Painting a Theoretical World:
Stuart Davis and the Politics of Common Experience in the 1930s

by

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Abstract:

This dissertation examines Stuart Davis's paintings of the 1930s in relation to his conviction that art could transform reality by extending and reordering the spatial dimensions of common experience. While Davis's enthusiastic involvement with Marxism had a significant impact upon the development of his ideas during the thirties, his reception of liberal aesthetic theory, as exemplified in the writings of the philosopher John Dewey, played a more fundamental role in his understanding of the social function of art.

By situating Davis's activities within the context of other artists and intellectuals who sought to rebuild public life through the aesthetic organization of common experience, Davis's strong political convictions are brought together with his abstract art within an integrated interpretive framework. He described cubism as an extension of the realist tradition that could express his reactions to the modern environment and in so doing offer a conceptual model to guide future action. Through a complex and not always consistent theoretical rationale, he related the formal structure of his paintings to their ability to communicate his vision of common experience to a broad audience without violating the logic of two-dimensional design.

The social and political value of aesthetically reordering common experience was understood by many between the World Wars to reside in art's capacity to facilitate the formation of a shared national identity and cultural discourse. The profound geographic and spatial transformations associated with modernity played a crucial role in this conception of identity. Davis's contributions to these issues is examined in relation to his understanding of the internationalism of his modernist art and his complex relationship with American Scene painting. His engagement with these themes suggests that the pictorial reorganization of spatial experience that anchored his practice as a socially engaged artist is inextricably bound to the politics of place.

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I first became interested in the work of Stuart Davis while taking courses in modern art with Anna Chave as an undergraduate at CUNY, Queens College. She presented his work in relation to a challenge that has faced many historians intent on understanding the history of art: what is the relationship, if any, between modernist art and the political projects to which so many modern artists have allied their work? While my reasoning through the issue of Davis's intent has evolved considerably since I was first confronted with it, the initial question has persisted to engage my attention.

In framing my answer to this question, my dissertation committee has been an invaluable resource. Michael Leja, in particular, has offered keen critical insights and subtle encouragement, as well as reservation at those moments when it was most needed. His methodological rigor and discerning use of historical and pictorial evidence have served as a valuable model in working through my thesis. Eric Rosenberg's perceptive interpretations of images and ability to think creatively about art-historical issues have expanded my capability to react critically not only to the pictures of Davis but also to larger historical questions. Finally, David Friedman has encouraged me to communicate complex ideas in a lucid and logical manner and has shed needed light upon the broader currents coursing through the intellectual context described in this dissertation.

My colleagues at MIT have been valuable not only in the framing of my thesis, but also for the friendships they have offered. Their reactions to early outlines of this project, their encouragement as I stumbled over the inevitable bumps along the way, and their more general contributions to my intellectual growth are great. It is impossible to

credit each any every one of these individuals here, but Emily Gephart, Ann Vollman Bible and Adnan Morshed do stand out. It also goes without saying that within such a diverse and intellectually rich community as Cambridge, those seminars, resources, and connections encountered at MIT have been but part of a far broader intellectual and personal experience.

During the final stages of this project, discussions of large portions of this dissertation with members of a reading group in which I participate have been tremendously valuable. There is no substitute for the in-depth analysis and dialogue they have offered. If I have any regrets about this group, it is only that we did not begin meeting earlier; if we had, their advice and probing questions would surely have further affected the final form of this work in productive ways. Mari Dumett, Emily Gephart, Jaimey Hamilton, and Stuart Steck have each been good friends and effective critics of my work.

Rebecca Hegarty has not only been one of my most consistent and thorough readers and a trove of knowledge about the history of New York City, but also someone with whom I have shared an important part of my life. Her friendship and encouragement have been a great asset whether I am expressing the frustrations that inevitably arise in pursuing such a project or enthusiastically announcing that another piece of my research has come together. And in those moments when I just need to get away from my research, her company on a long hike, in sharing a meal we have prepared, or discussing the many topics in which we possess a mutual interest is always something to look forward to.

My family has been enormously supportive of my academic pursuits and have no doubt contributed to my interest in the history of art. Trips to various museums with my parents as a child piqued my interest in modern art; not only were so many of these works visually engaging but they also posed intellectual challenges. In many respects, my parents and my brother Michael and sister Theresa are often present in my thoughts as implicit critics while I develop arguments that I aim to have relevance beyond a limited audience of scholars. I hope they enjoy the story that unfolds.

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Introduction

In the fall of 1945, a retrospective of the work of Stuart Davis was held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Writing of this exhibition, the former director of the WPA Federal Art Project Holger Cahill described Davis's work as representative of an era that by 1945 was coming to a close.

> The coming Stuart Davis exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art is more than a long backward glance at the work of a leading contemporary artist. In a very real sense it is the biography of an era, one of the most vital and revolutionary in the history of American art. Davis, now at the half-century mark, has lived this era fully. His report on it, expressed in a racy personal idiom in a group of some fifty paintings and drawings, 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.[1]

Cahill described Davis's vision as 'personal,' but also made clear that his modernist paintings, rather than being transcendent, are very much representative of their time. Davis reacts to his environment, 'reports' upon it, concerns himself with the most pressing artistic problems facing artists of his day. Cahill concluded his essay:

> The exhibition, handsomely installed in the first floor galleries of the Museum, admirably charts the development of a painter, primarily interested, as he himself says, in 'color-space compositions celebrating the resolution in art of stresses set up by some aspects of the American scene,' and for whom painting is 'not a duplication of experience, but the extension of experience on the plane of formal invention.'[2]

Cahill, in a perceptive selection of Davis's stated intentions, emphasized not his fading ties to Marxism or his engagement with abstraction and late-cubist form, but his formal reordering of his reactions to the experience of the American scene. Davis's claims to

[1] Cahill, "Stuart Davis: In Retrospect 1945-1910," *Art News*, 15-31 October 1945, p. 24.
[2] Cahill, "Stuart Davis: In Retrospect," 32.

extend experience through the spatial logic of pictorial form define his practice as a socially engaged artist.

The argument presented in this dissertation is guided by the objective of explaining the connection between Davis's political activism and his seemingly unengaged paintings. In 1938, Davis completed the large abstract mural *Swing Landscape* [fig. 4.29]. In this same year, his commitment to the Communist Party and Marxist theory held tremendous sway over his thinking about issues ranging from art to international politics. With few exceptions, historians have treated these aspects of his career separately, as if Stuart Davis the painter acted independently of Stuart Davis the activist. His statements, however, make clear that he understood these two sides of his practice as contributing to a common goal. The pages that follow explore the logic behind his repeated insistence that his modernist art had political significance as a progressive social force.

Davis's enthusiastic involvement with the Communist Party and Marxist theory, although in many respects crucial to the understanding of his activities during the thirties, is alone an insufficient context within which to explain his understanding of the social function of art. He had begun to develop a consistent style and to formulate many of the aesthetic beliefs that guided his understanding of painting well before Marxism had made any significant impact upon his discussions of art. While he did describe his paintings in the late thirties as having a firm foundation in a revolutionary Marxist worldview, these writings represent a recasting of propositions that had developed earlier.

This dissertation relates Davis's activities as an artist to the discussions of American identity that played a crucial role in the production and reception of art in the

United States between the World Wars. These discussions were not wholly new, but they did acquire a particular urgency during these years. As the social and economic forces of modernity broke traditional regional and cultural bonds and the US attained increased international stature in economic and military affairs, the character of the US as a nation and of its citizens as individuals became increasingly contested. Many concerned with these issues looked to art as an embodiment of new collective ideals.

I examine Davis's work relative to a particularly influential strategy of cementing these new values, one based upon the transformation and instrumentalization of common experience. This approach had its strongest proponent in the American Pragmatist John Dewey. Dewey believed that art could communicate aesthetic experience to a broad audience and in so doing rebuild the public life and identity upon which he believed a healthy democracy is based. Davis similarly insisted that his paintings, although not propagandistic, could communicate and theoretically transform what he believed to be the most spatially progressive aspects of common experience. While many Marxists during the thirties did share the belief that art must have a basis in common experience in order to communicate to a broad public, Davis's specific development of these concepts cannot be understood in relation to Marxism alone. Many Pragmatists and Marxists alike were caught up in these discussions of national identity and common experience; Davis's own engagement with these themes is clearly marked by the assumptions that guided the activities of both of these groups.

The discussions of American identity that were so prevalent during this period are inseparable from the processes of modernization, globalization and urbanization that were radically altering the manner in which individuals experienced the world. The social

and political value of aesthetically reordering common experience was understood by many during the interwar years to reside in art's capacity to facilitate the formation of a shared identity and cultural discourse. Because one's identity was believed to have been shaped by one's past experiences, the act of aesthetically selecting and ordering common experience was understood to have considerable political significance. In transforming experience, the artist altered the collective identity that provides individuals with access to public life in a democratic society.

By demonstrating the parallels between Davis's understanding of art and the liberalism of Dewey, the political impetus that directed the production of Davis's paintings is shown to stem from assumptions that are not always reconcilable with his Marxist rhetoric. His efforts to justify his art through Marxist theory resulted in a productive, if not always coherent, amalgamation of Marxist and Pragmatist ideas. Furthermore, many of Davis's aesthetic beliefs not only predate his embrace of Marxism in the thirties but were also likely formed before he had any serious contact with Dewey's philosophy. This fact is important, as it illustrates the pervasiveness of many of the principal concepts at the core of Dewey's and Davis's thinking. In fact, many of Dewey's assumptions share a great deal with Enlightenment aesthetics and the art-historical tradition that had been developing since the late-nineteenth century; in this regard perhaps his Hegelian origins are more apparent than his seeming rejection of German idealism would suggest.

In constructing my thesis around the affinities between Davis's conceptualization of art and Dewey's Pragmatism, I do not ignore Davis's other theoretical and formal interests. Marxism, formalism, Cubism, the American Scene, and Pragmatism: these all

find an important place in this study. His attempts to bring together these multiple influences generated quite a few contradictions. Rather than ignoring these inconsistencies or merely dismissing them as the failings of an artist over his head in theory, I have brought his multiple interests together into a single, though certainly not homogeneous, analytical framework in order to more fully understand his stated intentions.

This thesis draws upon original research and analysis as well as the insights of previous scholars. Most historians recognize Davis's interest in depicting common experience and everyday scenes of urban life. However, the full implications of these observations are usually not drawn out in a manner that would allow for a reconceptualization of his practice. John Lane, in one of the most thorough and discerning accounts of Davis's career, discusses his interest in the spatial reordering of experience through abstract art. However, he relates this neither to Dewey's Pragmatism nor Davis's politics, the latter of which he interprets as having little bearing on Davis's art.[3] One of the most insightful treatments of Davis's career, although rather brief and in many regards less systematic than Lane's, is Brian O'Doherty's. His discussion of Davis's interest in systematizing the pictorial logic of space to its experiential counterpart is perceptive and in certain respects parallels my own. However, his text lacks the methodological rigor to draw out the connections necessary to substantiate his claims and draw out their full implications.[4]

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[3] Lane, *Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1978). Lane has also offered valuable insights into interwar abstraction in the US more generally; see for example Lane and Susan C. Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944* (Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 1983).

[4] O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973). My noting of his lack of rigor is not meant so much as a critique as a description of a text that was obviously written with great admiration for the artist; in many respects it is as much a personal reaction as historical narrative. One

The relationship between Davis's interest in 'common experience' and the more specific impact of John Dewey's Pragmatism has received very little attention. Lane mentions the 'perhaps unconscious' influences of Pragmatism, in particular on Davis's optimism and individualism, but his cursory treatment of this subject suggests that it does not have a significant role to play in the interpretation of Davis's art. Further, he contends that it was in the 'social' rather than the 'aesthetic' that Pragmatism had its influence, a view I challenge. Diane Kelder is the only historian to take seriously the notion that Pragmatist ideas may be present in Davis's writings.[5] Besides her references to the authors to which Robert Henri introduced Davis in the teens and to Davis's insistence on art's relationship to everyday life, she does indeed propose his possible interest in the philosophy of Dewey. Nevertheless, her brief article, however perceptive and valuable in illuminating some of these links, does not sufficiently draw out the complex formal and textual connections necessary to fully appreciate the effects these ideas had on his practice.[6]

The only sustained attempt to mend the historiographic gulf separating Davis's theory and practice relies heavily upon his engagement with Marxist theory and the Communist Party, and in so doing obscures his significant debts to Pragmatism and the liberal tradition more generally. Cecile Whiting examines Davis's participation in the

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must also keep in mind with regard to his text the fact that it was written with a greater knowledge of Davis's ideas as they developed in the post-WWII situation.

[5] Kelder, "Stuart Davis: Pragmatist of American Modernism," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 29-36. In her essay, she specifically references the brief comments noted above by Lane.

[6] Wayne Lloyd Roosa's dissertation "American Art Theory and Criticism During the 1930s: Thomas Craven, George L. K. Morris, Stuart Davis," (PhD Diss, Rutgers, 1989), brings together a group of actors that would allow Davis's debts to Dewey's Instrumentalism to be drawn out, but his study does not alter our understanding of any of these actors fundamentally, leaving the interest Davis and Craven shared in theories of 'common experience,' for example, all but unexplored. Further, Davis is portrayed as little more than a 'middleground' between Craven and Morris and the triumphalism of the arrival of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s, the critique of which is now so common, is left in place.

Communist Party's Popular Front struggle against fascism as it developed beginning in the mid-thirties.[7] Because she does not account for the fact that many of the assumptions that guided the production of Davis's art had developed earlier, she overemphasizes the impact that the fight against fascism and Party doctrine had upon his art. In his review of her book, Andrew Hemingway has demonstrated how she at times homogenizes the fraught and complex culture of the Popular Front, misleadingly stressing the role of the struggle against fascism as if it was the overriding concern of the cultural left.[8] Although Whiting ultimately claims that Davis's art was not a clarion call to Marxist revolution so much as a "liberal defense of American democracy," she neither distinguishes between the numerous strains of liberal thought coursing through the interwar cultural and political context nor situates Davis's activities securely within them. She is absolutely correct in recognizing something in Davis's work suggestive of liberal and progressive values, but certainly he did not unreservedly celebrate the US model of capitalist democracy as she implies.

Davis's significant role in art world discussions of national identity was guided by his conviction that social and representational space had been radically altered by modernity. It is his particular response to these discussions, whether offered as a Communist or independent progressive, that ties together his diverse interests in

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[7] See Chapter Three, "Practicing Democracy Through Abstraction," Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[8] Hemingway, "Fictional Unities: 'Antifascism'' and 'Antifascist Art' in 30s America," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 107-117. His review of Whiting's book raises many important objections, which is not to deny the real accomplishments of her analysis, which is often quite compelling despite its limitations. For example, she ties her analysis of developments within the Popular Front to a relatively close reading of individual images. Hemingway's *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) is in many respects a more complex, in-depth and agonistic analysis of the art world's engagement with Communist politics. A notable failing of this otherwise excellent study, however, is his almost complete lack of engagement with images (an omission he notes in his introduction), leaving the reader wondering at times precisely how all of his very thorough analysis bears upon the actual production of art.

questions of common experience, Parisian modernism, internationalism, technology, the American scene and radical politics. In engaging these issues, he emphasized their importance to the understanding of space and geography. For example, he related the internationalism of his cubist-derived style to the internationalism of the modern environment as well as the Communist Party.

Davis's contributions to interwar concerns about national identity and the American scene are often noted by Davis scholars, but they have for the most part not been studied in great depth.[9] The more general literature on the interwar exploration of national identity in the arts of the US is extensive. However, Matthew Baigell and Wanda Corn stand out for their significant and broad contributions. The strength of Baigell's work lies in his ability to ascertain the general trends underlying the often-complex debates on national expression, offering valuable insights into such subjects as the calls for an American renaissance and the emergence and transformation of the American Scene movement. However, his aversion to a theoretically informed approach, although it allows him to avoid the theoretical idealism that sometimes marks scholarship on identity politics, also precludes an analysis that incorporates his close readings of images and texts into a materialist history capable of considering larger structural transformations in the economic and social spheres.[10] Further, while he discusses Davis as an American Scene painter, he does not offer the necessary evidence to substantiate a link between Davis and the other American Scene artists that accounts for what they held in common

[9] John Lane, for example, mentions the importance of Davis's attempt to participate in the artistic search for distinctively American subjects as well as the significance of the positive reception of his 'American Scene' exhibition, 29-30.
[10] Baigell, *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s* (New York: Praeger, 1974). For a clear statement on his methodology, see his introduction to *Artist and Identity*.

conceptually, that is, beyond their mutual interest in depicting aspects of the American environment.[11]

Although the overall issues that Wanda Corn addresses in her book *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* do overlap with Baigell's, she focuses her attention on a more international cultural milieu.[12] Her examination of the transatlantics, those modernist artists who criss-crossed the Atlantic during the 1920s celebrating the modernity of American industry and mass culture, is quite compelling and has influenced my own analysis of Davis's practice, despite his conspicuously small part in her narrative. Through an examination of these artists, she demonstrates that the celebration of modern American culture was not merely an American phenomenon but profoundly transformed cultural production on both sides of the Atlantic. The limits of her analysis, however, become evident in her reading of individual artworks and in her methodology, which obscure contradictions and struggle, the stuff that drives history, in favor of clear-cut narrative. For example, the practical-minded efficiency of American business, so celebrated during the twenties, often finds too straightforward an embodiment in her analysis of particular works of art.[13]

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[11] The inclusion and exclusion of artists, including Davis, in his categorization of American Scene painting comes across as the result of an arbitrary sense of liberal inconclusiveness rather than as an attempt to reexamine the movement in such a way as to better understand its discursive coherence. He includes the Social Realists, for example, even as he admits that they contradict aspects of his own argument. At the same time, however, he omits many other artists, such as Charles Burchfield, who also portrayed the American scene and were central to its critical reception in the thirties. Baigell, *The American Scene*.

[12] Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[13] Duchamp provides a clear example. Although she claims to be aware of the interpretation of his work in relation to his tongue-in-cheek humor and irony, she does not allow this reading into her own analysis of his fascination with America's plumbing. It is his ambivalence and playful testing of one's expectations that makes his work interesting, not his didactic illustration of American ingenuity. Furthermore, it is somewhat puzzling that she does not look more closely at an artist such as George Ault, who claimed that the Precisionist skyscrapers he painted were in fact the 'tombstones of capitalism.' It is the contradictions that such an analysis might bring forth that is sorely lacking in her study. Eric Rosenberg's review of her book raises many of these important issues; he claims her explanations not to be 'hybrid,' 'dense' or

I have organized my study of Davis's conceptualization of art's relationship to common experience and national identity into four chapters, each of which examines certain key moments in the development of these themes. In the first chapter, I examine the writings of John Dewey to better understand his efforts to radicalize the liberal tradition and to overcome the theoretical separation of thought and action through aesthetic experience. In addition to discussing Dewey's ideas in their own right, I place them in a wider political context in order to explain what was at stake in Davis's tying of his practice to Dewey's project. I examine the currency Dewey's ideas held within the art world through a brief examination of the activities of a few select individuals on whom he had a marked influence and of his involvement with the attempted formation of an artists'-run Municipal Art Center and Gallery in New York City.

In the second chapter, through a close formal and textual analysis of Davis's paintings and writings, I explain the central role that experiential theories played in his practice as a painter. He believed that art, by extending and reordering common experience, provides a means of understanding and transforming reality. Central to the argument presented in this chapter is his belief that painting should communicate the experience of the three-dimensional world without violating the logic of two-dimensional design. In order to explain his understanding of art in its full complexity, I also discuss his stress on the spatial aspects of common experience, his belief that abstract art was the most viable extension of the realist tradition, and his attempts to justify his practice through Marxist theory.

'disjunctive' enough to allow for a more properly complex assessment of history. "America's Thing," *Art History* 27, no. 1 (February 2004): 163-169. A recent catalogue consisting of essays by multiple authors that also offers some valuable insights into this context is Sophie Lévy, ed., *A Transatlantic Avant-Garde: American Artists in Paris, 1918-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

With this interpretive framework in place, I turn in the final two chapters to issues of national identity in relation to Davis's professed internationalism and his engagement with American Scene painting. In certain respects, these chapters move from a more pictorial notion of space dealing with cubist form to broader issues of social space and geography. In the third chapter, I examine Davis's internationalist position in interwar discussions of national identity. While many artists and critics mobilized arguments about art's necessary basis in common experience to defend localism and nationalism in art, Davis used these same theoretical tools to argue for an internationalist art. Countering claims that abstract art was a foreign import divorced from the American environment, he suggested that American culture itself is thoroughly international: not only is the US a nation of immigrants but furthermore space and geography had been radically transformed and collapsed by the technological forces of modernity which allow for greater communication between regions across the globe. I ground this discussion in the general cultural discourse, in Davis's writings, and in a series of three paintings he produced in 1931 known as the *New York – Paris* series. I conclude by examining Davis's contributions to the fight against fascism in the late 1930s as part of a more general transformation of the rhetoric of national identity.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze Davis's contributions to American Scene painting. The largest portion of this chapter is devoted to an exhibition held in 1932 at the Downtown Gallery in which his representations of technological objects, New York City, and Gloucester, Massachusetts were staged as representative of the 'American Scene.' Although his modernist paintings clearly stretched the conceptual limits of the growing American Scene movement, most critics accepted his unique contribution even if with

some reticence. I then examine a bitter series of exchanges in *Art Front* and *Art Digest* between Davis and Thomas Hart Benton, the artist who by the mid-thirties had become most identified with American Scene painting. To portray these arguments as only the result of a rivalry between a modernist and a naturalist or a Marxist and a liberal is to fail to account for their shared interests. They both claimed that the subjects and the formal means through which they were expressed were based upon their attempts to come to terms with the experience of the American environment. I conclude with a brief discussion of Davis's *Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors – Seventh Avenue Style* of 1940 in relation to his art's increasing independence of recognizable referents in the environment. This chapter is in many respects the most synthetic, bringing Davis's formal interest in extending the spatial aspects of common experience together with his concerns for issues of national identity and a close iconographic reading of his images.

Chapter One

The Instrumentalization of Common Experience
John Dewey's Theories in Artistic Context

In the 1930s, Stuart Davis elaborated upon a theory of art that he believed related his modernist paintings to the experiences of the common man. His understanding of art's relationship to experience, although in certain respects unique, is also clearly marked by a broad discourse that included, most notably, the voice of John Dewey. In this chapter, I explain Dewey's theorization of art and public life and the currency these ideas held within the art world.

According to Dewey, aesthetic experience is directly related to 'common experience.' Aesthetic experience is any common experience that has been brought to fruition, which is 'consummatory.' These experiences do not remain detached and fragmented from other experiences, but instead include elements of the past and a projected future. They exceed mere sensation to become a basis for knowledge and are instrumental in their ability to further transform future experience. As shorthand for referring to this general constellation of ideas, I employ the term Instrumentalism. This label is both historically current and capable of distinguishing Dewey's philosophy as it developed in the interwar period from other strains of Pragmatism.

Dewey's influence on the interwar art world was substantial and loomed even where those involved remained unaware of his presence. While Davis's own references to Dewey were certainly not absent, they were far from common, and it is difficult to determine the extent to which and when he may have had first-hand contact with

Dewey's writings. Regardless, Dewey's ideas permeated widely and many of Davis's acquaintances during these years had read Dewey and clearly had an impact on Davis's thinking about art. Holger Cahill, for example, knew Davis well, and his writings, particularly those written in relation to his tenure as head of the Federal Art Project on which Davis participated, read almost as reports on his attempts to put Dewey's ideas into practice. Conversely, Thomas Benton and Thomas Craven, among Davis's most vocal antagonists in the 1930s, also expressed a deep interest in Dewey, and it is their parallel but divergent attempts to relate art to common experience that no doubt so infuriated but also influenced Davis. Dewey's impact reached far, and one could no doubt trace it in many more directions than I attempt here. What guided the engagement of these figures with Dewey's theories was a belief that art needed to break free of its ties to a narrow class of elite collectors and critics and be made relevant to a broader audience.

My analysis of Dewey's theorization of art's relationship to common experience begins with an examination of his perception that US democracy was in crisis and his understanding of the role that art could play in communicating new values upon which to build the strong public life that he believed was necessary for a healthy democratic society. I then expand my inquiry to examine Dewey's writings within a broader political context in order to better understand just what was understood to be at stake in participating in his project. From there, I turn more explicitly to Dewey's beliefs in the transformative power of aesthetic experience. I conclude with a brief examination of the resonance of his ideas within the art world, in particular as it relates to Davis's own development as an artist.

JOHN DEWEY: THE PUBLIC AND ITS PAINTERS

By the 1930s, John Dewey (1859-1952) was already quite old but he nevertheless remained one of the most renowned and influential philosophers, social theorists and journalists of his day. In fact, his own positions became further radicalized in time. Already by the late nineteenth century, after having developed beyond his Hegelian roots, he had become an established philosophical voice of Pragmatism. By the interwar years, he began to express his belief that public life had become significantly weakened during the twentieth century. He asserted that aesthetic experience has the power to bind people together in common discourse. Therefore, by aesthetically reordering common experience and offering shared ideals by which to live, art could revitalize the public life upon which democracy is built.

The aftermath of the First World War signaled to many observers an ominous path for the institutions of democratic life. The lasting effects of the highly centralized and regulated war-economy on U.S. industry, labor relations and the media were central to this perception. Workers were not only dehumanized by the labor process but found their voices harshly suppressed, their rights to organize and control their own destinies refused. Related to the discontents of labor, but of more general concern throughout the class structure, was the perception of the increasing complexity, hierarchization and urbanization of the nation. Experts not directly accountable to public scrutiny were seen to play an increasingly important role in the administration of society. As the agrarian republic became a modern state ruled by urban-industrial capital, many saw a crisis in its democratic system of governance, that it needed to be procedurally transformed in order to remain vital and represent its citizens who were becoming increasingly distant from

the seats of economic and political power. Somewhere along the line, it was believed, the public had lost control, not only of governance but also of its very ability to formulate coherent ideas.

Walter Lippmann's was an important voice in these discussions. In *The Phantom Public* (1925), he argued that due to the complexity of modern society, it was no longer possible for citizens to adequately inform themselves about important political and social issues to participate in a legitimate discussion of how they were to be handled. What at first seemed like public opinion was in fact something else, an assemblage of knowledge constructed from without and veiled in a cloak of seemingly open discourse; it was a 'phantom.' Lippmann advocated for the technocratic administration of society by experts, seeing in this no necessary contradiction to democratic traditions, just their adjustment for modern society.[1]

Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) can be read as a direct response to Lippmann's *Phantom Public*.[2] While agreeing with Lippmann's prognosis of the eclipse of public life and the increasing manipulation of public opinion by new forms of communication, he took a less bleak view of the possibilities for the rehabilitation of an intelligent and effective public. In recognizing that the modern state was at best negligent towards the aspirations and needs of the people and at worst coercive and destructive, he advocated neither majority rule nor technocracy, but instead believed that community could be restored and that a more decentralized and socially responsive

[1] Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925).
[2] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (1927; Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946). This book was also to some extent a response to Graham Wallace's study, *The Great Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), to which he counterpoised his notion of a "Great Community."

democracy was possible.[3] Democracy, as a form of collective governance the institutional existence of which far exceeded the government to include various aspects of civil society, demanded strong public life, which was built upon both positive and negative liberties.[4]

Dewey increasingly understood the extent to which the capitalist economy, although it was tied to the birth of modern democracy, was also a significant part of the problem. This realization became quite pronounced in the context of the Depression. Decision-making based upon public discussion had become eroded by private interests that were often hidden from individuals. Private enterprise and, in particular, large corporations, because of their tremendous and unchecked expansion, had become a public interest even as they were still treated as private entities.[5]

> That the competitive system, which was thought of by early liberals as the means by which the latent abilities of individuals were to be evoked and directed into socially useful channels, is now in fact a state of scarcely disguised battle hardly needs to be dwelt upon. That the control of the means of production by the few in legal possession operates as a standing agency of coercion of the many, may need emphasis in statement, but is surely evident to one who is willing to observe and honestly report the existing scene. It is foolish to regard the political state as the only agency now endowed with coercive power. Its exercise of this power is pale in contrast with that exercised by concentrated and organized property interests.[6]

[3] By 'state', Dewey referred to neither the public as such, nor the governmental agencies that carry out the public directives, but rather to the institutional existence of the organized public through representative bodies in directing the government.

[4] A full conception of democracy, according to Dewey, needed to encompass the family, education, industry and religious life. In this, it went beyond mere liberal notions of negative freedom to include positive control of social life: "The belief that thought and its communication are now free simply because legal restrictions which once obtained have been done away with is absurd." And further: "No man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone. Removal of formal limitations is but a negative condition; positive freedom is not a state but an act which involves methods and instrumentalities for control of conditions." Dewey, *Public*, 168.

[5] Dewey, *Public*, 48.

[6] Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935; New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 63-4.

Despite his recognition of the coercive power of economic interests – and despite his normal stress on individual agency he is careful here to locate the power in the economic system itself rather than in the class through which this power is wielded – he failed to recognize, and even refuted, the extent to which these interests had tremendous power over the state.[7]

Terms such as democracy, the public, and community were not merely employed by Dewey descriptively. In some cases, he used these terms to describe actually existing institutions. However, these terms were also intended to denote shared ideals, the full realization of which had not yet come to pass and most likely never would. They had a dual existence as partially realized forms and as ideals towards which to strive that had a material presence through their motivating power in the evolution of society.

According to Dewey, an ideal public would be built upon face-to-face communication, which would produce a shared set of values and beliefs: community. The modern age, however, in bringing forth the 'Great Society,' had weakened traditional values without in turn creating new ones upon which to build a 'Great Community.'[8] Although he did not outright dismiss the new technological means of communication available in modern society and believed one of the most important traits of older communities, a common identity based on shared ideals, to be obtainable through them, he was reluctant to embrace their possibilities, as he believed face-to-face communication to ultimately be more effective in galvanizing a united public. He desired to find new and

[7] Of those in control of power and the extent to which they are mere pawns of larger forces, he states: "At all events, it is a shifting, unstable oligarchy, rapidly changing its constituents, who are more or less at the mercy of accidents they cannot control and of technological inventions." *Public*, 204. As for his contention that big businesses, although coercive, do not run politics, see for example *Public*, 220.
[8] Dewey, *Public*, 126-7.

modern values by which to live, but he remained tied to ideals of public life inherited from a pre-technological past.

The new ideals that Dewey envisioned as corollaries to the modern age involved a major recasting of the American tradition of individualism, which he spelled out most clearly in a series of articles in 1929-30 in the *New Republic*. Although he recognized the new national and even global social forces acting coercively behind the backs of individuals in modern society, crushing their individual power, initiative, and imagination, he maintained his faith in an evolving individualist tradition, one which had overcome its opposition of individual to society to stress the individual's social and intersubjective basis. Rather than unmasking the ideology of rugged individualism for its false portrayal of personal volition, he instead concentrated his efforts on spelling out the need for a new individualism commensurate with an increasingly socialized and coordinated world. He viewed the tradition of 'rugged individualism' as a plainly outmoded and untenable ideal in the twentieth century, but also believed it a mistake to find in the demise of one form of individualism the end of individualism as such.[9]

Dewey explicitly related the transition towards a new individualism to the restructuring of the economy along 'corporate' lines. He viewed this process with a similar forward-looking regard to Marx's celebration of the socializing aspects of capitalism as both its apotheosis and ultimate demise. He observed the extent to which 'trust-busting' had lost its popularity as largess became a matter of pride, and noted also how mass production and distribution had increasingly united people across ever-greater distances through common markets. He conceived of this world in which activities were

[9] For example, he notes that some think that socialism and individualism are not compatible, but he finds that even these people probably do not really think that individuality will end with socialism. Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (1929-30, *New Republic*; Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1984), 40.

becoming increasingly socialized and coordinated as both liberating in its possibilities and troubling in the coercive power of its large privately controlled institutions. While he saw modern life as increasingly defined by the collective nature of industrial production and certain modes of living and entertainment, he also recognized that group ideals, such as those embodied in art, and the distribution of wealth remained to a great extent organized around private interest.

He placed a great emphasis on the importance of communication as a means through which this new individualism could concretize itself. To establish itself in the daily routines of people, it needed new symbols through which to order life, concrete cultural signifiers through which to *communicate* its ideals:

> Symbols control sentiment and thought, and the new age has no symbols consonant with its activities.… We have the physical tools of communication as never before. The thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence are not common. Without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless… Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.[10]

Communication was central to Dewey's thinking and endowed what might otherwise have been a narrowly individualistic and personal philosophy with real social dimensions. The full development of thought, he explained, is inconceivable without communication: "Ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought." Communication, perhaps more than

[10] Dewey, *Public*, 142.

any other concept, unifies his diverse interests in democracy, education, aesthetics, experience and epistemology.[11]

The importance of communication to Dewey's thinking about democracy comes through with particular clarity in his discussions of art. He often celebrated art as one of the most profound and transformative embodiments of communication. I quote at length:

> The freeing of the artist in literary presentation, in other words, is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social inquiry…. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought…. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation.
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> We have but touched lightly and in passing upon the conditions which must be fulfilled if the Great Society is to become a Great Community; a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being. The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it. When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.[12]

The arts clearly held an important place in Dewey's philosophy and this is no doubt one of the reasons that many of those in the art world were attracted to it, for it offered them

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[11] Dewey, *Public*, 218. In *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), already Dewey discussed in complex terms that shed a good deal of light on his later writings the importance of communication as a central aspect of his understanding of society. For example: "Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to posses things in common," 4.

[12] Dewey, *Public*, 183-4.

what could be understood as the necessary tools for the production of truly effective, yet nondogmatic, democratic art forms.

Despite art's important social function, he explained that its role had been compromised in modern times. First of all, the artist had been put in an awkward position in which he lost his social grounding:

> While the artisan becomes more of a mechanic and less of an artist, those who are still called artists either put themselves, as writers and designers, at the disposal of organized business, or are pushed out to the edge as eccentric bohemians. …The status of the artist in any form of social life affords a fair measure of the state of its culture. The inorganic position of the artist in American life to-day is convincing evidence of what happens to the isolated individual who lives in a society growing corporate.[13]

Dewey continued this analysis in his 1934 book *Art as Experience* by describing how many artists, faced with this situation in which their role has not caught up to the larger social forces, shun the dominant economic relations and turn to 'self-expression,' transforming their isolation into an expression of 'eccentricity'[14] or mere 'emotional discharge.'[15]

He framed this critique around the art world's embeddedness in the modern capitalist economy.[16] Unlike certain romantic and right-wing critiques of capitalism,

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[13] Dewey, *Individualism*, 20-1.
[14] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (1934; New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 9.
[15] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 61.
[16] Dewey's critique of the role of capitalism within the art world was perhaps in part influenced by the Marxist art historian Meyer Schapiro who had read at least two chapters of his manuscript for *Art as Experience*, as Dewey stated in his acknowledgments. However, conservative critics such as Thomas Craven also made similar critiques of the art world. However, their critiques of the economic position of the artist rather than being framed around capitalism as such were often aimed more specifically at industrial and monopoly capitalism. It is difficult to ascertain which direction the influences flowed between Schapiro and Dewey. Schapiro stated in an interview in 1995: "I was a student of John Dewey, whose classes I very much enjoyed. Dewey asked me to do a critical reading of *Art as Experience* in manuscript form. The book is important, of course, but it is marked by a tendency to treat humanity and art as extensions of nature, as products of nature, without dealing with how humanity reshapes and remakes nature, hence also itself. This lack of emphasis on mediating nature, on humanity using craft and art to redefine itself, is a problem of the book." This interview is reproduced as Appendix C of David Craven,

however, Dewey's explanation of the alienation of the artist is not based merely upon the notion that modern industrial civilization inherently ran counter to aesthetic life, thereby existentializing artistic alienation, but is rather based upon a more pointed critique of the functioning of the capitalist market and the 'economic system of production for private gain' which could be overcome, thereby bringing the arts back into practical situations.[17] Dewey extended his analysis to include an institutional critique of the museum and gallery as spaces of exhibition.[18] As he understood the art world, works were increasingly produced for no other purpose than sale in the market and exhibition in socially neutered gallery spaces, a situation that, as he explained, was directly related to the isolation and 'eccentricity' of much modern art. These institutions estrange artworks from the public not only by cloistering them from everyday life but also by bestowing a prestige upon them that interferes with the open-ended process of aesthetic experience. Further, the '*nouveaux riches'* often acquired fine art as 'evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture,' as cultural capital to use a more current term, in a similar manner to how "his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world."[19] Modern museums mirror this individual exhibitionism on a broader scale, exhibiting their wares as nationalist representations of the power and wealth of the nation-state.[20]

Artistic practice and the institutions that nourished it needed reconstruction if they were to again become the basis for strong public life. Dewey, along with many others, was calling for new art forms that could communicate the ideals of the modern world to a

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Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 175.

[17] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 343.

[18] "An instructive history of modern art could be written," he explained, "in terms of the formation of the distinctively modern institutions of museum and exhibition gallery." Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 8.

[19] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 8.

[20] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 8-9.

broad public. For these new forms to develop, forms that were both intellectually complex and accessible, new institutions were necessary that could skirt the problems wrought by the dealer-critic system of bourgeois patronage and the modern museum.

Although he was clearly searching already in the 1920s for alternatives to traditional artistic institutions,[21] the onset of the Depression provided the catalyst as well as political legitimation for the formation of a truly public alternative. I refer not only to the formation of the WPA Federal Art Projects, but also to Dewey's efforts to foster a more socially relevant and accessible art through his aid in the establishment of a Municipal Art Gallery and Center in New York City to be run by artists. This struggle was carried on by the Artists' Committee of Action and the closely related Artists' Union, of which Davis was president, and was discussed in the pages of *Art Front*, the official journal of the Artists' Union, also edited in its first year by Davis.[22] The purpose of the Center, as the urbanist Lewis Mumford noted in *Art Front* in November 1934, was to bring art into the daily lives of ordinary people, support living artists, and release art from the clutches of wealthy collectors and connoisseurs.

Davis elaborated upon the mission of the Center in the pages of *Art Front*, stressing the importance of forging a new relationship between artists and their audience, of making art again relevant to the lives of a broad public. He criticized the narrow audience of wealthy collectors that had historically dominated artistic patronage and in turn shaped "the art taste of their time. No artist could be free from their vulgar

[21] Most notably, he put significant effort into the conceptual development of the educational activities of the Barnes Foundation during the later 1920s.
[22] See in particular the first issue of *Art Front*. Although this was the issue most devoted to the Municipal Art Center and Gallery, subsequent issues did keep readers posted of developments as they occurred. For a valuable history of the Artists' Union, see Gerald M Monroe, "The Artists Union of New York," (PhD dissertation, New York University, 1971).

domination." He recognized in the seemingly free market system of dealers and collectors that the former 'demanded work' that they could sell to this limited class of buyers, severely limiting aesthetic freedom. The capitalist marketplace limited and distorted open and free communication, to put it in more Deweyan terms. Davis saw the Center as a means of "putting an end to this intolerable condition." He continued by describing the more socially responsible and democratic organization that was proposed in comparison to the dealer-critic system. "Through the Municipal Art Gallery and Center, which will be guided in its policy by directors elected from the rank and file of the artists, a cultural impetus will be established in the community which will make possible a powerful art expression, having its roots in the masses of the American people." One can certainly follow his logic that such an institution would help in alleviating the problems of bourgeois patronage, but one must ask if artists, who Davis willingly admitted had been historically alienated from the masses, would be able to run the art world more effectively or more in tune with the interests of a wider audience than the wealthy collectors and dealers, although certainly this would be a positive step.[23]

Dewey played a key role in these art world activities. Davis mentioned Dewey's involvement years later in an interview:

> In [1934] the Artists' Committee of Action …had something to do about a municipal art gallery.... We eventually had a parade from this place [ACA headquarters] on West Fifteenth Street all the way down to the City Hall. We had banners, pictures, slogans, etc., for this municipal art gallery. Then I guess that it was that time that we got into the City Hall, and I remember that I was sitting right next to John Dewey. He went along, and we were sitting there on the benches.[24]

[23] Davis, "Letters from Our Friends," *Art Front* 1, no. 1, (November 1934): 2.
[24] Davis in an interview with Harlan Phillips, "An Interview with Stuart Davis," *Archives of American Art Journal* 31, no. 2, (1991): 9.

In the same inaugural issue of *Art Front* cited above, Dewey described a letter he had sent to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and a related meeting mostly of interested artists he had attended on 8 May 1934 at which a resolution was accepted regarding the overall plans for the Center. As these plans began to gain recognition, and Dewey's name no doubt lent credibility to the artists' petitions, he remained involved. On 27 September, he went to meet the mayor along with sixteen artists at City Hall; the mayor, claiming illness, cancelled at the last minute leaving the assembled artists and Dewey to arrive at City Hall greeted by the bad news. Another appointment was set for 4 October, which again was cancelled last minute due to illness.[25]

Following these and other persistent attempts by the artists and Dewey to press for their vision of a democratic and artist-run art center, the mayor on 6 January 1935 presented his own plans for a Municipal Art Center. He ignored calls for artist participation in its administration, as well as many others of the original provisions of the plan, and chose his own 'Committee of One Hundred' to run the Center. It goes without saying that those supporting the initial efforts described above were incensed. Nevertheless, it was a partial victory in so far as a community art center had been established, even if not along all the democratic guidelines originally envisioned.

DEWEY'S LIBERAL DEFENSE OF SOCIALISM

In discussing Dewey's political ideals, it is important to stress the extent to which they did not exist in a vacuum but circulated in diverse contexts. The content of much of this dissertation is deeply entwined with political affiliations and how influences crossed

[25] See "Municipal Art Gallery and Center: Administered by Artists," *Art Front* 1, no. 1 (November 1934): 6-8.

political boundaries and effected the mobilization of various agendas. The fact that Dewey defended the liberal tradition, even if for socialist ends, caused his reception among the left to be a mixed one, at once admired by many independent leftists and chastised by Communists. The art world reception was even more complex, in part because of what many perceived to be the narrow aesthetic goals of the Communist Party as well as his close ties, at least for a time, with the Marxist-leaning members of the Artists Committee of Action and Artists' Union. Davis is a case in point; as a strong adherent to Party doctrine in most matters, he fought hard for his own aesthetic vision, which was strongly inflected with Instrumentalist notions of experience.

Dewey, although a defender of liberal values, was neither a supporter of the liberal economic policies of the Republican Party nor the partially reformed liberalism of the Democratic Party. As time progressed, he came increasingly to back the Socialist Party, by the 1930s quite outspokenly so.[26] Although many commentators now and then have claimed Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to be an enactment of Dewey's experimentalism, Dewey himself found FDR's experimental methods to be merely haphazard and his overall philosophy to compromise crucial democratic values. For Dewey, as for thinkers of the Enlightenment, liberalism was a radical social philosophy, even if the terms had changed over time: "If radicalism be defined as perception of need for radical change, then today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and

[26] In 1928, he still publicly supported Al Smith, the Democratic candidate in the presidential election, although he in the same breath stated his real support for Norman Thomas, the Socialist candidate. His ultimate support for Smith, he explained, was largely the result of his belief that Smith had a real chance of winning the election and was in the end not all that bad of a candidate. See Dewey, "Why I Am for Smith," *New Republic* 56 (1928): 320-21.

doomed."[27] Dewey's views had gained significant influence even as his liberalism was clearly far to the left of what most considered the liberal tradition.[28]

In 1935, Dewey wrote *Liberalism and Social Action* as a defense of a radically reconstructed liberal tradition, no doubt in large part as an answer to the mounting critique from the radical Communist left of liberalism's futility. Like Marx before him, Dewey recognized that capitalist economic conditions had eroded the individual rights, freedoms and equality that were purportedly at the heart of the liberal project that provided the ideological and institutional foundation to the free market: "The point is that their failure to grasp the historic position of the interpretation of liberty they put forth served later to solidify a social régime that was a chief obstacle to attainment of the ends they professed."[29] One of the problems, as he saw it, was that liberal values were 'formulated as eternal truths' which prevented their adjustment to changing social circumstances. Rather than show their false or ideological being in modern society, he defended "the ideas of liberty, of individuality and of freed intelligence" as having continued value, even as their means of expression and implementation needed to be radically transformed.[30] Not believing that the social control of the economy ultimately lay beyond the liberal tradition, despite its *laissez faire* history, he contended that social planning was the only means of realizing liberalism's ideals.

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[27] Dewey, *Liberalism*, 62.
[28] Americans had clearly taken notice of Dewey's radicalized positions. Gardner Jackson, "The American Radical" in Fred J. Ringel, *America as Americans See It* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932), notices as much. "The substance of the radical predicament in America is that there has been no sustained radical thinking here since Tom Paine and the American Revolution nor has there been the sustained passion essential to produce such thinking. By his application of philosophical thinking to everyday life, John Dewey, the country's foremost pragmatic philosopher, a man past 70, has almost inadvertently found himself in a position of leadership of radical trends in America. But these trends find expression in no program. They make their appeal through scores of one-phrase organizations such as the League for Industrial Democracy and the American Civil Liberties Union," 186.
[29] Dewey, *Liberalism*, 36.
[30] Dewey, *Liberalism*, 47-8.

Just as Marx and Engels in writing the *Communist Manifesto* offered a critique of the other major socialist and anarchist movements, Dewey in *Liberalism and Social Action* also took aim not only at the liberal tradition he sought to transform but also at the competing political positions of the left. His critique of Marxism was based not only on its espousal of violent revolution,[31] but also upon the belief that Marxism, despite its materialist claims, was overly theoretical and hence had not escaped its idealist origins.[32] What Dewey's critique suffered from most was his lack of first-hand familiarity with the writings of Marx, his critiques of Marx often better directed at third-rate Party ideologues.[33] Dewey advocated for a more gradualist – if not necessarily slow – approach to social and political change. Common interests aside, factionalism ran deep in the

[31] Part of the problem for Dewey was that he did not believe that ends justified means; he was a firm believer in method. Similarly, he did not believe that violent revolution and ensuing dictatorship would likely lead to a democratic society.

[32] For example, Dewey criticized the Marxist notion of inevitability for its basis on a hypothetical model of development rather than observation and further criticized the related concern with class structure as *the* motivating agent of history. Another of his central criticisms of Marxism stemmed from his understanding of the 'public' and its relation to private property. He viewed the Marxist concern with the confiscation of private property for the public good as a confusion of categories, the public being nothing other than the coming together of private individuals for a collective good. As he stated in *The Public and its Problems*: "But, alas, the public has no hands except those of individual human beings. The essential problem is that of transforming the action of such hands so that it will be animated by regard for social ends." Dewey, *Public*, 81.

[33] Dewey's lack of familiarity with the writings of Marx has often been made note of in the secondary literature. This lack is somewhat surprising, however, given the interest in Marxism exhibited by some of those closest to him and his month-long trip to the Soviet Union in 1928, which resulted in a series of six articles for the *New Republic* (1928); "Impressions of Soviet Russia," as reproduced in Jo Ann Boydston ed. *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Volume 3: 1927-1928 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 203-50.These articles were for the most part nuanced, exhibited an understanding of Soviet doctrine even if not of Marx's writings at first hand, and, most surprisingly, were relatively positive in tone. Still, he remained unconvinced that whatever society did finally emerge would resemble too closely what the Party had envisioned. The importance of the revolution, he believed, was less in the bringing of economic socialism than in the renewal of the vitality and spirit of the people, in the fostering of a conscious project to shape their own future, in the revolutionary changes it brought to education, and in its emphasis on the cultural aspects of public life. Perhaps the most telling line in this series of articles comes as a musing on the possibility of this experiment being implemented in the U.S.: "Not being an absolutist of either type, I find it more instructive to regard it as an experiment whose outcome is quite undetermined, but that is, just as an experiment, by all means the most interesting one going on upon our globe – though I am quite frank to say that for selfish reasons I prefer seeing it tried in Russia rather than in my own country," 244. That said, he does suggest that the 'experiment' be examined up close to see how it develops and what may be learned from it.

thirties and often prevented the mutual understanding of one another's positions in any deep and constructive manner.[34]

Despite factional rifts, there were some intellectuals who wished to update and in some cases Americanize Marx by bridging the gap separating the Communists from the radicalized liberals.[35] Although not all such attempts explicitly involved Pragmatism, many did, including those of Max Eastman and Sidney Hook.[36] Hook was a student of Dewey and wrote, among other things during the thirties, two monographs devoted to those who he considered the two greatest modern thinkers, Dewey (1939) and Marx (1933). To oversimplify, it can be said that he read Marx as a pragmatist before the fact and Dewey as the unwitting twentieth-century heir to Marx.[37] Hook's creative misreading

[34] Richard Pells has claimed, and I think with some basis, that many during the Depression years were compelled by Marxism over the Instrumentalism of Dewey as it found voice in the *New Republic* because the latter's ideas were just too practical, seemingly unimaginative and lacking in a specific villain, whereas Marxism offered the challenges of personal sacrifice, danger and a heroic battle against a visible enemy, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 60-1.

[35] It is worth noting that the attempt to bring the American pragmatic tradition together with the continental Marxist tradition has more recently become a far more mainstream project. For example, Habermas and his followers have attempted to bring Charles S. Peirce and George H. Mead together with the Hegelian Marxist tradition and various other theoretical traditions to forge a new social theory, epistemology, and pluralist politics. Also notable is Cornell West's beliefs in the power of both Liberation Theology, bringing together the radical aspects of the Christian theology with Marxist liberation struggles, and the American pragmatism of such figures as Dewey.

[36] For example, Lewis Corey (Louis C. Fraina) was an important early member of the CPUSA who had a falling out with the Party over ideological differences but still went on to write important books discussing the American situation as it relates to the possibilities of Communist revolution and the shifting class structure of the U.S. including *The House of Morgan: A Social Biography of the Masters of Money* (New York: G. H. Watt. 1930), *The Decline of American Capitalism* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1934) and *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1935). What Corey shared with Dewey, the Communists and the left more generally was a sense that there was a deep crisis that the New Deal, with its state-capitalist National Industrial Recovery Act, could not adequately solve. Along with Dewey and other social scientists, he recognized that capitalism had mutated from a competitive to a monopoly phase and was an increasingly collectivist endeavor. One of his most important contributions to Marxist theory's adaptation to the mid-twentieth century was his observation of the shift in the class structure. He recognized that the old middle class of small property owners no longer existed and that it had been replaced by a middle class of salaried employees, the majority of which, he believed needed to recognize their common fate with the industrial working class and poorer farmers in a coalition to overthrow capitalism.

[37] For example, he referred to Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action* as "a book which may very well be to the twentieth century what Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* was to the nineteenth." *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: John Day Company, 1939), 158.

of Marxism perhaps comes out clearest in his strong emphasis on method over results. This strategy allowed Hook to salvage Marxism from some of Marx's more disputable conclusions that were often blindly held up as doctrine by Party members. Despite his defense of method, however, Hook, unlike Dewey, defended the use of force and proletarian dictatorship.[38] The opening up of possibilities of a revised Marxism in which the historical materialist methodology and the promotion of liberation struggles still remained central values but were tempered by other traditions, although not embraced by all, was seized by many as a necessary strategy with which to grapple with their own historical situations. Pragmatism offered an important means of retooling Marxist theory, as was evident not only in the writings of Hook and Eastman, but also where the intent was not so clearly stated, as in the aesthetic writings of Stuart Davis.[39]

Orthodox Marxists recognized the threat to official doctrine proposed by these revisions. Emanuel Kanter, for example, wrote an article for the *Marxist Quarterly* in

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[38] The use of revolutionary violence, he argued, did not necessarily foreclose an ethical outcome, as force would be almost inevitable to overcome the counter-revolutionary violence of the state: "Revolutionary terrorism is the answer of the proletariat to the political terrorism of the counter-revolution," Hook, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (New York: John Day Company, 1933), 305. As for proletarian dictatorship, he states: "Here it is clear that 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is the domination not of an individual, group or party but of one *class* over another. *Its opposite is not 'democracy' but the 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,'*" Hook, *Marx*, 299. Dewey steadfastly opposed the notion of 'dictatorship' in any form, despite his apparent understanding in the 1920s of the Marxist implications of this concept: "That the existing state of affairs is not Communism but a transition to it; that in the dialectic of history the function of Bolshevism is to annul itself; that the dictatorship of the proletariat is but an aspect of class-war, the antithesis to the thesis of the dictatorship of bourgeois capitalism existing in other countries; that it is destined to disappear in a new synthesis, are things the Communists themselves tell us. The present state is one of transition; that fact is so obvious that one has no difficulty accepting it." Dewey, "Impressions of Soviet Russia," 343-4.

[39] For more info on Hook see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), Chapter 12, "American Culture and Socialist Theory," the section on "The Americanization of Marx." He discusses Hook's background in New York, his studies at City College, his dissertation with Dewey and his travels to Europe where he became familiar with Marxism. He believes that like Lukacs and Korsh, who he studied while in Europe, Hook criticized the mechanical Marxism of the Second International and returned it to its Hegelian roots. He also discusses the differences between Hook and Eastman.
It should be noted that Sidney Hook after the 1930s became a Cold-Warrior, defending American capitalist-democracy against the heresy of would-be radicals.

1932 titled "Dewey vs. Marx." Unlike many Marxists, Kanter had some familiarity with Dewey's writings allowing him to recognize his importance: "Before the rise of *pragmatism*, and particularly its left wing as represented by the Dewey school of instrumentalists, no American philosophy even attempted to 'reflect the political and economic actualities in American life.'"[40] He was also able to recognize what he deemed the superficial similarities between the Instrumentalists and the Marxists, but ultimately found them of little significance in comparison with their vast differences.[41] Kanter singled out Hook's project in this regard, offering a strong critique of his reading of Dewey into Marx for its dangerous consequences.[42] All in all, he believed American pragmatism to amount to little more than bourgeois ideology, a brand of 'social fascism,' a period term applied by the Communist Party to Democrats and other reformists.

In 1937, Dewey further complicated his turbulent relationship to Marxism when he defended Leon Trotsky's right to a fair trial. Trotsky was an important figure to many in the art world in the late 1930s. As a left-wing Marxist, he was not well received by

[40] Kanter, "Dewey vs. Marx," *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1932): 37. Despite the well-informed critique that characterizes this essay, he does take a few cheap shots, such as noting Dewey's support for US involvement in the First World War and pinning this as a failure of Instrumentalism rather than the shortsightedness or failings of an individual, 46. He also, in recognizing Dewey's critique of the uneven distribution of wealth, states that Dewey calls for a return to competitive capitalism, which is clearly a misrepresentation. He also criticizes Dewey's positive assessment of the growth of trusts, monopolies and corporations. While this is true, Dewey discusses their affects upon the cooperative organization of society and the individualist tradition, just as Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* remains one of the greatest celebrations of the powers unleashed by capitalism ever written even as it is also among its greatest condemnations.

[41] Kanter, 45, stated: "We are thus forced to conclude that Marxism and Instrumentalism are in fundamental opposition, notwithstanding the occasional use of the instrumental logic by Marx. No doubt there are many surface similarities in the respective systems."

[42] Kanter, 43-4 fn 3, stated: "Dr. Hook, who is well-versed in both Marxism and Instrumentalism, is one of the most dangerous neo-revisionists in America. Dewey is less harmful in this respect because he is almost completely ignorant of Marxism. Max Eastman is altogether harmless because he is ignorant of both Marxism and Instrumentalism."

Dewey, not to mention the Communist Party.[43] Trotsky's rabid revolutionary zeal and propensity for violence clearly did not sit well with Dewey's emphasis on 'means.' Still, when Trotsky was accused at the Moscow Trials, Dewey led a commission of mostly anti-Stalinists as chairman beginning in March 1937 to assess the charges. Although there were certain philosophical and political differences among its members, the Dewey Commission, as it was called, defended Trotsky, believing he had a right to a fair trial and was not guilty of the charges of which he had been convicted.[44] Despite the ostensibly non-partisan nature of this defense, it further complicated already tumultuous relations between the various leftist factions in the 1930s and also serves to further highlight Dewey's defense of means, that he would defend someone who he must have viewed as a vicious murderer because of his belief in the judicial process.

The political picture of Dewey with which we are left is complex. He was an anti-Marxist Socialist who nevertheless defended Trotsky against the Soviet Union and opposed the pallid reformism of the New Deal. The Socialist Party, however, had by 1936 gone into its own crisis as its old guard split off to form a new party. The Socialist Party itself remained highly critical of the New Deal and was infused with Trotskyists. It outflanked the CPUSA on the left, which by that time had formed its Popular Front coalition with the Democratic Party. The political alliances of the 1930s are a difficult terrain to map as parties and individuals constantly shifted positions and vied for support. In this context, Dewey's Instrumentalism represented but one option, the choice of which

[43] The differences between Dewey and Trotsky found their clearest outlet in the Trotskyist journal *New International* with a discussion of 'Means and Ends.' For more information, see Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 471.
[44] See Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) for additional information on Trotsky, his influence on American intellectuals such as Hook, and Dewey's defense of his innocence.

was not merely academic but involved the making and breaking of political affiliations and the construction of provisional alliances. As we will see below, Dewey was claimed by many in the art world often working on politically opposed projects and no doubt his presence caused a certain degree of tension that only the practicalities of realpolitik could overcome.

DEWEY'S INSTRUMENTALIST THEORY OF EXPERIENCE

I have already alluded to art's instrumentality in discussing its ability to offer symbols by which to live, the necessary ideological counterpart to the machine age. It was through its basis in 'common experience,' however, that Dewey believed art could communicate these symbols and offer a model for the reconstruction of democracy. By the 1920s, he had developed an understanding of experience that elaborated upon the latent content of his earlier writings.[45] His first full exposition of these ideas came with his book *Experience and Nature* in 1925, which was followed in 1934 by a more thorough examination of the aesthetic implications of these theories in *Art as Experience*.[46]

[45] Probably the most clear early exposition of the ties I discuss here, although not yet thoroughly worked through, came in the context of his discussions of education in *Democracy and Education* of 1916.

[46] Dewey's development of his theory of experience in *Experience and Nature* (1925; New York: Dover, 1958) and *Art as Experience*, while incredibly influential, has been greeted by some with skepticism. At the time, as I have mentioned, many Marxists regarded these ideas as idealistic. More recently, even sympathetic scholars, have often noted how these theories amounted to a new metaphysics, and in that sense ran counter to some of his core beliefs about Pragmatism, notably his critique of idealism. See for example, Westbrook, beginning p. 320.

As for the general literature on Dewey's Instrumentalism, those large studies dealing specifically with this topic such as Philip Zeltner's *John Dewey's Aesthetic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: B. R. Gruener B. V., 1975) or Michael Eldridge's *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998) have not been very helpful. Zeltner's study, in those instances in which it goes beyond the mere summation of Dewey's ideas, analyzes their logical consistency through a completely inadequate logical positivist methodology. Most of the interesting and useful writing on Dewey comes from other politically engaged philosophers, for example Cornell West and Richard Rorty. These studies are limited from a historical perspective by their creative, even if productive, misreadings of Dewey's project for their own ends.

Experience, according to Dewey, is the product of the "interaction of organism and environment." It is evident that in discussing experience, or in the very least those experiences that were of social value, he was referring to the interaction between a *human* and the environment. And by environment, he had in mind not only the natural world, as this term sometimes more narrowly denotes, but the full natural and social realm with which a human could interact: trees, animals, infrastructure, art and other people. Experience, as the interaction between a thinking person and the environment, refers to neither the mere perception of the material world nor the mind, but rather to the process undergone upon their interface.[47] Accordingly, he explained how in experience the dualities of subject and object, of perception and reality, of theory and practice, are overcome. The theoretical implications of such a maneuver are clear; it amounted to an attack on both the positivist and subjectivist traditions that he saw as plaguing Western philosophy in which reality was either there for the spectator to behold or immune to perception behind individual consciousness. It also implied a wedding of knowledge to practice. Reality is available to the actor through experience, but it is a shifting one without ultimate certitude that is gained through intelligent practical intercourse with the world.[48]

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[47] "The environment," Dewey explained, "consists of the sum total of conditions which are concerned in the execution of the activity characteristic of a living being. The social environment consists of all the activities of fellow beings that are bound up in the carrying on of the activities of any one of its members," *Democracy and Education*, 22. Although even animals and vegetables interact with their environment, it is the extension of "meanings and values drawn from what is absent in fact and present only imaginatively" that distinguishes man's interaction, *Art as Experience*, 272.

[48] Dewey finds in the physical sciences a practical manifestation of what he discusses; reality is not self-evident in observation but nor is it invisible; it is available through intelligent investigation which yields results which while not ever final are both practical and socially agreed upon because of the use of particular methods. See first chapter of *Experience and Nature*.
Cornell West has offered a solid study of the manner in which Dewey and other American pragmatists have 'evaded' the dualisms that have traditionally plagued Western epistemologies. According to West, Dewey rejects the subjectivist turn of Descartes instead beginning with intersubjectivity and he champions doubt

But it is not in just any experience that knowledge is to be attained. He distinguished what he referred to variously as '*an* experience,' 'consummatory experience' and 'aesthetic experience' from the multitude of 'habitual' experiences that occurs continuously in everyday life.[49] Only in '*an* experience' does the "material experienced runs its course to fulfillment" and become something distinct, "demarcated in the general stream of experience" as something with transformative capacities.[50]

These consummatory experiences, he explained, often result from some sort of environmental stimulus, a conflict or novel situation, which directed attention towards what had been routine actions experienced without reflection: "The familiar does not consciously appear, save in an unexpected, novel, situation, where the familiar presents itself in a new light and is therefore not wholly familiar." In adjusting to a new situation, "there is shock, and an accompanying perception of dissolving and reforming meaning."[51] In these situations, which could almost be referred to by the term 'defamiliarization,' the person undergoing the experience becomes newly conscious of his inter*action* with the environment, that he is an active participant in the world and can therefore react upon it, thereby transforming experience.[52] Creative thinking is action: "Ideas are largely the

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while also sidestepping modern skepticism, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 89.

[49] Dewey says of habit: "Habits bind us to orderly and established ways of action because they generate ease, skill and interest in things to which we have grown used and because they instigate fear to walk in different ways, and because they leave us incapacitated for the trial of them. Habit does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates. Thinking is secreted in the interstices of habits," *Public*, 160.

[50] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 35.

[51] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 311.

[52] By referencing the term 'defamiliarization,' I am not indicating that Dewey in fact had any knowledge of or interest in Russian Formalism (see Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated and edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, pp. 3-24) but rather noting the similarity between their ideas about the function of art and the stress they both lay upon art's difficulty. In part, I mention these similarities in order to stress the extent to which Dewey was very much interested in the effects of modern and even modernist art. This fact is sometimes lost sight of due to the fact that some of Dewey's followers were staunchly anti-modernist; see below for more on this topic.

obverse side of action; a perception of what might be, but is not, the promise of things hoped for, the symbol of things not seen. A fixed idea is no idea at all, but a routine compulsion of overt action, perfunctorily and mechanically named idea."[53]

The instrumentality of experience, that experience is not only passive but also active and transformative, is central to this study in so far as it is this dimension of experience that interested many artists and critics in the 1930s including Davis. Art's basis in common experience offered a means of explaining what on the surface may have appeared as politically unengaged art forms as catalysts for social change. Art need not be propagandistic or espouse a particular political program in order for it to be politically effective, by which is meant socially transformative. It is the task of the artist both to react to unique situations through his art and to turn the ordinary itself into something newly and fully experienced through its creative re-presentation. Art's role in the development of strong public life and modern ideals is found in its breaking through habitual thinking. Dewey made this clear already in *The Public and its Problems* in emphasizing art's crucial role in a democratic society.

Dewey often referred to art and aesthetics as among the most complete realizations of the possibilities found in experience. He believed that in art the dualisms

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Dewey was also involved with Albert Barnes and his Barnes Foundation. Barnes was a major U.S. collector of European modernist art, as well as African and 'primitive' sculpture. He established the Barnes Foundation not only as an art collection but as an educational institution; it was not conceived of as a museum in which one haphazardly browses the masterpieces, but as a place to go to learn about art and aesthetic experience through acquaintance with some of the best examples of modern art since Impressionism. During the twenties and early thirties, Dewey was closely involved with the educational department at the Barnes Foundation and his students filled many of the important posts within that department. In one regard this was a perfect amalgamation of Dewey's interests in both educational reform and aesthetic experience, but in another Dewey's pairing up with Barnes is also an odd one, as their views also present many contradictions, which one must assume were put to the side because of their common interests in artistic education. For some general information see Westbrook. Also see Mark Jarzombek, *The Psychologizing of Modernity*. Also see John Dewey, Albert C. Barnes, Laurence Buermeyer, Thomas Munro, Paul Guillaume, Mary Mullen, Violette de Mazia, *Art and Education* (Barnes Foundation Press, 1929).

[53] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 350.

that governed much thought dissolve: "The oppositions of individual and universal, of subjective and objective, of freedom and order, in which philosophers have reveled, have no place in the work of art. Expression as personal act and as objective result are organically connected with each other."[54] In this sense, art not only plays an important role in his philosophy but also served as a model for it, as he was not want to admit.

The centrality of 'art' to his philosophy is complicated, however, by his inconsistent use of the term. Sometimes in referring to 'art' or the 'aesthetic' he described art in its narrow definition as fine art or even painting, while at others he used these terms far more broadly to describe a creative process of arriving at a consummatory experience, in a sense almost any consciously organized experience: "It would then be seen that science is an art, that art is practice, and that the only distinction worth drawing is not between practice and theory, but between those modes of practice that are not intelligent, not inherently and immediately enjoyable, and those which are full of enjoyed meanings." The distinction he drew between art and non-art is often one of quality rather than kind. In a more healthily organized society art would be useful and other forms of labor would be artistic. For practical reasons, however, he employed both definitions, the particular meaning being employed indicated through context.[55]

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[54] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 82. Despite his high estimations of the power of art, including the visual arts, an argument can be made that Dewey was ambivalent about visual communication. In *The Public and its Problems* he states: "The connections of the ear with vital and out-going thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth." Dewey, *Public*, 218-19. Yaron Ezrahi has discussed this aspect of Dewey's thought in his essay, "Dewey's Critique of Democratic Visual Culture and Its Political Implications," in David Michael Levin, ed. *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997). The focus of his essay is not art but Dewey's critique of the 'spectator theory of knowledge.' He explains how Dewey and Lippmann came to understand that transparency was no longer possible in the modern government because of its complexity and how Dewey sought a solution in replacing the omniscient 'spectator' with a 'participator' actively engaged in events and without absolute knowledge.

[55] See, for example, Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 26.

Dewey's contention that 'art' refers to a process rather than to specific objects offers related difficulties. This thesis is directly related to that of art's basis in and as experience, which is itself a *process* of interaction. "Art is a quality of doing and of what is done. Only outwardly, then, can it be designated by a noun substantive. Since it adheres to the manner and content of doing, it is adjectival in nature."[56] Furthermore, he drew a distinction between 'art' and 'esthetic,' designating by the former a process of making and by the latter the process of reception. By focusing on the procedural aspects of art, he made of it something dynamic in conception, more than a static object to be beheld. Rather than existing merely as an object without history, art has built into its plastic form a process of making and organization that is continued through its reception. Accordingly the "*product* of art – temple, painting, statue, poem – is not the *work* of art."[57] Again, his actual employment of the term 'art' wavers between these two definitions.

It is in this regard that he believed that art, when understood as consummatory experience, contains a temporal dimension. Art reorders past experiences in the present and in so doing provides a model for future experience. "Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is."[58] Put in another way, the environment is understood as "charged with accumulations of long-gathering energy" which art has the capacity to bring forth. As one of the most complete manifestations of experience, art unites the material with the ideal, physically embodying existing life in such a manner as to evoke its latent future. According to Dewey, art *is* experience, most completely understood.

[56] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 214.
[57] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 214.
[58] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 18.

Until now, I have discussed Dewey's theories largely in terms of an *individual's* interaction with his environment. Had his philosophy not gone further, this would have been an insecure basis upon which to build a new epistemology and theory of praxis. He insisted, however: "Experience is not a veil that shuts man off from nature; it is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature."[59] What enabled him to claim any objectivity for his theories, even if one that allowed for malleability and historical relativity, was its intersubjectivity. He claimed that experience, in its most consummatory forms, is not based merely on an individual's interaction with his environment but on communication of and through these actions. Communication, he stated, is "uniquely instrumental" in that it allowed the things of the world to have meaning and that through further communication meaning could be transformed and offer a 'sense of communion.'[60] Knowledge exists through interaction with the environment, but it was only through communication involving the sharing and comparing of experiences that such knowledge could gain any practical and epistemological grounding.

I have already stated that the knowledge of which Dewey wrote was not absolute. In a society in which communication and language are fractured and incomplete, knowledge itself could be no more complete: "Intelligence is partial and specialized, because communication and participation are limited, sectarian, provincial, confined to class, party, professional group."[61] For this reason, routine and habitual thinking are not only unreflective but also malformed: "The subconscious of a civilized adult reflects all the habits he has acquired; that is to say, all the organic modifications he has undergone. And in so far as these involve mal-coordinations, fixations and segregations …sensory

[59] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, x.
[60] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 204-5.
[61] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 204-5.

appreciation is confused, perverted and falsified."[62] Experience is distorted by the limitations on open communication and by unreflected thought.

Art, according to Dewey, as a particularly open form of communication has the ability to communicate across racial, national and class boundaries where other forms of communication often broke down, offering to the public a communion of shared experiences and ideals. These experiences, because of their degree of organization, could offer a critique of life as routinely lived. While he recognized that art was not always instrumental in intent, he found in its aesthetically reordered vision of common experience an instrumentality that is nonetheless implied. Art offers to society a model and direction for future development through its "objects of enjoyment" which "do more than all else to determine the current direction of ideas and endeavors in the community."[63]

THE ARTWORLD RECEPTION OF DEWEY'S THEORIES

Dewey's influence on the art world was deep and widespread. Although discussions of 'common experience' in the interwar art world were almost ubiquitous (and certainly had an influence on Dewey as well) and to even attempt to discuss them is a daunting prospect, I have narrowed this task by focusing on that discourse which centered roughly on Dewey and by examining those figures and institutions most central to Davis's activities.

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[62] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 300-1. This is surprisingly similar to Jurgen Habermas's understanding of the distortion of open communication by capitalist and political imperatives, although without the theoretical complexity involved in his bringing together of system and lifeworld paradigms from mainstream sociology, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981 in German; Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).
[63] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 204.

In 1922, Davis painted *Still Life with 'Dial'* [Fig. 1.1]. Davis is seen working through the formal challenges posed by Cubism in a manner that exhibits his increasing understanding of modernist form. His use of an upturned, flattened space and his particular application of tonal variation demonstrate a more complex attempt to learn from the examples of Cézanne, Picasso and Braque than those of previous years. His engagement with European modernism found its counterpart in a number of small journals then popular amongst a limited cultural intelligentsia, including *Dial*. Roughly speaking, *Dial* was devoted to publishing modernist literature and cultural criticism alongside progressive political and social essays. In this painting, Davis represents an element of the artist's studio, a journal, to which he aligned his own formal and intellectual development.

In the late teens, *Dial*, under new ownership, was revamped as a voice of aesthetic modernism and progressive politics. John Dewey was offered an editorial position alongside Thorstein Veblen and Helen Marot in order to address issues of postwar reconstruction at home and abroad. These issues were explored not only from the vantage point of politics but also from that of what was considered advanced culture. Although the prestigious name of John Dewey remained on the editorial roster for some time, by the spring of 1919 his activities for the journal were largely behind him.[64] Nonetheless, a significant group of intellectuals came together, a number of whom would eventually turn to Dewey's theories and some of whom went through significant aesthetic and political realignments as the twenties progressed. Among the contributors to *Dial* during these years was Davis; four of his relatively conventional portrait-drawings – at least from a stylistic point of view – were printed in the August 1920 edition.

[64] Westbrook, Chapter 8, "The Politics of Peace."

Thomas Craven contributed a number of articles to *Dial* in the early 1920s. However, he was to become one of Davis's greatest adversaries due to his support of Regionalist art and his declarations against modernism. The content of these articles suggests a markedly open position not only toward modernist art but even its formalist interpretation as exemplified by the English writer Roger Fry. While Craven did not unreservedly celebrate Fry, his willingness to accept so many of Fry's assumptions is striking when viewed in the context of his later positions, to be discussed below.[65] *Dial* also published a number of articles by Henry McBride who was on his way to becoming one of the most esteemed critics of contemporary art in the interwar U.S. art world, reviewing quite a number of Davis's exhibitions over the coming years. These early connections point to the participation of a number of individuals in a common project in the immediate post-war context, a project that related the revitalization of modern culture to the reconstruction of democratic society domestically and internationally. Many of these figures shared a belief in the importance of modernist form as a rejuvenating force on artistic production and democratic society.

Although much art produced during the twenties could be described as celebratory of 'common experience' in that it represents the city, industry, transportation, the landscape, and other emblems of modern American life, the specific experiential discourse as developed by Dewey had not yet taken hold in any perceptible manner, nor had Dewey himself yet published extensively on the topic. His eventual exposition of these ideas roughly coincides with the art world's own increasing stress upon the basis of art in 'common experience' in the late twenties and thirties. What many of these artists

[65] Craven, "Mr. Roger Fry and the Artistic Vision," *Dial* 71 (July 1921): 101-106. It is also worth noting that Craven also published a number of articles in the early 1920s in the *New Republic*, the organ for many of Dewey's important articles during the interwar years.

and critics shared, and what set them apart from the modern artists of the twenties, was an interest in the routines and phenomenology of daily life, as opposed to the icons that symbolized that life.[66] To be sure, the two tendencies coexisted throughout the period, but a shift in their relative emphasis is evident. Furthermore, the social analysis underlying the turn to the type of experiential discourse that played such an important role during the late twenties and thirties often resembles that which framed Dewey's critique of modern society, that art was becoming increasingly disengaged from the concerns of an increasingly fragmented public. An art based upon common experience could bring culture, and hence socially responsible democratic ideals, back to the people. The onset of the Depression underscored the urgency of these concerns.

Craven's development as a critic exemplifies this trend. While he is largely known today as a conservative promoter of Regionalism, as the arch-opponent of all art either left-wing or modernist, his development is more complex than this caricature allows, as I began to suggest in regard to his early writings for *Dial*. Even his later writings, however, are far more nuanced and insightful than that for which he is often given credit.[67] The staid provincialism and anti-modernism that characterize so many of his statements lay alongside celebrations of the accomplishments of modern art. He praised those artists who had discarded what he interpreted as the naïve naturalism of

[66] I discuss this issue in reference to Davis's development in the third chapter.

[67] This reading is partly the result, and justifiably so, of his tendency to overstate cases in open debate that he may have with more reflection, such as in a published article, not have been willing to make. As an example of his off-the-cuff demeanor, one can take comments made in the spring of 1932 during a lecture tour. His response to audience questions made news. The *Art Digest* quotes the Los Angeles *Times* as saying that although Craven had completed his lectures on the Pacific Coast, his dynamite 'continues to explode:' "No one ever succeeded in planting so many ticks under our artists' skins as this little smiling blasphemer. The heckling he received at the California Art Club and his rapid comebacks are history. 'You are all imitation French artists,' he told the boys and girls. 'Who,' asked the sculptor, 'do you consider a good American sculptor?' 'There has been no sculpture since Michaelangelo,' came the answer like a flash," Arther Miller from the L.A. Times in "Craven Heckled," Art Digest 6, no. 14 (15 April 1932): 32.

many nineteenth century painters, recognizing that a painting should not and could not be a direct duplication of nature. He also sharply criticized the effects of corporate capitalism upon the cultural development of the United States; this is not to say that Craven was by any means a socialist, but that he recognized the need for more social control of the economy. It was less his interpretation of modern art or his critique of corporate capitalism that estranged many in the art world, than what he predicted and espoused, his aesthetic prescriptions for the development of a healthy society. He contributed his own idiosyncrasies and insights to a long history of conservative populists who, while offering valid critiques of society – ones shared by many on the left – fed into the public's anxieties and offered easy answers that often looked back to an idealized past that could not be recreated.

Dewey's impact upon Craven's writing is most evident in the latter's theoretical understanding of art's future development. Craven judged the quality of contemporary art in relation to its ability to reorder experience through the simplification of nature and communicate this content to a broad public. Without such simplification and organization of experience, he argued, art would have little more function than photography.[68] In going beyond mere transcription to reorder experience, art participates "in the general evolution and development of thought."[69] In elaborating upon this process, he stressed the temporality of experience in a manner that in many respects parallels the writings of Dewey. He looked to the past for the 'method,' the formal tradition, by which to

[68] Craven, among many others at this time, considered photography the antithesis of art because of its mechanical relationship to its subject. It was presumed that an artist could not reorder nature and therefore transform experience through photography. It needs little emphasis today, given the profusion of excellent studies on the history and theory of photography in the past decades, that despite this mechanical relationship, the photograph is very much a product of a subjective process and is not merely an unmediated 'document.'

[69] Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 50-1.

communicate 'meanings' to the present. "When art is a functioning activity, closely related to life and bent on communicating the meanings of life; when the need for expression is vigorous and forceful, new forms inevitably occur."[70] In expressing a contemporary meaning, new forms are developed which are instrumental in the movement toward a future. The development of these new forms must always have a basis in tradition, which is transformed by the pressure of present circumstances.

It is these temporal dimensions of experience that allow Craven's writings to gain their conservative valences. To reiterate, past experiences are organized in the present towards a possible future. One reading of this statement is as a materialist foundation for speculations about future progress, that any projected future must be based upon the real possibilities of the here and now rather than on fanciful or utopian ideas divorced from history. More conservatively, however, this same statement can lead to a stress on the historical as the future, that whatever is to come must have already been, an argument akin to the circularity of conventional hermeneutics. At his more abstract, Craven often took on the guise of the former, stressing art's progressive potential and its necessarily social foundations, whereas when it came down to the realities of promoting those artists in whom he saw the greatest potential, his sympathies clearly resembled the latter.

Craven's assessment of modernist art is telling in this regard. Although he offered a sensitive analysis of the underlying social and institutional problems plaguing the artist, including those problems related to the capitalist class structure, his intent was ultimately conservative. He was not dismissive of modernist form as such – sometimes even

[70] Craven, *Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, the Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), 184. Dewey's influence upon Craven is widely acknowledged. See for example, Wayne Lloyd Roosa, "American Art Theory and Criticism During the 1930s: Thomas Craven, George L.K. Morris, Stuart Davis" (PhD diss, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 1989).

defending the technical advances opened up by various avant-gardes, but rather of the lack of engagement of modernist artists with modern experience:

> All art, to be sure, implies a certain amount of selection – one cannot include everything – but normally the purpose of selection is to set down one's experiences in forms objectively valuable. Such is its biological function – a means to an end. Why then should the Cubists carry the process to its second stage, to abstract the primary selection until nothing remains but dry bones? The answer is that they have no experiences worth communicating, or in plainer speech, nothing to say.[71]

The problem, as he saw it, was that many modern artists, in recognizing their social alienation, willingly withdrew even further from society. This argument parallels Dewey's, as well as those of many prominent Marxists including Davis. Where he differs from Davis, for example, is in his failure to articulate the differences between the various modernist schools, declaring all modernist artists anti-social and even anti-modern:

> They maintain that an abstract art is the reflex of a machine age, and that its technique is the organic expression of the scientific trend of the times, a theory echoed by many writers. It happens, however, that the Modernists, by their own confession, are aggressively hostile to our machine age, and that they live as far from it as possible, preferably in the more romantic quarters of Paris.[72]

He mobilized this argument to defend his own chosen camp of artists as thoroughly modern in their engagement with the contemporary environment, although one needs look no further than the paintings of John Steuart Curry to call this assertion into question. Further, in labeling the modernists themselves as anti-modern and escapist, although in a limited number of cases a valid argument, he is unfair to modernist artists

[71] Craven, *Men of Art*, 500. Although Craven in this statement does refer to the objective value of particular experiences, this should not be taken as evidence that he was not a Deweyan, although it does point to the extent to which many, including Craven and Dewey, still retained certain aspects of the dialectical tradition despite their espousal of an Instrumentalist theory of experience. It should come as no surprise that contradictions abound in the writings of many of these figures.
[72] Craven, *Men of Art*, 504.

as a whole, many of whom did celebrate modern life and an even greater number of whom expressed a productively ambivalent attitude towards modernity.

Despite Dewey's criticism of the New Deal's economic and political ideology and what I have argued is his real distance from its timid approach to social transformation, his ideas did find a strong advocate in Holger Cahill, director of the New Deal's WPA Federal Art Project. When Cahill was first approached for the position of director of the FAP, he turned to Davis for advice. As Davis recalled: "He asked, 'Well what do you think? It's a hell of a big job. I don't know whether I'm up to it.' ...He was closer to the artists in their living and their problems than any other person, so you know, I said, 'For God's sake, take it! You'll be the savior of the whole situation.'"[73]

The debt that Cahill owed to Dewey in his conceptualization of the FAP's role is unambiguous.[74] Cahill discussed the artistic process in terms of the 'interaction between man and his environment;' he stressed the importance of public life and art's existence as a form of communication to a healthy democracy; he held that the artist had in recent history become increasingly separated from community life: clearly Dewey loomed not far behind such pronouncements. Part of the problem with the contemporary artistic situation, as Cahill explained it, was the category of the 'masterpiece' and the understanding of art as a 'luxury product;' this conceptualization of the art object distanced it from the possibility of a truly social reception. He discussed the important role of the FAP in relating the arts back to common experience in terms of their subjects

[73] See Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 114-16.
[74] See *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936). Also see Cahill's foreword to Francis V. O'Connor ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, "American Resources in the Arts" (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973). He devotes a good deal of this essay to outlining Dewey's ideas and just how important they were to his own intellectual development.

and form. He described the various methods by which to accomplish this goal as implemented by the FAP, including federal patronage, stylistic eclecticism and a geographic dispersal of artistic production. He believed that through this new system of public patronage and distribution, art could be wrested out of the hands of the elite and back into the realm of the common man. His desire, one he shared with many in the art world including Davis and other members of the Artists' Union, was that the FAP would ultimately outlive its role as relief for unemployed artist-workers and continue to serve as a vital cultural institution fostering a democratic society.[75]

In discussing the FAP, Cahill framed its goals of reconstructing a situation in which the artist had a vital public function to play within a social history of art aimed at explaining how the artist had become alienated within modern society.[76] Despite his analysis of the limitations placed upon artists by the institutional organization of the art world including its system of patronage, he did find within the history of modern art precedent for the project of relating art to common experience. In particular, he referred to the artists of the Ashcan School, where Davis himself received his training, who he believed painted pictures of the American scene that brought 'the gusty vitality of city streets into the staid salons of the genteel tradition."[77] He also found value in the

[75] The literature on the Federal Art Projects is substantial. I cite only one source, as it is most directly relevant to Cahill's interest in Dewey: Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983).

[76] He made these arguments in the catalogue for an exhibition celebrating the accomplishments of the FAP, *New Horizons in American Art*. They parallel those by Dewey, as well as those of Craven, Schapiro and Davis, illustrating the extent to which this basis of critique was shared across the political spectrum even if the solutions were not. In referring to Cahill's analysis as a social history of art, I refer to his understanding of the form and content of art as it developed in relation to such things as class structure, the forces of production, patronage, and the interests and beliefs of members of society. That being said, the social history being developed by Cahill and others at this time, lacks the theoretical and historical complexity one finds in the present social history of art. What one does find, however, and what is often so lacking in today's histories, is a view towards the present situation and its possibilities for future progressive development.

[77] Cahill, *New Horizons*, 15.

American folk art tradition, which he portrayed as a historical model of non-alienated artistic labor in which art was tethered to community life and in which the restrictive divisions between fine art and decoration did not apply. Although he recognized that the increasing mechanization and urbanization of society had blocked the further development of folk art, he believed that modern artists could nonetheless learn from its example: "That their work was not the background for the development of American art as we know it today is one of the accidents of our history."[78] This belief no doubt explains part of the impetus for his involvement in the presentation of folk art to large audiences at what were otherwise contemporary art spaces such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Downtown Gallery.[79]

Cahill's emphasis on the importance of the folk art tradition does suggest a reading of Dewey's philosophy stressing the past's role in future development that can be interpreted as resonating with Craven's conservatism. Although Cahill's interpretation of Instrumentalism was not as focused on the forward looking potential of the present as Davis's, his interest in the past was also not as conservative as Craven's. Similarly, the geographic dispersal of which Cahill wrote, in which various regional centers take on greater importance in the production and reception of art, although superficially similar to Craven's support for Regionalism, diverged greatly from the anti-urban rhetoric of Craven's espousal of the shifting of artistic production away from its traditional urban centers; Cahill was not so much anti-urban as against centralization. Furthermore, Cahill

[78] Cahill, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 7. He also observed that some more recent artists had rediscovered the folk art tradition, in particular a number of modernist artists upon their return from France around 1910, p. 26.
[79] For his involvement with folk art at MoMA, see Cahill, *American Folk Art*. For his involvement with the Downtown Gallery, see chapter four; also Diane Tepfer, "Edith Gregor Halpert and the Downtown Gallery: 1926-1940; A Study in American Art Patronage" (PhD Diss, University of Michigan, 1989).

mobilized the discourse of the 'usable past' through his writings on folk art and his participation in the cataloguing of objects in the FAP's Index of American Design as a model for the bridging of the gulf separating fine and applied art, whereas Craven mobilized this discourse in his search for what he believed was a more authentic and wholesome culture which could be retrieved from the jaws of modernity.

One of the things the onset of the Depression, the collapse of private patronage and the establishment of the WPA art programs made clear was that there were alternatives waiting to be discovered to the dealer-critic system of wealthy collectors, quasi-public galleries, elite critics and market-driven evaluations of quality. The government was looked to not merely as an interim solution to the economic hardships artists faced during the Depression, but as a permanent source of patronage that would nourish rather than strangle socially expressive art. A new and broadly based public art was envisaged based upon new forms that could communicate to this non-elite audience. Like the concerns of Dewey and Lippmann with issues of public discourse, so with issues of art's relationship to its public, rumblings of this discourse can be found in the 1920s, particularly in discussions of the viability of a homegrown modern art. It was in the later twenties, and in particular in the thirties, however, that the experiential strains running through these discussions of art's relationship to its public became a pronounced motivating force behind the production and reception of art.

The extent to which an experiential discourse (or discourses) dominated much aesthetic discussion in the 1930s was reflected upon in 1940 in an article written by Philip Rahv for *Partisan Review* looking back at the decade, "The Cult of Experience in

American Writing."[80] John Dewey must be understood to have participated in this discourse in a definitive manner, but one must also realize the extent to which it had an important impact well beyond his ever-present shadow. Rahv described an experiential tradition in American literature stretching back to Walt Whitman and William James and looming large through the 1930s. He described the literature of that decade as portraying a 'vast phenomenology' of the 'real,' which foreclosed on the 'intellect.' He proclaimed that by 1940 this trend had begun to wane and forecasted its ultimate demise, although he also admitted that he could not as yet name its successor. Despite his criticism of the lack of intellectual reach of this aesthetic, he did appreciate its ability to avoid the 'abstraction and otherworldliness' that marked certain aesthetic forms.

Contrary to Rahv, Dewey, and especially Davis, did not oppose the experiential to the intellectual, but instead believed that in experience the material and the intellectual were wed. For Davis, to understand reality one must be able to theoretically grasp common experience. Davis was certainly aware of Dewey's theories, even if it is difficult to ascertain their precise relationship. It is likely that Davis had already been introduced to Dewey's philosophy by the early 1930s through various art world acquaintances, including Holger Cahill. Further, conceptual parallels are evident already in the twenties that indicate the presence of a shared intellectual context that likely conditioned the development of the beliefs of both Dewey and Davis at least as much as it was the result of their activities.

What is clear is that by 1935 he was willing to endorse Dewey's theories in an article in the *American Magazine of Art* on the activities and purposes of the Artists'

[80] Philip Rahv, "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 6 (Nov-Dec 1940): 412-424.

Union.[81] A principal aim of this article was the explanation of the artist's social and economic situation since the onset of the Depression, stressing that the artist was not aloof from its effects but was in fact in the same miserable predicament as the rest of the population; the artist was in serious need of assistance. Although artists often had lower middle-class origins, he explained, they were taught by art schools to orient their production to the solid middle class who held the institutional reigns of the art world. The artist, he insisted, was often exploited by dealers and patrons. With the onset of the Depression, these artists were discarded by the gallery system and came to recognize the 'shallowness' of middle-class interests and their real 'alignment' with the working class. They unionized. They reoriented their artistic production for what they perceived to be their new public and the perceived the social nature of their endeavors:

> 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 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. From this it follows that there are many 'qualities' and no one of these qualities is disassociated from the life experience and environment that produced it.[82]

Keeping in mind his public persona at this point as an outspoken Communist and Marxist, his choice to relate the social nature of art to Dewey's Instrumentalism is striking, as is the more general coincidence in his writings of his deeper engagement with Instrumentalist theories of art and his turn to Marxist theory. Despite this generous public reference to Dewey, however, Davis did not emphasize his ties to Pragmatism. This was probably in part to avoid the controversy that such a balancing act would entail, but also

[81] Davis, "The Artist Today: The Standpoint of the Artists' Union," *American Magazine of Art* 28, no. 8 (August 1935): 476-8, 506.
[82] Davis, "The Artist Today," 478.

because he did accept, at least in part, the Marxist critique of Dewey.[83] Regardless of his general lack of explicit references to Dewey, however, it is clear that Dewey's presence looms not far away from his working through of the social function of art in a democratic society.

[83] This particular reference to Dewey may also have been in part prompted by the generous aid given by Dewey to the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union in the attempted foundation of a Municipal Art Center. However, not all of his references to Dewey were positive: see for example Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Papers of Stuart Davis, Gift of Mrs. Stuart Davis (All rights reserved by the President and Fellows of Harvard College), 20 January 1937. Still, around this same time, he referred repeatedly to art's relationship to common experience in a manner that clearly resonates with Dewey's. Even at those times at which he lapses from discussing the importance of experience for quite some time in his notebooks, it seems that at those moments when he returns to reflect upon more general aesthetic principles, experience almost inevitably returns as a key principle. He discussed at great length in the early 1940s his own theory of experience in a manner that closely parallels Dewey's. On 8 January 1942, he wrote what appears to be a draft of an essay or lecture outlining his aesthetic theories in which he planned on opening with an epigraph from both Dewey's *Art as Experience* and Siegfried Geidion's *Space Time and Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941).

1.1. Davis, *Still Life with 'Dial'*, 1922.

Chapter Two

Towards a New Realism
Abstract Art and Common Experience in Theory and Practice

In the 1930s, Stuart Davis developed a theory of art that he believed related his modernist style to common experience. Although he was by no means alone in the attempt to relate art to 'common experience,' his voice in this discourse was in many ways unique. In this chapter, I examine Davis's understanding of art's relationship to experience not only in relation to Dewey's Instrumentalism but also in relation to his interests in Marxism and modernist aesthetics.

Through this exploration of Davis's theoretical writings on art's relationship to common experience, I aim to better explain the connection between the form of his paintings and his strong political convictions. In the charged political context of the 1930s, it is all too easy to overlook the extent to which Davis may have intended his paintings to be instrumental in producing a new social order. They were not intended to illustrate a particular political viewpoint, at least not narrowly understood, or to directly stir the masses to revolution. They were neither depictions of the toiling working-class, nor the unemployed. They did not heroize modern collective labor or represent the frontier or the soil upon which was based a romanticized notion of the agrarian tradition.

Davis claimed that his paintings were material embodiments of experience. By reordering experience on the two-dimensional plane of the painted canvas, Davis believed that art provided a means of theoretically understanding the spatial dimensions of experience and transforming reality. These ideas clearly resonate with Dewey's

Instrumentalism. However, given the relative scarcity of clear references to Pragmatism and its philosophical practitioners in Davis's writings, I examine his language, the words he employed and the way in which he used them, to locate his intellectual development securely in relation to this context. I do this in order to understand his very real contributions to this discourse and how his interests in Marxism and modernism enabled him to develop an effective and unique, if not always consistent, voice within it.[1]

Theory and Practice through the Early 1930s

The multiple interests that characterize Davis's writings only began to gain real coherence in the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, many of the ideas that define these later and more developed theoretical writings first appeared much earlier. His early writings range widely and reveal an interest in democratic ideals as the necessary content of modern art, in the fundamental rules of pictorial organization, in the historical development of modernist art, and in art's relationship to experience. He only began to bring these diverse issues into any kind of conceptual harmony in the mid-thirties.

A theme that appears a number of times in Davis's notebook entries of 1923 is the relationship between artistic form and the institutional history of governance, relating art to feudalism and democracy, among other governmental systems. These texts were written with the intent of discovering a means through which art could communicate democratic ideals:

[1] In basing large portions of my analysis on writings from his private papers, it must be noted that I inevitably extract ideas midstream from what are often exploratory and speculative records of his thinking about difficult issues in which he attempted to work through the internal consistency of his logic. It is for this very reason, however, that these writings are so interesting, that in them one can view his thoughts in formation. In order to remain sensitive to this process, to not treat a fleeting reverie as if it was the key to understanding his career, I focus on those aspects of his writing that remained relatively consistent and only then follow them through their more transient and temporary transformations.

> Painting is the vehicle for the expression of an ideal.
> An ideal is a mental concept, an evaluation of natural material.
> It can be the Greek ideal of physical health and logic. It can be the ideal of the Middle Ages of the Holy Virgin. It can be the ideal of the present day of Democracy or every man a law unto himself, personal expression, Expressionism.[2]

Although Davis is seen grappling with art's social function, these writings do not display an understanding of the nature of democracy in any theoretical or historical complexity. He accounts only for negative liberties, exhibiting a naïve definition of freedom, which does not take into account the concept of positive liberties that needs to be invoked in any complex and socially responsible discussion of democracy: "There is no common idealism to-day except this one of the right of a man to do as he pleases."[3] What is clear about his definition of democracy is his stress upon the common man, a tradition that could be related to his training under Robert Henri as much as to Jacksonian democracy.

> The Assyrians glorified their king in art; the Greeks found a common ground in the glorification of the body; the Gothic artists united on a mystical satire; the Italian artists of the Renaissance made art in the image of worldly riches. They were all slaves; all using their art for the glorification of some extraneous power. Democracy is the cry of the world to-day. The artist must express the plain man, even if that plain man be himself.[4]

Davis proposed democracy as the proper content of modern art. In place of the 'slave' mentality of depicting figures of power that had defined previous art, he suggested self-expression as an appropriate artistic ideal for a democratic society.

Self-expression can be interpreted in many ways. Davis outlined one possible understanding in 1918, one that I believe is crucial to his development, even if it had not

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[2] Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Papers of Stuart Davis, Gift of Mrs. Stuart Davis. All rights reserved by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. 23 March 1923 (hereafter Stuart Davis Papers).
[3] Stuart Davis Papers, 23 March 1923.
[4] Stuart Davis Papers, 31 January 1923.

yet found clear formal expression at this early moment in his career. In an early attempt to understand the significance of Cubism, he described its function in a manner that anticipates his later theorizations of aesthetic form:

> Cubism is the bridge from percept to 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. 14th century demanded plot relationship of subject, 1870 to 1918 demanded plastic relationship of subject. 1918 – demands plastic expression of mental scope.[5]

It is impossible to ascertain for certain the origins of the words 'percept' and 'concept,' as these ideas circulated widely not only during the interwar years but more generally in modern philosophical and aesthetic thought. Some clue as to their specific meaning can be gleaned from their usage by William James.[6] He explained that a percept refers to the stimulus of the environment upon an organism and a concept refers to the mind's comprehension of these stimuli, providing order for them in the flow of one's experience.

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[5] Stuart Davis Papers, 1918.

[6] I mention James here for a number of reasons. As a renowned philosopher, his ideas circulated relatively widely, at least among intellectuals. His definition of these terms is as close to a general period formulation of them as one is to find. See James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911). Furthermore, it has been contended that perhaps even Picasso was aware of and possibly influenced by the theories of James in his own early development of Cubism. Eliza Jane Reilly's dissertation "Pragmatism, Cubism, Modernism: William James and the Trans-Atlantic Avant-Garde, 1905-1925" (PhD Diss, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2000), for example, draws out some of these associations in the work of both European and American artists. While portions of her study are somewhat speculative and overly broad, her discussion of Picasso's possible familiarity with the Pragmatism of James is intriguing. (Although it seems that many of the connections to which she points have been drawn from previous scholarship, her ability to integrate this material and relate it to the reception of modernism in the United States is a notable accomplishment.) Gertrude Stein, a pupil of James known to have introduced other artists to his work as well, most likely mediated this link. By placing Picasso in this context, she underscores his materialism and contrasts it to the critical reception of his work, which became increasingly idealist and formalist by the later teens. Her study is limited, however, by a lack of close formal analysis. Nevertheless, her discussion of Picasso's Cubism does parallel my own reading of Davis: "one of the goals of Cubism was to reproduce in material form this cognitive *process* – the unifying negotiation that takes place between what we see and what we know, or between 'things' and 'thoughts.' …this was also one of the key goals of James's psychology..." Reilly, 135. She points to similarities between Picasso's organization of spatial planes and the drawings of reversible cubes in James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890. Reprint, New York: Dover, 1950). Frustratingly, due to her lack of close formal analysis, she fails to offer a convincing alternative theory of how Picasso's works signify. Her discussion of Charles Sheeler and Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, her two US case studies, suffers from related limitations.

Davis framed his paintings as 'plastic' objects that conceptually reorder the percepts of 'nature.' Clearly, he at least partially understood the real importance of Cubism, that it is not merely a means of fragmenting form in a nihilistic act of aesthetic rebellion or a mere step closer to the compositional grid, but is more importantly a means of recording and communicating one's reactions to the environment after the collapse of the perceived veracity of iconic representation. Cubism provided Davis a means of looking at, and not simply abstracting from, nature.

In 1923, he elaborated further upon this notion; he discussed art's relationship to 'experience,' its 'symbolic' form of signification and the necessity of its objective existence as paint on canvas rather than as imitation – in this regard, his ideas can perhaps be linked back to the American reception of Symbolist theory as well.[7] Stressing the importance of art's basis in experience, he stated: "The primary purpose of all art 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."[8] Experience, for Davis, is not only 'emotional' but is also directly linked to 'natural stimuli;' it brings together percept and concept, mind and matter. He suggested that through its 'construction' art could reorder this original experience and convey a sense of unity as a remedy for the fragmentary

[7] At times Davis referred to the 'relief' that the use of color could suggest in painting as 'symbolic', differentiating that form of relief from 'natural light' and 'natural proportion.' He stated that there is a sense of depth created through the use of colors that is inherent to painting and that could be used to suggest depth in a manner independent of its relation to the three-dimensional world. See Stuart Davis Papers, 26 February 1923 and 23 March 1923.
For more on the prevalence of Symbolist ideas such as art's inability to directly copy nature and its task to respond to emotions evoked in the artist within American discussions of cubism in 1920s see chapter four of Susan Noyes Platt, *Modernism in the 1920s: Interpretations of Modern Art in New York from Expressionism to Constructivism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985). She discusses in particular the writings of Walter Pach, whose discussions of cubism reached a relatively broad audience.
[8] Stuart Davis Papers, 5 March 1923.

nature of the environment. This reordering occurred not merely by representing an ordered world; it was the artist's task through his use of form to "shock the spectator… into reexperiencing" the original "emotions" evoked in the artist's own experience.[9] Representation was not enough; experience needed to be recreated.

His interest in 'symbolic' forms of signification surfaced repeatedly and suggests that he was working through the lessons of modernism and in particular Cubism. He remained ambivalent, however, about the Cubists' ultimate success. Although he praised their accomplishments, he sometimes criticized them for not having gone far enough:

> All natural perspective must be eliminated because this is an illusory element which compromises the purity of the expression. (Overlapping planes such as those employed by the Cubists are illusory perspective and must not be employed.)
> This seems to make the ideal picture which we are projecting take shape as a kind of picture writing or hieroglyph.[10]

In turning to the concept of the 'hieroglyph,' Davis was referencing a common analogy of the period in attempts to understand new visual languages.[11] The hieroglyph, as a form of writing, cannot be designated neatly as either a symbolic or mimetic form of representation. Instead, it is a sort of intermediary language in which mimetic forms have become systematized into a conventional language in which symbols still retain some level of visual identification with their referent. For these reasons, the hieroglyph served as a valuable model in attempting to describe emerging visual languages, allowing them

[9] Stuart Davis Papers, 9 March 1923.
[10] Stuart Davis Papers, 2 March 1923.
[11] For example, see Vachel Lindsay's discussion of cinema's early development, in particular his attempt to grapple with its use of close-ups and storytelling through the succession of images that to a period viewer could be quite jarring and unconventional. He discussed the possible development of a 'hieroglyphic' 'picture alphabet,' chapter 13, "Hieroglyphs," *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1922; New York: Liveright Publishing, 1970). Incidentally, in June 1941 (Stuart Davis Papers) Davis mentioned Lindsay's discussion of the structural rhythm of words, but found his writing 'provincial and stupidly practical.'

at once to describe their conventionalized system of signs and the persistent resemblance of these signs to actual objects.

An important moment in his development of a formal system that could express the ideas about which he had been writing and that no doubt also further transformed his thinking about art's relationship to experience occurred in 1927-8 when he painted his *Egg Beater* series (Figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). As he stated in 1945: "The 'abstract' kick was on. The culmination of these efforts occurred in 1927-1928, when I nailed an electric fan, a rubber glove and an eggbeater to a table and used it as my exclusive subject matter for a year." In *Egg Beater #3* (1927-8, Fig. 2.3), he invented a composition of clean, unmodulated planes of color that intersect in a shallow space that never remains stable. Planes continually contradict one another spatially, keeping the eye playfully moving about as forms pop in and out of perspective. Just as a grouping of colored planes begins to make sense spatially, establishing its own shallow logic, one of the lines or smaller forms drawn upon one of these planes bends it, skews it into another perspective, ties it to or deflects it into one of the other incongruent planes. The curvilinear Miro-like form that is doubled begins to suggest a deeper space because of the discrepancy in size between the two forms, but this relationship is not stable as both are tied back into the shallow overall space. The manner in which positive and negative forms continually reverse themselves in the black, pink and yellow 'eggbeater' almost suggests the spatial play of one of Lissitzky's *Prouns*. 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 planes only to have these planes again insist upon their materiality as part of the overall planar configuration resting upon the surface of the canvas. The heavily

impastoed canvas ultimately draws all of these many forms onto the stubborn materiality of its surface. The complex delineation of space that Davis employed in this painting came to characterize much of his most successful mature work and his understanding of cubist form.

By the early thirties, not only had Davis begun to incorporate the formal lessons of the *Egg Beater* series into depictions of the built environment, but his understanding of the instrumentality of art's relationship to experience had started to become more apparent. Although not for the most part discussing democracy at this moment, he did begin to more precisely discuss art's ability to reorder experience. In a 1933 essay for the Downtown Gallery titled "Analogical Emblems," he explained:

> pictures are the result of a point of view which seeks to reduce the various aspects of visual Nature to a logical system.
>
> It establishes and imposes an arbitrary space scale on the subject to make it more coherent in the medium of painting. It presents simultaneously that which is observed sequentially. It rationalizes vision and creates a new view of Nature which is not entirely the accident of binocular vision.[12]

He described how painting, by imposing the artist's vision of order onto nature 'rationalizes vision,' transforming one's understanding of nature into something less arbitrary. He continued by making those temporal dimensions of experience, so central to the philosophy of Dewey, explicit: "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." He was not merely referring to Cubist simultaneity, but to ordering itself as a temporal process. Observation for Davis, as for

[12] Downtown Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Dewey, contained a forward-looking aspect, which was visible in the present and based upon potential bestowed upon experience by the past.[13]

Davis's friend and fellow modernist painter Arshile Gorky, in a 1931 article in *Creative Art*, explained Davis's attitude toward painting, including its temporal dynamic, in a manner that stressed the extent to which an experientially-based painting need not necessarily resemble the visual stimuli received from nature, at least not mimetically.[14]

> He gives new shape to his experiences with new sequences – orange, red, yellow, green, brown, and chalk-like white, metallic grays and dull blacks, profound spaces with sky-like blues, stabilized upon rectangular directions. He takes a new position upon the visible world. This artist, whether he paints egg-beaters, streets, or pure geometrical organizations, expresses his constructive attitude toward his successive experiences. He gives us symbols of tangible spaces, with gravity and physical law. He, above all his contemporaries, rises high – mountain-like! Oh, what clarity! One he is, and one of but few, who realizes his canvas as a rectangular shape with two dimensional surface plane.[15]

Gorky emphasized how Davis, through his pictorial structure, represents and reorders 'successive experiences.' Gorky noted that even where Davis's canvases are seemingly divorced from the common experience of 'tangible spaces,' such as in 'pure geometrical organizations,' his 'constructive attitude' still communicates the experiential dimensions that underlie his art. His canvases, as Gorky described them, insist upon their objectivity,

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[13] It is possible that this notion of an embedded temporality in form had multiple sources. It resonates with Dewey's ideas perhaps better than any others, but can also be related to the practice of Robert Henri. While it does not seem that this sort of idea was central to Henri's thinking, a passage from *The Art Spirit* is suggestive: "There is a past, present and future in the fall of a dress. Don't arrange it." Of course he admonishes the model and artist to not 'arrange' this aspect of nature, as opposed to the constructive process that Davis espoused. Henri explained how he would wait for to effect to occur naturally: "In the old days of long skirts the models used to wonder why I made them walk from the end of the room to the place where I would have them pose. They were to continue walking until I spoke, and then they were to stop and turn as though to hear what I had to say. It was not always a success, but eventually it would happen right, and the fall of the drapery would express the gesture of movement, the arrest and the possible next gesture. There would be past, present and future, and there would be unity and rhythm in the dress." *The Art Spirit* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1960), 207.

[14] John Graham had introduced Davis and Gorky in 1929. I mention this to emphasize that Gorky and Davis were close friends, a fact that no doubt marks his discussion of Davis in significant ways, not the least of which being its perceptiveness of Davis's process.

[15] Arshile Gorky, "Stuart Davis," *Creative Art* 9, no. 3 (September 1931): 213-217.

their existence as painted objects that signify through 'symbols' rather than being windows onto nature. Gorky treated the modernist materialism of painting as Davis himself did, as lending clarity to his experiential constructions rather than foreclosing on experience.

In the early thirties, Davis began to articulate the important role that he understood space to play in his art. He explained in 1931: "My own [form concept] is very simple and is based on the assumption that space is continuous, and that matter is discontinuous."[16] This statement says quite a bit about his beliefs regarding a picture's ability to organize space conceptually. He clarified this concept further the following year: "One must learn to see the space not simply the boundaries of objects // one must see the 'shapes' of the space not the shapes of the objects which occur in it"[17] Bringing his beliefs about space together with the experiential valences of his art described above, one can see how it is the coherent development of the spatial ordering of a picture that allows the individual 'discontinuous' elements of that picture to gain meaning and coherence. Space has the ability to conceptually unify the diverse objects of a painting, emphasizing their dynamic existence, that they are pregnant with future experience. The spatial organization of a painting is what unites the past, present and future of represented objects in a consummatory experience, to put it in Deweyan terms. Over time, Davis became ever more persistent about his contention that painting must be related to the three-dimensional *forms* of 'common experience.' This emphasis on form is crucial, in

[16] Davis, "Recent Painting in Oil and Watercolor," 1931, Downtown Gallery, as reproduced in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, Documentary Monographs in Modern Art (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 111. This is an excerpt from a catalogue from a Downtown Gallery exhibition held in 1931.
[17] Davis, 1932 in *Stuart Davis Sketchbooks* (New York: Estate of Stuart Davis, Grace Borgenicht Gallery and The Arts Publisher, 1986).

that it underscores his interest in space as that which unites specific objects into a conceptual unity.[18]

To concretize this discussion, I examine Davis's painting *Landscape with Drying Sails* (1931-2, Fig. 2.4), a characteristic work of this period that represents a working harbor in Gloucester, an important fishing town in northern Massachusetts.[19] Through cubism, Davis believed he could organize experience by bridging 'percept' and 'concept.' In this painting, while the modeling of forms is almost completely sacrificed to planar construction, he does indicate the play of natural light in the swirling of smoke from a passing ship, the suggestion of a cloud, the trace of texture on the wall and roof of the net house. Local color is also implied in the red of the net house, the blue of the sky and the white of the rolled up sail. But these three colors – red, white and blue – take on a life of their own to become structural elements of the painting aiding in distinguishing and complicating the intersection of spatial planes on the two-dimensional canvas. Environmental stimuli have not been entirely subordinated to pictorial construction. Perception leaves its visible traces within the conceptual order of the cubist picture.

What Davis represents is experience understood as a process, an action. In experience, environmental stimuli are not lost, they are conceptually ordered, cubist form in this case being the conscious process of providing order to raw data. Pure abstraction as pure conceptual order represents experience no more than does mere perception. He

[18] It is worth noting the similarities between Davis's ideas about space and those of Dewey, both of whom were exposed to quite a bit of modern art during these years. The latter believed that space was not a neutral and empty vacuum to be filled with objects or in which to act but was itself a 'medium.' He stated: "Space thus becomes something more than a void in which to roam about, dotted here and there with dangerous things and things that satisfy the appetite. It becomes a comprehensive and enclosed scene within which are ordered the multiplicity of doings and undergoings in which man engages." Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 23. Further, according to Dewey, the visual arts emphasized the 'spatial aspects of change,' not merely change that takes place in space, Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 208.

[19] For an analysis of his engagement with the iconography of Gloucester see the fourth chapter.

represents their dialogue as a dynamic process in which some aspects, some moments, remain less processed than others. The conceptual logic of the picture plane and the raw sensations of vision both remain in playful interaction in the act of composition.

The objects represented in this painting abound: the red net house, the ship rigging, the sails, and boats to name the most obvious. As objects, however, they are subordinated to the overriding spatial construction of the picture. When Davis stated that space is 'continuous,' he was not merely referring to the natural space of the three-dimensional world but to the manner in which pictorial form has the ability to bring together what are often perceived of as the discontinuous objects of perception. The objects referred to in the painting each retain their iconographic abilities to evoke meaning, but are also involved in a series of planar relations that at once organize the picture plane and disrupt habitual viewing. He arrives at this effect through the interlocking of what might otherwise be conceived of as dissimilar spatial planes. Upon meeting a mast, the line denoting the peak of the roof continues toward the right where it is transformed into what is presumably an apparatus used in the drying of sails. The diagonal running off the peak of the house to the left, upon reaching the limit of its function in delineating the roof, continues through (pictorial) space to divide two planes of color, applied arbitrarily of their denotative function; upon crossing a hanging sail, it bisects yet two more planes. The white plane that reads as sky behind the house, a reading that is emphasized by the placement of the cloud, flattens into the picture plane, or perhaps even suggests another sail, as one identifies the areas of blue to the left and above as sky.

Similar to the strategies of analytic cubism, the over-riding spatial organization of this painting, what Davis increasingly came to refer to as 'color-space,' is not superimposed upon its subjects or formed merely by fracturing them; it is drawn from them, knitting them together, tying them into a common spatial system of interlocking planes in which foreground and background are flattened onto the picture plane. The objects produce their spatial configurations as much as existing within them. This all occurs through the two-dimensional extension of the planes of the three-dimensional world itself. This often occurred in practical terms through the reorganization of sketches from nature through the grouping of common lines and angles. These are not objects in space but rather objects that exist as space and space that is defined through objects, space serving to bind objects into a continuity rather than distinguishing them as discrete entities.

The pictorial conventions I have described in *Landscape with Drying Sails* result not only from Davis's attempts to understand art's relationship to common experience, but also from his interest in various formalist and quasi-scientific aesthetic theories. His interest in these theories that aimed to uncover the fundamental tenets of pictorial organization grew out of his desire to better understand form and more effectively convey the experience of the three-dimensional world. The theorists that had the greatest impact on Davis were Clive Bell, Denman Ross and Jay Hambidge.[20] At those moments when

[20] Davis's introduction to these figures and to this sort of systematic thinking more generally can be attributed to his studies with Robert Henri, who exposed many of his students to the formalist criticism of Clive Bell, the color theories of Hardesty Maratta, and the attempts to find the elemental building blocks of art that characterize the writings of Denman Ross and Jay Hambidge. Bell's influence was most likely rather general in scope, although Davis did continue to reference his writings for years to come. The primary intent of Bell's widely read formalist text *Art* (1913; New York: Capricorn, 1958) was to define 'significant form,' which he understood to be the one quality common to all true works of art. Although not the primary focus of his text, he did discuss art's relationship to experience in a manner that could have at least affirmed Davis's views, if in the most general of terms; for example, see 16-7. He also discussed the

his writings about the fundamentals of pictorial organization become intensely systematic and visually diagrammatic, such as in his investigations of "Ideal Form," the influence of Ross and Hambidge, who attempted to systematize form in an almost scientific manner, becomes most evident.[21] Their systematic use of language and diagrams is sometimes conspicuously similar to long passages in Davis's notebooks. Still, it seems that Davis was determined to work through the logic and verity of these theories himself and come to his own conclusions. Perhaps the most noticeable concepts to come from these theorists are Ross's ideas about 'direction' and 'angle' and Hambidge's delineation of 'static' and 'dynamic symmetry,' which Davis used extensively to describe the tensions and progressive possibilities of his 'color-space' compositions.[22]

Davis devoted a great deal of energy to these formal concepts in the early 1930s, always insisting, however, that they not be applied formulaically, that the artist not merely follow a 'system.' In 1931, he wrote: "I conceive of form (matter) as existing in space, in terms of linear direction. It follows then that the forms of the subject are analyzed in terms of angular variation from successive bases of directional radiation."[23]

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not uncommon notion that the aesthetic can lead to a critique of the existing world. In distinction to Davis, however, he discussed aesthetic experience as distinct from everyday life.

[21] The scientific ambitions of Ross's treatment of form in *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony, Balance, Rhythm* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907) are clear: "I want to bring to definition what, until now, has not been clearly defined or exactly measured. In a sense this book is a contribution to Science rather than to Art. It is a contribution to Science made by a painter, who has used his Art in order to understand his Art, not to produce Works of Art." Ross, *Theory of Pure Design*, v. Ross referred to art as a process rather than the physically manifested object, and in this regard a parallel can be drawn to Davis and Dewey. Although he does briefly mention art's relationship to experience and concluded with a study of the relationship between the ordering of life and that of art, this is clearly not the primary purpose of the book, nor is it likely that this was where its greatest impact lay for Davis.

[22] See *Dynamic Symmetry: The Greek Vase* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920) and *Practical Applications of Dynamic Symmetry* (publication of series of lectures first given in New York during winter of 1921; New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1932). The diagrams that Hambidge used to illustrate his theories about dynamic symmetry and the choppy sentence-long paragraphs suggestive of deductive reasoning are strikingly similar to those appearing in Davis's notebooks, particularly in 1932.

[23] This notion that forms exist in terms of 'linear direction' unmistakably resembles Ross's concept of 'direction,' by which he referred to the fact that between any two or more points 'direction' is established.

When multiple directions are established, he contended, one could discuss the 'angular variation' between them, which he took at this point to be a fundamental and determining basis of design.[24] My discussion of *Landscape with Drying Sails* stresses the intersection of planes on a two-dimensional surface in a manner that extends the experience of the three-dimensional world. The pictorial extension of experience occurs through the delineation of shared angular variations that serve to tie together the 'discontinuous' objects of perception into the 'continuous' space of pictorial experience. Furthermore, the use of 'direction,' which is at the heart of 'angular variation,' could lend experience its 'dynamic' quality. Directions are balanced in such a way that their symmetry is 'dynamic' rather than 'static.'[25]

Although Davis was still referring to the importance of such concepts as 'point relation' in 1933, it had been replaced as the 'common denominator' of pictorial organization by the "Unit Area" and "Unit—Area—Angle."[26] These terms refer to the spatial planes that I discussed in *Landscape with Drying Sails* through which he

[24] "The phenomena of color, size, shape and texture are the result of such angular variation." Davis, "Recent Painting in Oil and Watercolor" from a catalogue of an exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, New York, 1931, reprinted in Kelder 111.

[25] Static symmetry can best be described by analogy to the mirror image. In 1932, Davis produced a series of writings in his papers under such headings as "Ideal Form" and "Point Relation" in which he further clarified the formal concepts he had been working on in 1931. He described the compositional process in which angular 'variations' were grouped and spatially ordered: "In an agreeable reaction to the form of a scene, for example, the artist intuitively groups variation into units and relates these units one to the other to form another unit." He related this process of ordering the 'unit space' to the artist's ability to "classify and give greater precision to his intentions." "Ideal Form," Stuart Davis Papers, 1932. On at least one occasion, he attempted to relate pictorial structure to the expression of time, which he intended to locate as a formal coordinate of composition, analogously to Einstein's relation of time to space. In "Point Relation" Davis made explicit the importance of 'lines' as they develop between specific 'points,' a concept closely related to 'angular variation.' As interesting as his conclusions is the systematic manner at which he arrives at them. What made 'points' crucial, even though a drawing could be conceived of as made up of 'straight lines' was that it was at 'points' that 'direction' changed: "change of direction from any given base is the generating factor in all visual space." "Point Relation," Stuart Davis Papers, 1932. These other factors included not only such things as color, but also most notably 'perspective,' a term he sometimes used and of which it is difficult to discern his precise meaning. He rejected illusionistic painting, but not the symbolic representation of depth.

[26] To be sure, he had already anticipated this concept in 1932 with his occasional references to 'unit space.'

organized his paintings and unified individual objects into a coherent space. The angular variation of lines remained conceptually important, but as it organized 'Unit Area.' He may not have been getting any closer to understanding the fundamental laws of pictorial organization, as if such laws could be discovered, but he was becoming increasingly lucid in describing his own process as it had been developing.

His notebooks of 1933 also exhibit a renewed interest in explaining the relationship between the three-dimensional space of nature and the two-dimensional space of painting. "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"[27] Although he never ignored this relationship between form and observation, his renewed interest in it coupled with his questioning of the concept of 'ideal form' is startling: "Therefore, if any lesson may be drawn from experience [of past art] it is – Go to Nature for your subject because there is not Ideal form. That which is lacking now is not technique but interest in a subject."[28] Davis apparently intended to apply the knowledge gained through his formal investigations to the representation of the American scene, which he had in fact been doing already for at least a couple of years. 'Proportion,' he continued, should be based not upon an 'ideal' but upon 'observational interest.' 'Ideal technique' should be employed, but in order "to achieve Real form which is simply that form which is dictated by his observational intuition."[29] Davis proposed an art that is both true to the two-dimensionality of its medium and fundamentally based upon the observation of nature.

[27] Stuart Davis Papers, 1933.
[28] Stuart Davis Papers, 1933.
[29] Stuart Davis Papers, 1933.

The New Realism

> 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.[30]

Although Davis was by no means unique in relating art to 'common experience,' his defense of cubism as the most viable means of communicating common experience did set him apart. He defended cubist abstraction as a technique that could extend the realist tradition without lapsing into naturalism. His defense of abstract art's place in the 'realist' tradition, however, is complex; he echoed many modernists in stressing the reality of the picture plane, but also insisted upon the reality of the experience of nature to which his art referred. While it is tempting to dismiss this seeming contradiction as an example of his not entirely successful attempt to merge abstraction and American scene painting, a more productive explanation can be found in his interest in art's relationship to experience. I have described his practice as one analogous to the process of experience itself, as an act of conceptually and spatially ordering visual stimuli. The transition from the three-dimensional environment to the two-dimensional plane of the canvas can be understood as corresponding to the interaction of organism and environment in that the canvas is simply a means of organizing perception, just as is thought itself.

Davis's framing of his art in the realist tradition has a possible origin in his career-long interest in the work of Fernand Leger.[31] As editor of *Art Front*, Davis published a lecture given by Leger at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935, "The New

[30] Stuart Davis Papers, 29 November 1937.

[31] Davis first met Leger, to whom his work is sometimes compared, during his trip to Paris in 1928, although he was already familiar with his work and no doubt saw the solo exhibition of his work organized by the Societe Anonyme and held at the Anderson Galleries. It must also be noted that the linking of Cubism to the realist tradition was not by any means unique to Davis and Leger. It is not uncommon within histories of modern art to interpret Cubism as a direct descendent of a long tradition reaching back to Courbet and extending through Manet, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism.

Realism."[32] Leger's discussion was more explicitly driven by modernist principles of pictorial realism than Davis's own. Leger described a process by which various pictorial elements, such as color and form, were 'freed' of their referents until finally, 'Subject-matter [was] at last done for, we were free." Consequently, he asserted that these pictorial elements, far from being abstract, had a reality of their own that was 'independent and plastic.' In practice, both artists retained an interest in environmental referents.

Confronted with one of Davis's paintings, *Drying Sails* for example, one cannot help but be struck by its 'realistic' presence as paint applied to a two-dimensional support. Even where shallow depth is suggested by the intersection of planes, his paintings insist upon their materiality. Many factors contribute to the declarative flatness of what might otherwise be considered shallow depth. The intersecting planes often cancel one another out, as they suggest contradictory spatial arrangements. His use of painted borders hinders the centrifugal push of space beyond the frame. The play of natural light and the use of modeling, except in those scattered instances already discussed, is not so much deconstructed or rendered arbitrary, as it was by Picasso and Leger, as it is eliminated. The entire picture is present in equally vibrant values, the only light source being that in the viewer's actual space. These vibrant, unmodulated colors – "indignant, peremtory, clean, crisp" as Samuel Kootz has described them[33] – are applied with a striking lack of emphasis on painterly bravado; their pasty texture suggests an attempt on the artist's part to create the look of the paint as having been frankly applied,

[32] Art Front 2, no. 1 (December 1935): 10. Harold Rosenberg translated this essay. Appearing in the Marxist dominated, if officially independent, *Art Front*, it comes as no surprise that this essay stirred some controversy. Balcomb Greene defended Leger as a revolutionary artist of the people, "The Function of Leger," *Art Front* 2, no. 2 (January 1936): 8-9. In the same issue Clarence Weinstock described Leger's art as idealistic in its relation to the outside world and critiqued abstract art more generally, as was common among Marxists, as being little more than the product of the art world's alienation from society.
[33] Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting* (New York: Hastings House, 1943), 37.

as if by a 'workman.'[34] The duplication of these colors without regard to their referents further emphasizes the picture plane; the hanging blue sail, for example, in echoing the color of the sky, suggests a spatial affinity that cancels any residual perspective. In stressing the materiality of the canvas the viewer is embodied as existing in distinction to the depicted scene and can therefore actively confront the painting as a consciously constructed object; its order can be contemplated as a deliberate reconstruction of experience so that it may serve in the organization of future experiences.

In 1932, Holger Cahill offered a provocative description of Davis's art, the most interesting characteristic of which is its ambivalence towards Davis's realism. He referred to Davis as "a realist of the abstract who practices a very personal kind of legerdemain with rectangular contours and proportions."[35] Cahill recognized that Davis was, or at least claimed to be, a 'realist of the abstract.' Yet, he does not seem entirely convinced by this seemingly oxymoronic turn of logic; he refers to Davis's practice as 'legerdemain.' Taken literally, he is accusing Davis of pulling the wool over the eyes of the public, that his art is somehow analogous to the sleight of hand of a magician. Of course, in using the term 'legerdemain' he was also likely making a reference to Leger and by extension European Modernism in general. Modernist form is tricky; it can be deceitful, even if playfully, in particular in terms of the sometimes dubious logic employed in its defense.

[34] There is good evidence for referring to Davis's application of paint as workmanlike, besides that provided by the painting itself. Davis referred to the benefits of a 'workmanlike execution' in his notebooks, 2 March 1923. Henry McBride stated: "His work is clever, fashionable (that is – it is in the fashion of the day) and widely known. Theoretically, we ought to relish such clear-cut, workmanlike statements with no pretense about them. But do we? Not to the extent of buying them in quantity, at any rate." McBride, "New York by Stuart Davis," *New York Sun*, 28 April 1934, as reproduced in McBride, *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), *316*-318.
[35] Cahill, "American Art Today," in Fred J. Ringel, ed., *America as Americans See It* (New York: Literary Guild, 1932), 258.

Davis believed that not only was his style not trickery, but that it was comparable to science in its rigor. The benefit of science with its rational methods, he explained, was that it "looks at life as knowable and at man as its master."[36] Art was a means of mastering reality, of better being able to shape one's future. "Today there is only one art which is comparable to modern industrial and experimental science. That art is abstract art."[37] Like science, modern art was systematic and offered a means of understanding reality that, in employing 'abstract' or 'theoretical' reasoning, overcame the limitations of literal description, transforming knowledge into something practical. He directly related the 'scientific' understanding of painting as the arrangement of forms on a two-dimensional surface to its ability to convey the experience of nature:

> 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. A painting for example is a two dimensional plane surface and the process of making a painting is the act of defining two dimensional space on that surface. 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.[38]

So, while Davis did insist upon the realism of the medium, he did not take what some perceived to be the next logical step, claiming the elements of painting to be self-referential. Painting needed to retain its relationship to nature, its semiotic function to refer to the outside environment, a task made the more reliable through the clear and logical employment of abstract form.

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[36] Stuart Davis Papers, 29 November 1937.
[37] He continued: "The other sea of indeterminate paintings of naturalistic and romantic trend represent nothing except ignorance and immaturity. They form a cultural hog wallow which bespatters the public with artistic waste products." Stuart Davis Papers, 29 November 1937.
[38] Davis, introduction to exhibition catalogue: *Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935).

Davis believed that it was art's relationship to nature that was at the base of its dynamism. In the context of his turn to Marxist theory in the mid-1930s, he insisted all the more strenuously upon the material foundations of his art. Nature implied 'life and motion,' whereas 'ideal form' as an end in itself amounted to little more than "the Static, the Complete and the Dead." Davis framed this critique as a materialist condemnation of utopianism *and* conservatism in politics and nonobjectivism *and* naturalism in art. 'Ideal form' assumes a utopian harmony and completion rather than the dialectical unfolding of history. Similarly, naturalism, whether mobilized for politically radical or conservative ends, implies a static world in which change does not occur even in those cases in which what is represented is class struggle; form must be commensurate with content. He argued that both aesthetic strategies, despite intentions, fail to recognize historical movement as implied by 'common experience.' He insisted that his own approach was realistic because through its abstract reordering of common experience, it stressed the dynamic nature of the environment.

Davis's criticism of nonobjectivism became increasingly pronounced; by the late 1930s it manifested in an outright feud with Hilla Rebay of the Guggenheim Foundation, who represented for Davis its institutionalization (backed by large amounts of capital).[39] Even as the American Scene movement was at its apex in 1935, abstract art (understood

[39] Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 108, has pointed to the origins of the adversarial relationship between Davis and Rebay in 1934. Davis, whose finances had become desperate by that summer, got in touch with Rebay who was working with Solomon Guggenheim to collect modern art. "As Davis explained later, one of his watercolors 'seemed to be non objective enough for her, providing I would fix it, meaning change it, so that – you know, that's the final insult. But I was in no position to object. I would have crawled in on my hands and knees, if necessary, because I needed the money, and that was the only place where I saw any possibility of getting any.' So Davis 'fixed it,' the Baroness approved, and she sent him a check 'for some pitiful amount.'"

broadly to include nonobjectivism) had begun to claim increased critical attention.[40] In distinguishing his practice from that of the nonobjectivists, Davis insisted that the formal elements that are common to art, 'Pure Form,' not be mistaken for the subject matter of art, which is the spatial experience of the three-dimensional world. In 1937, making reference to the Guggenheim Foundation and Rebay, Davis began to define a stance in his notebooks that would later become part of the public discourse:

> Thus on one hand we have those like the Baroness Rebay and Sheldon Cheney who see in abstract art the expression of "cosmic truths" behind the "illusion of materiality", while on the other we have critics like Meyer Schapiro who see in abstract art only the expression of the socially isolated artist. Both of these viewpoints agree that abstract art has no "social content". One regards this as a merit and the other as a shortcoming. Both viewpoints are alike in their idealism because each in its own way ignores the basic fact that art in painting always refers to the physical attributes of the world we live in.[41]

Not content to merely criticize the nonobjectivists, Davis related their encouragement of abstract art to the Marxist critique of abstract art as laid out by Meyer Schapiro, describing how both positions failed to account for abstract art's relationship to reality.

Davis's attempt to distinguish himself from the nonobjectivists became the subject of a prolonged public debate following the installation of a mural he had produced for the WNYC radio station in 1939 (Fig. 2.5). Edward Alden Jewell of the *New York Times* wrote an article on 6 August, "Abstraction and Music," that focused on these murals and the reasons why the WPA may have favored abstract art for this particular location. He quoted a statement by Davis rehearsing some mostly banal clichés

[40] Jewell took note of the growing prominence of abstract art in the *New York Times*, "On the Abstract Trail: Whitney Exhibition an Inventory of One Modernist Movement in America," 17 Feb 1935, sec. 10, p. 9. Other than his recognition of the growing importance of abstract art and the current exhibition at the Whitney Museum for which Davis wrote the catalogue essay, this is not a particularly noteworthy article.
[41] Stuart Davis Papers, 27 August 1937.

regarding the relationship between art and music.[42] Two Sundays later – with an article from Rebay in the intervening week spelling out the differences between abstract and nonobjective art, Jewell declared the debate over abstraction 'reopened.'[43] Except for questions of modern art more generally understood, he claimed: "there seems to be no topic more dependable on the score of controversy, these days, than abstraction."[44]

The debate certainly had reopened, for on this same Sunday, Davis responded to Rebay's comments of the previous week, reiterating his claims that abstract art was 'realistic.' He sensed something elitist and superficial in nonobjectivism, the rhetoric of which he described as 'propaganda,' repeatedly stressing its strong financial backing. What most incensed Davis, however, were her claims that nonobjective art did not have meaning: "It is like music; it means nothing." Davis claimed a broad coalition of socially conscious artists – "abstract, social-comment, political, domestic naturalism" – whom he claimed insisted upon art's meaning and its relationship to the masses. "Democracy can afford an art of the study of the general relations of space, abstract art. It cannot afford an art with the credo set forth by the 'nonobjective' endowed propaganda, because its very essence is anti-democratic, and its social and political implications lead only to a Fuehrer."[45] Davis understood that all art is ideological and claimed the remoteness of nonobjectivism from the realities of common experience to be elitist and anti-democratic.

This debate continued in the pages of the Sunday *New York Times* for several weeks with Jewell occasionally trying with varying degrees of success to sort out the two

[42] Regardless of Davis's statement about its relation to music, Jewell did not find Davis's composition for Studio B 'musical.' Jewell, "Abstraction and Music: Newly Installed WPA Murals at Station WNYC Raise Anew Some Old Questions," *New York Times***,** 6 August 1939, sec. 9, p. 7.
[43] By 'reopened' Jewel was referencing the debates of 1937 sparked by the opening of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
[44] Jewell, "The Cheshire Grin Again: Further Discussion of the Principles of Abstraction – Old Debate Reopened" *New York Times*, 20 August 1939, sec. 10, p. 7.
[45] Davis, "Opinion Under Postage: Abstraction," *New York Times*, 20 August 1939**,** sec. 10, p. 7.

basic positions.[46] Hilla Rebay responded to Davis's charges of elitism by claiming that great art is open to all classes and that: "Art itself is a Fuehrer leading to order and intuitive joy."[47] Evidently, quite a few readers found both sides of this argument to be flawed; for example, Igor Steinvaloff insightfully claimed that their arguments were 'nebulous,' even though they presented their "opinions as though they were extremely valuable truths. The former [Rebay], inspired by the divine afflatus, giving vent to oracular obscurities; the latter [Davis] indulging in a studied exercise in semantics, wherein culture, democracy, art and civilization are identified, by implication, with Marxism."[48]

With the debate still raging in early September, Davis continued laying out his case: "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."[49] On 8 October, he was given further opportunity to make his case. He criticized the notion that

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[46] For example, Jewell, "Soundings Off a Treacherous Coast: An Effort to Distinguish Between the Types of Abstraction and To Clarify the Issues in a Spirited Debate," *New York Times*, 27 August 1939, sec. 10, p. 7. The following week, Jewell again tried to distinguish the arguments for his readers, this time with somewhat more clarity, "Exploring a Dark Realm: A Further Note on Types of Abstractions as Exemplified in Modern Art," *New York Times*, 3 September 1939, sec. 10, p. 7.

[47] Letter from Rebay, "Opinions Under Postage: Two Contrasted Views, Further Discussion of Non-Objective Art By Our Readers – The Problem of Form," *New York Times*, 27 August 1939, sec. 10, p. 7.

[48] Letter from Steinvaloff, "Opinions Under Postage: Two Contrasted Views, Further Discussion of Non-Objective Art By Our Readers – The Problem of Form," *New York Times*, 27 August 1939, sec. 10, p. 7.

[49] "Embattled Readers: Pros and Cons of Abstraction," *New York Times*, 10 Sept 1939, sec. 10, p. 7. See also: "Adding Fuel to Abstraction's Fires: Further Discussion by Our Readers of the Vexing Problems in The Field of Non-Representational Art – Opposing Views," *New York Times*, 24 September 1939, sec. 10, p. 7. By this point, *Art Digest* had also taken note of these debates and recounted, with a bit of condescending humor, a blow-by-blow account of their development, referring to them as a "'nineteen against twenty-minus-one' game in dialectic," and compared them to the delusions of Don Quixote: "Further classifications and re-classifications, definitions and re-definitions fill the air. The windmills referred to earlier are attacked with a vengeance. Lances in the shape of words jab and thrust. The revolving super-structures of the windmills are in turn shattered and rebuilt. The jousting field is strewn with battered terms. Finally peace. Armistice comes in Jewell's concluding paragraph…." "Abstract Windmills," *Art Digest* 13, no. 20 (1 September 1939): 18. This was published on 1 September and armistice had not been reached. Davis published "Art and the Masses" in the 1 October issue of *Art Digest* further clarifying his position, *Art Digest* 14, no. 1: 13, 34.

abstract art is elitist and Rebay's claims that artistic form is simply self-evident: "Abstract art is a truly democratic art. …Economically the average person cannot participate deeply in art; therefore with rare exceptions he sees artistically with eclectic and shallow vision." He believed, however, that with proper education and opportunity anyone could appreciate abstract art.[50] By this point, the debates had finally wound themselves down; Davis and Rebay had each made their respective cases. Nevertheless, Jewell took the opportunity on numerous occasions during the following years to make digs at what he clearly understood to be Davis's counterintuitive position.[51]

If in 1932 Cahill had skeptically and perhaps even with a certain degree of confusion recognized Davis's attempt to practice abstract art in the tradition of realism, a decade and many public pronouncements later these views had become an established position within art world discourse. In 1943, when Samuel Kootz wrote his book *New Frontiers in American Painting,* he devoted a full section to the "New Realism" and described the work of Davis in a manner that suggests a relatively clear understanding of his aesthetic program.[52] Among other things, he suggested that a painting by Davis be understood as an 'autonomous organism' that signifies through 'symbols' and

[50] Davis, "Abstraction is Realism: So Asserts Stuart Davis in New Letter on Non-Objective Art Controversy," *New York Times*, 8 October 1939, sec. 10, p. 10.
[51] Jewell stated in 1941: "Stuart Davis, returned to the Downtown fold after an absence of several years, furnishes a couple of pleasing tiny abstractions (pardon me, realisms)." "A New World Roundup: Work by Artists of the Three Americas Bulks Large in Exhibitions of Week," *New York Times*, 12 October 1941, sec. 10, p. 9. In 1942, Jewell made another snide comment to which Davis responded: "His suggestion that the Baroness Rebay acquire the picture for her museum could be a subtle crack to the effect that my work belonged in the category of the 'nonobjective,' which I do not relish." "Davis and 'Abstraction'," *New York Times*, 27 Sept 1942, sec. 10, p. 5. On the same page, Jewell states: "In a letter printed elsewhere on this page, Stuart Davis tells us all about his 'Arboretum.' Curious. I'd have been willing to swear it was an abstraction. Just Swear." Jewell, "New Group and One Man Exhibitions," *New York Times*, 27 September 1942, sec. 10, p. 5.
[52] Kootz, *New Frontiers*. Among Americans, he names Davis, Walter Quirt and Abraham Rattner as its proponents, despite what he sees as the clear differences between these artists, 35. He also recognized the close relationship between Davis and Leger, "in that [Davis] has the same technological equipment, the same anti-romantic attitude, the same pressing necessity to be of his time," 37-8.

'ideograms' rather than through mimesis.[53] Furthermore, he located Davis's politics within his compositions, even referring to Davis as a 'revolutionary.' He distinguished Davis from illustrative artists such as William Gropper, however: "Whereas they are opposed to an existing order and spend their time bewailing and belaboring it – Davis serenely creates a new order, as though it were a waste of time to fumble with existing mistakes. Thus he points the way to other revolutionaries who also seek change and a growth to a better society." Although one could get the impression that Kootz understood Davis's politics as analogous to the idealism of Mondrian who believed that painting could serve as a model for a better society only by separating itself from the 'particulars' of nature, a position Davis criticized in the early 1940s, Kootz did recognize the experiential dimension of Davis's aesthetic:

> Davis's intention is to combine his social experience, his memories and imagination into a 'coherent dimensional statement in terms of the three-dimensional color-space of painting, which has direct reference to the color-spaces, forms and tactile sensations we perceive in the world around us.' He has succeeded in doing just that, utilizing frontal geometry and bold color to make his statement compelling.[54]

Davis's claim to be working within the realist tradition, although recognized by many critics for quite some time, finally became a relatively coherent position within art-historical discourse in the late-1930s and early-1940s.

Progressive Aesthetics, Modernist Form and Radical Politics in the Thirties

If Davis was attempting only to forge a new realism by bringing the modernist belief in the independence of pictorial invention together with aesthetic theories of common

[53] Kootz, *New Frontiers*, 38. It is beyond the scope of the current study to discuss or further investigate Kootz's use of these terms and how it may intersect with his involvement in the activities that contributed to the formation and interpretation of the New York School in the 1940s.
[54] Kootz, *New Frontiers*, 38.

experience, that in itself would have been a difficult and complex task. However, as he became increasingly serious about both of these notions and the necessity of holding them within a consistent theoretical framework, he also turned to the radical politics of the Communist Party. Even if such a theoretical amalgamation was possible – and at least in part it was, he still had to contend with the problem of political affiliations – no small issue in the thirties. That is, many on the left and right viewed abstract art as socially degenerate or politically impotent. Marxists, on the whole, viewed Pragmatism, even in its radicalized forms, as ultimately counter-revolutionary. Many who allied themselves with Dewey's pragmatism viewed both Marxism and modernism as foreign 'isms' with little relevance to the realities of the American situation. This is a sketch; notable exceptions persisted.

Davis expended great effort resulting in page after page of writings in attempting to work through and eventually explain how his art could be claimed as having a truly radical potential.[55] It had become clear by the mid-thirties that despite earlier attempts to point to a social relevance for his art, he still had much work to do if he was to convince critics. In fact, my own discussion of his art in the early thirties is based upon my making inferences and piecing together connections between various isolated comments that were never put forth as one clear statement of intent by Davis himself. Furthermore, even my more synthetic reading is not devoid of contradiction and, more importantly, leaves open serious questions regarding the viability of his logic, whether his art really could affect any political change.

[55] Although Davis had a history of involvement in radical politics, it was never such an overriding concern until the mid-1930s.

In the spring of 1933, Gertrude Benson reviewed the "Social Viewpoint in Art" exhibition held by the John Reed Clubs in which Davis participated.[56] She recognized among the artworks a relatively high quality, but also a general lack of specific political intent. She singled out for their lack of commitment those established artists concerned with the representation of the American scene: "The facile but mild realism of Allen Tucker or Kenneth Hayes Miller and his numerous satellites, of Stuart Davis, with his pale, linear, disemotionalized constructions – even the stylized, if expert, Benton – seemed to look on the social scene from a safe and comfortable second-story window." She went on: "The social viewpoint in some canvases (Stuart Davis's, for example) was altogether absent, or concealed behind technical trickery or subject matter only remotely social in its implication (as in the Pollet landscape)." Like Cahill, she recognized the possible 'trickery' of modernist form. As a committed leftist of significant stature, Davis needed to defend his practice as politically progressive, to ensure that his modernist representations of the American scene were not received as art-for-art's-sake.

Meyer Schapiro, the most prominent and articulate Marxist critic of the 1930s, in his now famous 1936 essay, "The Social Bases of Art," explained the impotence of

[56] Benson, "Art and Social Theories," *Creative Arts* 12, no. 3 (march 1933): 216-218. The John Reed Clubs were established in 1929 in New York City in cooperation with the Communist journal the *New Masses*. Its activities were focused mainly on organizing and supporting radical artists. For more information, see for example Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), and James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

abstract art in a manner that could not merely be dismissed as could so many Marxist tracts against modern art, as Schapiro clearly understood modernist form.[57]

> Yet helpless as he is to act on the world, he [the abstract artist] shows in his art an astonishing ingenuity and joy in transforming the shapes of familiar things. This plastic freedom should not be considered in itself an evidence of the artist's positive will to change society or a reflection 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. The space within pictures becomes intraversable; its planes are shuffled and disarrayed, and the whole is reordered in a fantastically intricate manner.[58]

Schapiro exhibits his keen eye for modernist art even while dismissing its potential. He understood modernist art as the result of the artist's alienation from society rather than his will to transform it. This continuing critique of modernist art from the left made a real impact on Davis.[59] While he admitted to the partial truth of such claims, he was not willing to accept the conclusion that modernist art had nothing to communicate:

> Art is environmentally conditioned
> Abstract Art is a product of an environment in which the artist was a dispossessed and unemployed individual who lived by his wits
> But in that tradition there were those who intuitively strove for order in a real world

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[57] A less nuanced and interesting critique of modern art, although one that was specifically focused on Davis's catalogue essay for the Whitney Museum's "Abstract Painting in America" show, was written by Clarence Weinstock, "Contradictions in Abstractions," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 7. Davis responded in the following issue: "A Medium of Two Dimensions," *Art Front* 1, no. 5 (May 1935): 6.

[58] Schapiro, "Social Bases of Art," in Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (1936; New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986). For an insightful series of articles on Schapiro, see the special edition of the *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994) devoted to his career.

[59] Schapiro's position is not all that different from that of many others across the political spectrum who criticized abstract art for its reflection of the alienation of the artist from society. What sets Schapiro's critique apart is his clear articulation of these themes as well as his nuanced understanding of modern form. Not long after writing this essay, Schapiro began a re-evaluation of modern art, which at least in the 1930s remained dialectical in its ability to see the embeddedness of modernist form in bourgeois society as well as its radical potential as social critique. For an insightful, if sometimes contested, interpretation of this shift, see Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

> And there were those who accepted their isolation and made a virtue of introspection + eccentricity.
> A sort of divine fool idea.
> The former carry the tradition of realism even in their abstract terms and have something to give to the picture.
> The latter have nothing to communicate save the idea of madness and suicide, which are ideas but have no career of popularity in prospect.
> In the environment we must include the artist as an active element
> It is wrong to regard him as a mere reflecting agent.[60]

Two related beliefs lie at the heart of Davis's differences from Schapiro: abstract art is a means of more effectively conveying reality – as opposed to evading it, and art is more than a mere reflection of society but also an active element within it.

Davis's politicized defense of abstract art was a necessary task for an artist of his stature who wished to remain a leading political and artistic figure. At his best, he mobilized Marxism to perform scathing analyses of the art world and global politics and to provide social grounding for his practice, but often his rhetoric also fell in line unreflectively with Communist Party doctrine. His adherence to Party dictates in directly political matters is striking in light of his lack of confidence in the Party on aesthetic issues, where he attempted to work out an independent position for himself, not a liberal defense of his art among a plurality of accepted styles, but a more forceful argument that put forth his aesthetic as *the* most progressive Marxist approach.[61]

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[60] Stuart Davis Papers, 1936.

[61] Only after the invasion of Finland in late 1939 did he finally break his ties to the Party. Although Davis was clearly aware of official Party policy on aesthetics at this point, it is less clear to what extent he was aware of the repression of those who were deemed 'counter-revolutionary' artists. Many during the thirties let their enthusiasm for radical change override what could have been more nuanced critical judgments of the Soviet situation, which had deteriorated significantly by the 1930s. For evidence of the persisting belief that liberal policies toward artistic production remained in place in the Soviet Union, see Margaret Bourke-White's 1936 address to the First American Artists' Congress in Baigell and Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 85: "An Artists' Experience in the Soviet Union:" "The party and government lay down no method of technique, no laws of esthetics. All types of art are found – abstract, cubist, surrealist. Every artistic experiment that individual artists wish to carry out they can. People in general have the notion that there is an art line laid down by the government but this is not true." Of course, this may really have been her impression, as foreign visitors made for convenient outlets for the propagating of a positive image,

At those moments when Davis most explicitly expressed art's transformative potential, he turned not to Marxism but to an experiential theory of art that has clear ties to Dewey's Instrumentalism.[62] He explained that painting had a direct relationship to 'common experience,' not so much as its representation as its embodiment, its 'extension.' The painting extends experience in so far as perception is conceptually reordered through its organization on a two-dimensional canvas. Experience, understood as the interaction of organism and environment, it can be inferred following this logic, always involves such translations; the mind is no more a duplication of nature than is a painting. Davis's discussions of the artistic process lend further credibility to viewing his paintings in this manner. His descriptions of experience are striking for their seamless interweaving of perception and pictorial construction: "Drawing is the expression of socially valid concepts in terms of visual and spacial experience. Such experience is understood in terms of structural planes in perspective, having local color and being lighted in a natural way."[63] His references to 'local color' and 'natural' lighting suggest that he is referring to perception. Yet his discussion of structural planes in perspective indicates more pictorial concerns. What is being described is experience, as a process. If experience involves, according to Instrumentalist reasoning, the conscious ordering of environmental stimuli, then Davis's description of experience in terms that fall between

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where such an image could be manufactured through a well-constructed tour. Also see Lozowick's paper delivered at the Congress.

[62] As mentioned in the previous chapter, Davis did mention Dewey from time to time, but these references were few and far between, in particular as compared with those to Marx. This was probably due at least in part to his partial acceptance of the Marxist critique of Dewey, despite his obvious indebtedness to the latter's ideas. On 20 January 1937, Davis listed a series of seven critical methods by which to interpret art, explaining the flaws of each. Of Dewey, he stated, "Description in terms of 'life values', 'urges', 'nature rhythms' etc. All speculative and primarily 'god-worship' (Dewey)" Among the other methods he critiqued were biographical approaches to art, the 'Pseudo-historical' approach of Van Loon, the 'Pseudo-scientific' approach of Cheney, formalism, the 'mechanical quantitative' approach of Barnes, and the Marxist approach as exemplified by Schapiro. He stated: "All of these various methods are unsatisfactory as a guide to action in the field of painting, although they all contain facts of value."

[63] Stuart Davis Papers, 20 July 1936.

pictorial structure and perception makes sense, for he is describing experience as the *process* of transcription.

This process is analogous to that which I described in discussing the bridging of percept and concept in *Landscape with Drying Sails*. In *Waterfront Landscape* of 1936 (Fig. 2.6), Davis has further distanced the painting from immediate perception. Drawing exists almost autonomously of planar relations in the latter image and local color, still lingering in *Landscape with Drying Sails*, has been neutralized by vibrant primary colors functioning in complete independence of their referents. Modeling, however, is evident, most conspicuously in the ropes on the right side of the composition, which are rendered in a manner that suggests a natural light source; they even cast a shadow. Although this modeling indicates volumetric space, the illusion is inconsistent, coming into view only to be cancelled out by the inevitable flatness of the total composition. In this pictorial context, the conventionality of volumetric modeling is not concealed; three-dimensional perceptual space is indicated through an obvious pictorial convention rather than mimetically replicated. The drawing of a harbor on the left side of the composition might also suggest a three-dimensional space had it not been so simplified and splayed across a flat plane of red paint, stubbornly fixed upon the surface of the canvas. What is depicted is the act of organization of observations of nature on a two-dimensional canvas, the ultimate logic of the composition coming from neither nature and its conventionalized system of representation nor pictorial logic (‘ideal form’) but from their interaction.

Davis explained these distinctions between pictorial logic, the percepts of nature and their conceptual ordering, between ‘geometric form,’ ‘objective form,’ and ‘ideological form,’ as they relate to the construction of a picture. By ‘geometric form’ he

referred to the "shape and color of the two-dimensional medium of painting itself;" by 'objective form' he meant the 'environment;' and by 'ideological form' he referred to the meanings associated with forms and objects:

> Art, then, is a triple unity of geometric form, objective form, and ideological form. With the knowledge of the reality and meaning of art the artist can approach his problem objectively. He can systematically record by going to nature without prejudice and selecting the shapes and colors of which its character is made. Second, he can consciously select the suitable objects associated with a purposeful idea and then construct them in their proper shapes and colors. Third, he can manipulate geometric space experimentally with the hope of finding new synthetic forms.[64]

To put this another way, if experience is the interaction of an organism and the environment, geometric form serves as the medium through which an organism armed with ideological form interacts with the objective forms of nature. Through the 'manipulation' of geometric form guided by perceptual and conceptual form, "the expression of reality is achieved." And by 'reality' he referred not merely to the 'natural environment' but to something more akin to experience itself, which includes the environment and the artist.

Davis's belief that his paintings were referable to nature inevitably leads to the question of their verisimilitude. In practical terms his paintings bore increasingly less resemblance over time to natural referents. *Waterfront Landscape*, for example, is less clearly relatable to a particular place than *Drying Sails*. While he certainly did not attempt the mere duplication of nature, or even believe that such an endeavor was within the realm of possibility, he did believe that to some extent his art, in being referable to the environment, carried an element of resemblance. But, as he explained, resemblance to objects in the environment is always already mediated by experience.

[64] Stuart Davis Papers, 6 July 1938.

> 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. And since esthetic experience is also a matter of everyday life, which gives new values to life, the test refers to the referability of the picture to an esthetic experience with the everyday aspects of natural objects, both animate and inanimate.[65]

The painting should resemble not raw visual sensation or for that matter subjective feeling, but rather aesthetic experience, which is understood as a consummatory phase of common experience in which an artist creatively interacts with his environment. While the passage above only implies this interaction, he was more explicit at other moments:

> But those who seek to portray that real objective world of experience by exact optical measurements are not highly regarded. Why? Is there not a contradiction here? There is not a contradiction, because those who seek to record objectivity by purely mechanical means leave out the most important part of all, the artist himself.
>
> But artistic expression, while concerned with objectivity is not merely a spacial measurement such as are made by science. Artistic expression is a measurement of an objective event in nature on which the artist participates.[66]

If Davis could be said to be interested in verisimilitude, he wanted his art to resemble not visual sensation but the experiential interaction of a subject with the environment.

It is instructive to step back to the writings of Dewey at this point in order to emphasize the extent to which the abstractness of Davis's art and its difficulty for a popular audience in the 1930s are not irreconcilable with Dewey's Instrumentalism. Not only was Dewey involved with the Barnes Foundation in the 1920s, which promoted the appreciation of modernist art, but central to his philosophy was an assumption that consummatory experience involves a process that mitigates against 'easy' art. Perception

[65] Stuart Davis Papers, 23 August 1937.
[66] Stuart Davis Papers, 24 March 1937.

can only truly occur, he stated, in the absence of base recognition: "But receptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment. Otherwise, there is not perception but recognition. …Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely."[67] Reception is an active process; it is an experience that extends the experience embodied in the painting, which is itself an extension of the initial experience upon which the painting is based.[68] What allows this process of experience to continue on the level of the consummatory is a process 'of reconstructive doing' that prevents perception from becoming mere recognition. Art is not simply a representation of a past experience, but is itself an experiential act in the present that modifies future experiences. In order for it to function as an extension of experience, the painting must be complex and even difficult enough to prevent perception from becoming recognition.

Davis conceived of the pictorial reordering of experience as facilitating a reordering of reality. This belief stemmed from the notion that a painting based upon experience embodies a process of inter*action*: "It is a two dimensional space-tone system made to correspond symbolically to a series of physio-phycical interaction [sic] between a human being and its environment."[69] These interactions are not merely replicated but offered as models for future action: "A work of ART is Creative, it brings new factors

[67] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 52.
[68] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 53. He continued: "For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in the literal sense. …Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work or art. …In both [artist and beholder], an act of abstraction, that is of extraction of what is significant, takes place," 54.
[69] Stuart Davis Papers, 18 June 1937.

into Visual and Spatial experience, and it becomes the basis of new experiences."[70] In explaining this process, Davis theoretically wed Instrumentalism and Marxism:

> Art comes from non-art. But art reacts on the non-art and changes it. Art describes nature but it changes nature in the process of description. Art springs from the people but it changes the people. The saying of Marx that the task of philosophy is not merely to explain the world but to change the world, applies very strongly to art. …Art is by its very nature a revolutionary agent.[71]

The logic of this statement follows very much on the heels of his Instrumentalist analysis of art's social functioning, but the rhetoric is unmistakably Marxist. Davis, like Hook and Eastman, brought these theoretical paradigms together, but unlike the latter figures, he did not explicitly discuss this important conceptual dialogue, if in fact he even understood it as such.

If Marxism had any real impact upon Davis's reception of Instrumentalism beyond his translation of its principles into Marxist terms and his discursive repression of its actual influence, it was in making of experience something more theoretical than it was in the hands of Dewey. To be sure, Dewey was neither anti-theoretical nor subjectivist; he neither stressed the theoretical nature of the knowledge attained in experience nor denied it. Davis, on the contrary, discussed the reordering of experience as a means of attaining a more effective theoretical grasp on reality,

> Also art 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.[72]

[70] Stuart Davis Papers, 18 June 1937.
[71] Stuart Davis Papers, 25 August 1938.
[72] Stuart Davis Papers, 30 November 1936.

Davis explained that painting offered a means of better understanding and changing the world through the theoretical knowledge available through aesthetic experience. When properly and consciously understood, experience functions as a weapon in a similar manner to which theory does within Marxism. It provides the conceptual knowledge necessary to effectively understand and transform the environment. If Davis's paintings can sometimes give the impression of being technical and cold, or 'disemotionalized' to use Gertrude Benson's phrase, it is perhaps because they are meant to embody this theoretical attitude. Davis painted a 'theoretical world' in which sensation had been reordered to communicate a more profound conceptual understanding of the possibilities latent in the environment, a materialist argument as amenable to Instrumentalist as Marxist reasoning.[73]

A significant divide did exist between Marx and Dewey, however. A fundamental function of Marxist theory is ideology critique, the unmasking of bourgeois ideology to reveal the real workings of capitalist society. Instrumentalists did not believe that a deeper reality lay hidden beneath the veil of consciousness or that the masses were being duped. To be sure, this theoretical rift is not absolute, but setting up this opposition is instructive. Davis did not seek to reveal the real social relations that structured society or bring forth its repressed subject, as many social realists had done for example. He instead began with experience as a given and sought to expand and further its development into

[73] Davis repeatedly stressed this materialism, that his paintings, although presenting a reordered world, are not utopian schemes, as he later criticized Mondrian's of being, but were rather based upon the realities of the environment: "The object of painting is to give expression to the participation of the artist in the movements of Nature. His expression acts upon and changes Nature. But this doesn't mean that to participate in an act of Nature, one has the privilege of creating monsters, and assuming the viewpoint that Nature doesn't exist. This means that the artist must accept as the subject matter of his art natural forms and common aspects of Nature. Further, that these forms have social meaning, in that they all have a place in man's social Scheme. …The 'accidents' and irregularities of Nature are real and cannot be eliminated by pretending to create an ideal world." Stuart Davis Papers, 6 October 1935.

the future. While he often wrote about politics and social relations in terms that bespoke ideology critique, his discussions of aesthetics consistently evaded this logic. His paintings harmoniously, if in the most modern and discordant sense of the term, reorganize the spatial qualities of common experience, stressing their progressive potential. He did not depict the manner in which space is manipulated to facilitate the flow of capital.

Despite these differences, Davis's invocation of Marxism as a theory capable of encompassing all aspects of existence was extended into the formal realm. While his attempts to apply dialectical logic to his existing artistic practice sometimes failed, in some instances dialectical reasoning added real depth to his theorization of aesthetics.

> By dialectics is meant the process by which esthetic form develops. This dialectical process develops through contradiction in space. It starts with the presence of 2 opposing space systems which establish a specific planal relationship. This primary contradiction in unity is the initial impulse in a dynamic process which continues through contradictions to develop that planal diversity in unity which is Form in Space.[74]

Although he sometimes referred to the internal dynamics of space as 'dialectical,' the two systems to which he referred in this passage are the three-dimensional space of nature and the two-dimensional space of the painting.[75] In *Landscape with Drying Sails* lines denote both compositional form and objects. A single line simultaneously signifies the peak of a roof and extends beyond that object to delineate a compositional axis intrinsic to the *pictorial* organization of space. He discussed the coming together of these two spatial

[74] Stuart Davis Papers, 7 August 1937.
[75] For a clear example of his discussion of the dialectical relation between art and the environment see Stuart Davis Papers, 24 August 1938: "And in addition he is aware of the real picture color-space and its dialectical interpenetration with the natural space. He knows that a natural relation is changed in its translation into a picture relation and he makes that change."

logics as a 'dialectical process' involving 'contradiction in space.'[76] One also sees this in *Waterfront Landscape* in the manner in which drawings of places are imposed upon distinct planes of color, the latter establishing relationships to one another independently of the depicted scenes but without either logic ultimately dominating the composition. It is the knitting together of objects in pictorial space through the intersection of planes shared by both spatial logics that he referred to as 'dialectics.' "The 'accidents' and irregularities of Nature," he explained, "are real and cannot be eliminated by pretending to create an ideal world."[77] They must achieve dialectical resolution in the work of art. The 'contradictions' that inevitably occur between these logics are what gives a scene its dynamic quality, in which percepts are ordered towards a future conceptual harmony. If dialectics is a logical unfolding of contradiction, then the spatial dialectics of which Davis wrote is the extension of space through pictorial logic to reveal its latent dynamic, its resolution. As in philosophical dialectics, so in spatial dialectics, thesis and antithesis, percept and concept, are both embodied in the resolution. He made clear that contradiction is not mere accident of method; it is 'contradiction in unity,' contradiction within a dialectical process understood as a pictorial totality.[78]

In discussing abstract art, Davis often turned to science and technology as analogies in explaining its relevance.[79] His style does not suggest the ineffable but instead

[76] My discussion of these formal traits as 'dialectical' is in keeping with Davis's own stated logic. One could also discuss them, of course, as the result of Davis's formal interest in earlier modernist art, notably that of Cézanne and the Cubists.
[77] Stuart Davis Papers, October 1935.
[78] The resemblance should be noted between phrases such as Davis's 'diversity in unity' and Dewey's 'unity in variety.' Both believed that this complex character could make art 'dynamic.' One must also be aware, however, that such concepts abound in modern aesthetic, not to mention philosophical, discourse. In fact, such concepts probably point to the lingering impact of Dewey's early Hegelianism.
[79] Davis's interest in this scientific analogy for art has many possible sources including the pseudo-scientific aesthetic theory he was reading, the industrial Precisionism of an artist like Charles Sheeler, the purported scientific basis of Marxist materialism and Dewey's claims for the importance of scientific

a straightforward and frank application of paint on canvas without pretense of bravado or indication of skill. The impression one receives of his process is of a technician piecing together a series of unmodulated plains rather than a heroic genius producing a sublime masterpiece with the delicate touch of a master. He stated: "To regard abstract art as a mysterious and irrational bypath on the road of true art is like regarding electricity as a passing fad."[80] Like an industrialist, Davis insisted that he merely wanted to apply the technical achievements of the modern age, in his case cubist form, to the radical transformation of the American scene. Unlike the industrialist, however, Davis's logic was dialectical and revolutionary; in the transition to socialism the advances made by modern artists should not be discarded, just as one would not eliminate modern technology and science, but rather develop their full potential: "[The Cubists'] *technological revolution* is still valid. To underestimate it is reactionary. …The technological forms of capitalism are used under socialism."[81] This is the same argument used to justify the Soviet emulation of U.S. industrial ingenuity, and Davis recognized this overlap:

> Socialist Russia uses the space-forms of capitalism in industry. The capitalist Ford built cars of functional social significance, even though he is a rugged-individualist and jew-hater.
>
> So we see that even with the acceptance of the idea of revolutionary progress, we do not imply the destruction of the past completely….
>
> Applied to painting of today it means that any wholesale destruction of existing art forms, without discrimination, (by means of theory, of course) is unrealistic and mechanical.

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method. Regardless of the specific manner in which he read and misread these various influences, what one can say is that science was a common analogy for much activity in the interwar period and Davis was himself influenced by it.

[80] Davis, "Abstraction is Realism: So Asserts Stuart Davis in New Letter on Non-Objective Art Controversy."

[81] Stuart Davis Papers, 12 January 1937.

> Politically, such a theory is reactionary, counter-revolutionary and destructive.[82]

To support the destruction of the most progressive artistic forces developed under capitalism, he argued, would be undialectical, unrealistic and ultimately counter-revolutionary. Furthermore, although insisting upon art's relationship to common experience, he never challenged the category of art as such, as had many interwar avant-gardes with scientific pretenses. He understood art and science as independent categories of inquiry that function effectively as forms of knowledge but only through their adherence to their disciplinary foundations. Art, like science, is a means of knowing and changing the world; it did not need to be sublated into life so much as tuned into an effective instrument through which to understand and act upon reality.[83]

Democracy, Art and Intersubjectivity

For Davis's art to have any impact upon the social world, for it to be useful in the cementing of democratic ideals, it would need to communicate to a broad public. So far, I have discussed Davis's understanding of art's basis in common experience in terms of an artist's personal interaction with the environment and his ability to provide a model for future interaction. Dewey claimed epistemological grounding for his Instrumentalism by

[82] Stuart Davis Papers, 10 January 1937. It is noteworthy in this statement that Davis uses the phrase 'space-forms' not just to describe the forms of modern art, but in this instance to discuss social organization, capitalist industry.

[83] He did occasionally acknowledge in his writings the various European experiments to reintegrate art and everyday life, sublating the category of art as an independent activity. For example, he explained: "The Bauhaus, for example, has expressed the realization of the artist' social disenfranchisement. It has sought to integrate him socially by bringing him into contact with the materials and needs of modern industry. Such an attitude constitutes the philosophical viewpoint of mechanical materialism. Its social implication leaves the artist merely in the position of a more efficient slave of the very forces which have disenfranchised him." Stuart Davis Papers, September 1937.

focusing on the intersubjectivity of communication. Although Davis claimed his method to be 'objective,' it is not always as easy to define his reasoning.

The logic Davis employed to defend abstraction against charges of its subjectivism is complex. It not only changed over time, but he combined aspects of various theoretical frameworks, not always resulting in a clear synthesis. At times, he referred to the 'objective' quality of his paintings following the logic of modernist materialism, insisting upon their non-illusionistic reality, while at others his rationale clearly sprung from his understanding of Marxism. At other moments he stressed a more individualistic model of experience, which was more nuanced than his position of the twenties and was probably offered as a critique of the more extreme appeals to collectivism.[84]

At times, however, Davis based his claims for the 'objectivity' of abstract art upon a notion of communication that intersects Dewey's Instrumentalist reconstruction of epistemology:

> Meaning is an objective process, a real happening, which is proved by its social communicability. Meaning is a quality found only in association with experience common to many people. For an event to have meaning for us, we must have had experience with the objective elements that compose it. Abstract art is realistic and has meaning because it expresses common experience.[85]

'Common experience' does not simply refer to everyday experience but instead to experience which is held in common, that is communicable because it is shared. Davis discussed this same process in the early 1940s in a manner that further emphasizes the

[84] For example, he stated: "The argument which we are discussing is also opposed to modern science because it assumes that all people react to the same situation in the same way. It denies the complex historical environment which has produced the many types of people who exist today and who react to the same situation each in their own manner." Stuart Davis Papers, 27 August 1937.
[85] Davis, "Abstraction is Realism: So Asserts Stuart Davis in New Letter on Non-Objective Art Controversy."

role of communication, not only through art, but also in other realms, as a means of building a common discourse through which to understand art:

> The source of the artist's awareness of the color-space of the real world is available to all because it consists of his optical experience, his experience of the physical motions of his body in moving about, and his knowledge of similar experiences by other people gained through conversation, reading, and by looking at other works of art. The aesthetic quality of his art expression consists of the heightened awareness he has achieved in successfully unifying these experiences in relation to a concrete event. The only proof we need of the objective truth and social value of the artist's expression is given when other people look at his work and find in it a verification of their own experience and imagination.[86]

The artist's own understanding of the world, according to Davis, is based upon his interactions with others, whether in conversation or through their art, and his 'verification' of the truth of his work is found in the consensus formed around those experiences. To the extent to which experience is common, that the artist lives in the same world as others and has his experiences shaped by similar prior experiences, it is shared, communicable and does not remain an isolated individual event.

Despite Dewey's radicalization of the liberal project, including occasional swipes at class interest, his theory of the instrumentality of common experience is nevertheless based upon the traditional universalist principles of liberalism. Although at times Davis's understanding of experience suffered from the same pitfalls, at others he insisted that the interests of which he spoke were not universal, but class-based:

> In the concept of social value is automatically included the decision as to whom its social value has meaning.
>
> Is it the entire human race as it exists at present? This question has been answered by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Their answer is, No. The human race to-day is not an abstraction but represents the peoples inhabiting the planet Earth. Their interests, when specified, must refer to all, since we start by speaking of the human race, which means all men. Analysis, however, reveals that the affairs and interests of man, as carried

[86] Davis, "Abstract Art in the American Scene," *Parnassus* 13, no. 3 (March 1941): 101.

> forward by their organized representatives, the various governments, are not planned in the interests of all men but in the interests of a very small group, both relatively and actually. The plans made in the interests of a small group are reactionary, because, in that they do not realistically include in their scope their avowed subject matter, namely, all men, their form does not correspond to the requirements of the task.[87]

Taking his clues from Marxist ideology critique, he rejected the notion that one can speak of the people as an undifferentiated whole. Where he and other Marxists did sometimes universalize human interests was in their construction of a historical teleology in which it is the interests of a specific class which are those historically destined to inherit the earth, specific class interests being the heirs apparent to the universal end of history. In discussing Davis's understanding of common experience, of experience that is widely shared, one must remain aware of the extent to which, despite his obvious indebtedness to Dewey's Instrumentalism and liberal values more generally, his theoretical elaboration of this concept is marked by the class politics of Marxism.

Because Davis attempted to base his art upon common experience, grounding it epistemologically in the intersubjectivity of communication, he needed to legitimate abstract art's capacity to communicate to a broad public. Furthermore, it was his intention to align his practice with the revolutionary interests of the international proletariat. He needed to justify his practice not only to himself, but to the many other committed leftists in the art world and beyond, many of whom, prescribing a more naturalistic mode of expression, did not concur that abstract art could speak to the working class. He was aware that his own sentiments ran counter to popular as well as Party opinion. His defense of abstract art's instrumentality was based on an aversion to what Dewey referred to as 'recognition.'

[87] Stuart Davis Papers, 24 November 1935.

> Other types of art, such as magazine cover girls, romantic landscapes etc. are loved by millions of people. Are they not therefore social and utilitarian expressions. From our standpoint they have practically no social function at all because they are concerned with trivial aspects of visual nature and make no effort to express anything except the most obvious and commonplace experiences. They are concerned only with sex + sentimentality. Their expression is trite and therefore their social value is nil.[88]

Davis stated that his belief in art's relationship to common experience was not an endorsement of the 'commonplace,' but of experience where it revealed its most dynamic tendencies. Nonetheless, negatively defining what his art is not was not sufficient; he needed to validate his own practice: "Here is the new dilemma. Cast off by the bourgeoisie, repulsed by the proletariat. What is to be done?"[89]

Davis did not provide a singular response to this question. On some occasions, he countered the charge that abstract art was overly difficult, if not asocial, by insisting upon the necessity of education for its full appreciation: "Education is necessary to the understanding of the new object, the drawing, since it is not a duplicate of that which it represents. The education will consist in study of the theory of pictorial form. Knowledge of the forms of art leads to a wider appreciation of the forms of reality."[90] Aesthetic education was usually understood to require, however, an increase in leisure time (a tall order during the Depression). Recognizing this obstacle, he sometimes suggested that if problems of the Depression were overcome, that those of the abstract artist too would diminish in that the workers would have greater leisure time. These statements were usually directly bound with statements supporting the growth of the Communist Party or

[88] Stuart Davis Papers, 17 March 1936.
[89] Stuart Davis Papers, 24 June 1937.
[90] Stuart Davis Papers, 8 October 1937.

the Farmer-Labor Party (depending on current Party policy).[91] He believed that advanced art, although historically produced for a narrow leisure class, would be relevant to a larger leisure class of liberated workers:

> The critics hold the mechanical assumption that a form produced in one environment and for a certain social objective has no validity for another environment. This is of course absurd because a work of art made for a leisure class will be just as valid for the larger leisure class which the emancipation of the workers will create. …Cubism and abstraction were repudiated by a leisure class not because the work was remote from life but because its content which is realistic and constructive was unconcerned with their terror and panic in the capitalist crisis. It did not show them the way to save their fortunes or forget their loss.[92]

While the desire to communicate to and educate a larger public often led artists to question the efficacy of easel painting, this remained Davis's primary medium, whether

[91] The issue of leisure begs a comparison with the writings of Meyer Schapiro. In his "Social Bases of Art," delivered at the First American Artists' Congress, Schapiro critiques the perceived disconnection between modern art and society by discussing art's basis in class dynamics, locating it in the ideology of the 'rentier leisure class' that had penetrated deep into other layers of society. Schapiro's writings (this essay in particular), have been delved into on other occasions more thoroughly than I can hope to accomplish here. The foundation for a new relationship of art to a broader public than that for which bourgeois patronage allowed was stated in Schapiro's essay of November 1936, "Public Use of Art," *Art Front* 2, no. 10: 4-6. He proposed that the government art projects be transformed from their impermanent status as emergency relief to permanent programs, which could provide security for the artists' profession. He believed that these programs could extend art to a wider public through 'collaboration' with various working class institutions and schools. Furthermore, he noted that a public art already existed in the form of comics, movies and other popular media. "It may be a low-grade and infantile public art, one which fixes illusions, degrades taste, and reduces art to a commercial device for exploiting the feelings and anxieties of the masses; but it is the art which the people love, which has formed their taste and will undoubtedly affect their first response to whatever else is offered them." Many others as well had similar ideas regarding the necessity of finding new institutions and avenues of artistic expression, but Schapiro is one of the most articulate, capable of tying these issues to broader concerns and implications. For another fairly articulate discussion of the issue of leisure in relation to the development of new art forms, see Max Weber's address to the First American Artists' Congress, "The Artist, His Audience, and Outlook."
One should also not ignore Leger's contributions to this discourse, as Davis clearly saw his own practice in many respects as an extension of that begun by Leger. In "The New Realism Goes On." *Art Front* 3, no. 1 (Feb 1937): 7-8 (originally a speech delivered at the Maison de la Culture in Paris), Leger stressed the fact that for the workers to cultivate a taste for art, they needed leisure: "At no period in the history of the world have workers had access to plastic beauty, for the reason that they have never had the necessary time and freedom of mind. Free the masses of the people, give them the possibility of thinking, of seeing, of self-cultivation - that is all we ask; they will then be in a position to enjoy to the utmost those plastic novelties which modern art has to offer."

[92] Stuart Davis Papers, 15 January 1936. It is curious that Davis chose to use the term 'leisure class' to denote the larger body of workers that would have the time to appreciate art after their emancipation, rather than discarding such terms as remnants of class-based society.

because of difficulties in receiving commissions for murals and lithographs or otherwise.[93]

Davis also believed that, irrespective of education, abstract art had a particular capacity to communicate modern experience. This is one of the fundamental assumptions that framed his 1943 article "What About Modern Art and Democracy" published in *Harper's Magazine*. He stated: "anyone who discusses the question of 'an art for the masses' which must speak 'a common language' should bear in mind the fact that Modern Art does speak a common language to thousands who have had the opportunity and the will to cultivate it." Although 'opportunity' was still a real issue at this point, he insisted that the position of those who claimed that modernist art was inappropriate for a broad audience because of their 'incapacity' to appreciate it was simply undemocratic.[94] With not always convincing, and sometimes circular, turns of logic, he discussed the impact that modern art already had upon the world through its "repercussions… on aesthetic perception and industrial design." He turned to a recurring trope in his writings since the thirties, one to which I shall return in the fourth chapter, that abstractions of various technological and epistemological sorts were already a part of people's everyday lives:

> In America there is a tendency to look with suspicion on 'abstract' ideas or creative innovations when they occur outside the field of technology or commerce. Although we live in an industrial society built on abstract ideas, 'professors' in politics and 'abstractionists' in art are generally held to be crackpots. We do not call the radio an 'abstraction,' and we do not

[93] For example, Davis produced some fabric designs for Samuel Kootz in 1934. He also executed several murals during the 1930s, but he certainly did not receive enough commissions for mural painting to become a primary focus of his activities. He had also produced a number of lithographs and even mentioned a few times in his papers the importance of lithography as a reproducible, color, and inexpensive medium. For example see, 24 June 1937. In the end, despite these interests in other media, his primary medium was painting.

[94] Davis, "What About Modern Art and Democracy?," *Harper's Magazine* 188, no. 1123 (December 1943): 17.

> put bird feathers on the wings of our airplanes or artificial dentures in the radio loudspeaker. We regard synthetic quinine and sulfa drugs as very real and desirable despite their foreign origin and 'unnaturalness.' But where art is concerned the Currier and Ives model is held to be adequate. In science the word 'abstract' is identified with progress; in social philosophy and art, with the Ivory Tower.[95]

All in all, he was critical of the disjunction he perceived between modern life, which was distinguished by the place of modern design in homes and by the importance of abstract ideas and technologies, and the overall cultural conservatism, distinguished by a support for the status quo among cultural institutions and large businesses that patronized art and aimed to maintain stability.[96]

Davis understood the form of his art to have real progressive implications for the development of a democratic society, even if it did not communicate politics as such. He declared his Cubist-derived art to be far more defensible from a radicalized position – whether Marxist or otherwise – than any other style being practiced at the time. It could expand and enrich democratic society through the communication of those aspects of common experience, theoretically understood through abstract form, that were most dynamic and progressive. In being able to conceptualize the spatial aspects of modern experience, one would not only be able to better interact with the world, but the basis would also be founded upon which to build a new sense of identity relevant to the current

[95] Davis, "What About Modern Art and Democracy?," 19.

[96] Davis stated: "This patronage which in its entirety consists of the government art projects, the cultural foundations, the museums, the private collectors, art societies of laymen, art schools, art dealers, lecturers and writers of books on art, and art editors and reviewers. It would be an extremely interesting and valuable project for some qualified person to systematically chart the chief activities of these groups during the last twenty-five years, and to evaluate their cultural contribution in its main trends. Whatever the findings might show I feel sure that the words, ''provincial conservatism', 'academic scholasticism', 'commercial exploitation', and 'social snobbism', would have a prominent place in the summing-up. Instead of calling on the talent of American artists for a genuine art of the color-space of our epoch this group has demanded, ''Regionalism in art'; 'Americana in art'; 'The New Deal in art'; 'Social-content in art'; and 'Sanity in art'. To have a strong art in America the patronage will have to develop a little of that talent and discrimination which is automatically expected of the artist." Davis, "Abstract Art in the American Scene," 103.

historical situation. The continuing criticism of his aesthetic position from the political left, however, makes clear that despite the great lengths to which he went to clarify the social role that abstract art could play in American life, many were not convinced by either his often complex and sometimes self-contradictory logic or his seemingly aloof paintings.

2.1. Davis, *Egg Beater No. 1*, 1927.

2.2. Davis, *Egg Beater No. 2*, 1928.

2.3. Davis, *Egg Beater No. 3*, 1927-28.

2.4. Davis, *Landscape with Drying Sails*, 1931-32.

2.5. Davis, *Mural for Studio B, WNYC*, 1939.

2.6. Davis, *Waterfront Landscape*, 1936.

Chapter Three

The Struggle Over Americanism in Art
Stuart Davis's Internationalist Vision of Common Experience

Between the world wars, efforts to produce a distinctively American art were widespread and involved artists whose diversity can only be suggested by such stylistic designations as Precisionism and Regionalism. Davis contributed to this project through his paintings, his published statements and his organizational activities. While he claimed that his art was thoroughly American, he defined America itself in international terms. He argued that to separate native expression from the European tradition was not only undesirable but denied the realities of the American environment. Davis was not alone in his belief that an American art severed from its ties to the European tradition was unhealthy and historically untenable. What set him apart, however, were his vocal elaboration of this position and his development of an art that is thoroughly defined by these principles. He produced an art that is unmistakably stamped with its French origins, but he employed these means as the most capable of representing modern American experience.

My analysis of these issues begins with an examination of the broad public perception during the twenties that America had come of age and the impact this had on the art, politics and cultural criticism of the period. I then examine Davis's series of three *New York-Paris* paintings in relation to issues of national identity and Davis's declared internationalism. From there, I discuss the 'American Wave' gallery season of 1931-32 in which art world discussions of national identity came to a feverish pitch, representing the concerns of Depression-era America. I conclude with an examination of the struggle

against fascism in the later thirties and the eventual success of the internationalist position as a new form of patriotism.

America Comes of Age

In the first chapter, I discussed the perception exemplified in the writings of John Dewey that US democracy was in the midst of a crisis. The public life upon which democracy is built had been weakened and no new values had yet appeared that were capable of bringing citizens together in common discourse. One of the nodal points of the interwar discussions of the future of US democracy and American identity was the new standing the US acquired as a modern nation with a powerful position in international affairs. Perhaps foremost among the factors leading to a reevaluation of its international standing was the decisive role it played in the First World War and its aftermath. The war thrust the US into the turmoil of world political events and into a position of global leadership. Although its entrance was late, its role was understood to be decisive. During the war, through financial and material aid to its allies, the US was generating a situation in which it would become a major creditor nation, a position with enormous monetary and political rewards. The tradition, however nominal it may have been, of political and cultural isolationism was put into jeopardy in this context.[1]

[1] This situation was the result of many factors including the devastation of the US's European competition. Foreign loans, such as the Dawes Plan of 1924, were offered to help clean up the post-war financial turmoil related to the chain of debt incurred by the Treaty of Versailles and thereby enable the Europeans to buy more American goods. Furthermore, U.S. production shifted toward a greater emphasis on luxury goods which included a concomitant growth in advertising to convince consumers of their need for these new consumer products. The consumer culture that arose was central to discussions of 'Americanization.' For a insightful discussion of the importance of the shift towards an economy oriented towards the production of what might be deemed leisure goods, as opposed to the means of subsistence, and how the interruption of this process midway led to the seriousness of the economic depression of the 1930s see Michael. A Bernstein, "Why the Great Depression Was Great: Toward a New Understanding of the Interwar Economic Crisis in the United States," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal*

The questions the US confronted regarding its identity due to its prominent new international role were not wholly new. What was new was their urgency and the ways in which they were framed. Was the United States to continue to play the decisive international role it had in the First World War? Did the perceived loosening of traditional mores and the focus on the superficial aspects of life associated with the Jazz Age represent America's coming of age as a cultural leader or a passing adolescent revolt that had somehow even infested the European spirit? What was 'Americanism,' or even America for that matter, and how did it relate to Fordism? Had the U.S. finally become a nation defined by its dynamic industrial cities rather than its agrarian traditions? Had the frontier ceased to be definitive of the American experience and homegrown democracy? The 1890 census proclaimed the closing of the frontier. The 1920 census declared that the majority of U.S. citizens lived in cities. The statistics of the Census Bureau do not offer any simple panorama of the opinions and beliefs of the diverse individuals who made up the U.S. Nevertheless, these were and still are oft-discussed markers of a changing nation. The frontier was closed and people were streaming from the country into the cities. Questions remained as to the advantages of this trend and the burgeoning international consumer culture to which it was connected.

One could produce a long list of texts in the decade following the First World War proclaiming America's triumphal coming of age, explaining how it had carved out a leading position for itself on the world stage. I discuss one particular account, an idiosyncratic one, but also a particularly interesting one. *America Comes of Age: A*

Order, 1930-1980 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). For a relatively conventional, although well written and still relevant, account of the 1920s, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). A discussion of the Dawes Plan can be found on page 111.

French Analysis, by André Siegfried, was published in 1927.[2] Its French origins indicate that the sense that the U.S. had acquired a new international stature was acknowledged abroad as well as at home. Siegfried was neither a booster for the spread of 'Americanism' nor its simple opponent, but instead discussed in great detail both the benefits and dangers of the American business model. While he agreed that America's stress on standardization and the maximization of efficiency had revolutionized industry, he also explained how they had imperiled the humanity of individual workers.[3] Furthermore, he believed that the US might displace Europe as the dominant world civilization. In a chillingly farsighted critique, he described the possibly grim international ramifications of U.S. success:

> In this lies the danger that America may feel she can do as she likes without consideration for any one else. She can act as arbitrarily as she pleases. She can strangle whole peoples and governments, or she can assist them on her own terms. She can control them and indulge in the pleasant sensation of judging them from her superior moral height, and then impose her verdict. This is bad not only for Europeans, who are humiliated, but also for Americans; for their sovereign independence makes them less and less willing to accept international obligations.... and from this may arise a new and subtle imperialism unlike anything we have known before.[4]

Although he concentrated his efforts upon the US economy and global politics, he also examined, among other things, America's diverse ethnic origins, an aspect of American life that we will see was central to art world discussions of national identity. Despite the prescience of Siegfried's analysis of the new international role the US was playing, he was nevertheless not speaking directly to the concerns of many US citizens.

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[2] André Siegfried, *America Comes of Age: A French Analysis* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927, translated by H. H. Hemming and Doris Hemming).
[3] Siegfried, *America Comes of Age*, 349.
[4] Siegfried, *America Comes of Age*, 227.

Dewey, despite his often keen socio-political insights, did not discern the mechanisms of international trade and politics nearly as convincingly as Siegfried, but he did very persuasively voice the concerns of their social and geographic impact on US citizens at the level of personal psychology as well as collective solidarity. He believed the influence of the new means of communication and distribution was enormous; one could speak of 'a new age of human relations.'[5] Because of these new technologies that allowed for the travel of goods and information at great speeds and across vast distances, local communities increasingly shared their markets and ceased to exist in isolation. He perceived this world, in which activities were becoming increasingly socialized and coordinated, as both promising in the possibilities of collective living it seemed to offer and troubling in the coercive power that its large privately controlled institutions wielded.

He related these geographic transformations to the development of the modern nation-state and the emergent spirit of nationalism. The unity of the modern state, he explained, is only possible through the new technologies of communication.[6] However, the loss of old values and loyalties that bound communities together left the public unsure of where to direct its sense of social purpose: "I do not think it is fantastic to connect our excited and rapacious nationalism with the situation in which corporateness has gone so far as to detach individuals from their old local ties and allegiances but not far enough to give them a new centre and order of life."[7] The construction of the 'Great Society' had destroyed local communities without offering in their place a 'Great Community.' Modern experience, he argued, was increasingly based upon communications – often

[5] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (1927; Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946), 98.
[6] Dewey, *Public*, 114.
[7] Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (1930; Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), 30-1.

through such technologies as the radio – and products – often produced far away – that were shared across vast distances and that could cement new bonds. Yet, lacking new socially responsible ideals through which to organize these relationships, the public organized itself through nationalism. His warning is clear; he explained that the business interests that often guided public policy could alone not bring a nation to war, whereas the solidarity offered by nationalism could.[8]

These same technologies that allowed goods and ideas to follow new geographic paths, some believed, might also allow for new forms of urban development that could restore a sense of community. The writings of the urbanist and cultural historian Lewis Mumford provide a clear example. He not only recognized and articulated the importance of these new technologies to larger political and cultural unities, as Dewey had done, but also proposed their use in eliminating what he perceived to be the excesses of urban life.[9] He thought that they could allow for a more social and ecological scale of development at once urban and local. His hope was that the modern city would be replaced by a less congested form of urban planning in greater harmony with the natural environment, the 'garden city.' This more decentralized vision of the city was in large part enabled by the advent of the automobile, which was seen as far more flexible than the train as a means of delivering goods to loosely networked towns.[10]

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[8] Dewey, *Individualism*, 30.

[9] Dewey himself, it should be noted, despite his insistence on the importance of community and his recognition of some of the problems plaguing modern cities, did not denounce urban life as such, but rather critiqued certain aspects of it. For more on Dewey's attitudes toward urban life, see Chapter 10 of Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and MIT Press, 1962). Despite their common ground on certain issues, Mumford and Dewey also disagreed on much during the 1920s.

[10] See Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938). The contemporary situation of suburban sprawl has proved his thesis amazingly accurate and yet devastatingly misguided. Mumford, in later years, did not remain as optimistic about the car's potentials as he had been in the 1930s.

These developments in international trade and politics and their repercussions on popular culture and urban development had a marked impact on the art world during the interwar period. For example, Davis included representations of cars and filling stations in many of his paintings; although his intentions may have differed from Mumford's celebration of the automobile, the car was broadly discussed for its important role in the transformation of urban development as well as for its prominence as a new luxury good in the developing consumer economy. Many both inside and outside the art world, recognizing America's leading role in these transformations and believing that America had indeed come of age, sought an art worthy of its new worldly stature and that could express its unique ideals, an art both modern and distinctively American. Consensus, however, was far from apparent regarding which aspects of American identity were to form the basis for this art. While discussions would increasingly foreground the political dimensions of questions of national identity, for many in the twenties, discussions of Americanism did not yet involve the more overtly political implications their responses implied. Many artists searched for representations of America and found them, picturing aspects of the natural landscape, heroic icons of the city, sleek evocations of modern industry, and homages to traditional agrarian life.[11]

The prophesies of a flourishing American renaissance built upon the foundation laid by Walt Whitman became increasingly common. Many claimed to have already seen its rays emerging over the horizon, the glimmerings of a monumental, homegrown art of public importance, an art capable of communicating to the people, and in some cases an art that was an affront to what was deemed the decadent, anti-social art of Europe,

[11] Although there is a good deal of literature dealing with specific episodes in the interwar exploration of national identity in the arts, Matthew Baigell and Wanda Corn stand out for their broad and synthetic studies. See my discussion of their work in my introduction.

particularly that of the Parisian avant-garde. One hurdle was almost universally recognized across the spectrum of nationalist and internationalist artists, convincing the collectors that American art was as sound an investment as European art. With state support still a decade off, this new art would have to prove itself viable in the market, where exchange value determined aesthetic value.

Many of these artists, in particular during the 1920s, made a second home in Paris; they believed that a new American art would bring together the formal lessons of European modernism and the sense of modernity as found in the American environment. The critic and historian Malcolm Cowley famously wrote of this 'lost generation' of 1920s American transatlantics, describing a situation in which the US had ceased to be culturally dependent upon Europe. *Exile's Return* is his story inscribed along an axis running from New York to Paris of writers and intellectuals who lived between these two cities and provided an image of America defined by its modern jazz-age culture. America, he proclaimed, was no longer a 'colony of European capitalism:'

> It exported not only raw materials but finished products, and the machinery with which to finish them, and the methods by which to distribute them, and the entire capital required in the process. In addition to wheat and automobiles, it had begun to export cultural goods, hot and sweet jazz bands, financial experts, movies and political ideals. There were even American myths, among others that of the hardheaded, softhearted businessman enslaved by his wife. Yet our literature had not registered the changed status of the nation. American intellectuals as a group continued to labor under a burden of provincialism…[12]

America, although emulated abroad and increasingly defining the world's markets culturally and financially, remained a mere province of Europe artistically. Furthermore, the transatlantic artists themselves, although not understood by Cowley to be as advanced as their European counterparts, played a key role in disseminating the new consumer

[12] Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934; New York: Viking Press, 1951), 93-4.

culture into new territories through their animating presence across the Atlantic. He saw the roots of this new international culture in the radicalism of Greenwich Village, which he believed played an unwitting role as a model for the new ideology of consumption. All over the nation and world, people dressed and acted like Greenwich Villagers and artists living abroad were helping to spread these fashions.[13]

Davis is very much a part of this context. Not only did he go to Paris for a year in 1928 and engage in many of the same activities of other transatlantics while there, but a number of his paintings from the 1920s make clear the extent to which he was caught up in the art world's enthusiasm to incorporate elements of the machine age and the emerging mass culture of the US into elite, modernist cultural production. In 1921, he painted *Lucky Strike* (Fig. 3.1), an image of tobacco packaging that has been related by historians to the collage techniques of synthetic cubism as well as to the American tradition of tromp l'oeil painting.[14] The packaging is centered on the canvas with minimal borders, almost negating the very notion of composition. The composition provided is that found in mass-produced packaging itself. The words "The American Tobacco Company" stress the Americanness of this subject. In 1922, he painted another tobacco painting, *Sweet Caporal* (Fig. 3.2), which although compositionally more complex than *Lucky Strike* – at least from the point of view of personal artistic volition, still follows the

[13] Cowley stated: "There must be a new ethic that encouraged people to buy, a *consumption* ethic. It happened that many of the Greenwich Village ideas proved useful in the altered situation. Thus, *self-expression* and *paganism* encouraged a demand for all sorts of products - modern furniture, beach pajamas, cosmetics, colored bathrooms with toilet paper to match. *Living for the moment* meant buying an automobile, radio or house, using it now and paying for it tomorrow. *Female equality* was capable of doubling the consumption of products - cigarettes, for example - that had formerly been used by men alone. Even *changing place* would help to stimulate business in the country from which the artist was being expatriated. The exiles of art were also trade missionaries: involuntarily they increased the foreign demand for fountain pens, silk stockings, grapefruit and portable typewriters. They drew after them an army of tourists, thus swelling the profits of steamship lines and travel agencies. Everything fitted into the business picture." *Exile's Return*, 62-3.

[14] For a discussion of these readings, see Lowery Stokes Sims in Sims, ed., *Stuart Davis: American Painter* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), 148-151.

basic aesthetic of a painted collage, in this case referencing not only the packaging of consumer goods but also markers of various modernist movements. Similar to *Lucky Strike*, amongst the various objects can be read "U.S.AMERICA." In 1924, he painted *Electric Bulb* (Fig. 3.3), a representation of an electric light bulb and its cardboard container. Electric lighting was sweeping the nation during the 1920s, altering not only the rhythm of domestic living but also the appearance of the urban environment (for example, it was used to transform architecture into spectacular displays of economic abundance). Also significant are his 1924 paintings of *Odol* mouthwash (Figs. 3.4 & 3.5), a product from the throng of mass produced consumer goods that were transforming people's daily lives and standardizing such things as hygiene, making such personal activities, with the help of advertising, into part of the modern American way of life.

Each of these paintings represents a symbol of the emerging consumer economy and evokes the momentous changes taking place in all areas of everyday life, from leisure to hygiene to the look of the city. Although these objects are represented in all of their unadulterated iconic potential, they are also clearly marked by the formal lessons of European modernism. These paintings depict consumer products in an increasingly internationalized language of modernist form and in so doing communicate the modern ideals that many believed defined American identity, the same ideals that were increasingly penetrating the culture of Europe as well under the guise of 'Americanization.'

Although many in the art world agreed that American artists had quite a way to go before reaching their maturity, there was a growing recognition among perceptive critics and artists that a geographic realignment of the art world was taking shape. Sheldon

Cheney, for example, in responding to America's perceived coming of age, described a shifting balance of cultural power: "Paris is still geographically the center, but a Paris wherein Russians, Spaniards, even Americans sit in the high councils of (unofficial) art."[15] This remark comes from Chapter Twelve of his 1924 book *A Primer of Modern Art* titled, appropriately enough, "The Geography and Anatomy of Modern Art." New York, while not yet the new center of the art world, was already gaining significant ground. Furthermore, Paris, because it was a pilgrimage site for modern artists, was a multinational center of cultural power. Paris was still the center, but its 'high councils' were international and Americans were among those at the table. This emerging international art market, in which New York was becoming an increasingly important player, existed in tension, although not outright contradiction, with the tendency to nurture a homegrown American art founded upon native values – even if those seemingly native values were increasingly becoming a part of the new international consumer culture.

Although the turn to a more nativist notion of Americanism which rejected the international crosscurrents of the 1920s is often associated with the culture of the Depression, it existed throughout the interwar period and a real swell in this sentiment is evident as early as the late twenties. Furthermore, many of the activities of the transatlantics themselves were often marked by a nationalist impulse. Henry McBride, a critic who had been quite sympathetic to the modernists during the twenties, wrote an article in *Dial* in April 1929 on "American Expatriates in Paris" in which he explained that the "centre of the world" had in fact moved:

[15] Sheldon Cheney, *A Primer of Modern Art* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1924), 220.

> Paris is no longer the capital of Cosmopolis. All the intelligence of the world is focused on New York; it has become the battleground of modern civilization; all the roads now lead in this direction, and all the world knows this save the misguided artists who are jeopardizing their careers for the dubious consommations of the Café de la Rotonde.[16]

Although he forthrightly admitted to his own trips abroad, he was deeply critical of those "who go abroad too often and stay too long when they do go." The need to go abroad to learn about art, it was his contention, had ceased to exist; New York was the new center.

New York – Paris

> The orbit of such a world city as New York also intersects the orbits of other world cities. New York, London, Tokyo, Rome exchange preferred stocks and bullion, ships' manifests and radio programs – in rivalry or well-calculated friendship. During the 1920's, for example, a jump spark crackled between New York and Paris. The art of Matisse, Derain, Picasso commanded the Fifty-Seventh Street market. The French developed a taste for *le jazz* and *le sport*; in an atmosphere of war debts and the Young Plan, the Americanization of Europe was mentioned. Paris, capital of the *Valutaschweine*, became the bourne of good and gay New Yorkers, the implicit heroine of a comedy by Philip Barr or a novel by Ernest Hemingway. The French replied, though not always in kind. [*New York Panorama* - 1938][17]

Americans were purchasing French Paintings; the French were consuming American mass culture; goods and ideas flowed across the Atlantic as never before. Davis was well aware of the international dimensions of modern life, of the social and economic reach of

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[16] McBride, "American Expatriates in Paris," *Dial* (April 1929), as reproduced in McBride, *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 255-7.

[17] "Contemporary Scene: Metropolis and Her Children," in Federal Writers' Project, *New York Panorama: A Comprehensive View of the Metropolis, Presented in a Series of Articles Prepared by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in New York City* (New York: Random House, 1938), 3-4. Cowley described the *Valutaschweine*, or 'bargain-pigs' (my translation): "Nobody was honest in those days: the seller could not cheat enough to profit, nor the buyer give anything but paper. Those who had gold, or currency redeemable in gold, hastened toward the cheapest markets. There sprang into being a new race of tourists, the *Valutaschweine*, the parasites of the exchange, who wandered from France to Rumania, from Italy to Poland, in quest of the vilest prices and the most admirable gangrenes of society. Suddenly indifferent to the past of Europe, they were seen in fashionable hotels, in money-changers' booths, in night clubs oftener than in museums; but especially you saw them in the railway station at Innsbruck: Danes, Hindus, Yankees, waiting by the hundreds for the international express that would bear them toward the falling paper-mark or the unstabilized lira." *Exiles Return*, 81-2.

New York beyond its geographic boundaries, of the cultural power established and contested between New York and Paris. Although he lived the majority of his life in New York, often summering in Gloucester, his trip to Paris in 1928 is nonetheless quite significant.[18] This trip, made by so many aspiring American artists of the day, was almost obligatory for an ardent modernist. It was a rite of passage in which the artist could learn first-hand from the French example, could experience the culture that was origin to what many believed to be the most advanced artistic languages being developed.

Although Davis was not a transatlantic in the manner of Gerald Murphy and innumerable others who stayed abroad for extended periods and established a lasting presence on both sides of the Atlantic, his interests clearly resonated with theirs. During his year in Paris, he participated in many of the same social activities and seized the opportunity to meet renowned European artists.[19] He even had one of his paintings reproduced on the cover of *transition* (Fig. 3.6), one of the chief journals of the transatlantics.[20] Although he never met some of those artists on whom he had set his eyes, he did meet Fernand Léger, a painter with whom he held much in common formally and ideologically. He showed Léger paintings he had brought with him from his *Eggbeater* series of 1927-28. Léger was impressed by these paintings and likened them to his own, although he was less interested in the pictures of local street scenes Davis painted while in Paris. Léger's judgment aside, these paintings are quite interesting and important; they

[18] In May of 1928, Juliana Force of the Whitney Studio Club bought several of his paintings, giving him the necessary income to finally make the journey.
[19] He made clear the extent to which he was a part of the transatlantic culture: "There was no feeling of being isolated from America, as I met practically everyone I had ever known at one time or another during the year." He is clearly referring to a small international elite of artistic producers. Davis, *Stuart Davis* (New York: American Artists Group, 1945), unpaginated.
[20] *Transition* 14 (Fall 1928). 14. His friend Elliot Paul was a former editor and still involved with the journal and published an article in this issue, "Stuart Davis, American Painter," along with four reproductions.

were the first images in which the formal and spatial lessons of the *Eggbeater* series (Figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) were applied to urban scenes, however tentatively. In paintings such as *Place des Vosges No. 2* (1928, Fig. 3.7) and *Rue des Rats No. 2* (1928, Fig. 3.8), one witnesses the tying of spatial planes indicative of buildings to the edges and corners of the canvas, the juxtaposition of differing denotative systems such as drawing and colored planes, and the use of heavily impastoed paint in order to emphasize surface and counter the planar perspective.

In 1931, Davis made his interest in the transatlantic crosscurrents more explicit when he produced a series of three paintings, the *New York-Paris* series (Figs. 3.9, 3.10, 3.11), in which he combined motifs from New York and Gloucester with others from his trip to Paris. These paintings not only reinforced the internationalism of the 1920s, but through their iconography and style also challenged the growing nativism of the 1930s art world. What these paintings also inadvertently indicate, however, is that the internationalism of the interwar US art scene was a rather narrow affair, limited primarily to the relationship between itself and France, with marginal acknowledgment of the larger global context, or even of greater Europe.

In his memoirs of 1945, Davis reflected on his trip to Paris in a manner that sheds light on these pictures:

> The absence of American drive and tempo was not missed. There was so much of the past, and of the immediate present, brought together on one plane, that nothing was left to be desired. There was a seeming timelessness about the place that was conducive to the kind of contemplation essential to art.[21]

He described his experiences in pictorialized terms; the manner in which various scenes and eras are “brought together on one plane” evokes the qualities of his paintings. In the

[21] Davis, *Stuart Davis*.

previous chapter, I related this characteristic of his writings to his understanding of art's role as an extension of experience. An unfamiliar side of Davis to those who associate him with positive evocations of urban experience also comes through: "On arrival in New York I was appalled and depressed by its giantism. It was difficult to think of either art or oneself as having any significance whatever in the face of this frenetic commercial engine." It was of course this 'commercial engine' that fascinated so many about New York, including Davis. As he stated: "As an American I had need for the impersonal dynamics of New York City..." He needed New York, and, like many transatlantics, collapsed American identity into the New York experience.

The *New York-Paris* paintings abound in spatial and iconographic juxtapositions. However, the sizes at which various objects and urban scenes are depicted sometimes seem more related to compositional concerns than any actual differences between the two cities. At other moments, however, a sense of history characterized by an uneven development between the two regions is conveyed. In the latter cases, New York's urban environment populated with skyscrapers and elevated trains exhibits the transformations wrought by modernity far more radically than Paris, represented predominantly through its older housing stock and cafes.

Despite the obvious comparison of subjects from New York and Paris in a manner that allows them to remain distinguishable, many subjects challenge any easy national categorization. Planes, automobiles, furniture, tobacco: these subjects, although perhaps associated with Americanization and in some cases the products of US industry, could have shown up almost anywhere. They are artifacts of the new international consumer culture that was being established. They are catalysts in the homogenization of world

culture by capitalism, in the deterritorialization of human geography. They broke apart regional bonds, but also increasingly bound together the modern world through a common culture and allowed for the sharing of experiences across vast distances.

Although these are *New York-Paris* paintings, Gloucester's presence is evident, for example in the fishing boat in *NY-P 1*. Gloucester was home to a quite large artists' colony that was the summer destination of an annual migration of artists for many of whom cities such as Gloucester and Provincetown formed a spur on the New York-Paris axis. The suggestion of an automobile flanked by two gas pumps in *NY-P 3*, due to its situation before a rolling landscape, indicates that this is a reference to Cape Ann, the peninsula on which Gloucester is located. Davis claimed that one of the things he appreciated about Gloucester was that it was not yet overrun by automobiles and that its Main Street was not yet 'pre-fabricated' as in other cities. Yet, in the next sentence, he described his arrival in Gloucester behind the wheel of a car.

The car was not only a fashionable and exciting new technology, but was also important to discussions of geographic development, as I discussed with reference to Mumford. Another valuable example of the evaluation of the impact of the automobile on economic and geographic development can be found in Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore's 1938 book *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration*:

> If the railway has been one of the dominant factors in the emergence and organization of the metropolitan region in the past, the motor vehicle seems to supply the key to understanding what has happened during the last twenty years and what is likely to happen in the near future. The inflexibility of the rail system gave the city and its region a rigid, compacted form in which the city differed greatly from the surrounding areas. The elasticity of the automobile and motor truck are changing this

> to one of loosely nucleated, highly specialized and therefore interdependent, communities.[22]

They believed that new technologies, in particular the car, could both interconnect distant regions *and* increase 'regional consciousness.'[23] Robert Park, the Chicago School urban sociologist, saw in U.S. cities the most advanced examples of the culture toward which he believed modern society was headed and reiterated the appropriateness of the term 'Americanization.' In particular, he stressed the popular use of the car, the plane, and the telephone and the consumption of motion pictures and newspapers. He directly related these technologies that allowed for movement and migrations to the 'restlessness' and 'mobility' that he understood as central characteristics of the American people.[24]

The references to the automobile, or the plane for that matter, in *NY-P 3* must not be understood as just another element of the American scene or even merely in terms of the greater freedom of mobility it offered to individuals, but in relation its central role in discussions of the future shape of regions and cities. In fact, these two aspects of the reception of the automobile, one popular and one more sociological, are not so far apart. It was the new freedom the car seemed to offer that fueled dreams of an urban life that was less congested, slower and more human in scale. The car allowed the characters in

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[22] Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1938), 115.

[23] Although there would be increased communication by various means that would link regions together, these media would nevertheless remain local in origin and therefore actually strengthen 'regional consciousness.' Odum and Moore, *American Regionalism*, 131.

[24] Dewey felt similarly about America's place in these processes: "It is a commonplace that the problem of the relation of mechanistic and industrial civilization to culture is the deepest and most urgent problem of our day. If interpreters are correct in saying that 'Americanization' is becoming universal, it is a problem of the world and not just of our own country - although it is first acutely experienced here." What sets Park's assessment of urban life and modernity apart from Dewey's, whose influence on Park is evident, and especially Mumford, and therefore makes him worth mentioning separately, is the degree to which his sociological understanding of city life incorporated the psychology of the urban experience. Park's studies with Georg Simmel are clearly evident in this regard. The city was for Park a 'state of mind.' City forms were the result of the psychological make-up of those who built them, a sort of concretization of the collective mind. See Park in Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (1925; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

The Great Gatsby to live in suburban Long Island and yet cruise through the landscape to enjoy the thrills of the city on weekends as visitors. The new freedom created by the car should not be disconnected from the transformation and de-urbanization of leisure and dwelling. In many respects, the latent tendencies of automobile culture that many observers recognized ran counter to those aspects of urban life that were most central to Davis's vision of experience.

Davis did represent this other urban ideal in these paintings, the dense urban fabric associated with the el train, a New York in which buildings almost seem to pile atop one another. In *NY-P 1* and *NY-P 2*, he alluded to the elevated rail system that still occupied Manhattan. The el train offered to Davis a means of representing a dynamic and visible means of travel through the city. Although he seems to have had a certain fondness for el trains, their days were numbered. They were increasingly replaced by subways, which were perhaps even greater marvels of engineering, but were less readily visible as embodiments of the modern city and the futuristic possibilities of engineering. By the 1930s, the positive associations of the el were linked to a heroic past of urban development as they increasingly came to be discussed as eyesores and as sources of social corrosion.[25]

This discussion of Davis's representation of the new means of transportation is meant to indicate the extent to which his engagement with the interwar discourse on the transformation of the world's geography goes beyond his representation of the New York-Paris axis to engage more regional concerns as well concerning the shape of urban development. The symbols of technology and transportation in these paintings abound and clearly resonate with discussions of nationalism, urbanism, social health and modern

[25] For more on the importance of the el train to Davis's iconography, see the fourth chapter.

American experience. Yet, they do not provide a voice devoid of contradiction, but rather seem to draw upon those aspects of the American and Parisian scenes that most evoked the radical changes taking place regardless of their sometimes-conflicting historical implications.

The evocation of the geographic changes wrought by the US's new international stature and the transformation of international communication and trade are not limited to the iconography of transportation. The conspicuous presence of a leg in *NY-P 1* evokes the sexualized role of modern women in popular entertainment, such as the flapper in the US or the dancers of the Folies Bergere in France; due to its abstraction from the body as an icon, it is particularly evocative of the use of ideals of sexual freedom in the mass culture of advertising and entertainment. To its right is depicted a package of Stud tobacco complete with an image of a rearing stallion; the masculinized and American tobacco packaging is clearly played off against the feminine leg as two intrinsic elements of the same increasingly internationalized culture. Laid on its side to the far right, the Chrysler Building is depicted as an abstracted priapic advertisement divorced from its urban context, much in the manner that many skyscrapers were designed to soar above their neighboring buildings as 'cathedrals of commerce.'[26] One wonders if it was Davis's intention to lay flaccid this symbol of capitalist prowess in the worsening economic climate of the early 1930s or if he had even further eroticized it by aiming it at the leg and topping it with swirls of clouds. Perhaps these interpretations are not mutually

[26] The phrase 'Cathedral of Commerce' was first applied to the Woolworth Building (Cass Gilbert, 1910-13) by Rev. S. Parkes Cadman at the building's opening ceremonies. This nickname referred both to the building's gothic stylings and its ability to soar above the city skyline as a symbol of Woolworth's capital just as Catholic cathedrals rose above their surroundings as beacons of God's kingdom. For a brief but informative discussion of this building, see Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl W. Condit, *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865-1913* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

exclusive and taken together in fact add to the complexity and playfulness of the associations conjured by these themes.

If the sexualized icons noted above can be taken as symbols of an emerging consumer culture that was transforming both sides of the Atlantic, even if America had clearly taken the lead, many of the other elements can be interpreted in terms of the substantial differences Davis found between his experiences of New York and Paris. The fishing boat in the lower left, a motif from Gloucester, although not particularly modern in comparison to the Chrysler Building, provides a clear contrast to the rowboat floating in front of the Paris café and beside what one presumes is a tarp covering some unknown objects. This latter form, due to its very illegibility conjures many associations, perhaps suggestive of Davis's interest in Surrealism; we can never know for certain what is hidden beneath this amorphous tarp, if it is read as a tarp at all and not a visual pun on a crumpled stocking, leading to further associations, even if not entirely logical.[27] The café itself is set against a blue structure representing an elevated train station; the modern engineering of a multi-layered New York is distinguished from the slow pace of a café. Further, the old gas light illuminating the street outside the café is contrasted to the electric light of New York.[28]

Of the three *New York-Paris* paintings, perhaps the only one to achieve any sense of spatial cohesion is *NY-P 2*. It is quite plausible to see in the *New York – Paris* series a transitional moment in Davis's development. *NY-P 1* and *NY-P 3* are best understood within the context of his more iconic 1920s paintings discussed earlier in this chapter.

[27] My colleague, Emily Gephart keenly pointed out the possibility of reading the tarp as a crumpled stocking.
[28] In case there might be any confusion, Davis connects each light to its respective city by color-coding each city with matching lights.

NY-P 2, although it does not display the spatial complexity of *Landscape with Drying Sails* of less than a year later (Fig. 2.4), clearly exhibits a move in that direction, pushing beyond the tentative employment of these strategies in his Paris pictures. In his mature paintings of the thirties, which I have been describing as experiential, form serves to spatially unify the various iconographic elements into a single yet complex experience that unfolds through spatial play and contradiction. The more spatially straightforward compositions of the twenties, often still-lifes updated through modernist form, convey less of the sense that painting is a process of ordering experience, which played such an important role in his understanding of art's progressive social function. *NY-P 2* represents the spatial (and iconographic) aspects of a world in motion and under the pressure of transformation; *NY-P 1* and *NY-P 3* represent the objects of experience, not the *process* of experience.

In *NY-P 2*, rather than representing the various motifs as abstracted icons, Davis brings them together in a singular, if disjointed, space. Because spaces merge and overlap, the iconographic juxtapositions are brought across more directly than in *NY-P 3*, for example, in which each element exists in its own pictorial realm. The juxtapositions of scale are brought together in a somewhat obtuse and suggestive manner, perhaps reminding one of his comments regarding the markedly different scales and spatial experiences of the two cities. Aspects of his personal experience culled from impressions and sketches of New York and Paris are brought together in a new experience that conveys the interconnectedness as well as uneven geographic development of the modern world. By bringing the experiences of Paris and New York together pictorially, the new experience produced by the painting is a hybrid one, one that stresses the growing

homogenization of place without covering up the persistent differences between the "United States" and France ("Hotel de France").

Davis's methods in this painting resemble those of *Drying Sails*, even if the level of spatial integration is not quite as high as in the latter image. What at one moment appears as sky above the Parisian housing slips into a flat plane representing a sidewalk that abuts the building depicted above right. The older housing topped with chimneys, a representation of Place des Vosges, is dwarfed by the platform of the New York el with its crossed steel trusses, probably no larger in actual size than the buildings below.[29] Although Place des Vosges represents in many regards the height of ordered symmetrical urban planning, Davis's evocation of this square suggests an almost haphazard and playful quality. The upper windows and chimneys, rather than declaring their regularity, better convey a syncopated rhythm; the colors are in constant transition – the shift between colors even being staggered between upper and lower registers of the buildings; the second-story balconies never rest firmly as positive or negative spaces. At Davis's hands, the regal order of a stately and symmetrical square becomes lively and offbeat, if quaint. It is a psychological effect of scale that he conveys as much as the delineation of physical differences in size between the places. The larger-than-life Parisian kiosk in the foreground, conspicuously marked by a series of figural and geometric glyphs and the word 'SUZE' as in reference to Picasso, cuts off the procession of housing with the light post serving as border between the two spaces. Examining the sketch (Fig. 3.12), one gets a better sense of some of the means that Davis used to organize this composition; faint

[29] It is possible to determine, based upon his previous paintings of Paris, that the housing is in fact a representation of a quite old square, the Place des Vosges in the 3rd Arrondissement (constructed 1605-1612). It was commissioned by King Henry IV and originally named the 'Place Royale.' As a park square bordered by streets and striking architecture, it provides ample opportunity for good views and the comfort to construct a careful drawing.

lines are drawn indicating the grouping of 'angular variations' and 'point relations.' Whereas in *Drying Sails* he included these vectors in the finished painting, defining planar relations on the canvas that cut across the dimensions of lived space to organize them on a canvas, in this image these lines fade from the finished painting, serving only to organize the relation between planes and lines, not to completely tie the urban spaces down to the planar logic of the canvas.

This modernist style is itself marked by the international crosscurrents that Davis evoked iconographically through the juxtaposition of New York and Paris. His style, whether characterized by the straightforward representation of modern icons or an Instrumentalist reinterpretation of Cubism, was to a large extent based upon lessons learned from European examples. These lessons were brought to bear on the American environment and transformed in the process. By the early thirties, his engagement with Parisian modernism had led some critics to accuse him of being un-American.

Henry McBride, for example, wrote a review of Davis in the spring of 1931 in which he criticized Davis for his heavy reliance upon European models. McBride considered abstract art a French invention and claimed Davis to have been young enough to absorb this language without much trouble: "He was young enough for it not to seem surprising to him. Like a child that is born in China and finds it easy to speak Chinese, Stuart Davis found it easy to think in terms of abstract art."[30] The full implications of such criticism become apparent in his use of a war analogy to explain this adoption of a foreign language; he referred to Davis as a 'good scout,' by which he meant someone who "gets up in the middle of the night and goes far off into the enemy country and

[30] McBride, "Stuart Davis Comes to Town," *New York Sun*, 4 April 1931, as reprinted in Diane Kelder, ed., *Stuart Davis* (Documentary Monographs in Modern Art; New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 191-2.

returns with useful information." Still, he was not so much opposed to learning from an 'enemy' language, as adopting it as one's own:

> I love scouts and approve of scouting, but somehow – deep down in my heart – I should have preferred Stuart Davis to have invented the kind of talk he now hands out. But we can't have everything, and, next to the invention of a language, there is the speaking it nicely – and that Stuart Davis surely does. He speaks it better than any other American I know of.

Faced with the apparent fact that there were many at the opening of the exhibition he was reviewing that clearly enjoyed Davis's paintings, he resisted the admission that Davis had in fact developed a language that could communicate to Americans and instead claimed, with a bit of truth, that these were "initiated people who also speak Chinese."[31]

Significantly, for all of McBride's lingering on the unfortunate foreignness of Davis's style, he simultaneously hedged, recognizing in it something that is 'typically American.' Davis apparently had developed a unique voice: "The pictures whether scoutwork or nonscout work, are certainly Stuart Davisy. In spite of all the Braques, Légers, and Juan Grises, that loom formidably in the No-Man's Land of Mount Parnassus, the Stuart Davis work is always easy to distinguish." One of the traits that he believed distinguished Davis's work was its 'humor:'

> It is healthy, wholesome and typically American fun. Braque and Picasso, the great leaders of the abstract movement, never make jokes; Miro's impulse is toward the fantastic and slightly macabre; Jean Hugo's is witty and drawingroomish, but also decadent. Stuart Davis is alone in giving you the hearty laughter of outdoors.[32]

In his inability to draw firm conclusions regarding Davis's credentials as an American painter, McBride is typical of many critics caught in these debates who at one time

[31] McBride, "Stuart Davis Comes to Town."
[32] McBride, "Stuart Davis Comes to Town." Although he recognized that the work of some Europeans might be humorous, he seems to denigrate their humor by claiming it to be 'witty,' that somehow it is overly clever and therefore elitist as opposed to Davis's more American 'hearty laughter.' As for his missing of Picasso's humor, this is rather puzzling.

castigate Davis for his strong ties to Parisian modernism and at another celebrate the typically American qualities of his paintings.

According to Davis, the influences of Parisian modernism in no way conflicted with the American tradition, which was itself international in origins. In 1930, about a year before McBride wrote the review discussed above, Davis was already taking issue with McBride's assessment of his art's foreign inspiration. He claimed that no American painter, including such notables as John Singleton Copley, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Thomas Eakins, had produced an art free of foreign influence: "Suppose a selected show of the painting of Europe and America for the last four hundred years were held, would the American contribution stand isolated as a distinct point of view, unrelated to the European? Again the answer is, no."[33] As time goes on, he explained, American art would not only not grow independent of European developments, but would in fact become increasingly similar. He was an American artist, he insisted, no less so for his foreign influences:

> In view of all this I insist that I am as American as any other American painter. I was born here as were my parents and their parents before, which fact makes me an American whether I want to be or not. While I admit the foreign influence I strongly deny speaking their language. If my work were an imitation I am sure it couldn't arouse in you that enthusiasm from which, you state in your review, the bridles were almost removed. Over here we are racially English-American, Irish-American, German-American, French, Italian, Russian or Jewish-American and artistically we are Rembrandt-American, Renoir-American and Picasso-American. But since we live here and paint here we are first of all, American.[34]

The America with which he presented the reader is a melting pot, a culture defined through-and-through by its hybridity, a nation in which racial and cultural essentialism

[33] Stuart Davis, "The Place of Abstract Painting in America (letter to Henry McBride)," *Creative Art* 6 (February 1930), as reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, 109.
[34] Davis, "The Place of Abstract Painting in America."

are more un-American than foreign influences. When the majority of Americans themselves are imported, why should American art not reflect these diverse origins and even make a virtue of it?

The implication of Davis's statements, however, is not only that the artist should make a virtue of America's role as a melting pot, but that somehow it is not even a choice. It is his adherence to a theory of experience with strong environmentalist implications that lies behind his defense of an internationalist position and leads him to criticize many nativists with similarly strong environmental inclinations. The American environment itself, he argued, was increasingly characterized by its international qualities. Perhaps even McBride unwittingly sensed this when he remarked that the 'initiated people' who understood Davis's paintings were possibly aided by the fact that these pictures: "had the new kind of elegance that is typical of the times we live in." For how would this new 'elegance' aid viewers in understanding a foreign language if it was not itself to some extent of foreign provenance? If the American environment itself is international, or at least marked by the effects of transnational migrations, then one's experiences would also be so marked. Even the experience of a pristine natural landscape could not be divorced from an international context. If one believes that past experiences play a role in shaping present ones, then anyone socialized in an environment shaped by international influences, such as immigration and global trade, would inevitably bring these past experiences to bear on current ones, even if that part of the environment with which one is interacting is itself not yet physically marked by internationalism. According to this logic, the production of an American art untainted by foreign influences

had not ever occurred, for it could not and would not ever be possible. He turned environmentalist arguments against the nativists in his defense of an international art.

For these reasons, Davis's transformation of the Cubist idiom represents far more than just an American vernacularization of Cubism, at least as this process is normally understood. It does involve the making of Cubism into an idiom relevant to American experience, but he conceived of this process as one of lifting it out of its adherence to still life and other props of academic art and introducing into it the flux of the environment. It is in this regard that he believed himself to have transformed Cubism, making it progressive by bringing it into contact with the most dynamic aspects of the environment. In his case, this resulted in an art of the American scene, an art based upon the transformation of American experience, itself understood in international terms. It would seem that he understood that despite his representation of Paris in the *New York-Paris* series, he did not need to represent the international scene literally in order to evoke this axis; it was already embedded in his form, as it was knowingly or not in the pictures of all American artists.

A central component of Davis's argument, as evidenced in his remarks regarding American artists being 'Picasso-American' and 'Rembrandt-American,' is the role that art itself plays as part of the environment that conditions future artistic production. The environment with which the artist interacts includes the paintings of other artists, many of whom are European. These paintings bear upon the artist's sense of order as it is applied to future experiences. This understanding of the important role that formal influence could play in the development of an art purportedly based on environmental influences can be linked to the intense search for American ancestors that grew ever stronger

throughout the interwar years. For example, Holger Cahill, we saw in the first chapter, was both a strong proponent of Dewey's Instrumentalism and an ardent advocate for American folk art. Of course, this issue begs the question of whether Davis at this point had a real understanding of the role that art plays in shaping the environment, that is, the extent to which even where examples of elite artistic production are not evident their influence on graphic design and other processes still is. Or, was Davis simply overestimating the importance of art as an environmental influence due to his own ghettoed experience of the world caused by his limited perspective from inside the art world? There is likely some truth to both explanations.[35]

Another crucial aspect of Davis's understanding of the internationalism of American experience related to the new technologies of communication and transportation that increasingly shaped modern life. We have already seen that technology played a central role in his paintings and in debates over the future shape of urban development. The America with which he presented the reader is interconnected to the rest of the world by modern technologies and defined by its hybridity:

> Since this is obviously true, why should an American artist today be expected to be oblivious to European thought when Europe is a hundred times closer to us than it ever was before? If a Scotchman is working on television do similarly interested American inventors avoid all information as to his methods? Not if they can help it. If a Norwegian has the most interesting theory of atomic physics do American scientists make a bonfire of his works on the campus? Hardly. If Darwin says that the species evolved, do American educators try to keep one hundred per cent Americans from hearing it? Yes, they do in Tennessee.[36]

[35] A student of Dewey, Laurence Buermeyer, who played an important role at the Barnes Foundation, described the manner in which past art plays a role in the shaping of future experiences. He also mentioned, as Davis did, how artistic form can function by 'analogy' to experience. Buermeyer, "Art as Creative," in Dewey, Barnes, et al, *Art and Education* (Barnes Foundation Press, 1929), 22-3.
[36] Davis, "The Place of Abstract Painting in America."

He extended his argument to suggest that not only were knowledge and experience becoming increasingly international due to the shrinking of the world by technology, but that art is also comparable to science and technology in the manner in which technical advances, such as those developed by the Cubists, are understood to have universal validity regardless of their geographic origin.

New York's role in immigrant life points to yet another aspect of Davis's view of the American environment as thoroughly international. At times he almost equated New York with America. While in certain respects his inability to see west beyond the Hudson River reflects a narrow New York attitude, for many immigrants this vision of America was all too precise. Although there were many intellectuals and artists who agreed with Frederick Jackson Turner that the frontier was the defining aspect of American culture, giving to it an almost mythological status, others realized that for most immigrants entering the US, New York provided more than just a gateway to the frontier; Manhattan's tenements, particularly those of the Lower East Side, also became a permanent home and site for the amalgamation of cultures. Regardless of whether this was Davis's articulated program, this type of belief in the city governed much work produced within its limits during these years, including his own.[37]

[37] Marlene Park, "City and Country in the 1930s: A Study of New Deal Murals in New York," *Art Journal* 39 (Fall 1979): 37-47, offers a compelling comparative analysis of murals in New York State and New York City that can offer insight into Davis's position. She finds that on the whole, murals produced within the city communicate a more international vision, whereas those produced in the rest of the state are more local in character. Furthermore, the city murals have a more future-oriented vision in which the past points towards a future and a greater openness towards abstraction, whereas the state murals are more bound to tradition.

The American Wave

Q. - ....Now tell me, Mr. Davis, is there any one outstanding event in your artistic life that has special significance for you?
A. - Yes. My trip to Europe in 1928.
Q. - What was its particular value?
A. - It enabled me to spike the disheartening rumor that there were hundreds of talented young modern artists in Paris who completely outclassed their American equivalents. It demonstrated to me that work being done here was comparable in every way with the best of the work over there by contemporary artists. It proved to me that one might go on working in New York without laboring under an impossible artistic handicap. It allowed me to observe the enormous vitality of the American atmosphere as compared to Europe and made me regard the necessity of working in New York as a positive advantage.
Q. - Well, that's something anyway. Now in view of what you've just said, am I to understand that you think America has a great artistic future?
A. - Of course! Not only a future but a present. We have the talent right now but could do with a trifle more support from the bleachers.[38]

These are questions and answers from a 'Self-Interview' performed by Davis in September of 1931. This excerpt begins with Davis explaining what he takes to be the most important event of his 'artistic life,' his trip to Paris. However, rather than doing as one might expect, celebrating the great artists with whom he had the opportunity to study, he explained that what he discovered was that New York had more 'vitality' than Paris and had artists of at least the same caliber. While he never sacrificed his internationalist position, these remarks demonstrate a marked effort to boost support for American artists, even at the expense of distorting his own real enthusiasm for Paris and its artists. America had come of age, not only socially and economically, but also artistically; it was no longer a province of Paris that needed to look to its foreign capital for artistic leadership and training. Still, the interviewer that Davis cast as his foil did not seem altogether

[38] Stuart Davis "Self-Interview," *Creative Art* 9, no. 3 (September 1931): 211.

convinced. “Well, that’s something anyway,” he stated, taking as his persona that of the critic skeptical of America’s artistic accomplishments who was nevertheless willing to admit that New York’s atmosphere was at least ‘something.’ Unconvinced by Davis’s praise for American artists, ‘he’ asked if Davis thought America had a real future, to which Davis replied that it had ‘not only a future but a present.’ Yet, despite its artistic maturation, he suggested, its artists still lacked recognition from the ‘bleachers,’ which is to say from the public.

Davis was going to have his requests met, it would seem, as this “Self-Interview” was one among many articles, books and exhibitions appearing in the fall of 1931 kicking off the ‘American Wave’ gallery season, as it came to be known in the press. During this season, the debates over questions of Americanism and national identity in art, although already building for at least a decade, surged to new levels. Davis’s publication of a self-interview devoted primarily to issues of national expression that autumn shows him to have been deeply engaged with the direction art world discussions were taking and to have found it important to have his voice heard. After outlining a strong internationalist position for himself in the previous few years, he reiterated that he was nonetheless an American. His simultaneous recognition of the international dimensions of modern art and strong support for American artists was not unique. The debates during this season were open-ended and diverse. Although the search for American roots and a uniquely American artistic expression predates the onset of the Depression, the 1931-32 ‘American Wave’ gallery season owes its timing, at least in part, to the economic collapse.[39] The search for a ‘usable past’ and the calling into question of urban and industrial ideals,

[39] On the timing of the American Wave season as well as a good overview see Baigell, “The Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ and the Depression,” in *Artist and Identity in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

although already prevalent during the twenties, flourished and came to play an increasingly central role in the definition of American identity in the thirties, in the context of which the internationalism and what many perceived to be the cultural and economic excesses of the twenties came under greater scrutiny.

The discourse on national identity that typified the thirties accentuated the almost sociological interest in the documentation of the American environment that had surfaced in the twenties. In particular, the problem of the possibility of a uniquely American identity caused quite a bit of controversy. Many internationalists argued that national boundaries were becoming increasingly less relevant to the formation of identity; others did claim to see a distinctively American identity taking shape. While there undoubtedly were politics behind this discourse, the majority of the debates were really more sociological in tone, having to do with finding tendencies, traditions and present realities more than with political ideologies. Only later in the thirties, in the context of the growing threat of fascism and war, did the political aspects of these debates grow in prominence. The largely sociological questions of the possibility and desirability of an American art became the more polemically political questions of the very future of the American way of life in the face of fascism and Communism. Yet, even as the political battles became increasingly bitter in the late thirties, the sociological and documentary impulses remained intact, even being institutionalized in such agencies as the Farm Security Administration and FAP's Index of American Design.

The pronounced role that Dewey's instrumentalist philosophy played in the thirties should come as no surprise. Art, he stated, incorporated aspects of past experiences into the present, using them as models by which to order future experiences.

This process did not necessarily entail a redemptive attitude towards the past, one in which past ideals could be recovered in the rebuilding of American manifest greatness, but it also did not foreclose such a possibility. In my brief examination of the art world reception of Dewey's Instrumentalism in the first chapter, I explained how Thomas Craven brought out the latent conservatism of these theories. I also discussed Holger Cahill's mobilization of Dewey's theories as head of the FAP and as an advocate for the folk art tradition. Dewey's explanation of the past's role in future experience and art's basis in the environment and common experience not only engaged clearly populist themes, but also framed them in a manner intellectually rigorous, dismissive of continental metaphysics, and open-ended enough to allow for diverse interpretations.

Dewey was surely not unaware of the growing art world discussions of national identity when at approximately this same moment he delivered the lectures that were to become the basis for *Art as Experience.*[40] For a noted philosopher and public intellectual to discuss art's relationship to common experience at a time when so many others were debating art's ties to the American environment, national identity, and international influences was no small matter. While ultimately unsympathetic to nationalism, his overall theoretical framework provided a means of defending arguments made by nationalists and internationalists alike. His own interest in art as a particularly effective embodiment of consummatory experience was based to a large extent on its ability to transcend barriers to communication where written and spoken language often could not:[41] "In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls

[40] Dewey was first invited in the spring of 1931 to give a series of lectures on the philosophy of art at Harvard University.
[41] Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 335.

that limit community of experience."[42] Although at times it seems that Dewey repeated clichés of the universality of the visual arts, that they could transcend any cultural barriers, at others he pointed to an approach to art that recognized the embeddedness of its forms in a cultural context. He sometimes explained that even if its borders were not national, the visual arts were nonetheless based upon a language (or languages) that was not innate, that had to be learned. These borders were often based, however, as much upon class and racial differences as national ones, the importance of which he often had difficulty fully articulating.

Edward Alden Jewell, chief art critic for the *New York Times*, neither a complete stranger to nor an ardent promoter of Dewey's theories,[43] was a vocal advocate for American art and played a significant role in these discussions by keeping the public well informed of the developments emerging in the struggle to define a national identity in art. His wide audience of readers, one that far outreached the circulation of any art magazine, makes his voice an important one in attempting to understand a movement with strong populist sentiments. Although his position was ultimately pro-Americanist, he attempted to play a mediating role in these divisive debates. The *New York Times* art pages became a lively forum covering the emerging American Scene movement and a hotbed for arguments over the viability of Americanist attitudes in the art world.

In October of 1931, Jewell wrote an article on what he perceived to be the coming American renaissance. He not only reiterated many of the central points he had already

[42] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 105.
[43] It is evident in reading Jewell's book *Modern Art: Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), that he too had an interest in art's relationship to experience and in the writings of Dewey, even if his direct citations of Dewey actually refer to Dewey's essays on individualism.

been making over the course of the past year, but also raised a host of other issues that were to be definitive of the debates on nativism in art throughout this season:

> With an unprecedented triumph freshly celebrated in Pittsburgh and with the opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art now not far distant, one feels little hesitation in calling this America's year. Certainly, with overwhelming emphasis, it has thus far proved an American season. …Has American art swept forward on the crest of a ferment so significant and so widespread as to justify use of the term 'renaissance,' encountered with greater and greater frequency? It begins, indeed, to look as if such were the case. In any event, opportunity has never before smiled with a welcome so cordial. Never before in behalf of native art has popular imagination been so fired.[44]

The growing nativist sentiment in the art world had caught the 'popular imagination.' Indeed, central to his argument was the fact that art had become separated from the people, a phenomenon associated by many critics with the excesses of French modernism. (Dewey, we have seen, although he did recognize the hermeticism of some modern art, did not blame the artists themselves but rather sought to understand the social structure that landed them in that position.) An attempt was being made on a grand scale, Jewell told his audience, to again create a courageous public art.

The opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art, as mentioned by Jewell, was an important landmark in the development of a support system and permanent venue for contemporary American artists. It also sparked an extended textual battle in the *New York Times*. The Whitney was not the first exhibition space devoted to American art, but it was, because of its size and resources, an important moment in the institutionalization of American art. Jewell took this occasion to reiterate what he deemed the important and still contested issues regarding the question of nationalism. He even indicated the political battle lines that at this moment were only beginning to be drawn:

[44] Jewell, "American Art Climbs the Bright Hill of Renaissance," *New York Times*, 25 October 1931, sec. 10, p. 12.

> The sociological angle has been much discussed of late. Who, for that matter, are Americans? What, come to think of it, is America? With this larger and even more baffling aspect in mind, when we speak of American art's being something unique and within reason homogeneous are we approaching it from a standpoint of nationalism or of race? If we allude to our art as a national asset, then we are pounced upon at once by internationalists and esthetic 'purists,' who call us 'patrioteers.' We wave the flag and make the eagle scream. If we try to be broader in our approach, esteeming it a matter of race expression, then we are called still worse and more confounding names. For what, if may not unreasonably be asked, is the American race? Has amalgamation of the legion ingredients as yet proceeded far enough to permit a definite race type to emerge? The puzzle grows more mocking as we dig into it.[45]

Jewell noted the near impossibility of these questions and yet devoted so much effort throughout the decade to puzzling through their answers, always trying to play the role of mediator between opposing sides. The sides, however, at least as he presented them here, do not leave open many options; the uniqueness of American art it would seem can only be defended from the standpoints of 'nationalism or of race.' This hardly seems a 'sociological angle,' at least not in the more complex terms I describe above. At times, it seems that he did not believe the U.S. to have yet arrived at a point in history at which a true internationalism would be possible, even if such a point may one day become a reality.[46] Jewell equivocates; one never quite knows where he stood. All in all, he did favor the development of some sort of a national art, yet he continually distanced himself from what he perceived to be the pitfalls of provincialism and nationalistic jingoism.

Samuel Kootz was more decisive. Although Jewell attempted to temper his nationalist sentiments, Kootz, in his pointedly titled article "America Uber Alles," saw

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[45] Jewell, "The Whitney Museum of American Art Opens This Week, What is American Art? : On the Eve of So Important an Event, We Pry Discreetly Into This Problem," *New York Times*, 15 November 1931, sec. 10, p. 14.

[46] He stated: "More and more as time goes on, as civilizations advance, nations tend to be drawn into a brotherhood envisioned of old, but only now beginning to be realized in any practical way. Modern devices of intercommunication bind the peoples of the earth ever closer and closer together." Jewell, "The Whitney Museum of American Art Opens."

through Jewell's wavering and admonished him for his nationalist support of homegrown art. Although Kootz's accusations are in many respects correct, Jewell was not the most ardent or naïve proponent of artistic nativism, just one of its more visible ones.

> In magazines, newspapers, galleries and museums the new phrase 'America über Alles' arrogantly lifts its head, in constant and monotonous exaltation of modern American painting. It is sponsored by chauvinistic persons who gleefully disparage the contributions of the School of Paris, and in none too mild a fashion exalt home products. Also, with customary American distaste for materialism, the matter is placed upon the high level its sponsors desire in the use of the revealing slogan: 'Buy American Pictures First.'[47]

When French and American artists produce both good and bad pictures, it made no sense, according to Kootz, to purchase only those produced by American artists, as some suggested. Both should be bought and enjoyed equally, and certainly the bad pictures did not need to be revered just because they were 'Made in the USA.' In certain respects, this argument echoed that made by Davis (cited above), that American artists are very much deserving of public support, but that this support should not result in an exclusionary attitude towards European art. Yet, despite the actual availability of quality American art, Kootz complained, there was not much to be found at the opening of the Whitney.

With the publication of this article, an extended debate opened that persisted as a separate column in the Sunday *New York Times* for the coming couple of months over the viability of a distinctively American art. The positions of the contributors varied greatly. While some stressed the importance of native subjects and style, others criticized the search for native expression, stressing the diverse origins of the American people and the fact that many works at the Whitney Museum did in fact exhibit an undeniable sympathy

[47] Samuel M. Kootz, "'America Uber Alles': Critic Rises to Admonish Our 'Renaissance' – Urges: 'Let's Forget Premature Circus'," *New York Times*, 20 December 1931, sec. 10, p. 11.

to French art.[48] Where the nativists and internationalists often found common ground was in their recognition that Americans were simply not buying enough American art, as Davis had pointed to in his 'Self-Interview.' A number of contributors focused on the importance of the representation of the American scene, while others explained that the representation of the American scene itself was not enough without the development of a native style.[49] Elisabeth Luther Cary, a regular contributor to the *New York Times*, took a position that was not entirely nationalist or internationalist; like Davis, she claimed that America itself was thoroughly international:

> As to our own case, we have always to remember that our nationalism is internationalism and that our style never will be entirely American until we have fused into one expression of our time and place in the world the characteristics of many races. If we dig in our own garden we are digging in every one's garden.[50]

She argued that to be an American artist in full awareness of the American environment was to recognize the international dimensions of life. In searching for an American expression, the artist needed to begin by realizing that America was a melting pot that could unite the characteristics of many cultures and races.

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[48] Thomas Donnelly offered one of the early letters, which expressed the latter view: "We are receiving a lot of unasked-for advice and criticism these days. Some tell us to be Indians, others to be Mexicans, and still others ask us to look to the various amateur artists of the last few centuries, who are being brought forward as our 'ancestors.' We are not and never have been a primitive people. We are all transplanted Europeans with centuries of European culture behind us, somewhere. Wyndham Lewis once said, in an article about American art, that America was simply a Europe that had decided to lower all barriers, intermarry and speak one language." "What is American Art?: A Readers' Forum of Opinion – Replying to Last Sunday's Diatribe by Mr. Kootz" *New York Times*, 27 December 1931, sec. 8, p. 12.

[49] I discuss the problems of the American scene in more depth in the following chapter. Gale Turnbull, focusing on the question of the American scene, insisted that: "The belief that all that is necessary to establish a national school is to paint the native scene – as seems to be the thought behind the manifestoes of some of these super-patriots - is naive in the extreme.… To say that a red barn in Woodstock painted by an American, but in the manner of Picasso, is American and representative of America is ridiculous and dishonest.… It is nothing but an imitation Picasso.… Ladies and gentlemen of the press, we will have an American school, not because we desire it, but when we have painters who are individual and new in style, with something of the newness and individuality of America in their work, no matter what they paint, nor where, and despite red barns and subway trains." "The Art Forum" *New York Times*, 21 February 1932, sec. 8, p. 10.

[50] Elisabeth Luther Cary, "The Problem of Internationalism – Ecole de Paris vs. the French School – The Sprightly English – We Cultivate Our Garden" *New York Times*, 21 February 1932, sec. 8, p. 11.

The Whitney Museum continued to play an important role in these discussions. After sparking the above debate simply by opening its doors, it held a symposium in conjunction with the New School for Social Research, "Nationalism in Art – Is It an Advantage?", to discuss these issues further.[51] The *Art Digest*, an important outlet for Americanist sentiment, printed the artists' arguments at length over the course of two issues.[52] Maurice Sterne and Joseph Pollet argued for the negative, Richard Lahey and William Zorach argued for the affirmative, and a jury of four judges voted three to one "that the champions of nationalism had won."[53] Lahey and Zorach both noted the universality of artistic expression, but also contended that for a healthy art to develop it must first have native roots. Furthermore, Zorach's admission that foreign influences were not necessarily harmful, as long as not overwhelming, surely helped repel charges of xenophobism. The crux of Pollet's argument against the nationalists was that the elements through which art communicates – including line, color and space – have no nationality. The stripping down of art to its barest formal elements, while it had its adherents, was becoming increasingly unpopular, and the related contention that formal elements could not be discussed in terms of their national character ran against the grain of much contemporary criticism.[54] In retrospect, Sterne made the most interesting case, not because of the forcefulness of his argument, but because of its very irresolution. His

[51] It has been difficult to find information on this symposium. Although it received significant press coverage, the Whitney has no records of it. A librarian did relay information about the concurrent exhibition at the Whitney, "Exhibition of the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers" (6-28 Feb 1932). Lahey was the secretary of the organization; Sterne and Pollet exhibited; William Zorach was on the council and Margarette Zorach exhibited; Davis exhibited *House and Street* (1931), to be discussed at length in the next chapter; and Thomas Benton exhibited *Ozark Musicians*.
[52] "The Debate," *Art Digest* 6, no. 12 (15 March 1932): 15, 21-22 and *Art Digest* 6, no. 13 (1 April 1932): 15-16, 21, 28-29. Jewel too, not surprisingly, devoted to it significant space in the *New York Times*. Jewell, "In the Realm of Art: Should Art Be National?: Debate at Whitney Results in Affirmative Victory – Well-Known Artists Argue," *New York Times*, 28 February 1932, sec. 8, p. 10.
[53] "The Debate," *Art Digest* 6, no. 12 (15 March 1932): 15.
[54] More convincingly, Pollet argued that the best art was international in so far as isolation was not beneficial for the health of art.

paper, aside from damaging the internationalist position, highlighted the contradictions that were endemic to these discussions.[55]

No one was as divisive in these debates over national expression as Thomas Craven. His chauvinistic polemics negatively tainted the reception of the artists he supported as much as helping them sell paintings, acquire commissions and gain wider recognition. Near the conclusion of his 1931 book *Men of Art*, he stated his anti-elitist position toward the art market:

> Among the younger painters there is plenty of talent worth mentioning, but more important than talent is the growing desire to throw off the European yoke, to rebel against the little groups of merchants and esoteric idealists who control the fashions and markets in American art, and who maintain little stables of thoroughbred artists just as the sporting millionaires deal in thoroughbred horses.[56]

These statements may seem quite reasonable and perceptive, in many respects ringing as true about the 1930s art world as the contemporary one. However, he was also prone to outrageous broadsides against what he perceived to be the eccentricities of urbanites and their art. His encouragement of an art with roots in the American environment was strongly biased in favor of the Midwest, which he celebrated for its relationship to the American frontier. The frontier, as described by Frederick Jackson Turner, was an almost mythical phenomenon that was believed to be at the heart of homegrown democracy. Furthermore, even in the excerpt cited above, it is all too easy to overlook the process of

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[55] While Sterne stated at the outset that art was and had always been international, even universal, he also declared that its content is of local interest. Furthermore, he *encouraged* the development of a national art, so long as it did not become provincial. What are most perplexing are his claims about 'race.' Racial issues would seem to play right into the hands of the internationalist position that he was defending, given the diverse origins of the US people. Counterintuitively, he argued that a new race was in fact evolving out of the American 'melting pot' and observed its expression of a 'true American flavor.'

[56] Thomas Craven, *Men of Art*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 512-13. While it is difficult to determine precisely to whom Craven was referring, he could have been referring to Stieglitz for example as an 'esoteric idealist' although the latter was a supporter of American art, or perhaps Craven had in mind one of the more international galleries such as the Daniel Gallery or the Anderson Galleries.

equating the 'European yoke' with 'merchants and esoteric idealists,' as if the latter were always of foreign origin and the Americans were always clear-headed pragmatists. It was the xenophobic conservatism that ran through even his more progressive beliefs that eventually prevailed as his public voice. Recognizing the continued European influence on America, he dismissed it. The last line of the book reads: "Certainly we have profited little by the culture of Western Europe."[57]

Some of the most interesting and perceptive comments on these issues come from Holger Cahill. Throughout the decade, Cahill maintained an openness toward these debates, perhaps in part due to his politicized role as head of the Federal Art Project, even as many others became increasingly factionalized over the political implications of their positions. Among his numerous publications, he contributed to a book bearing the stamp of these years called *America as Americans See It* (1932).[58] He aptly characterized the growing fervor over American art:

> America is filled with talk and writing about an American renaissance. The critics fill the reviews with articles about it, the gallery goers are crowding to the American exhibitions, the collectors and the museums are patronizing American art with almost as much enthusiasm as they patronized the School of Paris a few years ago. The American public seems to feel that American painting and sculpture have been stepchildren in their own home long enough and that it is high time they be given their rightful place in the family. Whether or not we are to have an American renaissance it is certain that we now have a renaissance of public interest in American art.[59]

Whereas Davis and others had called on the public to turn an eye toward American art, Cahill observed that the development of the public interest that facilitates the healthy growth of a national art had in fact taken place. He was less confident, however, of the

[57] Craven, *Men of Art*, 513.
[58] Cahill, "American Art Today," in Fred Ringel, *America as Americans See It* (New York: Literary Guild, 1932).
[59] Cahill, "American Art Today," 244.

extent to which this art would be a uniquely American expression, both because of the diversity of American experience and the continued debt that American art owed to the European tradition.

In a catalogue published for the Museum of Modern Art in the same year surveying the development of American art since 1862, Cahill took his understanding of the relationship of modern art to tradition a step further. As opposed to the avant-garde notion that it was the role of modern art to overturn tradition, he argued that the modernists had brought tradition back into contemporary practice: "…there can be no doubt that the modernists have exerted a powerful and vitalizing influence upon contemporary American art. They have given American painting and sculpture a wider range of knowledge and a broader basis in tradition."[60] What Cahill recognized is that modern art had become dependent upon its own tradition, that art was increasingly based upon the reworking and updating of previous forms. In the process of finding ever new means of reevaluating tradition, artists often looked to 'Oriental and primitive art' as models. Cahill's ideas could only have developed alongside a maturing art-historical discourse that itself located the meaning of art in its internal development. Within the context of his overall project, it becomes clear that this mining of tradition alone could not serve as the basis upon which to produce an experientially based art. Therefore, although he appreciated the lessons of this period of experimentation and historical self-consciousness, he was equally pleased see it pass, allowing a new art to develop with a firm basis not only in tradition but also in the experiences of the American environment.

[60] Holger Cahill, in Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862-1932* (1932; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), 22.

The American Wave gallery season marked an important moment in the escalation and transformation of art world debates about national identity. Consumer culture and Parisian modernism, so important to the understanding of national identity in the twenties, became increasingly contested terrain during the Depression. Similarly, the iconic evocation of national identity that so marked the art of the twenties increasingly gave way to other alternatives in the thirties, including Davis's more experientially based practice. His *New York-Paris* series, as discussed above, resides on the edge of this transformation. As for his contributions to the American Wave gallery season, they did not end with his "Self-Interview" of September 1931 but became even more pronounced when in the winter of 1932 an exhibition was held at the Downtown Gallery titled "Stuart Davis's American Scene," to be discussed in the following chapter.

Internationalism Beyond the *New York-Paris* Series, At a Glance

Davis's *New York-Paris* series is his most unmistakable painterly statement of his internationalist position within these debates over native expression. Even where less explicit, though, his internationalism is implied in the form of his art. As stated above, he did not need to illustrate the New York-Paris axis in order to evoke it in his paintings. Much of his production in the 1930s was devoted to the representation of the American scene, but even in these more 'native' subjects, he employed a style that was based to a large extent upon a formal model developed in France that he believed was the most capable of representing modern experience in all of its international dimensions.

Landscape with Drying Sails represents a Gloucester harbor in Davis's characteristic 1930s style. He utilized this formal vocabulary to pictorially reorder the

experience of the original subject, and in so doing create a new experience, constructed through a language that brought the internationalism of modern experience to bear on this seemingly native subject. Reality itself, according to Davis, is analogous to experience in that it refers not only to the objective world but also to the participation in that world of a human subject. As human subjectivity is itself constructed in an environment marked by international influences, from French paintings to Italian immigrants to German musical recordings, one's reality too is international, as is the experience that is conveyed through a painting, the language of which is conditioned by all of these international influences.

Most of Davis's paintings from the later thirties, such as *Waterfront Landscape* (Fig. 2.6), employ this same basic aesthetic strategy, despite having been produced after his turn to Marxism. This recognition of the overriding continuity of Davis's practice has formed the foundation for this dissertation. In order to comprehend the internationalism and progressive potential signified by his artistic form, it is not sufficient to identify his position within 1930s Marxist discourse; one must recognize that he developed a mature style and conceptualization of that style prior to his engagement with Marxism. Despite the increasingly politicization and Marxification of Davis's internationalist rhetoric in the context of the struggle against fascism, to be discussed below, his artistic signification of his internationalist position remained relatively consistent.

There are instances in which Davis's Marxist politics find a clearer iconographic expression. *Artists Against War and Fascism* (1936, Fig. 3.13) is a clear example. A violent scene includes soldiers, an injured man, what could possibly be an interrogation lamp, barbed wire, a canon and a trampled down sign reading freedom. In illustrating this brutal scene, Davis runs the risk of contradicting his own aesthetic, which is an

embodiment of the potential for change that often takes the progressive aspects of the environment as its subject matter. He comes close to merely aestheticizing barbarity. In other images, he displays his increasing interest in working-class life. *The Terminal* (1937, Fig. 3.14), for example, represents workers performing their duties on a waterfront. This illustrative reference to working-class labor although complex and formally rich is more literal in its approach than some of his more typical references to working class locales in the thirties.[61] These more illustrative paintings remain exceptions within his practice.

The Internationalist Counteroffensive to Fascism

Many of the intellectual issues that were debated during the twenties and early thirties by philosophers, urban sociologists, artists and critics assumed even greater urgency, if in somewhat altered form, as the Depression deepened and the threat of fascism grew more imposing.[62] The New York-Moscow axis became the other international axis to which Davis's career was attached and that earned him opponents among ardent nationalists, many of whom claimed that not only was his style imported from France, but that his politics were imported from Europe and the Soviet Union. What had for the most part been cast as a sociological and aesthetic question regarding the possibility of an American expression based upon the realities of the American environment became a deeply contested political choice over the future of the American way of life. While

[61] This issue is more fully explored in the following chapter.
[62] John Dewey's influence continued to expand, even as he was forced to share the stage, not only with figures such as Walter Lippmann, but also with the specter of Karl Marx on his left and the enormously popular Franklin Roosevelt on his right, to mention only a couple of the numerous figures dominating political conversations in the thirties. Some of these other figures included: the left-wing Trotskyists, the Socialists under Norman Thomas, right wing demagogues such as Father Coughlin, Huey Long and the Liberty Leaguers, and independent leftists such as Upton Sinclair.

Davis still claimed a basis for his internationalist position in the characteristics of the American environment, he also increasingly stressed that there was an inevitable choice to be made between nationalist fascism and the internationalism of democracy and modern art. While this story moves us beyond the realm of the direct influence of Instrumentalism on Davis's practice as a painter, it is nonetheless an important coda to the history described above that needs to be sketched in.

The relatively even-tempered, if still critical, discussions of the character of American experience of earlier years became increasingly contested and volatile. In particular, artists such as the Regionalists, who celebrated local customs and traditions with a nationalist flavor, became the target of leftist artists and critics. Where nativist artists had previously been criticized by internationalists in large part for misunderstanding the environment, their practice came increasingly to be portrayed as in an alliance, wittingly or not, with the forces of fascist reaction.

A victor emerged in the series of debates that had been mounting since the First World War over nationalism in the arts. The internationalist position for which Davis fought so hard gained ground as the press began to stress ever more strongly the importance of international political alliances and the dangers of xenophobism. But this was a new form of internationalism; it was a new nationalism. Although many artists remained steadfast internationalists, skeptical of any form of nationalism, a new nationalism was nonetheless growing that co-opted their rhetoric of international cooperation for often zealous and selfish ends. Many on the left, in particular the Communist left, for their part willingly played into nationalist sentiment for the practical realities of building alliances. And modernist art, so long stigmatized for its

internationalist associations, gained increasing critical prestige, even if the reasons for this cannot be located solely within the growing acceptance of internationalism within the political sphere.

An important moment in this history is the formation of the Popular Front against fascism in 1935. Although the fight against fascism predated the formation of the Popular Front (it was a significant aspect of Third Period Communism), this date does mark the formation of an important provisional alliance and signifies a more general cultural shift on the left, one that shows clear evidence in Davis's own activities and rhetoric, even if not within his artistic practice.[63] The change in CPUSA policy establishing the Popular Front, declared at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International (1935), involved an abandonment of the sectarianism that characterized Third Period policy toward the Democratic Party. Sectarianism was by no means over (one need look no further than the debates between Trotskyists and Communists and even lingering animosity toward the Democrats), but FDR was offered cautious support. To facilitate this maneuver the struggle of socialism against capitalism was replaced with that between democracy and fascism. Among other things, this policy entailed an acknowledgement of the latent possibilities of the American democratic tradition; bourgeois democracy was portrayed as a progressive stepping-stone to socialist democracy.

In forging this broad alliance, the CPUSA willingly played into nationalist sentiment, all the while retaining its ultimate internationalist and socialist goals, a delicate balancing act. Earl Browder, General Secretary of the CPUSA, often declared:

[63] The Third Period was declared in 1928 at the Communist Commintern and ran until the declaration of the Popular Front. For more specifics on its place within the development of Communist Party politics see Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). For a discussion of its impact on the art world, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

"Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism." On one occasion, he stated: "Eighteen years ago was born the Communist Party, the Party destined to carry on and complete the work begun by Tom Paine, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln."[64] He emphasized the revolutionary tradition of the U.S. not only as part of its democratic history extending back to its war of independence but also as central to its current prospects. Communist internationalism was portrayed as patriotic.[65]

Davis played a key institutional role in the art world's contribution to Popular Front culture. He served as executive secretary and then national chairman of the American Artists' Congress, a high profile artists' organization devoted to the defeat of fascism. Although ostensibly non-partisan, its existence had origins in meetings held within the more sectarian John Reed Clubs and its activities remained under the strong

[64] Browder, *The People's Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 235.

[65] Much of the material relating to the Popular Front has already been stated in great detail elsewhere. Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, presents a valuable account of the formation of the Popular Front. He keenly describes the balancing act the Party played between supporting FDR and its own ultimate agenda. Following the formation of the Popular Front, the Party announced the formation of a new Farmer-Labor Party meant to unite the industrial working class with the large American agrarian working class to which the Party had little previous contact. He describes the 1936 presidential election: "This farrago defied understanding. The Party was for the defeat of Landon but not for the election of Roosevelt. It wanted to use Roosevelt to defeat Landon but to prevent Roosevelt from defeating a Farmer-Labor movement. And, on top of all this, it asked voters to support the Communist ticket in order to endorse a Soviet government and socialism while criticizing Norman Thomas for making the election issue socialism versus capitalism,"192.
For a discussion of the influence of the CPUSA on US culture, see Lawrence Schwartz, *Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s* (San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 1980).
Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, focuses on the Party's influence on the art world from 1926-1956.
A solid history of Popular Front culture that limits the influence of the CPUSA without overlooking its undeniable importance is Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997). According to Denning, the Popular Front, broadly understood, encouraged the formation of a working-class culture in the U.S. beginning in the mid-thirties and lasting through the 1940s. In playing down the story of the Popular Front as a tactical compromise between liberals and Communists and stressing the important role played by independent leftists, he foregrounds the diversity and inclusiveness of this culture as well as its longevity. While this approach has real strengths, it minimizes important discontinuities in this culture, notably the break that occurred between 1939 and 1940 over Soviet policies, a break that had a tremendous impact on many in the art world, including Davis.
Also see *The United Front Against War and Fascism: Speeches Delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International by Georgi Dimitroff* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1935). This is a foundational document in the establishment of the Popular Front.

influence of Communists and fellow-travelers.[66] The fight against fascism allowed a bloc to form around a popular internationalist position, bringing together a broad coalition of left-leaning artists of diverse aesthetic alignments. Strategically, this was a brilliant maneuver – regardless of whether it was precipitated by a group of committed artists or the shifting tactics of Party hierarchy – that illustrates the manner in which power can be shifted through concerted action, a process involving tactical adjustments at all geographic levels: from international Communism, to national party politics, to local art world alliances.[67]

As secretary, Davis explained the reasons for the formation of the Congress, including most notably the pressing concern that economic, political, and other extra-artistic matters were becoming for artists: "In order to withstand the severe shock of the crisis, artists have had to seek a new grip on reality…. Increasing expression of social problems of the day in the new American art makes it clear that in times such as we are

[66] For a good history of the Congress, see Garnett McCoy, "The Rise and Fall of the American Artists' Congress," *Prospects* 13, (1988): 325-340. Also see introduction, Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

[67] Perhaps the most striking difference between earlier organizations and the Congress was the latter's goal of 'preservation' regarding the existing culture. Although many of its members were Communists and fellow travelers who sought radical change, the organization itself called for an international and interpolitical alliance for the preservation of existing bourgeois democracies. This policy did not foreclose upon an eventual proletarian revolution, but it did allow non-aligned artists of standing to contribute to the common cause of defeating fascism. Practically speaking, many artists in the Congress including Davis, although they had aligned themselves with the Popular Front, retained their earlier proletarian, anti-Democratic Party attitudes in a kind of messy balance with the new, more inclusive position that they were attempting to forge. Davis's voice is paradigmatic in a number of ways of the reaction of many CP aligned artists to the Popular Front. He eventually came on board with fervor although it took some time for him to shed his proletarian, anti-New Deal positions.
The Congress also unambiguously embodied the tactical shift enacted by the Party's shift to a Popular Front policy in that its solicitation of membership can be viewed as a direct affront to the proletarianism of such organizations as the John Reed Clubs and the Artists' Union. Whereas the Union stressed its proletarianism and sought to organize artists of almost any standing as workers to fight for the right to a fair wage and control of their own professional destiny, the organizers of the Congress stated the goal of this organization to unite artists 'of recognized standing,' who presumably could lend greater visibility and credibility to its program. The Congress certainly did not seek to contradict the Union's agenda and did even manage to bring aspects of its activist program to a broader audience through the featuring of lectures at its first national meeting covering its accomplishments and future plans.

living in, few artists can honestly remain aloof, wrapped up in studio problems."[68] It had become clear that progress and internationalism were not the inevitable outcome of greater communication and immigration. Davis repeatedly stressed the urgency of the efforts to forge an alliance against the forces of reaction, claiming that the threat of fascism was not merely a foreign one, but also loomed large at home where nationalist and reactionary sentiment was enticing many as an elixir for the problems of the political and economic crisis.[69] In his text for the 'Second Annual Exhibition' of the Congress (held 5-21 May 1938), he discussed the importance of culture in a manner that clearly reflects the doctrinal changes that had taken place; he discussed the role of the artist not so much as a revolutionary agent in the transformation of society, as one engaged in the "preservation and development of democracy in culture."[70] Under the threat of fascism, the most important task was not revolution but the preservation of any gains that had already been made.

The Congress did remain under considerable Communist influence despite its nominal non-sectarianism. This led to a serious crisis in 1940 that left the organization far less influential and eventually led to its dissolution a few years later. Many members in the late 1930s continued to insist that it support Soviet policies as an ally in the fight against fascism even as evidence mounted that the Soviet Union was guilty of at least the same order of repression and brutality as that perpetrated by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The factors leading to the political dissolution of the Popular Front have been stated by others: they include increasing knowledge of the Moscow Trials – including the

[68] Davis, "Introduction," delivered at First American Artists Congress, *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 65-6.
[69] Davis, "Introduction," *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 68.
[70] Davis, text to "Second Annual Exhibition," 1938 in *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 293.

perception that Trotsky among many others had been wrongly convicted, the signing in October 1939 of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-aggression Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and the final blow, the Soviet invasion of Finland which led to an full-blown political crisis.[71] Davis attempted to skirt the growing divisions among the left-wing of the Congress by stressing its non-partisan stance and redirecting attention to more broadly cultural issues. These attempts failed, however, and in January of 1940, a dissident group led by Meyer Schapiro raised a number of probing questions regarding the politics and proposed neutrality of the Congress.[72] Following difficult proceedings with little productive resolution, Davis resigned his post.[73] While this was not the official end of the Congress, it rendered the organization far less influential because many of its

[71] The Dewey Commission, headed by John Dewey, had found Trotsky innocent of the crimes of which he was convicted. After the Commission published its results, Davis and Paul Strand, among others, published a defense of the Trials in the *New Masses* on 3 May 1938. However, a letter published in the *Daily Worker* on 14 August 1939 denying the identity of Russian and totalitarian states, although signed by many of the same people, was not signed by Davis, although this should not necessarily be read to indicate that Davis had lost faith in Marxist politics. See McCoy, "Rise and Fall of the American Artists' Congress."

[72] Seventeen members including Schapiro, Lewis Mumford, Mark Rothko, Gottlieb, George Biddle, and Milton Avery, signed a petition to be taken up at the Central Executive Board Meeting on 28 March. "17 Members Bolt Artists' Congress: Charge Organization Backs Stalinist 'Line' and Can 'Only Damage' Free Art," *New York Times*, 17 April 1940, p. 25. This letter declared that the Congress no longer deserved the support of its members because it had become a partisan puppet of a group of Stalinists. They complained in particular of its support for the invasion of Finland at its last meeting on 4 April, and its implicit support for Hitler's position on the war in so far as it blamed England and France for the start of the war. The other major complaint of this dissenting group was that the Congress had revised its policy regarding its boycott of Fascist and Nazi exhibitions.

[73] According to McCoy, "Davis, whom the press grouped with the other dissidents, took pains to dissociate himself from their views, insisting on the precise wording of his statement." 338. Shortly thereafter Davis bitterly renounced his ties to Marxism. On 11 March 1940, Stuart Davis Papers, he stated: "Marxism is fallacious because it defines a human economy which excludes spiritual values. It does this by regarding spiritual values as non-material products or overtones of physical labor. To Marxism all art is an illusion which masks the rotten nature of the base it rests on. In other words what we regard as art is not beautiful at all, but ugly. Real art can only exist in future society. What rot. and what escapism – what snobbery – what impudence – and what undervaluation of man in this philosophy which says to each historical epoch, 'your culture is a mere reflection of your limitations', According to this vulgar philosophy all of mans good times were a mere illusion, and mans power to <u>think</u> a better world is denied because his thought is a mere reflection of his environment. Marxism is a complete denial of the reality of spirit. Spirit is an emotional and ideological coordination or chord which is an instrument of motion and a director of action. Marxism sees only the material forces which impinge on spirit and fails to regard spirit as one of these material forces." Thereafter, he also began to equate Hitler with Stalin. Nevertheless, he had learned the lessons of Marxism, as is apparent in his institutional critiques of the art world and remained critical of both internationalism and capitalism, if not so outspokenly so of the latter.

high profile members had resigned and it lost its non-sectarian appeal. Nevertheless, it had already made a real impact on artistic discourse. Despite the intentions of many of its radical members, as an anti-nationalist defense of US democracy it represents one moment in a more general realignment of nationalist ideology toward an internationalism that was more productive in the maintenance of political equilibrium.

Edward Alden Jewell recognized the growing force behind the internationalist position. In 1939, he published *Have We an American Art?*, indicating that this question still persisted.[74] After a decade of championing the formation of an American idiom or at least a set of common aesthetic principles, he was forced to conclude that an American art had not yet coalesced into anything coherent and that continued support for the nationalist rhetoric of the earlier 1930s was becoming increasingly difficult. Still, he was careful to maintain a distance from the internationalists. While he called off the search for an American art, he did so not because it was not what he desired, but because he did not want to support what he believed was, or at least would become, a discredited mission. Perhaps it was for these reasons that he expressed these issues and their political implications most forthrightly by quoting others, letters from readers: "While nations war and prepare for war and politically tend to become more nationalistic, the world of art (I hope) travels a different road and tends to become more universal, approaching finally the expression of a common human experience."[75] Another letter reads:

> Our modern civilization is an international civilization. The modern artist must ignore petty loyalties and conceive of himself as a part of one (or an interpreter of one or both) of the international systems of political thought that will eventually dominate the earth: one leading to nationalism and

[74] Jewell, *Have We an American Art?* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1939). According to Jewell, the substance of this book is similar to a series of six articles from *NYTimes* in Summer of 1938 and also an article in *Parnassus.*
[75] Jewell, *Have We an American Art?*, 128-9.

> thus barbarism and international conflict in the cause of nationalistic supremacy; the other to some form of international collectivism....We must accept the fact that we as a nation were born too late for the development of an 'American art', and that the world of today opens the way to a new art and to a new school: the international school.[76]

Jewell would not have been willing to make such a statement, of course, but it seems almost as if he needed to make it anyway by way of proxy. He also would certainly not agree with the limited political choices on offer: fascism or communism ('international collectivism').[77]

Within a few years an internationalist discourse had begun to emerge that was to a large extent based upon the gains made by internationalists during previous decades but brought the added force of the changed political context to their arguments. Samuel Kootz's 1943 book *New Frontiers in American Painting* (discussed in reference to the reception of Davis's 'new realism' in the previous chapter) is a clear example of that which increasingly came to replace the Americanism debates of the 1930s. Kootz stated at the beginning of his book that the Second World War was one of ideas, the ideas of democracy and fascism, and that the U.S. entry into that war dealt a great blow to the artistic nationalism of the 1930s. In addition to historicizing and thereby neutralizing nationalist sentiment by relating it to the threat of economic and class instabilities, he explained that the nationalistic painters of the 1930s "never really captured America" anyway.[78] Recognizing the US's increasingly prominent and influential position in political as well as artistic concerns, he proscribed an art that he believed would not further enflame hatred and the war spirit: "Today, in war, we have a new kind of realism,

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[76] Jewell, *Have We an American Art?*, 129-30.
[77] The letters he chose to reprint also brought up other themes that have by now become familiar and that infused his entire book, thereby adding legitimacy to his own claims; these topics include: communication, experience and public life.
[78] Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting* (New York: Hastings House, 1943), 14.

an inward spiritual searching, a reaching for new forms, new dissonances, mergers of impressions on all subjects – an international art of movement, universal, democratic in its inference." He continued: "Our revolt against conservatism, against reaction, has made our painters part of a world movement to perpetuate liberal democracy – and to go forward in social thinking so that we may destroy forever the margins of poverty heretofore existent in that world."[79] What Kootz called for was an art relevant to modern democracy, an art that turned away from the empirically based realisms of the 1930s in favor of what he saw as the internationalism of modernist form; he prophesied, no doubt with the help of keen observation, a realism based upon subjects that are 'spiritual' or even psychological. It is more than a little ironic that although Kootz chastises Benton's art for doing what might better be handled by the Office of War Information (OWI), he looks to artists to become "part of a world movement to perpetuate liberal democracy," and surely he had in mind democracy based upon the U.S. model. The OWI could not have said it better. Although Kootz distanced himself from the nationalist rhetoric of the 1930s, he failed to fully understand that he was implicated in the propagation of a new internationalist patriotism that proudly placed the U.S. at the reigns of the world artistically and politically.[80]

Upon the publication of Kootz's book, Peyton Boswell published an article panning it in *Art Digest*.[81] He claimed that Kootz, besides talking down to readers and revealing the true inconsequence of modernist art, did not in fact offer any new ideas, but rather the same staid arguments of the 1920s about America and Paris. While Boswell did

[79] Kootz, *New Frontiers*, 6.
[80] Kootz stated: "We happen to be, geographically, the art center of the world today. War, devastation, brutality have forced artists to discontinue their work in other countries." *New Frontiers*, 5.
[81] Peyton Boswell, "Old Frontiers," *Art Digest* 17, no. 15 (1 May 1943): 3. The *Art Digest* of course, along with Boswell, had been a supporter of nationalism in the arts for more than a decade by this time.

not recognize, or at least admit to having recognized, that significant changes in the political context and the logic used to defend the arguments of the internationalists had taken place, he did realize the fact that the ideological link between internationalism and modernist art that was so central to 1920s discourse remained in place. Kootz retorted in the next issue of the *Art Digest*, turning Boswell's nationalist argument back on itself through a strategic turn of logic. He argued that F.D.R. had already urged citizens to let go of strongly nationalistic sentiments in favor of a more international perspective. Therefore, to argue in favor of artistic nationalism is to oppose American interests and the leaders of the U.S. government; it was tantamount to being un-American.[82]

The publication of this book was not the first, nor even one of the most pronounced, of Kootz's interventions in art critical discourse. In the summer 1941, roughly a decade after he inflamed debate during the American Wave season with the publication of his article "America Uber Alles," he sparked debate again within the pages of the *New York Times*. Jewell, in introducing Kootz's letter, explained that what he had to say was going to cause controversy, particularly among artists. "Under present circumstances," Kootz stated, "the probability is that the future of painting lies in America. The pitiful fact is, however, that we offer little better than geographical title to the position of the world's headquarters for art." He did not find much at all to be positive about in surveying the best America had to offer artistically; in fact he referred to his findings after a decade of gallery-going as 'depressing.' "My report is sad. I have not discovered one bright, white hope. I have not seen one painter veer from his established course. I have not seen one attempt to experiment, to realize a new method of painting." Within the next few years, of course, he would find such painters, the future Abstract

[82] Peyton Boswell, "Mr. Kootz Explains" *Art Digest* 17, no. 16 (15 May 1943): 3.

Expressionists, who would define the nucleus of his activities as a gallery owner and promoter of American art. He explained that he had had enough of Depression era art defined by subject matter; in his critique of some of these artists, he resembles Davis who also respected the political and social interests of the Social Realists, for example, but found their style to be incommensurately conservative and affirmative of the status-quo. As for established modernists, although Kootz respected their accomplishments, he felt that they had come to rest on past successes ("Isn't it time right now to check whether what you're saying is regurgitation…") rather than continuing with their experimentation. He concluded: "Galleries need fresh talent, new ideas. Money can be heard crinkling throughout the land. And all you have to do, boys and girls, is get a new approach, do some delving for a change. God knows you've had a long rest."[83]

Jewell was correct; many artists were incensed by Kootz's provocations. Davis, in a letter to the editor, responded to Kootz's demand for more experimentation by claiming that the market and the institutional support system for art would not support it. In certain respects, he was right; the money that Kootz had heard 'crinkling' continued to circulate for quite a few more years before it found its way to Kootz or the artists whom he would come to support. Although Davis had by this point cut his tethers to Marxism, he had retained many of its analytical tools. His letter is an incisive critique of the institutional apparatus that had come into existence to govern the production, distribution and interpretation of contemporary art. Although Davis exhibited some real knowledge of how these processes worked, he did overstate the case at times, turning the artist into a helpless pawn. He probably overfunctionalized the artists' role, despite his earlier

[83] Kootz letter quoted in Jewell, "The Problem of 'Seeing:' Vitally Important Matter of Approach – American Artist and His Public," *New York Times*, 10 August 1941, sec. 10, p. 7.

admonishments against this, because of his own recent disappointments with the organizations upon which he had worked so hard and in order to strengthen his argument against Kootz that artists alone could not change the face of artistic production. I quote at length:

> The 'manager,' as it refers to art, consists of that vast hierarchical superstructure that makes its living, or enhances its prestige, on the work of the artist. This group, because of its ownership of all the important channels of art distribution, both economic and educational, constitutes a real monopoly in culture.
>
> Specifically, the monopoly includes the cultural foundations, art museums, art dealers, art collectors, critics and writers of books on art, art magazines and national magazines that run art features, government art projects, college art departments, etc. The power of this group to dictate art policy and standards is enormous, and the artist has no voice whatever in its decisions.
>
> With this in mind, I think it is a bit unrealistic of Mr. Kootz to demand more will-power and guts from our artists without distributing a few gross of blackjacks at the same time. The panzer divisions of monopoly subsidized professors, 'authorities,' both American and refugee, academic scholars, casual cataloguers, chiseling collectors and just plain, ordinary commercial exploiters, make a formidable enemy to oppose with will-power alone.
>
> The slogan of our untalented and monotonous monopoly is: 'More Buck-Eyes, more anecdotes (both surrealist and country style), more Pan-Americana, etc.' I would be interested in knowing whether Mr. Kootz would agree with me on the mere possibility of a connection between our monopoly's taste and the fog with the unpleasant odor that seems to hover over American art. It may simply be the cultural halitosis of our monopoly.[84]

One wonders whether Davis was familiar with Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" of two years earlier.[85] Despite their differences over the ultimate meaning of abstract art – and they are significant, they both relate degraded culture (Greenberg called it Kitsch; Davis said 'Buck-Eyes,' a term Greenberg also used at times) to totalitarian control of the arts (not only does Davis discuss the institutional control of art in

[84] Davis, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, 12 October 1941, sec. 10, p. 9.
[85] *Partisan Review*, Fall 1939, reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

functionalist terms but he refers to its 'panzer divisions,' a reference to German tank warfare). They both recognize, in a sense, what Greenberg termed the 'umbilical cord of gold' that tethered seemingly independent artistic production to its patronage. Fundamentally, of course, Davis would not have supported Greenberg's elitist position regarding the role of avant-garde art as a means of evading kitsch, but instead sought to utilize formally advanced techniques in the production of a popular art of common experience.

Despite Davis's cynicism towards the art world, much of his organizational activity during the thirties was aimed at the transformation of the very institutions that he understood to be constricting artistic freedom. It is perhaps the perceived failure of such institutions as the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress, both of which were clearly by this point not going to survive as institutional embodiments of the artists' interests, that so disillusioned Davis. However, as I described, the American Artists' Congress did have a transformative effect as part of a broader social project in providing the necessary context for the development of an internationalist ideology, an ideology that legitimated the arguments he had been making since the twenties, but on political rather than experiential grounds. Therefore, although the transformation was not complete, the art world was shifting away from the climate of the nationalist thirties towards a new internationalist ideology that could support the modernist art that was often culturally tethered to internationalism.

Although internationalism and modernist art did eventually prevail in the mainstream art world, the radical intentions of many of their proponents often did not. The critical climate obviously went through enormous changes in the early 1940s.

Internationalism, previously the rallying cry of both the Communist and modernist vanguards, became the American way of liberal-democracy. This is not to suggest that many artists did not retain subversive intentions for their art and did not still conceive of internationalism in these terms, but that the shifting political hegemony, continuously responding to pressures by functionalizing them, kept these intentions repressed in favor of more politically neutralized meanings. Internationalism became a part of the dominant discourse but only by containing those meanings that stretched hegemony too far. The radical intent that marked much of the internationalism of the 1930s became the lubricant for a new and more economically and politically productive form of nationalism. Abstract art, as the antithesis of fascist and Communist realism, was often perceived as a progressive art form with internationalist credentials to boot.

It would be wrong however to absolve Davis of any culpability in the transformation of the ideology of modernist internationalism into a new nationalism. Davis's abstract paintings of the American scene were often, quite literally, red, white and blue. This is as true of *Landscape with Drying Sails* as it is of *Waterfront Landscape*, despite the few yellow accents in the latter image. While his choice of colors could have been governed by his preference for crisp, unmodulated hues, the fact remains that these colors do appear perhaps more than any others. What are perhaps most striking and noteworthy, despite their almost singular appearance in his notebooks, are a series of comments about the national character of his art:

> How American art looks to French and English critics – It does not have anything in it which is new to Europe.
> An American picture taken to Europe should have the following characteristics to be really American
>
> Large in size
> Red, White, & Blue color

> Strong, musical, design
> For example, many of my pictures of Gloucester have excellent and clear proportion and space, but it is weakened by lack of color unity and irrelevant descriptive detail.
> It is now necessary that every picture I make – mural, easel, or graphic, – be unmistakenly American and free of any ambiguity in the 3dim. unity.[86]

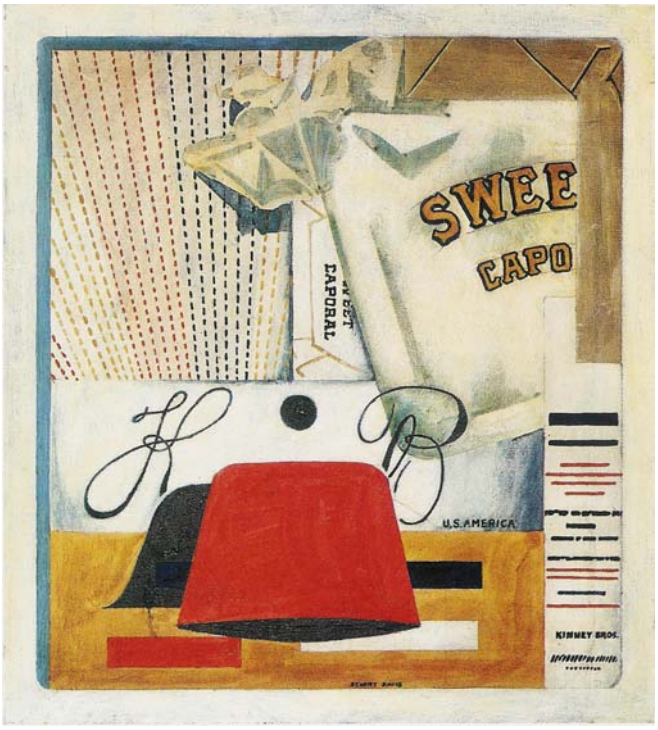
Aside from the fact that these comments are not typical within his writings, there could be no clearer statement of intent to relate his modernist and internationalist style to the quest for a national expression. The following day, still concerned with similar issues, he expressed the lingering sense of inferiority that marked the attitudes of so many modernist artists of his generation in relation to their French peers: "Be liked by French artists. Because French art represents the best in modern development in art. If they liked it proof of its excellence would be established." American art, according to Davis, still needed to be approved by the French to gain any legitimacy. He did not want to win French support by producing French art, however: "Be distinctly American. Because as an American I am familiar with the American environment and want my work to appeal to other Americans. It would also result in sales." The production of a modernist art that was at the same time resolutely American would not only appeal to the US public – as opposed to Benton's version of American art one presumes, but would also be commercially expedient. Continuing this discussion about the relationship of the form of his art and its reception, he stated: "Be large in size. So that it will be physically dominant in any group exhibition."[87] One wonders what exhibition he had in mind; given the context, one could speculate that he wanted his work to dominate an international exhibition, with large, clear, red, white and blue expressions of American experience.

[86] Stuart Davis Papers, 24 July 1938.
[87] Stuart Davis Papers, 25 July 1938.

Siegfried's warning about US arrogance in international affairs, discussed earlier, describes well the world order as it has increasingly developed. The international situation that developed, although evident enough in the 1920s for Siegfried to have described its origins, began to find its ideological counterpart during the Popular Front struggle against fascism and especially the Second World War. Whereas following the First World War, the US had gained a powerful economic and cultural position – even if not yet solidified within the realm of elite cultural production, by the Second World War the new internationalist ideology began to match the realities of the economic situation and New York took the reigns of the art world. There are of course many other factors that came into play that are too complex to explain here, including the often over-emphasized importance of the presence of exiled European artists. What was needed was a group of artists who could signify specifically American ideals on a global stage through an international modernist language, but that unlike Davis's art would not be read as derivative. But this is another story, one involving Jackson Pollock, Willem deKooning, Clement Greenberg, and Harold Rosenberg, among others.[88]

[88] See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) for the story of New York's rise to preeminence in the art world. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993) has offered an excellent study of the manner in which the concerns expressed by New York School artists resonated throughout the broader culture. For an analysis of the continued subversive ideals of many of these artists see David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

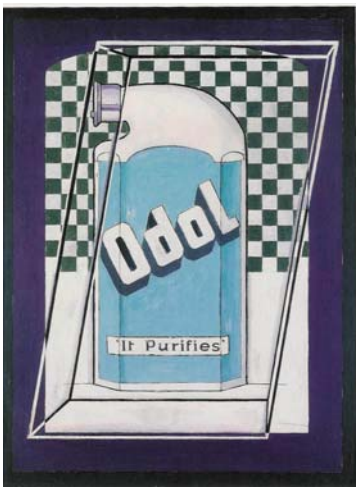
3.1. Davis, *Lucky Strike*, 1921.



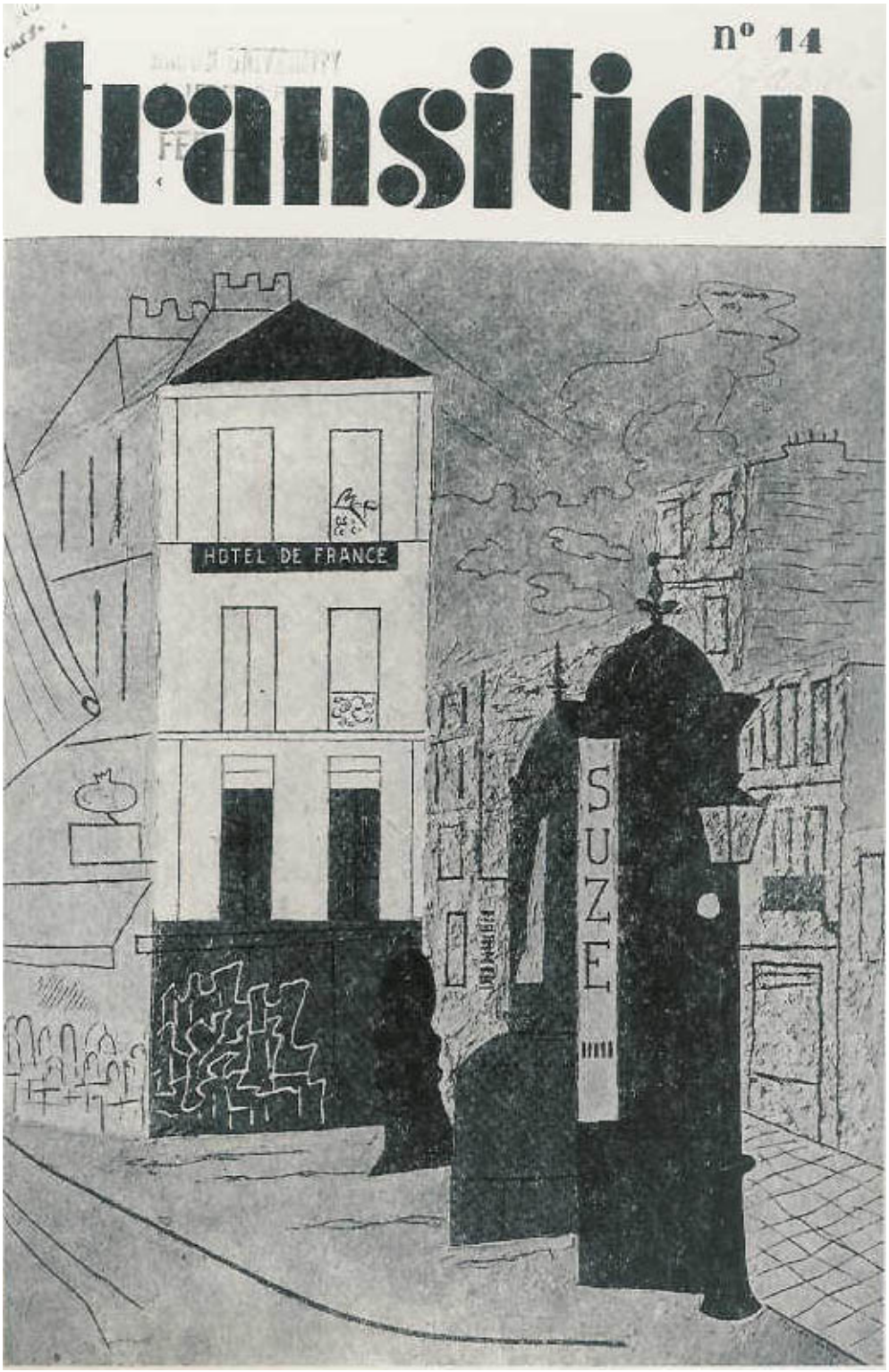
3.2. Davis, *Sweet Caporal*, 1922.

3.3. *Electric Bulb*, 1924.

3.4. Davis, *Odol*, 1924.

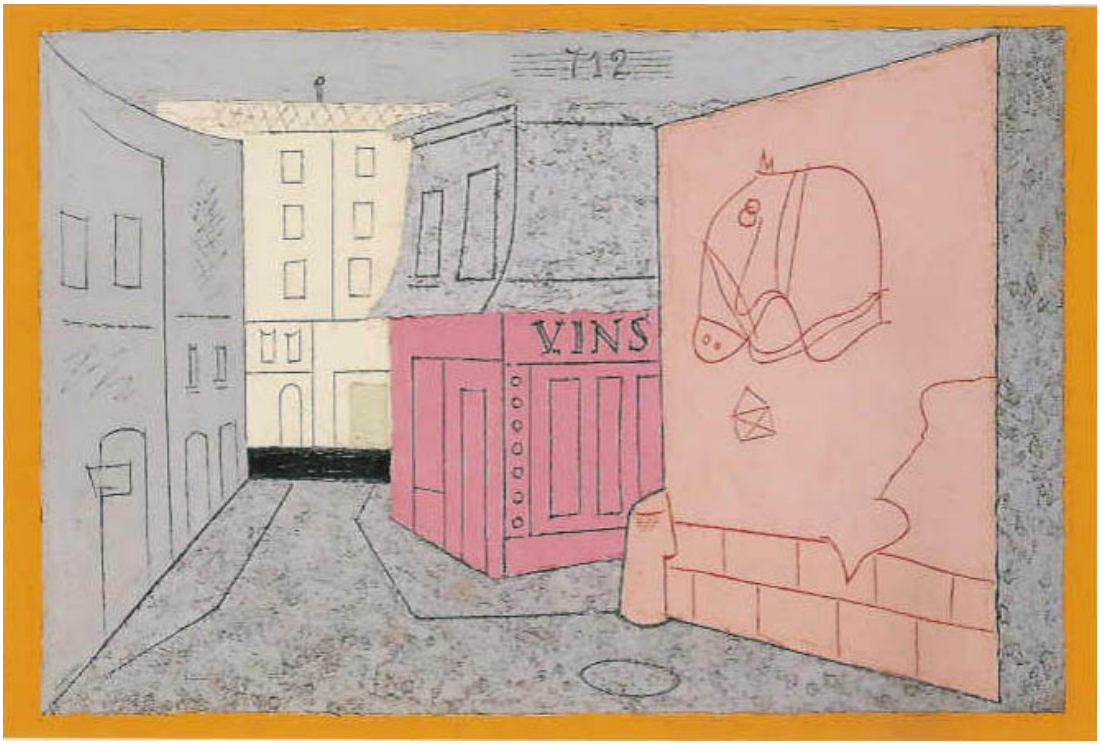


3.5. Davis, *Odol*, 1924.



3.6. Davis painting as reproduced on the cover of *transition*, 1928..

3.7. Davis, *Place des Vosges No. 2*, 1928.

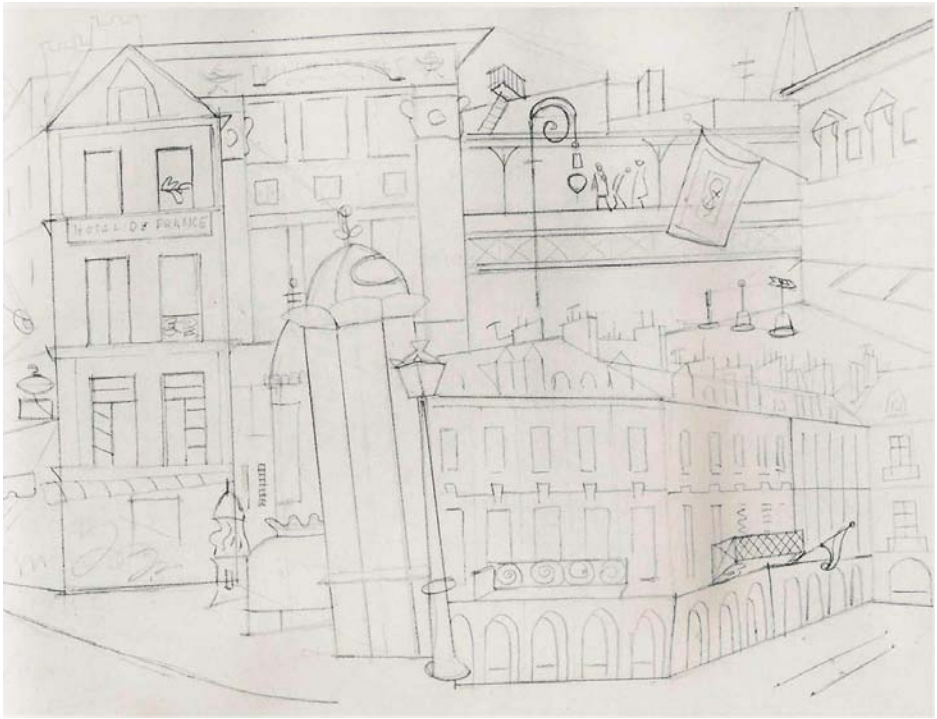


3.8. Davis, *Rue des Rats No. 2*, 1928.

3.9. Davis, *New York-Paris No. 1*, 1931.

3.10. Davis, *New York-Paris No. 3*, 1931.

3.11. Davis, *New York-Paris No. 2*, 1931.



3.12. Davis, sketch for *New York-Paris No. 2*, 1931.

3.13. Davis, *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 1936.

3.14. Davis, *The Terminal*, 1937.

Chapter Four

Stuart Davis's American Scene
The Stylistic and Iconographic Struggle over National Identity

In the previous chapter, I examined how Davis proposed his international style as the most apt expression of American identity. In this chapter, I focus on his engagement with American scene painting and the more local meanings of his style and iconography. Davis's involvement with the American Scene movement is complex; he was at once amongst the strongest critics of its most acclaimed practitioners and an artist who claimed that his own paintings are based upon his experiences of the American scene.

After briefly considering the inclusiveness of discussions of American scene painting in the early thirties, I analyze a 1932 exhibition of Davis's work that presented his art as representative of the 'American Scene.' I explore the relationship between his iconography, his formal idiom and the critical reception of this exhibition. I then examine the bitter exchanges between Davis and Thomas Benton at mid-decade within the context of their shared interest in 'common experience.' I conclude with a brief analysis of Davis's *Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors – Seventh Avenue Style* of 1940 to demonstrate the trajectory that his engagement with the American scene took into the forties and beyond.

Staging Davis's American Scene

During the American Wave season, during which Davis's "American Scene" exhibition was held, the 'American scene' had yet to congeal into the signifier capable of referring to the relatively stable set of artistic practices that it was to become. Understood within

this context, the choice to display Davis's paintings under this banner was not as peculiar a maneuver as it may seem today. If anything defines American scene painting, as it existed at this moment, it is its pluralism. As discussed in the previous chapter, the attempt to narrowly define national identity was virtually impossible and inevitably met with opposition. Many critics celebrated this diversity as itself representative of the American scene. It seemed that if a picture was to be produced at this moment that could evoke national identity, it would be a composite one.

In a 1932 essay, Holger Cahill clearly expressed this sense of expansiveness:

> Contemporary American prints are rich in social content, and give a fresh and vital interpretation of life as it is lived in this country today. Every aspect of the American scene is reflected, the cities with their architectural gigantism, skyscrapers, gasoline tanks, subways, the great harbors of the Atlantic seaboard, home interiors of every social class, prairie farms, mountaineer cabins, the factories, the mines, the wheat fields, sports, politics, contemporary types, and a hundred other subjects.[1]

His description of the American scene placed virtually no limitations upon its thematic expression. He did nonetheless organize the relevant artists into two broad categories. The first group, he explained, were less concerned with "realism as such" than with presenting their "interpretation of the American scene in highly personal idioms." This group could be broadly characterized as modernist and includes, among others: Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, Preston Dickinson, Niles Spencer, Stefan Hirsch, Peter Blume, George Ault, and Stuart Davis.[2] The other group includes artists "who preserve for us moments of our history." He discussed John Sloan and Glenn Coleman, friends and mentors of Davis, as leaders of this group, which also includes Edward Hopper, Charles

[1] Cahill, "American Art Today," in Fred J. Ringell, *America as Americans See It* (New York: Literary Guild, 1932), 262.
[2] Many historians today would recognize this group, with the possible exceptions of Blume and Davis, as Precisionists who engaged the American scene but were not necessarily 'American Scene painters.'

Burchfield, Reginald Marsh, Rockwell Kent, Boardman Robinson, John Steuart Curry and Thomas Benton. These are the artists, with some exceptions, that eventually came to be identified with the American scene. Cahill's essay suggests that they had already gained a certain group coherence, but it is also clear that he did not want to see the expression of the American scene limited to their visions.[3]

By the time of the American Wave season, Benton had arrived at a mature style, was receiving increasing press coverage, and had completed two significant mural commissions, one for the newly opened Whitney Museum of American Art and the other for the New School for Social Research (Fig. 4.1). While he was already a central figure in this growing discourse, he had not yet become the artist-laureate of the movement. Even Craven, Benton's greatest supporter, still harbored reservations in 1931, noting his 'nervous' and even 'annoying' style.[4] Still, Craven also placed great hope in him as a harbinger of future greatness. He compared Benton's development to that of the Mexican muralists, a group of artists that were often discussed as precedent for the formation of a homegrown, socially engaged art.

[3] Other examples of the diversity of this discourse could be cited. For example, an exhibition was held in the fall of 1931 at the Brownell-Lamberston Galleries called 'The New York Scene.' Its title suggests its affinity with American scene painting, while simultaneously claiming its specificity. The *Art Digest* noted the diversity of subjects upon its opening. 'Seeing Itself," *Art Digest* 6, no. 2 (15 October 1931): 12. In returning to this exhibition to reprint excerpts of its reception, it placed these texts on the same page as those from a John Steuart Curry exhibition; interestingly, the New York paintings were a greater critical success. "New York Season" *Art Digest* (1 November 1931): 19. Edward Alden Jewell was among the critics cited by the *Art Digest* to have reviewed this exhibition: "Fifty-four artists assist in creating a mosaic impression of the modern metropolis. They explore, each in his own fashion, numerous aspects, some very familiar ones, some not to be glimpsed on every street corner. Inevitable variety - taking into consideration the divers personalities that contribute - is cousined by frequent instances of imagination admirably released in paint." The stylistic diversity of these artists, according to Jewell, was in keeping with their subject matter: "In fact, there are extremes of many sorts, and all this is sufficiently as it should be, always bearing in mind the exhibition's title." Jewell, "Theme Exhibition Opens," *New York Times*, 14 October 1931, p. 32.

[4] Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 511.

The Mexican muralists had a tremendous impact on discussions of the character of American art. They portrayed the modern environment in a manner that was accessible yet innovative, basing their styles not only within the tradition of Western art but also in indigenous forms. Their Marxist politics mattered less to many critics than their successful development of a style both modern and native. Not only did the conservative Craven praise their art – estimating it above that of Benton, but Rivera received several major commissions in the US including those from Ford and Rockefeller and a retrospective at MoMA in the fall of 1931, at the height of the 'American Wave.'[5]

An interesting comparison can be drawn between a selection of Davis's paintings from the late 1920s and the work of the more mainstream American Scene painter Grant Wood that illuminates what may have been a shared attitude between these seemingly very different artists. They both expressed an ironic and humorous, if not necessarily parodic, understanding of painting's relationship to historical narrative.[6] In Wood's *Daughters of the Revolution* (Fig. 4.2, 1932), for example, three stoical women stand out starkly against the bombastic heroism conveyed by Leutze's painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware, before which reproduction they stand. Other paintings are subtler; in *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* (Fig. 4.3, 1931), Wood depicted a

[5] Rockefeller destroyed Rivera's mural before it was completed, pointing to the fact that although Rivera could receive commissions from powerful capitalists, he could also antagonize their sensibilities. Jewell, among others, favorably reviewed the MoMA exhibition, raising the expected issues, ranging from the art's native roots to his representation of modern Mexico. "An Impressive Exhibition," *New York Times*, 22 December 1931, p. 28 and again "In the Realm of Art: Rivera at Museum of Modern Art, An Artist Sees Mexico and 'Finds Himself With a Bang' – Search For Tradition Roots – Rivera's 'Phrases'" *New York Times*, 27 December 1931, sec. 8, p. 12. Davis's view of Rivera was ambivalent at best. While he was sympathetic to Rivera's politics, he was critical of what he perceived to be Rivera's staid naturalism.

[6] While this group of Davis's paintings is relatively consistent within itself, it represents only a portion of his full output from this period, which was quite diverse. On Wood's irony and humor see James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) and Wanda Corn, "The Birth of a National Icon: Grant Wood's *American Gothic*," in Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy, *Reading American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

moment in history represented in such a way as to denote its mediation, its constructedness; the artificiality of the lighting, the fisheye view, and model-railroad-style trees and houses indicate as much. This mediation of history is clearest is *Parson Weems' Fable* (Fig. 4.4, 1939). The narrator pulls back a curtain to reveal the over-stylized historical scene, calling attention to its status as myth; the image of George Washington's fully-developed head atop the body of a child provokes myriad interpretive complexities concerning the construction of history and the unity of the human subject.

Davis's *Early American Landscape* (Fig. 4.5, 1925) has an artificial affectation not unlike some of Wood's paintings. Possibly, Davis had the similar intention of offering a friendly dig at common notions of history. Each element is detached from the rest of the composition, depicted almost as if to resemble a prop from a stage-set. The two charming Gloucester fishing-industry buildings in the background serve as backdrop and the boat as a picturesque icon of simple beauty and communion with the sea. The colors are uncharacteristically pleasant and muted in the context of his broader practice. The soft curves and artificiality of the trees frame the view and lead to the inevitable question of whether the artist is framing a view of already framed history as false image. This is the *Early American Landscape* of New England that many surely believed it to have been; the differences between his own vision and the often clichéd Gloucester paintings of many other artists may not have been far from his mind. His painting *Myopic Vista* (Fig. 4.6, 1925) raises similar questions, in particular what it means for a vista to be 'myopic.'[7] *Town Square* (Fig. 4.7, 1925-6) and *New England Street* (Fig. 4.8, 1929)

[7] Davis stated in 1941: "If the sewer backs up in his studio, for example, the artist's muse may well be affronted, and if he continues work on his masterpiece, 'Myopic Vista,' in spite of this, it is no doubt true that in a sense he is 'fleeing from reality.'" While this statement could well be read as unrelated to the specifics of the actual painting discussed, his reference to a particular painting, and this painting, is quite

provide yet further examples of this possibly ironic engagement with the American scene. It is difficult to ascertain in *New England Street* if Davis is attempting to work through a geometry similar to that which crystallized a couple of years later in his *Egg Beater* series (Figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3), or if he is painting a scene from Cape Ann as if it were a stage set; perhaps these are not mutually exclusive readings. Nevertheless, by the thirties Davis's American scene was far less ironic, if still at times humorous.

In February 1932, an exhibition was held at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery in Greenwich Village: "The American Scene: Recent Paintings, New York and Gloucester by Stuart Davis." This exhibition was clearly staged as a contribution to the American Wave gallery season. The Downtown Gallery had a history since 1926, when it first opened as Our Gallery, of exhibiting art by living Americans.[8] Like Davis, many of the artists Halpert represented developed a style that was resolutely modern and yet representational and distinguishable from its European sources.[9] The Downtown Gallery expanded twice during the early thirties. In 1930 the Daylight Gallery was constructed in the rear garden, and in 1931 the American Folk Art Gallery opened upstairs. The purpose

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revealing about the dry humor that may have originally been intended. "Abstract Art in the American Scene," *Parnassus* 13, no. 3 (March 1941): 100.

[8] In the fall of 1926, Halpert along with her two partners, Samuel Halpert (her husband) and Berthe Kroll, opened Our Gallery (soon to become Downtown Gallery). It was by no means the only gallery showing living American artists between the wars, but it did distinguish itself from these other venues. The ACA Gallery, for example, was run by Herman Baron with the intention of supporting contemporary American art, in particular that which conveyed strong social and political meanings; it became a locus of activities for leftist and social realist artists in the thirties. The artists from the Downtown Gallery, with some exceptions, kept their art independent of their political activism, which is not to say that they did not see political implications in their practice, just that they did not want to use their art to illustrate a political viewpoint. Alfred Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery, which opened in 1925, and the galleries of Montross and Daniel also showed leading contemporary American art. Additionally, there were museums showing American art: the Whitney Museum of American Art and before it the Whitney Studio Club and the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art which opened in 1924. For more information on the gallery, see Diane Tepfer, "Edith Gregor Halpert and the Downtown Gallery: 1926-1940; A Study in American Art Patronage" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1989).

[9] Among the other artists shown at the Downtown Gallery, some more consistently than others, were Alexander Brook, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Charles Sheeler, Niles Spencer, William Zorach, George Ault, Peter Blume, Stefan Hirsch, Walt Kuhn, Pop Hart, Samuel Halpert, Joseph Pollet, and Abraham Walkowitz.

of the Daylight Gallery, according to Halpert, was to exhibit works of art in the best possible conditions and to emphasize how modern art could be integrated into modern architecture. The American Folk Art Gallery opened just in time for the American Wave season. By displaying contemporary American art downstairs and objects from the 'usable past' upstairs, an implicit connection was established that could aid in the development of a native tradition for contemporary art. If there should be any doubt regarding this relationship, Holger Cahill's close involvement as an aid to Halpert in getting the Folk Art Gallery under way is evidence enough to the contrary.[10]

Halpert supported the formation of her own brand of American scene painting. This is evident not only in the artists she chose to represent but also in her presentation of their work to the public. Her emphasis on the resonances between Davis's paintings and the burgeoning American Scene movement was in no way unique within her practice. Even as those artists Craven supported, including Thomas Benton, Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, became more entrenched in the art world, she continued to promote her own vision of the American scene. In March 1935, she exhibited fourteen paintings by as many artists including Davis.[11] The *Art Digest* took the hint and appropriately titled its review: "Mrs. Halpert's 'American Scene' Differs from Mid-Western School."[12] The reviewer cited Halpert's intentions: "Officially, however, the exhibition has no title. But it was selected, according to Mrs. Halpert, to show that 'life in New York City, our

[10] On Cahill's involvement with the American Folk Art Gallery, see Tepfer, 48. Among other things, this gallery exhibited Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican art. Probably due to his friendship with Cahill and his trips to the Downtown Gallery, Davis drew a series of Mesoamerican motifs in his notebooks in 1933. While he did not incorporate such motifs into his art in any sustained manner, his passing interest in this art is noteworthy; these were charged subjects in debates over native expression. One painting, *American Waterfront Analogical Emblem*, does include these motifs, combining a reference to a sculpture of the winged serpent with other subjects that are defined most of all by their sheer diversity.
[11] Other artists shown in this exhibition included Alexander Brook, Ernest Fiene, Bernanrd Karfiol, Yasuo Kuniyoski, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, Niles Spencer, and Marguerite Zorach.
[12] *Art Digest* 9, no, 12 (15 March 1935): 10.

national art center, and the close study of all the great art traditions, have created a broad universal language rather than an expression of limited provincialism.'" The *Art Digest* perceived her implicit challenge.

Halpert's press release for Davis's 'American Scene' exhibition presented his art so that its engagement with the American Scene would be beyond question:

> With the present accent placed on American art, and particularly on the American scene, it is of especial interest to find so personal an interpretation of the popular subject, as is to be seen in the work of Stuart Davis. …By his unique combination of unrelated, but realistically painted objects, he removes the subject from the realm of the commonplace and gives a spirit of adventure to the American scene.[13]

Strikingly, the release stressed both his 'realistically painted' 'familiar object[s]' and his 'inventiveness' and 'sense of abstract design.' It might seem that Davis was being marketed to two publics, one interested in 'familiar' realities and the other in modernist form and the unfamiliar. While there is some truth to this statement, it is probable that Halpert did not see these publics as so far apart, or at least it was her intention to bring them together through the artists she was promoting. Davis himself, as discussed in the second chapter, understood his modernist idiom as facilitating rather than denying art's ability to communicate common experience.

Edward Alden Jewell's review for the *New York Times* illustrates this tension between Davis's abstract style and his purported realism.[14] He described the difficulty of deciphering the paintings of Davis, whose subjects' "actual counterpart in the American scene you may seek in vain unless your range of vision be peculiarly acute." But he also

[13] Excerpts of this press release are reprinted in "Davis 'American Scene'," *Art Digest* 6, no. 12 (15 March 1932): 16. Halpert often worked on press releases in conjunction with the artist, to which the files of the Downtown Gallery at the Archives of American Art attest.
[14] Jewell, "Stuart Davis Offers a Penetrating Survey of the American Scene," *New York Times*, 10 March 1932, p. 19.

noted the conventionality of these subjects, that they are "old and tried favorites."[15] Davis's American scene was 'unique,' but certainly not beyond the scope of the genre, despite the fact that his style was imported from Paris's left bank: "In this gay and sparkling show a talented American artist is seen at length definitely on his own, graduated from the School of Paris, although his calligraphy would no doubt still be understood without difficulty along the famous boulevards of the Rive Gauche." Jewell, so concerned with native expression, interprets Davis's works as a sort of linguistic hybrid of American and French idioms. The following Sunday, a paragraph of the weekly review section was devoted to Davis. This time, the Americanness of Davis's paintings was stressed: "The new work is presented as illustrative of 'The American Scene,' and indeed its American flavor is at once felt, though the scene itself is dramatized in the sort of abstract terms that Mr. Davis has made his own."[16]

The review offered by *Art News* was unambiguous in its praise for the specifically American qualities of Davis's canvases.

> His visions fairly sing from the walls with a good American will. They have a sort of stars-and-stripes complexion, a robust squaring off that is neither the mechanistic solidity of Leger nor the more nervously ordered angling of Picasso. He has ranged his pieces under the general heading of 'The American Scene,' and has certainly been true to his thesis. …But at any rate he has made the eagle scream with his red-white-and-blue interpretation of the 'American Scene' and he remains happily beholden unto himself alone.[17]

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[15] The *Herald Tribune* also found Davis's subjects to be fairly typical: "everything, in fact, that is indigenous to and characteristic of the native scene." Nonetheless, Davis's modernism was questioned: "Mr. Davis is a difficult person to estimate in terms of growth, and the question arises whether he has not gone as far as he can with his present formula." As reproduced in "Stuart Davis, the Difficult," *Art Digest*, 6, no. 13 (1 April 1932): 2.

[16] "The Week in New York: A Roster of Recently Opened Shows," *New York Times*, 13 March 1932, sec. 8, p. 10.

[17] "Stuart Davis: Downtown Gallery," *Art News*, 12 March 1932, p. 10.

The author recognized the obvious parallels between Davis and Picasso and Leger, among others, but ultimately found them less significant in the estimation of Davis's art than its overwhelming Americanness. Nevertheless, most critics were not so clearly convinced of the Americanness of Davis's canvases. Davis himself, as discussed in the previous chapter, discussed his Americanness in a manner that foregrounded the hybridity and internationalism of American experience and identity.

Creative Art's review discussed the national character of Davis's canvases, including what was perceived as the French origins of his style.[18] Unlike the French original, however, Davis's style is 'cold:'

> A modern God is needed to breathe life into the cold pure color world of Stuart Davis. This universe hasn't yet got beyond its two-dimensional stage. But what is already created – color and line – stands out brightly. It is a still-life world, and it is American, as can be seen from the subject matter of garage lights, streets, 'L's,' buildings and bridges, which is used as a basis for Mr. Davis' abstractions.

Although Davis's subjects are emphatically American, his style is not. Further, this style transforms his landscapes into 'still-life.' Davis's analytic engagement with his subjects undermines their human values for this reviewer. Davis's alleged realism further complicates this review: "In this matter of realistic rendering of abstract subjects, Mr. Davis is unique." Is Davis's subject the American scene, as suggested in the passage above, or is it 'abstract'? What does it mean for an abstract subject to be painted realistically, perhaps, to treat the medium with formal rigor? Or, is the reviewer simply making light of Davis's logic? The critics faltered over his work, seemingly perplexed by

[18] "There's a plain suggestion in his work, through his use of bright colors, that Mr. Davis is influenced by Dufy. He strives hard to be gay in the Dufy manner, it seems to us, but he lacks the Gallic light touch of the Frenchman, his humor and imagination, and he gives no substitutes for humor or for imagination save his glaring pure colors and his good draftsmanship." It is difficult to discern the author; the reviewers included Melvin Geer Shelley, Angela E. Hagen and Ralph Flint. "Around the Galleries," *Creative Art* 10, no. 3 (April 1932): 302.

his modernist representations of the American scene. Despite the liberal willingness of some critics to accept him as an American scene painter, many were already too reticent to unreservedly celebrate his visual language as capable of communicating this subject.

The New York Scene

Standing in the shadows under the tracks of an elevated railway, the viewer confronts a brilliant orange wall. This wall is framed by the trusses of the el. On its lower right, adjacent to several rows of bricks, the word 'SMITH' is printed in red letters across a green sign. Further up this wall, a black and white sign reads 'FRONT.' Two windows are seen in full view on the lower level and two in partial view on the second story, their full view obstructed by the horizontal tracks of the el train. This partial view of the side of a building represents half of a scene painted in 1931 by Davis titled *House and Street* (Fig. 4.9) included in his American scene exhibition.[19] The trusses supporting the tracks of the el also frame a view of a 'street,' which leads away from the picture plane into the distance disappearing toward the center of the composition. This street intersects Front Street, running parallel to the orange wall and marked with the sign bearing its name. The street receding into the distance is lined with buildings of varying sizes, shapes and colors and is bounded by the snaking curve of the el as it winds off into the distance. Above the tall buildings is seen a small portion of blue sky nudging out from this active urban view.

I have offered an overly literal reading of this painting in order to pose a question, to inquire as to the importance of locale, of knowing that this scene represents Coenties Slip at Front Street. *House and Street* was painted during a period in Davis's career when

[19] This painting, in addition to its inclusion in this exhibition was also included a month earlier in February 1932 exhibition of the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers at the Whitney Museum.

formal concerns were of extreme importance. An analysis of the paintings in this exhibition and their reception, however, suggests that the paintings' referents in the environment were of equal importance. Davis provides ample clues that the scene references a specific locale. The word "FRONT" indicates the street. The 'S' curve of the el train at the intersection of Front Street and Coenties Slip was well known for its dramatic twists which took the Second and Third Avenue el trains from Front Street in the south to Pearl Street to the north. Although for many Americans this site may have simply evoked an urban milieu, perhaps even New York, for a New Yorker it could quite plausibly signify a specific place. Jewell was ambiguous in this regard; he referred to Davis's subjects as 'old and tried favorites' but also stated the difficulty of identifying these subjects. Jewell advocated aesthetic and geographic pluralism in the representation of the American scene, so long as it did not stretch too far art's ability to evoke place.

Coenties Slip had been a notable subject of representation since the nineteenth century. *King's Handbook of New York City* (1892), for example, includes three photographs of it: two of these feature the el train and one features Jeanette Park on its eastern end (Figs. 4.10, 4.11, 4.12).[20] In 1935, a book of illustrations by Vernon Howe Bailey of New York City was published, each accompanied by a short descriptive text.[21] An aerial view focusing on the nearby International Telephone and Telegraph Building (Fig. 4.13) depicts the 'S' curve of the el winding through the slip below. Another image (Fig. 4.14) depicts a similar view to that found in Davis's original sketch of the slip (Fig. 4.15). This site offered a dramatic scene, which included one of the most noteworthy

[20] Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York City: An Outline, History and Description of the American Metropolis* (Boston; Moses King, 1892).
[21] Bailey with texts by Arthur Bartlett Maurice, *Magical City: Intimate Sketches of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935).

lengths of the elevated system, a view of a number of skyscrapers and a working harbor. The text accompanying the illustration reads:

> Today, with Jeanette Park in the center, the Seamen's Institute at the South Street corner to the north, and the group of old houses at the corner to the south, Coenties Slip seems to be dreaming apart, silent save for the clatter of the Elevated trains. But rising behind Pearl Street, punctuating the sky, are the great towers indicating the Slip's proximity to the turbulent city.[22]

Aside from the el train, Coenties Slip with its 'old houses' was 'dreaming apart.' But it was close to so much action and spectacle, including a number of modern skyscrapers. This social and historical hybridity characterizes many of Davis's subjects.

The el was not only a commonly depicted sight in the early thirties, but also a matter of serious public debate. Although there were four lines running at this time, their future was already written on the subway walls; they were to be torn down.[23] The Second Avenue line had opened in 1880 and served Manhattan's east side alongside the Third Avenue line. It was often discussed in engineering journals and the popular press as the line on which new technologies were first implemented. By the 1920s, however, public sentiment was turning against the els. Their opponents claimed that they were unsightly, lowered property values and were noisy, criticisms inseparable from the bawdy working-class amusements that prospered in their shadows, which were often seen by reformers as an affront to respectable bourgeois decorum and entertainment. In 1923, with growing concerns regarding the els' reputation, a major public relations program was developed, 'Ride the Open Air El.'[24] But such programs could not stop what by then had become

[22] Bailey, *Magical City*, 208.
[23] Els still run within the NYC subway system, but not within Manhattan for any extended length.
[24] Passengers could enjoy the benefits of the 'open air' on 'Goldenrod Specials' during the summer months when ridership often slumped.

inevitable. Following efforts by various community groups with the aid of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, the east-side els were completely shut down by the early 1940s.[25]

Coenties Slip and the el train are among those subjects that Jewell described as 'old and tried favorites.' The els remained emblems of modernity and engineering for many artists but by the 1930s they also represented a disappearing New York. Through the els, artists alluded to the great speeds at which people could travel, to the dynamism of urban life, and to vibrant if gritty street life. But as Jewell's reception suggests, these subjects were no longer new and exciting; they may even have been a little worn-out. But why would an artist who claimed to be interested in the progressive aspects of experience choose to feature the el train in so many of his compositions of these years? His formal interest in the complex geometries formed by its trusses and stations is undeniable. Less obvious is their relationship to his understanding of the temporal dimensions of experience and his celebration in his mature paintings of the vitality of working-class life.

Malcolm Cowley described how Greenwich Village bohemianism had served as a model for the international consumer culture of the 1920s.[26] The same could be said of working-class, African-American and ethnic culture, even if the details involved are not identical. Davis participated in this process from his Ashcan School representations of Chinatown to his career-long interest in jazz.[27] He incorporated aspects of subaltern culture into the realm of bourgeois taste and in so doing radically transformed their

[25] For more information on the history of the elevated railway in New York, see for example *Second Avenue El In Manhattan* (Hicksville, NY: N. J. International, 1995).
[26] See my discussion of Cowley in the third chapter.
[27] For a discussion of Davis's implication in this process as examined through his engagement with New York's Chinatown see my article: John X. Christ, "A Short Guide to the Art of Dining, Slumming, Touring, Wildlife and Women for Hire in New York's Chinatown and Chinese Restaurants," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, 2 (2003).

meanings. To be sure, he was not producing mass cultural products, but he did participate in the mainstreaming of the cultural forms upon which much mass culture was based.

By the time Davis approached Coenties Slip as a subject, however, it had already been incorporated into mainstream visual culture. In this case, he was not so much sanitizing the image of working-class New York as he was salvaging something vital from a vanishing urban fabric. It is possible to interpret *House and Street* as a celebration of a disappearing style of life, not in order to deny the forward motion of time but to construct an image of progress that incorporated the 'usable past.' This redemptive attitude towards history was widespread during the 1930s.[28] While some artists employed such tactics towards politically conservative ends presenting the past as the future, Davis instrumentalized vital aspects of the past – as represented in a disappearing present – towards the ordering of future experience, a subtle but important distinction. This is the iconographic corollary to Davis's understanding of form. He criticized naturalistic art, claiming that it created a world in stasis, whereas he celebrated the forms of abstract art because they, like his constellations of urban iconography, suggested a world in motion under the constant pressure of transformation.

Davis's inclusion of the word 'SMITH' in *House and Street* supports this thesis. The former Governor of New York State and 1928 Democratic presidential candidate, Al Smith, was raised in the Lower East Side as a working-class Irish Catholic.[29] He played a

[28] For example, it found a conservative proponent in Thomas Craven and an ambivalent embodiment in the photographs of the Farm Security Administration, which often celebrated for political purposes the individual landed farmer despite his increasing replacement (with government support) by agribusiness.
[29] Bruce Weber, *Stuart Davis's New York* (West Palm Beach, Florida: Norton Gallery and School of Art, 1985) has suggested reading *House and Street* as a rebus for Al ('el') Smith. Although this painting is based in part upon a 1926 drawing of Coenties Slip which also includes a reference to Smith, Davis did nonetheless make the conscious choice to incorporate Smith's name into this painting.
Mathew and Hannah Josephson have discussed Smith's origins in one of the better monographs devoted to him. They explain that although he would often rightly claim his Irish background, his story is more

central role in New York politics during the teens and twenties, supporting workers' rights first as assemblyman and then governor.[30] Many urban New Yorkers took great pride in Smith, a man who rose through the ranks of state politics beginning with little formal education or money. When running for president in 1928, the first campaign in which the radio played a significant role, he proudly spoke to the nation in his working-class New York accent.[31] Although he ran a relatively conservative campaign, many progressives and members of the urban working-class supported him, including Dewey.[32] However, by 1931, when *House and Street* was painted, he had shed even more of his progressive agenda, become a defender of the status quo, and had lost many of his working-class, Lower-East-Side connections. To be sure, many did not become fully aware of these tendencies until he began publicly attacking Franklin D. Roosevelt a year later.[33]

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complex, as he also had Italian and German ancestry. As for his working-class origins, at nineteen, Smith began work at the Fulton Fish Market (just a few blocks north of Coenties Slip), a job he held for two years and often recalled with pride, because it suggested his working-class credibility. Other helpful sources on Smith include his autobiography *Up to Now: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking Press, 1929) and Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), Edmund A Moore, *A Catholic Runs for President: The Campaign of 1928* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1956) and Richard O'Connor, *The First Hurrah: A Biography of Alfred E. Smith* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970).

[30] He received his first political break in 1911 as vice-chairman of a committee investigating the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in which 146 female workers died due to poor conditions including the locking of exit doors.

[31] He refused to pronounce certain words properly despite his advisors' pleas, referring to the radio as 'rad-dio' and the hospital as 'horspital.'

[32] In an article published in the *New Republic*, Dewey stated that while he supported the platform of the Socialist Norman Thomas, he believed that Smith would raise important issues including prohibition and bigotry, even if not solve them, and bring a degree of integrity to politics. Dewey, "Why I Am For Smith". Norman Thomas, the Socialist candidate, believed Smith's pro-business platform to be so conservative as to be indistinguishable from Hoover's. See Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984) for a discussion of Smith's conservatism. While never a radical, Smith did at least defend the rights of radicals during the red scare of the early twenties believing in their right to at least have their ideas heard.

[33] Roosevelt and Smith were on good terms through the mid-twenties. However, when Roosevelt became governor of New York in 1928, Smith who saw Roosevelt as his protégé expected a role within his administration, but Roosevelt instead ran things himself. When Roosevelt ran for president, Smith's conservatism grew as did his attacks on the candidate.

House and Street is by no means Davis's only iconographic reference to Smith. Most notably, he painted *Abstract Vision of New York; A Building, a Derby Hat, a Tiger's Head, and other Symbols* (Fig. 4.16, often referred to as *New York Mural*) for MoMA's 1932 exhibition "Murals by American Painters and Photographers," which featured the works of sixty-five artists who were each invited to produce a work based upon American history since the First World War.[34] References to Smith's political career, such as the derby hat and the tiger's head, abound in this painting. A grinning moon appears to have just finished a drink from a cocktail glass from which a drop falls, a reference to Smith's outspoken and in many respects politically divisive stance against prohibition.[35] Davis stated in his "Self-Interview" of 1931: "Q. – … what do you think of prohibition? // A. – I think the beer is getting decidedly better."[36] Among other things, Davis shared with Smith a penchant for flouting prohibition laws. However, Smith's increasingly prominent, and decidedly non-working-class, business activities since 1928 are also represented in this painting; Smith was president of the Empire State Building.[37] Unlike *House and Street*, Smith is not evoked only as a working class, Lower East Side figure, but equally as a participant in a not entirely successful piece of real estate speculation. Davis was certainly sympathetic to Smith, but this painting suggests that he also recognized the changing character of Smith's public persona. As MoMA's invitation

[34] Lincoln Kirstein organized this exhibition at least in part to showcase the abilities of American artists for the proprietors of Rockefeller Center who it was hoped would commission some of these artists to decorate its spaces. Many reviews of the show, however, were rather negative; *Art Digest* titled its review: "Critics Unanimously Condemn Modern Museum's Mural Show," 6, no. 16 (15 May 1932): 7.
[35] Weber, *Stuart Davis's New York*, has offered the most thorough iconographic analysis of this painting. For example, the brown derby hat is associated with Smith as a campaigner and the tiger head is a reference to Tammany Hall (the seat of NYC Democratic Party politics). Weber has also teased out many of the possible connections to popular imagery regarding Smith's role as a prominent anti-prohibitionist that may be suggested by this configuration of symbols.
[36] Stuart Davis "Self-Interview" *Creative Art* 9, no. 3 (September 1931): 211.
[37] This building was completed just in time for the onset of the Depression, in the context of which it served as a reminder of the excesses of the 1920s. Because its owners had a difficult time filling its vast office space, it earned the nickname 'Empty State Building' and 'Smith's Folly.'

suggests, this is a historical subject, as is the reference to Smith in *House and Street* even if the history suggested is not as complex and fraught with paradox.

The vividness of the colors and the objective quality of the surface of *House and Street* is central to the viewing experience. This surface is composed of bold brush strokes, not the bravura marks of a master but those of an artist intent on deflating such conventional markers of aesthetic value. The paint is tactile, applied thickly upon the surface of the canvas. Illusionistic depth is suggested in the reference to a real place only to have its logic canceled by an impastoed surface and a series of frontal geometries that stick to the picture plane. These geometries include the wall and the collage-like white and green sign, but also the red trusses, the gray and white hatching, and the red and blue border serving as an inner frame. Regardless of whether Jewell understood their full importance, he took note of Davis's collage-like use of color and emphasis on surface, claiming that the "shapes of color resemble cut-outs applied upon a plain surface." The painting transforms experience by unambiguously becoming an object of experience. It even proclaims its ability to compete with modern media on their own spectacular two-dimensional terms, stirring the viewer to action, not to buy a product (although the painting is a commodity) but to reexperience the world and hence transform it.

The importance of surface in Davis's painting is emphasized by his inclusion of the word 'FRONT,' the meaning of which overflows its reference to Front Street. It emphasizes the frontality of the picture plane and perhaps also false appearances, such as those involved in organized crime in which a legitimate business may serve as a 'front' for elicit activities. It may also refer to the superficies of fashion, to the fact that one's identity is determined by one's outward appearance. The urban sociologist Robert Park

employed this term in 1925 in describing the culture of the modern city, which he saw as having been radically transformed by new technologies of transportation and communication, which displaced the 'permanent associations' traditionally associated with community life in favor of ones "more transitory and less stable." He continued: "Under these circumstances the individual's status is determined to a considerable degree by conventional signs – by fashion and 'front' – and the art of life is largely reduced to skating on thin surfaces and a scrupulous study of style and manners."[38] 'Front' evokes the impenetrable surface of Davis's canvas as well as the urban culture that serves as its referent. The meaning of *House and Street* resides on its surface, perhaps even in its stress upon surface as the locus of signification. Davis believed that modernist form could communicate common experience and lead to an understanding of the world. The semiotics of modernist form is analogous to those of everyday urban live; both are 'conventional' and reside on the 'surface.'

In examining Davis's other New York paintings from this exhibition, the interpretation I have offered of the relationship between the temporality of his formal language and that of his iconography is verified. In *Jefferson Market* (Fig. 4.17, 1930), a complex city is depicted, almost a labyrinth in which various layers of the built environment cross one another both horizontally and vertically, the trusses of the 6th Avenue el train again providing a means of organizing the pictorial experience. Similar to his references to the el train and Al Smith in *House and Street*, Jefferson Market is a site that evokes historical change. The past mingles with the future through their simultaneous concretion in a new spatial experience in the present. The area around

[38] Robert Park, "Temperament and the Urban Environment," chapter four of Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (1925; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 40.

Jefferson Market was going through a marked transformation. For example, a Women's House of Detention was built almost simultaneous with the creation of this painting, although a few years after the initial sketch upon which it is based. The most conspicuous building, depicted with its prominent clock tower, is the Jefferson Market Court, which was designed in the 1870s by Calvert Vaux and Frederick C. Withers as a neogothic courthouse.[39] According to the *WPA Guide to New York City*: "The fantastic Victorian Gothic building with its array of weird turrets, traceried windows, and its patterns of brick and carved stone is an exceptionally interesting work of its period."[40] It was visually arresting, but also 'of its period.' This was a historical subject, one popular with *many* artists.[41] The el evokes modern engineering when contrasted to the neo-gothic courthouse, but was also itself dated. Moments of the past, concretized as built form, are experienced in the present and pictorially reorganized as a model for future experience.

Situated at the intersection of Sixth Avenue, Greenwich Ave and 9th Street, Jefferson Market was centrally located in terms of Davis's everyday life (see map, Fig. 4.18). It was only a short distance from Washington Square, near which were the Whitney Museum and the ACA Gallery (Eighth Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues). Just to the north near Eleventh and Twelfth Streets between Fifth and Sixth Avenues was the New School for Social Research where Benton's *America Today* mural hung in a boardroom. Slightly further north was the Downtown gallery (Thirteenth Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues). And Davis's own apartment and studio a couple of years

[39] This building exists today as a branch of the New York Public Library.
[40] *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; New York: New Press, 1992), 138.
[41] A 1936 guidebook states: "We walked west along Bleecker Street, and when it came into Sixth Avenue we caught sight, some blocks northward, of the old tower and clock of Jefferson Market Court, which practically every water colorist in or near New York has painted at one time or another." McAdoo, *How Do You Like New York?*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1936), 18.

earlier was located at Thirteenth Street and Seventh Avenue. Jefferson Market was an immediate part of Davis's changing environment.

Many of the same formal issues that structured my discussion of *Landscape with Drying Sails* (Fig. 2.4) in the second chapter also pertain to this image, notably the existence side-by-side of 'percept' and 'concept,' of naturalism and formal invention, the ordering of one through the other of which I have taken as the formal corollary of Davis's theoretical understanding of aesthetic experience. For example, the clouds are modeled almost illusionisticly as if to suggest their three-dimensional existence, although surely not without recognizing that illusionistic representation is itself a convention. Planes in space, often based upon the planar relationships of nature, such as those of the elevated platform and the succession of trusses, form highly ordered, if playful, pictorial arrangements which refer to nature, as Davis would say, by 'analogy.' This painting embodies Davis's process of reordering past experiences not as representations of the past, and hence static or even reactionary, but as an experiential manifestation serving as a model for the development of experience in the present towards the future.

The Gloucester Scene

Davis's attraction to New York as a center of modern technological innovation and culture is clear despite his simultaneous attraction to residual forms of urban life. But what about his continual iconographic references to Gloucester, which almost seem to be more common than those to New York? Was it simply, as Davis himself had remarked, that Gloucester offered "topographical severity and the architectural beauties of the Gloucester schooner"? Was it a convenient subject for an artist who wished to spend his

summers in a seaside town with a large artists' colony? Or was there something more socially engaged about his interest in the Gloucester harbor? I believe that each of these answers contains a certain amount of truth.

Gloucester was and remains a firmly established fishing town on Cape Ann in northeastern Massachusetts. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Gloucester was also establishing a reputation as one of the preeminent summer destinations for artists, a place at which prominent painters, many from New York, gathered during the art world's off season. As one historian has noted: "there is *this other Gloucester,* one made manifest not by salt cod boxes or echoing streets but in wood and brick, in oil and watercolor, in clay and bronze."[42] In 1907, a reporter wrote of these increasingly visible artists:

> They have within the past decade completely changed the complexion of things at Rocky Neck. Formerly that section was a busy mart of fish houses, net making and of things fishy in general. Now the artists have elbowed out the fishing interests and have preempted the fish sheds for studios and this process is steadily going on and covering larger ground. In a few years the entire East Gloucester waterfront will be given over to summer resident purposes.[43]

By the teens, the artist colony had begun to establish itself institutionally, a process that was further cemented in the early twenties with the creation of two principal arts groups: the Gloucester Art Association and the Gloucester Society of Artists. The latter, for which Davis served as chairman of the art committee, distinguished itself by holding unjuried exhibitions, positioning itself as the more aesthetically progressive institution.[44]

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[42] James F. O'Gorman, *This Other Gloucester: Occasional Papers on the Arts of Cape Ann Massachusetts* (Boston: James F. O'Gorman, 1976), 5.
[43] Reporter from the *Cape Ann Shore* as quoted by Judith McCulloch and Sharon Worley, "Introduction: *Stuart Davis in Gloucester*" in Karen Wilkin, *Stuart Davis in Gloucester* (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1999), 20.
[44] Nevertheless, O'Gorman believes that both were on the whole formally unadventurous.

Gloucester's artists' colony was becoming one of its important attractions and sources of income. Further, it played a significant role in a more general transformation of its economy towards tourism. Gloucester did not give up its role as a fishing community; in fact, its appeal to tourists and other visitors rested (as it still does) on the fact that it retained strong ties to these origins. Had it only offered art and seashores, it most likely would not have been able to compete with Provincetown, for example, by distinguishing itself on the market of summer destinations. A late nineteenth-century guidebook describes its attractions, which included not only pleasant bike trips along its many roads and rocky shores but also watching fishing boats and the skinning and cutting of fish.[45] A 1923 illustrated history of Gloucester describes the fish industry in detail, from the fishing to the final products: smoked fish, salted fish and fish skin for the glue factories. Noticing the growing importance of the summer business, the author stated: "It is sentimentally disappointing to find a fishing captain or an able seaman working on shore for a summer resident. But all this has its compensations." These compensations, of course, took the form of additional capital.[46] The tourist industry appreciated the lure of a working fishing industry to attract visitors and the working-class town welcomed the added capital that the outsiders offered. "The ways of summer visitors are sometimes

[45] John S. Webber Jr., *In and Around Cape Ann: A Hand-Book of Gloucester, Mass., and Its Immediate Vicinity. For the Wheelman Tourist and the Summer Visitor* (Gloucester: Cape Ann Advertiser Office, 1885).

[46] "The 'summer business' has grown amazingly in recent years… and the work and trade that the summer brings, support many of the people on the Cape the year round." Charles Boardman Hawes, *Gloucester by Land and Sea: The Story of a New England Seacoast Town* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1923), 212.

incomprehensible, but even those who suffer by their eccentricities are willing to give them the benefit of any charitable doubt."[47]

It is not much of an exaggeration to refer to Gloucester's artists' colony as an industry. Jewell stated in 1930:

> There is the big colony at Gloucester, where acres of wall space take care of what appear to be thousands of canvases at a time. But in these vast factories of art one feels the need of moving cautiously. Gloucester is famous for its manufacture of fish cakes and glue; sometimes it seems as if art up there had also been coerced into an industry to supply such depots of consumption as the National Academy and the Grand Central Art Galleries.[48]

Jewell recognized not only that Gloucester's artists' colony served as a 'factory' for the production of images, but also the implications. It was literally a colony, to extrapolate from his statement, that supplied finished products for the art world's central houses of distribution. Gloucester's image – defined by sailboats, a rocky coastline and a working harbor – provided the raw materials for the production of consumer goods for the art market, just as its fish provided for the 'manufacture of fish cakes and glue.' It provided Davis, for example, with endless themes and geometries upon which to base his formal inventions, the products of which ended up for the most part not in the hands of the people of Gloucester – for whom they would have a more direct meaning and to whose experiences they would perhaps have been more relevant and even instrumental, but in the New York art market where the subjects were received as 'tried and true favorites.'

Davis made his first trip to Gloucester in the summer of 1915, following two summers spent in Provincetown. What is plainly visible about his representations of

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[47] Hawes, *Gloucester by Land and Sea*, 211-12. Another useful guidebook to Gloucester from this period is Roger W Babson and Foster H. Saville, *Cape Ann: A Tourist Guide* (Rockport: Cape Ann Old Book Shop, 1936).

[48] Jewell, *Modern Art: Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 42.

Gloucester is his focus on the working harbor, as opposed to the picturesque seascape. Davis stated in his autobiography: “The next year I went to Gloucester, Mass., on the enthusiastic recommendation of John Sloan. That was the place I had been looking for. It had the brilliant light of Provincetown, but with the important additions of topographical severity and the architectural beauties of the Gloucester schooner.” The rigging and sails of the schooners and the clean geometries of the fishing buildings structured many of his compositions, providing a rich source of complex forms to knit together through the grouping of ‘angular variations.’ “The schooner is a very necessary element in coherent thinking about art. I do not refer to its beauty of form, but to the fact that its masts define the often empty sky expanse. They function as a color-space coordinate between earth and sky.” The schooner provided Davis with a means of coordinating the space of the picture, bringing it into a coherent whole.

Historians have often taken these statements by Davis as self-evident truths, recognizing the obvious fact that the schooner did provide him with a tool through which to organize his canvases. However, the facts do not add up to such a clear picture. He first went to Gloucester in 1915, but the schooner would not become a major referent in his paintings for another decade. And although some of his paintings do reference Gloucester’s ‘topological severity,’ it is difficult to claim that this was the animating force of his production. Something else caused Davis to choose Gloucester over Provincetown. In 1915, despite his growing interest in modernism, he was still working under the influence of Henri and Sloan. Gloucester provided him with the kind of working-class subjects with which he had been working, subjects less central to Provincetown’s urban fabric. Gloucester’s schooner and ‘topographical severity’ did

become significant features of his art, but his assertion in 1945 that this singularly drove his decision to summer in Gloucester is an obvious recasting of history. In stressing his formal attraction to Gloucester, he de-emphasized the importance of locale at a point in his career when identifiable referents had ceased to play a notable role in his practice.

In this 1945 autobiography, Davis described his arrival in Gloucester for the first time by car. He also, however, celebrated their relative scarcity on its streets. Taking him at his word, this statement suggests a similar attitude towards history as that suggested by his New York pictures; he celebrated modernization but not without an affirmative glance at the 'usable past.' Davis observed: "Another very important thing about the town at that time was that the pre-fabricated Main Street had not yet made its appearance. Also the fact that automobiles were very few and their numerous attendant evils were temporarily avoided."[49] There was something of the past in the Gloucester environment that he found worth evoking, even if to radically transform it. Although he embraced modernization, his attitude remained dialectical, recognizing the latent potential in certain residual social forms. He expressed the progressive temporality of experience not only on a formal, but also an iconographic level, suggesting that experience is a process that builds upon the past but also progressively transforms it.

Landscape with Garage Lights (Fig. 4.19, 1932), included in his 'American Scene' exhibition, noticeably evokes the changes through which Gloucester was going. References are evident to its working-class fishing port, to gas pumps, to electric 'garage lights' and to what appears to be a ferry. This ferry perhaps carries summer visitors and may be powered by the coal indicated to the left, the fumes of which are depicted rising

[49] Davis made certain to qualify this statement: "I would not want my reference to the evils of the automobile as being indicative of opposition to mechanized progress. I have drawn and painted automobiles on occasion, and for several years introduced filling station gas pumps into my landscapes."

from its stacks. The electric lines inscribed across the sky supply power to such objects as the lights and are clear markers of the electrification of the nation, which while not entirely a cutting-edge phenomenon was very much associated with recent modernization. As in many of his Gloucester images, a series of buildings associated with the fishing industry are depicted, one labeled 'FISH' and another 'CO.,' as if to label the working-class activities contained. What does one make of the references to the schooner, however? Although formally interesting, a sailboat in 1932 did not evoke modernization, or if it did, it is only as its foil. Surely Davis recognized that as the fishing industry was mechanized, the sail would be replaced by the internal combustion engine, already introduced to Gloucester two decades earlier. The schooner remained a mainstay of the fishing industry for at least another decade but, like the el, its days were numbered. Davis thematized these historical juxtapositions and transformations. For example, he brought together in the upper-left corner a coal tower, schooner masts and electric lines, each indicative of a different form and level of technological advancement of energy.

A principal issue that has framed my analysis of Davis's paintings is their purported 'realism' and relatedly their ability to evoke place. "'Garage Lights' was painted down Gloucester way," Jewell wrote, "and it is reported that one visitor to the gallery delightedly detected in it 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)."[50] This comment was possibly meant as a tongue-in-cheek – perhaps even sarcastic – reference to Davis's claim to be an American scene painter, as realism and the ability to evoke place were central to American scene discourse. Read literally, Jewell's statement suggests that Davis really did evoke the

[50] Jewell, "Stuart Davis Offers a Penetrating Survey of the American Scene," 19.

Gloucester environment, even the smells of its industry. However, Jewell concluded that Davis is a 'super-realist,' which he insisted should not '*quite*' be confused with Surrealism. The term 'Super-Realist' was still an acceptable translation of Surrealist and maybe Jewell recognized Davis's indebtedness in many images of this period, at least on a formal level, to the work of Joan Miro. Still, not 'quite' Surrealist: was Davis really a 'super' realist? It is not possible to ascertain definitively what Jewell intended. His statement is ambivalent, perhaps even purposefully so because of his own interpretive fumbling. He must have felt a need to at least acknowledge Davis's realism, even as he was not comfortable doing so. So he then maligned it through an association with Surrealism, only to hedge yet again, stating that maybe it is not 'quite' Surrealism. Many critics mentioned Davis's realism, but few did so without reservation.

The formal organization of *Garage Lights* engages many of the strategies that I discussed in the second chapter with reference to *Landscape with Drying Sails*, also included in this exhibition. Although not as reliant upon the schooner as *Drying Sails*, the schooner does play a role.[51] It is primarily the architectural lines of the commercial buildings that define the trajectories of spatial planes in *Garage Lights*. For example, the line that distinguishes the roof from the wall of the black building continues across the waters of the harbor, tying the background into a common spatial system with the buildings of the foreground. In examining his compositional drawings for this image (Figs. 4.20, 4.21), one can trace the establishment of many similar spatial relations throughout the painting and how he attempted to organize the composition into contrasting tonal regions on the two-dimensional surface. Another interesting device he

[51] The masts of the schooners are in fact difficult to tell apart from the electrical poles, indicated by the electrical lines. The sketch clearly depicts one such pole, but the finished painting is ambiguous.

employed to collapse what could otherwise be read as depth, showing both his resourcefulness in dealing with these problems (as well as a familiarity with Picasso and Braque) and his formal wit, is his handling of the sign reading '15' on the larger gas pump. The shadow indicated behind the sign suggests that it is contiguous to the orange plane that reads as ground, thereby collapsing any residual illusion of depth, even as one continues to read the orange plane conceptually as ground. Davis playfully reminds the viewer that the image really is flat. Furthermore, references to natural lighting are evident in the highlight on the roof of the orange building, the modeling of the cloud, and the blue of the sky. The interaction of these various elements indicates the process of experience carried into the pictorial realm of composition.

Garage Lights includes an embodied human subject, which although not characteristic of Davis's work, is also not completely anomalous. In *The Terminal* (3.14, 1937), the figures exist awkwardly, appearing out of place and disruptive within his planar arrangement. It is perhaps for this reason that the figure in *Garage Lights* is almost ghostlike; to have a solid footing would contradict the two-dimensional pictorial logic. In his least awkward depiction of the figure in the 1930s, *Men and Machine* (Fig. 4.22, 1934), the men are depicted observing his color-space composition *from the outside* rather than participating in it, almost as stand-ins for the viewer.

As I have described Davis's paintings, they are highly engaged with the social realm, representing it not so much through the depiction of embodied subjects as through the results of social activity upon the built environment, action for which his paintings could serve as models. This strategy exhibits a conceptually complex understanding of the implications of environmental theories of art, suggesting not only the intersubjectivity

of experience (as discussed in the second chapter) but also a materialist conception of consciousness. Subjectivity is dispersed into and recorded by the environment, which in turn defines subjectivity. In his writings of just a few years later, often in response to Marxist art criticism, he suggested a dialectical understanding of painting and the individual human subject, understanding both as not only reflective of their environment but also transformative of it. Davis understood what many other Marxist and Instrumentalist artists of the period did not: it is not necessary to literally depict a human subject to produce a socially conscious art sensitive to the realities of human action. Although many Marxist critics dismissed the social dimension of Davis's art, perhaps because it lacked an embodied representation as in Social Realism, critics more attuned to Davis's style such as Holger Cahill did recognize his increasing social engagement: "Stuart Davis, one of the most intelligent and inventive of American experimenters in abstraction, appears to be turning to an art of richer human documentation."[52] Davis's art engages subjects of labor and 'human documentation' most successfully where it may seem most superficially absent because of the lack of human figuration. Davis's evocations of labor do not engage in any specific manner with the complex issues facing labor during the thirties, although to be sure, with few exceptions Social Realists did not grapple with these subjects in all that much greater complexity.[53]

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[52] Cahill in Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr. eds, *Art In America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Halcyon House, 1934), 98.

[53] The labor suggested in *Garage Lights*, as in his production more generally, is a masculine working-class labor. Although a heroized male labor was a common subject during the 1930s, other options existed. One of the most prominent alternatives is that offered by the Fourteenth Street School, the details of which have been excellently discussed by Ellen Wiley Todd, *The 'New Woman' Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
Terry Smith's interpretation of Charles Sheeler's work in *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) intersects my analysis of Davis in interesting ways. Neither Davis nor Sheeler for the most part populate their images with embodied subjects. Smith argues that this abstracts Sheeler's images from the social processes occurring in Ford's plants, producing an

Technology in the American Scene

The final subject that must be examined in order to understand Davis's engagement with the American scene is not a place but a series of technological objects, which did nonetheless have a marked impact on the perception of place, as well as space and geography more generally. It was not uncommon between the wars to associate modern technologies of communication and transportation with Americanization, and by extension with the American scene. As I have suggested, however, these technologies have a dialectical relationship to the process of urbanization. Although they were often understood as emblematic of modern urban life, they were equally implicated in the deurbanization of dwelling and leisure. I have mentioned the automobile in this regard but could just as well have substituted the radio, electricity or other technologies that allowed for more decentralized development based upon a more flexible flow of information and goods. Furthermore, these same technologies that were altering urban and increasingly suburban life were also radically changing the agrarian landscape from a culture of family farming into large-scale industrialized agribusiness, and were transforming 'Middletown' by connecting it to the rest of the world.[54] *Garage Lights*, in the electric lines as well as the 'garage lights,' references the electrification that had been sweeping the nation during the previous decades. The sign in *House and Street*

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image amenable to advertising and business. While it is tempting to make a similar argument about Davis's depopulated pictures, they are on the whole far less corporate in appearance than Sheeler's, exhibiting instead his interests in the spatial transformations wrought by modernization. These artists share in their aversion to dealing with the specifics of the labor process, although their reasons for doing so differ significantly.

[54] See Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd's famous studies of Muncie, Indiana, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957) and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1937).

referencing Al Smith includes a bell, perhaps a reference to the nearby Bell Telephone Company or the newly built International Telephone and Telegraph building.[55]

House and Street has been described by some historians as cinematic in that the two views can be read as still frames from a reel of film.[56] This analogy is interesting in relation to cinematic montage, a process that literally occurs through the juxtaposition of frames composing disparate views, a technique often described as analogous to modern forms of perception. Mumford, for example, discussed modern perception in these terms:

> For the motion picture symbolizes and expresses, better than do any of the traditional arts, our modern world picture and the essential conceptions of time and space which are already part of the unformulated experience of millions of people, to whom Einstein or Bohr or Bergson or Alexander are scarcely even names. …The moving picture, with its close-ups and its synoptic views, with its shifting events and its ever-present camera eye, with its spatial forms always shown through time, with its capacity for representing objects that interpenetrate, and for placing distant environments in immediate juxtaposition – as happens in instantaneous communication – with its ability, finally, to represent subjective elements, distortions, hallucinations, it is today the only art that can represent with any degree of concreteness the emergent world-view that differentiates our culture from every preceding one.[57]

For Mumford, cinema evoked modern experience more effectively than any other medium. Regardless of whether Davis literally intended to produce a cinematic image, he undoubtedly sought to produce a montage-like effect; he referred to this painting retrospectively as a 'mental collage.'[58] At least two views are represented in order to give the viewer a sense of this place. Together they not only offer more than a single perspective but also evoke modern experience itself through 'mental' juxtaposition.

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[55] This bell, Weber has suggested, is possibly a reference to the Bell Telephone Company, the New York Telephone Company Building being located nearby on Pearl Street and St. James Place. The new ITT building was completed in 1930 and was located at 67 Broad Street also just a few blocks away.
[56] See for example, Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Ridge Press).
[57] Mumford, *Technics and Civilization,* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1934), 342.
[58] As reproduced in Rudi Blesh, *Stuart Davis,* (New York: Grove Press, 1960) 15.

Davis's reordering of the experience of the American scene, compositionally framed by a technological emblem (the historically unresolved el), was based upon formal strategies that were related to modern technology, and by extension modern experience.

In some of Davis's paintings, the manner in which technology had altered perception is made more explicit, even illustrational. In *Windshield Mirror* (Fig. 4.23, 1932), the experience of a landscape is displayed through a 'windshield mirror.' As in *House and Street*, the viewer is presented with a simultaneous, montage-like view. That view seen through the window of technology is brightly colored, while the scene unmediated by technology is rendered in dull browns.

Some of Davis's paintings from this exhibition, including *Radio Tubes* (Fig. 4.24), take technological objects themselves as their primary subject. This painting represents not the look of a radio but its tubes, the technology instead of its packaging. In certain regards – in representing a consumer good rather than the environment, this painting harkens back to Davis's more iconic 1920s images, but with some considerable differences. For one, he has transformed his subject radically, almost surrealistically. Furthermore, in places he organizes space in a manner characteristic of his 1930s images, such as in the array of tubes in the center and especially in the planar arrangement above; these are the planes in space that he related both to pictorial construction in general, as well as to the modern experiences that they organize.

The radio played a central role in Davis's conceptualization of art. He understood its importance to be its transformation of the modern experiences upon which art is built, often employing it as an analogy in explaining the accessibility of abstract art. He

explained this in his 'Self-Interview' (1931), relating it to the impact of cinema upon experience:

> Q. - Could you name some of the positive factors that contribute to the vitality of the American atmosphere you spoke about?
> A. - The movies and the radio.
> Q. - Why?
> A. - Because they allow us to experience hundreds of diverse scenes, sounds and ideas in a juxtaposition that has never before been possible. Regardless of their significance they force a new sense of reality and this must of course be reflected in art.
> Q. - O.K. But don't they have radios and movies in Europe?
> A. - Of course, but they don't have the same volume or quantity. It is precisely this volume which forces the issue.[59]

Davis discussed this modern form of perception, as did many others, as expressly American, even as it was transforming experience globally as well. Over time, he turned to the radio with increasing frequency as an analogy to explain abstract art:

> In America there is a tendency to look with suspicion on 'abstract' ideas or creative innovations when they occur outside the field of technology or commerce. Although we live in an industrial society built on abstract ideas, 'professors' in politics and 'abstractionists' in art are generally held to be crackpots. We do not call the radio an 'abstraction,' and we do not put bird feathers on the wings of our airplanes or artificial dentures in the radio loudspeaker. We regard synthetic quinine and sulfa drugs as very real and desirable despite their foreign origin and 'unnaturalness.' But where art is concerned the Currier and Ives model is held to be adequate. In science the word 'abstract' is identified with progress; in social philosophy and art, with the Ivory Tower.[60]

The radio had transformed experience and was an inextricable and, like science, progressive element of the American scene, serving as an analogue of abstract art itself. Furthermore, despite their seeming homogenization of the world, New York was often perceived as the central node of these new technologies, a position which allowed its urban culture and vision of American identity to infiltrate broad territories, bringing New

[59] Davis "Self-Interview," 211.
[60] Davis, "What About Modern Art and Democracy?" *Harper's Magazine* 188, no. 1123 (December 1943): 19.

York's commercial culture into the daily lives of diverse people. These technologies transformed perception, urbanizing the visions of peoples across the continent and globe, from Middletown to Paris.[61]

Many believed that television would have a similar impact as the radio. It seemed in the early thirties, before subsequent setbacks, that it was on the verge of major distribution. A number of artists took immediate note of this apparent technological boom. Davis included a painting titled *Television* (Fig. 4.25) in his 'American Scene' exhibition. Two of the paintings in the MoMA mural exhibition (Figs. 4.26, 4.27), in which Davis's *New York Mural* was exhibited, also reference television among other means of communication and transportation as significant aspects of post-WWI history. Unlike these latter images of the television, however, which are relatively straightforward, it is difficult to make sense of Davis's *Television*. If in *Radio Tubes,* the radio is turned inside out to reveal its inner workings, one cannot even find a trace of the object in *Television*. Electrical lines connect the house to the electric grid from which it derives power. Two oddly rendered figures are depicted looking into a cut-away house and presumably a television. Although one cannot be certain, it is perhaps through the bringing of the landscape into the house that the perceptual effects of television are suggested, montage-like effects in this case being produced by the juxtaposition of percepts from a technological and a physical world.[62]

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[61] "In the world's intricate spiderweb of radio communication, New York forms a central node. …It is in broadcasting, where radio most vividly touches the lives of the people - where it enters their homes with words and music to become part of the daily routine of living - that New York plays one of its most significant and popularly appreciated roles." Chapter 14: Radio, "World of Wireless," in *New York Panorama* (New York: Random House and the Guilds' Committee for Federal Writers' Publications, 1938), 294.

[62] "World of Wireless" Beginning on 302 is a discussion of the development of television. In 1923 a portrait of President Harding was sent from Washington to Philadelphia. In 1928, the first television drama was broadcast by GE from Schenectady New York. In 1929, the cathode ray tube was introduced. In 1931,

These technologies, central to the new consumer society being developed during the interwar period, share one trait that distinguishes them from turn-of-the-century technologically advanced culture; they encourage private reception. To be sure, cinema, which had been developing as one of the more public forms of entertainment since the turn of the century, was booming during the twenties, but it too had been transformed in significant ways since its inception; the interactive forms of working-class spectatorship that characterized its early years had been replaced with a more passive and docile ones.[63] Through these technologies, increasingly large and diverse publics were being integrated into a common culture, but only at the cost of privatizing reception, locating it within one's home, often in the narrower context of family and immediate friends. In practice, Davis continued to attend live jazz performances, for example, but the mediation of these experiences offered by the radio and television did become increasingly important aspects of his daily life. Along with many others, including Dewey, Davis recognized the public impact of these new technologies, even where their reception could be described as private, in that they had transformed the perception of time and geography in a manner with broad public consequences.[64]

C. Francis Jenkins, who broadcast the 1923 signal, opened the first television station in New York, which broadcast programs on a regular schedule and others followed suit. This 'television boom' lasted until 1933. "But the boom was premature and proved to be something of a fiasco. The stamp-size pictures were very poor in quality, New York's regularly broadcasting television stations disappeared, and television retired again behind closed doors. There it now remains, issuing reports from time to time of brighter and larger images, of television in natural colors, of stereoscopic television in three dimensions - but still awaiting the day when it can emerge as a commercially practicable reality."

[63] For a study of the development of spectatorship in turn-of-the-century cinema, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). It should be kept in mind that private reception is a broader aspect of bourgeois culture, exemplified for example by the novel. Ideally, however, even the novel served as a catalyst for enlightened public discussion among the elevated classes.

[64] Dewey found aspects of a new individualism in, among other things, the new forms of entertainment enjoyed by the masses, including sports, theater chains and the radio: "The radio, the movies, the motor car, all make for a common and aggregate mental and emotional life. With technical exceptions, to be found in special publications and in some portion of the newspapers, the press is the organ of amusement for a

Davis and Benton: Struggling to Define American Experience

> There is a prophetic aspect to all observation; we can perceive the meaning of what exists only as we forecast the consequences it entails. When a situation is as confused and divided within itself as is the present social estate, choice is implicated in observation. As one perceives different tendencies and different possible consequences, preference inevitably goes out to one or the other. [John Dewey][65]

Dewey's statement sums up well the reasons for the intense antagonism between Davis and Benton. They each would have agreed with the fundamental proposition offered by Dewey. They each perceived the American scene and recorded their respective experiences on canvas, depicting not only what they saw, but also its latent tendencies. They sought to represent the dynamic and democratic potentials of modern experience. They recognized the future, however, in different aspects of the American scene and chose markedly divergent formal means as the most appropriate for its representation. Their fierce exchanges over the future of American democracy and art's formal development have often obscured their notable common ground. In order to better understand their differences, I treat them in the context of those values they shared.

In the early 1930s, Benton still offered a diverse cross section of the American scene and the modernist bases of his style had not yet been masked by his naturalism. This is not to suggest that this art did not already embody some of the conservative and anti-urban sentiment that would later earn him criticism from the left, but that these traits had not yet become definitive of his reception. In 1932, Holger Cahill considered Benton a modernist: "Several of the American modernist pioneers are represented in this

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hurried leisure time, and it reflects and carries further the formation of mental collectivism by massed methods." Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (1929-30; Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), 21.

[65] Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 36.

exhibition: Max Weber, Samuel Halpert, Bernard Darfiol, William Zorach, John Marin and Thomas Benton. These men all studied in France and came into contact with the movements and ideas which stirred the art world in the first and second decades of this century."[66] Davis also had not yet dismissed Benton's potential, and even recognized something specifically American in his art. He stated in his 'Self-Interview:'

> Q. – Could you name some of the younger artists who reflect this American spirit of which you speak?
> A – Yes. Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, the three Doctors –
> Q. – No, no, I mean painters. You're supposed to be interested in painting, aren't you?
> A. – Oh, certainly, well – let's see, just as they come to mind some of the ones I have noted are Benton, Graham, Gorky, Gaulois, Coleman, Matulka– [67]

This is an even more striking grouping of artists than that presented by Cahill; it includes some of Davis's closest modernist friends. Benton remained for the moment a modern artist, one worthy of inclusion among a list of Davis's friends in the art world and the great jazz musicians, the latter perhaps an even higher acclamation from Davis.[68]

The publication of the article "U. S. Scene" in December 1934 in *Time* magazine publicly exposed the growing rift between Davis and Benton.[69] It celebrated the group of artists who increasingly came to be identified with American Scene painting, Benton most prominent among them. Each painter had *his* own region, including Reginald Marsh as a token painter of the New York scene. Davis's hoped-for status as painter of the urban environment had been usurped by a more naturalistic painter. Craven's stable of artists

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[66] Cahill, "American Art, 1862-1932," in Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862-1932* (1932; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969), 12-13.
[67] Stuart Davis, "Self-Interview," 211.
[68] Although it has been hypothesized that this antagonism had been growing since 1916 (Erica Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 116), when Benton told Davis that he should go to Paris if he really wanted to be a modern painter, and there is probably some truth to this, clearly Davis had not yet completely written off Benton in the early 1930s, even if he did harbor some ill feeling.
[69] "U.S. Scene," *Time*, 24 December 1934, p. 24.

was celebrated as *the* painters of the American scene. Furthermore, Craven's xenophobic rhetoric had also framed their interpretation. France had "conquered the art world" at the Armory Show in 1913; "Painting became so deliberately unintelligible that it was no longer news when a picture was hung upside down." The rejection of French modernism, the author indicated, had its roots firmly planted in the Midwest, where "A small group of native painters began to offer direct representation in place of introspective abstractions." The supporters of artistic internationalism that fought so hard for their position during the American Wave received a great blow in this widely read article. The work of the modernists, even if understood as laboratory work, as even Craven had done at his more reflective moments, was dismissed. There is a striking passage, however, that points to a real contradiction in the rhetoric of this article, even a possible recognition of the relevance of modernist form to the American scene: "In Taos, reality is almost Cubism and Taos shadows are actually as elongated and mysterious as those in Salvador Dali's Surrealism." Why would the author, after just having chastised European modernism, use these styles to describe the American landscape? Perhaps these styles could evoke indigenous experience, even of the natural environment.

Davis, recognizing he had lost this round in the struggle over the American scene, published a scathing challenge to these painters in the third issue of *Art Front*, criticizing what he deemed their xenophobic and blind patriotism.[70] Titled, "The New York American Scene in Art," his article extended its critique to William Randolph Hearst's magazine, *New York American*. Hearst's reactionary politics and prominent position in publishing made him a common target among leftists. Although Davis recognized the

[70] Davis, "New York American Scene," *Art Front* 1, no. 3 (February 1935): 6.

adverse impact Craven's rhetoric had upon the reception of these painters, this did not deter him from conflating it with their art, which he described as:

> burdened by the vicious and windy chauvinistic ballyhoo carried on in their defense by a writer like Thomas Craven whose critical values may possibly be clouded by a lively sense of commercial expediency. His efforts to bring art values to the plane of a Rotarian luncheon are a particularly repellent form of petty opportunism and should be so understood and explained whenever one has the misfortune to slip on them. Craven's ideas are unimportant, but the currency given to them through the medium of the Hearst press means that we must not underestimate their soggy impact.[71]

Although Davis's antagonism toward these painters would have no doubt developed regardless, his particular bitterness was certainly exacerbated by Craven's rhetoric. The editors of *Art Front* offered Benton the opportunity to respond by answering ten questions of their choosing. According to the editors: "Mr. Benton became panicky. He 'scooped' us and delivered our questions and his answers to them to *Art Digest*."[72] Not surprisingly, the debate did not end there; several more exchanges followed.[73]

Jewell took stock of this escalation of rhetoric in the *New York Times*.[74] Always seeking out a moderate position in debates over nationalism, he stated that both sides had made some valid points, and that the resultant 'animosity' was unfortunate and would hinder productive work. He recognized something in their rhetoric and art that suggested that they were not so far apart. Both artists were "fundamentally interested in the creation

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[71] Davis, "New York American Scene," 6.

[72] First, Benton wrote a letter to *Art Front* (published in its fourth issue), in which he reminded its editors that he had not yet received a copy of the journal in which Davis's article was published. He referred to Davis in this letter as an 'imitator of imitations' and his words the 'squawks of the defeated and impotent.' The editors of *Art Front* stated that they had a phone conversation the next day in which he offered to answer ten questions of the editors' choosing within a three thousand word format. "Why Mr. Benton," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 3. In the end, *Art Front* too printed Benton's responses.

[73] Davis wrote a rejoinder to Benton's answers, "Davis's Rejoinder," *Art Digest* 9, no. 13 (1 April 1935): 12-13, 26-27.

[74] Edward Alden Jewell, "When Cobblers Turn from the Last: Issues in the Debate Between Leading Exponents of 'Abstract' and 'Nationalist' Tendencies – Mr. Benton's Recent Painting," *New York Times*, 7 April 1935, pp. 194-5.

of works of art rather than the mere exploitation of subject." He continued: "If Mr. Davis were wholly intent upon browsing among abstract theories that had their origin in Paris ateliers earlier in our century, and if Mr. Benton were wholly engrossed in American history and the contemporary American scene, neither would be worth bothering about as artists." Both artists were formally innovative interpreters of the American scene. What Jewell failed to recognize, whether willingly or due to his often blindly heeded pluralism, is the profoundly different impact political considerations had upon these artists' interpretations of American experience.

Benton and Davis agreed upon the environmental conditioning of art. They also agreed with Dewey that observation was projective, that the artistic reordering of experience suggested a future. They each claimed to realistically portray the American environment, which for them included its active interpretation by the artist. But, they observed that environment very differently and saw the political and geographic location of the future in radically different places.

While internationalism, the city and Communism governed Davis's vision, Benton's Regionalism had roots in the regenerative powers of the frontier and in the tradition of American republicanism. While localism does not necessarily imply nationalism, Benton's grounding of his art in the rural soil, in the typing of races and in the benefits of a return to tradition was not well received by the left. Davis associated these traits with the extreme nationalism of fascism:

> The slight burp which this school of the U. S. scene in art has made, may not indicate the stomach ulcer of Fascism. I am not a political doctor, but I have heard the burp and as a fellow artist I would advise those concerned to submit themselves to a qualified diagnostician, other than witch doctor Craven, just to be on the safe side.[75]

[75] Davis, "New York American Scene," 6.

While Davis refrained from an outright accusation of fascism, he had said enough. As this debate became further enflamed, he deepened his accusations: "On past performance Benton should have no trouble in selling his wares to any Fascist or semi-Fascist type of government that might set itself up. His qualifications would be in general, his social cynicism which allows him to depict social events without regard to their meaning."[76] Over time, the accusations from the left of the fascist tendencies in the work of Benton and other American Scene painters became increasingly commonplace.[77]

Davis's accusation that Benton painted without regard to the meaning of his work is not without basis. Benton missed what could have been a productive opportunity to explain the 'social function of a mural,' as asked by *Art Front*. He stated: "This is for society, as it develops, to determine."[78] While it is true that reception plays a significant role in determining the meaning of any work of art and this can be a progressive treatment of one's audience, one not unrelated to Dewey's own understanding of the process of aesthetic experience, it cannot therefore be extrapolated that there is no social function or meaning prior to reception. If this were true, the artists' function in society

[76] Davis, "Davis' Rejoinder," *Art Digest* 9, no. 13 (1 April 1935): 13.

[77] See for example Meyer Schapiro. Although he labeled the judgment of Benton as a fascist 'premature,' his own characterization leaves little other conclusion: "Benton has been criticized as fascist, but such a judgment is premature. To accept his ideas and art on their face value, to welcome them as an expression of 'democratic individualism,' would be no less absurd. Benton repudiates European fascism, but fascism draws on many streams including the traditional democratic. The appeal to the national sentiment should set us on guard, whatever its source. And when it comes as does Benton's with his conceited anti-intellectualism (he has also his own pretentious intellectuality), his hatred of the foreign, his emphasis on the strong and the masculine, his uncritical and unhistorical elevation of the folk, his antagonism to the cities, his ignorant and violent remarks on radicalism, we have good reason to doubt his professed liberalism and to expose its inconsistencies." Schapiro, "Populist Realism" *Partisan Review* 4, no. 2 (January 1938): 53-57.

[78] Benton's reply to *Art Front*, "On the American Scene," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 4. Not only those on the left such as Davis, but even Thomas Craven, Benton's greatest booster, had reservations about the political content of Benton's pictures: "Benton, on the other hand [from the Mexican muralists], holds aloof from any fixed pattern of ideals. Despite his tremendous vitality and his massive knowledge of American life, his art, so far as meanings are concerned, seems unfailingly to end with a question mark." *Modern Art*, 340. What Craven goes on to describe in particular as lacking in Benton's art is the element of a projected future, some sort of idealization.

would be void, as intentional making would cease to have any bearing upon a work's meaning. Davis turned to recent history to illustrate the shortsightedness of Benton's response. Although Benton could not determine the social function of a mural, "his employers are not so ignorant in this matter as himself. Rockefeller is not an artist but he has a sharp eye for the social function of a mural. He spotted the social function of Rivera's mural in Radio City before it was completed and destroyed it."[79] By making reference to Rivera's mural, Davis not only took advantage of a widely known recent event to make his case, but also chose an especially clear-cut example to illustrate the far more complex issue of the ideological nature of artistic form.

Central to their debates about art's relationship to the environment were the differences between Davis's espousal of international Communism and Benton's frontier-style liberalism. In Benton's answer to *Art Front*'s question regarding the existence of a 'revolutionary tradition for the American artist,' he criticized the geographic and political irrelevance of Communism to the US context. He perceived a revolutionary tradition, but not "in the current Communist sense," but rather in the frontier's effects upon "provincial Forms in the East and South and [that] continues to this day in the actual moves of conflicting interests."[80] Benton was influenced in his response by Turner's famous 'Frontier Thesis,' which describes a constantly evolving democracy spurred by the evolving and dynamic frontier experience. By the 1930s, however, the frontier no longer existed. Benton portrayed not the frontier but the myth of agrarian and small town life, made all the more ideologically compelling by the upheaval of urbanization and modernization. While he did represent the effects of modernization within his work, by

[79] Davis, "Rejoinder to Thomas Benton," *Art Digest* number (1 April 1935): 13.
[80] Benton, "On the American Scene," 8.

the mid-1930s in murals such as his *Social History of the State of Missouri* (Fig.28) these elements were subsumed into an overriding myth of frontier life.

Benton believed that one of the key factors making the frontier a more suitable foundation for progressive democracy was its basis in American experience, the implication being that Marxism was a foreign theoretical construct applied irrespective of native conditions. Benton had a point; although a materialist theory of society, Marxism was often applied in an inflexible and idealist manner. Yet, given Benton's extensive engagement with Marxist theory, he should have realized that many Party ideologues had misrepresented the ideas of Marx.[81] Although Benton's writings from this period still exhibit a real debt to Marx, his allegiances had clearly changed: "I believe in the collective control of essential productive means and resources, but as a pragmatist I believe actual, not theoretical, interests do check and test the field of social change."[82] The anti-idealist tone of Benton's response turned the issue of radical materialism back on the Marxists. "I agree with Benton," Davis retorted, "that the perception of

[81] Benton was quite familiar with and upfront about his interest in Marxism, which extended back into the twenties and as far forward as the early thirties. In 1931, he illustrated a book for the Marxist historian, Leo Huberman, claiming later that he still felt "in intellectual harmony with its writer." He continued: "Up till then in spite of some differences, which I kept more or less secret because I was not sure of my ground, I was on reasonably good terms with the boys of the John Reed Club and the Russo-American front in general. The 'boys' did not begin calling me a reactionary, 'nationalist reactionary,' traitor, and chauvinist until later." *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969), 168. Even in his answers to *Art Front*'s questions, he mentioned Marx in an ambivalent manner suggestive of a lingering debt, even as he rejected the Soviet-American axis. He claimed that his rejection of Marxism began in 1926, although it did take some time to become complete.

[82] Benton, "On the American Scene," 4. Benton elaborated more fully in a later response, "And So On Ad Infinitum," *Art Front* 1, no. 5 (May 1935): 7. Jacob Kainen provided a Marxist response to Benton: "Many people, in a vague humanitarian fashion, urge 'a better production-consumption economy' and urge 'democratic' methods for arriving at this desired end. But it is a sad fact that the historical process is singularly inattentive to the pinchbeck urgings of well-intentioned individuals. …Do you for a moment think, Mr. Benton, that bankers, large merchants and industrialists are interested in Socialism? Don't you know that these people control the political apparatuses, the newspapers, the educational institutions - that they overlay the body and soul of modern society? Don't you know that these people will create wars involving destruction, death, pestilence, mutilation and a thousand other horrors to protect investments or to capture markets? Can one expect such people to provide legal means for expropriating themselves? We would be political babies to think so." "And So On Ad Infinitum," 7.

environment is primary, but possession of the weapon of theory does not render the artist unable to perceive his environment."[83] For Davis, experience in its most profound forms implied theoretical reflection, and if this reflection is based upon a European model, this did not necessarily contradict American experience.

Both Davis and Benton defended their visions of the American scene on the grounds of diversity and openness, claiming that the work of the other was 'provincial.' Asked whether the "future of American art lies in the Middle-West," Benton responded: "Yes. Because the Middle-West is, as a whole, the least provincial area in America."[84] Davis did not deny that "great art will come out of the Middle West," but it would be produced by artists who had a truer ability to "perceive their environment."[85] Although it may seem odd, even inaccurate, to describe New York as 'provincial,' this is precisely what a number of writers of the 1930s did. Davis's art, in many ways – including his references to Al Smith, epitomized what these writers found narrow and dependent about the culture of New York. For example, many claimed that Smith, during his presidential campaign, exhibited little understanding of national and global concerns. According to H. L. Mencken, he was "as provincial as a Kansas farmer. He is not only not interested in the great problems that heave and lather the country; he has never heard of them."[86] Similarly, F. Scott Fitzgerald described his view from the Empire State Building:

> From the ruins, lonely and inexplicable as the sphinx, rose the Empire State Building and, just as it had been a tradition of mine to climb to the Plaza Roof to take leave of the beautiful city, extending as far as eyes could reach, so now I went to the roof of the last and most magnificent of towers. Then I understood – everything was explained: …the city was not the endless succession of canyons that he had supposed but that *it had*

[83] Davis, "Davis's Rejoinder," 12.
[84] Benton, "On the American Scene," 8.
[85] Davis, "Davis's Rejoinder," 12-13.
[86] Mencken quoted in Albert Fried, *FDR and His Enemies* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 25.

> *limits* –from the tallest structure he saw for the first time that it faded out into the country on all sides, into an expanse of green and blue that alone was limitless. And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe… That was the rash gift of Alfred E. Smith to the citizens of New York.[87]

Many perceived the culture of New York to be narrow, as if the world existed in one city. This was its great asset, its diversity, its encapsulation of so many world cultures within one small region, but also its blight, that many never really saw beyond its limits.

Benton, who lived for a number of years in New York during the twenties and early thirties, echoed these sentiments in a letter he wrote before returning to Missouri. In this long diatribe against the city that served as his second home, he wrote:

> New York, stacked up against the rest of America, is a highly provincial place. It has such a tremendously concentrated life of its own that it absorbs all the attention of its inhabitants and makes them forget that their city is, after all, only an appendage to the great aggregation of states to the north, south, and west. New Yorkers have a tendency to mistake their interests, wishes, and hopes for those of the whole country.

Besides this narrow attitude, what Benton really found provincial about New York was its continued dependence upon Europe, that it still understood itself culturally as a province. "This is natural, because its population is very heavily bound by ties of blood and habit to the ways of Europe." What is unsettling about this critique is not the perception that New Yorkers need to loosen their cultural dependency, but his linking of this notion to 'ties of blood,' which reads as a direct nativist attack on immigration. Davis, we saw in the previous chapter, celebrated immigration as providing American culture with its vitality and international spirit. Benton, to the contrary, portrayed modernist internationalism as a form of elitism born of "young intellectuals who are not

[87] F. Scott Fitzgerald, "My Lost City" (July 1932) in Fitzgerald (Edmund Wilson, ed.), *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions Books, 1945), 32.

happy unless they are expressing ideas consecrated by a birth overseas."[88] Benton expressed a valid point regarding the need of many intellectuals to validate their abilities in relation to European culture; however, his criticism is mired in a disdain for the foreign.

Benton not only lived in New York for a number of years, but had also been a modernist painter through the early 1920s, his mature work still exhibiting a lingering debt to these influences. No doubt recognizing this, *Art Front* asked: "Is your art free from foreign influence?" As if to short-circuit any possible dialogue, he answered with an unqualified negative. No explanation! In responding to the question of American influence, however, Benton attempted to turn the situation to his advantage. He claimed the European influences of most modernists to be at least as provincial as his own: "American practitioners, for the greater part, look like French practitioners, because they know (have learned) only French practice. With a wider knowledge of historic process as a whole, they would have escaped the sort of provincialism which is involved in the imitation of French process. …It indicates dependency."[89] He suggested that his own experience was wider and more rounded, whereas the supposed internationalism of American modernists exhibits a 'dependency' upon a far narrower set of influences. "The answer to this question is in the Form of my actual work, where my perceptions of the American environment have influenced my historical knowledge of processes (French and other) and set up a new synthesis which no one can confuse with other syntheses, French, Mexican or what not."[90] Benton and Davis agreed that European art is inescapably a part of one's experience as an American, but the question remained as to

[88] Benton, "Essay Before Going West" (as printed in *An Artist in America*, 261-269), 262-3.
[89] Benton, "On the American Scene," 4.
[90] Benton, "On the American Scene," 4.

the extent to which these influences were tempered by the native environment. Both artists claimed the American scene as their subject, but consensus could not be formed on the relative importance of foreign influences in their work.[91]

Both artists also looked to commercial culture as a basis for what they hoped would be an accessible and democratic evocation of the American scene. Davis, in questioning the dichotomy drawn by *Time* between modernist artists producing 'introspective abstractions' on the one hand and the 'direct representation' offered by the American Scene painters on the other, was pointing to the importance of the mediation of direct sensation, whether one's style was classified as abstract or realistic. Davis recognized in Benton's realism little more than racist caricature, the only reality evident being that of lowbrow tabloid entertainment:[92] "Are the gross caricatures of Negroes by Benton to be passed of [sic] as 'direct representation'? The only thing they directly represent is a third-rate vaudeville character cliché with the humor omitted."[93] Furthermore, he saw in the caricatures of the American Scene painters the influence of European art: "They paint burlesque shows, Civil War architecture, the wonderful meals that farm help receives under the New Deal, Mother Nature acting tough in Kansas, and

[91] Schapiro, in "Populist Realism" explained Benton's continued indebtedness to European modernism.
[92] Henry McBride, a few years earlier in 1932, also related Benton's work to 'tabloid' imagery in "Thomas Benton's Murals at the Whitney Museum," *New York Sun*, 10 December 1932, as reproduced in McBride, *Flow of Art*, 295-7. Jacob Burck, in an essay in *Art Front*, also has some insightful comments about the sources of Benton's images. "There can be no doubt as to this art form's being 'American.' This country has given the world the picture-tabloid. But Thomas H. Benton, it seems, prefers to do it by hand and call it art." Burck, "Benton Sees Red," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 8. In *An Artist in America*, Benton uses the stereotype as a literary tool. He tells his stories using slang and colloquial pronunciations, telling the stories of various people and places along the way. With a few short descriptions of random encounters with individuals, he sums up the character of an entire region, thus allowing him to speak of regional tempers and characters.
[93] Davis continued: "Had they a little more wit, they would automatically take their place in the body of propaganda which is constantly being utilized to disfranchise the Negro politically, socially and economically. The same can be said of all people he paints including the portrait of himself which is reproduced on the cover of *Time*. We must at least give him credit for not making any exceptions in his general under-estimating of the human race." Davis, "New York American Scene," 6.

caricatures of Negroes and farmers done in a style which is an amazing filly out of EARLY PUCK AND JUDGE by REPRODUCTION OF MICHAEL ANGELO."[94] Davis described Benton's process as the passing off of the environmental influence of caricature – interpreted through the style of High Renaissance art – as direct observation of nature. In fact, Benton shared Davis's critical attitude regarding the direct reproduction of nature.

Although Davis criticized Benton for his formal borrowing from lowbrow entertainment, Davis too related the form of his art to commercial culture, jazz. Davis had incorporated jazz into his work, even if only on an iconographic level – depicting jazz musicians and establishments, from his earliest years as a student of Henri. He stated in 1945, referring to the impact of canvases by Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse at the 1913 Armory Show: "I also sensed an objective order in these works which I felt was lacking in my own. It gave me the same kind of excitement I got from the numerical precisions of the Negro piano players in the Negro saloons, and I resolved that I would quite definitely have to become a 'modern' artist."[95] For Davis, jazz was analogous to modern art in its 'precision,' and 'objective order,' by which one presumes he referred to art's ability to communicate clearly without violating its own formal logic, even if communicating the experience of the American scene. For Davis, jazz was a dynamic and modern music, sophisticated and yet popular and American. It was unquestionably not tabloid caricature.

In 1937, Burgoyne Diller, the FAP's mural supervisor in New York City, commissioned Davis, along with eleven other modernist artists, to paint a large mural for the newly built Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York. Diller explained:

> These buildings contain social rooms which were open to the WPA/FAP for decoration. The decision to place abstract murals in these rooms was

[94] Davis, "New York American Scene," 6.
[95] Davis, *Stuart Davis*.

> made because these areas were intended to provide a place of relaxation and entertainment for the tenants. The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation.[96]

The commission for abstract art was governed by the belief that it is somehow capable of evoking 'relaxation' in its viewers, a sort of non-distracting but soothing art of 'arbitrary' shapes and colors composed in such a way as to have a relaxing psychological effect. The visual equivalent of Muzak. The historian Jonathan Harris has described how abstract art, often shunned by the government projects in the thirties, was favored for hospitals and other institutions that sought psychological stability and comfort for their viewers; abstract art was believed to be 'therapeutic' as opposed to instructive or revolutionary.[97]

Davis's product for this commission made a clear reference to swing jazz; it was called *Swing Landscape* (Fig. 29, 7' x 14', never installed).[98] In October 1937, he described some of his thoughts on this commission in his notebooks, explaining how the government housing program could improve people's living conditions through the production of a new architecture, the necessary artistic equivalent of which was an art conditioned by the same modern environment. Abstract art was not merely appropriate for housing projects and hospitals but everywhere, for it was the only art truly of its time. "This art reflects the colors and shapes of the time. It has a new sense of space and color

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[96] Diller, "Abstract Murals," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), 69.

[97] Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79, states: "The installations of federal art in psychiatric hospitals raised, in a vivid way, the issue of what social and moral character could be attributed to aesthetic modernism by artists and administrators of the Federal Art Project. In contrast to Project workers' usually very negative view of modernist aesthetic theories and values, the intersection of modernist discourses with those of psychoanalytic and therapeutic themes in the hospital context appears to have been highly positive."

[98] For more information on the specifics of the commission, see Hills, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 116-18.

which reflect the broader view and experience of modern man which modern technological advance has made possible. The train, auto, and airoplane, have made a new sense of space and color. Abstract art reflects this new experience." Abstract art reflected the appearance of the modern world, not only the static design of modern objects but also the manner in which visual experience had been transformed by modern transportation. And as he stressed on other occasions, art does not merely reflect the world, but transforms it. The wide audience his jazzed vision of modern experience could reach in a working-class housing project far surpassed that of any of his previous commissions.[99]

The size of *Swing Landscape*, together with its brilliant and predominantly unmodulated colors, juxtaposed in a discordant all-over pattern, was jarring to some contemporary viewers. Compared to Benton's *Social History of the State of Missouri*, which is clearly organized around three discrete focal points and painted in more muted tones, Davis's composition is almost visually assaulting. It is at once far less complex and intricately engaging due to its simplification of form and far more frenzied due to its strident juxtapositions. Whereas one can psychologically enter Benton's composition, inhabiting his busy if ultimately comprehensible scene, the eye is repelled by *Swing Landscape*, left wandering the 'front' of its surface, never given a place to rest or the reassurance of mimetic identity. To be sure, the space of Benton's mural is not wholly without spatial ambiguity and juxtaposition; he is unmistakably a modern artist. But these juxtapositions do not jolt the eye nearly as intensely. Although *Swing Landscape* is

[99] "They are not familiar with the art itself," Davis explained, "because it is too expensive. But now the gov't made a start in bringing this abstract art directly to the people in modern homes." Although he produced *Men Without Women* for Radio City, it arguably reached a class of viewers more accustomed to modern art.

organized around three primary compositional units, they abut in a manner that interlocks them and does not allow the eye a respite from the clashing of colors and forms. Benton's realism was a tabloid realism, as many including Davis had pointed out; his juxtapositions were those of the modern media, but a media not so much developed to shock the viewer as illustrate an idea in an engaging manner.

In comparing these two murals, one must acknowledge their environmental referents in order to inquire as to their meaning. I'll be brief with regard to Benton, as his work has been analyzed elsewhere in far more depth than I can provide here.[100] He offers, as the title suggests, a social history of Missouri (the mural's intended home), including not only traditional forms of labor and association, but also the signs of modern industry, peoples of different classes, a dancing girl, fat bourgeois suits, violent and arguing African Americans, farm workers and many others. This is a diverse panorama of types and social forms, but it is also a caricature, more reaffirming of existing prejudice than a beckon to change. Davis, on the contrary, while he does offer a more dynamic emblem of modern life, does not make reference to the locale for which his mural was designed, or even New York; its iconography is culled instead from Gloucester. While Gloucester's landscape did provide for interesting formal invention, Davis had also produced many interesting canvases based upon his experiences in New York, which might be more directly relevant to the experiences of a Brooklyn audience. It is possible that Davis wanted to bring some warm summer sun into Brooklyn, offering relaxation and entertainment as described by Diller, but why then the jarring colors and why not the seashore instead of the harbor?

[100] For example, see chapter two of Doss, *Politics of Modernism*.

If the dynamic forms and coloration of this mural, which never allow the eye to come to rest, seem to run contrary to Diller's tone in describing abstract art as 'entertaining' and 'relaxing,' this is reflected in its reception:

> Now Stuart Davis's color is gay as the lark, though its clarion is higher than that of dawn's barnyard Gabriel. Stuart Davis, making the easel scream, supplies his public with seven-league boots; for in the very act of entering the long main gallery at the far end of which his landscape swings (the title is apt enough: 'Swing Landscape'), already you are there; nothing so leisurely as Alice's fall down the rabbit hole; you are there – at any rate in the sense that this well-oiled huge crochet, this non-objective inebriant, cancels everything else within range.[101]

Jewell's description of the experience of encountering Davis's mural is effusive. Davis makes the 'easel scream,' Jewell tells us, not only pointing to the manner in which the painting hails the viewer, insistently exclaiming its presence, but also a possible allusion to the popular nationalistic phrase, making the 'eagle scream.' So loudly does the painting proclaim its presence that even from a great distance it engulfs the spectator and nullifies all other experience, taking him with 'seven-league boots' right into the maw of the composition, an experience similar to the disorientation and sensorial upheaval of Alice's fall down the rabbit hole.[102] It inebriates. Further, Jewell described the painting as a 'crochet.' In explaining Davis methods, I too have discussed the manner in which he ties pictorial elements to the surface of the canvas, bringing the objective referents into the realm of declarative two-dimensional design. This is composition as the all-over arrangement of forms on a flat canvas, but it also borders on mere surface decoration, crochet. Yet the strident tone suggests that it is not merely decorative. Jewell stated that

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[101] Jewell, "Commentary on Murals: Exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery Presents WPA New York Region Survey," *New York Times*, 29 May 1938, p. 117.

[102] The phrase 'seven-league boots' refers to a fairly tale involving a giant with magic boots, in French *Le Petit Poucet* and in English *Hop O' My Thumb.* The phrase describes a rapid voyage in which the wearer travels seven leagues in each stride.

perhaps it "deserves a room of its own or an entire housing project." *Swing Landscape* is not 'relaxing.' It swings, not only musically but, as Jewell noted, perceptually.

The attempt to relate the visual arts to music is always a delicate and awkward endeavor. However, given Davis's own attempts to do so, it is necessary to try to understand the role that he imagined jazz to play in his work. Jazz appealed to Davis, at least in part, for the same reason that it appealed to many artists and writers during the interwar years; it embodied what many perceived to be the only truly American contribution to culture. Above, I quoted a passage form Davis's 'Self-Interview' in which he listed a group of jazz musicians as "younger artists who reflect this American spirit." Several years later, he stated more clearly:

> For a number of years jazz had a tremendous influence on my thoughts about art and life. For me at that time jazz was the only thing that corresponded to an authentic art in America. Mondrian also felt its impact; I talked to him about this several times. He responded to the basic rhythms of jazz in a direct physical way; they even made him want to dance. …I think all my paintings, at least in part, come from this influence… It was the *tradition* of jazz music that affected me.[103]

Jazz is not merely a historically detached expression, as if any are, but is part of an American tradition upon which to base a homegrown and yet resolutely modern art. Davis was not alone in recognizing the possible impact of Jazz in shaping national identity. Dewey too recognized the value of jazz, that despite its real significance as a contemporary American expression, it was often not received as 'art,' whereas much that was received as art was not connected to the people.[104]

Donna Cassidy has offered a compelling study of Davis's engagement with jazz, discussing many similar issues although in far greater detail and with more contextual

[103] Interview with Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 53.
[104] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 5.

evidence than I am able to offer in this study.[105] Jazz, she argues, was central to discussions of national identity as an indigenous expression that had roots in the past but was also linked to the modern and urban consumerism of the twenties. Its meanings were multivalent:

> Discussed in the popular press and churches, among the intelligentsia and both white and black Americans, jazz acquired numerous cultural meanings: it communicated change and rebellion; it was associated with marginal groups – blacks and musicians – and was perceived as a challenge to white cultural hegemony; and it was often viewed as the devil's music, sinful and morally corrupt. Jazz became an important marker for modernist artists for many reasons. They considered it authentic, real, intuitive, vital and modern; both primitive and progressive; and distinctly American. Jazz, in a way, was the ideal American modernist art – anti-victorian, antibourgeois, transgressive, both primitive and modern, natural and industrial. Black culture became an important part of modernism as visual artists – both American and European – engaged in these discussions and represented jazz in their work.[106]

She goes on to discuss how jazz was related by many to the machine-age because of its jarring and 'harsh' sounds, often even employing such devices as car horns and steamboat whistles. Many related its 'cacophony and syncopated beat' to the 'clatter and rhythm of mechanical noise.'[107]

Returning to *Swing Landscape*, one can perhaps understand Davis's striking juxtapositions of complimentary colors as analogous to the cacophony of jazz, with the somewhat irregular arrangement and juxtaposition of forms and colors across the canvas relating to swing's syncopated beat and improvised melodies. Each of the three main sections of this mural is defined by a dominant color harmony that is offset by dissonant notes. For example, a cool blue dominates the left side of the canvas, but within it are

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[105] Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997). She focuses on five artists: John Marin, Joseph Stella, Arthur Dove, Davis, and Aaron Douglas. For an analysis of Davis, see the third chapter.
[106] Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City,* 71.
[107] Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City,* 77.

accents of orange and yellow, such as the orange plume of smoke rising from the yellow house. The entire composition also carries certain tones throughout from left to right. Not only do the dominant blues of the left become the accents when applied on the right, but muted browns also appear fairly regularly across the canvas, almost in a staccato, if offbeat, rhythm. This multiplication of related colors also serves to further flatten the canvas, making of it a rhythmic 'crochet;' the same blue denotes the roof of the house and the background, tying them both into the same plane; even the white ground upon which this image is imposed is brought into the same plane, at least partially, through the inclusion of similar whites throughout the composition. Forms pop in and out of perspective, from positive to negative space; the red and orange box on the lower right (with the complimentary blue corner) does not rest firmly as a positive or negative form; it continues to play and pulse, never resting within the overall swung rhythm playing out across the surface of the mural.

Cassidy contends that Davis's endeavor (along with Arthur Dove's) to develop a formal style between the wars that utilized jazz as a means of Americanizing modernism implicated him in the sanitizing and 'de-Africanization' of jazz. It is her contention that when used as a marker of national identity, as Davis had done, jazz often relinquished its associations with its African-American roots.

> The whitening and sanitizing of jazz in the popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s also informed their view of the music and their jazz paintings. Dove's and Davis's jazz images in turn participated in this process. While the fact that jazz was identified as American is certainly evidence of the blackening of American culture and identity, Dove's and Davis's abstract paintings… made blacks invisible in the representation of jazz.[108]

[108] Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City*, 70.

To some extent, she makes a compelling case. She recognizes that 'pure' jazz does not exist; it is a hybrid form. She also discusses the fact that much popular Swing-era jazz was performed by segregated orchestras that shifted the music away from the improvised 'raucous, wild' styles of its origins.[109] Her evidence for implicating Davis in this process, however, while in part valid, is not at all times convincing. For example, her statements about the non-representation of blacks within Davis's abstractions sometimes seem to imply that abstract art inherently 'whitens' the jazz aesthetic. The implication is that Davis's earlier naturalistic representations of African Americans playing and enjoying jazz is more acceptable, despite the fact that in many of his Ashcan works he caricatures his subjects and merely illustrates the music. Davis's attempted integration of jazz into the form of his abstract paintings through a structural consideration of jazz is seen as somehow problematic because black musicians are not literally portrayed.

Michael Denning, in his study of Popular Front culture, offers valuable insights into the politics of jazz.[110] Although historians often emphasize the centrality of folk music to the Popular Front because of its stronger institutional ties to left-wing organizations, he explains that jazz was a far more popular and galvanizing expression for the working class. He outlines three causes for the emergence of a jazz left: the rise of jazz and Swing as the dominant popular music among the working class, the growth of a Popular Front within Harlem, and the efforts of a number of figures within the jazz community to eliminate racism within the music industry.[111] Nonetheless, he recognizes that the politics of jazz artists was often not embodied as directly as within folk music or

[109] Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City*, 71.
[110] Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997). See chapter 9, "Cabaret Blues," in particular section 2, "Hot Jazz and the CIO," beginning on page 328.
[111] Denning, *Cultural Front*, 328-9.

the radical theater. Central to his understanding of jazz are the attempts made by many artists, black and white, to bridge jazz and orchestral music. In retrospect, this is not the direction that 'progressive' jazz was to take, but during the Popular Front many artists did support the writing (as opposed to improvisation) of orchestral jazz. Denning's study complicates some of the assumptions about the transformation of jazz, as described by Cassidy as its 'whitening', stressing the fact that it was as much a black phenomenon as a white one. It was part of a process of making jazz more serious as well as more popular and visible, bringing it out of the dark clubs and into larger and brightly lit performance halls. On the one hand this was part of the commercialization and sanitizing of jazz, but on the other this attitude resonated very much with the left culture of the Popular Front.[112]

Jazz became an increasingly integral component of Davis's American scene and represents a further level of hybridization in his art. Like many jazz artists of the period, black and white, Davis sought to bring jazz together with elite white culture in the production of a popular American art. Cassidy points to the inevitable pitfalls of such an endeavor but fails to fully emphasize the benefits to be had from such hybridity, which in Davis's case entailed the bringing together of New York and Paris, elite and working-class culture, past and future, black and white.[113] *Swing Landscape* was conceived as a

[112] Lending further support to his claims for the working-class credentials of jazz, he discusses the fact that, contrary to common assumptions, many of the white musicians within the jazz world came from working class backgrounds. Denning, 329-30. Ultimately, Denning is more concerned with class dynamics than with racial politics as such, although they certainly are a significant issue within his study.

[113] For an interesting period discussion of the benefits of cultural and racial hybridity, see Robert Park's 1929 essay "Mentality and Racial Hybrids," in Park, *Race and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 377-392. He states, 377, "Racial hybrids seem to be one of the invariable accompaniments and consequences of human migration. Hybridization is probably, therefore, a mathematical function of the geographic mobility of peoples. At any rate, miscegenation seems to take place, other things being equal, more rapidly than elsewhere on the frontiers of an advancing civilization; in seaport cities, and in commercial centers, where people of divers cultures meet and mingle with more than ordinary freedom; and where, under the influence of a mobile, changing, and cosmopolitan population, custom is relaxed and the traditional distinctions of class and caste not rigorously enforced." He is particularly interested in the role of the mulatto, who he sees as "the cultural advanced guard and the leaders of the Negro people." He cites Booker T. Washington and

large and spectacularly composed mural for an urban housing project. Its style and subject are derived from the American scene understood in terms broad enough to include the material rigor of French cubism, the dynamic sophistication and swing of jazz music, and the geometries found in the wharves of Gloucester. Davis reordered the experience of the American scene, bringing its diversity into a coherent, if almost overwhelming, whole that could provide a model upon which to build future experience and a cultural identity. Benton and Davis each engaged a lively commercial culture in their forging of a uniquely American art that could communicate to a broad audience. The experience of frontier life as envisioned by Benton, however, contrasted sharply with Davis's celebration of the urban cacophony of jazz.

Postscript to the American Scene: Hot Still-Scape

Over time, jazz came to play an ever greater role in Davis's practice, not only increasingly shaping the form of his paintings but also the language through which he described his process. Furthermore, although he continued to insist that his art was based upon the experience of the American scene, literal references to the environment became increasingly scarce. It would be too great a task to fully explain this transformation here, but it must nevertheless be mentioned, as it points to the transformation of his engagement with the American scene into the forties and beyond.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the eclipse of the chauvinistic nationalism that marked so much artistic discourse during the 1930s. Not surprisingly, this shift included a rejection of American Scene painting. By 1940, many critics, even those most

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W.E.B. duBois as examples. He believed that racial hybrids often develop greater intelligence because they are more self-conscious and more stimulated to action because of their situation.

encouraging to these artists such as Peyton Boswell of *Art Digest*, recognized that its days were numbered.[114] Jewell began to refer to the American Scene movement retrospectively: "We witnessed not long ago the rise, inebriating debauch, and decline of that movement called the 'American Scene.'"[115] It is difficult to determine to what extent Davis distanced his practice from objective references in order to remain current as the art world shifted away from the American Scene and to what extent this shift was the result of other factors.

In 1940, Davis painted *Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors – 7th Ave. Style* (Fig. 4.30). This painting is an early example of the direction his practice would take, even if not representing the full extent of his transformation. A significant aspect of this shift is his increasingly common choice to rework previous compositions rather than organize sketches from life. To some extent, he had always done this. Not only are there a number of earlier examples of works based upon previous compositions, but even his method of working from and juxtaposing sketches, often made years earlier, is in some respects similar. What changed, however, is that in the vast majority of his later work, he lifts compositions from his previous paintings wholesale, without modifying the basic compositional structure. Instead he improvised within it. *Hot Still-Scape* is based upon *Egg Beater No. 2* (Fig. 2.2). The primary planar relations remain identical, but the colors are far more vibrant and 'hot' and the secondary forms are far denser. The classical harmony of *Egg Beater No. 2* gives way to the raucous and dazzling colors of *Hot Still-Scape*. Oddly the play of figure and ground, of positive and negative forms, is both increased and denied. The overlapping of planes never rests firmly; one cannot

[114] Peyton Boswell, "Shelving 'American Scene'." *Art Digest* 14, no. 16 (15 May 1940): 3.
[115] Jewell, *Have We an American Art?* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1939), 202-4.

definitively ascertain figure from ground. But the brilliant, impastoed paint and the all-over array of forms, similar in many respects to *Swing Landscape*, keep the eye moving, jumping around on the surface of the canvas, never really allowing it to occupy the shallow pictorial depth or remain situated long enough to decode the forms. The squiggles, lines and dots insist on their existence on the surface, pulling the larger planes onto the canvas. Like a billboard, with which it might compete, the suggestion of depth does not create its illusion, but rather insists upon the blazing surface of hot color. And the stylized signature – possibly its first appearance within his work – almost becomes another squiggle within the composition.[116]

The title of this painting does suggest a place, Seventh Avenue, despite the seeming non-referentiality of the forms. However, it is not precisely a representation of Seventh Avenue so much as an evocation of its mood. Davis's American scene became increasingly less characterized by the organization of the percepts of nature. He turned instead to a notion of experience that was more psychological. "My painting, 'Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors, - 7 Ave. Style', represents a mood which is expressed through the arrangement of colored shapes in perspective."[117] Characteristic of his approach, he did not see this 'mood' as merely personal feeling, but something more shared. "The Mood expressed is not esoteric or extremely personal. It is the product of everyday experience in the new lights, speeds, and spaces of the American environment." He elaborated upon the new sensations that inspired this painting: "The subject matter of this picture is well within the everyday experience of any modern city dweller. Fruit and flowers; kitchen utensils; Fall skies; horizons; taxi-cabs; radio; art exhibitions and reproductions; fast

[116] In his later works, his signature takes on a life of its own, rendered in different angles as one improvised swirl among others.
[117] Stuart Davis Papers, 2 September 1940.

travel; Americana; movies; electric signs; dynamics of the city sights and sounds; these and a thousand more are common experience and they are the basic subject matter which my picture celebrates."[118] Whereas in his earlier work, he conceptually organized the perceptual space of the environment, in his later paintings he creates a sense of space that is analogous to the psychological effect of these perceptions but without referencing them literally, almost as if he had painted the mental concept without the physical percept upon which it was based. If perception is organized in his later work, it is perception conceived in terms of a state of mind rather than the data of visual sensation.

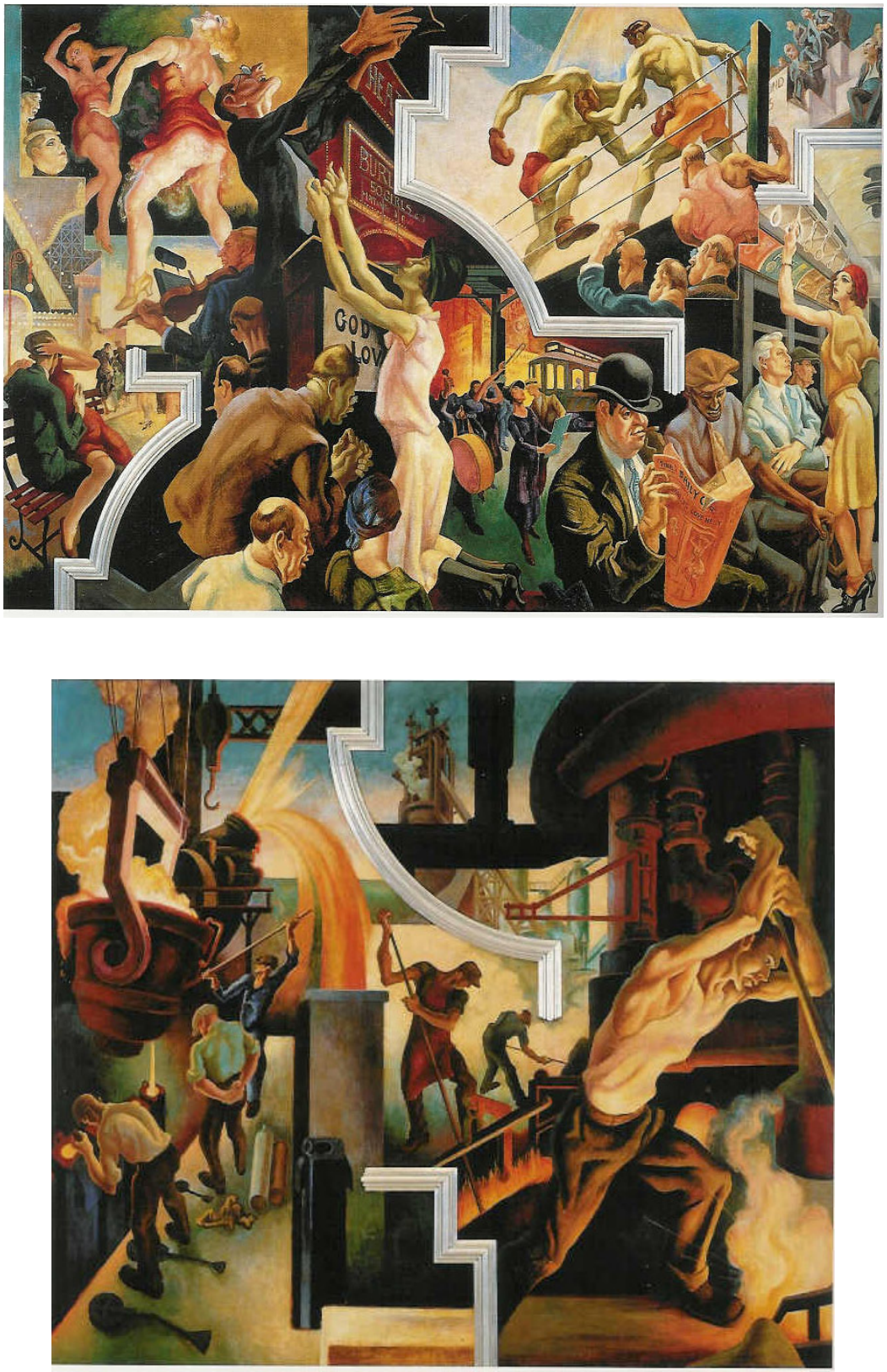
Davis's forging of a jazz modernism came to define his reception as a resolutely American artist. For example, Peyton Boswell described Davis's accomplishments as a jazz painter in *Art Digest* in 1943: "And now, at long last, it seems we have an artist-laureate of the jazz era. He is Stuart Davis, whose current exhibition of abstract paintings at the Downtown Gallery in New York was frankly opened with a 'jam' session."[119] He quoted Emily Genauer of the *World Telegram*:

> Davis hoped that guests would see how the irregular geometrical shapes and piebald colors of his compositions . . . echo the rhythms and tempo of swing music. And they do, too. There are the same two-dimensional quality, the same tangential patterning, the same quicksilver variations within a compact frame – and the same lack of anything in the least resembling emotional and intellectual depth.

Carlyle Burrows of the *Herald Tribune* stated: "If you feel the nervous spirit, the hectic movement which jazz and swing celebrate in modern music, you doubtless have sensed what Davis intends his pictures to convey." Boswell returned with his own voice: "This is alright with me. In so far as they honestly express their time, Mr. Davis' paintings are legitimate. My objection is having jazz confused with music – which, I suppose, is what

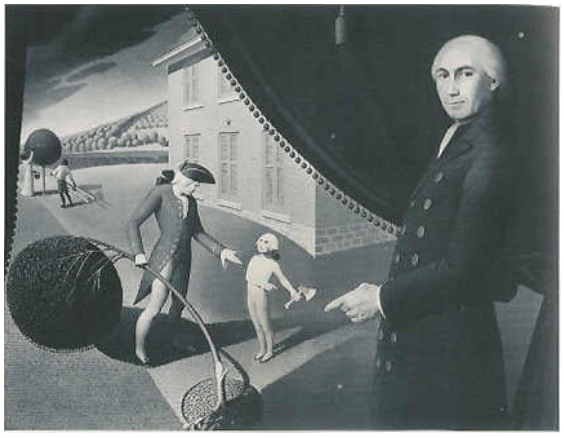
[118] Davis, "Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors –7th Ave. Style," *Parnassus* 12, no. 8 (December 1940): 6.
[119] Peyton Boswell, "Painted Jazz," *Art Digest* 17, no. 10 (15 February 1943): 3.

conservatives say about modernism and art." With certain reservations, Davis had finally become a distinctively American painter, bringing together his abstract responses to the American scene, by this point divorced from direct visual perception, with the distinctively American spirit of jazz.



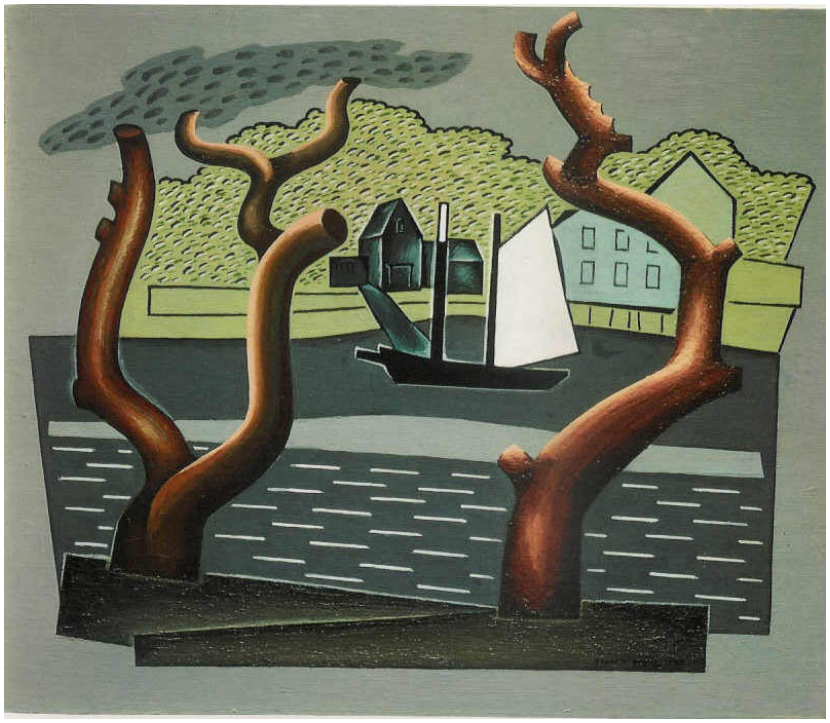
4.1. Thomas Hart Benton, *America Today* (details), 1930.

4.2. Grant Wood, *Daughters of the Revolution*, 1932.

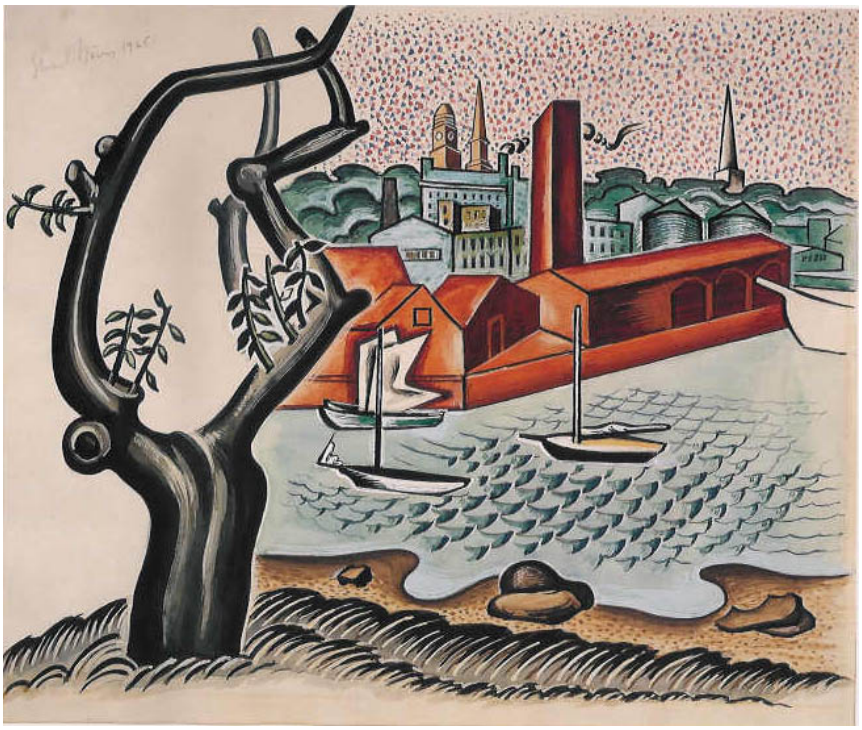


4.3. Grant Wood, *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, 1931.

4.4. Grant Wood, *Parson Weems' Fable*, 1939.

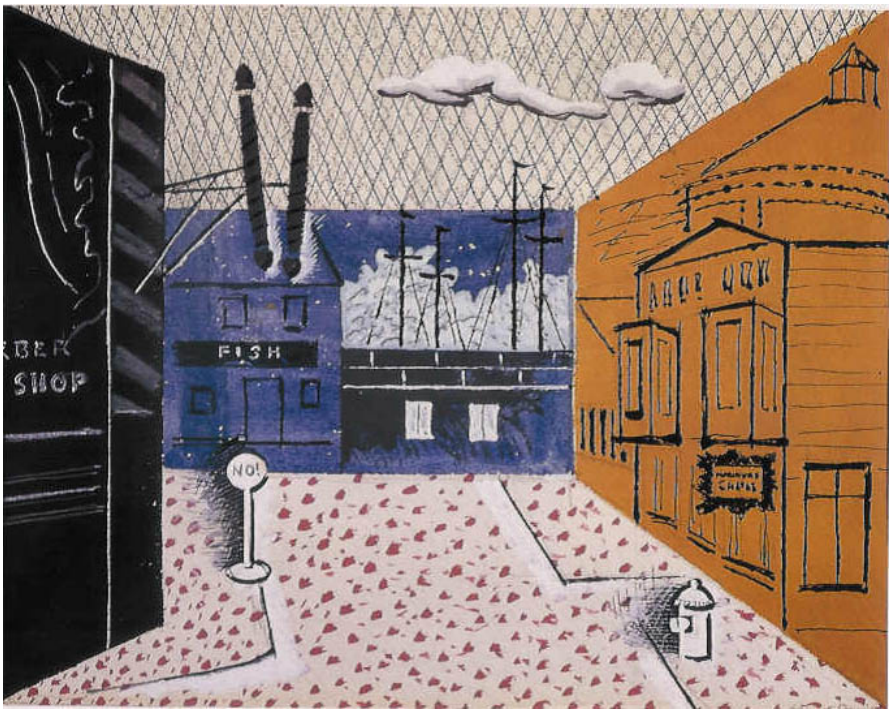


4.5. Davis, *Early American Landscape*, 1925.



4.6. Davis, *Myopic Vista*, 1925.

4.7. Davis, *Town Square*, 1925-6.



4.8. Davis, *New England Street*, 1929.

4.9. Davis, *House and Street*, 1931.

ELEVATED RAILROAD NEAR COENTIES SLIP, EAST RIVER.

4.10. Illustration from *King's Handbook of New York*, 1892.

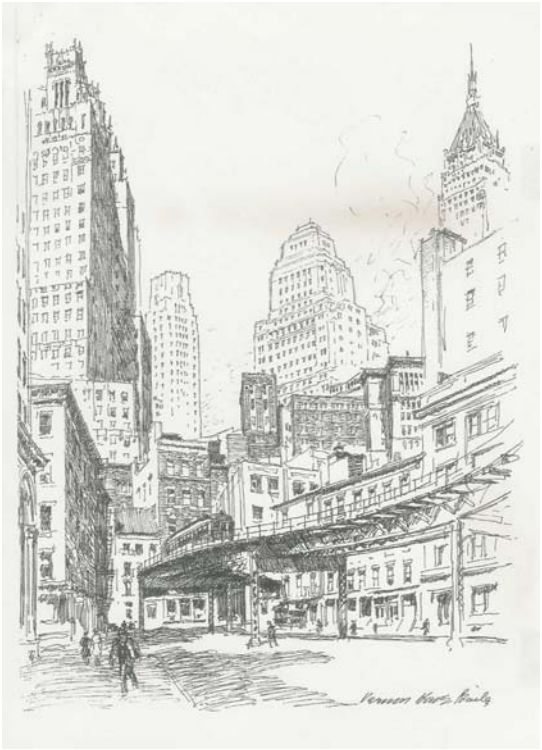

ELEVATED RAILROAD IN COENTIES SLIP. PRODUCE EXCHANGE TOWER.

4.11. Illustration from *King's Handbook of New York*, 1892.

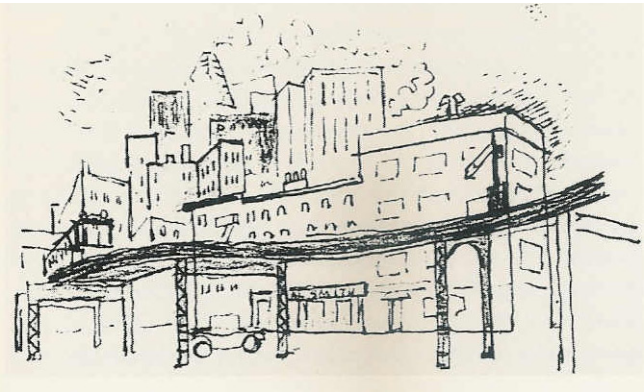

JEANNETTE PARK, COENTIES SLIP, EAST RIVER, LOOKING TOWARD BROOKLYN.

4.12. Illustration from *King's Handbook of New York*, 1892.

4.13. Bailey, *International Telephone and Telegraph Building*, 1935.



4.14. Bailey, *Coenties Slip*, 1935



4.15. Davis, sketch of Coenties slip, 1926.

4.16. Davis, *New York Mural*, 1932.

4.17. Davis, *Jefferson Market*, 1930

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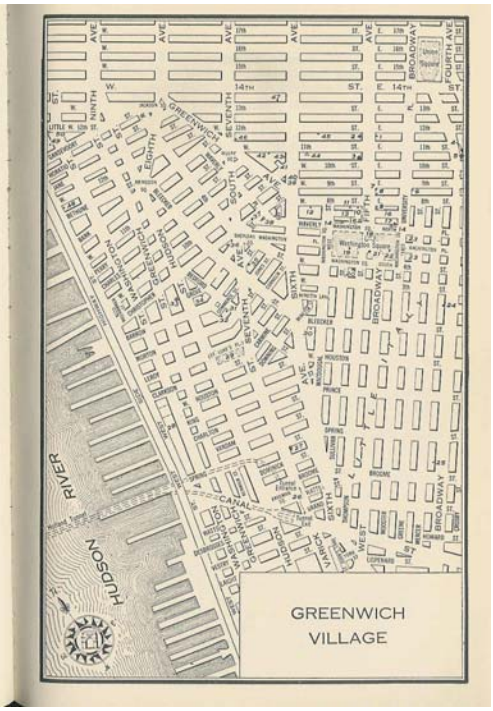
epidemic, quartered temporarily the counting houses of Wall Street, and still bears the name Bank Street.

From 1825 to 1850, the population of Greenwich Village quadrupled, its inhabitants being largely of middle-class and well-to-do American stock. But for the next half-century, its growth, although steady, was slower than that of New York as a whole. While the city moved steadily northward, along Broadway, Fifth Avenue, and other great arteries, the Village, with its narrow erratic streets, remained a quiet backwater. As late as 1875, since only 32 per cent of its population was foreign-born—unusual for Manhattan—the section was known as the "American Ward."

An area so central, however, could not escape the ever encroaching poorer classes. Already numbers of Irish immigrants had moved into the neighborhood, and later a Negro invasion, starting at the southeastern edge of the Village and moving north to Washington Square itself,

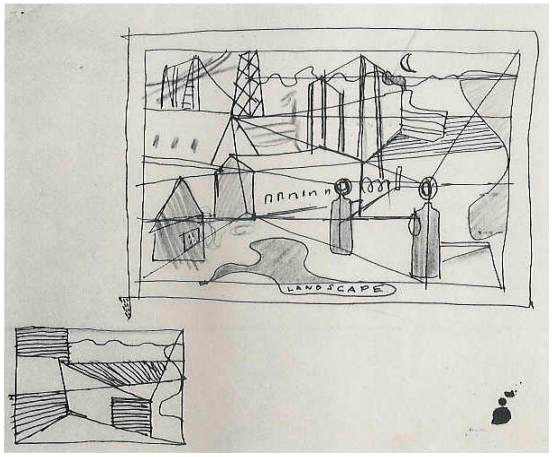
KEY TO GREENWICH VILLAGE MAP

1. Salmagundi Club
2. First Presbyterian Church
3. Church of the Ascension
4. Grace Church School
5. Grace Episcopal Church
6. Hotel Lafayette
7. Home of Mark Twain
8. Hotel Brevoort
9. One Fifth Avenue
10. Clay Club
11. Whitney Museum of Art
12. A.C.A. Gallery
13. MacDougal Alley
14. The Row
15. Rhinelander Mansion
16. Washington Mews
17. Wanamaker House
18. Washington Arch
19. Bust of Alexander Lyman Holley
20. Judson Memorial Baptist Church
21. World War Memorial Flagpole
22. Statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi
23. New York University Museum of Living Art
24. Broadway Central Hotel
25. Bannerman Museum
26. Holland Tunnel
27. Spring Street Presbyterian Church
28. St. John's Park Freight Terminal
29. Hudson Park Playground
30. Little Red School House
31. Narrowest House in New York
32. Cherry Lane Theater
33. St. Luke's Chapel
34. Grove Court
35. Greenwich House
36. Site of Tom Paine House
37. Statue of General Sheridan
38. Northern Dispensary
39. House of Detention for Women
40. Jefferson Market Court
41. Patchin Place
42. Rhinelander Gardens
43. Milligan Place
44. Spanish-Portuguese Cemetery
45. New School for Social Research
46. St. Vincent's Hospital
47. Downtown Gallery
48. Bell Telephone Laboratory
49. Gansevoort Market
50. West Washington Market

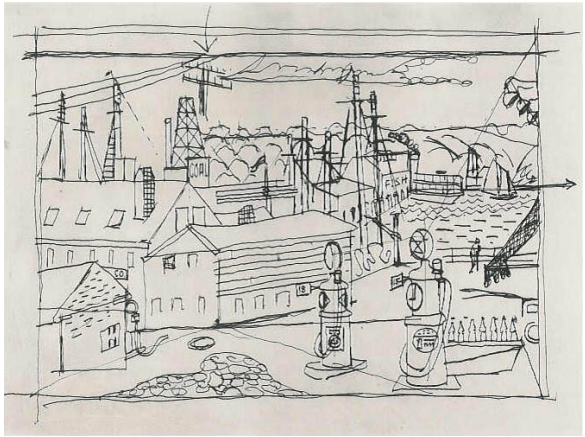


4.18. *WPA Guide* map of Greenwich Village.

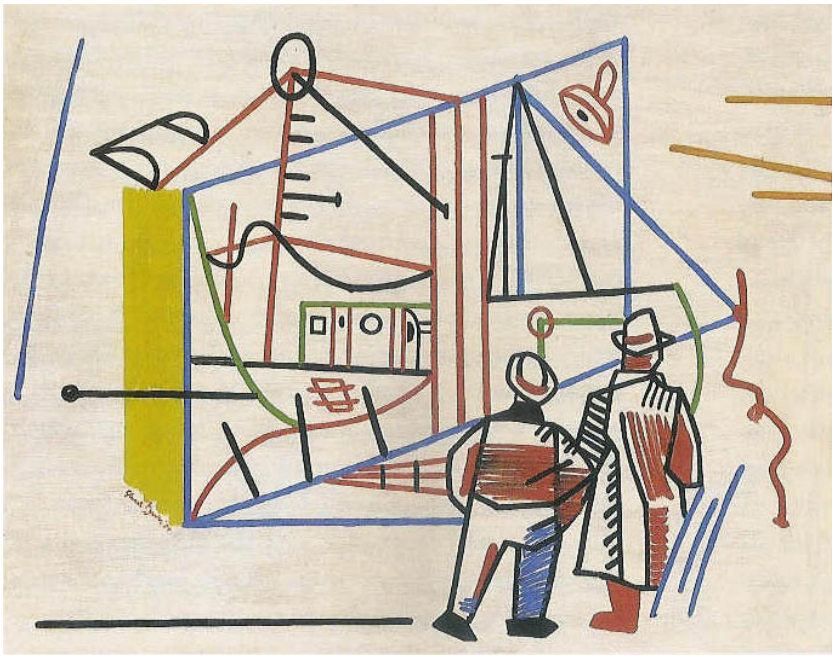
4.19. Davis, *Landscape with Garage Lights*, 1932.



4.20. study for *Garage Lights*, ca. 1931.



4.21. study for *Garage Lights*, ca. 1931.

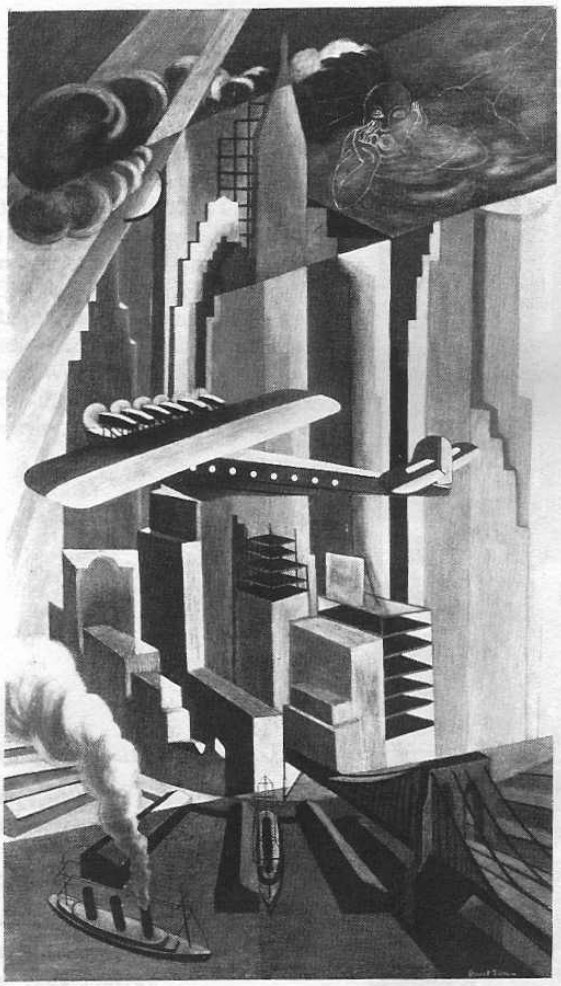


4.22. Davis, *Men and Machine*, 1934.

4.23. Davis, *Windshield Mirror*, 1932.

4.24. Davis, *Radio Tubes*, 1931.

4.25. Davis, *Television*, 1931.



FIENE

Ernest Fiene, painter, etcher, and lithographer. Born in the Rhineland, Germany, 1894. Educated at the National Academy of Design, 1915-19, and in etching and lithography at the Art Students' League, New York, 1924-25. At present an instructor in drawing, painting, and etching at the Westchester County Center. One-man shows in New York at Whitney Studio Club, 1923; Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery, 1926, '30, '31; The Downtown Gallery, 1928; and in Chicago at the Arts Club, 1930. Represented in the permanent collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, the Newark, Los Angeles and San Francisco Museums, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Large panel (illustrated at left)

Aviation
based on left-hand section of Study

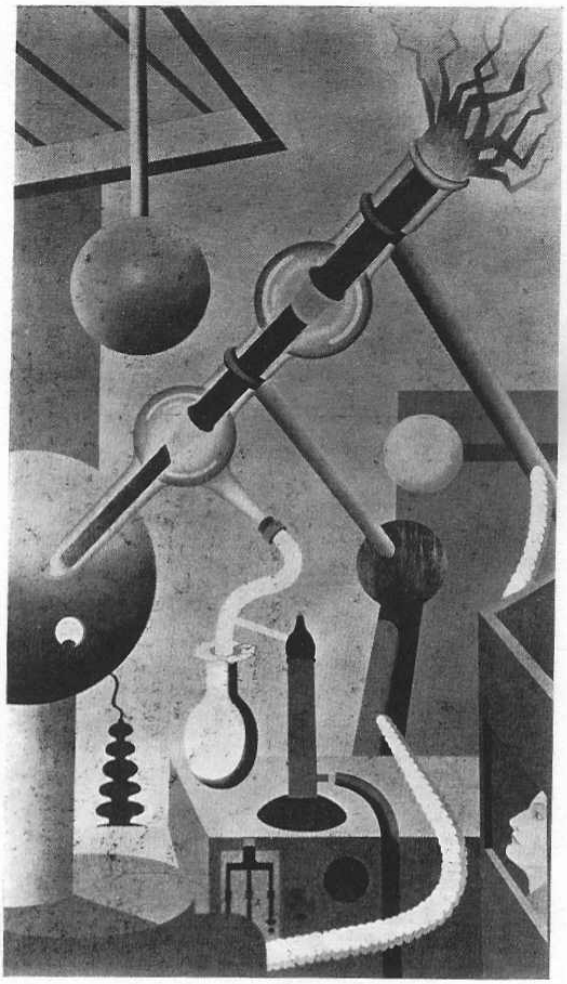
Study for three-part composition (below)

Mechanical Progress

left: Aviation
center: Television
right: Steel Structure

Medium: Tempera on gesso grounded wooden panels.

4.26. Ernest Fiene, *Mechanical Progress*, 1932.



BILLINGS

Henry Billings, painter and mural decorator. Born, New York City, 1901. Studied, Art Students' League, 1918-20. First one-man show at the Daniel Gallery, 1928. Exhibition of sample murals in relief and metal, Squibb Building, New York, 1932. Represented in the Gallery of Living Art, New York University, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Large panel (illustrated at left)

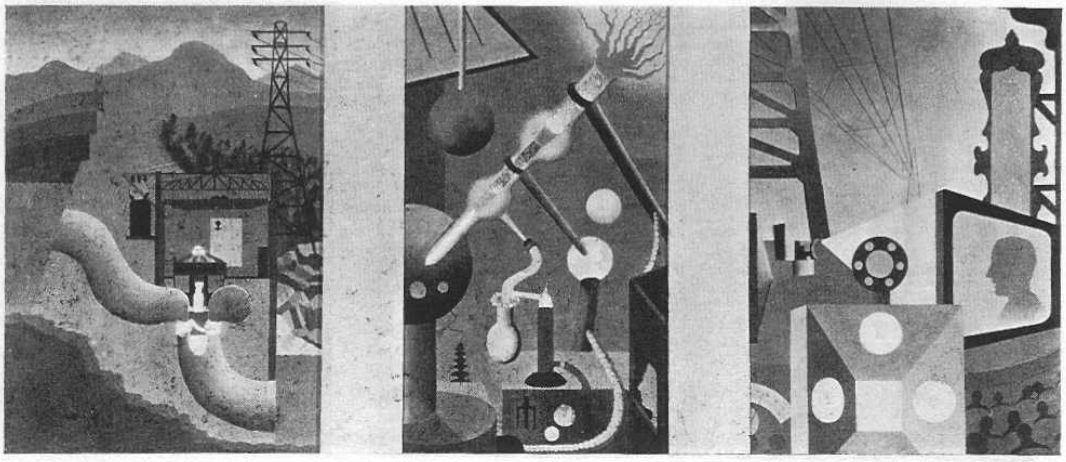
Electrical Research
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

Electricity in Modern Life

left: Source of Electrical Power
center: Electrical Research
right: Electrical Amusements, particularly Television

Medium: Oil paint and metal leaf upon prepared wood.



4.27. Henry Billings, *Electricity in Modern Life*, 1932.

4.28. Thomas Hart Benton, *Social History of the State of Missouri* (detail), 1936.

4.29. Davis, *Swing Landscape*, 1938.

4.30. Davis, *Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors – Seventh Ave. Style*, 1940.

Conclusion

Stuart Davis understood that the production of art, even where seemingly divorced from direct political intent, is an act with political consequences. It is this knowledge of the ideological nature of aesthetic form that enabled him to recognize that he did not need to illustrate a particular political viewpoint in order for his art to communicate socially progressive content. He believed that his abstract art could transform reality through the extension and reordering of spatial experience. Furthermore, his engagement with the American scene makes clear the extent to which the pictorial reorganization of space that socially anchored his practice is inextricably bound to the politics of place.

Davis argued that painting, in reordering experience, offered to the viewer a theory of reality, a means of conceptualizing space. He explained that it is space that binds together the 'discontinuous' elements of matter into a continuity, that it is not merely a container for objects and action, a vacuum to be filled with human labor and commodities, but is itself productive, an active part of the changing environment. El trains, schooners, fish processing plants, radios: these exist in space but are also productive of space. I have explained this on a formal level in relation to the planes that are produced by the extension of the forms of depicted objects, tying space and objects into a unity. I have also discussed Davis's iconographic choices relative to contemporary discussions of the manner in which certain objects and technologies had transformed geography and the perception of space. Davis believed that the conceptual understanding of space offered by his paintings could be instrumental in the ordering of future experiences.

Davis's intentions are complex and difficult to contain within any single conceptual framework. For this reason, I have not attempted to present his theories as a simple totality devoid of contradiction. In fact, those places where Davis's logic fails or is pushed to its limit have interested me at least as much as those where it comes together seemingly without effort. The contradictions within Davis's theoretical writings represent not so much his failure as an artist, as a serious attempt to come to terms with a number of very pressing concerns that faced artists and intellectuals of his generation. He was not content to appropriate a pre-existing aesthetic or theoretical platform as his own. Instead, he brought together diverse logics in an attempt to find a new synthesis that could explain as well as guide his own practice. This synthesis is not a mere compromise between Marxism and Instrumentalism or formalism and social content. Rather, he pushed each of these logics to its limit, seeking resolution dialectically rather than through concession. More important to my analysis than the ultimate validity of this logic has been what it represents, which is a profound engagement with what were vitally important aesthetic and political issues facing artists during the interwar years.

Intentions, however, do not in themselves determine the significance of a work of art. Aesthetic production always entails the creation of unintended meanings, values imparted to a work that are more the result of ideology and socialization than personal volition. I have attempted to remain sensitive to both sources of meaning within this dissertation, to the extent to which they can be neatly isolated. Through the analysis of iconography and reception I have brought out some of the less explicit meanings of Davis's work. Even in my examination of his intentions, however, if I had not read between the lines of his statements and placed them within a broader historical context,

the Instrumentalist ideas that clearly played so important a role in his understanding of the social function of art would not have been brought forth; it is all too easy to take Davis at his word when he stated his intentions of aligning his practice with Marxism and international Communism, which while not entirely inaccurate are only a part of a larger and more complex story.

Marx himself, although he wrote about art on a few occasions, never outlined a precise method for its interpretation or production. In this we are fortunate, for it is this lack of a specific doctrine that has led to so much fruitful discussion regarding its social function. To be sure, an inflexible aesthetic dogma did develop under the regime of Joseph Stalin, but it never closed the possibilities for open investigation in the West as it did in the Soviet Union, to which Davis's relatively independent artistic activities during the late thirties attest. His attempt to come to terms with the implications of Marxism for the production of art represents just one effort within a long history of such intellectual labors. His particular position is at once highly particular and clearly marked by these broader discussions. In certain respects, his working through of Marxism resembles that of Sydney Hook, who employed Dewey's Instrumentalism as a means of updating and Americanizing Marx. Davis, of course, followed this tactic far less explicitly and not always to the same conclusions. Furthermore, certain fundamental tenets of Marxist theory, including ideology critique, had no place within Davis's conceptualization of artistic production, even if they played crucial roles in his understanding of the reception of art and the institutional structure of the art world.

Dewey's impact on the interwar art world is acknowledged to have been significant. For the most part, however, his role is understood through his influence upon

such figures as Thomas Benton and Holger Cahill. As I have shown, the art world's engagement with Dewey's theories was far more complex and broad than this picture allows. While historians usually discuss Davis as a modernist painter who turned to Marxist politics during the thirties, his understanding of the social function of art clearly exhibits a familiarity with Dewey's ideas. By complicating our understanding of Dewey's role in the interwar art world, I have begun to destabilize the interpretive categories that still characterize our understanding of this period, categories that for the most part have been handed down without question from the artists and critics who originally framed them. While these classifications certainly have their historical value, their rigidity often prevents a deeper understanding of the art produced. Davis and Benton no doubt had legitimate reasons to argue, but they also shared a number of fundamental assumptions, the comprehension of which allows us to more fully comprehend these disagreements. Furthermore, not only was Dewey's influence upon the interwar art world broader than that usually presented, but his involvement with the art world also undoubtedly shaped his own development of the Instrumentalist theories that were in turn embraced by artists and critics.

As I suggested in concluding the fourth chapter, Davis's art changed markedly in the following decades. His paintings grew larger in size, their colors became even more vibrant, words grew into autonomous compositional elements, and his forms became increasingly detached from any recognizable environmental referents. Throughout his career, however, he maintained that his art was based upon the reordering and extension of the experience of the American scene. While his pictures suggest that his

conceptualization of this process had clearly changed, his stated intentions in certain respects remained consistent. In 1951 he stated of his 'Objective Art:'

> Objective Art sees the Percept of the Real World as an Immediate Given Event, without any Abstract Term in it. But there is Consciousness of Change, of Motion, in it. The Real Object, its Image of Idea as Design, are experienced as a simultaneous event in Consciousness. These three distinct realities are Perceived as a single Object; a Headline on the Display-Surface of Common Sense. The consciousness of change experienced in these separate identifications is understood as the Total Form of this Object. To know this is the experience of its Free Accomplishment; an act amenable to Volition. This is the Total Appearance, hence Total Content of Objective Art, Absolute Art. Its Universal Principle is the Sense of Freedom.[1]

Not only the form of his art, but the style of his writing had changed since the thirties. His logic, however, remains in certain important respects unchanged. The pragmatic materialism that defined his understanding of Cubism in 1918 as the 'bridge from percept to concept' was solidified in the thirties in relation to Dewey's Instrumentalism and remained with him into his late career being further transformed.

What most significantly changed in the forties is that his understanding of experience became increasingly conceptual, even psychological, less connected to the percepts of the environment. One can find parallels in this regard to such artists as Willem deKooning and Franz Kline, whose work also unmistakably expresses urban experience, less through resemblance than through the evocation of the mood and psychological impact of urban life. Davis knew deKooning well in the thirties, and it is tempting to speculate upon what they may have learned from one another. Ultimately, of course, Davis's vision remained optimistic and was increasingly infused with the rhythms of jazz, whereas deKooning's was far darker, more violent. Throughout his career, the temporal dimensions of experience for Davis were progressive, as they were for Dewey;

[1] Davis in Museum of Modern Art, New York, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *MoMA Bulletin* 18, no. 3.

they suggested a means of better ordering reality. If urban experience could be said to express a temporality for an artist such as deKooning, it is a catastrophic one, governed by a markedly different understanding of history.

Within a broader account of the development of modern art, Davis's activities in the 1930s represent one attempt to relate art to experience as a means of bridging the gap separating it from its public. Each of these efforts has brought something new to bear on the obstacles that face modern artists in communicating their ideas. One of the most oft-cited examples of this strategy is that of the Minimalists in the 1960s who brought concerns about the phenomenology of experience and perception to the production of art and in so doing brought art out of its own conceptual space into that of the viewer: the space of the gallery itself – and increasingly spaces beyond its white walls – became an integral part of the perception of art.[2] More recently, many artists have sought to produce interactive works in which the viewer is a literal participant not only in the reception of the work, but also in the production itself. For these artists, art does not exist as a discrete object, performance or installation but through the actions of an audience that create new situations each time the work is encountered.[3] To be sure, this is far afield from anything Dewey had imagined and one would have to dig far to uncover his name within the

[2] The theorist who is most often discussed as a model for these developments is Maurice Merleau-Ponty; see specifically his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Some of the most insightful period writings on these artists come from the artist Robert Morris (see for example: "Notes on Sculpture," 1966, reprinted in Gregory Battcock ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and the critic Michael Fried (see "Art and Objecthood," *Art Forum* 1967, as reproduced in Battcock, *Minimal Art*), despite the latter's negative assessment of these artists.

[3] The artist who most clearly exemplifies this trend for most observers is Rirkrit Tiravanija. Also, many have come to associate these artists with the writings of Nicolas Bourriaud (see his *Relational Aesthetics*, 1997; Les Presses du Réel, 2003). It is both valuable to have a complex and theoretically reflective interpretive structure such as his in place and limiting in that his methods favor large formal and intellectual narratives over the interpretation of the social engagement of these artists in terms of the particular and local meanings that these works are capable of evoking. The latter especially can be disappointing in that it is this aspect of these interactive works that are most empowering for the viewer as an active participant in the production of meaning. For an alternative reading of such art, see my essay, John X. Christ, "Bodies in Heat: A Discussion of Pia Lindman's Sauna Projects," *Rethinking Marxism* 15, no. 2, (April 2003).

discourse framing these practices. However, his theories do often mesh surprisingly well with this work, suggesting both the continued relevance of his philosophical assumptions to the contemporary scene as well as the possible limitations of current attempts to push beyond the problems of previous aesthetic models.

Davis also shares with many modern artists the practice of explaining his art in great detail, if not always perspicuity, to a public perceived to be either unconvinced or unfamiliar with his artistic language. Like many of these artists, he argued at times that his art alone, without the support of any textual supplements, should be capable of communicating the meanings that he ascribed to it. The reception of his art makes clear, however, that critics considered his writings as seriously as his paintings searching for clues regarding its significance. In this regard, my own analysis has been no exception. Would so many critics have puzzled over the realism of his abstract style, for example, if Davis himself had not indicated that this was among his primary concerns? The relationship between Davis's art and theory displays a great deal of dependency, the effects of which structured both the production and reception of his art.

Many of the issues with which Davis struggled during the interwar years regarding the transformation of space and geography are still very much with us today. Although the particulars have been greatly transformed over the course of almost a century, the basic economic and political mechanisms that have guided these changes remain fundamentally unaltered. The similarities between the interwar context and the current one points to the continued relevance of an analysis of the relationship between the capitalist economy, the nation-state and the development of culture. Lenin, in 1917, in

one of his most cited essays, described imperialism as "the highest stage of capitalism."[4] In 1927, Siegfried forewarned of the possible dangers of US imperialism. Today, it is almost a commonplace of journalism to describe the role of the US in international politics and economics as imperial.[5] Discussions of 'globalization' and the 'digital revolution' are so pervasive as to almost seem trite. And, of course we too have our share of zealous patriots, more concerned with the global stature of the US in terms of military or economic power than with international cooperation or human dignity. Because these problems are still very much with us, it is obvious that the solutions offered by history are inadequate. History, however, can offer perspective and a deeper understanding of our current situation.

The social production of space and geography has served as the subtext of this dissertation. The emphasis upon the role that space plays in the development of modern society has been growing since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and more recently has gained a particularly privileged position within social theory. Davis's engagement with these themes has guided much of my analysis of the political content of his art. His project represents one among many such attempts by artists, theorists and activists to grapple with the condition of modern society. The theoretical framework that has guided my historicization of Davis's conception of space has come largely from the writings of such authors as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey and especially David Harvey.[6] While

[4] Lenin, "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism," in Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Lenin Anthology*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 204-274.
[5] For more in-depth, if at times divergent, treatments of these issues see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) and David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[6] For example, see Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (1974; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991, translated Donald Nicholson-Smith) and *Writings on Cities*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, translated and edited Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas), Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*, (New York: Routledge, 1984), and Harvey, *Spaces of*

these names are absent from my previous discussions, their ideas are very much a part of my perspective on art, politics and society. The visual arts deal specifically in the manipulation of material and ideas in space, whether one is discussing a painting by Davis, a video installation by Bruce Nauman or a definition posted on a wall by Joseph Kosuth; even at their most conceptual, these works communicate through spatial conventions. Artists today continue to engage space in new and creative ways, sometimes subverting, sometimes keenly interrogating and at others affirming evolving conceptions of space. A study of the broader developments of the spatial relations of modern capitalist society can offer tremendous insight in interpreting the visual arts, in particular as contemporary artists become increasingly engaged not only with represented spaces but also with action that takes place in literal social space. Further, one must remain aware not only of the ways in which our understanding of space can be used in the analysis of art, but also the manner in which art itself offers new means of conceiving space, as art too is productive of knowledge. Those concerned with the interpretation of modern art must possess at least as complex an understanding of the manner in which space operates as the artists themselves, not only within individual artworks but also in the broader social sphere, in the spaces of reception.

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