Stuart Davis as Public Artist: American Painting and the Reconstruction of the Public Sphere

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In the years between the world wars, serious questions surfaced regarding the continued health of American democracy and especially the ability of public life to withstand the stresses placed upon it by rapid modernisation and other challenges to social integration. Stuart Davis participated in the ensuing attempts to reconstruct American cultural democracy by coupling his role as a public intellectual and activist to his efforts to produce a modern art capable of communicating shared experiences and collective values to a broad audience. His outspoken activism, leadership roles in the Artists' Union and American Artists' Congress, mural commissions, involvement with the New Deal art projects, and defence of the progressive nature of modernist art place him among the most prominent public artists of the interwar years. He worked alongside fellow artists, intellectuals, and activists to coordinate these activities with broader struggles for social justice, to bridge the space between the symbolic realm of the fine arts and the institutionalised practices of civil society that galvanise public life and can give rise to new forms of solidarity.[1]

American Democracy in Crisis

The decade following the First World War was a time of both bright-eyed optimism and mounting anxiety in the USA. But why in the midst of the boom of the 1920s did so many Americans question their collective identity and the health of their democracy? The reasons are numerous and complex. Society was becoming ever more corporate and urbanised. The frontier – that mythic pillar of American culture – was deemed closed. The small-scale agrarian republic characterised by face-to-face communication and town meetings succumbed to the centralised and bureaucratic power of the modern federal state and urban-industrial capital from which citizens felt increasingly distant. Technocratic experts not directly accountable to public scrutiny played an expanding role in governance, leaving civil society with shrinking abilities to counter their power. Despite a booming market, many workers struggled financially and politically. A maturing consumer society continued to replace open communication and solidarity with commodity exchange and acquisitive individualism. The mass media promised to unite diverse peoples in shared conversation, but there loomed the danger of oligarchy and the one-way flow of content. Whatever the causes, many sensed that they had lost control, not only of governance, but also of their very ability to formulate coherent and cohesive ideas. The model of an open and democratic public sphere, though as much an ideal type as an historical reality, became increasingly difficult to sustain.

The situation of American labour was closely bound to this ideological crisis. Workers had little control over their labour and their incomes rose slowly compared with the overall economy, a serious problem not just ethically but also structurally. Industrial rationalisation and the rise of 'scientific management' techniques increased efficiency and profit without ameliorating

1. I employ the term 'civil society' to denote a realm formally distinguished from both economic and political society, though in various ways both subject and resistant to them. Gramsci provides a valuable, if not entirely unproblematic, model for understanding the role of culture as institutionalized in civil society as an agent of social change. See Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks,* 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). For a broad assessment of Gramsci's importance to the history of Marxist political theory, see Peter Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011). For a rigorous assessment of his place in the intellectual history of 'civil society', see Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

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doi:10.1093/oxartj/kct041 Advance Access publication 16 February 2014

workers' lives. Entry into the First World War brought centralised planning and new controls on the media that tightly entwined the state and market, inhibited political liberties, and further eroded labour rights. Workers who did exercise their right to strike or to align with radical political movements often found their efforts swiftly, and at times violently, suppressed. Until receiving limited concessions under the New Deal, workers struggled with marginal success for collective self-determination, continued to face the enforcement of open-shop rules, and were often pressured to join pliable company unions.[2]

The responses of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey to this crisis provide a valuable point of reference, for they lucidly articulated the issues at stake as individuals searched for a way forward. Lippmann had been a notable intellectual and journalist since the 1910s and cofounded the liberal *New Republic* in 1914. In the 1920s, he published a series of influential responses to what he described as the decline of journalistic quality and public opinion, most notably in his books *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925). As modern society and political administration grew more complex, he did not believe that citizens could maintain the technical expertise or even interest in important issues to engage in legitimate discussion of policy. Where a semblance of public opinion could be found, he argued, it was a mere 'phantom'. He had little faith in the ability of a reinvigorated public to engage in meaningful policy deliberations. He instead advocated for the administration of society by a class of experts, really little more than technocrats managing a functionalised state apparatus, as the path forward for democracy. He rightly discerned in modernity a process of rationalisation that decoupled specialised areas of competence from legitimation in ordinary discourse, but rather than seek new forms of democratisation responsive to the complex realities of the twentieth century, he accepted the bureaucratisation of politics and what sociologist Max Weber famously called the 'iron cage' of modernity. As for his one-time adherence to socialist politics, it was discarded along with that 'mystical fallacy of democracy, that the people, all of them, are competent'. As the public was bypassed by a 'governing class', despite his evident regrets, so too would any democratic legitimacy.[3]

Dewey too was a renowned public intellectual, known especially for his role in education reform, his further development of American pragmatist (or as he preferred 'instrumentalist') philosophy, and his advocacy for progressive political causes. By the late 1920s, he had also become a commonly cited figure among artists and critics interested in the contested relationship between art and its public, including several of Davis's colleagues, as he increasingly wrote of the importance of aesthetic experience, outlined the limitations of cultural institutions, and developed practical connections to the art world. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), he echoed Lippmann's diagnosis, describing the withering quality of journalism, the lack of meaningful communication, and the increasing manipulation of public opinion. He was more optimistic, however, regarding the prospects of restoring a democracy founded in an educated and cohesive public and was quite suspect of the notion of 'rule by experts', which he characterised as undemocratic and likely to undercut the very expertise that buoyed this system: 'A class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all'. He maintained that public life could be restored, but only through a radical questioning of the foundations of modern democracy. He prescribed, if sometimes vaguely, a robust and creative culture of shared values, 'common experience', and open communication and a concomitant reconstruction of political and cultural institutions.[4]

2. On the history of labour and the position of the worker in society, see Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker 1920–1933* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966); David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); or Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

3. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922) and *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925). Lippmann quoted in *The Phantom Public*, p. 38.

4. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (1927; Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946). See also his *Individualism Old and New* (1929–30, *New Republic*; republished by Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1984). Dewey quoted in *Public and Its Problems*, pp. 205–7.

Despite such dissensions, the edifice of the social order remained relatively intact until the onset of the Great Depression. In this heightened state of crisis, Lippmann reiterated his defence of specialised rationalisation. While he warned of the dangers of economic and political power growing overly entwined in a 'planned and regimented state socialism' as they had during the war, he nevertheless encouraged state intervention to 'overcome the disorders of capitalism', remained dismissive of popular opinion, and supported many New Deal programmes.[5] Dewey, to the contrary, remained a sharp critic of mainstream politics, including the New Deal and endorsed the Socialist Party. In *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), he outlined a liberal defence of radical politics, explaining that 'any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed' and distinguished his vision from both Democratic and Communist alternatives, the latter despite more positively assessing the Soviet Union a decade earlier.[6]

As the crisis deepened, Marxist voices became increasingly prominent in this conversation, reshaping both aesthetic and political discourse in profound ways. Lewis Corey, for example, pointedly described this ideological crisis as well as the contradictions of the class structure and post-war state capitalism that were at its root: 'The crisis of the American Dream is an ideological expression of the class-economic crisis of the middle class. The dream was its creation, and the dream is now a nightmare'.[7] As a whole, Marxists were united, despite various factional rifts, in grounding their analysis decisively and densely in political economy and in proposing a socialist reorganisation of the economy with the state acting as a leading force in democratisation. They developed a complex relationship with instrumentalists like Dewey that is especially germane to the history of interwar culture. Though their mutual critiques could be blindly sectarian, with Marxists, for example, sometimes employing the period parlance of 'social fascist' to describe Dewey, this did not prevent them from finding common ground and profoundly shaping art discourse. Dewey collaborated with outspoken Marxists, including his own student Sidney Hook, and defended Leon Trotsky's innocence against the Soviets, and his writings were warmly described by several prominent Marxists. Ultimately, Dewey and his staunchest followers differed from Marxists in putting greater faith in an independent civil society rather than a centralised state as an organ of change and in seeking to maintain a liberal public sphere rather than fomenting a proletarian public that could organise against that of the bourgeoisie, but most Communists also understood the strategic importance of forming broadly based coalitions within civil society and participated in liberal and radical clubs, unions, and journals to create cohesion, raise consciousness, and exert pressure as a bloc.

Cultural Democracy and Public Art

Many writers described the arts as a potential catalyst in reconstructing American democracy, but usually not without suggesting that they too had lost their way and had drifted increasingly distant from public life. Diagnoses of this schism were not driven solely by a critique of the commodity status of art, which does not entirely preclude public relevance or critical resistance, but rather by more materially grounded concerns about the wielding of power by social classes and institutions.

Dewey's high-profile role as a public intellectual carried over into the cultural sphere. In influential essays and books, including articles in the *New Republic* and his widely read *Art as Experience*, he described art as one of the most profound but also ailing vehicles of communication.[8] 'While the artisan becomes more of a mechanic

5. Lippmann, *The Method of Freedom* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1934). Lippmann quoted p. 16.

6. Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963). Dewey's reaction to the Soviet Union appeared as a series of essays 'Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World' in the *New Republic* in 1929. For more recent and influential theoretical models of a conflictual public sphere, see especially Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

7. For a typical Marxist critique of Dewey, see Emanuel Kanter 'Dewey vs. Marx', *Marxist Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1932), pp. 37–53; Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1934); and *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1935). Corey quoted, *Middle Class*, p. 221.

8. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (1934; New York: Capricorn Books, 1958).

and less of an artist, those who are still called artists either put themselves, as writers and designers, at the disposal of organised business, or are pushed out to the edge as eccentric bohemians'.[9] Many artists, faced with their growing marginalisation, shunned social responsibility in favour of isolated self-expression, 'eccentricity', and 'emotional discharge'.[10] Until art is again an integrated social practice, he wrote, it will remain largely bohemian and private, a judgment grounded not behind the veil of romantic anti-modernism, but in a critique of modern artistic institutions and the capitalist market.[11]

Dewey's ideas earned a considerable following in the art world, for he outlined a political philosophy in which the arts were integral agents of modern democracy as non-propagandistic manifestations of collective values. With references to Dewey appearing in the writings of Davis, the *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, the American scene painter Thomas Hart Benton, the physician turned art collector Albert Barnes, among others, he was clearly not only widely referenced but also seized upon for diverse agendas. Holger Cahill, for example, fused his own work with John Cotton Dana at the Newark Museum with his study of Dewey as he shaped the art world in pivotal ways. He collaborated extensively with Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery, curated several exhibitions at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and most famously served as the director of the WPA Federal Art Project (FAP), the most significant realised alternative to the art market of this period. Dewey's notoriety attests to his ability to successfully articulate the concerns and struggles of those who sought to reclaim a space for the arts in American public life.[12]

As in the broader political debate, Marxists claimed a strong role in the art world of the late 1920s, and especially that of the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly critical of the institutional foundations of modern art, they brought to this analysis a keen understanding of the interplay of ideology and political economy. The pamphlet *Culture and the Crisis* (1932), for example, describes the deepening crisis and calls upon cultural producers to unite under the Communist Party in the struggle against capitalist exploitation and in the initiation of a 'cultural renaissance', a phrase highly resonant with the rising tide of cultural nationalism that framed the reception of American culture in these years.[13]

Some of the most insightful Marxist art criticism of the period was written by Meyer Schapiro. He composed incisive assessments of both the art market and government funding. In his influential paper 'The Social Bases of Art' he unmasked the hollow ideology of modern aesthetic autonomy by demonstrating how thoroughly modern art was shaped by the art market and the class-bound nature of taste, which he located in the lived experiences of collectors from the rentier leisure class. While he was more optimistic about state patronage, he was by no means a defender of the New Deal. He published 'The Public Use of Art' in *Art Front* in 1936. In this article, he described the FAP as a 'remarkable advance' and 'an immense step towards a public art', but argued that the full realisation of a public art is a 'social and economic question' that required not only state commissions but the legitimation of artistic labour and the broader advancement of social justice as well. State funding was not only insufficient, it could be detrimental and lead to an art of 'government demagogy'. This position was notably at odds with the conciliatory position taken by many Marxist artists employed by the projects. Schapiro's discussion of art's accessibility is especially pertinent to the history of public art. He does not limit it to the rhetoric of public space but rather emphasises broader issues of reception and circulation and rightly puts the fine arts in dialogue with mass

9. Dewey, *Individualism*, 20–1.

10. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 9 and 61.

11. Of the many commentaries on Dewey's aesthetic theories, see especially John Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

12. Cahill describes his indebtedness to Dewey in 'American Resources in the Arts' in O'Connor, *Art for the Millions*. On Halpert's relationship to Cahill and her discussions with La Guardia see Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (Public Affairs, 2006).

13. *Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists, and Other Professional Workers of America* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1932). For a detailed and insightful account of the impact of Communism on American art of this period, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

culture as an already realised if overly commercialised and emotionally exploitative public art. To offer a viable alternative to popular culture, the artist must demonstrate 'solidarity with the workers' who should find in art 'their own experiences presented intimately, truthfully and powerfully'. And this art should be created not only with the workers in mind but directly 'in collaboration with working-class groups, with unions, clubs, cooperatives and schools'. The artist needs to become an active agent in, not mere observer of, the organs of civil society.[14]

The relationship that developed between Marxists and instrumentalists, as suggested above, is indicative of the delicate and sometimes provisional alliances that were forged in the 1930s. This relationship was most consistently described and at times facilitated by Sidney Hook, who stressed the parallels between the theories of Dewey and Marx. In the art world, Schapiro was on good terms with Dewey and was cited in the acknowledgments for *Art as Experience*. Dewey worked with the Marxist-led Artists Committee of Action in the failed attempt to realise their vision of an artist-run Municipal Art Gallery outside the dealer system. The FAP was enacted by a Democratic president, run by a liberal student of Dewey, and supported by many Marxists. As for Davis, he was a core advocate for a Municipal Art Center, an enthusiastic member of the FAP, and a good friend of Cahill but also a Marxist activist and Cahill's adversary in negotiations between the Artists' Unions' and FAP management.[15]

Critiques of the social disengagement of modern art came not only from the left but also from across the political spectrum. Thomas Craven, for example, defined his combative public voice as an art historian and critic by advocating for traditional aesthetic and social values and by championing a nationalist vision of the American scene. He sought to develop a uniquely American public art that was no longer a 'plaything of the rich' but instead a practice with its roots in national traditions. 'The Modernists were men of the strongest anti-social propensities', he wrote in 1931. 'They took pride in their aloofness and gloried in their refusal to traffic in bourgeois sentiments and vulgar emotions. . . . In such an atmosphere art turns inward, feeds upon itself, takes refuge in abstractions'. Such statements echoed across the political spectrum. What set Craven's populist rhetoric apart was his deeply ingrained conservatism and his xenophobic excoriation of urban cosmopolitanism and the 'European yoke' of foreign influences.[16]

Davis was an articulate and energetic advocate for artists who aligned their interests with those of the public. 'The most superficial contact with artists makes it clear that the artist today is in a state of confusion, doubt, and struggle. He is not alone in his plight, but has the respectable company of businessmen, chambers of commerce, politicians, congresses, presidents, and supreme courts. In short, the artist participates in the world crisis'. Like Dewey and Schapiro, he was a proponent of modern art despite being fully aware of its maladies, he called for an institutional restructuring of the art world to foster a healthier relationship between modern art and the public, and he levelled sharp critiques at those artists who made a 'virtue' of their bohemian eccentricities rather than engaging the material world.[17] 'A work of art', he wrote, 'is a public act, or, as John Dewey says, an "experience." . . . it is the result of the whole life experience of the artist as a social being'.[18] Davis normatively defined art as public art, as an extroverted social act.

Davis regularly expressed his great frustration with modern cultural institutions. In 1941, he wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*: 'The "manager", as it refers to art, consists of that vast hierarchical superstructure

14. Schapiro, 'The Social Bases of Art', in Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (eds), *Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Schapiro, 'The Public Uses of Art', *Art Front* vol. 2, no. 10. On Schapiro's complex attitude towards modern art and his critique of the FAP, see Hemingway, ''Meyer Schapiro in the 1930s', *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1, 1994, pp. 13–29.

15. Schapiro describes his classes with Dewey and his reading of Dewey's manuscript in a 1995 interview reproduced as Appendix C of David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). On Schapiro's relationship to Dewey and to Sidney Hook, who attempted to bring Marxism together with Deweyan instrumentalism, see Hemingway, 'Meyer Schapiro: Marxism, Science and Art' in Hemingway, ed. *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (London: Pluto Press, 2006). The Municipal Art Center has very little secondary literature devoted to it, but the early issues of *Art Front* provide a chronicle of much of the efforts made by those involved.

16. Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), pp. 502 and 512.

17. He claimed this of the Surrealists several times in his notebooks, for example, see Stuart Davis Papers, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 15 January 1936.

18. Davis, 'The Artist Today: The Standpoint of the Artists' Union', *American Magazine of Art*, August 1935, p. 476.

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'. He continued by naming the professions and civic institutions that define and shape modern ideology: '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'.[19] Two years later, he even more emphatically spelled out the impact of this arrangement on the public sphere, explaining how 'the agencies of sponsorship and distribution' wield their power to 'reflect and create public opinion' and stand 'between the artist and the public'.[20] Davis offers an incisive critique of the institutional apparatus (including the federal projects) and social elite that had come into existence to govern the production, distribution and reception of contemporary art.

19. Davis, 'Letter to the Editor', *New York Times*, 12 October 1941, sec. 10, p. 9.

20. Davis, 'What about Modern Art and Democracy? With Special Reference to George Biddle's Proposals', *Harper's Magazine* 188, issue 1123 (December 1943), pp. 16–23.

21. The Whitney Museum of American Art opened in 1931 as a successor to the Whitney Studio Club and as a venue for contemporary American art. The Metropolitan Museum opened its American Wing in 1924. And the Museum of Modern Art, though known from its opening in 1929 for its focus on European modernism, hosted several exhibitions under the guidance of Holger Cahill, devoted specifically to the history of American fine and folk art.

22. On Halpert's role at the Downtown Gallery, see Diane Tepfer, 'Edith Gregor Halpert and the Downtown Gallery: 1926–1940; A Study in American Art Patronage' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1989) and Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery*.

The Downtown Gallery

Histories of American art and cultural democracy between the wars often focus on the New Deal art projects and for good reason, but to do so to the neglect of the museums and especially private galleries is misleading. Most artists who sought a more socially responsible role for art remained tied to private galleries for much of this period, viable large-scale alternatives not being available prior to the mid-1930s and independent mural commissions being quite limited. Already though, many museums were cultivating an artistic discourse responsive to the growing role of national identity as a galvanising post-traditional ideology[21] and several galleries, including Alfred Stieglitz's An American Place, Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, and the ACA Galleries, put reformist pressures on the market and challenged traditional gallery practices. What follows is a description of Halpert's role as proprietor of the Downtown Gallery and primary dealer for Davis.

Halpert opened the Downtown Gallery (originally Our Gallery) in 1926 to promote American art's ability to reach a broader public than regularly visited art galleries, especially the growing middle class who were priced out of much of the art market but had spare time, ambition to amass cultural capital, and a moderate degree of disposable income. Though this goal was likely driven at least as much by her desire to run a profitable gallery as by political or social interests, she aligned her efforts with growing concerns for American cultural identity and public accessibility. With the stated goal to 'enable all to possess works of art', she experimented with new business practices, including official payment plans, the loaning of art, and various commercial marketing techniques. She held several end-of-season markdown exhibitions in emulation of department store clearance sales. She staged exhibitions in department stores, university art museums, and other venues. She further intermingled art with fashion and advertising to find profitable commercial outlets for her artists, for example, by holding the exhibition 'Practical Manifestations in American Art' in 1934 that featured works, including fabric designs by Davis, that could demonstrate the role of modern art in everyday life. These practices provided a set of possibilities for working within the capitalist market to seek new audiences, incorporating them into the bourgeois public sphere and American cultural traditions.[22]

Halpert expanded viewership and fostered a more public art, but she did not fundamentally challenge the structure of the art market. The development of this system allowed for the exchange of money mediated by a dealer to replace communication and contractual agreement between the artist and patron, which further severed the artist from the public, distanced the artist from a sense of social purpose, and formally decoupled the art world from the various institutions that had previously steered it. Halpert thus reproduced a feedback loop between the artist and patron shaped by the abstractions of capital and a specialised discipline of art criticism. But reality is never so tidy. She also ceded to artists significant power to frame press releases in collaboration with her articulation of their work to such powerful ideologies as national identity. And though from the perspective of the market, the critic's aesthetic judgment is rendered as monetary value, for members of the public the critic remains an arbiter of aesthetic and social values. While some critics accept their (often formalist) role as experts within a functionalised and ostensibly independent art system, others attempt to put their professional expertise in the service of the general public by translating works of art and press releases into the language of quotidian life. Halpert encouraged the latter, for this is how one expands one's audience beyond the already initiated.

Stuart Davis had long been critical of American capitalism, but he also needed to support himself and wished to communicate his vision to a wide audience. For several years, he maintained a fruitful professional relationship with Halpert that offered him needed exposure and a relatively stable income and provided Halpert, in turn, with paintings by an adept modernist who could claim a strong national identity and populist impulse not often identified by critics with the cubist tradition. She promoted Davis in ways that at once strengthened her strategic position in the market by elevating the prestige of a prized artist and provided him with opportunities to reach out to new audiences, for example, by negotiating his mural commission for Radio City Music Hall. As her ability to materially support his career through the Depression waned and his vocal criticism of the capitalist market and some of her policy positions escalated, their previously symbiotic relationship deteriorated and finally severed in a bitter (if temporary) parting of ways in 1936.

Halpert's promotional activities tapped the defining tropes of period constructions of American identity and her gallery became one of several significant players in the much prophesied emergence of an 'American renaissance'. As her friend Cahill described this renaissance in 1932:

> 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.[23]

These discussions of national identity became a gateway to public dialogue even for those not otherwise disposed to nationalist sentiments. In a lacerating 1931 letter to the *New York Times*, the critic and future gallerist Sameul Kootz wrote: '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 chauvinstic persons who gleefully disparage the contributions of the School of Paris, and in none too mild a

23. Cahill, 'American Art Today', in Fred Ringel (ed.), *America as Americans See It* (New York: Literary Guild, 1932), p. 244.

fashion exalt home products'. Yet, he made certain to clarify his support for American artists as long as they competed fairly against their European competition.[24] This discourse on national identity framed much of the reception of contemporary art and drew what might otherwise be scattered reviews and commentaries into a cohesive, if contested, conversation about nationhood and public life within which works of art gained meaning and a positioned voice.

Halpert capitalised on two crucial strains of period constructions of national identity: the 'usable past' and the 'American scene'. To this end, she tapped less exposed cultural resources such as American folk art and fostered her own brand of American scene painting. The idea of a usable past was amongst the most common and ideologically powerful tropes in period constructions of nationhood.[25] Elements of the past that lingered in the present were reclaimed as the foundation for future growth. Halpert expanded the Downtown Gallery twice in the early 1930s: in 1930, the Daylight Gallery was built in the rear garden as an expanded and more modern setting for contemporary art and in 1931, the American Folk Art Gallery opened upstairs, a move that benefited from her close ties to Cahill. Folk art offered viewers a return to the rootedness of traditional community life and implied continuity between the past and present. Through such exhibitions as 'American Ancestors' and by displaying contemporary American art downstairs and objects from the usable past upstairs, Halpert helped narrate a nativist history for modern American art.[26]

The American scene movement played the most visible role in defining American identity and was widely acclaimed for its potential to unify the public. Halpert attempted to stake a unique claim to this movement, as is evident in her choice of artists, American and representational but resolutely modern, and in her framing of their reception.[27] The works she exhibited, though small in scale and intended for private purchase, often served all the same as important catalysts within the public sphere. A notable example of her attempts to shape a counter-narrative for American scene painting is the group exhibit she held in the spring of 1935. *Art Digest* fittingly titled its review 'Mrs. Halpert's "American Scene" Differs from Mid-Western School' and went on to describe the exhibiting artists, including Davis, as 'diametrically opposed' to its most famed proponents.[28]

The publicness of the works shown by Halpert should be evaluated less in relation to their commodity status or physical site than to their discursive life once exhibited, their accessibility, and their formal mode of address as extroverted bearers of collective values rather than introverted carriers of private meanings. These works would in most cases be seen first-hand by a smaller audience than a mural, for example, but they would briefly be physically accessible (in practical if not full legal terms) and were not infrequently photographically reproduced in the press. The latter is especially important as it increasingly reshaped the nature of artistic reception beyond primary viewership to a mass audience with access to newspapers. Judging by press coverage, the ability of these works to shape public discussion was significant.

The American Scene

In February 1932, Halpert opened 'The American Scene: Recent Paintings, New York and Gloucester by Stuart Davis' (Fig. 1) at the Downtown Gallery in a bid to claim a place in the public imagination for Davis's cubist-inspired vision of the American scene. The 'American scene' was not yet, if ever it truly was, a stable marker of any specific style or set of practices. It was defined as much



Fig. 1. The cover of Stuart Davis' The American Scene exhibition catalogue, 1932. Downtown Gallery records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (©Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.)

24. Kootz, '"America Uber Alles": Critic Rises to Admonish Our "Renaissance" – Urges: "Let's Forget Premature Circus"', *New York Times*, 20 December 1931, p. 11.

25. The notion of a 'usable past' can be traced back to Van Wyck Brooks, *Ameirca's Coming of Age* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1915).

26. *Art Digest* published a digest of criticism from other journals on the 'Ancestors' exhibition, 'New York Criticism' (1 January 1932), p. 18.

27. Among the 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.

28. *Art Digest* 9, no. 12 (15 March 1935), p. 10.

as anything by its diversity, an association that persisted despite press coverage gravitating increasingly towards Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry (Fig. 2). This exhibition, quite notably, coincided with the gallery season that was referred to by several critics as the 'American Wave', a season in which the growing emphasis on the national character of American art and artists' responsibility to their public came into sharp focus. Critics responded in narrowly targeted art journals and broad-circulation newspapers. They tried to understand whether Davis's paintings could express American experience and communicate its character not just to the art cognoscenti but to the general public as well.[29]

Davis's American scene presents a complex vision of national identity. It brought together the formal inventions of modern art – often associated with an elite European culture – with a populist interest in the evocation of place. Though rightly understood to be an ardent modernist and advocate of

29. On the American Wave, see Matthew Baigell, 'The Beginnings of "The American Wave" and the Depression', in *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).



Fig. 2. Thomas Hart Benton, *America Today*; *Changing West*, 1930, distemper and egg tempera on gessoed linen with oil glaze. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. (©The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.)

technological innovation, he could just as handily evoke the usable past. The press release positioned his complex vision in the expanding conversation about American art: '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'. Halpert implicitly acknowledged his forging of a modernist realism: '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'.[30] In part, she was reiterating Davis's belief that modern abstraction facilitated rather than denied art's mission to communicate modern experience in a realistic manner, but she was also potentially reaching out to two audiences: one popular and with an interest in the familiar and the other highbrow and interested in formal experimentation.[31] Whether trying to cast the widest net, pursue middlebrow cultural accommodation, or something else, she created a space – albeit a limited one – in which Americans came together in shared conversation.

House and Street (Fig. 3), included in this exhibition, places the viewer in the shadows under the tracks of an elevated train, the trusses of which frame a brilliantly coloured orange wall. On the lower right of this wall, adjacent to several rows of bricks, the word 'SMITH' is printed in red letters across a green sign. Further up the wall, a black-and-white sign reads 'FRONT' indicating the street on which we stand. Two windows are seen in full view on the lower level and two in partial view on the second storey. To the right, the trusses frame a view of a street, which leads away from us into the distance.

30. As reprinted in 'Davis "American Scene"', *Art Digest* 6, no. 12 (15 March 1932), p. 16.

31. For an analysis of Davis's realism and its relation to Dewey's 'instrumentalist' conception of aesthetic experience and Marxist politics see John Christ, 'Stuart Davis and the Politics of Experience', *American Art* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 42–63; on Davis's realism and politics see Jody Patterson, 'The Art of Swinging Left in the Thirties: Modernism, Realism, and the Politics of the Left in the Murals of Stuart Davis', *Art History* 33, no. 1 (February 2010), pp. 98–123.

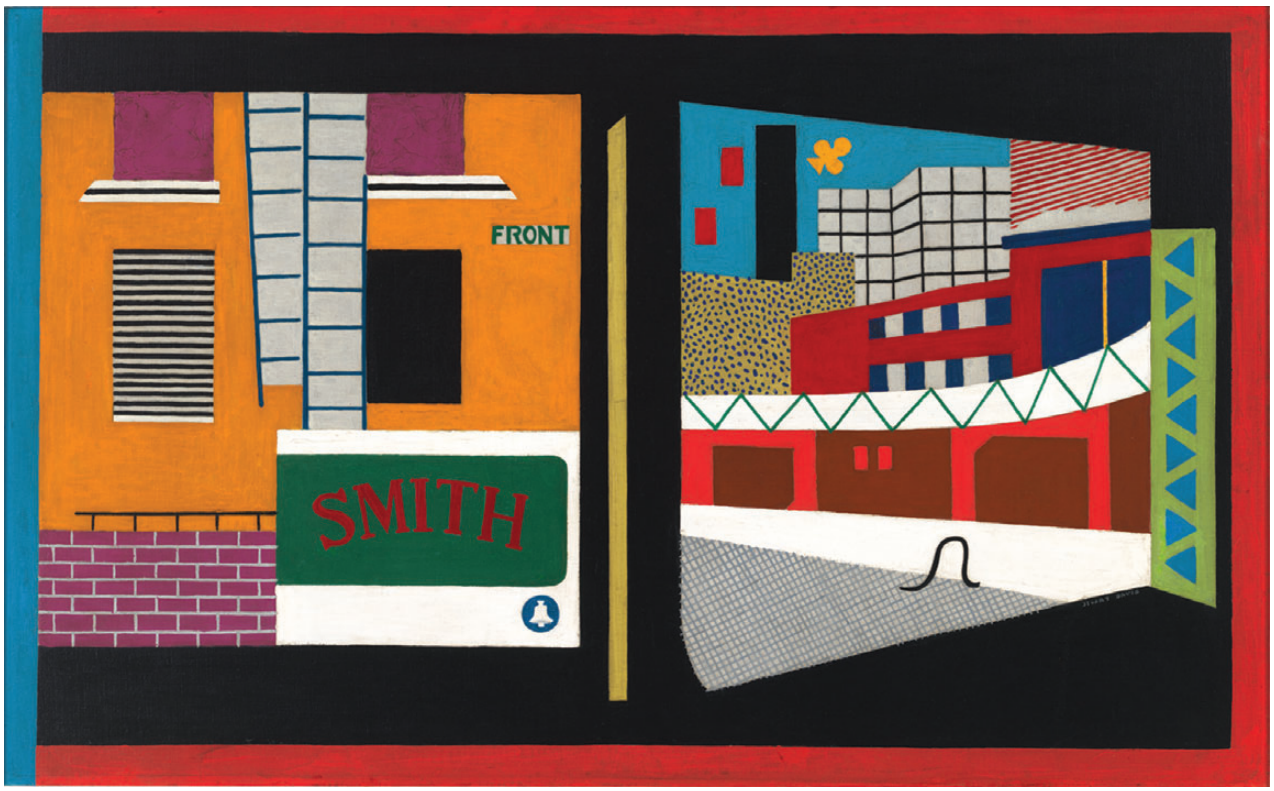

Fig. 3. Stuart Davis, *House and Street*, 1931, oil on canvas, 66.4 × 107 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 41.3 Digital Image © Whitney Museum of American Art. (©Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.)

This street intersects Front Street, is lined with several buildings, and is bounded by the snaking curve of the el train as it winds off into the distance.

This description is overly literal. It is offered to provoke a series of questions regarding Davis's realism and his interest in place, the importance of knowing that this painting depicts Coenties Slip at Front Street, near the mouth of the East River in Lower Manhattan. Formal concerns occupied much of his attention in the early 1930s. Yet, an analysis of the works in this exhibition and their reception suggests the crucial importance of place. *House and Street* provides the viewer with ample geographic clues. The word 'FRONT' puns on the frontality of the picture plane but also indicates the street. The snaking curve of the el train at the intersection of Front Street and Coenties Slip was widely known for its dramatic twists which took the Third Avenue elevated line from Front Street in the south to Pearl Street in the north.

Coenties Slip and the elevated rail system were both firmly established subjects in the American imaginary. The slip had long been incorporated into mainstream visual and literary culture as an emblem of both contemporary urban experience and traditional maritime culture. It was dynamic and modern, but also, as one writer described it, 'dreaming apart'. Even the elevated trains, icons of the modern city, were by the 1930s a soon-to-be demolished reminder of an earlier moment of modernisation. Davis's paintings, like the experience of the city itself, are topologically and historically stratified. The urbanist Lewis Mumford aptly described in 1938 this sedimentation of history into the built environment: 'The story of every city can be read through a succession of deposits: the sedimentary strata of history. While certain forms and phases of development are successive in time, they become, through the very agency of the civic process, cumulative in space'. Like other American scene painters, Davis rescued a 'usable past' from the clutches of history. And he brought a disappearing past together brashly with the dynamic geometries and cacophonous blare of a densely layered urban experience, not to deny the forward motion of history, but to construct an image of progress that redeemed the past.[32]

The word 'SMITH' references the politician Alfred E. Smith and indicates a further layering of history. Smith rose through the ranks of New York State politics in the 1910s and 1920s fighting for progressive causes first as assemblyman and then as governor and in 1928 he unsuccessfully ran as the Democratic nominee for president, all this despite being raised in New York's Lower East side and dropping out of school at age fourteen to support his family. He flaunted his identity as a wet (anti-prohibition), urban, working-class, Irish Catholic, earning respect from many urban Americans but equally alienating others. As a presidential candidate facing a strong Republican opposition and with his ties to New York's elite growing, he ran a fairly conservative campaign that nevertheless managed to attract many loyal progressives. When *House and Street* was painted a few years later, Smith maintained his popular reputation as an urban reformer but further shed his progressive agenda and working-class connections, tied his name to speculative real estate investment – the Empire State Building – and increasingly criticised Democratic politicians from the right. By referencing Smith, Davis further encodes the deeply political and even divisive connotations that urban places could evoke on the national stage.[33]

The iconography of *House and Street*, like that of other American scene paintings, is based in the careful observation of place and a layered representation of regional and national history. Coenties Slip could evoke both modernisation and tradition, the skyscraper city alongside fragments of colonial New York, a city of immigrants

32. Quote from Arthur Bartlett Maurice in Vernon Howe Bailey (illustrator), *Magical City: Intimate Sketches of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 208. Other notable references to Coenties Slip include Moses King's *King's Handbook of New York City: An Outline, History and Description of the American Metropolis* (Boston; Moses King, 1892) and that on the first page of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The elevated system had become by the 1930s a matter of serious public debate as sentiment had turned against them resulting in their dismantling. Mumford quoted in *The Culture of Cities* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938).

33. Bruce Weber, *Stuart Davis' New York*, (West Palm Beach: Norton Gallery and School of art, 1985) and Morgan Falconer, 'Manhattan Modern: Making an Image of Urban Life in America 1920–1940' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 2001), pp.101–5 provide many insights into Smith's role in Davis's art. One progressive to support Smith was Dewey; he claimed his admiration for the Socialist candidate Norman Thomas, but also his ultimate support for Smith; Dewey, 'Why I am for Smith', *New Republic* 56 (1928), pp. 320–1.

and relentless change but also old maritime trade. Davis placed this urban culture at the heart of American identity and he was not alone. The contemporary urbanist Ernest Burgess wrote of this intertwining of the city with American life: 'All the manifestations of modern life which are peculiarly urban – the skyscraper, the subway, the department store, the daily newspaper, and social work – are characteristically American'.[34]

But are his paintings realistic and could they evoke a convincing sense of place for a broad public? To galvanise viewers in shared conversation, artists were tasked with communicating the American scene in a realistic manner, conveying common experience and local character, and forging an American identity. Davis did all this while articulating a counter-conceptualization of these themes that undercut neo-traditionalist and patriotic posturing in the mainstream press that equated realism with a positivist belief in mimesis and patriotism with nationalism. He chastised the naturalistic styles often associated with realism for conservatively positing a world beyond change, claiming that cubist form could more effectively convey the dynamic reality of an evolving environment. Further, he argued that abstraction is analogous to science in that it facilitated the generalisation of visual experience to aid in knowing and transforming the material world.

While we cannot know with any certainty how the average viewer reacted to this exhibition, the critics equivocated. They accepted Davis's foray into the American scene, but rarely without serious caveats. Edward Alden Jewell, a vocal advocate of native expression, conveyed this ambivalence in his *New York Times* review. Davis's subjects, he reassures us, are conventional and 'old and tried favorites', and yet he notes that their 'actual counterpart in the American scene you may seek in vain unless your range of vision be peculiarly acute'. As for his Franco-American idiom, though a handicap to overcome, it was American enough. Davis's realism too was scrutinised. Jewell was ostensibly affirmative but then sarcastically undercut this judgment, as I describe below. *Creative Art* summed up critical consternation most pithily: 'In this matter of realistic rendering of abstract subjects, Mr. Davis is unique'. He was not unique, but his attentiveness to the dynamics of urban experience was nonetheless undermined, his subjects (not their representation) were derided as 'abstract', and his challenge to the equation of realism with naturalism was effectively ignored. It was left to *Art News* to publish a triumphantly positive review, even though – as if by obligation – citing the European influences that he had overcome. 'His visions fairly sing from the walls with a good American will. They have a sort of stars-and-stripes complexion ... he has made the eagle scream with his red-white-and-blue interpretation of the "American Scene"'. To varying degrees, critics tried to play along, but most ultimately faltered over Davis's entry into American scene painting.[35]

Davis's regional contribution to the American scene included both New York and Gloucester. Gloucester is located in New England, at Massachusetts's Cape Ann, and its iconography was also by this time firmly rooted in the national vocabulary. Its role in the public imagination rests in its harbour and its long-standing pre-eminence in the New England fishing industry. But by the late nineteenth century, its appeal rested as well on its new roles as a tourist destination and leading summer home for artists. The artists' colony had grown large enough for Jewell to describe it as an industry: '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

34. Burgess, 'The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project', in Richard LeGates and Frederic Stout, *The City Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 90, originally in Robert Park and others, *The City* (1925).

35. Jewell, 'Stuart Davis Offers a Penetrating Survey of the American Scene', *New York Times*, 10 March 1932, p. 19. 'Stuart Davis: Downtown Gallery', *Art News*, 12 March 1932, p. 10. 'Around the Galleries', *Creative Art* 10, no. 3 (April 1932): p. 302.

and the Grand Central Art Galleries'. Jewell identified the Gloucester artists' colony as a 'factory' for the production of images, quite literally as a 'colony' supplying recognisable products to the art world's distribution houses in New York.[36]

Landscape with Garage Lights (Fig. 4), focussing like many of Davis's Cape Ann pictures on a working harbour, serves well as an emblem of his Gloucester scene.[37] Though he claimed that it was the formal geometries of the ubiquitous schooner that attracted him to this region, one must be careful to not overlook the draw of its working-class character, strong sense of place, and historical stratification. Like the New York of *House and Street*, his descriptions of Cape Ann look to the past as much as they point forward, as can be confirmed anecdotally in his writings. In 1945, he wrote of his first trip to Gloucester, without evident irony, both describing his arrival by car and celebrating their relative scarcity. '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'. Again one finds Davis, the ardent champion of modernisation, offering an affirmative glance at the traces of a usable past still compellingly visible in Gloucester's urban fabric.

36. Jewell, *Modern Art: Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 42.

37. Though this painting may represent the small town of Rockport on northern Cape Ann, I treat it here as a picture of the larger and more working-class town of Gloucester, as it was presented to and received by the public in 1932. For evidence that this work represents Rockport, see Ani Boyajian and Mark Rutkoski, eds., *Stuart Davis: A Catalogue Raisonne* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).



Fig. 4. Stuart Davis, *Landscape with Garage Lights*, 1931–32, oil on canvas, 32 × 41 7/8 in. Memorial Gallery of Art of the University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, Marion Stratton Gould Fund. (Photo, James Via. ©Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.)

Garage Lights evokes the complexly layered history and local identity of Gloucester in a manner that is arguably realistic. Its schooners and fish houses are visible alongside gas pumps, electric lights, a ferry, and plenty more. The ferry, perhaps carrying summer visitors, is visually connected to the coal power to its left. The electric lines inscribed across the sky signal the modern electrification of the nation. But the schooner, though still common in Gloucester's waters, can only evoke modernisation as its foil. By the 1930s, the fishing industry was being mechanized; the sail was being replaced by the internal combustion engine, introduced to Gloucester two decades earlier. Several sources of energy are pictured, each representing a different phase of technological history and calling up Gloucester's local character. If realism is more than perceptual naturalism, something evocative of class and history as evidenced in the here and now, then Davis may very well have been carrying on this tradition.

Jewell singled out this painting in his review, noting those qualities – realism and the sense of place – that were so central to American scene discourse. '"Garage Lights" was painted down Gloucester way, 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)'.[38] Again equivocating, the strongly positive commendations of realism and geographic localisation are accompanied by a critical sleight of hand. Davis is all but accused of being a surrealist, understood by many at this time as foreign in origin and unrealistic in its reliance on subjective psychic impulses.

Formally, even the smallest of Davis's paintings demands our active attention. He does not give us subdued colours or gently sweeping rhythms. We are confronted with intensely saturated and clashing colours and brashly syncopated planar rhythms. Rather than a window onto another world arranged through the rules of linear perspective into which our eye carefully roams, we are confronted with a stubbornly material surface that still manages to pulse in its shallow space as if straining to push beyond the restrictions of the canvas out into our space. Rather than waiting for us to happen upon a politely presented glimpse into a fictional world, his paintings hail us from across the room and do not allow for the kind of absorptive spectatorship associated with traditional easel painting or even many murals. These small paintings address the viewer in a manner that is extroverted, performative, and public.

The paintings in this exhibition were produced, exhibited, and discussed in the press with the clear understanding that they could contribute to what many perceived to be among the most important of contemporary conversations: how could public life and the shared beliefs that girded it be revitalised. The criticisms of the ineffectiveness of extant artistic institutions such as the for-profit gallery were strong and came from many angles. Yet, given the lack of actually existing alternatives, especially prior to the New Deal, most artists continued to work within this system. Halpert was a valuable ally; while she did not wish to dismantle the capitalist marketplace, she supported Davis and other progressive artists, sought to open up the market beyond the narrow demographic that traditionally defined it, and gave artists greater voice within American culture.

38. Jewell, 'Stuart Davis Offers a Penetrating Survey of the American Scene', p. 19.

Stuart Davis as Public Artist

The politically energised conditions of the 1930s set the stage for Davis's greatest achievements as a public artist – offering him several opportunities to prove the

viability of modernist mural painting and the chance to engage in collective action aimed at far-reaching reforms. Yet, despite such notable mural commissions as those for the New York World's Fair (Fig. 5) and the Williamsburg Housing Project (Fig. 6), we must not fail to account for his easel paintings when considering his role as a public artist, for he needed to work with the resources at his disposal and these works thus constitute the bulk of his efforts as a painter. His American scene exhibition, however imperfect, contributed in important ways to the development of a public art.

It is best to regard public art as we do the public sphere, not as a stable category, but rather as a shifting normative ideal and partially realised practice. Public art is something towards which many artists, to varying degrees and in diverse ways, have laboured. The public artist is engaged in a *process* aimed at the continued democratisation of culture and the reconstruction of public life, a process not

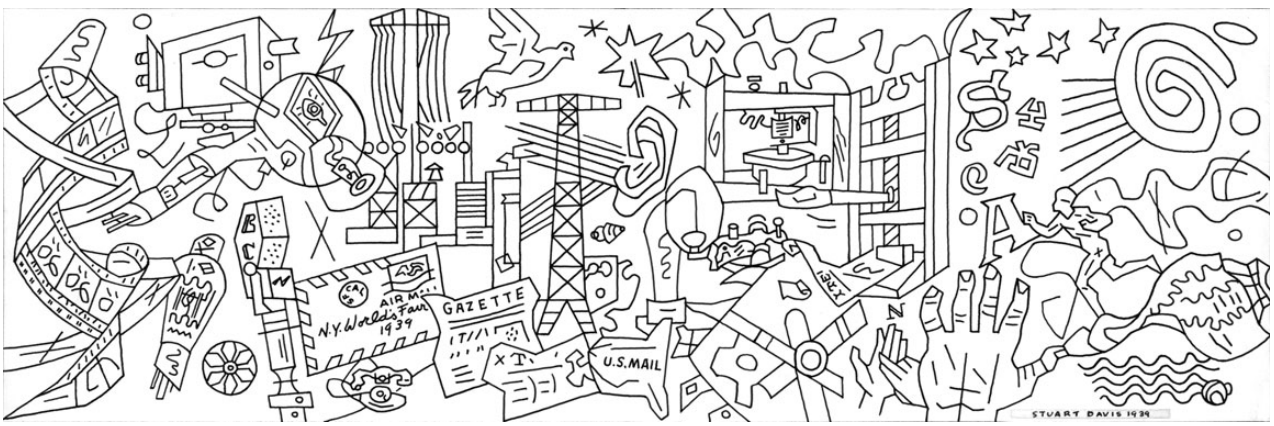

Fig. 5. Stuart Davis, Study for *History of Communication* Mural, 1939, ink on paper, 9.75 × 30 in. Minnesota Museum of American Art, Gift of Grace Borgemicht Inc. (©Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.)



Fig. 6. Stuart Davis, *Swing Landscape*, 1938, oil on canvas, 86 3/4 × 173 1/8 in. Museum purchase with funds from the Hope fund. Indiana University Art Museum, 42.1. (©Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.)

only characterised by freedom *from* coercion, but also freedom *to* participate in open and creative communication in an egalitarian society. The government projects were a milestone in this process, but this should not prevent us from recognising the importance of smaller exhibitions, even those held in private galleries, that were presented to contribute to a larger conversation. Davis's activities in the 1930s constitute a significant contribution to modern public art, not as a fixed entity but as an ongoing, imperfect, and volatile historical process.