Art Across Frontiers: Cross-Cultural Encounters in America

Introduction

Abstract
This short introduction provides a brief overview of the collection, by addressing the main historiographical and theoretical concerns that unite the individual contributions and by placing the essays in comparative, inter-American and interdisciplinary perspective. What do comparative analyses tell us about patterns of cross-cultural exchange in the visual arts? More specifically, what do these analyses tell us about the role of ethnic agency and audience, and the complex relationship between artistic practice and the ‘mainstream’, the local and the global?
Art historical approaches provide useful methodologies for understanding cross-cultural exchange. For example, it is often by way of the art object that processes of transculturation become tangible while the objects themselves possess the power to generate significant “rift[s] in understanding” as they move or migrate from one context to another. Yet in a study devoted to diaspora and visual culture, Aline Brandauer declared that “the meanings and uses of chunks of cultural practice have floated far more widely than art history has yet accepted.”

In a broader vein, according to Jonathan Harris, art history has yet to catch up with art practice in terms of addressing the “collaborations” and “interactivity” embedded within contemporary aesthetic production, suggesting that the permeability of borders between different artistic media and between artist-performers and audiences might best be understood by engaging the “inter/transdisciplinary fields” of visual culture and visual studies. These scholars raise important questions for understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange in the visual arts. This was the central theme of a symposium funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art at the University of Nottingham in 2011, which generated the essays for this special issue.

Showcasing the interdisciplinary range and international expertise of leading and emerging scholars in the fields of American Studies, Latin American Studies, Cultural Studies, History and Art History, Art Across Frontiers explores the impact of cross-cultural exchange on the visual arts by examining specific periods, group encounters and sites where negotiation was most intense. The essays consider cross-cultural encounters between Euro-Americans, Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos in the visual arts, as well as

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cross-border relations between the art of the United States and the visual cultures of the Americas from the early nineteenth-century to the present. By examining the significance of transcultural, transnational and transatlantic relations in Native American, African American and Latina/o art, as well as cross-border flows between US, Latin American and Caribbean art, this collection brings different regional and historical models of cultural crossover, diaspora and aesthetic experimentation into comparative and inter-American perspective. For example, the essays address a set of shared processes, contexts and thematic concerns: the legacies of colonialism and nation building, theories and patterns of transculturation and migration, encounters between Native Americans, African Americans, Latina/os and the mainstream, and between artists and the diaspora in shaping artistic forms, categories and institutional practices. By moving across a series of borders—geographic, ethnic, cultural and the less tangible borders that define style, form, genre and the category of art itself—the contributors demonstrate how cross-cultural contact has fostered opportunities for creative collaboration, aesthetic experimentation and new patterns of identity, agency, appropriation and counter-appropriation. From early colonial encounters through to twentieth-century modernist primitivism and on into the contemporary globalized world marked by new patterns of transnational migration and diaspora, practices of exchange and diversity have provided not simply the foundations for dynamic experimental aesthetic practices, but for a more intellectually rigorous and critical approach to art history.

In their encounter with postcolonial theory, scholars have explored the significance of transatlantic, transnational and transcultural relations in shaping the “multiple modernisms” that emerged in the Americas as a result of colonialism, and the importance of these flows for shaping the re-appropriation and counter-appropriation of modernist primitivism by African
American, Native American and Latina/o artists. The emphasis on mainstream modernism’s exclusionary tendencies, cultural and hemispheric nationalisms, and the relationship between art, imperialism and cultural diplomacy has produced a series of discrete studies mapping artistic flows within the Americas at key moments in the twentieth century: between the United States and Latin American art, principally Mexican art; between US and Caribbean art; and between Mexican and African American artists. In the wake of globalization and concerns with “official,” de-politicized forms of multiculturalism, scholars have also interrogated cross-cultural exchange in contemporary Native American, African American, Asian American and Latina/o art. Very few studies, with the possible exception of Miller, Berlo, Wolf and Roberts’s *American Encounters* (2007), place exchange at the core of understanding American visual culture in its entirety, across time, space and media.3 Most importantly, there have been few attempts to place these discrete analyses in comparative, chronological and inter-American perspective, and to consider different cultural and aesthetic diasporas as a way of deepening our understanding of cross-cultural exchange in the visual arts.

Despite the fragmented scholarship, specific conditions have shaped cross-cultural exchanges in the visual arts and their scholarly interpretation, thus providing us with a starting point for comparative study. Periods of intense change—colonialism, nation building, modernisation, modernity and, more recently, heightened globalization and transnational migration—have generated cross-cultural encounters and opportunities for visual representation and self-representation. Art has often been deployed as a tool of colonialism

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and nation building through the depiction of the “other”. Yet the representation of indigenous and non-white peoples on the canvas and through the camera did not always succeed in constructing monolithic and essentialist ethnic “types.” As this collection makes clear, the colonial project was never a totalizing force, and any study of cross-cultural exchange must begin with this encounter rather than fast-forwarding to the twentieth century where interplay has become an established force in contemporary artistic practice.

Elizabeth Hutchinson’s essay on early nineteenth-century Indian portraiture as a form of “intercultural negotiation” suggests that the colonial and early American Republic was not simply a period of intense economic and political negotiation in Native-US relations; it was also a period when Native American brokers and diplomats proclaimed their vision of “personal and tribal sovereignty” as white artists were commissioned to paint their portraits. Hutchinson provides a very different vision of George Catlin’s and Charles Bird King’s “Indian gallery” paintings as an “Indian pantheon”: rather than a form of colonial subjugation and assimilation, portraiture became a tool for Native “self-fashioning” through the individual display of clothing, trade and consumption. Miller, Berlo, Wolf and Roberts suggest that cross-cultural exchange in the visual arts shifted from being a tool of survival and adaptation for colonial “societies in transition” to an “increasingly self-conscious strategy” for contemporary artists working under the conditions of modernity, postmodernity and postcoloniality.4 Hutchinson’s essay demonstrates that “self-conscious strategies” on the part of subordinate groups evolved much earlier and, more importantly, that such strategies expressed alternative forms of “cosmopolitan modernity,” countering the stereotype of Native peoples as “vanishing,” voiceless subjects.

By reframing the colonial project as generating opportunities for “self-fashioning” through visual representation, Hutchinson’s essay suggests an historical lineage of counter-strategies by subordinate groups who have struggled to define their place in modernity.
Stephanie Lewthwaite’s contribution revisits the ambiguous legacy of colonial art traditions from the perspective of contemporary New Mexico. By reworking officially-sanctioned forms of Spanish colonial art that underpin New Mexico’s ethnotourism, recent Hispano artists have challenged discriminatory artistic binaries and purist notions of ethnocultural identity. Contemporary Hispano art exposes the deeply mestiza/o reality of New Mexico’s colonial legacy and the politicized nature of spiritually-based aesthetic practices. Similar colonial-based practices of syncretic accumulation are evident across the Latina/o Southwest, in the altar-based installations of Chicana artists and a broader improvisational or “rasquache” aesthetic that crosses media and artistic binaries.5

The ambiguities of visual representation in the Southwest, and the contact between different aesthetic and economic systems, cultural tourism and anthropology, are also evident in Martin Padget’s essay on Hopi artist Victor Masayesva, Jr. Padget explores Masayesva’s development of a contemporary “indigenous aesthetic” through the medium of film, extending Hutchinson’s viewpoint that forms of visual representation associated with the colonialist enterprise can become conduits for counter-assertions of Native agency and sovereignty. Padget examines Masayesva’s film Paatuwaqatsi (2008), which documents how “acts of running, prayer and personal sacrifice,” long-standing anti-colonial practices for Native peoples, have been used in the campaign for Hopi water rights against a major US coal company. For Padget, Masayesva’s filmwork exemplifies “the ideology and practice of visual sovereignty,” in which “oral storytelling and ceremonial aspects” of Hopi culture help illuminate the broader environmental and political concerns that affect many Native peoples. Hutchinson and Padget both demonstrate that certain inherently collaborative artistic forms and media have become deeply embedded in cross-cultural exchange, and capable of generating subversion over time and space. Indeed, perhaps because of their inherently collaborative nature, portraiture, film, photography and performance art have worked to both
establish and counter the ethnographic gaze as the tangled and often fraught relationships between subject and artist, director-choreographer and performer, and multiple audiences are negotiated.

With a similar focus on artistic medium, Hannah Durkin’s contribution explores the “authorial interplay between director and performer” in Maya Deren’s avant-garde dance film, *A Study for Choreography and Camera* (1945). Jewish-American filmmaker Deren’s collaboration with African-American dancer Talley Beatty demonstrates cross-cultural exchange on multiple levels: Deren’s commitment to racial integration, her “cross-cultural exploration of dance,” and the mixing of elite, non-elite, Western and non-Western art forms such as ballet, cinema and the Haitian ritual performance vodun, facilitated Beatty’s “co-authorship” and the undoing of racial and artistic hierarchies. Durkin contends that Beatty’s cross-cultural agency subverted dominant modes of performance, art and filmmaking from tools of ethnographic documentation and racialization into tools that countered prevailing views of African American performers as racially segregated visual spectacles.

Durkin’s essay reiterates the view that subordinate groups countered the ethnographic gaze through creative acts of collaboration and counter-appropriation. Her contribution also underscores that the development of modernist culture was a key intercultural “moment” in this process. As Mercer notes, the view of modernity as an “alien invader” obscures the agency of non-white artists as subjects engaged in aesthetic experimentation because it denies “adaptation and resistance…and the creative opportunities made possible by the contradictions of the colonial encounter.” The history of primitivism and the dominance of formalist analysis in art history have excluded non-white artists from view or misrepresented their work within the mainstream modernist canon as derivative or deficient. As critic Lucy Lippard notes, however, “modernism opened art up to a broad variety of materials and techniques as well as cultures.” Perhaps more than anything, revisionist histories of
modernism produced in the last two decades have helped generate a fuller understanding of cross-cultural flows, and especially patterns of transcultural, transatlantic and transnational exchange.6

Valerie Fletcher and Lowery Stokes Sims have underscored the “creative opportunities” offered by modernist culture, and modernist primitivism specifically, for non-Western artists such as Roberto Matta, Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García and Wifredo Lam. Fletcher argues that modernism provided Latin American artists with the first explicit opportunity to contest the colonial legacy and their interventions ensured the multidirectional nature of future artistic “flows.”7 Fletcher’s identification of a “New World modernism” based on engaging rather than rejecting European influences and synthesizing them with national and ethnic cultures, has been accompanied by a number of studies arguing for the existence of multiple modernisms, which vary from “integrative” forms of cosmopolitan and hybrid modernism to explicitly anti-assimilationist forms of indigenous and counter modernism.8 These modernisms were often founded upon the artist’s creative strategy of re-appropriating or counter-appropriating modernist primitivism and critiquing the exclusionary concept of a “universal” art. In this process, the non-white artist’s encounter with the mainstream did not necessarily result in loss or the creation of a derivative art; rather, it worked towards the powerful assertion of the artist’s national, ethnic and cultural heritage, sometimes alongside while at other times directly counter to European and American hegemony. Sieglinde Lemke’s revisionist history of transatlantic modernism as a “pas de deux” between black and white cultural influences through which African Americans redeployed European primitivism to explore their own form of Africanism and diasporic identity, and Bill Anthes’ study of Native American artists who engaged modernism as a way of sustaining indigenous tradition in the face of dislocation and migration, suggest the
opportunities and dilemmas presented by the strategy of re-appropriation and the hybrid modernisms forged through cross-cultural contact.\(^9\)

Some of the recent literature on modernist cross-cultural encounters identifies specific metropolitan locations as “hubs” for artistic exchange. Durkin’s essay suggests that 1940’s New York was fertile ground for Deren’s experimental and collaborative filmmaking. Similarly, El Museo del Barrio’s project, *Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis* (2009) enlarges our vision of the multidirectional flows shaping American modernism by identifying New York not simply as a “magnet” for the European and American avant-garde, but as a hub marked by historical interaction between Puerto Ricans, African Americans and Euro-Americans, and between resident US artists and visiting Latin American and Caribbean artists, some of whom re-routed their artistic visions from homeland to host society and back again. More importantly, as Deborah Cullen shows, the productive and often-neglected interactions between African American painters such as Charles Alston and Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros (whose Experimental Workshop influenced a number of Harlem-based artists), suggest that cross-cultural encounters were more complex than a simple meeting between the mainstream and margins: artists shared their political and artistic visions within a “global, deterritorialized context” as common, if not similar, experiences of imperialism and racial oppression generated fruitful exchange across national borders.\(^{10}\)

The dialectic between the local and the global and experiences of travel and migration, both real and imaginary, have often shaped a multiperspectival aesthetic that breaks with the formalist conventions of mainstream modernism. In this respect, the work of Ann Eden Gibson has been vital in bringing female and African American artists—neglected because of their perceived “failure” to adhere to a universal “purity” of form—into our understanding of post-war abstract expressionism. So too has Kobena Mercer’s collection on
the practice of “discrepant abstraction” among artists from Asia, Africa, Europe, the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{11} Chiming with these studies is Graham Lock’s illustrated essay on part African American and part Native American artist Joe Overstreet.\textsuperscript{12} Overstreet maintained a productive engagement with mainstream abstract expressionism while forging an aesthetic marked by multiplicity and simultaneity: he broke artistic boundaries by literally moving his work beyond the picture frame and onto hanging canvases that represented teepees and sails during his period of “nomadic art” in the 1970s. Overstreet also visited Senegal and experimented with West African sources and the “tools of his ancestors.” By mapping “the journey from there to here, displaced African to reconstructed American,” thus connecting African American realities with the slave past, Overstreet established a diasporic framework for black art.

Lock’s essay carves out a much larger geographical and imaginary terrain for understanding experimental abstraction, suggesting that the margin-metropole model cannot encompass the spatial and temporal complexities of cross-cultural exchange. Likewise, Deren’s experimental filmmaking rested on a triangular relationship between the United States, the Caribbean (Haiti), and Africa. More recently, Hispano artists have drawn on cultural influences from across the Latina/o diaspora, such as Cuban santeria and pre-Columbian-inspired pop iconography, as well as global environmental concerns, while transatlantic flows, including British-style portraiture, shaped early American representations of indigenous peoples.

The rationale for practicing and examining an art of interplay and plurality has become all the more important. Multiculturalism and globalization have generated a more thorough questioning of established art narratives and categories, and the diasporic condition. For artists who experience migration and the diasporic condition, writes Andrea Herrera O’Reilly in relation to Cuban art, “movement functions as a mode of cultural survival as well
as a form of potent resistance. It promises, moreover, accumulated knowledge, and often serves as a source of creative potential and fecund possibility.” Herrera O’Reilly’s emphasis on the “strategic advantages of multirootedness and translocality” for contemporary Cuban artists is evident in recent moves to reconfigure ideas about national art and cultural belonging.\(^{13}\) Moving between the local and the global is Jacqueline Francis’ essay on the origins and development of African diaspora art as a concept and practice that challenges the established categories of African and African American art. Key artists, scholars and institutions have shaped the “African diaspora visual turn,” from Robert Farris Thompson’s excavation of a “transatlantic tradition” of black art in the 1960s to David Hammons’ street-based performance art of the 1970s, which articulated “a black experience grounded in transnational affiliations,” through to the 2005 opening of San Francisco’s Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD). African diaspora art is not a closed, uncontested concept, argues Francis, who reveals the local-global tensions embedded in the course of “institutionalizing” African diaspora art and engaging a “black diasporic constituency,” tensions which sometimes lead critics to re-assert the very categories that diaspora art works to problematize.

Leon Wainwright’s essay problematizes the concept of African diaspora art in another way by exploring the migratory journeys of artists from the Caribbean. Wainwright argues that the persistence of “centre-periphery” models in art history and curatorial practice, and “Americocentrism” in particular, have side-lined artists such as Trinidadian-born Christopher Cozier and the British Guyana-born painters Frank Bowling and Aubrey Williams from the sphere of contemporary art. Wainwright extends Francis’ discussion of the local-global dynamic in African diaspora art by examining the “complex triangle” of the United States, Britain and the Caribbean, assessing how Crozier, Bowling and Williams participated in a series of “global networks” as a way of “claiming transnational sovereignty.” Just as Francis underscores the local-global tensions in contemporary debates about African diaspora art,
Wainwright’s discussion of Americocentrism suggests how nation-centred art-historical narratives threaten the transnational thrust of the diaspora framework.

In Francis’ essay, Thompson’s exploration of a black transatlantic tradition in the sixties is positioned as a form of “scholarly activism,” thus outlining the politicized basis for the development of African diaspora art as a concept. Certainly, the scholarly and artistic impetus to uncover cross-cultural exchange in the visual arts has often constituted a form of social activism, as in the case of Shifra Goldman’s dedication to documenting the presence of Latin American art in the United States, especially during periods of intense hemispheric interaction, imperialism, war and trade. For Goldman, the political and ideological impetus to reveal the contours of a “socially concerned art” that crossed national borders within the Americas from the early twentieth century onwards, mapped neatly onto historiographical trends in the 1960s and 1970s to provide a more explicitly “social history of art” embedded in contemporary movements for social action and justice. In particular, Goldman contextualized contemporary US Latino art, and especially Chicano art, in relation to the constituent homeland or diaspora rather than the United States, suggesting the role played by exile, migration and displacement.  

*Art Across Frontiers* outlines an array of strategies emanating from cross-cultural contact, strategies which lie at the heart of the struggle for ethnic self-representation—integration, synthesis, adaptation, re-appropriation, counter-appropriation, resistance—suggesting that certain forms of artistic expression and media are inherently collaborative “contact zones” for intercultural negotiation. From Native American “self-fashioning” in early Republican portraiture to David Hammons’ explicit interrogation of Western modernism by revealing a black diasporic arts tradition alternative and equal to the West’s, cross-cultural strategies have challenged, if not necessarily broken, established artistic categories, hierarchies and narratives. In some of these scholarly and artistic interventions,
we find new forms of artistic expression emerging in between the boundaries of established art practices. For example, Maya Deren’s experimental “chorecinema” constitutes a form of “time-space art,” David Hammons’ refusé aesthetic seeks out an alternative “street audience” in a bid to break fine art categories, while Hispano artists’ practice of mixed-media recycling and syncretic accumulation meshes with a wider, subversive Chicana/o tradition of rasquachismo. By bringing material objects and aspects of performative culture typically labelled “non-art” into view for diverse institutional settings and audiences, these practices destabilize binaries between art and craft, high and low, modern and primitive, and fine and folk art. Furthermore, cross-cultural practices in the visual arts and their scholarly interpretation often rely on breaking down disciplinary borders. Both Deren and Thompson forged pioneering interdisciplinary approaches to the study of dance and black material culture respectively: Deren’s experimental aesthetic derived from her intellectual engagement with anthropology and psychology, as well as her understanding of avant-garde film, while Thompson employed the fields of history, archaeology, art formalism and comparative literature to define the contours of African diaspora art.

However, it would be unwise to exaggerate changes in the disciplinary study, practice and display of art, as well as levels of artistic agency. Durkin’s essay reveals “authorial tensions” in Deren and Beatty’s dance-film collaboration, as Beatty struggled to establish his individual artistry in the face of Deren’s desire for a collective experience through the “filmic ritual.” Similarly, Francis demonstrates that while the concept of African diaspora art has complicated established categories of African and African American art, critics’ responses to MoAD’s recent exhibitions suggest that the old commitments to fixed notions of race, ethnicity, culture and nation die hard. Wainwright’s essay on the problems of Americocentrism provides another case in point. Despite the acknowledgement of deterritorialized subjectivities and aesthetic practices of interplay and difference, a lack of
reciprocity still characterizes many cross-cultural encounters in the visual arts. As Fisher and Mosquera remind us, “The questions are still who organizes, who curates, who pays, and who hosts.”

Miller, Berlo, Wolf and Roberts insist that scholars move beyond a “multicultural history” of American art that does little more than present a series of “discrete traditions.” As Tomás Ybarra-Frausto asked recently:

How can we imagine a new narrative of American art history that focuses on respect for difference and variation, but at the same time builds conviviality and two-way sharing across social divides? That is the next step. We now have stories and visions of African American art, of Asian American art, and Latino art. How can we build points of contact across them? That is what American art is all about—not an individuated ethnic base of narratives, but all these stories calling and responding to each other. Somewhere in this “dialogic imperative,” simultaneous with global tensions, are the contours of a new cartography of the imagination, of a new sense of American visual culture that is not restrictive but open and expansive; that is not national but integrates the local with the global; that offers a possibility of ongoing dialogue and two-way communication.

Dialogues about cross-cultural exchange have enabled us to “imagine a more expansive narrative of American art,” to employ Ybarra-Frausto’s phrase, a narrative that does not simply “add” artists to existing canons but that remains critical of the foundations on which extant narratives and institutional practices are built. Art Across Frontiers represents a similar attempt to expand the horizons of American visual culture, exploring what Lippard calls “the area in between—that fertile, liminal ground where new meanings germinate,” so that we might avoid replicating old narratives and categories and, instead, open up a terrain that enables us to “see art…differently.”


4 Miller, xvi.


8 See especially Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*.

9 Lemke, 6-7; Anthes, 89-116.


12 Lock’s contribution is available in the journal’s online version only.


14 Goldman, 36-37.


16 Miller, xii.


18 Lippard, 9, 14.