
BRINGING ART TO ALL AMERICANS

A CONVERSATION WITH DANA GIOIA



Dana Gioia

There is no central ministry of culture that sets national policy for the arts in the United States government. The two national endowments — the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) — provide grant support for individual artists and scholars and for arts and humanities institutions. While the NEA budget — \$115 million for fiscal year 2003 — is quite modest when compared to other nations' public arts funding, private donations have always provided the major support for American culture. Private spending for the arts in the United States for the year 2002 has been calculated at roughly \$12.1 billion. During its nearly four decades of existence, the NEA, whose goals are to encourage excellence and to bring art to all Americans, has used its funds as a spark for private beneficence.

When Dana Gioia took over the NEA chairmanship early in 2003, he brought unusually broad cultural expertise to the position. Known mostly as a poet and essayist, Gioia spent 15 years as a corporate executive, writing verse in his spare time, before becoming a full-time artist. His pivotal 1991 reflection on his craft, "Does Poetry Matter?" (see Bibliography) — originally a magazine article — later was expanded into a book and continues to fuel spirited discussion. He has also written newspaper, magazine, and radio commentaries on music, film,

literature, and art, and has composed librettos for operas.

In the following conversation, Gioia discusses a range of subjects, from the public and private aspects of American culture to the evolution of various disciplines.

Q: Let's begin by viewing the arts in America through your unique prism — the NEA itself.

A: I come to the NEA with a very simple vision. A great nation deserves great art. America is the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the history of the world. But the measure of a nation's greatness isn't wealth or power. It is the civilization it creates, fosters, and promotes. What I hope to accomplish here, in the broad sense, is to help foster the public culture that America deserves.

Although we are the largest arts funder in the United States, the NEA's budget represents less than one percent of American philanthropic spending on the arts. So the federal government could never "buy" a certain kind of culture. Our role at the NEA is leadership. We are in the unique position of being the only institution that can see all of the arts from a national perspective. Enlightened leadership from us could accomplish goals in American culture more quickly and more pervasively than efforts by any other institution might. What excites me about my position is the possibility of using the arts to make America a better place in which to live.

Q: Contrast, in general terms, American philanthropy with the European model with which the world is quite familiar.

A: The European model grew out of a tradition of royal and aristocratic patronage that in modern times has been assumed by the state. Over there, the majority of an arts institution's budget comes from federal or local subsidies. The American model rests on private philanthropy. And it works. We have an enormous range and depth of museums, symphonies, theaters, opera houses, and ballet companies.

Historically, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, the NEA used federal funds across the country to seed the development of regional dance, theater, and opera, as well as, to a lesser degree, museums and symphonies. The enormous number of these institutions that now exist in middle-sized American cities is evidence of the power of the NEA to lead.

Q: How do we explain the emergence of significant private funding for the arts, over the decades, even the centuries?

A: The arts in America grow out of American culture. The reason that America has had this diversely distinguished history of art, this unprecedented breadth of achievement — ranging from movies to abstract expressionism to jazz to modern literature — is because America was and is a society that recognizes the individual freedom of its citizens. American philanthropy follows the same model. America is perhaps the only nation in the world in which there have been hundreds of people who created enormous fortunes and gave them away within a single lifetime to philanthropic enterprises.

Q: Is there a corner of culture that might have escaped wide notice?

A: The original mission of the NEA was to foster excellence and bring the arts to the American people. We would now probably qualify that as bringing art to *all* Americans — recognizing the multitude of special communities in the United States, some cultural, some geographic, some related to language, and some related even to age and physical capabilities. All of those groups are our constituencies. We've also come to realize that to support our goals, we must have a role in education. And so providing leadership in arts education is now another goal of the NEA.

Q: What excites you the most about American culture these days?

A: There are several huge, overarching trends in the arts today. The first I would characterize as a kind of aesthetic crisis. As America enters the 21st century, there is a growing conviction that the enormous explosion of energy that came out of the modernism movement that began after World War I has reached its end. We still appreciate the rich legacy of modernism and the avant-garde, but it no longer seems to have the generative power it once possessed. There is a growing consensus on the need for synthesis between the intensity and power of modernism and experimental art, with the kind of democratic accessibility and availability that traditional and popular arts have. In every art form in which I have an active participation, I see this trend of artists trying to reconnect themselves to the public. What is emerging — whether one likes it or not — is a kind of new populism.

Q: How does this play out, for instance, in music?

A: Look at classical music — which actually leads me to the second major trend, the notion of fusion — disparate traditions coming together. For example, there is a very powerful movement in American music called world music, spanning everything from classical to pop — an attempt to combine and harmonize Eastern and Western traditions. You also see a kind of technological fusion — taking traditional performing arts and applying the potential of new technology. Twenty years ago, the emerging trend was postmodernism. But I think postmodernism in some ways was just an attempt to add to the life span of modernism. Today, the movements are not so much characterized by manifestos and methods as by intuition and outreach.

Q: And outreach is how you make the arts accessible?

A: Yes. The history of the arts in America, to a certain degree, reflects the excellence and depth that comes from elitist traditions tempered by the human possibilities of art in a democratic culture. That is a dialectic that will probably never be exhausted, but will take a slightly different form with each era. No art can cut itself off from its history. Even futurism and the avant-garde have deep and complicated traditional backgrounds. What often happens in the arts is that you reject your parents while embracing

your grandparents.

Q: You mentioned world music as an example of technological fusion. Talk about music in terms of the first trend you cited — the new populism.

A: The major tendencies in American classical music at the moment all have traditional roots. There is the new romanticism, which is the most overtly traditional. There is the world music movement, which uses non-Western traditions. And there is minimalism, which basically combines classical and pop traditions. All of these styles aim at accessibility.

Q: How do the megatrends play out in some of the other art forms?

A: In painting, interestingly, one of the major trends has simply been the reaffirmation of paint as a medium — as opposed to construction or collage and various other forms of expression. There has also been a revival of figurative and landscape painting as viable alternatives to conceptual art and abstraction.

In poetry, there has been an enormous revival of form and narrative. One of the major literary trends in America has been the re-creation, entirely outside of official intellectual culture, of popular poetry — rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams [oral competitions in which the audience selects the winner]. Almost always, it employs meter and rhyme, even if it's a syncopated jazz rhythm as in rap, or, in cowboy poetry, a revitalization of the kind of stress meter of the border ballads. So what you see, in a sense, is an attempt to reestablish a relationship between the past and present, to mix the modernist and traditional modes to create something contemporary.

In theater, the most highly regarded American playwright in mid-career is August Wilson. Wilson, essentially, has revived the naturalist tradition that you see in Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.

Q: Take a play of Wilson's like *The Piano Lesson* — tradition, family history...

A: Exactly. It focuses on social issues. Yet more interesting, perhaps, in American theater is what a European would call *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "together artwork" — the Wagnerian notion of a theatrical piece that involves multiple media. New operas and opera productions are more overtly literal because the subtitles make their dramatic and poetic elements accessible to the audience. Meanwhile, in theater, you have someone like Julie Taymor, who brings together elements of *commedia dell'arte*, music, and

spectacle that one usually considered the province of opera or ballet. You have the notion of trying to fuse media — dance, opera, musical theater, spoken theater, even puppetry — into a total theatrical experience.

Q: Your own work is a mirror on this kind of fusion, isn't it?

A: Yes. I'm a poet, and before I took office here, I was collaborating with dance and opera companies. There are dance companies in the United States that employ resident poets and use texts with music and dance.

Q: I'd like you to place your personal history — someone who worked in corporate America while nurturing a career as poet and critic and essayist — against the backdrop of the responsibilities in which you'll be engaged for the next phase of your working life. What does that renaissance duality — the worlds of business and culture — mean for the Endowment?

A: If I am a renaissance man, it is only because it was the only way I could survive as a working artist. I wanted to be a poet, and I didn't want to have a career at a university — which meant I had to find some other way of making a living. I'm a working-class kid from Los Angeles who spent 15 years in corporate America working 10 to 12 hours a day while writing nights and weekends. I did that to survive as a writer, but I also discovered that I was good at business. I learned things in the business world that I don't think writers necessarily learn in their art form, like teamwork — the fact that you can accomplish so much more if you can create a situation in which, by working together against common goals, everyone can succeed. Business also taught me the importance of understanding what you want to do in the long term, and working toward it. Ironically, when I left business, I promised myself that I would never work for a large corporation again.

Q: What spurs your cultural sensibility these days?

A: I've long felt that one of the missing pieces in American culture is a new generation of public intellectuals — serious intellectuals, that is, who are not affiliated with universities. America needs more artist-intellectuals who can speak without condescension in a public idiom.

We have had a distinguished tradition in this regard that goes back at least as far as Emerson and Poe, up through the extraordinary explosion of New

York Jewish intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s — which may have been the high point in the American tradition.

Q: When did the system change?

A: In the decades after World War II, the university system in the United States grew so large in the midst of a prosperous society that academia employed most of the intellectuals. Increasingly, these men and women began to speak within a narrow discipline, rather than to a diverse audience of intelligent readers. At the same time, the various media that once employed these public intellectuals grew smaller. One of the issues that most interests me is how to reinvent the media for public intellectual life. How can we create opportunities for artists and thinkers to address a general audience?

Q: How is American intellectual life currently changing?

A: I believe America is currently undergoing a transformation that I like to think of as the creation of a new Bohemia. The old Bohemia, in American terms, was an urban neighborhood characterized by a concentration of artist-intellectuals who crossed disciplines and were organized without regard to social class. The poet e.e. cummings, for example, also painted, wrote fiction, and did theater. Ezra Pound wrote music, criticism, and poetry. Wyndham Lewis was a superb painter as well as a novelist. A lesser-known American writer I greatly admire, Weldon Kees, was a poet, a writer of fiction, an

abstract expressionist, an art critic, and also an experimental filmmaker. Bohemia is based on the notions that the different arts reinforce and nourish one another and that creativity happens best in a classless situation where talent and energy are the currencies.

Today, a new sort of Bohemia is emerging — not as neighborhoods in big cities, but as a virtual community through technology. It moves through the Internet, inexpensive phone calls, the fax, overnight delivery, electronic publishing — and also through the creation of such temporary Bohemias as writers conferences, artists colonies, and artists schools, where people come together for a week or more. These communities are not defined by local geography but by cultural affinity.

In the broadest sense then, the question is, how do you create artistic and intellectual life outside the institutional support of the university? Not that the university is bad, but rather that a culture is richer when art is created in many places in a society and when academic and bohemian cultural life creates a healthy dialectic. Even though my heritage is Italian and Mexican, my thinking is Germanic in that I believe in dialectics — how forces meet and transform each other constantly. Or perhaps such intellectual hybridization is characteristically American. ■

The interview with Dana Gioia was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.