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Americanist Questionnaire

Jenni Sorkin

It has now been over twenty years since John Davis wrote the most recent "State of the Field" essay on American art.¹ Published in *Art Bulletin* in 2003, Davis's essay offered a clear-eyed and thorough appraisal of our field's increasing maturity, set against the framework of the firm grip of American imperialism, or what was better known at that time as the nation's global reputation as a "superpower." The essay is an important touchstone in explicating the immediate revisionism present in Davis's generation, one composed of scholars who set about immediately unmaking and remaking the field that they inherited from a small, distinguished group of intellectuals, the first generation of Americanists to be hired into art history departments and to subsequently train doctoral students.

Today, twenty-one years later, American art has been dramatically upended and reshaped by a spate of social, political, and cultural forces in the United States. In 2008, the financial crisis hit. In November 2016, Donald Trump first won the election, and we saw the swift and alarming rise, tolerance, and encouragement of white supremacy and white power militias. In May 2017, the Robert E. Lee monument was removed in New Orleans, and then-mayor Mitch Landieu gave an impassioned viral speech on the generational harms of institutionalized racism, which initiated a complex, painful discourse on its unconscious acceptance in public life. A yearslong nationwide reckoning began, forcing the widespread reconsideration of monuments and memorials in federal buildings, public plazas and parks, and college campuses. This reappraisal was a way to interpret, for a broad American public, the way in which these monuments valorized and enshrined the racism of the Confederacy, the disingenuous rhetoric of the Lost Cause (an idealized fantasy of the South with benevolent slaveowners and cheerful Black workers), and the utter lack of public acknowledgment of enslaved people's forced contribution to the Southern economy. In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd and the consequential Black Lives Matter protest movement led to the embrace of Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion (DEAI) in academic and corporate life and in cultural institutions. Such initiatives have had an uneven track record, ranging from sincere intervention to virtue signaling. Beginning in March 2020, public life first eroded and then came to a full stop due to the global pandemic. Now, in 2024, we find ourselves post-COVID and amid a right-wing backlash to DEAI, which is cast alongside trans identities and critical race theory as threats to American society. At this juncture, facing a second Trump term, we find ourselves navigating the all-but-certain uncertainty and future promised threats to undoing the gains in diversity and equity that have been made socially, politically, and within higher education. In Davis's text, he recounted an earlier, equally virulent narrative strain, the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which similarly targeted racial, sexual, and ethnic identities.

In response to the political and social conditions I have just outlined, American art has actively self-corrected. Race and gender have become primary subject matters for emerging studies from the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries. Scholarship has moved away from American art and toward the complexity of Hemispheric studies, comprising art of the Americas including, but not limited to, histories of borderlands, diaspora, Indigeneity, the Pacific Rim, international artistic exchange, diverse cultural practices of colonial resistance, and so on. We might even say that American art historians have turned a corner, producing public-facing work that often yearns to be activist in its aims.

As such, *Panorama* sent out a brief survey to fifteen midcareer and senior scholars, in the form of a questionnaire. Eleven responded, and they represent a wide geographic breadth of stakeholders in the field.

In 1984, in the very first attempt to characterize the field of American art, the eminent scholar of painting Elizabeth Johns (1937–2022) argued that nineteenth-century historians endlessly reordered the chronology of American artworks in order of so-called importance to construct an evolution of eras and epochs tied to the social and political life of the nation.² This commitment to canon formation, she claimed, was, along with the near-uniform belief that the art of the United States had developed under the unique political condition of democracy, the most crucial sensibility shared by American art historians. Today, we would readily contest the notion that such freedoms were equitable or available to artists other than white male painters for much of our nation's history. But Johns's notion of reordering is, actually, the kernel of our historic, ever-present, and shared commitment to revision—our enduring faith in reconceiving, rethinking, and rediscovering.

Respondents:

Mia L. Bagneris, associate professor, art history and Africana studies; director, Africana Studies Program, Tulane University, New Orleans/Bulbancha

Maggie A. Cao, David G. Frey Associate Professor of American Art, Department of Art and Art History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Sarah Burns, Ruth N. Halls Professor Emerita, Department of Art History, Indiana University, Bloomington

Adrienne L. Childs, senior consulting curator, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Robert (Bob) Cozzolino, independent curator, art historian, and critic, Minneapolis

Erika Doss, Edith O'Donnell Distinguished Chair in Art History, Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, University of Texas, Dallas

Jennifer Greenhill, endowed professor of American art, inaugural graduate director for MA/Arts of the Americas Program, University of Arkansas, in partnership with the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Eleanor Harvey, senior curator, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC

Amy Von Lintel, professor of art history; director, Gender Studies Program, West Texas A&M University, Amarillo

Elaine Yau, associate curator and academic liaison, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA

Sylvia Yount, Lawrence A. Fleishman Curator in Charge of the American Wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

"American art" was initially a defensive term, responding to the prevalence of European art as a primary field of research. What are your thoughts on "US art" as a renamed category of study? Does this offer a more macro view of the field?

Burns: At this point, the term "American art" sounds almost quaint, harking back to an earlier era when the canon was predominantly, and self-evidently, white and male, and nationalism was not necessarily a dirty word. "US Art" strikes me as a term that fosters greater critical distance and further prompts interrogation of the myriad histories, places, races, ideologies, and conflicts that have made up the crazy quilt of art and culture fabricated within (and across) our borders.

Childs: It has become increasingly clear that the term "American art" has not been inclusive enough to account for the "Americas"—South, Central, and North. Nor was it ever intended to. So for its entirety as a field, it has been a shorthand for work created by artists born in the United States. However, until recently, those artists considered American have been largely of Euro-American descent, or "white" (although that designation is now in flux). I think that the art of the United States, with its particular history in relationship to Europeans, Indigenous and African diasporic people, and immigrants from across the globe, is inherently complex and reflected in diverse voices and traditions. We need to rethink and challenge the history of dividing the field into "Native American" and/or African American art, reserving "American" for Euro-American artists. We need to understand what is lost when we silo culture groups who are far from homogeneous. Perhaps the shift to "US art" will dislodge us from the myths of a cohesive narrative of American art and force us to take into account the complexities of these United States.

Harvey: There isn't an easy or obvious answer to how to recharacterize what we study. "American Art" is most often used to define the art made in the United States but is broad enough to be hemispheric (and understandably annoying to those hemispheric residents living outside of the United States). But if our field is to embrace Indigenous artistic practice as a full part of the field, then "US Art" seems to ignore (or diminish) their contributions. So the question is, is our field defined by political nationality or terroir? If it is about politics, does "US Art" include settler art of the colonial era or Indigenous art made prior to 1776? What about art made in what is now the US but created when that land belonged to England, France, or Spain? If it is about land, is there a way to indicate those more fluid boundaries? Those nations whose ancestral territory extended beyond the current geopolitical borders with Canada and Mexico—and those nations that have attained closer to sovereign status—should question whether or not they can or should be included in a

term that seems overly reductive (and clunky). I'm not convinced we should be renaming the field until we can find a more graceful way to be more inclusive and accurate.

Greenhill: "American art" is more capacious and is not limited to art produced in a US settler-colonial context (although it is often used in this way, particularly in institutional contexts). Many scholars have found the clunkiness of "US art" to be a useful way of pointing to the elisions and politics embedded in "America." I describe myself as "a scholar of US art and visual culture" due to my research concerns. But "American art" appears in my job title because I direct an MA program with an emphasis on the arts of the Americas (sometimes described as a "hemispheric American art"). I expect that both categories of American and US art (among others—it's worth noting that this question does not seem to account for Indigenous perspectives on the colonial state) will continue to circulate and that scholars will offer explanation via a "note on terminology," as, for instance, incorporated by Frances Pohl.³

Bagneris: I appreciate the term "US art" as a potential clarifying tool that allows scholars to refer specifically to visual and material culture associated with a particular part of the Americas at a particular time and/or within the context of the history of a specific modern nation-state, i.e., the United States of America. However, I also recognize its dangerous potential as a convenient tactic that perpetuates the status quo hegemony of visual culture from the geographic area now understood as the United States and the way it works semantically to ostensibly relieve the pressure of our ethical obligation to meaningfully engage with "the Americas" beyond the artificial and fraught historical and geopolitical borders the term supposedly describes and anxiously tries to contain. Because national boundaries exist as artificial, historically contingent constructions, one cannot responsibly practice "US art" without considering "American art" more broadly, and the term "US art" does not relieve scholars—even scholars who might work on objects whose geography and time period it seems to contain—of the responsibility to consider how the subjects they study might connect to Indigenous American histories, multiple and intrinsically enmeshed colonial histories (particularly British, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Dutch), art histories of Africa and its global diasporas and of Asia and its global diasporas, as well as to intersectional vectors related to issues beyond the notions of geography and period that have conventionally defined subfields in art history and visual and material culture studies.

Von Lintel: I now consider myself a regionalist American art historian, but one who was trained as a Europeanist and who fell into American art based on taking a job in a strange but fascinating part of America, an inland borderland (between Indigenous groups, Hispanos, and Anglos) with more art and hybridity of cultures than might seem evident to outsiders. I live in "cowboy country" [Amarillo, TX], but it is way more interesting and diverse than I expected it to be. And because of my place-based work, I investigate the notion of region not as a small pocket of "area studies" but, instead, as a theoretical premise that helps us dehierarchize contexts of American art and appreciate the diversity of localities and regions across the Americas. I think that a deep investigation of "America" as a collection of regions, full of borderlands and frontiers, contact zones and hybridity, can continue to be useful.

Yount: Personally, I consider "art of the United States" to represent a microview of the field, defining in circumscribed terms what has become a far more expansive and inclusive

concept. And in my curatorial practice, “American art” increasingly refers to a wide range of work produced by a diversity of artists both inside and outside the boundaries of the US.

Yau: In my work, “art of the United States” (or considering “art of what is now the United States,” to borrow a phrase from my mentor) more accurately reflects the country’s entanglements with colonialism and its shifting borders; it appropriately “provincializes” ideas about national identity vis-à-vis other regions of the Americas. That said, political discourse and national identity abroad continues to give “American” currency in speaking about the policies, places, histories, and diverse cultures of the US—so I don’t think the phrase will become obsolete. But perhaps it should.

Cozzolino: I have such problems with labels and their limiting scope that I’m not sure if I would feel comfortable with an umbrella term for such a complex transhistorical/transcultural geography. I usually take my cues from the artists I write about, whether in the archive or in life. How do they talk about how and where they belong? “American art” has been anachronistic for some time and, for me, was connected to the toxic impulse that claimed American exceptionalism in culture—imperialist or otherwise. And there is always a periodic demand that being a “real” American can be put to a loyalty test. “US art” doesn’t roll off the tongue as well, and it has the problem of not aligning with or sitting well with all of the people who work in the country. For a time, I thought I might only know what mattered by looking at communities of artists—working, say, in Chicago, Madison, Philadelphia, or Minneapolis. Artists carry with them their own territories, intimate geographies, and landscapes of identity in those connecting friends and family they hold close. Looking at the local always makes me understand the bigger picture somehow.

Doss: No matter what we call the field, the titles of the courses we teach continue to lean on the words “America” and “American,” as in “Art in America,” “American Art,” “African American Art,” “American Art & Visual Culture,” etc. What is different is how many course syllabi, like many books in the field, explain what these words mean and how they are being used. In my most recent book, for example, I included this sentence: “Recognizing that the term ‘America’ extends to countries in North and South America, my use here references the United States of America, parsed in terms of its imagined national unity and its multiple inconsistencies.”

Cao: I began using “US art” to describe my field of study a few years ago. I used it exclusively in my new book *Painting US Empire: Nineteenth-Century Art and Its Legacies* at the encouragement of Latin Americanist colleagues. It felt inappropriate to use “American” given the term’s imperial connotations. “American art” is still a viable term if we are thinking hemispherically about the broader continent, a geographical category well suited for studying the eighteenth century and earlier.

How do you feel about the social justice direction many humanities fields are incorporating? Is our field doing this, in your opinion? Is this a good direction? Why or why not?

Yau: The explicit acknowledgment of how museums and art history have participated in cultural harm (through appropriation, theft, disregard, patriarchy) is long overdue.

Museums are one of the few sites of cultural conversation and are a part of a public trust—it is essential that the goal is to spur movement toward a more inclusive society for all.

I also don't think that necessarily means that projects require explicitly activist subject matter. What are the humanities for if not to keep us—individually, collectively—tethered to the complexities of history and attuned to ways people have creatively responded to, understood, and shaped that history? Scholars who call to light underrepresented artists tend to the margins, and especially those who call into question the terms of representation (I think of those critically examining whiteness and white supremacist culture) all clear the way toward the most honest and equitable accounts of art and culture of within the field.

Yount: Of course, many museum- and academy-based scholars have been embracing this approach for some time, but there's no question it became more mainstream—if not an imperative—after the 2020 murder of George Floyd and its widespread cultural consequences. One can define "social justice" in many ways; if that encompasses sharing more truthful and nuanced narratives about the American past—whether directly with objects or through publications—I think it's critical that it remains a thoughtful, sensitive, and responsible part of our practice as Americanists.

Von Lintel: This is a tough one, actually. I am not sure that any of my research work has been "social justice" focused, but my teaching has been. I teach students in a largely rural, isolated, majority Christian, politically conservative area. And my students want to learn about social issues, but they don't already have a grounding in this learning. They discover a social consciousness in college in a new way, beyond their sheltered, if not privileged, upbringing. But they are hungry for this kind of learning. And art is a great way to teach social justice issues without shoving any political views down students' throats. To be sure, in a state where DEI initiatives have been outlawed in public universities, it has become all the more important to teach social justice issues in my art history classroom—because the anti-DEI laws don't touch my teaching so long as I am teaching about art. So, if the artist I am teaching brings to light issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, identity, etc., we can have a lively discussion in my classroom about these issues without ever breaking the state laws against DEI. I teach classes on gender, race, and the African Diaspora; Latin American art; art and social conflict; and more. My students need and want these courses. And they love learning about such social issues and identity politics through works of art, through human connections to artists as human makers, through the empathy of human-to-human understanding that this teaching encourages. So, I think this question pertains to my pedagogy more directly, more explicitly, than my research, and I believe this is a good and needed direction.

Doss: There are lots of ways to "do" art history. American art history's increased attention to social justice issues and movements follows from the field's embrace of social history forty or more years ago. Challenging the discipline's racism, "master narratives," and mainstream notions of cultural hierarchy, American art history today often engages marginalized artists, alternative perspectives, and heightened attention to issues of power and identity. It is a reflection, in other words, of the cultural present in the United States.

Cozzolino: A "social justice direction" suggests that institutions are capable of changing, transforming, dismantling, and rebuilding themselves. People populate academia,

museums, and other cultural organizations or parts of the art world. Real, lasting change is generational but depends on individuals consciously shifting their attention, intentions, and actions. My experience is that structures are in place that enable the status quo to maintain itself. I have long been suspicious of academic interests without direct action and immersion and feel that too often the humanities and art history play at a distance and construct ideas from places of privilege full of assumptions: about what is right, what people want, how change happens. I have been in spaces where the people mutually supporting one another in this work have been accountable to their communities and proceeded with vulnerability and intersectionality; I have also been in spaces in which speaking the intention to do this work, let alone doing it, was viewed as a threat and was put down remorselessly, causing harm to me, my colleagues, and the communities we were engaging. While frustrating, this did not surprise the community members; they saw it coming. I am skeptical about how this work will become embedded in the DNA of institutions and the humanities. Much has to get out of the way and be set aside for change to occur. Individuals advocating for change in institutions will only be seen as agitators unless the structures change, boards and leadership pledge to do this work, etc. But pledging to do this work requires letting go of power and control, and people are largely not in those positions because they know how or understand the impact of letting go. All I can say is, keep learning, prioritize care, speak up, do not give in to retrenchment, which has to be perpetually countered. Social justice is a living credo, not a direction. If it isn't embodied, it is in jeopardy of being swept away.

Childs: Art has always been an arm of social justice movements, whether from the center to affirm power or from the margins to incite change. As such, those who research, write, and speak about art and social justice become part of the story. For example, activist scholars and students during the Black Arts Movement demanded the academy recognize their work on the arts of Black Americans as a legitimate field of inquiry, thus changing the field. These changes only improve the depth and breadth of our field. However, we do need to be careful not to abandon areas that may be considered to have been oppressively exclusionary—European art, for instance. Instead, we need to be clear-eyed about the problematics that those discourses posed, put them into perspective, and enter with a more balanced view.

Cao: The social justice direction really helps give relevance to historical research. In studies on the nineteenth century (my primary period), it has brought deserved attention to understudied and underrecognized BIPOC individuals who contributed to the making, maintenance, or even meaningful destruction of art and material culture. Yet, this shift in the field can also be contentious as we reckon with how to deal with canonical artists and artworks of the past that are implicated in white supremacy and other forms of bigotry. It is no longer possible to simply brush politics under the rug in order to study them for their other merits, as we have done in the past.

Burns: It seems to me that the social justice direction has emerged as a prominent area of inquiry and revision in our field, encompassing the dissection of settler colonialism, extractive industries, and the many wrongs, past and present, that have been visited on minorities of every stripe. Considering not just the state of our field but also the current state of the "Union," it's a necessary path forward. Yet at the same time, in their intrinsic iconoclasm, such approaches pose the prospect of scholarly tunnel vision disinclined to acknowledge or accommodate the complexities of the whole. That is, for example,

knowing what we now know concerning US histories of ruthless expansion, exploitation of the environment, and violence against Native populations (just for starters), can we still like nineteenth-century American landscape painting?

Bagneris: In my view, more and more meaningful discussions about what social justice looks like and how to achieve it are never a bad thing, especially in institutions like universities and museums, which simultaneously reflect and reproduce broader structural inequalities but also tend to attract a healthy contingent of folks who—at least intellectually or at the “we should definitely have a committee to address that” level—understand and acknowledge this as a fundamental problem. Especially in the wake of the 2020 moment of racial reckoning prompted by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, I have certainly registered many, many more of these discussions than when I started my academic career; however, I would not describe the majority of them as more meaningful, at least not in the ways that count for me, that translate discussion into explicit actions that promote enduring institutional change—let alone that have implications beyond a particular institution—in pursuit of justice for all its constituents (which for universities and museums includes thoughtful, just, and intentional relationships with the members of the communities where they exist).

However, I have always been clear about the limits of the practical effect of the kind of work that I do, that scholars do in general, and that institutions like universities and museum can accomplish. To my knowledge, for example, a “decolonized” syllabus has never resulted in the return of stolen land. I have no delusions about the origin of the boom in the market for works featuring Black subjects or made by people of African descent and the historic number of museum acquisitions of them, as well as the uptick in interest in my own work and the number of invitations I get to give lectures or even participate in features like this one. We have shifted toward a “social justice direction in the humanities” because it’s far easier to issue DEI statements, organize an “anti-racist” lecture series, or hang token portraits featuring Black faces on gallery walls than it is to implement the kind of systemic change that might have kept Breonna Taylor or George Floyd alive.

That said, I do not want to minimize the real impact that incorporating what you’ve articulated here as a “social justice direction” can have in humanities disciplines (or any academic discipline, I say as the mother of a college senior currently applying to PhD programs in the sciences) or for the education of students in universities, like the one that employs me. In the last several years, the two academic units with which I am affiliated—Tulane’s Newcomb Art Department and Africana Studies Program—have undertaken actions in a several areas—particularly curricular review, faculty hiring and retention, and graduate student recruitment—that align our strategic priorities with our ethically informed commitments in ways that will meaningfully shape the work we do—what we teach and who we train and how—for the foreseeable future.

Greenhill: The good: tenure-track faculty and curatorial hires in historically underrepresented and marginalized fields within art history and an acknowledgment, on the part of institutional leadership and funding agencies, of the immense value and necessity of diverse voices and perspectives on cultural production.

The bad: scholars and artists of color tasked with heavy lifting in academic and museum contexts, being relied upon to “add diversity” or provide a shortcut for predominantly

white institutions unsure of how to critically engage with racist representational, social, and political regimes.

I've also overheard some scholars outside the US lamenting the social justice shift of one of the field's most impactful foundations, referring to a former "golden age" in this organization's history, when it ostensibly had a wider purview. But remember all of the dissertations developed to take advantage of Terra Foundation funding by fitting into its international mission? A PhD student at the proposal stage once came to me worried that they were not pursuing a typically Terra transnational topic. Are PhD advisors now hearing from students with related worries about the social justice angle of their projects (or lack thereof)?

For better or worse, scholarship tends to follow the funding, especially in the underfunded humanities. Will we now have a glut of dissertations that "do" social justice poorly, expediently, or unethically? This is a cynical question, to be sure. But given the swiftness with which some of the DEAI initiatives established in 2020 have been dismantled in the academy and beyond, it's clear that we will have to be vigilant to make lasting change and adequately support the next generation of scholars to make meaningful interventions in the interests of access and equity.

Harvey: The last four years have had a cathartic effect on everything, our field included. I see in fellowship applications, exhibition proposals, and published articles evidence that we are in fact grappling with social justice issues in our work. However, this pendulum is swinging fast and sometimes without nuance. I believe social justice issues are important for the long-range implications of our work, but I am alarmed that it is (at least in this moment) progressively harder to find funding for projects that are monographic in nature, that are medium-driven, or that focus on recovering information or insights that are not overtly tied to social justice concerns. We need both—or really, all—types of art history projects.

Can you name or describe a book, article, lecture, exhibition, or collection installation that you felt was a watershed moment / game changer in the field over the past ten years? What made it pivotal?

Doss: *America Is Hard to See* (2015), the inaugural exhibit in the Whitney Museum of American Art's new building in the Meatpacking District. [It] complicated the history of modern and contemporary American art (1900–2015) by emphasizing the fluidity and diversity of styles, media, and subjects, and it included unexpected artists, [while] summarizing the museum's investment in American art's unmappable messiness with the statement, "Questioning and interpreting the term 'American' is part of our institutional DNA."

Yount: There have been many, so it's tough to choose, but I would say that for both our particular field and the culture at large, Nikole Hannah-Jones's "[1619 Project](#)" for the *New York Times Magazine* (published in 2021 in book form as *A New Origin Story: The 1619 Project*) is key, opening more minds to understanding the centrality and legacy of enslavement in American life.

And, as a curator, I must name an exhibition! A recent one that readily comes to mind is [*Entangled Pasts, 1768–Now: Art, Colonialism and Change*](#), which I had the privilege of experiencing at the Royal Academy, in London, last winter. The exciting range of historical and contemporary works and ideas creatively displayed in that hallowed aesthetic and ideological setting—including such icons of American art as John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)—combined form and content to an extraordinarily powerful effect to raise challenging questions of Anglo-American identity, both then and now.

Yau: Lynne Cooke's *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2018) was a major retrospective, not in the conventional sense of a single artist's body of work but of a modernist theme: the artistic mainstream's relationship to creative practices at its margins. The show and her arguments illuminated so much critical ground around discourses defining "self-taught," "folk," and "outsider" artists. Her proposal of "outliers"—reflecting notions of otherness back on the "center" and urging audiences to consider creativity along a spectrum of culture, artistic professionalization, and social networks intermingling over shared affinities—especially made the case for the fluidity of artistic boundaries. I feel like her show heaved the conversation over the fray of "term warfare," providing models for how to enter headlong into the imaginative worlds of unfamiliar makers with new sensitivity.

Anne Wagner and Michael Moon's contributions to the related 2018 symposium were also deeply impactful for me (published in 2022 as *Boundary Trouble in American Vanguard Art, 1920–2020*). Their talks were beautiful meditations around themes that continue to inspire my own work. What happens at the edges of culture, of creativity? The unknown, as well as the possible. I've been indebted to this entire project and the community of scholars around it.

Childs: For me, *Soul of A Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, an exhibition that began at the Tate Modern in London in 2017 and proceeded to travel the US for the next three years. This expansive exhibition featuring around sixty artists and more than two hundred works of art brought a group of artists and concerns that had once been considered "niche" to the attention of national and international audiences, artists, scholars, students, and more. The exhibition expanded the definition of Black activist art to include nonfigurative works and works by non-Black artists, and it included women artists who were previously left out of the movement's origin stories. Focusing on the tumultuous years between 1963 and 1983, the exhibition places the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power/Arts movements within the story of US art and history. I particularly appreciate the inclusion of both renowned artists and lesser-known artists. As I have written elsewhere, the publication edited by Zoe Whitley and Mark Godfrey is a rich compendium of micro-histories, essays, reflections, images, and memories of one of the most dynamic periods in the history of "American" art. The archival materials and voices of participants in the movement make this a treasure trove.

Cao: The exhibition and book *Nature's Nation: American Art and the Environment* was pivotal for the field.⁴ It helped to establish Americanists at the forefront of ecocritical art history, which is now a rapidly expanding area within the discipline.

Cozzolino: Most of the books that have made an impact on me in recent years are nonfiction. I aspire to write as though I am crafting tales that hold and absorb the reader. Much academic writing leaves me cold. Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes* (2023) is one example that moved me. I would draw attention to *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017) by Timothy Snyder. Lately I have been inspired by the writings and work of Manchán Magan. In the past I have found the approaches of Wanda Corn, Michael Leja, and Alex Nemerov to be useful, challenging, and provoking.

Burns: I can think of a number of contenders, but unless I've been in a fugue state the last ten years (entirely possible), I'm not sure I can recall anything of more recent vintage that has had the enormous impact of *The West as America* exhibition of 1991.⁵ That show, along with its catalogue, was so controversial that it even had members of Congress weighing in and expressing their extreme displeasure at the way the organizers had attacked sacred shibboleths, like Manifest Destiny and rugged cowboy individualism. In turn, the example set by *The West as America* gave rise to increasingly critical scholarship bent on chipping away at national myth and mythmakers. That said, I'd point to the 2019 *About Face: Stonewall, Revolt, and New Queer Art* as a prime example of an exhibition that built on pivotal scholarly and curatorial work carried out before 2014.⁶

Greenhill: "Watershed moment/game changer" is a tall order—must a thing be so big to be meaningful? Julia Silverman and Mary McNeil don't think so. One of my favorite pieces to discuss with students is Silverman and McNeil's coauthored "Art History and the Local," and the collection of essays they gathered for *Panorama's* "In the Round" for Spring 2022.⁷ The question "How are our subjects, objects, methods, and communities of study connected to the immediate context in which we work?" is, in some ways, an artifact of pandemic isolation and quarantine. For McNeil and Silverman, "the local" is an analytic and corrective to the field's nationalist underpinnings and more recent global turn. Calling attention to artists and scholars who cultivate "place-specific ways of knowing . . . derived from a deep relationship with, attention to, and care for specific places," they seek to "counter transient, extractivist modes of scholarly production" and argue for "entangling our research and ourselves with the many people and communities that inform it."

I had the pleasure of seeing such entanglement play out in real time at the 2024 symposium "Crafting Art History in the Ozarks," which Silverman (who had spent two years in northwest Arkansas) co-organized with McNeil and multimedia artist (and native Arkansan) Cory Perry, at the University of Arkansas. And more than any other piece of writing I have assigned students in the new MA/Arts of the Americas program I direct, it is "Art History and the Local" that seems to have impacted their thinking and research projects most profoundly. Now, you might ask, how much of an impression will any of these activities, so far removed as they are from the established centers of Americanist activity, make on the field? Could they ever conceivably register in the future as "watershed moment/game changer"? Why wouldn't they?

Von Lintel: Maybe the Jaune Quick-to-See Smith solo show *Memory Map* at the Whitney in Summer 2023 (fig. 1). I took students from our region of the Texas Panhandle to NYC on a weeklong summer course, and our museum visits included this show. My students felt a deep connection to the works in this exhibition—because they are about an America my students know well: the Western conflict zones where cowboy culture butts up against and clashes with minority voices, both non-white and non-male. But I also connected with

several New Yorkers in person who were seeing the show and got to chatting with them. These enthusiastic visitors were absolutely flummoxed at how they did not know about Smith's art before coming to the show. They kept saying how they found it so engaging and valuable, like they were discovering both a whole new realm of American art. My students, in contrast, knew about Smith because we study her art in my various courses—"Aesthetics of the New West," "Women Artists of the Southwest," "Art at the Crossroads," "History of Drawing," and "Animals in Art." I began to realize just how powerful regional differences continue to be in America (US America and the broader Americas). Because of these differences, an artist that to us seemed almost canonical now was a new discovery in another region. Artists like Smith have been celebrated and appreciated in exhibitions throughout and about the West, or about women, or about Indigenous artists. But only decades and decades later do they make it to NYC, into the Whitney. It's not unlike how Georgia O'Keeffe is only NOW getting international acknowledgment with shows at major museums in London or Paris after a century of renown in US America. I guess she seemed like "just an American artist" for so long, but that is changing. There is no "just" any more. American art's profile is changing, growing, diversifying, writing new futures, and that is a good thing.



Fig. 1. Installation view of *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Memory Map*, showing (from left to right), *Memory Map* (2000), *Homeland* (2017), and *State Names Map I* (2000). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, April 19–August 13, 2023. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

Bagneris: Perhaps I could, but I won't. I have certainly encountered any number of provocative exhibitions and compelling texts over the last decade that have profoundly moved me and my scholarship. However, as I often explain to my students, I need to sit with things for a long while before I really understand their enduring implications (and certainly before I'll commit to going on record in writing with my thoughts about it!); that's why I choose to work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century material and rarely accept an invitations to give my "hot take" on the visual-culture controversy du jour. Please, do not ever ask for my scholarly comment on anything Beyoncé does.

Rather than cite a specific text or exhibition or watershed moment, I will offer that I embrace the pressure that interdisciplinary, intellectual projects like Black studies have put

on traditional disciplines like art history—and especially on fields like American art—to question and challenge the problematic orientations and assumptions that underpin their most basic and fundamental conventions and metrics of value from the very start. I often say that art history is my method but Black studies is my discipline, and approaching art history and the field of American art from the vantage point of my training in Black studies, I understand that my task and that of the students I teach who will go on to do this work moves beyond mere “revision” or “recentering,” beyond “reimagining” or “remaking” even, and yet we also cannot undo all that has already been done. Perhaps, in the undisciplined spaces between these ideas, we will find ways to approach the imperative and exciting work of defining a way forward.

In five words or fewer (list of adjectives or phrases welcome!), what are some words that portend our field’s future?



Fig. 2. World cloud representing responses to the question “In five words or fewer (list of adjectives or phrases welcome!), what are some words that portend our field’s future?”

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Notes

¹ John Davis, “The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States,” *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 544–80.

² Elizabeth Johns, "Histories of American Art: The Changing Quest," *Art Journal* 44, no. 4 (Winter 1984), 338–44.

³ See Frances Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*, 5th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023), 14.

⁴ *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment* (2018) was organized by Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow for the Princeton University Art Museum and traveled to the Peabody Essex Museum (Salem, MA), and the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art (Bentonville, AR).

⁵ The full title of the show was *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* (1991), held at the National Museum of American Art (now the Smithsonian Museum of American Art), in Washington, DC. It was curated by William Truettner, with a team of seven advisors: Nancy K. Anderson, Patricia Hills, Elizabeth Johns, Joni Louise Kinsey, Howard R. Lamar, Alexander Nemerov, and Julie Schimmel.

⁶ *About Face: Stonewall, Revolt, and New Queer Art* was an exhibition curated by Jonathan D. Katz, and held at Wrightwood 659 Gallery in Chicago in 2019. It has been recently expanded into a survey and reissued as a book published by Phaidon in 2024.

⁷ Julia Silverman and Mary McNeil, introduction to "Art History and the Local," In the Round, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.13157>.