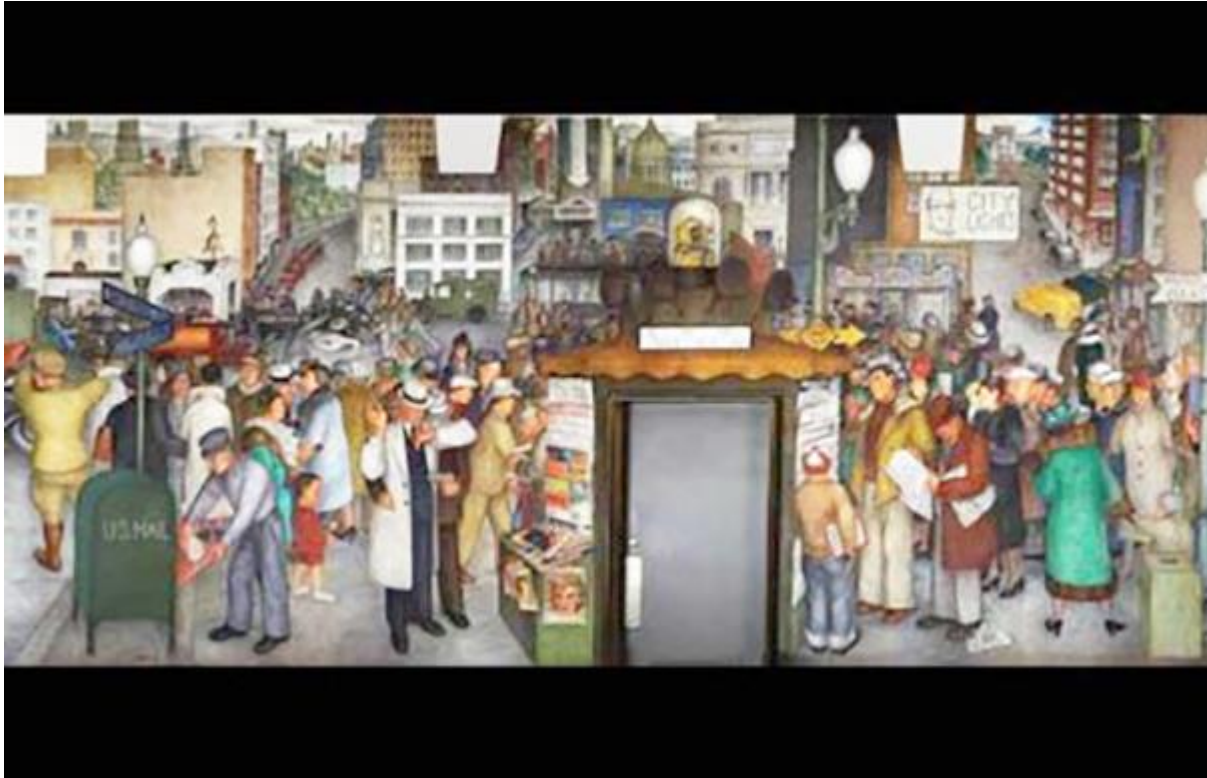


Art, Artists and Activism-- 1930s to Today



Victor Arnautoff, "City Life" mural, Coit Tower, San Francisco, 1932

Art Hazelwood

Source: <http://www.artbusiness.com/artists>

Often a question arises when I am talking about my work... it might be hostile or just as often, simply curious. "Do you really think that art can change the world?" Because my art is broadly political, the implication is political art is somehow not effective in the real world. It's a question that political artists are often confronted with and it is a question, I believe, most are already asking themselves, sometimes in frustration and sometimes in despair. But history and current examples show that it does have an effect. For all political artists the big question should be not whether political art is effective, but how it can have a bigger effect in the world.

There's a history here that is helpful for political artists to be aware of today. The effectiveness of past and present political artists in organizing, in advocating, in building solidarity in movements and in retaining a history that is often suppressed by the mainstream is essential. For American art, that history can best be viewed as it developed from the Great Depression of the 1930s to today. The lessons from these past actions can help contemporary political artists be more effective.

What differentiates "art for art's sake" from political art is that political art intends to have an effect on the world. That doesn't sit well with many who believe art must stay in its place and especially that art should never sully itself with mundane reality... especially with politics. Artists in the 1930s did sully themselves and their artwork with political content. They had solidarity with the 99% against the ruling elites who had increasingly monopolized the wealth

of that period. Artists had that solidarity with workers and poor people because they saw themselves as workers and poor people.

In fact, in the 1930s the federal government treated artists as workers. The federal government through the New Deal programs of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt hired artists to create art. That act alone showed an incredibly different approach to artists. Today, a poor artist would be offered "life training skills" and job placement counseling... but certainly not asked to make art at a basic living wage with no restrictions on what was produced and no goal for how the work would be used, which is what the New Deal did for artists. And cut free of the competitive gallery system that had died of economic collapse, artists suddenly turned in large numbers to politics.

Political art rose in the 1930s then fell in the period between World War II and the late 1960s; a marginalized group of artists kept the flame burning during this conservative period before it blossomed again. Sputtering somewhat through the 1990s, it has blossomed yet again in recent years under the twin hammers of endless war and economic injustice.

Organized Artists, Anti-Lynching, Right Wing Responses

The Great Depression was the first time in US history that a widespread movement of artists began to address politics. They actively found ways to influence society through exhibition and distribution of their work. Artists organized exhibitions around social and political themes such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, anti-lynching, anti-fascism and workers strikes. They organized conferences. They actually unionized. They contributed to leftist publications such as the Daily Worker, New Masses, Art Front, all of which had large numbers of subscribers and emphasized artwork as a regular part of their content.



Picasso Guernica, 1937

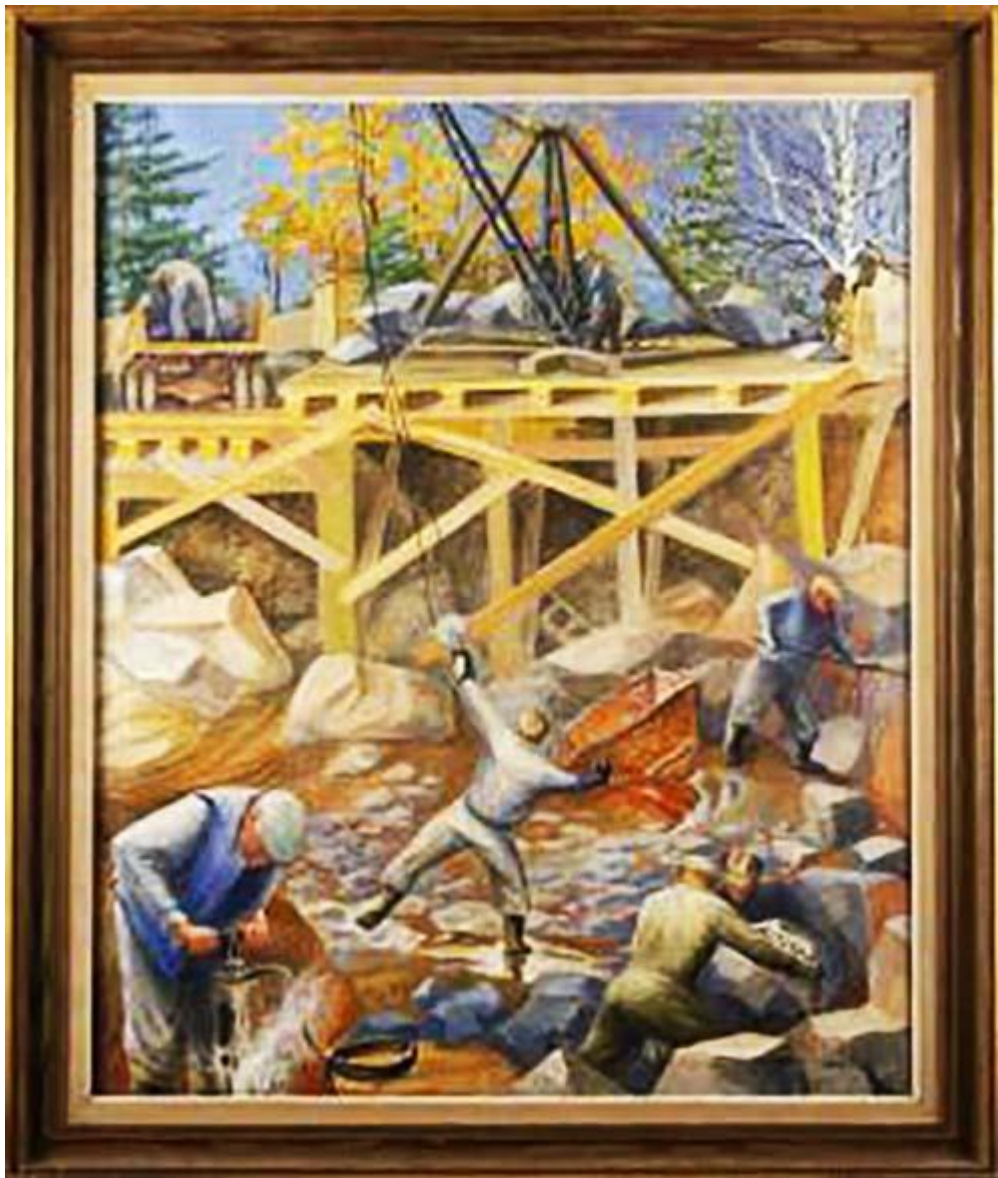
Many artists of the time joined and organized for political objectives and in 1936, the American Artists' Congress was formed as part of the Popular Front of a united Left against fascism. The Artists' Congress represented the height of artists' political involvement in the 1930s. Hundreds of artists joined the group at the beginning and hundreds more came to the conventions. They

organized exhibitions, including the important show, Against War and Fascism. They raised money for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade fighting the Fascists in Spain, and they were responsible for bringing Picasso's painting Guernica to New York where it remained until the death of the dictator Franco. They pressed the US Congress to establish a permanent Bureau of Fine Arts.



Pele deLappe, Transients, 1938

In 1934 the Federal government was just starting to get involved in the arts. The Coit Tower murals in San Francisco were the first mural project of the Roosevelt Administration. The murals faced media and politicians' calls for their destruction due to controversies over several Communist references. The San Francisco Chronicle branded them "red propaganda". At the same time the dockworkers went on strike on the waterfront. Artists in San Francisco supported the waterfront workers when they went on strike against low wages, long hours and terrible working conditions. Many artists such as Victor Arnautoff, Adelyne Cross Eriksson and Louise Gilbert commemorated the events that led to the 1934 General Strike, and some artists like Pele deLappe were working on sign painting and cartooning from the moment the waterfront workers went on strike.



Cross Eriksson Adeline, Grovarbetare

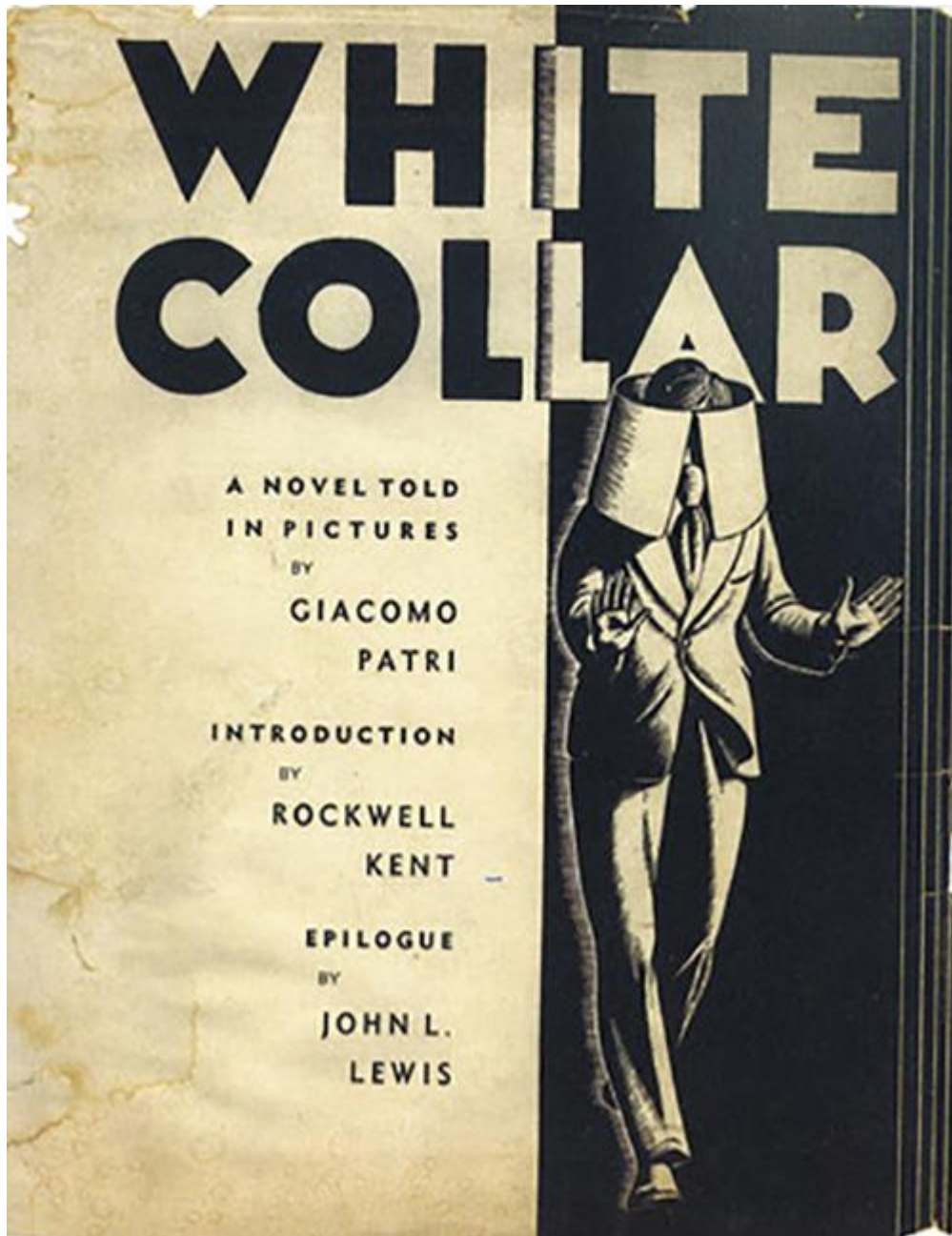
This proliferation of groups, publications and activities among artists represented a tremendous amount of organization on a broad range of social and political themes. One example of how artwork was created and used for political ends can be seen in two rival anti-lynching shows that were staged in New York City in 1935. Lynching was an issue that a wide range of artists responded to in the 1930s. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP) organized an exhibition to draw attention to lynching and to encourage the passage of a federal law banning it. While the House of Representatives passed several different bills in the 1930s, Senators always filibustered and stood in the way. No federal law against lynching was ever passed. It wasn't until 1968 that the Federal Government prosecuted a lynching case under civil rights statutes.



William Gropper, Uprooted

The Communist Party through the John Reed Club organized an alternative lynching show to the one organized by the NAACP. The show included 43 pieces by Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Louis Lozowick and others. The Communists saw the futility of working within the political system and sought to build a movement of racial solidarity against the divisions imposed by capitalism with its vast differentiations in wealth. Both exhibitions sought to bring attention to the scourge of lynching. Their efforts drew attention to the cause and had echoes through to the Civil Rights era.



An example of another approach to political art is Giacomo Patri who in the 1930s was a newspaper illustrator, the same trade as the main character in his 1938 book of linoleum cut prints, *White Collar*. In this novel, with only images and no text, Patri tells a story of the increased political radicalization of the central character. The novel reflected the economic despair that white-collar workers shared with blue-collar workers during the Depression. At the beginning the main character dreams of the road to success but his hopes are repeatedly dashed along the way. As the economic forces of the Depression pull him and his family down, he begins to see that he is part of a wider community of workers. The series of events, the Stock Crash, job loss, health problems, foreclosure, is a litany of the insecurities faced during the Depression. The family moves from home to apartment to shelter until they finally are forced to move into a tent city. His belief in capitalism shattered, he envisions himself joining an army of the dispossessed marching in revolution.

End of the 1930s Experiment in Democratic Art

In a widely cited quote by Abstract Expressionist Arshile Gorky, the powerful political art of the 1930s was dismissed as "poor art for poor people". The elitism fueled by a reinvigorated art market and the hero worship associated with it was once more in evidence as the economy recovered sufficiently from the Great Depression. Many art world luminaries, curators, gallery owners and artists shared in the strong disdain for political art, a mirror image of the solidarity of 1930s artists.

An improved economy, changing art world trends, a revived commercial art market, fatigue with politics, and even a sense of the futility of political art, have all been offered as reasons for its demise. But among the most sinister forces were the anticommunist witch hunts of the Cold War era. These intimidated many political artists and discouraged a new generation from making political art. Many lost jobs, faced deportation or had their passports revoked on suspicion of Communist sympathies.

In 1938 the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), claimed that the Federal Arts Project, especially the theater and writers projects were, "a hotbed of communists". Their investigations were given extensive press coverage. This pressure contributed to a reorganization of the WPA, weakening it substantially. World War II redirected most projects remaining to the war. The WPA was formally ended by presidential order in 1942.



Anton Refregier Mural, 1947

Anton Refregier's Treasury Section mural at the Rincon Center in San Francisco is titled "The History of California." Refregier won the commission at the beginning of World War II, which had delayed the project, making it the last project of all New Deal art programs. By the time it was completed in 1949 the political climate had turned very conservative and Refregier was forced to repaint parts that were found offensive to the tastes of the new era. The mural was vehemently discussed and denounced as it progressed. Government officials responsible for the mural did not allow him to include a portrait of FDR. While painting, he was threatened by angry groups that gathered to harass him.



Anton Refregier Mural, Chinese part, 1947

The mural tells the history of California without the usual positive angle that most New Deal murals presented. Controversial issues of vigilante justice, anti-Chinese violence, and the battle over whether California would be a slave state or not were boldly portrayed.



Anton Refregier, Mural, Vigilante, 1947

In another example of the rising tide of right wing bullying, Rockwell Kent, who had been one of the best known artists of the 1930s had his passport revoked by the US State Department, which refused to issue passports to Communists and their sympathizers. Rockwell Kent's case went to the Supreme Court. He opposed the State Department's claim of authority to revoke passports based on political association. The case was decided in Kent's favor in 1958 on free speech grounds. But the message was clearly sent against artists who had leftist leanings.

Artist-Worker Alliances

One model for artists and activists to work together in a politically engaged environment was the California Labor School in San Francisco. A Communist and Union school that included courses for union organizing, trade skills and culture, it was accredited for college level work, and was active from 1942 to 1957. It was shut down as a result of the anticommunist purges of the Cold War. The Graphic Arts Workshop print studio, spun off from the Labor School, survives to this day as its only vestige, now located on Third Street in San Francisco. Before it was shut down, the Labor School art department attracted a wide range of local and international artists with a strong connection to Mexico and the populist art traditions there. Pablo O'Higgins, an American who lived in Mexico and co-founded the collective printmaking workshop Taller de Gráfica Popular (T.G.P) in Mexico City, briefly taught at the Labor School. Mural artists Victor Arnautoff and Anton Refregier also taught at the Labor School. For a time, Giacomo Patri was the head of the art department.

Most of the artists in the San Francisco Bay Area that kept political art alive during this postwar period were somehow connected with the Labor School and the Graphic Arts Workshop. Some of them are better known than others, but the names of these artists have mostly been written out of the standard narrative of Bay Area art. Emmy Lou Packard, Pele deLappe, Richard Correll, Frank Rowe, Victor Arnautoff, Irving Fromer, Stanley Koppel. The FBI harassed all these artists; some were blacklisted, and most were dismissed by the art world. One powerful artist among these was Frank Rowe, a World War II veteran of the 101st Airborne Division who fought at the Battle of the Bulge. Like Scott Olsen who served in Iraq only to come home and discover, when the police stormed Occupy Oakland, that the Bill of Rights does not

necessarily apply in America, Frank Rowe returned to the US to find that the rights he had believed he was defending in war were being taken away. He was fired from teaching at San Francisco State University and blacklisted for refusing to sign a loyalty oath. The loyalty oath was later found unconstitutional, but not until Rowe had been hounded by the FBI and forced to move from job to job to survive. He continued to make his powerful political artwork and carry the ashes of struggle to another generation when political consciousness and political art was revived in the late 1960s.



Frank Rowe

Activism Takes New Forms

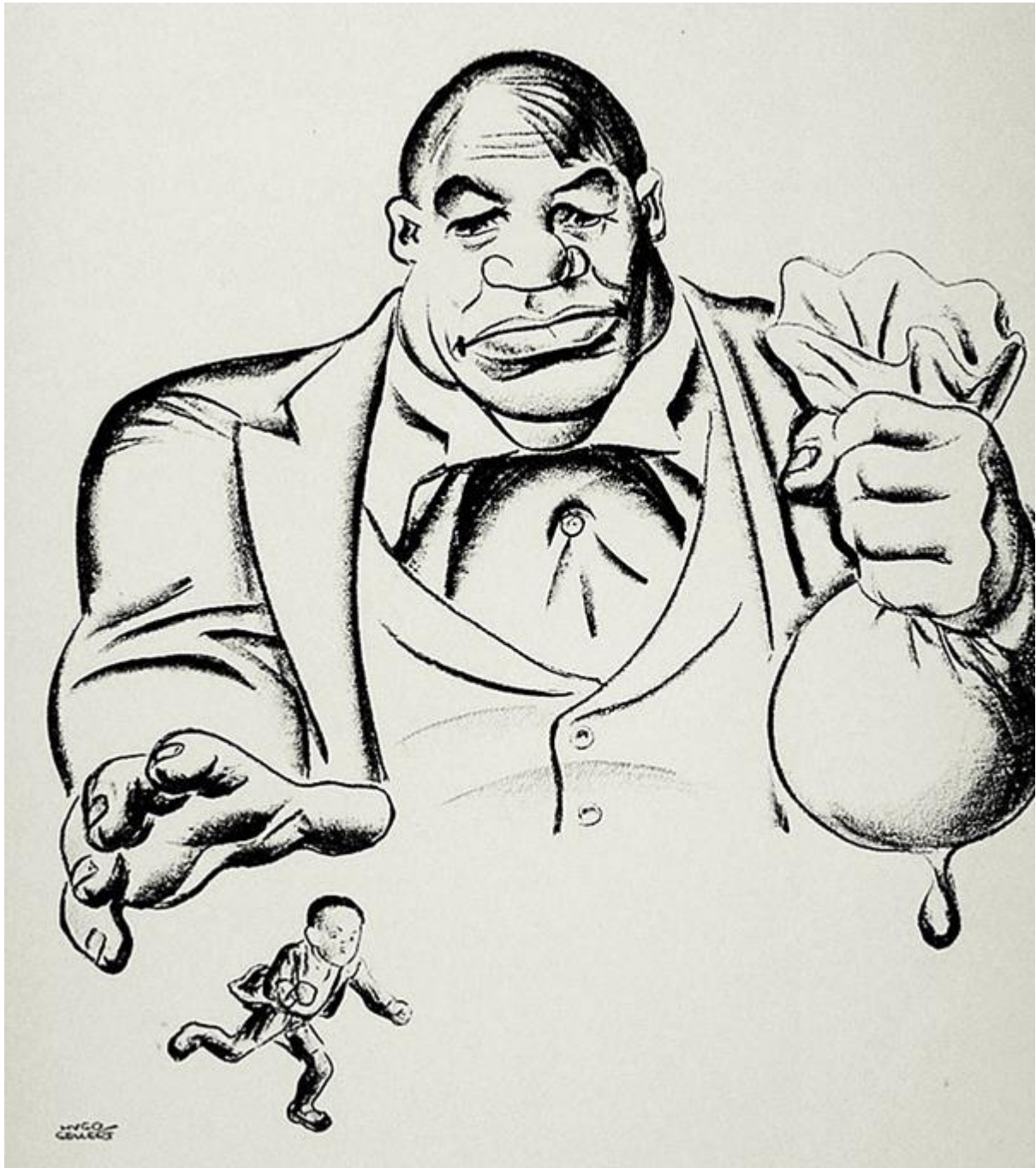
An example of the resurgence of political art and organizing is seen in the struggle around the I-Hotel (International Hotel) in San Francisco. With the postwar prosperity of the late 1940s, redevelopment and urban renewal became the focus of cities around the country. The federal government gave tax incentives that aided in the demolition of neighborhoods and the displacement of huge numbers of poor people. Minorities made up 75% of people displaced nationwide due to urban renewal projects. From Atlanta to Kansas City, from Pittsburgh to Boston, a series of infamous urban renewal projects destroyed poor communities. In 1953, San Francisco's Western Addition became the target of one of the largest urban renewal projects in the West, encompassing hundreds of city blocks and impacting close to 20,000 residents. By the late 1960s people were fed up with the arbitrary manner of these schemes.

In 1968 plans were made to destroy the International Hotel or I-Hotel in San Francisco, home to fifty elderly tenants, one of the last remnants of the Filipino community known as "Little Manila." Hundreds of people rallied to the defense of the I-Hotel. Many artists joined in this struggle.



Hotel I, San Francisco, 1968

Between 1975 and 1984, the San Francisco Poster Brigade designed hundreds of political posters. Though they called themselves a "brigade", there were no more than a few artists involved. Rachael Bell (now Rachael Romero) was the principal artist of the Poster Brigade. She created woodcuts that were later produced as offset posters, distributed at marches and put up on the street. They created several posters to protest the demolition of the I-Hotel. People organized to fight the demolition from 1968 until 1977 when, ultimately, 400 police in full riot gear stormed the building. The builder who evicted the tenants went bankrupt and the lot remained undeveloped for over 20 years. In a bittersweet victory, a new building called I-Hotel Manilatown Center has been constructed at the site.



Hugo-Gellert, Primary-Accumulation, The-Money Lender

Mission Grafica was founded in 1982 by artists Jos Sances and Rene Castro. In the early years Mission Grafica created hundreds of screenprint posters with artists from around the world. One of their major focuses was on Central American solidarity with the struggles going on there against US sponsored right wing governments and paramilitary groups. These posters were distributed widely and sent to many other countries. Mission Grafica is one of the largest of the print poster workshops from that era and it continues today, though without the volume of production and without the international scope it once had. But it continues to serve as an incubator for political artist groups that spin off and create their own workshops and political actions. One such group, started in 2000, is the San Francisco Print Collective.

Following in the tradition of the San Francisco Poster Brigade, the San Francisco Print Collective (SFPC) was founded by a group of artists with the purpose of using graphic art to support social justice organizing. The first campaigns of the SFPC focused on the gentrification of the Mission. Again the displacement of poor people became a rallying cry for artists. The SFPC allies itself with various activist organizations to create work and also to help the activists create work that speaks to their struggles. The SFPC uses screenprint posters, banners and murals created in collaboration with organizations including the Coalition on Homelessness and the Mission Anti-displacement Coalition. In 2006, they worked with Northern California War Tax Resistance to create a poster campaign that focused attention on federal spending priorities in a time of war.

We've seen a revival of politically oriented art over the last ten years, especially in reaction to the run up to the Iraq War. A lot more artists have created political art. Well-known artists such as Richard Serra and Fernando Botero who rarely touched on politics have made work. But aside from the famous, many other artists threw themselves in with dedication, feeling that they had to do something.

Sensing the need for something to unify these many artists, New York artist Stephen Fredericks and I put together a group of shows to try to give support to these various actions. Our project was called Art of Democracy. We linked up over 50 shows nationwide and distributed more than 100 posters designed and printed by artists all over the country. We had shows in red states and in blue, in museums and in cafes, all at the same time in the run up to the presidential election of 2008. Artists in each of these shows did outreach through events on the street, political actions, billboards, etc. Art of Democracy activated many artists and encouraged them to make political work. Some work was like a cry in the night, a scream of rage, some was simply a call for common sense, and some was sophisticated political commentary. Our inspiration was print shows organized in the 1930s such as Art Against War and Fascism, which took place in multiple cities at the same time.

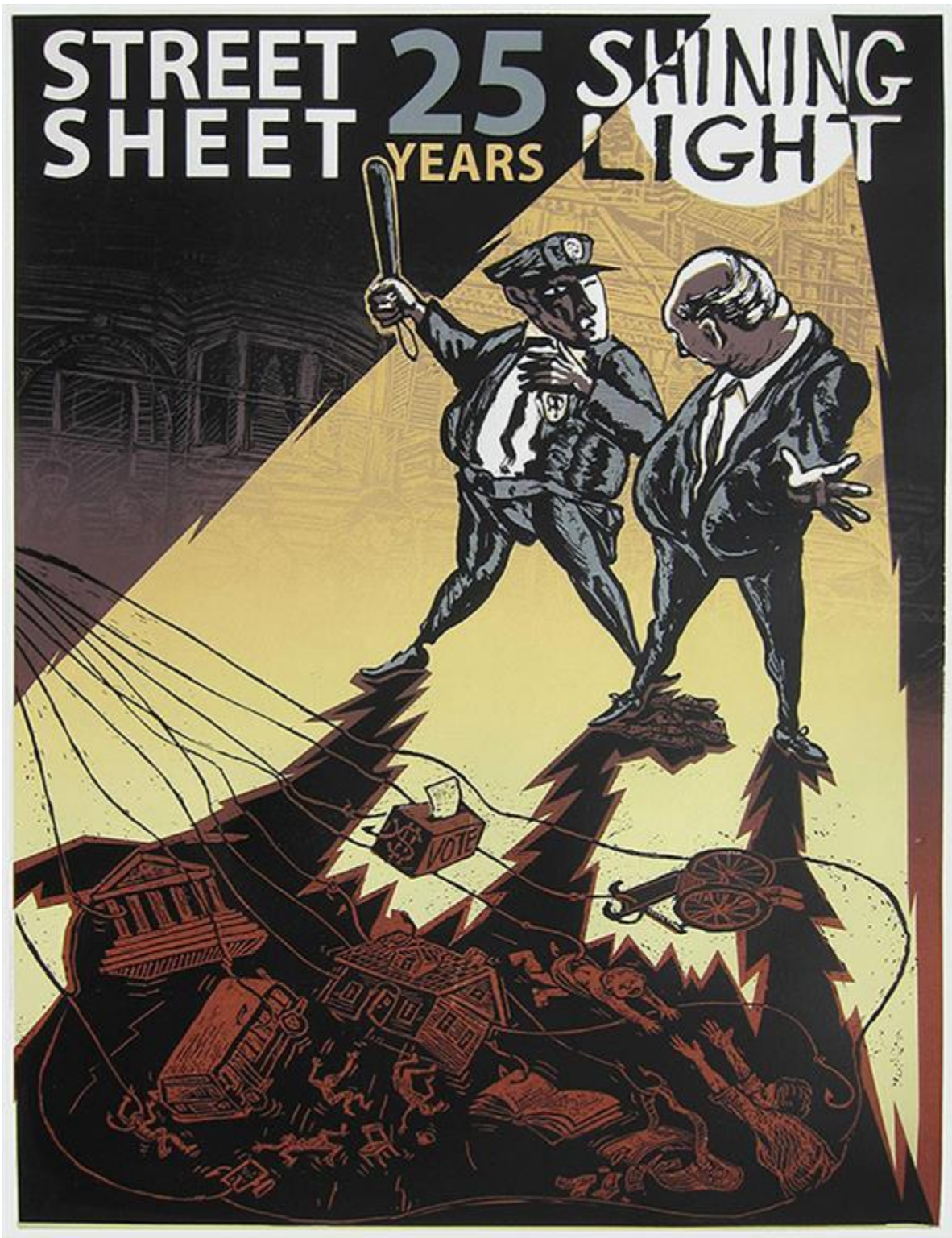


Another approach to political art is a show I organized with artists Francisco Dominguez and Doug Minkler. The exhibition is called *New World Border*. Artists were invited to create posters and prints about the border wall that the US is building on the US/Mexico border. The exhibit is set up to travel easily with lightweight artwork ready for hanging. The work has been shown at community centers, high schools, galleries and colleges. Many of the venues have connected the art show to their own programming about the border wall and other border issues. Some of the participating artists are significant figures in Bay Area political art over the last forty years, including artists associated with the Chicano Poster Movement-- Malaquias Montoya, and Juan Fuentes; with the Black Panthers-- Emory Douglas; with the Kearny Street

Workshop-- Nancy Hom, as well as younger artists focusing on political issues such as Favianna Rodriguez and Imin Yeh.

Art and Homelessness

In 1979 Ronald Reagan rode to power along with the rise of conservative politics and the dismantling of safety net programs that had originated in the 1930s. Reagan immediately set about destroying New Deal programs. Naturally his first targets were poor people and the mentally ill. In a slow motion repeat of the Great Depression, poverty and homelessness again became visible in cities across the US as public housing was defunded and mental institutions were emptied. By the mid 1980s, emergency homeless shelters were opening across the country. Those emergency shelters remain open today, nearly three decades later. By the late 1980s activists were organizing and artists were starting to respond to the crisis.




Jos Sances, Street Sheet Shining Light

The San Francisco Street Sheet is the oldest continuously published newspaper about homelessness in the US. It began in 1989 as a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. The American Friends Service Committee has published the Street Spirit based in Oakland, California since 1996. Both papers have always used paintings, cartoons, woodcuts, screenprints and drawings to address issues of economic justice and homelessness.

The papers draw attention to the struggle for dignity and human rights by low-income and poor people facing eviction, homelessness, psychiatric treatment and other issues. They report from the shelters, soup kitchens and SRO hotels, places the mainstream press rarely visits. Homeless vendors sell the papers, of which there are now twenty-three in various US cities. All these papers have access to a shared Internet archive of artwork that addresses homelessness, another way to broaden the reach of imagery.

WESTERN REGIONAL ADVOCACY PROJECT
2005 10 YEARS STRONG 2015
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING • DIRECT ACTION • OUTREACH • RESEARCH • ARTWORK • STREET THEATER

PEOPLE ARE NOT "BROKEN WINDOWS"
HOUSE KEYS NOT HANDCUFFS

 WRAPHOME.ORG

In 2006, the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) produced *Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness and Policy Failures*, a report that pointed out the policies the federal government has pursued since the early 1980s to sharply reduce funding for affordable housing. The report uses artwork to portray the statistical data. I organized artists to illustrate the messages of this report. I also created a poster used in the report that represented the dwindling funds for public housing as ever-shrinking buildings, while the rise in homelessness is represented by larger and larger human figures.

WRAP brings together grassroots groups in the Western US to address wider issues of federal and state policies that affect homeless people. Many of the homeless rights groups are too busy dealing with local issues to have time for the bigger picture. WRAP is an example of an organization that seeks to bring artists into activist realms. It is a mutually beneficial union--artistic imagery can help educate and build the emotional commitment of members and of the public. In turn, by working with these organizations, artists gain a deeper understanding of the issues. The relationship also provides artists with a wider audience for their messages.



Because of my connection with homeless rights groups over the last seventeen years, I have learned of the activities of many artists to address issues of homelessness and have encouraged others to make art about this issue. In 2009 I curated an exhibition at the California Historical Society called *Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present*. This show has been traveling since then and will continue for another year to museums around California and in Colorado. For me the act of curating is an extension of art and organizing. Museums are generally slow to respond to current events. *Hobos to Street*

People is one of the few shows (if there are others, I am unaware of them) that deal with the affects of our economic system on society.

While the exhibition was on display in San Francisco, I counted several fashion shows at the big museums, but nothing on the economic dislocation we were all feeling. Of course since that time, museums have had time to react to the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression... and they have given us more fashion shows. This last month, the book I authored to accompany Hobos to Street People was published by Freedom Voices press. The text and images tell the story of the parallels and differences between the 1930s and today. A clear similarity is the artists who have embraced their role as participants in this political struggle for an equitable and just society.



The exhibition: Between Struggle & Hope

Understanding this period of time, and some of the actions that artists took and continue to take, can help political artists to shape how they act in the world. They can form both artist alliances and alliances with activists. By building relationships, artists can keep the resilience needed for the long haul, because there are and will be forces arrayed against you. The truth and justice of a cause will be opposed by the most stunning variety of forces, many you never imagined would oppose you. What seems like a completely rational solution will be the target of vicious attacks from entrenched interests. You will be vilified; you will be shunned. Fellow

artists will demonize you. Curators will mock you. Newspapers will dismiss you as a joke. Industry front groups will portray you as a stooge of other industry front groups. To fight back you'll need allies. The independent heroic artist is a figment of the art marketplace; work with others to build a movement.



This Camera Fights Fascism, David Bacon & Francisco Dominguez

This brings us back to the question posed at the beginning of this article-- does political art have an impact on the world? The right wing response is to say art never stopped a war, art didn't stop lynching, art didn't save the I-Hotel nor did it end repressive attacks on homeless people. But art does not exist in a vacuum. It is a part of culture. And political art that stands up to the repressive forces of society is a part of the culture of change. Political art does have effects in the real world, it is clearly part of the force, not the only force, but part of the force that keeps the human spirit alive. It keeps the flame of justice burning. It keeps memory alive. It moves with the struggles and moves those struggles forward.

Art Hazelwood is the author of the newly released book **Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present** and has curated three shows currently on display at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University: the traveling show, **Hobos to Street People**, as well as **Between Struggle and Hope: Envisioning a Democratic Art in the 1930s**, and **This Camera Fights Fascism: The Photographs of David Bacon and Francisco Dominguez**.

Reference:

<http://www.artbusiness.com/artists>