



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Harold Arberg,  
1971 December 28

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# Transcript

## Interview

**Interview with Harold Arberg  
Conducted by Laurin Raikin and Barry Schwartz  
In Washington, DC  
December 29, 1971**

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Harold Arberg on December 28, 1971. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Laurin Raikin and Barry Schwartz for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

LAURIN RAIKIN: For the Archives of American Art's documentation, The Art world in Transition and oral history, we're interviewing Dr. Harold Arberg who's the Chief of the Office of Arts and Humanities of the Office of Education, of Health, Education, and Welfare.

HAROLD ARBERG: That's quite a mouthful, Laurin, right?

LAURIN RAIKIN: Right.

HAROLD ARBERG: We call it the Arts and Humanities Program, actually. Originally, it was called the Cultural Affairs Branch, this goes back to 1962. The then Commissioner of Education, who came from the field of philosophy, was Sterling McMurrin from the University of Utah. And, during his brief tenure as Commissioner of Education, there was established in the Bureau of Educational Research a program called the Cultural Affairs Branch. This was an attempt by the Office of Education to give visibility to the areas of the arts in the structure. By its very nature it was somewhat anomalous, because the Office at that time and for the most part still is organized by levels. We have bureaus of elementary and secondary education, higher education, adult education and technical education. It's organized that way, not by program areas. But the establishment of what became the Arts and Humanities Program was to give visibility to this area of education, which was, I suppose, a kind of admission that the arts in education had been largely overlooked and largely neglected. The enactment of the National Defense Education Act, back in 1958, you know, that whole frenzy. The great push in technology that that instigated moved the arts and humanities even farther from center stage, so to speak. In the '60's, beginning, as I said, in 1962, the Office, I think, sensed the need to help to redress this offense. Remember this was three years before the enactment of the basic legislation. The elementary and secondary education act, the higher education act, the National Arts and Humanities Foundation Act, all were to come three years later. Indeed, we worked closely originally with the Council on the Arts, and subsequently with the National Council on the Humanities, and still do.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: What's the unique identity of the Arts and Humanities Program in the Office of Education as opposed to these other funding agencies?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, I think the unique aspect of our program is that the Federal agency having the primary responsibility -- underscore the word "primary" because many other agencies have concerns -- but the primary responsibility rests with the Federal Office of Education, which has been in existence for over a hundred years now. It was formed in 1867. But for many of those years, it provided data on the status of the educational establishment, if you will, but it did not exercise the leadership role which it has developed and assumed with the enactment of this legislation. So that the Office has the primary responsibility, particularly in the elementary and secondary education field and also in the area of teacher training -- the educational development, if you will. There are, of course, other agencies, the Foundation, for example of the Arts Endowment and the Humanities Endowment. The Arts Endowment has a primary concern for the institutions of the arts, for the individual artists, for the arts in public life, if you will. And the Humanities Endowment has broad concerns, has supported the humanities in the field of scholarly research. But they also have concerns with the relevance of the humanities in curriculum development, too.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Are you saying that all the art that goes on in education, at the Federal level, is through your Office?

HAROLD ARBERG: Yes.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: And the people who apply for grants would most likely be educational institutions wishing to

innovate an arts program in an educational setting or context?

HAROLD ARBERG: Yes. School systems, colleges and universities, state departments of education, are the principal recipients. Those are the agencies that we deal with primarily. There's one basic fact that needs to be clarified here, and that is, our program -- we're talking about the Arts and the Humanities, or if we're talking now only about the Arts, we'll narrow it to that -- the study of the arts is defined as a humanity in the legislation. So that the arts and education in that sense -- the study of the history, theory, criticism, and practice of the arts -- is defined as a humanity. So that I think the arts and humanities communities are more likely to make a sharp distinction than our teachers and people outside. We speak of the humanities broadly as perhaps the more inclusive term.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Perhaps in a sense the kind of archival historical study that we're undertaking now.

HAROLD ARBERG: Yes.

LAURIN RAIKIN: It would be considered humanities under that program?

HAROLD ARBERG: Yes, except that this is an activity which we would not under our present policies and authorization support. This is the kind of scholarly research, you see, for which the Humanities Endowment is particularly geared. Interested in it and authorized to do it.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Have applicants over the last two years reflected any new or emerging concerns in their wish to do certain kinds of programs? Or has there just been more of a continuation of direction?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, in the early years of the Federal legislation -- we're talking now about 1966, because that's the first year that funds were available -- there was a good deal of more of the same: "I want to do more of what I've already been doing." Many of the Title Three projects in the arts were just that. Symphonies were playing ten youth concerts: "Now we can play twenty," you see. More of the same.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Title Three is what?

HAROLD ARBERG: Title Three is the supplementary centers and services program under the elementary and secondary education act. Sometimes it's referred to as PACE, which is an acronym for Projects to Advance Creativity in Education, which is a bit more descriptive. But I need to return to the earlier point. Title Three pinpoints this, and that is the fact that the states have the say with regard to Title Three allocations for the majority of it. There is 15% that is discretionary with the Commissioner at the Federal level, but even this 15% is allocated to states on an allotment formula. So that of the Federal budget in education, let's say four billion, to use a round figure, this represents a very small part of the total education bill. We're approaching \$70 billion perhaps now in education at all levels, so four billion is a very small part. And of that four billion, a very small part of that again is discretionary at the Federal level. As you know, the present trend is to provide even more in the way of block grants so that states and the local education agencies are the ones that are going to establish their priorities because, for the most part, this isn't categorical money for the arts, unlike the money which goes to the Arts Endowment.

LAURIN RAIKIN: But you do an accounting of the money, a study of how it is spent?

HAROLD ARBERG: We're a catalytic agency. We have funded, over the last six or seven years, well over 200 individual projects dealing with the arts and the humanities. These were primarily discipline-oriented: in music, in the visual arts, in theater, in dance, in museums, in media, and in the humanities, to a lesser degree. This was because, five or six years ago, these various constituencies were really starting almost from scratch in terms of defining their needs and where they wanted to go in research and development. We're moving into a new phase now. On the one hand, the arts are moving more in concert. The whole ACA [Associated Councils of the Arts] movement here is an example of that. For years it was music doing its own thing, and it was the visual arts doing its own thing. It still is this, and, of course, the arts need to preserve identities, but they also need to relate to a total structure. And this is what we're attempting to do in the educational context now, to provide arts for all students, not simply to get more students enrolled in classes in painting or to sing in the chorus or whatever.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: Are you saying that before they were doing in the early stages "much of the same?" Now has there been a shift in priorities on the state level that's been reflected?

HAROLD ARBERG: In some cases, yes. One state that's particularly hard-hit economically is the state of Washington, but they have inserted in the state education budget, largely as the result of an innovative Title Three project involving all of the arts out there built around their symphony and their opera and their theater resources, a line item now in their budget. It's true it has been somewhat reduced from the level it was funded earlier, but it has been accepted as an integral part of their education budget.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: When you say ". . . in Title Three elementary and secondary education," do Title Three funds go to universities?

HAROLD ARBERG: No. They must go to local education agencies. Universities receive help through the higher education act.

LAURIN RAIKIN: And does that also come from your Office?

HAROLD ARBERG: Yes. It's administered by the Bureau. But remember we said we have level-oriented bureaus.

LAURIN RAIKIN: What Titles apply to the university?

HAROLD ARBERG: The university is supported by the higher education act which has a whole range of programs. Title One is the community service program. Some universities have chosen to use these monies. They've been limited to only about ten million for the entire country, again allocated on a state allotment basis. But some states have put this money into art programs. For the most part, they are small projects, but ways in which colleges and universities can provide services in the arts to their surrounding community. In the visual arts it's happening, in music. One state, for example, it was the State of Maine, applied a large amount of its money to raise the quality of the professional orchestra in the area, and also to provide a professional string quartet in residence at several cooperating colleges and universities. But they established that priority themselves in Maine.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: So that the great amount of decisions made as to which priorities should be funded is on a state level?

HAROLD ARBERG: Yes. At the state level and below that, at the local level. Remember this Title Three program in innovation depends upon a school system having something to innovate with and making a proposal. If they think only in terms of Laurin's discipline, which is sociology, this is sociologically fine. They could have oriented projects, or they could have art-associated projects, or maybe it would be a good idea to bring them together.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Do you perceive that there has been a significant interest in new media in terms of how this money is spent as opposed to symphony orchestras or performing arts? Do you see an increasing interest in the use of video in an educational way?

HAROLD ARBERG: There was a special program that supported this for a number of years. It's no longer in existence. The National Defense Education Act we mentioned earlier. In Title Seven of that was a program to develop what was called a new educational media -- video tape, the whole range. We also supported a number of projects at that time. It's still possible under the research development provisions for Title Four of the elementary and Secondary Education Act to support media projects. And a number of these are taking place. There is a focus on the media, on mixed media, on ways of using these more effectively. Here again, I think the problem has been that, more often than not, they have simply been using the traditional ways, rather than thinking of the media itself as a learning vehicle. They simply document on film or video tape the string quartet performance.

BARRY SCHWARTZ: Is your office publishing documents that explain all of these different areas of the various titles? How do you distribute this document?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, the Bureau of Higher Education has a number of publications which relate to the college and university level programs. The most comprehensive of these is a publication called, I believe, "How the Office of Education Assists Colleges and Universities." We publish a document which we're revising and updating. It's called "U.S. Office of Education Support for the Arts and the Humanities." It's a round-up of all of the legislation which may provide not categorical support, but support for the arts and the humanities. It identifies the program area and tells who the Office of Education contact is, what the amount of Federal contribution is, all of the rest of it.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Obviously, when you discuss these dates of the legislation and we have an overall perspective, many people say that within the country after World War II, the arts organizationally and institutionally were in somewhat of a chaotic state and what we have now is a growing centralization due to increasing government involvement at the organizational level in terms of policy and at the funding level. Within the community of artists and educators and arts management people across the country, there is somewhat of a split. There is one group that feels we need more government support in terms of money and in terms of programs. And the other group says that that represents centralization; it's dangerous. We may need more government support but we don't need the new government bureaucracies. Now, looking ahead from your position, from your Office, what do you predict as the general trends in support and policy direction from the Federal government?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, Laurin, again we have to put this in perspective and draw a distinction when we speak of

Federal support for the arts. The reference has been made that our Federal support for the arts is about seven and a half cents per capita. In West Germany it's 250 or whatever per capita. This is partly misleading. This refers to categorical support, money that is appropriated to the National Endowment for the Arts as the Federal agency to support arts programs. But the arts in a broader context, and this runs the gamut of all education legislation, and even beyond education; in the field of recreation, for example, a great deal of money is spent in that field. In a non-professional sphere, if you will, that is opening up and involving more people. So, with that clear distinction, I think it's obvious that the Federal role in terms of support -- of money -- is going to have to increase if we're going to solve the educational dilemma. And as it increases certainly that portion of it going to arts in education programs should also increase. I won't even say proportionately, because it has been so minuscule in terms of the total education offered now that it ought to increase several-fold. Now, is that a fair analysis?

LAURIN RAIKIN: That is a fair analysis and response to our interest in terms of support. Now, what about the notion of, maybe it's too harsh a word, "policy-ing" in the sense of giving direction to the arts? To get down to what is considered by some as really important issues, who is going to give direction to the arts: the artist or the government? By the way, this doesn't imply that if the government were to give direction to the arts in a pluralistic society like ours, it would be a bad thing necessarily. It's just where you feel it's moving to.

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, of course, here again we have to contrast our experience in history with the European experience where there was outright government subvention and support and a good deal of policy control in some cases. In other cases, I guess, the British experience has been quite a favorable one in terms of major government support but not complete government domination by any means. The Canada Council too has had an excellent record, and we've learned a good deal from them. If by policy you mean whether we'll support representational or abstract art, there are people in government now in permanent places, and you know them as well as I, who are simply anti-abstract, if you want to put it that way. And they will use whatever influence they have. I don't think this is the government's role at all. I think it's important that the government be insulated to that degree. This is the reason why the point was made yesterday that we need to support artists and not institutions. Well then, the question is, "Which artists are we going to support?" In many cases an institution provides this kind of insulation and you could say, "Well, government is one step removed from the actual policy." This is one approach to it -- the actual selection of artists. In the Endowment program, for example, they employ elaborate panels of qualified people, as you know, to sift through many, many applicants, and to put some aside and to say, "These people are to the best of our knowledge serious. They're not all of a particular ilk, but they deserve support." It's not done by the agency itself directly, and that's an important point.

LAURIN RAIKIN: I remember, in terms of different governmental operations in social history, the word "lobbyist," which had been considered somewhat denigrating. I think that the atmosphere has changed now and it's a very legitimate activity.

HAROLD ARBERG: Right.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Many of the Federal agencies have to deal with lobbying groups. This may be true in some areas of the arts when you have groups like Partnership for the Arts. Now what is your feeling about such movement developing among artists themselves; artists unions, or however you would characterize them? Do you see them? Or are you critical of them, in favor of the, or what? Have you seen them on the horizon yet?

HAROLD ARBERG: I think that the arts need to organize themselves, unquestionably. They have been weak in education because they have been fragmented. So the arts literally have frequently had no one here, and still don't have any local representation.

LAURIN RAIKIN: By "local representation" what do you mean?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, I mean, when the school board meets to vote on its budget, who is going to speak for the role of the arts in schools for kids, starting with pre-school if you will? They haven't had a spokesman. In most cases, many of the people at this conference asked me the question, "What is the Federal Office of Education? What can the Federal Office of Education do?" We need to turn this around and say, "What can you as Citizen John Q. do in Garden City, in Hempstead, in Yonkers, or wherever, to establish this as an entity, as a priority?" Get down in the arena and do battle.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Dr. Arberg, when we come to an issue like this through the process of the interview, you seem to have hit upon what a few people are beginning to sense as the really crucial issue for the arts over the next ten years or so. And that's what I meant by in a sense you exercising some of your prophetic capacity . . . .

HAROLD ARBERG: Not prophetic . . . .

LAURIN RAIKIN: No. Since you are in government, would you have any suggestions to the arts community, be it to ACA or to individual artists themselves as to how they should organize? I mentioned this especially because

there was a study by Bernard Poggiolo, called The Theory of the Avant Garde, in which he says that artists are basically anarchists. And if this is the case, and if it's changing, which I think our observation is, artists will have to organize just like the business committee for the arts is organized, and the Associated Council for the Arts. In the level of the artist, and of the art teacher, there has to be organization as well.

HAROLD ARBERG: Well. To take your point of the artist as anarchist, the artist is by nature anarchistic to the extent that he is engaged in the process of change constantly.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Right. That's what I meant.

HAROLD ARBERG: He either changes or he dies. Art and repetition are, I guess, mutually exclusive. Education needs to have that same capacity for self-renewal that the artist constantly seeks. Unfortunately it's pretty difficult to bring into the education field, but this is one thing that the artist can contribute. And it's this very anarchistic element that, in a sense, is what's needed. I mean that quite literally, because we need to turn the whole educational process around. We need to focus it not on a prescribed curriculum through which everyone must pass, but on a prescribed individual who confronts the world around him, how is he developed? And the artist provides one means, and a unique one, not the only one, but certainly a unique means of accomplishing this kind of personal development which is the goal of education.

LAURIN RAIKIN: This leads to another question. Recently, when you read articles on the future of education, for example, in last Sunday's New York Times News and Review Section, you are reading about the terrible shape universities are in economically. There has been criticism of the universities from the extreme left and from the extreme right as to certain kinds of educational irrelevancy. If we need trained, educated people in the economy, does it necessarily mean that they have to have the traditional type of university degree, or high school degree? It seems that there is again on the horizon in this country a sense of education and training through new institutions that are growing. If there are such new institutions for education and training developing outside of the traditional ones, is your Office and the Federal government in a position to support them? Or can you only support the traditionally organized school systems?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, to answer the question, not only is the Office in the position to support, but there is a specific program that is designed to support such innovative systems. It's called The Experimental Schools Program. And talking to the director of the program here in our Office, Robert Binswanger, frankly they're having a problem getting enough experimental ideas from the field. So this is an instance where the present administration has established this program, and now the educational community is having to somehow catch up.

LAURIN RAIKIN: What defines an experimental school?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, this is the point. There are experimental aspects that can be built into an existing school situation. The thrust of that program is to create totally new learning environments, totally new sequences.

LAURIN RAIKIN: Does it have to be within the overall umbrella of a Board of Education, or a school system?

HAROLD ARBERG: Well, then here again, we're somewhat hung up on the legislation, because that would specify a local education agency. But we can and do deal in research and development efforts with museums, with private organizations, with ACA as we have done.

LAURIN RAIKIN: I want to give you an example of what I mean in terms of one such institution. There is a book called something like, The Big Rock Candy Mountain which comes from Portola Institute. It speaks of different modes of education, and new communal movements in this country. There are groups which, from very traditional institutes, form this as a separate institute, or perhaps exempt non-profit educational institutions. They are not universities; they are not secondary schools, but under the IRS laws they are considered educational institutes. Can these groups be supported by the funds from that experimental program?

HAROLD ARBERG: The research and development money which is appropriated is in a sense the most flexible money that we have, because the Office is authorized to make grants and enter into contracts virtually, as I've indicated, with any entity, either profit or non-profit. Much of the other legislation which the Office administers is restricted.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated... *September 30, 2003*