

REVIEWS

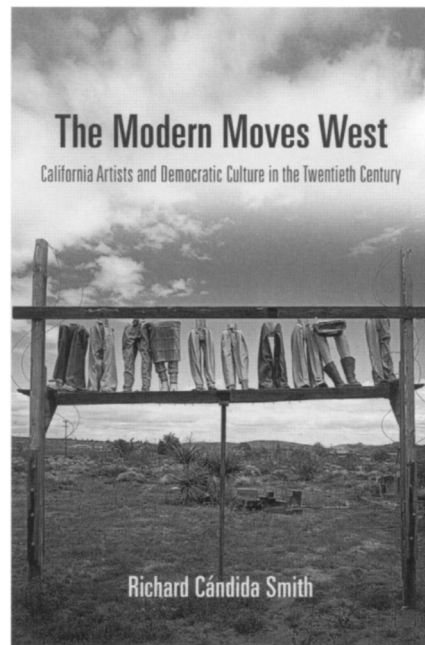
EDITED BY JAMES J. RAWLS

THE MODERN MOVES WEST: CALIFORNIA ARTISTS AND DEMOCRATIC CULTURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By Richard Cándida Smith
(Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 2009, 264 pp.,
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RICHARD CÁNDIDA SMITH'S most recent book is another tour de force example of the skillful employment of art in the service of ideas. Here the highly respected intellectual historian further develops ideas introduced in earlier works: *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (1995), a strikingly original look at mid-twentieth-century California avant-garde art that diverged from the typical practice of determining significance by progression along established formalist lines, and the brilliant *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (1999), in which the author finds significance in California's innovative bohemian subcultures and working-class society.



The Modern Moves West is in some ways even more ambitious than the earlier two books, but they really should be viewed as a series—a trilogy—sharing an intellectual/historical point of view that seeks its evidence in art and specifically that of California. The approach is largely chronological, moving from nineteenth-century France to California, the early chapters laying the intellectual and philosophical groundwork. For this reader, the guiding historical perspective came together on page forty-five with the introduction of Simon Rodia and his splendid Watts Towers in South Central Los Angeles. Moving from the abstract to the specific, the author could not have done better than to start with Rodia, the working-class master who stands legitimately shoulder-to-shoulder with the leading modernist elites—and not only in California. Rodia's direct influence is emphasized by a long discussion of Noah Purifoy, first director of the Watts Towers Art Center, whose questioning of the efficacy of working

as an individual artist to benefit his community, and his use of assemblage as a democratic means of expression, fits well with the author's interests.

Rather than focus on the most prominent California artists, Cándida Smith prefers to concentrate on a few figures who best exemplify how artists create a place for themselves in a more broadly defined modernity. The analysis of Jay DeFeo's iconic *The Rose* (1958–66), with its obsessive layering of monochromatic pigment to approximate sculptural form, convincingly places the work within the realm of ideas as well as the senses.

In this extraordinary book, strikingly original and rich in synthetic thinking, Cándida Smith presents an alternative way to look at and think about art, and its relationship to the larger social and cultural context. He patiently explains how forces came together to produce a creative culture in California that, on its own regional terms, played a significant role in expanding how we think about modernism as a historical concept. Along the way, he presents a nonstandard but recognizable historical overview that significantly expands our understanding of how art fits in and contributes to society. For those seriously interested in art, and in California history, *The Modern Moves West* is indispensable reading.

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Richard Cándida Smith

The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century

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Sarah Schrank

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Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing well into the 1990s, a number of academics, critics, and curators turned to the question of California modernism asking, in short, if there was such a thing and, if so, to what did it owe its unique place in the annals of American art. Anne Bartlett Ayres, Bram Dijkstra, Susan Ehrlich, Paul Karlstrom, Susan Landauer, Peter Selz, and Richard Cándida Smith, among others, suggested, in a generous collection of books, essays, and exhibitions that not only did California modern art reveal a distinctive form and content but that it was far closer to the vanguard of American modernism than had previously been recognized. Some of the critical questions asked include: was it geography that made California modernism distinct? Was it Mexico's proximity? The peculiar institutional forms the art world has taken here? The specific socio-economic context? California's isolation? Its provincialism? No consensus was ever reached beyond agreement that there was indeed a set of creative ideas alive and actively producing cultural artifacts in twentieth-century California that were modern and regionally distinctive.

This conversation was exposed to a wider public in October 2000 when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000*, a celebration of California's sesquicentennial and the largest show the museum had ever organized. Running a history of California art alongside a social and cultural history of the state, the exhibition highlighted many of California's best-known moderns alongside landscape painters and a wide variety of architectural, pop-cultural, and ephemeral forms. The purpose of the show was to simultaneously popularize the museum and offer an ethnically diverse representation of California's rich visual and cultural landscape. Panned by critics for littering a museum space with pop-culture ephemera, not to mention breaking with

art history's canonical fetishism, *Made in California* was nevertheless wildly popular with a public who delighted in its inclusion of the historical "everyday" (cars, surfboards, bathing suits). Indeed, there seemed to be something spectacularly specific to California: a twentieth-century coming-of-age; an interplay of high and low culture; a history of radical social protest; an interface of materials that were just so *familiar*. The exhibition, whatever the criticism, was exciting, inclusive, and modern, both in the literal "of our time" sense and the self-referential, pluralistic art-theoretical sense. Most recently, works by Cécile Whiting (*Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Daniel Widener (*Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), and myself (Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) have oriented the discussion of California modernism toward the social and political concerns of cultural production, tying modern art's production and reception, and particularly that of Los Angeles, to urban, racial, and sexual politics, pondering the limitations and possibilities of a politicized modernism in a fraught, restrictive, and often highly commercial art scene.

With *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Richard Cándida Smith engages the current interest in the politics of California modernism that he stimulated with his important 1995 work *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press). In his new book, Cándida Smith focuses on the possibilities for democratic access to the modernist conversation, asking how artists navigated the institutions that control the resources and discourses upon which they rely to forge professional identities and careers. The struggle between innovation and provincialism that underlay much of the criticism of the *Made in California* show is one that has haunted California's art institutions for a hundred years and one that has, according to Cándida Smith, reshaped the nature of modern art in the state. At the center of *The Modern Moves West* is the irony that while California's art institutions lagged behind the state's exemplary university system and Hollywood's culture industry, the startling lack of support for the fine arts forced artists to the social and economic

margins, leading them, ultimately, to articulate a more progressive and inclusive modernist vision than might otherwise have formed. The idea that California's provincialism created much-needed room for artists to explore new expressive forms in ways that New York or Paris's tight-knit network of patrons and collectors stifled it has been argued elsewhere; Cándida Smith's innovation is to position this perceived freedom alongside mid-century modernist thought to see how artists engaged or rejected a set of intellectual and artistic concerns to push their way into museums and galleries. As he argues in the introduction, "in peripheral locations like California in the mid-twentieth century where resources were often exceptionally limited, choices frequently generated protests against the inherent limitations of the criteria used, a challenge that intensified as artists, curators, and critics from marginalized social groups worked to break the barriers preventing their full participation in the profession" (3). Underlying much of Cándida Smith's analysis is an effort to locate the artistic challenges that democratize the seemingly impenetrable thicket of art theory and professional culture.

Tracing modernism's migration as a coherent set of intellectual concerns from Europe to the United States and from New York to California, each chapter examines how California artists located at the margins of the mainstream art world engaged with conceptual ideas of individual autonomy, artistic reproducibility, subjectivity, and form. Cándida Smith then assesses to what extent the artist in question made it across the gauntlet of an inherently elitist system of gate-keeping criteria, enjoying professional success, causing controversy, or working in obscurity. Identifying assemblage as California's best, if not unique, contribution to American modernism, Cándida Smith begins with Simon Rodia, the builder of the Watts Towers and the most marginalized of all his examples, as an instance of how modernist ideals could be translated and personalized by the most unassimilated and least versed in modernist discourse. Indeed, much of Rodia's mythology is attached to his untrained, organic genius. Cándida Smith then follows California assemblage artists from San Francisco (Jay DeFeo), to Los Angeles (Noah Purifoy) and, finally, to the Tijuana-San Diego border and the 1990s in-Site public art projects, touching on other artists along the way. Throughout, Smith makes a case

for “modernism from below” by focusing on artists who, by virtue of their gender, race, social class, or nationality, fall outside the usual vista of professional possibilities afforded those in the American art world’s economic and political mainstream.

One of the most important points that Cándida Smith raises in *The Modern Moves West* is that California’s rich modernist legacy was shaped by the state’s remarkable commitment to higher education and, most significantly, the wide public accessibility of its education system. (This is especially poignant now when the recent economic crisis has laid bare the disastrous effects of chipping away at California’s public schools, a process begun in the wake of 1978’s Proposition 13.) The founding of art departments and art schools in northern and southern California created accessible spaces that fostered young talent and provided an entrée to contemporary conversations about art that were far in advance of those taking shape in most of California’s museums and galleries. Moreover, women had an important role to play in art education, teaching at most levels of the state’s college-level curriculum. This helped make room for young female artists like DeFeo, who emerged in the 1950s as a countercultural icon, objectified and sexualized, but less than she might have been in more commercial art circles. DeFeo’s paintings, notorious for their immense weight and lengthy execution, were respected for their powerful reflections on mystical spiritual traditions and the human psyche. The physical heaviness of her paintings, balanced by their cerebral themes, contributed to the contemporary modernist conversation by highlighting the sculptural possibilities of paint and pointing to the importance of surface, a new avenue of exploration in the mid-twentieth century. She produced brilliant paintings like *The Rose* (1958–66) and *The Jewel* (1959), and by the end of her life DeFeo was a highly regarded practitioner of her craft on the West Coast, an achievement Cándida Smith implies would have been unlikely elsewhere.

DeFeo’s professional shift from margin to center is repeated in Cándida Smith’s discussion of Betye Saar, an African American assemblage artist best known for powerful compositions employing racist kitsch to highlight the viciousness of black cultural stereotypes. He suggests that the

peculiarities of the California context permitted her to produce social protest art addressing racial injustice and succeed financially as a professional artist because of the regional interest in artwork that, ultimately, turned inward. In balancing social protest and individual self-reflection, Saar oriented a sharp commentary on American racism toward an exploration of the self: “The juxtaposition of images in Saar’s assemblages asks viewers to reflect on their own interpretative responses to the individual images as an indicator of how much the stereotyping process has made them part of a social structure built on degradation and violence. . . . Saar like most other California-based assemblagists redirected the political message, which in her work is both pointed and explicit, into a zone of spiritual reflection that pointed toward greater reverence for all with whom we share the world” (149).

Cándida Smith’s chapter on Purifoy, “Learning from the Watts Towers,” is especially compelling for its attention to an artist who blended modern artistic practice and political commitment, community engagement and personal exile into a creative life grounded in a pronounced sense of place: at the foot of the Watts Towers and in the southern California desert town of Joshua Tree. The first full-time African American student to attend the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, Purifoy explored abstract painting and sculpture in the 1950s and built himself a community of black bohemians, musicians, and artists. Drawing on his earlier undergraduate study of social work, Purifoy took the job as the director of the Watts Towers Art Center in 1964, merging his concern for social problems with artistic practice. Studying the young students at work, Purifoy formulated (together with co-worker Judson Powell) a theory of “creative process” by which art education could serve as a strategy for positive identity formation and knowledge acquisition. Teaching art classes at the Center in the midst of the 1965 Watts uprising was a formative experience for Purifoy who, together with other assemblage artists, gathered the debris of the riot and shaped sculptures that appeared in a local exhibition at Markham Junior High, *Sixty-Six Signs of Neon*. According to Cándida Smith, Purifoy “exhibited them as elegant artworks that were also eyewitnesses to, and products of, the heat of the community’s anger” (165). Spending the 1970s and 1980s working for the California Arts Council designing art-in-

education programs, Purifoy ultimately found himself alienated from the professional art world. Cándida Smith suggests that the experience of working for a state office that increasingly dismissed community activism in favor of corporate art models left such a sour taste in Purifoy's mouth that he not only quit the field of art education but also stopped making his own art. From 1989 to 2004, however, Purifoy lived in a trailer in Joshua Tree and immersed himself in a second wind of art activity that continued until his death. Here, Cándida Smith beautifully describes Purifoy's sculpture garden of modernist assemblages cast against the surreal landscape of the Mojave Desert.

Isolated, alone, often using donated materials, working on a vertical plane as well as a horizontal one, functioning outside the professional art world, Purifoy appears to be channeling Rodia who, in *The Modern Moves West*, haunts California artists like the phantom of moderns past. There is no doubt similarity in both artists' relation to place, form, and material; and there is no question that Purifoy was deeply affected by Rodia's legacy of immense beauty and focused labor: seven towers of metal and cement encrusted with broken tile, 7-Up and Milk of Magnesia bottles, shells, found objects, and imprinted with Rodia's initials, tools, and signature emblem, a heart. As Cándida Smith writes, "like Rodia's Watts Towers, Purifoy's desert sculpture park is both elegant and bewildering in the number of references and in the lushness of the visual imagination. As viewers walk though the site, they face gallows, witches, African warriors, crucifixes, bathtubs, bed frames, PVC pipe, bicycle wheels. Many of these pieces are quickly thrown-together visual jokes, but many others, like the objects he plated with melted lead and then covered with multicolored lumps of splattered metal, are elegantly crafted works that cannot be translated into a simple verbal counterpart" (181). While the material relationship to Rodia is clear, it is here that I must gently chide Cándida Smith for making Rodia representative of an art discourse of which he was never a part. The Watts Towers, irresistibly metaphoric though they are, serve as an awkward representative of modernism that, as Cándida Smith himself points out, is tied to a set of institutional conventions about form, perspective, and reproducibility to which Rodia was never privy. As much as Rodia's towers engage place, material, and surface, all elements in mid-century modern

art (especially California assemblage), they are overwhelmingly an exercise in monumentality. They are a reflection of the artist's efforts to do something grand and be part of a historical timeline reaching back to the ancients and forward toward a distant future. Unlike the other artists in *The Modern Moves West* who consciously engaged with the questions and theories of modernist art practice, Rodia worked entirely outside the parameters of the profession and never made it inside.

In many ways, the key organizing theme that threads Cándida Smith's delicate argument through each chapter is that of space and the fascinating and challenging ways all the artists discussed use it to connect their artwork to a vision of the broader world. The spatial elements of modern art, particularly protest art in the public realm, are neatly addressed in the final chapter on contemporary art along the United States-Mexico border. Here, Cándida Smith complicates his story in a most satisfying way by considering the implications of protest art in a transnational context, when art institutions too have to struggle with issues of language, borders, and nationhood in order to engage artists, upending (if only temporarily) their privileged, institutional status.

The Modern Moves West is not an introductory text to the topic of California modernism, but its meticulous research and thoughtful argument will reward the diligent reader with a sophisticated contemplation of the relationship of theory to practice in a specific regional context.

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USIH Review: Lacy on Cándida Smith

Review of Richard Cándida Smith's *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). ISBN 978-0-8122-4188-4. 252 pages.

Review by Tim Lacy
University of Illinois at Chicago
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Thinking Through Modern Art

In *The Modern Moves West*, Berkeley Professor Richard Cándida Smith tackles the intellectual and cultural history of modern art in California. He explores aesthetic theory, the core-periphery tension in the institutional art world, art education, and the potentially explosive intersections of art and politics. By focusing on visual, stationary media in the work of Sam Rodia, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, Noah Purifoy, Marcos Ramírez ERRE, and Daniel Joseph Martínez, Cándida Smith presents an incredibly rich look at California's pantheon of twentieth-century modern artists.

To read this book is to enter a world where a particular community used painting, sculpture, and assemblage art to grapple with the acids and innovations of modernity. In relation to California and the American West, Patricia Nelson Limerick's notion of a "the legacy of conquest" is implicitly at work in Cándida Smith's narrative. California is indeed a land of jostling due to internal migration, immigration, and racial politics.[1] But this book concentrates on explaining how modern art, and its postmodern successors, assisted in bringing these conflicting cultural visions together under a democratic aesthetic as the twentieth century progressed.

The Modern Moves West is a recent addition to Penn Press's new series, "The Arts and Intellectual Life in Modern America," edited by Casey Nelson Blake. That series welcomes manuscripts "in architecture and the visual arts or music, dance, theater, and literature." Thus far the visual arts seem prominent, but there are only six books in the series.[2] If Cándida Smith's contribution is indicative of the series on the whole, then that endeavor is intent on underscoring how art enriches America's intellectual life, and how all of this comes together to foster (or hamper) democracy.

In his introduction, Cándida Smith offers a number of formulations of his thesis in relation to the themes outlined above. I believe, however, that the following passages—one longish and the other succinct—best express his argument. Both also provide a sampling of the author's style:

(1) "The challenges inherent to modern life in California initially developed along different lines from much of the rest of the world. Its isolation, its relative prosperity, and the ascendancy of middle-class democracy fostered widespread faith, perhaps objectively an illusion but nonetheless powerful in its subjective consequences, that a new world culture was in the process of emerging there. It would be a culture that synthesized a broad variety of cultural traditions, and it would be a culture developed by both men and women. It would be a culture where the ideal of creating something new while building on the achievements of their heritage would take roots and guide the cultural activity of the future. ...Freed from limiting if identity-giving geographic, family, and class roots, many during the post-war boom had to create their own lives in a complex world that was often indifferent, if not openly hostile or derisive. The ultimate universal that the arts in California proposed was the ability of each individual to define the meaning of his or her own existence in the relative isolation a new society provided, an isolation that involved perhaps a callous indifference." (p. 57)

(2) "The stories in the previous chapters suggest the difficulty of the process by which artists in the state developed a distinctive regional

culture that inevitably reflected the ambiguities of their own social position. ...California cultural life took its particular shape as members of marginalized groups staked their claim to interpret modern life” (p. 209).

The second comes from Cándida Smith’s conclusion. By the end of the book one is most impressed with the ways that members of marginalized groups, such as African-American (Betye Saar and Purifoy) and Mexican-American (ERRE and Martínez) artists, navigated what was called the “art as knowledge” terrain. They worked within the modern art tradition while also maintaining a political-cultural voice that spoke to race and ethnic relations. These artists built a new “third space” from which one might view both his or herself and the surrounding world (p. 207). They hoped to change the future by using art to re-view the present.

While a baseline interest in art and artists might move you to pick up *The Modern Moves West*, an ongoing fascination with the notion of democratic culture—and its associated intellectual life—drove my reading. A short way into the book, however, I perceived a contradiction: how could a movement (i.e. modern art) that promoted individual expression, sold society on the beautiful inaccessibility of abstraction, and pushed the subjective nature of knowledge, actually *buttress* an accessible, participatory, shared democratic culture? And, in Cándida Smith’s case, how does California’s regional, peripheral modernism help answer to this question?

The author’s narrative builds toward a present where art contributes to a healthy pluralistic democratic culture, but I found the intellectual origins of that trajectory most intriguing. Cándida Smith begins with a detailed study of Monet and his critical appreciation. Monet is defended by Georges Clemenceau in 1928 as the archetypal modern artist for his *disponibilité*. This meant a disengagement from “immediate feelings,” a “refusal of theoretical speculation,” and specialization in a particular style. To Clemenceau—and Cándida Smith, it seems—these traits made Monet the “representative modern” and an exemplar of the reconciliation between “universal law and individuality” (pp. 18-22).

Monet becomes the standard by which art and democracy might fuse. He represents the notion that the “average citizen” might focus on “his craft” through “incessant labor” and “serve the common good with his life” (p. 22-23). Monet’s art contributed to a national cultural life wherein all might participate.

Delving into a philosophy behind Monet’s person and creations, Cándida Smith links him and Clemenceau to Hippolyte Taine’s 1864 lectures at the École des Beaux Arts, known together as the “Philosophy of Art.” Taine offered a view of “art as a distinct form of experimental knowledge.” Both the artist’s labor and his or her evocation of sensations and “identifying...sensational ranges” contributed to humanity’s fund of knowledge (p. 16-18). Taine’s philosophy formed a wall of defense, intellectually at least, around visual media that would grow increasingly sensational to the popular mind through the twentieth century. Cándida Smith supplements Taine’s view with the psychology of William James. James forwarded that consciousness, or “knowing with,” girded a pluralistic view of truth friendly to subjectivity and perspective. Our consciousness of our own senses would help us to share our experiences in a collectively productive fashion (p. 4). Together these philosophies of knowing formed a basis for a pluralistic means of truth-telling that might underscore positive human differences as expressed in modern art. The potential convergences with twentieth-century notions of democratic diversity are plain.

The problem of course was educating the public to view artists and their works as useful, solid expressions of knowledge. Monet had Clemenceau to explain and defend his work, both during and after Monet’s life. But twentieth-century California artists—like Rodia, DeFeo, Purifoy, Saar, ERRE, and Martínez—did not always have such capable explicators, either locally or nationally. Of course a few existed in California. In the 1950s and 1960s, during a popular period for DeFeo’s works, the critic (and artist) Fred Martin articulated the need for, and presence of, a regional element in art. He understood Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of a “habitus” in relation to an object’s structure and sensual experience (p. 7). Martin most certainly believed in Martin

Heidegger's notion of *techne* (i.e. "mode of knowing") and the idea that "things" have presence and meaning independent of their maker's purpose. Heidegger argued that these meanings also sometimes "insist upon a response." In his critical writings, Martin applied these ideas to mid-century artists like DeFeo and Hedrick to enliven—to intellectualize—an appreciation for their art's texture and process (p. 85-87, 108). Martin hoped to cultivate an audience "with sufficient sophistication to see the work before them" (p. 107). No small task, to be sure.

Capable explicators of modern art existed in other contexts. Clement Greenberg performed an educative function on behalf of 1930s and 1940s modern artists on the East Coast. Dorothy Miller did likewise for the controversial, emergent "postmodern" participants in the "Sixteen Americans" exhibit of 1959. Noah Purifoy seems to have educated others about his own work—melding art and art critic during the sixties. Indeed, Purifoy's work was accessible enough to become part of the healing process in Los Angeles in the wake of the Watts riots.

But Purifoy's contemporary African-American artists, whose more controversial works attracted the gaze of the public before the mid-1960s, suffered under that same gaze. This was due to either the lack of an interpreter, or the fact that the messages in their works were unwelcome. On the latter, assemblage artists like John Outterbridge and Saar made uncomfortable political statements with their "found object" constructions. Their art melded politics and perspective in a way that echoed Taine's philosophy while remaining true to each artist's larger (homogenized) racial background. This was not the case with other modern artists. In New York, for instance, artists their either transcended or left behind their upbringing, depending on your perspective. The didactic conveyance of messages, political or otherwise, was *passé* to them. But California was different. Cándida Smith summarized: "The depoliticization of art that occurred along with the vogue for abstraction and purification [in the 1960s on the East Coast] was never complete" in California (p. 153). Even so, it was their residual politicization that made the work of Purifoy's African-American contemporaries accessible.

One might be tempted to call the lack of appreciation for that California cohort of African-American artists a form of anti-intellectualism. That label, however, would depend on both the intent of the artist and the viewer-of-art, as well as how the term is defined. If the ignorance of the viewer was deliberate (i.e. the viewer made no attempt to understand the artist's perspective before or after), then anti-intellectualism is an appropriate label. If not, then two factors complicate anti-intellectualism theses. First, California's modern artists were relaying new "knowledge" through highly individualized perspectives. This constitutes an almost deliberate avoidance of accessibility. Second, per the examples above, the lack appreciation might derive from a direct realization by the viewer of an unsettling political statement. When, for instance, the 1950s art of Wallace Berman, Edward Kienholz, Walter Hopps, George Herms, and Robert Rauschenberg aroused popular and critical disgust, it was because people objected to the social, cultural, and political critiques embedded in their art (pp. 136-139). Yet—to extend this line of thought a bit—having the right of free expression does not automatically absolve the artist from popular (if sometimes conservative) notions of obscenity and concern for social stability. In other words, free expression is a necessary rather than sufficient condition for the creation of an intellectually sound public philosophy that supports a democratic culture.

The anti-intellectualism issue arises not just in terms of art appreciation, but also in relation to the artists themselves. While most of the artists discussed in *The Modern Moves West* were self-evidently geniuses in terms of their material creations (to me, at least), Cándida Smith does hold forth the theme—presented via Clemenceau and Monet above, and continued in relation to Rodia and DeFeo—that the practical orientation of modern artists enabled their accessibility, as artists, in a democratic culture. Even if their art is difficult to interpret, the fact they create complex cultural artifacts, in spite of their un-theoretical and un-philosophical dispositions, also makes them sites of a fusion between art and democracy. While this is a somewhat risky extension, one might say that the anti-intellectualism of the artists becomes, in

fact, a kind of virtue. If so, this fosters a feeling in the narrative that Cándida Smith's retelling of their story is somewhat over-intellectualized. When only artists and critics like Noah Purifoy and Fred Martin really discuss the intellectual aspects of modern art, the framing of DeFeo's and Rodia's work in terms of Heidegger and Taine feels stretched. DeFeo, Rodia, and others did not operate under an "art as...experimental knowledge" paradigm. Does the book then make too much of their productions in terms of epistemology? Put another way, how do we make anti-intellectualism a virtue in terms of intellectual history?

Apart from the perhaps unsolvable problems of audience interpretation and anti-intellectualism, the book raises another important issue in relation to building a modern democratic culture: balancing the past and present, or traditional virtues in art versus novelty. In discussing Sam Rodia's genius at the end of the book, Cándida Smith presents the artist as "quintessential" and "exemplary" in that he "transcend[ed] the dual challenge of personal marginality and regional provinciality." He did this by overcoming his lack of both material resources and training in the arts. Here is the passage that crystallize the issue: "Preexisting standards of excellence did not constrain him. ...Rodia provided a model for cultural production no longer defined through a subordinate relationship to imaginary cultural capitals [in New York or Paris] whose distance always marked the inadequacy of one's own immediate situation" (pp. 209-210). Putting this another way, how does novelty on the margins develop with existing power structures that define artistic excellence? Or how does a democratic culture balance respect for access alongside respect for past learning and accomplishment? If access, novelty, and subjectivity are emphasized, is the humanistic tradition denigrated? If teaching, learning, and knowledge of history are celebrated, is the creation of new knowledge through art stymied? Does the knowledge of historical excellence constrain and burden the imagination such that social progress through art is impeded?

Cándida Smith offers no definitive answers to these questions.

Indeed, there may be none. But this book does seem to point, in its sympathy for DeFeo, Purifoy, etc., toward edgy, novel, perspectival art as both a prime form for pushing social progress, and as truly representative of a democratic culture. Without explicitly saying it, it is in these artists, and their work, that Cándida Smith defines genius. But I would argue that building a democratic culture involves splitting the difference between the past and present. This at least allows for the young creator to not repeat the mistakes of the past—to be creative, but based on a sound foundation. Then again, if excellent modern art truly represents the subjective, and all humans are unique (a proposition one must take on faith), then all authentic art will never be merely repetitive. It will always convey some new perspective that may inspire a future cohort to look at the world differently. But here enters a second problem based, in a word, on optimism: namely, are not *all* new creations in art good in and of themselves, regardless of standards of quality? Bringing these speculations back to California, with the art of Purifoy, ERRE, and Martinez in mind, maybe it is the connection to politics and current events that keeps modern art grounded—anchored in something tangible. But that brings us back to the old democratic problem of representation: whose population’s message is being communicated in the art? And what is our collective standard for judging and preserving an artistic creation in a democratic culture? Is that standard determined merely by the approval of the majority? Subjectivity leaves us chasing our tails in terms of standards and tradition.

The weaknesses and lacunae of *The Modern Moves West* are mostly isolated. For instance, I was disappointed in Cándida Smith’s concession, or admission, that “however talented California writers, artists, and architects were in the first six decades of the twentieth century, none played a critical role in shaping either national or international conceptions of modern arts movements” (p. 38). While this might be technically true, in a public-awareness sense, they did play a role in shaping the nation’s *collective expression* of modernism. Indeed, if nothing else that role was “critical” because California’s artists worked against the central-place hegemony of modern art (i.e. New York’s

defining role). California offered an organic alternative rather than a mere “derivative” (p. 39) expression of modern art—especially as shaped by the professionalism of the fine arts that occurred within its higher education institutions. But Cándida Smith’s concession undermines the importance of his text. There comes a point when caveats, for the historical profession or otherwise, sometimes push an author’s argument too far to the margins.

I was mildly disappointed with the book’s discussion of education. In terms of higher education and the fine arts, *The Modern Moves West* presents something of a paradox. The assertion is made, in the context of Rodia and Monet, that the untrained art specialists whose productions achieve excellence—in spite of a lack of training or education—are paragons of modern art’s ability to foster a democratic culture. But when California universities are discussed in chapter three, particularly Berkeley, it appears that they—and not untrained individuals—actually foster the aggregate development of democracy through their growing fine arts departments. Indeed, DeFeo studied at Berkeley as a student and she ends up a tenure-track professor at Mills College in Oakland, California (p. 128-29). Training and education helped make her the artist she was. The reader is left wondering whether individuals or institutions foster democratic culture. A sensible answer might be in the middle. Cándida Smith goes some way in this direction by arguing that social conservatism “over the last third of the twentieth century” undermined “progressive reforms launched much earlier” (p. 72-73). But since an artist like DeFeo arose from the education establishment, it would seem that the promise of mid-century education initiatives, writ large in California, was indeed that they would foster a democratic culture. Even so, in the book the judgment of which route is best—individual or social (via education institutions)—is left unsaid. The book might have come down, with its informed history, forcefully on behalf of art education, as a social endeavor, being integral to the maintenance of a democracy. Perhaps Cándida Smith felt this was self evident?

Speaking of larger institutions fostering art, as the book moved through the early Cold War years I also began to wonder how political

entities and politics affected the modern art movement in California. Even though the National Endowment for the Arts was not created until 1965, the U.S. State Department supported arts exhibitions in the 1950s and before (i.e. under the cultural diplomacy rubric). Were any of the works of California's artists sent overseas mid-century? If not, why? A discussion of this—even if California artists were lacking—would go some way toward proving Cándida Smith's periphery thesis. But perhaps California has already been discussed in work by, say, Gary O. Larson? Or maybe a discussion in Larson's *The Reluctant Patron* reveals why California was excluded from early funding initiatives? [3]

But these quibbles are philosophical, or merely additive, in a story that is much more than adequate. *The Modern Moves West* is an intelligent, thorough book as is. Cándida Smith opens up a complex discussion about the relationship between art's prickly modern forms and democracy. If that discussion cannot be neatly closed, it is because thinking about art's effects on the modern world is no less difficult than thinking through art, with its artists, to understand the complexity of the modern world. But this book is not an abstract intellectual history: the author tells a particular story about skilled, talented, and intriguing artists who localized a strain of modernity for Californians. The trials of Rodia, DeFeo, Purifoy, and the rest provide an thoughtful entry point for understanding the history of modern art in the United States generally.

[1] Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: Norton, 1987).

[2] The rest of series is [listed here](#).

[3] Gary O. Larson, *The Reluctant Patron: The United States Government and Art, 1943-65* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

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Putting California on the Map

Lucy Bradnock

The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century by Richard Cándida Smith, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, 264 pp., 35 b. & w. illus., £26.00

Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art by Stephen Fredman, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010, 240 pp., 1 table, 25 b. & w. illus., \$55.00

When the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1961, just a handful of the 138 artists represented were from California. At a time when the state was still considered artistically provincial by many, the exhibition's curator, William C. Seitz, figured assemblage as an art form born in the cities of Europe and raised in the urban grid of Manhattan. The longstanding subordination of West Coast art in narratives centred on (and often written in) New York is a situation that new books by Richard Cándida Smith and Stephen Fredman go some way towards rectifying. Although there is some overlap in their subject matter, notably in the central role that assemblage plays in their respective accounts, their significant methodological differences indicate that there is still much at stake in the writing of Californian art history.

Cándida Smith's *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century* is a predominantly sociological account. It considers art made in California as a product of a particular set of pressures that acted upon artists at mid-century and beyond. The central chapters outline the burgeoning art world in California in the 1950s and 1960s in terms of the tensions felt by artists who existed somewhere between the professional roles demanded by academic and cultural institutions, and the democratic impulse to develop more inclusive means of art production, display and dissemination. Cándida Smith's narrative thus oscillates between an account of the rise of the art school, museum, and commercial gallery, and the acknowledgement that many artists still experienced

a lack of institutional support, and felt a need to create their own spaces and practices to fill that gap. Accounts of the establishment of the California School of Fine Arts, Chouinard Art Institute, the San Francisco Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are juxtaposed with those of smaller, more informal spaces like the King Ubu Gallery in San Francisco and the Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles (though Cándida Smith could equally, and perhaps should, have included others, like Walter Hopps' Syndell Studio, Ed Kienholz's Now Gallery or Suzanne Jackson's Gallery 32).

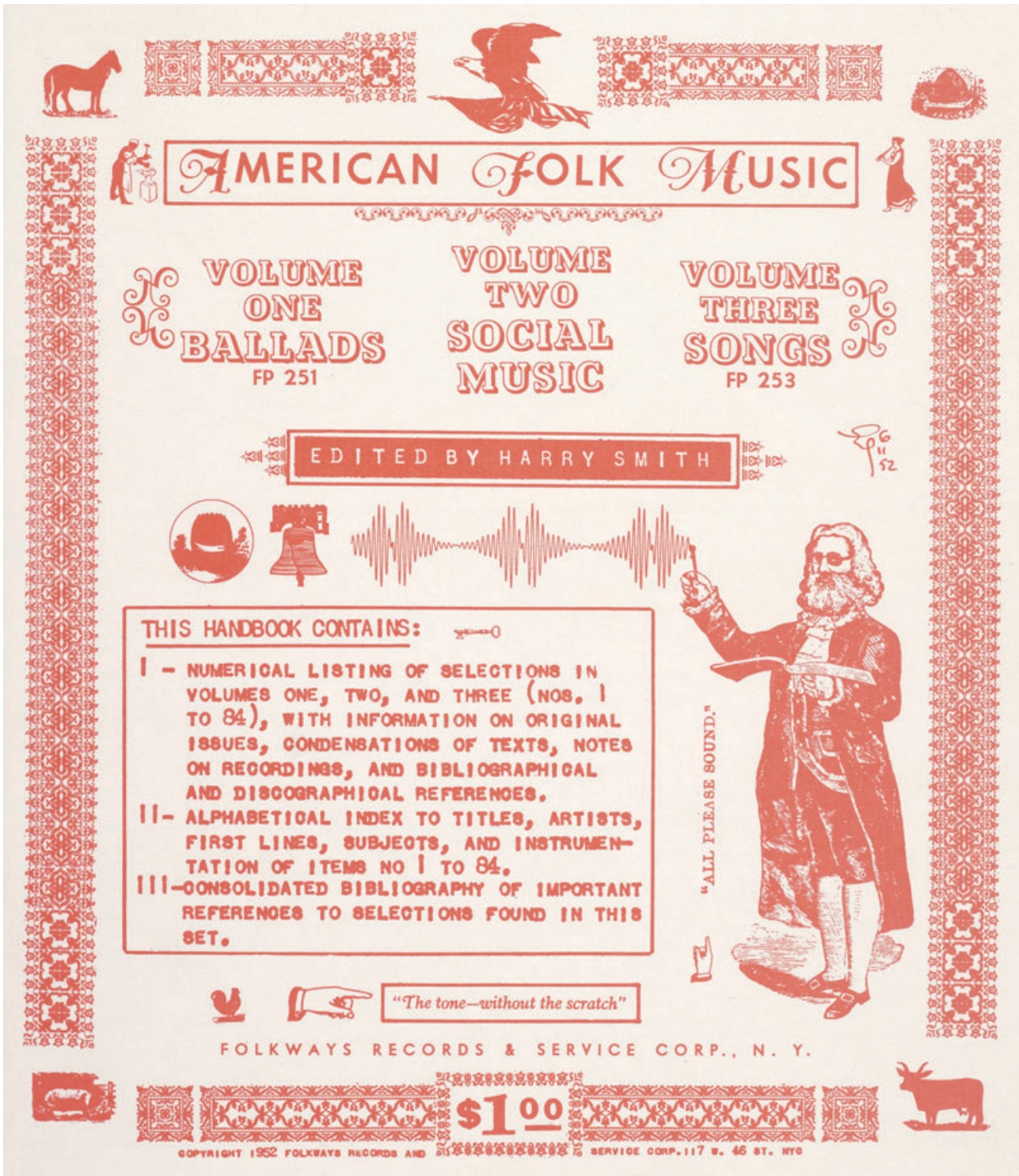
In the case of this generation of California artists, frequently accused of producing either weak reiterations of abstract expressionism or, perhaps worse, shiny baubles for rich collectors, the nuances of position are important. The mid-century development of art scenes in San Francisco and Los Angeles was characterized by a peculiar self-consciousness that manifested itself in the simultaneous embrace of professionalization and anxiety at its implications. There are other, related tensions at play in Cándida Smith's account, most notably between form and content, surface and substance, present and past, and self and community. Cándida Smith's primary focus in this book is on the politics of modern art, and he returns frequently throughout to the struggle between the belief in art as a socially influential force that has the power to reveal universal truths about the human condition, and what he sees as the more 'professionalized' model of art that rejected the need to represent the world in favour of the disciplined creation of new, non-referential objects. The contradictions between these two positions emerge in terms of the question of engagement, since much of Cándida Smith's focus is on an era when social and political struggle were at the forefront. This had a particularly profound impact upon artists in California, he claims, because of its peripheral location, and the relative youth and rapid growth of its art world structures.

The strengths of this book are its inclusion of much material that has been thus far omitted from narratives of the period, and the origin of its research in archives and oral history interviews, several of which were conducted under the auspices of the Archives of American Art and the UCLA oral history programme, some by the author himself. Cándida Smith's choice of subjects evinces a deliberate and laudable emphasis on ethnic and gender diversity without recourse to the rhetoric of marginalization: there are chapters on the

San Francisco painters Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick; African American assemblage artists Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge and Betye Saar; and contemporary artists from the Mexican-US border region, including Marcos Ramírez ERRE. A significant discussion, over two chapters, of the ways in which African American artists made use of assemblage to think through their relationships both to their own community and to the nation at large is a particularly welcome counterpoint to existing histories that focus on the predominantly white Beat community of assemblagists.

But the alternative practices of the artists Cándida Smith chronicles sit uncomfortably with the theoretical and historical framework that he adopts. The book's trajectory marches from the nineteenth-century world of the French academy and the writings of Hippolyte Taine and Georges Clemenceau, via New York, to California, a migration that only serves to reinforce the model of provincialism that he aims to contest. The point that American modernism owed much to European conceptions of the role of the modern artist is well taken, though the direct lineage that this structure implies seems a little forced. When so many of his subjects, like those that participated in the In-Site exhibitions detailed in chapter eight, are making work that specifically contests ideas about site, centre and margin, this seems unfair. Similarly, some of the philosophical allusions that Cándida Smith invokes are more convincing than others (Jay DeFeo, for example, almost certainly read Carl Jung, though probably not Martin Heidegger). Most troubling is his unquestioning adoption of the model of rupture signalled in the fifth chapter, 'Becoming Postmodern'. Besides the fact that for artists of the 1950s and 1960s such distinctions were non-existent, the terms modernism and postmodernism, problematized in much recent literature on the subject, belong to a specific, and New York-centric, vision of American art history that sits uneasily with the concerns of his subjects.

Fredman's book, *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art*, offers a similarly unconventional cast of characters. These include several that have been overlooked not on the grounds of their gender or ethnicity, but because they are 'tricky', producing works that speak to several disciplines at once: such as the filmmaker, musicologist, ethnographer and collector of string figures Harry Smith; or the sculptor, magazine editor, poet and exhibition-maker Wallace Berman. What unites such figures, and where the real potential of the book lies,



1 Cover to *Handbook for Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music*, 1952. Smithsonian Folkways. Photo: Courtesy of Harry Smith Archives.

is in the expanded notion of assemblage that Fredman proposes. Extending the model of accumulation described by Seitz, Fredman envisions a sort of assemblage that gathers ideas, words, cultures, belief systems, actions and behaviour, as often as concrete

objects. Assemblage here encompasses the writing and performance of poetry or music, the acts of collecting and collating, or the art of communicating with peers.

Though some figures emerge as central to Fredman's argument, however, he tends to consider examples in pairs or groups, focusing on collaboration, cross-fertilization and artistic exchange. Running through the book is the notion of the artist or poet

as part of a larger contextual continuum. In chapters that focus on Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*, Robert Creeley's collaborative interview projects, and Robert Duncan's *Grand Collage*, Fredman considers the larger constellations of which these projects were part, outlining the regenerative potential that these poets, and their artist friends, found in communion with the world around them. He highlights the centrality of the body as a repository of meaning for them, framing their work in terms of an 'erotic poetics' that informs his reading of assemblage throughout the book.

Fredman is primarily a literary historian and at the heart of his book is a careful balance between a discussion of world views and a dedication to supporting this with close reading of lines of verse. This works well to integrate the individual (and often highly personal) motivations of his subjects with the broader politics of the era, those same tensions that Cándida Smith outlines. But it also points to the value of reaching beyond the traditional boundaries of art history. The notion of an art of context opens up new possibilities for our understanding of some complex works that defy the traditional classification of disciplines, and thus have not met with the scholarly attention that they deserve.

Fredman's interrogation of traditional categories is exemplified in his nuanced analysis, in chapter five, of Wallace Berman's *Semina*, usually described in terms of the loose-leaf journal (1958–64) that Berman disseminated among his peers. Fredman convincingly reframes *Semina* as an open-ended project manifested not only as mail art objects, but as what Fredman terms a 'principle of association', by which friends, ideas, allusions and artworks come together. Similarly, in two chapters that centre on Harry Smith, Fredman considers Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1951, plate 1) not as a straightforward compendium, but as an assemblage of songs that demands participatory interpretation from its listener.

The projects that Fredman outlines revel in the contingent and invite the unexpected. They enact, he explains in a discussion of Creeley, 'a continual "equilibration" (to use Duncan's term), in which the artist intends not to reach a predetermined outcome but to interact gracefully with new conditions as they unpredictably arise' (35). Put simply, the art of contextual practice is concerned with the journey, rather than the destination. It demands not only an ongoing awareness of present reality but, as Fredman puts it, 'a willingness to engage it in conversation' (37).

As the social or political environment around the work changes, as inevitably it must, so will the meaning of that work. Life becomes a constantly evolving assemblage composition.

The status of *Contextual Practice* is that of a minor history, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari proposed the term: it is understood according to networks and connections rather than linear development, by works that occupy several disciplines, while refusing to settle happily in any of them, and by artists who do not usually appear in surveys of the period. This is one of the great strengths of this book. Fredman's choice of Smith, Berman, Creeley and Duncan (in place of the more obvious Charles Olsen, Frank O'Hara, Joseph Cornell and John Cage, as he acknowledges at the outset) forces a reassessment of the canon of post-war American art and poetry. It also makes Fredman's case all the more forcefully – his choices have been left out of the dominant narrative, he implies, precisely because their work cannot be readily understood without recourse to the terms of contextual practice.

Fredman's account of post-war American art and poetry is driven not by a catalogue of masterpieces, but by ongoing investigations that are manifested in word, image and the art of living. That the subjects he describes often appear through the rhetoric of mastery, however, leaves one feeling that they do not, perhaps, 'disappear into their artworks' (74) to the extent that Fredman would like. Thus Berman's 'mastery of the art of context' or his 'place at the center of the midcentury California aesthetic' (104–5) seem counter to the non-hierarchical emphasis of Fredman's idea of contextual practice. It seems at times to be a model that works better in theory than in practice.

That the psyche of the author might render fraught an engagement in contextual practice emerges especially forcefully in the final two chapters of the book, which deal with Robert Duncan's crisis of contextual faith in the face of his souring relationship with Denise Levertov over the war in Vietnam. It is this moment of personal instability that inevitably, and somewhat problematically, signals the end of contextual practice for Fredman. In contrast with Cándida Smith's broad historical sweep, Fredman's account is situated within the chronological boundaries of the 1939–45 war and the war in Vietnam (1955–75). The issue of art as political engagement that is so overt in Cándida Smith's subject lurks, too, beneath Fredman's account.

Both Fredman and Cándida Smith seek to offer

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alternative accounts that are well overdue and that are timely given the current drive towards reconsidering the significance of Californian art history. Both authors choose to focus on lesser known figures in order to present a fuller picture of creative practices post-1945. But where Cándida Smith's book submits an alternative set of protagonists to the restrictive conventions of a grand narrative structure, Fredman understands that it is in the act of writing history that the more effective revisions might be achieved.