

HISTORY

Government-sponsored Arts and the New Deal

George Mason University

In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that provided jobs for as many as 3.5 million unemployed men and women. Included in the WPA plan were artistic projects for musicians, writers, painters, and historians. Through the Federal Writers' Project, young writers like John Cheever and Ralph Ellison were put to work gathering and writing first-hand accounts from people living in the Depression era. Through the Federal Arts Project, unemployed actors performed the works of then-unknown playwrights, including Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, in theaters rented by the project. The plays often focused on the social themes of the day, including blighted farms and waste of natural resources.

A great deal of this work—scripts, oral histories, theater designs, and books—is available to students and historians in its original form. However, because the material is stored in numerous college and government archives throughout the United States, it is often difficult to get at.

Using NeXT technology, John O'Connor, associate professor of English at George Mason University (GMU), is creating an interactive multimedia library of WPA arts projects called, "Government-sponsored Arts and the New Deal." The library will also include commentary on a variety of issues, including government-sponsored art, the role of art in society, and the dynamic between art and documentary. The library will be used by GMU's theater, literature, and American studies classes.

"This is a way for students to explore material without having to seek out the actual physical artifacts," says O'Connor. "Students might want to explore material on the Machine Age, for example. Using a NeXT computer, they'll be able to review images of works on the production line as well as oral history statements from the workers. This is a way for students to work through the images and oral history together."

O'Connor is currently scanning images and text using OCR software into his NeXTcube™. Using MediaStation, he is setting up a series of archives, arranged by subject. With the instructional design application Knowledge Tool, he plans to set up interactive tutorials on the material. In one instance, O'Connor might have students review information on government control in the arts. He will then ask students to work on a tutorial that compares issues in the arts during the Depression era with the recent

NEA controversy. Students might then be required to write a paper comparing and contrasting the activities in the 1930s with those of the current era. O'Connor says he plans to have several tutorials completed by the summer of 1992 for use with students in the fall.

"The NeXT machine has been very easy for me to use," he says. "MediaStation, has the capability to combine CD-quality sound, photographic quality images, and text, making it a terrific tool for this project. It's made it much simpler for me to connect the various materials."

He continues, "I started this project with an MS-DOS machine last summer, but it was so clumsy to use. I kept getting more and more frustrated and eventually just stopped pursuing the project, until I got a NeXT machine. NeXT is so much more flexible than either the DOS or the Macintosh machine."

JOHN O'CONNOR
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
FAIRFAX, VA 22030
(703) 993-1172
joconnor@gmuvax2.gmu.edu