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# ***THE ARTIST AND THE ARTS BUREAUCRACY***

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**PANEL:** Don Asker, Valda Craig, Sue Healey, Jane Pirani, Hilary Trotter

When I was invited to speak to you today about THE ARTIST AND THE ARTS BUREAUCRACY I thought, "Oh yes, I can do that for haven't I been both artist and bureaucrat? Haven't I worked on both sides now and have much to say?" But when I sat down to write it was a different matter.

My mind flashed back to English 101, University of California, Berkeley, 1956, Expository Writing. Lesson One, Define Your Terms. I turned to the Macquarie Dictionary. The question, what do the words ARTIST and BUREAUCRACY mean in the Australian vernacular? The answers may shock you:

An ARTIST is defined as:

- 1) a person who practises one of the fine arts, especially a painter or a sculptor*
- 2) a member of one of the historic professions as an actor or a singer*
- 3) one who exhibits art in his work or makes an art of his employment*
- 4) an artisan. (Perhaps dancers are considered artisans as they figure nowhere else!)*
- 5) a person noted or notorious for a reprehensible aspect of his behaviour*

And what about BUREAUCRACY?

- 1) government by officials against whom there is inadequate public right of redress*
- 2) a body of officials administering bureaus*
- 3) excessive multiplication of, and concentration of power in, administrative bureaus*
- 4) system characterised by power without responsibility*
- 5) excessive governmental red tape or routine*

Shaken, I then looked up the word BUREAUCRAT:

- 1) an official of a bureaucracy*
- 2) an official who works by fixed routine without exercising intelligent judgment.*

Given these definitions, what was I to talk about?

An artisan against a system characterised by power without responsibility? A person noted or notorious for a reprehensible aspect of his behaviour and excessive governmental red tape and routine?

And, I asked myself, am I, in my present disguise, an official of a bureaucracy who works by fixed routine without exercising intelligent judgment?

As a definition of the artist, let's begin with the best of the Macquarie Dictionary options and define an artist as one who exhibits art in his work or makes an art of his employment.

I believe that we can use the same definition for the bureaucracy with only a slight alteration: an arts bureaucracy is an organisation for which the arts is its work and a bureaucrat is one who makes an art of his employment.

If language forms our world view, and I am convinced that it does, then, by definition, society's generally negative view of both the artist and the bureaucracy sets the stage for the cross purpose, lack of understanding, poor communication and adversarial relationships that too often exist between the artist and those government bodies that subsidise them in Australia.

To make a good beginning, we will not enter into the arguments for the need for and the value of the arts in society, something upon which I know we all agree. What we need to explore is the need for subsidy and how the artist can work with the bureaucracy for the development of the arts in Australia.

I am going to plagiarise for a moment from a report I wrote for the Australia Council in 1980. The arts have always been subsidised. Emperors and kings of earlier times kept their court and temple dancers, acrobats, fools, painters, sculptors and musicians. The classical ballet had its origins in the reign of Louis XIV of France who kept a court ballet and frequently joined in himself. Students of the Imperial Russian Ballet School were the wards of the Czar who later paid their salaries as performers from his privy purse. Dancers in some ancient cultures were slaves, trained in the art from childhood - a sort of total subsidy situation. The bull dancers of Crete were sometimes young people of noble birth given in title from Mediterranean city states. They could win their freedom through graceful exploits on the horns of the Minotaur - bad luck if you slipped. Government subsidy rather than slavery seems a more practical and democratic way to sustain dance in the 20th Century.

Given Australia's small population and thus small audience base, the vast distances between population centres, the need to offer dancers long term contracts, and a lack of tradition for private support, the arts in general, and dance in particular, could not exist in Australia without subsidy from both the federal and state governments.

The training period is long and the career of a dancer short. Today, if you are a young dancer, you may have completed ten or more years of study, passed your Solo Seal, graduated from the Australian Ballet School, achieved a diploma or degree from a tertiary course. You are ripe. You are ready. Now to dance, at last. So, where do you go? If and when you contact the state or federal funding body about grants available, you will be told that subsidy is only for professionals. If you are lucky you will audition, if you can find one, and be accepted into a subsidised company. If not, then you might get work for awhile in a commercial production. If worse comes to worse you can do cabaret in Manila. Another alternative is to try and teach, but here again you are unqualified and untried so you take temporary work at Myer, or seek out guest roles with amateur groups or maybe get some theatre restaurant work. There are few jobs and 99% of them are with subsidised companies or projects.

As a dancer's performing life is short, he or she must constantly seek better employment and artistic opportunities. You may have worked professionally for a number of years but due to an injury or a desire to extend your technique or explore new repertoire or re-train as a teacher, a choreographer, a theatre designer, an actor, you apply for a grant for professional development. What you find is that few state governments offer subsidy to individuals and the competition at the Performing Arts Board is fierce. However without subsidy, you may have to take up other work or languish on unemployment benefits.

Of all dance artists, the life of the choreographer is the most difficult and the opportunities to practise the art few. You have probably worked for some time as a professional dancer either in Australia or overseas and now want to concentrate on creating new work. You need dancers to work with, a venue and to have that work seen. Your best option is to make a work for an existing company and all of these, at least those who can afford to pay you for your efforts, are subsidised. They have limited budgets, most of the new work is created by the director or other members of the company, so the opportunities are limited. You can apply for a choreographic development grant which subsidises your work or you can apply for a performance project grant from your state or federal funding body to mount and produce the work yourself. Whether you work for a professional company or mount your own projects, you will probably be indirectly or directly subsidised.

If you are a professional dance company, you need subsidy just to survive each year. Dance is an expensive art form to mount and to sustain. Permanency is needed to ensure effective development. A dance company cannot assemble a new cast of players for each production as can a drama company. Most dance companies are repertory in nature and it is necessary for dancers to train and rehearse together over extended periods of time. Paintings don't get down off walls and walk away. Dancers do. Company managements must be able to offer long-term contracts at equitable awards.

On a national average, most dance companies cover up to 60% of their annual operating expenditure by income from box office and sponsorship. However the rising costs of salaries, production and touring and the general upward inflationary spiral are pushing expenditure beyond reasonable expectations of income from box office or subscriptions. An industrial dispute, injury to a dancer, lack of public response to a program or production, any drop in earned income, could undermine a company overnight. Government subsidy provides the stability you need to survive.

Until we have a society which cherishes art and artists over rates, rear axles and Rugby league, and find a way to prick the pocket book of corporations and privy purses, governments, both state and federal, must set up structures and provide budgets for support for the arts. We need it in Australia and a responsible democratic government should also have a role in the development of the arts, not just for today but for future generations.

But where there is government, especially democratic government, there will be politics and power structures and conflicting policies and ever-changing guidelines and, of course, bureaucracy.

Let's hear what the artist has to say about the arts bureaucracy...

"Government by officials against whom there is inadequate public right of redress, guilty of excessive multiplication of, and concentration of power in, administrative bureaus in a system characterised by power without responsibility, red tape and run by officials who work by fixed routine without exercising intelligent judgment.

"A bunch of bureaucrats who couldn't organise a cut sandwich, who get flexi-time and paid vacations and fabulous superannuation packages and you can't get them on the phone. What do they know about the arts anyway? Nothing, that's what. When they finally send you the application forms they are unintelligible and the information booklet is translated literally from the Japanese. You waste valuable time filling out forms, drawing up budgets, meeting with project officers. Once

you've made your application you are subject to the vagaries of this thing called peer group assessment. People you don't know and who don't know you or people whom you don't like and who don't like you are going to decide your fate.

"And there isn't a member on the panel or the board or the committee who represents the area in which you work and then there are the dreadful assessments by congenial idiots and there isn't enough money and what there is isn't used properly and why did they fund so-and-so who is so untalented when they didn't fund you or why didn't they give you more money, and you need guaranteed funding for the next ten years with at least 10% indexation and who do they think they are anyway who keep changing their deadlines all the time and you are going to write to the Prime Minister, or the Arts Minister or the Premier or to God. After all, you are the artist."

Years ago when I was directing a dance company and a training school in Orange County California, I used to have a recurring dream. You know the kind - what we call the "dancer's dream" or the "actor's dream". I would be asleep in my bedroom and then awakened by noises beyond the door. I would arise but could find no clothes to cover my nakedness, so I opened the bedroom door, anyway. But instead of finding an empty upstairs landing, I would be looking straight into the rehearsal studio. Everyone was lined up at the barre and when I appeared, they rushed me. They all wanted something from me and all I wanted was to cover up my nakedness, get back into bed and pull the coverlet over my head.

I was an artist then - I am a bureaucrat now, but sometimes I still have the same dream, but with a difference. Now when I open the door it is not a studio, but a room full of applicants for grants. They still all want something from me, only it is not mine to give and I feel even more naked.

I have changed roles, I am wearing a new disguise and now I dance to a different tune. One still keeps taking steps and recovering one's balance and the risk is a part of the rhythm but one keeps on doing it and a formal path evolves. I have made the arts my work and I have tried to make an art of my employment. It has not been a painless metamorphosis.

It is now the arts bureaucrat's turn to speak.

"You drown in paper. If you only get twenty phone calls, it is a good day. In between you try to meet with clients and complete the paperwork. If only it were the artists you had to deal with but there is the bureaucracy, performance planning and review, work redesign, enterprise bargaining, file notes, minutes, endless minutes of endless meetings. Meet, meet, meet, that's all you do. It's a butcher shop. A member of the panel rings up and wants statistics on the last ten years of funding to the performing arts before next week and the Minister needs a keynote speech written by tomorrow on What is Art? Disappointed applicants write to complain about you to the Director, the Minister and you have to draft the reply. And flex forms. Yours are six weeks behind and if you don't bring them up to date you can't be paid and they won't believe your real hours even if you put them down. Why do you work days and nights and Saturdays and Sundays and you'll never get time off to take the flex days, anyway. Work this year take next year off. Just when you have prepared the applications and the agenda for a meeting it's time to prepare the letters and the conditions and then it's time to prepare the applications for the meeting and the agenda again. You worry about all the artists and groups that you can't see and the company deficits and the worthy projects that weren't funded and when clients will acquit their grants and nobody is happy.

"You are present at the creation, but you are only an observer, an innocent bystander but everyone blames you if they are unsuccessful. You have no life but somehow you love the work. Why don't artists understand that you have to deal with everyone's problems, not just theirs and it was so much easier being a dancer and why did you think that choreography and teaching was so hard because at least you were producing something instead of all this paper. Forests fall."

At this point I would like to repeat what I said earlier - that by definition, society's generally negative view of both the artist and the bureaucracy sets the stage for the cross purpose, lack of understanding, poor communication and adversarial relationships that too often exist between the artist and those government bodies that subsidise them in Australia.

Before a government can address itself to the complex task of providing enlightened assistance to the arts, it must set up structures, bureaucracies, equal to the task. It must then develop aims and objectives for its development responsive to the needs of the arts, the public and in line with government policy in the broadest sense. In a democracy, government policy is constantly changing to meet the needs of a changing society and so arts policy must evolve, be reviewed, amended. Without arts policy objectives, governments might as well give every citizen a dollar and tell them to go jump for themselves! But policy isn't written in blood.

The bureaucracy exists to develop the arts, make them more accessible to the public, encourage participation by all Australians and to preserve our cultural heritage. Grant distribution plays only a small part in the life of the bureaucracy. Arts policy development, advocacy, research, dissemination of information, promotion, equity issues, public education and artform development are equally important in the long term.

What the arts bureaucracy must do is to see the arts as through a camera obscura, the past, the present and the potential for the future all at once. This is a difficult task and sometimes it takes many years before you can see the results of policy and funding decisions. We all agree that more money is needed, that more progress could be made, that development would be faster if we had the funds to meet the ever growing needs. However, if we remind ourselves that the Australia Council was established in its present form only 20 years ago, in 1973, and that most state arts funding bodies postdate that time, the results, despite restricted funds, have been spectacular. I believe that there has been more arts development in our country in the past 20 years than in the previous 200 and that the establishment of both state and federal bureaucracies is the reason.

I went to my duties as Dance Officer for the Theatre Board of the Australia Council in 1977 as a professional dancer and choreographer and teacher. Rather insolently I thought that my duties were going to be to see the dance and to assess and to describe what I saw. I knew only one of the steps and had to learn to understand all of the parts and then to see the dance not as a piece but as part of the whole.

If I draw only upon my own experience of the past fifteen years as an arts bureaucrat, member of peer group assessment panel, both state and federal and as a former member of the board of Sydney Dance Company, One Extra Company, DanceWorks, Australian Dance Theatre and Dance North, I see enormous progress. Fifteen years ago there were no smaller dance companies in Australia in receipt of annual or general grant funding. There was only one tertiary institution offering a degree in Dance, Rusden State College. There was no Ausdance. There was no policy for the development of choreographers, new Australian work. The concept of the development of art by people of non-English speaking background was in its infancy, women in the arts were neglected, people with disabilities overlooked, community arts a new and alien idea, arts writing and research practically non-existent, the concepts of public access and participation accepted in principle but not addressed in reality, Aboriginal and the arts of the Pacific people acknowledged but ignored, documentation non-existent. I could go on and on.

Yes, we have made progress. What we haven't learned to do, the artist and the bureaucracy, and this is a very revolutionary idea, is to work together for the greater good. If I had to describe to you what I see as the general relationship between the artist and the bureaucracy in one word, that word would be - suspicion. An adversarial situation exists and we need to dance together.

This seems an appropriate moment to pause and look at the role and the responsibility of the arts officer and peer assessment.

The arts bureaucrat is the visible person, the officer with whom you as artists deal, face to face, on the telephone or by correspondence. The officer assists and advises you on your application, explains the criteria, the programs, the policies and, in a sense, is your representative to the peer assessment panel. But the officer does not make the decisions. His or her job is to inform and provide the peer assessment panel with an overview. Working for the bureaucracy is not very different from working as a dancer in a company or a soldier in the army. He or she is responsible to those in higher governmental positions, serves the peer assessment panel and spends a good deal of time preparing ministerial briefings and correspondence.

The quality of the advice the arts bureaucrat provides to both the artists and to the peer assessment panel is the critical factor. As he or she works full time in support of the arts, the overview is generally very good. He or she can help artists by providing information, putting them in contact with other artists, funding bodies, organisations that can help them. Part of the duties is to be alert to any problems seen to be looming for both individuals and arts organisations within the portfolio. The arts bureaucrat is truly the artist's public servant. Remember, they are on the side of the art. Don't shoot the messenger.

I have the greatest respect for artists and artworkers who are willing to serve on peer assessment bodies. It is a thankless task, but a vital one for the development of the arts. Not only must they participate in difficult decisions that affect the artistic lives of their colleagues, they must also assist in the development of policy which affects the future of the art.

In my role both as a bureaucrat and a peer assessor, I do not remember participating in a discussion where an individual or the peer group made recommendations for any reason other than the advancement of the artform. There is no room in the board room for personal prejudice, rancour or self-interest. And if you think that serving on a peer panel gives an individual or a group an advantage in terms of funding, then you are wrong. If anything, it makes it more difficult.

Believe me, when the spectrum is before you in the form of applications, hundreds of applications, it is not difficult to identify those programs or projects that are the most developmental, of the highest artistic quality and best meet the criteria and policy guidelines. When peer assessment bodies fall short it is usually because they are short of money. It does no one any good if peer assessors are subject to private, personal and public abuse. If you want to know how difficult the job is, volunteer to serve!

Over the years I have developed what I call my ten commandments. I use them to advise artists and arts organisations on how and why to approach governments. I am now going to share them with you:

**1. Subsidy is a privilege not a right.**

We are fortunate in Australia that we have both federal and state governments which have established structures and policies for arts support and development. The monies to sustain these come from the taxpayer and the government arts bodies are the custodians of these funds. They have a responsibility and are accountable to the public for their expenditure. However, their programs, policies and priorities are determined in consultation with peer assessment panels and in response to perceived industry needs.

You have a right to apply for financial assistance if you have a good project or program, meet the guidelines, fill out the form properly, get the application in on time and can responsibly acquit previous grants and can show evidence of the ability to carry out your project as outlined and budgeted. But you must compete with many other applicants. You have no right to subsidy.

**2. Just because you exist does not mean you shall be funded.**

For each of us, what we do is the most important thing happening, but in terms of government arts policy and development the activity which you undertake must help to advance policy objectives and the artform. Just because you or your organisation have been in existence, maybe even for a number of years, does not give you squatters' rights.

**3. Subsidy is about the future of the art, not the past.**

Art is an act of becoming. It is evolutionary. If funding to the arts was only about maintaining the status quo than we might as well all go dark. Art reflects society and should constantly change. The new has to be supported, it needs nurturing until it can find its place in the spectrum. Funding bodies are always looking for the harbingers of the future. An exciting new project will take precedence over the tried and true. Funding bodies put development before maintenance.

**4. Money is only money, you must make it happen.**

All the money in the world does not good art make, and how well you plan and budget and for what is very important. Some of the greatest leaps forward in dance have happened without subsidy at some sacrifice to the artists. Both the Federal and the State governments in Australia are concerned about the welfare of artists and subsidy is provided for proper wages, better work environments, venues, to encourage greater access and participation by the audience and the community. But you must first make the art with good ideas and demonstrate the ability to carry them out.

**5. Don't tell us what's wrong until you can tell us what to do about it.**

I seldom read a positive article in the print media about the achievements of the Australia Council or the state funding bodies. Everyone is always telling the arts bureaucrats what they are doing wrong and seldom acknowledge what is right. If you are unhappy with the policies of the funding bodies then express your view but be prepared to make positive suggestions, serve on advisory committees, peer group assessment panels. If you support peer group assessment and the bureaucracy, publicly, especially in their never ending quest for more money, you can effect change and make the bureaucracy work better for you and your artform. Be vigilant!

When I first took up the career of an arts bureaucrat, funding bodies were actively recruiting artists or individuals with practical expertise in the arts as their officers. Today, now that we have excellent courses in arts administration throughout Australia, practising artists have become the minority. I am the only former professional performing artist in the Queensland Arts Division. Dinosaurs like myself have been replaced by graduates of specialist courses with all the knowledge that it took me years of trial and error to learn about financial management, economics, arts politics, governmental procedures and policy development. I urge those of you, however, who may be interested in a career change to consider entering the arts bureaucracy, for you as an artist have a lifetime investment in your artform and the knowledge and the passion that comes from having been there and done that.



**6. There are other artists, organisations and artforms just as worthy as you.**

The most surprising thing that I have had to come to terms with during my fifteen years in arts administration is the lack of generosity and good will between artists, arts organisations and artform area. It is the most discouraging, heartbreaking and divisive aspect of the life of an arts bureaucrat. Don't you know that just because some other company got more money isn't the reason you got less? If someone else got a grant and you didn't, it doesn't mean that they are better than you. Look to yourself. What was your project or your artistic program? How well did it fit into the policy guidelines? Is the work of your group developmental? What has been the audience response? Did you make a good application? Perhaps, given the small amount of funds available, other projects were seen to be of a higher priority or the committee or panel did not want to fund you to fail. Find out where you went wrong, don't dance the dog in the manger.

By undermining your fellow artists you are undermining the whole fabric of the arts as well as your own artistic integrity. We are all part of the whole, one person's success or failure affects us all. Remember, the arts bureaucracy must attempt to develop all artforms with equanimity and sometimes this means that certain artforms, equity areas or aspects of the arts must take precedence. All funding bodies publicly announce and publish their priorities. Make yourself familiar with these and decide how your project or program fulfils them and find positive ways you can participate in their development.

**7. What you want to do may be more important than who you are.**

Many artists, no matter how talented or worthy, frequently expect to get a grant based solely on their standing within the community, how hard they have worked and their past achievements. You might be one of Australia's most talented dance artists and miss out on a grant because your project was ordinary, not well thought out, inappropriate to your skills or experience, lacked development, was poorly budgeted and planned or did not fit within the policy guidelines of the funding body. It is not just what you have done but what you want to do that is important.

**8. A grant is not a prize, a funding round is not a contest, subsidy is an investment in the art, not a promise.**

Look, this isn't lotto or a reward for good service. Grants are non-repayable loans. The interest is your art, your contribution to the development of the arts. If you don't deliver the goods, you won't continue to be funded. Funding bodies are not there to punish or reward. They exist to develop the arts and if you don't understand how or why, sit down with an open mind and read the policy guidelines, the policy statements and if you still don't understand, ask. If you don't like the policies, make an effort to affect them. Stand up and be counted.

**9. The bureaucracy is there to help you not to hurt you.**

Sometimes it seems to me that all artists and arts organisations see the funding bodies as the grants police. They forget that the bureaucracy has been set up to advance the arts and is there to help if not always with money, then with advice. Use the bureaucracy in a positive way. Learn all you can about them and their staff and peer assessment groups. Assistance in kind is usually available. When you are ill you go to a doctor. When you have legal problems, you go to a solicitor. The arts bureaucracy is there to help you, be an advocate, guide, inform and counsel. These are the experts. Use them.

Now, let's try to redefine the artist and the bureaucracy, let's use as an analogy a definition of dancing by the late great American dance critic, Edwin Denby:

*"...step by step the mass of the body moves about. ...A formal path involves electing a base from which to move. It involves giving a spot an arbitrary imaginative value. It is a feat of imagination essential to dancing."*

The artist provides the movement, the imagination, and the bureaucracy helps to develop the base from which to move - makes a spot for the essential feat of the imagination.

#### **10. Try to make an art of your application.**

Next after the ten commandments, my most important list for living has been the famous check list for choreographers in Doris Humphrey's inspired book on *The Art of Making Dances*. If you read them and think about them you will find that they apply to most other tasks in life. They are also an excellent guide on how to make an application for funding. Let's take them one by one and see how they apply:

*Symmetry is lifeless*

Don't play it safe. Just because the bureaucracy seems stodgy and two-dimensional, don't you be. That's not what they want. What they look for is excitement, risk, new ideas. Unfortunately, the majority of applications are lifeless.

*Two dimensional design is lifeless*

Extend your view. Take advantage of the fact that subsidy exists to help artists experiment, allow them to take risks, bring in new elements, collaborate with other artists, artforms. Don't keep your dance in a box.

*The eye is faster than the ear*

Isadora once said "if I could say it I wouldn't have to dance it". It is difficult to verbalise or write about dance, but try. Try to explain, clearly, with economy and with some art what it is you want to do, what your work will look like.

*Movement is slower and weaker on the stage*

Be brief, be succinct. Use analogies, poetry, humour, whatever it takes to help the peer group "see" what you want to do. Remember, you are preaching to the converted, artists who understand your art, creators, dancers, educators and administrators.

*All dances are too long*

Reams and reams of paper only discourage peer group assessors. Don't write a thesis or a treatise or borrow from the Latin. Less is more. You won't impress just because you have written 50 pages when five would have been sufficient. Remember that peer group panels must read hundreds of applications, and in their spare moments which are usually between midnight and dawn. Verbosity incites them rather than excites them.

*A good ending is forty per cent of the dance*

What will be the result of your project? Why is it important to dance today, next year and years after? And say so up front, preferably in the description of your project. Know what you want to do, how you are going to do it, express clearly what you believe the value will be to the development of the art.

*Monotony is fatal, look for contrasts*

Write your application with the care that you use to develop your choreography or execute the dance. Edit, select, abstract. Make it interesting.

Don't make sweeping and meaningless statements like: "This project will develop a new kind of Australian dance". There is nothing truly new under the sun, only you as an individual or your group are unique.

*Don't be a slave to, or a mutilator of the music*

Explain why you are going to use certain music, a particular composer, or no music at all. Don't opt for the Sabre Dance unless it is appropriate and then explain why. Your collaborators are important; choose them carefully, treat them with respect and give details of their artistic backgrounds and how they will contribute to the project.

*Listen to qualified advice; don't be arrogant*

As I said before, the arts bureaucrat can offer expert advice. They have the advantage of seeing and knowing what is happening throughout the country or the State at a glance. They can often suggest ways of improving your project or your program, help you to find the expertise, the venue, the promoter, the entrepreneur that you need. Work with them. Consult your fellow artist. Listen, listen, listen, even if you don't always agree with or accept what you hear.

*Don't intellectualise; motivate the movement*

Try to show, not tell. Don't be patronising. Reams of philosophical jargon won't impress. After they have read fifty pages they will probably still ask, 'but what is it they want to do? How do they plan to achieve it? Who will do it? How will it advance the art?'

*Don't leave the ending to the end*

Don't make a grant application just because it's that time again. Those of you involved in companies must apply for ongoing assistance to pay salaries, cover administration, hire venues, engage choreographers, tour. But don't make a project application just for the sake of subsidy. Funding bodies are not there for social welfare. Some applicants want a grant for what they believe is the kudos or simply for maintenance. Don't make up a project or an empty reason for an application just to get a grant.

We have talked of many things except what is art, what is a good program, a good project, the kind of activity that might inspire government support. Well, that is really up to you, to your imagination, skill. But if you want a guide, then I will share with you a definition by the poet Marianne Moore. Ms Moore is writing about poetry, but I believe it serves as an excellent guide for judging and making all good art:

'I too, dislike it; there are things that are important  
beyond  
all this fiddle.  
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one  
discovers in  
it after all, a place for the genuine.  
Hands that can grasp, eyes  
that can dilate, hair that can rise  
if it must, these things are important not because a  
high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but  
because they are  
useful. When they become so derivative as to become  
unintelligible,  
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we  
do not admire what we cannot understand: the bat  
holding on upside down or in quest of something to  
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a  
tireless  
wolf under  
a tree, the immovable critic, twitching his sin like a  
horse that feels a flea, the base-  
ball fan, the statistician -  
nor is it valid  
to discriminate against 'business documents and  
school books'; all these phenomena are important. One  
must make a distinction  
however; when dragged into prominence by half poets,  
the result is not poetry,  
nor till the poets among us can be  
literalists of  
the imagination - above  
insolence and triviality and can present  
for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,  
shall we have  
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,  
the raw material of poetry in  
all its rawness and  
that which is on the other hand  
genuine, then you are interested in poetry.