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Lambert Zuidervaart
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PART I

DOUBLE DEFICIT

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1

Culture Wars

Whenever I hear the word “culture” I reach for my revolver.

Friedrich Thiemann¹

In 1989 Senator Jesse Helms called artist Andres Serrano “a jerk.” Speaking on the floor of the United States Senate, the Republican senator from North Carolina endorsed a letter to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), drafted by Senator Alfonse D’Amato (R-N.Y.), which objected to the NEA’s supporting “a so-called ‘work of art’ by Andres Serrano entitled ‘Piss Christ.’”² According to Senator Helms, “What this Serrano fellow did, he filled a bottle with his own urine and then stuck a crucifix down there – Jesus Christ on a cross. He set it up on a table and took a picture of it. For that, the National Endowment for the Arts gave him \$15,000, to honor him as

¹ Friedrich Thiemann is a character in the play *Schlageter*, written by the German playwright and Nazi Poet Laureate Hanns Johst and performed to celebrate Hitler’s birthday and his coming to power in 1933. See *Hanns Johst’s Nazi Drama Schlageter*, trans. Ford B. Parkes-Perret (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1984). The actual line spoken by Thiemann (p. 89) is “When I hear the word culture ..., I release the safety on my Browning!” (“Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning!”) – a less snappy phrase, and perhaps one less easily misattributed to a whole rogues’ gallery of Nazi “leaders,” including Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, and Joseph Goebbels. They might not have said it, but the sentiment expressed was not foreign to their ideology.

² Letter dated May 18, 1989, addressed to Mr. Hugh Southern, acting chairman of the NEA, and signed by D’Amato, Helms, and more than twenty other senators; reprinted in Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992), pp. 29–30.

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an artist. I say... he is not an artist. He is a jerk. And he is taunting the American people, just as others are.... And I resent it. And I do not hesitate to say so.”³ The lines of battle could hardly be more starkly drawn: a powerful conservative senator attacking an accomplished artist and defending “the American people” from the alleged taunts of this “jerk” – with a federal arts agency caught in the middle. The so-called culture wars, described by one observer as a “struggle to define America,” had begun.⁴

The American battle over federal arts funding and its less heated counterpart in Canada continued through the 1990s, until the events of September 11, 2001, and a “war on terrorism” diverted cultural warriors to other controversies. Yet the struggle has not ended. One notes, for example, a federal election in Canada during the fall of 2008. Defending his government’s decision to cut \$45 million in funding for the arts and culture, Prime Minister Stephen Harper remarked: “I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see... a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren’t high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up – I’m not sure that’s something that resonates with ordinary people.”⁵ More politely than Helms, perhaps, yet targeting many artists rather than one, Harper in effect called all of them jerks and asked “ordinary working people” to back him up. An undercurrent of pseudopopulism and resentment runs through the speeches of both politicians, despite the national borders and nearly twenty years that separate them.

Such attacks on artists by prominent politicians add both urgency and confusion to questions that are in any case hard to answer. What should the arts contribute to a democratic society? What is the proper

³ From the *Congressional Record* for May 18, 1989, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). For a contemporaneous sociological account of the art–political skirmishes within this larger struggle, see Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (New York: Routledge, 1992). These and similar skirmishes are put into historical perspective by Michael Kammen, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006). For reflections that are closer to the artistic ground, see *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁵ Quoted in “Ordinary Folks Don’t Care about Arts: Harper,” *Toronto Star*, September 24, 2008, <http://www.thestar.com>.

role of government with respect to the arts? And, in light of the first two questions, what justifies government funding for the arts?

In the past few decades, public debates about these questions in Canada and the United States have revolved around three other questions: Is government funding beneficial to artists and their publics, or would it be better for artists to compete in the economic marketplace without government support? Should government funding come “with no strings attached,” or should it uphold standards of decency and social order? Are contemporary artists progressive agents of social change, or are they a decadent menace to society? This book argues that to frame the debate in these three ways is counterproductive. Both advocates and critics of government arts funding assume outdated and questionable views of the state, the arts, and the nature of a democratic society. I challenge these assumptions by developing the concepts of civil society, relational autonomy, and cultural democracy.

I realize, of course, that controversies about government funding for the arts raise many specific questions and point to numerous fields of study. But my goal is to call attention to recurring themes and shared topics, to uncover and challenge widely shared philosophical assumptions, and to propose an alternative conception of art in public. I recognize, too, that the cultural, political, and economic issues surrounding government funding in North America vary for different types of art and in different jurisdictions. Yet the philosophical vocabularies and positions framing debates on these issues do not differ significantly from one art form or political jurisdiction to the next.

This chapter aims to identify commonalities at the level of conceptual framework. After describing three polarities in recent debates about government funding for the arts and exposing shared assumptions to critical commentary, I propose a different approach to these issues, which is elaborated in subsequent chapters.

1.1 POLARITIES

Three conceptual polarities pervade North American debates about government funding for the arts. The first is an opposition between endorsing government support and advocating a strictly free market

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approach. The second is a tension between protecting the freedom of artistic expression and maintaining the authority of traditional values. The third is a conflict between images of contemporary art as a provocative challenge to the status quo and portrayals of it as a decadent menace to society. The two main camps waging cultural warfare include those who call for government support, freedom of expression, and provocative challenges, on the one hand, and those who defend the free market and traditional values while blasting cultural decadence, on the other. Let me describe the three polarities in more detail, with a view to the philosophical assumptions the two camps share.

Government Versus Market

Both those who advocate government funding for the arts and those who oppose it cast their arguments in instrumental terms. The advocates claim that many deserving artists and arts organizations would not thrive or even survive without government funding. Moreover, because government funding attracts corporate and individual support, governments get an incredible return on their minimal investment in the arts. Often the advocates of government funding avoid difficult questions about which arts should thrive and why they should thrive.

Proponents of the free market approach, by contrast, think that the government has no business meddling in what they regard as essentially a private enterprise. They trust the market to sort out which artists and arts organizations will survive. In fact, they often embrace a Social Darwinian view: the arts that make it in a capitalist economy are precisely the arts that deserve to thrive. Furthermore, they think government support, whether through direct funding or through tax policy, usually leads to the imposition of undesirable art on unwilling taxpayers without their knowledge or their consent.

Put in such starkly instrumental terms, the debate between advocates and opponents of government funding skirts crucial philosophical issues. Unless one has already established that (some) art is a good whose support is in the public interest, there is little reason in principle why the government should be involved, and claims about the beneficial effects of government funding are beside the

point. Similarly, unless one has already established that (all) art is a commodity-producing and commodity-consuming enterprise whose operation should meet economic criteria of efficiency and marketability, there is little reason in principle why the marketplace should be preferred over government support, and claims about the advantages of the free market are neither here nor there. Each camp in its own way accepts the current politico-economic system: one side has confidence in the political system and mutes its democratic deficits, while the other side trusts the economic system and ignores its cultural deficits. Yet the philosophical issues at stake in their debate pertain precisely to questions about democracy and culture.

Freedom Versus Authority

Before the 1960s, North American advocates of free market forces made common cause with those who defended the freedom of artistic expression. With the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) in 1957 and the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965, however, and the rise of new social movements and a religious Right, a dramatic realignment occurred. Now advocates of free market forces regularly team up with outspoken critics of artistic freedom who defend the authority of traditional values. So too advocates of government funding now usually cooperate with those who insist on the freedom of artistic expression. Just as protecting the freedom of artistic expression is no longer a primary reason for opposing government funding, so too promoting social cohesion is no longer a primary reason for urging government support. The conceptual polarities under discussion reflect larger shifts in the political, economic, and cultural terrain.

The most heated debates in recent years have occurred amid legal battles over government-administered projects (such as Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, 1981), state-funded works (such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, 1987), and publicly accessible exhibitions and performances (such as the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit at Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center in 1990). Given the legal context, those who promote the freedom of artistic expression couch their case in the language of rights. More specifically, they make or assume a connection between the freedom of artistic expression and the right to

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free expression guaranteed in the United States by Article I of the Bill of Rights and in Canada by Section Two of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.⁶ The advocates of free artistic expression often regard this as the equal right of each individual artist to pursue his or her own project.

On the other side, contemporary champions of “family values” can be dangerously dismissive of individual rights. Many who have wanted to shut down the NEA do not merely object to government funding for art that challenges traditional values. They also think the government should actively promote traditional values, even if this means squelching the voices of opposition. When it comes to questions of civil liberties and public expression, there is not that large a distance between positions taken by Reverend Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association and Nazi cultural policy⁷ – a proximity made apparent by the 1991 *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Los Angeles and Chicago.⁸

Confusion reigns on both sides of the freedom-authority divide. The freedom side too often collapses two different concepts of freedom: the occasion and opportunity to engage in artistic expression, and the constitutionally guaranteed right to engage in governmentally unabridged public discourse. Although there are situations where the denial of the first type of freedom coincides with the denial of the second, the discouragement of artistic expression (e.g., by refusing to fund a show) need not violate a person’s or community’s public discourse rights. I hasten to add, however, that informed discussions and decisions about artistic freedom, discourse rights,

⁶ Strictly speaking, Article I of the Bill of Rights secures the freedoms of speech, petition, and assembly. Collectively they have come to be known as the freedom of expression.

⁷ See, for example, the summary of Wildmon’s claims and tactics in Richard Bolton’s introduction to *Culture Wars*, pp. 8–11.

⁸ See the exhibition catalog “*Degenerate Art*”: *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, ed. Stephanie Barron, with contributions by Peter Guenther et al. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991). The exhibition was held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. The catalog’s foreword, written by the directors of these museums, emphasizes the timeliness of this exhibition in light of right-wing attacks on federal arts funding in the United States: “As the 1990s begin, museum exhibitions are in a precarious position. If government support for the arts is jeopardized, the ability of all museums to organize exhibitions will be affected and the museum as an educational institution will be seriously diminished” (p. 6).

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and their relationship in a particular case require acute sensitivity to matters of context.

The authority side of the debate nearly fuses two different concepts of authority: the ability to enact and enforce legal codes, and the ability to inculcate moral standards or inspire religious devotion. While it would be a mistake to think that legal authority and moral or religious authority are completely disconnected, as some defenders of the liberal state suggest, a fusion in the manner of fundamentalists worldwide can only be disastrous for law, morality, and religion, not to mention the many victims of zealotry and repression. Just as the development of legal codes need not inculcate moral standards or inspire religious devotion, so moral and religious authority need not depend on legal and administrative power.

Common to both sides is an inability to regard artists as anything more than isolated individuals who are dependent on either government generosity or free market fortune. Advocates of free artistic expression picture artists as atomistic individuals having equal rights to pursue their own projects. Those who champion authoritative traditional values view contemporary artists as undesirable deviants on the margins of society. Both sides fail to recognize the way in which artists are full-fledged members of social institutions and cultural communities. Recognition of such membership, I suggest, would help remove the impasse into which civil libertarians and religious fundamentalists have brought debates about government funding for the arts.

Provocation Versus Decadence

Introducing his anthology of documents from the battle over the NEA's budget and reauthorization in 1989 and 1990, Richard Bolton correctly observes: "The clash over government funding was much more than an argument over art; it was a debate over competing social agendas and concepts of morality, a clash over both the present and the future condition of American society."⁹ Just how deep and hateful the clash became is clear from the promotional literature of each side.

⁹ Bolton, introduction to Bolton, *Culture Wars*, p. 3.

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In opposing the proposed NEA budget, the Christian Coalition's *Washington Post* advertisement on June 20, 1990, signed by Pat Robertson, asked members of Congress: "Do you... want to face the voters with the charge that you are wasting their hard-earned money to promote sodomy, child pornography, and attacks on Jesus Christ? You could choose to fund the NEA while refusing public funding for obscenity and attacks on religion. But the radical left wants you to give legitimacy to pornography and homosexuality. So you are being asked to vote like sheep for \$175,000,000 with no strings attached."¹⁰ This is just one example of the threats, smear tactics, and outright lies common to advocacy from the religious Right.

The NEA's defenders were not above using similar tactics. To explain the religious Right's "War on Art," for example, C. Carr wrote in the *Village Voice*: "The Saved are always a minority among the Damned. Practicing zealots don't feel powerful, but beleaguered. That's why they're obsessed with policing the boundaries of the permissible.... How will they erase those sex-crazed Jimmies (Bakker/Swaggart) from our minds? Regroup around some unseen enemy. And wouldn't ya know, fresh outta godless Communists, they've discovered the art world – a rich new motherlode of sinners."¹¹ One can find many other such examples of demonization and ridicule.

A strong image supports the rhetoric of each side. On one side is a portrait of the artist as a decadent menace to civilization. As C. Carr points out, the works singled out for greatest outrage are discussed "in metaphors of chaos, dissolution, sewage, engulfment: 'the river of swill' (representative Dana Rohrabacher); 'stinking foul-smelling garbage' (an American Family Association coordinator); 'a polluted culture, left to fester and stink' (Patrick Buchanan).... There's an apocalyptic quiver at the heart of the religious right's anti-NEA campaign. For in this art, they see the decline of civilization."¹² On the other side is an image of contemporary artists as provocative challengers of the status quo. Their art is cutting edge. It's in your face. It transgresses established boundaries in art and life: "Up yours."

Here the shared and dubious assumptions of both sides surface in an especially powerful way. Each side assumes that contemporary art

¹⁰ Reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 316.

¹¹ C. Carr, "War on Art," *Village Voice*, June 5, 1990, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 231.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

is in the vanguard of culture and society – an assumption inherited from the modernist movement, and one that even astute postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard have had trouble surrendering.¹³ Pat Robertson and company see contemporary art out front on the road to destruction. The advocates of contemporary art make it a progressive pathfinder for the perpetual negation of established boundaries. Neither side sees contemporary art as part of a sustaining tradition. Neither side hears it as bringing voices to a multifaceted conversation. This shared inattention feeds on the two other assumptions already noted, namely, that the current politico-economic system is acceptable and that artists are isolated individuals.

1.2 EXPOSURE

Status Quo

At first glance, it might seem preposterous to portray either advocates or critics of government arts funding as favoring the systemic status quo. The advocates seem always to want more government money than they can get, and the critics seem intent on dismantling the entire structure of government funding for the arts, not to mention education, the humanities, and other areas of culture.

Nevertheless, most advocates of government funding do endorse an arrangement whereby government agencies act as pump primers for an art world dominated by large businesses (e.g., media conglomerates), corporate donors, and wealthy individuals.¹⁴ On the other side, most critics of government support do not object to corporate dominance as such but to the supposed hegemony of what they label, rather indiscriminately, as the cultural elite, liberals, secular humanists, or

¹³ Arguably, the project of radical experimentation is what Lyotard endorses for both art and science in the “postmodern condition.” In both areas, there must be no attempt to reinstate the master narratives of liberation and truth. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
¹⁴ The dilemma for a progressive critic of this arrangement is that every challenge to the government-supported “corporate takeover of culture” plays into the hands of reactionaries who would abolish government funding altogether. See Hans Haacke, “Beware of the Hijackers!” in *Culture and Democracy: Social and Ethical Issues in Public Support for the Arts and Humanities*, ed. Andrew Buchwalter (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 139–53.