



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Charlotte Street Responds to Loss of NEA Funding with Public Statement on the Role of the Arts in Democracy

Kansas City, MO, May 21, 2025: Charlotte Street today shared a public statement in response to the recent withdrawal of a \$25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The organization, which has supported Kansas City artists for over 25 years, was one of many cultural institutions affected by a federal decision to reframe national arts funding priorities.

Lane Czaplinski, Charlotte Street's Interim Executive Director, authored the following statement, reflecting on the political context, historical precedent, and civic implications of the withdrawal:

When Charlotte Street received a letter from the National Endowment for the Arts rescinding a \$25,000 award on May 2nd—claiming a shift toward projects that “reflect the nation’s rich artistic heritage and creativity as prioritized by the President”—the decision signaled a dangerous departure from long-standing public cultural policy. It was the kind of action that trades principle for showmanship, and public service for political gain.

The theatrics, the tokenizing of people and institutions, and the pitting of them against one another are nothing more than petulant power grabs with devastating consequences. This performative governance was on full display in the letter from the NEA, where the agency declared it now wants to “prioritize projects that elevate... HBCUs and Hispanic Serving Institutions... Tribal communities... military and veterans... and... Asian American communities.” And yet, at the same moment, the President proposed defunding the NEA entirely in the next budget cycle. The contradiction between the rhetoric and the reality is hard to stomach.

To invoke historically marginalized communities as justification for dismantling an arts agency is not advocacy—it’s sabotage wrapped in virtue signaling. It’s the weaponization of language in service of authoritarian goals. History has seen this before. Despots have long used culture to define what’s worthy of state support and what should be cast out. In 1937, 112 artists were publicly denigrated in the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich, including some of the most visionary voices of the era: Vincent van Gogh, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Maria Caspar-Filser—one of the only women represented. At the same time, the Nazi regime celebrated performances of Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal*—a work held up as an exemplar of national purity and spiritual redemption. In one of its climactic moments, the character Parsifal—Wagner’s symbol of purity and redemption—proclaims, “Redemption to the Redeemer!” For the Nazis, this became more than opera; it became allegory—justifying cultural “cleansing” in the name of rebirth. While one vision of art was exalted, another was erased. Now, nearly a century later, the board president of the Kennedy Center invokes *Les Misérables* while raiding government coffers to gild the eye beam of his ego—and silence the creative majority.

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Granting agencies exist to help people where there are gaps in support. By administering their funds according to evaluation criteria that gauge excellence and need, they aim to allocate resources responsibly and in service of the common good—that elusive part of the social contract that, as the Declaration of Independence puts it, draws its “just powers from the consent of the governed.” The Preamble to the Constitution echoes this, calling on government to “promote the general welfare.” And when those ends are undermined—especially when a President attempts to gut the very institutions designed to serve the people—the Declaration reminds the nation of something often forgotten: “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.” That’s not radical language. It’s the basic doctrine of this country.

Some may find it unexpected to invoke originalist language in the middle of the latest culture war, but this is precisely the moment to do so. It is in the arena of language and principle—those foundational tools—where the best chance lies for uniting a fractured society, even across deep differences.

For years, the language of justice and identity has helped elevate those historically excluded. That work must continue. But if that language has sometimes felt inaccessible or alienating to others, this may be the moment to translate those truths into a voice that calls more people in—not by diluting those truths, but by rooting them in shared civic ideals.

The current power establishment is using the basic doctrine of this country to divide. That doctrine must be reclaimed—and its full democratic promise harnessed—to bring us together.

ABOUT CHARLOTTE STREET

Charlotte Street centers Kansas City’s most forward-thinking visual artists, writers, and performers—acting as the primary incubator, provocateur, and connector for the region’s contemporary arts community, and its leading advocate on the national stage. Since 1997, Charlotte Street has distributed over \$2.5 million in awards and grants to artists and their innovative projects, and connected individual artists to each other and to the greater Kansas City community. For more information about Charlotte Street, its awards, programs, and initiatives, visit www.charlottestreet.org.

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