# It's Hard to Argue for Public Funding

By Douglas McLennan

For the past 30 years, opposition to government funding for the arts has been a rote exercise for conservatives wanting to demonstrate ideological bona fides. It's not just about opposing arts funding, it's about actively seeking to defund the arts (two different things).

Arts funding is shorthand for a laundry list of evils, from rampant government handouts to profligate spending, suspicious values and out-of-touch elitism. Framed in these terms, who wouldn't be opposed? Opposing arts funding checks the boxes on numerous fundamentalist conservative issues.

**I think as long as it's about money, the arts lose.** As long as the conversation starts with funding, the arts lose. Yet that's where the arts often start; if the debate is about money, then we try to prove what a good investment the arts are.

But the problem with economic impact studies is that if someone isn't in the market to invest — no matter how good the return is — they won't. Concurrently, the problem with arguing aesthetic value is that if the aesthetic values aren't my aesthetic values, they don't sound compelling to me.

**Conservatives have been successful not because they have a better economic case, but because they make an argument about values.**

In a time when people are angry over a sour economy and a lack of accountability for those they perceive got us there, they preach caution, living within our means and trying to impose more responsible behavior. Argued in these terms, again, who wouldn't sign on?

Against this, how does arguing for public funding for the arts get anywhere? The argument seems so ... small ... so self-serving. By the time it's about money, the argument has already been lost. **The arts actually are about values.** The question is how to argue them before the argument ever gets to funding.

Douglas McLennan is the founder and editor of ArtsJournal.com.

Find this article at:

http://www.ajc.com/opinion/its-hard-to-argue-1439664.html