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Mapping the Reception of American Art in Postwar Western Europe

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Abstract

This article presents a project launched by a multidisciplinary team based at Purdue University in partnership with ARTL@S. The ambition is to map the diffusion of American art in postwar Western Europe by recovering exhibitions that took place between 1945 and 1970 and that featured works by American Abstract Expressionist and American Pop artists. The results of this research will be featured on an interactive web application that will allow users to view the maps, zoom in on them, select artists or artworks, scroll through dates, and even create their own maps. It will thus be a great tool for scholars, students, and museums professionals, who will be able to use it as a starting point for their own investigations.

Résumé

Cet article présente le projet d'une équipe pluridisciplinaire de l'Université de Purdue, en partenariat avec ARTL@S. Son ambition est de cartographier la diffusion de l'art américain dans l'Europe de l'après Deuxième Guerre mondiale, en recensant les expositions qui présentaient des œuvres d'artistes américains expressionnistes abstraits et pop art, entre 1945 et 1970. Les résultats seront présentés sur une interface numérique qui permettra à différents utilisateurs de visualiser les cartes, de zoomer, de sélectionner des données (artistes, œuvres, dates) et, finalement, de créer leur propres cartes. Cet outil, à disposition des élèves du secondaire, des étudiants, mais également des professionnels, leur servira de point d'appui pour leur propres recherches.

1. To mention just a few: Pontus Hulten [1977], Germano Celant and Anna Costantini [1993], Detlef Junker [2004a and 2004b]. Even Jeremy Lewison in his excellent discussion of Jackson Pollock's reception in Europe adopts a bilateral approach, examining successively the situation in Italy, England and France [1999].

2. In 1970 Irving Sandler published a history of Abstract Expressionism titled *Triumph of American Art* [1970]. In the following years several art historians questioned the notion of triumph of American art and argued that, if triumph there had been, it had been the triumph American imperialism [M. Kozloff, 1973; E. Cockroft, 1974; S. Guilbaut, 1983]. This started a controversy which is still going on today.

3. Here I am alluding to the exhibition Michel Tapié organized in collaboration with Alfonso Ossorio in March 1952 at the Parisian gallery of Paul Facchetti [1952].

Mapping the diffusion of American art in postwar Western Europe is the object of an ambitious project conducted by a multidisciplinary team based at Purdue University in partnership with ARTL@S. The results of our research will be featured on an interactive web application that will allow users to view the maps, zoom in on them, select artists or artworks, scroll through dates, and even create their own maps. It will thus be a great tool for scholars, students, and museums professionals, who will be able to use it as a starting point for their own investigations. Its interactive and stimulating design also makes it attractive to non-professionals. As such it will stand as a model contribution not only to ARTL@S but also to the discipline of art history.

The project originated in my research on the European reception of American art in the second part of the 20th century. Although this has been the theme of numerous studies, they all tend to adopt the same bilateral approach by focusing on the reception of American art in one particular European country.¹ However pertinent and productive this is, such a method compartmentalizes the natural flux of artistic exchanges into national limits that contradict their transnationality. Knowledge of American art did not necessarily follow national channels: Belgians' acquaintance with US art was not limited to what was presented in their country but also came, if not mostly, from what they could see outside their borders in Paris, Düsseldorf, Den Haag, and other nearby foreign cities. Adopting a multilateral approach which would take into account the national and the transnational dimensions of the diffusion of American art through Europe therefore seemed necessary. It seemed also important to move beyond the myths and controversies surrounding the so-called Triumph of American art which clutter an understanding of its diffusion and reception.² My ambition for this project was to plainly establish what Europeans knew about American art in the early 1950s. I intended to retrace, as accurately as possible, the chain of events that marked the dissemination of US art through Europe. In order to avoid a retrospective or omniscient perspective, my investigation would be restricted to blunt and factual questions: What could Western Europeans see of American art? When could they see it? And where could they see it? Focusing on the 'what,' 'when,' and 'where', i.e. the concrete modalities of European public's exposure to American art, promised to deliver a more

accurate representation of Europeans' familiarity with this style of art. For example, one cannot simply conclude that West Germans knew about Abstract Expressionism in the early fifties because Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were featured in a show in West Berlin in 1951. At that time, West Berlin was not only isolated from the rest of West Germany; it was also an object of contention between the United States and the Soviet Unions, and thus a precarious place to be. Westerners would not go to West Berlin just to see a show. The import of *Amerikanische Malerei: Werden und Gegenwart* could therefore only be small. Even for those who did visit the show, its contribution to their knowledge of the new American art must have been negligible. In this retrospective of American art since the 18th century, Pollock and Rothko were in fact mere newcomers among many others [J. Tiburtius, 1951]. Likewise, one should not assume that the Parisian public knew about Pollock because he had a show in a small Parisian gallery in 1952.³ When studying the reception of any art, there needs to be a clear distinction between the cities in which the shows took place and between the institutions in which they happened since the potential outreach of museums, established galleries, and vanguard spaces are very different.

In order to consider those multiple factors – the countries, cities, and spaces in which the exhibitions of American art took place, as well as the themes, artists, and artworks they featured – a simple linear chronology was not sufficient. These factors had to be combined with a typology and geography which, as a whole, would be best to visualize through maps. The main problem was that there is no complete list of American art exhibitions in Western Europe that could be used to map the progressive and regional diffusion of American art through postwar Europe. Thus, I had to *bricoler* one myself. The lack of centralized information is actually a general plight of our discipline. The history of art is made up of data pertaining to individual artists (biography, catalogue of works, list of exhibitions, and bibliography) and individual artworks (physical information as well as list of exhibitions and owners). This data is what allows us to think, discuss, teach, and display art in an accurate and relevant manner. Yet there is no centralized, dependable place to access this information. Dates and facts are to be found in monographs, *catalogues raisonnés*, and

exhibition catalogs. The fact that art historical data is difficult to access, always partial, and often inconsistent is a serious limitation for the discipline. The absence of a centralized, reliable, and usable art historical database is all the more throbbing since today's technology makes possible to collect, compute, and share large amount of data. My initial project expanded as I thereby aimed at creating such a centralized database for the reception of American art in postwar Europe.

Considering the scope of the project and my limited resources, I decided to focus on the respective diffusions of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. While mapping the reception of those two American trends my ambition was threefold. First, I wanted to show that the presentation of Abstract expressionism in Western Europe had been extremely limited until 1958; then that the public and commercial recognition of Pop art had happened quickly thereafter and was larger and more widespread; finally that the center of American art in Europe had shifted throughout the period from Italy to Paris to the Rhineland, with London and the Netherlands also playing key roles at particular moments. Even in its reduced scale and with a more focused argument, the project still constituted a daunting task I could not achieve on my own. I needed help collecting data, processing it, and generating maps. While teaching at Purdue University, I met Chris Miller, a geoinformatics expert in charge of the Purdue GIS Library,⁴ and Sorin Matei, a digital humanity specialist creator of *Visible Past*, a georeferenced online content management.⁵ Together we requested and were awarded grant support from the Office of the Vice President for Research at Purdue University to develop a web interface that would serve as an original contribution to ARTL@S.⁶ Thanks to the combined support of a Global Research Synergy and an Enhancing Humanities grant,⁷ I could hire undergraduate art history students to collect data on exhibitions, museums' purchases and press coverage. Dr. Miller and the Purdue GIS Libraries' team could apply their data preparation and web map programming workflows to compute and analyze this data, while Dr. Matei and his team could develop a dynamic interface to display it through the narrative and historical mapping technology of *Visible Past*.

The first step in the process of transforming my research into maps was to build a relational database that would be

used to systematically collect and analyze data, and use this data to generate maps. The first task in building the database was to decide what the smallest element of the analysis was: was it the artwork, artist, or exhibition? I dismissed the first two because the project did not deal with the artist or artwork per se but with the act of exhibiting them. Exhibitions, as they were documented in catalogues, became the base of my database and so far we have identified more than four hundred exhibitions. The next step was to determine a list of attributes to attach to these exhibitions. Some categories such as dates, locations, or artists were obvious. Others, specific to my project, were meant to enable further research. Because it is complicated to modify the structure of a database once it is in place, the categories of analysis need to be planned ahead. I therefore created categories to distinguish whether the exhibitions were taking place in museums or commercial galleries, and whether they had been organized at a European or American initiative. We also made a distinction between shows that only featured American artists and those where American art was presented along European art. Similarly, we differentiated exhibitions that focused on Abstract Expressionism and exhibitions in which it was presented along other American styles and did the same for Pop art.

4. For information on Purdue GIS Library, see: <http://www.lib.purdue.edu/gis/>

5. On *Visible Past*, see: <http://visiblepast.net/see/>.

6. One can visit the site of Purdue's Office of the Vice President for Research at <http://www.purdue.edu/research/vpr/>.

7. Information on those grants is available at <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/research/facressup/internalsupport/>.

Map I. Exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism from 1946 to 1969



Screen capture from unpublished, development web interface ©2012, *Triumph of American Art*, Purdue

8. For more information on Peggy Guggenheim's promotion of the New American Painting in Italy and the Netherlands, see Peggy Guggenheim [1960].

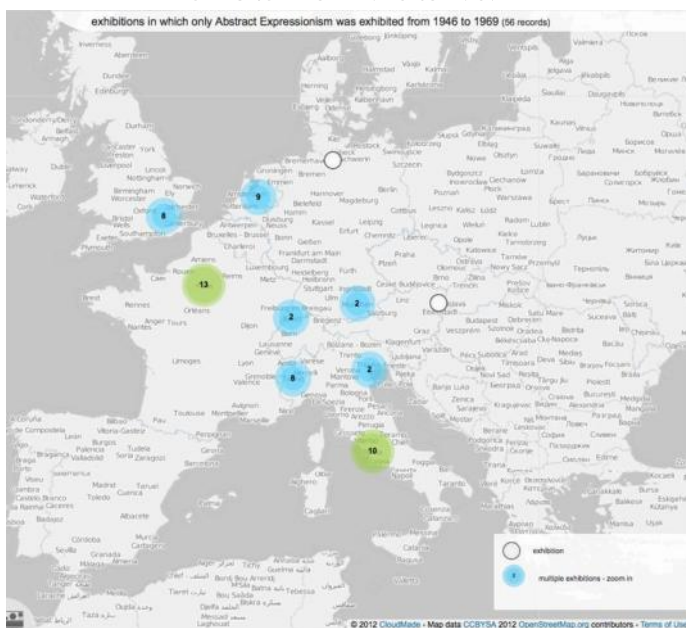
9. On the activities of the Sonnabend Gallery, see Michel Bourel [1988].

10. On the West German craze with American Pop art, see [2011].

11. What we call today Abstract Expressionism was then regarded in Europe as the new American painting and given many qualifiers including Tachist, Informal, Spontaneous, Subjective and Expressionist. See for instance: Léon Degand and Pierre Guéguen [1953], Jean-Pierre [1952], Léon-Louis Sosset [1958], Gottfried Sello [1958].

The resulting maps helped corroborate my argument, as they visualized the slow arrival of Abstract Expressionism in Western Europe (Maps 1 and 2). Looking at the animated maps on the beta interface, it was clear that, until the late 1950s, presentations of Abstract Expressionism in Europe were rare, scattered, and hazy because they were generally displayed alongside other American or European styles. The maps demonstrated that what we regard today as Abstract Expressionism did and could not exist in the European consciousness before the late 1950s since, as we could see on the maps, it was rarely presented as a coherent group. Abstract Expressionism arrived so late in Europe that it almost arrived at the same time as Pop art, which appeared almost simultaneously in the United States and Europe and enjoyed instantaneous success. Maps featuring exhibitions that only featured Pop art further indicate that it arrived in Europe as one cohesive and coherent group.

Map 2. Exhibitions in which only Abstract Expressionism was exhibited from 1946 to 1969



Screen capture from unpublished, development web interface ©2012 *Triumph of American Art*, Purdue

The maps were also useful in analyzing data I had collected but was unable to grasp. The maps in which museum and commercial gallery exhibitions were distinguished were particularly interesting, since they showed that Abstract Expressionism was mostly presented in museums. Only for a few years, between 1959 and 1963, were there more commercial shows.

After 1963, museum retrospectives of individual artists prevailed. The few commercial shows indicate that Abstract Expressionism was an institutional phenomenon and suggest that it was never a commercial success. American Pop art also appeared first in European museums but, in contrast, it was immediately picked up by commercial galleries. Throughout the sixties, Pop art was the darling of both European museums and galleries. Comparing the reception of both American styles, it is unquestionable that Pop art was met with greater enthusiasm. Another interesting finding came from the visualization of whether the exhibitions were organized at the initiative of Europeans or Americans. Whereas most presentations of Abstract Expressionism had been sent from the United States, the vast majority of the Pop shows were organized by Europeans. As seen on the maps, very few Pop shows came from the United States. This provided further evidence of Europeans' greater response to Pop art. Finally, the maps showed how the center for the diffusion of American art in Europe shifted between 1948 and 1968. While Abstract Expressionism was first presented in Italy thanks to Peggy Guggenheim,⁸ in the 1950s France became the major hub for its presentation. It was also in Paris, mostly through the Sonnabend Gallery, that Pop art was first introduced in Europe.⁹ Although Italy and France remained central to American art, by the end of the decade West Germany had become *the* place to see American art.¹⁰ Through the maps, we are able to follow the hot spots of American art as they shifted from Italy, to Paris, and to West Germany.

I was very pleased with those first maps, yet I could not ignore the fact that they relied on categories of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art which were rarely used in the exhibition catalogues I was using. By applying those labels, I was introducing attributes that pertained to interpretation not fact. The term Abstract Expressionism, in particular, was hardly used in Europe until the 1960s.¹¹ Instead of working on Abstract Expressionism or Pop art as a whole, I decided to focus on a few artists which represented each movement, starting with Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein. Focusing on individual artists presented an additional advantage of enabling an exhaustive study.

In Western Europe, Pollock was indisputably the best-known Abstract Expressionist. Yet, aside from 1951 and

1955 when he had eight and seven shows respectively, his European presence was dim and mostly centered in Paris and Italy (Map 3). He became more visible after his 1958 traveling retrospective. As for Rothko, until 1958 his work was hardly seen in Europe. In Paris, *the place where everyone came to see art at the time*, Rothko was only shown twice before 1959. Rauschenberg's European reception was radically different: not only did he have more shows, more quickly, but they were also taking place all over Europe. Lichtenstein's European success was even swifter: from zero in 1962 to twenty-one in 1968. When comparing the four artists' European presence, the success of Lichtenstein is obvious: in only five years he had more or as many shows as the others. We also see that while Pollock and Rothko were mostly seen in Italy, it was in Paris that Rauschenberg was most visible. As for Lichtenstein, he first appeared in Paris, but it was in West Germany and Belgium that the artist was mostly shown.¹²

Map 3. Any Pollock work from 1946 to 1969



Although the approach by artist was more productive and less problematic than the approach by style, the fact that artists change styles throughout their careers made it challenging sometimes. For Pollock, it was a real problem. Seeing a Pollock painting could mean very different things. When Europeans saw a Pollock, did they see an early figurative work, a surrealist painting, a drip

composition, or a late figuration? Since those differences could not be ignored, it became necessary to examine the individual works. Realistically, I could not tackle this for each artist but I could do it for a few, starting with Pollock, and continuing with Rothko, Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg.

The analysis of Pollock's works presented in Europe was extremely useful. Collecting data from 1948 to 1960, I found that eighty-six Pollocks had been presented on the Old Continent, of which about 55% were drip paintings. During those twelve years, Europeans had more than four hundred opportunities to see a Pollock, of which 42% involved drip paintings (Map 4). Before 1958, there had only been one hundred seventy-six opportunities to see a Pollock painting, of which 40% involved drips. Between 1948 and 1960, 23% of the Pollocks shown in Western Europe came from Peggy Guggenheim's Collection. Between 1948 and 1957, her Pollocks counted for 52% of the Pollocks shown in Europe. The most widely exhibited Pollock was the *She-Wolf* (1943). It was shown twenty times all over Europe between 1953 and 1959. Among the earliest and most widely shown paintings was the *Moon-Woman* (1942), which was shown eight times before 1956, mostly in Italy. Among the drip paintings often seen in Europe was *Full Fathom Five* (1947), which was presented eleven times in seven different countries between 1950 and 1959.¹³

Map 4. Any Pollock drip work from 1948 to 1960



12. The numbers provided in this section reflect the information we had collected by February 2012, and might slightly change at a later stage of our research.

13. Data on Pollock's works exhibited in Europe was compiled using *catalogue raisonné* [F.V. O'Connor and E.V. Thaw, 1978] and exhibition catalogues.

While all this information is progressively integrated into the interface, I am addressing new questions. I am particularly eager to consider the relative importance of exhibitions. Although we lack attendance records for those shows, and cannot know how many people learned about them indirectly through advertisement and press reviews, we can use geography and geopolitics to assign relative importance. An exhibition in Paris would have had more impact than others, because until 1962 it was in Paris that people went to see art. Likewise, an exhibition in West Berlin would have less impact than one in Aachen, even though it is a smaller town, because it is surrounded by Cologne, Düsseldorf, Brussels, and Eindhoven. By placing the cities in their geographic context, the maps change the way we approach the reception of a show: they invite us to consider what other cities were in a 100km radius, how accessible it was by train and car, what language was used, etc. There might have been few shows of American art in Belgium, yet the Belgians had access to many shows in Paris, the Netherlands and West Germany, so that Belgian collectors and art professionals were very well informed. In the central part of Western Europe, cities were connected through a dense network of highways, railroads, and people that made transnational exchanges easy and common. The maps invite us to think about cultural transfers in supranational, regional terms, because what happened in Cologne was more relevant to the people in Brussels than to those in Berlin or Munich. Heat maps are particularly useful as they allow us to visualize and study exchange and influence beyond national borders. As such, maps derived from GIS are not just useful delivery tools that summarize information in a synoptic and interactive way; they are also powerful research tools that provide a truly transnational and even global method to study the history of art. The digital cartographic method has the potential of transforming the discipline by supporting transnational studies of national art in a global geographic and historic perspective. Such approach could be particularly useful in the field of American art whose national focus is often incompatible with the demands of transnational and global studies.

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