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## **FEDERALIZING THE MUSE: UNITED STATES ART POLICY & THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS 1965-1980**

Donna M. Binkiewicz. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004

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Given the deep involvement of the state in cultural management in most Western countries, it is surprising that substantial and critical political histories of government art agencies are lacking. While it is true that most of these agencies are relatively young (between forty and sixty years old), perhaps part of the reason for this conspicuous absence is the abandonment of the rational, 'top down' positivism of political science for cultural studies' concentration on a 'bottom-up' reading of popular pursuits. Attempting to bring together the advantages of both approaches, Donna M. Binkiewicz combines aspects of cultural studies with traditional political history in an effort to counter popular perceptions regarding the US National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). While her approach suffers from methodological shortcomings, *Federalizing the Muse* succeeds in providing an intriguing counterpoint to common understandings of the NEA as a progressive, liberal institution.

Inspired by deep ideological and political challenges to NEA programs during the late 1980s and 90s, Binkiewicz's assertions are two-fold. Firstly, she proposes that the state-funded agency has not historically tended to conceive of art 'in advance of the curve' of popularly accepted tastes. Secondly, she suggests there is reason to revise commonly-held understandings regarding the importance of arts policy under the Nixon and Carter presidencies.

Binkiewicz handles the second goal skilfully. In narrating the political history of the NEA, created in 1965, she presents a well-researched description of the struggles arts advocates have waged with the White House and Congress since the 1950s. Binkiewicz considers the development of the NEA from its foundation at the confluence of Cold War interests in international cultural competition with the Soviet Union and the need to develop a domestic plan for directing the growing leisure time of American society. While historians such as Serge Guilbaut have concentrated on the former, Binkiewicz describes the development of equally important domestic interests in offering Americans a spiritual, educational complement to their material affluence. She also clearly indicates how, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political function of the NEA graduated from providing cultural weapons in competition against communism to becoming a tool for domestic management of dissent and dissatisfaction with the Nixon presidency.

With its fine consideration of the philosophic and political forces compelling interest in a federal cultural agency, *Federalizing the Muse* is a needed addition to scholarship on the political history of the NEA. However, the extensive coverage of the genesis of the agency compels Binkiewicz to defer tackling her primary goal of discussing the NEA as a cultural arbiter until almost halfway through the book.

Assessing the NEA as an arbiter of 'taste,' Binkiewicz attempts to convey an understanding of the Endowment's internal operations, albeit through an exclusive concentration on the Visual Arts Program. The core of her argument is that the make-up and operations of the NEA's Visual Arts Program peer re-

view committees for grant applications led to the privileging and protection of a high-modernist (abstract) aesthetic that had experienced its peak in the early 1960s. This aesthetic was one the federal government also embraced, at the time, as a tool for representing the success of democracy and capitalism against communist ideas. Given these forces, Binkiewicz suggests that high modernism, particularly in painting and sculpture, became the dominant, if not near exclusive aesthetic supported by the NEA until the 1980s, long after most artists regarded the style as passé.

Countering the commonly held view of the NEA as a continually progressive, 'democratising' agency, Binkiewicz shows how the move to a pluralist approach to funding was begun under Nixon. During the 1970s, it was Nixon (motivated by NEA Director Nancy Hanks) who sought to utilize culture as a means to reinforce the challenged reputation of his government through liberal domestic policies geared towards intellectuals and youth. In response to pressures from above and below, the NEA began to reconsider its position on supporting only 'good' art, along with art's role in society. It was not until the 1980s, however, that the Visual Arts Program began to truly embrace styles other than formalism, media beyond painting and sculpture, and artists who were not regarded as 'professional.'

Despite deft handling of policy documents, *Federalizing the Muse* suffers from two shortcomings. Neither, however, completely undermines Binkiewicz's central arguments. Firstly, the text is clearly written by a policy scholar, not an art historian. Binkiewicz makes no effort to convey what was happening stylistically in American art during the 1960s and 70s. When she suggests that the NEA favoured abstraction, but does not provide some kind of art historical context, the reader has no reference point against which to measure if the NEA was reflecting the majority of working artists' interests, or attempting to direct American cultural trends. Binkiewicz would have substantially strengthened her argument if she had explained whether artists, critics and collectors' tastes differed, and where the NEA was located in the aesthetic/cultural topography.

Similarly, Binkiewicz's attempts to illustrate the types of artists the NEA supported are far too simplistic. She reduces entire bodies of artists' work to either abstract, mixed, or representational categories. The descriptions of artists and art works she provides, while interesting, usually concentrate on a single piece as representative of an artist's whole *oeuvre*. The reader cannot help but ponder how representative a sampling of each artist's work Binkiewicz's highly reductive classifications were based on, and how universally accepted her classification of these artists might be.

Working from these dubious classifications, Binkiewicz attempts to statistically illustrate how the NEA favoured abstract art. Her attempt, while suggesting intriguing results, is too limited to show true significance. For instance, the author provides proportional figures for how many NEA grants went to artists working in what she classifies as abstract, mixed, and representational styles. The figures, she argues, suggest that the NEA disproportionately favoured abstractionists. However, Binkiewicz does not provide the data for applications for grants from the NEA. Without this second data set as a comparison, how can we conclude that the NEA was *favouring* a particular style when these missing figures might suggest that it was simply *reflecting* the dominant trend in applicants' artistic styles?

Additionally, Binkiewicz uses statistical analysis to suggest the NEA tended to favour artists living in New York City and on the West Coast. While she recognizes that these regions have the highest percentage of practicing professional artists who might apply to the NEA, she never actually offers data on the percentage of applications the NEA received by region. These figures would either provide irrefutable evidence that the NEA was favouring particular regions in the face of demographics, or that the NEA was

simply reflecting the demographics of its applicant base.

While these problems could likely be fairly easily resolved, they do leave the central conclusion of this book on a weak foundation. That is not to say that Binkiewicz's conclusion is likely incorrect. In fact, she identifies an additional area of research where her thesis could reasonably find confirmation.

In making her argument regarding the NEA's favouring of high-modernism, Binkiewicz focuses on the media that are most popular for national journalistic coverage, e.g., painting and sculpture over, for instance, mural art. That a much smaller percentage of NEA funding was committed to mural projects during the 1960s and 70s indicates that it chose to prioritize some forms of culture over another. The community-oriented, predominantly political and visually representational nature of most mural projects does suggest some rationale for why the NEA might have distanced itself from mural art. It is the break this choice represents that Binkiewicz could further investigate to reinforce her central thesis. If, indeed, high modern abstraction was the preferred form of expression among the NEA's assessors and administrators, how were mural projects conceived of within the agency's programs and philosophy? If they were the exception, as Binkiewicz suggests, then the conception of these projects within the NEA's operations becomes critical, and the language used to discuss them would reveal how these projects were understood within the dominant framework of stylistic formalism. While the logistics of the mural program are touched upon in the text, the lack of consideration of its philosophic place in American cultural management by the NEA is an unfortunate absence.