Rethinking America Refiguring the Humanities

Pitt's scholars of culture and thought engage the past, the present, and the power structure—all in an effort to define who we are.

In her poem "Walt, I Salute You!" Lynn Emanuel speaks to poet Walt Whitman from, she says, "the Continent of the Amnesias." Those last five words reflect what many say is *the* crisis in American humanities.

America is not a land prone to deep reflection on the cornerstones of civilization, Emanuel's words tell us. This is a New World that prides itself on having made a break from the Old. In such a place, how do you teach and research the humanities, which, by their very nature, follow the roots of civilization into the depths of history?

A Pitt English professor and director of the Pittsburgh Contemporary Writers Series, Emanuel eloquently answers this question in *Then, Suddenly* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), her third book of poems; it wittily sheds light on literary greats like Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein and still has space left over for "Homage to Sharon Stone." It does not gently invite the reader into the poet's emotional crannies. Instead, it makes the reader part of a landscape of American personalities.

"Reader, I accuse you!" Emanuel says, in an interview. "You are implicated in this book!...I wanted to be troublesome."

Not all faculty members in the University of Pittsburgh's humanities departments would describe their goal as being troublesome. But in the English, film studies, history of art and architecture, theater, music, and world languages and literatures departments, there is a universal determination to engage. Engage the student. Engage the material. Engage the past, the present, and the power structure.

Understanding Our Common Culture

The humanities at Pitt constitute one of the 10 most successfully articulated and productive sets of programs in cultural studies in the country, according to Pitt Department of English Chair David Bartholomae. So what is cultural studies?

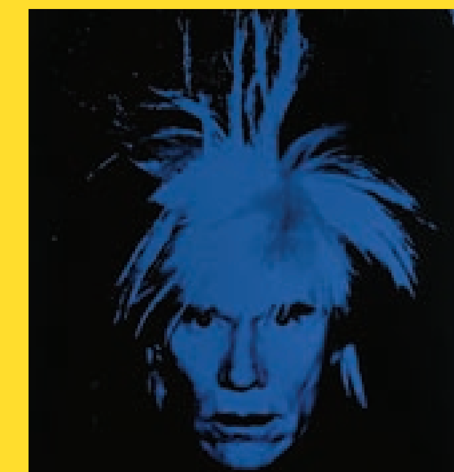
As would be expected, it includes working with major figures and with the great achievements of world artistic production—literature, painting, and music. But the same careful attention also is given to the materials of contemporary culture—not just to contemporary literature, music, and studio art, but to movies, television, songs, images, speeches, performances, public documents—the materials through which the modern world sees, hears, and understands the present moment.

"Like 'high culture,' " says Bartholomae, "our common culture comprises powerful and determined projects—producing ways of thinking about, remembering, understanding, and responding to the events of 9/11, for example. A surprising number of scholars on campus are also in conversation with a broad public, including those who have the power to shape taste, markets, and public policy."

Outreach programs cater to a variety of publics, including not only those who attend readings, exhibitions, and screenings, but also educators and local students, working artists, museum curators, activists, politicians, members of the medical community, and representatives of business and industry.

The departments of the humanities are made up of critics and scholars as well as working artists—novelists and poets, painters and video artists, composers and performing musicians.

"We are pleased to represent the work of the scholars and critics," says Bartholomae, noting that scholarship and criticism go hand in hand. "The scholars work to better understand the historical conditions of the production and reception of text, image, and composition in sound. And the critics are making judgments of value. Is the work good? Whom does it serve?



Self-Portrait, 1986. Founding Collection, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh.
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Cultural studies includes in-depth consideration of the materials through which the world sees, hears, and understands the present moment—including, for example, the works of artist Andy Warhol.

"We also have a distinguished and distinctive group of faculty working on the Americas—not just the United States, but below and above U.S. borders as well," says Bartholomae. "They are interested in how America has functioned as a way of thinking about the region in relation to the globe, and they are interested in how literature, film, music, and the visual arts have helped to serve or frustrate lines of thought about the nation."

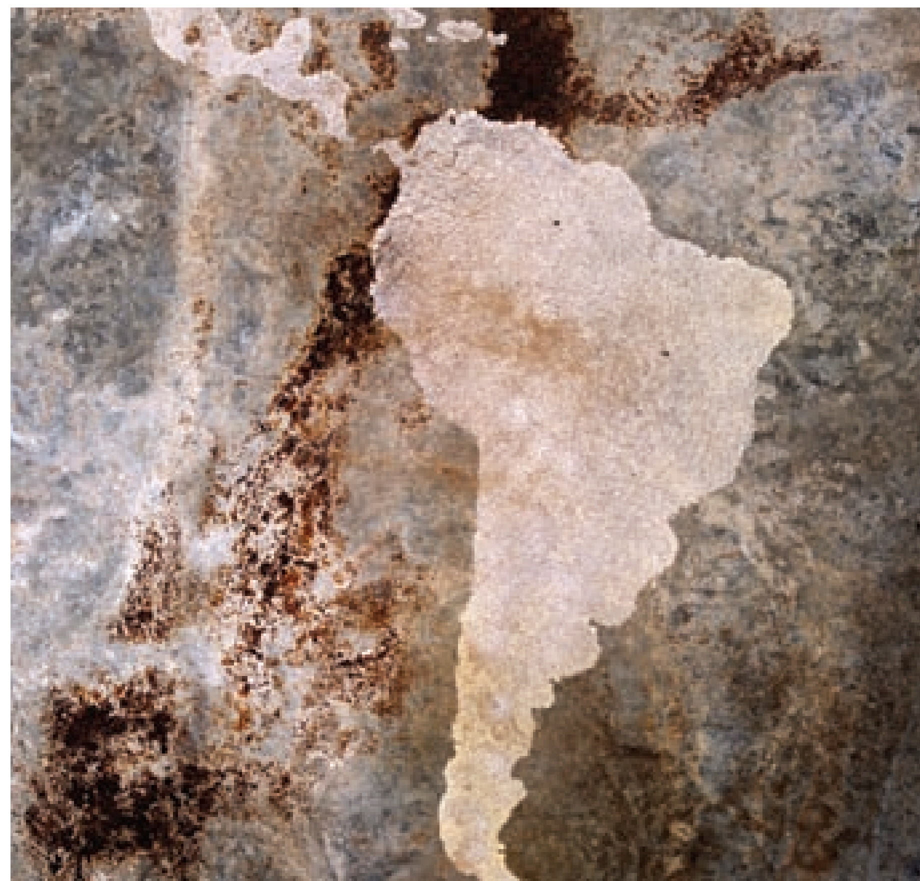
As scholars work to understand America as a metaphor for aspiration or right, says Bartholomae, their goal is to stir debate and understanding—and, perhaps, to make possible alternative ways of thinking about and figuring America. And in the process, they're quite possibly refiguring the future and the relevance of the humanities, too.

Challenging Nationhood and the Humanities

Education in the humanities was a way of preparing citizens to function as part of a nation at a time when a common language and body of literature were the anchors of a nation's culture, says John Beverley, chair of Pitt's Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures. That worked until globalization and television came along to challenge nationhood and literature.

"Why does anybody want to study the history of Spain or Germany if it's not connected with anything?" Beverley asks. "That's been the crisis in the humanities."

Beverley has addressed that crisis in a number of ways. First, he has turned the question of the humanities' relevance on its head. What, he asks, aren't the humanities connected to? Every field—science, public policy, finance—runs into ethical and cultural questions that are best answered using the accumulated wisdom of the ages contained in the humanities.



Anticipating the increasing links between North and South America and immigration patterns that have brought to 40 million the number of Hispanics in the United States, John Beverley and his colleagues have shifted the focus of Pitt's Department of Hispanic Languages and Literatures from Spain to Latin America and have also developed conferences and projects that have built bridges with Pitt's cultural studies and global and Latin American studies programs and English department.

"There's no question on the utilitarian side that the humanities don't have something to say about," Beverley says.

Second, anticipating the increasing links between North and South America and the influx of immigrants that has brought to 40 million the number of Hispanics in the United States, Beverley and his colleagues shifted the focus of his department from Spain to Latin America. They built bridges between the department and Pitt's cultural studies and global and Latin American studies programs and English department. And they inaugurated a series of international conferences and related books that Beverley says have come to "define the state of the art in the field of Latin American cultural studies."

A 2004 conference provided a beyond-the-textbook example of Beverley's approach to the humanities. Held at the University of Pittsburgh and titled Race, Coloniality, and Social Transformation in Latin America and the Caribbean, the conference involved the presentation of papers by scholars from both continents. But it went much further, closing with a panel discussion that included a message from Felipe Quispe, "El Malku," a leader of Movimento Indigena Pachacuti, one of the social movements involved in the overthrow of the Bolivian government in October 2003.

Scholarly luminaries and grassroots activists sat at the same table, discussing ethnic politics and social transformation.

"Being in contact with contemporary social forces energizes and enlivens the humanities," Beverley says.

The issues Beverley wrestles with don't stop at the Bolivian border, or even at the Rio Grande. The culture and population of the United States are increasingly multiethnic, he notes, and those ethnicities are no longer necessarily blending together in the venerable melting pot. They are more like elements in a salad, he argues, existing side by side and influencing each other's tastes while not losing their distinct identities.

Many Latin American countries have long been cultural salads, and Canada is a two-course meal, but the development of a similar model in the United States could represent a continental shift in the nature of this country.

"If the old model was E Pluribus Unum—let the many be one—the new model is, let the one nation permit many," Beverley says.

Also shattering our understanding of boundaries is Associate Professor of Italian Dennis Looney. In 2002, when Looney chaired the Department of French and Italian Languages and Literatures, that department hosted a conference called ConcateNations that directed the attention of scholars from the United States and Europe to the political and cultural links within the Continent and between it and its neighbors. If globalization is blurring boundaries, the humanities can seek to encourage solidarity and diversity rather than conflict and chaos.

Popular Culture: Stage, Screen, Song, and Society

A leader in the study of film in relation to literature and cultural history, Pitt's Film Studies Program offers, in any given year, films and courses from England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, India, Russia, Mexico, Argentina, China, Korea, and Japan.

Lucy Fischer notes that American popular cinema—and consequently, American commerce, art, and sexuality—were powerfully influenced in the 1920s and 1930s by European avant-garde style.

Few universities sponsor programs of such reach and depth.

"Today, we talk about the global and the transnational," says Lucy Fischer, professor of English and film studies at Pitt and director of the program. "But it was forever thus, on some level."

Fischer's scholarship often has emphasized the links between European avant-garde art and American popular culture. Her 2003 book *Designing Women: Cinema, Art Deco & the Female Form* (Columbia University Press) takes that much further. In *Designing Women*, Fischer makes the case that the most quintessentially American art form—popular cinema—was powerfully influenced during its Golden Age by European avant-garde style and that the process changed the nature of American commerce, art, and sexuality.

If that sounds "academic," turn on your favorite movie channel. See a product placement or a film obviously intended to move a line of merchandise? That's rooted in the 1930s, when companies like Cinema Fashions and Studio Styles quickly placed in department stores like Macy's knock-off versions of whatever Adrian design Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford were wearing in MGM movies. That trend inaugurated what Fischer calls "the movie screen as department store window."

See a film laden with special effects and a plot that's a matrix of illusions? In Garbo's 1929 MGM movie *The Kiss*, techniques like the dissolution of images were used to show the fluidity of reality and lead the audience down a slippery slope of visual lies, Fischer writes. In *The Kiss*, the lies ultimately prevailed.

In gangland epics or film noir, we cheer for the gangster, Fischer says, because the "need to rise to the top and the disparities in American society almost make us admire the person who has risen to the top illegally."

The femme fatale character, meanwhile, has roots in 19th-century art, Fischer tells us, but was popularized in the 1920s and '30s, when actresses like Garbo personified the concept of the sexually liberated woman to a nation that was still getting used to women's suffrage. In fact, the liberated

woman is an idea the nation is still struggling with, Fischer argues. To hammer home that point, *Designing Women* includes a picture of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft standing in front of the busty Art Deco statue called Spirit of Justice, which, for modesty's sake, his department ordered to be obscured with curtains.

This isn't the first time the cultural pendulum has swung toward modesty, Fischer notes; film vamps who won the day in the '20s were often bested by maternal heroines in the '30s, she writes. The American movie screen has always been the scene of tussles between social liberalism and conservatism, and between artistic and commercial sensibilities, Fischer says, and that may be one of its strengths.

"Film has been this really interesting site for doing both the avant-garde and the popular, all at once," she says, adding that the screenscape is bound to become even more varied with the drop in production costs made possible by digital filmmaking and with new distribution channels like pay-per-view.

The University of Pittsburgh's Center for American Music holds the original manuscript of Stephen Foster's "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair" (1854) and has collected every published edition of the song. Center Director Deane Root has worked for the past eight years to channel the chronicling power of American music into today's classrooms, where song can be used to help teach both history and current events.

Of course, the jousting of ideas before mass audiences doesn't just take place on screen. Professor of Theatre Arts Bruce McConachie, interim chair of Pitt's Department of Theatre Arts, is former president of the American Society for Theatre Research and a noted scholar on the history of audiences and performances. Pitt Center for American Music Director Deane Root, professor of music and chair of Pitt's Department of Music, has worked for the past eight years to channel the chronicling power of American music into today's classrooms. Root's *Voices Across Time* package includes CDs and lesson guides for English and social studies classes that use 155 American songs from the Colonial era to the rap era to help teach history and current events.

Popular art's power to reflect the tumult of history isn't a uniquely American phenomenon. Nancy Condee, director of Pitt's graduate program for Cultural Studies, has recently had a three-year Ford Foundation grant to conduct yearly research seminars on contemporary Russian cinema. Pitt conducts an annual Russian film festival on campus, coordinated by Vladimir Padunov, associate professor of Slavic languages and associate director of the Film Studies program, and owns what is believed to be the largest collection of Soviet cinema outside of Russia.

Condee is completing a book on contemporary Russian cinema. Her research focuses on the late-Soviet and post-Soviet era, during which the tensions of empire and the strain of constant conflict threw a world power into turmoil and its once-burgeoning film industry into collapse—a cautionary tale that she notes deserves attention.

Criticism and the New Realities

Distinguished Professor of English and Film Colin MacCabe has had the opportunity to view American world dominance through the eyes of one of the great anti-Americans—acclaimed French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. The two met in the late 1970s, when MacCabe was a film producer and Godard was returning to cinema after a decade of immersion in anti-American political activism spurred by the Vietnam War. They worked together on a film, and MacCabe wrote a short book about Godard. Now MacCabe is the author of the just-released full-length book *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004).

MacCabe isn't one to let Washington's follies go without remark, but he argues that for Godard and many other European thinkers, knee-jerk anti-Americanism is a weakness.

"At the end of [World War II], there was a tremendous pro-Americanism that took place generationally" in Europe, says MacCabe, who grew up in London. "There was a simple identification with America—an identification with blue jeans, Coca-Cola, and democracy."

Then came the Vietnam War, American cultural dominance, and, most recently, the invasion of Iraq.

"The last two years have seen an incredible growth in anti-Americanism throughout the world," MacCabe says. If disagreement with American policy morphs into disdain for the American people as a whole, we'll all be the losers, according to MacCabe. "The solutions to the problems that American empire presents at the moment will be found in the American public," he says. "And if they aren't found there, they won't be found anywhere."

As editor of *Critical Quarterly* (CQ), MacCabe invites humanities scholars from around the globe to turn their attention to meaty political and cultural topics. *CQ*'s Spring/Summer 2003 issue was largely composed of papers from a 2002 conference MacCabe chaired called Innocence, Terror, Public Policy: The September 11th Anniversary. The conference and resulting issue, coedited with Condee, brought together scholars from America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Arab world. Among MacCabe's hopes is that scholarship like that represented in *CQ* will have a greater influence on U.S. policy.

Just one office away, English Professor Paul Bové edits *boundary 2*, a 31-year-old critical journal that started as an effort by European and American scholars to engage in what he calls "the new political and intellectual realities that were coming into existence." Back then, those realities included antiwar activism, civil rights struggles, and feminism, says Bové.

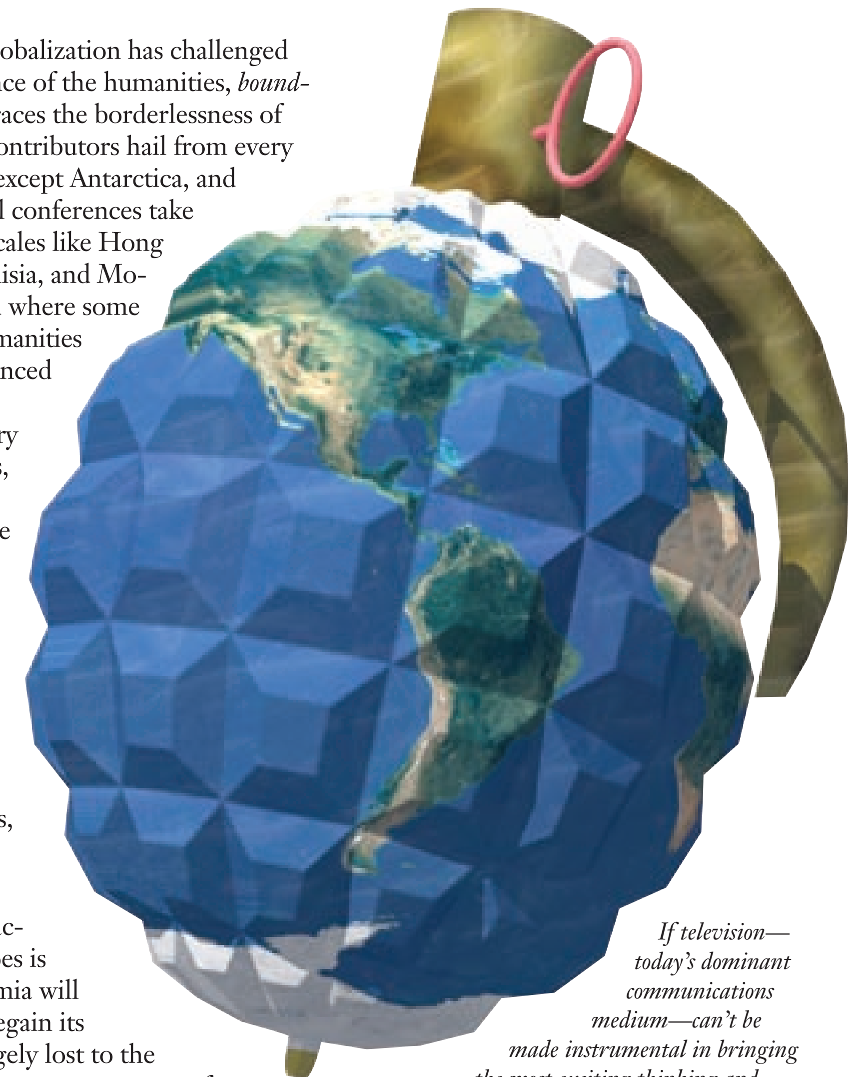
The realities have certainly changed, and *boundary 2* is watching them with a critical eye. Bové is in the process of assembling an upcoming issue of *boundary 2* that focuses on Leo Strauss, the late University of Chicago professor credited with founding the neoconservative political movement. Strauss' controversial theories on the weakness of "liberal democracy" include the belief that governments should tell "noble lies" to their people in an effort to rouse them to great causes, even preemptive wars, Bové notes. Disciples of Strauss now occupy numerous top positions in American government, and scholars are uniquely positioned to look at the growing impact of Strauss' theories.

"What happens in the world when you try to implement his thinking?" Bové asks. "People like us, who are trained to read carefully and who have time to study ... can be doing writing that expresses reality and carrying out the job of teaching and professing in a way that reflects reality."

Though globalization has challenged the relevance of the humanities, *boundary 2* embraces the borderlessness of ideas. Its contributors hail from every continent except Antarctica, and its editorial conferences take place in locales like Hong Kong, Tunisia, and Morocco. And where some say the humanities have ensconced themselves behind ivory tower walls, *boundary 2* aims to ride out and meet history head-on. Bové's credo: "Know the history, do the analysis, engage the present."

One of MacCabe's hopes is that academia will someday regain its place—largely lost to the think tanks—as a generator of policy ideas. He's not waiting around, though, for official Washington to come calling. Instead, he's seeking to bring high-level thought to a broader audience. When he's not teaching at Pitt, he's often in England, where he chairs an internationally renowned graduate program in the humanities, called the London Consortium.

MacCabe cofounded the consortium in 1995 in response to "a deeply felt dissatisfaction with the forms of academic communication," he says. "The majority of academic conferences now tend to be very dull affairs."



If television—today's dominant communications medium—can't be made instrumental in bringing the most exciting thinking and reflection on art and society to larger numbers of people, "then literally...the planet is in peril," notes Colin MacCabe.

London Consortium students write and present academic papers and hold conferences, to be sure. But they also put on film festivals and, if MacCabe has his way, will one day dive into the ultimate democratic medium: television.

"There really must be ways of making the most exciting thinking and reflection on art and society available to larger numbers of people," particularly via TV, MacCabe says. If the dominant medium can't become an educational vehicle, he adds, "then literally, without being melodramatic, the planet is in peril."

Art and Architecture: Foundations of the Iconomy

Terry Smith didn't think the planet was in peril when he disembarked from a flight Sept. 10, 2001.

"I sensed that the United States had reached a certain level of coherence," he says, and that the Americanization of global culture would continue to be a relatively stable process. "I was stuck in the same illusory world picture that many other people were."

Smith, traveling from his native Australia to Los Angeles, came to the United States for two reasons: to serve a one-year term as a Getty Scholar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles and, subsequently, to take up his current position at Pitt as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture.

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>
> — Terry Smith

Smith often has written about what he dubs the iconomy—the trade in images that underlies the interactions of world cultures. In Australia, he'd written about the dominant icons of White and Black culture: the Sydney Opera House and the Uluru stone monolith, respectively. The first is a temple of high culture and architectural splendor, while the second is a natural formation said to represent the petrified bodies of Aboriginal soldiers. Those icons symbolize very different cultures, but they could be reconciled without either culture being subsumed or homogenized, he hoped, through the careful cultivation of iconomic exchange.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Washington Monument are powerful architectural presences in Washington, D.C. Architecture is one way in which civilizations respond to both positive and negative world events.

"Homogeneity is absolutely deadly," he says. "On the other hand, totally rampant, self-interested anarchism is ridiculous. There's no progress out of that." Progress, he says, comes from seeking understanding.

The day after Smith's arrival in the United States, one icon—the concept of the religious martyr—crashed into two others: the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"Bin Laden said it was an attack on the icons of American power," Smith notes. "What September 11 tells us is that the iconomy has an enormous negative energy, a destructive energy." Americanization may be the dominant current, but it has produced a countercurrent, he says. "There are massive forces in the world that are working against American culture and American-style democracy."

Smith's upcoming book, *Architecture of Aftermath*, explores the ways in which buildings and other public spaces address trauma. Architecture is on one level an artistic reflection of power, he says, in that people of power and wealth use it "to communicate a certain picture of themselves and the world as they see it."

When that power and worldview are challenged, architecture can enter a period of turmoil. That's what's happening now. "Very tall buildings around the world that are being built [now include] very elaborate security structures," notes Smith. That security consciousness has intersected uncomfortably with a trend toward building "ecological paradises" within office buildings, he adds. What we may get are incongruities—an indoor forest in a bunker-like office compound, for instance. "We're in a state of confusion and hybridity," he says, "and engaged in an effort to reach totally incompatible goals."

Architecture's reaction to turmoil can be beautiful, Smith says. An example is the striking zinc/titanium Jewish Museum Berlin, which commemorates centuries of German Jewish history, including the Holocaust. Smith says it's heartening that architect Daniel Libeskind, who designed the museum, also has been chosen as the architect for the World Trade Center site. Libeskind has a track record of using architecture to promote reconciliation, says Smith—and reconciliation is something that has so far eluded America and its antagonists in the post-September 11 world.

If Libeskind's handling of Ground Zero can help America process trauma, it won't be the first time architecture has sought to serve that role. As chronicled in Kirk Savage's *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 1997), the histories of slavery and the Civil War were documented in sculptures and monuments that are still among the dominant images in the nation's parks and public places. Savage, an associate professor in Pitt's Department of the History of Art and Architecture, is now studying the landscape of deindustrialization and ecological initiatives in contemporary art and has participated in efforts to turn Pittsburgh's Nine-Mile Run slag dump into a residential development called Somerset at Frick Park.

Post-Civil War architecture, of course, reflected introspection. The post-September 11 America is extroverted in ways some find alarming, including an aggressive foreign policy.

"It was an in-turning country that suddenly started turning outward in ways it hadn't done in a long time," says Smith. "This country is going through a massive reinvention of itself." That will no doubt play out in architecture, art, and the broader iconomy in ways we can only begin to fathom, he says. "Imagery," he cautions, "always tends to evoke its other and opposite life."

Literature That Engages Across Time

Lynn Emanuel doesn't write only to amnesiacs. Poetry scholars with good memories will recognize that her poem "Walt, I Salute You!" is a reaction to early-20th-century Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's critique of Walt Whitman.

"Whitman has traditionally been considered the great democrat, the great embracer of the suffering, the great describer of the American city," says Emanuel. Pessoa saw sinister aspects of Whitman's verse, including what Emanuel calls "this voracious appetite for inhabiting other peoples' suffering and lives." Empathy and an almost sadistic voyeurism run side by side as countercurrents, as suggested by the following passage from "Walt, I Salute You!"

> You have already been every
> Conestoga headed to California
>
> that broke down in a cul-de-sac of
> cannibalism in the Rockies.
>
> You have been every sprouting
> metropolis rerouted through three
> generations of industrialists.
>
> You, the sweat of their workers' brows!
> You, their hatred of poets!

But as Emanuel was channeling Whitman, she had a nagging sense that she should be doing something else, too.

"I felt that I was not doing my job because I was not writing about the everyday," she says. It is a defining and noble characteristic of American art to find sublimity in the mundane, she says. So one early morning, according to the poem "Homage to Sharon Stone," in bathrobe and curlers, with Marlboro ash dripping on her text, the poet looked out her window. There was actress Sharon Stone, emerging from a nearby house she'd rented for the duration of a shoot, "her head swollen with curlers, her mouth red and narrow as a dancing slipper," being rushed into a limo.

"I was setting for myself an assignment to write something from real life, and at the time real life became very, very peculiar," Emanuel says. The poem unabashedly brings the reader into the writer's interior and exterior worlds. Emanuel names herself as Stone's watcher and then struggles with her own role in poems and life—but she does it in her kitchen rather than in some ethereal space.

Reading the result is like watching a highly literary version of reality TV—perhaps "Who Wants to Live Next Door to a Diva?"

> In the kitchen, I stack pans sleek with
> grease, and on the counter there is a roast
> beef red as a face in tantrum. Amid all
> this bland strangeness is Sharon Stone,
> who, like an engraved invitation, is asking
> me, Won't you, too, play a role?

"There are poets who see poetry as a private preserve of some kind," says Emanuel. "I don't want to do that." But neither does she want to see poetry, or the humanities in general, cater to commerce or play for popular appeal. "I don't think all parts of the humanities do have to do that. ... I think there should be room for people to do very arcane work, and very specialized work."

Emanuel's chosen role as a poet, and Pitt's chosen role as a pioneer in humanities research and education, have a lot in common. They dare to take roads less traveled but don't fear the raceway of modern life. They reflect upon and reconsider this thing called America. And most of all, relentlessly, they engage. ■