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Editorial

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Editorial

Anne Lafont

- 1 With its special issues devoted to the history of art as it is practiced in different countries, *Perspective* has set itself two objectives: to abandon the geography of art based on the exclusive and partly obsolete concept of the nation-state (Europe, just like the Middle East, the Americas and the Balkans and Kurdistan, today covers political and/or territorial entities as meaningful as Switzerland and Spain)¹ and, furthermore, to question the notion of cultural hierarchy existing between center and peripheries in our globalized world of art and art history.
- 2 This issue of our journal – devoted to the United States – is, paradoxically, the first step in this process of updating a questioning of the discipline and of adjusting it to the geopolitical realities in which both the agents and the objects of art history are evolving. This, it seems to me, means shaking off both of the inherited eighteenth- and nineteenth-century categories that operate when constructing a discourse on art, namely: the regional territory as a measure and an end of the history of works and artists, and Europe as an agent in determining universal artistic canons via museums.
- 3 After Canada and Brazil,² which represented the first extra-European foray for *Perspective* – the journal had started out by exploring countries near France's borders³ – we turn our attention to the United States as the third cultural and linguistic element in the issues of our journal devoted to the Americas. Crafted in a territory of multiple temporalities and bridging two oceans, the history of art as practiced in the United States thus presents several characteristics in the production of historical and critical knowledge of art.
- 4 The papers collected in this issue reflect a desire for renewal through explorations of digital techniques while also being inscribed in the plurality of sites of knowledge that undermines notions of the pre-eminence of one coast over another, of one metropolis over any other. Finally, researchers show clear evidence of the critical responsibility imposed by their use of the current *lingua franca*. However, the project of presenting the state of art history in the United States is overly ambitious from the outset given that the country functions on a continental scale; we have, therefore, focused on a certain number of themes.⁴

- 5 To start with, we wished to draw on these historiographical studies to show various aspects of American art that are often unknown – at least in France – ranging from the Pre-Columbian period up to contemporary art (Elvan Zabunyan), by way of the colonial era. Also, though generally confined to the margins of canonical surveys, it is worth recognizing the extremely interesting production of decorative art objects, such as tobacco boxes from around 1800, the characteristic American quilts and the rich production of urban photographs (see the debate moderated by Wendy Bellion, as well as articles by Janneken Smucker, Katherine Bussard, Alison Fisher, and Greg Foster-Rice). Similarly, work from Amerindian communities and by Afro-American artists is highlighted through the substantial articles discussing the research and exhibitions generated by these artworks throughout the twentieth century (Janet C. Berlo, Richard J. Powell), while Californian arts and the production of the Pacific area emerge, thanks to studies by Judith Delfiner, Dana Leibsohn, and JoAnne M. Mancini, as expanding fields of research devoted to objects that are still relatively unknown.
- 6 We also wanted to give voice to scholars who most thoroughly question the ambitions and potential pitfalls of the global turn not only in our discipline's discourse, but also in museographic attitudes to art: this was the remit of Serge Guilbaut's contribution. The papers gathered here represent scholars' enthusiasm over a long period and resonate with the cultural stratification, either violent or consensual, of the indigenous, displaced, and immigrant populations particular to the United States. If we acknowledge that the history of art before World War II was not closely implicated in a textual production charged with transmitting national ideologies – unlike European art history of the same period – this original feature may have facilitated acceptance of theoretical and political challenges characteristic of globalization today. Given that this narrative was neither homogeneous nor linear "from the beginning," it was able to develop and forge a field outside the discourse of art as an aesthetic manifestation of the spirit of a place and/or people. The article by Caroline A. Jones and Steven Nelson, important from both a historical and theoretical standpoint, as well as the reflections of Susan Bielstein, an editor at the forefront of international research and, by definition, able to influence the course of our globally collaborative (rather than standardized) thinking, certainly contribute to the current examination of a possible global art history.
- 7 However, these questions relating to globalization do not exhaust the numerous theoretical issues that animate the world of art history. The interview with James Elkins is the best proof of this: his explorations are varied and have often been the source of major trends. Veerle Thielemans offers an illustrative summary of recent work concerned with a renewed definition of spectatorship through theories of affect and the study of the materiality of artworks. Finally, the art historian most involved in the current developments of research regarding sexuality, Amelia Jones, aims in her contribution to address the political heart of theoretical questions.
- 8 We have also chosen to examine experiments in digital art history, which echo the globalization of the academic world, since the issue of access to sources and – if not to art works themselves – their reproductions is redefining issues relating to the size of audiences, publics, readerships, and users on an international scale. Digital art history is also reformulating – sometimes, but not always, as we can see from reading the group debate launched by Francesca Rose – the discipline's terms and objectives. For some time now, sponsorships and private institutions such as the Getty Research

Institute have taken a particular interest in supporting and funding initiatives in the digital domain. Furthermore, the study of public grants, in particular through the National Endowment for the Humanities and private research funding (especially for American art), allows us to detect their proactive cultural strategies, as the articles by Elizabeth Mansfield and Michael Leja both demonstrate, while at the same time offering a historical perspective.⁵ The French art historian Henri Focillon was a committed promoter – in the middle of the adversity of war – of a transatlantic sharing of knowledge. In 1942 in New York, where he had taken refuge and where he collaborated in founding the *École libre des hautes études*, he vigorously praised political and aesthetic diversity, in words that offer a striking opening to this issue: “The scourge that threatens the world is not merely servitude, but the monotony of the mind. Thinking the same way, creating identical mechanisms, treating man in series, abolishing that precious touch of difference that always in some way corrects and colors the rigor of uniformity, that is the aim, the technique of totalitarian regimes that aim to neutralize, to replace the fertile life of the intelligence with a false unity of method.”⁶

NOTES

1. *Perspective*, 2006-2 for Switzerland and 2009-2 for Spain.
2. *Perspective*, 2008-3 for Canada and 2013-2 for Brazil.
3. *Perspective*, 2007-2 for Great Britain and 2010/2011-4 for Netherlands.
4. We were not interested in publishing articles by specialists in French art, the Italian Renaissance, Classical Antiquity, or Pablo Picasso, since these researchers are already our interlocutors. Instead, we took advantage of this opportunity to demonstrate that there is a milieu of American art historians based in France, thanks both to the networks of the Terra Foundation for American Art, whose European headquarters are in Paris, and through the mediation of researchers producing remarkable work.
5. For nineteenth-century American landscapes, see the recent article by David Peters Corbett, who has already introduced the readers of *Perspective* to this defining form of American artistic production: “Painting American Frontiers: ‘Encounter’ and the Borders of American Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art,” in *Perspective*, 1, 2013, p. 129-152.
6. “Le fléau qui menace le monde, ce n’est pas seulement la servitude, c’est la monotonie de l’esprit. Penser pareil, former des mécaniques identiques, traiter l’homme en séries, anéantir cette précieuse touche de différence qui toujours par quelque côté corrige et colore la rigueur de l’unanimité, voilà le but, voilà la technique des totalitaires [qui tendent] à neutraliser, à substituer à la vie féconde de l’intelligence une fausse unité de méthode” (Henri Focillon, extract from a talk delivered at the inaugural session of the *École libre des hautes études* in New York, on March 18, 1942 and published posthumously in *Témoignage pour la France*, New York, 1945, p. 116-117).