

# 217 Films New Essay in Film, ‘Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA’

[artsmagazine.com/2015/08/217-films-new-essay-in-film-enough-to-live-on-the-arts-of-the-wpa/](http://artsmagazine.com/2015/08/217-films-new-essay-in-film-enough-to-live-on-the-arts-of-the-wpa/)

There are still many people, perhaps our grandparents or great-grandparents, who can vividly recall the Great Depression of the 1930s. Memories of hardship, loss and displacement become the narrative when we ask those who lived through it to recall what it was like. It has shaped the behavior (and fears) of those who experienced it, even today. Following the stock market crash of '29, the United States, and many other parts of the world, were plunged into a decade-long cycle of protracted unemployment, shortages of food and shelter, and—worst of all—a state of antipathy. Only after the election of 1932, when Franklin Roosevelt assumed



Work/Welfare Line, New York (c. 1935)

the office of president, were progressive programs instituted to address the issues created by the crushing economic downturn. As unlikely as these aggressive federal initiatives are to ever be repeated in today's cynical political climate, their effect at the time was dramatic and, for many, life altering. xxxxxx

With the recent release of their sixth and latest essay in film, **“Enough to Live On: *The Arts of the WPA*,”** 217 Films has brilliantly captured the tenor of that times, with all of its complexity, controversy and hope. Husband and wife team, Michael Maglaras and Terri Templeton, production company executives, have demonstrated their ability to delve into a complex topic, making it both understandable and compellingly fascinating. Carefully researched over many months, the WPA story, as written and narrated by Mr. Maglaras, unfolds as one of the most dramatic of our nation's history.

Right: Detail: *Life of Action*, Carl W. Peters, 1937. Mural. Photography: Fotowerks/St. Clair Photo Imaging, Rochester, NY

“Enough to Live On” celebrates the 80th anniversary of the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Art Project; the New Deal initiatives that put artists, writers, musicians, and actors on the federal payroll and back to work, as a part of our nation's recovery from the effects of the Great Depression.

Featuring more than 70 works of art from this period, including notable works by Rockwell Kent, Dorothea Lange, Stuart Davis, and Reginald Marsh, as well as rare



footage of WPA artists at work, this film tells the story of how Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal moved art in America out of the rarified atmosphere of the elite and brought it directly to the American people as an inspiration and catalyst for change and recovery in the 1930s.

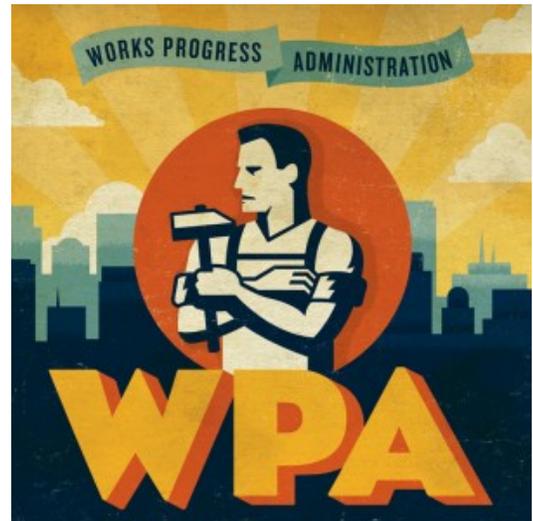
In a director's statement posted about "Enough to Live On," Maglaras comments that Franklin Roosevelt was convinced that the way to rebuild our confidence in ourselves was to return us to work. Labor. Toil. Effort. On May 6, 1935, FDR signed an executive order authorizing the creation of the Works Progress Administration...the WPA.

It was an effort aimed at simply putting us all back to work. That effort included, by August 1935, artists, musicians, writers, actors, and others...who could have been handed a pick or shovel...but, instead, were handed an opportunity, through the practice of their art, to help us understand what had happened to us on October 24, 1929. To help us understand what we were continuing to endure, and, through our engagement with what became known as the arts of the WPA, to inspire us to dig ourselves out of the horrific mess we had so blithely gotten ourselves into.

Right: FDR, soon after his election in 1932

FDR knew, somehow instinctively, that creative Americans could play a role in America's rebirth. Sure, the creative endeavors sponsored by the federal government...the early work of the Public Works of Art Project, the later work of the Section under the Treasury Department, and the enormous collective efforts of the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Writers Project...were all first and foremost work relief efforts. With equal certainty, however, this deep intervention by the federal government into the creative lives of Americans enriched our society, helped to rebuild it, and helped to sustain it through the dark days of breadlines, abject poverty, and profound despair.

*Below: Diego Rivera, the Detroit Industry mural (detail), Detroit Institute of Art (1932).*





The WPA was to be a grand experiment. Federal money thrown against the problem of unemployment under the simple idea that it was better to be employed than not...regardless of what the work involved was. Better to be off the streets than agitating in the streets. Better to be using skills than letting them languish, and with that see the spirit of a nation's people deflate before their eyes and before the eyes of emerging enemies at the edge of both oceans.

Left: Artist at work, producing an image of an American artifact for the Federal Art Project, Index of American Design.

With the creation of the controversial WPA, Franklin Roosevelt and his friend and alter ego, Harry Hopkins, were flying by the seat of their pants. With the creation of the four major arts projects under the WPA, FDR pushed through an even more controversial agenda. Creative citizens, out of work like the rest of us, were worth saving like the rest of us. The employment of actors, musicians, artists, and writers could and did contribute to the rebuilding of our society, the rescuing of our culture. George Biddle, a former classmate of FDR, champion of social art and advocate for



government funding of artistic endeavors, argued successfully within the halls of power the revolutionary idea that, once an artist had picked up a paintbrush, the word 'work' had been redefined.

Art program advocate, George Biddle, at work on his "Society Freed through Justice" mural, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., 1936.

Maglaras notes, "From time to time, as I am stunned by what I see and read in so much of today's news, I ask that same question, as I am sure many of you do. It is not a rhetorical question. It is a question worth asking...are America's best days behind her? The answer lies in the words of the 19th century English critic and painter John Ruskin, who wrote, "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art."



"With regard to the last of Ruskin's three books, I can tell you emphatically that the arts in America are alive, but to remain alive they continue to need our support at all levels and to be a living part of the lives of all citizens. The arts in America live today, in no small measure, because, at the beginning of the Depression and facing the potential disintegration of our democracy, we had the audacity to put the arts squarely at the service of that democracy: an idea embodied in the phrase of the great educator and philosopher John Dewey, who wrote, "How can a finished citizen be made in an artless town?"

**By Richard J. Friswell, Managing Editor**

*Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA* is now being shown in museums and other venues around the country. To learn more about the screening schedule and view excerpts from the production, go to:

<http://two17filmsschedule.blogspot.com/>

Read more in an ARTES interview with Michael Maglaras and his vision for his series, "essays in film" at:

<http://www.artesmagazine.com/2014/10/modernism-and-the-american-idiom-a-conversation-with-film-maker-michael-maglaras/>



And more about the WPA, itself:

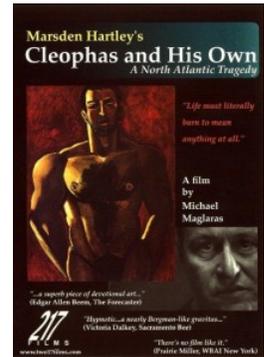
<http://www.artesmagazine.com/2011/03/fdr%e2%80%99s-%e2%80%98new-deal%e2%80%99-and-the-works-progress-administration-wpa-helps-define-modern-art-in-america/>

and the ongoing WPA preservation effort: <http://www.artesmagazine.com/2013/04/wpa-era-post-office-murals-by-american-realist-painter-ben-shahn-threatened/>

**More about 217 Films**

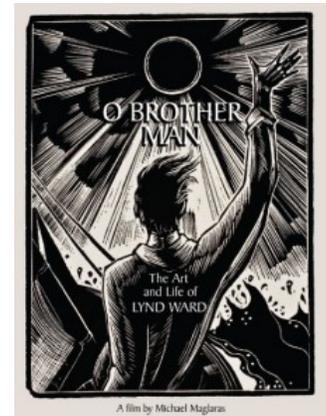
217 Films is an independent film company devoted to the American artistic experience. In recent years, the

company has examined the lives and times of noted artists and writers, utilizing the unique “essay in film” model. In 2005, Michael Maglaras and Terri Templeton released their first film “*Cleophas and His Own*” taken from the American Modernist painter Marsden Hartley’s epic narrative of love and loss, a private and personal narrative which was first published many years after his death. In “*Cleophas and His Own*,” Maglaras both directed and played the role of Hartley.



In 2008, 217 Films’ second release was the first-ever documentary film on the life of Hartley, called “*Visible Silence: Marsden Hartley, Painter and Poet.*” In 2010, with their film “*John Marin: Let the Paint be Paint!*” they established, through the first documentary made about this important painter, that John Marin was one of the fathers of American Modernism.

In 2012, in honor of the re-publication by the Library of America of the six seminal graphic novels of the American master Lynd Ward, they released the film “*O Brother Man: The Art and Life of Lynd Ward.*” Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the art exhibition that introduced Modernism to America, in September 2013 “*The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show*” was produced.



Their sixth film “*Enough to Live On: The Art of the WPA*” was released to critical acclaim in May, 2015, in celebration of the 80th anniversary of the Federal Art Project under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.

*Among other distinctions, several of these films have been shown to acclaim at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The Sacramento Bee called Michael Maglaras a filmmaker of “Bergman-like gravitas.” His films have been described as “virtuoso filmmaking” (National Gallery of Art) “alive and fresh” (Art New England) “elegiac and insightful” (Naples Daily News) and “unforgettable” (Journal of American History). David Berona, author of “Wordless Books” said “O Brother Man” “is stunning” and Judith Regan of Sirius XM called it “magnificent.” A review in The Dartmouth said of “The Great Confusion” that “Michael Maglaras...brought the drama of the original show back to life.” Maglaras was recently featured in a full-length interview on “Conversations from Penn State” on Public Television.*

