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The Networked Art Object of the Cold War

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- 1 Two recent book projects capture the politics of interpreting American art during the Cold War: the two volume *Hot Art, Cold War* which anthologizes European critical responses to post-World War II American art and *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War* that considers the way covert American funding supported a global network of publishing and exhibition ventures. Gerald Laing's painting *Souvenir (of the Cuban Missile Crisis Oct 16-28 1962)* from 1962 – while not mentioned in either project – can introduce the ideological stakes of art interpretation during the Cold War period.¹ Painting on angled wooden slats, the British Pop artist created an image that changed as the viewer moved in front of it. Walking to one side, viewers see the US President John Kennedy; if they then walk over to the other, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev appears. Viewers who stick to a straight-on position – the standard way of looking at art on a wall – encounter a scrambled, abstract image.
- 2 By forcing viewers to step to one side in order to see the legible political imagery, Laing suggests that rigidly partisan views of art are not the natural order of things, but instead are a product of viewer choice and political training. If that viewer happens to be a powerful art critic or cultural arbiter, then partisan interpretations can become dominant. The two volumes of *Hot Art, Cold War* make this point many times with specific case studies from every major nation in Europe.² Lead editors Claudia Hopkins and Iain Boyd Whyte, along with their scholarly team of regional experts, demonstrate the ways in which critics across Europe forged positions relative to the Cold War through their opinions on American art, much of which was not inherently propagandistic.
- 3 However, the abstraction of *Souvenir* when viewed straight on also suggest one of the key arguments of *Parapolitics*: the ways that hidden political agendas and subterfuge dominated the cultural Cold War. This important exhibition catalogue and research project, led by a team of four curators and writers, covers the enormous and secretive influence of the Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF), a Berlin-based organization

covertly funded by the CIA. By supporting 50 so-called “little magazines” around the world, as well as hundreds of exhibitions, conferences, and seminars, the CCF attempted to “normalize capitalist democracy”³ through deploying cultural soft power, especially from the late 1940s until the late 1960s. *Parapolitics* not only provides a compendium list of CCF-funded projects – augmented with high-quality facsimiles of covers and magazine content from around the world – but also enlists an international network of scholars to interrogate relationships between artistic modernisms of the 20th century, cultures of colonialism and white supremacy, and the global Cold War.

- 4 While Serge Guilbaut and other thinkers began dismantling the mythical autonomy and presumed superiority of American post-World War II painting over forty years ago in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*,⁴ these two book projects, with any luck, will definitively change the narrative. Through extensive archival work, both projects locate American art and culture within a vast global network of exhibitions and publications. The discourses of American “freedom” pushed by the CCF and other institutions not only repressed the covert (and no so covert) support of brutal dictators in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, but also tried to mitigate the international fallout over Civil Rights struggles at home. The global approach of these book projects allows readers to see products of American art and culture during the Cold War as multilingual agents whose alliances shift depending on local circumstances – not as autonomous “masterpieces” disconnected from time and space.
- 5 *Hot Art, Cold War* is comprised of two volumes, one that includes writers from countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, the other focused on critics from Northern and Western Europe. With this publication, there is no longer any excuse for scholars to overlook period and site-specific accounts of American art in Europe during the years of the Cold War. For too long, academic hearsay and generalizations have clouded discussions about the European reception of Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, and other American artists. In these books, readers can explore the specific and different ways French and West German critics celebrated Pollock’s work and then find a Czech writer who suggests that American postwar abstraction “degrades people, their dignity, or any moral values”⁵. Too often, scholars rely upon monolithic understandings of “Western Europe” and “Eastern Europe”; these volumes explode that fiction with a panoply of critical positions from within each Cold War bloc. Furthermore, these books delve into often-overlooked countries like Franco’s Spain, Ceaușescu’s Romania, and an Ireland who remained officially neutral during World War II. For instance, one writer from Greece celebrates Pollock, while another denigrates his work. Other accounts – from Yugoslavia, for instance – adopt tones that are more ambivalent, befitting that nation’s attempts at Cold War neutrality. The political valance of art criticism during the Cold War is not a new revelation, but the over 200 specific case studies in these volumes give physical weight to this assertion.
- 6 What is also significant is that the contents of *Hot Art, Cold War* span the entirety of the Cold War; too often any discussions of American art and the conflict peter out around 1960 with the emergence of Pop art. It was informative to read a positive Soviet response to Photorealism and a Norwegian take on Neo-Expressionism, for example. Reading the many conflicting responses to American Pop and Minimalism was revelatory; these styles prove to be just as contentious and political across Europe as Abstract Expressionism was the decade before.

- 7 Substantial introductions, penned by a team of country-specific specialists, provide clear and original overviews of the reception of American art in each nation and are invaluable in their own right, providing a broader context for the primary sources that follow. Put simply, these volumes are an incredible resource for any scholar of American or European art during the Cold War period, as English readers can access overviews and archival examples of the reception of American art from the entirety of Europe and from 20 different languages. With its more honest and complete accounting of American art during the Cold War, material from these books will certainly find their way into many undergraduate and graduate syllabi.
- 8 These anthologies should also spur vital new research on art and the Cold War in Europe, through helping art historians forge more networked models of transatlantic art history. Yes, the books still focus on American art and not art actually produced in these European nations. The editors and contributors, however, treat these artworks as flexible, contingent objects that adapt to local needs and political interests across Europe. Remade through site-specific criticism, these works forge conceptual links between America and new national discourses, whether Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, or Finnish. As such, the book will, ideally, compel scholars to consider the ways that artists in these specific European countries both digested and resisted models of American art to forge their own aesthetic styles. The discipline needs a more diverse set of narratives from across Europe, as well as, perhaps, subsequent critical anthologies that tackle the reception of American art in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.
- 9 If *Hot Art, Cold War* tackles all of Europe, *Parapolitics* attempts to cover the global Cold War. Like the other project, this book foregrounds the networks that enmeshed and structured American art and culture abroad. *Parapolitics* started as an exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2018, and the present book, published this year, is a consequential and far-reaching volume, with numerous scholarly essays, high-quality archival images, and projects by contemporary artists. The illustrations in *Parapolitics* support a shift in emphasis from art object to network; while some images feature art objects, the majority reproduce images of covers and other pages of the numerous “little magazines” that the CCF supported around the world, whether Great Britain’s *Encounter*, the Arab-language *Hiwar*, or *Black Orpheus* in Nigeria. *Parapolitics* does feature short catalogue entries on works by Philip Guston, Howardena Pindell, Romare Bearden, and others, but the overwhelming visual presence of CCF-funded printed networks does a commendable job of stressing the importance of this covertly partisan cultural infrastructure. Even in the longer essays that discuss specific artworks, such as Andrea Giunta’s exploration⁶ of the battle over *Guernica*’s interpretation at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the focus remains largely on the critical apparatuses that frame and inflect works of art.
- 10 The book intentional erosion of art’s autonomy also serves a specific revisionist function. Many CCF-funded publications and programs equated the perceived autonomy and purity of American abstract art with notions of democratic freedom, something also supported by Alfred Barr and others at MoMA (which had its own international exhibition program). Before World War II, the most radical artists, whether Berlin Dada artists like John Heartfield or the Soviet Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko, viewed the autonomy of art as the fundamental problem of bourgeois culture. In the book’s introduction, the four editors frame the question as such: “How could it be that the autonomy of art was regarded as its historical achievement, rather

than as the central problem of art in the bourgeois economy – the problem that prompted the emergence of historical avant-gardes?”⁷

- 11 This elevation of the autonomy of art served two functions. First, it helped repress the plethora of engaged and oppositional practices in the global Cold War – whether Gustave Metzger’s destructive performances in London, an Egyptian model of Socialist Realism, or artists associated with CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte) in Chile. Second, it served to support the destructive flipside of American postwar liberalism. As Christian Kravagna brilliantly points out in his essay on Black painters Norman Lewis and Wifredo Lam, such autonomy was also an “aesthetic of exclusion and segregation”⁸. The writings of the powerful American art critic Clement Greenberg (whose trip to India in 1967 is the subject of another of the book’s notable essays⁹) ignored artists who mixed mediums, engaged explicitly with politics, or utilized recognizable imagery. In another of the book’s standout essays, Barnor Hesse¹⁰ returns to Franz Fanon’s idea that Nazism was not a historical aberration but an importing of settler colonialism – well established in Latin America and Africa – into the heart of Europe. Put simply, the American notion of “freedom” supported by the CCF was not, to quote a popular song from the late 1960s, “another word for nothing left to lose,” but was instead another word for white supremacy.
- 12 *Parapolitics* also excels at moments when discussing the ways that the editors of CCF-funded “little magazines” were sometimes able to publish subversive content, no matter the covert CIA support. The Lebanese poet Unsi al-Hajj captures this tension effectively when writing about *Hiwar*, the Arab language cultural review: “Who sees himself laughing at the other in this game, the Marxists who got the CIA to spread their ideas, or the CIA who made Marxists write in an ‘American’ journal?”¹¹. Kodwo Eshun’s essay¹² about the experiences of Black American author Richard Wright is a vital case study in this regard. It probes the ways that CCF magazines did publish Wright (and other Black authors), but attempted to prioritize his anti-communism over his anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism. The CCF might have tried to control its authors, but in a world of veiled meanings and hidden political agendas, specific essays in its magazines could bite the American hand that covertly sponsored them.
- 13 While both of these book projects under review have significant and important merits on their own, thinking about the two in tandem allows readers to see both the proverbial forest and trees. In *Hot Art, Cold War*, specific critical reactions to American art from across Europe give readers a myriad of concrete examples of the ways that Cold War politics, including those who resisted its binaries, shaped the interpretation of works. *Parapolitics* offers a broader view, the official, yet covert, mechanisms that attempted to spread American values around the world. Considered together, these books might inspire art historians to connect the dots between the CCF (and other organs of cultural support during the Cold War) and specific critical responses to American art in Europe and beyond. This kind of art history would both expose and probe Cold War artistic networks; as such, it would account for the macro forces attempting to steer culture, while also probing the micro cultures, whether critical or artistic, that respond to directives with varying levels of critique or compliance. This is the hard work of a truly revisionist modernism, but with these books, the project becomes a little easier.

NOTES

1. See the introduction to my *Global Art and the Cold War* for a more detailed analysis of this painting. John J. Curley, *Global Art and the Cold War*, London: Laurence King, 2018, p. 10-12.
 2. The only countries not covered are Luxembourg, Albania, and principalities like San Mario and Monaco.
 3. Franke, Anselm. Ghouse, Nida. Guevara, Paz. Majacap, Antonia. "Introduction", *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War*, Berlin : Sternberg Press : Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2021, p. 14
 4. Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983
 5. Bouček, Jaroslav. "Formalist 'Art' in the Service of Warmongers", *Hot Art, Cold War: Southern and Eastern European Writing on American Art 1954-1990*, London: Routledge, 2021, p. 416
 6. Giunta, Andrea. "The Power of Interpretation: How MoMA Explained *Guernica* to its Audience", *Parapolitics, op. cit.*, p. 259-272
 7. Franke, Anselm. Ghouse, Nida. Guevara, Paz. Majacap, Antonia. "Introduction", *ibid.*, p. 16
 8. Kravagna, Christian. "Purity of Art and the Racial Politics of Modernism", *ibid.*, p. 436
 9. Zitzewitz, Karin. "Clement Greenberg in India: A Recursive History", *ibid.*, p. 361-366
 10. Hesse, Barnor. "Two Concepts of White Sovereignty", *ibid.*, p. 85-98
 11. Salti, Rasha. "The Story of *Hiwar*: Cold War Imbroglio and the Struggle for Autonomy", *ibid.*, p. 467
 12. Eshun, Kodwo. "Signifying Deceit: Richard Wright's Anti-Colonial-Anti-Capitalist-Anti-Colonialism", *ibid.*, p. 546-584
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John J. Curley is associate professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC. He is the author of *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2013). His second book, *Global Art and the Cold War* appeared in 2019 (Laurence King). An article on the connections between the paintings of Morris Louis and Cold War cultures of rationality appeared this year in *Art History*. His new book project is provisionally titled *Critical Distance: Black American Artists in Europe 1958-1968*.