



By Alyson B. Stanfield

Why Art Matters

Last week, while presenting a series of workshops in Boise, Idaho, I had the pleasure of hearing a keynote address by Dana Gioia, Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Gioia has a background in business—17 years at General Foods Corporation—which he left to pursue a full-time career as a writer and poet. He has also published an opera libretto and was music critic for *San Francisco Magazine*. His most recent collection of poetry was honored with the American Book Award last year. Unanimous confirmation by the U.S. Senate last January, after the sudden death of Michael Hammond, installed Gioia as the seventh Chair of the NEA in its 38-year history.

If you've been in a cultural catnap for the last decade or so, you are probably unaware of the turmoil at the NEA, which can loosely be dated to 1989 when then-Senator Alfonse D'Amato (New York) tore up a reproduction of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* on the floor of the U.S. Senate. D'Amato complained that the artist had received funding from the Endowment and called it "a disgrace." His conservative colleague at the time, Jesse Helms, tried to pass an amendment that would limit the kinds of programs the NEA could fund, barring all art deemed "indecent" as set out by his explicit list. The law, thankfully, did not pass. Its details and shortcomings are too many for this short space. Suffice it to say, the battle lines were drawn.

The arts were no longer part of the fabric of our lives, but had been successfully painted by the Right as far outside the mainstream, even something to be feared. Art began to be seen as a luxury. As we know well in Colorado, when art is viewed as a luxury it becomes expendable. It is sometimes the first line in the budget to be slashed by our cities, legislatures and, worst of all, our schools. We have watched our state's arts commission budget unceremoniously cut from \$1.2 million two years ago to a token \$200,000 this



Photo by Vance Jacobs

Dana Gioia, Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.

year. The NEA has also seen its budget slide from a high of \$175.9 million in 1992 to its current level of \$115.7 million (it has been slowly increasing since its low in fiscal year 2000). At this level, it is still a mere 1 percent of all the arts funding in the U.S.

Gioia's Vision

Gioia contends, in one of the great understatements of our time, that those involved in the arts have done a poor job of verbalizing the value of art to society. In just under four decades the NEA has given out 120,000 grants, which breaks down to nearly 3,000 for each year of its existence. These grants go to dance, music, drama, writing and visual arts venues and artists in all 50 states. Of all these awards, only 11 have been labeled "controversial." Unfortunately, those are the ones that were singled out and trumpeted to ready ears by opponents of federal arts funding. The NEA and other arts advocates did not have an articulate response and were, in fact, stymied by the shouts of those offended

by the so-called controversial art. Rather than focusing on the positive aspects of the remaining 119,989 grants, advocates found themselves defending the 11 under attack. Gioia put forth a challenge to all arts advocates to communicate what art is and why it is valuable and to do it with one voice. Only then can we expect federal and state dollars. But what should that unified message be?

The Greek word for art is "poesis" which Gioia described as "a way of knowing the world" separate from but equal to science and mathematics. As we know, the latter two disciplines carry much more weight in budgeting by lawmakers and those who set school curriculum standards. When art is seen as a luxury, his argument goes, it is considered unnecessary to our survival and, indeed, our prosperity. We are complicated beings, not just analysts. We have emotions, desires and fears that can't be explored or expressed through science and math alone. "Art is the one form of communication we have that acknowledges we have a body and mind," Gioia says.

"Art completes our humanity," Gioia adds. It is used to educate children about their feelings, not just their analytical thought processes. Throughout a person's life, they will not simply be given information in the form of facts and figures. Unfortunately, our schools are often set up so that there is just one path for success, but not everyone is the same. Sports, for instance, are so important because some students who don't succeed in the classroom find success when they become part of a team and can contribute to the goals of the group. On another level, the arts foster individuality, freedom and self-expression, the very ideals on which our nation is built. These things are rarely encouraged in current curriculum. Gioia calls on America to be "worthy of its own civilization." Art is not a luxury, but absolutely necessary to complete our humanity. It is "mainstream civic common sense," he says. **W**