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Stuart Davis and the Politics of Experience

John X. Christ

The severe economic depression and political turmoil of the 1930s had a profound and lasting impact on the development of modern American culture. In reaction to this crisis, many artists worked to defend art's social and political relevance. Stuart Davis (1892–1964) played an important role in these efforts, both as a painter and as an influential leftist activist. But how do his modernist paintings, such as *Shapes of Landscape Space* (frontispiece), relate to the artist's strong political convictions? The upheavals of the thirties find no straightforward expression in this picture's geometric composition, intense colors, and abstracted forms. Davis nevertheless insisted that his canvases, while not overtly propagandistic or illustrative of his political position, could play a vital role in society by communicating and ultimately altering what he referred to as "common experience." His faith in the transformative and democratic potential of a shared understanding of the American scene finds strong parallels in the nation's liberal tradition, especially as exemplified in the writings of philosopher John Dewey. Davis is rightly recognized for the high-profile role he played as a Marxist activist during the thirties, but when he talked about the social function of his paintings he most often described art's link to experience—a term that for him encompassed a process of interaction with, perception of, and knowledge about the world—in a manner that relates as much to Dewey's theories as to those of his fellow Marxists. In declining to adopt the preference of many radical Marxists for a more naturalistic, figurative art with an overt sociopolitical message, Davis insisted on the ability of abstract art like his to communicate in the most vital way the dynamic dimensions of everyday experiences and to serve as a possible model for future action.

Davis's concerns about the social relevance of painting stretch as far back as his student years. From 1909 to 1912 the Philadelphia-born artist trained as an Ashcan School realist in New York under Robert Henri, who encouraged his students to depict plebeian subjects and grapple with complex formal and social issues. From 1912 to 1916, Davis also found expression for these interests in the illustrations he produced for the leftist journal *The Masses*.

His commitment to radical politics came into sharpest focus during the Great Depression of the 1930s. When the liquid capital on which the art market relies dried up, countless artists were left financially insecure but also, in many cases, politically mobilized. Davis's

Stuart Davis, *Shapes of Landscape Space,* 1939. Oil, 36 x 28 in. Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, Gift of Roy R. Neuberger © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, Jim Frank

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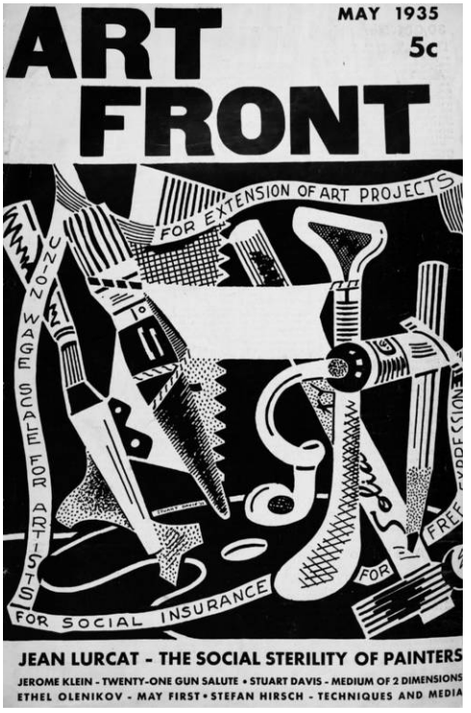
1 Ben Shahn, *Untitled (Stuart Davis and Roselle Springer among Artists' Union Demonstrators, Division IX, May Day Parade, New York City)*, 1935. Photograph, 6 7/16 x 9 3/16 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn © Estate of Ben Shahn / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College

2 Cover, *Art Front* 1, no. 5 (May 1935). Art Front Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution





letters to Edith Halpert, his dealer at the Downtown Gallery in New York, indicate that despite his strong reputation he too was deeply affected by the economic downturn. The establishment of the New Deal art projects eventually provided Davis and others with much-needed assistance. First under the Public Works of Art Project and then its successor, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Projects, he received federal support from 1933 until 1939. His commitment to the economic and political empowerment of artists is especially evident in the role he played beginning in 1934 as president of the newly formed Artists' Union. This organization advocated for a living wage for artists and, among other causes, worked to wrest control of the art market from the hands of dealers and to place it into those of artists and publicly accountable institutions. In addition to his administrative duties for the union, Davis marched in labor rallies (fig. 1) and served as the first editor of its official journal, *Art Front* (fig. 2).[1]

In a 1935 article devoted to the activities and purposes of the Artists' Union, Davis offered a public endorsement of Dewey's philosophy, declaring, "A work of art is a public act, or, as John Dewey says, an 'experience.' By definition, then, it is not an isolated phenomenon, having

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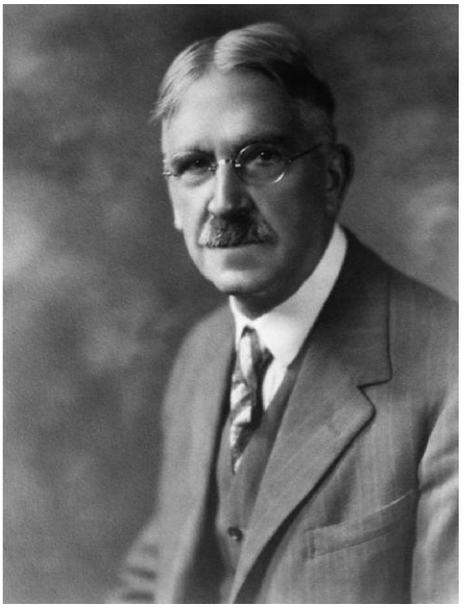
meaning for the artist and his friends alone. Rather it is the result of the whole life experience of the artist as a social being." This passage appears near the end of Davis's discussion of the social and economic hardships faced by artists during the depression, the artists' recognition of the "shallowness" of middle-class interests, and the Artists' Union's role in organizing artists as responsible members of the working class, with whom they claimed solidarity in the struggle for decent wages. Davis concluded this article, rooted in the class politics of Marxist social theory, by referring to Dewey, a liberal philosopher whom most Communists at this point considered a counterrevolutionary. Given Davis's radical sympathies, his decision to ally the social nature of art to Dewey's philosophy publicly is striking and cannot be ignored. Davis could be dogmatic, even belligerent, regarding his Marxist allegiances, but an examination of his writings and paintings reveals that he was open to an eclectic range of influences that cut across party lines and the polarized aesthetic positions of the 1930s.[2]

Davis's writings at times devolve into what seems an intellectual labyrinth,



3 John Dewey. Undated photograph, 8½ x 6½ in., by the Wurts Brothers. Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

and here I am fortunate to have the work of previous scholars as a guide. These historians have examined his career in reference to such themes as the Popular Front alliance between liberals and Communists, the history of the Communist Party's influence on the U.S. art world, and even American pragmatism. Building on this scholarship, though at times questioning some of its conclusions, I connect Davis's artistic and political objectives by examining his practice in the context of efforts to enrich American democracy through the aesthetic transformation of daily life.[3]

John Dewey

Born in 1859, John Dewey (fig. 3) already had several decades of mature writing behind him by the end of World War I. Dewey, who studied at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and taught at the University of Chicago and Columbia University in New York, built his brand of pragmatism, often referred to as "instrumentalism," on principles first framed in the late nineteenth century by fellow American pragmatists William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. He proposed a metaphysics of experience as an answer to the problems he perceived to be plaguing the European intellectual tradition. Because the term "experience" was widely used in philosophical discussions of this period, great care must be taken to distinguish among its varied meanings. Dewey's practice of expressing complex philosophical propositions in everyday language—intended to lend greater clarity to his writings—has sometimes resulted in a failure to recognize his serious challenges to commonly held beliefs.[4]

Experience and Nature (1925) was Dewey's first fully developed statement of his new metaphysics, followed by *Art as Experience* (1934), a more thorough examination of its aesthetic implications.

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Dewey explained that experience is a process undergone in the "interaction of organism and environment." In other words, it does not refer to mere consciousness or the spectator's unmediated perception of the world; rather, it is the process of a reflective individual's interaction with his natural and social environment. With this theoretical model, Dewey sought to undercut both realist and idealist theories of knowledge, and overcome the dualities of subject and object, perception and reality. Decades later, he considered *Nature and Culture* to be a more appropriate and less confusing title for *Experience and Nature*. Experience implies transaction, interaction, and communication; it amounts to a social phenomenon so broad in its implications that "culture" was the closest term he could muster as an alternative.[5]

The philosopher's emphasis on "interaction" implies the coupling of knowledge to practice. Knowledge is gained through intelligent, practical exchange and communication, but it is a shifting understanding without ultimate certitude. Not every interaction leads to greater comprehension and practical knowledge. Dewey distinguished what he referred to variously as "*an* experience," "consummatory experience," and "aesthetic experience" from ordinary, "habitual" experiences. In aesthetic experience the "material experienced runs its course to fulfillment" and develops its transformative potential.[6]

Many of Dewey's core philosophical beliefs were framed in the context of social problems that can be traced at least to the late nineteenth century, when a number of Americans believed modernization had left society rootless. The authenticity of shared experience presented itself as an antidote to rampant industrialization and social alienation. Dewey's writings exhibit tensions that parallel those found at the turn of the century; he offered experience as a progressive (and even radically democratic) force and yet tied it to a notion of community life that is as much nostalgic as modern.[7]

These concerns resurfaced with a renewed vigor, if in an altered form, during the interwar years. In the wake of World War I, many commentators described a crisis in American public life and democracy. The lasting effects of the highly centralized war economy on U.S. industry, labor relations, and media as well as the more general sense of the nation's increasing complexity, hierarchization, and urbanization played major roles in this perception. As traditional regional and cultural bonds were broken and the agrarian republic became a modern state ruled by urban-industrial capital, many sensed a breakdown in its system of governance and felt that citizens were becoming increasingly distant from the seats of economic and political power.

In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) Dewey described the withering of public life, the increasing manipulation of opinion, and the modern state's negligent, even destructive, attitude toward the needs of the public. He proposed the rebuilding of community through the establishment of shared values and a more responsive democracy, a term that for him exceeded mere reference to governance or the state.[8] In Dewey's opinion, art is an active social force that can aid in the reconstruction of the public life and collective identity on which a healthy democracy is based. Art's power, he explained, is found in its ability to communicate ideals and suggest a path forward. Aesthetic experience brings past interactions into the present and anticipates a common future. When it is most fully realized, as in a work of art, it provides the catalyst for the creation of a robust and democratic community life.

Dewey's ideas circulated in a highly fraught political context. He was at once admired by many independent leftists and chastised by Communists. His 1935 book *Liberalism and Social Action* laid out his plan to rebuild the liberal

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tradition and restore the radical potential it had carried for such Enlightenment thinkers as John Locke. He espoused a form of liberal socialism that could not be easily collapsed into any party platform, including that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose New Deal is sometimes mistakenly perceived to embody Dewey's pragmatist politics. Throughout the thirties, Dewey remained sharply critical of Marxism in all its forms, although sadly his analysis is based on little more than its caricature, more suggestive of flat-footed Communist Party rhetoric than the nuanced theory of Karl Marx or his more sensitive followers. For their part, most Marxists followed the Communist Party line and insisted that Dewey's instrumentalism, as a variant of liberalism, was of a piece with reactionary bourgeois ideology. Nevertheless, some American intellectuals, most notably political philosopher Sidney Hook but also implicitly Stuart Davis, integrated important lessons of the pragmatist tradition with Marxist theory, often with the intention to Americanize Marx.[9]

Although Dewey had tremendous faith that an art based in shared experience could aid in the reconstruction of democratic life, he warned that the promise of art had been compromised by a capitalist economy that isolated the artist from social concerns. Unlike certain romantic and antimodernist critiques of capitalism's impact on art, his diagnosis is based, not on the belief that industrial civilization inherently curtails aesthetic life, but on a more pointed critique of the modern system of patronage and exhibition in which artists produce works for sale on an open market rather than for a clearly defined social purpose. Dewey's criticism of the capitalist art market shares important assumptions with that of many Marxists. Significantly, however, his writings are not grounded in the logic of class struggle, as are those of such prominent Marxist art critics as Meyer Schapiro and artists like Davis.[10]

Echoing many in the U.S. art world, Dewey advocated for the formation of new institutions that could bypass the limitations of the dealer-critic system and the modern museum. His influence on such institutions as the Barnes Foundation during the twenties is notable in this regard, despite significant tensions between Dewey's democratic ideals and the autocratic personality of his friend Albert Barnes. But the onset of the depression provided the catalyst and political legitimization for more far-reaching attempts to restructure the art world. I refer not only to federal funding of the arts, as in the case of the WPA Federal Art Projects, but also to Dewey's part in trying to establish an artist-run Municipal Art Gallery and Center in New York City.

The struggle to set up this important institution was conducted by the Artists' Committee of Action and the closely allied Artists' Union. Both groups were nominally nonpartisan but clearly operated under the strong influence of Communists and fellow travelers. Davis discussed the proposed center in an article in the first issue of *Art Front*. In characteristically Marxist terms, he described the free market system in which dealers "demanded work" that they could sell to a restricted class of wealthy collectors who dominated the art market, severely limiting aesthetic freedom and the relevance of art to ordinary individuals. He described the organization of the proposed center as a socially responsible and democratic alternative that would put decision making in the hands of artists.[11]

Dewey held similar reservations about the art market, and contributed to the artists' efforts to realize their plans. In a letter to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia that was reprinted in *Art Front*, Dewey and three cosigners, including Lewis Mumford and Alfred Stieglitz, described a meeting of the Artists' Committee of Action that they attended on May 8, 1834, at which a proposal for this center

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was agreed upon. On September 27 Dewey also went to city hall to meet with the mayor and sixteen artists, Davis among them; the mayor, claiming illness, canceled at the last minute, and when another appointment was set for October 4, he canceled that one too. Davis later recalled meeting Dewey during this effort. In the face of persistent demands for a democratically organized art center, the mayor on January 6, 1935, presented his own plan for a municipal art center. It ignored many of the original provisions, including calls for strong artist participation in administering the center, angering supporters of the initial proposal.[12] Despite their failure to achieve their original goals, this collaborative effort between Marxists and liberals offers a glimpse of the common ground that could be forged within the social and political climate of the thirties.

"From Percept to Concept"

Davis put tremendous effort into defining his aesthetic and political positions, and his many thousands of pages of private writings serve as evidence of his ideas.[13] At times complex and nuanced and at others dogmatic or rife with contradictions, these writings most of all indicate an earnest attempt to come to grips with the urgent political and theoretical issues facing artists of his generation. Of specific concern for the artist was the relation between his abstract formal vocabulary and his developing conception of aesthetic experience.

Davis's understanding of aesthetics likely has diverse origins, including but certainly not limited to Dewey's writings. Davis's training under Henri, for example, exposed him to similar notions of art's social function. Other authors also frequently referred to Dewey's ideas, not only in esoteric theoretical texts but also in more widely read articles and books. Some of Davis's friends (and foes), including most notably Holger Cahill, future director of the WPA Federal Art Project, were well versed in Dewey's philosophy. Davis also had connections following World War I to *Dial*, a journal of progressive politics and aesthetics where Dewey was briefly an associate coeditor. Davis contributed drawings and included a copy of the magazine prominently as a studio prop in *Still Life with "Dial"* of 1922 (fig. 4). Setting aside this tangle of influences, it is clear that by the midthirties Davis had met and read Dewey and had found enough in common with his ideas to endorse some of them in a public forum. His comments on Dewey are relatively limited in number and fluctuating in tone over the decades.[14] But in praising Dewey's concept of experience, Davis must have recognized some crucial similarities in their responses to their historical situation. In fact, regardless of whether any clear lines of influence can be demonstrated, Dewey's description of aesthetic experience remains the fullest articulation of certain ideas that Davis and others were attempting to express.

Davis's notebook entries of the teens and twenties contain many of the interests that the artist would elaborate more fully in later decades. He described art's relation to experience, saying modern art should express a democratic worldview as well as hew to fundamental principles of composition. Yet, despite his longstanding involvement with radical politics and growing connections to American Marxism during the twenties, he did not consistently describe his artistic practice in Marxist terms until the midthirties. Importantly, these Marxist-inflected writings often recast earlier propositions and describe a formal style that was already well developed.

Perhaps his earliest statement expressing an attitude to modernist form similar to his later discussions of aesthetic experience is a 1918 reference to cubism: "Cubism is the bridge from percept to

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4 Stuart Davis, *Still Life with "Dial,"* 1922. Oil, 50 x 32 in. Private collection © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, courtesy Owings-Dewey Fine Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico

concept. A cubist picture is a concept in light and weight of a specific object in nature. It is from that only a step to the expression of a concept of diverse phenomena, sound, touch, light, etc., in a single plastic unit." Given the prevalence of such common terms as "percept" and "concept" in the art criticism and philosophy of this time, it is difficult to ascertain their precise origins. Some sense of their period meaning can be gleaned, however, from their usage by nineteenth-century pragmatist philosopher William James. James explained that percepts are environmental stimuli and that concepts entail the mind's comprehension and ordering of these stimuli. In Davis's mind, cubist pictures were plastic objects that conceptually reorder the percepts of nature. Cubism, therefore, was not merely a means of fragmenting form in a nihilistic act of artistic rebellion or just another step toward the compositional grid, but a means of signifying a painter's reactions to the environment after the collapse of faith in the truth of what the eye saw.[15]

Davis elaborated on these themes in the twenties, discussing the relation of painting to "experience," its "symbolic" form of communication, and the need for its objective existence as paint on canvas. These ideas likely related, at this point, as much to the American reception of symbolist aesthetic theory or to Henri's teachings as to American pragmatism. "The primary purpose of all art," Davis said, "is to stimulate the emotional perception of beauty by an artificial construction which is to produce in the observer an approximate sensation to the one originally experienced by the artist from a combination of natural stimuli." The modern artist communicates to a viewer through "symbolic" means, and this allows the painting to become "a kind of picture writing or hieroglyph." Communication occurs through the mingling of symbols that have been conventionalized into a visual language, one in which individual symbols nevertheless retain some visual resemblance to their referents.[16]

Davis's 1927–28 Egg Beater Series represents a key moment in his development of a rigorous formal model commensurate with his theoretical writings, a style that remained relatively consistent through the thirties and informed his work for the remainder of his career.

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5 Stuart Davis, *Egg Beater #3*, 1927–28. Oil, 25⅛ x 39⅛ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of the William H. Lane Foundation © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo © 2008 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Egg Beater #3 (fig. 5) is composed of unmodulated planes of color that intersect in a shallow space. As forms pop in and out of perspective, the eye playfully darts to and fro. Just as a group of planes begins to establish a consistent spatial logic, another form skews it, deflecting the eye into incongruent planes. Within the egg beater itself (center left), positive and negative forms continually reverse. The white ground on which it is set does not remain a simple negative space; near the top of the painting it changes from background into the upper side of a projecting volume. The pink side of this volume, receding into space from its vertical edge, flips forward in space as this same edge, crossing the yellow plane, becomes an inside corner of the egg beater. The yellow arc on the right side of the composition anchors itself to the green plane, suggesting a splayed-open cube formed by the brown, green, and gray forms. But these planes insist on their materiality, as the formal organization of the canvas ultimately ties all of these diverse forms to its surface.

In the early thirties, as Davis was applying the formal strategies developed in the Egg Beater paintings to the representation of the American scene, his descriptions of the artistic process began to gain greater coherence and depth. In his 1933 essay "Analogical Emblems" he explained how perception unfolds across time: "In contrast to ordinary methods which present on a canvas observations made in time and are therefore to a degree unrelated, this system brings into one focus and one place, the past, present, and future events involved in the act of observation of any given subject." What he described was not only cubist simultaneity but also the manner in which observation suggests a forward-looking element, a projection

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6 Stuart Davis, *Landscape with Drying Sails*, 1931–32. Oil, 32 x 40 in. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Museum Purchase, Howald Fund II © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

into the future based on elements of the past lingering in the here and now. Painter Arshile Gorky similarly commented about how Davis "expresses his constructive attitude toward his successive experiences. He gives us symbols of tangible spaces, with gravity and physical law."[17]

Concurrently, Davis began to articulate the crucial role played by the spatial dimensions of experience. He explained that whereas space is "continuous . . . matter is discontinuous." The shapes of space itself or the "shapes of landscape space," to use the title of the painting reproduced as the frontispiece to this essay, are a positive subject of his art, and indeed of the scene that he painted. Space is not merely a vacuum to be filled with objects. Davis's writings, taken as a whole, suggest that the coherent development of the spatial ordering of a picture allows its individual "discontinuous" elements to gain meaning and coherence. Dewey would have concurred that space is not a neutral "void" but is itself a "medium." Further, Dewey said the visual arts emphasized the "spatial aspects of change," not merely change that takes place in space.[18]

Davis's *Landscape with Drying Sails* (fig. 6) is characteristic of his work of the early thirties. It incorporates the formal approach of the Egg Beater Series into representations of the working harbor of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he spent

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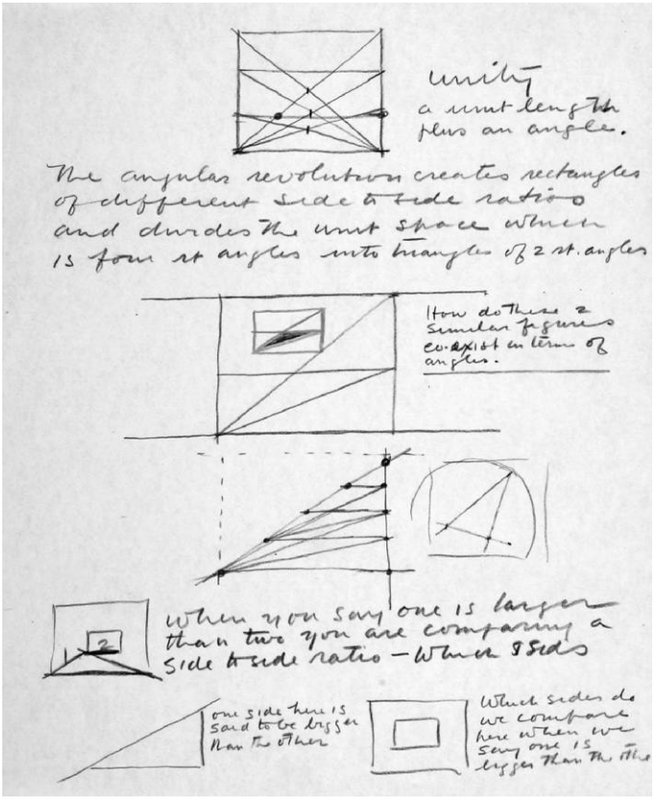

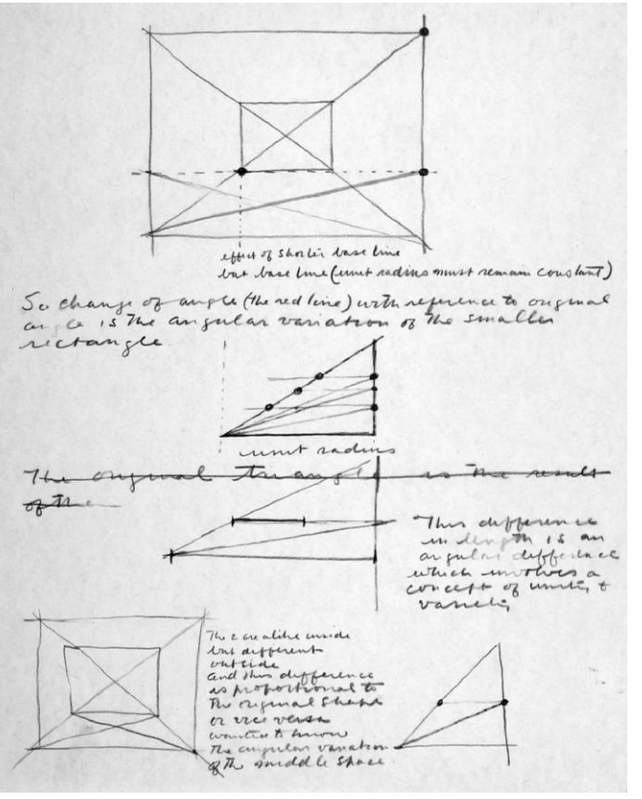

7 Stuart Davis, *Drawing* from notebook, 1932. Stuart Davis Papers, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Stuart Davis © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College

8 Stuart Davis, *Angle Theory Diagrams* from notebook, 1932. 11 x 8 in. Stuart Davis Papers, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Mrs. Stuart Davis © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College

many of his summers. Davis said the artist could order reality through cubist form by bridging percept and concept. But how does this occur? While the modeling of form in this painting is almost entirely subordinated to planar construction, the natural play of light is indicated in the cloud, the swirling smoke from a passing ship, and the traces of texture on the wall and roof of the net house. Local color, however simplified and abstracted, is implied in the red of the net house, the blue of the sky, and the white of the rolled-up sail, but these colors take on a life of their own; they become part of a complexly structured configuration of intersecting planes. Davis represents comprehension of the visible world as a process in which environmental stimuli are not lost but conceptually ordered through his cubist-derived language.

It can be inferred that when Davis stated that space is "continuous," he referred not only to the spaces of the three-dimensional world but also to the manner in which pictorial form can bring together seemingly "discontinuous" objects of perception. In *Landscape with Drying Sails*, objects retain their potential to produce meaning but are also arranged into a series of forms that at once organize pictorial space and disrupt habitual viewing. This is achieved through the interlocking of otherwise detached spatial planes. When the line denoting the peak of the roof meets a mast, it continues toward the right, where it is transformed into an apparatus used to dry sails. The diagonal running off the peak to the left, when reaching the limit of its function of delineating the roof, continues through pictorial space to divide two planes of color, applied independently of their descriptive function. The white area suggestive of sky flattens into the picture plane, or perhaps even invokes another sail, as the viewer identifies the areas of blue to the left and above as sky. The organization of the painting is not superimposed on its

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objects or formed by fracturing them; it is drawn from them, knitting them together into a common spatial system of interlocking planes in which foreground and background commingle.

Davis discussed the formal organization of his paintings not only in terms of his attempts to understand art's relation to spatial experience but also of his interest in various formalist and quasi-scientific theories of art, as exemplified in the writings of Clive Bell, Denman Ross, and Jay Hambidge, writers to whom he was likely introduced by Henri and who had a lasting impact on his understanding of art. In particular, Ross's ideas describing the importance of "direction" and "angle" and Hambidge's regarding "dynamic symmetry" resemble aspects of Davis's attempts to deduce a set of fundamental, if not formulaic, principles of composition. This probable influence is most evident at those moments when Davis's writings and related drawings become intensely systematic and deductive (figs. 7, 8). In these diagrams, he renders a series of lines, angles, and geometric forms in such a way that all the pictorial elements are tied together within a single, rigorous, and internally coherent spatial unit. The writings that accompany such diagrams explain that the establishment of multiple directions in a composition creates "angular variation" and lends a work its "dynamic" quality. Davis elaborated soon after that "Unit Area" and "Unit—Area—Angle" were the "common denominator" of design, organizing the various angles and directions of a composition into a coherent whole.[19]

In *Landscape with Drying Sails*, Davis deploys such pictorial devices, not slavishly but with dexterous creativity. The experience of the environment is organized into a coherent two-dimensional planar matrix. The grouping of shared directions and angles, which allow for the creation of these pictorial planes (or "Unit Area"), unifies the diverse objects of perception, conveying a sense of rhythm and conceptual order.

The New Realism

Davis promoted "abstract" art (a term he was never quite comfortable with) as the most viable means of representing common experience and extending the realist tradition. He wrote to Edith Halpert in 1927: "People must be made to realize that in looking at Abstractions they are looking at pictures as objective and as realistic in intent as those commonly accepted as such." More than a decade later in the *New York Times*, he reiterated: "Abstract art is not different in kind from the main stream of realistic art throughout history. It remains the most vital contemporary painting, and that vitality comes from its realism and its objectivity, and from its direct relevance to everyday experience." For Davis, art was socially valuable because it could communicate life's dynamic nature and serve as a model for future understanding.[20]

Davis proposed that painting remain faithful to both the physical reality of its materials and the reality of experience, which he understood as the artist's interaction with his environment. In 1933 he suggested just how closely entwined these two aspects were, saying: "I offer the principle of direct observation of nature in realistic terms, in terms of the two dimensional medium in which the idea is constructed." And painting for Davis was not merely reflective but transformative: "The great artists of today have not invented abstract art to escape from reality, but on the contrary to go deeper into reality, to seek new relations of form and color in the real world." Davis echoed many modernists in stressing the material nature of the painting, but he also insisted on the evolving reality of experience to which it referred.[21]

Davis's claims for the realism of abstract art have a corollary most notably in the ideas of Fernand Léger, an artist he met in Paris in the late twenties and held in high esteem throughout his

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9 Fernand Léger, *The City*, 1919. Oil, 91 x 117½ in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, A. E. Gallatin Collection © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

career (fig. 9). Léger's lecture "The New Realism," delivered at New York's Museum of Modern Art, was published in *Art Front* in 1935. In it, the Frenchman described the manner in which various pictorial elements, such as color and form, are "freed" of their environmental referents; these elements, far from being abstract, have a reality of their own that is "independent and plastic."[22]

The similarly "realistic" presence of Davis's *Landscape with Drying Sails* as paint applied to a two-dimensional support is plain, even if he veers from Léger's formal model in significant ways. Many factors contribute to the declarative flatness of what might otherwise be considered its shallow depth. The conflicting trajectories of intersecting planes often cancel one another out. The painted borders hinder the centrifugal push of space into an imagined realm beyond the frame. The principal planar relations are organized with respect to the four corners of the canvas, emphasizing the presence of the painting as a discrete object, whose physical edges play a significant role in its internal organization. The modeling of forms in space through subtle variations in value, except in those few instances already mentioned, is not so much applied with relative autonomy of environmental referents, as it was by Pablo Picasso and Léger, as it is eliminated. The conspicuous lack of bravado in the application of paint creates a pasty, frank, and nonillusionistic facture, as if applied by a "workman" rather than an ostentatious master, an association of which Davis and some of his critics were well aware.[23] Ultimately, all of the intense, unmodulated planes of color stubbornly stick to the surface of the canvas.

Davis insisted on the reality of his materials, but he did not take what some perceived to be the next logical step, claiming that works of art are self-referential.

Since we forego all efforts to reflect optical illusions and concentrate on the reality of our canvas, we will now study the material reality of our medium, paint on canvas or whatever it may be. The approach has become scientifically experimental. . . . Any analogy which is drawn from our two dimensional expression to three dimensional nature will only be forceful in the degree to which our painting has achieved a two dimensional clarity and logic.[24]

While maintaining the centrality of painting's relationship to nature, he stated that this goal was achievable only through the logical employment of the principles of two-dimensional design.

Davis asserted that the development of cubism was a technical achievement equivalent to those made in the sciences. Like science, cubism is systematic and offers a means of understanding reality that overcomes the limitations of literal description through processes of abstraction, which allow knowledge to be organized and become practical. Echoing arguments made by the Communist Party to justify the Soviet emulation of U.S. industry, Davis defended the "*technological revolution*" of modern (bourgeois) art as a necessary facet of the transition to socialism. Therefore, he did not challenge

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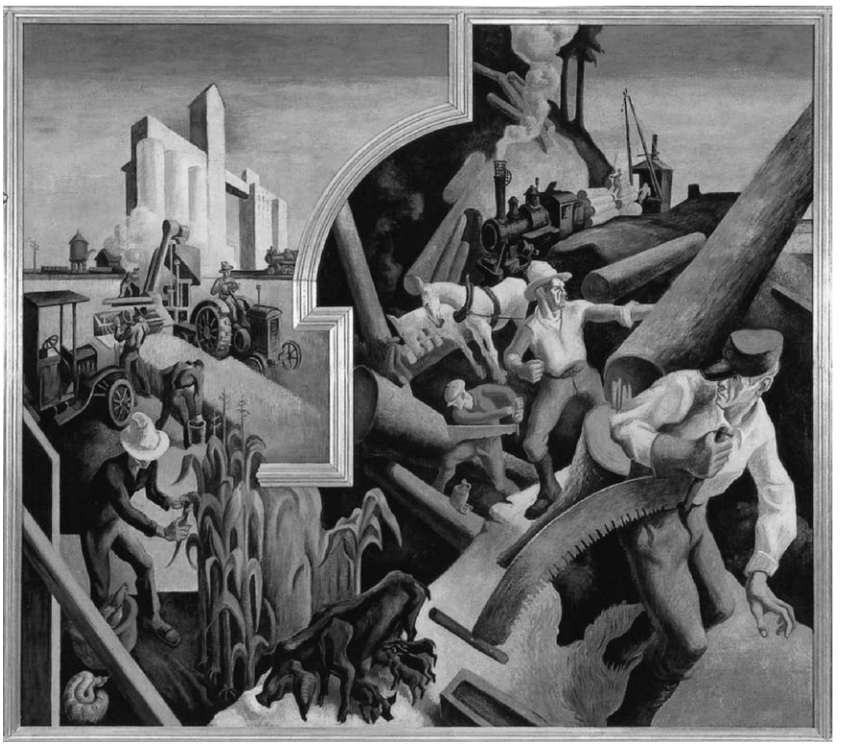
10 Marianne Brandt. *Small Tea Essence Pot*, 1924. Bauhaus-Archive. Reproduced from Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus* (Bauhaus Archiv / Taschen, 1993), 76

the category of art itself, as had some of the scientifically oriented interwar avant-gardes, but rather defended its relative autonomy. He believed, for example, that the Bauhaus's response to the "artist's social disenfranchisement"—what we now refer to as industrial design (fig. 10)—ultimately made the artist "a more efficient slave." Like science, the visual arts offered a means of knowing and shaping the world. A skilled artist is able to tune the arts into a powerful instrument through which to understand and act on the environment.[25]

That abstract art was based on the careful observation of material reality had important implications for Davis.



11 Thomas Hart Benton, *Midwest* from *America Today*, 1930. Distemper, egg tempera, and oil glaze on linen, 92 x 117 in. The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the U.S., New York

Abstraction, he argued, is incompatible with either nonobjectivism (art that does not refer to what the eye sees) or a greater naturalism in art, with either utopianism or conservatism in politics. Nonobjectivism's divorcing of form from the observation of nature assumes a static and utopian harmony rather than the unfolding of history. Similarly, naturalistic representation implies a fixed, unchanging world, even when what is pictured is a working class engaged in revolutionary struggle. Davis said both aesthetic strategies fail to recognize the dynamic nature of common experience. For him, abstraction's basis in material reality and its ability to convey the environment's potential for change made it an appropriate model for the development of a radical art.

During the 1930s, American scene painters and social realists received the greatest recognition as heirs to the realist tradition. Davis sought to challenge these artists on their own terms. His charged altercations with American scene painter Thomas Hart Benton (fig. 11) point to what he perceived to be at stake. Asserting that his own paintings more accurately represented the American environment, Davis accused Benton of being artistically and politically reactionary, even fascist. He admonished Benton's work for its racist reliance on ethnic caricature and claimed that Benton's purportedly homegrown style was based largely on Italian Renaissance precedents that were not only foreign but also unsuited to the communication of modern life. In retrospect, it is not difficult to see that Benton had filtered these formal influences through a modernist understanding of space, which resulted in his pictures' being organized into shallow, intersecting vignettes suggestive of his familiarity with modern visual media ranging from the fine arts to cinema and tabloids. Both artists, despite their very real differences, attempted to produce an art that brought together elite and popular culture, that was complex and yet accessible, that was socially engaged

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without being propagandistic, and that updated the tradition of realist painting for the twentieth century.[26]

Halpert organized a solo exhibition of Davis's paintings in 1932 in an attempt to capture the reins of the burgeoning American scene movement (fig. 12). *Landscape with Drying Sails* (see fig. 6) was among the pictures included, and *Landscape with Garage Lights* (fig. 13) was reproduced on the cover of the exhibition pamphlet. Critics commenting on the show attempted to grapple both with the issue of national identity, so important to American scene painting, and with Davis's realism. Edward Alden Jewell, for example, in a review for the *New York Times*, questioned the "legibility" of Davis's canvases but also claimed that "one visitor to the gallery delightedly detected in it [*Landscape with Garage Lights*] even the pungent Gloucester aroma, compounded of glue and fish cakes—which can only mean that Stuart Davis is a super-realist (not quite to be confused with the term surréalisme)." This comment is puzzling. Read literally, it suggests that Davis truly did evoke a sense of place, down to the smells of Gloucester's industries. But Jewell concluded that Davis is a "super-realist" whose work should not "quite" be confused with surrealism, which was then still a common translation. Jewell acknowledged Davis's realism, but not



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12 *"The American Scene" Exhibition: Recent Paintings, New York and Gloucester, March 8 to 21, 1932, Stuart Davis*. Cover, catalogue for solo exhibition at the Downtown Gallery. Downtown Gallery records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

13 Stuart Davis, *Landscape with Garage Lights*, 1931–32. Oil, 32 x 41⅞ in. Memorial Gallery of Art of the University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, Marion Stratton Gould Fund © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, James Via

without pulling back from the precipice of endorsing it, choosing instead to malign it through an association with surrealism.[27]

Holger Cahill made similarly ambivalent comments. In a 1932 publication, he described Davis as "a realist of the abstract who practices a very personal kind of legerdemain with rectangular contours and proportions." Cahill acknowledged Davis's supposed realism and yet referred to it as "legerdemain," the sleight of hand of a magician. And even if the term "legerdemain" was intended to double as a pun, a witty reference to the influential Léger, Cahill's skepticism remains. Yet, just two years later, Cahill detected an increasing social engagement in Davis's paintings, describing how he was "turning to an art of richer human documentation."[28] The indecisive tone of these reviews was indicative of the larger reception of Davis's realism. Davis had staked a firm enough claim for the realism of abstract art that it could not be ignored, but it was not convincing enough to be widely accepted without hesitation and equivocation.

The Politics of Abstraction

Davis insisted that his paintings celebrated what is most vital in American experience and that they could serve as a positive impetus in the movement toward a more egalitarian society. His explication of this position involved the implicit crossing of a number of often rigidly defended barriers. Many Americans spanning the political spectrum viewed abstract art as politically impotent. For example, a number of Dewey's proponents considered both Marxism and cubism to be foreign "isms" with little relevance to the realities of the American context.[29] And most Marxists, supporting class struggle and believing liberalism to reflect capitalist ideology, considered Dewey's instrumentalism to be counterrevolutionary.

While the Communist Party of the United States fairly closely followed the theoretical and political doctrines dictated by the Soviet Union, some flexibility did exist to reshape these policies to the demands of the American situation. This, together with Marx's own lack of a clearly defined aesthetic vision, allowed artists to retain a certain autonomy. Yet, despite the absence of a rigid doctrine that dictated the proper form that revolutionary art should take, the majority of American Communists and fellow travelers by the thirties supported some form of naturalistic realism, such as the works of William Gropper or Raphael Soyer.

Davis recognized that the acceptance of abstract art among other radical artists and intellectuals would not come easily. In a 1933 issue of *Creative Arts*, for instance, critic Gertrude Benson reviewed the *Social Viewpoint in Art* exhibition in which Davis participated. While she considered the work, on the whole, to be of high quality, she found too few examples with perceptible political intent in the show, which was organized by the radical John Reed Clubs. She singled out Davis in this regard: "The social viewpoint in some canvases (Stuart Davis's, for example) was altogether absent." Although Davis did occasionally produce an overtly politicized canvas, such as his *Artists against War and Fascism* (fig. 14), for the most part he avoided such subjects. Instead, he defended in writing what he perceived to be the radical potential of his modernist paintings.[30]

Meyer Schapiro's critique of modernist art in his 1936 paper "The Social Bases of Art" was one of the most well-known and articulate expressions of Marxist skepticism, if arguably not outright hostility, toward modernist art. Schapiro's positions, often stripped of their full complexity and nuance, served as the object of a number of Davis's criticisms of Marxist aesthetic orthodoxy in his notebooks. Schapiro claimed of the work of modern artists:

This plastic freedom should not be considered in itself an evidence of the artist's positive will to change society or a reflection

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14 Stuart Davis, *Artists against War and Fascism*, 1936. Gouache and traces of pencil on paper, 11 ⅝ x 15 ½ in. Fayez Sarofim Collection, Houston, Texas © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

of real transforming movements in the everyday world. For it is essential in this anti-naturalistic art that just those relations of visual experience which are most important for action are destroyed by the modern artist. As in the fantasy of a passive spectator, colors and shapes are disengaged from objects and can no longer serve as a means in knowing them.[31]

Here Schapiro criticized modernist form as the expression of the artist's alienation from society rather than his will to transform it. And while Davis often echoed many of Schapiro's criticisms of the predicament of the modern artist, he was unwilling to accept the conclusion that modernist art is politically impotent. More specifically, he criticized the Marxist proposition (one to which Schapiro himself did not wholly subscribe) that art is simply reflective of the dominant social conditions. Davis wrote: "In the environment we must include the artist as an active element. It is wrong to regard him as a mere reflecting agent."[32] Contrary to the views of many Marxists, he insisted that abstract art is the most effective means of conveying reality, as opposed to evading it; it is not just a reflection of society but also an active catalyst within it.

Davis painted *Waterfront Landscape* (fig. 15) in 1936 while working for the WPA. Comparing it to *Landscape with Drying Sails*, we immediately recognize that Davis has further distanced the painting from immediate perception and the types of realism espoused by many on the radical left. This trend would continue throughout the rest of his career as his vision of the American scene became increasingly characterized by less visually tangible referents, especially the sounds of jazz. In *Waterfront Landscape*, drawing exists almost independently of planar relations, and local color, still lingering tenuously in *Landscape with Drying Sails*, has been neutralized in the form of vibrant primary colors divorced from their referents. Modeling is indicated most conspicuously in the ropes on the right side of the composition, which even cast a rudimentary shadow. Although this use of modeling may seem to indicate volumetric space, the illusion fails to cohere. The conventionality of modeling is not concealed; three-dimensional space is indicated through an instantly identifiable convention rather than illusionistic modeling of objects in light and shadow. And the drawing of a busy harbor on the left side of the composition might suggest a three-dimensional space were it not so simplified and splayed across a flat plane of red paint, interlocked with the blue plane to its right.

Davis indulged in increasing levels of abstraction for several years. *Shapes of Landscape Space*, which he conceived in 1932 but completed in 1939 (see frontispiece), displays even fewer vestiges of immediate perception or the related artistic conventions of modeling and perspective. Similarly, its title is less descriptive of a specific locale than of the artist's broader understanding of visual experience. Yet Davis maintained that the spatial logic of his paintings—despite its degree of abstraction—was not derived solely from

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15 Stuart Davis, *Waterfront Landscape*, 1936. Oil, 23⅛ x 30¼ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Transfer from the General Services Administration

nature or purely from pictorial logic but from their interaction.

How to explain verisimilitude and the increasing distance of Davis's paintings from immediate optical perception? In his discussions of his art's realism, he employed the term "reality" to refer not only to the environment but to something akin to Dewey's conception of experience. Davis insisted that "reality" and "experience" encompass both the real world and the subjectivity of the artist. As such, he claimed his art would resemble visual appearances but in no way mimic them.

Thus, in creating a picture, it is well to use the test of verisimilitude. By this is meant observation of the degree to which the picture corresponds to optical and spacial memories and observation in ordinary life. This is in no sense an argument for the trite, the banal, or the naturalistic in painting.

It is not so because our purpose has already been described as the record of an Esthetic experience.[33]

A painting should resemble not raw visual sensation but aesthetic experience, understood as the result of an artist's creative interaction with his environment, in which the conceptual split between the individual and the world dissolves. Davis explained, placing emphasis on the active nature of artistic expression: "[T]hose who seek to record objectivity by purely mechanical means leave out the most important part of all, the artist himself. . . . Artistic expression is a measurement of

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an objective event in nature on which the artist participates."[34] If Davis was interested in verisimilitude, he wanted his art to resemble not merely visual sensation but the encounter of an individual with the environment.

In stretching traditional notions of verisimilitude, Davis's art may have been difficult for a popular audience to understand, but it is not irreconcilable with the democratic orientation of Dewey's instrumentalism. Dewey was closely involved in the twenties with the Barnes Foundation, which promoted the appreciation of modernist art, and he favored an appreciation based on an active rather than passive perception of art. Perception can only truly occur, Dewey explained in *Art as Experience*, in the absence of mere recognition. It is an active process that extends experience through "reconstructive doing."[35] Dewey, like some proponents of the European avant-garde, insisted that art must be engaging and challenging enough to prevent perception from becoming recognition—to allow percepts, to put it in Davis's terms of 1918, to develop fully into a concept.

The resonance of Davis's writings with those of Dewey is at times striking. For example, in describing how art involves a process of interaction, Davis explained: "It is a two dimensional space-tone system made to correspond symbolically to a series of physio-phycical interaction between a human being and its environment." These interactions are not merely represented, he continued, but offered as models for future action: "A work of Art is Creative, it brings new factors into Visual and Spatial experience, and it becomes the basis of new experiences."[36] This is a notion with which Dewey would concur.

These strong parallels between Davis's conceptualization of art's social function and Dewey's instrumentalism should not mask their important differences. For instance, Davis emphasized the theoretical bases of experience more than Dewey, commenting:

> *[A]rt does create an imaginary world, or more precisely a theoretical world, which is not to make one forget the real world but on the contrary to give one the power to deal with the real world by having a theory of reality.*
>
> *Therefore, painting which is great, is that painting which contains a vital theoretical approach to the visual and spacial world of common experience. Such a painting arms the spectator with the world of his experience.*[37]

Davis explained that painting thus offered a means of better understanding and changing the world. He painted a "theoretical world" in which sensation (or "percept") is organized to communicate a more profound understanding of the physical environment. Like the knowledge offered by scientific inquiry or Marxist social analysis, the conceptually based knowledge offered by abstract art could make visible possibilities for actual social change and become the basis for action.

Davis firmly believed that his art, given the opportunity, could communicate to a broad public, enriching and expanding shared experiences and fostering a democratic culture. Though continuing to work primarily as an easel painter, he completed a number of murals during the thirties, including *Swing Landscape* (fig. 16). This work was commissioned by the WPA in 1937 for the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York, and offered Davis an opportunity to bring his modernist style to a wide audience. Formally, *Swing Landscape*'s large scale and allover arrangement of intense, unmodulated colors is visually jarring, leaving the viewer's eyes dancing among the syncopated, jazzed rhythms of its impenetrable surface. As in his other works from these years, the identifiable sites that figured so prominently in the early thirties are barely legible. And while an attentive viewer might discern references to Gloucester's wharves, Edward Alden Jewell pointedly nullified these environmental referents,

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16 Stuart Davis, *Swing Landscape*, 1938. Oil, 86¾ x 173⅛ in. Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington © Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo, Michael Cavanagh, Kevin Montague

describing the painting as a "non-objective inebriant."[38] *Swing Landscape* does evoke modern experience, but less through its suggestion of a specific place or set of objects than by its formal analogies to jazz and evocation of the rhythm of contemporary life. Davis did not receive as much public recognition as he hoped for in the thirties—or at least we can assume as much from his stated frustration with the lack of popular support for abstract art—but his significant stature in the art world, his numerous references in the press, and his ability to attract commissions for an albeit modest number of murals indicate that his abstracted paintings were capable of communicating to, if not necessarily radicalizing, a public.

In the fall of 1945 a retrospective of Davis's work was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In a review of this exhibition, Holger Cahill noted how unmistakably Davis's work represented the spirit of the thirties. More than just a monographic overview of a single artist's career, it was "the biography of an era." For Cahill, Davis's art was closely attuned to the world around him: "His report on [this era], expressed in a racy personal idiom . . . reveals the character of the man, the things he has found interesting in his environment, and the nature of the problems which have concerned creative artists in our time." Cahill concluded his review with a quote from Davis in which the artist called his work "not a duplication of experience, but the extension of experience on the plane of formal invention." Cahill emphasized not Davis's fading ties to Marxism or his indebtedness to European modernism but his formal reordering of the American scene.[39]

Davis created his art in dialogue with broader efforts during the interwar years to reinvigorate public life through the extension of aesthetic experience. To understand his contributions to these efforts, it is necessary that we acknowledge the complexity of his political and aesthetic positions. Bringing together a variety of intellectual traditions, Davis argued that his modernist paintings of the American scene could enrich and radicalize U.S. democracy through the communication of those aspects of common experience that are most dynamic and progressive.

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Notes

Among the many individuals who aided this project, I especially wish to thank Michael Leja and Eric Rosenberg for their generous encouragement and commentary.

1 Key monographs on the artist include John Lane, *Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1978) and Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996). For an analysis of the Artists' Union, see Gerald Monroe, "The Artists Union of New York" (PhD diss., New York University, 1971); and Monroe, "Art Front," *Archives of American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (1973): 13–19.

2 See Stuart Davis, "The Artist Today: The Standpoint of the Artists' Union," *American Magazine of Art* 28, no. 8 (August 1935): 478. While there is no evidence that Davis ever joined the Communist Party, his sympathy with many goals of American Communists is evidenced in his writings and participation in Communist-affiliated organizations and events in the 1930s. He renounced his Marxist allegiances in the 1940s.

3 Cécile Whiting has discussed the impact on Davis's art of the Popular Front's endorsement of liberal American ideals in the fight against fascism in her *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989). Diane Kelder has offered valuable insights into some of the conceptual parallels between Davis and the American pragmatists in her article "Stuart Davis: Pragmatist of American Modernism," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 29–36. The monographs by John Lane and Patricia Hills are invaluable. And it is impossible to write about the politics of the U.S. art world of the 1930s without relying on Andrew Hemingway's *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002).

4 On Dewey's attempt to express his ideas in an accessible manner and resulting interpretative problems, see Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1987), 69–70.

5 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925; New York: Dover, 1958); Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Capricorn Books, 1958). For analyses of Dewey's metaphysics of experience, see esp. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art*; see also David Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 2003); Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005); and Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989). On Dewey's reconsideration of the title of *Experience and Nature*, see Alexander, 70.

6 See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 35.

7 On the search for authentic experience, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981). For a period account of American interest in experience as anti-intellectual and conservative, see Philip Rahv, "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 6 (November–December 1940): 412–24.

8 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (1927; Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946). For a similar diagnosis of this crisis with a different remedy, see Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925).

9 John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935; New York: Capricorn Books, 1963). Dewey's relationship to the Communist Party became increasingly strained, not only because of his independent socialist stance but also for his criticism of Trotsky's conviction in the Moscow Trials; see Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), 480–82. Dewey's seeming lack of understanding of Marxism is surprising given his monthlong trip to the Soviet Union in 1928, which resulted in six mostly positive articles for the *New Republic* ("Impressions of Soviet Russia," 1928). On attempts to Americanize Marx through pragmatist theory, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 425–34.

10 Differences aside, explicit connections do exist between Schapiro and Dewey, including Schapiro's commenting on portions of Dewey's manuscript for *Art as Experience*. See Dewey's acknowledgments for *Art as Experience* and the interview with Schapiro included as appendix C in David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 175.

11 Davis, "Letters from Our Friends," *Art Front* 1, no. 1 (November 1934): 2. Not surprisingly, such rhetoric contributed to Davis's worsening relationship with Halpert, and they severed their relationship from 1936 to 1941.

12 "Municipal Art Gallery and Center: Administered by Artists," *Art Front* 1, no. 1 (November 1934): 6–8. Years later, Davis described one of these trips to city hall and a brief encounter with Dewey in an interview: see Harlan Phillips, "An Interview with Stuart Davis," *Archives of American Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (1991): 9.

13 Some ten thousand pages of Davis's writings on topics ranging from aesthetics to politics can be found in the Stuart Davis Papers, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums (hereafter Davis Papers). Other valuable documents may be found in microfilmed papers of the artist and papers of the Downtown Gallery at the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. The idiosyncrasies of Davis's punctuation and spelling, for example his use of "spacial" rather than "spatial," have been maintained here where possible. At several points in this article I describe without further citation recurring themes in Davis's voluminous writings.

14 On Dewey's connections to *Dial*, see Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 233–39. On Dewey's impact on Cahill, see esp. Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts," in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973). At his most critical, Davis described Dewey's philosophy in a notebook entry of 1937 as "speculative and primarily 'god-worship.'" (He meted out such harsh criticism across the board, even to fellow Marxists at times.) In the forties, after renouncing his Marxist allegiances, Davis again cited Dewey, in more positive terms: a draft of a 1942 paper indicates that he planned to use a passage from Dewey's *Art as Experience* as

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an epigraph; Davis Papers, 1918; Davis Papers, January 20, 1937, and January 8, 1942.

15 Although William James's ideas certainly circulated widely among intellectuals, these terms were also employed in a similar manner in artistic discourse. See James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911). On James's possible influence on Picasso and other modernists, see Eliza Jane Reilly, "Pragmatism, Cubism, Modernism: William James and the Trans-Atlantic Avant-Garde, 1905–1925" (PhD diss., Rutgers, State Univ. of New Jersey, 2000).

16 All quotes in this paragraph are from the Davis Papers, March 1923. On the influence of symbolist theory in the U.S. art world, see Susan Noyes Platt, *Modernism in the 1920s: Interpretations of Modern Art in New York from Expressionism to Constructivism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985), chap. 4. For an example of the hieroglyphic analogy, see Vachel Lindsay, "Hieroglyphs," *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1922; New York: Liveright Publishing, 1970).

17 Davis, "Analogical Emblems," Downtown Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, reel 5546. For contrary evidence suggesting a reading of Davis's art in terms of simultaneity, see Edith Halpert's April 1934 press release, certainly written closely following statements of the artist: Downtown Gallery Records, reel 5569, frame 157. Gorky's statement is from his "Stuart Davis," *Creative Art* 9, no. 3 (September 1931): 213–17, quote at 213.

18 Stuart Davis, "Recent Painting in Oil and Watercolor," 1931, Downtown Gallery Records, reel 5546, frame 618. Also see Davis in *Stuart Davis Sketchbooks* (1932; New York: Estate of Stuart Davis, Grace Borgenicht Gallery and The Arts Publisher, 1986). Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 23, 208.

19 See Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1913); Denman Ross, *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony, Balance, Rhythm* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907); Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1920); and Hambidge, *Practical Applications of Dynamic Symmetry* (based on lectures given in New York in 1921; New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1932). For an example of Henri's positive assessment of Hambidge, Ross, and Hardesty Maratta as well as the marrying of art and science see Henri, *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1923), 53–54.

20 Davis's letter can be found in Downtown Gallery Records, reel 5546, frame 589. For his later remarks, see "Embattled Readers: Pros and Cons of Abstraction," *New York Times*, September 10, 1939, sec. 10, 7.

21 Davis Papers, 1933 and November 29, 1937.

22 Fernand Léger, "The New Realism," translated by Harold Rosenberg, *Art Front* 2, no. 1 (December 1935): 10. See also the opposing views of Balcomb Greene and Clarence Weinstock in *Art Front* 2, no. 2.

23 Davis referred to the benefits of a "workmanlike execution" in his notebooks, March 2, 1923. The critic Henry McBride referred to Davis's "workmanlike statements" in "New York by Stuart Davis," *New York Sun*, April 28, 1934.

24 Stuart Davis, introduction to *Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935).

25 On the "technological revolution" of modern art, see Davis Papers, January 10–12, 1937. For Davis's reaction to the Bauhaus, see Davis Papers, September 1937.

26 The bulk of these exchanges took place in the pages of *Art Front* and *Art Digest* in the spring of 1935. On these debates and Benton's modernism, see Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991); or John X. Christ, "Painting a Theoretical World: Stuart Davis and the Politics of Common Experience in the 1930s" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), chap. 4.

27 Edward Alden Jewell, "Stuart Davis Offers a Penetrating Survey of the American Scene," *New York Times*, March 10, 1932, 19.

28 Holger Cahill, "American Art Today," in *America as Americans See It*, ed. Fred Ringel (New York: Literary Guild, 1932), 258; and in Cahill and Alfred Barr Jr., eds., *Art in America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Halcyon House, 1934), 98.

29 Thomas Benton, for example, although perhaps most influenced by such figures as Hippolyte Taine, claimed to have read Dewey rather closely: see Benton, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1969), 167. He also described himself at points as a pragmatist: see Benton, "On the American Scene," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 4.

30 Gertrude Benson, "Art and Social Theories," *Creative Arts* 12, no. 3 (March 1933): 216–18.

31 Meyer Schapiro, "The Social Bases of Art," in *Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1986), 111. In subsequent essays, Schapiro celebrated the progressive qualities of modernist art; see, for example, "Nature of Abstract Art" (*Marxist Quarterly* [1937]) or the later "Recent Abstract Painting," both reprinted in Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1979). Among other Marxist theorists whom Davis sometimes mentioned was Georgi Plekhanov.

32 Davis Papers, 1936.

33 Davis Papers, August 23, 1937.

34 Davis Papers, March 24, 1937.

35 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 52–53.

36 Davis Papers, June 18, 1937.

37 Davis Papers, November 30, 1936.

38 Edward Alden Jewell, "Commentary on Murals: Exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery Presents WPA New York Region Survey," *New York Times*, May 29, 1938, 117.

39 Holger Cahill, "Stuart Davis: In Retrospect, 1945–1910," *Art News* 44, no. 13 (October 15–31, 1945): 32.

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