

Huffington Post Exclusive by Marcia G. Yerman

Obama Reaches Out to the Art World

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The gathering was billed as “The New York Art World Votes.” My e-vite outlined a forum on why New York artists, curators, critics and dealers believed that Barack Obama was the best choice for the Democratic nomination. Lucy Mitchell-Innes, who told me she had been introduced to the Obama message through her 20-year-old daughter, hosted the event at the Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery. A recently naturalized citizen, she is “convinced of Obama’s ability to pull the country together.”

Along with other campaign literature, the flyer Barack Obama: A Champion For the Arts was available. It referenced how as an author of two books, Obama understood and appreciated “the role and value of creative expression.” I was delighted to read that Obama believes that an arts education “should be a central part of effective teaching and learning.” Efforts to achieve these goals would include developing public and private partnerships between schools and arts organizations, as well as implementing an “Artists Corps” trained to work in low-income academic facilities.

Acknowledging that current funding for the NEA has diminished to \$125 million from the \$175 million allotted in 1992, Obama is in favor of an increase in financial support to this independent agency of the federal government.

The part of the platform which included enlisting the country’s talent as “artistic ambassadors” to promote a cultural exchange, struck me as a breath of fresh air. In addition, the premise of making America a premier destination for foreign artists to visit and study showed insight. Helping to break down the barriers between diverse cultures can only be a step in the right direction.

While health care is a major concern for the country at large, it is particularly problematic for those in the creative fields. Working outside the traditional employment archetype, they are left to scramble. Obama’s coverage plan includes “a new public program that will allow individuals to buy affordable health care, similar to that available to federal employees.”

Not surprisingly, Obama has teamed up with endorser Sen. Patrick Leahy to back Leahy’s H.R. 1524 Artist-Museum Partnership Act. This long overdue legislation amends the inequity of permitting artists to deduct only the costs of their materials when making a charitable contribution of their work, rather than the fair market value.

While people milled around, talking and looking at the exhibit, I had the chance to engage in conversation. The woman sitting next to me described herself as a 61-year-old art advisor.

She told me that she was a registered Republican who was voting for Clinton. "My generation has fought so hard for women's rights that there is no way I won't vote for her," she said. Her male companion was supporting Obama.

The organizing artists Janice Caswell, Susan Jennings, and Alexander Ross had lined up an impressive roster of speakers to expound upon why they were supporting Obama. Peter Schjeldahl, critic for *The New Yorker*, was up first. He seemed a bit nervous being in front of a crowd, rather than expressing his ideas through the medium of print. His opening remark was, "This is weird. I'm making a political speech for the first time in my life." Once he got past that admission and launched into his feelings about Obama, he easily hit his stride. "There's a quality about him," he said, "I want to call Obama music. Every time you hear Obama say a line again, it becomes deeper." He paused. "Change is uncertainty. It never comes with guarantees. This is not about him, it is about us." Looking out at the audience, he asked, "Are you ready?"

Laura Hoptman, Senior Curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art reflected on how her work has informed her political view. "I look at things and their place in history." With an eye toward a new era, she noted, "Visual culture has played such a small part in the past three administrations."

New York Magazine art columnist Jerry Saltz (previously the critic for *The Village Voice*) connected to the audience using a different approach. With a nod to the gallery environment, his delivery could almost be qualified as performance art. He held up a photograph of himself with Bill Clinton, and did a riff on the story behind the picture. Like a comedian working the room he declared, "I don't want to go anti-anything!" After a few beats he continued, "Hillary is like MOMA (The Museum of Modern Art). It's big, it's beautiful, it's where we come from. But it's the status quo." The group waited for the second part of the analogy. "Obama is The New Museum and The Studio Museum... something audacious. In electing Obama," he reasoned, "in one second it changes everything." He shook his head and added, "It's too important. When I spoke to him later to get his reaction on Obama's backing of the Leahy bill, Saltz said, "I'm not even thinking about the art world. It's bigger than that."

Matthew Ritchie, the British artist who was tagged by *Time Magazine* as one of "100 Innovators of the Next Millennium," informed the listeners that, "If Obama becomes President, I will become a US citizen." He used the "p" word that I had been hearing so frequently from Obama advocates. "It's very personal," he said. "Something more is at stake. People tell me, 'He's not the pragmatic choice. You're a dreamer.' But I think Obama can beat McCain. The whole world is waiting for the United States to come back." Injecting an edge of realism Ritchie acknowledged, "I don't expect him not to make mistakes. I expect him to make new ones."

Co-Chair of The Obama for American Arts Policy Committee and renowned Broadway producer Margo Lion, (*Hairspray*, *Angels in America*) gave a passionate talk emanating from a visceral point of view. "I know Barack," she declared. "I met him at a fundraiser." Discussing the candidate's impact on followers, she qualified, "He is filling an enormous need. The emotional investment in this man is huge. We are projecting our need onto him." She concluded, "Barack Obama always tells the truth. This is the guy we need to fill the gap. I promise you, this guy is

the real thing.”

Her comments were met with applause. Not everyone there had decided how they were going to cast their vote, but there seemed to be a consensus about the urgency and imperative to “move the country in a different direction.”

Before leaving, I had the chance to ask some follow-up questions. In talking with Lion she told me, “I want someone who can restore our faith in ourselves.” Schjeldahl asked and answered his own query, “Is Barack Obama ready to be President? I think so.” Then he added, “One thing I’m damn sure of. We’re ready.”