



*Fall-Out Shelters
for the Human Spirit:
American Art
and the Cold War*

Authored by
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Art as propaganda is nothing new; almost since their beginnings, art and politics have had a symbiotic relationship. The promotion of post-World War II American art has been recognized as a weapon in the war against communism since the 1970s. Michael L. Krenn's *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* is the most recent text to examine role American politics played in relocating the center of modern art from Paris to New York in the mid-twentieth century. Krenn focuses his text on the roles that the United States State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA) played in the international promotion of Abstract Expressionism abroad and the debates that raged in the United States over the potential security risks of promoting abstract art overseas during the Cold War.

Krenn traces the USIA's propagandizing efforts via international exhibitions of contemporary American art from the *Advancing American Art* show, which was exhibited from New York to South America to Europe in 1946, to the *Venice Biennale* of 1970, when the federal government ceased to be involved in overseas exhibitions of American art. Krenn argues that a central debate was whether modernism or "realism" was the best propagandizing agent at the disposal of the U.S. government. Time and again, Krenn points out that the Modernists often came from "subversive" backgrounds and were frequently aligned at one time with the communist party in the U.S. Additionally, criticism of the United States by artists like Ben Shahn included in these exhibitions was a double edged sword. On the one hand, criticism of one's government was only possible under a democracy in which one has freedom of speech, but on the other hand, Congress disapproved of exhibiting negative images of America.

Krenn demonstrates that Congress repeatedly intervened to censor these international exhibitions, eliminating artists that were considered "subversive," suggesting they were fearful of artwork that they did not understand. While many in the art community knew at the time that these exhibitions were designed as propaganda to fight the war on Communism, figures such as Lloyd Goodrich of the Whitney Museum of American Art argued that Norman Rockwell style "realism" celebrated American nationalism in a similar manner as officially sanctioned Soviet social realist painters. Goodrich and other supporters of Modernism also recognized that Europeans understood modern art, and argued that in order to present Americans as cultured and

sophisticated, American art had to adopt the modernist aesthetic. Krenn argues another central debate at this time was whether the U.S. government should be involved in exhibiting contemporary art.

In an attempt to compromise, the Advisory Committee on the Arts, a branch of the US Department of State, issued a statement in 1960 to the USIA asking that artist backgrounds not be a consideration for exhibition when curating a show – despite potential Communist backgrounds – and that the target audience of an exhibition be of primary concern when selecting contemporary art to be shown. The problems with the compromise were twofold: the former never happened as the USIA continued to run security checks on every artist included in exhibitions, and it was never clear how to best appeal to target audiences. For example, an exhibition of American painting in the Soviet Union received mixed reviews, some pointed to the fact that 20 percent of Soviets had a lessened opinion of America after the show, while others pointed to the fact that 20 percent of Soviets had an increased opinion of America after the show. Problems such as these continued until 1966 when the USIA turned the international exhibitions over to the Smithsonian Institution, where they floundered until the 1970 *Venice Biennale* when government involvement in overseas exhibitions was terminated.

Krenn's text is arranged in seven chapters, organized chronologically. In the first chapter, Krenn argues that there was opposition to government involvement in the promotion of art, which culminated in the ultimately censored 1946 exhibition, *Advancing American Art*. He then argues that in the fallout from the failed exhibition, there was an increasing need for culture to play a significant role in diplomacy abroad, especially when post-war German officials specifically requested an exhibition of modern American painting to be exhibited at the *Berlin Cultural Festival* of 1951, which was wildly successful. The German exhibition convinced the U.S. government that it was possible to spread democracy with art, and Krenn argues that with the increase in federal involvement, it became unclear who was responsible for funding and building overseas exhibitions, which led to a dismal display at the 1952 *Venice Biennial*.

Krenn demonstrates that the media became involved in the debate over international exhibitions after the demise of the *Sport in Art* and *American Painting, 1900-1950* exhibitions. The failure of these 1956 exhibitions led to tensions around mounting an exhibition for the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels – which artists would be included, who would select artwork, and who would fund the pavilion were all issues played out in the press – Krenn argues that the exhibition of modern painting in Brussels strengthened

the argument that American modernism was a diplomatic weapon in the Cold War. The result was the aforementioned 1959 exhibition of modern American painting in Moscow, which resulted in debates over the success of the exhibition. By 1962, the USIA was carefully watching Soviet art criticism, and as the Soviets criticized American modernism, the USIA determined it was successful. Krenn argues that this success led to the U.S. sending American paintings to foreign embassies to act as art galleries. Increasing federal involvement in international exhibitions eventually led to a failed 1970 *Venice Biennial* after which the USIA ceased to be involved in exhibiting paintings.

Krenn's background in American diplomatic history makes him well suited to explore the history of these exhibitions as diplomatic propaganda. In some areas, however, his text is lacking as a result of his cursory knowledge of art history. For example, nowhere in the text does he indicate what works of art were censored from or included in exhibitions. Rather, he lists which artists were censored or included. This point is moot when Congress censored the artist as a "subversive." However, in preparation for the 1964 *Venice Biennale*, Krenn notes that USIA officials objected to paintings by a number of artists including Jacob Lawrence. Lawrence's positive images of hard working African Americans would have contributed to the government's desire to show positive race relations, thereby dispelling the widely-held belief that blacks were second-class citizens in the United States. It would therefore be useful to know which image(s) by Lawrence were censored, and why.

There are also brief passages in the text that show Krenn's weakness in the history of art. For example, in his discussion of German influence in post-war American art, Krenn placed Jackson Pollock first on his list of American painters taught by the German born abstractionist, Hans Hofmann. It is well known that Pollock studied under Thomas Hart Benton and in one of Pollock's only meetings with Hofmann the instructor indicated that Pollock should work more from nature to which Pollock famously replied "I *am* nature." Clearly, Hofmann did not play the role of mentor to Jackson Pollock that Krenn claims.

Krenn also does not give enough credit to Eva Cockcroft, whose 1974 *Artforum* article titled "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," was groundbreaking in this discussion of Cold War propaganda, especially the temporary interest that the United States government took in promotion of American art abroad. Cockcroft appears only in Krenn's bibliography, but not in the footnotes, nor in the body of his text, which is especially problematic considering that the second chapter of his book, "Art as a Weapon," is a close approximation of the title of Cockcroft's

seminal essay. While Krenn's text is considerably more thorough than that of Cockcroft, omitting her from his text is problematic. However, other significant contributors to this subject matter, such as Serge Guilbaut and David Craven, are likewise not included beyond the bibliography.

This being said, Krenn's study is a careful analysis of government documents and records detailing the events of international exhibitions of the years 1946-70. His analysis is thorough and thoughtful as he carefully records each of the exhibitions and provides the reactions of both pro- and anti-modernists. At times this analysis becomes necessarily repetitive because the same arguments were raised for each show. Beyond the scope of Krenn's study are the domestic exhibitions of American art. The scope of such a project is likely sizeable, but a study comparing the domestic versus international exhibitions during these years may provide additional insight into how the propaganda machine operated during the Cold War.

Krenn's text is a must for any scholar of post-war American art in order to appreciate how great a role cultural diplomacy played in the debate over who would become the faces of contemporary American art. Krenn's writing is clear and his research thorough, providing a clear understanding of how a bureaucratic organization tried to control how people around the world would perceive contemporary American art in an effort to demonstrate that the U.S. was a country with a rich cultural history, completely distinct from the Soviet Union, and promote the advancements were seen as possible under a democratic, capitalist system. Krenn's text is only partially in his own words as he cleverly weaves together quotes from noted Cold War politicians and art critics to make his points. That Krenn allowed this story to be told in the words of the key players in this debate is a smart tactic that validates and authenticates his text.

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