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Exile and Expatriation

Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions. The Movement of Images in Early America*

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REFERENCES

Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions. The Movement of Images in Early America*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2014, 226 pages, 47 €/54 \$, ISBN : 9780520251847

- 1 Modern and, more especially, post-modern art has adamantly reinstated the picture-as-object next to the picture-as-illusion. Think of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Whereas a long tradition —strategies of the frame, of linear perspective, of the internal relation of forms and narratives (2) — had virtualized the painting, much of the art since the 1960s has returned the issue of the work's real space to the visual process: witness Smithson's *Land Art, Institutional Critique, the Installation*. In a welcome gesture linking contemporary art with the art of the early American Republic, Jennifer L. Roberts, as it were, "rematerializes" paintings produced between 1760 and 1850 and enables us, through her virtuoso interdisciplinary construct, to re-imagine their material history.
- 2 Her precise project is to analyse the importance of transport in the production and reception of American paintings made in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Her case studies are focused in three dense chapters on Copley, Audubon and Durand. In each case, she explores the issues of transportation and how these issues leave their formal imprint on the work. Geography, she believes, does not surround the work, but is integral to it; and temporality is constitutive : at play are issues of delay, resistance and loss.

- 3 Take the case of a talented and ambitious Boston artist seeking to have his work validated by the British academy. Such is that of self-taught John Singleton Copley, who, when selected to present paintings in London, became engaged in a process involving long delays — it was six months before the artist heard how British artists responded to his work, and even longer when he needed to question their feedback. All these temporal calculations, as Roberts demonstrates, went into the production of his *Boy with a Flying Squirrel* (1765). The dress, for instance, was simplified in order to circumvent problems of fashion; a boy was chosen (and his youth exaggerated) in order to give greater universality; the numismatic profile was borrowed from medallions or coins for greater currency; the configuration of the table was strained to foreground exchange as in conversation pieces. For Roberts, the artist's thinking about the work as a transportable showpiece reveals itself, moreover, in his representations of water and measurement (the glass and the chain) and the squirrel proves metapictorial. The author offers subtle readings of the tabletop reflections. Her treatment at the close of this chapter of *Watson and the Shark* (1778) provides equal intellectual delight: her reading of the black figure; her conflation of this harbor drama and the Boston Tea Party (in which Copley was personally involved); *Watson and the Shark* figuring the danger of losing a painting during its transatlantic voyage.
- 4 Likewise, John James Audubon's gigantic *Birds of America* — as much a shipping and distribution project as a scientific and artistic one — involves the question of the circulation of images across the Atlantic but also across the continent at a moment (between 1820 and 1839) of crisis in both geographical scale and monetary exchange in the USA. Audubon traveled 3500 miles for (and with) *The Birds of America*, producing what was (until 2004) the largest book ever published. But why did the artist complicate things by refusing scale, when abstraction from size is the basis of representation, the founding operation of virtuality? Why did he prefer the near-indexical transfer from body to page? To answer a question which has been inadequately addressed in the scholarship, Roberts weaves a stunning narrative with an intricate network of determinations: the gothic living image (as in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe), transatlantic natural history (like his fellow Americans, naturalist Audubon refutes Buffon), western frontier tall tales ... and wildcat banks. The artist's performance proves in particular to be a resistance to both the latter, his insistence on the bulk and materiality of images a symptom of his own suffering in the financial panic of 1819. "His rhetoric of honesty, self-evidence and immediacy, responded directly to Audubon's experience of the instabilities of modern monetary culture" (112).
- 5 Another tour de force is performed in the final chapter devoted to Asher B. Durand. Roberts attends to Durand's lesser-known work, his engravings (particularly his uncommissioned project to engrave a copy of Vanderlyn's *Ariadne*), and his foregrounded landscapes of moss, tree and rock. Roberts links both to the temporal and spatial changes brought about by Durand's fellow artist Samuel E. Morse when the latter invented the telegraph. The visual arts, like *Ariadne*, are left behind, and, in another act of resistance, Durand insists on conveying the adhesive reality of things by making pictures which Roberts defines as "non-conducting" (112). The argument is again stunning, almost vertiginous at times.
- 6 "In tracing the transit of paintings and prints through British America and the United States in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century [Roberts shows] how such pictures could and did register the complications of their own transmission"

(1). For Roberts, pictures served communities as connective devices, maintaining social links across vast ranges of space at a time when space was not annihilated by technologies of instantaneous communication and information transfer. Time is what her book reimagines and conceptualizes for us. After Bourdieu, she endeavors to reintroduce time and by extension space with its rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility into the analysis of cultural production (16).

- 7 Roberts convincingly juxtaposes Audubon's prints with works by Mel Bochner and Jasper Johns, and for each artist she convokes not only art which is contemporary to us, but literature contemporary to the artist (Addison for Copley, for instance). She weaves and weaves together various histories — those of technology and economics in particular. She brings to her text her art history toolbox, picture theory, anthropology, philosophy and what she calls (after Bill Brown) "thing theory" (9). The resulting approach is an art history that has assimilated visual and cultural studies.
- 8 *Transporting Visions* manages to conceptualize links with broad aspects of society and to narrate the diverse elements in vivid detail while operating sharp analyses of the visual works. An elegant balance of concrete detail and subtle argument is thus achieved in a prose that is alert, witty, and consistently clear. The wealth and depth of the research is impressive, the critical debate fully present in the notes. One wonders what other artists the author might examine in this way, what other works in early America formally preprocessed the distances they were designed to span. One wonders especially what projects outside the question of transport this book could and will generate. Beautifully produced with excellently disposed reproductions, it is a major work, and one that deserves to be known outside the English-speaking and American-art-focused world.

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