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The Artist as Worker: Radical Responses to the New Deal Federal Art Projects

The 1930s represent an exceptional moment in the history of twentieth-century American culture. Due to massive state funding of the arts, channeled through such New Deal agencies as the Works Progress Administration (hereafter WPA), many artists began to rethink their professional status and their relationship to the wider working-class movement. Rejecting the more traditional and well-worn category of artistic individualism, dominant since the Romantic period, they joined together in such collective organisations as the Artists' Union to defend their wages and work conditions on the federal art projects. Redefining themselves as 'cultural workers' they regularly participated in demonstrations to express their solidarity with the more advanced sectors of the American working-class that were swelling the ranks of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (hereafter CIO), the trade union newly formed to recruit mass production workers **[figure 1]**. This shift from 'artist' to 'worker' was nevertheless a contradictory process for at the same time that the left within the Artists' Union was arguing for this equivalence, many of its members were pleading that the special nature of their work meant that they should be exempt from the type of bureaucratic rigidity experienced by other workers on the WPA. But more significantly this radical response to federal patronage was also at loggerheads with the aesthetic ideology promoted by Holger Cahill, Director of the WPA Federal Art Project (hereafter WPA/FAP), which was by far the biggest of the cultural programmes and accounted for nearly ninety percent of the approximately \$40 million spent on funding the arts during the New Deal period.

The WPA/FAP blurred the distinctions between producer and consumer through the community art centres that were established up and down the country to encourage a broader participation in the production of art **[figure 2]**; challenge the segregation between high and low culture via the Index of American Design under which elements of Americana that predated industrialisation in the United States were carefully copied and documented in a series of hand-drawn plates **[figure 3]**; and supplant the commercial gallery system through the patronage of state-funded murals and easel paintings for installation and distribution in public buildings **[figure 4]**. These features of the WPA/FAP were obviously appealing to newly collectivised radical artists wishing to democratise the production and consumption of art. They

also fitted with Cahill's utopian conception of the artist that, following the influence of John Dewey, looked back towards a less alienated mode of artistic labour that was to many intents and purposes pre-industrial. Like Dewey before him, Cahill berated the sundering of the organic link between the artist and the wider community that followed industrialisation. And it is this contradiction between the radical emphasis upon the modern artist as worker and the more liberal emphasis upon the unalienated labour of artists in the antebellum period that I want to explore in this paper.

The Artists' Union began as the Unemployed Artists Group (hereafter the UAG) within the Communist Party's John Reed Club in the summer of 1933, initiated by the executive board of the club at the prompting of the Party's Cultural Committee.¹ The UAG was given a focus by the cultural programme of the Emergency Work Bureau of the Gibson Committee, which between December 1932 and September of the following year spent about \$26,000 giving employment to approximately 100 artists.² At its first appearance as an organised body at a meeting of unemployed artists at the New School for Social Research in October 1933, arranged by Audrey McMahan of the College Art Association, Phil Bard, one of the UAG's four executive officers, called for the state to pay all artists a living wage for producing work in their studios, or alternatively buying their output in lieu of one. At its second meeting the UAG drafted a petition to be sent to Harry Hopkins, head of the Civil Works Administration (hereafter CWA); Frederick Daniels, executive director of New York State's Temporary Emergency Relief Administration; and Mayor La Guardia, calling for a programme of mural and sculptural decoration for public buildings; a federal purchasing programme that would lead to 'permanent and travelling exhibitions of works in public schools, hospitals, rural districts and in all public buildings'; and a programme for the teaching of arts and crafts.³

Whilst some of these ideas had already been incorporated within the CWA funded Public Works of Art Project that ran from December 1933 through to April 1934, they overlapped significantly with the more expansive WPA/FAP. The WPA was established by Executive Order on 6 May 1935 to supervise and coordinate federal

¹ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-56* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 85.

² Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 85.

³ Quoted in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 85.

work relief programmes and was funded by the \$4.8 billion assigned for that purpose by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of the same year.⁴ With his background in relief administration Hopkins was a natural candidate to run it and he was clear from the outset that the WPA should have a cultural component. The resulting WPA/FAP consisted of four projects under the general title Federal One divided between art, theatre, music, and writing. At its largest in 1936 it employed about 5,000 artists across the nation, and about 10,000 were on its rolls at some time or other.⁵ Whilst it was decentralised and operated on a regional basis it should be noted that its activities were concentrated disproportionately in New York. Of an estimated total budget of \$35 million spent on the WPA/FAP about \$16.6 million went to New York State, and most of that to the city, and in 1937 almost 45 per cent of all artists employed on the project were working there.⁶

In terms of painting the most significant component of the WPA/FAP was the Easel Division which provided more work for painters than any other type of creative artist. At one point over 900 of them drew WPA checks and by the time that the project was terminated in 1943 they had contributed 108,099 works in oil, watercolour, tempera, and pastel.⁷ Whilst these artists appreciated the opportunity to work in the wake of the economic collapse they were nevertheless often frustrated by the stringent bureaucratic rules of the programme. Most painters working for the Easel Division wished to work at home or in their studio and produce works to a quota system – an oil painting in four to six weeks depending upon size etc. This was allowed in the smaller state projects and experimentally in Illinois, New York, and New Jersey up until 1939. Yet in other urban centres, and the latter three states after this date, nervous project administrators corralled artists into central workshops with individual cubicles so that they could thereby check that they were putting in the requisite hours and therefore escape the charge of ‘boondoggling’ that was all too often levelled at the cultural projects by the conservative anti-New Deal press – all this against the desires of Cahill who realised that most artists worked better in their own time, at

⁴ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 78.

⁵ Gerald Monroe, ‘Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression’, *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1974), p. 8.

⁶ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 79.

⁷ Richard McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 114 & 5.

their own pace, and in conditions of their own choosing.⁸ The works produced were varied in both style and subject matter and fully reflected the eclecticism of American art in the 1930s, a period preceding the dominance of the type of abstraction typified by the New York School in the postwar period [figures 5, 6, 7 & 8].

Whilst the artists painting under the auspices of the Easel Division produced a whole range of divergent works that fully reflected the aesthetic plurality of the period they were nevertheless united in their embrace of collective action. And with the beginning of large-scale government funding for the arts the UAG, now renamed the Artists' Union as of February 1934, was propelled into prominence as the de facto bargaining agent between artists and the WPA administration, and its ranks swelled accordingly. By the autumn of 1934 its membership had passed 700, and this more than doubled with the advent of the WPA/FAP.⁹ For the first time American artists, now freed from their dependence upon the caprice of private patronage, shared the same employer – the federal government. This not only produced a shift in the relationship between artists and the state, but also between each other as they became co-workers rather than competitors, and this enabled the more radical elements within the Artists' Union to redefine themselves as 'cultural workers', a discursive shift only solidified by the administrators efforts at making them clock in and out of centralised studio spaces. And, as Gerald Monroe has made clear: the exceptional working arrangements when allowed; the large percentage of the national quota on the New York City Project; the generous exceptions to the stringent relief requirements; and the highest WPA hourly wage were substantially a result of union pressure.¹⁰

It was their collective enthusiasm and their identification with other workers that made Artists' Union members such an active presence in demonstrations and on picket lines, and which earned them the nickname of the 'fire brigade' [figure 9].¹¹ Their militancy was evident from the outset as with the creation of the WPA/FAP they consistently picketed the College Art Association, which administered the New York City Art Programme, and their actions eventually resulted in the arrest of 83

⁸ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, p. 116.

⁹ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 86.

¹⁰ Gerald Monroe, 'Artists on the Barricades: The Militant Artists' Union Treats with the New Deal', *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1978), p. 20.

¹¹ Monroe, 'Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers...', p. 8.

artists who then spent a night in police cells in the winter of 1935.¹² In this they took their cue from the broader trade union movement which had been flexing its muscles in its fight to win collective bargaining rights from their recalcitrant employers in the industrial sector. And in their battles with the WPA/FAP bureaucracy over work conditions, demeaning means tests, and lay-offs the tactics of the Artists' Union sometimes precipitated that of the wider labour movement as a whole. When in the autumn of 1936 President Roosevelt decided to cut the rolls of the WPA in keeping with an apparent upturn in the economy that he expected would absorb workers back into private industry, Artists' Union members went on the offensive. In early December over 400 of them assembled to storm the lower 5th Avenue Art Project offices in an attempt to force the administration to rescind the proposed layoffs on the WPA/FAP. About 225 succeeded in occupying the offices where they staged a sit-down in an attempt to win concessions. The police were summoned and a bloody battle ensued in which 12 demonstrators were wounded and a further 219 were then carried off in 11 police patrol wagons.¹³ In this the Artist's Union members used a tactic that would become famous just weeks later when automobile workers at the General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan, used the sit-down strike as a means to win trade union recognition for the car industry as a whole [figure 10].

Yet, as I indicated at the outset, if the more radical elements within the Artists' Union took their cue from trade union militancy in the industrial sector and redefined themselves as 'cultural workers', then this contradicted the conception of the artists' role as elaborated by Cahill, chosen by Hopkins to run the WPA/FAP. Cahill was a natural choice in that he had worked at the celebrated Newark Museum under John Cotton Dana who was a firm believer in making art more accessible to the general public; had been temporary acting director of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (hereafter MOMA) in 1932-33; and had curated the First Municipal Art Exhibit in New York in 1934.¹⁴ As such, as Andrew Hemingway has argued, Cahill had successfully 'established his credentials as a propagandist and ideologue for modern American art'.¹⁵ After arriving in New York in 1913 Cahill got to know members of *The Masses* group and fell under the influence of the renowned communist Mike

¹² Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 86.

¹³ Monroe, 'Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers...', p. 8.

¹⁴ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 151.

¹⁵ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 151.

Gold. Yet by 1921 this earlier political radicalism had become firmly displaced by his ambitions in the art world so that by the time he was called upon to head up the WPA/FAP in 1935 his key ideological influences were Dana and Dewey – the latter who he had seen speak at the New School for Social Research whilst he was studying aesthetics and art history at Columbia University.¹⁶

Importantly for the argument that I want to pursue here Cahill was a pioneer in researching and exhibiting American folk art. Whilst he left the Newark Museum in 1929, he returned to curate the shows *American Primitives* in 1930 and *American Folk Sculpture* the following year. Then, when at MOMA in 1932, he organised the show *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* from the collection of folk art amassed by the Rockefellers with Cahill's assistance; and then another titled *American Sources of Modern Art* which mined the aesthetic significance of 'naïve', 'primitive', and 'folk' traditions in American art. In the substantive catalogue that he wrote for the *American Folk Art* show Cahill claimed that folk art grew out of 'the fertile plain of everyday competence in the crafts, and was 'the expression of the common people, made by them for their use and enjoyment'.¹⁷ Unfortunately, such art had languished as a result of the spread of 'machine industry' after the Civil War, and by the end of the century the decline of the crafts had caused it to die out. These themes were taken up once again in a speech he made at the eightieth birthday celebration for Dewey in 1939 titled 'American Resources in the Arts', in which he presented the WPA/FAP as essentially an implementation of Dewey's ideas on art and education.¹⁸ Here he reiterated the fact that industrialisation had had a catastrophic effect upon the arts, 'having divorced the artist from the usual vocations of the community' to the point whereby from the Gilded Age onwards 'The art object has become more and more a minor luxury product', little more than 'aesthetic fragments torn from their social background'.¹⁹ As such America had 'suffered a cultural erosion far more serious than the erosion of the dustbowl'.²⁰

¹⁶ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 151.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 152.

¹⁸ Holger Cahill, 'American Recourses in the Arts', Francis V. O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Massachusetts: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 33-44.

¹⁹ Cahill, 'American Recourses in the Arts', pp. 36-37.

²⁰ Cahill, 'American Recourses in the Arts', p. 38.

These arguments were extremely close to those expounded by Dewey in his 1934 book *Art as Experience*, his most significant contribution to aesthetic debate which was written with the assistance of the radical art historian Meyer Schapiro and the radical philosopher Sidney Hook, before the latter's subsequent slide to the right.²¹ Dewey argued that in pre-modern times 'the arts of the drama, music, painting, and architecture ... had no peculiar connection with theaters, galleries, museums. They were part of the significant life of an organized community', and here he referred back to Classical Athens with the examples of the Parthenon and Greek philosophy.²² And, as with Cahill after him, Dewey located the separation of art and everyday life with the emergence of the artist as 'individual' with the onset of industrialisation and the free market in art.²³ As Raymond Williams succinctly put it in his *Culture and Society* nearly 25 years later: 'The positive consequence of the [Romantic] idea of art as superior reality was that it offered an immediate basis for an important criticism of industrialism. The negative consequence was that it tended, as both the situation and the opposition hardened, to isolate art, to specialise the imaginative faculty to this one kind of activity'.²⁴ For Dewey then, the task of the cultural critic was, 'to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience', and he thereby equated aesthetic experience with everyday ones such as poking wood in the hearth.²⁵ As such, Cahill's emphasis upon the value of community and democratic participation; his refusal of the distinction between the fine and the practical arts; and his insistence upon the ordinariness of aesthetic experience, all demonstrated a clear debt to Dewey.²⁶

As I mentioned at the beginning, these impulses were manifested in the WPA/FAP in its blurring of the distinctions between producer and consumer through the community art centres; the attack upon the separation of high and low via the Index of American Design; and the assault upon the gallery system through the emphasis upon easel paintings and murals created for display in public buildings. And whilst these

²¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Paragon Books, 1979).

²² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 7.

²³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 3.

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), p. 60.

²⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 3.

²⁶ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 152.

measures were enthusiastically embraced by both leftist artists and Cahill, as an ardent follower of Dewey, his utopian conception of the artist was in fact distinctly different to that proposed by the more radical members of the Artist's Union. If their model of a 'cultural worker', organised through a trade union, looked to the example of contemporary industrial workers pouring into the ranks of the CIO, then Cahill's conception of the artist was resolutely pre-industrial. This romanticized view looked back on the antebellum Period with a kind of sentimental nostalgia, as an idealized pre-industrial highly structured genteel and stable agrarian society in contrast to the anxieties and struggles of everyday modern life. And ultimately it was the contradiction between the aesthetic ideology enunciated by Cahill and the militant actions of rank-and-file artists radicalised by the broader industrial trade union movement that ensured that the WPA/FAP remained a site of ongoing conflict despite the fact that American artists had never had it so good, either before or since.