IS CONGRESS READY TO FUND INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS?

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May 23, 2010; Source: Denver Post | In the same year that we've seen passage of health care reform and the likelihood that a sweeping financial reform package will be approved soon, some say this might be the right time to start seeking Congressional approval to reinstate grants from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) to individual artists.

In the mid-90s, strong conservative anger over works dubbed "offensive" and "obscene"—such as Andres Serrano's photo of a plastic crucifix drowned in a bottle of the artist's urine—coupled with Republicans capturing control of the House and Senate, led lawmakers to strip the NEA of funding for individual artists. While he says it's not at the top of his list for this year, the NEA's current chairman, Rocco Landesman, says he does hope it's something he can help get done before he leaves his job.

In an email to the Denver Post, Landesman said, "In many ways, the question of supporting individual artists is the question for any chairman of the NEA." All political—and cultural—arguments aside, and the certainty that any proposal to reinstate funding will result in some of the same arguments about the wisdom or foolishness of such a program, one reason that might help gain favor for the idea is economic. As the Post notes, "Money goes directly into those artists' pockets. It's an economic stimulus that pays dividends when the artist reinvests back into the community. Like any small business, they buy raw materials, maintain manufacturing workspaces, hire assistants."

For Landesman, a former Broadway producer, just thinking out loud about the possibility of funding for individual artists, is only the prologue for what could be a long, messy and contentious battle. But among the other, and non-economic reasons for giving it the push it deserves, is this thought from Robert Lynch, president of Americans for the Arts. "A little grant [to artists] early in their careers makes a dramatic difference on the quality of their work. Kathryn Bigelow (this year's best director Oscar winner for 'The Hurt Locker') credited an early NEA grant in giving her the boost that kept her career moving forward. There are thousands of those stories out there."—Bruce Trachtenberg