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Organizing Bodies:
Creating and Funding Experimental Dance in the United States, 1965-2000

by

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ABSTRACT

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Avant-garde artists are among the most broadly theorized sub-groups of cultural producers. Artistic vanguards been theorized in two opposing ways—either as uniquely able to change social conditions through artistic invention and intervention, or, alternatively, as destined to recuperation into mainstream artistic and social structures. Anthropological theories and methods can contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between self-proclaimed artistic experimentalists and broader social, economic and political trends. This dissertation illuminates these relationships by focusing on the cultural ideals, artistic traditions and economic and organizational structures that undergird the production of contemporary experimental choreography in the United States. While avant-garde dance is my primary case study, I also aim to capture some of the overall dynamism and mobility of cultural processes. I do so by means of this ethnography of relationships that tracks the movement of both cultural ideals and resources (including capital in the form of public and private funding) in the production of experimental dance. The sites I examine are the National Endowment for the Arts (both in 1991-92 at the height of the funding controversies and then during the 1995 funding cuts and restructuring), the New York City-based ‘alternative spaces’ that house and present experimental choreographers, and finally, and the networks of
choreographers that perform in these spaces. This research revealed that funding patterns and trends have deeply affect avant-garde choreography in the United States, especially since the founding of the NEA. Not only have artists’ career narratives and the organizations they build up around themselves become increasingly professionalized, but the aims and content of their art-works have also responded to the agendas of funding agencies. And yet, I argue, the lived experience of seeing and making experimental dances still offers the possibility of real social critique even (or perhaps especially) if that critique is only implied through the multi-vocal, ephemeral, and non-commodity quality of this contemporary art form.
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PREFACE

My dissertation is a multi-site ethnography that considers the interrelationship of arts funding in the U.S. and notions of the social role of the artist. My study uses contemporary experimental dance as a case study; its central sites are the National Endowment for the Arts, the organizations that house and present experimental choreographers, and the loosely organized communities and networks of choreographers. I became interested in writing about US funding for the arts during my employment in the Dance Program of NEA in the early 1990s. The early 1990s were a time of crisis for public arts funding, and during my 18-month stint at the NEA, I became intimately aware of, and even involved in these controversies. It was both a difficult time and a deeply interesting one, as the very existence public funding for art was being questioned and threatened in an unprecedented way. Moreover, both experimental and socially engaged art was being scrutinized and, arguably, censored in new ways even as funding agencies themselves exerted certain pressures on art works to be socially relevant.

Practical, theoretical and historical concerns all influenced my choice of experimental dance and its funding history as a case study for investigating trends in how artists and their social roles are viewed in the contemporary United States. At the time I was hired by the NEA’s Dance program, the agency (in keeping with general intellectual and artistic trends) was grappling with questions of multiculturalism. One goal was to diversify their applicant pool to include artists working outside of European-American concert dance forms, and they saw the addition of a cultural anthropologist to their staff as a boon to this project. This was my introduction to active participation in a system based on the assumption that not only could funding be used to bolster certain art forms,
but also that these art forms could in turn further particular social goals, in this case multiculturalism in all of its forms. The unique history of social critique and commentary within American modern dance also made it an especially rich field for considering questions of social engagement and aesthetic innovation. The accepted and legendary founder of American modern dance, Isadora Duncan, set into motion the association of American concert dance with social and aesthetic critique. The social critique of Duncan and her contemporaries was not only embedded in their art works, but also expressed itself in their spoken and written commentaries and pronouncements, which were variously political, social, and spiritual-mystical (Kendall; Ruyter).

Finally, two related features of dance led me to focus on this medium as I examined the relationship between funding, artistic production and the social role of the artist. These actors are the ephemeral nature of dance, and, by extension, its reliance on public subsidy. The fact that experimental choreographers do not produce a tangible, salable product only serves to bolster its non-commodity status, and means that publicly funded avant-garde choreography (unlike publicly-subsidized visual art) does not enjoy a parallel commercial market. Its reliance of public subsidy meant that whatever pressures or trends were happening in terms of artists being asked to act in particular ways would come into greater relief in the field if dance than in the plastic arts. Finally, because I was considering the ways in which avant-garde art forms participate in broader economic and political trends, the anti-commodity, often anti-commercial realm of dance offered a particularly convincing view of the scope of the incursion of professionalization and entrepreneurialism into alternative cultural forms.
My work actively investigates the relationship of artistic vanguards to mainstream culture by considering how this relationships manifests itself across time, in a variety of sites and in various cultural expression including official rhetoric, artists’ testimonies, and finally, in the content and style of art works. Three central questions provide the backbone of my research and fieldwork. They are:

1) How do notions of artistic experimentation and engagement change over time; and what external social, political, and economic factors drive these changes?;

2) What is the relationship between arts funding practices and prevailing ideas about the proper social role of the arts and of artists? and;

3) How do particular funding patterns in turn affect the ways in which artists—and in the case of my study, choreographers—imagine and structure their careers and their artworks?

This study begins by addressing these questions in the abstract, and becomes increasingly historically- and genre- specific as it progresses. I open, in Chapter 1, with a discussion theories of the avant-garde, focusing on how the historical avant-garde and their chroniclers questioned the autonomy of the artistic sphere, imagining art, instead as a mode of social transformation (Burger; Berman; Mann). Any socially and culturally sensitive analysis of avant-garde forms must take account of their relationship to the dominant social and economic conditions in which it is produced and disseminated. Avant-gardes interact with elite spheres in complicated and seemingly contradictory ways—relying on them; resisting them, and often being embraced by them. Sociologists of culture analyze the structure and rhythm of the relationship of avant-gardes and elites as a multi-layered and dynamic one in which cultural and economic capital interact in
unique ways (Bourdieu 1993; Williams). This chapter also establishes a cultural historical context for understanding contemporary dance avant-gardes with an overview of the ways in which dance historians, anthropologists, and choreographers themselves have understood the social and political potential of American modern dance forms (Daly; Franko; Graff; Banes; Novack).

Chapter 2 proceeds to a more located examination of uniquely American modes of cultural patronage, including the non-profit (charitable) arts organization. The backdrop for this chapter consists of the problematic represented by these linked questions: What is the role of the arts in the life of the Nation?, and, inversely: What is the proper role of the Nation (as a public entity) in the life of the arts and of artists? I consider the various answers to these questions Americans have enacted in the form of rhetoric, policy and funding patterns, I also demonstrate how certain social ideals (such as a Deweyian faith in the reformist potential of art) came into play in the shaping and development of the NEA, and how certain other ideologies and views of art—such as art as elitist and degenerate—led to the recent NEA controversies, budget cuts and restructuring. This chapter considers the role of cultural and economic conservatism in the NEA controversies and restructuring. Here I challenge existing understandings of the NEA funding controversies in two ways: first, I argue that the 1980s attacks on the NEA were, in fact, consistent with anti-NEA sentiment that had always existed; secondly, I argue that not only the NEA's recent problems, but also many of its organizational solutions (partnerships with private entities and a general trend towards corporate modes of thinking) reflect a trend towards corporatization and privatization of both the public sphere in general and the arts in particular.
Fieldwork conducted at four New York City-based dance organizations—Danspace Project, the National Performance Network, Dance Theater Workshop, Movement Research—from 1997-1998 informs Chapter 3. The latter three chapters focus on New York-based organizations, artists and performances not because they represent a microcosm of U.S. trends, but rather for their unique qualities. The sheer concentration of dance activity together with the persistent, almost mythic, view that "making it" in New York constitutes the highest level of success made this the richest terrain for considering experimental choreography. Organizational and aesthetic trends show themselves in the greatest relief in New York. I open my treatment of the experimental dance field by investigating alternative spaces and their role in the growth and professionalization of the field. I trace their trajectory from their founding in the 1960s through the 1970s and 1980s during which they flourished due largely to government funding, and finally to their recent organizational rearrangements from the mid-1990s to the present. I argue that organizations themselves have acted as vehicles for the marriage of social and aesthetic ideals and, later, as bridges between funders and artists. I describe features of the growth of these organizations by considering: the narratives of the organizations' founders; NEA dance program funding to these organizations; and structural/organizational changes that span these organizations. Drawing on organizational theory (especially the notion of institutional isomorphism), I describe how both government involvement and, later, private funding and involvement accelerated and determined the form that professionalization took in these organizations (DiMaggio; DiMaggio and Powell).
The final two chapters extend the investigation of my central themes, but do so from the perspective of independent choreographers themselves. Chapter 4 looks at how recent NEA funding cuts—especially the demise of fellowship funding—have affected artists’ career trajectories and professional self-image and aspirations. Deep readings of specific works are juxtaposed with a treatment of the conditions of production of these works, including the ways in which these conditions affect career trajectories and the professional self-concept of their choreographers. Fieldwork and interviews for this chapter revealed a general narrative of decline caused by dwindling funding opportunities for individual artists, specifically the discontinuation of NEA choreographers fellowships. What’s more, the overall cuts and restructuring of the NEA has brought changes in how independent choreographers think about their career trajectories and about the possibilities for producing and disseminating their work, and have spurred generalized ambivalence about choreography as a means of financial support and, specifically, as a profession. The subtler, more veiled expressions of ambivalence about choreography as a career choice surfaced through the repetition of certain themes often in a kind of coded language that centered around, for example, themes of security vs. flexibility, luck vs. merit, and loss. As choreographers reflect on their career struggles, they reveal much not only about the daily reality of working as an independent choreographer, but also about the tensions and problems inherent in contemporary American attitudes about the social role of art and artists, many of which they have internalized.

Chapter 5 describes the aesthetic concerns of contemporary dance and gives special attention to the ways in which the work engages with the social/addresses social
concerns—including, among others, community outreach, sexual identity, and racial/ethnic identity. "Downtown dance" denotes not just the geographical placement of these institutions, but also indexes certain kinds of shared aesthetic, institutional, and funding trends, networks and expectations. As one moves through these spaces, what precisely does one see onstage? What are the movement styles, the common concerns, and the trends? The work presented in the 1997-98 season challenged my notions of experimentation by presenting much more varied (although sometimes less engaging) palette than I had expected. As I attended scores of concerts in the late 1990s, it is perhaps not surprising that the work I saw was incredibly varied. The work ranged from very abstract movement explorations that harked back to historical modern dance to quite theatrical works that used elaborate sets, music, and multimedia installations to achieve a certain spectacular "look," and from the solo character study to large group works incorporating non-dancers. While autobiographical and narrative work peaked in New York’s experimental dance and performance scene in the 1980s, the 1990s saw the rise of a more complex understanding and expression of identity, a phenomenon I elaborate as "performing identity." Another commonality in the work I saw was a kind of professionalism and seriousness of intent that came through in most of the work, a trend I trace to market pressures (understanding, of course, that the "market" for experimental dance is a unique one, comprising not individual consumers, but presenting organizations, government funders, and private foundations).

My project offers a located look at the NEA controversies within the context of American cultural patronage. By focusing on the development of a particular subsection of the art world, my research demonstrates the effects of economic and structural
changes, not only statistically but also in terms of artists’ lived experiences, self-conception, and artistic output. The anthropological approach—which sees artistic production and funding and the rhetoric and organizations that surround it in its broader cultural context—gives a richer, fuller view than purely economistic or journalistic accounts.

The dissertation also provides an example of a new model of anthropological research design and methodology. Its mobile focus and multi-sited emphasis on tracking certain cultural ideals and how they manifest themselves in organizational forms is meant to capture some of the dynamism and mobility of cultural processes (see Marcus 1998). It also contributes to the anthropology of organizations and institutions by elaborating how particular organizational forms grow out of certain cultural ideals (for example, the non-profit organization an outgrowth of the notion of art as socially useful).
Chapter 1:
ARTISTIC ENGAGEMENT: THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE ARTIST

Prelude: Terms of Engagement

The following conversation from my fieldwork with experimental dance communities highlights debates about “political artists” and “engagement” that grew out of the 1980s NEA funding controversies. The themes that surface in my conversation with Movement Research’s Cathy Edwards (as well as in Cynthia Hedstrom’s reply to Edwards) are specific to a particular time and organization. Even so, they offer an example of a range of debates that have long surrounded the artistic avant-garde, including: definitions of the proper relationship between aesthetic expression and political engagement as well as issues of generational change and intergenerational rifts.

In the following 1995 interview excerpt, I ask arts administrator Edwards to reflect on her organization’s connection to an earlier moment in experimental dance production.

George: One thing that’s really interesting to me is Movement Research’s connection to Judson Church because it links the work of your organization to the work of the Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s. How do you see your connection to Judson and the postmodern dance movement that has become synonymous with that space?

Edwards: In one way, it’s simply that the leaders of Judson Church were willing and interested in supporting whoever asked. But I don’t think there was necessarily an organic connection. I mean, the work that they were doing back then, I feel like it was all about abstraction; I think of it as fitting in with the visual art of the time. And now I feel like a lot of dance is both about really politicized identity stuff, or it’s about really beautiful dance movement, neither of
which was happening back then. Ideally, I think that what's happening at Judson now and what happened back then reflects the artistic sensibility of a certain era. And those sensibilities are different. But, at the beginning of our Judson series, we looked around and thought, “Nobody in this room knows what Movement Research is, they're just here because they're at the Judson Church.” Also, the Judson Church is a political space, so it's nice to be situated in that context.

In addition to the artistic differences between the contemporary Movement Research personnel and their Judson predecessors, Edwards pointed to differences in the vision of the organization and the vision of the role of dance in social and political concerns of the day. The Fall 1991 publication of *Performance Journal* #3, the third volume of Movement Research's quarterly journal treating issues of concern to the dance and performance community, was instrumental in giving form and expression to these differences. With the theme of “gender performance,” this issue of the journal contained articles on topics from gender inequality in modern dance forms to expressions of gay sexuality. The publication of the journal drew Movement Research into the arts censorship and funding debates when the NEA Dance Program asked the organization to return the portion of their FY 1990 Services to the Field grant used to produce the journal. In a subsequent meeting, MR board members Steve Paxton and Simone Forti (themselves Judson-affiliated choreographers) took to task MR’s Edwards and co-director Guy Yarden. Edwards describes the generational clashes that surfaced in that confrontation:

We were just so surprised that Steven and Simone of all people couldn't understand the relevance, even if for no reason beyond confronting propriety or
the status quo. We were really surprised that they were so unwilling to see that in an art context. But we felt like it was really important to keep the journal integrated with the more political profile of the organization. Not that we have a single political stance, but we really do feel grounded in contemporary culture, not in the culture of the 1970s. And it is politicized in certain ways that those artists in the 1970s weren't politicized, and they haven't changed. I mean they have their houses in the country. A lot of those people moved up to Vermont in the 1980s; some have moved to upstate New York. They want to keep things the ways they were. They bought their loft spaces. I'm not saying they were rich and successful, but they were able to remove themselves to some extent, and the rest of us, the younger people like Donna Uchizono and John Jasperse, don't want to; they're part of this particular mix, we don't want to step away. What makes art interesting to us is that it's reflective of a particular culture.

Movement Research founding member Cynthia Hedstrom read the transcript of my interview with Cathy Edwards and noted a number of misperceptions and rifts across generations, especially around notions of what is meant by "political art" and who can be counted as an engaged artist. She eloquently responded to two particular moments in my conversation with Edwards:

And what does building a house in Vermont have to do with not being politicized; it might mean becoming more politicized--it is a really strangely damning connection to make. The perception that there was not 'politicized' or 'really beautiful dance movement' happening in the 1970s is very strange and sad to me. Perhaps [the misperceptions] are the tragic reality of dance--that once performed,
it is gone. One cannot really know it without having seen it (October 15, 1995 personal communication).

Edwards's reading of the earlier generation's response to the journal is rich in implicit commentary on what it means for artists and arts organizations to be politically engaged with their historical moment, and hints at a generational divide in her surprise that the older generation couldn't understand the journal in "an arts context." Finally, the statement about 'moving to Vermont' and 'wanting to keep things the way they were' suggests a creeping bourgeois complacency. The debate between Hedstrom and Edwards (albeit mediated) as well as Edwards's criticism of the previous generation as excessively abstract and removed offers a window on recurrent arguments about the nature and limits of political and social engagement in art.

**Overview of themes**

This chapter surveys existing thought on the artistic engagement, aesthetic autonomy, and the relationship of the avant-garde to the bourgeois in art-making and dissemination in order to provide a context for the consideration of the restricted cultural field (in Bourdieusian terms) of experimental dance in the United States. The central theme of this chapter is a range of challenges to the modernist paradigm of high culture as an autonomous realm, a challenge attributed to the historical avant-garde. Accordingly, I begin with an overview of theories of the avant-garde, and related analyses of political engagement on the part of artists (Burger, Berman, Mann). In addition to this theoretical framing, this chapter provides historical context, outlining the history of social and political engagement in American modern dance.
In both theories of the avant-garde and in avant-garde practice, the relationship between art and politics is often understood in terms the dual play of the politicization of aesthetics and aestheticization of politics (Berman; Benjamin) and as a tension between engagement and aestheticism, with the latter associated with bourgeois modes of artistic production (Burger; Schulte-Sasse). The relationship between bourgeois class interests and tastes and avant-garde artistic production are central to understanding the place and nature of engaged art. Accordingly, theories of the social meaning of avant-garde art as well as its patterns of development and dissemination address this relationship. Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of this relationship focuses on the relative social positions and the interdependence of the bourgeois and the bohemian, and is treated in greater depth later in this chapter. Bourdieu gives a uniquely broad historical and conceptual view of engaged art as he interrogates the social role of artists, i.e., their position within systems of economic and political domination. A key concept for understanding the role of avant-garde art its social and economic context is what many have noted as the tendency for avant-garde forms to move from the margins to the center. This tendency is expressed variously as absorption (Bourdieu); recuperation (Mann) and as a move from emergent to hegemonic forms (Williams). Yet it is a theme that recurs across the literature, lending credence to Frederic Jameson’s contention that the movement of artistic forms from the margins to the center is a key feature of late capitalism. An understanding of this rhythm can shed light on the artistic and organizational development of experimental dance, especially the ways in which funding from official public and private entities supported its growth.
Finally, this chapter also takes up another task central to contextualizing contemporary experimental dance, specifically, the social role of the artist within history of American modern dance. Here I also describe the history of social and political activism in US dance from Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham through the Judson Church choreographers and the more performance art/identity-inflected work of the late 1980s. This genealogy is not merely an aesthetic but also carries with it the evolution of ideas about the place of art in changing, critiquing, and/or reflecting society (Daly, Franko, Graff, Banes, Novack).

**Engagement vs. Autonomy: The Aestheticization of Politics/The Politicization of Aesthetics**

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Peter Burger uses the term "engagement" to describe the ways in which the historical avant-garde¹ shifted the relationship between life practice (understood to include political action) and the work of art. Burger's discussion of the development of the historical avant-garde together with his analysis of political engagement in the avant-gardist work provide a theoretical and historical backdrop against which to consider moments of politicization of aesthetics, a phenomenon that has surfaced in dance over the last decade. Walter Benjamin as interpreted by Russell Berman in *Modern Culture and Critical Theory* (1989) provides the focal point for a discussion about the various manifestations of aestheticized politics, which, incidentally, Benjamin sees as the central mechanism of fascism. The elaboration

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¹For purposes of this discussion, the historical avant-garde is taken to encompass Dada and Surrealism, to be historically situation in the early part of this century, and to be characterized by, among other things technical innovations such as collage, montage, and chance. Above all, though, the historical avant-garde distinguishes itself by its critique of the bourgeois institution of art.
of these categories is designed to clarify the mechanisms and characteristics of activist art, including the ways in which it differs from earlier avant-garde movements.

**Background: The Development of the Historical Avant-garde**

Modern debates about the social role of art and artists have their roots in a series of changes that art works and the institution of art have undergone since the mid-19th century. Peter Burger cites this period as the beginning of Aestheticism, which was the precursor of the historical avant-garde, and was also the movement that characterized bourgeois art and literature from the middle to the end of the 19th century. While Burger believes that art and life began to disengage from each other in bourgeois society as early as the mid-18th century, he sees Aestheticism as a vital shift in the history of art. Burger characterizes aestheticism as a change in the relationship between form and content in art works, but extends beyond those qualities to the point where the separation of art from life becomes the very content of the work of art (1984:xii). Otherwise put, “Aestheticism can best be described as a transformation of form into content (Schulte-Sasse in Burger 1984:xiii).” At the beginning of the 20th century, this marked division between life practices and art, together with the development of art as an autonomous institution (with its own economic structure), became the focal point of the historical avant-garde's critique of autonomous art (Burger 1984:27). Burger goes on to characterize the historical avant-garde's sought-after effect as the aestheticization of praxis and the making practical of art. Taken to its logical end, the effect of this reintroduction of art into life and life into art would be the end of the autonomous work of art in capitalist society. Through a critique of the bourgeois institution of art, the historical avant-garde implicitly critiques bourgeois thought itself.
Development of the Notion of Engagement

Burger argues that the historical avant-garde's critique sought to bring art to bear on social practice through a re-aestheticization of practice, by seeking to "organize a new life praxis from a basis in art (1984:49)." Although he believes that the historical avant-garde didn't destroy the institution of art, he does concede that they re-organized the ways in which art could be received. Specifically, he believes that they upset the primacy of aesthetic norms used to evaluate art, and replaced them with norms that would measure the social effect of a work insofar as it related to the social situation in which it was created. This conceded, Burger shifts his pessimism to the question of work of art itself, and especially its inextricability from the aesthetic sphere. He explains that the very existence of art as an institution undermines the desired effects of the work of art that contains political commentary, arguing that:

Received in the context of artifacts whose shared characteristic is their apartness from the praxis of life, the work that shapes engagement according to the aesthetic law of organicity tends to be perceived as a "mere" art product. Art as an institution neutralizes the political content of the individual work (1984:90).

Identity-based performance art of the 1980s and its dance world counterparts would seem to fit well Burger's description of "the work that shapes engagement according to the aesthetic law of organicity" and one which, according to the above definition, is necessarily politically neutral (87). If the organicity of the work is a major stumbling block to its real-world effectiveness, then the fragmentation of the work of art as carried out by the historical avant-garde's techniques of collage, montage, and
juxtaposition would seem to offer a potential solution to the problem. Burger argues for the methods of certain avant-gardists (Bertolt Brecht is a favored example) and explains the benefits of fragmentation for the possibility of socially engaged art. Unlike the organic work of art in which the political message is subordinated to the larger structure of the work, the fragmented avant-gardist work of art allows the political content to have its own valence. As a freestanding component of a work of art, political content is then released from its slavish relation to the whole and can then be directly relevant to life praxis, and, says Burger, can even be taken as “political instruction” (1984:90).

According to this analysis, it would seem that the potential for engagement rests almost exclusively on form. Burger is actually a moderate on this front, unlike Theodor Adorno, for whom the very rupture of organicity signals emancipation from bourgeois forms of thought as they represent and congeal into bourgeois ideology. Burger does allow, however, that the deliberate fragmentation and fissures that exist in the work of the historical avant-garde enable the work of art to be meaningful to the life practice of the viewer, by leaving gaps into which s/he can insert his/her own experiences. Brecht’s theatrical alienation effects and the estrangement they produce in the viewer are offered as an example of the partial fulfillment of the avant-garde’s aim to use art to alter life practice; partial because, while not revolutionary, they do allow a reimagining of life praxis (Burger 1989: 89).

**Comparison of the Terms of Engagement of the Historical Avant-Garde and the Contemporary Activist Avant-Garde**

Whether or not we fully agree with Burger’s characterization of the limits of the possibility for engagement in art, it is clear that the intentions of the contemporary avant-
garde are from the outset less ideal and abstract than those of the historical avant-garde. The engagement of the contemporary avant-garde is characterized by a high degree of literalness and instrumentality. The content of their work revolves around specific social and political problems, and art is conceived of as a vehicle for the exploration and the eventual amelioration of those problems. This approach differs from the historical avant-garde's use of aesthetic forms (e.g., the dadaist manifesto) to illustrate ways of aesthetically reimagining the social and material world and the role of the artist within it (e.g., Duchamp's ready-mades). Burger's views of the historical avant-garde's orientation to political engagement help to sort out the intentions of their contemporary activist counterparts even though their aims and methods differ greatly from those of the historical avant-garde.

The explicit political art of the 1980s, as epitomized by performance artists involved in the NEA, but which also characterized much of the visual art and dance of the period, represent a self-consciously explicit mode of social engagement, indeed the one Cathy Edwards characterizes as "politicized" and "reflective of a particular culture." Engagement for this group entails (1) strikingly explicit commentary on contemporary mainstream values, (2) alignment with specific social movements and identity groups; and (3) a sense that they, as artists, have certain social responsibilities to fulfill. Scholars of the avant-garde explain the growth of politicized artistic movements—such as the identity-based dance work of the 1980s or, before that, the revolutionary dance of the 1930s United States—as based in an attempt to revive the brief moment in the 1870s when aesthetic and political avant-gardes worked together. Paul Mann, for example, contends that this desire colors avant-gardes' self-perception and has pushed them to
social and political engagement as they have attempted to “re-establish this mythic alliance (47).” These different views about what constitutes artistic engagement form an ongoing debate among avant-gardes; those whose work is explicitly political are accused of oversimplification and artistic pedestrianism, while those whose work is not are accused of bourgeois aestheticism (Mann: 12). Indeed, this debate seems to lurk just under the surface of the intergenerational rift embodied in the Edwards and Hedstrom commentary that opened the chapter.

The activist avant-garde critiques bourgeois society through a direct critique of the content of bourgeois social and political institutions and conventions, and not through an indirect critique of modes of bourgeois thought. Unlike the historical avant-garde who, through techniques such as collage and montage, left space for a range of interpretations, activist artists tend toward more direct, literal narrative forms which offer the viewer an already fully wrought interpretation of a specific social or political issue. In the 1980s and 1990s dance followed on the heels of performance art and many artists started working with is a solo form that is usually autobiographical in nature and is also usually highly charged emotionally and politically. In contrast to early avant-garde art, this kind of engaged art constructs a unified narrative experience for the viewer. In terms of the potential social effectiveness of art, such explicitly socially engaged work may work against itself and forestall social action through its displacement of harsh social realities into the realm of art. That is, performance art, in playing out the problems of mainstream society in a hyper-realistic way, may threaten to forestall any real social action by allowing art to compensate for what society lacks. Some warn that “politically engaged” art may hold out the promise of art as a tool for social reform, but in reality
may contribute to the opposite phenomenon, that is, the aestheticization of politics, the pitfalls of which are elaborated below.

**Aestheticization of Politics**

Walter Benjamin, unlike Adorno, believed in the potential political efficacy of art, not only in terms of the emancipatory potential of the destruction of bourgeois thought through avant-garde forms such as Schoenberg's music, but also in terms of the effects of certain mass forms of communication, such as cinema. However, Benjamin recognizes that while new proletarian masses are indeed being formed, they are blocked from revolutionary collective action by the imposition of fascism. The central mechanism of fascism, for Benjamin, is aestheticization. As a post-bourgeois politics that dispenses with the liberal bourgeois notion of individualism, yet retains a capitalist property structure, fascism controls the masses by providing opportunities for the expression of collective desires, while blocking their actual realization. As Benjamin himself characterizes this predicament:

> Fascism sees its salvation in giving the masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life (Benjamin in Berman 1989:37).

For Benjamin, the introduction of art into the realm of politics forestalls social action because of the kind of viewer created by the organic, auratic work of art. Although Benjamin differs with Adorno as to what actually constitutes a potentially emancipatory art form, he nonetheless also prefers the open or fragmentary work of art. This
preference derives from his belief that the closed work of art engenders an "enervated passivity" on the viewer (Berman 1989:38), which is the possible consequence of much identity-based work. Benjamin fears the translation of this kind of passivity from the aesthetic realm into the political, a fear based on the notion that, as Russell Berman interprets it, "prohibiting criticism, right, and justice, the fascist state and absolute art valorize submission and spectacle (39)."

Berman argues that Benjamin's equation of fascism and the aestheticization of politics, while apt in many senses, is finally both too narrow and too broad; too narrow because fascism and fascist culture comprise other characteristic mechanisms, and too broad because the aestheticization of politics can be seen as characteristic of the contemporary capitalist state in general, especially as it manifests as the politics of spectacle. Certainly the 1992 U.S. Presidential campaign, of which the NEA funding debates were a significant component, epitomizes nothing if not the politics of spectacle.

Among the characteristics of contemporary society to which Benjamin's discussion of the aestheticization of politics are relevant are "the aesthetic packaging of political discourse, the priority of image over substance, and the metamorphosis of the political speaker into an actor for the mass media (Berman: 41)." As activist performance art exists within this sociohistorical context, it is important to ask to what degree it resists the aestheticization of politics and to what degree it represents an example of the contemporary aestheticization of politics. If we attempt to answer this question primarily on the basis of the formal characteristics of identity-based and literalist performance art, it becomes clear that the arguable organicity and narrative closure of the form may indeed lead to a version of the "enervated passivity" of which Berman speaks.
On the other hand, if we consider the broader subculture of which activist art is a component, we may find that such performances or spectacles are not always guilty of forestalling social action. Indeed, the creation and reception of activist art may sometimes contribute to more broadly-conceived projects of social and political action, such as AIDS activism and the fight for changes in public policy on, say, women's health care and domestic abuse.

John Guillory (1997) argues that the belief that cultural practices can transform societies is spurious because it makes of the cultural a "crypto-totality" which subsumes the economic and the political under the sign of the cultural, and, in doing so, makes cultural resistance feel like total resistance to social and political injustice. Guillory's doubts about the potential scope of cultural resistance resonate, for me, with my own questions about activist art and the economic and political conditions under which it is created and received. That is, art works that claim to be at the artistic and political "cutting edge," and especially works in which the exploration of one's identity necessarily stands in for political action, often seem complacent.

**Avant-Garde/Bourgeois Relationships: Artists as a Dominated Elite and the Recuperation of Avant-Garde Works**

In order to properly understand the social role of avant-garde artists, we must consider not only their artworks but also their social positioning, especially as they attempt to effect social change. Understanding the sociological connections between avant-garde artists and official bourgeois culture and class interests is necessary for a complete view of the socially engaged artist. Bourdieu posits a complicated positioning for artists, saying:
Artists within the larger social field are neither purely dominant nor dominated. Rather, they occupy a dominated position in the dominant class, they are owners of a dominated form of power at the interior of the sphere of power. This structurally contradictory position is absolutely crucial for understanding the positions taken by writers and artists, notably in struggles in the social world (1993: 164).

This view of the artist as an odd “dominated elite” is especially intriguing to consider in relation to the experimental dancers and choreographers whose experiences inform my study. The above quote from Bourdieu sheds light on a number of issues central to the explorations of my dissertation: especially the kind of elite that artists constitute and also the predicament and placement of artists as they involve themselves in social and political engagement or “struggles in the social world.” Bourdieu argues that much of avant-garde art is so readily recuperable into bourgeois life because the “literary and artistic fields attract a particularly strong proportion of individuals who possess all the properties of the dominant class minus one: money” (165). This determines their relationship at different times with both the bourgeois and the ‘people.’ Paul Mann also posits a special and complex relationship to the mainstream: “The avant-garde is the outside of the inside, the leading edge of the mainstream, and thus is marginal in both senses: excluded and salient” (13). Bourdieu contends that not just their own sociological and economic backgrounds, but also the inherent place of art within a system of domination, also yield ambivalence about the relationship of art and artists to “the social,” broadly conceived. “In a similar way [to the formation of their relationship to the bourgeois], they form an ambiguous image of their own position in social space and
of the social function: this explains the fact that they are subject to great fluctuation, notably in the area of politics” (1993: 165).

Bourdieu traces the fluctuations in engaged art and the shifts in conceptions of the social role of the artist to mid-19th century European literary production, a moment where there arose three potential positions for literary production: ‘social art’ (the bohemian); ‘art for art’s sake’; and ‘bourgeois art’ (1993: 166). Within this schema, the bohemian purports to oppose itself to all that is bourgeois, but the bourgeois and bohemian rely upon one another as the bourgeois co-opt the bohemian and, in response, the bohemian continually remakes itself. Others see the complicated bohemian/bourgeois connections in more purely aesthetic terms, noting that avant-garde art is “an art grounded in working-class or populist ideology that nonetheless appeals largely to the bourgeoisie” (Mann: 50 and throughout).

Vacillating between the bourgeois and the people (or a condescending notion of the people) are the defenders of art for art’s sake. According to Bourdieu, they are the most conflicted of all in terms of subject-position, feeling “with doubled intensity the contradictions that are inherent in the ambiguous position of the field of cultural production in the field of power.” Bourdieu sees the practitioners of art for art’s sake as swinging between the bourgeois and the bohemian (whom, again, they link to a notion of the working class. the ‘people’). To the disinterested artist, the bourgeois is “a customer who is at the same time sought after and scorned, whom they reject as much as he rejects them”. In what Bourdieu calls the “reverse economy” of the field of avant-garde artistic production, commercial success is reviled and “the artist can triumph on the symbolic terrain only to the extent that he loses on the economic one, and vice versa” (169).
Bourdieu also points out that this degree of economic disinteredness and the freedom to pursue truly innovative artworks is only truly available to those that have pre-existing economic means to reject commercial success, i.e., the bourgeois or the aristocrat. Disinteredness of a kind (or at least the illusion of disinteredness) is also made possible by public subsidy. With the money coming directly from the state (a bourgeois state) and also from the private foundations, this tension seems to be intensified—here the NEA and foundations represent the bourgeois dominant. But the requirements of funders seem to sometimes make them swing between having to please a bourgeois audience and having to make socially beneficial art in order to receive funding. In other words, the NEA controversies and reductions of the 1990s shattered the illusions of those making “art for art’s sake” and revealed their connections to official culture.

**Margins and Centers: Recuperation, Absorption, and Dominant-Emergent Dynamics**

In the current moment, the alternative (bohemian) in the United States relies upon the bourgeois state for funding and for legitimacy. The current relationship goes beyond the kind complementarity described by Bourdieu to a frequent merging (as I elaborate in my Chapter 3 discussion of alternative arts spaces). One related way the avant-garde interacts with the mainstream (beyond its *placement*) is in its *dynamic* of interaction. Mann calls this both absorption and recuperation, but prefers the latter term because it implies both “recovery and expropriation” (15). This relationship and movement between margins and centers is variously described. Bourdieu describes a kind of ongoing and perpetual state of confusion of artistic and social categories, while Mann describes a more
linear progression into the process of recuperation.\(^2\) Mann also claims that the very process of recuperation as well as the avant-garde's relationship to a cultural system that values progress is contained in the very term avant-garde, which indicates a "cultural system that could gear every mode of alterity into a machine of progress" (46). Both views of artistic production and reception resonates with Raymond Williams's own three-part schema of the residual, hegemonic and emergent as possible cultural forms, although Williams seems to hold forth the possibility for new artistic forms that can lead to real social change.

**A More Optimistic View of Artistic Processes: The Category of the Emergent in Raymond Williams**

Raymond Williams (1981) offers a view of the relationship between aesthetics and politics from a more sociological perspective, arguing that formal innovation in any given artistic field is often sparked by changes in social classes, or in the understanding and experience of social class. While complex societies retain some clear relations of domination and subordination, there are still many relations that are dynamic. Williams has a tripartite scheme that describes the dynamism contained within processes of cultural and artistic production. The three modes of cultural production—dominant, residual, and emergent—are what drive changes in cultural production and, indeed, what drives artistic innovation.

But how precisely do both artistic reproduction and artistic innovation occur, and what is its relationship to the social? Dominant cultural forms are those embodied in the prevailing institutions and forms (for example, ballet in the early 20\(^{th}\) century). What's

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\(^2\) This moment and movement of recuperation is the point at which Mann's "death" of the avant-garde occurs, but which, provocatively, he calls its most interesting and productive moment and feature.
more, these dominant cultural forms are integrated into dominant cultural forms, and while they "may present themselves as unconnected with dominant social forms, ... the efficiency of both depends on their deep integration" (Williams: 204). Indeed, argues Williams, so naturalized has the presumption of the autonomy of aesthetic tastes from professional values become that the very presumption of autonomy itself has become dominant. The other modes of cultural production—residual (work from an earlier time and/or different society) and emergent—the range of new work in various forms—interact with the dominant in the following ways: 1) either becoming absorbed by the dominant, or 2) as an alternative, even a challenge to it. For Williams, a central question about innovative or experimental work is: which innovations are genuinely emergent (i.e., one that would eventually destroy the dominant in any of its forms) and which are simply new forms of the dominant (205)? Although he does say that answering this question for any given new art form is extremely difficult in contemporary complex society, Williams does not foreclose the possibility that some cultural forms can lead to real change rather than simply being absorbed (recuperated into the extant and dominant forms). Moreover, it seems to me that the possibility for change may lie in that moment that precedes the absorption of the emergent into the dominant. (For example Judson, which, while it may indeed have ended up emerging and producing the dominant did, for a moment, radically alter the ways that people imagined seeing art and seeing virtuosity and even gender relations within dance and perhaps beyond.) Although Williams does say that the emergent often gets absorbed into the dominant (indeed he posits that this is how and where culture reproduces itself and also how it changes), the very existence of the category of the emergent as separate from the merely innovative does seem to go
beyond the possibilities offered by Bourdieu’s bohemians, who, in the end, seem destined only to reinforce the bourgeois order by providing it with new material to co-opt. While Bourdieu posits an insidious parasitical relationship of interdependence, Williams seems to leave open the possibility for moments and movements of genuine change.

The Role of Political and Social Engagement in American Modern Dance

From its inception and embodied in its most revered practitioners, modern dance in the U.S. has periodically and regularly asserted its role as a potential mode of social commentary and social change. The manifestations are numerous, from Isadora Duncan’s radical politics and Graham’s anti-war dances to the radical democracy of the 1960s Judson Dance Theater and to the identity politics and more narrative tendencies of the late 20th century. But it also has a strong tradition of recuperation in which the avant-garde becomes canonical. Most often an elite pursuit and usually dependent on private, bourgeois patronage, dance in the U.S. has since its founding been continually caught up in one of the key debates of the avant-garde: that of bourgeois aestheticism vs. political pedantry. What we see when we look more closely, though, is a much more complex picture, characterized by artists struggling to understand the role of dance in commenting on and affecting a range of social and political concerns.

Among the key, recurrent issues/debates were: the place of the worker (socialism) in the U.S.; the social place of women; what it meant to be an American; and individualism vs. communitarianism. These debates get articulated and played out in different ways at different historical moments: from the turn of the century works and proclamations of Isadora Duncan through the evolving work and pronouncements of Martha Graham and the group of explicitly radical members of the Workers Dance
League, many of whom were her students. The anti-expressionist, anti-narrative interventions of Graham’s student Merce Cunningham led to a revival of another mode of intervention, namely one that aimed to effect change in the world by changing how people saw and perceived art. Cunningham and his philosophical, artistic and personal companion John Cage were central influences on the members of the Judson Dance Theater, who in turn are the direct ancestors of the contemporary dance experimentalists central to this project. In other words, this section establishes a kind of genealogy of experimental dance, not only along aesthetic lines, but rather in terms of changing iterations of social engagement, often based on the rejection of one’s direct predecessor or contemporaries.

The acknowledged founder (“Mother”) of American modern dance, Isadora Duncan, is far too complex a character to fully do justice to here. But I would like to suggest at least that a combination of her dance, her cult of personality and her politics set the stage both aesthetically and in terms of possibilities for social engagement for future dance experimentalists (both in the US and abroad). It is well known that Duncan’s dancing was based on a rejection of the bourgeoisie aestheticism of European classical ballet. But it was also a rejection of an evolving range of social and cultural ills Duncan saw as uniquely American, chief among them Puritanical repression, coarse materialism, mechanization and capitalist wealth (Daly; Franko). But Duncan’s critique of these ills was rarely if ever explicit in her dancing, at least not usually. Where it was explicit was in her pronouncements, manifestos and writings. Her embrace of a certain notion of the political opened the door to seeing this new American dance as a tool of social reform, and was alternately expressed through anti-American sentiment, the
flirtations with Communism, the alignment with leftist radicals in Greenwich Village; her Whitmanesque pronouncement: “I See America Dancing.” Duncan saw the emancipatory effects of dance as potentially spilling over into all aspects of life.

Indeed the tensions and interaction between Duncan’s art and words helped to construct dance as a form of complicated social critique, one in which much is implied in the moving body, but often needs interpretation by the dancer herself.³ Duncan’s vacillation between the explicitly political (in her case in her pronouncements and her connections to Soviet Russia) and a social critique implied by a new use of the body would be echoed over the next century of dance experimentation in the U.S.—as a recurring debate. In her heightened visibility both onstage and in her public persona, Duncan sparked an enduring (gendered) view of American modern dance as containing implicit critique of the relegation of women to the private sphere (Franko: 2). Finally, Duncan’s class politics and alliances make her an especially rich predictor of the ongoing contradictions between the elite and the bohemian that have always accompanied the practice and dissemination of dance in the U.S. Duncan, a professed radical with a developed critique of class politics, nonetheless appealed to the moneyed elite largely as a result of “the patronage network she cultivated in America and abroad as well as her perceived aestheticism” (Franko: 7). These tensions are that the socially critical artists often rely upon bourgeois (and sometimes, or later, state) patronage in order to survive.

³ Duncan’s arguments for the importance of her dancing in resisting larger social and political forces is a precursor of the kind of analytical and intellectual auto-critique undertaken by the contemporary artists George Marcus describes in his 1991 essay “The Power of Contemporary Work in an American Art Tradition to Illuminate Its Own Power Relations.” Indeed, choreographers in the 1980s and 1990s deployed many of the techniques of self-interpretation Marcus identified in their visual artist contemporaries (see Chapters 3 through 5).
Duncan’s Leftist Heirs: The Revolutionary Dance Movement of the 1930s

The revolutionary dance movement of the 1930s was based in lower Manhattan and was aligned with the socialist project and with the working class. Those who led this movement were often students of the artistically innovative accepted personalities of American modern dance, especially Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey and, of course, Martha Graham. But even as these pioneers of the art form were establishing themselves, there were debates in left-wing magazines about whether modern dance could express “socially revolutionary sentiments” (Franko: 25). The members of the Workers Dance League, an umbrella organization of several “revolutionary dance” companies founded in 1934, broke ranks with their aesthetic mentors, seeking to produce works with socially relevant themes. The recurring debate about bourgeois aestheticism vs. political literalness surfaced again in the debates around revolutionary dance. Graham’s critics (the critics writing for the leftist magazines as well as dancers) focused in on Graham’s formalism.

The major debates of the day centered around concerns of content versus form. This was a particularly loaded debate, as many of the revolutionary dancers had trained with the formalists and were steeped in their technique. Some, such as Jane Dudley, continued to dance with Graham’s company even as they were active in the revolutionary dance movement. Debates about how to more closely have the form of dance mirror the content, while fascinating, are too detailed to go into here, but one solution of the day stands out for a variety of reasons. This is the revolutionary dance-makers’ preoccupation with what they called “mass dance.” In a 1934 article for New Theatre, Dudley outlined a process for creating mass dances that would be studies in revolutionary
action. Dudley explained that the foremost goal was to get dancers to understand "what it means to move together as a group." Moreover, in a passage that seems oddly prescient of the radical democracy espoused in the pedestrian movements of the Judson Dance Group, Dudley explains:

The simple fundamental steps—the walk, the run—are the most useful and effective. Think of the possibilities in the walk—marching, creeping, hesitating, rushing forward, being thrown back, the group splitting apart, scattered in all directions, uniting, coming forward, backing away, being thrown down, rising up (Dudley in Franko: 29).

Graham’s relationship to revolutionary dance was complicated. For as much as revolutionary dancers criticized her bourgeois formalism and emotionalism, many wished to bring her over to their project of social critique. To that end, some were continually on the lookout for social commentary in Graham’s work, while others exerted considerable pressure on her and other “modernists by demanding that modern dance address social problems” (Franko: 27). Graham obliged in 1936 with the production of the explicitly anti-war Chronicle. In 1937, responding to the Spanish Civil War, Graham choreographed two anti-fascism pieces. The following year, in an atmosphere of nationalism in the face of the international threat of fascism, Graham produced her ode to American democracy, American Document (1938). This work was accessible and nationalistic; it was also critically acclaimed. As dance historian Ellen Graff points out, the piece “incorporated many elements that had proved popular in the revolutionary dance movement, including moral fervor, archetypal figures, pageantry, and text (127).”

At the opening ceremonies of the New York World’s Fair in 1939, the performance of
Graham's *Tribute to Peace* (1939) followed President Roosevelt's dedication of the fair. Graham, at the forefront of American modern dance in the late 1930s (as she would be for the next two decades), had emerged as a political, though not revolutionary, choreographer (Graff).

By the 1950s any kind of explicitly left-wing content was suspect in dance, as in other art forms. The atmosphere of the Cold War in the U.S. fostered abstraction in the visual and performing arts (Guilbaut). Fittingly, the next big revolution was in Cunningham's rejection of narrative and emotionalism, and in his use of chance procedures. But some, indeed, saw him as excessively formalist. Cunningham's successors and students (and many who danced in his company) would go on to found the Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s, and, as I describe in Chapter 3, not only (self)-consciously reimagined modern dance, but also laid the groundwork for the dance trends, institutions (alternative spaces) and funding relationships explored herein.

Segue: Reading theories of the avant-garde against current economic and social realities

As much as the theoretical work on avant-gardes can help to identify major issues and organize an analysis of this particular branch of the contemporary avant-garde, it does have its functional limits. That is, questions about the impact of contemporary activist art on programmatic social change need to be situated in the present and must revolve around ethnographic investigations. Such investigations would need to be located in communities of artists, their audiences and other (institutional) supporters, and be driven by questions of the perceived relationship between the expression of social problems and the preferred mechanisms for addressing and ameliorating those problems. The funding structures and professionalization that characterize contemporary
experimental artists distinguish them from their historical counterparts, as do their accommodation “to the principles and priorities of high art aesthetics and capitalist market economics” (Mann: 35). Others contend that is most significant about the accommodation is “its institutionalization as administered culture,” (Huyssen in Mann: 35), a characterization that certainly pertains to the experimental choreographers described in Chapter 4, to the alternative spaces and touring networks (Chapter 3), and to the administration of the avant-garde by the NEA (Chapter 2).
Chapter 2: 
THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS AND CULTURAL PATRONAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

The structural changes, debates, and crises that led up to the 1995 restructuring of the NEA are central to this chapter, which asks: What were the paths that led to this crisis in the understanding of the federal role in the arts? The broader subject is the role the NEA has played in the evolution of forms of cultural patronage in the United States. In order to better grasp the significance of the NEA as a cultural and political entity, we need to consider the history not only of the agency, but also of the linked questions: what is the role of the arts in the life of the nation and what is the proper role of the nation (as a public entity) in the life of the arts and of artists? The chapter looks at the various answers to these questions Americans have enacted in the form of rhetoric, policy and funding patterns, with an ongoing concern with what makes the forms and development of cultural patronage in the US uniquely American. First sketching a brief history of philosophies and forms of cultural patronage in the US, and then examining the founding, growth and eventual restructuring of the NEA, I attempt to follow these questions over time. Proceeding chronologically, the chapter focuses on the artist-nation dyad by zeroing in on NEA policies and rhetoric about fellowships (direct federal support of specific artists) and partnerships (formulations about the role of the federal government in the arts in relation to private and local interests).

My employment and fieldwork experiences at the NEA that inform this chapter took place at two of the most dramatic moments in its history—the controversies of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the 1995-96 restructuring. This chapter places these
moments of crisis in the broader history of this organization and its role in how artistic production is understood as a national interest. I open, though, not with an historical overview of patronage, but with an event that took place during the institutional upheaval that was the 1995 NEA restructuring, a moment during which the agency had its budget cut in half and its staff reduced by forty percent and had been ordered by Congress to abolish all funding to individuals.

The following vignette describes the 1995 the Day Without Art observances at the NEA. What took place there was essentially an impromptu ‘performance’ that wove together longstanding grief over the ravages of AIDS/HIV with the more local and specific grief over job loss and institutional unraveling. During this unique ceremony, NEA staff members—largely removed from the process of art-making in their day-to-day jobs—enacted a highly aestheticized statement about the state of the NEA as an organization, about their relationship to the organization and even about one of the themes of this chapter—what art can do for the nation and its citizens.

**Interlude—The 1995 Day Without Art Observances at the NEA**

The overall atmosphere of the agency in the fall of 1995 was somber and tinged with loss. But being a workplace, these feelings weren’t often on the surface, and when they were, were treated with a sense of resignation. The official 1995 Day Without Art observance was organized by the NEA’s AIDS Working Group (a group founded in the late 1980s, two-thirds of whose members had just received their termination notices). The event provided an occasion and a venue for the expression of grief and powerlessness that permeated the agency. Although the observances were nominally about mourning the loss of artists to AIDS/HIV—the driving logic of this annual
observance is the question "what will become of the arts in the US if we keep losing artists to this disease?"—they provided a therapeutic space and perhaps even a ritual form for the expression and enactment of the decimation of the agency.

The centerpiece of the 1995 Day Without Art observances at the NEA was the U.S. premiere of the film version of Bill T. Jones's 1994 dance-theater work *Still/Here*. *Still/Here* (both the live version and the film) was crafted from the testimonials of people with terminal illnesses, primarily cancer and AIDS. Ironically, the screening of the film at the NEA was preceded by testimonials about loss from staff members. NEA Chairman Jane Alexander began the observances, standing at a lectern draped in black cloth and lamenting the loss of the AWG leaders to "downsizing." She also told about losing a young friend to cancer this past year and read an Emily Dickinson poem on hope. The two leaders of the AWG, both of whom had just lost their jobs, then took over. The first read a Walt Whitman poem, and shared two trinkets that had been left to him by a friend who had recently died of AIDS. He then linked the theme of loss to the loss of his own job and to the "family" of Endowment employees he was to leave behind. The second AWG leader then encouraged people to testify or add items to a collage of mementos that was to remain up throughout the day and to function as a kind of mini-AIDS quilt. As a staff member spoke of the loss of her mother to breast cancer and added a special scarf to the collage and another told of a friend who had recently been shot, I was struck by the broadening interpretation of Day Without Art from an acknowledgment of the devastation of AIDS on the arts community to be about loss in general. The screening of *Still/Here* followed, and inspired more reflections on the connections between the devastation of illness and the problems of the agency and of particular art worlds. The
therapeutic/aesthetic environment furnished by the Day Without Art proceedings enabled staff members to talk about the emotional and economic loss associated with the restructuring of the agency. It was one of the few moments during my fieldwork when I saw staff members break through the bureaucratic veneer. Interestingly, the presence of art (or at least the act of aestheticizing the occasion in the various ways described above) helped the agency articulate its moment of institutional crisis. In this way, the institution itself (comprised of its members) can be seen to have enacted an idea about art—in this case, that art can be used therapeutically.

**Introduction To Themes**

While the previous chapter looked at the relationship between artistic production and social life from the perspective of artists, this chapter considers that relationship from the vantage point of patrons, and specifically of cultural patronage in the United States. It considers the uniquely American forms of and debates about cultural patronage and the development of national policies and programs of cultural patronage. Both patrons and artists (and particularly avant-garde artists and their contemporary counterparts, activist artists) are concerned with the social and political uses and place of art. While the cadre of artists I consider are often concerned with social change, patrons and especially public patronage structures such as the NEA concern themselves with maintaining and building social fabric through artistic expression.

Two central and perennial concerns run through the enactment and development of cultural patronage in the US. They are: 1) how to build a national arts support system while avoiding the creation of an official culture and 2) how to balance the roles of public and private sectors in achieving this goal. Since its founding in 1965, the NEA has
functioned as a flashpoint for these issues, which have often risen to the level of anxieties and have deep ideological underpinnings related to the maintenance of a national identity. These anxieties reached their peak in the post-WWII era, a moment at which the U.S. sought to solidify and assert its power and prestige in the international arena (Guilbaut). Culture was seen as one front on which symbolically to consolidate national power, yet political leaders wanted at all costs to avoid the hint of socialism associated with official ministries of culture, and to distance themselves from more traditional models of European cultural patronage as they sought to create a uniquely and appropriately American way of supporting and advancing the arts. In achieving this goal, competing ideologies—the glory of the nation and the glory of the free enterprise system—were at odds; this tension has sustained a debate about the respective roles of the private and public sectors in supporting the arts.

The tensions and anxieties related to cultural patronage (and especially state-sponsored forms) show up most vividly in the 1965 authorizing legislation of the NEA, which states that support of the arts "while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, is also an appropriate matter of concern to the Federal Government" (United States Public Law 89-209, sec. 2, article 1). I include a more in-depth analysis of how these tensions show up in the authorizing legislation in a later section of this chapter. The founding of the NEA in 1965, the censorship controversies of the 1980s and early 1990s and the consequent 1995 restructuring are the moments at which the anxieties about the role of arts and culture in national identity and nation-building appear most strongly and are debated most vigorously. However, these concerns appear at every point in the evolution of the NEA in less dramatic but equally significant ways: in the
agency's official rhetoric; in its policies and organizational structure; and even in its funding patterns. Two fronts on which these issues recur are in the agency's policies towards and invocation of relationships called partnerships and its approach to direct funding of individual artists, called fellowships. While this chapter proceeds chronologically, these two categories are recurring themes and topics in my treatment of the evolution of the agency. For now, though, it is enough to note that the ongoing preoccupation with partnership speaks to a concern about the relation of federal government to private interests as well as to local and state governments. The ongoing concern with and debates about the advisability and rationale for supporting individual artists reflects a concern with supporting and encouraging new and unestablished talent without the drawbacks of traditional models of direct patronage.

**Cultural Patronage In The United States: History And Themes**

In order to arrive at an understanding of key trends and moments in U.S. cultural patronage, it's necessary to consider the development and articulation of American views on the role of art in society and in the building of a nation. Here I not only consider the ideological forces and organizational forms that have shaped arts patronage in the United States, but also argue that certain kinds of ideological orientations have led to the establishment of particular forms of patronage organizations; one such organizational form is the nonprofit charitable art organization, which I describe in greater detail later in this chapter. A central ideological orientation that has shaped U.S. cultural patronage is the view that art possesses a general and inherent social value. Sociologist of art Judith Balfe describes the view of art as an inherent social good as a direct outgrowth of John Dewey's late 19th-century social reformist philosophies (1993:73). In this view, art is a
force to be harnessed for general social and spiritual edification but not necessarily towards specific social or political ends. This view played a pivotal role in the establishment of a high cultural sphere in the late 19th century, and set the stage for particular institutions and programs of arts patronage, including the NEA. Some contemporary programs related to this view of the social value of art include the kinds of community outreach programs described by contemporary choreographers (see Chapter 4). The Deweyian notion of art as naturally edifying and salutary has also led an instrumental orientation towards art and its social place that is widespread and deeply culturally American. This brand of instrumental thinking, diffuse and nonspecific, has nonetheless paved the way for enlisting art and artists in the service of any number of specific ends including: building national pride; rehabilitating a corporate image; and addressing the needs of disenfranchised groups and communities, to name a disparate few.

The uniquely American organizational forms of cultural patronage also have their roots in the mid- to late-19th century experience of the arts in the U.S. The most important and distinctive form to emerge at this time is the nonprofit charitable arts organization, the genesis of which is outlined in Paul DiMaggio’s seminal essay “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston” (1986). DiMaggio discusses the economic and social conditions and interests of Boston Brahmins and how those conditions and interests gave rise to the nonprofit corporation. With the founding of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, culturally and economically elite groups were able to espouse current ideas concerning the educative potential of art while consolidating and displaying their own social and economic power
(DiMaggio 1986: 46-49). This fundamental clash between social democratic and reformist ideals, on the one hand, and free-market ideals, on the other, not only shapes the nonprofit organizational form but also surfaces in discussions surrounding the founding of the NEA and, indeed, at every stage in its existence, including, of course, during the recent restructuring with its focus on forging “public-private partnerships”.

Sociological discussions of cultural patronage such as Balfe’s and DiMaggio’s offer explanations of particular orientations toward arts funding, and even, in the case of DiMaggio, the ways in which certain kinds of patronage organizations and forms grow out of particular social and economic conditions. What such discussions leave out, though, is the dynamism between particular beliefs and orientations—or, more precisely, certain cultural logics, on the one hand, and particular organizational forms, on the other. This chapter addresses this dynamic relationship by describing how key cultural logics (often at odds with one another)—among them social reformism, populism, free-market entrepreneurialism, and nationalism—have shaped and reshaped the NEA and U.S. artistic production over time.

**Definitions of patronage**

In order to understand the NEA as both a result of and shaper of uniquely American modes of cultural patronage, it’s necessary to understand both basic forms of cultural patronage and the pre-NEA history of arts patronage in the U.S. Most discussions of patronage start with its traditional or classical form, one in which an individual artist is supported by an individual patron. This classic model, aristocratic in origin, pertains to such iconic relationships as that of Beethoven to the Viennese aristocracy and Renaissance painters to the Medicis. While direct individual-to-individual
patronage still occurs, there has been a general trend in the US towards more indirect forms of patronage in which private institutional bodies such as foundations, for example, mediate between particular patrons and artists. There has also been a trend towards indirection in public forms of cultural patronage, with public funders in the U.S.—at federal, state and municipal levels—following models that combine public and private funding, interests, and initiatives (Balfe 1993).

Yet despite the evolution of patronage into myriad forms—public, private, and mixed as well as direct and indirect—the classical model retains a hold on the imagination and, as Judith Balfe points out, “The traditional forms have remained the models by which the success of contemporary ones are judged by all concerned” (1993: 4). But, if current patronage forms do differ so markedly from traditional forms, it would seem that contemporary patronage institutions such as the NEA should be assessed according to different criteria. Balfe argues that traditional patrons operated on the “supply” side of arts production, and in conjunction with the artist, determined the product. Audiences were free to respond either favorably or unfavorably, but their response did not violate the patron-artist dyad. As the state and its agents (the NEA, for example) take on the mantle of patronage on behalf of taxpayers, they often forget to keep the “supply” and “demand” sides of artistic production separate, and therefore “risk the political and artistic failures of their programs if they respond only to audience demand” (1).

Indirection

Contemporary patronage also differs from the traditional form in that it often takes an indirect form. Two of the most significant funders of the arts in the US—
foundations and the NEA—represent indirect patronage, complete with mediating bodies such as boards of directors and peer review panels. Indirect institutional models have the effect of weakening the degree of control over the artist by "stretching out the chain of patronage" (Balfe: 251). In the case of the private foundations, the desires of the patron are depersonalized via the institution, thus creating breaks in both control and responsibility. The NEA, then, would seem to be an ideal model for freeing the state from the repercussions of its decisions by "stretching out the chain of patronage." (Indeed the abolition of artists fellowships in 1996 represented a move towards further indirection, by requiring all applicants to be institutions, and not individuals.) Balfe contends that the recent NEA controversies result from the persistence of traditional models as measures of success, which creates a misapprehension of the state as the primary and sole patron. In other words, the staff and peer panels recede as responsibility-bearers and are replaced by an abstract idea of the state (or, at best, some individual, like the NEA Chairman or the President), which then bears the risks and responsibilities for the work of various artists and its interpretations.  

Professionalization

Patronage scholars also argue that indirect patronage leads to the professionalization of both patrons and artists as artists and staff of funding bodies interact in peer-like relationships (Balfe; van der Tas). In the case of the NEA and private foundations, artists usually interact with groups of people, namely, the staff of funding organizations. These interactions often (but not always) place the artist in the role more peer-like than subordinate as artist and staff member share aims and understanding of a

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4 Some have argued that the peer review panel is a mechanism designed to further diffuse state responsibility. Galligan in Balfe.
particular artwork or project (van der Tas: 32). While professionalization is certainly a component of the contemporary patronage systems in the US, it is neither indigenous to the American context nor is it new. In both historical and contemporary settings, the institutionalization of patronage contributes to the professionalization of artists.

The evolution of cultural patronage in the US has involved the establishment of particular institutional forms of indirect patronage—such as the nonprofit corporation, the corporate foundation and, most recently, the NEA itself. In addition to these particular organizational forms, cultural patronage in the US has, as noted, evolved according to certain culturally and historically specific views of the value and nature of art in society.

**Late 19th-century sacralization of culture in the United States**

Historians have described the 19th century United States as a kind of golden era of cultural production and consumption because of the way culture was being enjoyed and experienced. In the 19th century, U.S. arts patronage understandably began to develop according to certain patterns as the wealth of the nation itself grew. Alice Marquis (1995) describes a society in which what she calls “the broader culture” (the working and middle classes, one assumes) produced and partook of artistic entertainment that blended forms—opera and theater with popular song and dance. for example—with little regard for the distinctions of high culture and popular culture. Cultural historian Lawrence Levine (1988) vividly documents this era as one in which Shakespeare’s plays and classical opera were not only attended but also enjoyed by a burgeoning immigrant community that felt free and entitled to comment on and participate in these entertainments in a way that would be unexpected today. Both Marquis and Levine seem

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5 For example, 17th century Dutch academies of art drew together patrons and artists in quasi-collegial relationships, resulting in the rapprochement of “bourgeois values and the professional aspirations of the Dutch artists (van der Tas:32).”
to lament the loss of these more porous boundaries between audiences and performers, on the one hand, and between high culture and entertainment, on the other.

As the century progressed, a range of cultural, philosophical and economic shifts in the view of the place of art in the life of the nation and its citizens were taking place. During this period, private wealth (often through industrial channels) was on the rise. As industrialists and others amassed private art collections, they founded the museums to house these collections (Cummings). By the latter half of the 19th century, an anxiety about the dominance of European culture, and especially its "aristocratic origins and haut bourgeois patronage" reached an apex among upper and upper-middle class Americans (Marquis: 4). At this juncture, the Deweyian notion of art as a "natural good" played a part in the growing distinction between high art and entertainment, with high art and Culture cast as edifying and uplifting in contradistinction to "mere" entertainments. The emergence and consolidation of a high cultural realm towards the end of the 19th century is often discussed as a period of the "the sacralization of culture" (Levine).

Paul DiMaggio astutely analyzes the significance of this historical moment to the development in the support of the arts in the U.S. as he interrogates the social, economic and political motivations of those who brought it about. He contends that the establishment of high cultural forms and institutions by Boston Brahmins in the latter half of the 19th century grew "out of the efforts of urban elites to build organizational forms that, first, isolated high culture and, second, differentiated it from popular culture (41)." DiMaggio calls the authors of this distinction "cultural capitalists." That is, those who sought to establish high culture were members of the great industrial families of the day who sought to transfer some of this capital into "the foundation and maintenance of
distinctly cultural enterprises” and the concomitant prestige (“cultural capital” in Bourdieusian terms) related to knowledge of certain artistic styles and forms (DiMaggio 1986: 43). Further, in order to accrue cultural capital, the upper and upper-middle classes had to not only be able to claim certain styles and genres for themselves, but also to have them recognized as such by both the classes under them and by the state. Most importantly, argues DiMaggio, the non-profit corporation enabled the elite groups to “legitimize” and sacralize particular art forms and institutions by asserting that they served “the community even as they defined the community to include only the elite and upper-middle classes,” while the art forms themselves took on a sacred aura by placing “enough social distance between artist and audience, between performer and public, to permit the mystification necessary to define a body of artistic work as sacred” (1986: 47).

So we see that many contemporary dilemmas and debates in arts funding—the mandate for artists to perform community service; the populist arguments against funding elitist art forms—have their roots in the developments of this earlier moment in American cultural history.

The legacy of the mid-late 19th century sacralization of art as well as the organizational forms this view enables are with us to this day, and shape both public and private funding patterns and policies for the arts and culture. A key part of this legacy is the tax incentives granted to nonprofit arts organizations, which remain a major form of federal arts subsidy. These tax incentives themselves represent a kind of indirect form of public patronage for the arts, as public laws are used to spark private initiative. Indeed, many have argued that tax incentives as ratified by the Federal Tax Reform laws of 1910 continue to be one of the most significant forms of “public-private partnerships,” to use a
current term for the blending of private interests and public responsibilities (Cobb: 31-32). Nevertheless, tax incentives are only incentives and do not guarantee that private donors will choose to direct their charitable contributions (tax-free though they may be) to the arts and culture.

Debates about the relative merits of direct governmental support vs. casting the government in the role as a catalyst for private giving cycle through the NEA rhetoric from its inception in 1965 to the present. Yet it is important to remember that until the founding of the agency there was very little direct federal arts funding. An obvious exception is the arts projects of the New Deal, designed to provide employment to artists during the Depression, which at “their peak, between 1935 and 1938, …were the largest public arts program in the history of the world” directly employing more than 40,000 artists and indirectly providing work to many others through their various programs and commissions (Cummings: 41-42). In 1938, though, the House Un-American Activities committee launched an investigation of the WPA arts projects. The suspicions aroused there, together with the preparations for war, ended these initiatives completely by January 1943. The years surrounding WWII saw a shift in the ideologies associated with governmental support of the arts. In the pre-war period, as evidenced by HUAC investigations, federal arts projects became the target of anti-Communist fervor, and support for the arts was seen as “un-American.” The post-war era saw a reversal of this sentiment, and support for the arts was seen as potential way building and assert US political and economic dominance in the world arena, a very pro-American thing to do.
Pre-NEA History of Support for Arts in the United States

Although there was little direct governmental support for the arts in the WWII and postwar era (from around 1940 to 1965), the arts were seen as a nation-building force. Indeed, the rhetoric developed during this time together with nascent institutional arrangements, key foundations (and their officers) and particular cultural organizations paved the way for the eventual founding of the National Endowment for the Arts. These two decades and the economic and political developments they ushered in saw a shift in ideas about precisely how the arts could and must contribute to the life of the nation, and to its place on the world stage. For example, as historian Serge Guilbaut asserts, U.S. intellectual and political leaders (including President Truman) saw the 1940 occupation of Paris by the Germans as nothing less than a “symbolic destruction of Western culture” (49), a predicament that thrust the United States into the role of the new guardian of that culture. Guilbaut argues that the U.S. attempt to assert its cultural dominance in the early years of WWII met cultural and political needs:

The new enthusiasm for the arts not only met the cultural needs of the nation but also satisfied a political need without engaging American forces on the ground. America participated as a defender of the arts in the war effort against fascist obscurantism. To assist American artists [through government-sponsored Buy American Art Weeks in 1940 and 1941] and to contribute the victory of life (artistic creation) over death (Nazi barbarism) was seen as a national duty (56).

On a more basic level, pride in the cultural life of the nation both grew out of and helped to fuel the rapid and widespread growth of nationalism during the war. The ideological imperative thus set during the war, the prosperous post-war 1950s saw philanthropists
and civic leaders establishing metropolitan arts centers and building audiences for the performing arts, modern dance and ballet, theater and classical music (symphony and opera). Nationalist and civic rhetoric accompanied these projects, and this rhetoric often resonated with anti-Soviet/Cold War-inspired views. In this climate, the arts were often cast as a necessary tool for asserting and maintaining cultural dominance. Further, the postwar economic boom generated certain anxieties that support for the arts could help assuage. On the one hand, there was a concern that too much prosperity and leisure time would have a deadening effect on Americans. Involvement in the arts could fill this time in personally and culturally edifying ways. There was also a related fear that post-war prosperity in the U.S. would translate to the rest of the world as “empty” economic and political power with no cultural substance behind it. Finally, beneath these anxieties was the Cold War preoccupation with asserting scientific, military, economic, and cultural superiority over the Soviets.

Amidst all these anxieties and shifting social and economic situation in the 1950s, two things were clear: 1) most politicians, intellectuals, and philanthropists did see some role for the culture in strengthening the nation, and 2) this conviction that the arts could benefit the nation and its citizens continued to draw strength from the Deweyian view of art as a fundamental spiritual good, one capable of conferring benefits upon producers and audiences alike. Yet, although culture was seen as a tool for strengthening the nation, there was not yet enough support for the idea that the nation could have a direct and reciprocal role in strengthening culture. Support for this idea would grow steadily throughout the 1950s, and was, ironically, ushered in by certain projects of private
individual philanthropists and the initiatives of private foundations (especially the Ford Foundation).

During the 1950s, an era of great private philanthropy, major philanthropic figures concentrated on funding major metropolitan institutions and cultural centers, such as the already extant Rockefeller Center and City Center, and the newly-built Lincoln Center. Of these, Lincoln Center was the most ambitious in terms of its vision of arts in the metropolis and in society. John D. Rockefeller III, the major impetus behind the establishment of Lincoln Center, conformed to the model of the private patron concerning himself with civic and national strength (although city and national government land use provisions and programs initiatives also subsidized Lincoln Center significantly) (Marquis 22-3).

Other, more widespread developments in the 1950s included the overall growth of arts and cultural organizations; already existing organizations increased in size and scope and new cultural centers and organizations sprung up across the US (Cummings). The majority of funding for this growth came from private, individual donors. But two other changes were taking place in the field of cultural patronage: 1) foundations grew and began to take on more arts funding and developed programs and 2) institutions of higher learning grew in size and scope and began sponsoring arts groups for cultural programs and therefore had a hand in building arts audiences (Marquis). Yet, what seems the most significant development if this era is the fact that despite the general climate of prosperity and the overall growth of arts organizations, arts organizations were also losing money. It became clear that while the arts could be seen as central to strengthening the "American way of life," they were not commercially viable. This development engaged
the nascent realm of foundations in various ways. On the one hand, the Ford Foundation undertook a long-term study exploring the reasons for this fact. Secondly, the Ford Foundation (under MacNeil Lowry) sought to address this problem directly by providing funding to artists and arts organizations (Marquis; Cobb).

These postwar developments paved the way for the foundation of a federal system of support for the arts both ideologically and institutionally. That is, the persistent and widespread notion of the arts as a kind of tonic for the nation and its citizens encouraged acceptance of the idea of federal support for the arts. Further, the process of establishing private civic institutions such as Lincoln Center helped to lay the groundwork for public funding for arts and arts institutions by galvanizing business/financial and civic leaders to come together to create major arts institutions. Finally, foundation support for individual artists and arts organizations underscored that the arts need not be commercially viable to be worthwhile and even useful; in this way, foundations help set the stage for the NEA and for federal subsidy of nonprofit arts organizations by encouraging the field of and very idea of "nonprofit arts." All of these developments in the arena of cultural patronage in the years leading up to the NEA grew out of the combination of historically-specific conditions and the persistence of the Deweyian notion of art as a natural social good, a notion that would come even more strongly into play in the founding months and years of the NEA.

**Early Months and Years of the NEA**

While the postwar ideological and economic climate in the U.S. and especially in its major cities and arts communities provided an atmosphere conducive to the establishment of a federal arts program, certain events and initiatives had to take place in
order for such an institution to be created. In the years leading up the founding of the NEA (1960-1965), the actions of key individuals helped to launch it into existence. The presence of arts advocates in politically strategic positions (as presidential advisors and in Congress, for example) pushed federal arts funding efforts beyond rhetoric and into concrete policies. Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger exemplifies the persistence and persuasive skill of those who favored federal arts funding. This is clear in an excerpt of a memo from Schlesinger to Kennedy shortly following a 1961 state dinner in honor of Pablo Casals at which the cellist gave his first White House concert since 1904 (Cummings). Schlesinger’s follow-up memo to the President, entitled “Moving Ahead on the Cultural Front,” illustrates his ability to move from the passing glow of such a moment to strategies for developing federal arts funding. Perhaps more significantly, the memo outlines ways of using the arts to achieve broader political goals, including garnering the political support of intellectuals and artists and rehabilitating the image of the US in the world arena. Schlesinger reminds Kennedy that:

The Casals evening has had an extraordinary effect in the artistic world. On the next day, when the advisory council for the National Cultural Center met, a number of people said to me in the most heartfelt way how much the Administration’s evident desire to recognize artistic an intellectual distinction meant to the whole intellectual community.

He continues:

All of this is of obvious importance, not only in attaching a potent opinion-making group to the Administration, but also in transforming the world’s
impression of the United States as a nation of money-grubbing materialists (Schlesinger in Cummings: 48).

Although Kennedy himself is portrayed by chroniclers of federal arts funding as dragging his heels when it came to federal arts funding, his advisors such as Schlesinger and August Heckscher as well as Congressional allies Senators Jacob Javits and Claiborne Pell ushered in policies and developed arguments that led to the founding of the NEA (Larson, Cummings, Marquis). (Indeed, it was Pell’s own staff member Livingston Biddle who drafted the legislation that authorized the NEA and who would be its chairman from 1977-81, during the Carter administration.)

**Arguments in favor of federal support for the arts**

What, precisely, were the leading pro-federal funding arguments put forth by these arts supporters in the early 1960s? Certainly, Cold War anxieties about the need to assert cultural superiority still held sway. Likewise, the Deweyian arguments for the arts as a kind of general tonic for society persisted and were invoked in the months leading up to the establishment of the NEA. In addition, new kinds of economic arguments emerged including those that warned that the arts were in financial trouble, as well as those that claimed that the arts could act as an economic stimulus to a community.

The most galvanizing and powerful arguments were explicitly ideological and cast in language that seems at once to hide and reveal fundamental Cold-War-era fears and desires about the place of the US in the world arena. This kind of language reaches its height in the 1965 legislative act that authorized the NEA, but also surfaces in preliminary pro-federal funding arguments like the following 1963 statement by Jacob Javits in which he baldly declared that “the Russians and the Chinese are...impressing
upon other peoples the fact that they sponsor such extraordinarily gifted organizations and artists" and went on to warn that “[t]he grandeur and dignity of our nation are at stake” (Javits in Larson: 182).

As in earlier moments in the history of cultural patronage, ideological and institutional developments went hand-in-hand. In the early 1960s, U.S. arts organizations were both expanding and professionalizing as new small-scale arts organizations sprang up and established ones grew (Cummings). Yet this rapid growth, ironically, gave rise to an economic crisis in the arts, one in which artists and arts organizations (both large and small, mainstream and experimental) could not remain financially solvent. A 1961 Congressional subcommittee heard testimony from the director of the Metropolitan Opera to soloists from major ballet companies. All told the same story: that all too often expenses exceeded income (Larson). The economic arguments in favor of federal arts funding that grew out of these changes were apparently contradictory, but persist to this day. Specifically, arts advocates claimed that on the one hand the arts were in economic trouble and needed federal subsidy because they were not commercially viable. On the other hand arts advocates put forth an economic stimulus argument that claimed that federal arts dollars would encourage private donations and contribute to overall economic growth in communities/cities with strong arts organizations.

Finally, arts funding advocates (and their counterparts in the humanities) looked to levels of government funding for science and technology and argued for their place alongside these fields. As science advanced and funding for it did, too (in the form of the NSF), anxiety that the US would become a soulless technological giant (and that all funding would end up with scientists) drew arts and humanities organizations together.
Along with Congressional advocates they hashed out a few possible scenarios for the funding of the arts and humanities, and rested upon the model of two separate entities under a single institutional heading—The National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities.\(^6\)

**Authorizing Legislation of the NEA**

The range of arguments that led to the founding of the NEA surfaced in the language of the Congressional Act, entitled “The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965,” that officially called into existence both the NEA and the NEH. The explicit purpose of the authorizing legislation is to formally establish a governmental agency to fund the arts and to detail its structure and function. Both in my roles as an employee at the NEA and as an interviewer, I found that the authorizing legislation was alluded to as a kind of timeless originary text and a final word on policy matters. For example, senior staff members appealed to the authority of this document in the definition of key terms, the articulation of central goals (such as artistic excellence), matters of grant-making procedure, and guidelines for the NEA’s financial relationship to states and state arts of agencies. Interestingly, though, the text of the 1965 authorizing legislation was not made readily available to staff or panel members as part of grant deliberations or policy discussions. When I finally did review the content of the

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\(^6\) In November of 1963 President Kennedy told his new special consultant on the arts, Richard Goodwin, to prepare a press release announcing a new body called the President’s Advisory Council on the Arts. This advisory council was the precursor in form and in spirit (a body of arts experts who mediate between the president and the world of the arts) to what is now the NEA’s National Council on the Arts. On November 23, 1963, the day of his assassination, the New York Times carried a story announcing Kennedy’s appointment of Goodwin. In many of the accounts of the founding of the NEA, this eerie and ironic sequence of events is highlighted and takes on a mythic tone. But what emerges from the creation story of the NEA is a somewhat unlikely hero, or at least someone to share hero status with Kennedy—Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson and Kennedy would have to be seen as sharing hero status with Schlesinger, though, as it was he who pushed Johnson to carry on with the work that had been done on establishing a federal arts program (Cummings).
legislation, I found much more than a procedural manual. While one might well expect the broad ceremonial language in such a document, much of the rhetoric of this piece of legislation is remarkably historically specific and ideologically packed. The language of the document is an odd blend of poetic, official, and declamatory rhetoric that simultaneously reveals and obfuscates fundamental anxieties, desires and contradictions surrounding the role of the arts in the life of the nation circa 1965.

In the seven brief but densely written articles that comprise the opening “declaration of Purpose,” several key themes show themselves to be the preoccupations of the day. These are: 1) a Cold War concern with asserting US dominance; 2) the fear that science will eclipse the arts and humanities, both economically and in terms of its importance; 3) the respective roles of private and public sector funding; and 4) a desire to articulate a role for the artist in the project of nation-building. Moreover, a number of the articles knit together these seemingly disparate national anxieties and present the support of arts as part of the remedy to internal weakness and external threats.

Clearly Cold War anxieties about the role of the US as a world leader drive the nationalistic rhetoric of the legislation. This general preoccupation finds its strongest and most vivid expression in article 6 of section 2, which reads:

[T]he world leadership that has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation’s high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.

But these general anxieties seem surprising vague when compared with the unexpectedly virulent expression of concern about the place of the arts and humanities in relation to
developments in science and technology. This concern is central to no less than three of the seven opening articles, and seems to have various sources and expressions, among them the recent lunar landing and development of atomic bombs. The anxiety about a cult of science (and perhaps wanting to redress the amount of federal money going to the sciences via the National Science Foundation) melds with an anxiety about the place of the US in the international arena, and a need to assert superiority in the global political and cultural realm. Articles (2), (3) and (6) cast art, spirit, and creativity not as mere complements to science, but even as antidotes to excessive faith in science, and assert that “a high civilization must not limit it efforts to science and technology alone” (sec. 2, article 2), and that the government must “foster and support a form of education designed to make men masters of their technology and not its unthinking servant” (sec 2. article 3).

Surely one inspiration for this overblown, nationalistic rhetoric was to respond to long-standing criticism that subsidizing the arts and humanities was not an appropriate task for the national government. While much of the legislation argues that the government must take on this role, the legislation also reveals sensitivity to these criticisms. Indeed, the question of the respective roles of private and public funding bodies is invoked in the very first article, indicating that from the very beginning of the agency’s existence, its founders either themselves had or felt that they had to respond to doubts about the wisdom of federal involvement in the arts. The very first article of the act (sec 2, art. 1) states “…the encouragement and support of national progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative [my emphasis], is also an appropriate matter of concern to the Federal
Government.” On a rhetorical level, opening with this assertion sets the stage for explaining just why the national government must take up the task of funding arts and humanities.

Finally, the authorizing legislation presents a view of artists and intellectuals as having a potentially central and unique role to play in the strengthening of the nation. The authorizing legislation suggests a kind of ideal symbiotic relationship between the State, i.e., the Federal government and the arts and humanities (artists and intellectuals). In this relationship, the State, by providing the necessary “material conditions,” is in a special position to assist the artist, who is portrayed as a unique kind of being in need of a “climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry” in order for his talent to be “released” (article 5). The government’s implied role, then, is to free artists from material worries so that they may devote themselves to their art. In return, artists and scholars are portrayed as being in a special position to assist the nation, both by encouraging the kind of “wisdom and vision in its citizens” that democracy demands (article 2) and by serving as exemplars to the rest of the world of “the Nation’s high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit” (article 6). From its inception to the present, directors and staff as well as champions and detractors of the NEA have been engaged in an ongoing working-out (in word and deed) of the role of the nation (especially vis-à-vis the private sector and the states) in the life of the arts. This has been accompanied by a parallel, ongoing negotiation of the role of the artist in the life of the nation (through fellowships)

**Evolution of the Organizational Structure and Budget of the NEA**
The official rhetoric used by the agency to explain and justify its role finds its most distilled expression in NEA publications, including its annual reports. Official NEA rhetoric also comes through in more conversational and performative ways, such as interviews with agency employees and in an event (described at the end of this chapter) staged to celebrate a 1995 relationship with a private corporation. The official rhetoric shifts in response to outside variables such as the general political and economic climate of the US and the size of the agency’s budget. Some of the most dramatic outside influences on the Endowment’s rhetoric and practices came during the period of upheaval that began in the late 1980s and is known variously as “the culture wars,” the “decency debates,” the “censorship controversies,” or simply “the crisis.” Despite historical shifts, official NEA rhetoric tends to center around statements about the role of the government as a public, democratic patron as well as the role of the arts and the artist in nation building.

One rhetorical thread or axis that I trace over time is the NEA’s depiction of its relationship to other sources of funding, both public (i.e., state and local as well as other federal agencies) and private, a relationship that can be tracked largely by considering the agency’s use of the term “partnerships” in describing its activities and the relative vigor with which they use certain policies and programs (such as partnerships and Challenge grants to promote private giving to the arts). The second area of funding that is particularly telling to track over time is that of fellowships. i.e.. direct funding to individual artists, not channeled through a larger institution (either one founded by the artist—like a dance company—or an external one, like a nonprofit presenting organization). Fellowships are interesting to track for a number of reasons; among them
are the fact that they mostly closely resemble the traditional patronage relationship in which one individual or family directly commissioned work from one individual artists, thus linking their goals, tastes, and objectives to their own. This one-to-one correspondence, I argue, is what came into play in the controversies of the 1980s and 1990s; those who received direct funding from the NEA were seen to embody the tastes and ideas of the organization. Indirect funding of organizations such as museums, theaters, and literary magazines serves to diffuse the association between funder and artist. Fellowships also reveal temporal variations within the aesthetic field but also between that field and others—economic, political and social—by revealing how the figure of the artist is viewed during a certain period, or by a certain group. The ways that fellowships are talked about and handled in policy and budgeting arenas of the NEA say something about the status of the figure of the artist at a given moment. Both of these modes of imagining patronage relationships and resource distribution are flashpoints for arguments and anxieties about the proper role for the federal government (in a democratic, free-market system) in arts funding.

Even during periods of institutional stability and economic growth, the official rhetoric of the NEA often included arguments aimed at justifying its very existence or, at least, its structure and modes of operating. In a sense, even when the agency was not directly undergoing an external crisis or controversy, the more diffuse pressures and anxieties about the place of patronage and the role of art in democratic society generated a kind of ongoing, low-level instability that made the agency never completely stable. Moreover, not only was the agency perennially vulnerable to criticism, it could be argued to be always in the defensive position of fending off potential criticisms. Indeed, as I
argue later, the continual process of self-justification calls for reconsideration of the accepted view of the recent controversies, seeing them not as a break with the NEA’s history up to that point, but rather as a not-surprising culmination of external and internal pressures on the agency. Finally, it’s important to note as we consider each of these areas—partnership; fellowships; and the overall growth and programs of the NEA—that at times the policies reflect and support the official rhetoric of the agency and at times contradict it (such as during the anti-direct-funding Reagan/Hodsoll during which fellowship funding nonetheless continued to grow).

**Evolution of NEA Partnerships**

In the beginning, the term partnership referred primarily and officially to the NEA’s relationship with the states (which has been a complicated and ever-changing one). That is, the early endowment emphasizes the way in which it can stimulate support of the arts by individual states through the set-asides and by encouraging the establishment of state arts councils (NEA 1970 Annual Report: 55). The stipulation that twenty percent of the Endowment’s total budget must be set-aside to go to state arts agencies was a federalist, anti-big-government move from the start a federalist, which is to say, in favor of giving, or, in the language of its proponents, “restoring” more power to individual states. What’s more, it encouraged the establishment of state arts councils (because states obviously had to have arts councils to receive money). Within two years of the establishment of the NEA, every state had a state arts council set up to receive federal funds as well as new state funds (Cummings). Thus, in the first years of its existence, the NEA made great inroads towards one of its perennial goals—namely, stimulating funding for the arts from other sources. This early and continual form of
partnership not only changed the field of arts funding, but also was a concession to those who feared that centralized support for the arts smacked too much of socialism.

Although early official uses of the term partnership referred to the NEA’s relationships with other public entities, official agency literature has stressed a commitment to encouraging private arts patronage. Indeed, the very first article of the 1965 authorizing legislation indicates that while private funders should bear the brunt of the arts funding burden in the US, there is nonetheless a role for the federal government, stating, “that the encouragement and support of national progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, is also an appropriate matter of concern to the Federal Government” (Public Law 89-209, sec 2, art. 1). However, official NEA literature casts this relationship in different terms at different moments in its history. In its early years, the NEA indeed acknowledges the private sector as an important potential funder of the arts, but argues that it hasn’t lived up to its potential, a stance that engenders the acknowledgement and even celebration of direct government assistance to artists that characterizes the early annual reports. Under more conservative administrations, and especially in the Reagan years, the term partnership is more closely linked with private sources of funding, and specifically of using symbolic amounts of NEA funding as a “catalyst” for private giving. The NEA’s “catalyst” role reached a peak in 1983 with the near tripling of the budget of its Challenge program, a program that required grantees to match NEA funds 3:1 with funds from other, preferably private, sources. And yet later, during the post-controversies restructuring of the mid 1990s, partnership comes to index even more strongly privatized modes, described as “information brokering” and “fund leveraging.” In other words, over its history, the
NEA’s “partnership” relationships follow a trajectory in which the NEA becomes an ever more symbolic partner and less an economically concrete partner.

Endowment officials repeatedly cite partnership (with both public and private entities) as an especially advantageous and uniquely American mode of cultural patronage. Livingston Biddle, NEA chairman from 1977-1981, reflected. “I am convinced that the Arts Endowment has been the chief catalyst for growth of the arts in the United States”. He goes on, saying that art has reached beyond the major metropolitan centers; that arts organizations such as dance, opera and theater companies have increased in number; and finally that annual private giving in the arts has increased from a pre-Endowment level of $200 million c. 1960 to $3.5 billion in 1987. On this last point, Biddle says: “What began as an experiment, with a uniquely American process of partnership—differing markedly from patterns in Europe where arts support has been primarily governmental—has proved a success (Biddle in Wyszomirski: 6-7).”

**Fellowships: Institutional Arguments for and about Direct Support to Artists**

I think it's absurd that a Federal agency scattered $5,000 grants all over the country to places that didn't know how to report, that didn’t have stable staff, and that had twelve people in the audience. I just don’t think it’s appropriate; even if it’s possible. I don’t think it’s appropriate….I just don’t think that a Federal agency can do that.

—Michael McLaughlin

With no fellowship support out there for beginning artists or individual artists, a whole creative engine has just about ground to a halt….One of the intriguing and irritating things about this country is that in some ways it’s very politically immature in its attitude towards art and culture and newness and experimentation…. It takes a rather mature government to understand how and why innovative and avant-garde things need to happen. Essentially what you’re talking about is research and development.

—Douglas Sonntag

These views, uttered by mid-level NEA staff members during the 1995 restructuring of the NEA, reflect two opposing viewpoints on the value of fellowships just at the point when the NEA was being forced to abolish fellowships. The dismissal of fellowships as “little bits” of this first quote and even, to an extent, the qualified
justification for them in the second quote stand in contrast to the celebration of direct funding for artists contained in early annual reports, which stress the positive dimensions of directly funding artists, i.e., not only "the arts" but actual individual people who make art.

Early NEA annual reports stress the positive results of direct funding to individuals, and the 1969 annual report cites a 1967 Art News editorial that said of the first round ever of NEA fellowships to visual artists, "The money has gone to artists at a point in their careers when it can make a financial or psychological difference, possibly a crucial one." The Endowment then gives its official line, indicating the place of direct assistance to artists within the scope of its overall mission: "In the period since the awards were made, many of the artists have become better known, and some have achieved considerable distinction. It can be safely assumed that the Endowment fulfilled its aim of directly stimulating the production of important new art" (NEA Annual Report 1969: 37).

But direct support of artists wasn't merely rhetorical: over the course of its history, the NEA disbursed this special kind of funding—with minimal reporting and application requirements to artists in a range of fields. The changing approach to fellowships, from their early role to their eventual abolition in the mid-1990s, are emblematic of the evolution of the NEA's own view and official line about what it should be doing for art and artists. Policies and rhetoric about fellowships are directly related to the NEA's view of the benefits of funding the untried, the unestablished, and the untraditional in the arts, distinctions that are not just developmental but also aesthetic, as "emerging artists," avant-garde and experimental artists are those most likely to be free of
established institutional structures (i.e., of the nonprofit institutional status necessary to receive all other categories of NEA funding).

In 1993, at the height of the funding controversies, the NEA published *A Generation of Fellows: Grant to Individuals from the National Endowment for the Arts*, a report that featured selected fellowship applicants (many of whom who had gone on to relative to great success in their fields). At a time when people were talking about “accountability” and inability to “track” what was produced from a specific grant (some of the key arguments of the decency controversies of the early 1990s), the publication can be seen as a strategic attempt to rehabilitate the image of the fellowships as a granting mode. The report opens by arguing for the importance of support to individual artists at crucial moments in their careers, most often relatively early in their careers, “before becoming household names (3),” and appeals to the language of the NEA’s 1965 authorizing legislation and cites the following passage from the 1965 act: “While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent (4).” The language suggests that the NEA catches people early in their careers and helps to launch then towards success, and takes pride in “taking a chance” on an artist, and taking part in “discovering” them.

This document also stresses and even celebrates the fact that artists can use fellowships for whatever helps them to create. Drawing on the myth of the artist as a singular genius needing to be freed from the mundane details of daily life, the study crafts a symbolically rich fable of how the NEA participates—through fellowships—in a very
American cycle of discovery, creative release, and eventual celebrity. When author John Irving received his writing fellowship in 1974, the authors report, "he didn’t dare take the summer off to write full time for fear that if he quit his summer school and coaching jobs that year, he might not get them back the next. So he spent the money on a new bathroom—not a second bath, just a new one to replace the worn-out original in his rustic home. A few years later the world woke up to this newcomer: his new novel became a best seller, was made into a successful movie, and contributed a new word to American English. All the fruits of inspiration from hot and cold showers perhaps? Ask John Irving (4)."

What’s striking about some of the official language that accompanies the overall disbursement and celebration and justification of fellowships in this 1993 document is that a kind of instrumental ethos creeps into even this most direct support for art and artists. That is, in the John Irving example above, what is highlighted is not so much the easing of financial burden for an artist, but rather the way that a fellowship acted as a launching pad to a desired progression from unknown/marginal to celebrity and perhaps even commercial ("household name") success. Another way in which fellowships are portrayed as a means to an end is through their ‘imprimatur’ function, as elaborated below:

The end result of this [application and review] process is the grant itself, valuable not only for the monetary aid, but also as a sign that the recipient’s work and promise have been recognized by a jury of peers in a national forum. The Endowment’s imprimatur instills a sense of confidence and achievement. (5).
Overview of the NEA’s Evolution from 1966-1989

ROGER STEVENS: 1965-1969

The NEA had only four chairmen from 1966-1989, all political appointees that changed with Presidential administrations. Lyndon B. Johnson’s appointee, Roger Stevens, was the first NEA Chairman and served from 1965-1969. Stevens’s introductory remarks in early annual reports convey optimism and a sense of new beginnings. They are also poetic and make reference to occurrences and trends in the broader world of the arts, in a sense appealing to the authority of art itself over the authority of a governmental institution. This is perhaps a reflection of Stevens’s background in the theater, but can also be seen as an outgrowth of the lack of criticism and constraints that would plague subsequent administrations.

A kind of freedom in disbursing and faith in the power of direct funding to artists exemplifies the early years. Under Stevens, from 1966-1969, the NEA awarded 22 grants to individual choreographers (p. 14 1970 annual report). It was also under Stevens in FY 1969 that the separate category of Choreographers Fellowships was instituted to encourage the creation of new works. (NEA 1969 Annual Report). Fellowship funds could be used to pay dancers, to rent rehearsal and/or performance space, and to generally help build a repertory and a group of dancers that could, eventually, add up to a company. So, although this fellowship money wasn’t specifically directed at establishing dance institutions, it had an institutionalizing and professionalizing effect on the field as
individual choreographers spent these small money at least partly on activities amounts of that built the field from the bottom up.\footnote{Indeed, as we will see later, choreographers who lamented the loss of this funding category in the mid 1990s noted its effect on the notion of what constituted a valid and possible career progression as a choreographer.}

It was also under Stevens that the Federal-State partnership program was established, and while Stevens certainly acknowledged the importance of private giving, during his tenure “partnership” referred to the federal-state relationship. In 1967, a $2 million appropriation from the NEA to the States was responsible for the very creation of most of these state arts councils—another key element in the creation of a national arts funding infrastructure. Prior to the existence of the NEA, only a handful of states had arts councils but by 1968, 53 of the 55 states and special jurisdictions had active arts councils.

NANCY HANKS (1969-1977)

Under Nancy Hanks, a Nixon appointee who held chairmanship from 1969-1977, the NEA’s budget and scope increased dramatically, from $8.5 million in FY 1969 to $99.9 million in FY 1977. In fact, it was under Hanks that the NEA established the general operating structure that it maintained until the 1995 restructuring. Ironically, the biggest percentage increases came during the Nixon administration and in FY 1972. Nixon approved a budget increase from $16.4 million to $31.5 million. In his preface to the 1972 NEA annual report, Nixon draws attention to the Endowments nation building function “advancing the artistic development of the Nation” and to its support of arts institutions — “Through its programs, the Endowment provides essential support for our famous cultural institutions—our opera, theatre, dance companies, our orchestras, our museums.” Nixon himself, as every NEA chairman in his or her own way will do, also
notes the Endowment’s role in encouraging private giving, saying, “I view this as essential, for if the arts are to flourish, the broad authority for cultural development must remain with the people of the Nation—not with government (i).” Nixon’s rhetoric in some ways contradicts the NEA policies that took root during his administration and under Hanks’s leadership; it was under Hank’s leadership and with his budget increases that the importance of the federal government as a direct funder of artists (through fellowships) and as a funding leader—a model that would last into the 1990s—was firmly established.

During Hanks’s tenure the NEA concentrated on building up certain artistic fields. NEA’s approach to dance funding is a prime example of the ways in which the agency (especially under Hanks) built markets and infrastructure for various art forms. Dance is a prime example of the ways in which infusion of money could make or break the development of an art form (Straight). Of course, one thing that made this possible was simply the greater sums of money available for various major dance companies—(interestingly, the big grants went almost exclusively to the three New York City-based ballet companies [NEA 1970 Annual Report]). The other was the design of certain kinds of programs explicitly geared to the specific needs of particular art forms. For dance in the 1970s, this meant the establishment of the NEA Dance Touring Program which funded venues all across the US who wanted to present dance to new audiences (Straight). From the beginning, the NEA sought to enlist the private sector in this project and used the mechanism of matching grants to do so: “In January 1969, the national council recommended that the Endowment establish a program of challenge grants for
new productions by major dance companies in which federal funds would be matched by private contributions (1970 NEA Annual Report: 14).

**LIVINGSTON BIDDLE (1977-81)**

With the change of administration from Ford to Carter, Livingston Biddle took over the agency in late 1977. In a statement from his November 1977 nomination hearing, he appeals to the NEA’s authorizing legislation and says that “partnership between government and the private community is basic to the law.” He goes on to give a unique reading of partnership, concluding that the government should fund but not interfere in the arts. He suggests that the original legislation was designed to “safeguard” against “inappropriate governmental pressures” (1977 NEA Annual Report: 7). In his words,

> [i]t is for this reason that the partnership concept is so important and why I so firmly believe in it. As the Committee knows, the law prescribes a catalyst role for the government. The federal role is to encourage, not dominate, to assist without domineering; and there is thus the basis for a lasting and developing partnership between the federal government and private community, and between the federal government and state and local governments, in keeping with the best principles of our democracy.

It’s a subtle but significant difference in emphasis, one that foregrounds the special role of the government in encouraging artists.

For Biddle, partnership isn’t just about stimulating private giving, as it will be for his successor Frank Hodsoll, but also about the local and state role and broadening the base of the arts. Finally, in a rhetorical move that can be seen as resisting the arts-as-
economic-stimulus rhetoric, Biddle asserts: “The arts serve as focal points to enliven economic growth.” And then goes on, “But their greatest value lies in the less tangible. They enrich our lives.” (1977 NEA Annual Report: 7). These are the words of a man who seems not to be struggling to justify the NEA’s existence. who knows that incoming President Carter does not need to be sold on the idea of the Endowment. Indeed, total Endowment budget takes a nice leap during Carter administration, growing from $99.9 million in FY 1977 to $158.8 million in FY 1981.

**FRANK HodSOLL (1981-89)**

The first years of Reagan’s first term saw a foreshadowing of the kind of criticisms of national support for the arts that would finally flourish by the beginning of Bush’s term in 1989. Frank HodSoll was chairman from 1981-89, and what one notices first about HodSoll’s tenure is that the healthy and constant overall budget growth that the NEA had enjoyed since its inception slowed drastically, and actually suffered a 10% budget cut in FY 1982. In eight years, the overall NEA budget grew from $158.8 million in 1981 to $169 million in 1989, an increase of less than 10%. compared to the almost 400% growth under Hanks/Nixon and the over 50% overall budgetary increase under Biddle/Carter.

HodSoll’s remarks in annual reports came close to disavowing the importance of direct support and focused instead on what HodSoll called a “catalyst” role (i.e. a catalyst for private giving). Indeed, although the overall agency budgets stayed more or less constant—with small dips and rises—throughout the Reagan years, the Challenge Program received big injections of funds (e.g., funds for Challenge grants nearly tripled from $11.8 million in 1982 to $32.4 million in 1983). This shift of funds from program
offices to the Challenge program underscored Hodsell’s faith/belief in the ability of the Endowment to stimulate private giving, as did the formation (in 1983) of new Office for Private Partnership to oversee the Challenge and Advancement programs. Challenge grants were a stringent test of an arts organization’s ability to raise funds from private sources because they required a three-to-one match of Endowment dollars (as opposed to a one-to-one match required of other grantees and the complete lack of matching requirements for fellowship recipients). In his opening remarks to the 1982 annual report, Hodsell asserts that “[t]he arts have from the beginning flourished in our country with little direct help from the government at any level—federal, state, or local.” He goes on to contend that we “did not make... a direct government commitment to the arts.” but have rather encouraged private philanthropy by granting tax deductions to donors since 1913. He concludes by asserting that the aim of the NEA “is to be catalytic, to spark other sources of support for excellence and access to that excellence. The mechanisms we use to achieve this catalytic role involve matching grants, advocacy, and information (1982 NEA Annual Report: 3).”

Hodsell’s rhetoric marks a departure from early statements highlighting states as partners and even from the Nancy Hanks-era cultural/national pride rhetoric. Hodsell’s retrenchment and emphasis on private partnership is related to the threat of Reagan cuts to the NEA (which did happen in 1982) and also to his generally more conservative inclinations. Indeed, among the many developments of the 1990s that were foreshadowed in the 1980s was the shift to an information-distribution—as opposed to a funds-distribution—function. Yet, in many ways, despite slowed growth and occasional budget cuts, the Reagan-era Endowment sustained itself both on the momentum built up
in the 1970s and by dint of Hodsoll's protection of the agency from the Reagan administration (Alexander 2000). Indeed, although growth had slowed dramatically, when Hodsoll left the agency in 1989, he left it with its highest-ever total budget--$171 million for FY 1990. Ironically, given Hodsoll's generally conservative views towards the direct funding of art by the government (the very same arguments archconservatives would make during the soon-to-erupt NEA controversies) the Mapplethorpe and Serrano grants that sparked the NEA controversies were made during Hodsoll's tenure. Another factor that made it possible for these grants to have been made under a conservative administration is that the organizational structure and procedure of the NEA had, by the 1980s, evolved to a point where it was largely self-sustaining. That is, the staff and panelists of the agency were working more in conjunction with the various arts fields and were less beholden to the Presidential administrations or even to the National Council of the Arts. The chairman, in effect, acted as an advocate and publicist for the agency, and it seems, in the cases of Hodsoll and Hanks, also acted as a buffer between the agency and the more conservative strains of the Nixon, Ford and Reagan administrations.

Chairmans' statements from annual reports underscore their function as cheerleaders for the agency, using their rhetoric to anticipate and fend off the perennial criticisms about the advisability of government funding for the arts. It was this delicate equilibrium that was to be upset during the controversies that began in 1989.

**Controversies: Continuities And Discontinuities; Rhetorics And Counter-Rhetorics**

The NEA funding controversies of late 1980s and 1990s—alternately known as the censorship controversies, the decency controversies or simply the "culture wars"—were without a doubt a unique moment in the history of US arts funding. Yet, contrary to
journalistic accounts of these events, they also represented a crystallization of tensions that had always accompanied discussions of arts funding in the US. In other words, the controversies—while a pivotal moment—did not explode out of nowhere, but rather were continuous with anxieties about: 1) the role of arts in the nation; 2) the role of direct funding to artists; 3) the practice of funding controversial artists (or more broadly, of having the government’s name attached to any one particular artist or artwork); and 4) the NEA’s relationship to private funding bodies and to the arts marketplace.

Indeed, the controversies gained force and had lasting effects precisely because they tapped into already existing conflicts about public funding for arts. Conservatives had long monitored the NEA; in fact, in his first senate term in 1972. Jesse Helms publicly opposed the NEA funding of Erica Jong, who acknowledged the NEA’s support in *Fear of Flying* (Bolton). Moreover, these pressures from Congress and sometimes from the Presidential administration had occasionally even resulted in policy changes or budgetary adjustments (as in the case of Hodsoll’s focus on Challenge grants; a move that was probably at least partly conciliatory). But what is discontinuous with the NEA’s history, what is new, is the persistence with which Congressional members tried to get into the content and details of grantmaking procedures and actually deeply affected policy and programs of the agency.

One factor that enabled cultural conservatives to consolidate their arguments and rally support was the growing influence of the radical and religious Right in U.S. politics. Throughout the 1980s, the religious right was organizing against perceived obscenity in various media—mostly mainstream broadcast media and Hollywood movies. In June 1985, the Reagan administration created the Meese Commission, which tried to
demonstrate connections between pornography and anti-social behavior and called for increased regulation of erotic materials. While Members of Congress began to listen to these voices and in the late 1980s passed resolutions stating the opposition to cultural products from anti-nuclear films to depictions of flag burning to Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, there were few real policy or funding changes at the NEA (Bolton).

By the late 1980s, The Religious Right was both internally well organized and had built relationships to members of Congress. They had systems in place including direct-mail know-how and lists as well as the art of the press release, according to NEA staff member Randy MacAusland, in an address to an NEA Dance Program panel in the early 1990s. These systems enabled them to garner support for their ideas and programs and to lobby Congress to take action. This is one of the developments that enabled the controversies to escalate with each new piece of controversial art targeted by members of the key religious conservatives (such as Wildmon and Buchanan) and their Congressional allies. The NEA controversies were sparked in April 1989 by Donald Wildmon’s letters to Congresspeople protesting Andres Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ*. Senator Alfonse D’Amato (R-NY) wrote a letter to the acting NEA chair protesting the 1988 $15,000 grant to Serrano (which—through a regranting program—was actually channeled through an intermediary visual arts organization, SECCA) (Bolton). D’Amato was not a lone voice: twenty-five senators added their signatures to this letter. The Robert Mapplethorpe installment of the controversies followed two months later when Dick Armey (R-TX) protested the NEA’s support of an exhibit of the artist’s photographs.

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8 Donald Wildmon, who would lead the attack on the NEA, acted as a witness in the Meese hearings (Bolton).
The building controversy caused the director of the Corcoran Gallery to cancel the museum’s planned showing of these works.

On July 7, 1989, four days after the protest against the Corcoran’s decision, John Froehnmayer was named the chairman of the NEA. During Froehnmayer’s tenure (from 1989-1992), the controversies intensified and extended beyond the few radical voices in Congress and on the fundamentalist Right. In this new climate, indirect political modes of protesting NEA actions (such as non-binding resolutions) were abandoned in favor of more direct and specific interventions that led to restrictions on policies and fund distribution. In July of 1989, Congress voted to cut the overall budget of the agency by $45,000 (the combined amount of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano grants), and in a further punitive move, also shifted the significant sum of $400,000 from the Visual Arts program that had funded these exhibits to Local Programs and Folk Art Programs. This new level of Congressional interference foretold the budget cuts to come. Perhaps the most disturbing response to congressional pressure on the agency came with the March 1990 addition of an anti-obscenity clause to all NEA awards. The language of this clause strongly echoed that proposed months earlier by Jesse Helms and focused on sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and sexual acts with children (Bolton). It was a

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9 The preconceptions and ideologies that guided the decision to reallocate funds to these particular programs are too dense to fully unpack here, but this decision reveals popular views of experimentation and avant-gardism by naming and rewarding two of its perceived opposites, the “local” and the “folk”. The conservative populist subtext is that “community-based” art is wholesome and educative while elitist art is dangerous and degenerate. The reallocation of funds to localities is also very much in line with the “new Federalism” that took hold (especially in the U.S. House of Representatives) in the early 1990s. The choice of Folk Art as a foil to contemporary visual art is an even richer topic for cultural analysis. Clearly, the assumption is that “traditional” artists preserve specific heritages and art forms and are mere vehicles for the reproduction of pure, even old-timey, ways of doing things. This naïve view leaves no room for the possibility that folk artists are as innovative, and even as subversive as those working in the realm of high culture. The deployment of Folk Arts as a foil for the controversial art played a part in the attempts of the NEA to rehabilitate their image and save themselves from Congressional eradication in the mid-1990s. During my 1995 fieldwork in the NEA’s office of the Congressional Liaison, one of my tasks was to compile lists of folk arts grants to artists in certain states that could be used as talking points when arguing the NEA’s case to particular Congressional opponents of the agency.
definition of obscenity that was particularly homophobic, even in the NEA’s softened
version, which included the qualifying language: “which, when taken as a whole, do not
have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value” (Public Law 101-120
pertaining to NEA FY 1990 grants).

In 1990, the most visible controversies shifted from the visual to the performing
arts. In July 1990, Frohnmayer vetoed the Theater Program fellowship grants to four
performance artists, Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, even
though the peer panel had recommended them for funding. Although technically
advisory, peer panels’ recommendations had come to be understood as tantamount to
awards. Frohnmayer and the controversies upset this way of working as he singled out
these grants for special attention by the second-tier advisory body, the National Council
on the Arts. In a practice that was not unprecedented in the history of the agency, but that
became familiar to me during my NEA employment at the height of the controversies,
program directors were requested to “flag” potentially controversial grants for the council
and the chairman. This is, presumably, what happened with the NEA four grants. In
their lawsuit against the agency, the four artists charged Frohnmayer with tampering with
the decision process for political reasons and for his own self-preservation and the
preservation of the agency. Certainly Frohnmayer’s comments on these artists to seem to
be asking them to reject the grants:

Let me just tell you. Karen Finley inserts vegetables into her orifices. That is
what is going to come out—and rubs chocolate on her bare bosom and uses bean
sprouts for sperm… That is a metaphor. That is not what she is all about. But this
is what is going to be in the press if you fund it.
In similar warnings about Hughes and Miller (but more insidiously bowing to the anti-gay sentiment of the right), Frohnmayer, quoted in *The Washington Post*, warned that “Holly Hughes is a lesbian and her work is very heavily of that genre. It is very tough stuff….So that is what the newspapers are going to pick up” (1991). The lawsuit waged on for years, and, in the end, the four artists had their grants restored. While the Serrano and Mapplethorpe events kicked off the controversies and showed how the Religious Right could use the agency to further its agenda, the NEA Four controversy demonstrated how the agency let its critics and their perceived criticism affect the way it did business. Indeed, it set off a period of politically motivated institutional self-censorship that would continue throughout the restructuring.

The Dance Program became embroiled in the controversies with the unfolding of two newsworthy events in the early 1990s, involving, respectively, a modern-dance pioneer and an alternative space. Interestingly, it was the 75-year-old Bella Lewitzky, director and founder of a well-respected modern dance company that helped to bring the dance community into the controversies. In 1991, Lewitzky sued the endowment for requiring that she sign an obscenity clause in order to receive a $72,000-grant awarded to her. Lewitzky recalled refusing in the 1950s to sign a loyalty oath that would signal her willingness to name suspected Communist sympathizers at a university where she sought employment. Then, she reports, her “life moved on forward to 1991.” She continues.

It was an interesting personal and physical thing that happened to me when I read the sheet of paper that states what your obligations are if you accept the NEA’s money, And I came to this [obscenity] clause….Automatically, all my past history just came forward. I couldn’t have physically signed my name to that. I
was so repelled by familiarity. I knew fear. I knew how self-censorship results from intimidation of any kind. I knew thought control was at the base of it.”
(Dance/USA Journal 1991).

In the fall 1991, the non-profit dance service organization Movement Research was asked to return a part of a $4,400 NEA grant after publishing a layout depicting female genitalia and accompanied by text that urged readers to urge their senators to oppose a recent ruling withholding federal funds to doctors who provided information on abortion. The activist artwork was included in an issue of MR’s journal devoted to gender performance, including transvestism, transsexuality and homosexuality. While the NEA contended that the journal did not “appear to speak to the dance community on issues specific to dance or performance art,” representatives of MR countered that the journal did indeed “come from a performance and dance context because these are issues that are dealt with a lot in dance” (Honan 1991: C13). In June of 1992, two months after Frohmayer left the agency and just a month before I did, the 1992 choreographers fellowships panel convened. On the first day of the panel, deputy chairman for programs Randy MacAusland visited the panel and made it clear that acting chairman Ann Radice would consider their recommendations in light of the “current environment” (Masters 1992: B2). The panel discussed whether or not to continue with its deliberations or to walk out; they decided to stay, but to issue a statement protesting the conditions under which they had to deliberate and make funding recommendations. This event shows just how quickly the controversies had proceeded and snowballed; in less than three years, Jesse

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10 The choice of the term “gender performance” is an interesting and coded one, especially at this time. There was cross-fertilization between art and academia in terms of theories of performativity, especially as they relate to gender identity as these theories were variously deployed in academia and in the art world (especially in dance and performance art) in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, a period of time concurrent with the unfolding of the NEA crises.
Helms’s opposition to *Piss Christ* had snowballed into an organizational culture in which grants were being routinely “flagged;” senior Endowment staff was admitting that political considerations were coming into play; and many if not most panels during my tenure there discussed whether they would walk out in protest (which some did), issue a protest statement, or simply proceed as usual.

**Rhetorics And Counter-Rhetorics**

Throughout the various installments of the controversies, a few key rhetorics and counter-rhetorics remained constant. The two main arguments against NEA funding revolved around: 1) obscenity and decency, and 2) the use of federal funds to support any art at all. The Religious Right used the NEA as a galvanizing topic to gain more mainstream support for their message of cultural conservatism. One of their methods was to use symbols to mobilize support within Congress and beyond. (The artworks of Serrano, Mapplethorpe and the Movement Research journal were brought onto the Senate floor.) Rhetoric about “traditional family values” was deployed to protest the creation of artworks that depicted naked bodies or addressed sexuality openly.

These two central anti-government-funding arguments often bled into each other, usually when the right would be accused of censorship or of violating First Amendment rights. Then representatives of their point of view would shift to free market arguments that declared, “Okay, fine, produce this art, but not on the taxpayer’s dollar.” This argument collapses cultural and economic conservatism, or at least makes one parade as the other. The “free-market” response, moreover, is a spurious one because it doesn’t reflect of the history of art-making in the United States, disregarding as it does “the realities of the dissemination of cultural products in the contemporary world” (Haacke
The free market has never been the rule of law in the production of high culture in the US, at least since the mid-1800s and the advent of the charitable (non-profit) organization. As explained earlier, this organizational form, as well as the various tax codes and statutes that link private and public giving, have created a world in which arts institutions depend on public and private funds as channeled through the very non-profit organizations so central to the arts in the United States.

As the controversies progressed, many in the arts community—from NEA staff members to academics to those in progressive arts lobbying organization—faulted themselves for being poorly organized and slow to respond to the attacks from the right. And while it’s true that those under attack didn’t have a single voice with which to answer their critics, several strands of argument to answer the right did emerge. Some of these were embraced or even initiated by the Endowment, some by the lobbying organization of particular disciplines. Among these counter-rhetorics were: the economic stimulus argument; the educative and generally positive social effects of art (or instrumentality arguments); “general standards of decency” as inherent in panel system (to counter obscenity charges); and First Amendment/free speech (eventually strongly embraced by Frohnmayer).

The first two counter-rhetorics grow directly out of the history of U.S. cultural patronage as described above. Economic stimulus arguments stress the interrelation of private- and public-sector giving in the arts, while those that argue for the social benefits of art draw on the Deweyian view of the generally salutary social effects of art. An interesting variant of this argument emerged to answer critics of controversial art; these “R & D arguments” assert, in part, that not only are the arts necessary for the health of a
democratic society, but moreover, that controversial artists can remind American
businesses of the value of risk-taking. While this notion of R&D operates a little
differently in Sonntag’s quote on fellowships, it’s interesting to note the cross-pollination
of the arts and business that occur as many players try to make sense of the value of
publicly funding art and especially experimental or controversial art forms. Both critics
and defenders of the NEA often appealed to economic arguments (free-market, economic
stimulus, etc.) to further their cause.

Frohnmayer’s Resignation

In light of this, it’s especially interesting to reflect on the emergence of
Frohnmayer’s idealism as he defended public arts funding. His arguments came too late
to redeem him in the eyes of the arts world, the Presidential administration, or even his
own staff, and they were certainly insufficient to save his job. Frohnmayer’s counter-
rhetoric ended up being one of free expression/First Amendment rights, but it was also
during his tenure that Program directors started flagging grants and endowment-launched
image-rehabilitation campaigns that focused on the “wholesome” grants and programs of
the NEA over time. Continually required to put out fires, Frohnmayer showed himself
eager to please, but inclined to react to situations. An early and characteristic mistake,
which Frohnmayer himself attributes to his own naïveté, was his initial refusal and
subsequent reinstatement of funding to the David Wojnarowicz exhibit at New York
City’s Artist’s Space (Frohnmayer 1993). Actions like this made the mild-mannered
Oregonian lawyer equally unpopular with artists and conservative art critics.

In February of 1992, Frohnmayer, pushed out by the Bush administration,
announced his resignation from the post of chairman of the NEA. Frohnmayer had been
in over his head from the beginning, a feeling that was prevalent in the agency and also comes through in his memoir *Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Arts Warrior*. Although hired by Bush and a solid Republican, he was neither allied with nor ready to bow to the religious right (in spite – or perhaps because – of the fact that he was an observant Protestant with a degree in religious ethics). On February 21, 1992 the entire agency staff was assembled to hear the chairman’s resignation speech. We filed in to the big ground-floor conference room where the National Council meeting took place. and filed past the portrait of President Bush. There was a somber air and much hugging. I have noted before that the actual experience of art seldom took place inside the Endowment walls. Frohnmayer’s resignation, like the 1995 Day Without Art ceremony described above, was an exception to this. In retrospect, it was a very ordered performance in three parts. The three parts were: 1) the opening credo in which he expressed his belief in the wisdom of the agency and the peer panels in making their decisions. “I believe…/I believe”; 2) a very brief statement of what it meant for him to lead the agency after which he sang several verses of the Shaker hymn “simple gifts” which casts leadership as service and responsiveness and which declares that “to bow and bend we shan’t be ashamed” (an interesting and savvy choice for a man who had been criticized as a “weak” leader); and 3) the recitation of a William Stafford poem about taking stock of one’s life. He was a man making himself vulnerable by admitting the moral crisis that he had faced. Yet he was also answering his critics, redeeming himself, and, in the choice of the hymn, making a move to reclaim religion from the radical right by explicitly linking spirituality to art. It was a moving event, and although Frohnmayer had few friends among the program directors, the sheer emotional force of the event as a
staff member cannot be discounted, containing as it did equal parts redemption, idealism, and solidarity. The ceremony shows the struggle even a bureaucrat had with the conflict between an idealized view of the arts and what they can do for humanity and a society, and the political pressures on a public arts agency.

As anthropologist Carol Vance points out, “symbolic mobilizations and moral panics often leave in their wake residues of law and policy that remain in force long after the hysteria has subsided (Vance in Bolton: 111).” This explains eerily well the agency I encountered upon my return—none of the hysteria or, admittedly, the excitement of the early 1990s, but the “residues” were immense. The effects of the controversies showed themselves to be nothing less than a total dismantling of the agency, a state that was physicalized in the general squalor and disarray in the corridors.

**Restructuring**

When I returned to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in September of 1995, I found an agency in organizational upheaval and much changed from that I had left in August of 1992. While most of the individual controversies that had thrust the NEA to the center of the so-called culture wars had hit the news years before—including the Mapplethorpe, Serrano/Piss Christ, and NEA Four/Finley cases—their effects were just now settling into the institution in the form of structural changes. As with all things federal and bureaucratic, there was a considerable time lag. Part of this lag had to do with outside influences as anti-NEA players had also moved from the religious and political extreme into the Congress. The 104th Congress included a House of Representatives packed with 1994’s freshman members who were staunch cultural conservatives and backers of Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America. It seemed that the election of a liberal Democratic president and his appointment of stage and screen actress Jane Alexander (a good old-fashioned liberal and, not insignificantly, the first working
artist to head the agency) would bode well for the agency. Yet Alexander had inherited a raft of problems and was charged with the task of defending the agency from a Congress many of whose members sought no less than to completely dismantle it.

In 1995, with Alexander at the helm, the NEA faced great external pressures that resulted in internal changes, changes that manifested themselves not only in the structure of the agency, but also in terms of its very mission and goals as well as in the atmosphere inside the organization. Most significantly, Congress had just passed a vote to cut the budget of the agency nearly in half, a fact that meant that it could no longer do business as usual. Among the most significant results of the budget cut would be a 40% reduction in staff; a considerable pall existed over the agency in September as staff members awaited their notices. Nobody knew for sure who would end up being fired, but those without seniority knew they would be the first to go. Further, many staff members including some program directors had already left the agency, either in direct protest of decency restrictions put in place as a result of the controversies or simply because, as one person put it, they “saw the writing on the wall” and wanted to move into another job as soon as they could. Yet very few staff members even mentioned the controversies of 1989-90, so completely had they become institutional reality. An exception to this came during one 1995 interview when a staff member who was preparing to leave reached into one of her packing boxes and pulled out the catalogue from the SECCA show in which Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ was shown. She said, “you wanna know what’s going on. This is what started it all.” It was the first time that anyone in the agency gave that moment that kind of weight, and was a refreshing contrast to the layer of rationalization
and denial that people who were staying at the agency had kept up as a defense mechanism to deal with radical change and uncertainty.

Just as dramatic as the staff in disarray and slashed budget were changes in the structure of the organization, many related, of course, to the looming budget cut. These shifts in organizational structure and mission were referred to internally simply as “the restructuring.” Another external component of restructuring came in the form of Congressional legislation that abolished fellowships in all disciplines except for Literature and Jazz Masters, citing as its reasons a lack of “accountability” on the part of the artists and a lack of control vis-à-vis the results of support on the part of the government. This meant that the NEA’s tradition and philosophy of providing direct funding to artists was now a matter of history. Related both to this change and to the budget cut was the most dramatic shift—that from the discipline-based organizational model to a theme-based model. The agency, and Alexander in particular, rationalized the change as a way of “maximizing” the good the agency could do with the money it had left. Only “exemplary projects” within the various disciplines would be funded under the new theme programs.  

Quite aside from all of its philosophical and practical implications for various artistic fields, the abolition of the NEA’s discipline programs brought about a dramatic physical rearrangement of offices and reshuffling of staff. Some of those who had worked as specialists in discipline offices were being moved to theme offices, but the majority would be laid off. One program director described what this meant in actual

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11 In this move towards project-based funding, the NEA was echoing the product model that dominated the U.S. corporate arena at this time. In arts funding, this way of operating favors time-specific projects with certain discrete parameters, goals and timelines as opposed to open-ended or ongoing support meant to sustain an artist or arts organizations.
terms—during my last weeks at the NEA, the staff of the visual arts program and museum programs were merging the entire contents of these two programs into a few file cabinets, while the staff of these two programs was being cut to an eighth of its former size. As it turned out, discipline programs staff were cut disproportionately in comparison to those in more administrative sectors of the agency, leaving, in effect, a top-heavy agency. As each program dismantled it offices, years and years of shared history ended up in huge mail carts in the hallways encircling the atrium of the old post office, the building that houses the NEA. Materials that filled these offices and served as partial history of various fields—grant applications and reports as well as the materials that accompanied them including thick, glossy catalogs from NEA-sponsored visual arts exhibitions and complete runs of small-circulation but respected literary magazines—now ended up stacked in hallways, a physicalization of the evisceration of the agency. While the actual grant applications were headed for government storage facilities, there was no room for the accompanying materials, the artifacts and signs of the effects of NEA support, and they were left in piles for public consumption.

**Partnerships and Privatization as Restructuring Strategies: A New Role for a Public Agency**

The situations and new institutional arrangements—public-private partnerships, especially—described below are drawn from field research conducted during the NEA’s restructuring. Even at the moment of severe crisis, many of the recurrent logics that guide US cultural patronage held true, even as there was an unprecedented move toward privatization and away from direct public funding of artists. Among these trends were: the increasing tendency to think of art in instrumental terms, a tendency that is occurring at many sites and in many forms: using art to achieve a specific social goal; to create a
national identity; to challenge that national identity (activist art); to heal; and to construct status.

Although the terms of the debate around the NEA have changed, at least on the surface, Helms is still a galvanizing symbol. He showed up as such in the announcement of an event held to celebrate one of the NEA’s public-private partnerships. This appeared in the Washington, D.C. weekly the City Paper on December 8th, near the end of my stay at the NEA.

Autographs--proof merely that a celebrity once used ink--are entirely overrated. But it's still nicely ironic that a U.S. Senate mug, John Hancocked and donated by Jesse Helms (R.-N.C.), will raise money for the National Endowment for the Arts. At Tonight's NEA Rent Party. Borders bookstore raises money for the organization's general fund by hosting a silent auction of items like signed copies of Faith Ringgold's Tar Beach and Garrison Keillor's Cat, You Better Come Home. Jazz pianists Marian McPartland, Kenny Werner, Stanley Cowell, and others will provide tinkly background entertainment. Buy that mug and smash it to smithereens tonight at 7 p.m. at Borders, 18th & L Sts. NW. $5. (City Paper 1995: 55).

The many questions raised by this clever paragraph overlap significantly with those raised by the last of my stays at the NEA. Why would Jesse Helms donate an item to be auctioned off to benefit his supposed nemesis, the NEA? What were the connections at all between the NEA's mid-1990s funding problems and those controversies of several years earlier? Why was a private corporation holding an event to raise money for a public agency, and what, precisely was the larger relationship between the sponsor, Borders, and the NEA? Unraveling the contradictions and incongruities of this paragraph is a small-scale version of the broader goals of this section, i.e., to try to make sense of the NEA's
move towards public-private partnerships, including how these partnerships enabled each institution to use each the other to achieve what may be different ends.

**Partnerships and the Restructuring of the National Endowment for the Arts**

In the fall of 1995, the United States Congress cut the NEA's budget by forty percent, forcing the agency not only to let go of nearly one half of its staff, but also to reformulate its function and goals. During the consequent institutional reorganization, NEA administrators deployed the term "partnership" to describe a variety of new relationships and projects necessitated by the economic and political pressures the Endowment faced. Although the term itself was not new, it was now being used more often and, indeed, seemed at many points in my fieldwork to be an obsession of the restructuring. Partnership as a management mode stresses the strategic formation of coalitions, and also seeks to maximize (or at least maintain) influence over a project while minimizing actual economic investment. This last aspect is especially important for the NEA, an agency whose visibility and influence far outweigh its actual financial resources. The NEA's motivations for including this particular understanding of partnerships as a central mechanism of its recent restructuring were unique to this historical moment. That is, not only did they have specific causes in government and economic policy, but they also had analogs in a variety of contemporary American organizational settings, most notably the for-profit corporation. Strategic coalition building and maximizing the influence-to-economic-investment ratio appear in the contemporary U.S. corporation in the forms of corporate mergers and downsizing. The recent NEA restructuring was driven by a brand of instrumental thinking that resonates strongly with these two corporate modes, a fact that made it quite a different agency than the one founded in 1965 on idealistic and progress-oriented thinking.

Partnerships are but one component of the NEA's new orientation. Another major and obvious example of this targeted way of thinking was the 1996 replacement of
discipline programs with four theme-based granting categories—Heritage & Preservation, Education & Access, Creation & Presentation, and Planning & Stabilization. From that point forward, applicants had to submit proposals for particular projects, and would no longer be able to apply for general operating support. Furthermore, the agency, by Congressional decree, abolished all grants to individual artists, with the exception of its Jazz Masters and Literature Fellowships.

In interviews conducted in the fall of 1995, NEA staff members described the new focus on partnerships as part of the organizational vision of agency chairman Jane Alexander. Appointed by President Clinton in October 1993, the respected stage and screen actress came to the Endowment with specific ideas for the agency, thus disproving speculation both within the agency and outside of it that she was merely a figurehead appointee meant to boost the agency’s image. Staff members noted that one of Alexander’s first priorities was to strengthen the agency’s ties with other federal agencies. This decision was certainly motivated by the agency’s desire to exert its influence and secure funding for arts organizations while spending as little of its own budget as possible, especially when its budget was threatened. Moreover, the kinds of projects in which it engaged were those that sought to achieve social goals through the use of art. In October of 1994, Alexander named longtime Washington bureaucrat Marianne Klink as Federal Liaison, and charged her with forging these relationships with other federal agencies. Recent federal partnerships of which Klink was particularly proud included a Department of Justice program called Pathways to Success, a youth anti-crime program to which the DOJ contributed $800,000 and the NEA $100,000. The NEA’s involvement in “Pathways” resulted in the incorporation of arts organizations in the planning of after-school activities meant to keep kids away from crime. The process of identifying potential non-arts sources for arts funding and of contributing non-monetary agency resources (such as staff and panel expertise) to foster joint projects is referred to at the
NEA as “leveraging” funds. Klink explained that partnerships with other federal agencies were shaped by the fact that the NEA had little money, but had developed a staff uniquely in tune with arts organizations and possessed of an unparalleled ability to identify artists and arts organizations suitable for projects funded by other agencies. In its partnerships, the NEA sought to use its knowledge resources to benefit those who may have previously received direct assistance from them. The NEA's strategy of moving away from providing direct support of art and towards a role of identifying potential extra-arts funding possibilities for arts activities was described by staff members, in corporate-inflected bureaucratese, as “information brokering.”

In a press release announcing the inauguration of its own Website, the NEA described its new role by calling the Website itself “a national arts information clearinghouse,” and asserting that “[t]he launch of this Website heralds a new era at the Endowment which, faced with substantial budget cuts, has implemented a new structure emphasizing partnerships, community-building, and resource development.” Coalition building figured largely in this new way of channeling support to arts organizations, namely encouraging arts organizations to join forces with social service organizations in order to tap into a broader base of public funds. Partnerships reflect an aspect of the widespread and multi-faceted “instrumentalization of art” occurring in this country at that time. Instrumental, goal-oriented thinking guides both coalition-building itself (in which collaborators come together to complete a specific project) and also shaped the kinds of partners—drug prevention, crime prevention, and other social welfare organizations—artists are being encouraged to seek out. In the latter case, instrumentality took the form of using art as a means to achieve a certain social good.

**The Logic of Partnerships: Cultural and Historical Themes**

The NEA, then, used partnership to refer to a range of arrangements including: lending its name and staff expertise to a project administered by another federal agency;
co-funding a project with another entity; and accepting funds from a private donor. In addition to these fiscal arrangements, the term also described the agency's use of its knowledge base and high profile to stimulate and guide non-governmental funding of the arts, the “information brokering” function referred to above. The focus on seeking out potential private sources for arts funding as well as the transfer of funds and power to state and local agencies was part of a broader rethinking of the role of the federal government then occurring in the U.S.

The ideology of privatization, by which fiscal responsibility for programs is transferred from government to other entities, including individuals and corporations, came to the foreground during this period. In the context of these ideologies that address the proper role of the federal government, immediate economic and political forces are undeniably a major impetus for the deep institutional change at the NEA, and especially for its search for new ways to generate revenue for itself and its former grantees. But economic forces alone do not fully account for the NEA’s increasing focus on collaborative partnerships with states, nonprofit organizations, and increasingly, with corporate entities. Here I look beyond the immediate economic and political circumstances that led the NEA to forge partnerships with other organizations to examine the potential implications of collaborations in arts funding.

The symbolic dimensions of partnerships are among the most complex of these implications. Given the broad range of relationships that fall under the rubric of partnership, one key to understanding the motives of each party is to ask what is gained and lost symbolically by each “partner” in each scenario. Especially in the realm of art and culture, an exchange of funds is often accompanied by a good measure of what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital. As I examine the growth of partnerships within the NEA, I ask how this symbolic capital—which alternately takes the forms of prestige, status, an imprimatur, and a legitimating force—is set into motion in each case. I also
argue that in addition to creating increasingly complicated systems of fiscal relationships, partnership agreements undertaken by the NEA established a circulation of symbolic capital, or an “economy of legitimation.” Of course, in such an economy, legitimacy, prestige, and recognition stand not only to be gained but also lost by each “partner.”

A second and related question is, "What happens to institutions as they begin to interweave their goals and activities with other institutions?" In the case of the NEA, its agreements with various organizations affected the agency's structure and mission. Changes in official rhetoric and in the shaping of specific projects resulted from the combined efforts of governmental, for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Organizational theorists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell call this process of organizational change “institutional isomorphism” (1991: 64). The most striking example of institutional isomorphism in the arts funding field is an increased focus on enterprise and marketing (i.e., a nascent corporatism) in the both the government and nonprofit arts sectors, and also visible in the degree of sophistication about business matters displayed by many contemporary artists (including, if not especially, “independent” artists unattached to big arts organizations such as ballets or symphonies). Direct public-private partnerships such as the Cultural Tourism Initiative and the Borders-NEA partnership (the ones that I focus on here) afford a view of how processes of organizational change occur structurally and in terms of their effects on an organization's public image.

I now turn to the description of a partnership agreement—the Borders partnership—to discuss and analyze the NEA’s policy of partnerships, especially those that explicitly merged the interests and administration of public agencies and private corporations. The material that I draw on includes field notes generated from participant-observation; interviews with NEA staff members; and a range of official NEA publications.
The Borders case—partnership as receipt of funds from a corporate donor

A number of themes surface in the NEA’s relationship with the national book and music chain Borders, Inc. Among these are: the problems of merging commercial interests with the production and dissemination of art; issues of control not only of particular shared projects but also of the NEA’s own public image as it becomes affiliated with that of its corporate partner; and the nature of the relationship between private interests and the public good. The Borders partnership represents one further (and complicated) step towards privatization, as it set up a direct and mutually beneficial relationship between a federal agency charged with advancing the public good and a private corporation concerned with its own interests. As such, it presents a study case for considering what each partner gains economically and symbolically from the relationship. The Borders case also enables us to look at how such a relationship either actively changes or indicates a perceived change in the social role of the corporation, the government and its social welfare programs, and, finally, of art and artists.

The partnership that the NEA and Borders initiated in 1995, though, consisted not of the NEA jointly funding a project nor of the agency using its influence to encourage a private entity to take over the funding of certain arts projects. Rather, it entailed the NEA receiving an unrestricted gift of over $100,000 in one single year from Borders, with the money accepted by the NEA becoming part of the general fund from which it disbursed grants. NEA staff members stressed that accepting gifts from private donors was not unprecedented in the agency's history. However, the Borders relationship clearly consisted of more than a one-time gift, a fact underscored by both parties' presentation of the relationship as innovative and unique.

A notable aspect of the Borders partnership is that the total amount the NEA stood to gain was directly related to the overall commercial success of Borders in 1995; although Borders initially gave the NEA a lump sum of $50,000, the remaining amount of the gift
was determined by the number of Borders stores opened in that calendar year (46), with the opening of each new store resulting in an additional $1000 donation to the NEA. Furthermore, Borders held fund-raising auctions in each of these new stores and donated the proceeds of these events to the Arts Endowment.

Implicit in the distinctive economic relations of the NEA-Borders partnership was the emergence of new social roles for public agencies and for-profit corporations. In this arrangement, the corporation expanded its goals beyond immediate profits and concerns itself directly with doing (or at least appearing to do) social good, while a government agency became the direct beneficiary of a private corporation. This melding of roles raises questions about how social responsibilities have been and should be divided among sectors, a question which certainly has ramifications beyond arts funding and which is at the heart of the current debate over privatization. Borders' gift to the NEA represents a complicated moment in the push for privatization occurring in so many areas. The Borders-NEA partnership, as an instance of a strong private-sector endorsement of public involvement of arts and culture, raises questions about the parameters of privatization as both a concept and a policy. Borders' description of the partnership published on their Website explains their position:

"Borders shares the NEA's commitment to the arts. It is an organization that does a tremendous amount of good in communities across the country and at many levels in society," said Borders President Rich Flanagan. "Regardless of the level of NEA cutbacks made by the government, the Arts Endowment truly is an organization worthy of our support. We want to provide an example to all companies who believe, as we do, that supporting the arts is essential to their survival in this country."

Paradoxically, many of the activities through which Borders' support for the NEA as a public agency was enacted—and especially the Borders-sponsored silent auctions in which arts organizations donated goods or services to raise money for the NEA—looked
an awful lot like privatization. It is striking to note the involuted form that privatization took in this case as funds generated from these auctions (a decidedly free-market form of commerce) were recycled back through the bureaucracy of a public agency. The blurring of perceived roles inherent in the Borders/NEA partnership exceeded that of the joint initiatives and coalition-building of the Cultural Tourism Initiative, in which the relation of the public to the private consisted mainly of the public sector schooling the private sector in how to take over the reins. In the case of the Borders partnership, the corporation symbolically took over the leadership role as it pronounced the value of public support of the arts. In other words, the corporation was not simply sponsoring the arts, but, in effect, presented itself as sponsoring the public sponsorship of the arts.

The Borders/NEA Rent Party: A Ritual of Privatization

These entanglements of public monies and corporate philanthropy were enacted in two events staged to announce the Borders/NEA relationship. The first took place on December 6, 1995 in Borders' home city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and featured Jane Alexander accepting a block grant of $50,000 from Borders President Richard L. Flanagan. The second event was the NEA “Rent party” and silent auction mentioned above and which took place in the downtown Washington, DC Borders store.

As I read the Endowment's press releases about these events, I was struck by the disjunction between their celebratory tone and the dismal atmosphere within the agency. What connected these worlds, was, of course, the threats to the agency being enacted in Congress at that very time. That is, Borders portrayed themselves as coming to the agency's aid at a particularly difficult time—a time that had started with the decency controversies of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The relationship between Borders' intervention and the NEA's history of image and funding problems informed my understanding and analysis of the December 10th, 1995 celebration of the partnership at the Washington DC Borders store. The event, billed as a "silent auction and NEA Rent
Party,” was poorly publicized within the Endowment, with just a couple of flyers at the elevators, so although I had been at the NEA for most of the week preceding the event, I got my information about it from the *City Paper* blurb I mentioned earlier, the one which invoked Helms and his Senate mug.

In what follows, I describe the ritual celebration of the Borders-NEA partnership and the ways in which my experience of it was shot through with these two questions: 1) how is this event related to the NEA’s recent history and threats to its existence and 2) what was being exchanged—both economically and symbolically—between the NEA and Borders by means of this partnership?

I got to Borders at about 6 p.m., just as they were about to close their doors for the evening and prepare for the auction and piano performance. It was an unusually cold night, so store personnel allowed us to stay inside while they prepared. We were asked to sit in the cafe section of the store while they closed to the public and were also asked to purchase our five-dollar admission fee for the evening. We were also informed that a donation to the NEA in a greater amount could be paid at any cash register. During this time, there was a good deal of confusion about who was in charge and just exactly what was to occur. I saw no NEA staff members during the set-up time, and concluded that Borders was taking full responsibility for the event’s logistics. People milling around seemed perplexed about what to do, and like me, relied on occasional shouted announcements from Borders clerks as cues. Instead of adopting a playful attitude in the face of indeterminacy, both audience and organizers seemed tentative and tense. I wondered if the tone of this event somehow characterized the entire Borders/NEA relationship, and if the questions that came up in terms of five-dollar tickets and this one unique event weren’t indeed the very same ones that may continue to color the entire relationship: who was responsible for collecting the money?; exactly how would it get to the NEA?; how and why did my buying a desk calendar at Borders benefit the NEA?
While waiting for the entertainment to start, staff passed out programs, which included a point-by-point list of how attendees could support the Endowment throughout the evening:

1. Make a silent bid. Auction table is upstairs.
2. Shop. A portion of tonight's book, music and cafe sales will be donated to the NEA.
3. Feel free to make a further tax-deductible cash, check, or credit card donation at any cash register.
4. Buy a glass of wine. Proceeds will benefit the NEA.

Finally, we were let downstairs where a grand piano was set up in preparation for a jazz piano performance. Before the entertainment began, Omus Hirshbein, Director of the NEA's about-to-be-defunct Music Program, explained the context of the evening. He mentioned the Ann Arbor program of the previous Wednesday and the announcement of Borders total contribution of $116,000 to the NEA for 1995. Hirshbein also applauded the Really Rosie production, saying that the NEA "wants to see a lot more of this kind of work." It wasn't clear just what kind of work he was referring to: more children's theater? more public-private partnerships? Hirshbein then acknowledged the presence of Borders President Richard Flanagan and declared of the Borders relationship, "It's a miracle." but made no mention of the drastic staff and budget cuts the NEA was weathering. This omission, along with the Flanagan's failure to make any remarks and the paucity of NEA staff in the audience, made the Borders gift seem somehow unconnected to the current state of the agency and the arts field.

Art per se finally manifested itself in the jazz program that took up most of the evening. Murray Horwitz, a programming director at National Public Radio and former NEA employee, was the jocular emcee. Horwitz explained the evening's billing as a "Rent Party and Cutting Contest" benefiting the NEA, noting that rent parties were fairly
common in Harlem during the 1920s, and occurred when musicians would come together to play a sort of house party cum benefit to raise rent for a friend threatened with eviction or who had otherwise fallen on hard times. Cutting contests, the mode of performance wherein musicians respond to one another with improvisatory one-upsmanship, were apparently the order of the day for Harlem rent parties.

There was nothing particularly demanding about the evening's entertainment, and nothing that created a “cutting contest” atmosphere of one-upsmanship. Rather, the performers chose to play non-esoteric music for a partly non-expert audience. I wondered what kind of image of the NEA the curators of the evening (whoever they might be) wanted to project. Hirshbein's comments that, apart from certain Native American crafts, jazz is the only truly indigenous American art form, offered a clue. Despite its questionable claim, his contention nonetheless linked salvaging the Endowment with salvaging our “national treasures,” a sentiment that has accompanied pro-NEA rhetoric since its inception and has been revived over the past several years of controversy.

During intermission, Horwitz plugged the silent auction and held up the featured item, the Senate mug bearing Jesse Helms's signature. Horwitz gently lampooned Helms, and indicated the irony in the fact that bidding on a Helms-donated item would actually benefit the NEA. Again, this would have been a perfect moment to contextualize the Borders event, and the need for it in the current political and economic climate, but it was passed over. Helms's donation signaled, I believe, his approval not of the agency, but of a move towards using private funds to support the arts in this country. Nonetheless, it is still odd that he would support the NEA as a government entity, which, despite the size of Borders' or any other private donor's contribution, it still is.
The Borders case is emblematic of a specific time and place. If, as stated, the Borders partnership consists of a role reversal, two questions arise: 1) what does each party gain and lose from assuming a new role in the economy of public arts funding?, and 2) why is the seepage between public and private roles occurring at this time in this way? Again, what was new about the partnership, as Borders stressed in its public relations literature, was that it was the first time the NEA entered into a direct, ongoing relationship with a corporation. Clearly, what the NEA stood to gain by its participation in the economy of legitimation activated by this partnership was an influx of money and a public vote of confidence from a fairly visible private sector organization. Particularly in light of the recent decency controversies, such a visible endorsement of the NEA went a long way towards correcting its alternately outlaw and elitist image. On the other hand, in accepting the donation, the NEA stood to lose ground in their attempt to further the perception of their granting activities as free from the pressures of outside interests. The NEA's General Counsel Karen Christiansen, who was most intimately involved in setting up the Borders partnership, conveyed this anxiety about maintaining an autonomous image in a partnership, especially one involving a corporation. (The fact that the head lawyer for the NEA was charged with overseeing this relationship indicates that the anxiety was not hers alone.) Christiansen explained the negotiation of the Borders partnership like this:

Borders came to the Endowment about a year ago with an idea of giving us a contribution in exchange for a whole series of activities that they wanted us to do. I looked at it and talked with people at the Justice Department about it, and then went back to Borders and said, "We can accept gifts. If you want to give us $50,000, that's
fine, but we can't come up with an exchange of services, because then it's no longer a gift, it's a quid pro quo, which raises issues of us licensing the Endowment logo and name." In addition, there were ethical considerations about endorsement. Government employees aren't supposed to endorse private companies' products, and it could look like the Endowment was endorsing Borders over some other bookstore.

So Borders re-evaluated, and went ahead and gave us the gift, but there's very little Endowment activity in exchange for that. So, the analysis we go through with any entity that offers to help us is, "If you're really giving us a gift, then that's the kind of partnership that we've been talking about." The point being always that we have to make sure that it doesn't look like we're endorsing that particular company.

The Endowment stood to gain both a needed cash influx and a private-sector endorsement from Borders, but what did Borders stand to gain from the partnership, if, as Christiansen noted, "there's very little Endowment activity in exchange for" the gift? The public face that Borders put on the partnership indicates that for them the exchange operated largely on a symbolic level. Both on their Web page and in the events held to raise money for the NEA, Borders used its NEA connection to craft a specific public image. Further, Borders portrayed its community service as decidedly progressive, a feature meant to distinguish them from other corporations, and by extension, to enable them to appeal to a certain kind of customer and to carve out a unique market niche for themselves. The corporation's preoccupation with public service contributed to its symbolic capital much as a philanthropist's choices construct him or her as a certain kind of elite donor within a larger philanthropic community. Borders could then translate this
symbolic capital into economic capital by using it to appeal to a certain group of consumers who may in turn construct status and distinction through their affiliation with a progressive corporation.

Borders has invested a great deal of energy into the community service aspect of their corporate identity. Their Web Site, in an extensive section on “Community Relations,” explains that each Borders store has its own “Community Relations Coordinator (CRC),” who “develops innovative and creative store events tailored to the interests of the local community.” Borders's corporate history helps to explain their cultivation of this particular image and also the scope of what is at stake for them as a corporation.¹²

In a series of conversations that took place in 1991, Pierre Bourdieu and conceptual artist Hans Haacke discussed common concerns. Haacke has created a number of installations (shown mostly in private galleries) critiquing corporate sponsorship of the arts; among these are Helmsboro Country (1990), an exploration of tobacco company Philip Morris's extensive arts sponsorship and simultaneous backing of Senator Helms's campaigns. Helmsboro Country juxtaposes a sculpture of a huge box of cigarettes with the Marlboro design, but bearing a likeness of Helms in the coat of arms; the installation also includes wall labels with anti-NEA statements from Helms and statement from a Philip Morris executive declaring, “Our fundamental interest in the arts is self-interest.”

¹²Founded an Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1971 by Tom and Louis Borders, the company was acquired by the K-Mart corporation in 1992 (Investor's Business Daily 1994). In 1994, an ailing K-Mart corporation revamped its bookstore operations by creating Borders Group, Inc. as the parent company for Borders bookstores, Waldenbooks and Planet Music. Borders moved it corporate headquarters back to Ann Arbor in 1994, and completed its break with K-Mart in August of 1995 after buying back its stock (New York Times 1995). These high-stakes corporate relationships, invisible to the average bookstore customer, indicate the importance of maintaining a distinct corporate image, not to mention the importance of sheer name recognition. Seeing Borders' partnership with the NEA in the context of its larger program of community service as a mode of asserting a corporate identity also illuminates some of the broader complexities and indirect consequences of public-private partnerships, including the question of potential gains for the corporate partner and the thorny issues of endorsement, sponsorship and privatization.
Central topics of Bourdieu and Haacke's conversation, published in English under the title *Free Exchange*, were: the role of the artist and intellectual in society; the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and, in a section entitled "Sponsors Who Know the Tune," patronage and corporate sponsorship. Haacke's knowledge of the U.S. (and indeed international) predicament for the production and dissemination of art complements Bourdieu's highly elaborated notion of capital, its circulation and transformations. The synthesis of their points of reference make for a uniquely complex and up-to-date analysis of the contemporary culture wars and one of their key battlegrounds, patronage.

In their dialogue, they also analyze the operations of symbolic capital and privatization, and identify the most important operation of symbolic capital in sponsorship situations as "recognition." Haacke distinguishes sponsorship from traditional notions of patronage, contending that sponsorship amounts to buying good will under the auspices of beneficence. Bourdieu, for his part, sees the problems of privatization as extending beyond the corporation and its interests, to create misrecognition of the responsibility of public agencies. Although their conversation predates the Borders partnership by several years, their commentary is uncannily keyed into some of the problems of its institutional arrangements and images. Bourdieu, speaking of more straightforward cases of private patronage, i.e., those in which public and private entities are not nearly as enmeshed as in the Borders case, states, "private patronage may justify the abdication of public authorities with the extraordinary result that citizens still finance the arts and sciences through tax exemptions. Furthermore, they finance the symbolic effect brought to bear on them to the extent that the funding appears to be an example of the disinterested generosity of the corporations. There is, in this, an extremely perverse mechanism which operates in such a way that we contribute to our own mystification (Bourdieu and Haacke: 16).” We, that is the taxpayers who believe
that we are saving taxes by not directly subsidizing a government agency that funds art
and culture, are actually subsidizing the corporation's construction of its own positive
image. Haacke contends that, in the exchange of capital between a sponsoring
corporation and a sponsored organization--whether that agency is the NEA or an arts
organization--the corporation offers financial capital in exchange for symbolic capital
(17). This symbolic capital not only works to boost their image, it also diverts attention
from the company's "interests when it comes to matters like taxes, labor and health
regulations and ecological constraints," an operation he explores visually through
installations such as Helmsboro Country.

The exchange of capital and the implications of private sponsorship for public
agencies that Haacke and Bourdieu describe certainly pertain to the Borders partnership,
and even to aspects of the Cultural Tourism Initiative. However, there are elements of
the Borders partnership that are even more complex than those they describe. That is, not
only does the private sponsorship of Borders enable a potential abdication of public
agencies, it threatens to have corporations directly step into the role of public agencies by
working through them. In other words, not only does the sponsoring agency change from
public to private, but the sponsoring agency (the NEA) becomes corporately sponsored.
Furthermore, as to the exchange of symbolic capital, not only does the NEA, as the
sponsored, offer its symbolic capital to the corporation, but because anti-government
sentiment is so high, the approval of a private corporation may, in some situations,
actually confer symbolic capital (in the form of recognition and legitimacy) upon the
NEA. For example, if we consider the NEA's "market" to be the United States Congress,
then it is easy to see how symbolic capital gained through its association with private
companies may be exchanged for financial capital in the form of a renewed budget.
Conclusion

The move towards privatization clearly stands not only to transform the NEA as an organization, but also to profoundly affect artists and organizations that previously benefited from its funding. Beginning to understand the mechanisms of privatization as they are enacted in the two cases I described may help in understanding the more general operations of this phenomenon. In the Borders partnership and the Cultural Tourism Initiative, the NEA is seen as most attuned to the needs of the arts community but as lacking the resources to meet those needs, a predicament which leads to them assuming the role of "information broker" and catalyst for private giving to the arts. Turning to the corporate sector to take up the reins of arts funding raises questions two sets of questions, one slightly more optimistic than the other. The first set resonates with questions asked by those who study the relationship between private philanthropy and public policy, namely, how can the private sector best serve the public good? The second set of questions resonates with the critiques of sponsorship raised by Bourdieu and Haacke. These questions are more critical and more cutting, and ask how can corporations be stopped from using sponsorship as a smokescreen for public relations?

While scholars of philanthropy and of the nonprofit sector in the U.S. have discussed and analyzed the history (if not tradition) of private interests influencing an understanding of the "public good," we must wonder how, if at all, the interests of large corporations can work to complement government social welfare programs. In this still-emerging landscape of privatization, is the NEA as a public agency transforming into a corporate consultant, while the corporate sector takes on the role funding the public good? If this is so, then we are seeing not merely an elaboration of partnership models and philanthropic practices, but real structural change in how notions of the public good and private interests meet to generate policy and to determine the distribution of resources in this country. The implications of this last possibility clearly extend beyond
the NEA and even beyond public-private partnership more generally and raise fundamental questions about the burgeoning role of market forces not only in determining access to arts and culture but also in terms of the ways in which artists see themselves in relation to mainstream cultural, economic and political forces. The following chapters consider these questions by looking towards, respectively, the organizational, professional, and artistic features of contemporary experimental choreographer in the United States.
Chapter 3:  
ALTERNATIVE SPACES: FROM COLLECTIVES TO BUREAUCRACIES

Introduction

This chapter acts as a bridge between the more general discussions of engaged art and of cultural patronage in the first part of the dissertation (Chapters 1 and 2) and the located discussions of choreographers’ career narratives and evolving aesthetic concerns in its latter half (Chapters 4 and 5). It does so by considering the organizations that have themselves acted as vehicles for the marriage of social and aesthetic ideals and, later, as bridges between funders and artists. These organizations are the alternative dance and performance spaces that sprang up in U.S. cities (primarily New York, at first) from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. This chapter traces their trajectory from this founding moment through the 1970s and 1980s during which they flourished due largely to government funding, and finally to their recent organizational rearrangements from the mid-1990s to the present.

I focus on three New York City organizations in/with which I conducted fieldwork in 1997 and 1998: Dance Theater Workshop (DTW) and it spin-off organization the National Performance Network (NPN) (founded in 1965 and 1983, respectively); The Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church (founded in 1974); and Movement Research (MR) (founded in 1974). For context, I also refer to three other key dance-performance spaces: The Kitchen (founded 1971); PS 122 (founded 1979); and Houston’s Diverseworks (founded 1983). These organizations were most often founded by a small group of artists whose initial goal was to create opportunities for themselves and their peers to create and show their artworks.
It's helpful at the outset to know a few basic facts: in their early days, these alternative dance spaces were housed either in artists' lofts (DTW and Movement Research) or in donated quasi-public spaces such as churches (Danspace). Their founders were artists loosely organized into groups or collectives with shared goals and interests. Finally, they construed themselves as an alternative to traditional modern dance organizations with one leader and technique and organized themselves around the ideals of opportunity and access; possibility and experimentation; and service to a community. Never commercial ventures, they all eventually incorporated as nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations in order to obtain funding (at first in the form of local and state public grants).

**Part I: History and Background of Alternative Spaces**

In this first section I describe the early days of these organizations drawing on participant observation; interviews with key founding figures; and journalistic and scholarly accounts. In order to fully understand the artistic and social significance of these alternative spaces in their early days, I consider their historical context, including the dance traditions and organizations to which they considered themselves an alternative and also those to which they saw themselves as heirs. Finally, and most importantly, I explore the connections between the social ideals and aesthetic concerns of the artists who founded these organizations and the organizational structures and forms they created around themselves.

The founding narratives of these organizations offer the richest if not entirely transparent view of the ideals and concerns that shaped these organizations. Whether informal reminiscences or official organizational narratives, these founding stories (and
the language of their tellers) convey the ways in which aesthetic concerns, social and political ideals, and a certain kind of organizational thinking merged to create these alternative dance organizations at a given historical moment. As the range of accounts here indicates, the vision of what this literal and figurative alternative space would look like was a broad one. Yet it had specific consistent features, including a preference for collective structures and an interest in new definitions of dance and choreography that eschewed codified techniques and the cult of personality characteristic of American modern dance since its inception. Let me now turn to these nostalgia-tinged narratives, keeping in mind that they were fashioned at a time (the middle to late 1990s) of financial threat to these organizations.

**Art as Collective Work: Dance Theater Workshop**

Dance Theater Workshop (founded in 1965) is the oldest and, arguably, the most continually influential of the downtown alternative spaces. And Village Voice dance critic Deborah Jowitt is one of the most influential and respected of New York dance critics and scholars. In 2000, on the occasion of DTW’s 35th anniversary, Jowitt publicly recalled its early days:

The sound of a hammer. I hear it when I think of Dance Theater Workshop during the 1960s. For those of us who performed in Jeff Duncan’s very small loft on West 20th Street, the hammering was both a ritual and necessity. Vigorous rehearsing inevitably caused the nails that held the Masonite panels to the scabby old floorboards to work their way upward, a menace to bare feet. Jeff, DTW’s founder, did most of the pounding, but, in the spirit of the times, what he and Jack Moore…spawned 35 years ago was a loose cooperative of
dancers and choreographers. "Where's the hammer?" Or "I'll get the hammer." we said, and did (Jowitt: 33).

In Jowitt's telling the hammer is the symbol of scrappy energy that these artists worked with. What also comes through is the sense of collective, even communal work, and also an anti-elitist view of the artist as laborer. Jowitt's choice of the hammer as the symbol for those early days underscores what came through in the very names of these new downtown spaces—symbolically and actually constructed in opposition to their uptown counterparts. The names communicate this sense of down-to-earth work and labor—Dance Theater Workshop, The Kitchen, Movement Research (originally "The School for Movement Research and Construction"). As founding member Daniel Lepkoff parsed the original name: "And it was called 'The School for Movement Research and Construction' and the 'Construction' like researching and also building something….making things, building things" (Lepkoff 1995). 13

**Historical Roots of Alternative Spaces: Judson Dance Theater**

The anti-elitist stance of the founders of these organizations grew out of the work of their predecessors in the Judson Dance Theater (JDT), so called because they held their concerts in the Judson Memorial Church in New York’s Greenwich Village. The concerts of the Judson Group in the early 1960s are seen as the roots of contemporary postmodern dance, and in many ways paved the way for the activities and artworks of the early alternative spaces. There were some continuities in terms of personnel and direct lines of influence as founders of MR and Danspace in particular had either studied or danced with members of the Judson Dance Theater and were certainly influenced by their

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13 Interestingly, Lepkoff notes that the word "School" part soon was dropped from the name as schools were not eligible for public grants. This is significant for the ways in which funding possibilities affect the look, shape, vision of organizations.
ideas. But the strongest links existed in terms of the view of the aesthetic and social possibilities of dance; the founders of alternative spaces shared with their Judson predecessors a commitment to increasing performance opportunities as a way of building community.

These philosophical continuities led to similar kinds of organizational solutions to aesthetic and cultural problems, such as pooling resources, expanding performance opportunities and notions of where performances could occur, and loosening or abandoning the curatorial process. As Judson chronicler Sally Banes relates, the members of Judson Dance Theater “discovered a cooperative method for producing dance concerts. For young artists who did not want to be judged by older authorities in the field, or who wanted the freedom to experiment in a familiar space that was easily accessible, this was an alternative to uptown juried concerts (Banes 1995: xi).” Dance Theater Workshop formalized this broader curatorial and programming approach, enabling the growth of experimental choreography and its organizations by simply allowing people to show their work informally and frequently. At a time (the 1960s) “when the once-a-year single recital was the debilitating standard in modern dance, [DTW’s] ‘Mondays at 9’ or ‘Saturdays at 9’ meant that, over six strung-out performances, a choreographer could present one dance and watch it grow (Jowitt: 33).” This more informal and less precious view of performance emphasizes the work inherent in the choreographic process instead of the perfected product.14

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14 The Kitchen was founded in 1971 by video artists who congregated in the kitchen of the Mercer Arts Center. In 1973, the Kitchen opened in Soho, where it acted as “an unofficial community center and think tank at the heart of a burgeoning gallery-café scene. Artists would drop in, watch videotapes, hang out. There was an emphasis on spontaneity and process; people would sleep in the space to figure out how to use it.” (Carr 1994: 34)
“No to Spectacle, No to Virtuosity:”¹⁵ Artistic Concerns of Dance in Alternative Spaces

But what, then, did this work—that of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors—actually look like? One of the most important aesthetic continuities was the emphasis on the use of task-oriented pedestrian movement. This propensity towards non-virtuosic movement wedded social ideals and aesthetic concerns in a new way and created a new understanding of choreography. Judson chronicler Sally Banes explains that “[w]ithin the Judson workshop, a commitment to democratic or collective process led on the one hand to methods that metaphorically seemed to stand in for freedom (like improvisation, spontaneous determination, chance) and in the other hand to a refined consciousness of the process of choreographic choice” (Banes 1995: xvii-xviii). What’s more, there was a shift in focus from technical virtuosity to the compositional process. This choice was not only an aesthetic one (which, incidentally, owed much to John Cage), but was also a political one as it enabled all members of the collective to participate fully. Moreover, it lent the works of JDT “an unpolished, spontaneous, ‘natural’ appearance” (Banes 1995: xviii).” But it is not just scholars and historians who were conscious of the relationship between artistic forms and social ideals inherent in the work of the Judson-era choreographers. Indeed, the choreographers themselves had a conscious although by no means unified sense of an aesthetic and social mission. Yvonne Rainer’s manifesto-like 1965 view of choreography articulated a constellation of social, political and aesthetic ideals for dance performance:

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no

¹⁵ From JDT choreographer Yvonne Rainer’s 1965 statement calling for a demystification of dance (Rainer in Banes 1979: 73).
to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved (Rainer in Banes 1979: 43).

Art World Context: Parallels and Intersection with Visual Arts Alternative Spaces in the 1970s

The preceding recollections and analyses give a sense of how certain social ideals became manifested in the artistic goals and organizational structure of early alternative spaces. But it's important also to consider the economic and social atmosphere of New York City during the early to mid-1970s, including developments in other experimental artistic milieus and forms (most notably the visual arts). If Judson was the dance historical precedent for these alternative spaces, then the new visual arts alternative spaces offered contemporaneous models of organizational responses to art world (and even artistic) problems. Visual arts alternative spaces were in large part an outgrowth of an influx of artists into New York City in the 1960s and early 1970s. With not enough opportunities for shows (especially all-important first shows) in private galleries and museums, painters, sculptors and installation artists began creating opportunities for themselves and their peers to show work. Like their contemporaries in dance, they felt that new kinds of visual artwork (anti-objective, anti-commercial and even performance-oriented) were seen as needing new kinds of organizations for its presentation.

Intriguingly, there were not only parallels but also concrete intersections between these new dance and visual arts in New York in the 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the dancers that eventually founded MR and other spaces had themselves used both commercial galleries and alternative art spaces as early venues. Indeed, some recall that while art galleries were initially supportive of dance experimentation, they eventually
pulled back, a move that compelled dancers to find their own spaces. It is not clear whether just the commercial galleries pulled support or whether some of these burgeoning non-profit arts spaces also backed away from supporting dance. As MR founder Mary Overlie recalled:

In the 1970s, most of the galleries allowed dance performances because the art scenes were closer at that time because of the Happenings. Most of my early performance experience in New York was in art galleries. But then the galleries started to pull back, insurance became an issue and I always suspected that it was more about the fact that you couldn't sell this work as a tangible product. They started saying, "Well, we can't insure your safety, we can't give the time over to dance." When they started taking their support out, it further marginalized the scene because we could no longer meet in the galleries to watch each other perform. The galleries had been the central contact point for everybody, and when it started to disappear, people got put on third floors in private lofts, and it was hard to just find people. So another impetus for Movement Research to start was the desire to at least have a flyer to let people know where things were happening (Hedstrom/Overlie 1995 interview).

Organicity, Possibility and Service: Movement Research

So, once this gap in potential performance spaces was identified, how was it filled? Overlie’s discussion of the founding of Movement Research echoes Jowitt’s recollection of DTW’s early excitement and energy. Both convey nostalgia for a simpler time, one in which ideas and plans could be more easily realized. Along with this sense of possibility, Movement Research founders communicated a sense of organicity, almost
inevitability, a notion that “we just wanted to do it, so we did” or “there was a need, so we met it.” When asked about the founding of MR, Overlie mused, “My memories of it are standing [with a group of dancers] on Canal St... in between two parked cars.... So I just said, ‘We need to start an organization.’ And I just thought that we could do it as a collective.” Overlie goes on to explain that there wasn’t a central location for people to learn about the new movement and dance workshops springing up around the city. She saw the need for a kind of organized support system. And she recalls, “To my total surprise, everyone went, ‘yeah.’”

For many years, Movement Research had no performing space, but rather was an information-gathering and dissemination service. One feature of these early organizations was their emphasis on service to a community. This awareness of a larger community marks a move away from or at least a widening of the notion of a pure collective meant to address the needs and interests of a discrete group as it recognizes a potential community outside itself, an early step towards institutionalization. As the founders explained, at the time of its founding (early 1970s), dancers and choreographers were still working largely in their living spaces (often lofts). In fact, Overlie noted that the lack of a centralized space was a major impetus for the founding of Movement Research because when art galleries started to “pull back,” people started to perform in their lofts and “it was hard to just find people.” A growing awareness of the connection to and even responsibility towards a larger community surfaces in accounts of the genesis and raison d’etre of Movement Research. Lepkoff recalls:

All of these different people were teaching classes and workshops down around here in New York, independently. One of the ideas was to kind of pool together
and put out the announcements on one piece of paper and to help each other organize. So, instead of many individuals repeating the same effort, to kind of come together. That seemed like to me a really practical thing. But then it became much more than that. It identified an area of exploration more broadly, and it suddenly became very attractive to the community.\textsuperscript{16}

On the surface, Lepkoff’s account of the founding of MR emphasizes the practical impetus for MR—simply getting the information together in one place. Yet it also suggests that the service provided was much greater than that, and even bigger than its founders could imagine. Lepkoff’s guileless, “gee-whiz” response to the effects of Movement research is set off by Overlie’s much more explicit view of the community-building effects of MR:

The other idea behind it was to representing the downtown work in some supportive manner. It’s always been like that for MR—there’s always been this sense of sort of being able to keep it alive with real brass tacks support but also a kind of trying to look toward the future way of trying to keep the whole scene alive, and keeping the audience coming to it (1995 interview).

New Ideas in New Spaces: Danspace Project

The philosophical and aesthetic ideals (combined with practical contingencies) also affected the choice of the actual spatial settings for these explorations in dance.

While much new work still happened in choreographers’ lofts into the 1970s (and

\textsuperscript{16} Performance artist Tim Miller recalls a differently inflected, more playful, less earnest view of the communitarian ethic of alternative spaces, and perhaps one more befitting the late 1970s when PS 122 was founded. Here Miller recalls the approach to performance opportunities and community: “For me, it was the ultimate treehouse. There was a real ‘I’ll show you mine, if you’ll show me yours’ buzz about the place” (Miller in Druckman 1999).
beyond), the density of activity called for the establishment of more formal and larger performance and rehearsal spaces. DTW and Danspace made this change in the early 1970s. In the following interview excerpt, Cynthia Hedstrom (who co-founded MR in the 1970s and directed Danspace Project from 1980-1983) explains the relationship between artistic goals and the physical space in which these goals are realized. Here she describes why the sanctuary of the historic St. Mark’s Church was a good choice for the work of Danspace Project, and in so doing illuminates another facet of alternativity:

   George: I have a question about the aesthetic impact of Judson on the creation of alternative spaces. In that “Space and Support” article, you said that one thing that they were an alternative to was simply the proscenium stage. I found that intriguing.

Hedstrom: Right, I think part of the work that happened in the sixties, through Happenings and through the Judson Dance Theater and early work like with The Performance Group, Living Theater and Open Theater, was that the traditional break between the audience and performers started to soften or get wavy or break through completely. Part of what attracted me to St. Mark’s Church was that that space was a completely open, undefined space. Even though it was a church and you couldn’t get away from that. There was an altar end and it had this sort of Colonial look to it, but it was a very fresh and open space. You had to walk in there and you couldn’t think traditional theater and you certainly couldn’t think proscenium arch. I think we’ve gotten away from that a little bit [in the 1990s]. We’ve gone back to liking to have the audience on one side and the performance
on the other side. But at that time, the line between audience and performer was much more fluid in some performances [Hedstrom 1998].

Hedstrom's description of how the physical space of St. Mark’s church matched the aesthetic ideals of Danspace Project exemplifies the tendency towards generating concrete solutions to artistic problems. Even the language describing the space—“fresh, open, undefined”—resonates with the qualities that many artists strove for in the dance presented in these alternative spaces.

Cultural Ideals into Artistic Forms: Contact Improvisation as Case Study

Anthropologist Cynthia Novack’s study of contact improvisation as a cultural form offers one of the most sustained investigations of the ways social ideals get manifested in particular artistic and subcultural forms. Novack looks at the growth of the art form of Contact Improvisation in the 1970s as an aesthetic manifestation of social and cultural trends; specifically, she demonstrates how social ideologies (feminism, egalitarianism) are manifested in the artistic and organizational features of Contact Improvisation.

Contact Improvisation was one of the movement styles/forms that was supported by these alternative spaces, notably Movement Research and Danspace Project. Novack explains that “many of the early participants, audience members, and critics felt that the movement structure of contact improvisation literally embodied the social ideologies of the early 1970s which rejected traditional gender roles and social hierarchies” (Novack: 11). The informal setting with minimal distinctions between amateurs and professionals, and, initially, between audience and participants as well as

17 Both organizations continue to be friendly to the founders of contact improv and their successors. Danspace Project hosts the annual improvisation festival, while MR hosts workshops and Studies Projects with contact improv innovators and their students and artistic heirs.
the actual movements conveyed a social statement. The form itself is a “physical dialogue” based on “sensations of touch and weight” which doesn’t emphasize virtuosity or expressiveness. Its practitioners saw these features—and especially the “experience of touching and sharing weight with a partner of either sex and any size as a way of constructing a new experience of the self interacting with another person” (Novack: 11).

Novack’s close reading of the physical features of Contact Improvisation in and of the words of its practitioners provides a unique and valuable model for looking at cultural processes. Moving between the specifics of this relatively rarefied cultural form and the general cultural, social and political atmosphere in which it grew, Novack demonstrates both the complexity and dynamism of located art forms. Equally valuable is the fact that she follows her subjects and the development of this dance form over time, thus charting changes in how founding ideals are interpreted. Specifically, Novack describes the processes of institutionalization and professionalization in Contact Improvisation as she charts the growth of the movement throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. The following section takes a similar approach as it considers the development of alternative spaces during the same time period.

The Heyday of Alternative Spaces circa 1975-1989

Once established, how did these alternative dance spaces sustain their visions and their growth? Part of the answer lies in the fact that just as these spaces were getting established in the early 1970s, public arts funding was growing at the national, state, and local levels. Certain artistic forms grew more than others in response to this infusion of funding; dance headed this list, and there was an acknowledged "dance boom" that lasted from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s (NEA 1977 Annual Report; Acocella 198?;
Banes postmodernism book). Public funding, and especially state and federal funding, enabled the rapid growth of dance alternative spaces from the mid-1970s through the late 1980s (see Appendix). While DTW and its spinoff, the National Performance Network, received huge injections of public funds Danspace Project and Movement Research epitomize the steadier rate of growth and institutionalization that alternative spaces enjoyed during this era. It's important to recognize the special situation of small performing arts organizations vis-à-vis public funding. In short, while public funding for the arts as a whole is a mere fraction of total donations in the U.S., for most of the performing arts in the U.S., public subsidy has historically been the most important form of funding. Moreover, small organizations tend to be more dependent on government subsidy (local, state and federal) than larger ones (DiMaggio 1981: 8-10). Given this, it follows that the organizations considered here are among the most dependent upon and sensitive to changes in public arts funding.

This section describes features of the growth of these organizations by considering: the narratives of the organizations' founders; NEA dance program funding to these organizations; and structural/organizational changes that span these organizations. In this chapter, and especially this section. I consider what happens to alternative spaces when they begin to grow and especially when they interact with the public funding agencies that are necessary to their growth. Observation as well as the testimony of founders and directors shows that they become more stratified, specialized, and rationalized and develop a stricter division of labor than in their early collective form. As to the individuals associated with these organizations (both administrative and artistic), the more hierarchical structures (including the presence of administrators that
are not or are no longer working artists) contribute to their professionalization. The growth and transition narratives of founders provide rich accounts of the institutionalizing effects of government funding on what were originally artists’ collectives. As we will see, not just increased available funds, but also specific application and reporting requirements directly changed the structure and profile and goals of these organizations. These responses to funding are referred to as "recipient effects," and tend to be fairly direct: helping organizations achieve explicit stated goals (like increasing dance touring, for example); affecting their management structures (an increase in professionalization and rationalization of management, i.e., creating job titles), and finally contributing to their overall economic health by enabling organizations to raise funds (DiMaggio 1981: 33-35). (This final effect is a combination of the "imprimatur" and leveraging functions mentioned/described by informants in the chapter 2.)

But the effects of public funding on these organizations and the artists they serve are not always direct and predictable nor are they confined to those organizations that receive funds. Rather, by changing the look of particular, key organizations/producers, public funding affects entire areas of artistic production, in this case experimental dance in New York City. DiMaggio hypothesizes that public funding affects organizations that do not receive it as well as those that do, and calls these effects on non-recipients "ecological effects" as opposed to direct "recipient effects." Quite simply, he explains, "ecological effects are those that lead organizations that do not receive grants to become more like organizations that do" (DiMaggio 1981: 35). Organizational theorists contend that organizations change—and specifically, become more bureaucratized, rationalized,
and stratified—not only because that is what will make them run more efficiently (in fact, it often doesn’t), but instead as a way to gain legitimacy in an organizational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 63-65). That is, non-recipient organizations may consciously “consciously model themselves after successful grant recipients” or they may seek to improve or expand operations in order to compete with a similar organization that receives funds (DiMaggio 1981: 36). But the most intriguing ecological effect, and the one most relevant to considering the evolution of alternative spaces occurs when, often unintentionally, organizations within an artistic field (or at least within a particular sub-field) begin to resemble each other.

Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell call this trend towards homogeneity in the “structure, culture and output” within specific organizational fields institutional isomorphism. (1991: 64-65).” Institutional isomorphism is a helpful concept for understanding the evolution of alternative spaces, including their increasing bureaucratization throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In subsequent chapters, this concept will be extended to an examination of choreographers’ career narratives (chapter 4) as well as to aesthetic trends in the work of artists who perform in these spaces (chapter 5). Another helpful concept from organizational sociology is that of organizational field, that is, the entities that comprise a “recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products.” (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 64-65). Taken as whole, the artists, organizations and funders of experimental dance conform to the definition of an organizational field. Looking at specific organizations, the rest of the chapter considers the mechanisms and events by means of which organizations begin to
look like one another. Organizational theorists argue that both specific and general external pressures drive institutional change. These pressures are divided into three categories—coercive, normative, and mimetic. In what follows I consider instances of these kinds of pressures as I analyze of the growth of the experimental dance field from the 1970s to the early 1990s.

This chapter also poses a question that is beyond the domain of organizational sociology, namely: what is the ideal self required by these organizations and necessary for the professionalization of the dance field? What are the sometimes subtle but profound effects of institutionalization on notions of what constitutes a legitimate contemporary dance organization, and, by extension, an ideal dance administrator? To answer these questions, it’s necessary to look to and “read” the words of those in the field involved in these organizations both in interviews and in more formal, official documents, such as mission statements and press materials. Finally, it’s important to note the gaps, the slippages, and the unexpected; indeed, my examination of the stated programs of certain organizations as well as the less-codified visions of their founders revealed some unexpected, hidden relationships, and some apparent contradictions in relation to their funding histories. Specifically, an often-surprising level of autonomy and even anti-establishment artistic activity remains possible even in organizations that are generously (even primarly) funded by the NEA, a phenomenon that will be discussed later in relation to the work of the NPN, a national touring network of alternative spaces.

But in order to get a sense of these effects, interactions, and even points of contradiction, it is necessary to consider these organizations and their funders systemically. For that task, the notion of a cultural circuit is a useful complement to that
of the organizational field. Anthropologist Elizabeth Traube argues that in order to grasp the complexities of cultural products, one must take into account the various stages of their production, circulation and reception. (1992:4-5). For instance, the flows of resources to avant-garde artists, the products they create, and the evolution of their world-views all constitute a unique and dynamic system. Tracking such a circuit of production for experimental dance provides a more complete picture of the ways in which funding sources limit or restrict certain art forms and artists the moments at which such involvement gives rise to changes in its organizations.

The Experience of Professionalization: Hedstrom on Movement Research

Over the course of her career, Cynthia Hedstrom, a founder of Movement Research, has gone from dancer to full-time arts administrator. From studying with Merce Cunningham to dancing with Judson choreographer Lucinda Childs, Hedstrom banded together with other choreographers and dancers to start Movement Research in the 1970s. A personal career transformation went hand-in-hand with the transformation of Movement Research from collective to incorporating and launched Hedstrom into a career as an administrator; she would later move on to Danspace Project as well as other performing arts organizations.

Hedstrom’s account highlights the fact that some of the early changes in the organization were the direct result of clear mandates from funders—this is the most direct mechanism of institutional changes as understood by organizational theorists, and is termed “coercive isomorphism.” Here, then, is Hedstrom’s account of an organizational transition and a personal career transformation:
Early on in Movement Research, it was a collective. It was myself, Mary Overlie, Danny Lepkoff, Beth Goren, Richard (I forget his last name, but he was a designer), and Christie Svane. We met regularly at different people’s homes and talked about what was going on in dance, what we wanted to do, and what kind of programs we wanted to develop. We sort of collectively decided what Movement Research should be focusing on, divided up the work, created a calendar, sponsored workshops, and found spaces and times for them and also handled registration. All of that was divided fairly equally among the collective members.

Then we started to apply for grants. At that time, it became clear that we had to set up our books and develop a reporting process, and that there needed to be one person that people could call and get information from. It needed to be centralized and organized, and I took on that role. I did that for a few years out of my house. Although we still met and made decisions collectively, I was the administrator and the facilitator for Movement Research. At some point Wendell Beavers took on that role and then it's gone on from there.

As Hedstrom describes the transition from a collective structure to a more stratified one with specific roles for specific members, she highlights bureaucratic requirements as the impetus for structural change, even framing the change as primarily (or at least initially) a process of jumping through bureaucratic hoops.

Hedstrom: I did that administrative work for about three years, during that transition from being a loose collective to becoming incorporated. Beginning to apply for grants and setting up some kind of record-keeping system. And I knew
nothing about any of that, nothing at all [laughs]. I had studied a little dance here, done a little bit of literature there and traveled around and had been a very fancy-free kind of person. Learning how to create a system, even though it was very small and probably very simple, seemed like a huge task to me at that time, to figure out how you set up an organization and run it. And when you incorporate, it becomes very clear what kind of filing you have to do. Then it's just about keeping everything in order so you can fill out the right form with the right information.

George: So the impetus to incorporate was so that you could...

Hedstrom: Apply for grants!

Other accounts of the organization's evolution echo Hedstrom's, but convey a less acute experience of bureaucratization. MR co-founder Daniel Lepkoff's account belies a less strict division between those who took on administrative tasks and those who did not. He describes how the philosophical goals of collective decision-making and work sharing evolved gradually into a more hierarchical and divided labor structure, recalling that:

When it started it was a collective, so we ran the organization. We would meet and divide up the work, and get it done somehow or take on a project like organizing a benefit. Someone would have the idea and then just do it. Then we did have a director, and that one individual ended up doing so much work that we decided. "Well, if that person's gonna work way harder than anyone else, they oughtta get paid."

Lepkoff portrays the bureaucratization of MR as an organic, self-motivated, and common-sense process: "if someone is doing much more of the work, then they oughtta
get paid.” Hedstom, by contrast, cites the outside pressure of funding requirements as the major impetus for the bureaucratization of MR. It’s interesting to note that not only did Lepkoff and Hedstrom occupy different positions within the organization, but that their careers also diverged, with Hedstrom moving fairly quickly from a career as a dancer into a career as arts administrator, while Lepkoff (who had never taken on the directorship role in MR) moved onto a career centered around teaching and performing his own brand of Contact Improvisation. Lepkoff perhaps saw less of the changes in the organization—or at least experienced them differently—because as time went on, he was less and less involved in its administration.

This kind of split—some artists become administrators while some remain primarily artists—is a common life story that cuts across many of these alternative spaces. DTW’s director David White started as a dancer and quickly moved into a career as an administrator; DSP’s current director Laurie Uprichard took a similar career path (with a hiatus for business school). Examples of this progression abound among those who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, and even among those just recently starting out. However, the establishment of academic training programs in arts administration over the past fifteen years or so has made possible another model, namely, the individual that sets out to become an arts administrator. Organizational theorists note that formalized training programs, by identifying a legitimating “cognitive base” can hasten change in organizations within a certain field (DiMaggio and Powell: 71). Certainly this seems to have contributed to the professionalization of arts organizations over the past decade and a half. But this aspect of professionalization in the dance field is relatively new; when as an undergraduate dance major at Wesleyan University, I expressed interest in a career as
an arts administrator, I was told by a dance professor, “Well, then, you shouldn’t be here. You can’t learn that in school. You should start out sweeping stages and work your way up. That’s how it’s done.”

Coercive isomorphism: formalizing organizations to access grants

Movement Research’s evolution from a collective to a stratified organization began with two key changes: the naming of an administrative director who could centralize information, and the acquisition of not-for-profit tax status. Hedstrom’s account as well as her amused answer about the impetus to incorporate (“To get grants!”) implies a kind of inevitability to trajectory many alternative spaces followed: “If you want grants, you must get non-profit status; if you want nonprofit status, you must set up accounting procedures and a board of directors; to have efficient and accurate numbers, you must have a centralized administrative structure.” What sets off this chain of events, then, is a direct outside pressure, namely, the demands of funding organizations. This kind of impetus for organizational change is seen as the engine behind what organizational theorists call coercive isomorphism. Indeed, Hedstrom’s account seems a classic case of the external pressures DiMaggio and Powell cite as examples of coercive isomorphism, including “formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent.” The pressures MR and other similar organization responded to were and are often direct, as in the government mandate of non-profit status and other “legal and technical requirement of the state—the vicissitudes of the budget cycle, the ubiquity of certain fiscal years, annual reports, and financial reporting requirements... (67).”
But coercive isomorphism, contend organizational theorists, isn’t always quite so explicit or “coercive.” Many have argued that collectivist organizations (such as neighborhood organizations and experimental schools) may also institute hierarchical structures in order to effectively interact with and gain legitimacy and funding from stratified organizations with which they must interact. An example that closely mirrors the situation with the alternative dance spaces is that of California-based work collectives in the late 1960s and 70s, for which the “process of bureaucratization began at the point at which they had to solicit outside support [i.e., grants] (Newman in Novack: 222).” Others note the effect of government funding throughout the art world, and see government funding as a major impetus in the “formation of stable organizational structures with standard accounting procedures, a development which requires bureaucratization and rationalization of production” (Peterson in Novack: 227).

**Professionalization as a broader dance and art world trend of the 1970s and 1980s**

**Relationship to and resonances with visual arts alternative spaces**

Alternative dance spaces also had corollaries and, indeed, precursors in the visual arts world. There were not only points of comparison, but also concrete intersections: for example, some dancers danced in these galleries and Soho’s 112 Greene St., a key visual arts alternative space hosted “a spate of avant-garde performance and dance” (author of Other voices...:80; hedstrom and overlie interview). Some, like the Kitchen, included the desire to host a range of forms including dance as part of their original missions.

A 1977 *Art News* article that describes the opening of visual arts spaces in early 1970s notes that by 1977 they were already securing government funding, and asks, “Now, with government funding promising a secure future, can they maintain the
flexibility which made them ‘alternatives’ in the first place?” (Artnews 1977: 80-87). The gap that they were meant to fill sounds similar to that described by the founders of Movement Research—a gap created in part by an influx of young artists and lack of resources to meet their needs (not only money, but also space in which to realize their work and information about activity in the field). What’s different, though, is that the visual artists were participating in a different kind of economy and were often seeking the first show and recognition by critics. The number of commercial galleries was simply not great enough to accommodate this need. Another is that these spaces constructed themselves in opposition to already existing institutions, namely museums and commercial galleries. The difference, of course, is that there was a much more developed commercial market for visual art than for contemporary experimental dance!

Another similarity is that they were conceived as service organizations as much as presentation spaces, and were described during their heyday as “not interested in selling work (like commercial galleries) or in assembling permanent collections (like most museums). Instead, seeing themselves primarily as service organizations, they seek to provide display and studio space for artists. Dance and visual arts alternative spaces also saw the relationship between the institutional forms, social ideals, and aesthetic concerns similarly. For example, the trend toward anti-virtuosity, exploration, and experimentation in dance had as its corollary in the art world the anti-objective leanings of a large group of young artists—installations, new definitions of sculpture and even video and performance. As one observer of that era concluded, “Many people in the art world began to feel that the new type of art required new sorts of organizations for its presentation” (Arts News: 80). Finally, their development follows a similar trajectory.
from loosely organized collectives to stratified non-profit organizations heavily dependent on government funding.

The observation of a funding-driven trend towards professionalization helps to establish a context for the changes in alternative dance spaces. This trend extended to dancers and choreographers and their ways of organizing themselves into companies and networks, as well as to visual arts alternative spaces (which were, in many ways the precursors of alternative performing arts spaces). Cynthia Novack’s account of professionalizing trends in the Contact Improvisation community furnishes models for understanding the struggle between founding ideals and effects of growth and success in an artistic subfield, as well as for examining experimental artists' links to mainstream culture. She identifies a tension between Contact Improvisation's ideology of experimentation and radical democracy and the desire of some of its practitioners at a certain moment to promote and market the form as a product, a desire that sparked debates about access and commercialism within the Contact Improvisation community in the late 1970s.

As Contact Improvisation developed as a discrete art form, the point of public performances was not only to introduce it to potential participants, but also to demonstrate a certain level of skill and mastery. But organizing showings was a problem because in many ways, curatorial issues went against the anti-authority and anti-hierarchy basis of Contact. This resonates with the anxieties that caused curatorial decisions to be avoided by those in Judson and in the early, collective days of alternative spaces. Indeed, Novack reports that even as Contact grew more established, collective decision-making was practiced in theory, but in practice became more and more difficult (216). Novack
and the testimony of her interlocutors suggests that tensions around shared decision-making that were developing in the late 1970s and 1980s were partly due to overall growth of the form (larger groups made collective governance and art-making more and more unwieldy and difficult). At the same time, they also reflected larger social changes, namely, “the social conditions of the 60s and 70s had encouraged a conception of the individual which tied realization of individuality to a group; by the 80s, these conditions had virtually disappeared and the countercultural support for communal enterprises no longer existed (Novack: 218-219).”

Novack also discusses the rise of a business sensibility in the world of Contact, noting several parallel developments in Contact communities across the US. and showing how changes in organizational structures and artistic forms interact. Among these developments were: a splintering of groups within any given city, sometimes caused by disagreements about the desirability and possibility of making a living teaching and performing Contact. In 1976, two management specialists worked with Contact Improvisers, urging a more precise definition and centralization of Contact in order to “tighten up Contact’s public image” (Contact Newsletter cited in Novack: 220). Although nothing came of this rather extreme suggestion, there were ongoing debates about business concerns throughout the 1970s and 1980s—including grant procedures, the concerns of touring and marketing and publicity materials in forums such as dance conferences and in Contact Quarterly, the main organ of the contact community. Grants were an especially thorny problem for contact improvisers as the improvisational and collective nature of the form didn’t lend itself to the demands of grant applications.
specifically a “clearly identifiable, repeatable product” and a clear artistic and financial structure.\textsuperscript{18}

In many ways, the contact companies faced some of the same structural/organizational problems and dilemmas (and, accordingly, followed the same pattern of organizational growth) as the alternative dance spaces. What’s more, the trends Novack cites in terms of organizational change—institutionalization, rationalization, and bureaucratization—within dance companies may be more pronounced within the also historically collective and egalitarian alternative spaces because these institutions affect more people, have larger budgets, and are in more of a leadership position (and from early on mediated between funders and artists).

\textbf{Hedstrom’s Move from Movement Research to Danspace: Normative Isomorphism}

As alternative spaces became more established and structurally complex as the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, the mechanisms of change become subtler. So, instead of changing in direct response to funders’ mandates. organizations change in order to conform to real or perceived norms, through a process of “normative isomorphism” (DiMaggio and Powell: 70) But, how do these norms get established, if not through explicit funding requirements? One important vector of organizational change is the frequent shifting of personnel among these organizations, sometimes from like to like and sometimes from like to unlike; the term for this mechanism of change is “filtering of personnel (71).” The establishment of meta-administrative organizations such as

\textsuperscript{18} That is, many Contact-based dance companies had a difficult time maintaining their egalitarian structures as they became more dependent on outside, grant-based funding, with its special application and reporting procedures. Contact groups grappled with this well into the eighties; in 1988 the contact-based dance group Channel Z disbanded because members were unable to apply for NEA and NYSCA funding both as individuals and on behalf of Channel Z. the members of channel Z chose to go it alone and apply as individuals (Novack: 222, fn. 3).
professional networks and associations (like the NPN) also play a role in generating norms for the organizational field through meetings and conferences, and newsletters.

Hedstrom's move from Movement Research to Danspace in 1981 and with it her administrative and organizational knowledge illustrates a key mechanism of normative institutional isomorphism. Her account of her tenure as director of Danspace provides a view of the further institutionalization of alternative spaces in the 1980s. It also shows how importing administrative experience from another organization accelerated the process of institutionalization and the organization’s ability to receive grants at an early point in its process of institutionalization.

Hedstrom: I was there at Danspace for about four years [from 1981-1985]. It was a time of establishing it as a kind of organizational institution. At that time Danspace got its first grants and created systems. I had been a dancer. I had never done anything like that. So it was also a time of learning on my part, learning how small businesses are run. I remember trying to figure out “How do you do financial reports and how do you do budgets and keep the right paperwork?” It was a lot of that kind of tedious, administrative task part that I had to learn during that time, but which set a foundation for Danspace to continue. I don’t even know if there was an answering machine there. It was really starting from scratch.

George: What was the aesthetic vision that you brought?

Hedstrom: That Danspace could be a laboratory for experimentation and other ways of looking at dance or movement. But in general I wanted it to be a place where there was a sense of exploration and experimentation. And I was looking at young choreographers, the less established artists, partly because that was my
interest and partly because we really didn’t have the resources. We were working with really almost nothing at that time.

George: What were your main sources of funding in the beginning? Were they local or state?

Hedstrom: No, they were federal, NEA and NYSCA. Only later did we start to get any foundation support. Support from individuals was always minimal. And on the corporate side, Con Edison would give maybe five hundred dollars (Hedstrom 1998).

Although Hedstrom says the organization was “starting from scratch.” Danspace was poised to grow more rapidly as Hedstrom brought experience to the process. Her description of starting out at Movement Research differs significantly from her account of establishing Danspace as, in her words, an “organizational institution.” Whereas the concern with MR was responding to funders’ demands, in discussing Danspace Hedstrom talks of “creating systems,” “setting foundations,” and “learning how small businesses are run.”

**Other modes of normative isomorphism**

Although discussions of normative isomorphism in DiMaggio and Powell emphasize the movement of people among *like* organizations (as in Hedstrom’s case), I have also observed frequent movement of individuals between *unlike* organizations within the dance field, sometimes moving staff positions at the NEA to positions within an alternative dance space, and sometimes in the opposite direction. More recently, I have seen people moving from the NEA into consulting. Another mode of carrying
organizational norms from one site to another occurs with artists' and administrators' frequent service on government and private funding panels.

Another mechanism for defining and disseminating standards of professional behavior is the "growth and elaboration of professional networks that span organizations and across which new models diffuse rapidly (DiMaggio and Powell:71)." As the field of contemporary dance grew largely due to public (and especially federal) funding throughout the 1970s and 1980s, growth and change happened on a number of fronts. Not only did funding for already-existing organizations increase, but this was also the period of the most rapid professionalization, the sprouting of new alternative spaces and of meta-organizations and training systems. Interestingly, just as alternative spaces were growing, their professional umbrella organizations were as well—notably, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) and the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO), which included both visual and performing arts organizations. In 1983 David White founded the NPN and conceived of it as a national network of alternative dance and performance spaces. With this offshoot of DTW, White created an organization that would play a key role in defining the role of alternative spaces and, by extension, of experimental dance and performance in the 1980s and 1990s. As a whole, these meta-organizations were a key engine of professionalization of the field as they provided regular and structured occasions (in meetings, conferences and planning sessions) for their members to seek to define the conditions and the methods of their work and to come up with common understandings of what constitutes their occupation as directors of alternative performing arts spaces.
Developing an “industry standard” for alternative performance spaces: David White, Director of DTW and NPN

As Hedstrom’s career path illustrates, the history and character of any given organization is unavoidably intertwined with the life stories of those who make it up. One of the most visible and constant personalities in New York’s experimental dance world is David White, the director of Dance Theater Workshop for the past 26 years. White is both something of a legend and a ubiquitous presence in contemporary dance; a number of choreographers I interviewed cited his role in building their careers, either through his sustained support of their work or by “taking a chance” on them at an early point in their careers (Wilkes; Wood). In a field so heavily reliant on government support and founded on non-commercial principles, White is something of an entrepreneur and an impresario. Paradoxically, these very qualities meant that White and his organizations DTW and NPN led the way for the growth, institutionalization and professionalization of alternative dance and performance spaces throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The original founders of DTW took a number of clear steps towards institutionalization in 1975, a decade after its founding. Most significantly, they hired David White as DTW’s director and first full-time employee. They also made the symbolically and practically significant move from the loft-home of founder Jeff Duncan into a theater. So, while Movement Research and Danspace were just taking shape around 1974-5, DTW had already been presenting dance for a decade, and was poised to take advantage of availability of public funds. And while other alternative spaces would make the same shift (from artist founders acting as administrators to hiring a full-time
administrative directors) in the 1980s, White was the first to be “only” an administrator. This was due not only to fortuitous timing, but also in large part to White’s ambitions for himself, for DTW, and for the field of contemporary dance at large. In the same year he was named director of DTW, he also helped to found a dance management organization (Pentacle) and a dance performance series (Dance Umbrella), proof, according to one veteran dance critic, of “his appetite for sensible remedies to the shaky finances and mom-and-pop management endemic to the world of experimental dance (Jowitt: 33).” That one individual could be involved in so many aspects of the institutionalization of the experimental dance field attests not only to the fact that the field was in its formative stages, but also to the power of personal energy and charisma. Interestingly, a subfield founded on the rejection of the cult of personality in American modern dance tolerated and even relied upon the presence of an administrator who embodied the ideal downtown dance personality. In many ways, White retains the status of the exemplary dance administrator and DTW as an exemplary—if atypical in budget and scope—dance and performance organization.

In addition to an aura of professionalism, White brought dollars to DTW. Indeed, his arrival set DTW on a path that would rapidly lead to their federal grants and overall budget being on an entirely different scale than organizations producing similar work (see Appendix). In White’s first year, DTW’s NEA dance program grants went from just under $10,000 in 1974 to just under $47,000 in 1975.¹⁹ By 1983, DTW was awarded $150,000 in NEA Dance Program grants; in comparison, in the same year, Movement Research received $4,000 and DSP $8,000 (figures drawn NEA Annual reports). White

¹⁹ All years are fiscal years.
also was one of the first alternative space administrators to serve regularly on NEA peer panels: two panels in 1979 (Dance/Film/Video and Fellowships), four in 1980 (Policy, Fellowships, Companies, and Services to the Field); and at least one each in 1981 and 1982.\textsuperscript{20} While other directors of alternative spaces would regularly serve on panels in later years, White was one of the first to branch out into NEA panel service and, in doing so, to promote institutional isomorphism between alternative spaces and their funders.\textsuperscript{21} White’s panel service was a form of professionalization that made him see the possibility and desirability of a national network of alternative performance spaces; this would be the National Performance Network, founded as a program of DTW in 1983.

**The National Performance Network (NPN): The NEA’s Hand in Building a National Network of Alternative Performance Spaces**

The NPN is the epitome of the professionalization of the alternative dance space scene in the 1980s. What is little known (or at least seldom discussed) in the experimental dance community is the NPN’s close ties to the NEA, at least originally. As NEA annual reports show, the founding NPN was only possible through NEA funding; for its first ten years, the NPN received at least $100,000 per year from the Special Projects category of the NEA Dance Program.\textsuperscript{22} The levels of NEA funding are so high relative to other experimental dance organizations and the method of review so unusual that the NPN—at least at the outset—can fairly be seen as a joint NEA-DTW project (see Appendix). The close NEA/NPN alliance is the result of the broad interests and ambitions

\textsuperscript{20} NEA annual reports for these years don’t specify which panels certain individuals served on.

\textsuperscript{21} For example, PS 122’s director Mark Russell served in NEA dance program panels from 1986-1988, and Danspace’s director Amy Lamphere served in 1990-1992 (Lamphere’s summer 1992 panel service coincided with her move from Danspace to the Wagon Train Project in Nebraska).

\textsuperscript{22} The Special Projects category is an amount of grant money that isn’t disbursed according to the standard peer panel system, but rather is under the discretion of the Program Director (in conjunction with senior NEA staff).
of David White, and of his ties to funding structures, a connection exemplified by his NEA panel service as well as his desire to lead an organization (the NPN) that could, in effect, re-grant NEA money.

Given its relation to the NEA and its fashioning of itself as a response to the problems of “non-mainstream” presenters and artists, the NPN stands as both an example of institutional isomorphism and an important vector of it for dance presenters across the U.S. The NPN’s mission statement describes the organization as founded in “response to the chronic economic problems that independent artists and non-mainstream presenters face in creating and producing progressive work.” The NPN set out to do this by creating a consortium of cultural organizations (theaters and community centers) across the U.S.; during my 1997 fieldwork, member organizations numbered 52. The budget of the NPN goes to funding member organizations to bring artists to their spaces across the U.S.) for performances and residencies. The NPN pays forty percent of an artist’s engagement and requires the sponsoring organization to pay a set fee (a way to combat the underpayment of artists). Like the NEA, the NPN uses funding (i.e., forty percent of the artists’ fee) to encourage arts organizations to find other resources in order to realize particular projects. Otherwise put, NPN member organizations must find funds to match the NPN’s contribution to a project. By structuring itself in this way, the NPN’s funding modes replicate on a smaller scale the “catalyst” function espoused by NEA staff throughout its existence (see Chapter 2).

In its structure, function and goals the NPN seems a prime example of institutional isomorphism, yet close inspection of the organization and its members may also point to some limits of theories of institutional isomorphism. The NEA had long had
as a goal the creation of a healthy dance climate through establishing national dance touring networks. David White clearly shared and then channeled this desire to dance companies and presenting spaces across the U.S. And, as the above description of the NPN's funding practices illustrate, the organization (if not entirely consciously) was also structured similarly to a public granting agency. And yet, while the NPN itself retained close economic ties with the NEA and became increasingly structured and bureaucratized, the spaces that formed the membership of the NPN were able to maintain a certain level of autonomy from the NEA in their artistic and political profiles. One longstanding NPN member organization, for example, was Highways, whose director, Tim Miller, was one of the four performance artists who had NEA funding denied in 1990.

The irony that huge infusions of NEA cash built up a network of alternative spaces, many of which had explicitly socially radical goals, indicates that while there may be a general drift to bureaucratization and professionalization within an organizational field, we can in no way see such a field or an even a particular organization as monolithic. Not only are NPN member organizations able to retain a certain degree of autonomy from the NEA, but there may also be room for variation and even resistance within the an official agency like the NEA. That is, the NPN—especially because it was funded so consistently and through a discretionary fund—was most likely a favorite project of a particular program director.

**Radical/progressive aesthetics and politics in corporate-inflected organizations: Movement Research and others in the 1980s**

One possible way to understand the NPN in the 1980s is as part of a larger trend in contemporary arts organizations to wed radical politics with a highly professionalized
sense of organizational management. Cathy Edwards, herself the co-director of MR from 1991-1995 [check exact dates], describes a move away from the organizational structure that unfolded under the rotating directorship of the founders as she describes the management style and contributions of Richard Elovich, director of MR from 1987-1991. Edwards's characterization of the pre-Elovich 1980s at MR as "unprofessional" and "postage-stamp sized" and "just serving a group of twenty or so" differs hugely from the accounts of Hedstrom and her cofounders. Their account of the move into the 1980s is one of growth and institutionalization. It is largely a question of frame of reference—the budgetary growth and business savvy late 1980s and 1990s make the early moves towards professionalization insignificant even though they were very significant to the founders, especially Hedstrom (see above):

Edwards: It was really a non-professional situation. And I think that situation lasted until Richard Elovich was hired to be the first Executive Director, he was probably hired as Director, and he turned himself into Executive Director; the others had all been Administrative Director or Administrator.

Richard came on in 1987 and he was the first person to go in and say, "I am the director of this organization. You, the board, work for me and my vision, as opposed to me being there to do your mailings." He embarked on a really ambitious re-envisioning of the organization because the infrastructure of the organization was not up to his vision. He wanted to go on full-time, he wanted to make a reasonable salary, he wanted to have an assistant, an administrative assistant and interns in the office, he wanted to do a permanent presenting series,
he wanted to do a lot more workshops, and he really wanted to introduce
It wasn't only performance people, but also dance people like Stephen Petronio
who were not only doing Contact Improvisation.

In the 1980s, MR begins to follow a particular management model with the arrival of
Elovich. Edwards identifies Elovich’s organizational and managerial style as the norm
that had emerged by the mid-to late-1980s. Edwards names the NPN’s David White as
an example of this style. Key components of this model are the presence of an Executive
Director with a unified vision for the organization and the presence of a board of
directors who have both the cultural and economic capital to help the organization realize
that vision.

Edwards: Richard began working in the model of David White and Mark Russell
[of PS 122] and other Executive Directors and he reshaped the board. He didn’t
pull in a money board at all, but he pulled in a somewhat high-powered
administrative board --Laurie Uprichard [of Danspace Project] joined the board.
Bill T. Jones joined the board, Cee Brown from Creative Time and Art Matters
joined the board.

Elovich’s arrival and consequent rapid restructuring and re-visioning of the organization
point to another mode of institutional isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism. Mimetic
isomorphism occurs when organizations model themselves after similar organizations
that they perceive to be successful (DiMaggio and Powell: 70). The implied rationale
(and one that Elovich may well have followed) is: “we will make our alternative space
look like this because this is what successful alternative spaces (like DTW and PS 122)
look like now.” But other organizational and larger cultural pressures were certainly
affected the new look of Movement Research. As evidenced by the NPN and the
growing budgets of alternative spaces in general, there was a trend, quite simply, toward
economic growth for the arts. For models of how to achieve economic growth, Elovich
had not only the directors of other alternative space, but could also tap into much broader
social conceptions of the ideal business-person of the 1980s—youthful, rebellious and
risk-taking (Traube: 71-81). Elovich’s tenure at the organization seems to have been as
tumultuous as it was successful, perhaps because of his financial, artistic and political
risk-taking; most likely it was the juxtaposition of these interests as described below that
led to the visibility of the organization, but also. as Edwards reports, to Elovich’s own
personal “burn-out.”

So Richard had this great expansive vision. And he was a real out-there activist,
but as the years went on the financial problems of the organization became more
acute. When I came there was a real situation of robbing Peter to pay Paul,
because the visibility of the organization rose at the same time that its financial
and infrastructure problems also increased. Richard brought the annual budget up
to a hundred thousand dollars, which was a big watershed. He always used to say
to me, "I can't believe a former heroin addict is running an organization with a
budget of a hundred thousand dollars." He was really proud of that, and it seemed
like it was really exciting that Richard had such a great vision of arts in a culture
that was really unreceptive at that time. There was just so much going on. AIDS
activism and ACT-Up, and he was a real spokesperson for all of that. Things
were just all over the place and then Richard began getting more and more burned out by that, and then he hired me (Edwards 1995).

The aggressive, innovative and growth-oriented Elovich that Edwards describes epitomizes some of the trends of the art world of New York in the 1980s. Moreover, the rapid expansion of the budget and programs of Movement Research, an accomplishment that caused Elovich himself to "burn out," resonates with corporate economic trends of the Reagan-era United States.

Edwards implies that Elovich's status and connections as a really "out-there activist" contributed to his success in attracting a new board of directors and new kinds of artists to Movement Research. This is probably accurate as the 1980s and early 1990s saw the terms of social and political engagement embraced by alternative spaces and those they sponsored come to center largely around identity politics. Ironically, Elovich's interests and connections—performance art, gay activism, and generally more explicitly socially engaged work—probably also attracted funding from public and private bodies who mandated community outreach. That is, the trend towards explicitly socially relevant and identity-based work—a trend that would cause many artists and spaces to come under attack—was partly the result of funding mandates.

For Movement Research and for other alternative spaces, the controversies hit just as their NEA funding was reaching a peak (see Appendix). This timing, along with the fact that these alternative spaces and the artists they presented were disproportionately dependent on public funding, would cause them to rethink their missions and structure in the 1990s, a decade characterized in its early days by the controversies and, in the latter half, by the resulting budget cuts. The next and final section of this chapter looks at the
alternative spaces, their organizational structure, shifting missions, and programming
decisions in the 1990s. I concentrate on the post-restructuring years of 1996 and 1997,
when I conducted field research at Danspace and the NPN.

The Writing on the Wall: Preparing for Imminent Funding Cuts

In the wake of the NEA controversies, the fear of federal funding cuts compelled
many experimental arts organizations to take measures aimed at safeguarding funding.
Some initiated projects that would make them more attractive to the NEA, while others
attempted to strengthen ties with foundation and corporate supporters; many
organizations did both. Some of the organizational changes that became necessary after
the NEA cuts were already taking root in the mid-1990s. One way that presenting
organizations sought to make themselves more attractive to public and private funders
alike was by highlighting projects with an explicit community outreach component. For
example, in 1995 Houston's DiverseWorks revamped their programming, moving from
presenting thirty weekends of performance annually to focusing on long-term residencies
in which artists would stay in Houston for extended periods of time and work with
different communities of people. A major impetus for thinking about restructuring (and
indeed, re-thinking the goals and mission of the organization) was the prospect of
receiving a Challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (since awarded to
the organization). That shift in focus indicates a larger trend on the part of alternative
spaces, which are responding to the wishes of funders and passing that on to artists.
Alternative Spaces after the NEA Restructuring: New relationships with funders;

new roles for alternative spaces

In 1997, I conducted fieldwork at Danspace and NPN in New York. I chose these two spaces based on the recommendations of Diverseworks’ performance director Loris Bradley. Bradley was a former NEA staff member who had worked in the agency’s Interarts program in the early 1980s, when they began funding performance art under the rubric “New Forms.” I was familiar with Danspace’s director Laurie Uprichard because she was a site visitor during the time I was the site visit coordinator for the NEA dance program. The NPN connection made sense for a broader, national view of alternative dance presenting and, as it happened, it was now being led by Cathy Edwards, who had just taken over its direction after having left Movement Research. The second-in-command at the NPN when I arrived there was a young Houston artist recently relocated to New York after a stint on staff at Houston’s DiverseWorks. Here I was, conveniently caught in a web of relations made possible by what organizational theorists call the filtering of personnel among entities within a discrete organizational field.

What I found were two highly professionalized organizations with small but serious staffs caught up in responding to the NEA cuts in a variety of ways. The three most apparent responses were:

1. Reassessing their missions, often in comparison with their past; sometimes this reassessment consisted of finding new ways to do what they had always done. But at NPN and Danspace reassessment led to the planning of new programs;

2. Seeking ways to help artists fill the gaps left by NEA funding cuts (the loss of Choreographers Fellowships and then of all dance program grants in the following year). Danspace addressed this need by disbursing commissioning funds to independent choreographers, while the NPN extended its membership eligibility from formal organizations to include independent artists and artist-run companies; and
3. Looking towards private foundations to fill the gap (both real and present and perceived and imminent) left by NEA funding cuts.

What’s more, during my fieldwork both organizations were undertaking large-scale projects, and part of my fieldwork involved participating in these projects. The NPN, in addition to seeking out new kinds of members, was also anticipating an institutional break with DTW to become its own freestanding organization. Danspace was preparing for its 25th anniversary celebrations in 1999, which involved planning a series of events, from galas to reconstructions to exhibitions and lectures. Interestingly, Danspace’s NEA funding actually took an rare post-restructuring leap in FY 1999 with a $25,000 grant to support the 25th anniversary celebration and performances.

Another trend that was apparent in the organizations I worked with post-restructuring was a continued corporatization and intensified professionalization. Although these organizations were administratively professionalized, they retained much of the original aesthetic and political founding principles. At Danspace, for example, a relatively formal organizational atmosphere was shot through with reminders of past artistic and social preoccupations (among them periodic performances that charged admission in the form of donations to a local food pantry and informal matinee showings of work by young choreographers). The NPN, with its mandate of community-based residencies and its embrace of identity politics (a point I expand later in this chapter), was a more complex amalgam of the highly professionalized and the socially engaged and politically progressive. The tensions and contradiction brought about by the juxtaposition of a highly corporate organizational form and a continued commitment to artistic experimentation and some form of social engagement manifested themselves in artist-administrator relationships as well as in organizational image and character. These
contradictions and changes, caught up in and sparked by changes in funding patterns, are the focus of the ethnographic descriptions that follow.

**Danspace Project: A Business Savvy Director Seeks New Funding Sources and Redefining Relationships with Artists**

In 1992, Laurie Uprichard joined Danspace as Executive Director, and with her arrival the organization enjoyed an infusion of NEA funds, not unlike the increase for DTW with the arrival of David White. In fact, Uprichard worked for White at DTW from 1984-1991. She had also managed the highly respected and consistently funded dance company Urban Bush Women for five years and, before that (from 1973-1981), worked at the New York State Council on the Arts. The spike in NEA funding, then, can be seen as a vote of confidence for a known and proven arts administrator. Uprichard apparently delivered because the budget and programs of Danspace expanded considerably under her direction. By the time I arrived at Danspace in 1997, Uprichard had brought the organization’s NEA grants to an all-time high despite the budget cuts. What kind of managerial vision ensured success and indeed growth for this alternative space in the face of the funding crisis in the field at large? Uprichard had perhaps just the right combination of experience and connections to ensure the financial success of the organization, at the same time that she also revamped its image and its relationship to artists. She came to Danspace with an MBA in marketing and an apparent ambition to expand the donor base for this small-scale dance space. This willingness and ability to secure private funding was felicitous given the state of public funding, but also brought certain pressures to the organization.

My initial impression of Danspace Project was of an incongruity between the physical setting of the organization and the formality and intensity that characterized its
administrative offices. Uprichard’s ambition together with the number of projects and initiatives undertaken by the organization gave the impression of being barely containable within its small one-room office overlooking the sanctuary of St. Mark’s Church. While the staff was still very small (Uprichard was the only full-time administrative staffer; she retained an assistant director with a ¾-time schedule and two ½-time employees), growth was occurring on many fronts. Uprichard was actively recruiting a higher-powered money board; when I started fieldwork in September of 1997, the director of giving for Philip Morris had just been named president of the board. In addition, there were a variety of projects and initiatives, most tied to a particular foundation or pool of money. Some of these involved Danspace taking a quasi-funder or at least a regranting role as they commissioned new pieces (a complicated re-assignment of resources that I explain below). Finally, there were a number of collaborations and exchanges with foreign funding and artistic entities. I got the impression that this international thrust reflected both personal interest (Uprichard herself is a Francophone and Francophile, and traveled often), as well as the fact that foreign (especially Canadian and European) governments had large arts budgets that could be tapped through exchanges and by co-sponsoring events. But the rapid growth and top-down management style created stress in the organization, both in its internal staff relations and in the relationships between administrators and artists. Below I examine what strategies ensured success for an organization in a hostile funding climate while assessing the broader implications and effects of those changes.

23 Indeed, Danspace rented auxiliary office space a couple of blocks down the street from the church towards the end of my field research.

24 At a Fall 1997 management consultant-led staff retreat (itself a sign of the corporatization of the organization) both office and artistic staff (i.e., lighting designers and technical staff) suggested that rapid growth had stressed the organization.
Commissioning and Regranting: Funneling Private Funds to Independent Artists

As public and especially national grants have disappeared, artists have begun to look to private sources for funding. But because most foundations don't make grants to artists without nonprofit, 501c3 status, they must access these funds through an intermediary. One choreographer told of initiating a commissioning program between three downtown presenters and the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation. She had the idea after the foundation had turned her away from applying due to her too-small annual budget. That commissioning program was indeed instituted and many choreographers have gained access to foundation funds through these commissions. From a choreographer's point of view, these commissions function somewhat like regrants (another mode of funding discontinued in the mid-1990s at the NEA). In addition to Joyce Mertz-Gilmore, the Minneapolis-based Jerome Foundation and Philip Morris give commissioning money to be disbursed by presenters. Indeed, one choreographer asserted, "the only way I get grant money now is through presenters."

Danspace Project also participates in its own commissioning initiative. In the 1996-97 season, Danspace used funds from two private foundations and the NYSCA to establish a $42,500 commissioning fund, and was able to give twenty-three choreographers $1,000 to $2,000 each in commissioning support to assist them in making new pieces. In an memo to their board of directors, the staff asserts that "with the loss of NEA Choreographers' Fellowships and the general trend away from the support of individual artists, such funding is ever more critical to the creation of new work (Danspace Project Final Report 1996-97)." But while these funds are appreciated by choreographers, they hardly make up for the loss of NEA fellowships, which, when
abolished, amounted to $20,000 disbursed in equal parts over two years. These numbers make clear that although choreographers and presenters are continually strategizing new ways to access private funds, they have yet to find a way to replace direct fellowships in either sheer dollars or in spirit. That is to say, a one-time commissioning fee is very different from a $10,000 annual open-ended fellowship.

**Corporatization of alternative spaces: alliance with foundations as a way of surviving**

While institutional isomorphism in the late 1970s and 1980s manifested itself as public-agency style bureaucratization and stratification, new and stronger relationships with corporate foundations in the late 1990s brought to alternative spaces a degree of corporatization in management strategies and styles. The following account of a Danspace Project board meeting zeroes in on an event that illustrates the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism.

On September 24, 1997, Danspace held a board of directors meeting to go over plans for the upcoming season (performance spaces tend to follow an academic calendar with fall and spring 'seasons'). As part of its move toward stratification, Danspace had long ago instituted a two-tiered board structure—an advisory board composed of artists and a so-called money board. Tellingly, this money board is called simply the "board" while the artist advisory board is referred to as the "artists' board." This meeting, a gathering of the general (as opposed to the artist advisory) board, was to be held not at St.

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25 The members of the "money board" are not only legally financially responsible for the organization, but are also expected to use their personal and professional resources to benefit the organization. One lawyer on the board, for instance, provided pro-bono legal advice. Board members are also expected to pledge a certain amount of their own money to the organization (pledge forms were distributed at the meeting described here) and also to encourage personal and professional acquaintances to do the same.
Mark’s, but at the offices of Philip Morris companies on Park Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

In the Danspace offices during the days leading up to the meeting, the energy of the three staff members was devoted to preparing information packets for the board members. As we prepared, Uprichard reminded the staff and me to dress “corporate” for the board meeting. I found this exhortation especially interesting and symbolic, indicating that an artists’ organization, by its association with a corporate organization, felt the need to literally “dress itself up” to conform to a particular standard of professionalism. This could have been just a simple desire to look appropriate and respectable within the corporate environment of Philip Morris. After all, “we” would be on their turf for this meeting. But if Philip Morris were seeking to build a philanthropic image by contributing to a wide variety of community programs and artistic endeavors, wouldn’t it make more sense for those representing the artist community to look the part of artists? In fact, the lines are not all that distinct and clear; as described earlier in the chapter, the staff of Danspace—while they may be former artists—define themselves as administrators.

Another blurring of lines is reflected in the fact that the main board of Danspace does, in fact, include a number of artists; in addition to these permanent artist-members of the main board, there was a representative from the artist advisory board at the meeting. At the time of this meeting, I hadn’t yet met most of the board members (non-artist or artist). What I found initially disorienting and then simply interesting about the meeting is that, in many cases, I couldn’t tell who at this board meeting was an artist and who was not. One woman, in a conservative black pant suit and small gold earrings, turned out to
be choreographer Sarah Skaggs, known for her kinetic and fierce choreography which she often sets to popular disco music. Another young woman of about the same age and dressed in a kind of minimalist-hip outfit, turned out to be the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s vice-president for marketing. I could dismiss as insignificant all of this corporate-artistic cross-dressing much more easily if it weren’t for the fact the Philip Morris boardroom in which we held the meeting was itself “cross-dressed.” The setting of this meeting was a formal boardroom, yes, but decorated with the hip, colorful contemporary paintings—some in the cartoon-like style and bright colors that represented one trend of the 1990s. These paintings, the involvement of Philip Morris with Danspace Project, the codes of personal dress and comportment—all are clues not only of the kind of institutional isomorphism that results in increased professionalization of arts organizations, but also of a more complex and ongoing cycle in which cultural capital and symbolic resources (such as “image”) are traded among artists, arts organizations, and their funders. Perhaps this is not all that surprising, but this was a particularly concrete reminder of the very important relationship of these organizations to corporations and foundations—the ways in which their aims and very institutional borders, not to mention the self-presentation of their members, are fluid and overlapping.²⁶

The changing place of the artist in the increasingly professionalized alternative space

As with other alternative spaces that I observed during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Danspace Project could no longer be properly called an “artists’ space” (i.e., run

²⁶See journalist David Brooks’s Bobos in Paradise (2002) for an analysis of combination of capitalist enterprise and countercultural styles and values that characterizes the contemporary American middle and upper-middle classes. Hence, Bobos (bourgeois bohemians).
by and for artists). Like others, they had gone through the process of bureaucratization and stratification described earlier in this chapter. But this organization’s relationship to artists seemed unusually imperious, despite the presence of an Artist Advisory Board. One incident in particular stood out as illustrative of the rationalization of the organization, and also of the tensions that funding mandates (especially that of community outreach) ended up stirring up between artists and administrators.

The Fall 1997 season opened with an ambitious project that employed two different strategies artists and arts organizations had been encouraged to use as a way to expand funding possibilities—collaboration (in this case, with non-U.S. artists, so it had a cultural exchange component) and community outreach. In one of my first days at Danspace, the artistic director of the entire project came in to do her final dress rehearsal in the space. This was a complicated piece; in addition to the several artist-collaborators, there were eight teenage performers. Drawn from an alternative high school for students who had not succeeded in traditional schools, these teens constituted the “community outreach” component of the project.

On the day before the opening of the piece, the choreographer came into the administrative office to resolve an issue about reduced-price tickets for the teachers and classmates of the student-performers—performers whose presence arguably increased the fundability of the piece. Because no one could guarantee how many friends, family members and teachers of the students would show up, there was anxiety and confusion about ticket sales and audience size. As a result, the choreographer, forced to take on the role of cultural ambassador and social worker in the context of the project, had to mediate between the bureaucracy of the school (which was to write a check for the students’ reduced-price tickets) and that of the presenting organization (whose director was concerned about chaos at the door). What struck me about this situation was the
resistance on the part of the presenting organization to manage the details that various forms of community outreach entail. That is, when arts spaces take on projects that involve a social service function, they are asked to manage situations that may be unfamiliar and/or complicated. And, with each new community outreach project and each new “community,” the special needs and situations may be different. The resistance and fear of the “chaos” that a new population might bring to this elite arts space demonstrated the contradictions inherent in these odd mixings of interests and goals—social service, artistic, and status building—that characterize many alternative spaces today.

This incident also demonstrates that the visions and goals of the artists and their projects are often eclipsed by the desires of the directors of these organizations. Interestingly, the presence of an artist advisory board as a separate body from the “money” board or main board of directors (who are financially responsible the organization) is meant to keep the voices and visions of artists alive in the organization. Ironically, the very artist who was debating with the director was a long-time member of this organization’s artist advisory board. The artist/administrator split also came through in a subsequent debate between the same artist and administrator involving the videotaping of the concert. The choreographer wanted to record all four performances of the piece, while the director insisted that only one showing should be taped. When the artist protested, the director referred her to her contract that stated that only one showing could be taped. The director’s exasperated “Why don’t you artists ever read your contracts?!” that ended this conversation bespeaks a trend towards the legalization of artist/presenter relationships in which decisions are made via contract rather than by consensus.

The National Performance Network in the Wake of NEA Restructuring

My overall impression of the NPN was of a very administratively top-heavy but very well run organization. The administrative complexity existed not so much in terms
of the staff (a small group consisting of only two full-timers and three part-timers), but rather in terms of the numerous committees and boards. Individuals representing the 54 member organizations served on steering, executive, and finance committees as well as on various "caucuses" that represented particular areas of concerns or interest, as well as geographical regions. As a newcomer to the organization, I found it confusing enough to try to discern what the organization did, and almost impossible to understand how it did it. The short answer to how they did it was: 1) with very active member involvement (i.e., heads of these various committees were in close contact with staff, especially when specific decisions were being made or actions being taken); and 2) through many meetings, memos, e-mails and faxes. NPN was a large organization with a relatively (for the field) large budget and scope, but one in which the voice of the artist (a key component of alternative spaces from the beginning) as well as collective decision making (in this case, by NPN’s membership in its countless meetings) was actually stronger than at Danspace, a much smaller but more autocratic organization. If Danspace relied on contracts, then the NPN seemed obsessed with democratic decision-making (and especially with the representation of artists within the presenting space milieu, an objective they sought to address with a caucus system).

During my time at the NPN, they were undergoing a number of transitions, all in some way related to funding changes. The most significant change was that they were about to earn their own nonprofit status and become independent of DTW. They had been operating as an independent organization for some time and it was becoming more complicated to remain under the wing of DTW. When I got there, they were in the process of imagining how they could both disentangle their funding and budget management from DTW and also how they could generate new kinds of funding for themselves (mostly from private, foundation and corporate sources). The other transition
the NPN was going through was a kind of reassessment and expansion of its membership. They were also planning to add a new kind of member--artist (i.e., non-presenting organization) members, which could be either dance companies or individual artists. This change was a response to NEA funding cuts and a conscious way to funnel more funds directly to artists. Finally, like many other alternative spaces, the NPN was also looking to increase private sources of funding; indeed, their NEA funding during this time, while much higher than most other organizations, did go down (see Appendix). In addressing the October 1997 steering committee meeting, David White stressed that NPN was seeking to increase foundation support, and reported that Philip Morris was interested in supporting NPN because they were supporting artistic innovation and community outreach.

During the time I was there, I learned that the NPN was not just a touring network, but was also concerned with larger overarching goals that had a social-activistic component—and explicitly focused on improving the lives of artists and broadening their impact and visibility in regions across the US. A key goal was, in their words (from a 1996-97 brochure): “to engage diverse populations in substantive relationships with artists and to anchor the creative process within the needs and contexts of local communities.” They sought to do this through “alternative performance spaces and community centers.” The way they sought to do this was by bringing artists in for extended residencies in a particular place and having them create projects with different “populations”—in 1997, directors expressed a desire to have a comprehensive listing of past NPN residencies by subject areas and gave as examples incarceration, gay and lesbian, and youth, among others.
Many in the organization wanted to give artists a bigger role in the organization, perhaps to counteract the power that was becoming concentrated in the hands of presenters. Despite being an organization of presenters (prior to the 1997-98 addition of Artist Primary Partners), I got the impression that NPN was striving to keep or perhaps reinsert the voice of the artist into what were previously artist-run organizations. In a sense this was being done to counteract the rifts between artists and administrators that were occurring in other organizations (such as MR and Danspace). One way they sought to do this was through the addition of ten to fifteen new artist members, to be known as Artist Primary Partners, with the goals of counteracting the loss of NEA fellowships and shifting the focus of the organization to give artists more power to determine their projects and use of NPN funds.

This opportunity, though, while it had the potential to help choreographers and dance companies, also had the potential to really tax their resources. The rules seem to indicate that they couldn't use their money to develop a piece of their own. While they wouldn't have to act as presenters, they would have to use their funds for a project that engaged another artist or a community center in order to create a project above and beyond their normal season. The way the NPN expressed this in a 1997 memo about the transition was: “NPN monies will not be used for artists to produce or present themselves as a matter of course, but rather to enable community engagement residencies and performance projects beyond a normal season of activity.” One of the selection criteria was a choreographer or dance company’s demonstrated ability to carry out such a project and the demonstrated commitment to the goals of the NPN, including the commitment to extended residencies with a social/community outreach component. The NPN, even with
its ties to the NEA, furthers a specific view of social activism and how to use arts to achieve social goals, one that relies not only on the viewing of the artwork, but also on sustained interaction between artists and communities (artists in schools, artists in prisons, etc) ostensibly in need of the ameliorative effects of the arts. The next chapter turns to the words of artists and dance company directors for their perspective on how to adapt to reduced funding levels and opportunities.
Chapter 4:
CAREER STRATEGIES, CONCERNS AND SELF-PERCEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTAL CHOREOGRAPHERS

Scene One

A man sits draped in a ruffled red tulle scarf, his long black hair teased back from his face which is dusted with pale make-up and accented by a tiny tuft of black hair under his lower lip. Long curtains of metallic fabric hanging from the rafters define the stage space, and the solo dancer sits on a chair placed in center stage. With deliberate and presentational movements, his hands reach out pleadingly and his chin juts forward in an apparent challenge to the audience. As the drum rhythms of the live musical score accelerate, he rises to circle the stage with a processional stately bearing. In later vignettes, Ortega’s character--La Puta Santisima, the Sacred Whore--kneels before a plate of tomatoes in red liquid and devours them messily. He then reappears on a pedestal with the red tulle scarf draped over his head and shoulders so that he resembles the Virgin of Guadalupe. The on-stage musicians intone “Maria, madre mia,” highlighting the sacred aspects of the complex cultural figure of La Puta Santisima. A final scene in this solo sees Ortega with knife in hand, simulating castration. Though fragmented and imagistic, Ortega’s dance tells a story--a story about religious and cultural icons, about ecstasy and faith and about sexuality and ambiguity.

Scene Two

Four performers, two men and two women, dressed neatly in trousers, blouses and vests of muted earth tones, inhabit a stage space clearly delineated by lights and by gray carpet-covered risers. The performers’ movements are measured and dancerly. They step, swoop and lunge into couplings and groupings that suggest relationships and
characters, but these relationships remain mysterious and ultimately impenetrable. A soundtrack includes experimental music composed especially for the dance as well as excerpts recited from Samuel Beckett’s Now How On which the choreographer cites as the textual inspiration for this work. The inventive lighting and music together with set, costumes, and the overall kinesthetic quality and affect of performers create a visually cool and emotionally distant atmosphere.

Scene Three

Five dancers are scattered across the stage. Dressed in simple cotton tank tops and trousers, they begin the dance lying down, heads resting on jewel-toned velvet pillows. As they begin to stir, they keep their dance low and on the ground, manipulating the pillows, sliding them to one another and eventually moving towards one another. They rise, assemble and reassemble in groups, pushing and prodding one another, guided by rhythms both internal and external. The external rhythms emanate from an enormous string instrument that captures sound from the environment and from the dancers’ bodies and transforms them into the tones that the dancers appear to respond to in turn. This is weighty, virtuosic movement, with dancers now upending themselves to dance on their hands, now folding their limbs in on each other, now leaping and running through the space. All is executed with a signature fluidity and groundedness, a looping sense of fall and recovery. Into this orderly scene burst eight teenagers. Their energy is unharnessed, exuberant, questioning and challenging. They enliven the stage with their interaction with the other dancers as they lift and are lifted, grab and throw pillows, and also rest and find quiet as at the beginning of the dance. Finally, these eight young dancers introduce themselves one by one to the audience as each gets the stage to him or herself for a
moment. This draws cheers from their classmates and teachers, and the performance ends on a note of controlled chaos not often seen in the realms of experimental dance in New York.

What do these three pieces, each with its distinct set of concerns, movement style, and tone have in common? Despite the very different look and feel of these dances, their creators belong to a specific and relatively small group—that of choreographers working in the small-scale performance venues known as alternative spaces. In fact, each of these works was presented as part of 1997-98 season of the Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church in New York City. Further, each piece was supported in part by funds from Danspace Project’s Commissioning Initiative, an indication that this particular alternative space deemed the work worthy of receiving money to help bring it into existence.

Finally, all three choreographers serve on the organization’s artistic advisory board. But it is not just their ties to Danspace Project that unite them. They all participate in a particular cycle of funding, presentation, and training and share understandings of and assumptions about how best to create and disseminate their artwork. For the most part these artists, known sometimes as “independent choreographers,” work outside of a formal company structure. That is, they are not paid by another entity for their work as choreographers, but rather work independently on a project-by-project basis.

While alternative spaces are at the center of this circuit of choreographic production, a vast range of other concerns and experiences characterize the lives of this group of artists. Other chapters focus on the aesthetic concerns of these artists, the changes in the public agencies that fund them, and the nature of organizations that present them, respectively. They take a look at the lives of independent choreographers
from the outside in, from the perspective of the various organizations and trends that shape their lives, careers, and self-understandings. This chapter, in contrast, considers this group from the inside out. It turns to their own words for a sense of how they negotiate these different spheres of their professional lives. As they convey their life stories and career trajectories, they articulate not only the reality and challenges of their current careers, but also their thoughts on how their situations could be better. They discuss, among other things, the changes they have perceived and experienced in funding possibilities, how they earn a living both through and apart from their work, and how their relationships with funding agencies, with presenters, with critics, with money, and with other dancers and choreographers shape their lives, their careers, and the development of their work. This shifting matrix of funding, presentation opportunities, aesthetic concerns and orientations, and organizational structures affects and shapes lived experience—how they make sense of this circuit, how they navigate it, and how they ultimately have a major role in shaping it.

My discussions and interviews focused on choreographers whose work I had seen in the 1998-99 season, so that their comments about their work and lives could be juxtaposed with descriptions and analysis of their performances. Although the interviews varied widely in focus, I asked a fairly constant set of questions focused on each artist’s current situation and how they got there. These discussions about life trajectories often revolved around their views on how to maintain a viable career given the current funding climate. Several artists noted the increasingly significant role of alternative spaces and other presenters in building a career, and suggested that power has shifted from funding bodies to presenters. Another common thread in these discussions was an ambivalence
about the feasibility of continuing to make work in the face of economic hardship, especially when many choreographers noted that they nearly always go into debt in order to mount a show. Nevertheless, choreographers suggested that experimental choreography existed before the advent of public and private support and will continue to exist without such support, at the same time that they wondered how they themselves could survive from season to season.

**Case Studies**

Although this chapter does not explicitly treat the aesthetic orientation or stylistic concerns of experimental choreographers such as Ortega, Green and Loring, it is helpful to maintain a mental image of each dance described above alongside the following analysis of the means with which and the circumstances in which each of these dances were made. To do so will allow us to begin to draw together discussions of the economic hardships facing experimental artists with discussions of the aesthetic concerns of those who inhabit this elite realm of cultural production. My goal is to fill out the understanding of these economies of experimental, anti-commercial art worlds by giving a sense of the material conditions of productions of such artwork. Perhaps the best way to begin to discuss the way these issues play out in individual artists’ lives and work is to tell the individual stories behind the dances described above. Details about how these dances came to be, including how they came to be presented by Danspace Project, the sources of funding for the pieces, and the choreographers’ journeys from conception to realization will give a clearer sense of the day-to-day realities of generating the means with and environment in which experimental contemporary dance can be made. These
case studies are the behind-the-scenes stories of these dances, stories that introduce themes and concerns to be treated in greater detail later in this chapter.

The specialized field of experimental choreography comprises both specific economies and systems of beliefs and values, which are in turn embedded in larger economies and systems of belief. There are inherent tensions in the relationship between the more localized economy of the experimental artists and the larger economic and social system in which it is embedded. I access these tensions not by means of a top-down analysis, but through the stories and struggles of particular artists engaged in making particular dances for viewing in particular institutional settings. Each particular dance illustrates various and unpredictable ways in which this realm of anti-commercial, not-for-profit artistic experimentation exists within and depends upon larger economies, both public and private, i.e., governmental and commercial. Further, the case studies represent a range of possible strategies for accessing the resources necessary to develop and present one’s artwork. These strategies include Ortega’s residency away from the space and economic constraints of New York City, Green’s developing her piece on university students, and Loring’s association with a composer as a way to access a Meet the Composer grant. The three cases that follow also point to historically and socially specific organizational structures (e.g., patterns of funding) as well as to deeper, unspoken assumptions about the nature and value of making dances and about choosing experimental choreography as a career.

Case Study One

The first dance described, Puta Santisima, is the work of Jaime Ortega, a choreographer from Mexico City who has been living and working in New York since
1986. *Puta Santisima* was presented at Danspace in February of 1998. Ortega presented a version of the piece the previous year at a San Antonio, Texas alternative space called Jumpstart. Jumpstart and Danspace Project co-commissioned the piece and both organizations used funds from other organizations to support Ortega’s work. By means of a complicated and convoluted circuit of money flows, Ortega’s work indirectly received money from public, private and various not-for-profit organizations. Danspace Project used money from the Jerome Foundation earmarked for its Commissioning Initiative to pay Ortega. Each organization also used funds from the National Performance Network, another not-for-profit organization, to finance the work. The NPN, in turn, receives funds from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, Philip Morris Companies, Inc., The Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Ortega also received municipal support through Materials for the Arts, a program co-sponsored by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Department of Sanitation. Materials for the Arts accepts tax-deductible donations of equipment and materials of all kinds from private businesses and makes them available free of charge to not-for-profit arts organizations and independent artists. The metallic curtains for Ortega’s set came from Materials for the Arts and were remnants of sheets out of which sequins had been stamped. Like presenters, Materials for the Arts also acts as a conduit between artists and the resources necessary for the production of their art.

Like many of the independent choreographers I spoke with, Ortega lamented the paucity of direct funding for artists. Here he reflects on the experience of being on the receiving end of these money flows, and also hints at how this economy affects artists’ relationships with directors of alternative spaces:
Ortega: Presenters have the power to get you some money and that’s probably, at least in my experience, the only way I can get funded right now. If I get a presenter interested in my work, and interested enough to submit an application for a project in which I’m involved.

George: Why? Because they have access to...?

Ortega: Because they have access as an organization who’s presenting work, and they have the whole infrastructure of being a not-for-profit organization. They’re commissioning and presenting new work, so they can apply for a wide variety of grants. The only way I got money for Puta Santisima was like that (Ortega 1998 interview).

Presenters not only grant artists access to money, but also are the conduit to two other resources precious to all choreographers, the time and space in which to rehearse and develop new work. Especially for dancers based in New York where space is at such a premium, presenter-sponsored residencies--periods in which artists are paid a small salary to rehearse, develop work, and often teach classes to local dancers--are an invaluable means of support.27 Jumpstart gave Ortega a residency that was crucial to the development of his most recent piece:

Ortega: Danspace got me some commissioning money, but most of it came from Jumpstart in San Antonio who applied to commission the piece and got the money, so most of the funding came from them. We were able to be in residency in San Antonio for a week or ten days prior to the performances, in which time we were able to develop a big chunk of the work because we were

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27 Most younger choreographers do not have the option of rehearsing large groups of dancers in their living spaces, an option that was open to many of their predecessors who lived in larger lofts in downtown Manhattan in the 1970s.
in residency in the theater, in the space. We had the space all day to
ourselves, which is the kind of opportunity that you need in order to develop
work.

From conception and early informal showings, to its workshop process in San Antonio, to
its presentation in New York. Ortega’s work was three years in the making because
funding was sporadic. Ortega was more philosophical than regretful as he explained that
lack of funding opportunities means not only that he is doing more “solo work, but also
that the work develops very slowly. And that also is a mixed blessing; it has allowed me
to develop these pieces.”

Case Study Two

*On* was made by Allyson Green, a New York-based choreographer. The piece
was presented in January of 1998 at Danspace Project on a shared program with
Montreal-based dancer and choreographer Dominique Porte. Like Ortega, Green
received a commissioning fee from Danspace for this project, but the presenter’s
commissioning fee didn’t, as one might expect, defray all or even most of the expenses
incurred during the gestation period for the piece or even during the actual run of the
show. The commissions offered by Danspace Project, at least as described by Green,
appear to work more like a bonus on top of the usual fees paid to artists. For *On*, Green
received a $1500 commissioning fee and a $750 artist fee (half of what it normally would
be, because she shared the concert with Porte). Although she was presented by
Danspace Project, which means that she did not have to pay to rent the performance
space, and although the work was even selected to receive commissioning support, Green
explained that she lost a lot of money on the show. Green’s $9,000 in expenses included
paying the dancers, paying the composer, renting rehearsal space and paying the videographer to document the dance, but Green herself was not paid.

Green described the frustration of getting to a certain point in one’s career, of developing in one’s work a certain level of professionalization, a “certain standard,” in her words and yet still incurring debt for one’s projects.

Green: It’s such a strange thing that we work so hard in this field and we get to a certain place and we’re all so impoverished. I supplement what I do by teaching and by doing graphic design. I’m really lucky that I’ve developed those skills because they’ve really helped me pay my bills, but it means, for example, when I was doing my concert in January [1998] to help offset costs, I took on a big [graphic design] job for Channel 13. I was in the theater all day and going home and working on the computer until one or two in the morning. And it’s nuts. I’ve never had a time where I could just do a concert and just dance it and enjoy it. I’m constantly doing lots of other things to try to pay for what I’m doing (Green 1998).

Like Green, most of the independent choreographers I spoke with supplement their income by teaching dance, although the settings in which they teach vary widely. Some, like Green, have university jobs, often serving as an artist-in-residence for a semester or more. Rarely are these university jobs permanent, full-time, tenure track positions. Others teach youngsters in school or community programs, and many give classes and workshops in the studios where aspiring and established dancers and choreographers take classes. Many choreographers indicate that teaching has become a central part of their artistic identity by including their teaching experience in their
program biographies. Green described access to rehearsal space and to dancers, albeit student-level dancers, as another benefit of university teaching. Here she explains the relationship between her teaching and her process as a choreographer, especially as it relates to the making of *On*:

Green: I feel like I can’t make work the way I would like to as an artist. There’s no access to process; you can’t ask dancers to be in rehearsal day after day for nothing, because they’re in equally bad straits. So you have to devise ways to work in very compacted periods of time which affects the way the work looks. The way I worked this year was I made a big group piece on my students at Bucknell University, which helped me be able to research the material. Then I came to New York and I took three weeks to teach it to New York dancers, and then I presented that in my concert. So, it gave me a way to have process, just not with the dancers I would really like to be working with.

For Green, the making of *On* involved finding the means with which to maintain the aesthetic and professional standards she has set for herself and for her work. Maintaining these standards meant paying dancers and the others necessary to create and present a polished program. Having the time, space, and dancers required to try out ideas and movements—the “process” or “research”—was also an integral part of presenting a complete and finished product. Although Green points out that it was not the ideal situation in which to develop work, she makes it clear that her position at Bucknell was a way to gain access to the monetary and non-monetary resources necessary to make and present a dance piece.
Case Study Three

Sondra Loring’s *El Puente/The Bridge* was a collaboration with Mexican choreographer Vivian Cruz and Mexican composer Ariel Guzik. This is the largest, most ambitious and most generously funded of the three dances described. In addition to the creators, the performers included two American dancers, three Mexican dancers, two Mexican musicians and eight young performers from the Satellite Academy, a public school on Manhattan’s Lower East Side where Loring volunteers teaching dance.

The development of the piece was determined not only by the artistic vision of Loring and her collaborators, but also by a series of circumstances including the acquisition of a number of grants directly and indirectly related to this project. Loring first met Cruz while they were teaching together in New Mexico. The two women reconnected in 1996 while Loring was in Mexico City on a three-month Rockefeller Foundation exchange grant administered as a re-grant through Movement Research, another Manhattan-based dance nonprofit. The idea for this collaboration grew out of conversations between Loring and Cruz at that time. Together they applied for and received a $70,000 grant from the Meet the Composer International Collaborations program, a project administered in partnership with the Ford Foundation. This large grant enabled Cruz and Loring to work with composer Guzik, a frequent musical collaborator of Cruz’s. Like Ortega and Green’s pieces, *El Puente/The Bridge* also received commissioning funds through Danspace Project’s Commissioning Initiative. All three of these grants are examples of what artists and presenters call “re-grants,” which artists receive indirectly from foundations and public agencies through non-profit organizations. In this case, the three intermediary organizations were Movement
Research, Meet the Composer and Danspace Project. Regranting enables foundations, most of which do not give grants to individuals, to enlist the help of non-profit arts organization in administering their funds. While regrants ultimately place funds in the hands of artists, they do require a certain amount of administrative labor on the part of the arts non-profit. Finally, as Ortega intimated, relying on regrants from presenters can have the effect of placing even more power over artists’ lives and work in the hands of administrators.

The ideal against which artists appear to measure all other funding is that of the unrestricted direct grant or fellowship. Of the three choreographers whose work is described above, Loring is the only one who received direct grant support during the making of her project in the form of $10,000 from the Minneapolis-based Jerome Foundation at the beginning of the making of *El Puente/The Bridge*. Although choreographers spoke of and seemed to experience Jerome Foundation funding as a direct grant, a Jerome Foundation program officer was quick to point out that they must make their grants to individuals through a fiscal conduit with not-for-profit status. Further, the foundation officer stressed that Jerome generally makes grants to individuals with the understanding that the grant will be used to make new work. Indeed, Loring reported that Jerome was very interested in the project, and implied that her receiving the Jerome fellowship was closely tied to their interest in this particular project. One reason that independent choreographers seem to experience Jerome Foundation grants as a kind of fellowship is that Jerome funds at a fairly high level, with most grants to what the Foundation calls “emerging” choreographers at $10,000 per year and, more importantly,
the Foundation funds them at this level for five or six consecutive years. This means that any one choreographer can receive up to $50,000 to $60,000 from the Jerome Foundation in the course of their career. Benson verified that choreographers’ comments to the Foundation indicated that the grants had a significant impact on their careers and in the way they could think about making work. As Loring suggested, it is not the annual or even aggregate amount of money that a choreographer receives from Jerome that makes the difference but rather the assurance that for a number of years, she or he can rely and plan on receiving that sum.

As mentioned earlier, Loring’s project *El Puente/The Bridge* stands out because of its scale and scope, features of the project made possible largely through the $70,000 Meet the Composer grant. When asked what had been different about working on a project with this kind of budget, Loring explained that, first and foremost, this had been an extremely expensive project, which involved transporting from Mexico not only people--musicians and dancers as well as Cruz and Guzick--but also Guzik’s enormous and heavy instrument. The instrument, better described as an installation, is constructed of a wood and iron frame over which are stretched more than one hundred strings. A major portion of the Meet the Composer grant went towards the transport and care of this instrument. Loring also pointed out that tensions arose due to an unequal distribution of funds between the composer and the choreographers. She explained that she had to use her Jerome Foundation grant to pay for aspects of the project that should have been funded by the large grant. Ultimately, she did not benefit financially from this huge grant and, like Green, was unable to pay herself a reasonable salary for her work on the project.

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28 Conversation with Jerome Foundation program officer Vickie Benson.
Finally, another aspect of Loring’s project which set it apart from the other two is her use of non-dancers, her students from the Satellite Academy, within the piece. In an interview about the piece, Loring and Cruz describe how the process of making the piece reflected and fed their original theme of bridging cultures and bridging worlds, including generational and experiential worlds. Loring incorporated the students into the piece gradually, first working with them separately at the school. The students later came to work with the dancers in the studio for a month, during which time each performer was asked to record the creative process in a journal. Finally, all the performers spent an intensive week together at Earth Dance, a retreat in Northampton, Massachusetts. In addition to having to work and live side-by-side with professionals, the student participants also had to adjust to being outside of New York City. While projects involving a component of socially aware outreach are popular with funders, Loring’s project did more than pay lip service to community outreach. While the community outreach component may have contributed to her winning the Meet the Composer grant, Loring explained that in the end the large grant didn’t cover the student performers’ stay at Earth Dance and that she had to fund their stay through her Jerome Foundation grant. Despite the stresses of taking on such a huge project and the disappointments surrounding the collaboration with the composer, program notes encapsulate Loring’s aims and indicate that the project lived up to her expectations:

*El Puente* represents the collaboration of a large group of people, including choreographers, a composer, videographers, performers, musicians, technicians, managers, and designers. Geographically, we come from Mexico City, Brazil, Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan; artistically, we range from first-time performers to
first-rate professionals. We have been working together for an intense five-week period....We know a lot more about each other now, we asked each other deep questions; we brought out frustrations, our tears our anger and our joy to the table. We are proud of where our risk-taking has taken us--we have built those bridges we only imagined before we began.

Loring’s description of the making of _El Puente/The Bridge_ shows both the benefits and drawbacks of taking on major projects that are funded by a variety of organizations. Loring is perhaps one of the most administratively savvy of the cadre of independent choreographers whose experiences I document. She is the co-founder and organizer of a ten-day, multi-part annual improvisation festival and has also worked as a box office manager for Danspace Project. Even with her experience managing money and complicated arts projects, the administrative aspects of this project proved a major burden for her, both psychically and financially. Certainly, part of that stems from the lack of cooperation on the part of the composer. But surely a major part of the burden lies in the fact that Loring had to assume so many roles as she brought this project to fruition, roles including: organizer, fund-raiser, teacher, social worker, liaison between groups of artists and between artists and presenter, spokesperson, and, most importantly, choreographer.

Although Loring’s project is an extreme example of the extra-artistic demands a project can put on an independent choreographer working with little administrative support, Ortega and Green’s comments indicate that similar demands accompany even more modest projects. For example, Ortega’s account of the chain of funding and re-granting that enabled his piece to exist bring to light the importance of access to
resources such as time and space. Similarly, Green's experience of having to take on more freelance graphic design work in order to cover the expenses of mounting her show just at the very time when she was in rehearsals reveal another kind of pressure experienced by independent choreographers.

In what follows, I move from the stories of these three dances to a more general exploration of the challenges experimental, independent choreographers face as they build a repertoire and a career given the funding and performing opportunities available to them. These observations were culled from conversations and interviews with independent choreographers working in New York City, most of whom had presented their work at a major alternative space (either DTW, Danspace Project, Movement Research, or P.S. 122) in the 1997-98 performance season. The case studies traced out the ways in which art works come into being within particular institutional and economic contexts. The following section takes the analysis one step further and considers how choreographer's view the economic and cultural fields in which they work. Certain topics recurred with regularity as I discussed with choreographers their ideal and actual working conditions. These topics are arranged into three subsections: 1) the impact on their career of their funding and grant histories, including the demise of National Endowment for the Arts choreographer fellowships; 2) their relationships with presenters, and the role of alternative presenting organizations in their work; and 3) their professional identities as choreographers and the question of supplemental income.
Funding And Grant Histories, Including NEA Funding Cuts

In FY 1996, the NEA, under pressure from a conservative Congress, abolished all individual artist fellowships including the dance program’s choreographer fellowships. Grants which in their last round of existence awarded $20,000 in two consecutive annual installments to each grantee. Opposition to fellowships hinged on their nature as a form of funding which usually allows artists to work in a relatively open-ended way—projects can change midway through the grant period, and money can used to pay dancers, to rent rehearsal space, to buy props, or to pay one’s rent. Although most of the choreographers I talked to were not directly affected by the demise of the NEA’s choreographer fellowships, the NEA cuts and controversies loom large in their minds as the moment when things began to change for them and their careers, financially, artistically, and as members of a community engaged in a certain kind of work and production. Indeed, the notion of a smoothly-operating, well-funded NEA occupies a central place as the ideal patron in an ideal funding universe.

In keeping with this narrative of decline, a central topic of discussion in the interviews was the dwindling funding opportunities for individual artists, specifically the lack of other fellowships. Fellowships are most attractive to artists because they require much less complicated application forms than project-based grants and seldom require detailed budgets or project plans. Just as independent choreographers see direct funding as the ideal against to which measure other modes of funding, so, too, do they cast NEA choreographers’ fellowships as a kind of ideal of direct funding. Jennifer Monson, an independent choreographer with her own rehearsal and performance space in

29 Literature and Jazz Masters fellowships alone survived.
Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was one of the few independent choreographers I interviewed who had a consistent history of NEA funding in the form of Choreographers' Fellowships. Even so, Monson stressed the symbolic over the purely economic effects of these grants by noting that her first NEA grant gave her a certain kind of confidence, even though she's not sure she spent the grant on the "right things." Sondra Loring also mentioned the NEA as a symbol of how much the artist is valued. She also contended that in recent years, there's been a "loss about that" and that the NEA controversies revealed an opinion that an artist's place in society just wasn't important. Allyson Green, who had never received an NEA Fellowship herself, nevertheless cites the demise of NEA Fellowships as pivotal to changes in the atmosphere and environment in which she works. Although it may not have affected her directly, it looms large in her mind and colors the way she thinks about opportunities for herself and for other independent choreographers. Here Green assesses the state of the field and strongly suggests that its relative vitality hinges on the state of the NEA:

Green: It's so sad to me, I think there's such enormous talent in this country and there's really no place to go anymore for individual choreographers to find funding.

George: You say there's no place for individuals to go anymore, so did you apply for NEA Choreographers' Fellowships?

Green: Absolutely, yeah. And I didn't get them. I was just starting to choreograph when they were phasing them out, so I wasn't around long enough to establish a track record to get it. But I definitely know in the 1980s, for people who were getting those grants, it made such a big difference, there's no question.
Green goes on to discuss the impact of the NEA controversies and funding cuts on relative roles of public and private funders and predicts that more experimental, fledgling work will suffer if private funders are expected to take over the role of public funding agencies.

Green: I just thought the whole thing was pathetic, really, the way it all happened. I thought the [NEA panel] system was a really good system of peers judging peers. I thought it was working. I really did. And I wasn’t getting a grant yet. It’s not like I was profiting from it, but I believed in who was getting NEA funding. By getting grants those people could then get private money. So it was working.\(^{30}\) And now the thought that private funding is going to fill in the gap just isn’t so, because what private industry goes for are the big institutions. They go for the theaters or ballet companies or the big groups like Mark Morris or Cunningham, which leaves no place for smaller companies to grow.

The ways in which the NEA functions symbolically for these choreographers suggests that the agency operates in artists’ imaginaries as a civic/democratic manifestation of the grand bourgeois patron. That is, the NEA functions as a faceless but powerful body that can nonetheless sanction, encourage and even seem to call into being new artistic work. This view of the agency, which comes up most strongly in Green and Loring’s language of loss, reveals the persistent dependence on the notion of a patron in the absence of a single individual or family and even in the absence of actual support.

Even choreographers who are independent of company structures are symbolically dependent on the notion of an approving and supportive patron. The NEA is a unique

\(^{30}\) Here Green, like many of her peers, indicates the artist’s-eye view of the phenomenon of “leveraging” funds, a mechanism discussed earlier in relation to the NEA’s own development of public-private partnerships and encouragement of such partnerships on the part of their grantees.
kind of patron. On the one hand, it functions as the institutional manifestation of the bourgeois patron, yet on the other hand it derives symbolic importance from its public status and its aura as an anonymous body of citizen-patrons.

Another symbolic dimension of the NEA and the abolition of its choreographer fellowships is the loss of the promise of a coherent and uniform career progression. A number of choreographers outlined this career progression thus: one would make work for a few years, apply for an NEA fellowship, get it for a few years, then start a company and begin applying for company grants. Although most independent choreographers’ careers may not in fact have followed this progression, its logic and order seems to have acted as a stabilizing force even for those who were not receiving grants:

Ortega: In terms of how you structure a career we are in totally unfamiliar territory and we don’t have any role models in terms of how do it now. In the past there seems to be have been a logical step-by-step progression in an artist’s career. You got a certain point, then you had a company. You had a company, you started to get work and support, so you could grow and develop, not only in terms of the kinds of grants that you were able to get, but also in terms of being able to sustain your work. You kept on performing, you could do more touring, you could stop doing whatever other jobs you had to do to support yourself. There was a logical progression.

George: When do you think that really changed? How many years ago?

Ortega: I really think it started when the cuts for the NEA happened. The disappearance of the individual fellowships at the NEA was a big blow, because it took out that part of the equation. Getting an NEA fellowship also always made it
easier to get other grants. You get one thing, and it always opens doors to do other things. You get some support, it allows you to do more work, and it allows you to be more visible. The more visible you become, then when the next grants come, it’s easier. How do you build a career now? Because there’s not a next logical step as there used to be. I don’t feel like there’s such a thing as planning your career now.

Ortega points out that not only did the NEA structure set up a sense of a certain kind of career progression (namely from independent to company structure), but also concludes—echoing Allyson Green’s earlier comments—that an NEA grant conferred a certain amount of prestige that enabled one to seek and often receive other grants (its power to “open doors”).

Clearly, the loss of fellowship funding from a public body represents much more than a policy decision. Specifically, it represents a perceived loss of status and social value of the artist and a sense of disorientation vis-à-vis career planning and progression. Further, the severance of the NEA’s relationship with independent choreographers represents the unseating of a patron-artist dyad, a relationship especially important to choreographers working not only in experimental aesthetic modes but also outside of the organizational structure of a dance company. In the face of this increased instability, artists must replace these patronage relationships not only for financial reasons, but, as I will argue in the next section, for symbolic reasons as well.

**Choreographers’ Relationships with Presenters and The Role of Alternative Spaces**

The recent restructuring of the NEA has brought changes in how independent choreographers think about their career trajectories and about the possibilities for
producing and disseminating their work. With fewer grants available, choreographers—especially those at earlier stages in their careers and/or without a stable economic and organizational base—often rely on the directors of the theaters in which they produce their work for career breaks and for access to funding. The small-scale theaters in which they perform are often the conduit for funds to independent choreographers. As presenters often have ongoing relationships with particular foundations and their program officers and board members, a strong relationship with a particular presenter can do much to determine the course of an artist’s career. In fact, some younger artists noted being “discovered” by a presenter early in their careers as infinitely more important than receiving individual fellowships.

This shift in the relationship between artist and presenter—including changes in what each party expects from the other—is both subtle and complex for it involves far more than the presenter taking the place of the funding agency, i.e., the NEA, in the chain of funding. When Ortega, for example, notes that “the only way I got money for Puta Santisima is through commissions from presenters,” he makes clear the pivotal and powerful role the presenter plays in the creation of choreography. Especially in the case of commissioned work, in which organizations have a hand in the creation of new work, the term “presenter” has become limited and inaccurate. Further, these new interactions and structures of funding carry the weight of past funding structures and associations. As presenters take on a quasi-fellowship-granting function in artists’ career trajectories, the residue of past associations—past modes of funding, making and disseminating art—remain and accrue. Among the artists, these accretions surface as expectations and perceptions that may strain the artist/presenter relationship: expectations of the presenter
as fellow artist/fellow traveler in the furthering of artistic experimentation, \(^{31}\) as impresario/talent scout; as business associate trading with the artist for his/her goods; and, as noted above, as patron. Indeed, the language used to describe the presenter’s connection to the artist can gesture towards these earlier implied economic and power relations, as in the case of the term “commission.” Here the presenter clearly assumes the role of patron, assuming not only the economic function of a patron, but also all of the accompanying unspoken historical expectations of the patron. Among these are: the ability and power to “discover” an artist; the charge to protect and nurture that artist by means of an ongoing relationship of advocacy; the existence of a symbiotic relationship with an artist by means of which each party builds and asserts his aesthetic preferences and profile by means of association with the other. \(^{32}\)

The shift in the role of the presenter is further complicated by the fact that alternative spaces—formerly artist-run, often according to a collective democratic structure—have themselves undergone the kind of evolution and changes discussed in the previous chapter, changes themselves largely brought about by the earlier evolution of public funding bodies (i.e., the process by which alternative spaces became more hierarchical and professionalized in order to meet demands of public funders and in order to access increased funding of the 1970s and 1980s). This economy is complex not only because of the loops of grants and re-grants and the fiscal intricacies of collaborations.

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\(^{31}\) This is the legacy of a time during which presenting organizations operated according to more collective or democratic ideals. See discussion, in Chapter 2, of the evolution of Movement Research from an artist-run collective to a stratified organization.

\(^{32}\) Raymond Williams’ schema of the residual, the hegemonic and the emergent can help explain the ways in which unspoken expectations born of earlier kinds of economic and power relationships (in this case, the expectation that the bourgeois patron will discover, nurture and sustain the singular artistic genius) linger in current formations.
from the unspoken, the implicit, and the met and unmet expectations and assumptions that occasion each instance of art-making. 

When they describe and analyze their relationships with presenters, choreographers point to the range of economic and power relations that can characterize this relationship. Their emotionally resonant stories of times in which hopes were met or dashed, and moments at which presenters seemed to exceed their roles (in positive or negative ways) offer a window onto the sources of certain expectations. As choreographers describe the role of presenters as conduits to funding and other resources such as rehearsal space and audiences (through mailing lists, for example), they also discuss the less tangible but more resonant instances in which presenters assert their power to affect the course of their careers. Several choreographers, including Ellis Wood and Cydney Wilkes, noted the role that the grandparent of downtown performing spaces Dance Theater Workshop (DTW) and its founder and director David White played in launching their careers. Each described DTW’s support in terms of a pivotal moment of being noticed and singled out by a presenter. Significantly, both artists had been dancing in companies but were new to choreography when DTW showed their work. In their minds, therefore, the emergence of their respective careers was bound up with the support and guidance of a particular space and its director.33

Wood: I did Fresh Tracks and then I did two Split Streams in which you share the show and then I got my own show [at DTW]. David White’s also given me other opportunities, like their benefit at The Joyce Theater and sending me on to places like Jacob’s Pillow. And they’ve been really, really good to me, and nothing that

33 While many of the alternative spaces have collective roots, the profile and reputations of a great many are also bound up with the figure of a particular and charismatic artist director/founder such as DTW’s David White.
I ever asked for. He [White] has completely supported me and definitely started me down this path. I’m at a turning point right now, where, if I’m gonna do this, I need to take charge of my own career, get myself out there and find my own shows.

Here, in a discussion of her career progression, Wilkes discusses the central role of DTW and its director David White in launching her career. Earlier in the conversation, Wilkes noted that this support has been sustained over nearly a decade, and that she is scheduled for her fifth or sixth show at DTW in late 1998.

Wilkes: I started making work and performed it in little lofts here and there. The whole key to this is that I got an internship at DTW and did a number of things there. I worked in the summer in construction and also worked in publicity, so I got to know the office staff. So then I put on a performance piece at the Pyramid Club and David White came to see it. And then he just said, “Okay, I want you to do a show in the Out-of-Towners. I know you’re not an Out-of-Towner, but I’m gonna stick you on.” And the show sold out. They actually had to add a day.

From the piece that I did there, I actually got a NYFA grant. So that’s how I really got started, and then the rest has just been basically bouncing off of that.

In acknowledging the role presenters play in affording access to funding and other resources such as rehearsal space and audiences, choreographers highlight the important role presenters can play in any one individual’s career progression. Choreographers describe a process of being discovered, encouraged and generally supported by the presenter, a relationship that is often described as beginning with a single revelatory moment (“he just said, ‘okay, I want you to do an Out-of-Towners’”). Wood and Wilkes
both also describe going through a series of specific steps in their evolution, steps
determined in large part by the organizational structure of DTW. Perhaps in a field
characterized by uncertainty, DTW's structure provides a kind of security by means of
signposts of success and a sense that one's career is progressing in a measurable way.
That is, DTW's structure and programs define an implicit logic of success, a logic by
means of which one graduates through certain career stages: Fresh Tracks (a showcase of
new talent) or Out-of-Towners (another showcase format); Split Stream (a shared
evening); and finally, the desired goal, a full-evening program. While these categories
are not rigid--a point illustrated by Wilkes's inclusion on an Out-of-Towners program
even though she had been on staff at DTW office for some time--they do imply a kind of
orthodoxy and outside imposition of categories of success on independent artists. This
kind of predetermined progression resonates with Ortega's description of a kind of
implicit and understood career progression previously determined in part by the now-
defunct structure of the NEA dance program, namely that one would get a
Choreographers' Fellowships and then "graduate" to a company structure, acquire non-
profit status, and so become eligible for the much larger NEA Company grants as well
grants from private foundations. 34

Like Wood and Wilkes, Allyson Green attests to the power of presenters to "make
careers" by supporting artists at an early stage and giving them the resources to make
work. For Green, an ideal artist-presenter relationship exceeds even the kind of
consistent support through presenting seasons that Wilkes and Wood talk about in terms
of their relationship with DTW and David White. Green describes relationships in which

34 The logic of leveraging, as well as structure of NEA dance program, will be familiar to readers of the
earlier chapter on recent structural changes and rhetorical strategies at the NEA.
the presenter acts like a traditional patron, supporting the artist through the early stages of making the work, and “believing in” that artist. This differs in more than financial ways from the typical presenter/artists relationship in that the presenter is seen as exerting his aesthetic tastes at an early formative stage of the work rather than after the work is already made. So, for Green, the kind of shopping for a product that she has observed on the part of most presenters is less desirable than the presenter taking it upon him or herself to recognize, foster and reward talent by “making a career.” Green describes the kind of involved, hands-on approach (one in which the presenter, in her words, “takes a personal interest” in an artist) that she values:

Green: For example, Meg Stuart [an American choreographer], was taken under the wing of a man with the Klaapstuck festival. She hadn’t made any work at all. He’d seen her in Randy Warshaw’s company when we were both dancing for him. And he said, “I think you could make something interesting. Here’s some money, make a solo.” And from there it’s like, “Okay, that was good. I believe you could do something else. Here’s money for you to make a trio.” And Meg’s like Anna Theresa [de Keersmaeker, a very successful European choreographer]. It was completely someone saying, “I believe in you. Work on this.” Once you get into one place, someone thinks that you can do something and they start watching. They start working you in, they start doing things, you know. Maybe it’s crazy to think that that should happen here [in the U.S.] but it just seems like there was a possibility for it in the eighties. They [presenters] made Mark Morris, they made Ralph [Lemon]and Bebe [Miller] and Stephen [Petronio].
The approach that Green describes as so desirable may be experienced negatively by other artists. If presenters are seen as having the power to launch and partially sustain careers, they are also seem as potentially detrimental and too powerful especially when they attempt to exert influence over an artist’s aesthetic decisions or choices. Ortega describes the paternalism of a formerly enthusiastic presenter who asserted that a piece of his was “not ready” for presentation in her space. Ortega implies that this was a disingenuous comment which masked her own dislike of the new artistic direction his work was taking. Ortega was not only critical of what he perceived as her dishonesty, but, more significantly, bristled at her assumption that she could determine whose work was sufficiently developed for presentation in public. Asserting their aesthetic tastes through programming is seen as suspect by a number of choreographers I spoke with. Jennifer Monson, for example, noted her disgust at a presenter advising choreographer Donna Uchizono not to show a work-in-progress at Judson because it too “wasn’t ready.” Monson conjectured that this presenter feared that the audience would be discouraged from coming to her space to see the full-length piece, which was to be shown at that presenter’s space later in the season. Again, Monson’s distress derived from her perception that the presenter’s own self-interest threatened to interfere with Uchizono’s artistic process.\(^{35}\)

One may ask why should artists balk so much at presenters asserting their aesthetic choices. After all, the artistic director of a theater company would be allowed to

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\(^{35}\) Ortega notes tensions between presenter’s need to have a polished product to show and artist’s goal of experimentation. Discussing Puta Santisima, he says that experimentation continues to happen in front of an audience, but that the downtown scene has moving away from a true spirit of experimentation. Ortega conjectures that this derives from expectation of a certain kind of experimental product; this suggests that presenters may have a hand in consolidating a sort of avant-garde orthodoxy. The next chapter takes up this and other issues related to aesthetic trends and choices.
select playwrights, for example, and even to make suggestions about the work one assumes. Part of the resistance to presenters taking a paternalistic approach, especially towards artistic matters, derives from the history of alternative spaces as both artist-run and collectively-run. As described in the previous chapter, these now largely stratified organizations (Movement Research, Danspace Project and even DTW, and PS 122) were all founded by artists, and, although artists retain a major presence in these organizations, serving alternately as board members, employees, guest curators and audiences, they no longer exercise the same kind of control over the economic and aesthetic profile of these institutions. Monson, for one, was critical of the trend towards directors making all programming and artistic decisions for the organization and traced this problem to the kinds of organizational changes in alternative spaces discussed in the previous chapter. She noted pointedly that the artist-composed board used to make programming decisions for a particular organization of whose current aesthetic direction she disapproved.

Artists’ criticisms and expectations of presenters derive not only from the changing structure and function of specific organizations, but also from larger questions about the economic and social status of the artist, in general, and about artistic experimentation. What ideal of the experimental artist is perceived as being upheld or threatened by specific presenters? Is Monson’s ideal of non-interference which she sees being transgressed an outgrowth of the tradition view of the avant-garde as necessarily autonomous from outside economic influences and questions of marketability? Alternatively, does Green’s valuation of presenters who believe in and sponsor artists signal a desire to return to a traditional model of bourgeois patronage? The following
section takes up the question of professional identity as another field in which the role
and status of the artist is currently being forged and challenged.

**Making It Work—Professional Identity and Supplemental Income-Generating
Strategies**

In the preceding section, experimental choreographers expressed ambivalence about
depending on presenters to ensure their success and the state of their careers at a given
moment. This section explores an even more fundamental ambivalence about
choreography as a means of financial support and, specifically, as a *profession*.
Choreographers occasionally voiced this ambivalence explicitly but more often expressed
it in subtle ways such as tone of voice or the use of coded language. The explicit
expressions of ambivalence often centered around discussions of the sheer financial
difficulty and often impossibility of supporting oneself (much less a family or
dependents) as an independent choreographer. Choreographers stressed the logistical and
emotional difficulty of having to supplement one’s income with second jobs as they
described some of their strategies for generating supplemental income.

The subtler, more veiled expressions of ambivalence surfaced through the repetition
of certain themes often in a kind of coded language that centered around, for example,
themes of security vs. flexibility, luck vs. merit, and loss. Choreographers grappled with
these issues in different ways—many lamented the outside perception of their profession
as an indulgent, elitist and somehow unprofessional pursuit, while others went so far as to
question their own career choice. These doubts indicate an internalization of prevalent
social attitudes about the value of art and artists. As choreographers describe the
interaction between their jobs and their profession, their artworks and their various kinds
of labor, they reveal much not only about the daily reality of working as an independent choreographer, but also about the tensions and problems inherent in contemporary American attitudes about the social role of art and artists.

The most direct expression of ambivalence and frustration about a career as an independent choreographer came through in discussions of the problem of balancing money-making work with time to choreograph, rehearse and perform. There were many variations of this problem—for example, having to work more at an outside job in order to finance a show—and just as many solutions, some more livable than others. One model of working is to have a “job” that pays the rent and puts food on the table, i.e., a source of money that meets basic needs and frees the choreographer to do her work. Another model is to have a job somehow related to the work of making dances. Many people partake of both models in order to cobble together enough work to make ends meet.

Of thirteen experimental choreographers that I interviewed, all hold at least one job other than choreographer: seven teach dance to adults; three teach dance to children; two are computer network administrators; one curates an annual dance festival; one owns and manages a dance studio; one is a personal fitness trainer; one teaches yoga; one waits tables; one is a biological researcher; one is a graphic designer; and one is an administrative assistant. This small sample reveals that most people hold more than one supplemental job and that most prefer to engage in gainful employment somehow related to dance. Often, though, money-making work is only very tenuously related, as in the case of the choreographer whose dance teaching consisted of directing the annual musical at a Catholic girls’ school, where she also, incidentally, maintains their computer
network. Some artists hold second non-dance-related jobs that approach the status of a second career, as in the cases of the biological researcher Clarinda Mac Low and the computer system administrators, Cydney Wilkes and Wendy Blum. Most also suggested that while part-time and freelance work are draining and give little access to the benefits of full-time employment, the flexibility they afford enables them periodically to step away to concentrate on a particular project, a feature that compensates for the drawbacks. Neither solution—i.e., knitting together a string of dance-related jobs or holding an unrelated job to finance one's artwork—truly recognizes the making of dances as a full-fledged profession. Otherwise put, while the choreographers cited here are indeed professional choreographers, they do not enjoy a salient features of professionalism that characterize the careers of people with similar education and training. For one, their means of survival are often not related to their professional self-definition. Furthermore, measures of success that mark other professions such as salary raises linked to experience and time in the field, job security, seniority, and benefits simply do not exist in their lives. This predicament makes wage laborers out of highly trained and educated professionals. John Kriedler, a program officer at the San Francisco Foundation, notes that artists "tend to accept a high measure of non-monetary rewards, that is the gratification of producing art, as compensation for their work," and in so doing "discount the price of their labor" (Kriedler 1999: 4).

Most if not all choreographers accepted their often-difficult job and professional situations as the necessary price of sustaining a life as a choreographer. When given the opportunity to reflect on their lives, though, choreographers often revealed a range of existential struggles right beneath their apparently sanguine attitudes towards chronic job
insecurity and the incommensurate relationship between their often significant critical success and their financial stability. In the exchange below, Dean Moss, a mid-career artist whose work has been presented at the major New York-based experimental dance venues over the past two decades, offers just such a window on the conditions of his everyday life. As he describes his job situation and muses about a potential imminent change, Moss gives a sense of the psychic toll the job/profession split has taken on him.

George: Do you do work right now other than making artwork?

Moss: I’m a waiter. I work at Florent.

George: Does having that kind of job free you up to not have to get so freaked out about money?

Moss: You get freaked out because it’s a very marginal life. You get freaked out because I’m 44 years old and I’m a waiter and I don’t think of it as a profession. You get freaked out because you have expectations beyond that. I’m having to keep those expectations in check. I would like not to be waiter, so that forces me to think of things like teaching. I’d almost rather not teach, almost as badly as not being a waiter [laughs]. I really have to get over that because it’s much more useful to me in terms of getting my work out, getting my aesthetic out. I’m now framing what I would teach, how I would teach it.

George: But, for a while it may take a lot more energy than waiting tables.

Moss: Yes, yes. exactly.

Moss’s discussion of the pragmatic quandaries of being a choreographer reveals the difficulties of the uncertain and contingent life of an independent artist. Moss intimates that taking on teaching as an ancillary job could actually advance his career by enabling
him to develop and disseminate his aesthetic, but might be more trouble than it's worth as it would cost an initial expenditure of energy to develop a class and a group of students. As Moss told me about his job, his voice took on a slight edge of abruptness and defensiveness as he reiterated several times in a few minutes, "I'm a waiter" vs. "I wait tables." Moss's repetition of this seemed to be a way of his baldly stating, "The reality is that I can't support myself as a choreographer, so I have to wait tables. What's more, I'm 44 years old and I've been doing it for so long that this is partly my identity." Moss took my question about the instrumentality of just having a job to pay the rent and turned it into a commentary on the lived experience of being in a profession that is not really a profession. Allyson Green described another effect of the split between money-making work and choreography as she described having to take on more income-generating work during the run of a shows in order to cover the related expenses. Summarizing this ironic situation of having to work more at an ancillary job just when one should be concentrating on a show, a predicament in which she found herself during the mounting of her commissioned piece On, Green declared: "It's nuts, I've never had a time where I could just do a concert and just dance it and enjoy it."

Moments of candor and clarity about ancillary jobs such as Moss's admission that he'd rather not be a teacher or a waiter and Green's realization that she's never been able to just "dance a concert and enjoy it" were relatively rare in the process of the interviews. More often, questions about second jobs and other sources of income resulted in a catch in the flow of the conversation or some kind of misunderstanding. For example, when asked, "What work in addition to your choreography do you do?," Ellis Wood hesitated and looked confused. Only when I elaborated did she understand my
mundane and somewhat personal question, and then readily responded that she works as a fitness trainer. Such miscommunications can be partly explained by the fact that in a society where identity and self-worth are so tightly bound up with professional standing and financial status, questions of employment and income are somewhat taboo. While both flashes of candor and the conversational misfirings signal the existence of ambivalence, a much more common expression of ambivalence came across through the reiteration of those themes of security, loss, and luck. While admittedly subtler, these repeated themes and tropes are more culturally telling as they both derive from and perpetuate some basic conflicts related to the role and status of art and the professional artist in contemporary U.S. society.

One especially loaded term used to discuss careers and jobs was “security.” Choreographers vacillated between seeing this as a positive yet hard-to-attain state and seeing it as potentially negative. Most equated security with a level of structure incompatible with a career as an independent choreographer—such as the structured time of a full-time job or the organizational structure and responsibilities inherent in having an incorporated dance company of their own. Wooc, who has recently made the transition from dancing in others’ companies to launching her own solo career, asserted that she wouldn’t want a university teaching job, but understood that “a lot of dancers” are looking for that because “it’s security.” Security as a feature of a job is implicitly contrasted with and weighed against the relative flexibility of that job. Wilkes, for example, has opt for a ¼-time job as a computer administrator, saying that she has “a

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36 “The Real Story,” the name of a project recently undertaken by choreographer Fiona Marcotty under the auspices of The Field, suggests that income and money issues are not fully transparent in the world of independent choreographers. Another even more taboo subject, is the issue of family money, either inherited, like a trust fund, or disbursed directly by one’s parents. More than one choreographer raised this topic by either stating that they did or did not get help from their families.
bit of flexibility” in her job hours, but countered by asserting that “¼-time when you’re making a big piece is really, really horrible and has been quite a struggle for a long time.” Ortega equated lack of security with the decline of the dance company model discussed earlier, asserting that: “There’s not the infrastructure there for us create a company and sustain it, paying salaries to people, having the security of being able to work X amount of hours every day and knowing that you have the funding coming in to sustain a certain level of work on a daily level.” The promise of establishing a company and the subsequent loss of that possibility due to funding cuts seemed to represent the loss of a certain level of professionalism. While in reality establishing a non-profit organization may mean very little in terms of financial stability, it nonetheless functioned as a marker of success equivalent to a job promotion. The implications, if not the reality of a company, include the appearance of stability, as well as a certain level of artistic and professional achievement, responsibility and self-determination. Having a company and building a board and hiring and paying dancers all represented progress and a kind of professional maturity. Security, then, goes beyond economic solvency to include a level of predictability in one’s career trajectory or the benefits that go along with a university teaching position. In both of these examples, security connotes an attachment to a larger institutional structure.

In a field with no guarantees of career security and with resources insufficient to meet the needs of many capable people, choreographers appealed to the notion of “luck” as a determining force. Most often, luck and chance were contrasted with merit and hard work and very often were invoked in discussing other people’s careers. Guggenheim fellowships in particular were discussed in terms of luck, partly because they are awarded
on the basis of nominations, and thus don’t even require the labor of compiling a grant application. Around the time of the interviews that inform this chapter, John Jasperse and Donna Uchizono (choreographers discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Movement Research), had just received 1998 Guggenheim fellowships. Allyson Green, discussing the general field of grants available to independent choreographers, noted:

The one thing that still drops on you like *manna from heaven* [emphasis added] is the Guggenheim Fellowship. Two good friends of mine, I’m thrilled, just got Guggenheims—John Jasperse and Donna Uchizono. I know for a fact that Donna had stopped choreographing because she was too broke. At the point where she was doing great work. She’s taken this year off because she was in so much debt and she told me, “I can’t continue. I can’t keep doing this.” And so her getting the Guggenheim is the difference between her continuing and not. There’s no question about it.

Echoing Green’s sentiments and introducing the notion of merit as a foil to that of luck, Ortega analyzes fellow choreographer John Jasperse’s career:

Ortega: The more visible you become, then when the next grant cycle comes up, it’s easier. John [Jasperse] is a very good example of that. I’m not saying he doesn’t deserve it or anything, but he’s got into a very lucky streak [emphasis added].

Here, as elsewhere, choreographers invoke an ideal career by discussing what is lacking, what has been lost, or what kind of compromises they must make in order to sustain their careers. Implicit in these laments is an image of an ideal career as one which would offer security, recognize merit, experience and training, and provide a clear trajectory by which
one's progress could be planned and measured, in short, a career as an artist that would conform to a traditional corporate model. This ideal career, of course, remains an ideal and not a reality. Choreographers seemed to recognize an irresolvable tension as they simultaneously lament that a career as an artist doesn't follow the same rules as other careers and acknowledge their choice of career opened the door to a professional life characterized by its own set of rhythms and rules.

Choreographer Clarinda Mac Low offers a unique perspective on this tension as she had just left her job as AIDS research scientist at the time of our interview. This parallel career in a "skilled profession." as she put it, is certainly atypical. Nevertheless, her situation as well as her uniquely reflexive and candid manner bring into relief some very deep issues and ambivalent feelings common to many experimental choreographers. As Mac Low discusses leaving her job in order to devote herself exclusively to choreography and performing, she uses uncommonly explicit language of ambivalence—bringing up issues of the utility of art and of self-indulgence—as she contemplates committing herself to making dances.

Mac Low: April was a scary month in terms of letting go of my identity as a scientist and saying I'm an artist and how I feel about "just" being an artist. quote-end quote. I think it really is difficult for my ego in some ways. It's like "I can't just be that. That's not allowed. That's not useful. That's so self-indulgent." It's a huge conflict.

Mac Low delves deeper into her own ambivalence than the other choreographers and brings to the surface doubts and struggles about the social role and status of the artist.

37 It's important to note that the ideal envisioned by artists as a measure of career success is currently a rarity in most professions. In an era of downsizing and contract labor, the experiences of unaffiliated artists may indeed resemble quite closely those of corporate consultants or academic adjuncts, for that matter.
These issues come through in Mac Low's agonizing about her own professional identity, the nature of work and the social utility of art, especially art created for a small, relatively elite audience. Here Mac Low looks back on her decision ten years earlier to construct parallel careers, a decision that had recently lived out its usefulness in her life:

Mac Low: I never thought I would be an artist. Since I was eleven. I thought, “I’m a scientist.” But then, all of the sudden, I knew I had to make performances. So I said, “Alright, I’m going to do it. I’m gonna try my best and see what happens.” I knew I had a sellable skill working in laboratories and I knew it could be flexible. So in a way I wasn't taking too big a risk. It’s a really different thing both socioculturally and economically to be an artist than to be a scientist. How people treat you, what kind of money you’re gonna make, what kind of security you’re gonna have, what effect you have in the world, what voice you have in the world. It’s been a long process of letting go of that. I’ve been holding on to “I am a scientist” for almost ten years. And though I respect the idea of being an artist immensely, I didn’t respect it for myself, because I had a different agenda. I thought making art and performance in particular was, well, I still had problems with it [laughs]. It’s not about my security. It’s about how it affects culture and society and how “useful” quote-unquote an activity it is.

As Mac Low compares her work as a scientist to her work as an artist, she uses as a measure of comparison not only categories of social status—“how people treat you, what kind of money you’re gonna make, what kind of security you’re gonna have”—but also the notion of social utility and effects—“what effect you have in the world, what voice you have in the world.” Mac Low’s road to economic survival as a choreographer, i.e.,
engaging in a parallel career, offered her an identity and degree of status not available to most of her peers. Her special situation foregrounds issues of the social place of art—its perceived utility and social impact as well as the view of art as elitist luxury (here internalized by Mac Low). Having her career as a scientist as a point of comparison impelled Mac Low to articulate some of her doubts about the nature of making art as real work, doubts which remained largely unspoken in discussions with other choreographers. What Mac Low really reveals is that the ambivalence and general sense of loss, lack and struggle that permeates the stories of so many of the choreographers in this study goes beyond the concrete conditions of their existence. Mac Low, in unusually self-revelatory language, gives voice to what may be a much more widespread internal conflict for experimental artists, specifically, a fundamental clash between their career choice and the ideals and values characteristic of the middle-class in the U.S. As generally middle to upper-middle class individuals with a level of education and training that would otherwise land them in a skilled profession, the choreographers in this study have nevertheless chosen an occupation that doesn’t follow traditional patterns of compensation and professional recognition.

Some of the ambivalence expressed by these choreographers derives partly from a tension between the notion that experimental art should be free from the pressures and logic of marketplace and the expectation (or at least the lingering hope) that there will be a market for their art, a market that will then generate predictable and stable career trajectories. Second jobs perpetuate the ideological divide between making money and making art and in so doing do much towards preserving the aura of vanguardist art and artists at the same time that they work to amateurize art-making as an occupation. What is
ultimately complicated, then, is that the production of experimental choreography and, indeed, careers as choreographers, are neither completely free from nor completely determined by a simple supply and demand, free-market logic. Rather, there are various kinds of markets for the labor and products of experimental choreographers. These markets comprise a complex economy that includes granting agencies, presenting agencies, and ancillary jobs. Choreographers must move in and out of these logics and their demands as they conduct and maintain their careers.

Conclusion

This chapter began with descriptions of works by three contemporary experimental choreographers and then moved into a discussion of the conditions of production of these works, including the ways in which these conditions affect career trajectories and the professional self-concept of choreographers. The next chapter turns to the question of how access to resources affects the actual look and content of the artworks themselves. In it, I explore the relationship between specific aesthetic concerns and styles and particular economic, social and institutional conditions of production. The goal is not to posit a direct, causal relationship between socioeconomic factors and aesthetic concerns, but rather to explore how certain artistic decisions and trends may relate to the kinds of resource flows and economies discussed above. For example, what extra-aesthetic factors may have helped to impel Ortega towards the kind of identity-based work exemplified by *La Puta Santísima*? Similarly, how did the Meet the Composer-inspired collaboration and the community outreach component shape the artistic concerns and choreographic decisions in Loring’s *El Puente/The Bridge*? The following chapter treats such questions and also goes beyond specific cases and dances to
consider larger aesthetic trends in the field of experimental choreography. Such a view of artistic trends read against recent trends in funding and institutional organization will, it is hoped, further debunk the myth of vanguardist art as a privileged sphere free of market and political forces.
Chapter 5: 
DEFINING “DOWNTOWN DANCE”: THE CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY CHOREOGRAPHY IN NEW YORK CITY

In 1997, I undertook field research exploring the state of contemporary choreography in New York City, the acknowledged current and historical center of dance in the United States. Over the course of two years (several “seasons” of dance activity), I focused on a certain cadre of choreographers whose work could in broad terms be described as experimental. Some phrases that are used to describe this sub-field of choreographic output include: contemporary dance; experimental dance; new dance; downtown dance and independent choreographers. Here I also explore what downtown dance means in terms of the perception of social and cultural place of this form on the part of its producers. The notion that their work and that they as artists have a social role to fulfill derives from an American modern dance tradition in which social commentary is often given as much significance as artistic experimentation (see Chapter 1). In conversation with choreographers and in viewing their works, I observed that in the late 1990s, the nature of artistic experimentation is under continual negotiation and is often deeply affected by economic, social and institutional pressures.

Access to resources is one of the major influences on the actual look and content of the art works themselves. By investigating the relationship between specific aesthetic concerns and styles and particular economic, social and institutional conditions of production one will not necessarily uncover a direct, causal relationship between socioeconomic factors and aesthetic concerns, but may see how certain artistic decisions and trends relate to changes in funding patterns and institutional structures. One institutional pressure that choreographers frequently mentioned was the need to present a
polished, professional, finished-looking product in order to conform to the desires of certain presenters. At times, these influences on artistic production are indirect and diffuse, and revolve around the pressure to respond to broader social and cultural concerns of the times. Two key concerns that recurred were: a preoccupation with notions of community and social activism; and anti-essentialist explorations of identity, a trend that I call “performing identity.”

**Mapping the field of downtown dance**

The key players in downtown dance are the choreographers who make the work and the producing organizations that present it. These institutions, which currently play a central role in every aspect of downtown dance, mark the boundaries of this study. Specific institutions considered here—Dance Theater Workshop, Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church and Movement Research—are among the most influential dance presenters in New York; the research for this study was carried out primarily in those organizations in the late 1990s. “Downtown dance” denotes not just the geographical placement of these institutions, but also indexes certain kinds of shared aesthetic, institutional, and funding trends, networks and expectations.

Choreographers active in “downtown dance” all participate in the cycle of funding, presentation and training described in chapter 4. In this world, the promise of a performance date, sometimes accompanied by a commissioning fee, largely drives the production of new art works. A contrasting and perhaps outdated model is that of the dance company that continually works to expand and hone its repertoire. In contemporary dance in New York (and indeed in the United States in general), the presenting organization has replaced the dance company as the most significant
institutional form. As dance scholar Ann Daly wrote in her overview of the fall 1996
dance season, “Today, dance is defined primarily by its producing institutions. You hear
more about P.S. 122, “BAM” (the Brooklyn Academy of Music), and “DTW” (Dance
Theater Workshop) than you do about any choreographer, company, teacher, technique,
critic, or style. There are certainly no new artistic ‘movements’ afoot. Symptomatically,
program biographies supply nary a clue about a choreographer’s aesthetics or concerns
but scrupulously catalog the funders, producers, and presenters who have granted their
imprimatur (Daly 1998: 16).” While Daly’s article looks beyond “downtown dance” and
considers larger and more mainstream dance activity (although still non-commercial), she
very clearly captures the dynamics of a field in which the producing organization is the
pivotal player.

The history and ethos of some key institutions of downtown dance

The dance presenters discussed here share a certain approach to art-making, one
characterized by an ethos of inquiry and of ongoing labor. In short a concern with the
process of art-making. Further, many present dance in spaces that suggest a certain views
of art-making and of the social place of art. For example, Movement Research presents a
weekly program in the Judson Memorial Church while St. Mark’s Church-in-the-
Bouwerie houses Danspace Project. Both of these historically significant churches
consider artists and their audiences a part of their neighborhoods and communities. The
leadership of St. Mark’s Church sees Danspace Project and their other arts projects as
part of their history of furthering arts as an integral part of the community. In a Church-
published brochure, this Episcopal congregation cites a “powerful tradition of social
activism,” noting that the arts have been part of this mission since the early 1800s and
that Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham both danced in the church’s sanctuary.

Movement Research’s venue, the Judson Church, is located several blocks west of St. Mark’s, also has a tradition of social activism and support of the arts as part of its ministry.

To the bohemian elite that comprises the performers, founders, administrators and audiences for these alternative spaces, the images of labor and the "workshop" reflected in spaces’ names serve to distinguish them from uptown theaters. Similarly, the names of the major uptown performance venues—City Center, the New York State Theater (home of the New York City Ballet), the Metropolitan, and Lincoln Center with its various theaters named after key donors—paint their own picture of life in the city. Their names articulate a view of the city as civic space, an ethos that announces these institutions as capable of consolidating and presenting a shared and perhaps even official aesthetic. But how do those choreographers active in downtown dance experience the split? What are the meaningful categories for them? One choreographer active in the downtown scene illuminates some ways in which the downtown/uptown split refers to far more than a geographical difference as she discusses how some of her colleagues proudly claimed that they had never seen some of the more established companies including the companies of the late Martha Graham, Paul Taylor and even Merce Cunningham. She found this especially distressing because she believed that by ignoring the more established companies, downtown choreographers were willfully cutting themselves off from the history of American modern dance and, thus, from their disciplinary roots. She herself resists the split she diagnoses and asserts. "I move in all worlds of modern dance—of release technique and Graham and Taylor and the downtown companies and
improvisation” and says, “you know, there’s not just one scene for me.” The significance of the downtown/uptown split is not a new phenomenon in dance in New York. Indeed, some of the distinctions gave rise to the establishment and growth of the organizations considered here. Mary Overlie, a founding member of Movement Research, recalled organizing a concert of Movement Research-affiliated choreographers to be presented at Symphony Space a theater in upper Manhattan in the mid-1970s, shortly after establishing Movement Research. Overlie spoke of the need for Movement Research as a means of consolidating and nurturing numerous strands of dance experimentation that were arising in the 1970s. As a related part of her vision, she cited this early uptown concert as a great success partly because of its role in (at least temporarily) expanding the audience for postmodern dance.

Stylistic eclecticism: artistic experimentation in flux

As one moves through these spaces, what precisely does one see onstage? What are the movement styles, the common concerns, and the trends? The work presented in the 1997-98 season ranged from very abstract movement explorations that harked back to historical modern dance (Mark Haim) to quite theatrical works that used elaborate sets, music, and multimedia installations to achieve a certain spectacular “look” (Koosil-ja Hwang and Andrea Kleine), and from the solo character study (Ortega) to the large group works incorporating non-dancers (Loring). While the variety attests to the presence of inquiry and experimentation, the work gave an overall impression of being less radical and daring than I had expected, both in its political orientation and in the overall look and movement techniques. For example, there was much less concern with presenting
autobiographical and identity-based themes. The following field note excerpts reflect my initial response to seeing unexpected themes and styles in downtown dance venues.

10-12-97

Mark Haim’s *Goldberg Variations* at Danspace Project. When E. remarked how much he liked Haim’s performance, I said, “Yes, it was nice but it certainly wasn’t ‘edgy’ in terms of its overall aesthetic.” But I’m not quite sure what ‘edgy’ work is or where it’s being presented. What does it mean when the last two performances I’ve seen at an alternative space (Danspace) were danced to sacred medieval music and the Goldberg Variations?

While my initial reaction to Haim’s piece was disappointment, a second viewing revealed new layers of movement invention and experimentation. What I saw in Haim’s ninety-minute solo was a sort of music visualization, a form that harks back to the work of the early modern dancers Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. But Haim’s piece is a decidedly contemporary take on music visualization, with rapid shifts in movement dynamics and styles. Haim, a classically trained dancer, moves elegantly and precisely no matter what style he’s quoting. Indeed, he adopts the ethos of hip-hop DJs as he “samples” ballet, classical modern dance, and popular social dance styles. Within a single forty-second interlude, stately, fluid whole-body arabesques mutate into mechanical elbow jabs, and virtuosic up-to-the-ear kicks give way to loose and easy flops and head rolls.

Haim’s movement invention is sometimes serious and sometimes playful. Towards the end of the hour-long piece, to one of the slower variations, the stage lights are dimmed as Haim undresses completely. He then lies flat on floor, rolls languorously
a few times, rises to standing and then lowers himself back to the ground in a resting position. He tosses his clothes aside and then, to laughter, they are tossed back to him from offstage. In this and other later sections the dance seems to include more emotional and even semi-narrative content. As his hands reach to his heart and then to his head, Haim recalls an elderly man or a disturbed or perhaps ecstatic person. The placid yet intense end of the dance recalls the beginning as Haim walks in circles with his arms swinging loosely and easily as he lets the music move through him and gradually carry him offstage.

Two months after seeing Haim’s *Goldberg Variations*, I saw, in the same performance space, a short work by a younger “emerging” choreographer. This work typified what I had expected from “downtown dance”:

12/19/97

Andrea Kleine, a choreographer who looks to be in her twenties. Her piece had a trendy, quintessentially “downtown” look to it—visually, kinetically, and in terms of overall themes and design. All the requisite elements of hipness: boys in drag; black lace and see-through costumes. a text by Jean Genet; a black-and-white film of Kleine in various naked poses and very athletic dancing. Also some intriguing work with knives held between dancers’ toes. Looked dangerous. The work needed editing, but again, this is what I expected to see a lot more of here in New York.

**Movement styles and techniques: the social dimension of bodily practices**

Paradoxically, in the midst of this visual and thematic variety, there was a subtle but persistent kind of orthodoxy that crept into the movement itself. While the dancers
were not doing the same steps from dance to dance, nor could they even be said to be performing using the same "technique," there was a certain, hard-to-pin-down sameness to much of the dancing. A movement mode that predominated was actually more of a recurring cadence. That is, many dance pieces contained long sequences of multi-directional movement that had a kind of looping rhythm punctuated by bursts of athletic movement. This approach to movement is one that currently enjoys great popularity among downtown choreographers, and seems related to the study of a body training system called Skinner Release Technique (SRT). Devised by Joan Skinner and taught regularly in Movement Research-sponsored classes. SRT does not teach particular movements or steps, but rather encourages "letting go—of stress, of unnecessary holding in your body, of preconceptions about what is supposed to happen" and in so doing lets the mover "experience many [movement] centers at once (Skura 2000)." While there was a common rhythm to the dancing, it was often very satisfying to watch, providing as it did a vicarious sense of release to the viewer. Another movement trend that recurred in the late 1990s was a kind of weighty partnering style, a clear outgrowth of a form called Contact Improvisation. This technique was developed in the early 1970s and involves inventive and intuitive ways of transferring and supporting the weight of the dancing body, both one's own and those of one's dance partners. Many of the founding members of the presenting organizations discussed here were very active in the Contact Improvisation movement in the 1970s, a moment when Movement Research was a center of classes and workshops in Contact Improvisation.

Dance theorist Susan Foster relates the stylistic eclecticism in contemporary dance both to the choreographic experimentation that peaked in the 1960s and 70s and to
the current lack of training in distinct dance techniques such as those of Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham. Foster instead links current bodily techniques and practices to economic and institutional conditions, saying that in the absence of training in a particular technique and philosophy, today’s dancer is a “hired body.” She contends that because independent choreographers are not supported by recognized, formal academies of dance, they must aggressively market themselves to audiences and producers. These choreographers perpetuate this entrepreneurial approach as they, in turn, “encourage dancers to train in several existing techniques without adopting the aesthetic vision of any” (Foster 1997: 254). That is, choreographers contribute to the development of a body that “homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface. Uncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision, it is a body for hire: it trains in order to make a living dancing (255).” Foster ends on a deeply pessimistic and overstated note, saying that this hired body “denies the existence of a true, deep self (256).”

Choreographer and dancer Grace Mi-Hee Lee is decidedly more optimistic about current technical trends as she discusses both the social roots and the artistic uses of release technique. Lee explains, “The dominance of release technique is a result of dancers studying many forms of ‘alternative health’ practices, which all advocate ‘letting go’ of that which is negative. In fact, release technique will not train someone how to dance in and of itself. It will help a trained dancer to dance more freely, with more versatility and a fuller range. It liberates (releases) dancers from the tyranny of their previous training so that they can then use it at will. So that you get an amazing dancer like the Stephen Petronio Company’s Ori Flomin, who can fly through the air, low to the ground and upside down with gorgeous feet and a huge arabesque! Fantastic.” What can
we make of these two takes on eclecticism and a kind of cut-and-paste approach to dancing? Does Lee’s almost celebratory tone negate Foster’s assessment? In fact, although they reach different conclusions about implications of contemporary trends in movement styles and techniques, they each suggest an intriguing connection between larger social trends and economic structures on the one hand and artistic styles and bodily practices on the other.

**Debating the terms of experimentation—from formal innovation to social critique and back again**

Mark Haim’s *Goldberg Variations* drew on multiple movement techniques and certainly included sections that resonated with some of the approaches described above. Indeed, while my first impression was that of a quite conservative piece, upon a second viewing, I experienced his eclectic and rich movement vocabulary as satisfying and innovative. In fact, it made me rethink my presuppositions about what constitutes experimentation and invention in choreography. I have concluded that the terms of experimentation are under continuous negotiation in the milieu of downtown dance. Some choreographers experiment primarily on the level of the movement itself. Haim, for example, explores the relationship of movement to music—changing the ways we see and hear this canonical piece of music. For others, though, experimentation may also involve changing the way we see the world and our place in it by means of explicit or implicit social commentary (as in Kleine’s piece). Whether experimentation occurs primarily on the formal plane or extends to social and political commentary, it nonetheless exists within an institutional context rife with pressures that impinge on the creation of dances. An individual with a particularly astute way of talking about this
matrix of concerns in contemporary dance is choreographer John Jasperse. Jasperse has
made works that he describes as “formalist investigations” as well as works in which he
includes more explicit social commentary, such as his 1995 work *Excessories*, which
explores gender personae and relationships. Jasperse offers a nuanced view of the role of
social critique in choreography as he compare his more abstract work to the more explicit
social critique in *Excessories*: “I feel like there are certain social things that are
happening within that work, but is that really about social activism or social
consciousness per se? Is it about making an overt political statement or is it precisely
about dance itself as a political form? To be dancing at all now is so in contrast to the
what the status quo value system is, maybe it’s just an inherently political statement”
(George 1998: 320). As Jasperse suggests, experimental dance sustains a multi-layered
and multi-valent conversation with outside social pressures and social trends. The
following sections looks at some of these pressures, turning first to those concerned with
economic and institutional matters.

**Market and institutional pressures, including the drive towards professionalism**

While it would be impossible to identify a single aesthetic or technical thread
common to the dance I saw at the various alternative spaces, there was a kind of
professionalism and seriousness of intent that came through in most of the work. The
persistence of this polished quality—a look that extended from the technical expertise to
the costumes to the lighting—was initially surprising. In addition to expecting to see
more politically adventurous work, I had also expected to see work that was more “raw.”
The elements that contributed to a work’s looking “polished” did vary somewhat
according to the tastes and priorities of the particular presenter. For example the artistic
director of Danspace Project seemed to favor more technical, polished work with an emphasis on the physical act of dancing itself. At Dance Theater Workshop there was an emphasis on work that incorporated more theatrical elements, and with more emphasis on spectacle, i.e., the lights, the costumes, and overall look of the piece. Movement Research presented the most varied and the least finished-looking work, a function of the format of their free, Monday-night performance series at Judson Church that most often included works-in-progress.

Many choreographers commented on the pressure to present very polished-looking work and discussed it not only in relation to their own artwork, but also (and often quite critically) in terms of an overall trend. Jaime Ortega complained that “presenters want to have this finished product that conforms to their idea of what a finished piece of art is,” and went on to say, “When I talk about experimenting, it doesn’t stop in the studio; it goes on to the stage and to what I present to the audience. I think presenters sometimes forget the importance of that part.” While Ortega lamented what he saw as drift away from a general spirit of aesthetic experimentation in favor of more “finished” work, choreographer Jennifer Monson talked more generally about the notion of “politically active” or “activist” art. Although Monson did not claim a political bent for her own current choreography, she did convey a propensity for thinking about art works in terms of their political orientation.  

Monson diagnosed a current lack of experimentation in contemporary work, saying that work today seemed “safer.” She believes that the “activist moment” associated with the nightclub-like venues and

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38 Monson also talked about her work with Circus Amok, a traveling avant-garde circus that offers free performances in New York City public parks. Each summer, Circus Amok treats a different social issue in their programs. Monson has been affiliated with this group for several years and stressed that this project, which she describes as a “totally queer, totally political” project, feeds and affects her as an artist.
performance art of the 1980 has passed largely due to the pressure on presenters to present “polished” work to attract audiences and corporate funding.

Other choreographers talked more personally about specific outside pressures that have affected their approach to making dances. Ellis Wood discussed how institutional pressures and a looming concert date affect the artistic process. As she recalls making the transition from dancing in other people’s companies to making her own work, Wood conveys vividly how it felt to make her first dance. She says, “After I left the company, I just made a piece. You know, making a piece will never be the same as making that piece, because I didn’t make it for a show.” Then, wistful, she says, “but choreographing has never been the same since. It’s great and it’s always inspirational in new ways, but there’s nothing like the freedom of choreographing when you don’t have any pressure to live up to anything.” Allyson Green discussed how there was no “access to process” because of the prohibitive expense of renting a rehearsal space and paying dancers for rehearsal time. She notes that her 1997 piece On would have looked very different if she had been able to set it in the actual professional cast instead of having to work out her ideas for it on student dancers.

Another extra-aesthetic concern: the artist’s role in society

Of the trends that typify contemporary work, some can be best described as aesthetic or stylistic, such as the predominance of release technique. Other trends are more complex both in their sources and manifestations, and are responses to broader social conditions and expectations. In other words, these trends relate in one way or another to a choreographer’s sense of him or herself in relation to a larger sphere. These spheres may be local and concrete, leading choreographers to such questions as “how do
I relate to the youth of my neighborhood?” or they may relate to more global questions, such as “what are the social obligations of the artist?” Many choreographers see their role in society as involving some form of explicit social critique, a view that dates back to the work of Isadora Duncan. Indeed the trajectory of modern and especially experimental dance in the United States can be seen as continual vacillation between a preoccupation with social reform and an emphasis on aesthetic innovation. Furthermore, throughout the art form’s history, as today, these concerns often exist side-by-side, even in the work of a single artist.

One key mode of social engagement that a number of contemporary choreographers undertake is known as “community outreach.” In such projects, choreographers interact with a group of non-dancers, often involving them in the creation of a dance piece. Some have pursued this way of working more consistently and over a greater amount of time than have others. Another mode, the exploration of identity within the context of a dance work, straddles social critique and social engagement. This mode peaked in the early 1980s with an efflorescence of autobiographical and narrative work—and often work including spoken texts or monologues—that explored identity. Dancer and scholar Ann Cooper Albright cites explicitly autobiographical work as a trademark of the 1980s. Citing choreographers Bill T. Jones and Johanna Boyce as early practitioners of this style, Albright contends that by “claiming a voice within an artform that traditionally glorifies the mute body, these choreographers used autobiography in performance to change the dynamic of an objectifying gaze. Almost overnight, dance audiences and critics had to contend with...personal narratives that insisted, sometimes in very confrontational ways, on the political relevancy of the body’s experience (1997:
The exploration of identity persists in contemporary dance, but has developed from a more direct, activist, identity politics-inflected approach to one that takes a more distanced, nuanced and even ironic look at identity, a phenomenon that I talk about in terms of “performing identity.” The following sections offer detailed descriptions of particular works that had at their core either a preoccupation with community outreach or with the exploration of identity.

Community outreach and notions of social activism

Sondra Loring’s *El Puente/The Bridge* described in the previous chapter typifies a work with a community outreach component at its center. While many artists incorporate a community outreach component into their careers (through teaching, workshops or residencies, to name some ways of “reaching out” to various communities), *El Puente* is an example of a piece in which community outreach is integral to the finished, presented product. That is, it is a work in which the product, process and philosophy are tightly woven together. Loring drew on her relationships with Mexican choreographers, dancers and composers as well as her experience teaching young people from an alternative high school to create a work that treated, as the title suggests, “bridging” various worlds of experience.

Loring elaborated her view of the power of community outreach as she described the process of combining “at-risk” young people and professional dancers in a single artistic endeavor. Clearly, the most important community outreach component of *El Puente* was the inclusion of the eight young dancers, all students at the Satellite Academy, a New York City public high school for students who, as Loring explained, “have had trouble in conventional school environments.” Loring met these students
through her weekly workshop at their school and describes their evolution from reluctant dancers to performers by noting that at first, “they resisted taking their shoes off. We started doing yoga with them, dance exercises, learning how to move together and improvising (Kourlas 1997).” The process of building the dance intensified as Loring spent five weeks working with these students every day, a period which culminated in a week-long retreat with student and professional dancers at Earthdance, a former dancers’ commune in rural New England.

When I asked Loring whether she saw El Puente/The Bridge and its community outreach component as social activism, she said that for her the piece made a variety of statements about understanding experiences across generations, across cultures and across movement styles. The questions she and her collaborator Mexican choreographer Vivian Cruz asked of all the dancers revolved around bridging disparate experiences by asking questions related to home, safety and comfort and “telling each other about our lives (Kourlas 1997).” Loring and Cruz both concede that this piece was extremely ambitious in what it hoped to achieve aesthetically and socially. In an interview several days before the premiere of the piece Loring and Cruz said that many of their hopes were already met because the teens had already gained “self-confidence, empowerment, and tolerance for others (Kourlas 1997).” In program notes as well as in interviews, Loring also cited increased cross-cultural and cross-generational understanding as outgrowths of the making of the piece.

While Loring experienced success, it was not an unqualified success. Although El Puente was well funded, in part due to the cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and community outreach aspects of the project, Loring indicated that producing the piece and
facilitating all of its components (especially taking the students on the retreat and paying for the elaborate musical component) had left her financially depleted. The challenges Loring experienced derived from the practical need for her to assume many offstage roles and identities (social worker, community activist, cultural ambassador, and teacher, among others). Below, I consider three dance works in which the multiple identities assumed by a single person are explored onstage.

**Identity explorations/performing identity**

While autobiographical and narrative work peaked in New York’s experimental dance and performance scene in the 1980s, the 1990s saw the rise of a more complex understanding and expression of identity. The three pieces described below—Jaime Ortega’s *La Puta Santisima*, Deborah Hay’s *Voila*, and Koosil-ja Hwang’s *memoryscan*—illustrate this trend. While each of these pieces contained a semi-autobiographical component, they all treated identity indirectly and with a kind of distance. This distance was achieved in a number of ways, including the use of exaggerated theatricality (Ortega), the use of irony and suggestion (Hay and her dancers), and through fragmentation techniques (Hwang). These three choreographers, as they move from the literal and narrative to the suggestive, nonetheless share a tendency to supplement their onstage statements with highly-elaborated understandings of identity. In other words, although language doesn’t play a central role in their onstage work, each relies on language to flesh out their rather complex and layered notions of identity and of self. Below, I consider each of the works, along with the philosophical and personal frames in which their choreographer’s cast them.
Jaime Ortega’s *La Puta Santísima*

Of all the choreography I saw in the 1997-98 season, Ortega’s *Puta Santísima* had the most in common with the explicitly identity-based work that characterized the late 1980s. The melding of ethnicity, religion and sexuality as the not only a feature, but indeed the very *subject* of the dance marked it for me as clearly a work about identity. When I asked Ortega whether he considered this piece to be about identity, he hesitated and bristled a bit at the term. Then he conceded that one could say this work is about identity, but only insofar as identity or, he was quick to clarify, "identities" (plural) “permeate the work and percolate up through the work in various ways.” He continued, saying that he hoped *La Puta Santísima* would encourage the audience to question the very concept of concept and recognize it as, in his words, a “social construction.” The kind of exploration of identity Ortega describes involves a mediated, non-essentialist take on identity, one filtered through trickled-down academic notions of identity as performative.

**Performing identity in Deborah Hay’s *Voila***

Deborah Hay’s *Voila*, which premiered at The Kitchen in April of 1997, offers a rich case study of the ways in which disparate identities can be performed within the context of a single work. Hay transmitted *Voila* to dancers Grace Mi-He Lee and Scott Heron not via the usual means of demonstrating it for them in a studio, but rather by *telling* sending them a written libretto that they were to follow in their performances of the dance. Thus, during the performance, the audience had the rare opportunity to get inside the making of a dance by seeing three different versions of the “same” dance. The relationship between each of the dancers (i.e., Hay, Lee, and Heron) and the dance (i.e.,
the libretto) in this performance raise the question of how one can perform the dance
Voila, but also be simultaneously performing one’s own identity. For, indeed, Lee and
Heron brought located, if not explicitly politicized, dimensions of their off-stage selves
(e.g., ethnicity and sexual orientation) into their interpretations of Voila. Before
exploring the differences among these three interpretations, it will help to consider their
common source, the libretto. The first page or so of the libretto, excerpted below,
illustrates the combination of description and narrative, humor and seriousness that
characterize the whole document. The libretto begins thus:

Voila she entered prancing sideways, clipped and poised.

From darkness into light she sidestepped urban memories of horses; suspending
purity.

The back of her body pressed close to us, suspending perspective.

Horse inspired movement ceased mid-crossing, replaced by her clucking mouth.

She clacked, and clicked horse walk, trot, canter, gallop, and prance.

The sounds swept her into horsey locomotion and dance.

But she was stopped by a wall.

Caught with her pants down.

Fini.

Done.

Hay was the first to interpret the libretto for us, that is, to dance it. Hers was the
longest solo and had many signature elements of her performance style; it was slow.
painstakingly precise, hypnotic in its attention to detail, but also absurd. Hay interpreted the score rather literally as she “entered prancing sideways, clipped and poised.” With no musical score and minimal set, Hay’s movement and elaborate costume captured one’s focus. She is a generous but uncompromising performer, and doesn’t pander to her audience by making her dances pretty or amusing. Even her costume for Voila, a heavy brocade tunic with an attached tail, while fascinating and alluring, was decidedly unpretty. The oddness and incongruity of this rich, heavily worked material juxtaposed with a ridiculous tail and a hat that was part helmet, part turban echoed the shifting moods of seriousness and levity.

To assess what Hay’s performance of Voila might have to do with presentations of identity in dance and contemporary choreography, it is helpful to turn to another of Hay’s own movement practices, one that she calls “playing awake.” “Playing” a state of being, like “performing” an identity, puts the actor at a remove from that which she performs, but this remove can also allow an exaggeration of that state or identity. These understandings of play and performance work together with the libretto to enable and encourage each dancer to bring a great deal of him or herself to the stage. What, precisely is each dancer performing in his or her interpretation? In Hay’s interpretation, described above, she was performing crone and master teacher, performing sage, trickster and fool.

Grace Mi-He Lee’s solo followed Hay’s, and, like Hay, Lee danced the libretto without the aid of musical accompaniment. Also following the score, Lee “entered prancing sideways, clipped and poised.” Unlike Hay she entered a stage that had been

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39 Hay’s attention to detail is a recurring element of her performance style, and, I believe, one that grows out of her notion of “individual cellular consciousness,” a metaphor she uses to hone the quality of her performances and those of her students.
embellished by a set of her own making. Puffy white fabric clouds were scattered across the stage and a mobile with origami-like birds cast shadows about the stage. Lee was dressed in a stylized cowgirl outfit with chaps, embroidered vest, and a cowboy hat atop two girlish pigtails. In her hand she held a stein of beer. The initial visual impact was both touching and funny because Lee’s set seemed an ode to the Texas Hill Country and to Austin where she had studied with Hay.40 The set’s birds and clouds referred to the big sky so unlike the New York City sky under the dance was taking place, but the Western allusions also came from the libretto, with its references to horse-like movement and cowboy-like actions:

The hand-held microphone became a horse’s tail.

She galloped in circles, changing styles while retaining a sense of ritual.

She stopped before us and placed a forefinger handgun into each hip holster, the two gestures highlighted by brief lip blasts.

In her solo, Lee repeats many of Hay’s actions such as galloping and shooting. Although “Voila” is still very much Hay’s creation with her signature blend of the profound and the absurd, Lee’s rendition is also unmistakably about Lee. She performs with the feeling-tone of many of her own autobiographical dances, a mixture of camp and coquettishness. She also performs an ironic interrogation of stereotypes of Asian women, as she makes herself now girlish and coy, now fierce and outlandish. As much as anything else, though, Lee performs the possibility of multiple and mobile identities linked to disparate and varied experiences. This ethos, which she shares with many of her contemporaries in

40 Thanks to Jim Faubion for his perceptive comment that Hay’s costume also recalls another dance with Western imagery, Agnes De Mille’s Rodeo. The allusion (conscious or unconscious) to a modern-dance pioneer who often worked on Broadway brings into play another identity, that of the dancer as entertainer.
world of dance and performance, attests to the circulation beyond academia of anti-
essentialist, postmodern and social constructionist theories of identity.

After Lee’s performance, the audience sees Voïla a third time, now interpreted by
Scott Heron, who also cuts a striking figure. He’s slender and leggy, and his attenuated
body is topped with a boyish face graced with expressive elasticity. Heron also follows
the opening instructions of the libretto, as he enters downstage and makes his way
between two low lights placed on either side of the stage:

*Voïla she entered prancing sideways, clipped and poised.*

*From darkness into light she sidestepped urban memories of horses; suspending
purity.*

Heron’s version of the dance is beautiful, funny and frenetic. Certainly the most dancerly
of the three, Heron is a caricature of the classical ballerina, whose dancing consists of
huge bursts of virtuosity framed by moments of spotlight-relishing calm. As critic
Deborah Jowitt notes, the lighting designer “gives him the most bravura light changes,
and he performs in a corral of fluorescent trails (1997: 95).” As I looked back over the
libretto, I wondered how Heron made sense of the persistence of the pronoun “she”
throughout the libretto. Heron’s costume, a shirt and pair of pedal pushers trimmed with
fabric daisies seemed his whimsical nod to the feminine. Heron’s performance of the
dance also says as much about him as it does about the dance, for in it, he adheres closely
to the libretto, but all the while performs a multi-layered construction of himself. He
performs dancer and camp, humor and fashion sense and finally, he performs ballerina
poking fun at dancerly conventions.
As we consider three such distinct versions of the same dance, we are compelled to ask, "How could each performer be performing the same dance and also performing his or her own identity or sense of self?" In *Voila*, Hay, Lee, and Heron each present a kind of hybrid understanding of the self, an understanding informed by both deconstruction and identity politics, but representative of neither. This interpretation eschews essentialist, fixed notions of identity and consists rather of making a political statement about identity and stereotypes by affecting an ironic distance from such stereotypes through a variety of techniques including exaggeration, humor, and fragmentation. Performing identity involves making a statement about identity stereotypes while trying to avoid essentialism. But, due to the persistence and strength of stereotypes, art that critiques fixed notions of identity may not be received as anti-essentializing and may contribute to stereotypes. That is, what is meant to be as playful and parodically subversive may end up being taken at face value. In other words, instead of asserting fluidity and multiplicity of identity, the mere presentation of identity categories on stage may lead instead to their "sedimentation," to use the language of feminist theorist Judith Butler (1990: 33).

**Fragments of history and of self in Koosil-ja Hwang’s “memoryscan”**

Ironic distancing and fragmentation are strategies for avoiding sedimentation or reinscription of stereotypes. Koosil-ja Hwang’s *memoryscan*—a group dance that draws heavily on film, video and original music—concentrates on fragmentation as a way of unseating stereotypes while exploring them. While very athletic and even fierce movement figures centrally in Hwang’s work—she herself is a strikingly beautiful technical mover—the multi-media and even spectacular character of her works disrupts
the possibility of a coherent, linear narrative. Indeed, if it were not for Hwang’s program notes, the subject of identity may not have even been apparent.

Hwang has developed this dance over a number of years. One of the earliest showings of it was at Danspace in December of 1997 and consisted of several vignettes. The most striking involved Hwang tying herself to the waist of another dancer with a heavy rope. Hwang then trudged around him in circles with a faraway, disaffected look on her face and a bodily bearing that communicated ennui. Seemingly unrelated video images, some distorted, some mere flashes of color, were projected on screens placed on either side of the stage. The manipulation of images resonated with Hwang’s program notes in which she described the themes of the dance:

_MemoryScan_ deals with the question of how ethnicity and culture determine and individual’s identity in space and time. Scanning memories is the vehicle to travel through time and mind. This is a way to depict how individuals relate to their ancestry/cultural lineage and to manifest this process through dances portraying each dancer’s personality but not her/his race.”

In field notes written after seeing _memoryscan_, I reacted to the piece and to Hwang’s program notes:

12/19/97

Hwang’s program notes resonate with my thoughts about performing the self or “performing identity.” But the dance didn’t look like an exploration of self, and had little in common with straightforward kinds of autobiographical works. I’m not so sure I would automatically think of exploration of cultural heritage as an issue, except that I know it has been so in Hwang’s life, especially with the very
dramatic self-changing move of reclaiming her Korean name in favor of her Japanese name, Kumiko Kimoto. (Interestingly, she keeps a connection to her former name in her company name, Dance Kumikokimoto.)

*Memoryscan* tells its story through suggestion and images and feeling tones and fragments, rather than literally. Hwang’s own movement was gorgeous; she herself is a particularly smooth mover and transfixed (because transfixed, at one point she was offstage, but clearly still *in the dance*) performer. Her use of video technology (two videographers circle the dancers and manipulate images in real time) and of sound technology supported the dancing and the story, and kept it from ever getting boring. And, despite the gee-whiz potential of both video technology and the allure of hip hop music, these other elements did not overshadow the dance.

After this initial presentation of *memoryscan*, Hwang developed the piece into an hour-long multimedia piece and presented it at the Kitchen in 1999 and at the 92nd St. Y in March of 2000. Like the smaller, earlier version of the dance, this later version uses film images projected behind the dancers, lending a dream-like, layered quality to the dance. In this version, the images are drawn largely from popular American movies and suggest associations with the dancing and with the viewer’s own past experiences. However, these images seem largely unrelated to each other and to the dancing, and change too rapidly to form a story. In addition to the fragmented film images, the dancing unfolds in a series of distinct scenes, each apparently tied to the memories of one of the dancers. For example, the dance begins with all five dancers seated around a low table, miming eating with stylized chopsticks, with one of the dancers obsessively grooming Hwang. Are these memories of Hwang’s childhood in Japan? A solo follows
in which one dancer recites a list of disparate objects and experiences as gestures pop out of his body and moods play across his face. A subsequent section uses no speaking or images and relies solely on movement to carry the action. In this section, three dancers execute lunging, reaching movements as they run, leap and fall into one another’s arms.

Hwang explains that memoryscan doesn’t just explore her own interesting and complex personal and ethnic history, but draws on the experiences and memories of her dancers, whom she describes as a “tribe of cultural nomads,” to take a broader look at “how traces of forgotten ethnicity affect our cultural personality.” It was only in 1997 that Hwang, who had previously gone by her Japanese name Kumiko Kimoto, began to use her Korean name, Koosil-ja Hwang. She explains her multiple, complicated relationship to her own past: “Just because I changed my name to Korean doesn’t make me Korean. Growing up with a Japanese name, I felt in a sense that I was cheating and not standing up for my ethnicity. But now...I’ve been thinking about who is Koosil-ja inside? There are so many layers of culture. I am who I am. So I stopped pursuing one country to embrace all the layers of culture that are a part of me (Kourlas 1999).”

Memoryscan uses flashes of images, fragments of memories, and bits of personal history to communicate Hwang’s notion that identity is not only multiple and layered, but also fragmented, partial, and contingent. These three very different dances show that there are many modes of and possibilities for exploring the complexity of identity. While the autobiographical and narrative trend of the 1980s served to break up the muteness of the dancing body, the 1990s approach towards exploring identity exploits the nonlinear, evocative and imagistic nature of dance to present what is often a more complex understanding of the self.
Concluding thoughts

While the choreographic work presented in the seasons of downtown dance I describe herein varied widely, there were nonetheless certain trends and threads that recurred. Often these trends, as well as individual career decisions, are shaped by concrete and traceable contingencies such as access to funding or an artist’s relationship to a particular producing institution. Sometimes these influences are less concrete and revolve around notions of artist’s role in society (and result in activities such as community outreach) or hinge on their interaction with other spheres of society, such as the political and intellectual/academic (and result in identifiable trends such as “performing identity.”) What we can gather from this is while dance (like other contemporary art forms) is affected by its economic conditions and social milieu, it is not determined by it but rather exists in conversation with it. Further, the best of experimental artistic activity may not only interact with other spheres of activity, but perhaps even change them, if not through direct intervention, then by enabling the viewer to see the world in a different light.
CONCLUSION

General Findings

An ethnography of relationships, this project began with an examination of the sources and movement of tangible resources that enable the creation of experimental dance. While sociologists and historians of art (in this case, dance) might consider these relationships from the perspective of the artistic form and its development, I consider the place of artistic experimentation by conceiving of the place of artists in the broader culture as a complex and changeable constellation. My project uses a multi-site design to illuminate the complexity and dynamism of the relationship between experimental art and mainstream culture. As I tracked the flows of money from funding bodies to arts organizations to individual choreographers. I soon noticed other, less tangible exchanges. For example, cultural ideals of professionalism as well as organizational models and ways of thinking also circulated among avant-gardes and mainstream society (both corporate culture and "official" culture as embodied in the NEA).

My research revealed that while artistic experimentalists in the contemporary U.S. construct themselves in opposition to and as critics of mainstream social and economic forms, their artworks and their careers are nonetheless shaped by and reflect mainstream cultural ideals and economic forms. The relationships between contemporary dance experimentalists and the broader culture play themselves out in various domains or spheres of experience, which can be described broadly as: 1) economic; 2) sociological; and 3) cultural. What’s more, each of these kinds of relationships manifest themselves differently within the various sites of this ethnography (i.e., the art world; funding systems; alternative spaces/organizational domain; career and professional narratives; and
the content of art work), though one kind of interrelationship may dominate a particular site. For example, economic relationships between official culture and experimental artists are most obvious in the kinds of funding patterns and trends established at the NEA (see Chapter 2). However, exploring these funding relationships also led to discovering sociological relationships such as a shared class background between NEA staff and artists. Even more striking, employment and research at the NEA revealed that many staff members had previously enjoyed careers as artists and/or administrators in arts organizations of various sizes and profiles. The presence of such networks and movement of personnel among seemingly dissimilar arts organizations demonstrates how the categories of mainstream and experimental are upset once we begin to look at how things actually operate on the ground.

**Aesthetic Findings: Legacies of the Historical Avant-Garde**

If the categories of avant-garde, bohemian, experimental and oppositional are indeed outdated or at least blurred in today’s art world, why maintain the distinction and this language for this project? The answer lies in the fact that the group of artists and the milieu I looked at labored under the legacy of the avant-garde. What this means for US artists is that they shoulder the expectations of certain kinds of engagement with social and political realities. The form of this engagement has traditionally been resistance through challenging the forms of bourgeois art and a desire for autonomy and critical distance form bourgeois culture and cultural forms (see Chapter 1). What’s more, artists in the U.S.—especially those working in accepted Euro-American high-cultural forms—also labor under culturally and historically specific expectations. These are: 1) art should confer social benefits to its viewers and 2) the related expectation that contemporary art
will include a social activist component (in some ways this is a more recent post-1960s
development linked to identity politics, but also has historic precedents such as the social
activism of Isadora Duncan. This kind of explicit engagement with the political reached
its peak in the 1980s in the form of activist art that brought explicit identity politics to the
forefront of experimental dance and performance.

**Extra-Aesthetic Constraints**

In addition to artistic expectations, experimental artists in the U.S. today are also
subject to specific extra-aesthetic constraints, the most obvious of which is funding and
their access to it. As we have seen, because of its, experimental dance in the U.S. has a
unique relationship to funding (and to public funding, particularly) because of its non-
commodity nature. This feature has made it markedly more reliant on public subsidy
than the visual arts or even some of the other performing arts that are seen as more
accessible and marketable (certain musical forms for example). Dance has neither a
tangible product to offer nor because of its audience size does it usually offer the promise
of generating revenue through ticket sales. Partly due to its inherent nature and partly
because of its particular funding history (namely the public funding-driven ‘dance boom’
of the 1970s), U.S. dance has a unique ‘market,’ one comprised primarily of the NEA,
other public funders at the state and local level, and, to a lesser degree, private funders.
These official bodies, their funding criteria, standards and agenda, and not audiences
exert the strongest ‘market pressures’ on the creative output of experimental
choreographers.
**Mainstream Culture and Experimental Art: Relationships in Different Registers**

In addition to this explicit connection to mainstream culture, there are less explicit resonances, relationships and connections. These connections exist in a variety of spheres and in a range of registers. The contribution of this project and its methods rests in uncovering the specific spaces and terms in which artists interact with mainstream culture—economic, sociological, and cultural, as mentioned above. Understanding the moments and terms of contact between experimental and the broader culture gives us a sense of the place of art in culture and the process of artistic creativity that goes beyond that offered by only considering art works in and of themselves (or even within their own disciplinary historical context).

**Economic Relationships**

Economic connections between avant-garde artists and mainstream culture are two-tiered. On the one hand, they derive from the fairly direct economic relationships between government agencies and private donors and the artists and art organizations they fund. On the other hand, these economic connections are more general and global, and derive from the pervasive economic forms and organizational structures of what cultural theorists call late capitalism. Moreover, there is an ideal professional self that is valued and even generated by this mode of production that artists are not impervious to. So artists’ understanding of themselves as professionals and to their career and to gathering the resources it takes to make and present their work are shaped by the trends and values of late capitalism. Questions of the formation of an ideal professional self bring together sociological and cultural questions with economic ones, but there are certain art and art-funding world trends that are primarily based on the economic models
of and relationships with mainstream culture. The three that emerged most dramatically in this research are: 1) the pervasive move towards corporatization (of the self and of grass-roots arts organization, for example); 2) privatization (of public funding agencies); and 3) commodification (in the form of choreographers responding to a market for their work, albeit one comprised primarily of funders).

Privatization and corporatization in the public arts funding sphere occur both in terms of the actual circulation of funds and in the ways that administrators and artists think and talk about the distribution of funds and the value of art work. Privatization—the relegation to the private sphere of roles of responsibilities previously seen as public—has had deleterious effects on experimental choreographers, especially those working outside of a company structure. As public agencies and private interests combine their operations and funds via public/private partnerships, experimental artists have proven to be less likely than their more mainstream counterparts to maintain their funding levels. The reason for this is that private, proprietary organizations are often wary of linking their name to the untried, the unknown, and the potentially offensive.\footnote{There are, to be sure, exceptions to this rule, and smaller, family foundations such as the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore and Puffin Foundations stake their reputation on seeking out lesser known artists and artists with ideas that push aesthetic, social and political boundaries. One can argue that these family foundations are more able than corporate foundations to take these kinds of risks because they are less concerned with the association of a particular artwork with their brand name (i.e., Philip Morris or Borders Books.)} Finally, privatization also means an overall reduction of the budgets of public agencies such as the NEA, and therefore of the total funding available for all artists, especially those most reliant of public subsidy.

The other related trend—that of an overall corporatization of the realm of artistic production—has more diffuse but pervasive expressions and effects than that of privatization. Corporatization is an overall way of understanding economic resources and
their flows, and shows up as a force in public agencies, in nonprofit organizations and in artists own career plans and self-conceptions. During my fieldwork at the NEA, corporatization showed up in the adoption of corporate-inflected jargon and management approaches. Some examples of this trend show up in the kind of language that we hear from NEA staff members in Chapter 2 as they discuss the NEA’s role in “information-brokering;” “leveraging;” coalition-building; accountability; and public-private partnerships. Moreover, most of the management strategies adopted by the NEA have direct analogs in the corporate sector. For example, the strategic coalition-building that the NEA both practiced and encouraged during the 1990s resonated strongly with the corporate mergers and downsizing occurring at that moment. Finally, the NEA restructuring was characterized by an overall results-oriented approach that sought the greatest return on its investment (either through partnerships in which their contribution would be smaller than another body’s or through funding projects with multiple purposes (including a social outreach component).

Corporatization also surfaced in the artists and organizations funded by the NEA or, more precisely, those who hoped to be or continue to be funded by the NEA. In a sense, that kind of cultural resonance of these independent choreographers doing experimental and politically oppositional work and the presenting organizations that showed such work being such astute businesspeople. In these cases, the economic connections and the cultural connections between experimental artists and the broader culture are difficult to disentangle, but it’s probably safe to say that new modes of self-understanding on the part of artists are related to privatization and corporatization of the public funding realm. More specifically, as the primary market for contemporary
experimental dance, the public funding realm encourages a certain kind of business savvy in its applicants. The paradox lies in the fact that the set of skills that make any one person a good navigator of today's public funding—self-marketing; flexibility; the ability to design, promote and execute a time-bounded project—would also contribute to success in today's corporate realm.

Socioeconomic and Sociological Connections

Experimental artists and funders are not only linked by economic relationships (including, as treated in Chapter 2, those that involve the exchange of cultural or social capital for economic capital), they are also linked by specific socioeconomic and sociological relationships. The most significant socioeconomic link is, quite simply, the fact that artists and funders often share the same class and educational backgrounds. The experimental choreographers included in this study more often than came from middle- to upper middle class backgrounds. Although they might reject the concrete professional ambitions of their class peers, they seem to retain a certain class orientation, bearing and set of expectations, a Bourdieusian habitus that is theirs neither to cast off nor take on. It should come as no surprise that they share cultural ideals with their funders, presenters and audiences, and, indeed, with the broader middle-class culture as a whole. A key sociological link is that of education, one of the great markers of class in the U.S. It's crucial to remember that the dance forms considered in my project flourish not in conservatories or in professional dance schools, but rather in elite liberal arts universities and colleges. As Bourdieu, John Guillory (1996), and others have elaborated, elite universities not only transmit knowledge, but also reproduce class distinctions and teach the skills required of members of a certain class. Not only their milieu, but also the
content of the training, produces artists unusually rich in cultural capital. What’s valued in the dance training at most elite universities is not physical technique but rather composition, i.e., dance-making techniques based around certain concepts and principles. Given its surfeit of cultural capital (with arguably more cultural cachet and certainly less revenue-generating potential than technique-based classical ballet), it makes sense that experimental dance would need to seek atypical, non-audience-based markets.

Another important sociological link (although one downplayed by artists and administrators alike) are the informal networks that enable individuals to move with ease between artistic and administrative roles within these spheres, so that one person can be in the course a career in the arts, an artist then a government bureaucrat to private arts funding agency officer. Time and again throughout my research, life histories of arts administrators at the NEA as well as in dance presenting organizations revealed pasts as dancers or choreographers. These occupational networks and career trajectories derive in part from this shared class and educational background and in part from the overall professionalization of this milieu as discussed in Chapter 2. Moreover, networking (what organizational theorists call “filtering of personnel”) not only reflects shared class backgrounds, but also helps to produce shared expectations and practices as people and ideas move among different kinds of arts organizations and milieus.42

Cultural Connections and Cultural Logics

The sociological and economic interrelationships described above provide the mechanisms through which unexpected cultural connections between artists and the broader culture develop, connections that threaten to make obsolete the distinctions

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42 See DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 71) for more on the “filtering of personnel” as a feature of institutional isomorphism.
between bourgeois and bohemian. These cultural connections surface in the tone, approach and worldview of many contemporary choreographers, and encompass shared cultural logics and well as ideal expressions of the self as an artist and as a professional. Artists I interviewed often presented themselves as in opposition to funders. Yet often shared with funders a commitment to the legacy of engagement and social commentary in American modern dance. Similarly, while their work was presented as oppositional and resistant to mainstream values, they participated in broad-based understandings and enactments of the ideal professional self with the attributes mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, including project-based thinking, flexibility, and business-savvy.

Indeed, experimental artists participate in many of the same cultural ideals as those involved in more mainstream pursuits and careers, including those who fund them. They have many of the same expectations of career progression and professional life, and often use the very same strategies of self-presentation and career planning. One can see this in the Chapter 4 testimony of Jaime Ortega in which he says there is no longer any such thing as planning your career and contrasts himself with a friend in the publishing business. The irony lies in the perception of a guaranteed career security and path in other professions. Indeed, Ortega’s friend in publishing may well find himself having to move from firm to firm within the course of his career, plying his skills. This last point suggests that there are also at play what historical (in a Jamesonian sense) connections. That is, the shared understandings and economic relationships that surface in the disparate sites that comprise the art world described herein are characteristic of a historical moment, one in which not only on stage but also behind the scenes identity is fragmented, contingent, and flexible.
Effects of Economic, Sociological and Cultural Connections on Creative Process and Product

How, then, do all of these connections between avant-gardes and their funders (and the broader culture in general) affect the creative process and the artistic product? What are the results and the terms of this multi-layered relationship? Not only do artists have to embrace certain orientations to their work, but they also have to be sensitive to what the market for their work (as comprised by funders and presenters) privileges at any given moment. For example, in the 1980s community outreach and accessibility dominated the agenda of many public funders, including the NEA. Many artists responded by designing artworks and projects that targeted specific populations or asserted their connection to a particular population or community. Within experimental choreography, dances with extra-aesthetic messages and goals characterized this period, even though, in the end, many of the projects inspired by a funders’ community outreach mandates contributed to the funding controversies of the late 1980s and 1990s.

During the span of my fieldwork, from 1991 to 2000, the explicitly identity-based work that had been privileged in the 1980s gradually fell out of favor due to its potential for inciting criticism from cultural conservatives. What took its place was a valuation of a kind of distanced, ironic view of identity. This new kind of work (characterized as “performing identity” in Chapter 5) was a vestige of the identity politics of the 1980s but drained of its explicit politics. Just as the presence of identity politics in choreography and contemporary art at large was largely funder-driven, the creation of this new take on identity was a response to a certain kind of market pressure. And yet, as choreographers backed away from explicit and literal/narrative (and especially oppositional)
presentations of identity both on stage and in their grant applications, they nonetheless retained the language and content of identity concerns in their work and in their descriptions of it. Identity as a topic for choreography became less an explicit theme and more of a style in the 1990s. This trend seemed to be encouraged by the curatorial preferences of dance presenters as they acted as conduits for funding between funding bodies and thereby exerted more aesthetic power within the field of experimental choreography (see Chapter 4).

What, then, is the role of the experimental and socially critical artist when faced with these conditions of production and constraints? While the move toward a less explicitly political expression of identity is driven by funding practices and by broader social and economic constraints, there is a way in which this aesthetic mode identity, while less explicitly oppositional and ‘political,’ has just as much emancipatory, resistive potential for artists and audiences. Performing identity can represent a different kind of activist intervention, one in which the emancipatory moments lie in the irony, the distance, and the aesthetic force of the work. Although it has threatened to become so, performing identity as an aesthetic mode needn’t be limited to a mere style that stamps one as ‘alternative’. Indeed, the openness in the expression of multiple, shifting and fragmented identities (as we see in the work of Jasperse, Hwang, and Hay described above) can be more resistive than the straightforward expression of identity precisely because in the best hands it strategically defies easy categorization. By eschewing monolithic understandings of identity (such as woman, gay, Korean, and so on), contemporary choreographers who perform identity augment the ineffable quality of dance with similarly hard-to-absorb theamtics. As we have seen, the non-commodity
nature of experimental dance doesn’t make it immune to the forces and logics of corporate capitalism. And yet, the actions of many of these choreographers—staying literally and figuratively in motion, refusing to be pigeonholed in terms of identity or style, and simply continuing to do the work of dancing—keep open the possibility of their implicit critique of mainstream cultural and economic forces. For, in the words of choreographer John Jasperse, “at this point in time, there is something inherently radical about practicing an art form that doesn’t exist in a tangible way... as soon as you stop dancing, it isn’t there anymore. We don’t produce a product. I think that is a big social statement.”
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NEA Dance Grants to Movement Research

Appendix--Figure 3
Appendix--Figure 5

NEA Dance Program Grants to PS 122