

# YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

## *American Artists and the Communist Party*

### Galerie St. Etienne

In the 1930s, the Great Depression's far-reaching economic impact lent credence to the Marxist belief that capitalism was doomed. Membership in the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA) swelled, and artists became increasingly politicized. The near total collapse of the art market fostered interest in alternative modes of patronage. Recognizing that, even in good times, the elitist art establishment showers its favors on a mere handful of creators, artists cultivated new audiences and a broader relationship with society at large. At the heart of this quest were issues that bedevil artists to this day. Whom does art serve? By whom and by what standards should it be judged? For a brief period, artists tried to conjure an art world beyond the reach of the capitalist marketplace.

From the outset, the Communist Party, both in America and abroad, viewed art as "a weapon in the class struggle," but the specifics of its aesthetic program were subject to vagaries of interpretation and the shifting priorities of the Soviet leadership. In addition to using art for propaganda purposes, Communists hoped to develop a distinctive workers' art, free of "bourgeois decadence" and the conflicts engendered by capitalism. In the U.S., these efforts were initially driven by the Party's culture magazine, *New Masses*, and its offshoot, the John Reed Club. Founded in 1929 and named after a cofounder of the CPUSA, the John Reed Club aimed to unite "cultural workers" in furtherance of the "international revolutionary labor movement." Responding to "a crisis in art as deep, if not as obvious, as the economic crisis," Club members would wrest control of culture from the elite and reestablish it on a sounder social footing.

In keeping with the directives of the Communist International (Comintern), the John Reed Club initially disdained any sort of association with the bourgeoisie. But after Hitler came to power in 1933, Stalin adopted a more expansive tone designed to enlist the support of Western democracies in fighting fascism. The new Party line, dubbed the Popular Front, was announced at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in August 1935. At around the same time, a representative of the CPUSA's Central Committee advised the John Reed Club (of which there were by now about thirty chapters) to broaden its reach by bringing "intellectuals into closer contact with

the working class."

Over the course of the spring and summer of 1935, leaders of the John Reed Club's New York branch met repeatedly at the ACA Galleries to discuss forming a more inclusive artists' association. Stuart Davis was appointed executive secretary; Hugo Gellert, Louis Lozowick, Ben Shahn and Lynd Ward were also among those who helped craft the new organization's agenda. Its goals included improving ties between artists and the general public, encouraging government patronage, support of expressive freedom and opposition to war and fascism. An initial "Call for Artists" was published in *New Masses* in October 1935, and in February 1936, the American Artists' Congress held its first public meeting in New York City.

The American Artists' Congress was one of many Communist "front" organizations (a concept derived from the term Popular Front) that proliferated in the 1930s and thereafter. Although artists such as Gellert, William Gropper, Lozowick and Raphael Soyer had early ties to the Communist Party, a front organization by definition aimed to attract less radical associates. Party discipline could be harsh, and membership required frequent meetings as well as participation in seemingly endless pickets and demonstrations. Many artists therefore preferred to remain "fellow travelers," rather than join up. The artist Bernarda Bryson, who would later marry Ben Shahn, found the Party's dogmatism "insufferable" and quit after being reprimanded once too often for stepping out of line. Due to all the foregoing complexities, the CPUSA maintained at most loose control over the American Artists' Congress and similar front organizations.

In the interest of preserving "collective solidarity," the Artists' Congress refused to take sides in the stylistic debates then roiling the art world. Abstraction, comprehensible neither to the proletariat nor to most Americans, was a problem for both hard-line Communists and conservatives. Soviet critics considered modernism a bourgeois affectation, and right-wingers considered it un-American. There was also a general sense that abstraction, associated with prewar French Cubism, had had its moment, and that the exigencies of the present demanded a return to realism. Stylistically, the gritty work of the social realists and the idealized landscapes painted

by the more reactionary Regionalists were quite similar.

Nonetheless, many artists on the left were partial to modernism. Lozowick incorporated Cubist elements in his depictions of the urban scene and was taken to task by *New Masses* for being "arty." George Grosz, a member of the German Communist Party who had begun teaching at the Art Students League shortly before Hitler's election and wisely decided to stay on in New York, was a significant influence. The exaggeration and emotional intensity of Expressionism shaped Gropper's scathing caricatures, as well as the graphic language of Ward's wordless novels and the painterly pathos of Philip Evergood and Jack Levine. Davis was at pains to reconcile Marxist ideology with his personal allegiance to abstraction. "In its internal form and its external relation to reality," he hoped, "modern art could stimulate radical change in the political and economic structure of America."

Davis's commitment to social justice was expressed primarily in written polemics and organizational activities. The latter in fact usurped so much time that his artistic output declined noticeably in the 1930s. Other politically oriented artists expressed their convictions more directly in paintings, drawings and prints. Gropper and Lozowick (a Ukrainian immigrant) visited the Soviet Union and returned with visions of a dawning workers' paradise, which artists compared to what *New Masses* termed "hell on the Hudson." The inequities of the capitalist system—the brutal suppression of striking laborers, the lynching of African Americans, the unjust execution of the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti—were explored in searing detail. Hortatory posters and cartoons spelled out the issues. Images of heroic workers, bloated fat cats and corrupt politicians viscerally illustrated the divide between labor and capital, while the privations of the Depression were another common subject. Empathy alone, however, did not pass muster with the comrades back in Russia. Soyer was chided for depicting the homeless as passive victims rather than revolutionaries in the making.

If the Depression-era art world remained divided on matters of style, content and ideology, there was relative unanimity regarding the artists' economic plight. Artists insisted they be accorded the same benefits as other unemployed workers. In 1933, members of the John

Reed Club organized the Unemployed Artists' Group and issued a manifesto demanding that the government "eliminate once and for all the unfortunate dependence of American artists upon the caprice of private patronage." In 1934, the Roosevelt administration established the Public Works of Art Project, the first of several New Deal programs designed to aid artists. The Unemployed Artists' Group subsequently changed its name to the Artists' Union, which throughout the 1930s represented artists in occasionally violent negotiations with their government employers.

The need to remedy capitalism's failings created common ground between the U.S. government and the radical left. "New Deal" was a gambling metaphor, derived from a political cartoon illustrating a poker game among a "crooked politician," "big biz" and a "speculator." Roosevelt believed the Depression had been caused by excessive speculation, and that a sound economy rests on productive labor and earned wages. By this reckoning, artists in a market economy are speculators in their own work, hoping for windfall profits that may or may not materialize. "The number who attempt to become artists have no discernable ratio to the demand for art," explained Forbes Watson, an advisor to the Public Works of Art Project. Paying artists a steady wage would transform them from gamblers into honest professionals. "It may sound dull and bourgeois to remove the artist from the high plane of romantic finances... down to the lower work-a-day plane," Watson averred. "On the contrary, knowing what is going to happen to him materially [frees] his imagination."

Implicit in all the arts programs established by the Roosevelt administration was the belief that art is integral to a functioning democratic society and therefore an appropriate target for government intervention. Holger Cahill, who ran the WPA's Federal Art Project, heralded a welcome return to the "tradition of art patronage which existed during the Renaissance and Middle Ages." Cahill, Watson and their government colleagues recognized not only that the capitalist art market had failed, but that it fostered an unhealthy distance between artists and the general public. Artists would be reintegrated into the social fabric through the government's employment initiatives, and public appreciation of art would be furthered through local arts centers and other educational programs. Bringing the artist "into... closer touch with his community," Watson said, would "result in a... deeper interpretation of American life in art." Art should be judged by its "serviceability to the community." Davis concurred. "Art values," he said, "are social values." By mutual agreement, artists of the left and their WPA sponsors favored

accessible art forms such as murals and prints over easel painting.

In the early 1930s, the Comintern had lambasted the New Deal as a fascistic attempt to save capitalism, but this rhetoric softened after the inauguration of the Popular Front. Acknowledging the New Deal's success with American voters, the Communist Party changed the name of its U.S. initiative to "Democratic Front" in 1937. "Communism," declared Earl Browder, leader of the CPU-SA, "is twentieth-century Americanism." "Now you could be for every kind of social reform," writes the historian Daniel Aaron, "for everything and anything that was at one time radical, rebellious, subversive, revolutionary and downright quixotic—and in so doing you were on the side of all the political angels of the day; you were on the side of the Roosevelt administration, on the side of Labor, the Negroes, the middle classes; on the side of Hitler's victims, on the side of all the oppressed colonial peoples in the world. In short, this is the only period in all the world's history when you could be at one and the same time an *ardent revolutionary* and an *arch-conservative*, backed by the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union."

Artists associated with the American Artists' Congress, the Artists' Union and other front organizations were fully integrated into the mainstream American art scene in the 1930s. Members of the John Reed Club showed in all the early Whitney Biennials, and Davis was asked to write an introduction to the catalogue for that museum's 1935 exhibition, "Abstract Painting in America." Evergood, Gropper, Shahn and Soyer received mural commissions from the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, the most conservative of the federal government's patronage initiatives. The Artist's Congress staged its exhibitions not only at the downtown ACA Galleries, but at such bastions of free enterprise as Rockefeller Center and Wanamaker's department store. In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art opened its first building on West 53rd Street with a show of mural painting that, over the objections of several trustees, included scathing indictments of American capitalism by Gellert, Gropper and Shahn. The conflicts that periodically erupted between left-wing artists and their Depression-era patrons—such as the censorship and eventual destruction of Diego Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural—are legendary. More surprising, however, is that Nelson Rockefeller would commission a mural from an avowed Communist in the first place. When asked why she wanted to buy Shahn's series on the persecution of Sacco and Vanzetti, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (Nelson's mother) supposedly replied, "Comes the revolution, I

can fill the windows with these, and the House of Rockefeller may survive."

The radicalization of the American art world was not without its critics, nor was Roosevelt's New Deal uncontroversial. The conservative *Art Digest*, which favored Regionalism, branded the American Artists' Congress a "potential tool of the Communist Party." In 1938, Martin Dies, chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, began attacking the WPA for suspected Communist infiltration. Roosevelt's progressive allies suffered a significant defeat in the mid-term elections that same year, and support for the government's art programs subsequently diminished. In 1940, as the nation began preparing for war, Cahill suggested that the Federal Arts Project redirect its energies to decorating military bases and designing propaganda posters. The Arts Project limped on in this mode until 1943, when it was shut down along with the rest of the WPA.

In the later 1930s, it became increasingly difficult to reconcile the Popular Front's tolerant democratic rhetoric with Stalin's harsh tactics. Loyalists (including Davis, Evergood, Gellert, Gropper, Lozowick and Soyer) stood by Stalin through the Moscow trials of 1936-38, which purged the leader's ideological rivals. But as the decade wore on, Communism no longer seemed a credible bulwark against war or fascism. First came Stalin's 1939 non-aggression pact with Hitler, and then, a few months later, the Soviet Union invaded Finland. The American Artists' Congress was divided on both issues, with Lynd Ward backing unconditional support of the U.S.S.R. and American neutrality in the war with Germany. After Ward's faction prevailed, Davis and other key members resigned from the group. The Artists' Congress was still condemning the European war as a "brutal shameless struggle" when, in June 1941, Germany attacked Russia. Now the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were on the same side, but the unity of the American left had been irreparably broken.

Many of the issues that united left-wing artists during the Depression ceased to be of relevance after World War II. The demise of the government's prewar patronage programs returned control of artistic production to the capitalist marketplace. Under these circumstances, it seemed ridiculous for artists to identify with other manual laborers, and easel painting once again took precedence over more accessible forms like murals. Most devastating to the American left was the government's aggressive hunt for alleged Communists, which escalated with the Cold War. Artists who had perhaps drifted into, and then out of, the Communist Party, who had been loosely affiliated sympathizers or just members of the broadly inclusive American Artists' Congress

were all suspect. Herman Baron (founder of the ACA Galleries), Evergood, Gropper and Shahn were among the many called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Republican Congressman George Dondero, who was especially fixated on art, labeled the ACA Galleries “the hub...of Marxists in art,” which should be “shunned like a plague center of infection.” The mainstream museums that had supported left-wing artists in the 1930s and ‘40s quietly dropped them from their programs. Gropper, once a regular at the Whitney, noted that after being blacklisted, he was “completely ignored” by the museum. Baron accused the Museum of Modern Art of kowtowing to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-Communist demagoguery by shifting its focus almost exclusively to nonobjective art. MoMA’s exhibition priorities demonstrated, in Baron’s view, that, “McCarthyism is no more an epithet but a basic policy of the governing circles of the United States and that...artists in particular...have been placed on notice that painting might prove a [covert] act unless it happens to conform.”

Although there is some truth to Baron’s accusations, the actual situation was more complicated. The postwar American art world was shaped by two Depression-era idiosyncrasies: a belief that art is a matter of government concern and an obsession with theoretical prescriptions. It was generally assumed that, as an emergent superpower, the United States would assume global leadership not just politically and economically, but culturally as well. During the immediate postwar period, America’s artistic achievements were widely promoted abroad, overtly by the U.S. Information Agency (an arm of the State Department), and covertly by the

C.I.A. Inevitably, this attempt to establish international cultural hegemony was colored by the Cold War’s political agenda. “We wanted to unite all the people who were artists,” recalled Tom Braden, head of the C.I.A.’s cultural arm in the 1950s, “to demonstrate that the West and the United States was [sic] devoted to freedom of expression.”

The aesthetic ideology that drove postwar American art derived from earlier Marxist debates about form and content. In his seminal 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” the Trotskyist critic Clement Greenberg had come down firmly on the side of form. Culture, he said, was under siege by the commercial forces of late capitalism, and the only solution was for artists to retreat from the social sphere. Greenberg’s formalist mandate, which dovetailed neatly with the narrative that Alfred Barr was crafting at the Museum of Modern Art, would in the 1950s be used to justify the historical inevitability of Abstract Expressionism. Due to its lack of apparent content, Abstract Expressionism also proved ideally suited to America’s propaganda needs. “I’d love to be able to say the C.I.A. invented it all,” joked a former agency employee. “In [their] politically shrewd reaction against politics,” observed the critic Harold Rosenberg, “the new painters and their supporters had become fully engaged in the issues of the day.” They made “the political choice of giving up politics.”

The advent of Abstract Expressionism and the McCarthy witch-hunts did not eliminate left-wing political art overnight. For one thing, most Americans still preferred realism to abstraction. And there were many active collectors in the 1950s and ‘60s—including such unlikely capitalists as Joseph Hirshhorn

and Roy Neuberger—whose tastes had been conditioned by New Deal sensibilities. Shahn enjoyed his greatest professional success in the 1950s, not just as an exhibiting artist but as a sought-after lecturer and illustrator. Slightly younger artists, like Jack Levine and Leonard Baskin, carried on the tradition of socially conscious representational art. Levine was given a retrospective by the Whitney Museum in 1955, and Baskin was included in MoMA’s 1959 exhibition “New Images of Man,” one of the few attempts to construct a humanist counter-narrative to the art world’s by-then dominant formalist ethos. Many left-wing artists, in fact, continued to enjoy considerable popularity, but they were increasingly shunned by the elite and ultimately relegated to footnote status in most histories of twentieth-century American art.

Postwar formalism entailed a pronounced contempt for the democratization processes that had previously preoccupied the art world. Greenberg wrote off the masses as “more or less indifferent to culture.” Bypassing the art establishment, Shahn, Baskin and more recently Sue Coe engaged a broad public directly through prints, books and illustrations, but it didn’t matter, because that public didn’t matter. And yet, as Coe makes clear in her vast body of work, the inequities produced by unrestrained capitalism are as socially destructive today as they were in the 1930s. The problems of poverty, unemployment, political corruption and racism remain unsolved. What most Americans, including nominal Communists and fellow travelers, wanted during the Depression is what most Americans still want and need: the fulfillment of the democratic promise, equality of opportunity and justice for all.

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