

Artists working as activists on political causes is not as new an idea as we think. It has a history in the United States, but that history has been practically obliterated by modernist-trained scholars who have looked mainly for the pedigree of abstract art in early twentieth-century American art. Only recently, with the decline of modernism, has there been an effort to acknowledge earlier phases of cultural activism. A current exhibition, for example, highlights the importance of the highly politicized Mexican muralists for African American artists.¹ The role of the Communist Party is also beginning to be examined, and New Deal art is now seen as a complex product of political strategies.²

The Mexican muralists played a key role in galvanizing artists in the United States to produce a public art that expressed political principles. In the early 1920s, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, among others, worked for the new Mexican government and particularly for the Minister of Culture, José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos sponsored artists to celebrate the ideals of the new socialist society in murals in public buildings and inexpensive prints that could be distributed to the illiterate throughout the country. He even revamped the art education system to include more sensitivity to indigenous traditions. Some of this came to an end when the government changed in Mexico in 1924, but the more prominent Mexican muralists found themselves taken up by, of all people, American capitalists. The Rockefellers were particularly interested because they had extensive oil-producing holdings in Mexico, and they were afraid that it would be nationalized by the Mexican government. The American ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, had the idea of sponsoring the muralists as a form of cultural homage to smooth diplomatic tensions.

But there was, inevitably, a conflict of interest between artists committed to radical social change (and particularly the redistribution of wealth) and American capitalists. In May 1933, Diego Rivera was stopped

in the midst of executing a mural at Rockefeller Center because it included a prominent portrait of Lenin. The event galvanized artists in New York, from the left to the right, to protest censorship. There were huge rallies and protests. Rivera took the money from the Rockefellers and made a mural on the history of radical protest in the United States for the New Workers School.³

In these same years, the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was encouraging artists to collaborate with laborers and to use art to address economic injustice. The Communists emphasized culture as a means to power that could force political change. While only a few people were actually card-carrying members of the Party, many artists were deeply affected by their principles. In the early thirties, the concept of proletarianism appealed to many writers, poets, and visual artists. There was a profound desire to expose the devastating conditions brought on by capitalist excess.

Proletarianism promoted "worker's culture." As discussed in the main cultural publication of the CPUSA, the

Art and Activism: A Brief History

by Susan Platt

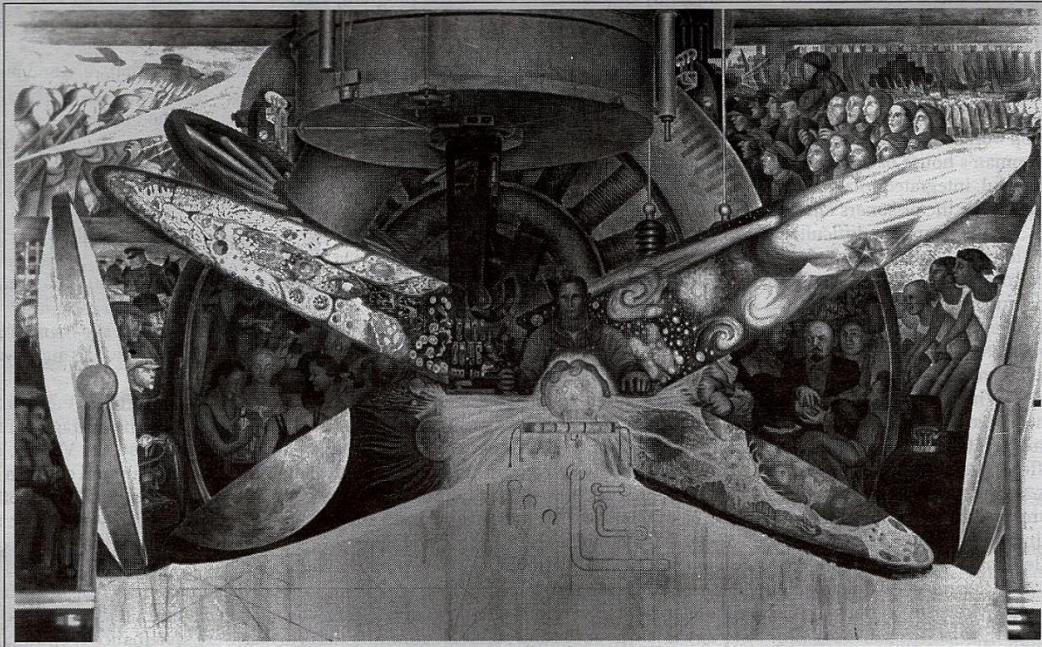
New Masses, the idea was that artists would actually go out to mining camps as well as set up schools to teach workers to express the evils of capitalism. At the same time, the artists themselves, through exposure to the primary conditions of capitalist oppression, could write, draw, sculpt, or photograph with far more conviction on the subject. Worker culture included plays, poetry, novels, dance, music, film, architecture, and even sports. In visual arts, most artists produced posters and prints that were cheap, public, and accessible to the average person.

Subjects for worker art in the United States included working conditions for sharecroppers, mine workers, and textile workers, and dramatic strikes, protests, and emblematic martyrs. The most frequently invoked martyrs were Tom Mooney, a labor leader who was wrongfully imprisoned; Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants executed for a murder that they did not commit; and the Scottsboro boys, nine black teenagers falsely accused of molesting two white women on a train in Alabama. Proletarian artists also emphasized racial tensions with drawings of black demonstrators killed by the police or brutal lynchings.

At the same time, literary and art critics articulated a philosophy that proletarianism had to combine sophisticated artistic practice as well as politics. Critics like Joseph Freeman admired artists whom they saw as deeply committed to both social and political change as well as to aesthetics. He constantly exhorted artists to keep both in mind.⁴

But just as worker culture was really expanding and succeeding, the CPUSA began to shift its emphasis in response to new directives from Moscow. The new cultural principle was to reach out to middle class bourgeois artists in a Popular Front. Proletarianism was diluted by the inclusion of liberals and formerly spurned American nationalists such as Thomas Hart Benton. This shift was catalyzed by the rise of Hitler. The Popular Front created a much larger activist coalition under the umbrella of anti-fascism.

Anti-fascism appealed to far more artists than



The Rockefellers hired Diego Rivera to paint *Man at the Crossroads* in the 1930s. The fresco mural would have been 1400 square feet if completed (photo courtesy Lucienne Bloch/Old Stage Studios).

proletarianism. Thousands of artists organized into such groups as the Artists Union and the American Artists Congress. Both of these organizations demanded rights for artists as workers and encouraged the production of art that addressed political concerns. They marched, made posters, and even signed up to fight in the Spanish Civil War in opposition to Franco and fascism. Artists also contributed works to exhibitions sponsored by the Congress calling attention to the horrors of war and fascism. The exhibitions, as well as the demonstrations, were avidly supported by art critics like Elizabeth McCausland and Jerome Klein. This critical support was crucial in providing the artists with a lasting impact and much more visibility beyond the event itself.⁵

Partly in response to these widespread confrontations, the government began to support artists. Relief support for artists actually began in New York City under the unlikely auspices of the College Art Association. These pilot “white collar” relief programs employed artists as teachers in settlement houses and schools, as well as to paint murals and create posters. The murals were placed wherever a wall could be found: boys’ clubs, churches, high schools.

As the Depression deepened, the CAA appealed to the City of New York, then to the State of New York, for additional support for artists. In the latter, the welfare relief programs were managed by Harry Hopkins, a renegade social worker who had devised the first Easter Seal program. He soon became the head of all relief for the federal government. In the fall of 1933, with the support of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, artists were included in the massive relief programs at the federal level. These programs starkly departed from the tradition of giving lump sum commissions to well-established artists to ornament federal buildings. While that program continued and by the end of the thirties evolved into its most populist manifestation, the familiar Post Office murals, the more radical aspect of the government support was the hourly and weekly relief payments that simply supported artists like any other workers.

These cultural workers were based in communities across the country—one of the sacred New Deal principles

was to disperse workers to rural areas, probably a device to defuse the massive demonstrations in the streets of New York and Washington, DC. Since segregation was still in place, there were separate Negro art centers and separate commissions for African American artists. These programs launched many of the well-known African American artists of the last half century such as Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett.

One of the selling points for the Federal Project Number One, as it was called, was to encourage the “preservation of skills,” so all media were encouraged. Artists worked as printmakers, sculptors, painters, photographers, illustrators, architects, and teachers of art. The relief project resulted in a dramatic new self-respect for artists in the United States and it repositioned the place of art in the United States to a more community-supported activity.

At the same time, as the artists began to receive government paychecks, their art became less radical and less political. Thus the New Deal program was also a strategy to defuse the power of artists as political activists. The ideol-

ogy for the program, inspired by John Dewey and Alain Locke, was that art should be based in life, not in a sanctified aesthetic realm. It was dubbed "cultural democracy" by the administrator of the program, Holger Cahill. Cahill himself was deeply committed to crafts and folk art, and felt that art should be part of everyday life. His fervent goal was to raise "a generation...sensitive to their visual environment and capable of helping to improve it."⁶

Murals created by artists on relief (about \$25 per week) appeared in high schools, community centers, prisons, and public housing. Ben Shahn created a mural for the community hall in Jersey Homesteads (now Roosevelt), New Jersey, a planned community for Jewish garment workers. The mural presented a history of Jewish immigration and the oppression of sweat shop workers; it culminated in the depiction of the New Deal supported utopian community. Lucienne Bloch created a mural in a woman's house of detention that was based on consultation with the black women who would be looking at the mural. Her cheerful, integrated image of a children's playground was covered over by officials shortly after it was completed on the basis that it gave the prisoners false hopes.⁷

Artists ran into difficulties in communities as they were producing public art. Farmers in small towns would correct the anatomy of a horse or cow. In other cases, a particular historical event that the artist had chosen to depict was embarrassing to the community or unacceptable to the federal government. At the same time, federal government officials sometimes censored the artist's style to try to achieve a bland, plump, well-fed image. But in spite of these problems, the WPA community art centers, as well as community theater and music programs, were, in general, a huge success, particularly in the many places where there had been no previous place to pursue art. The community art programs stimulated art among a much wider spectrum of the population and became catalysts for permanent institutions.

When the government support came to an end in the midst of World War II, artists were already converted to the idea that they were part of the real world, that they could effect political change and that they could connect to the average person. Immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, thousands of artists joined Artists for Victory, and offered their creative skills to help win the war. But when the group held an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in late 1942, the growing faction of abstract artists denounced the work as Communist influenced. Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko wrote a famous letter to *The New York Times* that rejected nationalism, and supported subject matter that was "tragic and timeless." At the same time, financial support for modern art was already flourishing. The critical voice of the still obscure Clement Greenberg had already begun to repetitiously pump for abstract art in *The Nation*.

After the center of action moved from Union Square to 57th Street, capitalism sanctified abstract art. At the same time, Joseph McCarthy, assisted by George Dondero, targeted creative thinkers in all fields who had been politically active on the left in the thirties. The sense of community as well as the social and political commitments of artists were systematically eliminated.

Today, there are more fragmented alliances, even though some artists and critics still call themselves Marxists. Indeed, among Latino and African American artists, there is a profound connection to the communal spirit of the thirties, particularly that of the Mexican muralists. Activist artists today address racism, colonialism, immigration, feminism, the environment, and AIDS. They are again engaged with hard political issues and raising their voices to intervene directly in the corrupt systems and structures of a capitalism that is ravaging the planet and its inhabitants.

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¹ Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, et al., *In the Spirit of Resistance, African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (The American Federation of the Arts, 1996). The exhibition is circulating around the United States until 1998.

² My forthcoming book, *Radical Women of the 1930s* (Midmarch Arts Press), looks closely at the role of the Communist Party as well as the New Deal. There are many new studies of New Deal art; one example is Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³ Rivera's role in these complicated events is explained in Laurence Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (University of New Mexico Press, 1989). Apparently it was the rental agent for Rockefeller Center (more than the Rockefellers) who objected to the portrait of Lenin.

⁴ Joseph Freeman is discussed in James Bloom, *Left Letters, The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁵ On Elizabeth McCausland, see my article, "Elizabeth McCausland: Art, Politics and Sexuality," in *Women and Modernism*, editor Katy Deepwell (University of Manchester Press, 1997, forthcoming).

⁶ "WPA Art Comes to Harlem," *Architectural Forum* (February 1938), p. 9.

⁷ Author's interview with Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Dimitroff, November 1994. Bloch and Dimitroff, both assistants to Rivera at Rockefeller Center, are still giving fresco workshops.

Ben Shahn with Bernard Bryson, the Jersey Homesteads mural, Roosevelt, New Jersey (unofficially, *Struggles and Achievements of Immigrant Workers or the Benefits of Unionization and Community*), 1936-1938 (photo: Susan Platt).

