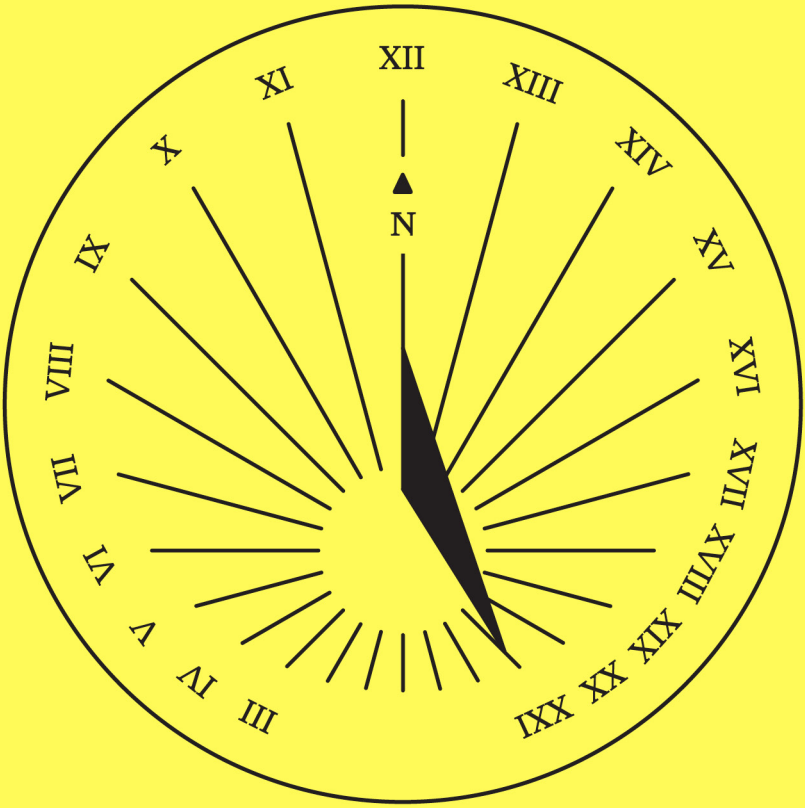

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL

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PICTORIAL REALISM AND TIME. EARLY MODERN TO NOW

ed. by Thomas Hughes
& Rachel Stratton

PART II

https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2025.4

ARTICLES – ARTIKEL

REVIEWS – REZENSIONEN

ARTICLES
BEITRÄGE

RURAL TEMPORALITIES

POSITIONS OF REALISM BETWEEN SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY AND NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Julia Secklehner

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
6/4, 2025, 435–470

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ABSTRACT

The rural has long functioned as antithesis to the urban as the location of modernity. One of the defining elements of this dichotomy is the different temporalities they relate to, which mark the urban as fast-paced and technologically driven, while the rural appears slow, even "timeless". In 1930s Czechoslovakia, however, an array of different realisms, defined by their value as a social record, was inscribed in the countryside through photography and film. Exploring the tensions arising in this space in the work of Irena Blühová and Karol Plicka, this essay argues that the fusing of urban and rural temporalities played a defining role in constructions of competing rural realisms. It takes the rural/urban dichotomy as a point of departure to show that its intrinsic, competing constellations forged new rural realisms at the intersection of modernist form, ethnography, and reportage.

KEYWORDS

Czechoslovakia; Modernist photography; Rural realism.

Reviewing the German Werkbund exhibition Film und Foto (FiFo) in Vienna in 1929, a commercial photographer going by the initials S.F. highlighted:

> The value of photography does not lie in its aesthetic qualities, but in the human, social intensity of what has been captured. The only standard for everything produced is this: not to turn photography into an art form again, but to highlight the deep social responsibility of the photographer, who works with the tools available to him that could not produce otherwise: this work must be a truthful document of contemporary reality.[1]

Photography's main task for S.F. was, therefore, focused on social realism, emphasising the human figure and documentary practices at the expense of modernist formal experimentation. S.F. was disdained due to the selection of photomontages on display and lamented the few examples of landscape and rural photographs that could offer visitors new perspectives on contemporary reality beyond the metropolis.[2] Although a distinctive voice, S.F.'s perspective not only reflects the scepticism with which modernist photography in interwar central Europe was regarded by conservative circles; his reference to landscape and rural photography also draws attention to a little explored phenomenon of modern photography, which was deeply connected with the medium as an "objective" and "practical" tool of realism in the region after the First World War:[3] images of the countryside.

The "rural" – symbolising tradition, folk culture, and archaic lifestyles – gained increasing significance by the mid-nineteenth century in central Europe. As the century drew to a close, the rural was firmly established as the opposite of the city as a cosmopolitan, inherently modern, but also destructive space. This dynamic continued to be particularly prominent after the First World War within national discourses in the Habsburg successor states, largely due to the geographical dominance of rural areas outside the capital cities – Budapest, Prague, and Vienna. Representing different realities of life, both urban and rural spaces gained heightened importance in the ideological battles following the geopolitical shifts of the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 and the nation-states that were founded in its place. Photography and film became vital

1
S. F., Ausstellung Film und Foto, in: *Allgemeine Photographische Zeitung* 12/3, 1930, 5.

2
For a study of this exhibition in the Austrian context, see Julia Secklehner, Social Realisms, New Aesthetics. Women Photographers' Engaged Photography in Interwar Central Europe, in: Magda Lipska and Piotr Skłodkowski (eds.), *Was Socialist Realism Global? Modernism, Soc-modernism, Socially Engaged Figuration*, Warsaw 2023, 85–102.

3
Elizabeth Cronin, *Heimat Photography in Austria*, Salzburg 2016, 28.

tools for visualising these conflicts. Mapping, tracing, and anchoring national origins, images of the countryside circulated widely in popular culture, shaping an imagery of "national traditions" and "authenticity". Simultaneously, documentary and activist photographs on the political left aimed to frame the countryside from a perspective that revealed the failures of capitalism, portraying the "homeland" as poor, isolated, and neglected by modern society. Taking these contrasting representations of the countryside as forms of competing realism as a starting point, this essay examines the dynamic between idealising/folkloristic and activist/documentary photography in interwar central Europe. It argues that this process transformed the countryside into a highly contested ideological space, where photographers created competing realisms through a wide array of images, whose significance has often been overshadowed by the focus on the city as a location of modernity.[4] As Peter Demetz noted in his introduction to the catalogue *Foto. Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945*: "Modernity means, above all, a modernisation that thrives in the industrial world of the new metropolis, an emancipatory nationalism, and a democratisation based on widening suffrage to include women and working people."[5] In a critical revision of this argument, this essay examines how the rural was constructed during processes of modernisation. Exploring the work of two photographers working in eastern Czechoslovakia (today's Slovakia), Irena Blühová (1904–1991) and Karol Plicka (1894–1987), it demonstrates that the blending of urban and rural temporalities played a crucial role in constructions of competing rural realisms at the intersection of modernist form, ethnography, and reportage.

I. Rural and Urban Time: The Countryside Outside Modernity?

Raymond Williams opens his seminal book *The City and the Countryside* (1973), with the simple notion that "'Country' and 'city' are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities".[6] Williams draws attention to the ways in which city and countryside have been imagined for centuries as seemingly

4
Malcolm Bradbury, The Cities of Modernism, in: Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism 1890–1930*, Harmondsworth 1991, 94–104; Martin Kohlrausch and Jan C. Behrends (eds.), *Races to Modernity. Metropolitan Aspirations in Eastern Europe, 1890–1940*, Budapest/New York 2014; Nathaniel D. Wood, *Becoming Metropolitan. Urban Selfhood and the Making of Modern Cracow*, DeKalb, IL 2010.

5
Peter Demetz, Introduction. A Map of Courage, in: *Foto. Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (exh. cat. Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art), ed. by Matthew S. Witkovsky, Washington 2007, 1–7, here 1.

6
Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London/New York 2016 [1973], 1. This section is a reworked version of Julia Secklehner, Introduction. Central European Modernism and the Countryside, in: ead., *Rethinking Modern Austrian Art beyond the Metropolis*, London 2025, 1–14.

oppositional poles of human existence. Each has its positive and negative attributes: the countryside as a place of "peace, innocence and simple virtue", but also "backwardness, ignorance, limitation"; while the city embodies "learning, communication, light" as much as "noise, worldliness and ambition".[7] More recently, Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey have stressed that the very idea of the countryside is often rooted in middle-class ideas about specific areas, and "constructed as a site of nostalgic retreat divorced from modernity and modernisation".[8] However, they also note that the sets of values that define "the countryside" within modern society – such as "rural", "country", "pastoral", "nationalism", and "nostalgia" – are only the surface of a much broader range of negotiations concerning the role of the rural in twentieth-century culture.[9] While Bluemel and McCluskey focus their analysis on Britain, their argument about the need to examine more closely the various meanings that the countryside came to hold within modernity also has implications in the context of central Europe. Dominated by the idea of a "national revival" in the arts at the turn of the twentieth century, the role of the countryside in central Europe has long been shaped by its definitions as a middle-class concept of the rural idyll. On this basis, the countryside has primarily been addressed in scholarship on turn-of-the-century craft practices, where the appropriation and borrowing from rural and folk culture led to the development of new visual forms and styles.[10] Not least, it also manifested the rural in the urban imagination as the "national heartland" within the competing nations of the Habsburg Empire.[11] After the First World War, however, accounts of central European modernism shifted, and the importance of the countryside appeared to recede in favour of the metropolitan avant-gardes, conflating, not least, the presentation of new states such as Czechoslovakia as intrinsically progressive with the forward-looking attitudes of the avant-garde.[12] However, the role of the countryside should be reassessed within the changed

7
Ibid.

8
Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey, Introduction. Rural Modernity in Britain, in: eid. (eds.), *Rural Modernity in Britain. A Critical Intervention*, Edinburgh 2018, 1–16, here 2.

9
Ibid., 3.

10
David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State*, Manchester 1992; Nicola Gordon Bowe (ed.), *Art and the National Dream. The Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn of the Century Design*, Dublin 1993; Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 6.

11
Marta Filipová, National Treasure or a Redundant Relic. The Roles of the Vernacular in Czech Art, in: *RIHA Journal* 66, 26 February 2013, 1–33; Gordon Bowe, Art and the National Dream.

12
Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes. Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930*, Cambridge, MA 2002; Steven A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans*, ca. 1890–1939, Cambridge 1997.

geopolitical context of the First Czechoslovak Republic: a composite country comprising Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, all centrally governed from Prague. A significant part of the state was classified as "rural", and this designation continued to influence how new, modern realities were shaped after 1918.[13] Thus, rather than being placed "outside" modernity, the countryside was an important part of reformulating local culture in light of new social and political realities, especially to the eastern part of Czechoslovakia – Slovakia and Ruthenia. The main drive in doing so lay in the exchange between rural and urban spaces and, as such, also between the different temporalities they appeared to be governed by.

Williams writes about urban-rural cultural exchanges as an "active and continuous history", "moving in time [...] moving in feeling and ideas, through a network of relationships and decisions".[14] By extension, life in the countryside, in the village, or at suburban peripheries is believed to be governed by different structures than those of the modern city: constructed from the perspective of the "unstable" and contingent temporality of the modern metropolis, it appears repetitive and unchanging, contrasting the constantly shifting, fast-paced urban environment with notions of permanence, tradition, and stability. This clash of perceptions becomes especially evident when city and countryside collide. In an account of his journey to eastern Czechoslovakia in the mid-1920s, for instance, the Hungarian historian and politician Oszkár Jászi describes his encounters with villages in the eastern regions of Slovakia [italics mine]:

> Though the railway is near them and motor cars pass through the villages, the internal culture of Eastern Slovakia still remains *entirely medieval*, based exclusively on *tradition and religion*. What we, not without a certain arrogance, fondly call 'modern culture' has never touched them and is only slowly beginning to penetrate.[15]

Jászi's description – typical of how a metropolitan class viewed the countryside – is linked to his sociological analysis of a "miracle" in the small town of Dlhé Klčovo, where the Blessed Virgin of Lourdes appeared to the peasant woman Anna Šaffa, explaining that she had decided to relocate there after the people in Lourdes had fallen from

13
Budování státu. Reprezentace československa v umění, architektuře a designu (exh. cat. Prague, National Gallery), ed. by Milena Bartlová and Jindřich Vybíral, Prague 2015.

14
Williams, The Country and the City, 10 and 11.

15
Oszkár Jászi, How a New Lourdes Arises, in: *The Slavonic Review* 4/11, 1925, 334–346, here 342.

faith.[16] The countryside in his narrative seems to be governed by entirely different laws than the modern city and represents a realm of superstition and magic that, Jászi affirms, belongs to a different time than his own. In other words, the countryside exists outside of contemporary time, and although it could be reached by modern means (such as the "motor cars passing through the villages"), it was simultaneously far removed from it. Travelling from city to countryside, in the eyes of cosmopolites like Jászi, thus also appeared as a journey through time. Similarly, the Austrian journalist Hans Margulies published a travel account of his trip to eastern Czechoslovakia in 1932, in which he described the region as a "jungle and medieval age".[17] In the 1920s and '30s, then, a period often associated with visions of utopian or dystopian futures, the countryside symbolised an accessible "safe" location in the past.[18] In the process, it became valued both as an adventurous "backwards" place, as the accounts by Jászi and Margulies suggest, and as "a wonderful old chest filled with precious goods", as the Austrian writer Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski referred to rural Czechoslovakia in a cultural travel guide published in 1936.[19]

Dominated by cosmopolitan views of the countryside, the association between "the rural" and "timelessness" notably echoes the way colonising powers historically positioned indigenous cultures as standing outside linear time. Termed the "denial of coevalness" by anthropologist Johannes Fabian, the institutionalisation of linear time by modern "civilised" Western culture thus defined different ways of living as anachronistic and legitimised its perceived superiority.[20] Within central Europe, the unequal relationship between urban and rural cultures was understood similarly, though its outcomes often took on quite different forms:[21] instead of fostering the creation of an "other" to justify overseas imperialist or colonial projects, the anachronisms of urban and rural time supported constructs of an "authentic" and accessible local culture. This positioned the countryside's "backwardness" as a necessary condition for preserving tradition. While "rural" and "tradition" are not identical, their meanings frequently overlap in reference to rural

16
Ibid., 336.

17
Hans Margulies, Reise durch Urwald und Mittelalter, in: *Der Tag*, 7 February 1932, 6.

18
David Ayers, Benedikt Hjartarson, Tomi Huttunen, and Harri Veivo, *Utopia. The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, Berlin 2015; David Cunningham, Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde, in: *The Journal of Architecture* 6/2, 2001, 169–182.

19
Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, *Columbus in der Slovakei*, Bratislava 1936, 10.

20
Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York 2014 [1983], 32; Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 159.

21
The exception to this would be the depiction of minorities, especially Roma communities.

culture. Tradition, in this sense, presented an image of stability and established social norms that, by the nineteenth century, became an "assuring reconstruction of the past" and a natural counterbalance to the rapid changes of modern life.[22] Thus, even though "tradition" is not necessarily rooted in the countryside, its meaning as a preservationist approach to "past" customs could easily be associated with rural areas, considering its connotation as an archaic place.

The construction of the rural through "temporal distancing" as an anachronistic aspect within modernity found wide application in new media such as photography and film.[23] In this practice, photographers avoided including elements of modern culture in their compositions of the countryside, instead drawing on folk culture and natural landscapes to forge a divide between the "modern time" of the photographer and viewer and the "rural time" of the scene depicted. As a result, photography of an idealised countryside became a popular element in mainstream culture, consistently emphasising the role of the rural as a place of a different temporality, which could be highlighted especially through photography's claims to realism.[24] The complexity of this interplay between rural idealisation and emphasis on realism is especially clear in the work and reception of the Czech photographer Karel Plicka, whose photographs, films, and photobooks represented an important way of viewing the Slovak countryside from the mid-1920s onward. Using the sharp realism of New Objectivity photography to forge lyrical scenes of the countryside, Plicka's work constituted a form of rural realism, in which the two temporalities of city and countryside continually collided.

II. Rural Photography as National Realism?

Plicka's manifold interests as a pedagogue, ethnographer, musicologist, photographer, and filmmaker formed a practice which had documentary aims at its core. He studied music in Berlin and Prague and graduated from the Teacher's Institute in Hradec Králové in east Bohemia in 1913. Working as a schoolteacher until the start of the First World War, Plicka initially helped establish several choirs in the new Czechoslovak state before being appointed as a music researcher for the national Slovak cultural organisation Matica slovenská in Bratislava in 1923. Plicka soon expanded his interest in Slovak folk culture beyond music. During the 1920s, he would not only collect thousands of folk songs, melodies, and

22 Anthony Giddens, Tradition in der post-traditionalen Gesellschaft, in: *Soziale Welt* 44/4, 1993, 445–485, here 449 and 454.

23 Matti Bunzl, Foreword. Syntheses of a Critical Anthropology, in: Fabian, Time and the Other, vii–xxxii, here x.

24 Matthew S. Witkovsky, Land without a Name, in: Foto. Modernity in Central Europe, 160–179.

children's games, which he published extensively throughout his long career, but also began capturing folk life with a camera, which he understood as a complementary practice:[25] his photographs and films recorded the environment in which the music originated.[26]

While Plicka's musical research was dedicated to efforts to preserve national heritage for Matica slovenská, his photographs quickly went beyond the purpose of an accompanying ethnographic record. On postcards, Plicka's compositions of serene landscapes, shepherds, and children in elaborate folk costumes helped shape a popular image of Slovakia as an ancient cradle of folk culture. To this day, Plicka's body of work is synonymous with the "invention" of a beautiful rural Slovakia through modern photography, mainly represented by his work for Matica slovenská. Overall, Plicka produced a much broader body of work, which not only included a photo book about Prague (1940), and contributions to various travel guides, but also a more critical social photography of Roma camps and impoverished communities in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, a region to the very east of Czechoslovakia.[27] However, these have rarely been published. Based on his idealised images of Slovak folk culture, the reception of Plicka's work has garnered a variety of interpretations: while some scholars have noted the exoticist flavour of his images in reference to the peasant communities in Sunday dress that frequently appear in his work, others have discussed his idealisation of rural scenes as an example of so-called *Heimatphotographie* (homeland photography), for instance, an idealised form of rural photography mainly considered within the German cultural context.[28]

Initially mentioned in a pamphlet by Anton Kuhfahl as a medium dedicated to the preservation and study of the "homeland", the genre was characterised by views and portraits capable of encapsulating the "homeland" in a way that highlighted subjectivity and remained notably vague.[29] In central Europe, the guidelines

25
Karel Plicka, Songs of the Slovak Mountains, in: *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 8, 1956, 30–31; id., Poznámky k Národopisným Soutěžím, in: *Český Lid* 36/5–6, 1949, 111–112 (8 October 2025); id., Na festivalu lidového tance a zpěvu v norsku, in: *Český Lid* 43/2, 1956, 90–91.

26
I first discussed the outline of Plicka's biography and his links to *Heimatphotographie* and Austria in Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 110.

27
Simona Bérešová, *Die Slowakei in der Fotografie von Karel Plicka*, MA dissertation, University of Vienna, 2014, 22–23; Marián Pauer, *Karol Plicka*, Bratislava 2016, 58–59.

28
Bérešová, Die Slowakei in der Fotografie, 20–24; Witkovsky, Foto. Modernity in Central Europe, 169. Jonathan Owen, Old Worlds and the New Vision. The Ethnographic Modernism of Karel Plicka's *The Earth Sings* (1933), in: Beáta Hock, Klara Kemp-Welch, and Jonathan Owen (eds.), *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism. 1918–1956*, London 2019, 228–240 (8 October 2025).

29
Anton Kuhfahl, *Heimatphotographie. Die Photographie im Dienste von Heimatschutz und Heimatforschung*, Halle-Saale 1921, 1.

for homeland photography were explained in the Austrian amateur photography magazine *Kamera Kunst* in 1929: "*Heimatphotographie* enforces a consolidation about what the German *Volk* has achieved across the centuries. From this consolidation, pride and love of the *Heimat* will grow by itself. The joy in the beauty of the *Heimat* will be awakened."[30] In this vein, homeland photography was based on subjective views to construct a national photography that celebrated folk traditions and natural landscapes. Bolstered by the rise of affordable cameras and illustrated photography magazines in the 1920s, a vast production of homeland photographs emerged across the region, often linked to equally popular activities such as hiking and mountaineering.[31] Yet even though homeland photography had a popular basis, its most successful representatives were artists specialising in creating idealised folk scenes mediated through viewpoints common in contemporary photographic practice: steep angles, sharp focus, dramatic shadow and light, close-up portraits, and an emphasis on material details such as dress, headgear, and decorative elements. Such depictions reinforced folk culture as a marker of "authentic" national traditions rooted in the countryside. These had first been manifested in the nineteenth century and, despite changing fashions and industrialisation, folk culture continued to be portrayed as an archaic remnant that maintained cultural stability through its connections to national communities.[32] Photography, by extension, provided a tool to express this position of folk culture within modernity. Represented by (almost exclusively male) photographers such as Rudolf Koppitz in Austria and Plicka in Czechoslovakia, homeland photography thus approached the creation of rural scenes with "scientific" precision. Applying theories by avant-garde artists such as László Moholy-Nagy, who argued that new technologies offered a new perspective on "reality", they crafted realistic fantasies of rural life that showcased the countryside in its best light.[33]

In the 1920s and '30s, Plicka worked for Matica slovenská, and as such, his photographs closely aligned with national ideals of a Slovak homeland, conveyed through the camera as a tool of ethno-

30
F. Limmer and A. Petersen, Richtlinien über Heimatphotographie, in: *Kamera-Kunst. Illustrierte Zeitschrift für Photographie* 12, December 1929, 273–274, here 273. See also Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 98.

31
Witkovsky, Land without a Name, 161.

32
Corinne Geering, "Is This Not Just Nationalism?" Disentangling the Threads of Folk Costumes in the History of Central and Eastern Europe, in: *Nationalities Papers* 50/4, 2022, 722–741.

33
László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, transl. by Janet Seligman, London 1969, 28; Elizabeth Otto, Designing Men. New Visions of Masculinity in the Photomontages of Herbert Bayer, Marcel Breuer, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, in: Jeffrey Saletnik and Robin Schuldenfrei (eds.), *Bauhaus Construct. Fashioning Identity, Discourse, and Modernism*, London/New York 2009, 183–204, here 189.

[Fig. 1]
Karel Plicka, *Děvčata z Trenčanské Teplé* [*Girls from Trenčianska Teplá*], 1928, black and white photograph, 18.9 × 28 cm, Bratislava, Slovak National Gallery © DILIA.

graphic "veracity".[34] Places like the traditional sheep-farming village of Čičmany, where Plicka created much of his work, became very popular with tourists and were promoted as opportunities for live engagement with a native culture that was on the verge of extinction. In fact, many of the village's traditional painted log houses had to be rebuilt after a fire and were reconstructed by the architect Dušan Jurkovič, who had specialised in folk-style modern architecture at the turn of the twentieth century.[35] The Slovak photography specialist Aurel Hrabušičký referred to popular touristic outposts such as Čičmany as a "Slav Tahiti" for its popularity with artists, emphasising the ideals of a romanticised "exotic" that significantly impacted the presentation of such places in modern Czechoslovakia.[36] In this context, Plicka's photographs exhibited typical features of homeland photography: the idealised traditional life they captured served as an antidote to modern, urban life. *Girls from Trenčianska Teplá* (1928), for example, depicts three young female figures kneeling on the grass [Fig. 1]. All three wear elaborate folk dress and look in the same direction, at a vantage point to the right outside the picture plane. A ceramic jug placed before them adds a piece of traditional craftwork to the scene, which, along with the multi-layered costumes, creates an archaic portrait of a rural community living in a natural environment. The scenic lighting in which the picture is bathed is particularly noteworthy: surrounded by a darker first scene, the central illumination of the meadow where the girls sit stages the scene in a highly theatrical manner, while emphasising the gleaming white of the girls' freshly starched blouses. Even though the formal composition follows that of a conventional portrait, its sharp, clear and highly orchestrated setting underlines a high technical finish that underscores the "certainty that such a thing had existed", with a focus on its representation of the past.[37] For, as Roland Barthes writes, "reality is absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead".[38] In this sense, Plicka's meticulously composed and highly finished image does not emphasise the contemporaneity of the scene photographed

34
David Václavík, Shaping the Slovak Identity and the Manifestation Thereof in the Social Iconosphere. The Case of the Slovak National Museum, in: *Historická Sociologie* 11/2, 2019, 35–52, here 44; Aurel Hrabušický, Okrajova kultúrna kiižovatka ako pôda slovenskuého mýtu, in: *Slovenský mýtus* (exh. cat. Bratislava, Slovak National Gallery/Slovak National Museum), ed. by ead., Katarína Bajcurova, and Alexandra Kusej, Bratislava 2005, 29–45.

35
Zuzana Štancelová, Dušan Jurkovič a Čičmany, in: *Monument revue* 3/2, 2014, 8–11 (16 October 2025).

36
Hrabušický, Okrajova kultúrna kiižovatka, 31.

37
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photograpy*, transl. by Richard Howard, New York 1981, 80.

38
Ibid., 79.

but, through its focus on costume and elements of folk culture in a natural setting, constructs its "pastness". While the initial aim of such photographs may have been ethnographic, moreover, the popularity of Plicka's work created the very rural life of bliss they appeared to document, fluctuating between ethnographic pictorialism and the "modern" precision of New Objectivity.

Composed as genre images that avoided references to contemporary life, Plicka's photographs were mainly produced for urban and international audiences. They drew on the formal style of modernist photography, while placing scenes in an ambiguous time through folkloric motif choices, highlighting tensions between urban (technological/contemporary) and rural (natural/ancient) temporalities on the image surface. In a broader sense, Plicka's approach thereby also complicates notions of realist and non-realist photography. In his essay "The New Realism", British photographer Derek Gardiner noted in 1953:

> A realist photograph treats its subject as a fact; it is crisp and objective and requires the subject to speak of itself and for itself. A romantic photograph uses the subject as a vehicle for conveying an emotional idea, and has a greater emotional potential that normally belongs to the subject itself. At its worst, romantic photography leads to that odd pastime, 'fancy dress' photography.[39]

Plicka's work in film and photography blends the two aims of realist and romantic photography that Gardiner distinguishes. The photographer's role as an ethnologist adds an element of "scientific" credibility to his work. Simultaneously, his compositions draw on a romanticising lyricism that, in the style of a national photography, emphasises the key features of local culture in an idealised way. A particularly relevant project is Plicka's major film venture, *Zem spieva* (*The Earth Sings*, 1933), which, both in its presentation and reception, highlights the different temporalities – and interpretations of realism – involved.

III. Modernist but Archaic? Plicka's Czecho/Slovak Film Poem *The Earth Sings*

At about an hour in length, *The Earth Sings* is the first feature-length sound film produced in Slovakia, presented as a monochromatic, lyrical portrait of life in the Slovak countryside. The film's technical achievements and highly inventive perspectives, meanwhile, connect it to avant-garde filmmaking practices. Film scholar Jonathan Owen, for example, has drawn parallels to projects such as Vladimír Úlehla's *Mizející svět* (*The Disappearing World*, 1932), which focused

39 Derek Gardiner, The New Realism, in: *Aperture* 2/4, 1954, 35–38, here 35 (8 October 2025).

on Slovak folklore in a documentary style.[40] According to Plicka himself, his primary inspiration for making a film that depicted rural life with an aesthetic appeal through montage techniques was the Soviet film theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin. In later years, he also highlighted a kinship with the Ukrainian filmmaker Alexander Dovženko, whose silent film *Земля* (*Zemlya*, *Earth*, 1930), about collectivisation, employed montage techniques to forge idealised images of peasant life.[41] As these examples demonstrate, *The Earth Sings* is part of a range of ethnographic productions in eastern and central Europe during the 1930s which combined documentary-style and experimental filmmaking with portrayals of the countryside as a place of rural idyll.[42]

In an interview from the late 1960s Plicka explained, "I came to Slovakia as a musician, but I could not just stick to music. At that time, Slovakia was a multi-faceted world of ancient, high folk culture. Its artistic strength and beauty literally conquered me."[43] This fascination with the beauty of Slovak folk culture was important for *The Earth Sings* and its circulation, as well as Slovakia's role within Czechoslovak ideology and consciousness. While Slovaks were considered one of the "state-forming nations" of the country, alongside the Czechs, the relationship between the two was anything but equal, and the two nations were viewed quite differently.[44] Because Slovakia was mainly an agrarian country, it was often portrayed as being at an earlier stage of economic development and cultural maturity, which resulted in its representation on both the national and international stage primarily through folk culture.[45] Thus, while the Czechs represented the urban educated elites of the country, Slovaks were often portrayed as shepherds and peasants, whose lives could provide insight into a vanishing folk culture – hence also the title of Úlehla's film, *The Disappearing World*. As a film about Slovakia made by a Czech filmmaker and ethnographer, these imbalances also played a significant role in the production and reception of *The Earth Sings*. Throughout the process, rural and urban time clashed both during filming and within the film itself, making the differing realities and associated temporalities of Czechs

40
Owen, Old Worlds and the New Vision.

41
Karol Plicka, Poznámky o filme, in: *Slovenské pohľady* 48/9–10, 1932, 594–595.

42
Owen, Old Worlds and the New Vision.

43
Plicka in conversation with Martin Slivka, printed in Pauer, Karol Plicka, 22.

44
Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics. Nation versus State*, New York 2019 [1996], 26–27.

45
Marta Filipová, 'Highly Civilized, yet Very Simple'. Images of the Czechoslovak State and Nation at Interwar World's Fairs, in: *Nationalities Papers* 50/1, 2022, 145–165.

and Slovaks, town and country people, an intrinsic aspect of its construction.

The Earth Sings extended the concepts of Slovak folklore films developed in Plicka's earlier projects, *Za slovenským ľudom* (*About the Slovak Folk*, 1928) and *Po horách, po dolách* (*Over Hill and Dale*, 1929), which were critically acclaimed, shorter documentary features.[46] The film opens with an introductory sequence in Prague, first providing an overview of historic sites before transitioning into the streets, busy with cars, pedestrians, and the hustle and bustle of a modern metropolis. By starting in the Czechoslovak capital, the film's narrative arc not only shifts from the city to the countryside and from modern to traditional life, but also reflects the perspective of its audiences: primarily aimed at urban viewers, *The Earth Sings* recalls the tours to eastern Czechoslovakia as narrated by Jászi, depicting these journeys as "back in time", where rural life was untouched by modernity.[47] At the same time, in the context of the physical reconstruction of Čičmany and its role as an early heritage site, it becomes clear that this journey was not only about a "past" shaped by the film itself but also one that was being physically reconstructed in the Slovak countryside. In other words, the distinction between rural and urban time emphasised in *The Earth Sings*, created through the spatial separation between Prague and rural Slovakia, not only underscores a contrast between Czech urban modernity and an archaic rural Slovakia; it also reflects the active *reinvention* of Slovakia within these terms at the time.

The division between modernity and tradition is a theme that not only shapes the film's framing through the opening sequence but also its overall production: between 1929 and 1932, Plicka travelled to various locations from the Valašsko region in eastern Moravia to the Carpathian Mountains to record scenes for the film. In October 1932, the material was then edited and cut at Prague's Barrandov film studios by the young avant-garde filmmaker Alexandr Hackenschmied (1907–2004). Hackenschmied's own films from this time included *Bezúčelná procházka* (*Aimless Walk*, 1930), an avant-garde project recording a surrealist-inspired walk in the metropolis.[48] His contributions to *The Earth Sings* significantly enhanced the film's modernist framing, once again emphasising the production of Slovak ancient "authenticity" through the lens of the modern city. A similar approach was also adopted for the music: instead of being set to the Slovak folk songs recorded by Plicka, the music was composed by the Czech composer Frantisek Škvor and performed by the orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague. Although the film

46
Owen, Old Worlds and the New Vision.

47
Margulies, Reise durch Urwald und Mittelalter, 6; Jászi, How a New Lourdes Arises, 342.

48
Natascha Drubek, "Bezúčelná Procházka" / "Aimless Walk" (1930). Alexander Hackenschmied's "Film Study" of a Tram Ride to the Outskirts of Prague – Libeň, in: *Bohemia* 52/1, 2012, 76–107.

was financed – at a loss – by Matica slovenská, it is thus generally best described as a "Czechoslovak" project, relying on a combination of Slovak film material and Prague-based production. Indeed, Slovak cities such as Bratislava and Košice were entirely omitted at this stage: only after Slovakia seceded from Czechoslovakia as a Nazi puppet state in 1939 was the opening sequence in Prague replaced with one from Bratislava.

After the opening sequence in Prague, the focus lies exclusively on rural Slovakia. The film from this point onwards is a montage of close-up cropped portraits of old men, women, and children in folk costume, alongside fast and dynamic sequences of dance and games [Fig. 2]. It also features dramatised landscapes shot from steep angles and at diagonal perspectives, with a quick succession of images: archaic rural life, framed by a perspective aligned with a modernist visual language. Different locations in the countryside are visited from spring to harvest season, capturing the work cycle of farming communities and folk traditions. Winter is omitted, as Plicka collected all the film material in the remote and often hard-to-reach locations in the warmer months. Whenever scenes shift to a new location, subtitles by Ján Smrek – editor of the Prague-based Slovak cultural magazine *Elán* – offer brief lyrical descriptions of the approximate location within the country (in the Tatras, to the east etc.). Altogether, locations remain vague and the focus lies on assembling a harmonious cycle structured by the seasons, rather than on individual places: instead of the linear timeline of modern life, *The Earth Sings* presents Slovakia in accordance with ancient cyclical patterns of time. Linked to this contrast are also the locations where the film is shot and produced: after travelling "back in time" to an unspecified Slovak countryside from Prague, the film's treatment of time shifts and emphasises through the montages that, in the countryside, an indistinguishable "natural" order prevails. Slovakia thus becomes a homogenous, folkloric, agrarian whole, organically tied together by the connection between its people and the land.

The main influence on people's lives is the change of seasons. These are introduced through a rapid succession of landscape views – mountains, fields, rivers – which set the scene before the flow of images slows down to focus on the people inhabiting it. With spring's arrival, for instance, a group of young girls is shown carrying the Morena, an effigy of a woman symbolising death [Fig. 3]. Traditionally, she is carried out of villages and set on fire to mark the beginning of spring in the film. The scene is carefully staged as a highly dramatic event, shot from a frog's perspective with fast-moving images. After the burning, the girls drop the figure into a river and watch it drown while sitting on steep rock formations. The effigy, still burning, is carried away by the current, dramatising the forces of nature with a focus on the strength of the river and the towering steep rocks above. Other festive moments include religious holidays such as Easter and lively village fairs. Between these celebrations, scenes depict workers in the fields – ploughing,

[Fig. 2]
Karel Plicka, Zem spieva [The Earth Sings], 1933, black and white photograph [no measurements provided] © Slovenský filmový ústav /© Slovak Film Institut / © Slowakisches Filminstitut.

[Fig. 3]
Karel Plicka, *Zem spieva* [*The Earth Sings*], 1933, black and white photograph [no measurements provided] © Slovenský filmový ústav /© Slovak Film Institut / © Slowakisches Filminstitut.

[Fig. 4]
Karel Plicka, *Zem spieva* [*The Earth Sings*], 1933, black and white photograph, 27.1 × 37.5 cm, Moravian Gallery, Brno © DILIA.

sowing, harvesting. Although these sequences hint at hard working conditions in reference to the basic tools and limited technology used, rural life still appears theatrical and romanticised: workers appear on the field in gleaming white Sunday best, with not a speck of mud on their calves, even as they draw a plough through the earth. When old women in folk costumes stack hay bales and weave rugs in large groups, men perform traditional highland dances with spectacular choreographies, and children play on rolling hills, it creates a paradisiacal image of Slovakia where people live fulfilled lives, far from modernity [Fig. 4]. Yet all the while, the film's formal aspects, which help to emphasise the rural as a place of archaic times, borrow from avant-garde filmmaking techniques, recalling Catherine Russell's argument that, "in the cinema, the pastoral allegory becomes exaggerated by the role of technology in the act of representation, further splitting the 'modern' from the 'premodern'".[49] *The Earth Sings* demonstrates this by combining experimental camerawork with realist documentary filmmaking to create an idealised countryside, which affirms Slovakia's position as a place separate from modernity itself.

IV. A Land of Biblical Times or Homegrown Exoticism?

The presentation of Slovak peasants in the film generally depicts them as cheerful communities living in large collectives. They are portrayed as good-natured and enthusiastic musicians and dancers from a young age. The gender division of labour reflects a "natural order" that permeates both society and the cyclical way of life in the villages. Young girls already help with childcare and handicrafts, while the boys play in the hills, preparing for a future as shepherds. The Slovak landscape is portrayed as an archaic paradise, and its inhabitants are exoticised as a premodern society existing outside modern time. This portrayal was widely accepted as a beautiful and highly artistic representation of Slovakia in both local and international press. After the film's premiere in 1933, it was shown in Prague and Bratislava, as well as in Vienna, Venice, and to Czech and Slovak émigré communities in the United States.[50] Thus, its reception was predominantly among urban, educated audiences who were promised a filmic journey leading back to the country's traditional roots. One review, published in the magazine *Venkov* in 1933, for example, noted that "the film wants to represent the illusion of a lost paradise, which will never return in its purity".[51] The popular Czech writer Karel Čapek, meanwhile, celebrated *The*

49
Catherine Russel, *Experimental Ethnography. The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Durham, NC 1999, 5.

50
Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 110.

51
Pauer, Karol Plicka, 49.

Earth Sings for its presentation of Slovakia as "a land of shepherds" reminiscent of "truly biblical times".[52] In Austria, where the film was shown in 1934 at Vienna's Urania cinema, an institution for adult education, the "naivety" and "innocence" of the Slovak population was affirmed in an article by Rochowanski in the Viennese newspaper *Der Tag*, titled "Adventures on Set" [Fig. 5].[53] Here, the author describes people's distrust towards the filming equipment, with one woman scared that her soul might be lost when caught by the camera. Only after some interaction with Plicka, the mediator between modern technology and the "native" population, do the villagers agree to be filmed. The accompanying production stills that contrast modern camera equipment with the curious, uniformly dressed shepherd boys surrounding it visualise the fusion of urban and rural temporalities in Plicka's work in the most direct manner. Beyond distinguishing the villagers as an ethnographic subject from the urban viewer, these images emphasise the fundamental differences between modern and traditional life and demonstrate this through the striking juxtaposition of the children and the camera, as if the two temporalities are at once clashing and fused together in the photographic image.

Unsurprisingly, this portrayal of the "Slovak pastoral" also faced criticism, particularly from young Slovak intellectuals. In the leftist magazine *DAV*, an article by the communist critic Vladimír Clementis asked: "Is Plicka's film folkloristic kitsch?", while, in the same magazine, the poet Josef Rybák criticised the absence of suffering, pain, and poverty as central elements in Slovak folk culture.[54] Similarly, a reader's letter published in *Nástup*, a nationalist newspaper for young readers, complained with reference to the world economic crisis:

> When we think about the economic ruin of our devastated Slovakia, about the misery of our Slovak people, the overwhelming question mark that stands before our Slovak intelligentsia is about misery and scarcity at every step, and yet on the other hand, we are making our sole Slovak film 'The Earth Sings', and between these two, we clench our teeth and deeply sigh. Yes, we sing! But the stomach doesn't sing, it whines.[55]

52
Karel Čapek, Dva neznámé světy, in: *Lidové noviny*, 5 November 1933, 7.

53
Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, Erlebnisse beim Filmen. Mit Professor Plicka in der Slowakei, in: *Der Tag*, 23 November 1934, 6.

54
Vlado Clementis, Je Plickov film folkloristickým gýčom?, in: *DAV* 6/10, 1933, 148–149, here 149; Pauer, Karol Plicka, 50.

55
Nástupista od Zvolena (pseudonym), "Zem spieva…", *Nástup*, 15 March 1935, 10. English translation in Nicholas Hudac, *Picturing the Nation. Slovak National Identity in the Age of the Mass Produced Image*, PhD dissertation, Charles University, 2020, 135 (8 October 2025); Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 111.

Die 6. Seite

Erlebnisse beim Filmen

Mit Professor Plicka in der Slowakei

Heute nimmt die Wiener Urania ein Filmwerk besonderer Art in ihr Programm auf. Ein dichterisches Gemüt ist sein Urheber, er machte dazu keinen Entwurf auf Papier, er nahm die Baustücke unverändert aus dem Leben eines Volkes, das seine Freude und sein Leid in Liedern und anderen Gestaltungen auszusprechen versteht. Er nahm dazu keine Schauspieler, sondern die Bewohner, die Jugend jener Erde und die Natur selbst. Der dramatische Verlauf der Jahreszeiten ist die Handlung. Nur ein Musiker konnte sein Herz und sein Ohr so aufschließen, und auf diesem Gefühlsweg bekam der Film den Titel: „Die Erde singt." Professor Karel Plicka, der ihn allein dichtete und allein ohne jede Mithilfe in jahrelanger Arbeit kurbelte, hat seine Lebenskraft und seine Liebe jenem slowakischen Land geschenkt, in das wir geführt werden. Nur die Gemeinschaft mit der Seele dieses Volkes gab ihm die Fähigkeit, es zu erkennen und es dann auch für diese Arbeit zu gewinnen. Auf welche Weise sein Film entstand, welche Schwierigkeiten, welche (in der Erinnerung wohl heiteren) Erlebnisse er hatte, will ich erzählen.

Die erste unangenehme Überraschung brachte der Filmapparat. Gegen Maschinen haben einfache Menschen ein großes Mißtrauen und es dauert lange, bis sie sich ihnen annähern und anvertrauen. Oft schien das Beginnen günstig. Wenn aber Professor Plicka die unheimlichen lauernden vier Objekte und die vielen Kurbeln hervorholte, war alles verloren. So eine Maschine, riefen die Leute, zieht einem die Schönheit aus, das wissen wir! Andere warnten: Paßt auf, Leuteln, man will euch hoppnehmen! In diesem Augenblick liefen auch schon alle davon und Plicka stand ratlos da. In der Zipser Magura wurde es einmal besonders kritisch. Irgend jemand hatte in den umliegenden Dörfern ausgesprengt, daß der, der in eine solche Maschine gerät, nicht einmal richtig sterben könne. Das heißt, sterben würde er schon, er werde auch begraben werden, aber eigentlich werde er nicht tot sein, sondern weiterleben. Bis in alle Ewigkeit werde er durch die Welt irren, springen, Komödie machen müssen und niemals zur Ruhe kommen. Das jagte allen Angst ein und selbst die kühnsten Goralen wollten nicht dabei sein. Doch es wurde ein Ausweg gefunden. Plicka setzte sich mit den Angesehensten ins Wirtshaus, besprach alles, und beim Trinken, erzählt er, haben sie auf alles, auch auf das Leben nach dem Tode, vergessen. Eine ständige Angstvorstellung sind die Steuern. In jedem Fremden wird ein Kontrollor vermutet, und ein vorsichtiger Bauer erkundigte sich: „Wird das nicht neue Steuern bringen, wenn die Herren in der Stadt sehen, daß wir da heraußen so lustig sind?" Wer gern ein bißchen wildert oder gar eine geheime Schnapsbrennerei besitzt, ist besonders mißtrauisch, und die erste Frage lautet, ob die Bilder vielleicht in die Stadt zum Gericht kämen.

Scheinen alle Hindernisse beseitigt, ist der Apparat schon genügend beäugt und es geht ans Drehen, tauchen oft neue Zweifel bei den Spielern auf. Eine große Gefahr bringt die Reflexionswand, die zum Aufhellen dunkler Flächen verwendet und mitgeführt wird. Gewöhnlich wird sie bis zum letzten Augenblick verborgen gehalten, um nicht unnötig Erregungen auszulösen. Oben auf die polnische Grenze zu war einmal ein altes Goralenweiblein bereits für die Aufnahme gewonnen und stand schon im Blickfeld. Da fiel das Licht des großen Spiegels in ihr Gesicht. „O Gott!" schrie sie auf, „was für ein unbarmherziger Blitz, o, o wie er schlägt! Schadet er nicht dem Menschen?" Um sie zu beruhigen, wird einer der zahlreich anwesenden Verwandten aufgefordert selbst durch den Apparat zu schauen. Aber was geschieht? Kaum schaut er durch ruft er lachend: „Oje, Alte, du bist ja mit den Beinen nach oben!" Alle lachen mit, und das Großmütterchen gerät in noch tieferes Entsetzen. „Mit den Beinen nach oben? Zum Gelächter gebe ich mich nicht her!" Nun wird eine andere Frau vor den Apparat gestellt und das Weiblein soll sich selbst von den Eigenschaften der Maschine überzeugen. Kaum findet sie sich beim Durchschauen zurecht, ruft sie: „Nun freilich, mit den Beinen nach oben! Aber — die Röcke sind in Ordnung!" Diese Feststellung genügt, sie begibt sich auf den Platz und Plicka kann endlich beginnen.

Das herrlichste Stück des Plicka-Films — er wurde heuer in Venedig ausgezeichnet und brachte erst kürzlich in Berlin großen Erfolg

Prof. Karel Plicka, der Autor des Films „Die Erde singt".

— sind die Räuberspiele, sind die Hirtenkinder, die sie bieten. Der Held Janoschik, dem man einmal den Garaus machte und der dann in unzähligen Liedern, in Epen und Romanen besungen und verherrlicht wurde, lebt wirklich noch in den Männern und Kindern dort oben. Plicka war der glücklichste Mensch, als er sie gefunde hatte. Immer wieder sucht er sie auf, ruft sie mit ihren köstlichen Spitznamen. Er ist das ganze Jahr unterwegs. Eigentlich ging er der Lieder wegen in die Slowakei. Sein Fleiß hat bisher zwanzigtausend aufgeschrieben. Auf meinen Kreuz- und Querfahrten durch die Slowakei habe ich ihn lange Zeit vergebens gesucht. Aber einmal sah ich einen großen Menschen mit Apparaten beladen eine Berglehne hinaufgehen, — das war Plicka. Wie so oft im Sommer, wenn alle Leute auf dem Felde beschäftigt sind, fand er nicht einmal einen Träger für sein schweres Gepäck und mußte alles selbst tun. Seine Begeisterung erleichterte es ihm. Er war gerade auf dem Wege zu einem Goralenbuben und ich schloß mich ihm an. „Nur hier," war einer der ersten Sätze, die er zu mir sprach, „hier in dieser Umgebung, die den Kummer der Zeit vertreibt und nach dem ewigen Frieden ruft, kann man alles fühlen. Es geht mir nicht um eine effektvolle Oberfläche. Seit Jahren lebe ich gemeinsam mit diesem Volk, und wenn das Lied ein treues Bild seines Lebens ist, dann glaube ich, daß mir seine Welt so nahe ist wie kaum einem anderen."

Naturgymnastik der Kinder

Auch seine kleinen Künstler gewann er erst nach und nach für den Film. Sein bestes Mittel war, bei allem mitzutun, wie ein Frosch zu hüpfen und auf Zigeunerisch zu tanzen. So errang er ihr Vertrauen. Kleine Preise halfen mit. „Zur Zeit, wenn die Knaben weiden", erzählte er mir, „ist's auf den Höhen am lustigsten. Es sind dann auch Mädchen da, es wird gesungen, getanzt und getollt, es gibt so viel Zeit, sich Späße auszudenken und gerade die Originalität ihrer Späße lockte mich immer wieder und wieder an diese Orte. Die Buben wetteifern miteinander ganz nach Art der ehemaligen Räuber, sie sind fest und stramm und ihre Künste sind von einer so phantastischen Kühnheit, daß es einem angst und bange wird. Wie arm sind gegenüber dieser Naturgymnastik die Spiele und die erdachten Übungen städtischer Turnschulen. Die Buben von der Tatra kennen natürlich kein Turngerät, sie bilden es sich selber aus ihren Leibern, nur selten benützen sie dazu die Valaska oder eine Bank. Das, was die Kinder hier machen, ist ebenfalls ursprüngliches Volksschaffen wie das Lied, wie die Sage oder die anderen Gebilde. Leider konnte ich nicht alle Spiele filmen. Einige sind so gefährlich, daß ich mich nicht traute, eine Wiederholung für eine Aufnahme zu verlangen. Der wilde Ententanz, der an die Bewegung einer Peitsche erinnert und bei dem die letzte Reihe durch eine erstaunliche Zentrifugalkraft in die Weite und plötzlich zur Erde geschlagen wird — dieser Tanz ist ein unschuldiges Vergnügen gegenüber jenen Spielen, bei denen sie sich wirklich das Genick brechen können. Nichts wird geschehen, bettelten die Kinder und wollten wiederholen, aber ich ließ es nicht zu. Ich gestehe, daß ich oft und oft unwillkürlich die Augen schloß, um nicht zu sehen, was vielleicht geschah. Aber diese Buben scheinen unverwundbar zu sein. Ihre Spiele sind jedenfalls die wunderbarste Verkörperung der Menschen jener Gegend."

Diese lebhaften Kinder wurden nicht bloß die Spieler, sondern auch die Mithelfer Plickas. Jedem übertrug er eine Aufgabe und bei jeder Verteilung wurde sie gewechselt. Keinem sollte es langweilig werden, wenn er unbeschäftigt war, keiner sollte sich durch die Art der Betätigung verletzt oder bevorzugt fühlen. So wild sie bei den Spielen waren, so folgsam und brav waren sie bei ihren Verrichtungen, genau so wie in der Schule oder bei der Arbeit für ihre Eltern. Nur mit zuviel Kraft vollzogen sie manchmal die Befehle ihres Regisseurs. Einer, der die Spieler zur rechten Zeit auf die Szene rufen mußte, besorgt es durch Steinwürfe und darum wurde ihm das Amt wieder abgenommen. Er war eben ein Zbojnik. Die deutsche Übersetzung ist schwierig, Räuber ist dafür zuviel und mißverständlich, Wildfang aber doch etwas zu zahm und unrichtig.

„O wie herrlich ist es", sagt Professor Plicka mit strahlendem Gesicht, „hoch oben

Die „Künstler" machen sich mit dem Apparat bekannt.

bei einem Felsen oder auf einer Wiese mit den Hirten zu arbeiten. Wir scherzen, wir singen, wir vertrödeln die Zeit, ohne Absicht bauen sich die Szenen auf und dann — dann schalten wir die Millionenkerzen des lieben Gotteslichtes ein, zur rechten Zeit fliegen gerade auch ein paar Wölkchen daher und wir filmen wie richtige Filmleute."

L. W. Rochowanski.

Der Mensch vom Jahre 2000

In einer Maschinenausstellung, die jetzt in Turin zu sehen ist, wird ein neuer und vervollkommneter Maschinenmensch gezeigt, ein „Robot", der offiziell „der Mensch vom Jahre 2000" heißt — für den Fall, daß unser mechanisches Zeitalter nicht vorher mit einem weithin hörbaren Gerassel zusammenstürzt. Äußerlich sieht dieser neueste Robot oder Golan etwa aus wie ein gepanzerter Ritter. Ein Mitarbeiter des „Corriere della Sera" schildert den Kopf des Ungeheuers als eine Schachtel aus Aluminium, mit einer Art Visierhelm, die Augen sind zwei elektrische Lämpchen, die Nase eine kleine Pyramide im zylindrischen Gesicht, der Mund ein gerader Schnitt. Dieser „Kopf" sitzt auf einer Röhre, in dem allerlei Mechanismen stecken, Arme und Beine sind primitiv geformt. Die ganze Figur sieht wuchtig aus, wiegt aber, da sie aus Aluminium ist, nur soviel wie ein lebender Mensch — 60 Kilo.

Im Inneren dieser vage menschenähnlichen Hülle stecken nun Akkumulatoren, die eine ganze Anzahl winziger elektrischer Motoren betreiben; der eine hebt z. B., wenn der Robot geht, seine Beine, der andere, wenn er arbeiten soll, seine Arme, der dritte setzt, wenn er reden soll, ein verborgenes Grammophon in Bewegung. Ähnliche Automaten hat man schon gesehen, aber das Bemerkenswerte an diesem Turiner Robot ist, daß er durch keinerlei Drähte an seinen Herrn, den Operateur, gefesselt ist; sondern das Gespenst wird mit Hilfe einer kleinen Radiostation in Bewegung gesetzt, die ebenfalls von Akkumulatoren gespeist wird und die durch drahtlose Kraftübertragung den Mechanismus im Inneren des Robots kontrolliert. In Turin steht diese Radioanlage in der gleichen Halle wie der „Mensch vom Jahre 2000" — aber es besteht theoretisch kein Hindernis dagegen, daß sie aus weiter Ferne auf diesen Maschinenmenschen oder auf eine ganze Armee von Maschinenmenschen wirkte.

Der Robot von Turin hat ein neuerfundenes Gyroskop im Leibe, das ihn dazu befähigt, im vollkommenen Gleichgewicht zu stehen, zu gehen, zu marschieren, zu rennen — man kann sich schon heute ein Bataillon metallener Polizisten vorstellen, das im Gleichschritt gegen eine demonstrierende Menge vorrückte, bewaffnet, hirnlos, seelenlos, aber unverwundbar. Natürlich könnte der Maschinenmensch doch unschwer die schwersten Arbeiten verrichten und menschlichen Arbeitern das Brot wegnehmen, das er selber nicht braucht. Er ist schon ein bißchen unheimlich, der Mensch vom Jahre 2000, der unter Umständen die Menschen von vorher ausrotten könnte!

Lector.

Hollywoodiana

In Hollywood geht jetzt Charles Laughton, der berühmte Darsteller Heinrichs des Achten, mit einem rasierten Schädel herum, und mit Groll im Herzen. Laughton hätte in dem Film „David Copperfield", der im Entstehen ist, die Figur des Micawber spielen sollen, und der Regisseur bestand darauf, daß er sich den Kopf rasieren lasse. Laughton verlangte erst, daß ihm nach der Vollendung des Film solange noch Gage gezahlt werden müsse, bis ihm die Haare nachwüchsen. Das wurde ihm verweigert, weil er ohnedies 50.000 Dollar für die Rolle bekommen sollte. Also ließ sich Laughton den Kopf ratzekahl rasieren — und bekam zwei Tage darauf Krach mit dem Studio, schmiß die Rolle hin, verzichtete auf das Honorar, und behielt nichts, als einen rasierten Schädel. Nun kann er mit dem neuen Film, in dem er spielen soll, nicht anfangen, weil er noch keine Haare hat. Am meisten dürfte ihn kränken, daß der Schauspieler W. C. Fields, der an seiner Stelle den Micawber spielt, es im vollen Schmuck seiner Haarmähne tun darf.

[Fig. 5]
Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, Erlebnisse beim Filmen. Mit Professor Plicka in der Slowakei, in: *Der Tag*, 23 November 1934, 6 © Austrian National Library, Vienna.

In the United States too, a younger generation of Slovak emigrants was unhappy with the idealised image of Slovakia. They criticised its unified portrayal as a rural area, despite the fact that some parts of the country – most notably Bratislava – were urbanised and had experienced substantial modernisation over recent decades.[56] Based on the idea that *The Earth Sings* represented a distilled Slovak "reality", critics thus rejected the "Slovak pastoral" both because it seemed disconnected from modern times and because it failed to show the harsh realities of agricultural labour and impoverished living conditions. In fact, beyond concerns about the idealising nature of *The Earth Sings*, positioning Slovakia as a rural country was linked to the broader international image of Czechoslovakia, especially as the film toured through central Europe and the United States. Within this context, Plicka's "Slovak pastoral" visualised the contradictions at the heart of Czechoslovak state ideology: while the western, Czech part of the country was widely represented by the modern and future-oriented time of the city, *The Earth Sings* positioned Slovakia in an ancient past. In Czechoslovakia's international image, this reinforced the country's foundations by portraying it as a progressive nation that simultaneously remained connected to its history, which could still be seen in Slovakia. In this vein, the presentation of Slovakia as a rural idyll thus represented a complementary aspect to the Czechs as a "highly civilised" and modern culture.[57]

V. Counter Images: Social Documentary Photography as a New Rural Realism

Aside from criticism by young activists against *The Earth Sings*, visual responses to picturesque depictions of the Slovak countryside gained widespread attention within a photographic movement that sought to expose the hardships of rural life: social documentary photography. The "longstanding social and cultural deprivation and neglect" of rural communities meant that low standards of living and education could only be gradually improved and were often accompanied by ignorant and outright colonialist attitudes:[58] as Stanislav Holubec has demonstrated regarding the Czechoslovak government's treatment of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, for instance, efforts to integrate the region into the new state were viewed as part of a colonising, civilising mission. This approach was based on stereotypes portraying the local impoverished population as "noble

[56] Jaroslav E. S. Vojan, Budouci forma Česšstvi v America, in: *Kalendář New-Yorských Listů* 18, 1939, 26–32.

[57] Filipová, 'Highly Civilized, yet Very Simple', 145–165. See also Marta Filipová, *Czechoslovakia at the World's Fairs. Behind the Façade*, Budapest 2025, 177–213.

[58] Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe. Crisis and Change*, London/New York ^{2}2007 [1998], 355.

savages" in need of support from more experienced officials from Prague.[59]

The main opposition to such paternalistic attitudes came from the left of the political spectrum. Using the camera as a "weapon", social documentary photography aimed to record the difficult realities of rural life.[60] Interrupting idealised views by drawing attention to people's struggles within them, activist photographers such as Irena Blühová formulated powerful visual counterpoints to romanticised national photography. Combining an interest in modernist artistic production, sociology, and political activism with the use of the camera as an instrument of "truthfulness", so-called social photography renegotiated the relationship between art and activism, form and content, and sought to find new ways of portraying the "everyday" lives of those at the lower end of the social spectrum, in both rural and urban areas.[61]

Variously called worker photography (*Arbeiterfotografie* in Germany and Austria, *munkásfotó* in Hungarian) or social photography (*szociofotó* in Hungarian, *sociální fotografie* in Czech and *sociálna fotografia* in Slovak), the movement was widespread in central Europe and aimed to highlight photography's potential as a realist mass art, which ought to depict social hardships and the struggles of society's underprivileged classes.[62] Realism, in this context, carried a strong political dimension and was intended to be used as a tool in the class struggle. Initially, this aim was to be achieved by encouraging a wide base of amateur photographers – similar to the goals of photography magazines in engaging amateurs to create homeland photography.[63] Introducing photo competitions in leftist illustrated newspapers as well as advice features on how to take the "right" kinds of photographs in dedicated publications such as the German magazine *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, worker photography was widely presented as an emancipatory practice with the potential to counter the glossy images of middle-class magazines.[64]

59
Stanislav Holubec, "We bring order, discipline, Western European democracy, and culture to this land of former oriental chaos and disorder". Czech Perceptions of Sub-Carpathian Rus and Its Modernization in the 1920s, in: Wlodzimierz Borodziej, Stanislav Holubec, and Joachim Puttkamer (eds.), *Mastery and Lost Illusions. Space and Time in the Modernization of Eastern and Central Europe*, Munich 2014, 223–250, here 225.

60
Rudolf Stumberger, *AIZ* and the German Worker Photographers, in: *The Worker Photography Movement (1926–1939). Essays and Documents* (exh. cat. Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), ed. by Jorge Ribalta, Madrid 2011, 80–97, here 86.

61
Matthew S. Witkovsky, Activist Documents, in: Foto. Modernity in Central Europe, 141–157.

62
Ibid., 141.

63
Stumberger, *AIZ* and the German Worker Photographers, 86–87.

64
Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 131.

Most relevant in central Europe, however, was what Jorge Ribalta has called the "denunciative mode" of worker photography:[65] rather than celebrating ideal working-class lives, it focused on the desperate living conditions that impoverished citizens and, particularly, society's most disadvantaged, the *Lumpenproletariat*, endured.[66] By the 1930s, social photography had become a well-established form of oppositional art, documenting rural poverty as a realist counter-practice to idealising homeland photography. In other words, it served a revelatory purpose, with making claims to "truth" as a central aim of the practice.

However, realism, regarded as the primary aim of social photography, was not seen as inherently linked to the medium of photography. Therefore, one of the most significant issues in debates on social photography was the question of form. As Matthew Witkovsky emphasised, "photographs were understood, however naively, to convey truths, but those truths needed to be underscored, put to work".[67] In the process, social photography adopted experimental viewpoints and compositional techniques with the aim of showing reality in its "true" light. Across central Europe, leftist theorists debated the "right" way to implement an aesthetic that would support the photographs' claim to realism.[68] In the catalogue to the *Exhibition of Social Photography* taking place in Prague's Metro palace in 1934, for example, its main organiser, the writer and theoretician Lubomír Linhart, argued that "one must reject bourgeois [that is, artistic] photography but not outright, rather in a critical, dialectical manner".[69] Rather than dismissing experimental photographs outright, Linhart proposed that they should be regarded as a developmental step, which would eventually integrate with socially critical photography to develop, as photography historian Fedora Parkman has analysed, "a photography of tomorrow combining social utility and modern style".[70]

However, when it came to depicting rural areas, Linhart's ideas were more challenging to realise: although social photography had little to do with the core national imagery of homeland photographs

65
Jorge Ribalta, Introduction, in: The Worker Photography Movement, 15.

66
John Welshman, *Underclass. A History of the Excluded since 1880*, London 2013, 21.

67
Witkovsky, Activist Documents, 141.

68
Karel Teige, The Tasks of Modern Photography, in: The Worker Photography Movement, 265–269; Lubomir Linhart, Tasks and Work of Proletarian Photographers, in: The Worker Photography Movement, 272–275; Siegfried Weyr, The Photograph as a Weapon, in: The Worker Photography Movement, 240; Lajos Kassák, From Our Lives. Foreword, in: The Worker Photography Movement, 308–310.

69
Lubomír Linhart, *Sociální fotografie*, Prague 1934, 67. English translation in Fedora Parkmann, A Czechoslovak Variation on Fifo, in: *Études photographiques* 29, 2012, 1–14, here 3.

70
Parkmann, A Czechoslovak Variation on Fifo, 10.

in ideological terms, photographers often also produced folkloric images as part of their documentary work. By engaging in a dialogue between these two seemingly contradictory photographic practices – one romanticising the countryside as an idealised, archaic place, and the other highlighting the social hardships of rural life – they did not necessarily distance themselves from idealised views of the countryside.[71] Instead, they layered new elements of realism, often displayed through photo series that blended the archaic time of homeland photographs with the immediacy of modern snapshot images. Beyond serving as activist documents, the social photographers' rural realism captured the contradictions within the landscape. It merged the idealising views that Plicka's work was known for with records of rural poverty, all within a documentary, realist style. Blühová's work is particularly notable in this context, developing a practice that served as a means of mediating what seemed to be contradictory depictions of rural eastern Czechoslovakia.

Blühová was born in Považská Bystrica, now in central Slovakia. She attended grammar school in nearby Trenčín until 1918, after which her family could no longer afford to pay for schooling, so the fourteen-year-old began to support herself as a secretary and bank clerk and continued to educate herself, which was soon complemented by keen political interest.[72] At age seventeen, in 1921, she joined the newly founded Czechoslovak Communist Party, through which she initially organised meetings and strikes, and prepared and distributed flyers.[73] Around the same time, she also started photographing as an autodidact. The origins of her practice thus bear some similarities to Plicka's in that she was self-trained and used photographs to document trips to the Slovak countryside. For both photographers, too, the experience of the countryside played a significant role in the development of their practice. In 1931/32, Blühová spent a period studying at the Bauhaus in Dessau; however, for the purposes of this essay, her photographs taken in Slovakia are the main focus, especially those that do not emphasise the experimental aspects of some of her Bauhaus work, but instead highlight a realistic, documentary style.[74]

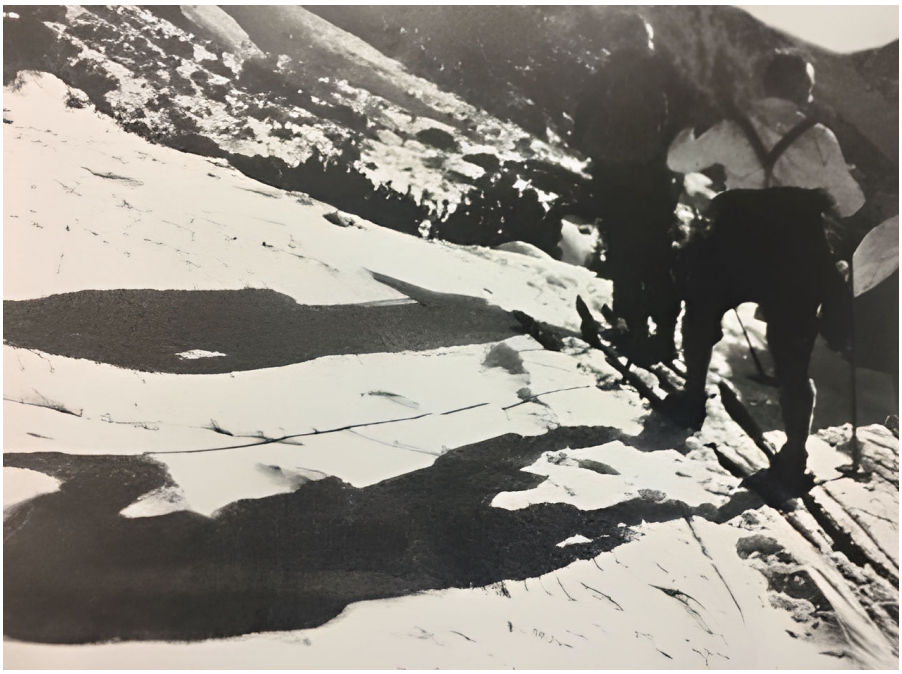
Early works such as *Skiing Fashion*, dating from 1926, demonstrate a clear intent to experiment with image composition: placing

71
As I argue elsewhere, the stronghold of homeland photography in Austria, for example, made it difficult to establish a critical rural photography for precisely this reason. Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 121–146.

72
Dušan Škvarna, Příběh Ireny Blühovej, in: id., Václav Macek, and Iva Mojžišová (eds.), *Irena Blühová*, Martin 1992, 8–12, here 9.

73
Ibid., 11.

74
See Julia Secklehner, "A School for Becoming Human". The Socialist Humanism of Irena Blühová's Bauhaus Photographs, in: Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler (eds.), *Bauhaus Bodies. Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism's Legendary Art School*, New York 2019, 287–310.



[Fig. 6]
Irena Blühová, *Skiing Fashion*, 1926, black and white photograph, in: Dušan Škvarna, Václav Macek, and Iva Mojžišová (eds.), *Irena Blühová*, Martin 1992, 56 © Irena Blühová (heirs) / LITA, 2025.

the skiers not at the centre but to the right of the image, their long shadows stretching across the snow passed by the skiers in a playful shadow game [Fig. 6]. At the same time, the image adhered to the conventions of touristic photography, as records of sporting achievements and peaks climbed, mapping and tracing explorations of the countryside. Indeed, even though Blühová's engagement with photography began around the same time as her political activities, her camera was initially used as part of hiking tours and thus had a basis in amateur photographs related to sports culture.

Yet, Blühová's photographic activities soon also collided with her work for the communist party, where she expanded her propaganda efforts as part of activist youth circles. In 1928, Hungarian intellectuals in Bratislava established the leftist cultural organisation Sarló (Sickle), which launched an ethnographic and sociological survey of Hungarian minority homesteads in Czechoslovakia's borderlands.[75] In groups, people went on excursions to gather data on employment, working and living conditions, child labour, and food supplies. Alongside photographic documentation, analyses of the findings were published in newspapers and magazines to highlight difficult living circumstances and to advocate for improvements.[76] Blühová, alongside other Hungarian speakers based in Czechoslovakia, such as Barbara Zsigmondi (1908–1978) and Róza Földi/Rosie Ney (1897–1972), was a contributor to these surveys early on and quickly made a name for herself as an activist and photographer.

Throughout the 1920s and '30s, Blühová captured images that focused on social disadvantage and rural tradition: between 1926 and 1936, she produced reportage series about child labour and the unemployed, as well as a series on market fairs and traditional crafts. Her images from the 1920s form a striking blend of reportage and ethnographic views that are both emotive and sensitive in their depiction of the subjects. *The Youngest Cowherd* from the series "Children and Child Labour", for example, shows two young children tending to a small herd of bathing cows [Fig. 7]. The picture plane is horizontally divided between land and water, with the two children and the cows forming the focus of a triangular composition. Shot from a slightly elevated position, the little girl at the front of the image is out of focus, adding a sense of movement. The photograph has been cropped, suggesting it was composed with strict adherence to compositional conventions as they were advised in contemporary photography magazines. Even though the photograph does not contain any elements that suggest it is a contemporary photograph, the way this pastoral scene is captured – with the blurred foreground and diagonal placement of the children – still

75
Marketa Svobodová, *The Bauhaus and Czechoslovakia, 1919–1938*, Prague 2017, 190–191; *A Sarló jegyében. Az újarcú magyaroktól a magyar szocialistákig, a Sarló 1931-iki pozsonyi kongresszusának vitaanyaga*, ed. by Sarló Országos Vezetősége, Bratislava 1932.

76
Škvarna, Příběh Ireny Blühovej, 11.

[Fig. 7]
Irena Blühová, *Pastierik kráv* [*The Youngest Cowherd*], 1926, black and white photograph, 40.2 × 30.4 cm, Bratislava, Slovak National Gallery © Irena Blühová (heirs) /LITA, 2025.

creates the impression of snapshot spontaneity, which emphasises its grounding in modern photography. Similarly, *Children Without Shoes* shows a composition with a group of boys lined up against a wall [Fig. 8]. Further in the background, a traditional village church emphasises the rural character of the setting. In both images, the children appear happy, curious even, and look directly at the camera. They are quite clearly aware of being photographed, yet do not seem "arranged" to pose. Blühová thus offers us a subjective, realistic perspective, where form and composition highlight content. They underscore the human, emotional focus of her work, which subtly hints at the poverty she documents, without idealising or heroising her subjects. In contrast to the sharp and meticulously composed framings that place Plicka's camerawork between realism and idealisation, Blühová's photographs seem more naturalistic by comparison. Containing some compositional "flaws", scratches, blurs, or unusual exposure levels, their more spontaneous quality introduces a stronger sense of immediacy and, consequently, aligns the work more closely with modernity, in contrast to Plicka's perfected constructions of the archaic countryside. As the compositional forms of Blühová's images follow their role as photographic reportages, her work from the late 1920s can be seen as ideal social photography: realistic, dynamic, aimed at capturing the daily life of the proletariat, and seemingly "honest" in the way that Blühová denies neither her subjective viewpoint nor her presence as a photographer. Even folkloric motifs, such as *Gingerbread* from the "Fairs" series, are a step removed from image compositions by Plicka, as the close-up and diagonal angle show the traditional sweets in a modernist light [Fig. 9]. Soft, yet avoiding the "picturesque", and grounded in local culture without idealisation, Blühová developed a photographic style that sits between social photography and modernist experiment – never prioritising form over subject.

This focus on photography as activist documentation also influences how Blühová's photographs are positioned in time: instead of emphasising a Slovak pastoral, her use of photographic series and attention to capturing movement and maintaining dynamic viewpoints highlight rural scenes as part of the contemporary world, thus firmly situating them within modernity, away from the cyclical flows of time in *The Earth Sings*. However, it would be wrong to assume that the differences between social documentary and "homeland" photography are entirely unbridgeable: although Blühová's work mainly offered a different perspective of the countryside and circulated within different social and political settings, her broader practice reveals that national idealisation and rural realism were not as distant from each other as one might think.

In 1936, for example, Blühová contributed images to Rochowanski's cultural travel guide *Columbus in Slovakia*. An enthusiast of Slovak folk culture, Rochowanski played an important role in promoting *The Earth Sings* in Vienna. After establishing contact with Plicka, he began working on a book to bring Slovak culture closer to a German-speaking audience, with financial support from

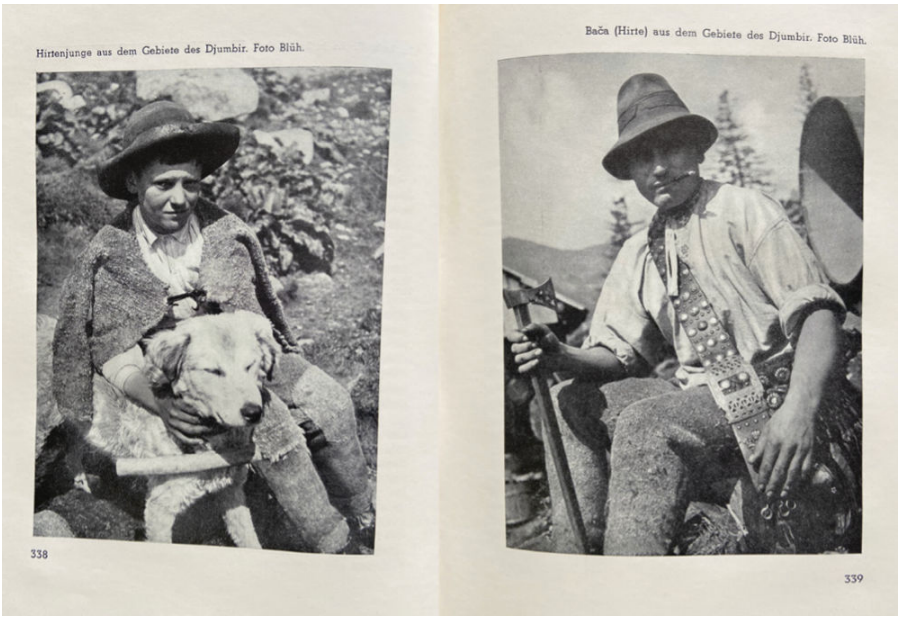
[Fig. 8]
Irena Blühová, *Deti. Bez topánok* [*Children. Without shoes*], 1929, black and white photograph, 39.3 × 26.8 cm, Bratislava, Slovak National Gallery © Irena Blühová (heirs) /LITA, 2025.

[Fig. 9]
Irena Blühová, *Jarmok na Považí 2* [Gingerbread], 1927, black and white photograph, 29.5 × 32.1 cm, Bratislava, Slovak National Gallery © Irena Blühová (heirs) /LITA, 2025.

the Czechoslovak Chamber of Commerce. Many of the images for the publication were supplied by Plicka, who also features in the book as a "real-life" explorer of the Slovak countryside. Showing a hands-on approach to exploration, Plicka's journeys and difficulties in collecting songs are described similarly to Rochowanski's above-mentioned report from the film set. Plicka himself appears in several photographs behind the camera and in conversation with his "actors" – ordinary village people – for *The Earth Sings*. Always distinguished from them by way of dress and different camera installations, Plicka's presentation as a "friend" of rural communities once more draws attention to the gap between rural and urban time.[77] Blühová's contributions differ: even though her photographs also follow the overall theme of the book, focusing on the countryside as a place of ancient customs and traditions, her portraits of shepherds from Ďumbier in the lower Tatra mountains adopt an aesthetic that, compared to Plicka's, places Blühová's rural Slovakia firmly in modernity [Fig. 10].

To the left, a young boy sits on the rocky ground, embracing his dog. He wears traditional dress, which has evidently been mended several times, and a worn old hat. Most striking, however, is the look on the boy's face. Facing the camera directly with a slightly sceptical smile, the camera captures the boy in a realistic light and indicates interaction between the photographer and the photographed subject. This strongly contrasts with photographs and film stills by Plicka, in which a low vantage point emphasises the distance between the photographer and the subject. Blühová's second image in *Columbus in Slovakia* resembles the first one in that it indicates direct interaction, albeit the portrait is taken from a lower angle. Even though details of the depicted man's dress add ethnographic elements to the image, again, the returning of the gaze of the photographed shepherd adds a sense of human interaction, which draws on a sense of contemporaneity that is lacking in Plicka's work. In both of Blühová's images, moreover, the close cropping of the portrait omits the rural landscape as idyllic framing, instead emphasising the portrayed subject. Although Blühová adjusted her focus on the human figure to resemble the ethnographic framing of the travel guide overall, therefore, her images resist interpretation as a record of ancient folk culture. Taken at a time when she photographed more extensive series of folklore traditions, her contributions to the travel guide highlight a broader concern with rural life, which bridged her activist documentary practice, ethnographic interests, as well as a focus on special occasions and festivities – elements that also featured prominently in homeland photography. Simultaneously, Blühová remained politically active, supported the party with photographic reports, and organised and participated in social photography exhibitions in Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

77
Secklehner, Rethinking Modern Austrian Art, 113.



[Fig. 10]
Irena Blühová, *Hirten aus Ďumbier*, in: Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, *Columbus in der Slovakei*, Bratislava 1936, 338–339 © Irena Blühová (heirs) /LITA, 2025.

Given the simultaneity with which Blühová engaged in these diverse activities, which ranged between a critical-activist view of rural Czechoslovakia and promoting the same region as an idyllic tourist destination, her images both extend and challenge the work of photographers working within a nationalising framework. One of the main formal techniques used to achieve this was based on Blühová's reportage style, which emphasised contemporaneity in contrast to the emphasis on timelessness that conventionally encapsulated photographs of the countryside. As a result, her social photographs depict a rural realism that is firmly rooted in its own time. Although her photographs of rural Slovakia not only documented impoverished communities but also captured folk traditions, Blühová's work thus exemplifies how social photography resisted the romanticisation of the countryside as a place "out of time".

VI. Converging Temporalities of Rural Realism: Conclusion

The rural, symbolising tradition and archaic lifestyles, has long served as an antithesis to the city as the core of modernity. A key element of this dichotomy is the differing temporalities they embody: the city is associated with a fast-paced, technologically driven environment, while the rural appears slow and antiquated. Amidst the tensions between the camera's claim to "truthful" realism and modern technology, and the connotation of folk culture and rural space as steeped in a bygone era, modernist photography of rural Slovakia developed various registers. Through these, the countryside was depicted both as an imagined place of longing, firmly rooted in the past, and as a site of social activism, where presenting the countryside within contemporary time was essential.

The different depictions of the countryside as a contested ideological space were situated at the intersection of rural and urban time, resulting in different outcomes and creating two distinct forms of realism: the first, homeland photography, depicted the countryside as a blissful national space, which was widely circulated in popular culture and linked to a burgeoning tourist market and commercial advertising. Moreover, its portrayal of Slovakia as an archaic rural country contributed to the national hierarchies within the First Czechoslovak Republic, recalling the concept of "denial of coevalness", whereby a location set in a specific past time is seen as politically and culturally inferior. The second, social photography, presented rural realism as a counter-movement to these idealisations, documenting the lives of vagabonds and outcasts, as well as realities of agriculture and ethnic minorities living on the margins. Beyond a focus on different subjects, social photography's emphasis on series and its dynamic reportage style positioned the countryside within a different temporality compared to homeland photographs. These images highlighted the precariousness of rural lives by being not only realistic but also set in the "now". In other words, the dichotomy between urban and rural time, beyond being embedded in modern technologies such as film and photography,

manifested differently in depictions of the countryside seen in social versus homeland photography. As exemplified by the work of Blühová and Plicka, through contrasting approaches to time and place, photographs of the countryside were continually caught in the tension between the camera's claim to objectivity and the clash between modern technology and the archaic connotations of folk culture and sublime natural landscapes. Moving beyond simplistic constructions of an urban/rural dichotomy, the depiction of rural Slovakia in interwar film and photography underscores the countryside's role as a contested ideological space and, ultimately, highlights its broader significance in shaping various forms of realism within the region.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC REALISM IN NIGERIA

AKINỌLA LAṢEKAN AND POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY

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21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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ABSTRACT

After Independence in 1960, postcolonial modernists in Nigeria like Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko began to produce art that merged learned indigenous and global visual traditions into new visual languages for the postcolonial era. Skeptical of the so-called "abstraction" that pervaded the work of this younger generation of artists, first generation modern Nigerian artist Akinọla Laṣekan, self-trained as a painter, illustrator and political cartoonist, continued to insist upon realism as the formal language that would secure an African Renaissance. This essay traces the origins of Laṣekan's commitment to realism to the earlier writing and practice of pioneer Nigerian colonial modernist Aina Onabolu. It examines the claims that an African Renaissance would be articulated in a visual language that privileged the clarity of form and message – the legibility – offered by realism. The disjunctures of realism, between the future once dreamt of and the realities of history, are played out in this essay's analysis of relations between painting and photography, and between imagination and naturalism.

KEYWORDS

Post-colonialism; Nigeria; Realism; Abstraction; Modernism; Photography.

I. Introduction. Nigeria at Independence

In 1971 the first-generation modern Nigerian artist Akinọla Lasẹkan (1916–1972) painted *Untitled* ("Nigeria Independence Day") [Fig. 1].[1] Lasẹkan – self-trained as a painter, illustrator, and political cartoonist for Nnamdi Azikiwe's anticolonial newspaper the *West African Pilot* and committed to Nigerian nationalism in his life and work – began his career in the Yoruba town of Ọwọ in southwestern Nigeria before temporarily relocating to Lagos from the mid-1930s through the 1940s. Shifting between rural and urban environments exposed him to different technologies for self-fashioning, communication, and nation building available to Nigerians during the late colonial era, especially photography and print media. Lasẹkan recognized the value of the visual to reach different publics, and his paintings drew upon the different visual languages in operation among his diverse audiences. He argued in a posthumously published essay that art should reflect the time of its making, writing that, "Art does not and should not end with the physical execution of an image in any one technique. It has meaning, message, and mission."[2]

To ensure the legibility of that "meaning, message, and mission", Lasẹkan developed a formal style in his paintings that I propose we call "photographic realism". The term was first used in 1961 by the Nigeria-based German scholar and art critic Ulli Beier (1922–2011) to describe the investment on the part of Lasẹkan and his predecessor Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) in verisimilitude – the appearance of the real – in their paintings.[3] My deployment of the term considers its insights into both the process and motivations of artists navigating the colonial and postcolonial artworld. It reveals to us the sources of paintings made with limited access to art education in colonial contexts – mainly photographs and illustrations that circulated in print media – and a commitment to art that responded to contemporary realities. Related art historical terms like photorealism were used in Euro-American contexts to refer to art rendering images of reality in extreme detail, often with the aid of photographs, and produced in reaction to the prevailing post-World War II abstraction of the 1940s and 1950s.[4] Lasẹkan's "photographic realism" similarly responds to a turn towards abstraction, but in his case among the next generation of postcolonial modernists in

1
There is no title written on the painting, which measures 100.6 × 134.1 cm. It was exhibited as "Nigeria Independence Day" in the Akinọla Lasẹkan retrospective organized in 2012 at Terra Kulture, Lagos.

2
Akinọla Lasẹkan, Problems of Contemporary African Artists, in: *Kurio Africana. Journal of Art and Criticism* 1/1, 1989, 25–37, here 26–27.

3
Ulli Beier, Contemporary Nigerian Art, in: *Nigeria* 68, 1961, 27–51, here 28.

4
Anne K. Swartz, Photorealism, in: *Grove Art Online*, September 22, 2015 (October 3, 2025).

[Fig. 1]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Untitled* (Nigeria Independence Day), 1971, oil on canvas, 100.6 × 134.1 cm, Lagos, Nigeria, Laṣekan Family Collection, Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan. Photograph by Perrin Lathrop.

Nigeria. To be sure, Laṣekan's paintings would not be confused with the photorealist portraits an artist like Chuck Close produced in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Instead, in Laṣekan's hands, "photographic realism" results in a more stylized version of reality. It merges the technological modernity, perceived documentary quality, and reproducibility of photography with the sociopolitical realism of satire and caricature to revise and monumentalize Nigerian histories, myths, and personalities.

In his large-scale history painting "Nigeria Independence Day", one of his final works before his untimely passing the following year, Laṣekan told his version of Nigeria's Independence Day by retrospectively reimagining a scene that evoked nostalgia for the lost promise of Nigerian nationalism little more than a decade after the former British colony became an independent nation. Building on a painting practice that relied on photography, I argue that Laṣekan editorialized and collaged documentary photographs that circulated in the Nigerian press of the 1960 independence festivities to create a painted composition that appeared to depict reality. For the artist, photographs, whether picturesque landscape postcards, studio portraits, or photojournalism circulated in the press, were integral sources for his paintings. Laṣekan's 1971 composition returns to and elides the different temporalities of his source photographs to represent a single moment – the exact moment of Nigeria's independence – the midnight-flag-raising at the Lagos Race Course on October 1, 1960. On that night, Princess Alexandra of Kent represented her cousin Queen Elizabeth II to oversee the momentous transition from British colony to independent Federation of Nigeria. She was greeted upon arrival at the airport in Lagos on September 26, 1960, for her three-week tour of the nation by Oba Adeniji Adele II of Lagos, who stated, "while we celebrate we won't forget the debt we owe to Pax Britannica". The *New York Times* reported that his statement was met with silence from the gathered crowd, perhaps signaling their indifference to his sentiments [Fig. 2].[5]

Upon independence, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of the Northern People's Congress became prime minister. As represented in Laṣekan's painting, fireworks burst as 20,000 Nigerians gathered at the Lagos Race Course (rebuilt as Tafawa Balewa Square in 1972) to watch Nigeria's green and white flag replace Great Britain's Union Jack [Fig. 1]. Princess Alexandra, dressed in a white hat, gloves, heels, and tea dress, ceremonially hands Nigeria's constitution to the new Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, similarly attired in white. A line of smiling, formally dressed dignitaries looks on from the royal pavilion, under a patriotic green and white awning. Laṣekan squeezed in a grimacing caricature of Sir James Robertson, the outgoing governor general, at the far right margin, while he framed the three regional premiers Ahmadu Bello,

5 Paul Hofmann, Nigerians Greet British Princess, in: *New York Times*, September 27, 1960, 16.

[Fig. 2]
Britain's Princess Alexandra is greeted by Adeniji Adele II, President of the Lagos Town Council, on arriving at Lagos Airport in Nigeria, Monday, September 26, 1960. Photo credit: AP Images.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Obafemi Awolowo in the center between Tafawa Balewa and the princess.

This article traces the origins of Laṣekan's commitment to a "photographic realism" to the writing and practice of an earlier pioneer Nigerian colonial modernist, Aina Onabolu. In 1920, Onabolu articulated the stakes of naturalistic painting, particularly portraiture, that harnessed on the canvas the technology and visuality of photography as a tool of modernity and that countered the colonial regime's racist denigration of African artistic ability. After independence in 1960, postcolonial modernists in Nigeria like Uche Okeke (1933–2016) and Demas Nwoko (born 1935), eager to move beyond the constraints of academic painting espoused in the nation's university fine arts programs, began to produce art that merged learned Indigenous and global visual traditions into new visual languages for the postcolonial era. Skeptical of the so-called "abstraction" that pervaded the work of this younger generation of artists, Laṣekan argued against the primitivism he associated with that abstraction and for art that better reflected the African Renaissance of nations emerging from colonial rule. As the crisis in the postcolony took hold with the onslaught of the Nigerian Civil War from 1967 to 1970, Laṣekan employed "photographic realism" in paintings like "Nigeria Independence Day" to reflect on the meaning of independence from a postwar perspective. He used collage to return to the events of the preceding decade and to evoke a more totalizing picture of independence that encompassed an ambivalence toward the nationalist project.

II. "Photographic Realism"

In his essay on the contemporary Nigerian art world at independence for the leading culture journal *Nigeria*, Ulli Beier coined the term "photographic realism" in the Nigerian context to describe Laṣekan and Onabolu's paintings.[6] Beier noted a preference for realism among colonial-era Nigerian modern artists, writing "the only way in which a Nigerian could withstand the impact of Western culture and art was to try and master the foreign technique and style. There was a tendency towards meticulous – and mostly rather boring – realism."[7] He identified the pioneer Nigerian modernist Aina Onabolu and his successor Akinọla Laṣekan as the leaders of this group who aimed to achieve a "photographic realism" in their paintings. Beier, though disparaging in his assessment of Onabolu and Laṣekan's work, acknowledged the importance of this commitment to realism to the development of modernism in Nigeria and conceded its potential necessity in the transition from colonial to

6
Beier, Contemporary Nigerian Art, 28.

7
Ibid.

postcolonial contexts. His description also critically paired realism in Nigeria with the photographic, a key association that Onabolu used to define and differentiate his academic painting practice in the early twentieth century.

From 1900 until 1920, Aina Onabolu worked in the Lagos colonial administration, in the Marine and then the Customs Departments. During this time, he developed his artistic practice on his own and began painting portraits of the Lagos elite on commission. Among his first is the portrait of Mr. Lawson, a Lagos goldsmith, in 1902. Onabolu cultivated his connections with colonial officials to pursue art education in England. He traveled to Europe in May 1920 to study fine art, enrolling in St. John's Wood School of Art in London and, briefly, at the Académie Julian in Paris, a school known for admitting women and Black artists. He studied portrait and landscape painting in oil and became proficient in the science of perspective. In London, he also regularly attended lectures at the Royal Academy of Art and was steeped in the British academic art world. Before returning home to Lagos in 1922, Onabolu had earned a certificate in oil portrait painting from the Académie Julian and a Diploma in Fine Art from St. John's Wood. Reflecting on his career in correspondence with the New York-based Harmon Foundation in the early 1960s, Onabolu noted his goals as an artist: to become qualified as a portrait painter in Europe; to share his acquired knowledge of art with Nigerians; and to refute the racist reproach of colonial administrators in Nigeria toward the artistic abilities of Africans.[8]

Before leaving for England to become the first known West African to study painting in Europe, Onabolu opened an exhibition of his paintings in Lagos in April 1920 – reputedly the first fine art exhibition in West Africa. According to the artist, the exhibition, mainly comprising academic realist-style portraits, positioned by this article as "photographic realism", was visited by thousands, including Europeans, Africans, students, and government officials.[9] The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue that included a remarkable text by Onabolu titled *A Short Discourse on Art*, in which the artist articulated his artistic motivations. In his preface to the volume, prominent Lagos merchant A. O. Delo Dosumu described art as an expression of national life and character that could be harnessed to present African culture to the world, foregrounding the radicality of Onabolu's intervention. Onabolu used his text to establish a hierarchy of the arts in Nigeria that both centered African artistic achievement and internalized colonial disparagement of Indigenous African culture and spirituality. He differentiated his

[8] The above biographical information comes from Onabolu's correspondence with the Harmon Foundation in the early 1960s. Letter from Aina Onabolu to Evelyn S. Brown, February 1, 1963. Aina Onabolu File, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., ca. 1967, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

[9] Ibid.

work from the so-called "primitive" arts created for ritual, spiritual, and cultural purposes and from crafts produced by artisans. He wrote, "The Art in this catalogue is used only as a term specially applied to distinguish painting and sculpture from many so called arts because, now-a-days many things have been adorned with that title to which the term science or skill would be more applicable."[10] Onabolu's commitment to a hierarchy of arts in Nigeria reflects his navigation of a colonial art world that required him to prove his artistic ability as an African.

In *A Short Discourse*, Onabolu wrote directly against the racist colonial discourse that impacted his worldview. Racism pervaded the colonial world in which Onabolu began his career as an artist – shaping and limiting his ambitions for his art. Into the last years of his life, Onabolu recalled the galvanizing impact of a February 1918 episode in which his supervisor Mr. T. F. Burrowes, the Controller of Customs in Lagos, showed him an article written in the *Blackwood Advertiser* by Sir Hugh Clifford, then governor of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana).[11] Onabolu paraphrased an oft-quoted excerpt from the article in his 1920 essay to demonstrate the vitality of the work presented in his exhibition. The artist wrote,

> We are all fully aware of the fact that from time immemorial the West African Negro has often been reproached with his failure to develop any high form of civilisation that he has never painted a picture or sculpted a statue and that this reproach like an irrefutable fact has so long remained, as it were, ineffaceable.[12]

With his paintings, Onabolu aimed to directly challenge those racist assumptions upheld by Clifford and his ilk.[13] Working within the confines of colonial hierarchies may have limited Onabolu's ability to imagine the possibilities beyond them. Yet in his work and words, we see his awareness of the colonial gaze and his interest in refuting and coopting its power.

Onabolu focused on painting in his essay, which he considered the pinnacle of the fine arts. The text explained the function of art to society and defined the qualities of a "good" picture. Following

10
Aina Onabolu and A. O. Delo Dosumu, *A Short Discourse on Art*, Lagos 1920, 1. Found in Aina Onabolu Artist File, Warren M. Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

11
Burrowes was invested in Onabolu's career as an artist, encouraging his studies and commissioning him to paint a portrait of his daughter. Report on the career of Aina Onabolu (January 1, 1963). Aina Onabolu File, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., ca. 1967, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

12
Onabolu and Dosumu, A Short Discourse on Art, 1–2.

13
Clifford became Governor of Nigeria in 1919, and Onabolu invited him to open his landmark Lagos exhibition. Clifford sent his regrets.

Dosumu's foreword to the volume, Onabolu understood the potential of art to preserve historical memory, to represent those who should not be forgotten.[14] Raised in Victorian Lagos, Onabolu perceived a conflict between African culture as defined by the colonial administration and his lived experience of cosmopolitan urbanity in Lagos.[15] He identified a need to develop a historical record for modern Nigeria to combat colonialism's misrepresentation of the society in which he lived, writing, "Now in this country, it is a blessing that we begin to value the portraits of our parents, of great men, and of those who are dear to us. Yet there is something wanting and that is, that we have not learned to distinguish painting from coloured photograph or the requisite qualities that make a good picture."[16] Here Onabolu invokes the camera as both a point of reference and departure for his work.

At the time of his writing, studio portrait photography had long been used by West Africans to represent the modern self.[17] By the late nineteenth century, important Lagosians like the Registrar of the Lagos Courts John Augustus Otonba Payne, were photographed outfitted in their refined professional garb and seated in powerful poses to memorialize their positions in society [Fig. 3].[18] These photographic portraits were featured in *The Red Book of West Africa*, originally published in 1920, which included profiles of elite Lagosians, including Onabolu's supporter Dosumu [Fig. 4].[19] Onabolu recognized the power and popularity of photography as a tool of modernity, a technology capable of representing individual identities and concretizing social status. He writes that for most people,

14
Onabolu and Dosumu, A Short Discourse on Art, 4.

15
Michael J. C. Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos. Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life*, London 1977.

16
Onabolu and Dosumu, A Short Discourse on Art, 5–6.

17
Over the past twenty-five years, African photographic history as an art historical discourse has grown. Important contributions to the literature that have shaped my thinking about the subject include Erin Haney, *Photography and Africa*, London 2010; ead., The Modernist Lens of Lutterodt Studios, in: Elizabeth Harney and Ruth B. Phillips (eds.), *Mapping Modernisms. Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism*, Durham, NC 2018, 357–376; Vera Viditz-Ward, Photography in Sierra Leone, 1850–1918, in: *Africa* 57/4, 1987, 510–518; Jürg Schneider, The Topography of the Early History of African Photography, in: *History of Photography* 34/2, 2010, 134–146; Erika Nimis, *Photographes de Bamako de 1935 à nos jours*, Paris 1998; Clare Bell, Okwui Enwezor, and Octavio Zaya (eds.), *In/Sight. African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, New York 1996; Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *Events of the Self. Portraiture and Social Identity*, Göttingen 2010; Jean Loup Pivin and Pascal Martin Saint Leon (eds.), *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, Paris 1999; Elisabeth L. Cameron and John Peffer (eds.), *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*, Bloomington, IN 2013.

18
Echeruo, Victorian Lagos, 36–37.

19
Allister Macmillan, *The Red Book of West Africa. Historical and Descriptive, Commercial and Industrial Facts, Figures and Resources*, London 1968, 107, 117. Art historian Olubukola Gbadegesin's research and forthcoming manuscript explores the role of photography in Victorian Lagos. See *Picturing the Modern Self. Politics, Identity and Self-Fashioning in Lagos, 1861–1934*, PhD Dissertation, Art History Department, Emory University, 2010.

[Fig. 3]
Portrait photograph of John Augustus Otonba Payne, in: Michael J.C. Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos. Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life*, London 1977, n.p.

COMMERCIAL LAGOS. 117

SOME NATIVE BUSINESS MEN OF LAGOS.

DELO DOSUMU, B.A., Produce and General Merchant.

G. DEBAYO AGBEBI, B.Sc., C.E., F.G.S., Civil Engineer, Architect and Surveyor.

G. T. BICKERSTETH, Auctioneer and Commission Agent.

CHRIS. JOHNSON, Produce Merchant.

E. S. KESTER, Pawnbroker and Produce Merchant.

I. T. A. WHITE, Agent for Overmann and Co.

P. H. WILLIAMS, General Merchant.

M. O. COKER, Agent for Horsfield and Co.

L. A. CARDOSO, Merchant and Auctioneer.

C. W. GEORGE, General Merchant.

S. O. BAMGBOSE, of S. O. Bamgbose and Bros.

A. M. MUSTAFA, Merchant in Textile Goods.

[Fig. 4]
Allister Macmillan, *The Red Book of West Africa*, London 1968, 117.

this is what distinguishes a good picture. But for Onabolu, who spoke against the colonial insistence on the African's inability to produce *art*, proficiency with the camera was not enough. Academic painting requires command over a complex range of formal skills, a command that Onabolu was repeatedly told he could not possess. A painting, also according to Onabolu, lasts longer than a photograph, solidifying the future of the historical record Nigeria needed to create.[20]

Onabolu held tight to his identity as an artist to rebuke colonialism's attempt to deny him that role. Painting by painting, he broke down colonial assumptions about the African artist's ability. In portraits like *Sisi Nurse*, painted after Onabolu's return to Lagos in 1922 [Fig. 5], the influence of both photographic and academic portraiture conventions is evident in the formality of the pose, dress, and expression. Onabolu displays the technical skills he acquired while studying art in London and Paris in portraits that make permanent the subjectivity his sitters would also fashion before the camera's lens. The works Onabolu exhibited in his second exhibition in Lagos in 1925 left no doubt in the minds of figures like F. H. Harward, Deputy Director of Education in Nigeria, that "Africans will take their place side by side with Europeans in the sphere of art as they have already done in other spheres".[21] Throughout his career, Onabolu remained committed to portraiture, as evinced by a photograph the artist sent to the Harmon Foundation in New York, in which he poses with his wife in front of a wall of his portraits [Fig. 6]. Though his portraits are grounded in his knowledge of European academic realist painting, their merit for a popular Nigerian audience is also found in their connection to the growing importance of photography for representing the modern self. Onabolu translated the photographic portraiture conventions that developed among Nigerians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a more permanent and, to the artist, higher form of art.

The connection between Onabolu's painted portraits and photography has been made by many. In his 1979 "History of Modern Nigerian Art", artist Uche Okeke wrote incisively of the camera's role in inaugurating a new, modern mode of representation among Africans. Okeke understood Onabolu's eye to be trained by this photographic visual approach, writing,

> It is significant that the camera held the magic through which records of people and events are kept. It kept records of people and events as they appeared in nature, thus contrasting radically with the ritual images of the ethnic society.

20
Onabolu and Dosumu, A Short Discourse on Art, 7.

21
F. H. Harward, *Foreword to the Catalogue of the Exhibition of My Work in Lagos in 1925*. Aina Onabolu File, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., ca. 1967, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

[Fig. 5]
Aina Onabolu (1882–1963, Nigeria), *Sísi Nurse*, 1922, oil on canvas, stretched: 63.3 × 39.7 cm (24 15/16 × 15 5/8 in.), Museum purchase, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2018-14-1. Photograph courtesy kó gallery and the Estate of Aina Onabolu.

[Fig. 6]
Photo of Aina Onabolu in front of his portrait paintings, Harmon Foundation Artworks by African Artists, 1947–1967, 200 (S)-HN-AA-9J-22, National Archives, College Park, MD.

> Aina Onabolu, as it were, saw the world through the eye of the camera. He was a naturalistic painter uninfluenced by the great experiments of European art which mark out the twentieth century.[22]

Art historians Nkiru Nzegwu and Chika Okeke-Agulu, attentive to the critical nature of the practices developed by colonial artists like Onabolu, have since framed his deployment of realism as modernist and anticolonial in the face of colonial claims that Africans lacked the intellectual sophistication or capacity to master naturalistic representation.[23]

Further, they consider Onabolu's encounter with European art through the same lens of appropriation that has been granted a European modernist like Pablo Picasso. Nzegwu writes,

> Fascinated with realism because of its illusionistic effect and difference, pioneer Nigerian artists readily opted for this style, that incidentally is also traditional to Europe. At the same time, modernist artists in Europe were choosing the abstract style that is indigenous to Africa, because of its acclaimed conceptual emphasis and difference. By so doing, both groups of pioneer artists literally embraced the prevailing traditional style of the other, and both took a radically different stylistic path from one another.[24]

Before his entry into the British academy, Onabolu looked to the visual culture at his disposal in colonial Lagos, to the realism of photography and illustration, as models for his art. As Okeke-Agulu has observed, Onabolu, seeking a language to assert his modern subjectivity, saw photographic realism as the pictorial mode most consistent with his experience of modernity under colonialism. Okeke-Agulu concisely argues, "To put it baldly: academic portraiture was

22 Uche Okeke, History of Modern Nigerian Art, in: *Nigeria Magazine* 128–129, 1979, 100–118, here 105.

23 Their work disputes the charge of critics like Rasheed Araeen, who characterize Onabolu's commitment to realism as proof of a colonized mind. Rasheed Araeen, Modernity, Modernism and Africa's Authentic Voice, in: *Third Text* 24/2, 2010, 277–286. Scholars Sylvester Ogbechie and Olu Oguibe present arguments like Nzegwu and Okeke-Agulu's without so directly tying Onabolu's realism to photography. Ogbechie writes, "Modern Nigerian art accommodated Onabolu's mimetic realism, which appropriated European conventions of portraiture for the subversive purpose of asserting subjectivity for colonized Africans." Ogbechie, Oguibe and Okeke-Agulu's analyses rely on the early work carried out by art historian Ola Oloidi, who gathered archival material on artists like Onabolu, Laṣekan, and Akeredolu. See Sylvester Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu. The Making of an African Modernist*, Rochester, NY 2008, 122–123; Olu Oguibe, Nationalism, Modernity, Modernism, in: id., *The Culture Game*, Minneapolis 2004, 47–59; Ola Oloidi, Art and Nationalism in Colonial Nigeria, in: *Nsukka Journal of History* 1/1, 1989, 92–110. More recently, Sam Rose has written about Onabolu's commitment to realism as reverse appropriation in *Art and Form. From Roger Fry to Global Modernism*, University Park, PA 2019, 128–138.

24 Nkiru Nzegwu, Introduction. Contemporary Nigerian Art, Euphonizing the Art Historical Voice, in: ead. (ed.), *Contemporary Textures. Multidimensionality in Nigerian Art*, Binghamton, NY 1999, 1–39, here 8.

the pictorial language of early colonial modernity in the same way that abstraction was for Europe's imperial modernity."[25] Burdened by the need to prove himself as an artist in the face of colonial racism, Onabolu could not simply produce photography in order to be seen as an artist in colonial Nigeria. Instead, he translated the language of photography into painting.

Not every artist working in Nigeria under colonialism agreed with Onabolu's, and later Laṣekan's, commitment to realism. Ben Enwonwu (1917–1994), especially, aimed to transcend photographic realism's limits in his work. First influenced by his teacher, the British artist Kenneth C. Murray (1902–1972), Enwonwu felt that modern art in Nigeria had to refer to, rather than refuse, the "old art" of Nigeria, that traditional European art was an inappropriate source for Nigerian modernism. He wrote, after a September 1942 visit to Onabolu's studio in Lagos,

> I visited the best Nigeria[n] artists' studios in Lagos while I was there last September. The artist studied in Paris. He spoke of 'Realism' meaning photographic or realistic portrayal of Things and Nature. I aired a different view which almost aroused a polemic discussion. I did not venture to be there again.[26]

Enwonwu had gained exposure to images of European modern art from Murray and later through his own travels to Europe to study in the mid-1940s, broadening his field of visual referents for the formal language he developed in his work. In a 1950 radio interview with *The Negro World*, Enwonwu maintained his position that African artists should not produce realistic art just to prove that they can, demonstrating a shift in Enwonwu's worldview from the limitations placed on Onabolu's by the openly racist discourse prevalent in the early days of British colonial rule in Nigeria.[27]

Unlike Enwonwu, Laṣekan looked to Onabolu as the model for his artistic ambitions. The younger artist pursued art training through correspondence courses from the United Kingdom and the United States that taught the technical skills required to use art to communicate with a broader public. As with Onabolu, Laṣekan understood one of art's primary functions to be historical

[25] This essay condenses the arguments of Okeke-Agulu's *Postcolonial Modernism. Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, Durham, NC 2014; a longer analysis of Onabolu and Dosumu's "A Short Discourse on Art" can be found in chapter two of that volume: "Indirect Rule and Colonial Modernism". Chika Okeke-Agulu, Natural Synthesis. Art, Theory, and the Politics of Decolonization in Mid-Twentieth-Century Nigeria, in: Harney and Phillips, Mapping Modernisms, 235–256, here 239.

[26] Letter from Ben Enwonwu to Lionel Harford, November 18, 1942, Edo College, Benin City. Lionel Harford Papers, Collection of Neil Coventry, Lagos, Nigeria.

[27] Ben Enwonwu radio interview transcript, *The Negro World*, October 14, 1950. Folder 2, File 10, Harmon Foundation Papers, 1929–1994, David C. Driskell Center Archives, University of Maryland.

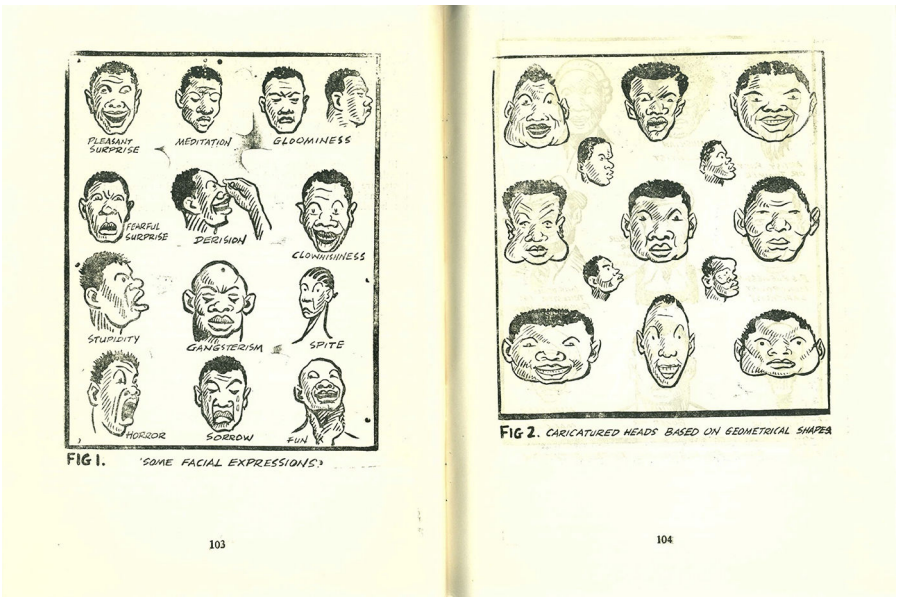
documentation in the face of erasure. Where Onabolu limited his ambition to the picturing of the modern self through portraiture, Laṣekan expanded that scope into paintings, illustrations, and political cartoons that visualized his socio-political world, deflating or revealing the injustices of the colonial and later postcolonial reality he endured in Nigeria. The art manuals he published, beginning in 1942, incorporated training in popular forms of visual communication like cartooning and caricature. He wrote in his art manual *Drawing & Painting Simplified* (1970) of the cartoonist's role as "a poet, editor, essayist, dramatist, and artist, all put together. [...] A cartoonist must be a bit of a psychologist in that he should time his political cartoons to fit in with current political problems."[28] He encouraged his readers to carefully study the human form and facial expression, identifying exaggerated, reproducible characters and caricatures [Fig. 7] that everyone can grasp. These conventions were recognizable to Laṣekan's audience and provided a flexible framework with which Laṣekan could play and expand in his paintings, including "Nigeria Independence Day".[29]

An examination of his compositions and formal choices also reveals Laṣekan's interest in the legibility that "photographic realism" offered, informed by the conventions of photography that had developed for a century throughout West Africa. With their flattened backgrounds, lack of depth, and fixed facial expressions, Laṣekan likely painted his portraits directly from photographs, rather than from life. In so doing, he supplemented the limited opportunities for art education in colonial Nigeria by studying and seizing the modes of visual communication in operation in everyday life. Through his painted portraits, especially, he replicated and documented the development and circulation of different photographic conventions among overlapping communities in colonial-era Nigeria. Some focus on his subject's face in a cropped three-quarter view, similar to those printed in publications like *The Red Book of West Africa* [Fig. 4]. Such compositions usually represent more youthful or cosmopolitan subjects and include his portrait of a Nigerian constable under colonial rule, displayed at the exhibition organized to coincide with the Independence festivities in 1960 [Fig. 8], and his many oil portraits of young women against muted colored backgrounds [Fig. 9]. In addition to these cropped portraits, Laṣekan also produced more formal full-length portraits, often to memorialize older subjects, including his mother [Fig. 10].

These full-length portraits tend to display the characteristics of a "traditional formal portrait" outlined by Stephen Sprague in his influential 1978 essay "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See

28
Akinola Laṣekan, *Drawing & Painting Simplified*, Ibadan 1970, 102.

29
In his study of African American cartoonist Ollie Harrington, art historian Richard J. Powell writes of the importance of blending realism with caricature to lend Harrington's cartoons an illustrative, documentary quality similar to Laṣekan's. See Richard J. Powell, *Going There. Black Visual Satire*, New Haven, CT 2020, 88.



[Fig. 7]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Drawing & Painting Simplified*, Ibadan 1970, 103–104.

[Fig. 8]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Portrait of a Nigerian Constable*, ca. late 1940s, oil on board, dimensions unknown, Lagos, Nigeria, Collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Nigeria. Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan. Photograph by Perrin Lathrop.

[Fig. 9]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Portrait of a Girl*, ca. 1950s, oil on canvas, 39.5 × 32.1 cm, Private Collection, United States. Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan.

[Fig. 10]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1954, oil on canvas, 86.5 × 66 cm (99 × 77 cm, framed), Private Collection. Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan and Sotheby's, London.

Themselves", which explores how photographic conventions among Yoruba communities demonstrate a transformation of traditional aesthetics to a new medium.[30] Sprague carried out his fieldwork in the Igbomina Yoruba town of Ila-Orangun in the summer of 1975. He observed the aesthetic preferences and practices of the town's photographic studios and their clientele for formal portraits that conformed to the following characteristics. The subjects wore their best traditional dress and sat squarely in front of the camera, with knees spread wide to display the fabrics of their garment and both hands in their lap or on their knees. They stare straight into the camera's lens and surround themselves with or wear accoutrements that speak to their position in Yoruba society. Their pose, which includes their entire body, communicates symmetry, balance, and solidity.[31] In her fieldwork in Nigeria in the 1970s, art historian Jean Borgatti also recorded the importance of composed, controlled, and idealized "completeness" among African photographic subjects.[32] Such portraits, the scholars argue, communicate a fulfillment of one's role in traditional Yoruba society as an individual who embodies ideal Yoruba characteristics. These portraits, and the many others like them, highlight the importance of visibility and clarity of identity for these sitters and represent one type of picturing the self in front of the camera that arose in Nigeria, and across West Africa, in the twentieth century.[33]

As seen from other photographic portraits produced throughout the twentieth century that focus on the face or feature sitters in three-quarter poses, photographic self-fashioning took different forms in Nigeria. Since Laṣekan likely painted directly from photographs, rather than from life, his portraits document and reproduce the different conventions of self-presentation that developed in different places and among different social groups. Laṣekan's painted portrait of his mother hews closely to the conventions described by Sprague [Fig. 10]. The elder subject is seated directly in front of the frame in a formal pose that displays her traditional dress and her complete body. Onabolu's portraits, too, convey adherence to photographic conventions like frontal poses, composed expressions, and formal dress, including his 1922 portrait *Sisi Nurse* [Fig. 5]. Although Onabolu obscured the background in his portrait, Laṣekan included a painted curtain and column backdrop in the portrait of

30
Stephen Sprague, Yoruba Photography. How the Yoruba See Themselves, in: Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (eds.), *Photography's Other Histories*, Durham, NC 2003, 240–260.

31
Ibid., 244.

32
Jean Borgatti, Likeness or Not. Musing on Portraiture in Canonical African Art and Its Implications for African Portrait Photography, in: Peffer and Cameron, Portraiture and Photography in Africa, 315–340, here 324.

33
Sprague, Yoruba Photography, 246.

his mother, a typical convention in West African studio photography. The more formal, memorializing portrait connects Laṣekan's work to an Indigenous aesthetic order that developed as memorial photography began to replace figural sculptural traditions in twentieth-century Nigeria. Memorial portrait photographs also circulated in newspapers to announce the deaths of beloved family members, including in the *West African Pilot*, the Nigerian newspaper to which Laṣekan contributed political cartoons for decades. In an edition of that paper from 1960, the death of Martha Agbuluaku Mbanugo, an Igbo woman, was announced alongside her photograph [Fig. 11]. Though Sprague's analysis resulted from research in a single Yoruba town, the photographic conventions he observed were not exclusive to that town or to Yoruba communities.

In twentieth-century Nigeria, and throughout Africa, photography operated at multiple levels, used by some to define themselves as modern against tradition and by others to sustain tradition through its transformation. It was incorporated into varied ritual contexts, including funerary rites, discussed by Okwui Enwezor as "post-ethnographic photographs" that document how "photography has been adapted to vernacular cultural practices" throughout Africa.[34] In some cases, photography was adopted because of its proximity to the realism of aesthetic traditions already in practice. For example, Laṣekan, in his research on the tradition of realism in the ancient Yoruba kingdom of Ile-Ife, describes the use of verisimilitude as a means to emphasize the most important part of the body to the artist: the head, in the case of Ife.[35] From the nineteenth century on, however, the relationship between the aesthetic conventions of photographs and different traditional and ritual practices are entangled, as both practices and conventions transformed simultaneously. In Laṣekan's home region of Ọwọ, for example, the representational funerary practice called *ako* likely has a relationship to photographic conventions employed there, as argued by art historian Rowland Abiodun [Fig. 12].[36] With his portrait paintings, modeled on photographs, Laṣekan documents the different social uses of photography throughout Nigeria.

34
Enwezor's essay was written as a catalogue essay for an exhibition of photography from the 1960s and 1970s from Benin Republic but discusses the use of photography in Africa beyond those national bounds, particularly in Nigeria. Okwui Enwezor, Life & Afterlife in Benin. Photography in the Service of Ethnographic Realism, in: Alex Van Gelder (ed.), *Life & Afterlife in Benin*, New York 2005, 10.

35
Akinọla Laṣekan, Authenticity of Ife Art, in: Moyo Okediji (ed.), *Yoruba Images. Essays in Honour of Lamidi Fakeye*, Ile-Ife 1988, 40–60, here 53.

36
Ako refers to a funeral effigy tradition in Ọwọ, documented by Rowland Abiodun between the late nineteenth century (1880s) and 1945, that relies on an idealized form of realism. Rowland Abiodun, A Reconsideration of the Function of Ako, Second Burial Effigy in Ọwọ, in: *Africa. Journal of the International African Institute* 46/1, 1976, 4–20, here 18. See also id., Ako-Graphy. Ọwọ Portraits, in: Peffer and Cameron, Portraiture and Photography in Africa, 341–362, here 341; id, Ako. Re/Minding is the Antidote for Forgetfulness, in: id., *Yoruba Art and Language. Seeking the African in African Art*, New York 2014, 178–203; Olu Oguibe, Photography and the Substance of the Image, in: id. *The Culture Game*, 73–89.

IN MEMORIAM

In ever treasured memory of our mother and wife

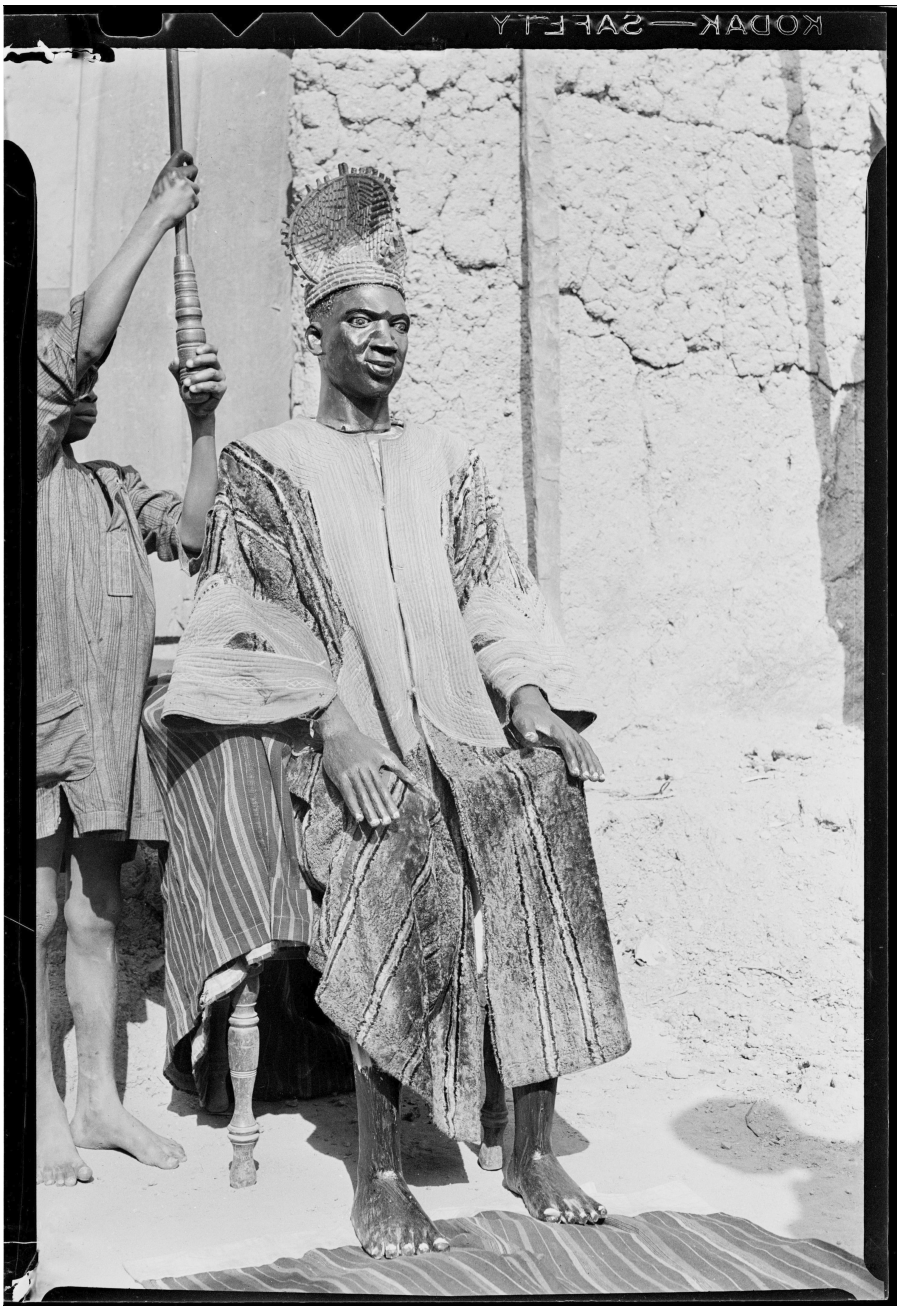
MARTHA AGBULUAKU MBANUGO

Oh ! What a sad morning is January 21 when all efforts to save you failed and death snatched you away from us. It is one year today that your motherly care and advice ceased. Your place remains unfilled for ever.

Rest in perfect peace.

Mr J. C.	Mbanugo	Husband
Mrs E. R. N.	Okagbue	Daughter
Mr O. C.	Mbanugo	Son
Dr G. C.	Mbanugo	Son
Mrs M. O.	Nwasike	Daughter.

[Fig. 11]
In Memoriam Martha Agbuluaku Mbanugo, *West African Pilot*, January 21, 1960, 1.



[Fig. 12]
Justine M. Cordwell, photograph of an *Ako* figure, ca. 1949, Owo, Nigeria. Justine M. Cordwell Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections and University Archives. Courtesy of Northwestern University Libraries.

III. African Renaissance and the "Sublime"

Laṣekan's engagement with photography in "Nigeria Independence Day" is more complex than in his portraits. It is an ambitious act of revision and re-memorialization. Though likely painted from multiple still-unidentified source photographs, the overall scene is retrospectively imagined from a 1970s, postwar vantage point, compressing Nigeria's 1960 independence festivities into a single image. According to the artist's son, Laṣekan collected local press clippings and photographs for use in his paintings.[37] A single photograph could not have served as a source because the events and details represented did not occur at the same time. My research in the holdings of various Nigerian and international newspapers and press agencies revealed several potential photographs that record different events from the independence celebrations of September and October 1960 upon which Laṣekan may have drawn. For example, Princess Alexandra wore a day dress like the one featured in Laṣekan's painting during events leading up to October 1, 1960 [Fig. 13], but on the night of the flag raising, when she ceremonially handed over the constitution to the new prime minister, she dressed in a formal gown, as recorded in the Associated Press film *Nigerian Independence*.[38] The central figural composition featuring the princess and the prime minister facing each other recalls an image circulated in the *West African Pilot* of Princess Alexandra's meeting with Tafawa Balewa upon her arrival at the Lagos airport in Ikeja on September 26, 1960 [Fig. 14]. Finally, the wildly popular nationalist leaders Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo were not invited by the new prime minister to witness the flag raising by his side, a visible absence that was reported in the press.[39]

Azikiwe, however, did meet the princess days earlier at a party he organized at the Federal Palace Hotel [Fig. 15].[40] And the day after the flag raising, Princess Alexandra attended the state opening of the first parliament of independent Nigeria, at which Nnamdi Azikiwe, then president of the senate as leader of the nationalist pan-Nigerian political party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), presided [Fig. 16]. The following month,

37
According to Laṣekan's son, David Laṣekan, his father kept an album of photographs collected from newspapers, upon which he possibly called to create this work. Interview with David Laṣekan, Lagos, Nigeria, June 8, 2022.

38
Nigerian Independence, in: *Associated Press*, October 6, 1960 (June 25, 2023).

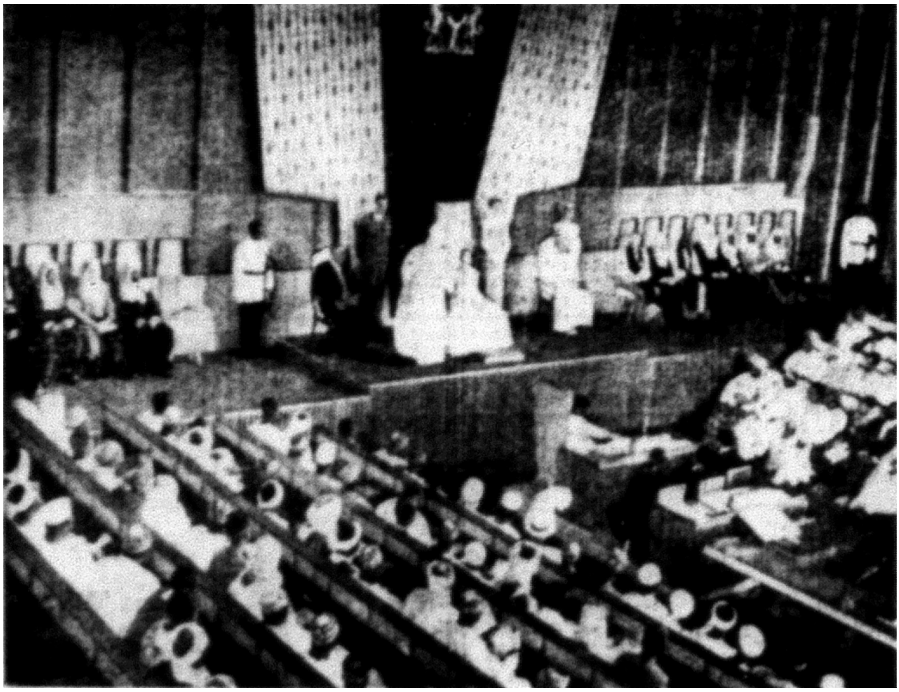
39
The Guardian reported, "There was no doubt that the 20,000 spectators wanted to see Dr Azikiwe and Chief Awolowo, who had, after all, been in the independence business far longer than the Nigerian Prime Minister. That Alhaji Abubakar did not make the gesture of inviting these two men to stand by his side during the flag-raising will long rankle as a mark against him." Hella Pick, 3 October 1960. Nigerian High Society Celebrates Independence, in: *The Guardian*, October 3, 2013 (March 1, 2021).

40
Ibid.

[Fig. 13]
Princess Alexandra with Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, prime minister of Federal Nigeria and other members of the Council of Ministers, along with retiring Governor General Sir James Robertson, on the day of her arrival in Nigeria to celebrate independence, in: Royal Visitor Meets the Press, *West African Pilot*, September 28, 1960, 1.

[Fig. 14]
Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Prime Minister of the Federation, welcoming Princess Alexandra to Nigeria, in: Royal Visit in Pictures, *West African Pilot*, September 27, 1960, 4.

[Fig. 15]
Princess Alexandra arriving at a party organized by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, President of the Senate, and Mr. Jaja Wachuku, Speaker of the House of Representatives. The Princess is shown speaking with Azikiwe, her back to the camera, in: Royal Visitor Meets the Press, *West African Pilot*, September 28, 1960, 1.



[Fig. 16]
Alexandra Opens First Session of Free Nigeria Parliament, in: *West African Pilot*, October 4, 1960, page unknown.

Azikiwe took over from Sir James Robertson as governor general, the representative of the British government in Nigeria, with Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Action Group as opposition leader. Azikiwe was inaugurated as the first president in 1963, when Nigeria became a republic. Laṣekan inserts Azikiwe and Awolowo into a central position in his composition to affirm their important roles in decolonizing Nigeria [Fig. 11].

Laṣekan represents these Nigerian leaders in the painting through the conventions of caricature. In *Drawing & Painting Simplified*, Laṣekan encouraged readers to become familiar with the symbols representing different nations and social types.[41] Familiar accessories, like Awolowo's round wirerimmed eyeglasses, and culturally associated articles of clothing, like Azikiwe's traditional Igbo cap, serve as a shorthand in the painting to identify the men for the viewer. He carried over this approach into the history painting from his political cartooning practice, blending the photographic with the satirical to depict the political reality of independence and its aftermath. Art historian Yomi Ola locates Laṣekan's use of caricature and satire in his cartoons in Indigenous Nigerian culture, including satirical Yoruba masquerade traditions.[42] The artist used recognizable, reproducible pictorial tropes as a narrative tool to build a distinct visual world representative of the visual culture of his time.

In their paintings, Aina Onabolu and Akinọla Laṣekan engaged with the camera in twentieth-century Nigeria as a tool of modernity. The artists maintained their commitment to realism into the independence era, informed by the prevailing racist rhetoric of the colonial era that denigrated African artistic ability. Laṣekan articulated his anxieties about foreign patronage and control over the Nigerian art world in a 1962 editorial in the *West African Pilot* entitled "Wanted: Sublime Art".[43] The essay expresses his observations about developments in the Nigerian art world since independence. It builds on articles Laṣekan wrote during the colonial era in the same newspaper that called on the government to hire Nigerian artists for public monument commissions and voiced the stakes of artmaking in decolonizing Nigeria.[44] His 1955 essay "Appreciation of Art", especially, serves as a template for the later article's underlying

41
Laṣekan, Drawing & Painting Simplified, 101.

42
Yomi Ola, *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture*, Durham, NC 2013, 81–82.

43
Akinọla Laṣekan, Wanted. Sublime Art, in: *West African Pilot*, August 22, 1962, 4. Laṣekan wrote his 1962 essay the year he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in London. Meeting of Council, in: *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 110/5070, 1962, 368–370. Laṣekan also marked this event in his personal record of his life. See Akinọla Laṣekan, *Memorable Incidents in My Life*, completed 1971. Document, Laṣekan Family Personal Papers, Lagos, Nigeria.

44
Akinọla Laṣekan, Art Contracts. Whither Our Art?, in: *West African Pilot*, October 15, 1953, 2.

populism. Both essays convey a deep skepticism about the elitism of a "modern" art grounded in the visual language of abstraction that requires explanation for understanding. Though Laṣekan disdained European modernism, his essay reveres the European Renaissance, the Baroque, and Romanticism; his 1955 text, while written with populist intent, acknowledged artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Diego Velázquez, and J. M. W. Turner as pinnacles of culture and brilliance to which Nigeria, and by extension Africa, should aspire.[45]

Laṣekan's suspicion about European modernism was informed by its relationship to the "primitive", which the artist understood to mean Indigenous art perceived to hold Africa in a timeless past. The artist's awareness of European modernism and its often-abstract visual language was filtered through the views of Europeans with whom he interacted. The predominantly nativist appreciation of Nigerian art among figures like Kenneth C. Murray and Dennis Duerden threatened the nationalist promise the artist envisioned for artmaking in Nigeria. His 1955 essay responds to articles like Duerden's 1953 *Nigeria* magazine piece "Is There a Nigerian Style of Painting?", which privileged a decorative, naïve visual style among schoolchildren in Nigeria over the work of trained artists, prioritizing artwork that evinced the so-called "primitive" mind and reinforcing the colonialist belief that African artists were incapable of producing academic art.[46] Murray and Duerden's preference for the untrained hand among their Nigerian students was not motivated, however, by purely primitivist intentions in the European modernist sense, since they were guided by conventions of aesthetic taste that limited the creativity of the African artist; they did not see African artists as their equals. Laṣekan thus understood the unschooled art elevated by European teachers and critics in Nigeria as dangerous, as a denial of coevalness for African artists seeking to articulate their own modernity in forms of their own choosing and a means to "perpetuate the stigma of inferiority labelled on the African race by detractors".[47] He therefore urged Nigerian artists to create compositions that privileged "accurate" drawing and coherent arrangement over "mutilated or distorted modern forms".[48]

45
Id., Appreciation of Art, in: *West African Pilot*, October 13, 1955, 2–3.

46
Laṣekan would have understood "primitive" to refer to "traditional" African art, and further, "modernism", in the European sense, to mean abstraction. Laṣekan's understanding of European modernism's primitivist origins would have been shaped by the teachings introduced into Nigeria by colonial officers like Kenneth Murray and Dennis Duerden who did not see Africans as capable of producing rigorous academic art and who claimed to seek to "preserve" the "primitive" mind of the African artists they encountered. Dennis Duerden, Is There a Nigerian Style of Painting?, in: *Nigeria* 41, 1953, 51–59.

47
Laṣekan, Appreciation of Art, 2.

48
Ibid., 3.

In "Wanted: Sublime Art", Laşekan argued more explicitly against abstraction as the visual language appropriate for an African Renaissance in the independence era. Laşekan employed the term imprecisely to broadly refer to art informed by formal languages that fall outside the parameters of academic realism, including both Indigenous African arts and European modernisms. For Laşekan, the growing trend toward so-called abstraction among Nigerian artists represented an attempt by European tastemakers to hold Nigerians in the past. He wrote, "For Nigerian artists to keep working in the so-called traditional style is to perpetuate our living in the Neolithic age."[49] The "traditional", or the abstract, demonstrated, to Laşekan, a lack of knowledge. Instead, he promoted art that better suited "the mid-twentieth century African Renascent Age with its bright promise of a glorious pan-Africanism".[50] For art to embody an African Renaissance, it could not emulate the traditional but had to embody the change proposed by the camera. It was not for the elite, but for the broader public and required no "pseudo-philosophical jargons" to interpret. The artist referred to such work as "sublime".[51] Though Laşekan asserted his awareness of world art history, especially the movements of European art, his text does not associate the "sublime" with Kantian aesthetics or with the writing of Edmund Burke. Instead, his use of the term was shaped by and filtered through the rhetoric of his patron Nnamdi Azikiwe.

In his volume *Renascent Africa*, originally published in 1937, Azikiwe offered a path to independence for Nigerians, and Africans, based on an embrace of modernity and progress. He writes, "There is a destiny sublime for Africa and the Renascent Africans. And neither the forces of time nor the forces of space can obliterate this destiny."[52] To the Romantic painters and poets of the nineteenth century, the sublime visualized an encounter that inspired awe beyond reason or understanding. The sublime undergirded the European colonial project's expropriation of land by emptying landscapes inhabited by others. In a move similar to Onabolu and Laşekan's appropriation of the conventions of European academic painting, Azikiwe appropriated the term to expose that theft and to reclaim the land and the future. Laşekan defined sublime art as universal and enduring work whose value can be understood by all without explanation, art that represents the height of human achievement. Privileging legibility, Laşekan's "sublime art" was enabled by realism, a universally recognized form of "artistic maturity" that Africans must achieve before they "could come down to doing any

49
Laşekan, Wanted. Sublime Art, 4.

50
Ibid., 4.

51
Ibid., 4.

52
Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renascent Africa*, London 1968, 118.

amount of grotesque works".[53] To Laṣekan's mind, an artist with command over the rules of academic realism, the height of visual communication, was beyond the reproach of a colonial audience eager to discount their ability. Laṣekan's understanding of abstraction, described as grotesque in this editorial, limited his capacity to frame the work of younger artists as productive or self-directed; for him, such artists must demonstrate their academic abilities before they could experiment with other styles. He questioned the success of artists like Afi Ekong [Fig. 17] and Felix Idubor [Fig. 18] of whose wood carving he asks, "What age really does his art represent?" Both Ekong and Idubor worked in an expressionist figurative style in painting and in sculpture that Laṣekan perceived as lacking technical skill or as too closely associated with the art of the past.

Laṣekan wrote "Sublime Art" while serving as a lecturer in the College of Fine Arts at the newly opened University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). The artist began teaching at Nsukka in 1961, a year after the university's 1960 opening by Princess Alexandra as part of Nigeria's independence celebrations. At Nsukka, Laṣekan regularly held exhibitions of his work that captured the nationalist spirit embodied by the opening of the university at independence and reaffirmed the artist's connection to Nnamdi Azikiwe into the 1960s. The first exhibition, "Nsukka Landscapes of the University", marked the installation of Nnamdi Azikiwe as chancellor of the university in 1961. The second, opened in October 1962, honored Zik even more directly, unveiling "a large biographical portrait" of Nnamdi Azikiwe.[54] Described by the artist and critic A. Okpu Eze in Lagos's *Morning Post* newspaper, the painting "contains a life-like and life-size portrait of the Governor-General in the centre surrounded by 24 exquisite paintings depicting most interesting and important stages in the life of the great Nigerian".[55] In his preview, Eze references Laṣekan's "Sublime Art" essay to argue that the portrait cycle, a monumental work in scale and ambition, fulfilled Laṣekan's call for "Nigerian artists to start executing sublime works of art to reflect the new renaissance in Africa so as to project the new African personality".[56] As described, Laṣekan honored the hero of Nigerian nationalism by structuring the cycle as an altarpiece, a format favored by artists of the European Renaissance, and one with which he had experimented in 1955. That year he painted his

53
Laṣekan, Wanted. Sublime Art, 4.

54
Letter from Akinọla Laṣekan to Evelyn S. Brown, October 5, 1962. Akinọla Laṣekan File, Harmon Foundation Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

55
The 182.88 × 243.84 cm painting was exhibited at the beginning of the 1962–1963 academic year at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in October 1962. A. Okpu Eze, The Azikiwe Story in Painting, in: *Morning Post*, Lagos, September 22, 1962, page unknown. News clipping found in Akinọla Laṣekan File, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., ca. 1967, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

56
A. Okpu Eze, The Azikiwe Story in Painting, page unknown.

[Fig. 17]
Afi Ekong (1930–2009), *Olumo Rock*, 1960, oil on canvas, 25.7 × 76.5 cm, Nashville, Tennessee, Fisk University Galleries, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1991.1075. Courtesy the Estate of Afi Ekong © Bronze Gallery. Photograph by Jerry Atnip.

[Fig. 18]
Felix Idubor, *Edward H. Duckworth*, ca. 1950s, ebony, dimensions unknown, Birmingham, United Kingdom, University of Birmingham, bequeathed by E.H. Duckworth, 1972, BIRRC-D0181. Courtesy the Estate of Felix Idubor and University Collections, University of Birmingham.

triptych portrait of the three "First Regional Premiers of the Federation of Nigeria" [Fig. 19], a work that he later evokes with the central figural grouping in "Nigeria Independence Day". Choosing this format for his definitive portrait of Zik allowed Laṣekan to deify his patron and to elevate his accomplishments in a manner that "effectively reflect[ed] the spirit of the present African Renascent Age" for the Nigerian populace.[57] Unfortunately, careful analysis of the cycle is impossible, as the work is lost, a casualty of the fall of Nsukka in the Nigerian Civil War.[58]

IV. Problems of Contemporary African Artists. Encountering Postcolonial Crisis

In the late 1960s, the Nigerian state fractured along ethnic lines, resulting in a violent civil war (1967–1970). Though Nnamdi Azikiwe had consistently called for a united Nigeria in his fight for independence, the Federation of Nigeria had been long divided by region and ethnicity, resulting from regional inequities first engendered by colonial rule. These divisions were formalized after World War II through a series of constitutional reforms that gave increased autonomy and political power to the three regions (North, East, and West) then comprising the Federation of Nigeria, causing nationalist party politics to consolidate according to regional and ethnic divisions over the pan-Nigerian philosophy advocated by Azikiwe.[59] The civil war ended the ebullience of the post-independence period, beginning with the military coup of January 15, 1966 that resulted in the deaths of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa and Premier of Northern Nigeria Ahmadu Bello.

Widespread perception outside the Eastern Region rose that Igbo people, some of whom were behind the coup, aimed to seize power. Massacres of Igbo people across the nation resulted in thousands of deaths and led to the flight of Igbo refugees, previously settled all over the nation, back to the East. Artist Ben Enwonwu,

57
Laṣekan, Wanted. Sublime Art, 4.

58
Oloidi cites a conversation with a source at the UNN Library who stated, anecdotally, that Laṣekan's portrait of Nnamdi Azikiwe "was probably removed by the Biafran soldiers as protest against Azikiwe who was officially regarded as a 'deserter' and the enemy of the state; after his disagreement with the Biafran Head of State, Odumegwu Ojukwu during the Civil War". See Ola Oloidi, Nnamdi Azikiwe in the History and Development of Modern Nigerian Art, in: id. (ed.), *Modern Nigerian Art in Historical Perspectives*, Abuja 2004, 12–31, here 31. Though the painting was lost during the war, this anecdote might revise the historical facts, as Nsukka fell in 1967, and Azikiwe did not "defect" until 1969.

59
Sociologist and historian Immanuel Wallerstein presaged the certain instability in Nigeria soon after independence in the following article: Immanuel Wallerstein, Nigeria. Slow Road to Trouble, in: *The New Leader*, July 23, 1962, 15–18. News clipping found in File 1, Box 17, Claude Barnett Research Collection, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University. The Mid-West region was later added to the Northern, Eastern, and Western.

[Fig. 19]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Archival photograph of First Regional Premiers of the Federation of Nigeria Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe; Alhaji Ahmadu, Sardauna of Sokoto; Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, 1955, oil on board (?), dimensions unknown, Collection of Federal Government of Nigeria, from Akinọla Laṣekan File, Harmon Foundation Artworks by African Artists, 1947-1967, 200 (S)-HN-AA-7B-2. National Archives, College Park, MD.

an Igbo, fled his home and studio in Lagos for Onitsha.[60] A countercoup on July 29, 1966, was staged by Northern troops, killing military head of state Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi and Adekunle Fajuyi, the military leader of the Western Region. After a failed attempt by military governors and Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, the army chief of staff after the second coup, to reach an agreement during talks at Aburi, Ghana in January 1967, Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region, declared that region a sovereign state, the Republic of Biafra, in May 1967.[61]

Non-easterners were ordered out of the Eastern Region by Ojukwu in October 1966, their safety no longer guaranteed.[62] Laṣekan remained in Nsukka until that 1966 order.[63] The artist remained politically outspoken during this uncertain period by continuing to publish political cartoons. According to E. Okechukwu Odita, who served on the faculty at Nsukka with Laṣekan, the elder artist was jailed by the military government in Enugu for two weeks for cartoons in the *West African Pilot* that featured symbols of banned political parties, including the cock emblem of the NCNC.[64] Following Ojukwu's orders, Laṣekan and other professors and students left Nsukka in 1966 for posts at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in Western Nigeria.[65]

60
Matthew Lecznar provides a focused account of Enwonwu's "biafrascapes" in the following: Matthew Lecznar, Weathering the Storm. Ben Enwonwu's Biafrascapes and the Crisis in the Nigerian Postcolony, in: *Tate Papers* 30, 2018 (March 6, 2020).

61
For a more detailed account of the events that led to the Biafran War, see Michael Gould, *The Biafran War. The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*, New York 2013.

62
Meredith Coffey, Ethnic Minorities and the Biafran National Imaginary in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in: Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem (eds.), *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*, Cambridge 2016, 265–283, here 270.

63
In the timeline he kept of his life, Laṣekan wrote on October 6, 1966, "I left Nsukka today on the order of Lt-Colonel Ojukwu, Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria. This was an order he made by which all Non-Igbo speaking people of Nigerian nationality were expelled from Eastern Nigeria as a result of the growing crisis in the country." Akinọla Laṣekan, Memorable Incidents in My Life.

64
Emmanuel Okechukwu Odita, *Foundations of Contemporary African Art*, Unpublished Manuscript, 2009, 100. Laṣekan's granddaughter Bukola Smith corroborated in a 2015 interview with the author that Laṣekan was jailed during his lifetime due to the political nature of his work, but she did not provide details. Interview with Bukola Smith, Lagos, Nigeria, June 1, 2015. Laṣekan himself wrote about his 1966 imprisonment in both Enugu (June 4–8, 1966) and Apapa, Lagos (July 8–August 2, 1966), stating, "The offense was that I was author of a cartoon published in the 'West African Pilot' in Lagos on 3/7/66 in which I used the picture of a cock, which was banned by the Military Govt. being a political party symbol. I, of course, did not insert the picture of the cock in the cartoon for party political reasons but to praise the military govt. Unfortunately my intention was misinterpreted." Akinọla Laṣekan, Memorable Incidents in My Life.

65
Laṣekan's eldest daughter Mrs. Funke Omoyele said the following of her father's removal from Nsukka, "My daddy had to leave the place during the war when Ojukwu, the then Biafran head of state said all those who are not Igbos should leave. My daddy had to leave. He and some others [...] they had to come back to the West. They were absorbed at the Awolowo Ife University. A lot of them, like Professor Fafunwa and Professor Aluko and

At Ife, Laṣekan found a university in transition, and an environment removed from the turmoil of the East but not without unrest. The University of Ife opened at a temporary campus in Ibadan in 1962. As the official university of the Western Region, its operations and development were intimately tied to the tumultuous regional politics in the West, resulting from the fragmentation of Obafemi Awolowo's Action Group political party and the rise of Samuel Ladoke Akintola's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in the early 1960s. The influence of ethnopolitics on the development of universities in the post-independence period prefigured the fracturing of the nation to come by the end of the decade.[66] In the wake of the second coup in July 1966, eastern students and professors increasingly fled universities in the West, and westerners stationed in the East, like Laṣekan, did the same.[67] Though Laṣekan found a place as a fellow at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife, he reportedly remained an outsider among his new fellow Yoruba colleagues, who debated his staunchly vocal NCNC political outlook.[68] It is also likely that his lack of academic credentials contributed to his outsider status among his colleagues, for whom such qualifications were of utmost importance.[69]

In addition to research and teaching, Laṣekan participated in life at the University of Ife by documenting the rise of the campus in paintings that highlight and celebrate its modernist architecture. Designed by the Bauhaus-educated Israeli architect Arieh Sharon and his son Eldah, the campus opened in January 1967. Its impressive multi-story concrete buildings, called "grossly overdesigned" in foreign studies undertaken by USAID in 1964, were nevertheless constructed to justify the Western Region's developmental prowess to the nation. The campus' commitment to displays of Yoruba nationalism extended to structures and features that firmly located the university within its cultural and spiritual home of Ile-Ife, the

some others, they had to come back to the West." Interview with Mrs. Funke Omoyele, Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria, August 1, 2017. Laṣekan himself wrote that he took the temporary post as Research Fellow in Art and Art History at the University of Ife in November 1966. The position was renewed and confirmed a year later. Akinọla Laṣekan, Memorable Incidents in My Life.

66
Tim Livsey, *Nigeria's University Age. Reframing Decolonisation and Development*, London 2017, 153–155.

67
Livsey, Nigeria's University Age, 168.

68
Professor J. Rowland Ojo, who taught as a young professor at the Institute of African Studies while Laṣekan was employed there, noted that Laṣekan would debate politics with Action Group supporters among the faculty on campus. Ojo also recalled Laṣekan's detainment following his publication of a cartoon during a regional election. Interview with Professor J. Rowland Ojo, Ife, Nigeria, July 14, 2017.

69
Laṣekan's Ife colleagues were also outraged at the high prices he charged for purchase of his works. In our interview, Ojo recalls that Laṣekan's painting of Moremi was displayed for sale in an exhibition that drew ire for this reason. No exhibition catalogue has been found to determine the checklist of paintings at the exhibition, or its exact date. J. Rowland Ojo mentioned the show in our interview. Interview with Professor J. Rowland Ojo, Ife, Nigeria, July 14, 2017.

founding city of the Yoruba people. These included a concrete replica of Ife's Opa Oranmiyan, a sacred stone pillar associated with the great Oba Oranmiyan – the fourteenth-century founder of Ile-Ife – as well as the layout of the oba's *afin* (palace).[70] Laṣekan most memorably represented the pride surrounding the opening of the University of Ife campus in a large-scale 1967 oil painting called *Moving Day at Ife* [Fig. 20], which represents the flurry of activity as laborers unload sturdy wooden desks, chairs, and bookshelves from trucks onto the grounds of the new campus, readying the university for a new generation of students.[71] The university's distinctive tiered concrete Humanities Faculty buildings rise in the background. A fashionably dressed man and woman, presumably professors or students, arrive to survey the scene. Laṣekan's exuberant painting is hopeful, holding on to the promise of nationalism at the moment of its collapse and countering the chaos of the simultaneous forced exit of Eastern Nigerians from the University of Ife at the start of the war.

During his tenure at Ife, Laṣekan held an exhibition of his work that included two portraits now in the collection of the university. These monumental, near life-size paintings, of the assassinated Military Governor of Western Nigeria Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi [Fig. 21] and of Princess Moremi, the wife of Oba Oranmiyan [Fig. 22], represent figures revered by the Yoruba people and the university community.[72] Fajuyi was assassinated in the second coup in July 1966 in Ibadan, where he was hosting Major General Ironsi, the military head of state and the chief target of the coup. The men were arrested together and disappeared; their deaths were not officially acknowledged for six months.[73] A martyr in the eyes of his Yoruba countrymen, Fajuyi was considered a pan-Nigerian figure for protecting Ironsi, an Igbo man. As a subject for Laṣekan, then, Fajuyi enabled the artist to simultaneously participate in Yoruba cultural nationalism and maintain his interest in painting political portraits of figures with a pan-Nigerian national vision. Possibly painted as a gesture of good faith to his new employers at Ife,

70
Livsey, Nigeria's University Age, 155. See also Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler, Campus Architecture as Nation Building. Israeli Architect Arieh Sharon's Obafemi Awolowo University Campus, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, in: Duanfang Lu (ed.), *Third World Modernism. Architecture, Development and Identity*, London 2010, 113–140; Ayala Levin, Exporting Architectural National Expertise. Arieh Sharon's Ife University Campus in West-Nigeria (1962–1976), in: Raymond Quek, Darren Deane, and Sarah Butler (eds.), *Nationalism and Architecture*, Burlington, VT 2012, 53–66; Bayo Amole, *The Legacy of Arieh Sharon's Postcolonial Modernist Architecture at the Obafemi Awolowo University Campus in Ile-Ife Nigeria*, paper presented at Bauhaus Imaginista Conference, Lagos, Nigeria, November 23–24, 2018 (May 12, 2020).

71
This painting made an impression on J. Rowland Ojo, who made a point to recall it in our interview. Interview with J. Rowland Ojo, Ife, Nigeria, July 14, 2017.

72
Each figure was commemorated on the university campus in the name of a student dormitory. Laṣekan presented the posthumous portrait of Fajuyi (dated 1967) as a gift to the vice-chancellor of the university in July 1968. Laṣekan, Memorable Incidents in My Life.

73
Gould, The Biafran War, 32.

[Fig. 20]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Moving Day at Ife*, 1968, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 157.48 cm, Ife, Nigeria, Collection of Obafemi Awolowo University, Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan. Photograph by Perrin Lathrop.

[Fig. 21]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi*, 1967, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Ife, Nigeria, Collection of Obafemi Awolowo University, Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan. Photograph by Perrin Lathrop.

[Fig. 22]
Akinọla Laṣekan, *Moremi of Ile Ife*, 1968, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Ife, Nigeria, Collection of Obafemi Awolowo University, Courtesy the Estate of Akinọla Laṣekan. Photograph by Perrin Lathrop.

Laṣekan's portrait does not explicitly celebrate Fajuyi, who he formally depicts dressed in his military regalia and stationed alone on a ceremonial platform. He stares soberly ahead with pursed lips and an ambivalent expression, capturing the somber and resigned tone of the war era.

Laṣekan's painting of Moremi, a mythic and heroic historical figure among the Yoruba in Ile-Ife, conforms to the artist's reputation for aggrandizing Yoruba histories to national significance, which continued to different effect during the war era, when the idea of Nigeria as a nation came under real threat. His depiction of Moremi is a narrative portrait, representing the moment Moremi resolved to sacrifice herself for the people of Ife. Pictured elegantly dressed in her richly colored *iro* (wrapper), *gele* (head wrap), and coral beads, Moremi appears troubled but resigned, her chin cradled in her hand and eyes fixed ahead. As she walks away from a violent scene of pillage in the background, a costumed figure wielding a sword follows her down the path. The people of Ile-Ife, under the attack of a neighboring group of people called the Igbo (said to be unrelated to modern-day Igbos but whose name nevertheless resonates with the historical context of the painting), believed their aggressors to be supernatural beings. Moremi, having made sacrifices to the *orișas* (Yoruba deities) at a nearby river, allowed herself to be captured by the Igbo in order to infiltrate their society. Known for her beauty, she became intimate with their king and learned from him the secret to their prowess. The Igbo were not supernatural but merely humans who disguised themselves in raffia war garments to attack their enemies; especially vulnerable to fire, their raffia-costumed warriors could be vanquished with the right weapons. Equipped with new knowledge about the Igbo, Moremi escaped her captors and revealed the military secret of the Igbo to Ife. Moremi was forced to sacrifice her only son to the *orișas* who had aided her journey.[74]

Moremi, commemorated in the annual Edi Festival in Ife, is regarded as a hero, and her story memorializes the ever-present threat of conflict with one's neighbors – a resonant theme during a civil war. Moremi revealed the military secret of the mythic "Igbo" to ensure their defeat. Desiring the preservation of Nigeria as a nation, Laṣekan perhaps commemorated with this painting his hope that the present-day Igbo would remain Nigerians rather than Biafrans. These two portraits of past and present Yoruba heroes, painted in 1967 and 1968 when Nigeria was in the middle of its civil war with Biafra, open them to interpretation as tools of Yoruba cultural nationalism. These paintings evince Laṣekan's sense of conflicted nationalism after the fall of his mentor, Zik, and his vision of a united Nigeria with the outbreak of civil war, hoping for the

74
The story of Moremi is recounted by Johnson and Smith in their historical accounts of the Yoruba. Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas. From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, London 1966, 147–148; Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*, London 1969, 15.

defeat of the Igbo in the civil war but wary of ethnic conflict and entrenchment.[75] The *West African Pilot*, Laṣekan's main outlet for expressly political art, ceased publication in 1967, limiting his access to a steady platform for his brand of visual politics. Though the portraits of Fajuyi and Moremi suggest the continued importance of pictorial commemoration of Nigerian figures, they also reveal an ambivalence towards the nation in a time of civil unrest.[76]

Though Laṣekan's pan-Nigerian nationalist convictions were tested by the war and the ethnic division of the socio-political climate, he continued his investigations into the state of the contemporary Nigerian art scene. While a fellow at the Institute of African Studies at Ife, he wrote his posthumously published essay "Problems of Contemporary African Artists", which further developed the arguments of previous editorials like "Wanted: Sublime Art" (1962) that itemized the issues facing artists in Nigeria and reflected on trends among postcolonial artists. Though he did not directly reference the changed circumstances caused by the unrest of the civil war in Nigeria, Laṣekan wrote with a sense of urgency, concerned for the use of art to demonstrate a forward-moving African society. In the essay, Laṣekan definitively articulated his philosophy towards artmaking as engaged in the development of a healthy society and as accurately reflecting "the present African age".[77]

Laṣekan may have deployed "photographic realism" in paintings like "Nigeria Independence Day" to express ambivalence toward the nationalist project [Fig. 1], but through the end of his life, Laṣekan retained his belief that art should reflect the time of its making. For him, realism, as he argued in "Problems", was the only effective means to make sense of the unsettled postcolonial reality.[78] In 1971, the year after the fall of Biafra and the year before his death from cancer, the artist used "photographic realism" to *retrospectively* reimagine a scene that evoked nostalgia for the lost promise of Nigerian nationalism, highlighting figures like Tafawa Balewa who had been lost to the new nation's violent conflict. Returning to and collaging source photographs he had assembled a decade earlier, Laṣekan proposed a multi-temporality in the 1971 composition to evoke a more totalizing picture of independence than any

75
Azikiwe briefly supported Biafra's independence and participated in meetings in September 1968 in Paris to negotiate the French government's support of Biafra. Azikiwe later changed his mind, preferring to compromise and settle with the Federal Government of Nigeria, spending the rest of the war campaigning for reunification, proposing a peace plan in February 1969. Gould, The Biafran War, 116–117.

76
Chika Okeke-Agulu and Sylvester Ogbechie discuss the artistic responses to the Biafran War of artists Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Ben Enwonwu in their seminal volumes on Nigerian modernism. Okeke-Agulu, Postcolonial Modernism, 259–289; Ogbechie, Making of an African Modernist, 154–215.

77
Laṣekan, Problems of Contemporary African Artists, 32.

78
Ibid., 33.

one photograph could capture. Building on his understanding of the social role of photography in portraiture and the changing representation of the self, he exploited the perceived truth value of photography, imagining and re-presenting historical events, to memorialize, remember, and reinstate the promise of independence. As an artist, he represented the past and present, here by combining different temporalities within the confines of a single frame, to provide Nigeria with a history on which to build its future.

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SLOW SPECTACLE

LOS ANGELES IN THE ART OF SAYRE GOMEZ

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ABSTRACT

Sayre Gomez's photorealistic works reflect explicitly on the gentrification of historically low-income, non-white areas of Los Angeles, manifesting a pervasive aspect of spectacle, namely, its production of the city as a collection of images that in the last instance resolve to ciphers of property relations. Building on Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle, this essay explores Gomez's characteristic device, the use of literal or implied scrims to produce layers of spatiality distinguished by their degree of focus. My argument is that the enframement of the city in Gomez's paintings concretizes Debord's critique of capitalist spatiality by returning it to the built environment, while also reflecting on the entanglement of spectacle with racial capitalism (unlike most Debordian discourse). Gomez's highly stylized painterly realism hence does not articulate spectacle as an undifferentiated miasma but rather as the minutely differentiated medium of racial and class distinction.

KEYWORDS

Photorealism; Spectacle; Property; Race; Class.

I. Cruising

In an essay published in 1989, Joan Didion relays the dominant phenomenology of urban Southern California:

> A good part of any day in Los Angeles is spent driving, alone, through streets devoid of meaning to the driver, which is one reason the place exhilarates some people and floods others with an amorphous unease. There can be about these hours spent in transit a seductive unconnectedness. Conventional information is missing. Context clues are missing. In Culver City and in Echo Park and in East Los Angeles there are the same pastel bungalows. There are the same leggy poinsettias and the same trees of pink and yellow hibiscus. There are the same laundromats, body shops, strip shopping malls, the same travel agencies offering bargain fares on the national airlines of Costa Rica and El Salvador. "SAN SALVADOR," the signs promise on Beverly Boulevard and on Pico and on Alvarado and on Soto. "SAN JOSE! GUATEMALA!" [...] Such tranced hours are, for many people who live in Los Angeles, the dead center of being there, but there is nothing about them to encourage the normal impulse toward recognition, or narrative connection.[1]

This is now commonsense; part of the above quotation featured as wall text in the exhibition *Joan Didion: What She Means*, which Hilton Als curated at the Hammer Museum in 2022. Didion orients disorientation by supplying it with deadpan glamor. Unconnectedness need not be suffered if it can be enjoyed, connoisseurially, as a proper LA state of mind. "When I moved here from New York, in 1964, I at first found this absence of narrative a deprivation. At the end of two years here, I realized (quite suddenly, alone one morning in the car) that I had come to find narrative sentimental."[2]

Compare this to a "studio visit" with the contemporary Los Angeles-based artist Sayre Gomez, which turns out not to be any such thing but rather a narrated drive through a few neighborhoods of the city (most noticeably Boyle Heights, where his physical studio is in fact located, and Downtown, where luxury apartments jarringly abut massive homeless encampments).[3] The voiceover – which is suspiciously unlike the artist's normal speaking tone – is not entirely deadpan, not entirely Californian; there is a Midwest

1
Joan Didion, Letter from Los Angeles, in: *The New Yorker*, September 4, 1989, 92–99.

2
Ibid.

3
Sayre Gomez, *Studio Visit*, 2020 (October 10, 2025). Quotations are transcribed from the video's subtitles.

pinch in the vowels. The video starts by showing a few slides of an industrial-looking space with unfinished canvases hanging on the walls. "My studio like you can imagine is uhh quite similar to most artists' at least in America and I think probably most of Europe", the narrator says. "Perhaps also in China but I'm not familiar so uh...." This only lasts about half a minute. Prelude over, footage starts rolling, evidently shot from the window of Gomez's car. The year is 2020 and thus the streets are unusually empty: COVID-19 has temporarily eliminated numberless commutes. The colors are digitally shifted to the mildly psychedelic iridescence of old VHS tape. We never see the artist's body, meaning that, at first, it is hard to tell if the voice was recorded synchronously with the video or superimposed in editing. Soon it becomes obvious that the latter is the case since the narration continues uninterrupted even as the shots jump around irregularly. As the camera tracks across strip malls, billboards, and murals from the Chicano Movement of the 1970s, images of Gomez's paintings occasionally pop up on screen [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]. These hyper-detailed airbrush works are conspicuously faithful to their referents. It seems that the rhetorical point of such juxtapositions is to show that Gomez invents little or nothing and hence that his art functions as a direct – a more or less photographically "realist" – transcription of the appearance of things. The car never stops moving. Paintings appear as insets just when the camera's viewpoint most closely approximates each one's framing, then linger a few seconds like afterimages as the car travels on. The insets are in higher resolution than the video footage and are not color-shifted, with the curious effect that the moving rather than the still images feel relatively more dissociated from the real despite video's higher degree of indexical immediacy.

Two and a half minutes in, the narrator starts talking about the long list of places where he has lived since moving from Chicago in 2006: Venice, Marina Del Rey, North Hollywood, Valencia, Highland Park, Boyle Heights, Culver City ("which was good cuz I was working in Santa Monica at the time"), West Adams, Koreatown, Pico Union, Echo Park, Chinatown, Atwater Village. This enumeration only rarely has anything to do with the surroundings we simultaneously glimpse in the video. When he describes moving from Culver City to West Adams, for example, the camera rolls past the pupuseria Divino Salvador in Highland Park, at least ten miles away. At the mention of Echo Park, we do indeed see the corner of Montana Street and Echo Park Avenue, occupied at the time by the now-defunct bar The Whisperer. (Divino Salvador has also since gone out of business.) Coordination of this sort is the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, "seductive unconnectedness" reigns supreme – or anyway, it does for spectators unable to tell Echo Park from Culver City.

It emerges that Gomez is precisely not such a spectator. As the voiceover notes, while "living in all those places I always kept the same studio in Boyle Heights, so the most familiar parts of the city are all the routes getting to the studio from all these different

[Fig. 1]
Sayre Gomez, *Studio Visit*, 2022, digital video, still, 07:10 min., 01:21, Courtesy of the Artist and Yuz Museum, Shanghai.

[Fig. 2]
Sayre Gomez, *Orale Raza*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 96 × 144 inches (244 × 366 cm), private collection, Madrid (SG 19.015), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

areas". From each temporary home, Gomez would try to find the "best shortcuts to get to the studio [...] I have like a million routes to avoid all traffic". The commute is a cognitive map[4] that inscribes the contingencies of housing and work, one of capitalism's eccentricities being that, in contrast to earlier modes of production, it tends to separate those two sites, often by unreasonable transit times. Paradoxically enough, for a device that in its twentieth-century heyday had everything to do with the glamor of speed, the car, in Los Angeles, is a technology of slowness. At about the five-minute mark, we hear a Didion-like reflection:

> The point that I'm trying to make is that when you live here you drive a lot, and some pretty long distances too. Almost nothing is close so you spend a lot of time looking around. Just [...] looking, looking, looking. You're usually alone, you're looking and pondering in your little mobile bubble. If you're stuck in rush hour traffic that's when you might catch the sunset, which is a waste because you're so pissed off anyway. So I guess you could say my recent work is really just a byproduct of sitting in traffic on my way to my studio.

Here, though, Gomez's origin story departs from Didion's script. His keynote is not oblivious jadedness but rather "looking", "pondering" – a slow absorption of things. In 2017, he made a painting ("how could I not?") based on a faded sign for a strip club called Déjà Vu that, at the time, lay along his daily drive [Fig. 3]. "And then after that I just started noticing more and more and more and before I knew it I just wanted to paint everything." Narrative over, the video ends with the camera parallel to a blank highway noise barrier with some trees, one of them a palm, sticking out above.

II. The View from the Laundromat

Sayre Gomez's "studio visit" would seem to literalize, much more than does Ed Ruscha himself, an observation that Rosalind Krauss has made about Ruscha's art. For Krauss, the medium in our "post-medium condition" is no longer a specific material but is rather the "technical support" that enables a practice. In Ruscha's practice – which is an important point of reference for Gomez, not least because he is a fellow Midwest transplant become Los Angeles

4
I borrow the influential idea of cognitive mapping from: Fredric Jameson, Cognitive Mapping, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, IL 1988, 347–360. Jameson first introduced the term in: id., Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, in: *New Left Review* I/146, 1984, 53–92. One of the oddities of Jameson's notion is that he calls for cognitive mapping as an aesthetic project. But if a "cognitive" map takes the form of an aesthetic object, then what makes it different from any old (presumably somehow non-cognitive) map? Regular maps after all similarly involve translation from material signs to a mental totality, as from a vaguely hexagonal shape to the concept "France". To the extent a map is a map, a cognitive map is its result.

[Fig. 3]
Sayre Gomez, *Déjà Vu*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 84 inches (152.4 × 213.4 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 17.025), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

painter par excellence – the relevant technical support is the automobile.[5] Ruscha paints and photographs automobile infrastructure: "his parking lots, gasoline stations, and highways" are "articulated as the secondary supports for the car itself".[6] His photobooks rely upon, and mime, a driver's constantly scanning gaze, which by its nature cannot afford to rest on anything for very long. As an ongoing digitization project at the Getty Research Institute has revealed, Ruscha photographed vastly more of the city's streetscape than ever made it into definitive works such as *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966): there are over 140,000 negatives in his archive.[7] Gomez proceeds much like Ruscha. He drives around Los Angeles, extracts photographs, and then brings them back to the studio. But Ruscha's automotive vision is emphatically dedifferentiated. The point of photographing every building along a stretch of road is to avoid emphasis on the telling irony, the poignant detail, the corny anecdote – the gimmick, in short. His gas stations are quasi-Platonic abstractions [Fig. 4]. Repetition polishes off specificity.

Gomez never does this. Although he states a desire to "paint everything", in practice his views are more selective, more obviously framed and composed than Ruscha's. His LA scenes are always specific places, and if we know the city well enough we can identify them. (That said, his pictures also mix and match elements from different locations; the artist and his assistants work up the source photos into digital composites before translating these into highly skilled airbrush work on canvas, in a reversal of the historical trajectory from artisanal handicraft to technical reproduction.)[8] Instead of flattening difference into monotony, then, Gomez's "amorphous" commute involves a mnemotechnics of its own, as I have already implied by invoking the idea of cognitive mapping. The dull repetitiveness of passing by the same features over and over again finally extrudes its own architecture of memory like a sediment slowly laid down on a riverbed. Repeated looking becomes more like touching, or tracing – a touching, often, of the traces of other, preceding presences and agencies that impress their own

5
Rosalind Krauss, Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition, in: *October* 116, 2006, 55–62. See, as well: ead., *Under Blue Cup*, Cambridge, MA/London 2011, 76–78; and for a lengthier exploration of the same idea: Jaleh Mansoor, Ed Ruscha's One-Way Street, in: *October* 111, 2005, 127–142.

6
Krauss, Two Moments, 58.

7
See Getty Research Institute, *Ed Ruscha's Streets of Los Angeles* (March 20, 2023).

8
As many reviewers have noted, this process is related both to vernacular forms such as custom automotive paintjobs as well as to Hollywood's matte paintings and set decorations. This higher degree of mediation intervening between photographic source and painted result also differentiates Gomez's work from classic photorealism, which – in the work of artists such as Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes – often adopted the automobile as an object of representation but not as its enabling "technical support" in Krauss's sense. Gomez's painting *2 Spirits* (2024) appeared alongside these and other predecessors in the exhibition *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 2024–2025.

[Fig. 4]
Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station*, 1966, screenprint, 26 × 40 1/8 inches (66.04 × 101.92 cm), Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Digital Image © 2025 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY.

distinct temporal signatures on the apparent simultaneity of the pictorial field. Something perhaps never consciously noticed before becomes something Gomez cannot *not* notice, and therefore cannot not paint. His practice inserts the *punctum* into the city: Déjà Vu the strip club becomes Déjà Vu the sign (in more than one sense of the word) becomes déjà vu the sensation becomes *Déjà Vu* (2017) the painting, each iteration a node in the relay between signifier and place, abstraction and concreteness. When the painting *Buzz's Lavanderia* (2019), flashes up forty-four seconds into the "studio visit", it matters that we are being shown *this* Lavanderia rather than a generic anywhere [Fig. 5]. But it is equally significant that Buzz's Lavanderia might be located almost anywhere within the so-called Southland's hundreds of square miles. Like much of Gomez's work, the painting depicts specific yet interchangeable ordinariness, and it does so by giving us a moment in which material reality signifies itself.[9]

Since we live in capitalist modernity, this is the kind of environment in which most people are constrained to invest meaning and phenomenological routine, which means that Gomez's is a realism of everyday life insofar as everydayness is already subject to abstraction (and, by the same measure, insofar as abstraction becomes everyday: becomes subject to everyday materiality's expected corrosion). Realism, in the sense that matters in the present context, means the correspondence of a representation to the felt density of a lifeworld. Given that there is no single objectively correct way in which representations correspond to experience (there are different modes of "experience", too, needless to say), there has been a great diversity of realisms in the history of art, including but not limited to capital-R Realism in its nineteenth-century French manifestation. Whether or not realism is photographically precise – though of course it may be, as tends to be the case in Gomez's work – is less important than whether an aesthetic artifact compels a viewer's conviction that its forms register a specific zone of experience: a specific place, a specific mood, a specific atmosphere, a specific material trait, all the more so if the viewer takes this specificity to index habitual, iterative familiarity.[10] Realism is at least in part a matter of duration, then. We orient ourselves by habit and symbolization, processes that involve repetition and, usually, a broadly somatic rather than only specular relation to things; this is why pristinely instantaneous snapshots, like brand-new houses,

9
Although signs, billboards, posters, and stickers are omnipresent in Gomez's work, he has not, to the best of my knowledge, demonstrated any attraction to the mimetic architecture of LA landmarks such as the Randy's Donuts building (a donut-shaped donut shop). That is, his built environment mostly consists of "decorated sheds" rather than "ducks", in the terminology that Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, and Steven Izenour develop in their book *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, MA 1972.

10
On the nexus of realism, everydayness, and absorption (meaning the sense of an artwork's showing us things or people as they are when unobserved, rather than when acknowledging us as spectators), compare Michael Fried's work, in particular his essay on Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday, in: *Critical Inquiry* 33/3, 2007, 495–526.

[Fig. 5]
Sayre Gomez, *Buzz's Lavanderia*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 108 inches (183 × 274.3 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 19.049), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

often feel less real to us than images and spaces that index a jostling of traces and times and which thus feel properly "lived in". An artist can make the persistence of a world for a subject felt even when that subject is unknown or anonymous – even when the depicted entities are themselves unspecific, alien, and in that sense abstract. A person to whom Divino Salvador is a real place is not the same as a person to whom the words SAN SALVADOR are "devoid of meaning". Presumably, indeed, the words San Salvador mean quite a lot to someone likely to eat at Divino Salvador, or who regularly sends remittances via wire transfer to family in El Salvador's capital city. This is so even when the words are part of an advertisement. Presumably, too, such reading entails a degree of "recognition, or narrative connection", the absence of which, for Didion, these Spanish words epitomize.[11]

To put it differently: the circumstance that "the same laundromats, body shops, strip shopping malls, the same travel agencies" recur mile after mile does not cancel the affect that a person might associate with any one of these. It is just that those sorts of experience are irrelevant to LA's (mostly white) literature of alienation. Gomez is a counter-Didion, a counter-Ruscha – not an *anti*-Ruscha or Didion, since disconnection is part of his phenomenology, too, but rather a serious observer of things that tend towards essential vagueness in much of the city's mirroring of itself in the genre of "sunshine noir".[12] Gomez particularizes vagueness. His particularities are temporal, geographic, and social. A laundromat is a capitalist enterprise, but of a sort that tends to be owned and operated by an immigrant petty bourgeoisie not very distinct from the working class it serves. This sort of business lacks almost everything that makes high capitalism both glamorous and terrifying. Its social relations are of a more grindingly ordinary kind.[13] The illuminated sign

11
Didion's book on the civil war in El Salvador begins with a gesture of ungrounding that ruins in advance any hope of place-making, the signature of which is, noticeably, the presence or absence of foreigners like herself: "The three-year-old El Salvador International Airport is glassy and white and splendidly isolated, conceived during the waning of the Molina 'National Transformation' as convenient less to the capital (San Salvador is forty miles away, until recently a drive of several hours) than to a central hallucination of the Molina and Romero regimes, the projected beach resorts, the Hyatt, the Pacific Paradise, tennis, golf, water-skiing, *Costa del Sol*; the visionary invention of a tourist industry in yet another republic where the leading natural cause of death is gastrointestinal infection. In the general absence of tourists these hotels have since been abandoned, ghost resorts on the empty Pacific beaches, and to land at this airport built to service them is to plunge directly into a state in which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse." Joan Didion, *Salvador*, New York 1983, 13. Surely the point of Didion's invocation of Guatemala and El Salvador at the start of her *New Yorker* piece from a few years later is to infect LA's featurelessness with Central America's even more abyssal incomprehensibility.

12
A term that the film critic J. Hoberman develops in his article "A Bright, Guilty World". Daylight Ghosts and Sunshine Noir, in: *Artforum* 45/6, 2007, 260–267, 315. Incidentally, this approach places Gomez in closer proximity to Didion's contemporary and other great chronicler of the city: Mike Davis, whose attentiveness to the conflicts that have made Los Angeles what it is remains indispensable to any interpreter of its representations.

13
Laundromats thus make excellent settings for stories that deal with the intersection of class, race, and immigration, as in the films *My Beautiful Laundrette* (directed by Stephen Frears,

in *Buzz's Lavanderia* is distinctive because some of the bulbs behind it have gone out; some of the plastic has singed to brown or faded to gray. Failing electricity goes head-to-head with the fading sun: technological obsolescence versus the twenty-four-hour cosmic cycle. At the sign's bottom edge, cracked screens in an ad for a cellphone repair shop reflexively repeat the damage. A commuter obliged to pass this sign over and over again becomes an aficionado of these and other nuances of spectacle's aging.

III. Stop Being Poor

The remainder of this article defends the following premises. Thanks to capitalist social relations, much of reality has become abstract. Things dissolve into images that are hieroglyphs of the commodity form. This is a world or at least an aspect of the world that we can call "spectacle", following Guy Debord. But because those abstractions are real, are embodied in material artifacts and the built environment, they fall prey to the wear-and-tear of various human and nonhuman forces, some of which belong to mostly unrepresented subcultures, some of which involve temporalities radically unlike those of capitalist production or even the human lifespan. Finally, Sayre Gomez depicts this world in depicting the ecology of the contemporary city, or more specifically, that of Los Angeles. Gomez-as-noticer notices traces of life. But that life is already mortified.

The problem lies in making sense of a realism oriented towards a concreteness that has partly slipped into abstraction, and vice versa. One form of abstraction is human sign-making: the city as forest of symbols. The curator Rita Gonzalez has argued that Gomez "uses photography and memory to stitch together an affective terrain".[14] (Or what I have called a cognitive map.) Many of his works combine different registers of signification. We see mass-reproduced images or advertisements (often, as in *Buzz's Lavanderia*, in various stages of breakdown), but also traces of more fugitive agency:

> Paintings and painted objects Sayre Gomez has produced over the past several years draw from the place-making and identity-based strategies of muralism and graffiti, not merely as appropriation, but as a recognition of the divergent aesthetic claims etched, scrawled, painted, and postered onto the urban landscape.[15]

1985) and, more recently, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022).

[14] Rita Gonzalez, X-Scape L.A., in: Saskia Draxler and Christian Nagel (eds.), *Sayre Gomez. World*, Cologne 2021, 83–86.

[15] Ibid., 83.

Sometimes these forms of mark-making are more ambivalent than Gonzalez makes them sound. *Stop Being Poor: Learn to Flip Houses* (2020), for example, is one of several paintings that display the tag of the Florencia 13 street gang, which has been implicated in racist attacks on African Americans [Fig. 6]. Moreover, these signs themselves, even when authentically subaltern, are not automatically immune to the commodity form. Gangs are primarily an economic phenomenon, after all. Their mythology revolves around profit. Spectacle is not always a matter of high production values: the reduction of historical experience to the experience of exchange reproduces itself at all levels.

What else would we expect from the "colonization of everyday life"? *Stop Being Poor: Learn to Flip Houses* shares the first part of its title not with a graffiti tag but rather with a viral (in fact, photoshopped) image of Paris Hilton wearing this phrase on a shirt. The painting assembles a range of would-be money-making or at least money-saving schemes. On the right edge of the canvas we see a telephone pole stapled with the ephemera of depressed big-city life: posters shouting "I Buy Houses Fast Cash Any Area, Price, Condition" and "We Buy Houses Fast Cash" (in the United States, these are found anywhere gentrification is in its early stages); another crumpled sheet on which the only legible word is "RENT", repeated twice; an ad for "Truck & Car Title Loans".[16] Behind one of two broken-down vans, viewers can make out the words "Always Low Prices" dimly painted on a concrete barrier, just to the left of the aforementioned gang tag. Gomez provides viewers with a cornucopia of traces to be read. All relate to the cheerless transactions of the sub-corporate economy: discount furniture, dubious real estate, predatory lending, organized crime.

Likewise worth noting is the difference in scale between the street scene and the pole at right. As often in Gomez's paintings, this is a transition marked by a too-pronounced discontinuity in facture. Whereas the airbrush technique that is the artist's trademark tends to blur distinctions, the edges of the pole and its posters are razor-sharp, likely evidencing the use of a stencil. This tactic distinguishes Gomez from some of his art-historical precedents. Giampaolo Banconi writes that, "[u]nlike the blurs of Gerhard Richter, who has relied on it as a means of reducing visual information, engendering anti-technological imprecision, and de-subjectivizing his painting, Gomez's blur appears as a kind of mediatized reality effect".[17] The mediation involved here is double. Gomez imitates a characteristically photographic look ("his mimicry of the camera-generated

16
A title loan, also known as a logbook loan, is a short-term loan using the borrower's vehicle as collateral. They are illegal in more than half of US states.

17
Giampaolo Banconi, Citizen Sayre. Economic Illusion and Civic Discernment in Sayre Gomez's Works, in: Draxler and Nagel, Sayre Gomez. World, 29.

[Fig. 6]
Sayre Gomez, *Stop Being Poor: Learn to Flip Houses*, 2020, acrylic on canvas,
96 × 144 inches, 244 × 366 cm, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art (SG 20.033),
Courtesy of the Artist and Jeffrey Deitch, Photo Credit: Joshua White Photography.

motion blur", as Banconi puts it),[18] but then also distances this mimesis from a straightforward photorealism by introducing anti-photographic disjunctions, such as the unrealistically precise edges between certain pictorial objects, in this case the telephone pole and its background.

A great number of Gomez's pictures illustrate this photography/anti-photography dialectic in a way that clarifies its functioning as a device for not only visual but also social and economic difference-making. Among the most programmatic examples (they now already belong to a slightly archaic phase in his work, when his techniques were not yet so elaborate) are a series of paintings from 2017 that use an identical stencil of a chain-link fence enlaced with creeping ivy. Through the fence we see blurred-out backgrounds: in one, a building in the process of demolition, in another, an advertisement for off-brand lingerie [Fig. 7 and Fig. 8]. Repetition of an identical formal element reinforces the sense that one is looking at a constructed scene or montage rather than a photographic reproduction. The partly destroyed building makes a conceptual claim. Aside from possibly being a reference to works such as Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), or Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974), and thus to canonical instances of post-Minimalist quasi-architecture (or "anarchitecture", as Matta-Clark called it), in a city such as LA it is hard not to associate demolition with capitalist redevelopment.[19] Cookie-cutter condos are likely go up in the old building's place. As in *Stop Being Poor*, over-sharp distinction thus makes for an over-sharp critical point. "Urban renewal", predatory house-flipping, and the gentrification both foretell are the obverse of pervasive immiseration.

IV. For Example

To say as much, however, is to translate a painting into propositional content – to extract the moral from the story. It is to suggest that there is something gimmicky about Gomez's compositions, which, as here, frequently seem to mark a relapse from Ruscha's destructured aesthetic of one-thing-after-another to an older penchant for

18
Ibid.

19
Matta-Clark's critical response to 1970s "urban renewal" has attracted sustained scholarly attention at least since the publication of Pamela Lee's book *Object to Be Destroyed. The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, Cambridge, MA/London 2001. For a more recent account of the relation between 1970s post-Minimalist practice and capitalist real estate development, compare: Sami Siegelbaum, Christopher D'Arcangelo Speculates. Transcending the Art-Labor Dialectic in Post-Fiscal-Crisis New York, in: *American Art* 36/1, 2022, 90–109. For a sweeping account of this dynamic centered on LA, see Susanna Phillips Newbury, *The Speculative City. Art, Real Estate, and the Making of Global Los Angeles*, Minneapolis/London 2021.

[Fig. 7]
Sayre Gomez, *Building in Deconstruction with Chain Link and Ivy*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 50 inches (182.9 × 127 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 17.027), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

[Fig. 8]
Sayre Gomez, *Angelina Hosiery with Chain Link and Ivy*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 50 inches (182.9 × 127 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 17.028), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

the "decisive moment" or the (socially) telling detail.[20] A diagnosis of gimmickry is not necessarily pejorative. In her book *Theory of the Gimmick*, Sianne Ngai writes that "[t]he gimmick is what obtrudes [...] The gimmick is thus the bad twin of Roland Barthes's melancholic, critically hallowed *punctum*."[21] The gimmick is also what becomes of concepts when concepts are commodified.

> [T]he 'idea' comes in the damaged guise of the gimmick: a compromised form encoding an ambivalent aesthetic judgment in which our contempt is mixed with admiration. The gimmick is thus the overprocessed symbol, the 'lite' Styrofoamy concept; the all too obvious joke.[22]

One such joke is found in the title of Gomez's painting *The Party Continues* (2020), which pairs child-friendly balloons on a sign for a party store with a van-side advertisement for what is, evidently, a shady successor to the online sex work emporium Backpage, which was shut down by US federal authorities in 2018 [Fig. 9]. Balloons and sex are both purchasable; this is the guise in which "fun" persists now. The commonality is real rather than imagined. If both can be purchased, both are equivalent to money, a quantitative abstraction. Their likeness is forced but the forcing is capitalism's before it is the artist's. The gimmick, then, is an aspect of capitalist society's "objective conceptuality".[23] An ad for a party store and an ad for sex work are alike because both are ads; both are representations that stand, as it were immediately and without remainder, for the commodity they aim to sell, commodities that are similar – that are made abstract and interchangeable – insofar as any commodity is equivalent to any other. As Marx noted, a commodity is, at once, "a very trivial thing, and easily understood" as well as "a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties".[24] Gomez's pictures of the commodified cityscape are subtly

20
Although compressed and gnomic, a mini-review of *Building in Deconstruction with Chain Link and Ivy* suggests something to this effect: "Painting the walls of your cage generally comes in less literal forms. [...] All of this is obvious, it's right there, legible; the point is that it's alluring." Contemporary Art Writing Daily, *Sayre Gomez at Ghebaly Gallery* (April 9, 2023). See, as well, the same (anonymous) author's essay, credited to CAWD, in: Draxler and Nagel, Sayre Gomez. World, 51–52.

21
Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick. Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*, Cambridge, MA 2020, 201.

22
Ibid., 200.

23
The term is Theodor W. Adorno's; cf. id., Sociology and Empirical Research, in: id., Hans Albert, Ralf Dahrendorf, Jürgen Habermas, Harald Pilot, and Karl R. Popper, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, transl. by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London 1977, 68–86, here 80.

24
Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, transl. by Ben Fowkes, Harmondsworth 1976, 163.

obvious in this Marxian sense. Things are exactly what they are and at the same time ciphers for invisible yet disastrously real property relations.

The trouble with phenomenalizing this basic aspect of capitalist ontology is that any particular instance, any example, will, precisely by being particular, fail to instantiate the abstraction of which it is the bearer. Any one commodity incarnates but fails to *be* value. We might be aware that every scrap of land in a big city is meticulously overlaid with property claims (real estate is just as much a commodity as a Coca-Cola bottle), but we never really see these relations as such except in their imperfect material indices, such as fences. Paul de Man describes something akin to this as the problem of "the necessity and the validity of examples in any cognitive inquiry".[25] Examples need mimetic stage-setting to make their point. A painting about gentrification has to show *something*. Since examples always refer to more general principles, however, the point is not to be found on the plane of mimetic, sensuous particularity: "The authentication of the diegesis can only proceed mimetically, but this mimesis turns out to be itself diegetically overdetermined."[26] So it is with the commodity form. We cannot see this social relation in anything but commodities, but in commodities we see it wrongly, because here we see the abstraction too much in the flesh. A commodity is an allegory of itself because its social meaning as a bearer of value is always less than identical with its material particularity.[27] A sign imploring owners to (under)sell their houses cannot be more than an allegorical fragment of house-flipping as a social dynamic that depends upon a vastly more complicated and largely hidden financial infrastructure. And of course, a sign reading "We Buy Houses Fast Cash" is only there for us to see because the painting's mise-en-scène is "diegetically overdetermined" by Gomez's desire to make an abstraction concrete. The overstrained critical gimmick is the dialectical counterpart of real abstraction's withdrawal from phenomenality.

In this connection, it is fortuitous that Ngai brings up a few of Gomez's other characteristic motifs, I presume without consciously meaning to refer to his work at all. In her writing on the gimmick, Ngai isolates "the genre of the capitalist 'sticker': tape cassette, bumper, promo, price".[28] Stickers account for an entire subfield

25
Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York 1984, ch. X, Aesthetic Formalization. Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, 263–290, here 275.

26
Ibid.

27
Sami Khatib has developed a compelling account of the allegorical structure of the commodity with constant reference to Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht; see Sami Khatib, Aesthetics of the "Sensuous Supra-Sensuous", in: *Selva. A Journal of the History of Art* 4, 2022, 89–102.

28
Ngai, Theory of the Gimmick, 196. Ngai is in fact here writing about the photographer Torbjørn Rødland, who also happens to live and work in Los Angeles.

[Fig. 9]
Sayre Gomez, *The Party Continues 2020*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 144 × 108 inches (365.8 × 274.3 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 20.001), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

[Fig. 10]
Sayre Gomez, *Legend*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 50 × 40 inches (127 × 101.6 cm), private collection, New York (SG 17.018), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

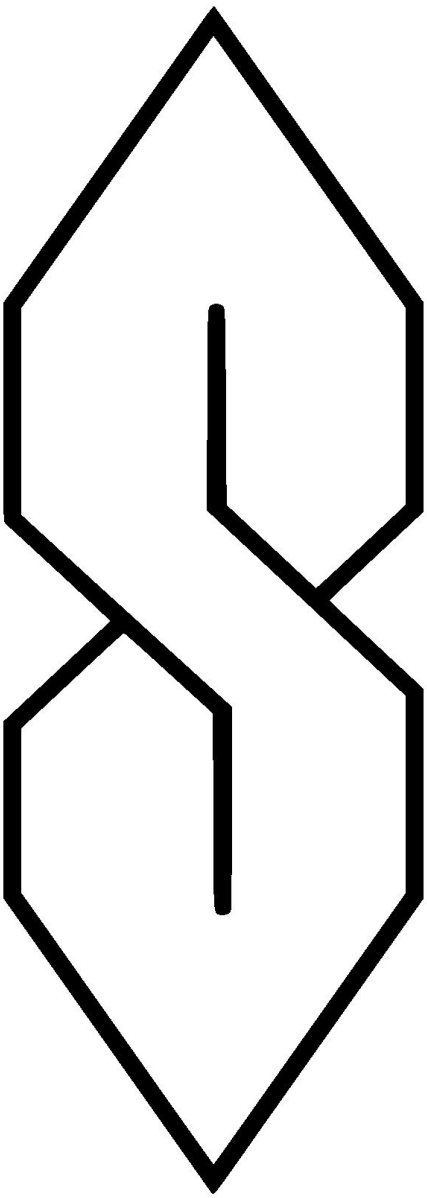
within Gomez's production. *Legend* (2017), is a painting in acrylic on canvas, which is almost impossible to believe given its extreme verisimilitude [Fig. 10]. It depicts stickers on a scratched and stained wood panel, or more likely, on faux wood veneer (the faux wood itself is also painted by hand and not a readymade). One might say something here about how the use of faux woodgrain connects to Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Cubism's own relation to trompe l'oeil,[29] but it seems more fruitful to go in another direction. Like the strip-mall lightboxes, these stickers are transmissions from a culturally specific yet curiously anonymous, not to say alienated, semiotic. In this case the signs point towards the 1990s. Bart Simpson does not exactly *belong* to anyone – not even to Matt Groening, his creator; an unquenchable flow of bootlegs puts paid to that idea. Skating brands are at least as popular with non-skaters. The black cat logo in the painting is from a brand of fireworks, which happen to be illegal in the city of Los Angeles. But what does putting that sticker on a desk or bathroom wall say about oneself? What does it communicate to others, and is that exchange of information a social relation or something less? These are signifiers of a culture that does not have to be organic to its users to be effective in identity formation. Gomez's stickers are also of a particular vintage. They neither represent brand-new intellectual property nor are they brand-new objects themselves. Indeed, in *Legend*, all are perceptibly damaged, like the lightbox in *Buzz's Lavanderia*.

Although I am not aware that Gomez has used it in any of his pieces, the above motifs remind me of the infamous "cool S" that proliferated across American notebooks and desks in the 1990s [Fig. 11]. The "S" does not mean anything except that you know how to draw it, which is cool in and of itself. It has no cultural content for historians to interpret.[30] Even its rumored associations with Superman and the clothing brand Stüssy turn out to be erroneous. These are instances of "retcon", or retroactive continuity, in the entertainment industry's parlance. By all evidence, the S came first, its supposed meanings later. In that sense, the cool S is the perfect formalist object. Nothing could be more autonomous. Yet it also behaves like nothing so much as a brand unmoored from any product, any specific subcultural allegiance or real affective investment. Similarly, a bumper sticker of Calvin pissing on a Ford logo (another classic of the era) probably does not imply any particular investment in the comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*; in fact, more probably the opposite.

Apart from the cool S, the greatest of all these hermeneutically impenetrable signs is arguably the smiley face. Smileys recur in several of Gomez's works (there is a partially mangled one in *Legend*).

29
Recently the subject of a major exhibition: *Cubism and the Trompe L'Oeil Tradition*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 20, 2022–January 22, 2023.

30
It does, however, have its own Wikipedia page, at the bottom of which can be found links to a few useful articles: Wikipedia, *Cool S* (March 20, 2023).



[Fig. 11]
RootOfAllLight, *Cool S*, 2021, digital drawing, 938 × 1,250 pixels (2 KB), Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0 (October 22, 2025).

It is, indeed, the artist's logo, appearing at the top corner of his website and on the colophon of a recent exhibition catalog.[31] Ngai has interesting things to say about smileys, too. In an article called "Visceral Abstractions", which subsequently became a chapter in *Theory of the Gimmick*, she tries to figure out just what is so unnerving about them. The smiley "expresses the face of no one in particular, or the averaged-out, dedifferentiated face of a generic anyone", she writes. "[T]he smiley always confronts us with an image of an eerily abstracted being."[32] Like the Simpsons, smiley faces are yellow because no actual human skin approaches that shade. Bright yellow is plausible enough to be human but inhuman enough to avoid racial or ethnic specificity.[33] To be sure, the smiley is often put to nauseating use, for example as the bland icon of Walmart's corporate omnipotence. But Ngai does not think this is why it so easily turns stomach-churning:

> [T]he visceral feelings provoked by the smiley are underpinned by something more profound than a bohemian distaste for corporate aesthetics [...] or a liberal individualist dread about the erasure of individual particularity. For the smiley is not just an image of abstract personhood but also an uncanny personification of the collectively achieved abstractions of the capitalist economy: abstract labor, value, capital. Its unflinching gaze as we encounter it daily as a cookie, on a price tag, or in a comic book, confronts us in a palpably unsettling way with the radically alienated status of sociality itself under conditions of generalized commodity production.[34]

Which is to say that the smiley stands for what Debord calls spectacle: not because the smiley happens to be an image, if a minimal one, and not because there happens to be anything particularly "spectac-

31
Sayre Gomez. Halloween City (exh. cat. Los Angeles, François Ghebaly Gallery), ed. by Lekha Jandhyala and Belen Piñeiro, Los Angeles 2022.

32
Sianne Ngai, Visceral Abstractions, in: *GLQ. A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 21/1, January 2015, 33–63, here 36. I am quoting from the article version of the essay rather than the reworked text that appears in *Theory of the Gimmick* because there are certain formulations only found in this iteration that are useful for my purposes.

33
This despite the persistent if wholly illogical association of "yellow" skin with Asian people. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has suggested that the skin tone of the Simpsons implies Asian identity, since yellow effectively equals white in the series. (Needless to say, in reality "white" skin is never literally white, either.) At least in the show's early seasons, Asian characters were, rather bizarrely, distinguished from white (that is: yellow) characters by their paler, grayish skin. The more recent proliferation of online avatars has put a new spin on these matters. Over the past few years there has been a small boom in academic literature on emoji skin tone modifiers, for example. Alternatives to yellow were first made available in Unicode 8.0 in 2015. See Miriam E. Sweeney and Kelsea Whaley, Technically White: Emoji Skin-Tone Modifiers as American Technoculture, in: *First Monday* 24/7, 2019.

34
Ngai, Visceral Abstractions, 40.

ular" about it in the colloquial sense, but rather because spectacle, as Debord tries to define it, is nothing other than this radical alienation of sociality and this radical becoming-abstract of world, flesh, blood, and mind. As he writes:

> The origin of the spectacle lies in the world's loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been: the abstract nature of all individual work, as of production in general, finds perfect expression in the spectacle, whose very *manner of being concrete* is, precisely, abstraction.[35]

V. Pensiveness

There may be a temptation here to assume that abstraction is necessarily pristine. This would be to take capitalist abstraction's withdrawal from phenomenality too much at face value (no pun intended). In Gomez's painting *Hilarity Ensues*, from 2020, a black plastic bag adorned with a smiley face sticks out of an over-full trash can alongside a Styrofoam takeout container and other debris, almost certainly the remnants of an urban picnic [Fig. 12]. There is a blurred but lurid California sunset behind the razor-sharp foreground. The shock, here, comes from seeing Ngai's visceral abstraction in the garbage, pulled into the muck of the material world in a way that nonetheless does not cancel its abstract universality. Like classical ruins in early modern European aesthetics, the degradation of human-made artifacts points towards a reconciliation of the temporalities of nature and culture. Withdrawn from both instrumental reason and aesthetic plenitude, the ruined object opens a pensive allegorical distance from any totalized symbolic meaning.[36] Here, though, the result is both funny and distressing rather than comfortingly melancholic. The smiley generates a persistent "succession" to its minimally figurative identity, inasmuch as it remains recognizable even when crumpled, turned upside-down, or subject to extreme anamorphosis.[37] Although not quite legible in full, the white letters

35
Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, transl. by Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York 1994, 22; emphasis in the original.

36
Compare Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson. Meaning and Material in Western Culture*, Chicago 2020. Walter Benjamin writes that "Allegories are in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things". Id., *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, transl. by Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA 2019, 188.

37
As do the Disney and anime characters that Eliza Douglas crumples up and anamorphically distorts in a recent series of paintings. Louise Lawler's anamorphic wall graphics similarly play on the distortions to which universally recognizable imagery is subject in late capitalist visual culture. Interestingly enough, the critic Zack Hatfield has cited Ngai in relation to Lawler's "career-long embrace of the gimmick". Zack Hatfield, Louise Lawler. Metro Pictures, in: *Artforum* 60/1, 2021, 264–265. On "successions" to visuality and anamorphic viewpoints, see Whitney Davis, *Visuality and Virtuality. Images and Pictures from Prehistory to Perspective*, Princeton, NJ 2018. The smiley is, of course, a simplified human face, which

below the smiley seem to read "Reus-" before fading into obliquity: another too-pointed gimmick, since eco-friendly reuse is just what isn't happening. The bag is a disposable sign that the artist paints in precise illusionistic detail. Gomez's rendering seems too lavish for what it is.

Hilarity Ensues also places its viewers in a specific physical and social space. We view the garbage from just about exactly eye level. The rim of the metal canister is seen from very slightly above (a sliver of its top surface is visible at either side), but effectively we read it as straight, horizontal, and parallel to the picture plane. Unless this is a bizarrely tall trash receptacle, this perspective puts the spectator's gaze at a child's height rather than an adult's. The foreground object's excessive largeness and sharp focus strengthen one's sense of viewing it from unusually close up. Trash here behaves like a still life: a bouquet of refuse, akin to a pot of flowers from the Dutch Baroque. Ephemerality is crucial in both cases. The point of a flower still life is paradoxically to eternalize the most fleeting of nature's creations. Exquisiteness is the foil to its contingency. Part of the incongruity of *Hilarity Ensues*, then, has to do with the way that Gomez adopts the presentational style of the "pensive image", as the art historian Hanneke Grootenboer calls it, partly in reference to Dutch flower paintings, only to fill it with disreputable contemporary content.[38]

It would seem downright laughable to attribute "a kind of profundity – an interiority different from their meaning or narrative through which these images become thoughtful"[39] to a picture of a smiley face in a trash can. (Perhaps this unsuitableness accounts for the painting's title.) Nonetheless, this is what I am interested in doing. Details like the tiny spots of reflected light or flakes of rust on Gomez's plastic and metal in *Hilarity Ensues* are eminently comparable to the illusionistic drops of water that preoccupy Grootenboer in her analysis of Jan van Huysum's early eighteenth-century flower paintings: moments in which the apparatus of illusion detaches from any narrative totalization. Grootenboer's thoughts on Dutch hyperrealism and trompe l'oeil, which she defines as an "extreme consequence of (or departure from) realism, as a heightened truth in painting, one that radically goes beyond verisimilitude by ultimately fooling the eye into believing that something is what it is not",[40] are useful for thinking through the relation between such effects

surely accounts for much of its power; here, the requisite citation is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's analysis of facialization in a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis/London 1987, ch. 7, Year Zero. Faciality, 167–191.

38
Cf. Hanneke Grootenboer, The Pensive Image. On Thought in Jan van Huysum's Still Life Paintings, in: *Oxford Art Journal* 34/1, 2011, 13–30; and more recently: ead., *The Pensive Image. Art as a Form of Thinking*, Chicago/London 2020.

39
Grootenboer, The Pensive Image, 17.

40
Ibid., 25.

[Fig. 12]
Sayre Gomez, *Hilarity Ensues*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 20.020), Courtesy of the Artist, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

and capitalist abstraction in Gomez's work. Dutch flowers were commodities – indeed, in their day, some of the most representative and notorious objects of capitalist speculation – but they were also eminently perishable, thus lending themselves to condensed allegoresis of both human mortality and the vicissitudes of the market. Flowers and trash are both pre-ruined and, in their ruination, point towards the essential crisis tendency of the capitalist mode of production. All commodities are trash-to-be. They exist for the sake of something else: the accumulation of value. Meanwhile, inexorable natural or at least chemical processes, like oxidation or the sprouting of weeds, gnaw at capitalism's rubbish, insinuating a distinct and generally slower kind of time. Pensiveness takes root in the discarded: Walter Benjamin could have told us as much.

Unlike most still lives, however, Gomez's scene is set outside, in public, presumably in a park in the Los Angeles region. A park is definitionally a social space. In common with nearly all of Gomez's works, however, we see no human figures within the frame.[41] There seem to be buildings at the rear of the diegetic space, underneath the palm trees. Below them is a blank darkness that could be a field of grass. One imagines children playing soccer. The trash can and its contents must be situated at the edge of the park, or maybe on a walkway through its middle. Since the refuse and its container hog the depth of field, this visual object dominates our attention. It mediates access to the background, even though about two-thirds of the canvas is sky. In order mentally to reconstruct the source photo on which the painting is based (of course, it may well have been based on at least two snapshots, one for the foreground and one for the background – but visually, I think, we read the two parts of the image as sharing a single virtual space),[42] we must imagine Gomez squatting down in front of a trash can somewhere in public. The close-up view privatizes a public utility, an object of the sort that Robert Smithson would have called a "monument",[43] even while blowing it up to genuinely monumental scale (the painting is more than two meters tall). Gomez monumentalizes the trashcan while also bringing it into an intimacy close enough to smell. Beyond waits a larger implied sociality, even if of a minimal and alienated sort.

41
Humans rarely show up in his practice except as representations of representations, for example in the advertisements in his shop window pictures. An exception is *Ghost* (2021), which captures a pedestrian crossing the street; another is *The Entrepreneur* (2019), in which a barely recognizable stooping figure is starting or tending to a fire. Indicatively, both works are painted with a uniform photographic blur that lacks the discontinuities of facture to which I have drawn attention. They are accordingly closer in strategy and appearance to Gerhard Richter's photo-paintings. Richter's blur has attracted much scholarly attention; see, for instance, Gertrud Koch, The Richter-Scale of Blur, in: *October* 62, 1992, 133–142.

42
The lighting on the trash can seems too bright and white to have been cast by the sunset at rear. But this could be explained diegetically by the presence of a streetlight that may well already have switched on by this time in the evening.

43
Robert Smithson, A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, in: *Artforum* 6/4, 1967, 48–51.

Bifurcated spatial structures of this kind are omnipresent in Gomez's art. *Hilarity Ensues* represents a fairly benign case, since a park is a remnant of the commons; fixating on rubbish extracts a micro-incident without excluding its ambience. In other cases, comparable structures mark transitions from private, indoor space to a more ruthless social exteriority. This is true of *CRY: The Sequel*, from 2021, in which a maniacally detailed bug screen mediates between a domestic windowsill, upon which rest a glass of water and box of Kleenex, and a blurry homeless encampment on the other side [Fig. 13]. In other paintings, such as *Untitled* (2019), and *Untitled* (2020), fences that work like raster patterns literally screen our view of another barely-legible urban scene [Fig. 14 and Fig. 15]. In these latter cases, everything takes place out of doors, but it is unclear whether one, both, or neither sides of the fence are private property. In Gomez's practice, planes such as these that signal transitions from one social zone to another are often visually permeable membranes, such as the aforementioned chain-link fences, which are a literal marker of property lines. Although Gomez differentiates physical from visual access, they mediate each other. Visual barriers are social and economic ones, too.

In his paintings of storefronts, which constitute another highly developed subgenre within his practice, visual access to interiors is generally nil or restricted to just a few inches of virtual space between the picture plane and the objects that lie behind the glass. Meanwhile, trompe l'oeil reflections of whatever notionally exists on "our" side of the canvas play across the surface [Fig. 16].[44] Here, the Eugène Atget-like shop window (or rather glass door) does not so much offer enticing commodities for purchase as simply redouble its viewer's physical and social exteriority. The pathos of these works does not derive from the classic early modernist dyad of luxurious interior/impoverished exterior,[45] but rather from the impoverishment of an infrathin neither/nor. None of Gomez's shops are very luxurious; more than a few might have gone out of business altogether.

Just as common as windows in the artist's work are the spike-topped security fences that tend to mark the edges of Southern California's mini-malls. A fence is a social relation. One of the curious things about these membranes is that, although in pictures such as *Untitled* (2019), we seemingly view them from the side of the street, or from public space, the other side often appears to be publicly accessible, too – at least nominally, or, to put a finer point on it,

44
A good example is *Hop Louie Doors* (2018), which depicts the entrance to a much-loved restaurant in LA's Chinatown that went out of business in 2016. Despite media reports in 2018 that a reopening was in the works, the building remains closed as of writing.

45
The paradigmatic formulation of the trope is Charles Baudelaire's prose poem *The Eyes of the Poor*. Gomez's quasi-reflections also seem to lack much interest in the famous Lacanian mirror stage (his simulacral reflections do not provide a bodily schema for the viewer), although they might have a relation with artistic precedents such as the mirror paintings of Michelangelo Pistoletto.

[Fig. 13]
Sayre Gomez, *CRY: The Sequel*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60 inches (152.4 × 152.4 cm), private collection, Spain (SG 21.009), Courtesy of the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

[Fig. 14]
Sayre Gomez, *Untitled*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 36 × 48 inches (91.44 × 121.92 cm), private collection, New York (SG 19.045), Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

[Fig. 15]
Sayre Gomez, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 50 × 72 inches (127 × 183 cm), private collection, Israel (SG 20.016), Courtesy of the Artist, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

[Fig. 16]
Sayre Gomez, *Olympic Donuts*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 96 × 192 inches (243.8 × 487.7 cm), private collection, Hong Kong (SG 21.008), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

[Fig. 17]
Sayre Gomez, *Untitled*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 84 × 120 inches (213.5 × 305 cm), private collection, Los Angeles (SG 19.007), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

accessible in a differentiated and limited mode that makes doubtful the universality of "publicness" as such [Fig. 17]. A fence at the perimeter of a shopping plaza is not meant to keep anyone out, since of course one can just walk around it. Its purpose is to restrict the movement of bodies to vectors that pose a minimal threat to property. Mass cultural representations of Los Angeles sometimes generate excitement from transgressing expected vectors. An example is the great foot chase in Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 film *Point Break*, which traverses several backyards and even private domestic interiors. In this scene, Patrick Swayze and Keanu Reeves literally pass through the urban fabric. By contrast, Gomez's graffiti writers and other subaltern mark-makers inscribe a counter-semiotic that ironizes capitalism's spatial order while essentially leaving it intact. Fences remain standing; those without homes remain outdoors.

Gomez's scrims reflexively formalize this osmotic filtration of social space. Certain kinds of surface, mesh, or filter are porous to semiotic or visual but not physical or social penetration. Property is an immaterial abstraction that orders space and thus human experience. Money passes through barriers, while (certain) bodies do not. These dynamics are inscribed on the physical environment of "fortress LA", but not in a manner that corresponds seamlessly to abstract legal relations, given that some barriers have no built manifestation. Police and private security exist to fill the gap. Gomez's work parses this real, arbitrary violence of property, and for that reason his "realism" is not exclusively retinal. It is not a realism of how things happen to look to the eye so much as a realism of relations. The edges of his stencils, his startling transitions from blur to pinpoint sharpness, are signatures of property's intricate but otherwise immaterial subdividing of phenomenological space. This casts a different light on the supposed epistemological naïveté of trompe l'oeil.[46] In one extraordinarily simulacral work, *Window* (2020), the words ADDICTION, ANXIETY, and NAUSEA rest on the surface of a trompe l'oeil pane of glass [Fig. 18]. Proximity to the picture plane is conflated with literal surfaceness, such that reading text and phenomenalizing an illusion become all-but indistinguishable.[47] Although it operates like a smartphone screen, this window is a real object (or rather, to be literal about it, in a manner that

46
A naïveté that is perhaps itself only an illusion to which representation's modernist detractors are especially susceptible. Recent work on trompe l'oeil, especially in its seventeenth-century Dutch and nineteenth-century US manifestations, has tended to emphasize its relation to the market economy and sophisticated play with its viewers' visual habits. Cf. Maggie M. Cao, Trompe L'Oeil and Financial Risk in the Age of Paper, in: *Grey Room* 78, 2020, 6–33; ead., Playing Parrot. American Trompe L'Oeil and Empire, in: *The Art Bulletin* 103/3, 2021, 97–124; Michael Leja, *Looking Askance. Skepticism in American Art*, Berkeley, CA 2004.

47
Effects of this sort are highly characteristic of historical trompe l'oeil painting, which abounds in letters, banknotes, stamps, cartes de visite, and so on. It would require another essay to examine Gomez's relation to this tradition. For an analysis of trompe l'oeil that also happens to relate the genre to Ngai's theorization of the gimmick, cf. Patrick R. Crowley, Parrhasius' Curtain, or, a Media Archaeology of a Metapainting, in: Pantelis Michelakis (ed.), *Classics and Media Theory*, Oxford 2020, 211–236.

has become unavoidable since Magritte: a painting of a real object) touting what might as easily be hypnotherapy or psychic readings as low-rent psychoanalysis or shady pharmaceuticals. Either way, the peeling logo of ADT Security is down there at lower left to ensure that what really matters remains intact.

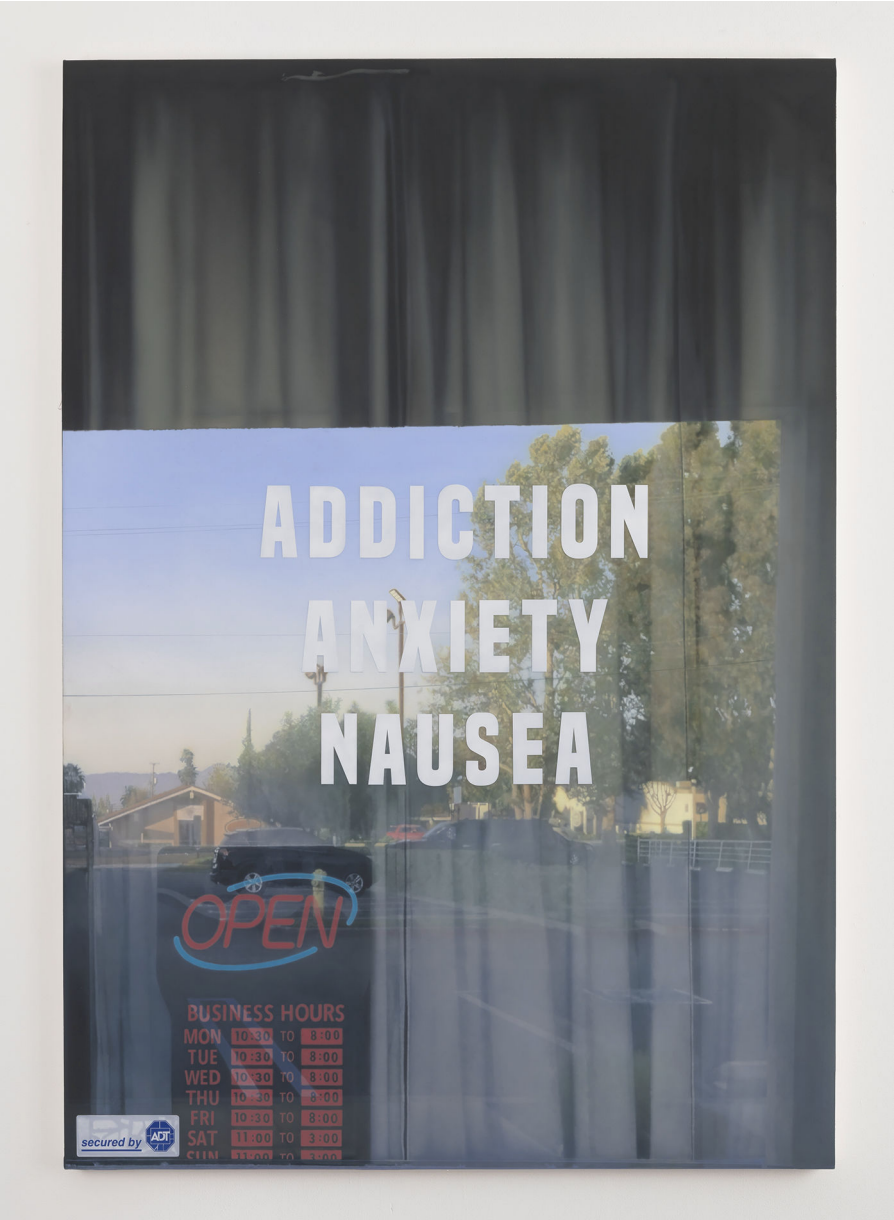
VI. An Ending

This is slow spectacle. It isn't all that spectacular. Star Wars is usually credited with popularizing the idea of a "used future", that is, rusty spaceships, malfunctioning robots, and so on.[48] But if capital is always oriented towards the realization of future profit at the cost of present and future human and nonhuman wellbeing, then our used future is now. Spectacle is not so much a collection of images as sociality turned into images that act like commodities. Commodities are above all disposable, since they are not autotelic: they only exist to facilitate value-accumulation. A smiley face in a trash can returns flat neoliberal affect to the dustbin of history, from whence no doubt it will leach toxins into air and groundwater for centuries or millennia to come. In *Hilarity Ensues*, as in some of Gomez's other pictures, you can also literally watch paint peel.

It is too easy to equate spectacle with dazzle, with the mirage called modernity. But the becoming-commodity of the world need not look like the brand-new commodity as it appears in a window display. As Debord writes:

> Each individual commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others and aspires to impose its presence everywhere as though it were alone. The spectacle is the epic poem of this strife – a strife that no fall of Illium can bring to an end. Of arms and the man the spectacle does not sing, but rather of passions and the commodity. Within this blind struggle each commodity, following where passion leads, unconsciously actualizes something of a higher order than itself: the commodity's becoming worldly [*devenir-monde*] coincides with the world's being transformed into commodities. So it is that, thanks to the cunning of the commodity, whereas all *particular* commodities wear themselves out in

48
The oft-noted post-apocalyptic ambiance of Gomez's work also relates to sci-fi's fondness for depicting the future ruins of present-day civilization, as in the destroyed Statue of Liberty at the end of *Planet of the Apes*. In the sticker paintings, especially, there is also a distinctly nostalgic note to Gomez's ruin-pictures. There are, however, much earlier precedents to be found in the Enlightenment cult of ruins. See, for example, Hubert Robert's painting of the grand gallery of the Louvre in imagined dereliction, and, for a reading of Robert's oeuvre that connects his sense of temporality to capitalist cycles of boom and bust: Nina Dubin, *Futures and Ruins. 18th-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert*, Los Angeles 2010.



[Fig. 18]
Sayre Gomez, *Window*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 50 inches (182.88 × 127 cm), location unknown (SG 20.038), Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Photo Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

> the fight, the commodity *as abstract form* continues on its way to absolute self-realization.[49]

"Particular commodities wear themselves out in the fight." What is left over from that erosion is the violence of the chain-link fence. The ordinariness of property relations is modernity's dirty secret (it would be much more convenient if everything really had dissolved into the digital ether). To repeat: real estate is a commodity, too. Even where valorization has mostly ceased, as in deindustrialized Los Angeles, property lines remain in effect as something like production's shadow. Neither production nor active commerce are much in evidence in Gomez's art. This does not mean that his world is any less totally structured by the imperatives of global capital.

In the context of urbanism, then, spectacle is the false coherence that capitalist culture gives to the heterogeneity of visual orders that capitalism itself produces in its combined and uneven development. This is one of T. J. Clark's points in his book on *The Painting of Modern Life*: "The spectacle is never an image mounted securely and finally in place; it is always an account of the world competing with others, and meeting the resistance of different, sometimes tenacious forms of social practice."[50] Rita Gonzalez draws attention to a number of these forms, and I have brought up others – gang tags, stickers, improvised semiotics of the "cool S" variety. Yet by the time we get to Gomez's work, or more simply, by the time we get to the early twenty-first century, it is no longer so clear that capital needs to provide an "account" of anything; perhaps the commodity form no longer has to bother with a *logos* when its absolute realization is at hand. It may be that contemporary capitalism ensures its reproduction not so much through ideological domination as blunt violence and neglect. This is what we see in Gomez's paintings: urban space as shambolic, yet minutely policed. Nonetheless, spectacle's non-totalization and inherently multiple temporality is something that realist art may be especially good at bringing to attention, whenever its representational means shudder between one socio-semiotic register and another (between blur and uncanny precision, for example). The additive, disjunctive quality of Gomez's technique, by sharply separating each of the composition's elements, dilates time in an anti-photographic and anti-Impressionist way that is characteristically realist, if we follow Marnin Young's work on the post-Courbet generation of French realist painters in

49 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 43. Emphasis in the original, although I have added the French in brackets because the translator's "becoming worldly" is less useful for my purposes than Debord's literal "becoming-world". As throughout the book, Debord's language here is thoroughly *détourné*, in this case from Virgil and Hegel.

50 T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, New York 1984, 36. That capitalist temporality is destructive to human biological and social temporalities is the basic claim of Jonathan Crary's *24/7. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, New York/London 2014, a book similarly in Debord's lineage.

the 1880s.[51] It resists the idea that any of these scenes is "mounted securely and finally in place" and demands more protracted looking. This slowness is helpful in making perceptible the contingency of commodified spatial orders. The trick is in representing spectacle without reproducing it. Since spectacle is the semblance of simultaneity, anachrony is, perhaps, resistant art's best available tool.[52] Realisms that abjure the concept of the snapshot can instead draw upon a literally cosmic archive of other speeds.

Gomez calls his ambitious paintings of Los Angeles "X-Scapes" to signal their difference from the more traditional landscape genre. But why, then, not just call them "cityscapes", a word that the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests as early as 1856? I think the term "X-Scape" is meant to indicate something more than that these scenes are urban and thus definitionally unnatural. X means "hyper", as in "hyperreal" or "hyperspace". An X-Scape is to landscape as the X Games are to the Olympic Games: more extreme. The term signals that something more than photorealism is at stake. I have been building a case that the distinctive quality of Gomez's hyperrealism has to do with its combination of temporalities. These include, at a minimum, the disposable quickness of capitalist production and consumption, the slower human rhythms of subaltern appropriative practices, and lastly, creeping in the interstices of the above, or blaring out from a smog-darkened sky, the growth and decay of what, by now, we only conventionally call the "natural" world: ivy growing up a chain-link fence, corrosion on a van's wheel wells, glowing pink sunsets (which, one presumes, will survive in some form after the last of spectacle has rotted away, even if part of their special brilliance in LA probably derives from smog or smoke from forest fires).[53] Anthropogenic 'scapes are inherently anach-

51
Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism. Painting and the Politics of Time*, New Haven, CT 2015.

52
I use the term "anachrony" rather than the more usual "anachronism" in reference to the notion of the "anachronic" in writings by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, in particular their book *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010. To anticipate a possible objection to my argument: it may seem that Gomez's practice is very "spectacular" itself in the colloquial sense that it delivers striking images and also in the sense that he makes expensive commodities (large saleable paintings). There is ultimately nothing to be said to the complaint that Gomez makes money from depictions of poverty; only the modality in which he does so lends itself to debate. (Would it be less problematic, for example, to exhibit small photographs of comparable scenes?) I do think, however, that the relationship between Gomez's appropriations of Hollywood's technologies of illusion, vernacular visual cultures, and the tradition of documentary social realism lies at the core of the work he does on and maybe against the spectacular order, in which case the ascetic gesture of refusing oneself a "commercial" or "spectacular" mode of production would knock one leg out from under the dialectic, so to speak. Gomez's critique of spectacle is homeopathic, or immanent, or less positively: knowingly complicit. Note that similar issues have been aired at length in the controversy over Jeff Wall's use of large-format photographic lightboxes, a medium derived from the backlit advertisements that, as we have seen, likewise draw Gomez's attention.

53
This is a point that Thomas Hughes and Alex Potts pushed me to consider in their responses to an earlier manifestation of this project. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Sayre Gomez for his generosity in discussing his work with me over the past several years.

ronic. Even something as utterly domesticated and iconographically overcoded as a Los Angeles palm tree is still a living thing with its own ways of adapting to its habitat. Weather, rust, chlorophyll: nonhuman agencies of a multidimensional realism.

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REVIEWS
REZENSIONEN

WIE KANN ‚QUEERE MODERNE' ERZÄHLT WERDEN?

Rezension der Ausstellung *Queere Moderne 1900 bis 1950* in der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (27. September 2025 – 15. Februar 2026)

Rezensiert von
Jo Ziebritzki

Der erste Raum der Ausstellung *Queere Moderne 1900 bis 1950* lädt mit einem kuratorischen Einführungstext und einem in dunklen Farben gehaltenen Gemälde dazu ein, in der Ausstellung anzukommen. Auf dem Gemälde *Ohne Titel (Sitzender Mann, mehrere Bilder)* (1927) des Surrealisten Pavel Tchelitchew sind schemenhaft zwei sich umschlingende Figuren erkennbar [Abb. 1].[1] Bei näherer Betrachtung verschmelzen die aus der Distanz als zwei Körper wahrgenommenen Formen zu einer einzigen Figur, die aufgrund des Herrenanzuges, der Krawatte und der ordentlich gescheitelten Kurzhaarfrisur männlich lesbar ist. Sie scheint zeitgleich in verschiedenen Sitzpositionen dargestellt zu sein. So entsteht ein Vexierbild, das aus der Ferne betrachtet eine intime Szene eines eng umschlungenen Paares zeigt, die sich beim Nähertreten in die Mehrfachansicht einer kubistisch anmutenden Person auflöst.

1
Auf den Abb. 1, 2 und 4 fehlen die Angaben zu den Werken und die Werktexte, die in der Ausstellung jeweils neben den Werken an der Wand angebracht sind. Ob diese schlicht noch nicht montiert waren, als die Fotos gemacht wurden, oder aus ästhetischen Gründen in der Nachbearbeitung wegretouchiert wurden, ist unklar.

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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[Abb. 1]
Pavel Tchelitchew, *Ohne Titel (Sitzender Mann, mehrere Bilder)*, Öl und Kaffeesatz auf Leinwand, 116.8 × 89.5 cm. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY, in: Queere Moderne. 1900 bis 1950, Ausstellungsansicht, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2025, Foto: Achim Kukulies.

Der kuratorische Werktext neben dem Gemälde erklärt, dass Tchelitchew viele moderne Stile aufgegriffen habe. Das gezeigte Werk *Ohne Titel* orientiere sich an dem Stil des Kubofuturismus, der hier dem Ausdruck „einer multiplen, fluiden Identität" diene. Weiter wird erläutert, dass „die Szene sich auch als Umarmung identischer Figuren lesen [lässt] und an Sigmund Freuds Verbindung von Homosexualität und Narzissmus" erinnere. Ob es kuratorisch klug ist, im ersten Werktext der Ausstellung die Freudsche, zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts durchaus übliche, Pathologisierung von Homosexualität zu reproduzieren, erscheint fraglich. Auch später in der Ausstellung wird nochmals auf Freuds Verwendung des Narziss-Mythos „als modernes Bild für Homosexualität, verstanden als das Begehren des Gleichen im Spiegelbild des Selbst" rekurriert, abermals ohne dieses „moderne" Verständnis kritisch aus heutiger Perspektive zu kontextualisieren.[2]

So stellt sich als erster Eindruck ein, dass hier ein hochspannendes Werk eines wenig bekannten Künstlers in den Vordergrund gerückt wird, dieses aber zugleich interpretatorisch nicht auf der Höhe aktueller Diskurse ausgedeutet wird. Um diese zwei Ebenen – einerseits die in der Ausstellung gezeigten Werke und andererseits die Erzählung darüber, was die ‚queere Moderne' sei – gebührend zu untersuchen, werde ich im Folgenden zunächst die Werkauswahl der Ausstellung beleuchten. Anschließend werde ich – die in den vielen Wandtexten angelegte kuratorische Aufforderung zum Lesen ernst nehmend – das Ausstellungsnarrativ analysieren. Abschließend werden Elemente wie ein zur Partizipation einladender Aktionsraum und die allgemeine Zugänglichkeit der Ausstellung untersucht.

I. Die Werke. Augenweide und Sinnesfreude

Die Auswahl der in der Ausstellung *Queere Moderne* gezeigten Werke ist fantastisch. Eine derartige Zusammenschau moderner europäischer Kunst, die queere Liebe und Lebensweisen thematisieren und/oder zwischen 1900 und 1950 von Künstler:innen geschaffen wurden, die nicht nach heteronormativen Geschlechterrollen und Beziehungsmodellen lebten, hat es, wie die Kuratorinnen zu Recht schreiben, in Europa noch nicht gegeben. Eine große Leistung des kuratorischen Teams – von der Gastkuratorin Anke Kempkes stammen Idee und Konzept, die Umsetzung hat sie mit Isabelle Malz und Isabelle Tondre realisiert – ist es, die Werke dieser Künstler:innen ausfindig gemacht und nach Düsseldorf gebracht zu haben. Etwa zwei Drittel der Werke befinden sich in Privat-

[2] Siehe den Wandtext, der in das „Kapitel II. Modernes Arkadien" einführt. (Die Kuratorinnen haben die Ausstellung in acht „Kapitel" unterteilt, worauf unten genauer eingegangen wird). Die Wandtexte sind nachzulesen in der Pressemappe der Ausstellung (11.12.2025). Für eine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Zusammenhang zwischen Freuds Theorien zur Homosexualität und homosexueller Kultur um die Jahrhundertwende siehe: Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty. Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond*, New York 2010, Kapitel 7 und 8.

[Abb. 2]
Queere Moderne. 1900 bis 1950, Ausstellungsansicht, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2025, Foto: Achim Kukulies.

[Abb. 3]
Queere Moderne. 1900 bis 1950, Ausstellungsansicht, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2025, Foto: Linda Inconi-Jansen.

[Abb. 4]
Queere Moderne. 1900 bis 1950, Ausstellungsansicht, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2025, Foto: Achim Kukulies.

sammlungen. Die Kunstwerke aufzuspüren und den Leihverkehr zu organisieren, war, wie in einem Interview berichtet wurde, eine Mammutaufgabe, die das kuratorische Team mit Bravour gemeistert hat.[3]

Die über 130 Werke von 34 Künstler:innen geben einen umfassenden Überblick über moderne Kunst, mit der – oftmals unter oder trotz großen sozialen Drucks – verschiedenste Ausdrucksformen für Geschlechtlichkeiten, Begehren, Beziehungsformen und Sexualitäten jenseits der im frühen 20. Jahrhundert in Europa und den USA gültigen Normen entwickelt wurden. Vertreten sind Werke von bekannten Künstler:innen wie Richmond Barthé, Romaine Brooks, Paul Cadmus, Claude Cahun und Marcel Moore, Ithell Colquhoun, Leonor Fini, Hannah Höch, Gluck, Duncan Grant, Lotte Laserstein, Marie Laurencin, Jeanne Mammen, Marlow Moss, Toyen und Jindřich Heisler, Henry Scott Tuke, oder Gerda Wegener. Bekannte und vielfach reproduzierte Werke dieser Künstler:innen im Original zu sehen, öffnet den Blick für deren Materialität und Größe, die in Reproduktionen schwer zu begreifen sind. Cahuns Fotografien, oftmals großformativ reproduziert, überraschen im Original mit ihrem kleinen Format. Manche der Gemälde von Laurencin hingegen sind großformatig, was ihren zarten, pastellfarbenen Figuren eine unerwartet raumgreifende Präsenz gibt [Abb. 2]. Das Zusammenspiel von Bild und Rahmen – letztere werden in Reproduktionen meist weggelassen – wird besonders eindrucksvoll in den Werken von Moss und Gluck [Abb. 3].

Die Ausstellung zeigt auch einige weniger bekannte Werke, unter anderem von Nils Dardel, Beauford Delaney, Jacoba von Heemskerck, Ludwig von Hofmann, Robin Ironside, Louise Janin, Milena Pavlović-Barili, Anton Prinner, Pavel Tchelitchew oder Ethel Walker. Insbesondere das vielfältige Œuvre von Prinner, aus dem Werke in verschiedenen Medien (abstrakte Reliefbilder auf Holz, figürliche Schnitzereien, abstrakte Drucke, Messingplatten und ein Buch) ausgestellt sind, öffnet den Zugang zu einer bisher wenig bekannten künstlerischen Position [Abb. 4]. Die Begegnung mit den Originalen von Prinners abstrakten Reliefs ist für ihre Wirkung unerlässlich, da die leicht erhobenen Kreise, Spiralen und Linien ausreichend Profil haben, um bei eigener Bewegung vor dem Bild durch Perspektivverschiebungen in Bewegung zu kommen. So öffnet sich eine Vielzahl an Assoziationen und Interpretationsmöglichkeiten, die von Beweglichkeit und Veränderung von Geschlecht über kosmische Konstellationen bis hin zu industriellen Maschinen reichen.[4]

3
Queere Moderne – Ausstellung in Düsseldorf. WDR, 26.09.2025, 05:05 Min, verfügbar bis 26.09.2026 (11.12.2025).

4
Einzig ein Werk fällt aus der visuellen Erzählung zur queeren Moderne heraus – das allerdings so deutlich, dass erneut die ungeklärte Frage aufgeworfen wird, wie die Kuratorinnen den Begriff ‚queer' in der Ausstellung setzen und einsetzen. Es handelt sich dabei um René Magrittes *Les jours gigantesques* (1928), das ohne Werktext im „Kapitel IV. Surreale Welten" gezeigt wird. Der Ausstellungskatalog, in dem Magrittes Gemälde das erste reproduzierte

Die in der Ausstellung versammelten Werke sind in sechs thematischen „Kapiteln", die von einem „Prolog" und einem „Epilog" gerahmt sind, angeordnet. Dass die Kuratorinnen die Bezeichnung „Kapitel" für die in verschiedenen Räumen entfalteten Themenschwerpunkte nutzen, unterstreicht ihren Appell, die Ausstellung nicht nur zu sehen, sondern auch zu ‚lesen'. Die „Kapitel" folgen grob einer chronologischen Abfolge, wobei zugleich auch thematische und lokale Schwerpunkte gesetzt werden. Manche „Kapitel" nehmen Orte und ihre jeweiligen Kunstszenen in den Blick, wie New York oder Paris. Manche sind künstlerischen Stilen wie der Abstraktion oder dem Surrealismus gewidmet und wieder andere setzen soziale Themen, wie den Sapphismus oder den antifaschistischen Widerstand von 1933–1945, ins Zentrum. Den Werken, die in einem „Kapitel" gruppiert sind, ist jeweils ein kontextualisierender Wandtext vorangestellt, der zentrale Künstler:innen in ihrem jeweiligen sozio-kulturellen Umfeld verortet. Neben den einführenden Wandtexten sind immer auch einige Archivalien abgebildet, meist Fotografien von Künstler:innen, deren Werke in dem jeweiligen „Kapitel" ausgestellt sind [Abb. 3]. In der Zusammenschau ergeben die Wand- und Werktexte einen etwas unzusammenhängenden Eindruck, da in den einführenden Texten immer wieder Namen von Künstler:innen genannt werden, von denen dann keine Werke gezeigt werden. Die Archivalien zeigen zudem oftmals nicht weiter besprochene Dokumente und Personen. Und die Erklärungen in den Werktexten machen es nicht immer möglich, den Bezug des Werkes zum jeweiligen „Kapitel" zu entschlüsseln. Im Folgenden wird diese Problematik exemplarisch anhand von drei Fallanalysen untersucht.

Zoom in: Lotte Laserstein, *Ich und mein Modell* (1929/1930)

Ein Werk, das besonders beeindruckt, ist das Gemälde *Ich und mein Modell* (1929/1930) von Laserstein, das im „Kapitel II. Modernes Arkadien" [Abb. 5] ausgestellt wird. In dem Werk wirft die Malerin durch das Genre des Selbstporträts mit Modell Fragen nach Geschlechterrollen auf, denn sowohl die Malerin als auch das Modell sind als moderne Frauen lesbar. Die Blickachsen in und vor dem Gemälde sind von Bedeutung, da der Blick der Malerin nicht etwa das Modell fokussiert, sondern mich als Betrachter:in trifft, während die hinter der Malerin positionierte und dieser zärt-

Werk ist, erklärt, dass es sich um eine „gewaltvolle Darstellung eines modernen Geschlechterkampfes" handele. Es wird jedoch nicht benannt, dass es sich um einen männlich dargestellten Gewalttäter während eines sexuellen Übergriffes auf eine nackte, sich wehrende, entsetzte weiblich dargestellte Figur handelt. Der Mehrwert dieses Werkes, das männliche Gewalt an einer Frau zeigt, im Rahmen der Ausstellung zu queerer Moderne, hätte deutlich besser erklärt werden müssen – denn der Zusammenhang zwischen ‚queerer Moderne' und misogyner Gewalt in Darstellungen der Moderne ist nicht selbsterklärend. Ausschlaggebend für die Aufnahme des Gemäldes in die Ausstellung scheint gewesen zu sein, dass es aus der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen selbst stammt, die neben diesem und zwei Werken von Max Ernst keines der Werke, die in der Ausstellung als ‚queer und modern' gesetzt werden, beisteuern konnte – was deutlich werden lässt, dass die Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen die gezeigten Positionen nicht gesammelt hat. Dies hätte ein idealer Ausgangspunkt sein können, die Mitverantwortung an der Unsichtbarmachung dieser Künstler:innen zu reflektieren.

[Abb. 5]
Lotte Laserstein, *Ich und mein Modell*, Öl auf Leinwand, 49.5 × 69.5 cm, Privatsammlung, Courtesy Agnews, London © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025.

lich die Hand auf die Schulter legende zweite Person auf die für mich als Betrachterin nicht sichtbare Leinwand schaut. So stellt sich die Frage, wer hier das eigentliche Modell ist: die zweite abgebildete Person, oder ich als Betrachter:in vor der Leinwand? Denn in der dargestellten Szene scheint die zweite Person der Malerin den Rücken freizuhalten und zu stärken, was eine Umkehrung von Blicken und Macht zwischen Malerin und Modell beinhaltet, die als eine queerende Intervention in das Genre des Selbstporträts mit Modell verstanden werden kann. Doch der Werktext stellt weder die Frage danach, wer Modell ist, noch was die soziale Rolle des Modells im Verhältnis zur Malerin ist, sondern erklärt, dass die zweite abgebildete Person Traute Rose, Lasersteins „Geliebte und ihr bevorzugtes Modell" sei. Queerness wird hier, wie es in der Ausstellung häufig der Fall ist, im dargestellten Bildgegenstand beziehungsweise stärker noch in der Identität der Künstlerin selbst verortet, während das Potential von Blicken, von Stil und vom Zusammenspiel von Werk und Titel vernachlässigt wird.

Zoom in: Duncan Grant, *Männlicher Akt (Pat Nelson)* (1930)

Eines der wenigen Werke, das die im Einführungstext als zentral benannte Frage nach Rassismus in den queeren Szenen der europäischen Metropolen visuell aufgreift, ist der Rückenakt *Männlicher Akt (Pat Nelson)* (1930) von Grant. Pat Nelson war, wie der Werktext in Analogie zum Bild von Laserstein und Rose erläutert, Grants bevorzugtes Modell und sein Geliebter. Allerdings stellte Grant, so erklärt der Text, „den Körper Nelsons in dieser Zeit" – was sich vermutlich auf ihre gemeinsame Zeit in der Bloomsbury Group bezieht – häufig „exotisierend und sexualisiert" dar. Worin in dem Gemälde das Exotisierende liegt, wird nicht ausgeführt. Denn dass der Akt sexualisiert ist, ist im Genre selbst angelegt, ebenso wie in der Eingliederung des Bildes in das „Kapitel VI. Queere Avantgarden und intime Netzwerke", das – anders als der Titel vermuten lässt – Werke mit ausschließlich männlich lesbaren Figuren von männlich positionierten Künstlern zeigt.

Zoom in: „Kapitel VII. Queerer Widerstand seit 1933"

Im „Kapitel VII. Queerer Widerstand seit 1933" werden unter anderem Werke von Höch, Toyen und Heisler sowie Cahun und Moore gezeigt. Mit Ausnahme von Heisler werden alle im einführenden Wandtext als Künsterler:innen beschrieben, die „Formen des antifaschistischen Widerstandes" fanden. Etwas vereinfacht suggeriert der Wandtext, dass die in diesem „Kapitel" gezeigten Künstler:innen primär auf „Grundlage des Paragrafen 175" durch „Konzentrationslager, grausame medizinische Experimente und de[n] Tod" bedroht gewesen seien. Bei genauer Betrachtung zeigt sich jedoch, dass in dem „Kapitel" keine Werke von Künstlern ausgestellt sind, die auf Grundlage von § 175 des Strafgesetzbuches (StGB) verfolgt wurden. Denn § 175 StGB, der homosexuelles Ver-

halten von Personen männlichen Geschlechts, sowie ab 1935 bereits den Verdacht darauf, unter Strafe stellte, galt nicht für Personen weiblichen Geschlechts. Dass homosexuelle Personen weiblichen Geschlechts dennoch stigmatisiert und diskriminiert wurden, liegt auf der Hand, allerdings wurden sie nicht strafrechtlich verfolgt.[5] Der Unterschied zwischen strafrechtlicher Verfolgung homosexueller Männer und Personen mit männlichem Geschlechtseintrag auf Grundlage von § 175 StGB und der gesellschaftliche Stigmatisierung von homosexuellen Frauen und Personen mit weiblichem Geschlechtseintrag ist im Kontext moderne Kunst deshalb relevant, weil die eingangs genannten Künstler:innen zwar durchaus von Verfolgung betroffen waren und im Untergrund lebten, dies jedoch nicht primär aufgrund ihrer gleichgeschlechtlichen Beziehungsform oder ihres nicht im binären Geschlechtersystem verorteten Geschlechtsausdrucks. Vielmehr war es ihre avantgardistische Formsprache und ihre antifaschistische Haltung, sowie im Falle Heislers seine ‚jüdische' Herkunft, die sie in den Untergrund trieb.[6]

Unausgeschöpft bleibt in dieser Zusammenschau zudem die Frage nach dem sozio-politischen Gehalt von künstlerischen Medien. Denn was alle der genannten Künstler:innen verbindet, ist, dass sie während des Nationalsozialismus im Duo (Cahun und Moore, Toyen und Heisler, Höch und Brugman) im Medium des Buches kollaborierten. Cahuns und Moores Zusammenarbeit wird in der Ausstellung unter anderem in dem Buch *Aveux non Avenus* (*Nichtige Geständnisse*) sichtbar, das als Digitalisat lesbar und in einer Vitrine im Original gezeigt ist. Ebenso kollaborativ arbeiteten Toyen und der Dichter Heisler, den Toyen während des Krieges im Badezimmer ihrer Wohnung in Prag versteckte. In neun Drucken entfaltet Toyen bedrohliche, lebensfeindliche Bildwelten, die auf Heislers Gedicht „Cache-toi guerre!" (Versteck dich, Krieg!) Bezug nehmen. Die kreative Partnerschaft von Höch und Brugman ist in der Ausstellung in einem von Höch gemalten Portrait Brugmans vertreten. Doch haben auch Höch und Brugman zusammen im Buchformat in der Publikation *Scheingehacktes* gearbeitet, in der Brugmans Text mit Höchs handkolorierten Zeichnungen kombiniert ist.[7] Die Häufung der Zusammenarbeit zwischen dichtenden und bildenden Künstler:innen im Format des Buches oder der

5
Zu lesbischem Leben im Nationalsozialismus siehe: Alexander Zinn, „Kein Anlass zum Einschreiten gegeben". Lesbisches Leben im Nationalsozialismus, in: ders. (Hg.), *Homosexuelle in Deutschland 1933–1969*, Göttingen 2020, 103–116.

6
Der zum „Kapitel" gehörende Artikel „Queere Kompliz*innenschaft" von Isabelle Malz im Ausstellungskatalog zeichnet die Zusammenhänge zwischen politischer Haltung, künstlerischer Position und queerer Lebensform etwas differenzierter nach. Siehe Isabelle Malz, Queere Kompliz*innenschaft, in: *Queere Moderne – Queer Modernism* (Ausst.-Kat. Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen), hg. v. Susanne Gaensheimer, Isabelle Malz, Anke Kempkes, München 2025, 253–271.

7
Til Brugman, *Scheingehacktes*, mit (handkolorierten) Zeichnungen von Hannah Höch, Berlin 1935 (10.12.2025). Malz erwähnt in ihrem Artikel auch diese Publikation, s. Malz, Queere Kompliz*innenschaft, 265.

Mappe, die während der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft und des Krieges zu beobachten ist, zeigt, dass sowohl die Wahl des Mediums als auch ein erhöhter Zusammenhalt bemerkenswerte Strategien antifaschistischer, queerer Künstler:innen während dieser Zeit waren.

II. Das Narrativ

Das kuratorische Narrativ, das in den Einführungstexten zu den „Kapiteln" und in den Werktexten entfaltet wird, ist in der Ausstellung sehr präsent. Die Aufforderung, die Werke eingebettet in die kuratorische Erzählung zu entschlüsseln, wird im Eingangsbereich der Ausstellung besonders deutlich. Denn der Eingangsbereich wird von Textangeboten dominiert. Links neben dem eingangs besprochenen Gemälde von Tchelitchew befindet sich ein in die Ausstellung einführender Überblickstext. Wiederum links davon, auf der Wand über Eck, ist eine große Grafik angebracht, die queere Netzwerke in Nordwest-Europa und New York visualisiert. Gegenüber davon hängt ein halbdurchlässiges Stoffbanner mit Fragen wie „Was macht Kunst queer?", „Was ist ein queerer Blick?", oder „Wie können Leerstellen in der Kunstgeschichte sichtbar gemacht werden?". Zudem ist an der Wand, die die Besucher:innen, wenn sie die Ausstellung betreten, im Rücken haben, ein QR-Code angebracht, der zu einem Glossar führt, in dem Begriffe wie „androgyn" oder „Hermaphrodit" erklärt werden.[8] Neben dem QR-Code des Glossars befindet sich das Kolophon, in dem alle an der Ausstellung beteiligten Personen und Institutionen in ihren jeweiligen Funktionen gelistet sind. In diesem Raum treffen sich also Anfang und Ende der Ausstellung.

Der in die Ausstellung einführende Wandtext erklärt, dass ich mich in der „erste[n] umfassende[n] Ausstellung in Europa" befinde, „die den wegweisenden Beitrag queerer Künstler*innen zur modernen Kunst würdigt". Die Ausstellung erzähle eine „alternative Geschichte" queerer Positionen, die „trotz ihrer engen Verflechtungen mit den Kreisen der künstlerischen Avantgarde [...] in der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung oft unberücksichtigt" blieben. Somit verspricht sie eine „neue Perspektive auf die Festschreibungen der Kunstgeschichte der Moderne" zu eröffnen.[9]

Auch wenn noch keine institutionelle Großausstellung mit dem Titel *Queere Moderne* in Europa gezeigt wurde, so gab es doch Ausstellungen, die sich mit der künstlerischen Darstel-

[8] Das Glossar bleibt mit der Ausstellung seltsam unverbunden. Obwohl manche der Begriffe darin für das Verständnis bestimmter Werke unmittelbar relevant sind, wie beispielweise „Hermaphrodit", wird bei den Kunstwerken, die „Hermaphrodit" im Titel tragen, nicht auf das Glossar verwiesen, so bei Jeanne Mammen, *Hermaphrodit* (um 1945), das ohne Werktext präsentiert ist, sowie Toyen, *Hermaphrodite au coquillage* (1930), das mit einem Werktext präsentiert ist, der mit der kritischen Erklärung des Begriffes beginnt. Das Glossar hätte besser in die Ausstellung eingebunden werden müssen, um seine Wirkung als Bildungsinstrument über queeres Leben zu entfalten.

[9] Die Wandtexte sind auch in der Pressemappe der Ausstellung nachzulesen (10.12.2025).

lung von Geschlecht, Sexualitäten, Begehren sowie Familien- und Freund:innenschaftsmodellen jenseits heteronormativer Muster in der Moderne befasst haben, sowohl in Europa, wie auch in den USA, die der wichtigste außereuropäische Referenzpunkt in der Ausstellung ist.[10] Es scheint also fraglich, welchen Mehrwert das Nicht-Nennen von vorangegangenen Projekten und der reichlich existierenden kunsthistorischen Forschung zu queerender Kunst und queeren Künstler:innen der Moderne haben soll.

Die „neue Perspektive auf die Festschreibungen der Kunstgeschichte" reflektiert zudem nicht die eigene Involviertheit als Institution in den angeprangerten Ausschluss queerer Positionen. Denn dass queere Künstler:innen und Kulturschaffende in der Kunstlandschaft nicht oder lange nicht als solche wahrgenommen wurden, hat nicht allein die Kunstgeschichte zu verantworten, sondern auch die Sammlungs- und Ausstellungspraktiken von Zentren der symbolischen und kulturellen Macht, wozu die Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen gehört. Dass die Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen für diese notwendige Selbstbefragung als Mitgestalterin kunsthistorischer Narrative in dem Wandtext kein Bewusstsein zeigt, ist verwunderlich. Denn die Institution hat mit dem Langzeitprojekt *museum global*, das neben einer temporären Ausstellung auch die Neupräsentation der Sammlung und die Ankaufspolitik nachhaltig veränderte, vorbildhaft eingeübt, sich selbstkritisch auf eurozentrische Muster hin zu befragen.[11]

Da mit dem Ausstellungstitel *Queere Moderne 1900 bis 1950* bewusst der Begriff ‚queer' auf die erste Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts bezogen wird, wäre eine kurze Auseinandersetzung mit dem Begriff produktiv gewesen. Unerwähnt bleibt in diesem Zusammenhang, dass der Begriff ‚queer' erst seit den 1980er Jahren eine Selbstbezeichnung und nochmals zehn Jahre später zu einer theoretischen Analysekategorie wurde.[12] Das heißt, dass die künstlerischen Positionen von 1900 bis 1950, die in der Ausstellung gezeigt werden, erst im Rückblick so bezeichnet und als Gruppe sichtbar gemacht wer-

10
Eine Auswahl von Gruppen-Ausstellungen mit dem Fokus auf queerer Moderne in Europa und den USA in chronologischer Reihenfolge: *Ars Homo Erotica* (Ausst.-Kat., National Museum Warschau), hg. v. Paweł Leszkowicz, Warschau 2010 (Moderne und Gegenwart); *Queer British Art, 1861–1967* (Ausst.-Kat., Tate Britain, London), hg. v. Clare Barlow, London 2017 (Moderne); *Over the Rainbow* (Ausst.-Kat., Centre Pompidou Paris), hg. v. Nicolas Liucci-Goutnikov, Paris 2023 (Moderne und Gegenwart); *Brilliant Exiles. American Women in Paris 1900 – 1939*, (Ausst.-Kat., Washington/Louisville/Athens in Georgia), hg. v. Robyn Asleson et al., 2025 (Moderne); *The First Homosexuals. The Birth of a New Identity 1869–1939* (Ausst.-Kat., Chicago Wrightwood 659), hg. v. Jonathan Katz and Johnny Willis, New York 2025.

11
Siehe dazu auch: *museum global – Mikrogeschichten einer exzentrischen Moderne*. Ausstellung und Forschungsprojekt in der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (10.12.2025). In dem „Vorwort und Dank" beschreibt Susanne Gaensheimer, Direktorin der Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, auch, dass *Queere Moderne* an *museum global* anschließend ein weiterer Schritt auf dem Weg sei „neue und visionäre Perspektiven mit den eigenen Sammlungspräsentationen und Ausstellungsprojekten zu verbinden". Vgl. Susanne Gaensheimer, Vorwort und Dank, in: Queere Moderne 1900–1950, 9–19, hier 9.

12
Siehe dazu Mike Laufenberg und Ben Trott, Queer Studies. Genealogien, Normativitäten, Multidimensionalität, in: dies. (Hg.), *Queer Studies. Schlüsseltexte*, Berlin 2023, 7–99.

den können. Das bedeutet auch, dass die gezeigten Künstler:innen den Begriff nicht als Selbstbezeichnung verwendet haben. Da die Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen aus der Position der Mehrheitsgesellschaft über eine Minderheit berichtet, wäre ein bewussterer Umgang mit der Frage nach Selbst- und Fremdbezeichnung von zentraler Bedeutung gewesen. Die Begriffswahl der ‚queeren Moderne' historisch einzuordnen wäre zudem wichtig gewesen, um das Bewusstsein der Besucher:innen dafür zu schärfen, dass es sich hierbei um eine kuratorische Setzung handelt. Zugleich hätte dies aufzeigen können, dass eine Betrachtung der Werke als ‚queer' durch einen neueren, heutigen Blick bedingt wird. So wird es versäumt, die Aufmerksamkeit der Besuchenden auf das queerende Potential des Blicks sowie die Möglichkeit, Kunstwerke queer zu lesen, zu lenken. Das heißt, anstatt ‚queer' primär als ‚essentielle' Eigenschaft der Künstler:innen zu verstehen, hätte ‚queeren' auch als Tätigkeit der Betrachter:innen verstanden werden können.[13] Da dies nicht geschieht, stellt sich der Eindruck ein, dass die Ausstellung nicht aus einer queerenden kuratorischen Praxis heraus entstanden ist und somit selbst auch wenig queerendes Potential hat.[14]

III. Zugänglichkeit

Im hinteren Teil der Ausstellung befindet sich ein „Aktionsraum". Hier laden ein Basteltisch, eine Sitzecke mit Büchern und Karten mit den eingangs gestellten Fragen ein, selbst – gestaltend, schreibend, lesend – aktiv zu werden. Neben diesen Aktivierungsmöglichkeiten gibt es hier auch weitere Informationen. Ein Wandtext informiert darüber, dass ein ‚Queerer Beirat' den Kuratorinnen beiseite gestanden habe. Wie viele Personen in diesem Beirat waren und vor allem wer erfahren wir hier jedoch nicht. Die Namen der Beiratsmitglieder sind lediglich auf dem Kolophon im Eingangs-/Ausgangsraum zu finden, allerdings auch hier ohne Angaben dazu, von welchen Initiativen kommend, so dass unklar bleibt, welche Expertisen und Perspektiven sie eingebracht haben. In zwei Sitzungen, so erklärt es der Wandtext, habe der Beirat das Kuratorinnen-Team beraten. Unklar bleibt allerdings nicht nur, wie die Beiratsmitglieder ausgewählt wurden, sondern auch, wie sie die Ausstellung, das Narrativ und kuratorische Entscheidungen mitformen konnten und wie viel ihrer kulturellen und symbolischen Macht die Kuratorinnen bereit waren, zu teilen oder gar abzugeben.

Alle Texte in der Ausstellung sind auf Deutsch und Englisch verfasst, so dass auch ein internationales Publikum einen guten Zugang zur Ausstellung finden kann. Jedem der in ein „Kapitel"

13
Abgesehen davon, dass auf dem Fragenbanner im Eingangsbereich die Frage nach dem queeren Blick aufgeworfen wird, erklärt die Ausstellung die *queerness* in den meisten Fällen mit der von der Heteronorm abweichenden Künstler:innen-Persona.

14
Zu Praktiken und Ansätzen von ‚Queer Curating' siehe: Jonathan Katz und Änne Söll, Editorial „Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating", in: *OnCurating*: Queer Curating, hg. v. dens. und Isabel Hufschmidt, Heft 37, Mai 2018, 2–4 (15.12.2025).

einführenden Texte vorangestellt ist ein kurzer Absatz von etwa drei Sätzen, der den Text in einfacher Sprache zusammenfasst.

In der Nähe des Eingangsbereiches ist über einen kleinen Lautsprecher ein Ausschnitt des Liedes *Prove It On Me Blues* (1928) von Ma Rainey – einer einflussreichen Bluessängerin, die auf einer Lesbenparty verhaftet wurde – im Loop zu hören. Obwohl der Lautsprecher am Eingang platziert ist, schallt das Lied durch die ganze Ausstellung. Die klangliche Dauerschleife birgt das Risiko, unter anderem für Menschen mit einer nicht neurotypischen Reizverarbeitung eine Herausforderung darzustellen.

Wer nicht lange stehen und gehen kann, findet Sitzmöglichkeiten lediglich an zwei Orten in der Ausstellung: Ungefähr in der Mitte des Ausstellungsraumes gibt es einen runden Tisch mit Büchern, wo auf Bänken ohne Rückenlehnen pausiert werden kann. Im Aktionsraum gibt es drei gemütliche Sessel mit Rückenlehne und viele Hocker.

Den richtigen Weg durch die Ausstellung zu finden, der die „Kapitelabfolge" wie intendiert befolgt, ist nicht einfach. Im Eingangsraum ist unklar, in welcher Richtung der Rundgang startet. Besucher:innen, die verstanden haben, dass offenbar die Laufrichtung entgegen dem Uhrzeigersinn ist, müssen, ohne dass es darauf Hinweise gäbe, nach den ersten „Kapiteln" umdenken und begreifen, dass die Ausstellung quasi im Zick-Zack von vorne nach hinten aufgebaut ist. Ein einfacher gedruckter Raumplan oder ein gut platziertes Pfeilsystem wären hier hilfreich. Zusätzlich wäre es gut gewesen, anstatt der lateinischen Bezifferung der „Kapitel", die einen klassistischen Ausschluss erzeugt, die allgemein bekannten arabischen Ziffern zu verwenden. Für Besucher:innen, die nicht im binären Geschlechtersystem weiblich oder männlich positioniert sind, gibt es überdies keine Toiletten.

Der Katalog umfasst zu jedem der sechs „Ausstellungskapitel" neben der Reproduktion der gezeigten Werke und Archivalien kontextualisierende Artikel. Neben dem kuratorischen Team, Anke Kempkes, Isabelle Malz und Isabelle Tondre, sind mit Jonathan D. Katz, Tirza True Latimer und Diana Souhami drei bahnbrechende US-amerikanische Autor:innen und Kurator:innen, die zur queeren, transatlantischen, künstlerischen Moderne arbeiten, vertreten. Jeder der Artikel greift eines der thematischen „Kapitel" der Ausstellung auf und setzt darin gezeigte Kunstwerke in einen größeren sozio-historischen Kontext.

IV. Fazit

Wer ein Anknüpfen an vorangegangene Ausstellung und den auch in der deutschsprachigen Kunstgeschichte immer breiter werdenden Diskurs zu queerer und queerender Kunst und Kunstgeschichte erwartet, oder gar Strategien des queerenden Kuratierens, wird in der Ausstellung nicht fündig werden. Dennoch bietet die Ausstellung *Queere Moderne* eine exzellente Auswahl an Kunstwerken, die qua ihres Bildgegenstandes oder aufgrund der sexuellen oder

geschlechtlichen Orientierung ihrer Schöpfer:innen einen umfangreichen Überblick über die unglaublich große Vielfalt an Stilen und Medien geben, die die europäische und US-amerikanische ‚queere' Moderne prägen. So wird eine bisher selten gezeigte Perspektive auf die Moderne eröffnet, die noch weiterer Ausstellungen und Forschung bedarf.

BRIGITTE BUETTNER AND WILLIAM J. DIEBOLD (EDS.), *MEDIEVAL ART, MODERN POLITICS*, AND PHILIPPE CORDEZ (ED.), *ART MÉDIÉVAL ET MÉDIÉVALISME*

Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2024, 332 pages with 73 color and 64 b/w ill., ISBN 978-3-111436-81-4 (Hardback) / ISBN 978-3-111436-82-1 (Open Access Ebook), and Paris: Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte; Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2024, 451 pages, ISBN 978-3-948466-56-5 (Hardback) / ISBN 978-3-948466-55-8 (Open Access Ebook).

Reviewed by
Annamaria Ducci

Art is a vehicle for aesthetic, ethical and ideological values, if not strictly political ones.[1] Thus, over time, it has been and continues to be used as an effective instrument of soft power: lending a masterpiece can be as valuable as (and perhaps even more valuable than) a summit of foreign ministers, as Francis Haskell taught us many years ago in his essays on Italian art exhibitions.[2] We see this clearly

1
I would like to thank Cosimo Iardella for reviewing the English translation of my text.

2
Francis Haskell, Botticelli, Fascism and Burlington House – the 'Italian Exhibition' of 1930, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 141, 1999, 462–472, then in id., Botticelli in the Service of Fascism, in: *The Ephemeral Museum. Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition*, New Haven, CT 2000, 107–127.

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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today with Emmanuel Macron's ill-advised proposal to loan a masterpiece such as the Bayeux Tapestry to the British Museum for ten months; the many voices that have spoken out against an operation that puts the conservation of a fragile and unique artefact at risk have been deliberately ignored. But what sense does it make today to use a work of art for a political operation? And why a medieval work of art in particular?

The two volumes presented here answer the latter question, focusing, albeit from different angles, on the concept of "medievalism", i.e. the reception, interpretation, re-mediation, appropriation and manipulation of medieval art from a *longue durée* perspective (p. 25). It should be noted first that these two publications are destined to occupy a prominent place among art historiography studies. The thirty essays (including the detailed introductions), written by scholars of various nationalities, contribute to painting a multifaceted picture of the issue, with a broader view of regions and contexts that have been little studied until now. They all are of high scholarly value, addressing case studies, both well-known or completely new, with methodological accuracy and extensive use of bibliographical sources. The overall panorama they provide is extremely interesting for art historiography studies, but also for intellectual history in general. This review has chosen to select only a few contributions, in order to develop a coherent discussion that offers a synopsis of the relationship between medieval art and ideology, retracing this phenomenon in light of various historical contexts.

The contributions provide a detailed and up-to-date overview of studies on a topic first addressed many years ago by the pioneering work of Paul Frankl,[3] and later continued by scholars such as Louis Grodecki,[4] Willibald Sauerländer[5] and Roland Recht,[6] but also by Enrico Castelnuovo and his students.[7] Italy's established tradition of medieval historiography is after all proved by Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri's book, *The Militant Middle Ages*,[8] repeatedly cited by Buettner and Diebold (pp. 4–5, 20).

3
Paul Frankl, *The Gothic. Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries*, Princeton, NJ 1960.

4
Louis Grodecki, *Le moyen âge retrouvé. De Saint Louis a Viollet le Duc*, Paris 1991.

5
I'm thinking in particular of studies from the 1990s, such as the essays collected in Willibald Sauerländer, *Cathedrals and Sculpture*, 2 vols., London 1999–2000.

6
For instance, but not limited to: Roland Recht, *Penser le patrimoine. Mise en scène et mise en ordre de l'art*, Paris 1999; id., *Penser le patrimoine 2*, Paris 2016; id., *Revoir le Moyen Âge. La pensée gothique et son héritage*, Paris 2016.

7
Enrico Castelnuovo and Alessio Monciatti (eds.), *Medioevo/Medioevi. Un secolo di esposizioni d'arte medievale*, Pisa 2008.

8
Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *Medioevo militante. La politica di oggi alle prese con barbari e crociati*, Torino 2011, translated to English as *The Militant Middle Ages. Contemporary*

Significantly, Philippe Cordez opens his Introduction with a statement by the editor of the other volume, William Diebold: "there is no medieval art that is unmediated by modern representations of it – that is, by medievalism" (p. 15). Now, if this retrospective phenomenon is valid for every era, the Middle Ages and medieval arts represent a special case. Firstly, because the Middle Ages itself is a modern historiographical invention, constructed not *per se*, but in contrast (with Antiquity, or Renaissance). Secondly, because there was a specific medieval revival that shaped tastes and styles, based on an artificial idea of the Middle Ages, an imagined Middle Ages that people believed could be revived through, for example, the fashion for historicist restoration. But above all, medievalism can be understood if we read the long Middle Ages as an era in which great absolute powers confronted each other, and therefore as a reservoir from which to draw legitimacy for modern politics. Skilfully selected, copied and altered, medieval art was thus chosen as an aesthetic model with great ideological significance. When the peoples of Europe organised themselves into nations, especially in the nineteenth century, the search for "origins" became imperative in order to claim supremacy over the European continent. Medieval history became the pivot around which narratives of identity were constructed: phenomena of nation-building that found in art and images – besides and perhaps more than in documents and literature – forms of consolidation of pretextual genealogies, as Haskell's unsurpassed volume, *History and Its Images*,[9] has shown us. In this sense, medievalism is inherent in nationalism, and even in the resurgent nationalisms of our (post) globalised world. Two specific phases are particularly evident in this act of recovery: the Carolingian Empire, with the almost mythological exaltation of the figure of Charlemagne, then with the critical phase of the Treaty of Verdun (843), read as the first separation between the Germanic and Frankish worlds; secondly, the (controversial) birth of Gothic art, seen not only as a formal revolution, but as a transition from the imperial world to a more articulated society gravitating now around the cities, thus constituting a model for the young European nations.

Gothic art has long been a subject of contention among different schools of art history, and it is therefore interesting to note that the two volumes presented here originate from German and French research milieus. As is well known, France and Germany have long faced each other from opposite sides of the Rhine, using also the weapons of artistic appropriation, giving rise to intellectual controversies that have been extensively reconstructed.[10] While the young Goethe inaugurated the debate on Gothic art, identifying

Politics between New Barbarians and Modern Crusaders, transl. by Andrew M. Hiltzik, Leiden 2019.

9
Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past*, New Haven, CT/London 1993.

10
See the fundamental book by Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l'art national. Le nationalisme et les origines de l'histoire de l'art en France et en Allemagne 1870–1933*, Paris 2012; also see

Strasbourg Cathedral as the monument symbolising the "German style" (*Von deutscher Baukunst*, 1772), during the nineteenth century, ethnological science introduced the notion of race into historical and artistic reconstructions, giving the discourse a precise ideological turn. The lectures of the Louvre curator, Louis Courajod, which focused on the re-evaluation of Nordic and barbaric art in an anti-classical view, were no exception; it is no coincidence that these ideas would become a reference for the Aryan artistic genealogies proposed since the late nineteenth century by Josef Strzygowski, which in the following three decades would gravitate towards imaginaries of the *Ur-Germanen*, in line with Heinrich Himmler's *Ahnenerbe* ideology.[11] But it was above all with the Franco-Prussian War, and then with the two world wars, that the controversy over Gothic art reached fever pitch, producing a rich harvest of pamphlets printed in France in the aftermath of the bombing of Reims Cathedral in September 1917 (a symbolic episode recently studied by the founder of the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte, Thomas Gaethgens).[12] Émile Mâle's well-known volume, *L'art allemand et l'art français du Moyen Âge* (1917), opened with these words: "Even to speak of German art requires a huge effort", giving rise to a stream of anti-German writings that also included democratic intellectuals such as Henri Focillon (among others, we mention *L'An mil*, written in the mid-1930s but published posthumously in 1952) and Pierre Francastel's *L'histoire de l'art, instrument de la propagande allemande* (1945). After the Great War, Reims Cathedral became a symbol of peace for the Americans, who in fact financed its restoration. Thus, as rightly pointed out by the editors of *Medieval Art, Modern Politics* (p. 25), "heritage sites could be unmoored from national identifications to become international cultural patrimony"; a gradual transformation that was in line with the notion of *patrimoine* that was being developed in those years within the League of Nations, increasingly oriented towards a "universal" dimension, as it was called at the time.[13]

Medieval Art, Modern Politics opens with the statement that "the Middle Ages has functioned as a foundational myth for modernity" (Introduction, p. 3). The volume aims to explore the ideological

the previous Germain Bazin, *Histoire de l'histoire de l'art de Vasari à nos jours*, Paris 1986, 269–295.

11
The long history of these racial genealogies is reconstructed by Éric Michaud, *Les invasions barbares. Une généalogie de l'histoire de l'art*, Paris 2015, translated to English as *The Barbarian Invasions. A Genealogy of the History of Art*, Cambridge, MA 2019. For Strygowski, may I refer to Annamaria Ducci, Strzygowski in Geneva circa 1933. Ideological and Political Use of Artistic Genealogies, in: Irene Baldriga and Marco Ruffini (eds.), *Processing Memory in Art History and Heritage. Politics of the Arts and the Elaboration of Collective Culture*, Florence 2025, 143–154.

12
Thomas Gaethgens, *Reims on Fire. War and Reconciliation between France and Germany*, Los Angeles 2018.

13
Annamaria Ducci, The League of Nations and the Notion of Cultural Heritage. Legacies and New Departures, in: Martin Grandjean and Daniel Laqua (eds.), *Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations. Shaping Cultural and Political Relations*, Geneva 2022, 19–30.

and (geo)political implications of this phenomenon through twelve essays divided into two sections ("The Politics of Building and Rebuilding"; "The Politics of Display and Dissemination"). As is clear from the various contributions, the appropriation of medieval architectural and artistic languages cannot be attributed solely to the conservative orientation of the right wing, but also finds expression in progressive ideas: just think of the secular and civic Middle Ages of Victor Hugo and Viollet-le-Duc; or the revival of collaborative forms of work based on the model of medieval craft guilds in the socialist thinking of William Morris, later revived by the Bauhaus in the brief but intense period of the Weimar Republic; but also, of course, Soviet totalitarianism, with its wide geopolitical orbit and long temporal range. Proof of this can be found in the cases of Gothic churches in Poland, which, after the Second World War, were systematically rebuilt by a government that theoretically should have opposed monuments of the Catholic faith: "Churches and cathedrals were restored to an ideal former state taken from their long history, one that was assumed to be untouched by foreign, especially German, influences" (Marcus van der Meulen, p. 135). But perhaps the most eloquent case is that of the constant neo-imperial revival of Byzantine architecture in Tsarist Russia, then in Soviet Russia and finally in Putin's Russia today; in this case, symptomatically, the revival of such architectural forms is accompanied by that of the early Christian and Byzantine technique *par excellence* – the mosaic –, in an ideological programme that seeks to present the image of Moscow as the heir to the imperial capitals, Rome and Byzantium (Ivan Foletti). On the topic of fascism, an essay describes the policy of protection and reconstruction of some 2,000 medieval castles in Franco's Spain; the Caudillo explicitly saw this operation as the defence of the "spiritual values of the race", as part of a broader programme of glorification of the Middle Ages and its Catholic monarchs (Francisco J. Moreno Martín). But even democracies are not immune to this retrospective temptation. Suffice it to mention the case of the fire at Notre-Dame (2019), a building symbolic of the Catholic community and of Paris as a whole, which, partly as a result of that disastrous event and the following immense reconstruction work, skilfully presented by the media, was supposed to embody the much-coveted but illusory national unity, at least in the intentions of President Macron (Kevin D. Murphy).

If architecture imposes itself on urban spaces and rural landscapes as a sign of power, medieval images possess an intrinsic agency, perceptible in the preciousness of their materials and their allegorical value. In this sense, modernity reflected itself in certain works perceived as having extremely high identity value. In 1938, Hitler removed the so-called *Reichskleinodien* (imperial treasures, tenth–eleventh century) from Vienna and carried them to Nuremberg, considered an imperial city, where they were exhibited as *insignia* of power with which every good Aryan German should identify. In reality, this neo-medieval propaganda had already begun in Germany during the Wilhelmine period, when works such

as the *Bamberg Horseman* (ca. 1225–1237) and *Ute of Naumburg* (ca. 1250) were presented as symbolic images of the German soul. With the Third Reich, these statues became true icons of Nazi ideology, thanks to skilful photographic and cinematographic re-mediation (as in the case of Fritz Hippler's 1940 film, *Der ewige Jude* [The Wandering Jew]), but also through clever exhibition policies: in the aberrant *Entartete Kunst* exhibition (1937), a giant poster of Ute's reassuring and harmonious face served as an aesthetic and ethical counterpoint to the expressionist figures. This exhibition nostalgically opposed the "degeneration" of a modern and cosmopolitan Germany with the lost dream not of Winckelmann's, but of the Teutonic Middle Ages. The 'Verlust der Mitte' had to be countered with the force and evidence of the most realistic, concrete and anthropomorphic art of all, statuary. However, over the centuries, a great work of acclimatisation of the Middle Ages to the modern world was carried out by various media; for example, the very first Christian monuments – the catacombs of Rome – were disseminated by papal power through a skilful orchestration of printed reproductions, first during the Counter-Reformation "from an anti-Protestant perspective, in demonstrating the apostolic origins of the Roman church", and then during the nineteenth century "in response to a crisis in their international secular power that culminated in 1870 with the end of the Papal States" (Chiara Cecalupo, p. 179). Museums also played a decisive role as places par excellence for the construction of "imagined communities":[14] this is the case of the Historical Museum in Bern, conceived at the end of the nineteenth century to forge a still elusive national identity: "destined to house the memories of our history, the products of national industry, and above all the trophies of patriotic glory" (Andrew Sears, p. 266). Temporary exhibitions were also relied upon, whose impact on the public, compared to museums, is less permanent but perhaps more incisive for this very reason. In Liège in 1951, immediately after the Second World War, the major exhibition *Art mosan et arts anciens du Pays de Liège* was staged (Iñigo Salto Santamaría). The choice of the Walloon city, located at the geographical meeting point of the countries that signed the treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) that same year, was part of the post-war exhibition strategy designed to celebrate the reconciliation and 'refounding' of Europe. Once again, medieval art was chosen to represent this ecumenical dimension, in this case the highly refined Rhine-Mosan artistic production, due to cultural exchanges and cross-fertilisation at the heart of that Europe that was now on the verge of becoming a political entity – a historiographical construction that would also pave the way for a successful line of research, culminating twenty years later in the memorable exhibition in Cologne and Brussels, *Rhein und Maas*.

14 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London ³2006.

As explained in the title, the volume promoted by the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (comprising seventeen contributions) combines essays on medieval historiography with others focusing specifically on medieval artworks; however, even the latter are approached from a 'perspective' angle, in which the stylistic-formal aspect melts with those of production, social function and reception. In this broad context, a complex monument such as the tomb of Philip the Bold (1412) is reinterpreted, highlighting how the sophisticated specialisation of roles it required led to a modern affirmation of the figure of the sculptor, a social actor perfectly integrated within the Burgundian court (Andrew Murray). The major theme of 'artistic geography' is addressed in an essay that highlights the pivotal role played by the Duchy of Savoy in the spread of fifteenth-century painting. Reinterpreting the various readings that have been given of that Alpine artistic enclave in different historical periods, the author (Frédéric Elsig) ends up challenging the overly rigid notion of "artistic school". The painter Meister Franckes, active in Hamburg in the early decades of the fifteenth century, enjoyed great fame between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the end of the 1930s, Wilhelm Pinder wrote about him, making him the champion of a perennial and immutable "deutsche Kultur", deliberately ignoring his training in Flanders. However, a fair assessment of the artist had been made in 1929, thanks to the accurate monograph by art historian Bella Martens, a scholar who, not surprisingly, was in contact with the cosmopolitan milieu of the Hamburger Kunsthalle (Iris Grötecke). Two essays address the issue of the visibility of Gothic sculpture. The first focuses on the sculptures of the Portal of Judgement in the north transept of Reims Cathedral (ca. 1225), showing the calculated arrangement of the statues according to the light: the deliberate choice to leave the figure of Christ in a "numinous twilight" ("das numinose Halbdunkel", p. 91) determined a "hierarchy" in the placement of the figures that structures the whole composition, thus making Reims a unique and innovative case compared, for example, to the prototype of Chartres (Lukas Huppertz). Similarly, in the Pillar of the Angels (1215–1230) inside Strasbourg Cathedral, the upper part remains in shadow when viewed from below, a choice dictated by theological reasons (the inexpressibility of the apical figure of Christ); the meaning of this unusual sculptural composition (a Last Judgement unfolding vertically) must be interpreted bearing in mind that the medieval faithful did not gaze at it head-on and fixedly, as we do today, but observed it while moving within the sacred enclosure along precise trajectories (Jacqueline E. Jung). Some art historians grasped that this temporal dimension intrinsic to the sculptural *Bildsystem* of cathedrals would be captured better by the cinema than by photography; starting in the 1930s, Henri Focillon, Erwin Panofsky, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Roberto Longhi and others explored the potential of cinema as a means of documenting and

interpreting architectural and sculptural monuments.[15] However, until the 1950s, it was photography that conveyed a seemingly precise image of Gothic art. In 1927, photographer Walter Hege – who was also a painter – portrayed the statues of the donors of Naumburg Cathedral (including the aforementioned Ute) with a refined chiaroscuro and an "empathetic" sensitivity, reinforced by Wilhelm Pinder's evocative commentary.[16] The volume was a real success and was republished in 1939 in the climate of racist propaganda mentioned above. The photographic campaign conducted by Richard Hamann between 1940 and 1942 on the major medieval monuments of occupied France was part of a colossal documentary operation financed by the Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung (Reich Ministry of Science, Education and Culture), strongly demanded by Hitler: by photographing the cathedrals of France, Germany would in some way be appropriating their 'soul', finally winning the competition of Gothic supremacy. Sixteen photographers, directed by Hamann, took thousands of shots of completely empty cathedrals, pure architecture highlighted by perfect, clear framings: a formalist interpretation (or more precisely *Strukturanalyse*), which revolutionised the way Gothic architecture was observed and studied. Purged of its materiality and history, in those photos Gothic architecture became a concept, refounded according to the Germanic *Weltanschauung*.

The Franco-German ideological conflict was considered to have been overcome, as already mentioned, in the post-war period. This is confirmed by the essay (Philippe Cordez) dedicated to the major exhibition in Aachen in 1965, *Karl der Große. Werk und Wirkung*, strongly supported by the RFD "sous les auspices du Conseil d'Europe", an organisation founded in 1949 to promote the development of European identity. Curated by Wolfgang Braunfels, the exhibition exalted Charlemagne as the tutelary figure of a renewed European unity and harmony, overcoming once and for all the 'misappropriation' of the emperor by National Socialism and instead supporting the work of building the European Community that was underway in those years. Moreover, the figure of Charlemagne embodied the first form of "rebirth of Antiquity" (Panofsky's book, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, was published in 1960), and therefore perfectly matched the 'humanist' emphasis that informed the cultural programmes of the Conseil d'Europe in its early exhibitions (starting with the 1954 Brussels exhibition, *L'Europe humaniste*, centred on Erasmus of Rotterdam).

The volume concludes with an extensive review of German-language studies on medieval art in France (again by Cordez),

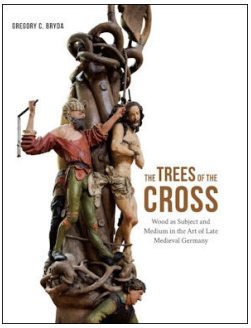
15
Horst Bredekamp, A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft, in: *Critical Inquiry* 29/3, 2003, 418–428; Valentine Robert, Laurent Le Forestier and François Albéra (eds.), *Le film sur l'art. Entre histoire de l'art et documentaire de création*, Rennes 2015.

16
Wilhelm Pinder, with images by Walter Hege, *Der Naumburger Dom und der Meister seiner Bildwerke*, Munich 1925.

starting from the key date of 1933, when the best art historians were forced to leave Germany and Austria and thus to re-found the discipline in England and the United States. As in a cross-section, we read in this long essay not only about the development of art historical research, but also about the constant attraction of German art historians to the medieval monuments of France. A fatal attraction inseparable from historical events, even the most dramatic ones. As Willibald Sauerländer confessed, "La sympathie pour la France commença dès 1945 comme prisonnier de guerre et devait accompagner toute ma vie" (p. 344).

GREGORY C. BRYDA, *THE TREES OF THE CROSS. WOOD AS SUBJECT AND MEDIUM IN THE ART OF LATE MEDIEVAL GERMANY*

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2023, 224 Seiten mit 124 Farb- und 34 s/w-Abb., ISBN 978-0-300-26765-5 (Hardback).



Rezensiert von
Britta Dümpelmann

In seiner bei Yale University Press erschienenen Monografie *The Trees of the Cross. Wood as Subject and Medium in the Art of Late Medieval Germany* geht Gregory C. Bryda den vielschichtigen Bedeutungsebenen von Holz und Pflanzen im Kontext spätmittelalterlicher Kunst im deutschsprachigen Raum nach. Bryda baut seine Studie auf einer breit gefächerten Analyse ethnografischen Materials auf, im Zuge derer er wissenschaftsgeschichtliche, medizinische und literarische Quellen auswertet und diese sowohl mit wenig erforschten Bildwerken verbindet als auch, im Zuge zweier Fallstudien, mit ausgewählten Werken Mathis Neithart Gotharts (genannt „Grünewald“) und Tilman Riemenschneiders. Damit widmet der Autor sich einem bisher wenig(er) erforschten Gebiet, das gerade in den letzten Jahren an Aktualität gewonnen hat: so haben sich einige wissenschaftliche Publikationen und/oder Tagungen in interdisziplinärer, kunst- und kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive dem weiten Feld des Vegetabilen in Relation zur Produktion und Rezeption menschlicher Artefakte gewidmet. Daniela Bohde und Astrid Zenkert etwa brachten kürzlich den Sammelband *Der Wald in der Frühen Neuzeit zwischen Erfahrung und Erfindung. Naturästhetik*

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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und Naturnutzung in interdisziplinärer Perspektive (Paderborn 2023) heraus; das Kunsthistorische Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (KHI) und die Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz veranstalteten vom 04.–08.11.2024 in Berlin die interdisziplinäre Tagung *Ecological Entanglements across Collections – Plant Lives and Beyond*, und Vanessa-Nadien Sternath, Silvie Lang und Christine Riess gaben 2025 den im Open Access publizierten Band *Menschen-Pflanzen-Netzwerke. Vegetabile agency in der Klimakatastrophe* heraus.[1] Zum einen ist die langjährige Marginalisierung des Themenfeldes einer negativen Konnotation des Materials Holz und im weiteren Sinne des Motivs „Deutscher Wald" geschuldet, die im Zuge nationalsozialistisch eingefärbter Forschungen entsprechende politische Vereinnahmungen erfahren haben. Zum anderen liegt dies aber auch, wie der Autor ins Feld führt, an einer bewussten Ausklammerung folkloristischer Praktiken früherer Studien zur deutschen Holzskulptur des späten Mittelalters, die als „uncomfortably fugitive material" empfunden wurden (S. 12).[2] Mit historischer – und geografischer – Distanz nimmt Gregory C. Bryda sich somit ein in zweifacher Hinsicht anspruchsvolles Thema vor, das er, gerahmt von einer Einleitung und einem Epilog, in vier Kapitel unterteilt: *The Vegetable Saint* (1), *The Spiritual Maypole* (2), *Grünewald's Greenery in Spring and Summer* (3), sowie *The Spiritual Vintage* (4). Während Kapitel eins mit einer hagiografischen Darstellung des Kreuzes und dessen Konnotation als Lebensbaum und Kapitel zwei mit einer Darlegung der Frühlingsbräuche vor allem um den Maibaum zwei allgemeinere Themenfelder eröffnen, fokussieren Kapitel drei mit Mathis Neithart Gotharts (genannt „Grünewald") *Isenheimer Altar* in Colmar und Kapitel vier mit Tilman Riemenschneiders *Heilig-Blut-Altar* in Rothenburg ob der Tauber auf einzelne Künstler und deren Werke. Wenngleich der Autor wiederholt die Materialität des Holzes als künstlerischen Werkstoff ins Feld führt, ist sein Zugang methodisch stark von einer kulturwissenschaftlichen Perspektive geleitet, die primär nach den Bedeutungen des Materials und der Symbolik des Kreuzes in seinen religiösen und sozialen Verflechtungen fragt, wodurch technische und materialästhetische Aspekte bisweilen in den Hintergrund rücken.

Ausgehend von zwei wundertätigen, im frühen 14. Jahrhundert entstandenen Kruzifixen (*Lage-Kruzifix*, frühes 14. Jahrhundert, Osnabrück, St. Johannes; und *Kranenburg-Kruzifix*, frühes 14. Jahrhundert, Kranenburg, St. Peter und Paul), untersucht Bryda in Kapitel eins die Zusammenhänge zwischen dem wahren Kreuz und dessen Auffindungslegende gegenüber den auf wundersame Weise entstandenen Pendants. Umfassende Bildprogramme zur

1
Vanessa-Nadine Sternath, Silvie Lang und Christine Riess (Hg.), *Menschen-Pflanzen-Netzwerke. Vegetabile agency in der Klimakatastrophe*, Bielefeld 2025 (11.11.2025).

2
Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven, CT 1980, 31, zitiert in: Gregory C. Bryda, *The Trees of the Cross. Wood as Subject and Medium in the Art of Late Medieval Germany*, New Haven, CT 2023, 12.

Kreuzauffindungslegende aus dem späteren 15. Jahrhundert (etwa in der Heiligkreuzkapelle Duttenberg, um 1485, oder im Chor der Heiligkreuzkirche in Wiesendangen, vor 1498) hätten dazu gedient, das Holz des Kreuzes zum Prototyp für geschnitzte hölzerne Retabel per se zu stilisieren (S. 26–33). Wie der Autor in seiner Studie herausarbeitet, bestand die Herausforderung dieser zwischen Kunstwerk und Reliquie anzusiedelnden Objekte darin, dass sie zwar eine über die Ebene der Repräsentation hinausgehende Wirkmacht entfalten sollten, dem wahren Kreuz jedoch nicht zu ähnlich werden durften (S. 33–39).[3] Weiterhin hebt Bryda die Popularität von Wurzel-Jesse-Darstellungen hervor, die die Abstammung Christi von Maria als Virga vor Augen führen. Zudem stellt der Autor eine enge Verbindung zwischen den hölzernen Bildwerken in den Kirchen und der umgebenden Landschaft mit den dort ebenfalls verehrten Bäumen her (S. 42–51).

Im zweiten Kapitel widmet sich Bryda den profanen Frühlingsbräuchen rund um den Maibaum, denen geistliche Autoritäten aufgrund der Gefahr einer Gleichsetzung des Maibaums mit dem Kreuz und einer daraus resultierenden Pervertierung der Kreuzigung kritisch gegenüberstanden, während Landesherren ihre Wälder von der Plünderung bedroht sahen. Als frühesten Beleg für die Errichtung eines Maibaums führt Bryda die *Libri VIII miraculorum* des Cesarius von Heisterbach (ca. 1180–1240) an, worin Heisterbach den umtanzten Maibaum mit dem Goldenen Kalb vergleicht und die Errichtung eines Maibaums in Aachen im Jahre 1224 entsprechend verurteilt (S. 58–59). AutorInnen wie der Dominikanermönch Heinrich Seuse (1295–1366) domestizierten die folkloristischen Bräuche später im Sinne der Kirche, indem sie diese in die sogenannte „Maiandacht" integrierten. Seuse stellte in seinen Schriften nicht nur eine Analogie zwischen Kreuz und Maibaum her, sondern deutete den Maibaum ferner zum Rosenbaum aus, der in einer engen Verbindung aus Kunst und Natur Gläubigen in der mystischen Andacht den Weg zu Gott weisen sollte (S. 65–69). Die darin angelegte Verklammerung der Maibaum-Darstellung mit dem Rosenbaum habe in der Folge einige bildliche Darstellungen angeregt (S. 82–87).[4] Der Franziskanermönch Stephan Fridolin (1430–1498) schließlich verknüpfte die Maifeierlichkeiten mit Andachtsübungen der Klarissinnen in Nürnberg, im Rahmen derer er die Arma Christi als Schmuck des Maibaums hervorhebt (S. 69–75). Hieraus sei, nicht zuletzt in Anlehnung an die Geißelsäule, die Ikonografie einiger deutscher Pranger hervorgegangen (S. 75–82).

In Kapitel drei stehen das Œuvre Mathis Neithart Gotharts (genannt „Grünewald") und der Antoniterorden in Isenheim im

[3] Womit die Grenze zur „exzessiven Mimesis" („excessive mimesis") wie Bryda sie unter Bezugnahme auf Louis Marin und Bernhard Siegert nennt, nicht überschritten werden durfte; vgl. Bryda, The Trees of the Cross, 38.

[4] Vgl. etwa den Heggbacher Altar, ca. 1510, Ulm, Stadtmuseum; oder auch ein kolorierter Holzschnitt, der Heinrich Seuse selbst darstellt; ca. 1475–1480, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett; vgl. Bryda, The Trees of the Cross, 83–84, Abb. 2.24, 2.26 und 2.27.

Fokus. Die von „Grünewald" für das Hochaltarretabel des Ordens gemalten Tafeln reflektierten die Gründungsgeschichte und dienten als Programmbild des Ordens, der sich der Krankenpflege und insbesondere der Heilung des Antoniusfeuers (Mutterkornvergiftung) verschrieben habe. Bryda beruft sich auf Joachim von Sandrarts *Teutsche Akademie* von 1675, um die posthume, sich in Folge etablierende Benennung Mathis Gothart Neitharts als „Grünewald" in Verbindung mit dessen Vorliebe für genaue Naturbeobachtung in botanische(n) Darstellungen zu bringen, was ihn für diesen Auftrag prädestiniert habe (S. 95). Bryda beobachtet an den in Kapitel eins behandelten Kruzifixen aus Köln und Lage eine Verschmelzung des Christuskörpers mit dem Kreuz, die er unter anderem an Blutspuren am scheinbar selbst blutenden Kreuzesholz festmacht. In der Kreuzigungsdarstellung des Isenheimer Altars kulminiere diese metaphorische Verbindung von Christuskörper und Kreuzholz, da das grünlich-fleckige Inkarnat des Gekreuzigten Baumrinde evoziere, während die gleichsam organisch aus dem Haupt Christi wachsende Dornenkrone den Gekreuzigten einem Baum zusätzlich angleiche (S. 96). „Grünewald" setze das aus dem Kreuzholz rinnende Harz mit dem aus dem Christuskörper austretenden Blut in eins, um so die heilende Wirkung beider Stoffe zu betonen. Bryda bezieht sich dabei zum einen auf Rezepturen der Antoniter, die Harze und Terpentin unter anderem für die Heilung des Antoniusfeuers verwendeten, zum anderen auch auf die übliche Verwendung von Harzen und Terpentin im Zuge der Farbherstellung und des Malprozesses seit dem frühen 15. Jahrhundert (S. 100–103). Im nachfolgenden Abschnitt zu den farbreduzierten Außenseiten des Frankfurter *Heller-Altars* führt Bryda den durchscheinenden ockerfarbenen Grund der Tafeln als Argument dafür an, dass Mathis Gothart Neithart auf diese Weise die Plastizität des Holzes habe ausstellen wollen – indem der Bildträger seine faktische Materialität selbst exponiere und die grau-in-grau gemalten Heiligenfiguren ungefasste Lindenholzskulpturen evozierten (S. 114–129, bes. S. 124–129).

Sein letztes, viertes Kapitel widmet Bryda den eucharistischen Symbolen des Weinstocks und der Weinranke, die in Tilman Riemenschneiders *Heilig-Blut-Altar* in der Rothenburger Jakobskirche semantisch verdichtet wurden. In dem ebenfalls nicht polychromierten Hochaltarretabel in Lorch am Rhein (ca. 1450) und im farbig gefassten Hochaltarretabel der Wallfahrtskirche Mariä Krönung in Lautenbach im Renchtal (1488) seien die dort dargestellten Weinranken und Trauben als statische eucharistische Symbole aufzufassen. In Rothenburg jedoch seien die holzsichtigen Ranken von der Retabelarchitektur geschieden, was ihnen erlaube, zwischen Kunst und Natur zu oszillieren, um so ihre Medialität und Materialität auszustellen (S. 135).[5] Die Fallstudie Rothenburg bettet Bryda in eine breite Analyse von Bild- und Textquellen des 12. bis 16. Jahr-

[5] Im Original: „the wooden vines dance between art and nature, or what man has formed and what continues to form itself" (Bryda, The Trees of the Cross, 135).

hunderts ein (darunter Hildegard von Bingens *Physica*, ca. 1150–1160; Bonaventuras *Der Baum des Lebens*, ca. 1260; *Das Stundenbuch der Katharina von Kleve*, ca. 1440, oder auch Stephan Fridolins *Der geistliche Herbst*, ca. 1530), die er in den Kontext einer zunehmenden kulturellen wie ökonomischen Bedeutung des Weinbaus im ausgehenden Mittelalter stellt (S. 136–144). Metaphern wie Christus in der Kelter, in der das Kreuz Christi mit der Weinpresse verglichen wird (S. 148–150), Christus als Traubenkern, der in Maria eingepflanzt wurde (S. 150), die Gleichsetzung der Tränen Christi mit den Tränen des Weinstocks wie auch der Traube (S. 146–147), oder auch Christus als Fass (S. 150–153) verdichten so das Untersuchungsfeld. Im Laufe seiner breiten Quellenlektüre bindet Bryda seine Beobachtungen an das Heiligblutretabel zurück, etwa um das komplexe Spiel der Weinranken als natürlicher und der Retabelornamentik als künstlicher Architektur mit Karl Oettingers Interpretation der Rippenfigurationen gotischer Sakralarchitektur als Himmelsgarten zu fassen.[6] Im letzten Abschnitt zu Riemenschneiders „woodiness" gibt Bryda einen kurzen Forschungsüberblick zur farbreduzierten Holzskulptur, um darauf aufbauend die enge materialästhetische wie semantische Verbindung von darstellendem Holz und dargestelltem Kreuz und Wein besonders in Rothenburg, aber auch in Creglingen herauszuarbeiten (S. 157–161).

In seinem Epilog richtet Bryda den Blick schließlich auf die Reformationszeit, im Zuge derer außerbiblische Legendenbildungen um das Kreuz, Maiandachten, oder der Glaube an wundertätige, vegetabil anmutende Bildwerke aus einer Glaubenspraxis verbannt wurden, die Realpräsenz ebenso ablehnte wie Heiligenkult (S. 163–171).

Brydas beeindruckende Monografie schlägt einen auf diese Weise bisher nicht verfolgten Perspektivwechsel mit neuen Zugangs- und Betrachtungsweisen zur nordalpinen Holzskulptur vor, die besonders in den ersten beiden Kapiteln entlegenere, in der kunsthistorischen Forschung bisher nicht im Zentrum stehende Werke in den Blick rückt.

Das kulturwissenschaftlich breit angelegte Forschungsinteresse sowie das zu großen Teilen populärkulturelle Text- wie Bildmaterial führt die Reichhaltigkeit des Themas vor Augen, wirft zugleich aber auch Fragen nach der Abgrenzung des Forschungsgegenstandes auf: Ein Anspruch auf „Vollständigkeit" kann insofern per se kaum beansprucht werden (nicht ohne Grund hatte Michael Baxandall das Material als „uncomfortably fugitive" bezeichnet).[7]

6
Karl Oettinger, *Laube, Garten und Wald. Zu einer Theorie der süddeutschen Sakralkunst 1470–1520*, München 1962; Bryda, The Trees of the Cross, 145.

7
Allein die Legendenbildung zum tausendjährigen Hildesheimer Rosenstock und zur Klostergründung etwa hätte Stoff für ein weiteres Kapitel geliefert (vgl. Karl Bernhard Kruse, *Der Hildesheimer Mariendom. Eine kurze Baugeschichte (um 815 bis 2014)*, Regensburg 2017, darin: Die *Fundatio ecclesiae Hildensemensis* – neu übersetzt von Stefan Petersen, Anhang, 108–120), wie auch die in Kapitel zwei in Verbindung mit dem Maibaum diskutierte Ikonografie der Rose etwas kurz zu kommen scheint.

Auch wirkt die quantitativ hohe Gewichtung des breit diskutierten Quellenmaterials zur Religions- und Kulturgeschichte in ihrer dichten Reihung bisweilen ermüdend, vor allem wenn dadurch die eigentlich im Zentrum stehenden Werke in ihrer materiellen und technischen Verfasstheit in den Hintergrund rücken.

Eine in der Tat sehr anregende Zuspitzung der Thesen Brydas vollzieht sich im dritten Kapitel zu „Grünewald", in dem die heilende wie gleichermaßen im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes bildgebende Bedeutung von Blut und Farbe, Harz und Terpentin in Relation zu Baum, Kreuz, und Christuskörper gestellt werden. Allerdings wirkt so manche These gegenüber einer wenig tiefgehenden Auseinandersetzung sowohl mit der bestehenden Forschungsliteratur wie auch den analysierten Werken vergleichsweise vorschnell aufgestellt: Hierzu zählt meines Erachtens sowohl die semantische Ausdeutung des seit Joachim von Sandrart etablierten, doch mindestens umstrittenen Namens „Grünewald" wie auch die Auseinandersetzung mit den äußeren Flügelseiten des Frankfurter Heller-Altars.[8] Die hier angeblich ins Werk gesetzten Allusionen auf Lindenholskulptur wurden bereits von Hanns Hubach und Michaela Krieger aufgrund der überaus hohen Verlebendigung der dargestellten Figuren bei gleichzeitiger Verfremdung durch die Grisaille-Malerei überzeugend als „gemaltes Statement [...] zugunsten seiner Kunst [=der Malerei]" und als „genialste künstlerische Schöpfung", an der „nichts [...] das [ist], was es vorgibt zu sein", gedeutet.[9]

Auch die enge Lesart des Weins in Relation zur holzsichtigen Skulptur, eingebettet in ein breites Spektrum zeitgenössischer Quellen zum Thema Wein, überzeugt zunächst, wirft jedoch abermals einige Fragen auf: So wäre der von Bryda selbst angesprochene Dualismus Kunst-Natur, den seines Erachtens das Rothenburger Retabel gegenüber anderen Werken, die Wein(-ranken) darstellten, auszeichne, tatsächlich in einem weiteren Kontext zu diskutieren, als der Autor dies in seiner Studie tut.[10] Besonders überrascht, dass Bryda zum Schluss seines Buches in Widerspruch zu sich selbst gerät: So hatte er in seinem 2019 publizierten Text *Der mittelfränkische Heilig-Blut-Altar in Rothenburg als mittelrheinische*

8
Bryda nennt als einzige Referenz Karl Arndt, Der historische ‚Grünewald'. Anmerkungen zum Forschungsstand, in: Hartmut Boockmann (Hg.), *Kirche und Gesellschaft im Heiligen Römischen Reich des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 1994, 116–147 (Bryda, The Trees of the Cross, 188, Anm. 13); vgl. dagegen die ausführliche Diskussion dieser umstrittenen Frage gegenüber der Quellenlage bei Hanns Hubach, Der heilige Abt und Grünewald. Chronologie eines Mißverständnisses, in: Valentina Torri (Hg.), *Der heilige Abt. Eine spätgotische Holzskulptur im Liebighaus*, Berlin 2001, 127–144.

9
Hubach, Der heilige Abt, 142, und Michaela Krieger, Grünewald und die Kunst der Grisaille, in: *Grünewald und seine Zeit* (Ausst.-Kat. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle), hg. von der Staatlichen Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe 2007, 58–67, hier 65.

10
Oettingers Lesart gotischer Sakralarchitektur als himmlische Laube wird zwar angesprochen, doch bleibt dagegen beispielsweise Hans Körners Idee der „gestörten Form" in der Architektur des späten Mittelalters gänzlich außen vor: Hans Körner, Die ‚gestörte Form' in der Architektur des späten Mittelalters, in: Christoph Andreas, Maraike Bückling und Roland Dorn (Hg.), *Festschrift für Hartmut Biermann*, Weinheim 1990, 65–80.

Goldschmiedekunst noch die „glänzende Oberfläche des Holzes, die mit Bronze vergleichbar ist" zugunsten seiner dort verhandelten These betont.[11] Dagegen wird jetzt die „woodiness", also das blanke Holz, als Argument dafür herauspräpariert, dass Riemenschneider (und der Schreiner Erhart Harschner, dessen Rolle Bryda wiederholt hervorhebt) die Materialität des dargestellten Weins betonen wollte.[12]

Trotz des an sich schlüssigen Perspektivwechsels, den Bryda in seiner Studie vorschlägt, hat die Durchführung demnach gewisse Schwächen, wozu nicht zuletzt auch das ungewöhnliche Fehlen einer Bibliografie zählt. Die Fußnoten halten zwar entsprechende Nachweise bereit, doch müssen sich nicht ins Thema involvierte Lesende hier in einem System ohne jegliche Rückverweise mühsam selbst rekonstruieren, welcher Titel sich beispielsweise hinter „Baert, *Heritage of Holy Wood*" oder „Hamburger" (hier ohne Jahreszahl oder Stichwort; S. 188, Anm. 121) verbirgt. Auch fallen wiederholte Flüchtigkeitsfehler wie unsauberes Bibliografieren – falsch geschriebene AutorInnennamen, unvollständig angegebene Zeitschriftentitel und ähnliches – sowie Verwechslungen von Bildunterschriften auf (vgl. S. 134, Fig. 4.4 und 4.5).

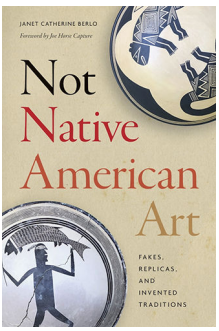
Brydas Studie bringt eine Fülle an anschlussfähigem Text- und Bildmaterial in Verbindung mit zahlreichen anregenden Thesen in den Forschungsdiskurs ein – eine fundiertere Absicherung der vorgeschlagenen Thesen wäre dabei jedoch ebenso wünschenswert wie eine engere Verschränkung mit der materialästhetischen Substanz der Werke.

11
Gregory C. Bryda, Der mittelfränkische Heilig-Blut-Altar in Rothenburg als mittelrheinische Goldschmiedekunst, in: Martin Büchsel, Hilja Droste und Berit Wagner (Hg.), *Kunsttransfer und Formgenese in der Kunst am Mittelrhein 1400–1500*, Berlin 2019, 221–236, hier 235–236.

12
Hinzu kommt, dass die herangezogene Literatur, auf die Bryda sich in seiner o. g. Studie stützt (Holger Simon, Das Hochaltarretabel aus Lorch am Rhein. Grundlegende Überlegungen zum neuzeitlichen Bildbegriff, in: Claudia Euskirchen, Stephan Hoppe und Norbert Nussbaum (Hg.), *Wege zur Renaissance. Beobachtungen zu den Anfängen neuzeitlicher Kunstauffassung im Rheinland und den Nachbargebieten um 1500*, Köln 2003, 365–389, hier 369; und Georg Habenicht, *Die ungefaßten Altarwerke des ausgehenden Mittelalters und der Dürerzeit*, Diss., Universität Göttingen, 1999, 151–152), von der bronzenen Wirkung des Kruzifixes in St. Lorenz von Veit Stoß handelt, nicht aber von Riemenschneiders Heiligblutretabel. Zur unterschiedlichen Fassungstechnik bei Veit Stoß gegenüber Riemenschneider vgl. Britta Dümpelmann, *Veit Stoß und das Krakauer Marienretabel. Mediale Zugänge, mediale Perspektiven*, Zürich 2012, 187 und 191.

JANET CATHERINE BERLO, *NOT NATIVE AMERICAN ART. FAKES, REPLICAS, AND INVENTED TRADITIONS*

Washington: University of Washington Press 2023, 360 pages with 42 color and 22 b/w ill., ISBN 978-0-29575-136-8 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
Felipe Rojas

Anyone interested in fakes or the history of Native American art will benefit from reading this book. It displays a combination of learning and openness to multiple viewpoints – including those held by a single person at different times – that is often lacking in discussions of fakes and related phenomena. As its subtitle suggests, the book's scope is wide. Art historian Janet Berlo deals with forgeries, pastiches, knockoffs, and invented traditions, and also with reenactments, replicas, restorations, and revivals. In ranging over the last two hundred years of (re)productions of Native American art, she tackles questions about the stability of identity and artisanal innovation, copyrights and the shifting location of aesthetic and historical authority, how craft knowledge is transmitted from one body to another, and how humans manage to insert themselves and others into the things they make. Through detailed case studies the author shows that fakes can be mindbogglingly complicated cultural products, and that judgements regarding the authenticity of what purports to be Native American art are not always constant or clear-cut.

Berlo does not peddle in binaries: she probes blurrings and complexities. Her assessments are sensitive to the historical and

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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cultural specifics in which such things as carved pipes, beaded moccasins, and ceremonial dances have been reproduced and reperformed, as well as to the circumstances in which those artifacts and practices have been deemed authentic (or not) by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The adjudication of authenticity is relational, not only with respect to a purported original, but also within the multiple – often conflicting – regimes of authenticity of which every cultural product is part. As Berlo states at the beginning of her book, even "within Native North American artistic systems, there is no single definition of an original, a copy, or a replica" (p. 14). Performances of Native American rituals that less than a century ago were extolled as paradigms of authenticity would now incite embarrassment, laughter, or worse. In 1947, a *New York Herald Tribune* dance critic declared that the dances of Reginald Laubin, a White man and mostly self-taught expert on Native American matters, gave substance to "the Indian's character, imagination, wisdom, dreams and hopes". Berlo is candid in disclosing that her own initial lack of sympathy for Laubin was tempered after exploring the "complex saga" in which he and his wife gained choreographic competence, were adopted by eminent Sioux elders, and participated in the development of world dance, even if they also lucratively managed to "play Indian" around the world, reinforcing paternalistic and other tropes about Native Americans (pp. 68–74).

From the outset, Berlo provides insight into the ever-changing relationships between Native and non-Native makers, collectors, dealers, and general enthusiasts. She asserts that "[n]either culture nor artists have walls around them" (p. 5). This is an understatement. Even when formidable walls are erected, either to bury Indigenous cultures or to protect them, cracks are inevitable. Through those cracks new forms of making and knowing emerge – not to mention new historical artifacts. For instance, Berlo traces how paragons of Mesoamerican art collecting – Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Barnes Bliss, of Dumbarton Oaks fame, along with their dealer Earl Stendahl – were involved also in the trade of Native American pastiches (pp. 130–137). In the mid-twentieth century, a few exquisite Chumash artifacts were put up for sale by Stendahl and eventually bought by the Blisses. One of the pieces was made of an ancient Chumash cloud-blower intricately enhanced with ancient seashell and pearl inserts to appeal to potential buyers. The separate components were mostly or entirely old, but their combination was new. Whatever that thing is, it is both spectacular, and neither totally Chumash nor totally not-Chumash. (One hopes that the Getty Research Institute's ongoing investigations into the Stendhal archives reveals more of that dealer's role in the production and distribution of questionable Native American and Mesoamerican artifacts, and more generally of the vicious loops that are often generated by eager buyers, resourceful dealers, and the craftspeople in their employ.)

Sustained engagement with individual artifacts allows Berlo to probe the paradoxes that result when copies are made, manipulated,

assessed, and sold in different environments than their models. Store-owners marketing replicas of Native American objects in the American Southwest feel the pressure to issue certificates of authenticity for their most expensive reproductions. Those certificates attest to the impeccable pedigree of both artifacts and artists, catering to whatever shifting criteria of authenticity appeases buyers. Indigenous histories of making are distorted or outright invented to satisfy the market. Those interested in artisanal production of Indigenous artifacts elsewhere in the Americas will know of parallels. In Oaxaca I have visited workshops of *alebrijes* – statuettes of animal-hybrids decorated in hypnotic polychrome patterns. Zapotec craftspeople claim that the craft is Zapotec and of pre-Columbian antiquity and encourage buyers to look up their birthdates in allegedly ancient Zapotec "calendrical books" so as to identify personal "spirit-animal" hybrids. The shtick extols local traditions, even if it is demonstrable that the origin of *alebrijes* dates to the 1930s, when Pedro Linares, a man from distant Mexico City, first saw the creatures during a fever induced by peritonitis. The little zoomorphs frantically called to the delirious Linares in no known language: "alebrijes, alebrijes!"

One distinct virtue of Berlo's book is the close attention she pays to people who make fakes and how they acquire the knowledge to do so. Berlo is empathetic to the makers of non-originals, without being condescending or overlooking the potential damage caused by non-Natives engaged in the (re)production of Native American artifacts and practices. She is acquainted with many non-Native craftspeople and interested in understanding and conveying their experiences and perspectives, rather than in summarily denouncing this or that piece as inauthentic. Many readers will value her insistence on the skills and experiences of those artists and artisans, and also her accounts of the transmission of embodied knowledge – even when that knowledge is now incorporated into bodies that are not genetically Indigenous. The cases of non-Native craftspeople who have learned by serving as apprentices to Native masters incite challenging questions about the location of Indigenous culture and the various means available to archaeologists and historians of accessing past practices. Some of those non-Native apprentices are now in the paradoxical position of being possessors of skills that very few others have. (Similar dynamics are attested in the case of Indigenous languages, when some last speakers happen to be non-Native.)

Matters quickly become jarring: What if a virtuoso artist, though uniquely skilled, is a man practicing a craft that, according to Indigenous traditions, should be the domain of women? A French-speaking Belgian man is among the best quill-workers alive today. In Lakota tradition, quill-working is meant to be a woman's art (pp. 109–113). Chris Ravenshead's Lakota wife gently mocks him saying that he speaks Lakota like an old lady. Ravenshead retorts: "Well, that's where I learned it", in reference to both the language and the craft. Some of his work sells for tens of thousands of dollars

and has been deceitfully marketed (not by Ravenshead) as originals. What has been made once can be made again. But even if Ravenshead knows how to prepare porcupine quills using Native dying techniques, he cannot replicate the whole cultural system that once gave quill-working meaning among the Lakota. Nor does he want to. At the core of these inconcinnities is the fact that whatever value has been assigned to an artifact – whether it is financial, social, aesthetic, or spiritual – that value is not susceptible to automatic replication even if the artifact in question is exactly replicated.

Related problems ensue when an artifact in one cultural context (for example, an Indigenous religious ceremony) is made to serve as a holder of value in another (for example, an art museum). Is Navajo Ritual sand painting "art" (pp. 174–188)? The question barely makes sense when one considers that the original power of the performance is in the act, not in its material byproduct. All sand painting is, according to Navajo traditions, a replica of a divine original (which was itself ephemeral). Sand paintings are thus *only and always* transient copies. For them to be displayed as paintings in a museum, they need not only to be fixed and lasting, but also somehow turned into originals. At play are weighty financial concerns, but also precipices for those wanting to traverse rich and distant aesthetic and cosmological systems. Arguably few of the problems involving the replication of valuable objects are new, much less exclusively "western". Post-enlightenment certainties about the nature of art are insufficient when dealing with Native American traditions. As Berlo makes clear, ideas that have been productive in the history of western art and anthropology have been pondered independently by Native American people. Walter Benjamin's notion of aura is insightful, but it may not be enough to answer the question: How many times can one replicate (the power of) visionary objects? According to Crow tradition, in the case of a medicine object, you can do so *only* four times (p. 101). The specificity of that number suggests epistemological complexities that can only be distorted by facile comparison with western discourses.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, advances in reprographic technologies and the intensification of global commerce have had a direct impact on the making of reproductions, often far beyond the places where the corresponding originals were first made. As Berlo notes: "What has been reproduced and seen cannot be unseen" (p. 183). She analyzes the case of Mimbres-style pottery made *not* in the American Southwest, but rather in San Juan de Oriente, Nicaragua and traces the origin of those copies to a catalogue of Mimbres pottery introduced to existing communities of skilled potters (pp. 163–168). The knockoffs are not identical to the Mimbres originals (their walls, for instance, are less fine than those of their northern analogues), even if they echo those originals in their stark black-and-white motifs and in the composition of ornament and images. As often happens among talented copiers (for example, Brígido Lara or Eric Hebborn) and even less talented ones (for example, Han Van Meegeren and Konrad Kujau), some of the

individuals responsible for first producing the Mimbres copies in Nicaragua are now acknowledged as collectible in their own right and even sign their reproductions.

Berlo does not limit herself to artifacts. She also attends to various forms of cultural cross-dressing (Chapter 2). Her examples range from the "Indian" dances of American Boy Scouts to those of contemporary African American men who proudly "mask Indian" during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Many of the incidents may incite cringing, but Berlo again notes that quick judgements are folly. Some of these performances involve cultural complexities that can only be understood by attending to local details, sometimes far beyond the American continent. What may seem risible upon first inspection – for instance, German "Indianthusiasts" smoking peace pipes and reciting the fictive genealogies of their imagined tribes – may be responses to social and political inequalities that have nothing to do with the context in which peace pipes were originally smoked and lines of Indian ancestors solemnly recited. Berlo quotes scholar Yolanda Broyles-González, whose own work with a Cheyenne Indian club in Germany led her to conclude that the Native American playacting of working-class Allemansch-speaking Germans was "the drama of one marginalized people giving expression to that marginalization by re-enacting the experience of another marginalized and subordinate people" (p. 79). Those who would mock the chief of the Heidelberg "Oglala" would do well to remember that there have been moments of political collaboration between German "Indianthusiasts" and Native Americans (pp. 78–79). The American Indian Movement opened an office in West Berlin in 1975 precisely because they recognized the potential for expanded recognition in such international partnerships.

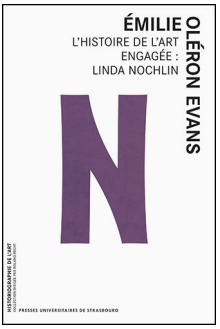
Rarely does Berlo express absolute certainty in her own expertise or in the authenticity or lack of authenticity of an ambiguous artifact. As anyone interested in fakes will probably realize, in the long run, absolute claims tend to be either perilous or banal. Sometimes, Berlo makes striking original propositions. In Chapter 5, she asserts that a very unusual set of drawings – purportedly a "Hidatsa" ledger book – is the work of the innovative Mexican art historian and caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957). One of the drawings shows a standing Indian couple sharing a blanket. Through a sort of "x-ray vision", the viewer is allowed to see what happens behind the blanket: the hand of a young woman (on the left) strokes the erect penis of her companion (on the right). According to Berlo, Covarrubias drew these in jest – they are examples of "transgressive modernity" (p. 146). This and much else in the Codex Covarrubias, as Berlo calls the object, is eccentric when compared to other Plains Indians ledger art. Whether or not she is right about the authorship of the drawings, her analysis is thought-provoking. Caricature is an important yet understudied topic in discussions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century replication and forgery. It requires an observer to distill and emphasize key stylistic traits,

even if only to make distorting comments or to reveal interior characteristics that are somehow hidden.

Not Native American Art is meticulously researched and beautifully illustrated. Its excellent photographs exemplify the care with which Berlo approaches spurious and suspect artifacts and practices. The book is a defense of connoisseurship (p. 129), of an undogmatic sort of expertise that extends beyond the canon, acknowledging the wisdom of makers. In interacting with fakes, Berlo evidently enjoys the intense "sensuous" pleasures that animate many of the craftspeople who produce them. In an era preoccupied with public health, readers should know that these pleasures are contagious.

ÉMILIE OLÉRON EVANS, *L'HISTOIRE DE L'ART ENGAGÉE. LINDA NOCHLIN*

Straßburg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg 2025, 260 Seiten mit 39 Farbabb., ISBN 979-10-344-0227-4 (Softcover).



Rezensiert von
Hannah Goetze

Auf den gegenüberliegenden Seiten 214 und 215 in Émilie Oléron Evans' Fazit zu ihrem Buch *L'histoire de l'art engagée. Linda Nochlin* finden sich zwei Aussagen, die die Paradoxität der Rezeption der titelgebenden Kunsthistorikerin gut auf den Punkt bringen. Man liest auf der linken Seite: „Pour étudier et écrire l'histoire de l'art aujourd'hui (pas seulement féministe), il est besoin de lire ou de relire Nochlin"; etwas weiter dann rechts daneben: „Il n'est presque même plus besoin de « lire » Nochlin : par effet de synecdoque, le titre [Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?] suffit à démontrer le féminisme ardent de quiconque l'invoque". Kritisch aufgegriffen wird damit eine Beschäftigung mit dem Denken der 2017 verstorbenen US-amerikanischen Kunsthistorikerin und insbesondere mit ihrem wohl bekanntesten Aufsatz, das sich damit begnügt, den zugehörigen Titel als (pop-)kulturelle Chiffre tauglich zu machen, statt tatsächlich eine inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung zu suchen. Einen solchen Umgang kritisiert Oléron Evans, verbunden mit einem Aufruf zum (tatsächlichen) Lesen: „[I]l ne suffit pas de répandre la bonne parole, encore faut-il l'avoir lue" (S. 224).

Oléron Evans' Buch stellt eine Konfrontation mit diesem Erbe und der Person Nochlins dar – und eben vor allem: eine Einladung zur (Re-)Lektüre. Er ist, und das insbesondere in den ersten beiden

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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der insgesamt vier Kapitel, intellektuelle Biografie einer Kunsthistorikerin, die sich früh bestimmten institutionellen Vorgaben verweigert und stattdessen auf die Suche nach Schreibformen begeben hat, die beständig die Positionierung zum Gegenstand herausfordern, die der Schreibenden ebenso wie der Lesenden. Ein solches Querstellen zu bestimmten akademischen Idealen und insbesondere zu spezifischen Erwartungshaltungen der Kunstgeschichte als streng methodischem Fach, zu der Möglichkeit einer starren Methodik überhaupt, verstanden als fixem Modell, manifestiert sich auch in den Publikationsformen, die Nochlin bevorzugt wählte. Ihre Bibliografie versammelt primär Texte in Artikelform, die dann, häufig ohne allzu große weitere Überarbeitung, gesammelt als Publikation herausgegeben wurden und vornehmlich bei Thames & Hudson erschienen sind, einem Verlagshaus, das, wie Anne Lafont und Todd Porterfield in ihrem Gespräch mit Linda Nochlin hervorheben, kein akademisches ist. „[E]lle n'a jamais cédé à la stratégie éditoriale académique",[1] heißt es in diesem Zusammenhang. Gleichzeitig zeigt Oléron Evans' Lektüre von Nochlin, dass sich das Tätigkeitsfeld einer engagierten Kunstgeschichte, wie von ihr entworfen, keineswegs im (akademischen) Schreiben und Publizieren erschöpft. Das Schlagwort des „Bildungsromans", das den Text von Oléron Evans durchzieht, wird von Nochlin selbst verwendet, unter anderem im Titel zu zwei Vorträgen, „The Museum as Bildungsroman"[2] und „The Seminar as Bildungsroman"[3]. Damit werden weitere Handlungsräume eröffnet, die Oléron Evans insbesondere im dritten und vierten Kapitel ihres Buches herausstellt.

In den beiden erwähnten Vorträgen Nochlins wird ihre persönliche (Lebens-)Geschichte in das akademische Vortragsformat eingebunden. Linda Nochlin ist eine Autorin, die in ihrem Schreiben und ihrer Arbeit allgemein sehr präsent ist und ihre Person darin offenlegt – eine Extrovertiertheit, die das Schreiben über sie durchaus vor spezifische Herausforderungen stellt. Im bereits erwähnten Gespräch mit Lafont und Porterfield fragt letzterer dezidiert nach der Zentralität von Nochlins eigener Stimme und einer damit verbundenen Problematik der Übersetzung.[4] Einer solchen Bedeutung

1
Linda Nochlin, Anne Lafont und Todd Porterfield, Entretien avec Linda Nochlin, in: *Perspective* 1, 2015, 63–76, hier 64 (31.07.2025).

2
Ihr mit handschriftlichen Notizen versehener Vortragstext ist digitalisiert über die Seite der Archives of American Art verfügbar: Linda Nochlin papers, circa 1876, 1937–2017, Box 16, Folder 35: „The Museum as Bildungsroman. My Life in Art, Trash and Fashion" at Material Things Conference, Toronto, 2002, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C. 20560 (31.07.2025).

3
Linda Nochlin papers, circa 1876, 1937–2017, Box 17, Folder 15: „The Seminar as Bildungsroman. History Personal and Impersonal" at College Art Association, Atlanta, 2004-2005, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C. 20560 (31.07.2025).

4
Die von Porterfield gestellte Frage in Gänze: „Peut-on aussi revenir sur un aspect de votre œuvre qui est moins accessible à vos lecteurs qui n'ont pas l'anglais pour langue

ist sich auch Oléron Evans bewusst – das erste Kapitel ihres Buches beginnt programmatisch: „La première voix à entendre pour comprendre l'attitude de Linda Nochlin envers l'histoire de l'art, c'est la sienne" (S. 21).

Ihr Buch ist insofern als Übersetzungsarbeit im doppelten Sinne zu verstehen. Zwar liegen Übersetzungen von einer Auswahl an Texten Nochlins vor;[5] wo dies jedoch nicht der Fall ist, sind verwendete Textstellen und Zitate von Oléron Evans selbst ins Französische übertragen worden. Das englische Original ist jeweils in den Fußnoten beigegeben. Neben einer solchen Form des praktischen Übertragens eines Textes in eine andere Sprache ist der Text von Oléron Evans zudem Beitrag zum kulturellen Transfer:[6] Auch aufgrund des Standes der Übersetzungen sei die Rezeption Nochlins in Frankreich einseitig (S. 18) und konzentriere sich vornehmlich auf die Texte, die in erster Linie einer feministischen Kunstgeschichte zugeschrieben werden.[7] Gleichzeitig präsentiert Oléron Evans die Rezeption einer solchen feministischen Kunstgeschichte in Frankreich als schwergängig. Über die Hartnäckigkeit, mit der sich gegen die Notwendigkeit einer feministischen Kunstgeschichte gestellt wird, mokierte sich bereits Nochlin selbst, wenn sie auf die im Centre Pompidou gezeigte Ausstellung „elles@pompidou", die dort 2009 bis 2011 stattfand (und damit über 30 Jahre nach der von Nochlin und Ann Sutherland Harris organisierten Ausstellung „Women Artists" im Brooklyn Museum), mit einer Frage reagiert, deren leicht spöttelnder Unterton nicht zu überhören ist: „Pourquoi ne pas l'avoir organisée avant ?" (S. 199).

maternelle, car il est singulier, à vous lire, de constater que la force de votre écriture réside notamment dans votre voix, en plus de l'importance de vos idées proprement dites." (Nochlin, Lafont und Porterfield, Entretien avec Linda Nochlin, 73).

5
Übersetzt von Claude Bourguignon, Pascaline Germain, Julie Pavesi, Florence Verne: *Femmes peintres 1500–1950* (Ausst.-Kat. New York, Brooklyn Museum), hg. von Ann Sutherland Harris und Linda Nochlin, Paris 1981; übersetzt von Oristelle Boinis: Linda Nochlin, *Femmes, Art et pouvoir et autres essais*, Nîmes 1993, ebenso wie Linda Nochlin, *Les politiques de la vision. Art, société et politique au XIX siècle*, Nîmes 1995; übersetzt von Margot Rietsch: Linda Nochlin, *Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas eu de grands artistes femmes ?*, London 2021 (anlässlich des 50. Jahrestages des Erscheinens).

6
Zum Übersetzen siehe auch Émilie Oléron Evans, « Une culture traductrice ». Quand les historiens de l'art (se) traduisent, in: *Revue germanique internationale* 32 (La traduction en histoire et en histoire de l'art), 2010, 93–105, ein Aufsatz, der mit der Zentralität des Übersetzungsprozesses für die Kunstgeschichte einsetzt: „La notion de traduction fait partie des outils conceptuels fondamentaux de l'histoire de l'art ; au premier chef, elle décrit l'opération par laquelle on rend compte d'une perception des œuvres, en un passage du visuel à l'écrit. [...] De plus en plus, dans le sillage du « tournant culturel » de la traductologie, l'historiographie de l'art aborde la traduction sur un plan plus crucial encore, comme matrice de la formation, de la formulation et de la circulation des savoirs sur l'art."

7
Eine Aufteilung von Nochlins Themen in „feministische" und „nicht-feministische" erweist sich zugleich als nicht zielführend; Nochlin selbst wird von Oléron Evans zitiert, dass eine feministische Kritik ihren Platz nicht nur im Umgang mit, lapidar gesprochen, „Frauen" haben könne, sondern vielmehr auf das gesamte Feld der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung auszuweiten sei (vgl. S. 124). Für eine Würdigung Nochlins im Bereich der Courbet-Forschung vgl. das Vorwort von Laurence des Cars und Dominique de Font-Réaulx in: dies. gemeinsam mit Mathilde Arnoux, Stéphane Guégan und Scarlett Reliquett (Hg.), *Courbet à neuf !*, Paris 2010, 4–5. Die Würdigung ihrer Arbeit fällt zusammen mit der Würdigung ihrer Person, beides unzertrennbar auch in dem Text, mit dem Nochlin im Band vertreten ist: Living With Courbet. Fifty Years of My Life as an Art Historian, in: ebd., 11–22.

Zwar beginnt das Buch mit dem Bild der Kunsthistorikerin als junger Frau, folgt jedoch nicht notwendigerweise einer chronologischen, sondern mehr einer thematischen Logik. Das erste Kapitel „Fragments biographiques" kommt in seinem Aufbau einem streng geordneten biographischen Schreiben noch am nächsten, bezeugt gleichzeitig durch die Aufnahme des Fragmentarischen bereits im Titel, dass es keineswegs darum gehen soll, lückenlos ein Leben nachzuerzählen. Hierin vollzieht Oléron Evans, zum Teil mit Hang zum Anekdotischen und unterstrichen mit Hinweisen auf Archivmaterial, Nochlins Weg als Kunsthistorikerin „par accident" (S. 33) nach, eingebettet in eine Institutionen- und Disziplingeschichte der 1950er Jahre. Im intellektuellen Milieu von Vassar, als Seminarteilnehmerin und später auch in der Rolle der Seminarleitenden, keineswegs jedoch von Anfang an mit Interesse für die Kunstgeschichte überhaupt ausgestattet, kristallisieren sich hier die Vorbilder Nochlins heraus: Karl Lehmann, der sie zu einer quellenbasierten, sozialen und politischen Kunstgeschichte leitet; Meyer Schapiro, dessen Aufsatz „Courbet and Popular Imagery" einen Wendepunkt für Nochlin darstellt; Erwin Panofsky, nach dem, wie wir erfahren, Nochlin ihre Katze benennt (S. 47); Aby Warburg, zu dem neben der akademischen auch eine persönliche Nähe aufgrund seines Jüdischseins kommt.

Thematisiert wird dies im zweiten Kapitel, „La voix de l'Autre : Le paradoxe de l'engagement", das die Frage nach den Schreibweisen der Kunstgeschichte dahingehend zuspitzt, was eine „engagierte" Kunstgeschichte im Sinne Nochlins sei. Die Operation der Stellung- als Positionsnahme ist hierbei zentral; Ausgangspunkt ist entsprechend, auch für das Kapitel, eine Reflexion der eigenen Privilegien – dem Aufwachsen Nochlins im New Yorker Bildungsbürgertum, in dem früh eine große Nähe zu Kunst und Kultur gefördert wird – und dem gleichzeitigen Bewusstmachen einer doppelten Marginalisierung durch ihr Frau- und Jüdischsein. Eine „engagierte" Kunstgeschichte wird möglich eben durch die Reflexion der eigenen Position und das Einnehmen einer Haltung, das Herausfordern der eigenen Subjektivität in der Betrachter:innenrolle. Daraus entspringt eine Kunstgeschichte, die von Oléron Evans an Donna Haraways Konzept der „Situated Knowledges" zurückgebunden und von ihr als ein „thinking art history *otherly*" (S. 95) theoretisiert wird, das stets kritisch auf den eigenen Standpunkt zurückgreift, diesen befragt und so auch Platz zu schaffen sucht für den:die Andere:n.

Hiervon ausgehend führt der Text hin zu einer spezifischeren „feministischen Kunstgeschichte". Unter dem Titel „Le tournant féministe" behandelt Oléron Evans das, was Nochlin selbst als zentrale Wendepunkte ihres Lebens herausstellt: Der erste davon ist ein Seminar in Vassar, dessen Thema sie kurzfristig ändert zu „Women in the 19th and 20th Century" (S. 115) und damit 1969 die „première classe d'histoire féministe de l'art" (S. 118) gibt. Die Geburt ihrer Tochter Daisy und die Reaktion darauf verdeutlichen die institutionellen Hürden: Mutterschaft und akademischer Wer-

degang beziehungsweise intellektuelle Tätigkeit werden als nicht vereinbar verstanden (S. 122–123). Das Kapitel ist zudem Publikations- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von Nochlins Aufsatz „Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?", der 1971 erstmals bei ARTNews erscheint, kurz bevor er mit in die Gegenwart versetztem Titel im Band *Woman in Sexist Society* veröffentlicht wird.[8] Sein Erfolg führt mitunter zu nicht notwendigerweise produktiven Missverständnissen des Titels, auf den der Text häufig reduziert wird. Neben einer solchen „simplification regrettable des concepts centraux" (S. 135) ist er jedoch durchaus auch Katalysator für ein kritisches Weiterdenken, insbesondere von verschiedenen Kunsthistoriker:innen *of Color* – eben das paradoxe Erbe, das zu Beginn bereits angesprochen wurde.

Das vierte Kapitel unterstreicht die Breite des Engagements Nochlins, indem es mit „Le musée engagé : Entre experimentation et utopie" Nochlins Präsenz im Ausstellungsbereich hervorhebt. Mit der ersten dieser Ausstellungen, „Realism Now" (1968, Vassar College), kommt Oléron Evans auch auf eine weitere Weise des Zugegenseins Nochlins in der Gegenwartskunst zu sprechen: Sie thematisiert hier die Repräsentationen Nochlins auf den Porträts von Philip Pearlstein (1968, gemeinsam mit Ehemann Richard Pommer) und Alice Neel (1973, gemeinsam mit Tochter Daisy) und das Verhältnis Nochlins zur eigenen Darstellung. 1976 organisiert Nochlin gemeinsam mit Ann Sutherland Kiefer die bereits erwähnte Ausstellung „Women Artists" im Brooklyn Museum; ebendort findet knapp 30 Jahre später, 2007, kuratiert gemeinsam mit Maura Reilly, „Global Feminisms" statt. Letztere ist selbst bereits Revision von ersterer und kann durchaus als ein Ernstnehmen der Kritik verstanden werden, dass „Women Artists" primär Werke von westlichen und weißen Künstlerinnen zeigte. Das Kapitel selbst ist gekennzeichnet durch eine erhöhte Stimmenvielfalt und gibt kritischen Interventionen und Reaktionen auf Nochlin Raum. Diese lassen umso stärker die Frage hervortreten, wo und wie Kritik im Museum möglich gemacht werden kann. Das Kapitel vermittelt eine Institutionengeschichte, in der sich das Museum als resistent gegenüber Kanoninterventionen und Änderungsbemühungen offenbart.

Das Schlusswort, das hier eingangs bereits zitiert wurde, thematisiert noch einmal die Verknappung von „Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" hin zum bloßen Schlagwort. Dieser Einseitigkeit, die Verkürzung sowohl der Arbeit Nochlins insgesamt ist und häufig zudem einhergeht mit Verkürzung des von Nochlin in diesem Bereich Gesagten, spürt Oléron Evans insbesondere in ihrem Schlusswort nach. Unterschwellig lässt sich dieses als Zugeständnis an eine Schwierigkeit lesen, die das Schreiben über Linda Nochlin bereithält. Zwei Gefahren sind hier hervorzuheben:

[8] Linda Nochlin, Why Are There No Great Women Artists?, in: Vivian Gornick und Barbara K. Moran (Hg.), *Woman in Sexist Society. Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, New York 1971, 480–510.

Die erste besteht in der Zementierung einer Inszenierung Nochlins als Gallions- bis hin zur mythischen Gründungsfigur, als „sainte patronne des interventions féministes en histoire de l'art" (S. 217), einer „métamorphose de Nochlin en madone de l'histoire de l'art" (S. 220). Gefährlich nahe kommt man hierin der Perpetuierung von Ideen der Genialität und Kanonizität, gegen die sich Nochlin selbst so vehement positioniert. Mit einher geht damit die Tendenz, andere Denker:innen unsichtbar zu machen, was in keiner Weise kongruent mit dem eigenen Denken Nochlins ist, für die Kunstgeschichte eine grundlegend gemeinschaftliche Praxis ist: „I believe that art history, like any scholarly discipline, is basically a communal enterprise"[9], schreibt sie in der Danksagung zu *The Politics of Vision*. Man hätte sich an dieser Stelle ein stärkeres Eingehen auf andere Formen der feministischen Kunstgeschichtsschreibung vorstellen können, wie sie gegenwärtig unternommen werden, um die Person von Nochlin noch deutlicher aus dieser zentralisierten Rolle zu entheben beziehungsweise um solche wie die oben genannten Zuschreibungen zu dekonstruieren.[10]

Daneben besteht die Gefahr eines Festschreibens Nochlins auf bestimmte Essentialisierungen hin. Gegen ein ebensolches liest Oléron Evans den von Nochlin selbst für die eigenen Memoiren

9
Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision. Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, London 1991, X.

10
Man denke an den Band, der aus dem DFG-Netzwerk Wege – Methoden – Kritiken: Kunsthistorikerinnen 1880–1970 hervorging (15.09.2025): Lee Chichester und Brigitte Sölch (Hg.), *Kunsthistorikerinnen 1910–1980. Theorien, Methoden, Kritiken*, Berlin 2021. Dieser legt den Fokus auf den deutschsprachigen Universitätsbereich; in der Einleitung rekurrieren Chichester und Sölch auch auf „Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", jedoch eher kursorisch. In dem eben erschienenen Band von Elena Zabunyan (Hg.), *Vaincre le silence*, Paris 2025 (15.09.2025), ist insbesondere der enthaltene Vortrag von Griselda Pollock anlässlich der Neuerscheinung der Übersetzung von *Old Mistresses. Women, Art and Ideology* (gemeinsam mit Roszika Parker, London 1981; *Maîtresses d'autrefois. Femmes, art et idéologie*, übersetzt von Christophe Degoutin, mit einer Einleitung von Giovanna Zapperi, Genf/Paris 2024) interessant. Der Einfluss von Nochlin für *Old Mistresses* wird im Vorwort der Ausgabe von 2013 hervorgehoben – und zugleich unterstreicht Pollock hier die Änderungen, die die dazwischenliegenden zehn Jahre mit sich gebracht haben, ohne dabei jedoch die Trägheit bestimmter Institutionen zu vernachlässigen: „Linda Nochlin opened the field in 1971. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* took on the challenge of shifting paradigms in 1981. It has taken until the first decade of the new century for the museum world to awaken, a little, to the feminist critique. Only after 2006, in France, the United States, Spain, Netherlands, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, have major exhibitions reinstated feminism, feminist art and feminist questions after a period of active casting feminism into the dustbin of history" (Griselda Pollock, A Lonely Preface [2013], in: dies. und Roszika Parker, *Old Mistresses*, London/New York 2013, xxvi). In diesem Gespräch nun finden sich neben einigen Gemeinsamkeiten zu Nochlin, etwa dem Einfluss Timothy Clarks, auch viele Unterschiede, unter anderem in der Wahrnehmung des intellektuellen feministischen Klimas in Paris: „Je dois aussi dire qu'apporter à l'époque [gemeint ist die Zeit Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts] l'histoire de l'art féministe et l'art féministe à Paris était, comme on pourrait dire en anglais, similaire à « to carry coal to Newcastle », car on y trouvait le centre de la pensée féministe le plus important en histoire de l'art au monde. Je vois ici, autour de moi, des femmes qui m'ont inspirée pendant des années et je me sens chez moi, plus que nulle part ailleurs. C'est pourquoi Maîtresses d'autrefois n'est pas vraiment un événement dans la communauté féministe en histoire de l'art, mais un ajout à l'édifice permettant de réunir nos tentatives pour changer l'histoire de l'art. J'espère ainsi qu'il aura une nouvelle vie avec cette traduction française. À Paris, on retrouve aussi des structures qui n'existent nulle part ailleurs. Je pense notamment à AWARE, mais aussi à un grand nombre de recherches sur les féminismes, ce qui me rend très fière d'être parmi vous" (Griselda Pollock, D'*Old Mistresses* (1981) à *Maîtresses d'autrefois* (2024). Les femmes, l'art et l'idéologie revisité·e·s, in: Zabunyan, Vaincre le silence (15.09.2025).

vorgeschlagenen Titel, „A Walk in the Park": „Le mode de la déambulation lui sied plus que l'introspection qui risque de figer ce qu'elle contient elle-même de multitudes" (S. 220). Die Möglichkeit einer Autobiografie stellt Nochlin bereits vage im Nachwort zu dem ihr gewidmeten Band *Self and History* (2001) in Aussicht: „She [gemeint ist Moira Roth] is now encouraging me to write a memoir of my own, and I shall probably do so under her insistent tutelage – eventually."[11] Voraus geht dieser Erwähnung ein Text von besagter Moira Roth, in dem sich an den titelgebenden Fragen nach dem Verhältnis von Selbst und Schreiben ein Austausch zwischen Roth und Nochlin entspinnt. Roths persönliche, fragmentierte, mit Bildern von Nochlin als Jugendliche, Erwachsene und alte Frau durchsetzte Melange, teils im Format eines Tagebuchs, teils das Gesprächsformat beibehaltend, passt in ihrer Form deshalb so gut zu ihr: Sie zielt nicht auf Abgeschlossenheit, sondern gibt Eindrücke, bildlich und in Gesprächsfetzen, die unter Überpunkten angeordnet werden, ohne dass dadurch jedoch ihre Flexibilität und Momenthaftigkeit verloren ginge.

Anders als Roth nimmt Oléron Evans die Formfragen mit *L'histoire de l'art engagée. Linda Nochlin* weniger performativ selbst auf, behandelt sie jedoch in Bezug auf Nochlins eigenes Schreiben und bemüht sich durchaus, den Idealen Nochlins im Schreiben über Nochlin gerecht zu werden (man bemerke die „Envois" am Ende jedes Kapitels, die im Abschließen eine Öffnungsbewegung zu integrieren suchen). Oléron Evans gelingt nicht unbedingt eine Auflösung einer engen Bindung von Nochlin an „Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" – der Aufsatz nimmt vielmehr auch hier eine zentrale Stellung ein. Sie plädiert jedoch erfolgreich gegen eine Simplifizierung der Thesen, die ein Missverständnis der und eine verkürzte Antwort auf die titelgebende Frage begünstigen, und für ein Wiederlesen des Textes sowie des Werkes von Nochlin insgesamt. Acht Jahre nach Nochlins Tod ist dieses Buch, mäandernd zwischen intellektueller Biografie und kritischer Würdigung der Leistung Nochlins, deren eigenen Stimme viel Raum lassend, Auseinandersetzung mit einer Autorin, deren Re-Lektüre lohnt.

11 Moira Roth, Of Self and History. Exchanges with Linda Nochlin, in: Aruna D'Souza (Hg.), *Self and History. A Tribute to Linda Nochlin*, London 2001, 175–200, hier 204.

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