

Who's Afraid of the NEA?

Justice, Solidarity, and a Democratic Culture

~ *Outline and Summary* ~

A lecture by Lambert Zuidervaart at the Grand Rapids Art Museum on March 17, 2011.

Presented by the Grand Valley State University Department of Art and Design and the Grand Rapids Art Museum.

This lecture discusses mainstream justifications of direct state subsidies for the arts. It offers a fresh vision of art in public and gives a new sociocultural argument for government arts funding.

1 Economic and Political Justifications

1.1 Mainstream Economic Arguments

Mainstream economics pictures participants in the arts as “maximizers of utility” and argues on that basis.

- *Efficiency arguments:* The government should subsidize the arts because they “public goods” offering “external benefits” that the market fails to provide in sufficient amount and quality.
- *Equity arguments:* The government should subsidize the arts because they are public goods to which the market fails to provide equal access.
- *Merit good arguments:* The government should subsidize the arts because they are “merit goods” that the political community values or prefers even though individual preferences might differ.

I claim that all of these standard economic arguments suffer from a “cultural deficit.”

1.2 Mainstream Political Arguments

Mainstream political thought divides into perfectionist and instrumentalist camps. Whereas perfectionists think the state should promote better forms of human life, also by way of the arts, instrumentalists say the state should restrict itself to maintaining equality and fairness.

- *Perfectionism (Joel Feinberg):* The intrinsic aesthetic value of art makes it worthy of direct state subsidies.
- *Minimal Instrumentalism (John Rawls):* The two principles of justice (i.e., equality and fairness) preclude any direct state subsidies for art other than ones that promote intergenerational equity.
- *Robust Instrumentalism (Ronald Dworkin):* Considerations of justice obligate the political community to pass along a rich cultural structure to future generations, and the arts are an important part of this structure. Direct state subsidies are justified as a way to protect the community’s cultural structure.

I claim that all of these standard political arguments suffer from a “democratic deficit.”

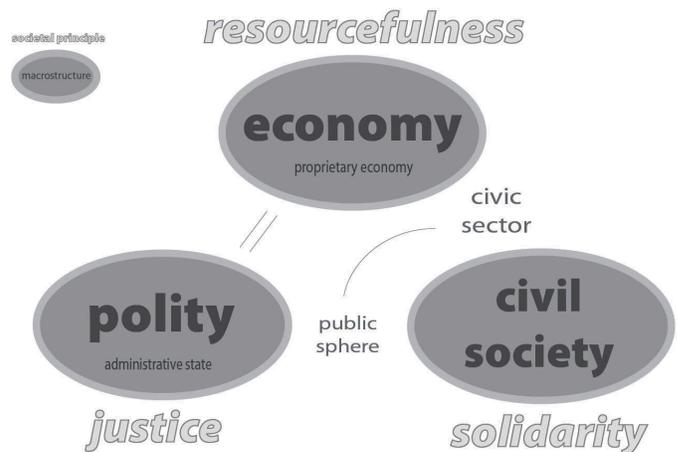
2 Reframing the Debate

2.1 Art in Public

“Art in public” refers to any art (1) whose production and use presupposes government support of some sort and (2) whose meaning is available to a broader public—broader than the original audience for which it is intended or to which it speaks. This concept challenges mainstream assumptions. It points toward a postindividualist, nonprivatist, and communicative framework for understanding both the recipients and the rationale of government arts funding.

2.2 Civil Society

Civil society is one of three macrostructures in contemporary Western societies. The other two macrostructures are the for-profit or proprietary economy and the administrative state. The economy and the state are highly integrated systems. But civil society is a more diffuse array of organizations, institutions, and social movements. It is the space of social interaction and interpersonal communication where economic alternatives can thrive and informal political publics take root.



The *civic sector* lies at the intersection between civil society and the proprietary economy. It is the economic zone of nonprofit, cooperative, and mutual benefit organizations.

- It is the primary way in which civil society achieves and maintains both economic differentiation from and economic integration with the proprietary economy and the administrative state.
- It is the zone that is most conducive to a “social economy” where solidarity takes precedence.

The *public sphere* lies at the intersection between civil society and the administrative state. It is a continually shifting network of discourses and media of communication that supports ongoing discussions about social justice and the common good.

- It sustains widespread participation in the shaping of societal structures that affect everyone.
- It facilitates challenges to the economic system and the administrative state that open these to non-monetary and non-administrative considerations.
- It promotes democratic communication about matters of general concern.

2.3 Five Philosophical Questions

1. *What good is art?* It is a sociocultural good offering imaginative disclosure that helps people find cultural orientation.
2. *What should the arts contribute to a democratic society?* Among many other things, they should shape and renew a vital public sphere by helping people disclose in fresh and insightful ways the felt quality and lived experience of concerns that merit public attention, thereby fostering critical and creative dialogue both within various publics and among them. E.g., the AIDS Memorial Quilt.
3. *What is the best form of economic organization for art in a democratic society?* The best form is that of the civic sector organization, because of the priority solidarity has in the social economy of the civic sector. By “solidarity” I mean the democratic expectation that no individual, group, or community should be excluded from the recognition we owe each other as fellow human beings. But art’s participation in civil society involves it in a macrostructural dialectic. Economically, civic sector arts organizations foster a sociocultural good that the proprietary economy both needs and impedes. Politically, art in public promotes the sort of nuanced public communication that the administrative state both requires and undermines. The systemic pressures on civil society and art in public are reasons why governments do well to protect and subsidize civic-sector organizations that sponsor art in public.
4. *What right do people have to participate in the arts?* It is a cultural right that pertains not only to individuals but also to the social institutions and cultural communities in which they participate. This right is a matter of government concern because the primary normative task of the state is to achieve and maintain public justice for all the individuals, communities, and institutions within its jurisdiction.
5. *What justifies government funding for the arts?* Three things:
 - Art is a social institution with its own legitimacy and an important contribution to make to society.
 - Society needs what the arts offer.
 - The normative task of public justice obliges the state to support the arts in a wide variety of ways, including the provision of direct subsidies.

3. Sociocultural Argument

1. *Public justice premise:* The state has a public justice obligation toward art as a social institution.
2. *Societal need premise:* Society needs arts organizations that foster imaginative disclosure.
3. *Civil society premise:* The state’s public justice obligation extends to the public sphere and civic sector.
4. *Arts organizations premise:* The state’s public justice obligation also extends to civic sector arts organizations.
5. *State subsidies premise.* Direct state subsidies to civic-sector arts organizations are appropriate and effective ways to discharge the state’s public justice obligations to the institution of art, to civil society, and to such arts organizations.
6. Therefore, direct state subsidies for the arts are warranted on the basis of both public justice and societal need.

Conclusion: A democratic society needs art in public. And art in public needs us.

—Lambert Zuidervaart, Institute for Christian Studies,
Toronto lambertz@icscanada.edu

Continue the discussion of *Art in Public* by attending the associated Symposium on Friday, March 18th at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts at 1pm. The symposium is co-sponsored by the GVSU Department of Art and Design and School of Communications, Civic Studio, and UICA.

