

Eccentric, realist, populist, procedural (Berlin, 18–19 May 18)

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 18.–19.05.2018

Eingabeschluss : 30.10.2017

Larne Abse Gogarty, Institut für Kunst- und Bilgeschichte

Eccentric, realist, populist, procedural: the politics of figuration in American Art 1929-1980.

Keynote speakers: Darby English and Andrew Hemingway

This conference addresses figuration in American art as a broad tendency that encompasses representational approaches as well as artworks that are underpinned by the human figure in a procedural sense, even where the body might appear obscure or highly mediated. Through the periodisation of this conference, the aim is to address figuration in relation to various flashpoints of social crisis in the United States, beginning with the impetus towards realism and its variants including social surrealism during the Depression, and then traversing towards the mid-century moment when American abstract art gained global prominence at the onset of the Cold War. Despite marking an apparent erasure of the figure, we know that non-representational artworks continued to be read in relation to the body in the 1950s-1960s, whether positively as in Harold Rosenberg's analysis of action painting, or negatively as in Michael Fried's accusations of a lurking anthropomorphism within minimalist sculpture. Through the 1960s and 1970s, the figure persisted in a whole range of new painting, sculpture and performance practices from Ed Kienholz's assemblages to Romare Bearden's collages to Paul Thek's wax sculptures to Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P. series, all of which went beyond a strictly representational or realist paradigm and instead sought out mimetic and/or highly mediated ways of approaching the figure. Moreover, the post-war period also raises questions of geography and artists' groups, such as the dogged persistence of artists working with eccentric and skewed forms of figuration in Chicago from the 1950s.

Across this fifty year period, the meaning and critical purchase of figuration became a contested ground for debate. On the one hand, it was associated with regression and the irrational, and on the other, with progress and the rational. Although such views cannot be assigned a fixed political value, figuration does not stand as a neutral category within this history. This conference seeks to explore such issues in relation to the various struggles over who counts as human during this period, and to consider how artists working with the figure engaged with this, in both reactionary and critical modes. How did figuration act as a means to humanise, or conversely de-humanise individuals and social groups? Such debates took shape within a variety of politico-historical conjunctures, from the leftist Cultural Front to the black arts movement, from Cold War debates around humanism to artists producing work in opposition to the Vietnam War. And following on from this, how has representation of the human figure frequently been situated as a responsibility to bear, or conversely, a burden to shed, within struggles around race, class, sexuality and gender in the United States?

We welcome papers that engage with the above issues. Further topics and questions for discussion include:

- Art historical and theoretical debates on realism, expressionism and surrealism in American art.
- Abjection, violence and the figure in relation to race, gender and sexuality.
- Debates on humanism / anti-humanism / Marxist-humanism / post-humanism and art during this period.
- Critical responses prompted by exhibitions and practices which sought to advocate or present a "return to figuration", such as New Images of Man (MoMA 1959).
- Nationalism, populism and figuration: how has artistic practice served to model an idealised national subject, or conversely to disrupt such populist notions?
- The impact of popular culture and lifestyle choices on artistic engagements with the figure during this period, within and beyond Pop Art.
- Figuration and the politics of pleasure.
- Literary theories of the narrative, allegory and metaphor and how these have been taken up within art history and theory.
- Performance and figuration: how have the various theorisations of performance via painting, sculpture and theatre produced different understandings of the place of the corporeal?
- Art and conceptions of "human nature" during this period in the United States.

Please send proposals of 500 words maximum for papers of 20 minutes by the deadline of Monday 30th October 2017, together with a short biography of 100 words maximum, to Larne Abse Gogarty at larne.abse.gogarty@hu-berlin.de

The conference is organised by Dr Larne Abse Gogarty, the Terra Foundation for American Art Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at the Institut für Kunst- und Bildgeschichte der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

The conference is generously funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Quellennachweis:

CFP: Eccentric, realist, populist, procedural (Berlin, 18-19 May 18). In: ArtHist.net, 19.09.2017. Letzter Zugriff 23.10.2025. <<https://arthist.net/archive/16129>>.