

Red Decade Exhibit Reflects Future of Block Museum

'Left Front' and upcoming programs set tone for museum's expanded vision

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EVANSTON, Ill. --- With a widely-acclaimed exhibit recently concluded, "The Left Front: Radical Art in the 'Red Decade,' 1929-1940," and an eagerly-anticipated new exhibition coming this fall, "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey," the [Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art](#) is on a roll.

In its five-month run, "The Left Front" showcased the Block's new approach to audience engagement, with the Northwestern University museum bringing in practitioners from across campus and the world for lectures, performances and conversations about issues of the past that matter today.

"The exhibit and its related programs set the tone for the museum's expanded vision," said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum's Ellen Philips Katz Director. "Emphasizing interdisciplinary connections between art, history and ideas, the Block is growing partnerships on and off campus and expanding its vision for what engagement can look like."

The Mutu exhibition, opening Sept. 19 and running through Dec. 7, will advance a global perspective with the internationally renowned Kenyan-born artist's work and mark the first stage of a continuing focus on Africa and the Africa diaspora in Block programming.

In anticipation of Mutu's exhibition, the museum is planning a number of thought-provoking programs, working with the same kind of imagination and innovation demonstrated in "The Left Front." The Block invites members of the public to attend the exhibition's opening reception at 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 27, when the artist will speak about her work and be in conversation with Northwestern art history professor Huey Copeland.

Similarly, the successful "Left Front" program demonstrated an increased focus on engagement at the Block. The exhibit of works by socially conscious artists who were prominent in America's progressive movement ran from Jan. 17 to June 22 and, with all the related events, attracted more than 12,000 attendees.

Since the exhibit's opening, the media has taken notice.

Recently the Chicago Reader, in the Best of Arts and Culture section, cited "The Left Front" as "all part of Corrin's vision of opening the museum's floodgates to discussion and collaboration."

"The Left Front" was cited by The Wall Street Journal as an "'original' and 'wholly new' exploration of the overlooked political activism that inspired the work of many artists in the 1930s," by the [Chicago Tribune](#) as a fine exhibition "that frames the era's impassioned political activism as an essentially humanist pursuit of justice and equality for all," and by the Chicago Sun-Times as "groundbreaking."

Susy Bielak, the first associate director of engagement/curator of public practice at the Block, has been central to "The Left Fronts'" success and spreading the word about the museum's expanded vision of audience engagement.

Under Bielak's guidance, the museum followed the lead of progressive artists of the 1930s, hosting a number of events that called into question the role of the relationships between art and politics. The museum connected with Northwestern and Chicago-area communities through pop-up performances, actions, collaborations and lectures, both inside and outside of the museum. Activities included a conversation with labor activist and Guggenheim award-winning poet Mark Nowak; an auditorium lecture from Andrew Hemingway, one of the seminal scholars on artists of the Left Front; and a performance of "Newspaper Theatre," turning newspaper headlines into short plays for live performances in the gallery by Jackelope Theatre with Northwestern student actors.

A potluck picnic that took place in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood the last day of the exhibit brought together artists, activists and scholars and continued the conversation launched during the Block's [Artists' Congress](#), held in conjunction with "The Left Front."

Inspired by the American Artists' Congress meetings of progressive artists in 1936, the Block's interdisciplinary forum also brought together artists, scholars, educators and activists to address contemporary issues of art and social change. The program combined historical perspectives, such as the presentation by artist Paul Durica on re-enacting labor history; politically motivated presentations, such as Don Washington's Mayoral Tutorial; and personal reflections, such as Eric Triantafyllou sharing his work as an artistic director for a union organizing campaign. These were complimented by performances, conversations and acknowledgements for artists working on the ground with social justice organizations.

During an [interview about the Artists' Congress with WBEZ-91.5 FM](#) which aired May 15, Bielak said: "In the 1930s, just like today, there were artists who were deeply invested in questions of social change."

"Being in the context of Chicago, which has a deep history of labor activism and is a current hub for socially engaged artistic practice, it seemed highly relevant to ask how the questions of the 1930s might have resonance today," she said.

During its run, "The Left Front" also was lauded by WTTW, Truth-Out and NewCity.

"The Left Front" is the first exhibition to examine the visual culture of two activist collectives formed during the 1930s -- the John Reed Club, named after the journalist who witnessed the Russian Revolution firsthand, and its successor organization, the American Artists' Congress. In the wake of the Great Depression, progressive artists, writers and intellectuals coalesced to form a "left front" dedicated to making socially conscious art.

The exhibition, co-curated by Northwestern doctoral candidate John Murphy and recent Ph.D Jill Bugajski, was honored with a [2014 Award of Merit from the American Association for State and Local History](#). The award, specifically for the contribution that an exhibition makes to state and local history, is a testament to the work the Block has been doing to broaden the museum's relevancy and to the museum's investment in the issues of history and our time -- in this case, of Chicago. Adding to this success, the exhibition is scheduled to tour New York University's [Grey Art Gallery](#) in winter 2014.

The exhibit provided an opportunity for both students to curate a major traveling exhibition under the mentorship of Block Museum staff.

“It’s rare that students would have the opportunity to curate the main gallery space of a professional institution,” Bielak said. “Part of the mission of the Block is to provide experimental learning opportunities, including full-fledged curation.” To this end, the Block has dedicated an entire gallery for the purpose of student-curated exhibitions.

“Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey,” will bring more than 50 pieces, from the artist’s most iconic collages to her rarely seen work, to Northwestern. Mutu is best known for large-scale collages depicting female figures in lush otherworldly landscapes. Her work explores issues of gender, race, war, globalization, colonialism and the eroticization of the black female body. She often combines found materials and magazine cutouts with sculpture and painted imagery, sampling from sources as diverse as African traditions, international politics, the fashion industry and science fiction. Spanning the mid-1990s to the present, the exhibit also will feature new creations including collage, drawings, sculpture, installation and video.

A highlight will be Mutu’s first-ever animated video featuring singer-songwriter and producer Santigold and commissioned by Duke University’s Nasher Museum of Art. The video imagines an apocalyptic scene of gluttonous consumption and overindulgence that is at once repulsive and disturbingly beautiful.

This exhibition is the first of what will be a repeating focus on Africa and the Africa diaspora in Block programming, supported by the scholarly expertise of the Block’s new associate director of curatorial affairs, Kathleen Bickford Berzock.

For more on the fall exhibits, visit the Block Museum’s [upcoming attractions](#).