Introduction (Draft)
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A Useful Art: Essays and Radio Scripts on American Design. By Louis Zukofsky. Edited with an Introduction and Preface. Middletown: Wesleyan U P, [July 2003.]

As the narrative of American poetry during the 1930s has it, writers of otherwise incommensurable camps came to see the relation between art and society as a central issue (Nelson 17). While for many the choice between aestheticism and realism dichotemized the possible responses, Louis Zukofsky's poetry of this decade reflects the intersection between a high modernist aesthetics and a left-wing politics with a deep concern for history (Scroggins 49, 54). In this light, his "Program 'Objectivists' 1931"--the foundational essay for what has subsequently seemed a heterogenous group of writers--defines the Objectivist poem as enmeshed in "the direction of historic and contemporary particulars" (268). Recent critics of Objectivist writing tend to agree on at least one characteristic: that it is "aware of its own historical contingency and situatedness" (DuPlessis and Quartermain 6). A little-noted sheet of paper held among Zukofsky's archives at the University of Texas conceives of the relation of art and society in a scenario perhaps only articulable at the precise moment in the course of American poetry and history:

> It's obvious a poet lives in his time and can't escape it, and he writes because he lives in his time. Today obviously he can't escape even to the so-called ivory tower, for he's likely to find it's in the Chrysler Bldg. A poet's technique keeps up with the working materials of his time, just as other craftsmen and workers keep up with theirs. . . . It is unfortunate that the poet to-day has [not] carried over into his job the business of the division of labor as other workers, because good poetry is a product (sic) more of dealing with specific tasks, than of poetic sentiment. . . .Yes, it would be nice if poets could forget themselves get together and one do this about a poem, and one suggest this and the other cadence, etc. and produce a cooperative poem which would be a product of their combined labor and not of individual sentiment.[1]

The statement indicates Zukofsky was thinking about the poem in social terms circa 1937, as an object produced by and reflecting on historical and social conditions. Interesting for its content and context as a public intervention, it advances an image of the poet working alongside other laborers, rather than as a bard speaking for nation or tribe.

It is in this respect that Objectivist poetry can be situated in the loosely defined tradition of the American epic that begins with the democratic vistas of Walt Whitman, moves through the

[1] A reconstructed transcript of Zukofsky's response to a question about the relation between social consciousness and poetic technique, it marks his contribution to a League of American Writers panel on New York radio station WOR (with a "nationwide hookup") broadcast on June 7, 1937. From the Zukofsky collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas, this unpublished document is copyright Paul Zukofsky and quoted by his permission. It may not be quoted by third parties without the express permission of the copyright holder.

"poem including history" of Ezra Pound, and arrives at a labor theory of poetics in the first half of Zukofsky's "A." According to Yves di Manno, the development of a "social voice" for poetry (297), or what might with equal aptness be called the social epic, reflects the Objectivist interest in "reclaiming the possibility of a collective song, a social voice, putting the emphasis on the bonding of a poet to a community" and exists "in contradistinction to a strictly individual trajectory of development" (297). Objectivist poetics is social to the extent that "the poem weaves, knots, and unravels the fibers connecting the artist to a particular place and time" (298). As it combines the characteristic Objectivist interest in a poetry of historical particulars with an artisanal dynamic of production worthy of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century craftsman, Zukofsky's social vision might be contextualized in terms of his reading of Marx. The commonly identified source for Zukofsky's thinking about labor, production, and all things economic, Marx, along with Thorsten Veblen, invites the analogy with mechanical production that leads to the idea that poetry is ideally an impersonal art that might be practiced communally. Zukofsky adopts the Marxist labor theory of value to the extent that poesis becomes a "subcategory of production" and poetry "a commodity" in his poetry and correspondence of the 1930s (Marsh 105). But another source at work here in fomenting this equation between craftsmen and poets is Zukofsky's extensive, first-hand research into the tradition of American handicrafts.

One of five divisions of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) established on May 6, 1935, the Federal Arts Project (FAP) engaged Zukofsky and some 6,000 other individuals in its employ. The Index of American Design, a program of the FAP, aimed to recover and diffuse information about U.S. culture, at a time when interest in handicrafts had just begun to emerge; like all Federal One programs, it aimed at once to create jobs and provide a public service. Envisioned as an eventual publication of encyclopedic scope, the Index of American Design now exists as an archive at the National Gallery of Art, including "approximately 18,000 watercolor renderings of American decorative arts objects from the colonial period through the nineteenth century." While visual artists worked to illustrate characteristic craft objects, "researchists" like Zukofsky compiled information from primary sources as well as publications geared toward collectors.

Zukofsky wrote the pieces collected and published for the first time in this volume as contributions to a highly institutionalized national project. Readers will be interested in noting what light they cast upon the cultural, political, and historical context of Zukofsky's contemporaneous poetry, and perhaps also want to assess their relationship with his other works of critical prose. The mission and scope of the project itself provide a starting point. The Index Editorial Director, Constance Rourke, wrote in 1937 that the work then being done "under the Federal Art Project by the Index of American Design, in recording sequences of examples in the useful and decorative arts, suggests both the richness of this phase of our inheritance and the slenderness of our knowledge." She depicts the Index as responding to a particularly American need for a cultural vocabulary that might be absorbed through the "strong and natural association with evidences of the past" more typical of European experience; the assembly and eventual publication of the Index, she argued, would allow for citizens and prospective artists to "saturate themselves with a knowledge of forms which have been essential to us in the past, getting a sense of these into their minds and eyes and at the ends of their fingers, without any immediate purpose." Zukofsky's own summation of the Index in the "Henry Clay Figurehead" radio script represents the ideals of the project in terms congruent with those of Rourke:

> The artists, research workers, and writers of the Index, a division of the New York City Art Project, are preparing for publication a monumental history of American handicrafts. The whole field of manual and decorative crafts in America will be

> summed up in colored and black and white plates together with written descriptions of the objects rendered. The Index of American Design promises to be a new history of our country from the earliest days down to the present revival of handicrafts. (166)

We do not know precisely how Zukofsky came to undertake the job of Index researchist, but it is consistent in some ways with his known interests. Examples include the articulation of a kind of craft aesthetic in "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931" cited at the outset, and the poem "To my wash-stand" (1932), which meditates upon a quotidian household object in anticipation of the Index. So too, through the process of writing "A"-8, he began to incorporate details from his research on craft in the poem as historical information, and on a more subtle level began to investigate the models of artistic production in the labor of the craftsmen he studied. "A"-12 provides corroborating evidence (256-57) that Zukofsky planned both a story, "The Hounds," and critical study, "About Some Americans," derived from his Index research. (Ahearn, "Marxism" 83)

In a 1937 letter to fellow poet Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky wrote, "I am now outlining the economic, political background of American Design (useful arts)--and with a chance to read and study history" (Pound 193). His appreciation of this research job--"a responsible position while it lasts"--is at first begrudging. The drain on his poetic energy must have been compounded by what he perceived as the political inequity of the fact that so many of his contemporaries had been invited to take part in the Federal Writers Project, employed to do their own writing (Ahearn 81). Zukofsky was presumably comfortable with the Index's mission to represent a national, cultural heritage, but it is also clear that he found a personal use for the job. As evidenced by specific poetic borrowing from his research, he gradually came to appreciate the fact that the work might contribute to his poetry, both as information and in giving a model of artistic laboring; it "could contribute to his concern with the labor process, and to beauty, for he was studying objects that combined elements of both" (Ahearn 83).

In one of two studies indispensable to those interested in Zukofsky's Index work, "Zukofsky, Marxism, and American Handicraft," Barry Ahearn argues that Zukofsky's Index research documents a tradition in which productive labor of craftsmen was not dissociated from issues of form and aesthetics--a tradition, that is, which essentially confirms Zukofsky's own poesis. (Ahearn 84) Zukofsky's preoccupation with complex form, rather than the transparent social messages of poetry popular in venues such as the left-wing periodical New Masses, troubled his own relation with American Marxism. While the popular and institutional interest in American craft tradition proceeded largely out of a desire for "totems of a pure-blooded American past" (Ahearn 88-89), Zukofsky finds that "these artifacts illuminate the social and economic life of the common people" (89)--and can, should be recovered so as to speak of and for the same. Thus, Ahearn observes, "the attraction Zukofsky finds in American handicrafts and design that predate industrial manufacture is the attraction of an artist who sees his own work as comparable to theirs. The same values he finds in their craft exist in his. . . . "A" itself . . . is an American handcraft" (90). Research into American Design bears on Zukofsky's poetics because he found the handicraft tradition applicable by analogy to poetic method, and historical information about labor, fit subject.

Rather than seeing these Index essays as an isolated example of an American poet doing cultural research, Ira Nadel argues they should be placed in the context of kindred work by William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain, and Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur. (114). In his critical study, "'Precision of Appeal': Louis Zukofsky and the Index of American Design," Nadel observes that a central lesson Zukofsky derived from the Index was the discovery, or, arguably, the confirmation "that materiality and its preoccupation with making is the very heart of a craft" (117).

Nadel summarizes the importance of Zukofsky's work on the Index as follows:

> it immersed him in American history; it confirmed the method initiated by the Objectivist 'movement'; it underlined the value of citation and keen observation; it united a poetics of detail with the plot of history; it clarified Zukofsky's emerging social and political thought; and finally, it reflected an aesthetic that required the proximity of lost or forgotten objects . . . (115)

As Nadel concludes, the methodology Index writing entailed led to those which Zukofsky would "elaborate in sections of "A": research, documentation, definition, history, and fact, vying with each other in poetic statement" (121).

Zukofsky began his work for the Index in January of 1936, although the earliest surviving work is from the middle of 1938. First composed were the essays on Ironwork, Chalkware, Tin Ware, and Kitchenware; nearer the end of his tenure, he completed eight radio scripts and researched three more dealing with exceptional objects of Index research. Given their comprehensiveness, the essays hold obvious scholarly value in their indication of the poet's reading and research preoccupations during the period. At points they grow heavy with data. The format of the radio scripts, in which Zukofsky would himself have spoken the part of the researcher, allows for freer play, a livelier tone, and limited editorialization. Zukofsky's class politics are most clearly revealed here through his own direct observations. The occasionally political tone is particularly remarkable given that the composition of the scripts coincides with the culmination of the Dies Committee hearings into "Communist" influence in Federal One programs. Perhaps the political climate influenced Zukofsky's decision to omit this passage from the radio script "A Pair of New York Water Pitchers":

> Advocating the theory that wealth consists not in labor and its products, but in the quantity of hard gold and silver in a country, mercantilism encouraged mining and importation of these metals by the state and the exportation of goods as well as people who make them. It sought to increase national rather than common individual interests, and as such especially influenced the legislative policy of Great Britain. The first extensive use of indenture, as of modern slavery, occurred in the British colonies. (187)

Without proposing a constant or unidirectional influence of the Index on the poetry, we can discern a number of familiar themes and issues, including: labor, craft, and the art object in the following pages. Most specific instances have been addressed in footnotes to the body of the text. A few cross-referenced examples will suffice to establish how integral Zukofsky's Index work is to the remainder of his writing.

Zukofsky addressed such related issues as Labor conditions, the division of labor, and the effects of industrialization on craft tradition with seemingly heightened attention in the Index. A passage in the "Ironwork" essay and another from the radio script, "Two New York Water Pitchers" bear comparision with a selection from "A"-8:

> And skilled, like unskilled labor, was not always free. Extant copies of early colonial indentures are the same word for word as those of England. Colonial apprenticeship, except for differences of training compelled by different conditions, bears the stamp of a system taken over from abroad. (12)

> History has minimized the evils of this brand of slavery by giving it another name - indenture. . . . Indenture was really a means by which the growing mercantilism of the 17th and 18th centuries employed government sanction to transfer labor to

undeveloped colonies. (187)

By what name you call your people
Whether by that of freemen or of slaves . . .
That in some countries
The laboring poor were called freemen,
In others slaves . . . ("A"-8; 89-90)

In this next Index passage, Zukofsky gives an idealized description of the organic nascence of American craft. It dramatizes Ahearn's observation that "the items Zukofsky writes about in his notes for the Index of American Design and in his radio broadcast scripts are not products of alienated labor." (88). Passages from "A"-8 and "A"-9 evoke a similarly approving attitude toward the products and activities of a pre-industrial laborer:

Given an unsettled landscape, they would try to order it, work the land and build on it. Having built houses, they would fashion iron to supply their daily demands. Once these were satisfied, increasing comforts would permit them the luxuries of decoration and playthings for their children, tho it is true that sensitive craftsmen would find even these luxuries a need from the beginning. (28)

How entirely different the relation between theoretical learning
And practice was in the handicraft,
From what it is in large-scale industry" ("A"-8, 74).

Hands, heart, not value made us, . . .
. . . . . .
Lives worked us slowly to delight the sense ("A"-9, 107)

The Index essays pose an implicit critique of industrialization on the basis of its effects on craft production. Celia Zukofsky's American Friends, a commonplace book of quotations drawing from Zukofsky's published writings, notes and library, offers a passage from Alexander Hamilton, which she correlates with the subsequently quoted lines from "A"-9:

For in a society with a limited labor force, one individual was often called upon to do numerous tasks. In the individually managed households of the rest of the country, however, craftsmanship was fast becoming a mere pastime. (115)

". . . there is scarcely anything of greater moment in the economy of a nation than the proper division of labor."

Alexander Hamilton
Report on Manufactures

"The foci of production: things reflected
As wills subjected; formed in the division
Of labor"

L.Z.
from "A"-9 (23)

The inclusion of poetic artifacts, often doggerel, reveals these Index essays to be the work of a poet, not to mention the editor of the unpublished Workers' Anthology and A Test of Poetry. Zukofsky uses this quatrain to illustrate the particular historic quandary faced by a congregation modernizing its house of worship with the addition of a cast-iron stove or foot-warmer:

Extinct the sacred fire of love
Our zeal grown cold and dead
In the house of God we fix a stove
To warm us in their stead. (77, 176)

In another instance, the poet and future translator offers a cleverly rhyming version of a stove-maker's signature couplet. "Baron Stiegel ist der Mann / Der die ofen Machen Kann" becomes: "Bard Stiegel is the cove / Who can make an iron stove" (44, 175). The acknowledged "Briticism" Zukofsky supplies to preserve the rhyme means fellow or man. This use of illustrative period verse carries out the convictions expressed in Zukofsky's A Test of Poetry that poetry "is one of the arts--sometimes individual, sometimes collective in origin--and reflects economic and social status of peoples . . . " (99) and that ". . . Good poetry is definite information on the subject dealt with . . . " (89).

On several instances, Zukofsky observes the simple fact that "the majority of craftsmen and their masters left no personal record." Of itself unremarkable, the observations anticipate Zukofsky's own courting of a kind of anonymity in his Autobiography and his use of his own initials and those of family members throughout "A":

> The ironwork and the industry they established tell the story of most of them. Occasionally their names were engraved or stamped on an object, most often only their initials. (43)
>
> Like most of the American designers of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, the majority of craftsmen who worked in tin remain anonymous. There exist only the wares they made and some few traditions connected with these . . . . (77)
>
> As a poet I have always felt that the work says all there needs to be said of one's life. (Autobiography 5)

The craft object or poem should apparently speak for itself, saying all that need be said, and the artist contents himself with a simple "L.Z." This reflects not only an effacement of the artist as person but also relates to Zukofsky's well-known positions on the sincerity of good craft. In a remarkable passage from the radio script, "Remmey and Crolius Stoneware," Zukofsky suggests that the high-quality craftsmanship of the object itself confirms the good character of its maker:

> . . . Mr. Z. do we have so much faith in the accuracy of Clarkson Crolius' statement on the origin of his pottery?
> Mr. Z.: - For one thing, no authorities have denied it. And, if for no other reason, we will see when we presently look at his work, that he must have been sincerely interested in the tradition of the craftsmen he followed.(226)

In a similar fashion, after paying Duncan Phyfe the high compliment of calling him "a distinguished and sincere craftsman," Zukofsky notes that while Phyfe declined to sit for a portrait, the furniture Phyfe made substitutes:

> And the symbol of his career is almost summed up in the horizontal curves of his table tops, chairs, seats and sofas. . . . His best art, like his time, was given over to order and freedom, simultaneously as it were. Phyfe's furniture reflects the virtues of his life and age. (211)

It is but a few steps from this celebration of the immutable artifact to the poetic animation of history suggested in these lines:

> Mr. Zukofsky: - In objects which men made and used, people live again. The touch of carving to the hand revivifies the hand that made it. (166)

which cannot help but recall: "Measure, tacit is. / The dead hand shapes / An idea . . ." ("A"-12, 131).

Of course, the first half of "A"-9 has long been celebrated as a masterfully Objectivist exercise in reanimation. Its speaking objects are introduced with the lines: "So that were the things

words they could say: . . . ." (106), in a section Zukofsky likely completed in November 1939. This passage from the "Remmey and Crolius" script, completed in February 1940, provides an interesting context and points to a possible source for "A"-9's masterful conceit:

> If the stoneware shown on our Index plates could speak, like Omar Khayyám's pots, they would say: "'Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?' It doesn't matter really which Crolius or Remmey made us. The tradition is unbroken. (228)

The Persian poet, whose Rubáiyat was famously translated by Edward FitzGerald and included in Zukofsky's A Test of Poetry, also wrote of handicrafts that speak for themselves. Did the Index research lead to "A"-9? Did the decision to include Omar Khayyám quatrains in A Test of Poetry predate the Index? Perhaps it does not matter; Zukofsky participates in a tradition that is unbroken.

The pertinent biographical and bibliographical information can be summarized concisely. From January 1934 to March 1935, Zukofsky worked for a Civil Work Administration program doing research at Columbia University; he then moved to another Federal job, where according to his (April 8, 1935) letter to Ezra Pound, he worked as a "feature and continuity writer and special researchist for WNYC, the Municipal Broadcasting Station of the City of New York" (Pound 166). His employment by the FAP on the Index probably began as early as January 1936; letters confirm that by December 7, 1937 Zukofsky was actively engaged in historical research. Of the surviving writings, his first essay "American Ironwork," is dated August 27, 1938; the last, April 28, 1939; the first radio script, November 16, 1939; the last radio research piece, April 4, 1940. Those readers interested in tracing correspondences between Index work and Zukofsky's other contemporaneous writings should refer to "Year by Year Bibliography of Louis Zukofsky," by Celia Zukofsky, or A Catalogue of the Louis Zukofsky Manuscript Collection, by Marcella Booth. Key Zukofsky works include A Test of Poetry (1935-1940); "Modern Times," "Arise, Arise," "A"-8 (August 1935-July 1937), First Half of "A"-9 (1938-1939), and "Aids and Restatement for the First Half of 'A'-9" (subsequently omitted from "A").

The manuscripts that this volume presents were all conserved by Louis Zukofsky and sent to the archive at the University of Texas. The initial essays required the least editorial intervention. An Index typist had produce clean copies, with minor corrections in pen, which bear Zukofsky's signature and a date signifying he had proofread them. Beginning with the third radio script, "A Pair of New York Water Pitchers," I worked from holographic manuscript in Zukofsky's hand, sometimes heavily revised. These later works, produced near the completion of Zukofsky's Index tenure, are thus not edited to the standard of the initial essays. I have made no effort to conceal this.

Errors of spelling, obvious internal inconsistencies, and other mechanical infelicities have been silently corrected. Except where confusion might arise, antiquated or obsolete usages (eg. "adaption") have been retained in the spirit of the text and as indicative of Zukofsky's erudition. Inconsistent usage has in most cases been resolved in favor of the more contemporary usage. Informal spellings such as "thruout" have been retained if consistent; when possible the preference has been confirmed with the style in other published writings. Zukofsky's use of two elipsis points to indicate omissions within quotations has been modernized. In the cases of questionable or marginally legible passages, the original manuscripts as Texas have been consulted. In the infrequent instances when a passage was reconstructed or based partially on conjecture, I have bracketed it. I have allowed Zukofsky's preference for parentheses to mark the editorial insertion within a quotation to stand, so as to distinguish his insertions from my editorial modifications. Other changes or questionable readings are addressed in the endnotes.

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