MARY ANN CALO, *AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS AND THE NEW DEAL ART PROGRAMS. OPPORTUNITY, ACCESS, AND COMMUNITY*

Epilogue by Jacqueline Francis. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2023, 216 pages with 15 b/w ill.,
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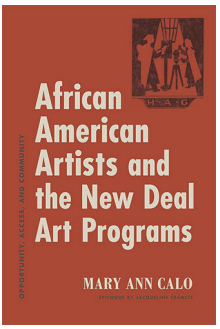

Reviewed by
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New Deal art programs have been the subject of multiple anthologies – perhaps most prominently *The New Deal Art Projects. An Anthology of Memoirs* (1972) and *Art for the Millions* (1973) – which comprise perspectives on the programs collected by Francis O'Connor. These publications provided personal insights into the community spirit, frustrations, and bureaucracy of government arts funding. O'Connor's research corresponds with a range of exhibition catalogs from the New Deal period (1930s and early '40s) and later historicizations of the New Deal art. As Mary Ann Calo writes, however, despite this important history of scholarship, African American participation in the federal art projects has been studied piecemeal at best. Within these publications, a focus on individual artists and/or their stylistic and thematic approaches has tended to neglect the nuances of Black participation in the federal arts projects (FAP) and the array of opportunities and obstacles Black artists confronted. Calo's *African American Artists and the New Deal Art Programs* seeks to address this gap by exploring the broader experiences among Black artists located in key art cen-

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ters in the North, South, and Midwest United States. The book enables a fuller understanding of the circumstances Black artists faced and the potential legacy of government programs for Black artists. Within this manuscript, the author explores the myriad ways in which the democratic ideals of the FAP were inevitably compromised by racial discrimination, segregation, and assumptions about Black artistic production. Digging deeply into previously untapped sources to provide a broader picture of Black participation and discourse in the 1930s and '40s, the book establishes a solid foundation for further research.

Rather than evaluating individual artworks, Calo considers the environments in which Black artists generated their art. The small black-and-white image insert mostly illustrates the spaces and people that contributed to the projects, rather than highlighting individual works. Calo discusses FAP director Holger Cahill's concerns about "criticism of New Deal art as driven by social objectives rather than aesthetic values" (p. 7). Realizing that a focus on aesthetics – and concerns over artistic "professionalism" which are cited throughout the book – have driven much of the scholarship, Calo importantly attends to the often overlooked "social objectives" that played out through the New Deal. Even as the book avoids discussion of individual artistic styles and motivations, however, Calo lists the names of the many Black contributors to New Deal projects, a vital move for mere visibility for some of these barely known artists and for future research. In her epilogue for the book, Jacqueline Francis follows up by underscoring artists' names, where they appear in documentation of the period, and the place of their individual voices in the projects, when they appear at all.

Prevailing scholarship reinforces the predominant assumption that the New Deal programs significantly bolstered African American art, which Calo posits as an exaggerated claim that relies too much on the words of Works Progress Administration (WPA) (p. 10). Calo writes,

> Historians have tended to think of the projects overall as initiatives that redressed chronic disadvantages faced by Black artists, with a generally positive effect on their subsequent professional development. The result is a kind of consensus view of their collective historical relevance that is often vague or scarce in terms of details and complacent in terms of analysis (p. 2).

The author indicates that Alain Locke, who unsurprisingly surfaces repeatedly in the study as an advocate and scholar of African American art, had been writing about Black art years before the government programs. Black artists had also shown their work and received awards through the Harmon Foundation. Calo positions the government projects within these broader conversations and exhibition opportunities.

The first chapter, "Historiography", reviews the studies of the era. Francis O'Connor's multiple publications, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson's attention to the WPA in their tome on African American art, alongside a range of archives, newspaper reviews, writings by Black intelligentsia including Locke and James Porter, and an array of secondary literature and recent interdisciplinary work by scholars including Jonathan Harris, Stacy Morgan, Sharon Musher, and Joan Saab inform Calo's historicization of this period. She follows these studies by digging into the variety of experiences confronting Black artists depending on location, Community Art Center (CAC) directors, funding, and advocacy. From this Calo presents a range of experiences, all of which underscore the effect of institutionalized racism, alongside evidence of mostly genuine efforts to include African Americans in government-sponsored art centers.

The second chapter, "Participation", focuses on Black inclusion in the CACs and the balance and aggravations surrounding the establishment of art education programs and the clashing of amateur engagement in the projects in relation to Black artists with professional status or aspirations. Calo makes a vital contribution by engaging lesser-known projects in the Jim Crow South, highlighting the differences in these centers depending on leadership, support, and community engagement. The chapter distinguishes between urban organizations that served mostly Black communities but were not defined as segregated in relationship to those units in the South, called "Negro extension galleries" that strictly reinforced Jim Crow segregation. Southern areas were skeptical of government funding of the arts and suspicious of arts programming more generally. At times, Calo employs biased language in referencing southern communities as "culturally backward" (p. 37) and the challenge of establishing the Jacksonville Negro Federal Gallery within an "unsophisticated community" (pp. 39–40). This kind of blanket statement about southern cultures undoubtedly circulated in northern urban thought, but at times overlooks the huge structural disadvantages southern Black artists faced and/or their understandable uncertainty about the practicality of becoming an artist or art educator. This segment of the book could benefit from greater consideration of the ways in which socio-economic class and Jim Crow restrictions affected language and assumptions about southern communities, particularly through a critique of northern artists both Black and white traveling south to interact with extension centers. The paternalistic language stemming from directors and educators surrounding outreach in the South and assumptions about what "art" means to a given community demands critique and skepticism. Also worth acknowledging is the profound range of Black artistic creativity in the South – that which may fall under the moniker "folk" or "vernacular" – that was overlooked by government programs and directors perhaps too rigid in their conceptions of "art" as defined and cultivated by these programs and too out of touch with community needs.

Regardless, Calo sheds light on a range of southern centers through her careful combing of archives with particular attention to three that represent the possibilities and the shortcomings of the government programs: the Raleigh Art Center, the first FAP supported community art center in the country, the Greensboro Art Center extension gallery, and the Jacksonville Negro Federal Gallery. Calo provides Raleigh as a case with a high level of administrative skill and input from sponsoring institutions, while the Greensboro center met with administrative squabbles and a lack of funding. Harry Sutton's strong leadership of the Jacksonville gallery garnered much attention and praise as a proper art unit rather than a "Negro extension". Calo concludes that despite best efforts, the extension galleries closed without living on in institutional memory. She queries,

> [The Negro art centers] provided opportunities for Black artists, but to what extent did they transcend their educational, social, and economic functions and contribute to telling a national story about redefining America and reshaping its cultural production? (pp. 55–56).

Calo explicates how the stated goals of the centers repeatedly fell through, particularly regarding Black participation.

The third chapter, "Advocacy", ties together New Deal art projects with sponsoring organizations, such as the Artists' Union and the National Negro Congress, who sought to position artists as cultural workers essential to the project of American democracy and the fight against discrimination. Their ideas contrasted with traditional conceptions of the artist, their work, and their patron. Calo writes, "The prospect of steady employment in the projects and a union that advocated for artists' rights was anathema to elite art patrons accustomed to thinking in terms of stylistic allegiances, not economic conditions" (p. 59). Calo highlights the Harlem Artists Guild (HAG) as providing a space for education and professionalism, particularly in relation to the patronizing language of the Harmon Foundation and the often-discriminatory practices of government art programs. The HAG sought prestige, professionalism, and increasing exposure through art exhibitions and sales. Calo establishes Alain Locke's precarious place vis-à-vis the HAG; Locke, as a writer and continuous advocate for African American art, frequently fell out of step with the desires, beliefs, and ideologies of young Black artists. Locke in turn shifted perspectives about art theories based in race toward art making as an agent of communication and social change. One of the many obstacles facing Black artists was the FAP's cowardice towards bad publicity. In disallowing white models to pose in majority Black classes, for example, the FAP yielded to segregationist principles rather than supporting the basic needs of the artists.

The fourth chapter, "Visibility", considers exhibition opportunities at a variety of venues associated with the FAP and the pro-

motion of African American art by the Harmon Foundation. Calo writes,

> The formation of the FAP marked a turning point in the view of many Black artists, who went from being a neglected cohort of creative Americans with limited visibility to membership in an officially recognized category of the deserving unemployed (p. 86).

Yet the FAP, Calo tells us, generally failed to include African American artists in large exhibitions of American art, despite their language of democracy and inclusion. The exclusion of Black artists went hand in hand with segregated "Negro art shows", with accompanying racialized language.

Calo's concluding "Aftermath" considers the implications of the federal art programs in terms of Black artistic prominence and discourse. Howard University scholar James Porter expressed skepticism about the long-term possibilities of government support. Calo places Locke and Porter in conversation with art critic Clement Greenberg as a means of highlighting the corresponding dialogues of the period and the ways in which certain artists and critics become canonized in the history of art, while others were institutionally marginalized as a racial minority. While Greenberg sought a radical aesthetic separate from mass culture, Locke and Porter located progress in greater opportunities and audiences for an inclusive and more dynamic understanding of American art. Locke and Porter thus seek a different kind of disruption of the norm than Greenberg.

Black artists were ultimately more affected by the collapse of government-funded art projects than whites due to their historical exclusion from mainstream institutions. Historically Black colleges and universities, vital yet underfunded institutions, attempted to fill this gap. Calo further notes how the decidedly progressive motivations of the St. Louis project whittled away over time. The book illuminates the great complexity of the United States as a nation in undertaking the federal art project with so many different players, communities, and manifestations of racial oppression. Government funding of the 1930s and '40s was later solidified in the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), created in 1965 to provide support for the arts, yet survives precariously as an organization privy to cuts and censorship. Alongside the forming of the NEA, Calo details how in 1968 the Whitney Museum of American art's "The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America" continued Black invisibility by featuring not a single Black artist. Met with protest and countered by Henri Ghent's "Invisible Americans" exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Whitney exhibition suggested that even within the Civil Rights and Black power movements, which raised Black concerns and politics to nationwide and global discussions, Black artists continued somehow to be invisible.

The book's epilogue, penned by Jacqueline Francis, considers the framing and discourse surrounding two major "Negro" art exhibitions and ends with white photographer Carl Van Vechten's photographs of interracial homosexual relationships at New York's Stage Door Canteen. Francis's contribution does not extend Calo's attention to the FAP, but rather uses the Stage Door Canteen as an example of a more genuinely interracial, progressive, and queer artistic space in comparison to the programs examined by Calo. The book concludes with words by Calo and Francis that enable the reader to contemplate where we are now in terms of visibility and support of Black artists. They stress the continued need for advocacy and visibility, acknowledging the ways in which institutionalized racism across all levels of society inevitably influences the locations and discussions surrounding Black artists within an array of cultural fields. The book offers clarity in articulating the complex and wide-ranging government and non-government programs and the place of African American people within them (as artists and within artistic discourses), and serves as a vital source within New Deal studies and African American art.