CULTURE

Meet the Woman Leading the Fight to Protect the Arts in Trump's America

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by REBECCA BENGAL

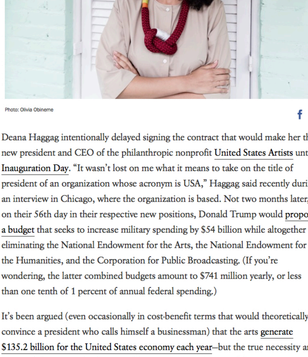

Photo: Olivia Obineme

Deana Haggag intentionally delayed signing the contract that would make her the new president and CEO of the philanthropic nonprofit United States Artists until Inauguration Day. "It wasn't lost on me what it means to take on the title of president of an organization whose acronym is USA," Haggag said recently during an interview in Chicago, where the organization is based. Not two months later, on their 56th day in their respective new positions, Donald Trump would propose a budget that seeks to increase military spending by $54 billion while altogether eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (If you're wondering, the latter combined budgets amount to $741 million yearly, or less than one tenth of 1 percent of annual federal spending.)

It's been argued (even occasionally in cost-benefit terms that would theoretically convince a president who calls himself a businessman) that the arts generate $135.2 billion for the United States economy each year–but the true necessity and power of the arts are both impossible to quantify and impossible to underestimate, and, advocates argue, something the Trump administration clearly views as a viable threat. "We need the arts because they make us full human beings," sociologist Eve L. Ewing wrote in *The New York Times*. "But we also need the arts as a protective factor against authoritarianism."

In any case, it's certainly not the first time that the NEA has weathered such an attack in its 50-odd years of existence–United States Artists was created largely in response to the deep budget cuts the NEA suffered in the early 2000s. Since 2006, it has quietly flown under the radar, in relative anonymity compared to peers like Creative Capital and the MacArthur Foundation, giving unrestricted grants of $50,000 to individual artists who represent an uncommonly diverse range of genre and medium, geography, race, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identification. While there are a number of recognizable names on the roster of United States Artists fellows–past grantees include visual artist Kara Walker, novelist Annie Proulx, and *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins–the organization's real strength lies in its ability to award individuals who use traditional methods and unexpected approaches to speak to a vast range of experience. The classes of the past two years include its share of well-known artists (Mickalene Thomas, Dawoud Bey, Miranda July, Charles Atlas, Teju Cole, and Claudia Rankine) alongside far more whose work and method lie further outside the margins: Vicky Holt Takamine, whose work focuses on Hawaiian dance as a form of resistance; Kiowa beadworking artist Teri Greeves; potter Roberto Lugo; and Winfred Rembert, whose hand-tooled and dyed works on leather depict a childhood as a field-worker in the South before the civil rights movement.

As arts funding faces a devastating blow, it's an ominous time to be an artist or to take a leading role in nonprofit fundraising, but it's also a time when the arts need a fresh kind of fire, something that Haggag embodies with passionate devotion and an approach that feels both thoughtful and innovative. At 30, she is considerably younger than most of her peers, coming off a career largely focused on curating in New York City, Cairo, and Baltimore, where she most recently headed the traveling museum The Contemporary. She was raised in a large family in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, the daughter of Egyptian immigrants. "I am not an artist, I never have been, but I've come to understand who I am through the arts, as a curator and as a person," Haggag said. "Also, my parents are from Egypt, so there are ideas about colonialism and blackness and being African and being American and, growing up, when I didn't have language for those things, there was always an artist who could help navigate that for me in his or her work. Understanding myself as a black woman, a brown woman, an Egyptian, and an American has been through the lens of all these amazing thinkers."

Below, an excerpt from that conversation.

You're taking the helm of this particularly auspiciously named organization at a particularly ominous-seeming time. How did that come about? I had been asked to be a nominator in 2013, but I learned of the opening last year. My job interview was the week after the election. It felt like the most bizarre time in the entire world for me to uproot my life. But it also really felt important to do this work, to walk away a little bit from curating and be more involved in this fundraising and support system for artists, because of everything that's happening. And, frankly, even if the government doesn't cut the NEA, this work is still important. United States Artists was founded in response to the NEA's cuts in the early 2000s, but the NEA has never gotten back to that place of supporting individual artists the way it once did. So, regardless, our mission is to amplify the growth of artists in America and to broaden the idea of what it means to be an artist in America.

And what do you think that means now, especially when so much else is at risk? How do we as a community value the existence of art at a time when things like health care and housing and immigration and education are imperiled? I've thought about that a lot: Why put any skills or efforts into protecting this thing when there are a million other fights? When millions of Americans could potentially die if certain things are repealed and cut? Weirdly, they were talking about this on, of all places, *The View*, in the midst of a discussion about the controversy over Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till. Joy Behar made the point about how they want to defund the arts because they know that it [has] power. The reason the federal government wants to defund arts is that the arts have the power to make people think for themselves, and in every moment when there's been a fascist society they try to remove the arts because they know that a painting can wage war.

What are the greatest challenges of taking on a job like this now? Well, first and foremost: What does it mean to raise money for individual artists at a time when our largest governing body says that thing has no value whatsoever? For me, the main goal is to make the organization sustainable. I want to know that if the NEA is cut today, tomorrow, 10 years from now, 15 years from now, that United States Artists can still be here, still doing the same work. That requires a lot more long-term thinking and fundraising than what I was used to in past nonprofit jobs, where I was like, "We've got to get through this year, the next several years." And also: How do we advocate on behalf of artists in other ways that are compelling, beyond just cutting someone a big check? We're thinking, for instance, about the things that artists are using this money for. If you get a grant, does that mean you get bumped off your health care? I'm thinking about levels of debt that all Americans are collecting in this economy: college debt, credit card debt. What is an artist's relationship to that now?

There are also plenty of artists in America who have never truly faced the risks involved in exercising free speech. I walk around museums sometimes and I think about the fact that civilizations have ended, and I wonder about what it is to record this. My parents are immigrants; they're from Egypt, so I have a little bit of a different view of what it means to be an American. I have an appreciation for it that is more profound than I really have the language for–in part because they were raised in Egypt at a time when you really could not express yourself, you could not talk about anything. So even at moments when I am so angry at this country, and even though I don't believe we have the freedom to express ourselves entirely, there is something about being able to be an artist here and being able to say the things that artists are saying, no matter what they are, that I think needs to be protected at all costs, and which is a thing that makes this country profoundly hopeful.

I was living in Egypt during the uprising under Mubarak, and just watching arrest after arrest. They go for the artists first. They go for the journalists, writers, painters, and photographers. That's who you lock up if you don't want people to know what's happening. So that's why I think if we don't protect what they're making now, it is a slippery slope, and we will lose by the time we need these images to go to the general public. No matter what these artists are working on now, whether or not it has an overt political sensibility, we need to protect them and their freedom.

You've said that your career thus far has been centered around asking two things: Who is art for, and what can it do? And your answer to those questions is: Everyone, and everything. That's why I think that *Moonlight* is so compelling. You know, [director and screenwriter] Barry Jenkins was one of our awardees in 2012, and he gets that grant and goes away and makes one of the most amazing movies ever, so deserving of its Oscar. I don't think we've ever looked at masculinity in that way. If that film doesn't cause someone to really see themselves and their love with another person, I don't know what does. So that's one reason I love this organization: that it does represent a true diversity of voices and experiences and forms.

But then, on the flip side of that, I think about people who didn't grow up with art or don't have art in their lives, who are perhaps missing that thing that art can help bridge, which is having empathy for another person and another experience. If you can't meet someone day to day who is different from you, if you don't have that in your life, then you can find that through music and the arts and books. *That's* why we exist.

This interview has been condensed and edited.