

# Art, Like Life, Isn't Fair

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The New Art Examiner is the product of the thinking and life-long contribution of Jane Addams Allen. We thank you in her name for reading her independent journal of art criticism.

If you have an interest in our venture, please consult Google, also Art Cornwall, for an interview with the publisher, Derek Guthrie, a painter who keeps his art practice private.

The New Art Examiner has a long history of producing quality and independent art criticism. Chicago and Cornwall, as any art scene, needs writers to keep a professional eye on art activity. Otherwise, insider trading will determine success in this troubled art world.

You can participate directly by sending letters to the editor which are published unedited.

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## The Attentive Artist



The visual identification of characters was important in crowded marketplaces, where there was competition for an audience, as well as indoor theatres, which were poorly lit by oil lights and candles. Unlike court actors or ballet dancers, whose costumes were embellished with rich and luminous metallic embroidery or braid, as well as sequins, jewels, or even silver backed faceted glass, the costumes of the commedia dell'arte were usually cut from simple materials, though exceptions could be made for the dress of the lovers and sometimes for female actors. It seems possible that the bold colours and geometric designs of some costumes may have been deliberately adopted by the commedia dell'arte to help the audience identify the characters in dimly lit interiors and to focus the attention of the fickle exterior crowd.

*Harley Quinn Unmasked; the commedia dell'arte and porcelain sculpture by Meredith Chiltern. Published by Yale University Press 2001 with the George R Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, p34.*

### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The New Art Examiner is a not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.



## IN THIS ISSUE YOUR CONTRIBUTORS ARE:

ANNA MARIA BENEDETTI loves the world of the Greeks and Latins very much but did a thesis in the philosophy of mathematics. Art has been a constant companion since childhood. She lives in Milan where she was born.

GRAZIELLA COLOMBO lives in Milan, Italy. She has a degree in foreign languages and literature and has taught for many years. She is a volunteer and guide at the Diocesan Museum of Milan. She has always had a passion for art, is one of the things in which Italy excels.

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CHRISTIAN HAIN studied philosophy and literature in Germany before moving to Paris for a postgraduate course in art history/art market, then working in a gallery and as an independent curator/art dealer. Since returning to his native Germany, he's been editing the bilingual blog [www.wartsmagazine.com](http://www.wartsmagazine.com)

ALEKSANDER HUDZIK is a cultural journalist and occasional critic of art. He studied art history. Co-author of texts in *My Art Guide*, *Polish Street Art* and *About Poland*. He published in magazines *Aktivist*, *Esquire*, *Cross-section*. In *Newsweek Polska* he mainly writes about pleasant things.

AL JIRIKOWIC is a long-time cultural observer and participant, commentator and humorist lurking in the fringes of Washington DC... Designer of bars and restaurants as oases from the untold stresses of the city... free spaces where hopefully humans could interact on human terms, on art terms...and maybe relax.

MIKLOS LEGRADY is a visual artist, writer, anti-hero and protagonist who's expecting trouble. He steps out of the art world's blind spot, uncovering myths and deconstructing fictions. He has a BSc. in visual studies workshop, Rochester, N.Y and an M.F.A from Concordia, Montreal. He is co-founder of N.Y. performance group The Collective Unconscious.

JOHN LINK was an accomplished artist, writer, and art critic. His professional recognition included over 50 exhibitions, and 28 inclusions in muse-

ums, private and corporate collections. His writing was equally prolific with articles in 66 publications. There are 116 references to his work and he was very active doing lectures, workshops, panels, and consulting. John also received numerous grants and awards.

STEPHEN LUECKING is retired from DePaul University as a professor of sculpture and computer science. Many of his other writings can be accessed at <https://depaul.academia.edu/Stephen-Luecking>

DANIEL NANAVATI is the European editor of the *New Art Examiner*, author of many children's books and sometime poet. He runs [www.footsteps-books.com](http://www.footsteps-books.com).

FRANCES OLIVER has published seven works of fiction and self-published three memoirs. She was born in Vienna, grew up and married in the USA, and has since lived and travelled in a number of countries. After her husband's death she and their daughter settled in Cornwall, where she devotes much time to environmental campaigns.

SHÄNNE SANDS is a poet and author. Her non-fiction work *Bombay City of Sands* was reviewed as one of the most lyrical books ever written.

ELEONORA SCHIANCHI was born in Sassuolo, near Modena, and graduated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna in Didactic and Communication of Arts. She is currently an AMaC student at the University of Bologna, and an art mediator at Musei Civici in Reggio Emilia. She has cultivated the passion for photography through travelling widely across Europe. Art is a powerful communicative tool and she explores its inclinations with passion and curiosity.

SCOTT WINFIELD SUBLETT is a screenwriter, playwright, film director, professor at San Jose State University in California, and author of *Screenwriting for Neurotics*.

SAM VANGHELUWE is a Belgian painter, art historian (specialising in African arts), critic and translator. He questions preconceived notions in art theory and criticism, and what Samuel Beckett called 'academic dementia'.

If you have ideas for articles or are a writer please get in touch:

[contributor@newartexaminer.net](mailto:contributor@newartexaminer.net)

# LETTERS

## Karl Wirsum, A True Legend of the Chicago Art World, Dies at the age of 81

Editor,  
A great, thoughtful article  
Garry Noland 15/05/2021

Garry,  
Thank you, Garry. It was a pleasure to write about Karl Wirsum, a great artist and long-time friend.  
Margaret Lanterman 19/05/2021

22/03/2021

## How the Value of Art is Decided and Defended

Editor,  
Duchamp in a 1968 BBC interview with Joan Bakewell, available on youtube, said that he had tried to discredit art, to get rid of art the way some people got rid of religion. His statement that "good taste is the enemy of art", while untrue, was part of that effort to discredit art. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's study of non-verbal language says that "every perceptual experience is accompanied by emotional coloration – an evaluation of subtle shades of good or bad, painful or pleasurable, a spectrum of cognitive and emotional memories, providing an instant valuation...taste is a cultural adaptation of great significance."  
Miklos Legrady 10/05/2021

Editor,  
Well gosh!.... what does this all mean ????. have we created a new freedom to actually address what art may be if...IF we speak up????  
Al Jirikowic, 13/04/2021

## American Artland

Editor  
I was interested to read what was

going on in the Mid West but it still seems the regional artist is overwhelmed by New York. If any of the cities and States are to be seen as a true contender to New York than they must do something more than New York is doing. New York is in a rut of its own making and nothing original or exciting or intellectual is being considered there, so we must look elsewhere for those writing their treatise on art in the 21st-century. Just having a lot of artists doing good work that matches New York is not enough. Not in the new age of fascism.

Abel Johnson 18/06/2021

Abel  
It is easy to persuade people that the energy and creativity they see is short of the mark but the real need and the one the *New Art Examiner* champions is the need for writers and writing. Every artist over 30 should have published their manifesto and by the age of 40 edited it three times. PDFs can travel the world today in a way that no digital image can because you cannot critique a digital image. If you do you are never going to do justice to the original piece.

Daniel Nanavati, 19/06/2021

## Disneyfying Italian Culture

Editor,  
Italy suffers from its past success. We have birthed so many great names we are brought up on their worth and their mastery and we find it impossible to get past them, if getting past them is even desirable. This is very difficult for modern artists to get ahead and make a name and it makes writing about art in Italy impossible without reference to the past.

Giada Porzio 29/06/2021

## An Interview with artist Donna Nadeau

Editor  
Donna is a true inspiration and I am fortunate enough to own a piece of her art. It truly is an honor.  
Paul Mysliwiec 28/06/2021

## Editorial – Volume 35 no 4 March – April 2021

Editor  
I so agree with this; "No art, worth its salt, is ever obvious. This is why art is enthralling, for art, in all its forms, constantly unfolds before us, often mysteriously." I've come to compare an artist's work to a physicist's scribbles on a blackboard, art speculates on what we'll think in the future and that's likely one reason why it's never obvious.  
Miklos Legrady 09/06/2021

We publish all letters unedited to give artists and readers a fair say.

If you would like to start a conversation, or enter one please visit

[www.newartexaminer.net](http://www.newartexaminer.net)

or write an email to

[letters@newartexaminer.net](mailto:letters@newartexaminer.net)

## QUOTE of the Month:

"All artists are willing to suffer for their work. But why are so few prepared to learn to draw?"

Banksy, *Wall and Piece*



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We would like to take a moment to remember a friend and teacher John Link, who was among the first to champion the *New Art Examiner* when we commenced republishing and supported the magazine with writing and ideas. We were happy to meet with him in his home and were always heartened by his warm welcome and insightful observations. Rest in Peace.

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# EDITORIAL

## Vale

Every so often, even in sadness, it is the pleasure of an editor to thank colleagues for all their hard work and their wisdom. In May this year we said farewell to John Link, a contributing editor and long time writer for the *New Art Examiner*. His quality of mind is rarely equalled and we are happy to reprint his *Speakeasy* from 1984, still fiery, still apposite, and still insightful, in memory of his life and work. "Major styles, of course, are not the cause of major art." is one of the most telling critiques of contemporary art and one which writers at the *New Art Examiner* take to heart. We, as John, understand that recognizing a major artist is as great a skill as being a major artist, whatever 'major' may mean, and propaganda eventually is always seen for its naked self. Everyone dies, and everyone who dies is a loss of experience and, in John's case, a lifelong consideration of art, aesthetics and the human condition. He is greatly missed by all those whom he taught in Michigan. From this point forwards, part of what we do here at the magazine will be in honour of his thinking.

My second thank you goes out to Pendery Weekes. She joined one of our writers' groups here in Cornwall and spoke of her years as an art student reading the *New Art Examiner*. She immediately began writing for us and helping distribute issues. When Derek Guthrie decided to sit back a while from Publisher duties she agreed to take on the role. Her energy and enthusiasm is the major force behind our phenomenal success online. We passed 1.5 million unique visitors in four years and now have 50,000 plus unique visitors a month. We are on track to have a million unique visitors every 18 months and it continues to increase. While we are not overly happy about having a wordpress site with limiting functionality, with Pendery's help we have certainly made the most of it. She even enlisted the help of her family. As she steps down after three years she leaves us with strong ties to Italian writers, an address list of some 16,000 museums, universities and galleries around the world, writers from Hong Kong (and we wish them well as communist fascist principles take over), Poland and France as well as two writers' groups in Cornwall whose work will continue once lockdowns are eased. We were and are very fortunate to have her as a friend and advocate for our work.

A magazine is the sum of its parts. Coming together they all make something greater than their individual selves. From content to presentation we will always abide by our Statement of Purpose and continue to work from within the community of artists around the world to champion discussion of the visual experience.

To John Link, we raise a glass and fond memories and to Pendery Weekes we shall look forward to her writings and contributions as a colleague in her new roles.

Daniel Nanavati



# SPEAKEASY IN MEMORIAM



Each issue, the *New Art Examiner* will invite a well-known, or not so well-known, art world personality to write a speakeasy essay on a topic of interest

John Link was a painter who liked to talk and write about art. His ideas aligned with the new formalism, and he believed “plain speaking and clear understanding” are essential to decent art writing. The way art looks was more important to him than any other consideration. He lived in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he served as chairperson of the art department at Western Michigan University, an appointment he held for seven years. The photograph by J.M. Carney shows him fishing for trout and salmon at nearby Gull Lake.

## ART, LIKE LIFE, IS NOT FAIR

‘Regional artist’. Being called one is not much of a compliment. Still, it is better than being called provincial or minor. All three words mean about the same thing when they refer to artists. They mean being less than the best.

Regional refers to being out of it, being cut off from the source of power due to one’s geographical location. In the US today, it means living too far away from New York. Most of the artists in this country are regional artists, including myself. The truth is that it is just too inconvenient for New York to pay much attention to us. To make it in New York, you have to go there.

That seems fair enough, except being from a region isn’t quite acceptable in New York these days. There are more artists there than anyone knows what to do with anyway. Then there is the matter of the city’s reputation. It can’t be maintained if outsiders are allowed to just walk in and become famous. Therefore, a certain portion of the art crowd’s resources are devoted to keeping regional artists in their place, that is, to keep them regional. We can make it (to a degree), we can be attended to, but only if we remain regional, only if our work does not threaten what New York regards as its special preserve, making of major art. I was once told that James Surls, a Texas artist, is making it in New York because he does what New York thinks ought to be done by a Texan: kinky, crafty, narrative wood carvings, clearly regional, clearly provincial and clearly minor. He is not that bad, so he can be enjoyed. But he is no threat to the assumption that major art belongs to New York. His success helps keep other Texan artists focused on being the next to be called to New York. They are in their place, so to speak, fighting among themselves for the positions most likely to be looked at when the call comes.

Like all effective rulers, New York takes steps such as the elevation of Surls, to see that provincial uprisings are kept to a minimum. The art press has grown to understand that most of its readers live in the provinces and enjoy hearing about local folks every now and then. The stories can be about other localities, so long as they are about some locality. One province can stand for all provinces. So we get an occasional article about the art of a large city or whole state. Chicago art, New Mexico art, Texas art – in 5000 words or less, plus a few reproductions. Most regional

artists regard such articles as the gateway to fame. They exhaust themselves jostling for a favourable position when the writer comes to town. Wining, dining, dancing, screwing, money. Whenever the writer wants can pretty well be delivered – discreetly too. Of course, writers of integrity don’t let this affect their judgement, and most writers have some integrity. I say this seriously. They have their fun, but they do their job as well as they can according to whatever insights they might have.

Being included in one of these articles is of questionable value, unless one is a university art teacher building a resume. But it isn’t bad. It is just that everyone remembers the locality the article is about and not the artists. There are a lot of aesthetic strategies which might improve one’s chance of being chosen. They come down to being very good, but nonetheless representative of the region. Most importantly, you can be too close to what New York regards as the current major style. Major styles, of course, are not the cause of major art. Very few people in the world recognise this, so style is protected and fretted about as if it is the only real source of art.

**The regional artist must realise that the official art system is organised to avoid taking his or her work seriously for as long as possible. This means that most regional art will never receive any attention. Taken absolutely, this is not unfair. Most of the work done in the regions, like most of the work done in New York, isn’t that good.**

The regional artist must realise that the official art system is organised to avoid taking his or her work seriously for as long as possible. This means that most regional art will never receive any attention. Taken absolutely, this is not unfair. Most of the work done in the regions, like most of the work done in New York, isn’t that good. The safest thing anyone can say about a randomly selected work of recent art is that it isn’t that good. You don’t even have to look, because the chances are so great that this judgment will be correct. The question remains, though, whether New York plays by the same rules when it comes

to itself.

By now you can tell I am over 40 and have not made it in New York. True. Still, I have a right to be bothered by what takes place there. Out here in the provinces we are too timid to think that our best artists are great artists, and usually we are right. New Yorkers, on the other hand, think nothing of putting up their trash as great art, and usually they are wrong. They remember a lot of very forgettable artists and persuade many of us to help them do it. I don't mind the system's corruption or its power. Corruption is everywhere and power has to be somewhere specific, otherwise it isn't power. What I do mind is the way New York puts over its own minor art as being major art, something that has been going on since 1960. That was when the world recognised that Jackson Pollock had made pictures which were as good as any that had ever been done. But with the consecration of Pollock, American art opinion changed direction 180°, and decided to never reject radical art again. Unfortunately, the same disregard for aesthetic quality which preceded the recognition of Pollock continues to this day. That didn't change. But the manner in which quality was to be ignored did.

Avant-gardism, as developed and codified by Marcel Duchamp, furnished the model for the construction of the new Academy. It also provided the standards by which art opinion was to judge current art. It replaced the provincialism which led to the misjudgment of Pollock, but it didn't understand the point of art any better than the provincial attitudes it displaced. It was, in fact, a worse way to proceed. One of the tenets of avant-gardism is that one moves up the Great Artist ladder by one-upping one's predecessors. So American artists set out to one-up Pollock, and in effect, try to make art that was better than had ever been done. Only in America could something that silly get serious support. Support it got, however, and of a magnitude rarely seen in the history of art. Warhol, Lichtenstein, Johns, Rauschenberg, Stella, Judd, LeWitt, Flavin, Kosuth and others each played the one-upping game with tremendous, historically unprecedented success, if success is measured in terms of the art opinion of one's own immediate time. New York put these people across as being the new great artists, and we in the provinces were quick to agree, lest we get left behind. For a while, there was an almost universal agreement that great art and new art are the same thing. But the best – Lichtenstein and Johns – were and are minor artists; good, but minor. The worst – Kosuth – isn't an artist at all. This is how art gets back at the foolish art crowd. It lets them live out their delusions.

This way art has of getting back at fools has been going on for a long time, since the days of the French Academy. Art opinion will eventually correct itself, as it has for the past hundred years, and recognise that it was once again wrong about the art of its own time. Then museum directors will quietly deaccession the worst objects, move the best of what remains to the back galleries, and the major art of the period will take its rightful place. There is no need for us provincials to be intimidated by what happened in New York during the 1960s and 70s, just because we didn't live there. Anyone with a decent eye can see it for him or herself. The sorting out will take some extra time, because never before has the system invested so much capital on the basis of its judgment

of correct art. The inertia of all those investor dollars will slow things up a bit, but really good art outlasts its resistance, even when the resistance is well-heeled.

But lately, things have taken a turn for the worse. The taste of the official art crowd, the new Academy, has sunk to a new low. Schnabel, Scharf, Haring, Salle, Longo and Boseman, along with the imports, and others, have achieved so little, yet they are so highly regarded. Dealers, museums and art writers have joined with these artists to celebrate the return of 'content' to art. The new Academy praises their work because it is radical and it tells us something about angst, about suffering, about 20th-century life. It is as if everyone believes the reason we still look at mediæval art is to learn about piety. Well, the best of this group – Schnabel – may become a decent minor artist, but he has a way to go. There is less hope for the others. None of them compares favourably with Lichtenstein or Johns or, for that matter, with Rauschenberg or Stella. Yet they are receiving so much notice. Why, and why does their work bother me so much, much more than that of previous 'great artists'? They would say I'm troubled

**One of the tenets of avant-gardism is that one moves up the Great Artist ladder by one-upping one's predecessors. So American artists set out to one-up Pollock, and in effect, try to make art that was better than had ever been done. Only in America could something that silly get serious support. Support it got, however, and of a magnitude rarely seen in the history of art. Warhol, Lichtenstein, Johns, Rauschenberg, Stella, Judd, LeWitt, Flavin, Kosuth and others each played the one-upping game with tremendous, historically unprecedented success, if success is measured in terms of the art opinion of one's own immediate time.**

because they are so good, but I know better than that.

The way their work comes on is at the heart of why I don't just walk away and forget it, as I do with other inferior artists. It affects me like pornography affects women (and some men) because it excites by assaulting aesthetic sensibility itself, just as pornography excites by assaulting sexuality itself, at the expense of women. The new expressionism gets its attention at the expense of artists. It is a kind of art pornography. Ordinarily, over-the-counter sexual pornography attracts attention because in debasing sexuality it makes it exciting. Pornography encases sex in a fantasy just as imaginary as the Victorian up-tight fantasy it displaces, but the new fantasy is free of romantic pretension and titillates the beast within all of us.

Just as pretension gets in the way of sex, so does it interfere with art. When I look at pictures by this latest group of 'great artists' I don't worry that I will be taken in by slickness. Their work is refreshing (I cringe a bit, using such a positive word) in that it is



free from aesthetic pretension. But that is because it is free from anything aesthetic. The pictures aren't really pictures. This group doesn't make pictures in the sense that urbanised artists have been making them for thousands of years. Unlike the German Expressionists, the neo-Expressionists don't understand how pictures are made nor do they appear to care. They try to get some pre-civilised, pre-urban need to make an image, any image, no matter how bad, so long as it is there. Their work is an attack, grounded partly in arrogance, partly in ignorance, upon our civilisation's entire pictorial achievement, just as pornography is an attack upon the entire humanity of sex. Most women and some men can't become comfortable around pornography, even after they are certain that this level of existence is low and not worth taking seriously. Its violence is directed against their sexuality in particular. Violence is hard to ignore when it is directed against oneself.

Likewise, serious artists, and I count myself one, can't become comfortable around the new bad painting because its violence is directed against our aesthetic sensibilities and powers. These bad paintings don't simply aspire to be high art and fall short of the mark. They seek to become high art by destroying the whole tradition of aesthetic experience, so they can replace it. The one-upping begun in the 1960s has reached a conclusion of sorts. The highest traditions of urban art are to be demolished, along with the sensibility which made them possible. Forget one-upping previous artists; it is now time to one-up art itself, high art, at least. Other artistic revolutions have occurred in the past, but they were to restore the highest level of the urban tradition, not to make it go away. Those revolutions were led by artists of the finest sensibilities, not the worst. Unlike sexual pornographers, the new art pornographers offer precious little to take tradition's place, except the thrill of destruction. I would call them barbarians, except that would give them too much credit. Attila knew what he was doing. They don't.

Just as women are the targets of pornography, artists are the targets of bad painting. It makes its way at our expense. The very fact that it exists and receives attention costs us something, just as sexual pornography costs women something. Unlike sexual pornography, art pornography passes for the real thing.

My vulnerability to all this is greater because I live in a provincial setting and have provincial attitudes. My awareness of my own provincialism makes it more difficult for me to resist the new Academy's axiom that only insensitive and naïve neoconservatives oppose new art. I am afraid they might be right. The fact that my eyes tell me different does not still the fear. It was difficult enough to live with the new Academy's success in putting over minor work as major, but this is tougher yet.

Civilised picture making will endure because art is hard enough to see that it does. It is far harder than this group of juvenile artists and their supporters realise. Sometimes its hardness is expressed maliciously. They ought to watch out, but chances are they won't. They have too great a share of the praise from current art opinion. I know art will get its way because it always has, but I fear becoming a casualty of the process. Art, like life, is not fair. Its driving force is to maintain its quality, not to serve jus-

**Most women and some men can't become comfortable around pornography, even after they are certain that this level of existence is low and not worth taking seriously. Its violence is directed against their sexuality in particular. Violence is hard to ignore when it is directed against oneself. Likewise, serious artists, and I count myself one, can't become comfortable around the new bad painting because its violence is directed against our aesthetic sensibilities and powers.**

tice. Whatever maintaining quality requires, is done.

Tenderness, or self-doubt, is a necessary part of making good pictures. But too much of it can lead to loss of nerve, which is fatal to the artist and the art. Witnessing the critical success of the attack on aesthetic sensibility has made it more difficult for me to live with my doubts and fears. Rather than let them feed upon neo-expressionism's success and destroy my nerve, I am tempted to set them aside. To do so is damaging in other ways. Either extreme is a bad move. Art, because it is so hard, does not care what individuals such as myself do, so long as somebody does what has to be done. Nor does it care where it is done. Tough world. New York took advantage of the hardness of art when it transferred the centre of power from Paris to itself. Only fools, and I guess the new Academy fits that description, would think the transfer to be permanent.

The advantage of the regional setting, as I see it, is that we are less directly pressured to succumb to the everyday chaos which governs the functioning of the official art world. Pressure is an absolutely necessary ingredient in the creative mix, but too much of it overwhelms and numbs sensibility. It is strong enough to be felt just about anywhere, if one wants to feel it, thanks to modern transportation and expansion of the art world. But with the distance comes the feeling of being left out, and therefore many regional artists try to join the various bandwagons as they gain attention. Since we don't live in New York, we are forced to do it by proxy. That is really worse than doing it in person. There is nothing much sadder than talking with a 40 or 50-year-old university art teacher who followed the trends, had his or her students follow too, and can't understand why fame never came. Incredibly, more often than not, the University is held responsible. But that is another story.

**We will miss you John. We thank you for all your kindness and support these past six years as we have worked to regain a voice among thinkers and artists.**

**Our thanks to Mackenzie Salisbury, Reference & Instruction Librarian, Flaxman Library at SAIC for finding, scanning and sending us this archive piece.**

# Sex, Pills and Crazy Women in American Movies

Scott Winfield Sublett

Apart from Covid vaccines, the big pharmaceutical story in the US these days is the saga of Purdue Pharma, which has filed for bankruptcy and sooner or later will pay an enormous settlement to compensate for their wildly addictive pill OxyContin. It's basically opium, peddled by street-level dealers in lab coats known as physicians. Historically, psychotropic drugs have been marketed preponderantly to women, and usually the upper strata. Queen Victoria used opium tinctures (that is to say, opium-and-booze cocktails), and chewed chewing gum spiked with cocaine. 'Double your pleasure, double your fun.'

Recreation aside, drugs, doctors and psychiatry have also been helpful in procuring women's cooperation, especially in sex. That wasn't necessary when the cooperation was compulsory (before the 20th century there was no such crime as 'rape within marriage', so Rhett Butler was perfectly within his rights when

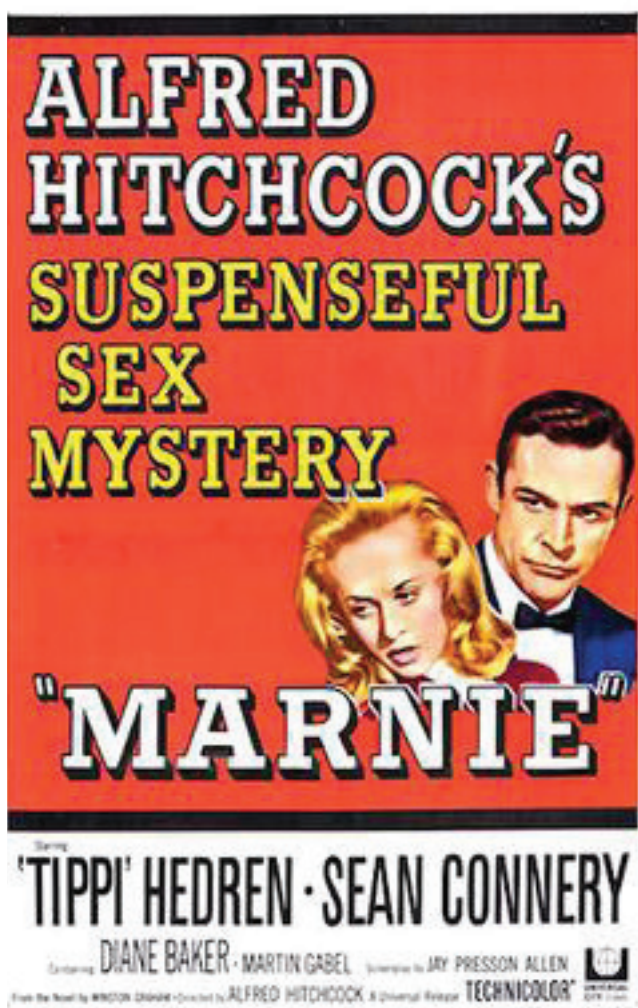
he carried Scarlett up the staircase in *Gone with the Wind*). Meanwhile, the economic disenfranchisement of 19th-century women left just one alternative to wedded bliss: selling their bodies at prices that were remarkably affordable for the average cowpoke (see Clint Eastwood's 1992 western *The Unforgiven* for an unforgettable portrait of working girls in the Old West). In the 20th century, women enjoyed greater economic freedom and therefore the option of sex if they wanted it and none if they didn't. Something certainly had to be done about that, so psychiatry invented a new mental illness: 'frigidity', which basically meant 'women who don't want to have sex with me'. Crazy!

As seen in American movie houses of the 1960s, frigidity was a real and serious threat to women's mental health. Interestingly, when its utility to the mostly male psychiatric establishment waned, frigidity went the way of other obsolete lady-brain problems like hysteria, neurasthenia and penis envy. But, oh, frigidity was campy fun while it lasted. In *The Group* (Sidney Lumet, 1966, from Mary McCarthy's novel), Jessica Walter's archly bitchy performance as frigid Libby firmly established that frigid females are simply not nice people: gossipy, brittle, and so stingy. Miss Walter's portrayal arrived on the spiked heels of Tippi Hedren's career-making performance in Hitchcock's campy 1964 masterpiece *Marnie*, where Sean Connery attempts to cure Marnie's maladjusted unwillingness to have sex with men by raping her. How did that not work! He finally cures her frigidity, as well as her kleptomania, by discovering that her mother was a Protestant—er, prostitute—and they live happily ever after in suburban Philadelphia.

The iconic Hitchcock blonde was a woman who looked frigid, or at least cold, but was in fact heaving and seething with lust just under the ice. Hitchcock saw Tippi Hedren as the ideal exemplar of that and famously tried to manipulate her into loving him. His weirdly childish gambits failed so pathetically that, were he not so sadistic (nobody likes being pecked by birds), one would almost feel sorry for him. Hollywood is full of men just as homely as Hitch who regularly get girls into bed. Hitchcock didn't want girls. He wanted 'The One'.

That monomania was tangled up with genius. Hitchcock's keen understanding of the ruthlessness and specificity of male sexual desire came through most dizzyingly in *Vertigo*, where Jimmy Stewart used Kim Novak as his personal Barbie doll, selecting her clothes and hair with breathless, leering eagerness - just as Hitchcock specified the personal wardrobes of the actresses he had under personal contract. As the Master of Suspense once said, "To dress a woman is to undress a woman," meaning that to control a woman's grooming is to turn her into your private, erotic fantasy.

Obviously, your private erotic fantasy has a knockout figure, and



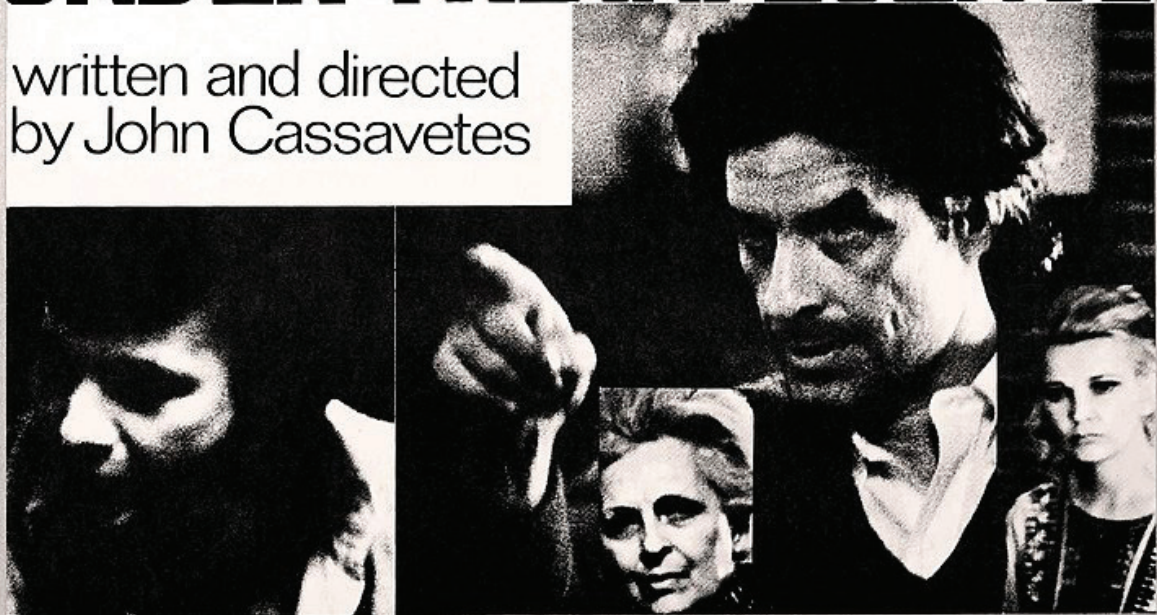
(image: Wiki commons)





# A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

written and directed  
by John Cassavetes



*Theatrical release poster for John Cassavetes's 1974 film A Woman Under the Influence.*  
(Image: Wiki commons)



fortunately, medical science can help there, too. Wife too fat? Have your trusted, hearty, avuncular family physician prescribe a fistful of the colorful 'diet pills' that fueled America's amphetamine epidemic from the 1940s through the 1960s. (Daddy, why is Mommy so mad?!! Well, because she's on speed, Princess. She's tweaking her ass off.) Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* would, in 2000, finally look at women and meth. Ellen Burstyn was nominated for a Best Actress Oscar as an older woman who just wants to lose a few pounds, but by then the subject of women and meth had been ignored for much too long.

The quintessential women-and-pills scene is in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, which might today be titled *The Man Who Mansplained*. Jimmy Stewart plays a trusted, hearty, avuncular family physician, married to a woman who used to star in stage musicals, but she gave it up for the role of doctor's wife because, after all, in the 1950s you wouldn't think of unmanning your husband by working outside the home. The woman (Doris Day's best performance outside comedy), suspects there's something fishy about the suave Frenchman that they just met while on vacation in Morocco. Her pompous doctor husband pooh-poohs her suspicions, so when hubby finds out spies have kidnapped their adorable little boy, he's understandably chagrined about informing the little woman. Rather than face her wrath, he decides to give her a super-strong sedative, so she'll conk out right after she hears about the kid getting snatched. That way he won't have to listen to her nagging. But how to get her to take the pill? She doesn't want it. Oh, I know—gaslighting! "You've been talking a blue streak and walking around in circles," he gaslights.

She denies it because it isn't true. He pulls rank: "I make my living knowing when and how to administer medicine."

"Six months ago you told me I took too many pills," she points out. Oh! And guess where she's been getting them. Obviously, he's been feeding her uppers and downers like she's Judy Garland and not dancing fast enough. Faster, Judy, faster! People like to paint Hitchcock as an anti-feminist villain but who else, in 1956, was illuminating the dark corners of the psychiatric manipulation of women?

It was rampant. In full-page ads in medical journals, doctors were alerted to women 'suffering from recurring states of anxiety which have no organic etiology,' which is to say that these women felt things, and complained about it, and obviously all that yakking had to be stopped before it gave Doctor a headache! The newly minted tranquilizer Miltown was just the ticket, and later, in the 60s, 'benzos' such as Librium and Valium would be dubbed 'mother's little helper' by The Stones. Today, the pill du jour is SSRI antidepressants.

All of the above drugs have been prescribed to women considerably more often than to men. Are women unhappier than men? Or do they merely talk about it more? Do men just not want to hear it? Whatever the case, Jimmy gave Doris that pill in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* for no other reason than to shut her up. Watch the movie. It's great. It's all about silencing women. Not for nothing does Miss Day play a star who has given up singing - the use of her voice - for housekeeping. In this film, at least, Hitchcock is a presciently feminist filmmaker.



(Image: Wiki commons)

Probably the best American movie about the relationship between women and psychiatry, because it's the most ambiguous, complicated, and self-contradictory, is the 1974 John Cassavetes indie masterpiece *A Woman Under the Influence*, starring his wife Gena Rowlands. She got an Oscar nomination as Mabel Longhetti, a blue-collar wife-and-mother who's either genuinely mentally ill, or just desperately self-conscious, or both. Her husband, Peter Falk, is maybe her jailor, maybe her savior, and probably, yes, both. Her undeniably weird behavior causes him to have her committed, but during the many months she's away, Daddy makes a mess of things with the kids, and when she finally gets home, she's not really any better. The movie leaves us wondering, who's the crazy one? Is there even such a thing as crazy? Or is it just that the people we really are (women, gays, visionaries, whatever) don't fit into the roles society has made for us?

Those rules are enforced by doctors and pills. In a very real way, it's a history of mind control, so is it any wonder that the USA is currently full of paranoid nutcases who refuse to take a world-saving vaccine because they distrust the medical establishment? Interesting factoid: according to at least one medical historian, it was 1930-something before a visit to the doctor was likely to do you more good than harm. Corrupt doctors and their greedy pals at the rapacious drug companies have a lot to answer for, and Purdue Pharma, for one, is answering. Somebody should make a movie about it.

# Iain Baxter& & the Ampers&

Miklos Legrady

"Don't look at this unless you're ready for anything. Ok. Sit down and with a pair of scissors cut 4 inches off your tie and please mail it immediately to Iain Baxter Pres. N.E.Thing Co (address supplied)... Now you are ready for anything." (N.E.Thing Co. 1967 Xerox.)

Disclosure: I did cut four inches off my tie recently and sent it to Iain Baxter&, now I'm collaborating with him on an art and ecology project. Over the years we learn that it is not enough to stand on the shoulders of giants. Many were disappointed when they found themselves standing on the shoulders of very short giants or, even worse, the giants were standing on their shoulders! We're actually grateful that Iain Baxter& is empathic, concerned with ecology; we may well see him as a gentle green giant.

I discovered Animal Reserve on the [www.ccca.ca](http://www.ccca.ca) (Canadian art database) website and was struck by the interplay of humor and tragedy, how well he gets it. Baxter& is one of those masters in their field whom the Japanese honor as a living national treasure. Interestingly enough, he always had an interest in Zen and now has the calm demeanor of a Zen master, as in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Zen is a spiritual philosophy and discipline; it's the art of self-awareness within the laws of existence, of being alert while acting from instinct, so that you're in the right place at the right time.

In the 1969 issue of *Art in America* critics Thomas M. Messer and David L. Shirey first defined conceptual art as a new artistic movement. For the cover they chose the work of N.E.Thing Co., consisting of Canadian artists Ian Baxter and his wife Ingrid Baxter. (This was before Iain added the ampersand to his name, which he legally changed to Baxter&.)

In researching this article I am grateful to Dr Adam Lauder, W.P. Scott Chair for research in e-librarianship at York University in Toronto, Canada, whose books on Iain Baxter& are the authoritative works in the field. Writers Richard Cavell, Dennis W. Durham, Murray White, and Derek Knight have contributed insightful articles on Canada's first conceptual artist (with Michael Snow). Rather than cover similar ground I wanted to see this artist in the matrix of his time and apply a McLuhanesque analysis of method and consequence.

Following McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message, we invite the reader to interact, immerse themselves in some of Iain Baxter&'s images and history.

Immerse yourself:

[http://www.mikloslegrady.com/iain\\_images.html](http://www.mikloslegrady.com/iain_images.html)

[http://www.mikloslegrady.com/iain\\_links.html](http://www.mikloslegrady.com/iain_links.html)

Life for Iain Baxter& is for curiosity rather than authority. Iain can be seen as the type of man who walks untroubled through the valley of shadows, intuitively avoids pitfalls, while discover-



Eighty-five-year-old Iain Baxter& is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a Companion of the Order of Canada, an officer of the Order of Ontario and the Order of British Columbia. He is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy. Among the many awards he has received are the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, the Canadian Council Molson Prize for the Arts in 2005, the Gershon Iskowitz prize

in 2006, and the Canadian Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2004. He was winner of the Melva J. Dwyer Award Winner in 2013. Iain Baxter& holds five honorary doctorates from the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, NSCAD University, the University of Windsor, and, most recently, OCAD University.

He has taught at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design, the Alberta College of Art, and York University. During his time at Simon Fraser University Baxter& was responsible for creating the department of visual arts. He currently serves as a University Professor Emeritus at the University of Windsor's Center of Creative Arts, and his work is shown in major museums worldwide such as MOMA and the Centre Pompidou.

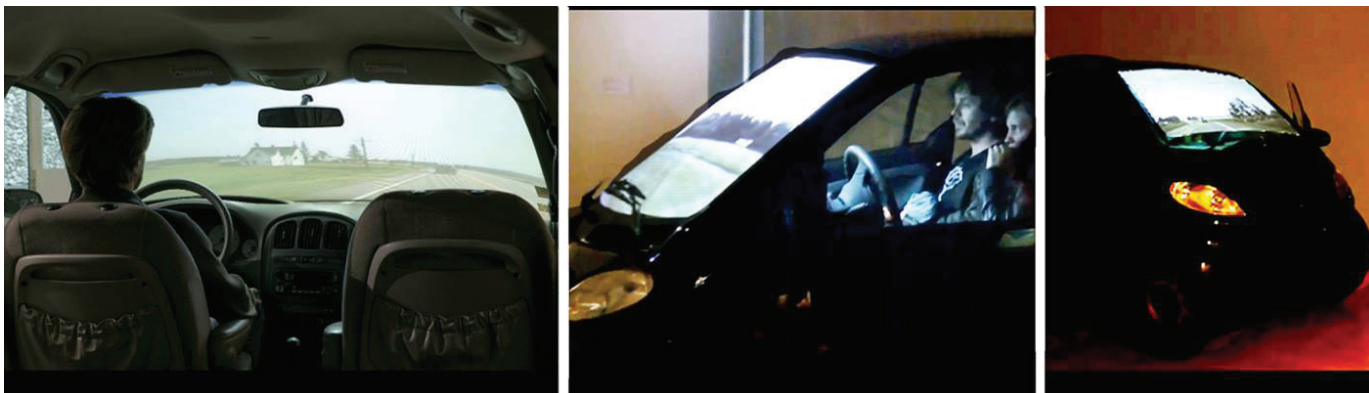
Iain is a painter, photographer, sculptor, mixed media artist, installation artist, film and video maker, interventionist and performance artist. Along with Michael Snow, he is one of the first conceptual artists in Canada. As an educator, Iain Baxter& directly influenced major Canadian artists including Stan Douglas, Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Roy Arden, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham.

ing solutions to problems we weren't even aware of. Although his work has caused outrage, he gets away with it as his interests intersect with the cultural values of his time. Where did that come from?

One of Iain's major strategies was acting on instincts and trusting in chance. That extended to meeting his future wife Louise by chance, a woman whose last name was Chance, now Louise Chance Baxter&.

At age 19 he was in a car accident, suffering a broken neck and body cast. This was a wake-up call. Psychology tells us early trauma often shapes character that may otherwise spoil for lack of challenge. Iain had to renounce a skiing scholarship so he went for the sciences, pursuing an interest in biology and ecology. He has commented on this divergence from a traditional art-





Iain Baxter & Louise Chance Baxter: *One Canada Video*, 1992.  
(Photo: Jean Brasille/courtesy Villa Arson, Nice)

ist's education. His aptitude for drawing field specimens in biology class led to illustrating a professor's book, which brought him to visual art. An interest in Zen took him to Japan on an art scholarship, where he created vivid abstract expressionist paintings on Japanese folding screens, powerful work bridging two cultures at the start of his career.

Science and sports are pragmatic reality checks that shape one's attitude; as a result Iain Baxter's creativity has a different spin that surprises us even when his process is ubiquitous. In 1966 he and his then wife Ingrid Baxter established the N.E. Thing Co., reframing fine art as a corporate practice. At 32 he was the youngest living Canadian artist selected to create a large-scale multi-media environment at the National Gallery of Canada. From June 1 to July 8, 1969, Baxter & transformed the entire lower floor of the National Gallery of Canada into the corporate headquarters of the N.E. Thing Co. In 1977 they opened Eye Scream, a restaurant with an artful menu such as Still-Life Salad and Scallops Renoir.

"We had a Canada Council grant in 1972 to travel in Europe and we had no job to come back to in Canada. We thought about applying for the job of humans at the Vancouver Zoo because then we'd have a roof over our heads and we'd be fed and taken care of. We decided to do the Eye Scream restaurant as a survival technique." The financial stress of that venture led to divorce and the dissolution of N.E. Thing Co.

**Today we know Clement Greenberg's formalist narrative was superficial; like Duchamp with his misreading of the optical, Greenberg lacked the science that reveals layers of meaning and diverse functions in the form and iconography of non-verbal vision. Greenberg's assumption that forms exist for their own sake failed to grasp the nature of non-verbal languages. But Greenberg is really a quixotic windmill because non-verbal languages are truly different modes of thinking coexisting with and informing intellectual thought.**

Baxter's cv for the following years shows photography and video having a large role in his work. In 1992 Iain and Louise were concerned about Quebec seceding from Canada in an upcoming referendum. They decided to drive across the country and document it while it was still whole. From sea to shining sea, *One Canada Video* lasts 101 hours and follows them from Cape Spear, Newfoundland, to Vancouver Island. This video includes audience participation.

In every gallery installation, *One Canada Video* is projected on the windshield of a car inside the gallery space; one can sit in the car to view a rolling Canadian landscape, or stand outside and see the journey projected on the windshield. The audience was free to walk away when they had seen enough, knowing a vision of Canada would continue in their absence. That car strategy contextualized the footage; the work represented Canada overseas as it was shown, among other venues, at the 40th anniversary of the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris.

It's fitting to compare this video with *Empire*, a 1964 American black-and-white silent film by Andy Warhol: eight hours and five minutes of slow motion footage of an unchanging view of the Empire State Building. Warhol said about his films that they're more interesting to talk about than to watch. "Most of the interesting art of our time is boring," wrote Susan Sontag. If their most interesting art was boring then obviously they failed. Because these artists failed we need to differentiate failure from achievement or we'll go extinct ... art is always a cautionary tale or a parable. It was creative of Warhol to shoot the film, great art comes from taking risks. In this case the film was a dud destined for the storage shelf, for a lack of audience even at the rare venues where academic interests scheduled it. While Boring Art is a legitimate and valid art movement, no one's interested and those forced to watch it are secretly resentful.

Since Iain's video is alive, as interesting to watch as to discuss, this contrast between *One Canada Video* and *Empire* marks the limits of 'dematerialization'.

"Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (1968), coined dematerialization to refer to conceptual artists' de-emphasis of the visual properties of the art object in favour of ephemeral and linguistic gestures that trouble the formalist criteria enshrined in the influential criticism of Clement Greenberg as well as the commodity status of the artwork."



On left: Animal Preserve; Middle: installation detail (*Individuals*); on right: Baled Out

I fail to see why artists would derail the commodity status of their income, but let's not diverge. Today we know Clement Greenberg's formalist narrative was superficial; like Duchamp with his misreading of the optical, Greenberg lacked the science that reveals layers of meaning and diverse functions in the form and iconography of non-verbal vision. Greenberg's assumption that forms exist for their own sake failed to grasp the nature of non-verbal languages. But Greenberg is really a quixotic windmill because non-verbal languages are truly different modes of thinking coexisting with and informing intellectual thought. The importance of non-verbal languages was obvious to Iain from the start and permeated his practice and teaching, which focused on action and interaction more than an intellectual distancing. "Baxter experimented with techniques of non-verbal pedagogy that radicalized McLuhan's critique of print-based classroom procedure. Incorporating found objects gleaned from his urban explorations, Baxter's lectures at UBC and later at Simon Fraser University mimed a choreography of generic actions (such as 'swimming on dry land')."

Paul Dirac, Steven Mithen, Abraham Males and Frieder Nake all wrote on the importance and depth of the non-verbal. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio says that "every perceptual experience is accompanied by emotional coloration - an evaluation of subtle shades of good or bad, painful or pleasurable, dark or light, a spectrum of cognitive and emotional memories, providing an instant valuation... art is not mere 'cheesecake' for the mind. It is instead a cultural adaptation of great significance." Dennis Dutton writes that we can explain art more effectively through anthropology than "through an American version of French theory or a Frankfurt school in contemporary art criticism", as MO-MA-Yale's Rob Storr put it.

Albert Mehrabian (born 1939 to an Armenian family in Iran), currently Professor Emeritus of Psychology, UCLA, is known for his publications on the relative importance of verbal and non-

verbal messages. His findings on inconsistent messages of feelings and attitudes have been misquoted and misinterpreted throughout human communication seminars worldwide, and have also become known as the 7%-38%-55% Rule, for the relative impact of words, tone of voice, and body language when speaking.

Body language gives dance subtlety, acoustic language gives music tonality, and a picture is worth 988 words after inflation. Kevin Zeng Hu, a Ph.D. researcher at the MIT Media Lab, writes of images that "we all know how unwieldy texting can be and how much context can be lost, especially emotional context. Once you make it visual, you have a higher bandwidth to convey nuance."

To understand the times, the 1960s were a rebellion and a cultural renaissance. Pop art was in its heyday while at the same time postmodernism was born in the seminar room and sent out with each new wave of fine-art graduates.

Enter Iain Baxter's *Bagged Room* and *Bagged Landscape*. Christo wrapped the monumental; Iain didn't wrap, he bagged. While appreciating the strategic parallel with Christo, bagging is an American suburban thing, a practice of conservation for future use. In the *Bagged Room* Iain bagged it all, every fork and chair and drape, all the socks in the closet and even the baby's bagged poo inside the bagged toilet. *Bagged Room* made the personal monumental, as it made the personal conceptual.

McLuhan saw that communication turned the world into a global village; Baxter's *Bagged Room* trashed the distance between home and gallery, self and stage; *Bagged Room* was everyone's room, as moulded by culture and technology. The foreboding problem of plastic pollution and its harm to the ecology is ever present in this work and also in the plastic extrusion series, where Iain extruded apples, carrots and toys and brushes et al. asking what technology does to iconography and ecology.

Bagging also led to the *Bagged Landscape* series, one of which



caused a scandal in 1966 when the Vancouver Art Gallery awarded *Inflated Vinyl and Water* a \$500 prize and purchased the work for its collection. There were protests and outrage. The *Vancouver Sun* issued its opinion about Baxter's landscape being chosen as a winner of the Centennial Award in a headline that summed up the editorial: "Fun's Fun, But Not at \$500" - \$500 in 1966 is equivalent in purchasing power to about \$4,154.24 today. The editorial obliquely referred to an "inflated vinyl cushion as the best new B.C. Painting of the year".

The nature of interdisciplinary work leaps over the constraints of material, of matter, and medium. Yet it is an unavoidable fact that the more experience one has with a specific medium the more we learn of its nature and the better we speak its language. Malcolm Gladwell wrote of 10,000 hours required to achieve mastery; traditional art was based on skill with non-verbal media whose language can only be learned through experience, otherwise one acts by chance. Iain achieved mastery in acting by chance, touching the same sophistication and complexity as if he had mastered a denser medium. This conceptual height isn't for everyone; be warned that many in their enthusiasm overleap the saddle and end up on the wrong side of the horse.

Lippard and Chandler's de-emphasis of the material properties of visual art partially applies here, but I doubt Baxter& intended the denial of tradition as anything more than a by-product of following one's vision, as one project leads to another from curiosity. Breaking the rules does trigger creativity but traditional rules turn irrelevant when one has a clear road ahead. Baxter& was bagging, he bagged a landscape, introduced some aesthetic, iconic, even ironic changes, added water and closed the stopper. It looked as intended, a bagged landscape, showing us what a

bagged landscape looked like, with a vocabulary of plastic, ecology and a dash of cuteness. He submitted one of these to the jury. Protests against *Inflated Vinyl and Water* spoke of the years of study and practice required for mastery of painting, the enormous effort required to execute a work of the highest quality. There was talk of a degradation of standards in contemporary Canadian art, of harm to both the culture and the arts community, if quality was replaced with facsimile. Now with 40 years of hindsight we can answer that question. Were they Luddites or Cassandras? Did Iain's *Inflated Vinyl and Water* cause inestimable damage to Canada's art ecology? The answer of course is yes.

Art as radar acts as "an early alarm system," as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* p. 7. Gingko Press. Kindle Edition.)

We can also see art as the architect's blueprint, the physicist's blackboard on which they chalk their equations. Paul Dirac wrote that whenever he sees beauty in his math he knows he's on the right path of progress, while the converse was also true. With *Inflated Vinyl and Water* (which does have a pop-art beauty) Iain exposed a conflict in art theory and triggered questions of standards, quality, definitions and limitations that would take years even to rise to the consciousness of the creatives involved. People get absorbed by their details, then fail at the large-scale perspective; we still haven't answered these conflicts sparked 55 years ago. For example, when a new category is introduced it's another slice in the pie chart, the other slices get thinner.

When Iain spent a few hours assembling this piece, he had no desire for, or interest in crashing theologies. Nor was he thinking of rebelling Samson-like to tear down temples of tradition, that was a by-product of the ideological weakness of art theory in the 1960s. Derrida's method of deconstruction was to look past the irony and ambiguity to the layer that genuinely threatens to collapse that system. Out of a creative curiosity Iain Baxter& cut to the chase on conflicts of our times with a cute little piece of wall art now enhanced by its cultural status as a shit disturber.

When art is anything you can get away with, the worst you can get away with is always the best strategy, a race to the bottom leading to a steady degradation of the field. We hope that when Marshall McLuhan coined the expression art being anything you can get away with, he meant it as an observation and not an endorsement; without limitations we dissolve in the boundless. Even the words 'get away with' call for a discussion of ethical logic.

One curator wrote that no one knows what art is anymore, though every other profession knows what they're doing. If we don't know what art is, shouldn't we make an effort to find out? A professor critiqued a student's work saying that there's no such thing as good or bad art, but those poor plants crushed for linseed oil probably regret ending up in that painting. If there's no good or bad then there's neither meaning nor purpose in art. But since art has a long history of standards, meaning and purpose, it is more likely that art is good or bad, or in between, and we need to develop the skills and standards by which to judge the difference, else forfeit our claim that we're professionals in our field.



*Ingrid Baxter and Iain Baxter&: Bagged Landscape, 1966.*  
(photo: Vancouver Art Gallery)



**For Baxter&, adapting the media to ideas meant constantly switching technique, touching on Marshall McLuhan's point that the method changes the maker. In Baxter's art the inconsistency of media triggered the creativity needed for unique solutions.**

Reagan Upshaw is an American gallerist who also writes on art for *The Washington Post*; "to say most art today is mediocre is merely to state an historical fact – most art of any period is mediocre. History will sort things out".

Iain Baxter& has a gift. His concepts and works hit the target more often than others do, even at those times when none of us can see the target or even know it exists. Psychology says consciousness is often the last to know, as our destinies and desires are forged in the unconscious depths of the mind. *Inflated Vinyl and Water* was a logical product of an interest in ecology and the social phenomena of bagging, but it touched a nerve.

Clinical psychology notes a person will score higher when motivated by innate curiosity; Iain found a method to take advantage of curiosity's spark, through a Zen influence of non-attachment to any specific media. Iain said an idea will come to him in the form of word play, the way a child might play with language, perhaps a word, sentence, statement, or language, then expressed in any medium at hand.

Conceptual art is an umbrella term for work where concept is dominant. For Baxter&, adapting the media to ideas meant constantly switching technique, touching on Marshall McLuhan's point that the method changes the maker. In Baxter's art the inconsistency of media triggered the creativity needed for unique solutions.

Conceptual art also has a dark side that scrapes against our nerves like an errant car scraping against a concrete embankment. Complaints center around conceptual artists whose work is essentially negative, nihilistic, where the semiotic reading de-

grades or denies art, sensation, instinct, and logic. These are the ones purposefully doing the worst you can get away with to cash in on the shock value. Iain avoided all that from the start, a strong concern for ecology being an integral part of his work, a positive message, a vital political one.

Baxter& often speaks of creative compost, and for that leaves have to fall. He is one of the few artists who can do anything they want since his *modus operandi* is discovery and experiment. He's like a stone flying over the waters of creativity, that skips and skips from one medium to another then bounces to the next. Unlike the stone, Iain's doesn't sink but keeps on going, for each project energizes the next.

History is often written on the intersection of truth and legend. It is the work of the historian to separate the legend from the reality, and to speculate on the lessons and strategies that can be shared among us to all our advantage. That is Iain Baxter's legacy as a teacher and an artist, not that he ever stopped working, for even now he creates new stars in the cultural matrix.

McLuhanesque Segway:-

Immerse yourself again in the Baxter& link

[http://www.mikloslegrady.com/iain\\_links.html](http://www.mikloslegrady.com/iain_links.html)



©1999 Baxter&: Animal Preserve 2

# Katherine Anne Porter and the Spanish Flu

Frances Oliver



We can have no idea what masterpiece, if any, will emerge from experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. We do know that the 'Spanish' influenza of 1918 produced at least one classic, Katherine Anne Porter's short story, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

The Spanish flu, another species-jumping virus, probably actually originated in America. Unlike with Covid-19, those

who did not recover were mostly young; nearly half the dead were aged between 20 and 40. The majority died of secondary infection, bacterial pneumonia, since no antibiotics were available in 1918. Katherine Anne Porter had Spanish flu in its most virulent wave and lived to tell her story. A great many others did not; in a world population of then – only! – approximately 1.8 billion, an estimated 50 million died.

Covid lockdown inspired me to go back to that story, and all of Porter's others I had or could find. It was well worth the return. Porter had a fascinating background and a varied and exciting life, and drew on her experience and her imagination with consummate skill. Her writing is low-key but vivid, ironic but moving, perfectly crafted. As it had to be; Porter's whole literary reputation rests on only 30 stories and one novel, which took her 30 years to write. The stories won her both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Katherine Anne Porter was born in Texas in 1890. Her mother died when she was two and she and her siblings were brought up mainly by their grandmother, who regaled her with reminiscences of the – not so long ago – vanished old South. Much of this went into richly colourful family saga stories whose protagonist, young Miranda, doubles for Katherine herself. After her early first marriage ended in divorce, Porter worked as a journalist in Texas and Denver, Colorado; it was then she caught and nearly died of the Spanish flu. Porter went on to live in New York's Greenwich Village, a centre of radical Bohemia, and also lived in Mexico during its failed revolution and after. Her Mexican stories, pictures of a Mexico tourists do not see, are some of her best.

Porter was also in Europe during the rise of the Nazis, an experience she drew on for her one novel, *Ship of Fools*. She was back in

America during McCarthyism and the Cold War. She had four marriages, none of which lasted long. Besides her more exotic stories are domestic everyday life ones, as finely wrought as the rest. One short but unforgettable piece is just titled *He*. 'He' is a boy who in Porter's day would have been called simply *simple*. When he becomes ill and begins to have fits, his ignorant and impoverished parents, though they love him, are compelled to place him in an institution; a story as sad and powerful as Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

When *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* begins, Katherine's alter ego Miranda is working as a journalist in the very male-dominated newspaper world of First World War America. The ugly jingoism of the time is beautifully captured when Miranda, already weakened and slightly dazed by her first flu symptoms, is harassed by a couple of Liberty Bond salesmen to buy a 50-dollar war bond though her salary is only 18 dollars a week. Miranda, like the always left-wing Katherine, hates the war, but she fears for her job and does not dare speak out.

Miranda is soon seriously ill. Adam, the new recruit soldier boyfriend she has known only 10 days but loves as he loves her, looks after her devotedly until an ambulance, a doctor and a rare free hospital bed are found. On their last day together, she remembers an old spiritual, *Pale horse, pale rider, done take my lover away*. They sing the line together but Miranda can't recall how it goes on. When Adam goes out to get her coffee and ice cream, two hospital interns finally arrive, after frantic demands from her newspaper, to take her to hospital.

Porter writes with wonderful vividness of the dreams, memories and hallucinations, some beautiful and bright, some dark and terrifying, that make Miranda's world as she drifts in and out of consciousness, until "all notions of the mind, the reasonable inquiries of doubt, all ties of blood and the desires of the heart, dissolved and fell away from her, and there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone, that relied upon nothing beyond itself for its strength; not susceptible to any appeal or inducement, being itself composed entirely of one single motive, the stubborn will to live".

When she comes back to her rational self, a month in hospital has gone by and there are letters waiting for her. Adam never made it to war. He caught Miranda's illness and died just before the Armistice. Miranda thinks bitterly, "What do you think I came back for, Adam, to be deceived like this?"

Still, the story ends on a hopeful note. The hated war is over, and Miranda is leaving the hospital. "No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns, noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything."



# Art for the Blind

Bridget Crowley



*JMW Turner: Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway*  
*Describe this to a blind art lover*

Although it's now 20 years since the introduction of audio-description of painting and sculpture in art galleries, this is still often the first question sighted people ask when I tell them that's what I do. Before we go into the how, when and where, here are a few answers to the question from experts in the field - some of the blind and partially sighted visitors, many of whom have been coming to audio-described events since the very beginning.

"There are a hundred reasons, but just because you lose your sight, you never lose your interest." – David, severely sight-impaired.

"You feel the space and feel the atmosphere in the environment of the paintings." – Noula, severely sight-impaired.

"Art in all its forms should be available to everyone. Most people, like me, have been able to see to a greater or lesser extent at one time and can appreciate a description of a work of art." – Chrissie, now almost totally blind.

"Everyone should have a chance to compare and contrast

works of art in all their glory." Robin, who now sees just a little colour.

In Britain, the news is good. In normal times, most of the London galleries now provide audio-described sessions for blind and partially sighted people on a regular basis. They each provide a slightly different experience but are all well attended and appreciated. On occasions as many as 30 or more visitors gather, many of them accompanied by a sighted companion who likes to stay and join in. In regional galleries, numbers are smaller, often because it's not possible for economic reasons to provide a regular service and build up an audience. But when it does happen, it's popular.

Regular live audio-descriptions at the National Gallery in London were started in the mid-1990s. Marcus Weisen, then arts officer and head of leisure policy for the Royal National Institute for the Blind, came to the gallery with what I remember as a slightly mischievous smile and suggested that as New York galleries had started live audio-description, it was about time we



tried it too. I was outreach officer at the gallery at the time and enthusiastic about innovations of this kind, so I volunteered to have a day's basic training with him, and then to do a trial live description for a single visitor some days later when I'd had time to think about it. (There is far more to training now, but we had to start somewhere!)

There are rules, but the most basic are the clarity of the journey round the painting and the spontaneity and inclusivity of a live session. The picture itself usually dictates the starting point and the direction it should go, but a clear path around the picture is paramount. Dodging backwards and forwards because your own attention is suddenly taken by a detail off the path or because you've missed something is distracting and confusing to these visitors.

Above all, never read out a whole written description. Do your homework, carry notes to remind you of facts and quotes to pop in if they're helpful, but the rest is between you and the picture. It's the immediate response in you – the feeling of 'oh, you really should take a look at this!' – that brings the picture alive to your visitors. Stop for questions, ask for responses at appropriate moments. Communicate your own wonder and delight in a picture and particularly how and why it was made, but go easy on the personal interpretations as your visitors will want to have their own. And even if you don't like a painting, the process of describing it will open it up to you, and reveal hidden depths that will endear it to you more than you expect.

My first 'dry run' in the late 1990s was with a lovely woman wheelchair user who wore a white peaked tennis shade over dark glasses and below them, a big smile. We explored J.M.W Turner's *Rain Steam and Speed* together and I began to see how exciting, how much fun this new venture was going to be.

A couple of months later, the first public description to an audience of some 15 blind and partially sighted people was a little more intimidating. A 17th-century Dutch flower painting by Jan van Huysum was the choice. It must have been in the spring, because we carefully laid out tulips and narcissi and some luscious grapes on the table for each of our visitors to handle. Beside these tactile resources was a large reproduction of the painting, which they took home with them if they wished. Visitors were eager to ask questions – in this case, how did the artist manage to paint so many fruits and flowers from different seasons in one picture? This was interesting, because it's also the question that sighted visitors often ask.

After the description was done, we all went out into the gallery to look at the painting itself, with other, sighted, visitors around. This method is still followed at the National Gallery to large groups of blind and partially sighted visitors who like to listen to the description in comfort, handle tactile resources in private without being stared at, but also enjoy the inclusivity of experiencing the atmosphere of a busy gallery.

At the Royal Academy, we did the opposite – look first and handle afterwards. This was done before the building opened to the public, so there was a feeling of being at a privileged private view. Elsewhere, there is simply a description in front of the painting. Sometimes this is in a cordoned-off area with seating, at others our visitors stand with members of the general public

who have dropped by to listen. It's a great moment when one of these people comments – as they often do – that 'they've never looked at a picture like that before and please can they have a similar session for themselves?'

Tactile resources are helpful and popular. The smell of linseed oil or the light touch of a badger hair paintbrush goes down well. So does a length of velvet or a musical instrument that, with luck, someone can play. At the Wallace Collection's regular *Sensations* events, a visiting expert often comes to join our visitors for tea and rather splendid cakes, and the occasion develops into a master class in their individual fields. Regulars have made perfume after a foray into the 18th-century galleries, discovered first-hand how gilded frames are made, written poetry inspired by a Rubens landscape, experimented with colour and shape and even listened to a short lecture on Indian armour given by one of their own. On special occasions, they don gloves to handle a bronze relief sculpture or an ancient piece of oak furniture covered with tiny carved figures.

So each gallery has its own way of presenting pictures and sculptures to blind and partially sighted people. But some things are constant – we do use the words 'look' and 'see'. We describe colour – often with a sensory adjective that enhances its quality – 'a sharp apple green', 'red as fire'. It helps to have a wide vocabulary and to use onomatopoeia – the 'whoosh' of Turner's train as it thunders over the bridge. Simile is good, but metaphor not so good. 'She's a bird in flight' can be confusing, whereas, 'her arms are spread wide like a bird in flight' isn't.

Writing a description for a website is quite a different process, hopefully it's rewarding for both parties, but there's nothing like a live description, with a live audience asking questions, telling you if you aren't being clear or accurate: 'You've just said it's green and now you're saying it's blue!' You've obviously neglected to tell them the grass is in the shadow on one side.

You sometimes have to take the odd knock to your pride in the audio-description business. Some years ago, I was describing a print of Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac, and was brought to an abrupt halt by a somewhat caustic regular who knew her Bible: 'And where's the ram in the thicket, Bridget?'

In my own defence the missing animal was very well hidden and in fact, I seem to remember one of our partially sighted visitors found it first. It was an occasion when the picture didn't 'speak to me and tell me what it wanted me to say' in quite the way I would have wished, but it all added to the fun of the afternoon and at least one visitor went home feeling delighted with herself. Hopefully, all our visitors go home delighted with all the pictures – and, although we have fun, talk, and activities at these events – it's the pictures that matter. We can't wait till galleries are fully open and welcoming back all the groups with different needs and expectations from their visits, including our blind and partially sighted friends.

As the poet Criss Jami wrote: "If love is blind, then maybe a blind person that loves (art) has a greater understanding of it." *The brackets are mine.*

# Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth (Хлеб-соль ешь, а правду-матку режь – old Russian proverb)

Al Jirikowic



More often than not, critical analysis of much modern or post-modern art is stymied by its simplicity of appearance. Critically explained: the more seemingly simple or basically apparent the art is, the bigger the modernist or postmodernist mess or confusion there is to fall into. We have seen far too many fairly blank canvases and cubes just sitting there without discussion, which when addressed, can aesthetically get complicated, alienating and unwieldy. So we arrive at the times we live in when criticism is dead. For as we said in our last issue, art worth its salt is not obvious and never has been. However, plainly and sadly, this is not the case with the recently sold *Non Fungible Token* (NFT) at a Christie's auction. For this is an example of 'what you don't see is what you will not get'. In this case, as it turns out, this is an intangible work of art.

Sadly, this is the unfortunate case of the highly touted sale of an NFT, entitled *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* created by Beeple (real name Mike Winkelmann) and sold by Christie's auction house for \$69.3 million, plus fees, on March 11. An NFT is not a material object, rather it is a non-fungible token, minted as immutable i.e. digitally authentic to one owner, in this case a crypto-fund from Singapore known as Metakovan. So the ownership is of prime concern here, not copyright, nor the actual art, as this image will be replicated millions of times but there is, alas, only one owner. And that is quite a stunt but the overwhelming factor in this transaction is just ownership of the minted certificate, not really the digital image. Of course this is situated on the blockchain, that is, its location is spread over the many computers that comprise the blockchain to further add to its original nature and consequently adds to its financial value. This is purely a digital endeavor that does not exist in any form of materiality except for its unwieldy price. In a real sense, in the history of art, it does not exist but for its digital status. The actual art could not matter less and at this point, it simply does not matter. And that

**The subject and object have not only merged, they were never under consideration in the first place. This does not consider the anti-art of Dadaism, for at least Dada took society and art into consideration. That this NFT is considered art, in the first place, is troubling.**

is the problem. It has no matter of concern or focus or material matter of sense. So what is it?

"It will one day be worth \$1 billion," Metakovan said in a statement.

<https://www.cnn.com/style/article/banana-artwork-eaten-sculpture-intl/index.html>

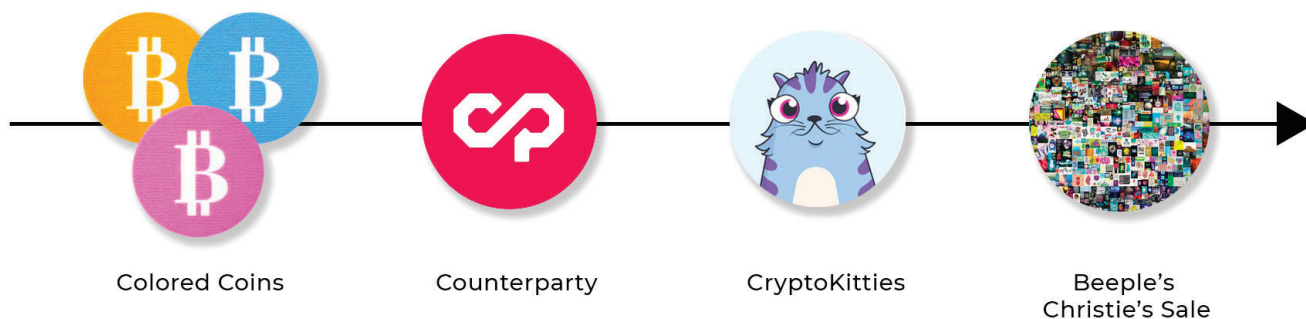
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That art has faced a dematerialization before is not the issue here. Art has often, especially in the postmodern world, come to a vanishing point. We know that the conceptual movement was an attempt to elude the market/gallery system only to have collectors purchase the documentation of such conceptual work. Certainly performance vanishes, as does theatre, dance, music and even film as all these forms will hang in our minds but all have a material reference. Not this stuff. The nature of this NFT is purely financial and declares itself as a real departure from whatever we have ever considered art. This is not Warhol.

In our past we may have had an overpriced object or memory to belittle or trash but never pure investment in a digital format. This is now art of a non-aesthetic. The subject and object have not only merged, they were never under consideration in the first place. This does not consider the anti-art of Dadaism, for at least Dada took society and art into consideration. That this NFT is considered art, in the first place, is troubling.

But the trouble is that this is not nothing. We have covered art as a deliberate store of value and tax evasion in earlier issues so as to de-artify its human purpose or any need for humans to make art. But such art still exists in its packing crates and in vaults stored away, hidden from us. This NFT is not hiding. Is it now right in front of us, for all of us to behold?

But nothing itself is more elusive, for nothing seems to be the



*A suggested time line for NFTs.*

way it is, even nothing itself. Everything, it would seem, comes from nothing. So I have a high regard for nothing as a cosmic focus. Forgive me. But there is something here that is important. That is, if we actually look at this phenomenon artfully. We see once again, TA DA! ... the art mind doing its job. Art as the unconscious reflection of our state of being, society today revealed, our gods so to speak - but only if we do the work to interpret it. And here we have an absolutely unmistakable representation of an ominous and omnipresent reflection of our mind-numbed society and its distracted and dangerously alienated state in a dead/living metaphor! Our god is glaring back at us.

*The Washington Post* was wise to say it was not art but they really held up going any further about the nature of this thing. They said rich people should not waste their money on this.

Ironically, at least from my point of view, they largely represent and tend to the culture that sprouted this monied monster in the first place. Our highly contentious and material postmodern state of chaos is our god's home. They water this garden on a daily basis. *The Post* would never insult money itself. Money is god in Washington. Who would read the paper if the lifeblood of American and world culture was trashed by the very daily document that defines and sets our culture right on an hourly basis? So what gives in this contradiction?

The NTF is mental dust. That it achieved so much attention was, indeed, its value, but that is all. Just hype. And to the extent we cannot conceptualise this we will feel the pain of being burned. From the looks of this, I think we have had quite enough. I feel degraded dealing with it.

I would say we are now in a position, with these decks cleared, to demand more from our art, our culture. I would never try to define art and enjoy the reality of its non-definition, but that is to say it is time to shape up. Artists and critics need to wrest our art away from those who settle for mental dust. Our life depends on it and the time is nigh. So start. And stop breathing that mental dust. You know what it is.

The following comes from <https://jingculturecommerce.com>

Colored Coins are often considered the conceptual spark for NFTs. Beginning in 2012, these small denominations of Bitcoin were used to represent assets from digital collectibles and property to company shares.

Next came Counterparty in 2014, a peer-to-peer financial platform on the Bitcoin blockchain that became a hub for digital asset creation and trading (memes and trading cards thrived).

NFTs hit the mainstream in 2017 with CryptoKitties, a blockchain game in which players adopt, rear, and trade virtual cats (so popular it significantly slowed the Ethereum blockchain).

2021's manic demand for NFTs can be explained through a confluence of factors:

After years of growth, cryptocurrency investors are looking to diversify portfolios.

Pandemic lockdowns saw homebound creators and collectors invest more time and money in NFTs (\$250 million of NFT volume traded in 2020, up 300 percent year-on-year).

Emerging NFT marketplaces have become more user-friendly, bringing in new collectors.

Celebrity interest (Grimes, Mark Cuban, Lindsay Lohan, etc.) has generated huge hype.

NFTs are created, bought, and traded on the blockchain, predominantly Ethereum's. To participate, users use a digital wallet and create an account on one of many of marketplaces including:

Rarible — a Moscow-based platform and currently the world's largest marketplace. It's centered on supporting artists producing affordable art, with the average transaction per user standing at \$129.

OpenSea — one of the first decentralized NFT marketplaces and currently the second largest. Considered by some as the eBay for NFTs, OpenSea platforms millions of assets across hundreds of categories including trading cards, domain names, digital art, and virtual worlds.

Nifty Gateway — focused on fine art and collectibles it terms "Nifties," its prominence is soaring off the power of platforming celebrity "drops." Somewhat uniquely, users are not required to own or deal with cryptocurrency and can conduct purchases using a credit card.



# Day of the Tentacle: Yayoi Kusama at Martin Gropius Bau

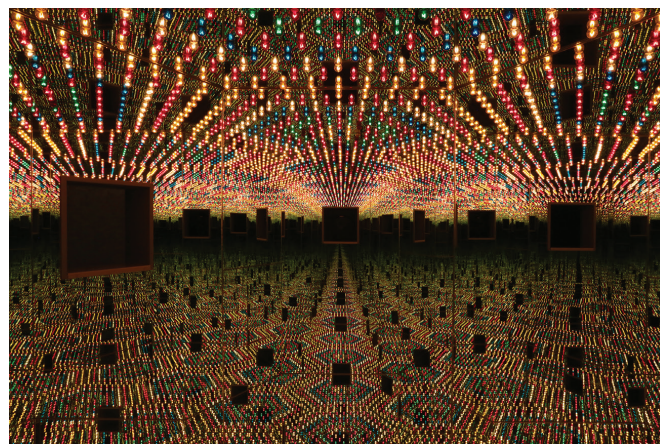
Christian Hain

The retrospective of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama at Gropius Bau starts in the employees' parking lot (they *do* still have one, despite an outspoken political agenda that doesn't exactly approve of private transport), where we find some trees transformed into a smurf-like village, or fly agaric-styled art objects. "Hard wood, wearing a (white and red-dotted) dress, wrapped up, clothed, covered" - this could have some deeper meaning, as we'll see later. The colourful - poisonous, though, if we continue that mushroom association - patterns are a key element in Kusama's work, and feel very welcome in these dark and trying times. Mentioning this, there's something else: you may not actually visit the show, not right now; it's confusing, and the rules are changing almost by the day. Not even a week after the preview, MGB was ordered to close the doors again, like all Berlin art venues. The ongoing situation and not the artworks' supposed value, was also responsible for heightened security measures around that preview, but at least, they might have attracted the curiosity of random passers-by.

Upon presentation of a time-slot ticket, the personal invitation on our smartphone, and a positively negative Covid test not older than 24 hours, we were allowed inside. Peeking through glass doors in the foyer, we see pink tentacles, black-dotted, and reaching high up in the air, as if some mythological beast were breaking through the floor. Silly visitors will feel inclined to mumble, "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cthulhu>), but we're still in Berlin, and H.P. Lovecraft was most definitely NOT an inspiration for the artist.

These glass doors are only the show's exit and securely guarded (Covid laws again, probably), so it's upstairs first. Many steps and a panting break later, admiring the whole, and huge, installation while being aware of the artist's nationality, a second, more reasonable, interpretation forms in our mind. Let's call a spade a spade, all false modesty aside: the most fitting association here goes by the name *shokushu goukan*, Japanese Tentacle Erotica. Should you not be familiar with the motif, no, that's not just the outlandish interpretation of a pervy Hentai Kamen fanboy film, but quite common in Japanese art and entertainment, from classic to contemporary. Even Hokusai did it (not literally, but - well, you know, what I mean), go ahead, and google his *Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*.

Leaning over the railing, we note two things: the material appears balloonish - not Jeff-Koons-500kg-balloonish, but airy



*Kusama: infinity mirrored room Love Forever 1966*

plastic and it's almost, but not quite, possible to reach out and touch it. That railing being rather low, curiosity could pose an even greater risk to museum goers of all age groups than a certain virus does. Recoiling from the abyss, we enter an exhaustive retrospective starting from Kusama's beginnings in the 1930s and leading right up to recent years. A photograph accompanying the timeline on a wall shows the artist as a young girl aged 10 in 1939, while the earliest drawing in the room dates from 1934 ... wait, this might be a typo? Or was she indeed some sort of drawing wunderkind?

As a general rule, background information can be helpful, but also stand in the way of understanding, especially if that background info says mental illness. Walking around between the early paintings, visitors feel serious Halle St Pierre/Museum of Everything vibes, but are these premature traces of future mental troubles, or merely a debuting artist's attempts at 20th-century surrealism?

Part of a recreation of Kusama's first ever exhibition in a local community centre (don't ever say those are good for nothing!) in 1952, *Speurim* introduces what would become one of her trademarks: the mushroom patterns, here appearing on a misshapen tongue (or worm?). This, like other images, did not come out of nowhere, has not been deliberately imagined by the artist (is that ever the case?). From an early age, Yayoi Kusama has experienced visual hallucinations of a style, some would describe as 'shrooms flashbacks, I'm told. She portrays the world as she sees it, and others don't. We find a quote in reference to the *Infinity Nets* series, which she began painting in the late 1950s: "I would

cover a canvas with nets, then continue painting them (...) the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as they enveloped me." These words also suggest an escape from her true self, body and life.

Presented alongside paintings dominated by the same non-colour, a large scale photograph shows the artist in front of an empty (also for her?) white wall. A young Japanese surrounding himself with whiteness is the equivalent of a Western teenager dressing all in black, easily judged as potentially depressive; white being the colour of death and mourning in Japanese culture. This bit of information could already count for exoticism, supposing different cultural upbringings to result in differently conditioned people in different parts of the world, people thus being different instead of equal everywhere - yet, there might be something to it.

Shades of white are still omnipresent in Kusama Yayoi-san's first NYC show of 1963, having moved there in 1958. Is the abstract painting *Pacific Ocean* (1960) motivated by homesickness, fear of the big changes in her life, or, on the contrary, does it mark an escape from learned conventions, to embrace another culture with its whole new set of connotations, where white is no longer Japanese white, but Gaijin white, and an innocent new start?

The wall text tells about depression, poverty, and visa struggles. In that same show, the Gertrude Stein Gallery sold an installation, which we likewise find at MGB today: white and very phallic row boats painted on black walls surround an actual white row boat covered with very phallic plaster objects that are aiming in all directions, some dangling limp, some standing, well, (half-)erect, some even strategically placed on the rowing bench. From this point on, visitors can no longer escape a second key element in Kusama's art beside psychopathology, and that's the erotic/sexual aspect - or let's put it in the most low-brow, but very hip internet meme slang: all together now; 'Psychology has long moved on from Freud' - Yayoi Kusama: Hold my beer.' (/ saké).

The artist's ultimate breakthrough followed with another show two years later, now at Castellane Gallery, and works like *Phallis' Field*: A room with white, red-dotted phalli on the floor - pick one like a flower? - and mirrors for walls. The door could be closed from the inside, yet stands wide open, securely locked in place, and MGB's warden couldn't enlighten me as to the original concept. This was the first of many infinity mirror rooms to come, spaces for the visitor to get lost in, melting in and outside, mingling reflections of self and abstract patterns, challenging the perceptions of self and reality.

Kusama's style more and more mirrors the style of an era, to a point that many works don't seem necessarily unique, or personal, but a typical expression of the 1960s and 70s, right there in line with lava lamps, French fashion, and hallucinogens. Kusama's natural highs must have resonated greatly with society at a time when Timothy Leary had only recently quit his practical research projects at Harvard ("Turn on, tune in, and drop out", sounds like a perfect slogan for Kusama's art, too). We follow her to shows all over the US and Europe, watch extracts from contemporary French and German TV documentaries next to videos of happenings and performances that look exactly what you'd



*infinity mirror room Phallis' Field, 1965*



*Yayoi Kusama*

imagine a decent 1960s/70s happening or performance to look like.

In a way, you might think, Kusama became the artworld's beloved star, a compatriot of hers always wanted to be, and she is undoubtedly more talented than Yoko Ono. With macaronis - indeed, you got that right: solid, unboiled pasta - another element joins her installations, and we wonder about the inspiration. Despite having just cited that other Japanese artist, any unrequited feelings for Paul McCartney seem very improbable.

Noodles in all forms and variations, noodles and ... more phallic symbols, in many colours, occasionally red-dotted phalli, and... balls, or actually spheres, half-spheres, like silver bowling balls. On a poster we see the artist tossing one of them away (they cannot have been very heavy).

We discover Yayoi's adventures in fashion wonderland, which were more than a digression: Kusama successfully orchestrated an empire of boutique stores to sell her self-designed clothes and accessories (take note: Takashi Murakami is not the first Japanese art megastar with an attached merchandising business). Total art and entertainment: Kusama was definitely a part of the 1970s.



It's not very important, only a detail in the literature of the show. The sentence confirming their relationship as only friends is the only occasion when Gropius Bau tells us anything about Yayoi's relationships (at least I haven't noticed other examples). Sadly, we don't learn much about her artist connections and mutual influences, with the exception of some words on a close (but not physically intimate) relationship to Joseph Cornell. She should at least have gotten along well with the Gutai group. Having participated unofficially in Biennale 1966 - showing her art in the streets of Venice like a tourist, she was finally invited in 1993.

Kusama's *Peep Show* may justifiably be called one of the most impressive examples of Op Art, as looking through a tiny window, we catch glimpses of an alternate reality: a thunderstorm of blinking rainbows, not unreminiscent of a 1970s disco dance floor (only misses some seriously bearded singer in a tight white tracksuit if movies and music videos are anything to go by).

Other many mirrored rooms of the Infinity sort are even more immersive and intimate, and must be entered - or should we say penetrated? - to discover objects and patterns, fluorescent double helix-shaped tube lights or atom models, dimming and re-lightening, of course all surrounded by mirrors again. They admittedly left us searching for the exit. There are so many, but which one is real, i.e. leading back to (our) reality?

Another example adds a further dimension to the room in a room concept, when MGB's walls are painted in the same fashion as the insides of a large cube, and now the mirrors are on the outside, too (sounds complicated? (just see the picture). The patterns in this case seem to summon Halloween pumpkins, yellow with black dots, but don't be afraid of your own reflection.

Great art and great spectacle don't need to be mutually exclusive. It's all very trippy, but is it a good trip or a bad one? Referring to the artist, we cannot be sure; the art aficionado certainly has a great time. Perhaps it all boils down to the old saying: there's a thin line between genius and insanity, maybe none at all. Also to another, more fundamental question: could there be indeed something like the higher truth of madmen? Dots, vectors, what if some were able to gain insights into a higher order of things, catch a glimpse of the matrix, beyond reality, and open those doors of perception, to transcend natural science that only allows us one possible representation of the world? We don't know about that, but we feel that it's better this way. Though infinity can look wonderful, it comes with a price, namely the forlorn feeling that man doesn't belong there, lost among endless reflections of shapes, self, and colours.

Yayoi Kusama never gave up painting entirely, and at certain times even intensified her production on canvas. Now living in a mental hospital - by her own choice, as stresses Gropius Bau. They seem eager to downplay the mentally unconventional condition, also citing issues of physical health as the reason for her return to Japan as early as 1973 - the late works appear post-surrealist. Some could be influenced by Australian aboriginal art, or is this just coincidence, maybe even by unconscious spiritual links?

Another mystery remains unsolved in a great, and multifaceted, retrospective: what are those dots and circles good for that we



*Kusama Pollen 1986*



*Kusama with Pumpkin, (2010)*

© Yayoi Kusama

find here and there, in fact almost everywhere throughout the exhibition, painted on the floor like colour code charts?

On the way home, I realized that I did not wander among the tentacles as I'm sure to have seen others do from above (and it really wasn't just a hallucination ... I guess). The circuit led me past the main entrance, the restrooms and an improvised Covid test station in the basement straight to a back door. Thinking about those tentacles again, I found another association: flames. ...No, not really, tentacles it is.

*Yayoi Kusama, A Retrospective: A Bouquet of Love I Saw in the Universe, 23 April - 15 August 2021, Martin Gropius Bau*



# Displaced

Eleonora Schianchi



Richard Mosse: *Platon*, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo  
Photo: Jack Shainman, 2021

Entering MAST, one has the impression of being teleported into another dimension, a feeling which might well be shared by anyone seeing this space for the first time. The modern and shiny building, designed by STUDIO LABICS (Rome) in 2005, is the last thing you would expect in an historical and very much lived-in city like Bologna. Inside the complex, 77 photographs in large format, a big video wall and two monumental immersive video installations are spread within the three main exhibition spaces: the MAST Gallery, the Foyer, and Level 0.

Mosse's interest in social and political conflicts is apparent in his first shots, taken in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Gaza Strip, and on the frontier between Mexico and the United States. He captures the tragedy of these events, but there is something in Mosse's works exhibited at MAST that resonates and becomes louder at every step forward: the series *Infra*, *Heat Map* and *Tristes Tropiques* show Mosse's need to stand at a distance from his subjects. A distance that is both physical and conceptual and, as stated by the curator of the exhibition, Urs Stahel, fundamental to "give account of the circumstances, of the context, putting what precedes and what follows at the center of his reflection" (press release). After all, in *Displaced* we never see the destruction, the ongoing catastrophe, but we know something happened or will eventually happen.

The constant technology upgrades, non-stop feeds, and instant updates of the postmodern era brought about a perpetual image-exposure that made us oversaturated. This flood of informa-

Located on the periphery of Bologna, Fondazione MAST has just reopened its doors to host *Displaced: migration, conflict, climate change*: the first retrospective of the artist Richard Mosse, curated by Urs Stahel. Born in 1980 and currently based in New York, Mosse represented his home country Ireland in the National Pavilion of Ireland for the 55th Venice Art Biennale in 2013 with the video installation *The Enclave*, and exhibited in major institutions including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, FOAM in Amsterdam, and the Tate Modern, London.

tion inevitably pushed documentary photography towards a blind alley that seemed impossible to escape. We are too close, we see too much, we live with skepticism, in a state of anaesthesia.

I was caught by surprise when, while searching information about the artist, I read that he was defined as a "conceptual documentary photographer" in the press release. But wasn't *documentary photography* dead? Richard Mosse is determined to relaunch documentary photography, employing new tools and new approaches to upend conventional representations. Using specific devices, some of which were originally made for military purposes, he rewrites the terms of a genre.

When seeing the pictures from the series *Infra*, one has the impression of seeing coral-coloured imaginary landscapes. Instead, the use of the Kodak Aerochrome film, originally designed to detect the enemy, is an attempt to stress the ongoing state of emergency in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In *Heat Maps*, the device is used to underline the anonymity and the shared condition of people in refugee camps. Using a thermal imaging camera, able to detect temperature differences, he calls our attention to mass migrations towards Europe and to the crisis between open and closed borders. Lastly, in his recent *Ultra* and *Tristes Tropiques* series, he uses UV fluorescence technique and satellite photography respectively (based on drones and multispectral imaging) to crystallize both the beauty of the Amazon rainforest and the striking impact of deforestation in Brazil.

As suggested by Susan Sontag, "there's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking" (*Regarding the pain of others*, ed. Penguin, 2004). Richard Mosse steps back, takes aim and finally re-appropriates this distance through the use of a series of tools that were not created to serve art, but that turn out to be a way to subvert the conventional way of conceiving photography. The

impressive size of the works, the immersive video installations and the use of different devices forces us to step back too, to observe at a thoughtful distance. If images “cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine”, the aim of “Displaced” is precisely for the spectator to feel again that discomfort, that sense of estrangement lost due to the constant exposure to an endless flow of images.

Richard Mosse finally understands that the only way to challenge how we see and perceive images is to establish new visual, conceptual and critical meanings within the images themselves,

and within us. This exhibition is a jolt to the system, showing that documentary photography is not dead, and that it might have acquired a new shape.

*Richard Mosse's exhibition is at Fondazione MAST, Bologna until 19th of September 2021. The entrance to the exhibition is free upon reservation, and open from Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am-8 pm.*

## BRUSSELS

# Pierre Alechinsky: Carta Canta

Sam Vangheluwe

*To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.*

Samuel Beckett

Belgium is a beautiful city, in the words of the previous POTUS, Brussels, alas, is a hellhole. In these times of division, polarisation and discord, nationally and internationally, we Belgians shrug our schizophrenic shoulders and sigh. Belgium having so often been called a surrealist country, the entire world is now catching on to the fact that it is no less so. A favourite parlour game of the British is ‘Name ten famous Belgians’. The implication that this is an impossible exercise never fails to tickle the average Englishman. There are funnier jokes. Somewhere in the first decade of this century, Belgian TV decided to copy BBC1’s *Great Britons* series. True to character, it came up with two lists, one of famous Flemish Belgians, and one of famous Walloon Belgians.

Yet it is truly not difficult to name 10 famous Belgians, without even resorting to ancient history (Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor), fiction (Tintin, Hercule Poirot) or criminal history (Marc Dutroux, King Leopold II). There are even some that are habitually claimed by both Flemish and Walloons (Aldolphe Sax, Django Reinhardt, Audrey Hepburn, Jacques Brel...). At times, we are true Belgians.

But then again, sometimes we simply cannot shrug off our provincialism. At this very moment, a commission of nine experts is fashioning what is called a ‘Flemish Cultural Canon’: a list of the most important names, events and objects from Flemish culture and history, so-called cultural anchor points. It should be ready by October 2022. An impressive array of medals for the Flemish to flaunt in the face of the rival Walloons, the patronising Dutch, snooty French, and the chuckly Brits. Likewise, a handy tool to indoctrinate, I mean integrate, refugees and other newcomers to our neck of the woods.



*Pierre Alechinsky: A propos de Binche, (1967)  
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Grafisch Buro Lefevre*

Upon hearing of the planned exhibition of Pierre Alechinsky’s work, I was overcome with nostalgia for a bygone era, in tempore non suspecto, when the arts might allow one to feel a harmless flutter of national, yes, even European, pride, without being yelled at or soliciting insult.

Pierre Alechinsky (b. 1927, in the ‘hellhole’) is most often described as a Belgian painter. Arguably, he is also the last. The *Carta Canta* exhibition in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, is not a retrospective. It is inspired by the long-lived relationship between Alechinsky and the museum, and the many works the painter donated. The title can be translated as ‘words fly away, writings remain’, or more succinctly: ‘there it is in black and white’. The exhibition comprises hundreds of graphic works, prints, etchings, lithographs, drawings, and a small number of paintings.

Upon entering the exhibition, I found I had to check my habitual anarchic streak: meticulously ignoring the thematic order and



even the trajectory proposed by the curator. No such luck in pandemic times. But I was not perturbed: apart from keeping hygienic distance and sheepishly following the darts stuck to the floor, the visitor may ignore the curator's set-up at leisure.

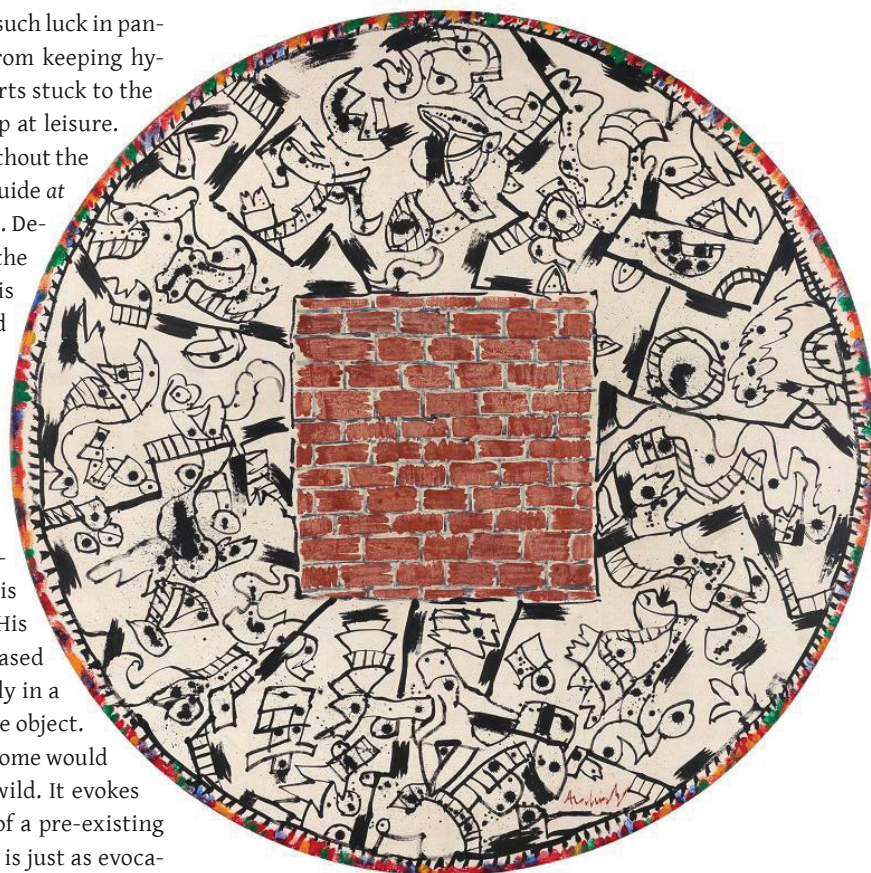
He or she may contemplate the works *as such*, without the intermediate literature. And read the visitor's guide *at home* (thank heavens, there are no audio guides). Despite so much ink having flowed throughout the artist's long life, describing and analyzing his many inspirations, his methods, media, and techniques, I am happy to confirm that the visitor to *Carta Canta* can easily do without the 'background information' and enjoy the full anarchic force of Alechinsky's oeuvre. It is strong enough.

Alechinsky crosses frontiers other painters avoid, and he appropriates them. The usual categories do not apply. His work is painting, but it is drawing, it is painterly but likewise graphic. His painting is a form of writing. His writing is not based on conventional signs, yet it is legible, albeit only in a painterly way. It narrates, but the story is not the object. His painting-drawing-writing is spontaneous - some would say automatic, yet rigorously disciplined. It is wild. It evokes (medieval) illumination yet is not illustrative (of a pre-existing reality). It is informed by Asian calligraphy, but is just as evocative of Breughel or Jeroen Bosch. It is monumental, as in the *grandes machines* (of which in my greed I would have liked to have seen more), and precious like jewellery, as here in his graphic works.

The paintings on paper are mounted by way of *marouflage*: glued with wallpaper paste onto raw canvas, resulting in a surface with a sheen beyond comparison. It is as if the more or less ruffled painted-on paper, once smoothed, acquires a new dimension, as if it has somehow come into being by itself.

Many compositional devices and features in Alechinsky's work challenge the observer's gaze. He plays, profiting from being ambidextrous, with the reading order (East Asian: also right to left/vertical). The composition of paintings with *predella* (along the frame at the bottom), or with 'marginal remarks' surrounding a central painting, offer multiple shifting perspectives.

*Carta Canta* exposes a paper universe of sizzling, crackling and chirping creatures, objects and spaces, all issuing from the tip of a brush, and laid down, without relenting, on all kinds of paper supports: fine Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese paper, 19th-century laid paper, vellum, wrapping paper, old hand-written letters, in-



*Carta Canta*

voices, securities, notarial deeds, maps - anything the painter can lay his hands on, attesting to an appetite for salvaged paper possibly only rivalled by Paul Klee.

Pierre Alechinsky is one of those rare remaining (Belgian) painters, who do not resort to selecting their 'subject matter' from one or other photographic source, in order to then arbitrarily superimpose 'content' (the back story). Because this content never really merges with the form, it must painstakingly be repeated, by the artist, gallery owner, museum curator, critic. Ultimately, however, you are left with a random, photo-based, mute 'image'.

In Alechinsky's work, refreshingly, form, content and physical substrate are an indivisible, organic unity. *Carta Canta* is evocative, affecting, delectable. It is a feast.

*Carta Canta*, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Until 01.08.2021

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# The History You Save May Be Your Own

Aleksander Hudzik

What do you know about socialist realism? Perhaps that it was a weird aberration in art during the Cold War era, when nebbish Soviet artists were trying to depict life in a heavy handed manner like the sculptures of Kim Jong-il that adorn every square in Pyongyang. There were paintings of workers and tractors and factories and fields, it was an exasperating outpouring of ideology that permeated all aspects of life.

If you have a better grasp of art and culture behind the iron curtain you might know that socialist realism was an official tool of the state. Officially institutionalized in Poland in 1949, an entire division of artists eagerly or perhaps more opportunistically

supported what Aldous Huxley called the *Brave New World*. It lasted less than a decade. When Josef Stalin died in 1953, socialist realism went with him.

But was it really only a moribund period where the art was no more free than the dissidents imprisoned in Gulags? Is there anything we can learn today from the socialist realists? This seems to be the central question of the new exhibition *Cold Revolution* at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw.

Socialist realism was not the first moment where art turned its eyes to the working class. Galleries of 19th-century paintings are filled with the half naked bodies of workers, like those in



Józef Chelmoński: Indian Summer  
Google Art Project





Ladislav Guderna: *Soldiers in the Club-Room, (1952).*  
 Courtesy of Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava

Gustave Caillebotte's *The Floor Scrapers*, or the women taking a break after a long day of labour in Josef Chelmoński's *Indian Summer*. In 1924 the Nobel Prize was given to Polish writer Władysław Reymont for his work *The Peasants*, which is known as the first modern story written from the perspective of the peasantry. What was anticipated in pre-war European art came into full bloom during the times of socialist realism. The exhibition *Cold Revolution*, curated by Joanna Kodjak and Jérôme Bazin, follows the nuanced paths that socialist realism opened.

The history of socialist realism belongs to the realm of the art world, but we can also see it through a broader lens, suggested in the new book written by Polish scholar Adam Leszczynski, *Ludowa Historia Polski (A People's History of Poland)*. This title might be familiar for American readers: Leszczynski uses the same frame as Howard Zinn in his famous *A People's History of the United States*, written not from the perspective of the minority: those who owned the land and factories, but from those who served these landscapes and industries, who lived their lives within them. Those whose history has not previously been written.

The exhibition opens with a beautiful, large-scale painting of workers by Hungarian artist Hans Mattis-Teutsch. Proletarians are marching towards the better future. The atmosphere is as bright as their freshly cleaned and rolled shirt cuffs, there is no pain, no sweat, not a single stain, because such things are not part of socialist realism. And from there we set sail through seven large rooms filled with paintings, movies, sculptures, and toys, which all show us how capacious socialist realism actually was.

Another large painting depicts a couple looking into the distance, where we are reminded of the one thing we tend to forget. Those people are war survivors, what they see might be a better future, but it is within the context of a traumatic past filled with homes and families buried during WW2. This interpretation of socialist realism can be a challenge for those who think that postwar trauma can only be represented through abstraction, because there is no art after Auschwitz.

We speculate about what those people were thinking, how they were processing and coping with their traumas. The exhibition doesn't give us complimentary texts that might build the context for what we see. If we want to understand the movement better, we are to do it through the collection of essays written for the exhibition catalogue, which is one of the greatest books about socialist realism that I have ever held in my hands.

Context is crucial, and here, the context for propaganda in painting is built around toys, posters, and movies. Mundane life. It was a peculiar kind of epiphany for me, when I saw a Czechoslovakian poster of a farmer drinking fresh mineral water. It could have been an American advertisement from the 1950s if we just replaced the water with an ice cold bottle of Coca-Cola. The epiphany is simple: it's perhaps the first time I saw the people, not the ideology, in socialist realism. I felt their happiness and sorrow, hidden behind what is told in the language of propaganda. This was the reality of their lives.

Here in Poland, we denied our own past. We told proletarians 'it wasn't your country you built, it was Communism, it wasn't your



history you created, it was the Soviet State. It wasn't your responsibility for the wars you took part in, it wasn't you, it was your oppressor'. In 1989, we decided to remove these efforts and life achievements out of sight, quite literally. The vast majority of our socialist realist sculptures are kept in a rundown countryside museum in Kozłówka. The same thing happened to Hungarian socialist realism: their sculptures are now kept in a Budapest park of unwanted history.

"A thorough, bias-free reassessment of the art made in the former Eastern Europe under Stalinism feels all the more important today, as battles over the collective memory of the Communist period are waged in these countries," writes Magdalena Moskalewicz on the second life of socialist realism for Art in

America in 2021, as Poland and Hungary grapple with our shift to the far-right. The state has created a new kind of propaganda where everything that was before 1989 no longer belongs to our history. The most successful note of this exhibition is the confounding of this demagoguery with reality. We are told we don't own our history. It is narrated and depicted by the rich, by the state. But of course that's not true, we do own it, and it is illustrated in these paintings and embedded in the sculptures, left to us to learn how to respect and continue to tell, to keep from being buried.

## MILAN

# Contemporary Art in Galleries in Milan

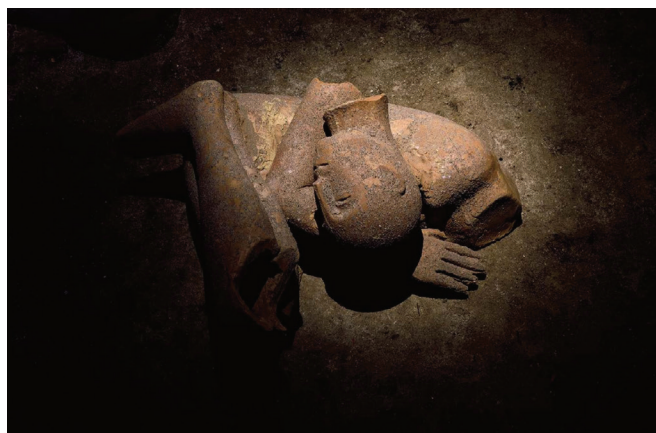
Graziella Colombo

Museums and exhibitions are open again in Milan. That's why I've recently visited two different shows in two different galleries, trying to understand something more about contemporary art, which is often difficult for me to approach and appreciate to its full value and in its fullest expressive power.

Mimmo Paladino is a very well known artist in Italy. He has just received an honorary degree in arts, music and entertainment for his ability to explore and use traditional artistic techniques, mixing them with theatre, music and cinema.

Paladino recently exhibited at the Cardi Gallery a series of 32 terracotta sculptures, *I Dormienti* (the Sleepers), made up of naked bodies of men, some whole and some broken, huddled and lying on a grey floor in a large dimly lit room and accompanied by music by Brian Eno. Usually Paladino's works and drawings leave me perplexed, but I found this sculptural ensemble engaging. Walking on tiptoe among the motionless bodies, almost with the fear of disturbing or waking them, I thought of the inhabitants of Pompei and Ercolano, dead because of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. This was not the intent of the artist who was drawing inspiration from Henry Moore's drawings of the British war shelters during World War 2. But the exhibition aroused in me an emotion, a memory, and in the respectful silence for these eternal bodies, I perceived a harmony made of melancholy and also solemn beauty.

This did not happen with the other contemporary show I saw: *Etere* ('ether') by the Israeli Yuval Avital at the Building Gallery. The exhibition is structured in four sections, each of which is a microcosm connected to the others. The artist uses different expressive languages and tools, from the most traditional, such as drawings, paintings and watercolours, to the most innovative: multimedia installations and video projections. Many works are



Mimmo Paladino: *I Dormienti* (The Sleepers)



Yuval Avital: *Etere*

untitled and new, created for this event. All are accompanied by sounds and music.

An artist and composer, Avital is recognized as an explorer of identity and the subconscious, of darkness and light, of love and desire, an artist who tries, he says, “to reveal, at least in part, the truths hidden in the Things”. His exhibition should be an aesthetic and metaphoric journey between reality and fantasy, between physics and metaphysics. I’m afraid I did not understand the message and had a sense only of a chaotic ensemble of colours, images, figures, sounds, videos, installations. Only one thing provoked an emotion: watching two videos, very lively, with strong colours, supported by adequate music: I imagined the moment of Creation, a true cosmic chaos.

Leonardo said that the artist must know how to paint man, which is easy, and the concepts of the mind, which is very difficult, because it’s a huge task to be understood through signs,

symbols and figures without forgetting harmony. Nowadays artists are generally conceptual, but they are often incomprehensible, at least for me, even after the usual and necessary explanations.

Art, even that of the past, is always contemporary because it is an expression of its time and its reality, but, for me, it must be engaging, intelligible, interesting of course, able to arouse emotions, be attractive not only for its message but for its beauty and even spirituality. Above all, when you look at an artwork, whatever it is, you have to like it. If you don’t, it can be very hard to grasp the meaning, or give another meaning of your own, to stand still, enjoy and appreciate it, even it’s considered a masterpiece.

## A New Look at Italy

Painting in late 19th and early 20th-century Europe isn’t only about the avant-garde! In the second half of the 19th century, the impressionists mastered a revolution by eliminating non-naturalist subjects from painting with their ‘retinal painting’ (Duchamp). They eliminated past and future in time, reducing the present to the moment. Reality was what you saw. The *inventio*, elaborated in the studio, gave way to the sketch *en plein air* from drawing on to the fast and unfinished brush stroke.

Towards the end of the century the first modern revolutionary movement was over and impressionism was questioned: in 1878 Cezanne gave life to cubism, Renoir went to Italy and discovered Raphael along with the paintings of Pompeii. Only by thinking about going beyond can we speak of return. In 1895, after visiting the Vatican museums, Maurice Denis wrote to Gide about classical art: “It reveals the power of an art that does not seek superficial pleasure: this is the teaching of Rome”. Gauguin loved simplicity, Van Gogh adhered to Symbolism, the Pont Aven group was born, the Nabis theorized a ‘new classical order’ that was active throughout the first half of the 20th century in a dialectical relationship with the impressionist revolution. Presences that were extraneous to nature appeared in the paintings, they were references to the temple of Borobudur in Java, Egyptian paintings, Japanese prints, Buddha statues, Greek and Roman sculpture. The present was painted recalling the great art of the past, where the past did not exclusively include European art.

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the path that was different but parallel, going from Symbolism to a new classical order; the witness is Klimt who in 1903 went to Venice and Ravenna, inducting the neo-Byzantine way of modernity.

Beauty was what the artists of that time aspired to. People

Anna Maria Benedetti



Mario Sironi: Cityscape (1927)

sought tranquillity. References to tradition are already present in the age of the avant-garde or the era of ‘adventure’, as Apollinaire called it. The Salon d’Automne of 1904 hosted Renoir, Cezanne and Puvis de Chavanne, the latter captivating young artists with his arcadian and metaphysical world, though sadness was lurking there. The Salon d’Automne of 1905, remem-



bered for the scandal of the Fauves, included a retrospective of Ingres where his *Turkish Bath* (modified in 1862) was displayed for the first time. A summer spent in the Pyrenees marked Picasso's first classic turn. The 1909 Salon d'Automne was followed by the French translation of Leonardo's *Treatise on Painting*, focusses on his Pythagorean considerations about harmony and his notion of painting as a mental thing, which went on to influence Duchamp.

In *Invitation to a Voyage* Baudelaire dreamt of an idyllic place where everything is 'luxury, calm, voluptuousness', which would be the title of Matisse's painting *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (1904) inspired by Baudelaire's poetry. In 1916 Gino Severini painted *Maternity*, inspired by the Madonnas with Child of Tuscan art of the 14th and 15th centuries. Metaphysical painting was born in Ferrara, and saw the return of the classic subjects from Greek and Roman antiquity; the metaphysical aspect addressed the unconscious, the dream, the surreal. This artistic path led to magic realism. As in dreams, landscapes appeared realistic but confusedly assembled.

After World War 1 ended, what remained was great despair, men and women no longer understood their world. De Chirico's enigmatic works seemed to portray the new reality. Amazement and estrangement hovered in all works. A few years later, in 1926, Massimo Bontempelli called that period magical realism, a realism full of wonder. Everyone talked about the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, in the same year Matisse painted *Joie de Vivre*.

We can understand the habits and customs of a people by observing the environment in which they live, we can see the soul of a person from the objects he has collected throughout his life. On display are 16 paintings from the Rusconi Collection that were donated to the Capuchin friars in Milan. The Capuchin philosophy, refined over the centuries, knows how to give new life to things. Now these works constitute a permanent exhibition in the museum.

The paintings are from the early 1900s and the period between the two wars, when logical positivism was born in the Anglo-Saxon world and existentialism in the Latin world. The question to be answered was what is the 'function of the sciences and the meaning of man?'

The collection is the expression of this period: disillusion after World War 1, and the desire for a return to order. It is the search for a corner of serenity, a way to exorcise problems.

Umberto Boccioni conveys the restlessness of the time. Massimo Campigli immerses us in a nature inspired by the primitivism of Etruscan painting. A Filippo De Pisis, from 1947, gives us the liveliness of life in the Venetian lagoon. Pio Semeghini, an established painter then and later forgotten, brings us back to the harsh reality of how the world of criticism is always capricious.



Massimo Campigli: Braids (1951)

The presence of the Chiarists testifies that they were a must in the houses of the Milanese bourgeoisie.

These are mostly scenes of everyday life. In Mario Sironi's (1885-1961) work we have a glimpse of the 1920s Milan displaying the city's vulnerabilities, where men lose their identity there follows loneliness.

The exhibition has proved popular; there is a reflective silence in homage to the memory of the past, and it seems people like to imagine what the life of the bourgeoisie was like: it speaks to everyone, young and old.

On the back of one of the paintings is a portrait, another one is painted on a board that was used to cover the windows against the cold in Venice, another was done on cardboard as painting material was scarce. The numerous travel tags on the back of one of the paintings attest to its presence in as many exhibitions.

Anyone can live this experience of going back in time - entrance is free, but they also rely on donations from visitors. The message for us? In every age we seek serenity, here we find an art that goes beyond description, that is if we can make an effort to see not only with our eyes.

Museo dei Cappuccini - Permanent exhibition "Rusconi Collection" - Milan



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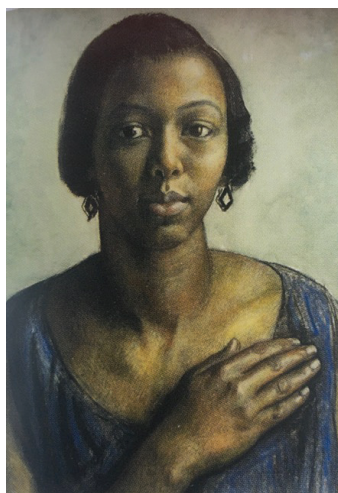
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# Laura Knight - A Celebration

Mary Fletcher



*Laura Knight: Pearl Johnson (1927)*

This exhibition covers Laura Knight's art from her early studies at Nottingham Art College to her work as a war artist. What a remarkable career she had and what a wide range of work. The book published to accompany the show has further pictures and essays and is edited by Elizabeth Knowles.

We can see her colours brighten on coming to Cornwall after the darker palette she used in Staithes, in North Yorkshire. At the edge of a cliff (1917) is vertigo-inducing through its dramatic view of a stylish young lady standing

above the sea.

Like Degas, Knight was fascinated by dancers. She conveys the solidity of a ballerina called Barbara in a study of 1932, choosing pastel blue greys, pinks and a variety of whites to animate every inch of the surface in the costume and curtains behind. There are also fascinating picture of gypsies in Malvern - notably one old lady wearing a feathered hat.

In Baltimore in 1927 Laura Knight painted a black nurse, Pearl Johnson, who introduced her to the civil rights movement with which she sympathised. She was taken into what were segregated wards at John Hopkins hospital to meet and paint women. How shockingly this brings over that problems of racial prejudice remain now.

There's quite a strange composition in one of the circus pictures of 1950s which makes me wonder if the artist used a camera, because the horse's head and tail are not entirely within the frame. The label speaks as if she is drawing swiftly and we see her technique change to cope with complex scenes such as women sowing potatoes, which remind me of the loose energetic brush strokes of Van Gogh.

In 1934 Laura Knight designed a 'Circus' dinner service under a government scheme delivered by Clarice Cliff, which promoted design in industry. These ceramics reminded me of Russian Revolution figures depicting workers at a similar time.

Then there is the famous painting done by Laura Knight as a war artist of *Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring* (1943). Ruby, 21 years old at the time, was already a highly skilled worker and this re-

markable detailed depiction of her at work was shown at the Royal Academy and voted Picture of the Year 1943.

It was the artist's own suggestion to paint the Nuremberg Trials of 1946 and she also gave a broadcast on the BBC. It's a remarkable historical record of the Nazi criminals in court, in a lively variety of poses and with the devastation of rubble and fire of war used imaginatively in the background. It looks unfinished in places, with areas of rough of paint creating an abstract expressionist feel.

This is an exhibition that shows how engaged with contemporary life and all its different people Laura Knight was, observing women in particular as working participants.

I overheard an impressed visitor who had not heard of Laura Knight before - an artist who was well known in her lifetime and deserves wide recognition.

*Laura Knight: A Celebration, Penlee House, Penzance, May 17 - September 16, 2021*

## Where Leaps The Flame

If this poem was an element,  
It would be fire -  
A million scarlet tongues  
Would be its flame  
Each hot flicker to proclaim  
A martyr's name.

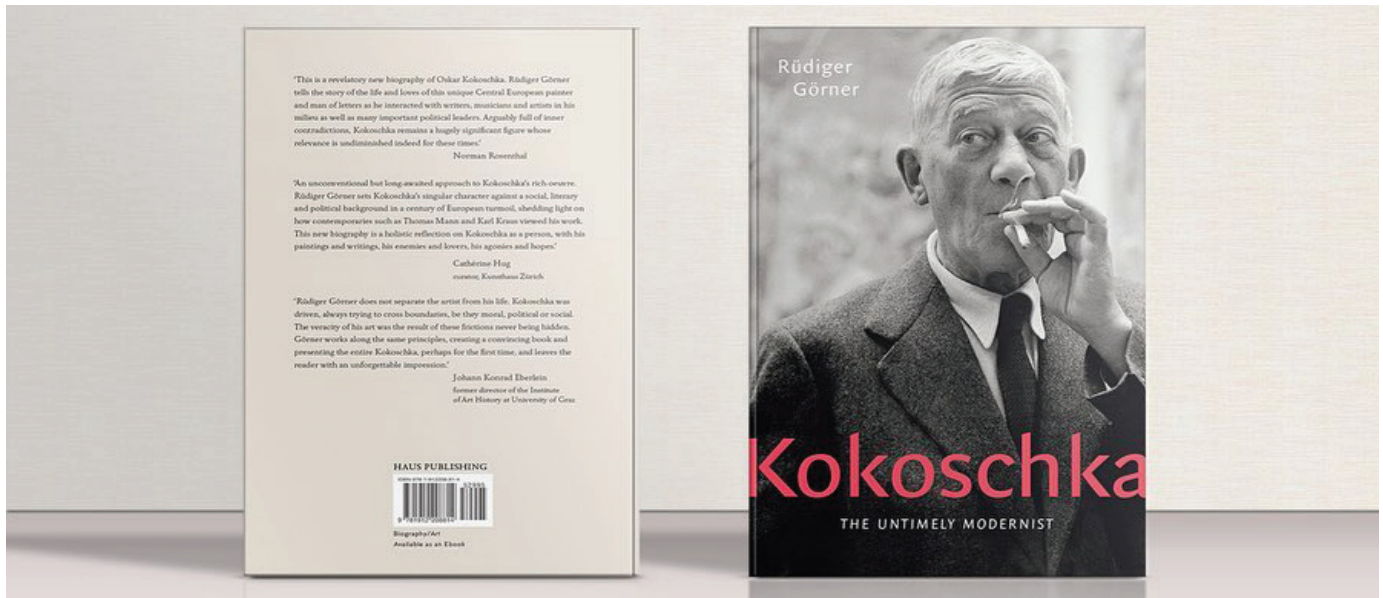
Not martyrs of the Cross  
They are re-born in stone  
But martyrs of camps of hell  
All unknown, un-named  
Shall in this poem  
Be crowned with flame

The atoms from each soul  
Will fly the unknown tombs  
Fire and flame raised from bone  
Even beyond eternity -  
Free to the outer-rim of space and time -  
Sings the martyr's cause  
Now yours and mine.  
Each name spelt out from fire  
This poem not of desire, but honour  
Mercy, love, where leaps the flame.

Shänne Sands

# That Special K.

Christian Hain



**“Kokoschka was - arguably - the greatest portraitist of the 20th Century.”**

There are many ways to write a biography, and different reasons for reading one. At the beginning of his comprehensive work on Austrian artist Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980), Rüdiger Görner, German professor at London University, touches upon the difficulties in painting any ‘true’ portrait in written form, or for that matter a ‘painted’ one. Kokoschka himself admitted that his autobiography “contained part real, part imaginary events and anecdotes” - but then again, whose life doesn’t? It won’t diminish the book’s artistic merits, nor tarnish its ‘truthfulness’ in a literary sense. The artist, by the way, might have chosen the title *Mein Leben* (My Life) to indirectly quote - and contradict - a certain other book infamously called *Mein Kampf* (My Fight/Struggle). Kokoschka, we learn, felt guilty for entering Vienna’s School of Decorative Arts in the same year that the other candidate was rejected who subsequently chose the career path of murderous tyrant. But today, we shall be concerned with Rüdiger Görner, and his characterisation of the artist as an “Untimely Modernist”.

A third-person narrator of any famed individual’s life will make decisions and, just like an artist painting a portrait, he may use - even abuse - the sitter to communicate views of his own, and tell (if only subconsciously) mostly about his own place and time, or, on the other hand, stay as close to ‘truth’ as is humanly possible. Trivially spoken, staying true to a character gets more and more difficult with the passing of time, yet personal acquaintance with the subject may influence the outcome just as well for

the good as for the bad.

Oskar Kokoschka loved to have his photograph taken, but in his paintings sought to see beyond the face, and to unmask those who subjected themselves to his art. Quoting him on the occasion of a portrait done after the death mask of a catholic priest who was to be canonised: “How do I breathe life into the ashes, that this mask becomes a face again?”, Mr Görner adds: “What Kokoschka also brought back to life in this ‘portrait’ were unmistakably his own facial features.” (p.198) Is every portrait partly a self portrait?

It also needs to be said that a most faithful biography offering the truth, and nothing but the truth, holds less interest for the amateur reader: an encyclopedia article will only ever satisfy his appetite for facts with no added entertainment value. A mere recording of indisputable facts appears best suited for academic literature; regularly revised and updated, it often proves tiresome to read. On the other end of the spectrum (not caring about trivial ‘historicizing novels’ here), through fictional, albeit not purely made up works of literature, that might be all the ‘truer’ - think of Heinrich Mann’s *Henry IV* or Robert Graves’ *I, Claudius*, etc. Even that behemoth, Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* today appears as a mix between minute truthfulness, the author’s interventions and mere hearsay. Contrary to purely functional texts, these have everlasting value at least equal to their respective subjects. Somewhere in the middle, we find entertaining portraits of a historical person written after the latest fashion,



*The Bride of the Wind or The Tempest, oil on canvas, a self-portrait expressing his unrequited love for Alma Mahler, widow of composer Gustav Mahler, (1914)*  
(Image: Wiki commons)

well-adapted to the style and ideology *du jour*, and catering to the target audience's interests, tastes, and manners. RG's painting of OK (Görner likes these abbreviations a lot as Oskar signed his paintings OK, and we'll just follow his example) is smartly written, but not so much a work of art itself: a portrait of Kokoschka is not a portrait of Kokoschka's.

A German scholar writing about an Austrian artist, this might not sound too promising to the foreign reader, but just like his biographer, Kokoschka spent considerable time in the UK, and Görner dedicates many pages to that period, to art, politics, intrigue, and acquaintances the artist made. He paints a multifaceted image of Kokoschka as a person who was always *en route* and hardly ever arriving, travelling and "schooling his vision" around the world, though with some constancies nevertheless, for example lifelong obsessions with the 17th-century humanist Comenius, and women (one, Alma, towering above all!).

For Rüdiger Görner, Kokoschka was more than an 'ok' artist; the author can in good conscience be called a fan, as becomes evident in the introduction when he claims: "Kokoschka was - arguably - the greatest portraitist of the 20th Century", continuing to compare "his easel and canvas [to] Freud's couch", and readers might think of Lucian F. among others also competing for that title. Calling *Windsbraut* (Bride of Wind) "one of the greatest paintings of the 20th Century", doesn't sound much like an impartial observer, either. As Görner states himself with regard to Kokoschka and his affairs: "There's a fine line between love and hate, and we must probably hold his admiration responsible for certain emotional outbursts, calling the Alma doll - we'll come to it shortly - "dismal"; or judging some politically (very) incorrect quotes "idiocies" (they might well have been that in their colloquial antisemitism, but still...). Then again, that's what a portraitist often does, placing himself above the sitter, judging him from a contemporary point of view and his proper morals, not the ones that person was subjected to, particularly if it's a

posthumous portrait.

Mr Görner knows has a lot to say about the eminent people Kokoschka met in his lifetime, a Who's Who of writers, composers and politicians; he further shines light on a side of Kokoschka that seems almost forgotten today: the painter as a writer of plays and stories himself. OK's literary oeuvre takes about as much space as the paintings for which he is so much more, if not solely, remembered. Yet Görner takes care to differentiate the writing painter - or painting writer - from other multidisciplinary artists, in particular another 'hun' who also passed the wartime years in the UK: Kurt Schwitters. Kokoschka did not want to mingle different genres, not to create a 'total work of art' like Schwitters did, rather he was a 'total artist'.

The preliminary outline sketch is followed by initially conventional biography: the artist's birth in rural Austria, his family background, the move to Vienna, studies and first success, scandals, etc. But soon Görner interweaves this linear storytelling with a maelstrom of colourful impressions and episodes, jumping forth and back in time, quite early going into medias res - or media vita - the artist at 50, then back to the 1910s again, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, enfant terrible, darling of the upper class, starving bohemian, the reader can not necessarily keep track of all the where and whenabouts. There are, however, certain leitmotifs holding the book together, one of them being the School of Seeing, mentioned early on for the first time (call it 'Chekhov's Gun', if you like), and then again and again. Sadly, the chapter finally dedicated to this hobby horse of Kokoschka's - encouraging individual ways to see the world, influenced by the premature school reformer and pacifist globalist Comenius as well as by philosophical empiricism - that the artist tried to put into practice at an advanced age when teaching at Vienna Summer School, cannot fully convince as the curriculum remains obscure. The (potentially) underlying thesis, that Kokoschka's whole life and career could be perceived as 'going to school' without ever graduating, training his regard all life long, collecting and adding more and more (visual) knowledge to his oeuvre, seems more interesting.

A second, much foreshadowed episode concerns the 'Alma doll', that might or might not have been emblematic for Kokoschka's attitude towards the fair sex. Like countless artists before and after him, the painter enjoyed himself as a womanizer, and would most certainly find himself harassed by antisocial media's lynch mobs today - 'hetoo', society having moved on from accepting the human, all too human. Above all, and even the marriage to Olga if we believe his biographer, emphasised a lasting enchantment with Alma - it actually feels weird to read "Mahler-Gropius", as was her status then, the lady in question being nowadays remembered as Alma Mahler-Werfel. Gustav Mahler (music) came first, then the Kokoschka interlude (painting), followed by Walther Gropius (architecture), and later Franz Werfel (writing). Somehow you get the notion that she misunderstood the concept of 'art collecting' (note: I once met a business-minded type of person who told me about his youthful endeavours to collect one girlfriend from every G7 nation; I'll just leave this here). Years after the couple's separation in 1914, Kokoschka or-



Only occasionally this reader wishes Herr Görner had heeded the old advice, *Si tacuisse, philosophus mansisses* (if you had been silent, you would have remained a philosopher). While calling Jeremy Bentham, the founding father of utilitarianism, a “social utilitarian” merely sounds odd; the reference to Voltaire’s slogan in *Candide* about “the best of possible worlds” (p.190) suggests nobody’s ever told him it was not Voltaire speaking as himself, but a parody of Leibniz.

dered that doll from a professional puppet maker, providing him with most detailed instructions as to material and appearance. He was not a sculptor himself (and neither Ron Mueck nor John deAndrea existed yet even as preparatory sketches in their respective father’s mind), but he likened the project to Rubens’ portraits of his wife. Strangely, mentioning this, Mr Görner hardly investigates the artistic context any further, and instead limits himself to playing at psychoanalyst. It is remarkable, though: not satisfied with his proper ‘copies’, depictions of the beloved, the painter turned to another genre, admitting artistic defeat – or separating art and life for once. We further find the assumption, Kokoschka would not have been honest when writing in the final days of WWI. Why? When he had been preoccupied with geopolitics? Perhaps it caused him too much sorrow and inner turmoil? Could not this (even if it’s not documented in letters, precisely *because* of its importance to the artist) have gone hand in hand with some personal escapism, a doll’s house (or: ‘bed’) to avert his thoughts, not to have to think about the world that much? And why not both: obsession and distraction at the same time? It sounds more interesting than the supposed ‘objectification’ of a former partner alone.

Just to add here: In certain comments, Görner appears to misunderstand Kokoschka’s dreams of a “global matriarchy” replacing all warring nations. This of course only made sense as long as ‘woman’ existed as a socially created entity that thought, talked, acted, and indeed: was different to man – duality, not equality. Also by the way: “Kokoschka, who was robbed of fatherhood through abortion by Alma...” (p. 189) – this doesn’t sound very pc for a change!

Not by accident, certain chapter titles read like parts of an exhibition: “The Journey”, “Wartime Art”, “Exile in England” – even their contents occasionally resemble wall texts. Humble suggestion for that imaginary retrospective’s title: “A School of Seeing, OK?!” There’s one major difference to an actual exhibition, though: all pictures are missing (equivalent to a Corona ‘virtual show’ with bad network quality?). Depictions – even monochrome – would’ve been useful for the non-expert who isn’t able to summon every single work before his mental eye, let alone those among us who don’t even have a precise idea (/none at all) of the artist’s style... Certainly, there’s Google (and Bing, and DuckDuckGo, and Qwant ...), but from time to time you’d love to actually see what the author is talking about, particularly in the later parts, when the hitherto avoided name dropping of art-



Portrait of Lotte Franzos (1909). Oil on canvas,  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC  
(Image: Wiki commons)

works hits in full force.

It doesn’t require a connoisseur to savour this biography, yet some background information, or preparation, seems indispensable: Beside being familiar with 20th-century art, literature, and music, readers should have at least a general notion of German politics – could you tell, without hesitation, who Theodor Heuss was, or even Konrad Adenauer (being German, I couldn’t name more than a handful of British Prime Ministers, one of them being Winston C., obviously)? This also concerns the translators – footnotes maybe?

To put it differently: If you haven’t visited an OK exhibition in recent times (when exhibition spaces were still open), this might not be the book for you, it’s certainly not ‘Kokoschka for Dummies’!

Not having read the original text, the translation seems otherwise well done, with only few exceptions such as rendering ‘Hammel’ as ‘lamb’ in several titles of paintings (it’s an *adult* sheep, or ‘neutered adult ram’ to be precise), or ‘Seele’ as ‘spirit’ instead of ‘soul’, but this is mere nitpicking about a great example of biographical writing that offers a lot of interesting insights, anecdotes, and mostly refreshing interpretations. Rüdiger Görner is a thorough expert in all things Kokoschka, and his work is entertaining as it is knowledgeable. We’d love to see a

production of Kokoschka's *Orpheus and Eurydice* opera with the score of Ernst Krenek on stage one day!

Only occasionally this reader wishes Herr Görner had heeded the old advice, *Si tacuisse, philosophus mansisses* (if you had been silent, you would have remained a philosopher). While calling Jeremy Bentham, the founding father of utilitarianism, a "social utilitarian" merely sounds odd, the reference to Voltaire's slogan in *Candide* about "the best of possible worlds" (p.190) suggests nobody's ever told him it was not Voltaire speaking as himself, but a parody of Leibniz. And, more serious: "Kokoschka wanted to paint all Greats: Stalin, Truman, de Gaulle and Churchill." We can be sure, every single one of the estimated 60 million victims of Stalinism would not put him first in line, and find much harsher words for this than "idiotic".

Oskar Kokoschka lived through difficult times: wounded in World War 1, exiled in Number 2, he later also socialised with the 'wrong ones': people in art and culture whose past was not beyond reproach (thankfully, Görner abstains from judging his earlier admiration for Knut Hamsun in this light, the Norwegian writer being also labelled 'problematic' by some). Kokoschka's own political views can best be described as 'classical humanist', formed after the example of his life-long idol Comenius. Görner stresses supposed leanings towards left-wing politics, comparable to Picasso – whom Kokoschka loathed – and as in the case of the Catalan, this should not be taken too seriously: many artists love the role of a champagne socialist, and Kokoschka never set foot behind the Iron Curtain, instead choosing his last – and in a certain sense first – permanent home on the shores of Lake Geneva: that's Monte Carlo with cows.

As mentioned before, a certain kind of biography tends to cater to fashionable views, and please allow me some remarks concerning a line in Rüdiger Görner's foreword to the English edition of his book: "once again, we find ourselves confronted with increasingly aggressive right-wing nationalism all across Europe". That's certainly correct, albeit incomplete: the independent thinker might remember another Germanophone scholar who lived and taught in London for large parts of his life, i.e. Sir Karl Popper, and his warnings that the open society is surrounded by enemies right and left. For reasons logically inherent to the ideology, collectivist materialism – whether it be socialism in its national (German) or international (Soviet) incarnation – will always be hostile to art, individual liberty, and cultural diversity (which is not the same as assimilation).

Görner even implicitly admits this in his statement, "The artist protests against collectivism through portraiture" (p197) – socialism and communism being of course the ultimate form of collectivism. Freedom of art and expression today appear no less threatened from 'the left' as from 'the right'; only recently, the van Gogh Museum came under fire for acquiring a Degas nude: "the depiction of a woman made by a man" – now, isn't it shocking...? Who cares about (by itself always 'irrational', 'unscientific', 'human') quality, when all art needs to bow before the new mass morals. But today's morals are beyond all doubt, indisputa-

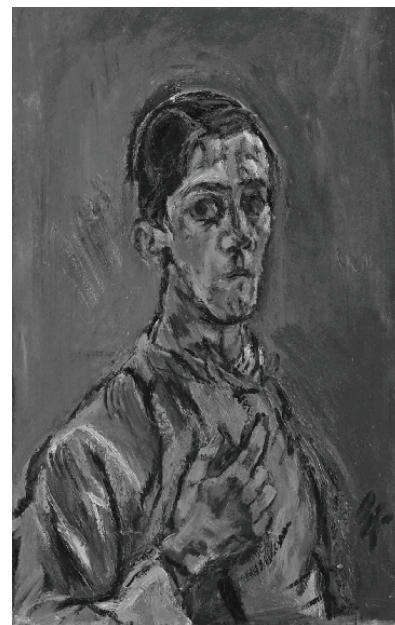
ble, and will hold true forever; only they have been granted by GOD or SCIENCE – says every generation, ever.

Görner's praise of art dealers and historians who supported female artists, climaxing in the assertion: "The dominance of the feminine in the work of that time (1912/13) results from Kokoschka's realisation that woman as the bearer of new life has an unassailable advantage over man" (p55) likewise sounds very modern – an "untimely modernist" indeed. Now compare this to an earlier quote,

and Görner paraphrasing the artist: "(Kokoschka) left himself in no doubt over the purpose of artwork (...) the 'miracle' of which 'every young girl of the common people is capable at any time: to conjure a life out of nothing (...) That is why only women and artists have respect for life' " (p32). Sounds more like dualism, doesn't it? Equalling (man's) artistic creation (of art, culture, and society as alternative, yet no less 'true' realities) to biological creation.

Furthermore, we aren't obliged to follow Kokoschka (and Görner) in his – perfectly understandable, given the historic background – utopian dreams of a "world without nations" that would effectively equal only one all-encompassing superstate without chance of escape for the individual, and the end of all living cultural diversity. After all, Kokoschka himself preferred Greek tragedies to the contemporary stage, and not by accident did those originate in a fractured landscape of independent (city) states, each holding its own against the others – comparable to the great epoch of 'German' art and thought that provided more favourites of Kokoschka's: Goethe and von Kleist. One could well argue that 1914 – and, consequently, 1933 – started in 1871 with the surrender of numerous independent nation states to one powerful Germany. Dreams of unification are first and foremost dreams of the greatest power over the largest mass, and a patchwork of competing colours will always prove more creative than the monochrome shroud, no matter how many colours lie smothered underneath.

*An Untimely Modernist*, by Rüdiger Görner, Haus Publishing  
Debra Marmor (Translator), Herbert Danner (Translator) Hardback £15.32



Oskar Kokoschka: *Self Portrait* (1913). Oil on canvas. The Museum-of Modern Art, New York.

## 12 Fascinating videos to watch in 2021

### 1. Without Gorky

Without Gorky is a biographical documentary discussing the highs and lows of troubled artist, Arshile Gorky. Netflix.

### 2. The Posterist

Documentary highlighting the contribution of popular artist Yuen Tai-yung. Netflix.

### 3. Julian Schnabel A Private Portrait

A look at the personal life and public career of New York artist, Julian Schnabel. Netflix.

### 4. Abstract The Art Of Design

A comprehensive overview of the lifestyles and careers of contemporary designers. Netflix.

### 5. Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang

Documentary looking at the major achievements of a Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, including a detailed discussion of his dream project Sky Ladder. Netflix and YouTube.

### 6. The Creative Brain

Neuroscientist David Eagleman explores what makes people creative. Netflix.

### 7. Cutie and the Boxer

The documentary describes the chaotic 40-year marriage story of Boxing painter Ushio Shinohara and his wife Noriko. Amazon Video.

### 8. Age of the Image

James Fox unveils how images have reshaped our modern world. BBC iPlayer

### 9. Arena: The Changin' Times of Ike White

The life of musical prodigy Ike White. He recorded a soul musical album while in an American prison convicted of murder. BBC iPlayer.

### 10. Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present

If you want to know why Marina Abramovic is famous in the field of performance art, tune into Amazon Prime Video.

### 11. Kusama Infinity

The tragic life of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. This documentary highlights her personal and professional achievements, while residing in the US. On Hulu.

### 12. Frank and Ollie

An exploration of the professional careers of two animators, Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, who worked as chief animators at the Walt Disney Animation Studios from 1934. Disney +

*ArtDaily May 30th 2021*

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## CULTURAL ADVOCACY ON FACEBOOK

### Five practices from the EU-EaP Culture and Creativity Programme

1. Personal rules: There are no clear instructions or rules as to social media marketing (SMM), but there are always the goals of a specific project. Start with them.

2. Talk about yourself last: It's very important to hear what followers write and ask. A "Like" on your page is a sign of trust and expectation of something useful. That is why we rarely post anything about ourselves or our daily work like other narrowly specialised projects do.

3. Promotion can also reflect the idea of the project: Competitions undoubtedly draw attention. But then again for us this is an opportunity to hear those interested in the subject of our project, to ask what is expected from us, what they would like to see or hear in the future.

4. Control your desire to tell everyone about everything: Since the project is designed to target the six countries of the Eastern Partnership, we use targeting and give each country the most relevant information.

5. Reading with taste: People scroll through lots of text on Facebook every single day. Even a bit too much. We've adopted a rule stipulating that we must be concise and informative, but at the same time, our posts should sound as if two art connoisseurs exchanged a few words at a museum or a gallery.

Overall, our ability to reach the 20,000 friends makes us happy.



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Liste Showtime Online, 15–30 September

Liste Expedition Online, October onward

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