Journal of American Studies, **42** (2008), 1, 141–147 © 2008 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0021875807004410 Printed in the United Kingdom

Review Essay
Art as Diplomacy

DOUGLAS TALLACK

Art in America: 300 Years of Innovation, curators Susan Davidson, Elizabeth Kennedy and Nancy Mowll Mathews, Shanghai Museum, 1 May to 30 June 2007.

Robert Henri may, or may not, have been aware that in 1911, three years before he completed *Chinese Lady*, the Qing Dynasty fell. But knowing that the turmoil of reform in China in the 1900s dramatically overshadowed the age of reform in the United States in the same period prompts a contemporary comparison. After all, the American century that got properly underway following World War I could well be succeeded by the Chinese century. The relative scale of their respective prehistories is evident in the three hundred years covered by Art in America, compared with the five thousand years of exhibits in the permanent collection of the Shanghai Museum. The extent of routine mobile phone use in Number 1, 2 and 3 galleries of the Shanghai Museum probably tells us something of what is to come, as well.

Art in America is the first comprehensive survey of American art to exhibit in mainland China, and it came to the economic hothouse that is Shanghai after opening in Beijing at the National Museum of Fine Arts. There are echoes in the show's national narrative, cued as it is to the four hundredth anniversary of the Jamestown settlement, of the cultural campaigns of the Cold War. The exhibition is on a "diplomatic mission", according to the introductory wall caption. Yet there is far more national self-criticism in 2007 than in the exhibitions that toured the US and Europe in the 1950s; there needs to be, if bridges are to be rebuilt across the world in the desperate aftermath of a military victory in Iraq. Colonization and westward expansion thematically link paintings by Gustavus Hesselius (*Tishcohan*, 1735), Benjamin West (*Penn's Treaty with the Indians*, 1771–72), George Caleb Bingham (*Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap*, 1851–52) and William Matthew Prior (*Young Boy Holding a Bow and Arrow with a Drum on the Floor*, 1856). While George Innes's *Twilight* (*c.*1860), Albert Bierstadt's *Sierra Nevada* (*c.*1871) and Martin Johnson Heade's *Newburyport Marshes: Approaching Storm* (*c.*1871), which all depict versions of American pastoral or the sublime, are countered, on the wall opposite Gallery Number 1, by John Weir's *The Gun Foundry* (1866), with its

Douglas Tallack is Professor of American Studies and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004410 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hellish scenes of molten iron and exploited workers; Charles M. Russell's scene of cruelty in *Wild Horse Hunters* (1913); and Frederick S. Remington's depiction of end-of-epoch weariness, *The Fall of the Cowboy* (1895). There are also some quite shocking paintings that rarely figure in surveys of American art. Joe Jones's *White Justice* (*American Justice*) (1933) shows, in a naive style, a Ku Klux Klan lynching of a bare-breasted black woman, her house burning in the background. Thomas Hart Benton's neglected *American Historical Epic* (*Second Chapter*) (1924–27) is a heightened mix of reactionary populism, lasciviousness and technological advance. It is difficult to say whether its five panels portray an epic of progress or of regress into barbarism. And then there is the implied militarism of *The Unveiling of the Statue of Liberty: Enlightening the World* (1886), by Edward P. Moran. Events of the American century that, some would maintain, got under way two decades before World War I, with imperialist adventures in the Philippines, retrospectively inform and interestingly distort Moran's depiction of a celebratory event. It comes across more as a sea battle with smoke billowing out around the foot of Liberty.

Yet context works both ways to inform and distort. The evocative sunset of wavering stars and stripes in Frederic Edwin Church's *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861) is subtle, compared with the barrage – in so much Chinese art and life – of flags and other symbols of one-party nationalism seeking to control and harness Western capitalism in a much less liberal "great experiment." The astonishing economic, market-driven transformation going on in the street outside the Shanghai Museum – a sign of hope rather than fear for many Western, liberal eyes – gives an extra dimension to the goods coming ashore in the background of West's *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* and to the scene of local trade in Thomas Waterman Wood's *The Yankee Pedlar* (1872).

As noted, the curators have made an effort to include a large number of overlooked works, including one by Yun Gee, an immigrant from Guangdong Province who set up the Chinese Revolutionary Artists Club in San Francisco in 1926. His seven-foot-high *Wheels: Industrial New York* (1932) is a strange mix of skyscrapers, industrial plant, out-of-scale graffiti, an airplane out of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and a circling group of polo-players, who resemble circus warriors on horses. Yun Gee's painting is also one of the few paintings to show abstraction and representationalism competing with each other to convey the material base and sheer superstructural energy of modernity in America. Elsewhere, the art-historical story jumps too abruptly from realism to modernism, from Frank Benson's *Lady Trying on a Hat* (*The Black Hat*) (1904) and the Impressionist variants of Childe Hassan, Ernest Lawson and Robert Reid, to Lionel Feininger and Max Weber. This is largely because the works chosen to represent the Ashcan School are not in the mode of George Bellows's almost "flat" but extraordinarily exciting painterly explosion, *New York* (1911), but of William Glackens's Victorian interior scene, *The Shoppers*, of 1907–8. And ethnically interesting though they are, Henri's portraits, *Chinese Woman* and *Gregorita* (n.d.), needed, for company, his *Street Scene with Snow* (*57th Street NYC*) (1902), in which modernist formal techniques are enlisted as appropriate for street scenes rendered indistinct by a concoction of industrial smoke, adverse weather and buildings that inconveniently block a clear point of view. Instead, we jump from the society portraits of Frederick Frieseke, Richard E. Miller and John Singer Sargent to Marsden Hartley's *Painting No 50* (1914–15) and onward to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004410 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the post-Impressionism of Maurice Prendergast, and then to a Georgia O'Keeffe closeup, *Red Poppy VI* from 1928.

In the story of politics-and-aesthetics that Art in America relates more obliquely than did the Cold War exhibitions of half a century ago, abstraction is very favourably treated. There is a passing comment, reminiscent of mid-twentieth-century accounts of the non-ideological independence of the Abstract Expressionists. A swipe is taken, in a wall caption in the gallery containing Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, at

> regionalist realism … identified, after World War Two, as an ideology as well as a style, with some works reflecting a detested propagandist agenda. Consequently, abstraction triumphed over all expressions of modernity, and, ironically, came also to be understood as a political belief that was illustrative of freedom of expression in a democratic society.

There is, though, an arbitrary quality to the Abstract Expressionist works in the exhibition that undermines such a claim. Jackson Pollock's *Number 18* (1950) is so delicate, so personal and so very small that there must have been a great deal of paint, as well as democratic expression, left on his garage floor. None of Rothko's enveloping sombreness is on show in his one painting, and therefore he comes across as a too smiling and acquiescent contributor to the triumph of American art. Some of Clyfford Still's intimations of violence are conveyed by the jagged landscape of *Untitled* (1964), while an untitled work by Franz Kline of 1952 hints at a convergence of Chinese hieroglyphics and Western abstraction. Art in America reflects the canonical status of these mid-century, late Modernists, but gives ample credit for the first innovations to the equally varied period of early American Modernism: Max Weber's dynamically clashing shapes in *Rush-Hour New York* (1915), Charles Demuth's *Welcome to Our City* (1921), Archibald J. Motley, Jr.'s *Saturday Night* (1935) and Arthur Dove's *Alfie's Delight* (1929) stand out. Only Edward Hopper, with *Dawn in Pennsylvania* (1942), can live with these Modernists.

The incidence of text in artworks that becomes such an explicit interest in American art with Demuth, but also Stuart Davis and other Modernists, appears in very different form much earlier, for instance in Richard Goodwin's *Wild Game in the Kitchen* (1855), with an almanac from 1822 prominently featured. The line of visual experimentation runs through the 1890s trompe l'oeil painters, John Frederick Peto and William Harnett, though none of their curious works are included, and through many of the Ashcan artists, in whose works we can discern the shift from texts as part of the scene painted to painted text. Demuth's *Welcome to Our City* is the clearest link in this exhibition, though, between early Modernist experimentation with the meaning of letters and words in visual art to the full-on use of text as art.

The New York conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner has experimented throughout his career with different locations, with the coincidence of title and artwork, and with translations into different languages. *To See and Be Seen* (1972) attracted attention because of the site-specific alterations. The words run vertically up a pillar in Gallery Number 2, but on a different side of the pillar the work incorporates a Chinese translation:

视而为人所视

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004410 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These Chinese characters carry at least the following variations:

What you see is also seen by others,

or

You see others and you are seen by others.

Arguably, the greatest interest in the English phrase is the causal connection in the word "and", but in Chinese there is greater ambiguity and richness, though the subject matter – language – potentially allows for expansion of meanings, even in advance of these latest two moves of translation (into Chinese) and relocation (to a new place, the Shanghai Museum).

The grand intercultural comparisons and contrasts initiated by a major American art exhibition coming to China in its period of contradictory opening up can coalesce around an artwork such as Weiner's. And around Roy Lichtenstein's *GRRRRRRRRRR!!* (1965). It was intriguing to stand in front of this cartoon-style depiction of a fierce wolf, with the sound it is apparently making included, in visual written form, in the image, as well as on the title caption, and hear Chinese visitors articulating the sound made by a threatening wolf. It sounded nothing like "grrrrrrrrrr" to me.

It is hardly surprising that there has been a coming together of an ancient Chinese tradition of calligraphy, which embraces the confluence of pictographic, ideographic and arbitrary signs, and an interest in text as image. Reviews of Art in America in Shanghai newspapers, and commentary from academics, have remarked on the interest in this tradition, and the overlapping one of collage and assemblage, represented in this exhibition by Robert Rauschenberg's *Barge* (1962). In a review of Art in America in the *Oriental Morning Post*, Chen Yi reports that when

> asked about the artwork that has left the deepest impression on them, a group of faculty members from Shandong College of Art and Design mention in unison the work of Robert Rauschenberg. Standing in front of the "Barge", they were brought back to the "trend of 1985", when Chinese artists were tired of the Russian tradition and were eager to seek inspiration from modern Western art. To further propel such a trend, Robert Rauschenberg held his solo exhibitions in Beijing and Lhasa in succession. After a brief moment of shock, young Chinese artists retraced the path of more than one hundred years of Western modern art within a short period of time, a process comparable to the American borrowing of Parisian impressionism.[1]

The sheer sweep of Art in America, with its desire to inform and to explain the United States to a new and important audience, can only prepare for subsequent stages in a most welcome cultural interaction. Individual Chinese and American artists, particularly since the 1980s, are turning out to have a good deal in common, as vanguard cities such as Shanghai and New York confront local and global imperatives, as the contradictory politics and aesthetics of city and country

[1] Chen Yi, "300 Years of American Art," *Oriental Morning Post*, 17 May 2007, http://www.hwxart.com. Excerpt translated by Wang Lei. I would like to thank Wang Lei for his research on reception of the exhibition, and for his assistance, and Xinwei Sun, also of Shanghai International Studies University, for his assistance in analysing *To See and Be Seen*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004410 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in both countries intersect, and as the fascinating story of ancient Chinese writing starts to teach lessons to American postmodern experimenters with word and image.

For further information on this exhibition see:
http://www.shanghaimuseum.net/en/special/juti.asp?id=14,
http://english.cri.cn/4026/2007/02/09/164@194780.htm

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875807004410 Published online by Cambridge University Press