

ART

Who establishes the establishment in American art?

AN ANTI-CATALOG

By the Catalog Committee of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, 1977

In April 1976, the *Smithsonian* magazine's cover story was on John D. Rockefeller 3rd's private collection of American art which was to go on exhibit for the first time that fall as part of the Whitney Museum's bicentennial celebration. The *Smithsonian* cover showed John D. III standing and his wife sitting in front of a valuable John Copley portrait from their collection. As the Rockefellers sat for their own portrait, the message to the American public was clear: if Copley were alive today, he would be painting their portraits. These are the rightful heirs of tradition, of wealth, and of status.

The calm satisfaction projected by the Rockefellers was not shared by all segments of the art world. To many artists in New York, it was an outrage that "the major bicentennial exhibit" at the Whitney would be chosen not by a process of healthy de-

bate but by the artistic—and political—biases of the Rockefeller family.

In September 1975, long before the exhibition was scheduled to open, three groups—the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Women's Art Registry, and Artists and Writers Protest—joined together to ask the Director of the Whitney Museum to reconsider. They argued that the Rockefeller collection "could not possibly include the various facets of American art bicentennial celebration should encompass: art of dissent, art by minorities, and adequate representation of art by women." Director Thomas Armstrong refused to negotiate.

The protesting artists then formed Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, a group that has gathered weekly for over two years. One result was a series of protests outside the museum. Another was the *Anti-catalog*.

The work of 19 different contributors, the *Anti-catalog* is an attempt to analyze the biases of "official culture" as revealed in the Rockefeller collection. The approach is varied, lively and



Guests arriving at the opening of the Whitney Museum Bicentennial show pass picketing artists.

compelling. Several of the chapters examine what is missing from the collection: there are no paintings by Hispanic or Native Americans, only one woman and one black are represented. Other essays consider the paintings that are included: portraits of those wealthy enough to commission and pay for a sitting, women who are idealized as at-home ladies or as beauty incarnate.

Through its many short essays, each covering a different issue, the *Anti-catalog* creates a convincing critique of the myth that art history is politically neutral. It examines the Rockefeller collection as a reflection of the ruling elite's version of American art and history. As the authors put it, "...we see a genteel, placid America, a United States made

up mostly of great and wealthy men, picturesque country and frontier folk, and idyllic landscapes... The exhibition obscures any view of a history made in conflict and a country built by great numbers of laboring people."

Nor do the authors limit themselves to an analysis of the content of the exhibition. They also discuss the political and social significance of "cultural philanthropy." How do we remember Andrew Carnegie today? As the ruthless steel baron, master of the lock-out? Or as the kindly old man who established libraries across the country and actively supported institutions of higher education? The wealthy know the value of philanthropy. A 1970 Gallup poll revealed that

the Rockefeller family enjoy a very positive public image—due primarily to their very visible philanthropic efforts.

The *Anti-catalog* is an angry, document. Yet the authors have consciously framed that anger in reasoned and careful artistic and political analysis. It is not a simple polemic. It is a well-planned—and well-executed—collection of essays. Conclusions are backed up by pictorial evidence or by relevant quotations. If used properly, the *Anti-catalog* is a learning tool, a self-directed course in American art history, political history, and their interrelation. The reader is asked to react not simply with outrage but rather with the development of a critical "new way of seeing," "a new way of being in the world."

This book is the first attempt by this group, but others are planned. As Rudolf Baranik, one of the authors, explains, "The book was triggered by the show. But our purpose is to go beyond the Rockefeller show itself and to create an ongoing research investigation into official culture. We hope to anti-catalog whatever has been catalogued wrong."

If the subsequent volumes are as instructive as this, it will be a worthy and important undertaking.

—Richard Kazis
An Anti-catalog is available from Artists Meeting for Social Change, at 106 E. 19th St., New York, NY 10003, for \$3.50 plus 50¢ for postage and handling. Richard Kazis is the editor of Self-Reliance, published by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, DC.

CLASSIFIED

ABSOLUTELY FREE—IN THESE TIMES report to friends and subscribers—a prospectus. Write ITT, 1509 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60622.

CHICAGO AREA READERS—Hear Anselmo Sule, vice president of the Socialist International, President of Chilean Radical Party in exile, member of the Senate and key figure in the Allende government, speak on his experiences, including year spent in the infamous Dawson Prison. Wednesday, April 19, 8 p.m., St. Paul's Church, 655 W. Fullerton, no admission charge. For further information, call 262-5331. Sponsored by Chicago Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee.

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INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS/IN-PRECOR—Weekly newsmagazine specializing in political analysis and interpretation of events of particular interest to labor, socialist, colonial, independence, black and women's liberation movements. Correspondents worldwide. 16th year of publication. Send \$12 for 6 months or 75¢ for sample copy. Box 116, Village Station, New York, N.Y. 10014.

WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING 35th Anniversary Issue, April JEWISH CURRENTS: "Ethnicity and Survival" by Yuri Suhl; "Learning About the Holocaust" by Walden School Students; "Auschwitz Commemorates the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 1944" by Yudel Korman, Auschwitz underground leader; Reviews, Poems. Also, "What Now in the Middle East?" an editorial. Single copy 60¢. Subscription \$7.50 yearly U.S.A. Jewish Currents, Dept. T. 22 East 17 St., N.Y.C. 10003—For both parts of Schappes' article on Irving Howe's WORLD OF OUR FATHERS in Sept. and Oct. issues send \$1.00—Special—just published—A TEN YEAR HARVEST, Third Jewish Currents Reader 1966-1976, 300 pp. paperback \$3.75.

CAPITAL DISTRICT ITT will sponsor a forum on "Labor Law Reform and Organizing in the South" at 8 p.m. Wed., April 19, at the Friends Meeting House, 727 Madison Ave., Albany. Speaker: Sam Hersh, J.P. Stevens boycott organizer. Free—refreshments served.

SOUTHERN AFRICA: INTERNATIONAL DEFENSE AND AID FUND FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA has books and info., e.g.: Women Under Apartheid, Soweto, Zimbabwe: The Facts, Poets to the People. Also FOCUS, journal on political repression. Write Box 17, Cambridge, MA 02138.

TYPESETTING: IN THESE TIMES is now setting jobs at very reasonable rates. IN THESE TIMES typesetters and other on hand. Will set large or small jobs. For stylesheet or estimate contact: In These Times, 1509 N. Milwaukee Ave. Chicago, 489-4444.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF A CLASS KIND — Celebrate May Day—Cinco de Mayo—Tribute to Malvina Reynolds—Salute to Labor Militants. Entertainment and speakers. Sunday, April 30, 8 p.m. Frictzman Auditorium. 2936 W. 8th St., L.A. Donation in advance \$2.00, at the door \$2.50. Unemployed \$1.50. Sponsored by the New American Movement. Phone 385-0650.

SPECIAL OFFER TO READERS OF IN THESE TIMES: James Weinstein's "The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State 1900-1918," regular price \$4.95, now \$2.50 with subscription renewal. Send ITT mailing label and \$20 to IN THESE TIMES, 1509 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60622. Book alone, \$4.95.

EMMA'S HEALTH CENTER, 1628A W. Belmont, Chicago, is now offering services in self-help clinics, pregnancy testing, abortion and birth control counseling and more by feminist paramedics on Monday evenings 7-10 and Saturday mornings 10:30-12:30. Call 528-4310 or 493-5364.

GET YOUR MONEY OUT OF THE BANK AND PUT IT IN A SAFE PLACE. Frontier Cooperative herbs is borrowing money at 7% annual interest for a down payment on a new warehouse space. We are a consumer owned/consumer controlled business. We need \$13,000 by April 15 and have already raised \$6,350. Call (319) 362-9736 or (319) 363-1574. Ask for Rick Stewart. Our address is P.O. Box 1421, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406.

WOMEN AND THEIR BODIES CLASS—Three sessions: April 17, Physiology; April 24, Sexuality; May 1, Self-Help. Emma Goldman Women's Center, 1628A West Belmont, Chicago. Donation requested. Call 493-5364 to register.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE: Carter's Use of the Issue, Indonesia's Garrison Showcase, Kampuchea and the World Press, Martial Law and Underdevelopment in the Philippines, Vietnam's Political Reconstruction, Split in the American Peace Movement, Thailand's "Catch-21": Southeast Asia Chronicle, \$1.00, Dept. F, P.O. Box 4000-D, Berkeley, CA 94704. Free catalogue of materials on Southeast Asia available.

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PERSONALS

CORRESPONDENCE WANTED—I am a prisoner at the James River Correctional Center, State Farm, Va. Arthur Shelton 106334, JRCC Infirmary, State Farm, VA 23160

WOMAN BORN SEPT. 10 or thereabout, in her thirties, sought by male born March 10, 39, scientist, writer, producer, for the real thing: true love, marriage. Please write, enclosing picture. J. Friendly, 203 West 107, NYC 10025.

I AM PLANNING to write some political reminiscences about The Shelter Half Coffee House. I hope that some of the GIs who passed through there in 1969-1971 will get in touch. Trust me, I won't treat you like Loose Change. Write to Barbara Garson at In These Times.

OUR EYES MET outside the Film Forum (the Chile film). I was wearing yellow boots and an orange poncho. You were selling IN THESE TIMES. It was just a glance and a smile (I was with someone else.) But if it meant something to you too, write to Stephanie, Box 6, In These Times.

VICKIE DEAR, thanks for the subscription. Daddy and I have been reading your newspaper and are quite impressed by its seriousness. Daddy thinks it might be nice for you to bring your good friend Jenny home with you this summer. We can change too—but slowly. Please don't be afraid to get in touch.—Mother.

O.K. ROBIN, you're right. The Democratic party is a cop out and a trap. But our relationship isn't. Please come back—Noel.

MALVINA REYNOLDS

1901 - 1978

"Some sort of miracle"



Pete Seeger has called her "some sort of miracle."

According to legend, the miracle happened in the early 1950s when, out of a ragged-looking chrysalis called the Old Left, there emerged a beautiful writer and singer of songs named Malvina Reynolds.

In those days the appearance of a new songmonger was no rare phenomenon, let alone a miracle, but Malvina was different. She was a late bloomer, being then in her 50s and violating the convention that to enter her chosen field you had to have youth, as well as a guitar.

That she overcame the odds of geriatrics and the politics of the '50s is part of the miracle. Soon she also overcame the generational barrier, captivating mostly young audiences at the mass protest rallies and demonstrations of the 1960s. The miracle grew.

By the time of her death on St. Patrick's Day, 1978, at age 77, Malvina had performed (in person or via TV) all over the U.S. and in countries as far apart as Finland and Japan. She was a cultural/political figure of world stature, a folk heroine, admired and beloved by a mass constituency.

A couple of years ago, irritated by a kind of social embalming that prettifies the radical dead, she wrote her own epitaph. She wanted to be remembered as "a workingclass woman, and a red." Her perception of self imparts a special significance to some facts and associations:

- birth in a red household and a working class district; her speech always retained a certain twang and cadence of San Francisco's South-of-Market where she first learned to speak.

- piano lessons as a child; her first piano teacher was Rena Mooney, wife of Tom, militant socialist and union organizer who became the principal in one of

the most celebrated labor/political cases of the century.

- diploma-less departure from Lowell High School; although she was an honors student, she was punished for the outspoken opposition to World War I of her socialist parents, Dave and Liz Milder.

Her academic career at the University of California becomes significant, not only for its scholastic brilliance (she received her Phi Beta Kappa pin in her junior year), but also for the hiatus between the M.A. degree in 1927 and the Ph.D. in 1939. During the intervening 12 years, which were mostly years of the Great Depression, she was a red soapboxer at the "University by the Sea," traditional free speech enclave in Long Beach, Calif., where the Milder family then resided.

She was in the family home late one autumn night in 1932 when a cross burned outside and 30 violent KKK invaders were inside. There had been a semi-public meeting in the house to muster support for the nine young black defendants in the Scottsboro (Ala.) rape frameup case. The Klansmen were going to take Malvina's father, brother Sam and brother-in-law Ben Dobbs "for a ride" to teach them the impropriety of their activity.

Malvina and the three men fought the intruders, but they were outnumbered, beaten and overpowered. The men were tied and dragged into waiting autos. Just then the cop on the beat came by and frustrated the abduction.

Malvina married William "Bud" Reynolds, carpenter, World War I draft resister, organizer of the unemployed in Detroit, and the two went off to Omaha, Neb., where he served as the Communist organizer, which meant economic hardship, some danger, much tension, along with the satisfaction of doing

something to which you were totally committed.

When Malvina gave birth to her only child, Nancy, the couple could not resolve the economic contradiction between being a Communist organizer in Omaha and raising a child. They moved to Berkeley. Bud went to work at his trade and Malvina returned to the campus to complete the work on her doctorate in romance philology.

Her dissertation was on "The Tradition of Amis e Amiloun" (the reference is to an Anglo-Norman poem about two knights). This esoteric preoccupation might seem bizarre or paradoxical for the wife of the recent Communist organizer in Omaha, but it, too, is an integral element of the miracle. The working class and red experiences were joined with a broader range of culture, which she never flaunted, but which was always there just the same.

Add to the above experience as a steel worker, a tailor (her father's trade), teacher, social worker and editor. It all helps explain how she acquired the mature wisdom that honed her lyrics.

I am old enough to realize how hard it is to combine and manage so much, and I know no one who did it so well as Malvina. How did she do it? If everything were readily explicable, there wouldn't be any miracle.

There is mystery, but also some clues.

For example, I would not attempt to catalogue all the issues, causes, aspirations, foibles, phenomena, atrocities, absurdities, tragedies, comedies and ordinary events she dealt with in her lyrics. Their number seemed to be almost as great as the number of songs she wrote, somewhere between 500 and 600. Their volume and variety attest to the extraordinary range of her interests, but even more, to the reach of her human compassion and empathy. She was ironic or witty, tender or

playful, or something else, depending on the particular theme. Audiences responded to the craft skills of the lyricist, composer and performer. But at her best she created a communion that was nourished by deeper well-springs of reciprocal empathy. At such moments one saw the performer, not only as entertainer, but also as prophet. This might be the vital clue to the mystery of the miracle that was Malvina.

Her administrative assistant and close co-worker for many years, Ruth Bernstein, says that one of the qualities she found most attractive in Malvina was her optimism. I have thought about this. It is manifestly true: her life-loving vitality, her fantastic energy would be inconceivable without the energizing force of optimism. As she and others of her generation learned long ago, a pessimistic revolutionary is a contradiction in terms.

And yet she could tell an interviewer, "These times are terrifying. I find the basis of civilization torn apart by people who don't know what the hell they're doing." That sounds hardly optimistic, and many similar lines cropped up in her lyrics. Hers was not a one-dimensional optimism but the rare and wonderful optimism that confronts reality as it is, that does not lean on self-deception or feed on fatalistic faith, and is the stronger and wiser for that. It was, in Romain Rolland's phrase, an optimism of will that is tempered by a pessimism of reason.

In the end one reverts to the question: Who was that white-haired woman in front of the microphone with a guitar and jaunty smile, who wrote and sang all those songs, who did all those things, who had all those unique qualities and attributes? There is no better answer than Malvina's: she was a working class woman and a red.

—Al Richmond