REMARKS TO AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS
a keynote of the 2016 Americans for the Arts Annual Convention

delivered by Donna Brazile on Saturday, June 18, 2016

Thank you for your kind and gracious introduction.

I’m so glad to be here in Boston.

Boston, like my home town of New Orleans, has a rich cultural heritage, a long history of supporting the arts in all their forms. That support, that encouragement, continues today, from the street musicians performing jazz in New Orleans to the always popular concerts of the Boston Pops, from JazzFest with its artists and craftsmen to the recently concluded Boston Public Schools Arts Festival, to the little theaters and major repertoire companies, the arts are thriving in New Orleans, in Boston and, despite budget cuts, censorship and apparent political priorities, the arts are flourishing in cities and towns throughout our country.

But while there is reason to be optimistic, we must also be realistic. The current political climate, the usual lack of proper funding, especially for arts education—aggravated by state budget crises and cuts—educational focus on a false division between the sciences and the arts, between “core” subjects and “extracurricular” one, continuous threats of censorship—all these threaten, as they have so often in the past, the foundation of the arts: the freedom of self-expression and self-discovery, and public interaction with the results.

As First Lady Michelle Obama said, “The arts are not just a nice thing to have or to do if there is free time or if one can afford it. Rather, paintings and poetry, music and fashion, design and dialogue, they all define who we are as a people and provide an account of our history for the next generation.”
I have been asked to discuss the impact of the political situation on the arts. But we would do well to remember that the arts have always had an impact on the political situation. Art affects politics, at least as much as politics affects art. The impact of the arts on policy, on systems of government, on communities, on how we organize and identify as a people—this impact is not always explicit, but it is always there, and it is considerable.

Toni Morrison once said, “All good art is political. ... Art has to be both beautiful and political at the same time.”

Current political reality certainly lends itself to the arts ... it’s chock full of comedy and tragedy. And sometimes they’re impossible to tell apart.

The current political situation isn’t very admirable as politics—but as art, well, it’s a work of genius.

I challenge you to name any great work of art that has inspired more laughter and tears than the current political situation.

If this presidential race were a work of art, we would be spilling oceans of ink asking “What is the artist trying to say?” I guess in a sense we are.

Of course, this presidential race would never have existed if it had to exist as a work of art. What patron of the arts would fund such a disaster? I wouldn’t want to be the one writing the grant request for this mess.

How will this coming election affect the arts? A Trump presidency could lead to an artistic awakening. I can’t think of anything else that’s more likely to make people question what life is really about.

In a Donald Trump presidency, people would flock to the arts if only to avoid reality.

The arts give us perspective. They demand we see things anew, and challenge the status quo—both the individual’s conceit and the system’s complacency. Art has always been involved in the political process. It impacts elections, topples totalitarians, sways public opinion and transforms society. We need only look at Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” the election of 1860 and the Civil War. Or Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle” and the plight of immigrants, the exploitation of workers, and the need for food safety inspection. Or Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” and the threats to our environment, chemical or otherwise.

These issues are still with us, and we need new artists to raise our awareness, strike our conscience, and rouse us to action.

Of course, it is not only literature that is political. All forms are, though some more openly so than others. For instance, the Blues—music that originated with African Americans in the Deep South and expressed their hopes, their hardship, their humor and their resilience— influenced and inspired rock and roll, which along with folk songs fueled the Civil Rights
and other movements of the 60s.

In a sense we cannot separate the politics of art from the art in politics. For dictators fear art; they try to suppress it or subvert it. They turn art into propaganda.

But when the arts are so threatened—and they can be even in a democracy like ours—artists have always found a way to express themselves, and to challenge, to question, to criticize inequality and injustice.

So even if an election is worrying, as this one is, artists have to have the courage to carry us all forward.

But even as artists provoke us, and politics as usual, they also reveal to us deep craftsmanship and deep beauty. As Toni Morrison said, we need both. So art’s intense involvement in politics does not contradict; it complements art’s basic function as self-discovery.

Indeed, in a country that prides itself on freedom, there is no greater guarantee of freedom than support for the arts and their development of self-expression.

This may explain why so much of the political impact on, and appreciation of, art depends on the attitude of the politicians, pundits and public toward art. Understanding this affects the practical questions of arts funding, arts education, and the politics necessary to make them happen.

Many in the public and political sphere are resistant to art, try to censor art, are offended by art or try to make it irrelevant, an extracurricular activity of little significance. Vested interests, those who benefit from obedient, submissive, robotic workers will dismiss or marginalize art.

But as Seth Godin says, “An artist is someone who uses bravery, insight, creativity, and boldness to challenge the status quo. And an artist takes it personally.” We must all take art personally.

Given the importance of art in a free society, how it advances civic understanding and contributes to political discourse, why is there not more funding for, and support of, the arts? As Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi once said, “Think of an economy where people could be an artist or a photographer or a writer without worrying about keeping their day job in order to have health insurance.”

In fact, funding for the arts falls into two categories: funding for the practice of the arts, which comes from the NEA, from state and local budgets, as well as corporate grants; and funding for arts education, which comes largely from federal, state and local educational allocations.

Funding for the arts itself depends in turn on the attitudes of legislators and political leaders.
Do they appreciate art? Are they artists themselves? We look to our leaders to set the tone, and I will talk shortly about the attitudes of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton towards the arts and art education. But at every level we need leaders who recognize the value of art and art education, and who enthusiastically support it.

We can see this in the funding of the NEA. President Lyndon Johnson, on signing into existence the National Endowment for the Arts, said, “Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation.”

So what’s the state of the NEA’s funding? Honestly, it could be better. In 2008 Congress appropriated almost $145 million dollars for the NEA. That amount rose by about $10 million a year for two years, peaking at $167,500 million in 2010. Then came the forced—and false—austerity and budget crisis. As a result, the NEA budget was slashed about $10 million dollars a year for three years, reaching a low of a little more than $138 million. In 2014 and 2015 it was funded at the same level, a little more than the 2008 budget. As of last month, the House approved an almost $2 million dollar increase, bringing the budget to about $148 million. That would not have happened without a lot of advocacy from arts activists. But it’s still well below the 2009 allocation. And this says nothing about keeping up with inflation.

I’m sorry to say that in many states the situation is just as bad, if not worse. State Arts and Culture spending depends on grants from the NEA, but much more on the allocations of state legislatures. And the amount, and whether or not there’s a yearly increase, varies from state to state.

But here in Massachusetts, just a few weeks ago, the state Senate approved, by a 37-1 vote, an increase in annual funding for the arts, humanities, and sciences through the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The increase is a million dollars. As Senator Eric Lesser pointed out, the cultural sector here “reaches every community, provides educational opportunity for tens of thousands of children, and produces $1.7 billion in economic activity. ... The arts are in our DNA and the fabric of our Commonwealth. When we invest in the arts, we invest in our future.”

That’s an important point, one I’ll talk about more when I get to arts education.

One often overlooked benefit of the arts is the positive effect a robust program of cultural activities has not only on individuals, but on the state economy.

For instance, here in Massachusetts, Cultural Investment Portfolio organizations had an economic impact of $2.2 billion dollars in 2014, about half in direct spending and the other half coming from audiences and tourists. This generated $124 million in revenue for the Commonwealth. And the cultural activity supported 68,000 jobs.

I suspect we would find a similar economic impact in other states, making a strong argument for spending more on the arts, not less. But this aspect of our cultural, and non-
profit, sector receives far too little publicity. To raise awareness of the multi-layered benefits of the arts—economic, social, individual—we need more advocacy, the kind of advocacy that is at the heart of what Americans for the Arts does.

And we need more visibility, the kind that comes from not just celebrity endorsements, but executive, and especially presidential leadership.

The irony is that the public recognizes the importance of the arts in general, and the funding of arts education in particular. For “an investment in the arts, is an investment in our future.”

Or, in the words of President Obama, who along with Vice President Biden has been a strong supporter of the arts and arts education: “The future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create.”

Arts education begins with recognizing that, as Pablo Picasso put it, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”

Even business leaders recognize the critical importance of arts education. Paul Ostergard, vice president of Citicorp, said, “We need students who are culturally literate as well as math and science literate.”

Ironically, the general public understands the importance of arts education, even if too many of our politicians don’t, with their austerity, or minimalist, approach to public investments, sometimes particularly investment in public education. Investment in education, and in arts education in particular, is too often seen by our leaders and legislators as a luxury but not a priority.

A 2009 Gallup survey about the benefits to children and teenagers of playing a musical instrument produced some surprising results. 97% of Americans agree that playing an instrument helps a child develop creativity. 96% says it helps develop teamwork skills, from playing in a school band. 94% say it helps a child’s overall intellectual development and 93% it helps them make friends. 91% say playing a musical instrument—and I have to believe this is true for all the arts, such as painting, creative writing, etc.—helps prepare children and teenagers to be creative and innovative in the workforce.

Finally, 88% of them say an arts education produces better grades, teaches discipline and motivates them to stay in school. Oh, and 83% think it makes you smarter.

In fact, last year, when asked about improving education without increasing the budget, Clinton said, “I had music when I was in elementary school. I had art. I had drama. … I was no great shakes at it, but I learned a lot working with the other kids.” She tried out for the chorus three times, and was allowed in only if she agreed to lip sync. Her final point is worth noting: “When you remove the arts, you really hurt kids who learn that way.”

This brings us to the question of leadership and the presidential candidates. In my opinion,
President Obama has set the bar high. He has instituted a number of arts initiatives, including last year’s Call to Arts Initiative to help inspire and mentor young artists around the country. And, thanks to the President’s efforts, the American Film Institute and Screen Actors Guild will provide a million mentor hours over three years, working with the Corporation for National and Community Service.

And Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, points out the President believes strongly that “arts education is essential for building innovative thinkers who will be our nation’s leaders for tomorrow.”

But we know that to improve arts education, to fund it and implement it properly, it will require co-operation and “buy-in” from Congress—and state legislatures. Still, candidates, and the president, can lead by example. Moral persuasion from the “bully pulpit” can be very powerful. The President must set the tone.

And both Trump and Clinton have a record we can examine.

Trump has somewhat of a personal background in the arts. He hosted two reality shows, “The Apprentice” and “The Celebrity Apprentice” for 14 years and earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He’s been featured in films and TV, including “The Jeffersons” and “Sex in the City.” He’s written 16 books on financial advice.

When it comes to Common Core, Trump opposes it “totally.” Clinton, by contrast says there’s “a really unfortunate argument” around the Core and feels the standards initiative is “useful.”

Trump does feel that “a holistic education that includes literature and the arts is … critical to creating good citizens.” But he opposes the Education Department determining how education dollars are spent, for the arts or otherwise. He feels the states should control the dollars and that “the federal government needs to get out of the education business.”

Trump personally donated about $465,000 to arts-affiliated organization in New York between 1994 and 2010. Asked about funding for the NEA, he said that Congress should determine the spending priorities.

For Trump, it seems that business overrules art. He destroyed a pair of Art Deco reliefs when tearing down a building to build Trump Tower, reliefs the Metropolitan Museum of Art had wanted. In 1999 he criticized the NEA for funding a controversial painting, which, in fact, it had not funded.

We can see that Trump has been—I think “ambivalent” is a fair word, in his support of the arts and art education.

Clinton, on the other hand, has a long track record of involvement in and support of the arts and art education. In 1999, Clinton won an Americans for the Arts National Arts Award for Arts Advocacy.
She’s a strong supporter of arts education in the classroom, noting. “So many of our poorer schools have cut off all the extracurricular activities. We’ve taken away band, arts classes, school productions.” She said that “investing in arts education is not only the right thing to do, but it’s the smart thing for our nation, for both the public and private sector.”

And she understands the transformative power of arts education, declaring that, “For our children, exposure to the world of arts and ideas can literally mean the difference between lives of accomplishment and lives of hopelessness and failure.”

As First Lady, Hillary Clinton created the White House Sculpture Garden, a public art collection. She assembled the White House Crafts Collection that toured around the U.S. She was presented the National Award for Museum Services in 1994 and 1995.

As Senator, she was a member of the Senate Cultural Caucus and supported tax donations for artists’ gifts.

And in November 2012, as Secretary of State, Clinton awarded the first U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts to five artists for their commitment to art in embassies and international cultural exchange. In her remarks, the then-Secretary said, “Art is a tool of diplomacy … one that reaches beyond government, past all of the official conference rooms and the presidential palaces to connect with people all over the world.”

In October 2015, she declared, “I believe that the art and culture are important in their own right … but they’re also important drivers for economic growth, tourism, and attracting young people.”

So there we have the positions, policies and actions of the two presidential candidates.

Of course, no one can predict what either candidate will do if elected, or how Congress will respond to their initiatives, or what the economic and social mood of the country will be.

One thing I can tell you though, is that it’s important that you vote, that you get everyone you know to vote. And if we want the arts and art education to be properly funded and supported, we need to get more people involved in the kind of advocacy you do. For the success of the Arts follows the advocacy for the Arts.

Thank you and G-d Bless.