

EVENTS AT THE NEA: NEW DIRECTOR FOR VISUAL ARTS, BUDGET REVISIONS

Benny Andrews, a painter and associate professor at Queens College, New York, has been named the new director of the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts by NEA chairman Frank Hodsoll. Andrews replaces Jim Melchert, who stepped down as Visual Arts director last summer. As an artist, Andrews has been involved with the NEA for some time, having served as a policy panelist during Melchert's directorship, and on various application review panels.

In other developments at the NEA, guidelines for fellowships to individual artists are being revised to reflect the current policy panel's decision to allow only slides, copy tapes, or copies of bookworks to be submitted with fellowship applications. Partly in accordance with this decision, the review panel for photographers' fellowships, which met April 27-30 in Washington, made its final recommendations based only on slides, résumés, and reviews or publications submitted with the applications. A second meeting, previously scheduled for mid-July to decide on

portfolios requested from the first-round slide screening, was cancelled.

But another factor involved in cancelling this second meeting was the decision to fund the photographers' fellowships out of the fiscal 1982 budget, rather than the fiscal 1983 budget. Announcements of the awards will now be made in late September of this year, not in February of 1983, as originally planned. The final recommendations of the photography panel had, therefore, to be in by July in order to send them to the August National Council on the Arts meeting for approval in 1982.

This decision in regard to photographers' fellowships should be understood as a product of a more complicated situation. Last spring, in response to the Reagan administration's request for a 50% cut in the NEA budget, the Visual Arts Program devised a system whereby fellowships to individuals in the various arts would be awarded on an alternate-year schedule: photography, crafts, video, and sculpture in one year; painting,

conceptual art, performance, printmaking and drawing, and artists' books in the next.

All fellowships which were to have been awarded from 1983 funds—i.e., photography, video, etc.—have been shifted to the 1982 budget. In other words, fellowships in all the arts will be awarded from 1982 funds. (For photographers, this means that the next round of applications will be early in 1984, with money to be awarded in 1984.)

According to sources at the NEA, this shift in budgetary allocations reflects in part the fact that Congress appropriated \$143-million for the NEA, not the \$88-million requested by the Reagan administration, and that the Visual Arts Program had decided that a significant proportion of any monies received in excess of its share of the \$88-million would be restored to the support of working artists, its first priority. (Reagan's failure to push through his original budget meant that the Visual Arts Program found itself with about \$6.5-million as opposed to \$4.3-million.)

However, it is also true that late last spring the Visual Arts Program had submitted to Congress contingency budgets for various appropriation levels, ranging from \$88-million to \$143-million. Those projected budgets included the alternate-year application system for funding fellowships. The more likely explanation for the accounting change, therefore, is the size of the drop in applications to the Visual Arts Program this year: as in every other Endowment program, applications fell by approximately one-third.

The Visual Arts Program emphasizes that it has continued to fund about the same per-

centage of applications received—for fellowships, 3-5%; for organizations, 50-60%. Such a drop in applications would logically cause a dramatic change in the projected budget. Although the following are at this point only approximate figures, the amount awarded to artists' organizations and artists' spaces declined from a projected \$2.5-million to about \$2-million; the amount to artists' forums from just under \$1-million to \$460,000. The amount for fellowships increased from approximately \$2.3-million to \$3.5-million.

It seems likely that the application decline which generated these changes stemmed from pessimism about getting grants in an era of austerity, the increased difficulty for organizations in procuring matching funds, and confusion about the deadline and guideline changes made in response to that request for a 50% cut in the NEA budget.

No one, of course, can forecast what the 1983 budget for the NEA will be, although it is reasonable to predict that it will drop. The Reagan administration has asked for a cut from the present level to \$100-million, which, if enacted, means the Visual Arts Program budget would fall from about \$6.7-million to about \$5-million. It does seem clear, however, that the decline in this year's application load was strongly affected by pessimism about the governmental climate established for the arts, and that as this administration's economic credibility declines, optimism will presumably increase, and with it, requests for support.

—Catherine Lord

NICARAGUAN PHOTOGRAPHERS ORGANIZE

The Association of Nicaraguan Photographers, one of six organizations which make up the Sandinista Cultural Workers Association (ASTC), held its first meeting in Managua on May 9. The group's 70 members represent a cross-section of the approximately 600 Nicaraguan photographers whose work ranges from documentation of agricultural reforms, to making photographs used in literacy classes, from photojournalism to passport photography. According to a spokesperson for the group, their primary objective is to provide a working space for photographers; this will include renting a building, providing salaries for a secretary and a caretaker, establishing a library, furnishing a darkroom, and buying three cameras and some lenses for an equipment loan center. They need to raise \$50,000 to realize these goals. Eventually, they hope to build a large public exhibition space; no such place, other than a theater building, now exists.

This organization was born in the midst of a difficult and critical period in Nicaraguan history, which naturally affects its purpose and its activities. Since the Sandinista victory over the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979, U.S. intervention in Nicaragua has always seemed possible, though not likely during the Carter administration. In the past year this threat has become actuality in the form of CIA operations in Honduras, in Florida, and, increasingly, in Nicaragua itself. (See e.g. *In These Times*, April 28-May 4, 1982, or *The Nation*, March 6, 1982).

Against this background, members of the association explicitly define their role as photographers within a process of revolutionary social change. A statement by the organization explained: "We feel this historical moment demands photography to document it, to speak for it. We're going through changes which only photography can register—moments lost in the public, collective sense. Because of the conditions we face, we must coordinate resources to make the work possible for us as photographers and for the revolution."

Four of the projects which the association plans to implement this summer reflect this political context. One program will bring five U.S. photographers to teach basic conceptual and technical skills; three- to six-week workshops will take place at a variety of work sites throughout the country. The funds to provide transportation and living expenses for these teachers and some photographic materials are presently being raised. Coordinators of the project in the U.S. believe that \$5,000 to \$10,000 will be necessary. (Donations can be mailed to: Comunica/Foto, Box 612, Cathedral Station, New York, N.Y. 10025; checks should be made payable to: Film Fund-Comunica/Foto. Donations of photographic books and other materials and supplies can be sent to the same address.)

The association also hopes to form a cooperative to obtain and distribute photographic materials in Nicaragua. Even the simple act of buying a roll of Tri-X there is highly political. Roberto Teran, the sole dis-

tributor of Kodak products in the country (and Kodak controls the photography market in Central America), moved to Miami after the revolution and has not maintained his business in Nicaragua. Photographers, therefore, must travel to Panama or Miami to buy supplies. The Foreign Commerce Department of the Nicaraguan government recently authorized some precious foreign exchange currency—U.S. dollars—to be spent on photographic materials, but there are none available.

For its part, Jim Albright, a representative of Kodak, told *Afterimage*, "Obviously business is not particularly good in Nicaragua, but it never was." When asked about the allocation of foreign exchange to be spent specifically on film, paper, chemicals, etc.—essentially a guaranteed market—Albright declined to comment further.

An exhibition which will include the work of a large number of Nicaraguan photographers, sponsored by the association, will open in Managua on July 19, the anniversary of the final rebel victory and the end of the war. They also plan to publish a book, *Logros*, which will visually document the revolutionary accomplishments of the last three years. Finally, members of the association will begin translating theoretical articles on photography into Spanish, starting with Walter Benjamin and John Berger, to promote a critical assessment of photography.

—Martha Gever

LETTERS

LITERAL VISUALCY

To the Editor:

I read with real interest Martha Gever's article on artists' books [May issue]. Among other things she made an intelligent, studied attempt to dissect each book and reconcile form with content. An issue almost totally neglected though, which I believe is crucial to the ultimate status and dissemination of artists' books, is the concept of *reading*. Indeed not once in the entire article does the word reading appear.

From where I stand the only hope these books have of making it out of the art ghetto, is if they are taken seriously as a form of reading (Dare I say literature?) by the larger public that invests in reading. Magazines, comic books and newspapers somehow make their way, pictures, words and all. A continued analysis based primarily on form and aesthetics, maintains an art-market orientation and turns living work into "multiples" (yuch!). As it is now, artists' books are the designer jeans of the book world, competing for a very small market at that. Which is not to say that locating a wider audience is easy, but it might help to be facing another direction.

There is a whole generation of kids (and adults) out there who have been preparing for the speed-reading of T.V. and video games, who ought to be able to handle the visual/verbal acrobatics of the artists' book. They might even enjoy it.

—Paul Zelevansky
New York, N.Y.

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