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BLOCK WINTER EXHIBITS SHOW CHICAGO ARTISTS AS ACTIVISTS, TASTEMAKERS
“The Left Front” and “Steichen | Warhol” examine American class and society

EVANSTON, Ill. --- From images of factory workers in picket lines to glamorous Hollywood icons, the winter 2014 exhibitions at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art explore visual representations of class and society in America during the 20th century, particularly the 1930s.

As described by the Block’s Ellen Philips Katz Director Lisa Corrin, “the new exhibitions and related programs that will be featured at the reopening of the Block in mid-January will set the tone for the museum’s expanded vision. Emphasizing interdisciplinary connections between art, history and ideas, the Block is growing partnerships on and off campus and expanding its leadership, exhibitions and programs.

The exhibitions and programs will take place at the Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive, on Northwestern University’s Evanston campus. All programming, with the exception of Block Cinema screenings, is free and open to the public, unless noted.

• **“The Left Front: Radical Art in the ‘Red Decade,’ 1929–1940,” Main Gallery, Jan. 17 to June 22**, focuses on American artists with Chicago ties who protested against injustice and pursued social revolution through their work and activism in the 1930s.

An innovative aspect of **“The Left Front”** will be an unprecedented push to connect the Block Museum with the communities of Northwestern University and Chicago through pop-up performances, actions, collaborations and lectures both in and outside of the museum. A broad array of programming will draw a line from the exhibition to critical contemporary issues, such as the recent economic downturn and the role of artists as social change agents.

• **“Steichen | Warhol: Picturing Fame,” Alsdorf Gallery, Jan. 17 to April 6**, examines the photography of Edward Steichen and Andy Warhol, artists whose portraits shaped the way social status and fame are defined through photographic conventions.

Related **“Steichen | Warhol”** events will include interdisciplinary talks by Northwestern scholars from the departments of English, theatre, and radio/television/film; a series of classic Hollywood films featuring Greta Garbo and other stars that Steichen photographed, and talks by photography experts, including a Berlin-based video artist who has written about Andy Warhol.

“THE LEFT FRONT: RADICAL ART IN THE ‘RED DECADE,’ 1929-1940”

In the wake of the Great Depression, progressive artists, writers and intellectuals coalesced to form a “left front” dedicated to making socially conscious art. **“The Left Front”** is the first exhibition to examine the visual culture of two activist collectives formed during the 1930s --the John Reed Club, named after the journalist who witnessed the Russian Revolution firsthand, and its successor organization, the American Artists’ Congress.

“Members of these collectives embraced the motto ‘art as a social weapon’,” said John Murphy, Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University and co-curator of the exhibition with fellow graduate student Jill Bugajski. “They sought to redefine what it meant to be an artist working in the shadow of the Great Depression by making no distinction between art and political struggle.”

While many of the artists featured in the exhibition are known for art they created in the Works Progress Administration programs, **“The Left Front”** brings their more provocative, political work to light.

“These artists dove headlong into controversial events of the day, from the stock market crash to the infamous Scottsboro case, from the New Deal to the rising threat of fascism in Spain and Germany,” Murphy said.

“The Left Front” highlights Chicago-based members of the John Reed Club and the American Artists’ Congress, considering specific conditions of the city -- its industrial legacy, massive immigration, ethnic neighborhoods, historical association with anarchism and labor unrest, and commitment to social reform through institutions like Jane Addams Hull House -- as the backdrop against which their work evolved. The exhibition brings together artists with Chicago connections, including Morris Topchevsky, Henry Simon, Mitchell Siporin, Bernece Berkman and Carl Hoeckner.

Related “Left Front” events will include lectures by scholars and cultural critics; a poetry program recalling the history of writers and activists such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright; a printmaking workshop bringing to life the radical democratic history of the medium; a series at Block Cinema featuring left-leaning films of the 1930s and 1940s and blacklisted filmmakers; and a reimagining of a 1930s American Artists’ Congress meeting. A newspaper-format publication will link the historic issues raised by “The Left Front” to the present through essays by curators and scholars and thoughts by contemporary cultural producers, thinkers and activists on what constitutes revolutionary art today.

Block Museum programs complementing “The Left Front” include:

- **Opening day program at 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 18.** After welcoming remarks by Northwestern University President Morton Schapiro, scholar and theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, editor of “Critical Inquiry” and professor of English and art history at the University of Chicago, will connect artistic concerns of the 1930s to present-day artistic practices, specifically the relationship between art and activism. Following his presentation, Mitchell will interview the exhibition curators. Throughout the afternoon Northwestern students, in collaboration with D. Soyini Madison, chair of the department of performance studies, will perform scripts based on left-leaning texts from the 1930s.

• **“WORK PRINT PROTEST REPEAT” exhibition, Ellen Philips Katz and Howard C. Katz Gallery, Jan. 17 to March 16.** This companion exhibition was organized by undergraduate students in Northwestern art history professor Christina Kiaer’s “Radical Art in the 1930s” course. It juxtaposes prints by Great Depression-era activist artists with prints by more contemporary political artists to explore the change in protest imagery over time.

• **Lecture by Julia Bryan-Wilson, 6 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 5.** Bryan-Wilson is a professor of modern and contemporary art the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include art, labor and the politics of art as practice.

• **Poetry reading by Mark Nowak, 6 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 26.** Nowak, a 2010 Guggenheim Fellow, is a poet and labor activist who has led workshops with autoworkers (Saint Paul and South Africa), domestic workers (NYC and London), and taxi workers. Along with a reading on campus he will conduct a workshop with workers in Evanston/Chicago.

• **Talk by Vasif Kortun, 2 p.m. Saturday, March 15.** Kortun is curator and director of research and programs at SALT, Istanbul -- Turkey's leading contemporary art center. Kortun will bring an international perspective to questions of art and social change in a program that will address Gezi Park and Taksim Square's history, Istanbul's so-called public spaces, art and architecture.

• **Living Newspaper performances by Jackalope Theatre, 6 p.m. Thursday, April 3, and 5 p.m. Saturday, April 5.** The Chicago-based theatre company and Northwestern students will enact four new short plays that reflect the themes raised by the Block Museum’s “**The Left Front**” exhibition.

• **Lecture by Andrew Hemingway, 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 16.** An emeritus professor in art history at University College London, Hemingway is the preeminent scholar on American artists and the communist movement. He will speak on the culture of the John Reed Club and the concept of proletarian art.

Additional programming will be announced throughout the course of the exhibition.

Generous support for “**The Left Front**” is provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, as well as the Terra Foundation on behalf of William Osborn and David Kabiller, and the Myers Foundations. Additional funding is from the Carlyle Anderson Endowment, the Louise E. Drangsholt Fund, the Kessel Fund at the Block Museum, and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

“STEICHEN | WARHOL: PICTURING FAME”

At the same time artists of the John Reed Club were trying to change American society and politics, Edward Steichen, the chief photographer for Vanity Fair and Vogue, was creating images that defined the nation’s perception of social status and fame.

The exhibition “**Steichen | Warhol: Picturing Fame**” pairs Steichen’s photographs with those of Andy Warhol, the Pop artist whose work some 50 years later reflected and transformed the conventions set down by Steichen.

“Steichen’s photographs captured the public’s imagination in the United States and shaped the visual language of celebrity-worship that Warhol would simultaneously glorify and undermine many years later,” said exhibition curator Elliot Reichert.

Steichen established himself as the premier portrait and fashion photographer in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States. Shooting in sharp focus with dramatic lighting before stark backgrounds, Steichen distilled the essential characteristics of his subjects’ personas. The parade of performers, writers and public figures who posed before his camera is staggering: Fay Wray, Eugene O’Neill, Carl Sandburg and Greta Garbo are just a few whose portraits are featured in the exhibition.

Steichen photographed the wealthy for commissioned portraits and the society pages of Conde Nast publications. Warhol also created images of high-paying patrons, including icons like golfer Jack Nicklaus and singer Carly Simon, in the manner of his iconic silkscreen paintings of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. **“Steichen | Warhol”** displays the preparatory Polaroids Warhol shot for these portraits, alongside Steichen’s images of stars, fashion models and socialites, examining the ways that Warhol and his subjects both borrowed from and subverted the styles defined by Steichen.

“Steichen | Warhol” brings to light a remarkable link between the artists -- drawings a young Warhol traced from a 1955 cover of Life magazine that featured a photograph of Greta Garbo taken by Steichen.

“Warhol’s copies of the Garbo portrait preceded his Monroe silkscreens by nearly a decade, but these inkblot drawings show that he was already beginning to realize the enormous power and appeal of the celebrity image,” Reichert said. **“Steichen | Warhol”** will include the Life cover that inspired Warhol, three of his drawings and Steichen’s original 1928 photograph of the actress.

The exhibition also includes a set of photos documenting Warhol’s social life in the 1970s and 1980s -- candid shots of nightclub impresario Steve Rubell, writer Fran Lebowitz, fashion designer Paloma Picasso and others -- that are contrasted with the carefully composed portraits Steichen created in his era.

“Steichen | Warhol” presents two major gifts of art to the Block Museum. It highlights the donation in 2013 of vintage Steichen photographs by collectors Richard and Jackie Hollander to the Block, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition also showcases gifts of Warhol photographs and prints made in 2008 and 2013 by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Block Museum programs complementing the “Steichen|Warhol” exhibition include:

- **Interdisciplinary gallery talk, 5:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 30.** Northwestern University’s Nick Davis, associate professor of English; Mary Poole, Charles Deering McCormick Distinguished Senior Lecturer in the department of theatre; and Beth Corzo-Duchardt, adjunct lecturer in the department of radio/television/film, will discuss the **“Steichen | Warhol”** exhibition.
- **Block Cinema film series.** A series of classic Hollywood films featuring Paul Robeson, Greta Garbo, Clara Bow and other stars Steichen photographed in their heyday, will include the following screenings: **Feb. 7, “The Emperor Jones; Feb. 14, “Grand Hotel”; and Feb. 21, “King Kong.”** General admission is \$6 for the general public or \$4 for Block Museum members, Northwestern

faculty, staff and students, students from other schools with valid IDs and individuals 65 and older. For more information, call the Block Cinema hotline at (847) 491-4000 or visit the Block Cinema website at www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/block-cinema.

• **Gallery talk by Elliot Reichert and Michal Raz-Russo, 6 p.m. Wednesday, April 2.** Exhibition curator Elliot Reichert and Michal Raz-Russo, assistant curator in the department of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, will discuss the Block Museum's "**Steichen|Warhol**" exhibition.

Support for "**Steichen | Warhol: Picturing Fame**" is provided by the Alsdorf Endowment, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, the Terra Foundation for American Art on behalf of David Kabiller, and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

ABOUT THE BLOCK MUSEUM

The Block is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays; and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. Free parking is available on weekends and after 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. For more information, visit blockmuseum.northwestern.edu or call (847) 491-4000.

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