

## Book and Exhibition Reviews

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**Carole Paul, *The Borghese Collections and the Display of Art in the Age of the Grand Tour*, Ashgate, 2008, hardback £70, pp. xv +313**

The Galleria Borghese has spectacularly rich collections which thousands of visitors to Rome continue to enjoy. On the ground floor the rooms include superlative sculptures, predominantly classical, but also including important works by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). The paintings on the first floor include works by Italian artists of the stature of Raphael and Titian. In addition the Galleria building, built in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and restored in 1997, has some of the most magnificent and lavish museum interiors in the world.

The main focus in this comprehensive study is the display of the Borghese collections during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was the era of the Grand Tour when wealthy and cultured Europeans were flocking to Rome to visit princely collections of antiquities and art of which the Borghese's was pre-eminent. At this point the Borghese collections were divided between two sites, the urban palace and the villa (later absorbed by the expanding city). The bulk of the paintings were displayed at the Palazzo Borghese in a suite of converted ground floor rooms known as the Galleria Terrena. The sculptures were displayed primarily at the Villa Borghese in the Casino Nobile, the building that houses the Galleria today.

Under the patronage of Marcantonio Borghese IV (1730-1800), and the guidance of the architect and designer Antonio Asprucci, first the Palazzo's Galleria Terrena (1767-1775) was redecorated and then the Casino at the Villa (1775-1790). The lavishly decorated interiors produced under Marcantonio's patronage dominated the way the sculpture and paintings were viewed and offered a remarkable aesthetic, intellectual and social experience for Grand Tourists.

Whilst the ceiling paintings and other decorations are largely intact the paintings that once hung on the walls of the Palazzo Borghese's Galleria Terrena are no longer there. The author uses late 18<sup>th</sup> century guidebooks, inventories, plans and comparisons with contemporary spaces to reconstruct the rationale behind the display, the multiplicity of meanings it conveyed and the way visitors experienced it. The rooms of the Galleria Terrena and the Casino Nobile were addressed primarily to visitors from abroad and celebrated the achievements of the Borghese family and Roman art, both ancient and modern. The spectacular ceiling paintings commissioned by Marcantonio in the rooms of the Galleria Terrena were painted by some of the most prominent artists then working in Rome. The commissioning of new work on this scale was a significant statement about the continued importance of Borghese patronage and the family's status in Rome.

After work on the Galleria Terrena was completed in 1775, the redecoration and renovation of the Villa Borghese began. The Villa, a subject on which Carole Paul has written before, forms the core of this book taking up three of its five chapters. Paul focuses on the history of the Villa as a whole, before discussing the redecoration of the Casino Nobile in detail, first in the Salone and then the smaller rooms on the Casino's two floors. The most acclaimed sculptures formed the centre-pieces of rooms which remain masterpieces of interior decoration. The sculptures in the Casino Nobile were carefully co-ordinated with the new ceiling paintings and decorative schemes to create ensembles more unified in theme and content than was the case at the Palazzo Borghese.

The Salone is the central and largest room of the Casino and the conceptual and physical heart of the building. The visual richness of its decoration is reflected in a generous number of plates, and the book as a whole is well illustrated helping the reader to follow Paul's

thorough analysis of the key paintings. The ceiling painting in the Salone (1775-1779), Camillus by Mariano Rossi, depicts scenes from ancient Roman history. The sculptures beneath the painting included Rome's heroes, leaders and founders and these resonated with the magnificent painting above them. On one level the redecorated Salone arguably positioned Marcantonio as heir to ancient Roman heroes like Camillus. However the name of the subject also alluded to Marcantonio's illustrious ancestor, Pope Paul V (the former Camillo Borghese). Further, the name also encompassed Marcantonio's new born heir, Camillo, and Paul argues that many of the paintings may also have been intended as exemplary scenes to educate the young prince.

The following chapter focuses on the decoration of the Casino's smaller rooms, first in the Pianterreno and then the Piano Nobile. Again, the principal sculptures were set in lavishly decorated rooms in thematic contexts with sophisticated visual and literary references that an educated and classically educated audience were expected to be able to decode. As with the Galleria Terrena the ceiling decoration displayed the work of the best of contemporary Roman paintings, and the prevalence of Borghese heraldic devices and historical figures as putative ancestors ensured that viewers were constantly aware of the Borghese's culture, patronage and noble Roman lineage.

The Borghese collections and displays were admired widely throughout Europe and the admirers included Napoleon, brother-in-law of Camillo Borghese. In 1807, Camillo felt it was prudent to sell Napoleon hundreds of statues, busts, bas-reliefs and other pieces which found a new home in the Musée Napoléon in the Louvre Palace. Today these pieces constitute the Borghese Collection in the Louvre and are dispersed throughout the Museum. In the epilogue to this volume the author suggests that Marcantonio's redecoration of the Galleria Terrena and the Casino 'heralded in a new era of display and viewing, that of the public museum'. It is a fascinating subject and one that could perhaps have been explored in greater depth. Paul argues that it was not just the Roman antiquities in the Borghese collections that were admired, but also the manner of their display in Marcantonio IV's new neo-classical interiors. At the turn of the nineteenth century programmatic ceiling paintings and thematic displays of sculpture were adopted in redecorated rooms at the Louvre, an approach influenced by princely collections like the Borghese's, but adapted to fit the agenda of a public state museum concerned with educating citizens rather than wealthy aristocrats and young princes.

This volume reveals just what an ambitious, bold and collaborative enterprise the redecoration of the Galleria Terrena and the Villa Borghese was. The detailed and masterful discussion of the transformation of the displays ensures that this important book will appeal to a range of readers, including art historians and those who are interested in the origins and development of public museums and galleries. The source material generously provided in the appendices will be of great value to other researchers.

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The Galleria Borghese today [www.galleriaborghese.it](http://www.galleriaborghese.it)

The Borghese collections at the Louvre and a digital reconstruction of the Villa Borghese. [http://musee.louvre.fr/expo-imaginaire/borghese/introduction\\_en.html](http://musee.louvre.fr/expo-imaginaire/borghese/introduction_en.html)

**Bill Ivey, *Arts, Inc.: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, hardback £27.95, paperback £12.50, pp. xx+342**

*Arts, Inc.*, titled after Herbert I. Schiller's 1991 book, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*, lays out the role of corporate greed in narrowing the range of artistic forms available to the majority of Americans. The author updates Schiller's arguments about corporate power to account for recently-secured monopolies and the second wave of the American culture wars, in which right-wing groups have attacked examples of artistic expression that do not conform to their conservative values. Although Ivey's emphasis is on the performing arts, museums occasionally figure in his analysis, and many of the points he makes can certainly be applied to museum trends. In particular, his discussion of an over-reliance on expensive technologies and blockbuster projects, capital campaigns to raise funds for new buildings while programming costs go unmet, a focus on profit rather than value (educational or otherwise), and the decline of risk and variety in the search for "safe" subject-matter are especially relevant.

Ivey draws on his experiences as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts during President Clinton's administration to build his case. He reveals the difficulties he encountered when attempting to advance arts policy, even under a sympathetic government, and argues that the widespread belief that the arts are merely for entertainment, rather than an important part of cultural heritage, undermines their funding, preservation, and perpetuation. To counter this damaging perception, he sets out to reframe the significance of the arts within a rights-based framework, as part of a national legacy that should be honored, as well as an essential part of human existence. As he puts it, 'culture is more than the surface sheen of civilization; it's an important reservoir of both identity and individual expression' (p.18). The book begins with a 'cultural bill of rights' which states citizens' entitlement to participate in America's artistic heritage as artists and audiences. Ivey argues that people are excluded from the enjoyment of a full and varied cultural landscape of art as diverse as jazz, ballet, and orchestral music by profit-focused programming, deliberate and casual censorship, and the decline of cost-intensive performing arts.

In a chapter focused on 'the right to healthy arts enterprises that can take risks and invest in innovation while serving communities and the public interest,' the author compiles infamous as well as lesser-known instances to explain how the consolidation of media ownership allows corporations to push their few priority brands whilst squeezing out others (184). In his discussion of Clear Channel's radio blackout of the country band the Dixie Chicks following the lead singer's negative comments about President George Bush, he describes how the leading companies shape the recording industry, influence radio playlists, and define the promotion of specific artists in chain stores. With the artistic landscape dominated by a small group of businesses, he argues, ideological struggles as well as economic incentives are increasingly likely to quash the careers of artists outside the mainstream.

What Ivey doesn't explore, however, is how the Dixie Chicks were able to use the controversy to reach a new audience and a new level of success. In fact, his assessment of the current status and likely future of the arts in general is largely pessimistic and does not fully consider avenues of resistance, such as the role of cheap technologies in fueling grassroots arts production and its wide dissemination via the internet. Instead, he highlights copyright battles over artistic products and the corporate drive to limit the scope of fair use and to buy and privatize public domain materials, as well as the impact of copyright abuse on individual artists. These are all important issues but his discussion would have benefitted from a deeper discussion of all the perspectives involved.

Furthermore, although Ivey makes a convincing case for improving access to the arts for audiences who want it, it is not always clear whether art forms that are losing their subscribers are simply underexposed, underutilized because of competing and cheaper alternatives, or in need of a radical re-imagining to capture the interest of contemporary audiences. While museum professionals are carefully considering ways to improve the relevance of their institutions for the communities they serve, Ivey does not explore any similar imperative in the performing arts in any detail.

Most problematic, however, is his assertion of 'the right to be represented to the rest of

the world by art that fairly and honestly communicates America's democratic values and ideals' (p.ix). Aside from the irony of invoking the discourse of universal human rights to assert a singular national identity, this idea rests on a stock of officially-approved cultural products designed to make America look good, surely further narrowing the possible range of artistic expression and tying the fortunes of individual artists even more tightly to political trends. Readers outside the United States may also balk at the notion of a new pro-American cultural mission, given the existing ubiquity of American culture globally. In fact, the chapter on 'America, Art, and the World' presents a contentious and conflicted argument. While on the one hand Ivey argues for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, he seems little concerned with its survival in other nations inundated with American media. He also claims that 'indigenous arts industries in other countries have been incapable of creating products of sufficient appeal to export anything close to the amount of US film, television, and sound recordings that are imported' (p.145). As his entire book aims to demonstrate the forces undermining rich and varied cultural production and promotion *within* America it seems particularly short-sighted of Ivey to overlook how such processes play out in the global media market.

Overall, the book is an interesting and wide-ranging discussion of the recent history of American performing arts and the economic and political factors shaping their content and consumption. Readers may be especially interested in its insider's perspective on national arts policy, even if they are perplexed by the author's international agenda.

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**Joyce M. Thierer, *Telling History. A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives*, Maryland: Altamira Press 2010; paperback \$29,95 / £18,00, pp. 232.**

Joyce M. Thierer's *Telling History* is a product of the author's twenty years of field experience as performer of first person narratives. The volume is addressed particularly to those willing to undertake a career as a first-person narrator but as well to museum staff or programmers of cultural activities of communities interested in the organization of events including historical performances.

The aim of the publication, as Thierer underlines, is to be a manual for sharing what she has 'learned along the trail'. The author makes it explicit that it is not meant to deliver a theoretical approach on the functions of historical performances, its meaning as a social practice for the creation of a cultural and historical identity of a community or on the question of authenticity. An analysis of the social functions of historical representations such as discussed in the recent volumes *Consuming History* (De Groot 2009) and *Staging the Past* (Schlehe 2010) is therefore absent. There is no discussion of how the history that is transmitted by performers to audiences might be different to 'scholarly' history: the author only alludes to a generic enhancement of historical learning by first person-narrative since it is considered 'appealing to diverse learning styles' (p. 3) but does not question the way this particular perception of history might influence the historical consciousness of the audience. Considering the criticisms of first-person narrative and its problematic status as 'popular' history, but also its potential for interaction and participant/audience 'enfranchisement', this represents a lost opportunity to make the case for its use in museums and cultural events.

Furthermore, the author demands throughout the text that the equipment used during performances must be authentic, as well as the impersonated characters, but without delivering a definition and a deeper reflection on its implications. More reflexivity on these questions would therefore have been enriching, enlarging the interest of the volume also to cultural contexts beyond the personal experience of Thierer in the American Midwest and its specific history and society. In particular, it seems to be far from most of the European museums' approach to didactics.

In defining her idea of 'on-stage' narratives of the past, Thierer introduces a taxonomy of best practice priorities for historical performances. The author considers all the familiar attributes of costumed interpretation, from the need for 'authenticity' - moving between the coordinates of accurate look and script - and the ability to effectively answer questions regarding the context of the historical era. According to Thierer, the ideal historical performance should

be composed in three parts: a first-person narrative 'in costume', a question-answer session addressing the audience in character, and a second question-answer session conducted as a 'scholar'. The performance should be 'entertaining, believable and historically accurate' (p. 173). Therefore, the idea of historical performance proposed in this volume can be considered a combination of narrative, visual and scholarly approaches to history. Unfortunately problems related to the quest for authenticity are not discussed in a broader way, such as the fact that a re-enactor with perfectly authentic (whatever this might be) equipment will be embedded in a contemporary surrounding or that splitting the performance in three parts could create a dichotomy between the first part in costume and the last part as a scholar, which could be disorientating to the audience.

The following chapters are dedicated mostly to those desiring to become first-person narrators. Throughout, the author gives indications on how to conduct historical research and how to write a captivating script for performances and present it to the audience. The very practical considerations are worth consideration by museum professionals who are preparing guided tours, for example the author provides advice on the choice of subjects, the structure of presentations and how to interact with the audience. More specialist is the advice on how to choose a historical figure and how to create so-called 'composite-characters', that is, characters combined of several historical personalities, such as 'ordinary people who did not individually leave enough primary resources from which to fashion an interesting narrative' (p. 40). In Thierer's opinion composite characters demand exhaustive historical research but permit the creation of a compelling narrative. This consideration could have been an occasion to reflect on a more analytical level on the implications of narrative needs and historical accuracy which could be considered a crucial problem of historical performance in general. The discussion of the choice of the figures seems to be guided by the assumption that the historical figures chosen for historical performances should be in somehow related to the local community, without reflecting on the difficulties and possibilities caused by the essential otherness of any historical figure presented, as raised for example by Vanessa Agnew (2004).

Great attention is paid to the practical aspects of doing historical performances as a business, touching on aspects such as taxes, office organization and marketing, sharing mostly the personal experience of the author in a rural American Midwestern environment which is very much limiting the interest of this chapter for non-American readers, although some general indication for business planning are delivered. For those willing to work as a historical performer, there are rich appendixes including sample invoices and contracts, as well as advice on the creation of the correct setting and clothing.

It takes until chapter seven of the book, 'Enhancing Museums and Historical Sites' (pp. 149 – 172), for the author to address some of the reasons why first-person narratives should be used by museums and heritage sites. Thierer argues that historical performance can help in reaching new and diversified audiences for museums and advises the reader about the organization of such events, regarding for example the choice of a troupe or means of getting funding. This chapter briefly also discusses the modalities of creating a historical performance group for specific, one-off events in a museum or a local community. The author focuses as well on the role that historical re-enactments can play in involving children in museum activities and in encouraging historical interest more generally. In conclusion, in line with the experience of Thierer, a programme for the broader use of historical narratives is developed, especially for schools and small towns.

Thierer includes in each of her chapters so-called 'Trail Stories' in which she shares personal anecdotes of her practice as a performer of historical figures and offers practical solutions to problems that might be encountered. This, once more, underlines the partly descriptive, partly prescriptive but barely analytic character of 'Telling History'. The very personal re-elaboration of professional experiences might disconcert the academic reader, but turns the lecture rather fluent. In conclusion, 'Telling History' can offer inspiration for those willing to introduce historical representations in museums and a starting point for a broader reflection on narrativity and performances in historical didactics, but should not be expected to deliver an analysis of the functions and fundamental problems of historical performances.

## References

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### **Because We Are, Exhibit, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, Texas, 19 June 2010-19 Sept 2010**

While the state of exhibiting diverse sexual history and art in the United States has met with some recent successes, most notably the opening of the first Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History Museum in San Francisco, exhibits dedicated to LGBT sexuality remain rare events. When they do occur they are often the focus of scrutiny and policing, as in the controversy surrounding the National Portrait Gallery's exhibit *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, which culminated in the withdrawal of David Wojnarowicz's film *A Fire in My Belly*. In 2010 the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston pushed back on this collective forgetting by entitling their exhibition as a simple but direct argument for sexual inclusivity in museums: *Because We Are*.

Curator Tim Gonzalez went beyond the incorporation of LGBT themes and approached *Because We Are* as an opportunity to cultivate a queer curatorial aesthetic. Using art as a way to illuminate history and politics, Gonzalez prioritized interventions in space over taxonomy and the residues of queer sex over practices of outing and exposure, strategies that Eve Sedgwick has critiqued as 'the epistemology of the closet' (Sedgwick 1990). Gonzalez strategically chose artists working in a variety of artistic media that included sculpture, painting, found objects, installation, video, poetry, photography, drawings, needlework, and even a cemetery memorial to demonstrate the diversity of LGBT artists through form and content. *Because We Are* became an art object in itself, one that mobilized a queer aesthetic approach to the organization of objects and their relationship to sexual politics in museums.

On the museum's front door a sign read, 'This exhibition contains material not suitable for minors.' Beyond that door, sex was certainly on the menu of visual, narrative, and aural encounters, but so too were themes such as illness, care, loss, death, protest, activism, memory, safety, humor, and politics. It was the explicit connection between sexuality and politics that made *Because We Are* such a landmark event (e.g., Human Rights Campaign literature covered the front desk and former American infantry officer-cum-LGBT rights activist, Lt. Dan Choi, appeared on the cover of the exhibit catalogue). Perhaps Gonzalez's curatorial balancing act of mainstream gay and lesbian politics and avant-garde display technologies was the danger to which the warning sign referred.

The first piece by J. Morrison was a patchwork of small American flags seemingly simplistic in its patriotism. In homage to artist Félix González-Torres, the text on the wall invited visitors to take a flag home; upon leaning down to do so we saw more clearly that each flag read 'aids, MADE IN U.S.A.', a social commentary on the relationship between sexually transmitted infection and politics. On the wall to the left, David Wojnarowicz's photo-text collage 'Untitled [One Day This Kid]' tells the story of a young freckled boy (a snapshot of Wojnarowicz as a child in the 1950s) and his institutional and social persecution as a sexual outsider, a particularly poignant message during this period of belated social consciousness of queer youth and suicide.

Though *Because We Are's* exposition inspired visitors to move through the galleries impacted by the gravitas of its opening narrative, the tone of the exhibition shifted numerous times revealing a multiplicity of ways to encounter queer sexuality. For instance, 'How to Use a Male and Female Condom' by Texas-based artist Eric Avery, displayed in the museum's

bathroom, consisted of photo relief engravings on mulberry paper wallpapering the interior accompanied by a mirror on the floor tilted upward so as to aid the hypothetical insertion or placement of a gender-specific condom. A sandblasted toilet seat read 'Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here,' and outside the bathroom two digital photographs named 'Proof of Concept' depicted two bare buttocks that had ostensibly sat upon a heated version of the toilet seat and were branded by its message. A comment on safe sex, eroticism, and anxieties about sexually transmitted infection, Avery's work approached these serious topics with a comical and even bawdy presentation.

Contrastingly, Patricia Cronin's art transformed another gallery into a veritable temple to lesbian love. On the walls, Cronin's 'Erotic Watercolors' eschewed the patriarchal tradition of depicting nude women in bed together from the positionality of an invisible voyeur; instead she implicated viewers in lesbian spectatorship by painting from the perspective of one of the women involved in the lovemaking. In the middle of the room sat her 'Memorial to a Marriage', a three-ton, Carrara marble mortuary sculpture of herself and her partner lovingly embracing in their future final resting place. Addressing issues of lesbian invisibility and state condemnation of marriage for gays and lesbians, Cronin chose the monumentality of neo-classical sculptural material to memorialize her marriage in death if not life.

For many of the other artists in *Because We Are*, it is the very material of waking, everyday life that serves as the basis for their artmaking. San Francisco artist Daniel Goldstein explored the maintenance of the self in his mixed media installation composed of over 300 empty HIV medication bottles collected over fifteen years from friends, partners, and his own medicine cabinet in his glorious sculpture 'Medicine Man 2.' 139 syringes tipped in red paint hover around the seven-foot tall, floating human form and surround that figure with a dangerous presence that doubles as a halo-like aura. In an adjoining gallery, Goldstein made reliquaries out of a San Francisco gym's leather exercise bench covers in his 'Icarian Series'. Like Veronica's veil or the Shroud of Turin, these 'sweat-cloths' retain the imprint of the bodies that encountered them but in an environment teeming with lust, desire, and sexual encounter.

While *Because We Are* was definitively a 'queer' show, most of the themes revolve around the experiences of gay men. In contrast, one piece entitled 'My Right Self' by Arthur Robinson Williams juxtaposed personal narrative with portraits of various trans-identifying individuals. While female artists made up only a small portion of *Because We Are*, Gonzalez did well to include women working in multiple artistic genres such as political poet Stacyann Chin and photographer Zanele Muholi, who explored black lesbian sexuality in post-Apartheid South Africa in her series 'Being'. Muholi's was the only exhibit from an artist outside the U.S., which had the misleading effect of inviting visitors to perceive South African lesbian experience through an American lens. Indeed, most of the show was dedicated to American regionalities that we have come to anticipate as queer geographies such as New York and San Francisco.

The 'we' in *Because We Are* was certainly broader and more global, and at the same time more local, than the exhibit communicated to Houston museum visitors. Nevertheless, the museum world can look to *Because We Are* as an example of how small, private museums can offer an explicit stance on the politics of exhibiting LGBT in museums through a curatorial practice that uses art as a way of unfixing meaning from the too-easy portrayal of LGBT history as a linear and univocal progress story.

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