



# America and Europe, quo vadis?



Jean-Michel Basquiat:  
*Cassius Clay*, 1982  
Acrylic on canvas  
106 × 104 cm  
Bischofberger Collection  
Zürich-Männedorf

When we ask ourselves, what comes after linear historiography, after our internalized notions of progress, after decades of the dominant hegemonic power of the USA, we are at a loss for a moment. For these questions do not only concern art, they also apply to morality, to our view of the world and to some expectations we have of life. We know where we come from. Do we also know where we are going in 2021? **After 9/11, America may have entered the age of 1/6. Thousands of people stormed the Capitol, some with Confederate flags from the time before the Civil War, wearing buffalo skins or brandishing spears, but also with guns and even bombs in reserve.** For hours before the violent raid, they stood in front of the barriers as representatives of a special idea of democracy, reassuring each other and chanting that they had come because of Donald Trump. After forcibly entering the Capitol, many of them activated their cell phone cameras to take pictures of themselves with their insignia, painted faces, and proudly raised arms in the rooms of the world's largest parliament. **The posed photos were intended to show the Capitol, a building designed in neoclassical style with a dome like the Roman Pantheon, as having been conquered.** All this was evidently prepared for in advance, with an expectation of victory. In a gesture reminiscent of a US military man who signaled his occupation of Saddam Hussein's desk by planting his boot on it, one of the intruders placed his foot on the desk of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, as a sign of triumph. The photos, as art historian Horst Bredekamp explained on *Deutschlandfunk*, reveal the plan underlying the seeming chaos. Those bearded, bellicose men were out to take vengeful possession of the Capitol with their pictures. The quality was poor, but we live in a digitalized world. Sometimes visually powerful scenes like the collapse of the *World Trade Center* are published so often that one never forgets them. On social media, what counts is the snapshot taken at the time of the deed; the aesthetic virtues of the work itself no longer matter. Painting on canvas is good, but it needs to be distributed through glossy magazines, websites, and the auction houses' color pages. Color, too, as in the work of Katharina Grosse, manifests itself optimally through photos and videos that show large surfaces and entire buildings after they have been sprayed. **Reality has moved into the monitors; that is where it currently resides.** The "Pictures Generation," artists like Robert Longo, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman, who grew up in front of their parents' television sets in the 1960s, heralded this trend.

History has thus shrunk to an image. The image, more than the museum, book, or film, encapsulates meaning for us. The image wraps up and replaces complexity. One consequence of this loss of linearity is not only what Andy Warhol prophesied, that people now become famous for fifteen minutes, instead of forever. Diachrony is becoming a kind of constant synchrony. The second consequence is the crisis of traditional storehouses of encyclopedic memory, to which the Capitol may one day belong. Old America with its large, *Acropolis*-like museums, which in numerous cities from New York to Kansas City store thousands of years of art history thousands of miles from the places where the art was produced, is now being put to a crucial test by the digital age. We Europeans are very nearly in the same predicament. Roughly 150 years ago, the New York *Metropolitan Museum of Art* was founded with the conviction that “the diffusion of a knowledge of art in its higher forms of beauty would tend directly to humanize, to educate and refine a practical and laborious people.” But education, too, has become digitalized. At the highest level, it is only obtainable in the US at exorbitant expense. Otherwise, it is dispensed in bits and pieces. In some cases, the whole project is bluntly rejected as the hobbyhorse of dead white men, prominent liberal opponents of slavery and social misery who, after the Civil War, made a strong plea for universal education and believed in art as a means for uplifting the masses. The American art museum, as Calvin Tomkins wrote about the New York *Metropolitan* in 1989, was originally conceived as a “department of knowledge.” It was intended to address the millions of ordinary people, students and workers, in full view of the fact that almost half of them were immigrants from various countries, that there were tens of thousands of homeless children at the time, and that the reported number of brothels in Manhattan in 1866 was 621. Diversity, which is in positive demand today, presented itself in New York a hundred and fifty years ago as an explosive, seemingly insoluble problem, with a population “too hopelessly split up into races and factions to govern it.” This led one of the city’s notorious and cynically self-serving entrepreneurs, William Marcy Tweed, to aspire to the precise opposite. What he recommended, in place of art and the building of museums, was “bribery of patronage and corruption.” **In the digital age no less than in previous periods, we need positive, reconciling forces. Neither in the USA nor in Europe should we write off high art and publicly accessible museums as long as serious conflicts exist.** Given the enormous profusion of digital images, high art cannot by itself produce a just and moral social balance. But the playful relief and creative education that art ideally provides can be optimally conveyed in good schools and museums. For this we need time.

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