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*CUBE Circuits*, March/April, 1995

Janice Misurell-Mitchell, "A Composer Speaks Out"

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## **A COMPOSER SPEAKS OUT**

To Voice of the People

**Chicago Tribune**

Dear Editor:

Now that the Cold War is declared over it is time to find new enemies from within. This time its public funding in media and the arts. We hear from your columnist, Joan Beck (Op-Ed, Jan. 12), and then from U.S. Representative Philip M. Crane (Voice of the People, Jan. 18) that the arts should not receive Federal funding. Thus art would need to compete for funding with elements of more popular culture, i.e., Hollywood movies, music produced by wealthy recording companies, and of course, the most commercial venue of all, television. Such a condition allows large corporations to be arbiters of taste, of what goes into the eyes, ears and minds of the population.

We know already that the U.S. population is less literate than it once was, less critical of what it sees as entertainment (i.e., extreme violence on television and in the movies), and increasingly insensitive to questions of morality in political situations (take the example of Oliver North, a person who has been convicted of lying to Congress, nearly winning the Senatorial election in Virginia). Unfortunately, this is not a country where people can be trusted to read and do research on their own (despite the popularity of the Internet, which covers a very small, privileged percentage of the population). This is a country where people need to have their information presented freely, without an agenda that tries to limit and control.

The current talk about dismantling the Public Broadcasting System is particularly dangerous because it would leave all news and much TV/radio arts programming in private control. This control is not designed in the public interest: it is for profit, to sell commodities and to put forth particular points of view, whether they be merely sensational (as is the case of much local television news) or narrowminded (as is the case of much national news).

The same fear can be raised over loss of public funding for the arts. Public funding supports one of our basic rights: freedom of expression. What art is chosen for funding is determined by peer group evaluation, not by radio talk show hosts. Public funding distributes money to all parts of the country, not just the wealthy areas, and it allows the arts to remain free of domination by the will of the powerful, of narrow political groups, corporations and the very wealthy. (This is obviously less true in regard to the market of painting and sculpture, but that is another issue.) It supports a large range of expression, from the small town wind band to the midsize city theatre company to the large city dance company, all of which would suffer if this funding were to dry up. In a time when funding for local public school systems is also under siege, public funding for the arts serves to supplement programs which have been cut and provides needed programs in systems which have none.

We in the arts are well aware that public funding is not the only avenue for support. Nonetheless, by receiving public funding a group is seen as being trustworthy in the use of private funds because it has passed the scrutiny of the public funding application process, which is far more detailed and rigorous than that of private funding.

Returning to the opening theme, enemies from within: it is disappointing to hear that the *Chicago Tribune* is planning to reconfigure its Arts Plus page into a format with even less arts information than it already has (which, by national standards, in papers such as the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, is already embarrassingly small). In a time when the arts are talked about as the new enemy, it would be far more courageous for the *Tribune* to *expand* its arts coverage instead of caving in to a questionable and moveable bottom line. In the same sense, it is important that concerned citizens should recognize that if they don't object to the efforts of public officials to silence the voices of public funding, the time will come that the only free expression is that which is paid for.

Janice Misurell-Mitchell, composer, performer, educator

*(Note: As we go to press, this letter has not yet appeared in the Tribune.)*