The process of forgetting happens in real time and it has a name.

I first understood it as a process when I encountered Howardena Pindell at a moment of transition in my life. Having graduated from the University of Chicago with a bachelor’s degree in art history and a focus on medieval Italy, I was trying to stay engaged in the art world while answering telephones for a major corporate real estate company in downtown Chicago. I attended galleries and art exhibitions; I visited museums and art happenings. And during my tedious hours at the switchboard, I read art history, critical theory, and every available magazine on contemporary art. Two readings stand out from this period of transition: a copy of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* purchased from the remainder table of Kroch’s & Brentano’s, and Howardena Pindell’s seminal essay on racism in the art world, which rocked the self-congratulatory delusions of New York’s museum-and-gallery system.¹ I was amazed by the amount of work that went into what she had done—interviewing every museum and gallery in the five-borough region and asking: How many women had they shown? How many nonwhite artists? She would later incorporate her findings into a traditional art piece, *Art Crow/Jim Crow* (1988), but I consider her original research...
Figure 6
and publication of her discovery inseparable from her work as an artist. Before ever seeing her art or meeting her, it is symbolic, I have always felt, that I encountered her words and her numbers and her facility for statistics first—words and numbers that made me aware of the large gaps in my education, aware of the silences and absences of artists of color and artists who were women in the museums and galleries that I had visited. They were words and numbers of power and inescapability, words and numbers that held us all accountable because even if you were not responsible for those exclusions, they forced you to answer the question “What are you going to do about it then?”

I went to graduate school, and at the University of Michigan I learned to listen for absences, for silence, and for the silenced. I asked questions of myself and of my mentors. I discontinued my studies of medieval Italy in favor of art of the British North American colonies and art of the United States; and I developed specialties in African American art, landscape representation, the visual and material culture of the first British Empire, histories of science and medicine, and women as patrons and collectors. Listening for absences, for silence, and for the silenced is difficult, however. Pindell’s study reminds us that forgetting is an active process that happens in real time and is structurally produced. Robert N. Proctor, who teaches the history of science at Stanford, informs us that “forgetting” is one of the many surrogates of “ignorance”—the study of which he and the linguist Iain Boal termed agnotology. They refined the term to suggest the “historicity and artifactuality of non-knowing and the non-known—and the potential fruitfulness of studying such things.” Ignorance can be made or unmade, Proctor argues, but we must question our assumptions about it as “something in need of correction, a kind of natural absence or void where knowledge has not yet spread.” Far from existing uniformly as a corrective, the beauty of the present volume, with its myriad voices, demands that we question the normalization of ignorance and the causes of forgetting and that we ask, “Forgotten by whom?”

The histories of women as patrons and collectors have long intrigued me, and I have been fortunate to teach in a university that allows me the freedom to pursue those interests. One reason is that I believe it is important to look back at a critical time in U.S. history when the very foundation of current museum collections was built on the taste and wealth of American women. The erasure of the role of collecting and collectors in art history functions to normalize the visibility of certain artists as evidence of their importance, genius, and value. When collectors do appear, especially in the case of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the celebratory narratives surrounding them obscure how soft power (influence, moral suasion, taste, sentiment, etc.) works to fuel and inform their agency beyond their wealth.

For over fifteen years, I have had the pleasure of developing and teaching my seminar “Patronizing Women: Taste and Collecting in the 19th and 20th Centuries.” We begin the seminar by exploring the history of the idea of “taste” as a so-called “feminine faculty.” A legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment, taste connoted (in the words of Lori Merish) “a particular, expressly feminine, political faculty, associated with female bodily weakness (and, indirectly, with the ‘natural’ emotions of motherhood): not an expression of direct force or
enactment of political will (‘power over’ an object), it connotes an act of will that turns against itself, sublimating ‘power over’ or direct use of an object into the imperative to ‘care for’ or preserve it.”

In the class, we focus on four American women who wrote autobiographies and whose taste and collecting (care for and preservation of art) helped to shape and to define the aesthetics of European and U.S. modernism from the nineteenth century to the present: Louisine Havemeyer, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Gertrude Stein, and Peggy Guggenheim.

Given the normalization of taste as feminine, we investigate how these women used this construct as an agent for risk, change, and power. Our goals are to understand the “autobiographical act” through theories of both autobiography and feminist and queer interventions in autobiographical theory. We consider the assigned autobiographies as a group, asking, for instance: How does the voice change from woman to woman, over time? What can and cannot be revealed? What does each woman consider important? How does she want herself to be remembered? What does “art” mean for each woman? To what extent can her collecting practices, exhibition practices, and legacies be understood as another type of “autobiographical act”? Each of these collector-authors was born before women in the United States had the right to vote; in such instances, what did “citizenship” and belonging mean to each woman?

Of the four women, Peggy Guggenheim most directly addressed how ignorance (as active construct and strategic ploy) was affecting her legacy as the person who first brought Jackson Pollock to the world’s attention.5 In one of the rawest passages of any of these autobiographies, Guggenheim wrote:

After I left New York, Pollock had a very unsuccessful show at Betty Parsons’ gallery. A few months later my contract with Pollock expired, and he remained with Betty without a contract until 1952, when he went to Sidney Janis’s gallery. Not being in New York, I had no idea what was happening, but soon I began to realize that little by little everything I had done for Pollock was being either minimized or completely forgotten. Catalogues and articles began to appear, ignoring me or speaking of me in inadequate terms, as in the case of Sam Hunter, later curator of the Minneapolis Museum [i.e., Institute of Arts], who referred to me in his introduction to a traveling Pollock show as Pollock’s “first dealer.” In the São Paulo catalogue and in the New York catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art, [J. Gray] Sweeney’s introduction to my first Pollock show was attributed to my uncle’s museum (where I knew Pollock had merely worked as a carpenter).6

Guggenheim’s list continues from there, with Pollock himself complicit in her erasure, in the active forgetting of who she was, in real time. The shameful culmination that reveals agnotology as the making of ignorance happened in 2000 with the Hollywood blockbuster Pollock, in which a fictional and messy sexual encounter between Pollock and Guggenheim puts her, finally, “in her place.”

Within art history, there are other ways of forgetting. Sometimes, we forget as the very condition of seeing—forgetting as constitutive of visuality. Here are two examples that have consumed me for much of my time as a scholar of U.S. art: Mary Edmonia Lewis’s sculpture
Forever Free (1867) and Thomas Crawford’s sculpture (generally conceptualized as Progress of Civilization) for a pediment on the U.S. Capitol building (1863). I first published an article on Lewis in the Smithsonian journal American Art. Lewis had never really been forgotten, but I believed that over time, the meaning of her monument to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had been lost or distorted: the standing figure of a man, fist raised triumphantly to display his broken chains while his other hand rests on the shoulder of a woman who kneels at his side; his foot resting on the symbol of his enslavement, the ball and chain; the woman, though her leg is still shackled, lifting her gaze and her hands prayerfully. Second-wave feminism, in its search for heroines, had ushered in a period of recovery. And during the 1970s, Lewis’s sculpture and Lewis herself were recuperated as a protofeminist statement and protofeminist artist, respectively, reflecting the double oppressions suffered by African American women, first under the weight of white racism and second under Black patriarchy. Something about the sculpture, however, prevented me from following that line of argument. I visited the sculpture at Howard University, and I made countless photocopies of it from books. On the photocopies, I drew lines and vectors of focus and consistently found a sense of comity between the male and female figures. Historical context seemed to confirm what I was seeing: emancipation had made marriage possible and legal for newly freed people; they were now free to perform middle-class respectability, modeled on heteronormative relations and “racially appropriate” gendered hierarchies; and African American women trusted African American men more than they did European Americans. Lewis’s own choices seemed to reconfirm what I was now able to see—my own process of “unforgetting”—since she wanted the sculpture unveiled in a ceremony dedicated to Henry Highland Garnet, a Black abolitionist famous for reuniting families torn apart by enslavement into a proper and properly racialized patriarchy.

The second example of what a process of unforgetting can be occurred to me after many years of teaching Crawford’s sculpture in my survey of U.S. art. Assigned to supervise the extension of the U.S. Capitol in 1853, Montgomery Meigs decided, with the American sculptor Thomas Crawford, to develop the theme of racial conflict between whites and Native Americans as the subject for the decoration of the pediment over the entrance to the new Senate wing of the building. The concept was to juxtapose the “Progress of the White Race” to the “Degradation of the Indian,” with “America” personified in the center of Crawford’s composition. A careful examination shows us that America stands on a rock, against which the waves of the ocean are beating. She is flanked by the rising sun on her right and by a bald eagle on her left. She holds in her right hand a laurel and an oak wreath, which signify the rewards of civic and military duty, and holds them in such a way that each will be placed on the respective heads of the pioneer and the soldier who ensure the march of civilization. Even as she is the focus of their energies, it is the actions of the men who flank her that must fulfill her purpose; thus, the soldier, acting in her defense, appears to either draw or sheathe his sword while the artist captures the ax-wielding pioneer mid-swing. With her beseeching left arm and her heavenward gaze, she asks for the protection and blessing of God. I had been prepared to give the standard interpretation of the narrative: that it unfolds from left
**Figure 7**
Edmonia Lewis, *Forever Free*, 1867. Carrara marble, 41 ⅞ × 21 ½ × 12 ¾ in. Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Photo provided by Wikimedia Commons Creative Commons CC0 license.
to right (in the way we read) and that it simulates the geography and populations of East and West. But with my back turned to the sculpture—forgetting, again, being constitutive of sight—I realized that the concept was not reliant on writing/reading; rather, the inspiration was visual. Crawford’s sculpture was inspired by Catholic iconography; it is a last judgment in which America is placed where Christ normally is. The damned occupy her proper left (Native Americans, the forests, kinship ties among indigenous people—all forfeit) while on her proper right (populated by white men and boys, together with symbols of learning, knowledge, trade, etc.) the figures represent the saved. By not seeing, I could finally understand that unforgetting is also a process that does not necessarily rely on a void or something in need of correction. What I offered was simply another avenue of interpretation in an expanding art history.

The idea and practice of an expanding art history brings me back to Howardena Pindell, whose work persistently asks: Who is responsible for remembering? What do they feel compelled to never forget? In Art Crow/ Jim Crow, she chronicled forgetting as an active process of exclusion; however, in another example of her work, she uses the device of autobiography, but in visual form. Her mixed-media painting Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts), from 1988, tells a multilayered story that she continues to enhance and nuance. Four years after the painting was finished, Pindell put pen to paper and described not
only what she saw but also what she had learned of enslavement in the intervening years. The torture, the institutionalized rape and victimization, all that she had discovered caused her to approach her own work with fresh eyes—with the eyes of the beholder. As for me, every time I see the work—whether in person or as a reproduction—I am moved by the sight of the heavily worked canvas that signifies the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean, which serves as a grave for millions of Africans. I am stirred by the outline of the artist’s body that seems both to float and to drown in that same ocean, while the eyes and the faces that surround her bear witness. So much presence is balanced by the representation and representational absence of the slave ship. The outline of the slave ship is immediately recognizable and is perhaps one of the most famous and evocative profiles in history, even as it is impossible to represent. Pindell’s burden of the unforgettable is embedded in the history of the United States and in the country’s reliance on agnotology as socially constructed ignorance. Writing in 1992, she noted: “An elaborate mythology has been developed to sanitize the history of the country. Although many may not acknowledge it, the facts do not change. Those who perpetrated the crimes carry the memories through the generations. This may explain the prevalence of addictions, child abuse, battering, and rape throughout all levels of American society. This may explain the demand for silence on the subject.”

Pindell was feared in the art world. Some would argue that, like Peggy Guggenheim, she bore witness to erasure in real time. But something happened along the way. A changing art world that now acknowledges her talent and her brilliance means that she does not have to be included in the body of this anthology. If you search for the most recent stories about her, you will find newspaper articles like the one by Megan O’Grady, published in the “Style” section of the New York Times in February 2021. Pindell is featured prominently before one of her massive paintings—both the artist and the painting monumental and enigmatic—while the headline proclaims, “Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due.” Those of us who have long known of Pindell and admired her tend to smile and ask, “Overlooked by whom?” But we happily accept the reassessment of her career. As Charles Eldredge notes in the preface, we must seek to integrate the record rather than replace the canon. We can accommodate the expanding canon.

*The Unforgettables: Expanding the History of American Art* accomplishes as many things as the voices who contributed to its creation. The various essays not only model short-form writing of art history, but also serve as models of generosity/invitation/obligation to continue what was begun here. They force us to answer the question “What are you going to do about it then?”

**NOTES**


3. Ibid., 3.


5. Proctor discusses three, admittedly arbitrary, distinctions to begin the discussion of agnotology: ignorance as native state (or resource), ignorance as lost realm (or selective choice), and ignorance as a deliberately engineered and strategic ploy (or active construct). He adds, “There are of course other ways to divide this pie, and several of the contributors to [the anthology] provide alternative taxonomies.” Proctor and Schiebinger, *Agnotology*, 3.


