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Jennifer L. Roberts (ed.), *Scale*

Charlotte Gould



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REFERENCES

Jennifer L. Roberts (ed.), *Scale*. vol. 2 of Terra Foundation Essays (Chicago, Paris: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 256 p., ISBN 978-09-321-7160-3

- 1 *Scale* is the second volume of the Terra Foundation Essays, a series conceived to explore general key concepts concerning American art. With other titles thus far including *Picturing*, *Experience*, and *Circulation*, this second instalment concentrates on an apparently subordinate subject, yet one which proves a wholly effective prism to discuss American experiments with the scaling up and down of art. Indeed, artistic practice is here set against a background defined by persistent dreams of expansion, whether territorial, economic, or of influence. The volume includes a very convincing introduction by the editor, six uniformly strong and gripping essays by Glenn Adamson, Wendy Bellion, Wouter Davidts, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Christopher P. Heuer, Joshua G. Stein, and Jason Weems, and eighty colour illustrations.
- 2 The very elusiveness of the concept of scale makes for a fascinating collection on a concept which proves central rather than auxiliary to the study of art. Indeed, and as Jennifer L. Roberts points out, scale is what vision needs to free itself from in order to operate properly and to be able to take it all in. There is no such thing as a primary visual experience of size for physiological reasons, and this is compounded by a long Western pictorial tradition which has aimed at keeping things recognizable rather than in correspondence to their relative sizes. The invention of photography in the 19th century gave the concept its modern inscription, both for art itself, but also for the myriad reproductions used to study art history as a subject. Jennifer L. Roberts quotes Craig Owens who famously observed, concerning the common disconnect between art and the scale of its subject, that: “Art history is, of course, not the history of works of art; it’s the history of slides of works of art.” The jocular remark does point to the relevance of fidelity to size as a criterion for the study of visual culture, precisely

because it is also often considered irrelevant. Digital technology has also recently reframed the notion of scale. The point of the authors is here to re-introduce this relational concept in the domain of art history, after it has consistently had a propensity to discard it in the process of representation. The volume aims to contribute to the development of a scalar critique specific to the study of American art and visual culture. American art is addressed here in particular because, while scale is a physical element of information, it is also a cultural one. Whether politically, intellectually or artistically, the United States always intervene on a particular scale. The relational nature of scale therefore makes it an apt concept to explore notions of standardisation, hierarchy of genre or of culture, variation, but also conflict.

- 3 The first chapter, Glenn Adamson and Joshua G. Stein's "Imprints: Scale and the Maker's Trace" (p. 28-63), uses the premise that an imposing size, whether ironic or in earnest, has recently become a competitive advantage for contemporary artists and the norm for many mid-career practices. Still, while it is widespread, audiences and critics are given little information on how this is achieved. By looking into the processes of scaling up, the authors approach gigantism less as mythologizing power than as structure. Their epistemological take on size focuses on the translations operated to achieve either a seamless and seemingly effortless result (Jeff Koons, Anish Kapoor) or one which deflates the pretensions of grand artistic gestures (Urs Fischer).
- 4 We are all familiar with Mount Rushmore, if only from Alfred Hitchcock's use of the colossal sculptures as a backdrop to the intrigue of *North by North-West*. In the second chapter (p. 66-102), Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby looks at Gutzon Borglum's earlier (failed) attempt at sculpting a Confederate monument directly onto a mountain at Stone Mountain. This adumbration of his 1941 realisation on Mount Rushmore was the locus of many technical experimentations which Borglum would learn from. Grigsby had explored Franco-American rivalries of scale in her 2012 book *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower and Panama Canal* and is a specialist of these grand enterprises. Striking about Borglum's project was of course its impressive scale, but also the many comparisons the sculptor made with the Egyptian Sphynx, justifying the decision to use dynamite to carve the mountain because he was—should we understand "sadly"—in a situation where ancient Egyptian slaves could not be used... a thinly-veiled euphemistic way of speaking about the black slaves who were no longer available to Borglum in the 1920s. It was indeed both because he did believe in white supremacy, as well as through opportunism, that he joined the KKK at the time of this commission by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The relationship with this incendiary patron eventually broke down and Borglum sabotaged his work. Still, this lesser-known, unsuccessful, and politically dubious experiment in the colossal later allowed for the success of Mount Rushmore in terms of technicality and legibility.
- 5 In the third chapter (p. 106-143), Jason Weems analyses the many bird's eye views taken of the Yards, Chicago's infamous meatpacking district, a new effort to visualise an industrial redefinition of scale which Weems calls an "out-of-scale modernity" (p. 111). The pictures were used for celebratory guidebooks as well as for new, more damning, sociological accounts. The abstracting force of this immensity, the author demonstrates, had dire consequences both for the workers and the animals. He presents the early 20th century as the moment when the human authority exercised on the world through scale was compromised after factories had served as symbols for a

new ambition for human dominance through a panoptic mastery, which was a dehumanising one.

- 6 Wouter Davidts then turns to the work of Barnett Newman (p. 146-177) whose name became synonymous with large-scale painting in the post-war era, and who mysteriously declared that “size doesn’t count. It’s scale that counts.” Newman’s work is explored here in his paintings, in his writings, but also in a few photographs taken by his photographer friends (Namuth, Liberman, Mulas) and which he controlled rigorously. The control exerted over the representation of his artistic persona is read here as a response to the public and critical misunderstanding he faced and which had him quit painting altogether for a while after he was accused of having carried abstraction to its extreme conclusion—when he himself did not read his work as abstract at all. The staged photos focused on himself standing in the gallery to look at his finished work rather than at work in the studio. The relation between the art and the artist’s gaze, either standing very close to a very large canvas, or looking at it from above, is what matters to Newman, not posture or the construction of a persona. Davidts interprets these staged photos as a way for the artist to set the record straight, to demonstrate that his concern is not with the size of his paintings but with scale, and therefore with an actual content rather than with its negation.
- 7 In “Arctic Matters in Early America” (p. 180-214), Christopher P. Heuer describes early expeditions in quest of the Northwest passage—and of precious ore which proved to be just mica, or fool’s gold—and provides the account and plural views of an iceberg given by one of the sailors. These confirm that the Arctic was not then considered a landscape, that it was not seen as stable, and was instead a non-place, neither continent, nor sea, nor the effect of the weather. The absence of a clear background also means an absence of scale which makes for a difficult legibility, but also an interesting shift in paradigm.
- 8 Wendy Bellion concludes the collection with a comprehensive panorama of the use of huge wooden or metal poles in late colonial New York. Her chapter (p. 218-249) on liberty poles before and after the War of Independence, their rise and fall, and their rhetoric very much has to do with scale, a scale on a par with that of the transatlantic crisis and that can contribute to a shift in power.
- 9 Central to any investigation of scale is of course the human figure against which it is measured. This rich volume provides fascinating historical and artistic cases to analyse the very centrality of this concept in the American context. All the while though, it also encompasses recent theories which have tried to decentre the human, a more recent approach successfully applied here when a post-nature condition is addressed or when the presence of animals contributes to reassessing the centrality of a human, also generally white and male, point of view on the world. This is one of the many reasons why *Scale* will both be a reference for the specialists of American art, and appeal to a much wider readership with an interest in the political and cultural implications of how we choose to see the world.

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Keywords: scale, size, proportionality, sculpture, photography, United States

Mots-clés: échelle, taille, proportions, sculpture, photographie, Etats-Unis

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