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"Directions in Arts Policy History"

Over the past four decades, historians of politics, diplomacy, society, and culture have joined scholars from fields of art history, cultural studies, American studies, political science, and public policy to create an exciting body of work defining the field of art policy history. It tells us not only about the arts that we enjoy (or sometimes do not) but also much about who we have been as a nation, who we are, and what we hope for our future. Arts policy history is a vibrant and growing field, and many of its current contributors are still building on the ideas Jane De Hart delved into early in her career. In 1967, Jane De Hart published *The Federal Theatre Project: Plays, Relief, and Politics.* A reviewer of the book for the *Journal of American History* stated that the book "should serve as a model for future studies of governmental agencies and projects . . . [it is] written with clarity, grace, and understanding . . . [and] could scarcely be improved upon."[1] De Hart's book was one of the first monographs ever to analyze arts policy and the reviewer predicted correctly that it would influence future scholars.[2] This article will trace some of the directions arts policy history has taken since De Hart's publication of *The Federal Theatre*.

De Hart's study of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration's theater project still serves as an excellent example of how to study society, culture, and politics combined. It is a wonderful articulation of the passion and possibilities of the theater project specifically and the dash, vigor, and hope of the New Deal at the height of its achievements. De Hart interweaves the broader history of the WPA with the particular leadership of the Theater Project under the dynamic figure of Hallie Flannigan. Her goal was not only to provide relief for unemployed artists but to use the WPA project as a springboard to form a permanent, truly national theater designed to outlast

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the New Deal itself and to provide (in Harry Hopkins's words) "free, adult, uncensored theater" to the masses. De Hart beautifully juxtaposes Flannigan's heady—and sometimes naive—plans with the political realities the federal theater faced. These realities included difficulties with bureaucratic red tape and funding, overcoming the urban centralization of the theater, and a congressional investigation by the then-new HUAC charging that the theater was communistic. Ultimately, De Hart argues that the theater proved unable to reconcile its social and artistic goals with politics.

By 1938, the WPA programs that had been founded on the principle of relief for the unemployed were cut back as aid was no longer needed and reform no longer tolerated on such a large scale (especially in the wake of FDR's court-packing plan). The first of the WPA arts projects to be canceled was the federal theater. And surely no program went down in such a blaze of glory, as De Hart illustrates in a chapter entitled "Congress Kills Pinocchio." When federal theaters learned of their midnight closing on June 30, 1939, a number of productions ended with more than the usual final curtain. Some sang "Auld Lang Syne" or knocked down their sets in full view of their audiences. At the Ritz Theater in New York when the play *Pinocchio* closed, De Hart tells us, "instead of becoming a living boy, Pinocchio died, symbolizing the fate of the federal theater," and actors and crew marched in a funeral procession out into the night.[3]

While the door closed on the WPA projects, a window opened for scholars. De Hart's book was the beginning of a fresh, new breeze of work on policy and politics as well as social and cultural history. She followed up on the Federal Theatre monograph with her article "Art of the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy" in the *Journal of American History*. This article expanded on the history of WPA art projects beyond theater, to include an overview of the music, writers', and arts projects. De Hart argues that the arts projects went beyond mere relief, although 90 percent of their members came from relief rolls: President Roosevelt regarded them as "the means to more important ends: the fulfillment of a long-standing desire to bring together artist and people and to use the uplifting power of art to enrich the lives or ordinary citizens."[4] Art, then, was a means to reform society, no longer a mere luxury item for the few, but a meaningful asset to improve the quality of life for the many. The artist would be integrated with society and help to preserve and produce distinctly American culture. So, New Deal cultural leaders were also "aesthetic nationalists." However, as De Hart explains, "the quest for cultural democracy . . . had to be pursued in a context

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complicated by relief, bureaucracy, and politics—and there, of course, was the rub."[5] Despite some positive advances in both creating Americana and cultivating a national audience for the arts, the public and Congress were never convinced that providing the public with access to art was a legitimate function of government. Thus, during the 1930s, cultural democracy did not become public policy. However, groundwork had been laid for the institution building of the future and cultural history and policy history had been combined.

De Hart's examinations of the art and politics within the WPA projects have served as models for other scholars' analyses of additional aspects of the New Deal art projects. Numerous monographs and articles have examined the music, writers', and visual arts projects (although in a testament to De Hart's achievement with her first book, no one has significantly improved upon the Federal Theatre Project). In the 1970s, a number of books covered other arts projects in more detail: these include Jerry Mangione's *The Dream and the Deal* on the writers' project, Richard McKinzie's *A New Deal for Artists* on the visual arts, and Milton Meltzer's *Violins and Shovels* on music.[6] By the 1980s books branched out, dealing with more specific aspects of the visual arts. Important works include Karal Ann Marling's *Wall-to-Wall America* analyzing WPA murals, Christopher DeNoon's *Posters of the WPA*, and Peter Daniel's *Official Images* on New Deal photography.[7] More recently, arts policy historiography has incorporated elements of social history, broadening analysis of ethnicity and gender issues. Outstanding here are Rena Fraden's work on African Americans and Tey Marianna Nunn's study of Latino artists in the WPA, as well as Barbara Melosh's *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater*.[8] Finally, Jonathan Harris's *Federal Art and National Culture* reflects the postmodern turn in historical studies of the 1990s with his Gramscian analysis of cultural hegemony in WPA arts.[9]

If Jane De Hart's work on the federal theater opened a window for developments in arts policy history of the New Deal era, her other significant publication on arts policy opened wide the door on the post–World War II period as well. In 1976, De Hart published "Art and Politics in Cold War America," in the *American Historical Review.* This piece explores the beginnings of American cultural exchange programs in the Cold War period and the backlash such public patronage elicited from anticommunists in Congress, such as George Dondero, as well as traditional, representational artists, who opposed the rise of abstract art. Granting that most Americans in the 1940s merely disliked or did not understand abstract art, De Hart asks why a relative few saw such political subversion in aesthetics. They railed vociferously against

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modernism and labeled such work communistic, succeeding, for a while at least, to curtail State Department and USIA sponsorship of modernism. Art policy was official support of nonexperimental art.[10] These political institutions, already under attack in the McCarthy era, had larger battles to fight than that for avant-garde art. De Hart probes behind what seems the overt paranoid style of the anticommunist politicians and traditionalist artists to reveal their "cultural fundamentalism." She defines this as "a view wherein the irrational was repressed, causation simplified, change controlled, heterogeneity denied, loyalty affirmed, national unity and personal esteem preserved."[11] Modern art was seen as threatening this worldview, and the fact that federal policy gave prestige to modernists (albeit only a few at first), dispossessed the cultural fundamentalists of their previous symbolic legitimacy. Ultimately, they were experiencing a period of social stress and it was not surprising that they tried to shore up their own economic and symbolic power by attacking the modernists as subversive. Ironically, they won the battle but lost the war, as abstract expressionism came to be viewed as the embodiment of the kind of freedom and aesthetic that the U.S. government celebrated and supported through arts policy later on.

De Hart's article made valuable links between the rise of modern art and the politics of cultural exchange in light of domestic political tensions. Significantly, it helped to set off a fresh stream of work, examining the international exportation of American art. Serge Guibaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* took up the challenge of infusing the history of Abstract Expressionism with the political history of Cold War America as suggested by De Hart and Eva Cockroft in her article "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon in the Cold War."[12] Guibaut detailed not only how New York surpassed Paris as the center of the art world in the 1950s but how modernist art rose and became acceptable to American liberal politicians, who saw it as a quintessential expression of American freedom and contrasted it with Soviet totalitarianism.[13] Erika Doss also examines the rise of both Thomas Hart Benton's regionalist art, promoted in New Deal arts policy, and Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism, promoted by Cold War American policy. Yet Doss notes that the artists' work was a personal expression not necessarily designed for use by politicians to symbolize American national expression in each period. Thus, Doss traveled a similar path as De Hart in moving from studies of the 1930s to the postwar period.[14]

Other scholars have also delved more deeply into the politics of State Department arts policy. For example, Michael Krenn's recent book *Fall Out Shelters for the Human Spirit* details the cooperation between the art world

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and political institutions via the USIA, the State Department, and the Smithsonian Institution's international visual arts exhibits. Naima Prevots's *Dance for Export* similarly examines the relationship between the State Department and the world of dance. Prevots is less adept in analyzing the politics of propaganda. But in the wonderful book *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War,* Penny Von Eschen studies the intermingling of music and American politics through Duke Ellington's State Department–sponsored tours. Von Eschen inserts the important issue of race into these studies of arts policy. She argues that on the one hand, the State Department used Ellington as a "good will ambassador" to promote America culture to the world and, not coincidentally, demonstrate American government sponsorship of a black man playing jazz; while on the other hand, Ellington himself critiqued the appropriation of African American culture for political purposes and managed to highlight the civil rights movement at home.[15]

Another avenue that scholars turned to was the development of arts policy within the United States after the 1950s. During the 1990s, controversies over the National Endowment for the Arts caught public attention and inspired a number of scholars to look anew at the relationship between art and the state as well as art and the public at large. Casey Nelson Blake's article "Atmosphere of Effrontery: Richard Serra, 'Tilted Arc,' and the Crisis of Public Art" examines the General Services Administration installation of art at federal buildings. Blake discovered a disconnect between federal officials' acceptance of modernist art and the public rejection of it, which in the case of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc,* resulted in its removal from federal property.[16] Michael Kammen's *JAH* article "Culture and the State in America" takes a broad view in asking why, when so many other countries had ministries of culture, did the United States not have such an institution? He traces the absence of arts policy until the establishment of the NEA in 1965 and argues that it could learn in the 1990s the same lesson that Jane De Hart posed in her work on the Federal Theatre—that federal arts policy would gain greater support if it were linked more closely to local arts and their constituents (814).[17] My own book, *Federalizing the Muse*, analyzes the development of the NEA and its Visual Arts Program policies. I found that NEA officials promoted a modernist abstract aesthetic that they believed would best showcase American achievement and freedom. Initially, this led them to neglect many contemporary art forms that they feared could be perceived as politically problematic, including pop, feminist, ethnic arts, and much figurative work characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the NEA was in fact not promoting the most avant-garde work, but the abstract expressionism and

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monumental sculpture considered the tried-and-true by the culture brokers of the 1970s.[18] Selections from many of these aforementioned studies can now be found in a new collection edited by Casey Blake titled *The Arts of Democracy*.[19]

The state of arts policy history is dynamic; and for many of us working in the field, De Hart's work remained a touchstone even as we ventured in new directions. There are now several clusters of work on arts policy dealing with different time periods, examining both domestic and international arenas that sustained arts policy, analyzing the connections between policy and public culture and the art market. There are still more windows and doors to be opened. De Hart made a great contribution to the field, one of the hallmarks of which included not only her connection of art and politics but of aesthetic, political, *and* social history. I believe more attention to social history could further enliven this field. There is still work to be done on dance, music, and museums as well. To end with a selection from Casey Blake's introduction to *The Arts of Democracy*, arts policy history demonstrates that despite the "cacophony of voices and images that have fractured public discourse and aesthetic experience, [arts policy historians] hold out the possibility for richer, more inclusive expressions of what holds us together as citizens and human beings. . . . [They illustrate] the cultural vitality and political innovation of the last century . . . [which] remain indispensable today."[20]

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NOTES

1. G. Thomas Tanselle, review of *The Federal Theatre Project*, in *Journal of American History* 54, no. 4 (March 1968): 921–22.

2. Indeed, two of us on the panel from which these essays originated owe a debt to Jane De Hart for the directions her work sent us in: Eileen Boris has noted that *The Federal Theatre* was important for her as she embarked on her career with her first book, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia, 1986), and I followed a similar path with my book *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965–1980* (Chapel Hill, 2004). I would like to thank Eileen Boris for her efforts in organizing our panel at the 2008 Policy History Conference as well as Linda Kerber for her enthusiasm to publish our forum.

3. Jane De Hart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre Project: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, 1967), 295.

4. Jane De Hart Matthews, "Art of the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy," *Journal of American History* 62, no. 2 (September 1975): 319.

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5. Ibid., 324–25.

6. Jerry Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935–1943* (Boston, 1972); Richard McKinzie, *A New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, 1973); Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York, 1976).

7. Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis, 1982); Christopher DeNoon, *Posters of the WPA* (Los Angeles, 1987); Peter Daniel, *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C., 1987).

8. Rena Fraden, *Blueprint for a Black Federal Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Tey Marianna Nunn, *Sin Nombre: Hispana and Hispano Artists of the New Deal Era* (Albuquerque, 2001); and Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C., 1991). Another notable work dealing with ethnicity is Robert Fay Schrader's *The Indian Arts and Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Indian Policy* (Albuquerque, 1984).

9. Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York, 1995).

10. Jane De Hart Matthews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (October 1976): 778.

11. Ibid., 786.

12. Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39–41.

13. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, 1983).

14. Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991).

15. Michael Krenn, *Fall Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Hanover, N.H., 1998); and Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

16. Casey Nelson Blake, "Atmosphere of Effrontery: Richard Serra, 'Tilted Arc,' and the Crisis of Public Art," in *The Power of Culture*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (Chicago, 1993), 247–89.

17. Michael Kammen, "Culture and the State in America," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December 1996): 814.

18. Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse*.

19. Casey N. Blake, ed., *The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State* (Philadelphia, 2007).

20. Blake, "Introduction: Public Culture Reconsidered," in *The Arts of Democracy*, 6.

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