Modern Art and Oral History in the United States: A Revolution Remembered

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In 1943 art dealer Paul Rosenberg learned the distressing news that a major collection of modern art, including works by painters represented in his prestigious Manhattan gallery, would be sold at auction, most likely at prices significantly below the values Rosenberg had established. He was most concerned about the fate of the Georges Braque paintings because he had a sizable investment in Braque's work. He sacrificed several American modernist paintings at below-market prices to obtain quick cash for purchasing the Braque work before it went to the auction block. Max Weber, one of the American painters whose prices were slashed, felt betrayed. "He didn't lift a finger to protect me," Weber recalled, "and that was the word he used when he invited me to join his gallery—he would be my protector." Weber broke with Rosenberg in a well-publicized and acrimonious dispute. "French prices and prestige had to be maintained at any cost; consequently reduction of American prices was the more practical and profitable [course] for him." As long as American modernism was institutionally connected to French art, he concluded, American painters had little likelihood of securing either a public or respect.¹

In this same period, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still began telling colleagues and students that American painters had nothing to learn from the European moderns. Clay Spohn, a student of Fernand Léger's in the 1920s, remembered that he was shocked when he first heard their argument. Then, with a profound sense of release, he embraced it. He surveyed nearly twenty years of work, both as a muralist in the Federal Art Project and as an independent modernist, and concluded that his lessons in Paris had led him to strive for an idealized, elegant perfection at the cost of spon-

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taneity. He found that his sketches were more compelling and satisfying visual statements than the finished pieces. He came to value rawness and immediacy over a refined formal coherence. "The things I want to paint," he decided, were "the things that I experience not with my eyes but with my whole being."2

The triumph in the mid-1940s of what we now loosely call abstract expressionism was the product of a generation of artists painfully confronting their relation to tradition. Artists tore themselves away from old loyalties and groped toward new ways of conceptualizing their work. The revolution in the American art world went well beyond shifts in aesthetic preferences. The triumph of abstract, experimental styles coincided with a phenomenal growth in material support for the visual arts. Sixty-seven percent of all American museums and 93 percent of corporate collections were founded after 1940. The number of galleries in New York City representing contemporary art tripled between 1949 and 1977, and that growth was matched by an even larger increase in the number of one-artist exhibitions. By the mid-1970s museum attendance surpassed admissions to athletic events, and in the 1980 census, over one million Americans identified their occupation as artist, a 67 percent increase from the previous census.3

The experience of these profound but recent changes has been documented extensively in oral history interviews conducted in all parts of the country. Existing collections counter superficial impressions that contemporary art was a concern only in New York and a few major urban centers. Oral sources allow us to see that the transformation of the arts was a national process and that, indeed, the growth of arts institutions was even more dramatic outside New York. In this essay I will review major collections relating to the visual arts and consider in more detail what oral sources have to say about the national dimensions of the postwar revolution in the arts. I will conclude with a discussion of the interaction of aesthetic and institutional factors revealed in oral sources.

Major Oral History Collections in the Visual Arts

With nearly three thousand oral history interviews in its catalog, the Archives of American Art, a division of the Smithsonian Institution, has assembled the single largest collection of interviews related to the visual arts in the United States. The earliest interviews were conducted in the 1940s, but the archives began interviewing in earnest in 1958 with a project to collect the memories of pioneers of American modernism. In 1961 a national conference on oral history and the arts sponsored by the archives surveyed the needs and possibilities of sustained interview-based re-


search projects. An immediate result of the conference was a project that collected more than three hundred interviews on New Deal federal arts programs. Later archives undertakings, funded by grants from state arts councils, have examined regional developments in American art. Recent projects have recorded the experiences of women and nonwhite artists. The archives' most recent project focuses on artists in midcareer.4

Strong regionally focused collections can be found at California State University, Long Beach; Claremont Graduate School; Columbia University; the Maryland Historical Society; the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses of the University of California; and the University of Washington.5 The largest compilation of interviews with African-American artists is at the Hatch-Billops Collection in New York City. The Chicago Historical Society and the Chicago office of the Archives of American Art, housed at and staffed by the Art Institute of Chicago, have focused on interviewing Chicago's black artists, with emphasis on the influential social realist school that flourished in that city's black community in the 1930s and 1940s. The Oral History Program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), recently began a series on African-American artists and gallery owners after noting that the black contribution to California's cultural life was virtually ignored in the numerous and extensive collections dealing with the state's art. The southern California office of the Archives of American Art has ongoing projects interviewing Latino artists and key figures in the development of the women's art movement in the 1970s. Interviews at the Hubbell Trading Post, Ganado, Arizona, are probably the single largest collection in the United States relating to native American arts. The Hubbell interviews focus on Navaho weaving and other crafts, the influences an expanding market had on design and production techniques, and the interaction of Navaho and European-American artists who have settled in Arizona.

The National Gallery of Art and the Museum of Modern Art have begun oral history projects to document their institutional histories.6 These efforts deepen the historical record by adding information on debates and compromises behind decisions, often recorded only in the most perfunctory manner in board minutes. An important goal of the National Gallery project is to open institutional policies to internal analysis by providing staff members with more detailed histories of the decisions and personalities that shaped their current responsibilities. Important topics

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5 For information and catalogs of collections, contact the Oral History Archives, California State University, Long Beach: the Oral History Program, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California; the Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York; the Reference Division, Library, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; the Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, the Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles; and the Manuscripts Collection, University Libraries, University of Washington, Seattle.

This essay considers only archival oral history collections, but published interviews are a mainstay of art journalism.

for museum-related interviews include the influence collectors have had on museum policies, as well as the changes brought about by the increasing professionalization of museum practice. In 1940 very few curators had advanced degrees; by 1990 an M.A., if not a Ph.D., had become a prerequisite for employment. Museum histories can reveal how curators asserted their rights to shape exhibitions around their personal critical perspectives. In related series, the Getty Art History Information Program has used oral history to examine the working methodology of art historians, while the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities and the UCLA Oral History Program have initiated a joint project investigating the development of consensual standards in education, research, exhibition, and publication in the art historical field. Interaction of artist and curator is also a focus in the collection of interviews on the development of photography as a fine art at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.

Oral Sources as Evidence

Oral history collections have thrown a wide net across the field of practice. Not only artists but also those involved in collecting, interpreting, selling, and promoting art have been interviewed. Following more general social interest in gender and multicultural issues, oral historians have collected interviews with women and non-white artists. Oral history in the arts, from its early days in the 1940s, has been concerned with expanding the definition of what is significant. The regional and local orientation of most oral history projects promoted efforts to show, in the words of one interviewer, that while her community might not have witnessed anything as exciting as the birth of impressionism, it was never mired in the Dark Ages either. As a result, a substantial majority of oral history interviews in the visual arts have been with artists, critics, and exhibitors outside New York City. Even the Archives of American Art has taped approximately two-thirds of its interviews with figures from outside the New York area. The picture of modern art found in interviews is considerably different from that presented in most surveys of twentieth-century American art. Few interviewees attained international prominence, but they had full careers as practicing artists and teachers. Oral history collections give a sense of the variety of experience and the attitudes prevalent among the rank and file of professional artists at various times in this century.

Not surprisingly, regionally based artists are obsessed with the New York art scene, the center where success is ultimately determined. The choice not to be at the center has to be explained and shown not to be prima facie evidence of failure. Lorser Feitelson, who relocated to Los Angeles in 1927 after having lived in New York and Paris, suggested in a 1964 interview how artists must negotiate their relationship to New York. He recalled that he disliked his new home "violently in the beginning, because

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7 Complete transcripts for most of the interviews conducted for Marilyn Schmitt, ed., Object, Image, Inquiry: The Art Historian at Work (Santa Monica, 1988) are available at the Department of Special Collections, the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica, California.

8 Betty Blum of the Art Institute of Chicago discussed this with me in a telephone conversation, November 1990.
there was no art appreciation.” Within six months, he found himself happy to be in California

because there wasn’t any art appreciation therefore the artist had to paint for only one person, himself. There was no one to write about his art; no one ever to show his art; no one ever to buy his art; therefore if he wanted to paint it was only because he himself felt it must be done. And therefore he was going to paint for its own sake and then he would do honest work. That’s what I liked about it.9

Yet Feitelson’s interview also details the years he spent fighting to build a public for modern art and to integrate the West Coast into the international art community. It was not so much isolation he wanted as a chance to participate, effected by expanding the boundaries of the art world.

Max Weber expressed similar feelings about the provincial quality of New York before World War II. The city had been the “North Pole in modern art,” he noted, uninterested in local talent. In his case, the hegemonic center was Paris, and the interview bristles with indignation at the monopoly European taste had achieved. “Even third-rate foreign artists come here and are welcomed and shown preference, while native talent is allowed to struggle and shift for itself. It has become a national custom of this young, wealthy country to neglect and starve its own artists.”10 Certainly Weber’s recollections exaggerated the isolation of American modernists in pre-World War II New York, while Feitelson’s account of Los Angeles’s cultural backwardness was more stereotypical than accurate. The motifs of isolation and backwardness were narrative strategies both men adopted to explain relatively modest commercial success while simultaneously sublating any hint of failure in a sense of freedom to be innovative. Frequently the response to the dominance of New York takes the form of asserting a unique quality to the art of a region, but the celebration of regional cultures, if too prominently a joint goal of interviewer and interviewee, can obscure consideration in interviews of important national patterns that help explain aspects of artistic developments since 1940.11 When similar patterns of explanation appear in interviews from California, Illinois, Texas, Massachusetts, and New York, the ensemble suggests that particularist traditions have been part of a larger national pattern involving the integration and articulation of an art infrastructure stretching across the country.

Primary to the expansion of the arts, but little understood by individuals within the profession, were government initiatives, both federal and state, that provided stable incomes to artists within the context of the expansion of higher education in the postwar years.12 Oral testimony reveals the central role of the “national de-

9 “Tape-Recorded Interview with Mr. Lorser Feitelson, May 12, 1964,” interview by Betty Lochrie Hoag, transcript, p. 11 (Archives of American Art).
11 For a discussion of the relationship of regional markets to New York, see Crane, Transformation of the Avant-Garde, 130–36.
fense" welfare state in creating new arts communities in all parts of the United States after 1945.

Connor Everts, the son of a longshoreman, recalled in his interview that had it not been for the GI Bill, he would probably never have entertained the idea of going to art school. Before his discharge from the navy in 1947, he had not thought about being an artist, but the freedom veterans' benefits gave him prompted him to take a plunge and discover if he had talent. He found that most of the men in his classes were also discharged veterans, many like him acting on spur-of-the-moment impulses. Lee Mullican expressed a key theme of his generation when he recalled that the sacrifices army service imposed upon him had convinced him that he had to do what he wanted to do, to live his life as a painter, regardless of practical difficulties. Nor would he compromise in terms of style or content. Representational painting did not speak to his emotional needs, so he pursued his interests in surrealist-inspired abstraction. The influx of veterans into art schools affected women in art as well. The GI Bill disproportionately favored men, and the percentage of women artists declined drastically. An aggressive "macho" aesthetic, validated for many by the sufferings of the war years, prevailed in the postwar period, an aesthetic that depreciated the work of many women who had established themselves before 1945.

The GI Bill allowed for expansion of art schools and for the training of much larger numbers of students, many of whom declared themselves artists even if they were not sure of how they would earn their living. Howard Warshaw recalled the ten years after the war as a period of great excitement and hope. Art schools were packed. National magazines such as *Time, Look, and Fortune* featured the work of the younger generation. The acclaim for abstract expressionism stimulated hope and further experiment in gesture and action painting. Still most could not make a living. The expansion of the number of artists had been faster than the market, itself expanding with postwar prosperity, could absorb. Connor Everts, after completing his education with a year abroad in London in 1951, followed in his father's footsteps and went to work as a longshoreman.

The National Defense Education Act and other state and federal legislation supporting university education helped take Everts off the docks and put him in a classroom. By 1960 he had a job teaching in the rapidly expanding California state university system. Employment in art departments in state and private schools in every part of the country provided many artists with stable incomes and time to pursue personal work with a minimum of overt interference. The importance of academic employment to the daily life of most practicing artists raises a question of how academic culture and organizational patterns have replicated themselves within

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16 "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Connor Everts," 52.
the arts. Interviews give tantalizing hints that the peer-review process has extended itself into exhibition and grant-making fields, previously administered through juries. Equally interesting to track would be how the emergence of an independent women's art was linked, not only ideologically but structurally, to the development of women's studies. Another area for investigation would be how museums, increasingly staffed by university-credentialed curators, became noncommercial exhibition forums particularly suited to the needs of school-based teachers.

Even though the influence of public policy is clearly visible in oral histories, most interviewees do not perceive that their lives have been fundamentally affected by a panoply of government programs, perhaps because the programs have become the ground of a "normal" life for many artists. African-American artists, who have been underrepresented in the classroom, have more clearly perceived and described the effects, both positive and negative, on their lives and their art, of government programs not directly related to art. From the midsixties to the end of the seventies,
Office of Equal Opportunity and Comprehensive Employment Training Act funds were vital to the birth of independent African-American arts institutions. John Outterbridge, a Los Angeles–based assemblage and environmental artist, recalled eight black arts organizations functioning in Watts, California, during those years. When the Reagan administration decimated federal poverty programs, Watts's art groups vanished; they were only partially replaced by a more limited city-funded program.17

Interviews often reveal surprising connections, which would otherwise be invisible or purely speculative. When asked if there was an African-American visual arts tradition that had influenced his work, John Outterbridge began speaking of his childhood in North Carolina. Rather than focusing on drawings or wood carvings, he recalled the women and children of his family making soap. Images piled on top

of each other: big black cast-iron pots bubbling on the stove, grandmothers teaching the children to stir in one direction only so the soap would not weaken, refreshing smells that filled the house, translucent bars sliced and stacked to dry. "The way it was stacked," Outterbridge remembered, "it used to look like buildings, very beautiful architectural forms — the way the light used to shine through them." In describing these images, he provided sources for visual themes that reappear in his largely nonobjective environments and assemblages. He also revealed his vision of the place of art in African-American culture. His people did not produce "art," but lived their daily lives with an "expressive spirit." He felt this remained after the migration north and west. He knew people in south central Los Angeles, where he works as director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, who treated their front yards with an artist's sensibility. By that he did not mean merely elaborate landscaping or flowerbeds. He cited as an example a driveway with "the oldest Cadillac in the world stacked up on blocks and [the owner] wouldn't move it for anything." had indeed surrounded the relic with objects. "If I could take that front yard and transfer it to a gallery, it would be a most successful work of art. We [African-American artists] can only mimic that attitude. The person who relishes that yard, he's the artist. We're just reacting."18

With the collapse of stable institutional support at the beginning of the 1980s, the opportunities for African-American artists to explore and promote the visual ramifications of their cultural tradition were sharply curtailed. In part, the debate over applying to the black aesthetic standards developed in "mainstream" art schools, galleries, and museums reflects the differences between two kinds of art institutions. Government policies in the 1960s and 1970s fostered the development of a network of "alternative" arts groups more rooted in local communities, committed to expanding the boundaries of the art world by continuing the process of opening up participation. These groups were professional and committed to standards of quality, but the roots of their aesthetic preferences were detached from the ethos of self-reflexive autonomy prevalent in the institutions that emerged after 1940. Had the policies practiced during the War on Poverty been continued, that "alternative" vision would have deepened with experience and the present contours of cultural life in the United States would be considerably different.

Practices of art institutions in the United States have been powerfully affected by government policies (and cash, or lack of it), even policies ostensibly having nothing to do with art. A complex interaction of bureaucratic practice, funding sources, employment patterns, intellectual and aesthetic preferences, and individual talent led to particular patterns for the distribution of rewards. A study of ideology and culture expressed in interviews uncovers the various, sometimes contradictory, self-images that artists might adopt at given times and places during this century. Beyond biographical and sociological details, interviews provide clues to how creative practice mediates subjectivity, formal requirements, and collective dispositions. Oral history in the fine arts can help unravel the ways aesthetic choices, shaped by personal and institutional self-images, interacted with other aspects of society to create our cultural inheritance.

18 Ibid.