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Bully Pulpit: Is American Art History Conservative?

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I find myself without much of a foothold in the question, “Is American art conservative?” How are we to understand the word “conservative” here? Is its meaning methodological? Political? Is there an implication that being “conservative” is a worse thing than not being conservative? And if so, why would that be the case? It may therefore be helpful to start by rephrasing the question: “When the field of American art history is being conservative, what is it that is being conserved?”

Stating the question in this way has the advantage of focusing our attention on the institutional and disciplinary work that has been involved in creating a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry called “American art.” This phrasing might also lead us to the conclusion that American art is by its very nature conservative, insofar as we owe the existence of the field to a process of gathering and conserving resources (departments, tenure lines, scholarships, collections, journals, professional associations, grants, foundations, etc.) that coincided with the rise of the postwar research university. If the latest College Art Association dissertation listings for North American art history are any indication (in 2014 there were 35 dissertations completed in this field and 168 in progress), there is no question this project has been a successful one. Would anyone argue that there is something called “American art” worth conserving?

As successful as American art has been in the academy, we are now at a certain distance from the era in which its institutional foundations were laid. From this vantage point the pressures to conserve the field may feel less urgent. The interests that fueled its rise seem more visible, and sometimes more troubling, than they once may have seemed. Whose “American art” was created? What were its motives? Such questions are not in short supply and they point to a healthy suspicion of foundations. As for myself, I cannot say for certain whether I am even an Americanist, and indeed I find it productive to work at the margins of the field, thinking more through categories like the “Atlantic” and the “early modern”, which do not map neatly onto the “American.”

On the other hand, amidst the present defunding of the humanities, the need to conserve them is felt with increasing pressure. I work in a large state research university whose adopted brand, “Driven to Discover,” speaks to the defining role the STEM disciplines have taken in the hunt for resources in higher education. My dean talks to state legislators and attempts to convince them that the humanities, like STEM subjects, are useful to society and will result in employable university graduates. Are we now in a situation where our priority must be to preserve the very existence of American art in the academy, even at the cost of reducing the humanities to their utilitarian value? Are we of necessity forced into a conservative mode? If this is the case, the institutional success of American art may put it in a better position than many other humanities

disciplines and subfields. Real objects and investments have been and continue to be made, and historians of American art are needed to conserve them. But in doing that work, rather than asking whether American art is conservative, we might do better to ask: What is worth conserving about American art?