

# For Joan Mondale, arts and politics are inseparable

By Hunter Drohojowska

**J**oan of Art. That popular nickname assigned the wife of Democratic presidential hopeful Walter Mondale has sprung from a life of active and vocal support of the arts.

During the four years of the Carter/Mondale administration in Washington, D.C., the vice president's wife invited curators from four regions of the country to install works of contemporary art in the vice presidential residence, Blair House. She gave dinner parties for the artists and museum personnel. A former docent, realizing the importance of arts education, she organized volunteers to give regular tours of the house.



When Joan Mondale goes campaigning, her message is often related to the need for public support of the arts.

She convinced the General Services Administration to increase the allocation for its Arts in Architecture program; she influenced then Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams to create a task force to monitor all design and arts projects in city bus and subway systems, as well as airport and highway designs. She encouraged Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall to include artists in the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act; she worked for a liberalization of tax laws to allow artists to deduct the fair market value of their work when they donate it to non-profit organizations. She resurrected the moribund Federal Council on the Arts and acted as honorary chairwoman. She lobbied for increased funding to the arts and the crafts, and refers to herself as a craftsperson. Even on the campaign trail, she never misses her Tuesday morning pottery classes.

While in Los Angeles last week, speaking to Democratic campaign workers gathered at the Century Plaza Hotel,

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Joan Mondale was introduced as a woman who valued "art, poetry, music, crafts ... what we can have forever." To reinforce the point, she went on to tour the Museum of Contemporary Art's current exhibition, "The Automobile and Culture." Museum supporters and artists in the exhibition were invited to meet the first lady-hopeful. She already knew a good many of them: Al Nodal, Marcia Weisman, Fred Croton, all fellow art-world activists.

Mondale appraised the 30 cars, with museum director Richard Koshalek on one arm, and art collector and City Councilman Joel Wachs on the other, and she posed for photographers in two pre-selected locations: in front of a James Rosenquist's painting of John F. Kennedy with a Chevy and a surrealist picture by Ralph Goings which prompted her to reminisce over a similar painting she had once enjoyed in Blair House. At one point, a black child was produced to shake hands with the former second lady in front of the TV news cameras. It was politicking of the first order, but it did seem that Mondale was actually *looking at the paintings, knew the names and reputations of artists, and seemed sincere when she trilled that the tour had been a "treat."* She approved heartily of the unconventional combination of cars and art. "It opens your eyes and that's what all art does."

In January 1981, the budget for 1982 submitted by the outgoing Carter/Mondale administration would have allocated a record high \$175 million to the National Endowment for the Arts, the federal agency providing the primary financial support to groups in the visual and performing arts. It was largely a "symbolic gesture of support," according to one congressional spokesman. The incoming Reagan/Bush administration's response was equally symbolic, proposing a 50 percent cut in funding, to slash the budget to \$88 million. Congress reacted by giving the NEA \$143,456,000 in 1982, a 10 percent cut from the previous year, but still a clear gesture of advocacy.

Now, extolling the benefits of

porter, Mondale exclaims that she was "proud" of the Congress.

"It was clear that the arts and humanities had no priority in (Reagan's) administration. But people *want* the arts. Elected public officials know how important the arts are. They serve as a giant magnet to bring people to the their towns and their communities.

"And when we think of our whole national scene, the arts are what we pass on to future generations. They're our seal, our voice, the fingerprints we've left behind. They are our *culture*. They express our ideas, they communicate thoughts, and make comments on the human condition. People feel good about them."

During the Carter/Mondale administration, monies allocated for the NEA increased steadily, with Joan Mondale using her considerable influence for greater financial support. In fiscal 1978, the NEA received \$123,850,000; in 1979, \$149,585,000; in 1980, \$154,610,000; and in 1981, \$158,795,000. Congress approved each request, without any substantial reductions.

By contrast, during the Reagan administration, Congress has fought consistently to win increases over the amounts requested. After the brouhaha surrounding Reagan's request for a 50 percent cut, in fiscal 1983, when the administration asked for \$101 million, Congress awarded the NEA \$143,875,000; in 1984, the administration requested \$125 million and Congress gave \$162 million. For fiscal 1985, the administration inched up the request to \$143 million, and Congress awarded a record high of \$163,800,000.

The suggested cuts in funding for the NEA are consistent with Reagan's policies toward reducing federal support to other social, welfare and health agencies. But one might ask, as social programs are suffering from cutbacks, whether the arts deserve federal funds.

"Absolutely," bristles Mondale. "The amount of money that is spent on the arts and humanities is so small it doesn't even show up in the federal pie." (The NEA spends less than two-fifths of 1 percent of the federal budget, and it accounts for less than 5 percent of all spending

# Arts activist Joan Mondale brings campaign to L.A.

Mondale continued, "The reason that it's spent is that Congress said 'no' to Ronald Reagan's cuts."

Mondale, who is known as a tough campaigner on behalf of her husband, had other disagreements with the Reagan administration's attitude toward the arts, especially in his appointment of former White House aide Frank Hodsoll as NEA chairman.

Hodsoll had no previous experience in the arts, though he refers to himself as a "failed actor." Since his appointment, there have been numerous charges by journalists and observers of the art world that he is politicizing and censoring the activities of the NEA.

The NEA was founded in 1965 as an apolitical agency, and though the chairman is always a presidential appointee, his role has mostly been advisory. Grants are awarded annually to artists, organizations and critics by a panel composed of artistic peers. The panels are changed each year so that funds are distributed fairly to a diverse body of recipients. Although the chairman has the power to veto the panels' decisions, only on exceptional occasions has that occurred. Until Hodsoll. In spite of the

approval by peer review panels, and by the advisory body composed of presidential appointees, the National Council on the Arts, in 1982, Hodsoll vetoed grants to four organizations: to New York's Heresies Collective/Political Art Documentation Distribution to support a series of public forums at which artists and critics such as Mike Glier, Hans Haacke, Suzanne Lacy, Martha Rosler and Lucy Lippard would participate; to the Bear Republic Theater in Santa Cruz — which describes itself as a "humanistic" theater and presents such groups as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino and feminist plays — for general program support; to the Southern California Center for the Arts in Los Angeles — a group which sponsors both theater and visual arts activities — for an artists' employment service; and to the Waumbek Center — a crafts organization in Jefferson, N.H. — for support of workshops. (Later, Heresies and the Bear Republic Theater did receive some NEA funding.) The money itself was a negligible amount, some \$13,000 for all four groups. Since two of the organizations were admittedly left-wing in philosophy, many saw

Hodsoll's vetoes as setting a precedent to overturn the decisions of an established system.

Concern about the future neutrality of the NEA was heightened earlier this year when Hodsoll virtually ignored the recommendations of an overview panel of experts, and the National Council on the Arts, and he suspended the program of grants given to art critics. Since a great deal of art criticism is socially conscious in orientation, many in the art world feared the decision to be a subtle form of censorship.

When asked about Hodsoll's vetoes, Mondale could barely contain her anger. "He said at the very beginning, when he was appointed, that he knew nothing about art. I don't think he has the right, as a political appointee who has not mastered the field, and doesn't know art... (to) exercise that veto. I think it's wrong. That's politicization of the arts and I disapprove." Mondale believes that an NEA chairman should be "someone who is thoroughly knowledgeable in the arts."

"It's such a very special field. It has its own disciplines, its own

vocabulary. Everything about it is very special," she said.

(In an interview with the New York Times last week, Hodsoll stressed the Reagan administration's support of his agency. "This administration is for the endowment," he said. "I'm not saying that every single person associated with this administration is for the arts endowment. I'm saying this administration, the president included, is for the arts endowment. The administration's position begins with the budget deficit," he added. "There's got to be restraint across the board. Everybody's got to do their part.")

If Mondale were in the White House, it is clear there would be a renewed interest in support for the arts, though she wouldn't necessarily return to past programs. "I think what we could do is look over what programs were effective, what programs made sense. We'll take what's good and expand it."

Mondale's enthusiasm for art is genuine, but why? "Well, it underscores the individuality of each human being," she said. "Because our imaginations are what we own, no one has one exactly like ours. It's just like our fingerprints, totally unique. And when you work in the arts, in whichever way — play a musical instrument, dance, go to a museum, or make pots, which is what I do — it reinforces your own uniqueness."

Reagan has said the free-enterprise system should apply to all areas of government life — including the arts. Mondale disagrees. Again her eyes flash as she declares, "That's social Darwinism. Survival of the fittest. We don't believe in that. As Democrats, we believe that we are all equal, we should all have equal opportunity, and just because you're strong doesn't mean you should turn your back on the weaker ones. We feel that we're a family, a community, and when you have children in the family, you don't just strengthen the strong ones. You help the weak ones along so we can all participate in the American dream. I think that's true in the arts. How can a small ballet company in the ghetto compete with a ballet company in Manhattan? Will the corporate sponsors sponsor them? Hardly. There is a role for the federal government to play, to help those that are struggling, that are emerging. We want to encourage everyone, to give everybody an equal chance. That's the purpose of the endowment."