

*Americans for the Arts presents
The 34th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture
on Arts and Public Policy*



Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts & Public Policy

An evening with

Ayad Akhtar

*September 21, 2022
The John F. Kennedy Center
for the Performing Arts
Washington, D.C.*

The Rosenthal Family Foundation (Jamie Rosenthal Wolf,
David Wolf, Rick Rosenthal, and Nancy Stephens) and
Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck



OPENING REMARKS BY NOLEN V. BIVENS



Americans For The Arts President & CEO Nolen V. Bivens

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the 34th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy. Thank you so very much for being here tonight. We are excited to share tonight's program with you, and ultimately thousands of attendees throughout the country, both in person and via livestream. Before going further, I want to acknowledge that we are standing on the traditional land of the Nacotchtank and Piscataway peoples and recognize their past, present, and future here, as well as our shared responsibility, to support tribal nations across the country.

I look forward to hearing from our lecturer, Ayad Akhtar, and thank him for his time and participation here this year.

And thank you to the Kennedy Center for its hospitality. I also want to thank our longtime sponsors of the Nancy Hanks Lecture: the Rosenthal Family Foundation members Jamie Rosenthal Wolfe, David Wolfe, Rick Rosenthal, and Nancy Stevens and her son Mick.

Thank you as well to Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck for their ongoing support, and David Reid is here representing them.

On behalf of the staff and board at Americans for the

Arts, we are honored to have key leaders attending tonight, including Congressional STEAM Caucus founder, Representative Suzanne Bonamici of Oregon.

Also, from the National Endowment for the Arts, we're excited to have Chair Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson, and representatives with the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thank you to the Americans for the Arts and Arts Action Fund board members who are here in person and listening in virtually.

Other than our Annual Convention back in May, you are the second large, in-person audience I have spoken to in three years. I have to let that sink in for a moment. This is also one of the first main events that my wife Pamela and I have been able to attend together since the pandemic began. Thank you, Pamela, for being here.

It goes without saying that we have all come back together fundamentally changed. Our individual journeys may have looked different over the last few years, but our collective journey and experience has shown us that arts and culture are a source of resiliency. Leveraging creativity and self-expression brought us together where connections had been lost, gave us hope where hopelessness overwhelmed, and demonstrated a peace and beauty in the world when none seemed to exist.

The arts allowed us the expression of our humanity during a uniquely challenging time. Simply put, the arts are powerful.

The arts allowed us the expression of our humanity during a uniquely challenging time. Simply put, the arts are powerful. If you're here today, you already know that, but I would like to share with you that our country is starting to notice that, too. This lecture is named for Nancy Hanks, who was one of the first presidents at the organization that we now call Americans for the Arts. She was an early champion for the arts at the local and state level, promoting the movement to expand local and state arts agencies across the country. Nancy was a beacon for the sector at a very transformative time in arts and culture history.



Nolen Bivens welcomes both a live and virtual audience to the 34th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

We are in another transformative moment. Over the last couple of years, groups like The National Independent Venue Association have emerged as powerful partners for key COVID-relief funding, including the \$16.5 billion towards Save Our Stages legislation. Along with community foundations, corporations, state and local governments, and art lovers like you, we all came together to ensure that artists and creative workers would thrive to support our communities during the pandemic.

The National Endowment for the Arts has an exceptional leader in Chair Jackson, whose agency is currently funded at \$180 million, but also received two additional federal allocations totaling \$135 million, which they quickly and equitably distributed as COVID relief funds to nonprofit and government arts agencies, including subgrants directly to individual artists through local arts agencies. The National Endowment for the Humanities also received \$180 million in 2022 with additional COVID relief funds.

It doesn't stop there. Alongside our national, state, and local partners, we'll be fighting for \$1 per person to ensure that federal support for the arts and humanities doubles. Chair Jackson and I share a vision for a sustainable, intersectional, and equitable arts ecosystem. This is a responsibility we recognize

with our colleagues at the National Association of State Arts Agencies, Grantmakers in the Arts, and members of the Cultural Advocacy Group, among many others.

These national collaborations are critically important, but the real magic happens at the grassroots level in communities every day. That includes local arts agencies, artists, art funders, service organizations, state arts agencies, and so many others.

In his book, *Homeland Elegies*, Ayad describes an organization that was created to provide, and I quote from the book here, "a safety net for those in need," which included "a food pantry, a walk-in clinic, a community arts center and café, and a career counseling service for former felons and at-risk youth." As you'd imagine, this caught my attention because, if for no other reason, an arts center is included.

But what really intrigued me was the fact that Ayad referred to this organization as a "community network" and this is in direct alignment with our vision for the future of the arts and culture sector. There are parallels to this story in the art world and so much that we can learn from communities about equitable collaboration.

If we work together—artists and organizations, funders and policymakers, educators, nonprofits, and for-profits—we can create a more vibrant, resilient, and equitable arts and culture sector.

Americans for the Arts has had a long and successful focus on local arts agencies—these are your local arts councils and government cultural departments. But what if we took a cue from Ayad and envisioned local arts agencies not as individual organizations, but as a part of a network of networks developing solutions with and for their communities. The world runs on networks after all. If we work together—artists and organizations, funders and policymakers, educators, nonprofits, and for-profits— we can create a more vibrant, resilient, and equitable arts and culture sector.

There are solutions like this growing organically right now at the local level, and it's particularly important that equity is embedded into this process. This is how Ayad has seen it, and this is how I was inspired by it in his book.

I will give you a couple of examples of how equitable art solutions are happening in communities. Along with one of our board members, Kristina Newman-Scott, I recently visited a Brooklyn-based local arts organization called The Laundromat Project, led by Kemi Ilesanmi and Ayesha Williams whose mission is to empower artists and neighbors as catalysts for change in their communities. Their work includes collaboration around everything from community gardens to public places to local cultural organizations. It is simple, elegant, and transformative. They are working with artists who didn't have the benefit or resources that come with an arts degree or training, but who are creating amazing things. The Laundromat Project is community-sourcing these talented people and giving them the resources to create, grow professionally, and make their neighborhoods a better place. I love this example of the power of the arts to connect people; improve lives; and foster equitable, meaningful, and most importantly, sustainable partnerships.

At Americans for the Arts, we've seen this connection most profoundly in our Arts and Economic Prosperity study. Working side by side with 400 local and state arts agencies, our research team has ensured that the economic impact of organizations and audiences representing people of color are specifically included in this project. It's our first time requiring this and many of our local arts agencies embraced the challenge. Jeremy Johnson, president and CEO of Assembly for the Arts in Cleveland, Ohio, has been instrumental in this work for some time. Here's how he described his experience to our research staff team member Dr. Genna Styles-Lyas.

[Video Plays]

"Americans for the Arts and your team has bent over backwards to reach out to us. This didn't just happen. Y'all didn't just send out one email and have one Zoom. We have been working through this together and it hasn't been easy work. Defining what we mean by different terms, for example. I'm using you all as a model. Can we advise Americans for the Arts, and can we learn from what Americans for the Arts is doing? It's working both ways. This is not a one-way street. We're learning from each other."

[End of Video]

I want to champion and be part of these transformative programs and collaborations with you. Please reach out to me anytime. I'd love to hear from you, learn about the solutions in your neighborhoods and communities, and share them across our networks.

I'll close with a message of hope, but also of caution. Art is a part of the human experience. It makes the world a better place. But we must remain relevant, prepared, and vigilant as there will be new and different challenges that highlight the strengths as well as the vulnerabilities of arts and culture in our communities. I'm confident we can continue to work together to ensure arts and culture remain a viable and vital component of solutions to whatever future problems we may face.

I often pull from this quote by Maya Angelo, our Nancy Hanks lecturer in 1990, to remind me of the power of the arts to sustain us: "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."

INTRODUCTION OF REZ ABBASI AND KIRAN AHLUWALIA

I'm now pleased to introduce our performers for this evening, Rez Abbasi and Kiran Ahluwalia.

Rez Abbasi is a world-renowned guitarist and composer whose life and music has been shaped by his journeys from Pakistan as a child to Southern California and New York, studying jazz and classical music at the University of Southern California and the Manhattan School of Music, and a subsequent musical pilgrimage to India. His many influences and genres have earned him recognition as one of the greatest modern jazz guitar players in the world. A 2021 Guggenheim Fellow for composition, Rez has released 14 albums to date and continues to explore new and provocative ways to blend culture and music. The music you heard tonight before the program began is from the soundtrack album that Rez wrote

and performed entitled *A Throw of the Dice*.

Kiran Ahluwalia's singing and composition is a dynamic and complex blend of her Indian, Pakistani, and Canadian roots, also pulling from western blues, rock, R&B, and jazz. After graduating from the University of Toronto, she returned to India to immerse herself in the study of music there, eventually coming back to Canada where she has since produced seven albums, performed worldwide, and collaborated with Rez, now her husband, and on her band and compositions. The title song "7 Billion" from her most recent album, reflects the complexity and sometimes discord of Kiran's multiple cultures and heritages in a world where majority norms prevail.

Thank you, Rez and Kiran, for being here with us tonight. Please join me in welcoming them to the stage.

PERFORMANCE BY REZ ABBASI AND KIRAN AHLUWALIA



Kiran Ahluwalia and Rez Abbasi perform “Mustt Mustt” by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and “Dil” by Kiran Ahluwalia in dedication to Nancy Hanks Lecturer Ayad Akhtar.

Rez: Hello, everyone. It’s a pleasure and an honor to be part of this wonderful, necessary night.

[Music]

Rez: That was a composition that’s a Pakistani Qawwali from the late, very great, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. I’m sure it’s near and dear to many hearts. I will give the floor to Kiran Ahluwalia for the next composition.

Kiran: It is so great to be here. Thank you for inviting us, Americans for the Arts, and thanks to all of you for being here. We’re going to do one more tune for you, and this is a brand-

new tune. We just recorded it. It’s called “Dil” which means ‘heart.’ I wrote this song about throwing away all my shame, and letting my desire run free, and taking the hand of my beloved, and parading my love out in public. This is “Dil.”

[Music]

Nolen Bivens: Wow. That was an incredible performance. It’s so wonderful to be back in person again to enjoy the full and dynamic presence of a live performance. Thank you so much, Rez and Kiran. Please join me in another round of applause.

INTRODUCTION OF STEPHEN HEINTZ BY NOLEN V. BIVENS

I'm now pleased to welcome Stephen Heintz to the stage, who will introduce Ayad for us tonight. Stephen is President and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a family foundation that advances social change through investments that spur large-scale systemic change on critical issues, including leading the way in the diverse investment movement.

Stephen's notable career spans both the public and private sector, as well as globally, and has been dedicated to strengthening democratic culture and institutions around the world to better serve citizens. In 2000, he co-founded Dēmos, a public policy organization that works to reduce political and

economic inequality. In 2018, he was named by the Academy of the Arts and Sciences as one of three co-chairs of a national commission on the practice of democratic citizenship and co-authored the commission's report, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.

Stephen is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and serves on several boards, including the Quincy Institute and Rockefeller Archive Center.

I thank Stephen for taking the time to be here tonight. Please join me in welcoming him to the stage as he welcomes his friend, Ayad Akhtar. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION OF AYAD AKHTAR BY STEPHEN B. HEINTZ



Stephen B. Heintz, president & CEO, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, formally introduces Nancy Hanks Lecturer Ayad Akhtar.

Wow. What a joy. Good evening. It's so marvelous to be back with people in all kinds of settings; enjoying each other's company; and being inspired by music, art, and good thought. I want to thank Nolen Bivens and Americans for the Arts for the extraordinary work you do across this country to support and advance the arts and arts education. It's a noble cause, and you do it with grace and with impact. Thank you very much.

When Ayad called me and asked if I would introduce him at this wonderful event, I was quite surprised and, obviously, deeply honored.

One of the reasons I'm so pleased to do so is an important connection to Nancy Hanks, the extraordinary second chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts, a former president of Americans for the Arts, and the person after whom this annual lecture is named. This connection was unknown to Ayad until I shared it with him during a conversation this past weekend.

Nancy Hanks was a close associate of three Rockefeller brothers—Nelson, Lawrence, and John III. On and off during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, she served on the staff of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, or RBF, which I have had the privilege of leading since 2001. She was also a member of our board of trustees from 1977 until her death in 1983.

Nancy joined Nelson Rockefeller's staff in Albany when he was elected governor of New York, and she played a crucial role in winning passage of legislation and creating a state council for the arts—the first in the nation.

In 1963, she served as executive director of a national commission on the arts organized by the RBF, with John III as its chair. This was an ambitious undertaking, which produced a landmark report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, which was published in 1965 just as the legislation to create the National Endowment of the Arts was being debated in Congress.

At the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, we are continuing the legacies of the brothers' love for, and commitment to, the arts,



Ayad Akhtar thanks Stephen Heintz for his warm introductory remarks.

and Nancy Hanks' leadership in making the case for public funding for the arts. We are extremely fortunate that Ayad Akhtar serves on our board of trustees today. It is through our work together at the RBF—and through the impact his writing has had on me personally—that we have become very dear friends.

Ayad is one of the most accomplished and important writers of our time. His plays and novels have been published in more than 20 languages and have won numerous accolades, including the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for his remarkable play, *Disgraced*. Ayad has received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an Obie Award, and the Edith Wharton Citation for Merit in Fiction. In 2021, he was named State Author by the New York State Writers Institute.

Ayad's works are intimate explorations of identity, social convention, and the challenges and contradictions inherent in the aspirations of cosmopolitan democracy and unbounded capitalism.

He is intent on searching for truth in an era in which truth is an endangered species. Ayad is unafraid to stand accused of the things he says and writes. As he has said, "Without the freedom to offend, there is no freedom of expression."

His elegant defense of free expression—of language in the service of truth—inspired PEN America to name Ayad its president in 2021.

Ayad works with unflinching intellectual rigor and forces his audiences and readers to look deep into a mirror while simultaneously holding the mirror before himself. He knows,

Ayad works with unflinching intellectual rigor and forces his audiences and readers to look deep into a mirror while simultaneously holding the mirror before himself.

as he has said, that, "what art does best is to nurture and develop the most invisible, interior, intangible parts of us... To offer us a path to a clearer and more vivid sense of ourselves and each other."

Much has been made of Ayad's identity as a Pakistani and Muslim American writer. In a narrow sense, this is objectively true. But I would submit that he is an *American* writer who, through his writing, explores what it means to be an American at this moment in history. In the first pages of his brilliant novel, *Homeland Elegies*, which one critic has described as "a fictive memoir," the narrator, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Pakistani American playwright, proclaims his American identity: "My tongue, too, is homegrown. Every atom of this blood formed of this soil, this air."

Ayad argues that art, "at its best, is about unity, not difference." As *The New York Times* critic Jennifer Szalai has written, Ayad's writing reveals, "that one's identity isn't a matter of argument but experience. That experience isn't static; it exists through time, absorbing and responding to the world in which it moves." Ayad's voice is a skeptical one—at times, a very provocative one. It comes from a place of deep consideration, conviction, and belief in the urgent power of art.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ayad Akhtar.



Nolen Bivens and Stephen Heintz welcome Ayad Akhtar to the Kennedy Center stage to present his lecture.

LECTURE BY AYAD AKHTAR



Ayad Akhtar presents the 2022 Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy.

Thank you, Stephen. Our friendship means a lot to me, and it means a lot for you to say those things. Thank you for the invitation to address you all today. To be here, sharing some thoughts, within the framework of a lecture named for the extraordinary Nancy Hanks is truly an honor.

Of course, we all know there isn't enough public funding for art in this country. There isn't enough regard for art in our great nation. We are not a nation of thinkers, but doers, and the expression of will par excellence in American culture is the making of money, not art. To state it so baldly isn't necessarily to bemoan it. Because one of the secondary effects of this primary focus on revenue and profit is a vibrant philanthropic sector that gives a lot of money to the arts—never enough of course, at least in my opinion—but all the same, the bigger picture of arts funding in America is not as dire as it may sometimes seem when compared to a country like Germany, where there is so much abundance in the government funding of the arts.

Whether funding is coming from the government or whether it's coming from the private sector in the form of charitable giving—invariably, the process of giving and getting money is understandably complicated. Foundations and councils and family trusts and corporations have images

to bolster (and protect)—and they have missions they often lay out in no uncertain terms. Mission alignment figures front and center in the dispensation of money in the American philanthropic sector. Moreover, as so much of the cash is ultimately coming from those who so profoundly understand cash, how to manage it, how to assess value in economic terms, the thinking around mission alignment takes on another dimension—measuring return on investment, that is, measuring the visible tangible effect of money given.

Many of us here in this room deeply understand how ultimately misguided this approach is, the reflex to measure prospect and product in terms of the tangible. We understand that art, what it is, what it speaks to and develops in us, can't be measured in that way, at least not the most important part. What art does best is to nurture and develop the most intangible interior parts of us; art enables and fosters the soul's growth. But we, here in this room, know to be mindful of using language like that. We know that we live in a culture which long ago forgot that responsiveness to the world is fundamentally rhythmic. That attunement, for example, to cadence and phrase, to embody of beauty through song, to know harmony, physically—that these are fundamental human and social capacities, needing development. But we understand our nation doesn't know things like this anymore—and so we understand why, yet again, our universities are cutting the humanities, and our schools are cutting funding for the arts. We don't like it. But we understand. The real conversations about value are had in monetary terms in America. And so, we don't bring up the soul. We don't want to be seen as those who just don't get it.

Many of us here, in this room, have not been particularly gifted at making money.

And we don't necessarily see that as a failing.

We may understand that our culture's values are hostile to what we most cherish, but we're here to do what we can. Tow a different line, even though we're not entirely able to resist the corrosive impact of the prevailing materialist metrics that dominate our society. Because see, we have not stopped hearing the whisper of the still quiet voice within, or living by the bright blaze of human imagination—these twin foundations of our humanity, these sources of our species' miraculous creative capacity. We know the world, in fact, is made of these far more than it is made of cash. We know. But needing to bridge the divide with those who don't, with a



Ayad Akhtar is the first Nancy Hanks Lecturer to present to a hybrid audience of both live and virtual attendees.

culture that refuses to understand, we make half-steps. We change the way we talk. We embrace the terms of tangible good. Advocacy. Changing minds. Opening perspectives. Dismantling barriers and fostering understanding. Diversity. Opportunity. Social justice. We learn to think in terms of causes that can help quantify art's good. We find our fight, make our case, articulate the narrative—and transform ourselves into sales staff for our causes. With time, we grow hidebound. Understandably. Hidebound by our battles, beholden to our identities, committed to promoting and celebrating our differences.

But let me submit that art, at its best, the art that has us dedicating our lives to it, has always been about unity not difference.

I want to tell you two stories today. About two pivotal experiences of art in my life, and how they shaped me. These two stories will, I hope, illuminate a distinction that may come across as somewhat starker than I actually believe it to be. Pointing out the contrast is important to what I want to say today, but it's worth emphasizing in advance that anything worth knowing is always tethered to reality through nuance.

Just to rewind a bit, and offer some context for both stories I'm going to tell:

My parents immigrated from Pakistan in the late sixties, a few years after the quota for immigration from the Indian subcontinent was lifted. Before 1965, only 400 immigrants from Pakistan and India were permitted. But that changed, in large part because of the Kennedy backed initiative to put a man on the moon and all that that implied, the push for scientific and technological advance in the era of the cold war, and the need expand the population of scientists and engineers in this country. My parents, both medical doctors, came over on a State Department program that was scouring the third world for this kind of intellectual talent—both of them were at the top of their classes at what was then the Pakistani equivalent of Harvard Medical School. They were given visas, plane tickets, jobs, and an apartment. I would become their first-born here, and the first-born child on either side of very large extended families to be born outside Pakistan, let alone in America.

Suffice it to say, there was a lot of pressure to make sure I did something respectable with myself, on me, but also on my parents. Case in point, when I was four years-old, and starting preschool, my mother coached me to respond to the question of what I wanted to be when I grew up by saying: "I want to be a neurologist." Of course, I wasn't sure what a neurologist actually was, but people seemed very impressed when I said it.

A little over a decade later, when I was fifteen and starting junior year in high school, I signed up for an elective in high school that I'd heard was really good. It was called World Literature, and it was taught by a teacher named Ms. Doerfler. I remember homeroom that first day of the semester, and the football jock sitting next to me asking what my third period class was. I told him it was World Lit with Doerfler. "Dude, Doerf is going to blow your mind," he said back to me with visible awe. Truth was, Ms. Doerfler had a reputation for changing kids' lives. She was one of those teachers nobody ever made fun of, but not because she was trying to be your friend, or because she was so entertaining. She exuded a kind of presence that made you realize you were with someone truly remarkable. By the time I'd met her she was in her late 50s, she'd been through five husbands, she lived on 40 acres of land north of Milwaukee where she kept 10 Great Danes and tended a farm-sized garden every morning at 4 a.m. before coming into school. She carried herself with a regal bearing that wasn't an affect. I recognize now what it was—though I didn't know it back then. It was the resonance of someone truly committed to an authentic life.

Our first day of class, she assigned a short story by a Swiss writer named Dürrenmatt. I went home that night and read it. In the story, a man wakes up on a train. He has no idea how he

got there. He has no idea where the train is headed. Confused, he tries to find out what's going on. Traveling from one car to the next, approaching fellow passengers. He hopes someone knows more than he does. But they don't. In fact, most are far more concerned with whatever they've got happening in their berths. The romance, the newspaper, the nap they want to return to. The protagonist finds a junior conductor who tells him that maybe the supervising conductor can answer his questions. But that turns out not to be the case either. Finally, having made his way to the front locomotive, our protagonist

But let me submit that art, at its best, the art that has us dedicating our lives to it, has always been about unity not difference.

finds the person steering the train, a madman shoveling coal maniacally into the engine's furnace. Over the noise of the fire, the protagonist shouts his question about where the train is going, but the driver just points at the ladder leading to the roof. Our hero climbs the ladder and peers out over the front of the train where he beholds an endless pitch-black tunnel into which the train is falling with unstoppable fury. The story comes to a close as he stares into the tunnel's abyss, overcome with primal terror.

I remember finishing the story that night, and thinking, okay. No idea why anyone would ever read a story like that or write one for that matter. Bizarre didn't even cover it. I didn't give it another thought. Until the following morning.

The next day, Ms. Doerfler comes striding into class, her right hand buried—as it often was—in her sport coat pocket, as she played with the set of keys she kept there. She walked up to the front of class and wrote the name of the story out on the chalkboard: "The Tunnel". And she turned to us and asked: "What's the meaning of the story you read last night?" Everyone looks around at everyone else. Meaning? Of a story? What is she even talking about? No one had an answer. She waited. Still no answer. Finally, she started to speak: The train is life. Sometimes one of us awakens to the question of what it is, where it might be headed. We look for the answer around us, only to find that most are not interested in an answer; many don't even know there's a question. The one who seeks to know will keep searching until they are confronted with perplexing truth: That

life is hurtling us into a great unknown, like the train tumbling into the abyss of that tunnel. And that the soul's innate reaction to confronting this truth directly is profound and primal terror.

What happened to me in that moment was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Something cleared inside me; there was a bright silence and spaciousness, as a vast perspective opened up. All the murkiness of life vanished in a sudden moment of inspiring crystalline purity. It was fifteen seconds give or take. But it was already clear to me that literature was going to be my life.

A few years later, I was fully invested in the idea that a life devoted to literature meant becoming a writer. It was 1989. I was now eighteen, and the controversy over Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was engulfing the world. But it wasn't just elsewhere, because the Rushdie affair had exploded like a mortar shell in my own community. I'd grown up in a tight-knit Muslim community in Milwaukee, and the people I loved most had very complicated feelings about what Rushdie had done. But no one I knew in my community, or in my family, had actually read the book themselves. That summer, I would. And what happened to me when I did was profound. I'd never before encountered so much of the culture I'd grown up with at home in the pages of a book, my questions, my preoccupations, the smells and sounds and tastes of my community and family, the mythos of our religious beliefs. I was shocked by Rushdie's book, not as an instance of blasphemy, but by the sheer



Ayad Akhtar is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author in drama for his play, *Disgraced*, and the President of PEN America.



Akhtar challenges the audience to reflect on the particulars and universals of identity. "...I worry that this focus on the centrality of particularity and identity might be helping us forget—it was likely the transformative power of the universal that landed us together in this room in the first place."

power it had on me. I was experiencing a potent form of self-recognition I'd never experienced before, and it bred a new certainty. My writing didn't have to be like the central European parables and stories Ms. Doerfler loved, and which had so inspired me. Writing could also come from what I knew. After reading Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, I saw the path I could take forward as a writer, writing in the world as a person who came from where I came from, with the particular history that I had.

The story of Doerfler and *The Tunnel* on the one hand. The story of reading Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* on the other. These are the alpha and omega of my personal origins as a writer in the world. The first is about encountering the universal with a capital U. A direct hit of the human condition mainlined into my very arteries. The second story is less about the universal than it is about the particular. How I found a book that spoke to me as a Muslim, as a child of immigrants of the subcontinent living in the West, and made me see how writing about things I knew could set me on a path to finding my voice as a writer. Both stories embody something essential—on the one hand, an encounter with literature as an expression of our unity, our sameness, our collective membership in the human condition; and on the other hand, literature as witness to the power of difference, and

how access to what was different than I had read before opened up opportunity for me, in the deepest sense.

I am loathe to compare these two experiences, but if I'm honest, they do hold different orders of magnitude in my life as a person and as a writer. Which is to say, the first is far more central to my life than the second, far more consequential to the development of the soul I was talking about earlier. My experience with Doerfler and *The Tunnel* was an example of what I believe to be art's profoundest transformative capacity—to introduce us to, and absorb us in, a different, higher order of being. To transcend the confines and limits of the self and connect us to something like source itself. The result, for me, of that encounter with source, was to fall in love deeply and endlessly with what had opened up this source for me, literature; in fact, I fell in love so deeply—that love has endured to this day, unblemished, undiminished, decades later.

In contrast, my reading of Rushdie, while no less essential for me, was an experience circumscribed and defined by the particulars of my life, particular to the situation I found myself in—wanting to understand how I could possibly write. In a sense, what I'm suggesting is that my encounter with Rushdie was a vocational encounter. But what made it possible was the earlier encounter with something that birthed my vocation itself.

I don't mean in any way to diminish the importance of my reading of *The Satanic Verses* by somehow relegating that experience to a second order of centrality. But it is that. An experience not of unity, but of difference, and how that difference, which was my difference, could live in the world in which I found myself, with the newly discovered love of my life.

...Literature as witness to the power of difference, and how access to what was different than I had read before opened up opportunity for me, in the deepest sense.

Particular and universal—a focus on both is necessary. And sometimes, I do worry, honestly, that our ever-growing focus on the particulars of identity are not only fostering a civic spirit in which contest and disagreement, and grievance is pushing to the fore, but I worry that this focus on the centrality of particularity and identity might be helping us forget—it was likely the transformative power of the universal that landed us

together in this room in the first place.

So, what am I saying? Let me boil it down, still doing my best to preserve the nuance—which is of course usually the first casualty of the pasteurizing and homogenizing process so much discourse undergoes today, as it meets the Manichean moral environment of our current politics, where everything is increasingly seen as either/or. On the one hand, either it's a defense of dead white men like Dürrenmatt, or on the other hand, it's a celebration of the young writer, like myself, of a marginalized identity who's going to finally be heard after generations of exclusion. Let me submit this is not an either/or. And yet, to the extent that we want to be fully alive to the art's greatest strength, not as a measurable good to be laid alongside test scores, or as a tool of social integration, but rather, in the actual shape of art's deepest, formative impact on us; to the extent that we are willing to meet art and its impact along the terms I have laid out here—I believe it's worth considering just how much this interplay between the particular and the universal is, by definition, tilted in favor of the universal as the ultimate source of art's inspirational and instructive power.

I know it's a mouthful.

I'd like to say a few words about a particular characteristic of our social environment today, one which, failing to comment on would be irresponsible, given its profound impact today on these questions of difference and unity. I'm speaking about the digital technologies changing the way we communicate, what we take for worthy of communicating, and what we take as true. Unfortunately, it is beyond the purview of this talk to lay out a larger vision of how these seismic changes are reshaping us in fundamental ways that impact so much I've spoken about today. But I do want to linger on a new social ontology resulting from the endless curation and enslavement of our attention to the digital devices which have increasingly turned us all into addicts.

We owe our dependence on those devices to the release of dopamine that engagement with those devices' occasions, momentary content selected and delivered to us for its capacity to thrill, enrage, titillate, and reaffirm us. This technology metes out its algorithmically curated stimuli as the reward for sustained and prolonged attention. This is all by design. The longer you are engaged, the more data can be collected about you; the greater the haul of data, the more your behavior and purchases can be predicted, even manipulated and the more that data is worth on the open market. All of this is driven by profit, profit which has created the epidemic of diminished concentration and pathological distraction rampant

everywhere today. This is a profound, even apocalyptic social ill that we all recognize and feel powerless to change.

The technology driving these attention-damaging devices understands something about us. It understands that what tethers us most deeply to the device confirmation bias. The algorithm learns to affirm our tastes, our desires, our points of view. This is the deeper pleasure that the technology offers, a cognitive flow formed from our own preferences and comprising a world in our own image. We pick up the device. We find there some form of what we already know, served up in a computer-curated diet of posts and photos and other sundries, content tailored to our desires, that the digital technology knows will keep us scrolling. We click and scroll, and click and scroll, enjoying the steady stream of tiny pleasures, familiar enough to keep us happy, surprising enough to keep us excited. Over time, we learn to trust in the path to understanding that leads only through the familiar, that leads through "me." "I" become the arbiter of what is true. "I" am the measure of what is real. What could possibly be more real than me?

What art does best is to nurture and develop the most intangible interior parts of us; art enables and fosters the soul's growth.

What I'm describing here is a profound technological support for enthrallment to primary narcissism. And though we all know this is what is happening, we still may fail to appreciate just how pervasive the social attitudes engendered by this orientation have become. Self-obsession is seen as a route to self-realization. Affirmation of bias confirmation reigns supreme. "I know" is a social prime mover. Elevation of the "I"-that-knows is a greater social good. Exhibitionist displays of self-esteem are conflated with instances of political defiance. Self-valorizing anthems. The elevation of "me" and "my" to categories of knowledge itself. And the now-widespread misreading of the self's fragility as resulting not from the contingent situation of selfhood itself, but from society's failure and neglect to protect and recognize "me." Accustomed to the neurotransmitter boost of constant digital approbation—the likes and shares and comments from followers and to those who we follow—we are increasingly convinced by a moralizing

rhetoric that passes off our dependence on technology as righteous activism. And so, the new social ontology emerges. Pleasure is the glue. The purpose is sales. It's the advertising model of thought; the entertainment model of consciousness. Self-promotion, self-commodification, self-marketing—all these are now increasingly taken for forms of legitimate commentary and critique; ceaseless affirmation of our personal biases emboldens the strident certainty of our moral positions.

The foregoing picture is an essential one to understand the primacy placed today on difference as a category of social being. Let me put that more simply. The technology transforming our societies and our brains is incentivizing us to be deeply invested in our particularities, our differences, and to embrace the confines of the self rather than to push for some meaningful transcendence from them.

But let me submit to you, friends, that art, at its best, is an ever-mysterious bridge to transcendence of exactly this sort. Other, not just self. Empathy, not narcissism. Transformation, not validation.

In closing I'd like to remind us all once again of the importance of nuance. The argument here isn't against difference, it's against the primacy of difference. The argument isn't against measurable metrics, it's against the faulty notion that, ultimately, art's benefit can be measured in this way. It isn't to elevate Dürrenmatt over Rushdie—or even to suggest there is not a place for narcissism in our lives. What I'm suggesting is that there are important distinctions that must not be lost,



Audience gives Ayad Akhtar a standing ovation at the conclusion of his lecture.

that some things are not others, and shouldn't be. American novelist, Ottessa Moshfegh, in speaking about the novel as an art form, puts it this way. And I quote:

"Art is not media. A novel is not an 'afternoon special' or fodder for the Twittersphere or for journalists to make generalizations about culture. A novel is not BuzzFeed or NPR or Instagram or even Hollywood. A novel is meant to expand consciousness. We need novels that live past the political agenda described on social media. We have imaginations for a reason. We need characters in novels to be free. How else will we understand ourselves?"

A wonderful question indeed.

Thank you.

CLOSING REMARKS BY JULIE C. MURACO



Americans For The Arts Board Chair Julie C. Muraco thanks Ayad Akhtar for his powerful lecture in her closing remarks.

Wow. What a magnificent program. Thank you, Ayad, for a truly inspirational speech and for sharing your personal story with us tonight. You have an important voice, and we are so grateful you shared it with us tonight.

Good evening, everyone. My name is Julie Muraco. I'm the chair of Americans for the Arts Board of Directors. I hope Ayad's journey will persuade all of you to take the time to reflect on the novels, the plays, and all the literary works that have shaped your character, your life, and your dreams. Take the time to talk with others, your families, and your friends about the power of the written word and how these precious instruments of language opened your mind to different cultures, new ideas, and diverse perspectives. I also want to congratulate Ayad and the PEN America organization on celebrating its 100th anniversary this year of promoting and defending free speech in America. I'm so thrilled that we have brought back this

powerful lecture series to a live in-person audience, while simultaneously live streaming it to a national audience. We are committed to this hybrid presentation for the future.

Tonight, we have thousands of arts advocates live streaming from all corners of our country and joining our community to witness in real time some of the best speeches on arts and public policy ever written on the value of the arts.

I want to thank our board of directors of Americans for the Arts. I also want to thank our president and CEO, Nolen Bivens, for his leadership of Americans for the Arts.

Nolen has embarked on the transformation of this organization in the service of the field with thoughtfulness and a vision to the future with a guiding ethos of equity. We are engaged with our local arts agency members and extended colleagues in the spirit of supporting the entire arts ecosystem and individual artists. Rez and Kiran set the stage with their engaging and beautiful performance tonight. Stephen gave us an insightful introduction to Ayad and the historical context of the lecture's namesake, Nancy Hanks. And before I conclude, I want to thank all of you here in the audience and those who are streaming live. We all experienced something very special tonight. Together as a community, we are inspired by the

Together as a community, we are inspired by the power of the arts and the power of tonight's incredible artist to educate, motivate, and elevate what we all passionately hold true to believe—that the arts are a national asset.

power of the arts and the power of tonight's incredible artist to educate, motivate, and elevate what we all passionately hold true to believe—that the arts are a national asset.

If you want to share tonight's presentation with friends or watch it again, it will be posted on the Americans for the Arts website, and I hope you do share it. This was an important voice tonight.

With that, the presentation and the evening is closed. Thank you so much for coming and have a good night.

ABOUT THE LECTURER



Ayad Akhtar is a novelist and playwright. His work has been published and performed in over two dozen languages. He is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Edith Wharton Citation of Merit for Fiction, and an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Akhtar is the author of *Homeland Elegies* (Little, Brown & Co.), which *The Washington Post* called “a tour de force” and *The New York Times* called “a beautiful novel...that had echoes of *The Great Gatsby* and that circles, with pointed intellect, the possibilities and limitations of American life.” His first novel, *American Dervish* (Little, Brown & Co.), was published in over 20 languages. As a playwright, he has written *Junk* (Lincoln Center, Broadway; Kennedy Prize for American Drama, Tony nomination); *Disgraced* (Lincoln Center, Broadway; Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Tony nomination); *The Who & The What* (Lincoln Center); and *The Invisible Hand* (NYTW; Obie Award, Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Award, Olivier, and Evening Standard nominations).

Among other honors, Akhtar is the recipient of the Steinberg Playwrighting Award, the Nestroy Award, the Erwin Piscator Award, as well as fellowships from the American Academy in Rome, MacDowell, the Sundance Institute, and Yaddo, where he serves as a Board Director. Additionally, Ayad is a Board Trustee at New York Theatre Workshop, and PEN America, where he serves as President. In 2021, Akhtar was named the New York State Author, succeeding Colson Whitehead, by the New York State Writers Institute.

THE AFTER PARTY



Americans for the Arts Board Chair Julie Muraco with Americans for the Arts Action Fund Board Chair Nancy Stephens.



Ayad Akhtar with Americans for the Arts board member Ravi Rajan.



Americans for the Arts President & CEO Nolen V. Bivens with actress and director Allyson Tucker.



Nolen Bivens gratefully thanks Ayad Akhtar for delivering an amazing speech.



Americans for the Arts board members (L-R) Ravi Rajan, Dorothy McSweeney, Nolen Bivens, Julie Muraco, Nancy Stephens, and Marc Folk.



Ayad Akhtar speaks with Americans for the Arts colleagues from the National Independent Venue Association (L-R) Rev. Moose, Jim Brunberg, and Sean Watterson.

ABOUT THE PRESENTER

With more than 60 years of service, Americans for the Arts is dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts. From offices in Washington, D.C., the organization provides programs designed to:

1. Help build environments in which the arts and arts education can thrive and contribute to more vibrant and creative communities.
2. Support the generation of meaningful public and private sector policies and increased resources for the arts and arts education..
3. Build individual awareness and appreciation of the value of the arts and arts education..



To achieve its goals, Americans for the Arts centers equity in all organizational practices, interactions, and programming in both approach and outcomes. The organization advocates equitably by ensuring representation of all communities; and partners with local, state, and national arts organizations, government agencies, business leaders, individual philanthropists, educators, and funders. While local arts agencies comprise Americans for the Arts' core constituency, the organization also supports a diverse variety of partner networks with particular interests in public art, united arts fundraising, arts education, local and state advocacy networks, and leadership development.

Through national awareness campaigns and local outreach, Americans for the Arts strives to motivate and mobilize opinion leaders and decision-makers. Americans for the Arts produces annual events that heighten national visibility for the arts, including the National Arts Awards; the Arts and Business Partnership Awards; and the Public Leadership in the Arts Awards (in cooperation with The United States Conference of Mayors), which honors elected officials in local, state, and federal government. Americans for the Arts also hosts Arts Advocacy Day annually on Capitol Hill, convening arts advocates from across the country to advance federal support of the arts and arts education. For more information, please visit AmericansForTheArts.org.

ABOUT OUR PARTNERS AND SPONSORS

The Rosenthal Family Foundation (Jamie Rosenthal Wolf, David Wolf, Rick Rosenthal, and Nancy Stephens) are proud to support the Americans for the Arts 34th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy. Established by Richard and Hinda Rosenthal, the Foundation embodies the belief that individuals fortunate enough to receive unusual benefits from a society have the distinct obligation to return meaningful, tangible support to that society—in the form of creative energy as well as funding. The Foundation encourages activity and commentary concerned with constructive social change and recognizes and rewards excellence in individuals and organizations nationwide. Americans for the Arts is particularly grateful to Hinda Rosenthal, who approached the organization about her foundation becoming a sponsor of the Nancy Hanks Lecture 21 years ago, and whose extraordinary support helped the program to flourish and grow into a pre-eminent national forum for dialogue about arts policy.

Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck is one of the nation's leading lobbying firms, offering a bipartisan team with full-service lobbying, public policy and legal representation that helps companies, associations, nonprofits, and other organizations interpret federal government actions, solve challenges, and seize opportunities. Brownstein's government relations team offers comprehensive services before Congress, federal agencies, and regulatory bodies, as well as at state and local levels throughout the country.

AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS LEADERSHIP

Under the leadership of President and CEO **Nolen V. Bivens**, Americans for the Arts' governing and advisory bodies are as follows:

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ABOUT THE NANCY HANKS LECTURE

Nancy Hanks was president of Americans for the Arts from 1968–1969, when she was appointed chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, a position she held for eight years. Until her death in 1983, she worked tirelessly to bring the arts to prominent national consciousness. During her tenure at the National Endowment for the Arts, the agency's budget grew 1,400 percent. This year marks the 34th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy, established to honor her memory and to provide an opportunity for public discourse at the highest levels on the importance of the arts and culture to our nation's well-being.

PAST NANCY HANKS LECTURERS

- 2022 Ayad Akhtar, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author and President of PEN America
- 2020 Vijay Gupta, Violinist and Social Justice Advocate
- 2019 Rita Moreno, Award-Winning Actor, Singer, Dancer, Author, Humanitarian, Civil Rights Activist, and Hispanic Heritage Trailblazer
- 2018 Lonnie G. Bunch III and Richard D. Parsons, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture
- 2017 Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation
- 2016 John Maeda, American designer and technologist
- 2015 Norman Lear, groundbreaking television producer, author, and social activist
- 2014 Maureen Dowd, op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*
- 2013 Yo-Yo Ma, acclaimed musician and arts educator
- 2012 Alec Baldwin, actor and arts advocate
- 2011 Kevin Spacey, actor and Artistic Director of the Old Vic Theatre
- 2010 Joseph P. Riley Jr., Mayor of Charleston, South Carolina
- 2009 Wynton Marsalis, Artistic Director, Jazz at Lincoln Center
- 2008 Daniel Pink, best-selling author and innovator
- 2007 Robert MacNeil, broadcast journalist and author
- 2006 William Safire, columnist and author
- 2005 Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker
- 2004 Doris Kearns Goodwin, journalist and author
- 2003 Robert Redford, artist and activist
- 2002 Zelda Fichandler, Founding Director of Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and Chair of the Graduate Acting Program at New York University
- 2001 Frank Rich, op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*
- 2000 Terry Semel, past Chairman and Co-CEO of Warner Bros. and Warner Music Group
- 1999 Wendy Wasserstein, playwright
- 1998 Dr. Billy Taylor, jazz musician and educator
- 1997 Alan K. Simpson, former U.S. Senator
- 1996 Carlos Fuentes, author
- 1995 Winton Malcolm Blount, Chairman of Blount, Inc., philanthropist, and former U.S. Postmaster General
- 1994 David McCullough, historian
- 1993 Barbara Jordan, former U.S. Congresswoman
- 1992 Franklin D. Murphy, former CEO of the Times Mirror Company
- 1991 John Brademas, former U.S. Congressman and President Emeritus of New York University
- 1990 Maya Angelou, poet
- 1989 Leonard Garment, Special Counsel to Presidents Nixon and Ford
- 1988 Arthur Schlesinger Jr., historian and special assistant to President Kennedy



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