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NECROMANTIC DOLLS AND PUPPETS, ABSTRACTION AND WATERCOLORS: The Index of American Design, Ruth Abrams' Facsimile Monuments, and Rethinking 1930s Transnational American Art

Index administrators [also] believed that a camera could not capture the 'essential' character and quality of objects.[i]

My research as a CASVA Beinecke scholar hopes to investigate a variety of small 1936-37 drawings on papers, the Index of American Design's public mission (WPA, a branch of the New Deal's Federal Art Project), and the preferred painterly artistic medium of watercolor—the verisimilitude at once seen as romantic and realist, manufactured and crafted. Pursuits of my art historical research at both an archival and visual level intend to readjust the orthodox lens of folk art and ornamental design: the nebulous aesthetic stakes of social realism and high-modernist discourse, issues of abstraction and vernacular figuration construct some of the central pillars to the project. How did the Index of American Design simultaneously highlight the taut relations between photography and painting, verisimilitude and graphic representation, a vertically oriented foci of Culture juxtaposed with horizontal conceptions of mass media and social receptivity? Today, my interstitially niche project seems even more apt considering the nature of the global pandemic, economic crisis of capital and potential brewing spirit of international revolution.

My proposed visual research most broadly aims to refigure an array of modernist transformations and in so doing redefine the role of mass media production looming over the American landscape during the mid-1930s. To be more precise, this project focuses closely on 1936-1937, the same year, in fact, Congress passed legislation to establish the National Gallery of Art. In my work, the often-labeled peripheral aesthetics of printmaking, set-design collectives, reportage photojournalism, and the enigmatic 1935 New Deal national documentation project titled 'The

Index of America Design' (a branch of the WPA) are situated as central arts and acts of the moment (Fig. 1). WPA artist Katherine Milhous' illustrated poster from March 1936 offers us a concise visual example of the epic scale and nationalist mission of the Index. Milhous' luminous Greco-Roman figures, her awareness of social realist formal conventions, and the statuesque scholastic figure—a quasi-academic gesture, nodding with paper in hand—together denote both the pathos and scale of the Index.

Most notably, my research is interested in two artists and their related oeuvres: the 1937 puppet pictures of Ruth Davidson Abrams (Fig. 2), and the complex variety of nominal tokens archived by artist Majel G. Claflin, her 1937 '*El Muerto'* (Death Figure and Cart) (Fig. 3). Fascinatingly, Abrams was one of relatively few WPA employed workers to continue her career as artist the post WWII scene—Abrams became an outside figure of the New York abstract expressionists in the 1950s and 60s. Conversely, little is known about the ensuant artistic work of the puzzling Claflin. Nonetheless, both artists painted miniaturized American monuments, their creative work offering us some of the more unusual examples of cultural documentation drafted in the first years of the Index. In my view, something strange lives on in certain objects.

Alongside the Index's compulsive record-keeping ethos and methodological fetishism, it seems then that certain vernacular things remained imbued with an excess of lifeforce, the *real* abundantly infused.[ii] Perhaps the talismanic pathos of grim-reaper-toys and the ventriloquist musings of marionette creatures endure through their stoic refusal to pictorial narrativization, an otherworldly resistance to industrial commodification or decipherable categorization. Regardless of utility or sacristy, ornamentation, beauty or appearance, somewhere in the liminal quaking of these certain excess icons we find the world of art. A radical kaleidoscopic window of otherness is *ad infinitum* memorialized in miniature form.

Moreover, within the wider milieu of mid-1930's otherness and uniquely available at the National Gallery is a motley crew of potentially analogous art objects—each also saturated with painterly intrigue and today trapped as mere archival relics in an ultimate muted stature of solitude: the American Block Print Calendar 1936/37; little studied printmaker and savant Philadelphia lithographer Benton Murdoch Spruance (Fig. 4); as well as the often overlooked documents associated with the 'New Horizons in American Art' show at MOMA 1936 and subsequent 'Cubism and Abstract Art' exhibition of the same year.[iii] Death was overwhelming inside the 1936-37 atmosphere of the globe; vertiginous, maleficent and chilling, something numinously dark was near at hand. In brief, the cultural history and social legacies of the WPA—most especially the Index of American Design—are explored through a variety of experimental art historical lens, in effect, through my own visual acumen, photographic vocabulary historical sensibilities.

At stake are questions of representation and the real, new mass media dissemination, and the networks of input/output for public consumption. For the Index, both secretarial book-keeping and the creation of an unruly visual record was paramount: an ethos of some ostensibly pluralized pictorial narrative of America's usable past (Van Wyck Brooks' salient terminology) was the central focus of its agenda. What is the socio-aesthetic relationship between vernacular design and folk, usable pattern and mass media, cultural identity and embodied materiality? Is it possible that American folk, ephemera records, and votive native objects of design recorded in the vertiginous classification swirl of the 1930's Index (think Benjamin's stormy 'angel of history' and the acrimonious march toward progress) may indeed offer some kind of portentous (even vampiric) tonic to the nightmare that became WWII?

My study and method aims to resituate the often leveling and dominant, hegemonic narrative of 1930s highbrow art; photographic discourse and analogous teleologically driven social transformations toward artistic abstraction are also under interrogation. In other words, readers

interested in the dominant discourse of akin salient cultural icons and artistic figures already staunchly situated in the 1930s American landscape of modernism—from Alfred Stieglitz circle to Berenice Abbott's New York cityscapes, Margaret Bourke-White's steel radio wires pictures, Walker Evan's vernacular maze, Dorothea Lange's sentimental dustbowl photography, Man Ray's obsessive experimental projects to the epic New Deal (WPA eventually) murals of Diego Rivera or other modernist virtuoso painters—will be disappointed.

Instead, my project is intentionally manifold and imagined as pastiche, a *vivant tableau* of sorts—puppets, talismanic knickknacks, formerly illegible vernacular aesthetic objects reterritorialize the horizons of media and art of the 1930s. While of course the aesthetic trends and dominant conversation of 1930s modernist art hover beneath the surface of my own historical investigations, I am more interested in an attempt to both psychosomatically decolonize and aesthetically reimagine the territorial reach of American hierarchical sensibilities.

In this way, my work approaches the Index of American Design most acutely through the vantage of Siegfried Krakauer's 1927 'The Mass Ornament.' Krakauer's theoretical insight is paramount as he outlines the function of ornamentation and replicability, stakes of mass media production and reception, and the ubiquitous transformations of both social and industrial hegemony. His acumen likewise helps us think through the critical cultural work embedded in the latent strictures of the Index of American Design.[iv] Undoubtedly then, also too, the critical cultural work of disparate intellectuals of that moment such as Van Wyck Brooks, Clement Greenberg, Walter Benjamin and other major thinkers remain at hand. The theoretical language of both the Vienna and Frankfurt School—Krakauer and Adorno, Benjamin and perhaps even (although a bit anachronistic) Hannah Arendt's post WWII tome *The Banality of Evil*. Let me finish this short proposal with a 1936 vignette.

In March 1936 two presumably disparate events (see. Fig. 1) transpired in isolate locations across the globe. First, local organizers of the American Design Index arranged a two-week exhibit of 'antique costumes' at Macy's in New York City. At the same time, unfolding across the national landscape from Chattanooga to Mobile appeared various temporary display forums—an introductory method for the Index to promote its ostensibly democratic artistic mission. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in Hitler's Germany the pageantry for the inaugural launching of the transatlantic passenger airship the *Hindenburg* was global spectacle (Fig. 5). Coined a momentous achievement of modernism, the engineering might of the west and industrial anchors of cultural hegemony, stakes of international reportage and photographic representation dominated lines of transatlantic communication. What sort of adhesive lining mark these disrelated cultural operations? How could such disparate kinds of events eventually manifest a parallel silent dialogue of nationalist zealotry? How did this panoply of aesthetic transformations perhaps also conceal a zeitgeist of archival ruin and ensuant natural disaster? Although the origins of both cultural endeavors were similarly incased in the highest echelon networks of state capital, innovative shared creativity and revolutionary social possibilities, they alike ended in abrupt demise—perhaps we may even call their terminations a kind of radical failure.

Whereas the 1937 Hindenburg catastrophe in flames at Lakehurst, New Jersey was spectacular and immediate (Fig. 6), the federally sponsored Index was a gradual burnout. Slowly defunded throughout the decade until its eventual termination in 1942, the WPA never published the proposed 10,000-plus pictorial document in any democratically accessible public format or medium. In this way then, notions of failure, a sense of modernist technological naivety and the fragmented ruins of any collective, coherent and imagined international landscape of goodwill haunt this project. Also, too, implicitly latent in the theoretical lattice of this art historical work are the

therefore the global ghosts of fascism, dangerous trends of totalitarian sensibilities and social fractures of international economic collapse.

Regarding publication, my research from the National Gallery of Art will be disseminated in at least two different avenues: the first is a book project I am currently working on with Stanford University Press. The working manuscript is focused on 1930s mass media, photography and the May 1937 Hindenburg disaster. I am currently in dialogue with an executive editor at the press and have outlined the final two chapters as centrally guided by the Index of American Design and its constitutive watercolor simulacra pictures. The second avenue for publication are two individual articles for the journal *American Art* and *Panorama*, respectively. The first essay is an acute study of Ruth Abrams, both her time in 1937 creating watercolor puppets for the Index as well as her subsequent illustrious (yet alas, mostly neglected) artistic career as an abstract painter and fringe member of the male dominated New York school Microcosm, 2012 solo show. The second article focuses on the relationship between 1930s American printmaking, the documentary archival impulse of the Index of American Design, and myriad prescient issues associated with populism, representational art and pathos of totalitarianism (think Huey Long, Peter Blume's *Eternal City* and MOMA's 1936 Cubist Abstraction Exhibition) as the kind of larger landscape and cultural context. I envision my academic contributions here as not only to the immediate field of 20th century American Art but also too within the wider discursive spaces of modernist discourse in the 1930s and beyond.

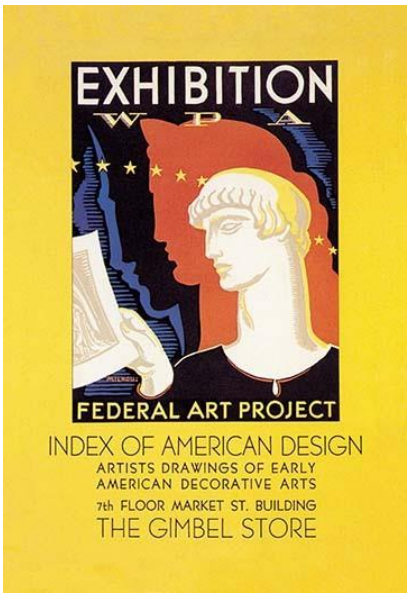

Fig. 1 Katherine Milhous, *Index of American Design Poster*, 1936


Fig. 2 Ruth Abrams, 'David and Goliath' Marionette, 1937, watercolor

Fig. 3 Majel G. Claflin, '*El Muerto'* (Death Figure and Cart), 1937, watercolor

Fig. 4 Benton Spruance, *Road from the Shore*, 1936, lithograph

Fig. 5 Hindenburg stock image


Fig. 6 Sam Shere, 'Crash of the Hindenburg,' Lakehurst, New Jersey Mat 7, 1937

[i] Clayton, Virginia Tuttle, et al. *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism and Index of American Design.* National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 2002. P. 12.
[ii] Please see Jennifer L. Roberts' 2017 criticism in "Things: Material Turn, Transnational Turn," *American Art.* June 2017. 31(2): 64-69.

[iii] For a copy of Holger Cahill 1936 introductory essay MOMA introduction; New Horizons in American Art Exhibition.
[iv] Also consult please too Erwin O. Christensen *Index of American Design*; Chris Wood, *Vienna School Reader* 1930s; Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy and American Public Culture*; Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* and others are some of the scholarship I find essential for this discussion.