Growing Pains: Artists' Organizations in the '80s

by Martha Gever

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Seated around dinner tables in Chicago's Blackstone Hotel Crystal Ballroom--a room most reminiscent of a giant wedding cake--the representatives of member organizations of the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO) politely listened to a series of keynote speakers. First at the podium was Hugh Southern, the Deputy Director of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), whose presence at the NAAO's first membership conference symbolized the importance of the federal arts agency to the nonprofit groups that comprise the NAAO. Southern's remarks reminded me of a generic political speech: brief, witty and largely rhetorical. He was followed by Mary MacArthur, former Director of The Kitchen, who related cautionary tales about the dangers encountered when alternative arts organizations grow and become increasingly respectable. As a warning to the NAAO members, she noted, "We're being told by our funders how to adopt business standards," adding, "you should know what you're doing when you run with the wolves and you're a sheep."

MacArthur's comments received a good deal of applause, signaling what I'd identify as ambivalence on the part of many of those in attendance, who feel compelled to court wealthy patrons--individuals and corporations--while agreeing with MacArthur that "the arts are often illegal. The arts are unbusinesslike and not very respectable." This theme was also taken up by the last keynoter, Allan Kaprow, one of the earliest and most prolific creators of happenings and other unconventional art events. Kaprow's message to the gathering was perhaps less sympathetic than MacArthur's and posed more direct challenges to the practices of many nonprofit art groups. The "predicament" Kaprow cited as the root of many nonprofit centers' problems was that there's "less and less money." No one, I dare say, disagreed. The strategies he proposed for overcoming this obstacle, however, were not methods for improving fundraising, but a call for new art forms. First, he said, "Get rid of the box, the house [the gallery, performance space, office]. You don't need that kind of expensive real estate . . . Get rid of being janitorial and get experimental. . . . The models we internalize for art are obsolescent and expensive." Not everyone in the audience, largely comprised of arts administrators who spend a great deal of time contriving ways to pay the rent, mortgage, heating bills and other maintenance costs, concurred with Kaprow. A woman from Creative Time in New York City interrupted him saying, "Artists do need *real* space." To which Kaprow rejoined, "When I was a painter, I showed in doorways." Needless to say, these differences were not resolved, nor are they petty.

My purpose in recounting that particular evening's proceedings at such length is to outline some of the general questions confronting the members of the NAAO. The four day conference, held on October 26-29, was futuristically titled "The Shape of Things to Come," but in fact focused primarily on the recent past and immediate present. Aside from the formal event described above, the meeting was characterized by remarkably down-to-earth, practical presentations and conversations about money and management. Parenthetically, I'll add that most of the conference events were held in several artists' spaces: N.A.M.E. and Artemesia galleries and Chicago Filmmakers, which provided more congenial settings than the ornate, fussy ballroom (and the informal meals there were better, too). The conference planners were careful to allow panels enough time for fairly thorough presentations as well as open discussions, but three panels were always run concurrently so that one was faced with choosing between immersing oneself in a topic or panel-hopping. I adopted the former strategy and the summary that follows therefore covers about a third of the sessions.

The curious exception to the three-at-a-time rule was the "Insurance Forum," the opening act of the conference. Moderated by the Director of the NEA Visual Arts program, Benny Andrews, the panel and the audience somewhat awkwardly explored the possibility of a group health plan for self-employed artists. The problems inherent in such a project were elaborately articulated by an Allstate Insurance Company executive who offered little encouragement. Several members of the audience cited already available health plans that seemed to answer the needs of artists. Quickly, the whole exercise became pointless. Andrews's message to the assembly was quite clear, however: NAAO, as a nation-wide service organization could/should initiate and administer a health insurance plan, and the Visual Arts program would entertain proposals requesting NEA assistance.

The moral of this story had nothing to do with health insurance, but instead is indicative of the relationship between NEA and NAAO. It's well known that the NEA Visual Arts program was the midwife, if not the actual parent of NAAO. In the late '70s, the NEA needed a means for identifying and evaluating all the workshops, centers, cooperatives, alternative spaces, etc. that began knocking at its door during that decade, and artists' organizations recognized the need for a collective voice for dealing with the NEA. Thus a symbiotic relationship has evolved, and it remains to be seen whether the progress of NAAO will be tied to NEA directives. The prominence of Andrews's panel in the conference schedule, despite the relative triviality of his topic (I'm not saying that health insurance is a trivial matter; it might have been discussed at the conference in the context of forming an artists union, for instance, but wasn't) and Southern's keynote address suggest that NEA policy is a priority for NAAO. On the other hand, health insurance was never publicly mentioned again at the conference, and I heard one NAAO board member grumble about the NEA trying to determine NAAO's agenda.

While NAAO is only one year old, many of the member organizations were founded in the early '70s. These are hardly venerable institutions, but some have achieved a highly visible, established presence in the artworld. Unlike MacArthur, none of the participants on the panel devoted to issues of growth and change, "Directions and Prescriptions," questioned the desirability of growth; they just described it. These panelists were, generally speaking, what moderator Ed Jones from New York's New Museum called "second generation directors." One discernible characteristic of all their organizations is what might be called professionalization. Jones, Linda Shearer from Artists Space in New York, and Joy Silverman from the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibits (LACE) all emphatically stated that theirs were *not* artist-run organizations. Actually, in terms of institutionalization, I'd say the New Museum outclasses all the organizations represented at the conference: Henry Luce is chairperson of the museum's board of directors. Boards, of course, were a major discussion topic, since the composition and role of these groups of overseers is increasingly stressed by funders. The dilemma, then, is how to remain responsive to young or inexperienced artists and new art forms when wealthy and influential people, not famous for their radical attitudes, are recruited to raise money and reassure funders. At Artists Space, half of the board members are artists, but, Shearer said, "Control is problematic." And at LACE, Silverman admitted, "There's conflict between artist board members and community board members."

As artists' organizations age, some come to resemble the cultural institutions their founders originally felt excluded from or opposed to. Or at least, as a historical phenomena, the integration of these groups in the United States art scene must be admitted, despite the precarious survival of even the most respectable organizations. One of the liveliest discussions during the "Directions" panel centered on the relationship between nonprofit and commercial institutions. Artists' organizations are often viewed nowadays as a testing ground for emerging artists. For some present, this role does not contradict their principles. Shearer, for instance, said that her organization will help an artist make connections with commercial dealers if the staff of Artists Space thinks that's appropriate. She also pointed out that there are artists who are not interested in commercial sales. Many are, of course, but, argued Jock Reynolds, Director of the Washington Project for the Arts, "We're not in the business of managing careers." Reynolds I think, *would* agree with Shearer's observation that nonprofits should be places where artists can take risks that might otherwise be impossible given the interests of commercial galleries. Does this division of labor, so to speak, then allow dealers to play it safe? Can dealers now sit on the sidelines, watching the performance of up and coming artists, waiting to sign up the few who receive critical accolades in important art journals? Or as Henry Korn, organizer of the New York Art Parade and chairperson of Franklin Furnace's board, suggested, is this relationship illusory? Speaking from the audience, Korn prophesied, "We'll prevail because the others [commercial ventures] have all withered away. . . . [Artists organizations are] the only places with standards independent of commodity standards."

Korn's separation of art and commerce and his implied hierarchy of values--art as spiritually superior-- struck a familiar chord, but one that was inconsistent with much of the conference's agenda. As I said before, the NEA maintained a high profile at the conference, with the entire administrative staff of the Visual Arts program, and representatives of the Inter-Arts and Museum programs present. Eight out of the 12 panels I haven't yet discussed were concerned specifically with either public or private funding. Several of these were of the instructional/testimonial sort: this is our technique; this is how much money we raised; you can too. At a panel on "Business Support," a series of expert fundraisers for nonprofits along with a corporate philanthropist from the Continental Illinois Bank and Trust Company offered the audience a lot of advice, illustrated with innumerable success stories. For the most part, panelists outlined what amounts to a description of the mores and folkways of wealthy board members of influential foundations and corporations; they weren't talking about your local merchants association here, but Morgan Guarantee, Exxon, Metropolitan Life, etc. In fact, some of these revelations were fascinating (a group of corporate funders in New York City regularly lunch together to compare notes, for example) and this information may have been valuable to the less-experienced fundraisers in the audience. The inspirational, "there's a funder out there for you" attitude was so pervasive, however, that questions about influences on programming were not asked. Rather, Sarah Hollander, a producer of some programs in the "Live from Lincoln Center" series, told us, "The people in corporations are just like us. They're just on the other side. We ask and they give. . . . You'd be surprised at how many people in the corporate world don't believe in what they're doing."

Whether they believe or not, the relationship between grantor and grantee is rarely a partnership of equals. No one on the "Business Support" panel even alluded to what can fairly be called "patronal relations." In Raymond Williams's words, "The defining characteristic of all patronal relations is the privileged situation of the patron . . . defined as one who can give or withhold his commission or support . . . in the crudest terms he is doing what he wishes with his own." That such ideas were unmentioned (or unmentionable) by panelists may indicate that the structural differences between alternative arts organizations and their mainstream counterparts are less substantial than is usually imagined.

One characteristic that continues to distinguish these groups, at least from their commercial counterparts, is their nonprofit and admittedly nonprofitable status. As David White, Director of the Dance Theater Workshop in New York City, said in the course of the "Business Support" panel, nonprofits can't expect to cover more than 60% of their expenses with earned income, and most make do with much less. Of course, city, state and federal government funding given directly to organizations is key to the existence of most nonprofits. Other important, but less often recognized factors are indirect forms of support: property tax waivers, lower postal rates, an income tax system that encourages charitable giving, etc. The panel on "Political Advocacy" forcefully reminded the conferees of the intimate and complex connections between the well-being of nonprofits and government policies.

The highpoint of the discussion was Bob Lawrence's detailed outline and analysis of the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) proposal for new regulations concerning political advocacy and lobbying by nonprofits. Lawrence, a staff person at a Washington-based watchdog group called Interchange, attributed OMB's recent efforts to restrict the activities of nonprofits to the conservative, Republican belief that most social service agencies are agents of the Democratic Party; he referred to the Heritage Foundation report to the Reagan transition team, *Mandate for Leadership*, as proof of this position. Under supply-sider David Stockman's direction, OMB has persisted in its attempts to impose rigid regulations and accounting procedures on nonprofits despite the outcry against the original plans to amend Circular A-122, the OMB rules in question, last spring. The OMB's initial version [see "Your Money or Your Politics," *Afterimage* 10, no. 9 (April 1983), p. 3] was withdrawn. According to Lawrence, this action was due to organized opposition from a coalition of nonprofits *and* business groups, also affected by the proposed rules. The second version of the amendment now covers only nonprofits. Lawrence elaborated on what he called the "chilling effect" that will result from the new regulations: requirements for extremely detailed record keeping by nonprofits concerning staff time and money spent on lobbying or "related activities"; difficult and time-consuming auditing procedures that can be used as harassment (Lawrence mentioned Planned Parenthood as a likely target); communicating analysis of proposed legislation to members of nonprofits would be disallowed; direct comments on pending legislation may still be allowed, but not if shared in any way that *may* lead to concerted action; agency lobbying would be disallowed, e.g., talking to NEA staff about efforts to increase the NEA budget at an NAAO conference; use of federal funds for meetings and conferences where "substantial lobbying" (5%) takes place would be disallowed (again, an NAAO conference, for example). The list goes on. These restrictions would effectively silence any public commentary issuing from nonprofit organizations on government policies. As Lawrence explained, the OMB's rationale for the proposed rules has been the illegal use of federal funds for lobbying by nonprofits, but none of the government studies on the subject support that assertion.

Following publication of the A-122 amendment in the *Federal Register* (on November 3), citizens have up to 45 days to comment, although there are no guarantees that such comments will be taken into account. The OMB is part of the executive branch of the federal government, which enables the administration in power to circumvent Congress, especially with the Supreme Court's removal of the legislative veto earlier this year. But, as Mike Dorf, assistant to Congressperson Sidney Yates, pointed out, Congress must approve OMB's budget, and therefore does have some leverage. Lawrence also emphasized that congressional opposition to the OMB rules can stall or prevent their implementation, and a constitutional challenge is certain should the amended A-122 go into effect. A judicial decision could take several years, however. The comment period ends December 16; soon after, OMB should announce its decision concerning A-122. For those wishing to be advised of these and future developments, Lawrence urged NAAO members to contact his division of Interchange: OMB Watch, 1201 16th St. NW, Suite 405, Washington, D.C. 20036.

This kind of information exchange indicates NAAO's potential as an information clearinghouse and advocacy organization for otherwise disparate groups. In many respects this was a working conference and an important order of business was solidifying the infant organization so that it might function to its members' advantage. To that end, three sessions were scheduled for regional caucuses, since its regional structure is NAAO's backbone. (What works in New York City or the problems specific to nonprofit art organizations in Chicago, for instance, may not be relevant to nonprofits in Phoenix). Each region elects two representatives to the NAAO board: one serves as an executive boardmember; the other coordinates regional activities. From the reports given at the final membership meeting, some regions seem more successful than others. For example, last year the Southeast held a conference attended by members of 80 organizations while an equivalent Northeast meeting (which excludes New York City) drew 10.

Two non-geographically defined caucuses were formed at the Chicago conference: Hispanic arts organizations and women's arts organizations. The projected agenda of the former includes establishing ties with other Hispanic groups. One goal set by the latter was representation on the NAAO board, and indeed two were elected. The formation of these caucuses reflects what was noticeably absent from the conference agenda. So much time was devoted to fundraising and politicking and very little allotted to discussions of the raisons d'   tre of the various arts organizations, the work they sponsor or support, or their positions within the U.S. cultural scene. There was also underrepresentation from organizations specifically involved in photography (I counted three), music, dance, theater, or film and video. Media groups have a parallel association, the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC), but after attending the national conferences of both umbrella associations, I would conclude that film and video folk could learn from and contribute to conversations and coalitions with their counterparts in other disciplines.

NAAO's failure so far to attract many minority cultural organizations was generally acknowledged, and in addition to the efforts projected by several regional caucuses, the general membership endorsed a resolution to increase minority membership during the coming year.

NEA program guidelines aside, perhaps it's time that non-mainstream (marginal?) cultural groups in this country reconsider the segregation imposed by definitions according to media. A collective theater group might have more interests in common with an artists' cooperative than with Yale Repertory. Likewise, a small photographic center needn't look to the Museum of Modern Art for guidance. I'm not sure NAAO should or could be the catalyst for bridging art's traditional boundaries, but if alternative organizations do not want to become little league trainers for the elite cultural establishments, a broad coalition should be the shape of things to come.

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