

The Social And the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere (Refiguring Modernism)



During the 1930s, American artists such as Ben Shahn developed a mode of representation generally known as Social Realism. This term is given broad new meaning in the anthology brought together by Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg. They and their collaborators argue that artists of the Depression era believed that their art became realistic by engaging the great economic and political issues of society. Through fresh investigation of the visual culture of the 1930s--painting, sculpture, photography, and the graphic arts--the anthology illuminates the struggle for social justice that led artists to embrace leftist ideologies and fashion an art aimed at revealing the harsh realities of contemporary life. In sharp contrast to earlier studies, *The Social and the Real* contends that the radical, realistic art of the Americas during the 1930s was shaped as much by hemispheric exchange as by emulation of the European avant-garde. Alan Trachtenberg, Mary K. Coffey, and the books other essayists consider Canadian art alongside art from the United States, the Caribbean, and as far south as Argentina. Some of the artists they discuss, like Philip Evergood or Dorothea Lange, are well known; others--the Argentinean Antonio Berni or the Canadian Parakeva Clark--deserve wider recognition. Situating such artists within the context of Pan-American exchange transforms the structure of the art-historical field. It also produces major new insights. The rise of Social Realism, for instance, is traced back not to the United States in the 1930s, but instead to the Mexico of the early 1920s. *The Social and the Real* makes an assessment of Social Realism that is comprehensive as well as groundbreaking. The opening essays deal with reality and authenticity in representation of the nation. Subsequent essays consider portrayals of manhood, labor, lynching, and people

pushed to the margins of society because of religious or ethnic identity. The volume concludes with a pair of essays--one on artists links with Communism, the other on the portrayal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's physical infirmity-- that carry the discussion of Social Realism into the postwar period. The Social and the Real is the first anthology to deal with the painting, sculpture, graphic arts, and photography of the 1930s in a hemispheric context. We take as axiomatic Cuban poet, journalist, and political theorist Jose Marti's (1853-95) definition of America as a hemispheric, multiracial, and multiethnic entity in which the United States is one nation among many. Although many of the individual essays have a relatively narrow focus, as an aggregate they begin the process of forging a Pan-American perspective on the art of the period, encouraging the reader to compare and contrast the experiences of artists across national boundaries and reconsider familiar narratives. Thinking about art and politics in a hemispheric context expands the very chronology of social realism. Whereas scholars in the United States locate the origins of the movement with the economic crash of 1929 and conclude it with the advent of World War II, the story really begins in Mexico in the early 1920s and continues during the 1940s and 1950s throughout the hemisphere.

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