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Growing Up in a CETA City

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The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funded artists and culture workers from 1974 to 1982. In San Francisco, the work of its beneficiaries uniquely served to visualize and create space in the public sphere and in the public record for local communities and their diverse cultures. I moderated the panel "The Artivism of CETA" as part of the "Forgotten Federal Art Legacies: PWAP to CETA" convening of 2025, speaking with CETA artists Dewey Crumpler, Nancy Hom, Bob Hsiang, and Devorah Major.² Listening to them was like connecting the dots of my past growing up in San Francisco, where the concept of cultural labor was familiar. CETA was an integral part of my world, even if I did not know it at the time. I grew up sitting on the grass in the park, watching the Pickle Family Circus. From posters in people's homes, you knew Spanish words like "La Raza," and on the street you heard about International Women's Day. Someone was always doing a reading at a cultural center somewhere around town. Though the centers often had specific affiliations, their intersectionality taught us to see local culture in the context of the global. When CETA workers sought training and brought it back to San Francisco, just as Crumpler did in order to make his murals (fig. 1), they expanded our world through the visual motifs and styles they incorporated.



Fig. 1. Dewey Crumpler, *A Celebration of Black and Tan Fantasy*, 1984. Acrylic on concrete, 4500 square ft. African American Arts and Culture Complex, San Francisco. Photograph by Jacqueline Francis, 2025

I took a school bus home in the afternoons, and one of our first stops was Ping Yuen on Pacific, and then we would head down Columbus, passing Kearny Street—a street name I recognized from eavesdropping on grownups. Before dawn on August 4, 1977, San Francisco's law enforcement agencies launched a coordinated action to break through the human barricade of nonviolent protestors on Kearny Street in order to evict the mostly elderly residents of the International Hotel (I-Hotel). The raid on the residential hotel—a vital option for low-income residents—marked the end of a nine-year-long, anti-eviction campaign by more than one hundred Filipino and Chinese tenants, supported by labor unions, students, and community organizations (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Nancy Wong, "Hundreds of protesters linking arms in front of the International Hotel at 848 Kearny Street near Jackson Street in San Francisco, California try to prevent the San Francisco Sheriffs' deputies from evicting elderly tenants on August 4, 1977." Photo: Wikimedia Commons

I was thinking about the story of the I-Hotel after the panel as an example of the way CETA work was not always apparent when it was present. I did not know that the photographs and posters I remembered from the Kearny Street protests were not just made by protesters themselves but that they were part of the organized effort to use art as a political tool. In the storefronts of the I-Hotel were a handful of community organizations, including the Kearny Street Workshop, directed by printmaker Nancy Hom. During the campaign, Hom and her photographer husband, Bob Hsiang, were two of the many CETA artists who coordinated, visualized, documented, and amplified the outcry and cross-cultural solidarity inspired by the threat of eviction at the hotel.

Beyond the I-Hotel situation, where the community unified with artists to speak up for the Asian communities of Kearny Street, CETA funded other workers who sought to protect culture around San Francisco. This was a core aspect of CETA work in the Bay Area, which included the formation of newsletters to write and document cultural history and the promotion of training and production of arts, like mural making, evident in the work of Las Mujeres Muralistas and Precita Eyes Muralists in the Mission District. The I-Hotel situation was a perfect example of how CETA arts workers engaged in the labor of cultural activism: making photographs; speaking with tenants, artists, and activists; documenting the poetry inspired by the standoff; and conducting oral histories. But this was not just happening at the I-Hotel. Across town, Devorah Major was working to create and preserve a different

kind of community archive as the librarian at the Western Addition Cultural Center (where Dewey Crumpler served as Executive Director).

Looking back, I realize that CETA workers reminded us young people that the fight for civil rights was ongoing. Through their work, they showed us what it looked like in our everyday lives. The CETA program and CETA artists were part of the dynamic confluence of historic factors in San Francisco: a changing and expanded local labor movement committed to worker solidarity, the rise of neighborhood arts centers and cultural activism, and an intersectional justice movement. These factors called for a new kind of justice movement. The I-Hotel campaign is an example of how CETA work can be difficult to trace and of how it is best understood when articulated by those who lived it. We can look at the posters and photographs and see evidence of presence and action, but we need the participants' words to tell us how they came together, where they found creative inspiration, and what drove them to create new visual languages. The participants in the "The Artivism of CETA" panel that I moderated offered important insights into how being employed by CETA gave local artists, many representing communities historically excluded from the art world, the means to learn, design, pursue and perform community-based arts labor that transformed the arts, politics, and neighborhoods of San Francisco, as well as their own career trajectories and professional networks.

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Notes

¹ Makeda Best is a member of *Panorama's* Advisory Council.

² Makeda Best, Devorah Major, Nancy Hom, Bob Hsiang, and Dewey Crumpler, "Radical Work: The Artivism of CETA," roundtable presented for the Living New Deal at California College of the Arts, March 8, 2025, video, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/BBnEp90YAeA?si=DjaM4KMxnZLqHnIQ>.