

Murals Over America

"A wall belongs to everybody~ it can't be traded on the art market... it's nobody's property and it's everybody's property, the way art should be."

Tania, City Walls muralist



William Walker's "History of the Packinghouse Worker" on the South Side of Chicago.

A Basic Book

Art for the Walls

"I do not paint (my still lifes) for the pride of the Emperor of Germany or the vanity of the oil merchants of Chicago. I may get 10,000 francs for one of these dirty things, but I'd rather have the wall of a church, a hospital, or a municipal building."

Paul Cézanne

TOWARD A PEOPLE'S ART: The Contemporary Mural Movement

by Eva Cockcroft, John Weber and James Cockcroft
E.P. Dutton, N.Y., 1977, \$7.95 in paper

As a political muralist, isolated in Montana, I am so stimulated by the realization—gained from this book—that my ideas and my work since 1968 have been part of a national movement, that it is difficult for me to review *Toward a People's Art* objectively. But I will touch upon some of its important and least debatable historical implications.

1. It describes the first major mural movement in the U.S. with social content since the 1930s.

2. Unlike the movement of the '30s, the major source of inspiration and contribution is multi-racial, an expression of black, chicano, and other ethnic groups, as well as whites.

3. It seems to have derived a substantial part of its patronage and support directly from local communities, which distinguishes it from the Mexican revolutionary mural movement, WPA murals in the U.S., and contemporary government-controlled art in communist countries.

4. It involves the active and sometimes equal participation of non-professional—sometimes non-trained—artists, working with the professionals—a significant experiment in democracy in the arts.

5. Many of the pictures reproduced in the book integrate abstract and realistic elements. This is unusual in a social art movement and deserves some discussion.

If there has been genuine popular support of these nonobjective approaches, this becomes an argument against the traditional left opinion that realism is the appropriate form for social communication in the arts. This support reinvigorates the position of revolutionary abstract artists of the Russian Revolution who argue that abstract forms can be used for the development of new social perceptions—a position that was suppressed by the mechanistic "socialist realism" of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

There are problems with a political art form as flexible as the contemporary mural movement. Too much variety of style can be as confusing as formalism. But for socialists a choice must be made between a regimented society (with predictably regimented art forms) and a democratic one that permits the openness, spontaneity, and unpredictability of non-regimented art. This demonstrates that there is a free art form, collective and democratic.

I have a few reservations about the book. It could give non-artists the impression of being too much a manual for mural painters. The theoretical sections might have been more fully developed, especially in view of the book's length. I have doubts about public acceptance and comprehension of all the murals.

That being said, *Toward a People's Art* makes an important and impressive statement. It battles the isolation suffered by mural painters who live outside large urban centers. It gives practical suggestions about collective-political mural painting of the future. It exposes to a national public some of the vital and lovely murals being produced in the country today. And it effectively opposes the forces and the despair that would deprive people of their right to call culture their own.

—Jim Todd

Jim Todd teaches the social history of art at the University of Montana.

In August 1967 a young black mural worker climbed a ladder to get above a large and angry crowd of blacks on Chicago's South Side.

The ladder was held by veteran muralist Bill Walker against a wall he and other black artists had been decorating with portraits of black heroes and statements about black people's lives and aspirations. The young muralist wrote the words "Wall of Respect" high above the heads of the crowd.

The crowd did not riot and the police did not fire. The "Wall of Respect" is considered by many to be the pioneer work of the modern mural movement, and Bill Walker is credited with being its mentor. Because of its unique goals and processes, this movement has gone some distance toward redefining the whole notion of art: what it is for; who it is for; and how it should be done.

In the ten intervening years, the idea of painting outdoor murals with strong political and/or ethnic statements has struck a resonating chord in many different communities. There are chicano murals, black murals, Puerto Rican murals, Asian murals, women's murals, underground comic-strip style murals, abstract murals (the latter usually of a more commercial nature, less a community statement). The Wall of Respect has fallen to the bulldozers of urban renewal, but still standing are Walls of Understanding, Meditation, Unity, Truth, Choice, Dignity, Respect for Women, Influences as Seen through the Eyes of Children. There is a mural called Bored of Education; an anti-pollution mural called Which River in upstate New York; and one in Los Angeles called The Wall that Cracked Open.

There is a group in the Southwest called Artes Guadalupeños de Aztlan. Many muralists have drawn on the Mexican tradition, but this group's work (which can be seen in Santa Fe, Denver and Phoenix) is an extension of that tradition, drawing on the electrically vibrant Mexican and Aztec styles of design.

Then there is Eva Cockcroft in New Jersey. She lived in Chile during Allende's regime and brought back the influence of Chilean muralists whose style is strong

and simple and allows almost anyone to paint in the bright colors once the outlines are drawn.

In New York City, Susan Shapiro-Kiok and others in the Cityarts Workshop on the Lower East Side worked with a gang of boys who were into drugs and gang fights. The mural leaders let the boys take pictures of themselves acting out aspects of their lives, then projected the huge, lifelike images on a wall. The final product is called the Anti-Drug Abuse mural.

The approach to mural making runs the gamut from the highly professional or subsidized murals, to murals done by a single artist (e.g., Bill Walker's history of the Packinghouse Worker); to the collective approach of a group of artists working with groups of local youth. Most of the good murals evolve out of the community in which they are located, on themes either chosen or approved by the local residents.

Financing is becoming a serious problem for muralists. For a short, sweet while there were federal funds for CETA or various agencies within the National Endowment for the Arts. As John Weber (accompanying review) said recently, "The money was given when things were hot, taken away when things cooled down. Now it is very tough going for all mural groups."

The future of the movement cannot be predicted. It depends partly on the political climate of the immediate future. Recent murals have been quieter, subtler, more symbolic, more concerned with permanence. (For example, one recent Chicago mural is partially cast in concrete.)

But whatever direction the movement may follow, it has surely provided one of the most important legacies of the political activism of the last decade. Murals from the '60s and early '70s are still here, sprouting up like fistfuls of wildflowers in a cracked, concrete jungle. For all their deliberate ethnicity, they are an expression of a truly American exuberance, a hopeful exercise of the free expression that is occasionally possible here.

—Jane Melnick



Teenagers who live near "Razem" in northwest Chicago stand in front of a section.

Photo by Jane Melnick

Chicago Murals

Off Belmont Avenue on the northwest side of Chicago, the Polish mural, "Razem" stands along the edge of a McDonald's parking lot—a wonderful visual shock. "Razem" means together in Polish. The rich blues and greens, the intricately designed imagery seem downright unAmerican.

We asked some teenage passersby what the mural meant. "It's the Polish people," one said. Did they like it? They looked down and around and finally said, "Yeah." Did they know what it stood for with its symbols, like the huge man in white peasant dress, reaching across it? Not exactly; just "the Polish people." They were definitely glad it was there. One boy said if he caught anybody defacing it, he'd fight them.

"Social protest imagery" in murals has to work in its community. Otherwise it's a target for one of the few cultural expressions widely available to the American people—defacement and graffiti. Mural artists must be expert at their craft (and art critics are finally admitting that they rank with the best), but they must also be organizers and diplomats.

The story of "Razem's" creation is an excellent case in point when you know the obstacles the artists faced. Project director Caryl Yasko, of the Chicago Mural Group, says of the Polish community here (the largest concentration of Poles anywhere outside of Warsaw) that they are not united and are generally very conservative. "In order to assimilate they have often disavowed their background. People hide their accordions in their closets and never play them." Also, severe generation gaps divide the immigrant from the first native generation, and both from the younger people.

Yasko went into the Polish community with Sauti Isrowothakul, a Thai artist who had worked on other murals. They wandered into the Polish Museum and got talking with a youth group, formed to rediscover their Polish identity, break down prejudices against Poles, and find different directions from those who, as Yasko says, "have been conditioned into super-patriots."

The artists explained that they were doing a mural and asked the group to tell them about Polish life in America and Polish traditions. The talk flowed a while, and one of the youth group's organizers, Bob Radycki, offered to contact some of the local organizations. Soon they had organized a meeting with several of them.

This was one of the points at which the participation of the youth group (many of whom committed full time to work on the mural) was crucial to success. "They knew how to talk Polish, and how to talk to the different groups." And they were able to prove to the community that those responsible for the mural were "Polish" enough to carry out such a project.

The artists originally wanted to depict the immigrant experience directly, but the community wanted to proclaim in their mural that they were not the ignorant clods of Polish jokes, but came from a world of science and culture. Debates continued until some consensus (as well as some financial support) emerged.

They chose a folk hero, Janotchek, a Polish Robin Hood, for the central figure. He is shown reaching from the old world to the new, offering a young sapling to be planted, integrated into a design that looks like an old-world paper-cut.

Some outsiders felt the final concept was not radical enough, but the muralists stuck to their conviction that it was vital to paint what the local people wanted. When the mural was finally finished there was a festive dedication including an enormous banquet that Yasko recalls as one of the fanciest she has ever seen. It was the Polish community's way of saying thank you.

The same sense of neighborhood ownership can be detected around each of Chicago's many good murals. One teenage boy proudly told us how he chased and tackled a drunken landlord who had thrown a bucket of gray paint at "Tilt," a mural only recently completed. Directed by Chicago Mural Group leader John Weber, "Tilt" is more overtly political than "Razem." It shows people uniting

against a rich man who is careening recklessly across the community in a big car, oblivious to the unemployment lines his priorities have helped to cause. Often, says Weber, the people who are "hungriest" both literally and figuratively, relate best to such murals.

A woman on her way to the laundromat told us that the mural has given hope to many unemployed in the community because it says that "it isn't their fault."

Similar relationships exist in the chicano community around the work of MARCH (Movimiento Artístico Chicano), which includes the work of talented young artists Salvador Vega and Aurelio Diaz. Black people on the South Side are proud to pose in front of William Walker's "Meat-packer's Union History." Junkies and gangs in Uptown make sure that no one touches the beautiful mural of Asian/Latino history done by Oscar Martinez and Jim Yanagisawa (regular editorial cartoonist for *IN THESE TIMES*.)

No precise scales exist to measure the weight of works of art and their effect on people. But murals profoundly affect many people's lives. They have brought people together where it was not thought possible, as for example in the Anglo-Latino mural on the North Side, called "People of Lakeview, Unite!"

For the left, John Weber says, the murals "have not always been explicit enough. The left sometimes hasn't been able to grasp the connection between the democratic expression the murals represent and revolution—how all reform struggles that have a mass character and go beyond the limitations of present society imply fundamental demands that can't be met under capitalism." One of the demands murals make is "that the masses have a right to culture; they are the sources and the legitimate patrons of culture. How can anyone deny that?"

Another thing the murals do, first by the process of their creation and then by their continued colorful presence imposed on the city's gray, is to state that "We can change things; we can alter the environment."

—Jane Melnick



San Fran

The Chevy Monza ad at Haight and Masonic Streets in San Francisco has to compete these days with a billboard-size mural standing right next to it. The brightly-colored "200 Years of Resistance" (done by the Haight-Ashbury Muralists) shows people of all races pushing back a wall whose surface is covered with the logos of corporations and other symbols of oppression.

Monza, prepare to meet your maker!

Murals are not new to San Francisco. The WPA arts program sponsored dozens, including the 24 works done for Coit Tower. The final—some say finest—work of that period is the "History of San Francisco," by Anton Refregier, in the Rincon Annex Post Office, an epic 29-panel work, completed in 1948 amid intense controversy.

The recent upsurge in public art dates from the fall of 1971 when Rene Yanez, director of a cooperative community gallery, involved underground cartoonists Robert Crumb and Spain (Manuel Rodriguez) and a number of their associates in two mural projects: one at the "Mission Rebels" headquarters and the other at a neighborhood Youth Corps center.

Inspired by these examples, Michael Rios, a local artist and musician did a cartoon-like work on the side wall of a building at 23 and Folsom. Rios' mural is peopled with animals engaging in fam-

calligraphy/tom greensfelder