Revolt

Aesthetics of Dissent and Disgust
Introduction

Protest and civil unrest have received enormous attention on the global stage recently, with the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement catalyzed by the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, and the recent Arab Spring providing just a few examples of how individuals and nongovernment organizations are speaking up in attempts to influence political and social realities. The members of Cornell’s History of Art Majors’ Society have taken such global developments as a starting point for our exhibition this year, using the term “revolt,” with its multiple implications, to create a show that explores resistance to prevailing social, cultural, artistic, and political conventions.

Calls for social or political change have long relied on visual imagery to convey their messages, and some of the works in this exhibition capture the signs and symbols associated with such movements. Many of these works do not simply document those movements, however, but actively promulgate them, using composition, color, and medium to convey a message of defiance and rebellion. In doing so, they exemplify the role art has played in instigating broad change throughout history, from Honoré Daumier’s caricatures of French government officials and Pablo Picasso’s Guernica to Pussy Riot’s more recent protests against the Russian government. Together, these works show art’s ability to compellingly convey and disseminate unconventional or subversive ideas.

Revolution also plays a prominent role in the history of art itself. Beginning particularly with artistic modernism, a seminal moment when artists such as Édouard Manet,
Camille Pissarro, and Gustave Courbet were rejected by the officially sanctioned academic Paris Salon and protested by establishing the Salon des Refusés in 1863, the history of art has been characterized by constant innovation and revolution. From cubism and surrealism to Pop Art, avant-garde movements have emphasized rupture and estrangement from past artistic conventions. A number of works in this exhibition use “new” media such as found objects, or unorthodox techniques such as collage, showing that the history of art is not so much a continuum as a series of disruptions and upheavals.

Artistic innovation and social or political rebellion are inextricably linked, and the crux of the exhibition lies in points of intersection between these two forms of revolt. In our selection of works, this exhibition seeks to highlight how artists’ search for visual language to express discontent with or defiance of the status quo leads to the development of a diversity of unsettling aesthetic theories and artistic processes. The work in the 1863 Salon des Refusés, for example, was created with the belief that the vastly different world created by the Industrial Revolution required vastly different art from the traditional subjects and forms of the academic Paris Salon, and initial reactions to that work and many of the pieces in this exhibition demonstrate that art that rebels against artistic or social conventions is often initially considered “revolting” in the sense of offending established, orthodox sensibilities as well.

As an institution that has been revolutionary since its founding as a nonsectarian, coeducational institution in 1865, Cornell is a natural locus for this exhibition. Beginning with its radical departure from conventional models of higher education 150 years ago, Cornell has continued to be an innovative and unconventional university, commissioning some of the first “happenings,” a form of artistic expression that emerged in the protest culture of the 1960s, and, in the same decade, establishing one of the first Africana Studies programs in the country. By including images of Cornell’s history, with the support of the Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, we hope to contextualize the history of revolution in art and in society, as a whole, showing how such exciting and often controversial decisions and events have shaped Cornell in its 150 years of history.

Though perhaps especially visible at a forward-looking institution such as Cornell, divergence from convention and radical change are central to the development of art and of political actualities around the world. In this exhibition, we seek to show that revolution within the realm of art and in society as a whole are inseparable, and that innovative, unconventional art not only reflects but also actively participates in the creation of new political, social, or cultural realities.

Cameron Ewing
View from above of the former occupiers of Willard Straight Hall walking across the Arts Quad, April 20, 1969 (courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell Library)
Robert Rauschenberg  
American, 1925–2008  
**Commemorative Artwork**, 1981  
Color lithograph on heavy wove paper  
Edition 21/300  
Gift of the National AFL–CIO, Lane Kirkland, President  
82.006  

© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY
Robert Rauschenberg’s career can be characterized by his thirst for artistic individuality. He was known for his ability to break down barriers between painting and sculpture, and famously bringing together various mediums into one canvas. In the 1950s, Rauschenberg began developing his artistic trademark when he started making “combines,” blurring boundaries between high and low art, the everyday world and our imagination, and various artistic mediums. Visually, combines are large-scale collages that synthesized subjects, materials, and techniques. Rauschenberg employed this unique approach as his version of contemporary relevance and artistic revolt.

Although Commemorative Artwork is not one of Rauschenberg’s combines, it emphasizes similar themes and intents. Commemorative Artwork is a color lithograph on woven paper, an entirely visual collage that embodies Rauschenberg’s desire to incorporate various messages onto one artwork. Disregarding preconceived styles of painting, Rauschenberg challenges the viewer to find order within his orchestrated chaos. Collages of images, overlapping colors and mediums, writing, painting, photographs, and symbols consume the canvas. The selected pieces could seem random, but the subjects included throughout this piece are linked by the common theme of revolt.

The AFL–CIO, an American union federation, gave Commemorative Artwork to the Johnson Museum. Commemorative Artwork portrays the theme of labor. Along the bottom of the sheet are the AFL–CIO’s affiliated union’s labels, almost in the center of the image is the AFL–CIO’s handshake identification symbol, and the only identifiable portrait is of Lane Kirkland, who was the AFL–CIO president from 1979 to 1995. Thus, Rauschenberg immediately offers a strong political message that broadly represents his interest in political rebellion, revolt, protest, and change. Ultimately, Rauschenberg’s described that his goal as an artist was to work “in the gap between art and life,”1 and this piece successfully demonstrates his intent. Commemorative Artwork lies in a limbo between art and reality, as this piece can be construed as a type of documentation or political statement—something a viewer could read in a newspaper, see on the television, or hear on the radio. Viewers are left with the symbiosis of external and internal revolt. Rauschenberg includes specific events of revolt yet invites the viewers to interpret it in their own way, and determine how it is that they want to revolt against society or themselves.

Alanna Klein

---

Pablo Picasso
Spanish, 1881–1973
The Dream and Lie of Franco, 1937
Etching and aquatint
Acquired through the Museum Membership Fund
62.0383

© Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Despite not being as immediately visually arresting or striking as his world-renowned Guernica mural, Pablo Picasso’s The Dream and Lie of Franco is just as expressive, and perhaps even as socially and politically pertinent as his grand masterpiece. Franco is one of a pair of prints, made in etching and aquatint, that consist of nine individual images arranged in three-inch-square grids, forming an eighteen-scene comic-book style narrative. When drawing on the plate, Picasso worked from left to right, so that when the images were printed, the images (and the writing) are in fact reversed. In their rough satire and striplike format, the prints were originally intended to be published as postcards and sold at the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 World’s Fair, evoking the revolutionary potential of this work from the start. Furthermore, in both style and symbolic content, many aspects of Franco in fact served as a preparatory sketch for Picasso’s Guernica.

Beginning in November 1936, General Francisco Franco of Spain conducted a series of air strikes on Madrid in which he carelessly bombed the Prado Museum. Naturally, this infuriated Picasso, who subsequently launched his own strike of sorts against Franco and became the spokesman of the Spanish Republican Government. Through this, Picasso found an outlet to expose Franco’s desecration of Spanish artistic heritage, and to ultimately display the hypocrisy at the core of this ruler who presented himself as the champion of the traditional Spanish culture he was in fact destroying.

Picasso’s The Dream and Lie of Franco is in many ways the epitome of this effort as the scenes express grotesque deceit in both style and subject matter. Picasso created the first five panels following the original Madrid bombings, which represent Franco in a variety of different guises and satirical episodes: Franco eating a dead horse; the aftermath of a battle with a corpse; the aftermath of Franco’s battle with a dead horse; and Franco fighting with a bull. The scenes of destruction symbolize a people and a culture lost at Franco’s hands, while the bull seems to represent Spain, evoking Franco both as a traitor and a destroyer of his people, and a call for Spain—the bull—to fight back.

Perhaps even more evocative, however, are the last four scenes of the work—added on June 7, 1937, six weeks after the infamous Guernica bombings in which an entire village was destroyed at the hands of the violent ruler. These four scenes ultimately served as preparatory studies for Guernica, immediately recognizable in the sixth scene featuring a woman reaching up in hysteria. The next three scenes depict other instances of horrific massacre and rape, inciting a more visceral response than the prior five scenes of caricature. Through his use of both satire and the grotesque, Picasso succeeds in blurring the lines between thought, language and visual imagery to create an image that screams an overt cry of revolt.

Lara Abouhamad
Honoré Daumier
French, 1808–1879

Baissez le rideau, la farce est jouée (Lower the curtain, the farce was played), 1834
Lithograph
Acquired through the Museum Associates Purchase Fund
69.100
Caricatures and drawings offer a means of disturbance which it is very easy to abuse." This sentiment, expressed by Deputy Claude Jacquinot-Pampelune in 1822, explains French legislators’ fear of caricatures during the nineteenth-century. Artist Honoré Daumier, often regarded as the father of caricature, created Baisserz le rideau, la farce est jouée and Mademoiselle Etienne Joconde . . . Bécassine de constitutionnel in 1834, during the constitutional regime of King Louis-Philippe. Although Louis-Philippe promised French citizens freedom of speech, new legislation that censored the news outlets contradicted King Louis-Philippe’s previous commitment to the French population. As a sign of rebellion, Daumier produced hundreds of lithographs in the satirical journal La Caricature, mocking the political and social climate of France. The use of caricatures allowed artists to evade censors as they depict their subjects metaphorically rather than literally. In both of these lithographs on view in the exhibition, the two primary subjects are portrayed as grotesque versions of themselves in order for Daumier to highlight the subjects' immoral actions toward France’s working class.

In Baisserz le rideau, Daumier illustrates King Louis-Philippe as a grotesque clown as the curtain is lowered behind him in the Chamber of Deputies. He points at Lady Justice, implying that justice is a sham. In the background, Daumier uses the harsh contrast of black and white to emphasize the fading appearance of the parliament members. To Daumier, the parliament has not been living up to its responsibilities within the justice system to protect the rights of French citizens. Based on the date of the print, it is speculated that this meeting was held to decide what action to take against the worker uprisings in April 1834. The cynical smirk on the king’s face cements the idea that justice will not be served under his reign, as he is the one in ultimate control of the judicial system.

Daumier chooses to highlight another member of the aristocratic class in his lithograph Mademoiselle Etienne Joconde . . . Bécassine de constitutionnel. Charles Etienne was the editor of Le Constitutionnel, a paper that expressed many of the opinions held by the bourgeoisie. Bécassine translates as “simpleton,” and Daumier depicts Etienne as a revolting old woman dressed in rococo attire seated at a production of Antony, a play censored by Etienne himself. Etienne unceasingly waves the fan and turns away in disgust. By illustrating him as a woman, Daumier attacks Etienne’s editorial status as nonexistent—similar to the presence of women within the field of scholarly writing in France.

In both of these prints, Daumier uses caricatures as a form of revolt against the rampant forms of censorship and unfair judicial process in France at the time. So why did people view caricatures as “dangerous” or a “threat to social order”? The visual immediacy of self-recognition frightened those in power since the lithographs were mass-produced and made available to a large number of people, and were readily understood regardless of literacy. Daumier’s influence on society’s mind-set toward the government made him the main spokesperson of the working class against the injustices of Louis-Philippe’s rule.

Chinelo Onyilofor
Polish poster artists Waldemar Świeży and Jan Lenica helped reinforce the belief that Poland would eventually emerge from the Soviet occupation that was in place since the end of World War II. They and other artists created works that promised a brighter future for Poland. Through the use of new visual languages, bright and loud color palettes, and subtly subversive symbolic assaults on the Communist regime, Świeży’s Odpocznij Po Biegu and Lenica’s Faust (1964) are situated within this legacy of revolt in the 1960s and ’70s.

Waldemar Świeży
Polish, 1931–2013
Odpocznij Po Biegu, 1976
Color lithograph
Gift of Rodger Gurrentz
82.089.006
To understand the impact these works had in their time, we must analyze their significance within the time period. When the Nazi occupying forces left Poland after the war, the Soviets became the new occupiers of Poland and implemented their own policies of cultural suppression and control. One of these forms of cultural extermination was the state’s support for the Soviet artistic style of social realism, which would serve to help promote and celebrate the ideological underpinnings of Communism and marginalize Polish artistic expression. After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1952, the slightly more liberal regime of Władysław Gomułka in 1956 led to looser restrictions on the type of art and poster art that could be made.

During this time, Polish poster art evolved. More nonacademic art such as abstracted, geometric, and minimalistic forms were incorporated into compositions, as well as motifs from other artistic movements such as surrealism. It is also significant that under Communism, the centralized film distribution authority eliminated the need for competition between filmmakers. This greatly contributed to the blossoming of creativity during the period since posters did not have to sell a certain product but could become more centered on aesthetics. The belief was that, if the film had already been approved by the censor, the poster would most likely not be censored, allowing the artists slightly more freedom in what they were able to depict in their works.¹

In Odpoczynij Po Biegu, these methods of subversion are daringly apparent. With its strikingly bold color palette and engaging gesture, this work advertising a theatrical production would have broken up the monotony of daily life and prompted the viewer to think differently. With their vastly different aesthetic sensibilities, posters like this would offer a focus on subjectivity through personal interpretation. Additionally, the Catholic blessing gesture evoked by the bloody hand is significant; Pope John Paul II and other Catholic figures stood against the Communist regime and were representative of potential change while also being brutally repressed. The power and appeal of these posters within Communist Poland was what they symbolized for people when they would see them hung up along the street.²

Because all posters needed to be approved by a censor, in most cases, the posters were not overtly political. Occasionally, there was symbolic language within the posters criticizing the Communist government that could be understood by most Poles but was not forthright enough to merit being removed. The Faust poster, also on view, is an example of this type of symbolic revolt. By associating the poster with the narrative of Faust, it was possible to understand this poster as a jab against those siding with the Communist Party. The poster seemed to compare siding with the Communist Party with Faust making a pact with the devil. Through their positioning on the street as well as being so different from previous artistic styles endorsed by the Communist state, Odpoczynij Po Biegu and Faust represent a type of aesthetic revolt that was legible to most Poles and that strengthened the spirit of change in Communist Poland.

Piotr Pillardy

¹ I am grateful to Alexandra Palmer, the Johnson Museum’s provenance researcher, for sharing her notes on Polish poster art.
Art Young
American, 1866–1943

**Reward, Jesus Christ**, ca. 1938
Lithograph in red ink on cream laid paper
Gift of Professor Robert H. Elias
80.014
originally published on the cover of the Socialist magazine *The Masses* in a special 1913 Christmas issue, the wanted poster designed by political cartoonist Art Young has been reproduced in countless variations, even decades after his death. Whether in its original format, with additional embellishments such as scrollwork, or simply printed using a different color, this lithograph depicts one of the most iconic images produced by this short-lived publication. Although a variety of controversial topics like politics, labor issues, women’s rights, and sexual equality were addressed, it was a federal investigation that accused Young and other magazine editors of conspiring to obstruct conscription that eventually forced the publication to fold in 1917. Despite the eventual dropping of these charges, Young’s irreverent attitude was not confined to his political cartoons—he was almost accused of contempt of court as a result of his tendency to nap during *The Masses* trials. Eventually, he would go on to publish his own magazine with Ellis E. Jones entitled *Good Morning*, where another example of the wanted poster appeared. Nevertheless, this project was mired by financial troubles and the last issue was published in October 1921.

Annotating the first image of Jesus Christ, Young wrote an accompanying text entitled “One of those Damned Agitators,” referring to Jesus as the “great agitator of Palestine,” suggesting the “Carpenter of Nazareth” would have been an ardent supporter of the labor struggle of the early twentieth century.¹ In this manner, what many might only consider in a religious or literary context is defined as a political figure whose actions and ideals continue to be relevant to the present day. In fact, reprints of the original image can be found in various Socialist newspapers, religious publications, and even more contemporary protest movements like Occupy London. This act of appropriation thus creates a notable parallel with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union which was one of the audiences originally addressed by Young, who were themselves accused of similar crimes in their strikes and demonstrations. However, it is interesting to also consider Young’s early apathy toward politics and his transformation into an ardent Socialist.²

The simplified line work and treatment of the subject matter also speak to a new approach to rendering religious subjects, as it contrasts with traditional representations of an idealized Christ figure. Young’s work on the other hand focuses on the historical personage whose very presence was reason for controversy. Through the use of simple strokes, he is able to highlight Christ’s human nature as opposed to his divine status, evidenced by the bags under his eyes and his unkempt appearance. Still, this is an image that evidences the sometimes radical and subversive nature of religion, calling into question who truly represents the ultimate authority.

Oscar Rieveling

Julie Speed
American, born 1951

Infallible, 2011
Polymer gravure etching and chine collé
Edition 1/40

Acquired through the Marcia Jacobson and Daniel R. Schwarz Johnson Museum Purchase Fund
2012.002
Infallible takes its setting and general composition from an eighteenth-century etching by Charles Monnet (1732–1808) entitled Day of 13 Vendemiaire an IV. Monnet depicts a battle between French revolutionaries, led by then-General Napoleon Bonaparte and Royalist agitators on October 5, 1795. The conflict ended with a stunning victory by Napoleon’s troops that would earn him worldwide fame, eventually leading him to run an Empire. Julie Speed inserts a crucifix into the smoke and rubble of the avenue extending into Paris, as well as a large statue of the bust and torso of what seems like a pope, bishop, or other high-ranking member of the clergy in the middle of a church square. It is unclear whether the figure is a large, hollow puppet, a parade-like float, or the top half of a sculpture, but he remains unscathed by the bullets and cannons focused on him and unmoved by the surrounding violence and tumult. The most curious thing about the figure is a third eye to the right of his left eye, a symbol that implies omnipotent vision and divine knowledge. The Christ figure to his left is very cognizant of the destruction around him and consumed with his own pain. Unmarked and blind to the bloodshed of battle, the clergyman stares ahead with an omniscient, almost stern calmness. Infallible points to issues of legitimacy, responsibility, and authority in institutional power as complete mayhem occurs under the nose of a figure who should bring peace or healing to a situation. The luxurious clergyman in the work is oblivious not only to the people’s injuries but also to the agony of Jesus Christ, signifying disconnect between the religious leader and the scripture he should symbolize and espouse. Infallible is a print that revolts against the implied supremacy and legitimacy placed in important institutions and their leaders.

Speed uses a very contemporary method to produce her works. The photographic image is transferred onto a piece of light-sensitive polymer and then etched in an acid bath. A thin sheet of paper known as chine collé, cut the same size as the plate, gives the background a rich cream color reminiscent of old paper. Run through the press, the plate with the chine collé is attached to the larger sheet with a nontoxic glue and bonds with the pressure of the roller, achieving a warm tone and precise line quality reminiscent of intaglio works of the eighteenth century. Speed manages to trick the viewer into thinking the print is centuries older than it actually is, and by re-creating a historical event, she is able to add her own allegory to an image that already has expectations of historical documentation, accuracy, and truth. Infallible creates a loaded narrative against expectations of the sacred and powerful.

Daniela Pimentel
Robert ParkeHarrison
American, born 1968
Shana ParkeHarrison
American, born 1964

Reclamation, from the series The Architect’s Brother, 2003
Multicolor photogravure on acid-free, mold-made paper
Edition 5/40
Acquired through the Jennifer, Gale, and Ira Drukier Fund
2004.064
Robert ParkeHarrison describes his work as “stories of loss, human struggle, and personal exploration within landscapes scarred by technology and over-use,” qualities which are clearly depicted in Reclamation. Reclamation comes from the series The Architect’s Brother, which depicts the modern world in an alternate reality. The medium used in the series is photogravure, with backdrops built by Robert and his partner Shana, over several days in order to see this surrogate world come to life. The characters depicted in these images is known as the “Everyman” who must set the world back to the way we once knew it.

With their backdrops, the artists create a surrealist world in which modern-day society has fallen into chaos and confusion that is no longer self-sustaining. Each image represents a world that has been overtaken by technology and must be reconstructed. Through use of alternative darkroom techniques, sets, and printing, the monochromatic images the ParkeHarrisons present tell a nostalgic story with a modern twist. Although the surrealist imagery harkens back to the past, the subject matter itself deals with modern-day issues, referencing climate change, the lack of sustainable farming and development, and the misguided focus on materialism.

In Reclamation the “Everyman” figures are forced to carry the burden of “reclaiming” the wasteland that has become our earth and revolt against the damage that has been caused. The two figures in Reclamation tediously pull fresh new grass over the harsh desert wasteland, dressed in suits. These actions portray a revolutionary movement of escape, a rebellion against the equipment used to destroy. This demonstrates that one way to rebel is through an alternate reality. Just as we have constructed every aspect of our modern world, the ParkeHarrisons have constructed this image, putting the viewer in the shoes of the “Everyman.”

The artists’ statement reads, “We create works in response to the ever-bleakening relationship linking humans, technology, and nature. These works feature an ambiguous narrative that offers insight into the dilemma posed by science and technology’s failed promise to fix our problems, provide explanations, and furnish certainty pertaining to the human condition.” The artists have provided the viewer the opportunity to place him or herself within the image, performing the laborious task of reclaiming the earth as it once was, signaling a message that something must be done or technology will overcome human’s relationship with nature.

Haley Knapp
Notice Forest (Breakfast Street) epitomizes Yuken Teruya’s ability to transform detritus into fantastical scenes of nature. The contemporary artist from Japan has devoted his work to elevating the most unlikely materials into a state of unexpected beauty, challenging the viewer to confront the wastefulness of modern society. Teruya has worked with a variety of media, from video installations to pizza boxes to designer shopping bags. Notice Forest is a series completed in 2006, and Breakfast Street is one work that exemplifies the project Teruya is best known for. The delicate trees carved in the paper are evocative of lace, juxtaposing the blank, unassuming form of the bags. Teruya’s trees are a quiet yet determined rebellion against contemporary notions of consumerism and waste.

The paper bags placed before the viewer are a short-lived commodity in reality. In their insignificant lifetimes these bags hold tantalizing pastries before they are discarded in an undignified manner; these paper bags are synonymous with consumer culture, bearing well-known brands such as Krispy Kreme and Dunkin’
Donuts. Ordinarily, when they are no longer of use, their existence becomes a nuisance, and they are rendered nearly invisible. But Teruya resurrects the bags from invisibility by introducing the antithesis of both mass production and faceless consumerism; the delicate trees carved into each flimsy bag are taken from distinct models in Teruya’s homeland. In choosing specific trees to replicate in a series of identical bags, the unique designs cut into the surface of the paper are an indication that even in exhausted, overproduced objects of consumption, there is beauty to be found. The spectator cannot resist examining what the eye is trained to overlook, and they are actively drawn into the piece.

Teruya’s sculpture defies all of the lowly associations of trash, transforming a simply constructed object into an elegant artwork and generating dissonance in the viewer’s previous notions of trash and high art. Each bag is revived from its crumpled, broken state, but evidence of its past is visible in the minute wrinkles of the paper. Teruya encourages the viewer to revolt against this blatant waste, and to see the natural beauty that has been converted into trash.

Ironically, the tree is a symbol of the origin of the bag, which is in its final state of consumption; the link between the beginning and the end reminds the viewer that while the creation of the tree was a natural process, the transformation into paper was a mechanical, human disruption.

Teruya finds beauty in a very basic object, upending our notion that trash is the final stage in the life cycle of the objects we’ve produced. His decision to depict trees on these paper bags speaks to the irony of humanity’s tragic ability to transform timeless natural beauty into products with a lifespan that begins and ends in minutes. Our ability to see nature as beautiful in the face of our own destruction of it is a revolting notion in itself, and Teruya asks the viewer to consider redefining this materialistic conception of waste. Rather than accepting trash as a state of demise and a point of no return, the viewer can learn to see potential rather than disgust, and effectively revolt against their own preconceived notions of beauty.

Virginia Girard
William Klein
American, born 1928
*Danseurs-Happening, Ginza, Tokyo*, 1961
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Arthur Penn, Class of 1956, and Marilyn Penn
90.054.022

© Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY
Rebelling against many of his contemporaries in the 1960s, William Klein shot street photography filled with black humor, absurdity, and panic, yet kept everything real and exact. During his career, when Japan was still considered self-controlled, polite, or reserved from a Western perspective, Klein traveled to Japan and created a series named *Tokyo* comprised of grotesque yet seductive photos of daily life in the Far East.

In *Danseurs-Happening*, Klein was able to capture the gesturing of and expressions on the dancers’ faces, as well as the stopped traffic and huge crowds at Ginza, known as Tokyo’s Champs-Élysées. So framed, the image delivers a unique temporal perspective on the dance, which is otherwise unavailable through any ephemeral record of live performance.

The spastic and disquieting dance being captured is named Butoh, an avant-garde performance art founded in late-1950s Japan, when rapid industrial modernization, urbanism, and social and political unrest created anxiety for the people.

But such a turbulent period also witnessed widespread artistic experimentation with a rejection of academic or formal qualities. There was a trend, especially where artists began working with bodies dynamically, toward the juxtaposition of objects with spaces. The intention of such a Butoh performance is then playful and conceptual, as the dancers attempt to challenge the ideas of representation, and contribute to wider social and cultural debates.

The contents of Butoh often revolt against modernization, specifically against the way that Japanese modern dance was imitating trends in the West. In this photograph, the stylized cruelty, silent brutality, and visible rituality in the dancers’ movements are all characterized by strong Japanese flavors. Paradoxically intended to reject Japanese traditions, their performance is nevertheless rooted in two traditional Japanese performance arts, Noh and Kabuki theater. The dancers’ struggle to inject new modes of modernization and push the boundaries of Japanese tradition is thus exposed in Klein’s work.

More importantly, as Butoh dancers aim to make a disturbance with their direct performance, their dance could be meaningless unless the act of participation is taken into account. Because the idea of such an event is to manifest itself in local and prosaic contexts, the dancers’ performance interacts with the city spaces. This way the dancers are able to interrupt, invade, and influence the daily maintenance of cultural production and power.

Through Klein’s eyes, the dancers might be vulnerable, but they are not hiding the self-contradiction of being themselves. Despite the presence of Klein’s camera or what the audiences’ reaction is, the dancers seem quite confident. They are shown as violent in the solitude of their heart and in their social organization, contrasting to Western perception. William Klein said nothing, but the dancers intensely stare at us with their mouths open, seeming to say that one may take them for what they look like, but they would like to be seen for what they are.

Yuanyuan Tang

---

Romare Bearden  
American, 1911–1988  
*Tidings*, 1973  
Screenprint and photolithograph on wove paper  
Edition 36/125  
Gift of Argosy Partners and Bond Street Partners  
80.020.003  

© Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY
Romare Bearden’s collage *Tidings* epitomizes the values of the revolutionary Spiral group—a collective in which civil rights activists and African American visual artists joined together to discover ways to promote social change through their creations. Spiral’s three founders—Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, and Bearden—were based in New York City. Though Bearden’s vision for Spiral involved the group’s collaboration on a project, this idea did not emerge until after Spiral’s breakup in 1966.

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1911, Bearden experienced life as an African American living on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line before and after the civil rights movement. Thus, his works draw from societal patterns in the African American community from these two eras and geographical regions. Bearden created *Tidings* during the height of the Black Power movement—a more radical continuation of the civil rights movement that spread across the nation in the late 1960s through the ’70s and led to an explosion of African American pop culture. The Black Power movement demanded equal rights, jobs, quality housing, and an end of racial discrimination.

This collage depicts the embrace of two African American figures, standing outdoors in a green landscape, not far from a train station. Evidence from other works suggests that Bearden’s use of the train references a popular mode of transport from south to north throughout American history, emblematic of migration and escape from the horrors of Southern slavery.

Although *Tidings* is not a scene of uprising, it is noteworthy to consider that the work itself is also a revolt—Bearden’s use of found materials and collage media is a break from classical fine-art materials. Bearden pieced together “found” images from various print media sources, such as *Ebony* magazine, newspaper articles, or even advertisements. Bearden not only saw these print periodicals as a more accessible and available medium to work with than oil paints or pen and ink, but also as “projections” of the current social atmosphere of the United States.

Through Bearden’s manipulation of content and materiality, *Tidings* employs visual components of past stories of this era in African American history to challenge ideals of fine art and the norms of racial injustice. Like-minded revolutionary thinkers and members of the general public commended Bearden’s ability to show a disjointed yet recognizable slice of everyday life in African American communities.

Wylie Rechler
Kara Walker’s pop-up book tells the story of N-, a recently emancipated black woman whose journey to freedom is anything but hopeful. Beginning shortly after the end of the Civil War, N- leaves her abusive master in hopes of returning to Africa, “where brown skin means nothing.” However, on the ship N- finds herself and the other freed slaves, who are referred to as “contraband of war,” with no crew and no food. As N- muses over the fate of the passengers, they in turn contemplate N-’s own fate, as they decide whether to throw her overboard—or devour her for their next meal. Freedom: A Fable draws from numerous and varied sources, most notably the art of the silhouette, imagery from the antebellum South, harlequin novels, and negative stereotypes of African Americans in a piece that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. Walker revolts against conventional methods of storytelling and accepted notions of historicity, in an effort to explore the complex understanding and experience of race in modern America.

For Walker, the silhouette becomes a way to tell an alternate history of race and racism. Now seen as craft, the silhouette has its origins in the art of the haute bourgeoisie of the French aristocracy, gaining popularity just prior to the Revolution. Named after Etienne de Silhouette,
Louis XV’s much-disliked finance minister who crafted portraits from cut paper as a hobby, the silhouette became the fashionable art form of the upper class throughout Europe and the United States. However, it eventually fell out of favor by the mid-nineteenth century, relegated to the realm of crafts, souvenirs, and keepsakes. Walker appropriates the silhouette in the manner of a caricaturist. Her delicate figures are often depicted in demeaning positions, both disgusting and sexual, with exaggerated features that recall derogatory stereotypes associated with African Americans. Borrowing imagery related to the pickaninny, minstrel shows, and the Hottentot Venus, Walker’s uncomfortable satire strikes a chord both within and outside the black community. According to Walker, “the silhouette speaks a kind of truth.” The exactness of the technique attests to truthfulness, but Walker’s forms are far from accurate representation, and inform a practice that questions representation itself. The creation of a silhouette is an act of rebellion in its inversion of reality; its story is revealed through negative space. The definitiveness of the silhouette’s contours mimics “the reductiveness of a stereotype, a negative characterization intended to oversimplify a particular group of behavior.” Walker rebels against typical racial representations, forcing a society—whose understanding of race is founded on prejudice and stereotypes—to reevaluate the limits of the white/black dichotomy. In doing so, Walker implicates viewers in a confrontation with their own role in perpetuating these harmful stereotypes, which is underscored by the personal, intimate nature of a book. The controversial nature of Walker’s work has consistently been a point of contention within the African American community. In 1997 Betye Saar initiated a letter-writing campaign to protest Walker’s work and her use of offensive stereotypes of African Americans. Saar and other black artists who were active during the civil rights movement felt betrayed by Walker, whose work they interpret as a repudiation of their own efforts to erase racist stereotypes from the collective American memory. The debate surrounding her work highlights the precarious role that race plays in constructing the narrative of America. Walker obliterates any possibility of a single national narrative in Freedom: A Fable, where she presents a space in which multiple narratives intersect and intertwine with one another. Her work is rooted in the gray area that lies at the intersection of fantasy, disgust, historical accuracy, and political satire. She reveals the complex network of relationships that form our understanding of race, and the impossibility of accurately representing the experience of race and its historical development in modern America. Appropriating the imagery and stereotypes that propel racial discrimination, Walker rebels against representations of race and casts a new vision for understanding race in America.

Zoe Carlson

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid
Betye Saar
American, born 1926

Wot’s Dat, from the series
Workers + Warriors: The Return of Aunt Jemima, 1998
Mixed media assemblage on vintage washboard
Acquired through gifts made in memory of Isabel Berley, Class of 1947, and through the David M. Solinger, Class of 1926, Fund
2000.008

A native Californian, Betye Saar grew up in Pasadena during the Great Depression. Although hometowns provide points of departure for many artists, Los Angeles has been “a constant presence in Saar’s life and an important source of inspiration.”\(^1\) Indeed, Jessica Dallow, a critical theorist with an emphasis on race and gender at the University of Alabama, has attributed Saar’s unique blend of interests to the importance of the city in the 1960s and early ’70s as “a site of geographic convergence of feminism, assemblage art, and black consciousness.”\(^2\)
Drawing on the political turmoil of the era, Saar became one of the foremost artists of the Black Arts movement of the 1970s, alongside such luminaries as Romare Bearden and Emilio Cruz. Her grandmother lived in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, and when Saar visited her in the 1930s, along with strengthening her ties to her family’s history, she also saw Simon Rodia (1879–1965) construct his famous Watts Towers. Saar later said of seeing him sift through debris to find discarded objects to embed into his towers that “I think that was the beginning of me becoming an assemblagist or recycler.”

Starting in the late 1960s, Saar began to gather what are euphemistically known as “black collectibles,” instances of latent racism manifested in posters, advertisements, and toys that would have been familiar to most Americans. Triggered by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, Saar began to combine these figurines and caricatures to form new pieces of art, appropriating them for the cause of black self-determinism. Her first series, called *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, was made in 1972. However, in 1998 she made a new series, called *Workers + Warriors: The Return of Aunt Jemima*, to which *Wot’s Dat* belongs.

*Wot’s Dat* typifies Saar’s style, and particularly the militant aspects of her fight against racism. The “mammy” figure, who recurs in each of her *Aunt Jemima* works, is the central figure of this piece as well. Saar takes the Western image of an African clad in straw and grass and combines it with two popular depictions of black people at the time to create this stereotypical, servile “mammy.” However, she inverts this stereotype to challenge the prevalent imagination that this kind, caring, subservient woman was delighted with her lot in life. As Saar explained: “the ‘mammy’ knew and stayed in her place. . . . I attempted to change that ‘place’ . . . [by turning] a negative, demeaning figure into a positive, empowered woman who stands confrontationally . . . armed for battle. A warrior ready to combat servitude and racism.”

Saar’s series challenges widely held notions of the roles of black people and women in America. She wields the weapons used for the repression of both of these historically and contemporarily victimized groups to defend them. These objects were a part of the white American vernacular within the last forty years, and by harnessing the revulsion and shock which their presentation engenders, Saar revolts against the entrenched racism and misogyny of both her and our eras.

Lucius Elliott
The two figures in Cao Fei’s Deep Breathing, from her COSPlayers Series, seem to belong to a different world than the one they inhabit in this picture. Dressed in theatrical costumes, brandishing weapons and preparing to face off in battle, these figures suggest a fantastical realm of epic battles and heroic narratives. The concrete steps on which they stand, covered with grime and litter, and the railings that surround them, however, are undeniably real and even mundane. Crouching with their arms rigidly extended, the figures captured by Cao Fei, widely recognized as one of the most important and innovative artists to emerge from contemporary China, look as though they might fly away at any moment, leaving the everyday world of anonymous urban spaces in favor of the far more exciting place from which they came.

Cao Fei
Chinese, born 1978
Deep Breathing (COSPlayers Series), 2004
Digital C-print
Acquired through the generosity of Jody and Peter Robbins, Class of 1974 2006.088
When their battle is over and they leave this space, the figures will simply go home to their families’ apartments in this same city of Guangzhou, where the artist was born. They will resume the ordinary, day-to-day life of teenagers in contemporary urban China. Engaging in cosplay, or costume play, by dressing up as video game characters, the two teenagers in *Deep Breathing* are representative of a generation that is increasingly engaged with and ensconced in virtual reality; in a 2007 survey, 61% of Chinese teenagers said they had a parallel life online (compared to 13% of Americans), and MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) are one of the most popular sites in which these alternate lives are led.¹ The popularity of these online, virtual realms is unsurprising, for as Professor of Education Fengshu Liu at the University of Oslo notes, “With the well-known pressure on the only child [in contemporary China] urban children and youth seem eager to carve out a social space to . . . cope with the pressure of daily life” and to satisfy their desire for social connection in an increasingly individualized, fragmented, competitive society.²

In Guangzhou, one of China’s first cities to be opened up to foreign investment in 1979, this fragmentation and upheaval is especially prominent, for the major metropolitan agglomeration of the Pearl River Delta has exploded in size, increasing in population from just under eighteen million in 1979 to almost forty-eight million in 2008.³ Unsurprisingly, this massive growth has led to seemingly constant demolition and reconstruction, as exemplified by the scaffolding on the two skyscrapers in the photograph’s background, and a growing sense of estrangement from a physical environment that is in constant flux.

Cosplaying, however, is not so much an escape from the concrete reality of the Chinese city as a challenge to it. By ripping the game from the contained, circumscribed screen of the computer and bringing it to life, the teenagers seek to project the agency and power they hold in cyberspace onto their physical surroundings, and Cao Fei’s photographs affirm their efforts. *Deep Breathing*, therefore, represents, as the artists says, a relationship “where reality and drama, the real and the artificial blend, interpenetrate,” and the teenagers’ attempt to inject an element of magical fantasy into the grey, physical environment in which they live.⁴

---

² Ibid, 53.
⁴ Cui Qiao and Chen Yun, eds., *Breaking Forecast: 8 Key Figures of China’s New Generation Artists* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2010), 46.

Cameron Ewing
Mary Ross
American, 1950–2012

Runaway, Las Vegas, 1979
Cibachrome print
Acquired through the Membership Purchase Fund
80.053.001
The ephemeral figure in Mary Ross’s *Runaway, Las Vegas* evokes a mysteriously dramatic narrative of revolt. She seems to emerge from another world—a digital realm of blurred lines and haunting colors. This is a result of the slide montage process, or “sandwiching,” that Ross used to produce the image, photographing an image of the woman from a black-and-white videotape and layering the slide with a nighttime photograph taken through a prism of the Las Vegas strip. The artificiality and haunting paleness of the figure result from the light emitted by the TV screen and the lack of resolution in the tape. To intensify this effect, Ross took advantage of the distortions produced by analog television signals and the feedback and “noise” produced by a paused videotape.

Further manipulating the distortion inherent in analog technology, Ross superimposes the images to build perplexity. Despite this ambiguity, the narrative and title point to revolt as they show the figure, a runaway, against the Las Vegas skyline. The highly glossy finish of the work recalls a television screen. This raises further consideration and wonder about the work’s narrative, as it seems to be a film still, capturing a momentary action and emotion of a greater story. The story is, however, very unclear and fabricated, as the piece evokes the presence of a narrative while simultaneously negating it and revolting against its presence.

In the 1970s, Ross began experimenting with the intersections of photography and early electronic tools. At the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York, Ross produced images such as *Runaway, Las Vegas* using video synthesizers and computers. Her work represents the convergence of photography, video, and computer technology that evolved into digital photography. Instead of exploring notions of time, as many new media artists did in the seventies, Ross let the video synthesizer function as an electronic darkroom. This allowed her to create composite and manipulated images while still maintaining precise control of the image and its technological manipulations.

Using the video synthesizer, Ross could easily perform many functions of today’s photo editing software. She could superimpose slides, switch between positive and negative images, add color to black-and-white photographs, and alter an image’s original color. As she made these changes, she viewed them on an adjacent TV screen. Technology provided Ross with a vast array of manipulations and potential images. However, she was very particular in evaluating the merit of each photograph as a video still. She explains, “The electronic system generates so much information that one must be selective and retain only the best from the vast amount of possible variations. Not every effort in processing is going to create a meaningful work.”

Ekaterina Savelieva

5 Ibid.
6 Ross, “Making Video Slides.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Each year, the History of Art Majors’ Society is able to curate an exhibition at the Johnson Museum thanks to the generous support of Betsey and Alan Harris.

Thank you to Alana Ryder, the Museum’s Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Coordinator for Academic Programs, for her time, tremendous effort, and invaluable guidance in advising the group. Thank you to Stephanie Wiles, the Richard J. Schwartz Director; Ellen Avril, chief curator and curator of Asian art; Nancy Green, the Gale and Ira Drukier Curator of European and American Art, Prints & Drawings, 1800–1945; Andrea Inselmann, curator of modern and contemporary art & photography; and Andy Weislogel, the Seymour R. Askin, Jr. ’47 Curator, Earlier European and American Art, for their assistance and expertise. Additional thanks to David O. Brown, Sara Ferguson, Sonja Gandert, Cathy Klimaszewski, Wil Millard, Kari O’Mara, Alexandra Palmer, Andrea Potochniak, David Ryan, B. J. Woodams, and all the receptionists and security guards on the Museum staff for making this exhibition possible.

Many thanks as well to our advisor Annetta Alexandridis, and all of our professors in the Department of the History of Art. Special thanks to those who helped with the works included in the exhibition, especially Heather Furnas and the staff of Cornell Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections.

Finally, we thank the Cornell Council for the Arts (CCA) and the International Students Union for their support of our exhibition.
May Stevens
American, born 1924
Pax Americana, 1973
Acrylic on canvas
Gift of the Charles Z. Offin Art Fund, Inc.
74.077

© May Stevens, Courtesy of RYAN LEE, New York

2014–15 History of Art Majors’ Society Exhibition Team

Lara Abouhamad
Zoe Carlson
Lucius Elliott
Cameron Ewing, president
Virginia Girard, secretary
Alanna Klein
Haley Knapp, social media manager
Chinelo Onyilofofor
Piotr Pillardy, treasurer
Daniela Pimentel
Wylie Rechler
Oscar Rieveling
Ekaterina Savelieva
Yuanyuan Tang

© 2015 Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University. All rights reserved.

An Independent Student Publication

The History of Art Majors’ Society, an independent student organization located at Cornell University, produced and is responsible for the content of this publication. This publication was not reviewed or approved by, nor does it necessarily express or reflect the policies or opinions of, Cornell University or its designated representatives.
Aesthetics of Dissent and Disgust
April 18–June 14, 2015
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Cornell University