The *Art Front*: A Vehicle for Artistic Awakening in the Strenuous Decade

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Abstract:

The *Art Front*, was a specialist journal published from 1934 until 1937 that reflected the views of politically radical artists as they confronted the changing realities brought on by the Great Depression. In particular, the journal promoted the interests of the New York Artists Union as it strove to better the economic and social circumstances of its members. The challenges were immense, and this meant attacking existing policies of city and national government, as well as the exhibit policies of galleries and museums that negatively affected the livelihoods and everyday existence of most artists. The *Art Front* represented a call for change and socialism in the midst of capitalist market crises and the rise of Fascism and militarism. The growth of the New Deal, Federal Art Project after 1935 provided a degree of financial relief. The *Art Front* nevertheless revealed the critical debates of the era and raised awareness of the often continuing artistic struggles that still have relevance today.

Keywords: Radical artists, Art Front, New York, Artists Union, Federal Art Project, the Great Depression, Popular Front, social and economic crisis

The pioneering radical journal, *Art Front,* began publication in November 1934, first from offices on 11 West 18th Street in New York City and appeared intermittently directed by a loose and frequently changing editorial team, until the final November/December 1937 issue. The journal printed a mix of current left-wing politics and art criticism, along with a spectrum of specifically focused Depression era social and economic demands. As Frances K. Pohl explained in her *Framing Art: A Social History of American Art*:

> there have been other long-term economic crises in the history of the country, but none has seized the public imagination as firmly as the one that began with the Stock Market Crash in New York City in 1929 (Pohl 2002, 364).

In the light of these devastating events, "it is not surprising that the more politically conscious should have wanted their own publication", simply to vent their frustration with current circumstances

(Hemingway 2002, 39). Among many artists, the nation's plummeting social conditions and economic constraints led to a rising belief that their lives now shared common ground with mainstream Americans, and that only persistent pressure, if not revolutionary action, could counter the malaise.

Although many artists believed a better society was achievable in such extreme circumstances; the actual uniting of artists with such a nationally diverse and politically amorphous public, was difficult to realize. This was particularly the case when outside political pressures, mainly those dictated by Communist Party ideological constraints, shaped the nature of debate. Though it claimed to be politically unaffiliated, the *Art Front's* sympathies ultimately shaped its dynamics, be it discussing socialist styles and artistic influences, perceived capitalist failures, Fascism's threats to the arts, the impact of racism and lynching on African-Americans, or the course of the Spanish Civil War. In its later editions, the place of Abstraction and Surrealism as stylistic competitors were discussed in the context of an artistic world of tightly defined, Stalinist approved socialist realist prescriptions (Marquardt 1997, 235). By 1935, the Third International called for a 'Popular Front' to combat Fascism which would take the form of a merger of various leftist political associations whose philosophies were less sectarian. As art historian Patricia Hills observed, "the editorial policies of the *Art Front* reflected the coming to terms with this new strategy" (Hills 1994, 30).

Though short lived, the *Art Front,* nevertheless provided penetrating perspectives on a range of troubling 1930s political and economic issues that affected artists. When translated into actions, these included organized protests against perceived social wrongs, resistance to restrictive exhibition policies, and the failure to pay living wage commissions. Anger over falling sales was made worse by the lack of open gallery exhibit policies, and the denial of direct museum and state support. The *Art Front* also was a forum for specific dialectical issues, all generally shaped within the confines of evolving Marxist aesthetic critical debate. The periodical, during these dark and gloomy days, provided a key outlet to a highly varied base of artistic activity and leftist opinion. It was, at least initially, an outlet for the *New York Artists' Union* and the *Artists Committee of Action* whose symbols together initially marked the Journal's masthead (Marquart 1997, 235).

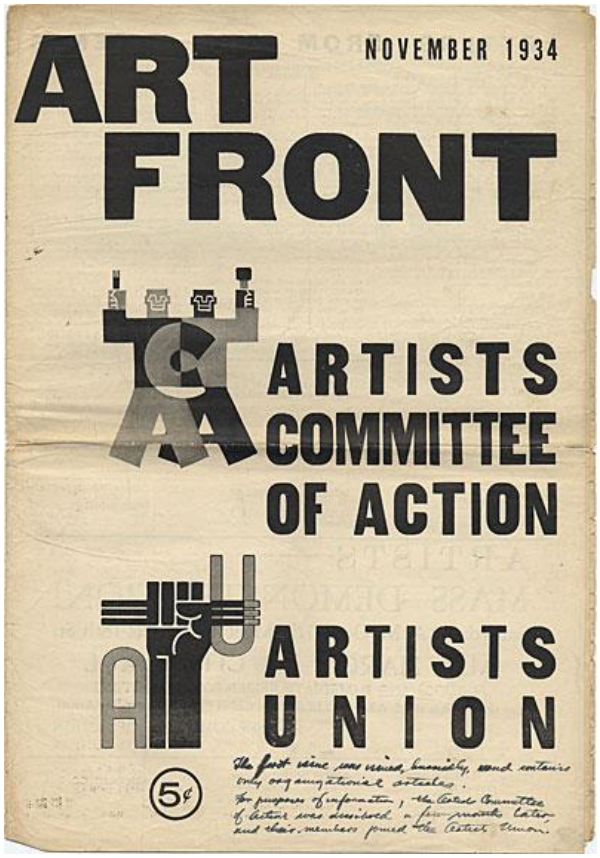

Illustration 1, November 1934 Inaugural issue, *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

The *Art Front's* first managing editor was Herman S. Baron, and he was supported by a large editorial committee led by art activists including Hugo Gellert, Stuart Davis, Abraham Harriton,

Max Spivak, Jacob Kainen, Harold Rosenberg, Joseph Solman, Clarence Weinstock (sometimes known as Charles Humboldt), and Ethel Olenikov. The magazine sold for five cents and was initially planned as a monthly but appeared as only seven issues over its first 13 months covering November 1934, and then January, February, April, May, July and November, 1935.

These issues were of eight pages and displayed in an eleven by sixteen-inch format, giving it poster like dimensions (Monroe 1973, 13). From its inception, the *Art Front* argued that:

> private patronage cannot provide the means to satisfy needs in this period of grave economic crisis. Therefore, it (*Art Front*) demanded that government fulfill its responsibility towards the maintenance and furtherance of the cultural standards of the country by the proper use of artists' talents and to set up the machinery necessary for the widest possible distribution of art to the general public (*Art Front*, vol. 1 1934, 2).

Although true to its editorial purpose which was repeatedly and passionately stated, the irregular publication schedule of 1934 to 1935 indicated future troubles as to the *Art Front's* function and sustainability. There were obvious financial limitations, given practical production and revenue economics, matters made worse by continuous organizational and political bickering among its writers and supporters.

Most significantly, arguments as to editorial direction arose and proved a constant in the journal's relatively short existence. Artist Stuart Davis assumed the role of editor in chief for the second through tenth issue, but over time his devotion, as well as that of other board members, became more geared to their work with the emerging American Artists Congress. The physical format also changed in the December 1935 issue to a smaller and presumably cheaper to produce nine-by-twelve inch format of between 16 and 32 pages. Historian and artist, Gerald Monroe, believed that Joseph Solman's position on the editorial board "was most influential in liberalizing *Art Front's* policy, but it was the activities of (Harold) Rosenberg and (Max) Spivak that proved to be the greater annoyance to the union's leadership" (Monroe 1971).

After December 1936 and reflective of new tensions and demands, the name American Committee of Action disappeared from the masthead. The dual involvement of the Artists' Union and the Artists' Committee of Action, illustrated the emerging Popular Front focus found in radical circles. This emphasis reflected the Soviet Union's ideological move away from denouncing the range of progressive non-communists as social-Fascists, to accepting broader politically cooperative endeavors in opposition to the rising reactionary tide yet on-going frictions existed between these two groups particularly over the Artists' Union's emphasis on more immediate economic and political issues (*Art Front*, vol. 1 1934, 2). These differences of opinion were initially confidently masked in the belief that, "the scope of this magazine will be as wide as art itse1f" (4). In support of this view, the Artists' Union welcomed, "all artists engaged in the practice of graphic and plastic art in their struggle for economic security and to encourage a wider distribution and understanding of art" (2). Although often divided as to how ideals were to be implemented as Virginia Marquardt suggested,

> the *Art Front* became the single most important forum for radical and even non-radical artists to air their views concerning the appropriate social function of art, to review and address new art movements, and to lobby for federal art programs (Marquardt 1997, 235).

In addition, it was said that the

> decision by the editors of *Art Front* to feature contributors outside the Artists Union—particularly men and women of well-known expertise—also conformed to the new Popular Front strategy (Hills 1994, 30).

One aspect of the *Art Front's* significance at this juncture was its attempt to formulate a leftist cultural identity that tied the artistic community to the larger, very changeable, and often ill-defined proletarian struggle. By placing artists in the proletarian fold, as equally affected economic victims, an ideological fit could be made that allowed artists to feel they were doing their part, according to the period's accepted ideology, in bringing about the irreversible decline of capitalism. This made many participants see themselves as members of a vanguard movement that was leading the way to a classless socialist utopia, ultimately offering the promise of an end to all society's ills.

Illustration, 2, 'Man at the Crossroads', Diego Rivera with copy of destroyed mural, Museo Frida Kalho

Historian Andrew Hemingway believed that the *Art Front's* most likely "immediate inspiration may have been the Chicago militant magazine *Left Front* (1933-1934)", an offshoot of

the Communist influenced John Reed Club (Hemingway 2002, 39). This link provided a familiar political focus and ideological backdrop, if not a successful financial formula, for a leftist publication. However, another view of the *Art Front's* actual origins stems from Gerald M. Monroe's notion that the radical artist, Hugo Gellert, was the spearhead behind the journal*'s* creation. Gellert was alarmed over the jackhammered destruction of Diego Rivera's grand mural at Rockefeller Center lobby and, in particular the removal of Rivera's portrait of Lenin which was placed on the right side of the mural, an addition that was not part of Nelson Rockefeller's approved design. Although Rivera was paid in full Gellert believed that the stage had been reached where a specialized artistic journal was needed as a channel for artistic protest against such actions as well as for the promotion of progressive agendas believed pertinent to artists of all strips and styles (Monroe 1973, 13). Through Gellert's considerable efforts many artists came to support the journal idea and the editorial committee reflected similar shared interests.

Illustration 3, Artists' Union Protest, *Art Front* Collection, Archives of American Art

In the face of a seemingly worsening Depression, most artists felt that even more drastic measures were necessary due to current pressing circumstances, and that a more determined political struggle was the only means to achieve some form of remedy. Examples of such an awakened social consciousness had occurred before. Artists from the early 1900s such as John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, George Bellows and Everett Shinn, sometimes known as the 'Ash Can' School, were also outspoken as to social conditions and called for progressive political reform (Pohl 2002, 304-315). Frances K. Pohl's examination of the social history of art suggested that "they

captured the changes made by immigration, mass media, shifting gender roles, and the increasing lavish public display of wealth" (304).

However, the depth of the 1930s crisis was such that in more urban and radical quarters an even greater stridency and wider sense of mission emerged inside the artistic community. For many this understanding was best dictated through an acceptance of the aesthetic guidelines of socialist realism. In addition, artists of the 1930s in their search for a mass identity, joined ranks with other cultural forces such as writers, musicians, and actors to become part of an energized leftist response to a nation in the throes of deep crisis. Robert Schulman observed in his *The Power of Political Art* that,

> although conflicts, rivalries, and later in the decade basic political and artistic antagonisms were integral to left discourse, during the thirties young left writers and artists nevertheless had a sense of shared purpose, of working together towards political and artistic goals they were in the process of creating (Schulman 2000, 15).

The *Art Front's* political vision did to a degree differ from the standard left orthodoxy in that it, on occasion, took a broader, less rigid position with an "emphasis less on immediate utility than on pictorial aesthetics. Rather than considering art as a form of propaganda, they argued for its cognitive value in broader and more diffuse terms" (Hemingway 2002, 39). Gerald Monroe, as a keen student of the *Art Front* years, agreed that, "the entire range of art styles existed within the rank and file and the leadership'. Nevertheless, his view was that the political orientation was 'generally committed to the Marxist doctrine of 'art as propaganda'" (Monroe 1973, 13). Nevertheless, the notion of what constituted revolutionary art did broaden, for example, as seen with the growing critical acceptance of Surrealism (Marquardt 1997, 238). As Grace Clements' stated in an *Art Front* article, "'Surrealists' techniques of juxtaposition and associative ideas were based on dialectical materialist methods of using modernist technique and past art to create new content'" (Clements 1936, 8-9 qtd. in Marquardt 1997).[1]

Illustration 4, *Art Front* Collection, Cover, Archives of American Art

As the Depression deepened its hold on the economy, many artists began calling for formal federally subsidized support regardless of artistic styles and techniques. Since 1933, the New York based Artists Group of Emergency Work Bureau produced a stream of demands for public financed art projects and they evolved after 1934, into the more formidable and aforementioned Artists Union, the key force behind the *Art Front.*

Formal federal involvement in the arts is well documented both as administrative histories, and through the extant examples of New Deal art projects

that can still be observed in many public spaces across the USA (O'Connor 1959; O'Connor 1975; McKinzie 1973; McDonald 1969; Hapke 2008). Artists who became involved with the FAP/WPA (Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration) were paid weekly and had to produce suitable art for potential distribution to specific buildings or other municipal purposes. As has been noted by Francis Pohl, "government sponsorship affected the day-to-day lives of the artists who enrolled in the various federal programs in several ways. Importantly, it provided many with their first experience of independence from the commercial art market" (Pohl 2002, 366).

The *Art Front's* contributory role as a critical voice behind the drive for municipal, state and federal support is less well known. Although the Artists' Union's demands were linked to the larger leftist ideological struggles to replace American capitalism along socialist lines, the PWAP (Public Works of Art Project), WPAP (Works Progress Administration, Arts Project) initiatives were clearly tied to mainstream New Deal systems and objectives. Given the acute financial position of most artists, the Artists' Union believed that increased economic support and recognition was more pressing than ideological consistency. The idea of generously paid Art rentals became one partial solution for generating a steady income, but the more comprehensive idea of a *Federal Arts Bill* provided a guide to gaining a more permanent system of income support. Yet the PWAP, and finally the WPAP, were the only existing options for establishing baseline art incomes.

The Depression era free market simply, with few exceptions, denied any semblance of a steady or predictable income for artists. In addition, artistic survival in hard times was not viewed as particularly a federal responsibility. In reaction to the question of support, the Artists' Union, with its heavy representation of New York artists called for the creation of a New York Municipal Art Gallery to serve local artists' interests through a fair exhibition policy. They believed that to achieve real change, such a gallery should be managed by artists and not by private or city administrators who might dictate policy and direction.

In face of these economic demands, and perhaps to circumvent the threat of radical Artists' control, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia designed his Committee of 100 to oversee the direction of the Municipal Gallery. The reaction of the Artists' Union was predictably antagonistic as seen when they declared, "The Municipal Art Center was being made the excuse for all this genteel back-scratching by the Mayor and his hand-picked committee of New York's most splendid citizens" (*Art Front*, vol 1 1934, 4).

Furthermore,

> Thousands of these artists are now struggling with no means of subsistence other than inadequate work relief or horn relief, without even the promise of any effective art program which will give them regular employment and enable them to continue as contributors to, and builders of culture (*Art Front*, vol 1 1935, 4).

The controversy over the Mayor's Committee provided an obvious opportunity for caricature. Ben Shahn's illustration 'Committee of 100' disparaged the whole notion of such a

committee guiding the artistic process. The *Art Front* frequently relied on satire as the best tool in their political belt. To combat what was deemed politically reactionary, the visual could carry maximum propaganda impact. In the February 1935 issue, contributor Elliot Paul caught the moment when he wrote,

Today in Germany and Italy it is forbidden under penalty of castor oil, infested prisons, forced military drill and firing squads to make fun of those superbly comical figures, Hitler and Mussolini. The suffering these clowns are causing, the rank injustices, and the contemptible frauds, the drain upon self respect...will surely pass into oblivion before their clownishness is forgotten. In fact, the hero of the middle classes is pathetically ridiculous and is more afraid of being caricatured than of being assassinated (*Art Front*, vol 1 1935, 5).

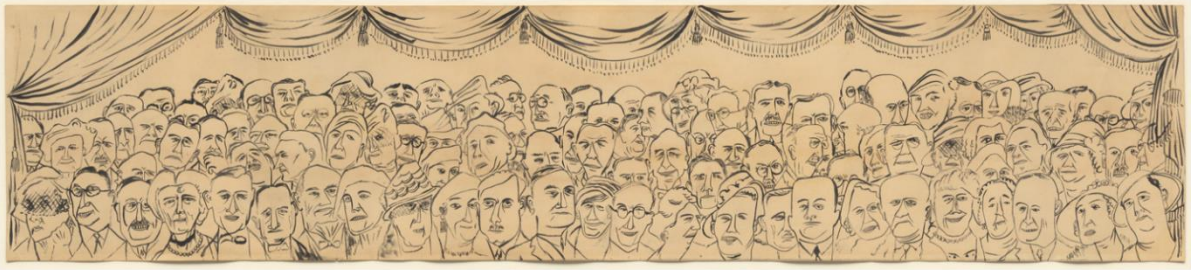

Illustration 5, Ben Shahn's Committee of 100, *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

In the course of its history, the *Art Front*'s editorial policy was often conflicted. This was the result of several factors: CP political interference and orthodoxy, the various challenging viewpoints of powerful personalities, and the nature of how art criticism should be shaped when applying the Popular Front strategy. What, after all, was the practical meaning of Marxist aesthetics? This was particularly seen in the rising divide caused by Trotskyist and other more radical challenges to Stalinist dominance of Communist artistic sensibilities. There was a feeling among some important voices that 'proletarian' art might legitimately reflect any number of representational outcomes. However, this notion of what was socialist acceptability did face recurring and heated debates throughout the journal's existence (Monroe 1973, 17).

Reflecting this atmosphere attempts were made after 1936, as popular front awareness grew, to acknowledge that the social basis of art could take several forms other than strict realism (Benton 1935, 4, 8; Schapiro 1936, 10-12; Weber 1936, 8-9; Lozowick 1936, 12-14; Putnam 1937, 10-12; Klingender 1937, 17-20; Lloyd 1937, 12-19). The contributions of art historian, Meyer Schapiro, to both the *Art Front* and the American Artists' Congress revealed that all art could be placed in a more revolutionary context with clear internationalist overtures. His writing furthered the debate as to how far prescriptive art criticism could go. Schapiro encouraged current artists to action based on class interests and not nationalist concerns (Hills 1994, 30). As Virginia Marquardt noted,

> a comparison of the assessments of surrealism appearing in the *Art Front* in 1935 and 1936 reveals a striking shift from criticism to acceptance, a change that may be attributed to the less sectarian restrictions on art qualified as revolutionary (Marquardt 1997, 238-239).

Artistic form it seems could now legitimately reflect modernist stylistic imagery and confirmed that revolutionary politics, including surrealism and abstraction, were not mutually exclusive or deserving of automatic denunciation as bourgeois.

Although the *Art Front* hosted a range of artistic concerns and assumptions in regard to the overall notion of revolutionary art and artists, what remained the most consistent issue was the plight of the individual artist in the face of current reality, and that ultimately formed the unifying social function in the *Art Front's* existence. Under the existing system of private sales, controlled by the dictates of fashion and gallery exposure, artists outside the latest vogue had restricted sources of income and virtually no security. This fact was as true for abstract painters as for realists. George Grosz's *Art Front* illustration 'Just for the Dining Room' confronted this commercial reality and poked fun at artists serving as decorators for the rich. Philip Bard's illustration 'Hunger' emphasized the destitution, resulting from the absence of commercial sales outlets which was as true for abstract painters as for realists.

Illustration 6, Grosz, 'Just for the Dining Room', *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

Illustration 7, Bard, 'Hunger', *Art Front*

The *Art Front* consistently placed blame on the capitalist marketplace as the source behind all social suffering. Adolph Dehn's cover design for the July 1935 issue reflected this overall sense of total artistic social dependency upon outside appointed committees such as the Arts Commission.

The *Art Front's'* politics also examined the larger world outside New York as it faced the full range of 1930s crises that impacted culture nationally and internationally. The rise of European fascism was such a political foe to free expression that the *Art Front* addressed. World circumstances in the 1930s saw fascism as a constraining force for artistic as well as individual freedoms and its impact threatened lives just as did the Depression.

Again the Artists' Congress saw its mission as a channel for resistance to the fascist threat, and Artists' Union members, and thus the *Art Front* needed to be part of this general effort. The November 1935 editorial declared, "Artists like all other people whom the pressure of recent events has made politically literate recognize fascism and war as the two greatest enemies of culture" (*Art Front*, vol. 1 1935, 3). This editorial went on to place the Artists' Unions in the broadest resistance context,

> The Artists' Union is primarily an organization for economic aims. We are interested in bettering the living standards of our artists. Nevertheless, we recognize that economic action is only one phase of the battle today. The prospect of a barbarous fascism necessitates a firm stand of all progressive elements against this political throwback to the Dark Ages. The Artists' Union unreservedly supports this call for an Artists' Congress and hopes that it will mobilize the best and most intelligent artists in the country behind its program. (*Art Front*, vol. 1 1935, 3).

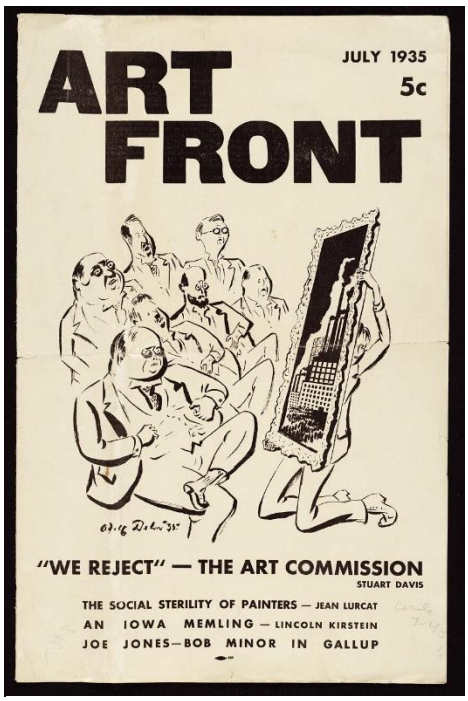

Illustration 8, *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

The symbolic 'call' for an American Artists' Congress, signed by over 400 artists, dramatically underscored the increasing need for concrete action in the face of dangerous world affairs. The Congress, held in mid-February 1936, overlapped in energy and belief with the *Art Front* and Artists' Union's direction and membership. In addition, the AAC tied its Popular Front philosophy to other groups such as the Artists International Association, founded in London in 1933, which were concerned with similar issues and, in particular, with the emerging anti-Fascist struggle in Spain. It was, according to historian Susan Platt, "one manifestation of the international Popular Front against fascism organized by Stalin to counter Hitler's increasing power (and) was a high point of activism for American artists" (*Art Front*, vol. 1 1935, 3).

As Patricia Hills also confirmed, "The AAC, like the American Writers' Congress, was initiated by party members in the summer of 1935 to replace the more sectarian John Reed Clubs, in order to achieve a broad appeal among nationally known and influential artists and writers" (Platt 1999, 72).

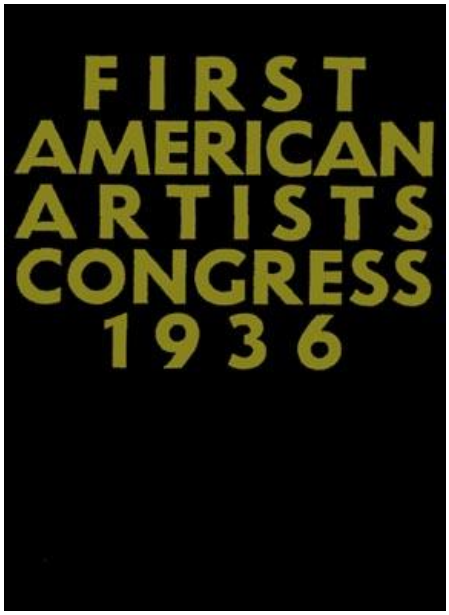

Illustration 9 and 10, Stuart Davis Papers, Archives of American Art

Anton Refregier's 'Clinched Fist' in the May 1936 *Art Front* issue emphasized this spirit of international Communist resistance to German and Italian authoritarianism suppression. The ultimate goal was a multi-front struggle against fascism in all its shapes and sizes. The coming of the

ART FRONT

MAY 1936

THINKING IT OVER

IN the hurry of going to press last month, we noted that eight members of the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers had refused to send their paintings to the coming Carnegie show. The issue is that the Carnegie outfit can't see paying the measure rental fee. The facts are that from 23 to 26 painters of the Society have refused the invitations, and that no member of the Society has accepted to show. These refusals represent one-third of the total number of artists invited to the American Section of the exhibition. Those who have followed the rental policy fight will recall that the organization of museum directors ridiculed the idea from the start and wouldn't negotiate. Now comes a proposal from the Association of Museum Directors that the Society get together with them in conference over the matter. It would be quite a dent in the Carnegie show at that. Between now and the opening a majority of the big shots may sober up.

A GROWING FORCE

IN the short space of time that the Commercial Artists Section has been in existence, it has made definite advances, in spite of limited funds, man power, and experience. A large part of the errors made was largely due to lack of a trained organizer, but we are taking steps to remedy this immediately.

Because of lack of trained leadership, we have been sidetracked on many occasions from our program of organization. We have over-stressed at times the cultural side of our work, at the expense of definite union activity.

The reason for this is that we have been outstandingly successful in the symposiums we have sponsored, featuring the leading figures in our field who have voiced from our platform their strong approval of our aims, and their willingness to support us to every extent. Nationally famous artists, like Steichen; Bernhard; Sinel; Grasstrom, the famous illustrator; Gordon Aymar, noted art director, and Russell Patterson, the well known humorist artist—all have lent their services to the Union on numerous occasions.

These forums have brought together many hundreds of artists in discussion of the vital economic and cultural problems which affect their lives. For many of them, this has been the first time they have joined with their fellow artists on any issue whatsoever. Naturally, these forums have added much to the prestige of the Union. But because we did not organize ourselves sufficiently to handle the great crowds that turned out, we gained very little in increased membership from these efforts.

Our cultural programs, as we are planning them now, will be more consciously an instrument for the building of the Union. The first symposium under this new plan took place on Monday, March 16th, at the Hotel Delano. The subject, "Speculation and the Free-Lance Artist," was of utmost interest to all commercial artists.

But what made this discussion a momentous step in our history is the fact that we succeeded in drawing into it delegates and speakers from the foremost artists' organizations in the city: The Artists Guild, The Society of Illustrators, The Art Directors Club, The Photo Illustrators Club, and the Photographers Union. As a result of this meeting, unified resolutions against speculation have been formulated and put into action.

The help of the Photographers Union, of the American Federation of Labor, in our work has been an important step towards the building of a powerful Graphic Arts Council, one of the primary aims of our section. Such a council would eventually include engravers, printers, photographers, typographers—all those engaged in the creation and reproduction of commercial art. When finally developed, this council should prove to be a most effective force in maintaining the living and working standards of all these allied crafts. Our "united front" symposium on Speculation, described above, is another step towards such an organization.

On April 4th, we staged the first great costume ball ever held exclusively for commercial artists. Nationally known figures, such as Russell Patterson, Tony Sarg, Grafstrom, Hoff, Mellisse, Corcos, and Adward A. Wilson acted as judges and sponsors of this affair, whose theme was "Kidding the Ads." As a result of the ball, we hope to have in our hands sufficient funds to employ the trained organizer we need so badly.

This in brief is a record of our first year's work. In the coming year, we hope to see much more tangible results. We urge all New York's commercial artists to join our section and help in building a powerful trade union.

If out of town commercial artists have any inquiries, they may address them to Ben Lassen, at the Artists Union, 430 Sixth Avenue, New York City.

ART FRONT, Official Organ of the Artists' Union, 430 Sixth Avenue, New York City. Vol. 2, No. 6. Editorial Board: Joe Solman, Editor-in-chief; Joseph Gower, Murray Hantman, Jacob Kainen, Harold Rosenberg, Balcomb Greene, J. Yeargens, Clarence Weinstock, Steve Mazie. Business Manager, John Opper. 10c a copy. Subscription $1.00 a year.

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Illustration 11, 'Fist', *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

Spanish Civil War provided a specific opportunity for the Artists' Union and the Artists' Congress to translate their 'premature anti-fascism' into more concrete actions.

Propaganda became a first weapon in the defense of Spain and articles like Ben Ossa's 'Artists in Arms' published in the November 1936 issue served this need. Funds were raised to supply ambulances and medical help to aid the Republican side, and Combat volunteers were soon turning support into more consequential action (Hills qtd. in Anreus et al. 2006, 183).

The death of sculptor, Paul Block, an American Artists' Union activist, and one of at least 35 Artists' Union members that joined the International Brigade volunteer force, provided a clear example of the ultimate sacrifice found in committed struggle.

reaction is to attack minority groups within a country one by one. From exclusion of aliens on W.P.A. it becomes easier to exclude non-Aryans, Jews, Negroes or what have you. The method of reaction is to create a precedent and then to quote it.

Strangely, the officials of the art projects do not see in such legislative manoeuvers a serious threat to art. Instead, we find them anxiously examining this piece of legislation with myopic eyes, fearful that they may have to take a progressive stand. There is nothing anywhere in the law concerning those who have applied for citizenship, which makes it mandatory for the administration to fire a single person. Yet under the pretext of abiding by this clause, they have rushed eagerly at the opportunity to dismiss in wholesale fashion!

Time upon time the Union attempted to prove that many of these foreign-born artists were indispensable to the project as they were men of high merit and possessed international reputations. It is a fact that they have given years of their lives in furthering American art and their loss is a distinct loss to the project. Yet the business office of the project has ruled that merit cannot be a consideration in the matter of indispensability to the project. Moreover, they ruled that if any section of the project were to be so severely crippled by the loss of the foreign-born artists, they would even liquidate that section of the project. In other words, if too many mural artists were fired to keep the mural division working effectively, rather than retain these artists they would liquidate the mural division!

Such a callous attitude toward the quality of the projects is sometimes called by an ugly word. Let us make it clear this time—we expect a business administration of the arts project to have a more constructive, progressive point of view.

We will not let the matter rest here. We have arranged for a conference with our Washington officials in order to obtain a more liberal ruling on the problem of the foreign-born artists. A broad conference of trade unions has been held in order to introduce a case in the Federal Courts to interpret the law. Nor will we be content until the problem is finally solved in the next session of Congress by legislation which will wipe out the unwelcome clause in the present Appropriations Bill.

PAUL BLOCK

In the town of Azaila, near Belchite in the Spanish province of Aragon, a mound of fresh-turned earth covers the body of Paul Block, sculptor and American soldier of the International Brigade. On September 4th, in the crucial and victorious Republican drive upon Belchite, fascist machine-gun bullets struck Paul as he led his men into the fight. He died two days later, not yet twenty-eight years of age.

Paul Block was one of the ablest leaders of the New York Artists Union. With quiet sureness he guided the Union through its most trying period: he was the main spirit behind organizational adjustments that gave new life to union

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on the Project which forces them to do creative work under the most difficult circumstances.

Despite these organic defects the Federal Art Project has long since demonstrated its value to the people of America. This project, originally intended for the relatively limited purpose of relieving economic distress among the artists, has become the basis for the complete development and maturation of art in this country. Under government sponsorship through the W.P.A. we have seen for the first time in our country the growth and stimulation of a broad and progressive movement in art in *all sections of the nation*. The important consideration is that this art movement has not functioned in isolation within a few metropolitan centers but has expanded and grown in conjunction with an audience of millions. The constant contact and interaction between the artists and the general public, which had been provided by the Federal Art Project, is the only basis and guarantee for a more democratic growth and distribution for art in America. Such a program cannot any longer survive and expand under the limitations and constant shocks prescribed by the Federal Work Relief Program. This program must be given a reasonable tenure of life sufficient to allow the operation of a long range plan. To accomplish this the program must have a stable employment policy which will leave both the administration and the artists free to concentrate upon the building of a public art for America which should function on the basis of a cultural service in each community. A limited program confining itself only to the decoration of the walls of public buildings can never meet the public's art needs and their demands. It could never meet the educational requirements particularly necessary in this field of American life.

We have previously brought to the attention of our readers draft legislation providing for the permanency of government sponsorship of the arts. We can now

PAUL BLOCK

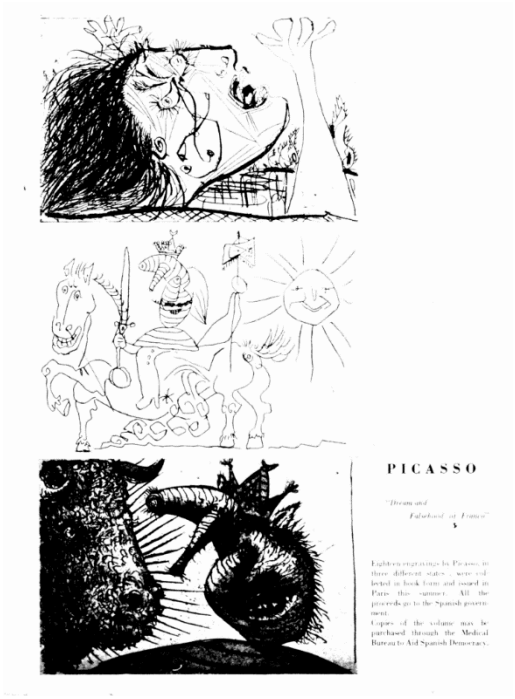
Drawing by

C. YAMASAKI

Illustration 12, Paul Block, *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

The conflict was further highlighted by works such as Picasso's 'Dream and Falsehood of Franco' published in the October 1937 issue. The *Art Front* was tied firmly to the Spanish Republican cause. Spain symbolized the initial battleground against the spread of Franco's and by extension, Germany and Italy's Fascist brutality. The *Art Front,* along with other leftist Popular Front magazines, saw Spain's struggle as central to their political internationalism, and as such, there was great sympathy and anger felt within the American artistic world at Republican losses.

The *Art Front* was a frontline witness to these harsh realities, and clearly reflected the artistic spirit of the times then so challenged by economic and social issues. Like so many small radical magazines, the *Art Front* lasted but a few years, and ended without fanfare or expectation. As Gerald Monroe made clear, "the *Art Front* went out of existence without warning; the last issue was still soliciting subscriptions" (Monroe 1973, 19). The *Art Front's* short publication life did not prevent it from being a key reflection on era events, and from being an insightful force in the period's artistic evolution. It also provided a critical outlet for many American artists absorbed in their own personal awakenings to the face of crisis. In addition, the Artists' Union, as the publication's leading sponsor, looked for a place for the artistic community within the nation's broader labor movement. This included, eventual merger as an associated union inside the Congress of Industrial Organizations. It was believed that this identity could best be realized through solid socialist political commitment, and by focused debate on the important economic/social issues of the day. To further their artistic outreach, many of the key *Art Front* participants such as Herman Baron, Adolf Dehn, and Stuart Davis were also active in the creation, in 1932, of the ACA Gallery (American Contemporary Art) which eventually moved to 52 West Eight Street in Greenwich Village. Here, a more progressive artistic gallery atmosphere existed with an exhibits' policy that opened commercial doors and provided additional public exposure for a variety of art styles and artists.



llustration 13, 'Dream and Falsehood of Franco', *Art Front*, Archives of American Art

Editorial boards changed frequently during the *Art Front's* short existence. Such transitions also influenced the journal's philosophical direction and clearly reflected the period's frequently shifting aesthetic and political orientation as well as the powerful personalities of its many constituents. However, its commitment to promoting the welfare, worth and varied aspirations of the American artist did not waver. Although mainly reflective of the New York Art scene, the journal also gradually broadened its base to represent a more national artistic following.

Although Artists' Union members accepted federal checks and commissions, the *Art Front* stood outside the established New Deal WPA structures and policies. Members consistently argued for an alternative path towards a more permanent approach to government art support (Monroe 1978, 20). The journal used its editorials to challenge the policy decisions of the Federal Art administrators and warred constantly against congressional cut-backs, be they economically or politically inspired.

In addition, the *Art Front* maintained its strident voice and radical viewpoints as it critiqued

capitalist culture's role and influence upon 1930s art. In order to realize a broader appeal, the *Art Front*, ultimately embraced standard Popular Front politics. Many activists believed that the latest Comintern guidance was the best ideological format for bringing the type of unity needed to meet rising Fascist threats. Although editorially often openly divided as to the correct publishing emphasis and thrust, a variety of artistic deviations in the area of stylistic expression did emerge and went beyond strict socialist realist propaganda. In Donald D. Egbert's classic *Social Radicalism and the Arts,* he captured the dominance of the particular era in shaping artistic expression when he stated, "most great painters or sculptors even in modern times when left to themselves have been essentially apolitical in their art and lives except at occasional times of great political and social crisis" (Egbert 1970, 736). This in essence defined the *Art Front.*

Much like the WPA itself, the *Art Front* didn't survive the crisis of the 1930s. This was made worse by the Stalinist purges that ordered the deaths of leading Communists, and the USSR's rising aggression against their immediate neighbors. The 1939 Soviet-Nazi Pact finalized the steady disillusionment felt in left wing circles that occurred between 1937 and 1939. With the coming of World War and full employment, the exigencies of the 1930s became part of the past. More specifically, the Artists' Union, and the *Art Front*'s proselytizing also failed to produce the implementation of a permanent Federal Arts Bill that guaranteed the security of the artist in American society.

The *Art Front* nevertheless symbolized critical debates, and revealed the cultural climate that defined the strenuous decade. In this way, the *Art Front* joined with other American little magazines, short lived though they were, such as the *Masses,* the *Liberator*, and the *New Masses*, to have an impact upon the intellectual history of an era. However, though *Art Front* sympathies were indeed loudly expressed, they were often only heard by the same ideological audience and, as such, became a distraction for the already committed. Wartime and the return to economic prosperity completed the breakup of the *Art Front* organization. In the end, not union, or community, but the transitory market relationships which initially keyed the protest of the Artists' Union, as artists faced the Depression, remained the only consistently available outlet for artistic creation and artistic survival in America. Just as historian Neil Harris observed in his study of American artists before the Civil War, "the American artist would be left with the conviction of things undone and goals unrealized" (Harris 1966, 316).

Endnotes:

1. There were, on occasion, even opportunities for American regionalists such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry to address criticism. See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 42.

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