

Elizabeth McCausland: art, politics and sexuality

The critic is not supposed to be a partisan. He is not supposed to feel, to share the feelings of others, to suffer himself. His emotions are assumed to have been surgically removed, as perhaps his brains have been. I am glad I escaped the scalpel. I am glad I share the experience of my fellow human beings, including that particularly intense and articulate expression called art.

Elizabeth McCausland¹

Elizabeth McCausland (1899–1965) wrote emotionally charged articles on contemporary art during the 1930s that call for the modern artist to be immersed in society.² Coming to art from her own transgressive position as a lesbian feminist active in left political causes, she intervened in both public affairs journalism and the domesticity of the art world to exhort all artists to belong to the world. She articulated a politically engaged avant-garde art that included both women and men. The separation of the public as political, activist and male from the private as aesthetic, passive and female, with all artists positioned as the female Other (as June Wayne has pointed out),³ is broken down by McCausland and replaced with an ongoing negotiation between those two positions. She further complicates her argument by polemics on gender politics and cloaked sexual games. In this essay I will look specifically at McCausland's reviews of women artists in terms of these shifting lenses of aesthetics, politics, sexuality and gender.

Elizabeth McCausland's criticism provides a stark contrast to the post-Second World War critical hegemony of modernist abstraction. The 'American Action Painters', as characterised by Harold Rosenberg, were celebrated for being active only in terms of moving paint around a canvas.⁴ In the modernist ideology, most famously perpetrated by Clement Greenberg, references to issues outside the artwork were seen as violating its 'purity'. Greenberg (and many others) returned the artist to the domestic sphere. The 'best' or most 'ambitious' modernist artist rejected politics and the world entirely.⁵

Under the sway of this ideology, the history of twentieth-century art has, until recently, been based on the paradigm of the isolated artist who rejected society. Such a perspective edited earlier art with an eye to locating a pedigree for post-Second World War abstract modernism. 'Ideological linkages' constructed a narrative of a constant push towards abstraction.⁶ All art that engaged politics, social concerns, and frequently even imagery at all, was excluded from this canon.

Many artists, critics and historians, particularly in the United States, still accept the simplistic idea that addressing political issues compromises art. The most recent example of this position was seen in the critical response to the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Critics dismissed the first Biennial as having a significant representation of women and people of colour and, not coincidentally, politically engaged art. Arthur Danto, for example, declared that it was 'mawkish, frivolous, whining, foolish, feckless, awful and thin'.⁷ There was no analysis of the political issues presented or the legitimacy of the artists' relationship to those issues. This knee-jerk, canonical separation of art from politics basically forces artists to remain as part of the powerless 'Other', while arbitrarily privileging some artists within that controlled place if they play the game 'successfully' (i.e. without any 'real' political concern). 'Apolitical' art is a political position that diminishes the power of art and artists.

Many revisionist historical studies, both feminist and Marxist, also suffer from this narrow historical template of an apolitical, formalist, modernist canon. *Modernism in Dispute*, for example, a recent effort at revisionism, is obsessed with the criticism of Clement Greenberg and the white male artists of abstract expressionism. It includes only brief token references to political art and art by women as the 'Other' to the dominant hegemony of abstraction.⁸ The book purports to 'dispute' by means of the social and political contextualising of modernism, but it endlessly and repeatedly discusses the canonical Greenberg as the central reference point for everything else.

More oppositional writers wonder why modernism is even privileged at all. Houston Baker calls it 'an assumed supremacy of boorishly racist, indisputably sexist and unbelievably wealthy Anglo-Saxon males'.⁹ Post-structuralist feminists see its definitions as 'constructions necessary to a highly political and successful cultural production of a highly privileged subject position. Modernist self-fashioning is accomplished . . . over and against a feminized and devalued other, a space of not-self'.¹⁰ A few literary historians look at that devalued space in political terms. They reject the dismissal of all communist writing as 'prescriptive'. In the women writers on the far left, for example, they find not a useless wedding of art to communist orders, but an intersection of genre conventions, communism, sexuality and gender constructions that results in a rich and complicated literature.¹¹

I argue here that Elizabeth McCausland can be grouped with these women. She intervened through writing to make a place for women artists within the politically engaged discourse of the 1930s. McCausland operated from a much marginalised place. Aside from the obvious factor of being a woman (that was not marginal in art writing) and working for a newspaper outside of New York, the genre of newspaper art criticism itself is regarded by front-page editors as much closer to society gossip than to hard news. In function, journalistic art criticism is normally affirmative, enhancing the commodity value of the art on the market, and seen as irrelevant to more serious criticism published in art magazines and journals. None the less, McCausland succeeded in redefining art criticism and becoming a widely respected presence. Her art 'column' became an art 'page'. At the same time she was personal, subjective and obviously polemical, never even pretending to the 'objectivity' of tradi-

national art criticism. And, finally, she linked art to public issues, political ideology and to women. Those linkages underwent constant revision in response to various pressures, many of which were the historical pressures of the 1930s as a whole. In many ways McCausland's positions were a product of those pressures.

As the Depression severely undermined both capitalism in general and the private patronage of art in particular, many middle-class artists moved to the left. They affiliated with communism, with workers and with the strategies of strikes and confrontation. The Federal Art Project relief programmes as well as the United States Treasury mural programmes responded with government support. As a result, the 'art world' expanded its boundaries from an elitist legitimising endeavour for the middle class to a dispersed activity often practised by politically radical artists in communities throughout the United States. McCausland was the critic who most clearly articulated the significance of this new expansion of the role, placement and practice of art.

From my own perspective as a feminist art historian who studies the history of twentieth-century art history and practises contemporary criticism,¹² I see Elizabeth McCausland's writing as emblematic of the politically engaged art discourse of the 1930s, as a feminist act of intervention and as a model for analysis of contemporary political art.

Coming from a pioneering family who helped develop Wichita, Kansas, in the late nineteenth century, McCausland seems an unlikely candidate to redefine art criticism and bear the epithet 'radical feminist'. Although a profound respect for the efforts of pioneers occasionally crops up in her writing, her effort is not to domesticate, but actually to undomesticate art, to get it out of the homestead and reposition it in the landscape of social issues.

It would seem to have been her sexuality that moved her to the activist left and gave her the confidence to intervene. Although never publicly identifying herself as a lesbian, her closest companions from 1930 until her death were other women who were politically on the left. Her leftist politics as well as her sexual orientation sparked deep compassion for the disadvantaged in society. This also made her profoundly aware of the limitations for women who were not playing the game according to the sexual rules of the male-dominated public arena. Her anger emerged in long, still unpublished poems that condemned the deep injustices and hypocrisies of American life at the same time that they celebrated the American land and its people. Later in life her anger turned to bitterness and alcoholism. But during the 1930s she achieved recognition and success as the most articulate art critic of her generation.

McCausland left Wichita, Kansas, in 1919 to attend Smith College, the year the national Woman's Suffrage Amendment was passed in the United States Congress (it was passed in Kansas in 1912). She received a master's degree in English in 1923.¹³ Her master's thesis was on Chaucer, rather than her first choice, Emily Dickinson, or her second choice, Walt Whitman; McCausland started out by pressing the restraints of an academic tradition that regarded all American writers as less significant than British and other European writers.

She was immediately hired as a feature writer in the Sunday Department of

the *Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican*. The newspaper had a long tradition of liberalism, dating back to the 1820s.² One editor, Waldo L. Cook, a member of the Sacco and Vanzetti defence committee, was to be a supporter of McCausland throughout her association with the newspaper.³ As a result McCausland had an ever-increasing amount of space in the paper, and, even more unusually, freedom to say what she chose. Her correspondence records that she had an enthusiastic following that reached throughout New England and New York City and embraced many different audiences. In the art world her articles were highly respected and frequently posted at museums and galleries.

McCausland identified, to some extent, with women workers. She saw herself quite literally as a 'worker' because of her demanding and exhausting job at the daily newspaper which frequently extended to seven days a week. At the same time, though, she was firmly linked to the middle class through her family and education.

McCausland's affiliation with the political left was accelerated between 1930 and 1933 by her partner, Ruth Fisher. Fisher was a journalist specialising in industrial relations, and an activist for better labour laws for women.¹⁶ This intersection of feminism and communism was a marginalised and difficult position.¹⁷ While there is no evidence that McCausland herself was ever a member of the Communist Party, she felt the injustice of economic inequality deeply. She wrote lengthy newspaper articles analysing labour-capital relations in New England textile strikes. In a model of the type of intersection she would later advocate for artists, she incorporated her public political commitments into her private life. As she commented in a letter to her mother: 'pretty soon my daily life ought to embody all my economic and social beliefs. I think that people ought to do what they can to give their principles support. Recently we raked together a lot of old clothes to send to the striking mill workers in Gastonia.'¹⁸

Two years later she wrote to her mother that she and Ruth were 'waging battle practically single handed to maintain the labor laws for women'.¹⁹ Such a close union of personal convictions and public issues would become the foundation for her commitment to advocating a socially engaged art world.

In 1930 she described her early years as a feature writer for the *Sunday Department* with some irony: 'a newspaper man - there is no sex really in newspaper work - is a permanently disenfranchised citizen of the world'. What she really knew was that there was only the male sex. She commented on her marginal status: 'I never gone to Russia . . . I have never tracked Coolidge . . . There is no prospect that I will be sent to London to cover a disarmament conference . . .'.²⁰ She wrote instead on 'almost anything from sports to philosophy'.²¹

Although all of her articles until 1932 were anonymous, McCausland was outspoken, and her work generated a lot of mail. In March 1928 under the pseudonym 'Libertas' she wrote a series of editorials objecting to the censorship activities of right-wing organisations and proudly reported to the *Smith College alumnae magazine* that she had been blacklisted.²² She went after the hot-button issues of the day, including as she enumerated them: 'Abolition of capital punishment, unemployment insurance, book censorship, . . . minimum wage law enforcement, the right of married women

to work in industry; birth control; free speech, and feminism'. In preparing these articles she interviewed Jane Addams, Margaret Sanger, Felix Frankfurter, Bertrand Russell, Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Hungarian pacifist-feminist Rosika Schwimmer.²³ McCausland had an interest in almost everything. She wrote book reviews and drama reviews, as well as articles on construction, aeroplanes, dams, scientific processes and education.

It was a long way from exploited women workers in factories to the pampered visual artist. Initially the art world seemed to her a precious, self-indulgent sphere with little soul. Until the early 1930s, she wrote on it as a cloistered, although intriguing, manifestation of a small enclave, far from the powerful social forces with which she was principally preoccupied. She found it disappointingly superficial, the artists were 'men of little faith, men who did not bleed their hearts', compared to Sacco and Vanzetti, for example.²⁴

Her first signed art review was on Georgia O'Keeffe, already a somewhat defiant protest against the norms of objective criticism, since O'Keeffe was a close personal friend.²⁵ O'Keeffe's public persona as a reclusive woman artist immediately presented contradictions for McCausland to sort out as she examined the intersections of the politics of gender and art. McCausland first set aside the verbiage that had accrued to O'Keeffe's work, verbiage that created so many interpretations that she felt it made it 'impossible to see the artist and her work for words (not her own to be sure, for what she says about her paintings is modest and often merry)'. Such an aside, a personal interpolation that marks McCausland's friendship with the artist, intentionally interrupts the reporter's tone.

The exhibition had six skull paintings and several New Mexico landscapes. McCausland saw 'an O'Keeffe [who is] . . . sometimes almost too clever in her technical mastery, but still a pilgrim'. The pilgrimage to which she referred was the embrace of New Mexico as a place: 'There is another O'Keeffe present, who goes out and paints directly from Nature, who responds defiantly to the terrible majesty and fear that is New Mexico.' Yet McCausland also felt that the profound emotion of that landscape was not yet part of O'Keeffe's work. She understood the effect of the landscape from personal experience; she herself had had a life-changing romantic encounter in New Mexico that had stimulated her to produce a huge outpouring of poetry and to turn more seriously to an identity as an art critic rather than as a general reporter.²⁶

McCausland defended O'Keeffe against those who saw her as only a 'precious' artist,²⁷ as well as those who sought 'proletarianism', 'social significance' or the 'American scene'.²⁸ She made space for the reclusive, but independent, O'Keeffe, an artist who would seem to be the antithesis of the engaged artistic practice that McCausland herself advocated. As she defended O'Keeffe, she defended women artists in general. She felt that O'Keeffe had become 'a myth, as well as a symbol, of a withdrawn and esoteric state of blissful contemplation said to be peculiar to women (women artists perhaps one should say) which has done her no particular good and certainly has done the artist (feminine gender) no good at all'.²⁹ In overturning the stereotype of O'Keeffe as a recluse, McCausland sought to expand options for all

women artists. O'Keeffe's notoriety was based on an already very public intersection of gender-construction and modernist aesthetics paired with sexuality through her early association with Alfred Stieglitz. This provided McCausland with an easy opportunity to polemicise about gender, but one full of ambiguity, as she endeavoured to counter the contradictory construct of a public image of the woman artist as a private person. In working with these contradictions McCausland was working not only with the obvious dialectic of the public space and the private person, but also with the internal tensions within the artists themselves, particularly in the case of O'Keeffe.¹⁰ O'Keeffe herself was bisexual, and by the mid-1930s she had shed the persona of the seductress and adopted an austere androgynous identity.

Käthe Kollwitz presented an entirely different challenge. In writing on Kollwitz in the United States, McCausland was a pioneer. Although well known in Germany, she had been little seen in the United States; her art was the antithesis of the popular School of Paris modernism that had prevailed in New York since the Armory Show of 1913.¹¹ McCausland wrote the first major studies of the artist in the United States, mainly emphasising the intersection of activism and aesthetics, with gender as a subsidiary theme. She struck the note throughout of Kollwitz's importance both as a profound social critic addressing a woman's perspective on war and as a profound artist in her handling of the print-making medium. She openly argued with the orthodox communist position that art was a tool of the working class in the class struggle. In Kollwitz she read the technique as part of the political message, both literally and metaphorically:

At first sight the prints shown in the present exhibition exemplify the Communist dictum 'Art is a weapon': it is their social significance, their tremendous indictment of the needless waste of war, of which one is immediately conscious. But these prints are more than propaganda . . . Here is life wasted, violated, raped, needlessly offered up on the altar of war. Against this waste and this violence [Kollwitz] poses the etcher's plate, the lithographer's stone, the woodcutter's block, paper, ink and a few lines, a few dots . . . the self-portraits become . . . the portrait of all stricken and suffering women, bereaved and struck down by the violence of war. In the face of this aging woman may be read the history of her times, of her country . . . the woodcuts . . . are strong and violent in their contrasts, a use of black and white is emotionally consonant with the artist's mood of rebellion at the needless waste and sufferings of the era depicted.¹²

Kollwitz was paradigmatic for McCausland as an artist who intensely and personally addressed public issues. The politics are gendered in that Kollwitz speaks unequivocally of the mother's excruciating sense of loss when her child dies in war, but they include the condemnation of all war as immoral. McCausland's own words also invoke the strong bite of Kollwitz's etched lines. McCausland here uses the written word as a means of political confrontation.

Gertrude Stein, a celebrated writer and publicly declared lesbian, fresh from the Left Bank in Paris, stimulated a different type of writing and polemic. McCausland here explored a more traditional model of modernist aesthetics as politically confrontational. At the same time she inserted the surging energy of Stein's

powerful sexual persona." When Stein actually came to nearby Hartford, Connecticut, in conjunction with the opening of her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, McCausland was euphoric. She attended three performances in Hartford and New York, then tackled the subject with a passion. The opera included music by Virgil Thomson, sets by Florine Stettheimer and a stunning all-black cast of dancers from Harlem. Notably, McCausland only briefly referred to the sets, dancing and music. Her main emphasis was on the text, which seemed to have washed over her physically, almost orgiastically:

For the time being one may say that 'Four Saints' is about life, about reality, about the constant flow and flux of human experience . . . Moreover the opera is about experiences not solely and not chiefly in terms of volitioned and censored thought but in terms of those deeper and more organic rhythms of existence, those buried sensory knowledges of sight and sound and kinesthetic sensation which explorers of the sub-conscious plumb and which the surrealists especially have invoked in their effort to translate the principle of automatic writing into many mediums.³⁴

McCausland identified Stein as the 'first' Surrealist and seemed to adopt the automatic process in her own writing. At the same time she clearly felt a deep attraction and even 'hero worship' for Stein which is contained within the intense words (and also seen in a contemporary photograph) (Figure 19). She evoked personal physical feelings, while at the same time connecting the personal to the public:

this matter of creating rhythms, cadences, concepts and connotations and connections of words which echo or are the equivalent of this age's experience of existence. Speed, broken rhythms, disconnected phrases, sentences without verbs, books without punctuation, these somehow seem consonant with the inner tempo of life as it beats through the western world today. This cadence, this beat, this irresistible pulse is the thing that Gertrude Stein (and her collaborators) have . . . created in 'Four Saints'.³⁵

Clearly, the opera forced McCausland to reach beyond her known boundaries in terms of her writing and her feelings, and she allowed those powerful feelings to emerge clearly. In a subsequent article, McCausland characterised Stein as a political activist in her own terms: 'she has helped change the world insofar as an artist can with his intangible weapons of art'.³⁶ The gender switch in this sentence simply underscores the normative patriarchal language that even the feminist McCausland used without thinking in reference to 'the artist'. McCausland here, though, affirms the idea of aesthetic radicality as a type of confrontation that can be political. Aesthetics, politics and gender were in a powerful conjunction in Stein.

Martha Graham, like Stein, was obviously subverting tradition through the forms of her dance. But as Graham moved to the political left in the mid-1930s, she provided McCausland with the chance to elaborate on the relationship of aesthetics and social concerns. In her first lengthy account of Graham's work McCausland declared that 'The ideal of the dance today, not as an escape from life but as a means of putting one close to life, takes on an added importance in Martha Graham's eyes.' McCausland further saw the dance as a 'very powerful weapon of propaganda' in its correspondence 'to the society that produced it'.³⁷ The particular model that



19 Gertrude Stein (left) and Elizabeth McCausland (right), Springfield, Massachusetts, 1934

McCausland had in mind in this article was native American dance.⁸ In co-opting the rhythms of native dance, Graham was seemingly following very much the same course as Picasso in his use of African imagery. McCausland saw it more as an intervention in the traditions of classical European dance that brought it closer to 'life' in America.

Graham apparently wanted to be seen as a formalist. The following autumn, under the headline 'Insistence that Dance be Understood in Terms of Itself, as Movement of the Body in Space', McCausland spoke of Graham as declaring that her work was purely abstract: 'it is eternity the artist faces, not time'.⁹ Two years later, though, Graham modified her commitment to formalism. In 1935 McCausland, now supported by the artist's program notes, stated that *Panorama* expressed the harshness of fanaticism in the United States through the metaphor of dance. It culminated in a sense of liberation as people awakened to 'social consciousness' in the present:

To be sure the fanatical intensity of our Puritan forefathers is in the American blood, as is the dreadful inheritance of slavery and sadism. There is also in the country's psyche the memory of the violence and brutality of the Western vigilante, the lust for power of the early empire builders . . .

That is why we may speak of *Panorama* as new and revolutionary. It is not a propaganda or proletarian work of art . . . it is to supply energy to mobilize the beholder as well as the dancer. Therefore the justice of the adjective 'revolutionary', for motion is change and change is revolution.⁴⁰

Here McCausland distinguishes Graham's work from the communist position on political art as the workers' art (proletarianism) and aligns it with the more generic principle of opposition to the inequities and abuses of society.

In a characteristic intersection of public and private, the emotional intensity of the articles on Graham and Stein in 1934 and 1935 coincided with a new personal relationship for McCausland. In the autumn of 1934 she first met the photographer Berenice Abbott.⁴¹ As she reviewed Abbott's photography, McCausland posited: 'the social muse and the artist can consort without either yielding position, the idea not subservient to the medium, the medium not the slave of communication . . .'.⁴² The language signifies her personal feelings as much as the character of Abbott's work. The verb 'consort' points to a courtship within the article, a courtship that resulted in the most important relationship in McCausland's life. McCausland here again inserts sexuality itself into her theorising on the relationship of art and society.

In the late winter of 1935 McCausland moved to New York City, propelled there by her new relationship with Abbott. She began to write for radical publications such as the *New Masses Fight* and *Art Front* under the pseudonym 'Elizabeth Noble' (her grandmother's name), as well as writing sedate articles for the College Art Association journal *Parnassus*. But her primary work continued to be as the main art writer for the *Springfield Republican*. Despite continued efforts over the next thirty years, McCausland never had a permanent position with the New York press.

On the other hand, her friendship with Abbott as well as her own reputation as a critic immediately brought McCausland into the centre of the action in New York. In early 1936 feminism and modernism were both subsumed by the specific anti-fascist agenda of the American Artists' Congress. McCausland's experience in reporting labour strikes was perfect to articulate the now widely confrontational and activist spirit of the art world. She wrote excited articles about the new 'world of reality' that the artists now occupied, in contrast to the 'ivory towers' of the past.⁴³

The spirit of unified political purpose notwithstanding, McCausland continued frequently to feature women in her reviews. In 1936 she wrote on a Peruvian artist, Julia Codesido, in an article on the Latin American delegation to Congress. In the midst of the rhetoric of the American Artists' Congress, McCausland used a Marxist analysis to examine Codesido's art in relationship to the degree of capitalist exploitation in Peru.⁴⁴ She saw Peru as still intact compared to Mexico: 'such paintings as these are a standard by which we can judge a world in transition, passing from a primitive agrarian culture to a highly organized economy. Wait till the American metallurgical interests get their hands on the Andes and see what sort of art comes out of Lima then.'⁴⁵

McCausland now had more sophisticated theoretical tools. She could move beyond the unhistorical 'artist' looking at the 'world', to look at the production of art in the larger historical perspective of economic forces. In an article on the printmaker

Mabel Dwight, McCausland cited the 'social handicaps with which women even in this age of equal suffrage are still attended'. She saw the effects of 'this struggle' in formal terms, in a 'dryness and tightness of line'. The connection of aesthetics and politics here is a provocative parallel to her analysis of Kollwitz's work. But now the struggle is more gendered, more located in the art world, and more historical; it is the struggle of all women as artists in a hostile environment. She characterised Dwight's work as having

an emotion pressed back because the artist did not dare let herself go. Probably women will always show this last quality in their work until they are free from the beginning instead of having to fight bitterly for every opportunity and recognition. A quality in fact something like that of those pioneer workers for women's suffrage, who were not the most beautiful and seductive women of their age, but who were the true pioneers.⁴⁶

McCausland hits here on both the struggle of the woman artist and the struggle of women in general. The reference to the pioneers of women's suffrage provides a historical reference that would have been familiar to most women at that time when suffrage had so recently been passed in the United States. At the same time McCausland again raises the ambiguity of women's position in the public sphere: the need to 'fight bitterly for every opportunity' speaks of the sexism encountered by women trying to make it in the public arena with a paying job and their consequent need to hold back their own opinions. In her own case, her ongoing effort to gain a position with a New York newspaper continued, and her frustration with the inequities of the world increased. The 'emotion pressed back' is clearly her own.

McCausland used a review of drawings of steelworkers by Elizabeth Olds (Figure 20) to look at the position of women artists historically, giving a perspective that would not be repeated for many years.⁴⁷ She compares Olds to Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, who had 'no option except to glorify motherhood and children. In our time women have too often been driven back to a position of priestess or prophetess . . . or at least [been] concerned with personal emotion as of comfort, love and narcissism.' In Olds McCausland saw someone who was moving out of the domestic and into the public arena, in her case in her subject of steelworkers: 'After the smell of hot damp earth from hothouses, [it is] a welcome relief.' But, McCausland firmly stated, the artist had not yet made a 'full identification' with her subject, something which McCausland felt led to a loss of 'passion or emotional power' in the drawings.⁴⁸ She saw sympathy and support in Olds's drawings of steelworkers, not the kind of engagement that would realise social change. McCausland was not willing to settle for an art that was less than compelling as it negotiated with social and political concerns. She never hesitated to call on artists to engage more deeply in both aesthetic and social issues. She believed that artists collectively and individually, male and female, could make a difference in changing the world.

After 1938 McCausland wrote less frequently on women.⁴⁹ Feminism seems to have taken a back seat to fear for the survival of humanity as Hitler's army marched across Europe. McCausland became increasingly activist herself. She moved from her

exhortatory role as a critic to become publicly involved in the American Artists' Congress. This bold act ran counter to the general tenor of the times. At the end of the 1930s artists were leaving the public arena and retreating to the more familiar studio as they were disillusioned by the Hitler-Stalin pact, the loss of the Spanish Civil War, and the increasing pressure within the United States from the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In 1946 the *Springfield Republican* closed, and McCausland lost the freedom of writing long polemical articles. During the remaining years of her career she wrote commissioned books and monographs, all of them on men. Her feminism and even her commitment to social engagement was effectively silenced by the necessity of making a living and the atmosphere of the 1950s. But she remained an articulate writer who laced her writing with concerns that were equally threatening to the profit-oriented 1950s, such as the relationship of the artist to the market.⁵⁰

At her death in 1966 McCausland had published only one book on a woman, an introduction to a portfolio of prints by Käthe Kollwitz in 1941.⁵¹ Her major work on the social history of the artist in America remains in typescript to this day, and has not even been acquired by a public archive.⁵² It is only in the *Springfield Republican* that her radical, feminist intervention in the staid tradition of art criticism survives.

As a writer and a poet, as well as an art critic, Elizabeth McCausland can be grouped with other recently republished feminist writers of the 1930s like Tess Slesinger, Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, Muriel Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard and Agnes Smedley.⁵³ While less officially and publicly aligned with the far left than



20 Photograph of Elizabeth Olds drawing steelworkers in the 1930s

these women. McCausland, like them, successfully inserted herself, as well as the concerns of women, into the male-dominated world of left politics, journalism and art. In the process, she formulated a model for a vanguard culture that was both politically and artistically engaged, and negotiated the relationships between aesthetic concerns, gender, sexuality, social concerns and politics.

Notes

- 1 Elizabeth McCausland, 'A Critic Explains', *American Contemporary Art*, 233-4 (1945), 3-4.
- 2 Previous articles on Elizabeth McCausland are Garnett McCoy, 'Critic and Ideologue', *Journal of the Archives of American Art*, 1912-1966, 10-20 and Susan Dodge Peters, 'Elizabeth McCausland on Photography', *Image*, 1985, 10-11. Susan Peters is also working on a book on McCausland's criticism of photography, 'Eyewitness: The Rise of McCausland's Photography'. McCausland is also treated in my forthcoming book *Art and Politics 1930s*.
- 3 June Wayne in Judy Loeb, ed., *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 129: 'It appears to me that society unconsciously perceives the artist as a female . . .'.
- 4 Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News*, 11:8 (1952), 22-3, 48-50.
- 5 Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', *Art and Literature*, 4 (1965), 193-201, summarises his position.
- 6 Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 38, uses this phrase. As far as I know, the earliest formulation of this idea was in Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).
- 7 Arthur Danto, *Emancipated Messages: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York: St. Giroux, 1994), 312-17.
- 8 Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris and Charles Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute: Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
- 9 Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 10 Deborah Jacobs in Lisa Rado, ed., *Reclaiming Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Garland, 1994), 277; Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 11-12.
- 11 Nelson, *Repression and Recovery*; Paula Rabinowitz, *Writing Red: An Anthology of Women 1930-1945* (New York: Feminist Press, 1987); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 12 My first book, *Modernism in the 1920s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), looked at the historiography of modernism at a time when I was still a brainwashed advocate of modernism myself.
- 13 In going east she was following her sister, Helen, who attended Simmons College, earning her B.A. in 1920. McCausland returned to Wichita for one year of grueling teaching at Fairmount College and then went back for her master's degree. McCausland also had other relatives in the east, including an uncle, John Noble, who was an artist on Cape Cod. Interview with Ross McCausland, 15 July 1990.
- 14 Richard Hooker, *The Modernist in Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).
- 15 Elizabeth McCausland, 'Americans', *New York Times*, 1945, 10-11.

- Italian anarchists to death. It was unsuccessful; they were put to death in 1927. They were a familiar example of injustice throughout the 1930s.
- 16 Fisher also spent much of her free time providing young factory workers with recreational activities. When her job was terminated, she emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1933 and is last referred to as writing for the *Moscow Daily News* in 1935. Information on Fisher is based on McCausland to Paul Strand, 1 September 1933 and 17 April 1935 (Paul Strand Archives, Center for Creative Photography, Tucson).
 - 17 Barbara Foley, 'Women and the Left in the 1930s', *American Literary History*, 2:1 (1990), 150–69; Debra Rosenbelt, 'From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition', *Feminist Studies*, 7:3 (1981), 371–400; Robert Shattler, 'Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930–1940', *Socialist Review*, 9:3 (1979), 73–118; Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston, Twayne, 1982), especially chapter 5.
 - 18 Elizabeth McCausland to Isabelle McCausland, 23 May 1930 (Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art). See her articles 'Capital–Labor in New Bedford I–III', *Springfield Republican*, 24, 26 and 28 August 1928, and 'Easthampton Makes Denial', 22 December 1928. Unless otherwise indicated, all articles cited by McCausland are from the *Springfield Republican*. All the references here are from clippings with no page numbers in the McCausland Papers, but her articles frequently appeared on page 6.
 - 19 Elizabeth McCausland to Isabelle McCausland, 5 December 1932 (McCausland Papers).
 - 20 Elizabeth McCausland, 'Behind the Front Page', *Purple Pastures*, 1920 Reunion Booklet (Northampton, Mass., Smith College, 1930), 15, 16.
 - 21 Smith College Alumnae Quarterly Class Notes, 1925, College Archives, Sophia Smith Collection, Northampton, Mass.
 - 22 The articles were collected in a pamphlet, *The Blue Menace*, under her own name, and sold through the *Springfield Republican* 'To those interested in Free Speech and Liberal Opinion'.
 - 23 'Experiences on *Springfield Republican*' (McCausland Papers); Smith College Alumnae Quarterly Class Notes, 1928.
 - 24 'In Retrospect', 9 July 1930.
 - 25 Georgia O'Keeffe to Elizabeth McCausland, 15 July 1935 and undated correspondence (McCausland Papers). The article was signed with an 'E'.
 - 26 'Georgia O'Keeffe Exhibits Skulls and Roses of 1931', 10 January 1932.
 - 27 'Georgia O'Keeffe from 1919 to 1934', 17 February 1935.
 - 28 'Georgia O'Keeffe's Flower Paintings', 28 April 1935. McCausland's trip to New Mexico in the fall of 1931 is treated in my forthcoming book, *Art and Politics in the 1930s*.
 - 29 'Georgia O'Keeffe Shows Her Latest Paintings', 2 January 1938.
 - 30 Barbara Marshall, in her *Engendering Modernity: Feminism, Social Theory and Social Change* (Boston, Mass., Northeastern University Press, 1994), 114, analyses the tensions of public and private. See also Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Steglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1989) on the construction of O'Keeffe's identity by earlier critics.
 - 31 Jean Owens Schaefer, 'Kollwitz in America: A Study of Reception 1900–1960', *Woman's Art Journal*, 15:1 (1994), 29–34, examines McCausland's writings in comparison to the writings on Kollwitz during the hegemony of formalism.
 - 32 'Käthe Kollwitz's Work Being Shown at Museum Here', 11 December 1933.
 - 33 Her first review was a matter-of-fact book review, 'Gertrude Stein's *Reminiscences*', 3 September 1933.
 - 34 'Super-Sense Applied to Twentieth Century Life', 4 March 1934. In November McCausland published an interview with Stein, following the poet's tour of the United States and spurred by the knowledge that Stein was scheduled to speak in Springfield in January 1935 at the

- Springfield Museum of Art ('Stein Sits Listening to America After Thirty-One Years' Absence', 11 November 1934; 'Stein and Toklas Here', 8 January 1935).
- 35 'Super-Sense Applied to Twentieth Century Life'.
- 36 'Stein Sits Listening to America After Thirty-One Years' Absence'; 'Stein and Toklas Here'.
- 37 'American Dancer is Evolving a Typically American Rhythm', 30 April 1933; see also 'Study of Modern Dance in America: Pioneering Venture', 22 July 1934.
- 38 'Indian Dances Parallel Cycle of the Seasons', 1933 (no day or month given). Graham had a Guggenheim Fellowship to New Mexico to study southwestern Indian dances in 1931-32.
- 39 'Absolute and Abstract Art is Dance of Martha Graham', 9 September 1933.
- 40 'Modern Dance Takes Another Step Forward', 25 August 1935.
- 41 Berenice Abbott to Elizabeth McCausland, 29 October 1934. A letter from Elizabeth McCausland to Berenice Abbott uses the word 'passion' eleven times: 5 November 1935, Abbot Archives. Commerce Graphics as cited in Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbot: Changing New York, The Complete WPA Project* (New York, New Press and Museum of City of New York, 1997), 19.
- 42 'New York City as Seen in Abbott Photographs', 14 October 1934.
- 43 'Artists Thrown into World of Reality Present Their Case at Recent American Artists' Congress', 1 March 1936. McCausland covered the American Artists' Congress throughout its history in more detail than any other critic.
- 44 'Mexican Art with Social Message', 19 March 1936.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 'Mabel Dwight's Art in a Lithograph Showing', 9 January 1938.
- 47 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1988) finally again brings together Marxism and feminism.
- 48 'Steel Mill Drawings by Elizabeth Olds', 5 December 1937.
- 49 Later articles include 'Lisette Model Show "Candid" Photographs', 27 May 1941; Irene Rice Pereira, *American Magazine of Art*, December 1946, 374-7.
- 50 'Must Artists Starve?', *New Masses*, 10 July 1945, 9, 10, and 'What is the Economic Future of the Artist?', *The Art Digest*, 1 November 1951, 22, 66.
- 51 Introductory Essay, *Käthe Kollwitz* (New York, Curt Valentin, 1941).
- 52 The incomplete manuscript entitled 'The Artist in America 1641-1941: A Social History' resides in a private collection in New Jersey.
- 53 Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991 and *Writing Red*).