

1936 Museum of Modern Art retrospective, "Cubism and Abstract Art," subsequent Museum of Modern Art exhibitions, American Abstract Artists annuals, and other occasions which had prompted denunciations and smug dismissals. Except for several paragraph headings, an introduction and a conclusion, writers of the A.A.A. pamphlet did a minimum of editorializing, allowing the critics to speak for themselves, although the selection of excerpts was calculated to embarrass and to highlight misstatements and contradictions. It was an irreverent document, created to put forth the opinion that major critics writing for New York newspapers and art publications often had little knowledge of 20th-century developments in European art and held fixed opinions about the national character of American painting and sculpture.

"The Art Critics—!" was the last American Abstract Artists publication to project this aggressive tone toward New York museums, the press, and the public. Abstract artists, by their numbers, their energy, and the solid accomplishment of their work, were at last playing a significant role in American painting and sculpture. By 1941, abstraction ceased to be treated as an issue and the content of individual artists' work became the primary focus of artistic and critical attention. The American Abstract Artists exhibitions and publications had helped to stimulate, provoke, and educate the art public during the later 1930s in significant ways, helping the abstract artist to discover his identity and his public in the United States.

#### Notes

1. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, "American Abstract Artists," microfilm NY59-11. This file contains the minutes of early meetings of the American Abstract Artists, c. 1937-1940.

2. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, American Abstract Artists, *General Prospectus*, 1937, microfilm NY59-11, frame #00184.

3. Charles Shaw, "A Word to the Objector," *American Abstract Artists 1938*, unpagued.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Carl Holty, "A Letter to Alfred Barr," November 22, 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm NY59-11.

6. Ilya Bolotowsky, "An Interview With Ilya Bolotowsky," interview with Susan C. Larsen, New York City, January 29, 1973.

The author wishes to express appreciation to members of the American Abstract Artists who have generously provided information, reminiscences, and documentation regarding the A.A.A.

# Artists As Militant Trade Union Workers During The Great Depression

Gerald M. Monroe

The artist of modern times has generally functioned in alienation from the mainstream of prevailing society. During the period of the Great Depression of the 1930's, however, artists rushed forward in large numbers to respond to the devastating economic and political crisis. After a period of stunned inaction, artists gradually realized that their economic and professional needs could only be obtained through massive government patronage. Influenced by socialist ideology and inspired by the growing labor movement, artists organized themselves as "cultural workers," and turned to militant trade union tactics to effect their goals.

In the summer of 1933, a small group of artists began to meet informally at the John Reed Club, an organization of radical artists and writers, to discuss the possibility of promoting government support. About twenty-five of them jointly issued a manifesto declaring "The State can eliminate once and for all the unfortunate dependence of American artists upon the caprice of private patronage."<sup>1</sup> The New York artists referred to themselves as the Unemployed Artists Group; among its early leaders were Max Spivak, Phil Bard, Boris Gorelik, Bernarda Bryson, Ibram Lassaw, Balcomb and Gertrude Greene, Michael Loew, Joseph Vogel, and James Guy. Frequent demonstrations by the UAG attracted hundreds of followers and were effective in securing a variety of city, state, and federal programs that supplied the artists with occasional work. During the winter of 1933-1934, the federal government initiated the Public Works of Art Project, a large-scale patronage program that was intended to last only three months but actually remained in effect about six months. Juliana Force, the patrician director of the Whitney Museum, was appointed head of the New York region with a budget providing work for approximately 600 artists. After requesting a list of needy artists from the major professional organiza-

tions, she ignored the entreaties of the UAG, informing them that there were relief agencies to which they might apply. The angry artists held mass protests, mounted picket lines on the narrow sidewalk in front of the Whitney, then located on 8th Street, and sent numerous delegations to her office. The pressure was overwhelming and Force gradually made concessions. She also closed the museum on March 27—six weeks early—presumably out of a fear of vandalism!

In February 1934, the name of the organization was changed to the Artists Union; it became a trade union of painters, sculptors, printmakers, and allied artists. Although the union professed to be nonpolitical, many of the leaders were Communists or fellow travelers. Control of the leadership by members of the Communist Party was maintained primarily because they were eager to do the (unpaid) work. However, the union was run on generally democratic lines, and non-Communists who were active became officers and were influential in the union's affairs. During that time of pressing humanitarian issues and political idealism, liberals and radicals were often able to work effectively together.

The union's first president was Balcomb Greene, a former English instructor at Dartmouth who had become a painter. When he resigned, his term was completed by Michael Loew, who in turn was succeeded by Phil Bard, surely the most popular of the union's leaders. He was a dedicated Communist who always seemed anxious to demonstrate that he was more radical than anyone else, but he was not so dogmatic as to be unable to work closely with those with whom he disagreed ideologically. Bard was also much admired as a draftsman; he had published political cartoons in *New Masses* when he was nineteen and was a regular contributor to the *Daily Worker* and *Freiheit*, the Communist English and Yiddish daily papers. Bard was followed as president by Murray Hantman, former member of the Los Angeles John Reed Club and exhibitor of a painting of the Scottsboro boys in court. Right wing "critics" broke into the exhibit and shot bullet holes into the heads

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of the Negroes in the painting.

The willingness of artists to turn out for demonstrations earned them the nickname "fire brigade," and they were frequently called upon to assist other unions or left-wing organizations in picket lines and demonstrations. A substantial number of young radical artists considered picketing for fellow unionists or participating in "anti-facist" demonstrations, a legitimate activity on behalf of their union, but the leadership never made it an obligation for the rank and file—they didn't have to; all that was needed was a suggestion from the executive board or a request by a member or a visitor during a Wednesday night meeting.

Wednesday night meetings started at 8:30 and often continued beyond midnight. Usually two to three hundred members attended and a crisis meeting could draw up to six or eight hundred. Most of the artists probably lived in Greenwich Village, Chelsea, or the Lower East Side, but the union also had constituencies in both the Bronx and Brooklyn, many of whom would often arrive at meetings with wives and children in tow. While debate was often lively and contentious, most of the rank and file respected and supported the leadership.

After meetings, the artists would drift off to their favorite cafeteria or bar with their friends in a cafe spirit to continue heated discussions on union matters, art, or politics. Deep concern and an easy gaiety were united in an exquisite sort of comradeship. Robert Cronbach recalls that never before or since had he been in contact with so many committed people. He could always count on seeing his friends at union meetings. Artists arriving in New York would automatically head for the union, often finding lodgings through the members as well as a warm welcome. Remo Farrugio recalls meeting an artist from the South at the union and having difficulty understanding his drawl. The southerner also had a problem comprehending Farrugio's rapid slurred speech, but they were both aware of sharing a very special fellowship. It was standard procedure during demonstrations and the occasional subsequent lock-ups for the artists to bolster their spirits by singing "revolutionary" songs. Herb Kruckman remembers marching on a picket line, singing, "Phil Bard is our leader; we shall not be moved," when a policeman said to his superior, "Give us the word, sergeant, and we'll move 'em!"

With the creation of the Works Progress Administration under Harry Hopkins in the spring of 1935, a historic commitment was made to the principle of work-relief as a solution to mass un-

employment in preference to the dole. Special projects were created in music, theater, writing, and art. All were represented by craft unions but the Artists Union was the most aggressive and imaginative in its tactics in promoting job opportunities and in preventing mass dismissals. At its peak in 1936, the Federal Art Project employed about 5000 visual artists and the union was the *de facto* bargaining agent. In the fall of 1936, President Roosevelt ordered the WPA Administration to pare its rolls in keeping with the expected absorption of workers by industry during an apparent upturn in the economy. The cultural workers, who would be the last to benefit from such a lift, were determined to battle any cuts in federal support; mass demonstrations and sit-in attempts were continued throughout the fall. At a November 30 rally, attended by 1200 workers from the various Arts Projects, Boris Gorelick, an organizer for the Artists



Fig. 1. Artists Union membership button.

Union, defined its position in unequivocal terms: "We say we are going to resist any and every effort by the government to take our jobs. We say that our resistance will take on such a character as to smash any efforts to institute dismissals regardless of protest. . . . These projects cannot be curtailed. On the contrary, they must become a permanent feature of our social and national life. From now on we are on the offensive. Our defensive is vigorous counter attack."<sup>2</sup>

On December 1, 1936, the union assembled over 400 of its members to storm the lower 5th Avenue Art Project offices in an effort to force the administration to forestall planned mass firings. About 225 members succeeded in occupying the offices, announcing their intention to sit in until concessions

were won. The police were summoned and a bloody battle ensued. Twelve demonstrators were wounded and 219 were carried off in eleven patrol wagons—the largest police bust in New York City history. Paul Block, the chief organizer and spokesman for the action, was severely beaten when he stubbornly resisted eviction by the police. Although trained as a sculptor, Block had decided that, during those troubled times, he would devote his life to political work. Shortly after the demonstration—along with other union members—he volunteered to fight for the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War; he died a hero's death in a churchyard in Belchite, Spain, while leading the Lincoln Brigade's Third Company, of which he had become commander.

On Thursday, December 3, 1936, the 219 demonstrators were arraigned in two groups, because the Yorkville Court could not process that many persons in one sitting. A week later the artists, having been unsuccessfully defended by Congressman Vito Marcantonio, were found guilty of disorderly conduct and given suspended sentences. Appalled by the brutal beating of some of the demonstrators, Mayor LaGuardia ordered the police not to arrest strikers on WPA projects unless they were violent or destroying property. The tough regional administrator of the WPA, Colonel Brehon Somervell, declared that the mayor's decision was a "new concept of law and order."<sup>3</sup> An editorial in the *New York Herald Tribune* deplored the artists' attitude that "society not only owes them a living but a living by the talents which each happens to fancy," and suggested that the WPA's pruning should begin with the "fancier projects."<sup>4</sup> The belligerent actions of the union and other organizations of WPA cultural workers did appear to frustrate the government's desire to decrease the size of the Arts Projects; while average employment on the WPA as a whole decreased 11.9 percent from January to June 1937, employment on the four Arts Projects increased 1.1 percent.

In April 1937, the President and Congress agreed on the necessity for a 25 percent reduction in WPA funds—a cut from which the cultural workers could not be exempted. During May, the leadership of the organized cultural workers met to plan a defense campaign, and Chet LaMore of the Artists Union was elected chairman of the Joint Strategy Committee. A month of demonstrations, work stoppages, visits to congressmen, and negotiations with top WPA officials were to no avail. On Tuesday, June 27, the pink slips (dismissal notices) were issued and the Joint Strategy Committee responded with the precision of a mili-



Fig. 2. Artists in Yorkville Court, December 3, 1936.

tary campaign: Wednesday, sixty workers barricaded themselves in the payroll offices of the New York City Arts Project; Friday, LaMore and a delegation of fifty journeyed to Washington, sat in at the WPA headquarters, and asked to see Hopkins. That same day in New York City, 600 artists, writers, and musicians invaded the newly consolidated offices of the Federal Arts Projects, now located on East 42nd Street, while another 100 remained outside to demonstrate. Harold Stein, a sensitive New Dealer who had recently been appointed administrator of the Arts Projects in New York, was ordered by his captors to call the Washington WPA officials to transmit the strikers' demands. Artists Union leader Moe Neuwirth announced that Stein would be held captive until those demands were met—by President Roosevelt, if necessary. The switchboard operator was told to answer "Artists Union" to all incoming calls. Every inch of the floor was covered by demonstra-

tors; the air was stifling. The police were warned if they took action and a riot ensued the floor might collapse.

During the night, Stein negotiated an agreement with the strikers; he was released Saturday morning, fifteen hours after the invasion of his office. In Washington, LaMore met with Hopkins' assistant, Aubrey Williams, who seemed to make some significant concessions. However, Williams later announced that he had been misinterpreted; he reaffirmed the administration's position to reduce the number of persons employed on the Arts Projects.

As early as the spring of 1935, the Artists Union had sought affiliation with the AFL on the assumption that its political leverage for expanding and stabilizing government patronage would be strengthened, but the AFL representative had difficulty reconciling the role of fine artists with a trade union and complained about their unorthodox demon-

strations. It is likely that the conservative labor organization was not anxious to bring a "radical union" into its fold. The AFL did grant a charter to the Commercial Artists and Designers Union (CADU), most members of which had been in the Artists Union and still retained close ties with it.

By 1937, the CIO was challenging the AFL as the major spokesman for American labor and welcoming labor organizations dominated by radical leaderships. A plan was evolved designating the Artists Union, the CADU, and the tiny Cartoonists Guild as a local of the United Office and Professional Workers of America, and, in December, Artists Union President, Philip Evergood, announced that beginning in January, 1938, the union would be known as the United American Artists, Local 60 of the UOPWA. Lewis Merrill, a left-wing trade unionist with an extensive background in organizing white collar workers, was president of the UOPWA. Primarily a

union of bookkeepers, stenographers, office workers, and insurance agents, the UOPWA originally had been the Office Workers Union of the Communist-run Trade Union Unity League.

After the merger was formalized, the union moved its headquarters uptown—a shock for many of the artists who loved the village character of the downtown location. Now dues were paid at a cashier's cage; there were partitions, offices, and small rooms for committee meetings. No longer were there the large open loft spaces in which artists could congregate as they had in the past; the expensive dropped ceilings were a dubious improvement, intensifying the impersonality of the new offices. Also, at the suggestion of the UOPWA, membership meetings now took place monthly. Merrill, who never really understood the special needs of the artist, thought the frequent meetings were an unnecessary extravagance for a poor union. He did not realize that, for the artists who worked alone in their studios, the meetings were social events. Merrill was brilliant, a highly effective speaker, but brash, even arrogant in his handling of others. He took seriously his charge to usher the artists into the ways of trade unionism, although he apparently had little sympathy for their generally different life-style. The flamboyant manner in which the Artists Union members usually demonstrated was abhorrent to the UOPWA president, and he forced them to give up the clenched fist and brushes emblem along with the red banners made famous during the street demonstrations.

By the spring of 1939, congressional foes of the cultural projects were primed for the liquidation process, and although the Art Project continued for an additional four years, it was on a steadily diminishing basis. The erosion of patronage coupled with the pressure of the congressional witch hunts of 1938, 1939, and 1940 made inevitable a shrinkage in the membership and a deterioration in the power of the union.

In January 1942, Merrill was insisting that the union hire an organizer to try to establish some sort of base in private industry. Both the UOPWA president and the leaders of Local 60 were aware that there was no justification in attempting to maintain a trade union without prospects of employment, but both sides were reluctant to make the apparently unavoidable disassociation. Finally, during the first week of March, three members of the union executive board entered into discussions with Merrill about the future of the artists' organization. An agreement was reached whereby the artists had the option of converting to a professional organiza-

tion and, if they wished, retaining a formal relationship with the UOPWA, although Merrill agreed that there was little he could do for them. The artists decided to seek *fraternal* connections with both the CIO and the AFL; a meeting was called for May 7, 1942, at which the artists were asked to ratify the executive board's recommendation to disaffiliate from the UOPWA. It was not a happy meeting. The enthusiasm that might normally accompany a new beginning was dampened by the unavoidable recognition that an era had come to its end and that a stubborn dream was being interred. That evening the membership voted to create a new organization, later named the Artists League of America.

The rest of the story is an epitaph. Not informed that the union would vote on disaffiliation at the May 7 meeting, Merrill was furious. On May 13, he dispatched an angry letter to the executive board demanding the immediate return of the charter, seal, and other properties of the UOPWA, including the per capita assessment in which the union was, as usual, in arrears. On the same day, a letter was also circulated to all the union artists offering them membership in the American Advertising Guild, Local 20, UOPWA. The executive board was surprised and upset by Merrill's reaction. Rockwell Kent, the distinguished painter and illustrator who had been president of the artists' union since its inception as a local of the UOPWA, hopeful that the artists might yet achieve a friendly and useful relationship with Merrill and the CIO, wrote a long letter of apology. It was through no fault of their own, Kent declared, that the artists were unable to "keep pace with labor's army." He asked Merrill to consider the artists "guerilla fighters . . . or a lost battalion separated temporarily from the main army, but don't for one minute do them the injustice of holding them renegades and treating them as such."<sup>5</sup> Merrill replied that "guerilla fighters are noted for their exceptional discipline under fire and preservation of a unity of command under difficult circumstances. Neither had been present here." He also informed Kent, now president of the new Artists League of America, that fraternal affiliation with the CIO would be impossible.

If the last days of the union were characterized by a sense of despair and futility, the members could recall with pride the history of an organization that had served them well. Certainly there was nothing in the history of the United States that indicated a significant commitment to the arts nor did the government's determination to assume responsibility for the economic survival of its

citizenry through work programs imply any special interest in the arts. But as "cultural workers," represented by a trade union, the artists had finally obtained a share of the federal largess provided for the traditional trades. The union had also fulfilled other fundamental needs. With the possible exception of the WPA payroll line, the union headquarters had no competition as the paramount meeting place for artists. Working hermetically in the solitude of their studios, the artists' need to interact socially and professionally with their colleagues had been satisfied; they had also benefited from the union-sponsored lectures, symposia, and exhibitions.

Although the union was to exist for almost a decade, the first five years were clearly the most exciting and productive. The vigorous and imaginative tactics of the militant artists forced revolutionary concessions from the government. Many believed that they were riding the wave of the future and that a more humane society would arise from the chaos of capitalism. But when the promise of permanent federal patronage began to fade, the foundation of the union began to crumble. The transition from the free-wheeling, spontaneous Artists Union to the bureaucratic, efficient United American Artists could have little effect on the government's determination to shrink the Arts Projects. The serious sophisticated artists, who had been ostensibly the justification for the existence of the union, lost interest and began to think more intensely about their own careers and investing their energies in artistic problems. Only those artists for whom political and economic challenges were more absorbing than professional concerns were able to plunge into the organizational problems of the United American Artists.

#### A Note on the Documentation

The article is abstracted from my dissertation, "The Artists Union of New York" (N.Y.U., 1971). Sources for the data—in addition to books, periodicals, journals and newspapers with material relevant to the study—include in-depth interviews with over fifty persons who were participants in or witness to the pertinent events. Generous use was made of the documents and private papers in the collection of the Archives of American Art. The dissertation, which is fully documented, is available on microfilm at the Archives. Notes for this essay has been restricted to sources of specific quotations.

1. Manifesto of the "Artist Group" given to the author by Max Spivak.
2. Boris Gorelik, "The Artist Begins to Fight!," *Art Front*, Jan. 1937, p. 4.
3. "Mayor Seeks End of Lay-offs on WPA," *The New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1936, p. 4.
4. "The Essence of Cheek," *The New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 3, 1936, p. 28.
5. Letter: Kent to Merrill, May 23, 1942, Rockwell Kent Papers. Archives of American Art.
6. Letter: Merrill to Kent, May 26, 1942, Rockwell Kent Papers. Archives of American Art.