

Exploring the potential for collective agency in art museums: What we can learn from two historic programs

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how two historic art programs from the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP) in the United States and El Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP) in Mexico, offer insights for contemporary art museums seeking to foster collective agency and community engagement. Through analysis of these Depression-era initiatives, the article explores how collective empowerment, shared decision-making, and collaborative cultural production served as foundational principles in democratizing artistic engagement. The WPA-FAP, despite its progressive goals, faced limitations due to governmental oversight and structural inequalities, while the TGP operated as an independent artist collective that sustained social initiatives through collaborative work. Both programs utilized printmaking as a democratic medium and established community-centered spaces that challenged traditional museum models. I argue that art museums can learn from these historical examples to reimagine their institutional practices, supporting community governance and collective action for social transformation.

KEYWORDS: collective agency, community engagement, art museum, Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration

The Federal Art Project (FAP), designed to employ artists during the Great Depression in the United States, and El Taller de Gráfica Popular (The People's Graphic Workshop; TGP), a printmaking collective established by artists to communicate social issues and create change in Mexico, represent two important early twentieth-century initiatives designed to democratize artistic engagement through community interventions. While the WPA-FAP operated through federal funding, the TGP functioned as an artist-led collective that sustained its social

initiatives through collaborative work. This paper examines the implications of these two historical programs for contemporary art museum practice, with a focus on how collective agency, the coordinated efforts of groups to act toward shared goals to create social change, served as a foundational principle in their organizational structures and community-oriented missions. In exploring the ways these programs utilized collective empowerment, shared decision-making, and collaborative cultural production, I consider how art museums might reimagine their institutional practices to better harness collective agency for community engagement and social transformation.

Rethinking the role of art museums: Then and now

In the early twentieth century, John Cotton Dana, director of the Newark Museum and former librarian, wrote a series of publications critiquing art museums as inaccessible temples that followed a European model instead of being relevant to the communities that surrounded them. He explicitly drew a distinction between his vision of a museum and existing institutions, contrasting “marble palaces filled with those so-called emblems of culture” with the “new museum” that “examines its community’s life first and then straightway bends its energies to supplying some of the material which that community needs” (1917, p. 32, see also, Weil, 2002, p. 87). He saw museums as serving only a small, socially elite audience. Conversely, Dana advocated for art museums to function more like public libraries to include lending collections, branch museums centered in neighborhoods, and open hours in evenings when everyday workers could visit. Like fellow philosopher and educator John Dewey (1934), Dana wanted people to engage and participate in art through dialogue and making, rather than as passive recipients consuming information curators conveyed to them. With the Newark Museum, he sought to create a democratized space for the entire community of Newark, one that focused on participation and engagement for everyone, regardless of class, occupation, and interests (Kern, 2016).

The role of museums in communities has come a long way since Dana’s critiques, but institutional change moves slowly. Internal hierarchies, colonialist practices, and elitism are still part of art museums. Yet, the relationship between art museums and communities continues to evolve in new and innovative ways that include curatorial practices (Golding & Modest, 2013; Krasny et al., 2021; Pegno & Brindza, 2024; Pegno & Farrar, 2017), programming (Kletchka, 2018; Morse, 2021; Rasmussen & DiCindio, 2023), and institutional missions and frameworks (Jung & Love, 2017; Pegno & Souffrant, 2025; Weil, 2002).

Art museums, as sites of public pedagogy, have the potential to be a part of communities beyond traditional approaches. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) envisions a post-museum, which she describes as “a cacophony of voices [that] may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values. The voice of the museum is one among many” (p. 152). Kletchka (2018) examines how post-critical museologies can serve as a socially responsive model for museums through “creativity, radical inclusivity, and visitor-centered practices” (p. 307). Gigante (2024), looks at the art museum as a democratic space, investigating how it “can participate politically in its local environment” (p. 1). The author explores how neighborhood assemblies in art museums that have the potential to create “a network of cultural citizens within and beyond the art museum” (p. 11). Gigante notes that these museum-community processes take time and are fragile as they build trust and relationships. Pegno & Brindza (2024) worked directly with members of their communities to develop a model of community-based curation that involves transparency and direct input throughout the decision-making process from the initial planning to implementation of exhibitions.

In this article, I use the term “collective agency” to describe decolonizing museum practices through collective empowerment, shared decision-making, and collaborative cultural production (Chipangura & Mataga, 2021; Message, 2018). As Gonzalez Montero et al. (2024) define it, collective agency “is the product of interconnected individuals whose actions and relations produce and transform social structures” (p. 410). These structures continuously shift through community members’ interactions and reflect “genuine interests and confidence in others.” Unlike frameworks that center institutional change or individual empowerment, collective agency focuses on the interconnected nature of social transformation, demonstrating how cultural workers, community members, and institutions can jointly reshape traditional museum practices. This lens is particularly useful for examining the 1930s, a time when political and economic upheaval created conditions for new collaborative efforts between artists, government agencies, and communities. During this period of history, collective action became not only a means for survival, but also for transformative change.

These historic programs illustrate evidence of shared decision-making processes, community participation, and impacts on social structures beyond artistic output. They are initiatives in which there was a genuine effort for power to be redistributed. The sources for this article draw from archival materials, first-person accounts, and institutional records that document collaborative processes to investigate how collective agency functioned in practice.

As federal arts funding faces cuts and free speech concerns intensify, examining the 1930s through the lens of collective agency reveals critical lessons about the civic potential of art and art museums. It offers a framework for understanding how art museums can systemically change to share power instead of simply reforming existing practices, becoming spaces that support and inspire community organizing and activism. This article analyzes how Depression-era artists, institutions, and organizations built collective power to drive social change and serve the public good, offering a blueprint for how art museums today can become catalysts for community transformation through collective agency.

Federal Art Project

Although Dana died in 1929, his philosophies continued into the 1930s, particularly as the cultural administrators reenvisioned the public's relationship with the arts as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP). The WPA-FAP's director, Holger Cahill, a former employee of Dana's at the Newark Museum and follower of Dewey, used similar values as the basis for federally supported programs. Although Cahill had worked in and with museums, he saw the need for art to be brought to rural and urban communities that did not have direct access to art museums. Started in 1935 as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, designed to employ millions of Americans during the economic strife of the Great Depression, the WPA-FAP gave artists work through creating, teaching, and documenting in a variety of art programs. A goal of the WPA-FAP reflects Dana's vision to create a distinctly American perspective of art and a national body of art consumers who were invested in the arts through participation.

Community art programs

Cahill's firm commitment to active participation was a foundational belief of the WPA-FAP. His criticism of museums focused on its elitist practices and separation from the people. He argued that the American art museum "hasn't devoted itself too much to serving the interests of the onlooker," stating that visitors only spend a few minutes "in contemplation" with art in the museum. He believed that "in art and in everything else, [people] demand participation- action- as well as contemplation. Our ability to understand and to enjoy art increases as we progress from the position of the onlooker to that of the participant" (Cahill, 1941, p. 9).

To put this philosophy into practice, Cahill developed a new model for community engagement with the arts. He designed and promoted community art centers as spaces in which people actively partici-

pate and create art. Daniel Defenbacher, director of the community art center program, devised the term “art center” to reflect the “motion and activity that worked for the community’s cultural good” (White, 1987, p. 2). The centers held studio art classes, demonstrations, radio programs, and special initiatives designed to reach their communities (DiCindio, 2023). Central to Cahill’s vision was the importance of fostering meaningful conversation and connection. In a 1941 speech, Cahill described community centers as “a place for talk- talk in the forms of club meetings, political rallies, or literary lectures, in small groups or large- talk in the form of casual conversation with people with common interests” (as cited in Warner, 2018, p. 50).

The implementation of these community art centers illustrates the promise and limitations to the WPA-FAP’s approach to cultural democracy. Community art centers emerged nationwide, initially focusing on rural areas in the South and West, under the assumption that cities already possessed adequate cultural resources. In response, marginalized urban communities successfully advocated for their own centers (DiCindio, 2023; Grieve, 2009; Saab, 2004). Two examples from major urban centers demonstrate how communities mobilized to create these vital cultural spaces. In Harlem, Augusta Savage campaigned for a federally funded community arts center, which, despite significant WPA-FAP resistance (Bey, 2017; Calo, 2007), was established with Savage as inaugural director. By 1939, this center served over 4,000 individuals monthly through studio classes, outreach, and exhibitions in a collaborative environment (Cullen, 2012). In Chicago, five women, led by social worker Pauline Kligh Reed, advocated for WPA-FAP funding to establish the South Side Community Art Center in an old brownstone, with founding member artist Margaret Burroughs helping to create an institution that attracted over 50,000 visitors in its inaugural year.

Recognizing that not all communities could establish permanent art centers, the WPA-FAP developed mobile programs to extend their reach. The WPA-FAP’s art caravan program developed in New York as a traveling program that used an army ambulance outfitted to carry works of WPA-FAP art to town squares and other local gathering points. The driver of the caravan was an artist who gave informal outdoor “gallery talks” and evening lectures (Ludins, 1973). The program was designed not just to display art, but to gather community input and assess interest in expanding WPA-FAP services. The exhibitions included ballots that asked participants their preference for future exhibitions. Along with contact information, the questions on the ballot reflect the goals of the WPA-FAP projects, including the work of art the visitor liked best, other art caravan exhibitions they would like to see, and interest in establishing a community art center in their town.

Printmaking in WPA-FAP

Among the various artistic mediums supported by the WPA-FAP, printmaking emerged as particularly aligned with the program's democratic ideals and collective vision. Printmaking held an important role in the WPA-FAP because multiples could be created and shared inexpensively, enabling artists to reach working-class audiences (Langa, 2004). Prints also reflected the democratic ideals of artists of the time who sought to create art for a broader public (Langa, 2004, O'Connor, 1973). Artists often chose lithography and screen printing, known as more commercial techniques than traditional intaglio, as more accessible mediums to communicate their ideas.

To support this democratic art form, the WPA-FAP established extensive infrastructure that fostered collaborative networks among artists and communities. Workshops around the country showed artists how to create prints and became sites of collective learning where experienced printmakers shared techniques to newcomers (Rudnick, 2023). These workshops operated as cooperative spaces where artists shared resources and equipment and collaborated on projects that addressed social concerns. These images could be found in community art center and art caravan exhibitions, on loan to public institutions, and in museum and gallery exhibitions, creating networks of cultural exchange that connected communities (Langa, 2004).

The exhibition of these prints in various public venues reflected a coordinated effort to impact public taste on art. Langa (2004) notes that some WPA-FAP artists were critical of public appreciation for the arts and felt that the public needed to be educated to appreciate the art of the WPA-FAP. For many artists, printmaking offered both creative freedom and the potential for broader social impact. Printmaker Elizabeth Olds (1973) reflected that artists could communicate through prints but also could choose their subjects. Like Dana, Olds envisioned access to prints through a lending library that would democratically share the works of art on a broader scale, creating a model that shared art with the public and challenged the traditional art market.

Inequities and activism in the WPA-FAP

Despite the WPA-FAP's progressive goals of democratizing art, the program's implementation revealed significant structural inequalities that mirrored broader social problems of the era. Hierarchical structure and inequitable representation in the WPA administration and the governmental oversight of this organization, meant that WPA-FAP programs carried some of the same issues as the institutions from which they sought to distinguish themselves. The experiences of artists var-

ied widely because each state implemented the program differently, and the experiences of Black artists particularly highlighted systemic inequalities within the program. Black artists found opportunities for cultural advancement, collaboration, and recognition through these programs, but they still encountered barriers from state directors and agencies (Sklaroff, 2009). Additionally, while these WPA-FAP programs were successful in the classes and resources they offered, they faced discrimination issues as administrators often downplayed achievements of community centers in African American neighborhoods (Hardy, 2018), adhered to racial segregation in the South (McKinzie, 1973), and gave more public attention to programs associated with well-known artists, with urban Black community centers receiving more recognition than their rural southern counterparts (Calo, 2016).

Importantly, the WPA-FAP programs themselves were not simply government initiatives but were the direct result of organized artist advocacy and activism. WPA-FAP programs were not gifted by the federal government but were created and protected by the organization and lobbying of artists (Fraser, 2023; Lampert, 2013). In New York, politically active artists formed the Unemployed Artists' Group, which later became the Artists' Union (AU). The AU became the primary vehicle for collective action. The group, which expanded to cities across the U.S., demanded public support for artists by the federal government (Tyler, 1991).

Beyond securing the initial creation of the WPA-FAP, the AU continued to serve multiple functions for its members and the broader artistic community. The organization became an important social network for artists, building a leftist culture within the WPA-FAP and sharing their messages through the publication *Art Front* (Cohn, 2010). AU actively recruited Black artists into the organization, declared support for civil rights, and advocated for equality in the WPA-FAP. They also organized protests, often successfully, when funding was threatened to be cut for artists in the WPA-FAP and for museums to support artist relief efforts (Fraser, 2023). The union's advocacy extended beyond the immediate needs of WPA-FAP artists to broader issues of labor rights and professional recognition in the art world. For example, the AU worked with professional artist groups to advocate for artists to be paid by art museums for work to be included in their exhibitions (Lampert, 2013).

The end of the Federal Art Project

Funding cuts eventually decimated the WPA-FAP, moving support for the arts mostly to the states and imposing limits on WPA-FAP projects. Additionally, accusations of Communism grew as politicians opposing the WPA-FAP used it to hinder artists' work (Lampert, 2013). These at-

tacks had long-term ramifications on artists who were blacklisted from teaching positions, put under FBI surveillance, and forced to face the House Committee on Un-American Activities, with the WPA-FAP on the list of organizations that were serving as fronts for Communist activities. Artists were forced to take a loyalty oath denouncing involvement with Communist organizations and pressured to censor their art to non-political themes (Lampert, p. 177).

In 1936, the AU brought forward language for a Federal Art Bill that was taken up by Representative John Coffee and Senator Claude Pepper in 1938 to establish a permanent Bureau of Fine Arts (Grieve, 2009). However, it was met with such resistance by not only opponents unwilling to fund the arts during the Great Depression, but also by some artists, who wanted to distance themselves from federal support after witnessing Nazi attacks on modern art or saw themselves as exceptional and not part of programs designed for the public (Grieve, 2009).

By 1940, Cahill shifted the WPA-FAP to focus on the armed forces. Roosevelt ordered all work of the WPA-FAP to end by 1940. However, as Grieve (2009) outlines, the WPA-FAP had both immediate and far-reaching effects. The Graphic Art Division produced over 11,000 prints by the time they closed in 1943. In 22 states, 100 community art centers were established, employing hundreds of artists and teachers. Some still exist today; although the South Side Community Art Center is the only community art center still functioning in its original form, other centers became art museums that were established by communities after the WPA (DiCindio, 2023). As Kalfatovic (1994) notes, 19% of WPA-FAP employees were part of educational services. Many of these teachers were also artists, who not only created art in the WPA-FAP, but taught it to a new generation.

When the WPA-FAP ended in 1941 as the U.S. entered World War II, more than 8 million people had visited or participated in programming by the community art centers of the WPA-FAP. Yet, governmental oversight meant that these programs carried some of the same serious issues as the institutions from which they sought to distinguish themselves. To exemplify this point, I will compare the WPA-FAP with an organization working outside of the government, the TGP, an artist print collective in Mexico.

El Taller de Gráfica Popular

The TGP was founded in Mexico City in 1937, after the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists; LEAR), an artist collective formed to support the Mexican Revolution, dismantled. The TGP utilized graphic arts to instigate public

awareness and social change in Mexico and internationally. Goals of the TGP included defending the national culture of Mexico, collaborating with cultural and political groups, and upholding artistic expression and professional interests (Avila, 2008). It also rested on the belief that to serve its people, “art must reflect the social reality of the times and have a unity of content and form” (Ades, 1989, p. 326, as cited in Richards, 2001, p. 36).

Avila (2014) notes, graphic arts in Mexico developed alongside Mexican mural painting, and like muralists, TGP worked within the community. Posters were at the heart of the TGP because graphic art was such an effective propaganda tool. The posters were not meant to last but instead crumbled or were washed away by rain after they had served their purpose in public spaces. As TGP artist Adolfo Mexiac describes, “[w]e were very concerned with everything that was going on in the neighborhoods of Mexico City. We went all around the city to draw, and...when the Taller met, we would discuss what we had seen, what interested us” (Blanco & Einy, 2008, 0:5:23). Many of the TGP artists were part of “cultural brigades” formed of teachers of different disciplines who went into rural communities to teach (Blanco & Einy, 2008). As a member of the TGP, Elizabeth Catlett describes helping with illiteracy, building schools, and farming, sharing that the TGP worked with the government, but they weren’t paid by the government (Blanco & Einy, 2008). After World War II, the group was part of Mexico’s literacy program, illustrating schoolbooks (Prignitz-Poda, 2015).

Between 1937 and 1966, there were over a hundred members in the TGP, usually twenty to twenty-five active members at a time (Prignitz-Poda, 2015). The TGP worked collectively. The TGP’s studio space was “a significant site among key Mexican artists where dialogue and exchange were encouraged, social and political consciousness grew, and collaborations occurred” (Avila, 2014, p. 313). As in the WPA-FAP, the group found that printmaking lent itself to a collaborative atmosphere in which artists would share equipment and ideas. They met weekly and made decisions about everything from membership to commissions, resolving issues through majority votes (Richards, 2001). They used these meetings to critique each other’s art, a process through which everyone was required to participate. TGP artists also used equipment to create independent art to support themselves (Prignitz-Poda, 2015).

Many of the artists worked as art teachers in K-12 schools (Richards, 2001). Older members of the group also fostered new artists. Member Arturo García Bustos remembers his high school literature teacher bringing him to meet the founders of the TGP, and he eventually became part of the workshop (Bustos, 2015). Unlike WPA-FAP that was created as a government program designed to support artists, the TGP

wanted to remain free of Mexican government commissions and paid dues to support the collective (Prignitz-Poda, 2015).

Artists of the TGP

As Cameron (1999) notes, Black artists of the WPA-FAP were influenced by the Mexican artists' commitment to social concerns and collaborative efforts to use art to promote awareness to racial inequality. Graphic artists of the TGP and artists of the WPA-FAP also became connected through a series of events that promoted cultural exchange between the U.S. and Mexico in the mid-1930s and 40s. Burroughs, then teaching in a high school, went to Mexico to study with TGP founder Leopoldo Méndez after being asked to pledge loyalty to the United States and disavow Communism (Langdale, 2022). Burroughs' work with the TGP inspired her to continue her activism in Chicago, including at Southside Community Art Center. Artists Elizabeth Catlett and Charles White were active in advocating for opportunities for Black artists in the WPA-FAP. Married at the time, they traveled to Mexico on Rosenwald Fellowships to work with muralists but soon became part of the TGP (Cameron, 1999). Catlett established permanent residence in Mexico partly because of hostility towards progressive artists in the United States at that time (Herzog, 2012).

The artists of the TGP were part of a community that included painters, photographers, and filmmakers, and these artists "participated in a reconstruction of the nation through their art" (Avila, 2014, p. 314). The work they created was meant to spread political awareness and activism but also joined people together for social causes. Working outside of the government and with communities, TGP artists were able to speak directly to the people in Mexico and internationally through their art and document the social and political changes of that time. Like the WPA-FAP community programs, the TGP broke down barriers between artists and the places of which they were part. However, working without the confines of the government oversight, the TGP served as a space of political change in ways that the WPA-FAP could not.

Collective agency in art museums

These 1930s programs illustrate ways in which art museums today can take on a more active, organic role in communities and how organizing together through common goals could open access and dialogue between artists, museums, and communities. Considering these historic initiatives in relation to museums calls for a reimagining of what art museums can become.

First, art museums should recognize that meaningful cultural programs come from collective community action, not institutional benevolence. Communities possess the agency to identify their needs, organize resources, and create their own cultural spaces. Like the TGP's democratic structure, art museums can support community governance over institutional policies and programming through collective decision-making. Following the model of WPA-FAP printmaking workshops, art museums can foster collaborative learning communities that democratize artistic knowledge through resource sharing. Finally, like the advocacy of AU to support artists, art museums can provide platforms and resources for community organizing efforts that help build broader movements for justice and social change.

Although many art museums are already working toward these ideals (see Gigante, 2024; Kletchka, 2018; Pegno & Brindza, 2024; Pegno & Farrar, 2017 as examples), articulating these goals and utilizing historic models in their implementation opens new ways of thinking about how art museums work with communities. How would these spaces transform into sites of care, engagement with social and political issues, and intercultural collaboration through collective action? What new forms of cultural institutions would emerge when communities have collective agency over their own cultural development? I believe the answer is in supporting communities to create the cultural institutions they envision for themselves, transforming museums into collaborative, democratic, and politically engaged spaces that may look very different than traditional museums but would directly reflect the histories, values, and cultures of the communities to which they belong.

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