



Bjorn Bear, 1998 (detail).  
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# CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside \*  
for Arts and Culture Workers

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Institute for Community Arts Studies  
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## **The Rise and Fall of the California Confederation of the Arts: 1976 - 1997**

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**H**aving been both the traditional and leading edge advocate for the arts in California, the California Confederation of the Arts led interest group politics within the arts domain and gained elite status over the small but significant range of arts issues over a period of 20 years (1976-1997).

The California Confederation for the Arts closed down its "grassroots activity" and subsequently dissolved itself in 1997. In its closing statement the Confederation noted its long-term role in defense of the arts and particularly its success in maintaining the budget of the California Arts Council over 20 years:

"We sought to develop the public policy muscle of the arts overall and to bring our members into needed dialogue about artists' rights and cultural equity. Despite or because of these political and economic challenges, the arts field grew. While many community based arts organizations struggled, most survived and the

local arts agency network branched out to include virtually every city in the state. The result is that California's advocates are in a stronger position than their national counterparts to make significant gains in the next decade."

The Confederation's statement of confidence was well placed. In the legislative year just concluded, a new grass-roots network of the California Assembly of Local Arts Agencies partnered with the new trade association California Arts Advocates (led by a discipline based membership) leveraged a \$20 million augmentation in the 1999 State Legislature budget as well as \$1 per capita enabling legislation for the Arts Council. Governor Wilson reduced the augmentation to \$6,000,000; this represented the first Arts Council increase in his 8 years as Governor. Wilson also declined to sign the per capita arrangement, agreeing in principle but specifically leaving implementation to future leaders.

*The Question:* if this most recent advocacy effort by a new entity was relatively successful, why did the Confederation have to shut down? The eight idea areas offered here concerning the Confederation's demise are proposed as unproved but perhaps intriguing place marks for those new (or old) advocacy organizations with potential for advocacy activity in the coming years.

## 1. A Good Start

Advocacy success demands evidence of what an organization is all about in some highly specific policy sense. Without an organizational identity as the motivation for providing recognizable services allies and adversaries can't be identified. The California Confederation of the Arts was founded as a non-profit. "statewide cultural service organization" whose "membership is open to artists and arts organizations working in every art form, to arts educators and to all those concerned with strengthening the arts in California."

## 2. Patrons and Members, How Vital?

The role of patrons is a traditional element of special interest group success or failure. In this instance individual patronage was far from the core of the CCA's financial support. Like many non-profit service entities today the Confederation used entrepreneurial alternatives to patron activity. Organizational leaders indicated that membership drives early on were fueled by 1977's Proposition 13, a California property tax cut initiative (citizens initiative) with far reaching catastrophic economic potential for totally eliminating agencies like the Arts Council. Confederation funds thereafter came primarily from membership dues (CCA claimed a membership base of 1200 organizations and individuals paying dues from \$1500 to \$35, at its height).

In deference to its large budget founding organizations and political supporters, the Confederation created the Leonardo Da Vinci awards for private arts philanthropy, awarded annually to "leaders who have made extraordinary contributions to the Arts"; winners ranged from Henry Segerstrom, developer of the Orange County Performing Arts Center to Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Computer. Yet while individual patrons of the arts in general were important to the Confederation's relationship to its constituency, these people were not consistently influential to its cash flow.

### **3. 1985: Enter the Politician**

Assembly member Maxine Waters, today a highly effective Congresswoman from South Central Los Angeles, was a central arbiter in arts-oriented multicultural legislation of the California State Legislature during the 1980's. A leader of the Ways and Means Committee, Water's support for the Confederation's advocacy efforts continued until she was elected to Congress in 1990. But her support was contingent on continuance of a substantial allocation in the California Arts Council's budget for multicultural (e.g., "programming defined as deeply rooted in racial and ethnic minority communities and concerns"). In 1985 the insertion of specific \$ for multicultural arts grants became the only legislative mandate for change in grants making programs in the Council's history. This "social" legislation decidedly impacted the Confederation's influence and strategic goals of the rest of its history.

### **4. Congruence and Commitment**

Theorists agree that among leaders and members of special interest groups there must be substantial congruence of beliefs for the groups to thrive and continue. Congruence among members in this case can be equated with collective policy benefits they derived in the form of funding from the California Arts Council (funds leveraged by the Confederation) or advocacy training they received from the Confederation.

Other helpful analysis of the situation comes from reviewing principles of commitment theory where leaders hold more extreme views than their members. This may also explain in part the reason for non-renewal of membership. Interviews with a group of people most active at various times during Confederation's history reflected that they were ideologically tuned in with the Board/staff leaders' priorities. However, those not so active who "exited" by non-renewal of membership cited disagreement with Confederation program changes and lack of board /staff attention to members. A generational change among organizational leaders was also a factor. New arts administrators felt the Arts

Council funding was a given and the CCA's influence was negligible.

We can thus extend references to congruence and commitment. The Confederation's survival or demise may have depended on its leaders' ability to adapt to changing attitudes of its members and vice versa. When CAC funding was enhanced for multicultural groups but remained flat or decreased for others the pluralist values of the organization were sorely tried. From at least 1987 onward there is evidence that the Caucuses (major institutional, individual artists, arts educators, arts presenters, multicultural artists and organizations, producers, exhibitors and local arts organizations - and of course some representatives were legitimate members of several caucuses, further complicating the mix), long a staple of the Confederation's membership structure, began to collapse. The caucus structure with its representation of deliberate factionalizing led to cause internal debates of privilege, a lack of consensus over objectives and priorities and constant threats to the compromises necessary to keep a diverse membership together.

## 5. Disconnection

This complex struggle included both traditional interests such as presenters who were in favor of maximizing ongoing programs and a newer wave of multicultural groups that contested the effects of state funding policies on their artists and communities. Then as the 1980's concluded, joint meetings were scheduled between the new multicultural caucus and the large budget organizations (LBO's) (representing the founders' heritage from the 1970's ). The Water's legislation tied requirements for community involvement to California Arts Council funding to the LBO's. CCA needed to maintain ties with these groups.

But the LBO's began to drop their CCA membership as the early 1990's recession took hold and concurrent visibility of the multicultural interests of the Confederation continued to increase. Some former Board members have expressed the opinion that Confederation's commissioning in the early 90's of a cultural equity paper reflected a disconnect with its core constituency; purposes of commission were unclear to them and were perceived to represent public policy theory rather than function.

Gradual diminution of attendance occurred at the Confederation's annual Congress along with declining membership of major and mid-sized organizations. The very different functions of its annual Congress Conference and Arts Day rally in Sacramento were all collapsed into one day. Attendance dropped from 500 participants in 1987 in Los Angeles to less than 100 in Sacramento in 1994. The California Arts Council instituted a "Governor's Conference on the Arts" which intentionally or not was billed as an annual statewide gathering beginning in 1991 and probably impacted attendance at the Congress.

Heroically, the statewide network trained over the years by Confederation

staff and Board members continued to function: ongoing advocacy activity included staff organization of fax alerts to key contacts in each of California's 122 legislative districts which continued to be effective without large active membership. And modest payments were continued to the Confederation's legislative lobbyist who scrupulously tracked arts-oriented legislation and spoke on behalf of the advocacy effort.

## 6. Climate Shifts

Unfortunately, a number of significant environmental factors also contributed to the Confederation's demise.

Changes in the statewide political climate resulted from the economic recession which hit California in the early 1990's. Corporate funders dropped out, leaving a huge gap in CCA's traditional income stream.

The static status of CAC's budget and funding formula's in the 90's meant smaller and smaller grant dollars to organizations whose budgets tended to be increasing. Newly hired development directors, noting the lessening percentage of CAC support did not lobby their organizations to become members.

Media interest continued in Southern California with CAC director a prominent administrator and Wilson supporter from Los Angeles. Media interest was greatly diminished in CAC grantee-rich San Francisco Bay Area by lack of representative Council appointees and Confederation board members from major organizations.

There were inadequate resources of staff and board time to woo mid-sized groups who had been a reliable membership base of the past but now exited in great numbers. Regional factionalism resulted in resentment of coastal urban centers Los Angeles and San Francisco which were perceived as absorbing all the money. Members in the interior of the state questioned the benefit from the Confederation to the agricultural/suburban Central Valley or Orange County?

## 7. Beyond their Means

The Confederation may not have set itself up to represent all components of the California Arts world but grew to do so as a by product of supporting Council programs which were supposed to represent all components. This evidently stretched the organization to engage in an activity level beyond its means even as external financial support was dwindling. 1990's Confederation Board members lacked authority standing in statewide arts circles and clout in streams of influence; and the board lacked access to financial clout represented by corporate sponsors of the past nurtured by savvy fund-raisers of the large budget/major institutions -- all now retired from active advocacy duty. And while the Arts Council staff were



guaranteed payment as civil service employees, paychecks to the dedicated Confederation staff were few and far between after 1994. Ultimately, as a professional not volunteer run organization, maintenance of paid positions became the bottom line for existence. Acknowledging the absence of financial support, dissolution became the Confederation Board's most appropriate choice.

## 8. Lessons to be Learned.

Based on this examination of the Confederation's circumstances, I recommend all arts advocates check with themselves on three caveats:

A. Advocacy is the political component of art and acceptance of the fact that if you are going to ask the government for money, *you're in politics*.

B. If you are a membership organization, non-renewal is at best, indifference to changes in arts advocacy program issues.

C. Non-renewals and grant denials mean you can't do much advocacy as members and politicians dance away.

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Bill Flood

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