

## Conference Report, Facing America, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2015, British Library conference centre

Facing America was organised by SAVAnT (Scholars of American Visual Arts and Text), a research network that aims to foster dialogue between Americanists and Art Historians working on American art and visual culture. Founded by [Joanna Pawlik](#) (Art History, Sussex) and [Doug Haynes](#) (American Studies, Sussex) in August 2014, it seeks to investigate some of the different methodologies and emphases in approaches to visual material in Art History and American Studies and to think through how our teaching and research might benefit from interdisciplinary and inter-departmental exchange.

Facing America brought together scholars from across the UK, Europe and North America to explore how faces, “facingness” and faciality can be understood in American art and visual culture. The first panel, ‘Presidential Faces’, featured papers by Emily Casey (Delaware) on representations of the sea in early republic portraits, Jennifer Wingate (St Francis College, Brooklyn), on depictions of FDR in African American homes, and by Caroline Blinder (Goldsmiths College) on the mobilization of Lincoln’s image in John F. Peto’s trompe l’oeil still lives. All contributions explored different mobilizations or appropriations of presidential portraits, expanding the range of meanings they generate or purposes they serve.

The second panel, “Faces in Progress”, took as its theme the significance of the face to narratives of cultural and political “progress.” Max Carocci (The Chelsea College of Arts), provided an anthropological perspective on the absence of ‘realist’ faces in Plains Indians Art, exploring the consequences of exposure to European portraiture on their representational practices. His paper was supplemented by the case study traced by Jacqueline Fear-Segal (UEA), which looked at drawings and portraits produced by or of students of the the Carlisle Indian School in the late nineteenth century. Barnaby Haran explored the politicization of photographic portraits by Margaret Bourke-White of Soviet workers on the Five-Year Plan.

The third and final panel, “Facing the Now”, featured Rebecca Harding’s (Sussex) discussion of Don DeLillo’s mobilization of Warhol’s work in his novel *Mao II*. Zara Dinnen (Birmingham) and Sam McBean (QMUL) jointly delivered a paper on new media face culture and the films of Scarlett Johansson. The second half of this all-woman panel saw Fiona Anderson (Edinburgh), speak about a series of portraits commissioned by Robert Blanchon from street artists, aggregated together under the title *Self-portraits* and Jessie Robertson (Courtauld) explore the politics of the face and the mask within contemporary surveillance culture.

The symposium featured two plenary lectures: one by David Peters Corbett (UEA) on the facingness and frontality in Caleb Bingham’s River Paintings, drawing comparisons to the Hudson River School and using them as an opportunity to reflect on the marginalization of nineteenth century American art in Art History. Celeste-Marie Bernier spoke about Frederick Douglas’s portraits as well as a wide variety of diasporic modern and contemporary artworks which explore the trauma of the middle passage, slavery and their legacies.

Facing America was a dynamic, friendly and productive event which served to consolidate and develop SAVAnT’s aims and membership.

