Visual Artists: A Part of the Labor Force

Susan Ortega

Visual artists in the United States are not considered part of the labor force. One is hard put to find official artist employment statistics at either the state or federal level. The U.S. Census Bureau does question the status of employment when it takes the census but the U.S. Department of Labor equates "artist" with self-employment. Thus an unemployed artist becomes a contradiction of terms.

Unlike performing artists and craftspeople within the film industry, visual artists have no union or advocacy group that keeps track of its members' working status. However, unofficial reports put artist unemployment in the double digit range.

The continuing inability of artists to earn their living from their art work is a serious problem for the development of art in this country. Certainly today's economic depression with its high unemployment and inflation severely affects visual artists as it does people of other walks of life. But even in the best of times, artists' ability to survive by the work they create is extremely limited.

This is attested by a national survey of artists who had won McDowell fellowships in the boom year of 1968. The questionnaire sent to relatively established artists, revealed that 62% had incomes of less than 5,000 dollars and only 4% earned more than 10,000 dollars from their art. Only one-half of those sent surveys responded. The complete poll would have probably shown even worse economic straits for artists. (1)

A 1977 survey of 1460 Massachusett's visual artists showed a median personal income (including sale of artwork, other employment income, investments, unemployment compensation, trust funds and grants) to be 6,200 dollars with 42% earning less than 5,000 dollars.(2)

Most artists are forced to seek part-time and often low paying jobs in order to support their art and their families. As the economic crisis continues it becomes more difficult for artists to find and to then give up whatever odd job they might have in order to meet the demands of their art.

While artists' grants offered by the National Endowment for the Arts and various state and local arts councils may bail artists out for a few months to a year, they hardly begin to deal with the annual problem of earning a living.

Besides, grants are highly competitive and are getting more difficult to obtain as budget cuts make less money available.

Most people outside the intellectual community .can't quite understand what artists actually do and how to measure it as work. This lack of understanding perpetuates the mystification of the creative act and the continued alienation of artists from society. The myth of the magically inspired, "struggling artist" still survives in America. Some argue that since artists "choose" their profession, they have no right to claim the right to be able to earn a living at it. If artists wanted to have a decent income, they should do something else. Others assign a penance to those who choose to do creative work saying that "dues" must be "paid" in order to gain the right to "make it."

Artists will quickly affirm that they don't create better in financial deprivation. They have as much right to work as those who "choose" to be teachers, auto mechanics or bank tellers. The truth, as shown by the previous mentioned surveys, is that most artists never "make it" and spend their whole professional career "paying their dues". In fact, one even questions what is a successful artist when one learns that prominent American sculptor David Smith only sold 75 major pieces during his lifetime. His total receipts for the last five years of his life were 207,846 dollars of which 19,747 dollars was profit. That comes to 4,000 dollars annually (3), hardly what one would call "making it." Success for visual artists all too often, if it comes at all, comes after death with the dealers and collectors the only ones making a living from the art work.

There have been only two times in U.S. history when an effort was made to deal with this problem of artist employment: The Works Projects Administration (WPA) in 1937–43 and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1974–80. Both programs occurred when the country as a whole, grappling with massive unemployment, enacted national jobs programs. Through the organizing efforts of artists themselves, artists took their rightful place by the side of other workers as integrated members of the labor force.

Attention here will be given to CETA as the WPA is dealt with in another article in this book. CETA was developed in the mid 1970s as a temporary program for the hard-core unemployed. It differed from the WPA in that people did not directly work for the federal government but federal money was made available to state, county and municipal governments and non-profit community organizations to run job programs. Emphasis was placed on training new skills with the hopes that these skills would enable the unemployed to find work.

Realizing that artists were part of the chronically unemployed a clever Californian successfully got San Francisco to hire artists under CETA's public service employment program in 1974. 3,500 artists picked up applications for the 113 positions available. Few of the applicants had ever held a full time artist job and most were receiving food-stamps or other public assistance.

Stanley Banos. CETA Artists' Organization to Save CETA Artists' Projects, New York, 1979

CETA and the arts caught on and by the late seventies CETA was the largest public funding source for the arts employing over 10,000 artists nationwide with an annual budget (1978) of 75 million dollars going to fund 600 projects in 200 localities. For the first time since the 1930s artists received a weekly salary for their work.

In the mecca of the art world, New York City, the CETA Artists' Projects started in 1978 under the initiative of several art organizations including the Cultural Council Foundation which eventually employed 312 of the total 612 New York artists (115 of them visual artists). It was the largest single artist project in the country.

Despite the fact that CETA only dealt with the tip of the iceberg of New York City's artist employment (there are several thousand visual artists in New York City alone), it had great impact. Employed under CETA, artists became valuable community workers providing over 150 free weekly performances, workshops, classes and exhibitions. As cultural workers, CETA artists played an integrated part in stimulating and revitalizing neighborhoods both economically and spiritually. CETA helped support the growing mur-

al movement and kept alive many small cultural organizations serving Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American and other ethnic groups which would have otherwise had to close. (As a matter of fact, many did go under or severely had to cut back their programing after the CETA projects ended.)

Shortly after the formation of the New York projects the CETA Artists Organization (CAO) was formed. While it never was recognized as an official bargaining agent for the artists it served as the unifying force to fight for an increase of artists' jobs for the unemployed, for the continuation of the CETA projects, and for a more permanent program of artist employment.

With an organization, artists began to find out what people in the trade union movement had known for a long time: working together could secure more than working as individuals. The CAO helped avert salary cuts, provided direct information to artists about CETA regulations and insured no blanket lay-offs of any particular artist discipline.

The CAO worked in conjunction with organizations representing the 15,000 other New York CETA workers including District 37 Municipal Labor Union. Collectively artists and other workers fought lay-offs with jointly sponsored petition campaigns, legal suits and job rallies. At the rallies artists provided songs, posters, and presented a play specifically dealing with the importance of CETA in keeping New York City functioning. The joint demonstrations showed artists the need for unity with all workers for the right of a job and strengthened artists' own struggle for the right to work as artists. It showed that artists were not in competition with hospital workers or daycare workers for jobs but that together they could fight for a better city for everyone.

The CAO also staged demonstrations to save the artists' projects including a 2-day cultural rally/demonstration in front of City Hall. CAO representatives met with the CETA Undersecretary of Labor in Washington D.C. in order to try to save the projects.

Despite nationwide recognition and public support by elected officials, the artists' projects along with most of the CETA public service jobs ended in 1980 as part of sweeping national budget cuts and a tide of conservatism that elected Ronald Reagan president.

Though short-lived, CETA, like the WPA, 40 years ago its predecessor, proved the viability of artists employed as public service cultural workers. Receiving a salary from their art gave artists a sense of dignity and allowed them to feel part of a community. By having artists work directly in neighborhoods, CETA helped demystify the artistic process and provided for a great democratization of the arts by giving everyone, regardless of economic status, the right to enjoy a cultural life. Many received classes and saw quality art, theater and dance for the first time. United with other workers in the common struggle against unemployment, artists began to feel linked with the people and people in turn began to see artists as fellow workers.

However, CETA proved to be no more than a bumpy roller coaster ride that took artists off unemployment and welfare lines for a spell only to throw them right back where they had started from.

Despite a tradition among artists to be involved in the progressive movement of people for peace, civil rights and more recently for nuclear disarmament, there has been little energy devoted by artists towards organizing around the basic issue of earning a living. Based on the experience of CETA and the WPA, the possibilities of visual artists working together with labor unions certainly need to be explored. There are programs in some unions throughout the country to bring the arts to members; most notable is the Bread and Roses Project run by Hospital Workers Union 1199 in New York City. It would be a welcomed addition if the unions also addressed the problems of artists as workers and the need to organize and incorporate them into the work force.

The current national "Jobs with Peace" movement, the momentum that came out of the AFL-CIO Solidarity Day (1981), and the massive New York June 12th Peace Rally (1982) along with other efforts to establish economic priorities that serve human needs rather than the military budget provide artists with another opportunity to link up with other working people. It is through artists aligning themselves with the labor movement that progress could be made towards artist employment and towards, as painter Stuart Davis said, ". . . a government administration that will regard the arts, along with proper housing, health services, social security legislation and educational facilities for all, as part of the basic obligation of a democratic government of all the people toward the welfare of its citizens." (Stuart Davis, National Secretary, President of the Artists' Union and American Artists' Congress, 1936.)

Notes

1 Art Workers Newsletter, January 1971. New York
2 "Career Development: A profile of Massachusetts Visual Artists" by Rita K. Roosevelt. The Artists Foundation. Boston. 1979
3 Art Workers Newsletter. Vol. 1, No. 4, New York

Susan Ortega, muralist and graphic artist was a CETA artist from the start of the New York city projects and President of the CETA Artists' Organization. She also was one of the organizers of Artists for Nuclear Disarmament for the June 12th Peace Rally in New York, 1982.

Gary Schoichet. Artists' Contingent of 2000. June 12th March for Disarmament, New York, 1982

Philip S. Foner, Reinhard Schultz

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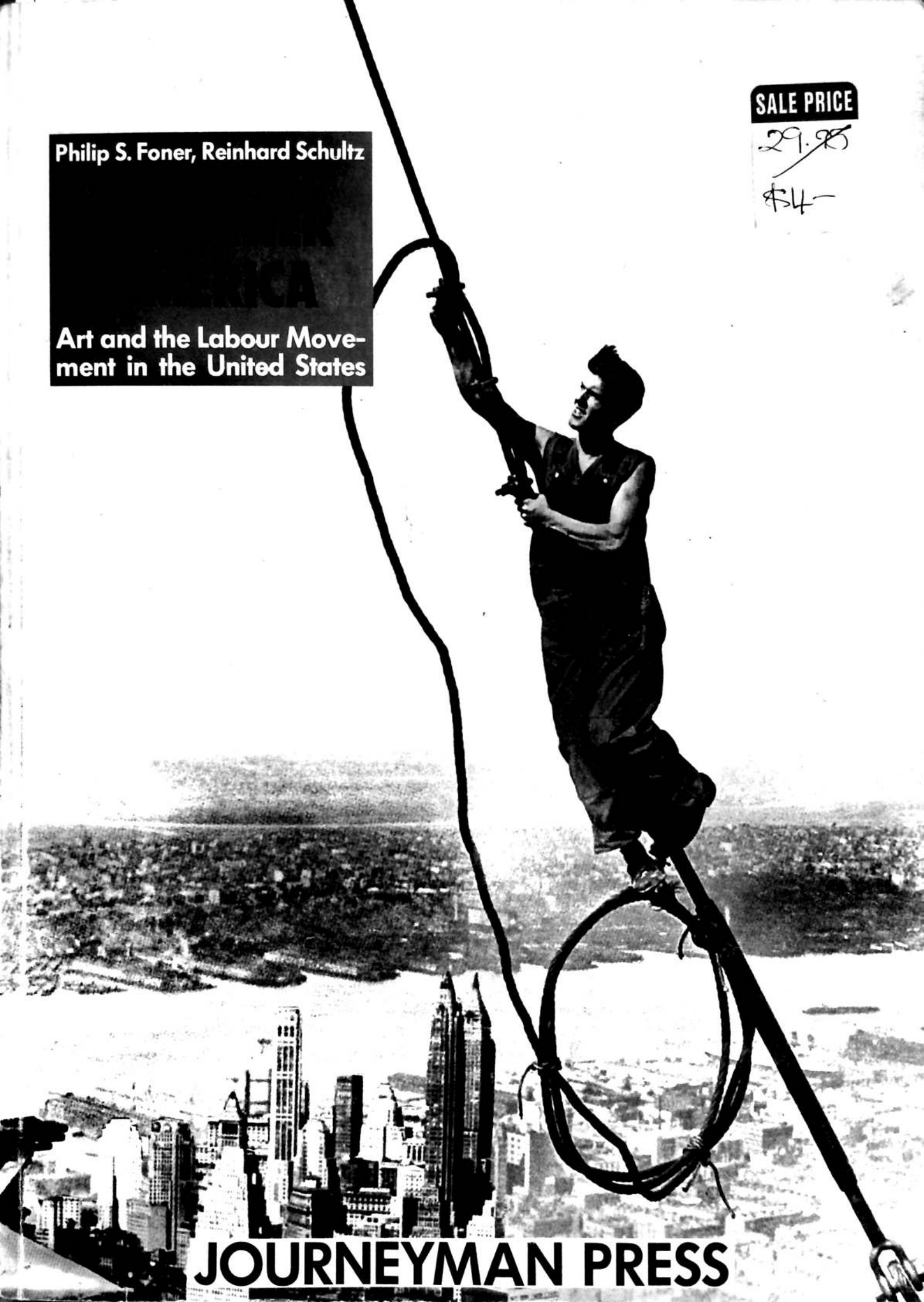
Art and the Labour Movement in the United States



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