

Rosson Crow's History Painting: Setting and Speculation

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1.

This grand east room presented a solemn appearance. It was hung with black everywhere. All glitter and gay color, save the carpet beneath our feet, had been covered with the emblem of grief. The only relief from the mournful shade which met the eye everywhere were the silk sashes of the marshals and committees, the rich silver ornamentation of the coffin, and the beautiful japonicas, roses and green leaves which shed their perfume as incense over the dead.

So wrote a reporter from *The New York Times* on 20 April 1865 of the room where Abraham Lincoln, assassinated five days earlier, lay in state. Compare this to Rosson Crow's *Lincoln's Funeral* (2008), a massive canvas—eight feet high, eleven feet wide—which depicts a darkened if otherwise somberly lit interior. Parked within it we see a formal, canopied hearse and a nineteenth-century funeral carriage. A further canopy appears to sit above and behind the carriage, while American flags hang, phantom-like, at the upper corners of the canvas as well as in trios at the corners of the hearse. Bunches of flowers, perhaps japonicas or roses, float over the surface of the scene, detached from the ambiguous architecture of the room. Only the green patterned carpet, and the oblique angles of the hearse and the carriage, seem to establish the recession of the chamber. Then, of course, there are the occasional ropes and skeins of off-white enamel, which interrupt the scene, and so remind the viewer that this is really no room at all.

The *Times*' description of the Capitol's temporary funeral parlor, as should be obvious, does not describe *Lincoln's Funeral*, though there are certainly echoes between the paper's account and Crow's painting. What does announce itself in the comparison,

however, is that Crow's work is concerned with the representation of specific historical content or subject matter, but exactly how it is concerned with that representation is not immediately clear. *Lincoln's Funeral* does not dramatise a particular moment during the slain president's services, nor does it offer us any of the actors instrumental in the unfolding of this drama. It stages a scene for us, but one whose specific historical reference remains ambiguous and fragmentary. The size of *Lincoln's Funeral* suggests the import of what it depicts. But the painting also appears equally concerned with the materials and procedures—factice, gesture—of painting itself, and the painting's large size seems only to underwrite this concern.

If *Lincoln's Funeral* is concerned with the representation of specific historical content, then, how does it go about its business of representing? How, in other words, might *Lincoln's Funeral*, as a painting of something historical, be a 'history painting'?

Of course this question need not be limited to *Lincoln's Funeral*. Even a brief glance at a few titles from Crow's recent series of paintings — *Dawson City Furrier Caters to Klondike Fever*; *Montana Men's Booth, World's Fair, 1904*; *The Bucket of Blood Saloon Destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake*; *Tea Room at the Plaza*; *Queens Butcher Shop, 1910*; *New York Stock Exchange After Bond Rally, 1919* — indicates the artist's interest in subject matter drawn from a specific period in US history. Apart from *Lincoln's Funeral*, which dates its subject to 1865, the rest of Crow's canvases return roughly to the two decades between the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 and the end of World War I, when New York would supplant London as the world's financial capital, at least until the stock market crash of 1929. All of which is to say that Crow

returns in these canvases to the period which, today, we have come to call the First Gilded Age.

Now, it would be too facile to simply state that what Crow's paintings do is to forge a link between that earlier period of financial and social decadence (and privation) and our 'New Gilded Age', whose beginnings date anytime from 1980s, but whose end, it seems safe to say, will be seen to coincide with the current global financial crisis, the first rumblings of which began at the end of 2006, with the contraction of the US housing markets and the ensuing credit crisis, only to have the financial markets following full bore by the beginning of 2008. It is not enough to state that this is just what Crow's paintings are 'about' because the question remains, as it does with *Lincoln's Funeral*, as to just *how* they are about it. How do Crow's paintings represent the First Gilded Age and, by extension, how do they represent history? How, again, are Crow's paintings 'history paintings'?

2.

Perhaps we should begin with *Lincoln's Funeral*, insofar as the end of the sixteenth Presidency, essentially coincident with the end of the US Civil War, began a process of mourning, and of Reconstruction, that would lay the foundations for the Gilded Age to come. But, other than its title, how is it that this painting can lay claim to any specific historical content at all? In the absence of recognisable characters or events, without the invocation of any dramatic action, all we are left with is the scene itself. If Crow is engaged in any kind of history painting, then it is manifestly different from that Grand Style history painting of the great European academies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The artistic schools of the European kingly states, under whose

auspices history painting served as the pinnacle of a system of sanctioned genres that carefully crafted the state's self-image through pictures of great action or passion, either heroic or pathetic, ones which were often dressed up in allegorical reference to the moralising lessons of Greek and Roman history, literature and myth. What was essential to academic history painting, in other words, was discourse, though not always truth. As Sir Joshua Reynolds famously noted in his fourth *Discourse on Art*, delivered on 10 December 10 1771, 'It is not enough in invention that the artist should restrain and keep under all the inferior parts of his subject; he must sometimes deviate from vulgar and strict historical truth in pursuing the grandeur of his design.' On the other hand, what is essential to Crow's painting, we might say, is its image, and in particular, the potential for that image to register a remoteness from our present, which it needs to do in order to secure its purchase upon history.

Of course such remoteness is exactly what modern painting began to overcome at just about the time that Reynolds was codifying the genres and styles of Academicism. Indeed it was exactly this overcoming which made painting modern. Recalling Edgar Wind's classic account of Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1771), the 'revolution' of history painting enacted by West entailed a revolt against the convention of depicting figures in something other than their period costume; it was thought that such 'vulgar and strict historical truth' would diminish both the impact of the story and its potential to transcend the specificities of its time and place. That West set the scene of his painting on the remote shores of the North American colonies was seen to offset the transgression of showing Wolfe in contemporary uniform, a 'mitigated realism' as Wind

would call it, which on Wind's account served also as a symbol of the brewing colonial patriotism.

For art historians such as T. J. Clark, the manifest entrance of such political content, and so of history now identified with 'contingency' rather than narrative coherence or closure, is exemplified by Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1789-91). The thing that sets David's painting apart for Clark, as it did West's for Wind, was that 'instead of metaphor and stage business, it would be transparent to the facts', in this case the martyrdom of the French Revolution's favorite son.¹ But the fact that interests Clark most is the half of David's painting in which nothing is pictured. 'Pictured' is the important term here, because *Death of Marat* is of course entirely painted; it is just that the thing that is painted there, and so 'pictured', is nothing more than painting itself. Clark describes this as 'the endless, meaningless objectivity produced by paint not quite finding its object, symbolic or otherwise, and therefore making do with its own procedures'. In other words, the contingency of history is here translated into the contingency of physical matter itself, which, as Clark says, is 'meaningless', and so antithetical to discourse.²

This opposition (I hesitate to say dialectic) between discourse, or meaning, or representation and the opacity of 'vulgar' facts or brute matter would fuel the engine of modernism, but it would also take up residence in the figure of photography, which usurped painting's long-held and privileged claim on mimetic representation. *Lincoln's Funeral*, and indeed most of Crow's paintings, hinge on photography, and in particular,

¹ T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)

² This opposition between 'discourse' and physical fact, or 'figure' is treated extensively in Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

on photography's fraught relationship to history, its ability to at once offer up an image of the past for our perusal in the present, literally re-presenting it, while reminding us that that past is irrevocably gone; that image, ultimately meaningless. After all, 'the mere notion of photography', according to Paul Valéry, 'when we introduce it into our meditation on the genesis of historical knowledge and its true value, suggests this simple question: *Could such and such a fact, as it is narrated, have been photographed?*'

Valéry continues:

Since History can apprehend only sensible things, being based on verbal testimony relayed through words, everything on which it grounds its affirmations can be broken down into things witnessed, into moments that were caught in "quick takes" or could have been caught had a cameraman, some star news photographer, been on hand. *All the rest is literature...* As a result, any discussion about the causal value of certain facts, about their importance and their meaning, revolves around non-historical factors: they are the ventures of our critical or inventive faculties, more or less controlled by documents.³

Valéry understands that, though photography emerges at a specific moment in history and evolves over time, its impact on our conception of history is retrospective.

Photography's empiricism not only separates out 'facts' from all of that baggage that comes after or in between—literature, narrative, interpretation—it aligns fact with reality, with brute matter, and thus tips the scales of epistemology and ontology in the latter's favour: what we know must now march under the banner of what is.

Photography is not something upon which Crow's paintings are 'based', of course. Though it is common for contemporary painters to make liberal use of photographic imagery, much of it culled from the internet, this easy acceptance of our new digital inheritance belies an uncritical attitude that understands such imagery as

³ Paul Valéry, 'The Centenary of Photography', in *Occasions: The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, Vol. 11, trans. Shattuck and Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); emphasis in the original.

simply part of our ‘natural’ world; to choose to work from it is no different, one hears, than it was, say, for nineteenth-century landscape painters to work ‘from nature’. What issues from this particular attitude, however, is an amnesia that befalls our understanding of the photograph when, in a digital universe, every image is stripped of the technical and institutional (I hesitate to say discursive) history that was once written into its very surface.

Lincoln’s Funeral in particular counters this amnesia by returning to that moment when photography was not yet wholly ‘spontaneous’. By the time Valéry was writing about photography in the first half of the twentieth century, its practice and implications had accelerated immeasurably. But the ‘quick takes’ of the photojournalist were not available to the technicians and studios that published the now famous, and famously staged, photographs of the Civil War. The technical requirements of photography at the time demanded a different approach to the capturing and conveyance of ‘views’. ‘Large cameras on tripods, lenses designed for landscape views, the necessity of preparing the glass plate in a portable darkroom, then rushing to the camera—all these physical barriers to spontaneous pictures of action encouraged a resort to easily applied conventions of historical painting, casual sketches, and even studio portraits.’⁴ The practical limitations that adhered to the medium in the 1860s continued to require a kind of intervention such that, on the one hand, there could be little doubt that what fell in front of the camera’s lens had been undeniably there, but on the other hand, just how it was there remained a different question entirely. Thus even though a photograph from 1865 can still be looked to for its evidentiary qualities, it nevertheless remains caught up within a network of

⁴ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

artifice, both technical and conventional, which challenges its direct purchase on some ‘unmitigated’ reality.

The two photographs that served as source material for Crow’s *Lincoln’s Funeral*, when taken together, offer a demonstration of this ambivalence. Both photographs were likely made sometime in the last ten days of April 1865, as Lincoln’s funeral ‘cortege’ travelled the Northeast Corridor to Albany, and then west towards the prairie and Springfield, Illinois, the assassinated president’s place of birth. One photograph shows the elaborate funeral carriage, which would have been used to transport the president’s coffin to and from the formal processional routes planned for the various cities along the journey. The second shows the elaborately decorated viewing hearse that would have offered a glimpse of the deceased to the hundreds of thousands of mourners who turned out to pay their respects.⁵ If we turn our attention away from the slain president’s conveyances, however, we see two very different representations of the people present in each picture. In the photograph that showcases Lincoln’s hearse, we see a group of figures to the left and the right whose dress (top hats and overcoats, constabulary and

⁵ The hearse in the photograph upon which Crow drew for *Lincoln’s Funeral* fits quite closely the one described in John Carroll Power’s account of the funeral procession’s landing in New York City:

The ferry boat landed at the foot of Desbrosses street, New York city, at ten o’clock a. m., April 24, and the coffin was at once conveyed to a magnificent hearse or funeral car, prepared especially for the occasion. The platform of this car was fourteen feet long and eight feet wide. On the platform, which was five feet from the ground, there was a dais, on which the coffin rested...Above the dais there was a canopy fifteen feet high, supported by columns, and in part by a miniature temple of liberty. The platform was covered with black cloth, which fell at the sides, nearly to the ground. It was edged with silver bullion fringe, which hung in graceful festoons. Black cloth hung from the sides, festooned with silver stars, and was also edged with silver fringe. The canopy was trimmed in like manner, with black cloth, festooned and spangled with silver bullion, the corners surmounted by rich plumes of black and white feathers. At the base of each column were three American flags, slightly inclined outward, festooned and covered with crape.

John Carroll Power, *Abraham Lincoln: His Life, Public Services, Death, and Great Funeral Cortege, with a History and Description of the National Lincoln Monument, with an Appendix* (1875), (Chicago and Springfield, IL: H. W. Rokker, 1889).

military uniforms) suggests that they are members of the formal procession. What is important though is that here they all are arranged and attentive to the camera, their stances are determined and still, their faces distinct, their gazes focused. In other words, they are *posed*. Now compare this scene to the one that attends the funeral carriage, in which the early limitations of the medium are more apparent. The figures at left and right are not posed at all, but in motion, and so blurred. We can see that the carriage itself was at a standstill; its wheels, shadows and contours are distinct (though the blurring and transparency of the gathered fabric drapery at the left-hand edges of the two most visible windows suggests a light breeze), but the people lining the route are rendered an inchoate mass, an anonymous confusion of light and shadow.

This contrast between identity and anonymity in the public's bearing witness to Lincoln's literal and figurative passing perfectly replays the general conditions under which photography laboured during the Civil War, when publishers such as Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner offered 'archival catalogues' of photographs whose listings opened with portraits of 'distinguished' individuals—'Generals', 'Statesmen', 'Clergy'—and then moved on to views of encampments, battlefields and, most famously, in pictures such as Timothy O'Sullivan's 'A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July, 1863', the anonymous dead. 'In its own prosaic way,' Alan Trachtenberg writes, 'by delineating an emergent whole and projecting a totality, the archival catalogue reveals a *literary* motive: to comprehend this unfolding event as epic in scale and meaning.'⁶ So neither the photograph as device of self-definition (the portrait), nor its status as a mechanical record of anonymous people and places (the evidentiary document), but the ordering of the two together establishes the possibility of photography's purchase upon history.

⁶ See Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 88; emphasis added.

Importantly, that purchase remains a possibility only insofar as it is constructed. Meaning cannot be wrought from the photograph alone, from the details and secrets it promises to reveal—as Roland Barthes famously noted, the photograph is a ‘sign without a code’. It must be a function of the syntax that renders historical representation both possible and legible, a syntax at once internal to the photographic documents of the Civil War—the portraiture, the ‘composed’ battlefields—and external to them, as episodes in the ‘archival catalogue’ with its ‘literary’—which is to say historical—motivations.⁷ By importing the subjects of these two photographs into the space of *Lincoln’s Funeral*, Crow allegorises that moment of photography’s uneasy entrance onto the stage of historical representation while at the same time putting on display the kind of construction that is necessary for photography to gain legibility as a representation of history.

3.

Perhaps a comparison to contemporary photography would be useful here in order to better understand why it is so important that Crow’s engagement with this problem of historical representation is played out in the practice of *painting*. Of the photographers of the past twenty years whose work has taken on the scale and mode of address once reserved for painting (Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Jeff Wall to name only a few), Thomas Demand is perhaps the only one whose art has consistently engaged with a history other than art’s own (à la Wall). Demand’s practice of building elaborate life-size paper models of scenes most often drawn from historical photographs, and then photographing those models with a large-format camera, generates pictures of a striking

⁷ Such photographic syntax would of course find its fullest articulation in the photomontage practices of the historical avant-garde of the teens and twenties.

clarity and veracity, but ones which are at the same time undeniably illusory and artificial. It is the push and pull between the indexical promise of the photograph as 'evidence' (Demand's images are regularly described as conveying the 'scene of a crime') and the obvious artifice or 'constructed-ness' of the modelled scenes, which lends Demand's work its aesthetic charge.

Demand's engagement with history, on the other hand, comes from the artist's habit of picking for his models source photographs or material that recalls, either directly or indirectly, past conflicts and catastrophes. For example, Demand's work from the 1990s drew upon photographs of Adolf Hitler's Nazi headquarters (*Room*, 1994) and old East German Stasi offices (*Office*, 1995). More recently, Demand produced an entire series of images of the Nigerian Embassy in Rome, from which originated the documents that British and American authorities took to link Saddam Hussein's regime to the purchase of highly enriched uranium (*Yellowcake*, 2007).

Like Crow's paintings, Demand's photographs are manifestly and self-consciously scenes meant to evoke another time and another place. But Demand's working method sheds all of those photographic markers and details, the traces of human interaction and presence, all of those 'accidents' of life lived, which would link the photographs, as evidentiary, to the historical content Demand's models are meant to recall. As a result, this historical content is foreclosed from the photographic representation, because the only thing to which the photographs point, indexically as it were, are to the models themselves, which, though constructed, are completely and utterly under Demand's control. One can argue, as Michael Fried has recently done, that there is nothing in these photographs that is not intended by the artist, and to push the

point further, that ‘Demand seeks to make pictures that thematise or indeed allegorise intendedness as such’.⁸ Within Demand’s frame, the ‘spark of contingency’ (Walter Benjamin’s phrase) enshrined in the logic of photography is erased, and thus any history other than that of the art itself remains all but illegible.

In contrast, it is exactly Crow’s painting process that counters the kind of historical foreclosure enacted in Demand’s photographs. Crow generally works very quickly. After periods of research, during which notebooks are filled with extensive copies of early photographs, the elements of which may or may not find their way into a painting, Crow will work out a composition, often in sketch form, and then translate that sketch to canvas, a move which requires a significant jump in scale. The ground and basic blocking of the piece is next laid out in acrylic paint, and then, over the course of only a small handful of sessions, perhaps two or three, the full composition is executed in oil and enamel. The time it takes for Crow to finish a painting is not dictated in advance; her concern is not solely formulaic or procedural. But the strategy to work very quickly and at a large scale is just that, a strategy, which means that the gestural marks which issue from that strategy are not invested in the least bit with anything like self-expression. If anything, Crow’s manner of painting, especially in those moments when the mark has been completely relieved of any and all intentionality, when the paint, as ‘matter’, is allowed to speak for itself — as seems to happen particularly with those ropes and skeins of enamel that interrupt the depth of her scenes, such as in *Tea Room at the Plaza*, *Queens Butcher Shop, 1910*, *Montana Men’s Booth, World’s Fair, 1904* and, of course, in *Lincoln’s Funeral* — indicates a purposeful relinquishing of authorial control, especially when juxtaposed with the mimetic impulse that otherwise underwrites her

⁸ Michael Fried, ‘Without a Trace’, *Artforum* Vol. 43, No. 7 (March, 2005), p. 202.

concern for the historical subject matter. The ropes and skeins of enamel that appear to lie on the surface of the pictures rather than in them thus stand as so many ‘accidents’ that ‘present’ rather than depict. As assaults on the surface of Crow’s paintings, like marks of graffiti, these moments do not register authorial presence as much as they index the author’s—and by extension, our own, the viewers’—separation or remoteness, in both time and space, from the content of the work.⁹ It is in this way that Crow’s process can be seen to harness that same dialectic between discourse and brute matter, between presentation and representation, which not only inaugurates the moment of painting’s becoming modern but also dictates its ambivalent relationship to photography, and in particular, to photography’s purchase upon history. This is *how* Crow’s paintings are ‘history paintings’.

Yet it remains to be seen how the manifest content of Crow’s paintings relates to their form. Which is to ask, what is it about these scenes from the First Gilded Age that make them equal to the task of ‘history painting’ that Crow has set for herself? To return to *Lincoln’s Funeral* for a moment: if we can understand the syntax that allegorises photography’s potential to represent history in the documents of Lincoln’s passage—their distillation of the photographic conditions of identity and anonymity which structure the archival catalogues of Civil War photography—then in painting, this syntax is rewritten as pictorial ‘composition’; and for Crow, it is a composition self-consciously presented as such.

This is what distinguishes Crow’s engagement with history from a painter such as Gerhard Richter. If we take the latter’s most historically potent work to date, his painting

⁹ For the quintessential account of the autographic mark’s separation from signifying authorial presence, see the final chapter of Rosalind Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

suite, *October 18, 1977* (1988), we see a series of works that treat their source material photographs—the press and police snapshots that accompanied the controversial deaths of the Baader-Meinhof members of the radical left-wing Red Army Faction—as a readymade matrix (à la Jasper Johns), one which simply awaits translation into paint. Richter’s strategy of translation, of ceding the inherent licence of painting to the physical fact of the photograph, is no doubt meant to stage the problem not only of the (repressive) representation and transmission of, at that time, recent German history (many believed the Baader-Meinhof group to have been the victims of extra-judicial assassination at the hands of the state rather than suicides, which is how the official account reads), but also, as Benjamin Buchloh would have it, of ‘the very possibility of painting’.¹⁰ In other words, in order to ensure its own self-preservation, painting had to give itself over entirely to the empire of the mechanised image.

Twenty years on, however, the ‘possibility’ of painting is no longer in crisis, and ‘composition’ is no longer so resolutely tied to that model of pictorial meaning by which it was regarded as nothing more than the marker of an (obsolete, bourgeois and, from the American point of view, European) authorial subject. In the digital era, it is composition itself, not mechanisation, which offers itself up to be self-reflexively addressed by painting, and this is exactly the project with which Crow’s enterprise is engaged. Like sets abandoned by their actors, all of Crow’s paintings appear staged or composed, as if what one were looking at were dioramas, or perhaps more appropriately, period room displays. Of course, that ‘as if’ asks quite a bit of the viewer. But the ‘period room’

¹⁰ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Gerhard Richter: Painting After the Subject of History” (Ph.D. Dissertation: City University of New York, 1994), p. 117.

itself has a particular history, and it is one that leads us straight back to the First Gilded Age.

4.

The American period room had its origin in a number of sites of modern display from the nineteenth century, such as the panorama, the diorama, and the international exposition.¹¹ The rising interest in national cultures, impelled by the burgeoning constitutional order of large nation states and exemplified by the international exposition and the world's fairs in particular, led European museums to adopt modes of display that focused on period and style rather than upon taxonomies of material and type. The first period rooms, 'vignettes' of interior scenes complete with decorative arts and crafts and regional furniture, were mounted in 1873 by Artur Hazelius, founder of the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm. Other museums, particularly throughout Northern Europe and Germany, were quick to follow.

But 'the concept of the period room,' writes Dianne Pilgrim 'did not firmly take hold [in the United States] until there was a true appreciation of American decorative arts'; and this, she notes, 'did not happen until the 'teens and 'twenties', once the US had passed through the looking glass of the Great War and had its own national culture's self-interest set firmly in place. Nevertheless, the first major bequests to museums in the US of collections of decorative objects and furniture began as early as 1904, when Charles L. Pendleton, a wealthy Rhode Island native, donated his collection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century decorative artifacts to the Rhode Island School of Design, but 'with the proviso that a structure be built in the Georgian style to house it'. The Metropolitan

¹¹ The following brief on the history of the 'period room' is drawn from Dianne H. Pilgrim's 'Inherited from the Past: The American Period Room', *American Art Journal*, Vol 10. No. 1 (May, 1978).

Museum of Art began exhibiting American decorative arts and furniture as early as 1909, and it acquired the collection (some 600 pieces) of H. Eugene Bolles, a Boston lawyer, in 1910, after which the museum additionally ‘decided to acquire a series of early American rooms’ to function ‘as a suitable stage set’ for the new material. From very early on, then, we can see that the decorative arts were intimately tied up with the circumstances of their exhibition, so much so that a distinction came to be made between the period ‘room’ and the period ‘setting’, where only the former concerned itself with ‘some sort of historical accuracy’ by exhibiting only genuine artifacts, while the latter was ‘organised to create an ambience’, and so took liberties with recreations, facsimiles and the occasional theatrical prop.¹²

If we read Crow’s works now not through the ‘period room’, with its connotation of historical accuracy, but through this notion of the ‘period setting’ and its sense of historical artifice, we can see that Crow’s paintings do not necessarily reproduce or depict scenes of or from the First Gilded Age as much as they reproduce or depict the very mode of historical re-presentation imagined by and inaugurated, in the US at least, during that same period.

Montana Men’s Booth, World’s Fair, 1904 is rather explicit in this regard, insofar as it offers something of a direct account of one such site of popular display. But it also offers a way to look at how such displays are structured in Crow’s other canvases too.

¹² George Francis Dow (1868-1936), secretary of the Essex Institute in Salem Massachusetts, the first American museum credited with using period rooms, noted in a piece for the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* in 1922 that, with regard to such ‘settings’: ‘An effort was made to heighten the illusion of actual human occupancy by casually placing on the table before the fireplace in the parlor, a Salem newspaper printed in the year 1800 and on it a pair of silver-bowed spectacles, as though just removed by the reader. Elsewhere was placed a workbasket with a half-knitted stocking on the top of other work, the knitting needles in place; and in other ways the illusion of daily occupancy was created’. Here we have an exemplary account of the staging of those ‘accidents’ that index ‘life lived’ and so offer access to history as immediacy.

For what is explicit in *Montana Men's Booth* is that we view its scene, or 'setting', on the oblique, and so are privy not just to what the booth displays but to the fact that it is staged for an audience. The booth itself is composed of a thin white backdrop or temporary partition, to which the trophies and other taxidermied animals have been affixed. Specimens too big for the wall stand on risers in front of it. And above the partition, running parallel to it in the perspective of the painting, we see the truncated or abstracted elements of a truss system, or other architectural component, such as might be used for lighting or for the backdrop's support. Again, as in *Lincoln's Funeral*, American flags appear to hover at the corners of the canvas, though with no direct or evident relationship to the architecture of the space.

But now note the black stanchions and rope or ribbon that separate the space of the booth from the space accorded to its audience. The loose structure of the painting's perspective places us, the viewers, on this side of the stanchions, which is to say on the side of the absent audience. And the only other items which appear on this, the viewers' and the audience's side of the pictorial space, are also the only items not unique to *Montana Men's Booth* as a painting, and those are the patterned carpet and the chandelier. One or the other of these objects, though quite often the two together, appear in nearly all of Crow's most recent works. *Dawson City Furrier Caters to Klondike Fever*, *Tea Room at the Plaza*, and *New York Stock Exchange After Bond Rally, 1919* show both; *Lincoln's Funeral* has a carpet; *Queens Butcher Shop, 1910* and even the *Bucket of Blood Saloon Destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake* bear chandeliers.

The common first impression has these items as somehow out of place, either spatially, for example, as in *Queens Butcher Shop*, or temporally, as in *Bucket of Blood Saloon* (how could any chandelier remain intact, let alone operable, in the wake of such an event?). But *Montana Men's Booth* shows us that these things are exactly where they are supposed to be, because each painting operates as a picture of just such a display; each one stands as a 'period setting'. This is not to suggest that Crow's settings point to actual referents, that her pictures are paintings *of* such settings. Rather, we know, as viewers of the paintings, that they are settings because, in *Montana Men's Booth*, Crow shows us *how* they are. Crow's carpets and chandeliers, either independently or together, quite literally 'set the scene'. They function as signifiers of 'composition' at both the level of the painting's form, its photographic syntax (insofar as the carpets and chandeliers are equally imports from photographic source material), and at the level of its content, given the correlation between Crow's chosen period 'settings' and America's First Gilded Age.¹³ The only difference between *Montana Men's Booth* and, say, *Alaskan Furrier Caters to Klondike Fever*, then, is that we are no longer shown how the scene is set, only the scene itself. Nevertheless, the carpets and the chandeliers (or the carpets *or* the chandeliers) alert us to the scene as a scene, and to that aspect of it that we might as well call 'scenic', which, at the level of content, is what makes Crow's paintings equal to the task of history painting.

5.

A history painting for the present, we need to remember. For this difference between accuracy and artifice, between period 'room' and period 'setting', between a

¹³ One could make a similar argument, I expect, with regard to what I have been calling the 'ambiguous architecture' depicted in Crow's paintings.

scene as such and a scene as ‘scenic’, plays itself out across a different set of representations that are equally relevant to the content of Crow’s paintings, but ones more immediately concerned now with time itself. Perhaps this is most readily evident in *New York Stock Exchange After Bond Rally, 1919*, but it is equally there in *Dawson City Furrier* and *Taxidermy Sale at Sotheby’s*, and even in the more idiosyncratic *Wildcattin’ in Paradise*—most of Crow’s newest paintings, we can see, depict either places of exchange or things that are for sale (and often the two together); but more specifically than this, each of those places or things serve as sites for speculation.

What is speculation? At its most basic, it’s an idea or an action based upon a division between the present, whatever is the case now, and some future, whatever the case may be. Stated differently, speculation amounts to a bet on a history to come, for which the present can only ever be of limited predictive help. From an economic point of view, perhaps the most compelling articulation of this temporal division can be found in the disclaimers, such as those that attend any over-the-counter equity investments, which state that past performance—i.e. the history of a share price—is in no way indicative, let alone a guarantee, of future performance. In other words, history, with respect to speculation, has no purchase on the present, almost constitutively so, and it follows that the present, with respect to speculation, can have no purchase upon history either. And what do people speculate on? In the most general sense, they speculate on commodities, such as (‘liberty’) bonds, or (‘Klondike’) gold, or (‘Alaskan’) furs. They may speculate upon the value of exotic (‘taxidermied’) animals in the form of trophies from a hunt, or they may speculate on (‘wildcatting’) energy in the form of natural resources.

Speculation is a bet on value, and if the value of things is generally located in their utility, then the value of a commodity (following Marx) is located in exchange, and so ‘the commodity is,’ to borrow from the literary critic Walter Benn Michaels, ‘an example of a thing whose identity involves something more than its physical qualities, but,’ Michaels explains, ‘it is by no means the only example.’ ‘Money’ is another example, as are ‘corporations’ (which cannot be ‘reduced to the men and women who are its shareholders’). And because Michaels is particularly interested in the kinds of literary representations or ‘modes of expression’ that are things like money and corporations (which is to say entities in which people speculate), he asks, ‘what else is that mode of expression, writing?’

For writing to be writing, it can neither transcend the marks it is made of nor be reduced to those marks. Writing, in this sense, is intrinsically different from itself, neither material nor ideal. And the drama of this internal division...is...one of the most urgent concerns of artistic representation in the half-century between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I.¹⁴

Stated differently, at the level of representation, what made the First Gilded Age so ‘gilded’ is this ‘internal division’ that constitutes or grounds the condition of representation’s very possibility, insofar as that representation was realist (or ‘naturalist’, Michaels’ preferred term). What Crow’s recent paintings do, in recomposing these various ‘speculative’ scenes of the First Gilded Age, is to rewrite this internal division now not as the logic of naturalist or realist representation in the past but as the logic of historical representation in the present.

¹⁴ See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), particularly the introduction and chapter seven, ‘Action and Accident: Photography and Writing’.

This logic is underwritten by a difference, an ‘internal division’ in time rather than space. If the commodity served as the figure of the First Gilded Age (the moment of market capitalism’s rise) because it embodies a difference that is not identical to itself, which is to say that it cannot be reduced to either of the two things, ‘material or ideal’, that would appear to occupy its same space, then the New Gilded Age would appear to have had less to do with any kind of speculation on commodities alone (the cause of the financial crash of 1929) than it would with speculation upon others’ speculations, in the form of derivatives, such as the now notorious CDOs (collateralised debt obligations) and CDSs (credit default swaps). The ‘derivative’, we could say, is or was the figure of the New Gilded Age. Within this new scenario, speculation upon a commodity at one level is literally rewritten into a new ‘security’ at another: an entity that is not different from itself spatially, but temporally.

What this amounts to is not an internal difference between what something is and what something represents (the commodity), but rather a difference between two different times of representation (the derivative), what Robin Blackburn has identified as the ‘fourth dimension’ of ‘financialisation’. Blackburn notes that ‘the characteristic instruments of financialisation are derivatives which are bound to wax and wane in exact relationship to an underlying asset or liability, futures contracts, or options (rights to buy or sell at some future date at a specified price)’, and that what is ‘central here’ is ‘temporality’.¹⁵ What the current financial crisis has revealed, at once in a very concrete and very abstract manner, is that such temporal attenuation has made it impossible to establish anything like a ‘present’ value, which results, quite simply, in a breakdown of the circuit of exchange.

¹⁵ Robin Blackburn, ‘Finance and the Fourth Dimension’, *New Left Review* 39 (May/June 2006), p. 41.

I trust it is not going too far to suggest then that this breakdown be seen as a crisis of history (which is different than saying it is 'historical'), insofar as it is, at bottom, a crisis of representation, and one brought on by a divorce not between the present and the past (the divorce figured forth by photography) but between the present and the future (the divorce figured forth by derivatives). History, as a representation of the past, has no purchase here, which means, as Crow's paintings demonstrate, that it can only be staged.