

San Francisco Arts Commission

Statement on the San Francisco Arts Commission Restructuring

Good afternoon, my name is JD Beltran. I'm a native San Francisco resident who has lived here all of my life, (except for college).

As a child, I grew up being entranced and fascinated driving by the Bufano sculpture "Peace," installed before I was born. In Golden Gate Park, I played among the monuments and learned about historical figures. And now, as an adult, I am one of the few who actually LOOKS FORWARD to traveling to the airport – because the **public art** commissioned by the SFAC has transformed SFO into one of the most wonderful, top-ranking, airport experiences in the world.

Skytrax, which ranks the best airports in the world, just named SFO to the list of the WORLD'S BEST ART for 2025. And just this year, SFO Museum has been honored with a 2025 Award of Excellence by The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) for the recent exhibition Rosie the Riveter: Womanpower in Wartime.

And these extraordinary achievements—for a city's PUBLIC Art collection!

A little history: the first public art at SFO was installed in **1977** with the construction of Terminal 3. This followed the 1977 launch of SFO's Art Program, which was created in accordance with San Francisco's percent-for-art ordinance, dedicating 2% of the construction cost of new or renovated civic buildings to art.

Who authored that ordinance? The SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION. Realizing how **critical public art is as a public good and benefit**, as well as the need to integrate art in the ~~conceptualization and~~ construction of all new public buildings, in 1969 the SFAC commissioners and staff authored and had passed the "Art Enrichment Ordinance" one of the first such public benefits in the country.

And the SFAC didn't stop there. Further championing critical art in enriching our San Francisco landscape, the SFAC co-authored and passed the 1% ordinance, Section 429 of the Planning Code, requiring private developers to spend 1% of their construction budgets on art. Since

then, **anywhere from 80 to 100 other municipalities around the country followed suit, enacting similar requirements.**

The SFAC is not merely a commission, **it is a standard bearer.** It has set the highest goals for achievement in the commissioning of and integration of public art in a major metropolis, because it realizes how critical art is to citizens' daily life, health, environment—and, particularly in San Francisco, it's ECONOMY.

According to a 2017 study by the non-profit Americans for the Arts, the arts sector generates approximately **\$1.45 to \$1.7 billion in annual economic activity** in San Francisco and supports roughly **37,000 to 39,000 jobs.** This economic impact is achieved through direct spending by arts organizations and audiences, and indirectly through support for other sectors like tourism, restaurants, and retail. The arts sector also contributes significant amounts in state and local tax revenue.

The SFAC also pioneered thinking about the actual value of the Public Art. The Civic Art Collection is worth over \$90M when last assessed years ago and has since grown to probably over \$120M in value. When I researched museums with collections of that stature, worth over \$100M, other museums named possessing collections of similar value were the Whitney in New York. The LA County Museum, and The Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The collection of our CITY **matches** the value of several of the top museums in the country, if not the world. Realizing both the actual value and the economic value of its art collection, the SFAC worked with the city to transform recognition of its collection as a Capital Asset (it wasn't previously protected as such, and had no conservation budget)—and insured that such a critical, capital asset as our civic art collection should be provided for in a City budget. Just like sidewalks need to be fixed, art needs to be maintained if part of an artwork becomes damaged or broken from public wear and tear.

And let's take a look at other major metropolitan cities who, like San Francisco, have appointed commissions that are NOT merely advisory, but whose commissioners function—at NO compensation, by the way—as deemed experts in their respective fields to make the critical decisions in commissioning, installing, conserving, and managing the public art in their cities. New York. Chicago. Philadelphia. All of those major metropolitan cities established appointed

arts commissioners through the requirements of decades-old city charters—just like San Francisco's—who have, as part of their city commissions like San Francisco, commissioned and built public art for their city landscapes, and who continue to maintain and conserve invaluable public art collections of their own.

These kinds of accomplishments don't happen overnight, and they also don't happen when you have people who aren't experts at the wheel. As competent as staff from the Planning Department or Public Works might be, they don't have the expertise to curate, plan and install Jorge Pardo's lollipops on Van Ness Avenue. Or the gorgeous sparkling ceilings *"Lucy in the Sky"* by *Erwin Redl*, 2021, at the Central Subway: Union Square Market Station. Or *Roxy Paine's* 102' high *Node* at the Yerba Buena Moscone station.

In their function, the crackerjack SFAC staff has actually INVENTED ingenious processes collaborating with their commissioned artists to make public art possible. Photographs integrated into metal at SF General, so that art could line the hallways, but still be splashed with bleach and blood, but not damaged. Huge 12' high historical city images by Catherine Wagner embedded in granite in the Moscone Station, immune to skateboarders or cigarette burns. And who benefits? Not only the City of San Francisco, but the artists, who can now go on to achieve new public commissions with innovative technology under their belt.

And the SFAC staff? Registrar Allison Cummings was formerly the registrar at SFMOMA. Mary Chou, our head of public art first joined the Arts Commission in 2008, and formerly worked in museums in NYC, including the Asia Society. Mary has a BS in Business Administration, BA in Art History, and an MA in Modern Art and Curatorial Studies with an emphasis in public art. The SFAC staff is a bunch of Rock stars. And the Commissioners? A stellar group of luminaries with advanced degrees in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Master's Degrees in art and music—and even law degrees.


This system works. That's why parallel arts commissions in those large cities have NOT arbitrarily split up their commissioners from arts agency staff and NOT made them advisory. Splitting up and delegating the current functions and operations of the SFAC among in what might seem a utilitarian process to aid "efficiency" seems, on the surface, a good idea. Perhaps

it might end up with a fewer less staff and save a few hundred thousand dollars here and there. It's doubtful, however, that Planning or Public Works would initiate groundbreaking new ordinances or processes in the field of public art, and lead the nation in championing the critical necessity of arts in a public landscape. And, skilled as they are, it's even more doubtful that anyone in Planning or Public Works would know the first thing about etching photographs into granite , or installing a 120' high sculpture. Hiring necessary outside contractors would end up costing the city even more and **decrease efficiency**.

And the long-term effects of such deconstruction of the SFAC would be devastating, even akin to what occurred when, in the name of efficiency, how DOGE destroyed Federal agencies.

The SFAC role, expertise, functionality are not broken. Quite the opposite, the SFAC has been a shining forerunner in showing other cities how it's done. And not in ^{the} structure where Commissioners are simply advisory—which frequently has little to no impact on what actually gets accomplished—but in a working, integral capacity wherein the operations, initiatives, and functions of the government-appointed body of appointed commission experts working seamlessly with the SFAC agency, and the city to produce and maintain a world-class public art collection.

Thank you.



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