

The “Frontier” Revisited

CÉDRIC VINCENT READS LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

British Art critic Lawrence Alloway (1926-1990) will certainly remain in art-historical memory as the coiner of the notion of ‘Pop Art’ – a term that first appeared in his essay “The Arts and the Mass Media”.¹ It should be remembered, however, that at the time ‘Pop Art’ referred more to popular culture’s visual products and artefacts than to the artistic practice that was inspired by it. Moreover, Alloway prefers to posit an “aesthetics of plenty”, a notion based on style diversity and consumer affluence, including two elements that available aesthetics theories tended to treat separately: fine arts and the mass media. For through advocating a “fine art/pop art continuum”, Alloway meant in both anthropological and egalitarian terms to undo entrenched hierarchies and therefore to counter art critics Clement Greenberg’s and Herbert Read’s defence of an isolated art at the apex of the pyramid of cultural tastes and values – a mode based on what Alloway terms the “aesthetics of scarcity”.

Alloway first tested and formulated his radically inclusive cultural theory during the meetings of London’s Independent Group – gathering together young artists, architects, designers and social theorists – which soon found a practical outcome in the famous exhibition *This is Tomorrow* (London, ICA, 1956). As early as the 1950s, he clearly aimed for an expanded critical approach to the arts, and considered art to be an integral part of a “communication network” that includes movies, advertising, graphic design and fashion.² From this perspective, Alloway wrote pioneering pieces about the interactions of the fine arts with commercial art, science fiction, cybernetics, mass media and urban structures. Throughout his career he maintained an inclusive, democratic view of art – one that encompassed popular culture, systemic abstract painting, realism, environmental art, women’s art, the complex issues surrounding mechanical reproduction,³ the distribution of information and power in the art world, and the politics of cultural institutions. The difficulty of systematising his wide-ranging thought is no doubt a further reason why his critical ideas are today less known than his name.

When Alloway published his article “Whatever Happened to the Frontier?” in *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin*, he was just beginning his career in the United States. In 1961, he moved from Great Britain to the US to teach at Bennington College, and then to become senior curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (where he remained until 1966).

“Can the art of the twentieth century usefully be treated geographically?” Thus began Alloway’s essay, in which he outlined a geographical approach to art.³ The reply should be self-evident, since art history traditionally classifies works of art by country as well as period – but political borders and cultural boundaries are highly complex and fluid. Geography itself cannot be taken as a given.⁴ The use of a central trope from geography provided Alloway with a method of critical analysis regarding the value of art, and enabled him to privilege features such as expansiveness in scope. This is particularly interesting, and perhaps inevitable, considering that his move to the US was also a shift from the periphery of the art scene to its centre. Europe was either statically confined to its pre-war memories or divided by post-war antagonisms. This sense of isolation, both geographic and generational, in post-war England led to the founding of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1947 in London, and the later appearance of Independent Group. Ironically, this move also represented the fulfillment, in geographical terms, of Alloway’s enthusiastic decade-long commitment to American visual culture, as the British intelligentsia accused Alloway and the Independent Group of ‘Americanisation’. However, when he theorised the term “aesthetics of plenty”, “plenty” was a way of referring to abundance, the European forms of which could never be confused with American standards.⁵ For an “aesthetics of plenty”, with its energetic multiplicity of styles and undaunted consumer mobility, is appropriate to a “non-depressive-based culture”.

Alloway’s essay is astonishingly contemporary in its purview and could gain a new currency. Substitute the names of artist and locations, and the text would be completely relevant to the art scene today. It begins with the problem of a peripheral biennale, then develops topics that have gained prominence via the rhetoric of the 1990s art world: internationalisation-globalisation, grey areas, identity, biennale culture, etc. However, this paradigmatic text is no doubt more relevant thanks to the path-breaking issues that are raised, than how it resolves them. In substance, Alloway’s essay could be read as a prescient alternative to the postcolonialist critics of the art world running in the 1990s. With reason, these have contested the validity of the art world’s Eurocentric claims, asserting the truths of hybridity, multiculturalism, cross-cultural transfer, diaspora.

But this project is dependent on a territorialised binary structure: the West contained within a centre called Euro-America, and its ‘Other’, the periphery, that is the Rest-Of-The-World. If the deconstruction of Eurocentrism – with Europe understood as the repository of the universal and good – still seems an increasingly complicated political and sociological project, such a project perhaps can or should be conducted within another framework. It would be preferable to demonstrate in what manner a very defined space – for instance, Euro-America – is organised into a hierarchy, and so is itself bound within the dialectic of centre and periphery. Alloway’s essay demonstrates that there are peripheral artistic scenes *within* what the supporters of postcolonialism have identified as the ‘centre’. In this sense, this text provides a way to challenge the culturalist North vs. South view; and the outcome would be the *mise en abîme* of the centre-periphery scheme.⁶ No doubt Alloway would rather insist: “[...] when town mouse and country mouse receive day-to-day, month-to-month

information at the same rate, it is impossible to maintain the former etiquette of priority – centre and periphery lose their distinctive character in an efficient aesthetics of plenty”⁷.

Whatever Happened to the Frontier?⁸

By Lawrence Alloway

Can the art of the twentieth century usefully be treated geographically? For example, is there a quality that separates art produced in Minnesota from art produced, say, on the West Coast of America? Is American art, as such, different from European art and, if so, are those differences embodied equally in the art of Minnesota and New York? There are various possibilities of geographical ranking which can be listed in terms of diminishing area: 1) international art, global, pervasive, and encompassing; 2) continental or national art, the limits of which coincide with tariff boundaries and the rights of citizenship; and 3) local and regional styles, within countries. The Minnesota Biennale presents an occasion to raise questions about the relation between regional, national, and international art – a topic close to present attempts to locate specifically American properties in recent American art.

The main influence on geo-cultural art criticism is the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner who developed, in the late nineteenth century, a theory of the influence of the frontier on American character and institutions. “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier”, he wrote, and argued that the frontier experience produced a “practical inventive turn of mind”, “restless nervous energy”, and “dominant individualism”. The idea of Turner’s that “the West, at bottom, is a form of Society, rather than an area”, that the West is you and me, is influential, still. Consider the following quotation from William Carlos Williams: “For Boone, at least, was not a romantic, losing himself in the ‘mystery’ of the forest. He was a technical genius of the woods”. Williams is using Daniel Boone to define *the* American quality. The use of the Coonskinner as a model for the behaviour of American artists by Harold Rosenberg continues the frontier image, as does John W. McCoubrey’s declaration: “Our art is possessed by the spaciousness and emptiness of the land itself”⁹. His proposal is that the big country produces big pictures. (Will the addition of Hawaii and Alaska compensate for the shrinking effect of efficient communications across the continent?)

The definition of America in terms of geographical metaphors is usually accompanied by a fixed image of Europe, one that can be summed up by a (European) poet’s line: “*Je regrette l’Europe aux anciens parapets*”. Much of the dialogue between the two continents, as conducted in literary and art criticism, depends on some such polar imagery. Europe is identified with Rimbaud’s ancient parapets, a stationary position to be defended, and the United States is identified with a mobile frontier (the East, the mid-West, the Pacific, Outer Space).

However, what of the supposed universality of art? Is this replaced by the concept of antithetical continental styles, one old, one new, one a response to the wilderness, the other a response to cultural overcrowding (i.e., Europe’s many monuments)? Works of art do not

need to be translated; they are always perceived in the original. Even a reproduction has more one-to-one references to its original than the best verbal translation. The presentational immediacy of the work of art as an organised, visible pattern is inescapable. It is true that the work may be hard to decipher, but it is not in a foreign language, even though other social customs and assumptions may have contributed to its formation. Even if we doubt the universality of art, it is demonstrably international in scope. Art is, at least, mobile.

It is true that Japanese, Italian and American art, for example, reveal considerable differences from one another. However, the differences are the result not so much of national characteristics, insinuating themselves into the actions of men, as of different choices and interests. These are shaped by the present state of information about art in each country and by the personal use made by the artist of the common store of knowledge. It is true that the experience of the artist is affected by his national and regional experiences, but these appear as objective historical influences, rather than as manifestations of pervasive hidden moods and patterns.

Because of the efficiency of our communications, art circulates immediately: the Japanese knew of Franz Kline's painting, and were discussing its relation to calligraphy by 1952, when it was only three years old, for instance. Cases of such prompt cultural crossovers are continual today. Instant diffusion is at least as old as Seurat's Neo-Impressionism which, centred in Paris, collected Italian, Danish, American followers in no time flat. Similarly, pre-World War I Futurism moved with the mails and the passenger trains. Even primitive Sunday painters, from different countries, reveal, when put together, shared formal characteristics (such as linear outlines, enumerative handling of details, etc.). Thus, knowingly aimed for, or naively arrived at, shared patterns emerge; an international art seems unavoidable. All that is needed is enough artists doing a certain kind of art for a stylistic character to appear statistically, even if not by intention.

An exhibition like the Minnesota Biennale would not, if I am right, be likely to reveal a regional style of much intensity, unless, as with the American Scene Painters of the thirties, it was consciously willed and sought. The individuality of the works of art will be attributable to the uniqueness of the artist, rather than to topography or the *genius loci*. They will be connectable to other works of art, both as echoes and modifications of international style and as parallels to other artists with a similar relation to the central body of art. The important elements in any assessment of artists, then, are the artist as a unique human being, and the work of art in relation to the broad lines of international art. A unifying factor is that art is basically an urban activity, and never more so than since the nineteenth century has it been centred on the big cities. Even artists who work in the country draw on urban traditions of style and depend on urban distribution centres for their art. Thus, national and regional style is dependent, at least, partially, on the urban and international style-outlines. This priority of the cities, however, is not tyrannical or conformity-inducing, since diversity is part of the essential condition of urban art. Variety of choice operates in art, as in entertainment and other services.

The American frontier, then, in answer to enquiries about what happened to it, got eroded by the same internationalism and by the same communications revolution that exploded national boundaries in the arts of Europe. Frontier theory is as nostalgic today as any national revival theories. It is as prone to irony as, say, Sir Herbert Read who once wrote, apropos the Dutch painter Appel, that Holland was the country of Van Gogh. Personally, when I look at Appel I can't help thinking that Holland was the country of Mondrian. And so on.

Author's Note

Lawrence Alloway (1926-1990) was an art critic and curator who worked first in London as an early member of the groundbreaking Independent Group, and was associated with ICA from 1954-60. After moving to the US, he worked for a period as Curator at the Guggenheim Museum, and wrote for *Artforum* and *The Nation*. His principal essays are anthologised in (ed.) Richard Kalina, *Imagining the Present: Context, Content and the Role of the Critic* (Routledge, 2006, New York).

Acknowledgements

Quotations by Frederick Jackson Turner are from *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) and *The Problem of the West* (1896); by William Carlos Williams from *America and Alfred Stieglitz* (1934); and by John McCoubrey from *American Tradition in Painting* (1963). For "Coonskinners", see Harold Rosenberg's *The Tradition of the New* (1959). I thank Georges Braziller for allowing me to see an advance copy of Mr McCoubrey's book.

Notes

1. Lawrence Alloway. "The Arts and the Mass Media". In *Architectural Design* 28, pp. 84-85 (1958). By 'Pop Art' he means the productions of the mass media understood as "one of the most remarkable and characteristic achievements of industrial society".
2. See for instance *Network: Art in the Complex Present* (University of Michigan Research Press, 1984, Ann Arbor).
3. In that way we could read "Network : The Art World Described as a System" (*Artforum*, pp. 27-31, 1972) as a fortunate reply to Walter Benjamin's influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936).
4. For further, and different, amplifications on the topic of the "geohistory of art", see Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann's *Toward a Geography of Art* (2004). Invoking Erwin Panofsky's essays on methodology, Kaufmann reminds us that space-time conceptualisations within the discipline of art history have usually claimed that stylistic changes are as inherently linked to region/location as to relative chronology.
5. The phrase "aesthetics of plenty" comes from Alloway's essay "The Long Front of Culture", in *Cambridge Opinion* 17 (1959); reprinted in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop* (The Clocktower Gallery, MIT Press, 1988), pp. 31-33. For a retrospective account, see (ed.) David Robbins, *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (MIT Press, 1990, Cambridge/London), pp. 49-54.

6. The term *mise en abîme* is originally from the French, and translates as 'placing into into infinity' or 'placing into the abyss'. In common usage, it describes the visual experience of standing between two mirrors, seeing an infinite proliferation of one's image. In Western art, *mise en abîme* is a formal technique in which an image contains a smaller copy of itself, the sequence appearing to recur infinitely. In film, the meaning of term *mise en abîme* is similar to the artistic definition, but also includes the idea of a 'dream within a dream'. For example, a character awakens from a dream and later discovers that he/she is still dreaming. Activities similar to dreaming, such as unconsciousness and virtual reality, are also described as *mise en abîme*. In literary criticism, *mise en abîme* is a type of frame story, in which the main narrative can be used to organise or encapsulate some aspects of shorter inset/embedded tales. In deconstruction, *mise en abîme* is used as a paradigm of intertextuality, asserting that language never quite reaches the foundation of reality because it refers in a frame-within-a-frame way to another language, which refers to another language, etc. The ability of computers to repeat a task infinitely has led to digital forms of *mise en abîme*: screensaver images that fragment and fly through cyberspace, interminably looping and coiling recursions, and so on.
7. Lawrence Alloway. "The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty". In (ed.) David Robbins, op. cit., p. 52.
8. First published in *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 54-56 (1963).
9. The art critic Harold Rosenberg, a major advocate of Abstract Expressionism, asserted with regard to American painting that artists should maintain familiarity with the phenomenological elements of their field; should avoid developing fixed styles that then become new schools; and should continue to extend and transform the ideas that seem to have led to success. His "Parable of American Painting", Chapter 1 in his *The Tradition of the New* (1959), posits "Redcoatism" – the tendency to "continue a previous style in a new location" – as a problem for the 'new' man in America, and suggests: "[...] painting in this country has behaved as if it were elsewhere..."
 As a counter to Redcoatism, Rosenberg's text offers "Coonskinnism", embodied in the 'new' heroes, the 'real' Americans who had adopted the anti-formal fighting style of the individual frontiersman/sharpsooter. Historically, "Redcoat soldiers were defeated by Indians and coonskinned trappers who, from behind the rocks and trees in their home ground of the wilderness, could easily pick off the Redcoats, who marched as if they were on a parade ground or on the meadows of a classical European battlefield... What defeated them was their skill... their too-perfected technique forbade them to acknowledge the chance topological phenomena..." For Rosenberg, "Coonskin doggedness is a major characteristic of America's most meaningful painters. There is not one – Copley, Audubon, Eakins, Ryder, Homer, Marin, Stuart Davis, de Kooning – in whom this quality is not predominant". The Coonskinner of the post-war period was the action painter who 'fought' improvisationally, within a canvas that became an 'arena' in which to act. The struggle of this encounter resulted in an image that had not been envisioned before the painting was complete. Rosenberg also indicates that when Coonskinners are successful and have secured their territory, they tend to transform into Redcoats and become less adaptive, trapped in their own brand of orthodoxy.