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## *Troubling That 1945 Border Again: Chronology, Geography, and Interpretation in American Art*

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Chair: Ellen Wiley Todd, George Mason University

Inspired by the Spring 2004 Stanford University symposium "Mind the Gap" and by the recent and extensive discussion on the AmArt-L listserv on the chronological and geographical barriers defining "American Art," this session invited discussion about what might constructively alter our longstanding paradigms for Modern, Contemporary, and American Art.

### **"45 and 49: Rethinking Chronological and Geographic Borders"**

Frances Pohl, Professor of Art History, Pomona College

Pohl looked briefly at possible reasons for our continual re-examination of the division of American art into pre-1945 and post-1945. She suggested that in terms of funding, we might maintain this division in order to help encourage students to enter the pre-1945 period, as so many students today tend to want to work in the late 20th/early twenty-first centuries. Much of her talk looked at the way American art has been taught in Canada. She discussed a recent essay (forthcoming in the anthology by Barbara Groseclose) entitled "Internationalizing American Art History," by Marilyn McKay. It surveys the ways in which art historians in Canada have treated the pre-1945 work of American artists. She notices first that this work is seldom taught, exhibited, or written about, and when it is, it is usually in comparison with Canadian artists, with the latter usually presented as aesthetically and morally superior to the former. Or pre-1945 American art is looked at if it was produced while the artist was on a trip to Canada. Pohl also surveyed the course catalogues at the University of British Columbia from 1955 through the present and noted that American art first appeared in the curriculum in a course on the art of Canada, the US, and Mexico in 1962 ("modern art" first appeared in 1959, changing into "the art of Canada and the United States" in 1969, the same year that "America" was added to Europe in the definition of modern art. This reaffirms a topic discussed at Richard Meyer's "Mind the Gap" conference: that American art and modern art entered the undergraduate and graduate curriculum around the same time--in the early 1960s. As of 2006, no course has appeared in the UBC catalogue focusing on the United States alone, although seminars on the art of Canada and the US have treated only American art. Pohl suggested that the coupling of American and Canadian art was a recognition of how inextricably the fates of the two countries are intertwined.

### **"Under Construction: Bridging Troubled Waters"**

Margaret Conrads, Samuel Sosland Curator of American Art, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

This talk presented a case study of how the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City has collected, departmentalized, and interpreted American art created around the 1945 border from its founding in 1930 to today. The museum's experience offers a synopsis of many prevalent attitudes towards the art of this period through the last half of the 20th century, and raises questions and considerations as 20th-century American art is further studied today.

### **"Publishing in the Gap"**

Stephanie Fay, Fine Arts Editor, University of California Press

Fay looked at the idea of the Gap as a metaphor for a series of divisions and periodizations in American art and presented recent titles that have challenged this idea. She also walked the audience through the acquisitions process, discussing how editors work with authors and how the

publishing world of university presses is working with various other kinds of gaps in fields, periods, and audiences.

Audience conversation went in many directions. Some participants wanted to maintain the divide. Others spoke about how its history was reinforced. Still others claimed that the story we have been telling about pre- and postwar American Art has served its usefulness and new stories emerge with the increase of scholarship on the part of a new generation. Several spoke of the politics that lie at the heart of a divide between “modernism” and “American.”