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Rogerian Sample Essay

The NEA vs. Taxpayers

The National Endowment for the Arts has been controversial for decades, affecting everything from art and culture to economic policy. Ever since its inception in 1965 there has been a debate over whether or not the government should fund the NEA. This disagreement came to a climax with the NEA's funding of the contentious arts produced by artists such as Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, Andres Serrano, and Robert Mapplethorpe in 1989 and 1990. For the past twenty-five years conservative politicians have attempted to eliminate funding for the Endowment on the basis that tax dollars should not be used to promote images deemed offensive to the general public. This is contrasted with those who wish to promote the NEA, which they say is beneficial in that it fosters creativity, diversity, and support for artists who otherwise would not have been discovered. The article, "The National Endowment for the Arts: Misusing Taxpayers' Money," written by Robert H. Knight, criticizes the NEA for its principles on art education, its attack on traditional values, and the lack of diversity in the artwork that it funds. A second article, "The National Endowment for the Arts and Its Opposition: Danto's Argument for Art for Our Sake," written by S. K. Wertz, takes up the liberal viewpoint as he defends the goals, vision, and mission statement of the NEA to foster artistic diversity and strengthen artistic presence around the country. While these two articles directly oppose one another, there can be common ground in the fact that both sides care deeply about the arts and wish to have an economic policy that will promote diversity, creativity, arts education, and strengthen the

presence of art in the United States.

Knight, the author of “The National Endowment for the Arts: Misusing Taxpayer’s Money,” takes a stance against many aspects of the NEA. He is opposed to the funding of the NEA to promote artists that attack traditional values, and while he does acknowledge the great impact that the program has had on the US since 1965, he argues that if the NEA must be saved, then it should undergo a series of reforms to return the program to its original charter mission. Knight states “In a time when already pinched families are being asked to sacrifice more of their incomes to new taxes, Congress should ensure that every tax dollar is well spent. It does not appear that NEA, as currently constituted, is doing so” (Knight 46). The author’s strongest claim is that the NEA attacks traditional values of art, family, and religion. He asserts that traditional skills such as figure drawing are being replaced by avant-garde works meant to shock the audience. Knight states that instead of balancing modernist works with representational ones, the NEA is heavily inclined to promote solely avant-garde artworks. In fact, “by systematically enforcing a modernist, avant-garde style, NEA censors all other art and, so doing, violates its own charter” (Knight 34). This viewpoint is valid in the fact that the most famous artists funded by the NEA have produced the most controversial works, which can often be offensive to the general public. It is understandable that a conservative public does not want to give money to something that goes against their core values, whether or not they actually see the performance or artwork themselves. These members of the public can feel responsible for something that they do not approve of, and Knight’s viewpoints are reasonable because people do not want to give money to something that they know will be offensive to them.

In contrast with Knight, S. K. Wertz, the author of “The National Endowment for the Arts and Its Opposition: Danto’s Argument for Art for Our Sake,” is in favor of the NEA and

argues that the program has improved the condition of the arts in the United States. Wertz writes that “the NEA program aims to reach people who would not otherwise be reached, whether artist or spectator” (Wertz 116). The NEA has expanded the type of artistic works that have been produced and has increased the visibility of the arts to the public. The program has not only benefitted the artists, but the public as well, as it is presenting the arts to people that otherwise would not have been interested. While some of the artworks may offend members of the public, “what [they label] as immoral art are things and circumstances that offend [them] rather than situations which are unethical, that is, a violation of a moral principle” (Wertz 116). Not every artwork is for every person, but the NEA has at least exposed the public to a different view of art and a new way of thinking. The strongest point made in this article is that by funding a particular artist, the NEA is not promoting an ideology created by the government. Wertz states that “Art under these conditions-the NEA conditions-is heterogeneous: the criteria of creativity, novelty, and diversity ensure that there will not be an ‘established art’ the way there would be an established religion” (Wertz 115). The NEA is not set up to limit the US to one type of art, but to expand the types of art that are accepted in today’s society. The purpose of the program is to diversify and promote all types of artistic achievement, not a singular type commanded by the government. This side of the argument makes valid points as well. If the NEA was not set up to fund and diversify the arts, then the only promoted arts would be those preferred by a small demographic of wealthy investors. The NEA gives different artists a chance to create and explore their talents in a way that they otherwise may never have if they had not received a grant. Without the NEA, the public may have never been introduced to some of the most well-known artists of today, and, in addition, the NEA funds many art companies around the nation. The program is not only invested in individual artists but in the greater art community and funds

those who have proven their artistic merit.

While Knight and Wertz have opposing viewpoints concerning the National Endowment for the Arts, the two share common ground in their desire to promote the arts in the best possible way. The two writers love the arts and have a wish for it to expand in creativity and diversity while gaining a more exposure in the United States. Knight and Wertz want the same outcome, they just have different methods that they believe will attain their desired result. In addition, while Knight does not approve of the actions taken by the NEA, he does understand the impact of the organization on the arts community. Both writers recognize that the NEA has funded thousands of artists and organizations, and without the creation of the program, some of these recipients would not have survived. Overall, both Knight and Wertz are passionate about the arts and economic policy, both want the arts to expand in diversity and reach greater audiences in the United States, and both recognize that the National Endowment for the Arts could benefit the arts if it acts according to its original mission.

Despite the opposing views on the actions taken by the NEA, a compromise is possible between the two sides of the argument. In Knight's article, he is not insisting that the NEA should be eliminated, rather that it is in need of reforms to return to its original goals. Therefore, it can be proposed to maintain the budget of the NEA, but put measures in place to ensure that the program equally divides the grants among artists and organizations from all artistic disciplines. This would find middle ground with Knight's wishes for reform as well as maintaining the majority of the NEA intact, as Wertz desires. In a debate that has lasted for the past twenty-five years, the only solution that will satisfy the most people is a compromise. Keep the budget and foundations of the NEA, but use reforms to align it with the goals and promises of its initial charter.

Works Cited

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