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Arts under attack: Trump cuts Endowment funding for Ulster County's cultural institutions

by **Rokosz Most** — June 18, 2025 in [Art & Music](#), [Politics & Government](#)

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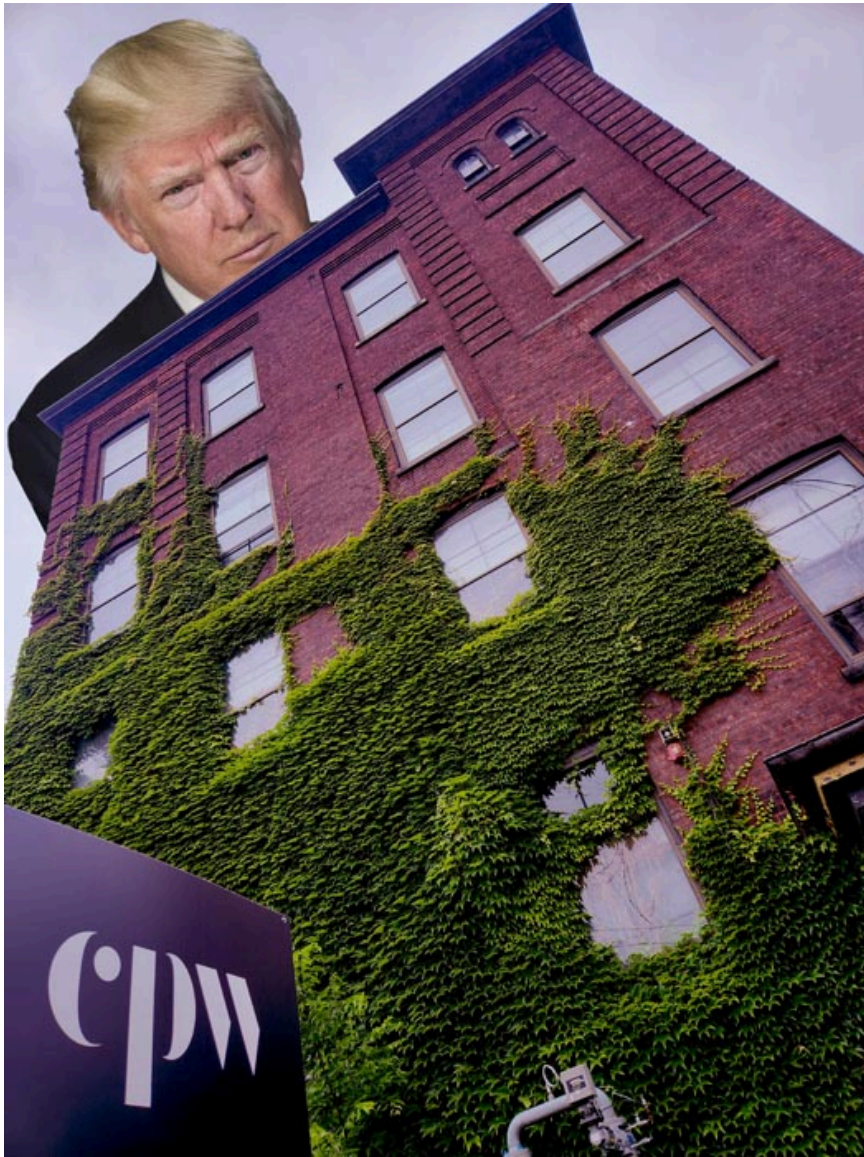
To understand the singular aesthetic of President Donald J. Trump, one needs look no further than his instinct to dig up the rose garden lawn at the White House and pave it over.

When asked why, he said it was because those attending rose garden press conferences – especially the women wearing high heels – were sinking into the grass.

To quote Andrew Carnegie, “The older I get the less I listen to what people say and the more I look at what they do.”

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Center for Photography at Woodstock in Kingston is one of several area organizations suffering funding cuts.

In the president's 2026 fiscal year budget request, submitted to congress on May 2, 2025, Trump formalized efforts already begun in executive orders. He called for the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Tear them up. Pave them over.

The NEA, since its inception in 1965, has awarded \$5.6 billion in support of the arts in America to underwrite artistic inspiration wherever it appears, parochial or sophisticated, modern or atavistic, often strange.

Musical theatre lyricists and librettists, poets and poetasters, painters and photographers, musicians and sculptors, dancers and actors, film and video artists, grotesques and fashion models, supporting and subsidizing

that branch of the human family growing at all times in ever crazier angles, looking to get paid to dream while awake. The muse's familiars.

In New York over the past five years, the National Endowment for the Arts distributed \$106,596,547 in

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The Voice Theater, currently building a set to put on a July run of *Noises Off* in Kingston's Bethany Hall, had initially been approved for a \$10,000 Challenge America grant – money awarded for projects aimed at underserved communities.

In May, the Trump administration had taken the endowment in hand. Someone with an NEA email address sent out letters reneging on all the funding promised by the National Endowment of the Arts.

"That was nice of them," said Voice Theater artistic director Shauna Kanter. "We're a small theater company and when we're in production, we employ about 30 people and our budget is something like \$200,000. So it's just a huge hit."

Originally conceived in Paris with funding from the French government, the Voice Theater moved to New York City 35 years ago. Now up here in the Hudson Valley, they were awarded the grant based on taking part in a major youth outreach program specifically focused on immigrant, undocumented and unaccompanied teens living in a locked facility in the Children's Home of Kingston.



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Cast and crew of Voice Theater, building a set.

"This was the eighth year that we have been doing this program. These are kids who've been arrested. They're teens, yes, but they're children. A lot of them are 14 years old."

Central American immigrants in Kingston arrive predominantly from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador – but Kanter said many she has worked with also walked through the Darién Gap – an infamously dangerous 60-mile stretch of swamp, rainforest and mountains which is the land bridge between Panama and Colombia. Wherever they come from, they all have to go through Mexico to arrive at the U.S. border.

"And they get arrested on the border. They're shipped to a couple hundred facilities around America. And then they're there in these various facilities for up to 90 days awaiting sponsorship. We've also begun a partnership with the Ulster County Department of Social Services where we've included foster kids in these workshops."

More than 60 percent of NEA grants go to small and medium-sized organizations, described as having budgets of up to \$2 million, and are aimed to benefit audiences with fewer opportunities to participate in the arts.

Thirty-five percent of Arts Endowment grants take place in high-poverty neighborhoods, and thirty-five percent reach low-income audiences or under-served populations, such as people with disabilities, people in institutions, and veterans.

"The history of it was that we got our award letter. Then we got another letter saying, you can now announce it, because the NEA does it in stages. And then, I think it was May 2nd, we got the email, which I was expecting, but saying, 'so sorry.'"

Actually, what it said was that "the NEA is updating its grantmaking policy priorities to focus funding on projects that reflect the nation's rich artistic heritage and creativity as prioritized by the President. Consequently, we are terminating awards that fall outside these new priorities."

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theory programs,” which they communicated yet again in the president’s official united states budget preamble.

But the letter continues and the list of artistic undertakings approved by the president grows increasingly scattershot.

Future grants will “celebrate the 250th anniversary of American independence, foster AI competency, empower houses of worship to serve communities, assist with disaster recovery, foster skilled trade jobs, make America healthy again, support the military and veterans, support Tribal communities, make the District of Columbia safe and beautiful, and support the economic development of Asian American communities.”

“Funding,” said the letter, “is being allocated in a new direction in furtherance of the Administration’s agenda.”

Maverick, one of Woodstock’s first art colonies, now an outdoor venue at which to attend primarily classical and jazz programming, also had their grant for the year cancelled, an award of \$35,000 announced in December of 2024.

The venue was informed that “chamber music performances unfortunately did not align with the president’s priorities”.

“We were given no indication that the award would be rescinded until we received the letter on May 2,” said board chair Steve McGrath. “The funds received from the NEA were earmarked to pay performer fees, including our free Maverick Family Saturdays and two outreach programs in Kingston. The original theme for the season was: Pioneers: Women in American Classical Music and Jazz – celebrating women composers and performers.”

Over at the Women’s Studio Workshop, Faythe Levine, the Hauser & Wirth Institute archivist, is similarly bemused. Most recently, the workshop received a \$10,000 NEH award for the development of archival systems as well as for policies for preservation, a grant for smaller organizations.



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archival supplies and housing designed and built to keep materials safe – one consideration is that paper has a specific pH and the boxes must be acid free – and partly to help the workshop develop systems to make their archives more accessible to the public.

The workshop boasts a repository of over 250 artists' books that were published by the workshop. Levine also points to a robust collection of files on over 500 artists who have come to create in residence over the course of the last 50 years.

That this award was a reimbursement grant, means the Women's Studio Workshop was spending the money based on the expectation they would be able to recoup the costs later down the line. When they received notification in April that the award was terminated, Levine says they managed to get reimbursed on what they had spent so far after all.

"The check has been deposited and cashed. And we have submitted our final report. So that chapter is now closed for us with that preservation funding."

If the goal was to effect a change in behavior or beliefs of artists by disincentivizing philosophies which differ from the president's announced preferences, then that message appears to be lost on Levine.



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Women's Studio Workshop, off the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail.

"We've received National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities funding pretty consistently over the last 50 years... so based on the history of what Women's Studio Workshop represents and who we represent and who we serve in our mission statement – which is women, trans and non-binary artists – unless there is going to be a future where funding is not shaped based on sexist and implied definitions of who deserves art funding, then it doesn't matter what we say."

Another \$40,000 for the Women's Studio Workshop to support a residency program for emerging and established artists was reneged on.

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The list of organizations in Ulster County currently experiencing the disappointment of having arts endowment funds first promised and then retroactively cancelled is long. Letters of retroactive cancellation have been emailed to communities in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC.

Artists, like elephants, have long memories, and are known to cry at the intensity of detail recalled, or shout or rave, or write a sonnet, so in the end this may all just be a long demonstration rife for satire and caricature, a handy narrative for revisiting the well-worn theme that while money can in fact buy advantage, which is a kind of happiness, money has not been able to buy the muse's favor.

Wealthy patrons throughout history have understood that in order to be surrounded by those gifted with artistic talent and genius, they'd have to pay for it. In this light, cancelling endowment funding for the arts is a counterintuitive strategy for soliciting the favor of artists.

But Trump has demonstrated bold incisiveness before. If it doesn't work, he can dig it back up, pave it and start over again.

In the short term, by firing board trustees at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts and appointing himself chair, he now dictates the programming at one of the nation's premiere performing arts centers. No doubt the programs curated for the upcoming seasons will captivate audiences everywhere.

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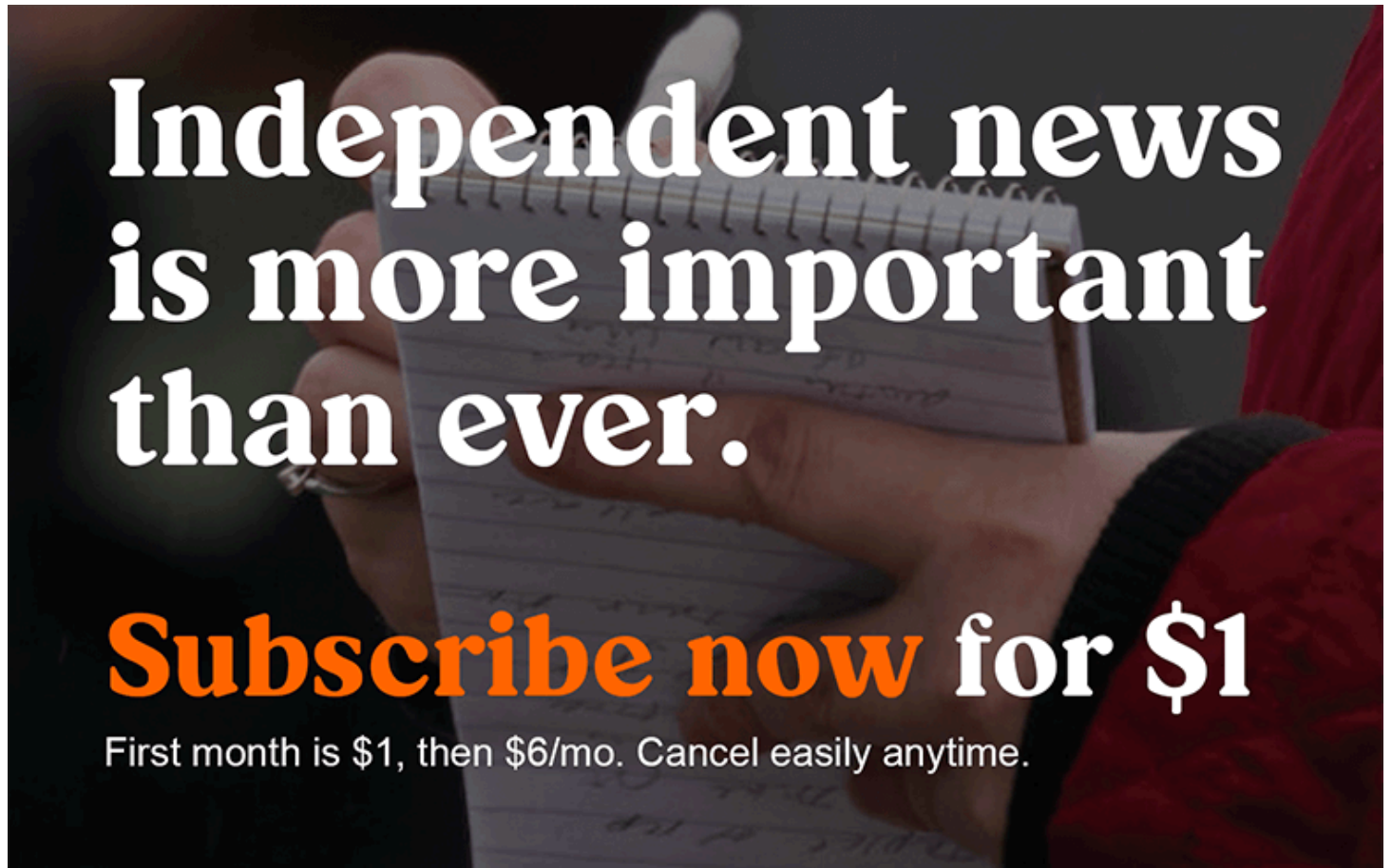
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