

# 2019 Company of Ideas Forum on Art and Moral Conscience

24-26 June 2019





J. Rubinoff Series 6 - Andromeda 9 | Photo by J. Rubinoff

## THE COMPANY OF IDEAS FORUM

*The Company of Ideas* was established by Jeffrey Rubinoff in 2008 to discuss major issues relating to art and society. Of Rubinoff's many concerns, the most fundamental related to morality and conscience. Rubinoff believed that a 'mature individual conscience' was not only the basis for original art but also for sustained social engagement. He was convinced that serious artists were obliged to address the biggest issues of their time, which in his view were the 'existential threats' of nuclear weapons and human genetic engineering. In doing so, they could influence their audience's thinking and contribute to historical change.

Rubinoff, of course, was not alone. The moral duties of artists have been debated since antiquity, and amid the unprecedented violence of the twentieth century those roles became more necessary than ever. From Otto Dix's eviscerating critiques of World War One to the anti-Vietnam protests by the Fluxus Group, modern artists consistently took a stand against the prevailing politics of their time. This moral positioning is now a dominant feature of contemporary art, with artists tackling issues like the refugee crisis (e.g. Ai Weiwei), environmental degradation (e.g. Agnes Denes), and social justice (e.g. Jeremy Deller).

At this year's Forum, we explore the relationship between art and moral conscience. Over

the course of two days academics and students will interrogate a cluster of questions that were of fundamental importance to Jeffrey Rubinoff. These include, but are not limited to:

- To what extent are artists able to follow their own moral consciences?
- Are artists obliged to hold up a mirror to their society?
- Can art address social issues without being representational?
- What audiences can the morally committed artist hope to reach?
- How effective can artistic protests be?
- Can a moral or political agenda compromise artistic quality?

## FORUM AGENDA

### Sunday 23 June

Speakers' arrival & optional dinner in Vancouver

### Monday 24 June

9:30 am Float-plane to Hornby Island from Coal Harbour

10:30 am Tour of the Sculpture Park for speakers

12:30 pm Lunch at the JRSP

2:00 pm Tour of the Sculpture Park for students

3:00 pm Check in at Sea Breeze Lodge

6:00 pm Welcome drinks at Sea Breeze Lodge

7:00 pm Dinner

### Tuesday 25 June

8:00 am Breakfast at Sea Breeze Lodge

8:30 am Depart for the Sculpture Park

9:00 am Welcome by JRSP Board Chair Betty Kennedy and by JRSP Manager-Curator Karun Koernig

9:15 am **Dr James Fox** | *Introduction: Jeffrey Rubinoff and Moral Conscience*

9:30 am **Dr Vid Simoniti** | *Artist's conscience, art's tendency, and the "hard problem" of beauty*

10:15 am **Dr Sarah Hegenbart** | *Art and its Freedom to Be Political*

11:00 am Coffee Break

11:30 am **Prof. Nick Riggle** | *Ethics and Style*

12:15 pm Discussion

1:00 pm Lunch at the JRSP

- 2:00 pm **Student Presentations**
- 3:00 pm Student visit to Vaughn Neville's studio (others welcome to join);
- The Sculpture Park is open to explore; Delegates free to explore the island.
- 6:00 pm Fireside Chat by Award Holders
- 7:00 pm Dinner at Sea Breeze Lodge

---

### Wednesday 26 June

- 8:00 am Breakfast at Sea Breeze Lodge
- 9:00 am **Prof. Mark Antliff** | *Romanticism, Responsibility, Disobedience: Pacifist Aesthetics in Britain during World War Two*
- 9:30 am **Prof. Patricia Leighten** | *Politics and 'The Decisive Moment': Henri Cartier-Bresson's Ethical Anarchism*
- 10:00 am **Prof. Allan Antliff** | *Pedagogical Subversion*

- 10:30 am Coffee Break
- 11:00 am Discussion
- 12:00 pm Lunch at the JRSP
- 1:00 pm **Student Presentations**
- 2:00 pm JRSP Board Meeting
- 2:00 pm Student visit to Vaughn Neville's studio (others welcome to join);
- The Sculpture Park is open to explore; Delegates free to explore the island.
- 7:00 pm Dinner at Sea Breeze Lodge

---

### Thursday 27 June

- 8:00 am Breakfast at Sea Breeze Lodge
- 9:15 am Float-plane departs to Vancouver airport
- 12:00 pm Students depart Hornby Island

## PRESENTATION ABSTRACTS

### VID SIMONITI

*Artist's conscience, art's tendency,  
and the "hard problem" of beauty*

"Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists." It is with these words that the American philosopher, sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois called upon artists to express their moral and political convictions. Du Bois' political context was that of pursuing Black liberation in the 1920s United States, but the words are clearly applicable to other artistic struggles for social justice as well. In this paper, I revisit Du Bois' claim to lay bare a fundamental opposition, which has structured much of subsequent, twentieth-century history of art: between politically tendentious art and aestheticism. The first part of the talk is expository, but it introduces some concepts of aesthetic theory that may help us structure our conversations about artists' moral conscience at this conference. Secondly, however, I

offer the thought that Du Bois is concerned with the "hard problem" of beauty: the idea that it is through *the very experience of beauty* that the moral conscience attains its full realisation. This idea, I suggest, has resonances with Jeffrey Rubinoff's sculptural modernism. In what ways, though, can the idea be made good in the art of today?

### SARAH HEGENBART

*Art and its Freedom to Be Political*

While this paper will not go as far as W.E.B. Du Bois who asserts that "all art is propaganda", I will argue that all art is political. The political nature of art, however, does not necessarily conflict with art's autonomy. Inspired by Juliane Rebentisch's *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, I will propose that the political nature of art forms part of its freedom to impact on all realms of life. Moreover, the relation between art and politics can be expressive of art's freedom rather than limiting it. A key example of how this may be accomplished is the artistic

creation of dissensus in the public sphere, in which multiple perspectives can be set in friction. Employing selected paintings from Meleko Mokgosi's *Democratic Intuitions*-series as a case study, I will elaborate on art's relation to the public sphere, a central aspect of functioning democracies. If art expresses freedom as a central moral and political value especially well, I will ask if this may also count as art's aesthetic value. If so, could freedom form the basis for an aesthetics of the unconditional?

## **NICK RIGGLE**

### ***Ethics and Style***

Is there an ethics of personal style? Some people (like Mark Zuckerberg and President Obama) say that style is trivial and unimportant—there are far more important things to do with one's time and resources. Others seem to think that style is inspiring and inspired—that, following Nietzsche, style is a “great and rare art” of utmost importance. Who is right? I want to argue that style is how we make ourselves

visible, and appreciable, to one another as individuals. As such it is an indispensable resource for the cultivation of self and community—indeed of a certain kind of freedom—in pluralistic and free societies. But questions quickly arise about the limits of style: What demands are placed on us when it comes to cultivating our own, and appreciating others', style? To what extent does the importance of style involve us in commercial and material culture? If style is so central to a flourishing society, then when, if at all, may it be legally constrained? For example, if religious garb stylistic then what should we think about recent laws in Europe and Canada that attempt to regulate it? Answers to these and other questions are difficult. I'll explain why and explore options.

## **MARK ANTLIFF**

### ***Romanticism, Responsibility, Disobedience: Pacifist Aesthetics in Britain during World War Two***

In my talk I will examine the theory of pacifist aesthetics developed during World War Two by Alex

Comfort (1920-2000), a Cambridge-trained physician, poet, anarchist, and conscientious objector, best known as the author of the *Joy of Sex* (1972). In a series of wartime polemics, which culminated in his manifesto *Art and Social Responsibility* (1946), Comfort developed a theory of Romanticism which positioned the artist as the moral conscience of society in the face of the social pathology fostered by war. In promoting this thesis Comfort not only critiqued Surrealism and Constructivism, he championed the contemporary fantasist Cecil Collins (1908-1989)—a prominent figure in Britain’s Neo-Romantic movement—and the 16th-century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder for conveying the sense of Romantic tragedy he identified with his anarchist pacifist vision. Comfort’s art criticism and aesthetics bring up key issues pertinent to an artist’s ethical position during wartime, to debates within the anarchist movement over the merits of violence, and to the troubling issue of whether war itself is justifiable. It is my hope that such topics, among others, will serve as spring boards in our subsequent panel and group discussions.

## **PATRICIA LEIGHTEN**

***Politics and ‘The Decisive Moment’:***

***Henri Cartier-Bresson’s Ethical Anarchism***

Henri Cartier-Bresson is often called the most famous photographer of the twentieth century, and by Richard Avedon also the greatest. Compositional perfection was a hallmark of his style, in which he captured juxtapositions that brilliantly evoke momentary coincidences and reveal telling truths for a variety of audiences. Yet—as with many artists whose innovative work is visually powerful—viewers often overlook Cartier-Bresson’s actual subjects and the importance of their tension with the geometry of their shapes. Such interpretations fail to account for his own stated philosophy, ethical anarchism, centered on the transformation of the individual, independent of the state, and free of bourgeois morality. As he has warned, “it is impossible to separate content from form.” In my talk, I will show how everything the photographer has said and written expresses his embodied and absolute individuality as fully present in the moment, making



possible his ability to see and respond, and resulting in his unique photographic vision. In the conversation following my talk, I hope we can explore many of the issues raised by his life's project, and also range beyond Cartier-Bresson to consider how artists are often viewed in terms alien to their social and political purpose as well as to consider how art, ethics, and politics inform each other in the creative act.

## **ALLAN ANTLIFF**

### ***Pedagogical Subversion***

In 2001 anarchist graphic artist Kevin Pyle published a remarkable illustrated book, *Lab USA*, documenting medical, biological and psychological experiments conducted by U.S. government and military agencies on civilians, soldiers and prisoners. Pyle's book was meticulously researched and featured multilayered illustrative narratives combining bureaucratic documentation, statistics, first-hand accounts, and period-specific imagery. This has been followed by a series of illustrated publications dealing with

state-capitalist apparatuses of control and domination in *America: Prison Town: The Real Cost* (2005), which examines the impact of prisons on economically-depressed communities; *Take What You Can Carry* (2012), which narrates the experiences of a Japanese-American child in an internment camp during World War 2; and *Bad For You* (2014), an illustrated history of censoring comics in the United States. Pyle is not content to simply relate a story or issue. He has also developed pedagogical projects involving collaborations with the communities his work seeks to radicalize. My talk will explore Pyle's illustrative styles, research methodologies, and community outreach projects as a distinctly anarchist variant of 'un-Americanism.' I will highlight ways in which his work models anarchist alternatives to the oppressive social structures it critiques, a strategy of prefiguration that breaks through the parameters of nationalism.

## SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

### **DR VID SIMONITI** **University of Liverpool**

Vid Simoniti is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. His academic work is in aesthetics, especially on the political dimension of contemporary art. In recent publications he has considered socially engaged art, the anti-racist art of the conceptual artist Adrian Piper, and artists' use of biotechnology. He is also interested in the history of aesthetics (especially Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, the Frankfurt School) and in philosophy of literature.

Before joining the department at Liverpool in 2018, he was the Jeffrey Rubinoff Junior Research Fellow at Churchill College, the University of Cambridge, where he taught in both History of Art and Philosophy departments. He obtained his doctorate (D.Phil.) from the University of Oxford in 2015.

### **DR SARAH HEGENBART** **Technical University of Munich**

Sarah Hegenbart is a post-doctoral lecturer (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin) at the Technical University of Munich. Having completed a M.St. in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Oxford and a Magister in Philosophy and History of Art at the Humboldt University of Berlin, she then took up a post in the cultural section at the German Embassy in London. Subsequently, she undertook her doctoral research at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London under the supervision of Prof Sarah Wilson. During this time, Sarah also worked as college curator of art at Pembroke (University of Oxford) and as associate lecturer at the Courtauld Institute.

Her dissertation, *From Bayreuth to Burkina Faso: Christoph Schlingensiefel's Opera Village Africa as postcolonial Gesamtkunstwerk?*, explored Opera Village as a testing ground for a critical interrogation of Richard Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Currently, Sarah is

working towards the book project *Perspectives in Plural: Collaborating Cultures, Negotiating Identities*, and co-edits (together with Mara Koelmel) the anthology *Dada Data: Contemporary art practice* in the era of post-truth politics. She is also preparing her habilitation focusing on Dialogical Art and Black Aesthetics.

**PROF. NICK RIGGLE**  
**University of San Diego**

Nick Riggle is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Diego. He specializes in aesthetics, exploring how issues in moral psychology and ethics echo and interact with issues in aesthetics and the arts.

He also has an interest in the history of philosophy (especially Kant and Schiller), and likes to keep a philosophical eye on contemporary artistic and ethical culture. His work has been published by *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophers' Imprint*, *The British Journal*

*of Aesthetics*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and *McSweeney's*. In 2017, his popular book *On Being Awesome: A Unified Theory of How Not to Suck* was published by Penguin Books.

**PROF. MARK ANTLIFF**  
**Duke University**

Mark Antliff, Anne Murnick Cogan Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University, is author of *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1993) and *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (2007) as well as co-author of *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (with Matthew Affron, 1997), *Cubism and Culture* (with Patricia Leighton, 2001), *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism 1906-1914* (also with Patricia Leighton, 2008), and *Vorticism: New Perspectives* (2013).

In 2010 Mark together with Vivien Greene co-curated

“The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-1918,” which opened at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and traveled to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and to Tate Britain in 2011. His research and teaching interests focus on art in Europe before 1960, with special attention to cultural politics in all its permutations, as well as the interrelation of art and philosophy.

**PROF. PATRICIA LEIGHTEN**  
**Duke University**

Patricia Leighten, Professor Emerita of Art, Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University, received her PhD from Rutgers University. She is author of *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris* (University of Chicago Press 2013) and *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton University Press 1989) as well as coauthor of *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906-1914* (University of Chicago Press 2008)

[*Le cubisme devant ses contemporains-Documents et critiques (1906-1914)*, Paris: Les Presses du réel, forthcoming 2018] and *Cubism and Culture* (Thames & Hudson 2001 [*Cubisme et culture* 2002]). Her field of research is late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century art and politics, including the history of photography. In her research, she is interested in the relationship between visual culture and the politics of both representation and interpretation. She is currently researching photography and anarchist ideology in the 20th century, and continuing to present her scholarship at conferences and in publications.

**PROF. ALLAN ANTLIFF**  
**University of Victoria**

Allan Antliff, Professor at the University of Victoria, has taught courses on activism and art; anarchist aesthetics; Russian Constructivism; New York Dada and a host of other subjects dealing with modernism and contemporary art. He is also Director of the

Anarchist Archive at U.Vic., and art editor for the interdisciplinary journals *Anarchist Studies* and co-editor of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*. He has authored three books and is editor of *Only a Beginning*, an anthology of the anarchist movement in Canada. Active as a theorist and art historian, he has written on a wide range of topics including pedagogy; post-structuralism; new media; theater; protest movements, and aesthetics.

In his role as art critic he has published numerous art reviews and feature articles in journals such as *SubStance*, *Canadian Art Magazine*, *C Magazine*, and *BlackFlash*. He has also contributed to exhibition catalogs for the Musee Du Luxemburg, Whitney Museum of Art, the Vancouver Art Gallery and other institutions. Allan has produced two feature programs for CBC Radio (*Guernica: A Political Odyssey*, 2007; *Anarchy, Art and Activism*, 2002).

J. Rubinfoff Series 5 - 3& Series 5 - 11 | Photo by D. Peterson



# Further Information for Participants

Company of Ideas Forums are not conventional academic conferences. They are ambitious but informal events, designed to bring together people from all corners of intellectual and creative life.

Participants are encouraged to take intellectual risks that normally they might be reluctant to take. Speakers and delegates are expected to make propositions, to test out big ideas, and to engage in genuinely interdisciplinary conversations.

## ACADEMIC SPEAKERS

Presentations should be no more than 30 minutes, and should be spoken (either with or without notes), but not read. All presentations will be followed by discussion.

Papers should be intellectually challenging but accessible, targeted at a mixed audience of academics, students, artists, and members of the public. Speakers are asked to frame their talks within the larger issues of the Forum.

Speakers are required to provide the JRSP with a brief abstract of their talk, and one relevant background text.

## STUDENT SPEAKERS

Student sessions will take place at the conclusion of each day's proceedings, in the early afternoon.

Participating students are required to prepare a ten-minute presentation. Student presentations will be followed by questions and group discussion.

Students can talk about any topic they choose, but are required to address the larger issues of the Forum. They may wish to address one or more of the following questions:

- To what extent is it appropriate to describe artists as following their own moral conscience, as opposed to the demands of their society?

- Is it the role of artists to hold up a mirror to their society?
- Can art criticize or comment on society without being representational?
- Given the status of artworks as commodities on the art market, how can art fulfill its function as critically thinking about the society?

Student speakers are encouraged, if possible, to make reference to what they have seen, read or heard at the JRSP.

They are required to provide the JRSP with a title of their talk.

**Note to all speakers:** The audio of all Forums is recorded, and may be used by the JRSP in future transcriptions or podcasts.

