



ART AND MORAL CONSCIENCE



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Proceedings of the 2019 Company of Ideas Forum  
of The Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park

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at The Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park

### **2019 Forum Convenor**

Dr. James Fox

### **Co-Editors**

Dr. James Fox & Mahat Karuna (Karun) Koernig

### **Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park Curator and Manager**

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**ISBN 978-0-9917154-5-9**

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*Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication*

Title: Art and moral conscience : proceedings of the 2019 Company of Ideas Forum at the Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park / 2019 forum convenor, Dr. James Fox ; co-editors, Dr. James Fox & Mahat Karuna (Karun) Koernig ; Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park curator and manager, Mahat Karuna (Karun) Koernig.

Names: Company of Ideas Forum (12th : 2019 : Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park, B.C.), author. | Fox, James, 1982- editor. | Koernig, Mahat Karuna, 1975- editor, organizer.

Description: Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20200404342 | ISBN 9780991715459 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Art—Moral and ethical aspects—Congresses. | LCSH: Rubinoff, Jeffrey, 1945— Congresses. | LCSH: Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park (B.C.)—Congresses. | LCGFT: Conference papers and proceedings.

Classification: LCC N72.E8 C66 2020 | DDC 701/.03—dc23

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## PREFACE

This volume is a record of the proceedings of the Company of Ideas Forum On Art and Moral Conscience held at The Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park June 24 to 26, 2019.

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 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?

— DAY ONE —

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**WELCOME ADDRESS BY BETTY KENNEDY,  
JRSP BOARD CHAIR AND KARUN KOERNIG  
JRSP MANAGER AND CURATOR**

**Betty Kennedy:** Welcome everybody. It would make Jeffrey very happy to see you all here. The students are so important to him. He would be delighted to see how the Forum has grown and that we still have our local contingent sticking with us. So, welcome everybody. Enjoy your few days here, and I hope it turns out well.

**Karun Koernig:** We have been so fortunate to have this opportunity thanks to the generosity of the Jeffrey Rubinoff Foundation and the Rubinoff family, as well as all the people in Jeffrey's life that were important to him. They continue to steward the work of the foundation and the work of the sculpture park.

I just wanted to thank all those people who keep the park running smoothly, as well as our volunteers. Vaughan and Susan do a lot of volunteering, as well as John Kirk. John has worked with Jeffrey for thirty years doing all the shaping and sculpting of the lands. Ambreen is with us for the second time. She is the Rubinoff Scholar at the University of Victoria, and we will hear from her later.

I am also excited that we have James Nguyen, the Jeffrey Rubinoff Post-Doctoral Award winner, and Zachary Weinstein, a Rubinoff Graduate Essay Award Winner. We started these award programs

in 2017 and it has been very successful. We have had several wonderful awardees, and this year we are having Zachary come to do some research on the sculpture. He will come back and have a presentation on an aspect of Jeffrey's work in 2020.

We also have Vid Simoniti, the Rubinoff Junior Research Fellow in Art as a Source of Knowledge at Churchill College in Cambridge. Vid held that position for four years and has since moved on to a position as assistant professor at the University of Liverpool. He has been a member of the Company of Ideas for many years and continues to work with us as co-editor of a book on Art and Knowledge with James Fox. I would also like to recognize Allan Antliff, who is a professor of Art History at the University of Victoria and is a contributor to the book on Art and Knowledge as well. So, we are very pleased to have members of the Company of Ideas with us in different roles.

We are very pleased to announce that Churchill College at Cambridge University has chosen Joshua Fitzgerald to be the successor to the Jeffrey Rubinoff Junior Research Fellowship in Art as a Source of Knowledge.

So welcome, everybody, to the eleventh Company of Ideas Forum.

## INTRODUCTION: JEFFREY RUBINOFF AND MORAL CONSCIENCE

Dr James Fox

This Forum is about art and moral conscience and as an introduction I would like to say a bit about how these issues are important to Jeffrey Rubinoff and why this is one of the subjects that we are exploring in our Forums.

Jeffrey was not only an artist, but also a wide reader, a deep thinker, and a completely distinctive writer. He came to know a lot about a bewildering variety of subjects. He had read more German Idealism than many professional philosophers. He thought widely about issues from prehistoric culture to the military industrial complex, the Cold War, classical music, the nature of evolution, and transgenic engineering.

All these ideas are present in the sculpture park. Not explicitly, but they pervade the spirit of the work, the park, and what we are doing here today. The Forums were an attempt by Jeffrey to link his life's work as an artist to the ideas that he felt were important. Of all Jeffrey's big ideas, I think the most fundamental one, the one that underpinned all his other ideas, was the nature of individual conscience itself. That is why I believe it is a good subject for the Forum.

Where did that passion for individual conscience begin? I think partly there was a family history to it. Jeffrey came from Jewish family. His grandfather had been a refugee from Russia, and his father had witnessed terrible things during the Civil War. He spoke of his father as "a man of extraordinary conscience

and character". When his parents eventually settled in London, Ontario, they became pillars of the local community and great philanthropists. Jeffrey himself was a great philanthropist, and I think we should always remember that all of us here are beneficiaries of his and Betty's generosity.

This notion of conscience for him, though, was not simply inherited. He found it himself. He dates it to a very specific moment. He was 19 years old and, on a bus, reading an article by Simone de Beauvoir, one of his heroes. She was talking about French collaborators with the Nazis, and specifically how ordinary people, whether they were engineers or schoolmasters or train drivers, went about doing their daily jobs in collaboration with the Nazis, never questioning their own morality. She contrasted them with the people who, at great risk to their own lives, tried to resist the Vichy government. Her conclusion, as far as Jeffrey remembers it, was that "our very existence itself depends on acts of individual conscience". Ironically, though Jeffrey was so influenced by this passage, he was never able to find it again. He spent decades looking for this Simone de Beauvoir piece that had so influenced him but could never find it. I looked for a long time and could never find it, other scholars working on Jeffrey Rubinoff tried and could not find it. It could have just been summoned up from within, but it became tremendously important to Jeffrey.

I think for a long time Jeffrey's commitment as an artist on the one hand and to moral conscience on the other ran along parallel but essentially separate paths. It was only twenty years later that he found a way of linking the two into the definition that many of us have heard before: "Art is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience".

How did Jeffrey understand conscience? I think it is important to say that though we have titled this Forum "Art and Moral Conscience", for him, conscience and morality were very different

things. He thought of morality as a social thing, and he described it with wonderful sculptural terms as plastic, elastic, mouldable, a thing that could be manipulated by politicians, could change over time. Conscience, by contrast, was for him an individual idea, something that came from higher and from within and was therefore resistant to change. There is a wonderful discussion between him and Jay Winter, at one of the first Company of Ideas Forums in this room in 2011. Jay kept saying “Jeffrey, conscience is a social thing, it is something that is done socially”, and Jeffrey kept denying it and saying “no, it is an individual thing”. In fact, Jeffrey believed that conscience was almost a genetic quality, and that artists had particular capacity for conscience, or at least a responsibility to deal with their conscience.

Where did Jeffrey's conscience take him? He was always politically engaged. He was born in 1945, at the end of the Second World War when the bombs were dropped in Japan. He watched with grim fascination as the Cold War unfolded. At the same time, he became increasingly disgusted by the art market, and particularly how artists had become, as he called them, petty functionaries at the service of capitalism, creating work just to be sold. These ideas came together in a question: why, when the stakes were so high for humanity, had so many artists relinquished their responsibilities and become purveyors of mere commodities?

Jeffrey was convinced that art was an important, perhaps the most important, source of knowledge and could therefore offer a unique critical perspective on society. He increasingly came to believe that artists were obliged to tackle these crucial issues. For him, the most important issues of his time were the threats posed by nuclear weapons and by transgenic engineering. Global warming was also an issue that deeply influenced him, though he did not write so much about it quite so much.

And yet, if you travel around the Park, you won't find those issues explicit in the work. Yes, there are some allusions to evolution. Yes, there are some allusions to military-industrial weaponry. Yes, there are a couple of pieces – the Nike of Baghdad, the Desert Storm – seemingly influenced by the 1991 Cold War, but generally Jeffrey's work, and the Park, acquires its meanings, its purpose, in indirect, suggestive ways; indeed, even in negational ways. The art seems to offer an abstract but critical alternative to the realities that Jeffrey was concerned by.

So over the next two days, our speakers are going to explore some of these issues that were important to Jeffrey. What we have tried to do is divide the Forum largely into two parts. Today, our three speakers will approach the issue of Art and Moral Conscience from a broader, more philosophical perspective. This will hopefully provide us with a toolbox of ideas that we might then apply to our own work and our own examples. Dr. Vid Simoniti is going to kick us off first by exploring art's thorny relationship to propaganda. Sarah Hegenbart will follow him, arguing that all art is political, and Nick Riggle is going to finish up with a talk about the ethics of personal style.

Tomorrow will be more focused. After understanding some of the broader ideas around Art and Moral Conscience, tomorrow's speakers will home in on three specific case studies. Mark Antliff will explore the relationship between art and pacifism during the Second World War, Patricia Leighton will discuss the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Allan Antliff will bring the story into the twenty-first century by looking at the American graphic artist Kevin Pyle.

Some of the questions we are looking to engage with, are: to what extent are artists able to follow their own moral consciences? Jeffrey, to some extent, was able to, but others might have to make more compromises.

Are artists obliged to hold up a mirror to their society, or is it perfectly fine, or even possible, for artists to have no social or political agenda? This is something that Sarah will be discussing.

Can art address social issues without being representational? Jeffrey's work was abstract, but does abstract work make it harder, does it complicate the process of trying to take political or social positions?

What audiences can the morally committed artist hope to reach? Jeffrey created these Company of Ideas Forums to reach an audience. We are that audience. Does the artist have to compromise his or her principles in order to reach mass audiences?

How effective can artistic protests be? Are artists often preaching to the converted? Are they often reaching audiences that already share their values?

Can a moral or political agenda compromise artistic quality instead of enhancing it?

My hope is that by the end of this event, we'll all have some new thoughts on these questions and more, and a more developed understanding about the power, the value, and the potential of art, as well as hopefully a new understanding and perspective on the art and ideas of Jeffrey Rubinoff.

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## ARTIST'S CONSCIENCE, ART'S TENDENCY, AND THE "HARD PROBLEM" OF BEAUTY

**Dr Vid Simoniti**

As Karun has mentioned, I was the inaugural Jeffrey Rubinoff Research Fellow in Art as a Source of Knowledge at Churchill College in Cambridge. A few days after I first got that Fellowship, I had this icon pop up in my Skype. 'Jeffrey Rubinoff had added me'. I was surprised when I saw that, and a couple of days later we had our first Skype meeting. It went on for two-and-a-half hours: we talked about the relationship between art and the art market, between art and morality, and between Jeffrey's own sculptural practice and certain, especially German, Idealist philosophers that I had studied. Jeffrey was very much interested. It was this incredible revelation that the person who had endowed the Fellowship I was the beneficiary of, was not only an artist, but very much a philosophical artist. He was a thinking artist, an artist with whom I could have these very rich and especially engaged conversations for so long. There was no small talk in those hours. I do not think anyone mentioned weather or "what time is it in your time zone" or anything like that. It was just art and what it means, straight off.

I hope that in the philosophy panel, we are going to talk about some of these ideas. About what art is for in a way that is accessible but also showcases that thinking about art is intellectually challenging, and that it's possible to drill deep into these issues in a way that Jeffrey would have wanted to.

In my talk I am going to discuss artistic conscience and what I am going to call the "hard problem of beauty". I am going to think through these issues with the help of the American philosopher

and thinker W. E. B. Du Bois, who was heavily involved in the struggle for Black liberation in the twentieth century. For my purposes, Du Bois will be viewed as a philosopher, rather than as an historian and a sociologist. Then what I am going to try and do is bring some of these ideas in conversation with Jeffrey's own ideas and work. I am doing this partly because I feel that one way in which ideas are kept alive is by bringing them in conversation with others and because I, like James, am one of the speakers who have been exposed to these ideas of Jeffrey's.

Our culture now is at a highly politicised point. Music, TV series, art, films, are media through which artists are thinking about pressing issues at the moment. They do not shirk from bringing a variety of problems facing our societies into art. From artists like Hito Steyerl, who is a video artist talking about surveillance capitalism, to artists like Ai Wei Wei and Anish Kapoor talking about refugee crises. From Beyoncé embracing Black Lives Matter in her hip-hop videos to TV series like *A Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's novel, tackling issues of patriarchy and feminism. It seems that artistic autonomy today is a dead position. Politics and morality, if you like, are regularly brought into all cultural expressions that surround us. In this context, it seems that the artist's ability to express moral conscience is almost limitless. Artists are encouraged to put their political leanings, what their conscience tells them is important, into their work.

Perhaps this raises a problem, a problem which I think was also something that Jeffrey thought of.

In the kind of public sphere that we have, one which is dominated by the art market, in which museums and galleries and other media outlets are so free to express political messages, these political messages become just easy, go-to paroles that we can subscribe to but actually do not live up to.

For example, if you go to an art biennial you will find all kinds of political messages strongly expressed. You might have a work like Ai Wei Wei's *F Lotus*, which arranges refugee jackets on rings and suspends them on a fountain in front of the Belvedere Palace in Vienna. This has a very strong message, condemning the European response to the refugee crisis. But is it not a bit too easy, to go over there, to agree with this message, and to then go home and not think about it anymore? When art is so free to express a clear political idea, is the result that it acts a little bit like the confessional box in a Catholic Church, if I think about my own upbringing. You go in, you offload your sins, and then you are free to go and enjoy yourself. I think this is a problem that should not lead us to condemn political presence in art, but something that artists and curators must negotiate and struggle with.

To think through this question of "how is it that art should express conscience or political or moral conscience in today's situation", I am going to refer to some of the ideas of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois was one of the key thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century from the United States. He was one of the co-founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and one of the thinkers that thought through the Harlem Renaissance, a period of great flourishing in African American cultural life. He also bequeathed us many concepts that have been very influential in both sociology and philosophy. I am going to focus, though, on his essay "Criteria of Negro Art", which was given first as a public address, where he makes this curious connection between what he calls propaganda and beauty. I am hoping that will give us some useful concepts for thinking about the role of political conscience in art.

In this address, "Criteria of Negro Art", Du Bois puts forward the controversial claim that all art is propaganda and always must be. First, we should think about that statement in the context of the battle between the idea of autonomous art –art that should

pursue only beauty and aesthetic experience – versus tendentious art – art which should express a strong political message. Usually people refer to a debate between Du Bois and another thinker of the time, Alain Leroy Locke, also known as the Dean of the Harlem Renaissance. He claimed that artists should choose art and put aside propaganda, and that art should express certain ideas of beauty and seek acceptance in the wider world, rather than just put forward strong political messages. Now this division between autonomous art and tendentious art is a little bit schematic, but I think it is a useful one to start with.

This is the quotation:

“All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent”.

On the one hand, Du Bois here seems to be saying that, in the particular historical moment that Black Americans found themselves in at that time, one must not be afraid to put strong political messages into art.

Take, for example, Richard Bruce Nugent’s drawing titled “Dancing Figures”. In it, you can see a way in which this artist has tried to express an interesting, alive, vivid, artistic vision for, in this case, Black Americans, in a way which creates this spiritual uplift—this sense of art that can aid the political movement in an important way. That seems clear enough, but what is confusing and controversial is Du Bois’ equation between art and propaganda, because propaganda is a loaded and difficult term. We think of propaganda as something that shuts down our cognitive

capacities. We think of propaganda as art that screams at you and makes you believe, perhaps, in one political cause; but also makes you stupid in the process. So why is it that Du Bois made this controversial claim, and how should we interpret it?

One way to interpret Du Bois is to think of him as really making a case for tendentious art—making a case for art which has a strong political message. Now, within the context of 1920s and 1930s America, we might think of that as making a case for art which strongly expresses that black people are equal to white people in the United States, and that they are just as capable of love, creativity, flourishing as other citizens. But perhaps in the contemporary context we might think of this claim that today we should pursue art which has a strong, straightforward political message—perhaps something like Ai Wei Wei’s F Lotus – and not pursue autonomous art—art which is concerned with beauty and creativity alone. So, one interpretation is to see him as setting up an opposition between these two options: either art is highly political or art is concerned with beauty, and we must go down one road rather than another.

I think the more interesting interpretation is one I hope we are going to talk about more today. Du Bois here achieves something which makes philosophers excited. That is to do the following: in a situation where it seems there is a fork in the road, where it seems you must pick one option or another, Du Bois, in fact, conflates these two positions. He is making the claim, I think, not that the artist should choose between a political message or creativity, but instead that the artist should precisely, through the exercise of creativity, through the exercise of things that are particular to art, like beauty and creativity, aim to express a certain political ideal. This is a very interesting, but also a very difficult proposition, which I hope we can think about.

There are two things that one can do here. One is to engage in interpretation, to think about whether Du Bois really means what I am ascribing to him. I should say that other commentators have thoughts along similar lines, and I think then one has to really go into the text and start looking at Du Bois' other texts.

In this essay, "Criteria of Negro Art", just before he makes his claim about propaganda, Du Bois writes "it is the bound duty of Black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization of beauty, beauty to set the world right, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before. The apostle of beauty thus becomes the apostle of truth and right, not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion". He goes on to say, "thus all art is propaganda and ever must be". Here, Du Bois is again doing something interesting. He is talking about propaganda, but he is also emphasising this need for beauty. We can think here of illustrators or artists of the Harlem Renaissance like Charles Colin, who created these incredibly uplifting but not straightforward political works, like his illustration of an angel, which does take a black man as its subject matter, but does not actually push a particular political message down your throat. Rather it creates a vision both fantastical, creative, and perhaps beautiful. Before I explain how I think Du Bois solves this problem, how all this connects to Jeffrey Rubinoff, I would like you to take two minutes and talk to your neighbour about this weird idea.

If we say that it is precisely by pursuing beauty that art expresses a political ideal, what could that be? What could that mean? Does this ring true of any other artists or political movements or philosophers that you have come across?

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## DIALOGUE ON ARTIST'S CONSCIENCE, ART'S TENDENCY, AND THE "HARD PROBLEM" OF BEAUTY

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** Brian and I had a very interesting, albeit brief, conversation. In the larger article you assigned, he seems to quite answer at least the second part. He seems to have a particular political agenda in terms of the rejection of what might be considered "black beauty" by a dominant white artistic community. Part of his radical mandate is to inject black beauty into the universal of what is accepted as beauty. Brian contributed a more sophisticated understanding of the first part of the question. Precisely by pursuing that which is peculiar to art, Brian defined that equation as beauty and political. They define and create each other in the medium of art in a unique way.

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** I had very similar thoughts. I wrote down "black is beautiful", which was a very powerful slogan of the 1960s which is all about the affirmational side of an African American identity. Pointing towards the way in which the very corporeal being of the African American was demonized, derided, and so forth, lynched, mutilated, enslaved, etc., and what a struggle it was to create an affirmative self image. Through the power of the art, that was very much on the agenda of Aaron Douglas and all these other fantastic artists of the Harlem Renaissance. I had not read this statement by Du Bois before, but I am going to use it in my classes, thank you.

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** Let me take a leap of theoretical and philosophical faith and make a comparison between what I have just been talking about, which is of course very historically specific, and the art of Jeffrey Rubinoff. I think that, within a completely

different context, this same problem of how can it be that something which is at first look beautiful and focuses your aesthetic experience like Jeffrey Rubinoff's sculpture, could also have a political or a moral focus expressed through it? We have already mentioned Jeffrey's definition of art, that art is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience. As James has so eloquently told us, Jeffrey had many strong political opinions and beliefs, which he did think about while he was making art.

One other quote which is indicative of this broader philosophy is that "art provides a means to experience the sacred beyond prescriptive narrative". We have had several interesting conversations on the tour about what Jeffrey might have meant by sacred, but prescriptive narrative is important here too. It is not that art should express a political view by prescribing a particular narrative or by forcing a very articulate political message down your throat, by saying that you look at a sculpture and the sculpture stands for opposition to nuclear deterrence or that the sculpture stands for a certain environmental message. Rather, the sculpture should lead you to use your ability to express that moral conscience through the aesthetic experience itself: through walking around the sculpture, through considering how it relates to the environment around it, and these formal, beautiful considerations.

I think both Du Bois and Rubinoff, in different ways, are struggling with this difficult question. How can the experience of beauty provide the moral conscience with an opportunity to express itself? What is the solution to this problem? It is a complicated one. Many philosophers have thought about the problem. From Schiller, today perhaps people like Jacques Ranciere, Adrian Piper, who is an artist philosopher. I think, though, that Du Bois' own solution is one which emphasises the ability of humans to find a flourishing kind of life through their engagements with beauty, with particular visual stimuli.

Here's a quote from his address to Fisk University: "Life is more than meat, it is the free enjoyment of every normal appetite . . . hence rise love, friendship, emulation, and ambition in increasing circles of apprehended and interpreted truth".

Rather than think of art as propagandistic in a sense of encapsulating a very clear political message, what I think is happening is that art offers you a set of visual concepts which enable you to articulate a flourishing life. To put it in a different way, it is not about art giving you a certain kind of message, but rather giving you a certain language or perhaps a certain set of stylistic resources to then articulate a positive message for yourself. Art is more about giving tools than it is about telling you what to do. In the case of the art of the Harlem Renaissance, we might think of these tools as ones that enabled more specifically a positive image for black people in America at the time.

Allan made his connection to the 1960s and to the later movements around Civil Rights and the Black Power movement, where Black Is Beautiful was an important slogan. Here too, you have visual stimuli which allow you to articulate a more uplifted kind of life. In this case, I find Richard Bruce Nugent interesting. He was an artist who W. E. B. Du Bois happened to dislike because Nugent did not make art which would straightforwardly communicate ideas of spiritual uplift. He did not like the slightly sexual or homosexual connotations of his works, but here you can see an image which is just two women playing in the foliage. This enables you to construct a different narrative for oneself than one would be able to with just shapes or visual language, which would have been available to African Americans in the 1920s and before.

You might contrast this example with a propagandistic work like the much older Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin". It is a novel, but one that articulates a very strong political message: that black slaves should be lifted from their condition and incor-

porated into society. It does so by using negative stereotypes, by depicting people with offensive stereotypes available at the time. Here we instead see this shift to a different visual language that enables you to articulate a more positive vision.

What about Jeffrey's art in connection to this? One theme that runs through Jeffrey's concern with nuclear deterrence, with genetic engineering, and, to an extent, with climate change, is one of creating a language which allows us to express a certain kind of affinity with the natural world which we must preserve, rather than allow these existential threats to wipe it away. Here's a quote by him, which goes "without life there is no witness to this awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe", here meaning human life, "as far as we know, we fragile humans are the only fully cognisant witnesses. This is the highest of human values, the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience. This is the essence of our being; art is the map of the human soul."

What kind of concepts does Rubinoff's sculpture provide that we might be able to articulate a more flourishing life for ourselves with? We live, of course, at a moment of great existential crisis for humanity, and a great environmental potential crisis for humanity. It is really notable that even though we might want to put forward a lot of political messages about the importance of battling climate change, about the importance of preserving the environment, our everyday life is not couched in concepts which would allow us to think of ourselves as flourishing when we are in sync, when we are in harmony with the environment. When we think about flourishing life, and I think this is almost inescapable, we think of fashion, we think of taking friends out for dinner, eating tasty meals, taking flights, going about our lives in the way that we go about them. These are our concepts; we cannot think outside of them. These concepts are probably not such as to enable us to lead flourishing lives in a way that will preserve

the environment, rather than destroy it through ever increasing consumption.

I think with Jeffrey's work, even though it is wholly abstract, this is something that is core to it. When you are looking for dissonances and contrapuntal moments within the work, it is about these forms being in sync with one another, being in sync across different series, being in sync across series which stretch from the beginning of evolution, from the beginning of life on earth, to contemporary conceptual works and contemporary political problems. They also create a sense of harmony, not just among themselves internally, but with what he described as lifelines of the environment, the lifelines of this beautiful landscape which we are in the midst of. In that sense perhaps beauty today, both through Rubinoff's work and artists yet to come, can play a strong and important political role, one which allows us to think of ourselves in synchronicity with the environment around us. This is somewhat abstract, but I think it is for the philosophers to formulate the abstract idea and for the artists to bring it to life.

To conclude, the way that I am thinking about the dilemmas of art today, art that we see in biennials and galleries, is that there must be a role for art to play in thinking through the problems of political conscience today, but it has perhaps become too easy for art of today to express strong political messages. It is like art as usual to go to a biennial and see political messages. The really difficult thing is to articulate a language, these visual concepts that we can then use to see ourselves as more integral parts of this world.

**Arash E. Jahromi:** It seems that for Jeffrey, and for Du Bois, messages or ideas are more important than art, so delivering a message is the important part. Why should we use art? Why not write a book or talk about our ideas? Would it not be clearer?

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** I think this problem arises if one thinks of art as just expressing messages. Jeffrey was relatively unsatisfied with certain forms of post-conceptual art, which were concerned only with putting forward a message that could be easily translated into text. For the sake of debate, look at Ai Wei Wei's piece. The artist is creating a work which has a very clear message: "the refugee crisis is a terrible thing and Europe has not done enough to help". Many refugees were dying on the shores of the Mediterranean. Ai Wei Wei's piece presents life jackets arranged in circles. It is a powerful work but as soon as it is translated into a message, the worry is that it becomes just a sentence on a t-shirt—something you can clearly say and be done with. Then the question arises, why not just write a book or an article about it?

Both Du Bois and Jeffrey's art offers a way out of that paradox. They state that the role of art is to create an aesthetic experience, a sense of beauty. It is not only about the message, but also about making sense of the world. It is about being uplifted and transferred into a realm of fantasy and experience. Their art also provides, not a message, but the means and the concepts to articulating a message. Jeffrey's art is impossible to interpret in a straightforward manner. It does, however, offer an ability to viewers to think about themselves in harmonious relation to the world. Rather than putting forward a message, it changes dispositions and how the experience is organized.

**Dr James Nguyen:** How important is it that the message is seen as politically progressive, rather than providing a style with which one can express regressive ideas? Is that still valuable?

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** I think that the art that uses a style which allows the expression of progressive ideas is better than the art that does so for regressive ideas. Art is open-ended in a way that a message is not. There is nothing preventing someone from taking a work and using it for a different purpose. This is what happened

with Nazism in many ways: they took art that was expressive of ideas of corporeal beauty and used it to express messages that are incredibly oppressive. It is too much to ask of art to express ideas that will immediately save the world. It can only hope to open a conceptual space that communities can use to move forward.

**Zachary Weinstein:** How important is it for beauty to be the art's own, rather than form or however else you want to deal with the territory? Is there supposed to be a positive valence of beauty? Is that supposed to lead you to some of the more progressive promises that you are identifying with the threat of triumph of the will?

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** The term 'beauty' is imported from Du Bois, though people do use different concepts in a more concerted theoretical discussion. Jeffrey did not talk about beauty very much, but he did talk about art as something that is experiential rather than providing a message. He sometimes used the word sacred as opposed to a prescriptive narrative, I think it has to do with that experiential aspect. It does have a specific valence because it is an experience which is a harmonizing one, a pleasant one, an affirming one, rather than one that is focused on the disgusting, things falling apart which elsewhere in the 20th century have been put to really good use. It is important to think about what that particular experience can do. The 20th century and especially the second half has been very down on beauty, after the experience of perversions of neoclassicism in the Nazi and other Fascist regimes. I think that today so many of the regressive forces are using these non-beautiful affects. If you think about populists like Trump or other new populisms, they are using satire and ugliness and rude vulgar humour. It is interesting to think if we can reclaim something like beauty or aesthetic harmony for progressive things in our world.

**Brian Pollick:** Given the monumentality of Jeffrey's work, I am wondering how he would have understood materiality? The use of materials – like metals that have come from different parts of previous existence – that are part of the everyday can enable accessibility to a different kind of visual experience and language. Would that have been a way of connecting with that inner and outer sacredness?

**John Kirk:** There was a day, working with Jeffrey, where he said that 'this piece probably has some medieval sword in it, some German tank in it' and so on. He saw that each piece had history to it, just beyond what we are seeing. He was very much aware of that.

**Ambreen Hussaini:** We are talking about morality as a social construct and conscience as something from inside. This balance between the social and the individual is present in Jeffrey's work. The reflections and the experientiality is there. What is the reception of this? How do people respond to this balance that Jeffrey has put forward to us, and how can we engage with that? How are people doing that in this communal setting?

**Karun Koernig:** The sculptures and the landscaping activate the natural surroundings as an aesthetic experience. When you walk into a space, you tend to look at the human objects as opposed to the natural ones. Jeffrey is integrating them, because they are grounded and there are no pedestals. He is integrating these aesthetic objects into this other aesthetic reality and forcing you to consider the whole. It is a gesture. It takes some time to get there.

Jeffrey said that one of the temporal aspects of the work is the change within the observer. You change, and so your perspective on the work and what you are bringing to it changes. There is no political action required after coming to the Jeffrey Rubinoff

Sculpture Park. It would be completely at odds with the spirit of Jeffrey's message, which was a sense of a non-prescriptive narrative. Jeffrey developed a whole approach to and language for a type of aesthetic experience that could move our moral consciousness. We can imagine humanity being beyond counterpoint with nature. It is working on our imagination and how we see ourselves, rather than prescribing specific action. Jeffrey fell much more obviously on the side of getting ever more universal.

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— Dr Vid Simoniti

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## ART AND ITS FREEDOM TO BE POLITICAL

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart**

I will start by saying that I reject the idea that art should be propaganda, though I do not disagree with Du Bois. Propaganda lacks the freedom and ambiguity that I consider constitutive for something to count as art. I think what he actually meant is that all art is political art. By political I mean that art comprises features that are constitutive for exercising democratic citizenship. To be more precise, I believe that all art allows us to exercise freedom.

While freedom, in addition to equality, solidarity, and justice, is an essential political value, I will argue that it also manifests an aesthetic value. Freedom as a feature of an artwork therefore allows us to distinguish good art from bad art. My suspicion is that freedom is an experiential value, rather than an aesthetic property, meaning that it is as part of the experience that it constitutes aesthetic value. In order to make this claim, a more nuanced distinction between different types of art and freedom might be necessary.

In order to differentiate art as propaganda from political art, it needs to be clear that political art does not limit the autonomy of art, whereas art as propaganda does. If art is used as propaganda, it pursues the implementation of a clearly defined and political agenda. I think there are wonderful works of activist art—which could be called propaganda—but I do not think it is art.

As an example, the Mbamba Collective, a collective based in South Africa that was fighting the apartheid regime, has a mural that I do not think is very clearly defined propaganda. I do, however, doubt it is art either. Their message is clear—they want to fight the

apartheid regime—so it is something between political art and propaganda.

There are artworks which have political messages without being propaganda. For instance, the work of Sethembile Msezane—a black artist from South Africa who performed as a specific bird in front of the Rhodes sculpture as part of the Rhodes Must Fall protests in South Africa—or the environmental art of Olanrewaju Tejuoso—a Nigerian artist who was exhibited at the Dak'Art biennial in 2017. These artworks do not prescribe a clear political message but invite viewers to engage with pressing political topics.

My definition of political art is quite broad: they are pieces of art that encourage you to exercise skills and virtues that are relevant to the practice and improvement of democratic citizenship. I will adopt an argument by Juliane Rebentisch that calls for art's freedom to be political.

Initially it sounds like a counterintuitive claim. If we believe art to be autonomous, then political art might be viewed as diminishing this autonomous nature. Art's political power, I propose, is very subtle and nuanced, rather than explicit and propagandistic, and therefore expresses art's autonomy rather than limiting its freedom. I think if we look at political works—works that force you to engage with certain virtues or skills necessary to be an active political citizen—we might find similar properties in much of the works here at the Sculpture Park.

During the introduction to the *Company of Ideas* Forum in 2010, Jeffrey Rubinoff made a claim. He said that: “to measure the inherent value of an artist's work is to be able to accept each artist's perception of the extent of all human knowledge in that artist's time. Original art is created beyond the limits of that extent and informs rather than reflects.”

There is a strong parallel there to Juliane Rebentisch's ideas that art is something that pushes us to exceed our limits in order to take on new information, knowledge, and ideas. This push is freedom.

To go back to what Rebentisch is saying in *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, “by contrast, in democracy a dialectic of freedom penetrates both spheres, ethics and politics, and sets them in motion. Because the good is only given to us historically, making our practical orientations never entirely stable, we must constantly redefine what we want (to be) in lived interaction with the world.” I think this is exactly what art is doing with us: it is challenging us to constantly redefine what we want and how we would like to be in engagement and interaction with the world. That is what I take to be the freedom of art, freedom as an aesthetic value.

Before I make my argument, let me introduce a historic example that illustrates potential conflicts that my argument might face. Let us go back to South Africa and the Mbamba murals. In 1989 the South African anti-apartheid activist Albie Sachs gave a very controversial paper delivered at an internal African National Congress (ANC) workshop seminar on culture.

The ANC has been the ruling party in South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994. Before then, it was banned in South Africa because it aims to unite all Africans. This included black Africans, which conflicted with the main target of racial segregation during the apartheid regime. Sachs, despite being a progressive anti-apartheid activist, proposed the following idea: “the first proposition I make – and I do so fully aware of the fact that the ANC is totally against censorship and for free speech – is that we should ban ourselves from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. I suggest a period of, say, five years.” His reason for this demand was a belief that resistance or propagandistic art impoverished the artistic nature of a piece.

He continued: “in the first place, it makes our art purer. Instead of getting real criticism we get solidarity criticism.” You might think here of artists who are criticized not on the artistic nature of their work but receive “solidarity criticism” based on the content of the message they are conveying. Albie Sachs rejected this idea. He said: “people do not feel free to criticize the work of our artists because it would be wrong to criticize a weapon of struggle. Therefore our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work. We accept that they are politically correct and so we do not criticize their work fully and honestly.”

That is the danger of art as propaganda. If art conveys a message, we might not dare to criticize it because it might mean that we criticize its message. It might be a terrible piece, artistically, but thrive on the idea that it is politically correct.

Albie Sachs made an interesting comparison. He said that his concern for the instrumentalization of art was that the political struggle would distract from art’s real power, [which is not] to alert us to aspects of life which are obvious — not hidden. He said that “a real weapon of struggle is a straightforward thing. A gun is a gun is a gun. There is no question about it. It fires only in one direction, similarly to propagandistic art. But art and culture have a different kind of power. Art and culture can look in many different directions at once to show us things which are hidden, to many different things of life which are not clear cut at all.” This ambiguity is why we cannot say that art is a weapon in the same way a gun is a weapon. Rather than mourning the misery of the past, art ought to sketch out a utopia of a brighter future.

Sachs very much aligns here with the politics of anticipation. Interestingly, he also aligns with someone who is not typically known for promoting art. Namely, Plato.

Plato rejected art for a similar reason to his detest of democracy: freedom. If we want to defend art, we also must defend its freedom. Plato conceived of democracy as a problematic form of government—almost the lowest form of government—because it features freedom as its highest virtue. He believed that, rather than being oriented towards the form of the good, democratic politics resembled a democratic person: a person whose reason was not the sole governor, who could be distracted by emotions and desires. Since art appeals to these aspects of humanity, Plato was sceptical of the arts, worried they might prevent people from independent critical thinking. However, an important distinction to make is that he only rejected the mimetic arts.

Plato was, specifically, concerned that the broad masses are easily misled by drones. The following quote, which is symbolic of demagogues—someone like Trump, for instance—is particularly topical: “When a younger man in the republic who was reared in the miserly and uneducated manner we described tastes the honey of the drones and associates with wide and dangerous creatures who can provide every variety of multi-coloured pleasure in every sort of way, this, as you might suppose, is the beginning of his transformation from having an oligarchical constitution within him to having a democratic one.”

Plato did not believe that ordinary citizens were wise enough to integrate their desires into their rational parts. He proposed a Socratic leadership, according to which philosophers—knowledgeable in the form of the good—would determine the structure of the state in order to benefit everyone. In this vision of an ideal *polis*, however, Plato himself uses art. His *Republic* is itself a piece of art in which he uses dialogue and diction to challenge his interlocutors to critical thinking. Plato is an artist who uses the freedom of art to be political, in order to sketch out a political system. He does this by not giving up this ambiguity. His dialogues are never resolved, so if you read them you must think for your-

self: that is his great achievement as an artist. I think this is also what art is doing. Near the end of his life, Plato formulated the *Nomoi*, ensuring that trust in the philosophers would not suffice. Citizens require laws as guidelines for individual decisions, since the overall good is too abstract a category to be implemented. If individuals need laws, they should become lawgivers themselves; they should become autonomous. I think only if we have these autonomous individuals should we say we have democracy.

Our current democracies are under threat because of education failures. People are not willing to accept that it is their responsibility to think for themselves. There is a tendency to say that politicians have failed; but in fact every one of us can become a politician. We have the responsibility to be active, to be critical, and to exercise this freedom in the public discourse.

But how should we do this? How can we engage with art as a form of ongoing self-examination?

Abstract moral laws are too abstract. They require the citizen to make individual moral judgements, which in turn require a level of personal freedom. Both art and democracy force us to make individual decision because both refuse to be conditioned by something clearly defined.

Juliane Rebentisch, again, makes an educated argument that allows us to see how we can safeguard democracy by engaging with the arts. She highlights, in her writing, the link between freedom, art, and democracy. She says: "the democrat does not merely abandon his changing self interpretations in the light of the prevailing self image, rather he only exists in and through his changing self interpretations. Like a chameleon, he is constantly in flux." Plato feared the arts simply because of this state of constant flux. He desired something that was fixed, a system where every human being finds his or her duty within the perfect state. He

was afraid of something that would overstep boundaries and challenge people to constantly define themselves anew, which is exactly what art does.

Juliane Rebentisch then continues by saying: "this in turn means that acts of self-determination necessarily occur in the name of a self that does not exist prior to those acts, at least not as such. It is only through this act of self-determination that the subject brings itself to bear in this or that determination, in order to then retroactively identify with this determination." While the characteristic of fluctuation bothered Plato, Rebentisch shows that it is an asset for individual determination and engagement in a public dialogue. Certain virtues are necessary to give up the anxiety of interacting with new perspectives. This is especially relevant in our current political crisis. Martha Nussbaum's book, *The Monarchy of Fear*, argues that this anxiety is stopping people from taking on perspectives different to their own. That is why art is so relevant in today's climate, because it forces us to look beyond our own limited perspectives.

Finally, I would like to argue that art is not only required to work towards a vision of society, but also to work towards a vision of oneself. A part of the process of creating a vision for the future is the development of a unique style and personality. Only if we have this style, this personality, can we have these kinds of individual people that are able to engage in a dialogue with others because we dare to abandon our perspective for a while to take on a new perspective. That is also something Albie Sachs promoted when he said: "culture is us, it is who we are, how we see ourselves and the vision we have of the world. In the course of participating in the culture of liberation, we constantly remake ourselves. Organizations do not merely evince discipline and interaction between their members; our movement has developed a style of its own, a way of doing things and of expressing itself, a specific ANC personality."

So how do we then implement these political ideals and personal styles in our everyday lives? Meleko Mokgozi has engaged with these questions in a particularly relevant fashion and has shown how much we can learn from practicing artists. His new series, *Democratic Intuition*, looks at how art can help people engage with democracy further without having to subscribe to a clearly defined political message. Mokgozi pointed, too, towards Axel Honneth, a philosopher of the Frankfurt School. He wrote the book *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, in which he argued that one of the major weaknesses of contemporary philosophy is that it has been uncoupled from the analysis of society, instead becoming fixated on a purely normative principle. This problem has a trajectory that harks back to Plato, whose prioritization of abstract normative principles made it difficult to assess how they ought to be implemented in everyday life. Plato's solution was to introduce laws in his later works as guidelines for actions. An alternative approach is to take aesthetic seriously as a renegotiation of how to implement and negotiate between different conflicting demands.

Conflicts and tension, Juliane Rebentisch points out, are constitutive for the democratic culture of freedom. This is precisely where the aesthetic principle becomes crucial as a realm for conflict and argument. It is there that we can engage with the experience of the ambiguous, the unfixed, and the changing.

In Meleko Mokgozi's *Democratic Intuition* series, he uses architecture in his work to relate back to early Renaissance predella paintings. Mokgozi uses their feel and architecture to show different sets of time, but there is no narrative that combines them. In doing that, he forces us to bring them together, to create something out of the friction that is inherent in the image. We must make a narrative ourselves by engaging with these multiple different perspectives. In a way, art serves as a public platform for discourse in order to engage with different kinds of ideas.

This is similar to the Sculpture Park, where we are confronted with multiple perspectives. We are made to engage with them by walking around them, by trying to understand a certain perspective. Stepping back and engaging with a different perspective is essentially the discourse that Plato desired in a perfect state. What he did not understand is that art allows us to build this. We cannot only do this through verbal dialogue.

That is why I find Mokgozi's work interesting, read against the background of Thomas Docherty's book *Aesthetic Democracy*, in which he argues that cultural events allow us to see the potential for freedom. He says that aesthetic democracy is based on the potentiality of democracy, because of this link to the metaphysics of going beyond. This is almost exactly what Jeffrey Rubinoff said, that art is going beyond the limits, constantly stretching our freedom further. That is something which Docherty views as really significant for our current climate of political crisis, which he anticipated in 2006, where we do not have stable democracies, where more and more democracies are taken over by populist politicians, politicians who use strategies from propaganda in order to infiltrate people. It is no longer about this independent critical thinking, taking on new perspectives, but about a clearly formulated single perspective.

Meleko Mokgozi recognizes this idea of democracy in the aesthetic realm. He confronts us with scenes from everyday life in South Africa. He himself is from Botswana, which is north of South Africa but very much linked with its history. He presents scenes from everyday life and asks how democratic intuitions can be implemented there. He does not want to show us the big fighters for democracy. He wants us to become aware that democracy is only thriving if everyone is subscribing to democratic intuition. In his art he is trying out how Axel Honneth's ideas of freedom can be implemented in single artworks, and then by setting these scenes in friction he wants us to make our own dialogue with

the artworks in which we can then negotiate what this freedom consists of.

Mokgozi also wondered about the question of commodification of art: why do we identify with a piece only as an object that fulfills our needs for consumption? In *Democratic Intuition*, it was about engaging with the new concept of time. Mokgozi refuses to subscribe to the concept of a linear time frame. Instead, he is interested in African concepts of time and space. Immanuel Kant said that, in Western philosophy, we could not live without the concept of time and space in order to perceive things. Meleko Mokgozi believes that, because African philosophy does not have this concept of time, we would have to establish a new system in order to understand what African philosophers want to communicate. In a way, if we maintain our Western perspective, we will never fully understand the content of these works because they really require us to abandon our traditional categories of time and space. That is why Mokgozi brings forward this friction.

His work is also interesting because it displays an emptiness in private environments. Meleko Mokgozi is deeply concerned that South Africa no longer has a public sphere. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas argued that a functioning democracy requires a sphere to allow for public discourse. Without these, there is no exchange between the private interior and the public outside, and individuals become increasingly isolated. There is no discourse anymore. Mokgozi's message is not clearly political, but it is a subtle demand to bring out dialogue necessary to sustain democratic functioning. He also criticizes the problem of corruption among the ANC itself, which used to thrive on these utopian visions of freedom. The reality is different today, it is a corrupt party which desires a capitalist vision of freedom, focused namely on satisfying consumer capitalism.

Rather than mediating a propagandistic message, art engagement could initiate a process of engaging with multiple perspectives. This process is leading to truth, which requires constant self-evaluation. If art promotes the openness that it shares with the democratic process, Plato would certainly see some value in it. Its ability to open up a realm of freedom means that all art is political to a certain extent. This political nature should be manifested as propaganda but as the freedom of art. If freedom is a core aesthetic value, then art is free to be political.

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## DIALOGUE SESSION ON ART AND ITS FREEDOM TO BE POLITICAL

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** Can you clarify what you said about content being propaganda? Clearly content is broad and can be many things, but we could turn it around and say propaganda is propaganda by virtue of its content.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** If a piece has one singular message (for instance, if a poster has an advertisement that clearly encourages audiences to buy a product), it cannot be artwork because, for me, art always possesses ambiguity. This may be a problematic description of artwork, but I think the definition of an artwork would lose something if we let go of this ambiguity, because that is what makes art exciting and challenging. It does not have a clearly defined message like an advertisement.

**Arash E. Jahromi:** Thank you Sarah. In your abstract you write that the political nature of life can impact all realms of life. What is the reason that you think all of life is political? And how do you define that?

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** I think there are certain virtues that lead to the implementation of freedom. These may be moral virtues, but they are transferable to the political realm, to the moral realm, to the aesthetic realm. That is why I think there is this overlap, we cannot clearly separate what is political and what is, for instance, moral.

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** Could you give a specific example of a virtue that you are talking about? You said there are certain

virtues we obtain in the aesthetic realm, in the moral realm, in the political realm. What is an example of a virtue like that?

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** A virtue would be attentiveness. In order to understand an artwork, you must attend to it. You cannot rush through a museum just taking photos. That is not engagement with the aura of an artwork, because it lacks the attentive necessary to understanding the work. That is a virtue transferable to the political realm. Attentiveness is necessary in order to understand the complexity of a political problem. Similarly, in the moral realm, you cannot make a quick decision of whether something counts as a good or bad action. You must be attentive to it.

**Dr. James Fox:** There are many artworks created with relatively unambiguous messages, such as religious artworks or the sculptures on the Parthenon. There are also many works of propaganda that I believe are great artworks on their own terms, despite their messages. For instance, I believe both of Leni Riefenstahl's films are technical and formal accomplishments. You have a strict definition of art and are excluding things you might not agree with.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** Take, for example, Picasso's *Korean War*. I do not think it is a good artwork—even though it is a Picasso—because it is too clear of a statement. With *Guernica*, it is much more ambiguous. I would argue *Guernica* is not a propagandistic artwork because it possesses this openness and experimentation with artistic language, whereas *Korean War* is propaganda. That is not good artwork. It may be an artwork because of the institutional theory, because Picasso is an acknowledged artist, but it is a bad artwork.

**Dr James Fox:** I am fine with the debate about whether something is good or bad, I was just questioning whether something ceases to be art because it is not ambiguous.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** I do believe it ceases to be art if it is not ambiguous. I think all good religious artworks contain ambiguity and do not explicitly tell you what to believe. Perhaps ambiguity in a smaller sense than in nonreligious work.

**Mona Hedayati:** Are you saying that the more complicated the reading of a message is, the better the art becomes? Consider the Habermasian statement of discussing everything in the public sphere. Even if the message is clear, if you consider the subjectivity of the art and of the viewer, you are still bringing the discussion into the public sphere. In today's world, if that discussion were in the virtual public sphere—if you were to Google it and see what that is—that would still bring it to the public sphere. It would still touch upon the phenomenological aspect of informing yourself whether you agree with that propaganda or not.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** The public sphere does not need to be a realm in the Platonic sense; it can occur in the virtual. I think with this ambiguity I am not saying an artwork must not have a message, but it still needs to have something else, something that engages your creativity or a new development of formal language, some inspiration that makes you go beyond your limits. That is what I mean by this freedom, or to talk in a Kantian sense about this kind of playfulness or free play. I think it is working much better in the aesthetic realm than in verbal dialogue because it has a strong aesthetic component. If something is aesthetic it always is ambiguous, because you bring a new subjectivity to a certain extent as a person brings in their subjectivity, so it is difficult to arrive at something entirely objective. Maybe that is the ambiguity.

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“While freedom, in addition to equality, solidarity, and justice, is an essential political value, I...argue that it also manifests an aesthetic value. Freedom as a feature of an artwork therefore allows us to distinguish good art from bad art.” – S. Hegenbart.

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*Professor Nick Riggle is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Diego. He specializes in aesthetics and explores issues of moral psychology and aesthetics and how they interact. He is the author of *On Being Awesome: A Unified Theory of How Not to Suck*. He will discuss the question of how we live through the concepts of ethics, moral conscience, and propaganda in everyday life, in relation to the ethics of style.*

— Dr Vid Simoniti

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## ETHICS AND STYLE

Prof. Nick Riggle

I will discuss style and the expression of individuality in democratic life and in personal lives. Take President Barack Obama. What did he wear? It was largely casual, though he wore suits when he was acting as President. These were typically navy blue or occasionally a grey one. Not much changed from the beginning of his Presidency to the end. When Obama was asked why he wore largely the same thing every day he said: “You’ll see, I wear only grey or blue suits. I am trying to pare down decisions. I do not want to make decisions about what I am eating or wearing because I have too many other decisions to make.” He said this in 2014, six years into his Presidency.

His comment echoes the comment of another style icon, a person we all deeply admire for style inspiration, Mark Zuckerberg, who in 2014 said: “I really want to clear my life so that I have to make as few decisions as possible about anything other than how to best serve this community. I feel like I am not doing my job if I spend any of my energy on things that are silly or frivolous about my life, so that way I can dedicate all my energy towards just building the best products and services.” Powerful people at the time seemed to suggest that style is too unimportant or trivial to be worth their time. This changed in 2014 when Obama helped a news conference wearing a tan suit—one with a long jacket and baggy pants. This was met with an uproar in the American media. One Gawker headline read: “President Obama Shames America by Wearing Wack-Ass Tan Suit.” This was divisive. Some people supported Obama’s right to wear what he wants, others—like Gawker—took him to task for his choice.

I will start by looking at whether Obama's answer—that he wears the same thing every day because he is too busy—was sincere. There is an air of disingenuousness there, in part by comparing his wife's style. There is, of course, pressure on women to dress up more, but Michelle Obama is as busy as her husband. She has nonetheless found the time to make certain style decisions. Furthermore, Obama did decide to wear his tan suit: why could he not do it more often? I do not think his answer was sincere. Based on this, I will examine the philosophical details of what it would mean for a President to express an individual style.

I want to begin by asking a classic philosophical question: what is *style*? How should people in power relate to it?

Upon immediate philosophical reflection, style is profoundly confusing. The first, most intuitive thought, is that it is simply a way of doing things. Everyone has a way of being in the world, and so everyone has a style. On the other hand, there is the thought that style is cultivated. Style must be actively cultivated—it is an achievement to do so. Therefore, not everyone has a style. These two claims are worrying, because both draw opposite conclusions. In philosophy, this constitutes a contradiction. Both cannot be accepted.

What, then, should we accept? Unfortunately, it is more complicated than above. Along with this descriptive contradiction, there also exists an evaluative contradiction about style. Obama and Zuckerberg voice the thought that 'style is superficial, anything superficial is disposable, so it is unimportant'. On the other hand, there exists the common thought that 'style is inspiring and influential'. There is an industry of style aimed at making you care about it. It is in some ways problematic, but in some ways inspiring. It can profoundly affect how people think about themselves. Style can be inspiring and influential, which would make anything important. Therefore, style is important.

This bring up the contradiction: style is unimportant, and style is important. Which set of claims do you want to accept?

{ Presenter holds a brief mid stream dialogue }

**Karun Koernig:** From my perspective, there is something about style (especially personal style) that is quite unique and creative. Style takes on importance depending on how much thought people put into it. If they do not put thought into it, they are still making a statement—it just is not a very interesting statement. In a sense, I might disagree with you. I believe you could agree with any and all the above claims in different situations.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** Style is ambiguous and can mean different things in different contexts.

**Ambreen Hussaini:** When we started the discussion, the first question we asked was 'are we talking about the artist's style or are we talking about our personal style?' I think personal style varies from time to time. People will carry a style according to the context in which they are. On the other hand, you have the work of style, where every artist has their own style but not every artist cultivates it. This cultivation is important not only for the artist but also for others, because it is inspiring and gives some meaning. Everyone has style, but not everyone cultivates it. In both cases, it remains important: if it is cultivated, it is important for others as well as the artist; if it is not, it is only important for the artist.

**Student:** I think all these terms can be true, it simply depends on the situations. Furthermore, denying a certain style and doing something different is, in itself, a style. Whether you think it is or not, everything has a style.

**Betty Kennedy:** Obama's comments recalled Jeffrey and his style: a black t-shirt, khaki pants, suspenders, and either a black leather jacket or a brown one. It truly was that he did not want to have to think about clothes.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I have a lot of sympathy for that claim, it is a very natural thought.

Even if you believe that everyone has style, what does it mean to cultivate a style? What are we doing when we are cultivating a style? Saying that everyone has a style does not give us a grip on that thought. When is style an achievement? What have you achieved? The first thought is that style is a form of self-expression. When you cultivate a style, what you are doing is expressing a self. The term 'self' is radically ambiguous, so it must first be clarified. What feature of the self is expressed in style? A common answer to the question of what the 'self' is in art history and philosophy literature is that it is personality. Style, therefore, is the expression of personality. This is present in writing on artistic style, personal style, and fashion. However, I do not believe that thought will work.

On the one hand, the first way of thinking—that everyone has a style—makes sense, because everyone has a personality. Their style may be less interesting, but everyone has a personality. I also submit that this style may come out despite a lack of effort to express it. It is not an achievement.

Although this thought is interesting, it does not make sense of the argument that style is cultivated and holds importance. What I want to suggest is that style is the expression of ideals. Not personality, not who you are, but who you aspire to be. This makes sense of artistic style as well, because it is the expression of the artist's ideals. This helps us understand cases where there is a

radical departure between what an artist expresses in their works and who they are as a person.

Philosophers call this the Anna Karenina objection to the personality theory of style. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy is a caring, compassionate, and attentive person, especially towards the plight of women in contemporary Russian society. The same could not be said, apparently, of Tolstoy himself. What is going on there? Artistic style cannot be an expression of Tolstoy's personality, because his personality was very different. Tolstoy's art reflected his ideals. He wanted to be a compassionate writer even if he struggled with compassion in his own life.

This helps with the idea that style is cultivated. How is it cultivated? We cultivate style in part by cultivating an ideal self. We can draw inspiration from different sources, think about who we want to be, who we aspire to be, and express that in our decisions. This also explains how the importance of style can be exploited by commercial culture. It can feed people ideals that will direct their life in ways that benefit commercial culture.

Notice that if we think about style in that way, as the cultivation and expression of ideals, there is something odd about powerful people in democratic societies saying that it is not important. Style is the expression of individuality. The ideal theory of style makes sense of that. Individuality is cultivated by cultivating values and the ideal self. If we did not value style, then we would not be visible to one another as individuals. We would all be masked behind various social roles, in order to live in a peaceful, efficient society.

To emphasize the importance of style, I want to talk about the pervasiveness of social and practical norms in our lives. There are so many of these roles, and we embody them most of the day. We do this all the time: when we walk down the street, order coffee,

go to the bar, rent a hotel room, fly on a plane. We have internalized the scripts for these social and practical roles somehow. When you order coffee, there is a very basic script that plays out in the same way for virtually everyone. There is a greeting, an order, and exchange of money, and a polite end to the interaction. It is an efficient exchange.

We need these roles. If we did not have these scripts memorized, we would not know what to do. We would be unable to communicate clearly. A good, peaceful, egalitarian society needs these scripts to be internalized. They need to be respectful, egalitarian, and moral. But as a result, who we are as individuals obscured.

We can, however, play with these roles in a way that does express our individualities. Suppose that, after hearing “that’ll be 2 dollars please” when ordering a coffee, you do not say “here you go”. Instead, you make a joke: “small price to become human again”. This breaks the script. You have expressed your individuality: your sense of humour. This break allows the employee to make a decision. They can take up the joke and express an individual response, or they can continue to play the role of employee. They might say something like “welcome back” or “it is not a price I am willing to pay”. Or they might say something like “um, here’s your coffee.” As a result of breaking out of your role, you have given the employee an opportunity to break out of theirs. You have seen each other for the individual each other is, not just ‘I am a customer you are an employee.’ When it goes well, there is a little community of individuals.

I think of this as a little instance of style, an expression of my sense of humour, my sensibility, in a democratic, individualistic, and pluralistic society. It plays an important role in creating moments of community among individuals. As an example of how a leader can riff on certain norms in a democratic global order, consider how Trudeau uses socks. Your typical politician does not wear

Chewbacca socks. Trudeau dons the typical black suit. However, people quickly realized that he had a little secret under his shoes. He chooses the socks carefully, to speak to a certain moment. When an Irish politician who loved *Star Wars* visited Canada, Trudeau wore *Star Wars* socks. The politician responded in kind, wearing his own playful socks. This is another instance of the slight breaking of norms by way of expressing individuality, in a way that creates a connection. They call it “sock diplomacy”. This is an example of a politician in a position of power noting the importance of the role requires a bland way of dressing, but nevertheless being able to modify it slightly to good political effect.

That is very different from Obama’s grey suit. I think Obama has a much better answer, on reflection, than the one he gave us. Why does he wear the same suit every day? Well, he is the leader of a representative democracy. What is a representative democracy? In principle, the voice of the people is represented through an individual who speaks on their behalf. Ideally, the leader of a representative democracy symbolizes the people, and so it is out of place for someone in that role to express their individuality. They should be expressing the people. For that reason, it makes sense for a politician to abide by an ethics of style that is consonant with their role as the leader of a representative democracy.

The President’s style should—as a matter of ethics and of aesthetics—reflect the fact that they represent a people and not a self. But how far should that extend to other people in public roles? Does it extend to Congresspeople? Does it extend to judges, police officers, public teachers, and so on? To what extent should that extend to law? Should there be laws about how we can dress in public roles?

Quebec recently passed a bill (Bill 21) that bans public employees from wearing religious symbols at work. Teachers, judges, police officers, and other civil servants, can no longer wear Muslim head-

scarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans, and other symbols of their faith in the workplace. It is easy to make sweeping conclusions about these different roles, but I think we need to be art critics and think about them individually. What is appropriate for each one? Morally and aesthetically speaking, given the president's role, they should perhaps cultivate a style that is appropriate for their role. But what about a judge? What about a police officer or a teacher?

It is essential to separate the moral questions from the political ones. It may be morally and aesthetically inappropriate for a judge to wear religious garb. Why might you think that? Well, there is a history of conflict between Muslims and Christians. If a blatantly Christian judge presides over a case that involves a Muslim defendant, there is, at the very least, a symbolic issue, especially in a secular justice system. It is one thing to think that there is a moral question that has a clear answer, but it is a different question whether it should be legislated. What does moral conscience require of us in these roles?

Imagine being a young student questioning your sexuality. If your teacher comes to class every day wearing prominent religious garb, you might think it is an impressive statement of the person's individuality. But you might look at the religious texts and find that most are deeply homophobic, unfortunately. As a seventh grader trying to figure out your sexuality, you find that most of the people that you admire seem to be adhering to a text that is homophobic. As a teacher in a public role, it is a failing of your moral conscience if you have not reflected on that. You ought to reflect on these issues. What you should do, I think, is a difficult question that is going to depend on the context. You will have to weigh the importance of your role as a mentor to students, of your identity as a religious person, possible power dynamics in your marriage, and potentially people telling you to wear certain things. I think it is important to take each case individually. This

brings up another question: is wearing religious garb stylistic? I think it is increasingly so, meaning that it is an expression of individuality, rather than conformity to a system. It would be a failing not to reflect on how style might affect those over whom one presides.

Finally, there is also a part of the law that is clearly immoral: anyone wearing face coverings is prohibited from receiving government services. That includes healthcare and using public transit. If you are a Muslim woman who thinks it is important to wear a face veil, you cannot access these services, according to the law.

In a democratic society, we must balance the importance of individual expression with the importance of our norms and public roles. This is challenging as citizens of a democracy. It is important that we cultivate our individuality and express it in public; that we confront others with our values. We must also, however, balance that between the institutions and roles that must function in a certain way—efficiently and respectfully—in order to help society run. I think President Trump is failing on this issue. When he goes golfing every weekend in his resort in Florida, that is a failing of style in a public role.

This balance requires what I call aesthetico-ethical insight. It must be achieved on a case-by-case basis, with people understanding the weight of these decisions as they make them themselves. The law should stay out of it.

## DIALOGUE ON ETHICS AND STYLE

**Student:** What would you think of laws around nudity?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** No laws on nudity. I think people should be good at judging when they should walk around naked. Laws should perhaps prohibit nudity in certain places (like the court-room), but in the public sphere I do not think there should be laws against it.

**Ambreen Hussaini:** When you discuss moral conscience, it is not only personal and individual, but our public roles. I understand that we should have the opportunity to express our individuality even in these roles, but how do we balance both? I agree that law might not be able to bring balance, because law imposes on people and balance is different for each individual. How, then, do we achieve that answer? If a teacher is wearing something personal to their faith or her individuality, it is a significant portion of their identity. So how do we create that balance in a practical way, to reach a win-win situation?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I think it depends. It takes judgement in the moment—this Aristotelian ability to see what the right thing to do is in the situation. Why did the person in the coffee shop spontaneously crack that joke? What was it about the context that made that seem like the right thing to do? It can be difficult to strike that balance. Regarding the public role and the teacher, I think there are a lot of professional roles that require a type of uniform, like a doctor or someone working in a retail context. We think it is fine for them not express themselves, by wearing a uniform or acting in a certain way, to embody their role. I do not think it is out of the question that a teacher would think that it is appropriate to have a sort of uniform in that role. I am not saying

that is the right thing to do, but professional roles and uniforms are a possibility to consider.

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** In Quebec, it is more than style. It is symbols related to one's identity. And in this case, it is about imposing another identity—namely Quebec as a Francophone culture drawing from laws in France. There is an overt attempt to signify French identity embedded in this prohibition, which leads to the question of how you are being identified as inside or outside of a culture.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I think you are right about the law being motivated in those ways, and that is to me deeply objectionable.

**Zachary Weinstein:** Did the analysis of style give you the tools to explain the idea of the superficiality of style? You could think that style is thought to be superficial because you fail to properly express your ideal, or that you favour individuality for individuality's sake rather than that ideal. But I wondered what resources this analysis had to explain the genuine feeling of superficiality.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I am tempted to say that people are confusing style with fashion. You might think fashion is superficial (though I love fashion as an art) because the fashion industry can be superficial. That superficiality might be conflated with style. Style is expressive of something. There may be a way of using the theory to explain it, perhaps that it is the unreflective adoption of certain ideals.

**Maria Buhne:** In terms of wearing particular things (say, a schoolteacher), I believe the morality comes with the role that you bring to the style you are portraying. You want to express yourself, but also understand that you cannot impose those ideas on your students. Ideas about dress codes are often specifically imposed on young women and young girls, looking at skirt length

or the straps on tank tops. I had to deal with male teachers telling me to put on a coat, for example. What ideas would you have on this matter?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I am sorry you had to experience that. There are similar bans on what children can wear in public schools in France (and possibly in Belgium). I am sure the Quebecois government is hoping to do something similar. They are looking at similar bans on religious items in daycare systems, but I do not know what to think about it yet. I went to public schools my whole life and we could wear essentially what we wanted. I do not remember there being many limits on what we could wear as long as it was clothing, but I know that Catholic schools have very strict dress codes. I do not know what to think about it.

**John McGillivray:** Do you think style changes with age? As you grow older, does your style change? How does it evolve? Do you conform to it or rebel against it? How does that in a larger social context play on how style evolves?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** My theory of style is that it is the expression of ideals. As we age, our ideals change—as they should. Part of this depends on what you think it is to have a personal ideal. I have a way of thinking about that which is very in line with Sarah's thoughts on the idea of openness in democratic citizenship. Part of being a good democratic citizen is being open to new values and new ways of life. This does not necessarily mean adopting them as your own but being appreciative of them. When we have this openness, our style can change even more because we are influenced in ways we might not have predicted. This might not have been consistent with the ideals we had before we encountered that new style. Our style does change a lot and it should change a lot, it is a feature of style that it is dynamic and open.

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** Nick has just given us a talk about personal style in a personal way, which we might think about as it relates to artistic style. Sarah and I both tried to negotiate the controversial path between propaganda and more subtle forms of political art. Sarah offered a solution whereby art allows us to negotiate different perspectives and exercise freedom. I tried to offer a view of beauty from which we formulate new visual concepts, which then allow us to create a flourishing life.

I hope we have provided ideas which are a bit provocative and controversial. Have we got any questions, comments, for any one of us or for the panel as a whole?

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## OPEN DIALOGUE ON DAY ONE PRESENTATIONS

**Ambreen Hussaini:** Jeffrey's definition of art is reflective and connected to sacred individuality. Style must be cultivated by going deep into oneself and reflecting on connection with the sacred. My question is for Sarah: How can art be political if it is individual and "maps the human soul" (borrowing the words from Jeffrey's definition)?

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** I feel that the idea of the 'sacred' Jeffrey was moving towards is tied to the meaning of life. He said that he wanted to get God out of the studio, so this idea was not linked to any specific religious belief. It is something more open. Perhaps he meant that life is meaningful, and that this meaning is given by the experience of the sacred.

I wonder whether the political nature of art could be the experience of meaning. Politics aims to formulate a vision for a community that allows everyone, every individual, to lead a meaningful life. There would, therefore, be an overlap. There is always tension in a political situation between individual needs and the needs of the community, which requires negotiation. I believe this could happen through the arts.

**Amena Sharmin:** My question is to Nick. You concluded with the comment that law should not be involved. I am concerned with the other perspective. Take the example of someone wearing a burqa or a veil on public transport. I believe she has every right to wear whatever she wants, but I am also concerned about others being afraid about terrorism.

Law is for everyone. On the one hand, she may be deprived if she is not allowed to wear what she wants. On the other hand, other passengers may feel uncomfortable or afraid. How would you suggest that law should act in these kinds of situations? Should law be fully uninvolved, or should there be some balance?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I find it difficult to be sympathetic towards someone who is fearful of a person because of their religious dress. There seems to be a racist association between the dress and terrorism. If there were a law based on that fear, it would be a racist law.

**Amena Sharmin:** Take another example of someone who preferred to be nude in public spaces. Others may say that they are not comfortable with nudity on public transportation. If one person's wants contradict with another person's wants, what should the law do?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I am still tempted to say that this is a matter of public discussion or of ethics; not a legal issue.

**Arash E. Jahromi:** My question is for Nick. What is the relationship between style and great art? Can, for example, Beyoncé's dress be called great art? Can everyday life be considered great art? What is the relation between everyday life, art, and style?

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche states that "style is a great and rare art". He said that we should survey our strengths and weaknesses and fit them into an artistic plan, until even weaknesses delight the eye and it becomes evident that a single taste governed the whole. I am paraphrasing, but I love that quote because Nietzsche's thought seemed to be that style is a matter of being radically open to who you are. That means being open to all our desires, conflicting thoughts, and the chaos in our minds, and fitting it into a style that affirms life. To do that

is difficult, it takes time, reflection, trial and error, inspiration, socialization, community, critique, and so on. It needs to become daily practice.

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** My question is for Vid. If beauty is defined as uplifting and transformative, what is the function of ugliness in art?

**Maria Buhne:** This relates directly to what you said. I am curious about whether or not you agree with aspects of or reject the idea of art for art's sake, kind of stemming back to the whole movement that was happening in the later nineteenth century, and whether or not you actually believe there was political agenda behind what people like Oscar Wilde were doing with both their art, their literature, and the way they styled themselves.

**Prof Pat Leighten:** I would like to discuss the idea that style is socially constructed. You made one statement I must disagree with, which is that Mark Zuckerberg has no style. His style is the kid in the Harvard dorm room, inventing Facebook. He is using that image of youth in order to keep in the persona of the brilliant kid, just as he is becoming one of the most ruthless capitalist exploiters – dangerously so – with the introduction of Facebook cryptocurrency. His style presents him in that way.

Obama looks corporate. He was not a left-wing Democrat. He was very much a middle of the road pro-business corporate Democratic president, like many before him. His style presents not only the image of 'I am not making a decision', but also 'I represent an incarnation of the powers that be in American life'. He is a representative of some, not all people. I wanted to introduce that idea and to add to Maria's question. I grew up in public school when girls had to wear skirts. I was controlled and I think it was sexist, and I just want to add that in response to the idea of controlling how women are presented at a vulnerable age.

**Levi Glass:** My question is for the panel. I have a similar question on relating art and style. Sarah and Vid both deal with art as it relates to a political propaganda realm, in a similar way to how style can be related to pushing a political agenda or propaganda. How can style and art relate in this manner?

**Student:** My question is for Sarah. You mentioned that art should challenge us and push us to think further and take on new perspectives. You also said that you did not consider the mural from South Africa art. I wanted to hear more about your distinction between good and bad art, and how you reconcile the above.

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** Let us start addressing some of these questions. I will go first with beauty and ugliness, the question that Mark brought up.

Beauty has had a bad reputation since the totalitarianism of the Second World War. I was trying to resurrect this idea that beauty might play a more constructive role, but I think it is a matter of strategic political positioning and responding to the current situation. Consider, for example, Jeffrey's work, the role of beauty would be to suggest a utopian possibility. What might be the place for ugliness? Should we then conclude that there is no place for ugliness? I think that ugliness plays a role once we concede that beauty can be abused. One can point to utopias, but that very action can create oppression. If one thinks of very uniform Stalinist or Nazi art (or, perhaps more pertinently, of consumerism that we have), they might point towards the appearance of harmony. They might use beauty to create that appearance, which is where ugliness can pull you back from the false utopian thinking. An example of that is the *Nike of Baghdad*, one of the few of Jeffrey's titled works. There is a dissonance built into it, where the forms do not match up, as a criticism of the current situation.

In terms of style, I remember being 14 and wanting to look ugly with army jackets and messed up hair, as a way of expressing dissent with the idea that everything is harmonious. I think it is a very important thing to do.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** I think the question of *l'art pour l'art* is interesting. The African philosopher Mbembe criticized *l'art pour l'art* because he believed there were so many political struggles to be fought. The black community felt that art had to be more political than *l'art pour l'art*. I believe pursuing the aesthetics movement is always a political decision.

As for the question about law that was raised, I would argue that we need more laws. I am very Platonic in this sense, based on Plato's idea of philosophers determining the right decision for each choice independently. Practically, however, it is not working. That is why we have laws. Our legislation is made based on a great deal of research, work, and time, in order to give a broad range of community a guide for action. Laws are not fixed. They can be changed and challenged, but I do believe we need laws in order to live with each other. Plato found that when he wrote his dialogue *Nomoi* (which means laws) because he realized, based on his political experience, that it is not possible to make quick, independent judgements on each decision. You need laws to guarantee that a community is functioning.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** I did not mean to suggest that we do not need any laws. What laws more specifically do you think we need with respect to public appearances?

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** This is a challenging question. With the example of nudity, you might have someone who has trauma associated with sexual abuse confronted with people who want to expose themselves publicly. There need to be laws to protect this person, because if you are in a vulnerable role, you cannot

always make a case for yourself. You should be able to take public transport, for example.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** Public transport would be a good case where you should not be nude for sanitary reasons.

**Amena Sharmin:** In Bangladesh, there is a specific law called Information Communication Technology System (ICTS). The law states that if someone makes a comment or posts a picture, in public or on social media, which causes someone to be hurt, they can be arrested without bail. It is tricky when a law is created to protect people and then used to harm people.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** Legislating on these matters can go both ways, which is what is troubling about it.

Speaking of art and style, I do not know if I agree about Zuckerberg. Take two people who look the same in terms of what they wear: standard business attire, the classic look. We can still imagine only one of them has style because only one of them thinks they are expressing their ideals. Maybe they are proud of being a businessperson, or they want to be a team player or exude confidence, and this is how they do it. The other person wears it because they must for work. For them, it is a uniform. That person does not have style in this situation.

These are the two ways of thinking about Mark Zuckerberg. Is he just making a uniform for himself with no sense of expression of his ideals? Or is it more like what you said—which I found very interesting and not implausible? I think of him as doing the former, but I will think more about that because I like that idea.

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** A further thought would be whether he must know he is doing it, for it to have that content.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** Sure, I would not want my moral psychology of ideals to entail that you must be aware of the ideals you have. I do not think that is plausible.

**Dr James Fox:** My question is for the artists in the room. Do you think of yourselves as having an artistic style? If so, how did you arrive at that style? Do you see it as an extension of your personal style (if you have a personal style)?

**Student:** I enjoyed the distinction of being aware of it or not and this active volition to have a certain style. You sometimes try to make an active effort to have a certain style, but other times you have no control over it. It becomes interpreted outside of yourself. It wavers between making your own decisions and emerging from how the viewer sees it.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** There was a quote from Sarah's talk that resonated with me about expressing yourself in a democratic society, and then retroactively—and retrospectively—identifying with how you determined yourself in that moment. I often think of art or writing working that way. Things happen in a certain way and you struggle for an unclear aim, until something happens in the work and you find it and start to organize the piece around it.

**Student:** It seems free at times, but even Jeffrey Rubinoff's sculpture is so much of his time. You can put anything in history, and it gives a clear narrative to your work that I do not know if Jeffrey would have known.

**Levi Glass:** I think style and art-making function much in the same way as fashion. It is your way of being in the world and the decisions you make. The style you choose in artmaking ultimately results in beauty or in a political or propaganda form. Can we see the same universal consequence in all style? In the politics of what you wear? I do not think much of the

politics of our artwork is consciously chosen. Rather, we arrive at it in an ambiguous way.

**Vaughn Neville:** I think I have a few styles. There is a formal style and a looser style, where I have no clue what I am doing. That is usually the best work. I am mostly informal in my work. I have been creating art for 45 years. I do watercolours, paint on canvas, charcoal, but it is all my style. It is the same with my music, I have come to the point where I do improvisational music. This is all free expression. There is a certain integration into the life surrounding you which becomes integrated into your art. Susan, for example, does beautiful work that is part of our environment.

**Mona:** On a formal level I would very much like to avoid that all the time, but perhaps not the content. If you consider how Hal Foster in *Bad New Days* categorized post-'89 art, I would like to think that—of object, memetic, and archival—my work would be archival.

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** It was great to bring together these threads, of art as beauty, as ambiguity, and of that exercise of freedom and the connection between style in personal life and in art.

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— DAY TWO —

Today we will examine three case studies that look at the issue of art and moral conscience.

Mark Antliff is the author of *Inventing Bergson*. Over the last two decades, he has written by himself and with others (including Pat Leighten) a series of books that have fundamentally altered our understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century art. He will talk about pacifist aesthetics during the Second World War.

— Dr James Fox

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**ROMANTICISM, RESPONSIBILITY,  
DISOBEDIENCE: PACIFIST AESTHETICS IN  
BRITAIN DURING WORLD WAR TWO**

Prof. Mark Antliff

This is the first of a series of talks about anarchism. Yesterday we discussed the issue of freedom and democracy. Here, we will reconfigure freedom from a different perspective—one that is nevertheless very political.

“The lessons of war are the lessons of a romantic ideology of responsibility, of disobedience.” So wrote the anarchist poet and conscientious objector Alex Comfort in his manifesto *Art and Social Responsibility: Lectures on the Ideology of Romanticism* which was published in 1946. Comfort would later gain international fame in the 1970s as the author of *The Joy of Sex*. He was a leading critic within the Neo-Romantic movement, which flourished in Britain and Europe during the 1930s and 40s, but was eclipsed by the rise of Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s. In *Art and Social Responsibility* (and a related series of wartime essays), Comfort declared his anti-status definition of Romanticism. This was the moving force not only behind the aesthetics of his generation, but of the anti-war production of artists such as the contemporary fantasist Cecil Collins—a prominent figure in Britain’s Neo-Romantic movement—and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This was premised on a complex theory of romantic realism and the aesthetics of anarchist-pacifist resistance, which he brought to bear not only on the work of Bruegel and Collins, but as a critique on surrealism, constructivism, and the art promoted by the Nazi regime.

Comfort's recuperation of realism was an open challenge to the Nazis' casting of realist aesthetics as a curative to the supposed degeneracy of avant-garde art. Following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the Nazi regime embraced the racial theory of art promoted by Paul Schultze-Naumburg. Schultze-Naumburg's 1928 book *Art and Race* juxtaposed avant-garde paintings by artists such as Otto Dix and Modigliani with photographs of the mentally ill, physically deformed, and diseased, claiming that modern artists shared in the supposed degeneracy of their subjects. Hitler's chief cultural propagandists, Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels drew on Schultze-Naumburg's theory to both condemn modern art and establish a racialized canon for pure German art. This canon was based on the realist aesthetics of the Renaissance era, when Germany was reportedly unsullied by any intermingling with lesser races and rivalled the Aryan purity of Ancient Greece. In a series of public exhibitions held throughout Germany, works such as Adolph Wissel's "Farm Family from Kahlenberg" of 1939 were displayed as regional models of German racial and aesthetic purity. Meanwhile, the style and content of the works of art of modernists such as Pablo Picasso were condemned as expressive of racial contamination, due in part to the modernist turn to non-European sources for their expressive abstraction. Thus, on the eve of World War Two, the Nazis had developed a eugenic interpretation of realist aesthetics as an extension of their folkish nationalism and as a propaganda tool that set the stage for the Holocaust.

Alex Comfort's professional training in both the sciences and the arts meant that he was cognisant of the pseudo-scientific premises behind the Nazi's racialized theory of realism. Comfort entered Cambridge University in 1938 to study poetry and medicine. In 1941, he moved to London to qualify as a doctor, again as a scholar. Having received a Bachelor of Medicine in 1944 and a diploma in child health, he joined the London Hospital as a lecturer in physiology. In 1949, he was awarded a PhD in Biochemistry from

London University. During the same period, Comfort published over 20 books. These included novels, books of poetry, a scientific treatise on physiology, and an unending stream of anarchist polemics, culminating in his behavioural study *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State* in 1950.

At the heart of Comfort's behaviourist critique of fascism is the belief that the fear of death can result in a pathological condition wherein we deny our own mortality, and, with it, our capacity to behave responsibly towards ourselves and others. Comfort argues that this denial of mortality leads us to pledge allegiance to supra-individual entities such as the State—an institution that calls on us to robotically behave in accordance to its protocols—rather than respond to our individual conscience. Thus, in objectifying and dehumanizing ourselves, we unleash our capacity to objectify others.

In times of war, states deploy their ideologies as collective and timeless belief systems, serving to justify the killing of fellow human beings. Comfort regarded fascism as an extreme form of this tendency. By calling on individuals to swear allegiance to the collective myth of the eternal folk, it teaches each person that the individual is not real—therefore death, the termination of the individual, is unreal. It teaches logical contempt for death and suffering in oneself and others. On this basis, the Nazi regime was able to demand complete obedience from its citizens, who wilfully committed wartime atrocities in the name of the mythic Thousand Year Reich. However, Comfort also regarded the Allies' call to citizens to engage in acts of violence (to defend democracy or communism as markable instances of mass irresponsibility) with equally dehumanizing consequences. Thus throughout the war, Comfort applied identical standards to the actions of both sides. This determined, for instance, the Allies' indiscriminate aerial bombing of residential areas of Hamburg in 1943. The bombing killed 50,000 civilians in one week alone. It was no different from

the Gestapo's mass reprisal killing of citizens from the Czech village of Lidice in 1942.

In response, Comfort called on all individuals—and on artists specifically—to reject the pathology of violence and irresponsibility by “facing the reality of personal death, empathising with the reality of their fellow human beings, and renouncing the insanity of group societies that act as groups in the name of quasi-human properties attributed to the state.” Referring to wartime Britain in a May 1942 essay, Comfort argued that the mass awareness of death had produced morbid feelings of isolation and the public’s related inability “to identify themselves with the professed aims of their fellow men”. This had given birth to “clinical neuroses.” If the nation is in a pre-neurotic condition, Comfort concluded, it is our moral duty as writers to attempt to substitute something healthier. This is, namely, the reuniting of humanity around “the common purpose of a society for stopping the war.”

For artists to behave responsibly in times of war, they reportedly had to detach themselves from the state, embrace anarchist pacifism, and develop forms of representation that acknowledge death (and with it, our capacity for compassion and universal sympathy). Comfort counselled artists to convey sympathy for the victims and the perpetrators of violence by regarding both as subject to the tragic impulse native to the human condition. He asserts in *Art and Social Responsibility* that “the essence of romanticism is the acceptance of mortality and of a sense of tragedy, which enables the artist to bear witness to his own sanity and the sanity of others in responding to a world gone mad.” It is in this context that Comfort broke ranks with his fellow anarchist Herbert Read, by criticizing surrealism as incapable of overcoming such mental illness. Comfort stated in a 1942 essay that the artist’s palliative role in helping create a healthy body political “cannot be through Surrealism, because Surrealism postulates a similar associative

complex in the beholder to that which the artist feels in himself. In other words, it is a communication of a neurosis.”

In *Art and Social Responsibility*, Comfort brought this thesis to bear on Giorgio de Chirico, an artist who was lionised by the surrealists by having proclaimed in 1919 that “madness is a phenomena inherent in every profound manifestation of art.” Referring to de Chirico’s “Evil Genius of a King”, painted in 1915 during the carnage of World War One, Comfort argued that the artist had created a confounding image of “mirror disruption”. He argued that he thereby posited “an exit via schizophrenia and an uncritical acceptance of lunacy utterly deficient in human responsibility.” On this basis, Comfort diagnosed wartime surrealism as a masochistic response to the neurosis created by total war. He said it was “an attack upon disintegration which is made by disintegrating oneself.” Comfort also numbered contemporary practitioners of abstractivism (this was, again, an implicit critique of Herbert Read) among those artists who rejected romantic ideology and adopted a failed aesthetic strategy in reaction to the barbarism of their era. Referring to Naum Gabo’s mathematically inspired spatial construction of 1944, Comfort argued that Gabo’s turn to pure abstraction during war amounted to a wilful infantile flight from his social responsibility as an artist. He compared Gabo’s obsession with the formal beauty of mathematical models to the irresponsible “pure scientist who does not attach any social significance to his discoveries. Useful, destructive, or negligible, they are all to be regarded as facts.” Thus constructivists like Gabo produced forms which are in essence “deliberate avoidances of personal claims of humanity, by virtue of being devoid of ethical, as opposed to purely intellectual or aesthetic claims.” It is interesting that he separates those two categories.

Having dismissed surrealist and constructivist aesthetics as neurotic flights from responsibility, Comfort then pointed to the unflinching realism of Bruegel and the fantastical imagery of

Cecil Collins as creating two art forms expressive of this concept of romantic anarchism. In *Art and Social Responsibility* and other wartime writings, Comfort describes Bruegel's "Massacre of the Innocents" of 1565-67 as "the greatest extant pictorial statement of Romantic ideology" by virtue of the artist's powerful combination of "objective realism and subjective pity". In this painting, Bruegel recasts the biblical story—King Herod's massacre of the children of Bethlehem—in terms of life in Holland under the oppressive rule of the Spanish monarchy. He dresses Herod's henchmen in the contemporary garb of Spanish soldiers and German mercenaries. Bruegel thus transformed a mythical parable into an indictment of modern-day warfare, while objectively studying the spectrum of emotions such violence generates in the perpetrators and their victims. Bruegel, states Comfort, has shown us the full spectrum of emotions. "On the one hand, distaste, resolution, cruelty, pity, lust, anger, savagery. As many different faces as there are men, and a detachment to a dirty and debasing expedition. On the other, a desperate, bedraggled unreality. An unwillingness to grasp all that is happening. Defiance, and the anaesthesia of fear." By combining these individualized portraits, Bruegel treated the victims and killers as interchangeable, and in so doing "captured the Romantic struggle of humanity in a pictorial exhortation to disobey the irresponsible directives of barbarism."

Comfort brought a comparable thesis to bear in his writings on Cecil Collins, whom he championed for his wartime meditations on the myth of the fool in his introduction to the first monograph on Collins written in 1946. Comfort called on artists to detach themselves from pathological societies and attest to their own humanity (and that of others) through their art. Bruegel had reportedly realized that aim through his objective and empathetic response to war. In Comfort's estimation, Collins had achieved similar results in his series of fools, which highlighted both the artist's tragic sense of alienation within a pathological body politic and his status as an innocent, ridiculed outsider. Such views echo

those of Collins himself, who claimed his series of fools were a declaration of his own estrangement from contemporary society in a 1945 essay titled "The Anatomy of the Fool". In his wartime review of Collins' first solo exhibition of his Fool series (which, incidentally, was blown off the walls in a bombing when it was put on display), Comfort described the combination of "wit and tragedy" in works such as the 1943 "Pilgrim Fool" as "statements of the artist's own relation to society". He said they were not mere reiterations of Picasso's series of harlequins, but instead "a picture of dissociation and an assertion of creative independence." Comfort praised Collins for "asserting perhaps for the first time in modern painting the social role of the artist as fool," declaring that such an outlet was "the most productive standpoint of sane men in neurotic times". Thus the fools were a symbol of personal liberation for those "whose sense of responsibility is intact."

Comfort also identified Collins as the direct ancestor of Samuel Palmer, a generative figure in the history of romanticism, and especially neoromanticism, in England. Comfort called him a "romantic of great powers and originality" who emulated the colour and figural design of Palmer's "Coming From Evening Church" of 1830 in his "Pilgrim Fool". The sense of colour and the treatment of the figures clearly relate to Collins' work. He then added William Blake to the lexicon of English romantics influencing Collins, stating that the figure of Collins' "Hymn" of 1934 echoed Blake's "Angel of Revelation" of 1803. Comfort enriched this reading by relating the artist's representations of the fool to a cultural lineage: the fool as a lord of misrule, a mocker of authority, a figure of rebellion, and a social leveller who speaks on behalf of the downtrodden and dispossessed. Comfort cites Collins' 1940 "Fool Picking His Nose in Front of a Bishop" and "Processions of Fools" (whose flamboyant gestures, excessive clothing, and foppish hairstyles satirize the class pretensions of the wealthy) as examples of the genre.

The attitude of the fool adopted by Collins is reportedly akin “to the classical defense of the peasant against usurping authority, conscription, war, barbarism, the traditional guise of the man for whom society has become an irrational evil, like a flood or an earthquake.” Thus Collins “is asserting more than the obligation of the possessors of minds to get themselves registered as fools forthwith, these fools fight back, struggle, crusade, are champions like the arch fools which are the patrons of every peasant community, such as Eulenspiegel and Punch.” The referenced *Till Eulenspiegel* is an itinerant trickster figure in German folklore, who legendarily played practical jokes on the German nobility and clergy to expose instances of greed, hypocrisy, and foolishness. Punch is a cunning clown who possesses an uncanny ability to turn the tables on his would-be oppressors. According to Comfort, such rebellious fools of folk legend had their contemporary counterparts in civilian practitioners of nonviolent resistance during World War Two. “The woman who fails to fuse a shell securely, the clerk who does not take a second look at a pass, the girl who hides a deserter, and an idiot who misdirects an escort, whatever their nationality.”

A more sombre version of the fool’s sense of alienation and empathetic responsibility is evident in Collins’ “Pilgrim Fool” of 1943. This piece depicts an isolated fool, dressed in the pilgrim’s symbol of the shell on his hose, leading an innocent child away from a scene of mass destruction signified by a firestorm on the horizon. Critics who saw this work at Collins’ February 1944 exhibition were immediately reminded of the horrific fires sparked by the Nazi’s aerial bombing of Coventry, London, and Collins’ native Plymouth. As Collins wrote, “the sky of our times has been lit by the light of apocalypse, and such a light is therefore the light of my pictures.” Thus it was because of the fools, and perhaps the “Pilgrim Fool”, that Comfort judged Collins to be a potential fellow traveller, who would share his pacifist vision of the artist’s salutary role in an irresponsible society.

In sum, Alex Comfort’s call for us to acknowledge our own mortality, and that of others, entailed an extension of that sympathy, love, and friendship we feel towards our intimates to every individual, regardless of their race, religion, nationality, or ideological allegiances. Rather than objectifying others and ourselves in response to abstract ideals, Comfort counsels us to practice empathy towards others in order to live fully in the present moment. This interpersonal relation between individuals amounted to Comfort’s definition of anarchism in its etymological sense of ‘anarch’: no authority, no domination. Comfort’s pacifist anarchism led him to draw parallels between the Allies and Axis governments while focusing on the aerial bombing of civilians as a quintessential example of their shared abuse of power and objectification of their fellow human beings. Thus, when Comfort initiated his own petition in January of 1944 to recruit writers, musicians, and artists in a public protest against the Allied bombing campaign, he was careful to frame his anarchist protest strictly in terms of the doctrine of universal human rights and international law upheld by the international Red Cross Committee. This strategy enabled Comfort to win over the broad community of pacifists to his campaign, including the celebrated novelist and activist Vera Brittain, the political scientist George Catlin, the pianist Clifford Curzon, and the composer Benjamin Britten, among others.

In Comfort’s view, it is the fear and martalling of such fear on the part of governments that is at the root of mass neurosis, pathological behaviour, and the abuse of power. He also claimed that the unreflective representations of neurotic or infantile influences on the part of the avant-garde were themselves an abdication of responsibility. On this basis, Comfort was prepared to number the surrealists, along with the constructivists, among those who behaved irresponsibly by embracing neurosis or engaging in infantile behaviour. Thus, although de Chirico’s artistic technique drew on the methods Comfort would associate with realism, to

his mind de Chirico's uncanny subject matter violated the ends to which such techniques should be responsibly used. However, while Comfort may have successfully detached realist techniques from the Nazi ideology or doctrine of racial purity, his critique of surrealism and abstraction had the unsettling effect of partially echoing the pathological dimension of the Nazi's thesis by condemning such artworks as representing varying degrees of neurosis.

Comfort's status as a scientist and anarchist, his behaviourist theory of human history and of the state, and his association of anarchist Romanticism with critical realism and irrealism all served to highlight the complex debate over art and ideology during a volatile period that witnessed the rise of fascism and the cataclysm of World War Two. While previous scholars have analyzed such issues in terms of the heated exchange between fascists, communists, and democrats over the stylistic merits of realism and abstraction, I would argue that we should also pay attention to those alternative voices who sought to transcend the geopolitics of the nation-state in favour of an embrace of global humanity in the name of universal rights and values. Defining the role of aesthetics and culture within this radical frame is an urgent and ongoing project, and by looking again at writings by prominent pacifists such as Comfort, we may gain an insight into the complexities and challenges involved in countering the continually tragic legacy of state-sponsored violence and fascism.

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“... we should ... pay attention to those alternative voices who sought to transcend the geopolitics of the nation-state in favour of an embrace of global humanity in the name of universal rights and values. Defining the role of aesthetics and culture within this radical frame is an urgent and ongoing project...” – M. Antliff

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## POLITICS AND ‘THE DECISIVE MOMENT’: HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON’S ETHICAL ANARCHISM

Prof. Patricia Leighten

*Professor Patricia Leighten is based at Duke University. She has produced, over the years, an extraordinary array of publications, including standard texts on Cubism and a monograph on early 20<sup>th</sup> century Parisian painting and politics. She has done a great deal of work on photography and will talk about perhaps the most famous photographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Henri Cartier-Bresson.*

— Dr James Fox

I think this will address the way that artists are often viewed, in terms that are often alien to their social and political purpose. I have devoted my career to rediscovering what artists indicated in any number of ways that are then ignored in aestheticized discourse. My first book on Picasso addressed that precise issue and it was extremely controversial as a result. It was, in fact, informally banned at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The staff were told they were not allowed to read it, so of course they all ran out and bought the book. It proved W.C. Field’s comment that there is no such thing as bad publicity. I share with this conference an interest in how art, ethics, and politics inform each other in the creative act. I will agree with Sarah that all art is political.

Henri Cartier-Bresson’s 1932 piece “Behind the Saint Lazare Station” is a typical work associated in literature with his own phrase, ‘the decisive moment’, the moment of taking the picture. It is almost always misunderstood. Cartier-Bresson is often known as the most famous photographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Avedon also called him the greatest photographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is quite a glove being thrown down on his behalf. I think this is partially because he is thought to be non-controversial. I would like to make him controversial.

He is best known for his compositional perfection, which can be observed in “Behind the Saint Lazare Station”. The piece displays an extraordinary balance of circles, curves; the leaping figure, that

wonderful little spot of white between the heel of his shoe and the shadow of his shoe being reflected in the water, the fact that he is suspended in the air. You can see in the distance that the leaping man echoes a poster of a leaping dancer. It is tiny, but there is a little white square in the background that shows a poster on the wall of the station with a dancing figure on it. He is famous for these juxtapositions that evoke momentary visual coincidences and reveal telling truths.

Viewers in these discussions often overlook his actual subjects. His own stated philosophy, which he discussed on an interview with Charlie Rose, centered on what he called ethical anarchism. He explicitly said ‘anarchism is an ethic’: it is centered on the transformation of the individual, outside of the state and free of bourgeois morality. This represents a notion of the absolute individuality of human beings, making Cartier-Bresson’s ability to see and respond to events in the world possible. This, in turn, results in his unique photographic vision.

In 1952 he wrote an essay called “The Decisive Moment”. In it, he talked about his discovery of a small handheld camera (called a Leica) in 1932. It is a light, handheld camera with film that is fast enough to capture motion, which was not possible until the 1890s so it still felt relatively new in the 20s when the Leica was invented. He said “it became the extension of my eye, and I have never been separated from it since I found it. I prowl the streets all day feeling very strung up and ready to pounce, determined to trap life, to preserve life in the act of living.” If we look at one example, there is a watery expanse of a flood. A man leaps into the water (or he intends to), echoing the dancer on a poster at the center rear. The geometric tensions of the forms seem very perfect and balanced, it monumentalizes the ephemeral moments of life and speaks powerfully to the contingent quality of 20<sup>th</sup> century life—lived at speed. Speed was one of the things that seemed the newest in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Cartier-Bresson was born in 1908, he came of age in the interwar period and witnessed the rise of communism, fascism, and the popular front in France, along with the growth of mass political movements and various theories of collectivism. He was a close friend of one of the descendants of Élisée Reclus, who was one of the major anarchist theorists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and an anarchist communist (or a communitarian anarchist). He was exposed early on to the ideas of Reclus. Cartier-Bresson described his own immersion at age 20 in Reclus’ book *Evolution, Revolution, and the Anarchist Ideal*. The book looks at how society must evolve between revolutions, for education to become increasingly tolerant and cooperative and understanding. Cartier-Bresson developed a commitment to radial individualism, in an unparalleled photographic practice. This became his main form of resistance to both the authority of the state and the authority of the past, in terms of inherited visual convention.

He was a photographer in his unit in the French army during World War Two. In 1940, he was captured by the Germans and was held in a prisoner of war camp for three years. He escaped three times but was caught the first two. He finally managed to escape and dug up the camera and film he had buried in a French farmyard, and then photographed the end of the war as a member of the resistance. Shortly after World War Two he founded an anarchist cooperative called Magnum. It was a loose organization that would help photographers connect with magazines around the world. As a cooperative, every artist involved would retain the copyright on their own work. Their idea was to provide humanist imagery to magazines and newspapers to fight colonialism, expose state oppression, and influence public opinion. They, in fact they succeeded amazingly, dominating the imagery in publications like *Life*, *Look*, and *Per Image*. It had an enormous influence.

I want to touch on the criticism of his work. His work titled “Hyères, France” (1932) appeared as the cover of Grand Pouillaux’s 1933 edition. It is typical of his early work as a photographer. It is interesting to think about how criticism follows national lines and prejudices. To the French, Cartier-Bresson is a photo-journalist primarily and his subject matter is most important. To Americans, he is primarily a photographic artist—the important thing is his composition. In “Hyères, France”, a bicyclist is speeding past an extraordinary geometric pattern on the stairway. The Museum of Modern Art’s website, in a retrospective of 2010, begins “Henri Cartier-Bresson is one of the most original, accomplished, influential, and beloved figures in the history of photography. His inventive work of the early 1930s helped define the creative potential of modern photography, and his uncanny ability to capture life on the run made his work synonymous with ‘the decisive moment’.”

The French, however, view him as a documentarian who has recently become politicised. A 2015 exhibition followed a recent biography of Cartier-Bresson by Pierre Assouline. Assouline spent hundreds of hours with Cartier-Bresson late in his life, and the biography presented new information on the artist. The French exhibition focused on his involvement with the Communist Front newspaper, *Se Soir*. It was unofficially connected with the French Communist Party. The exhibition presented Cartier-Bresson as someone whose political engagement had transformed an apolitical surrealist artist into a pro-communist social journalist working for the Communist Party. The cover of *Se Soir* in 1937, when he began his work there, shows what seems to be a homeless child.

In 1936, France was overwhelmed by strikes, factories occupied by workers, and demonstrations aimed at forcing the government to implement reforms that had been promised by the recently elected Popular Front. There was such an uprising that, within

weeks, the government passed historic new laws and created new institutions. These reforms included collective contracts, readjustment of wages, minimum wage, paid holidays, and the introduction, for the first time in human history, of the 40-hour workweek. *Se Soir* published photographs entitled “First Paid Holidays” celebrating these facts—showing someone fishing and someone having a picnic—showing the momentousness of people being paid for holidays.

Cartier-Bresson himself considered both the aesthetic and documentary interpretations of his work essential. Both the French and the American interpretations of his legacy neglect to account for his own stated philosophy. In his 2000 Charlie Rose interview, he repeatedly said, “I am an anarchist”. This echoes numerous interviews that he has given over the years in which he always said, “I am an anarchist, anarchism is an ethic.” Interviewers would fail to follow up on his statements and focus on his photographs, but he would continuously bring it up. In the 2000 interview, Rose finally asks how Cartier-Bresson defines an anarchist. Cartier-Bresson said, “It is a way of behaving, acting, loving, finally, mentally, spiritually, eventually, and physically.” Following this, Rose asked what attitude an anarchist has, to which Cartier-Bresson responded: “filling a necessity with oneself. Dealing with compromises, and living, especially in this society, in a world collapsing.” There, he introduced the notion of critique. European libertarianism (which could not be more radically distinct from American right-wing libertarianism) is at the centre of his self-conception and photographic practice.

Mikhail Bakunin and Max Stirner were especially influential to Cartier-Bresson. Cartier-Bresson frequently echoed one of Bakunin’s major works, *God and the State*, in which he said, “if God existed, we would have to abolish him.” Stirner was the author of a work usually translated as *The Ego and Its Own*, which defined the self as embodied. Stirner saw what he called “fixed ideas” as

pernicious abstractions constructed by a vested interest to divert us from the cultivation of our own beings and our own personalities, free of social constraint. He viewed Christianity as the best example of these “fixed ideas” by creating an artificial distinction between mind and body through the fabrication of an ethereal realm of so-called pure spirit. In *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner repeatedly defined the self as motivated by irrational sensations of physical desire, as part of the material world, and as a temporal being undergoing constant physical and psychological change. He identified the enemy of the individual as any institution or belief system—religious or secular, church or state—directing individuals away from their unique and fully embodied selves. His ideas led to what came to be known as ethical anarchism, which flourished between the two World Wars. The concept was the transformation of the individual independent of the state and free of bourgeois morality.

These were key ideas for Cartier-Bresson. He was an outspoken atheist, saying “man invented God, not the other way around.” In his book *The Mind’s Eye*, he talked about the relation between his photography and his anarchist thought, echoing Stirner’s concept of embodied individualism. He stated, “To take photographs is to hold one’s breath. When all faculties converge in the face of fleeting reality, it is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy. To take photographs means to recognize, simultaneously and within a fraction of a second, both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one’s head, one’s eye, and one’s heart on the same axis. It is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one’s originality. It is a way of life. Anarchy is an ethic.”

When, at 95 years old, he died in 2004, an homage appeared in the newspaper *Liberation*, published by Confédération Nationale du Travail (CNT; or the National Confederation of Labour). The

CNT was a labour union with deep ties to the anarchist-syndicalist movement. The homage was titled “Death of an Anarchist”, a shocking claim.

It read, in part: “The photographic genius that he was, known and recognized internationally, tirelessly answered those who asked him about his photographic compositions, ‘the technique has no importance, it is the photographer’s point of view that matters.’ Henri Cartier-Bresson never hid his point of view. On the contrary, he never missed an opportunity to let fly his war cry during interviews, ‘long live Bakunin,’ the inverse of a death-to. A convinced and declared libertarian, Henri Cartier-Bresson tirelessly photographed the world of labour, applying himself from 1931 on to denounce the alienation of humans before the machine. He was present in social struggles on every continent. It was because of his libertarian convictions that he enthusiastically agreed to join in the international demonstration for *Autre Future*, another future, organized by the CNT for May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000. Within the framework of this demonstration, he exhibited 30 of his photographs chosen from among thousands, in order to convey a libertarian view, in this case, his own. Five themes were addressed: the condition of the worker, social struggles, state oppression, true socialism, which is the word anarchists freely called themselves, and another future, which is to say freedom, poetry, love, humour. The CNT bids him a final farewell and will continue the fight for freedom for another future unshackled from capitalism, from its injustices, and from its alienation.”

This is the only piece I have found that acknowledges his own political perspective. He himself organized the exhibition of his own work, to reflect the issues the CNT was most involved with.

Cartier-Bresson was surrealist by virtue of juxtaposing surprising images in a way that they seem to be at once mundane and mysterious. It could be considered a photographic equivalent to

Comfort. Both are accidental and powerfully evocative simultaneously and framed in ways to emphasise their irrationality. Ethical anarchism deeply informed the surrealist movement itself well into the 1920s and was more influential than is often recognized. It emphasizes the cultural politics of sexual liberation and individual freedom. Assouline, the biographer, said that Cartier-Bresson devoured the journal *Revolution Surrealiste*—the official mouthpiece of the movement—and stated that “the pages of this journal contained a permanent justification for all forms of rebellion, against war, against obsolete rules, against anything that pertained a threat to liberty.” Later, the photographer wrote “I owe an allegiance to surrealism because it taught me to let the photographic lens look into the rubble of the unconscious and of chance.”

Anarchist sexual liberationism is central to his work, which included acceptance and celebration of homosexuality, cross-dressing, and other departures from the bourgeois norm. His two works “Alicante, Spain” (1933) show prostitutes and a crossdresser revealing aspects of their personal lives to the photographer. Without the respect that Cartier-Bresson brought to the exchange, such frank openness and self-revelation could not have been achieved.

There are two more photographs of prostitutes in Vera Cruz, Mexico, where he went and lived for a year in 1934. He lived in a house with the African American writer Langston Hughes in the red-light district, and they befriended many in the district. Later, Hughes invited Cartier-Bresson to move to New York. He lived in Harlem for a year, where he swears he was the only white person he saw for that year. He never left Harlem. His involvement in the community is what enabled him to photograph its members as an insider, which is evident in the photographs. This openness is central to his anarchist conception of egalitarianism, predicated on utter respect for every person as an individual. The photo-

graphs of the prostitutes in his Vera Cruz neighbourhood reveal the women participating in the making of the picture, engaged, fully humanized, individualized.

The 2005 French exhibition opens with a collage he made in 1931 and a handwritten statement written for another future. The statement reads “to photograph, it is to hold one’s breath when all art faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It is then that the seizing of an image is a great physical and intellectual joy.” His surrealist collage, titled “For Love and Against Industrial Labour”, suggests that the machine takes over all aspects of life. In the collage, the robot dominates the figure of the man in size. It also suggests that love, both physical and emotional, is the proper form of resistance. The exhibition also displays his photographs “Cuba” (1963) and “Citroën Car Factory” in Paris (1959).

He juxtaposed the photographs with quotations from Bakunin, combining anarchist theory with his specific images. His first two works were juxtaposed with the quote: “I am a fanatical lover of freedom, considering it as the unique place where the intelligence, the dignity, and the wellbeing of people can develop and grow, not this freedom where it is wholly formal, granted, measured, and regulated by the state, an eternal lie.” The photographs show that the figures are subsumed within the geometry of the machine. In “Citroën Car Factory”, the man’s face is obliterated by a piece of machinery.

Another Bakunin quotes juxtaposed here was, “the state was always the patrimony of any privileged class. Priestly class, noble class, bourgeois class, finally bureaucratic class, when all the other classes being exhausted, the state falls or rises as you wish to the condition of the machine. The state is the authority, the domination, and the power exercised by the possessing, and so-called enlightened classes over the masses. It always guarantees that which it contrives, to some their wealth, to others their poverty.

To some their freedom founded on property, to others slavery, the fatal consequence of their destitution." Including "Cuba" emphasized Cartier-Bresson's anarchist levelling of capitalists and communists after 1956, reinforcing the notion of his anarchism.

"Mexico City. Reception at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (1963) and "Wall Street" (1947) bear the Bakunin quote, "freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice, and socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality." In both, it is very interesting the way the architecture controls the figures, so these people think of themselves as free, but they are also trapped in their own role.

He photographed Paris in May 1968 as industrialization becomes state power. In one, you can see the Paris Police waiting in formation to break up a demonstration. They have been given their Coup de Rouge, the standard glass of red wine before battle. They are in protective gear, carrying shields—ready for a fight. May '68 also represented a level of culture clash a bourgeois man walking along, very properly dressed, as he is struck by a graffito that says 'jouissez sans entraves' (have pleasure without limits). The Bakunin quote for these works is, "liberty cannot, and should not, defend itself with other than liberty, and as ethics have no other source, no other stimulant, no other cause, no other object than liberty, and as ethics is itself nothing other than liberty, all the restrictions that one has imposed on morality with the aim of protecting it are always turned to its detriment."

The final pair of images were "New Jersey. Model Prison of Leesburg. Solitary Confinement," 1973, and "Berkeley, United States" 1967. Two forms of cruel experimentation and all too usual punishment. I love the fact that the prison is called a model prison, for trapped and vulnerable creatures. He is fully critical of the scientized world of the prison and of animal experimentation. He was an environmentalist as well, which is not surprising. He acknowledges his political position in making pictures like these

in *The Mind's Eye*. In it, he says, "photography appears to be an easy activity. In fact it is a very dynamic and ambiguous process in which the only common denominator between its practitioners is their instrument. What emerges from this recording machine does not escape the economic constraints of a world of waste, of tensions that become increasingly intense, and of insane ecological consequences." Statements like that are ignored. In 1998, he wrote, "In a world that is buckling under the weight of profit-making, that is overrun by the destructive sirens of Technoscience and the power-hunger of globalization—that new brand of slavery—beyond all that, Friendship exists, Love exists." That is his philosophy.

To come back to the first image, I would say again. The watery expanse of a flooded area; a man jumps to leap the water echoing the dancer in the poster at rear. The geometric tensions of the forms seem perfect. But now we can go further. The watery expanse is a flooded area under repair in a train yard. A man jumps, ripples emanate from his point of departure on the ladder. We see him airborne, but he is sure to land in the muck. We see that the geometric balance of this work is achieved through the roofs of the train sheds in the back, the iron fencing and its reflection, and a wheelbarrow just behind the man. Piles of discarded building stone, a derelict ladder with its contingent ripples, and rusty barrel hoops lie in the flooded area. Despite the decisive moment that its composition conveys, this industrialized landscape is no more inviting than other images of his that we have seen. By aestheticizing it, however, we can manage not to notice.

The setting was not accidental, he found this spot and waited. His vantage was so imperfect that he had to crop an out-of-focus post on the left. He was hiding behind this post, waiting for someone to leap. Most likely he had seen someone do it already and realized what he could make. It is one of only two negatives that he cropped, as he was not a craftsman and did not print his own

photographs. He kept the 35mm proportions by eliminating the top and bottom along with the left side. He was always frank about it, and what is unusual is that he bothered to perfect a work in this way.

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Given his many Bakunin-esque statements calling for the freedom of the individual against slavery to the machine under capitalism, the figure seen against an industrial wasteland converts into a dancer celebrating life, love, and desire. The extraordinary achievement of the picture is to find so much beauty in such detritus, such joy in the leaping figure. This early work easily sums up his philosophy and operates as a vehicle for us to make that leap as well. As with so many other artists whose innovative work is visually powerful, we have come to overlook his actual subjects and the importance of their tension with geometry. As he warned, “it is impossible to separate content from form.” We need to remember this in his many claims to an ethical anarchist vision, to understand his work from this more broadly theoretical and historical perspective. His photographic technique was an expressive vehicle for a vision of global humanity and for his belief that the photographic medium could be a means for overcoming prejudice and injustice. The actual impact of his work in changing people’s minds has yet to be evaluated, but I hope this may be a new way to look at his art.

[Cartier-Bresson] explicitly said ‘anarchism is an ethic’: it is centered on the transformation of the individual, outside of the state and free of bourgeois morality. This represents a notion of the absolute individuality of human beings, making [his] ability to see and respond to events in the world possible. This, in turn, results in his unique photographic vision.

– P. Leighten

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## MORALITY AND SOCIAL AGENCY IN THE WORK OF KEVIN PYLE

Prof. Allan Antliff

*Allan Antliff is a professor at the University of Victoria and a world authority on anarchism and art. He will talk about graphic artist Kevin Pyle, whose work has proved hugely influential in North America and beyond.*

— Dr James Fox

In today's Forum we have been looking at art's potential to communicate moral values, and to my mind this presupposes a deep social responsibility on the part of the artist. I think that sense of artistic agency as well as social responsibility came through the talks yesterday. How do you make the work alive and enter the world for a transformative purpose? Today I will look at this issue of morality and social agency in the work of graphic artist Kevin Pyle.

Over the last two decades he has produced numerous graphic stories and investigative exposés for activist and mainstream publishers. He reaches tens of thousands of people of many generations through mainstream publishing. He also has a world of activist publishing, which has been equally impactful in a different way.

I am concerned with how he infuses his work with empathy and love in a bid to disrupt dehumanizing forces cantilevering on nationalism and authoritarianism. He is interested in pedagogy; he has a child of his own and has discussed the challenges and joys of raising children. He conceives of learning as a key element in his art. I am interested in how his art muddles alternatives to the social structures that he critiques, so there is this interesting duality to his work that unfolds in tandem and interrelationship. I am going to demonstrate his ultimate purpose: to remind us of anarchism's foundational conviction that freedom is interrelated with our capacity to create and recreate the social

order. This involves empowering ourselves while disempowering authoritarianism through our enacting our being in the world. In 2001, Pyle published *Lab USA* with an anarchist publisher called Autonomedia in New York. It is an illustrated documentary of biological and psychological experiments conducted by government, corporate, and military agencies on civilians, soldiers, and prisoners. He called it illuminated, to signal the fact that he did intensive research and went through declassified governmental documents to illuminate these activities.

The book was an outgrowth of his involvement in a comic book project called World War 3. It was founded in the 1980s by participants of New York City's squatter movement. The publication is run on a collective basis, with a rotating editorship for each issue. It is one of North America's longest running anarchist projects. I think it is a great example of how to reach a wide audience through a popular medium: comics. *Lab USA* includes material that appeared in an issue focused on prisons, edited by Kevin Pyle. When Pyle was working on this issue, he contacted Jim Campbell, the publisher of a Canadian-based anarchist journal called "Prison News Service". The journal was created by an anarchist collective based in Toronto that would send the journal to prisoners and get contributions from prisoners. It was an avenue for prisoners to articulate what was going on in their lives and the injustices that they were dealing with. It is filled with artwork by prisoners, many of whom are Indigenous. Pyle contacted Jim Campbell to get in contact with prisoners, because he wanted to tell their stories in his issue of World War 3. Campbell in turn put Pyle in touch with a network of prisoners with a radical consciousness across the United States, who wrote firsthand accounts of what they were experiencing in prison.

*Lab USA* includes a story originally published in this issue of World War 3 entitled "On the Road". This piece pairs illustrations by Kevin Pyle of desolate highway landscapes with accounts of

an informal torture technique known as diesel therapy in the prison lingo. Prisoners who are deemed to be problematic are thrown into solitary confinement for three months. They are then put on a bus, frequently chained to the seats, and subject to strip searches. They receive one hot meal a day, and they are in transit on this bus three to six months, back and forth. While they are on the road, they are cut off from any access to family or friends. Their personal possessions are no longer with them, and when they arrive in their new destination—another prison—they are confined to solitary confinement for three more months. Kevin Pyle gives us the perspective of the prisoners. He combines this perspective with dispassionate descriptions of the procedure. His illustrations for diesel therapy eventually merge with snippets of description from the prisoners themselves. One of my favourite quotes from one of these prisoners is, "one of the few advantages is getting to see some scenery."

Another prison story that appears in *Lab USA* is the idea of maximum-security control units. This style of incarceration has sadly bled into the Canadian prison system as well. Maximum-security control units permeate the United States prison system, and in his book, Pyle presents the prisoner's point of view again. He takes us into the subjective experience of the prisoner. The point of view unfolds as a silent visual experience. Using the power of the graphic illustration, he brings us inside the prison, takes us into the control unit, into the body and the visceral experience of the prisoner. The unfolding of this experience takes place amongst the voices of the unit's designers. As we scan the imagery, information builds. From the initial proposal by a psychologist to institute these units, to the prison bureaucracy's embrace of the idea, as it took off. Pyle brings in a statement revealing the underlying political purpose of these control units, "to control revolutionary attitudes within the prison system and society at large," with clinical reports of the types of psychosis that these units induce. People who are studying the condition of the

prisoners in these units note that they hear voices, suffer panic attacks, grow acutely sensitive to stimuli, and cut and mutilate themselves.

He fills the pages with the voices of these prisoners, which press in on one individual who comes to dominate the cell. He communicates a sense of bodily confinement in an enclosed space, intensifying our perception of confined isolation. The illustrative technique enacts a reversal of perspective. We have the dispassionate voices of the state and medical authorities co-mingling with those they oppress, as the voices of the repressed gain agency. The systemic nature of the horrifying practices being documented resides in the pretextual objectivity, which is a dehumanizing stance towards the people who are subjected to the whims of the actors. What shields those actors? Their dispassionate bureaucratic dehumanization of themselves as they do that to people. Revealing the hidden structures that make such abuse possible, *Lab USA* educates and radicalizes its readers by going to the root of the problem: the authoritarianism and dehumanization that makes this systemic bureaucratic system possible.

More recently, Pyle has collaborated with a prison justice and advocacy organization based in Washington D.C. to create a comic book documenting the United States prison industrial complex called “Prison Town”. The purpose is to alert people to the devastating consequences of a boom in the construction of prisons, which grips the United States. This issue has also become an economic problem for various states. During the 1980’s, prisons began to be marketed as job creators to small towns that were being hit by deindustrialization and poverty. This proved to be a seductive technique, and people welcomed prisons into their community. Pyle gives us the story of one town’s descent into a prison town. This process is broken up in the middle by a diagram that takes up two pages of the comic, which shows how the public funding supporting the prisons is systematically

enriching investors and politicians, while the social costs escalate. There is a socioeconomic and political narrative which looks at how the prisons serve certain economic interests in society while bringing impoverishment to other communities. Documenting the real cost of prisons does not end with the damage done to the communities that are lured into building them. If your father or mother is now going off to participate in all that goes on in a prison, how do they behave when they get home?

This criminalization process is integral to the prison process targeting impoverished people in the United States (predominantly African Americans and Latinos). The prison expansion is complimented by the expansion of surveillance and policing, with millions and millions of dollars spent on targeting the inhabitants of inner cities for imprisonment. You have to feed the monkey, so to speak. Pyle narrates how racism in law enforcement is ripping the poor from their communities and dumping them in these prisons far out in the hinterlands. People are separated from their families and their loved ones. He closes with examples of alternatives. He points to a few instances where communities have channelled public funds into trying to uplift the social situation of people in these impoverished districts by investing in schools, libraries, and social programs.

Over 41,000 copies of this comic have been printed. Thousands have been sent to incarcerated prisoners, their families, and community activists across the United States. What is Kevin Pyle doing? He is contributing to and grounding his work in lived experience. He is trying to build a movement against the prison industrial complex. He is also giving us sequential narratives of empathy with those subject to repressive, economic, and governmental forces across social and racial divides. The immediate objective of “Prison Town” is to inform people about the situation and inspire them to organize and fight back. But it also calls larger issues into question. The center spread showcases a dysfunctional

and corrupt system—the system of representational democracy in the United States—and its ability to sustain and nurture the prison industrial complex.

Another issue that Pyle has addressed is the politics of memory, which is powerful in the United States. There is a powerful narrative about the United States and what it means to be American. Another issue that Kevin Pyle has mobilized his talents around reflects on a war that is routinely promoted in the United States as a defense of freedom: The Second World War. Kevin Pyle disrupts this narrative by recalling an injustice, the othering of those whose American status was revoked during the war. After the United States entered the war, over 110,000 people of Japanese heritage were declared enemy aliens. This, of course, happened in Canada as well. They had 24 hours to sell what they could and gather their belongings, then they were shipped to internment camps. Kevin Pyle has produced a wonderful graphic novel called *Take What You Can Carry*, published by a mainstream publisher, which weaves together the lives of two boys. One, who lives through the internment camp experience, and the other who grows up in a Chicago suburb in the late 1970s.

The story of the Japanese American boy in the internment camp unfolds without words in brown monochrome, a powerful device for casting our imaginations back to an experience before our lifetime. The counterpart's tale, in Chicago, is depicted in washed out blue. It follows the standard illustrated story format with voice bubbles. He weaves these two stories together seamlessly. Their lives converge at the intersection of anti-authoritarianism and secrets revealed. In both instances, these are mediated by mutual compassion and a breakdown of the othering process.

The Chicago boy, a known delinquent, sees his adventures come to an end when he is caught stealing from a grocery store. The owner of the store is the Japanese boy—once in the internment

camp—now grown up. He decides not to press charges on the condition that the boy start working for him to compensate for his actions. What is he pondering when he is thinking about it? He is thinking about his own time in the internment camp, when he engaged in his own petty theft, stealing boards to take to an artisan who was using them to create animal carvings in the camp for children. He makes the decision not to send the kid to the prison. While he is supervising this delinquent, he discovers the boy's compassion for the plight of a fellow thief. He refuses to give up his friend's name to the police or to the shop owner because he knew that his friend was being battered by his father.

When the shop-owner learns what is going on in this other child's life, he is moved. He has his own epiphany, and he gives the boy one of the birds that he himself carved when he was in the internment camp. He shares with him his story, with one secret component. At the camp, the military police periodically seized personal items from people incarcerated in the camp. During one such instance, they took the carver's tools. The boy who is been learning how to carve is determined to recover them, so he sneaks out from the camp and breaks into the shed where they are being kept. However, he is caught by a military policeman. Confronted by this terrified teenager trying to recover tools for carving birds, the soldier has an epiphany. Who is the real thief, the incarcerated child or the state that has othered the child? He lets the boy go and asks him to keep his dereliction of duty a secret.

This compassionate unraveling of authority plays out in the present of the story as well. We are in Chicago; we are with the boy who is returning home with his father. The boy learns that the store owner saved him from the punitive system of American law enforcement by refusing to press charges—choosing instead to let the boy work with him so the boy could have a chance to develop a deeper understanding of what he had done, understand the consequences, and build remorse for his actions. Pyle ends his

novel with a metaphor of freedom. The carved birds taking flight, as the internment camps are closed, and Japanese Americans are released.

*Take What You Can Carry* appeals to a willingness to ignore, to break, to circumnavigate laws that get in the way of mutual understanding. It presents anti-authoritarianism as a learning process, which transforms social interrelationships on a micro and a macro level. This reminds me of anarchist educational theorist Layla AbdelRahim's observations concerning the need to infuse learning with what she calls the ontological urge towards freedom. As human beings on this planet, we are part of a diverse ecology and diversification that is integral to the very life energy of the planet. Society should be nurturing this impetus towards freedom in us, not denying it or repressing it. In Layla's words, the pedagogical path towards shedding authoritarianism is "the ability to imagine what others live and feel, and being capable of connecting this observation with one's own life. Empathy is the key to intelligence, and together with imagination, interconnectedness, cooperation, and respect for the choices of others, constitutes the exigent components of a sustainable culture." Such values are arguably antithetical to state based conceptions of citizenship and acquiescence to higher authorities. This is Kevin Pyle's point. Perhaps the most subversive way to assert compassion towards others is to reject the identities that divide us. We can be freed to imagine different paradigms for organizing society, ones in which authoritarianism never gains power in the first place.

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## OPEN DIALOGUE ON ALL DAY TWO PRESENTATIONS

**Dr James Fox:** We have had three marvellous papers dealing with similar issues in very different ways. We will take questions about these three papers, the papers from yesterday, and the broader issues at hand.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** This question is for Mark. I was intrigued by Comfort's anarchism. It seemed very individualistic, but his conception of sociability seemed highly moralized as a matter of empathy and empathetic connection to others. I was wondering if he was engaged with the work of Emma Goldman. I think of her conception of anarchism as more communitarian and her conception of sociability—talking about social wealth—as being free to organically collect. I think of it as creating an aesthetic community. I often think of dada and surrealism as embodying some of those conceptions of social wealth, so it was striking to see a critique of that from an anarchist perspective. Is Comfort's conception of sociability really so moralized?

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** From the standpoint of somebody who has gone through Comfort's writings, I cannot find any evidence of him having read Emma Goldman, but I cannot see how he could not have. She was such a famous and powerful figure that I do not doubt for a moment that he did. In terms of his anarchism, something that I find slightly problematic is that it is so based on his theory of behaviourism. He is a scientist and a medical doctor, and he studied child psychology. He was reading some of the texts that were referenced yesterday such as Eric Fromme or Wilhelm Reich. He is interested in the psychological perspective on anarchism, which I think at times led to a lack of sensitivity to the

historical conditions under which anarchism could be achieved. It is a universalism across time with a notion of something (an impulse or tendency) intrinsic to the human condition. He is excellent at theorizing the state's role at reinforcing these things, but he is not sufficiently exploring the issue of empathy and how it can be socially constructed and reinforced. I think Allan's talk showed how that could be done through life experience. Through art, similarly to what Pat was saying. I see Comfort as somebody who is both admirable and problematic.

**James Nguyen:** My question is for Allan. I was wondering if you thought of Pyle's work as propaganda and how you thought the talks yesterday by Sarah and Vid might inform our analysis of that work, given that the interpretation is quite straightforward.

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** "Prison Town" is arguably propaganda, yes. W. E. B. Du Bois said, "all art is propaganda". You can have excellent art that is also playing a propagative role. When he is giving us these complicated stories and narratives (the flipping of perspectives, the dualities, and so on), he is going beyond the prescriptive. He is triggering our imaginations to open us up to the perspective of not only the person who is being repressed, but also the repressor. I could imagine myself as an objective psychologist working on the control unit through reading Pyle's narrative. The visual layering is remarkable in terms of the expansive dimensions of the art, in terms of triggering an imagination. Take, for example, the seriality of all the quotes of the prisoners with one prisoner who has grown huge inside the cell, preceded by the bureaucratic and dispassionate narratives. That is a little more complicated than a typical example of propaganda—which is about communicating one point of view—would be.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** My first question is for Mark: How did Dada feature in Alex Comfort's argument?

For Pat: I was intrigued because I was unaware of this relation to Bakunin. I was wondering how Cartier-Bresson interpreted himself. He was obviously appreciated by the art market and had admirers who he likely would have hated. I saw interesting parallels to Wagner. Wagner was also fighting on the barricades with Bakunin, but he is now remembered as a right-wing German composer, though he started as a left-wing anarchist who was not allowed in Germany.

And for Allan: I'm interested to hear more about how the prison-industrial complex in the United States differs from the treatment of prisoners in Canada. I felt that given what you showed us in these journals they are much more open to therapy. In the United States, it is an economic issue to create a cheap labour force, but because they do not offer therapy to communities—especially black communities who would really require this—people who have psychological illnesses are imprisoned, rather than helped. Is there a difference in Canada because there are these art engagement projects?

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** My answer is simple. He did not address Dada at all. That photograph is from the Degenerative Art exhibition of 1937, so he was aware of it, but he did not address dada. I think it is particular to the situation in Britain during World War Two and just before. Because of the introduction of surrealism and its power as a medium, there were surrealists who identified as part of the anarchist tradition. There was also a moment in time when Andre Bréton—the self-proclaimed head of the surrealist movement—tried to branch out to include some aspects of the libertarian anarchist tradition under the fold of the surrealist movement. He and Trotsky wrote a joint declaration in 1938, where they talked about how surrealism does still believe in the party of the proletariat, but also in that context one must have a libertarian impulse of spontaneity and freedom. There is an attempt to square a cube and Comfort was very critical of that. To

some extent, his intervention with surrealism is very particular to the historical moment. There is an incredibly rich history of dada and anarchism, so in a sense, you could see Comfort defining his discourse strategically not talking about certain things and talking about others.

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** As far as Cartier-Bresson, he was born into a wealthy family. The name Cartier was a button and thread factory, so his family had enough wealth to help him once they accepted the fact that he was going to be a photographer. They gave him a small annual income, enough for him to live the way that he wanted to. A lot of radical artists were lucky enough that that was true for them. He did not need to market his art, especially his early work. After World War Two, when he got out of the German prison camp, he wanted to found Magnum to create a body of art that was persuasive.

There exists a sliding scale from propaganda to persuasion. All art wants to be persuasive just as all art has some political position, whether the artist wants to articulate it. He did become popular, but I do not think that he ever cared about what happened to the works. He did not curate his own work, with the exhibition for the anarchist labour union being the only exhibition.

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** I can answer this question somewhat anecdotally. Right now, the Canadian government is fighting against a successful (to a certain degree) initiative to end solitary confinement in Canada. This points to the fact that the situation in Canada has been enriched by different communities that have been working to remediate the situation of imprisonment, not only outside of the prisons but within the prisons. There have been education programs. I have friends who used to go into local prisons in my hometown—which has many prisons—for educational programs with prisoners.

I also know people who have been incarcerated. One of them, Ann Hansen, has written a memoir called *Taking the Rap*. It follows her earlier book, which discusses how she was imprisoned in the first place. It is remarkable because she talks about her original experience in prison in the 80s and follows with subsequent instances of incarceration. She shares some observations about prison techniques as well as noting some of the ways in which formerly constructive programs in women's prisons—which bring some sort of remedial purpose—have been taken away. The architecture itself is being rebuilt to facilitate surveillance, control, which she discusses from an experiential point of view.

In terms of the situation in the United States, there are various organizations that have documented what is happening. The organization behind "Prison Town" has many publications dealing with the situation in the United States. There is a movement across North America called the Prison Abolition Movement.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** I believe Black Lives Matter has much of the information involved there.

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** You might be interested in the anarchist-focused archive at the University of Victoria. They have the full papers of Jim Campbell. You can track prisoners writing in and talking about how much it means to them, writing poetry and so forth. They also include intersections with Black Panthers becoming anarchists, indigenous activists talking about their struggles within the prison, and so forth.

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** Naively, we tend to think of anarchism as a movement focused on the political aims of dismantling the state. In popular imagery, it is the bomb-thrower image. In both of your talks (especially in the concept of ethical anarchism that Cartier-Bresson offers), it seems that it is much more opposition focused. It seems to be more of a humanist position, focused on

the dignity of individuals. My first question is: to what extent does that ring true? And secondly if we go back to the art, how does the centrality of the human figure come across in the three artistic practices that you have talked about?

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** The assumptions about what anarchism is in the popular imagination must be countered with more careful historical treatment and articulation of the enormous range. There were anarchist bomb-throwers. There is an association with terrorism that is perfectly historical that we need to acknowledge, but many anarchists are pacifists and do not subscribe to that.

There were fierce debates throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and to this day) about whether people supported the idea of a symbolic act of violence, called in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ‘propaganda of the deed’. There was the ‘propaganda of the word’ and the ‘propaganda of the deed’. The throwing of a bomb and of nails into the chamber of deputies in 1894 by Auguste Vaillant was intended simply to injure. It is not nice, but it was not intended to kill anyone (and no one was killed). He was executed for it. This disproportionate reaction was met by a deadly bomb that took place just a few months later by someone avenging his guillotining. There was this escalation. The period ended in a trial of 30 people, two of which were actual thieves. The other 28 were intellectuals who had advocated various aspects of anarchism.

In France, this became an enormous issue that everybody had to take a position on. If I recall correctly, Kropotkin defended it up to the Émile Henry bombing that killed 8 people. The targets were not politicians but people who had voted politicians into power. There was a long defense of the notion that voters were guilty of perpetuating the system of injustice. There was an enormous disparity in wealth in France in this period. Kropotkin defended it until it got too uncomfortable. Others, such as the art critic

Felix Feneon (who seems to have been a bomb thrower himself, as well as an aesthete), continued to defend it.

It is a wonderfully complex world, clearly. Other people had never supported any act of violence. They believed only in community-building instead of these symbolic acts of violence. Anarchism has a chequered life in public imagination that I think makes it difficult to deal with the ideas that it generates. If you are going to be a historian, you must open your eyes to that whole range.

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** To follow up on this, there is a paradigm in anarchism that goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and I think has become a more powerful and central value within anarchism. This is the notion of the state not as a fetishized object, but as a state of mind and a set of social relations between people. It looks at how people relate to each other and how the state intervenes and formulates those relationships.

I think both Pat and Allan touched on that in a central way. I did in my own way by talking about the objectification of the self and the other, and the way in which Comfort theorized that within human psychology. This could be what Allan referred to in his abstract as a form of prefigurative anarchism. This involves thinking about anarchism not in terms of some horizon line of revolution, but in terms of the kind of incremental changes you can make in your own life. In that sense, anarchism is happening right now in the choices we make, in the way we relate to each other, whether we follow Donald Trump in demonizing people. I think this is a fundamental aspect of what anarchism is about.

The issue of terrorism is very complicated. To some extent, what Pat was indicating was the difference between symbolic terrorism—when a figurehead for the state is killed—and indiscriminate bombing—when voters are attacked for their desire to

elect representatives. They are part of the structure by which the state is created. Where does that end? That is a problem.

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** The territory of Northern Syria is anarchist. The Kurdish anarchist movement is strong. I was recently in Turkey and had an opportunity to talk about what is happening with a Kurdish-Turkish anarchist. What strikes me is the way in which their territory has served as a refuge for all people fleeing the intolerance—both ethnic and religious based—that suffuses the ISIS project. The Kurds are going out to save people who were marooned on a mountain and besieged to a point where ISIS was killing men and enslaving women. That is a vital struggle, and notably it is also a struggle of renewal. There is a deeply rooted feminist component to their conception of an anarchist society. There is also an ecological component, because they are engaged in the ecological renewal of land destroyed by the Syrian state. This is happening at the same time as they are besieged not only by Assad's forces, not only by the remnants of ISIS, but also by the Turkish state itself, which has invaded part of that territory and has been working with deeply reactionary and religious militias. This is to say that there is also this constructive and social side of anarchism that we should keep mind of.

**David Christopher:** This question is for Mark. Why did you have us read Orwell's painfully pragmatic, humorously truculent ad hominem responses to Comfort via the editors of Partisan Review? How do you tie this into your discussion of Comfort's pacifism? Could you talk about that reading a little bit?

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** I was having fun. There is nothing like lack of resolution to encourage conversation. What is amazing about that is that Orwell himself was a pacifist in the moments leading up to the war. He was involved with and in dialogue with anarchists, and he described himself in 1941 as having a gut feeling that he had to defend his country. This was somebody

who was going through a degree of torment as to his position—and, of course, he evolved still further when he wrote 1984. He was in sympathetic dialogue with anarchists. A group of them were arrested in 1945, before the war ended, because they were involved in spreading anti-war literature among conscripts, and Orwell was involved in the defense committee to support them. Orwell was a very troubled, interesting, problematic figure and I wanted to put that out there to give you a sense of what it would be like to be a pacifist in 1942. Partisan Review was a Trotskyist magazine and was open to other tendencies on the left, but my choice was to give you an idea of what was at stake on the left, and the kind of dialogue that was going on and the problematic status of it. That was my basic message, and I thought it would be interesting to leave it open ended.

**David Christopher:** He has an almost convincing pragmatic defense against doing nothing—saying that by doing nothing you abet the enemy—when he started to see the atrocities of the other side. He does not seem very confused at this moment in time.

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** He does not seem confused in this piece, no.

**Zachary Weinstein:** I have a question for Pat. I was curious about Magnum. One of the interesting things about photojournalism, especially for artists with a political or activist bent, seems to be that you can get work in front of people who might not be seeking it out. I was wondering if Magnum's self-conception was to do that, and specifically what their strategy for publication was. Were they trying to place their work in non-partisan venues?

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** I think they were. They were targeting the magazines Look, Life, and European parallels. I grew up in the 1950s. Every week a Look and a Life arrived at my doorstep. In a sense it was the internet of the day, it brought imagery and

information to you about the world. I think that it was often also a kind of propaganda, or, at least, about persuasion. Look and Life celebrated the American way of life and naturalized consumption and wealth as values that everybody should be aspiring to, with the attendant myth that everybody could have it if only they worked hard enough. It was the perfect place to put information about decolonization, for example, or W. Eugene Smith's series on Minamata. This series was about mercury pollution of a town in Japan with horrifying photographs of children being born with deformities, making them dysfunctional, which provided all this information about mercury poisoning. Some stories were very anodyne and innocuous, while others were extremely powerful and informative. It was a perfect venue to put photographs that could, in their way, make an argument for tolerance and understanding of vast cultural differences across the globe.

Certainly Cartier-Bresson himself chose to focus on Asia. He was in India during the liberation and the founding of the Indian nation, he was in China right after the revolution. He sought out these places where there was radical social change going on. He photographed the people in such a way that they were expressing recognizable emotions that would be shared with the people back in the States or in France. The audiences were largely in Europe and North America, but Magnum was founded to make a humanist message of egalitarianism and the right of everyone to their own self-determination. That was his political conviction and why he went to those places where people were breaking free of the colonial system.

**Mona Hedayati:** I have a question for Mark. How do you think Alex Comfort's main ideas—thinking about anti-militarization and pacifism, his refusal of conscription, and condemning carpet bombing—would be applicable today, considering the military industrial complex?

Allan, I think it is worth extending the discussion on "Prison Town". He did a meticulous job coming up with all the statistics of how this state benefits substantially economically from building prisons—and how that funding system works—and the fact that a small minority of locals do get hired into this system.

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** Before I answer that issue, I wanted to note that an issue of being a pacifist—other than putting you in a very uncomfortable atmosphere in 1942—is that all of the thinkers or anarchists who are making their statements are practicing what Allan has referred to as prefigurative anarchism. They are saying that you cannot fight fascism with fascist methods. In the wake of the Spanish Civil War and the Russian Revolution, all these leftists were looking back and saying, 'what went wrong with those revolutionary moments?' They became increasingly aware of the organizational methods by which violence is effective. Violence invites hierarchies, military hierarchies, and central control authority. In the initial stages of the Spanish Civil War, anarchists were trying to do away with that as an organizational principle of violence. It was subverted, but ultimately many concluded that violence is not an answer because it is bound to fail. They put their faith in nonviolent resistance (and people like Gandhi), which does not mean doing nothing but stands for subverting the infrastructure by which the state imposes hierarchies. There was an attempt to rethink the necessity of violence within the context of revolution.

Allan and Pat talked about the need to practice empathy and not to objectify. When we think of the military industrial complex (or the prison complex, or the commodity complex in the case of prostitutes), it is all about modes of objectification.

If I were Comfort thinking today, what I would find most disturbing is the way in which the military has reinforced the sense of objectification in terms of spatial distance. You have drone

warfare; which people are controlling like video games when in fact real lives are being lost. The nuclear horror and the potential of annihilation is another real issue. Comfort, in the wake of World War Two, became involved in the anti-nuclear movement because he saw science as increasing the capacity for destruction and distancing attackers from their so-called enemies. He saw this as a pernicious psychological and infrastructural issue.

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** I should say that the issue raised is part of a book I am completing, called *The Aesthetics of Tension: Anarchist Currents in Contemporary Art*. One of the challenges as a writer is the word count. An important aspect of the discussion is the factual dimensions, which the art reinforces, humanizes, and turns into an experiential thing in a complex way. The complexity I initiated signalling is fascinating and I cannot think of anyone who has dealt with that complexity the way I am, so I am trying to achieve a new way of looking. I take your point, though. Those statistics and the information in “Prison Town” are eye opening.

**Brian Pollick:** I am a neophyte art historian and I have sat through many papers, and I have never experienced being moved in this way. To have one’s mind challenged, to have information, but to somehow also touch the heart. I wanted to thank you for that.

I was the warden of two Federal penitentiaries, as well as the Director of the John Howard Society of Alberta, which was the reform movement in the 1970s. I feel touched in a way and I am so grateful that there are people and organizations that are doing this, because it is so highly necessary. Thanks to all of you.

**Prof. Nick Riggle:** Pat, you touched on this, so this is sort of an invitation to say more. I was interested in why Cartier-Bresson chose photography, given his clear ethical anarchist aims. There exists in his art an interesting critique of representational

art that is not photography. If you look at the man in one of his photographs, he is climbing a ladder and leaping off into the idea. Behind it, you have a representational image of it captured by art, but in front of him you have the photographer and the image that we have. This is a more profound depiction of that aesthetic leap into the ideal. Do you think that somehow captured his thought that photography is especially good at playing a role in the aesthetic realization of the best form of life?

You were quoting Bakunin when you were talking about liberty through liberty, which sounds exactly to me like Schiller’s fundamental law of the aesthetic state, to bestow freedom by means of freedom.

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** I cannot speak to who might have influenced Bakunin. However, that is very interesting. My approach to studying and teaching the history of photography has always been to look at the ways that the photographer is manipulating the viewer. The photographer, just like any other artist, wants you to respond in ways that come into harmony with what they are seeing. Artists may state that the viewer can respond in any way, but they typically have a certain way they want people to receive their work. Photographers have many ways of control: framing, the angle of vision, use of light and dark, how much motion they want to stop, the use of blur, the use of a specific lens.

A photograph is an abstraction, and for Cartier-Bresson, it is a range of black and white on a two-dimensional surface. Photography gets to conjure the sense that it has captured real life, in a way that is not true for paintings. Photography has the extra power to make you think that it is neutral, and that is the power that photographers play with in persuading you of their vision.

In the negative for Cartier-Bresson's famous photograph, you can barely see what was there. With just the reframing, it created a decisive moment.

He did actually begin as a painter, studying in the studio of André Lhote. Lhote was a second-tier cubist, working later in the cubist movement but still in the World War One period, and then later had a studio where he taught principles of composition. Cartier-Bresson did in fact have this underlying artistic training that made them notice small details of composition. Later in his career, in his 80's, he decided he would be an artist again and stopped doing photography. His drawings are nowhere near as powerful as the photographs, but they suggest the awareness that he had every time he took a photograph. He was composing as an artist to set up a basic frame, and then waiting for life to happen in that frame. It is a brilliant technique. It focuses on this moment when his feeling is right, but that in fact has been carefully set up. He would wait for hours in places where he knew something interesting could happen.

That is my basic thought about the power of photography. Painters can do powerful things when that is their medium, but he found his medium with the camera.

**Zachary Weinstein:** My question is for Mark. It is a curiosity about the state of play in psychology at the time and how that was an influence in Comfort's thinking. You described him as very concerned about neuroses that come up with him—war or what have you—that contemporarily sound very Freudian. How are those reconciled in his own thought (if they were)? How did he work through both approaches?

**Prof. Mark Antliff:** That is a fascinating question because it is so problematic from our perspective today. The psychologizing that went on at that time was largely in a Freudian or Jungian

frame. Notably, the Freudian view was that other kinds of sexuality as aberrant. One has Comfort theorizing the notion of neurosis, but also sexuality as part of it. *The Joy of Sex* showed his trajectory as he was thinking 'healthy body, healthy mind', but it was defined in terms of a notion of freedom that was circumscribed by heterosexual relations. In that sense, there was a real limitation to the way in which he was ultimately thinking of that. He saw the fear of death as fundamental to this flight from reality, to this belief in supra-individual entities, and to a bad psychology of self-objectification and objectifying others. I can see all that as operative. He later went on to advocate sexual expression as affirming of a biology that included healthy psychology. He ended up in California in the 1970's and was part of experimental lifestyles and institutions at that juncture.

I find the psychology element both edifying and inclusionary of a horizon to his thinking on these issues that he did not get beyond, but he was not alone in that. Wilhelm Reich and Eric Fromme were theorists that he was looking at. We have the same experience today with Donald Trump. People are trying to think about behaviourist readings of Trump and his misbehaviour, and it is not wrong, but one has to be careful about psychologizing too much. We must think about social conditions as well, in a very serious way as something contingent.

**Levi Glass:** This question is for Pat, primarily to unpack more of the relationship between technique and what is offered through what that technique produces, especially looking at photography as this building up of technical choices that result in what is conveyed. You mentioned how Cartier-Bresson saw his technique as not having purpose, emphasizing instead the point of view. You also, however, talked about how it is impossible to separate content from form.

How do you understand how Cartier-Bresson sees technique in terms of what comes across? It seems to be important that he establishes himself as a photographer and conveys in terms of his anarchistic values, both through the documentary honesty of the scenes and the compositional formalism. What can you say about that relationship between technique and what is conveyed (maybe even more broadly through art that we can even see in Rubinoff's work)?

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** Cartier-Bresson thought of himself as not caring much about technique. He was "anti-craft", coming after Adams with a careful control of technique. Cartier-Bresson is careless. I looked through everything owned by the Getty and I was shocked by the bad quality of some of the prints. They have a weird range of tones, no real darts, no lustrous areas. He would make his negatives and hand the film to someone else to print, and he did not care much about the quality.

That is an anti-craft notion that goes along with Dadaism in many ways. It is saying what matters to him is the act of living, and, in that act of living, to express a vision at a certain moment. In other words, the decisive moment is both in the photograph and in the photographer. The decisive moment is when the photograph and the photographer are at one in this moment of exposure that he has carefully hunted. He describes it as a moment when his mind, his eye, and his heart all come together. It does not always result in a photograph with power, he destroyed whatever he did not like. There was this intention about what ended up coming through.

He has a funny relationship to technique. Clearly, it matters enormously in as much as it is the means by which he conveys any artistic vision. But I think he always felt he was on the other side of it, and the photograph was an almost accidental result of what he was doing. That sounds pretentious, because he should admit

that the product was the thing that ultimately mattered, but I think he truly believed it.

I think you must look at an artist's stated aim as if it is also a work of art. I am looking at the artists here wondering how they are hearing this, but as an art writer and an art historian, I am also just the viewer. I am receiving the work of art, and I think in that sense artist statements are vital. I started out working on Picasso. He was a great liar, he loved to spin myths that would puncture other people's assumptions about him as a Spanish artist. An artist will say things that themselves bear interpretation in relation to the work of art. I think that you have to see Cartier-Bresson's and Jeffrey's statements in relation to the work and ideally in the setting where they matter—in their historical period, in the way that they were received, the way they sought an audience. All those things need to be seen to understand how a work of art can function in its moment and for as long as it is going to last. To look at a photograph from 1932, you must understand the state of industrialization and industrial waste and pollution and the human joy in the midst of that. It needs context but it also transcends that. That is part of the power of art.

**Ambreen Hussaini:** I am wondering about the relationship between gender and anarchism, as the case studies focused on male artists. Are there any female, feminist, anarchist artists that you can talk about?

**Arash E. Jahromi:** It seems that all the artists that you talked about are political activists. What is the difference between a political activist and an anarchist?

**Prof. Allan Antliff:** If I may answer the first question, there are many women who are active as artists in the anarchist movement. One of them is Freda Gutmann. She is based in Montreal and she does amazing installation work related to the issue of

Palestine and her own identity growing up in Montreal in the Jewish community. It is very decisive, that is one instance I could point to but there are many others. In terms of political activist, we are all political actors in one way or another, most profoundly when we are in denial of our responsibility towards the world. One of the things that inspired me so much about Jeffrey was the way in which he pointed towards that responsibility in relation to writing about art, being an art historian, and also the way in which he wanted to expand the dialogues around the creative act and what that means, and whether it can be an avenue for knowledge about ourselves, and an understanding about the world we occupy. Much in the way as all art is propaganda, we are all political activists, it is just a matter of what you pursue in that regard.

**Dr James Fox:** Does anyone have any thoughts as to how the theme of art and moral conscience has changed their attitudes towards the Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park? Or conversely if what they've seen at the Park has changed their attitudes towards art and moral conscience?

**Dr Vid Simoniti:** For me, the key question that Jeffrey's work poses is, how can art, which is not itself representational of a distinct political issue, nevertheless be expressive of a kind of moral conscience? As Allan's talk reminded us, sometimes art needs to express a particular issue. Jeffrey's art poses the question of why the issues he was so heavily involved with are pointed at by his work. I initially thought about it through this medium of the word beauty, this sense of how an artwork can align us to something greater than ourselves. In Jeffrey's case, this might be the geological history of the world and our place within it, and perhaps a sense of care that we have towards the world. Something that my fellow speakers' talks have really brought to the front to me is this importance of freedom and individuality. Jeffrey was a very direct, committed person, who saw through this vision that was free from influence of the art market and fashions.

It is something that he had in common in a funny way with the anarchic spirit. Mark reminded us that anarchy means freedom from government. Sarah's paper reminded us of the importance of freedom in the exercise of democratic virtue. That importance of individuality and relying on your own vision to express artistic language and moral consciousness is something that Jeffrey expresses.

**Dr. James Fox:** Abstraction has been a big theme of this conference, although we have not spoken about it explicitly. I was struck by the comment in Mark's paper about Gabo's sculpture, that abstraction is a flight from social responsibility. That has been very interesting to me, the idea of how an abstract artwork complicates the act of trying to communicate something. At the same time, in Jeffrey's work (which is, of course, abstract), the value comes from the ambiguity that Sarah discussed, and the fact that it is opposed to prescriptive narrative. This is a particular kind of experience, a particular kind of knowledge that is acquired through something indirect.

**Prof. Pat Leighten:** Abstract art will render much more meaning when you see it in its historical moment and in its setting. Jeffrey clearly took an enormously social act in creating a sculpture park that people can come to. He did not just refuse to show in a gallery, like Robert Smithson who built "Spiral Jetty" outside of the white cube of the gallery only for it to be washed away over the decades. This is permanent and attached to the space and this conversation because he provided for that. To me, these are layers of his intentions. To take a photograph eliminating the whole landscape effect of the garden would be to entirely pluck it out of its social context. What we are trying to do here is to put things back into their social and historical context, with their theoretical connections and meanings. It is a larger project that gives context to his work. It has deeply changed my own feeling about what I

saw when I arrived and how I now feel about it. The whole experience has layered it with the thoughts that it has inspired.

**Dr Sarah Hegenbart:** What I found interesting is that our perspective on the arts in the West is very much from the perspective of a spectator. We are looking at the effect the artwork has on the spectators. However, I think here there is an effort to understand the artist's sense of perspective. This is implicit also in Nietzsche's work. Everything in the park is so thought out, there is so much inspiration, idea, and vision in the park. It is as if it was created as an artwork of one's life. I was reading Nietzsche before I came here because of this life as artwork idea. This is interesting because I think in the Global South, art is thought of more as a practice—from the perspective of the artist—whereas we here are focused with the spectator perspective. I do not know why this is, it was interesting to see that there is an example in the West which takes this artist's perspective.

**Prof. Nick Riggie:** I am a philosopher. I am prone to abstract thinking, and I typically do my work in my office on campus or at home. This is often rather disconnected from art and beauty. To be in an intellectual space with everyone, while being confronted immediately by artworks and some of the most beautiful vistas I have ever seen is quite special. It is rare to have that combination of thought, immediate beauty, and interesting art. I think it is a special setting, especially when you consider that it is created by an artist. It is not a hotel, it is not a commercial space, it is a park created from the love of art. We are here thinking about that and realizing that. It is incredibly unique. I certainly have not experienced that before.

**Dr. Vid Simoniti:** First and foremost, we have to thank the one who is absent. We have to thank Jeffrey Rubinoff. I was struck, Pat, by your comment and I think it has transformed my view of the park. We are viewing the artworks, but it is by a part

of the artwork that this is happening. It is like a living, thinking organism to which people can come back and keep thinking about the issues that were important to Jeffrey and are important to all of us. Thank you to him.

**Dr. James Fox:** I just want to pick up from what you said about Jeffrey, because although he died just over two years ago, the fact that we are here and what we are doing now is proof that he is still working. The work is still being made, the ideas, the context of the work is still being made, and I like the thought that every time we come here together the art is brought back to life.

## 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 Schlingensief'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 Koelman) 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 Leighten, 2001), *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism 1906-1914* (also with Patricia Leighten, 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 Luxembourg, 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).

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## STUDENT DELEGATES

**Ambreen Hussaini** | PhD student  
Art History & Visual Studies, University of Victoria  
Jeffrey Rubinoff Scholar in Art as a Source of Knowledge

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**Giorgia Autelitano** | MA student  
Art History & Visual Studies, University of Victoria

**Maria Buhne** | MA student  
Art History & Visual Studies , University of Victoria

**David Christopher** | PhD student  
Art History & Visual Studies, University of Victoria

**Arash Eghbal Jahromi** | MA student  
Art History & Visual Studies, University of Victoria

**Brian Pollick** | PhD student  
Art History & Visual Studies, University of Victoria

**Amena Sharmin** | MA student  
Art History & Visual Studies, University of Victoria

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**Levi Glass** | MFA Student  
Visual Arts, University of Victoria

**Mona Hedayati** | MFA student  
Visual Arts, University of Victoria

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## SUGGESTED PREPARATORY READINGS FOR DELEGATES

**For Vid Simoniti's presentation**  
W.E.B. Du Bois  
*Criteria of Negro Art*  
<http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>

**For Sarah Hegenbart's presentation**  
Juliane Rebentisch,  
*The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*  
Introduction and (optional) Part I ("An Antique Diagnosis of Crisis")

**For Nick Riggie's presentation**  
Nick Riggie  
*On Being Awesome*  
(especially Chapters 1-3, 5)

**For Mark Antliff's presentation**  
"Pacifism and the War: A Controversy, essays by: D.S. Savage,  
George Woodcock, Alex Comfort, George Orwell" *Partisan  
Review* Vol. 9, No. 5 (September-October 1942), 414-421.

**For Patricia Leighton's presentation**  
Henri Cartier Bresson interview by Charlie Rose  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U63Pf7GS6A>

**For Allan Antliff's presentation**  
Kevin Pyle and Craig Gilmore  
*Prison Town, Paying the Price*  
[http://www.realcostofprisons.org/prison\\_town.pdf](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/prison_town.pdf)