember, vividly, feeling transfixed by the magic I saw on those pages—by images of worlds to which I had no other exposure. I remember flipping through those magazines and programs, and falling in love, swiftly and deeply. Those pages unlocked my capacity to imagine a world beyond my own—and to imagine my place in it.

Simply put, the arts changed my life. They imbued me with the power to imagine, the power to dream, and the power to know I could express myself with dignity, and beauty, and grace.

But here's the thing: I was lucky.

I was lucky to have the right grandmother. Lucky that she worked as a maid in the right house. Lucky that house was inhabited by the right wealthy family, who subscribed to the right magazines, and had diverse interests in the arts. Lucky that family showed their love by giving me their discarded magazines and programs.

When I think about it now, the chances of my exposure to the arts were so improbable that I really should not be here with you tonight. And I imagine each of *you* can name a time when the arts changed *your* life, or *your* perspective—a moment when the arts moved you to empathy or to action; a moment when art made it possible for you to be the person you are today. And I encourage you to reflect on those moments tonight and in the days ahead.

You see, all of us here tonight: We are all the lucky ones. Because there are children across the country growing up in circumstances not unlike those of my childhood—children who,

day after day, experience in their lives the most terrible manifestations of inequality.

For them, exposure to the arts, to imagination and ambition, remains a matter of chance or circumstance. But it shouldn't be. It can't be. Not in a democracy like ours.

Everyone deserves to experience the arts. No child should need a permission slip to dream.

Art is not a privilege. Art is the soul of our civilization; the beating heart of our humanity; a miracle to which we all should bear witness, over and over again, in every home—from the most modest and humble to the grandest and well-fashioned.

And tonight—in this place, our national cathedral to the arts, and in this moment, these perilous and challenging times in our nation's history—I would argue that we need the arts and humanities more than ever before.

Art is not a privilege. Art is the soul of our civilization; the beating heart of our humanity; a miracle to which we all should bear witness, over and over again.

## A POVERTY OF IMAGINATION

My friend, Judge Albie Sachs—the great South African freedom fighter and one of Nelson Mandela's first appointees to the country's Constitutional Court—was asked the question, and I'm paraphrasing: *Is it right for the government to fund art when there is still so much hunger and homelessness?*

His answer was: "It's not only right, but necessary."<sup>1</sup>

Albie's contention was simple: Of course, the poor should be fed and clothed and housed; we all have these essential needs.

But all people also yearn for beauty, also long for grace, also have hearts as well as stomachs that need to be fed and filled. And people inevitably create beauty and grace when they lift their voices in song, move their bodies to music, shape color and form on canvass or in sculpture, or use language to tell stories in ways that delight and surprise.

The notion that low-income and working-class people, or people with backgrounds different from our own, do not derive meaning from the arts, or do not value free and full expression—this notion is equal parts insulting and ignorant.

The arts and humanities are necessary to address a kind of poverty that goes beyond money—a hunger that lives not in our bodies but in our souls, a uniquely human hunger for dignity and for transcendence.

In fact, the arts and humanities are necessary to address a kind of poverty that goes beyond money—a hunger that lives not in our bodies but in our souls, a uniquely human hunger for dignity and for transcendence.

The arts lift us toward this dignity, and open us to this transcendence.

Now, this grand monument—the Kennedy Center—is a temple to this idea. It's one such place where dreams are born and beauty made—where all Americans are welcomed. Tonight, as we gather here, I am reminded of President Kennedy, who said: "This country cannot afford to be materially rich and spiritually poor."

Today we may well be the wealthiest nation in the world—but I believe there *is* a spiritual poverty that plagues America.

It's a poverty of imagination that corrodes our capacity for generosity and empathy. It's a poverty of imagination that



diminishes our discourse, curtails curiosity, and makes our interactions petty and small. A poverty of imagination that breeds distrust for institutions and, increasingly, for information. A poverty of imagination that breeds distrust of other people who do not look or think like us. A poverty of imagination that shrinks our sense of self and our sense of a lofty and inspiring common purpose, luring us to the extremes rather than leading us towards the extraordinary.

And I believe this poverty—of heart and mind, of spirit and soul, of civic imagination—has brought us to our current moment of crisis.

## THE CHALLENGE OF OUR MOMENT

Across this country, we see inequality of every kind and category.

We see it in the growing income of the very wealthy versus the static income of the rest. We see it in who holds power in our government, and who does not. We see it in who our culture respects, and who it diminishes or renders invisible. We see it in the imbalances of our criminal justice system, and in whose lives matter. We see it in the rise of hate across the country, and in who we choose to vilify.

Ultimately, we see it in our unpreparedness to *compromise* (instead of polarize), our unwillingness to *empathize* (instead of ostracize), and in our unreadiness to *humanize* (instead of demonize).

All of this reflects a poverty of imagination—a poverty of imagination that has metastasized into a paucity of hope.

I've said many times, in many parts of the world, that the greatest threat to democracy—that one of the most dangerous consequences of growing inequality—is hopelessness. Democracy cannot breathe without hope.

Hopelessness breeds discouragement and despair, disillusionment with our government and other institutions that bring order and meaning to our lives, and desperate actions that threaten our collective self-interest. Hopelessness hardens our hearts, and makes it harder to hear difficult truths. When hopeless, we can't see beyond our own struggles, or imagine that there may be light at the end of the tunnel.

Too many people around this country feel hopeless—many millions of us. And yet, at a moment when art could be the light—when art's potential could bring us hope—we who support the arts find ourselves with our backs against the wall.

Those who discredit art's value and power surround us, parroting the canards and memes we have heard for decades. They claim the arts are for the “elite.” They claim the arts are “too expensive” so government shouldn't fund them. They tell us that art has no place in an economy in need of jobs, in a nation that is struggling to make itself great.

To be abundantly clear: They are wrong.

## **ONE COMMON ARGUMENT AND ITS LIMITS**

Some who currently target the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, see themselves as cutting waste. But we know, as Nancy Hanks herself knew in 1968, that compared to all our other national crises—be they poverty or inequality, civil rights or criminal justice reform—the expense is small.

To use her phrase, “the requirements for the arts are miniscule.”<sup>2</sup> The resources of the NEA, NEH, and CPB combined amount to *less than* one tenth of one percent of the federal budget.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say here, the benefits of the arts far outweigh their funding. These dollars achieve tremendous bang for the buck. And for every measure that concerns the opponents of the arts, we have the numbers to prove the value of our investment—an arts-multiplier effect, if you will.

Don’t take my word for it. Listen to the United States Bureau of Economic Analysis. If the issue is jobs, the arts and culture sector employed 4.8 million people in 2014. If the issue is trade, our arts and culture sector produces a trade surplus. And if the issue is the economy, just remember that the arts contributed more than \$730 billion to our economy in a single year.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, even as I say it, it pains me to make this argument. It pains me to reduce the importance of the arts and humanities to their instrumentality—to express their enormity in mere economic terms.

Now, I’m not naïve. I know that some people need to hear this before they cast their vote—or at least to defend their vote. But this argument is not enough. These numbers are not why we support the arts. They can’t be.

Because while we know these numbers matter, we also know that conventional metrics will always fall short.

To me, numbers will never explain what happens the moment the curtain rises or the

Numbers will never explain what happens the moment the curtain rises or the lights go up. They don’t measure the quickening of our hearts in time with the music, the widening of our eyes, or the suspension of our disbelief.

lights go up. They don't measure the quickening of our hearts in time with the music, the widening of our eyes, or the suspension of our disbelief. They don't capture the changes of heart, the new questions sparked, the sense of possibility that is opened. They don't capture the impact on a life trajectory that the arts can have. Like their impact on that small boy in rural Texas in the 1960s.

There is too much emotional value that cannot be measured. Beyond employment, there is enjoyment. A trade surplus does not capture the overflowing surplus of inspiration, or express the importance of cultural and aesthetic exchange. And the GDP is not a measure of what makes America great.

## **THE NECESSITY OF GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT**

Now, these days, we also hear another argument with increasing frequency—and it's an argument that I hear often as a foundation president.

Some say, "Sure, Darren, the arts are important, but why does the government need to support them?"

Others ask questions like this: "There are a lot of rich people in the country, can't the arts just live off of private philanthropy?" Or, when I'm talking with millennials, they ask, "Doesn't Kickstarter contribute more to the arts than the NEA?"

Well, here are the facts: For the past 30 years, American charitable giving to the arts has rarely risen past a meager 5 percent.<sup>5</sup> Which means the arts already live on a shoe-string budget. They can't afford another pay cut.

As for the suggestion that we replace the NEA with Kickstarter, that's like saying we don't need the National Institutes of Health or publicly funded medical research because the internet has given us WebMD.com.

Neither philanthropy nor Kickstarter is sufficient to support the arts in America—and we shouldn't want them to be. Because while private donors support elite and mostly urban institutions—and while crowdfunding favors those projects that can be marketed online—government investment in the arts has a much broader reach, a deeper and more profound impact.

This is an essential component of our democracy.

It is “we, the people,” who make our nation great. It is “we, the people,” not some faceless government, who choose to invest in ourselves and our culture. It is “we, the people,” who believe in supporting the small rural museums, and local theater groups, and mom-and-pop music festivals that bring people together across this country.

So, if we see ourselves as great, we must invest in that which makes us great, things that the GDP has never been able to measure: Investments that make “we, the people,” richer, better, more complete human beings.

We must invest in our ambition, in our aspiration, in that American spirit of ingenuity and sense of *imagination* that has always propelled this great nation forward. This is *no time* for a poverty of imagination in our country.

This is *no time* for a poverty of imagination in our country.

Right now, this is the argument we should be making. This is the argument for our times. As we watch the spreading disease of

cynicism, the widening divides, and coarsening of our discourse, the arts may be the very thing to save us from hopelessness and selfishness, and the ugliness they permit and promote.

## AN ARGUMENT FOR OUR CURRENT MOMENT

In this hall, it is too tempting to quote President Kennedy—so please indulge me—but it was Kennedy who so eloquently wrote: “There is a connection, hard to explain logically but easy to feel, between achievement in public life and progress in the arts.”

He wrote, beautifully, “The age of Pericles was also the age of Phidias. The age of Lorenzo de Medici . . . also the age of Leonardo da Vinci.” And “the age of Elizabeth also the age of Shakespeare.”

This insight has never been more true. If you are here tonight, I imagine you feel that connection as strongly as I do. For the age of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was also the age of James Baldwin. The age of Gloria Steinem, the age of Judy Chicago. What would the gay rights movement be without Larry Kramer or Keith Haring or Tony Kushner? The fight for immigrants without Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*, or Black Lives Matter without Ta-Nehesi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*?

Without art, there  
is no empathy.  
Without empathy,  
there is no justice.

My point is: Without art, there is no empathy.

Without empathy, there is no justice.

The arts have the power to lead us forward, to heal us, to bring us together and help us bridge real divides. The arts are the key to building and rebuilding bridges in our

society—between cities and rural counties; between the poor and the prosperous; between the past, the present, and the possible.

And in this way, investment in the arts is an investment in *moral* imagination, in our capacity for empathy—an investment in the kind of greatness that comes with a deeper, richer understanding of one another and ourselves.

## ON AMERICAN GREATNESS

Yes, there has been a lot of debate during this last year about what makes America great. Some believe it is the size of our economy, or the might of our military. Some believe it lives in the power of Congress, or the prose of the Constitution.

I believe what makes us great is the size of our hearts. It is our capacity for generosity, and the grandness of our imagination.

And if this is true, then the connection between American art and American greatness is easy to see *and* easy to feel. It is easy to nurture, and spread, and grow.

So, let us talk about what makes America great.

Our greatness manifests in an enduring, storied, and honorable vision that welcomes those who come to America seeking refuge from hatred, persecution, and injustice.

Our greatness stretches to every state in the union, to local communities far and wide.

Our greatness fills the air, every summer, at the Magic City Smooth Jazz Festival in beautiful Birmingham, Alabama. It fills the streets with warmth—and performances, and art installations—as part of FREEZE in Anchorage, Alaska.

Our greatness is seen on the faces of Navajo and Hopi students who fill the Grand Canyon with their original compositions. It helps students in Puerto Rico to dream of college—to build “A Bridge to the University and the World.”

Our greatness is giving ballet dancers in Des Moines, Iowa a leg up—and lifting the voices of poets like Hope Wabuke, whose family fled Ugandan genocide to find safety and opportunity in America.

Our greatness connects people from different walks of life. It brings The Harlem Quartet to Maize, Kansas. It helps a professor from Utah State University translate “New Voices from Vietnam.”

Let me tell you about American greatness. It is everyone and every program I’ve just told you about. And all of that astonishing and ennobling work is made possible because of support from the NEA and the NEH.

In my home state of Texas, greatness is seen on a stage in a barn in the historic town of Round Top, where thousands of Texans converge every spring to bear witness to extraordinary music and poetry.

Greatness resides in the papers of George Washington and movements of Martha Graham. It is the Hudson River School and the Harlem Renaissance. It is the poetry of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou. Yes, we contain multitudes. Yes, we still rise.

It’s the work performed by Anna Deavere Smith tonight, in *Notes from the Field*—the work of transforming ourselves and inhabiting the lives of others.

It’s the reminder of Langston Hughes in his iconic *Let America Be America Again*:



*I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.*

Because when we do the work of the arts, when we hold the mirror up to ourselves and our society, we not only experience our shared humanity, we arrive at our shared obligation to humanity: Our connection with and obligation to all people who suffer, and struggle, and seek to be heard.

## KEEPING AMERICA GREAT

This greatness—of our culture and our character—is worth fighting for. And nobody—*nobody*—knew American greatness better than Nancy Hanks.

Forty-some years ago, there was a congresswoman who Nancy Hanks needed to convince about the power of the NEA. Nancy charmed and pushed and cajoled—as she famously did—but the congresswoman said: “Nancy, no one is sending me any letters.”

As the story goes, Nancy said, “Letters? You want letters?” And soon there were fliers on the seats of concert halls and theaters across the country. The letters to the Congresswoman’s office started pouring in—by the mail bag, by the thousands.

The letters didn’t materialize just because of Nancy. These letters were written by people—people who sat in theaters like this one, people who read those fliers, and people who decided to take action.

At the end of the day, it will always be the people who love the arts who will spread the love of the arts. It will always be the people who love the humanities who make the strongest case for our shared humanity.

And it will be us, *all of us*, who will be the best advocates for the work that changes our lives, and the artistic greatness that makes us greater still.

So, friends: Let us resolve that each of us will do our best to be like Nancy Hanks.

Let us resolve to make our voices heard. To bridge the seats in the theaters to those seats in Congress. And to explain the value on the walls of museums to those in the halls of power.

Let us resolve to take this Arts Advocacy Day as our next opportunity, and after that, to make every day an opportunity to advocate for the arts.

This work has never been more important. But, together, we will rise to meet this defining challenge of our time.

Thank you for this unforgettable honor. I could not be more grateful.

## NOTES

- 1 <http://artofchange.is/why-support-the-arts-when-there-is-still-so-much-poverty-in-the-world/>
- 2 <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/nea-history-1965-2008.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/30/arts/design/donald-trump-arts-humanities-public-television.html>
- 4 [art-works.org/2017/taking-note-trending-now%E2%80%94arts-imperative-economic-policy](http://art-works.org/2017/taking-note-trending-now%E2%80%94arts-imperative-economic-policy)
- 5 <http://cfnwmo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Giving-USA-2016.pdf>

Copyright 2017 Ford Foundation

The full text of this speech, and more, is available at [www.fordfoundation.org](http://www.fordfoundation.org).