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The New Art Examiner is an open forum for discussion and publishes unsolicited informed articles and reviews from aspiring and established writers.

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**From the Editor-in-Chief, Art Lantern, Nancy Nesvet**

I was interested in how artists learn to make art, in conventional MFA programs and “outside the box” through creative thinking and practice. I hope you find the articles by Stephen Werstfall and Bradley Stephens, that address this quandary, interesting and beneficial to your interactions with the art world.

**The New Art Examiner welcomes ideas for articles and short reviews in all languages for our web pages.**

**Please send a sample of your writing (250 words) and any pitch to [contributor@newartexaminer.net](mailto:contributor@newartexaminer.net)**

**Deadline for articles/reviews: Pitch at any time:  
December 5th - February 5th - April 5th - June 5th - August 5th - October 5th**

**QUOTE of the MONTH:**

“Before I start carving the idea must be almost complete. I say ‘almost’ because the really important thing seems to be the sculptor’s ability to let his intuition guide him over the gap between conception and realization without compromising the integrity of the original idea.”

**Barbara Hepworth**



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## Editorial

The hunt for the right word to describe an art moment is difficult and, as often is seen in the history of criticism, serendipitous as descriptions are taken up by others who read the unsuspecting writer.

I am not going to attempt to describe the art world in the vain hope that I can coin such a descriptive term more from the fact that I don't see any art movements emerging than from some self-deprecation. It appears to me so far in the last fifty years that when everything can be art, deep thinking about what an individual artist is doing disappears into the dictionary as they also struggle to define their work. Surely it is an odd result of the promiscuous definition 'anything can be art' to find that artists are uncertain when they are the very people who are supposed to define our entire visual culture. And when the leading figures in the museum and galleries say openly about shows that they don't know what to think, the whole idea that definition exists anymore is as dead as taste and an unappetising as skill.

Except, of course, taste still exists and the visual experience still walks with us every second of every day of our sighted lives. And the men and women who claim they don't know what to, do know they just won't share for whatever reason.

Definition is not the be-a;-and-end-all of answering questions for the visual artist but it does provide a starting-point for discussion. 'It is art because I am an artist and I say it is art' is the end of all discussion and quickly leads to answers of like or dislike, which are themselves meaningless for cultural criticism. All visual art is a statement and it is essential to know what that statement is and why the artist has made it; otherwise we are looking at nothing more than a 'child's think.' That might be beautiful in its way and suggest the culture gives room for simplicity, but it doesn't tell us anything about how a culture thinks, and cultures do think. In much the same way as a tribe will generally birth people who look broadly similar, cultures while changing down the centuries, inspire similarities in customs and ways of thinking. If anything can be art then the history of art is no longer part of the contemporary scene because historically art was defined; even the impressionists defined themselves as breaking free from the accepted parameters in the academies. Definition requires thinking not just doing and deep thinking about culture is wholly lacking.

Daniel Benshana





*Speaking at a Q2 debate*

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

Scott Reyburn is a London-based freelance journalist who writes about art and artists, their culture and their markets. A former lecturer at the National Gallery in London, he has written for The New York Times since 2014, covering the international art world's major auctions, fairs and exhibitions.

## The inexorable rise of the art market this century has put paid to art movements

Scott Reyburn

“For almost every decade of the 20th century, a new art movement or “ism” developed: Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, Conceptual art, Minimalism. So what about the 21st century?” asks Josh Baer in his industry newsletter, the Baer Faxt. “Two decades in and the ‘ism’ that took hold is, in fact, the art market.”

Being an adviser embedded in the New York art trade, Baer would say that. But the question is nonetheless timely, given the ongoing sense of stasis affecting much of the West’s visual arts culture. Meanwhile, global auction sales of contemporary art between July 2020 and June 2021 reached an all-time high of \$2.7bn, helped by a 5% boost from NFTs, according to Artprice.

### **But is it really the case that the 21st century has not yet produced a meaningful art movement? And does it matter?**

Pop stars: a team photo of Andy Warhol (fourth from left in the bottom row) and collaborators at The Factory in New York in 1968 Photo: Fred W. McDarrah/MUUS Collection via Getty Images

“After Warhol, art world observers thought in terms of ‘scenes’ more than movements,” says Hal Foster, the professor of art and archaeology at Princeton University, who, along with many others, thinks art movements have had their terminological day. “In the wake of the fast and furious run of movements in the 1960s and 70s, most artists, critics and curators became suspicious of ‘isms’. They seemed to be taken as brands more than as projects.” That said, Foster concedes that “formations” have since emerged,

but these should be understood as “conceptual orientations of varied practices, rather than self-declared groups of a select few”.

But call it what you will, wasn’t there something collective going on when, say, the Young British Artists (YBAs) were in their creative pomp at the turn of the century? Or, more recently, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, now that a whole new wave of artists of colour have achieved recognition in the market and in museums?

But the question remains whether these have been coherent artistic movements, or whether these are looser groupings that the market has found profitable to label.

“Institutions are losing their power as framers of art history. The big ‘ism’ of the 21st century is Globalism, because every museum figured out that its claims to universalism were not actually applicable to large portions of the world,” says John Zarobell, an associate professor at the University of San Francisco and the author of the 2017 book *Art and the Global Economy*. “And the market for contemporary art really took off, making the art of the present in most cases more valuable than the art of the past, so the idea of the art market became dominant.”

Things were different in the early 20th century. Gertrude Stein recalls Picasso in 1903-07 “becoming the head of the movement that was later to be known as the Cubists”. Marinetti, in his 1909 manifesto, asserts “courage, audacity and revolt” will be the “essential elements” of Futurism. Avant-garde artists from this era of momentous technological and political change had a tremendous sense of their own



agency. They really did think the art they made could change the world. Now it is the price of art, like the \$25.4m recently paid for a half-shredded Banksy, that above all else makes the world take notice, if not actually change.

After Pop art, it no longer made sense to see any one mode of making art as a revolutionary transformation of all that came before it

Richard Noble, professor of art

As many critics have observed, the avant-garde seems to have run out of gas. "After Pop art, it no longer made sense to see any one mode of making art—Ab Ex, Minimalism or Situationism—as a revolutionary transformation of all that came before it," says Richard Noble, a professor and the head of the art department at Goldsmiths College, London. "The idea of the avant-garde and the kinds of aesthetic and political perspectives it generated cannot survive in cultures where the idea of revolution is as debased as it is in ours. The market has no doubt had some influence on this, but so did the collapse of the Soviet empire"

There are also practical considerations. Throughout most of the 20th century, artists could find inexpensive spaces in which to work and live. "There were lots of old industrial buildings we could repurpose to put on exhibitions. That's how we started. By breaking into places and securing them," recalls the artist Michael Landy, who was part of the YBA set in the late 1980s.

Now, virtually every building in London is an investment vehicle. Student accommodation is currently "the strongest performing asset class over all other forms of commercial investment", according to Sterling Woodrow, a property investment company.

In the 21st century, the training and output of artists have turned into investment opportunities. The Financial Times commentator Philip Stephens recently wrote that he regarded the 2008 financial crash, the culminating "failure of laissez-faire economics," as the most momentous geopolitical event of the last 25 years, explaining Trump's presidential victory,

Brexit and the rise of authoritarian populist governments.

Stephens writes: "The excesses of the financial services industry and the decision of governments to heap the costs of the crisis on to the working and lower middle classes have struck at the very heart of democratic legitimacy."

This piercing analysis in turn prompts the question, if laissez-faire economics delegitimised democracy, did it also delegitimise the art that democracies produce? The super-rich have spent billions on art as an alternative asset class, and some artists have made millions supplying them. Isn't art marketism (as Baer might put it) enough to put people off art, just as they've been put off democracy?

Artists are now too busy making inventory for exhibitions, fairs and auctions to think about art movements. Many are "creating just to meet demand," as Baer puts it. "I'm not saying there hasn't been any great art in the 21st century; there just hasn't been a great art movement. The market is a disincentive to experiment," Baer says. But what about NFTs? "NFTs are a medium, not a movement. No one is going to tell me that a CryptoPunk is on the same artistic level as a Cézanne." But in March, Beeple's NFT *Everydays* sold for a record \$69m. The highest auction price so far this year for a work by Cézanne, that titan of Post-Impressionism, is \$55m.

In Sally Rooney's novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*, Alice, the central character, reflects: "I think of the 20th century as one long question, and in the end we got the answer wrong." When it comes to the question of creativity, and the experimental movements that make art so compelling and world-changing, is the market simply the wrong answer?

The *New Art Examiner* welcomes reviews on books of visual cultural significance.

Please send you review 500- 800 words per book to:

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Subject headed BOOK REVIEW

Please include the full details of the title, author, publisher, date and ISBN.

# Cuba as Realised in Art

Lanita K. Brooks Colbert

At the beginning of my unforgettable visit to Cuba, a Cuban born anthropologist and scholar told me “to enjoy our people and country, but do not try to understand us”. Eduardo, a Cuban painter, and friend living in Washington D.C. whose artwork reflecting the country’s history, culture, and socio-political context shared stories of the inequities placed upon the Cuban people. One can witness the sufferings of the Cuban people at the hands of island’s invaders, conquerors, and rebels as that history documented by art illustrating more truthfully than the words of the historian or the Cuban government. Cuban artists’ works of surrealism and magical realism creates narratives that blend reality with fantasy with key themes in Cuban art, revolution and independence, social realism, Afro-Cuban cultures, isolation and embargo, migration and identify, nature and its landscapes, gender and sexuality merging and ever-present with multi-cultural influences of the Spanish, Italian, Moors, West African and Portuguese a visual presence and recurring theme in Cuban art.

My cultural visit was led by Juanita Britton and guided by Otunba Nana Kwaku Ankobeahene II (High Chief) Nathaniel B. Styles, Jr., a South Floridan, whose career has focused on sustainable international relations with an emphasis on cultural and economic revitalization of indigenous communities. I came to Cuba on a cultural visa as the Cuban government strongly supports the development of the arts in Cuba. Of the seven possible reasons for visiting Cuba, U.S. travelers must check “for the support of the Cuban People” when traveling to Cuba. We were instructed to bring gifts for a small village in Matanzas; pencils, crayons, paint kits, games, clothing for small children, soaps, body products, fabric for sewing, to be distributed by elders to 300 persons living there needed due to the U.S. embargo of goods not only in this village, but throughout the countryside of Cuba.

Walking the promenade of Cathedral Square in Havana, immersed in 500 years of history blended into its architecture, street artists’ works, sculptures, and murals, Cuba’s diverse and vibrant heritage draws inspiration from African, European, and indigenous influences. The wall murals, everywhere throughout the island, is Cubans’ visual storytelling, celebrating the Afro-Cuban heritage, blending



elements of African spirituality, music, dance, and religious traditions such as Santeria. Vibrant colors of blue, red, gold and the purity of white, merge the rich cultural contributions of the African diaspora to Cuban identity. The wall murals tell stories of African diaspora hidden under the disguise of Catholicism including a black face Saint Barbara surrounded by African drummers and guarded by an indigenous warrior.

The National Museum of Fine Arts (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes) in Old Havana, houses 17th Century to modern contemporary works of art in two architecturally fine buildings. The “American Mona Lisa” (“La Gitana Tropical” The Tropical Gipsy) painting by Victor Manuel Garcia, of Spanish ancestry, is a perfect example of the archetypal Cuban woman. Victor Manuel Garcia, who died in 1969, was considered the leader of Cuba’s avant-garde movement. Exhibited next to Garcia’s painting is Wifredo Lam’s, “La Silla”, (The Chair) depicting realism with surrealism. Of mixed-race ancestry, Black, Cuban, and Chinese, one of Cuba’s most prominent painters, exhibited worldwide in museums, Wifredo Oscar de la Concepción Lam y Castilla, better known as Wifredo Lam, was a Cuban artist who sought to portray and



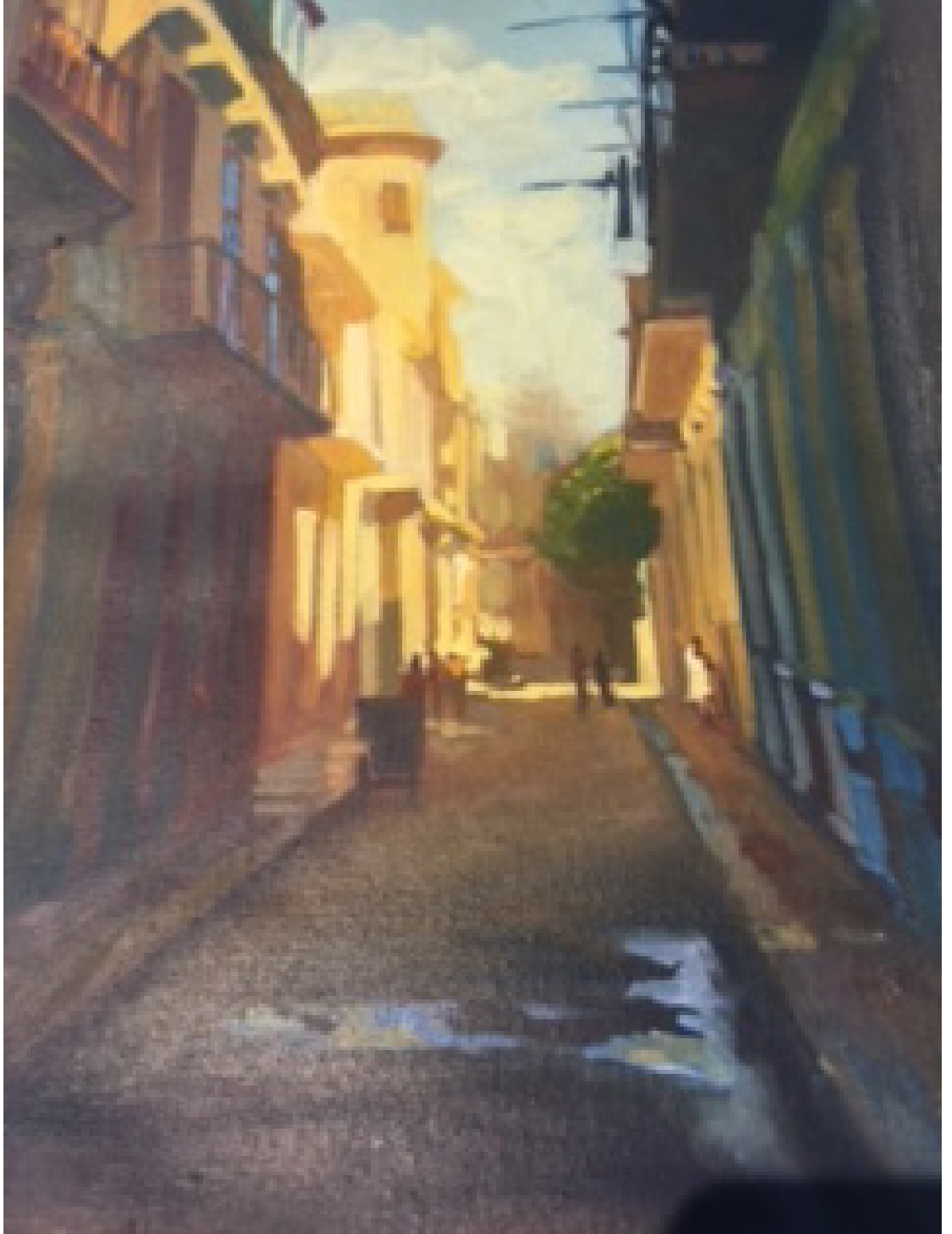
revive the enduring Afro-Cuban spirit and culture in paintings such as “The Jungle” (1943, Gouache on paper on canvas, Inter-American Fund).

Opened in 1983, Havana’s Wilfredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art (Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wilfredo Lam) is a state-run gallery in tribute to Lam. This art gallery is responsible for the organization of the Bienal de la Habana, Cuba, and a permanent art collection of more than 1000 works with facilities for research and study of contemporary visual arts in developing countries. In Havana, the Almacenes San Jose Artisan Market, a 12000 sq foot warehouse of 200 artists’ works, portrays heroic figures like Jose Marti and Che Guevara shouting revolution and independence while embracing social realism, depicting scenes of everyday life, the working class and the challenges facing the Cuban people since the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Contemporary, abstract, multi-media paintings, woodworking and sculptures show stories of 235 years of enslaved people still shackled to the ongoing discourse on social and human rights. Outside of Havana, amid the mountains and lush landscape of Matanzas, the Museum of the Slave Route in Cuba is housed in the Castle of San Severino which became a fort for arriving slaves in 1789. San Severino Castle is part of the Slave Route Project, Cuba, a network organized by the National Council of Cultural Patrimony in Havana, Cuba. The museum’s art works are conceptual, edgy and abstract, including wooden, metal, and multi-media sculptures with bulging eyes, raised hands, open mouths, all demonstrating the horrors and brutality of slavery.

Many Cuban artists were trained at The National Arts School (Escuelas Nacionales de Arte) of Cuba, one of the most important educational institutions of the Cuban nation that has been declared as “National Monument” where education of the Arts is free to all Cubans upon acceptance of the application process. Including post-graduate studies, the schools were conceived and founded by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in 1961, and they reflect the utopian optimism and revolutionary exuberance of the early years of the Cuban Revolution. Over their years of active use, the schools served as the primary incubator for Cuba’s artists, musicians, actors, and dancers. Most notable among the National Arts School alumni are Roberto Fabelo, a contemporary painter and sculptor and Tomas Sanchez, painter and engraver, known for his landscapes, represented in New York by Marlborough Gallery, now living in South Florida.

Cuban artists who can get their works out of Cuba through European and Asian brokers, are shaping the Cuban artistic narrative and amplifying its stories on the international stage as the artworks we saw, the buildings, and the sounds of infectious Cuban music, reflect the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the Cuban people. Visiting museums and galleries was amazing, as we were able to see work not on view anywhere else in the world. As Cuban art does not travel much for exhibition. But my interest was captured by the street artists, the murals on buildings, the emerging artists exhibited in open markets and artists workshops in Old Havana and the small towns of the countryside. I purchased two exceptional small streetscapes from a street artist, Alejandro Rodriguez, on Cathedral Square in Havana. I was cautious in my acquisitions, not knowing what I can bring back home. Hopefully, the world will soon open up for these exceptional artists so we can all see and appreciate their work.





# Here's looking at You, Casablanca

Mary Fletcher

This show at first viewing struck me as very colourful and reminded me of seventies hard edge painting in UK. It seems, free of French colonial rule at last 1956, Casablanca Art School developed to follow the prevailing western style.

I was a bit disappointed, expecting something more different from the 22 artists I had never encountered before. It was the brown more political and savage pieces by Farid Bekahia, 1961, about torture under the French regime and the spirit of revolutionary victory in Cuba that attracted me. Coming back to see it all again I slowed down to read the captions and view the slide shows. This showed me that a lot of art was placed in the streets on the walls.

There's a photo of students irreverently accessorising a classical statue - their studies now turning to the local design of jewelry, carpets etc.

Astonishing facts are found in the wall texts but not highlighted in any way. In colonial times classes at the art school had been divided not just by gender but by social class.

One of the female artists, Chaibia Tallal had been forced to marry at a very young age, but this I found out from chatting to an attendant, its not in the captions.

Two teachers of graphic design were imprisoned for Marxist tendencies for 6 and 8 years by the new Moroccan rulers but this is a brief reference which I would have liked to learn more about.

There are some poster designs that feature Palestine but the show does not enlighten us about these. I got some idea of how it was an exciting time when the artists met at the school, in the 1950's and changed the whole emphasis of the teaching, started controversial magazines and took their art outside the building to the ordinary people. They sought to infuse their work with motifs from their Moroccan culture whilst joining the western mainstream in many ways.

I would have liked to find out something of what goes on at the school of art in Casablanca now.

When the show goes to United Arab Emirates I visitors will be subject to the dress restrictions there. It would be good to find out how it is received there in a tribal autocracy, an authoritarian state whose cooperation with Tate may serve controversially to polish its unpalatable undemocratic image.

Although Human Rights Watch warn that conditions



*Melehi's notebook*

are worsening in UK, they are still considerably more intolerant and dangerous in both Morocco and Sharjah. However, the Tate Casablanca Art School show limits itself to the past although its subject raises curiosity about present day conditions.

Mary Fletcher

*The Casablanca Art School'. Tate St Ives, May 27th to January 14th 2024, and in Sharjah Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates, from February 2024*





*Farid Belkahia, Cuba SI, 1961*

# The Only Thing that's the End of the World is the End of the World

Elizabeth Ashe



*Latiano wall video still*

I was unable to make the opening reception but promised myself I would make it to “The Only Thing that’s the End of the World is the End of the World” before it closed. I had seen the images leading up to the exhibition, read that music was becoming a collaborative element to his installations.

Once there, the exhibition at Payne Gallery at Moravian University in Pennsylvania, US, had it all – the depth of space, trauma, a joyous stroll, an inevitable harmony that permeated my core. Music and sculpture installation are linked together, making for an immersive gravity I can acknowledge and appreciate. From the artist: “[...] is created in direct response to the current society-level emotional trauma being experienced worldwide brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, intense political polarization, systemic racism, and xenophobia. The installation is designed to challenge the viewer’s notions of the physical parameters of the space the artwork inhabits, while simultaneously creating an environment that heightens their emotional connection to it.”

The room is blackened, with a front foyer dimming entrance and simpler back exit. In the center are many broken-sharded mirrored spheres, suspended on slim chains and each dropped chain works on its own motor. Around the edge are smaller spheres, where they crowd one another and space apart. None are smaller than a closed fist, and the central three are larger, the size of rocks you could sit on. Some are flatter, like you’d hope of a skipping stone.

Others are the epiphany of stasis, where gravity is pushing it both together and apart. Each mirrored strand rotates on its motor, in different speeds and directions, casting light further out and onto the walls, floor and ceiling. The spotlights angle up from the floor, hit the mirrors and have an attract-and-repel relationship to each sphere. Five compositions play, from “Alien Forest: for string quartet” is busy; it creates the mood of walking in a primordial forest, full of trees conversing with one another in the same language. A single piano orchestration in “Tiny Forests” which gives a heavier vibe, recorded in a vast, echoed space. Then the next songs shift to violins and cello, viola. One has all the heaviness of deep water. And one, is a chorus (not in English) with a piano. The orchestrations were imposing, but at the same time light, ephemeral, and all encompassing. They are not mirrored disco balls, or even perfect spheres. They are fragments, amoebas, cells, stars in the vast universe or fallen detritus in the darkest ocean. Much had been broken yet remained together. Their broken edges would only be dangerous once more if the music stopped giving them purpose. All these broken pieces define their own ultimate shapes and needs to stay together. With the lights and motors programmed to match the music, the speeds, directions, and moods of the reflections out into the dark room, changes.

The collaboration between music and sculpture, blurred the boundaries of the space on a physical, visual, and auditory level. Yes -- it dazzled -- which paused time and sucked me in. Experiencing this piece reminded me about what it was like, not all that long ago. Surviving the pandemic, one day at a time, absorbing the news, phone calls, the isolation, the trauma and the losses. At the end of the day, I just needed a moment to sit outside and watch the stars and imagine their orchestration and power, out there in the vastness and end-all of space.

*“The Only Thing that’s the End of the World is the End of the World.” Jonathan Latiano, with music composed by Sam Wu Payne Gallery at Moravian University, January 26-April 2, 2023*



# Rodeny and the Imagination

Nancy Nesvet

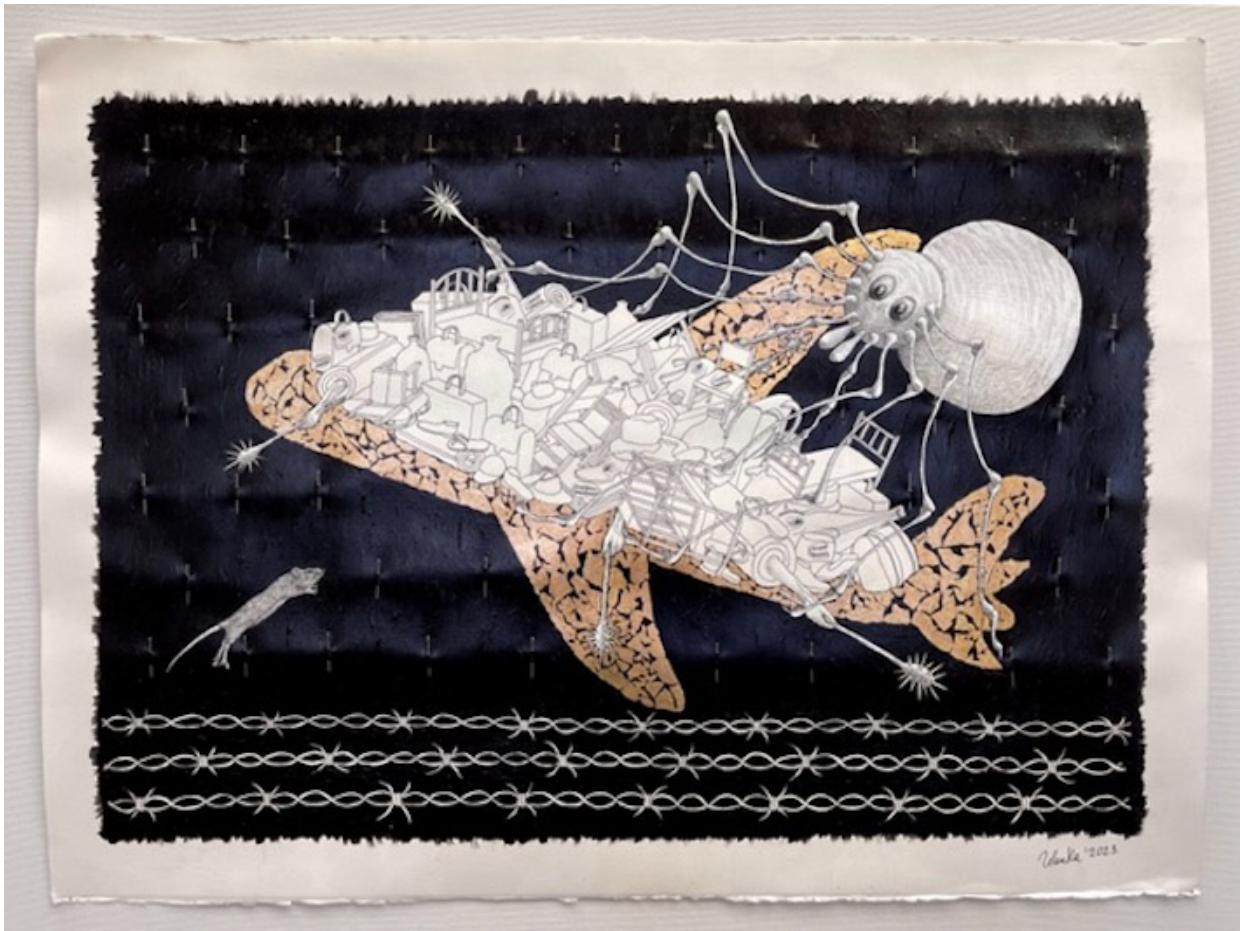


*El Cruce – The Crossing*

Rivers of Babylon at LichtundFire Gallery, 175 Rivington St., New York, opened a show of Rodney Zelenka's works on paper on June 27-July 28, and open by appointment after those dates.

Curated by Elga Wimmer and Priska Juschka, the drawings, inspired by Panama's past political dictatorship in Panama, the migration of his family and heritage as a grandchild of holocaust survivors, he claims the work is about the person depicted and his reality, "about the self-what am I supposed to do?" I would add what am I supposed to be? Babylon refers to the home of the Semitic tribes. Zelenka is from Panama, far from present day Iraq. Yet the work is clearly about migration and the constant moving of migrants from one location to another, the reactions of governments to that relocation, and the webs that government officials spin to ensnare those migrants. Incorporating gold leaf, aluminum foil, pins, paper,

and paint on canvas, he claims to be influenced by Picasso, and I do see the influence of Guernica, but whereas Guernica was covered in bold strokes depicting bulls and people and symbols of Franco's Spain, Zelenka's work is airy, the space equal to the marks beneath and surrounded by it. Like Picasso, there are strokes of bright red (and for Zelenka other bright colors) and they are often equal to the black marks and white space, but when I look at the drawings and paintings, it is that indeterminate, unmarked space with no specific heritage or location that seems important. It is about possibility, the possibilities inherent in the future of the travelers he depicts and symbolizes with their suitcases. That upper space is often filled with objects, as in "Webmasters" with images of Putin, Obama, and other governmental figures with objects one would travel with, including hats and suitcases. Those suit-



*Free Ticket*

cases are all the same, lacking location, ownership, or heritage. They could be anyone's, yours, mine, the travelers depicted or our ancestors'.

We cannot avoid seeing Goya's influence, in the black and white drawing and quality of line, as we remember that Zelenka is Panamanian and has noted his influence by Latin American mural painters, Rivera, Siqueros and others who depicted their politics in paint. We see the use of objects as proxies for people, and people's fates recalling the work of Anselm Kiefer at the Doge's Palace during the Venice Biennale 2022-23.

In a painting exhibited in an earlier exhibit at Tenri Gallery in New York, government officials stand under a cache of suitcases and jumbled chairs, all the same, as if government is a game of musical chairs, and suitcases relocated from one place to another, one owner to another, referring to global migration and the insanity of it all. Marc Bloch, a panelist at the panel curated by Elga Wimmer at the exhibit at Licht und Fire, saw the images of suitcases and was reminded of prisoners who had to leave their suitcases at the door. I was reminded of those holocaust victims, including Zelenka's ancestors, who left their suitcases before entering the gas chambers further

seeing Zelenka's drawings of shipping containers, on what appear tracks, so looking like sealed train cars with chairs and boxes and headboards of beds, and hats and water vessels strewn about. The birds that Zelenka uses as a constant must fly to survive, must keep on the move, as they relocate to feeding grounds around the world, carrying their flocks and with them. The spiders weaving their webs eat the male spiders after engaging in reproduction, having no more use for those who might challenge their power, like officials and politicians. And like officials, spiders weave webs to encapsulate their challengers in places and situations and keep them trapped. Those spiders almost smile, enjoying their power. It is a sly smile, a winning smile.

Panelists also noted Zelenka's work as reflective of surrealism, and considering the Latin-American murals of Rivera, Siqueros and others, surrealism earns a place in Zelenka's oeuvre.

Surrealism is encountering a present revival, having been the curatorial theme of the 2022 Biennale d'Arte in Venice. Surrealism shows how we are changing, how our world is changing. That is the essence of Rodney Zelenka's work, how the world's population is changing, where people live, how peo-



ple live, producing new families of multi-national and multi-racial children, changing politics and appearances, attitudes and allegiances, and the threats to immigrants and their incarceration in government produced webs, like those of spiders. Zelenka shows the result of immigration and voyages, packing your life and belongings in a nondescript suitcase and watching them stacked to the sky, getting mixed up together, infused in Rodney Zelenka's history, but also our own. If artmaking is a creative act, to be creative is to create a new society, a different and hopefully better world for oneself and all of us. Visual art, music, people are all fusing together; language is constantly recreating, adding new words, new symbols, new codes to communicate. Zelenka's language shows that evolution, but also shows the peril of those journeys.

We see in "Golden Wall" (2022) made on paper of gold leaf, ink, acrylic metal pins, hands holding medieval weapons, images of beds, purses, shoes, blankets, chairs, and eyes, drawn on these objects, all seeing eyes, but also a homage to surrealism and the Mexican surrealist muralists. We see in "Silver Worlds" (2023) on paper of aluminum leaf, metal pins, acrylic and ink, opposing worlds, one half sphere emerging from the bottom of the paper, the other half sphere downward facing from the top, with a sphere of faces and chairs and the usual debris depicted by Zelenka but supported by five swordlike-like rods. We see the same sphere, this time whole, in "Circle of Power" hands holding rod-like weapons at five points emerging from the sphere into a black void. This time objects within the sphere have stringed instruments, as well as hats and chairs and ubiquitous eyes. The parched earth surrounding the black void could be the deserts crossed, or the dry earth indicative of droughts in immigrants' countries causing them to flee. The drawn white boots, with eyes on the path, spikes sticking out of toes, marching on the parched earth in another drawing opposes the four leg-like bones on either side of the path. "Gold Diggers" (2022) of gold leaf, ink, acrylic and metal pins on paper shows the same sphere, the same weapons, the same parched earth letting us know that there are many reasons people immigrate, and many economic classes. Yet, "Living in Luxury" (2022, used architects' paper, used clothes, newspaper, acrylic, and ink on paper shows two women. I see a mother and daughter, with the mother on her knees buttoning the school uniform her daughter wears, showing that even, living in poverty, the dignity and importance of sending the child to school. A bed is drawn under the globe holding the women, representing their new home, no



*Web Masters*

longer on the migratory voyage, and two blackbirds fly above. The birds, looking like ravens fly above, still threatening their future. The threat is always there, whether rats, or ravens, or water or drought. Then we see people, in black and white, so their racial identification is indeterminate, the head of one carrying a baby on his shoulders, another torso deep in blue, looking like water, but hiding the beds, and suitcases and belongings of the travelers, the migrants. Like the people, the belongings are inundated by the water, but also travel on the waves. This is the drawing that held me, that affected me, that made me care about these people, so determined and full of hope to reach better shores and a better life for them and their children. Like the child dressed in her school uniform, it is about the future of the children.

What should I make of the yellow birds flying above the chairs and suitcases left behind, "One of those Moments", (2023, Acrylic and ink). Have the people gone on? What of the image of a plane, wings and tail of parched earth, pastel-colored shapes and beds and weapons, and the spider, head foregrounding a full moon with its eight legs extended, the plane in its grip, with a barbed wire three-tiered fence underlying it all? It is surrealism, but it is Rodney Zelenka surrealism, updated from that of the last century and commenting on and warning us of the political terrors that might come in this century, that immigrants face as they travel and settle in new lands. This is what art must do, make us aware and warn us, and make us care, and Zelenka has clearly made the art that does that. Bravo.

# The Geopolitics of Biennials

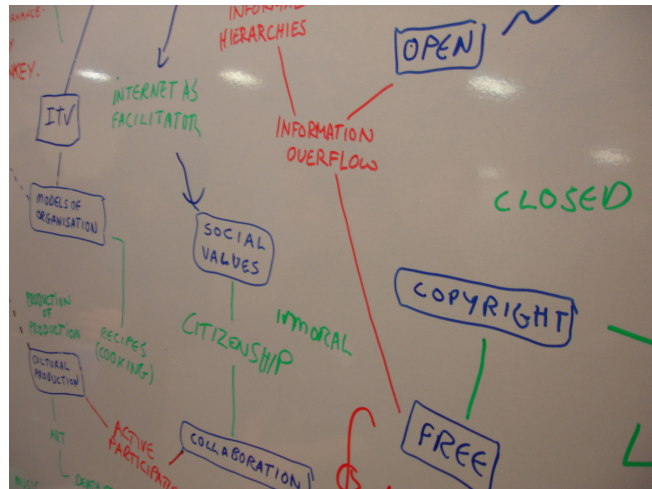
## Simina Neagu Interviews David Goldenberg

David Goldenberg's complex practice, focusing on the concept of post-autonomy and often employing participatory practices, poses ambitious questions on the future of art, thinking and language. And by investigating the geopolitics of biennials, David Goldenberg manages to shed light on a problematic, yet engaging set of inquiries. We set out to discuss the finer details of his ongoing work, whose structure is the methodology of artistic research and a constant interest in collaboration.

Simina Neagu: Why a new language? What is it about the framework of art that prevents new development?

David Goldenberg: To answer your first point, images of the container, the route for a mobile biennial and ideas for selecting information on Biennials that made up the installation for Venice were elements taken from the exhibition I staged in Milan in 2012, 'The Scenarios of Post Autonomy'.

We don't have language, nor thinking. Any discussion of a new language and discovering a language refers explicitly, on the artistic level, to the narrative described by the scheme of post autonomy, which indicates an end point in the trajectory of art as a signal for its collapse and re-imagining, and this describes precisely the collapse of language and thinking and its rediscovery. This can appear reactionary and anti-artistic, but this is wrong, since post autonomy registers neo-liberalism's and cultural capitalism's impact on art. Given that art and language are described as an absence, this can appear uncomfortable; however, an indication of a new language is shown at the point that the collapse of art triggers a new mental image of art, language and thinking. These complexities were visualised in the installation in Venice, the title, 'The Transformation of Art', showing a route back into language and thinking. These observations need to be seen alongside the influence of Thomas Krens, director of Guggenheim,



*Post Autonomy white board*

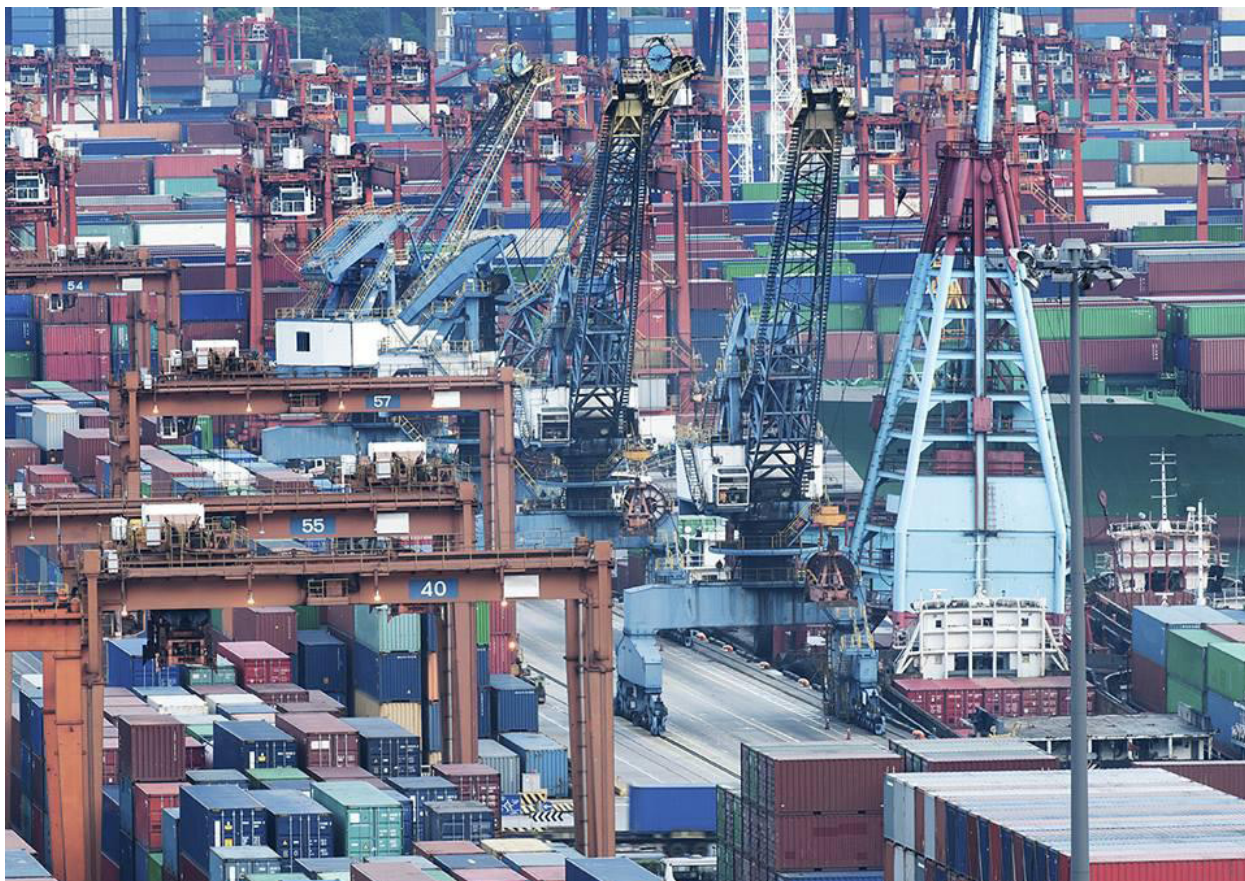
and his statement in the 1990s that art doesn't need further developments in the push to make art more accessible and global, which is outrageous and a clear indication of conservative thinking, leading to the proliferation of non-critical practices and unwillingness of artists to openly engage with serious problems behind biennials and the globalisation of art.

All these threads have been taken up by recent authors, who have traced the complete stripping away of existing terms and theories inherited from post war art to define art, there are no ready-made terms and criteria to define art, so whatever is happening now is highly significant and gives credibility to post autonomy.

Simina Neagu: The format of the Biennial still positions itself between Nationalism & Globalisation. What is the main issue behind the format and how does PA want to change it?

David Goldenberg: There is no consensus concerning the definition of what a Biennial is, but this is the main argument between Nationalism and Globalisation for breaking down the global expansionist role of Biennials. However the main problem con-





*Container Port*

cerns issues I have just mentioned, preventing developing art and thinking. The term “Biennial”, along with “contemporary art”, both equally obsolete, comprise the existing spatial temporal coordinates defining art. As a term, Biennial locks thinking into a restricted format, but the frustrating problem is that no other format exists, so we are forced to visualise our own. It also locks art into the function of expanding the Western art market, and this is where we do find a consensus. But if we imagine beyond the term and function as sites for art in a global context, the terms to reformulate the ontology of art intersect. Therefore, our task was how to stage a project examining these issues without replicating these mechanisms and break with these restricted forms into thinking.

Simina Neagu: How will a Mobile Biennial propose to resolve the common criticism of a Biennial that its Global agenda overlooks a local context?

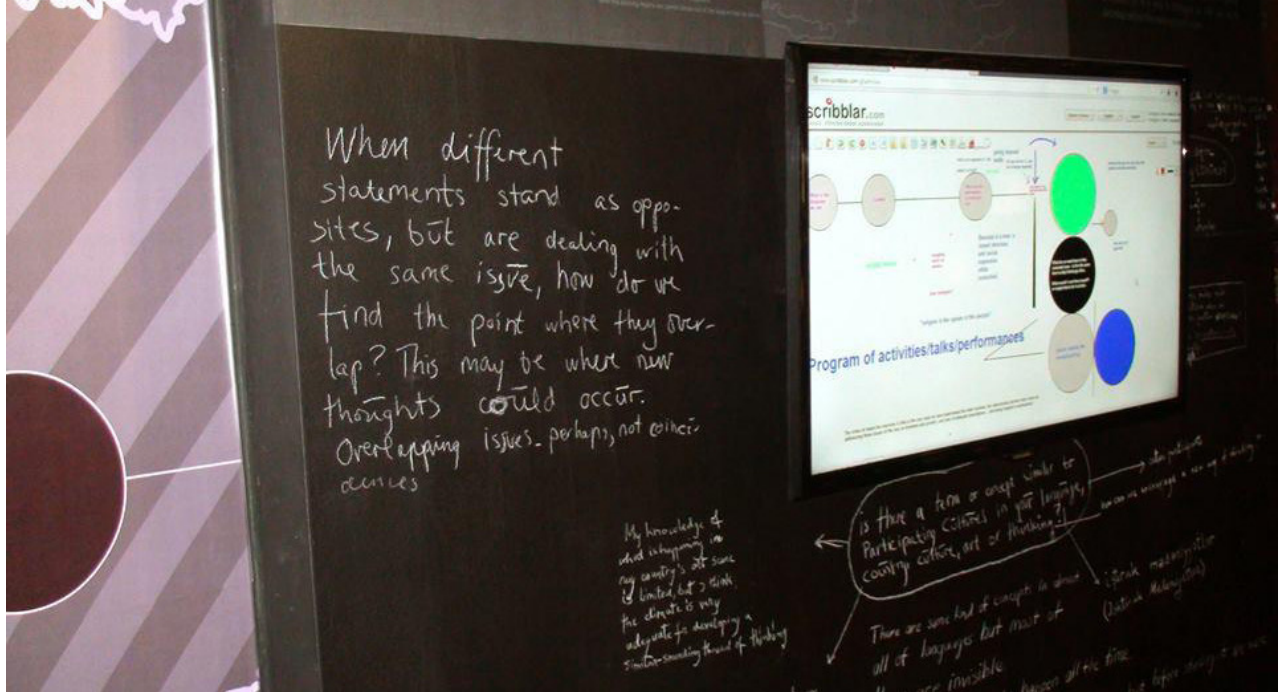
David Goldenberg:: We used the image of a Mobile Biennial to mentally unfix the Biennial exhibition, which allowed us to project our thinking into the concrete practicalities of touring a show to different locations and the political ideological consequences of doing this, as well as designing and organising our own biennial.

Simina Neagu: What is the similarity between a Global shipping container industry and Global exhibitions?

David Goldenberg:: The Global container industry provided a very simple familiar image that allowed us to link together the container with a Biennial pavilion, gallery units, minimalist sculptures as signs of global western art, the Global circulation of art and commodities. Two images structured our thinking: the image of a container port to summarise the existing limits, non development, Non thinking, stasis, the physical limit of what is possible, set against the Container Park to visualise going beyond existing forms leading into thinking and reconfiguring art. The installation in Venice comprised two containers in our imaginary container park.

Simina Neagu: Define Participatory Cultures?

David Goldenberg:: Participating cultures is a new term to embody the entry into thinking that changed Post Autonomy from its earlier limited definition into an expanded version. Existing methodologies and thinking are unable to break open the loop that traps us within the mechanisms of colonial and global expansion and non-thinking. So we need



*How do we find the point where they overlap*

something to assist us. Participating cultures is part of this thinking revolving around how to break open this trap and locate a trigger to start the process leading into reimagining art again. This occurs through linking up with Globally distributed cultures who are in the same stage of rethinking art as ourselves, and work towards developing a new art through exchanging ideas. This seems to take art to a higher level.

Simina Neagu: Did the show in Venice raise new Questions?

David Goldenberg:: Yes and it revolves around recognising the 2nd effect the ideas generated, and occurred when we recontextualised the installation and issues raised in Venice to Baku, in the form of a kit for a mobile Biennial, using the design for an imaginary container park, including a model of the Venice installation. What is of interest here is how we shift from the centre of cultural power in Venice out to a country and culture who represented the first example of a participating culture, in order to engage with the actual reality of establishing a participating culture. Bypassing the idea of a participating culture to the reality and context of a participating culture and reinventing the Biennial uncovers and puts under threat principles of western modernism, its autonomy and cultural power, and brings us face to face with the realisation that what we take for granted needs to be fought for and that it is unlikely that the principles of western modernism will be retained. In other words, entering a context where we begin to actively reimagine art again completely unsettles our received understanding, generating a

shock, and asks us very forcibly what we still want from art. It is here where new questions arise, moving us into the core of establishing participating cultures. What elements do we select and retain and what qualities and what criteria are used to select suitable cultures to be part of the network of Participating cultures?

Simina Neagu: Why is collaboration an important component? And say something about the PA group.

David Goldenberg:: It isn't so much collaboration, as participation, which is a methodology with its sets of problems that I have explored since the 1990's, first as a cybernetic model, then a Systems theoretical model, and its fundamental replacement of Modernism's terminology around the artist and art work, as a basis for breaking down hierarchies and cultural power. Participating cultures sought to reframe participatory practices after its recent appropriation by institutions. Members of the Post Autonomy group occupied points in both actual geographical space and in our imaginary map to take the mobile Biennial, a string of geo political coordinates that allowed us to test out and exchange our understanding and vocabulary for articulating art and its possible development, in other words, they were a physical embodiment to work towards materialising participating cultures.

I want to thank Ioana Pioaru and Bahram Khalilov for their advice and collaboration on many stages of the project.



# Ex Statu Pupillari: Against Guardians.

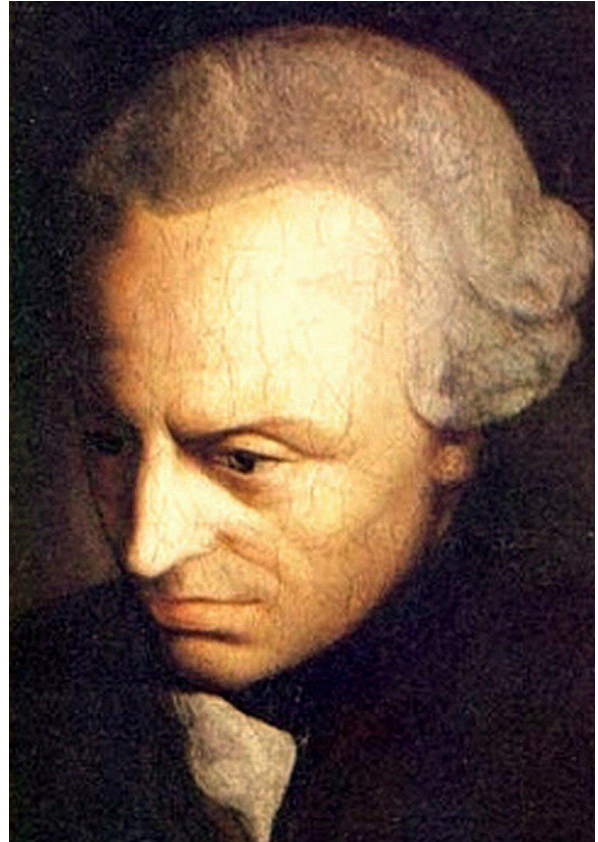
Sam Vangheluwe

My late father loved to drive his car. Whenever he lost the way (the era before GPS), he would rather stay lost than ask someone for directions. Whenever he set about assembling a newly purchased item of furniture or piecing together some apparatus, he would do so without touching the manual, without even acknowledging its existence. This in spite of the risk of messing up, and in contempt of his family's appeals to read the bloody instructions for goodness' sake. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another, he would retort. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. I cannot guarantee that he quoted Immanuel Kant verbatim, but his utterances sounded almost as eloquent.

In Kant's day, self-incurred tutelage was brought about through "guidance from books for understanding, a pastor to serve as one's conscience, a physician to determine one's diet," and so on.

The Ancien Régime is long gone, organized religion has lost much of its clout, slavery has been abolished (officially), the fair sex is emancipated (?), gender identity is on the agenda, and children have learned to talk back. Even animals are on the cusp of enjoying, well, animal rights. Yet it seems that early 21st-century humankind relies more than ever on alien guidance. In statu pupillari. Collectively underage. We delegate everything. Duties, responsibilities, skills, life choices, care, power – all are left to benevolent guardians who act on our behalf. We are so thoroughly accustomed to being supervised that we don't even start to question our permanent non-age. We rely on specialists to feed and clothe us, to look after our children, to represent our interests, to think, act and feel for us. The poor are guided through the rocky road of privation, the rich are provided with a lengthy description of what they are about to eat, and how to eat it, at each new course.

Nowhere is this self-imposed immaturity more surprising, if not vexing, than in the arts. Recently on Flemish tv, a middle-aged actor – on his first visit to a museum – complained to his interviewer that as a child he had to learn the periods and schools in art history without ever visiting a museum. "Take me to a museum!" he exclaimed anachronistically. "Ah," answered the interviewer, "but in that case what is



*Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)*

important is who accompanies you, who opens your eyes. Who is your guide?"

Not only in the fine or visual arts do we crave guidance. In music: a live concert performance of J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion, in a church in Bruges. First, a lengthy spoken introduction by some person, on what we are about to hear. We must be truly dim. Then, throughout the performance, the rustling of pages being turned in concert by the audience, who, with heads bent over their libretto, do not want to miss a word, of the original and the translation.

In theatre: as a 16-year-old, during an interval in the performance of the Apology of Socrates, a bare knuckle fight to the death with my Latin-Greek teacher, who maintained that without prior knowledge or thoughtful guidance, the audience would merely be the proverbial swine, incapable of appreciating the pearls that are cast before them. I reckoned, and still do, that if the tragicomic or comedic substance of any piece fails to reach the audience,



*Guided tour in aMmuseum*

most likely there is something lacking in the piece or in its performance. Or, indeed, the audience must be a vegetable garden, and thus beyond guidance anyway.

Many years ago, I inadvertently offended a kindly middle-aged Japanese lady who offered to guide me through Matsumoto Castle, by politely refusing her services. She was bewildered, vexed and possibly inconsolable. But I stood my ground (since then, I have learned that flat refusal doesn't sit well with Japanese mores). On that same journey, I was acquainted with further examples of benevolent Japanese guidance: the Zen garden of Ryōan-ji in Kyoto, where the visitor was (in illo tempore) invited to enjoy the meditative silence by a voice roaring unceasingly from a Tannoy. Or the spectacular fireworks at Lake Biwa, drowned out by the kindly advice on how to enjoy not only the sight but the subtleties of the soundscape as well, broadcast from a vast loud-speaker system.

The Japanese might have a particular penchant for docility under guidance, but are the rest of us so much more liberated?

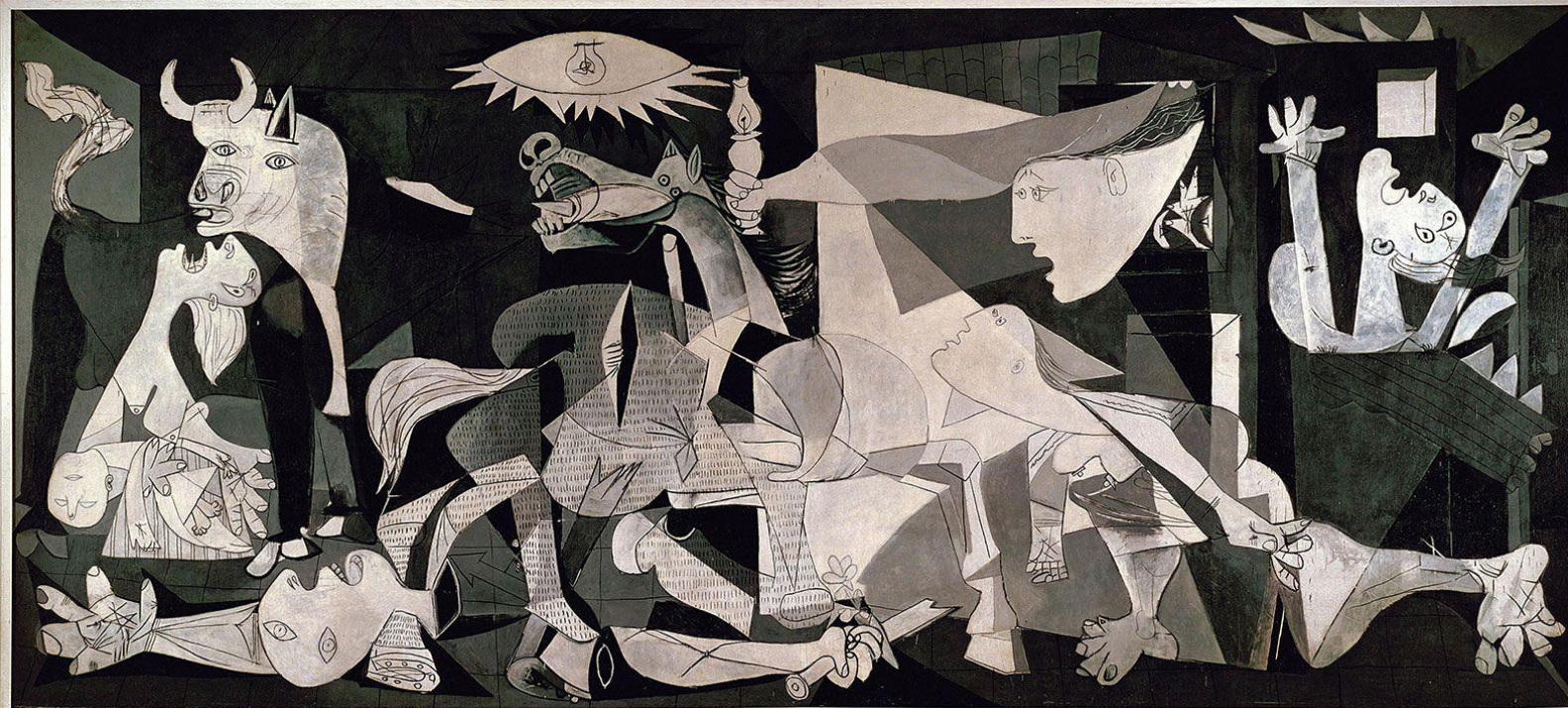
What is (visual) art, to most people? It is an object, a form, purportedly imbued with meaning, with content. The artist provides the form, but who furnishes the content? As the public is often not conversant with the artist, or the latter unable and/or unwilling to act as a guide, this role is left to, and eagerly taken up by the specialists: the art historian, the curator, the art critic, the museum guide – the guardians of

the fine arts.

Let us admit it: we are all docile creatures, and blindly trust our guardians. As Kant wrote: "Having first made their domestic livestock dumb, and having carefully made sure that these docile creatures will not take a single step without the walker to which they are harnessed, these guardians then show them the danger that threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone." Any attempt at walking alone is subverted by our guardians, and moreover, we ourselves are utterly loath to walk independently. How many people do I know, good friends among them, who feel they get a raw deal when not provided with some easy-to-swallow, predigested explanation of a work of art they are faced with. In the case of painting, it is all in the 'story' - specifically: the details, the sacred details. Painting as a picture puzzle. 'Abstract' painting presents other problems. More than once have I witnessed someone confronted with an abstract painting, and - bereft of any back-story, symbolist interpretation, or reference to 'familiar' reality - evolving from a state of minor irritation, to outrage, to outright fury: "What on earth am I supposed to make of this?!"

"Standing in front of it, I'd rather know that Guernica is an anti-war painting against the bombing of a Spanish town by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy at the request of the Spanish Nationalists," says the layperson in art, "without that knowledge, what and how am I to see?" Good question. "What if my ignorance causes me to fall, what if Guernica gives me





*Guernica P. Picasso) Death or Life (1937)*

the impression of a terrible vitality, of life, god forbid, instead of death and destruction?" Fear of falling has the viewer cling to commonplaces, and prevents him or her from further exploring what and how to see – where it all starts.

This is the ultimate danger that haunts the fine arts museum or gallery visitor: being abandoned, and falling. There are a thousand reasons why you might stumble and fall in the face of a mute work of art. It might just not be your day. Or the work might indeed be insipid. You might completely overlook the essence of a work of art. You might feel indifferent toward a masterpiece, or attracted to some banality. You might pass judgement and be mistaken. However, this danger is inflated, as, in Kant's words: "after falling a few times [you] would in the end certainly learn to walk; but an example of this kind makes men timid and usually frightens them out of all further attempts."

Anyone visiting the Museum Insel Hombroich (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany), as I did as a youth, will experience that timidity upon being abandoned: this singular museum does (did) not provide captions to accompany the works from various eras and cultures. None. No artist's name, no dates, no techniques. "Is that a... Rembrandt etching? Is it a real Rembrandt? Is it an etching or a dry-point? When is it from?" Thus one is enfranchised, left to one's own devices. It is striking how soon a certain irritation rises, so loath are we to dispense with our fetters.

Lacking the guardians' harness, and maintaining this simplistic and specious separation of form and content, the average museum visitor vaguely distrusts his or her esthetic judgement (for being superficial), and feels that one's own intellect is inadequate at grasping the 'correct' meaning. How could one's own understanding ever be on a par with the specialists' expertise? And thus, the forsaken visitor relinquishes all further attempts at walking alone.

There is however, imperatively, only one configuration that allows art/painting to live: that of the viewer and the work of art facing each other, one to one. Without external mediation. This setup is equally abhorred by the guardians and the public, for it risks rendering the former obsolete, and liberating the latter from tutelage for good.

And therefore no stone is left unturned in order to avoid that calamity. Visit any museum of fine arts today, and you will be beset by benevolent attempts to tether you to some form of guidance. You will be hard-pressed to walk alone. Walking alone, in these days of mass culture, is increasingly tricky – a successful museum of fine arts being, by definition, an overcrowded museum. In the very reception area, visitors are harnessed with audio gear to crowd their brain with text, and thus avoid the one-to-one relation with the art. You can of course also download the museum app and choose a themed tour. That is if you don't participate in a guided group tour, thereby averting serious contemplation altogether. You'll be positively encouraged to take photographs (selfies!),





*Exhibition Cubus of the Langen Foundation, Museum Insel Hombroich*

for looking through a lens is safer than looking at the work. Your feeble attempts at escaping tutelage will be wiped out by a tsunami of written text, on walls, labels, in brochures, on touchscreens and so on. Interventions by residing artists, ‘commenting’ on the works of art, will distract your overview by insisting on the details, the sacred godforsaken details. Curators will have rearranged the collection into some nifty thematic order of their own devising, impeding your autonomous gaze. No more bored children: the museum has become an exciting adventure trail, a treasure hunt, a family-friendly playground for young and old.

Yet the alternative is bafflingly simple. I firmly believe that anyone, especially those innocents who are not inclined to partake of the fine arts, or who feel intimidated by their supposed stature, can indeed develop a meaningful relationship with a work of art, without the tutelage of guardians or guides. Under their own steam. After all, they have not yet been (entirely) spoilt by “rules and formulas, those mechanical aids to the rational use, or rather misuse, of [their] natural gifts, [...] the shackles of a permanent immaturity” (Kant). These innocents are trustful, available, new.

It is particularly appalling to abuse these innocents’ trust and availability by imposing on them an im-

maturity which is a lesson in servility, an attack on the freedom of the mind and the dignity of humankind.

Just look, dear friend. Linger a while. Trust your senses. Do not look left and right for text. That can come later. Detach yourself from the tour group, run away from the guide. Switch off your audio. Remove the museum app from your phone. Do not take pictures: photographing = not seeing. Stay away from the touchscreens. Ignore the circus. Art reviews are not gospel. Don’t be told what to see, what to feel, what to think. Sapere aude - have the courage to use your own reason.

Quotes by Immanuel Kant taken from:  
What is Enlightenment? *Berlinischen Monatsschrift*  
(December, 1784), pp. 481-494.

# Learning From The Masters

Bradley Stevens

When I was a young art student I remember walking with some trepidation from my studio in downtown D.C. to the National Gallery of Art. I had signed up to copy my first painting in this venerable museum, and was apprehensive at the prospect of working in front of throngs of onlookers. Nevertheless, I was determined to follow the long tradition of art students reproducing the Masters as a means to unravel some of the mysteries of painting.

For my first copy, I chose a small Monet landscape titled *Argenteuil*, from 1872. I always loved this painting. With luscious oil paint on a flat canvas, Monet somehow captures the feeling and spirit of a particular time and place. One can sense the stillness of a warm summer evening, as he stood painting on the bank of the Seine. A tall row of trees on the right edge of the canvas block the setting sun, casting the foreground into shadow—except where a few bold streaks of sunlight pierce the adjacent road. On the low horizon below a luminous sky, two sailboats lazily head home, their sails mirrored in the calm waters. In the distance, façades of the local village catch the last rays of fleeting light. To me it was pure magic. The scene was real, but it was more than reality. It was art. Every brushstroke, every note was perfect, like a Mozart divertimento.

From that moment on, it became my mission to learn as much as I could from history's great artists. For the next five years, two to three days a week, I copied paintings from a wide spectrum of styles and time periods. I learned something different from every artist: Corot simplified the landscape into large masses and shapes, then skillfully added touches and accents to enliven the paint surface; Degas used



gestural lines to emphasize human movement; Rembrandt deepened shadows with transparent glazes to give physical and psychological depth to his subjects; Gilbert Stuart varied the focus in his paintings, delineating some parts and leaving others indistinct; Sargent, the ultimate master of bravura brushwork, expressed so much with an economy of strokes; Cezanne stressed structural form to give his subjects magnitude and gravity. Without exception, every artist taught me that a well-conceived and balanced composition is absolutely essential.

Copying paintings has long been an accepted, and indeed, venerated part of an artist's education. When in Rome in the early 17th century, a young Peter Paul Rubens copied *The Entombment of Christ* by Caravaggio, who based his Christ figure on Raphael's *The Deposition*. His figure came from *La Pietà* of Michelangelo, who looked towards classical Greek sculpture for inspiration. In 1831, artist Samuel F.B. Morse (later known for his invention of the telegraph) worked seven days a week for two years on his 6' x 9' canvas, *Gallery of the Louvre*. In this immensely ambitious painting of the museum's interior, Morse meticulously reproduced thirty-eight Old Master paintings. Morse's motivation was to educate and inspire American audiences about the great art and culture of Europe. At this time there were no significant art schools or museums in the United States. To paint well is hard—very hard. Myriad considerations demand attention seemingly all at once: color, light, shadow, drawing, proportion, design, brushwork, texture, edges, harmony, perspective, spatial depth, movement, focus and more. Accomplished artists from the past have already confronted and







solved these issues in one way or another, so why wouldn't we want to take advantage of their expertise and learn from them? To do otherwise is to be ignorant, if not arrogant. I call it learning the "language" of art. Observation of nature alone cannot make a painting. Artists learn to translate what they see, and you see, with their eyes and imagination, into art. Looking at a print of a painting in a book or elsewhere is not sufficient. Such a reproduction is an untrustworthy two-dimensional representation of a particular painting with suspect colors owing to the limitations of printing inks. A painting is a three-dimensional object with many built up layers of pigment, thick with impasto in places and thin with washes in others. A copyist is required to be a detective of sorts, carefully deciphering clues as to what was painted first, second, third, and exactly what pigments were used to create the colors in the original.

I am convinced that much of what I know about painting, I learned from being a copyist in the museums. I'll be the first to admit that copying something is vastly easier than creating the original idea. Nonetheless, it gave me a sense of confidence that I could at least technically produce a successful painting, which hopefully would translate to my own work. An

unforeseen and added benefit was that people wanted to acquire my copies. In time, I developed a reputation for this work and received major commissions to copy paintings from institutions such as the White House, State Department, Smithsonian, Monticello and U.S. Capitol.

Of all the pillars of an art education, I've often worried that art history is the most neglected. I see art as a continuum. Each generation borrows and learns from the previous ones. While present day students might see the idea of copying as passé, I believe it is a mistake to ignore the past. Picasso famously stated, "Good artists copy, great artists steal". The purpose of copying is not to mimic any one artist or style, but to gather ideas and be inspired by another artist's work so that you can interpret them into your own. My own experience of copying paintings led to the creation of Museum Studies, an on-going series of original work featuring intimate scenes of people looking at art in museums. These paintings are my tribute to the great artists who have inspired me and to the museums that invite us to appreciate their genius.





# A Retiring Art Professor

Stephen Westfall

Could be a title for a much more salaciously engaging short story than a reflective short essay, nevertheless I'm aging out of teaching art in college and can't help but wonder what it all means. At 70, I've been teaching for 50 years and I'm eager to spend whatever time I have left fully practicing what I "profess." It's not that I haven't been able to make my own artwork while teaching, or that the colleges and universities where I've taught haven't given me time to paint through sabbaticals and grants, not to mention salary. And I'm besotted with my students, perhaps more fiercely than I have ever been. The classes I've taught over the last few years have been my favorite pedagogical experiences of my life, partly because I feel looser, less constrained by syllabi that might have become a straight-jacket in previous years through righteous adherence in the face of shifting class demographics and broader and more immediate social crises.

The pandemic may have something to do with this increased flexibility: the very act of teaching art had to be reimaged as we all (or most of us) took the classroom online. This improvised migration to a radically different contact space was followed almost immediately (on May 25th, 2020, the end of the first pandemic semester) by the murder of George Floyd and the almost universally recognized need within academic art departments for a sober and far-reaching institutional response involving a recasting of an art curriculum which too often presented an bleached out art history excluding people of color and pre- and post-colonial cultures, not to mention the high-level participation of artists of color and women in the creation of the already sanctioned Modernist canon. Questions of broadening the canon and teaching towards inclusivity have of course been hammering at the door before the crises of the spring and summer of 2020, but crisis forced the issue, as it often does. At the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and the MFA program at Bard College, two programs that I've long been associated with, this push for diversity, equity and inclusion has been underway for some time. And, ironically, it is the constraint of time itself on a four year (BFA) or 2-3 year (MFA) education that is the site of conflict over this curricular enrichment. How do we cram the whole incomplete story in?

For Modernism was a process of liberation, primar-



*Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Meeting at the Golden Gate, fresco c. 1303-1306*

ily from theocracy, that provided models for what was to come. The process was fraught, filled with triumph and doubt, and because it's art, the doubt is also triumphantly representative of the human condition. So, we begin again with Giotto's blue sky and human tenderness and try to show how the universally and ordinarily human is emerging from the unblinking, frozen gold eternities of icon painting. It is a slow rolling Big Bang compared to what had come before. No matter how much how much Tony Kushner's Angel of History protests, we begin to weave a fresh tapestry in time which unrolls and widens into our expanding present. The admissibility of atheism, science, women, people of color, and LGBTQI folk has been fought tooth and nail by holders of revanchist notions of the sacred both within and without academe. The oppressive notion of the sacred is one that is aghast at the proliferation of complexity in modern life and can't imagine the sacred can survive. A contemporary "woke" (or waking, lol) artist or other form of intellectual understands that any notion of the celebratory or sacred can't flourish without it. I always come back to the astounding first two paragraphs of Susan Sontag's *The Aesthetics of Silence* to describe this expanded notion of the spiritual, hence the sacred:

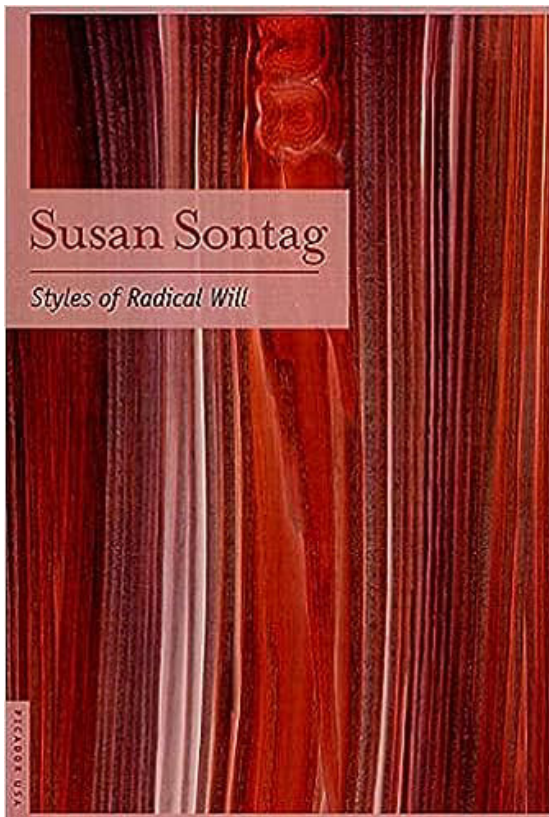


*Stephen Westfall, "Samba da Lua", 2021, oil on canvas,  
courtesy Alexandre Gallery*

Every era has to reinvent the project of "spirituality" for itself. (Spirituality = plans, terminologies, ideas of department aimed at resolving the painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence.)

In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is "art." The activities of the painter, the musician, the poet, the dancer, once they were grouped together under that generic name (a relatively recent move), have proved a particularly

adaptable site on which to stage the formal dramas besetting consciousness, each individual work of art being a more or less astute paradigm for regulating or reconciling these contradictions. Of course, the site needs continual refurbishing. Whatever goal is set for art eventually proves restrictive, matched against the widest goals of consciousness. Art, itself a form of mystification, endures a succession of crises of demystification; older artistic goals are assailed and, ostensibly, replaced; outworn maps of consciousness are redrawn. But what supplies all



*The Aesthetics of Silence is the first essay in the collection Styles of Radical Will by Susan Sontag*

these crises with their energy -- an energy held in common, so to speak -- is the very unification of numerous, quite disparate activities into a single genus. At the moment when "art" comes into being, the modern period of art begins. From then on, any of the activities therein subsumed becomes a profoundly problematic activity, all of whose procedures and, ultimately, whose very right to exist can be called into question.

Such a story presents art as participating in an intellectual history, part philosophy, part political-science; all of which is what establishes art as a discipline that has an important place in a liberal arts university or college. At the same time, we much teach the craft, even as the tools and platforms expand (besides the rhetorical omission of the sculptor, Sontag's own bundle forgoes the film maker, the conceptual artist, and the performance artist, all of whom must be included). How to fit it all into a sequence of college majors? My own experience is that we can't. Maybe the best we can do is prepare students to be students for the rest of their lives. Art classes must present the craft as a link to the history and a means to the present practice. The introduction of great writing into the classroom helps because it explodes the myth of inarticulability and

sets a foundation for critical accountability. Zadie Smith's essays on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Kara Walker are recent examples of exciting art stirring exciting language and a filling-in of histories. Within the classroom this accountability should be couched in kindness (something that often must be relearned in college after punishing experiences in the secondary school system) and permission to repeatedly fail, to test and discard models for expression even as fluency develops.

Then there's academic bureaucracy, which makes a lot of things possible, but inflates itself at the expense of teachers and numbers. The growth both in salaries and bodies of administration at the expense of faculty over the last twenty years has been well-covered, but how much administration inflation has added to the rising cost of tuition is less well-publicized. And I don't think the endangerment of the humanities in our collegiate education has been discussed enough. West Virginia University plans to cut 169 faculty positions and over 30 majors in a cost-cutting move, including world languages and literature and graduate level math. No administrative cutbacks have been reported as of this writing. Archeology programs have virtually disappeared from major universities across the country. College is now not only staggeringly expensive, but the humanities are being winnowed out as enrollment dwindles in favor of more vocational programs and the corporate grant attractors of research and development sciences. The programs I've been involved with have never had an enrollment crisis even as it's been predicted, but we don't generate alumni or corporate donations, either. A Tier-1 research university might support the arts for the prestige their programs bring if they are elite, but they are less regarded as part of the university's mission if the numbers shrink. Look for attrition in humanities to continue unless priorities shift back within administrative master plans. Art pedagogy could find itself relocated back to residing only in art schools, isolated from the liberal arts university, not because its own lack of vitality, but because the notion of a "liberal arts curriculum" itself gradually dwindles away.

At ground level, in the classroom and whatever studio space can be found, students face other pressures, perhaps primarily the seductively even sheen of images on their cell phones. The leveling effect of social media is an enormous obstacle to an undergraduate student's ability to make judgements based on the material presence of an artwork, and an enticement to a belief in art as a sure-fire career path. Of course, this is a Ponzi scheme. The truth is that the most interesting art sustains a long game, and





*Lynette Yiadom-Boaky; A Passion Like No Other, 2012  
oil on canvas, 84 × 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist*

the promise of near-term monetary success is an elusive and troublesome distraction from the process of deepening one's practice. Some people can handle it and continue to develop even if it means discarding motifs that have brought them recognition, while a lot of others burn out in a cycle of repetition. Artists can also burn out from neglect, and so I'm not sure if there's a template for right thinking and behavior except common sense. Do we counsel students towards treating their art as something a bit beyond their knowing, something that is just beyond the reach of their current solutions? I see it hanging out there, conversing with the culture of made art, beyond even the culture that first sponsored the idea, kind of like the Kabbalist's vision of *The Book* in which everything that has ever been written is but a page. On whose table does *The Book*

lay open? So, I'm retiring from teaching to return full time to practice, to be a student after matriculation. I have no idea how much time is given to me, but I'm hoping for a couple of decades to reach beyond my grasp. I know that teaching itself has been an extended learning process which has brought me to thinking more deeply about painting than I might have through any other up means. My interactions with my treasured colleagues and students have opened me up to fresh thinking about art and especially painting. The sharing of names and enthusiasms is the essence of collegiality and I'm optimistic I can carry that out the door. That, and a tantalizing sense of possibility that comes from anticipating an extended stretch of time with one's practice in the studio. I imagine that in some small but inevitable way my painting will evolve to look like . . . painting.











## The Great Derangement

Frances Oliver

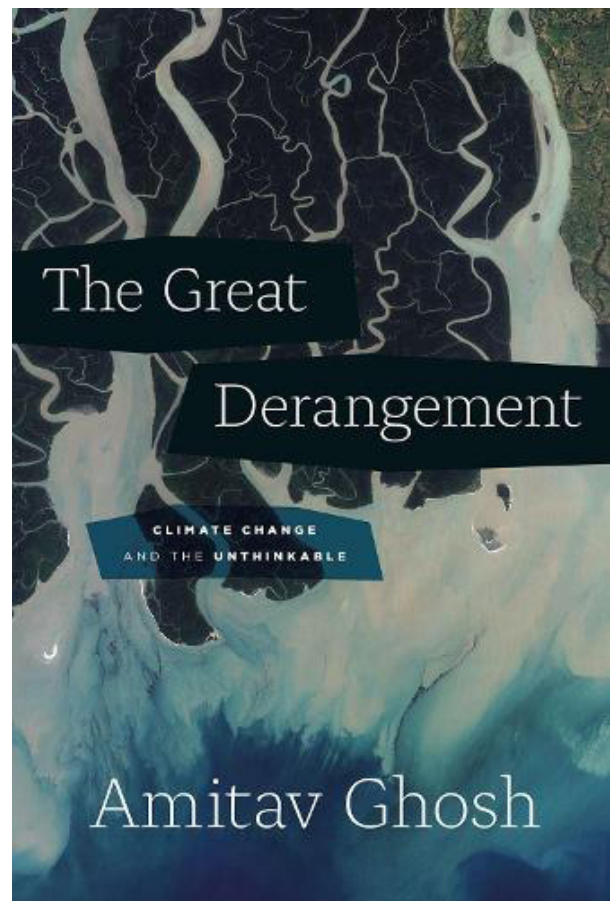
Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is a short book, pithy in the best sense of that word, which began as a series of four lectures. It was published in 2016; a review of a later book on a similar topic, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, made me eager to read the first.

*The Great Derangement*, at least as it begins, might be classified as a work of literary criticism. Ghosh's theme is the failure of literary fiction, since the novel became its dominant form, to engage with the critical issue of our age, climate change and the exhaustion of the earth. Just when human activity was beginning to dangerously change the atmosphere of the planet, literary activity became focused on the human, the individual. The 19th century, with its assumption that nature was orderly and predictable, and with the readership of a growing secure middle class, took fiction away from adventure and extreme events into the realm of personal relationships. "At exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike."

Ghosh believes therefore that the books of our era which posterity may actually remember and admire, barring a few exceptions, are those not categorised as 'serious' fiction but the only ones dealing with the extraordinary, unimagined and cataclysmic, the works of science fiction and the paranormal.

This little book however goes far beyond questions of literature. Ghosh makes so many sharp observations about the crisis we are in that it is hard to choose which to cite; so I will confine myself to what I regard as most insightful and have seldom found in other climate catastrophe commentary.

Given its huge population and rapid industrialisation, Ghosh states that no climate solution is possible without the agreement of Asia. He also attacks the myth of development, the empty promise the



rich West makes to the poor East and South. Aspiration to Western living standards for all or even many more is a pipe dream. Asia, says Ghosh, could have taken another path, the path of Gandhi. Gandhi understood that "a consumer mode of existence if adopted by large numbers would consume the planet." His movement advocated simplicity, community, a turning away from worldly goods. Unfortunately Asia has veered, inspired also by the newly industrialised nations' fear of 'backwardness', toward the self-destructive paradigm of consumerism and endless growth. Oil has made our

growth possible and also added to growing inequality. Ghosh believes that the oil dependency of the industrialised world has stripped power from the working public; oil, the major driver, does not need many workers for its production.

Unique in my climate reading experience is Ghosh's observation that seeing climate change in terms of an individual moral issue (don't fly, etc.) brings it back again to the singular, the individual, the place where our culture and politics is stuck. This is not to say that individual actions are not worthy but in the big scheme of things they are a last fallback when all else appears to be failing. It is only a total aggregate shift away from the present political and economic system that could really cope with the crisis of the world.

Ghosh compares the weak, woolly and obfuscating climate declaration produced by the Paris conference to the Pope's bold and realistic Encyclical on climate change. Nowhere does the Paris Agreement question the paradigms which threaten to doom us, whereas the Pope's document is "fiercely critical" of

"the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology."

There are of course some notes of hope in our grim scenario (and what climate change book can end without them? I might say dare end, but that is by the way.) Ghosh mentions, among other things, the "growing sense of urgency and widening activism around the world". What he finds most promising however is "the increasing involvement of religious groups and leaders in climate change politics". This sign of hope is important because, says Ghosh, "it is increasingly clear to me the formal political structures of our time are incapable of confronting this crisis on their own." Another unorthodox thought with which to leave this provocative and far-sighted book.

*The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable - Berlin Family Lectures*

*Amitav Ghosh: £11.50, Paperback, 176 Pages*