

The Arts are Apple Pie in New York, But The Candidates Have Been Silent on Specifics

by Norma Munn

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In the current election season, three campaigns stand out for their potential to impact on the arts in New York City. Bush/Gore and Clinton/Lazio are obvious, but not to be overlooked is the State Senate campaign on the Upper East Side where long term Senator Roy Goodman is being challenged by a Democrat, Liz Kruger, in her first attempt at public office. So, what are the issues artists and arts groups would like to hear the presidential and senatorial candidates talk about, and what are the candidates talking about?

In the case of Bush/Gore, not much, except violence on TV, in films and video games. A few general remarks from Gore about the importance of the arts on some of his fund raising visits to the city does not constitute an arts policy. The scary part for many liberal Gore supporters in New York, who also see the arts as important, is how close Bush and Gore are on the issue of controlling culture. However, neither of them as President can directly do too much to control the arts. The First Amendment is a pretty impressive barrier -- unless Bush is elected and his Supreme Court appointments undercut recent complex rulings on the First Amendment. In fact, it is possible that the greater risk lies not in the area of First Amendment rulings, but in the growing tendency of the Supreme Court to allow power at a state level to supercede federal controls. That may become a back door for "community standards" to prevail, especially in states whose constitutions do not have protections for free speech similar to the First Amendment.

Visit the web sites of both senatorial candidates and guess what is missing. Nothing about art or culture! So, what should Bush/Gore and Clinton/Lazio talk about if they want the arts vote? Here are a few suggestions.

Funding for the National Endowment for the Arts; how much is appropriate and how should the funds be used? Would they support fellowships for individual artists -- once a significant part of the NEA and now almost extinct? It would also be helpful to hear their positions about the arts endowment's sister agencies, the National Endowment for the Humanities and Museum Services.

Support for Public Television; how much and would they approve conditions about content, geographic distributions, etc.?

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What are their views on the issues surrounding the Internet and copyright? It is clear that current copyright law simply does not adequately address this new medium. Both the next president and the junior senator from New York will help shape changes in copyright legislation over the next few years.

Where do these candidates stand on legislative efforts to limit advocacy by non-profits? Sooner or later one of the many legislative efforts by far right Republican House members to hamstring the voices of non-profits will reach the Senate and possibly the President's desk. Non-profit arts groups fear this type of legislation given the regular legislative assaults on the arts.

And, specifically for Ms. Clinton, how can you reconcile your recent recommendations to control advertising for young children with the First Amendment? For Mr. Lazio, exactly what would you do about all the violence you abhor on TV, video and film?

Though neither senatorial candidate's campaign responded to email and phone calls to ascertain their positions on the arts, there are some clues. One should keep in mind that in this city, candidates for public office are generally for the "arts" -- it's like apple pie and motherhood.

Unless Lazio has voted on one of the many convoluted efforts to deny funding to the National Endowment for the Arts, there simply will not be a clear indication of his position from his years as a member of the House of Representatives. Tracking that type of vote is next to impossible, since these were often amendments to amendments, and sometimes voice votes. However, arts advocates do not think of Lazio as someone who poses a threat. The problem is they also don't have any sense of his fighting for the arts. At this point, any statement from his campaign is like to be what we call the "tea and sympathy" response, so it is doubtful that anyone will get a clear sense of his views.

The Clintons are both generally regarded as arts supporters, and compared to Jesse Helms's kind of opposition in Congress, they certainly are. Still, it is troubling to see no reference to arts or culture on the Hillary Clinton web site. Her need for a heavy turnout among city voters, where there are over a hundred thousand artists (mostly registered Democrats and with demographic profiles that scream voter to any pollster) ought to cause someone in that campaign to take ten minutes and correct the oversight. Again, it would probably not be a particularly substantive statement, but even tokenism might be welcomed by some.

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Ultimately the race that has potential for a real and immediate impact is none of the above, but the state senate campaign between Goodman and Kruger. Senator Goodman, a liberal Republican often acceptable to moderate Democrats, is chair of the subcommittee that recommends the appropriations for the New York State Council on the Arts. He has pushed successfully for several years for increased funding for that agency. Despite Ms. Kruger's thoughtful position on social issues, and her appreciation for the value of the arts to the city, non-profit arts groups and artists might lose a great deal if Goodman is defeated. Unless, of course, the Democrats take over the State Senate, in which case the arts chairmanship would probably continue in the hands of a city representative.

The likelihood that the Republicans will lose control of the state senate is about on a par with hearing real substance on arts issues from Bush/Gore or Clinton/Lazio. Perhaps we should find a way to have a fight over arts vouchers, or special tax cuts for artists. Or perhaps everyone in New York City and Hollywood, who earns a living in the arts, should close their wallets until these candidates speak to our issues.

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