

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

Arts and Free Speech Organizations Sound the Alarm: On Entering a “Golden Age” of Propaganda and a “Starvation Age” of Art and Culture

February 26, 2025 — Today, a cohort of national free speech and arts organizations expressed outrage at the Trump Administration’s recent efforts to establish ideological control over federally-funded cultural initiatives in the United States. Though some of these efforts have already been curtailed by a preliminary court injunction, they nonetheless signal an alarming departure from the fundamental democratic principle that the government may not interfere with artistic expression because of hostility toward its viewpoint. Rather than investing in a culture that is vibrant, free, and eclectic, the current administration clearly sees government-supported art as a tool for government propaganda.

Recently, the National Endowment for the Arts, the country’s single largest funder of the arts and arts education, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funds research and programming on subjects of history, literature, and philosophy, announced the sudden restructuring of their grant programs criteria as directed and enforced by the current presidential administration. As federal agencies, the NEA and NEH must ensure that project proposals adhere to all Executive Orders, including those that prohibit the agencies from providing grants to organizations that have any “discriminating” programs promoting “diversity, equity, and inclusion” or for any programs that promote what the administration refers to as “gender ideology.” Additionally, applicant organizations must submit descriptions of their arts programming over the past five years, which raises concerns that past programming would be scrutinized under those same standards. The constitutionality of these measures has since been challenged, and federal courts have partially halted enforcement of the Executive Orders related to DEI (on First Amendment grounds) and gender.

Shortly after the announcements about the impact of the Executive Orders on grantmaking at the NEA and NEH, the president announced he’d soon take over as chairman of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. This development has not only included the dismissal of Center board members, but the firing of longtime Center president Deborah Rutter, who had intended to step down at the end of 2025. Though the Kennedy Center has intentionally maintained an a bi-partisan board throughout its history, the president stated that its new leadership would share his “Vision for a Golden Age in Arts and Culture,” and ensure that its selections are “not going to be ‘woke.’”

The recent changes mark a sharp shift away from the founding principles of both institutions. The NEA and NEH were created together to “enable [Americans] to recognize and appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of our lives, the diversity of excellence that comprises our cultural heritage, and artistic and scholarly expression.” The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is

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highly regarded as a “leader for the arts” for celebrating diverse expressions of domestic and global cultural heritage and creativity that are not beholden to partisan viewpoints.

Celebrating and honoring the “diversity of excellence” that constitutes our cultural and historical milieu is simply not possible when all art and scholarship must first pass a partisan litmus test, and manipulating the work of the NEA, NEH, and Kennedy Center to reflect the political agenda of the sitting president would fundamentally upend core American values. Rather than laying the groundwork for a “golden age” of art, these new changes promise to starve the cultural sphere, and put what’s left of it in service to the federal government. This new embrace of propaganda is as much a threat to the arts as it is to democracy.

In the face of these blatant efforts to subject the arts to ideological conformity, our nation’s cultural leaders—the curators, librarians, directors of cultural spaces, museum trustees, artists, theater directors, authors, or publishers—are now left to uphold the founding American values of freedom of expression. These values are indispensable in fostering a free, robust, and diverse cultural sphere. Without principled resistance, the current administration achieves its greatest victory of all: preemptive self-censorship and culture of compliance.

Signed:

National Coalition Against Censorship

The Authors Guild

The Dramatists Guild of America

The Dramatists Legal Defense Fund

Artists at Risk Connection

AICA International

PEN America