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U.S. to Send Visual Artists as Cultural Ambassadors

by Kate Taylor

In recent years the State Department has relied on performing artists to act as cultural ambassadors, sending dancers and musicians around the world to show people that America is more than just Hollywood movies, McEverything and two drawn-out wars.

But under a new \$1 million program being announced this week, the Obama administration is planning to expand its cultural diplomacy programs to include visual artists like painters and sculptors, who will be asked next year to create public art projects in 15 foreign countries.

“To me, visual artists are just as capable as other artists of capturing a dialogue with people,” said Maura M. Pally, a deputy assistant secretary of state who is overseeing this two-year pilot program.

The new program, known as smART Power, will be administered by the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#), which was selected from a dozen institutions to choose the artists. They will be sent to places that include Pakistan, Egypt, Venezuela, China, Nigeria and a Somali refugee camp in Kenya.

The museum will put out an open call for proposals early next year; the 15 artists will be selected by a panel of experts put together by the museum. Holly Block, the museum’s director, said she had no preconceived notion of what projects the artists should undertake. But as an example of the kind of proposals she was anticipating, she mentioned a work by [Pedro Reyes](#), a Mexican artist, in which he melted down guns turned in as part of an anti-violence campaign and turned the metal into gardening tools.

She called the program “a fantastic opportunity for people who are interested in pushing the boundaries of art making.”

Cultural diplomacy, once a staple of American foreign policy during the two decades after World War II, has experienced a resurgence since 2001. That year the State Department’s cultural diplomacy programs had a budget of \$1.6 million; in 2010 the budget is \$11.75 million. The budget increased 40 percent between 2009 and the current fiscal year. (It is not expected to increase next year.)



Holly Block, the director of the Bronx Museum of the Arts. The museum has been chosen to administer a new State Department program sending artists abroad.

Photo: Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

This year the department initiated a program that sent three American dance companies to do four-week tours in Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, and South America. Ms. Pally said that the program, which was administered by the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#), was considered a success and would be repeated and expanded next year.

The Bronx Museum, with a total annual budget of less than \$3 million, might not seem an obvious choice to run a national program. But the institution, which primarily collects Modern and contemporary work by artists of African, Asian and Latin American ancestry, has a strongly educational focus and substantial international connections for its size. The museum has an international artist-in-residence program and under Ms. Block it has established relationships with individuals or institutions in Cuba, Brazil, Senegal and Egypt, among other countries.

Asked in interviews what would constitute success for the smART Power program, Ms. Pally and Ms. Block offered slightly different answers. Ms. Pally at the State Department focused on whether local people’s perceptions of the United States changed, and Ms. Block of the museum more on whether the artists were able to complete their projects. The museum will hire an outside consultant to conduct a formal evaluation of the program.

Of course, as decades of culture wars show, art and Washington politics don't always mix. Even in the heyday of cultural diplomacy, the 1950s, the government's efforts to promote American art abroad occasionally ran into controversy at home. According to [Michael L. Krenn, the author of "Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War,"](#) the State Department canceled international tours of two exhibitions following charges that some of the artists were Communists or had Communist sympathies.

And sending artists, as opposed to just their work, abroad to represent the United States was considered particularly risky, Mr. Krenn said in an e-mail, because artists "were not easily controlled."

"The very nature of their profession meant that they always felt absolutely free to express themselves," he continued.

Perhaps with this in mind, the State Department is reserving final approval over both the artists and their projects.

"We just want to make sure that there aren't any issues," Ms. Pally said. Asked to elaborate, she declined to name any specific possibilities. "Oh, who knows?" she said. "You never know, but you always want to reserve the right to have a final overlook."

One artist who Ms. Block said might put in a proposal is Judi Werthein. Born in Argentina and based in Brooklyn, Ms. Werthein received threats from anti-immigration groups after an [art project she did in Mexico in 2005](#), in which she created special sneakers and distributed them to people in Tijuana who were planning to cross the border into the United States. Each pair was equipped with a compass, flashlight, painkillers and insoles printed with maps of the border area.

Ms. Werthein said she thought that smART Power sounded like a great idea.

"I think it's very important for American artists to travel abroad, to get a different view of the world — it's really essential," she said.

But when asked if she thought that the program had the potential to change the image of the United States, she said no.

"American image in the world will change through policy and politics," she said.

"Believing that we're going to leave this image," she continued, "and it's going to make them happy, and we'll look good, it's underestimating their intellect."

Another artist who has worked abroad, Paul Pfeiffer, said he thought the program had the potential to change people's views of the United States, but only if the artists were given sufficient freedom.

The best projects aren't "necessarily going to take the most obvious form that somebody in the State Department might imagine," he said.

He noted that in his own experience working abroad, it was also important to be able to convince people that he spoke and acted for himself, not for the United States government. Particularly as a Fulbright fellow in the Philippines, he had to tell people over and over that he wasn't "officially a diplomat of the U.S.," he said, "just for people to be able to trust that a really straightforward and mutual conversation could happen." ■