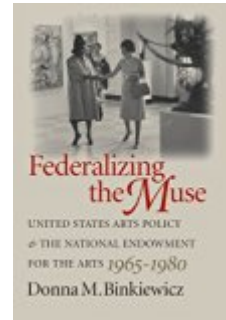


Donna M. Binkiewicz. *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 295 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-5546-1.



Reviewed by Jamie Pimlott

Published on H-Pol (July, 2006)

In *Federalizing the Muse*, Donna Binkiewicz sets a lofty goal: rescue the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) from being forever caricatured as an agent of perversion and use it as a lens through which to understand society and politics in postwar America. Restricting her analysis to the Visual Arts Program, Binkiewicz does an excellent job in providing the reader with a solid understanding of the political and historical context within which the NEA was created. Especially important to Binkiewicz's story is the political milieu of post-WWII America. Some form of a national arts program had been suggested since the late nineteenth century, but the federal government was wary of passing arts legislation. According to congressional records, the problems of who to fund, for how much, and to what end, were insurmountable. It is here, before national arts policy was even enacted, that Binkiewicz provides the first glimpse into the tension between "aesthetics and ideology" that would continue to haunt the NEA (p. 17).

Binkiewicz explores these tensions and their impact on the creation of a national arts agency in

part 1, saving the story of implementation for part 2. Regardless of the controversy, proponents of the legislation were steadfast. Four supporters are especially important to the NEA story: Rep. Frank Thompson, Senator Jacob Javits, Senator Hubert Humphrey, and Senator Claiborne Pell (pp. 24-30). According to Binkiewicz, the support of these men sprung from a belief that supporting the arts was part of "promoting the general welfare" (p. 31). This altruistic purpose stands in stark relief to the rationale behind the support of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. For the latter group of men, the NEA and its product, American art, was another tool to use in the fight against Communism. Binkiewicz argues that the NEA would have been pushed aside indefinitely if not for its symbolic use in the Cold War. Thus the NEA is really an example of presidential policymaking, and as such should be considered by scholars interested in the changing nature of the presidency.[1]

The reader leaves part 1 feeling informed and somewhat intrigued. How did the NEA go from an emblem of the Cold War to an emblem of liberal depravity in the 1980s? How should we evaluate

this change--what is its impact on art, government, and society writ large? Binkiewicz's goal is not to take sides on art policy; plenty of that has occurred in the public discourse. Rather in the second half of the book she tries to explicate the context within which the NEA existed and how this history continues to affect the relationship between the government, the NEA, and artists.

How did this transformation occur? How did administrators and artists react? According to Binkiewicz, the composition of the Council became the determining factor in the fate of the Visual Arts program and the NEA more generally. Had the Council been more open to change (to new art forms and more generally, to new ideas), it would not have become so incendiary in the 1980s and 1990s. But by the time the Council supported a broader array of artists and art forms, including support for Robert Mapplethorpe's provocative nude photographs and Andres Serrano's photograph entitled *Piss Christ*, politics had turned sharply to the Right.[2] In fact, the NEA became so controversial in the early 1990s that one political operative called it "the Willie Horton of the 1990s." [3]

Further complicating the NEA's position were the tensions between Congress and the Executive in post-Watergate politics. The NEA's history seems inextricably caught up in the tension between Congress and the President, but unfortunately that is not a key part of Binkiewicz's story. [4] Nevertheless her investigation of the early history of the NEA can be used by other scholars to further flesh out this tension.

In part 2, Binkiewicz revisits the history and making of the NEA and launches into a painstakingly detailed description of the members of the early Council, their background, political leanings, connections, and artistic vision. Collectively these mini-biographies provide an in-depth look into the inner workings of the body which controlled the allocation of resources within the organization. To fully understand the implications of

Binkiewicz's study we need to have a detailed look the politicians who were supporting and opposing the NEA, as these individuals determined how much money the Council was able to distribute in the first place. NEA funding began to fluctuate in the late 1970s and declined precipitously during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, in part because of larger economic trends, but also because of societal pressures. In many ways it is amazing that the NEA received as much support as it did until that point, and Binkiewicz makes it clear that this support is the product of Executive interest, even though in the end she casts Congress as "the NEA's most consistent champion" (p. 215).

Binkiewicz's *Federalizing the Muse* is a much needed addition to the scholarship on national arts policy and more specifically on the National Endowment for the Arts. No longer can the NEA be viewed as an organization without a past; rather Binkiewicz grounds the organization in the politics of the times leaving the reader better equipped to understand how the organization became embroiled in controversy and conflict in later years.

Notes

[1]. See Dennis W. Gleiber and Steven A. Shull, "Presidential Influence in the Policymaking Process," *Western Political Quarterly*, 45, no. 2 (June 1992): pp. 441-467; and Steven Shull, ed., *Presidential Policymaking: An End of the Century Assessment* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe., 1999).

[2]. For information about Mapplethorpe and to see a selection of his work see: <http://www.mapplethorpe.org/>. To view a photograph of Andres Serrano's controversial image see: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/502.html>

[3]. See Allan Parachini and Dennis McDougal, "Censorship and the Arts Reach Boiling Point Politics: Some Observers Say the Uproar over 2 Live Crew and the NEA Controversy Represent a

Much Larger and More Alarming Trend," *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1990, p. 1.

[4]. See Joseph Cooper, "From Congressional to Presidential Preeminence: Power and Politics in Late-Nineteenth-Century America and Today," in *Congress Reconsidered* ed. by Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce Oppenheimer, 8th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press,), for a detailed history of the tensions between the Executive and Congress. It was during the early 1970s that Congress entered the "Reform" phase, which is often used to describe changes that occurred within the institution. But changes were also occurring between these two branches as Congress attempted to gain back some power that it had ceded to the Executive during an earlier period. See also Keith Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Jamie Pimlott. Review of Binkiewicz, Donna M. *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12071>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.