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**\*ARTIFICIAL ART OFFICIALS**  
(THE CULTURAL MYTHS OF THE NEW STATE)

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### THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION OF OUR TIME

Since the dawn of the Reagan era, when a new wave of cultural and political conservatism swept over America, one of the most important ideologies which ascended to public prominence was the desire to scale back the welfare state, the role of the government in enforcing civil rights legislation and the spending of tax dollars on funding Federally-sponsored cultural programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts. All of these laws and programs were products of what is commonly referred "the era of big government," which, the theory goes, no longer exists because the free market has shown that it can perform the same egalitarian function that the state once did. Now that we are well into the second term of the Clinton era, the conservative economic and cultural logic which fueled the Reagan revolution of the 1980s appears largely unabated. Like punk, conservative anti-statism has gone mainstream.

Beginning in the early '80s, the newly elected Republican government became very sensitive to right-wing calls for the dismantling of the National Endowment for the Arts, a still-young federal agency with a fairly large budget, which saw its mandate as being to promote an indigenous American culture by providing public funding for arts education programs in public schools and deserving artists who could not find sufficient private resources to subsidize their work.

During the first years of the Reagan administration, when federal subsidies for a variety of government-funded programs ranging from mental health care all the way to public education started to get progressively cut, secular and religious conservatives allied with Reagan inaugurated a culture war to accompany the Republican Party's conservative political and economic program of downsizing. Initially this campaign took the form of preventing such small-time targets as suburban convenience stores from being allowed to carry magazines as diverse as Hustler, Circus and Tiger Beat because of the kind of affront to traditional religious morality such literature supposedly contained. But by going after such empty straw men proved to be practically ineffective because the results were largely symbolic. Pointing out the fake subversive potential of morally impotent, mainstream cultural icons only served to delegitimize the new religious piety in the eyes of the apathetic American public. Something legislative was needed in order to raise their ire.

By the mid-'80s, Christian and neo-conservative cultural activists began pressuring congressional leaders into forcing the music business to put warning stickers on to the covers of records with supposedly objectionable, non-Christian content. All of these cultural initiatives were for the most part successful, insofar as they forced the government into acknowledging the strength and power of conservative Christian lobbyists. But creating such legally sanctioned prohibitions on cultural consumption only served to enhance the market value of those commodities rejected as immoral by the new Religious Right. The government couldn't stop private businesses like Warner Music from pressing Slayer albums because that would have amounted to censoring a firm which provided a great deal of cultural legitimation for the Reagan presidency through its immense media network. While largely ineffective in achieving their stated purpose, such initiatives did succeed in creating a cultural climate more hospitable and welcoming to religious concerns.

In 1988, the Reverend Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association found the right target that would push the new Christian cultural revolution into its next phase of delegitimizing the official culture of the old liberal welfare state: The National Endowment for the Arts. For every Chippewa Wig Wam display in town halls in northern Wisconsin and every Appalachian quilt exhibit it sponsored in Amish communities in southern Pennsylvania, the NEA was found to subsidize cultural artifacts which really did subvert traditional religious definitions of heterosexual citizenship. For the first time, conservatives had found an effective target-artists given money by the state who created work which they could legitimately argue contradicted mainstream American cultural sensibilities.

The whole thing started with the NEA's sponsorship of a traveling exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photography in Washington DC, followed by a similar installation at the Corcoran Gallery in Cincinnati. This, the religious right argued, amounted to a symbolic federal condoning of homosexuality. Such state-sanctioned endorsements of alternative sexual orientations did not conform with the ideal vision of the new sexual culture of the emerging post-industrial economy, which would of course be culturally defined by Christians. After a great deal of public controversy, the Mapplethorpe exhibit was canceled, but not before Wildmon found four other strawpersons, led by performance artist Karen Finley and photographer Andres Serrano, to further bolster his point.

Nothing epitomized the object of religious rage more than Serrano's defilement of a crucifix soaked in urine. As pedestrian and commonplace as such an image is in contemporary American art culture, the fact that it was paid for using public money meant that it had a lot more symbolic power than a privately funded masterpiece of anti-religious art like Slayer's 1986 LP, *Reign in Blood*. Add performance artist Karen Finley's naked torso to the equation, cover her in chocolate icing and then listen to her recite a monologue about being raped with a rumup steak next to a slurpee machine, have the gig inadvertently financed by some poor farmer in rural Iowa who'd just lost his property to a bank foreclosure and voila, it's all over. You don't need any more ammunition than that to delegitimize the official culture of a country sliding deeper and deeper into the recession and chaos of economic restructuring.

Serrano and Finley, among many other artists on the federal payroll at the time, had their grants rescinded. They were the vanguard of a new generation of radical artists to be faced with a lack of public funding. While they appealed their loss of resources and eventually won their cases, they lost the bigger battle. The precedent had already been set for the state to divest itself of its liberal cultural holdings. After President Bush fired National Endowment for the Humanities chairman John Frohnmayer over censorship issues related to the arts and humanities, federal funding of the NEA continued to slide under repeated assaults by Republican and Democratic congressmen eager to score points with their growing conservative constituencies.

By 1997, in response to two judgments by district and appellate courts who ruled that the state had no right to censor publicly funded artists on the basis of public propriety, under the initiative of the Clinton Administration, the Supreme Court instated constitutionally binding decency standards which prohibited the government from funding certain kinds of art which violated ambiguous, religiously determined notions of cultural conduct. The liberal era of the cultural welfare state was now officially over. The cultural logic of the new conservatism had finally been etched in legislative stone. The responsibility for the maintenance of a new American arts culture had been handed over to the free market in much the same way that the state had given it the right to redistribute rights and income.

### SECURING CULTURAL LEGITIMATION

Despite this massive shift to the right, there are still some serious differences between Clinton's politics and the Republican ones which preceded him which make his administration's political orientation seem a bit more liberal. Clinton hasn't taken the same conservative stance towards reproductive rights that Reagan did. He did oppose bans on fetal tissue research, and for a while he struggled against a ban on third trimester abortions. And Clinton did try half-heartedly to have the state recognize the equality of queer sexual orientations in his vain attempt to have gays silently recognized by the US military establishment.

Clinton also hasn't taken as explicitly an intolerant a position towards cultural politics as Ronald Reagan and George Bush did either, despite the fact that he is the first president to place restrictions on how federal cultural agencies fund the arts. After all, Clinton has tried to be a youth president. He blew his horn on MTV; in the wake of Kurt Cobain's suicide, he even invited ticket-price conscious, child-welfare concerned liberals such as Pearl Jam and Soul Asylum over to the White House to discuss teen issues. These were really great public relations moves deliberately targeted at a youth audience. As discredited as such bands are with people in the supposed know, it certainly earns higher marks in the suave department than Boris Yeltsin inviting MC Hammer to have dinner at the Kremlin. Then again, we don't live in Russia—or so we thought.

Obviously Clinton understood that it's important not to marginalize would-be supporters in the rock community, particularly at a time when big money artists such as REM and former members of Nirvana were forming political action committees supposedly dedicated to combating censorship and racial prejudice, such as JAMPAC, Rock the Vote and Artists For a Hate-Free America. This new liberal rock constituency had a lot of money, and because of its fading punk roots, something of a conscience too. No wonder there have been no congressional hearings on the immorality of rock culture in '90s America the way there was during the '80s, when Clinton's own Vice President's wife, Tipper Gore, scored big points with Christian voters by reciting the lyrics to Mentors' songs such as "Smell My Anal Vapor Baby" to rapt, Bible Belt busting legislators on Capitol Hill. Suddenly the idea of rock millionaire Eddie Vedder sharing a sofa with Tipper and Al several years later while they talked about the problems which confront America's youth makes an awful lot of sense.

But embracing the current crop of successful rock and roll liberals in order to score brownie points with cable television-watching future indie rockers of America is not the same thing as helping stem the decline of big government. It gives the impression that Americans equate state legitimation of popular culture with a, metaphorically speaking, culturally big government, the kind of government which tolerates freedom of speech as long as it doesn't pay it by placing this responsibility in the hands of the culture industry. The problem is that the American government has washed its hands of bureaucratic responsi-

bility for defining a democratic civil culture. It has turned this supposedly unique mandate over to the market because it falls in line with how the financial establishment currently thinks about democracy. The state doesn't want to have to promote participatory democracy culturally because it objects to democratic politics formally—they run contrary to contemporary ideologies of economic productivity. When the cultural left moans about how the state doesn't support art anymore, they ought to remember that.

Under Clinton, the role of the government in our everyday lives hasn't so much been diminished as much as it has been redefined. The executive branch spends more time coordinating the economy and responding to the demands of the private sector than it ever did while spending less time responding to the demands of the public sector. In the name of deficit reduction, Clinton has followed the Republican ethos of bureaucratic decentralization by ending welfare as we once knew it, cutting off aid to dependent children, slashing school lunch programs, neutralizing affirmative action policies and putting limits on the amount of time individuals can stay on welfare rolls. Similarly, Clinton has also turned over the administration of public assistance payments to less benevolent, budget-conscious state governments in the form of block grants, eliminating the federal government's role in directly administering a great deal of public resources.

Downsizing the state's role in redistributing rights and income hasn't effected other areas of public spending, where the government remains as committed to doling out public resources as it was when it was ostensibly much bigger. For example, the defense budget hasn't shrunk dramatically despite the end of the conflict with the former Soviet Union. Frequent military deployments in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti and the Balkans over the past six years have, to a large extent, prevented the kinds of decreases in the extraordinary levels of military spending which characterized the core of America's 1960s warfare state economy. Much of the public resources that might have been spent on public assistance during another more generous period in history are now disbursed to unstable foreign governments, such as Mexico and Korea, to shore up their ailing economies or it's spent on high technology firms in the private sector to build a so-called "bridge to the future."

### THE CULTURE INDUSTRY AS GUARDIAN OF DEMOCRACY

In an era when the culture industry has by default replaced the state as the primary institution responsible for the cultivation of liberal civic virtues, the only guarantees of existing democracy are symbolic ones. Mass culture, like religion, always represents democratic utopias in the here and now, as though it were something already achieved. What's transpired over the past twenty years is that ideology has caught up with reality. In the place of the non-existent liberal welfare state of the 1960s, we live with the imagery and sounds of an era that never even existed, as though it were actually an existing reality.

The problem, of course, is that there is a disjuncture. The benevolent, multiracial, gender tolerant mass culture of the late nineteen-nineties does not correspond with the greedy, self-serving racist realities of the new conservative establishment. That's why the culture industry serves up such liberal utopian imagery. In the absence of a kinder and gentler society, it reverts back to old fashioned forms of propaganda which invert our experience of sexual hierarchy, of racism and economic disparity by telling us that we've overcome them. We are given real life examples too, because the culture business, unlike the stock market or the real estate profession, thrives on a liberal marketing ideology which turns every kind of possible social distinction like gay lifestyle politics, Jewish neurosis, or African-American oral culture into commodities which by virtue of their entertainment value, are the new prerequisites for full citizenship. When you can't legislatively guarantee freedom from discrimination, you grant it culturally because the market needs new commodities to sustain itself.

If you look at the political content of every aspect of contemporary, mass-produced culture, this fact is as plain as the eye can see. A&M feels free to produce records by nouveau black nationalists like Ice Cube. The Knitting Factory feels no contradiction about putting out Hasidic-inspired free jazz records. And rock bands like Sleater-Kinney can come out to their parents in the pages of SPIN magazine just like Ellen did on television last year. Now that's freedom! The message tells us, if they can do it, we can do it because we now have the liberty to do so. But that liberty doesn't actually exist; we have no real rights—we've fetishized difference as something that can be exchanged. We don't need the state to subsidize the production of democratic culture anymore because the cultural economy does it for us. Every single commodity produced by independent and multinational entertainment conglomerates celebrates every possible form of individuality, every stripe of ethnicity and every kind of sexuality, from Seinfeld to Go Fish, all the way to Shoah, and lets not forget, Amistad.

That's why we continue to see salvation in becoming cultural producers instead of political reformers, because a well-oiled productive machine like a successful independent record or film production company fits in with the concept of political liberation created by the new state and the new marketplace.

Nonetheless, the buck doesn't stop here. No matter how falsely optimistic the new utopia is, culture always leads back to politics. In the absence of a clearly identifiable state capable of concretely insuring equal rights, cultural producers who get used to being allowed to express their difference as a commodity end up wanting more than just symbolic affirmation of their right to be themselves because they begin to experience limits to their own freedom. They begin to find instances in their own lives which prohibit them from professional advancement in fields other than entertainment. Their children get discriminated against when they have to get real jobs; or they find that there's no true accounting of their respective histories in popular history books or documentaries on public television; or they find that the government's reluctance to prohibit structural discrimination leads them to lose their rights altogether once some savvy political conservative fears that they've gained too much power.

This makes for an uneasy balance between business and equality, where cultural attitudes towards all manifestations of ethnic, cultural or sexual distinction are predicated upon the whims of trade and not legal sanctions which guarantee impartiality. This makes fairness hostage to the principle of exchange, because it subjects political education about equality to the ebb and flow of profit making, something that the state is supposed to guarantee regardless of prevailing financial winds in the American economy. You might as well bet your fate on an astrological chart, it's that dicey, but that's exactly what the new corporate state is all about and why we ought to fear it. ©