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Artists in Uniform: Mural Work, Public Archives, and the Invention of a Usable Past

Works of art are traps set for life—if the trap is well set, life is snared within it forever.
—Wolfgang Paalen, 1939 diary entry

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion.
—Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever

The concept of the archive as a cultural repository bears much importance in relation to the New Deal murals. To galvanize the federal art project’s motif of national continuity, the artists put to work by the FDR administration turned to the past. The retrospective tendencies on display in the murals, the ways in which their rural images sacralize American country life, appear to share little with the ongoing conditions of unemployment-related poverty and social instability that troubled 1930’s America. At stake, for the 40,000 “New Deal” artists and writers put to work manufacturing a new cultural milieu, was the attrition of the symbolic American value system, jeopardized by the fallout of the 1929 market crash. As significant, though, to the irony of visual artists commissioned by the state was how consecration collapsed distinctions between the two. Muralists became harbingers, not of social change as many artists were in the 1920s, but of a style of painting to counter dissent. The murals project envisaged a national view of public space. For this, government-sanctioned “mural work” would stall, preclude, or even dismantle the socially active avant-gardist groups growing in import and popularity since the 1913 Armory Show. By implication, this also meant devaluing more solipsistic, alternative ways of bohemian living and emergent aesthetic practices, such as surrealism, which ostensibly linked art to radial political reformation and the dissolution of
hegemonic mercantile systems. Reacting to the crisis of the Great Depression, public muralists assumed the spatial practice of cultural production, depicting on walls the social geography of a unified landscape. To what extent the New Deal muralists, be it implicitly or explicitly, reified schemas of unequal power distribution maintained by the cultural logic of dominance—the ideological precondition necessary to form any idealized conception of a collective such as nationhood—is, of course, a more complicated matter, involving a cultural exchange between individual artists and a publicly cultivated set of archival practices.

**Federalizing the Muse**

Under the extensive mandate of Roosevelt's New Deal, the muralists reached back into history, toward an idyllic time before the troubles of the Great Depression. Its recuperating vision aimed to restore America's cultural symbols. Through paint and brush the New Deal images displayed countrified depictions of uniquely American ways of life. The common practice was to paint directly onto the raw interior surfaces of federal and state buildings, rather than to paint on removable canvases and hang them in America's public spaces—a distinction that will matter in this paper for questions of cultural significance and symbolic duration.

Still visible on the interior surface of the post office in Galesburg, Illinois, for instance, is the painted image of a New Deal mural, which stretches across the width of the lobby. Valuing the emergent moment of historical settlement, *Breaking the Prairie – Log City 1837 fig#1*, completed in 1935 by federal muralist Aaron Bohrod, depicts a scene painted in a social realist style. In the backdrop, the wilderness of the New World is cultivated for the first time by the sedulous hands of pioneer families, guiding horse and plow through rows of fertile, black soil. When viewed independently, apart from the other pieces commissioned by the public murals project, this founding story of "Log City" might appear to announce the establishment of Galesburg as a historical, if not mythical, singularity. Yet, in actual fact, backbreaking work that opened the agricultural land of Northeastern Illinois for settlement is framed by the New Deal's directive to disseminate a much larger, nation-
alist narrative, for at least 225,000 comparable murals were installed in the 1930’s by
the murals project.1 Taken together, their common subject matter reifies the com-
mon founding narrative of small-town America, and does so in highly aestheticized
terms.

Insofar as the murals project was deeply embedded within the New Deal’s call
for a return to progress, thereby advancing one of Sacvan Bercovitch’s main claims
about the configuration of the “American Jeremiad,” the murals did not, at least ex-
plicitly, instruct on the religious ways in which a people have fallen from the Pur-
tan norm.2 Here the New Deal’s cultural project of reformation appears to consti-
tute a secular turn in public policy. Any sense that the images sought to unify a peo-
ple by creating tension between ideal social life and its real manifestation was
achieved only through a contrast between past and present. Further, the nostalgic
images from America’s past differ greatly from Bercovitch’s study of Puritanism and
the American myth because the New Deal, as primarily an economic project, did
not readily engage with a Christian sense of redemption tied to moral transgression
or original sin. The murals project, for this reason, constitutes a shift away from the
biblical lamentations of Jerimiah (“I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right
seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto
me?”).3 Jeremiah’s sermon on the symbolic transgression of the land was not em-
braced by New Deal politics after 1929, perhaps because the Stock Market Crash
begs to be read as the era’s most significant marker of America’s possible transgres-
sion. Of course, highlighting the instability of the financial institution was not the
New Deal’s cultural mandate; to the contrary, it was to recuperate and reestablish
through positivist terms a sense of American identity. This decree was achieved by
means of inclusion rather than exclusion, whereby even peripheral towns like Gales-
burg could be more completely integrated into the national narrative should its peo-
ple return to work for progress.

We can also delineate how the murals collectivized America’s working class as
much as they universalized the founding myth of small-town America. Specific mu-
rals, like the one commissioned for Galesberg, incorporated details like men clutch-
ing and swinging axes. The inclusions of these hand-tools sanctify the forces of hard,
collective labour that opened up the American frontier. The work is performed under the watchful eye of the city’s founder, George Washington Gale, a Presbyterian minister, who dreamed of establishing a college of manual labour. And while there are obviously numerous Christian overtones, as I have already pointed out, we must not, in identifying them, underestimate the myth of American progress, which, by the 1930s, due to Fordism and similar industrialist strategies, came more readily to delineate the identity of the American worker than a nostalgia for religious convictions past. Capitalist progress meant expansion and growth using America’s two greatest assets: natural resources and human labour. The wood-framed structure under construction in the background was, in fact, identifiable as the vocational, rather than religious, college established by Gale, the town’s founder. It also held a national significance. One of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, as any grade school history book might tells us, took place at Knox Manual Labour College. Speaking in Galesburg, Abraham Lincoln argued that the land of America itself served to “unite” citizens who must labour together “as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.”

Fulfilling a similar conviction of national unification, these dense and highly charged local histories chosen for display in the National Post Offices functioned to romanticize the American pastoral.

Performative scenes of American workers in action are also suggestive of how the murals project aimed to depict a nation built through struggle, thereby advocating that the principles of hard labour persist during the Great Depression. Whether or not you view the perpetual labouring of America’s lower class as a Sisyphean task, put in affective terms, at least, these scenes of American bodies at work are “performative” in ways that can be linked to what Judith Butler has argued. Butler posits the human figure itself as the site of perfomativity: how we act as corporeal subjects is determined by cultural and social figurations of the body. What this adds to our discussion of the murals project is that an ongoing sense of progress matches the ongoing project to transform and collectivize how individual American subjects define their identities as corporeal subjects. The physicality on display in the murals rein-
forces the performativity of the body at work in the American landscape. The murals, in other words, reinforce how the viewer’s body can best perform or act to fulfill their social obligations as a worker. The foregrounding of quotidian labour, in addition, postulates the normative conduct of citizens to be a kind of permanent labouring for the greater good. Viewing the country murals, one also gets the feeling that struggle is somehow valorized, viewed as more admirable than facile forms of affluence that might jeopardize the formidable American character.

Likewise, painted cityscapes, while differing from pastoral landscapes in terms of surface qualities and formal elements, cast a similar projection of universalized public decree. New Deal murals ubiquitously championed America’s technological icons produced through seemingly astonishing feats of ingenuity by the common man. The painters’ use of impressionist techniques, such as vibrant colors applied side-by-side, with as little mixing as possible to create a dynamic surface, accentuate landmarks in the long history of American progress, such as bridgework, skyscrapers, and railroads. They illustrate how these engineering feats were achieved not through dissent or by questioning the task at hand, but through collective unity. A compensatory function of the murals project, then, paid tribute to the retrospective charms and vernacular elements characteristic of American durability, and, as such, predominantly overlooked the more systemic problems associated with soaring inner-city unemployment or the westward mobility of farm workers displaced by the “black blizzard” in the Midwestern dustbowl. Further at stake, then, in this project of cultural suture, was the calculated mitigation of the various national tensions and public anxieties that emerged alongside the potential for further erosion of a symbolic American landscape.

Archiving the event, for New Deal artists, involved narrativizing choice historical moments in which common folks laid the foundations for future communities, most often depicting events that took place in the same municipalities where the murals were installed. For many artists, this focus on collective labour induced a noteworthy shift away from his earlier autonomous art destined for the museum or private collector—as in the case of Louis Lozowick’s abstract piece from 1923, New
York (*Brooklyn Bridge*) fig. #2. In 1938’s *Bridge Repair* fig #3, Lozowick reworked his constructivist painting into a muralist image more reflective of the artistic milieu of the period—or, at least, of the WPA’s mandate—this time peopling his cityscape with construction workers, and at least one looks down on a city skyline gridded by bridge cables and other signs of industrial progress. Lozowick described his new role in patriotic terms, while offering some insights into how the apparent slippage of the national narrative after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 will be rectified: “The dominant trend in America of today, beneath all the apparent chaos and confusion, is toward order and organization.”

Renewed stability, for Lozowick, would occur through the public’s deep-seated resistance to radical reorganization. By installing the preservation of heritage into the tension between the American worker and the failing economic system, New Deal muralists displayed a willingness to close the circle of tradition, rather than opening it into a widening schism. Federal muralists knowingly, and by design, operated as social workers of the American uncanny, recuperating what Lozowick described as the “outward signs and symbols” from time-honoured value systems held deep within the collective—and very much material, geographical—unconscious.

Here we can draw on poststructuralist arguments to further an understanding of history as the collective memory. Like the individual memory, society recalls from history whatever information it needs to function in a given moment, and the needs of both individual and societal change. Having announced these problems fundamental to the concept of historiography in his study of the archive, Jacques Derrida purposely suggests that historical events are often repressed or advanced because the institutionalized “power of the state” imposes its rights over the historian, and “this right imposes or supposes a bundle of limits which have a history, a deconstructable history.” For public muralists these limits are now remarkably visible. To conduct the rewriting of history fundamental to the public arts project, the state granted the New Deal muralist access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. Because all pieces were approved prior to their installation, however, the state controlled the limits of the subject matter and the appropriate terms of expression.
As a case in point, in 1939 the painter Michael Siporin won a federal commission contest (as was the standard) to paint a mural series in fresco for the St. Louis Post Office. After completing the project, simply titled, *Cycle on History of Region*, the muralist openly recognized the importance of politicized “memory work” as creative process.\(^1\) He explained that in order to win the bid, the job description of the muralist required reevaluation of “the past in attempt to bring about a new synthesis of form and content, growing out of the artist’s own milieu, and the new social functions in our society” (64). Rather than the kind of social history found in the books, modern art in museums, or in the European avant-garde threatening the bourgeois upper class,\(^2\) this redressing of the American archive involved a mutually beneficial, and deconstructable, relationship between the artist and the state.

In light of Siporin’s commentary, it would be difficult to find a clearer example of what Horkheimer and Adorno sketched out in their initial appraisal of the culture industry: “The more strongly the culture industry entrenches itself, the more it can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers—producing, controlling, disciplining them; even withdrawing amusement all together: here, no limits are set to cultural progress.”\(^3\) Artists in uniform were dependant on monies earned; federal service, therefore, precluded one kind of creative license while it also gave rise to a new kind of cultural work. In the drying paint of state-sanctioned artists also congealed the semiotic terms of the American status quo. Collective integrity and artistic identity, however, risked becoming common casualties of this process.

In *Federal Art and National Culture*, Jonathan Harris explores 1930’s cultural progress as politicized ideology. For Harris, formerly unemployed artists working for the FDR administration serviced the larger strategy to produce a hegemonic discourse imbued with the capitalist principles of the New Deal. Given what we know about the widespread conditions of poverty, to some extent, Harris appears to be right. The Great Crash was similar to the more recent Wall Street downturn in 2008, but with less attenuated scales of federal stimulus and forfeiture. Lacking the essential countermeasures of stop-loss, the monetary deprivation that quickly became quotidian life in 1930’s America required a much more radical restructuring...
of the economic superstructure. By 1933, with the majority living well below the poverty line and experiencing firsthand the inadequacies of life without social security, Americans summoned up overwhelming public support for FDR’s complex set of economic programs. Among others, these bills included the genesis of social welfare programs still operative in America today. Yet, rather than liberating the proletariat, it was the public work of the burgeoning culture industry, Harris believes, that ratified a new era of governmental jurisdiction, whose top-down control strategies indentured artists for the purposes of ideological control. It is not too much, for Harris, to say that an emerging late capitalism washed over America’s muraled walls and publicly displayed canvases, along with the affective markers of economic and ideological production, not least the performative images of the working class previously discussed in this section.

Peculiarly, or perhaps not so peculiarly, depending on one’s level of commitment to Marxist dialectics, Harris’s viewpoint has not held much clout outside left-thinking circles. It remains the stand-alone study on the issue of consecration and the public murals project. In *Art and Politics in the 1930s*, Susan Platt attends to the scores of Marxist artists working throughout the years of the Great Depression, but dismisses Harris’s appraisal of the 1930s culture industry: “Harris sees the government discourse as a one-way street that manipulates artists, citizens, and even administrators” (163). Forming her resistance, Platt’s claim is that federal messages fell apart because there was no ideological unity between artists:

The Treasury Section gave large lump-sum commissions for murals in many new buildings, such as the Post Office, Justice Building, the Federal Trade building, and the Interior Department, but the murals ranged from racist interpretations of Indians in a pony express scene by Frank Mechau in the National Post Office to the Marxist-inspired worker images of a dam-building scene in the Department of the Interior by William Gropper. In other words, what Harris loses in his model of state subjugation is the play of power being negotiated between various individuals or subgroups within the artistic
collective. Platt is certainly not alone in her assessment. Writing in 2002, some three years after Platt’s assessment, Andrew Hemingway notes Harris’s study as the “single exception” because it recognize the problem of ideology; however, *Federal Art and National Culture*, from which his book takes its name, “operates with such a crude instrument model that it does not advance matters…. In his account the power of the state only works one way, and citizenship itself is an oppressive category.”

Judging from these remarks, it appears that Platt’s assessment of Harris also forced Hemingway to rethink his own previous opinions of the book. In fact, Hemingway’s statements do not match his earlier and much more favorable review.

To establish a surmountable approach to the memory work of populist murals we will need to supersede the terms of this antithesis. Because systems of thought fluctuate, the terms of power and social influence remain in a state of flux; out of this capricious climate arises the occasion for a critical reappraisal. My hope for the remainder of this article is to arrest the prevailing bifurcation, to test the cultural archive produced by the Federal Arts Project as it responded to various external pressures, and to examine how it reframed history in the process. As a case in point, I will explore how the murals forcibly mitigated the ontological threat of European abstraction that had been advancing in revolutionary potential since the 1913 Armory Show. Of course, now that we have familiarized ourselves with the rise of the New Deal, I will not chronicle it much further. I shall only address the bureaucratic origins of the major projects as they relate to new forms of ontological and semiotic production. It is easy to forget that U.S. Post Offices and other federal buildings did not always have murals on their surfaces. When American art shifted away from easel painting destined for the private collector what was left out, omitted? The long tradition of civic painting dates back, at least, to the fresco traditions in the Renaissance, or, even more accurately, the Middle Ages; yet, in the course of America’s history, murals denote a distinct cultural moment due to their status as architectural afterthoughts. Further, it is a twentieth-century phenomenon. As Francis O’Connor argues in the introduction to his collection of essays, *Art for the Millions*, throughout FDR’s term of office the president sought to supplant the
role of the museum as the preeminent cultured space for modernist art in favor of more readily accessible art forms. This shift from private artists to public artisan-ship calls for a theoretical model to assess the aesthetics of this mass culture funded by the state. To explore this topic, I will first discuss the Armory Show as a turning point in the history of American art, an event which produced, on an ontological level, an awareness of how cultural practices can critique or reinforce the institution. With this in mind I will then come back to consider to what extent the state-funded mural work nullified the ontological threat of modern art as it averted a large-scale economic reform in 1930’s America.

**Ontological Terrorism (1913)**

If art denotes a material practice—the painter’s wielding of his brush in three-dimensional space to render two-dimensional images in paint—it also connotes a more general problem regarding the display of human mastery over nature and the preservation of modernist traditions in the guise of flatness or inauthenticity. In twentieth century art there is a consistent distinction to be made between surface and that formal autonomy. As Clement Greenberg asserted in a now-notorious passage from “Modernist Art:”

> Each art had to determine, though the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. . . . It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. Flatness alone was unique to that art. . . and so Modernist painting orientated itself to flatness as it did nothing else.

Yet for the artist to reflexively scrutinize the mimetic faculties of his own work, in America, at least, was equated with a deficit in aesthetic value. Despite the influx of renegade modern artists (Breton, Duchamp) who fled Europe between the wars, reflexive practices failed to take root in ways one might expect. Indeed, the formal conventions of retinal art were practiced in the New World well into the twentieth century.
America’s famous disdain for European approaches to art climaxed with the upheaval of the 1913 Armory Show. European abstraction signaled consciously for many Americans that the purpose and aesthetic value of art is to maintain a kind of concrete accessibility. Like Lincoln’s earlier cited declaration about the American landscape, American art was supposed to be art by and for the people. This reaction against abstraction, however ironic in its misinterpretation of avant-garde art practices, provided the momentum necessary for the later mural projects to take shape.

Another decisive reason why European art was not wholly embraced in the United States was because museums and private collectors played a less central role in disseminating cultural capital than in Europe. “A great deal of ink,” writes William Innes Homer, “has been spilled about the role of the Academy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which, despite its weakness in America, has been scorned as the final barrier to modernism.”

The painting that most often produced this sense of interpretive dissonance and loss of control—and that, not coincidentally, aroused the most frequent and vehement outcries from critics—was Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* fig.#4. Observers of the Armory Show have focused a great deal of attention on the conflict the *Nude* provoked. While in France the painting received due clout and many favorable reviews, critics in America commonly described it as looking like “an explosion-in-a-shingle-factory,” on account of jaundiced tones that were juxtaposed by Duchamp to form the dynamic planes of a naked human body in motion. The stilted equation between practicing modern art and terrorism (i.e. bomb-like metaphors) would certainly have resonated at the time of the exhibition given the context of a British freighter named *Alum Chin*, which had just crossed the Atlantic carrying 343 tonnes of dynamite, and exploded in the Baltimore harbor with the force of an earthquake. Indeed, some commentators went so far as to call the Armory Show—on exhibition in New York until March 15, 1913—a kind of “intellectual dynamite.” Theodore Roosevelt compared Duchamp’s *Nude* to “a really good Navajo rug” he had in his bathroom. Yet Roosevelt’s “Layman’s View” article about the art exhibition also claimed terrorist references when describing the “lunatic fringe” of “European extremists.”
Defining the functionalities between viewer and materialist value also leads to the more perplexing problem of how an aesthetic so aware of its own construction could have received so much negative criticism. Inasmuch as the Armory Show stirred negative responses, the new methods of signification on display did indeed bring a type of ontological terrorism to America. Critics who saw these works not only voiced xenophobic concerns about the growing cultural dissent and civil unrest in continental Europe in 1913. Such claims also dealt more implicitly with the iconoclastic potentiality of art, which, I would argue, up to that moment in America had never been consciously conceived, at least by the lower class. Consequently, the question of what to make of the dynamic tones from the Fauves, and the Cubists’ use of manifold perspectives, seemed to trouble layman and art critic alike. Such vital principles of modern art attacked preceding criteria of aesthetic judgment, particularly negating orthodox ideas of form, colour and composition. The instability of these images challenged single-point perspective and necessitated a new critical logic of interpretation in order to grasp its abstractionist concepts.

Curiously, the collateral damage caused by these new signifying systems was relatively minimal. Modernist art was markedly impotent as a direct political threat. Consider how European art might have radically challenged American consciousness by communicating how its object circulations, commodity values, and spatial conceptions resonated in more hegemonic, Gramscian ways. Peter Bürger voices his contempt for the flattening practices he discerned in Cubism, for instance, practices he distinguishes as autonomous, not political and thus not avant-garde. Radical innovations in form, Bürger argues, have impeded art’s potential for revolutionary cultural reform because highly aestheticized or metaphysical styles are dissociated from the praxis of life. Modernist art’s attunement to a different, less Marxist interpretation, namely mastery and formal experimentation, was, therefore, far from revolutionary in the political sense. Given what we know about the historical avant-garde, the majority of the pieces in the Armory Show were surely made by modernists, with the exception, perhaps, of Duchamp, whom in 1917 would go on to create his avant-garde Fountain. The exhibition, then, was moderate, and in stark contrast
to the radical Dada movement which was in full swing across the Atlantic. Surrealist culture in France at this time was also cultivating a similar disdain for the state. André Breton called for the ontological redefinition of human relations, prompted mainly through a hybridized conception of the Freudian unconscious and Bolshevism. Thus America’s reaction to the Armory Show was relatively tame, in retrospect at least, and serves more as a systemic indicator of the insular way in which American art was being practiced and institutionalized.

American critic Adeline Adams, writing in 1914 on “The Point of View of the Moderns,” concluded that the problem with “the new school of emotion-painters” was not that they “forswear representation,” but how they “label their pictures” (861). A lack of obvious realism did not bother Adams so much as how the enigmatic naming of paintings—Wassily Kandinsky’s Improvisation No. 27 (Garden of Love), for instance—arrested a critic’s usual faculties of judgment. For this reason, Duchamp’s Fountain of 1917 redefined the manner in which viewers incorporate exterior conditions, such as names and museum fixtures, in rendering their assessment of an art object’s cultural capital. The piece succeeded, therefore, through its defamiliarizing separation between artistic subject and commonplace object. Yet, for Adams, toying with external parameters was more of a clever gimmick, kitsch perhaps (cultural trash), but not art. Terms of identification also concerned Roosevelt, but of a different type. As a cross-section, the Armory Show assembled a wide variety of pieces; oftentimes an art object from Europe could not be understood, even at a basic level, without situating it within the aesthetic parameters of painterly movement or historical lineage. For this reason, foreign art might have been truly alienating for the American viewing subject:

There is no reason why people should not call themselves Cubists, or Octagonists, or Parallelipipedonists, or Knights of the Isosceles Triangle, or Brothers of the Cosine, if they so desire; as expressing anything serious and permanent, one term is as fatuous as another.
If this tongue-in-cheek rejoinder doesn’t offer any tangible evidence, then surely the American art school students who attempted to burn a Matisse in effigy when the Armory Show installation traveled to Chicago substantiates the charged level of this “intellectual dynamite,” and art’s threatening potential for serious damage. Of course, the ontological threat simply subverted previous aesthetic judgments of art objects and not the politics behind everyday life in America.

**Manufacturing Ontology (1929 onwards)**

While it would be difficult, if not impossible, to correlate a direct lineage between reactions to the Armory show and the privileging of traditional figuration by New Deal artists, many resonances can be presented. If the public mural industry of the 1930s valorized an idyllic and often pastoral image of America’s past, it did so as a means to consecrate cultural unity and rescind the threat of the Armory Show by removing the political potential of art from cultural memory. However, the difficulty in assessing elision as it pertains to state patronage and its turn away from modern art practices is that very little theoretical work has been done thus far.

The twenty years between these two events were coupled with a serious decline in the American art market, especially the demand for work by its own artists. To keep their doors open, the majority of art dealers, even in major centers like Boston and New York, either removed themselves from the market place or intensified their importation of French art in order to satisfy the vanity of a dwindling group of economically secure clientele. Perhaps this decline in American painting was also due to the audacity of modernism itself, the way in which it established a more complicated, extra-mercantile understanding of art as commodity and its circulation of objects. Either that, or art in America was simply unpopular, out of fashion as quickly as it arrived with the Armory Show. In 1931, Edward Bruce, director of Public Works of Art Project, noted that in the years between these two events, American art, in its immature explorations of abstraction, had drifted away from its own historical traditions. “‘Modern art is foreign to our tastes,’ he claimed; if only Americans could overcome their inferiority complex in relation to Europe, they would create a
“Renaissance” (in McDonald 58). More fascinating, perhaps, is the calculated way traditional representation was employed by muralists to restore the expressive power of the old symbolic order. To remove conventional figuration would be detrimental to the cultural formation of national ideology since the symbolic American landscape stands in as a kind of cipher on which the control of the state depends.

There was progress, nevertheless, between individuals and the way in which the burgeoning public mural industry allowed them to confront these art objects. George Biddle, a lawyer and hobby artist, was impressed with the way in which recent murals on public buildings by Mexicans, particularly Diego Rivera, depicted images of nationalist character. An old friend of FDR’s dating back to Groton preparatory school, Biddle wrote a letter to Roosevelt on May 9, 1933 that was in a certain sense the occasion that inaugurated the New Deal Arts Projects:

There is a matter which I have long considered and which some day might interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers’ wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideas of the Mexican revolution.31

Ten days later, the President replied:

DEAR GEORGE:
It is delightful to hear from you and I am interested in your suggestion in regard to the expression of art through mural paintings. I wish you would have a talk some day with Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Robert, who is in charge of the Public Buildings’ work.32

Funding art required substantial justification of its merits, yet the project would eventually go ahead.33

Although the WPA issued an official pamphlet on the subject of style, and patronage requests were chosen by national competition, there was a fair amount
of formal variation. The so-called Chicago school, represented by artists such as Edgar Britton and Michael Siporin, cultivated a realist type of design (which could be easily criticized, even for the period, as too photographic). They did, of course, emphasize typically American scenes portraying men and women engaged in laborious tasks of social enterprise. One style that attracted much less attention was the semi-abstract mural, favored by a small group in New York City. This method incorporated a kind of fusion of techniques between traditional and modern forms. Subject matter, on the other hand, remained focused on feats of national durability. In viewing the public murals there is more or less a benevolent relationship, and in particular the individual is no longer bothered by the level of veracity or illusion in a piece. Perhaps due to their instillations in public places, rather than being confined to museums, public murals were governed by stringent terms of social praxis. For this reason, the mural scenes further invert what we know about autonomous modes of representation. Recall Jean Baudrillard’s claim about the system of “marginal objects.” By depicting frivolous experiences and objects of daily life “what has been liberated in them—and what, in being liberated by them, has liberated something from man (or rather, perhaps, what man, in liberating himself, has liberated in them)—is their function.”  

Yet for all intents and purposes New Deal murals were politically manufactured in ways contrary to such claims; function was primary, since most often what was removed in the 1930’s murals is any perceivable flatness in the painting, and therefore precluded from the American landscapes is any viable sense of modernist autonomy, of art for art’s sake. Like the solid walls of the public buildings on which they were they were erected, murals depicting public life were funded by tax dollars and for such reasons performed a decisive function for members of the state. Mobilized artists working on the public project, as well, then, rescinded the cultural threat of the Armory Show’s ontological revolution, if only because by privileging traditional figuration they performed the opposite work required to revolutionize any sense of ontology. It was a reinstatement of critical values, reifying American symbolic systems, which, in turn, rescinded the threats of modernism and perhaps other, more political forms of “European” extremism. Public murals, by virtue of
necessity, furthered a great cultural divide between museum art and the New Deal’s nascent forms of mass culture.\(^{35}\)

**THE TOTALIZING IMAGE**

Producing a very public archive of quotidian life, an image of national proportions, meant tracing a seemingly interminable lineage in America’s conception of time. Walter Benjamin’s “now-time” could hardly be more appropriate. He writes, “Now-Time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes.”\(^{36}\) Now-time reveals the present as a gateway in time. When I use the term “totalizing image,” for lack of a better term, what I suppose I would ultimately like to suggest is that crafting a moment that exceeds itself—in both temporal and ideological terms—became the implicit protocol for the most successful of New Deal artists.

In 1939, the public murals project bought a paid advertisement in *Life Magazine* to announce the “48 States Competition.” The largest mural contest ever run, it received 3,000 entries for potential murals. Of the 48 winners chosen, surprisingly only about half, like Manuel A. Bromberg’s *Chuck Wagon Serenade* fig.#5, depicted idyllic images of frontier life. The others depicted more contemporary scenes, yet ones tied equally tied to the frontier myth. One winner, simply titled *Electrification* fig.#6, picked to be displayed at the Lenoir City Post Office in Tennessee, depicted a group of men working to put the finishing touches on a new electrical transistor station. The worker in the foreground grips a cable as he looks up to the wires proudly, in ways suggesting that the discovery of electricity by American Benjamin Franklin had become a technological achievement on the scale of the railroad. Stringing electrical lines across America, from coast to coast, power workers united its landscape. The lack of temporal markers also subverts the aesthetic requirement of depicting a single moment in time. “Electrification” could now be anytime, Walter Benjamin’s “now-time.” The interminable function of the culturally produced utopia collapsed the requirement of collective memory to think historically outside the
totalizing image of American progress. The triangular relationship of past-present-future similarly terminated more accommodating conceptions of social relations, nationalized landscape, and workers’ rituals—folding symbolic identifications within a closed temporal system. For Florian Matzner, manufacturing ideological context in the public sphere is not an autonomous form or visual index. For “context is not a spatial boundary. Context is a thing like ‘jar’ is a thing, which gathers and unites. Context is partly ‘always empty’ and partly ‘to be filled’.”

To view a New Deal mural, one has sense that the viewer is either (a) contributing to the “filling” of this image of America, or (b) simply not performing any tangible labour. Sanctifying use value, that is, only forms of work relatable to American progress, therefore installed a public model of production in which meaning, particularly as it relates to self-actualization and work, could only be conceived as such if the action in question contributed to the state. A closed ethical system for the judgment of acts entirely dependent upon the perceivable benefit of the state configures the cultural production of these murals.

I will now show that the semiotics of the public space is determined conceptually, and therefore, remains largely ideological. The state’s determination to enact a cultural repository, an archive of a useable past, is indicative of the clear relationship between an existing copy and an original event in the murals’ historicized conception of the American terrain. As a point of comparison, both archiving and language translation operate similarly since both acts by definition fail due to the significance of their omissions. Language, like labour, is infinite in conception and yet bound by the limits of its own terms. Even if the goal is to perform a thorough translation between events, be it a textual event or a historical event, as Paul de Man suggests, “the translation can never do what the original text did.”

Insofar as translation seeks to follow an original activity and, in fact, derives from it, it resembles history, if only as imitation. Translating the visual archive also enacts another kind of mimetic restoration outside of written language since images are not entirely bound to the same linguistic parameters as verbal media. Visual sign systems operate first on a pre-linguistic level, bound much differently to the semiotic grid. Painted imag-
es, it would seem, sharply shift in the act of cognition. The viewer performs a secondary act of linguistic translation—thought—to gather a historical understanding of the event depicted in pictorial form. Generating an exhaustive cognitive map of the visual archive therefore also entails a translation, a slippage, from visual images to linguistic thought.

One of the chief ways in which the New Deal murals defined their hegemonic translations of history arises from the way in which images of a “working America” were rendered so completely as to arrest, or, at least, to subdue the cognitive process of secondary translation. Completeness is, of course, arbitrary, but the illusion of completeness for the individual viewer remains anything but. A totalizing image such as a simple depiction of country life that produces a monolithic discourse for the eyes of its viewing-subject also remains largely an image of precognition. Viewer confab is severely restricted within the frame itself. In this model, murals idealizing a simpler way of American life accomplish the task by operating beyond, or, more perhaps accurately, before, the level of cognitive thinking. The outcome is similar to how WWII propaganda (i.e. Nazi or Allied posters) derailed critical thinking by totalizing its subject. Such images allow little room for the production of speculation or experimental logic. In poststructuralist terms, a totalizing image suspends readily perceivable difference between past and present, as well as the image and the world. The totalizing image has the potential to operate simultaneously as both sign and signifier. This is due to the double nature of visual stimuli: a mural is a visible object, a sign easily recognizable as a painting on public display. The mural as a public spectacle, viewed by mass audience, also operates on the level of an ideological signifier. A nationalizing image, therefore, integrates various levels of the signification process to operate as a standalone marker of interpellation. The American flag, an image so prominent in New Deal murals, for instance, is so charged with ideology that its message of patriotism seems to outstep the usual realm of ideological cognition. In the symbolic production of public murals, when the sign and the signifier cannot be easily differentiated, the ambition to interpolate the identity of the viewer operates by limiting the potential outcomes of discourse
beyond neo-nationalism. Visual translation, therefore, is restricted due to a semiotic closure. In the case of the New Deal murals, the undecidability of the historical past is closed alongside the contingency of its viewer.

To collapse the dichotomy between private and public spaces, for New Deal muralists, meant privatizing public ideology. Sacralizing the laborious and often alienating lower class occupations of individual Americans in the public realm, when imagined in the more collective sense, brightens and fulfills this national conception, as well as the inner life of those who produce it. What individual freedoms are lost in this totalizing conception of mass culture is another matter, since images wholly based on the modes of production seem to leave no room for a conception of self which falls outside the mythologized, highly ethical frame of American prospectivity. Vast, in both scale and ideological import, the New Deal murals also promised a fundamental transformation of the nature of patronage. In reality, artists competed for commissions, and their creative license was supervised on-site. If this burgeoning public mural industry of the 1930s valorized an idyllic and often pastoral image of America’s past, it simultaneously postponed the advancements in modern art in America as much as it temporarily derailed avant-garde artist collectives.

For further questions of symbolic duration, consequently, it seems appropriate to conclude by mentioning how a new, highly autonomous group, was borne from this manufactured cultural milieu. By the 1940s, many American artists no longer employed by the state mobilized against its restrictive parameters. They shifted attention from manufacturing a politicized ethos of nationalism to resiliently explore other forms of picture work. In contravention to mural art, painting after the 1930s would turn inward, away from depicting picturesque images for the walls of America’s public spaces and toward non-figuration, to map the self and its abstract relationship to the medium of paint using methods obligatory to private interface. Among the major Abstract Expressionist painters once employed by the New Deal’s easel division were Baziotes, Brookes, de Kooning, Gorky, Gottlieb, Guston, Pollock, Reinhardt, and Rothko. Nearly an entire generation of fledgling American artists matured under the New Deal project of national unity, with all the appropriations, eli-
sions, and implications that notion evokes.

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Endnotes

1 For further examples, see one of the many websites that divide the murals by state or by artist: http://www.wpamurals.com.


3 Chapter 2, verse 21.


5 The body is, therefore, the "specific modality of power as discourse." Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993), 187.

6 See, for example, the suggestive union between the locomotive and public servants in Fletcher Martin’s 1938 mural, Mail Transportation fig.#7.

7 Picture work by New Deal painters and WPA cameramen took opposing trajectories. Capturing resonant images of the worst dust storm, “Black Sunday” (April 14, 1935), was the task of photographers; perhaps the most famous example being Arthur Rothstein’s Fleeing a Dust Storm fig.#8.

This divergence also qualifies, therefore, how the state apparatus conceptualized each medium differently, yet were complementary in communicating the FDR administration’s mandate to nationalize ideology. Imbricating the two sides of America’s psyche, painted landscapes reconciled an American unconscious, stimulating its visual imagination by reinscribing public spaces in relation to a mythologized past, while camera work performed on a conscious level. The mechanized camera lens documented a more “realistic” view of the 1930s crisis. Photography’s measure of veracity, of course, remains questionable: first, due to the exclusion of its frame; second, given the staged parameters used by WPA photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, whose highly aestheticized work is still largely celebrated for its realism.
Nevertheless, the photographer’s role in charting the western migration on the edges of the American frontier had much different stakes than the public murals project; both, of course, idealized American prospectivity. See Dorothea Lange, and Paul Torin, An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion. San Francisco: Oakland Museum, 1939.

8 Of countless examples, see the 1939 mural painted in oil for the NY Post Office in Boonville. In The Black River Canal [http://www.wpamurals.com/Boonvill.htm], artists Lucerne and Suzanne McCullough commemorated the 1845 construction of the headwater locks that would eventually enable the longest canal in the Eerie feeder system. The mural, therefore, was a public reminder imbued with the historic reshaping of the American landscape. Running from Albany on the Hudson River to Buffalo at Lake Eerie, the Black River Canal opened regions farther west in New York State and fostered a population surge, while also establishing New York City’s world-class port industry.


10 Ibid.


15 The original Social Security Act (1935) was amended in 1939, after a recession in 1937 was blamed on the government’s decrease in spending of the two billion dollars collected from Social Security taxes. The amendment increased the amount of benefits available to all recipients in the early years of Social Security and shifted its conception toward today’s pay-as-you-go system. That said, the general principles of the original system outlined by FDR remain, to this day, remarkably unchanged. For details, see Andrew Achenbaum’s *Social Security: Visions and Revisions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).


18 From these remarks, it seems Platt’s assessment also forced Hemingway to re-think his own previous opinions of the book. Consider Hemingway’s statements here to his earlier review in “Middlebrow: For and Against.” *Oxford Art Journal*. 22.1 (Spring 1999): 166-76.

19 A tireless project outlined in so many comprehensive studies that I need not rehearse these histories in any further detail. The best two *tomes*, in the encyclopedic sense of the word (as well as in physical poundage), are Donald S. Howard’s *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943); and, William F. McDonald’s *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

20 There were four main projects: the Public Works of Art Project (1933-34), the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (1934-43), the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935-38), and the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (1935-43). When speaking collectively I simply use “New Deal art projects.”


24 Tracing the lineage of this well-worn phrase, Mancini notes, “The quote is from Eldredge, “Arrival of European Modernism,” 35, but similar comments can be found in MacLeod, Wallace Stevens, 7; and Prince, “Of the Which and the Why,” 97-98.” In “‘One Term is as Fatutuous as Another’: Responses to the Armory Show Reconsidered.” American Quarterly 51:4 (1999): 845.


27 Ibid.


30 To explore the Chicago riot, see Sue Ann Prince’s chapter, “‘Of the Which and the Why of Daub and Smear’: Chicago Critics Take on Modernism,” in The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940. Chicago (Chicago University Press, 1990), 95-117.

31 Biddle in William F McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1969), 358.

32 FDR in William F McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1969), 359.
33 After Biddle’s meeting with the Secretary and drafting a proposal to bring forth young modern talent the project was nearly halted by Roosevelt because the suggestion was met with lesser approval by the Fine Arts Commission. Yet a change in government, and the championing of the program by Eleanor Roosevelt, eventually led to its approval.


35 Andreas Huyssen discerns how this opposition between modernism and forms of mass culture remained amazingly resilient until after WWII. With postmodernism’s dissolution of this great divide, “The boundaries between high art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred, and we should begin to see that process as one of opportunity rather than lamenting loss of quality and failure of nerve.” (ix.). Though Huyssen associates this bringing together with postmodernism synthesis, and does so quite effectively, it might be added that the much earlier public art produced through the New Deal channels of state consecration coerced many artists to occlude modernist autonomy and employ methods that developed their thinking about high art and mass culture. See *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).


39 By “totalizing” I mean the subject matter or content fuses with the viewing subject. Difference ceases to exist (i.e. between past, present, future; or between self and state).

40 To clarify, I am not arguing that Derrida’s aporia does not exist. The totalizing image that I am outlining, rather, wages a precognitive attack against the concept of undecidibility. A mural displays a totalizing image; in other words, it espouses that all public acts can be explained in relation to nationalism. Whether or not a public mural succeeds in achieving ideological finality is a matter left to the individual viewer and their faith in this same system.