

## LEFT FRONT EVENTS

All events are free and open to the public

Saturday, January 18, 2pm

**Winter Exhibition Opening with W. J. T. Mitchell**

Wednesday, February 5, 6pm

**Lecture & Reception: Julia Bryan-Wilson, Figurations**

Wednesday, February 26, 6pm

**Poetry Reading: Working Poems: An Evening with Mark Nowak**

Saturday, March 8, 2pm

**Film Screening and Discussion: Body and Soul with J. Hoberman**

Saturday, March 15, 2pm

**Guest Lecture: Vasif Kortun of SALT, Istanbul**

Thursday, April 3, 6pm

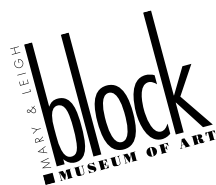
**Gallery Performance: Jackalope Theatre, Living Newspaper, Edition 2014**

Saturday, April 5, 5pm

**Gallery Performance: Jackalope Theatre, Living Newspaper, Edition 2014**

Wednesday, April 16, 2014, 6pm

**Lecture: Andrew Hemingway, Style of the New Era: John Reed Clubs and Proletariat Art**



**Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art  
Northwestern University**

40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, IL, 60208-2140  
[www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu](http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu)

Generous support for *The Left Front* is provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, as well as the Terra Foundation on behalf of William Osborn and David Kabiller, and the Myers Foundations. Additional funding is from the Carlyle Anderson Endowment, Mary and Leigh Block Endowment, the Louise E. Drangsholt Fund, the Kessel Fund at the Block Museum, and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

[theleftfront-blockmuseum.tumblr.com](http://theleftfront-blockmuseum.tumblr.com)

# THE LEFT FRONT

## RADICAL ART IN THE "RED DECADE," 1929-1940

MARY AND LEIGH BLOCK MUSEUM OF ART  
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

January 17–June 22, 2014



# DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

*The Left Front: Radical Art in the “Red Decade”, 1929–1940* was curated by John Murphy and Jill Bugajski, doctoral candidates in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University. Using the Block’s collection as the starting point for their research, their fresh take on American art of this tumultuous decade during the Great Depression adds a new dimension to the scholarship of the period. In light of the recent global recession, the study of the artworks created by artist-activists in the 1930s provides a relevant historical backdrop for understanding artists’ responses to moments of social, political, and economic crisis then and now.

Nourishing the next generation of scholars is central to the Block’s mission. The seed of this exhibition grew from John Murphy’s research as the 2012–2013 Block Graduate Fellow. This special program supports objects-based research by students in the Department of Art History at Northwestern through direct access to the Block’s collections of prints, drawings, and photographs. Students are also encouraged to mine the rich holdings of Northwestern’s Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections. After laying the foundation for the exhibition, John invited fellow PhD candidate Jill Bugajski to join him in shaping the focus around the work of American artists affiliated with the John Reed Club and the American Artists’ Congress. Bugajski’s expertise in cultural exchange and diplomacy between the United States and the Soviet Union during this period expanded both the scope and specificity of the exhibition.

Although *The Left Front* draws primarily from works in the Block’s collection, the museum is grateful to the many lenders whose artworks have enriched the exhibition: Mr. and Mrs. Harlan J. Berk; Bernard Friedman; Belverd and Marian Needles; a private collection; Amherst Center for Russian Culture, Amherst College; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum and the College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago; the Koehnline Museum of Art, Oakton Community College; the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago; the Terra Foundation for American Art; and the University of Michigan Museum of Art. For continued support and collaboration in lending rare books and other ephemera, we thank Scott Krafft and the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections.

We are especially grateful for the generosity of the Terra Foundation for American Art. The Terra’s support of the work of two emerging scholars not only made possible this publication and the innovative engagement programming accompanying the exhibition, it also reaffirmed the significance of the new perspective that the two curators have brought to this complex period in US cultural history. We are grateful to Bill Osborn and David Kabiller for their additional trustee directed gifts from the Terra to the Block, as well as the Myers Foundations. Additional funding comes from the Carlyle Anderson Endowment, the Louise E. Drangsholt Fund, the Kessel Fund at the Block Museum, and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

Our understanding of this period was immeasurably deepened through conversations with Chicagoland’s generous community of scholars and curators including: Dr. Nathan Harpaz, Director of the Koehnline Museum of Art at Oakton Community College; Rachel Shrock, Collections and Exhibitions Assistant at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum at the University of Illinois at Chicago; and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the Edith Kreeger Wolf Distinguished Visiting Professor in Northwestern’s Department of Art Theory and Practice. Dr. Rachel Sanders of the City Literary Institute in London also contributed, and Professor Stephen Eisenman of Northwestern’s Department of Art History provided his invaluable expertise to the co-curators. Other Northwestern faculty supported the efforts of the curators and the Block, including Jesús Escobar, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Art History; Kate Baldwin, Associate Professor, Communication Studies, Rhetoric, and American Studies; Harris Feinsod, Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies; Lane Relyea, Associate Professor and Chair of Art Theory and Practice; and Michael Rakowitz, Professor of Art Theory and Practice. Lisa Meyerowitz graciously assisted, and Mark Pascale, Curator in the Department of Prints and Drawings at The Art Institute of Chicago and Adjunct Professor of Printmedia, School of the Art Institute was especially helpful and generous.

The Block is especially grateful to Christina Kiaer, Associate Professor in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University, for her ongoing participation in the development of this project. In fall of 2013 Professor Kiaer taught a related

undergraduate seminar that focused on themes in the exhibition and culminated in student essays offering close examinations of particular objects from the show. Those essays are published here. In addition, the students curated a companion exhibition. Drawn from the Block’s collection, *WORK PRINT PROTEST REPEAT* is on view in the Ellen Philips Katz and Howard C. Katz Gallery until March 16, 2014.

I wish to thank specific Block staff who were instrumental in the realization of this project: Dr. Corinne Granof, the Block’s Curator of Academic Programs, who served as mentor and sounding board to the curators throughout the development and realization of this exhibition; Elliot Reichert, Special Projects Curator, who served as Managing Editor of this publication; Dan Silverstein, Senior Manager of Collections and Exhibitions, who oversaw the exhibition design; Elizabeth Wolf, Collections and Exhibitions Coordinator, who, with Dr. Granof, spent several sessions with Professor Kiaer’s students advising them on methods of research and curation; and Senior Registrar Kristina Bottomley, who coordinated the loans with patience and flexibility.

At the Block, art is a springboard for discussing ideas and issues. The museum identifies itself not only with its physical building and collection but also as “a state of mind,” taking its engagement vision and activities beyond its gallery walls. *The Left Front* engagement programming, led by Susy Bielak, Associate Director of Engagement/Curator of Public Practice, connects art activism—past and present—through a robust series of programs and events including lectures by Andrew Hemingway, Emeritus Professor of the History of Art at University College London; and Julia Bryan-Wilson, Associate Professor in the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley, a partnership with the American Cultures Colloquium; an in-gallery reading and community workshop by 2010 Guggenheim Fellow Mark Nowak in collaboration with the Poetry and Poetics Colloquium at Northwestern; in-gallery student performances of new short plays by Chicago’s Jackalope Theatre, and pop-up performances around Evanston and Chicago in collaboration with Professor D. Soyini Madison, Chair, Northwestern Department of Performance Studies.

Fulfilling the Block’s mission as a university art museum is made possible through dynamic partnerships with many departments at Northwestern University. We wish to express gratitude to its Office of the Provost and especially to Associate Provost Jean Shedd for supporting the Block’s new direction and for its belief in the value the museum adds to scholarship, and to teaching and for learning across our campus, our community, and our field.

The question “What Should Revolutionary Artists Do Now?” is as relevant today as it was when artist and political activist Louis Lozowick first posed it in the December 1930 issue of *New Masses*, the influential leftist magazine that served as a forum for the American Communist Party and “fellow travelers” in the early part of the 20th century. When Lozowick wrote, the United States was mired in the Great Depression, a period of severe economic collapse and political upheaval. Recent events are symptomatic of similar conditions: a worldwide economic recession, the rise of the Occupy Movement, and the onset of the Arab Spring indicate that business-as-usual has left many dissatisfied with their political and economic circumstances. In the spirit of Lozowick’s question and in consideration of the contemporary moment, we posed the question “What is revolutionary art today?” to the community of artists, activists, scholars, and thinkers living and working in Chicago. Excerpts of those responses can be found in this publication, next to voices and images from the 1930s in a transhistorical conversation on aesthetics and activism. An online platform accessible from the Block’s website will carry that conversation further and open it to the public at large.

I am extremely grateful for the fortitude and patience of the entire staff of the Block. In August 2013, our building sustained unfortunate water damage when a pipe unexpectedly burst. The staff responded with professionalism, patience, and pragmatism so that the Block could reopen in time for this exhibition. Because our team members are such a united front, they can accomplish anything and I am very proud to work beside them every day.

## LISA GRAZIOSE CORRIN

Ellen Philips Katz Director

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University

# THE LEFT FRONT: RADICAL ART IN THE "RED DECADE," 1929–1940

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# THE LEFT FRONT: FROM REVOLUTIONARY TO POPULAR

Severe economic downturn. A dysfunctional government. Wall Street bailouts. Public protests and police clashes. A president accused of “socialism.” Struggles for immigrant and minority rights. The threat of military conflict abroad and social turmoil at home:

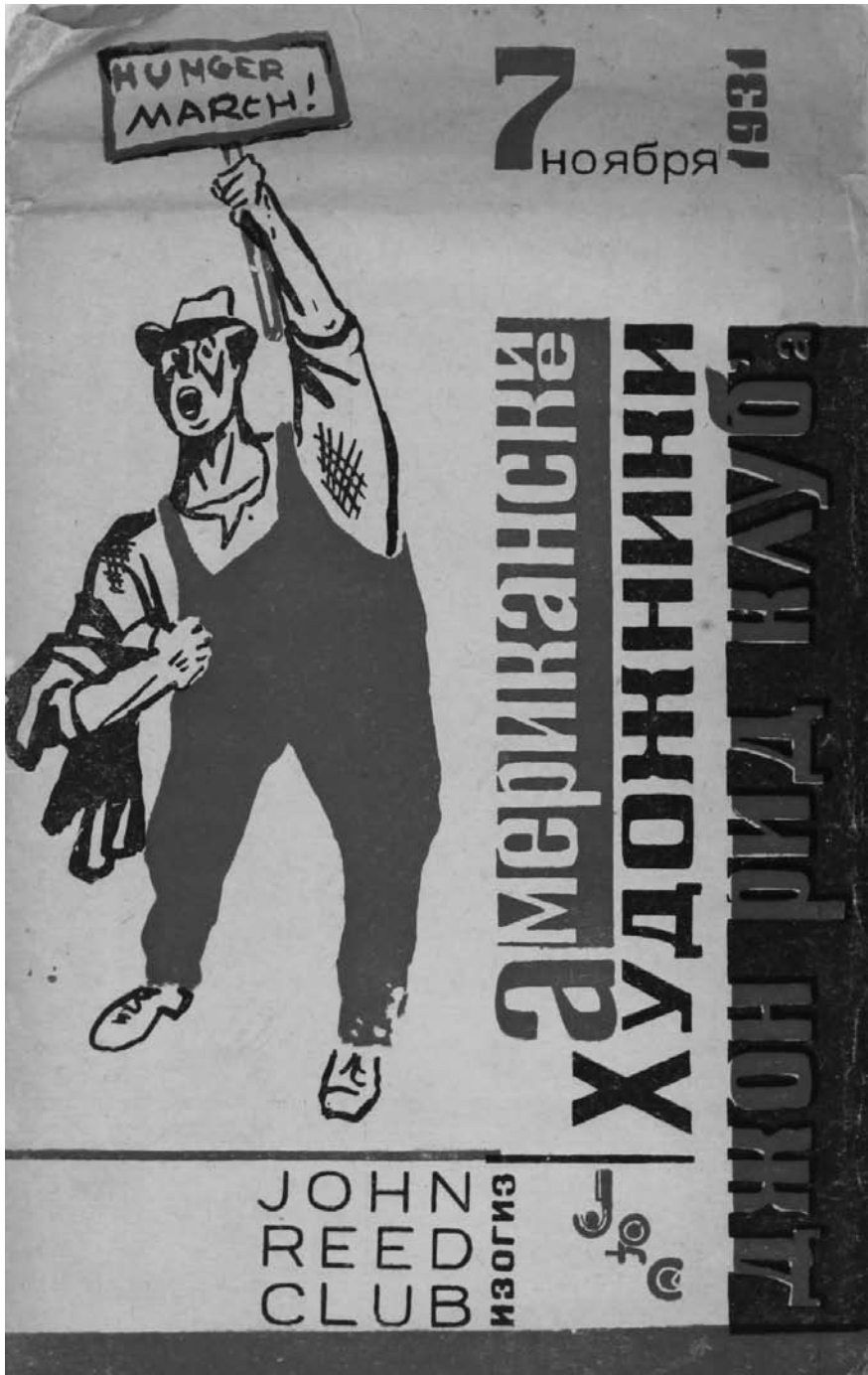
The United States in the 1930s.

In the years between the start of Great Depression and the outbreak of World War II, painters and printmakers joined forces with writers and intellectuals to form a “Left Front” dedicated to socially conscious art. The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing social and economic fallout created a white-hot social crucible, forging a new generation of artists committed to revolutionary politics. In 1941 American journalist and author Eugene Lyons used the phrase “Red Decade” to disparage the perceived “Stalinist Penetration of America.” He singled out for criticism the most high-profile and successful organizations of radical artists in the 1930s: the John Reed Club (JRC) and its successor group, the American Artists’ Congress (AAC).

John Reed—journalist, poet, witness to the 1917 Russian Revolution, and a founding member of the American Communist Party—embodied the role of artist as activist, publicly engaged and battling for progressive social change. The draft manifesto of the John Reed Club evoked his legacy by calling on all artists, writers, and intellectuals to “abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art’s sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides.” Members committed to “forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world.”

But a weapon for what? JRC and AAC members aimed to redefine what it meant to be an American artist. They rejected the “bourgeois” definition of an artist as a genius aloof from his or her historical moment. Instead artists collectively participated in the controversial events of the day, calling themselves “culture workers” and “workers with a brush.” Members contributed to the club’s journals, the New York-based *New Masses* (1926–1948) and the Chicago-based *Left Front* (1933–1934), which featured bracing images of class, race, and gender prejudice. John Reed Club members campaigned on behalf of prisoners, organized the first-ever Artists’ Union, protested institutional censorship, and taught art to the working class through JRC-sponsored art programs. Mabel Dwight wrote: “Art has turned militant. It forms unions, carries banners, sits down uninvited, and gets underfoot. Social justice is its battle cry.”


Chicago artists inherited the city’s radical political history that included the Haymarket Riot of 1886 and the Pullman Strike of 1894. They were in dialogue with their New York comrades, and in solidarity with new models for an engaged art practice in the Soviet Union and Mexico. In 1930 delegates of the JRC traveled to Kharkov, Ukraine, to participate in a conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers. This conference established the JRC as “the principal cultural link between the Soviet Union and its American supporters.” Art by JRC members traveled to Moscow in 1931 for the exhibition *American Artists of the John Reed Club* at the Museum of Western Art. The Mexican mural movement—led by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—inspired Chicago artists to adopt an expressive figural style and idealization of the heroic laboring body.



American Artists of the John Reed Club (Amerikanskii Khudozhniki "Dzhon Rid Klub"), 1931, exhibition catalog

acted as executive secretary with Schapiro, Rockwell Kent, Orozco, and Siqueiros speaking. The call for the congress stated, “We artists must act. Individually we are powerless. Through collective action we can defend our interests. We must ally ourselves with all groups engaged in the common struggle against war and fascism.” The congress sponsored antifascist exhibitions, boycotted exhibitions in fascist countries, raised money for Loyalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War, supported art projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and was instrumental in bringing Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* to the United States in 1939.

Despite claiming no political affiliations, many AAC members had invested utopian expectations in the Soviet Union. This allegiance was sorely tested, and in most cases eradicated, when in August of 1939 Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis and in November the Soviet Union invaded Finland. Many congress members withdrew their support, and in 1940 only 15% renewed their AAC membership. Revolutionary commitment led to disillusionment. Do artists truly represent the “Voice of the People,” as claimed the title of an AAC panel discussion? Can art ever be effectively enlisted in the service of a revolutionary program?

Beginning in 2007 the United States weathered the worst recession since the Great Depression and protest movements like Occupy Wall Street resurrected the polemical rhetoric of artists in the 1930s. Radical artists from both epochs protested political corruption, social injustice, and economic disparity. What role did art play in criticizing the status quo? What, if any, is an artist’s responsibility to society? In this context, the bracing images by 1930s artist-activists become newly vivid. The revolutionary art of the “Red Decade” raises the ever-disquieting question posed by Louis Lozowick to his *New Masses* readers: “What Should Revolutionary Artists Do Now?” 

## NEW MASSES, NEW YORK, JUNE 1932 DRAFT MANIFESTO THE JOHN REED CLUB OF NEW YORK

Mankind is passing through the most profound crisis in its history. An old world is dying; a new one is being born. Capitalist civilization, which has dominated the economic, political, and cultural life of continents, is in the process of decay. It received a deadly blow during the imperialist war which it engendered. It is now breeding new and more devastating wars. At this very moment the Far East seethes with military conflicts and preparations which will have far-reaching consequences for the whole of humanity.

Meantime, the prevailing economic crisis is placing greater and greater burdens upon the mass of the world’s population, upon those who work with hand or brain. In the cities of five-sixths of the globe, millions of workers are tramping the streets looking for jobs in vain. In the rural districts, millions of farmers are bankrupt. The colonial countries reverberate with the revolutionary struggles of oppressed peoples against imperialist exploitation; in the capitalist countries the class struggle grows sharper from day to day.

The present crisis has stripped capitalism naked. It stands more revealed than ever as a system of robbery and fraud, unemployment and terror, starvation and war.

The general crisis of capitalism is reflected in its culture. The economic and political machinery of the bourgeoisie is in decay, its philosophy, its literature, and its art are bankrupt. Sections of the bourgeoisie are beginning to lose faith in its early progressive ideas. The bourgeoisie is no longer a progressive class, and its ideas are no longer progressive ideas. On the contrary: as the bourgeois world moves toward the abyss, it reverts to the mysticism of the middle ages. Fascism in politics is accompanied by neo-catholicism in thinking. Capitalism cannot give the mass of mankind bread. It is equally unable to evolve creative ideas.

This crisis in every aspect of life holds America, like the other capitalist countries, in its iron grip. Here there is unemployment, starvation, terror, and preparation for war. Here the government, national, state and local, is dropping the hypocritical mask of democracy, and openly flaunts a fascist face. The demand of the unemployed for work or bread is answered with machine-gun bullets. Strike areas are closed to investigators; strike leaders are murdered in cold blood. And as the pretense of constitutionalism is dropped, as brute force is used against workers fighting for better living conditions, investigations reveal the utmost corruption and graft in government, and the closest cooperation of the capitalist political parties and organized crime.

In America, too, bourgeois culture writhes in a blind alley. Since the imperialist war, the best talents in bourgeois literature and art, philosophy and science, those who have the finest imaginations and the richest craftsmanship, have revealed from year to year the sterility, the utter impotence of bourgeois culture to advance mankind to higher levels. They have made it clear that although the bourgeoisie has a monopoly of the instruments of culture, its culture is in decay. Most of the American writers who have developed in the past fifteen years betray the cynicism and despair of capitalist values. The movies are a vast corrupt commercial enterprise, turning out infantile entertainment or crude propaganda for the profit of stockholders. Philosophy has become mystical and idealist. Science goes in for godseeking. Painting loses itself in abstractions or trivialities.

In the past two years, however, a marked change has come over the American intelligentsia. The class struggle in culture has assumed sharp forms. Recently we have witnessed two major movements among American intellectuals: the Humanist movement, frankly reactionary in its ideas; and a movement to the left among certain types of liberal intellectuals.

The reasons for the swing to the left are not hard to find. The best of the younger American writers have come, by and large, from the middle classes. During the boom which followed the war these classes increased their income. They played the stock-market with profit. They were beneficiaries of the New Era. The crash in the autumn of 1929 fell on their heads like a thunderbolt. They found themselves the victims of the greatest expropriation in the history of the country. The articulate members of the middle classes – the writers and artists, the members of the learned professions – lost that faith in capitalism which during the twenties trapped them into dreaming on the decadent shores of post-war European culture. These intellectuals suddenly awoke to the fact that we live in the era of imperialism and revolution; that two civilizations are in mortal combat and that they must take sides.

A number of factors intensified their consciousness of the true state of affairs. The crisis has affected the intellectual’s mind because it has affected his income. Thousands of school-teachers, engineers, chemists, newspapermen and members of other professions are unemployed. The publishing business has suffered acutely from the economic crisis. Middle-class patrons are no longer able to buy paintings as they did formerly. The movies and theatres are discharging writers, actors and artists. And in the midst of this economic crisis, the middle-class intelligentsia, nauseated by the last war, sees another one, more barbarous still, on the horizon. They see the civilization in whose tenets they were nurtured going to pieces.

In contrast, they see a new civilization rising in the Soviet Union. They see a land of 160 million people, occupying one-sixth of the globe, where workers rule in alliance with farmers. In this vast country there is no unemployment. Amidst the decay of capitalist economy, Soviet industry and agriculture rise to higher and higher levels of production every year.

In contrast to capitalist anarchy, they see planned socialist economy. They see a system with private profit and the parasitic classes which it nourishes abolished; they see a world in which the land, the factories, the mines, the rivers, and the hands and brains of the people produce wealth not for a handful of capitalists but for the nation as a whole. In contrast to the imperialist oppression of the colonies, to the lynching of Negroes, to Scottsboro cases, they see 132 races and nationalities in full social and political equality cooperating in the building of a socialist society. Above all, they see a cultural revolution unprecedented in history, unparalleled in the contemporary world. They see the destruction of the monopoly of culture. They see knowledge, art, and science made more accessible to the mass of workers and peasants. They see workers and peasants themselves creating literature and art, themselves participating in science and invention. And seeing this, they realize that the Soviet Union is the vanguard of the new communist society which is to replace the old.

Some of the intellectuals who have thought seriously about the world crisis, the coming war and the achievements of the Soviet Union, have taken the next logical step. They have begun to realize that in every capitalist country the revolutionary working class struggles for the abolition of the outworn and barbarous system of capitalism. Some of them, aligning themselves with the American workers, have gone to strike areas in Kentucky and Pennsylvania and have given their talents to the cause of the working class.

Such allies from the disillusioned middle-class intelligentsia are to be welcomed. But of primary importance at this stage is the development of the revolutionary culture of the working class itself. The proletarian revolution has its own philosophy developed by Marx, Engels and Lenin. It has developed its own revolutionary schools, newspapers, and magazines; it has its worker-correspondence, its own literature and art. In the past two decades there have developed writers, artists and critics who have approached the American scene from the viewpoint of the revolutionary workers.

To give this movement in arts and letters greater scope and force, to bring it closer to the daily struggle of the workers, the John Reed Club was formed in the fall of 1929. In the past two and a half years, the influence of this organization has spread to many cities. Today there are 13 John Reed Clubs throughout the country. These organisations are open to writers and artists, whatever their social origin, who subscribe to the fundamental program adopted by the international conference of revolutionary writers and artists which met at Kharkov, in November, 1930. The program contains six points upon which all honest intellectuals, regardless of their background may unite in the common struggle against capitalism. They are:

1. Fight against imperialist war, defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression;
2. Fight against fascism, whether open or concealed, like social-fascism;
3. Fight for the development and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement;
4. Fight against White chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution) and against the persecution of the foreign-born;
5. Fight against the influence of middle-class ideas in the work of revolutionary writers and artists;
6. Fight against the imprisonment of revolutionary writers and artists, as well as other class-war prisoners throughout the world.

On the basis of this minimum program, we call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art’s sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides. We call upon them to break with bourgeois ideas which seek to conceal the violence and fraud, the corruption and decay of capitalist society. We call upon them to align themselves with the working class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation, against unemployment and terror, against fascism and war. We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world.



# RED PARADISE TO RED DILEMMA: SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN THE VISUAL ARTS



Aleksei Ilyich Kravchenko, *On the Barricades*, c. 1925, wood engraving

I'm always thinking of Russia,  
I can't keep her out of my head,  
I don't give a damn for Uncle Sam,  
I am a left wing radical Red.  
—Harold Harwell Lewis, *Thinking of Russia*, 1932

It is no surprise that in the 1920s and 1930s American artist-activists turned to the Soviet Union as an aesthetic model. Among the many upheavals of World War I, the Russian Revolution in 1917 was the only proletarian takeover to actually succeed. Thus the budding USSR became an inadvertent role model for groups the world over seeking to elevate the working class and combat exploitative old-world monarchies or new-world industrial oligarchies. This success also positioned the USSR as a younger sibling to the US and France, whose revolutions in 1776 and 1789 served to historically contextualize and position the three nations as unique allies. Still, many in the US feared that American revolutionary sentiment was not a thing of the past. The stock market crash of 1929 suggested to some that capitalism was failing and a new order would be required to remedy the ills of the devastated economy.

The casting off of “bourgeois” art forms was an important step in erecting a new society in the USSR. Following 1917, American artist-émigrés like Louis Lozowick became crucial for interpreting the art of the new nation for American audiences. Lozowick published his first article on Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* in the journal *Broom* in 1922. He presented a lecture for the first exhibition of the new Russian art in the US, at Katherine Dreier’s Société Anonyme in 1924, which became the basis of his influential 1925 text *Modern Russian Art*.

The years 1927–1928 saw a marked increase of attention toward the USSR in the US. By the end of the 1920s many felt the nation had proven its legitimacy as a stable, successful, venture. Instead of waiting to see if the USSR would fail, spectators became enraptured with watching it grow. The launch of the First Five-Year Plan to expand industry in 1928, under Premier Joseph Stalin, piqued both admiration and trepidation. American books on Soviet topics doubled between 1926 and 1928, and doubled again by diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1933—one of the first actions taken by the newly inaugurated US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Amidst the Depression, it appeared the Soviet Union was succeeding where the US was floundering.

With the industrial expansion, the aesthetic priorities of the USSR began to shift. When Alfred Barr, the soon-to-be director of Museum of Modern Art in New York, traveled to Moscow in 1927–1928 in search of avant-garde painting, he was disappointed to discover that the constructivist Alexander Rodchenko had abandoned the medium after 1921. Lozowick observed: “it was not long before

everyone including the constructivists perceived that their works were precisely the same kind of ‘useless’ esthetic objects, of no immediate practical value whatever.” The art-into-life philosophies of applied design and communicative power of realism, in Rodchenko’s case via photography, were leading artists’ “reasoning to a logical conclusion”—to abandon the avant-garde vocabularies that shaped the 1920s.

The “Third Period” (1928–1935) forwarded an obdurate “with us or against us” dictum. At the Second World Plenum (IBRL) in Kharkov, American artist William Gropper and the US delegation absorbed the new mantra positioning art as a weapon in class struggle: against oppression, labor exploitation, and fascism. The militant party line emphasized revolutionary commitment and unwavering defense of Soviet interests (and borders) at the exclusion of “soft” socialists, social-democrats, fellow travelers, bourgeois “modernists,” social reformers, and liberals—all cast as enemies. In 1931, the JRC organized an exhibition of American art to be shown in Moscow. Featuring Lozowick, Gropper, and many others, graphic art themes of strikes, police brutality, racial conflict, and capitalist excess dominated the imagery. Soviet reviewers were paternalistically critical of the American artists: “An exhibition of this kind is a stock-taking for the foreign artists themselves; it places their work before fraternal criticism, reveals the level of their development, their diseases of growth, the possible mistakes... comradely criticism can only help the movement to grow stronger and find the right path.” These exchanges set the tone for the next several years. Following the ascent of hard-line writer Michael Gold to editor in chief of *New Masses* in June 1928, the stock market crash in 1929, and the Kharkov conference of 1930, the stakes for pro-Soviet American artists progressively increased. The rhetoric became quite alienating, and American communists split in their allegiances. The expulsion of Leon Trotsky (1927) and Nikolai Bukharin (1929) from the Soviet Politburo, and followers such as Jay Lovestone from the American Communist Party, helped to shape the anti-Stalinist left in the US.

Although the JRC and *New Masses* paid lip service to Soviet art and aesthetic theory, these outlets hardly illuminated the complexities of art practice in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. In turn, Soviet artists found much of the new American realist aesthetics pessimistic and lacking sophistication. The artists of the JRC struggled to balance their allegiance to the Moscow-driven artistic line with their interests in European modernism and devotion to forging an independent American aesthetics. They questioned the definition and purpose of revolutionary art. Despite this, the JRC and *New Masses* (alongside the Mexican muralists) helped shape the image of what so-called Communist art looked like in the United States, more consequentially than art from the Soviet Union itself.

Despite the militant rhetoric of the Third Period, in 1933 official diplomatic recognition by Roosevelt and the ominous election of Adolf Hitler in Germany brought the USSR closer as an ally to the United States. These political shifts led to drastic changes in Soviet interparty and international relations, moving the cultural front line once again. The USSR reevaluated its aesthetic program at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, developing new criteria for “socialist realism”—guidelines that would be enforced with increasing rigidity through the latter half of the 1930s. An order from the American Communist Party dissolved the JRC on May 1, 1935, and a new period of cultural advocacy began: the Popular Front. If the Third Period represented hard-line exclusionism, the Popular Front represented inclusiveness, an attempt to join center and left political groups into a broad-based coalition against fascism. Combined with the US Federal Art Project, then in full swing, the years 1935–1937 gave artists on the left a broad community and a forum to make their voices heard. However, these years of collaboration and strength of purpose were short-lived.

Artist Jacob Burck’s enthusiasm for the new socialist realism led him in 1936 to pen a zealous defense of its evolution, using an alarming but portentous metaphor: “The twin art forms developed by bourgeois society—‘formalism’ and ‘naturalism’—are being hunted down, defined, and put on trial with the zeal with which former saboteurs were liquidated. Every group discussing art problems is a court, and in the prisoner’s dock are ‘formalism’ and its somewhat older bourgeois brother, ‘naturalism.’ This is the means by which ‘socialist realism’ in art is being brought about... Socialist art will begin to look like itself soon—something beautiful and unique in history.”

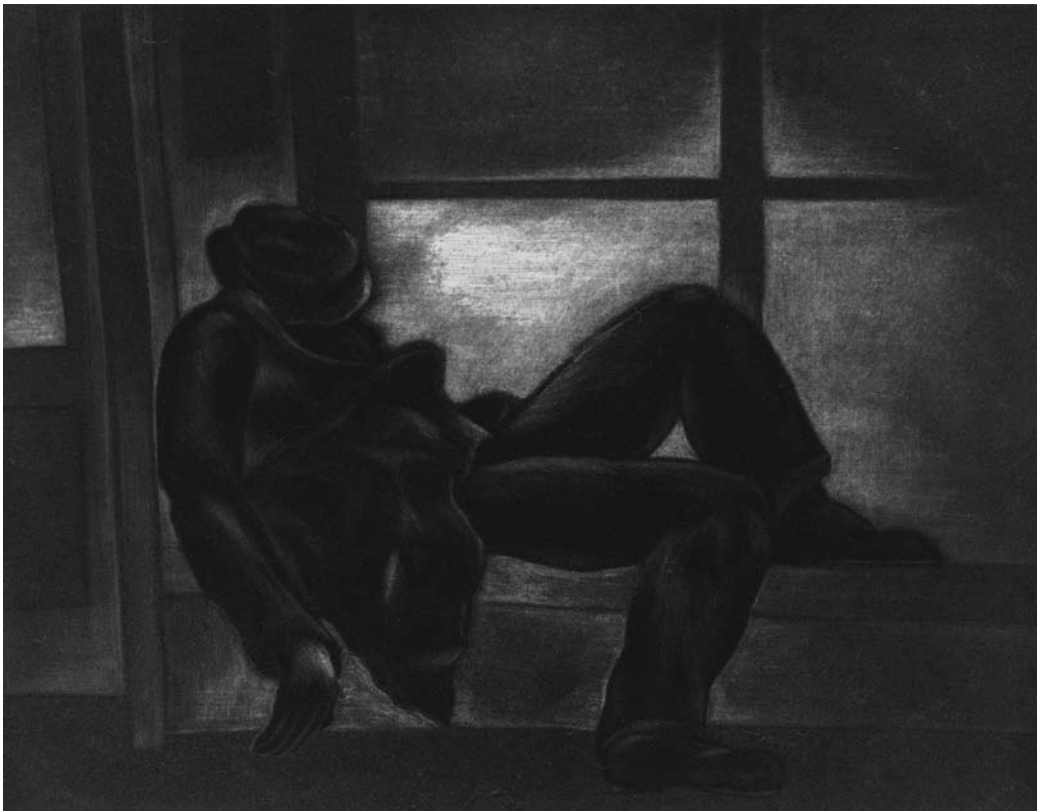
Four months after *New Masses* published Burck’s letter, the purge trials—the “great terror”—in the USSR began in earnest, with much more at stake than the question of artistic style. Despite growing awareness of the scope and scale of Stalin’s purges, many on the American left remained supportive of the USSR. The correlation between the tightening of aesthetic protocols, however, and the purging of political enemies tested the inclusive spirit of the Popular Front. On August 26, 1939, the Soviet Union betrayed the Popular Front and shocked the world by signing a non-aggression treaty with Hitler’s Nazi Germany, destroying the global anti-fascist alliance. For many, faith in the USSR as a political ally and aesthetic leader of the “Left Front” had been destroyed. [1]

# ALEXANDER STAVENITZ'S SUBWAY NO. 2

Alexander Stavenitz’s aquatint *Subway No. 2* shows a slumped and crumpled figure on a train. Is he an unemployed worker with no place to live? His hat covers his face and shields it from light, suggesting that he might be trying to sleep. His big body is folded into an uncomfortable position. The curves and triangles formed by his torso and legs are juxtaposed with the harsh straight lines of the subway window and bench. His hand dangles idly—the laboring potential in his body is folded away. This worker is trapped in a system in which his full potential cannot be realized.

On the contrary, the Soviet representation of workers is drastically different, as we can see in Fedor Bogorodsky’s 1931 painting *Long Live the System of the USSR!*, which is loosely translated from its original Russian title *Da zdravstvuet stroi SSSR!* The title alludes to the building of the new Soviet state by workers since the Russian word “строй” (stroi) is related to “стройка” (construction). The painting literally depicts three builders—one man with a wrench in his hand—surrounded by thick steel beams under construction. The lattice of steel structures is painted communist red, symbolically representing the nascent Soviet state. The viewer’s eyes are directed upward to the group of workers, whose bodies form lines parallel to that of the steel beams, signifying their harmonious existence within this society. Compared to Stavenitz’s lithograph of the individual unemployed worker, Bogorodsky’s three workers are soaring far above the Earth, bodies fully outstretched, practically freed from the constraints of gravity by their collective strength, power, and optimism. Below them are factory buildings with tall chimneys belching smoke, signaling that they are in use, productive. These workers form a total contrast to Stavenitz’s crumpled, folded, underground, dark, idle worker, whom we understand to be surrounded by Depression-era America, which was also less productive, more idle. Following the stock market crash in 1929, the US economy plunged and unemployment rates soared. By 1933, approximately 12,830,000 persons, about one-fourth of the civilian labor force, were out of work. Joblessness was quickly followed by homelessness; hundreds of thousands slept on the streets, in public spaces, or vacant buildings. In Soviet Russia, although workers did not typically live comfortably or enjoy good working conditions, there was no unemployment. Workers lived in socialist “company towns” where the local industrial plant provided all the facilities and employment.

While Stavenitz and other John Reed Club (JRC) artists tended to produce more critical images of the worker, Soviet artists depicted more optimistic views. Since the JRC artists read and studied Soviet materials, they would have been familiar



Alexander Stavenitz, *Subway, No. 2*, 1930, aquatint

with the Soviet artists’ practices. The reason for this difference lies in their different motives in using the worker image. The JRC artists believed that they needed to expose capitalism’s exploitation of the worker. In their manifesto, they declared that art should not “seek to conceal ... the corruption and decay of capitalist society” and called upon artists to “align themselves with the working class in its struggle” against capitalism. Their language was militant; all six of their main points began with “fight against.” The JRC artists were interested in revealing the problems of

“The future classless culture will not spring full-blown from the brow of the proletariat. It is up to the revolutionary artists to help pave the way for a complete break with bourgeois culture by developing new plastic revolutionary expressions which are an outgrowth of the class struggle and which embody the aspirations of the working class for the desired classless state...The revolutionary artist (this applies equally to the revolutionary critic) cannot remain aloof from the class struggle and expect to create a revolutionary art. He must consider himself as a unit in the struggle. In no other way can he acquire vitality and development in his work and escape from an individualistic subjectivity.” JACOB BURCK / REPLY TO MEYER SCHAPIRO’S REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL VIEWPOINT IN ART, 1933

capitalism and presenting them in a way that could agitate viewers. On the contrary, Soviet artists were receiving commissions from the party to create art that would mobilize the Soviet people. They helped stimulate the drive toward more production by painting workers laboring and displaying strength and health.

Despite their many differences, both works carry overt messages. *Subway No.2* depicts the neglect of workers by capitalism to promote communism. *Da zdravstvuet stroi SSSR!* illustrates an idealized picture of labor to celebrate communism. The influential Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, who wrote extensively on the aesthetics of Marxism, considers the question of partisanship versus propaganda a crucial one in socialist art of the 1930s. Bogorodsky’s soaring optimism and repeated use of red seem to “distort, rearrange or ‘tendentiously’ color reality,” which is characteristic of art that is merely propaganda. However, perhaps Lukács would have seen the Stavenitz being partisan, a quality characterized by candidness and achieved by the artist portraying reality without showing an intentional tendency. If the artist re-creates the reality honestly, the message—class struggle, etc.—would arise naturally out of the work. Indeed, *Subway No.2* is an intensely acute depiction of the experience of idleness and homelessness. Although there is no overt communist propaganda, the imagery of the unemployed worker was more relatable to the American viewers in the 1930s and a more powerful call for an end to capitalism. [2]



Fedor Bogorodsky, *Long Live the System of the USSR!* (“*Da zdravstvuet stroi SSSR!*”), 1931, oil on canvas




## BORIS GORELICK'S INDUSTRIAL STRIFE

During the Great Depression, unemployed men, unable to provide for themselves or their families, and men employed in marginal, oppressive labor conditions faced what art historian Erika Doss has called a “crisis of masculinity.” The concept of work has been a powerful source of national and individual identity for Americans throughout the nation’s history, intertwined with understandings of class and self-identity. During the Depression, many artists began to create explicitly political works in the hopes of fostering social and political change, and radical art groups such as the John Reed Club (JRC) became organized platforms for this motive. However, many artists involved in these radical art collectives also worked on New Deal projects commissioned by the government. The disparity in bodily representations between art created in JRC and New Deal projects illuminates the different motives of these two organizations. While New Deal art responded to this crisis of masculinity with images of heroic men at work in an attempt to regain the population’s confidence in the capitalist system, the JRC was not afraid to make this crisis the very subject of its works to call attention to capitalist oppression and foster resistance.

In contrast, in public murals funded by New Deal programs, workers are frequently shown seminude, muscular, and active, associating labor with masculinity as a way of legitimizing the capitalist economy. Howard Cook’s *Steel Industry* (1936), a mural in the United States Post Office and Courthouse of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for example, shows a much more positive image of factory work. In the center broad-shouldered men lunge, pull, squat, and lift around the molten steel. Moving further out, in all four corners of the mural, there are images of workers who, even if not physically producing, are actively observing, indicating their proficiency and dedication. By emphasizing both the physical labor and intellectual expertise necessary in industrial work, the mural pictures the worker as securely masculine in both figure and aptitude, and casts the laboring class as the backbone of America and its identity rather than as victims of the upper class and the government.

The use of montaged space in *Steel Industry* is organized and readable, suggesting that the factory is a logical space, as seen also in the murals of Diego Rivera. The architecture combines human labor with machinery, making the technology an extension of human (masculine) power. This ordered environment also emphasizes how each worker has a specific and important role to play. In contrast, Gorelick’s factory is filled with strange, undefined planes, a cantilevered ceiling, and repeating round objects. These architectural elements intrude upon the bodies of the subjects, cutting up their figures or compressing their space. Furthermore, the planes and objects are unorganized and unclear, thus picturing the work space of the factory as both disturbing and destructive to the body and mind of the worker. While JRC artists focused on industrial settings, few New Deal murals depicted factory scenes, instead concentrating on workers in agricultural settings or depictions of great American stories. This resistance to industrial images further illustrates how the motives of New Deal projects differed from those of the JRC: its preferred subjects capture the heroics and nostalgia of the American pastoral and sidestep the strife and class struggle in industrial work.

Lack of work and the oppressive and perilous conditions of industrial labor directly affected workers’ perception of themselves, their bodies, and their masculinity. By emphasizing this “crisis of masculinity” rather than combating it through reassuringly masculine bodily representations, the JRC expressed its revolt against the capitalist system. 



Boris Gorelick, *Industrial Strife*, c. 1936–1939, lithograph

## PERMISSIVENESS ON DISPLAY: THE ART OF NEW MASSES AND THE JOHN REED CLUBS

The New York John Reed Club (JRC) was established on a *New Masses* initiative in late 1929, primarily for the advancement of proletarian culture, the passion of Michael Gold, sole editor of *New Masses* between June 1928 and July 1931. By 1934 over 1,200 members belonged to thirty JRCs nationwide. The New York Club established an art school that proved extremely popular, providing vocational and political education in a social setting. In his autobiography *Self-Revelment*, Raphael Soyer stated that it helped him “acquire a progressive world outlook.” It ran a full timetable of classes in drawing, painting, and sculpture alongside mass-oriented art forms including lithography and fresco painting. Unsurprisingly the aesthetic vision and practices of *New Masses* and the JRC are inextricable. Indeed, many contributors to JRC art exhibitions are best (or only) known through the magazine.

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) played a significant role in both magazine and club; through them the party organized and promoted its political and cultural agenda. Although never an official party organ, *New Masses* was a principal disseminator of Soviet policy and as a “magazine of arts and letters” it actively sought to be the foremost voice of communist cultural theory in the US.

Sustained contact with Soviet art and literary groups first came in November 1930 when six *New Masses* and JRC representatives, including Gold, William Gropper, and A. B. Magil, attended the Second Conference of Revolutionary and Proletarian Writers held at Kharkov. It became fully apparent that proletarianism—privileging the cultural output of the worker (frequently to the detriment of aesthetic concerns, considered bourgeois)—was not a sanctioned cultural strategy. In an effort to meet Communist International (Comintern) directives, the US delegates published “The Kharkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers” in *New Masses* in February 1931. This included a ten-point “Program of Action” that presented the challenge of attracting “radicalized intellectuals,” while simultaneously extending the movement’s proletarian base. Therein lay a source of conflict that developed between *New Masses* and the JRC, engendering disparate artistic ideals.

Ostensibly, following Kharkov, *New Masses* and the JRC endorsed a Leninist interpretation of art that accommodated and appropriated bourgeois culture, but many club members harbored strong sectarian leanings. The JRC promoted a crude, utilitarian program under the slogan “Art is a Class Weapon.” In August 1932, Philip Rahv, future editor of *Partisan Review* (launched in 1934 by the New York JRC), published “The Literary Class War” in *New Masses*, in which he called for “a definite frontier” to be established between bourgeois and proletarian culture, the latter having “proclaimed its position to be that of irreconcilable class antagonism.” He was chastised four months later by Magil, who argued that bourgeois culture could “enrich the arsenal of proletarian art,” in an article titled “Pity and Terror.”

*New Masses* evidences engagement with nonnaturalistic “bourgeois” styles throughout its run as a monthly (1926–1933). Instruction imparted at Kharkov had no immediate impact on practice, and in the long term was detrimental to the number of experimental artworks published. Broadly speaking the imagery can be grouped into three key idiomatic veins: casually composed images in thick, soft crayon strokes or gently undulating pen line creating solid, often heavily shaded forms derived from Ashcan School realism and the Daumier-influenced cartoons of *New Masses* predecessor *The Masses* (1911–1917); post-cubist modernist illustrations of flattened and fractured subject matter and simplified planes and volumes in solid monotones; and expressionistic distorted space and forms of sinewy arabesques or scratchy needle-thin line inspired predominantly by the grotesques of German artist George Grosz. Few *New Masses* artists were faithful to one style; one assumes that the club exhibition space was an additional forum for experimentation.

A handful of JRC exhibits were reproduced with reviews—none in the inexpensive catalogs. There are works that can be identified with a degree of confidence, which appeared in *New Masses* and at the JRC, for example Theodore Scheel’s outline caricature *John* (January 1932), or the bulbous staggered profiles of Russell Limbach’s *Three Cops*, renamed *Faith, Hope and Charity* for the September 1931 issue. Both tend toward the grotesque, embracing modernist expressionism, an approach that found favor with American left-wing critics such as Anita Brenner, who spelled out her hope for stylistic progression in her review of the JRC’s *The Social Viewpoint in Art* exhibition for *The Nation* in 1933, arguing that artists “cannot adequately and movingly paint or carve their time and place” in outdated “academic mode.” The inclusive approach proved problematic for some Russian critics. Boris Ternoets’s April 1933 *New Masses* review of a JRC exhibition held in Moscow that year, which included pieces by *New Masses* regulars Gropper, Philip Bard, Jacob Burck, and Louis Lozowick, stressed the need for vigilance against bourgeois “abstract schematism on the one hand, and sickly expressionist hysterics on the other.”

With artists exploring a range of subject matters in the pursuit of effective revolutionary art, no fixed relationships between form and content are discernible. *New Masses* consistently published illustrations without explicit political commentary, presumably because the editors deemed them appealing to their readership. Writing for *International Literature*, the journal of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, Russian critic Anna Elistratova’s review of the 1931 issues of *New Masses* found an overall paucity of revolutionary content and accused the magazine of “a demobilising function” in its “advocacy of passiveness and non-resistance.”


The JRC catalogs point to overwhelmingly political displays, with titles such as *Against Wage Cuts* (William Siegel), *The March on the Capitol* (Sara Berman), and



John Reed Club, *An American Landscape*, 1930, point on canvas

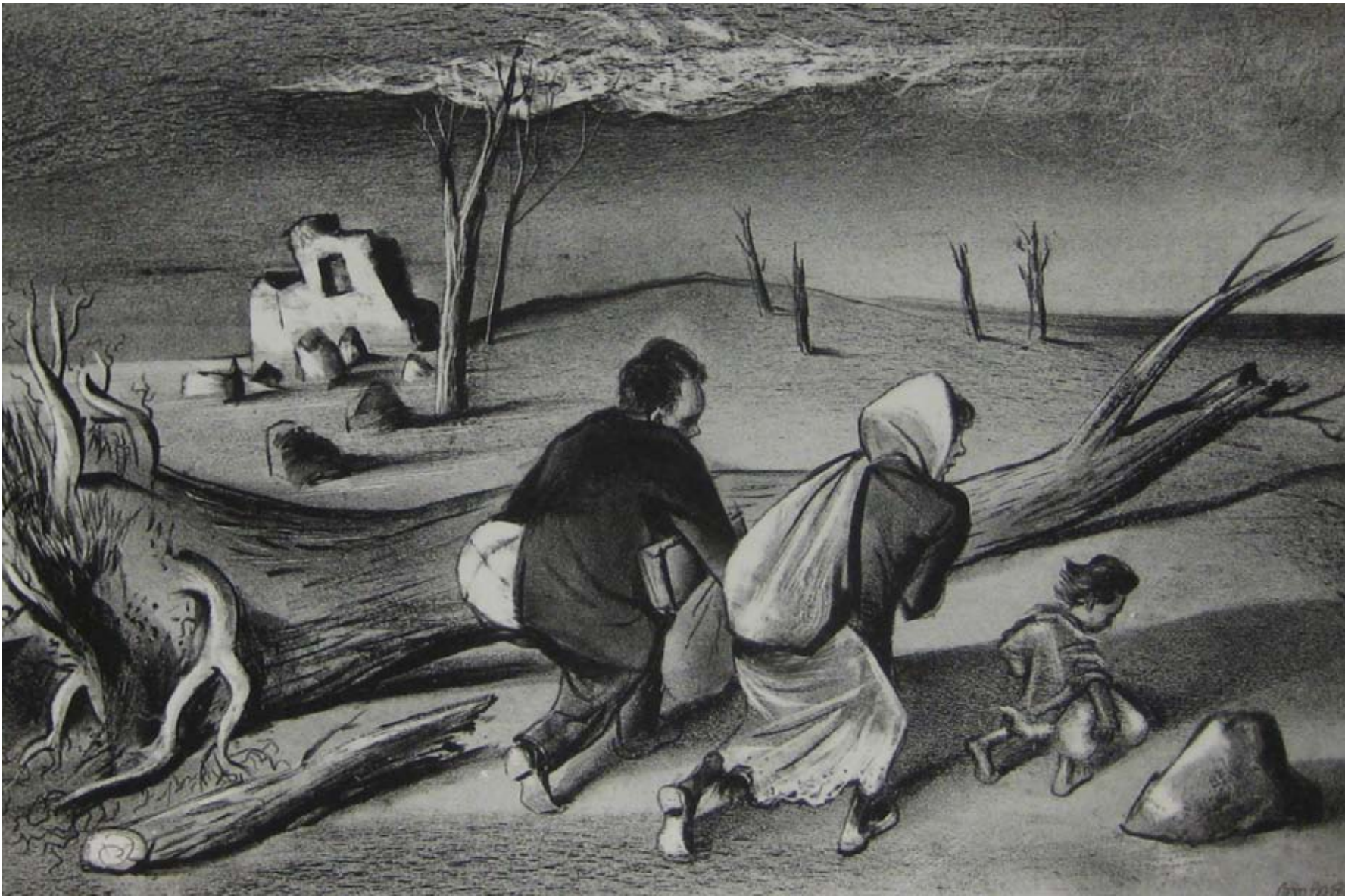
*Death of a Proletarian Hero* (Abraham Harriton). The catalog for the *Social Viewpoint* show propounded the club artists’ goal of differentiating their works from the mélange of contemporary “social scene” realisms by illustrating “the revolutionary class struggle.” The success of their communications appears to have been uneven—reviews confirm an awareness of the failings that Elistratova perceived in *New Masses* artwork. Bernarda Bryson bemoaned a lack of “the resistance, the spirit of revolt, which is truly characteristic of the masses” in her December 1933 review of the *Hunger Fascism War* exhibition for the *Daily Worker*. An ongoing battle with the issue of “leftism,” a criticism which, in part, denoted the unsatisfactory practice of creating journalistic responses that prioritize propaganda value, also seems to have hampered the development of club artists. Nonetheless, clumsy propaganda was preferable to what Jacob Kainen described as “the usual tear-jerking question mark pictures of park bench scenes and garbage can dramas.” His November 1934 review of *The Social Viewpoint in Art* for the *Daily Worker* praised Harry Sternberg’s *Industrial Landscape* (1934), for despite its “false perspective” in representing a National Guardsman as “a conscious agent of the bourgeoisie,” the depicted bayoneting of a protesting worker possessed “genuine revolutionary indignation and sent a thrill of horror up one’s spine.”

There is no evidence to suggest that the styles, subjects, and strategies of partisan artists were reshaped as they moved between magazine page and exhibition space. Study of the interactions and output exposes the challenge of meeting Soviet cultural expectation. *New Masses* strove to accommodate Comintern theoretical directives, although these barely manifest visually, while the John Reed Club resisted stemming the proletarianism that flourished in the late twenties, yet was criticized for displaying the same deficiencies of tendentiousness and defeatism. Study also reveals the American left’s artistic self-belief. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the “painted collective pictures satirizing the state of affairs” that Soyer recalled, which were signed “John Reed Club” and sent to national exhibitions. These works, now known only through photographs, including *An American Landscape* (1930), described in the April 1930 *New Masses* as a “huge canvas picturing police brutality at the City Hall demonstration,” have the disjointed quality of collaborative efforts, but display the familiar vitality of their key illustrators, in this case probably Gropper and Lozowick.

Surviving materials indicate the JRC took its artistic cue from *New Masses*, possibly due to lack of alternative models, but more likely due to encouragement from American critics and the established artists pivotal in cultivating idioms associated with left-wing politics. The JRC facilitated the cross-pollination of fine art and cartoon fundamental to American communism’s distinctive aesthetic during the early 1930s, and so played a pivotal role in its cultural “exceptionalism.” 



# WILLIAM GROPPER'S UPROOTED



William Gropper, *Uprooted*, c. 1930s, lithograph

There is no food, no water, and seemingly nowhere to go in the abandoned wasteland William Gropper depicts in the 1930s lithograph *Uprooted*. Little distinguishes the caked dirt from the sky with its one parched cloud. A few dry, leaf- and lifeless trees scattered upon the flat horizon are the only life that still inhabits the land, but even they have given up: they lean wearily like dehydrated wanderers stranded in the desert, and, in fact, one of them has already keeled over in the dirt and dramatically sprawls across the length of the composition. The uprooted tree severs the background from the foreground, where three faceless exiles trudge. The homeless man, woman, and child carry their poverty in four rock-sized sacks. The fallen tree blocks their path and denies them any chance of finding shelter in the recesses of the picture plane. The only option for the dispossessed family of travelers is to keep walking deeper into their own shadows off the edge of the paper or succumb to the same fate as the dead tree.

*Uprooted* is an image about the struggle for survival in a hostile environment that evokes the experience of immigrants in the United States. In the early decades of the 20th century, America was a hostile environment of virulent nativism and xenophobia. Legislation such as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which established the national origins quota system that primarily targeted Eastern and Southern European immigrants, evinces the nation's intense social anxiety and desire to preserve America's dominant "Nordic" (i.e., those of Northern and Western European descent) racial stock by restricting foreign infiltration into its borders. The stock market crash further strained ethnic and racial tensions in the US, which manifested themselves daily in spaces like the workplace. Although immigrant workers were largely responsible for the nation's industrial and agrarian economic prosperity leading up to the Great Depression, the foreign-born were frequently among the first to be dismissed from jobs and, thus, constituted a disproportionate sector of the nation's uprooted, unemployed population. Many John Reed Club (JRC) artists, like Gropper, were children of immigrants or were immigrants themselves, meaning they were intimately familiar with immigrants' struggle not only to obtain economic opportunities, but also to belong.

The JRC functioned as a platform for mobilization and collective action for those who were sympathetic to the downtrodden, marginalized, voiceless people in America, many of whom were immigrants. Taking their lead from the USSR, where they mistakenly claimed they saw "132 races and nationalities in full social and political equality cooperating in the building of a socialist society," JRC artists promised in their fourth mandate of their draft manifesto to "fight against white chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution and against the persecution of the foreign-born)" in the United States. The figures in Gropper's print

resist specific ethnic and racial coding, but they do not resist the general category or type of non-Nordic immigrant. Crudely written, features such as the figures' dark hair and the woman's headscarf flag the family as immigrant "others" who move within a landscape that symbolically stands in for the nation's spatial imaginary. While immigration and motion are the ostensible subjects of *Uprooted*, formally, they also function as a conceit for mobilization and revolution. The need for the figures to continue moving is imperative, just as the need to collectively organize is for the masses. Gropper redefines labor as the collective struggle for survival and the workplace as the nation, where that struggle takes place.

Gropper's image reads as a relevant social commentary on the heated topic of immigration in America today. The origins of these debates, which center upon the undocumented status of close to eleven million aliens in the US, coincidentally stem from the time when Gropper created the print. Before the 1920s, the notion of illegal alien did not exist for Mexicans, as there was no restriction on their immigration to the US before this time. Legislation like the Johnson-Reed Act, by restricting the availability of other immigrant sources of labor, "forced" American businesses near the border to entice Mexicans to cross over and work illegally. The head-tax and visa cost for Mexicans were often too high to permit easy, unburdensome legal immigration. During the 1930s, Mexican workers' high visibility in the US occasioned severe discrimination against them from natives, and they were both deported en masse and tricked into voluntary repatriation through national and local scare campaigns.

Although it is unlikely that Gropper was commenting directly upon Mexican immigration in *Uprooted*, his generalized visual representation of the foreigner in *Uprooted* and his detailed treatment of the landscape activate a contemporary reading about immigration at the US-Mexico border. For example, the barren desert and adobe-like structure in the print's back-left corner evoke the American Southwest border region where hundreds die every year trying to cross into the US. The fallen tree could be said to symbolize the US-Mexico border. In addition, following the criminalizing and stereotyping language of the media and laws such as the Arizona Senate Bill 1070 of 2010, one might interpret the wanderers as Mexican or Hispanic illegal aliens. Today, *Uprooted* reads as a response to the media's negative portrayal of immigrants—documented or not—and offers a more humane understanding of the state of uprootedness that is the defining feature of immigrants' individual and collective experiences as they struggle to survive in a new land. [📄](#)

# STUART DAVIS'S NEW JERSEY LANDSCAPE (SEINE CART)

Stuart Davis's 1939 lithograph *New Jersey Landscape (Seine Cart)* conveys a generalized notion of industrial life in the city. Flattened shapes intersect and overlap throughout the work, resulting in collage-like layers. On the far left of the print, a triangular form sitting atop a rectangle might represent a factory building. A squiggly line in the upper left corner suggests a curl of smoke. The three vertical shapes punctuated by dotted lines that animate the body of the work appear to be roads. A series of slimmer vertical and horizontal lines create a wide grid in the center of the work, possibly referring to metal scaffolding or construction. The conglomeration of circles and horizontal boards in the bottom right corner evokes a transportation device on wheels. Is this the *Seine Cart* of Davis's title? Maybe, but the phrase itself was not commonly used, and is therefore open to interpretation. The word "seine" can refer to a large fishing net that hangs vertically in the water, capturing fish when its ends are pulled together; perhaps the print refers to the movement of goods within the fishing industry.

Davis's rendering of forms is not completely abstract. Rather, he simplifies images of industry that could be interpreted as different objects. Because Davis's print does not display realistic figures within a tangible setting, his work might seem to lack an explicit social critique. How then, did Davis imagine himself to be making revolutionary art? His rejection of realism for new, modernist forms that reflected the artist's personal perspective might have conflicted with Marxism, which upheld collectivity and socioeconomic change. While most John Reed Club (JRC) artists were attempting to create art that was accessible to the working masses, Davis hoped to reconcile modernism with Marxist ideals by creating abstracted works that celebrate the technological environment.

Davis's refusal to employ naturalism or illusionism, methods he identified as bourgeois and doomed to lie to viewers, put his modernist work in conflict with his JRC colleagues. In a 1935 issue of the communist-leaning magazine *Art Front*, editor Clarence Weinstock denounced Davis and the freedom he granted his viewers: "Here all the clarity and logic are based on faith in the spectator, on a naïve hope that he will make the same interpretation of the color forms that the artist did. That this hope is not valid is proven by the frequent question of simple people and workers, 'What does it mean?'"

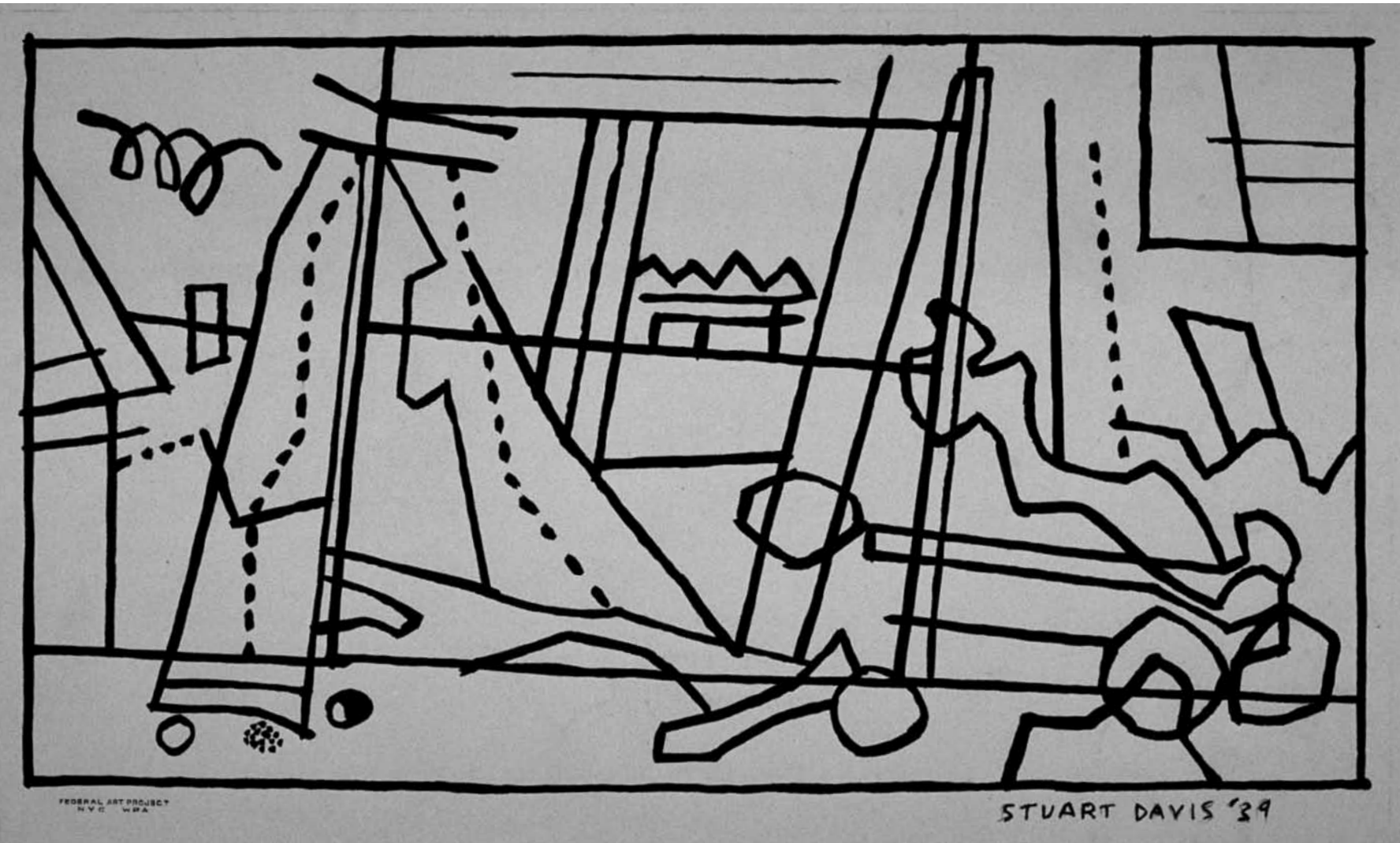
Meyer Schapiro, an art critic who sympathized with the anti-Stalinist left, voices a different qualm about abstract art in *Art Front*. Although Schapiro acknowledges the technical advances achieved through modernist techniques, he criticizes the modern artist for isolating himself from the social world. Schapiro argues that modernism is a result of patronage from an elite class. This leads the artist to feel estranged and ultimately have no desire to work for collective change. In the modernist's newfound

freedom from societal problems, he or she displays brilliance in transforming familiar things. Just as Davis warps the industrial objects in his landscape, the modernist destroys the "relations of visual experience which are most important for action." The bizarre, cryptic images that result are not easily accessible to the working viewer, and therefore do not encourage revolutionary change in the oppressed masses. For this reason, modernism cannot be considered a freeing art form.

In a 1935 exhibition catalog for the Whitney Museum of American Art, Davis responded to such accusations by defending abstract art's social purpose. Because modernism was born out of a struggle against a bourgeois tradition of illusionism, he argued that it inherently had a revolutionary significance. Davis believed that artists should not strive to mirror nature, but should make art that responds to the real world without hiding the flatness of their medium. Because Davis's art is not concerned with imitation, he could ask himself: "Does this painting...convey to me a direct emotional or ideological stimulus?" Since Davis aimed for truthful impact in material, visual, and emotive expression, he suggested that he was well equipped to approach social concerns from an honest perspective.

Ultimately, the socially conscious modernist must create work that balances identifiable imagery with freedom in two-dimensional form; Davis attempted to achieve this in *New Jersey Landscape*. Instead of abandoning working class viewers to decipher elusive art on the far end of the abstract spectrum, he depicted abstracted industrial images that laborers would have been familiar with. Because his art dismantled bourgeois standards while simultaneously speaking a visual language that resonated with the masses, Davis saw it as imperative to class struggle. Instead of being plagued by the passivity described by Schapiro, Davis described his art as alive: "It changes, moves, and grows like any other living organism." [📄](#)

**"In the present period of the death agony of capitalism, democratic as well as fascist, the artist sees himself threatened with the loss of his right to live and continue working. He sees all avenues of communication choked with the debris of capitalist collapse. It is only natural that he should turn to the Stalinist organizations, which hold out the possibility of escaping from his isolation. But if he is to avoid complete demoralization, he cannot remain there, because of the impossibility of delivering his own message and the degrading servility which these organizations exact from him in exchange for certain material advantages. He must understand that his place is elsewhere, not among those who betray the cause of the revolution, and of mankind, but among those who with unshaken fidelity bear witness to the revolution; among those who, for this reason, are alone able to bring it to fruition, and along with it the ultimate free expression of all forms of human genius." DIEGO RIVERA AND ANDRÉ BRETON / MANIFESTO FOR AN INDEPENDENT REVOLUTIONARY ART / 1938**



Stuart Davis, *New Jersey Landscape (Seine Cart)*, 1939, lithograph, Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



# THE BIRO-BIDJAN PORTFOLIO: A SOVIET ENDEAVOR AND CHICAGO PROGRESSIVE ARTISTS



Mitchell Siporin, *Workers Family*, from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, 1937, woodcut

In 1937, a group of fourteen Chicago-area artists created a portfolio of woodcuts as a fund-raising project for Biro-Bidjan, the newly established Jewish autonomous region in the Soviet Union. Their woodcuts, which revealed scenes of oppression and despair against images of “new hope” and optimism, reflected both past and present.

The artists revealed their objectives in the introduction to the portfolio: “We, a group of Chicago Jewish artists, in presenting our works to the Builders of Biro-Bidjan, are symbolizing with this action the flowering of a new social concept wherein the artist becomes molded into the clay of the whole people and becomes the clarion of their hopes and desires.” The introduction also acknowledges the sponsors of the project: “Chicago ICOR (*Idishe Kolonizatsie Organizatsie in Rusland* or Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union) is delighted to introduce the Jewish artists’ album ‘A Gift to Biro-Bidjan’ and to thank the artists and the publisher L. M. Stein, for their contributions. Not all the images in this album reflect the ideology of ICOR, but we are glad to present fourteen of the most prominent Chicago artists, who support ICOR and our efforts of building the Jewish autonomy in Biro-Bidjan. We are confident that all cultural progressive forces in the Jewish community will join us soon.” The use of the term “progressive,” common among the left-wing artists and intellectuals at that time, helped avoid the use of such terms as “socialist” or “communist” that would label them “un-American.”

Despite an ideological conflict with the Zionist movement, which advocated for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, American Jews founded two organizations to support the Jewish autonomy in the Soviet Union. In 1926, a group of American Jews met in Philadelphia to form ICOR. Their first mission was to raise funds for Jewish collectives in the Crimea. One of the chief supporters of ICOR in Chicago was Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932), president of Sears, Roebuck & Co. and founder of the Museum of Science and Industry. As a wealthy American, Rosenwald opposed the principles of the Soviet government, but he believed it was essential to take a chance on the good faith of the Soviet leaders and their proposal for Jewish autonomy. Rosenwald contributed more than \$2 million to ICOR, mainly as a humanitarian effort to save the European Jews.

A red-and-white unattributed woodcut, likely the work of Todros Geller, served as the cover. At the top of the image, a human figure looks skyward and stretches a hand toward the rising sun for “new hope,” in the same manner as Bolshevik posters during and after the Communist Revolution. Chicago publisher L. M. Stein (1883–1956), who produced the portfolio, had a long-term working relationship with Geller and shared a similar ideology. Stein and Geller, considered “radical progressives,” were part of the Chicago Jewish Left who believed in promoting the Yiddish language. They supported the Soviet Union for its commitment to the Yiddish language and to the Jewish settlement in Biro-Bidjan. The color red, with its socialist references, reflected their ideology.

Alex Topchevsky, who studied at Hull-House under the instruction of his brother Morris Topchevsky, produced the woodcut *Exodus from Germany*. It was the only image in the portfolio that directly portrays a specific political theme. Topchevsky was reacting to the events occurring in Nazi Germany. From 1933 to 1937, German Jews were gradually stripped of their rights and were under increasing legal and social restrictions. The artist’s image suggests a solution of evacuating from the hostile country and moving to a safe homeland. In the context of the portfolio, one

of the optional destinies is the Jewish autonomous region, Biro-Bidjan. The image supports the claim that ICOR’s intention was to create a shelter for Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union and it was not motivated by any communist agenda.

Mitchell Siporin also deals with labor in *Workers Family*. A working-class family is positioned in front of an industrial, urban landscape with smokestacks that emit thick plumes of dark smoke in the background. In the context of the Biro-Bidjan project, *Workers Family* is a socialist resolution where the family as a whole participates in building new hope.

Morris Topchevsky (1899–1947) was the most politically radical artist of those who contributed to *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*. His experiences during his travel to Mexico had a dramatic impact on his career. He was inspired by the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, not only artistically but also politically. When Topchevsky returned to Chicago, he applied the social messages and monumental effect of the Mexican muralists to his work, which often expressed the agony of the unemployed and scenes of Chicago’s industrial areas.


In his contribution to the publication *Art of Today: Chicago 1933*, published by L. M. Stein, Topchevsky wrote: “At the present time of class struggle, danger of war and mass starvation, the artist cannot isolate himself from the problems of the world, and the most valuable contribution to society will come from the artists who are social revolutionists. ...I hope in my future work, it will be a means of helping the revolutionary movement of this country and the liberation of the working masses of the entire world.”

Topchevsky’s *To a New Life* is a socialist realist image that resembles Soviet imagery of Stalin’s era. The man holds a hammer, a common Soviet symbol, in one hand. In the other hand, he holds a blueprint, a new plan for a “new life.” *New Life* was also the title of the publication of ICOR. The man and women in front are pioneer workers of the “new world order.”

In 2001 I had the privilege of visiting the Skokie residence of Morris Topchevsky’s brother Alex, who had passed away two years earlier. His widow, Rachel, directed me to the basement studio, which seemed frozen in time. Canvases and papers were everywhere and a smell of oil paint filled the air. Art books, magazines, Soviet catalogs, and a Russian-English dictionary crowded the shelves, and an old printing press stood in place, equipped with rollers and tubes of ink. The highlight of this surreal journey occurred when I noticed storage areas in niches near the ceiling. I climbed up and discovered piles of stretched canvases signed by Morris. After his death in 1947, his brother had stored the “orphan” paintings, preserving them until the day when they would be rediscovered.

Two years before the publication of *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, ICOR had assembled more than 200 works of art from more than 100 artists as the foundation of an art museum in Biro-Bidjan. In the introduction to the catalog of the collection, Prof. Charles Kuntz of the Department of Sociology at Columbia University defined the Biro-Bidjan settlement as “national in form and socialist in content,” and Moissaye Olgin, a writer and a founding member of the Workers Party, added that this collection was “a great link between America and the Soviets, between the progressive intellectuals of America and the liberated Jews.”

The collection included works by artists Ben Benn, Stuart Davis, Adolf Dehn, Hugo Gellert, Harry Gottlieb, William Gropper, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Boardman Robinson, William Schwartz, Moses Soyer, Raphael Soyer, Max Yamasaki, and William Zorach. Works by Max Weber and José Clemente Orozco were also included. Eight of the Chicago artists who contributed to the Biro-Bidjan portfolio donated artwork: Aaron Bohrod, David Bekker, Todros Geller, Raymond Katz, Mitchell Siporin, Morris Topchevsky, Abraham Weiner, and Louis Weiner.

In February 1936, Alexander Troyanovsky, the ambassador of the USSR in the USA, sent a telegram to the art committee of ICOR in New York praising their project: “I am glad to be one of the sponsors of the first art collection donated by American artists to Biro-Bidjan. Please express my thanks and appreciation to the artists and organizers of the collection.” The collection prepared for the future Biro-Bidjan art museum was first exhibited in New York and Boston. It was shipped to the Soviet Union the same year, but never reached its final destination. Its fate is still unknown. 

# RAISINS AND ALMONDS, FROM THE BIRO-BIDJAN PORTFOLIO


The Goat will...bring you raisins and almonds...

—Excerpt from a Yiddish lullaby

In 1937, fourteen Chicago-based artists each created a woodblockprint for the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, made primarily as a fund-raising mechanism for the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union. With his contribution to the portfolio, titled *Raisins and Almonds*, Russian-born artist Todros Geller distinguished himself from other John Reed Club (JRC) members by introducing a uniquely pro-Jewish motif—one that encouraged religious individuality, rather than social assimilation. While Jews comprised the majority of the JRC artists, many considered themselves only nominally Jewish, opting instead to integrate into the more mainstream cultural practices of the American working class. Perhaps as a way to solicit the membership of non-Jews, or perhaps because Zionism (like most forms of nationalism) distracted from the club’s primary goal of international socialist solidarity, the Jewish faction of the JRC typically cast itself as overly willing to assimilate into American culture. Sidestepping this aversion to practicing Judaism, Geller rallied for a proud Jewish collective not only within the community of socialist realist artists, but also as an autonomous artistic body itself.

*Raisins*, a dichromatic woodblock print, showcases the life trajectory of a single Jew from birth to maturity throughout a snaking narrative pattern. Within this twisting framework, Geller utilizes the white color of the paper as both a way to guide the viewer’s eye from the lower-right corner of the work to the apex in the upper left and as an outlining device, casting every image of the main figure in the print in a holy light, which imbues the entire work with a sense of religious devotion. With the careful placement of white in the composition—including the large swatch that cuts through the lower third of the print—the artist visually forces the viewer to scroll through the various scenes of the given subject’s life, similar to how one might read the texts from a Torah scroll. Because the first scenes in *Raisins* are weighted by

spaces of jet-black color that form the base of the print, the viewer logically evaluates the work from the bottom up, tracing the actual path of the depicted Jewish man as it winds around the frame. In this way, Geller steeps *Raisins* in Jewish tradition through the Torah-esque layout of his composition. For many Jews of the Russian diaspora, the retelling of oral narratives and rereading of Torah-based parables is one of the key connectors to their ancestry and historical past. Following in this vein, Geller begins his narrative on the right side of the page, asking the viewer to read the story of a Jew’s path from birth to Talmudic study to manual labor to emigration to political demonstration and eventually to the subject’s intended pinnacle: looking outward to new horizons (i.e. immigration to Biro-Bidjan). The title of Geller’s work augments this point. *Raisins and Almonds* is a reference to a Yiddish lullaby that allegorically describes the Jewish people’s wish to return to their homeland, establishing the print as a historical lullaby.

Unlike many of the other works presented in the same portfolio, *Raisins* is a true exaltation of Jewish culture as simultaneously non-assimilative and non-bourgeois. Even though the Jewish youth is raised in a Jewish environment (as noted by the symbolic goat that watches over his cradle), studies Jewish texts, and works in a stereotypically Jewish industry (tailoring), his Jewish identity does not prevent him from actively participating in the marches and protests of the Marxist collective depicted in the upper half of the print. The JRC’s quest to position the laboring class within a broader society devoid of specific religious leanings is, therefore, at odds with Geller’s depiction of the archetypical young male socialist. Despite cultural peculiarity, Zionist tendencies, and religious difference, the average Jew is still a blue-collar worker who will march with his proletarian brothers and seek a Jewish homeland concurrently. In a single print, Geller crystallizes the notion that verbal and visual accounts of a collective Jewish past are not antithetical to the goals of the JRC, but instead can be a congruent part of the proletariat’s own historical narrative. 



Todros Geller, *Raisins and Almonds*, from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, 1937, woodcut




## MILK AND HONEY, FROM THE BIRO-BIDJAN PORTFOLIO

Abraham Weiner's appropriation of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* in his woodcut *Milk and Honey* from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* transforms the iconic image of American regionalist pride into a utopian image of pride in the Biro-Bidjan territory. The painting *American Gothic* garnered instant fame in 1930 with its appearance at the Art Institute of Chicago, where it was awarded a bronze medal and three-hundred dollar prize. At the start of the Great Depression, the painting became a symbol of the working American's pioneer spirit during times of hardship. Weiner's decision to quote Wood's iconic image in *Milk and Honey* promotes the same recognizable forms of hope. Weiner projects heroic Jewish identities onto these Midwestern pioneer types to memorialize a new heritage about to be created in Biro-Bidjan.

Just as the painting medium of *American Gothic* signals a classic mode of representation, the woodcut production of *Milk and Honey* hints at a more modern, more progressive mode of art-making and mass production. The high contrast of black-and-white forms in Weiner's work produces a graphic, more abstract style, with bright white permeating the composition as a sign of hope. Weiner elevates the patterning in Wood's static composition so that the energy of the landscape is proudly echoed in the figures that have cultivated this new land. The vertical lines echoing from the pitchfork in Wood's composition have been replaced with the strong diagonal repetitions of the rake in Weiner's composition, marks that seem to animate the fertile landscape, the passing clouds, and the close-fitting drapery of the working couple's clothing—enlivening the dull appearances of Wood's figures. The bold forms in *Milk and Honey* come to define the bold types of Marxist Jews who will come to work the land in the Biro-Bidjan region.

Whereas traditional Zionists looked toward Palestine as the site of Jewish restoration, the Chicago artists who contributed to *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan* figured the Biro-Bidjan region of the Soviet Union as the new "Holy Land." To convince Jews to move to this seemingly inhospitable, unsettled territory of Russia, the Kremlin offered

monetary incentives and set out on a campaign to idealize the new Holy Land with posters and films of smiling workers and families happily emigrating. Photographs of women pioneers driving tractors were widely disseminated, promoting labor equality in this new socialist Zion. *Milk and Honey* promotes the image of the "New Jew" as either a male or female productive member of society.

In Wood's painting, a potted plant in the distance hovers over the woman's left shoulder, a marker of her domesticity. Conversely, in Weiner's print, the female figure stands closer to the viewer, in front of the male figure—she grasps a rake, a marker of her agricultural productivity. Ironically, it was Wood's original intent to depict the male figure holding a rake rather than a pitchfork, but he decided on the latter because of its vertical harmony with the composition. This reclamation of Wood's original intent on the part of the woman figure endows her with a power beyond that of the gray-haired male American farmer who clutches a tool more closely associated with gardening than with farming. The biblical phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" is, at its roots, gender-equal in that the motherland for the Jewish people flows with the mother's milk, a religiously valued form of spiritual and physical sustenance. In Weiner's woodcut, the woman's breasts are proudly emphasized at the forefront of the composition, signaling that Biro-Bidjan will thrive not only from her Judaism, but from her femaleness as well. Wood's female gazes off into the distance, her modest pinafore restricting her womanhood. Conversely, Weiner's female stares boldly forward, forcing the viewer to engage with her sexuality and the carnal landscape behind her—the undulating curves and stirring energy of the land as a product of man and woman's consummate spiritual labor together. In *Milk and Honey* Weiner infuses Wood's classic types with a robust, egalitarian nature, promoting a new world order in Biro-Bidjan. 



Abraham S. Weiner, *Milk and Honey*, from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, 1937, woodcut

## ART FOR THE PEOPLE: LEFTIST ARTISTS AND THE HULL-HOUSE SETTLEMENT COMMUNITY


The Hull-House Settlement was opened in 1889 by social visionaries Jane Addams (1860–1935) and Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940) with their housekeeper Mary Keyser (1861–1897). On Chicago's underserved Near West Side, the settlement welcomed all and became a major engine of democratic art production in early 20th-century Chicago. As a settlement, the Hull-House mission sought to serve and learn from its neighbors, and became prominent for its reformist policies with an atmosphere encouraging multiple voices. The settlement attracted leftist artists such as Morris Topchevsky, and Leon Garland (1896–1941) whose work was energized by the reformist community. Addams and Starr promoted the political rights of the settlement's working-class immigrant neighbors, crucially expanding the notion to encompass social and cultural rights. The Hull-House founders asserted that access to art—both as viewers and creators—was a human right, not a privilege for the few.

A valuable early addition to the Hull-House Settlement campus was the Butler Art Gallery, opened in 1891. The gallery functioned as an accessible creative space for the neighborhood's immigrant laborers. At first, Addams and Starr were interested in incorporating art and aesthetic beauty into the lives of underserved Hull-House neighbors as an uplifting experience. Initially borrowing and displaying works of art from upper-class institutions and collectors, Hull-House residents eventually found that this approach reinforced elitist notions of art. Over time, Addams and her colleagues developed a more egalitarian vision of art as an essential component of social justice and community, able to be produced and valued by all. In 1921, Hull-House resident and art school director Enella Benedict restructured programming at the gallery to feature art from settlement residents and neighbors from the 19th Ward, coinciding with trends depicting everyday social conditions. Further expanding access to art, Hull-House started a circulating loan collection of art from which neighbors could "check out" and enjoy art at home, just as they would a book from a library.

The Labor Museum opened in 1900 as a response to industrial conditions. The museum was an interactive space designed to connect local immigrant laborers with the history of industry and importance of their national crafts and traditions, considering labor as art and vice versa. Many Hull-House neighbors toiled for assembly-line Chicago sweatshops and factories in which high volume and financial growth were valued over craftsmanship. At the Labor Museum, Hull-House neighbors had the opportunity to claim creative ownership of a complete piece of art by performing the creation of the art themselves. Often imbued with ethnic and cultural relevance, the Labor Museum was an environment that dignified both craft and labor. Integrating labor as art and laborers as creatively worthy human beings reflected the radical possibilities of the progressive movement.

Addams further united Hull-House's involvement with Chicago's leftist artists when she accompanied artist Morris Topchevsky to post revolutionary Mexico in the fall of 1924. Before his experience in Mexico, Topchevsky painted romantic portraits and landscapes. His exposure to the Mexican political climate and Marxist muralists Diego Rivera (1886–1957) and José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City continued to transform Topchevsky's subject matter. Both Topchevsky and his art became steeped in this socialist spirit. Much as Jane Addams and the Hull-House responded to social conditions of the Near West Side by creating reforms, Topchevsky responded by depicting the lives of laborers and the lower class within a socialist framework. Topchevsky made *Don't Starve, Fight* (1934) during his tenure at Hull-House, depicting a scene of two male figures seated. The head of one figure is buried in his crossed arms, projecting a defeatist tone. The other man has his head turned to his companion, possibly encouraging him to resist oppressive economic and social conditions. During this period, both Topchevsky and Addams were grouped together in *The Red Network* (1934), a critical publication listing Americans with supposedly dangerous socialist connections.

Upon his return to the United States, Topchevsky was hired by Hull-House as a teacher-artist for the Hull-House Art School. Facilitating open access to art, the Hull-House Art School held a variety of classes and workshops for settlement neighbors. Hull-House used New Deal support from the Illinois Art Project and the Works Progress Administration Fine Arts Project to fund classes designed for both children and adults, and employed trained and talented artists. Leon Garland found New Deal support enabled "artists to be accepted as contributing citizens of the nation... removed finally from the unwholesome atmosphere of luxury trade and patronage." Eighty-six workshops were offered during this period, including metalsmithing, batik dyeing, wood carving, and pottery making. Topchevsky taught mural painting, Garland taught batik and metal design, socialist sympathizers Alex Topchevsky, Morris's brother, taught fresco painting, and Carl Hoeckner taught silk-screening. A 1939 exhibit at Hull-House featured what reviewers described as "work and workers, housing, the steel mills, its workers and its workings," which reflected Addams's view that art was intrinsic to daily life and not simply a portrayal of lofty ideals.

The creative and political friendship between Hull-House and leftist artists was mutually beneficial. Not only did the radical collaboration have an impact on the settlement and the artists themselves, but also it nourished progressive concepts of art for the people. 



Morris Topchevsky, *Don't Starve, Fight*, 1934, etching



# HENRY SIMON'S SET DESIGNS FOR THE CHICAGO WORKERS THEATER



Henry Simon, *Untitled (Set Design for Chicago Workers Theater)*, c. 1933, charcoal

Henry Simon's 1930s set designs for the Chicago Workers Theater depict an urban socialist utopia. In one of these images, a figure stands in front of a multi-story window overlooking a harmonious industrial landscape. His broad stance is confident, framed by strong diagonal planes and broad swaths of black charcoal. He is the master of this new domain. This iconography resonates with much Soviet imagery of the 1930s, which often featured a worker surveying the new industrial landscape of the Soviet Union under communism.

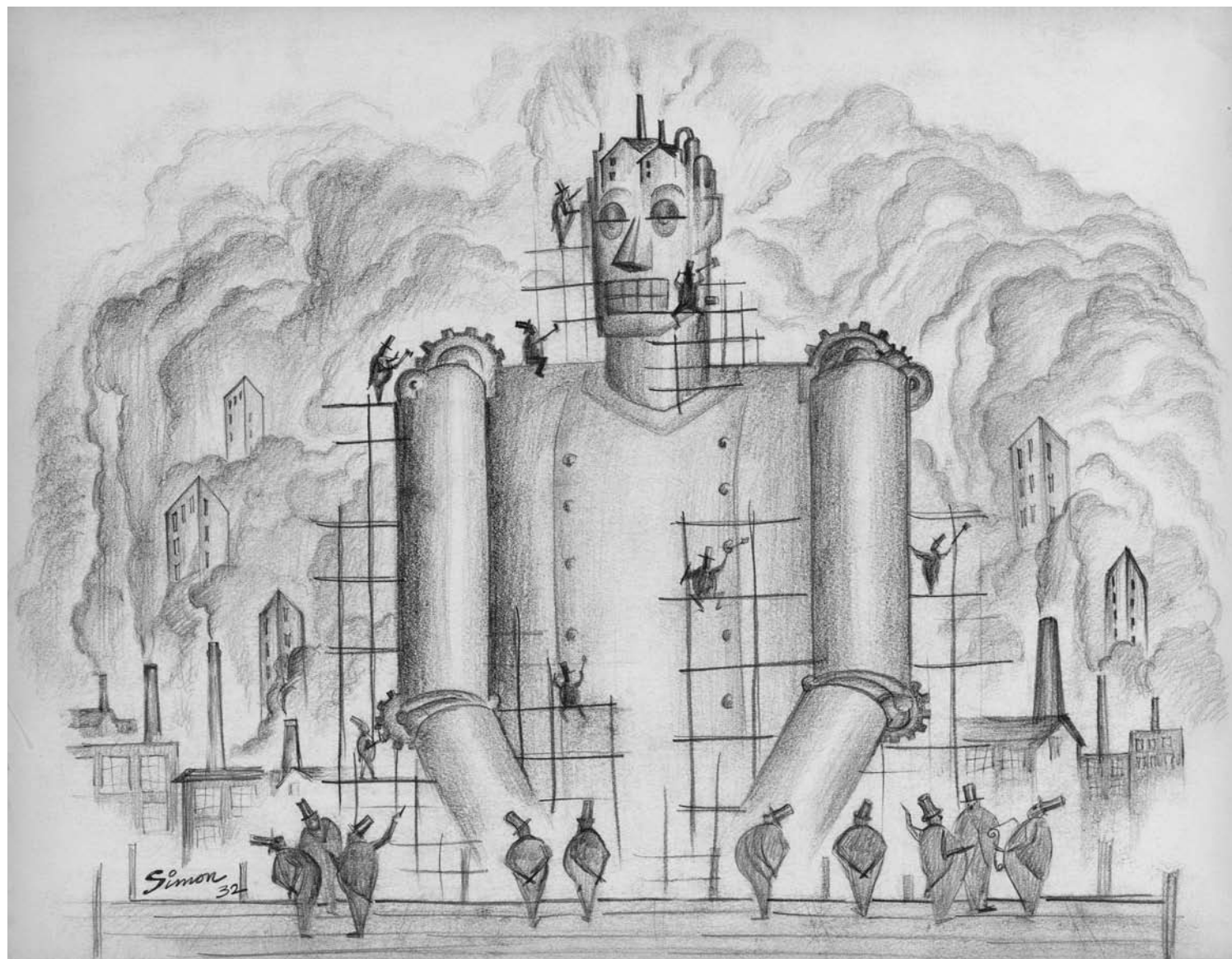
This correspondence is strengthened by Simon's quotation of Tatlin's Tower, echoes of which are clearly visible in the tiered conical structure that dominates the left half of the image. Vladimir Tatlin was a Soviet artist who designed the 1920 *Monument to the Third International* as the headquarters of the Comintern in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). The massive spiraling tower of glass and iron was conceived as both a series of buildings to house the offices and meeting halls of the Comintern and as a monument to the 1917 Revolution. Although the tower was never constructed, the image of the monument immediately became an icon of Soviet revolutionary art, and it still endures today. A model of the tower was displayed at the International

Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts Paris in 1925, where it quickly gained international fame. Tatlin was also an early pioneer of abstraction, and elements of the international abstraction of the 1920s are visible in the sleek and flattened geometry of the set design. This formal consideration was necessary for the function of the image: the stage set had to be visually dramatic, but also logical and unobtrusive to create a space that actors could occupy.

The Chicago Workers Theater attracted an audience that was already familiar and engaged with Soviet models of thought, and most viewers would have agreed with Simon's leftist politics. As a result, the set designs presented a dramatically modernist and positive view of the future of communism in the United States. Just a few years later, however, Simon would create a series of images for a different audience: the enormous and diverse crowds of visitors at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, where Simon was invited to design panels for a diorama. The designs for these panels drew on the pop-culture figure of Frankenstein, recently brought to life for American audiences by the hit 1931 film starring Boris Karloff, rather than icons of Soviet art.

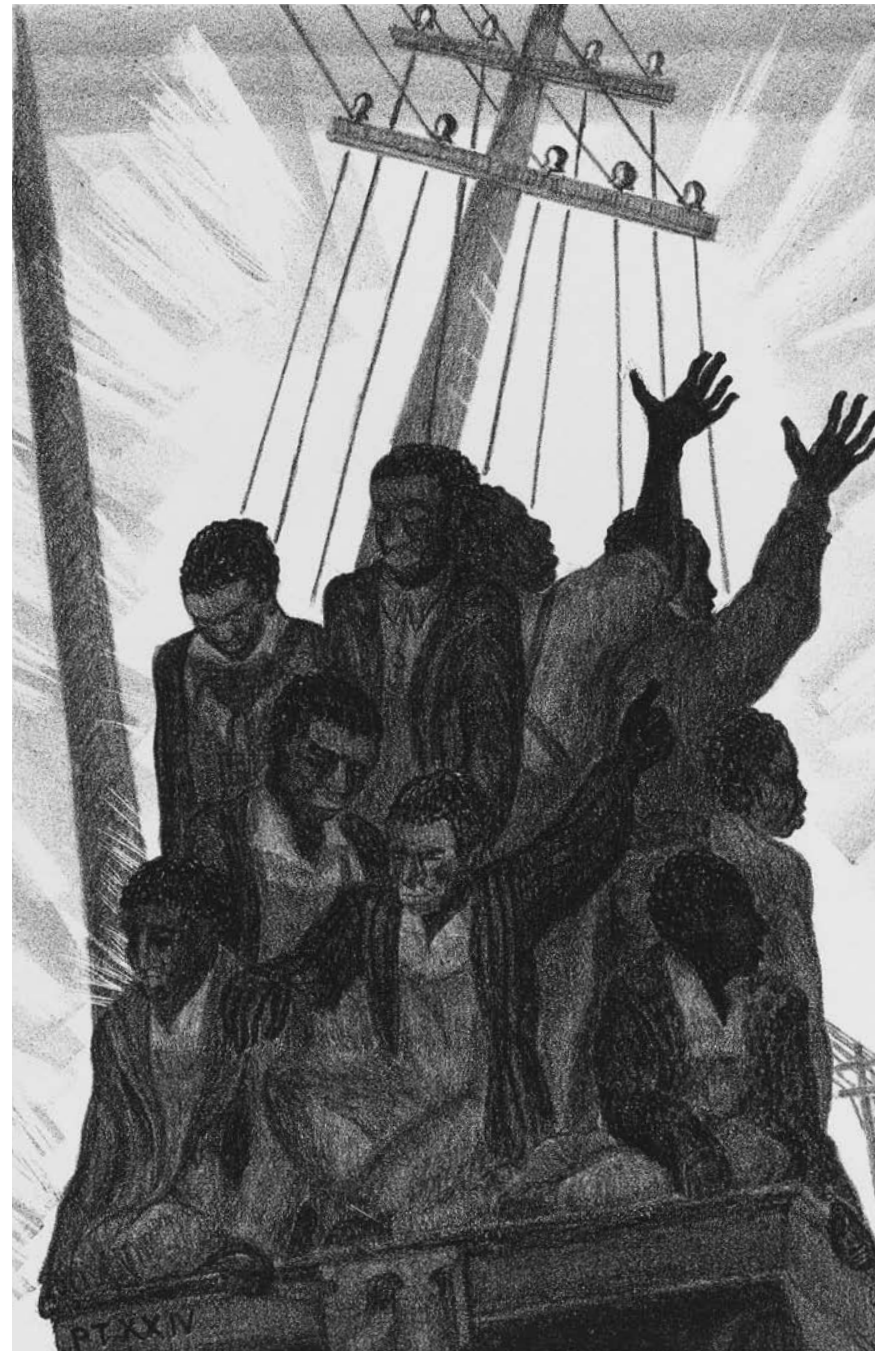
The panel designs consisted of a series of sketches of an "Industrial Frankenstein." Instead of an ideal communist future, these sketches depict a more immediate and acceptable idea, in the context of Depression-era America, of the defeat of the capitalist industrialists by their own machine. Using whimsical and fantastical visual language, the images show industry in the form of a mechanical humanoid figure that eventually revolts against its capitalist creators. In the first drawing in the series, the massive metal Frankenstein is surrounded by scaffolding and thick smoke, while comical round "capitalists" in top hats and black coats gather beneath it, assessing the progress of their great industrial endeavor. This quirky, experimental imagery was geared to appeal to viewers not yet converted to the communist cause. The diorama panel had more ideological work to do than the stage sets; the dystopian vision of the future of industry was meant to illuminate the communist cause for a wide audience that did not necessarily share Simon's political views. To engage this audience, Simon quoted dramatic popular culture rather than idealized Soviet iconography.

Although the Workers Theater stage sets and the "Industrial Frankenstein" panel are radically different on the surface, they exhibit clear ideological parallels and exemplify the formal experimentation Simon employed early in his career to communicate these ideologies. Simon's radical politics would endure throughout the 1930s, but he would soon trade in his visual experiments for a more stable and explicit socialist realist form which would define his later WPA murals and which can be seen in his more naturalistic and figurative *Demonstrators* of 1937. [\[1\]](#)



Henry Simon, *Untitled (Industrial Frankenstein)*, 1932, pencil on board

# PRENTISS TAYLOR AND GEORGE BIDDLE ON THE SCOTTSBORO TRIALS



Prentiss Taylor, *Scottsboro Limited*, from the portfolio *Scottsboro*, 1932, lithograph

Leftist artists Prentiss Taylor and George Biddle confronted Southern racism in works informed by the Scottsboro Trials of 1931, in which nine innocent black men were convicted and placed on death row for raping two white women. Seeing the trials as a "legal lynching," the Communist Party emerged as a major advocate for the defendants. The CP identified racial violence as a symptom of the economic oppression of the working class, and for it the trials linked racial and class struggles. John Reed Club artists took on the responsibility for challenging the racist narrative: some artists emphasized the victims' helplessness and working class identity while others magnified the stigma of sexual interactions between black men and Southern white women to illuminate the perverse racism embedded in American culture. White American artists Taylor and Biddle combated racial injustice using drastically different visual languages: Taylor employed semi-modernist, geometric forms to represent the victims of the trials, while Biddle created grotesque, sexualized caricature to illustrate the perpetrators.

Prentiss Taylor's *Scottsboro Limited* uses blocked, rectangular forms to illustrate the boys' stiff bodies, which overlap one another in an imposing, sculptural mass atop a wooden train car platform. The viewer looks up at the boys, some of whom hang their heads or look into the distance. Vertical electric power lines reach from the top of the boys' heads toward the sky, symbolizing the gallows or prison bars. Each geometric, masklike face contains rectangular cheekbones and sunken eyes, which emphasizes the anonymity of each individual. Rays of light emanate from the group, invoking the intensity of the black church and envisioning the boys as martyrs. Taylor's modernist language defines the group as a unified mass, void of distinctions, and thus similar to the communist proletariat.

Taylor's print served as the cover illustration for Langston Hughes's pamphlet of poems *Scottsboro Limited* critiquing the American justice system. Hughes called for revolutionary action: in "Scottsboro," he lists the Scottsboro Boys among the "fighters for the free," including Vladimir Lenin and Nat Turner. The call for action in the poem is a far cry from the passivity in Taylor's lithograph. Upon receiving the image from Taylor, Hughes noted that their faces were "so helplessly resigned, as though all the strength were quite gone," however he did not ask Taylor to alter it. Perhaps Hughes focused too intently on the faces rather than viewing the group as a whole. While Taylor and Hughes shared leftist views, Taylor was more critical of

the CP and overall less radical in his beliefs. Taylor responded: "I feel the quality of despair more strongly...more than I feel the aggressive hope." The artist's anguish explains his motive to promote the boys' innocence: his distanced modernism in the angles, isolation, and anonymity combined with semireligious iconography emphasized their victimhood.

In contrast to the quiet sorrow articulated by Taylor, George Biddle's *Alabama Code: "Our girls don't sleep with niggers."* is highly figurative and disturbing with sexualized imagery. The caricature illustrates a Southern white man gripping a disproportionately small white woman within an intimate space. The perverse nature of the work is evident in the man's monstrous figuration: his peering eyes, crooked nose, and large extremities. While this man is not of the upper class, he still possesses a privilege, which is that he is not black. With a smirk he holds up his pointer finger, as if telling the viewer the mocking phrase provided.

Biddle also employed extreme figuration in the woman's hypersexuality: her curvy legs and ample bosom are hardly contained within her strapless dress. While Taylor referenced sexuality by depicting the accused, Biddle directly illustrates this bodily experience in the man's grip on the woman's waist and breast, which holds her in place and shields her from the viewer. While the woman's gaze remains complacent, she is nevertheless equally complicit in this sexual drama: as a white woman, she holds power over the black man simply because she has the ability to accuse him of rape. Therefore, it is likely that in this image Biddle makes reference to Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, the white women who accused the Scottsboro Boys. It has been speculated that Bates and Price were prostitutes, just as the woman in Biddle's print appears to be, with her sexualized demeanor. Biddle's caricature is an amplified evocation of this racist perversion, which would have been extremely legible for the masses.

Biddle's illustration reveals a contrasting way in which leftist artists responded to Southern racial terror, as informed by Scottsboro. One could say that Taylor's image is a more predictable, uplifting leftist response while Biddle's is exceedingly complex because it personifies the corrupt system and the ingrained sexual codes of the South. Similarly, the alternate visual languages—one semi-modernist and the other more traditional and exaggerated — lends themselves to a conclusion that one image takes the moral high road, as it were, and the other the low. [\[2\]](#)

**"In America, race discrimination is one of the chief props on which Fascism can be built. One of the most vital blows the artists of this congress can deliver to the threat of Fascism is to refuse to discriminate against any man because of nationality, race or creed."** AARON DOUGLAS / *THE NEGRO IN AMERICAN CULTURE / FIRST AMERICAN ARTISTS' CONGRESS*, 1936



George Biddle, *Alabama Code: "Our girls don't sleep with niggers."*, 1933, lithograph



# PRINT ACTIVISM, A BRIEF HISTORY



Benjamin Franklin, *Join, or Die*, woodcut, 1754

Social realism, in this sense, is the shortest distance between two points: the artist and his audience, art and survival.—Harry Gottlieb, 1939

Print media have for centuries been a natural choice for artists seeking to make politically motivated statements. Techniques such as woodcut, etching, and engraving—employed for public broadsides and political caricature—date back at least to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Printmaking was uniquely suited to political purposes because of its reproducible nature and adaptability to presses that print newspapers or other circulatable paper media en masse. *Join, or Die*, a woodcut by Benjamin Franklin first published in 1754, is usually considered the first American political print. This image of a snake cut into segments representing the original thirteen American colonies became a symbol of unity during the

Revolutionary War. It was the invention of lithography, however, at the end of the 18th century that truly inaugurated the modern era of print activism. Lithography grew with the urbanization and industrial expansion of the 19th century. It was the choice for the first large-scale color posters, the themes of which reflected particularly modern subjects: advertising, public hygiene, and urban entertainment industries. World War I (1914–1918) saw the apotheosis of the new medium, as lithography’s scale, color, and reproducibility were applied to military endeavors around the globe. WWI also reintroduced an old term for a new purpose and era: “propaganda”—a word that acknowledges the power of images at the same time as it attempts to denigrate them by insinuating dishonesty.

If oppositions held in tension characterize modernity, print “propaganda” has its antithesis in print “democracy.” Democracy has been associated with print practices since the establishment of lithography in Europe, and its importation to the United States in the 19th century. American artists in the 1930s embraced printmaking as a process that operated “democratically” in production, message, and reception. The intrinsic reproducibility of prints meant that artists could cultivate a wider audience by generating more images at a lower cost. Prints countered the elitism and expense of painting, and circumvented institutions, such as galleries and museums, by bringing art directly into the hands of the people. As artist Elizabeth Olds emphasized, to maximize the democratic potential of printmaking, the entire community must collaborate in boosting the print’s communicability. Not only did a greater number of prints need to be produced, ideally with an appropriate message, but also these objects must enter a system of public education, distribution, and display wherein an audience with cultivated intellectual acuity and desire would possess the economic means to acquire them. Print democracy, therefore, meant more than numbers. Prints could be an agent for social change and community building, generating, in Olds’s words, “new social relations” and consequentially shaping new audiences mandating new aesthetics—grassroots activism.

Optimism surrounded print democracy in the 1930s. Artists genuinely felt that their images could improve society. The decimation of genuine print activism by the industrial machine of World War II was all the more tragic for their idealism. War shifted the power bases while an unprecedented new medium of mass production—photomechanical offset lithography—blurred the boundary between art and advertising and conscripted every image into the service of nationalist propaganda. In the 21st century, new internet-based media became the voice of the Occupy Movement and “Arab spring” revolutions. Does print still have a voice? What does artistic democracy mean today? [12](#)

“The John Reed Club must offer specific tasks, especially cooperative tasks, to the revolutionary artists. Only in this way will it develop an effective revolutionary art....The good revolutionary picture is not necessarily a cartoon, but it should have the legibility and pointedness of a cartoon, and like the cartoon it should reach great masses of workers at little expense. A cooperative program of agitational prints for every militant occasion, is within the means of the John Reed Club. In this way artists can be as effective as the writers and speakers, and develop their own powers in the process.” MEYER SCHAPIRO / REVIEW OF THE JOHN REED CLUB ART EXHIBITION *THE SOCIAL VIEWPOINT IN ART*, 1933

CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV, 2013

# REVOLUTIONS—FORMS THAT TURN

The impulse to revolt. Revolving, rotating, mirroring, repeating, reversing, turning upside down or inside out, changing perspectives. The etymology of the word “revolution” reveals its ambivalent and paradoxical nature. To revolve means to turn twice (re-volvere), to follow a curvature around, and return to where one began—an ecological movement. In its most common original usage, revolution defined the rotation of the planets. Later, as a political term in the seventeenth century, it referred to the restoration of an earlier form of rule. With the revolutions of the eighteenth century, the word came to mean a sudden rupture and the birth of a new and better society—a utopian world come true—with a strong projection onto the future.

In 2008, when I organized the 16th Biennale of Sydney called “Revolutions—Forms That Turn,” “revolution” was a term often considered obsolete, ominous and associated with violence—abrupt and sudden change was seen as impossible or dangerous. Revolution was defined as the collapse of revolt into institutionalized new orders. We were told that change could only occur as a series of micro-changes or through evolution, not revolution. On

top of it, the idea of revolution had become a lifestyle choice, co-opted into the latest software upgrade or Blackberry model.

The Biennale was instead a constellation of historical and contemporary works of art that celebrated and explored the impulse to revolt both in art and life. It articulated the agency embedded in forms that express our desire for change—from Victor Vasarely to Gianni Colombo, from Duchamp’s bicycle wheel to William Kentridge’s works, from Mike Rakowitz’s Aboriginal Tatlintower-looking and activist community-based project to Rene Gabri and Ayreen Anastas’s tour around Australia to understand the potential of revolution there might be. Such literal and formal devices were charted for their broader aesthetic, psychological, radical and political perspectives. It seems today that forms of revolution, based on both forward and reversed movements, ancient and contemporary knowledges, might actually be the best way to go in order to enact forms of cosmopolitics that are able to envision and perform a more just and lively world.

# MABEL DWIGHT'S DANSE MACABRE



Mabel Dwight, *Danse Macabre*, c. 1934, lithograph

As a passionate supporter of communism since her early twenties, it might be surprising that Mabel Dwight was best known for the “kindly humor” of her prints, several of which were sold as Christmas cards. She often lamented that her reputation as a humorist represented only a small part of her personality. The divide between Dwight’s reputation and her politics is evident in her artistic output from 1933, when she produced only two lithographs: the lighthearted *Gossip New York*, depicting two old women conversing in a park, and the more serious *Danse Macabre*. The latter is an important example of antifascist art from the early 1930s, which illustrates the effective translation of Dwight’s political involvement into her work.

*Danse Macabre* depicts marionettes on stage with a skeleton seated in the audience, wearing a gas mask and helmet. The puppets represent various countries (from left to right): England personified as John Bull, Italy as Mussolini, Germany as Hitler, France in the figure of Marianne, China, Japan, and the United States as Uncle Sam. The danse macabre was a popular genre in medieval art, usually depicting Death as an animated skeleton leading individuals of different social classes in the dance of death. The first known danse macabre was created in the 15th century, and its popularity quickly spread throughout medieval Europe. Its iconography remained popular centuries later, and several contemporary German artists, including Otto Dix, reference the medieval genre in their work from the First World War. Though Dwight had studied Dix’s *Dance of Death 1917* from the portfolio *War*, on a friend’s recommendation, her interpretation of the genre is unique.

The skeleton’s nonparticipation in Dwight’s dance is significantly different from its leading role in both medieval and contemporary examples of the genre. While other representations of Death force their victims to dance, in Dwight’s adaptation only Mussolini, Hitler, and Japan take action. Mussolini gives a fascist salute and Japan attacks China while Hitler, dressed in flamboyant Nazi armor, salutes and clutches the severed head of a Jewish caricature. The other Western nations respond passively: John Bull nervously mops his forehead, a wide-eyed Marianne looks down her nose with surprise, and Uncle Sam pulls back in disgust. These countries are represented through national personifications without tangible substance, as they fail to articulate any ability to act. As Death watches in the audience, the nations are already doomed to participate in the dance of death.

*Danse Macabre* is particularly striking in its skilled use of lithographic techniques. Mabel Dwight’s career did not gain momentum until 1926 at the age of fifty-one, meaning *Danse Macabre* was produced well within the first decade of her studies in lithography. In this piece, the artist deftly renders small features in smooth detail, as seen in the puppet strings and expressive faces of her caricatures. Dwight’s use of satirical humor becomes much darker, as does the overall tone of the composition. The skillful rendering of this lithograph speaks to Dwight’s attention to detail in both the artistic and political realms.

Dwight’s dark interpretation of the danse macabre, in which the participants are responsible for their own fate while Death merely enjoys the show, was one of the first manifestations of antifascism in art. When Dwight began work on the lithograph in June of 1933, Hitler had been chancellor for less than six months and Japan had just withdrawn from the League of Nations. It was not until mid-decade that Dwight’s colleagues began to express concern over the rise of fascism, after invasions by Hitler and Mussolini and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Even less attention was paid to the Japanese, who would not sign the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany until 1936. This lithograph impressively captures the major Axis powers well before the beginning of World War II. *Danse Macabre* therefore stands as a testament to Dwight’s political foresight and pointed artistic production. [13](#)

“With the advent of the market and the slow but steady rise to power of the mercantile class, the artist was forced to adapt himself to new conditions. The Church was decisively defeated, reduced in economic and political power, and the new merchant class became the chief patron of the arts. In the process a different kind of art, under different methods of production, was made necessary. From the closely organized guild of the Middle Ages, with its stable position in the economic structure, the artist had been gradually pushed outward to a very unstable place on the fringes of society...a sort of scavenger, or as he is sometimes called today, a ‘free lance.’” ALEXANDER STAVENITZ / *ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE ARTIST TODAY* / FIRST AMERICAN ARTISTS’ CONGRESS, 1936



ROCKWELL KENT'S END OF THE WORLD SERIES

On November 1, 1937, a series of four Rockwell Kent lithographs were featured in the *Life* magazine article “Hayden Planetarium Shows Four Ways in Which the World May End.” Against the backdrop of projected images of planetary collisions, Dr. Clyde Fisher, the curator of New York City’s Hayden Planetarium, was lecturing on potential world-ending celestial events. Kent’s background in book and magazine illustrations made him a logical choice for illustrating the theories, but the revolutionary undertones of his imagery, especially apparent in *Solar Fade-Out*, undoubtedly held more significance than the editors would have liked.

In the mid-1930s, Rockwell Kent was considered a quintessential American artist, a Teddy Roosevelt-style individualist and adventurer. He was very well known, perhaps best for illustrating pamphlets for companies such as Sherwin-Williams and Marcus & Company, as well as editions of popular books such as Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. His work, primarily in the form of advertisements, was also featured in popular publications such as *Harper’s Weekly*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Life*.

Although he was raised in a prosperous family, Kent was interested in the working class and leftist politics for much of his life. In 1902, he met two people who shaped his political beliefs: the wealthy socialist Rufus Weeks and the painter Robert Henri. Weeks introduced him to the basic ideas of Marxism, while Henri pushed Kent to explore the streets of New York City for artistic inspiration. Over the following decades, Kent joined many leftist organizations, including the John Reed Club, and later joked that when the US government issued a list of subversive organizations, he was ashamed that he was only a member of 85 of them. Kent’s belief was that Soviet communism was the beginning of worldwide socialism, and that the United States would eventually move in that direction. In an interview published in the *Washington Daily News* on the same day as the lithographs in *Life*, Kent explained that though he was primarily a landscape painter, he found that his drawings were becoming “more and more propaganda for the revolution.”

“There are a few people who have made a pot bellied living by the exploitation of labor, conveniently assisted now and then by that wholesale butchery of men, women, and children called War. There are millions of people who think that being slaughtered is Life, and that slaughtering—or being slaughtered—is its Heaven sent reward. Good: let them. So hurrah for Fascism!—and to Hell with the Human Race! Of the millions—and there are such millions—who want to pursue the cultivation of their garden which is America in peace and ordred security, art is the voice. For God’s sake listen to it.” ROCKWELL KENT / CATALOG FOR AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM: AN INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF CARTOONS, DRAWINGS AND PRINTS / NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH, 1936

NEW MASSES, OCTOBER, 1935  
AMERICAN ARTISTS’ CONGRESS

A CALL TO ALL ARTISTS

THIS IS A CALL to all artists, of recognized standing in their profession, who are aware of the critical conditions existing in world culture in general, and in the field of the Arts in particular. This Call is to those artists, who, conscious of the need of action, realize the necessity of collective dissuasion and planning, with the objective of the preservation and development of our cultural heritage. It is for those artists who realize that the cultural crisis is but a reflection of a world economic crisis and not an isolated phenomenon.

The artists are among those most affected by the world economic crisis. Their income has dwindled dangerously close to zero.

Dealers, museums, and private patrons have long ceased to supply the meager support they once gave.

Government, State and Municipally sponsored Art Projects are giving only temporary employment—to a small fraction of the artists.

In addition to his economic plight, the artist much face a constant attack against his freedom of expression.

Rockefeller Center, the Museum of Modern Art, the Old Court House in St. Louis, the Coit Memorial Tower in San Francisco, the Abraham Lincoln High School, Rikers Island Penitentiary—in these and other important public and

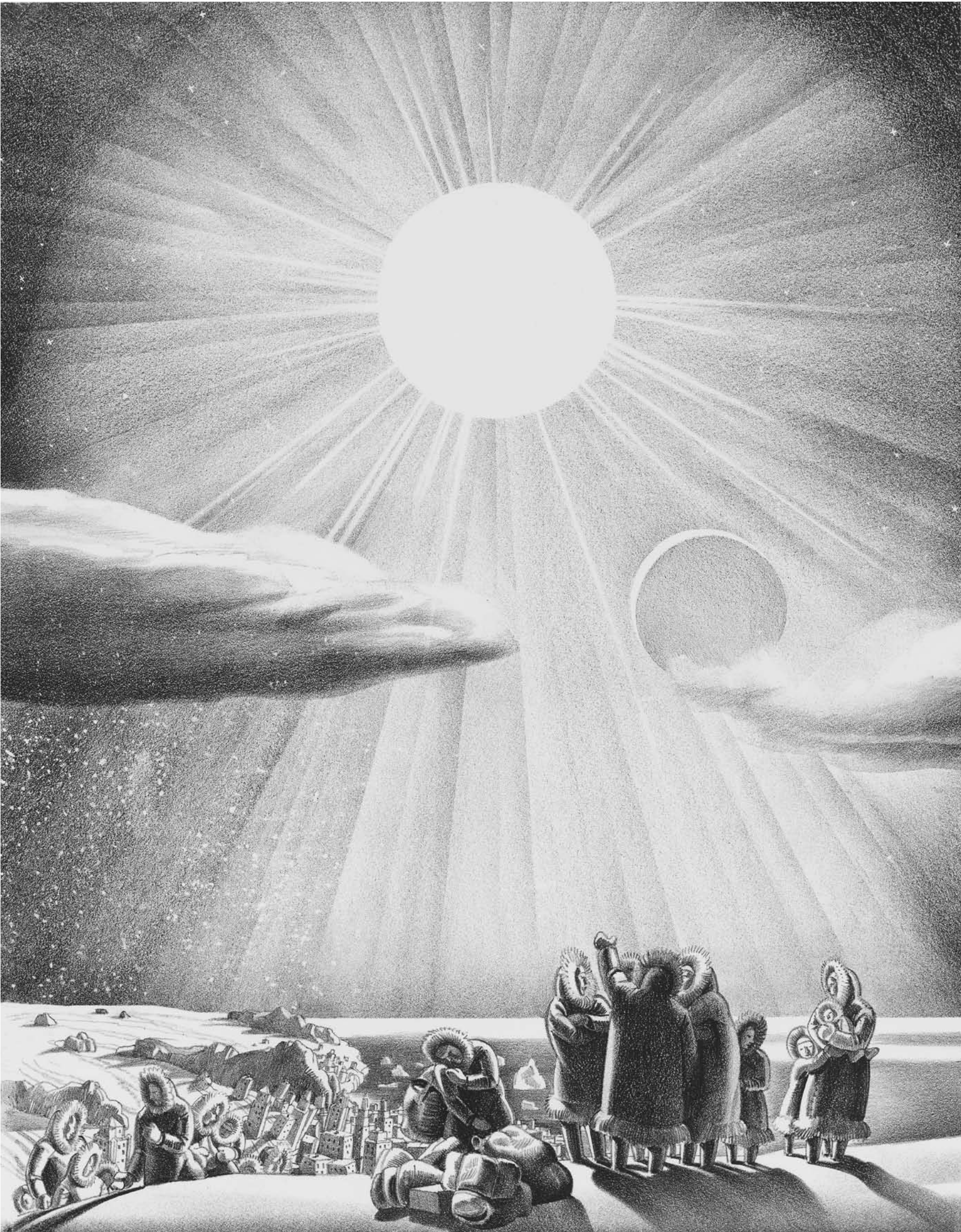
semi-public institutions, suppression, censorship or actual destruction of art works has occurred.

Oaths of allegiance of teachers, investigations of colleges for radicalism, sedition bills aimed at the suppression of civil liberties, discrimination against the foreign-born, against Negroes, the reactionary Liberty League and similar organizations, Hearst journalism, etc., are daily reminders of fascism’s growth in the United States.

A picture of what fascism has done to living standards, to civil liberties, to workers’ organizations, to science and art, the threat against the peace and security of the world, as shown in Italy and Germany, should arouse every sincere artist to action.

We artists must act. Individually we are powerless. Through collective action we can defend our interests. We must ally ourselves with all groups engaged in the common struggle against war and fascism.

There is need for an artists’ organization on a nation-wide scale, which will deal with our cultural problems. The creation of such a permanent organization, which will be affiliated with kindred organizations throughout the world, is our task.



Rockwell Kent, *Solar Fade Out*, from *The End of the World Series*, 1937, lithograph



# WHAT IS REVOLUTIONARY ART TODAY?

In the spirit of the John Reed Club and the American Artists’ Congress, the Block posed the question “What is revolutionary art today?” to the community of artists, activists, scholars, and thinkers living and working in Chicago. Excerpts of those responses are printed below and at [theleftfront-blockmuseum.tumblr.com](#), an online platform that will carry that conversation to the public at large.

One thing that revolutions share with avant-garde art (a similarly military term) is a tendency to launch manifestos—declarations infused with certainty. But I think we need to proceed by making room for lateral thinking and nimble response, for open-endedness. To somehow maintain revolutionary zeal while allowing for ambiguity and complexity: for solutions that might consist of silver buckshot from many sources, rather than a silver bullet.

**REBECCA KELLER**  
Artist and Writer / Associate Professor, adj., School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Revolutionary Art is a radical evocation that brings to light the deepest, darkest, and most entangled roots of a problem. Revolutionary Art is to expose and disentangle the roots of what is harmful to a flourishing life by not simply depicting symptoms or manifestations of the harmful, but reaching below surfaces to deconstruct its causes. Revolutionary Art is a showdown with limitation, the unimaginative, the monologic, and the dispassionate to embrace necessary excesses in order to disrupt a state of affairs. It is an aesthetics of incitement in the defense of love and beauty which is life in its fullness. Revolutionary Art serves justice through its unrelenting labor and the highest order of symbol making by excavating those hidden forces that exploit and overburden Earth’s balance and Earth’s yearnings to give us all what we need. Revolutionary Art is above all courageous and strikingly fearless in its radical clarity of purpose and its dedication to the power of beauty to arouse the sleepers into town criers and the lost into revolutionaries who revere life.

**D. SOYINI MADISON**  
Professor and Chair, Department of Performance Studies / Northwestern University

Joseph Beuys would surely have claimed a central importance for the creative process in the life of the culture, but Duchamp, our hero, would measure such an impact in the weight of a worn shirt. Only the activities of the ordinary, claiming nothing for art, can shift our cognitive geography in revolutionary ways. The hacker, the terrorist, or the sex worker operate in anonymity to reconstruct the individual, the economy, and history. Art can only be revolutionary by turning its back on the status it derives by definition. By becoming un-art. It cannot. I am ordinary. You are not.

**ADAM BROOKS AND MATHEW WILSON**  
Industry of the Ordinary

Thinking that art can lead revolutions is like thinking that the crowd can win the game, but, that’s just it: lots of people go to games because they really believe the team’s winning because they’re there.

**OUR LITERAL SPEED**

## TEN POINTS: REVOLUTIONARY ART...

speaks to the present historical moment, not a vanished time-past or an imagined time-future.

is political not cultural. It engages the struggle for power.

challenges the state (its political representatives and administrators) because that’s where the power is.

addresses the class struggle, including the human/animal class struggle.

talks to people in a language they can understand but doesn’t talk down to them—no to vulgar populism!

uses any form or language that works—no to fashion and style for their own sakes!

recognizes that the environmental crisis can only be solved by ending capitalism (by evolution or revolution).

reckons with the continued salience of the writings of Karl Marx.

“...becomes a material force when it grips the masses”

is only good art when it succeeds.

**STEPHEN F. EISENMAN**  
Professor of Art History / Northwestern University

Cyclically transformative, revolutionary art is movement from the very micro level of relationship, to self, to community, to place and meaning. It is (re)defining from the silenced spaces designed to be held still, where false promises of the colonial project crack and rupture.

**LAUREN LYSTRUP**  
Sustainability Coordinator / Proyecto Algarabia

The real revolutionary art act is in reorganizing sociality in order to find new sequestered spaces of tenderness, a longing to be held by something other than a commodity or any other event only pretending to subvert that expectation. As Gramsci said, “the challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.” To try to stay aware and seek out passionate action as a form of reciprocity and radical desire, while providing the potential to hope for previously unforeseeable means of collectivity.

**CASSANDRA TROYAN**  
Artist and Writer

If the failures of historical revolution in the previous two centuries have taught us anything it is that the dream of a better world, complete with greater conditions of justice for all people, continues to be a dream worth fighting for. As a committed Marxist and cultural critic I believe that such a dream realizes itself through a nuanced union of theory and practice (or praxis). Art as praxis is not revolutionary because it represents and documents the revolutionary idea; rather, art can be the seed of revolution. It has the unique capacity to dream of a better world while critiquing the insufficiency of the present one.

**JOSHUA TAKANO CHAMBERS-LETSON**  
Assistant Professor, Department of Performance Studies / Northwestern University

Revolutionary art today is the collective and creative forms of practice by artists and non-artists who participate and stand in transnational solidarity with the cycle of struggles since 2011 in Egypt, Tunisia, USA, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Brazil, Bulgaria, Italy... which took on the names Spring, Occupy, Resist, Revolt, June Journeys, Real Democracy Now.... It has so far taken multiple art forms that are inspired and translated from each other, including camp architecture in the parks, graffiti on the walls, posters and banners on the buildings, paints on the stairs, tweets and facebook posts on the internet, performances on the streets, concerts in the squares, outfits and ornaments on the bodies, designs for ad-hoc open-access hospitals, libraries, discussion forum auditoriums and food distribution tables in the public spaces,... or simply the sheer act of being there on the streets. Revolutionary art, as delusional as it might be like any revolution, is the claiming of the people’s right to the city and their right to history.

**ESRA AKCAN**  
Associate Professor, Director of Graduate Studies / School of Art and Art History / College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts / University of Illinois at Chicago

## "REVOLUTIONARY ART," IN 150 WORDS OR LESS:

• How can art be revolutionary, absent a revolution?

• The shit is hitting the proverbial fan: DO something, anything!

• Revolutions are short-lived. Many stall, or fail.

• “Revolutionary” is hyperbolic... better suited for capitalism.

• Historical memory is good: the global 1960s–70s, the 1930s, Russian constructivists, the Paris Commune.

• Sometimes revolutions kill their poets (think Roque Dalton).

• Trotsky was a hopeless romantic: “...the artist is the natural ally of revolution.”

• Some signposts: Zapatistas, Iraq Veterans Against the War, Axe St. Arena, Tamms Year Ten, Banksy, the Yes Men. Bad poetry in Tahrir Square. Good poetry in Tahrir Square. Hand-painted cardboard signs and shelters at Occupy. Speculative memorials for torture survivors. Films that make us imagine we could die for something. Courbet, Gil Scott-Heron, Patti Smith.

• Anonymous, authored, singular vision, collaborative, quiet, loud.

• What is left? What can art do? Not fix on failure: lots of little flames wobbling, flickering, refusing to go out.

**MARY PATTEN**  
Artist and Professor in Film, Video, New Media and Animation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The creation of meaning in public spaces is a collective process engaged by community gardeners, spray can artists, community-engaged artists, social projects, community development organizations, and increasingly by city/urban planners. A revolutionary struggle in this moment is to retain and enrich the notions of both theory and craft in art making as a public practice guided by engaged artists when many other forms and ideas endeavor to use the power of art for their own purposes.

**JON POUNDS**  
Executive Director / Chicago Public Art Group

What should revolutionary artists do now? End the meritocracy. Stop going to MFA programs and accruing massive amounts of debt. Make radical departures from existing methods for resource access. Be brave: make social and climate justice the true goals of the work, over career visibility and success. Recognize that place-making and social practice are a gentrifying force. Take that to task. Accept that everyone is implicated. Learn about your predecessors in the community arts. Talk about race. Reach across boundaries even if it sets you back or freaks you out. Start with a diverse group and place make from there. Recognize the major global, national, and institutional inhibitors to progress: racism, classism, sexism, and resource inequity. Work on these injustices directly while still making your work. Until they go, we are swimming upstream. Recognize that Art has a history that is fraught with institutional inequity, but creativity is a human right and necessity.

**SARA BLACK**  
Artist / Assistant Professor of Visual Art / Antioch College

I don’t know if there is such a thing as Revolutionary Art (there might be) and if so I don’t know what it is. It might be a well-fitted Brooks Brothers suit.

**GEOF OPPENHEIMER** is an artist. He lives and works in Chicago IL.

Any form of artistic expression that suggests a way toward healing and reconciliation contains the seeds of revolutionary change. Art experiences that revolutionize us are those that challenge us to see ourselves in others, recognize what was previously unnoticed, and change our intentions. It may help us discover inequities, injustices, and exclusions that are hidden or in plain sight. It may reveal and unravel our biases, expand our sense of compassion, seed new conversations, and move us closer to new truths. Its meaning and messages may be subtle and mysterious—yet it moves us, and stays with us.

**SUSANNE SCHNELL**  
Former Executive Director / Archeworks

The revolutionaries I have met are young and still invisible and powerful, not yet corrupted by the onslaught of ignorance or a public education whose order of business remains passive. I feel I am watching moments in their lives when decisions about what they do against the background of school and their alliances, the lure of mass distribution and personal compromise impact the honest energy of interpreting the vibrant testimonies that develop a voice and a vision.

**JIM DUIGNAN**  
Artist / Associate Professor of Visual Art, College of Education / DePaul University / Stockyard Institute

The art of turning is invisible. Like terrorism, it is slow and spectacular in the most heartfelt way. It involves touch and glances, small breaths and last breaths. At the same time the turn is eternal and always passes through like distant music. The turn is smartly qualified: pedagogical, expressive, ontological, curatorial, performative, ethnographic, quotidian, academic, spiritual. The left hand misses what the right hand is doing: its force, its affect, and its generosity. But later—not that much later—it is it. Turning (in art) is incessant. You can watch it on the Internet or in your microwave; all the while missing it, spilling it like clichéd proverbs. In the turning, everyone works and everyone eats, but not everyone speaks. It is gloriously uniformed uninformed. Who says it first? Who steps on its head? Someone cups their hand around your ear and declares, “For art’s sake stop making art.”

**JORGE LUCERO**  
Assistant Professor of Art Education / University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

“We Are All Pussy Riot.”–Kathleen Hanna

Pussy Riot is a group of Feminist performance artists who play punk music in brightly colored outfits, donning balaclavas, or ski masks, and who combine boxing moves, air guitar, and aerobic exercises into choreographed dance routines. Their performances, essentially peaceful acts of civil disobedience, have been staged in protest of Russian President Putin’s return to power, and what they see as Russian society’s misogyny and collusion of church and state. Their piece “Punk Prayer” angered Russian Orthodox clergy and followers so thoroughly that it led to the arrest of three of Pussy Riot’s members, two of whom were sentenced to two years in a forced labor camp. Members of the group, including those since imprisoned, have said they felt their art was joyous, and while born from anger, was done in earnest, but not without a sense of humor. Often times arrest, fines, or censorship serve to radicalize artists, transforming their creative expression into revolutionary agitprop. Pussy Riot made their work at considerable personal risk to themselves and their loved ones, and it is revolutionary not just in form and content, but because it has had the power to ignite a creative spark in others. They are imitated, emulated, and artists, musicians, and activists the world over have taken up their call in solidarity. Their art has inspired art making, but, like the best revolutionary art, it acts as a call to arms with the strength to foment revolution.

**THEA LIBERTY NICHOLS**  
Curator, Writer, and Teacher

What is revolutionary art today? Let’s ask instead, what is revolutionary, and what is art? Both are questions of form and content made familiar in the age-old debate between realism and modernism. But above all, these are questions of relationships. Revolutionary agendas can quickly render art into propaganda, and the avant-garde was easily assimilated and commodified. But it’s not so simple. Art and politics, like form and content, are imbricated, slippery, and inseparable—each a shadow of the other. So my answer for today: look to these shadows, but not to find an answer. Only through questioning may we provisionally locate ever-shifting relationships.

**ALICIA CHESTER**  
PhD student, Visual and Cultural Studies / University of Rochester



We deny the term revolutionary; with respect to Hakim Bey, we believe the idea of “revolutionary” only deposits us in a circular progress narrative we cannot escape—revolution, reaction, betrayal and the founding of a more oppressive state.

Instead, we suggest art that employs non-art social energies in co-resistance. This art is dependent on its lived context, and recognizes the importance of solidarity, community, and the necessity to work across boundaries and speak multiple languages.

This art takes a form that, like water, is shape-shifting, infinitely flexible, searching, and penetrating...a form that is self-critical and actively conscious. This art occupies and Gezi-fies. As capital markets have complex infrastructure, just-in-time inventory, and 24-hour feedback, cultural producers need to build their own network of support, communication, and distribution; defining success for themselves and within their own communities outside of a hierarchical market structure, whether those terms are political and/or formal.

**JASON LAZARUS AND SOFIA LEIBY**  
Co-Founders and Directors / Chicago Artist Writers

My revolutionary = justice-seeking. Now we can begin.

There is no revolutionary art that is not also revolutionary practice. I mean:

Revolutionary art has no truck with exploitation: It isn’t made by no-or-low wage assistants to capital-wielding, credit-claiming artists; it won’t be showing in galleries with all white, all male artist rosters; it doesn’t thrive in MFA programs subsidized by the labor of part-time professors with no benefits or job security.

Revolutionary art is incompatible with Harvard, Northwestern, the University of Chicago, and Yale, a representative short list of private, restrictive enrollment, wealth-hoarding institutions. Justice has goals and preconditions: Public, accessible, generous.

Revolutionary art builds its people. It’s not so special and it’s all that matters. It proposes: We are all capable of dreaming and making art, loving its-and-our beauty, and using what we learn and gain through that imagining, creating, and love to change our world together.

**THERESE QUINN**  
Director, Museum and Exhibition Studies / University of Illinois at Chicago

A revolutionary art today puts forward a broadly reaching abstraction—a good idea—in concrete sensuous terms. It is in the business of ideal formation, but knows it has to figure those ideals for an embodied world animated and constrained by political struggles, skeptical of past articulations of “unity,” filled with individuals who protect the freedoms afforded by alienation. In its immediate, sensuous dimensions, such art must simultaneously recognize the world’s very real array of differences and make palpable a proposal about a practice—of seeing or feeling perhaps, of forming structures that take bodies into account—that it wants to see more of, that it wishes for on behalf of everyone in its audience, an audience best conceived of as everyone. A revolutionary art today does not divide people according to their identities, directly solve practical problems, or endorse the false sense of security in critical vigilance over the neoliberal economy. Rather, it speaks with the wisdom of knowing its best ideas come after a close confrontation with vulnerability.

**ELISE ARCHIAS**  
Assistant Professor of Art History / University of Illinois at Chicago

Revolutionary art should afford the radical reclamation of meditative space and time, a place to pause and be present, to disconnect from all the distractions and intrusions in order to reconnect with what we value. It is the art of everyday life, the art of living, without which there is no material art and no revolution.

**SALOME CHASNOFF**  
PhD / Filmmaker / President, Personal Hermitage Productions / Founder, Beyondmedia Education

If a revolutionary art exists today, it will probably not be found in the art world—and I, as a member of that art world, may therefore be the wrong person to ask, “What is revolutionary art today?” (Though I do know.) In fact, the entire art world phenomenon may well be the one reason why it has become so impossible to imagine “art” and “revolution” as somehow related, complicit, entwined—which of course they once were, *in illo tempore*, though perhaps for only too short a time. (The experiment was prematurely aborted.) What is revolutionary art today? There is, of course, no longer such a thing—though history tends to repeat itself, and revolutionary art may one day be upon us again. First, however, the slightly more pressing matter of a total transformation of society, which art can only hint at, for the endless time being. Some help.

**DIETER ROELSTRAETE** is the Manilow Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, where he recently organized *The Way of the Shovel: Art As Archaeology*.

The Day I Met Raivo Puusemp

I once presented a project titled *paintings* in a sunny Silver Lake house gallery. The 100+ works hung at eye level and one inch apart. The pieces snaked through the entire split-level, across walls, doors, cabinets, and blocking the enormous panoramic window overlooking the Silver Lake Reservoir and the Hollywood sign (and supposedly the OCEAN on a clear day). Kirsten Dunst reportedly visited the New Year’s Eve party there. Another Kirsten showed up introducing her father, Raivo. He was a diminutive yet sturdy Estonian man exuding a quiet confidence with white hair peeking out from his hat and around his spectacles. Mr. Puusemp eventually stopped at a painting of a cloud formation that stated “GET A JOB.” Suddenly, he exclaimed “good, good” while nodding and slowly making his way out, headed to Salt Lake City to resuscitate a floundering ski resort he was advising.

**BRANDON WARREN ALVENDIA**  
Founder, Silver Galleon Press / Director, The Storefront

An art that is mindful of the particularities of location and historical experience while also committed to the generalized conditions shared by all would reach toward revolutionary art for today. It would weave images of familiar and pragmatic concerns with the surreal, impossible and wild images of a social life we have not yet known. Through these intermingling methods (processes and images), a revolutionary art can reveal where we are and have been, while treading and experimenting with where we might go. Representation, redistribution, and imagination must walk together hand-in-hand to create revolutionary art of the future.

**DANIEL TUCKER**  
Co-Organizer / Never The Same

Can there be revolutionary art in the absence of a revolutionary movement? With “revolution” co-opted by marketing, the term “revolutionary,” in the realm of art, is reduced to the art market’s constant cynical recycling of spurious newness. One can look instead to arts of refusal and sabotage, or one can look to an activist practice whose artness lies in the frank acknowledgement of utopian political goals, doggedly pursued in the face of (near-?) impossibility. My best local example—of a creatively political project that imagines a new and humane world, and in its sheer audacity and determination can have real effects—is the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials Project, which honors the survivors of police torture in Chicago and the decades-long struggle for justice waged by survivors and supporters.

**REBECCA ZORACH**  
Professor of Art History / University of Chicago

Revolutionary art today doesn’t look the way we expect it to, because modes of revolution have been aestheticized and commercialized. It doesn’t come to us in the way that traditional revolutions or art do, either, because the means of distribution are now wholly owned by others, in all aspects of life. We sometimes luck into it, on the street, or hidden within other forms, but in truth, truly revolutionary art today is almost impossible to fix, whether locationally, linguistically, or aesthetically. What I can tell you about revolutionary art today is that it aims to give back to the viewer/reader/experiencer more than it takes from them, and that it always fundamentally reforms human relationships. Also, the primary emotional experience of revolutionary art today is one of pain and discomfort, although that a deep joy is available in its making and following its discovery is the reason it thrives at all.

**ANNE ELIZABETH MOORE**

I’m not so sure that there is such a thing as Revolutionary Art these days. It doesn’t seem as though the language of art has an approachable enough voice to really set forth a significant cultural shift. There is a trend in contemporary art to take up the didactic strategies of activism (or art that doesn’t even distinguish itself from activism), which seems most effective when it finds focus on specific agendas, whether that be abolishing supermax prisons or establishing cultural centers in underserved urban neighborhoods. But broader change may be too much to ask of the typically rarefied experience of contemporary art. Particularly in contrast to other modes of expression—we have never had more tools of connectivity, simpler means of communication. Revolutions seem to be happening in 140 characters or less, not in the priced-out boutiques that are art galleries or the privileged halls of art museums.

**ERIC MAY**  
Director / Roots and Culture

Revolutionaries today are propagandists for a new world in birth, for a cooperative society where the abundant means of survival demands to be distributed according to need, to a people without the means to purchase. Artists are visionaries, and revolutionary art today helps imagine and illuminate the path to this new society.

**LEW ROSENBAUM**  
Editor and Publisher / Chicago Labor & Art Notes

Unless art and artists can break their ties with the corporate capitalist and political class who exist as funding agents, it will never be revolutionary.

**W. KEITH BROWN**  
Director of Education / Evanston Art Center

What will be the mindset of students emerging from American schools in coming years? Will they be a passive, “rubricated” generation? A generation whose creativity has been harnessed to drive unsustainable cycles of creating and fulfilling manufactured desires? Through reimagining the social practice of art education, let us imagine into being students/citizens who are able to experience fully, reflect freely, and represent without fear.

**OLIVIA GUDE**  
Professor, School of Art and Art History / University of Illinois at Chicago

The episodic nature of art is what I consider revolutionary, that is, the unfolding of possibilities of living under conditions not determined by hegemonic power. Today, art does not occupy the avant-garde position in regard to episodic revolutions: protestors and activists have already appropriated aesthetic tools to spread their messages and to make their ideas embodied. So, in those cases in which aesthetic practice is framed as “art” what I consider “revolutionary art” is art that puts the art system into critical consideration and that uses the opportunities afforded by the symbolic to not only represent, comment on, or question life experience, but also to enact possibilities—possibilities that radically depart from what we know.

**MARCELA A. FUENTES**  
Assistant Professor, Department of Performance Studies / Northwestern University

“Never let a good *gallery* go to waste” —W. Churchill

“You never want a serious *museum* to go to waste, and what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you didn’t think you could do before.”—R. Emmanuel

Then President Obama explained in his Saturday radio and Internet address that there is “great opportunity in the midst of” the “great *artists*” befalling America.

“Only *an artwork*—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that artwork occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.” —M. Friedman

“Never waste a good *art opening*, and when it comes to the economic *opportunities*, don’t waste it when it can have a very positive impact on *communal* change and *financial* security.” —H. Clinton

“Don’t Waste a *Museum*—Your *Communities* or Your Own.” —M. F. Weiner

///  
Crisis, 2013  
text and altered quotations

**CHARLES RODERICK**  
Professor of Art / Harper College

What is revolutionary art today?  
It is when creative practices align with people’s movements, the oppressed, and the earth.  
It is when the walls of dehumanization and oppression are exposed and crumble away.  
It is when creativity blossoms from within people’s movements.

It is people’s movements and individuals becoming aware.  
It is the embracing of our human vulnerabilities.  
It is the collective stories absorbed.

It is the monarch butterfly’s hope.  
It is the organizer’s compassion.  
It is the power to give away power.

It is the desert-flower’s tenacity.  
It is the individual’s inspiration.  
It is the fear deconstructed.

It is the redwood’s endurance.  
It is the teacher’s patience.  
It is the anger expressed.

It is the night’s reflection.  
It is the child’s innocence.  
It is the dream enacted.

It is the sun’s warmth.  
It is the bird’s flight.  
It is the story heard.

It is liberation.  
It is love.  
It is.

**AARON HUGHES**  
Artist / Iraq Veterans Against the War member

■



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works designated Block Museum are from the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University. Sizes given are approximate. All works are on paper unless otherwise noted. Because of the shifting boundaries or regime associations of European nations in the 19th and 20th centuries, cities of birth are provided for American artists born outside the United States.

American Artists of the John Reed Club (Dzhon Rid Klub - Amerikanskiye Khudozhniki), Moscow, 1931, 6¾ x 5½ inches, Courtesy of Amherst Center for Russian Culture, Amherst College (PAMPHLET)

Philip Bard (American, 1912–1966), *First Snow*, c. 1938, lithograph, 9¾ x 12¾ inches, Block Museum, 2001.40.2

Bernece Berkman (American, 1911–1988), Untitled (Figures with Gas Masks), c. 1930, pen and ink, 11 x 14 inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Bernece Berkman, *Jim Crow Train*, 1937, pen and ink, 14⅞ x 11⅞ inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

George Biddle (American, 1885–1973), *Alabama Code: “Our girls don’t sleep with niggers.”*, 1933, lithograph, 15¾ x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, 1996.26

Isabel Bishop (American, 1902–1988), *On the Street (Fourteenth Street)*, 1931, etching, 4¾ x 10¾ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Stuart Davis (American, 1892–1964), *Theater on the Beach*, 1931, lithograph, 11 x 15 inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Stuart Davis, *New Jersey Landscape (Seine Cart)*, 1939, lithograph, 11½ x 15½ inches, Block Museum, 1995.67

Julio de Diego (American, born Madrid, Spain, 1900–1979), *Industry Becomes More Complex*, 1943, oil on canvas, 24 x 48 inches, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harlan J. Berk

Werner Drewes (American, born Canig, Germany, 1899–1985), *Composition III: Arrows into Different Directions*, from the series *It Can’t Happen Here*, 1934, woodcut, 12¾ x 16¾ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Werner Drewes, *It Can’t Happen Here*, from the series *It Can’t Happen Here*, 1934, linoleum cut, 12 x 8½ inches, Block Museum, 1992.51

Werner Drewes, *The Prisoner*, 1934, woodcut, 22¾ x 17⅞ inches, Block Museum, 1998.17.2

Werner Drewes, *Old Scarecrow—Hitler as Scarecrow*, c. 1937–1943, woodcut, 19½ x 13½ inches, Block Museum, 1993.25

Mabel Dwight (American, 1876–1955), *Danse Macabre*, c. 1934, lithograph, 11¾ x 15¾ inches, Block Museum, 1995.59

Ernest Fiene (American, born Elberfeld, Germany, 1894–1965), *City Lights (Madison Square Park)*, 1932, etching, 13¾ x 11 inches, Block Museum, Gift of Anthony and Carolyn Donato, 1997.15

Todros Geller (American, born Vinnytsia, now Ukraine, 1889–1949), Untitled (Factory), c. 1930, watercolor, 12 x 10 inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Hugo Gellert (American, born Budapest, now Hungary, 1892–1985), *Law and Order*, from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935, lithograph, 22¾ x 15¾ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Henry Glintenkamp (American, 1887–1946), *Voter Puppets*, 1929, wood engraving, 14¾ x 19½ inches, Block Museum, 1993.19

Boris Gorelick (American, born Russia, 1912–1984), *Case No....*, c. 1938, lithograph, 11¾ x 14¾ inches, Block Museum, 1992.80

Boris Gorelick, *Industrial Strife*, c. 1936–39, liithograph, 15¾ x 21⅞ inches, Block Museum, 1993.20

Boris Gorelick, *Sweat Shop*, c. 1938, lithograph, 16 x 22½ inches, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1996.70

Harry Gottlieb (American, born Bucharest, Romania, 1892–1992), *The Strike is Won*, 1940, color screenprint, 12¾ x 16½ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Blanche Grambs (American, 1916–2010), *Workers’ Homes*, Pittsburgh, 1938, etching and aquatint, 16¾ x 12¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1992.1.7

Blanche Grambs, *Mill*, c. 1935/37, etching and aquatint, 11½ x 15¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1992.1.8

Blanche Grambs, *Design Steel*, 1937, etching and aquatint, 14 x 11¾ inches, The Art Institute of Chicago, Works Progress Administration Allocation, 1943.1878

William Gropper (American, 1897–1977), *Seamstress*, c. 1930, lithograph, 9 x 12 inches, Collection of Koehnline Museum of Art, Oakton Community College, Gift of the Schein Family, 2012.143

William Gropper, *Uprooted*, c. 1930s, lithograph, 11 x 14 inches, Collection of Koehnline Museum of Art, Oakton Community College, Gift of the Schein Family, 2012.142

William Gropper, *Paul Bunyan*, from the series *American Folk Heroes*, 1939, lithograph, 16⅞ x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Vivian Kaplan, 2011.17.13

Riva Helfond (American, 1910–2002), *Miner and Wife*, 1937, 9 x 12 inches, lithograph, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Carl Hoeckner (American, born Munich, Germany, 1883–1972), *Conflicts*, 1930, lithograph, 19¾ x 13 inches, Block Museum, gift of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1992.1.55

Carl Hoeckner, *Cold Steel*, c. 1934, 11¾ x 16¾ inches, lithograph, Block Museum, 1995.50.24

Carl Hoeckner, *The Sea of the Discarded*, c. 1935, lithograph, 11¾ x 16¾ inches, Block Museum, 1995.50.12

Carl Hoeckner, *Steeltown Twilight*, 1936–37, lithograph, 10½ x 15¾ inches, Block Museum, 1995.50.22

Carl Hoeckner, *The Yes Machine*, c. 1934, lithograph, 11 x 16¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Carl Hoeckner Jr., 1995.50.29

Carl Hoeckner, *The Holocaust*, c. 1935, lithograph, 10¼x 16¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Carl Hoeckner Jr., 1995.50.18

Carl Hoeckner, *The Darkest Age*, c. 1936, lithograph, 11¾ x 17 inches, Block Museum, 1995.50.21

Carl Hoeckner, *The Death of Truth*, c. 1936–37, lithograph, 11¾ x 16¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Carl Hoeckner Jr., 1995.50.30

Carl Hoeckner, *Fate*, c. 1938, lithograph, 12½ x 16¾ inches, Block Museum, 1995.50.19

Carl Hoeckner, *Hull-House Poster*, c. 1938, linoleum cut, 17¾ x 13¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Carl Hoeckner Jr., 1995.50.11

Carl Hoeckner, *The Fifth Commandment: Thou Shalt Kill!*, 1938, lithograph, 17½ x 12¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1992.1.53

Joe Jones (American, 1909–1963), *Missouri Wheat Farmers*, 1938, lithograph, 14¾ x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, 1994.93

Rockwell Kent (American, 1882–1971), *Solar Fade Out*, 1937, lithograph, 16 x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, 1994.94.1

Rockwell Kent, *Degravitation*, 1937, lithograph, 16 x 12¾ inches, Block Museum, 1994.94.2

Rockwell Kent, *Lunar Disintegration*, 1937, lithograph, 15¾ x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, 1994.94.3

Rockwell Kent, *Solar Flare-Up*, 1937, lithograph, 16 x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, 1994.94.4

Rockwell Kent, *Workers of the World Unite*, 1937, woodcut, 8 x 6 inches, University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 1937.2

Chet La More (American, 1908–1980), *Unemployed*, 1941, color screenprint, 17¾ x 12 inches, The Art Institute of Chicago, Works Progress Administration Allocation, 1943.2051

Margaret Lowengrund (American, 1902–1957), *Workshop in Color Lithography*, 1938, lithograph, 16 x 11¾ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Louis Lozowick (American, born Ludvinovka, now Ukraine, 1892–1973), *Still Life with Breakfast*, 1929, lithograph, 15¾ x 11¼ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Louis Lozowick, *Construction*, 1930, lithograph, 15¾ x 6¼ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Louis Lozowick, *Mid-Air*, 1931, lithograph, 11½ x 6½ inches, The Art Institute of Chicago, John H. Wrenn Endowment, 1990.76

Reginald Marsh (American, 1898–1954), *Bread Line*, 1929, etching, 5 x 9 inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Reginald Marsh, *Chicago*, 1930, watercolor over graphite, 13¾ x 20 inches, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Art Acquisition Endowment Fund, 1998.4

Jan Matulka (American, born Vlachovo Brezi, now Czech Republic, 1890–1972), *Arrangement – New York*, also titled *Architecture of New York: New York*, c. 1925, lithograph, 16¾ x 12¾ inches, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; Gift of Thomas McCormick and Janis Kanter, 2006.113.1

Jan Matulka, Original lithographic plate for *Arrangement – New York* also titled *Architecture of New York: New York*, c. 1925, lithographic zinc plate, 21¾ x 16 inches, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; Gift of Thomas McCormick and Janis Kanter, 2006.113.2

Miriam McKinnie (American, 1906–1987), *Sorrow—Spanish Civil War*, 1938, lithograph, 13½ x 19¾ inches, Block Museum, 1992.83

Kenneth Hayes Miller (American, 1897–1952), *Leaving the Shop*, 1929, etching, 9⅞ x 11⅞ inches, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1996.85

Edward Millman (American, 1907–1964), *Flop House*, 1938, lithograph, 9½ x 13½ inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Eugene Morley (American, 1909–1953), *Hurricane*, 1936, lithograph, 11½ x 15¾ inches, Block Museum, 1994.104

Elizabeth Olds (American, 1897–1991), *I Make Steel*, c. 1937, lithograph, 17½ x 12¾ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Elizabeth Olds, *Harlem Dancers*, 1939, color woodcut, 13¼ x 18 inches, The Art Institute of Chicago, Works Progress Administration Allocation, 1943.2065

Elizabeth Olds, *Picasso Study Club*, 1940, color screenprint, 10⅞ x 19⅞ inches, Block Museum, 2001.41.1

José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883–1949), *Unemployed*, n.d., lithograph, 19¾ x 12¾ inches, University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 1948/1.73

Dan (Donato) Rico (American, 1912–1985), *John Henry’s Mad*, c. 1937, wood engraving, 16½ x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, 1995.66

Bernarda Bryson Shahn (American, 1903–2004), *The Lovestonite*, 1933, color lithograph, 12¾ x 17¾ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Henry Simon (American, born Plock, now Poland, 1901–1995), Untitled (Industrial Frankenstein), 1932, pencil on board, 14¾ x 19¾, Block Museum, gift of Norbert Simon and David Simon, 1997.28.17 and 1997.28.18

Henry Simon, Untitled (Set Design), c. 1933, charcoal, 11¾ x 15¾ inches, Block Museum, gift of Norbert Simon and David Simon, 1997.28.8

Henry Simon, Untitled (Demonstrators), c. 1937, lithograph, 21¼ x 17½ inches, Block Museum, gift of Norbert Simon and David Simon, 1997.28.28

Henry Simon, *Bombing of Guernica*, 1937, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 9½ x 13½ inches, Block Museum, gift of Norbert Simon and David Simon, 1997.28.20

Henry Simon, *Women of Spain*, 1937, lithograph, 15 x 20, Block Museum, gift of Norbert Simon and David Simon, 1997.28.23

Henry Simon, Untitled (Spanish Civil War), 1937, lithograph, 15 x 20, Block Museum, gift of Norbert Simon and David Simon, 1997.28.25

Mitchell Siporin (American, 1910–1976), *Let America Be America Again*, c. 1936, tempera on panel, 14 x 16 inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Mitchell Siporin, *Spanish Civil War (after Goya)*, 1941, watercolor, 18½ x 23 inches, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harlan J. Berk

David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896-1974), *Workman*, 1936, lithograph, 11¾ x 8¾ inches, University of Michigan Museum of Art, gift of Jean Paul Slusser, 1948/1.25

John Sloan (American, 1871–1951), *Crouched Nude and Press*, 1931, etching, 6¾ x 5½ inches, Collection of Belverd and Marian Needles

Raphael Soyer (American, born Borisoglebsk, now Russia, 1899–1987), *The Mission*, c. 1935, lithograph, 16 x 22¾ inches, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1996.66

Alexander Stavenitz (American, born Kiev, now Ukraine, 1901–1960), *Subway No.2*, 1930, aquatint, 8¾ x 10½ inches, Block Museum, 1994.102

Alexander Stavenitz, *Unemployed*, 1930, aquatint and carborundum, 15½ x 10 inches, Block Museum, 1993.14

Harry Sternberg (American, 1904–2001), *Steel Town*, 1937, lithograph, 13¾ x 10¼ inches, Block Museum, 1995.37

Harry Sternberg, *Terror*, 1935, etching and aquatint, 9 x 11¾ inches, Block Museum, the Richard Florscheim Art Fund Purchase, 1995.36

Prentiss Taylor (American, 1907–1991), *Scottsboro Limited*, from the portfolio *Scottsboro*, 1932, lithograph, 13 x 9¾ inches, Block Museum, 1992.57

Prentiss Taylor, *Town of Scottsboro*, from the portfolio *Scottsboro*, 1932, lithograph, 13 x 10 inches, Block Museum, 1996.89

Prentiss Taylor, *Christ in Alabama*, from the portfolio *Scottsboro*, 1932, lithograph, 9 x 6¼ inches, Block Museum, 1993.6

Alex Topchevsky (American, 1911–1999), *Haymarket*, c. 1935, woodcut, 7½ x 5½ inches, Collection of the Koehnline Museum of Art, Oakton Community College, Gift of the Estate of Rachel Topp, 2003.35

Alex Topchevsky, Untitled (Factory Workers), c. 1935, etching, 4 x 6 inches, Collection of the Koehnline Museum of Art, Oakton Community College, Gift of the Estate of Rachel Topp, 2003.34

Alex Topchevsky, *Clark Street*, c. 1935, etching, 5 x 6¾ inches, Collection of the Koehnline Museum of Art, Oakton Community College, Gift of the Estate of Rachel Topp, 2003.37

Morris Topchevsky (American, born Białystok, now Poland, 1899–1947), *Down With Capitalism*, c. 1930, watercolor and pencil, 13½ x 10½ inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Morris Topchevsky, *Strike Against Wage Cuts*, c. 1930, watercolor and graphite, 17 x 13¼ inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Morris Topchevsky, *Lunch Hour*, c. 1930, watercolor and pencil, 18½ x 25 inches, Collection of Bernard Friedman

Morris Topchevsky, *Lunch Hour*, c. 1930, etching, 8½ x 11⅞ inches, Block Museum, gift of Bernard Friedman, 2013.1.5

Morris Topchevsky, *Sand and Grain*, c. 1932, color lithograph, 9½ x 11 inches, Private collection

Morris Topchevsky, Relief Shelter, c. 1932, etching 11 x 11 inches, Private collection

Morris Topchevsky, Company Violence, 1934, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harlan J. Berk

Morris Topchevsky, *Don’t Starve, Fight*, 1934, etching, 10¾ x 12¾ inches, Collection of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, University of Illinois Chicago, College of Architecture and the Arts.

Morris Topchevsky, *Unemployed*, undated, oil on canvas, 27½ x 29½ inches, Private collection

Lynd Ward (American, 1905–1985), *Lynching*, from the novel *Wild Pilgrimage*, 1932, wood engraving, 8¾ x 6¾ inches, Block Museum, 1999.27.1–2

Unidentified photographer, *Protest held by the JRC and Artists’ Union*, 1934, Louis Lozowick papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [FACSIMILE]



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Printing press, from the studio of Alex Topchevsky, 1930s, Collection of the Koehnlne Museum of Art, Oakton Community College, Gift of the Estate of Rachel Topp

**A Gift to Biro-Bidjan, 1937, portfolio of woodcuts by various artists, Block Museum, gift in part of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1997.30.1–16**

Todros Geller, Title page from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, color woodcut, 9% x 7% inches

David Bekker (American, born Vilnius, now Lithuania, 1897–1956), *Bronx Express*, 1937, woodcut, 10 x 8 inches

Bernece Berkman, *Toward a Newer Life*, 1937, woodcut, 9% x 7% inches

Aaron Bohrod (American, 1907–1992), *West Side*, 1937, woodcut, 8% x 10% inches

Fritzi Brod (American, born Prague, now Czech Republic) 1900–1952), *In the Workshop*, 1937, woodcut, 11 x 8½ inches

Todros Geller, *Raisins and Almonds*, 1937, woodcut, 11 x 8½ inches

William Jacobs (American, 1897–1973), *Persecution*, 1937, woodcut, 8 x 9½ inches

Raymond Katz (American, born Košice, now Slovakia 1895–1974), *Moses and the Burning Bush*, 1937, woodcut, 10 x 7½ inches

Edward Millman, *Shoemaker*, 1937, woodcut, 10 x 8 inches

Ceil Rosenberg (American, 1907–1939), *New Hope*, 1937, woodcut, 10 x 8 inches

Mitchell Siporin, *Workers Family*, 1937, woodcut, 8 x 9% inches

Alex Topchevsky, *Exodus from Germany*, 1937, woodcut, 11 x 8½ inches

Morris Topchevsky, *To a New Life*, 1937, woodcut, 10% x 7%

Abraham S. Weiner (American, born Vinnytsia, now Ukraine, 1897–1982), *Milk and Honey*, 1937, woodcut, 9% x 8 inches

Louis Weiner (American, born Vinnytsia, now Ukraine, 1892–1967), *No Business*, 1937, woodcut, 11 x 8½

**Books and Publications from Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library:**

*American Artists Congress: 3rd Annual Membership Exhibition* (“Art in a Skyscraper”), New York: American Artists Congress, 1939

*American Artists Congress presents the masterpiece Guernica by Pablo Picasso together with drawings and studies: For the benefit of the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign*, New York: Valentine Gallery, 1937  
*America Today: A Book of 100 Prints*, New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1936

*Art Front*, publication of Artists Union, Artists Committee of Action, 1934

*For Spain and Liberty*, American Artists Congress, Chicago: American Artists Congress, 1937

*Hugo Gellert, Karl Marx’s “Capital” in Lithographs*, New York: R. Long & R. R. Smith, 1934

Granville Hicks (American, 1901–1982), *One of Us: The Story of John Reed*, illustrated by Lynd Ward, New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, Inc., 1935.

Langston Hughes (American, 1902–1967) *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play in Verse*, illustrated by Prentiss Taylor, New York: Golden Stair Press, 1932

Eugene Lyons (American, 1898–1985), *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1941

*New Masses*, publication of New York chapter of the John Reed Club, 1929–35  
John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919

*Left Front*, publication of Chicago chapter of the John Reed Club, 1933-34

*Partisan Review*, publication of the American Writers Congress, 1934

Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America*, Covice, Friede, 1934

William Siegel (American, born 1904–2000), *The Paris Commune: a story in pictures*, New York: International Pamphlets, 1931

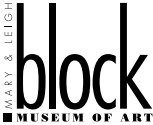
*They Shall Not Die! The story of Scottsboro in Pictures; Stop the Legal Lynching!*, illustrated by Anton Refregier, New York: League of Struggle for Negro Rights, by Workers’ Library Publishers, 1932

Walt Whitman (American, 1819–1892), *Leaves of Grass*, illustrated by Rockwell Kent, New York: Heritage Press, 1936

Lynd Ward, *Wild Pilgrimage* 1932, New York: H. Smith & R. Haas, 1932

Richard Wright (American, 1908–1960), *Native Son*, c. 1940, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1940

Art Young (American, 1866–1943), *The Socialist Primer*, Chicago: Socialist Party of America, 1930 



MARY AND LEIGH BLOCK MUSEUM OF ART  
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art enriches teaching and learning on the campuses of Northwestern University and in the communities of their surrounding regions by: Presenting art across time, cultures, and media; Convening interdisciplinary discussions in which art is a springboard for exploring issues and ideas; Collecting art that supports the Northwestern University curriculum.

VISION STATEMENT

- To be a dynamic, imaginative, and innovative teaching and learning resource at Northwestern University through an artistic program that is a springboard for thought-provoking discussions relevant to the curriculum and to our lives today.
- To inspire and develop a new generation of artists, scholars, and arts professionals by providing experiential learning opportunities bridging the classroom and the world beyond the campus.
- To serve as a crossroad between campus and community, by creating an environment where all visitors feel welcome to participate.

THE LEFT FRONT: RADICAL ART IN THE "RED DECADE," 1929-1940

Curated by John Murphy and Jill Bugajski, Ph.D. candidates in the Department of Art History, Northwestern University, with Dr. Corinne Granof, Curator of Academic Programs at the Block Museum. Generous support for *The Left Front* is provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, as well as the Terra Foundation on behalf of William Osborn and David Kabiller, and the Myers Foundations. Additional funding is from the Carlyle Anderson Endowment, Mary and Leigh Block Endowment, the Louise E. Drangsholt Fund, the Kessel Fund at the Block Museum, and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

WORK PRINT PROTEST REPEAT

This exhibition has been organized as a companion to *The Left Front: Radical Art in the “Red Decade,” 1929–1940* by undergraduate students in the course “Radical Art in the 1930s,” taught by Professor Christina Kiaer in the Department of Art History, Northwestern University. The Block Museum gratefully acknowledges Professor Kiaer and the following student curators for their contributions: Isaac Alpert, Nikhil Bhagwat, Sharon Chen, Claire Dillon, Cristina Doi, Sarah Hansen, Claire Kissinger, Hannah Kleinman, Sinéad López, and Sarah Sherman.

Exhibitions in the Ellen Philips Katz and Howard C. Katz Gallery are part of an ongoing series in which students are invited to curate exhibitions, bringing new perspectives to the collection. *WORK PRINT PROTEST REPEAT* has been generously supported by Ellen Philips Katz and Howard C. Katz and the Norton S. Walbridge Fund.

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THE LEFT FRONT IN FILM



Soon-to-be blacklisted actor John Garfield stars in *Force of Evil*, directed by Marxist filmmaker, Abraham Polonsky.

To coincide with the exhibition *The Left Front: Radical Art in the “Red Decade,” 1929–1940*, Block Cinema presents a film series featuring leftist and left-leaning films, both Hollywood productions and independent films made outside of the studio system. The series commences with a newly remastered version of Thom Andersen and Noël Burch’s *Red Hollywood*, a fascinating exploration of the contributions of leftist screenwriters and directors to Hollywood filmmaking from the 1930s through the early 50s, and concludes with a special screening of Robert Rossen’s anti-capitalist boxing film *Body and Soul*, selected and introduced in person by renowned film critic and *New York Times* columnist J. Hoberman.

COMPLETE SERIES LINEUP:

Friday, January 24, 7PM  
**Red Hollywood**  
(Thom Andersen and Noël Burch, 1996/2013, USA, Digital, 114 min.)  
Saturday, February 1, 2PM  
**Native Land** (Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand, 1942, USA, 35mm, 80 min.)  
Saturday, February 8, 2PM  
**Force of Evil** (Abraham Polonsky, 1948, USA, 35mm, 78 min.)  
Saturday, February 15, 2PM  
**Our Daily Bread** (King Vidor, 1934, USA, 35mm, 80 min.)  
Saturday, February 22, 2PM  
**Film & Photo League Shorts + Heart of Spain** (1931-1934, USA, 16mm, approx. 100 min.)

Saturday, March 1, 2PM  
**Salt of the Earth** (Herbert J. Biberman, 1954, USA, 35mm, 94 min.)  
Saturday, March 8, 2PM  
**Body and Soul – featuring film critic J. Hoberman in person!**  
(Robert Rossen, 1947, USA, 35mm, 104 min.)  
After the screening Hoberman will discuss the impact of leftist Jewish filmmakers on Hollywood.

For complete program details and film descriptions, please see our website at: <http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/view/cinema>