Art/Work: Women Printmakers of the WPA , and: *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People* (review)

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Gallery and Book Reviews

Art/Work: Women Printmakers of the WPA. Baltimore Museum of Art, November 5, 2023–June 30, 2024.

Dorothea Lange: Seeing People. National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., November 5, 2023–March 31, 2024.

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Reviewed by Laura Hartmann-Villalta, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

On display in the Mid-Atlantic region during spring 2024 are two exhibitions focused on women's artistic contributions during the Depression: *Art/Work: Women Printmakers of the WPA* at the Baltimore Museum of Art (November 5, 2023–June 30, 2024) and *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People* in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (November 5, 2023–March 31, 2024). The title of the Baltimore exhibit offers telling insight into the subject matter of the artworks on display and the larger meaning of both exhibitions: the labor of art, and the art—and struggle, starvation, and dignity—of labor.

Despite their shared concerns and the common moment and movement from which they arise, a visit to these two gallery shows in quick succession also underscores the contrast between the singular vision of Lange's photographic lens and the collective, kaleidoscopic imagination of the women printmakers of the Federal Arts Project branch of the Works Progress Administration. For *Art/Work: Women Printmakers of the WPA*, there is no catalog or digital exhibition resource, but the National Gallery of Art has teamed with Yale University Press to create a catalog of *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People*, which includes supplemental essays by Sarah Greenough, Philip Brookman, Laura Wexler, and Andrea Nelson in addition to the photographs. Unfortunately, the gallery notes and object captions are not reproduced with the plates, but the order is preserved in a "Works in the Exhibition" in the back.

Art/Work, with a relatively small collection on display, reveals an impressive variety: for modernist visual scholars, this exhibit is a window not merely into the printmaking of the 1930s but also into the everyday art created by the WPA. While the BMA show does have some repeat printmakers featured, for the most part its aim seems to be to cover

printmaking *as a point of view* on the mid-to-late 1930s and the WPA as the body from which that point of view emerged, rather than to feature any one style or artist. What average artists might have produced while working for the FAP can be difficult for contemporary scholars to comprehend, as their mission was quite different from more well-known individuals working for the government, like Lange, documenting the historical changes at the Farm Security Administration. These prints, then, give a great sense of the technical expertise these women possessed and with which they experimented, the diversity of the subject matter (including some tongue-in-cheek images) that caught these artists' eyes, and their concerns about their historical moment. This combination of political and artistic radicalism—of concern with the political conflicts and social dislocation of their moment, and the exploration of new means of depicting the realities they witnessed—connects the two exhibitions despite their significant differences in media and scope. Both shows underscore the great range of creativity women artists of the 1930s could allow themselves when they were not hired directly by clients and thus obligated by client expectations: working for the United States government allowed these women a broad mandate to produce, to record, and most importantly, to test the boundaries of their techniques.

Although I count myself a modernist visual culture scholar, I am not so familiar with printmaking, and this exhibition taught me quite a lot about the materials, colors, and art styles possible in 1930s printmaking. Methods include crayon lithographs of various kinds (for example, with scraping or burnishing), etchings, wood engravings, aquatint with printed tone, and screenprint examples. What surprised me the most about this variety in techniques was how it allowed for the addition of colors. "Country Barn" (1938) by Betty Waldo Parish, for example, is a color crayon and brush and tusche lithograph with scraping accented with barn-red and lush green, showing a representational quality and an idyllic, economic prosperity that is somewhat at odds with the rest of prints. Ruth Chaney's "The Writer" (c. 1936-39), a color crayon and brush and tusche lithograph, uses color to create a full scene: a green-and-red-patterned wallpapered room, a window opening to a colored-in city-scape, a yellow vest on a blue sweater on a woman writer sitting, pen poised, in a red chair at a blue table, waiting for the next phrase of her writing to come to her. In yet another, "Composition," a color screenprint by Cleo Van Buskirk, hazy shades of red and blue fill in abstract shapes reminiscent of Joan Miró. Such prints, with their variety of colors, styles, and subject-matter, vividly highlight the range of artistic production of this branch of the WPA.

The printmakers of the WPA were artists *and* women. While the BMA's opening gallery note positions the exhibition as "center[ing] on women artists and examin[ing] their contributions through the lenses of gender and labor," these lenses are not equally dominant throughout the show. These printmakers found the same sense of urgency that male artists did in reacting to the calamity of the Depression. Miners and industry feature prominently, as does impoverishment. "Buried Treasure" (1939), for example, a crayon lithograph with scraping by Mabel Dwight, shows two destitute men digging through the garbage cans at the bottom of a well-to-do front step. The rage and grit of this nearly documentary print is palpable, as with many of the prints featuring workers and crowds, but there does not seem to be anything particularly gendered about it. Only in the few prints focused on domestic scenes or underage workers, like the haunting "S"-shaped "Child Labor" (1937), a crayon, brush, and tusche lithograph with scraping by Ida Y. Abelman that shows both textile and agricultural workers who are children, gaunt and looking at the viewer with wide eyes, does one see a hint of the gender of the printmaker.

On one occasion, I visited the *Art/Work* show with my first-year writing students, who all gravitated toward Mabel Wellington Jack's "Swan Dive" (1939) as their favorite print: a striking black and white lithograph in crayon, brush, and tusche with scraping, depicting a white woman in a black 1930s tank-top and shorts swimming costume with her hair pulled up into a white swimming cap, captured mid-dive with her arms and neck arching backward. With no other background detail, the diver looks like she is flying through the air. Amid perhaps more technically accomplished prints—such as the extraordinary level of detail in Blanche M. Grambs' etching and aquatint with printed tone "Design Steel" (1937), or the surreal narrative behind the birth scene depicted in Jean Finlayson Holmes's "Ether" (1941), a crayon lithograph showing a cityscape where in a corner of the print, a laboring mother's spirit rises to commune with the

heavens (under the influence of chloroform)—"Swan Dive" means freedom for a contemporary young viewer and is easily relatable with its almost twenty-first century snap-shot precision.

The BMA extends this exhibition into the present through the curatorial text, with each group label—"Artistic Labor," "A Changing World," "Labor Seen and Unseen," and "Entertainment and Leisure"—including a timeline that guides visitors through relevant events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as the passage of the CARES Act in September 2020 (which included 855 grants, totaling $44.5 million, to arts non-profits), and the 2023 Writers Guild of America (WGA) labor dispute. The logic behind "Labor Seen and Unseen" is a bit more erratic, with the two last events showing high contrast, "2021: After dropping to a low of nine deaths per 100,000 births by the late 1990s, overall maternal mortality climbs to 32.9 in 2021. The rate for Black mothers is 69.9, or 2.6 times the rate for white mothers" and "July 14, 2022: Workers at the Baltimore Museum of Art vote to unionize with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME, AFL-CIO)." These events gesture at art and labor, seen and unseen, in ways that could leave the visitor more confused than enlightened; while the Black maternal health crisis is certainly an ongoing medical emergency to which we need to be responding, without more curatorial context, it is hard to know the connections between these different kinds of labor, exactly how to act, and if there is a call to act. For the timelines to connect ongoing contemporary crises to major artistic investments to historical moments successfully would entail providing more context. As is, these connections come across as if the curators are trying hard to make the 1930s relevant but not completing the circle for the gallery visitor.

The Lange exhibition, by contrast, evinces no anxiety about relevance, due to the canonicity of Dorothea Lange's photography in the American photographic tradition. When Lange died in 1965, she was already preparing and selecting photographs for her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, which went ahead with the retrospective the following year. Coupled with the position of the National Gallery of Art in the nation's capital, "relevance" is just not as much of an issue, and so the curatorial gymnastics required for contemporary connections are eliminated; the curators can focus on featuring the new donation. *Seeing People* then centers on Lange's portraiture through her decades-long photographic career, telling a story about the chronicle of time, such as the moment of calamity that was the Depression or the moment of Japanese internment, more than a biography of Lange. Although organized chronologically, it is also loosely thematic, with rooms titled "The Great Depression," "World War II," and the general "Worldview."

The orientation label for *Seeing People* underscores Lange's background as a reporter before she pivoted to photography. Her reporter background was useful in her work as a photographer: she knew how to approach her subjects and get them talking about their circumstances, and she often remembered their conversations and wrote snippets of their exchanges into the captions or titles for the photographs when she could. The National Gallery has tried to revert back to Lange's long, original titles for images where possible. One such example is from Lange's work with the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Agricultural Economics, which in 1940 hired her to photograph and record the lives of migrant workers in California and Arizona; the image is a white woman in short sleeves, with a kerchief on her head blocking the strong sunlight, her young face in shadow but looking straight at the camera with tired eyes. Lange's title for the photograph is: "Edison, Kern County, California. Young migratory mother, originally from Texas. On the day before the photograph was made, she and her husband traveled 35 miles each way to pick peas. They worked 5 hours each and together earned $2.25. They have two young children . . . Live in auto camp, April 11, 1940." The long, descriptive photo titles, often interjections from the photographic subject, are an experimental documentary technique that brings modernist aesthetics into the exhibition in a startling and unexpected way—almost as if Lange were drawing our attention to the photograph as a documentary genre. This type of textual and generic self-awareness, combined with interjections from the photographic subject with their biographical circumstances, add another level of engagement for the show. In an exhibition about Lange's photography, through these captions, I was reminded of Lange's background as a reporter and how little attention has been paid to her writing.

Before her work at the BAE, Lange started at the Resettlement Administration—which became the Farm Security Administration—under Roy Stryker, where she labored to tell "socially engaged" stories through images that also, somehow, evaded stories of racial oppression, following Stryker's instructions to his photographers to document primarily Southern whites (Fortune 84).[1] In this light, one of the most interesting images of the show is "Plantation Owner, Mississippi Delta, near Clarksdale Mississippi" (June 1936). We see Paul Taylor (a social scientist and Lange's second husband) on the left, barely in the frame, interviewing a white man in the center, with three Black men seated on the steps of a general store, behind him and looking down with weary, wary expressions. Another Black man stands at the top of the steps, leaning against one of the porch posts, attentive but avoiding eye contact with any of the white people. The dominance of the white man in the photograph, his white hat shining like a crown, arms akimbo, leg up on the car's bumper like a conqueror, and the facial expressions of the Black men, coupled with Lange's chosen angle, tell the story of racial oppression here more clearly than if Lange had depicted the white man enacting violence.

As the Depression engulfed California in the early 1930s, Lange experimented with new angles and techniques to capture the turmoil and unrest resulting from the high rates of unemployment and lack of housing. The NGA includes on the show's walls Lange's new aim in her photography: "to take a picture of a man as he stood in his world." Partly, what this meant for Lange was using unexpected angles and close-ups, or allowing a part to stand in for the whole (such as mended silk stockings as a portrait of a woman's struggle), or drawing attention to time and place through signage—all influences from modernism, according to Sarah Greenough, one of the writers of the accompanying NGA *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People* catalog.[2] The National Gallery includes multiple prints from a May Day demonstration in San Francisco, 1934, where we start to see a recognizable "Lange photo" emerge: the compositional details drawing attention to the tension of the moment and the emotion of the subject even if the face is obscure. Lange's vision is strongest in her work for the government of the 1930s and into WWII; in the later years, when Lange is working on assignment for *Fortune* or *LIFE*, her photographic eye is still great, but her subject matter is lacking the tension that creates the certain pull that is present in the middle years.

Some of the images on display form part of Lange's book *The American Country Woman*, and for readers who are curious about the various iterations of that project, the exhibit catalog contains an enlightening essay by Andrea Nelson that includes different page spreads for comparison. *The American Country Woman* took many years for Lange to assemble and publish, and the photographs in the gallery demonstrate Lange's investment throughout her career in how she "aspired to render the complexity of women's lived experiences, their labor, and their role as witnesses to history—and in doing so, to reveal how gender shaped both individual and national identity".[3] Nowhere is this aspiration clearer than in "Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother)," March 1936.

Aside from its canonical status, "Migrant Mother" exemplifies Lange's eye for photographing children and mothers, capturing their grit and endurance of the giant human disaster that was the Depression. In "Child Living in Oklahoma City Shacktown, August 1936," a white child of indeterminate gender, with bowl-cut dark hair and deeply dark hooded eyes, stands in a shirt made of what looks like a dirty sack or old sheet, knotted at the shoulders, looking directly at Lange's lens. The child's white skin is so overexposed as to be almost alien against the dark metal background of a shack dwelling; the dark eyes, almost obscuring any pupils, protect the child from connecting with photographer's gaze. Unlike other photographs, for which Lange is concerned, as she says, with taking a photo of the man in his world, Lange's use of camera techniques here anonymizes her subject. Poverty in this image is not romanticized but staring at the viewer unflinchingly. For "Children of the Weill Public School Shown in a Flag Pledge Ceremony, San Francisco, California" (April 1942), Lange photographed girls of many races and ethnicities with their hands over their hearts saying the Pledge of Allegiance. At the center foreground is a presumably Japanese-American girl in an oversized plaid coat, holding a brown lunch bag, looking earnestly up at an out-of-frame American flag, pledging her allegiance, at a moment when political forces were calling into question her loyalty to the U.S. The four photographs in this group correspond to the backlash against the Japanese and Japanese-Americans in California

in 1942 and are some of the most powerful images in the show, demonstrating Lange's ability to construct a visual, political narrative even as the subject's world is collapsing around them.

Lastly, there is "Nettie Featherston, Wife of Migratory Laborer with Three Children, near Childress, Texas, June 1938," for which the subject is photographed alone in a field, in a work dress, with her hand pressed against her head in a worried gesture, her other hand to the side of her neck, as if seeing something she would rather not take in. This image is also one of the few with a more recent pairing, as the National Gallery includes a 1979 photograph by Bill Ganzel of Featherston taken in her home, a four-room house that she shared with her son in Lubbock, Texas. Ganzel made a project of seeking out some of the subjects of Lange's 1930s FSA photographs for his mix of oral history and portraits published as *Dust Bowl Descent* (University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Ganzel also featured Florence Thompson and her daughters, of "Migrant Mother." The contrast of Featherston in the field and Featherston forty-one years later in an overlarge armchair, gaunt arm pressing her hand against her head, still immersed in economic struggle despite the decades between the portraits, illustrates for the viewer the lasting effects of the Depression on a generation.

Money is the unspoken factor here, for both exhibits highlight the labor of women artists subsidized by the US government and how such monetary support led to experimentation and innovation in the arts, and affects how we now envision the period of the Depression. For modernist studies more broadly, the BMA exhibit showcases an under-studied aspect of modernist visual culture—printmaking—and, in doing so, allows scholars to take the pulse of this kind of artistic production under the FAP. These exhibits enrich not only our field by bringing before us questions of how these images, their creators and subjects, considered their historical moment, but also how we consider art, labor, and gender in new ways with new captions and contexts. Lastly, both exhibits underscore that for modernist visual scholars interested in Depression-era visual culture, the National Gallery of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art are under-utilized resources.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Fortune, in *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2023), 84.

2. Sarah Greenough, in *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People*, 67.

3. Andrea Nelson, "Picturing *The American Country Woman*," in *Dorothea Lange: Seeing People*, 187.

Early Radio: An Anthology of European Texts and Translations. Emilie Morin, ed., with translations by Emilie Morin, Marielle Sutherland, and Nicolette Asciuto. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. Pp. xv+ 352.

Reviewed by Debra Rae Cohen, University of South Carolina

It's almost impossible to overstate the amount of labor that has gone into the assembling of Emilie Morin's valuable new anthology, *Early Radio*. The culling of speculations, analyses, and encomia about the new medium of broadcasting from a wide range of general and specialist publications across the European continent; the painstaking translation from French, German, and Italian of new radio terminology that (as Morin's informative opening note points out) is often affectively incommensurate across linguistic lines; the grueling ordeal of obtaining permissions—all of these have produced an anthology unprecedented in its scope, one that will be essential