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Article

Madness at the Whitney

Resistance to Genre in *Dempsey and Firpo*

Jamie Wood¹



GEORGE BELLOWS'S PAINTING of the now infamous 1923 boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Luis Ángel Firpo has taken possession of a critical space in the Whitney Museum of American Art. The *New York Times* commented on 18 November 1931, the day following the Whitney's inauguration, that 'George Bellows's famous oil, "Dempsey and Firpo," has a place of honor, directly facing the main entrance'.² A few days later, on 22 November, the newspaper further observed that the painting was 'so placed that it attracts at once the eye of any arriving visitor'.³ Although the Whitney has moved from its original location in four very traditional brownstones on West 8th Street to a new purpose-built and Bauhaus-inspired building at the junction of Madison Avenue and 75th Street, *Dempsey and Firpo* (1924) has maintained its 'place of honor' in the permanent collection, positioned to attract the immediate attention of the visitor.⁴ But despite this continuity and centrality, the relationship of the painting to the museum is an uneasy one. The more we examine the painting's form and content in relation to the history of

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its exhibition and reception, the more it serves to disrupt what I have termed the Whitney narratives: the series of stories the museum wants to construct around itself. By examining the Whitney's original narrative, especially the attempt by its founders to define a genre of modern American realism, I hope to show how Bellows's painting, as if part of some dramatisation of the return of the repressed, reveals the refusal of artistic documents to accept genre at the very moment they appear to submit to it. This, following Jacques Derrida, is to demonstrate the inherent madness of genre itself.



George Wesley Bellows, *Dempsey and Firpo* (1924)

It is important to emphasise at the outset what has already been stated in passing: the Whitney is a national museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is one of the many American museums founded, in the words of Elizabeth Broun, the Director of the Smithsonian Art Museum, in a 'confluence of national pride and cultural anxiety to trumpet the news that America had an art worthy of notice'.⁵ Its formal origin can be traced to 1931, when Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the daughter of the railway tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt II and wife of Henry Payne Whitney, the heir to an industrial fortune, determined to establish her own museum.⁶ Whitney had begun her collection of contemporary American art, accompanied by her assistant Juliana Force, in 1907. A sculptor herself, she had initially shown many of the 700 works of art that made up the eventual Whitney collection at a series of private salons: the Studio galleries (1904–1910), the Whitney Studio (1914–1918), the Whitney Studio Club (1918–1927), and the Whitney Studio Galleries (1927–1930).⁷ By

October 1929 the collection had progressively outgrown these spaces, although in the process, according to Force, it had created ‘a real interest [...] in American art’. To solve this problem of space, Whitney offered the Metropolitan Museum of Art both the collection and the funds to build a new gallery to house it.⁸ The offer was declined. The only other major New York museum, The Museum of Modern Art — established in 1929 — was firmly committed to promoting art from both Europe and America. This left Whitney with no choice but to establish her own museum.⁹ At its inauguration Whitney set out her mission in succinct terms:

I have collected during these years the work of American artists because I believed them worthwhile and because I believed in our national creative talent. Now I am making this collection the nucleus of a museum devoted exclusively to American art — a museum which will grow and increase in importance as we ourselves grow. In making this gift to you, the American public, my chief desire is that you should share with me the joy which I have received from these works of art. It is especially in times like these that we need to look to the spiritual. In art we find it. It takes us into a world of beauty, not too far removed from any one of us.¹⁰

This narrative establishes the precise orientation of the Whitney as a genre statement, designed to reflect the birth of a ‘national creative talent’ and as an antidote to economic depression. Importantly, it looks forward not backward: it is designed to ‘grow and increase’ with the nation, ironically at a time of enormous personal and economic stasis. The *New York Times* of 22 November 1931 echoed Whitney’s comments under a triumphal banner:

AMERICAN ART COMES OF AGE: THE OPENING OF A NEW EPOCH

With Our Painting and Sculpture Now Enjoying a Vogue That Suggests a National Renaissance, and With the Opening of the Whitney Museum Devoted to Native Work, America at Last and Dramatically Takes Her Place Beside the Older Countries of the World.¹¹

The artist and art historian Bryson Burroughs commented in similar terms in 1932, observing that the utility value of the Whitney originated in its elimination of ‘the unfair competition of the well-winnowed art of past ages’.¹² Burroughs echoes Force’s observation on the opening day of the museum: ‘This museum will be devoted to the difficult but important task of gaining for the art of this country the prestige which heretofore the public has devoted too exclusively to the art of foreign countries and of the past.’¹³ Force is clear though to separate the ‘art of foreign countries’ from that of the ‘past’. This allows the Whitney to be both modern and American without partaking of the European modernist tradition.

In order to mark its difference from both the past (figured institutionally as the Metropolitan Museum) and the European present (the Museum of Modern Art), Whitney’s collection showed a strong bias towards painters working in the figurative tradition. Particularly central to the collection were the urban and social realists, such as Bellows and Edward Hopper, two of the Ashcan artists who had studied under Robert Henri at the New York School of Art. This allowed Whitney’s museum to stand in sharp contrast to the both the

New York art scene and the period defined by Marjorie Perloff as the ‘avant-garde phase of American modernism’.¹⁴ This distinction was crucial. The years leading up to the Whitney’s inauguration had seen significant developments in American modernism. Alfred Stieglitz had launched the journal *Camera Work* in 1903 and subsequently opened the Photo-Secession Gallery, or *291*, in 1905. Marcel Duchamp arrived in New York in 1915 and quickly settled into a circle that included Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Man Ray. Whitney herself was involved in the funding of and planning for the 1913 ‘International Exhibition of Modern Art’, now known as the Amory Show, which introduced modern European art to American society.¹⁵ Several attempts had been made to define a distinctly indigenous American modernism, for example Williams’s launch of the journal *Contact* in 1920 with Robert McAlmon.¹⁶ But such was the persistent influence of European modernism that by the time Wyndham Lewis arrived in 1927 he was in a position to describe American art in typically caustic terms: ‘However much it buries its head in the tawny sands, or super-rich and fat Zolaesque red loam, of Arizona, Indiana, or Ohio, its bottom (so to speak) — its tell-tale ecstatically wriggling back-side, remains in the Café du Dôme, Montparnasse.’¹⁷ Whitney and Force’s establishment of the Whitney can then be seen as an attempt to correct Lewis’s assessment. Or as Hermon More, the curator of the inaugural exhibition, argued, the Whitney’s principal aim was ‘to help create rather than to conserve a tradition’.¹⁸

In recent criticism, this opposition of the Whitney to European modernism has been theorised in gender terms using a detailed analysis of the formal structure of the original gallery space. This is a debate that can be traced back to the museum’s origins and to the initial reviews that accompanied the inaugural exhibition and their focus on the physical exhibition space — the four adjoining brownstones on West 8th Street — rather than the collection itself. The *New York Times* of 17 November 1931 reflected:

The walls of the sculpture gallery are painted powder blue, against which marble and bronze are defined sharply. Two of the picture galleries have white walls and white velvet curtains, but two others have canary yellow walls and blue carpet and hangings. Another large gallery has rose-coloured walls, carpet and hangings, and furnishings which give it somewhat of the effect of a drawing room.¹⁹

The reviewer in *Parnassus* argued that the real triumph of the exhibition was the décor, the ‘impressive pink portals [...] the transformed drawing rooms and rose carpeted corridors of the converted houses’.²⁰ This was clearly a conscious decision. One surviving invoice from the decorator employed by Whitney and Force shows the range of internal decoration undertaken prior to the museum’s opening:

Eagle lights; chromium fixtures; window shades, special gray carpet for 2nd floor painting room #12; iron work on fire escapes; Venetian blinds in yellow gallery; brass shields for radiators; net curtains for cork rooms; curtains for galleries; fringe curtains for pink rooms; glass green bowl; lace paper shade; pair of blue and gilt lamps for reception room; Victorian sofa recovered in pink leather; 6 chairs recovered in green leather; 1 worn settee recovered in pink leather; modern table for pink

room; hair carpet for 1st floor and stairs #14; blue glass for table decoration.²¹

There was then a very deliberate attempt to recreate a domestic interior. Janet Wolff has argued that this domesticated gallery space was designed by Whitney and Force to stand in direct opposition to that of the white cube modernism of the Museum of Modern Art — described by Evelyn Hankins, in contrast to the Whitney's ornate design, as a space of 'light beige, coarsely woven cloth and delineated by a discrete program of geometric floor and ceiling moldings'.²² Wolff links this decorative opposition to modernism's attempt, both critically and artistically, to marginalize the realist and figurative tradition. It has done this, she argues, by preferencing a genealogy of twentieth century art history which links the avant-garde phase of American modernism — with its origins in the Armory Show and the Stieglitz group — to the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1950s.²³ Wolff unpicks this opposition as a gender distinction, opposing the masculinity of 'white cube' modernism to the decorative, realist, and feminine space of the Whitney.²⁴ 'The point is that the discourse of modernism is itself a masculinity discourse', Wolff concludes. 'This means that the marginalization of realism, though ostensibly an aesthetic move, is at the same time fundamentally gendered.'²⁵ This argues again for the Whitney being a marginalized space in which an alternative American modernity — realist, indigenous, and feminized — attempts to take root.²⁶

As compelling as Wolff's analysis is, Bellows's picture of Dempsey, a man described as a 'mauler', a 'brawler', a 'killer', and a 'jungle fighter', intrudes provocatively into the Whitney.²⁷ The painting graphically depicts Dempsey's contest with Argentina's Firpo, the 'Wild Bull of the Pampas', which took place on 14 September 1923.²⁸ Such was the interest in the fight and particularly in Dempsey, holder of the World Heavyweight title since 1919 following a technical knockout of Jess Willard, that the gates of New York's Polo Grounds 'bulged with people': 88,228 in total with an official gate of \$1,127,800. Outside, 'mounted cops surrounded the place, trying to keep some kind of order' amongst the 35,000 unable to watch Dempsey defeat the challenger.²⁹ But this interest in Dempsey was not entirely supportive since his relationship with the American public was deeply ambiguous. Elliott J. Gorn has argued that Dempsey was a love-hate figure, 'the villain who kept fans spellbound anticipating his downfall'.³⁰ In part this stemmed from his background. Variouslly categorised as a drifter, a mine labourer, and a hobo, he was seen in the popular imagination as a violent and intensely destructive fighter who relied on innate and untamed natural aggression for his success, rather than on craft. In their world title fight, Willard's size and weight advantage had counted for nothing; Dempsey had left him badly injured on his stool at the start of the fourth round. Rumours circulated after the fight that Dempsey had loaded his gloves, and in subsequent fights he would be jeered and booed as he entered the arena.³¹ While for some this brutality and life on the margins of society marked Dempsey out as an alien, for others it was the cause for celebration and the basis for subsequent mythmaking. On Dempsey's death in 1983, Jim Murray, the Pulitzer Prize-winning sportswriter at the *Los Angeles Times*, characterised him as a symbol of frontier America:

Whenever I hear the name Dempsey I think of train whistles on a hot summer night on the prairie. I think of a tinkling piano coming out of a kerosene-lit saloon in a mining camp. I think of an America that was one big roaring camp of miners, drifters, bunkhouse hands, con men, hard cases, men who lived by their fists and their shooting irons and the cards they drew. It was the America of the Great Plains buffalo, the cattle drive, the fast draw, the jailhouse dirge. America at High Noon.³²

Although these recollections are tinged with nostalgia, they signal the nationalistic interest which Dempsey's organic talent and primitivism held, and still hold, for at least part of the American public.

Although Firpo's size and power had been hyped prior to the fight in the 'wild bull' epithet, he was given little actual chance of success.³³ Jack Reams, Dempsey's manager, warned Firpo's team that 'there is a lot of people I'd rather be than Firpo when Dempsey is turned loose'. 'My advice to all ticket purchasers', he went on, 'is to be in your seat early.'³⁴ It was largely the apparatus associated with the fight's spectacle, the press and Dempsey's promoter, that built the fight into an equal contest.³⁵ In a recent article looking at the cultural construction of Argentinean boxers in the United States in relation to imperialism in Latin America, Daniel Fridman and David Sheinin have demonstrated how these apparatuses reconfigured the fight as a contest between Argentina and the United States. When Firpo fired his American trainer, allegedly on the advice of a former Argentinean adviser in order to be able to fight according to a South American style, such was the press intensity, before and after the fight, that the *New York Times* and the *Brooklyn Eagle* speculated on how the fight might damage the principles set down in the Monroe Doctrine, America's policy of protecting Latin America from European colonization.³⁶

The fight did, however, live up to the hype of its billing. Nat Fleischer, the editor of *Ring Magazine*, considered the fight the most exciting he had witnessed in his fifty years of reporting.³⁷ The warning given by Reams proved to be correct: Dempsey rushed off his stool in the opening round, knocking Firpo to the canvas on seven separate occasions.³⁸ Bellows, correspondent for the *New York Evening Journal* that evening, chose to document none of those knockdowns when a year later he converted some of the drawings he had made of the fight into *Dempsey and Firpo*. Instead, he chose to show Firpo unexpectedly knocking Dempsey out of the ring in the second round. This was the most contentious moment of the fight. According to contemporary accounts, the mandatory count given to Dempsey lasted beyond the ten allotted by the Queensberry rules. Moreover, witnesses to Dempsey's exit from the ring document how his fall was cushioned by and his subsequent return to the ring aided by a series of spectators close to ringside. 'So many writers pushed Dempsey into the ring it looked like he was getting a back massage', Firpo declared after the fight.³⁹ Bellows later claimed that he was one of those helping Dempsey: 'When Dempsey was knocked through the ropes he fell in my lap. I cursed him a bit and placed him carefully back in the ring with instructions to be of good cheer.'⁴⁰

In Bellows's painting of that evening, however, there is very little 'good cheer' afforded to Dempsey. The goodwill is rather afforded to Firpo in a

depiction which is consistent with the image bestowed on him by the American press as a 'wild bull of the Pampas', or what Fridman and Sheinin have theorised more broadly as an American 'fascination with an exotic, ethnically distinct, violent, foreign intruder'.⁴¹ We can see this same interest in the figure of the alien fighter in Bellows's earlier drawing *Introducing Georges Carpentier* (1921), which depicts Dempsey meeting the French light-heavyweight Georges Carpentier at a time when Dempsey was derided for being a draft dodger. Again, Bellows chose to depict the challenger's one moment of acclaim as he stands in the ring before the announcer and receives wild applause before being knocked out by Dempsey, who is seen sitting quietly on his stool, head bowed and bandaging his hands.⁴² In this drawing Carpentier, erect and shorn of Dempsey's significant entourage, is the forerunner of the perfectly sculpted muscular body of Firpo that stands over the flaccid and flailing limbs of the champion as he exits the ring in 1923. The exoticism of this Argentinean challenger is reflected in the tanned contours of his body and the richness of his purple trunks; Dempsey's coldness, in contrast, is encapsulated in his white trunks and pale body. Firpo's handsome face betrays no emotion as he watches a faceless Dempsey fall through the ropes; a facelessness that finds its echo in that of the owner of the arm supporting his fall. In the painting the friendly ringside support that breaks Dempsey's fall is reduced to a single disembodied hand at the foot of the canvas, curving around Dempsey's back in the murky light beneath the ring.⁴³ The consequent anonymity of Dempsey's saviour is made all the more pertinent by its contrast to the staring and shouting faces, stunned by Dempsey's exit from the ring. Amidst the clamour and the lights and the noise, Dempsey seems to fall silently like a leaf in a forest. What Bellows has chosen then to document is a moment of intense spectacle. It is the moment of anticipation of Dempsey's downfall. Rather than celebrating Dempsey's heroic and patriotic victory over the Argentinean interloper, this focus on anonymity and facelessness serves to lay witness to a moment that speculates on the morality of power. It is the fragility of power, its very precariousness, which is on display here.⁴⁴

This canvas, then, has a peculiar relationship to a museum designed to celebrate a new American tradition. This is obvious at the level of content but also manifest in the form of the painting, in the friction with the Whitney's stated intention to focus on American realism. It is clear that there is a distinct bias towards realism in the original Whitney collection, especially in the works by Thomas Eakins and George Luks, in the one hundred and seven etchings by John Sloan, and in the seventy-five plates of drawings made by John James Audubon for the 'Birds of America' series. But a great deal of the collection, while remaining rooted in landscape and urban scenery, is distinctively experimental: Max Weber's cubist-inspired *Chinese Restaurant* (1915), for example. This is also true of *Dempsey and Firpo*. In many ways this painting represented a departure for Bellows. By the time he began studying at the New York School of Art in 1904, scenes of prizefighters had already become a genre.⁴⁵ Eadweard Muybridge had used images of naked boxers as part of a time and motion study as early as 1887; Eakins had completed both *Salutat* and *Taking the Count* in 1898. Bellows's own contribution to the genre lasted throughout his career, from the aggression of the fighters locked together in

Stag at Sharkey's (1909) and *Counted Out* (1921) to the photographic realism of drawings such as *A Knock Down* (1917–1921) and *Introducing Georges Carpentier*. But *Dempsey and Firpo* stands in contrast to each of these paintings.⁴⁶ Bellows's early boxing paintings are loosely painted with little detail, broad patches of colour sufficing to stand in for facial parts and limbs. In *Stag at Sharkey's* such is the looseness of the painting that the two boxers appear to become one in the moment of aggression, their momentum and movement overpowering the necessity of detail.⁴⁷ In contrast, *Dempsey and Firpo* is clean and incisive in its use of symmetry, colour, and detail, exchanging the realism in the early paintings for a very modern look and feel. Take for example Firpo's blank face, an expressionless mask shared with the referee who starts the count, similar in structure to Lewis's own angular and vorticist-inspired portraits. Indeed, compositionally, the painting borrows a number of theoretical positions from European modernism. Firstly, it uses the technique of cropping or cutting the body of the recreational spectator at the edge of the canvas. This idea of the body in pieces has been theorised by Linda Nochlin in the work of Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet as a 'metaphor of modernity', a means of conveying the discontinuity in the experience of modernity.⁴⁸ This sense of modernity is perhaps also evident in the shift from the claustrophobic atmosphere of Bellows's early depictions of fighters in private members clubs to the clean lines and well-lit photographic quality of this later canvas, fought as a boxing match rather than a prizefight according to a set of rules specified by the sport and according to the demands of entertainment and spectatorship. The referee, the moral authority in the ring, is after all very central to the painting in contrast to actual practice which aims towards a position of anonymity.⁴⁹ Secondly, the painting closely follows Jay Hambidge's theory of Dynamic Symmetry, a specifically American derivative of the classical models of geometrical accuracy and Euclidian proportion used by many European modernisms. Influential during the 1920s in America, Hambidge developed much of the system following his encounter with European modernism at the Armory Show, especially from geometric-centric artists such as Vassily Kandinsky and Juan Gris. Harold McWhinnie argues that *Dempsey and Firpo* is the very model of the theory: 'Almost every line and slope in the composition falls at a precise joint in a Hambidge Root Five Rectangle.'⁵⁰ While it might then still be possible to detect the legacy of the figurative in Bellows's canvas, in its almost photographic qualities, equally it shows all the influence of the principles of abstraction and neo-classicism, trends in European art that Bellows would have been clearly exposed to at the Armory Show.⁵¹ Rather than being in the realist tradition this canvas very much has its 'tell-tale ecstatically wriggling back-side [...] in the Café du Dôme, Montparnasse'.⁵²

What we find then is that Bellows's painting simply won't sit still within the accepted narratives of the Whitney. It seems to push against the boundaries created by the attempt to create genre. The theory of genre advanced by Jacques Derrida reminds us that at the heart of all genre is such a profound conflict. This arises from a fundamental contradiction internal to the genre statement. Derrida claims that 'as soon as the word "genre" is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn [and when] a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind'.⁵³ The law of

genre is then marked by the desire to erect borders, to stand against impurity and all forms of monstrosity. John Frow reads this as a ‘law of purity, a law against miscegenation’.⁵⁴ But fighting against this principle is its very reciprocal, an alternative ‘law of impurity or a principle of contamination’ that invalidates genre’s striving after purity and makes it impossible not to mix genres.⁵⁵ Derrida points to the ways in which texts can be simply shifted from their original generic context to another through the process of repetition and citation. This he says is the madness of genre: ‘The law is mad, is madness; but madness is not the predicate of law. There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law.’⁵⁶ But neither of these principles can exist alone; order and madness must feed off each other dialectically. The law of genre is then ultimately marked by its very inability to control the texts it sets out to regulate.

These issues, of boundary, purity, and miscegenation, have been central to the Whitney since its inauguration precisely because of the initial attempts by the founders to define its law. Herman More expressed the tension in his introduction to the 1931 exhibition catalogue, in his curatorial defence of the Whitney’s mission. The emphasis, he argued, has been placed primarily on ‘art’ and only secondarily on ‘American’.⁵⁷ It is a line of defence that continued to animate the New York art scene throughout the following decade. In 1940 the Museum of Modern Art published a long explanation of its own track record of exhibiting American art:

The Museum of Modern Art has always been deeply concerned with American art, but the Museum was founded upon the principle that art should have no boundaries, that paintings and motion pictures, furniture and sculpture from any country in the world should be shown in the Museum provided they were superior quality as works of art.

In contrast to the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art argues itself here to be structurally without genre; it is borderless both geographically and by media.⁵⁸ ‘This principle is of course in diametric opposition to the hysterically intolerant nationalism which has swept over half of Europe’, the report argues.⁵⁹ Implicitly identifying totalitarianism as the apogee of European modernism, this transforms the Whitney into a modernist statement *par excellence*.

The debate continues in earnest. In 1999, Maxwell L. Anderson, Director of the Whitney from 1998 to 2003, wrote in his ‘Notes on the Mission of the Museum of American Art’:

While most other American art museums collect contemporary art with no national boundaries, the Whitney believes that the unlimited landscape of American creativity is a thoroughly demanding and rewarding one, and that we are better equipped to do justice to it because of our concentration upon it.

The logic here is that the focus on one national art, especially where it is so wide and diversified as in America, reaps better rewards for visitors and scholars. But the contemporary political necessities that have forced Anderson into a defence of the Whitney merely serve to expose a problem. ‘American artists’, Anderson argues, ‘are by our definition those artists at work in this country — regardless of immigration status.’⁶⁰ Is inclusion in the Whitney

solely a matter of whether an artist is successful in convincing a guard at passport control of right of entry? Or is there a problem here that the Whitney is struggling to reconcile, a problem between that ‘unlimited landscape’ and those ‘national boundaries’? How does this fit with the foundation of the American state as a collection of immigrant cultures and a displaced indigenous population?

Dempsey and Firpo is a symptom of the madness at the Whitney, the text that refuses to be regulated by the Whitney’s call to define an American order. It acts to visualise the dilemma of tone in the statements of More and Anderson. What else could explain the painting’s strange history in the museum? Perhaps it might be possible to draw intentional curatorial parallels between the feminized setting of the gallery and the masculine space of the ring, the manner in which the ropes cut the canvas and separate the viewer from the entertainment. The stretched guy rope of the ring’s canvas has its direct analogy in the stretched canvas of the painting.⁶¹ Is this intended then as a deliberate metaphorical or ironic reference to the scopoc drive, to the experience of viewing in the masculine world of art?⁶² This would be consistent with Rebecca Zurier’s recent analysis of Bellows’s interest in the relationship of boxing to cultures of looking and spectatorship. But *Dempsey and Firpo* was never a central part of Whitney’s original collection. It was not displayed at either the Whitney Studio Club or the Whitney Studio Galleries.⁶³ Indeed, the painting was not actually acquired until 14 November 1931, three days before the Whitney’s inauguration, as part of what Wolff has described as a ‘program of rather energetic “corrective buying”’.⁶⁴ This period saw Whitney and Force complete the collection as a public (rather than private) object of contemplation; a completion achieved in part by an accommodation with Stieglitz and those modernist artists associated with him. Along with *Dempsey and Firpo* and Weber’s *Chinese Restaurant*, important experimental canvases such as Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Skunk Cabbage* (1922), Edward Hopper’s *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), and Charles Demuth’s *My Egypt* (1927) were all bought in 1931.⁶⁵ Although Wolff acknowledges that Force’s ‘corrective buying’ pushed the collection towards more ‘avant-garde, European-influenced works’, she dismisses this as unimportant in what she calls the Whitney’s ‘particular sociology of artistic production’ either prior to 1931 or subsequently.⁶⁶ This would seem perhaps too simplistic when we consider the position of *Dempsey and Firpo* in the museum. Bellows was not after all crucial to the collection. More describes the inaugural exhibition as being ‘for the most part’ focused on ‘living artists’.⁶⁷ Bellows had died in 1925. And the canvas also has a questionable place in Bellows’s career, with most critics united in their dismissal of the later Hambidge-influenced period.⁶⁸ Perhaps the most relevant factor in determining the acquisition and subsequent positioning of Bellows’s canvas was its fame.⁶⁹ Such was its perceived importance that Force and Whitney were prepared to pay Bellows’s widow \$18,750 for the canvas, the highest price they had to that date paid for a single work of art.⁷⁰ *Dempsey and Firpo* reveals the Whitney to be a manifestation of the schizoid personality of modernism: that in attempting to efface its involvement in capitalist society merely serves to demonstrate the extent of its implication.⁷¹

It is possible therefore to start to construct an alternative historical narrative that focuses on the economic and not merely the socio-political aspects of the museum's formation. The absent, and perhaps most important, participant at the Whitney's opening was President Hoover. Excusing his absence, Hoover wrote a letter to Whitney that was read out to the assembled crowd:

My Dear Mrs. Whitney: I profoundly regret that the pressure of imperative public duties prevents my accepting your kind invitation to speak at the opening of the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is an enterprise which makes a strong appeal to my own interest and I am sure that this permanent pioneer museum devoted exclusively to American paintings and sculpture will appeal to the country as a benefaction of nation-wide interest. It is a promising step toward placing American art in the position of importance and dignity which its excellence and individuality merit. It should quicken our national sense of beauty and increase America's pride in her own culture. Please accept for yourself my heartiest congratulations on the consummation of your plans and the appreciation which I know every American must feel for so notable a contribution to the nation. Yours faithfully,
HERBERT HOOVER.⁷²

This is an impassioned and provocative statement, bearing all the rhetorical grandeur and the revolutionary politics of the ur-statement of American society itself, the Declaration of Independence. The terms are similar to those used by Whitney — and in some places, for example 'a museum devoted exclusively to American art' ('paintings' in Hoover's letter), they are the same. It stresses the 'dignity', 'pride', 'excellence and individuality' of the museum's opening. As befits the opening of a national museum, the words 'America' and 'American' recur five times in the piece; 'nation', 'country' and 'culture' a further five times.

Perhaps what is most revealing in Hoover's letter is the way it shapes the Whitney into a corporate entity, 'an enterprise which makes a strong appeal to my own interest'. Whitney's project is described as that of the 'pioneer'. She is then part of Dempsey's history, the 'America at High Noon'. Moreover, Hoover's letter echoes Force's own historicisation of the Whitney set out in the foreword to the inaugural exhibition catalogue. Force calls the original Studio of 1904–1914 the 'first venture'. The Whitney Studio Club she conceives as a literal members club, 'with a library, a meeting room':

Here the members not only exhibited their work but found a place where they could meet, exchange opinions and gain inspiration from one another. The Club included in its membership not only artists who had already risen to fame, but many of the younger men who showed their work for the first time [...] Many of these younger men who joined have since made their reputations and are now profiting by their careers in the Club.

With a membership of just 400 this is a very exclusive club, with the same ambitions and aims as any private members club on Wall Street. Its spirit is symptomatic of an era of widespread commercial and financial speculation. It is about 'profit' and 'career'. The decision to form the Whitney Galleries in 1927 is, according to Force, a symptom of the Club's success: to allow the

membership to keep growing would be to create an ‘unwieldy organization’. Instead, the Galleries provide a larger space for independent exhibition. But again this space is outgrown: ‘Many dealers who had formerly been slow to recognize the new forces in American art were now interested. They were as eager as we to find new talent and better equipped in every case to provide an avenue for sales.’ This is a language of strategy, of organic growth, expansion, continuous innovation, and reinvestment. Force speaks like Gertrude Whitney’s Chief Investment Officer, redeploying the family wealth into higher return projects, educating the market, and stimulating demand. This could be the story of the rise of any of the great American corporations: Colgate, Kellogg, or Coca-Cola. The failed bequest to the Met is effaced in Force’s introduction, as is the buying spree she undertook on Whitney’s behalf before the museum’s opening. Instead, the decision to form the Whitney is positioned as the very logic of capitalism, as an organic and natural development of historical progress:

After much consideration it was decided that what was needed was an organization unhampered by official restrictions, but with the prestige which a museum invariably carries — an organization which would purchase and exhibit under the most auspicious circumstances native works of art.⁷³

Perhaps then we can rethink the Whitney’s insistence on a gendered modern American realism as part of the broader discourse of American protectionism which became the hallmark of the Republican response to the economic depression of the 1930s and is most obviously manifest in the Smoot–Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, a system of taxes designed to preserve American markets for American goods, and the economic logic of the New Deal which aimed to alleviate mass unemployment.⁷⁴ Considered as part of this narrative, the Whitney marks an important moment in the shift of power — political, economic, and cultural — from Europe to America. This leaves the image of Dempsey, knocked from the ring by Firpo the foreign challenger, sitting at the heart of the Whitney as a symptom of the profound anxiety associated with the nature, stability, and morality of power, with the fragility of the moment, and with the rise of the spectacle.

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Notes

1. Support for the research and writing of this article was provided by a doctoral award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).
2. ‘Hoover Lauds Aims of Whitney Museum’, *New York Times*, 18 November 1931, section Radio-Art, p. 21.
3. ‘Well Planned Galleries. In the Main Brilliantly Successful, the Collection Reveals Some Strange Gaps’, *New York Times*, 22 November 1931, section Arts & Leisure, p. 140. Avis Berman, the leading historian of the Whitney, comments that the painting was ‘hung on the main staircase, where it could not be missed’. See Avis Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street: Juliana Force and the Whitney Museum of American Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), p. 311.

4. When the author last visited the Whitney in April 2009 Dempsey and Firpo was hanging at the entrance to the permanent collection, framed by the entrance door.
5. Elizabeth Broun, 'Telling the Story of America', in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. by Bettina Messias Carbonell (Blackwell: London, 2004), pp. 296–301 (p. 298).
6. As an aside, Harry Payne Whitney was one of the many entrepreneurs and wealthy magnates at ringside for the Dempsey-Firpo fight in 1923. See Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 183.
7. Janet Wolff, 'Women at the Whitney, 1910–30: Feminism/Sociology/Aesthetics', in *Museum Studies*, ed. by Carbonell, pp. 483–97 (p. 485). Force merges the Whitney Studio and the Whitney Studio Club into the Whitney Studio Club in her history of the museum. See Juliana R. Force, 'Foreword', in *Whitney Museum of American Art: Catalogue of the Collection* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1931), pp. 7–8 (p. 7).
8. Force, p. 8. Force does not refer to the discussions with the Metropolitan Museum in her foreword. For an analysis of the discussions between Force and the Metropolitan Museum, see Evelyn Carol Hankins, 'Homes for the Modern: En/Gendering Display in New York City, 1913–1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stanford University, 1999), p. 149.
9. The opening exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1927 was European. Entitled 'Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh', it included many key paintings of European impressionism, such as Paul Cézanne's *The Bathers* (1898–1905), Paul Gauguin's *The Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892), Georges Seurat's *The Bank of the Seine* (1883), and Vincent Van Gogh's *Irises* (1888). See *The Museum of Modern Art First Loan Exhibition, New York November 1929: Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh* (New York: Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art, 1929).
10. Quoted in *New York Times*, 18 November 1931, p. 21.
11. 'American Art Comes of Age', *New York Times*, 22 November 1931, section Magazine, p. 106.
12. Bryson Burroughs, 'The Whitney Museum of American Art', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 27 (1932), 42–44 (p. 42, p. 44).
13. Quoted in *The New York Times*, 18 November 1931, p. 21.
14. Marjorie Perloff, 'The Avant-Garde Phase of American Modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, ed. by Walter Kalaidjian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 195–217.
15. Wolff, p. 488.
16. 'The magazine's title represents Williams and McAlmon's belief that personal experience and locale should influence art. In order to accomplish this vision, a move away from European literary traditions proved necessary in order for a true American art form to appear'. See 'Little Magazines & Modernism', <http://www.davidson.edu/academic/english/Little_Magazines/contact/synopsis.html> [accessed 13 May 2010] (para. 2 of 3).
17. Wyndham Lewis, *Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting Pot* (New York: The Gordon Press, 1972), p. 117.
18. Herman More, 'Introduction', in *Whitney Museum of American Art, Catalogue of the Collection* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1931), pp. 9–12 (p. 10).
19. 'Whitney Museum to be Opened Today', *New York Times*, 17 November 1931, p. 27.
20. 'On View in the New York Galleries', *Parnassus*, 3 (1931), 7–10 (p. 7).
21. Quoted in Hankins, p. 158.
22. Hankins, p. 86.
23. Although European modern art had been exhibited in New York before 1913, the Armory Show was the first broadly accessible and wide-ranging exhibition. Support for this position is provided by Hankins, p.23. For the relationship of the Museum of Modern Art to the rise of Abstract Expressionism, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).
24. Hankins argues that, in contrast to the Whitney, the female power at the Museum of Modern Art, specifically the financial patronage of Abby Rockefeller, Mary Sullivan, and

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- Lillie Bliss, was effaced by Alfred Barr's role as curator and therefore as author of the museum's public output. See pp. 94–96.
25. Wolff, p. 491.
 26. A similar thesis is advanced in Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
 27. Elliott J. Gorn, 'The Manassa Mauler and the Fighting Marine: An Interpretation of the Dempsey-Tunney Fights', *Journal of American Studies*, 19 (1985), 27–47 (p. 42).
 28. The writer and journalist Damon Runyon is generally credited with the coining of Firpo's nickname. See Walter Monfried, 'Dempsey and Firpo, the Wildest Prizefight of All When the Wild Bull of the Pampas Met the Manassa Mauler the Ring Proved Too Small', *Milwaukee Journal*, 8 October 1973, p. 14.
 29. The quotations are taken from Jack Dempsey and Barbara Piattelli Dempsey, *Dempsey: The Autobiography of Jack Dempsey* (London: W. H. Allen, 1977), p. 160. The statistics are taken from Roberts, p. 183.
 30. Gorn, p. 39.
 31. Part of the atmosphere of suspicion and hostility directed towards Dempsey can be traced to the accusations made following the First World War, and especially in the *New York Tribune* on the day following the Willard fight, that Dempsey was a draft dodger. Dempsey denied the accusation. See Dempsey, p. 88, pp. 122–23.
 32. Quoted in Earl Gustkey, 'Passing of Dempsey Marks End of an Era', *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1999, <<http://articles.latimes.com/1999/may/31/sports/sp-42886>> [accessed 13 May 2010] (para. 2 of 8).
 33. In his autobiography, Dempsey recalled Firpo as 'a big fellow, six feet three inches, weighing 215 to 230 pounds' and argued the nickname derived from Firpo's 'wild hair and Latin fire'. See Dempsey, p. 156.
 34. 'Dempsey–Firpo Notes', *Time*, 17 September 1923, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,727425,00.html>> [accessed 13 May 2010] (p. 1, para. 5 of 13).
 35. Randy Roberts argues that Tex Rikard, Dempsey's promoter, was impressed not by Firpo's fighting skill but rather the crowd's reaction to him. 'Firpo inspired passion. Ruggedly handsome, his hair swept back off his forehead in a smooth, greasy pompadour, and with great, soulful eyes, Firpo had the appearance of a matinee idol' (Roberts, p. 172).
 36. Daniel Fridman and David Sheinin, 'Wild Bulls, Discarded Foreigners, and Brash Champions: US Empire and the Cultural Constructions of Argentine Boxers', *Left History*, 12 (2007), 52–77 (p. 57). The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 stated that further efforts by European states to colonize the Americas would be interpreted as an act of aggression by the United States of America.
 37. Quoted in Gorn, p. 41.
 38. Dempsey, pp. 160–61.
 39. Louis D. Rubin, 'The Manly Art of Modified Mayhem', *The Sewanee Review*, 108 (2000), 412–32 (p. 415).
 40. 'George Bellows, Dempsey and Firpo, 1924', *The AMICA Library*, <<http://www.davidrumsey.com/amica/amico166210-123970.html>> [accessed 13 May 2010] (para. 4 of 5). Dempsey confirms that he was 'pushed back' into the ring but claims many journalists subsequently stepped forward to argue that they had been the one to break his fall. See Dempsey, p. 161.
 41. See Fridman and Sheinin, p. 56.
 42. See Robert Conway, *The Powerful Hand of George Bellows: Drawings from the Boston Public Library* (Washington: Trust for Museum Exhibitions, 2007), pp. 100–01.
 43. The ownership of this arm is confused by the shading that results from Dempsey's fall; it could be the arm of the man to Dempsey's immediate left or the shocked man situated directly underneath him. However, in a lithograph version of the scene (see George Bellows, *Dempsey and Firpo, 1923–1924*, lithograph: 181/8 x 223/8 inches, sheet: 223/4 x 26 inches, Museum of Modern Art) made at the same time as the oil, the arm is much more clearly that of the man immediately to the left of Dempsey's fall. Although this man's face is also anonymous, such anonymity is achieved by its being turned away from the viewer so that we can only see the back of the head. In the oil, Bellows deliberately

- accentuates the facelessness by having it lost in the glare of the ring lights. During the Second World War, the United States Armed Forces commissioned a photographic facsimile of this lithograph to be distributed to soldiers (see ‘American Treasures of the Library of Congress: “Dempsey and Firpo”’, <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri025.html>> [accessed 13 May 2010]). Whether this was designed to celebrate Dempsey’s heroism or to celebrate a draft dodger knocked from the ring is unclear.
44. In contrast, Firpo’s loss only added to his celebrity in Argentina. Before the fight his name had been loaned to a variety of goods including Firpo Form-Fitting Shoes and Firpo Fedoras. On the morning after the fight he signed an agreement to sponsor a customised sports car imported into Argentina called the Firpo Stutz Bearcat (see Fridman and Sheinin, p. 55). After the fight his name was added to schools, streets, and soccer teams. He is buried in the Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires, along with several Argentine presidents and Eva Peron. See ‘Still a Knockout: Dempsey–Firpo a Short Fight, But Its Gone the Distance’, Vic Ziegel, *New York Daily News*, 14 September 2003, <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/sports/2003/09/14/2003-09-14_still_a_knockout_dempsey-fir.html> [accessed 13 May 2010].
 45. In 1932 such was the body of work that a full show devoted to boxing and wrestling art was staged at the Knoedler Gallery. See Edward Alden Jewell, ‘Art In Review: Boxing and Wrestling as Subjects for the Artists — Bouts, Rounds and Referees’, *New York Times*, 8 April 1932, section Art-Radio-Books, p. 19. In 1931 the Whitney’s collection included other pieces of art related to boxing including Mahroni Young’s undated bronze entitled *Boxer*.
 46. The strangeness of *Dempsey and Firpo* is perhaps most clear in the contrast with *Introducing Georges Carpentier*. In both cases Bellows was on assignment as a contracted newspaper journalist and in both cases Bellows depicted himself in the audience, as a participant in the drama. Stylistically, however, the paintings are radically different.
 47. Rebecca Zurier describes how Bellows typically used the cartoonist’s technique of distortion and reduction of detail to convey horror and violence. See *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 234–38.
 48. Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), pp. 36–37.
 49. The referee’s very visible presence in Bellows’s painting serves to remind us of the importance of his moral authority. ‘The referee is our intermediary in the fight’, says Joyce Carol Oates. ‘He is our moral conscience extracted from us as spectators.’ See *On Boxing* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 47.
 50. Harold J. McWhinnie, ‘A Review of the Use of Symmetry, the Golden Section and Dynamic Symmetry in Contemporary Art’, *Leonardo*, 19, 241–45 (p. 242).
 51. The idea that Bellows’s adoption of theory resulted from the influence of the Armory Show is widely accepted but has been subject to challenge in recent years. Robert Hughes argues that ‘after 1914’, Bellows’s art changed, as a result of ‘his first sight of modern European painting en masse, at the 1913 Armory Show’. See *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (London: The Harvill Press, 1997), p. 335. Conway, however, points to some recent academic work, especially that of Michael Quick, which has argued that Bellows used similar systems prior to the Armory Show. It does however seem clear that Bellows placed a good deal of emphasis on Hambidge late in his career. Conway quotes Bellows in a 1920 interview with *The American Architect* saying ‘I believe [Hambidge’s theory] to be as profound as the law of the lever or the law of gravitation’. See Conway, pp. 27–36.
 52. For Lewis, the backside is clearly gendered as feminine, further disrupting Woolf’s gendered opposition of modernism and realism.
 53. Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 55–81 (p. 56).
 54. John Frow, *Genre* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2006), p. 26.
 55. Frow, p. 26.
 56. Derrida, p. 81.
 57. More, p. 10.

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58. Hankins documents that the position at the Museum of Modern Art was in practice not so clear. Originally, Barr had wanted the museum to open with an American exhibition focused on artists such as Eakins. Barr wanted to appeal to both the public and the New York art community. He was overruled, however, by Rockefeller, Bliss, and Sullivan, who favoured the post-impressionists (Hankins, pp. 96–97). Sybil Kantor, in her biography of Barr, says: ‘The choice of a European show for the grand opening was a portent of future controversies. Barr was the target of a never-ending harangue by the museum-going public and the art world, accusing him of leaning toward the European avant-garde, and he was constantly defending his choices.’ See *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 213–14.
 59. ‘American Art and the Museum’, *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 8 November 1940, 3–26 (p. 3).
 60. Maxwell L. Anderson, ‘Notes on the Mission of the Museum of American Art’, *American Art*, 13 (1999), 84–86 (p. 85).
 61. I am grateful to James Emmott for his interesting suggestion that there is also an analogy to be drawn between the stretched rope of the ring as a masculine symbol and the more feminine velvet rope that is often seen in galleries in front of paintings. Although the surviving photographs (see Hankins pp. 292, p. 301) show that no ropes were present at the Whitney, the issue of the space of the spectator and that of the canvas was an important issue in New York galleries following Stieglitz’s radical practices at 291. Both analyses of the ropes suggest that Whitney and Force were ultimately interested in the relationship between the spectacle and contest of boxing and that of the New York art scene.
 62. Berman records a speech by the art critic Christopher Morley, ‘bowled over by *Dempsey and Firpo*’, at the museum’s inauguration in which this analogy is drawn. Morley is recorded as having said: ‘This is not just a museum; it is a ring; not a ring-around-the-rosy but the squared circle of combative and contemporary talents’. It is interesting however that Morley’s comments also point to combat beyond the ring itself, between the American artists in the museum and those beyond it. In this context the painting is a symbol of visceral opposition. See Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, p. 311.
 63. Bellows did, however, exhibit other work at Gertrude Whitney’s ‘Studio building on Eighth Street’ between 1904 and 1910, and would therefore surely have been considered a member of the Club. See Force, p. 7.
 64. Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, p. 311.
 65. Avis Berman, ‘The Force Behind the Whitney’, *American Heritage Magazine*, <http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1989/6/1989_6_102.shtml> [accessed 13 May 2010] (para. 41 of 46).
 66. Wolff, p. 486.
 67. More, p. 11. Flora Miller Biddle, Gertrude Whitney’s granddaughter, president of the Whitney from 1977 to 1995, and currently the Whitney’s Honorary Chairman, later described the ‘root and character’ of the Whitney as being ‘to show and to buy work by living artists’. See *The Whitney Women and the Museum They Made* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), p. 69.
 68. Hughes says that Bellows’s ‘1924 painting of Jack Dempsey knocking Luis Firpo out of the ring [is] a marionette’s ballet compared to *Stag at Sharkeys* (p. 335). Note that Hughes incorrectly reads the painting’s narrative. However, Conway supports Hughes when he argues that ‘after his [Bellows’s] encounter with Hambidge in 1917, he occasionally lost [a perfect balance of planning and spontaneity]’ (p. 35). Zurier makes no mention of *Dempsey and Firpo* in her analysis of Bellows’s boxing pictures (pp. 238–45).
 69. The painting had been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of an exhibition to mark Bellows’s death on 8 January 1925. The exhibition ran from 12 October to 22 November 1925. See H. B. Wehle, ‘The George Bellows Exhibition’, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 20 October 1925, 233–37 (p. 236).
 70. Berman, ‘The Force Behind the Whitney’, (para. 41 of 46). Bellows’s widow had initially asked for \$25,000. But the \$18,750 eventually paid for the canvas would not be exceeded as a purchase price by the Whitney until 1960. To put the acquisition in context, O’Keeffe’s *Skunk Cabbage* was purchased for only \$450. More important O’Keeffe canvases such as *The Mountain, New Mexico* (1931) and *The White Flower* (1929) were purchased by Whitney

- and Force at prices between \$2,500 and \$3,500. The Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning*, was also priced at \$2,500. See Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, p. 288, pp. 303–04.
71. This theory of modernism is taken from Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
 72. Quoted in *New York Times*, 18 November 1931.
 73. Force, pp. 7–8.
 74. For a detailed analysis of Hoover's crucial role in the passing of the Smoot-Hawley Act see Kumiko Koyama, 'The Passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act: Why Did the President Sign the Bill?', *Journal of Policy History*, 21 (2009), pp. 163–86. For a detailed economic assessment of this period, see Amity Shales, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

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