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Why Federally Funded Art?

Jacqueline Francis¹ and Mary Okin

How has the government supported expressive culture and the arts in the United States? This was the guiding question for a public convening we organized in March 2025: “Forgotten Federal Art Legacies: PWAP to CETA.”² Over two and a half days, artists, scholars, curators, and arts administrators discussed the history of government patronage and visited San Francisco public art sites, either built during the New Deal (1935–43) or funded by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) (1974–82).³ We wanted the convening to contribute to existing interdisciplinary histories of New Deal art—advanced in many scholarly publications and museum exhibitions to date—and to highlight what we had discovered ourselves through the Living New Deal’s Advocating for New Deal Art initiative, namely that CETA is an important and largely forgotten New Deal art legacy.

New Deal and CETA art projects were administered very differently, but federal funding in both their respective eras resulted in similar benefits for artists and the communities they served.⁴ The diversity of cultural production, cultural workers, and the prominent place of public art in the art world of the 1930s and 1970s are distinct from decades when federal funding for the arts was unavailable or more difficult to access. New Deal and CETA art history reveals what happens when a generation of artists is hired and encouraged to serve working-class communities rather than the narrower interests of the art market and large cultural institutions.

As we discovered, a key chapter in the story of CETA as a forgotten New Deal legacy took place right where we live. In 1974, the San Francisco Bay Area became the birthplace of CETA funding for the arts when local leaders used its Title VI funding, which was earmarked for community service positions, to hire artists.⁵ Qualifying Bay Area creatives specializing in the fields of literature, craft, and the visual and performing arts took up a range of civic assignments in neighborhood cultural centers and schools, the latter captured on the cover of a 1980 report documenting San Francisco CETA artists’ contributions to public education (fig. 1).⁶ As had been the case during the New Deal,

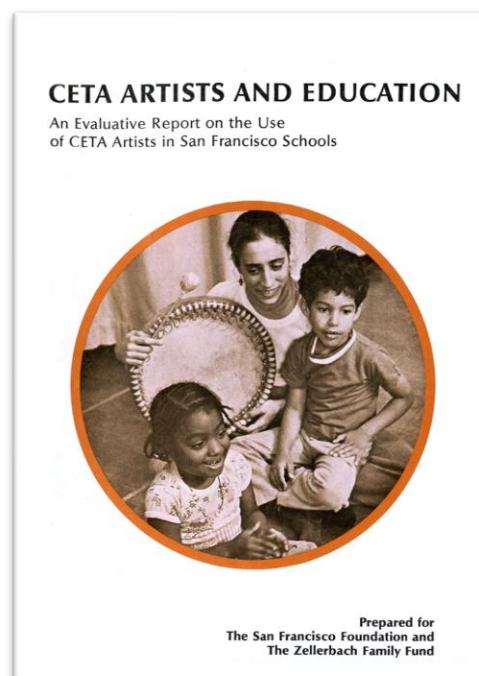


Fig. 1. Cover of *CETA Artists and Education* (San Francisco Foundation and the Zellerbach Family Fund, 1980)

applicants for federally funded jobs included painters, sculptors, photographers, filmmakers, poets, folklorists, playwrights, historians, curators, musicians, dancers, actors, archivists, and other creatives. Under CETA, they taught, made civic murals, designed and maintained public gardens, and organized cultural events, many of which continue to enrich San Francisco culture. They were paid to engage in service work and also received paid time to develop their art practices, grassroots arts organizations, and multidisciplinary creative networks.

In the planning process for the Forgotten Federal Art Legacies (FFAL) convening, we met John Kreidler, a central figure in San Francisco's CETA history. He wrote a master's thesis on New Deal art programs at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1960s; went on to pursue work for the federal government after graduating; and returned to the area to take on a graduate public policy internship at the San Francisco Arts Council.⁷ Familiar with federal hiring and employment administration, in 1973 he drafted the first proposal to use CETA funds to hire underemployed San Francisco artists. Alongside other arts administrators, among them the artist-educator Ruth Asawa, he witnessed the immediate economic and cultural impact of that proposal; there were more applications from local artists than CETA positions available, leading to the immediate creation of more jobs.⁸ San Francisco's successful pilot of CETA employment for artists sparked similar developments across the country. As CETA primary sources and recent CETA literature reveal, between 1974 and 1982 there were as many as twenty thousand CETA artists working in various service jobs in more than two hundred localities, both urban and rural, the largest federal investment in basic income for artists and in community-based practices since the New Deal.⁹ Recent exhibitions, including *ART/WORK: How the Government-Funded CETA Jobs Program Put Artists to Work* (New York, 2021), *Street Scene: CETA Murals, New Haven and the Late 1970s* (virtual, 2023), the Delaware Art Museum's upcoming survey *Citizen Artist* (2026), and a new iteration of *ART/WORK* (New York), raise awareness about the variety and breadth of CETA's impact on local and national culture.¹⁰

The essays in this Colloquium present responses by five FFAL participants who reflect on New Deal and CETA history and the stakes of federally funded art. In his essay, "Sargent Johnson's *Athletics: A Modernist Experiment in Public Art*," art historian John Bowles, who led FFAL's tours of Johnson's public art projects in San Francisco, shares some reflections on Johnson's monumental relief sculpture at George Washington High School and the questions about federal funding that it raises. In "ART/WORK: Civic Imagination and the Legacy of the CETA Art Programs," curators Jodi Wayneberg and Molly Garfinkel discuss their research into the national story of CETA, presented at greater length in their [CETA Arts Curator Lecture](#).¹¹ Wayneberg and Garfinkel assert that the legacy of CETA "continues in community arts practices, in artist-led organizing, in the ongoing struggle to define cultural work as civic work."

Art historian Makeda Best, a San Francisco native, moderated FFAL's "[Radical Work: The Activism of CETA](#)," a roundtable discussion that featured painter and art professor Dewey Crumpler, San Francisco poet laureate Devorah Major, printmaker and curator Nancy Hom, and photographer Bob Hsiang.¹² Writing about her childhood understanding of the city's cultural landscape in "Growing Up in a CETA City," Best focuses on the 1977 forced eviction of tenants at the International Hotel in San Francisco. This mixed-use, low-income complex housed the CETA-funded Kearny Street Workshop, where Hom, Hsiang, and other artists worked. In "Federal Funding, Local Practice, and Teaching Art History

Through CETA in San Francisco," art historian Elizabeth Fair considers insights she gained about the role of CETA in Hom's career and in local Asian American arts and historic preservation organizations. Fair envisions teaching an art history course modeled on the FFAL convening's engagement in site visits and conversations with CETA elders.

Finally, Deborah Cullinan, a leading arts administrator mentored by Kreidler, moderated FFAL's "[Intangible Legacies of Public Art](#)" roundtable. The panelists were CETA artist contemporaries Susan Cervantes and Rhodessa Jones, along with Gilda Posada, an artist-curator-scholar who was mentored by CETA participants at the Mission Cultural Center and Mission Grafica.¹³ Posada's print *ARISE* (fig. 2) pictures a scene of public classroom education, a form of community-based labor that CETA art programs supported. As Posada advocates, looking back at CETA's accomplishments means "serving as a bridge" between the generations, learning firsthand about how artists gained "the freedom to just be artists and support the self-liberation, the self determination that stands out of the civil rights that our communities were fighting for."¹⁴ In her essay, "Investing in Artists: Ripples of Return," Cullinan champions intergenerational dialogue and describes CETA's ongoing impact on her career, the Bay Area arts community, and recent efforts to pilot basic income programs for cultural workers modeled after CETA. Cullinan has argued for federal adoption of such frameworks, because there are ample resources to fund them nationally. At FFAL, she spoke of the tenfold return on investment when communities hire artists and demonstrated the need to enable artists to "dream bigger."

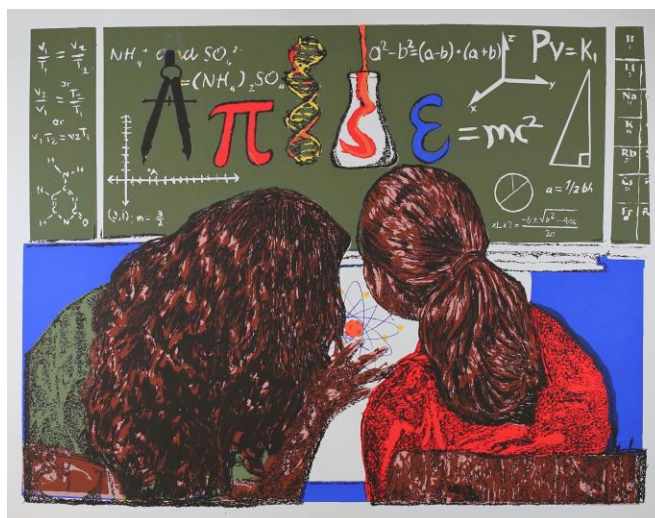


Fig. 2. Gilda Posada, *ARISE*, 2013. Silkscreen on paper, 28 x 42 in. Taller Arte del Nuevo Amanecer, Poster Archive. Photo: Carlos Jackson

As scholars, we are interested in the historical stakes of such recommendations. With the closing of the New Deal art programs, allied arts professionals (including scholars) advocated fiercely for the expansion of public art education, establishing or growing academic departments and studio art programs.¹⁵ They did so in the belief that providing general access to art making, art education, and art history inoculated the public against fascism and nurtured a healthy democracy. Decades later, CETA artists and administrators, who came of age during the Civil Rights era, shaped different and more sustainable grassroots relationships between the government, art, and art education that

outlasted CETA itself. Elders remind us that although their time with CETA was brief, it enabled them to forge local and national coalitions and influential arts and arts education projects that continue to merge art practice with community activism. Prominent examples include Judy Baca's Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) and the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* in Southern California, as well as Lou Bellamy's Penumbra Theatre Company in Saint Paul, Minnesota.¹⁶ Beyond CETA, there are other federally funded art history throughlines to consider. COVID-19 emergency relief measures, which funded artists during a pandemic-driven economic shutdown, and the General Services Administration (GSA)'s Art in Architecture program, which has quietly commissioned new art for federal buildings since 1972, offer two other areas of research in response to the question "Why federally funded art?"¹⁷

We see such scholarly investigations as a useful context for navigating our present. In the months since our FFAL convening, funding for arts, cultural, and educational institutions, federal agencies, and individual artists and researchers has been cut with devastating effects. The impact—from loss of livelihoods to threats facing collections, data preservation, and interpretation—ushers in a time of crisis for our labor sector that may rival the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Great Recession of the 1970s. The past shows us that in such trying times key individuals shaped US arts policy with a knowledge of art history that informed their interventions, such as the federal patronage of the arts and culture under the New Deal and CETA. As an exhaustive report on the impacts of CETA produced by the US Department of Labor in 1981 asserts, "Most significantly, the WPA established and CETA reaffirmed the importance of 'creative work,' within the social and economic fabric of the nation . . . [and] demonstrated the power of the cultural arena to provide jobs for thousands of unemployed Americans."¹⁸ Can we pivot to center more stories about such federal policies and structural mechanisms that support emerging artists developing their skills and talents alongside established artists and elders? Today, ninety years after the New Deal and fifty years after CETA first used federal funds to hire thousands of artists, we join in solidarity with this Colloquium's writers and other allies interested in such research and intergenerational dialogue.

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Panorama Editors' Note: See more about the history of public art and the WPA in this issue in [this research note by Robert Cherney](#).

Notes

¹ Coauthor Jacqueline Francis is a member of Panorama's Advisory Council.

² The "Forgotten Federal Art Legacies: PWAP to CETA" convening was organized by the Living New Deal at the California College of the Arts, March 6–8, 2025 with funding from a Terra Foundation for American Art Convening Grant, a California Humanities Quick Grant, and individual donors. The idea for hosting a

convening that examines the intertwined histories of the New Deal and CETA was inspired by "Art History in Search of a Historian" (February 17, 2023), a 2023 College Art Association Annual Conference session organized by Virginia Maksymowicz and Blaise Tobia, former CETA artists and co-founders of the CETA Arts Legacy Project. The session aimed to raise awareness about CETA's legacy and recruit historians specializing in American art to research, write, and organize scholarly projects about CETA's forgotten art history.

³ A summary of the convening's talks and tours, recordings of them, as well as CETA teaching resources are available at "Forgotten New Deal Legacies: CETA's Federally Funded Artists (1974–1982)," *Living New Deal*, updated October 6, 2025, <https://livingnewdeal.org/art-preservation/ceta>.

⁴ John Kreidler contributed content to the Living New Deal website, defining the differences in the administration and objectives of New Deal and CETA unemployment programs for artists; see sections "San Francisco CETA Arts Program Key Features," "Origins and Features of CETA Arts, and Links to the New Deal Art Programs," and "Comparison of Major Public Service Jobs Programs that Employed Artists: WPA and CETA" (chart) at "Forgotten New Deal Legacies," *Living New Deal*. See also John Kreidler, "The CETA Years, 1975–1980," in *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*, ed. Daniell Cornell and Elisa Urbanelli (University of California Press, 2006), 264–67.

⁵ Kreidler, "The CETA Years"; Stephen Brown, "The Public Artist Returns," reprinted in US Department of Labor, Employment, and Training Administration, *The Partnership of CETA and the Arts* (National Policy Institute, 1978), also available in "The CETA Arts Sourcebook: Some Primary and Secondary Sources about CETA Art History," *Living New Deal*, updated October 6, 2025, <https://livingnewdeal.org/art-preservation/ceta/#sourcebook>.

⁶ Most of this report's photographs are attributed to Allen Nomura of the San Francisco Art Commission's Neighborhood Arts Program.

⁷ John Kreidler, "CETA and the WPA: Making Public Art in Hard Times," *Living New Deal*, August 30, 2024, <https://livingnewdeal.org/ceta-and-the-wpa-making-public-art-in-hard-times>.

⁸ Kreidler, "CETA and the WPA."

⁹ On CETA's national history, see Marisol Riojas, *The Accidental Arts Supporter: An Assessment of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)*, CSRC Research Report, no. 8 (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2006), https://www.chicano.ucla.edu/files/crr_08May2006_001.pdf; and Jodi Waynberg and Molly Garfinkel, *ART/WORK: How the Government-Funded CETA Jobs Program Put Artists to Work* (Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space and City Lore Gallery, 2021), https://citylore.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ArtWork_Publication_FINAL.pdf. See also Virginia Maksymowicz and Blaise Tobia, "The Forgotten Federally Employed Artists," *Hyperallergic*, December 26, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/610071/the-forgotten-federally-employed-artists>; and Virginia Maksymowicz and Blaise Tobia, "CETA: Connecting Artists and Communities," *Living New Deal*, September 25, 2024, <https://livingnewdeal.org/ceta-connecting-artists-and-communities>.

¹⁰ See Laura A. Macaluso, "CETA Murals Remembered: At the Intersection of Public Art and Public History," *Humanities for All: Explore the Publicly Engaged Humanities!*, March 15, 2023, <https://humanitiesforall.org/blog/ceta-murals-remembered-at-the-intersection-of-public-art-and-public-history>; and the digital exhibition curated by Lori Goldstein and Alison Verplaeste, "New Haven Ceta Murals," *Public Art Archive*, December 4, 2024, <https://explore.publicartarchive.org/new-haven-ceta-murals>. *Citizen Artist* opens at the Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, on April 11, 2026, and runs through September 19, 2026. The first iteration of *ART/WORK* focused on New York CETA projects and debuted at City Lore Gallery and Artist Alliance Incorporated's Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space. A traveling exhibition focused on CETA's national history, the second iteration of *ART/WORK* is scheduled to begin at the James Gallery at the CUNY Graduate Center in the fall of 2026. See also Molly Garfinkel and Jodi Waynberg, "The Job We Wanted For Life: Suzanne Jackson and CETA," in *Suzanne Jackson: What is Love?*, ed. Kellie Jones, Paulina Pobocha, and Taylor Jasper (Princeton University Press, 2025), 114–17. The exhibition opened at SFMOMA on September 27, 2025, and runs through March 1, 2026.

¹¹ Molly Garfinkel and Jodi Waynberg, "CETA Curators Lecture + Q & A," lecture presented for the Living New Deal at California College of the Arts, March 7, 2025, video, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/Netl4nVyekY?si=V9O6lnlJOajF5lBa>.

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- ¹² See 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>.
- ¹³ See Deborah Cullinan, Susan Cervantes, Rhodessa Jones, and Gilda Posada, "Intangible Legacies of Public Art," roundtable presented for the Living New Deal at California College of the Arts, March 8, 2025, video, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/M8zBragHMXy?si=sNIUCc2pgXYrn8HQ>.
- ¹⁴ Cullinan et al, "Intangible Legacies of Public Art."
- ¹⁵ See Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (University of California Press, 2010).
- ¹⁶ Judy Baca's history with CETA was featured, along with that of dance historian Colleen Hooper, in Judy Baca et al., "CETA: The Forgotten Federally-Funded Artists: The Artist's Experience," webinar for the Living New Deal, video, YouTube, October 16, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n_PYQdNShc. Lou Bellamy's history with CETA was featured along with Ted Berger's reflections about managing New York City's Cultural Council Foundation project in Lou Bellamy et al., "Forgotten Federally-Funded Artists: CETA Impact on the Arts and Community," online webinar for the Living New Deal, video, YouTube, October 21, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htliQXndjZo>.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, "Covid Command Artists in Residence," San Francisco Arts Commission, May 6, 1970, <https://www.sfartscommission.org/content/covid-command-artists-residence>. The GSA celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Art in Architecture program in 2022. Altogether, the program has commissioned more than five hundred artworks nationally.
- ¹⁸ Donna Startzel with E. Patrice Walker, *The CETA Arts and Humanities Experience—CETA AHEAD Project (Arts and Humanities Employment Analysis and Documentation)* (US Department of Labor, 1981), <https://livingnewdeal.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CETA-Monograph.pdf>.