

NEA will establish new panel to select American artists for biennales

The State Department wants to promote programmes in the Muslim world

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Washington, DC. The US State Department and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) have signed an agreement to establish a committee that will select US artists and curators for international exhibitions. An official with the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs told The Art Newspaper that the committee will comprise "up to seven people", appointed by the NEA for terms of "no more than three years". They will include curators, artists, museum directors, specialists in American contemporary art, and perhaps persons from outside the field as well.

Important details remain uncertain, including the names of anyone who will serve on the newly established panel, precisely how the selection will take place, and how exhibitions will be administered and funded. "We don't have a model yet", the official concedes, but he says a structure may be in place in time to select an artist for the Istanbul Biennial which opens in September.

To the relief of the museum and arts community that lobbied the State Department, the committee will closely resemble the NEA-managed "peer-panel" that functioned as part of the public-private partnership known as the Fund for US Artists at Overseas Exhibitions. After 17 years, the fund was dissolved in December 2003 when its two private funders, Pew Charitable

Trusts and the Rockefeller Funds, decided to withdraw. The government was left without a system for selecting and funding artists representing the US abroad.

Last autumn, with the 2005 Venice Biennale approaching, the State Department asked directors and curators from four museums (the Guggenheim, Hirshhorn, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney) to suggest an artist for Venice. They opted for Ed Ruscha and asked Harvard University Art Museums curator Linda Norden to organise the show which opens this June. The State Department is contributing \$170,000 and Ms Norden is responsible for administering the project and raising additional funds as needed. She was unavailable for comment.

The US sends official representatives to biennales in Venice, São Paulo, Sydney, Cairo, Cuenca, Istanbul, Dakar, as well as to Documenta, among other exhibitions. The State Department officially names the artist, but in the past has rubber-stamped the choice of the advisory peer panel.

It remains to be seen how the committee will replace the money lost with the withdrawal of the private partners. The foundations had been contributing an average of approximately \$250,000 per year towards international exhibitions; the State Department had provided around \$200,000 per year. Although that amount is only a tiny fraction of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs fiscal year 2005 budget of \$356 million, the government does not appear prepared to increase its support for international exhibitions. “We recognise that we will need more complete funding through a public-private partnership for the long-term”, says the State Department official, adding, “There certainly will be a private-sector role”. The department is discussing options internally, but it has not yet requested funding proposals from the wider philanthropic community.

“Our goal is to promote understanding of the US society and cultural values”, explains the State Department official. “Clearly we need to reach out particularly in places where mutual understanding is more of an issue. We’re very concerned to work very hard with programmes throughout the Muslim world. It is certainly a priority for us. It is something that everyone here understands”.

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