

INTERVIEW WITH KEN KELNER

Q. You were a young professional working at the time of the fair and many of the artists with whom you worked on the federal art project were associated with the fair in one way or another, either privately or doing WPA commissions for buildings at the fair. What sort of reaction did they have working at the fair? How did they communicate to you their reactions?

A. Well as I recall it there was a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of all the artists. This was a great opportunity for them, and I think they made most of it. They worked hard. They were innovative, I think in many ways, they really did I think the best possible job they could have done. The conditions under which they worked good, THAT is the WPA Art Project, tried to put its best foot forward, you might say, and in doing it, they selected what they felt were the best artists available for the job. They made available technical facilities for them to work studios, and so forth, and they were given a great deal of encouragement. In fact I think this was one of the most illustrious periods in American art of that time. They anticipated a broad audience, broadly representative of America, and of the world and they certainly felt that the future was secure in that they as artists would be able to grow, develop, expand and make it. Just to go off on a tangent as I walked through the fairground today on this day in 1980, and I got you might say an acute case of nostalgia, walking through this place I have not been to in just about 40 years.

I never had occasion to come into this park and these fairgrounds, except to see in the distance the globe, but I visualize in my mind now the Trylon, and Perisphere and these magnificent buildings. Unfortunately they were short-lived. All of them had works of art, but of course my own personal association would be with the art project. So I watched this thing grow. At the time I was with the art project; at one time I was the director of supervisor of the New York City WEPA Art Project information division and so a great deal of what was written and appeared in the newspapers at least from the project point of view was either written by me or came across my desk and during those years, at different specific times, I was director of one of the community art centers--this was the Brooklyn Community Art center. There were five of them--Brooklyn, Manhattan, Harlem, Queens and Staten Island. These were all centers where you might say amateur artists here at work, going to classes and had a whole range of courses, and while we weren't trying to train them to be professional artists, yet we did stimulate the creativity of a vast number of people who grew in art expression.

Q. You did also extend some of that into what you did at the fair too didn't you?

A. Yes, well of course we had exhibitions at the fair, separate and distinct from the artists who were working on the murals which adorned several of the buildings, particularly the WPA building.

We had changing exhibitions and America was able to see a cross-section of the artist's work of that particular period, and I wouyld say they were . . . if you were to hold an exhibition anywhere across the country, you might say regional shows or national shows, the ones that were held at the world's Fair were comparable. They demonstrate that these artists of ability, of stature, of genuine creativeness, and the proof of that is that in the years after the fair, long after the WPA was what I call plowed under, many of these artists continued to exhibit, win prizes. I once made a list of WPA artists' work that was acquired by museums and the list was long, and they weren't selected because they were WPA, but because they were artists in their own right on a high creative level, and other organization that gave awards like the various print associations continued to select WPA artists' printmakers for high awards or honorable mentions and that sort of thing. So this was a period in American art that was of a high level.

Q. DO YHOU think that by exhibiting at the fair, these artists gained a wider recognition?

A. WELL there's no question about it. They received a wider audience. I would say yes, they did beget a great deal of recognition.

Q. And what about the public reaction to the exhibit?

A. I would say it was in general quite favorable.

Q. Did you have a chance to listen to many of the people?

A. Yes, I did. See, I had a unique job during that period in one of the buildings--the WPA Art Project Exhibition. We had graphic arts presses. We had a lithograph press, a printing, an etching press and print exhibition, and I was asked to give a number of lectures on how prints made and so I did, and I had rather large audiences--people coming through and seeing someone up there taling with print makers at work, making a lithograph, printing a lithograph and had an opportunity to talk to them and respnd to questions and were quite interested and fascinated by the process. You've got to realize at this time there were a lot of peolpe who had never had any personal contact with a work of art and this was true around the country--not necessarily in New York--but we were getting people from all parts of America. And I felt that they were responsive and were respectful of what they were seeing. In other words, here would be an opportunity to make comments, negative coments about this show and that show or these paintings, and I don't recall hearing that kind of comment. There was an eagerness and an interest, and a positiveness about the involvement of the audience, to the things they wre looking at, be they murals, easel paintings, sculptures, or graphic arts, photographs. And what I'm really saying at the same time is that these works came out of different divisdions hesde works came out of different divisions of the art project.

There was the mural painting project which turned out paintings both on canvas or true fescoes and other techniques, mosaics and so forth, and then there was the easel division and for the munificent of sum of \$23.86, that was the weekly salary they were expected to work on a mural, or work on an easel painting and within a limited number of weeks was to turn in a finished work of art. Just think what the government was getting! It was a real bargain. And it was a situation which was mutually satisfactory

Q. I understand they put up their money for working at the fair because the fair had union wages and union rates, so they gave them \$35 a week. They had to work pretty darn hard for it.

A. That's correct. But in general, the artists were able to supply and survive, and that's the important thing. Whoever created the project at the beginning suggested it to President Roosevelt and others who thought through the whole process that was to be unfolded, the idea was to give a group of people a minimum wage in order to help them survive, but they tried to tie it in with something which related to their craft and their ability, and this was true to writers on the theater project and so forth. And what they did unwittingly in my view, was create a renaissance in the arts in America. In my view, too, it was the greatest single period in American art history and a unique one. No other government had ever done as much for its culture than the United States--that we do know--and we were trying to develop a situation where they would remove the welfare aspect of it and make it a permanent project.

It was an extremely important contribution that was being made to American culture and American society, American life. Of course we didn't succeed, but we were comparing what we were doing and what the potential was with other countries. France, for example, had sponsored art one way or another, England. The greatest sponsor was the Soviet Union at that time and yet it was the impression of a great many people that the Soviet Union at that particular time was leading the rest of the world, not the U.S., but the rest of the world. But the United States was passing it, except that they had these welfare limitations, so if anyone were not able to prove that he was a pauper, he was liable to be fired, and a great many of the artists were dropped for one reason or another, as I recall, relating to their inability to pass the so-called relief test. It really was a horrendous situation for a great many very creative, fine artists.

Q. But of course at least by the time the fair came along, there was the opportunity to get employment there and many artists who had worked on the project subsequently became employed by the fair or at least were given a commission of some kind for a mural or sculpture.

A. Well a number of people left the project during this period to take on commissions, but of course the commissions terminated, the fair was over, and many of them made an effort to come back. Of course we were coming towards the end of the projects in 1942 for example--the projects were really on the way out.

But in 1941, a number of them did come back after the fair had passed. But I would say the World's Fair of 1939-40, gave a tremendous impetus to the arts and to the artists on the project, and I think the fact that it was held here in Queens is to the great credit of this borough. It maybe really to the credit of Robert Moses.

Q. Although the idea of the fair was originated by a Queens man and he did see this as a likely place for it.

A. I'm delighted, for example, that despite the fact the buildings were removed, the space allocated for this was retained as a public park and that this building we're sitting in at this moment and I remember the exhibitions--the New York City Exhibition which was a good one held here and I came into this building many times. But of course two years, 1939, 1940 were important years for me involved in the project.

Q. WHAT WAS the impression of this building as it was then?

A. I thought it was a well-designed building, not too ostentacious. The reason I mention that is because a great many of the others were flagrantly ostentacious and it's not regrettable that they've disappeared. This evidently was conceived as a more permanent structure because you could see that the materials were more solid, the exterior didn't look like they were built for just a few months' use, and others in 1940 for example, you could see that some of them were retouched. they were beginning to crack, the plaster was not as fresh-looking and I'm sure if they had remained another yuear or two, they might have looked like they were ready for the junk heap.

So it's just as well that man had assisted what nature had already begun. But it was an exciting place, and as I recall it, I felt by the end of 1940, I had not seen the whole fair yet. I must have been here 50 or a hundred times--a large number of times. Some days I came five times a week because I was playing a role, you see. That was when I was lecturing in the contemporary arts.

Q. Did you get a chance to see much of the fair even though you were here working?

A. Oh yes. I made it a point to get into all of the other buildings and try all the ethnic foods that were being sold.

Q. What are the exhibits that you remember best?

A. Well outside of the exhibitions and the WPA and the health exhibit which was very impressive and the science building, and the General Motors Building which was really impressive, many of them were sort of. . . the image of them is passed, but I recall sharply the WPA But I recall the WPA contribution. It was an important one. It was a good and constructive one.

Q.: Do you think it was well attended and well received?

A. Yes, I do. I remember large crowds coming into these buildings and since I was standing in a given place for a long period, I saw quite a bit of movement and appreciation--real solid warm response to what people were seeing. And I also saw people from many different places, not only in the United States, but from overseas.

This was at that time the center of the world and it was a very dynamic place to be then and I was fortunate in being here.

Q. Were you working here both seasons?

A. Well I was involved here one way or another in both seasons because in these years I was connected with the arts project, so I had occasion to come several times.

Q. How would you compare the two seasons?

A. I think the first season was the most exciting. It was the opening of something that had been anticipated for a long time and a lot of new ideas were generated and presented. The second season was in a sense a repeat of the first, not too much new stuff. It's deja vu. You've seen this thing already and it's not quite as exciting. But I would say that those who didn't come in 1939 and came in 1940 got quite a lift, so they were good shows, both good exhibitions, but the second one was less exciting, at least for me.

Q. Can you remember some of the reactions of the artists that you were working with just as a kind of here say testimony, but because you were closely associated with them?

A. WELL you see the mural painters were at work before the fair opened, and they were working here or at various studios. And there was a certain excitement. I don't recall any particular one who said this is great, but I have a consensus of recollection that they thought something really important was happening and that they were part of an exciting period in American culture and that is, the fair as a whole.

They felt that something special was happening for them as artists. Just think! You're commissioned to do a large mural on the facade of the building, or a mural on the history of medicine, for example in the health building. You're commissioned to do a lobby--the entrance of the WPA Building. These artists were given commissions like this for the first time in their lives. And who knew then if that the of commission would ever be repeated in their lifetime? In many cases they were not, so this was the peak of their professional life. Some of them dropped out of art because of economics after the WPA terminated. That was of course the beginning of the WAR. Some of them changed their styles. They didn't have large walls, so they worked on easel paintings, went to graphics arts or a whole range of prints--lithograph and so forth, and something new was being developed and that was the silk screen print which was motivated by their experience on the art project through the print department, the graphic arts division. And that's where the major research and the teaching of the technique took place in the New York City WPA Art Project. I don't think most people who take for granted now the silk screen print--as being always with us. Actually it hasn't been always with us, and of course I give the greatest credit for that impetus to the poster division which was using silk screen printing for posters and the graphic arts division working closely together, but particularly to the man who really developed it Anthony Velonus. And of course he was given the opportunity to do this research and original creative work by virtue of the fact that the New York City WPA Art project made it possible for him to do that.

Did they take him to the fair and he demonstrated silk screen to the public at all?

A. Yes I think so. Certainly the demonstration. I don't recall that Tony actually did it himself, but he set up the whole process and he should get credit--what person is to get credit for that--Anthony Velonus should get it. And I rather think that most people who did research in this field recognize the contribution that he made and in the WPA project. That's a little diversion from the question you asked me, but all kinds of things were happening in those days and the WPA arts project and I used the word plurally were being reflected in the fair. At one time one might think well the fair and the art program were really interchangeable or at least within the personnel. They were quite related and that goes for the theater, the music project. It would be arts and culture to the people on a whole variety of ways. It really was a general reflection of the attitude of the period. So there were great opportunities for artists of all types. And they flourished every way except economically.

There was something also interesting happening. I referred to art teaching. At the fair there was an exhibition of children's art that came out of the art classes sponsored by the Federal Art and New York City Art project in various institutions--not only in schools, but in settlement houses and a whole variety of institutions, hospitals, even prisons--all over this area.

And a lot of work as shown at the fair and people for the first time discovered that children really have unusual innate talent and ability to express themselves in art, line form and color and that was one of the very popular exhibitions. The children's Art show was--not so much known and I don't recall that this was exhibited in this particular show, but there were other exhibitions going on at the same time and art teaching and art generally applied to other social work situations and I include prisons as well and hospitals, etc. Art was being utilized in therapy and psychologists and psychiatrists and others were beginning to realize that the value of art teaching in these institutions and a number of them--that is these professionals in the field of psychiatry and psychology and so forth were beginning to make important discoveries on how art was therapeutic and helpful and in the area of juvenile delinquency for example. They seemed to discover an impact on juvenile delinquency. Certainly in the prisons, art had a rehabilitative effect and in other institutions and you see you have two things happening. Let's take a given prison. You'd have a mural painted by a WPA artist representing some aspect of social life--maybe family life and at the same time an art teacher would come in periodically and those who were interested or willing would take up paint and pencil and so forth, and somehow this helped them to rehabilitate them in terms of social relationships, the outside world. At any rate the art teachers who came out of it reported very interesting reactions--very positive reactions, enthusiasm.

But at the psychologists and psychiatrists who were also involved in this process were beginning to give reports on constructive results that came put, more scientific than just an artist who saw there was enthusiasm. And meetings of social worker and social scientists had this theme on their agenda at that time--getting reports. I remember after having made a study of this problem, I was invited to speak at the New York School of Social Work on the subject and as I recall it there, there students who attended this lecture were very much interested, and they asked a lot of questions, where they could see this going on, where they could get reports and so forth. It opened up a whole new vision as to the role of art in the field of mental health as a rehabilitative function.

There was this cross-pollenization of ideas that were being reflected back into the fair in one way or the other. The exhibition for example of children's work and there was information coming out which was seen at the fair as to the affect or influence of art on other aspects of life and big placards like the one you have here on the walls explaining various things bout the WPA Art Project which were not generally known and perhaps for the first time they got some broader idea of the uses of art beyhond smearing on the wall.

The Fair cetainly brings back memories of time gone by and I'm delighted that this part of American history is not forgotten, not overlooked. There was a period when the War came along and people's focus was on something else.

And for political reasons I think in part there was a general negative attitude expressed about the whole WPA and about the arts that played a role in that. I use the phrase the WPA Arts Project all of them were plowed under. And it was an effort to suppress that aspect of American creativeness and merely focus on the negative which was the boondoggling part and I see that as a political rather than an accurate social reflection, and this would rub off on other aspect of art of the period including the fair.

One good thing about American nostalgia--people like to go back to roots and like to look to the past, so I guess it was inevitable that we would come back to that period of 1936 to 1942 and take a new look at it and examine it. What was it really like and what did it mean? And it was not only political and not only economic, but it was very important in terms of the culture of America. People who had never seen works of art or had never heard an orchestra or gone to concert or people whose connection with writing was minimal--those guide books written by the writers project really were outstanding in their day. In other words, the arts project had to come back in some way into America's awareness and its consciousness, and I think it's a very healthy thing that it does. We've got to open up the past and take a new look at it. And not only from the association with a given set of techniques and certain kinds of things that were created for people on welfare, but take a new look at it in terms of American history and American culture and American art.

What was the specific contribution they made to art itself and how did it enrich American art? and how was it related to what went before and what went on and movements, in other words, look at it now from really an art point of view and historical and critical point of view. And of course you find as we have in every historic period in art, going back as far as we can in art history, there were always artists, some of them rose to the top, some of them out of sheer creativeness, made names synonymous with a given period, whether it be Rembrandt or Michelangelo and so forth. But we also know that many of them fell by the wayside because they didn't measure up to the time. And it's true of the arts project.

One cannot say that all the artists were great, but on the other hand, one would heartf in those years and in the late forties long after the project had been terminated negative comments about poor artists, not really artists, they didn't know real contributions. So you've got to take the parts that you can find today and analyze them in terms of the total culture. And I think we are finding that the arts projects made a genuine contribution to the culture of America, not only of that time, but for the period ahead. And in my view, looking at it from an art historical point of view, I see that there was a genuine renaissance, an awakening or reawakening and a major contributon to the culture of this great land.