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 **The Private Lives of Systems: Rukeyser, Hayden, Middle Passage**

Eben Wood

Modernism/modernity

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 17, Number 1, January 2010

pp. 201-222

10.1353/mod.0.0172

ARTICLE

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Private Lives of Systems**  
**Rukeyser, Hayden, Middle Passage**

*Eben Wood (bio)*

## Words at War

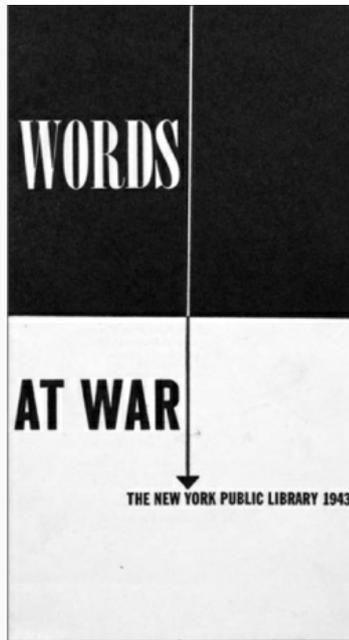
Writing to New York Public Library trustee Henry James in the spring of 1943, Left poet Muriel Rukeyser proposed an exhibition that would examine what she and her colleagues in the Office of War Information's Graphics Division called "the nature of total war."

The plan behind a series of single images may best be illustrated by such a series as the Graphics Division has carried out. The series on the Enemy does not show the Germans and the Japanese, for example, as brutalized and individual soldiers. It isolates a set of characteristics—suppression, starvation, slavery, torture, and murder—stamps them as the method of the enemy, and makes the positive answer of the United Nations: We Fight to Build a Free World. The qualities we fight against are contained in the images; the answer which implements daily life in America, as we wish to see it functioning to fight fascism, is contained in the text.<sup>1</sup>

*Words at War*, installed in a first-floor corridor of the NYPL's main branch on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, ran from June 18 to August 13, 1943. It was followed in the autumn by a weekly reading and discussion series whose participants included Rukeyser, exhibition coorganizer William Rose Benét, James Agee, W.H. Auden, Padraic Colum, Horace Gregory, Langston Hughes, Marianne Moore, Kenneth Patchen, and William Carlos Williams [Fig. 1].<sup>2</sup>

In its critical juxtaposition of text and visual image, *Words at War* extended the Left avant-garde's earlier experimentation with the "social production of culture ... and the new method of [End Page 201] literary representation / production that accompanied it, *factography*."<sup>3</sup> As Benjamin H.D. Buchloch has argued, factography was the distillation of Soviet constructivism's effort not merely to apply modernism's technical innovations (particularly in film and photomontage) and formalist experimentation to a revolutionary context, but to involve artists "with

materials and objects in actual space and the social processes that occur within it." In doing so, constructivists hoped to "transcend the historical limitations of modernism," moving from aesthetic mediation to direct participation in the processes of cultural production.<sup>4</sup>



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**Fig. 1.**

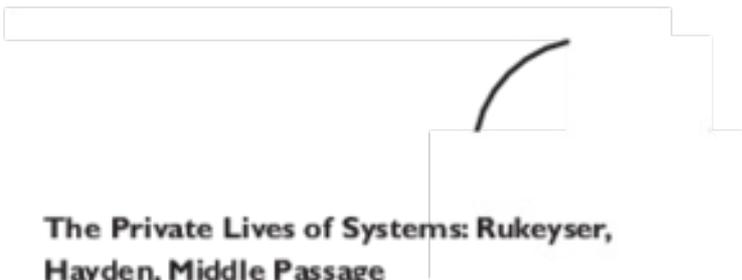
E. McKnight Kauffer's cover design for the *Words at War* exhibition catalog (1943). The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Rejecting liberalism's presumptive private/public divide and its geopolitical analogies, *Words at War* contested many of the contradictions that emerged when earlier factographic and photomontage techniques were utilized in an already industrialized American context, contradictions that for Buchloch are exemplified by Herbert Bayer's photomurals for Edward Steichen's 1942 MoMA exhibition, *Road to Victory*. The site of Rukeyser's exhibition is significant in this regard: its location in the NYPL's main corridor and its disjunctive, pedagogical technique emphasized "useful information and technical instruction," in direct contrast to MoMA's contemporaneous

"modernization of what had come to be known among museum professionals as the 'aesthetic theory of museum management.'"<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, *Words at War* retains a dialectical tension [End Page 202] between domestic American life and international fascism, implying that U.S. culture itself must be re-fashioned to counter totalitarianism both at home and abroad. Rather than channeling earlier leftwing political and artistic engagement directly into wartime propaganda, Rukeyser signals an ongoing conflict that emerged with the dismantling of the WPA, the move of "many arts projects participants ... into the war information agencies," and the complex, mid-century transformation of American public culture.<sup>6</sup>

Expanding Buchloch's narrow focus on the plastic and visual arts, Rukeyser's contemporaneous literary work explored the ways in which—as it interrogated the divisions of cultural labor that separate poetic technique from visual communication, historical knowledge, and political action—"the program of productivism and the methods of factographic production" informed specific literary/artistic projects, decades before these methods found more direct expression in the mid- to late-1960s.<sup>7</sup> In a globalizing postwar political landscape, domestic U.S. preoccupation with the production, transmission, and reception of networked information...



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### Words at War

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MODERNISM / modernity  
VOLUME SEVENTEEN  
NUMBER ONE, PP 201–222  
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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