

frieze

Germany is Your America Broadway 1602

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‘Germany was our America – our dream frontier, road movie, epic, historic landscape, in which we would find ourselves, our generation and our moral consequences finally and clearly reflected. That was the dream, anyway.’ Michael Bracewell wrote these lines in the first of his 2011 series of essays for BBC Radio 3. Galvanized by the sojourns of David Bowie and other musicians in Berlin in the 1970s, as well as art, movies and the Weimar-era ‘literary tourism’ of writers such as Christopher Isherwood, W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, Bracewell and others of his generation who were enamoured of punk had vividly imagined a nation at once Gothic and Modernist – a ‘Dream Germany’.

In fact, the essays, and the group show ‘Germany is Your America’, which Bracewell co-curated with Anke Kempkes, and which included the work of 14 artists, were inspired by a dream he had in which Brian Eno appeared like an oracle and declared, ‘Germany is your America’. Bracewell had not yet visited Germany when Eno paid his visit, but he subsequently began to explore cultural exchange between the US and Germany, and ‘a modern cosmology of German Romanticism’ as it has surfaced in the work of those who have travelled to Germany or have been exiled from it. Quotes from the first essay appeared on the walls in the exhibition; one mentioning the ‘coolly dazzling radiance’ of the spectral Eno accompanied a pastel drawing of a luminous blue cloud by Nick Mauss, who also designed the text arrangement.

Joseph Beuys’s 1974 performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* was a touchstone, as well as the works George Grosz made stateside. Grosz’s watercolour *The Nun / Gas Station, New York* (1933), depicting a mysterious figure in the glow of nighttime lights, is one of the romantic works he made after leaving Germany, while *Stickmen Meeting Members of the Bourgeois* (1946), with intimations of nuclear devastation, reflects his more familiar mordant wit. Xanti Schawinsky’s *Steptänzer versus Stepmachine* (1924), a dynamic image of a dancer and a dancing mechanomorph from his Bauhaus years, contrasted with *Untitled (Armor Heads)* (1944), a moody charcoal drawing of helmets from suits of armour, which he made after settling in the US.

Other works engaged in a subtle dialogue with each other, as well as a poetic kind of time travel. Ged Quinn’s print *I Like America and America Likes Me* (2007), based on an 18th-century painting of a spaniel by George Stubbs, was on view in the same room as a film of the Beuys performance. A black US-shaped blot in the dog’s fur suggests an opaque, menacing portent; speckled with foxing marks, its title engraved in copperplate script, the print exudes an ersatz authenticity, as if the US had been a dark lure from the days

of its founding. Dexter Dalwood’s painting *Mapplethorpe’s First Loft – Collage* (1999), which imagines peering into Robert Mapplethorpe’s loft – with a black floor and ceiling, through the chicken wire that the photographer used to make his bedroom cage-like – evokes a similarly menacing glamour, as does the starker *Mapplethorpe’s First Loft* (1999).



Devin Leonardi *Civil History*, 2011, oil on canvas

If ‘Germany is Your America’ was more like a prose poem than an intellectual exercise, as Bracewell has suggested, Devin Leonardi’s *Civil History* (2011) was an especially unsettling passage. Alluding to the photographic nudes shot by Thomas Eakins’s circle, a blindfolded model standing in the glare of artificial light evokes the birth of Modernism in the US, and the moment when photography struck a blow to painting and European academicism.

In this context, Beuys’s performance seemed especially haunted. On a wall opposite the projection was Meredyth Sparks’s diptych *Untitled (Brian Eno)* (2011), a glitter-embellished digital scan in which three identical images of Eno, looking away from the camera and toward spectral geometric shapes evoking Modernist abstraction, seem at once to move toward and recede from the viewer, like the other ‘phantasms of a heightened cultural identity’ that surfaced throughout the show.

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