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Does ‘American Art’ Exist Anymore?

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As U.S. national identity has changed, so too have ways of categorizing work that represents its country.

Every other year since 1895, the Venice Biennale has served as an international stage for some of the most interesting, daring artists working today. You might expect the Biennale to be a place where signs of nationalism abound in some form or another: After all, artists undergo a rigorous selection process by their respective countries before they’re sent to essentially compete against their foreign counterparts. (A jury awards a gold medal, the Golden Lion, to the best artist at the fair.)

The event, often referred to colloquially as the “Art Olympics,” is coming to a close this week, but not before making it abundantly clear how little nationalism matters anymore to one pavilion: the American one. Since 2000, the U.S. pavilion has largely featured apolitical works, with many artists finding burdensome implications in the association of their work with their home country. This raises the question: In 2015, what makes art distinctly *American*?

Indeed, the Biennale reflects a long-simmering shift in contemporary art. Many curators of American museums say they’re moving away from traditional definitions: In the past, the label has been more actively used to decide who does and doesn’t belong in the country’s cultural history. But art reflects identity, and the U.S. national identity has only grown more pluralized in recent decades, thanks to immigration and globalization. As a result, U.S. art museums today are embracing a new, more inclusive use of the “American art” label—one that better captures the rich, cross-cultural influences shaping the country’s artistic output in the 21st century.

“We open our doors very wide,” says Virginia Mecklenburg, the chief curator of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.—the closest thing the U.S. has to an art museum of national record. “There are many people who remain citizens of their home country, but have an enormous impact on American art and culture.” She points to a forthcoming fall 2017 exhibition

MARC STRAUS

of the Mexican semi-abstract painter [Rufino Tamayo](#), who represented his home country at the [1950 Biennale](#) but who worked and taught in New York for 14 years as well. Sixty-five years later, the American Art Museum, Mecklenburg says, is recognizing how “the influences he absorbed and projected played an important [role] in the art history of this country.”

[Recent shows](#) at the American Art Museum also illustrate the art world’s firming grasp on how much the Americas as a whole have influenced U.S. culture. As the curator and architectural historian Barry Bergdoll notes, there’s long been a notion that ideas are generated in the north and trickle down. But museums are finally taking Latin American art and U.S. Latino artists more seriously. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s [2013 data](#), Latinos are the largest American ethnic minority, representing 17 percent of the population, and art institutions are making a concerted effort to better reflect the people they serve.

Museums, too, are increasingly using the American label to acknowledge the country’s ugly past—even celebrating the role artists from abroad have played in capturing that uncomfortable history. Earlier this year, the American Art Museum displayed 70 paintings and drawings by the Japanese-born modernist Yasuo Kuniyoshi. He came to the United States in 1906 as a teenager but was barred from becoming a citizen under immigration laws, and the government classified him as an “enemy alien” after Pearl Harbor. He had a complicated relationship with his own identity: During World War II, Kuniyoshi created anti-Japan posters for the Office of War Information and participated in propagandizing radio broadcasts. [Reviewing the American Art Museum’s current show](#), the *Washington Post* critic Philip Kennicott reflected on how Kuniyoshi’s most productive years coincided with “an ugly age of racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigration sentiment,” in which the artist himself played a role. Yet Kennicott describes Kuniyoshi’s art as “deeply American, or at least as American as it is anything else.”

In the past, museums relied on straightforward, inflexible criteria to determine what could be considered American art. In 1986, the Whitney’s then-director Thomas Armstrong [sent a letter](#) to the influential dealer [André Emmerich](#) declaring that his client, the British-born painter David Hockney, wasn’t American enough for the museum—despite the fact that he was living in Los Angeles, where he created poolscapes like *A Bigger Splash* that [have come to define](#) the city’s mid-century panache. “Unfortunately, our criteria is citizenship, not longevity or residency in the United States. In this period of great change, that is one thing that is not destined to be altered, as far as I’m concerned,” Emmerich said. The Whitney has since featured the works of plenty of non-citizen artists, [including Hockney himself](#).

Curators and art historians let general instinct guide them: Does the art look or sound—does it *feel*—American?

Unlike the Whitney and the American Art Museum, which have had to redefine themselves as they’ve grown, museums founded in the last decade get the benefit of hindsight and a clean

MARC STRAUS

slate. “As a young museum building its collection, we look to artists to guide us through the complex issue of nationality. How do or did they define their relationship with the United States?” said Margaret Conrads, the director of curatorial affairs at [Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](#), which was founded four years ago in Bentonville, Arkansas. “Place is very important to us, so an artist has to have a substantial connection to the American experience. We recognize that can manifest in different ways.”



What We Want, What We Need,
2014 (Jeffrey Gibson)

As such, Crystal Bridges is explicit about the prejudices that have shaped American art over time. For example, an exhibition [this summer](#) reflected how attitudes toward Native Americans shifted through the course of the 19th century. Artists of European descent used to show the American Indian as a “noble savage,” with classic references to Greek and Roman sculpture.

MARC STRAUS

But as federal laws like the 1830 Indian Removal Act forced tribes from their land, some white Americans began to draw and paint more politically aware images. More recently, Crystal Bridges has made efforts to give Native Americans more power as artistic creators, not just the subjects they've historically been. One of the latest purchases in the museum's contemporary collection is a work by [Jeffrey Gibson](#), a Brooklyn-based member of the Mississippi band of Choctaw Indians. The sculpture, a punching bag covered with glass beads and nylon fringe, is titled *What We Need, What We Want*.

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Though museums are actively grappling with the notion of American-ness in art, the State Department's Cultural Affairs Division has yet to do the same. In order to represent the U.S. at the Biennale, the federal government [still requires](#) artists to hold an American passport, but they're under no obligation to present any work inspired by or *about* the United States.

This year, the U.S. State Department [selected](#) the 79-year-old pioneer Joan Jonas—an early adopter of video and performance art—as the official U.S. artist representative for the 56th Biennale, [to rave reviews](#). Her show, *They Come to Us Without a Word*, presented largely universal themes—fragility, loss, nature—rather than specific social or political ones, says Paul Ha, a co-curator of the country's 2015 pavilion and the director of MIT's List Visual Arts Center.



They Come to Us Without a Word (Wind) (Joan Jonas)

Most commissioning curators, Ha says, propose an artist who they believe the 500,000 international Biennale visitors should experience, regardless of national origin—an artist who “speaks to today.” *They Come to Us Without a Word* includes a series of video projections, as well as freestanding, rippled mirrors and various suspended objects, such as colorful kites, that cast reflections and shadows off one another throughout the exhibit—creating a kind of fanciful Alice in Wonderland effect.

MARC STRAUS

This move away from the regional characterizes other artists whose work has appeared at the Biennale—in an extension of how museum curators have been thinking of categorization. The sculptor Sarah Sze, [who represented](#) the United States at the 55th Biennale in 2013, says she felt responsible not to her home country, but to the thousands of international visitors who streamed through America’s pavilion daily during the Biennale. “Either way, I hold an American passport, so whether I choose to or not, I do represent some nationality,” Sze says. But her work, *Triple Point*, reflected the more universal state of “dystopian anxiety” and appealed to the information overflow people across continents experience on a daily basis.



Triple Point, 2013 (Sarah Sze)

This isn’t to say that the Biennale—or artists and curators who represent the United States—have come to shy away from themes that invoke politics or social issues. The curator and art historian Lisa Freiman, along with the art duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, wanted to directly confront the implicitly nationalist nature of the Biennale. To her surprise, her proposal for a series of installations was accepted in 2010. “I assumed our project was too critical,” says Freiman, the director of Virginia Commonwealth University’s new Institute for Contemporary Art. “We were using all of this American iconography. And as soon as you take a tank and put it in front of the U.S. pavilion, it’s inherently political.”

MARC STRAUS



Gloria (Algorithm) (Allora & Calzadilla)

When their project *Gloria* appeared at the 2011 Biennale, it was among the strongest critiques of American jingoism the competition has ever seen. One of their seven separate installations, *Track and Field*, showcased a deafeningly loud, overturned tank, a treadmill affixed to its right track, where a U.S. Olympian jogged in uniform for half-hour intervals throughout the day. For their work *Algorithm*, the artists installed a 20-foot pipe organ reconfigured as a working ATM.

Artists seize on similarly powerful imagery at home, with one example being the artist Sonya Clark, whose [work](#) *Unraveling* ran this summer at New York's Mixed Greens Gallery. Clark began unraveling the threads of a Confederate flag— a metaphor for racial progress—before the June attack in Charleston, South Carolina, that killed nine black Americans at a church study group. After the massacre and South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state grounds, *Unraveling* has a poignant urgency. Clark's U.S. nationality and Afro-Caribbean

MARC STRAUS

heritage feels inseparable from her work. The same piece, made by an artist from another country, would still reference America's racial tensions— but would feel more critical and less self-reflective. She asks viewers: How far have we really come since the Civil War?



Gloria (Track and Field) (Allora & Calzadilla)

Though the definition and use of the label is shifting, there will always be artists from the past whose work feels quintessentially American, says Stephanie Roach, the director at the FLAG Art Foundation. She points to Jasper Johns, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, and Ed Ruscha, all of whom remixed iconic American staples— such as flags, cowboys, and advertising slogans—creating what are now cornerstones of contemporary art. And there will certainly continue to be shows with distinctly American themes and conspicuously American symbols, even well beyond the reach of the Biennale. Roach described FLAG's [2011 exhibition by Josephine Meckseper](#)— an artist born and raised in Germany— that referenced America's over-saturated consumerism, using car and flag imagery throughout.



Unraveling, 2015 (Sonya Clark)

MARC STRAUS

But is something lost when the art world defines American art so broadly? Have American art institutions abandoned their core purpose if artists need only some appreciable connection to the United States? Or has art outgrown nationality, the way art movements of the 1960s— Minimalism, Fluxus, and Conceptual Art—pushed cultural boundaries forward? The fairly lax interpretation at the Biennale is evidence of a country that doesn't attempt to control or politicize the production of art. Still, when any label becomes too broad, it risks losing its meaning. [In his final book](#), the late Arthur Danto, a Columbia professor and art critic for *The Nation*, argued while it's true that art today is pluralistic, not just anything can be art. "There must be some overreaching properties why art in some form is universal," he wrote. The same is true for the concept of American-ness, which the art world now challenges freely, and with purpose— expanding its definition as it looks for a new kind of universality.

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