

**Art as Diplomacy: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges**

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## Art as Diplomacy: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges

“Call it winning hearts and minds, soft power, cultural diplomacy. We’re here today not only to celebrate forty years of accomplishment in the ART in Embassies Program, but also more broadly to look at the role of arts and culture in conveying the creativity and freedoms of the United States and in building long-term understanding among people.”

*Ellen McCulloch-Lovell*

### Introduction

On May 17, 2004, over 400 individuals representing the worlds of art, culture and public policy assembled at the Department of State in Washington, DC, to recognize the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the U.S. government’s most established and successful public diplomacy efforts: the State Department’s ART in Embassies Program.

A public-private partnership, the ART in Embassies Program curates exhibitions of original works of art by U.S. citizens for the representational rooms of U.S. ambassadorial residences worldwide. The majority of works on exhibit are borrowed from galleries, museums, foundations, collections, and individual artists from across the nation. In conjunction with most exhibitions, the Program funds and produces professionally designed, fully illustrated publications, many of which are bilingual. The Program’s latest initiative, American Artists Abroad, which began in fall 2002, extends exhibitions beyond the walls of ambassadors’ residences by sending some of the lending artists overseas for intensive, short-term cultural exchanges. With a modest budget and staff, the ART in Embassies Program engages the U.S. art community, both commercial and not-for-profit sectors, in public diplomacy; humanizes increasingly secure U.S. ambassadorial residences; and brings U.S. artists in direct contact with foreign populations, allowing them to establish long-term relationships.

As part of this celebration, the ART in Embassies Program and the Center for Arts & Culture -- a Washington, DC-based, nonpartisan, cultural policy think tank -- organized a panel discussion, *Art as Diplomacy: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges*, which addressed the impacts of cultural exchange and how to effectively incorporate the arts and culture in current U.S. government public diplomacy efforts.

Margaret Tutwiler, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, delivered opening remarks declaring that “We’re more than just policy as Americans...we are our culture, and we are our art [and]...it actually is something that I think for us as Americans culturally translates very well.”

Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, President of Marlboro College (Vermont), then moderated the panel discussion, which featured Charles Cowles, Director of the Charles Cowles Gallery (New York City); Karl Hofmann, Special Assistant to the Secretary and Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Washington, DC); Michael Kaiser, President of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, DC); Adair Margo, Chairman of the President’s Council for the Arts and the Humanities (El Paso); and Therman Statom, an independent artist (San Diego). Attendees, including artists, arts professionals, cultural policy practitioners, academics, U.S. government employees, and international diplomats, were invited to share their questions and comments at the conclusion of the event.

## Issues

The panelists consistently underscored several ideas throughout their discussion:

1. The visual and performing arts have the power to engage U.S. and international citizens on a personal rather than political level, highlighting commonalities rather than differences, thus contributing to the U.S. government policy objective of mutual understanding.
2. The arts community within the United States remains an underutilized force for the U.S. government in its efforts to engage communities abroad. Most artists, regardless of their political affiliations, are eager and willing to participate in citizen exchanges, either by traveling overseas or working with foreign artists in the U.S. Artists effectively build bridges by demonstrating and sharing what the peoples of the world hold in common.
3. Both commercial and not-for-profit arts organizations (galleries, museums, theater groups, dance troupes, individual artists, etc.) should be involved in U.S. public diplomacy efforts.
4. As security measures tighten at U.S. missions overseas, U.S. government personnel become increasingly isolated from local populations, both physically and emotionally. Public diplomacy programs focusing on art and culture provide opportunities for mission personnel to actively and informally engage with local citizens. As panelist Karl Hofmann stated:

“[A]ll of you who visit an American embassy abroad know the rigors of security under which we need to live. And despite the very best efforts of the folks [at the Department of State] who...provide our secure facilities and make sure that we have what we need to do our jobs, there is the perception that we sometimes live and work in bunkers and sadly, you know, we are brought to that requirement in this day and age, and so anything we can do to humanize us, to make us more accessible to our foreign interlocutors is a good thing.”

5. Effective U.S. public diplomacy efforts not only share the multifaceted story of the United States with international audiences, but also bring the stories of foreign citizens to the American public. Bill Gilcher, Director of Electronic Media Projects for the Goethe-Institut locations in North America, called for increased cultural exchanges.

“Artists are the world’s most expressive people... These are the people – who think, who feel for all of us who are less articulate, who speak for the millions and millions of people and for their feelings and for their thoughts. So we desperately need to harness the energy of these people and to get them to address the serious, horrible issues that are facing us as a people and the peoples of the world in general.”

## Challenges

While panelists were in consensus on the above issues, they also noted several challenges to implementing effective public diplomacy programs that utilize the U.S. art community. The foremost challenge is funding. At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government declared itself the “winner” in the global battle for hearts and minds and began to cut public diplomacy funding. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, financial support for public diplomacy has shrunk even more, with significant amounts of federal funds going towards security-related issues.

Practitioners of public diplomacy have had difficulty in building the case for long-term, sustained federal support for their programs because the programs’ effectiveness, particularly over the short-term, is hard to measure. Outcomes are difficult to predict, and almost all of the reporting on public diplomacy efforts is qualitative rather than quantitative, e.g. individual reports from participants. Public diplomacy is a long-

term strategy, aiming to influence how international citizens think and act towards the United States. Success cannot be measured in days but in years.

Additionally, the private sector has not stepped in to fill the financial gap. While foundations gave away \$4.1 billion to arts and culture in 2002<sup>1</sup>, only a fraction went towards supporting international arts exchanges.

Aside from funding, the decentralized nature of the American arts community poses another challenge to involving art and culture in public diplomacy. Within the federal government there is no coordinating body for culture, resulting in confusion among federal agencies in their attempts to work together and increase support for official cultural exchange. Community organizations responsible for facilitating successful cultural exchange should be encouraged to work more closely with government institutions in expanding cultural exchange as an arm of public diplomacy.

Homeland security has brought new challenges to cultural exchanges. Many foreign artists and visitors find it difficult to get visas for visiting the U.S. Without this influx, Americans are only exposed to a narrow range of international ideas, culture, and artistic expression. Cultural exchange at its best is a reciprocal exchange of ideas that builds long-lasting bridges of mutual understanding. Former U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands Cynthia Schneider emphasized that “the point just can’t be made enough that the idea that we are protecting ourselves by shutting people out is not, I think, right.” Promoting exchange allows foreign artists to gain firsthand experience of the United States, independent of policy decisions, and to then share their impressions with a larger community back at home.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural diplomacy should be an essential component of the United States’ strategy for ensuring national security through mutual understanding. In the words of Ambassador Schneider, “the United States must take our culture very seriously, because other people do take our culture very seriously.” The U.S. government should take a long-term, consistent approach to public diplomacy and increase funding in this arena. Collaborations between the U.S. government, artists and cultural policy practitioners should be strengthened to support public diplomacy initiatives. By curtailing the role of arts and culture in U.S. government public diplomacy efforts, we are undermining some of our best resources for furthering the national interest.

As Andrew Solomon, author of “The ART in Embassies Program: The American Tradition of Cultural Diplomacy,” noted at the conclusion of the panel discussion:

“It’s a war of ideas and a war of ideas can be won only by the compelling and direct address to those ideas, and...it’s through the cultural sphere that ideas are most vividly expressed and that other cultures have the best opportunity to engage with them and to recognize the splendor of them....The work...should reflect the diversity, the complexity, and the profundity of America and the nature of the freedoms that are so essential to this country.”

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<sup>1</sup> Szantos, Andras. “A New Mandate for Philanthropy? U.S. Foundation Support for International Arts Exchanges.” Center for Arts & Culture. Washington, DC. 2003. pp. 29.