

STUART DAVIS

-Someday it will be told how 'anti-Stalinis
which started more or less as 'Trotskyism'
turned into art for art's sake and thereby
cleared the way, heroically for what was
to come.

Clement Greenburg

- We want this old show of ours to mark
the starting point of the new spirit
in art.

-Walt Kuhn on the 1913 Armory
Show.

- art is the giving by each man of his evidence
to the world. - Robert Healy

Any discussion of the anarchist influence in American Art
cannot continue without a thorough examination of the career of
Stuart Davis. Davis was among the leading exponents of abstract
art during the highly politicized era of the New Deal when modern
art was under attack from the right and the left. This coupled
with his active participation in the shaping of government policy
towards art and artists during the years of experimental Federal
Patronage as well as his voluminous published and unpublished
writings on art theory make Davis extraordinarily interesting to
the student of art and politics.

Although Davis was honored after his death in 1965 by a
memorial exhibition organized by the National Collection of
Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution which travelled across the
entire country and during his lifetime by numerous awards and
honors, ^{there} ~~he~~ has always been a problem in tracing his developemnt
and position in the history of art in the United States. Most
recently he has been discussed as a precursor to Pop Art but
the studied abstractions of daily objects and scenes and the

non-imitative use of color that form the body of his work are as far removed from Pop Art as they are from the neo-plasticism of Mondrian to whom his work has also been compared. It is hoped that by elucidating the influence of Anarchism on his work and career that a more realistic approach to his work and his influence on his times as well as his legacy to the future will be developed.

It is for an example of Anarchist art education that we are first able to turn to Davis. For Stuart Davis in 1910 at the age of 14 was already enrolled full time at the studio school of Robert Henri. Robert Henri's Anarchism has been well documented as has his presence (1911-18) at the Ferrer Center, the Anarchist free school run by Goldman and Berkman at which such future luminaries as Will and Ariel Durant (she was 14 when they married), Henri and his student Man Ray developed the concepts and practises of Anarchist education based on the principles of Francesco Ferrer.

But Stuart Davis was born knowing Henri. In 1894, the year of his birth, his father Edward Davis was the Art Director of the Philadelphia Free Press. The Philadelphia Free Press has gone down in American art history as the meeting place of William Glackens, Edward Shinn and John Sloan who together with Robert Henri, George Bellows, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast and Ernest Lawson were to

~~form the first self-conscious artists movement in the U.S. - The Eight.~~
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According to William Iness Homer, Davis and Henri had actually been classmates at the Pennsylvania Academy classes of Thomas Anschutz. At any rate, it was in Anschutz's classes that Edward Davis met Helen Stuart Foulk, the sculptress who would become Stuart Davis's mother.

In the ~~early~~ years since art school Henri had gone on to Europe and developing himself as a fine artist. Davis had gone into journalism illustration. By the time 1894 came around, Edward Davis was the supervisor of Henri's ^{ex-}students and they were all ^{meeting} ~~hanging~~ ~~out~~ at the Charcoal Club, a social and educational club for artists founded by John Sloan. Henri discussed ^{with them} the things he learned in Europe, painting and Anarchism.

By 1908 they had all moved to New York. Stuart Davis's parents included, although they resided in East Orange, N.J. Holger Cahill about whom we will have much to say later tells us that Henri, Sloan, Luks, Glackens, Bellows and others were frequent visitors to the Davis household in East Orange. Stuart Davis was bouncing around on a lot of knees.

While the others in the group were working journalists, Henri was a fine artist. As an Anarchist Henri felt that their records of daily life, its humor and its tragedy, were the stuff of fine art and he encouraged them to paint in oils in their spare time.

By 1908 they were getting pretty good at it and the next thing you know they decided to have a real art exhibit, ~~at a real art gallery~~. They called themselves the Eight but the press gave them the name for which they have gone down in history—The Ashcan School. The American art public did not care for the vulgar reality there presented for their delectation. Why these were just inkstained newspapermen pretending to be artists. If they wanted realism, let them find an Adirondack landscape instead of the slummy Lower East Side. Democracy was fine, really, in its place. But its place was not ART.

But for the Eight it was too late to turn back. They had had such a good time with their exhibition of Fine Art that they started getting into this art thing very seriously. Some of them even started experimenting with techniques and subject matter that left their early newspaper subjects far behind. Others, especially Sloan really got into the subject matter and joined their talents to the various Socialist political movements vying to rouse the subject matter to political action. They never would have thought to have that art exhibit if Robert Henri the Anarchist hadn't put them up to it. The world of Fine Art was as far away from their lives as the Frick Mansion.

The next thing you know they were at it again. Only this time, in 1910, it was the Independents Show, obviously named after the famous Salons in Paris. This exhibition was the first absolutely open, juryless, prizeless exhibition in U.S. Art History. It was sheer Anarchy. After the Independent show, a permanent association of Independent artists was formed (uh, oh) and it was this show that was to inspire the watershed Armory Show of 1913 which introduced European experimental art (the new language and new meaning of art) to the American Public. Although Brown tells us that by 1913 Henri and his group were in the out crowd he also tells us that it was Walt Kuhn, a former student of Henri's who was the moving force behind it and that

"Henri's emphasis on freedom and independence in his art. His rebuttal of everything the National Academy stood for makes him the ideological father of the Armory Show."

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. It is 1910 and Stuart is enrolled at Robert Henri's studio school of Fine Art.

He stayed with Henri for three years until 1913 when the Armory Show (at which he was represented by 5 watercolors) sent him off in another direction. Davis's years with Henri constitute the only formal art training and the last formal education that he was to have for the rest of his life.

Of his experience at the Henri school, Davis has this to say:

"The Henri School was regarded as radical and revolutionary in its methods and it was. All the usual art school routine was repudiated. Individuality of expression was the keynote and Henri's broad point of view in his criticisms was very effective in evoking it. Art was not a matter of rules and techniques or the search for an absolute ideal of beauty. It was the expression of ideas and emotions about the life of the times. The idea was to avoid mere factual statement and find ways to get down some of the qualities of memory and imagination involved in the perception of it.

And.

"Henri talked about them (the students' paintings), about music, literature and life in general in a very stimulating manner and his lectures constituted a liberal education"

By 1911 Henri was volunteering at the Ferrer School with George Bellows and Man Ray and Leon Trotsky were receiving the same *education* at night school. Davis goes on.

"Whatever the Henri school may have lacked in systematic discipline was more than made up for by other positive contributions. It took art off the academic pedestal and, by affirming its origin in the life of the day, developed a critical sense towards social values in the student. If there may have been a tendency towards anarchistic individualism, any preconceived ideas about racial, national or class surperiorities could not thrive in its atmosphere."

Davis's work from this period of extreme youth reflects the interests of the Ash Can School - slice of life drawings of life in the tenderloin. If we are to draw any reference to his later development from them it is that at this early stage he was always trying to capture movement. His subjects are always moving. Of his extracurricular activities at the

time Davis tells us:

"(Glenn O.) Coleman, Henry Glintenkamp and myself toured extensively in the metropolitan environs. Chinatown; the Bowery; the burlesque shows; the Brooklyn Bridge; McSorley's Saloon on East 7th Street; the Music Halls of Hoboken; the Negro Saloons; riding on the canal boats under the Public Market, and lengthy discussions with Gar Sparks, talented artist-proprietor of a candy store the latter all in Newark, New Jersey. Coleman and I were particularly hep to the jive, for that period, and spent much time listening to the Negro piano players in Newark dives."

Davis was such a life long jazz enthusiast that in 1952 when his only child was born he named him after two Afro-American jazz pianists George after George Whetttling and Earl after Earl "Fatha" Hines. But now we are way ahead of ourselves.

It has not been established whether Davis ever set foot inside the Ferrer Center nor if he ever met Man Ray there. What is certain is that the art of both men was completely transformed by their introduction to Modern Art at the Armory Show.

Davis who went into the show with a watercolor of "Babes LaTour" at the Hoboken Music Hall found a totally new way to be radical no matter what the subject matter. Man Ray who probably stopped by on his way home from work at the print shop was to begin his lifelong association with Duchamp that would lead him to spend most of his life in Paris.

It is ironic that Henri the "ideoligical father" of the Armory was also the teacher of both Stuart Davis and Man Ray who each took up the new language of art and carried it with them in directions that Henri was not able to follow. But for Robert Henri, I am sure it was quite acceptable. As an artist and an Anarchist he understood

that it is the way of nature to create, then destroy, then create again. Robert Henri believed in progress in art as well as society.

If we would make a formula of this create-destroy, destroy-create, and apply it to the respective directions of Man Ray and Stuart Davis in their departure from realism into Modernism an interesting contrast appears.

Man Ray who adopted and expanded the tenets of Dada and who tells us about Henri's influence on him "I found his ideas more stimulating than any direct criticism" used his Anarchist art education as a form of destruction. The magazine he published was called TNT. On the staff of TNT was Adolff Wolff who would soon be jailed for provocative ^{political} activity. Ray participated in the anti-Art activities of the Dadas which climaxed with the rejection of R. Mutt's ready-made urinal at the 1916 Independents Show. His entire Fine Art ^{oeuvre} was made up of work which jolted the expectations of the viewers and destroyed preconceptions on the spot.

Davis, on the other hand, had a more Apollonian approach. As Davis picked up the banner of Modernism, he also picked up the tenets of Cubism. Cubism was based on the studied deconstruction of the subject in order to reconstruct it again giving it another order or logic including, this time, the dimensions of time and space. Or something like that. In his attraction to Cubism, Davis was translating the principles of observation, memory and imagination that he had learned from Henri into the new language of art.

Davis's opinion of Dada can be read in this journal entry of 1922.

"Art is art. That is to say a work of art can only be such by intention and a work of art no matter how

"slight is superior to a complicated piece of anti-Art."^u
In Russia an entire revolutionary art movement called Constructivism was going on at the time. Although Kandinsky was represented at the Armory Show, it is not known whether Davis was familiar with the Constructivist Movement. At any rate he understood the new language of art at the Armory Show to mean constructive imagination. In his 1945 autobiography, he re^printed the charter for the 1913 Armory Show:

"Art is a sign of life. And to be afraid of life is to be afraid of truth, and to be a champion of superstition. This exhibition is an indication that the Association of American Painters and Sculptors is against cowardice even when it takes the form of amiable self-satisfaction."

But there was a lot going on outside the Armory in those days and Stuart Davis was participating in other activities.

As John Sloan's protégé, Davis was invited in 1912 at the age of 18 to become a member of the staff of "The Masses". The Masses is well-known to students of American art history as part of the whole complex of involvements of American artists in radical political causes in the years surrounding WWI and the Russian Revolution. These were the old deal years of laissez-faire capitalism. And the years of Bohemianism in American culture. The years of H.L. Mencken, Gertrude Stein, and John Reed. The years of Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman. The years of "291" and the years of Max Eastman. The Patterson Silk Strike Pageant and the Armory Show were held in the same year and were worked on by many of the same people.

Of the climate of that period much has been written but it is to Milton Brown that we will turn for the

definition of Bohemianism.

"Bohemianism is essentially an intellectual revolt against the confines of established society resulting in the creation of an intellectual community within the framework of that society but with a different set of mores and antagonism toward those outside the community."

The common enemy of both Bohemians and Bolshviks is the bourgeois. the bourgeois who own the means of production. But also the bourgeois who lived on Main Street where the business of America was business and the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities was an activity for Pansies and women. Both economic and aesthetic anti-bourgeoisism would be lead by an avant-garde. In the fight to overthrow economic bourgeoisie the organization of the working class is the vanguard activity. On the art front, young people left their solid citizen homes in droves to become Bohemians and adopted the experimental language and new meaning of modern art. The Bohemians adopted the language of political revolution.

While Bolshvism and other varieties of Socialism adressed only the economic aspects of Bourgeoisism, Anarchism included its social customs as well. In that era we find Anarchists adressing themselves to birth control and free love as well as workers control of the means of production. We find them experimenting with education and experimental communities in the country. We find them ~~supportive and~~ enthusiastically supportive of all forms of modernism in the arts.

It was not the Armory Show that made Davis quit the Masses. He seems to have been perfectly content to go on drawing life on the streets for a living (he was already earning money from a weekly commission at Harper's Weekly) and experimenting with color and form in his free time. Davis

stayed at the Masses until 1916. What made him quit the Masses was a dispute over the use of his work for the purposes of Socialist Propaganda.

"In the beginning the magazine was edited by the entire staff of artists and writers at meetings where each had equal vote. The available material was presented, discussed, and a majority vote was taken. But as time passed, Max Eastman editor-in-chief, began to develop the idea that a more conventional editorial procedure was mandatory. Pictures and articles must be edited at his discretion. Prominent among those on his side were John Reed and Art Young. This threatened invasion of the artists freedom of expression caused great indignation among us. Sides were drawn, proxies were feverishly garnered from share holders, and a meeting was held. Lovable Art Young spoke scathingly of our "arty" ideas. He said, "They want to run pictures of ash cans and girls hitching up their skirts in Horation Street - regardless of ideas - and without title." Finally a vote was taken and Max snowed us under with proxies. John Sloan and the rest of us resigned."

Max Eastman gives a more detailed account of what happened on that day in 1916 in his autobiography Enjoyment of Living. Indeed that event was so important in his life that he takes the entire ~~500 pages~~ ^{book} to explain what happened. On page 550 he tells us that the group who refused to have their pictures captioned fought back with the proposition that the positions of Editor and Managing Editor be abolished. He calls the incident "A mere rebel mood of those who mistake creative art for the effort ^o _A towards world transformation". He has already spent pages describing how hard he worked and how much his own creative art was suffering because of his sacrifices as Editor. But when they offered to relieve him of the burden he fought to the death to hold onto his authority.

The real story is on page 416.

"There were a few members who wanted the magazine as a whole to have no policy. They were not the most playful members but those most serious about self-expressive art. I wanted everybody to express his own individuality to the limit, so long as he did not ^A _A transgress the principles of socialism.

And I could always see to it in the process of makeup and if driven to the wall by an ultimatum, as the holder of the pursestrings that nothing anti-socialist or counter-revolutionary should appear in the paper."

Enter the Thought Police; Stage left. It was this event in 1916, preceding the Bolshevik takeover in Russian, this event staged by the American wing of the Bolshevik international that began the rupture between Modern Art and the Marxist revolutionary movements that would reach its logical conclusion under Stalin.

It was with this decision that the first step was taken towards the Gulag Archipelago and the stagnant condition of the arts in the Soviet Union today.

Eastman went on to become an apologist for Leon Trotsky, translating his works and publishing volumes of his own forgettable poetry. He finished his career with a sleazy recantation of Communism in Readers Digest. John Reed who was also of the Eastman camp but who Eastman tells us was under the influence of "Lincoln Steffens' Christian Anarchism" had the good fortune to die young fighting in the Russian Revolution and become a hero. We will never know what he would have thought about the turgid, false, sentimental "Proletarian Realism" that spewed forth from his namesake John Reed Clubs that were the Cultural front of the Communist Party during the days when "Communism was just 20th Century Americanism" Maybe he would have liked it. Its possible. Eastman and Young did or said they did or thought they should.

Sloan with his wife Dolly continued his activities as a Socialist. He donated art work for posters and to Socialist publications like the New York Call. He believed that Socialism

was a choice that could be made at the ballot box. Although the unseating of 5^{duly} elected Socialist candidates from the 1920 New York State Legislature showed that the thought police were active on the right as well.

For Stuart Davis, however, this experience at the Masses marked the absolute end of the first phase of his involvement with politics. From 1916 until the years of the Federal Art Project there is no public record of any participation by Davis in any kind of political activity. His reaction to Eastman's centralization of power, to the rejection of the modern meaning of art in the Bolshvik aesthetic was to turn his back and exercise his right to discover his own song and the presentation of the evidence of his individual existence to society.

From that time until he reached his mature style in the 20's he experimented with the forms of modernism and came up with his own unique synthesis of cubist form and Fauvist color.

For a thorough discussion of Davis's art I refer the reader to John R. LANE's "Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory". It is significant that Davis rarely departed from the material world in his entire work. We are always aware of the initial subject matter and the process of decomposition and restructuring which forms the finished painting. One of his most abstract works occurs early in his career "The President" of 1917. This is a completely experimental exploration of pattern and color. Knowing now as we do Davis's Anarchist background, even this is a strong political statement. It is also significant that in the late 30's when Abstract Art had become almost a cult,

Davis eschewed the American Abstract Artists group and continued his solitary path. By then Davis had found a new mentor in John Graham. It is in the echoes of Graham's "Give the Masses great Art and do not worry about it" that Davis would hear again the voice of Robert Henri, his first teacher.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves again. Summing up we find Stuart Davis in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century departing from the realistic style of Robert Henri, his teacher but continuing to impliment his ideas on freedom and self-expression. We see that Davis consciously picked up the banner of Modern Art as a revolutionary activity. The new meaning of art had radical social content for Davis.

How Davis carried that banner of modernism into the ideolgical fray that consumed American Intelligentsia during the New Deal, how he defended ^{it} from attacks by both the right and the left will be the ^bsubject of the second half of this ^preport. We will close here with statements by Davis regarding the nature and social significance of his work.

"Tradition takes physical reality for granted. it is considered sufficient to place onself before an ~~object~~ ^{object} of nature and record its emotional reaction in terms of related forms. Ultra modern expression takes the whole scope of many (consciousness) as its field and in the plastic arts has as its object the expression of the mental scope in its plastic form."

"A work of art should have the following qualities. It should be first of all impersonal in execution, that is to say it should not be a seismographic chart of the nervous system at the time of execution."

"I do not want any illusions of light in the accepted symbolism to creep into the painting as I desire the light to be the actual light of the color itself."

"Quite obviously the perceptions of the artist are foreign to most people, in fact it might be said that

his audience is restricted automatically by the very quality that makes his work important, namely its perception or appreciation of values overlooked by nearly everyone."

"Painting is the vehicle for the expression of an ideal. An ideal is a mental concept, an evaluation of natural material...The only vital principle today, bad or good, is the ideal of democracy. Every man is the equal of the other, hence the man's personal reaction(s) to a given scene are the ideal. He has no standards of what is worthwhile in a given scene except the way he happens to feel about it at the time of perception. There is no common idealism today except this one of the right of a man to do as he pleases.

" Art is the thing that is needed as a life factor and the more of it we have the better it will be. Intention is the motive power of achievement."

STUART
DAVIS

END
REEL
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Because as I have said the entire development of self-conscious modern art is compatible with the philosophy of anarchism, I will confine the discussion to those artists who were concretely affiliated with Anarchism as a political movement and to the explication of their contributions to the ongoing dialog between art and society of their times. This is done with the purpose of tuning up the frequency on the Anarchist channel in the static clogged dialog between art and society that we find ourselves listening to at present.

Because the rights of the individual are written into the Constitution of the United States, ^{Anarchists} sometimes seem like defenders of the American way of life. In reality they are defending the American Revolution. Even in these times the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution seem like radical documents. We will always be able to differentiate them from reactionary elements by their consistently international, fresh and unprejudiced approach to their lives, their work and their times.

For Anarchists it has always been propaganda by deed. We will find concrete examples of risks taken and sacrifices made in the defense of the right to equal freedom ^{of} and opportunity in the pursuit of happiness that was the charter of the American Revolution and which is still in the process of being realized.

Included in the right to pursue happiness is the right to create a job for oneself. This is known as free enterprise. An artist selling his/her work on the open market is an entrepreneur. It is the artists right to be able to display his/her work in search of buyers or patronage. Free enterprise is included in Anarchism.

Free enterprize is included in Capitalism. Advanced Capitalism is not included in Anarchism.

So much for economics. Real art is not about economics although it is based in society. Real art is about matters unseen, about the life of the spirit. Real art in its new meaning and language is an individual statement against the monotony of controlled existence.

From an Anarchist perspective the societies of Communism and Fascism are exactly alike. The mass of people are slaves of the State in one and slaves of private industry in the guise of the State in the other. Anarchism is the politics of freedom. It is the politics of creative possibility. Under Anarchism the State will be abolished immediately and art will wither away.

In what follows we will see how artists in the United States adopted and advanced the new meaning of the language of art in the name of individual freedom and social Anarchism and its affects on the history of art as it has come down to us.

It is almost 1985 Mr. Orwell, and we are going to talk about Freedom.

Laura Zelasnick

8/15/84