## IN MY SECRET LIFE: (NEARLY) FIFTY YEARS IN PURSUIT OF A NEW WPA

Arlene Goldbard
with Caron Atlas and Jeff Chang
Imagining America 22 October 2020

This is the text of a talk I gave as part of receiving the 2019 Randy Martin Spirit Award from Imagining America, interspersed with the slides I shared. While I hoped to present it in person at the 2020 annual conference in New Orleans, COVID-19 had other plans. This online presentation was followed by a discussion with Caron Atlas and Jeff Chang, which is well worth watching. You can see the video of the entire 90-minute session here.

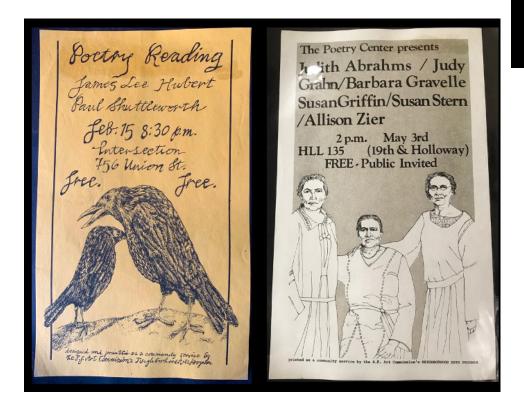
My aim in this session is to follow one specific thread in the tapestry of cultural organizing since the 70s, specifically artists and activists, including myself, trying to bring about a new WPA. We were inspired by the federal Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, which employed people to rebuild physical and cultural infrastructure at a greatly stressed time in our collective history.

I am going to invite you on a stroll down memory lane, then open things up to my friends Caron Atlas and Jeff Chang, who will have observations and questions of their own, especially on what seems to me the challenge of the day: building a movement for such a program should Biden be elected.

**One note:** The WPA was highly imperfect. Amazing accomplishments, major pitfalls. I am not idealizing the WPA of the 1930s. If you're looking for a discussion about its achievements and flaws, plenty of other people have written about both.

I am inspired by John Berger's observation that "the past is not for living in. It is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act."

What can we learn from this aspect of the past about how to act today?



The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past.

Consequently, fear of the present leads to mystification of the past. The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act.

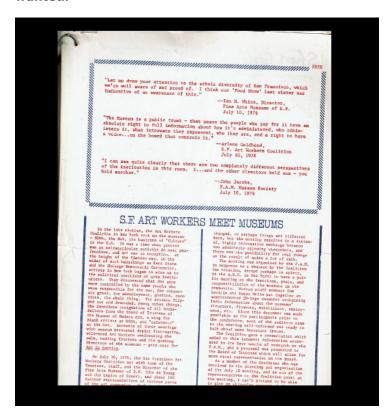
John Berger, Ways of Seeing, 1972

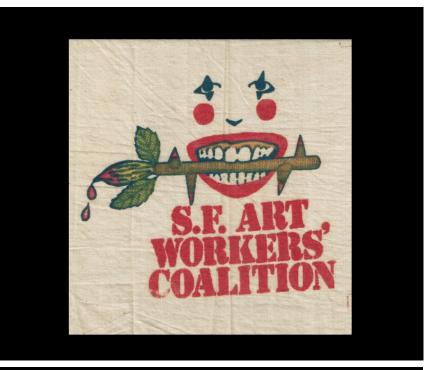
From 1971-73, I worked as a designer and printer for the San Francisco Art Commission's Neighborhood Arts Program, a city agency started in the sixties to engage people in neighborhood-based creative projects. I churned out mimeographed flyers for arts workshops and poetry readings, plays and concerts in San Francisco neighborhoods. I got to know many people involved in community-based arts work.

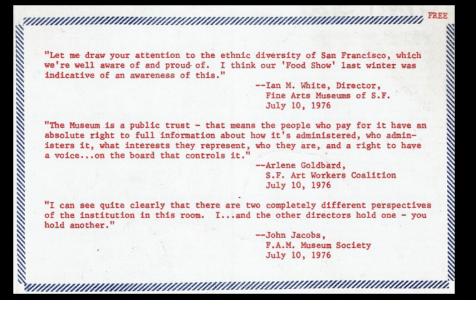
It was an interesting time in Bay Area cultural organizing. Many artists thought we should have a say in cultural policy and funding. I was an organizer for the San Francisco Art Workers Coalition, a group of artists from many disciplines and practices: performing artists from the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Pickle Family Circus, and many other groups; community muralists, community gardeners, musicians, filmmakers, all of us coming together to focus on accountability for public cultural spending and policy.

For example, we did a study of the Trustees of the Fine Arts Museums, taxpayer-funded institutions that operated like a private business. We mapped their interlocking business interests and indifference to local culture, and met with the Trustees in July 1976 to demand changes.

You will be unsurprised to learn that we didn't get what we wanted.







## But before any of that happened, we started the newsletter you've seen in the last two slides, the *Bicentennial Arts Biweekly*.

Our impetus was the upcoming Bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976, which was being lavishly funded to create an idea of America we found altogether too white, male, straight, and rightwing. The first goal was to create an alternative People's Bicentennial. Beyond that, the *Biweekly* covered a vast range of cultural organizing. It was researched, written, and produced by artists volunteering because we thought it was important to stand for the public interest in culture.

This is Geoff Hoyle and Larry Pisoni of the Pickle Family Circus, one of the groups that got in on the ground floor of the phenomenon that became CETA arts jobs: the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. It got to San Francisco through a guy called John Kreidler, who had interned at the Office of Management and Budget in DC. He came to work at NAP with the idea that the new jobs programs he'd heard about could be applied to community arts.





Here are a few lines from a January 1975 Biweekly article:

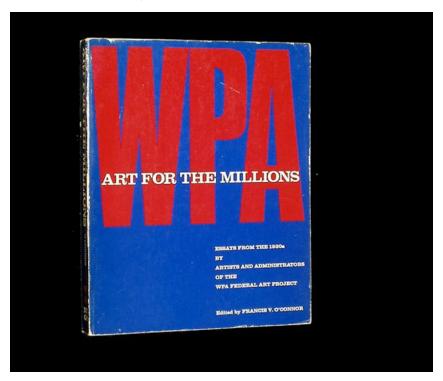
"Unemployed artists are being hired with federal funds in San Francisco in a program reminiscent of the WPA during the 30s Depression.

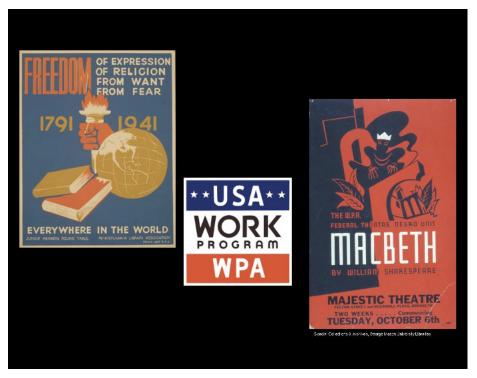
"This week 23 artists began work at the Neighborhood Arts Program and the DeYoung Museum Art School. They are being paid approximately \$600 a month under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). These jobs are guaranteed for 6 months and can be extended.

"Another 90 artist positions are expected to open in the next couple of days under the new Emergency Jobs Act signed by President Ford on New Year's Eve."

This opportunity catalyzed a great desire to discover what we could learn from the original WPA (Works Progress Administration), a massive relief program created in 1935 by the federal government in response to the Great Depression, when unemployment hit levels unequalled until today in America. It was a general relief program for people in many different types of work. And since the Depression dovetailed with major technological changes—for instance, thousands of performers were put out of work by the move from live theater and music to recordings and films—one of its largest parts was Federal One, comprising five different programs employing artists.

My fellow organizers and I began to study and to seek out WPA vets—this was less than 40 years after the WPA, so some were still around.





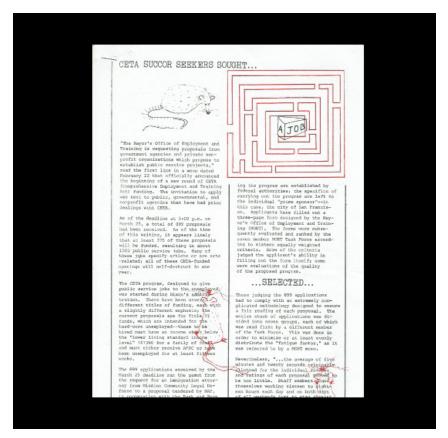
One high point was meeting with a writer called Francis O'Connor who had just published a WPA book, *Art for the Millions*.

He told us how after the WPA ended, surplus Art Project canvases had been baled and sold wholesale to plumbers to wrap pipes. But the paint melted and smelled, so the bales were tucked away in the back of a warehouse to be found a few decades later—including pictures by artists who later became famous, such as Jackson Pollock.

From the *Biweekly* of May 15, 1975:

"O'Connor's advice to CETA artists was, 'don't let the bureaucrats get their hands on your artwork,' lest it suffer the fate of the New York WPA painters' art. He was not optimistic about the present CETA-Manpower arts program, feeling it would end with the present administration and leave artists where they were. He proposed a guaranteed annual income for all citizens, regardless of occupation, rather than specific government arts subsidies, which he felt come with too many strings attached."

I have to say he had foresight.



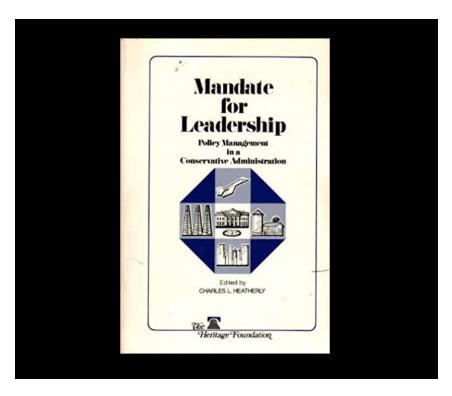


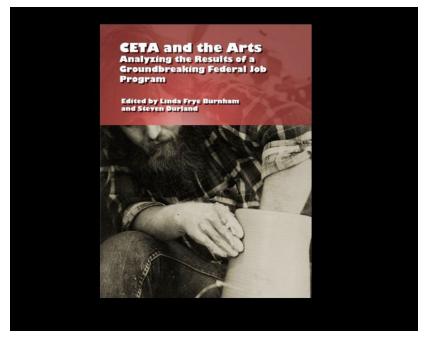
**CETA arts employment expanded through the 70s.** Here's a brief description from a June 1977 *Biweekly* of just one batch of jobs.

"As of the deadline at 5:00 pm on March 25, a total of 899 proposals had been received....It appears likely that at least 375 of these proposals will be funded, resulting in about 1500 public service jobs. Many of these jobs specify artists or are arts-related; all of these CETA-funded openings will self-destruct in one year."

Over time, the arts investment from CETA equaled about \$200 million a year (\$400 or \$500 million in current dollars).

There's some good CETA documentation available from Linda Frye Burnham and Steve Durland, who ran the Community Arts Network, an amazing resource for the field, now sadly defunct. This is one of the few books from them you can find on Kindle.





## When Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, everything changed.

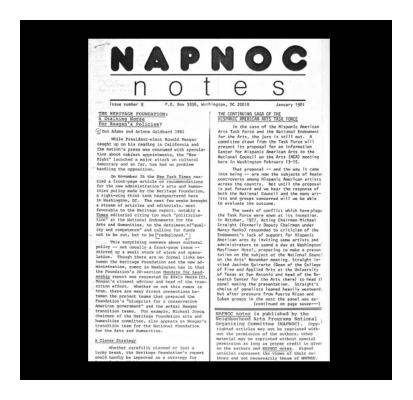
Reagan followed a roadmap the right-wing Heritage Foundation published in *Mandate for Leadership*.

By that time, I had moved to Washington as co-director of the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee (NAPNOC, later renamed the Alliance for Cultural Democracy—ACD). It was begun with a grant from the Department of Labor to study CETA arts jobs. So, I was sadly well-positioned to see what had been a growing movement reel from the shock of Reagan's election.

You couldn't read an advance copy of *Mandate for Leadership* unless you went to the Heritage Foundation office and under their supervision, copied out excerpts by hand—which we published in NAPNOC'S newsletter.

In those days, home computers were first emerging; people hadn't yet gotten used to life online. We tried to create a network based on mailing newsletters to a few hundred subscribers around the U.S. Everyone was desperate for information—which is kind of the opposite of now, when TMI is the watchword.





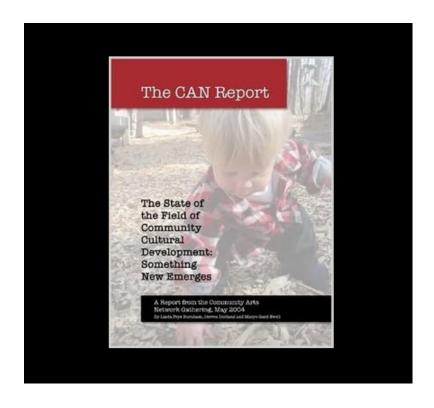
One of Reagan first steps was the elimination of public service employment—overnight. By April of his first year in office, the program has been axed, and many artists lost their jobs without warning.

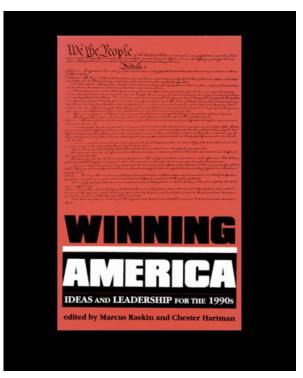
It was a huge blow to the community-based arts movement. Until then, every year there were little bits of new money and public programs and more people were understanding the importance of the work. CETA being cut off so quickly and completely was profoundly demoralizing. There was a lull in any sort of national organizing, though people continued their local work with as much energy as they could muster. At ACD, we tried to foment self-consciousness as a movement and propose next steps. But it was

really heavy lifting because it was such a demoralizing time.

Eventually I took a pause, turning to writing, painting, speaking, and dreaming rather than organizing.

As people began to recover from the Reagan years, there was more energy for policy ideas. In 1988, when it began to look like Jimmy Carter would succeed Reagan, I coauthored a chapter on "Cultural Democracy: A New Cultural Policy for the United States," in the Institute for Policy Studies' book *Winning America: Ideas and Leadership for the 1990s*, published by South End Press. Among other things, it called for a new WPA.



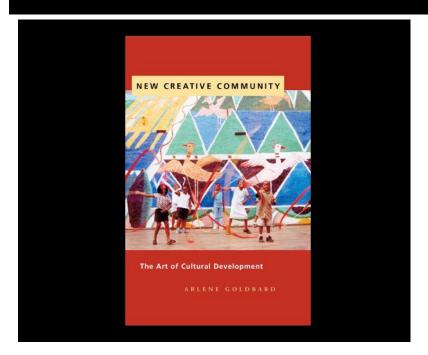


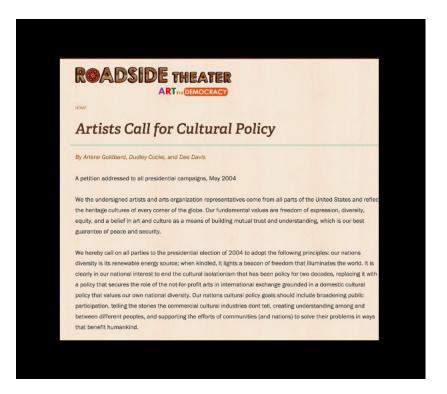
But I didn't really get on my WPA hobby horse again until 2004, after a lot of veteran cultural activists attended the Community Arts Network National Gathering, May 26-28, 2004, in Asheville, NC, which was described in The CAN Report.

I joined with Dee Davis and Dudley Cocke—who then both worked at Appalshop in Whitesburg, KY—to test the waters, seeing if we could get people interested in cultural policy questions. That was the next time I showed up as an advocate for a new WPA.

Let me read you a bit of a petition we wrote in May 2004 called "Artists Call for Cultural Policy," which is preserved on the Roadside Theater website.

Create Public Service Employment for Community Cultural Development. Cuts in state and municipal spending for cities, schools, parks, libraries, and arts organizations weaken social cohesion, endangering future generations rather than inviting them into cultural participation as a right of citizenship. Our nation needs a new federal initiative to underwrite public service jobs in cultural development, staffing local not-for-profit cultural institutions with citizens who are eager to be of community service. Funding should begin at US\$300 million per annum through the Department of Labor and/or other appropriate agencies, to return public service arts employment to the current-day equivalent of its pre-1980 level of US\$200 million federal dollars.





I quoted the Artists Call and wrote about the WPA and CETA in my book *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development,* which was published in 2006.

A few years later, Barack Obama was elected President, promising the nation recovery from what was called the Great Recession of 2008, triggered in the US by the collapse of the housing bubble, fueled by speculation in exotic derivatives and the subprime mortgage meltdown. This should have been a major turning-point in the history of neoliberalism, discrediting the notion of unending growth. But instead, "too big to fail" mostly prevailed, with huge bank bailouts and not much help for the average bear.

Before that became clear, though, many of us hoped that the new administration would invest in what we were calling cultural recovery. Four of us heard that there was someone working in the White House organizing meetings of activists. Caron Atlas, the late Claudine Brown, Billy Wimsatt (a mastermind behind today's Movement Voter Project), and I prevailed on Yosi Sergant—who was working with the White House's "summer of service" initiative promoting things like Americorps—to invite a delegation of artists and arts activists to the White House.

We didn't get anything out of the White House, but we did go to Busboys & Poets afterwards and divide into groups to talk about the issues we wanted to follow up on. Jeff Chang and I convened one on policy, and two things came out of that.

First, another petition. With a founding group of 36 people who had been at the White House meeting, we put out six points, one of which called for a new WPA.

"4. Put artists to work to support cultural recovery. We need a 'new WPA,' a public service jobs program addressing all our national goals—clean energy, excellent education, sound economy, good health and more. It should include putting artists and creative organizers to work for the common good using every art form and way of working: providing well-rounded education, sustaining and caring for the ill, engaging elders in creativity, rebuilding community infrastructure to reflect our best. Seventy-five years ago, the WPA supported five arts programs as part of FDR's program to recover from the Great Depression. It worked. Today, jobs are still the engine of prosperity; when tied to public purpose, no investment brings greater impact."





My companions here today, Caron Atlas and Jeff Change, both signed.

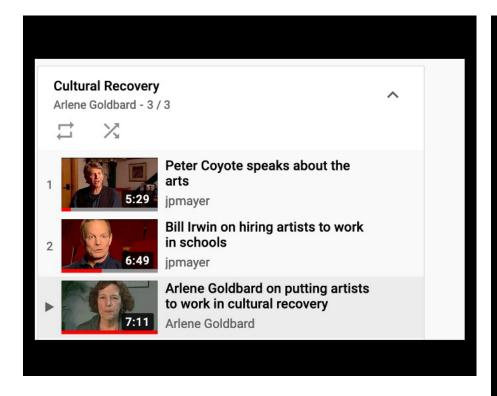
## This evolved into a project idea. Here's how we described it:

"Cultural Recovery is a project to build and sustain a coalition of artists, cultural organizations and their allies in other realms of social action, education and organizing. They would join to promote the democratic interest in culture, including democratic cultural policies and substantial public investment in community development, education and community service through the arts. Its centerpiece would be cultural recovery.net, an online center for information and organizing. While it would be home to a full range of initiatives to bring attention and resources to culture's mobilizing power, its first

targeted initiative would be a campaign to create a substantial, sustained public-sector investment in community service programs employing artists and cultural organizations as part of national recovery, WPA2."

The paper's appendix included several different approaches to structuring a new WPA. But since the Obama administration refused to try for anything like public service jobs so long as Republicans in Congress opposed that, it was just another good idea that disappeared for lack of political courage.

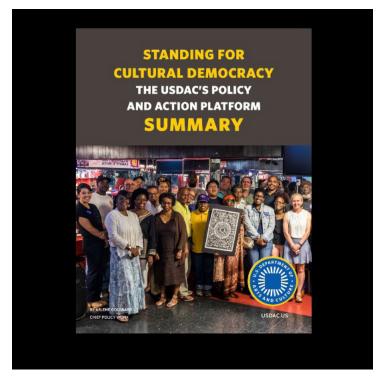
We hoped that getting these ideas into the national conversation could have long-lasting impact. I gave a lot of talks about a new WPA at that time, for instance: "A New WPA: Why a Sustainable Future Demands Cultural Recovery," Cultural Policy Center, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, October 2009. And I wasn't the only one talking about it. Peter Coyote, Bill Irwin, and I each made short videos with our personal pleas for cultural recovery.



In 2012, I met Adam Horowitz, who had the idea there should be something called the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, and one aim should be a "Culture Corps"—"Aha! I thought, a new WPA!" I signed on as Chief Policy Wonk, and worked with the USDAC until 2019, instigating its National Cabinet, authoring its policy documents and a great many guides, and coproducing many programs to promote culture in the public interest and the public interest in culture.



In 2016, the USDAC issued "Standing for Cultural Democracy: The USDAC's Policy and Action Platform." One of its ten points was "Institute a new public service jobs program, putting artists and others to work strengthening physical and cultural infrastructure."



**So here we are in 2020**. Again, I've been trying to drum up productive conversation about the fact that the economy needs even more stimulus than in 2009, infrastructure is in even worse shape, countless people are out of work and out of prospects, and artists, as one my colleagues liked to say back in the day, are "shovel-ready."

This summer I teamed up with my friend Michael Schwartz, a longtime cultural organizer and public artist, right after the draft Democratic Party platform was released. We asked platform committee members to include language we'd drafted calling for a new WPA. We hoped they'd be interested—especially since the platform draft mentioned neither art, artists, nor public service employment. We heard from one committee member that they'd tried to include public service

employment, but couldn't get the votes. When the final platform came out, there was a boilerplate paragraph pledging allegiance to the National Endowment for the Arts and other federal cultural agencies, but nothing more.

I asked IA to share with you the latest thing I've done, "The Arts and the State in Times of Crisis: The Prospect of a New WPA," a dialogue between myself and Francois Matarasso, a colleague based in the UK and France, exploring many forms of state support for arts work since the 1930s in the UK and US—and also a link to the recording of our recent international Zoom conversation on the subject.

So now I turn to you, looking toward the future instead of the past. I want to say a few things before we open this up to Caron and Jeff.

First, My primary work has been focused on cultural democracy, a social order in which every culture is recognized for its contributions, everyone is invited and acknowledged as a culture-maker and culture-bearer, and everyone feels equally welcome to create, communicate, and participate. Another way to look at this is full and universal cultural citizenship—not the kind that requires papers and passports, but the kind that understands cultural rights as fundamental and essential human rights.

Much of the most powerful work embodying these aims comes under the heading of community-based arts—also known as community arts, arts for social change, arts-based community development, or community cultural development, depending on the label you prefer. Artists place their gifts at the service of the self-determination and liberation of a community defined by geography, affinity, identity, or purpose. They work in community centers, after-school programs, correctional institutions, hospitals, senior centers, activist groups—everywhere, really—to cocreate music, writing, visual arts, dance, theater, media that expresses participants' concerns or aspirations, conveys their history, celebrates their communities' accomplishments—whatever expresses people's own words in their own voices, to paraphrase Paulo Freire.

This work must be experienced to be comprehended. People, including myself, have written a zillion words about it. But words can't convey what can be understood in an hour with a group of people discovering themselves and placing their own experience in the context of a collective story, making something beautiful and meaningful out of their own alienation or belonging, love or fear. Putting artists to work in public service across the country, especially in places otherwise lacking the wherewithal to support such work, would mean a quantum leap for this field.

Second, Community-based artists would be critical to the success of a new WPA, because their skills are perfectly suited to the project of recovery. Pick any of the essential aspects of recovery that stretch before us. Let's take creating a just transition to clean energy, for instance. That's often discussed in physical terms: supporting jobs in solar or wind energy for people transitioning out of fossil fuel-driven jobs. But no matter which aspect of the public good we are addressing, the work of artists is pivotal because to change the world, we have to change the story we hold. Addressing climate crisis has to seem doable, and people need to see meaningful roles for themselves in it. Community-based artists-who have skills in organizing and collaboration as powerful as their artistic abilities—know how to engage people in speaking their truths and how to braid those truths into new stories that open others' hearts and minds. Recovering from a time when people are afraid to leave their homes, reweaving social fabric, their work is essential.

Third, Public service employment has been an absolute nono in Congress since CETA, because Republicans so successfully promoted their critique and Democrats so obligingly caved. The Right said jobs should be a marketplace responsibility. They said previous jobs programs gave a platform to people with un-American ideas, that such jobs breed welfare cheaters and lazybones who'd rather be paid not to work. (We've just heard all these arguments against extending the unemployment insurance supplement during the pandemic.)

The counter-arguments are self-evident: unemployment is at levels unequaled since the Great Depression. Many thousands of people are unemployed or underemployed and need help. Under current conditions, many people want to do something they find meaningful, contributing to the public good, especially after a time of great

sacrifice. The needs are huge: to strengthen physical infrastructure, support a just energy transition, and repair our badly damaged social fabric. The exact shape and scope of a new program would have to fit the times, of course—I've laid out several models and I'm not the only one. But to succeed, it would have to triumph over those tired arguments.

The way I see it, only two things are needed to make a new WPA real: elected officials with enough spine to oppose the right's silly arguments; and cross-sector engagement and mobilization.

**Fourth, why cross-sector?** Special pleading for artists has never succeeded. Every program that has employed artists in the past has been universal, intended to support many types of unemployed or underemployed workers. Heeding this now would help to correct an idea that holds us back: that artists are more special and worthy than other types of workers—which is a really hard argument on which to build a partnership.

I can't understand why mainstream arts advocates haven't grasped this. They keep asking taxpayers to underwrite artists' specialness—support us, we're great, and here's a bunch of questionable economic data and secondary arguments to prove it! The result? The real value of the NEA budget today is significantly less than half what it was in 1980. I would like to see advocates form alliances with others who want to put people to work for social good and together create a universal program. It would be an antidote to the snobbery encoded in mainstream arts advocacy, which often makes people feel that they are deficient unless they adopt the tastes of the elite.

My colleague Francois Matarasso has pointed out that there is one exception to the universal approach that could conceivably work politically in the UK, and perhaps here as well. He refers to the

A Levels exam scandal. When British students couldn't gather to take these national exams, the government decided to give them scores based on things like how their school had done in the past or what their teachers thought their likely scores would be, and that disadvantaged students from low-income schools. Francois says that it "...led to a politically resonant moment in the UK during this pandemic. It touches millions of people. There is this sense that we are at risk of failing a generation if we don't help an entire generation get into the world, both through the exams and then getting them into work. That is a platform on which you can genuinely build a coalition of people who would care about that and say, we need a young people's employment initiative and you can tie it to environmental work, artwork, a whole set of stuff that is worth doing. And there are real jobs like that. Give young people a chance to do some good in the community. "

For many of you who teach, who've been bringing classes online, dealing with students and parents who feel cheated by what has happened to higher education, this may be especially resonant. How best could young people and their families be brought on board with a jobs program that employs them for the public good, giving them a route to the world of work?

Fifth, I hope this fifty-year stroll along one path of cultural organizing makes the point that socially engaged artists as a group have been ever-ready to take part in something that links the little stories of our lives and livelihoods to the big story of the economy, culture, and the body politic. Nowadays, much cultural organizing focuses on racial justice, gender justice, climate justice, the wicked problems that have seized national attention at last. I fear that too many people are thinking small: accepting the cultural

funding pie as it is, for instance, and arguing that it should be sliced differently. It's not that that's not true; it is absolutely true.

But I would like to us to be thinking much bigger. The U.S. is spending more than four annual National Endowment for the Arts budgets a day, seven days a week, on war. Our expenditure on policing, prisons, and the system that supports them beggars imagination.

I often ask three questions:

Who are we as a people?

What do we stand for?

How do we want to be remembered?

**Deducing our cultural policy from the way we spend our commonwealth is easy**: we evidently want to be remembered as the planet's biggest punishers. It's time for cultural advocates to stop focusing on reslicing the tiny arts funding pie—both public and private—and shift to the whole bakery, where the real magnitude of the problem comes into focus and a new WPA or a basic income grant becomes conceivable.

Finally, it wasn't until I took this trip down memory lane that I realized my presentation might be titled by someone a little more easily discouraged than myself, "(Nearly) Fifty Years in Pursuit of A Lost Cause." I admit that I am stubborn. But I chalk my persistence up to incredulity. I just haven't been able to bring myself to believe that after the terrible mess neoliberalism and Trump have made of our commonwealth, Biden or any other candidate would be cowed by the tired arguments against public service employment that have held sway since Reagan.

I'd be just as happy with a basic income grant. That was another of the ten points in the USDAC's 2016 policy and action platform. If

we don't get a new WPA now, perhaps I'll turn my attention to that for the next 50 years.

But in the meantime, let's talk about how we might put people to work for cultural recovery now.

[Caron Atlas and Jeff Chang spoke next; you can access their remarks in the recording of this session.]