



Print Article

TRANSCRIPT OF
CONFERENCE CALL OF THE
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

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THE NEW CULTURE WARS

by Ben Davis

The National Endowment for the Arts is in hot water with conservative politicians. Again. In August, allegations surfaced that the NEA's communications director Yosi Sergant had participated in a conference call with representatives of the art community, trying to get them to push the president's agenda. Now, Glenn Beck, Lou Dobbs and other right-wing commentators are attacking the NEA from all sides. Republicans are using the scandal as a club with which to beat the Obama administration.

"Activating artists and art groups reliant on NEA funds under the implied threat of withholding future grants is a Chicago-style tactic that should have been left on the campaign trail," representative Darrell Issa snarled. Hard-right Republican senator John Cornyn has called for "congressional hearings and sustained oversight" of the NEA, and issued an open letter to Obama demanding that he "take the necessary steps to ensure that the NEA and the American arts community it supports remain independent from political manipulation by the White House."

Issa, of course, was one of the Republicans who led the charge against the "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act" earlier this year, at that time using the presence of \$50 million in emergency funding for the NEA as a way to tar the whole idea of stimulus as a boondoggle. So was Cornyn. So, here you have the absurd spectacle of politicians who are ideologically opposed to government art support, who have themselves explicitly "politicized" the NEA by using it as a political prop, claiming to stick up for the sacred principle of NEA independence.

The NEA is not even standing up for itself. Its swaggering new director, Broadway producer Rocco Landesman, was forced to issue a statement on the subject, distancing the agency from Sergant, and saying he acted "unilaterally and without approval." The White House is issuing new guidelines for its staff because of the incident, to avoid even the "appearance of impropriety." Sergant was reprimanded for being on the call, sidelined, and then forced to step down last Thursday. Would it be too much to ask for someone to call the whole thing out for the smear campaign that it is?

Because here's the thing: Pretty much all of the sinister-sounding stuff about the NEA conference call -- the idea of an "implied threat of withholding future grants," the idea that Obama was trying to build a "propaganda machine" -- does not stem from the actual substance of the call, the transcript of which has now been posted online. Rather, these insinuations can be traced back to the original source of the story, an essay titled "The National Endowment for the Art of Persuasion?," by Patrick Courrielche, posted on the conservative website BigHollywood.com. Courrielche runs a "non-traditional marketing and publicity firm," Inform Ventures, and was apparently on the Aug. 10 call (strangely, he does not introduce himself during it), along with an oddball collection of creative types, including representatives of CurrenTV, someone from Shepard Fairey's studio, and a website called Fusicology.com. The group was

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called together by hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons' "political director" Mike Skolnik with the idea of figuring out how to raise the profile of the president's community service initiative, United We Serve.

Unlike the talk radio freak show that he has unleashed, Courrielche attempts to make his case against NEA in progressive tones, talking about how what he heard made him "uneasy." "I'm not a 'right-wing nut job,'" he wrote (before hopping onto the TV show of right-wing nut job Glenn Beck), professing himself to be just a citizen concerned about the baleful effects of Big Government on art. Courrielche talks about keeping art and propaganda separate. He cites Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*.

This is either intellectual dishonesty, or a calculated attempt to sow confusion. I lean toward believing that it is the latter. Courrielche did tape the call, so you have to assume he was plotting something in advance. And he is a marketing guy, so I expect that he figured that a liberal tone would be the best way to package his message. He seems to have been right, given the firestorm he has stirred up. But when you actually look over the text of the call, it becomes clear that he's deliberately mischaracterizing what took place.

I'll give you the most obvious example. Courrielche concludes his essay with a quote from Yosi Sergeant, a passage that he clearly considers to be his trump card, the most juicy, incriminating bit he has: "This is just the beginning," Sergeant is quoted as saying. "This is the first telephone call of a brand new conversation. We are just now learning how to really bring this community together to speak with the government. What that looks like legally? . . . bear with us as we learn the language so that we can speak to each other safely. . ." Courrielche then adds, "Is the hair on your arms standing up yet?"

But here's the rub. In the actual call, what falls in that ellipsis is pretty important. Because, when Sergeant says they have to figure out "what that looks like legally," he's referring to "putting government websites on Facebook and the use of Twitter." That's the legal gray area at issue. Sergeant was talking about promoting community service using social media, not about forming a secret art-and-politics cabal on the edge of legality. The fact that Courrielche leaves out this fact, inconvenient to the conspiracy theory that he is trying to insinuate, shows his essay for the deliberate hit job that it is.

Critics keep harping on Sergeant's "new conversation" line, implying that there is something sinister about the NEA "co-hosting" a conference call with other agencies. It is true that the people on the call were trying to launch a new initiative. That does not mean that it is unusual for the NEA to work with other wings of government. In July, for instance, it hosted a "National Summit on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities," with the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, the Administration on Developmental Disabilities of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Social Security Administration, among others. No one, to my knowledge, made a stink then about how the Endowment was "politicizing" its mandate by taking up issues of disability rights.

OK, but nevertheless -- was the Aug. 10 call an attempt at using the NEA for "political manipulation by the White House?" "What I heard was a well thought-out pitch to encourage artists to create art on these issues," Courrielche told Fox News. But *what* issues? The central point of the call, clear for anyone who reads the transcript, was just what Landesman has said it was in his statement addressing the incident: To get the word out about the president's community service program. The bulk of time on the call is spent talking about



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this subject. Numerous references are made directing participants to the website www.Serve.gov. I recommend you visit this sinister website. It allows visitors to search for volunteer opportunities in their neighborhood. Categories for would-be volunteers include such dastardly topics as "Seniors," "Technology," "Poverty," "Tutoring" and "September 11." (If I were the government, I'd want to watch anyone who volunteers for "September 11" activism).

Much is being made of the fact that those on the call were steering artists towards United We Serve's "four main areas": health care, energy and environment, education, and community renewal. Terribly liberal-sounding, no doubt. However, when you read the projects actually suggested on the call, what is striking is how middle-of-the-road and comically uncontroversial they are. When Buffy Wicks, of the White House's Office of Public Engagement, talks about "public service" around health care, she is *not* talking about pushing legislative health care reform. She mentions "preventative health care" and "children [sic] nutrition." Similarly, the "environmental service" category has nothing really to do with Obama's environmental legislation, but rather with issues like "trail restoration" and "weatherizing homes." As for education, Wicks mentions preventing "summer reading loss" and "getting kids library cards." In the community renewal category, she talks up "food shelters" and "homeless shelters."

Is your hair standing on end yet?

This notorious conference call, in other words, was essentially a pitch for artists to make glorified PSAs about volunteer work. As far as I can tell, the truth is exactly the opposite of the ominous attempt to yoke artists to the Obama Agenda that critics suggest; if anything, the call was an effort to take the inspiration for radical change that led many creative types to vote for Obama and channel it into low-level, local activism. As Rock the Vote's Thomas Bates summed it up on the call itself, the point of the initiative was to ask "what does our world look like outside of new legislation, outside of big stuff?" This framework is well illustrated by the only real example of an art initiative that gets mentioned on the call, a project by Chicago artist Cody Hudson. Here is the approving account of Hudson's project: He had people "go through their own community, do a clean up, and take those materials, frankly trash that they find on the ground, and take them to a central meeting point community in Chicago [where] Cody and other artists turn[ed] it into something of a community monument." In Courrielche's transcript, this passage is highlighted as if it is some kind of scary thing. Well, it starts with garbage art and it ends with the Gulag, right?

Whenever anything concrete is mentioned on the call, it is about raising the profile of "service" in general. You can actually be 100 percent certain of this, because during the questions at the end, someone specifically asks how artists can also push the administration's more specific legislative agendas, like "health care reform" and "cap and trade policy." To which United We Serve's outreach director Nell Abernathy responds by explaining that there is a difference between what has been discussed on the call, which she explicitly describes as "bipartisan" in nature, and volunteering opportunities with Organizing for America, which is openly partisan, and linked to the DNC. That is, despite the political affiliations of those at the head of the conference call -- they are Obama appointees, after all -- and despite an eager audience, participants were actually being directed away from legislative concerns.

Now, it is true that the people on the call generally seem to be liberals, and clearly it was taken for granted that most were Obama supporters. During the call, Sergeant, Wicks and others talk about how "we" -- meaning those on the call -- supported Obama's

1 Through the NEA, Department of Energy officials
 2 have said that they're concerned about the number
 3 reading level. Children learn the 3rd grade, and
 4 they have these great reading skills, and they
 5 read all summer in the pool like I did when I was
 6 little, and they go back in the fall and they have
 7 dramatically decreased their reading ability. So
 8 you have to play catch up.
 9 So we wanted to combat that. So the way
 10 we -- how can we combat that issue? You know, in
 11 it getting kids library cards or reading to
 12 children or doing book drives, things of that
 13 nature?
 14 And then the fourth category was community
 15 centers, and that's more focused on our traditional
 16 service organizations, you know, food banks,
 17 homeless shelters, many of these more traditional
 18 service organizations. A lot of these organizations
 19 are facing a decrease in funding while at the same
 20 time an increase in need. So how can we support
 21 those needs?
 22 So these are the four areas that we
 23 focused on, and we're managing the whole thing
 24 through DevOps, which is a new Web site that
 25 Bill and I can talk to you about here in a second.

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1 Department of Education. There are the number one
 2 issue that they're concerned about is number
 3 reading level. Children learn the 3rd grade, and
 4 they have these great reading skills, and they
 5 read all summer in the pool like I did when I was
 6 little, and they go back in the fall and they have
 7 dramatically decreased their reading ability. So
 8 you have to play catch up.
 9 So we wanted to combat that. So the way
 10 we -- how can we combat that issue? You know, in
 11 it getting kids library cards or reading to
 12 children or doing book drives, things of that
 13 nature?
 14 And then the fourth category was community
 15 centers, and that's more focused on our traditional
 16 service organizations, you know, food banks,
 17 homeless shelters, many of these more traditional
 18 service organizations. A lot of these organizations
 19 are facing a decrease in funding while at the same
 20 time an increase in need. So how can we support
 21 those needs?
 22 So these are the four areas that we
 23 focused on, and we're managing the whole thing
 24 through DevOps, which is a new Web site that
 25 Bill and I can talk to you about here in a second.

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1 I'm looking at the number one issue that the
 2 Department of Education is concerned about is
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election. This is because they are attempting to tap into a network of generally Obama-supporting artists to put out a call for community service. So what! (Dick Cheney had oil companies actually write Bush administration energy policy, for crying out loud!)

The Shepard Fairey "Hope" poster and Will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video are mentioned as particularly inspiring. But you know what? These two things were, in fact, particularly inspiring. Obama's presidential campaign really did open a new era of art and activism, and brought out young people in massive numbers in a way that the Republicans could only gape at. That is a *fact* that is true whether you supported Obama or not. Nell Abernathy actually specifically frames these works in such terms when she brings them up, as examples of how art can help "people to feel that they are part of a national movement and that their story, their private story, fits into this public space." So, the question I have for conservatives is this: Are you *really* saying that if that same energy was catalyzed towards soup kitchens it would be a bad thing?

Attacking a conference call of the "art community" as being full of liberals is a bit as if I were to get on a military conference call, and come away from it crying, "Why, this call is stacked with people who are pro-war!" The art world is liberal-leaning. Of course, there are all types in the art world, but in general, it is a cosmopolitan group; urban, educated and tolerant. Not really the Sarah Palin crowd. You have to defend the art world's right to be what it is. Representative John Kline demands "an explanation of the link between this call and several participants or their organizations coming out in support of the president's health care reform efforts." Think about that. In the name of keeping the NEA from being "politicized," Kline wants any artist associated with the National Endowment for the Arts to be politically muzzled. Which really makes you think that, aside from harrying the president, this whole uproar is about smacking down a group that went overwhelmingly for Obama, and pandering to a far-right lunatic fringe that hates the NEA anyway.

Let me tell you something: If I were going to pick an organization from which to launch a massive conspiracy to control people's minds, it would not be the NEA, which is these days a feeble shadow of its original, Great Society-era self (its critics, including Courrielche, don't seem to be aware that the *NEA does not fund artists*, only organizations -- individual artist grants were a casualty of the last culture wars). One of the momentary excitements of Landesman's appointment had been, in fact, that he had promised to bring some fire back to the doddering organization. In the *New York Times*, he argued that the NEA's current budget was "pathetic" and "embarrassing" -- which it is -- and that it deserved a substantial bump -- which it does. He pushed back against the idiotic idea that "artists don't have kids to send to college, or food to put on the table, or medical bills to pay." And he took on the way previous NEA heads disbursed the agency's monies to every congressional district (a quite literal example of "politicization" of the process) instead of by merit. This new sense of relevance is likely to be a casualty of the present controversy.

Of course, the most contemptible part of the whole uproar is the pure hypocrisy of conservative politicians decrying the politicization of government, after George W. Bush spent eight long, toxic years "politicizing" the Justice Department by firing lawyers he didn't agree with, "politicizing" education by pushing discredited abstinence-only sex ed on young people, "politicizing" science by redacting reports on climate change. All of these did more harm than Sergeant's bland call for artists to help get "kids with fancy haircuts and all the right clothing" interested in community service could ever possibly do. "The arts are a little bit of a target," Landesman told the *New York Times*, three days before the now-infamous call. "The subtext is that

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