

Art, Anti-fascism, and the Evolution of a “Propaganda of the Imagination”

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Ian Grosvenor and Siân Roberts

Art, Anti-fascism, and the Evolution of a “Propaganda of the Imagination”: The Artists International Association 1933–1945

Abstract: The artist and art educator Nan Youngman recalling the 1939 *Art for the People* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London said ‘we wanted everyone to use their art, whatever it was, in a political way.’ In the fight against the growing threat of fascism in the 1930s artists in Britain became increasingly concerned with producing art or curating exhibitions which presented a strong and radical challenge to fascist ideology. This agenda was also linked to desire to reach out to audiences beyond those of the metropolitan centre and in the late 1930s and 1940s anti-fascist art exhibitions toured to regional museums, civic centres, factories, and barracks. This essay identifies and documents the rationale, content, participants, impact and interconnectedness of exhibitions in late 1930s and early 1940s Britain that confronted the threat of fascism, including *Artists against Fascism* (1935), *Guernica* (1938), and *For Liberty* (1943) and in particular map the evolution of a “propaganda of the imagination” whereby through direct engagement with art and artists the public would look closely, rather than look away and become an advocate for the arts and progressivism.

Keywords: anti-fascism, spain, war, exhibitions, propaganda

. . . Today the forces of life and progress are on one side, those of reaction and death on the other. We are having to choose between democracy and fascism, and fascism is the enemy of art. It is not a question of relative freedom; there are no artists in Fascist countries.

Cyril Connolly, 1938.¹

painting is not done to decorate apartments. It’s an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.’

Pablo Picasso²

1 Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1938), 2.

2 Gijs van Hensbergen, *Guernica. The Biography of a Twentieth Century Icon*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 24.

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Introduction

Guernica by Pablo Picasso is a twentieth century icon, painted as a passionate protest against the fascist violence which on 26 April 1937 rained death on innocent Basque civilians. It was a painting born out of the reality of total war. As a painting it is iconic as both a visual statement against war and fascism, and the chaos and brutality it depicted captured the imagination of both artists and publics when it was displayed first in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la vie modern in July 1937 (see Figure 1) and then in London at the New Burlington Galleries in October 1938. In Paris four members of the Artists International Association [AIA] decorated rooms in the Peace Pavilion which was located 100 meters from the Spanish Pavilion.³ The London exhibition was organized by the Surrealist Roland Penrose who was a member of the AIA. Profits from the sale of the London exhibition catalogue went to the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. *Guernica* was praised by the critic Herbert Read and condemned by the art historian Anthony Blunt and Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery, respectively as “obscure” and “elitist”. At the same time as the painting was being displayed in London preliminary paintings, sketches and drawings were exhibited at Oriel College Lecture Room, Oxford in November⁴ and in Leeds City Art Gallery in December 1938. Organized with the support of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, Leeds had hoped to also display *Guernica*, but it was too large for the Gallery. At the opening the Chair of Leeds Libraries and Arts Committee observed that the pictures were done “as a protest against the sufferings of the Spanish people at the hands of the Fascists” and were “bound to arouse controversy, but the committee took the view [. . .] that Leeds people should have the opportunity of seeing different phases of modern art.”⁵ A view reinforced in the local press by Bonamy Dobrée, who wrote a short essay on the significance and meaning of the painting and concluded that “art is not a soothing syrup, it is an explosive to make us see afresh, to force us to readjust our preconceived ideas.”⁶ At the beginning of 1939, the preliminary works re-joined *Guernica* at the Whitechapel Gallery in the East End of London. This was a fitting location as it was an area of London with a large Jewish community and had been the site of a major

³ van Hensbergen, *Guernica*, 88. The four artists were Mischa Black, Betty Rea, Nan Youngman and James Holland.

⁴ Tate, “Pablo Picasso: Weeping Woman 1937”, accessed October 1, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/picasso-weeping-woman-t05010>.

⁵ *Leeds Mercury*, 6 December 1938; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 6 December 1938.

⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* 13 December 1938. Dobrée was Professor of English Literature at Leeds University.

demonstration against Mosley’s British Union of Fascists in October 1936. The exhibition proved to be a success both in attracting visitors, some 15,000 in the first week, and raising funds for the Republican cause. The exhibition was accompanied by documentary films on the Spanish Civil War and workshops. Read and Penrose both offered to help the public understand the painting. From Whitechapel *Guernica* travelled to Manchester where it was exhibited in a car showroom just north of the city center. Again, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief was involved. Proceeds from the exhibition were used to charter a food ship to send relief in what was becoming a humanitarian crisis. Funds were also gathered through the distribution of 150,000 collecting envelopes and appeal letters to 20,000 homes. Women in Manchester were particularly active in raising funds.⁷ After Manchester *Guernica* returned to Picasso and France.

Guernica was not the first anti-fascist painting to be seen in Britain, nor was it the first anti-fascist art exhibition. Nevertheless, this brief story of its sojourn in England provides a useful framing device for the present essay as it highlights many of the elements which will be told here – art as propaganda and creativity as a political act, debate and disagreement on the merits and meaning of contemporary art, artefacts on the move and new spaces of civic engagement, and individual, institutional, and organizational collaboration and cooperation in a common cause. That said, the story to be told is different from that originally conceived, not in its focus on the AIA and its role in promoting a propaganda of the imagination, but in the sources used. COVID-19 closed down our traditional spaces of historical enquiry – archives and universities – and instead forced engagement and immersion with the digital world of newspapers. In some ways this proved particularly fruitful with local reporting having equal exposure as the national, but as with all history what is presented is only one part of the story of the AIA and its “propaganda of the imagination.”⁸

⁷ *Manchester Evening News* 28 January 1939; Jim Fyrth, *The Signal was Spain. The Aid Spain Movement 1936–1939* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 257–260. On the role of women in anti-fascist politics see Sue Bruley, “Women Against War and Fascism,” in *Britain, fascism and the Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrth (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), 131–156 and Julie V. Gottlieb, “Feminism and Anti-fascism in Britain: Militancy Revived?” in *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State* ed. Nigel Copsey and David Renton (London: Palgrave: Macmillan, 2005), 68–94.

⁸ The archive of the Artists International Association is deposited at the Tate Gallery Archive, Tate Britain and covers the period 1933–1971. It consists of a large amount of printed material in the form of circulars, exhibition catalogues, news sheets, bulletins, newsletters, prints, private view cards and press cuttings, together with manuscript material: see <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/library-archive-reading-rooms>. The bulk of the material dates from after the Second World War as very few of the documents from the 1930s have survived. Lack

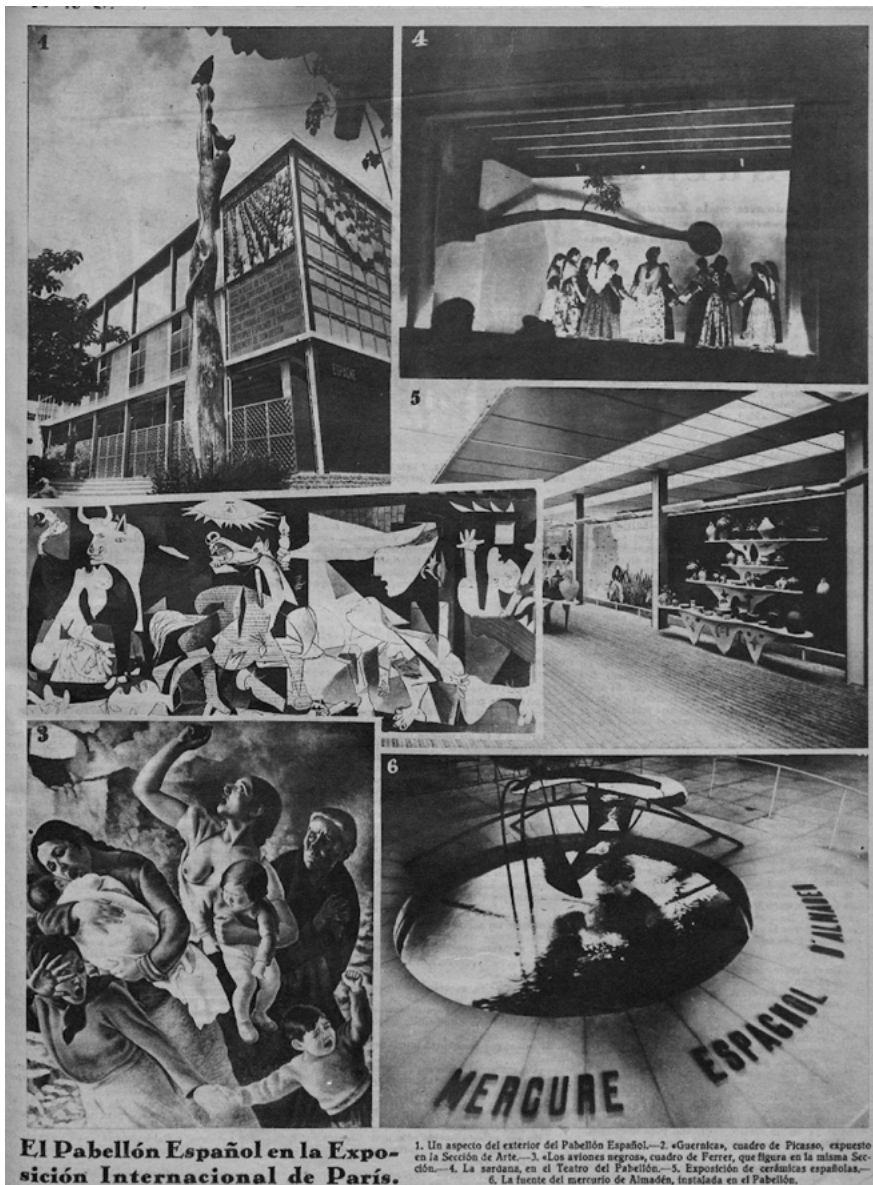


Figure 1: Guernica and the Spanish Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la vie modern, *Crónica*, 410 (19/09/1937).

Uniting Artists in the Fight against Fascism

Established in 1933 the Artists International [AI] was born out of the political and social conflicts of the period with the aim of mobilizing “the International Unity of Artists Against Imperialist War on the Soviet Union, Fascism and Colonial Oppression.” This was to be achieved through “the uniting of all artists in Britain sympathetic to these aims” into working units ready “to execute posters, illustrations, cartoons, book jackets, banners, tableaux, stage directions,” the “spreading of propaganda by means of exhibitions, the Press, lectures and meetings,” and maintaining “contact” with similar groups in 16 other countries.⁹ In a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* A.L. Meblin, secretary of the AI (British Section) added “artists, if they are to become economically secure and are to perform their proper function in society, must organize themselves to fight for an ordered socialist system [. . .] art which ignores social conditions and the needs of the people” was reactionary and instead “a new art” will emerge out of “the struggle for progress.”¹⁰ Two exhibitions were organized by the AI in 1934. An anti-War exhibit by the “revolutionary artists group of England” at Cambridge University which later toured (see Table 1) and *The Social Scene* in a shop in London which attracted some press coverage and was described by the artist Eric Gill as made up of “works depicting the hardship of the proletariat, the brutality of the police, the display of armed forces against street demonstrators, orators, starving children and slum conditions.”¹¹ The following year the AI changed its name to the Artists International Association [AIA] and modified its aim to: “The Artists’ International Association stands for the Unity of Artists against Fascism, War and the Suppression of Culture.”¹² The commitment to a socialist political program remained, but the more specific focus on anti-fascist sentiment allowed a wider circle of artists, both modernists and more traditional established artists, to join alongside social realists in a common cause. As the AIA stated:

of access to the archive due to Covid-19 and no archive material being available online meant that many lines of inquiry were not able to be pursued including explorations of ideological and intellectual connections with other left movements such as André Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky’s “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938).

⁹ Lynda Morris and Robert Redford, *The Story of the Artists International Association* (Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 11.

¹⁰ “Letter from A. L. Meblin, Secretary of the Artists International to the Editor of the *Manchester Guardian*” *The Manchester Guardian* 9 July 1934.

¹¹ Quoted in Morris and Redford *Artists International Association*, 14.

¹² Morris and Redford *Artists International Association*, 28.

Many artists feel that art and politics should be very separate things, but Fascism is not one of the usual political movements that the artists can perhaps afford to ignore. We see that Fascism not only cripples and lowers the conditions of the working class, but, in fear of liberty of expression, deliberately exterminates progress in art and culture, and persecutes professional and manual laborer alike in its endeavor to crush freedom of thought and speech.¹³

The exhibition *Artists against Fascism and War* was the first successful product of this new artistic alliance. The organizers were determined that it would be “an outstanding artistic event,” “a protest against Fascism and War,” and “against cultural reaction.”¹⁴ Open for just two weeks it attracted some 6,000 visitors¹⁵ and as the critic Montagu Slater wryly observed in *Left Review*, “Those whom art and politics have put asunder, an exhibition against war and fascism has joined together.”¹⁶

“A Sermon to Preach”

In 1937 the AIA rented a large empty house in Grosvenor Square, one of the most fashionable parts of London and covered every room with art. One room devoted to the peace movement consisted of posters produced by the Madrid Defence Committee which ridiculed Franco alongside other images of children killed in air raids and a British recruiting poster showing a sunburnt soldier to which was affixed a photograph of a war cemetery. In another, Hitler is seen debating over guns or butter. In other rooms were works by the “Ashington Group,” (miners from Northumberland), naïve paintings, European surrealist paintings selected by Henry Moore, and works by Barbara Hepworth and Stanley Spencer. The AIA described the exhibition “as a demonstration” by British and foreign artists “of their unity in support of peace, democracy and cultural development.”¹⁷ Harriet Atkinson has argued the use of the word “demonstration” represented a deliberate decision by the AIA to adopt “the language of politics,” and for the AIA “exhibitions-as-demonstrations acted as a form of agitprop, as embodied protests to raise the profile of a cause, rather than displays

13 Artists International Association *We Believe* leaflet quoted by Jutta Vinzent, *Identity and Image. Refugee Artists from Nazi Germany in Britain (1933–1945)* (Weimar: VDG, 2006), 201.

14 Publicity Poster reproduced in Morris and Redford, *Artists International Association*, 29.

15 van Hensbergen, *Guernica*, 86.

16 Quoted in Margot Heinemann, “The People’s Front and the Intellectuals” in *Britain, fascism and the Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrth (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), 164.

17 *Nottingham Journal* 15 April 1937.

to be consumed passively.”¹⁸ Certainly, this interpretation mirrors contemporary commentaries. Atkinson makes her case by focusing on the 1943 exhibition *For Liberty*.

A report on the opening of *For Liberty* syndicated in *The Manchester Guardian* under the headline “Art Among the Ruins,” began with the observation that it was “the creed” of the AIA “that art, being an integral part of everyday life, should be seen in everyday places,” and therefore it was no surprise that having already held an exhibition in the ticket hall of Charing Cross Underground Station (see Table 1), the AIA had chosen to stage *For Liberty* “in the basement under the battered ruins of John Lewis’s shop in Oxford Street as a pulpit.” The report continues, “‘Pulpit’ is not a mischosen [sic] word, because this exhibition has a sermon to preach.”¹⁹ The AIA had called on its members in 1942 “to organise themselves as propagandists” and this translated into a clear message in both the exhibition catalogue and the exhibition’s design. The catalogue presented a new role for the visual artist as an agent in the evolution of a “propaganda of the imagination”:

Here is a demonstration that artists feel they can contribute more than is at present being asked of them: that the function of art in wartime is not only to record what is happening and to give enjoyment and recreation, but to stimulate and encourage, by vividly representing what we are fighting for.²⁰

In design, it translated into an exhibition centerpiece which visually and textually celebrated the “Four Liberties” of the United Nation’s 1941 Atlantic Charter: “Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear.” Other sections addressed, “How we are fighting, what we are fighting for, what would happen if we lost.”²¹ *For Liberty* drew artists from across England and consequently received local press coverage. The *Western Morning News* which covered the southwest of England reported on the contributions of locally based artists including John Tunnard and Oskar Kokoschka. The former was praised for his large mural *Focal Point* which seemed to symbolize “the dawn of the freedom for which we are fighting” and latter for his “strongly

¹⁸ Harriet Atkinson, “Exhibitions as political ‘demonstrations’: Artists International Association’s *For Liberty* exhibition, London 1943,” ICDHS Conference Proceedings 2020, 3.

¹⁹ *The Manchester Guardian* 16 March 1943.

²⁰ Quoted in Lynda Morris and Robert Redford, *The Story of Artists International Association 1935–1953* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 66.

²¹ *The Manchester Guardian* 16 March 1943; *Liverpool Daily Post* 15 March 1943. The exhibition was given “an emotional unity” through connecting the art with a piece of free verse by Cecil Day Lewis.

painted study of many horrors of the war.”²² Kokoschka had fled the Nazis and arrived in England in 1938 and settled in Cornwall. The unnamed painting was *What We Are Fighting For*.

Reaching Out

In putting on *For Liberty* the AIA cooperated with the Free German League of Culture (FGLC).²³ The FGLC was established in 1938 as a confederation of anti-fascist and anti-Nazi refugee artists, writers, musicians, and scholars and was founded by, among others, Kokoschka. It was only natural given their political affinities that the two organizations would collaborate and in 1941 they organized an exhibition of sculpture which included the work of refugee artists. In the accompanying catalogue Herbert Read described the exhibition as “modest” as it was an art form that had been “neglected, indeed almost forgotten”.²⁴ It was he noted, “composed in the main of the works of artists who have been uprooted, deprived of their studios, their materials, their very tools. They work tentatively with great difficulty, without adequate economic support in their exile.”²⁵ The same year also saw a second sculpture exhibition and two other exhibition collaborations: *Exhibition of English and Refugee Art* and *Works by Refugee Artists and their English Friends*. Jutta Vinzent is of the view that despite the political orientation of the two organizations the joint exhibitions were generally non-political in content except for Socialist Realist subject matter.²⁶ This may be the case, although the exhibition documentation is fragmentary, but the key point is that the collaboration was a political act as it gave refugee artists, many of whom had been the subject of the Nazi Degenerate Art Exhibition, a place of display and a public platform.²⁷ Read’s concern regarding

22 *Western Morning News* 18 March 1943. The news report wrongly names Kokoschka as Loskoschka and identifies him as Czech when he was born in Austria. That said, he fled to England from Czechoslovakia and Jutta Vincent has argued that “he identified himself as a Czech and with the Czech people,” Vinzent, *Identity and Image*, 122.

23 Charmian Brinson, “The Contribution of German-Speaking Refugee Artists to British Wartime Propaganda,” in *Insiders Outsiders. Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture* ed. Monica Bohm-Duchen (London: Lund Humphries, 2019), 219.

24 *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* 8 November 1941.

25 Herbert Read, “Sculpture and Pottery” *AIA and FGLC Exhibition of Sculpture and Drawings* (1941), s.p.

26 Vinzent, *Identity and Image*, 114.

27 See Lucy Wasensteiner and Martin Fass, *London 1938. Defending ‘degenerate’ art*. (London: Weiner Library, 2018).

the lack of “economic support in exile” was shared by the AIA and it acted “as a valuable source of contacts and exhibiting opportunities” for exiled artists.²⁸ It also gave political and material support to German, and Austrian refugee artists who were interned as Enemy Aliens following the outbreak of the War.²⁹

The AIA worked with other cultural organizations “to achieve unity of action” and it had close and ongoing collaborations with the Left Theatre, the Christian Left Arts Group, the Left Review, the International Peace Campaign, the Council of Civil Liberties and Society of Industrial Artists.³⁰ Collaborations were also local and particular, such as in 1941 with the Sheffield branch of the Anglo-Soviet Union. Together they organized an exhibition of pictures showing the “many phases of Russian life and progress” and the event was marked by a presentation in Sheffield of a casket from “the steel city of Britain” to “Stalingrad, the steel city of Russia,” which depicted the “British Lion rampant, and the Hammer and Sickle.”³¹

The AIA actively encouraged the formation of “provincial groups” across the country the first being in Edinburgh in 1937,³² and others quickly followed including Dundee, Liverpool, Cambridge, Sheffield, Oxford, Durham, Cardiff, Hull, Leamington Spa and Nottingham. By 1944 there were 17 such AIA groups with the opening of one in Belfast.³³ To support the development of such groups the AIA produced “a schedule of advice and procedures”, including recommending affiliation to other similar politically aligned bodies such as Left Book Clubs and Peace Groups.³⁴ Groups were encouraged to help raise morale by participating in the AIA’s mural decoration program, using their skills to decorate buildings commissioned to meet the needs of wartime administration. These included British Restaurants, government operated communal kitchens created in 1940 to help people who had been bombed out of their homes, had run out of ration

28 Emma Chambers and Karin Orchard, ed., *Schwitters in Britain* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 10.

29 Peter Wakelin, *Refuge and Renewal, Migration and British Art* (Bristol: Sampson and Company, 2019) 67. See also Klaus E Hinrichsen, “Visual Art Behind the Wire,” in *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. David Cesarini, and Tony Kushner (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 188–209. For a discussion of the experience of internment see Ian Grosvenor and Angelo van Gorp, “At school with the avant-garde: European architects and the modernist project in England,” *History of Education*, 47, no. 4 (2018): 544–563.

30 Artists International Association Membership Leaflet 1938 reproduced in Morris and Redford *Artists International Association*, 30.

31 *The Manchester Guardian* 28 November 1941.

32 *The Scotsman* 21 December 1937.

33 *Belfast Newsletter* 10 November 1944.

34 Morris and Redford, *Artists International Association*, 65.

coupons, or otherwise needed help. Established by the Ministry of Food, there were 2,160 British Restaurants across the country, serving around 600,000 meals per day. Schools and churches were often used because they had dining halls and kitchens.³⁵ Exhibitions were also organized such as in Dundee in November 1937 when a 100 drawings and paintings by Spanish children in Montrose, Cambridge and Valencia were exhibited and as the press commented the drawings, not unnaturally showed a preoccupation with “bombing aeroplanes, air raids and bombardments.”³⁶ The first major exhibition arranged by a provincial group was *Art for All* in 1943. Organized by a group of Midlands’ artists at showrooms in Nottingham, it presented the work of international and local artists alongside examples of architecture, pottery, furniture and fabrics, theatre and film designs which collectively demonstrated “the place which art [. . .] claims in the day-to-day life of the community.” Formalized landscapes were displayed alongside Henry Moore’s tube shelter drawings, abstract art next to studies executed in local factories which conveyed the “power and weight of machinery,” but the centerpiece of the exhibition was a half dozen panels by Kokoschka and Edward Le Bas of the “Four Freedoms” previously installed at the *For Liberty* exhibition in London. Described as both “correspondingly provocative” and likely to raise “paeons and paroxysms among visitors,” the local press concluded that the message of *Art for all* was that by working together artists and designers could produce design of a higher standard and that exhibitions were a mechanism for stimulating wider public interest.³⁷

Reaching out also meant looking beyond London and AIA provincial groups if the desire to preserve peace and democracy through art was to be translated in action. Smaller communities struggled to have access to contemporary artworks “of more than strictly local interest” and some urban communities had no public art collections.³⁸ In 1939 it organized its first travelling exhibition, selecting work that had been previously exhibited in its *Art for the People* exhibition in London’s Whitechapel Gallery. A mixture of Social Realism, Surrealism, and abstract art its purpose was to be both political and educational and it toured England for

35 See Peter J. Atkins, “Communal Feeding in War-Time: British Restaurants, 1940–1947” in *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe*, “In *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Rachel Duffet and Alain Drouard (London: Routledge, 2012) 139–153. The British Restaurants were disbanded in 1947 but some continued as civic restaurants run by local councils.

36 *The Courier and Advertiser* 27 November 1937.

37 *Nottingham Evening Post* 6 August 1943; *Nottingham Journal* 14 August 1943.

38 Brian Foss, *War Paint. Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 182.

a year, the itinerary including Southport, York, Bradford, Hanley, Kidderminster, and Carlisle. The latter venue attracted some 32,000 visitors. A second travelling exhibition called *Britain To-day: Cross Section* travelled to Manchester and Liverpool and presented to the public 84 unframed prints, mainly lithographs of “everyday tasks, diversions, and living conditions of the British working class” and toured “the halls of trade union branches, co-operative societies and settlements” to bring “aesthetically good work, with some social and political meaning, into the hands of a new and wide public.”³⁹ Travelling exhibitions introduced new artists to local audiences, a feature signposted by the *Aberdeen Evening Express* in 1941 when an AIA exhibition included war paintings by Nan Youngman, Leo Hardy and Clifford Rowe.⁴⁰ The content was not always contemporary art. One of the 1944 travelling exhibitions (Hanley, Birmingham, Nottingham) curated by the Marxist art historian Francis Klingender and organized jointly with the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA) was *Hogarth and English Caricature*, which located “the ancestry” of his work in “native English forms,” his successors in England (Rowlandson, Gillray, Cruikshank) and in Europe (Goya, Daumier, Gericault) and served “as a reminder that the bringing of art to the people is in the best tradition of English culture.”⁴¹ Other exhibitions were held in libraries, canteens, shops, department stores, and British Restaurants (see Table 1). The AIA produced catalogues to accompany its travelling exhibitions, and these acted as a vehicle for persuasion during and after the exhibition had moved on. The catalogue for the second travelling exhibition was described as throwing “down the gauntlet to those people who declare that there is no place for art in time of war and it forces a claim for wider State recognition of the arts.”⁴²

The AIA’s political message was not just delivered through exhibitions. Street demonstrations and festivals brought artists together to produce the political ephemera of history: posters, banners and decorated billboards (see Figure 2). As one AIA member recalled:

We were convinced anti-Fascists and [. . .] we were all [. . .] involved in Anarchist groups, Communist Party Groups, Socialist groups, Labour League of Youth, and [. . .] the factor that kept us together was the anti-Fascist business and the Civil War in Spain [. . .] All

³⁹ *The Manchester Guardian* 13 June 1939.

⁴⁰ *The Aberdeen Evening Express* 25 July 1941.

⁴¹ *Staffordshire Advertiser* 26 May 1944; *Birmingham Evening Despatch* 14 June 1944; *Nottingham Journal* 17 August 1944.

⁴² *Derby Daily Telegraph* 15 March 1941. The catalogue was written by the artist Carel Weight and the art historian Anthony Blunt. It praised the Government’s commissioning work from war artists as “a beginning,” but it needed to be expanded and “not allowed to die between wars as so far been the case.”

these groups would come together for the massive May Day demonstrations. Big groups of artists would be formed to make the decorations for these festivals, making banners and floats; there would be as many as several hundred of us combined together. Nothing survived, everything went into the dustbin afterwards.⁴³



Figure 2: “Anti-fascists creatively engaged in producing propaganda posters and banners in the halls of Christ Church, Watney Street, Commercial Road, London (1918).” Reproduced with kind permission of the Whitechapel Gallery Archive, London.

The AIA hired 22 prominent billboard sites in London and on the 17 February 1939 some 50 artists came together to “paint pictorial appeals for Spain.” Art as both intervention and spectacle, which attracted crowds, press attention and publicity.⁴⁴ Workshops, talks and lectures were organized. February 1942 saw the AIA given free access to the National Gallery, London to organize a series of weekly lectures by, among others, the Marxist art historian F. D. Klingender, the artist Nan Youngman, the architect and business partner of Walter Gropius, Maxwell Fry, and Mischa Black, one of the AIA founders.⁴⁵ A monthly bulletin documenting activities was sent to members. AIA members also were highly visible and active in other political agencies, such as the Artists’ Refugee Committee.⁴⁶

Sympathetic journalists circulated their ideas. *The Manchester Guardian* described the AIA as, “[. . .] conscious of their responsibilities as members of the community and anxious to use their skill in the interests of peace and liberty, believing that these are essential conditions for the free development of all creative work” and committed to the breaking down “the barriers between artists and the people,” and the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported the organization’s desire to

⁴³ Reg Turner quoted in Morris and Redford, *Artists International Association* 34.

⁴⁴ *Daily Herald* 17 February 1939.

⁴⁵ *The Manchester Guardian* 5 February 1942.

⁴⁶ Morris and Redford, *Artists International Association* 52.

“bring together artists of all nationalities and all schools, and to secure closer relationship with the public.”⁴⁷ London newspapers were syndicated regionally extending knowledge of AIA activities and political messaging. In 1937 *The Manchester Guardian*, for example, reported on the AIA’s *Portraits for Spain* initiative whereby members offered to make portraits in painting, sculpture or drawing for any client, the money going to supply medical equipment to the British artists’ ambulance in Spain. The report ended with a clear statement of the AIA’s position that it was “vitaly necessary to stand with all progressive-minded people against the forces working for the destruction of peaceful democracy.”⁴⁸ While the *Shields Daily News* in 1940 had a detailed account which, alongside a description of the Surrealist Corner, praised as a “triumph” a roomful of paintings by Austrians and Germans most of whom had been, or still were in British internment camps despite being refugees from Hitler and classed as “degenerate artists.” The report detailed the works among others of Martin Bloch (interned), Hannes Hammerschmidt, Fred Uhlman (interned), and John Heartfield, and condemned the continuation of internment of refugees.⁴⁹ The press also offered an effective mechanism for the AIA to function as a professional collective and lobby on issues central to members’ interests including work for unemployed artists, reform of art education, and the need for government finance and patronage.

Towards a Propaganda of the Imagination?

At the opening of an exhibition of prints in Manchester June 1939 Professor T. L. Webster observed that the founders of the AIA believed “that their skills should be used to help the organised people of this country to resist [. . .] fascism and the suppression of culture.” But there was a problem which “bothered” him and which he felt many in the audience shared, “the problem [. . .] as to how much artists should go in for propaganda.” He continued, “Was that the job of the artist?” His answer was that “in times like the present artists had a duty to the community [. . .] [and] that they were justified in using their powers to help the community in the way the Artists International Association aimed at.”⁵⁰ Webster’s comments reflect a widely held view in 1930s Britain that propaganda was a

⁴⁷ *The Manchester Guardian* 10 February 1939; *The Manchester Guardian* 13 June 1939; *Birmingham Daily Post* 17 September 1941.

⁴⁸ *The Manchester Guardian* 16 December 1937.

⁴⁹ *Shield Daily News* 26 September 1940.

⁵⁰ *The Manchester Guardian* 15 June 1939.

creative instrument, part of a process of education which if used properly was, in John Grierson's words, an instrument for the "practical fulfillment [. . .] of the democratic ideal."⁵¹ What then of the evolution of AIA's declared "propaganda of the imagination"?

Propaganda of the imagination involved both the production of art and its consumption. In terms of the former the AIA was able to bring together in exhibitions many different artists representing different movements, addressing a wide range of subject matter. At the beginning the AIA focused on producing posters, illustrations, banners, and tableaux which demonstrated the unity of artists against fascism and in the cause of peace, but with the outbreak of war artists increasingly shifted their creative focus onto the conflict's impact on daily life. The AIA also drew on the work of refugee artists, offering them support and a platform. Vincent has interestingly written of refugee artists seeing themselves as "rooted in the imagined 'community' of 'modern artists'."⁵² This raises an interesting point about how the various publics – who the AIA tried to reach – were perceived and whether they can usefully be understood as constituting different parts of Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community."⁵³ Certainly, the travelling exhibitions helped through art to unify the regions and the metropolis.

Public interest can be gauged by the number of exhibitions staged by the AIA and the fragmentary evidence that survives of visitor numbers. As Table 1 shows between 1934 and 1945 the AIA organized at least 48 exhibitions in 25 different locations throughout Britain with visitor numbers ranging from 6,000 to 150,000.⁵⁴ The travelling exhibitions and activities organized by provincial groups all functioned as distributed interventions in achieving AIA aims. Art was not to be seen as a marginal feature of society but accepted as an important means of communication. This the AIA believed would help to gain for the profession "a considerable increase in power and influence," and in turn help to foster "progressive cultural opinion."⁵⁵ As Nan Youngman remembered, "we

51 Quoted in *Ian Grosvenor*, "No hay poder sin control de la imagen: "en la escuela aprendemos a leer, pero no aprendemos a ver," in *Totalitarismos europeos, propaganda y educación. Una historia visual desde los NO-DO*, ed. Eulàlia Collelldemont and Conrad Vilanou (Gijón: Ediciones Trea, S. L., 2020), 23.

52 Vincent, *Identity and Image*, 172.

53 See Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

54 Some of the locations outside of London hosted more than one exhibition, some of the travelling exhibitions had different titles at different venues and could be counted as separate exhibitions, and not all venues for travelling exhibitions are identified.

55 Reproduction of the Manifesto of the AIA British Artists' Congress 1937 in Morris and Redford *Artists International Association*, 35.

just wanted everyone to use their art, whatever it was, in a political way,” but not all art produced and displayed, and not all exhibitions staged by the AIA presented a strong and radical challenge to fascist ideology.⁵⁶ Nor were all exhibitions well received by the public or the critics, but they nevertheless generated debate. Exhibitions aimed to inform, but also to provoke. Attitudes could be transformed through engagement with art; attending an exhibition, hearing a debate, participating in a workshop were all activities geared to facilitating civic engagement. The aim was to produce a public that would look closely, rather than look away and transform the viewer into someone “who speaks on behalf” of the art itself.⁵⁷ In this sense the “propaganda of the imagination” was radical and emancipatory.

The AIA had always been international in focus and links were made and sustained with other similar associations advocating common cause in promoting artistic freedom, democracy and opposition to fascism, but events following the end of the War tested this commitment. Economic instability at home coupled with growing concerns around Soviet expansionism in Europe, the Czechoslovakian Crisis of 1948 and the Berlin Blockade of 1949 combined to produce political splits within the AIA and the removal of anti-fascist statements in its statutes and the political clause in its constitution. The AIA was transformed into an apolitical exhibition focused association. Fascism had been defeated and British art for a time moved in the direction of “national allegiance”, the celebration of Englishness and a moderate form of modernism. It was moving in this direction before the War ended as war art focused more and more on the impact of the conflict on the daily life of communities and the consequent shaping of a national story.⁵⁸

Looking Forward, Looking Back

“History,” as Timothy Snyder observed “does not repeat, but it does instruct.”⁵⁹ In recent decades neo-liberalism and global capitalism have combined to produce the conditions in which discord, instability and social polarization have flourished and fascist traits have emerged in political discourse and practice.

⁵⁶ Morris and Redford *Artists International Association*, 55.

⁵⁷ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 117. Azoulay is referring to photography, but her comment applies equally to other forms of art.

⁵⁸ See Foss, *War Paint*, chapter 6.

⁵⁹ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), 9.

Enzo Traverso, in the *New Faces of Fascism* (2019), has described this phenomenon as “post-fascism.”⁶⁰ Whether what we are seeing is new or old, what is clear is that there is a growing ascendancy of the radical right, with its nationalist, racist and xenophobic discourse that identifies both internal and external enemies and one which has gained both institutional acceptance and sponsorship. Racist vocabulary has been mobilized to promote “new identitarian nationalisms” and loose, transnational social networks have emerged online which are “united by misogyny . . . [and], racism.”⁶¹ At the same time there is a new “normal” in global politics where history is being abandoned in favor of “forgetting, misremembering and mistaking the past”⁶² and as partisan narratives gain traction historical revisionism has become more widespread.⁶³

Fascism did not disappear with the collapse of fascist regimes in the 1940s, but rather as Angela Dimitrakaki and Harry Weeks argue (after Stuart Hall) the residues of fascism have “sporadically re-congealed from the 1960s to the present day” and the social and political conditions which enabled fascist traits to begin to *re-emerge* as such point to a renewed growth of fascism.⁶⁴ Some artists and activists have begun to recognize this threat and responded accordingly. For example, *We are Here*, the Amsterdam based refugee collective, has been involved since 2017 in an interdisciplinary summer school with BAK (*Basis voor Actuele Kunst*) that brings together artists, curators, activists and theorists to “think through, learn about, and imagine critical, politically-informed artistic practices” that address “looming and present fascisms” and envision and actualize “ways of being together otherwise.”⁶⁵ Similarly, in Poland in 2018 a group of artists, art historians, curators and activists in Krakow began to work together to create a network of anti-fascist and anti-war cultural events across the country which culminated in September 1, 2019 (on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of WW2) with the launch of the Anti-fascist Year, “to commemorate all anti-fascist activists [. . .] who actively resisted fascism in the

60 Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism. Populism and the Far Right* (London: Verso, 2019).

61 Markus Miessen and Zoë Ritts, introduction to *Para-Platforms. On the Spatial Politics of Right-Wing Populism* ed. Markus Miessen and Zoë Ritts (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 9.

62 David Andress, *Cultural Dementia: How the West has Lost its History, and Risks Losing Everything Else* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), 47.

63 See Ian Grosvenor, “Populism, Nationalism and the Past. An English story of History in the Present,” *Rizoma Freirano*, 31 (2021), accessed July 22, 2022. <http://www.rizoma-freireano.org/>.

64 Angela Dimitrakaki and Harry Weeks, “Anti-fascism/Art/Theory. An Introduction to What Hurts Us,” *Third Text* 33, no. 3 (2019): 287.

65 BAK, “We Are Here (Amsterdam)”. Accessed September 2020. <https://www.bakonline.org/person/we-are-here-2/> The annual course is organized by BAK, Utrecht with HKU University of Arts Utrecht. BAK also runs a program called, *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living*.

past, and to oppose the reoccurrence in the public domain of neo-fascist and neo-Nazi movements as well as, and all parties, endorsing and idolizing fascist ideas, discourse and practices.”⁶⁶ 2019 also saw the exhibition *Never Again. Art against War and Fascism in the 20th and 21st centuries* at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw. The final paragraph in the online exhibition guide directly addresses the re-emerging fascist traits that have been observed, “The riots in Chemnitz, the rally of Unite the Right in Charlottesville, the National Radical Camp marching hand in hand with Forza Nuova on the Independence Day in Warsaw – is this already fascism? The contemporary artists who engage with these issues are unanimous: when this question can be answered with absolute certainty, it will already be too late.”⁶⁷

Fascism has a history, but so does anti-fascism and it is the latter’s history that at the present juncture is important for both fostering ongoing anti-fascist mobilization and political education so that what continues to stir in the undergrowth of politics is recognized and challenged. As Kokoschka wrote as the War was drawing to a close, “We artists have a responsibility towards the young generation of Europe, which has all reasons to doubt justice [. . .] Culture is at stake and therefore we artists must by no means dare to be indulgent. Our duty is to be honestly critical of everybody and everything at present.”⁶⁸ Words as prescient today as in 1944.

⁶⁶ Rokantyszystowski, accessed October 1, 2020. <https://rokantyszystowski.org/en/> .

⁶⁷ Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, “Never Again: Art Against War and Fascism in the 20th and 21st Centuries”, accessed October 1, 2020. <https://neveragain.artmuseum.pl/en/> .

⁶⁸ Extract from Kokoschka’s “Opening Address at the Foreign Artists Conference,” April 22 1944 quoted in Morris and Redford *Artists International Association*,72.

Table 1: Artists International Association Exhibitions 1934–1945.⁶⁹

1934	<p><i>Anti-War Exhibit</i>, Artists International ‘revolutionary artists group of England,’ Cambridge University</p> <hr/> <p><i>The Social Scene</i>, Artists International, 64 Charlotte Street, London, September – October</p>
1935	<p><i>Arts against Fascism and War</i>, 28 Soho Square, London, November 13–27. 6,000 visitors</p> <hr/> <p><i>Cambridge Anti-Fascist Exhibition</i>, Artists International Association [AIA], 27 Soho Square, London, November 18–27</p>
1936	<p><i>War and Fascism</i> [Cambridge Anti-Fascist Exhibition], Workers’ Film Society, Presbyterian Church, Hull</p> <hr/> <p><i>AIA Memorial Exhibition of Drawings by Felicia Browne</i>, 46 Frith Street, London October 15–29</p> <hr/> <p><i>Artists Help Spain</i>, AIA, London, December</p>
1937	<p><i>Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy and Cultural Development</i>, AIA, 41 Grosvenor Square, London 14 April – 5 May. 10,000 visitors.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Exhibition of Handicraft Objects</i>, AIA, London, April</p> <hr/> <p><i>5,000 Years Young</i>, AIA, 79 Charlotte Street, London, November. Exhibition of Chinese drawings and woodcuts to remind British public of Japanese aggression.</p> <hr/> <p><i>Spanish child art exhibition</i>, AIA, Dundee Training College</p>
1938	<p><i>Twentieth Century German Art</i>, AIA a sponsor, New Burlington Galleries, London, July 8–30.</p> <hr/> <p><i>London Life in Concrete</i>, AIA, 36 Soho Square, London. Solo exhibition of Peter Peri</p>
1939	<p><i>Living Art in England</i>, ARC [Artists Refugee Committee] and AIA ‘in aid of Czechoslovakian and Jewish Refugees.’ London Gallery, London, January</p>

⁶⁹ This working inventory is based on newspaper reports and secondary sources used in this essay.

Table 1 (continued)

	<p><i>Art for the People</i> as a demonstration of Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy and Cultural Development, AIA, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 9 February – 7 March. 40,000 visitors</p>
	<p><i>An Exhibition of Modern Art</i>, AIA, Museum and Art Gallery, Hanley, Staffordshire, May</p>
	<p><i>AIA Touring Exhibition</i>, York, York Educational Settlement, March; Bradford, Hanley, Kidderminster, and Carlisle – until Autumn 1940. Bradford alone attracted 32,000 visitors</p>
	<p><i>Surrealism Exhibition</i> of Work of AIA Members, Brighton Art Gallery, 3–27 August</p>
	<p><i>Modern Pictures: British and Foreign Artists</i>, AIA, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, July</p>
	<p><i>Britain Today</i>, AIA touring graphic art exhibition, including Toynbee Hall, London 16–28 January, Manchester Ancoats Settlement, June; and David Lewis Theatre, Liverpool</p>
1940	<p><i>Modern Art: Paintings and Drawings</i>, AIA, Art Gallery, Northampton, 5–31 January</p>
	<p><i>Modern Art</i>, AIA Derby Art Gallery, Derby May; <i>Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings</i>, AIA Cartwright Memorial Hall, Bradford July 31 – September 1; <i>Exhibition of Modern Art</i>, AIA Middlesbrough Art Gallery, Middlesbrough September</p>
	<p><i>Everyman Prints</i>, AIA, Picture Hire Gallery, 56 Brook Street, London, 31 January – 24 February, Bristol, and Durham [simultaneous opening] March and touring exhibition – Luton, Winchester and Mid-Rhondda</p>
	<p><i>Art for the People</i>, AIA loan exhibition with British Institute of Adult Education, Branch Library, Church Lane, Leytonstone, London, 6 February – 9 March</p>
	<p><i>Exhibition of Modern Paintings</i>, AIA, Ministries of Shipping and Economic Affairs canteen and Ministry of Information, London, April. Followed by a factory canteen tour starting at the Cowley Works, Oxford</p>
	<p>Touring exhibitions to British Restaurants [Government operated communal kitchens] organized by AIA and Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts [CEMA]</p>
	<p><i>Modern Art exhibition</i>, AIA, Royal Society of British Artists, London, September</p>

Table 1 (continued)

1941	<i>Russian art exhibition</i> , AIA and Sheffield branch of the Anglo-Soviet Union, February – March
	<i>Exhibition of War Pictures</i> , AIA, Charing Cross Underground Station Ticket Hall, London, 16 September – 9 October. 150,000 visitors
	<i>Artists International Travelling Exhibition no2</i> , AIA toured municipal art galleries, February onwards including Bluecoat Chambers, Liverpool, February – March, Derby Art Gallery, 15 March and Aberdeen, July
	<i>Exhibition of English and Refugee Art</i> AIA and Free German League of Culture
	<i>Exhibition of Refugee Artists and their English Friends</i> , AIA and FGLC, 36 Upper Park Road, London, July – August
	<i>Exhibition of Sculpture and Drawings</i> , AIA and Free German League of Culture [FGLC], Jack Bilbo's Modern Art Gallery, London, 19 July – 9 August
1942	<i>AIA Members Exhibition</i> , Royal Society British Artists Gallery, London, 7–27 February
	<i>Aid to Russia</i> AIA Members, Willow Road, Hampstead [home of émigré architect Emil Goldfinger] London 4–18 June
	<i>Artists Aid Russia</i> , Central Institute for Art and Design [CIAD] and AIA, Wallace Collection, Hertford House, Manchester Square, London 1 July – 4 August
	<i>Pictures to Live With</i> works, AIA members travelling exhibition under the 'Art for the people' scheme by the British Institute of Adult Education, for the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Art, October
	<i>The Soviet Union in Peace and War</i> , AIA, London
1943	<i>For Liberty</i> , John Lewis department store, Oxford Street, 12 March – 11 April
	<i>Hogarth and English Caricature</i> , AIA, London 13 Mar – 11 Apr, and touring 1943–4 including Birmingham, Barrow Stores basement, June and Nottingham Corporation War Time Gallery, August
	<i>Art for All</i> , AIA Midland Regional Group, Henry Barker's department store, Nottingham, August 14–2 September
	<i>After Duty</i> , AIA, 24 Charlotte Street, London, 16 November – 18 December

Table 1 (continued)

1944	<p><i>John Bull's Home Guard</i>, AIA, 34 Charlotte Street, London, January</p> <hr/> <p>Exhibitions by Individual Artists (Cliff Rowe, James Boswell, Austin Cooper and David Burton), AIA 34 Charlotte Street, London</p> <hr/> <p><i>AIA 1944 Members Exhibition</i>, Suffolk Street Galleries, London, 15 April – 6 May</p> <hr/> <p><i>Paintings of Today</i>, AIA, across three regional branch libraries (Matlock, Dronfield, Staveley), Derbyshire 3–24 June</p>
1945	<p><i>Picture Postcards. Popular Art in the Age of Post-Impressionism</i>, AIA, 34 Charlotte Street, London, June</p> <hr/> <p><i>This Extraordinary Year AIA</i>, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 8–29 September</p> <hr/> <p><i>Sculpture in the Home</i>, AIA Heal & Son, 195–9 Tottenham Court Road, London, 4–27 October</p>

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