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LITTLE PINK BOOK NO. 001  
from *The Independent*, June 1995

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On the Occasion of Ruby Lerner's 75th Birthday and Archive Launch  
[rubylerner.com](http://rubylerner.com)  
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*2023 Editor's note: The following is printed in its entirety from a column in The Independent, Film & Video Monthly. It originally appeared in June of 1995, pp.56-58.*

*1995 Editor's note: The following is excerpted from Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF) executive director Ruby Lerner's presentation at the public forum "New York City and the Contract on America," a speak-out on the proposed governmental budget cuts held on March 22 at New York University.*

I was pleased to be asked to be part of today's event, because quite often the arts function in isolation from concerns about cuts to education, health care, and welfare, when they are, in fact, very much a part of the same assault on tolerance and economic and political equity.

I want to talk a little about why the arts have been such a lightning rod, since in actual dollar terms what is at stake is a relatively small portion of the local, state, and federal governments' budgets.

Taken as a whole, the picture is quite grim for the arts in America right now. Not surprisingly, it is most grim for individual artists and small arts organizations. What that means, in practice, is that we are experiencing nothing less than a wholesale assault on the voices of women, low income artists, artists of color, gay and lesbian artists, and artists representing aesthetic or political points of view that are not acceptable to those in power.

Why the attacks on the arts, and why the ferocious attacks on individual artists? Why are little ole artists so terrifying to big ole politicians? First it is critical to understand that this debate is *not about money*. It is about shutting down access to the means of production and shutting down the distribution venues that provide access to a diversity of artistic visions and voices. The arts are threatening because they, like the academy, foster critical thinking; they challenge the status quo. So naturally they present problems to those with a vested interest in preserving their power.

And actually, they are right. There is a strong relationship between culture and power. I think Pat Buchanan actually understands this better than many of our arts supporters. If you accept that women's voices, the voices of people of color, of low income or gay and lesbian artists are as aesthetically and culturally valid as the voices of what we call the dominant culture, then eventually you must also begin to accept as valid the sharing of economic and political power as well. In many respects, the deeply entrenched power structure in this country is in a life and death fight for survival with supremacy. That's why this battle is so important to them.

In May 1989 Pat Buchanan, now a Presidential hopeful, wrote in *The Washington Times*, "While the Right has been busy winning primaries and elections, cutting taxes and funding anti-communist guerrillas abroad, the Left has been quietly seizing all the commanding heights of American art and culture. Quoting James Cooper, editor of the *American Arts Quarterly*, he goes on to say, "American churches, business corporations, and government and educational

institutions have...meekly embraced without protest a nihilistic, existential relativist, secular humanist culture they profess to abhor...Conservatives and the religious community that comprise the vast middle American population should actively support those artists that advocate the same values and ideas as they do. They should also choose to withdraw support and funding from the modernist culture they profess to despise. In short, they should do what the liberals did long ago..."capture the culture."

Although Buchanan wrote that article in 1989, the seeds were planted long before that, at least at the beginning of the Reagan years in the early eighties by right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation. So the stage was set at least 15 years ago for what is happening now. In the view of the Heritage Foundation, the only appropriate role for a federal agency is to support what they refer to as our "national treasures." Of course, they mean buildings, not people, and in most cases, they mean the arts organizations that exhibit or perform work by artists long dead. The only good artist is a dead one, and it helps if they are also from some other country.

They would probably agree that it is important for everyone to have access to the cultural products of these kinds of institutions. There are a lot of assumptions about how exposure to opera, ballet, symphony and so on should be part of the civilized life, and that no one should be denied access based on income or race. This is a reasonable goal, as far as it goes.

But what they cannot and will not tolerate is the companion ideal of cultural equity, which asserts that the cultural productions of a diversity of cultures and viewpoints are equally worthy of being promoted and shared throughout the broader culture.

The "culture wars" as they have been dubbed, are always fought on the margins, around work that may be uncomfortable, work that many of us may have difficulty standing up for and defending as being worthy of public support. But we must mount vigorous defenses, or we will allow a climate of general intolerance to grow and spread.

In this climate, as reported in People for the American Way's latest *Artsave* publication, a cellist in California demanded that the local orchestra cancel its production of *Peter and the Wolf* because she claimed it portrays wolves in a negative light; a parent in Flushing requested cancellation of a production of *Annie, Get Your Gun*, claiming the word "gun" in the title promotes violence; and the county commissioners in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, suspended funds to the production of the respected children's piece *A Thousand Cranes*, about post-war Japan, claiming the play was anti-American and anti-veteran.

The art critic for *The Nation*, Arthur Danto, wrote in 1989, "It is healthy for art to vacate the position of pure aestheticism in which conservative critics seek to imprison it and to try to affect the way viewers respond to the most meaningful matters of their lives."

Responding to the idea that the taxpayer shouldn't be forced to support "uncomfortable" or "offensive" work, he went on to say, "It is very much in the interest of every taxpayer that

freedom be supported, even—or especially—in its most extreme expression... However divided individuals are on matters of taste, freedom is in the interest of every citizen.”

I want to end with a message that Czech playwright and politician Vaclav Havel sent to Arts Advocacy Day in 1990:

*To Our Fellow Artists:*

We know first-hand how essential is a fierce, independent, creative artistic spirit to the attainment of freedom. Through a long night of repressions and control, the artistic community in our land helped keep alive the unquenchable flame of freedom. And artists played a central role in helping organize our final transformation to a new democratic state.

There are those around the world, indeed even in those democracies with the longest tradition of free speech and expression, who would attempt to limit the artist to what is acceptable, conventional, and comfortable. They are unwilling to take the risks that real creativity entails. But an artist must challenge, must controvert the established order. To limit that creative spirit in the name of public sensibility is to deny to society one of its most significant resources.

*Ruby Lerner is executive director of AIVF and publisher of The Independent.*