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Cube Calendar Articles from 1996

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Composers Corner

A modest proposal by Janice Misurell-Mitchell

A recent editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* spoke of funding for the NEA, even when functioning at its fullest, as "never more than a spit in the ocean." (*Tribune*, 8/30/96). Yet most of us who are deeply involved in the arts bemoan the loss of government support. We point out all the good things the NEA can do: support the community band, the ballet companies, the theatre companies, the orchestras, and so on. We tell them the art of Robert Mapplethorpe isn't at all representative of current American photography, and that if we want to insure freedom of expression we must include the offensive with the inoffensive. We speak, we sing, we dance, we write, we make pictures, we make sounds, and still our hats are empty. Isn't it time to change our tune?

Perhaps we should spend our time developing our links with the foundations, corporations and private donors, looking for that "angel" who will help us realize our most ambitious plans, or at least regular funders whom we can count on for the most basic operations. Or we can seek refuge in that restrictive, parsimonious but reliable patron, the university, who can give us space, equipment, publicity and, if we're lucky, an audience.

We can assist business in enhancing America's image, through art, not only in the boardroom but through better design, both of products and advertising. Or we can focus on our social consciences and encourage the creation of art in the less affluent urban areas.

We can help people meditate, contemplate (supply your own) and generally feel good about themselves. Or we can say, "art is art is art," or, "I know what I like! (And I like what I know.)"

Art as entertainment, art as education, art as religion, art as art-all of these, in myriad mixtures and relationships.

These are generally TAME, acceptable beliefs. But isn't the purpose of art also to mock, attack and illuminate the behavior of the society from which it comes? Isn't art also a human activity, and frequently also a social activity? And as a human and social activity, it is part of a larger society. It helps to define that society to the rest of the world, both in its popular art and its "serious" art forms. In the U.S. the popular form is well-supported - it's the serious art, being less commercial, that is getting shortshifted. Yet it's the serious art that is often a source for the popular art. Therefore, shouldn't its importance be recognized by giving it substantial funding?

If you answer in the affirmative, then you will probably enjoy the following, very modest proposal. But first a little history. In an "Op-Ed" piece in the Chicago Tribune in 1977, Wayne C. Booth, professor emeritus of the Department of English at the University of Chicago, proposed that we establish a tax on television networks the proceeds of which would go directly to funding education. His reasoning was that since TV is one of the major culprits in discouraging reading and writing among schoolkids, it should be taxed to pay for the damage it has caused and to help improve the situation.

Similarly, the popular music industry, the movie industry, the television industry - they're all doing very well, thank you - while we in the arts, aside from a limited number of major institutions and well-established individuals, are not. Therefore in the spirit of the still-viable idea of progressive taxation, I propose that we tax each industry to pay for the wrongs it has done. Put another way, one institution in society must pay for the rewards it receives at the expense of another, equally important, institution. Let's start close to home.

According to the 1995 Annual Report of the Recording Industry Association of America, in the United States alone, 90% of all sales of recorded music, including movie soundtracks and music videos, totaled \$12,322,300,000. Of this amount, sales of classical music totaled 2.9%, and jazz, 3%. (Small wonder we have a problem getting audiences for new music!) If we eliminate these percentages from the total sales, we can say that roughly 94% of the total, or \$11,582,962,000, comes from popular sources. If, for example, we taxed these amounts at the rate of 2%, a \$17.00 compact disc would cost \$17.34-a noticeable increase, but not a burden. That rate of 2% would translate into \$231,659,240 as funds available for non-commercial (or "serious") music. By comparison, the amount of funding given the NEA for 1995 was \$162,000,000; the amount given for music programs (composition and performance) was

roughly \$6,300,000 . (Statistics courtesy of the office of Representative Sidney Yates, the Harold Washington Library, and the Recording Industry Association of America.)

If you like this idea, think about applying it to the other artforms. If 2% of Hollywood revenues went to live drama, we could have a theatre on every corner-and Hollywood should of course pay for experimental cinema, and perhaps also art museums, galleries, and community art centers. And wouldn't it be interesting to write in a clause that they couldn't raise ticket prices to cover it?

A special tax on conglomerates like Microsoft could pay for computers in the public schools throughout the U.S. A similar tax on major news networks (now owned by the likes of Disney and General Electric) could help pay for that rapidly vanishing species, the city newspaper, and maybe also the alternative newspaper. Someone recently suggested to me that professional sports teams in this country should support dance. One could make up fascinating pairings, and some have already been done: cigarette companies paying for lung cancer treatment; the fashion industry paying for the treatment of anorexia.

But returning to the matter at hand, I realize that there will be questions of how to implement this policy. I'll propose a couple of ideas, but I think that we must not get lost in mechanics; let's not lose sight of our main goal: to fund the arts with substantially more money than they now receive. States already collect sales taxes, so the collection of this revenue need not be different. The money would have to go to a national fund, but that shouldn't be a problem. As for the allocation of the funds, this can be handled pretty much the way it is handled already, through government arts agencies. I don't think that we need any more arts agencies than we have now - they're already in place, they know how to select artists and they know how to run programs - it's just that they haven't had any money for quite a while. This gives them something to work with. This is just an idea that I thought would be interesting to throw out to our *CUBE Calendar* audience. It is here to be talked about, joked about, modified, expanded, refined, whatever our readership wants to do. It's not an ideal - an ideal would be a different social, political and economic structure where this wouldn't be necessary. But this is practical and it works within the system. Say it loud and be proud: TAX AND SPEND ON ART.
