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# Groups Advocating for the Arts Feel the Pinch

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

The Alliance for the Arts, which has served New York's cultural world through research and advocacy for 35 years, is transferring its primary activities to the [Municipal Art Society](#) and to WNET, two deals in the process of being completed that illustrate how arts advocacy and service groups in New York are struggling to sustain themselves at a time of scarce resources.

The advocacy groups find themselves competing for financing against the very cultural organizations they were created to support, which in turn can no longer afford the dues required by some of the groups that advocate for them.

The Alliance of New York State Arts Organizations, for example, dissolved last year because of debt and lack of money. The New York State Alliance for Arts Education has unsuccessfully explored merging with several organizations, all of which went out of business over the last two years.

"If it's tough times for the arts, it's even tougher for the advocates," said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy at New York University. "People want to give to the organizations that are involved in creating art. The advocacy groups are secondary."

The Alliance for the Arts says its decision to join forces with two other organizations simply represents an evolution of its activities, an attempt to change with the times that was prompted by the resignation of its longtime president, Randall Bourscheidt, last year.

"We spent a lot of time looking at the organization's position in the community," said J. P. Versace Jr., the alliance's chairman. "I've always been a fan of partnerships, because there is such limited funding."

Founded in 1976, the alliance was among the first groups to study the arts as an industry and continues to issue reports that emphasize the importance of the arts to the economy

and to education.

Over the years the alliance has operated as an industry research arm, providing the sort of intellectual heft that was useful in promoting the arts to fund-granting organizations like the City Council, at whose hearings it has often testified. An alliance study published in 2009, "Culture Builds NY," for example, studied how capital construction at New York City's cultural institutions between 2003 and 2010 created jobs and other economic benefits.

The alliance also serves as a source of information on the arts and cultural events in New York, through its Web sites, [nyc-arts.org](http://nyc-arts.org), [nykidsarts.org](http://nykidsarts.org) and [nystatearts.org](http://nystatearts.org).

Some see the move of the alliance's research operations to the Municipal Art Society and its Web operations to WNET, the public broadcaster, as an unfortunate diminution. "It isn't enough to just rely on the individual efforts of not-for-profit arts organizations or to rely on the city or the state to do what's needed," said Martin E. Segal, who in 1974 founded the Cultural Assistance Center, the alliance's precursor.

But others say that advocacy groups' efforts are often redundant. "I've never supported any of these groups, and I've never seen any reason to do so," said Robert W. Wilson, a former New York City Opera chairman who now serves on the Metropolitan Opera board. "I would rather support the arts organizations themselves."

Because the alliance's Web operations were built with city money, their transfer to WNET needs the approval of the city's Cultural Affairs Department. The agency would also need to approve the transfer of the alliance's city programming money to the arts society.

"It's a good example of an organization being thoughtful about its role and not just perpetuating itself," said Kate D. Levin, the cultural affairs commissioner. "These kinds of organizations remain vital parts of the city's cultural life."

Three of the alliance's seven employees are also moving over to the art society, including the chief financial officer.

The New York State Alliance for Arts Education considered throwing in the towel in recent years but decided against it. "The sentiment of the board is: There is still a role to be played and a need for the services we provide," said Jeremy Johannesen, its executive director. "It's just a question of adjusting the model to the economy."

The arts education alliance's some 100 members are struggling to pay dues of \$35 to \$250.

“Paying membership dues to support advocacy or making payroll — that decision doesn’t even get considered,” Mr. Johannesen said.

At the New York City Arts Coalition, which monitors the city and state cultural budgets and promotes arts awareness, membership dues range from \$35 to \$600, based on an organization’s budget. “Half the membership has asked if they can pay less,” said Norma Munn, the coalition’s chairwoman. “I’ve never seen it this bad. The last two years have been unmitigated misery.”

In tough economic times, arts advocacy can seem like a luxury, but cultural experts say this is precisely the time when institutions need their cheering section.

“Often our board members are supporting theaters they love, so we’re one step removed,” said Virginia Loulouides, the executive director of the Alliance of Resident Theaters/New York, an advocacy organization for nonprofit theaters in the city. “We really have to explain better what it is we do.”

That means explaining how supporting the arts doesn’t just mean supporting art or artists, but the restaurants near the theaters, the hotels people stay in to see the ballet and the taxis people take to museums.

“In times like this advocacy is even more important,” Ms. Loulouides said, “not just to fight for the dollars, but to let people know the value arts bring to the community.”

Unlike some larger cultural institutions, many small to midsize organizations cannot afford their own lobbyists, so the advocacy groups have filled that need.

“If you’re not at the table,” said Jimmy Van Bramer, chairman of the City Council’s Cultural Committee, “your seat is going to be filled by some other advocacy group and some other issue. We need more money for day care, we need more money for libraries, we need more money for parks.”

The Alliance of Resident Theaters/New York, for example — known as A.R.T./New York — has been a lifeline for nearly 300 member theaters since 1972. “They’re really the voice of Off Broadway and not-for-profit theaters,” said Todd Haines, the artistic director of Roundabout Theater Company. “If you’re a small theater company and you don’t have your garbage picked up, you call A.R.T./New York. If you don’t know how to reach your council person, you call A.R.T./New York.”

The New York Foundation for the Arts, which provides unrestricted funds, professional development training and entrepreneurial skills to artists, has been urging its constituents to represent themselves. “It’s very important for them to be part of the political process and not rely on advocacy groups to advocate for them,” said Michael L. Royce, the foundation’s executive director.

But Reynold Levy, the president of Lincoln Center, said cultural groups have their hands full maintaining their core operations. “Arts organizations can do some of this for themselves,” he said. “But their business is generating and producing art, their business is not generating resources for it.”