

# Managing the People: Art Programs in the American Depression

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It has become increasingly familiar to explain the contemporary arrangements for the management of culture in terms of culture's "privatization." This characterization describes a trend identifiable across those governmental sectors—health, education, and social security—established (in their nationalized form) as part of the post-World War II welfare state. As there has been a (relative) withdrawal of government from these sectors in recent years, the government role in the subvention of culture has also come into question. This shift in what Michel Foucault called "governmentality" (Foucault 1991) produces a range of problems for access to diverse cultural resources, cultural pluralism, and funding for nonprofitable "research and development" in the cultural sector. Because these issues have been examined elsewhere, I will not revisit or discuss further the issues at stake in this shift in governmentality.<sup>1</sup> Instead, by examining particular art programs from the 1930s, I will essay a theoretical framework for the analysis of conjunctions of culture and government.

The relations between culture and government are best defined by the identifying how different strategies for the management of populations have been organized and deployed. Such an approach provides a distinctive perspective on the history of culture and government. The relations between culture and government have been varied but can be best understood by examining how government has strategically used art to act on the "social." In this article I will describe the different organizing principles that inform the conjunctions

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of art, citizenship, and government and how those principles intersect. I will emphasize the complex and contradictory rationales for arts administration and conclude that no single defining logic can explain the particular forms of art's "governmentalization" in the 1930s.

My conception of government is not limited to organizations or mechanisms attached to the state. Rather, analysis of the relations between art and citizenship is informed by an understanding of governmental power drawn from a particular reading of Foucault's concept of "governmentality" (Foucault 1991). In brief, three aspects of this concept prove useful for this inquiry. First, not all forms of political power have their origins in the state; rather, government also denotes the activities of institutions concerned with the regulation and management of populations. Second, government is not functionally unified. Governmental rationales and technologies are distinctive and have distinct histories. Third, the object of government is population, and an amalgam of techniques with particular and practical objectives is brought to bear on that object. In relation to this, Foucault suggests that government is intrinsically involved with moulding both public and private behavior; to put it another way, government is concerned with the "conduct of conduct."

#### THE NEW DEAL

During the 1930s and 1940s, the arts were administered by an increasingly diverse range of organizations. This had two direct outcomes. The first was an increased political expectation that the state had the responsibility of funding and administering art. This meant that in times of dire economic and political circumstances, such as the Depression and WWII, multiple initiatives existed for administering the arts, with the aim of extending access and participation. The second outcome, linked to this shift in arts management, was the change in the way the way "the people" were constructed in relation to art. Unlike earlier conceptions of art as the property of the few or the elite, the definitive art programs of the 1930s and early 1940s were titled "Art for the People" and proudly proclaimed that art was the property of "Everyman." These discursive shifts grew out of much longer histories related to the more general movement toward different strategies for the management of "the social." This trend can be traced from the early nineteenth century in, for example, museum policy.

The ways in which cultural policy of the 1930s and 1940s sought to act on the citizen from a distance make those decades significant. The architects of these policies hoped to produce citizens capable of self-regulation in a way that would ensure their active and productive contribution to the nation. Accordingly, artists in America were encouraged to paint "American," and British culture became a symbol of "what we are fighting for." In the latter

half of the 1940s, cultural programs were also a significant part of Australian reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Each of these strategies held out the promise of cultural access as part a reconstituted nation. Most important, these programs can be seen as reflecting. This “welfarist” rationality constructed the citizenry as consisting of free individuals responsible for their own self-management. The cultural technologies of the 1930s and 1940s constructed the citizenry as freely participating members of a democracy that needed protection from the fascist threat. State subvention of cultural production would combat the “government culture” of fascism. In sum, art programs managed by the state were characteristically part of governmental policies of social-welfarism.

As a result of the logic characteristic of the welfarist governmental rationality, cultural and social technologies of the 1930s and 1940s sought to manage the citizen from arm’s length. Art programs educated the citizenry to manage itself in relation to a certain set of desirable norms. During the 1930s in the United States, these norms were set in relation to the construction of a free citizen who had the capacities to participate in the democratic reformism of New Deal America. The terms of these constructions will be interrogated later; for now, it can be observed that no single logic exists through which this formation of culture and government can be understood.

### THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT

As the most well known of the 1930s art projects and as the only art project specifically created by the New Deal, the Federal Art Project (FAP) is an appropriate beginning for this discussion. In 1935, the Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, which gave government broad powers to centralize the administration of and provide funds for unemployment relief. To address this problem, the Federal Works Agency was inaugurated in 1935, encompassing the Works Progress Administration (WPA) among other administration units. The WPA’s Division of Professional and Service Projects established a section titled Federal Project Number One (Federal One), which comprised the FAP, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Writers Project, and the Historical Records Survey.

The government organized and funded the large art projects of the New Deal for two primary reasons. First, the FAP received appropriations from Congress as a work relief project designed to create jobs for unemployed artists. This was quite radical in conception, “for it implied that it was normal for artists to be hired for fees or wages . . . (Rosenburg 1975, 197). At its peak, the FAP employed more than 5,000 artists. Second, the government also understood the FAP as having a wider social function. In particular, art created by FAP programs was characterized as “art for the people”—that is, art that depicted the life of the “people” (understood as citizens) participat-

ing in the reconstruction of the nation. The art projects operated as a mechanism to equip the New Deal citizen with a variety of capacities. For instance, the New Deal citizen would become a discerning consumer. Citizen-consumers would be educated to participate in the workings of a reconstructed American nation through the exercise of their social and political responsibilities, but also through the practice of thrifty expenditure of their capital and the sensible expenditure of their leisure time. Director of the FAP, Holger Cahill, explained how the FAP might contribute to the education of good consumption practices: "We are not particularly interested in developing what is known as art appreciation. We are interested in raising a generation sensitive to their visual environment and capable of helping to improve it" (McKinzie 1973, 130). The FAP was atypical of New Deal program in that it operated not only for the immediate goal of financial relief, but with a greater social goal in mind.

Cahill made a broad statement of the FAP's various social aims in its 1935 operating manual:

The plan of the FAP provides for the employment of artists in varied enterprises. Through employment of creative artists it is hoped, through art teaching and recreational activities, to create a broader national art consciousness and work out constructive ways of using leisure time through services in applied art to aid various campaigns of social value. The aim of the project will be to work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community, and an integration of the fine arts and practical arts. (O'Connor 1969, 28)

Three goals emerge from these statements: (1) art programs would encourage a more artistically aware population to spend their leisure time in constructive ways; (2) applied art would be used in campaigns advocating particular social values such as, murals in hospitals and schools and public art in government housing spaces; and (3) through these types of programs, the FAP would fuse the applied and fine arts. These aims would result in the production and consumption of better designed and more widely accessible cultural products. In sum, the project would advocate and create "useful culture." The FAP, far from being simply a work relief program for artists, is better understood an effort to provide an education in the civic capacities required under a more socially committed New Deal state.

### COMMUNITY ART CENTERS

The community art center program most clearly reflected FAP's instrumental goal of citizenship education. Indeed, we must bear in mind that the educational services section, of which the community art centers were a part, made up only 17 percent of the FAP. The project included the following sections: 48 percent fine art (murals, sculpture, easel painting, graphic arts), 29

percent practical and applied arts (posters, photography, Index of American Design, arts and craft, models), 17 percent educational services (federal art galleries, community art centres, art teaching, research and information), 6 percent technical and supervisory (Berman 1977, xvii–viii). McDonald states that by 1939 the education section had grown to 25 percent of the project (1969, 422–23). Although the community art center was part of a relatively small section of the FAP, the rationale for this program illustrated the project's larger goals. The community art centers, along with the FAP mural program, comprised the public faces of the project. According to historian Page Smith, by 1940 an estimated eight million people had attended the 100 art centers established by the FAP (1987, 810).

The community centers were developed to fulfill two main goals. The first was to provide democratic access to culture. Thus, assistant director of the FAP Thomas Parker said that the centers were devoted “to returning art to the people, to all the people” (McKinzie 1973, 141). The second was to provide a site for the management and reconstruction of citizens who, for various reasons, were disaffected, disconnected, and/or defined as dysfunctional. In this sense, then, art functioned as social therapy. Irving Marantz, an FAP artist-teacher, commented that art was “a great therapy” that could turn juveniles (and by implication, other misfits) “into useful social beings” (1973, 198). Thus, the Community Art Center Program targeted areas considered “culturally needy”—rural and desert areas, poor urban communities, and housing developments for the underprivileged. An FAP statement described the importance of the Community Art Centers as follows:

The draining of America's best talent from the native soil of the small town to the strange pavements of the big city has inundated certain sections of America and left others high and dry as potential cultural wastelands. It seems essential for the best interests of American cultural life that this process now be reversed. The provinces of America may yet become as important to the cultural life of America as the provinces of France and Germany are to their respective cultures. (White 1987, 2)

In sum, the FAP discourse recast areas and communities defined as peripheral to the nation as essential to the cultural development of the national whole.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the community art centers, and the one that most distinguished the form of cultural consumption promoted in the 1930s, is the emphasis on participation in the production process rather than just appreciation of the finished product. Throughout the limited literature available on the community art centers, from both project bureaucrats and artist-teachers asserts the necessity of active participation by people attending the art centers. The artists' statement presented at the opening of Chicago's South Side Community Art Center illustrates this commitment.

As teachers, some of us were able to unearth, encourage and develop dormant talents of many. As artists ourselves, creatively, we were able to experiment and work in many techniques and processes which were denied to us before because we would not afford to pay to go to art schools or because we were discriminated against as Negroes. We feel that with this art center, a worthwhile contribution is being made to all the peoples of the community. This art center is an opportunity for self-expression and development for all people. We truly feel that art belongs to all of the people and should be enjoyed by all. (Burroughs 1987, 138)

Similar statements have been made in relation to the Harlem, LeMoyne, and Jacksonville Negro Community Art Centers. These characteristically credit the Community Art Center program and the FAP with providing both the space and opportunity for black artists to bring their work to black communities. These statements reveal that art centers were seen as addressing not only endemic discrimination against black artists, but also providing spaces for cultural production for "all the people."<sup>3</sup> In this way, the black artist figured in community art center discourse as an artist-citizen who could contribute directly to the reconstruction of the nation by encouraging the development of an institutionally-based, participatory cultural process. The art center and the artist-citizen moved community culture from the periphery to the center of a New Deal America.

Despite the obvious fact that black communities were not able to participate politically in the reconstruction of the nation, community art center discourse stressed the emancipatory potential nature of cultural production and consumption as emancipatory undertakings. Art centers in Negro communities were deemed as contributing to a holistic understanding of a reconstructed American culture characterized as a participatory democracy. In this way, community art centers placed in "peripheral communities" were designed to reconnect such communities to the national whole.

These art centers had popular appeal and quote impressive attendance figures; for instance, the Harlem Community Art Center had over 70,000 attendees in its first sixteen months (Bennett 1973, 214), and the Jacksonville, Florida Community Art Center had 40,000 attendees in the three years of its operation (Sutton 1973, 216). For a number of reasons, one cannot dismiss the popularity of such centers as "false consciousness" or describe the centers and the New Deal in general in terms of a state-based cultural hegemony.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the number of art centers continued to increase after the withdrawal of federal administration opinion turned against the New Deal from 1937 onward. And what accounts for the fate of centers, such as the Harlem Community Art Center, that were closed as a result of investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee?<sup>5</sup> Analyses attributing a single, state-based ideological logic to the working of New Deal culture cannot account for the specific operation and effects of these programs. This is not to

deny the existence of hegemonic power effects, but it is to recognize that such effects are almost always the result of a process of negotiation between competing interests and discourses in the sites of their application.

## SECTION OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

The other main art project of the 1930s was the Section of Painting and Sculpture (SPS), established in 1934 and in operation until 1943. The SPS, which received funds directly from the Treasury, commissioned work for the embellishment of federal buildings. The SPS was not a work relief project; selection for commissions based on the quality and the specific requirements of the site. The members of the SPS advisory committee advocated realist art depicting the "American scene" and opposed European modernist art. "Painting Section," as Thomas Hart Benton disparagingly described it, involved a realist style that depicted "the people" as heroic in their daily activities.<sup>6</sup> Thus SPS art presented images of common people practicing civic responsibility in their work and social activities.

While it was important that SPS artists celebrated the "American Way of Life" in their commissioned works, this art also had to be representative of the best American talent. The primary goal of the SPS, as stated in its first Bulletin in 1935, was to "secure suitable art of the best quality for the embellishment of public buildings" (O'Connor 1969, 21). Edward Bruce, director of the SPS, described the aim as follows:

Our objective should be to enrich the lives of all our people by making things of the spirit, the creation of beauty part of their daily lives, by giving them new hopes and sources of interest to fill their leisure, by eradicating the mere utility, and by fostering all the simple pleasures of life which are not important in terms of dollars spent but are immensely important in terms of a higher standard of living. (Park and Markowitz 1992, 132)

The SPS envisaged that their art project would not only educate "everyman" in the civic virtues, but would also establish the training of "good" citizenship as indivisible from a training in "good consumption." This emphasis had two main configurations. The first involved an interest in the education of the proper use of leisure time; the second emphasized training people to recognize, produce, and purchase good quality design.

This insertion of quality art into the daily lives of the people was to be achieved by nationwide distribution of art in small federal buildings, such as post offices. During the nine years of the SPS's existence, it commissioned murals and sculptures for federal buildings and 1,100 new post offices across America (Park and Markowitz 1992, 136-37). An SPS bulletin described the post office as "the one concrete link between every community of individuals and the Federal government" that functioned "importantly in the human struc-

ture of the community” (Park and Markowitz 1984, 8). The distribution of art in this way established a visual connection between art, government, and the people. The murals in small federal buildings interpreted this relationship and depicted it as a celebration of nation and citizenship. These national representations functioned locally and regionally, as it required that artists work extensively with the local community. In so doing, the SPS could claim that the commissioning process and its outcome involved collaboration among community, artist, and government. Accordingly, SPS art articulated both the particular identity with the community and connected this specific identity into the greater whole of a reconstructed America.

In her history of post office murals, Karal Ann Marling discusses the extent to which the collaborative process advocated by the SPS reflects the reality of the commissioning process (1982). Marling finds that the commissioning process differed in each town, depending on the extent to which the artist sought community feedback and the extent to which the community wanted to be involved. However, Marling’s study makes it clear that, although SPS rhetoric encouraged community consultation, the administrative organization of the SPS did not facilitate such consultation. Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to characterize the workings of the SPS as simply involving the installation of works that the community passively accepted. Other studies of post office murals discuss various instances where works that the community did not like, were either not installed or quickly taken down (Marling 1982, 14; and Park and Markowitz 1984, 8). The principle for commissioning, production, and installation of such works was based on the precept of community consultation. Analysis of the concrete circumstances of the commissioning and installation processes of the SPS sheds light on the negotiated nature of the outcomes of New Deal cultural programs.<sup>7</sup>

### THE AMERICAN ARTISTS’ CONGRESS

The Artists’ Union of America and the American Artists’ Congress (AAC) distinctively articulated the connection between art, government, and the people. Both of these organizations, although organized around different primary aims, acted to professionalize the artist. Thus, the union and the AAC presented the figure of the artist as a professional “cultural worker” whose creations were integrally tied to the achievement and maintenance of a popular democracy. In this way, the union and the AAC claimed that funding of the arts was a responsibility of the state. Stuart Davis of the AAC captured the essence of this position when he advocated state arts subvention in the interest of preserving popular and democratic access to the arts:

Such conservation can continue only with the support of a government administration that will regard the arts, along with proper housing, playgrounds,



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health service, social security legislation, and educational facilities for all, as part of the basic obligations of a democratic government of all people towards the welfare of its citizens. (1973, 250)

Both the Artists' Union and the AAC trace their lineage to the John Reed Club, a radical cultural organization established in 1929 in New York.<sup>8</sup> In its lectures and art school, the club taught that artists' interests coincided with those of the working class and that art would advance the position of the working class. The AAC began at a Reed Club meeting in 1935—the same year the Reed Clubs were officially disbanded. Unlike the Reed Clubs, the congress was not specifically attached to the Communist Party; nevertheless, it continued to be informed by the Reed Club's "Prolecult" understanding of "art as a social force."<sup>9</sup> The AAC saw the artist as a cultural worker contributing to the establishment of a popular democratic culture rather than to the stimulation of a revolutionary working class.

The AAC was established as part of the Popular Front policy of a united alliance against fascism. Like the Popular Front, it was generally supportive of New Deal programs and reforms. The AAC dedicated itself to the opposition of fascism and at the same time advocated state support of the arts in the interests of popular democracy. The preamble to the first Artists' Congress, held in 1936, gave the following reasons for its formation:

1. to unite artists of all aesthetic tendencies and to enable them to attain their common cultural objectives
2. to establish closer relationships between the artist and the people and extend the influence of art as a force of enlightenment
3. to advocate and uphold permanent governmental support for the advancement of American art
4. to support other organized groups on issues of mutual interest in an effort to develop and maintain conditions favorable to art and human existence
5. to oppose all reactionary attempts to promote Fascism or curtail democratic rights and freedom of expression
6. to oppose war and to prevent the establishment of conditions conducive to the destruction of culture and detrimental to the progress of mankind (Baigell and Williams 1986 [1936], 11–12)

A number of interesting points emerge from this statement of purpose. For the purpose of this study, the rhetorical connection made between state support for art and the preservation of democratic culture should be particularly noted. For artists attached to the AAC, a clear connection existed between the advocacy of state art programs and the protection of a democratic culture against the threat of fascism. In the publication of the first Artists' Congress, entitled *Artists Against War and Fascism*, many of the papers make just this connection. For example, A. R. Stavenitz argued that it "should be obvious

that the prerequisite for a healthily progressing art in this country is a permanent, government-supported program, conceived and administered so as to make the efforts of our artists available to the public, to all the people" (1986, 180). In their introduction to a collection of essays from this first congress, Baigell and Williams argue that "the disputes that might have arisen from such a contradiction between artists' desires for free expression and the government's political uses of official art were to a large extent circumvented by the nature of the Popular Front itself" (1986, 23). Tempting as it may be to tie together the cultural interests of the Popular Front and the New Deal and to find evidence of a proletarian cultural sphere, the AAC held a particular rationale for the governmentalization of culture. This rationale, although constructing the citizen as a freely participating member of a people's democracy, manages citizens and their freedoms at arm's length.

In *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning argues that the relations between the cultural programs of the 1930s and the Popular Front constitute a proletarian public sphere. This proletarian public sphere has had cultural effects beyond the 1930s, according to Denning's conception of the "laboring of American culture" (1998, xvi-xviii). Denning discusses the distinctive nature of the discursive conjunction of culture and the people across a range of institutional sites and in a range of cultural forms. He argues that the predominant cultural forms of the 1930s (including the New Deal art projects) are characteristic of the momentary dominance of a labor public sphere, a "cultural front" that, although not successful in achieving hegemonic status, nevertheless "reshaped American culture" (1998, xvi). Denning's ambitious project provides useful analysis of various characteristics of the 1930s cultural formation and its relation to the left and labor institutions.

Given Denning's theoretical framework, the relations between culture and the various cultural institutional sites of the 1930s are best understood as constituting a left counterhegemony. However, this theoretical framework is extremely problematic. By using "left" and "right" as the defining categories of his analysis, Denning misses the important influence of the range of sites and discourses that cannot be described as "left." For instance, the characteristically social-democratic nature of 1930s cultural programs can be traced through the history of settlement houses and other philanthropic programs from the late nineteenth century. Although Denning surveys a diverse range of institutional sites and cultural productions, he typically overemphasizes the sites and productions he (often problematically) characterizes as distinctly "left." This creates the impression that a strong left consensus existed across the various sites of his analysis (see, for instance, Denning 1998, 39 and 44) and overstates the extent to which we can ascribe a single political logic to a diverse range of sites and institutions. Although I am not denying the important influence of socialist ideas for the relations between culture and the peo-

ple in the 1930s, it is necessary to place limits on the extent to which one can define the 1930s conjunction between art and the people as essentially left.

## CONCLUSION

By discussing the FAP, the Community Art Center Program, the Section of Painting and Sculpture, and the Artists' Congress, I have explored the conjunction of art, citizenship, and government across different state and nonstate institutions and programs. Some shared characteristics, such as the advocacy of participatory cultural processes rather than specific cultural productions, have been noted. At the same time, I have related this participatory democracy to the specific circumstances of a program's application. I have noted that, to a large degree, operational logics were negotiated and often contradictory. In the case of the Negro Community Art Centers, for instance, the discursive construction of these centers as sites for the reconnection of black communities to a democratic and national whole was belied by the existing state of black disempowerment. Nevertheless, the participatory nature of both the funding and administration of the centers meant that the communities in which they resided directed the programs. For this reason, the director of the Harlem Community Art Center, Gwendolyn Bennett, could claim that the center was "becoming not only a cultural force in its particular locale, but a symbol in the culture of a race" (1973, 213).

In relation to the Artists' Congress, a particular conjunction of art, citizenship, and government was discussed that was generally a characteristic of the 1930s. On the one hand, I noted that the idea of subvention of culture as a state responsibility predominated. The Artist' Congress advocated the notion that an educated and culturally aware populace would be less tempted by fascism. On the other hand, the equally predominant awareness of the need to guard against the kind of "government culture" characteristic of fascism was also noted. Consequently, the characteristic relationship between art, government, and citizenship in the 1930s was an "arm's-length" one that preserved the autonomy of culture even when subsidized by the state.

A main argument of this paper has been for the development of a different set of terms to analyze the relations between culture and government. I am advocating theory of culture and government that is more nuanced than one that characterizes the conjunction exclusively as a relation of oppression or resistance, hegemony or counterhegemony. Instead, the study of art programs during the New Deal has suggested some of the benefits of analyzing cultural programs by taking into account the specificity of their concrete circumstances and operations. As already mentioned, this approach does not deny the importance of particular and definite power effects, but rather addresses those effects in relation to the specific conditions of their making.

Nicholas Rose has asserted that if “we are to gain a critical purchase upon these contemporary strategies for the conduct of conduct, it will be, in part, through historical investigations which can unsettle and de-valorize the regime of subjectification to which they are inextricably linked” (1996b, 147). In this view, analyses of the history of cultural formations that reject accounts based on one logic will yield a more productive purchase on contemporary cultural programs if they address the conjunctions of art, citizenship, and government in relation to the concrete conditions of their application and effect.

#### NOTES

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1. I have discussed this shift, as it has occurred in Australia, in “The Arts as Industry” (1999).
2. I have discussed these trends in more detail in Lisanne Gibson, “Art, Citizenship and Government: ‘Art for the People’ in New Deal America and the 1940s in England and Australia,” *Culture and Policy* 8.3 (1997): 41–56; and “The Real Business of Life: Art and Citizenship during the Australian Post-War Reconstruction,” *Cultural Studies Review* 8.1 (2002).
3. Most community art centers either closed or became devoted to war efforts after the United States entry into WWII.
4. See, for instance, Jonathan Harris’s (1995) otherwise interesting history of the FAP.
5. Thanks to Joan Saab for this insight.
6. In a similar sense, history painting was the favored style of the early days of the French Revolution, involving depiction of the classical virtues. It was argued that history painting could best communicate and glorify the importance of the new regime’s republican virtues (see Crow 1985).
7. For a history of the Section, see Park and Markowitz (1984); for a discussion of the reception of particular murals commissioned by the Section, see Beckham (1989) and Marling (1982).
8. By 1933 the organization had 200 members in New York (Monroe 1971, 34–36).
9. The John Reed Club was a member of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers and, thus, received its policy directives from the Stalinist regime (Harrison 1982, 243).

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