

Narratives about American Art (Berlin, 24-26 May 07)

Winfried Fluck

CONFERENCE

Narratives about American Art

Berlin, May 24-26, 2007

An International Conference

organized by the John F. Kennedy Institute for American Studies, Berlin
and the Terra Foundation for American Art

<http://jfki.fu-berlin.de>

Conference Theme:

Narratives provide the framework and essential justification for interpreting individual art objects and give them meaning and significance in a larger context. They supply key premises which guide interpretive choices and conclusions. In effect, without such narratives we would have no object of interpretation: an exhibition or a book presenting unrelated objects without any narrative link would be considered pointless. Even where critics argue that art objects do not simply affirm one of these narratives but subvert or question them through their aesthetic strategies, the narrative framework itself nevertheless remains the organizing principle of the argument and decisively influences the way in which the interpreter approaches a particular work.

In this context, it appears of crucial importance for an understanding of historic American art and its assessment to analyze, compare, and historicize the narratives that continue to shape perceptions of American art before 1945: the melodrama of neglect in which American art of that period struggles against the fate of provinciality; the "Voyage of Life"-narrative, in which culture goes through stages of infancy, growth, and maturity; the liberal narrative of American exceptionalism, now reappropriated by triumphant neoconservative versions of an American mission; the "democratic art"-narrative designed to highlight American art's potential for dehierarchization and a vernacular modernism; the "visual culture" narrative, in which the role of art in the naturalization of power stands at the center; the multicultural narrative of American diversity intent on providing recognition for minority expressions; and,

most recently, an emerging transnational narrative that emphasizes the increasingly borderless nature of American culture and, in its most radical versions, claims that there is no such thing as an American art.

Each narrative of American art offers distinct reasons why we should study American art and what we can hope to gain (or lose) by doing so. We therefore invite contributions to the following topics:

- a) Canons as results of narrativization, revisions as acts of re-narrativization: analyses of narratives that have shaped canons and canon revisions in the study of American art.
- b) American exceptionalism and its disciplinary legacy: what are the disciplinary consequences of the current critique of exceptionalism? Is a plausible, non-triumphant and non-ideological exceptionalist narrative possible? Is there life after exceptionalism for American studies? On what other grounds can a specialization on American art and culture be justified?
- c) Transnational Studies as the solution? If national boundaries and identities are radically dissolved, where does that leave American art before 1945? Is there a danger that in drawing on a transnational context, the "metropolis vs. provinces" narrative will be revived?
- d) Alternative narratives: One potential problem for revisionist narratives like multiculturalism or transnationalism is that they do not necessarily entail aesthetic criteria. Is it possible (desirable) to come up with alternatives to exceptionalist narratives that are based neither on the idea of multiculturalism, nor on that of transnationalism? And what should be the aesthetic criteria on which to base a multicultural or transnational narrative?
- e) Resistance to narrativization: Narratives are generalizations, but much recent scholarship aims to resist generalizations that ignore difference. Can such studies focusing on the regional, the ethnically different, on gender difference, or on the inner contradictions of an artist's work, still be meaningfully discussed as narratives of American art, or do they present exemplary cases of resistance to narrativization that should serve as models for future studies of American art?

Conference Locations:

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN BERLIN
Am Sandwerder 17-19, 14109 Berlin
(S-Bahn Wannsee)

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN
JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT
Lansstr, 7-9, 14195 Berlin
(U-Bahn Dahlem Dorf)
AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Pariser Platz 4, Pariser Platz 4, 10117 Berlin
(S-Bahn Pariser Platz)

Program:

Friday 25

JOHN F. KENNEDY INSTITUTE, FREIE UNIVERSITÄT

9.00 AM Introduction by Winfried Fluck
(Freie Universität Berlin)

SESSION 1 AMERICAN ART AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Chair: Winfried Fluck (Freie Universität Berlin)

9.15 AM

John Davis (Smith College):

"Exceptionalism, Nationalism, Provincialism: Some Thoughts on
Historiography and Present Practices"

10.15 AM

Alan Wallach (College of William and Mary):

"The History of American Art and the End of American Exceptionalism"

11.15 AM Coffee Break

11.45 AM Jochen Wierich (Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art):

"The Quest for Essence in American Art: A German-American Collaboration"

12.45 AM Lunch

SESSION 2 AMERICAN ART AND VISUAL CULTURE / "BILDWISSENSCHAFT"

Chair: Ulla Haselstein (Freie Universität Berlin)

2.00 PM Michele Bogart (Stony Brook University):

"Down with the 'Low!': Unexceptionalism as American Art"

3.00 PM Michael Leja (University of Pennsylvania):

"A Narrative of Paradox: American Art and the Visual Cultures of Populism
and Commerce"

4.00 PM Coffee Break

4.30 PM W.J.T. Mitchell (University of Chicago):

"Dinosaurs, Deserts, and Terror: A Few American Stories"

WORKSHOP I

Chair: Bettina Friedl (Universität Hamburg)

5.30 PM Laura Bieger (Freie Universität Berlin):

"Both site and sight, image and location: Mediality, corporeality, and the

American landscape”

6.00 PM Edyta Freluk (University of Lublin, Poland):

“How American Is It? Thomas Hart Benton’s Social History of the United States”

6.30 PM Harald Klinke (Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe): “The Notion of Mimesis in American Art”

SATURDAY 26

JOHN F. KENNEDY INSTITUTE, FREIE UNIVERSITÄT

SESSION 3 AMERICAN ART AND SOCIAL/CULTURAL HISTORY

Chair: Heinz Ickstadt (Freie Universität Berlin)

9.00 AM Sarah Burns (Indiana University):

“Shifting Sands: Context in Context”

10.00 AM Ursula Frohne (Universität Köln):

“‘Homes for America’ Revisited: Typologies of Domestic Architecture and Consumer Culture in American Art”

11.00 AM Coffee Break

11.30 AM Andrew Hemingway (University College London):

“Resources of Critique: Marxist Histories of American Art”

12.30 AM Lunch

SESSION 4 TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Chair: Cynthia Mills (Smithsonian Washington)

2.00 PM Angela Miller (Washington University):

“Writing Across Borders: American Arts After Multiculturalism”

WORKSHOP II

3.00 PM Sieglinde Lemke (Universität Freiburg):

“Diaspora Aesthetics”

3.30 PM Susanne Scharf (Universität Frankfurt):

“In Favor of Contextualizing: Looking at Gertrude Fiske’s Revere Beach”

4.00 PM Coffee Break

4.30 PM Jennifer Raab (Yale University):

“Frederic Church and the Culture of Detail”

5.00 PM Bart Keeton (Duke University):

“Selling the American (?) Landscape Sublime: Western Aesthetics in Transnational Markets”

5.30 PM Peter Schneck (Universität Osnabrück):

“Just Show and Tell?: Black Faces, White Masks, and the Complexities of Iconographic Revision”

PUBLIC DEBATE

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE, PARISER PLATZ, PLENARSAAL

7.00 PM “Curating American Art in a transnational context. A Public Debate”

Chair: Veerle Thielemans (Terra Foundation)

Kathleen Adler (National Gallery London)

Stephan Koja (Österreichische Galerie Belvedere)

Pamela Kort (Freie Kuratorin, Berlin)

Ortrud Westheider (Bucerius Kunst-Forum)

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Registration Fee: 30 EUR / 15 EUR Single Day

Please register at kultur@zedat.fu-berlin.de

or directly at the conference.

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