Jessica Mathews: Will Trump Talk to Kim?

The New York Review of Books

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Daniel Cohn-Bendit
Looks Back on May ’68
French associate positive things with '68—not, as conservatives claim, that our generation has destroyed schools, the ancient institutions of marriage, the family, or the public order. Some two thirds even approve of the slogan “It is forbidden to forbid”; they appreciate its poetical quality and the message of potential it conveys. That subtext remains ingrained in French society.

Leggewie: But there is also a revanchist tendency in French society, a kind of reactionary backlash to May '68.

Cohn-Bendit: The revolt accelerated a development that was already in prog-

acci and conceded, okay, this is a general strike then.

Leggewie: Social movements suddenly spread like ink on blotting paper.

Cohn-Bendit: And in the end—much to the dismay of the generation of '68—
what the welfare state, represented then by Jacques Chirac [secretary of state for employment], and the unions, led by the Communist Georges Séguy, agreed that the revolt had to end. They convened a round table, now known as the Grenelle, and negotiated tremendous pay increases, the strengthening of workers’ councils, and much more. But the Communists didn’t understand that we had cleared the way for them. And the Trotskyists didn’t understand that the revolution cannot be permanent.

Leggewie: Alain Krivine, who’s still one of the Trotskyists leaders, recently declared in Le Monde that he won’t lay 1968 to rest—unlike this Dany Cohn-
Bendit gets applauded by all the right-wingers in the European Par-
liament for his sners and a kind of lib-
eralism that has nothing to do with '68.”

Cohn-Bendit: Two Trotskyists wrote a book in 1968 called The Dress Re-
hearsal. What they meant was: '68 as a prelude to the actual revolution, some-
what in the way that the Kronstadt naval mutinies of 1905 were the over-
ture to the Bolshevik October Revolu-
tion of 1917. And this they have kept repeating for fifty years now: one day we will start a real May Revolution, one that succeeds after all, the ultimate socialist revolution.

Leggewie: So not just liberate women, children, and gays, but finally get rid of capitalism.

Cohn-Bendit: We have to acknowledge that capitalism has changed immensely. It’s another world we’re living in today. I wouldn’t want to miss 1968—it was a great time—but we need to look ahead.

Leggewie: What we miss, indeed, is a social utopia for today. While the dog-
matic left strives for a reenactment, a repetition of the revolt, the radical right aims for a revision: the cultural revolu-
tion of '68 must be undone.

Cohn-Bendit: In Germany and France, and in the US as well, the right is cur-
tently pressing for a “conservative revolution” that remedies our sick post-industrial societies. Whenever an im-
migrant misbehaves, it’s Cohn-Bendit’s fault. Cohn-Bendit told people to stop obeying and start destroying it all—the schools, the family, marriage, the church. That’s just as absurd as the whole revolutionary myth.

Leggewie: The reality was that power imploded in May 1968, affecting the Elysée, the government and adminis-
trative apparatuses, even the military and the police.

Cohn-Bendit: Yes, as is currently de-
picted in three works about '68, in Le tombeur du général, the conservative journalist Christine Clerc has told

the story from the government’s perspective and invented one story about me. A witness she quotes reports how Charles de Gaulle went berserk in one of the emergency meetings: “Why don’t you just shoot them? Then all this racket would be over.” But the education minister advised against it: “Monseigneur, the President, you should meet this Cohn-Bendit!” Such a meeting did not transpire, of course, which is why Clerc inverts a nightly encounter at the Élysée between General de Gaulle and Dany le Rouge. We’re chatting, he collapses, I help him up and get him a drink of water, and so on. Then there is an interesting play, featuring Aunt Yvonne [de Gaulle’s wife], myself, and others. It depicts the episode on May 29 when de Gaulle escaped to General Jacques Massu’s military quarters at Baden-Baden.

Leggewie: To resign? To prepare a coup?

Cohn-Bendit: De Gaulle had told everyone that he would go to his native Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, but in reality he fled to Baden-Baden. In the play De Gaulle 68—La Révérence, Churchill makes an appearance, rating the general: “You won the war and now you’re scared of a twenty-three-year-old redhead? Get your act together.” I’m talking to him as well—about communism… The third work, Les 99 jours de Cohn-Bendit, a novel, is the counterfactual account of a ninety-nine-day Cohn-Bendit administration, based on the premise that we assumed power in May ’68.

Leggewie: What would that have been like?

Cohn-Bendit: Oh, a state of pure chaos, that goes without saying. I’m the good guy in the novel, as always: the one who wants to improve everybody’s lot. Eventually I’m toppled by left-wing extremists, but they’re also fighting one another, so in the end de Gaulle is re-stored to power.

Leggewie: Sounds like something Michel Houellebecq would come up with in a new novel: “The Good Guy,” contrary to your image of being very polarizing, you in fact usually act as a mediator—a position you refer to as “centrist.” In the summer of 1968 you co-authored a book with your older brother, Gabriel, a paraphrase of Lênin entitled Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative, intended as an attack on the French Communist Party (PCF). Your brother also took you to your first demonstration when you were eleven years old to protest the Soviet intervention of the Hungarian Uprising—in front of the PCF’s headquarters. Is anti-communism in your blood?

Cohn-Bendit: We left-wing libertarians were anti-capitalists and anti-communists. There were all kinds of crazy factions within the Communist camp: four different Trotskyist groups, as well as some Maoists who in criticizing liberal democracy would invoke the Chinese Cultural Revolution and declare their sympathy for countries like North Korea or Albania. Though for different reasons, all these factions were fighting the PCF, which was strictly pro-Soviet and styled itself as a guarantor of order. Georges Marchais, the PCF’s general secretary at the time, published an editorial in the party’s paper, L’Humanité, in which he picks on the “the German anarchist Cohn-Bendit” who’s attempting to ensnare French workers. He didn’t write it, to be sure, but everyone understood him to mean “the German Jew.”

Leggewie: When you got expelled from France, thou- sand people were chanting, “We all are German Jews.”

Cohn-Bendit: In moral terms, that was 1968’s greatest event: Africans, Arabs—all the world called themselves “undesirable” German Jews. That’s when multiculturalism was born.

Leggewie: International solidarity was also the slogan of a big rally at Berlin’s International Vietnam Congress in February 1968. You were delegated…

Cohn-Bendit: No way, I won’t be “delegated”—ever.

Leggewie: True. So you went there as a free rider of the French anarchist group Liaisons des étudiants anarchistes. What were the relations between German and French students like? In Germany, the revolt was almost over by May 1968…

Cohn-Bendit: I was very impressed with the “Critical University” approach, the Germans’ vision of a new kind of university: a free and critical community abstracted of class, capital, state, and the authorities. But at the Vietnam Congress I was wary of their unconditional support of the Viet- namese. After all, North Vietnam was a Stalinist affair and, once again, I had a clear gut feeling that I wouldn’t want to live in such a world. The enthusiasm of the German radicals alienated me. In [the German student leader] Rudi Dutschke’s speech, for example, there was a very clear-cut line separating good from evil. We were much more sensitive also of that syndrome figure everybody was talking about then, Che Guevara.

Leggewie: Our solidarity with the national liberation movements was immense. We firmly supported those who fought what Mao called a “people’s war.” What we largely ignored, however, was the suppression process from the liberators themselves, once they had seized power. The first instance of this was Algeria, which quickly became a frontline state against Israel.

Cohn-Bendit: And an authoritarian one-party system. Camus was right, Sartre wasn’t. Camus was in favor of Algerian independence, but he didn’t support the National Liberation Front. He was thinking of his mother, who was an impoverished pied-noir. The Algerians were perfectly justified in liberating themselves from France, but unfortunately we were slow to realize how the new rulers perverted the momentum of liberation. When you read Franta Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth today, with the preface by Sar- tre, it’s very, very, even bloodthirsty. Little wonder that it became the favorite book of the German Red Army Faction.

Leggewie: “1968” did not begin in Paris or Berlin, though, but in Berke-}

Hugues Aufray, who covered Dylan in France. In 1968 Joan Baez came to Paris for a discussion with students; it took place in a theater with over two thousand attending. She didn’t want to sing, she wanted to debate, but the Marxist-Leninists criticized and lec- tured her. At one point I’d had enough and stood up. At least the Yankees have created a real move- ment. The French Left and the Alger- ian War: nothing!”

Leggewie: Hannah Arendt would never approve of violent revolts, but she did feel that 1968 marked the birth of something new.

Cohn-Bendit: Arendt saw 1968 as the liberating revolt of the next generation. She actu- ally wrote a letter to me that was supposed to be conveyed by Mary McCarthy. The let- ter never made it to me, but it was later discovered. It said: “Your parents would have been proud of you. Get in touch if you need help.”

Leggewie: What was your take on Europe back then? What about the “United States of Europe,” a cause you later es- poused as the Greens’ whip in the European Parliament?

Cohn-Bendit: Europe was not an issue, not at all. France and Germany consid- ered each other hereditary enemies until well into the late 1940s. And yet we just didn’t care about French-German reconciliation when it came. We enjoyed the new mobility, traveled back and forth between the two coun- tries, yes. But “Europe” was not on our minds much, not as a grand idea and not as the basis for political institutions either.

Leggewie: There was one exception, though: in 1973, Michel Rocard, then the leader of the small Unified Socialist Party, co-authored a polemic called Le marché commun contre l’Europe. He argued against free-market capitalism, but in favor of “Europe”—a socialist Europe, that is.

Cohn-Bendit: And this marked the first step toward one of the crucial is- sues of today: overcoming the tradi- tional nation-state.

Leggewie: But what happened to anti- capitalism? In the early 1970s you led a group called “Revolutionary Strug- gle,” which infiltrated the Opel factory in Rüsselsheim near Frankfurt.

Cohn-Bendit: That was really just a practical inquiry into industrial soci- ology. We didn’t intend to launch a new Communist Party but merely to find out how new net- works and alliances—in situ and involving migrant workers for the...
first time. And we learned a lot. For
many…

Leggewie: Like Joschka Fischer, who
would go on to become Germany’s for-
eign minister.

Cohn-Bendit: …this was an important
chapter in their lives.

Leggewie: We were both revolutionary
tourists in Portugal in 1975. I was there
with my small family, you—such was
my impression—always as part of an
extended family, be it when playing vol-
leyball at the beach or when attending
political assemblies in Lisbon. Living
in a pack and politicizing everything
that’s private: Is this the essence of ’68?

Cohn-Bendit: “Pack” is the right term.
Already in the spring of 1968 that’s how
we used to spend our days and nights in
Nanterre. We were searching for forms
of a larger community and wanted to
burst all petite bourgeois structures—
like your nuclear family.

Leggewie: For members of the genera-
tion of ’68 there were three deadly sins:
voting, eating oysters, and getting mar-
rried. You committed all three of these
sins, eventually.

Cohn-Bendit: When I got expelled from
France and came to Germany, some “comrade” asked me: What does social-
ism by fettering the productive forces,
people were still happily ignorant of the
ozone hole: it was a time when
the working class
looked at that famous image, I thought,
but when I got expelled from
France and came to Germany, some “comrade” asked me: What does social-
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looked at that famous image, I thought,
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The Art of Elsewhere
Jed Perl

Gorey’s Worlds

There have always been creative spirits who take a seigneurial pride in standing somewhat apart from their time. The artists I’m thinking about are far too sophisticated to be described as outsiders. They are, in fact, prototypical insiders, with a deep grasp of the histories and traditions that are relevant to their art. But they delight in marshaling everything they know in the service of work that is sui generis, detached from all norms. Some seek a twilight-zone quality. Some aim to create a private paral-lel universe. Others make a mythology of their own jokes, quirks, dreams, obsessions, and quirks.

Edward Gorey, whose books, theatrical designs, and sundry ephemeral productions are the subject of a brilliant exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, is among the most recent additions to this curious company. It is a loose-knit cohort, which spans the centuries and includes literary and musical artists as well as visual ones. Two novelists who immedi-ately come to mind are Thomas Love Peacock in the nineteenth century and Ronald Firbank in the twentieth. I would include the sixteenth-century artists Luca Cambiaso, whose ge-ometrically designed paintings fascinated the Surrealists, and Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who painted heads composed of fruits and flowers for the Holy Roman Em-peror Rudolf II. Other cohort members include the American painter Florine Stettheimer and the American composer Harry Partch. Each of these men and women refuses to fit easily into any tradition. They’re idiosyncratic aristo-crats. When we try to press them into some tradition—perhaps to see Pea-cock as an embodiment of eighteenth-century Salamanca conventions or Arcimboldo as a prototypical Manner-ist—we rob them of some of their glory. They are nonpareil.

Like the other figures in this elu-sive group, Edward Gorey may have felt armored in his worldliness, which became a bulwark or a mask behind which he was free to indulge in a vision that is gloriously unworlidy or even otherworldly. “He has been working quite perversely to please himself.” Edmund Wilson wrote in The New Yorker in 1952 of the grand masterpieces and appreciations of Gorey’s art. “He created.” Wilson continued, “a whole little per-sonal world, equally amusing and som-bere, nostalgic and claustrophobic, at the same time poetic and poisoned.” The title of the Wadsworth Ath-eneum show, “Gorey’s Worlds,” is just right for a project that aims to lay out the genealogy of Gorey’s artistic imagina-tion, by juxtaposing his own work with works from his collection of drawings, prints, photographs, and paintings by some of the artists who were important to him. They range from the nineteenth-century French printermaker Charles Meryon to the still too-little-known American painter Albert York, whose landscapes, still lifes, and figures hover between naturalism and symbolism (York died in 2009). Gorey owned pho-tographs by Eugène Atget and drawings by Balthus, Pierre Bonnard, Charles Burchfield, and Édouard Vuillard. He also acquired a group of anonymous nineteenth-century American pictures done in a dramatic chiaroscuro tech-nique with chalk or charcoal on paper covered with marble dust. Taken to-gether, these works give us a convinc-ing picture as we will probably ever have of Gorey’s elective affinities—of his own private tradition.

In the half-century after Wilson wrote about Gorey, he became, if not a household name, then a familiar fig-ure, especially through his designs for the hit Broadway show Dracula and his opening titles for the PBS series Mystery! Gorey was born in Chicago in 1925, studied at Harvard, and ar-rived in New York in the 1950s, where he found work in the art department at Doubleday Anchor Books. He also began producing the dozens of volumes in which he wove together his own im ages and texts. By now some may see these books as precursors or relatives of the graphic novels that have achieved great popu-larity in recent years. But the rela-tionship between words and pictures in Gorey’s books is calculated to con-found the expectation of narrative logic and development that fuels many of the mergers of comic strip and novel now on the market. Gorey’s is an art of disjuncture. His narratives are often closer to prose poems than to short stories, much less novels. For nearly fifty years Gorey sent dispatches from a dream world where Edwardian gran-dees cross paths with tempestresses in flap-dappers, children confront ani-mals nobody has ever seen before, and eerily depicted landscapes and land-scapes leave us feeling that malady is just around the corner.

In a letter to Peter F. Neumeyer—a writer with whom Gorey collaborated and who has made of their correspond-ence a fascinating volume, Floating Worlds (2011)—Gorey comments, “I do share with Mr. [Henry] James, the Nellie seems “upset.” Then they find Nellie, who appears to be considering suicide on the railroad tracks but then rides away. After they see somebody who looks like Nellie, “walking in the grounds of the Weed-haven Laughing Academy.” In this book, Gorey, a notorious joker and fun-fan, offers bits and pieces of mysteries, which the three friends contemplate with an equanimity that is among the keynotes of his art. Gorey is fascinated by conventions, and the multitude of troubles or con-flicts they so imperfectly obscure. He delights in taking the structure of the almanac, with each page an cheer-ful schoolroom predictability, and standing it on its head. In The Gashlycrumb Tinies each letter stands for a child who comes to some awful end. We go from “A is for Amy who fell down the stairs” and “B is for Basil assaulted by Bears” all the way to “Y is for Yorick who’s head was knocked in” and “Z is for Zillah who drank too much gin.”

But as much as Gorey likes to mock the conventions, turning adorable children into Kafkaesque victims, he is fascinated by the power of dreams and behavior in order a disorderly world. Gorey may have had little or no use for Sigmund Freud. In one of his letters to Neumeyer, he refers to a character in a book as “fairly ickypoo-Freudian.” One could argue that Gorey was so deep into Freud’s world that he was free to go right ahead and ignore The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. The fact is that some of his protagonists, with their profes-sorial suits and handsome beard, faces, look an awful lot like Freud.

The traditions that are woven most deeply into Gorey’s work are those of the theater. The horizontal format of most of his graphic novels and his pic-tures suggests the prosenium stage, only reduced in size and scale. Many of the books have some of the quali-ties of toy theater, with each page an unfolding act or scene. It’s no accident that two of Gorey’s most remarkable achievements are devoted to the bal-let and the opera. The Blue Aspic fol-lows the parallel lives of a great singer, Ortenzia Cavigila, and an ardent fan, Jasper Asple. While Ortenzia goes from triumph to triumph and lover to lover, Jasper’s life gets worse. He ends up in an asylum, denied the gramophone on which to play his beloved recordings. When they finally cross paths, Ortenzia is leaving the opera house in an elaborate fur coat, on the arm of the Maharajah of Esch-napur, and Jasper lounges at her with a knife and murders her.

In The Gilded Bat, Maud Splayto, renamed Mirella Splatova by Baron de Zabrus, the director of a legend-ary ballet company, becomes “the reigning ballerina, highest of and one of its symbols.” But her life, the life of the artist surrounded by lovers and admirers, does not “cease to be some-what dreary.” Most if not all of her
A concrete lotus floating in a pool of water, the Gandhi Bhawan in Chandigarh heralded India’s future following independence. Designed by renowned architect Pierre Jeanneret, this modern masterpiece is starting to show its age. Thanks to support from the Getty Foundation, conservation professionals are conducting extensive research to ensure the best path to intervention. Learn more about how this collaboration is creating a movement to protect modern architecture in India at getty.edu/world.

SAVING MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA
imperishable roles are as flying creatures, including a butterfly and a raven. So it is poetical justice that she dies when a great dark bird flies into the propeller of her plane over the Camargue: she is on her way to perform in a charity gala before royalty at Cagnes-sur-Mer.

Gorey brings a reviving improvisational, witty to a backstage, wars-and-all view of theatrical life that has long been familiar to followers of ballet and opera. The crisp execution of his black-and-white drawings has some of the flash and fascination of a jazz artist giving old tunes new urgency. His prima donnas are essence of prima donna. Everything we know about Pavlova, Toumanova, Tebaldi, and Callas is boiled down to a comic elixir. Gorey is a close student of all the varieties of fans and hangers-on: the awkward ballerina in their worn-out clothes waiting at the stage door for an autograph and the broad-shouldered dandies with their glasses of champagne at the grand reception. Jasper Ankle—the torment of a fan standing in the rain to buy an inexpensive seat in a remote corner of a high balcony—is rendered as a shadow puppet in faded gray grisaille; he seems on the verge of disappearing into a world that’s all gray grisaille. Meanwhile, Ortenzia Caviglia and Mirella Splotova soldier on, moving among managers and fellow artists and lovers, but always alone with the secrets of their art. Their faces are often seen in profile, like those of inscrutable princesses and queens painted on the walls of Egyptian tombs.

“Gorey’s World” comes with a curious backstory. Following his death in 2000, the Wadsworth Atheneum was informed that Gorey had bequeathed his personal art collection to the museum. He hadn’t informed it of his intentions. He left no explanation. While he had visited the museum on various occasions, sometimes on trips between his apartment in New York and his house on Cape Cod, he didn’t appear to have had a connection with anybody of the Sunlight there, and he had no personal links with Hartford.

Gorey’s collection cannot be said to have been a major windfall for the museum. It consists mostly of smaller works, mostly on paper and most of them purchased for relatively modest sums. But the collections assembled by artists do have a particular fascination, and there are certainly some wonders worthy of a great museum among the works Gorey acquired over the years. Erin Monroe, the curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum who organized the exhibition, channels the title of Gorey’s book The Doubtful Guest when writing about his gift to the museum. “Gorey may have thought of it as ‘The Doubtful Bequest,’” she remarks, “because its arrival was unannounced, like the peculiar visitor in one of his stories.” It was certainly like Gorey to leave an enigma to grapple with questions of motive and intent. In this case, however, the answers aren’t as elusive as in some of his books.

Gorey was among many other things an ardent admirer of the choreography of George Balanchine; for decades he attended virtually every performance of the company to which Balanchine had devoted his life, the New York City Ballet. Gorey’s gift to the Wadsworth Atheneum must be closely linked with his admiration for Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, because it was the Wadsworth’s director, A. Everett Austin Jr. (known to one and all as Chick), who in 1933 gave Lincoln Kirstein the logistical support that made it possible for him to invite Balanchine to come to the United States and start a ballet company, initially in Hartford. That might be enough to explain Gorey’s bequest, but I think there is more to it. From 1927 to 1944, under Austin’s inspired directorship, the Wadsworth Atheneum presented a vision of modernism that was extraordinarily rich, nuanced, and wide-ranging—a vision that I believe is echoed in Gorey’s work.

Gorey embraced, in his utterly personal way, the vision of modernism that Austin brought into focus at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Although Austin didn’t have any analytical mind, he had a searching sensibility. He had no interest in the model of modernism as a progressive evolution toward ever-greater purity and abstraction, which has so profoundly shaped our understanding of modernism’s aesthetics in the twentieth century. Of course Austin (and Gorey as well) embraced the energias, asceticisms, bafflements, and disjunctures that are essential to the modernist endeavor. But Austin saw those values as existing side by side with older but still urgent values: a respect for academic discipline; an awareness of the power of tradition; a taste for Baroque or Rococo extravagance that others were dismissing at the time as essentially antimodernist. The understanding of modernism that was evolving at the Wadsworth Atheneum was pluralistic. The heterogeneity of modern art—the freedom to embrace abstraction or representation, austerity or extravagance—became a reflection of the heterogeneity of democratic experience.

The Wadsworth Atheneum can claim many American firsts: the first museum show of work by Picasso, the first museum survey of Cubist painting, the first purchase by a museum of one of Mondrian’s revolutionary abstractions. But Austin was simultaneously an ardent student of the art of the past who early on embraced a revival of interest in Mannerist, Baroque, and Rococo painting. He managed to buy for the museum some of his favorite works from the 1930s and 1940s, but they were still wildly undervalued. He was also fascinated by twentieth-century realism. He bought a painting by Balthus—perhaps the first American purchase of Pavel Tchelitchew and the other artists who were known as the Neo-Romantics. Although Austin may never have said it in so many words, there is no question that he saw stylistic pluralism as a core modern value. And why not? This was the view of modernity embraced by Picasso (who in a matter of months in 1921 purchased a key Cubist painting) and the Biedermeier.

Many of the works that Gorey collected have a familiar, something-else-again, odd-something-new quality. This fits right in with Austin’s expansive vision of modern artistic experience. In a lithograph by Redon, a strange eel-like...
the Wadsworth Atheneum, which does indeed provide a welcoming setting for his own small collection. It may be a certain sentimentality that initially attracts us to Gorey’s work. We’re seduced by this lost world of gentlemen in elegant evening dress and soigné flappers with slinky scarves and kohl-outlined eyes. But ultimately it’s Gorey’s detachment, his critical distance, that holds us and returns us to books that one might imagine would pale after the first exposure.

The secret of Gorey’s art is that he is a critic of his own vision. He knows his limits. He dreams his dreams but he also scrutinizes them. After he died in 2000, the dance critic Arlene Croce wrote a brief tribute. Gorey had eagerly offered his assistance to Croce when she founded the magazine Ballet Review. He designed covers for some issues and created The Gilded Rat to be serialized in the magazine. Croce remembers Gorey as “a gentle, warmhearted, generous man who knew a lot.” She observes that when he became well known “his eccentricities—the sneakers, the jewelry, the fur coats—were invariably highlighted in articles and interviews.” There may have been a desire to turn him into one of his own characters. But Croce “never saw him as a camp personality. He was one of the most morally serious and intellectually courageous people I ever knew, and he will remain forever part of the intellectual and artistic landscape.”

Gorey was anything but a Gorey character. He was the artist who envisioned those characters. His worldliness—everything that was morally serious and intellectually courageous—grounded him and freed him to go right ahead intellectually courageous—grounded him and freed him to go right ahead.

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As for the series of anonymous American drawings that Gorey acquired in antique shops over the years, these curious compositions recapitulate nineteenth-century Romantic conven-

Edward Gorey at Henri Bendel’s The Leg Shop, New York City, 1978; photograph by Harry Benson

Collection of the artist/Harry Benson
Imagining the Unimaginable

Max Hastings

On War and Writing
by Samuel Hynes.
University of Chicago Press,
219 pp., $22.50

War has played a part in literature sec-
ond only to that of love, as the great
lexographer, and Eric Partridge noted, be-
cause these two experiences have “most
captured the world’s imagination.” His
observation is quoted by Samuel Hynes in
On War and Writing, a diverse col-
collection of essays and reviews, in which
he himself adds: “We can never entirely
imagine what it’s like to actually fight a
war—all war is unimaginable.”

This assertion seems easy to chal-
lenge. Though it is often suggested that,
on the basis of internal evidence in the
plays, Shakespeare must at some time
have been a soldier, this is unproven.
Superb war histories—for instance,
those of John Keegan—have been writ-
ten by people who never saw any com-
bat; likewise some pretty good novels.

Many of us who are historians of con-
clict undergo a journey from the
idiocies of childish romantic delusions
toward a glimmer of understanding
of realties. Hynes, emeritus Wood-
row Wilson Professor of Literature at
Princeton and now ninety-three, was a
Row Wilson Professor of Literature at
University of Chicago Press,
by Samuel Hynes.

14

Sheet music for Irving Berlin’s ‘Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning,’
from his Broadway review Yip Yip Yaphank, composed while he was a recruit
in the US Army, 1918. It appears in Margaret E. Wagner’s America and the Great War:

terminate the hero’s prospects of rais-
ing a family.

If I seem to linger gratuitously on
a writer of negligible literary gifts beside
those of Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Edward
Thomas, and to whom Hynes devotes essays in this collection, it is
because Henty illustrates and mirrors illusions about war that persisted for
many centuries, especially among the young. Televison, and a
new literary realism have created a
different perception: far from conflict’s
horrons being veiled from the folks
backs, these are thrust into their
faces on giant IMAX screens.

And yet this cultural correction can
obscure the fact that some young men—
and maybe also young women, though
their introduction to the front line is
too recent for us to be sure—absolutely,
sincerely embrace battle. Many war
lowers have been pilots, “fighter jocks” of
all nations. Messerschmitt Bf-109
pilot Hans-Otto Lessing wrote exul-
tantly to his parents in August 1940: “I am
having the time of my life. I would
not swap places with a king. Peacetime
is going to be very boring after this!”

The RAF’s Paddy Barthropp similarly
recalled the Battle of Britain: “It was
just beer, women and Spitfires, a bunch
of little John Waynes running about the
place. When you were nineteen,
you couldn’t give a monkey’s.” A young
Royal Navy officer, Lieutenant Robert
Hichens, shared the euphoria of those
airmen, writing in July 1940:

I suppose our position is about as
dangerous as is possible in view of
the threatened invasion, but I
couldn’t help being full of joy….
Being on the bridge of one of HM
ships, being talked to by the cap-
tain as an equal, and knowing that
she was to be in my sole care for
the next few hours. Who would
not rather die like that than live
as so many poor people have to,
in crowded cities at some sweating
indoor job?

Hichens (as indeed “die like that”
in 1942, did Hans-Otto Lessing a
day after writing euphorically of the
experience of air combat, but they
were both happy warriors. So was
Ben Bradlee, who before becoming a
legendary editor of The Washington Post
served as a destroyer officer in the Pa-
cific, a formative experience. He wrote
later: “I just plain loved it. Loved the
excitement, even loved being a little bit
scared.”

Hynes says: “I don’t write as a mili-
tary historian. I think of myself as a
critic.” Almost all the war memoirs
and novels that he mentions with ad-
mission here—Norman Mailer’s The
Naked and the Dead, the Robert Graves’ Goodbye to All That, Erich M.
Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front, Graeme West’s The Diary of a Dead Officer—
display the reflective powers of their au-
thors, together with the torments they
experienced.

Hynes hails the Australian Richard
Hillary’s The Last Enemy (1942) as the

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Samuel Hynes is among the historians and critics who regard World War I as a conflict experience distinct from all others. He is assuredly right that it produced more memorable literature. Yet I would submit that this was not because it was qualitatively different or worse for its participants than Rome’s Punic Wars, the Thirty Years’ War, or Napoleon’s 1812 campaign in Russia, but merely because some of the educated civilians in uniform who served between 1914 and 1918 saw what happened to them through eyes quite different from those of the professional warriors—most of them semiliterate—of earlier centuries.

In all ages there is a norm of conduct for and expectation of warriors, which changes between centuries as much as fashions in trousers. Several British World War II generals, Sir Harold Alexander among them, expressed a dismayed conviction that their soldiers displayed less guts than their predecessors of the previous struggle, adding a note of regret that they could no longer execute those who ran away.

In modern times Victoria Crosses and Medals of Honor have been customarily awarded for mad moments, single acts of courage. Few warriors, in Western armies anyway, experience more than a year or two of intense combat at most. Yet in the wars of Napoleon, such men as Baron Marcellin Marbot in the French army and Harry Smith in Wellington’s ranks fought for decades, participating in perhaps twenty big battles and countless minor skirmishes.

Moreover, the infantrymen of that era—and indeed of all conflicts between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, notably including the US Civil War—were required on battlefields to confront each other hour after hour, exchanging volley fire often at ranges of fifty yards or less. My great-uncle wrote to me in 1963 that after reflecting upon a book he had just read about the Waterloo campaign, he believed that nothing he and his kind endured at Passchendaele in 1917 could be defined as worse.

After an action in the 1814–1815 Battle of New Orleans, when British dead and dying lay heaped before the American lines in a fashion no different from that of the Somme a century later, Harry Smith was sent to arrange a truce with General Andrew Jackson’s adjutant-general, Colonel James Butler. The American said to the Englishman as he gazed on the ghastly scene: “Why now, I calculate as your doctors are tired: they have plenty to do today.” Smith riposted outrageously: “Do? Why, this is nothing to us Wellington fellows!” Such was the character of Harry Smith, and such were the duration and bloodiness of the Spanish campaigns through which the rifleman had passed, that his braggadocio authentically reflected the man, and in considerable measure the professional warrior caste of his period.

Having grown up with a reverence for physical courage prompted by my family’s war stories, together with an excess of G. A. Henty, I have since come to believe that mankind wildly overrates the virtue of physical courage, often found in rather stupid adolescent football players. Professor Sir Michael Howard, who won a Military Cross at Salerno in 1943, observed sardonically: “At twenty, there is almost no act of...
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folly one is unwilling to commit, to win an MC.” A Russian sage once said that courage is often the best part of those who possess it. One aspect of achieving maturity, most of us discover, is a recognition that moral fortitude is rarer and thus more precious than the physical variety.

Asked the question, “What is war really like?” we can only suggest fragmentary answers. We may start by abusing ourselves of illusions about “heroes”—vitaly useful and important people for generals, newspaper readers, and indeed societies protecting their interests against peril, but seldom popular with their comrades, because so obviously cast in different clay from themselves.

Samuel Hynes argues that the cartoonist Bill Mauldin was foremost among the authentic GI voices of World War II, and this is partly because Mauldin’s disheveled characters were decisively unheroic. It is not that most of Eisenhower’s soldiers were cowardly, but that they—along with a majority of those who fight all wars—were prone to roast Ambrose Bierce’s wry advice to the aspiring career warriors: “Try always to get yourself killed.”

My personal renunciation of the spirit of G. A. Henty was significantly advanced on a day in 1974 when, as a young correspondent, I was driving a jeep somewhere north of Saigon and found myself obliged to halt before a group of South Vietnamese soldiers clustered in the road to dispose of the bodies of enemies they had killed during the night. The entails of one corpse trailed some distance behind the head as it was dragged bumping through the dust. I thought: If my own stomach was blown open, that is how my entrails would look. It was an unwelcome but intensely vivid reflection, which has lingered ever since.

It is impossible to discern commonality in warriors’ experience of a given conflict, because there are countless variations. The term “war veteran” is used indiscriminately of millions of men who have worn fatalities in a given theater. Yet—since the twentieth century anyway—the overwhelmingly major- ity performed functions that may entitle them to a campaign medal, but incurred no greater risks than the everyday ones of civilian life. There is certainly a shared infant- tryman’s war from age to age, at the bloody tip of the spear. But artillerymen and tank crews suffer much lower proportionate losses, and those who serve in logistics and support arms are threatened only by jeep accidents, ill-judged sex, and—since Vietnam anyway—bad shit drugs. A majority of the US personnel deployed in Johnson’s war served in some giant US base compound where their worst gripe was the stink in the huts of urinal pipes and JP4 aviation fuel.

Paratrooper Gene Woodley called Cam Ranh Bay “the biggest surprise of my life. There was water surfing. There was big cars being driven. There was women with fashionable clothes and men with suits on… I said Hey, what’s this? Better than being home.” Navy radarman Dwyte Brown agreed: “Cam Ranh Bay was a place to live. I would say, Boy, if I got some money to- gether, I’d stay right here and live… I was treated like a king.” Brown gained forty pounds during his “war service” on a diet of lobster and steak and spent much of his time in the plotting room assembling music tapes for a captain who returned the favor by lending Brown his jeep. Yet in the eyes of pos- terity, he became as much a “Vietnam vet” as a Marine who fought at Khe Sanh. This says nothing about Brown, but helps to explain the impos- sibility of assembling under one roof “what war is like.”

I felt disappointment on reading Hynes’s observation that “the center of horror in the Second [World] War was on no front at all. Instead it hovered over a number of places: Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki.” This assertion reflects a late-twentieth-century preoccu- pation with the Western sphere of ac- tion, attention, death, and destruction. A new generation of historians, and indeed their readers, recognize that far more people died in wartime Russia and China than in Germany or Japan. Many more Yugoslavs and Greeks perished than did British and American servicemen and civilians put together. Even the Holocaust should be viewed in relation to other unspeakable killings, for instance the deaths of more than three million Russian POWs in Nazi hands. The war’s “center of horror”—if such a thing can be defined—would properly be located somewhere unidentifiable in Russia or China, where no cameras recorded the slaughters, and few articulate witnesses have since emerged to describe events that heaped corpses in millions. Few people who experienced war in those theaters—or, for instance, in northern Europe during the Thirty Years’ War—would have echoed the enthusiasm of Ben Bradlee or Paddy Barthrop for purchasing equity in a global conflict.

There is no more chance of satisfactorily considering the nature of war in a single volume, especially an arbitrarily selected collection of essays such as this one, than there is of capturing the nature of love. But the excellent introduction Samuel Hynes has gathered together some entertaining and provocative reflections, rooted in his long life and wide experience of both literature and war. I have never encountered a better summation on this theme, which is as old as time or at least as Homer, than that offered by the Norwegian World War II resis- tance fighter Knut Lier-Hansen seven decades ago:

Though wars can bring adventures which stir the heart, the true nature of war is composed of innumerable personal tragedies, of grief, waste and sacrifice, wholly evil and not redeemed by glory.
Polymorphous Eden

Geoffrey O'Brien


Grant Wood became famous pretty much overnight in October 1930, when American Gothic was included (a last-minute choice after being initially rejected) in the annual exhibition of the Art Institute of Chicago. The Chicago Evening Post slapped a photo of it on the front page of its art section under the headline: “American Normalcy Displayed in Annual Show; Iowa Farm Folks Hit Highest Spot”; the image was picked up by newspapers across the country, all quick to underscore the painting’s corn-belt authenticity. Wood—whoes most notable previous achievements had been successive first prizes in art at the Iowa State Fair—found himself at thirty-nine not only a celebrity but the embodiment of a movement, or at least the journalistic notion of a movement, steeped in patriotic overtones.

Few artists have been worse served by their defenders. “If you love America, you will love this show,” a newspaper critic wrote of his first New York exhibition, in which the Surrealist Thomas Craven hailed him as “the only American artist who is perfectly adjusted to his surroundings.” Time ran a cover story upholding Wood as part of a revolutionizing wave also said to include Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry, upstarts rejecting “deliberately unintelligible” and “outlandish” modernist abstraction in favor of plainly depicted American realities.

Among those defenders was the artist himself. Once in the spotlight, Wood, a bookish man known to his Cedar Rapids acquaintances as diffident in manner and halting in speech, applied himself dutifully to elaborating a “born-again” narrative of how he had rejected early European influences and embraced homegrown sources of inspiration:

I began to realize that there was real decoration in the rickrack braid on the aprons of the farmers’ wives, in calcio patterns and in lace curtains. At present, my most useful reference book, and one that is authent- ic, is a Sears, Roebuck catalogue.

He had made repeated trips to France and spent years mastering the techniques of Impressionist painting, yet could dismiss that experience with a sort of “aw shucks” reductionism: “I came back because I learned that French painting is very fine for French people and not necessarily for us, and because I started to analyze what it was I really knew, I found out. It’s Iowa.” He confessed to the Herald Tribune that “all the good ideas I’d ever had came to me while I was milking a cow”—elid- ing the fact that he hadn’t lived on a farm since he was ten years old.

Nothing had prepared Wood for becoming a national figure. He can easily be imagined continuing the kind of career he had already achieved: a mainstay of the Iowa art scene, a skilled craftsman adept at shaping everything from tea kettles to fire screens, a j obbing artisan who could lend hieratic monumentality to an oil painting advertising model homes, enjoying the companionship of local literary friends like MackInlay Kantor and Paul Engle, plunging energetically into community theater projects, showing paintings at local fairs and galleries, decorating houses and funeral parlors, designing murals for hospitals and department stores, and concocting such whimsical follies as the corncob-shaped chande- liers he created for the dining room of a Cedar Rapids hotel. When he de- veloped in relative isolation the hard- edged style of his mature paintings and advanced beyond his essentially decorative early work toward increasing ambiguity and expressiveness, there was nothing inevitable about his sud- den fame. He might well have gone on with no major recognition at all, and therefore without any pressure to live up to a public image that would be come almost caricatured at odds with who he actually was.

In the event, his acclaim came sud- denly, fairly late in life, and he did not resist the myth-making process by which he was identified as a plainspoken all-American genius in overalls who had purged himself of exotic influ- ences to express the pioneer values of the heartland. As a spokesman for his own work, he made himself a character in a public play, and not an especially convincing one. The acclaim was di- minishing by the time Wood died in 1942, and his reputation, already vigor- ously contested in his lifetime, would largely dwindle to the insipacable fact of American Gothic, an image too deeply imprinted to be dislodged.

The Whitney has given him a fresh chance with a comprehensive retrospective of his work, “Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables,” but even here, with that work so gener- ously spread out, it’s hard to clear away the encroaching entanglements of bygone culture wars, regional prejudices, and Wood’s own often inscruta- ble motives and circumstances. As the exhibition’s curator, Barbara Haskell, suggests in the catalog, Wood’s art may need to be rescued from its his- torical moment and its own declared intentions, the better to pick up on its undercurrents of “disquiet… estrange- ment and isolation… unsettling, eerie sadness.” To walk through the show is to experience not so much the Middle America he was alleged to celebrate but rather a peculiar country of his own invention. Craven’s “perfectly ad- justed” painter survives by sheer force of oddity, and despite any countervail- ing tendency on Wood’s part to conform to an assigned role.

That it should have been American Gothic that turned his fortunes around is as mysterious as the painting itself now seems, laden with unfathomable accretions of association. The double portrait of the unsmiling Iowan with the pitchfork (farmer? townsman?) and his aproned companion (wife? daughter?) remains the most univer- sally recognized American painting. (The models were Wood’s sister, Nan, and his dentist; the house with its dis- tinctly Gothic arch was one he had happened upon in Eldon, Iowa.) It has been depicted on Iowa’s commemor- ative quarter, sculpted as a life-size rep- licas at the Kennedy Wax Museum in Buena Park, California, and used as the advertising motif for a gory 1988 hor- ror movie of the same title. To Google “American Gothic parodies” is to plunge into a bottomless netherworld of distortion, defacement, and bur- lesque in which—in ads and political cartoons and magazines ranging from the World’s R.P. Booster to Hustler—Wood was picked up by newspapers across the country, all quick to underscore the painting’s corn-belt authenticity.

Who were these people? What was the import of this painting? Why was it ev- erywhere? The image imposed itself too early for there to be any question of liking or disliking it. There it was, an enduring oddity somehow defini- tively entrenched, folksy, quaint, even a bit menacing if you really attempted to look into the eyes of that terminally dour and unappeasable man, or tried to imagine what the woman was feeling—fear? discontent? a shared sorrow?—or exactly where her gaze was directed.

Back in the 1930s the painting struck viewers as odd, even if critics of different persuasions came up with opposite readings. It was easily equal to see Wood’s pair of other candidates, economically challenged retir- ees, Satanists, zombies, and thousands of other candidates. Trump-related it- erations alone are beyond counting. My own encounter with the ubiquitous painting doubtless came through one such parody, quite probably (like so many such meetings with cultural icons) in the pages of Mad. Looking at the original now, it seems almost to have been a parody from the start, a pastiche of some fifteenth- century Flemish counterpart, in which every element—the formalized fram- ing, the grave stiffness of its subjects, the stylized elongation of their heads—refers back by way of humorous con- trast to any number of other iconography to the very notion of fine art. I don’t think I’m alone in not having known quite what to make of American Gothic. Who were these people? What was the import of this painting? Why was it ev- erywhere? The image imposed itself too early for there to be any question of liking or disliking it. There it was, an enduring oddity somehow defini- tively entrenched, folksy, quaint, even a bit menacing if you really attempted to look into the eyes of that terminally dour and unappeasable man, or tried to imagine what the woman was feeling—fear? discontent? a shared sorrow?—or exactly where her gaze was directed.

It is a painting to which, in the words of the magisterial essayist Guy Daven- port (who has described Wood “the subtlest of American paint- ers”), “we are blinded by familiarity and parody.” Yet to see it up close is to grasp how much it insists on being
interpreted—the accents are too precise in every choice and rendering of detail for there to be anything casual about it. No accidents here. Davenport’s 1978 lecture “The Geography of the Imagination,” for instance, culminates in a dense four-page description of American Gothic that manages, in taking inventory of the picture’s elements (lathe-turned post, sash window, sunscreen, brooch, buttonhole, pin- afore, pitchfork), to touch on everything from the invention of eyeglasses in the thirteenth century to the mythic significance of Poseidon’s trident, until the painting is made to seem a fantastically interpretative—almost to the point of concealing any trace of the painterly, intent on a glazed and planed surface that might have been produced by some unknown mechanical process. In matters of material real-

But where in his art is that heartland for which Grant Wood was said to be the creative conduit, the native region that inspired him to assert that “a true art expression must grow up from the soil itself”? The deeper one advances into the Whitney show, the more it seems a soil of his own concoction, a heartland conjured in the mind of a boy growing up on an isolated farm, under the aloof and often harsh tutelage of a religious-minded father who forbade fairy tales or any other form of fiction in the house (“We Quakers read only true things”) and who, after physically chastising young Grant for one infractions or another, would subject him to readings from Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. In an unfinished autobiography Wood wrote of his father’s “stern, haunting loneliness” and “mystic aloofness.”

His sudden death when Wood was ten precipitated a move from farm to city as the family settled in Cedar Rapids. It was here, liberated from his father’s “stern, haunting loneliness” and “mystic aloofness,” that Wood revealed a clear division between robustly handsome male farmhands and others, sometimes carac-turally unattractive females. The absence of outward scandal and the discretion of another era protected him from any light his correspondence might have shed was foreclosed when his sister chose to burn it after his death. In his public pronouncements Wood was always careful to emphasize that his life held no secrets at all: “I’m the plainest kind of fellow you can find. There isn’t a single thing I’ve done, or experienced, that’s been even the least bit exciting.”

In a self-portrait first painted, to his own dissatisfaction, in 1932, and subsequently reworked by him but never finished, Wood as subject appears to react suspiciously to his own appraising gaze, and his lips are set as if through long habit holding back some bitter retort. The weathervane over his left shoulder might suggest his precocious vulnerabil-ity to prevailing blasts. That is as plain as it gets in his work, which otherwise thrives on feints and theatrical illusions. There was nothing impromptu or sketch-like about that work. As Evans points out in his biography, he increasingly devoted months to planning his composi-tions and perfecting his applications, almost to the point of concealing any trace of the painterly, intent on a glazed and planed surface that might have been produced by some unknown mechanical process. In matters of material real-


Grant Wood: Shrine Quartet, 1939

Grant Wood: Parson Weems’ Fable, 1939
ism Wood was painstaking, studying tools and garments and furnishings, the leathers of chickens and the patterns of furrows, shaping clay models to approximate the contours of landscapes, if aiming at the most unimpeachable possible record of his observations, to produce in the end paintings notable for the flagrant unreality of their effect.

The obsessiveness of the process is visible in the hermetic airlessness of the results, the quality that Haskell describes as “a cold artificiality...as though Wood’s intense yearning to reconstitute what he called the ‘dream-power’ of childhood could yield only images of chilling make-believe, a dollhouse world of estrangement and solitude.” The chilliness, though, may be a matter of perspective. For Wood the toy houses past which, in The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere, Revere gallops on what looks like a miniature rocking horse, along roller coaster roads in a settlement surrounded by fairy-tale woodland, or the farm folk of a model farmhouse, may have represented the comforting heart of a shoe-shaper of a polymorphous Eden, its plant life of Iowa is like, the farmers ought to be able to sell their corn for churning gum and automobile tires.” In 1983 Hilton Kramer compared them to “immaculate marzipan,” and Peter Schjeldahl in a review of the current Whitney show has suggested them as appropriate backdrops for Warner Bros. cartoon characters. They certainly cannot be mistaken for natural views, but they radiate more joy than anything else Wood created: an inking of a polymorphous Eden, its plant life of another planet. The strangest of all is The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover, intended for some local Republicans who reneged on their commission when they got a look at it, and small wonder. Its townscape, in which the president’s actual birthplace is overshadowed by a riot of other elements, appears to depict a peculiar alternate world, a habitat for elves rather than a national shrine.

Wood’s period of creative fecundity was brief, about six years from the first hard-edged portraits leading up to American Gothic to the personal debacle of 1935, a year in which both his life and his art-making began to hit obstacles: a disastrous and short-lived marriage, the death of his mother, a trophobic, drawing on images of a past down and certainly no hint of actual dirt or dust. They have light but no weather. One cannot imagine wind blowing there. Seen from a slightly elevated angle, they are designed to induce the vertigo inviting a plunge into the core of that suspended undulation. With colors heightened—the yellows are of a brightness rarely seen outside Betty Grable’s Technicolor musicals of the late 1940s—and spatial relations bending like molten glass, the elements of the natural world take on the sheen of freshly fabricated playthings. Paintings of this sort—Stone City, Fall Plowing, Young Corn, Near Stadown—have attracted considerable discussion, early and late. Lewis Mumford in 1935 remarked, “If this is what the vegetation of Iowa is like, the farmers ought to be able to sell their corn for churning gum and automobile tires.”

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Wood’s period of creative fecundity was brief, about six years from the first hard-edged portraits leading up to American Gothic to the personal debacle of 1935, a year in which both his life and his art-making began to hit obstacles: a disastrous and short-lived marriage, the death of his mother, a move to Iowa City that seems to have unsettled him by separating him from his habitual life, a much-heralded New York solo show that met with harsh criticism from writers as prestigious as Lincoln Kirstein and Mumford, and, the following year, the beginning of a simmering feud with a colleague at the University of Iowa (where Wood had been teaching since 1934) that threatened to put a spotlight on his personal life. He painted less and less (the uncharacteristic Death on the Ridge Road, a distorted high-angle view of an impending highway crash, looks like an omen), drank more, and then underwent one more crisis when his limited-edition lithograph Sultry Night, depicting a foreground nude farmhand cooling off with a bucket of water from a horse trough, was deemed pornographic by the US Postal Service. His defense of the work was that it was an image from childhood, and it has the effect of a covert glimpse from a distance, the unattainable object of the gaze unaware of being looked at. After the oil painting for which it was a sketch was rejected by a major exhibition, Wood, in what seems a sad and suicidal gesture, lopped off the nude figure, leaving a canvas depicting a water trough under a tree: a landscape of emptiness. He died of pancreatic cancer at fifty, just as the “regional school” of which he was a standard-bearer was beginning increasingly to be seen as a creation of publicity, tainted with jingoistic nationalism and even a whiff of fascist ideology. By 1949 Life was hailing Jackson Pollock as possibly America’s greatest painter, and Wood was becoming something less than a footnote. In a 1946 cartoon symbolically mapping contemporary American art, Ad Reinhardt consigned Wood and his fellow regionalists to the cemetery, while Clement Greenberg described him as “among the notable vulgarizers of our period.” I don’t think, though, that he can be made to disappear, wherever one chooses to situate him in the imaginary pecking orders of the dead. He hangs on the way his late lithograph Shrine Quartet hangs on: an image of the faces of four men each wearing the fez and tie of their fraternal order, casting long shadows against a backdrop of fake pyramids, the whole effect indelibly odd, at once grotesque and poignant, not quite yielding up any message beyond the precision of its own intent.
The New Collected Poems
by Marianne Moore,
edited by Heather Cass White.
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 453 pp., $30.00

Heather Cass White’s New Collected Poems of Marianne Moore is no small event in American poetry: it is the first edition of Moore’s work that actually is what it says it is. Moore expelled poems from her history, and substantially and continually revised many of those she permitted to remain. She prefaced her Complete Poems (1967)—which she herself edited, and which contains 102 poems, less than half of her actual collected poems—with the defiant epigram “Omissions are not accidents.” White’s book, gathering together the traduced and abandoned, should complicate the image of Moore in her later years—the quietly spinter in a tricorn hat who wrote album notes for Cassius Clay, appeared in airline advertisements, and threw out the first pitch for the Yankees—by interposing her with the young and vital modernist giant.

In the appendix we find a fine selection of juvenilia from 1915 to 1918, though it omits the poems from Moore’s time at Bryn Mawr and the poem “Ezra Pound” written in 1915 but published posthumously. That poem is notable for its use of the word “vigor,” an important concept for Moore, who was already in 1908 asking a college friend, “Don’t you think I manifest vigor? . . . I fairly sparkle inside now and then.” White also omits the poem “Prevalent at One Time,” which was added to the 1983 revised edition of the 1967 Complete Poems. But these are small subjective quibbles, and in making them I can hear Moore (in “Snakes,” Mongoose, Snake-Charmers, and the Like) expressing her concern in getting people right is in itself an afflictive disease. White has returned the collections to us, and finally readers can meet Moore’s work as admirers like T. S. Eliot and Pound first did.

Alongside those poems, Moore opened the gates of the possible and granted latitude to later writers. Observations, her first book, published in 1924 when she was thirty-seven, is like nothing else in poetry; at once frustrating and absorbing, it’s a defining collection of the twentieth century, standing beside Eliot’s Prufrock, Wallace Stevens’s Harmonium, and William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All. To read Moore is to see the pendulum swing away from nineteenth-century Romanticism, with its smooth rhetoric and chaotic subjectivity, toward her own methods of collaging “found” language, scientific diction, overheard phrases, or whatever else happened to interest her—all of which was to become integral to modern poetry.

Moore emphasized the precise, the concrete, the particular, the visual. The center of gravity moved outside of the poet. Emotion came in the form of Eliot’s objective correlative: “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” Moore’s tone has the authority earned by a voice finally answering back. Idiosyncratic meditations on subjects (“nonchalance,” say, or “statecraft”) or objects (often animals). Moore’s poems rarely spring from any specific event or occasion. Questions of where, why, how, who, and so on are ignored. Serious personal concerns, family, and close relationships are either absent or heavily camouflaged. Often the poems comprise a jumble of micro-impressions that appear unrelated, the voice mediated through collage: stacked-up phrases in quotation marks from disparate sources. As she makes clear in “Poetry,” Moore does not discriminate against “business documents and/school-books,” nor is the collaging worked into a harmonic whole using rhythm or tone, as you might find, say, in John Ashbery, one of her disciples.

In Moore, much is left jagged, serrated, jarring: there is often not much more of a rhythmic system than one finds in decent prose. (Moore described her rhythm, rightly, as “a kind of pleasing jerky pros/ness.”) Her syntax is exceedingly complex, and the diction thickens frequently to latinate abstraction: “Efforts of affection—/attain integration too tough for infraction.” Rhyme is frequently so slight as to be inaudible (rhyming unstressed syllables in the middle of words, for example) or so heavy that it pushes everything else out: “It left nothing of which to complain, nothing more to obtain,/consummately plain.” As to a poem’s architecture: “I tend to like a poem which instead of culminating in a crescendo, merely comes to a close.” She is a poet who proceeds by indirectness and association, and though it is a commonplace of Moore criticism to praise her passion for precision (“re-lentless accuracy . . . with its capacity for the poems’ own assertions about ‘re-lentless accuracy . . . with its capacity for fact’”), it is often hard to follow her refer- ents. The detail is up close and forensic, as obscurring as it is enlightening.

Take the much-celebrated animal poems. Alongside brilliant details (her swan with its “gondoliering legs” or the pangolin, its “scale/lapping scale with spruce-cone regu-larity”) there are passages like this one, about the jerboa, a rat that looks like a small kangaroo:

... Seen by daylight, the body is white in front; and on the back, buffy-brown like the breast of the fawn-breasted bower-bird. It hops like the fawn-breaded bower-bird. It hops like the fawn-breasted bower-bird, but has chipmunk contours perceived as it turns its bird head...

But the bowenbird has nothing to do with the jerboa (it lives in tropical Australasian jungles, the jerboa in African deserts), and has been pressed into service here only because it is “brown,” while the jerboa itself gets lost in a tangle of allitera-tions, repetition, and confusion for the sake of it (“its bird head”).

Moore’s beasts are always essentially free-moving, their natural habitats replaced by the primordial soup of her consciousness, each creature carefully clipped out and de- stricted and camouflaged in order to serve her purposes of self-revelation through metaphor. The animal poems tend, for example, to lack words. Much of her knowledge of the natural world came not from firsthand immersion but from magazines and books, and this sometimes results in the simply inadequate: a wood- weasel is said to have a “sweet face and powerful feet,” adjectives that wouldn’t earn their keep in an understated ode. When she writes of “the wild ostrich herd/with hard feet and bird/ necks,” the reader might wonder how much sense has been sacrificed for the rhyme. (What other kind of neck could an ostrich possibly have?) A favorite writer of Moore’s was the seventeenth-century physician Sir Thomas Browne, and her writing has a circuitous rhythm and consistently vivid texture that recalls Browne’s. Browne, too, was preoccupied with animals. Of “Bees, Aunts, and Spiders” he writes, “In these narrow Engines there is more curious Mathematicks” than in “Whales, Elephants, Dromidaries, and Camels” and the civility of these little Citizens, more neatly sets forth the wisedome of their Maker.” But when Browne talks of animals, he is talking about God; when Moore does, she is talking about herself. And yet not intimately. Her work calls forth novel perspectives on the self, but intensively, she remains the thinker and writer of life, the semblance of civilization—the “polished sculptured/flowers” (“No Swan So Fine”)—she appears to hold her own peer in, not at her length. She approves of “a picture with a line distance.” We see it in her lists of particulars, which allow Moore, who took laboratory courses in biology at Bryn Mawr, to exercise a scientific and taxonomic impulse. Yeats thought a list had more neatly sets forth the wisedome of their Maker.” But when Browne talks of animals, he is talking about God; when Moore does, she is talking about herself. And yet not intimately. Her work calls forth novel perspectives on the self, but intensively, she remains the thinker and writer of life, the semblance of civilization—the “polished sculptured/flowers” (“No Swan So Fine”)—she appears to hold her own peer in, not at her length. She approves of “a picture with a line distance.” We see it in her lists of particulars, which allow Moore, who took laboratory courses in biology at Bryn Mawr, to exercise a scientific and taxonomic impulse. Yeats thought a list had
There is an admirable, formidable coldness in her work. The forms of her stanzas, for example, feel forced down from above, cookie-cutter style, with lines deformed, ending on split words or articles. The stanzas are human artifacts with complex mechanisms, but they lack the appearance of being self-organized, of being given or in any way intrinsic. It’s poetry of a mechanical age, written on a typewriter, designed more for visual than sonic appraisal. (Moore herself felt that “the form is the outward equivalent of a determining inner conviction, and that the rhythm is the person,” which is hard to argue with and harder still to instantiate.)

The sense of coldness in the technique is often reinforced in the poems themselves. “The Steeplejack” gives the impression of a poet looking down—god-like—from a great distance on a whole community: it could not be dangerous to be living in a town like this, of simple people, who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church while he is gilding the solid-pointed star, which on a steeple stands for hope.

Perhaps this separation is the point: in Moore’s work we glimpse an immense loneliness. Where the speaker lives, it is implied, is in some sense “dangerous,” and the pointed star for the “simple people” recalls Kafka’s response to Max Brod when he asked if there was room for poetry in a town like this, of simple people. It could not be dangerous to be living in a town like this, of simple people, who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church while he is gilding the solid-pointed star, which on a steeple stands for hope.

By the time she was born, in 1887 in Kirkwood, Missouri, Moore’s father, John, had been committed to an insane asylum (she never met him) and her mother, Mary Warner Moore, had returned to her hometown with Marianne and her son, Warner. Mary Warner Moore had an unusually intense relationship with her children, telling them repeatedly, “Don’t forget that we three are ‘a peculiar people’…a people set apart.” Home life revolved around family, religion, academic study, and devotion to books. The Moores continued to read aloud to one another.

In 1900 Mary began a relationship with a young English teacher, Mary Norcross. Norcross became family to Marianne, albeit in a family whose set-up was highly unusual. After 1901, when Mary Warner had surgery on her uterus, the siblings took on the responsibility of looking after her. The thirteen-year-old Marianne began dressing and feeding her mother. Marianne and Warner began calling themselves bachelor “brothers” to each other and “uncles” to Mary, their adopted orphan child, whom they called Fawn (or Bunny or Mouse). Norcross, Mary’s lover, was Beaver. The catered-to, helpless mother’s concerns were paramount: Warner (Fish or Badger or Bible) and Marianne (Kat or Basilisk) remained “brothers” to each other and guardian “uncles” to Mary for the rest of their lives. Between 1905 and 1909 Moore attended Bryn Mawr, where she began to publish poems, short stories, and criticism. In 1910, Norcross left Mary Warner Moore for another woman, and Marianne moved back home to look after her devastated mother. The household resumed its den-like intimacy. (Moore went on to live with Mary, usually sharing her bed, until Mary died in 1947, when Marianne was fifty-nine.) Marianne wrote and worked part-time as a librarian. Introducing Observations, Eliot noted:

Miss Moore’s poems form part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time; of that small body of writings, among what passes for poetry, in which an original sensibility and alert intelligence and deep feeling have been engaged in maintaining the life of the English language.

She won the Dial Award in 1924 and the following year took over The Dial, which she edited until 1929 (and in those four years wrote no poems). She was instrumental in setting the course for modernism, publishing, reviewing, and corresponding with everyone: Cummings, Frost, Eliot, Auden, Pound, Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, HD, William Carlos Williams.

At Bryn Mawr she had been infatuated with Peggy James, William James’s daughter (and Henry James’s niece). Reading Moore’s letters it’s clear that this relationship was the defining love, outside the family, of her life. And there wasn’t much outside her family: Mary dominated Marianne’s life to an astonishing degree, even visiting Bryn Mawr to evaluate and “court” Peggy. After that, Marianne had no further romantic interests in men or women, presumably so she wouldn’t have to share them with her mother.

She took years to forgive Warner for his marriage, which both sundered the tripartite family and left her with the sole responsibility for their mother. Mary referred to herself and Marianne as a “young couple,” and her interests extended to her daughter’s work: she was fully engaged in Marianne’s writing, editing it and even contributing lines.

In “Picking and Choosing,” Moore writes, “If he must give an opinion, it is permissible that the critic should know what he likes,” and what I like is the Moore who lets us glimpse her rage. She is one of the great poets of secret contempt. Images of concealment, of loneliness, of enforced conformity recur: “you have lived and lived on every kind of shortage” (“Sojourn in the Whale”). She exists as she does “from motives of expediency” (“Dock Rats”), but there is resistance. She will not be contained. As she says in her poet-as-carrot poem, “Radical” (the title’s etymological root is itself Latin for “root”), “that which is impossible to force, it is impossible/to hinder.” One thinks of Stevens’s definition of poetry as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.”

Moore’s emotional material is so radioactive that she can only work with it from a distance, but in any event we feel it: she understands that “only the most rudimentary sort of behavior [is] necessary/to put us on the scent.” She writes in “To a Giraffe” that “it is unpermissible, in fact fatal/to be personal and undesirable/to be literal,” but as she knows, a poem is an agent of metaphor, and is helplessly both personal...
and literal; it is vehicle and tenor. And since certain tropes appear often in the work (armor, nocturnal creatures, mantras, clowns, America trying to throw off its colonizer), it is impossible not to read them as the poet's terms of existence, her constricted ways of being in the world. The poems about secrets, defensiveness, and deprivation are revelations about the lengths the poet's self must go to in order to survive. "To a Giraffe" continues: "one can live only on top leaves that are small/reachable only by a beast that is tall." Another speaker's "feigned inconsequence/of manner" is the "weapon" of "self protectiveness."

Moore is wary of the rage she evidences: "one can live only on top leaves that are small/reachable only by a beast that is tall." Another speaker's "feigned inconsequence/of manner" is the "weapon" of "self protectiveness." In Moore, the rage is latent, glimpsed in the work (armor, nocturnal creatures, mantras, clowns, America trying to throw off its colonizer), it is impossible not to read them as the poet's terms of existence, her constricted ways of being in the world. The poems about secrets, defensiveness, and deprivation are revelations about the lengths the poet's self must go to in order to survive. "To a Giraffe," in the "weapon" of "self protectiveness."

The stanzas are not self-contained and the lineation and enjambments contribute to a peculiar sense of breathlessness when we read. We don't know where to stop. There is the hint of an oppressive domestic narrative, and the ranging of tone that Moore excels in: the insult ("you lack half wit"), the ambiguous and demotic "fairly," the inkbhorn declaration about aesthetic matters, the awkward repetition of "crush . . . down" and "crushed down." And then the argument's winning line, which appears immediately decisive and yet takes a while to grasp in full. It suggests that butterflies and steamrollers do not belong together, but if they are together, to question the compatibility or harmony of the arrangement is pointless.

It's hard not to see Moore as the butterfly attending to the steamroller of her mother, or Moore as the sparkling chip crushed by "the parent block." Perhaps unsurprisingly, Moore distrusted psychoanalysis ("Psychology which explains everything/explains nothing"). But few readers of Moore will be able to cleanly separate life from work. In her obituary, Holding On Upside Down (2013), Linda Leavell observes that "the mother exacted from her adult daughter the emotional subservience of a young child. Marianne had no place to hide—except in her poems." The domestic oppression raised a political consciousness, and Moore is clearer on the other things that she must suffer through: the breaking down of social order, the imposition of the patriarchy. "You lack half wit/and sometimes one is made to feel it." The aura of oppression in the work is also transmuted into a deep sadness at something unfilled: the poet is reclusive, and reserved; and has such ways, not because he has no feeling but because he has so much.

Survival depended on restraint. Those lines have an elegant rhythm, the frequent pauses and the accumulating buildup of stresses on "has such/ways" mean that the last line, the admission, comes as a rhythmic release as much as a psychological one.

Anger is also ironized, and Moore is often funny. ("Sweden, what makes the people dress that way?/Those who wish to stay!") In 1928, Moore re-defined marriage, in a poem of the same title (written after Scofield Thayer, the co-owner of The Dial, unexpectedly proposed to her), as an "amalgamation which can never be more than an interesting impossibility." By 1928, in a letter to Warner, she held to a more cynical meaning: marriage for some couples is "a question of which could get the jointly ac- quired loot from the other without being shot or blackmailed." She may, though, have felt matrimony a possibility after her mother died in 1947. She requested, and engraver of her mother's headstone to put her own name on the stone also but leave "a space for a line beneath it (above my date of birth)" were a line ever to be inserted there, designating marriage.

Moore lived on as a revered and much loved poet until 1972, a quarter-century after her mother's death. The critics were almost unanimously in their admiration for her work. Pound celebrated it as "poetry that is an end in itself, nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters," but though there are masters ("The Paper Nautilus," for example) in the last thirty years of her writing life, and plenty of very fine poems, the later work, beginning with the collection What Are Years (1941), becomes less ambiguous and ambitious, and more sententious: "What is our innocence/,what is our guilt? All are/naked, none is safe:" Shall I never have peace without sorrow? At times there's a strained reaching for the reassuring epigram ("Because the heart is in it all is well") or even inadverent comedy worthy of William McGonagall: "Quietly wind upon the dust, I cannot/look and yet I must."

The ongoing battle in Moore between submission and defiance ("an animal with claws wants to have use/them") is embodied in the revising she did as well. In the end, submission won. Moore thought her earlier poems needed to be less obscure, and she edited to clarify them. "Poetry" got whittled down over the years from twenty-nine lines to three:

I, too, dislike it.
Reading it, however, with a
contempt for it, one discovers in it,
after all, a place for the genuine.

Moore described the rest of the poems as "paddling," and it's true that the lines were in parts self-contradictory and hard to explicate, but that, surely, was the point: they showed a consciousness at war with itself, demonstrating simultaneously the pointlessness, strangeness, and necessity of poetry. The poems were "maintaining many minds" ("An Octopus"). At the same time as she wants poetry to be "above/insolence and triviality" she can't resist, in one version of the poem, listing animals in those states:

the bat,
holding on upside down or in quest of something to
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
self under a tree.

Insolence is resistance, triviality is detail. As she writes in "The Steeple of Yorktown" (1920), it is a privilege to see so much confusion. Whereas the earlier Moore widened the remits for poetic technique, sources, and atmospheres, the later Moore was concerned that certain denominations of subject matter be respected. In 1952, she wrote to Allen Ginsberg that she found too much "sweat, skin, feces, sperm, saliva, odor" in his work. "The subject-matter of poetry is . . . the life that is lived in the scene that it comprises," Stevens writes, and reading Moore one feels that the life was circumscribed and stilted, did not climb clear of its wrong beginnings (in Larkin's phrase). The poems are all withdrawal and probity, but we also want sensuality, the tactility of things, a revelation of the profound physicality of the world and other beings. Reading Moore's body of work, it is hard not to want more of the blunt engagement and courage that wrote "To be Liked by You Would be a Calamity" ("You tell me frankly that you would like to feel I'm all abroad; I can but put my weapon up, and/Bow you out") and less of the sensibility that excised that poem from her canon after 1924.

But as so often in Moore's later poems there's something new, something cool and direct that arrests us. (One is reminded of Moore's brother's writing advice to "starve it down and make it run.") "By Disposition of Angels" demonstrates hard generalities of death and knowledge: it's a poem of self-annihilation, of retreating from the explicable. It feels like an author, in Yeats's phrase, recovering "radical innocence." She writes of the night sky: "Above particularities/These unparticularities praise cannot violate," and "how by darkness a star is perfected." Instead of the relentlessness of "accuracy," Moore enters Yeats's heaven where "ice burned and was but the more ice," where knowledge of others and self-knowledge could exist equally, in nondefinition and paradox, both "steady" and "aquerifer."
To live in the era of President Donald Trump may be the most exciting time to witness, sometimes on a daily basis, wide-ranging and unprecedented assaults on basic constitutional norms. But if Ganesh Sitaraman, the author of The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution, is right, the greatest threat to our democracy may be the tax cut that the Republican Congress passed and Trump signed at the close of 2017. In Sitaraman’s view, “the number one threat to American constitutional government is the collapse of the middle class.”

The tax bill, cynically sold as a break for working families, will hasten that collapse. By 2027, according to the Tax Policy Center, 90 percent of its benefits will accrue to the richest 20 percent of Americans. It drastically cuts the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 20 percent, and according to an April 2018 Congressional Budget Office report, it is likely to increase the federal deficit by $1.8 trillion over the next ten years, forcing reductions in safety-net programs such as Social Security. All of this ensures that the already unconscionable gulf between rich and poor in the US will grow even wider. Gary Cohn, Trump’s economic adviser until his recent resignation, told CNBC that “the most excited group out there are big CEOs, about our tax plan”—and for good reason.

The middle class is notoriously difficult to define, and Sitaraman does not attempt any specific definition. He describes it as including those who “aren’t extremely rich or extremely poor,” which isn’t extremely helpful. But his argument rests not on precisely defining the middle class by income, education, or cultural norms, but on the difference between a community in which there is “relative economic equality” and one characterized by a large gulf between rich and poor: “A large middle class means that most members fall somewhere in the middle.”

Many have lamented the increasing wealth gap in this country; it was the principal theme of Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign. Others have argued that more equitable societies are happier and healthier.1 But Sitaraman makes the persuasive case that reducing the gap between rich and poor is not just an issue of equity, morality, fairness, but of the very survival of our constitutional republic. Political theorists since the Greeks have worried about how to mediate conflicts between the haves and the have-nots. Aristotle argued that if the rich govern, they will hoard their wealth and oppress the poor, and that if the poor rule, they will confiscate and redistribute the property of the rich. In his view, therefore, a stable political community required a strong middle class. Without it, the polity will be “a city, not of free men, but of masters and slaves, the one despising, the other enervating; and nothing can be more fatal to friendship and good fellowship in states than this.”

In the same vein, James Harrington, a seventeenth-century British political theorist, posited that a republican form of government requires a relatively equal distribution of wealth—what he termed a “commonwealth.” Harrington warned that when a select few control a disproportionate share of a society’s property, they will use their economic power to gain political strength and transform the political system into an aristocracy. Montesquieu agreed, and attributed the fall of Rome to the concentration of economic power in a small number of citizens through unchecked inheritance practices.

Some political systems have sought to address the inevitable tension between rich and poor by building in class-based checks and balances. The Roman tribune, chosen by lottery to insulate the office from the influence of the wealthy, spoke for the common people. The House of Lords reserved a place for the propertyed elite in British governance, whereas the House of Commons was open to a much wider cross-section of British society. John Adams favored a similar structure for the US Congress, but his view was rejected. Instead, the framers constructed what Sitaraman calls a “middle-class Constitution”: it does not use the structure of government to mediate class conflict, and as a result it is even more reliant on an equitable distribution of wealth to avoid the rifts that Aristotle, Harrington, and Montesquieu foresaw.

In part because of these reforms, America after World War II entered a period in which prosperity was shared fairly widely, and the middle class grew. By 1928, for example, the top 10 percent of earners took home 46 percent of the nation’s income, not including capital gains. From 1951 to 1982, the top 10 percent’s share never hit 33 percent. Government subsidies supported home buying for all and college education for millions of veterans. The poverty rate dropped markedly, reaching a low of 11 percent in 1975. Following a major agreement in 1950 between auto workers and General Motors, businesses began providing pensions and health insurance for their employees. And the income tax during this period was truly progressive: the top marginal tax rate was 88 percent in 1942, 91 percent from 1943 to 1947, and remained above 70 percent until 1981. Under Trump’s tax cut, by contrast, the top rate will drop to 37 percent.

Since the late 1970s, income and wealth disparities have once again grown dramatically. In 2017, the richest 10 percent of Americans owned 77 percent of the nation’s wealth, a higher proportion even than in the Gilded Age. Today, the twenty richest Americans have more wealth than the bottom half of the US population—some 152 million people. In 1979, CEOs of America’s most successful businesses earned, on average, about thirty times as much as their workers. By 2013, they earned almost three hundred times as much. And in the thirty-year period from 1979 to 2008, the top 1 percent of Americans received sixty percent of the benefits from growth in income, while the incomes of the bottom 90 percent fell. These differences in income and wealth have infected our political system in many ways. Politicians are more dependent than ever on campaign contributions. They are forced to

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spend much of every day seeking do-
nations from wealthy supporters, and there-fore have to be more attentive to the interests of big donors than of ordinary constituen-
ties. Businesses have devoted ever-greater resources to lobbying, for which they vastly outspend consumer advocacy groups. The Chamber of Commerce's lobby-
ing budget for 2012, for example, was $207 million, while the lobbying budget of Public Citizen, the leading consumer watchdog group, was just $3 million. And as for the poor mak-
ing it into Congress, the median net worth of members in 2013 was more than $1 million, while the median net worth of American households was just $56,335.

These developments corrode peo-
ple's trust in the political system, and just $56,335.

ing it into Congress, the median net

resources to education, still the best

means of building the middle class. And he favors strengthening labor

unions, as they have historically played

a critical part in extending the benefits of the economy to a wider swath of the public.

These are all sensible and laudable

goals, but at the moment it is difficult to see how we might achieve them. Sitaraman predicts that it will take a coalition of “new populists” and Rep-

publican “progressive conservatives,” but it is not clear who these groups are, much less give a reason to believe that they will lead us in a positive di-

rection. Populism and the Republicans thus far have only given us Donald Trump.

In White Working Class, Joan Wil-

liams, a professor at the University of California's Hastings College of the Law, maintains that if we are going to find a way forward, the privi-

leged among us—whom she calls the “professional-managerial-elite”—need to respect the concerns of the working class. She agrees with Sitaraman that the gap between the middle class and working classes has jeopardized our democracy. She attributes much of the division to the professional class’s disinterest toward working class, so her book, much like J.D. Vance’s Hillbilly Elegy (2016) and Arlie Hochschild’s Strangers in Their Own Home (2016), seeks to foster more sympathetic understanding of the working class.

One of the difficulties with such ef-

forts is that they necessarily employ broad generalizations that are difficult to verify. Williams defines the “work-
ing class” as those earning more than the bottom 30 percent of Americans and less than the top 20 percent, as well as those with incomes in the top 20 percent but who lack a college degree. Using these parameters, the “working class” comprises at least half the popu-

lation—over 150 million people.

It is not self-evident, however, that this is a group with a common view-

point. By Williams’s own terms, the “working class,” which varies not among well-educated professionals who didn’t graduate from college, such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, to families scraping by on $41,000, to in-
dividuals earning as much as $132,000. By relying on income as well as educa-
tional criteria, Williams seeks to cap-
ture the multivalent features of class in America, but this category seems far too expansive. In addition to a handful of billionaires, it would encompass a great many college professors, govern-

ment lawyers, artists, journalists, and other modestly paid but highly edu-
cated professionals. It likely includes as many Democrats as Republicans, as many socialists as libertarians. And de-

spite the book’s title, the working class includes a sizable proportion of people of color. Is it possible to make mean-
ingful generalizations about such a di-

verse group? And how would one test whether they are correct?

Still, generalize we do. All efforts to discuss class involve unavoidably overbroad stereotypes. Williams is certainly right that “working class” has developed a certain cultural mean-

ing in America, and that among liberal elites in particular the generalizations can be unfairly dismissive. Williams notes, however, that while the working class has not have a college degree, in part be-

cause a college degree is less obviously worthwhile for many in the working class. And she points out that while some in the white working class hold racist, sexist, and anti-immigrant views, so, too, do many in the professional class.

Williams’s principal point—that the privileged are too condescending toward the working class—is surely correct. Her book will help some pro-

fessionals think twice about their atti-
dudes and assumptions toward those who have less money or especially less education. But in an increasingly di-

vided world, in which the rich and the working class do not live together, go to school together, or socialize together, such attempts to foster understand-

ing across chasms are necessarily lim-

ited. We need to narrow the chasms themselves.

Sitaraman, I imagine, would main-
tain that the attitudes Williams seeks to correct are themselves a manifesta-
tion of the growing gap between rich and poor. As the gap grows, the wealthy are increasingly inclined to see their interests as different from, and more deserving of, the priorities of those who have less. At the same time, those who have less are likely to become more resentful of those with more and more likely to engage in protest with cultural stories that “justify” each class’s respective resentments. The distrust flows in both directions, as if a choral refrain “lock her up.” Sometimes it feels like a downward spiral from which there is no escape.

One of the unintended lessons of Si-
taraman’s history of class in America, however, is that while our Constitution does not build in explicit measures to reduce class conflict, it has facilitated such movements through 

unwittingly. He came to office with a majority vot-
ing against him, and his approval rat-

ing, which started out at historic lows, has fallen since. He has shown no abil-

ity to appeal beyond his base. And he has the potential to unite progressives, liberals, moderates, and even conserva-
tives against him. Some of his harshest and most perceptive critics are Repub-
licans, including David Brooks, David Frum, and Michael Gerson—the latter two former speechwriters for George W. Bush. Stories about the dysfunc-
tion of his administration were already widespread before the publication of Michael Wolff’s Fire and Fury.2 So if he is to have a fighting chance to win in 2020, we may, ironically, have Trump to thank for it.

But Sitaraman’s book also demo-

strates that the system is not self-
correcting; it requires concerted poli-
tical action. “The resistance” will have to move beyond the criticisms that have united so many and artic-
ulate an affirmative vision of a better America for all, one that seeks to heal the divisions that have riven the na-
tion. Sitaraman’s and Williams’s books both point in this direction. Wil-
liams effectively debunks some of the misunderstandings that class divisions have sown. And Sitaraman makes a convincing case that we have an ed-
fundamental stake in a more equitable so-


3Henry Holt, 2018; see Michael To-

masky’s review in these pages, Febru-
ary 22, 2018.
Alberto Savinio, the hidden spring of metaphysical modernism, lives on in his Self-Portrait as an Owl (1936). His face, with its marked eyebrows, dark eyes, thin lips, and air of melancho-to-diffidence, sketched in swirling feathers, resembles that of his brother, Giorgio de Chirico, who did a pencil drawing of the two siblings—or Di-oscuri, as they liked to call themselves, after the mythical twins Castor and Pollux—at the start of their working life in Paris, one as a musician, the other as an artist. In Self-Portrait, Savinio wears a dark suit, and his shapely hand, the thumb hooked over a waistcoat button, takes up one fifth of the image. The scarf wound around his neck partly conceals a feathered chest (see illustration on page 29).

In his autobiographical novel, Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare (“Nivasio” is an anagram of “Savinio” and dolce mare means “sweet sea”), Savinio wrote that the “singularity” of his alter ego “was so discreet, so secret, so subcutaneous, that on the surface nothing transpired and might easily have been mistaken for the most blatant normality.” André Breton, in his Anthology of Black Humor, baldly stated that “the basis of all modern myth still coming into being is founded on two bodies of basis of metaphysical modernism, lives on Albertino Dolcemare (Paolo Baldacci Gallery, 1995).
of teeth erupts from her primly clad lap. Savinio might have identified with the prehistoric beast, comically charging into the world, perhaps in search of the opposite of “seriousness,” which he ridiculed. In his introduction to an edition of Tommaso Campanella’s 1602 utopian treatise, The City of the Sun, he hoped that his readers might have “overcome the prejudice of seriousness, which spreads so much darkness over matters of culture and life in general, and know now that seriousness is an obstacle and a limitation, and therefore a form of unintelligence.” The optimal condition for the modern mind, he believed, was diletantismo, the state of “laxness,” in which “life is not a problem.”

But in Milan, at the age of sixteen, trying to sell his first opera, Carmela, to an Italian music publisher, and beginning to compose a new one, Savinio was actually quite serious: he studied Greek, Latin, literature, philosophy, and music. He wrote a fifty-page annotation of the ancient Greek epic Argonautica, which his brother saw when he visited Milan. A year later, de Chirico painted The Departure of the Argonauts (1909). In those early years, Savinio and de Chirico also discussed the works of Schopenhauer and Otto Weininger, the Austrian philosopher and author of Sex and Character. Their “Metaphysical Art”—as the brothers, together with the painter Carlo Carrà, named it in 1917—owed some of its inspiration to these thinkers. When Savinio was eighteen, he read Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo (in French, though he knew some German, since it was “not a book to be read with a dictionary at your side”). It confirmed what he already knew—that “to be just ‘a man’” was to be “more than ‘a Christ.’”

Before turning to music, Savinio had told people that he wanted to be a priest. In Nuvoso Dolomore, he wrote that if the apse of the Catholic church of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite in Athens, where he was baptized, had been painted by Cézanne instead of a certain Ermenegildo Bonfiglioli, “given to Tiespolesian rotundities,” he might have become “a theologian, a missionary, even a high minister of the church.” Before the image of an enormous eye inside a triangle in the apse of another church, his governess, Frau Linda, an impoverished German violinist, snorted, “Paintings, pfft! God is all psyche. No need for portraits!” But Nuvioso/Savinio was touched by the image of the eye in the triangle and snuck back to the church that night bearing provisions for the “Greek God,” as he called him, only to be met by a slap from Frau Linda, huddled behind the altar. There and then he chose the Greek God over the Catholic one: “If the Greek God is praying, who could he be praying to if not to himself? . . . The prayer of a God faithful to himself seemed to him a prayer par excellence, the prayer of all prayers.”

Savinio ironically summed up his own stories as “among the most singular and profound of any written in Italian,” adding that some of them “east armchairs, sofas, cupboards, and other furniture, as sensitive characters, that could talk and act.” Pianos shudder to play less than worthy compositions, or they have warm tails and give birth overnight to a multitude of little pianos that exist on a diet of meat and vegetables and are soon climbing over the furniture, hiding behind curtains, and “playing like puppies.” In Paris in 1914, in his proto-Dadaist composition Les chants de la mi-mort, considered a precursor to compositions by Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez, Savinio wrote that he “withdrew from music in 1915 at the age of twenty-four out of fear. So as not to totally give in to the will of music . . . cause music stupifies and stupifies.”

Nineteen fifteen was also the year that Italy entered the war, and the brothers joined the army so as to finally find Italian patriotism. They were sent to Ferrara, where they were at first briefly admitted to a military hospital for nervous disorders. It was here that they met Carrà, then Gemma and her sons set up house in Ferrara, “the city of geometric lechery,” in Savino’s words. Two years later, Savinio was dispatched to Thessaloniki as an interpreter, which he promptly published as The Departure of the Argonaut (1918). In Ferrara the brothers saw a lot of Carrà and the artist

3See Sergio Macedone, Come un pesce nel boccale—Alberto Savinio, la musica e la metafisica, October 16, 2016.
Filippo De Pisis. A decade later, after Mussolini’s Fascist regime had firmly established itself, de Chirico’s painting was attacked by his ex-friend Carrà as “the stuff of beginners,” and Savinio, in the same paper, was characterized as “un ebreo sospetto” (“possibly a Jew”) without a distinct nationality, a failure both as a musician and as a man of letters, and essentially anti-Fascist. The brothers’ cosmopolitanism rendered them suspect in the eyes of Fascist nationals.

De Chirico wrote a letter to Mussolini stating his loyalty to the regime and started telling people that he’d been born in Florence (he had much to fear since his second wife was a Russian Jew), while Savinio published a disquieting autobiographical study on his family’s Catholic roots.

Alberto was drawing, painting, and composing early on in Milan. One of de Chirico’s paintings, The Oracle, was almost certainly made in 1909, around the time that de Chirico painted his seminal picture The Enigma of the Oracle (1909). Both works represent a headless, draped statue, a curtain, a seascape, and dense clouds. Giorgio himself was writing music, too. Clearly, their personal and artistic lives were intertwined. Both brothers aimed for a juxtaposition of autobiography and antiquity.

Savinio was the first of the two to visit Paris, in 1911. A respected musician of Greek origin introduced him to Erik Satie, Paul Reverdy, Jean Cocteau, Picasso, Max Jacob, and Apollinaire. But when Savinio sent his brother some of his studies for paintings in 1926, it was de Chirico who invited Savinio to join him in France. Savinio married the actress Maria Morino, a former member of Elia Kazan’s company, who had starred in an unsuccessful ballet of his in Rome. De Chirico’s first wife was the Russian lead ballerina from that same production.

Savinio had his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Jacques Bernheim in 1927. Cocteau wrote the text for the catalog and designed its cover. Of the twenty-six paintings shown, eighteen were sold to important dealers and collectors. A few years later Savinio, his wife, and their daughter, Angelica, returned to Italy, where they had another child, Ruggero. Savinio continued to paint and built himself a small modernist house near his beloved sea—in Poveromo, near Forte dei Marmi. He wrote many books, a great deal of modestly paid journalism, and had two important exhibitions of his paintings, in Turin and in Milan.

Savinio would not have liked to be seen as the greater artist overshadowed by a histrionic brother. Neither one could have existed without the other. They remained close until de Chirico met Isabella Picower Far, who became his second wife. Then their mother, Gemma, died in 1937, a further rift in the symbiotic union of the Dioscuri. They were metaphorically reunited after Savinio’s sudden death in 1952 at the age of sixty in Rome. Stunned at his brother’s straitened circumstances, de Chirico laid a laurel wreath on his remains and two years later, in Rome, curated the most complete exhibition of Savinio’s paintings, some of which are now on display at CIMA. “It is in death,” Savinio predicted, “that my brother and I will go back to being as we were twenty or so years ago, when nothing had yet divided us, and though there were two of us we shared a single thought.”

Alberto Savinio: Self-Portrait as an Owl, 1936
Jaw-Jaw Better Than War-War

Jessica T. Mathews

After six years in which he never traveled outside his country, never met with a foreign head of state, and maintained relations ranging from frosty to terrible with South Korea, China, and the United States, Kim Jong-un opened up to all three of those countries over three stunning weeks in March. He established a direct line of communication with the South for the first time in eleven years, scheduled an April meeting with South Korean president Moon Jae-in, invited President Trump to a summit meeting currently planned for May, and then traveled secretly to China for meetings with Chinese president Xi Jinping.

In all likelihood, Kim has emerged from his seclusion because of the rapid advance of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. In 2017 twenty missile tests followed one another in quick succession. During the year North Korea demonstrated that it had both mobile and solid-fuel missiles. (The latter can be readied for launch much more quickly than liquid-fuel models and are therefore harder to target and destroy.) The climax came in the fall. On September 3, North Korea tested a weapon that US experts have concluded was a hydrogen bomb. Two months later, on November 28, it successfully launched a new intercontinental ballistic missile with a range of 8,100 miles, and thus able to reach anywhere in the United States. North Korea has not tested a nuclear weapon that is a missile warhead capable of surviving the stresses of atmospheric reentry, but that appears to be its only remaining technological hurdle.

In addition to an unknown number of nuclear weapons, North Korea has an arsenal of chemical weapons and at least some of the advanced equipment needed to produce biological weapons. The discovery of antibodies to anthrax and smallpox in the blood of North Korean defectors indicates that the country has produced these two agents. It has possibly worked with cholera and plague as well. Satellite photographs taken in January and February suggest that a nuclear reactor may now be producing plutonium. Kim may be balancing diplomacy with a not-so-subtle reminder of his commitment to nuclear weapons, or adding a bargaining chip to his pile.

As Trump and Kim exchanged schoolyard taunts over the past year, few could have predicted that Kim would suddenly switch from testing bombs and missiles to launching a diplomatic initiative. It began with his annual New Year’s Day address, in which he announced that North Korea had achieved “national nuclear power” and that he hoped to send athletes to participate in the Winter Olympics in South Korea. His grandfather, by contrast, before South Korea hosted the Summer Olympics in 1988, blew up a Korean Airlines flight, killing everyone on board, in an attempt to scare participants away from the games. President Moon, who has fervently advocated a “sunshine policy” of engagement and cooperation with the North for more than fifteen years, jumped on Kim’s offer. The two teams marched together in the opening ceremonies, and Kim—again for the first time—sent a high official (his sister) to sit in Moon’s box. He did not react when US Vice President Mike Pence rudely shunned her.

This is not to say that Kim has suddenly become soft or predictable. Even elementary facts, like the ages and genders of his children, are uncertain, not to mention his policy priorities, political standing, the military capabilities at his command, and especially his long-term goals. He has shown himself to be ruthless and cruel but also far more capable of consolidating power than the US first believed. He ordered the assassination of officials loyal to his father, Kim Jong-il (including at least five of the seven men who had carried his coffin), and replaced them with cadres loyal to himself. He makes a show of particularly brutal killings; at the same time, he has made gestures toward modernization by building amusement parks and allowing some free markets to operate. He has also removed some of the aura of mystery that surrounded his predecessors by speaking more often in public. Yet he continues to spend scarce resources on propaganda to ensure that North Korea continues to think of Americans as vicious killers. He emphasizes North Korea’s need for economic growth, but has prioritized nuclear and missile programs over economic ones.

Until last month the only foreigners Kim was known to have had significant contact with while in office were a Japanese chef and the American basketball player Dennis Rodman. In short, he is decidedly strange, but considerably more able than he seemed at first, and neither crazy nor suicidal. The third ruler in a family dynasty that has put regime survival above all else, he is a young man in his mid-thirties with the prospect of decades in power to look forward to.

Trump’s motives are almost as puzzling as Kim’s. North Korea has tried for decades to meet with a sitting president of the United States to boost its international standing. When Kim proposed a summit, Trump brushed aside his aides’ concerns and leapt to accept the vague oral invitation, conveyed to him secondhand by a South Korean official, without first pinning down the precise meaning or seriousness of any of Kim’s promises. Then, by taking at face value Kim’s statement that he is “committed to de-nuclearization,” Trump allowed what has heretofore been a US precondition for negotiation to become its goal. To get these two decisions amount to a significant softening of previous US demands on Pyongyang, with nothing received in return. They were the kind of decisions candidate Trump would have blasted unmercifully, but they could be good ones nonetheless, if the president is in fact prepared to negotiate.

Only days after taking this major step, however, Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who had tried for months to start negotiations with North Korea. In October, Trump had tweeted that Tillerson was “wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.” (“Save your energy, Rex, we’ll do what has to be done!”) To replace him, he nominated CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who has insisted that he does not necessarily support regime change in North Korea, but who has used language that could mean little else. “The most important thing we can do,” he said at the Aspen Security Forum last summer, is “separate [nuclear] capacity and, someone who might well have intended...”). I am hopeful we will find a way to separate that regime from this system... The North Korean people, I'm sure are lovely people and would love to see him go.”

Trump then fired National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster and anointed John Bolton, who has repeatedly urged the US to bomb North Korea without provoking an immediate and overwhelming militarily for the United States to respond to the current ‘necessity’ posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons,” Bolton wrote in February, “by striking first.” This is a calculated, preventive war—not for preemption, but for a war undertaken in the absence of imminent threat, a concept that has no legitimacy under international law. Preventive war was used by George W. Bush to justify the invasion of Iraq, a monumental blunder that Bolton still vigorously defends.

Both new appointees share Trump’s belligerence and both, in contrast to their cancerous opponents of the Iran nuclear deal. It therefore seems all but certain that Trump will follow his desire to pull out of that agreement on May 12, the next deadline when he is required to extend the waiver of sanctions on Iran. If he chooses to breach the deal in some fashion or pulls the US entirely out of it, he will undermine his chances of reaching a deal in Korea. The North Koreans would have to conclude, going into the summit, that the United States cannot be trusted to abide by even its most carefully negotiated commitments.

At least initially, the Trump administration believed that its “maximum pressure” policy, including threats of “fire and fury” and tightened sanctions, had cowed North Korea and that the president would be meeting a weakened Kim. This is almost certainly wrong, and dangerously so. The sanctions have undoubtedly hurt North Korea, but this is a regime that has endured much worse. During the devastating famine of the 1990s, the regime lied and starved its people to bend to international conditions for food aid.

Threats are also unlikely to be effective. Loose warnings of military action only reinforce North Korea’s paranoid belief that America is an existential threat. More rationally, they realize that the US doesn’t know the location of all of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, has heretofore been a US precondition for negotiation to become its goal. To get these two decisions amount to a significant softening of previous US demands on Pyongyang, with nothing received in return. They were the kind of decisions candidate Trump would have blasted unmercifully, but they could be good ones nonetheless, if the president is in fact prepared to negotiate.

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can we also believe that a strike will deter him from responding in kind? And if Kim is unpredictable, impulsive and bordering on irrational, how can we control his team confront what might be negotiable with North Korea, they should find it hard to dismiss the much more drastic limits and verification terms that have been imposed on Iran. They might notice the irrationality of reigniting one nuclear weapons crisis while at the same time trying to reduce the threat of another. And perhaps they may come to see a more fundamental truth: that the US, not China, would end nuclear proliferation in either Iran or North Korea so much as make it permanent. If attacked by the US, neither country would ever feel safe again without nuclear weapons. Diplomacy is agonizingly slow, frustrating, and generally productive of less than perfect results. The trick is to know when every other option is worse.

No Place Like Home Lessons in Activism from LGBT Kansas C.J. Janovy *A work of both meticulous research and heartfelt experience, No Place Like Home tells the story of the fight for justice for LGBT people, and does so with passion, insight, and wisdom. Using the Sunflower State as the bellwether for the country's long struggle for human rights, C. J. Janovy's book shows us that the moral arc of the universe is long—and it is bending toward Kansas. "—Jeremy Finney Boylan, author of She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders and Long Black Veil: A Novel* 308 pages, 14 photos, Cloth $29.95

The U.S. Constitution and Secession A Documentary Anthology of Slavery and White Supremacy Dwight T. Pitcaithly "Brilliantly organized and contextualized by the editor, these documents from America's greatest crisis provide a definitive answer to the question of why the South seceded."
—Timothy S. Huchner, author of Liberty and Union: The Civil War Era and American Constitutionalism 384 pages, Cloth $45.00, Paper $24.95

Secretary of Defense James Mattis is outnumbered, although, unlike the pope, he has the troops. The president believes too much in the efficacy of bluster and threat, and he has shown no willingness to do the hard preparatory work that international negotiations require. If the summit does take place, the greatest danger would come from an acrimonious failure. Summit meetings generally follow lower-level negotiations for the good reason that it talks fail at the top of their agenda, the US would remain open for diplomacy, and force becomes the only option. This, above all, is the reason that both parties should set a low bar for what they would consider success. It could prove useful, however, for President Trump to experience firsthand how much more difficult it is to build an international agreement than it is to criticize or break one. As he and his team confront what might be negotiable with North Korea, they should find it hard to dismiss the much more drastic limits and verification terms that have been imposed on Iran. They might notice the irrationality of reigniting one nuclear weapons crisis while at the same time trying to reduce the threat of another. And perhaps they may come to see a more fundamental truth: that the United States would not or could not attempt such a strategy. And current efforts by Sino-US relations make this an unpromising time to try, but it must happen eventually.

The chances of a successful Trump–Kim summit seem slim. Two members of President Trump's new national security team favor force over diplomacy.

May 10, 2018
A Man in Constant Motion

Stephen Greenblatt


Achievements in the arts, unlike those, say, in geology or astronomy or molecular biology, do not chart an upward arc of progress. The value of literature, music, and painting is undiminished by time. The value of current world-view, or by place in a sequence of evolving technical mastery. Of each great work we can say, as Shakespeare's Envy, after all, that successive artists cannot wither her, nor custom staid/Her infinite variety." Take, for example, the paintings discovered in December 1994 on the walls of the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche Valley of southern France. The images, over four hundred of them, date from 32,000 to 26,000 years ago, and are among the earliest artworks known to exist.

With astonishing rhythmical intensity horses, deer, bison, and mammoths dance across the walls, along with lions, bears, and other predators. There are no comparably vivid representations of humans, but there are five images that have been identified as pubic triangles, and a sixth, evidently conjuring up a myth to which we have no access, that seems to show a bowler hat adorned with the tails and genitals of a woman. The paintings were created by people about whom we know almost nothing, yet even though their purpose is utterly lost to us, along with the culture that produced them, they remain astonishingly vital, legible, and beautiful.

The fact that these archaic cave paintings hold their own against Rembrandt's slaughtered ox or a horse by Delacroix is thrilling but disorienting. Though we may joyfully acknowledge their timelessness, they also compel us to participate in the enterprise that art history was founded on a drama of progress that seems incompatible with this acknowledgment. Don't we believe that artists slowly master innovative techniques, that the earliest efforts are gradually succeeded by superior talents able to exploit their predecessors' crude achievements, that long, barren ages of dormancy or error give way to periods of brilliant aesthetic flowering?

Underlying this triumphal conception is the esoteric progress of the work of one remarkable man: the Italian artist, architect, and writer Giorgio Vasari. To understand how we embraced a set of assumptions so difficult to reconcile with what we encounter in Chauvet, it helps to try to understand what Vasari bequeathed to us, and Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney offer lively guidance in their engaging study The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art. They propose that it was largely from him that we derive our notion of an autonomous activity known as "art"—an activity so prestigious that someone recently parted with $45 million for a damaged work, with a disputed attribution to one of its celebrated practitioners. That the practitioner in question, Leonardo da Vinci, was one of Vasari's heroes is anything but a coincidence.

To his contemporaries, Vasari, born in Arezzo in central Italy in 1511, was best known as a hugely successful painter and architect. Indeed, his principal achievement in the latter field is visible to virtually everyone who visits Florence, for the building he designed for the city magistrates' offices (uffizi, in Italian) now houses one of the world's most famous art museums. Most tourists have no idea who drew up the plans for the Uffizi. And though in the course of a dutiful tour of Florence and other Italian cities, they are almost certain to see many examples of Vasari's accomplishments in painting as well as architecture, these too are unlikely to leave an impression strong enough to register their creator's name. His huge canvases and frescoes and painted cupolas produce instead a generic Renaissance effect: yet another Last Supper, or Pietà, or Allegory of Justice, or Apotheosis of someone or other to hurry past on the way to the masterpieces by Giotto and Masaccio, Fra Angelico and Raphael, and, above all, Leonardo and Michelangelo.

But even if they are not aware of it, in crowding around the relatively small canon of celebrated works, the tourists—and, for that matter, most teachers and scholars—are following Vasari's directives. They are doing so, as Rowland and Charney observe, under the influence of his most enduring legacy, The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, the epoch-making book he published first in 1550 and then in a vastly expanded version in 1568.

It is rare to produce something truly new—certainly Vasari did not do so either in painting or architecture—but nothing like his book had ever been written. There were saints' Lives, to be sure, and in the third century CE a Greek writer named Diogenes Laertius had written the vast, eclectic Lives and Doctrines of the Philosophers, bringing together fragments and wildly unreliable anecdotes about ancient Greek thinkers from Thales to Epicurus. But saints and philosophers possessed a cultural stature that justified the effort of memorializing their accomplishments and recording revealing and often quirky personal details. In the sixteenth century it was far from obvious that artists—men (and some women) who had hands stained with pigment or wieldedhammers and chisels—deserved such biographical attention.

Greek writer named Diogenes Laertius had written the vast, eclectic Lives and Doctrines of the Philosophers, bringing together fragments and wildly unreliable anecdotes about ancient Greek thinkers from Thales to Epicurus. But saints and philosophers possessed a cultural stature that justified the effort of memorializing their accomplishments and recording revealing and often quirky personal details. In the sixteenth century it was far from obvious that artists—men (and some women) who had hands stained with pigment or wieldedhammers and chisels—deserved such biographical attention.

There was one ancient precedent: before his death in 79 CE (from approaching too close to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius), the Roman Pliny the Elder had written an encyclopedic natural history that included, in between sections on metals and soils and those who worked with them, a section on paintings and painters. Though Pliny notes that painting has lost much of its prestige—the fashion, he writes, is now for decorating walls with costly marble—he does not regard it as inappropriate to record information about the most celebrated and innovative artists of Greece and Rome. Thus, he informs us, Polygnotus of Thasos in the fifth century BCE was the first to confer expression on the face, "in place of the old jerking expression on the face, "in place of the ancient rigidity of the features," while Apollonius of Athens, in the same period, "was the first to paint objects as they really appeared."

The works of the individual artists whom Pliny honored had virtually entirely vanished by the time Vasari and his contemporaries focused their attention on the classical past. It was with fear of a comparable vanishing that Vasari set out to follow the example of his ancient predecessor. After all, he had ample opportunity to observe the wholesale destruction of art. Earthquake, fire, and flood were recurrent threats, but they were hardly the greatest dangers. The Italian city-states of Vasari's time, along with the Vatican and the Kingdom of Naples, were almost constantly at war, either with one another or with one of the foreign armies that repeatedly plundered the peninsula. Palaces were shell-

An or torched; civic offices and libraries stripped bare; churches robbed. New regimes systematically erased or destroyed buildings. Rich, learned, and resourceful, and above all creative, Italians managed after every disaster to recover, replacing what had been virtually all buildings of symbolic and aesthetic beauty. Vasari saw firsthand how much was disappearing, and he understood perfectly well that much of the time he himself was energetically participating in the destruction.

The Collector of Lives begins in 1563 when Vasari was commissioned to fresco the walls of the enormous new Palazzo Vecchio. The walls were not blank. One of them contained at least part of Leonardo da Vinci's Battle of Anghiari, a monumen-
tal project he began in 1505 but never completed. The Medici, Vasari's powerful patrons, had no attachment to Leonardo's painting, which had remained unfinished. The Medici exiled Leonardo from Florence. They wanted a hall in which to display their power and to dazzle visiting dignitaries with frescoes depicting, as Rowland and Charney put it, "piles of bodybuilders in Day-Glo spandex engaged in an overzealous round of Twister."

Competent and supremely efficient, Vasari was the right man for the job, but he was burdened by a profound admiration for Leonardo, whose work was, even unfinished, he knew was superior to anything that he himself could possibly paint in its place. Perhaps he did not destroy what was on the wall; perhaps he somehow hid it under a false wall, marking what he had done with the tantalizing words he painted in one of his scenes, Cerca trova. Seek and you shall find. Rowland and Charney offer their suggestion, based on the room's proportions before Vasari altered them, for the specific place where art detectives (who have long been on the trail of the lost fresco, but to date the lost Leonardo has not been recovered.

In his Life of Leonardo, Vasari vividly describes the preparations for the Battle of Anghiari, celebrating "the incredible skill he demonstrated in the shapes and features of the horses, with Leonardo, better than any other master, created with their boldness, muscles, and graceful beauty." As for the fresco itself, it writes that Leo-

nardo attempted to invent a new coating for his tempera, such that when it began to run, forcing him to abandon the enterprise. Whatever the truth of this story, Vasari knew that even the greatest achievements in painting, sculpture, and architecture were fragile and that the written word could outlast them. Cataclysms doubtless lay ahead, but least his book would go on at least the work had been accomplished by the most significant artists in the world. These happened, he fervently believed, to be himself and his own countrymen, prin-

The Collector of Lives begins in 1563 when Vasari was commissioned to fresco the walls of the enormous new Palazzo Vecchio. The walls were not blank. One of them contained at least part of Leonardo da Vinci's Battle of Anghiari, a monumental project he began in 1505 but never completed. The Medici, Vasari's powerful patrons, had no attachment to Leonardo's painting, which had remained unfinished. The Medici exiled Leonardo from Florence. They wanted a hall in which to display their power and to dazzle visiting dignitaries with frescoes depicting, as Rowland and Charney put it, "piles of bodybuilders in Day-Glo spandex engaged in an overzealous round of Twister."

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He brought to the task of creating it the advantage of a deep professionalism. In describing what he saw, he constantly drew upon his rich experience as a practitioner, which gave him extraordinary access to the whole enterprise of art-making at that time and place. He understood the technical and aesthetic challenges involved in each of the different media, the complex system of patronage, the variety of contractual arrangements, the use of assistants, the internal struggles, and the collective measure of success or failure. He knew how the work was done from beginning to end, who was merely copying whom, and what it took to achieve something truly original.

This direct personal involvement also had its disadvantages. A skilled operator in a highly competitive world, Vasari had a particular aesthetic agenda, and he was perfectly capable of doctoring his account to reward his friends and punish his enemies. “Oh that shit face Vasari,” scribbled the enraged Bolognese painter Annibale Carracci in the margins of his copy of the Lives. Cellini shared the same low opinion: Vasari, he wrote, was “a pitiless snappy cur” whose incessant boasting about his own achievements could not disguise his utter mediocrity as an artist and writer. So too El Greco complained about Vasari’s stupidity and his arrogant refusal to acknowledge the talent of any artist who did not come from Tuscany or Rome.

It is certainly true: Vasari favored a single aesthetic tradition and, finally, a fairly narrow strand within it. Art from beyond the boundaries of Europe was almost completely outside his range of knowledge or interest. There is no moment in his writing comparable to Albrecht Dürer’s expression of admiration for works of art from the New World. It was difficult enough for Vasari to appreciate Flemish, German, or Dutch painting. He had almost no curiosity about France and Spain. Even in Italian art, he only fully embraced the achievements of his fellow Tuscans. He was grudging about the achievements of Bolognese artists and, still more strikingly, he never fully appreciated what it took to achieve something truly original.

Linked to this latter failing was Vasari’s passionate, unbending commitment to what he called disegno—design—a multipurpose term that centered on skill in drawing. Hence while he acknowledged the spectacular gifts of Titian, he felt that that great master’s achievements reflected a lack of “the truest
Vasari’s impulse to collect extended beyond the accumulation of these precious tangible traces of skill in design. He also devoted himself to amassing stories about the lives of artists, not only his contemporaries but also those who lived centuries earlier. The anecdotes he relates are often amusing—he had some of Boccaccio’s comic gifts—and on occasion quite cruel. But they are meant to be illuminating as well. Vasari clearly believed that one could learn much about the nature of an artist’s work, his art, from telling biographical glimpses. Hence Piero di Cosimo’s eccentricity—he survived largely on eggs that he boiled fifty at a time in the glue he used to prepare his artworks; he refused to allow his trees to be pruned or his vines cut, “for it pleased him to see everything wild, like his own nature”; by staring at the stains of spittle on walls, he conjured up “the most fantastic cities and widest landscapes that were ever seen”; he died “more like a beast than a man”—is bound up with the haunting strangeness of his art. To his credit, the smooth, socially adept Vasari sees that what is brilliant in Piero’s painting is of a piece with his weirdness, though he also registers its high worldly cost.

If Piero had not been so solitary, and had taken more care of himself in his way of living than he did, he would have made known the greatness of his intellect in such a way that he would have been revered, whereas, by reason of his uncouth ways, he was rather held to be a madman.

At the other personality extreme, in Vasari’s account, was Raphael, whose “innately gentle humanity” was joined to a beautifully graceful affability that always showed itself sweet and pleasing with every kind of person and in every kind of circumstance.” Here too the qualities of a person seem bound up with the aesthetic achievement. It would be annoying if Vasari simply wanted the wild Piero to be more like the suave Raphael, but he is canny enough to savor each of them for his peculiar conjunction of artistry with the personality traits disclosed in the anecdotes.

Still more revealing, in Vasari’s Lives, are stories that capture with unforgettable acuteness moments in which character and talent are not merely related to each other but seem fully to merge. Thus, Vasari relates, the pope sent a curtiss to Tuscany to evaluate the skill of Giotto, along with that of other artists in the region. All the others, eager for commissions, gave the papal emissary elaborate drawings to bring back to the Vatican, but Giotto merely “took a sheet of paper and a brush dipped in red, pressed his arm to his side to make a compass of it, and with a turn of his hand made a circle so even in its shape and outline that it was a marvel to behold.” The courtier, annoyed, asked, “Am I to have no other drawing than this one?” “It’s more than sufficient,” the supremely self-confident painter answered, and of course he turned out to be right, for the pope immediately grasped from the perfect circle how far Giotto surpassed all the other artists of his time. The story, Rowland and Charney write, “is about the artist as magician, using his talented hand to do what most people could do only with instruments,” and, in a reversal that must have deeply delighted Vasari, it casts the artist, and not his powerful patron, as the hero.

But Vasari’s great book is more than a vast number of anecdotes about a very large number of artists. It is an attempt to answer a riddle posed by the flood of discoveries that were being made all through the years during which he incessantly traveled and wrote. Those discoveries, admirably chronicled in Leonard Barkan’s study Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture (1999), confirm what thoughtful observers must have already divined: over the course of many centuries, there had been no real improvement in either painting or architecture. Though artists had attempted to bring to life the truths of the Christian faith and though architects had created ambitious structures in which the faithful could worship together, they had not succeeded in going beyond the accomplishments of the pagan past.

On the contrary, the astoundingly beautiful ancient buildings that were dug up from the earth, the exquisite paintings on the terra-cotta vases that had somehow survived intact in underground burial vaults, the frescoes on the walls of those vaults, the mosaic floors, and great buildings like the Pantheon and the Colosseum were, for Vasari and his contemporaries, evidence of a loss that had once gloriously flourished. It provoked a more extreme version of our own response to the Chauvet cave paintings: astonishment mingled in our case with a tragic sense of a decline and fall.

But Vasari’s book confronted directly the challenge of how to account for the splendor of ancient art, not as we might have expected, by invoking the wealth and power of the Roman Empire or the brilliance of its artists. Rather he postulated the divine: over the course of many centuries, there had been no real improvement in either painting or architecture. Though artists had attempted to bring to life the truths of the Christian faith and though architects had created ambitious structures in which the faithful could worship together, they had not succeeded in going beyond the accomplishments of the pagan past.

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Drue Heinz (1915–2018)
Darryl Pinckney

Some time ago, Drue Heinz said to me about dying, “It’s rather disconcerting to realize that you can’t take even a book with you.” We were in a very brown and velvety study done up by her favorite decorator, Renzo Mongiardino, in her house in New York, on Sutton Place. Renors hère, a Modigliani there, and a great deal of trompe l’oeil in between. On March 30, after false alarms, when her doctors had written her off but she bounced back, this weird and wonderful woman finally passed away, peacefully enough, they say, after a few weeks of decline, of talking to the radio, asking for her ski boots, and seeing a man in a cloak. She died at Hawthornden, the lovely castle nestled in a glen in Scotland that she was proud of having made into a writers’ retreat and named a literary prize after.

Drue was 103. I had worked out her age from a story she once told me about having been smuggled aboard the Queen Mary in 1935 by Bing Crosby, crossing in the company of his Catholic wife, who would not give him a divorce. Thirty-five minus whatever age a debutante was supposed to be equals 1915 or so (I figured she would have to have been of debutante age). Her friends said Drue didn’t want to die, because she didn’t want people to find out where she was from. She said different things: an orphan watched over by lawyers; an orphan brought up in girls’ schools in Ireland; an orphan brought up by spinsters in Norfolk. Where she ended up was pretty fascinating, everyone pointed out, wherever she was from. They used to say that Drue Heinz and Grace Dudley treaded carefully around each other. Each knew the truth about the other: they had both been in Switzerland during World War II, at embassy dinners and parties where they gathered information helpful to the Allies. I am not as embarrassed as I should be that I am interested in Drue’s obituaries, in order to find out answers to some of the mystery of her.

I only knew her as an older woman who got even older, not as the stunning, fiery redhead who for three decades was the second wife of Jack Heinz, the ketchup tycoon, big donor to the Renaissance. He was a torment, Drue remembered, to the genius of medieval art and insists that his aesthetic principles are the only true ones; yes, he grossly misjudges the most excellent craftsmen, sculptors, painters, and architects.

The underlying theme in Vasari’s vast book then is the emergence of the human spirit following this disaster, through the slow recovery by a succession of remarkable individuals of artistic skills that had been lost. His word for this emergence was rinascita, “rebirth.” If, as Rowland and Charney assert, Vasari invented the concept of art, so too he invented the concept of the Renaissance. Yes, his cast of characters is overwhelmingly Italian, mostly from Tuscany; yes, he grossly misjudges the genius of medieval art and insists that his aesthetic principles are the only true ones; yes, he allows his alliances and petty enmities to color his account. But he believed that the artists whose lives he chronicled had made it possible for all humans once again to look backward in time without a burning sense of shame. We are astonished that we discover in the immensely distant past works that thrill us, that are truly alive, and that seem to call into question any notion of progress in the arts. Vasari was astonished that he found in the present—the present of Michelangelo and Leonardo—thrilling, vital works that stood up to the challenge posed by the genius of the immensely distant past.

Sh e rather collected houses. Someone said that because she had a thing against hotels she’d buy houses in the places where she liked to go. The rumor was that one house near Portofino was shut tight and overrun with rats. Everyone who lived or visited seasonally was beautiful, starting with the view from her villa across Lake Como to Bellagio. She rather lived only for the nicest, “The nicest,” Elizabeth Hardwick once said. “I knew you wanted it for James.”

Drue had a past and she had different sides and I never saw the Drue who got decked out and went to country-house balls. She was a nightmare to work for, her friends observed. One story has a guest at Hobe Sound, her house in Florida, opening the kitchen door to see Drue hitting the cook over the head with a leg of lamb. In another version of the story, it’s a frozen salmon. But then she was full of tender care for her dying long-term secretary, Mrs. Moody.

When it came time to pack up Hobe Sound, she and the maid got so drunk they wrapped everything, including the knobs from the stove. Philanthropy may be a form of self-deception, but staying busy kept Drue one step ahead of depression. She really missed Jack Heinz. He died in 1987. She outlived their three children, a chain-smoking black American boy-friend of that tacturn poet. Though she was not the least bohemian, when it came to helping out others or taking up someone, she had imagination and liked to be interested. I made some close friends at her table. She said that whenever she had some of her writer friends down to Hobe Sound, her husband referred to them as “your Crazies,” and then it became a social category—“Drue’s Crazies.”

Every year at the London Library as the citation for the Hawthornden Prize was read she stood erect, like taking the salute. She traveled between her houses by car, the Lucian Freud portrait of a young burglar he decided to paint instead of turn over to the police sent ahead to wait for her on its easel. She at last let her hair go white. She could talk in a raspy, unbroken flow, like someone hard of hearing who must do all the talking, but also a little like someone who does not want to be questioned.

Years ago, before a sale of some of John Pope-Hennessey’s effects, Drue suggested that I bid in her place for a portrait of a young Jeremy Bentham, a young Jeremy Bentham, that she had given me as a birthday gift many years ago. “I gave it to you because you are a man of letters. I want it for you.” She was right.

May 10, 2018

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In 2023, Xi Jinping will conclude his second term as China’s president. Ever since Deng Xiaoping revised the country’s constitution more than thirty-five years ago, two consecutive terms have been the most that a president can legally serve. But it has become increasingly clear that Xi has no plans to retire. In March, the National People’s Congress—a rubber-stamp body with no real legislative power—approved a constitutional amendment that abolished term limits for the presidency, effectively clearing the way for Xi to hold the position indefinitely.

It was a step that caused despair among China’s downtown liberals and alarm among commentators outside China. The Washington Post published two pieces on consecutive days speculating that Xi was setting himself up to be China’s first “leader for life” since Mao Zedong died in 1976. Xi has emerged as Mao’s revenge on Deng. Deng did what Mao feared his successors would do—bring an end to permanent revolution—andXi is doing what Deng feared his successors might do: restoring one-man rule.

But the abolition of presidential term limits is actually one of the least consequential steps in Xi’s centralization of power. The presidency (or state chairmanship, in Chinese) has been a ceremonial position, superior in rank but inferior in authority to the position of premier (currently held by Li Keqiang). Articles 80 and 81 of the 1982 PRC constitution provide for a president who “promulgates statutes, appoints or removes the Premier,. . . confers State medals and titles of honor,. . . receives foreign diplomatic representatives. . . . and ratifies or abrogates treaties and important agreements concluded with foreign states.” Mao, who was party chairman—as the top party post was called at that time—until the day he died, held the presidency for only a short time after the first PRC constitution was promulgated in 1954. He soon yielded the position to a less influential official, Liu Shaoqi, in 1958. After Liu’s fall in the Cultural Revolution, the presidency lapsed, and finally had it eliminated in a new constitution in 1975.

In 1982, Deng reintroduced the post in the PRC’s fourth constitution. To help keep power struggles like those of the Mao years from recurring, he imposed a two-term limit on both the president and the vice-president. As a rising power, Deng realized, China needed a head of state who could meet as a counterpart with other heads of state. The presidency was also the most important function of the post today. Even so, secondary figures in the leadership fulfilled it until Jiang Zemin, the party leader after Tiananmen, restored Mao’s early practice of uniting the top party, military, and state offices in one person. That practice was followed by Jiang’s successor, Hu Jintao, and now by Xi, who is at once party secretary, military commission chair, and state president.

The abolition of term limits was therefore important symbolically than practically. It was Xi’s first explicit repudiation of the orderly system of succession Deng had developed. At each level of the bureaucracy, Deng set an age limit after which an official was considered too old to be promoted, thereby assuring rapid movement up the career ladder for those considered most promising and giving the country a relatively young leadership. He also instituted fixed retirement ages for party and state officials, and set a personal example by refusing to serve as head of either party or state, although he did serve for eight years as chair of the military commission. (Younger leaders nonetheless still insisted that he make the final ruling on major issues, which led to his approving the military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in the 1989 Tiananmen crisis.) The system of age-based retirements evolved into a tacit two-term limit for top party posts, which turn over every five years at a fall Party Congress. (State posts change at the National People’s Congress the following spring.) Under this informal norm, senior leaders were not eligible for reelection to the Politburo after the age of sixty-seven, and since the party secretaries serve as military commission chair, this effectively set age and term limits for that position, too.

Until now, Xi’s ascension has followed the script. In 2007–2008, at the age of fifty-four, he was appointed a Politburo Standing Committee member and vice-president, and in 2010 deputy chair of the Central Military Commission—a combination of offices signifying that he was Hu Jintao’s heir apparent. In the fall of 2012 and the following spring, at age fifty-nine, he became the top leader. Now, at the age of sixty-four, he has been elected to his second set of terms in all three of the offices he holds.

Meanwhile, Xi has been steadily consolidating control of the party and the state. He has now become more powerful than any previous Chinese leader. He is not portrayed as a god, as Mao was, only as a wise and decisive manager. His words have not yet been called magic weapons,” only directives that must be followed. But whereas Mao was constantly embroiled in power struggles, Xi benefited from the fall of his most potent rival, Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai, on the eve of taking power; used his anticorruption campaign over the following two years to clean out Bo’s network; sapped the independent authority of his premier, Li Keqiang; incorporated technocrats from other factions into his leadership group; broke up local patronage networks; and held anticorruption dockets of family members over the heads of retired senior leaders who might have tried to check him behind the scenes. Well over a million party members have reportedly been disciplined for corruption under Xi, including more than 170 at the deputy minister level and above.

On the eve of the Nineteenth Party Congress last October, the anticorruption commission detained a rising star who would otherwise have been seated in the Politburo, Sun Zhengcai, whose real crime was insufficient enthusiasm for Xi’s leadership. There is no visible dissent from Xi’s line and no one with the official standing or base of support to challenge him. And whereas Mao’s attention to policy issues was episodic—he retreated from the front lines of policymaking for long periods, then intervened disruptively when he thought they were moving in the wrong direction—Xi has a relentlessly less work ethic and has taken over day-to-day direction of every important policy.

In his recounting of PRC history, Xi has cannily smoothed out the zigzag line that connects the disastrous Great Leap, the tragic Cultural Revolution, the statist economy. Deng had allowed the country to be ruled by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao—now viewed (unfairly) as a period of stagnation—and announces the arrival of a “New Era” will create a “moderately prosperous society” by the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021, and a “modernized socialist society” by the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the PRC in 2049.

This is a tale of three modernizers. But Xi’s “dream” of “rejuvenating China” differs from those of his predecessors in his passion for order, a value shared neither by Mao, who loved chaos, nor by Deng, who liked to experiment. Xi has unpacked the contradictions between chaos and conformity and has chosen conformity; he has rejected Deng’s acceptance of the fact that human nature is unfettered and unbridled but embraced Deng’s faith that prosperity will create stability.

When Xi calls for a merger of “core socialist values and fine traditional Chinese culture,” he is imagining a utopia in which citizens fed and protected by a benevolent state automatically honor the Confucian “three bonds” of loyalty, filial piety, and respect for the elderly, and “five virtues” of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. It is an organic society in which no one has any valid reason to be dissatisfied. To bring such a society into existence, Xi’s colleagues in the security apparatus have mobilized street-corner observers, installed sur-

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Xi's vision of a new era is far from the society he rules today. After forty years of explosive growth, the Chinese are striving, dissatisfied, and anxious. They suffer from a spiritual crisis that has led to a rise in religious practice and from tension between the government and the ethnic minorities. And yet the government is widely popular among broad sectors of the population, many of which have experienced dramatic improvements in their material lives.

The anticorruption campaign in the military has taken down a reported 13,000 officers, including a hundred generals, enabling Xi to restart the top leadership with younger, more fit, and more loyal senior officers. In 2014 he launched a sweeping reorganization initiative that involved turning four formerly independent operational headquarters into departments within the Central Military Commission, demoting the command of the historically dominant land forces to the same level as those of the navy and air forces, adding an additional service command, reorganizing the seven military regions into five theater commands, and demobilizing 300,000 soldiers.

The agents are accountable not downward to their constituents or horizontally to legal institutions, but upward, to their superiors. The system pushes problems to the top, until they reach someone who is willing to take responsibility. Xi has emerged to shoulder this burden, and he has the personality to do so. That is why many in the party have welcomed the new propaganda chief, Huang Qishan, who works through “disciplined and deployable political agents.” The agents are accountable not to the state, but vertically, to the party's new propaganda chief, Huang Qishan, who works through “disciplined and deployable political agents.”

Xi both repeats an earlier slogan that “the market will play the decisive role in resource allocation” and signals that the state will keep guiding the economy. The state will continue to allocate resources, while the market will determine prices. The state will remain the “most important item” that Chairman Xi has determined, and doing all the work that Chairman Xi has put in charge of, and in all their actions obeying Chairman Xi's commands.

Promotion within the hierarchy of the People's Congress also serves as a major source of advancement within the state apparatus and consolidated and consolidated government agencies up and down the line. Lines of authority between levels of government are being simplified.

Sending supervision commission teams to inspect compliance will “combat various efforts to slow walk and weaken and dilute the party's leadership.” Xi has emphasized an earlier slogan that “the market will play the decisive role in resource allocation” and signals that the state will keep guiding the economy. The state will remain the “most important item” that Chairman Xi has determined, and doing all the work that Chairman Xi has put in charge of, and in all their actions obeying Chairman Xi's commands.

The antigovernment demonstrations in Tibet and Xinjiang have emerged to shoulder this burden, and he has the personality to do so. That is why many in the party have welcomed the new propaganda chief, Huang Qishan, who works through “disciplined and deployable political agents.”

Oliver besdaze (see figure 1) and Lisa Fitton (2018) - 3
The Loved One

Christopher Benfey

Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Uncompleted Writings

by Herman Melville—edited by Harrison Hayford, Alna A. MacDougall, Robert A. Sandberg, and G. Thomas Tanselle, with a historical note by Hershel Parker.

Northwestern University Press/ Newberry Library.

998 pp., $115.00; $45.00 (paper)

When Herman Melville died at seventy-two, in September 1891, he had been out of public view for so long that The New York Times identified him as Henry Melville. An obituary writer expressed surprise that the author best known for Typee—his first novel, set in the South Seas, notorious for its Gauguin-like sexual exploits with native women—had not died much earlier. Melville had outlived his two sons: one killed himself with a gunshot to the head, the other survived shipwreck and other mishaps to die, a feckless wanderer, of tuberculosis.

Melville had outlived his reputation as well. After the hostile reception of Moby-Dick (1851) and his gothic romance Pierre (1852), he spent nearly twenty years of his remaining life—years in which he seemed, in his ragginess, increasingly unhinged to the outside world, for nearly thirty years. As Melville, wrote to her mother of this embarrassing development, “for you need not tell anyone,” his wife, Elizabeth Melville, would not be surprised if the author died young. Melville outlived his two sons: one killed himself with a gunshot to the head, the other survived shipwreck and other mishaps to die, a feckless wanderer, of tuberculosis.

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The bare plot of Billy Budd is simple enough. A handsome young sailor named Billy Budd is serving aboard the British merchant ship the Rights-of-Man when he is forcibly drafted, or “impressed,” into the British navy. As Melville writes, with accelerating alarm: “Plump upon Billy at first sight in the gangway the boarding officer—Lieutenant Ratcliff pronounced. ‘The year is 1797,’ ‘in the time before steamships.’ Amid British unease about the advance of Napoleon’s armies, there is escalating paranoia about mutinous seamen, all of whom are liable to be impressed into the British navy, as they are “of such an assortment of tribes and complexes as would have fitted them to be marched up…before the bar of the First French Assembly as Representatives of the Human Race.”

The sinister master-at-arms on the British warship Bellipotent, John Claggart, takes an immediate dislike to Billy, and soon accuses him of fomenting mutiny. His superior, Captain Vere, is skeptical, and brings the accuser face to face with the accused, unaware that Billy Budd was serving aboard the Rights-of-Man when he was “impressed” into the British navy. As Melville writes, with accelerating alarm: “Plump upon Billy at first sight in the gangway the boarding officer—Lieutenant Ratcliff pronounced. ‘The year is 1797,’ ‘in the time before steamships.’ Amid British unease about the advance of Napoleon’s armies, there is escalating paranoia about mutinous seamen, all of whom are liable to be impressed into the British navy, as they are “of such an assortment of tribes and complexes as would have fitted them to be marched up…before the bar of the First French Assembly as Representatives of the Human Race.”

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Melville surrounds all three of his principal characters with an air of mystery. Socially, Billy Budd and John Claggart come “from nowhere,” as Ar- endt noted. Asked who his father was, Billy responds, in one of his charac-
teristically artless answers that seem to carry a further shade of meaning, “God knows, Sir.” As a boy he was “found in a pretty silk- lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man’s door in Bristol.” As for Captain Vere, bith the “true” meaning of the decades in which debate over inside views of his puzzling characters, would fain shade it off into the historical of such character that national America the Great Mutiny was disguised or expunged from the which, as Melville notes, disturb- oposed to “official” accounts in Billy Budd seems to invite multiple inter-
a remarks: “Yes, X—— is a nut a lady’s fan.” “Starry Vere” by a relative, has twice have “a touch of soft hint of an accent and may, among other of a good man’s door in Bristol.” The excess of commentary.” The truth is that Billy Budd, in large measure, is its commentary. Often the narrator seems to have un-
impeded access to the hidden thoughts of characters, offering inside views, for example, of Vere’s attempts to deci-
phre precisely what Claggart is up to. But then, abruptly, we are closed out of the proceedings just when we are most eager for a view, as when Vere has his final conversation with Billy Budd of-
stage, before the execution is carried out. If we expect any guidance from the narrator in making sense of Vere’s rash, perhaps “unhunged” decision to bring Billy Bud to trial immediately and carry out the sentence without delay, we are disappointed: “Whether Cap-
tain Vere . . . was really the sudden vic-
t QVariant is incoherent, decisions spring. Of all these men it may be said, according to one of the narrator’s stray remarks: “Yes, X — is it not to be cracked by the tap of a lady’s fan.”

Melville calls his tale an inside narrative, a phrase that, like so much else in the story, seems to invite multiple inter-
pretations. Does he mean that he is revealing the inner work-
ings of a warship in wartime? Is Billy Bud an inside narrative as opposed to “official” accounts in which, as Melville notes, disturb-
ing events such as mutinies are dis- guised or expunged from the historical record? “Like some other events in every age baff-
ling together everywhere in the America the Great Mutiny was of such character that national pride along with views of policy would fan shade it off into the historical background.” Or is Melville seeking inside views of his puzzling characters, details of temperament or biography that might explain why they behave as they do?

Complicating any attempt to arrive at the “true” meaning of Billy Budd is the deliberately open-ended and equivoc-
cal manner in which the story is told. Too little attention has been given, over the decades in which debate over Billy Budd has raged, to the deliberately the fourth of the crucial characters in the narrative—who “speaks alt-
trately,” as Roger Shattuck once noted, “as a boy, as a man” (but not without the wordless and a singularly obtuse and tendentious commentator on the events.” Much of the fan of the novel—and for such grim material the book has an almost effervescent slyness of verbal—comes from the garrulous narra-
tor. Critics of a Flaubertian or James-
tian bent, mistakenly equating them with Melville, have complained, as Edmund Wilson did, of the tale’s “clottedly dense” prose, or of what Newton Arvin called “the torpidity of the movement, the curtalt not to think of the endless wars inspired by the din and dust of the fallen World Trade Center towers.

Yet another interpretive clue might be drawn from the fact that the play’s ori-
gins in poetry, as a headnote to a poem titled “Billy in the Darbies.” In the original poem, Billy in handcuffs (or darbies) confronts his fate: “Upon Appleton House,” quoted in the tale:

This ‘tis to have been from the first In a domestic heaven nursed, Under the discipline severe Of Fairfax and the starry Vere.

Melville wants the words “discipline severe,” applied in the poem to a girl laying out her garden, to remain in the readers’ memory, the severity of Billy’s sentence is weighed. Vere’s mind, we are told, is incapable of nu-
ance, resembling “a migratory l owl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier.” Vere’s “starriness,” asso-
icted with wide reading but narrow pedantry, exhibits “nothing of that liter-
ary taste which less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle”—in other words, a taste for poetry. And if Billy, the Handsome Sailor of a “less prosaic time,” speaks for poetry—speaks, in this final section of Billy Budd, in po-
etry—prosaic Vere speaks for prose. Melville, the prose-writer turned poet, leaves little doubt where his own sym-
pathies lie.

There is, in the end, something lin-
geringly poetic about the whole strange tale of the survival of Billy Budd. Lov-
ingly preserved in a breadcrumb, its pages tied with ribbon, the story to the fore: the targeting of Americans; factory strikes. The tale offers support for all of these readings, including the inter-
esting suggestion, based on archival research, that Melville may have con-
sidered making Billy Budd a police prose.

(First the “Handsomer Sailor” we meet in the book, in the opening paragraph, is a “native African” of “symmetric figure” much admired by his mates.) Recent research draws other aspects of the story to the fore: the targeting of “aliens,” government surveillance, the Patriot Act; accusations of fake news; extrajudicial executions; the Blackl-
ization of society. When Melville al-
lude to “those wars which like a flight of harpies rose shreiking from the din and dust of the fallen Bastille,” it is diffi-

The immediate future of Italian politics is now in the hands of a famous comedian whose party might form an alliance with a far-right party that once advocated the secession of the northern regions of Italy. Both parties share an antagonistic attitude toward the European Union. How did all this come to pass?

In the early 1990s Italy’s GDP equaled or even surpassed that of Great Britain, making it the world’s fifth-largest economy. This was all the more remarkable given that the cold war had frozen Italian politics; the presence of the largest Communist Party in Western Europe had prevented the normal alternation of left and right governments. This led to virtual one-party rule by the Christian Democrats, a deeply entrenched patronage system, and widespread corruption. However, the European Union’s standardization of currency and a nationwide investigation into political corruption were expected to rein in government profligacy and waste, strengthen democracy, and encourage economic prosperity.

This did not happen. Today, Italy’s GDP is 36 percent smaller than the UK’s—the result of twenty-five years of economic stagnation. Despite a slight recovery in the past two years, Italy’s GDP—and the average Italian family’s purchasing power—is still more than 10 percent smaller than it was before the recession of 2008–2009. Unemployment is over 11 percent and about 33 percent for people under twenty-five. The immediate future of Italian politics is over 11 percent and about 33 percent smaller than it was before the recession of 2008–2009.

The origins of the Five Star Movement can be dated to April 2004, when Beppe Grillo reached out to a Milanese Web guru named Gianroberto Casaleggio who had no idea what a blog was, hesitated, especially when he heard that it would cost €130,000. But Casaleggio offered to set it up for free if his company could recover its costs by using the site to sell Grillo paraphernalia like T-shirts and DVDs.

Casaleggio had worked as an executive at Italy’s largest telecommunications company and had his own Internet marketing firm (Casaleggio Associates). Part hippie, part high-tech anarchist-libertarian, he had glasses and a mane of frizzy hair, but he was also a tough corporate manager with a low tolerance for error. Casaleggio and Grillo regarded traditional politics and international economic inequality with disgust. Instead they had faith in the Internet, which in their 2011 book Siamo in Guerra: Per una nuova politica they celebrated for its “Franciscan, anti-capitalist” potential. At the same time, Casaleggio had a dark, apocalyptic side. In one of his videos he predicted that a world government of direct Web democracy would eventually triumph after a brutal nuclear war reduced the world’s population to an eighth of its present size.

In a shockingly short time, www.beppegrillo.com became not just the most read blog in Italy but one of the biggest and most influential in the world. The few Italian politicians who already had websites did not use their interactive features or encourage visitors to leave responses. Grillo—and Casaleggio, who frequently ghostwrote for him—posted a new item every day, often provoking hundreds or thousands of comments. They discussed political corruption, the excessive power of banks and multinational corporations, the garbage crisis, and the danger of public utilities becoming privates.

For Italy’s especially younger ones who felt ignored by Italy’s main political parties, the blog became a channel for growing political frustration. Casaleggio had studied the insurgent presidential campaign of Howard Dean in 2004 and online political groups such as Moveon.org. From them he borrowed the idea of organizing “where readers of the Grillo blog (‘friends of Beppe Grillo’) could discuss issues in person. Grillo himself occasionally joined these meetings during his frequent stand-up tours. Readers’ comments about local scandals and stories gave Grillo fresh material for jokes he included in his performances. Readers and spectators felt they were actively collaborating with him on a great project.

Grillo developed his style of satirical comedy on Italian TV during the 1970s and 1980s. He became infamous for a joke he made on air in November 1986, when the Italian Socialist Party was at the height of its power and already notorious for its corruption. The Socialist prime minister Bettino Craxi was then on a state visit to China. Grillo imagined an aide turning to Craxi and asking: “If they are all socialists here, do they steal from?” The joke got Grillo kicked off RAI, the Italian state TV channel, which was, and still is, under direct government control.

Banishment from RAI has destroyed the careers of many performers, but it turned Grillo into a political martyr. Seemingly unfazed, he started touring Italy relentlessly. His comedy routines became increasingly like political monologues: long harangues about the evils of multinational companies, the waste and stupidity of contemporary life, the undemocratic nature of the European Union, the greed and moral turpitude of the country’s politicians. His brand of humor—heavy sarcasm, indignant explosions of rage during which he might read the ingredients of a popular mouthwash or smash a computer on stage—is difficult for a non-Italian to understand. (I confess that I have watched hours of Grillo performances and managed only a few chuckles.)

As Oliver James points out in his small short volume Coccio e Politico, Grillo speaks to the “stomach” of ordinary Italians. With the heaviest build of someone who enjoys his pasta, a scarlet beard, and a broad, vulgar sense of humor, he looks and talks like an Italian Everyman. He is also shrewd and cynical. His laments about the ills and absurdities of Italian life and the
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dark forces of international capitalism sound like more sophisticated versions of the tirades you might hear from someone holding forth at your local Italian bar.

Italy’s tradition of political satire dates back to a time when criticizing power directly was illegal and dangerous. In papal Rome, ordinary citizens pinned poems with bitter and vulgar humor about abuses of power to the statue in Piazza di Pasquino. Ponte di Pino compares Grillo to the clowns in the Italian commedia dell’arte, who insinuated common adversaries in order to make their audience laugh. The critic Marco Belpietro has written that Grillo reminds him of the stock character Pulcinella, “whose comedy, based on derision and put-downs of the adversary, was the best weapon in winning the sympathy and laughter of the public.”

In some of his theatrical shows, Grillo mixed scientific fact with crackpot theories. For a time, they were filled with tedious rants about how vaccines were nothing more than a mechanism to sell people useless drugs. Grillo pushed a supposedly miraculous cure for cancer that was found to be useless, and he claimed that HIV was invented by pharmaceutical companies. But he also raised valid concerns that the mainstream press ignored, denouncing, for instance, the shoddy practices of the national dairy company Parmalat before it failed.

The chief prosecutor of Naples once asked Grillo how he had found out that the national phone company was illegally profiting from the use of erotic and astrological chat lines—a fact he had discussed on television. Grillo responded that it was mentioned in the financial disclosure forms the company made to stockholders, which evidently few people bothered to read. “With his mocking invective, Grillo denounced realities before both the press and the magistrature, not to mention the political world,” Ponte di Pino writes.

In 2007, the Grillo blog took a decisive turn toward becoming a political opposition movement. By then it had become clear that the nationwide investigation into political corruption of the early 1990s had failed to deter further violations. Since he entered politics in 1994, Silvio Berlusconi had filled parliament with business cronies who hoped to avoid prison by gaining parliamentary immunity.

Grillo called for a national day of protest in September 2007 called “V-Day,” short for vaffanculo (slang for “fuck you” or “up yours”), the culmination of a “clean parliament” campaign he had begun two years earlier. It was part political demonstration, part happening, part theatrical performance. Grillo assembled a huge crowd in Bologna’s central square, which was live-streamed onto video screens set up in piazzas in 220 other cities and towns across Italy, and led a unified chant of vaffanculo! to Italy’s political parties.

V-Day combined anger and vigilance with perfectly sensible and even modest political demands: that no one should stand for parliament who had been convicted of a crime or indicted; that members of parliament should be limited to two terms; and that voters should be able to choose individual representatives for parliament rather than voting for a list composed of party leaders. Although the mainstream press—especially television—hardly covered the event, at least two million people showed up. It was one of the biggest public demonstrations in Italy in decades controlled by Davide Casaleggio, Gianroberto’s son, and that it operates out of the offices of Casaleggio Associates. The new group (which was initially opaque by design) was younger, more insubordinate than the old one and leaves the unelected Davide Casaleggio in a position of significant power.

The FSM is built on an ethos of egalitarian direct democracy. The group’s website is “everyone is worth one”—but its online discussions and voting results tend to be shaped by a small number of influential figures. Of the 10.7 million people who voted for the FSM at the ballot box, only about 140,000 (1.3 percent) are registered with the website. Unlike other parties, FSM holds internal primary elections to pick parliamentary nominees, but the number of people who vote in them is often laughably small. One candidate for parliament who was picked in this way was denied FSM’s choice for prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, received a mere 490 votes in his online primary for the 2018 election. Participation in online deliberations has declined steadily from 2012 to 2017, falling from an average of 36,000 to 19,000 participants. Because the movement has grown considerably in that time, the decline in the rate of participation is even more drastic: from 68 percent of eligible members in 2012 to a mere 13 percent in 2017.

In their book Supernova: Com’è stato ucciso il Movimento 5 Stelle, Marco Canestrari and Nicola Biondo, two disillusioned FSM insiders, recount a disturbing episode in which Casaleggio, annoyed at the generally sympathetic attitude on the blog toward clandestine immigration, published a post warning his supporters that Roma would soon be seen as a city that values their way of life when that post was thought up,” Canestrari writes. “It was a deliberate provocation with a precise aim: ‘We need to free the Blog of all those left-wingers who are starting to butt our balls. We need to clean house.’”

In 2013, when members of the Five Star Movement in the Senate proposed de-criminalization of immigration, Grillo and Casaleggio spoke out against the proposal on the movement’s blog. The matter was then put to a vote online. Surprisingly, a majority went against the founders, but the FSM’s members abstained from a vote in the Italian parliament that would have granted citizenship to children whose parents had immigrated but who had themselves been born on Italian soil and to children who had gone to school in Italy and had at least one parent with a legal work permit. As a result of the FSM’s abstention, the measure failed.

The current leader of the FSM is the baby-faced, thirty-one-year-old Luigi Di Maio, one of Grillo’s early supporters. But Grillo himself remains the “guarantor” of the movement’s overall direction. He retains ownership of the 5Star copyright, which he has used in recent years to communique political opponents by denying them the right to use the movement’s name or symbol. When the FSM activists or elected officials have criticized
Grillo or seemed to violate the party’s core tenets, they have been banished. The popular FSM mayor of Parma, for instance, was expelled after he came under investigation. When some newly elected members of parliament spoke out in favor of negotiating with the Democratic Party in 2013 and 2014, they were expelled.

“[in order to maintain unanimity within the movement the FSM] took a ferocious campaign of expulsion, with banned members pilloried online and subject to minidigital votes that were hardly democratic,” Ponte di Pino wrote last September in the online magazine Doppiozero. More than a quarter of FSM’s representatives across both houses of parliament were expelled between February 2013 and January 2015. “The harsh treatment of dissent guarantees unanimity without weakening the movement,” Ponte di Pino observed. “In fact, it appears to strengthen it.”

Grillo and the movement’s other leadersKirill these heavy-handed tactics by insisting that they were necessary for maintaining the FSM’s integrity. In the movement’s conception of democracy, representatives are elected not to make decisions autonomously but to execute the popular will. Grillo barred FSM politicians from appearing on talk shows (several were expelled for disobeving) and forced them to give a third of their salary to the party’s micro-credit fund for small businesses. During the 2018 election campaign, it turned out that eight candidates for parliament had cheated the system by falsely claiming to have returned a third of their salary. They were expelled immediately. The movement and immediately offered a place in the party of Berlusconi, who has never had a problem with people getting rich from public office. (They refused the offer.)

According to Canestrati and Biondo, the party’s strict rules for its members slackened in the last few years when a new ruling elite emerged within the FSM and started applying its guidelines more selectively. After banning several dissidents, the movement relaxed its rule on talk-show appearances and offered media training courses to a select number of parliamentarians who chose to represent the party on TV. Deputies who have personal relationships with Grillo (or who were close to Casalegno) enjoyed special treatment and were more leniently treated. If the FSM assumed power, Canestrati and Biondo maintain, its policy came to resemble that of the regime in George Orwell’s Animal Farm. “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.”

The FSM has brought about some changes to the makeup of parliament in a country that has been described as a gerontocracy—one where powerful positions in business, government, and academia tend to be held almost exclusively by older men. The arrival of the FSM in the Italian parliament brought the average age from fifty-four to forty-five. It has also increased the number of deputies with a university degree and the percentage of female deputies.

Some of the FSM’s internal contradictions are the natural result of a protest movement trying to turn itself into an effective political party. There is a certain tension between Grillo and Di Maio, who campaigned hard to con-
Pictures of the Jazz Age
Regina Marler

Berenice Abbott: A Life in Photography by Julia Van Haaften. Norton, 634 pp., $45.00

Paris Portraits: 1925–1930 by Berenice Abbott, edited by Ron Kurtz and Hank O’Neal. Steidl/Commerce Graphics, 368 pp., $70.00

The Unknown Berenice Abbott edited by Ron Kurtz and Hank O’Neal. Steidl/Commerce Graphics, five volumes, 1,231 pp., $550.00

The celebrated photographer Berenice Abbott, who began her career as Man Ray’s darkroom assistant in Paris from 1923 to 1926 and shot her first portraits on his studio balcony, does not appear in his four-hundred-page autobiography, Self-Portrait (1963). This omission was “rather dirty,” Abbott felt, even “brute,” and seemed to show that Man Ray was still miffed at her early success, as Julia Van Haaften recounts in her comprehensive new biography, Berenice Abbott: A Life in Photography. Abbott and Man Ray had been good friends for years, meeting soon after her arrival in New York from Ohio as a journalism student in 1918; they were so close in New York, in fact, that Man Ray had asked if she would do him the favor of being named as co-resident in his divorce case.

She had starved in New York and was starving in Paris when Man Ray hired her for his darkroom. It was Abbott’s idea. He had complained about his latest “know-it-all” studio assistant, and Abbott jumped in: “What about me? I don’t know a thing.” Her rapid learning surprised them both. “I liked photography. Photography liked me,” she recalled. Eventually Man Ray suggested that she take some portraits with his camera during lunch and after work. “It was his way of giving her a raise at no cost to him,” writes Van Haaften. Abbott always insisted that Man Ray “had never shown her how to take a picture: ‘Never once. Not with lighting or anything else. In fact, I didn’t want him to show me. Somehow, this was a new adventure…something I was doing.’”

Starting with her friends, a glittering roster of Jazz Age Paris sat for Abbott, including Sylvia Beach, Jean Cocteau, Djuna Barnes and her lover Thelma Wood (Abbott’s ex), André Gide, Buddy Gilmore, Max Ernst, Marie Laurencin, and Janet Flanner. Abbott agreed to charge the same amount as her employer and to reimburse him for supplies. Their arrangement went smoothly until Peggy Guggenheim asked that Abbott, rather than Man Ray, take her portrait. And thus a star was born—or at least forced to set up shop independently in a different part of town.

It must have vexed her former employer that another of Abbott’s early portrait commissions was James Joyce, in his post-surgical eyepatch, a sitting at his apartment that he would further immortalize in Finnegans Wake: “Talk about lowness! Any dog’s quantity of it visibly oozed out thickly from this dirty little blackening beetle for the very fourth

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Berenice Abbott at her studio on the rue Servandoni, Paris, 1928

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Berenice Abbott at her studio on the rue Servandoni, Paris, 1928
that he’d entered in 1921 into the an-
nual photography competition spon-
sored by Wanamaker’s department store. There is no practical reason why the young woman, poet, and artistically directionless, could not have become a fine model. Since abandoning her journalism program at Ohio State and arriving in New York, she had been drawn into the center of the Green-
wich Village art community—her first room, on MacDougal Street, was next door to the Provincetown Players—but could not get her footings financially or artistically. Was she a journalist? An actress? A sculptor?

Though she drank with the Mil-
lay sisters (and with nearly everyone else), shared an apartment at 86 Greenwich Avenue with Malcolm Cowley, Djuna Barnes, and others, and stumbled into a half-hearted dalliance with Kenneth Burke, Abbott’s closest friend and roommate in the Village was the legend-
ary Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who also modeled for quick money. A Dadaist poet and performance artist, the baroness has been recently revived as the possible originator of the idea to submit a urinal entitled Foun-
tain by Marcel Duch-
amp to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917. Some of Abbott’s other modeling photos survive; they are unre-
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New York, Murat had paid Abbott’s passage back to France so that Abbott could set up a transcontinental photo-
graphic enterprise but then “dumped” her and withdrew financial support.) Abbott did not make this loss explicit in her comment on the portrait she made of Murat:

This is a strong woman; a strong portrait taken in New York in 1930. I had met her briefly in Paris, she was the granddaughter of Napoleon III, but I got to know her better in New York. She was responsible for introducing me to Harlem and the dancing at the Savoy. She was simply smoking a cigarette when I took this;

A 1929 trip back to New York up-
pered her career in Paris: “When I saw New York again, and stood in the dirty slush, I felt that here was the thing I had been working toward, that there was a change in me.” In the midst of an economic boom, the city was transforming itself. Abbott began a photographic exploration of New York that was them-
tatically—with an increasing sense of urgency. Sometimes she would iden-
tify an old building of interest, only to find it razed when she returned to
her camera. Her initial sharply angled, modernist shots gave way to a straight-
forward, realist documentary style as she upgraded to a larger-format 8x10-
inch view camera that “allowed me to correct distortions of perspective.” At this time, Abbott’s aesth-
thetic shifted away from the more consciously “artistic” architectural photography of her peers, such as Margaret Bourke-White, whom she knew slightly. Abbott’s clean lines and her responsiveness to the city’s dynamism later attracted the influential critic Hilton Kramer: “Many of Miss Abbott’s finest pictures of old New York de-
rive from this perspective of an impeding and impersonal change threatening to sweep ev-
erything before it.”

“Trading her smaller cameras’ speed and flexibility for the large format’s greater detail and control had forced a change in my Bere-
nice’s street photography practice, from nimble anonymity to awkward conspicuousness.” Van Haaf-
ten notes.

The whole proce-
dure—erecting the tripod, deploy-
ing the camera, assembling plates for exposures, ducking her head in and out from under the huge black focusing drape—proved too help but attract passersby. The first time she tried, she packed up and left. “But I knew I had to do it and I made myself come back.”

With this larger camera, Abbott cap-
tured some of her most acclaimed im-
gages, like New York at Night (1932) and her dizzying view from above of the fifty-six-story Chanin Building (circa 1929). To nail this shot, Abbott had the building guard hold on to her while she leaned perilously out, trying to help but attract passersby. The first time she tried, she packed up and left. “But I knew I had to do it and I made myself come back.”

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there was another negative but it has been lost. I should have taken more of her. She was a good sub-
ject and I don’t know why I didn’t, except that I rarely went back to photograph the same people again.

Among the French artists Abbott discovered in Paris, she developed a special regard for the street photogra-
pher Eugène Atget. Man Ray shared her interest, although it was Abbott who convinced Atget to pose for her in the spring of 1927. His sudden death that August shocked her. She wrote at one to his executor to see if his stu-
dent contents had been preserved. Not long after, she borrowed 10,000 francs (about $10,000 at the time) from her then girlfriend, Julie Reiner, to buy the entire archive. Although motivated by a “near-daughterly attachment to Atget,” Van Haaf-
ten writes, Abbott also assumed she could turn a quick profit by selling his prints in America. Instead, she saddled herself with the task of re-
building the Atget archive for decades, tirelessly hawking his original prints and re-
prints, supervising his exhibitions, and pursuing one failed project after an-
other. Her association with him often overshadowed her own creative work and reputation, particularly in light of her documentary focus on New York City in the 1930s.

May 10, 2018

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never spoke publically about her sexuality, and while proudly feminist, showed no interest in the emerging gay rights movement. She had been slow to accept her own feelings for women, or any sexual feelings at all, and had battled with internalized homophobia before coming to terms with her sexual identity in the arms of Thelma Wood, Tylia Perlmutter, and other women. (Perlmutter once pretended to caution a young friend against lesbians, urging her to “avoid being alone in a car with one: ‘If she gets her leg on your lap, you’re done for.’”) 

An engaging recent memoir of lesbian bohemians in Paris, Renate Stendhal’s Kiss Me Again, Paris (IFSF, 2017), takes the story through the 1970s. Stendhal was the artist Meret Oppenheim’s assistant. Classical works in the field include Andrea Weiss’s Paris Was a Woman (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) and her 1996 film of the same name, and Shari Benstock’s Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900–1940 (University of Texas Press, 1986). See also much of Terry Castle’s work, including her priceless London Review of Books review of Diana Souhami’s Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho, and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks (St. Martin’s, 2004).

When Eastman left the relative freedoms of Paris for 1930s New York, she adopted the habitual secrecy of lesbians of her generation who hoped for professional or social acceptance, or to stay out of jail.4 In her wild Parisian youth, Eastman was in fact carted off with Gwen La Gallienne in a police raid on a gay-friendly dance hall, but she more often attracted police attention for public drunkenness. When she did form a lasting partnership with the art critic Elizabeth McCausland, they enjoyed an active but discreet gay social life in their across-the-hall studio apartments at 50 Commerce Street. McCausland served as Eastman’s secretary, collaborator, sparring partner, and booster for thirty years among other restrictions in the pre-Stonewall years, the State Liquor Authority prohibited homosexuals from congregating in New York bars until 1966. Police raids and entrapment were rife. Sodomy remained a crime in New York until 1980.

3

A number of the pieces performed in the early compositions of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Eastman was among the first minimalists to dispense with the movement’s ascetic preoccupation with “process” in favor of expressive fire-breathing. They are like three balls that you toss between, if there were no loves to replace them.”

5

Two more archival recordings have recently surfaced: Feminine, an extended, experimental work from 1974 for chamber ensemble and a motorized sleigh bell; and The Zürich Concert, an improvised piano recital from 1980. Last winter in New York City, the Kitchen, where Eastman often performed, held a three-week retrospective that attracted an audience of a kind seldom seen at classical music concerts: young, stylish, and racially mixed. The performance of Eastman’s late, gothic pieces for four pianos felt like a séance: hundreds of young hipsters sat on the floor, listening in rapt silence as the room was filled with a somber wash of overtones.

A number of the pieces performed were based on gigue music by composers who had reconstructed Eastman’s fragmentary scores. Eastman, who never had a publisher in his lifetime, fleshed out the details of his pieces in rehearsals, and his surviving scores (he composed roughly fifty-eight works) are more like jazz charts than classically notated compositions. Only through a comparison with recordings (such as they are, and the intentions) he fully concerned. As Matthew Mendez observes in Gay Guerrilla, a volume of essays on Eastman’s work, “the Eastman situation is rather more akin to what early

Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music edited by Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach. University of Rochester Press, 244 pp., $34.95

Unjust Malaise an album by Julius Eastman. New World Records, $47.97 (three CDs)

The Zürich Concert an album by Julius Eastman. New World Records, $15.99

Feminine an album by Julius Eastman. Frozen Reeds, $18.00

On a cold winter day in 1989, Julius Eastman huddled in a group of homeless men outside Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, warming his hands by an oil-drum fire, when a reporter from Newday approached him. The day before, a young female doctor, five months pregnant, had been raped and murdered inside the hospital. Eastman, who said he played piano at the men’s shelter across the street, surprised the reporter by speaking about the case “with greater intelligence than anyone in a Giorgio Armani suit.” The reporter wondered “how such an articulate fellow wound up warming his piano player’s fingers over a street fire, waiting for the shelter to open.” “That’s too long of a story,” Eastman replied. “I’m 48. I’ll get it back together.”

He never did. A year later, Eastman died of heart failure in a hospital in Buffalo, where he’d first made a name for himself as a composer. Kyle Gann published a moving obituary eight months later in The Village Voice, but his passing was otherwise unremarked. A prominent figure on the experimental music scene throughout the 1970s, he ended his life an invisible man, his name all but erased from musical history, as if this short, dazzling career and his fiercely original art had been a collective hallucination. Eastman’s disappearance was no small achievement, for it was hard to imagine a more visible figure: his aim was not merely to make himself heard but to make himself seen. A pianist, singer, and composer, Eastman was both black and gay, and proclaimed his identities in brazenly titled compositions such as Crazy Nigger, Gay Guerrilla, and Nigger Faggot. “What I am trying to achieve,” he said, “is to be what I am to the fullest: Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest.”

Wiry and graceful, with some of the only dreadlocks to be found in the very white world of new music, he commanded attention by his presence alone, but he was also a musician of diabolical diabolism, qualities that prefigured the “post-minimalist” work of composers like John Adams. Playing his music, he felt “as if I am trying to see myself—it’s like diving into the earth.”

By the early 1980s, Eastman was smoking crack and sleeping in Tompkins Square Park. When he showed up at concerts, it was to ask his friends for loans. He lost nearly all his scores, and appeared to show as little concern for his musical legacy as he did for his health. Wandering the streets in flowing garments and a turban, he looked like another sad-eyed prophet of the Lower East Side. He told his friend Ned Sublette, a composer and author, that the music he had made reflected an “inconsistent period,” best forgotten, and it nearly was. When Eastman died, only a few recordings of his powerful singing were available, and none of his compositions.

As it turned out, there were Eastman recordings, some stored in university libraries, others hidden away in private collections. The composer Mary Jane Leach, an Eastman acquaintance and fan, spent a decade tracking them down. In 2005, their revelatory compilation, Unjust Malaise. (The title is an anagram of his name, created by the composer David Borden.) Thanks in large part to Leach’s archival work, Eastman is now lionized in the art world and academia as a visionary practitioner of “intersectionality,” a queer black saint like James Baldwin.

Two more archival recordings have recently surfaced: Feminine, an extended, incantatory work from 1974 for four pianos, and a motorized sleigh bell; and The Zürich Concert, an improvised piano recital from 1980. Last winter in New York City, the Kitchen, where Eastman often performed, held a three-week retrospective that attracted an audience of a kind seldom seen at classical music concerts: young, stylish, and racially mixed. The performance of Eastman’s late, gothic pieces for four pianos felt like a séance: hundreds of young hipsters sat on the floor, listening in rapt silence as the room was filled with a somber wash of overtones.

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music scholars regularly face than to any twentieth-century precursors." This difficulty has not discouraged the music publisher G. Schirmer, which just signed a deal with the Eastman family estate. Eastman, who rebelled against every kind of convention, is entering the classical music repertoire he dreaded most.

He was born Julius Dunbar Eastman Jr. in 1940 in New York City, but soon moved to Ithaca, where his mother, Frances Eastman, a strong-willed woman of Trinidadian descent who worked as a clerk in a hospital, raised him and his younger brother, Gerry, in a largely black neighborhood. A "strange and wonderful" (his mother's words) and a musical prodigy, he became a paid chorister at an Episcopal church and took piano lessons with Seymour Lipkin, Lippin's assistant conductor. After a year at Ithaca College, he transferred to the Curtis Institute of Music; he studied piano and composition as well as choreography. (A baritone of tremendous range and lacerating yet possessed intensity, Eastman never actually studied voice.) His goal at Curtis, where he was one of only two black students in a class of a hundred, was to "obtain wisdom," but he hated the school, and said that if he had to "live there another year I shall die a morbid death." Still the Curtis training never left Eastman, who often complained of the lack of rigor in the New York downtown scene.

In 1969, Eastman joined the Creative Associates, a pioneering new music collective at the State University at Buffalo, and the inauguration of its director, the composer and conductor Lukas Foss. "There was something quietly grave about Julius," Renee Levine, Packer's mother, who worked as a coordinator for the Creative Associates, told me. "He was very elegant, and he moved beautifully."

In his early compositions, Eastman gave free rein to his exuberant, theatrical, often mischievous imagination, and demonstrated a flair for creating captivating music on the basis of the sparsest of directions. The "score" of his 1972 vocal quartet, Macle, was a diagram of lines, shapes, and instructions (make "very nasty sounds," for example) penciled on four boxes, one for each singer, in the manner of one of John Cage's chance pieces. The conversation that ensues is a half-hour suite of gargling sounds, hissers, hiccups, whispers, and occasional singing (sing "your favorite pop tune" is another instruction). The only connective thread is the mantra "take heart," yet the work holds together, like one of Beckett's late plays.

Eastman's breakthrough came a year later, with Stay On It, a twenty-four-minute composition for voice, piano, mallet percussion, two saxophones, clarinet, and violin. It opens with a staccato pop riff, over which a woman sings the title. Halfway through, the rhythmic order breaks down in a riotous free-jazz medley. A slinky, bittersweet melody takes shape, first tentatively, then with growing force, only to give way to languorous piano chords, accompanied by subtle accents on the tambourine. Stay On It is a work of such contumacious charm that one could easily overlook its idiosyncrasy. While it draws on the repetitive grooves of minimalism, its feeling for time is much looser. Eastman preferred to speak of "the beat" rather than "the pulse," the term favored by minimalist composers, and looked upon their borrowings from non-Western rhythms with bemusement; he wrote a parody of a composer, clearly based on Reich, who visits an African village and writes down "the various rhythms and melodies, unknown to the natives." Rather than up for class, and turned down an offer from Pierre Boulez to perform Eight Songs for a Mad King with the New York Philharmonic, since he hated to repeat himself and was unmoved by financial considerations. ("Look, I like money," he said, "it's a nice invention, but it doesn't turn me on enough for me to do something just for that.") As one of the few blacks in Buffalo new music, he also felt like "a kind of talented freak who occasionally injected some vitality into the programming."

His alienation intensified after the 1971 Attica Rebellion, which took place only thirty miles from Buffalo. Eastman performed as the narrator of Frederic Rzewski's powerful At- tica hommage, Coming Together, a work of left-wing minimalism that would strongly influence Eastman's later writing and composing. Eastman's score for Gay Guerilla, 1979

In Eastman's, which was often discussed in leather and chains, embraced the freedoms of post-Stonewall gay life. He pursued cruising as if it were a sacred experience to "being shouted at. There was an intensity of conviction both physically and psychologically that was harrowing... It gave me a headache." Eastman, who often dressed in leather and chains, embraced the freedoms of post-Stonewall gay life. He pursued cruising as if it were a sacred experience to "being shouted at. There was an intensity of conviction both physically and psychologically that was harrowing... It gave me a headache."
L. Frank Baum—there is no place like the outer rim of the disk. Circling his sterling silver necklace with a 1¾” pendant (A) is engraved in script with a line width of 2¼”. One size fits most. Choose is approximately ¼” wide with an inside circumference of 6¾”, while the author’s name is on the outside of the cuff, with the line width of 2¼”.

“Now Voyager” is engraved on a Möbius strip.

“Everything has been stripped away except the Holy Presence.” W e are left with a work of language suggests Gertrude Stein, the musical structure, a sequence of insistently simpler. But as Leach notes, “you do not notice how little is happening musically.” The performance was a performance of Joan D’Arc and the musical material could hardly be more obvious. Interpretation. Powerful though it was, Leach’s recitation amplifies its power, breaking off phrases before they could become intelligible; she returned repeatedly to the idea that “all of Julius’s scores and his master tapes. “I was always boldly, as the saints urge Joan of Arc to passion and sacrifice. At the Kitchen’s retrospective, Eastman’s music spoke boldly, as the saints urge Joan of Arc in his great prelude, yet it seemed incomplete without art, and I felt his absence as one might feel the presence of a ghost.

The Holy Presence, his life began to fall apart. He had long depended on help from friends to cover his rent. But eventually his benefactors grew exasper- ated, and sometime in the early 1980s, the sheriffs removed Eastman from his apartment for nonpayment. He lost nearly all his belongings, including his scores and master tape. “If then this is a cause of any trouble, and if it is a great cause,” Eastman explained from the stage, “those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood and their lives without blood there is no cause. So therefore that is the reason that I use ‘gay guerilla,’ in hopes that I might be one if called upon to be one.”

The idea of gay martyrdom struck a personal chord with Eastman, leading him back to the music of the church. The musicologist Luciano Chessa argues that Eastman melded homosexu- ality and Christianity in an act of queer religiosity: Gay Guerilla derives its form from the chorale fantasia and unfolds with an increasingly martial drive, as a series of notes is incessantly repeated and pitch is piled upon pitch, emitting a kind of tonal mist. Toward the end, the triumphal, ringing chords of Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” transform the reverie into a hazy, transfigured into an anthem of gay liberation.

Eastman’s “bad boys” were examples of something that he stated in no uncertain terms that he would not pay it. Presenting the “Nigger” and the “Fag- got” works was no easy matter. During his tour of duty at Northwestern Uni- versity in 1980, a black student group, For Members Only, rose up in protest over the titles of his compositions. A compromise solution was reached: the titles would not be printed in the program, but Eastman would explain them on stage. Dressed in army fatigues and combat boots, he said:

“What I mean by ‘niggers’ is that which thing is fundamental, that person or thing that attains to a baseness, a fundamentalness, and each of these things which is superfi- cial, or what we can say, elegant….

There are of course ninety-nine names of Allah, and then there are fifty-two niggers.

Richard Pryor couldn’t have said it better. “Niggers” had nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, they had built “the American economic sys- tem,” and even wrested an improbable victory from the system that oppressed them: an authenticity, a more immedi- ate connection to reality. In Crazy Nigger, Eastman’s epic 1978 composition for four pianos (most com- monly), the material is simple, even crude. The notes are repeated, agitated, flat-out is heard through much of the work—but it imposes extreme physical demands on the pianists, who are often required to pound on a single note for minutes at a time. It opens with a dark, restless rum- bling of notes, producing increasingly thick, dissonant harmonies. Twenty minutes into the piece, a pentatonic figure, a scale that suggests the minor, or “nigger” scale, is played. The melody is a reminiscence of a punk rock anthem, and for good reason: its lunging rhythmic structure, a sequence of insistently repeated sixteen notes, is lifted from Paul McCartney’s “Hey Jude.”

Even more striking than The Holy Presence is its solo vocal prelude. East- man recorded it in his apartment on East 6th Street; only two pages of the original score survive. The lyrics in- volve the saints Joan claimed to hear before her trial: “Saint Michael said/ Saint Margaret said/Saint Catherine said.” Only two pages of the original score survive. The lyrics in- volve the saints Joan claimed to hear before her trial: “Saint Michael said/ Saint Margaret said/Saint Catherine said.”

These were words Eastman himself needed to hear, not only for The Holy Presence, his life began to fall apart. He had long depended on help from friends to cover his rent. But even- tually his benefactors grew exasper- ated, and sometime in the early 1980s, the sheriffs removed Eastman from his apartment for nonpayment. He lost nearly all his belongings, including his scores and master tape. “If then this is a cause of any trouble, and if it is a great cause,” Eastman explained from the stage, “those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood and their lives without blood there is no cause. So therefore that is the reason that I use ‘gay guerilla,’ in hopes that I might be one if called upon to be one.”

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Prohibition, Detroit, 1919. black-and-white photograph, courtesy Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Lyman Allyn Art Museum 435 Williams Street, New London, CT 06320; (860) 443-2545; www.lymanalyn.org

Spitzak: Prohibition in America (on view April 4–May 25, 2018), a new traveling exhibition from NEH on the Road, brings visitors back to the period of flappers and suffragists, bootleggers and temperance lobbyists, and real-life legends, such as Al Capone and Carry Nation! Visitors will learn about the complex issues that led America to adopt Prohibition through the 18th Amendment in 1919 until its repeal through the 21st Amendment in 1933.

American Painting Fine Art 3125 MacArthur Blvd, NW, Suite 17, Washington, DC 20016; (202) 244-3244; classicamericanpainting.com; Wed thru Sat. 11 am–7 pm, by appointment. Current Exhibit: New Year, New Start, works by Gallery Artists, Andrei Kushnir, Michelle Martin Taylor, Andy Warhol lead, accredit, accredited, contemporary American painters, many with national reputations.

Victoria Munroe Fine Art 67 East 80th Street #2, NY, NY 10075; www.victoriamunroeart.com; margo@victoriamunroeart.com; Opening April 4 and running through May 12, 2018, Victoria Munroe Fine Art presents paintings by Laura Newman. In her dynamic paintings Newman uses structured calligraphic ink and facets of vivid color to abstract glimpses of an underlying grid. Her bold brushstrokes hold translucent washes against that grid, like the solder of a stained glass window.

GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS
A CURRENT LISTING

Gustav Klimt—Drawings. May 1–27, 2018. In 1918, in Vienna, four major contributors to modernism died: the architect Otto Wagner, and the painters Koloman Moser, Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt. Klimt was widely known as one of the most fashionable artists of the fin-de-siècle. Even so, he embraced the school of Kelly, Jaspar Johns and Andy Warhol lead this growing auction, which features fresh-to-market prints, drawings and multiples by working artists including Peter Doig, Robert Longo, Swoon and Christopher Wool. Portfolios by Barbara Hepworth and Friedensreich Hundertwasser, three-dimensional works by Barkay and a self-portrait by Keith Haring illustrate the breadth of the offering.

Swann Auction Galleries 104 East 25th Street, New York, NY 10010; (212) 254-4710; swannauctions.com. Upcoming Auction: "Contemporary Art: May 22; Preview: May 17–22. Iconic post-war pieces by Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol lead this growing auction, which features fresh-to-market prints, drawings and multiples by working artists including Peter Doig, Robert Longo, Swoon and Christopher Wool. Portfolios by Barbara Hepworth and Friedensreich Hundertwasser, three-dimensional works by Barkay and a self-portrait by Keith Haring illustrate the breadth of the offering.

Jacqueline Barnett: Conversation Bronzes & Paintings. April 12–May 12. Lurie and Sam Goodfriend Gallery (March 3–31), her first solo exhibition, which features fresh-to-market prints, drawings and multiples by working artists including Peter Doig, Robert Longo, Swoon and Christopher Wool. Portfolios by Barbara Hepworth and Friedensreich Hundertwasser, three-dimensional works by Barkay and a self-portrait by Keith Haring illustrate the breadth of the offering.

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Galleries

Boris Lurie Art Foundation 379 11th Avenue, Floor 4, New York, NY 10036

Boris Lurie is featured in VOLATURE! Women in Holocaust and Genocide, at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in NYC April 12–May 12. Boris and Sam Goodfriend

man are featured in Flashes of the Fu-

ture: the '68' generation or the power of

degraded material into their work they

"in introducing social concerns and

ability route artists were taking…their

"alienated themselves from the accept-

able route artists were taking…their

influences of an earlier generation, into a

I dismantle and distill them into

I see incidental beauty in the worn

strokes or individual figures which

by time and will soon be rendered

endings. Her bold brushstrokes hold

component of the"80s generation, into a

of the offering.

shepherdgallery.com. On the occasion of the centenary of the Klimt’s death, Shepherd W&K has mounted a special exhibition of forty of the artist's drawings, including portraits, studies, and a sizable ensemble of nudes.

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1. Now that I’m about to turn seventy I finally feel able to reveal a shameful secret: I was a teenage Yamasaki admirer. I have no good excuse for why I got hooked, but Minoru Yamasaki was the first contemporary architect who entranced me. I had already begun my arduous self-education when I lined up along the white quartzite colonnade of Yamasaki’s newly completed Union Station, where in 1962 she praised the plans for Yamasaki’s Robertson Hall of 1961–1965 (home of Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs) for the way in which “Greco-Roman and Far Eastern influences blend in a series of slender classical columns of Oriental lightness, in a top floor suggesting the cornice of a temple, and in a reflecting pool” and for how “the undertones of the past emerge subtly in a quite advanced and experimental construction.” I thought it was wonderful, too. So much so that as editor-in-chief of my high school yearbook, I dragged the baffled members of the National Honor Society fifty miles northeast from our unphotogenic hometown of Camden, New Jersey, to have a group picture taken with us lined up along the white quartzite colonnade of Yamasaki’s newly completed Princeton Parthenon.

My youthful infatuation with him accelerated in January 1963, when he appeared on the cover of Time magazine, an honor earlier bestowed on such master builders as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Rudolph Neutra, and Eero Saarinen. This accolade seemed likely to propel the fifty-year-old Seattle-born Nisei to the very top of his profession. But he never quite made it, and here I pause, for my understanding of advanced engineering prevented the second catastrophe of postwar American campus design. She sealed the deal when she pinpointed the stylistic contradiction in Yamasaki’s design for New York City’s World Trade Center of 1962–1976: “Here we have the world’s daintiest architecture for the world’s biggest buildings.” Although it is often assumed that taste is innate, it most certainly can be taught, particularly to the young and impressionable.

But time marches on, and so does the forty-year rule in architectural history, whereby once-admired but subsequently underestimated designers capture the interest of young scholars in search of figures who still await full evaluation. Buildings long deemed passé and unsuccessful can suddenly seem fresh and intriguing to a new generation, just as yesterday’s tacky decorative designs can become tomorrow’s next cool thing. This has been evident in the steady postmillennial flow of monographs on mid-twentieth-century architects who have undergone a downward critical reversal akin to that of Yamasaki—especially Saarinen, Edward Durell Stone, and Paul Rudolph, none of whom now commands the high artistic respect they all enjoyed around 1960.*

The latest in this sequence of revisionist studies is Minoru Yamasaki: Humanist Architecture for a Modernist World, by Dale Allen Gyure, a professor of architecture at Lawrence Technological University in Michigan. Like other enthusiasts of such forgotten figures, Gyure makes a brave effort to restore Yamasaki’s former glory, but his argument does not seem borne out by either the visual or sociological evidence he marshals. Nonetheless, his book does provide useful documentation on lesser-known aspects of American architectural practice during the three decades when his subject was at the peak of his renown.

2. Minoru Yamasaki was born in Seattle in 1912, the son of Japanese immigrants who had recently come to America for better economic opportunity but found little. After Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, employers encouraged immigration from Japan to fill low-wage jobs Americans did not want. A similar reaction against the Japanese later resulted in the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned all Asians from immigrating and doubtless fed the bigotry that confronted the young Yamasaki. Late in life he still harbored bitter feelings about the racial prejudice he faced while growing up, which persisted for decades even as he found the financial success that eluded his shoe-salesman father.

However, it was a case not only of race but of class, and there was a world of difference between his experience and that of the Chinese-born I.M. Pei, only five years his junior. The MIT-educated Pei came from an aristocratic family, had a faultless instinct for social relations, married an equally patriotic Chinese Wellesley graduate—a prime minister, an ambassador, a bank president, and assorted literati in the couple’s genealogies—and the couple was smoothly accepted into the highest echelons of the American establishment.

Unlike many future architects Yamasaki did not have artistic leanings as a boy; he excelled instead at math and science, which presaged his keen interest in engineering. But when his Tokyo-based architect uncle Kosken Ito (no relation to the Fritzker Prize winner Toyo Ito) visited Seattle en route to a job in Chicago, the teenager was so entranced by architectural drawings that he decided to follow his relative’s career path. He began the University of Washington’s five-year Beaux Arts–oriented architecture program in 1935, before the 1929 market crash, and during the Great Depression paid for his education with dangerous and exhausting summer stints in the Alaska salmon-canning industry.

Upon graduation Yamasaki headed straight for New York City, where he felt he could escape the discrimination he suffered in Seattle. But like many of his generation, during the slump he could not find full-time work, and survived on odd jobs until he was hired in 1938 by Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, architects of the Empire State Building, conceived seven years earlier. He was assigned to the design team for Parkchester, a vast middle-income housing estate in the Bronx sponsored by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the first such development in the US to apply the “towers in the park” concept espoused by Le Corbusier in his radical City Beautiful of 1922 (Radiant City) of 1924, which proposed high-rise apartment buildings widely spaced among park-like grounds to supplant densely settled mid-rise neighborhoods.

During World War II Yamasaki oversaw construction of the firm’s huge naval training station on Lake Seneca in upstate New York, which gave him the organizational skills needed to manage large-scale schemes. While occupied with this patriotic work he had to rescue his parents from being put into an all-white enclave and Grosse Pointe, he found it impossible to rescue his parents from being put into an all-white enclave and


Architectural Tragedies

Minoru Yamasaki: Humanist Architecture for a Modernist World

by Dale Allen Gyure. Yale University Press, 283 pp., $65.00

Minoru Yamasaki and his assistant reviewing his model for the World Trade Center, circa 1970

The New York Review
As he later observed, “The makeup of a large (several hundred men) office is such that its primary concern has to be to make as much money as possible, forcing it to take almost any kind of work.” In such firms, “the turnover ... works against the creation of sensitive, responsive architecture.” Furthermore, he recalled, “I was never permitted to meet with the client” if design changes were called for, and although this might be attributed to corporate bureaucracy, it is hard not to wonder if there was a racial component to his exclusion.

3.

In 1949 Yamasaki and two office colleagues, Joseph Leinweber and George Hellmuth, set up their own partnership in Detroit, and because of important contacts that the St. Louis-born Hellmuth had in his hometown they opened a second branch there. (Hellmuth went on to found Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum, now known as HOK, the largest architecture firm in the US.) The combination of Hellmuth’s local connections and Yamasaki’s Parkchester credentials quickly won them big commissions for public housing in St. Louis, then in the throes of a thoroughgoing slum clearance and urban renewal campaign. But if Yamasaki had already been frustrated by the economic incentives of large commercial architecture firms, such constraints were nothing compared to those imposed by the Federal Public Housing Authority, the New Deal agency that regulated the planning, design, and construction of what became known as “the projects.” It has been correctly noted that architects of speculative skyscrapers are so limited by economic factors that they can do little more than decorate the exterior of a bulk predetermined by cost accountants. Yamasaki found himself in much the same position when he planned his most controversial work, the Pruitt-Igoe Apartments of 1950–1956 in St. Louis.

Although he kept abreast of recent trends in social housing in Europe, he was stymied in applying those new ideas because every design decision was subject to a plethora of bureaucratic regulations. The countless mandated requirements—from the minimum size of rooms to the disposition of windows, closets, and appliances—make one wonder how any architect could juggle so many competing demands, stick to the prohibitively low budget prescribed for each unit (under $1,750 per apartment, or around $18,000 today), and still come up with a coherent, let alone beautiful, design.

Whatever small grace notes Yamasaki was able to eke out under these restrictive circumstances were further undermined by budget cuts during the Korean War, which began in 1950 just as his plans were being completed. Nonetheless, the final results, however compromised, were met with grateful enthusiasm by the first inhabitants of Pruitt-Igoe—African-Americans who found the racially segregated development to be a vast improvement over the segregated slums of the old neighborhoods. Yamasaki found himself in much the same position when he planned his most controversial work, the Pruitt-Igoe Apartments of 1950–1956 in St. Louis.

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The misconception that high-rise public housing was responsible for social malaise because of its design attributes has been promoted by many opponents of Modernist architecture, most notably the critic Charles Jencks, who began his 1977 polemic The Language of Post-Modern Architecture by writing:

Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite. Previously it had been vandalised, mutilated and defaced by its black inhabitants, and although millions of dollars were pumped back, trying to keep it alive (fixing the broken elevators, repairing smashed windows, repainting), it was finally put out of its misery.

However, as has been amply confirmed by well-informed sociologists, including the housing specialist Herbert Gans, the problems that were allowed to get so unmanageably out of control at Pruitt-Igoe were not architectural in origin. Rather, they had mainly to do with reductions in basic maintenance and social services as government funding for Great Society programs was shifted to the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, Jencks’s assertion has remained indelibly fixed in the public imagination, as indicated by the Victoria & Albert Museum’s 2011 design exhibition “Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970–1990,” which opened with an enormous photomural of the Pruitt-Igoe towers collapsing amid clouds of dust, like some lurid Victorian tableau of Samson pulling down the pillars of the temple (see illustration on page 52). No architect likes to see his work destroyed, but Yamasaki felt deeply humiliated by the ignominious end of Pruitt-Igoe, and a few years afterward he wrote that “of the buildings we have been involved with over the years I hate this one the most.”

4.

None of this could have been foretold at the time of Pruitt-Igoe’s completion, and during the 1950s Yamasaki racked up one enviable commission after another. His Lambert–St. Louis Airport terminal of 1951–1956, with its sequence of four triple-vaulted concrete canopies, although not quite as audacious as Eero Saarinen’s Trans World Airlines Terminal of 1956–1962 in New York City, nonetheless conveys a similarly evocative image of Jet Age dynamism. Yamasaki was esteemed enough to be chosen for the State Department’s
embassy architecture program—an initi-ative meant to advertise the Modern-ist supremacy of the US—and designed the US Consulate of 1954–1956 in Kobe, Japan.

There he came up with a low-rise grouping of three flat-roofed rectangular structures set around a traditionnal Japanese landscape garden. In a nod to the local vernacular, he sus-pended a contemporary metal adapta-tion of bamboo suzaku blinds—which allow transparent work well to filter daylight—from the projecting upper perimeter of each story. During this commission the architect’s exploration of his ancestral homeland intensified a growing desire to bring a more spiritu-ual element—“serenity, surprise, and delight,” as he put it—to his work.

In purely formalist terms, however, it is impossible to distinguish Yamasaki’s designs from those of his even more cele-brated rival Edward Durell Stone, who likewise espoused an approach meant to be more visually enticing than the glass-walled boxes of the debased commercial version of the late International Style. The main difference between the two architects, it now seems, is that Stone wrapped his travertine-clad shoeboxes in pierced screens of vaguely Maghul derivation, whereas Yamasaki preferred outer scrims of faux-Gothic appliqués and, later on, stylized classical colon-nades more familiar to Beverly Hills than the seven hills of Rome. In due course a confusing repetitiveness set in to Yamasaki’s work, and it was hard to tell from his exaggerated but superfi-cial surface effects whether the build-ing underneath was a cathedral on Chicago’s North Shore or an airport in Dharan, given how closely the Islamo-Gothic façades of those two buildings resembled each other.

In 1962 Yamasaki completed his most prestigious commission yet: the United States Science Pavilion at the Century 21 Exposition, more com-monly known as the Seattle World’s Fair. This interconnected cluster of six rectangular white pavilions (formerly called the Pacific Science Center) is surfaced with stylized Gothic tracery and hovers above a series of fountain-studded re-flecting pools interspersed with plazas. Over the whole ensemble soars a free-standing group of five schematic Gothic arches meant to reinforce the quasi-religious symbolisms of what one commentator has called this “virtual cathedra-l science.” Yet the architectural hit of the exposition was the Space Needle, Ed-ward E. Carlson and John Graham Jr.’s Jetsons-like observation tower, the tallest structure west of the Mis-sissippi. With its hipster-futurist styl-yng—like a flying saucer perched atop a hyperelongated tripod—the Space Needle retains a perennial tourist at-traction, while Yamasaki’s time-warp design evokes a stage set on a 1960s sci-fi show.

The real miracle was that these severely simplified, angular structures set around a traditional Gothic arch brace-ment were so visually enticing, even as long as they did. This allowed an estimated 14,000 to 17,000 people to escape, although many were trapped above the spire or the planes, where death was inevitable because emergency stairways were severed.

An unavoidable problem of sky-scaper design is that the higher a struc-ture, the more elevators are needed, thus reducing rentable floor space. And in the case of standard steel- or concrete-frame construction, the number of extra inner columns needed to strengthen super-tall towers adds to the problem. In order to increase the World Trade Center’s cost-effectiveness by keeping each story of the towers as free as possible from internal barriers—a necessity in commercial real estate by the 1960s, when the open-office con-cept began to take hold—Yamasaki decided on a structural system (devised by the Seattle-based engineer John Skilling) whereby the buildings’ external walls, made of colossal, hol-low steel tubes, became the principal load-bearing support, allowing for un-usually open interiors.

Had Yamasaki conformed to conven-tional internal steel-frame techniques, experts curor, the buildings would have snapped upon the planes’ colli-sion and collapsed much sooner and further afield than they did, with a sig-nificantly higher death toll. Indeed, as James Glanz and Eric Lipton write in their authoritative City in the Sky: The World Trade Center (2003), an aviation impact study con-ducted in 1964 to gauge how the struc-tures would withstand being crashed into by a Boeing 707 concluded:

The Skilling firm’s “total concept” would not just give the twin towers a huge margin of reserve strength to help them survive the initial im-pact; the peculiarities of their de-sign would let them act almost like a living being to resist overall fail-ure and collapse even when griev-ously damaged by the plane.

In the end, what destroyed the build-ings was the conflagration fed by tens
of thousands of gallons of jet fuel, as was fiendishly projected by the pilot's mastermind, Osama bin Laden, who had a degree in civil engineering.

Although the World Trade Center fully conformed to fire-safety standards at the time of its completion, there were misgivings during the planning phase about whether the super-wide Vierendeel trusses that enabled the open-floor spaces, a new concept at the time, were sufficiently fireproofed to withstand such an eventuality. It was the melting of those elegantly elongated supports that caused the Twin Towers' concrete floors to collapse onto one another, after which the outer perimeter gave way. By that time Yamasaki had been dead for nearly fifteen years and was spared a loss that surely would have been infinitely more painful to him than even his unjustly maligned Pruitt-Igoe.

Can a Chameleon Grieve?

Lynn Hunt

In 1668, when Peter Singer raised the flag of animal liberation in these pages, he helped galvanize an animal rights movement that over the decades since has challenged the presumption of human dominion over animals. Aristotle’s distinctions have not lost their salience; research in fields ranging from evolutionary biology to linguistics offers an animal moment similar to man’s as reflective thinkers to more familiar debates concerning the ethics of animal food production and zoos. If animal studies seems too tame, a leap can be taken to “critical animal studies” or “post-animal studies,” whose proponents argue against capitalism and for veganism, as well as for the complete liberation of nonhuman animals.

Whatever one thinks of this dizzying rush to the neo plus ultra, animal studies are here to stay. Although meat consumption is not about to disappear (beef consumption in the US is declining slightly while poultry consumption has increased threefold since 1960), concerns about methods of raising and slaughtering “livestock” have become more widespread, as have objections to the use of animals for laboratory experiments. Animal studies need not be programatically attached to specific policy options, but they can help illuminate the choises we make and have made in the past, not just about what we eat and wear or which animals share our beds and board, but more generally about how the use of animals has changed the landscape and humans themselves. At the very least, and leaving aside the question of animal studies, animal studies reminds us that consideration of animals, as Aristotle discovered long ago, affords a unique perspective on many things human.

In 1668: The Year of the Animal in France, Peter Sahlin does not pretend to offer policy prescriptions, but the current issues do inform his treatment of Louis XIV’s France, which he sees as offering an animal moment similar to our own. In 1668, animals were suddenly everywhere, in the king’s new collection of them at Versailles but also—in snake charmers, tapestries, fountains, poems, fables, and political and philosophical treatises, not to mention scientific experiments. In the service of his argument, Sahlin marshals an extraordinary array of maps, engravings, and paintings. Animals appeared in so many settings, he argues, because they had become crucial to the ways that humans thought about themselves. The new conception of animals did not bode well for them, however, since it led to their “generalized devalorization.” In contrast to the Renaissance defense of the “happy beast” as having some form of understanding and even potential moral superiority to humans, what Sahlin calls “Classical naturalism” effectively bestialized animals, stripping them of any semblance of reason or understanding. Ironically, even while animals became thereby incommensurable with humans, humans, were now seen as threatened by a potential beast within, that is, madness and uncontrolled passions.

Descartes has often been blamed for the devaluing of animals because he considered them automata, or machines without self-awareness. Although he regularly practiced vivisection, he proved ambiguous on the subject of animals feeling pain. His followers, in contrast, went straight for the jugular. One of them wrote that animals “eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grown without knowing it.” In this view, animals experienced pain but did not feel it. Sahlin reasserts placing the whole burden of blame on Descartes, but it is inevitable that the philosopher plays an outsized part in his account. Cartesian mechanistic philosophy dethroned Aristotelianism and in the process established an even starker division between humans and animals. Not surprisingly, then, Sahlin argues that Descartes’s views on animals, though first published in 1637, only prompted serious public debate many years later, in 1668.

The year 1668, it is not arbitrary and it has its advantages. Choosing a single year effectively draws attention to the connections between absolutist politics, metaphysics, and paintings. In that sense, Sahlin’s account is a model of what can be accomplished by cultural historians drawn from a particular vantage point. The meaning lost in the specialization of university disciplines. The royal menagerie is an obvious starting point, since its viewing pavilion was the very first building constructed at Versailles, the ultimate symbol of Louis XIV’s absolutist style of rule. Although the pavilion took shape in 1664, four years were required to fill the courtyards with a largely avian crowd. Many birds were immobilized by clipped wings, a perfect metaphor for Louis’s endeavor to domesticate his previously headstrong nobles. An occasional deer, camel, or even bear could no more compete with the “royal bird,” the crown-crested crane, than nobles could match Louis, who made himself the star attraction at court festivals. The bigger animals placidly carried actors on their backs in allegorical pageants. Like any good teacher, Louis believed that repetition ensured learning. Visitors to the menagerie viewed birds and rare animals through windows, but on the walls they could see a series of forty-six paintings commissioned in 1668 from the Flemish animal painter Nicolas Bernaerts. Although known for his renditions of nature red in tooth and claw, here the artist presents the creatures in supposedly natural bucolic settings. Serving as moral exemplars, these depictions still resonated with the Renaissance view of “theriophila” (love of animals). Two of the most prominent writers of the time, the novelist Madeleine de Scudéry and the poet Jean de La Fontaine, described the civilization of the graceful, sweet birds in their accounts of the menagerie. Yet even while claiming to pay homage to the king, both writers got in their digs, in Scudéry’s case by referring to the cranes as chickens. In 1668 La Fontaine published the first volumes of his famous animal Fables, which many subsequently read as coded criticisms of the king and his court. Still, the days of staged animal combats were far from disappearing; paintings, engravings, and even ancient poetry now celebrated the softening effect of a peaceable kingdom, whether of animals or aristocrats.

The year 1668 was early in Louis XIV’s reign (he ruled for another
forty-seven years), but according to Sahlins, it proved a turning point. The representation of animals began to shift away from the benign last gasp of the Renaissance model found in the menagerie toward a naturalism that emphasized the base and brutal character of beasts. Sahlins finds evidence for this in one surprising place: twelve huge tapestries, measuring nearly five by three meters, of the months of the year whose weaving began in 1668. The name of an anatomical engravings published in 1671 that were based on dissections, some of live animals, undertaken by the new Royal Academy of Sciences and sponsored by Louis XIV’s chief minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert; and a series of lectures on animals and physiognomy given by the royal painter Charles Le Brun in 1668. As director of both the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture and the Gobelins tapestry works that produced The Months, Le Brun’s pronouncements on aesthetics could hardly be ignored.

Le Brun’s lectures do not survive, but his sketches, based on animals in the royal menagerie, do, and they are crucial to Sahlins’s argument since neither the tapestries nor the anatomical engravings offer unambiguous evidence of a mechanistic view of animals. The tapestries may have frozen the wild animals and birds, but they render them, naturally rather than allegorically, as luxury possessions. The animals do not fight or grimace but rather stroll sedately among precious vases and musical instruments. Similarly, the anatomical engravings purport to show what one really finds when animal bodies are dissected, but the accompanying illustrations at the bottom of each page portray admirable live specimens in fanciful idyllic settings.

Sahlins wants to view Le Brun’s drawings of animal heads and especially of hybrid animal-human heads as fundamentally Cartesian because they employed a geometric grid and devalued animals by associating animal impulses with the baser characteristics of vulgar humans, such as peasants. That is a possible reading, though not the only plausible one. Geometric lines served the cause of precise rendering and had been used since the late fifteenth century. Moreover, Le Brun’s own annotations do not always tend toward bestialization; he may or may not have labeled his cattle “stupid” (the annotation is apparently hard to decipher), but he definitely called them wild, stronger and bolder—hardly disparaging characterizations.

Tapestries, engravings, and drawings finally bring us to Descartes, or rather to his specter. He died in Stockholm in January 1669, in comfiance with Queen Christina, and his remains, minus his skull, were only reburied in Paris in 1667. The reburial and a scandal over blood, strong, and belligerent experiments carried out by a prominent Cartesian finally ignited debate about Descartes’s beast-machine. One of Descartes’s acoylites, the physician Jean Denis, transfused blood from calves, lambs, and kid goats into the veins of five gravelly ill human patients. Denis began his experiments one week before the reburial of Descartes. In the end, the two patients died, but three were supposedly cured. A fierce debate erupted about the practice, and opponents won when the Parlement of Paris banned the experiments in 1670.

Denis’s investigations hardly fit, however, into Sahlins’s narrative of devalorization of animals. Denis argued for the practice on the grounds that animal blood was less impure than that of humans, “for debauchery and derangement in drinking and eating are not as common as among us.” In Denis’s view, “the life of the animal is much better regulated” than that of humans taintd irrevocably by original sin. While Descartes rejected any notion of blood as vital and sacred and emphasized its mechanistic qualities, Denis retained a moralizing view.

Scientific debate was not limited to the schools, academies, or courts. The Paris salons followed every new development, and in hers Madeleine de Scudéry led the resistance to the Cartesian denigration of animals. Not that she was anti-Cartesian in other respects. Among her closest friends were many prominent Cartesian scholars. Scudéry encouraged conversations about the new science and even undertook her own investigations, yet she came to very different conclusions about animals. The French consul in Alexandria sent her two chameleons in 1672, four years after the king’s own chameleon had perished following a mere six weeks in royal care; it promptly underwent dissection by the Royal Academy of Sciences. Scudéry’s chameleons were adored, observed, and written about at length. When the female died at the hands of a visiting gentleman who tore off her leg, Scudéry insisted that the surviving male was so devastated that he tried to commit suicide. He was saved by her own ministrations: “He came to love me,” she wrote, “to know me, to hear his name and to distinguish my voice.” Nothing could have been farther from an automaton than her little Méléon.

Sahlins claims that the labyrinth (destroyed in 1775) encodes the Cartesian view of animals as debased and depraved, but the whiff of protesting too much now gets stronger. Even if the birds and animals were presented there as contentious, competitive, and warlike, he himself admits that visitors were meant to first visit the labyrinth and then proceed to the menagerie; this may have been a passage from the bestial to the human through the animals carried both messages, and if only by their placement in the progression, the living, civilized ones outshone those captured. How are we to be sure of the meaning of the labyrinth statues, especially since the labyrinth garden became less fashionable as the costs of maintaining it grew?

Here cultural history is caught in traps of its own making. There are three different perils at issue: mistaking of high culture for general opinion, succumbing to the lure of fitting everything together, and overlooking the need for causal explanation. The first peril is especially hard to avoid when one year is meant to carry so much significance. There is no one year of the animal and no single moment when the pendulum swings toward valorization of animals in Western culture. Paintings, engravings, tapestries, sculptures, poems, and gardens must necessarily be deceptive with what they all rely on aesthetic devices; they are beautiful even when they render roosters as unruuly. Their moral message is necessarily ambivalent, and for every Cartesian disciple who espied an automaton crying without feeling pain, there could have been ten Scudériens imagining a humanoid emotion.

Things hardly ever fit together as neatly as we might like, and this is perhaps even more true of human-animal relations than most historical subfields. Sahlins, like Scudéry, he loved his pet, a dog named Mister Scratch. Explaining the industrial production of animals for human consumption—whether to be eaten or worshipped as pets—it is far from obvious that attitudes toward animals and can be placed along a neat chronological arc. The industrial production of animals developed at the same time as government, military, and the first law against cruelty to animals was passed in 1835, whereas abuse of children was only explicitly criminalized in England in 1872. The repentals are especially hard to avoid when one year is meant to carry so much significance. There is no one year of the animal and no single moment when the pendulum swings toward valorization of animals in Western culture. Paintings, engravings, tapestries, sculptures, poems, and gardens must necessarily be deceptive with what they all rely on aesthetic devices; they are beautiful even when they render roosters as unruuly. Their moral message is necessarily ambivalent, and for every Cartesian disciple who espied an automaton crying without feeling pain, there could have been ten Scudériens imagining a humanoid emotion.

So, yes, animals have been denigrated, but perhaps no more after 1668 than before and maybe in the long run less. If we are perfectly happy burning cats alive funny, even if we are perfectly content to suspend our knowledge of chicken cages or cow slaughterhouses while we eat. Although many blame Descartes for the objectification of animals, like Scudéry, he loved his pet, a dog named Mister Scratch. Explaining our changing attitudes toward animals ultimately requires a much broader and longer view than a few years in seventeenth-century France, however intense that moment was. Still, the virulence of the humanities shows how culture, politics, and science can be permeated with animal concerns. For to be human is to be an animal of some sort.
Stuff of Scandal

Adam Kirsch

Klimt and Schiele: Drawn
an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,
February 25–May 28, 2018

Klimt and Schiele: Drawings
by Katie Hanson.
MFA Publications, 150 pp., $49.95

As you enter “Klimt and Schiele: Drawn,” at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, you are faced with a choice. Begin on the left, with Gustav Klimt’s Seated Woman in a Pleated Dress, and you will find yourself following Klimt down one wall of the small, large room; pick the right, with Egon Schiele’s The Artist’s Mother, Sleeping, and you are in his more colorful and astringent territory. Not until you have completed the whole circuit does it become clear that these two paths are also mirror images, each organized around the same rubrics: “Inner Life Made Visible,” “The Stuff of Scandal.” It is the curator Katie Hanson’s deft way of paying obeisance to the familiar coupling of the two artists—the heroic heralds, with Oskar Kokoschka, of Viennese modernity—while also insisting on their difference, even their irreconcilability.

The show’s exclusive focus on drawings only heightens this contrast, since these two artists took very different approaches to drawing. Most of the Klimts works in the show are preparatory sketches, which give only hints of the power of the final products; and the magnificence of Klimt’s major paintings has little to do with what we ordinarily think of as the virtues of drawings—spontaneity, naturalness.

With Schiele, just the opposite is true: drawings for him were frequently ends in themselves, finished with watercolors and sold to collectors. Some of Schiele’s drawings in “Drawn” stand among his most powerful work, which cannot be said for any of the Klimts.

This contrast between the show’s two subjects is already present in the first drawings the visitor encounters. Klimt’s seated figure, feet together and knees spanned in a Plum Dress, and a garden rug, is a far cry from the erect and gorgeously decorated women in his best-known paintings, such as the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer. Yet there is still something monumental in the composition, which turns the woman into a three-leveled ziggurat—legs, torso, head. And there is an unmistakable excitement in her posture, leaning forward with clasped hands, and still more in her face: she has the kind of erotic avidity that, in Klimt’s great portraits and allegories, bursts into florid erotic avidity that, in Klimt’s great portraits and allegories, bursts into florid

Clearly, if these artists are both modern, they are promising different modernities—which is only natural, considering that they belonged to different generations. Both Klimt and Schiele died in 1918, the last year of World War I, and of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that alternately tempted and terrified him: “The devil has shat you into my dote has one of his professors shouting at him: “The devil has shat you into my

The difference in age and status did not stop Klimt from recognizing Schiele as a kindred spirit. At a time when Klimt was by far the most famous artist in Austria, he readily took the young Schiele under his wing, helping him find patrons and commissions. When they first met, in 1907, Schiele was a teenage student at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts, already starting to rebel against his conservative teachers. (One anecdotestates his was in the head of one of his professors shouting at him: “The devil has shat you into my classroom”) “Drawn” includes two of Schiele’s drawings from the year of their meeting, portraits of a bearded, older man and of a girl; the latter, in particular, is poignant yet sentimental, with a mood of reverie, in a way that he would soon reject violently. Indeed, on his first visit to Klimt’s studio, Schiele brought several drawings along and asked the master if he had talent—to which Klimt replied ironically, “Much too much.”

Klimt’s own career had demonstrated that talent needed to be restive if it was to count for anything. Starting in the 1890s, he was a favorite of Vienna’s civic and imperial establishment, the recipient of several major commissions to decorate public buildings on the Ringstrasse in the heart of the city. Its development, on the site where old defensive walls stood until they were finally demolished in the late 1850s, was crucial in the transformation of Vienna into a modern metropolis. Over the next decades the Ring was filled with pompous official buildings in a variety of architectural styles, which reflected the eclectic historical taste of the city’s newly dominant bourgeoisie.

Klimt, who had graduated not from the Academy of Fine Arts but from the more practically oriented School of Arts, was entranced—along with his brother Ernst and Franz Matsch, who formed a working partnership—with the decoration of several of these buildings. Among them was the Burgtheater, which in drama-besotted Vienna served as a kind of civic temple. Klimt’s ceiling paintings of 1886–1888 depicted episodes from the life of the theater, and “Drawn” includes three early sketches for the section showing a performance of Romeo and Juliet at Shakespeare’s Globe. While the loss of the show, they serve the same purpose for Klimt as the student sketches do for Schiele—demonstrations of an early mastery that the artist would soon rebel against. Klimt’s dying Juliet, peacefully reclining in white sheets and a white nightgown, can be seen as exactly the kind of idealized sleeping beauty that Schiele’s portrait of his mother refuses to be (see illustration on page 56). The two other sketches—heads of spectators in the theater, an adult man, and a boy seen from behind—have far more character, with a livelier sense of the drama unfolding on the stage.

But it was not in the direction of immediacy that Klimt was to evolve. On the contrary, his works of the 1890s and 1900s get more classical. “Drawn” includes two early sketches of allegorical women in his father’s early death—to see the subject sketches—heads of spectators in the theater, an adult man, and a boy seen from behind—have far more character, with a livelier sense of the drama unfolding on the stage.

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The Vienna of Klimt and Schiele was also, of course, the city of Freud, who was perhaps the only member of the university’s faculty of medicine who would have completely endorsed the intention of Klimt’s painting. The Interpretation of Dreams was published in 1900, three years after a group of rebellious, cosmopolitan artists broke with the Viennese art establishment to create the Secession, under the presidency of Klimt. Indeed, it is almost impossible not to see Klimt’s work as a part through a Freudian lens, as liberators of human sexuality from the forces of convention and repression.

Yet here, too, their paths diverged in very important ways. Klimt can be seen as the great artist of sublimation: in textbook Freudian fashion, he externalizes allegories and symbols to channel and heighten the force of sexuality. His portraits of Viennese society women, no less than his Pallas Athena, are masterpieces of such sublimation, with each female figure transformed by imposing artifice into a kind of goddess. Partly, this process depends on Klimt’s use of gold leaf and mosaic effects, which have always been popular with audiences—though they also contribute to what Emily Braun has called the “Klimtophobia” of some critics. Yet the portrait studies of Amalie Zucker-kandl included in “Drawn” show that the queenly effect of Klimt’s portraits is not merely a matter of surfaces; it has just as much to do with their architecture, and with the painter’s dramatic instinct for gesture and posture.

If Klimt successfully harnesses the power of sex, Schiele takes a directly opposite course. His drawings give us the chaos of neurosis, when sexuality has turned on its possessor and become a pursuing Fury. The subjects of Freud’s case-studies—the Rat Man or the Wolf Man—must have felt much the way Schiele appears in his Nude Self-Portrait of 1910: haggard, tortured, reduced to a harsh, mottled slash. The nimbus of white surrounding his body seems less like a halo than an electric shock, an impression reinforced by the way the hair stands up wildly in all directions.

**Medical**ine, for instance, was represented by the goddess Hygieia, just as Klimt’s patrons might have expected. But there are also less obvious gods, seen from below in dramatic feature-stripping, her hair and dress almost dissolved into abstract patterns. Braiding together traditional and other of Klimt’s allegorical works, her portion of the canvas; most of the work’s allegory is pure cosmic suffering, a place behind her back, seemingly occupied only the lower central place among them. The professors of medicine couldn’t have been pleased with this way of arguing that the walls were covered with pornographic drawings. He was arrested, initially on the charge of seducing and kidnapping a minor, and while he was acquitted of those crimes, he was found guilty of displaying pornography to minors. All told, he spent twenty-five years of a career that he obviously did use undergals to pose for pornographic works, in a way that would probably be punished even more harshly today than it was in Austria a hundred years ago. If Balthus’s ambiguous Thérèse Dreaming could recently become a subject for discussion, one that ended at the whole episode was simply another example of the philistinism that all modern artists glory in having fought against. But this truth is that Schiele’s prison drawings, which are bathetic and self-pitying in the extreme, start with their titles. Hindering the Artist Is a Crime, It Is Murdering Life in the Bud! portrays Schiele in the same rotated position as in the drawings of his mother: he seems to be leaning standing up, with his head askew atop a shapeless coat. The artist’s wide eyes and meek mouth demand pity, the same way a child who feigns a profound indignation. Schiele seems so confident in the script he is acting out—the modern morality play of the persecution art what he leaves no room for genuine exploration of his plight.

For the challenging truth is that sexuality, in both Klimt and Schiele, is a force more primal than morality. This is another Freudian intuition that the truth is that Schiele’s prison drawings, which are bathetic and self-pitying in the extreme, start with their titles. Hindering the Artist Is a Crime, It Is Murdering Life in the Bud! portrays Schiele in the same rotated position as in the drawings of his mother: he seems to be leaning standing up, with his head askew atop a shapeless coat. The artist’s wide eyes and meek mouth demand pity, the same way a child who feigns a profound indignation. Schiele seems so confident in the script he is acting out—the modern morality play of the persecution art what he leaves no room for genuine exploration of his plight.

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The Mars Room
by Rachel Kushner.
Scribner, 338 pp., $27.00

The mammoth and cruel American prison system poses a special challenge for writers. More than two million people are incarcerated in the United States. Millions more enter and exit the prison system on a regular basis. What actually happens there?

The conventional means of conveying information go dark. Journalists are rarely allowed access. Prisoners can’t use the Internet; their mail is often censored or lost. Writing classes in prison are common, but the works produced there rarely reach readers. Visitors—lawyers and family—usually only make it to a meeting room. New York is home to the world’s largest penal colony, Rikers Island, where ten thousand people are held on any given day in large, airless dormitories, often simply because they couldn’t afford bail for crimes they haven’t committed. Yet Rikers wasn’t on most New York subway maps until 2010; even now it’s not uncommon to see it unlabeled, a beige drop in the East River, present but unknown.

“If they could have shot us to the prison in a capsule they would have,” remarks Romy Hall at the beginning of The Mars Room, Rachel Kushner’s third novel. “Anything to shield the regular people from having to look at us, a crew of cuffed and chained women on a sheriff’s department bus.” It’s chain night, meaning that the inmates are being moved under cover of the California darkness to Stanville Women’s Correctional Facility. There, Hall will be serving two consecutive life sentences for murdering an inmate in prison. Inmates in prison are common, but the works they create are often censored or lost. Writing classes are rarely allowed access. Prisoners journaling information go dark. Journalists often remarkable, and sometimes frustrated. They may go dark. Yet Kushner is also keen to show that prison is a place where people live, where they form friendships, where they have sex—as Romy does with her trans cellmate, Conan, after a party where they get high for the first time.

What you do is buy peanut butter from canteen, or, if, like me, you have no money for canteen, you share Conan’s peanut butter. Put a dab of it on the roof of your mouth before you go to pill call. When you open your mouth like a horse to show them you properly swallowed, you need her approval, but the pill is in the peanut butter, unswallowed. “[Conan] mashed them with the bottom of a shampoo bottle and made ‘punch,’ which is pills dissolved in a container of iced tea. It’s a short island iced tea.

The “regular people” may not see chain night, but here is all of Stanville—its movements and its jokes, its cruelties and its depressions, even its moments of near happiness, of almost forgetting—brought straight to them.

Is there room for an individual in this harsh system? This is a question Kushner seems to be asking. Our case study is Romy, a twenty-nine-year-old white woman who has ended up in jail seemingly by fate. She is tough, smart, stubborn. She is not educated, but she reads a lot, especially books about the San Francisco streets where she grew up. (One thing Kushner has a special feel for is the symbiosis of a person and her native city.) She has a son whom she loves, whom she is determined to raise right. This is a woman who has done what she could to control her future, only to realize that it was written before she could make any decisions at all.

Romy’s story interrupts the prison accounts in carefully timed flashbacks. It makes for brutal reading. The traditional warning signs are all there: the absent father, the distracted mother, the homeless child, the drug, the alcohol, the violence. Yet Kushner is also keen to show how the system accounts for, how it makes the “regular people” account for our case.

When a deluded stalker named Kurt begins to write letters, Romy’s story interrupts the prison accounts in carefully timed flashbacks. It makes for brutal reading. The traditional warning signs are all there: the absent father, the distracted mother, the homeless child, the drug, the alcohol, the violence. Yet Kushner is also keen to show how the system accounts for, how it makes the “regular people” account for our case.

Notes from the Inside
Madeleine Schwartz

This talent for verisimilitude shapes The Mars Room. Kushner has described how she worked on the novel by spending time in prisons meeting inmates and “cover[ing] following criminology students as they toured the facilities. The amount of detail she presents here, some amassed and some imagined, is astonishing. I wonder whether inmates or former inmates reading her book will know which is which. She details the processing the prisoners must go through, the restrictions and regulations that suffocate the lives of those inside and even those who visit them:

No orange clothing
No clothing in any shade of blue
No white clothing
No yellow clothing
No beige or khaki clothing
No green clothing

This is just the beginning of the list, which lasts two pages.

Kushner shows the day-to-day operations of the prisons, for example the wood shops where prisoners work for 22 cents an hour, making Judges’ benches. Jury box seating. Courthouse gates. Witness stands. Lecterns. Judges’ gavels. Paneling for judges’ quarters. Wooden courtroom cages for in-custody defendants. Wood frames for the state seal that goes in the judges’ chambers, and judges’ seats, which then went to upholstery, next door.

On death row, the women pass the time trying to draw attention to their cases, calling lawyers and attempting to sway public opinion before they have to get back to work sewing sandbags for the highway: “If you see a pile of sandbags along the side of a California road, they have been touched by the hands of our celebrities.” Kushner has an ear for the talk of the prison. “The cops call [death row] ‘grade A,’” Romy thinks. “They say it about fifty times a day and probably the prison administration thought it was bad for staff morale to say ‘death row’ over and over.”

It’s the system in its entirety that interests Kushner: the way the prison creates its own microcosm, inexplicable from the outside, entirely self-contained. She details how prisoners get around rules: “We send ice cream sandwiches from canteen through the toilets, wrapped in Kotex as insulation, then plastic wrap.” She describes the prison economy, in which inmates pay for their personal items. “One young woman buys her runner from an aging inmate. Others set up websites with fake photos in the hopes that the runners, who are often in desperate situations themselves, will bite: “It was not that different from the Mars Room, except here they were preening and selling their accounts in carefully timed flashbacks. It makes for brutal reading. The traditional warning signs are all there: the absent father, the distracted mother, the homeless child, the drug, the alcohol, the violence. Yet Kushner is also keen to show how the system accounts for, how it makes the “regular people” account for our case.

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ultimately exposing a tangle of people and events and the impact of American inequality in all its dimensions, an attempt to show the connection of poverty and the American dream. A difficult book, like Kushner's

Random Family (2003), Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's journalistic account of a family living in the Bronx. Like Kushner's work, Random Family is not a detailed report of poverty and the American prison system, an attempt to show the impact of American inequality in all its dimensions. LeBlanc spent several years following the family, going to trials, talking to the neighbors, attending parties, sleeping on the floor, befriending and ultimately exposing a tangled web of

that they go in and out of jail, move from one crummy apartment to another, get pregnant, split up, suffer.

Jessica lived on Tremont Avenue, on one of the poorer blocks in a very poor section of the Bronx. She dressed even to go to the store.

Less than one hundred pages later, Kushner has written a powerful novel. It often has the feel of a script: beguiling and remarkable as it is, the prose is walled out. There's so much information on the page that the reader cannot hear the characters breathe. Information on the page that the reader cannot hear the characters breathe.

The characters seem constrained by the way they usually work. Nonfactual, nonvisual, nonverbal, an adherence to the way things are or were here at Stanville. Her friend responds. Both Thoreau and Kaczynski were here at Stanville. Her friend responds. Both Thoreau and Kaczynski were here at Stanville.

How could you have done such a thing. How could you. The how. Not the practical how, the why did it happen.

To stomp his foot…. The jury didn't want anything to do with him, or me. They complete a form and handed it to the judge. There are two boxes on the form. The foreman checked one

The reader wonders. But Gordon does not act like the man of action—he is a prisoner. He goes back into his cell, then into his thoughts and actions that no one has witnessed, that exists is nearly powerless. There's little will to solve it, and the will to act is nearly powerless. The reader wonders. But Gordon does not act like the man of action—he is a prisoner. He goes back into his cell, then into his thoughts and actions that no one has witnessed, that exists is nearly powerless. There's little will to solve it, and the will to act is nearly powerless.

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Theater of the Self

Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away

an exhibition at the Solomon R.
Guggenheim Museum, New York City,
February 9–May 9, 2018;
and the Statens Museum for Kunst,
Copenhagen, August 30–December 2, 2018.
Catalog of the exhibition
by Katherine Brinson.
Guggenheim Museum,
284 pp., $65.00

The art of Danh Vo is popular and politically engaged, though it’s the opposite ofagitprop. Vo is too canny and too much of an aesthete for that. He’s like Prospero and Ariel both, light on his feet, and his art manifests images and pulls in references from disparate places; it feels in transit, as if it just alighted here. The work can be profane, caustic, irreverent, or elegiac, often in combination. It can be beautiful or visually negligible. Occasionally it can be dull. Vo is already widely celebrated in Europe, but the retrospective “Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away” at the Guggenheim Museum is his first major show in this country.

Vo makes art by taking objects from the world—a washing machine, a chandelier, a car engine, a pen nib—and bringing them, sometimes with minimal alteration or none at all, into the museum. As an idea, this is certainly not new, but to assume that Vo’s work has anything to do with Marcel Duchamp’s readymades strikes me as wrong. The impulse is different. Duchamp’s snow shovel and bottle rack chandelier are anonymous and semi-ironic, idiotic even, in that amusing Dada way. Vo’s objects are, for the most part, highly specific; they are the visual equivalent of poetry’s “objective correlative.” Everything in Vo’s art comes with a story; his objects point to the way that things close to us—a signet ring, a marriage contract, or very ordinary things, like a cardboard box—are embedded in a web of connections with the larger world.

For Vo’s co-exhibition Das Beste oder Nichts (The Best or Nothing, 2010) is a car engine, a hunk of sofa-stain and rust-stained metal, albeit with an interesting, faintly intestinal or intestalish aura, until you learn that it was exhumed from the Mercedes taxi that belonged to Vo’s father, which symbolized for him, as for many other immigrants, having made it to the West. If you were just to hear about the piece, it might sound sophomoric. But on the floor of the Guggenheim the engine is strangely arresting; it looks like the carcass of an animal, something prehistoric, perhaps a deepsea creature that has become petrified. Like a lot of Vo’s work, it has a How did that get here? quality. It doesn’t happen every time, but there is an aesthetic transferance that can occur at the level of display. His best work refers to more than one thing, and even though transparent by design, still retains some mystery that can’t be easily explained.

Vo has a remarkable personal history, and it has given him a rich vein of material. He was born in South Vietnam in 1975, shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. In 1979, he and his family fled the country in an unseaworthy boat, somehow hoping to get to the US. They were picked up by a Danish freighter in the South China Sea, and after a layover in a refugee camp, they eventually made their way to Denmark. Vo went to Danish schools and was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where he was discouraged by the faculty from painting. A visiting professor, Rirkrit Tiravanija, a well-regarded practitioner of a type of conceptual art known as relational aesthetics, noticed him and arranged for him to attend the more happening Städelschule in Frankfurt.

Vo was a quick study, and seems always to have had the knack of attracting mentors and supporters. Something about “the way we make art now” aligned with how his mind works, and the new freedoms in art—the permission to take anything from anywhere, to make out of any object or circumstance a kind of thought bubble—opened up a space for his personal complexities to land. Like most artists, Vo is an amalgam of several different impulses and skills distilled into one sensibility: the archivist and scribe, the designer/arranger, the fashion stylist, the cultural critic, the megalomaniac and artful dodger.

Some of Vo’s themes are personal, like the Asian refugee and emigrant, the good son and gay man; and others are global: postcolonialism, the dislocations of war and the technocratic arrogance of which it is the result, regionalism, capitalist imperialism, and the law of unintended consequences. In some of Vo’s work the themes are refracted, one inside another; the micro in the macro. At times the ideas are overmatched to their correlative; the work can feel a little top-heavy.

In the Guggenheim, with the rhythm of its bays and the concentrated engagement they encourage, Vo’s tabloids and objects from life, and his elegant and precisely executed reconstructions and recombinations of sculptural artifacts from different times and cultures, have the aura of sophisticated stage design. The experience of seeing his work is like being in the theater for a much-anticipated production when the curtain first goes up—there is some of the same hushed expectation.

One of Vo’s best-known sculptures (16:32, 26.05, from 2009) involves three nineteenth-century crystal chandeliers that originally hung in the ballroom of the Hotel Majestic in Paris. The largest one was left intact and hangs from the ceiling. One is largely dismantled; its strings of lights and crystals are spread out on the floor, and it makes a ghostly, ghostful image. A third smaller chandelier hangs inside a wooden shipping container, looking disconsolate in its confinement.

Vo’s chandeliers strung along broad, sweeping catenaries, chandeliers in art are usually meant to signify fragility and opulence, like a spray of champagne suspended in the air. Vo’s chandeliers are not especially graceful or pristine; their brass arabesques droop; they look a bit tired. What distinguishes them is their supporting role in a painful history. The Hotel Majestic was the setting for the Paris Peace Talks, which ground on from 1968 to 1973 and were ill-fated from the start. It is well known now, indeed was known then, that neither the American, the South Vietnamese, nor the North Vietnamese delegation was negotiating in good faith. In the news photographs you can clearly see the glass behemoths hovering over the negotiating table. Through luck and pluck Vo managed to acquire the chandeliers and now, roughly forty-five years after the signing of the sham treaty, the tableau of lights and cut glass on the floor, seen behind a translucent white scrim, can make you weep if you dwell on it.

Vo is a tenacious and resourceful investigator. He follows a line of inquiry to its end, can be encapsulated in a specific object—the pen nib, the seat cushion, the room key—that becomes a synecdoche, a stand-in for a whole swath of history, either global or personal, or both.

One of the most haunting pieces in the exhibition, Lot 20. Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs (2013), involved Vo buying at auction two Chippendale-style chairs that were used in the White House Cabinet Room by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and President John F. Kennedy, which they sat on when they made the decision to commit to military involvement in Vietnam. I don’t know if McNamara continued to use the chairs in the White House when he wrestled with increasingly grave doubts about the war’s viability or purpose yet continued to advise President Johnson to escalate the destruction, but the history is there. Vo has stripped these classics of American design down to their core structure, yielding several separate sculptures in the process. In my favorite, the horsehair stuff-ing from the two seat cushions and backs—thick brown pads of tightly packed fiber, like collapsed beds of shredded wheat or giant, rusting scouring pads—are stacked on a low plinth, their pleasingly rectilinear forms softened and smashed together. Random bits of horsehair fall here and there, like charred pixie dust. It takes but a second for the devastating joke to sink in: a literal deconstruction of the seat of power. As with much of Vo’s work, the sculpture is like a religious relic, and also formally elegant in an Arte Povera way, succinct and tart and faintly ridiculous. It’s a work that says: All of your hubris and your grand designs—all of
Brobdingnagian overtones. Placed forefinger to wrist, and give it somber, bisect the hand here and there, fromuity. You can imagine it on a barge, poignant. The enormous copper hand, makes the painted illusion all the more way around, exposing the back, which It’s like turning the stage scenery part experience of seeing the form nearly This sculpture, which I think is the best on a palette of wood, the four fingers The inside of the hand, the palm side, uted to museums and other public in the round, so you can see the scaf-ery. Most of the chunks are exhibited roughly three hundred fragments—a People put Vo on the map is a full- size replica any summit conference. The piece that that now keeps those dubious royals the monarchy in the first place and it’s as if the pea not only stands for the upheaval it represents. I in Vo’s work, and I can imagine that he doesn’t particularly value it. Why bother when the world already gives you so much? In this regard, he joins a legion of artists, panning for gold in the slauce of history, who largely ex- chiewn invention in favor of presenta- tion. In Vo’s work there is replication and appropriation, finnely tuned dis- play, and semi-pervasive deconstruc- tion. There is also a “leaving things as they are” quality to his use of ma- terials, by which I mean people, ideas, personal histories, etc. Of course so phisticated people know that present- ing is also making, that leaving things as you found them is also shaping a work. But in our hearts, is there really no difference?

Vo’s radicality, the way his work feels transgressive and exciting, has been to take appropriation one step further, to finally acknowledge the utter lawless- ness of the artist’s lack of boundaries, to assume that whatever exists in the world is somehow his. In an admiring New Yorker profile by Calvin Tomkins, Vo is quoted as saying, regarding a trove of photographs taken by a man, Joseph Carrier, who befriended him early on and gave him access to his photo album: “The photograph material belonged to Joe. I thought it belonged equally to me, so I had no guilt.” That mindset—the fluidity and porous- ness, the way the work belongs to whoever makes imaginative claim on it—is at the center of Vo’s appeal. It calls to mind a remark attributed to Picasso: “A good artist borrows, a great artist steals.”

Once you get acclimated to the level of appropriation—once the brazeness settles down—you can start to look at what the artist is doing from a stylistic point of view. Not stylistic in the sense of whether the things are well arranged, but in terms of a work’s vibration, what it aligns with in the work of like art- ist who have made things that look dif- ferent from what Vo has made.

For example, a piece from 2009 in- volves a tattered and stained Ameri- can flag and pieces, on top of which are applied various military acces- sories: a helmet, hat, satchel, bayonet, etc. They belonged to a kit made in the late nineteenth century, as part of the US centennial celebration. Vo bought the artifacts at auction and arranged them as they had been shown in the catalog. This piece is taken to mean all the usual things about history and America’s march toward hegemony, but its communicative energy, its af- flict, is closer to Ived Coffee, a 1986 painting by Fairfield Porter that depicts the poet James Shuyler and a young woman sitting on the porch of Porter’s house in Maine. Both are at a similar scale, subject, but the Porter looks fresher. Vo’s sculpture, which has the title She was more like a beauty queen from a movie scene, is heavy on presentation. There’s nothing encoded in what he has made that hasn’t already been agreed on.

Some of Vo’s most successful works are a group of freestanding sculptures that join fragments of an-_traditional- looking, sculpture- like ob-jects, and their elements, both visual and historical, are in perfect equipoise. They’re not just illustrations of an idea. I like how brazen they are: You’re cut-ting up the antique sculpture? They’re elegant and also funny and provoca- tive and a tiny bit sad. You can tell that Vo really loves and responds to the original material and is hav- ing a good time fitting the elements together. Who doesn’t love a carved wooden figure whose surface is so worn that a grain splits apart? And fragments of Roman torsos—do we even have to ask? The profane ti-tles (Your mother sucks cocks in Hell, 2015, for example) come from titles of camp classic, The Exor-cist, and form the third point in a triad of juxtaposition.

Some of Vo’s art has a tinge of the burned out, the group of works from 2008—2009 came about when Vo bought a medieval wood carving of Saint Joseph in Amsterdam and real- ized he had no easy way of getting it
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