You Must Remember This:

THE WHITNEY'S AMERICA

BY ARLENE CROCE

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS:
THE WHITNEY'S AMERICA

The ideal spectator of the first half of "The American Century"[1] is a person young enough, or new enough to this country, to remember nothing of American art and culture up to 1950. Mid-century was more than the chronological cutoff point. After the terminal explosion of Abstract Expressionism in the '50s, American art went into a regressive, commentative phase from which it still hasn't emerged. Recycling the past, a private activity normally engaged in by each generation in turn, became an art- and fashion-world industry. In art that was created more than a generation before us, chances are that we recognize nothing of our own. Art then becomes pure contextless history, and we are free to respond to it as the detached observers museum shows are made for. Or were made for. The museum experience as we know it may no longer be possible. It used to be seeing art and filling in a context for it. Now, it's seeing the context and filling in the art. If the art hasn't already been redigested by the viewer, it's been predigested by the artist. At the Whitney last summer, you could have the classic museum experience, but you could also have no experience. You stared in wonderment at the Surrealists, or you were left cold by a "retro" spectacle,

conscientious post-modernist recycling having done its part to undermine any capacity whatsoever for wonder.

The inability of the Whitney's "American Century" to counter the effects of recycling increased as the century progresses—that much was to be expected. But what the Whitney couldn't seem to deal with at all is a polyglot, random culture bursting with self-contradictions in every era. The Whitney show, Part One, was Mall of America, a mass of paintings and sculptures of every description and aesthetic persuasion—and movies, too, and jazz records and songs and meat-slicers (industrial design got a fair amount of exposure). Instead of letting pluralism reflect the spectacle that was and still is America, the show tried to force it into historic molds. You got stuff arranged, more or less, according to school or style and bracketed by an overall period designation: "The Age of Confidence" (1900-1919) or "Jazz Age America" (1920-29) or "America in Crisis" (1930-39). Some of the exhibition's greatest treasures were produced by artists who paid no attention to jazz or the jazz climate or to a climate of crisis; they were artists going on with their lives. The living moment of art was reduced to a blip, its individuality threatened by the ingenuity of installation motifs on the one side and the din of miscellany on the other.

Like Shakespeare frenzy, the Whitney's millennial frenzy did good in spite of itself. It brought pre-World War I America out of storage, and this other America, which had not yet broken its ties to Europe, was eminently worth seeing. The diversity of the first two decades of the century was as close to chaos as the show came, but the effect was somehow enjoyable, if only because time had eroded the harsher discrepancies and created a patina of semblance out of sheer coincidence. This was art that had been, in Auden's words, "tidied into history." And yet both times I visited the show, it was the emptiest of the Whitney's five floors. (The show descended the building chronologically, one era to each floor.) The Whitney publicized "The American Century" as the show that "makes some sense of America"—in other words, as a display of affinities, causalities and millennial summations. This was just what it isn't. But the bait was alluring. On the fifth floor, where the Eakinses

and the Sargents glided imperceptibly into Ashcan realism, and the violent cubistic cityscapes coexisted with tranquil meditations on the holiness of skyscrapers and bridges—on this same floor, we were invited to step into a computer room and visit the show's web site. We could explore the background of the exhibition in greater detail; we could even create our own tour. For those unable to get to the Whitney, much good may have come of this, too, but one wonders how many web site visitors were led to the show by experiencing it first as virtual reality, and how many were content to let the experience stand for the show itself. In "real" reality, you can ignore the wall text, picking and choosing your own sensations. In virtual reality, the picks and choices are built-in, and the labeling blankets the sensation—if there is any.

At giant retrospectives like this, a critic indulges in a kind of reflexive historic theorizing, trying to beat the curators at their own game. On the third floor, I found myself musing that in every era, the arts are dominated by some single ascendant art or frame-making mode of thought. In the latter part of the 19th century, the frame for all the arts was music. This actually continued into the 20th century—the Jazz Age is a misnomer because there were other musics, too. Change set in with the rise of movies as the great entertainment medium of this century. The best of silent films, from Griffith's to Murnau's, were influenced by music, but the matrix of the movies was theater. With the talkies, theater eclipsed music as the dominant art, and theatre and theatricality set the norms for everything else the 1930s and 1940s invented—Pop Surrealism, Radio City mural art, fashion photography, modern dance, street demonstrations, political campaigns, propaganda. Circularly, propaganda in its most stentorian Stalinist form influenced the theater itself. Public life was theatricalized as never before. House furnishings looked like stage sets.

"Theatrical" didn't mean "unmusical" in the '30s, but in one instance at the Whitney, it did. In the kiosk set up for movie musicals, we saw a clip from "The Gay Divorcee," with Fred Astaire singing and dancing "Night and Day" almost exactly as he would on the stage (and as he, in fact, had done in the stage show "Gay Divorcee"). The Whitney projected the film on a triple

screen; while Fred sang the song to Ginger on the middle screen, he danced it with her on the two side screens—danced over his own vocal in a completely synthetic way that destroyed the musical sensitivity of the choreography.

The manipulation and false synchronization of images is a basic television technique. Since the Whitney's exhibits in Part One only went as far as 1950, the show didn't reflect the next big environmental change—from theatre to television—but in its mentality, the show was possessed by television. The retrospective's tendency to take journalism's word for what happened was

THE ESTABLISHMENT. . .CREATES THESE NERVOUSLY OVERCOMMUNICATIVE MUSEUM MEGA-SHOWS IN THE BELIEF THAT IT IS COUNTERING ELITISM.

compounded by the tendency to spread the word in jumpy, unpredictable, instantly recognizable sight-bites. (Before art is tidied into history, it is muddied into journalism.) The entrance to the '40s floor was flanked by huge blowups, one of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima and the other of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square—the former a great moment and a great photograph, the latter a great moment maybe. It is certainly a famous picture. As we now have a celebrity culture, we have an art culture consisting of celebrated images—you must remember this (nudge, nudge). The '40s were not as media-ridden as the '80s and '90s; still, even today, in how many Americans' imagination does the mushroom cloud really resonate? On the other hand, Robert Franks's photographs of New York resonate whether you have seen them before or not. Also last summer, I was assiduously collecting Karsh's portraits of recording artists done for RCA Victor—hardly great art but representative of a kind of cultural truth I would have preferred to see in the show in place of the posters for Broadway shows that merely fill in information. And I wish Martha Graham had been presented as the great camera object she was, variously captured by nearly every American photographer of importance, instead of in a small-screen video of one of her dances made too late in her career.

The 1940s, not the ’00s, ’10s, or ’20s, were the haziest part of the show. Artworld America did not go into its post-modernist rewind mode until the ’60s. In the ’40s and ’50s, it was still the future, not the past, that mattered. After the war, anything inhibiting the vision of the future was expendable—the corner drugstore, Penn Station, the inner city. At the Whitney, you had five full decades of futuristic past on display, and it was sad to see the show’s curators, whose own sensibilities are saturated with the past-ness of everything, falling back on the cliche of period labels and referring to a “usable past” as if it were the same as a retrievable past. They were stopped only by the obliterating momentum of 1940-1949, which may be the only decade they actually remembered and could actually begin to retrieve. Unfortunately, the art and artifacts of the period—Eames chairs, Pollock paintings—have recently been re-popularized, and your eye was already tired of them. The social context of America in the ’40s (as the elegies for Joe DiMaggio reminded us) has not altogether receded; that may be why—though life then was no less confident, jazzy, critical or what-have-you than it had been—the curators were unable to characterize it. The ’40s part of the show was just called “America in the 1940s.” The “usable past” (a Jamesian phrase lifted from Sam Hunter’s “American Art of the 20th Century,” the show’s unofficial bible), is necessarily incorporated in the art of the future, where it reappears transformed, re-disclosed, in the shock of the new. The Whitney’s fifth floor corresponded to the best part of the American home—the attic. Here, for most of us, was pure history; here there could be not blank wonderment but participatory imaginative re-creation—the very thing the Whitney show wanted to encourage and at times actually did encourage.

From that wonderful fifth floor I carried away two realizations about our culture, both concerning New York: the city as metaphor and the city as habitat. For artists in the 20th century, New York was the city of cities because it was the future, at its best (unlike Paris) when most expressible as an abstraction. But it was also an unwelcoming city, deficient in what Henry McBride called “the atmosphere of belief and interest that go so far to fortify an

artist"—the atmosphere he found so abundant in Paris. Henry McBride (1867-1962) wrote art criticism from 1913 to 1950 for the *New York Sun* and during the '20s for *The Dial*. In 1952, he reflected in *Art News* on the change that had made New York a harder place for artists to live in after 1918:

The consolations of Greenwich Village. . .appeared diminished and in the more frequented parts of the metropolis the eye was hemmed in by hardness in every direction and the extraordinary newness of everything prevented the play of fancy. It was difficult to grow attached to a skyscraper and the streets had nothing else to offer. New York has destroyed its past. It must be for that reason—for the total lack of mellowness—that our artists since the war turn more and more to hardness as a method of expression, and hardness, say what you will, is not lovable. Not only that but it constitutes a positive danger, keeping the nations with whom we would most like to be friendly at arm's length.

McBride referred to France pre-eminently, the motherland of American modernism. In 1913, he had urged American expatriate painters to leave Paris and return home—but by 1918 there was no more home to return to. The foundations of American abstraction and of New York as the capital of the art world were already being laid.

One of the blessings of the Whitney retrospective was that it brought me to read McBride in depth. His coverage of the art scene bracketed the show's first part, and to its remorseless chronology, his wise, easygoing commentaries were an antidote. McBride fits the art back into the city and the city into the world. His reflective 1952 piece, the last to be printed in the collected essays[2], is not a tribute to lost New York by an old man unable to feel anything new. In the same essay, McBride hails the epochal "Fifteen Americans" show at the Museum of Modern Art—the show that revealed the new giants of Abstract Expressionism. He had earlier written of the impact upon him of a Pollock painting: "The effect it makes is that of a flat, war-shattered city, possibly Hiroshima, as seen from a great height in moonlight."

Possibly Hiroshima. That the psyche of a Pollock painting could encompass such a reality strikes against the very soul of absolutistic abstractionism. But that is not McBride's point. If I understand him correctly, his point on which he does not elaborate is that only the psyche of a Pollock painting could encompass such a reality. The idea is entirely consistent with McBride's championing through the decades of a secular, humane, large-minded and, above all, native American art, an art beholden to nothing but the need, as he put it, to "say something in paint."

McBride's conviction that the best of what is said in paint will be comprehensible to the public is no longer shared by the American art establishment. The establishment views the best as the furthest from popular understanding, so it creates these nervously overcommunicative museum mega-shows in the belief that it is countering elitism. Well, the public may not recognize value, but it does recognize prestige, and the prestige that accrues to creative energy is the single most valuable asset an artist possesses. The next most valuable asset used to be the ability to keep the prestige dynamic of success functioning, but that has become something of a liability owing to the demands of big-time art. The successful artist simply switches to the success dynamic of success. The art scene is now so hollow and its energy so depleted that a public in search of prestige turns to an art museum in a kind of despair. But a bewildered, half-hysterical public is what the museums have helped to create. Frenzy comes in when energy goes out.

[1] "The American Century, Part One 1900-1950," the Whitney Museum of American Art, April 22-August 22, 1999.
[2] "The Flow of Art," edited by Daniel Catton Rich (Atheneum, 1975).