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ART/WORK: Civic Imagination and the Legacy of the CETA Arts Programs

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Since 2017, we have been researching the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and its generative but often overlooked impact on artists and cultural workers in the United States.

Our curatorial project [ART/WORK](#) began as an oral history initiative and grew into a multiyear national inquiry into the legacy of CETA's cultural programs. In 2021–22, we presented an [exhibition](#) of the same name focused on the CETA-funded arts projects of the 1970s in New York City. The show opened in the shadow of the Omicron variant, as artists and arts institutions struggled to recover from the economic losses of the COVID-19 pandemic. In that moment, CETA's story—a history of federal investment in cultural labor—felt both urgent and unfamiliar, an alternative to the scarcity-driven frameworks we have come to accept as the norm.

ART/WORK seeks to reposition CETA not as an anomaly but as a continuation of the political, aesthetic, and civic momentum of the 1960s and early '70s. Revisited through the lens of CETA, the pluralism of that era takes on a new dimension: artists working across media, in public spaces, in community centers and city agencies, often outside the market and beyond the museum. Many were at the vanguard of institutional critique and reform, challenging the absence of artists of color, queer artists, and women in mainstream arts leadership, collections, and exhibitions and imagining new forms of cultural infrastructure. CETA did not invent these practices, but it sustained them at scale and in public (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Classroom puppetry workshop run by a CETA-funded de Young Museum teaching artist, c. Spring 1979. Photo: Bob Hsiang

Since 2022, with funding from the Mellon and Warhol foundations, we have built an extensive oral history archive documenting the impact of CETA arts programming in case-study cities, including New York; San Francisco; Los Angeles; Chicago; Washington, DC; Baltimore; Whitesburg, KY; Atlanta; and Kingston, NY. The archive includes more than 160 historical and contemporary audio and video interviews with former CETA artists, administrators, and cultural workers, as well as present-day advocates working to reimagine artist workforce programs today. This growing body of research will inform the first major traveling exhibition on the national impact of the CETA arts programs, along with an accompanying publication.

The exhibition will visualize and explain how CETA played a critical role in scaffolding a cultural infrastructure across the country. Both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were established in 1965, less than a decade before CETA funds were mobilized to support culture workers. In several of our *ART/WORK* case-study sites, where we conduct archival and oral history research, federal funds enabled the creation or expansion of local arts councils, many of which still sustain local practitioners and organizations. Our research reveals how CETA helped seed an infrastructure for cultural work that has outlasted its brief window of federal support.

Our curatorial and research practices are grounded in the values that shape our institutional work. At [Artists Alliance Inc.](#) (AAI; Waynberg), an artist-founded organization, and at [City Lore](#) (Garfinkel), a cultural advocacy and education nonprofit, we support artists and cultural workers whose practices are embedded in place, memory, and civic life.



Figs. 2, 3. Left: Installation view of *ART/WORK: How the Government-Funded CETA Program Put Artists to Work* at Cuchifritos Gallery, New York, December 10, 2021–March 19, 2022. Photo: Brad Farwell; right: Installation view of *ART/WORK: How the Government-Funded CETA Program Put Artists to Work* at City Lore, New York, December 10, 2021–March 19, 2022. Photo: George Malave

At AAI, this includes presenting exhibitions at Cuchifritos Gallery inside Essex Market in New York (fig. 2), a New Deal-era site of daily neighborhood activity and exchange. This setting reflects a core tenet of our approach: that culture work is most impactful when it is supported in communal spaces. In many ways, AAI's mission echoes the civic commitments of CETA arts programs, advocating for the visibility and sustainability of artistic labor within everyday life and valuing experimentation outside market conditions.

City Lore, founded in 1985, serves as New York City's center for urban folk and traditional culture (fig. 3). Its mission—to foster living cultural heritage through public programming, education, and advocacy for cultural equity—resonates deeply with the pluralism at the heart of CETA. Through initiatives such as the People's Hall of Fame, the POEMobile, citywide arts education, and a community gallery, City Lore documents and uplifts grassroots knowledge ways, amplifying the practices, stories, and traditions of historically marginalized communities. This work reinforces our understanding of cultural labor as a form of public memory and civic belonging.

ART/WORK builds on these approaches and on the legacy of CETA itself. Our research is shaped by the wisdom of previous generations of artists and arts advocates who organized for public investment in cultural labor and by the conditions that continue to structure our own work. The values that guide this project—mutuality, cooperation, decentering, and the belief that all labor is valuable—are not just interpretive tools. They are working principles that shape how we collaborate, advocate, and locate ourselves within a continuum of cultural stewardship.

A central aim of *ART/WORK* is to resurface these CETA histories and records with care: to amplify the voices of those who shaped and benefited from the program and to ask what public investment in cultural labor could look like now. In a moment when arts workers face increasing precarity and when histories of government support are at risk of political erasure, we believe it is essential to revisit and retell this story.

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/WORK* draws a throughline from the New Deal to CETA, and to the present moment, insisting that these histories are not closed chapters but working propositions. The project serves as a live inquiry, one that asks what a durable, publicly supported arts and humanities workforce might require and what it could make possible.

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