

PEW FELLOWSHIPS IN THE ARTS
1995 AWARDS SPEECH

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak this evening.

I congratulate the 1994-95 Pew Fellows in the Arts. Through your fiction and literary nonfiction, poetry, sculpture, painting, and works on paper, through interdisciplinary artistry, and through your lives as well, you dignify all of us in your work as creative citizens deeply involved both in the life of your society and the life of the arts that enrich your society.

Imagine with me. Let us sketch an image on the canvas of our collective presence by exploring the concept of the creative citizen. I address two questions. First, what is, or should be, the role of creativity in individual and societal experiences? Second, what does it mean to be a citizen today? The first question explores the citizenship of the creative artist while the second explores the creativity of citizens.

When we think of creative people, many of us tend to imagine a great master, painting in the bucolic solitude of a mountaintop studio, and when we think of active citizens, we tend to visualize a community activist distributing pamphlets on the street. When I speak of an artist, I mean anyone who engages others in creativity. Artists, of course, span the spectrum of human creative contributions in society. Musicians, writers, poets, as well as painters, architects, designers, and photographers all fit the definition of artist. Perhaps even the great teachers, scientists, philosophers, and inventors fit the definition, for surely, they engage others in creativity.

When I speak of citizenship, I mean participation in the body politic. As citizens, we may, and, in fact, we must, engage one another in a dialogue about

The Creative Citizen



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the ever-changing state of our society. We do this in a number of traditional ways, by voting or petitioning the government for a redress of our grievances. But citizenship need not be limited to textbook civics definitions about political letterwriting or jury duty. Instead, citizenship can embrace the myriad activities in which we engage every day as we communicate our thoughts and ideas to others.

The premise is this: Neither society nor government nor art can mandate creativity, artistry, or citizenship, for all these concepts would be meaningless if they were not willingly chosen. Yet, if we were to visualize a perfect society, some artists might imagine a utopian creatocracy run by an enlightened, dispassionate despot, where everyone was trained and nurtured to be artists—although this would do little to serve the interests of art or government, for both would be weakened in their practice if their practice was made compulsory. For the same reason, neither should we expect much success from a government that mandates a demonstration of citizenship by artists. Citizenship, like creativity, must be voluntarily embraced. Given the limitations of requiring universal citizenship or creativity, what should be the role of creativity in our individual and societal experiences? As creative people, what responsibility do we have to our society, and how are we to conduct ourselves as citizens?

We need not look far for answers to these questions. The Pew fellows we honor today give us the answers. They are creative citizens. The poet who volunteers in community jails and organizes for farmworkers is the creative citizen. The photographer who shoots African American men in their true condition and contradicts the media image that black men only shoot one another is the creative citizen. The visual artist who, essentially, is sculpting his neighborhood with

mosaic wall murals on the homes of his neighbors is the creative citizen.

In fact, the work of all sixteen Pew fellows is the work of the creative citizen. By building bridges to unite the worlds in which they live with the worlds in which they create, they connect their identities as artists and citizens and literally bring art to the people and people to the artists. In their artistry, these sixteen gifted, creative citizens probe the limits of class, race, sexuality, gender identity, community, communication, language, beauty, life, and death. What are these ideas if not the foundation of civilization itself?

The creative citizens among us give birth to the foundation of civilization, but their work does not end there; instead, they also question the very foundations they create. They challenge them, critique them, and even destroy them in order to renew or replace them. They perform a singular and essential role in the life of our people. Businesspeople explore some of these important questions, politicians explore other questions, and other citizens examine still different questions, but the creative citizen asks all these questions. What they examine is life and love and beauty and loss and time and God.

In a society that embraces capitalism and democracy, when the leaders of both systems fail to address fundamental questions of our human identity, who else will? Some might expect our spiritual leaders to fill this void, but many of these leaders do not address the questions we ask. Only the creative citizen, whatever her profession or identity, engages us in this dialogue. In this way, the creative citizen is a spiritual leader healing the souls of the people, with both beauty and ugliness, enriching our senses and stimulating our minds. Few in society are able to communicate to the innermost emotions of those in need as artists are able to do. As Joseph Conrad said, "The artist

appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring.” The creative citizen has the power to glorify and uplift the human spirit. The classic works—El Greco’s religious paintings, Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel—bear witness to this power. But we also find this in the footsteps of Alvin Ailey and in the rhythms of popular music.

As cultural icon, the creative citizen teaches us about ourselves and our neighbors. We learn from the acid-induced lines of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” or the horizontal lines of Andy Warhol’s Television. Sights and sounds of art and creativity bombard and invade our senses in the most unsuspecting places and ways. The thirty-second television commercial, produced with larger production crews than a stage play, or the incessant base of a rap music beat pulsating from the speakers of a passing car challenges us to reconsider our understanding of art by reconsidering our understanding of our world.

The creative citizen also has the power to defy life, leaping through time to communicate to us from canvases and photographs of the past. Through modern interpretative analysis, we can hear their voices traveling eternally through time, like the helium from the big bang. The creative citizens of yesterday speak to us about feminism, racism, and sexuality. MacArthur Fellow Susan McClary finds in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, “the throttling, murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release.” Scholars studying the works of African American painter Robert S. Duncanson have found in his beautiful landscapes the expression of a subconscious desire to escape the oppression experienced by a free colored person in antebellum America. Whether or not these artists intended such meanings to be read into their works, the readings themselves convey the immortal power of creativity to communicate beyond time.

Creative citizens have the power to educate and inform. They peer deeply into the soul and expose to public scrutiny what few have seen. They bring to our living rooms and our museums the images of faraway worlds, the exotic environments of fascinating human cultures, of galaxies beyond our solar system, and the vast uncharted space hidden deep in the cavities of the human brain. The creative citizen has the power to shape young minds by providing a role model for youth; the creative citizen influences their view of the world and their contribution to it. By participating in arts and education programs, the creative citizen not only provides a path to follow but also becomes an impetus for young people to create their own paths. As a role model or mentor, the creative citizen gives young people strength of character to nurture themselves on the often lonely road of creativity or in the solitude of their own space.

When we look outside of this room, we find the practice of creative citizenry across the globe. The lens of photojournalist Vladimir Syomin brings to life images of the enduring spirit of the Russian people in a time of crisis. Cristo's flowing fabric wrapped around the Reichstag is a visualization of how art may literally consume our politics. The poetic voice of Kensors Wewa still reverberates throughout Africa weeks after an evil and corrupt Nigerian government murdered him in an attempt to silence it. In Peru, the writer Mario Vargas Llosa mounted a bid for his country's presidency, and in the Czech Republic, the poet and playwright Vaclav Havel became leader of his country. In Bolivia, muralist Walter Solon Ramero's so-called subversive drawings of Don Quixote so frightened the government that his work was banned from public display and was sentenced to exile. And, of course, in China, brave art students, in 1989, erected a defiant tribute to America's Statue of Liberty in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

Does the artist have an obligation or duty to be involved as a citizen? Absolutely. All citizens, artists and nonartists alike, share this responsibility. Artists do not acquire any absolution from their obligation by virtue of their creativity. In fact, artists bear a unique responsibility to contribute to society because they are artists. This responsibility flows in part from the trust invested in the artist by her audience. The artist must be an active citizen because the artist has the power to communicate what and when others cannot. Some artists become celebrities because of their art, but even the multitude of artists who lack prominence must recognize the artist's power to uplift and to expose, challenge and change. All of these actions by artists can impact society. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, was so influential that Abraham Lincoln, on meeting the author, was said to have jokingly remarked, "Are you the little lady who started the big war?"

The unique responsibility of the artist also flows from the privileges the artist enjoys in a truly free society. "Eternal vigilance," said Jefferson, "is the price of liberty." Those of us who are afforded the talent and the opportunity to create art must zealously defend the right that allows art to flourish. We must do this not only for ourselves but also for those who will follow us, and for those who do not enjoy the freedom to create art openly. Anton Chekhov once wrote in a letter, "I would like to be a free artist and nothing else and I regret God has not given me the strength to be one." Those of us who are free bear a great responsibility to defend and protect the freedom of which others can only dream. We must protect the freedom of art not only for those artists with whom we agree but for those artists with whom we disagree, for Salman Rushdie and Robert Mapplethorpe as much as for Mark Twain and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Art and culture provide value and meaning to our civilization far beyond the significance of sophisticated weaponry. They tell the story of who we are as a people and they communicate to others a message about our identity. Art and culture are time capsules that preserve the history of the condition of our country. As Ken Burns, the maker of documentary films, recently noted in testimony before Congress, "These things may not add to the country's defense, but they do make the country worth defending." And so, as creative citizens, your role, whether consciously chosen or not, is to make this country worth defending. The nation's two most sacred texts, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, provide a road map to our understanding. The Declaration cries out for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For the founders of the country to recognize the pursuit of happiness as a quality to be given equal stature to life and liberty suggests that the founders sought to unleash the creative spirit and energy of the people. The Preamble to the Constitution draws a similar picture of the society and the government. The very first words, "We the people," inform us that the document is not handed down from an omnipotent government, but rather, handed over from empowered citizenry to its delegated representatives.

Artists, are we the people? Each citizen, I believe, is we the people. We have been unleashed by our Constitution to pursue happiness. In so doing, the ordinary citizens must support and protect the creative citizens, our artists, because they are part and parcel of our pursuit of happiness. George Washington, our nation's first leader, told us "the private duty of every lover of his country and of mankind is the encouragement of the arts and sciences." Washington's admonition speaks to us of a calling of the creative citizen and the not so creative citizen as well.

The Preamble to the Constitution lists six reasons why the founders created it, and as creative citizens, we contribute to each of these. We seek "to form a more perfect union" by creating a government accountable to the people it services. We work "to establish justice" by highlighting injustice through our art as well as by our volunteerism. We "ensure domestic tranquillity" by providing a forum for the peaceful display of our differences. We also believe in the need to "provide for the common defense," but we recognize that this is not the sole purpose of the government. Through our works, we enrich culture and, therefore, "promote the general welfare." Finally, we help to "secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity" each time one of us stands against the forces of censorship and repression.

As we citizens seek to understand creativity, we must know that art does not exist solely for politics or profit, or for any single purpose alone. Art exists for many reasons, not the least of which is for its own sake. We must celebrate our creativity and our art as a unique gift of human existence; however, while we must be able to appreciate the beauty of art that is created when no social message is apparent, this does not mean that the artist must renounce her citizenship, disassociate from all things political, or become detached from her surroundings. We cannot be disengaged from our society merely because our labor is nonpolitical. We would not ask engineers or doctors or truck drivers to abandon their political beliefs because of their professions; neither should we expect the artist to abandon political thoughts because of what she creates.

As artists, we cannot fear to tackle the great issues of our time, and as citizens, we must not fear to take on issues that affect our art. We cannot absolve the arts community of its responsibility to help fight this battle. As artists, funders, patrons, or

supporters, we bear a debt of gratitude to the creative citizen and the society that allows such citizens to flourish. But neither the citizen nor the society will long endure if we fail to recognize our obligation to art. We are a community transcending other community boundaries, geography, race, nationality, identity. Once the artist builds a bridge, those boundaries do not matter. We are linked by our shared desire to enjoy and preserve art and creativity. As a community, we have the same responsibility that the artist and citizen have as individuals.

I understand the temptation to succumb to cynicism or lethargy. As Robert Brustein noted in the *New Republic* this year, "Delivering courteous speeches about the human spirit and the human heritage to people who believe the only function of government is to cut spending and reduce taxes is about as useful as reading Hegel to orangutans." We must learn to manipulate the levers of power; we must become better organized as a community. We must teach ourselves to use our power effectively as one united community. In this way, the synergy between creativity and citizenship will continue to survive and, perhaps, if we are really committed, grow.

Throughout all the changes we have experienced in our country, art and creativity have been at center stage. The photography of Matthew Brady showed up the horrors involved when brothers take arms against brothers in civil war. The Statue of Liberty provided a beautiful welcome for exhausted refugees. The writings of Upton Sinclair revealed the scandalous conditions of the meatpacking industry. The paintings of Jacob Lawrence captured the journey of American blacks migrating from the oppression of the southern plantation to the oppression of the northern factory. The music of John Lennon and Marvin Gaye challenged the Vietnam War. Of

course, we all know how Dolly Madison refused to leave the burning White House, under attack in the War of 1812, until the Gilbert Stuart portraits were securely removed. And the pivotal work of Harriet Beecher Stowe stands even taller as an example.

Art has played a key role in the history of the country. As creators, the duty to protect and defend what we create belongs to all of us. As citizens who support creativity, we must be willing to put our own lives and other creature comforts on the line to protect creativity from attack. With all the seriousness and energy that we devote to our lives, we must accept the responsibility of defending art and what it represents about our culture. Above all else, this is the calling of the creative citizen.

Peggy Cooper Cafritz is a longtime Washington arts and community activist who ranks among the nation's most distinguished cultural and civic leaders. Educated at George Washington University, she received a B.A. in political science in 1968 and a J.D. in 1971, followed by a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. In 1968, with choreographer Mike Malone, Cafritz created Workshops for Careers in the Arts which was renamed the Duke Ellington School of the Arts (DESA) in 1974. As a D.C. public school for youth gifted in the fine and performing arts, DESA receives a portion of its funds from the city budget. The Ellington Fund was established to raise additional funds for the school from both the public and private sectors. Cafritz has taken a lead role in the fundraising effort; she has served as chair of the Ellington Fund and is currently the vice president for development. In addition, she is a consulting editor for Elle magazine and arts critic for the weekly PBS television program "Around Town."

Cafritz's deep commitment to the arts and their special role in educating young people was recognized in 1994 by President Clinton when he appointed her vice chair of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

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A prominent advocate for women and people of color regionally and nationally, Cafritz is an active participant on several civic, cultural, and educational boards and committees. She serves as a member of the board of trustees for the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowships, the Whitney Museum of American Art's Painting and Sculpture Committee, the advisory board of the W. E. B. Dubois Institute at Harvard University, and the American Association of Museums' National Advisory Committee on Education. She also serves as chair emeritus of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and chair emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution's Cultural Equity Subcommittee. Cafritz is a member of the D.C. Bar Association, American Bar Association, National Women's Forum, Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington, Economic Club of Washington, and Cosmos Club.

Cafritz has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the John D. Rockefeller Youth Award; the George Foster Peabody Award; the National Society of Fundraising Executives' 1992 Volunteer Fund Raiser of the Year; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Outstanding Achievement Award, Arts and Letters; the twentieth Malcolm X Day Anniversary Award for Arts Advocacy; the Mayor's Art Award for Excellence in Service to the Arts; the Helen Hayes/ Washington Post Distinguished Community Service Award; and an Emmy for the weekly arts program "Around Town."