



Arts & Culture

Critics' Picks

Cultural Commentary

Food & Drink

Bay Area Hip-Hop

More ▾

ARTS & CULTURE

# All Your Favorite Arts Organizations Are Turning 50 This Year



By [Sarah Hotchkiss](#) Jan 26 [Save Article](#)



Creative Growth artists outside their 24th Street studio in Oakland in 1983. (Courtesy of Creative Growth)

What was in the water in 1974? That's the question you might ask when a surprising number of Bay Area arts organizations celebrate their 50th anniversary this year: [Creative Growth](#), [Kala, SF](#) [Camerawork](#), [Small Press Traffic](#), [Southern Exposure](#) — the list goes on.

In anticipation of the anniversary, Syd Staiti, executive director of Small Press Traffic (SPT), began talking to people present at the beginning, when it was a Noe Valley bookstore and poetry hub. The short answer, Staiti relates, is that “word got around that it was really cheap to live in San Francisco.”

“People came here or already lived here, young people with lots of energy and ideas and ideals who wanted to start things,” Staiti says. Aided by cheap rent, people would “work like a day a week — literally — and then spend the rest of their time making things happen.”



L: Southern Exposure's original location at 499 Alabama St. in Project Artaud; R: A drawing of the Small Press Traffic storefront in 1980 by Ed Aulerich-Sugai. (Courtesy of Southern Exposure; Courtesy of Denise Kastan Zetterbaum)

## **‘Turning 50, but not feeling 50’**

Valerie Imus, Co-Director of Southern Exposure, says the moment was ripe for the formation of new organizations. “We’re on the heels of a lot of social and political movements of the ’60s,” she says, pointing to the San Francisco State strike, anti-war protests, the formation of the Black Panther

Party, the trial of **Los Siete de la Raza** — all in the years just before 1974. “It’s just a lot of anti-institutional movements, a lot of self-determination and collaboration happening.”

Like many of the now-50-year-old organizations, Southern Exposure was a very different entity in its early years. It began as the American Can Collective, a membership-based gallery within Project Artaud (a former American Can Company building). Renamed Southern Exposure after a cease and desist from the still-operating company (and a sassy temporary renaming to the “American Cant Collective”), the arts space didn’t incorporate as a nonprofit until the 1990s.

**Celebrating The Black Panthers’ Oakland Community School**

Though Southern Exposure is now a 501(c)3 with an operating budget over \$800,000 and a staff of five, that playful and anti-establishment spirit persists. “The curatorial council is this evolving body of artists who are able to continue to bring in new folks and new things that are happening,” says Co-Director Margaret McCarthy. “That’s what’s exciting to me about turning 50, but not *feeling* 50.”



Besides their longevity, these organizations share a foundation in necessity. SF Camerawork was established to formalize and legitimize photography as **an emerging art form**. Kala was founded by 11 international artists to share printmaking equipment that they couldn't afford on their own. After state-run hospitals closed in the '50s and '60s, Creative Growth was born to support newly deinstitutionalized artists with disabilities.

As an example of how Creative Growth has changed and grown over the years, Director Emeritus Tom di Maria points to photographs of artists at the studio from its early days. "They have these little smocks on, and you would think it's an art room in an institution, the state hospital or something," he says. Over the years, the dynamic has shifted from directed art-making to artist-led initiatives.

Creative Growth's artists, di Maria says, "want to have input into their curatorial practice. They want to know what viewers think about them. They want professional development." Over its lifespan, the organization has evolved to meet those needs, engaging artists in aspects of leadership.

Sponsored

## Balancing past, present and future

For the five organizations in this story (others local orgs founded in 1974 include **Bread & Roses**, **Cal Shakes**, **California Lawyers for the Arts** and **ProArts**), taking stock of their 50-year history is a big part of the year ahead.

The first to celebrate will be SPT, with **a party** at Et al.'s Mission Street space on Jan. 27. The nonprofit just received a **\$150,000 Mellon Grant** to catalog and digitize their archives over a two-year period. That includes not just books and magazines, Staiti points out, but donated audio recordings of poetry readings, all soon to be made fully accessible to the public. In the meantime, SPT has commissioned artist, poet and writer Gabrielle Civil to create **a series of events** drawing from the collection.

Staiti is aiming for a fine balance between the present moment and Small Press Traffic's legacy communities. (Like most of the nonprofits' current leaders, Staiti wasn't even alive in 1974.) It's

**Small Press Traffic is Launching a New Venue for Bay Area Arts Writing**

---

**SF Camerawork Show Honors the Relationship Between Black Cowboys and Their Horses**

something SF Camerawork's Executive Director Aay Preston-Myint is also considering while working toward 50th anniversary exhibition later this year.

"There's a lot of different stories about what to include, who to include, right? Like why one person or one exhibit or the other stands out, versus why one might be hidden," Preston-Myint says. "But at least for Camerawork, I'm hoping to use the material itself as a springboard."

SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK

# NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 7, NUMBER 2

MAY, 1980



Steve Smith

Untitled, 1979 (original in color)



Susan Felter

Untitled, 1979 (original in color)

The birthday plans run the gamut: archival and group shows, **auctions-cum-anniversary parties**, conferences and museum exhibitions. (Those last two come from **Creative Growth's partnership with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**, which recently acquired over 100 works by artists associated with the nonprofit.)

While maintaining their existence (and relevance) over 50 years is a tremendous accomplishment, several of the organizations' leaders are quick to point out this milestone exists within an arts ecosystem that's constantly generating new and exciting endeavors.

"Artists tend to band together and get creative, out of a need or an absence," Preston-Myint says. "They do this to create the thing that isn't there for them."



*Small Press Traffic hosts 'The Party' on Saturday, Jan. 27, from 7–10 p.m. at Et al. (2831a Mission St., San Francisco). [More information and RSVP link here.](#)*

*Kala (1060 Heinz Ave., Berkeley) will host 'Kala 50,' an exhibition and art auction, March 21–April 27. [Details here.](#)*

*Stay tuned for 50th anniversary programming from Creative Growth, SF Camerawork, Southern Exposure and others.*

SPONSORED

**Care about what's happening in Bay Area arts? Stay informed with one email every other week—right to your inbox.**



**TV**

**Radio**

**Podcasts**

**Events**

**Newsletters**

**Mobile Apps**

**For Educators**

**News**

**Science**

**Arts & Culture**

**Crossword**

**Donate**

**Help Center**

**About**

**Staff DEI Report**

**Careers**

**Accessibility**

**Corporate Sponsorship**

**Financial and FCC Files**

**Contact Us**