



The Jay DeFeo Foundation

by Leah Levy

Jay DeFeo (1929 – 1989) was a remarkable artist who created a significant number of innovative artworks, both central factors to the distinct trajectory of The Jay DeFeo Foundation. Established as a private trust by the will of the artist, the trust was later transformed into a non-profit foundation. The mandates of the trust were caring for and furthering the public exposure of her artworks and encouraging the arts more generally. It was endowed with all of DeFeo's artworks and an extensive archive, but no funding. As can be imagined, in the community of artist-endowed foundations an unfunded entity is not considered a likely or advisable model for sustainability.

Jay DeFeo's instinct for philanthropy took shape at the relatively early age of fifty-five, when many artists are not thinking about legacy. As she created her will, she had no inkling that she would die of cancer at age sixty. Given her precarious financial circumstances for much of her life, her ambition as a patron was exceptional. DeFeo had never been able to support herself from sales of her artworks, and it was only in the last years of her life that she had a permanent teaching position to provide a secure income. In addition to the incredible quality of the artworks she left, it was her belief in her art—shared by the trustees—that inspired the journey ahead.



Jay DeFeo. Courtesy Jay DeFeo Foundation.

With no funds and a very limited market for DeFeo's art at the time, the original task was to grow the value of the art assets in an art historical context and to make prudent sales. We focused on introducing the work to curators at museums around the country. It may be surprising now to realize that Jay DeFeo still owned so many iconic works at her death—and it was these that we offered to museums: *The Eyes*, *The Jewel*, *Doctor Jazz* and other beautiful works on paper and canvas from every decade of her art. Her most famous work, *The Rose* (1958 – 66), needed extensive, almost miraculous conservation before it could even be viewed. (There's an entire book, *Jay DeFeo and The Rose*, with that story.) We actively partnered with several galleries to present her art and offer a selection for sale. We focused on scholarship and publishing as priorities to introduce and explore the varied series she made. We worked with museums

on conservation projects and exhibitions, most particularly with the Whitney Museum of American Art, which ultimately acquired *The Rose* and organized a retrospective of DeFeo's work.

Over time, the Foundation has endeavored to expand the general perception of who Jay DeFeo was and to bring attention to forms of her art that were less known or appreciated in her lifetime. These continue to be contextualized in carefully curated solo and group exhibitions in galleries and museums internationally. One example is her extensive body of photographs, barely shown in her lifetime, but now studied as unique works of art, appreciated as key to understanding her entire oeuvre and exhibited in the collections of eighteen museums.

With increasing recognition of Jay DeFeo as a major artist of the 20th century, we have begun to build an endowment, and to further develop the Foundation's grant-making capabilities. Among other areas, grants are made to support catalogues for museum exhibitions of artists' work that might not otherwise be accompanied by a publication. These serve to add scholarship, educate the public, and document the art for the future.

Fully investigating the depth of the Foundation's holdings (especially the archive) has been a long and deliberate process, as has been understanding how to best partner for programs and to present materials to multiple audiences. Our strategies have evolved over time. The Aspen Institute's National Study of Artist-Endowed Foundations has been invaluable in pointing to best practices in the field and in connecting colleagues to discuss challenges and solutions.

Following Jay DeFeo's lead, the Foundation believes in the essential importance of art in the culture and in maintaining the highest standards in terms of what is best to care for the art—in conservation, image quality for reproduction, presentation, and anything else. Our approach, by necessity and design, has been to be patient and methodical.

In a time of reconsidered and expanding narratives about art history, The Jay DeFeo Foundation is focused on informing the public about an artist who continues to have a vibrant and visible impact. Through its website and social media, the Foundation offers portals for the public to investigate DeFeo's art, archive and the Foundation's activities. We welcome students, scholars, artists, curators and historians by appointment and encourage new perspectives about the artist, her art, and the greater art historical context in which she worked.

www.jaydefeofoundation.org

CONTRIBUTOR

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