

## **Testimonial in favor of proposed bill 6119, AN ACT CONCERNING ARTS, CULTURE AND TOURISM FUNDING**

Hello, and thank you for reviewing my testimonial.

My name is Martha Willette Lewis, and I am a professional visual artist living and working in New Haven.

In addition to my own practice, I also curate art exhibitions at the historic **Institute Library**, a small not-for-profit where I organize group exhibitions mixing contemporary art with our historic collection and where I concentrate on exhibits revolving around words, archives, or collections. I have also done many of the other jobs artists do- including teaching, working as Educational Curator at **Artspace New Haven** and also helping to organize parts of **City-Wide Open Studios**. I currently am partnering with another artist on a percent-for-art commission by The State for the **Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station's Jenkins Waggoner Laboratory**. Additionally, I have two radio shows- one music and the other art-and -culture talk on independent radio **WPKN 89.5 fm Bridgeport**.

My art practice revolves around science-based installations, drawing and printmaking. During COVID-19, as most of my work and exhibition opportunities dried up, I turned my kitchen window into a projection device to broadcast messages that then were shared over social media. I am currently producing a print edition and a video of what is essentially a daily calendar during this fraught moment.

I appreciate being given a chance to voice my thoughts here, as additional arts funding is extremely important to me. I would like to emphatically state my support for the proposed bill 6119, AN ACT CONCERNING ARTS, CULTURE AND TOURISM FUNDING being introduced here by Rep. John-Michael Parker, 101st Dist. I thank him for doing so.

Art provides an essential collective good both in terms of Tourism and in terms of Community, of Place-Building. Artists make places desirable and envisage new ways of working with existing spaces and ideas. We make commercial buildings into vibrant centers of culture, we create environments that people want to experience, events they want to attend. We provoke thought, conversation and make people feel good.

Traditionally The State of Connecticut has seen the arts as a draw for Tourism and the money that brings. While this is indeed true, I would ask for a more nuanced, harder-to-quantify definition.

During the pandemic what have people been doing to stay safe, healthy and happy?

Consume art, that is what. Endlessly, along with exploring nature and exercising outdoors. Just look at social media- look at people's posts, ask them.

Watching dramas on Netflix, following cooking tutorials on Youtube, crafting, enjoying virtual events, exhibits, concerts, taking remote yoga and dancing lessons, hair-braiding, journaling, listening to the radio. It is all art, and someone had to create the content, the instructions, kits, zoom events.

As someone spending time live on the air, on radio, I can attest to how meaningful this contact is for people and how even the smallest creative gestures are keeping us all going. I have received outpourings of messages from listeners. This signals to me something I have always known- that art is

essential, and that artists- from the novice to the experienced master- provide an energy, hope, and set of resources that people don't just want- they NEED.

This deserves support and acknowledgement.

This means that experimentation, and small works in progress- ideas- need to be supported not just full-blown institutions like symphonies or grand statements like major museum retrospectives. It also means that art should not be relegated to something that children do- although education is very important. Unfortunately, it is often used as a loud signal that art is not useful to a community unless it revolves around children and their development, the suggestion being that somehow it is a childish pastime, a bit infantile. Please understand I think fostering creativity with young people is vital to a healthy and happy environment, and a joy to be a part of, but this is only one aspect of art and being an artist. Artists themselves need **The State of Connecticut** to foster a welcoming respectful environment with workspaces and projects to support artists of all backgrounds and all stages of their careers. I would like artists to be treated the way that **scientists** are treated- as experts in their fields, driving their own projects- as opposed to arts or other organizations coming up with a concept, they want artists to enact.

For instance: I would cite the recent removal of various monuments and statues, Recently I have seen local committees asking for new statues to go up and they tend to ask for something specific, a replacement for what was being taken down or asking for historic figures they have selected. I ask- why not let artists propose what should go up instead? Why not let them interact with the community directly and come up with the concepts? Does it need to be another statue? Artists have the expertise and the creative vision and ought not to be dictated to.

As an example, I invoke Maya Lin's hugely popular Vietnam Memorial Wall in D.C., which faced a huge outcry from veteran's groups and others when it was being proposed, because there was no literal depiction of a person, no statue. Instead, she used abstract means- the shiny wall structure and the staggering list of names – individuals who also act as a monumental piece of data on loss and sorrow. The groups opposing this work had an adjacent statue erected which everyone pretty much ignores now, having been totally won over by the moving work of art, the experience that the various committee's had trouble envisaging. This is how great, egalitarian, AND profoundly moving meaningful things get built in the public arena, and THAT is what I would like to see happen on all scales, in Connecticut.

Personally speaking, surviving as an artist during COVID has been difficult, as has been proving that I have lost income, opportunities etc. Like all artists I know I work several kinds of jobs and am over-educated, underpaid and live on a fragile edge.

I am lucky and have been working on a major commission. COVID-19 has made the process slow and difficult but at least I have something beautiful and lasting that We are making in celebration of the **Agricultural Experiment Station**, and I am proud that.

My other projects- though they did appear online- were largely uneventful. A large site-specific installation that was technically complex to construct sat for months in the dark as the New Haven Museum closed 4 days after I installed it. When they reopened it stayed up only to have them close again and for me to remove it.

My curatorial project at the library celebrating the 100 years of women's' right to vote has fared a bit better, largely because I have done a huge amount of extra work to make the exhibit visible online and to host Zoom events to engage people. **The Guardian** newspaper covered my vote-related Halloween zoom-crafting which DID give us a bit of a boost and I am planning a virtual closing event on the 26<sup>th</sup> which so far has a robust rsvp list, but as you all know – it is not the same as being together and gallery donations and library memberships which support us, have been going steadily down.

My project from my kitchen was quite successful from a popularity point of view- people responded, shared it, waited for it nightly and wrote me lovely messages, so from an art point of view it was a success, from a financial point of view, less impressive.

All of this means that supporting bill 6119 means supporting skilled talented artists and the wonderful hard-working arts organizations who will help make this state robust, pandemic or no. We need this support urgently, and the influx of funding will be abundantly rewarded with more of what everyone needs to keep things afloat and moving constructively into the future: **creativity, connectedness, innovation, hope and beauty.**

I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak. It is an honor, and I am delighted that bill 6119 is under discussion.

Thank You All.

Warmly,

Martha Willette Lewis