

Arts or entertainment?

High culture must take lower road to survive

MATT PETERSON is a senior English and news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

A federal study entitled "American Canvas," recently compiled by the National Endowment for the Arts, has shown that many Americans don't comprehend the cultural significance of art to their lives.

Bureaucracy strikes again. Faced with crippling budget cuts, the NEA has decided to devote its already dwindling resources to a study that confirms what the government has already concluded: The American people, as a whole, perceive the arts as little more than a cursory federal concern.

Although the impetus of the 193-page document would appear to be essentially redundant, the study does manage to offer a number of legitimate solutions as well as a challenge to the mass media, amongst others, to "step in and help save the arts in America."

As a dubious member of the aforementioned sector, I feel compelled to rise to that challenge and, in so doing, suggest that it is this very medium which can affect the solution.

First and foremost, although the government must reaffirm its obligation to provide the most complete public education possible, it has no responsibility in funding the arts directly for the simple fact that Americans have not demanded it. At the same time, as a liberal arts student, I understand the cultural relevance of the arts in any society, but particularly

in one as progressive and diverse as our own.

The solution to this dilemma lies in simple awareness — and by "simple," I'm not suggesting another 200-page study that will only be read by those who already recognize the problem and have agreed upon the solution. Nor would I propose a newspaper article on such a study buried in the Omaha World-Herald, which proved to be the eventual source of my own "enlightenment."

Rather, I would suggest that the artistic community accept the merits, and assume the practices, of its bastard son — entertainment. The NEA grants a cursory observance to this suggestion as well, but amidst the could've, would've and should've, that comprise the great majority of the document, this message is inevitably lost:

"Artists and administrators will have to search for ways to meet the entertainment industry halfway — to demonstrate the attractiveness of their creative work and how it can add depth and richness to the content of commercial entertainment."

Predictably, any sort of reciprocal gesture is entirely absent from this line of rhetoric. If the entertainment industry must entertain an "injection" of the arts, the arts must be willing to tolerate the "corruption" of entertainment.

In other words, the arts must sell out, or, in the immutable words of the once decidedly commercial, now decidedly defunct, rap group 3rd Bass, "Pop goes the weasel 'cause the weasel goes pop."

In a country in which "pop culture" has inevitably defined culture, at least since the advent of television, the arts have no choice but to sell out. If the nonprofit artistic community is to survive, it, like any other institution, must evolve. "Canvas" admits that many arts organizations are elitist, whether class- or race-based, and no longer cater to the "communities they claim to serve."

What's more, the audience

for such antiquated arts is aging, and private support is consequently dwindling. This is not evolution — it is stagnation.

Rather than assessing the stagnation of its own community, however, the NEA proclaims the mass media — particularly television and the film industry — to be the source of America's collectively diminutive attention span.

According to the study, the average American household devotes eight hours of every day to its television; of those eight fun-filled hours, a little more than an hour is comprised of paid advertisements. Comparatively, about 42 seconds of that eight-hour span is donated to public-service announcements, which may promote the arts but are far more likely to promote fried eggs and

keeping your brain off drugs.

Otherwise, the FCC only requires the networks to devote three hours per week to educational programming — apparently "educational" is a relative term, as most people would be hard pressed to point out those three hours in any given week.

The report continues its critique of mass media by pointing out that the average budget of a single Hollywood film "represents 75 percent of the entire grant-making budget of the NEA." The study acknowledges that such financial success comes as a result of the television and film industries giving the American people what they want; but if these industries are to meet the challenge

presented by "American Canvas," it is implied that they must offer the public what it doesn't want. While I agree that our society is sick, I don't think castor oil is the cure.

An expanded public education in the arts is unequivocally the long-term solution to our cultural problem, and I believe the only governmental responsibility in the matter.

In the meantime, however, a middle ground between the arts and entertainment must be achieved for their mutual benefit.



JOHN SYPAL/DN

A selfish solution

Suicide unfair to friends, family

"Death is a coward's way out. Everybody dies ... but he owes it to the people around him to duke it out for as long as possible."

during my senior year, we even lived together.

We were more than friends, we were brothers.

I knew that he had been down and out about some problems he had his first year in college. He had been caught smoking pot three times by his resident assistant, was caught up in a web of three intimate relationships, his two best friends at his new school despised each other, and for the first time in his life, his grades were going to hell.

But suicide? I never thought he would contemplate that.

I was shocked and puzzled. I tried to give him a call, but he was not home. I didn't know what to do. I didn't think he would leave this world without saying goodbye first, but maybe that was what the e-mail was. With nothing else to do, I thought seriously about the message for a while.

How could I not?

My best friend was somewhere feeling miserable. So much that he was even thinking about taking his own life.

I let my thoughts wander and got a vision of myself calling my mother. In a somber voice, I told her that I withdrew from classes so I could go back to Idaho for Matt's funeral.

The vision of telling my mom this sent me for a loop. The tears in my eyes started to roll down my cheeks. I was crying for the first time in several years.

After regaining composure, I went to my friend Nathan to show him the message. Once again, I bawled like a baby away from his mother. He asked if I would like to "get out of here." I definitely wanted to, so we went for a walk around campus.

We did not talk, just walked. My mind raced and everything seemed to be either muddled with confu-

sion, or so clear and simple it seemed uncanny.

We took a break from our walk at the Sheldon sculpture garden, a favorite place of mine, where we talked about things and finally changed the subject. Although the situation was in the back of my mind the whole time, it was refreshing to take the focus off of Matt for a few moments.

Before this situation ever came about, I was thinking a lot about death during my own freshman year, which was plagued with problems.

During that time, I had come to the conclusion that I was not at all afraid to die, nor would I have much remorse if my life ended at any one time. Although I never contemplated suicide, I thought about it a lot.

But the Matt situation gave me new light.

I started to see things clearly about my own life. During that walk, and for the first time ever, I realized that it was not my life that would be most affected by my death.

The life that I live is not mine to end.

It is my family's life. It is my teachers' life. It is my friends' and

peers' life. It is the life of everybody around me and the life of my God.

Death is a coward's way out. Everybody dies at one point in his life, but he owes it to the people around him to duke it out for as long as possible.

Life is not something that a person has ownership of in the same manner that a car has a title, giving whoever owns the title complete authority over it. The life of a human being is owned by society, and it is robbery to steal the title away so that one can do whatever he chooses with it.

Life is special.

I finally contacted Matt that night on the phone. Luckily he had not been as serious about ending his life as I feared he was.

Before I had a chance to tell him any of my new realizations on suicide, he went on to explain his thoughts that suicide hurts so many people that it is not fair to think that it is justifiable. My thoughts, exactly.

By the conversation's end, he was feeling better, laughing and enjoying himself.

I was, too.



LANE HICKENBOTTOM is a senior news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan photographer and columnist.

"Hey Lane. Hope all is going better than here. Question for you: Have you ever thought about suicide? I think I might have. 'The walk of life is traveled by the multitude. However, every so often a hapless soul is left by the wayside.' Me."

In November of my freshman year here at Nebraska, I received this alarming e-mail message from my best friend, Matt, who was going to school at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn.

Matt and I had been best friends for years. We went to school together. We went to work together. And after my parents moved from Pocatello, Idaho, to Cabot, Ark.,