Artfusion News
Issue No. 3 - Spring 2009

A publication of the Artfusion Club of Marymount Manhattan College
The Artfusion Club and *Artfusion News*

*Artfusion News* extends the spirit of Artfusion, Marymount’s art club, which serves as an open forum to learn about, discuss, advocate, and enjoy cultural activities in and around New York. The club and the magazine together represent a public voice for students of all majors who are interested in exploring and sharing their ideas on various forms of cultural expression, including art, music, dance, theater, and film. *Artfusion News* contains essays and works of art, as well as interviews with Marymount students, alumni, and professors who are working in art-related fields. We also count on students to keep us posted on cultural activities abroad. As an interdisciplinary newspaper, we invite students to write articles and editorials on intersections among the arts, sciences, humanities, business, and social sciences. We hope, ultimately, to enrich the cultural awareness of all Marymount students by investigating and celebrating the limitless and unparalleled artistic and educational resources available to us through our distinct location—the heart of a great cultural capital—and beyond.
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Cover: Sarah Filiault, ‘10, Untitled (detail), 2008, watercolor, 11x 15”.

Designed by Catherina Martinez-Greenberg, ‘11

Edited by Prof. Bell, Faculty Adviser
Letter from the President of the Artfusion Club

We are happy to report that the Spring 2009 issue of *Arftusion News* marks the first time the magazine has been co-sponsored. We welcome the support of The Dance Club of Student Representatives and the International Studies Club. The former is represented in this edition by Meghan Quinlan’s article on the Dance Theater of Harlem and the latter by excerpts—those featuring aspects of Ghanaian culture—from the “Ghana Blog” of Stephanie Evans, President of the International Studies Club. We very much look forward to collaborating with representatives from these and other Marymount clubs in the future.

Our special thanks go to the Student Government Association, especially Madalyn Mattsey, ‘11, Treasurer, for helping to fund this edition through SGA’s Special Projects Fund.

This edition of *Arftusion News* features an especially wide range of articles on the arts. Readers can engage with topics in contemporary art, contemporary fashion, contemporary theater, Abstract Expressionism, popular culture, modern dance, photography, and avant-garde film. We have also featured the works of three Marymount artists: Sarah Filiault, whose watercolor on the cover was inspired by her internship with the artist Jo Wood-Brown; Cameron Kelsall, an English major and one of our finest poets; and Franny Vignola, a Photography major, whose three photographs complement the outstanding work she exhibited (from 8-18 March 2009) in “Fashion Glass,” her Senior Show.

*Arftusion News* caught up with one of our distinguished alumni, Colin Sanderson, an Art History major who graduated *summa cum laude* from Marymount in 2008. A founding member of the improvisational, free-form band Manburger Surgical, Colin has interned at a variety of interesting...
arts organizations. In Fall 2009, he will begin graduate work in the Performance Studies program at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

We are printing two articles in this issue that have been recognized for their excellence by the Marymount community on Honors Day 2009: Franny Vignola’s “A Dominatrix in Couture: Allusions to the American Women’s Rights Movement in Richard Avedon’s ‘Dovima with Elephants,’” which received the Dean’s Award for Excellence, and Holly Gover’s “Mark Rothko: An Artist-Philosopher,” which received the Writing 102 Award for Excellence. We would like to note, too, that Cameron Kelsall’s poetry, including “Deliberate Souls,” was selected for presentation on Honors Day.

Two other essays that were acknowledged for their excellence are included here. They both come from Professor Bell’s Art 356: American Art seminar, held during the Spring 2008 semester. All students wrote and read each other’s reviews of current American art exhibitions; they then voted on their favorites. The two selected were Loren Diblasi’s review of election memorabilia in the exhibition “If Elected” at the New-York Historical Society and Franny Vignola’s review of David LaChapelle’s “Auguries of Innocence” at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

As always, Artfusion News keeps the Marymount community posted on Cultural Studies Abroad. This Spring is no exception. We have included a review of “Picasso and the Masters,” shown in Paris this past winter at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, and excerpts from Stevie Evans’s above-mentioned “Ghana Blog.”

The Artfusion Club is pleased to note that it co-sponsored the first annual Internships in the Arts Symposium on 16 April 2009. Students who have worked at a variety of internships—from the Rachael Ray Show to the Metropolitan Museum of Art—discussed their work and how it helped to shape their ideas for careers after graduation. On 29 April 2009, the Artfusion Club also co-sponsored the first annual Graduate Study in the Arts symposium, in which students learned about the process of applying to graduate school. During the Fall 2009 semester, the Artfusion Club plans to sponsor a kindred event in which students can learn about applying for fellowships and scholarships for graduate study in the arts.
We extend a very warm thank-you to all of the writers who submitted texts for this edition of *Artfusion News*. We are especially grateful to our designer, Catherina Martinez-Greenberg, who created an elegant lay-out and a new logo for the magazine, and who worked with unfailing efficiency and good cheer throughout the complex production process. If you would like to join our team of writers or if you would like to help with the design and production of the Fall 2009 edition, please contact Prof. Bell. We eagerly welcome the participation of all students.

Virginia Melvin, ’10
President
As I stared curiously into my grandfather’s yellow droopy eyes and traced my tiny fingers over the contours of his face, I began to wonder what he would look like on paper. I took out an orange crayon and began to diligently draw every wrinkle and laugh line that was embedded onto his face. His eyes became two misshapen ovals, his nose was a backwards J, and his lips were mountain peaks. At the ripe old age of eight, I had decided I wanted to be an artist.

Now, twelve years later, every Tuesday and Friday morning I climb a mountain of stairs that leads me to a 4th floor loft on the Lower East Side. From the top of the mountain, a tiny woman peers out the door, throws me a smile, and says, “Good morning, Sarah!” “Morning, Jo,” I call up to her. Panting and out of breath, I arrive at the door and walk into the front room, where I spend most of my internship as a Studio Assistant to the artist Jo Wood-Brown.

“The studio is an artist’s best friend,” Jo once told me. “There are many sacrifices one must make in life,” she observed, “but sacrificing your sanctuary, your artistic space, is not an option.” Jo’s studio is larger than my entire apartment. It has high ceilings and skylights that allow natural sunlight into the room. On the floor is giant, round palette covered in a rainbow of old oil paints, still wet and calling to be used. Brushes of all shapes and sizes are grouped together in old coffee cans, while rolls of linen and panels of clayboard rest in the corner. The walls of Jo’s sanctuary are adorned with her most recent works of art.

On one of the first days of my internship, Jo pointed to a figure in one of her paintings. “Something just isn’t working in here,” she said. The figure she pointed to was partly covered by a tree; he seemed to call out into a colorful forest and an audience of figures. She asked me, “How would you resolve the imbalance in the painting?” Gulp! I froze! As an art student, I had helped critique my peers’ work before but never had I dreamed of critiquing the work of an established artist, especially face to face. I must have seemed nervous. Jo did most of the talking but eventually I loosened up and stopped
thinking so much. I don’t remember exactly what I said but before I knew it, Jo was thanking me for my advice. The following week, when I entered her studio again, the painting had been altered and the imbalance resolved. Whether Jo used my critique or not is irrelevant. What mattered is that, for the first time, I was seeing as an artist sees—not with my brain but with my eyes.

I admire Jo’s vision. To supplement her income, she works with a retired art historian to give art tours to continuing education students. In the weeks preceding the tours, Jo and Bobbie venture out into New York City and research the exhibitions to which they will bring their students. I had the privilege of tagging along to many of these exhibitions. Jo’s approach opened my eyes. The date, the title, and the medium of a work of art are all, of course, very important, but sometimes what is most important is the process of seeing. At every exhibition we saw, Jo would ask me, “What do you think, Sarah, what do you see, Sarah?” We developed a dialogue. The less I tried to see, the more I really saw. I learned that artists can furnish their works of art with a meaning, but it is what I see in a work of art that determines its meaning. Art resides in the eye of the beholder.

One day, back in Jo’s studio, the two of us watched footage from a video she had taken from her fire escape of the hustle and bustle of Broadway. Second by second, we fast-forwarded and rewound, writing down each frame of the video we found visually pleasing. Later, we transferred the video onto the computer and printed out video stills on white paper. Jo had just finished her large-scale painting

Civil War II (2008) and was craving another project. Over the next few weeks, I watched Jo transform a simple idea into a successful work of art. She had the idea of painting on her video stills, of mixing wet media with photography. I watched the whole process: video transform into stills, which became paintings, which, most recently, became archival pigment prints. I learned that when you feel uninspired or don’t know what path to take, the best thing to do is, as she often says, “create, create, create!” Jo taught me that it is perfectly fine to produce too much and then discard unsuccessful works of art. Not everything an artist turns out has to be great or even a final version. The unsuccessful works of art often make us better artists.

Whether I become a famous artist or a businesswoman who likes to paint, I will always have the urge and the curiosity to translate my own vision onto paper. I have learned that we do not create art for money or fame but, instead, to express ourselves visually. The world can react and relate to our work in its own way. Naïve to the art world, I am no prodigy, but, slowly, with help from a good friend and mentor, I am learning what it takes to become an artist.
THE BLACK ARTS

I was born to fury, to fugue,
to rage down Madison Avenue
with my necktie dancing on the wing
like a sparrow’s tail, to breathe whisky-tinged fire
out of my bastardized eyes and ears,
expelling rather than importing. To be.

You hear the strangest things at distinguished
bars on First Avenue, shipwrecked on that island between
three-martini lunch and Happy Hour.

Folks in bellowing attire bare their souls without
being asked, and you find the most delectable poetry
in the dregs of a tumbler.

The man next to me has a life. I can
tell by his hair. He wants to show me the contents
of his briefcase—some spreadsheets, contemporary
fairy tales in black and white.

This is what passes for art nowadays:
numbers, binaries, Morse code. Harrowing explanations.

He’s in business with a building. I
ask the bartender to give him another,
on me. He’s too dazzling to pass up.

His daughter was a princess
for Halloween, and he has always been enthralled
with necromancy. He asks me:

enthralled with or enthralled of?
I honestly don’t know what
to tell him. I don’t know as much as I thought.

We banter.
I explain away my reasons for being alone
in a bar, midweek, mid-day. He follows suit.

We aren’t friends, exactly, but he says that when
he dies, he’ll be buried with his afflictions, but I must
resurrect him, make him new.

I look at my napkin, lousy with invisible words.
He looks at me. It’s a fair trade. I agree.
If memory will suffice, I hope we never meet again.
WAKE-UP CALL

The danger of waking up at three in the morning is the sound of your breath beating between your temples like a dissonant piano. It’s as if Schoenberg is inside my head, fists clenched, rejecting tonality. My piano teacher never let me play anything by the Austro-German Expressionists because she thought music ended with Purcell. At night, when I cannot sleep, I imagine people I have met as if they were characters from *Winnie the Pooh*. They sit around the Hundred-Acre Wood, eating honey and discussing who should win Pulitzer Prizes or Oscars for Adapted Screenplay. The woman in the next apartment emits a piercing scream. Maybe she’s being murdered, or acting out the kind of fantasy that is only allowed to come alive in dreams. I put my earplugs in and go to sleep. If anything happens, it will be on the news, around the hallway, in the world.
COUPLES THERAPY

I remember evenings passively
passed on the burnished leather couch,
drinking tap water from tumblers and
gin from clear plastic Evian bottles,
dissertating on mutilation and love being
third cousins, twice removed:
first by ignominy, then by inertia.
You said the most splendid and superb gift
a man can give his woman is a fraction of flesh,
that which he requires to continue living,
but will flourish unquestionably in a lover’s care.
John the Baptist severed his head for Salome
because he couldn’t part with his lips.
A fascinating advancement in the art of compromise,
enacted when love was still pure enough to have
meaning, before they began to pass their nights with
placebos. And the day will come when I ask myself
if I love you enough to peel forward my toenails
and present you with a toothsome collage fashioned out
of dark, amorous beauty.
Oscar Wilde said that love has a bitter taste, 
and I discovered it, quite 
by accident, on the tip of your 
index finger. That taste was the smell of fire, 
something wholly unnatural, the rendering of organs 
that long for sameness. 
It was akin to a heart that stops beating then starts again, 
when the world fails, when nature runs its course: 
a juxtaposition of grotesque truths. 
So now, in the middle of some Technicolor dream 
episode painted by David Hockney, 
or some similar contemporary, 
that formerly present figure wakes me and 
recounts, in perfect silence, 
the highs and lows of togetherness. 
Do you remember me? 
Maybe. 

I remember Amarcord at Film Forum 
and kissing on Varick Street like it was our living room. 
I remember the likes and dislikes: 
cheesecake, Didion, earnest people. (Which was which?)
All true—
and then?

You tried to become what I wanted, and
we failed—
too much truth: the feeling of
broken glass, felt-tipped pens, a village
paved in sand. Far too real for love.
A spreadsheet of life’s mistakes.
Photographs: At Home and Abroad

by Franny Vignola

I took the photographs on the following three pages with a Holga camera, which is a toy camera with a plastic lens. The plastic lens has only central point of focus, which distorts the image. It also creates a black, frame-like quality around the edges of the composition. The Holga takes away a lot of the control present in a normal camera. It forces the photographer to focus intently on the subject matter and on relationships between light and dark. The first two photographs were two of many I took during a “Semester at Sea” program in Summer 2008; the third photograph, “Park Blur,” is a long exposure.
Franny Vignola, *Egyptian Woman*, 2008, Giza, Egypt, gelatin silver print
Franny Vignola, *Greek Donkey*, 2008, Hydra, Greece, gelatin silver print
An Interview with Colin Sanderson

by Ariel Lask

What do you get when you combine a hodge-podge of improvisational, experimental, and psychedelic music with performance art? If you speak to Colin Sanderson, ’08, he will probably say it sounds a lot like a description of his band, Manburger Surgical. Recently, I had the privilege of sitting down with Colin and discussing his band and his life outside of the Marymount community. Having been a fellow Art History major with Colin, I went into our interview thinking that I already knew many of the answers. By the end of the interview, Colin had opened my eyes to an entirely new world of art and music. I think it is best to share our interview as “unplugged” as I can so as to try to recreate the free-wheeling nature of the experience.

Ariel Lask: How long has Manburger Surgical been together? Generally, what is your writing process?

Colin Sanderson: Manburger Surgical has been together since October 2007. My bandmate Paul Feitzinger and I had met over a year earlier in a songwriting class at Marymount and we immediately felt a musical kinship. We’ve been jamming off and on with my friend Dave on oboe since then. Until we formed MNBRGR, our music was based solely in the realm of improvisation. I had been exposed to a lot of free improv at my then-internship at Issue Project Room, which is a venue for experimental music in Brooklyn… I think that was also the time when I was exposed to Derek Bailey's famous book Improvisation, so I was really into a lot of free-form experimental ways of playing the guitar. Up to that point, my main exposure to experimental music was through more conventionally structured forms of outré music—progressive rock, “world” and traditional music (though that's hardly self-consciously “out”), European avant-garde, the more out-there side of fusion jazz—so working at Issue was a big
eye-opener. Paul has always been the structural backbone of Manburger Surgical, though, and I guess you can say he always keeps the music grounded and palatable. We are really a yin-yang, harmonious duo. Once we formed Manburger on a whim because the internet radio station I was working at was putting together a concert and needed bands, we started thinking more in terms of structure and composition. Both Paul and I are heavily influenced by 1960s and ‘70s progressive rock, psychedelia, and the more “head”-y side of “New Music” of the time, like the work of Terry Riley, and the first piece we composed, later titled “Ninny’s Tomb,” directly comes out of that tradition. Since we are a two-piece band, our songs are usually live-loop-based and come from jamming. They usually start off very melodically and structured and then go more into dissonant and free-form realms. It’s that balance—between noise and melody, structure and improvisation, devil-may-care experimentalism and free-reign-to-make-music-that’s-as-long-or-short-as-it-needs-to-be—that has always been the main aesthetic of Manburger music.

**AL:** Do you consider yourself a musician or an artist, and do you think there’s a difference between the two?

**CS:** Hmm . . . well, both Paul and I have dubbed ourselves a “performance art group” as often as “a band,” and, as you might know, I’ve always been very attracted to that intersection between music and art. I’m a bit hesitant to call myself a flat-out “artist,” though. In most cases, I know that there is a very blurred line between performance art and music—just ask Yoko Ono, Laurie Anderson, or the Residents!—but I’ve actually never heard Manburger Surgical referred to by someone independently as “performance art,” so it’s a bit tricky. We have been becoming increasingly elaborate in our theatrical presentations at gigs, though, incorporating knock-offs of Richard Foreman sound cues and ventriloquism, crazy prop-play à la Paul McCarthy, and so on…. I think our theatricality comes out of dissatisfaction with the New York scene of live shows consisting of wan, disaffected people loading samples from their laptops and taking themselves VERY SERIOUSLY. In many ways, we have a lot more in common with stuff going on in the West Coast, though Paul and I have very close musical and
theatrical connections to New York bands, like The No-Neck Blues Band and the Bunnybrains. And in terms of straight performance art, we’ve been very, very influenced by artists like Paul McCarthy, Dada, Pat Oleszko, the Kipper Kids, the German Grotesque, Richard Foreman, Michael Smith—stuff of high camp value, with a major tongue-in-cheek attitude and a tawdry low-budget, surrealist, lowbrow/highbrow aesthetic. Low-grade b-movies, particularly of the horror genre, have also been a huge influence.

**AL**: What are your aspirations for your band?

**CS**: Aspirations for the band include making our live show tighter, especially since we are becoming increasingly elaborate, growing musically (whatever that may entail), finishing our album, and incorporating more multi-media elements. For a while, we’ve been wanting to make a film with our friend Shane and to incorporate live video art in our live shows.

**AL**: Do you want to explore other venues of performance art?
**CS:** Indeed, exploring other venues for performance art would be amazing. Both Paul and I are starting to get into the history of vaudeville and there are certainly a lot of venues for post-modern variety theater in New York, such as the Jennifer Miller led Circus Amok/Great Small Works projects. I think that the ventriloquial stuff we’ve been doing with my little friend Felix certainly lends itself to that [Felix is Colin’s ventriloquist doll]. Also, making an art video along the lines of Devo’s “The Truth about De-Evolution,” or even more intensely introspective stuff ranging from Vito Acconci to Carolee Schneemann, would be a great venue for performance work.

**AL:** Do you consider yourself more of an artist or an art historian or both equally? Why?

**CS:** Hmm, well, I suppose both. I’ve never had an intention of becoming a straight-up art historian. I’ve always looked at studying art history as a way of shaping my cultural interests, being able to think in a scholarly way about those things, and, by proxy, shaping my aesthetic as a “performance artist.” I was just recently accepted into New York University's performance studies graduate program and I imagine I’ll use my knowledge of the art historical canon to a very large degree there.

**AL:** If you could send one message to the current art community at Marymount what would it be?

**CS:** Oh jeez, I’m hardly the person to answer that question! Well, I guess it would be to keep an open mind about “out-there” art, film, and music, and not to dismiss things because they’re not immediately “accessible.” The avant-garde is a language and, like any language, you need a basic knowledge of the vocabulary and context in order to appreciate it—well, at least to an extent. Some stuff *is* immediately understandable. I think being an open-minded student of culture, either informally or formally, is the most important thing of all in life.

**AL:** What are your thoughts as a graduate? How is life in the real world?
CS: Being out of school has been a weird thing, what with jobs, graduate school, moving out of the house. I think everyone should take advantage of college as much as they possibly can while they’re there. Life has been flying by very quickly and I’m definitely still trying to find my bearings, though my personal life has been extremely good these days. I basically had a six-month summer vacation this year, much to the chagrin of my parents, before I started an internship at Franklin Furnace, which is an archive for performance and other ephemeral arts. I also worked as a canvasser for the environmental organization Greenpeace for two months, which was a bit of mixed experience. I am now…er…unemployed…ouch!...with big bills to pay…double ouch! As I said, I’m gearing up for graduate school, which is very exciting, but I’ve certainly had to lower my expectations a bit when it comes to gainful, paid employment. With this economy, I don’t even bother looking in the “Arts” section of Craigslist anymore—it only has semi-exploitative, non-paying “internships,” to put it cynically. But I'm hopeful and I certainly have a bit of leeway, though time does go by quickly.

AL: Where do you hope to be in the art world in five years?

CS: Hmm, that’s a toughie. I really don’t know and I think I like that I don’t know. The world of academia again might take me in a completely new direction. What’s great about the performance studies program is that it’s so open-ended and speaks to so many of my interests—anthropology, art history, music, sociology—so being there can shift me into a totally new sphere of existence (to put it rather dramatically). I hope MNBGRGR is still going strong at that point, but things change, for better or worse. The band is secured by the fact that Paul and I are best friends and truly love making music together, so that’s no doubt a sign of good things to come. We’ll just have to see!

AL: Thanks so much, Colin.

You can learn more about Colin Sanderson and Manburger Surgical by going to the following sites: http://www.myspace.com/manburgersurgical and http://www.myspace.com/colinsanderson.
Betsey Johnson: A Profile

by Danielle Desmond

If Betsey Johnson didn’t exist, we would have to invent her, simply to remind ourselves that fashion can be fun. She’s the original wild child and set to paint the town pink!
—An Anonymous Journalist

A woman who cartwheels down the runway at the end of her shows, steps boldly out on the scene with Raggedy Ann hair, and makes up her own rules, Betsey Johnson is as young at heart as her designs. She is best known for her “over the top,” outrageous style. Johnson has been entertaining the

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fashion industry since the 1960s, a time when fashion designers were considered stuffy and pompous. As Susie Billingsley of Vogue wrote of Johnson, “She got on the street fashion wagon before anyone. She’s always been way ahead of what’s hip.”

Johnson was born in Connecticut in 1942 and spent her childhood at dance classes and in frilly costumes. She always aspired to be a dancer, an identity that exerted a major influence on her creative designs. After high school, Johnson studied at the Pratt Institute and later graduated from Syracuse University. In 1964, she stepped into the New York fashion scene by winning Mademoiselle magazine’s Guest Editor Contest. One year later, she landed the top designer position for Paraphernalia, a clothing boutique that housed London’s hottest up-and-coming designers. She began to make a name for herself there. She worked for many other labels before creating her own. In 1969, Johnson opened up her own boutique called “Betsey Bunki Nini,” on Lexington Avenue between 71st and 72nd streets in the Upper East Side. She was also part of Andy Warhol’s Underground scene. In the 1970s, she took control of the fashion label “Alley Cat,” which was popular with many rock ‘n roll musicians of the time. In 1972, she became the youngest designer to win the very prestigious Coty Award.

In 1967, Johnson married the Velvet Underground’s John Cale. They divorced in 1971. She had a daughter, Lulu, in 1975, who now works with her. In 1978, after a decade of designing for other labels, Johnson decided to launch the Betsey Johnson label with her partner, Chantal Bacon. She knew that designing her own line would allow her the creative freedom to execute her vision to its fullest potential. Her first retail store opened in the heart of SoHo. Even today, there is no store like a Betsey Johnson store. Everything—from the black-and-white checked marble floors, to cheery pink walls, and rose pink dressing room curtains—makes the customer feel special and happy. Her sense of detail not only creates fabulous designs but also a whimsical shopping experience. Feel free to sit on one of her pink-and-black embellished couches and read a magazine. Today, there are over fifty Betsey Johnson stores worldwide. International expansion came in 1998 with the opening of the popular London branch. There are also stores in Vancouver, Toronto, and Japan. Some of Johnson’s merchandise can also be

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in over one thousand department stores throughout the world, including such retailers as Bloomingdale’s, Nordstrom, and Macy’s.

Johnson distinguishes herself from other designers by mastering the art of fashion. She dares to mix bold patterns, such as leopard prints, with bold colors and lace. The Betsey Johnson label personifies femininity. Johnson pays attention to detail, using cute buttons and sequins in unexpected places. Even the bottoms of her shoes are creatively embellished. She has a one-of-a-kind style. Dresses, sweaters, coats, shoes, bags, necklaces, watches, earrings, bracelets, fragrance, wallets, tights, socks—Betsey Johnson covers it all, that is, in feminine designs: pink, tulle, polka dots, and appliqué rosebuds.

At the 1999 CFDA Awards, Johnson received The Timeless Talent Award, created especially for her, which recognized her influence on fashion throughout her career. In late 2002, she was inducted into the Fashion Walk of Fame to honor her contributions to American fashion.

In recent years, Johnson’s company has expanded dramatically; it has taken her signature prints to new audiences with categories including shoes and lingerie. Johnson expanded the line with handbags, belts, cold weather accessories, eyewear, watches, jewelry, swimwear, leg wear, and a fragrance. She has become more than a clothing designer; she has created a lifestyle. In 2003, while on vacation in Mexico, Johnson fell in love with a little hotel, which she named “Betseyville,” and turned it into a dream vacation home. She regularly visits Betseyville to work and get inspired. “Betseyville” is now also the name of her less-expensive line of accessories. She fell so deeply in love with Mexican culture that, in 2004, she purchased “Villa Betsey,” a second home there. Betseyville soon became a rental property and Villa Betsey became her home in Mexico.

Diagnosed in 1999 with breast cancer, Johnson continues to be a strong advocate in the fight against the disease. Her illness now in remission, she makes numerous public appearances on behalf of the fight for a cure, participates in numerous fundraising events, and creates items for charity auctions. In 2003, the Council of Fashion Designers of America asked her to be an Honorary Chairperson for the Fashion Targets Breast Cancer initiative. In April 2004, she was awarded another honor by the National Breast Cancer Coalition for her continuing fight against the disease. In Spring 2004, she teamed up with
Geralyn Lucas, the author of *Why I Wore Lipstick To My Mastectomy*, to design a special Breast Cancer Awareness t-shirt, which was launched in Betsey Johnson stores nationwide.

At age sixty-six, Johnson has no plans to retire. She continues to expand her line and influence fashion. Her designs are pieces of living art. She summarized her point of view when she remarked, “Making clothes involves what I like…color, pattern, shape and movement…I like the everyday process…the people, the pressure, the surprise of seeing the work come alive walking and dancing around on strangers. Like red lipstick on the mouth, my products wake up and brighten and bring the wearer to life…drawing attention to her beauty and specialness…her moods and movements…her dreams and fantasies.”

For more information on Betsey Johnson, see http://www.betseyjohnson.com/bio.html.

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"If Elected" at the New-York Historical Society

by Loren Diblasi

Though, at times, we who follow politics thought it would never come, the fourth of November came and went in 2008. This historic election and the thrilling race that preceded it captured our attention and consumed the media.

Whether it was through an Obama t-shirt or a button for McCain, Americans found many different ways of showing support for their chosen presidential hopeful. In stores, on TV, or on the street, we simply couldn’t escape the incessant promotion of the respective candidates.

Due, in part, to the internet and the growing power of the twenty-first century media, campaigning has acquired a life of its own. However, the idea of a president candidate self-advertising is not novel. In fact, it is a crucial part of gaining those much needed votes, and candidates have been using new and creative ways to gain support for nearly two hundred years.

Campaigning—specifically, the ways of the many candidates—was the theme for the exhibition “If Elected: The Game of American Politics” at the New-York Historical Society. The small exhibition highlighted various objects that presidential campaigns have used over the past two centuries. The memorabilia ranged from the traditional, such as buttons, posters, and flags, to the not-so-traditional, such as lamps, a board game, and even a dress. What may have been a useful tool in 1808 may not be in
2008, but the purpose of all of these objects is the same: to promote and support some of the most important campaigns in American history.

An especially exciting aspect of the exhibition was being able to examine artifacts from some of the early years of American history. We learned, for example, that Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley were just as adept as promoting themselves as any modern-day candidate. An Abraham Lincoln Lantern was one of the centerpieces of the exhibition (Figure 1). The tin, glass, and paper object is in surprisingly good condition, despite the fact that one of its sides is heavily taped. The 1864 election was one of the most important ever, as the nation was in complete chaos in the midst of the Civil War. America re-elected President Lincoln for a second term and the lantern reflects how something practical could also reinforce political ideas. Painted on the sides, the lantern features a portrait of Lincoln, who looks youthful and impressive. One image shows an eagle perched atop an American flag, the word “Union” stretched across it. At a time when the future of America was unclear, a lantern such as this one reminded people of Lincoln’s determination to end a horrific, bloody war and, ultimately, preserve the nation.

More modern times gave way to more inventive promotion ideas. In the 1950s, everyone “liked Ike.” President Dwight D. Eisenhower used his nickname to create an unforgettable catchphrase. What’s more, the words that were on everyone’s lips were everywhere else, too—on key chains, license plates, neckties, and even a dress. The “Ike” dress (1952-56) was a new and innovative way of expressing support for a political candidate in America (Figure 2). Although the style of the dress is traditional—Lucille Ball or June Cleaver would have worn it—it features a bold, red “Ike” print, a very creative way of making a statement. Using a dress as a means of endorsement...
clearly targeted women, an important constituency that, sadly, had sometimes been ignored in the past. In 2008, as we talked of appealing to “hockey moms,” the “Ike” dress is a reminder that the American woman plays a key role in political history, both then and now.

Campaign buttons may not be a particularly creative or exciting method of advertisement but the exhibition displayed them in a way that highlights their surprising value. Some buttons appear as expected: a picture or a name, decorated with red, white, and blue. However, some buttons make clear appeals to different groups or even have comedic value. For example, the exhibition featured a white-and-blue button with support for Nixon written in Hebrew and a red button with the text “Lithuanians for Ford.” One particularly funny button featured Bill Clinton playing his trademark saxophone with the words “Blow, Bill, Blow” written across the top. No matter whom one chooses to support, a button continues to be the ideal, cheap, and efficient way for a voter to display his or her convictions.

By the end of this year’s race, whether we cheered with delight or sadly peeled the bumper stickers off our cars, we could agree that politics can captivate and inspire us all. Congratulations to the New-York Historical Society for presenting this idea in a way that displays history, inspires patriotism, and, no matter whom we supported, makes us all proud to be Americans.

“If Elected: The Game of American Politics”: New-York Historical Society, 4 July 2008–11 January 2009. The New-York Historical Society is located at 170 Central Park West (76th-77th streets). Hours: Tuesday-Saturday (and selected holiday Mondays): 10:00 am - 6:00 pm; free admission Friday from 6:00 pm - 8:00 pm. Sundays: 11:00 am - 5:45 pm. Admission for students: $6.00.
Joaquin Alberto Vargas y Chávez (1896-1982) was born in Arequipa, Peru, and lived a life surrounded by art. His father, Carlos Vargas, was a famous Peruvian photographer. However, it was not until Alberto studied art in Europe that he was inspired to paint. He became famous in the 1940s for his representations of pin-up girls for *Esquire* magazine during World War II (Figures 1-2). Not surprisingly, his paintings were very popular with the GIs. He used a combination of watercolor and airbrush. His talent with airbrush technique is still highly regarded. Each year, *Airbrush Action Magazine* gives a prize—the Vargas Award—to the leading artist in airbrush technique. Despite his talent, Vargas was often questioned about his subject matter. He once remarked, “People always asked, ‘Why do you always paint nothing but girls...Girls, girls, girls?’ I'd answer, Show me something more beautiful than a beautiful girl, and then I'll go paint it.”¹

While painting for *Esquire*, Vargas took on the moniker of “Varga”; the girls he painted subsequently became known as “Varga Girls.” (*Esquire* shortened the name to make it appear more exotic.) Although *Esquire* had launched his career, it also patented his name,  

without his consent. The patent was approved, perhaps not coincidentally, after Vargas filed a lawsuit against the magazine to break his exclusive contract, which would expire only in 1957. In 1950, Vargas won the suit and forever rid himself of the label “Varga.” However, he was not famous for being Alberto Vargas, a man without *Esquire*, and was forced to begin his career again. For about ten years, Vargas struggled financially. His fortunes changed in 1960, when Hugh Hefner hired him to paint nude women for *Playboy*. At that point, the women he painted became known as the “Vargas Girls.”

Vargas was sixty-four when he started working for *Playboy*; he continued painting for the magazine for sixteen years. During this time, he produced 152 paintings, each one racier than the next (Figure 3). Although the two magazines had different demands as to how the paintings should appear, Vargas always managed to leave his mark. One of the many ways to determine Vargas’s work is by examining the hands and feet of the women painted. The women always have very long and elegant fingernails that are usually painted red. It is interesting to see the artwork produced under the contract of the two magazines. While Vargas painted for *Esquire*, the girls were very elegant, often looking away from the viewer or even covering their faces with their hair. They are, for the most part, clothed. By contrast, his paintings for *Playboy* displayed a more erotic and seductive woman, a woman who made eye contact and lured the viewer into her sexuality. It is not surprising that these are the images for which Vargas is best known.

Figure 3: “Vargas Girl” from *Playboy*, 1961. The caption reads: “He told me we would do whatever I wanted to do until midnight, if I would promise to do whatever he wanted to do the rest of the night…”

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Mark Rothko: An Artist-Philosopher

by Holly Gover
Mark Rothko (1903-1970) is widely known as one of the great Abstract Expressionists. He is associated with Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Franz Kline (1910-1962), who were working in New York in the 1950s. Many Abstract Expressionists focused on developing the gesture of the brushstroke; indeed, the physical act of painting became an important component of the finished work. Rothko was fiercely concerned with the artist’s identity and how the artist was viewed by society. He very much wanted to separate himself from his contemporaries or from schools and genres that might place a label on him or his work. The effort of such artists as Pollock or Kline is very apparent in their work. It is loud and has a tendency to attract a lot of attention. Rothko’s work, by contrast, appears very simple and is often overlooked. In reality, though, Rothko is a highly complex artist whose multifaceted work contains a seemingly inexhaustible supply of meaning and depth. Therefore, to view Rothko as simply a member of the Abstract Expressionists or to define him with too limited a terminology would be a mistake.

In fact, Rothko was a lover of the absolute—a mystic, a transcendent figure, and a wholly philosophical artist. He avidly read philosophy and sought to create a universal language of art aligned to the universal language of music; in this process, he derived inspiration from the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Rothko even wrote quite extensively on his own philosophies of art. His treatise, The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art (2004), was posthumously published by his son, Christopher. He would often discuss literature, music, and philosophy with his close friends. His progression as an artist—from his early expressionist and surrealist works to his late, iconic paintings—shows his struggle to find the absolute, the pure truth that, he believed, only art could unveil. What he sought to do from the beginning of his career...
was to find and express the truth in his work and to be able to communicate it to the public, much like a philosopher. His progression as an artist is very much a transcendent journey because he wanted his art to transcend ordinary experiences. The absolute is something almost inexpressible and to attempt to communicate it through plastic means—paint on canvas—would require transcendent or spiritual qualities in both the execution and the process.

In Rothko’s last public statement in 1958, he observed that he formed a speaking vocabulary long before he had formed a painting vocabulary (Ashton, 189). Rothko had always known what he wanted to achieve with his art, yet he had to develop his ability to translate his words onto his canvases. His art went through a series of stages before reaching his iconic style and beyond. Early on, he painted figurative scenes of daily and domestic life. The images were far from realistic; Rothko seemed more interested in conveying the perceptual experience of a given space rather than what was in front of him (Figure 1). His work became increasingly symbolic as he experimented with modes of expressing reality. He was largely influenced by the Surrealists, whose works often involved dream-like qualities and unexpected juxtapositions. The influence is clear in Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea (Figure 2). This painting shows two biomorphic figures that seem to float in the middle of the composition. They are surrounded by arabesques, spirals, and stripes that could be closely linked to musical symbols, a personal passion for Rothko. As his work progressed, it showed a gradual diminution of interest in recognizable imagery and gesture. By the late 1940s, Rothko had nearly eliminated all figurative elements from his work and instead relied on color and form to speak for him. In works from this period, patches of color seem to move around one another (Figure 3). These patches evolved from the biomorphic forms seen in works during the previous decade.
As Rothko explored the expressive potential of hazy, floating forms, he lived in the midst of the gestural painters, such as Pollock and Kline. From the 1940s and well into the 1960s, many Abstract Expressionists developed a style of painting known as “action painting,” a term coined by Harold Rosenberg in Art News in 1952 (de Kooning, 132). Action painting is a style in which the physical act of painting emerges as an essential and expressive component of the work of art. The artist often spontaneously drips, smears, or splashes paint onto the canvas, thereby creating a visually gestural effect. One can see the gesture of the artist’s hand in his works. Pollock, a famous action painter, would violently drip and splash his paint across his unprimed canvas. The physical gesture is clear; his paintings show an impasted, tangled web of paint, as seen in Number 1A, 1948 (Figure 4). In works such as Number 1A, we see Pollock’s mark, his gesture, and the path that the paint took to the canvas. The action and movement of the artist immediately come to mind.

Kline, an artist associated with action painting, also emphasized the gesture in his work. Kline’s gesture is evident in the way that he applied the paint, as in Painting Number 2 (Figure 5). He would often scrub his paint on canvas with a small, stiff brush or even lay it on with a palette knife, as one might apply cement. Kline almost brutally slashed black and white on the canvas. In works such as Painting Number 2, we can see the process of painting; the gesture of his hands and of his paintbrush are clear. Elaine de Kooning—painter,
critic, and wife of Willem de Kooning—reinforced the importance of gesture in Kline’s work when she noted, “His content was always gesture—the gesture of landscapes, of buildings, of women, of cats, of interiors….” (de Kooning, 112).

The gesture of the paintbrush on a canvas generally serves as an indication of the presence of the artist. The impasted, gestural marks in Pollock’s and Kline’s paintings are reflections of the artists themselves. In short, the gesture is a suggestion of self. Rothko, on the other hand, painted with a sense of what we might call “anti-gesture,” a resistance or even rejection of gesture, and with the anti-gesture comes a quality of the anti-self. With the exception of a few brushstrokes, Rothko’s rectangular forms seem to have appeared directly on the canvas without any trace of their source (Figure 6). The forms float above the colored ground and appear to glow in a mystical fashion, as if they appeared out of thin air. He seems somehow to have breathed paint onto the canvas. By removing himself from his own work, he removed another obstacle to gaining comprehension of his work and, at the same time, his work gained a metaphysical essence. His means of painting extended beyond the limits of an ordinary experience with art, for here we have a painting with, apparently, no artist. Rothko’s anti-gesture gives his works a sense of timelessness. The term “abstract expressionism” therefore only partially applies to Rothko; to be sure, his work was abstract, but is it expressive? There is no expressive gesture in Rothko’s works, as there is in the works of Pollock and Kline. Rothko’s anti-gesture suggests that he wanted to express universal truths through his work, to evoke transcendent experiences, without the influence or intervention of the artist’s self.

Rothko’s study of philosophy played an extremely important role in conveying his artistic intentions. He was drawn to the work of Nietzsche, a philosopher whose writings influenced numerous
artists since the 1920s, from bohemians to the Surrealists (Ashton, 48). Rothko’s exposure to the philosopher was limited to Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886), or, as it was originally titled, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872). Rothko found immense stimulation in music and may have been primarily drawn to the book by its original title. He related to the Nietzschean vision of the importance of music to one’s work. While other artists, such as Pollock, used music to inspire his physical motivation when painting (he would play jazz as he swung and splattered paint onto his canvas), for Rothko, music served as a fundamental necessity. Friends spoke of his intimate need for music; many recall Rothko lying for hours on the grass or in an armchair listening to *Don Giovanni* in its entirety (Ashton, 102). Rothko wanted his art to attain the sensations one gets from music. He wanted it to envelope the viewer and draw the viewer in, as Mozart drew in his listeners with his overtures. Nietzsche had studied Schopenhauer to explain the nature of music and this study helped Rothko to clarify his work further. He was inspired by the idea of music as a meditative, almost spiritual vehicle, which is what he hoped his work would become.

In *No. 13 (White, Red, on Yellow)* (1953) (Figure 7), Rothko used artistic techniques that paralleled musical elements. The top panel, a milky gray, appears to float above the golden yellow ground. The middle panel, a slightly brighter yellow than the shade of yellow behind it, emerges but then disappears into the composition. The red panel at the bottom looks as if it is popping out of the work, rather than sinking or floating. In all, the colors seem to hover on the surface of the canvas. The white floats, the yellow pulls, and the red pops. Seen together, they create a subtle feeling of constant movement.
Rothko achieved this radiating sense of energy by manipulating his brushstrokes one upon the other until he achieved precisely the right balance and intensity. By overpainting, masking, thinning and thickening his paint, he worked for the musical effect of the vibrato, which he had admired so much in Mozart’s works. In music, “tone color” is the sonorous quality of a particular instrument or voice. The forms and colors in Rothko’s paintings each seem to have a sonorous quality about them and the way they vibrate together determines the tone color of the sound. The colors have strength, tone, pitch, and amplitude. Rothko used color as his instrument. Both the density and the transparency of Rothko’s colors and forms have a lyrical quality to them. Once, when quoting Nietzsche, who was quoting Schopenhauer, Rothko remarked that music, if viewed as an expression of the world, is the highest degree of universal language. Rothko sought to bring his art to this level of universality.

Rothko followed Nietzsche from music to myth, as Nietzsche used music to explore the ideas of myth. Rothko was especially inspired by the idea of the myth. He wrote that a myth “is really a symbol of the notions of reality of a particular age” and, in a kindred statement, that a painting “is the representation of the artist’s notion of reality” (Rothko, 82, 25). Myth is something universal and timeless, something that would represent the utmost fullness of reality. Through this universality of myth, perhaps the absolute could be found and harnessed. Nietzsche wrote about the nature of music and how the composer must have “direct knowledge of the nature unknown to his reason” (Chipp, 324) to be able to express the universal language that both music and myth possess. This “nature unknown to his reason” would be a most ardently desired knowledge for Rothko, as it was for Nietzsche.
Rothko was able to find intellectual solace in his close friends as they understood his need to discuss and philosophize about art. Rothko met the artist Milton Avery (1885-1965) at the Opportunity Gallery when Rothko was in his late twenties. Avery influenced Rothko both in his work and his life and provided him with a comfortable atmosphere in which to discuss his ideas and thoughts. Rothko observed that Avery had a “naturalness, exactness, and an inevitable completeness” about him (Ashton, 115). Always in a state of intellectual unrest, Rothko must have looked up to Avery, who felt content and complete in what he had accomplished and what he was doing. Avery’s work was seminal to Rothko and his work; while Avery’s work is representational, it focuses on color relations and is not concerned with creating the illusion of depth in space.

Around the same time that Rothko met Avery, he began to see a lot of Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974), a fellow artist. The three would often show their works in the same galleries and would regularly meet, often at the home of the Averys, to discuss art, literature, and philosophy. Sally Avery, Milton’s wife, recalled that Rothko was “very verbal and told fabulous stories, a continual raconteur” (Ashton, 73). These meetings are reminiscent of the Salons of the nineteenth century, in which people would gather at a location to discuss cultured topics, such as literature and philosophy, with an emphasis on the art of conversation. As these men conversed, they mused and philosophized. Rothko, Gottlieb, and Avery were men of real intellect, enjoying a night spent over discussions of Kierkegaard or Plato. They were not seen at the Cedar Tavern, with Pollock and Kline. They would spend all day painting and all night discussing their works. Gottlieb once said of Rothko, “Rothko was one of the few guys who [was] articulate, because in those days painters were sort of silent men” (Ashton, 25). Rothko was vocal about his philosophies on art and music, always discussing his problems and concerns about art. In a world where Rothko was often on the defensive and felt misunderstood, both personally and with his work, his friends provided welcomed intellectual support and comfort.

Gottlieb and Rothko even collaborated on a philosophical statement concerning their art. The Gottlieb-Rothko Statement responded to remarks made by the art critic Edward Alden, who was puzzled by their early surrealist works. It laid out their aesthetic beliefs, ones that they had probably discussed at length at the Avery home. It made five, clear points:
1. To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risk.
2. This world of the imagination is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense.
3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way—not his way.
4. We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.
5. It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with the primitive and archaic art.

The Gottlieb-Rothko statement is a manifesto and defense for their art. There is a tone of high seriousness in the declarations. There seems to be a critical eye cast on the art world as well: if they don’t try or “take the risk” to understand their art, then they will never experience it. Rothko’s allegiance to Nietzsche is apparent in the first point, which references the unknown world and states that art is not a static process; it is something experiential and involves effort. They stress in the third point that their work is not something to be interpreted; it is an extension of how they see reality. They explain that mere skill is not enough for an artist; a true artist goes above and beyond technique. They express in the fourth point that even though their paintings are abstract, they are not devoid of meaning or content. Rothko and Gottlieb wrote these statements in 1943, when both were experimenting with Surrealism. The ideas remained relevant to them for the rest of their lives.

In the late 1940s, Rothko began writing a book, a collection of essays on his philosophy of art and the art world. The texts are sophisticated and verbose. He wasn’t shy to voice his opinions on other
artists or the contemporary art world. Rothko’s son, Christopher, comments in the introduction to Artist’s Reality, “You can taste the frustration of a man who feels like he has a great deal to say and desperately wants to be heard. Here is an artist who tries to capture his notion of reality, his idea of the truth, in every painting, but can’t get anyone to notice” (Rothko, 2). Rothko had an immense desire to cast himself as an intellectual and to separate himself both from his contemporaries and from the art world at large. He expounds on the role of the artist in society and expresses his concern for how that artist is viewed by society. As with the Gottlieb-Rothko statement, it seems as though Rothko is defending himself and his work throughout the entire text, although he does not once mention his own work. The book was left unfinished and published only after his death. Christopher conjectures that the reason for the delay was that in the late 1940s, Rothko went through an awakening in his work and was then able to express himself more effectively in his art than on paper. He wrote his book while he was struggling to find his voice as an artist. Once he experienced the awakening that Christopher described, he would explore his iconic style until his death. In a sense, the awakening meant that his art finally caught up with his words.

By 1947, Rothko reached a style in his painting that would remain, in slight variations, until his death. The multiforms of the previous decade gradually stacked up. His patches of color were reduced to three or four rectangles aligned vertically (Figure 8). Rothko experimented with the format, varying colors and tones, along with the atmosphere and mood. In these paintings, color and form seem inseparable. There is an eternal depth to these classic paintings, something almost unworldly about them. Rothko was no longer constrained by the limitations of emotions and experiences that are
expressed through recognizable forms and figures. He could move beyond what one could express through landscape painting or portraiture because he strove to transcend reality. These iconic works represent his versions of reality, his truths. He combined hues and values in a somewhat mystical way, like the alchemist. Perhaps he believed he was getting closer and closer to the “knowledge of the unknown world” that he ardently sought and stripped his paintings of more and more in his pursuit. In his final years, he reduced the numbers of colors yet again and weakened the intensity of his colors. The art critic Thomas Hess once observed that Rothko didn’t reduce the paintings to the bones but, instead, to the skin (Ashton, 117). He honed the paintings to their essentials, taking away all unnecessary elements without reducing the works into oblivion. Rothko took so many visual elements away from his paintings to gain a spiritual one. Like a religious artist, one who attempts to portray the spiritual ecstasy of salvation or God without ever having experienced or seen them through plastic means, Rothko attempted to express the inexpressible through his work, to make the masses believe.

Toward the end of Rothko’s career, his paintings took on a new, nearly sacred tone. The bright colors disappeared and, with some exceptions, he worked mainly with a very dark palette. In 1964, John (Jean) and Dominique de Ménil, Texas oil millionaires, commissioned Rothko to shape a space in a chapel in Houston; ultimately, fourteen of his paintings would hang there. The paintings are all variations of black or a nearly black (Figure 9). There are no colors to contrast or compare, or forms that float or pop; there is, instead, a vast emptiness…or fullness. These paintings lack color, form, and contrasts, but are we really left with emptiness and vapidity? Perhaps Rothko found what he wanted to express in this cosmic completeness of black; perhaps he found a way to communicate what it means to be a human being.
In these late works, we are left with the infinite, not with nothingness. As in a majority of his works but most fully evolved in the later paintings, the sublime emerges, the terrifying and overwhelming shock of recognizing the infinite. The Rothko Chapel in Houston embodies the final stage in the artist’s evolution, from his subway series, to the multiforms, and finally to an esoteric, nearly sacred, monochromatic black.

Rothko will always be known as one of the great Abstract Expressionists from the New York School, a tortured soul with a legacy heightened by his suicide in 1970, and an innovator for his color field paintings of the 1950s. Yet, it seems fundamentally wrong to overlook what Rothko was really trying to achieve with his art. He was not only a lover of the absolute; he wanted to capture it, to express it, and to share it through his art. He had an immense desire and need to articulate aesthetically what it meant to be a human being. Although his goal was certainly impossible to attain, he wanted, somehow, to sum up all of humanity in his work—everything from creation and death, tragedy and ecstasy, doom and failure, to pure joy. For Rothko, art was an antidote of the spirit; it was an extension of life onto the canvas. Rothko wanted his art to do something astounding; he wanted it to take the viewer to another world. For him, this ambition was a necessity. It was fundamental to his being to bring his art to the level of a spiritual experience, to match it to the vibrato of a Mozart opera and to transport an audience to a world where only the purest forms of art could go. He was a man of great intellectual unrest who strove to express his most profound desires and intentions through new artistic forms. Rothko wanted his art to move “toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the ideas of the observer.” For him, “to achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood” (Ashton, 78). Indeed, when one stands before a Rothko painting, one feels the weight of what it means to be a human being.
Works Cited


The Great Dark Way?

by Jennifer Moore

Will the sun really come out tomorrow, on Broadway? By the end of January 2009, thirteen shows closed and several more played to their final audiences in February or March. The “Great White Way” is now growing exceedingly dark as show after show closes, but what is the real reason?

The economy is part of it, with more and more people not wanting, or able, to spend $121.50 or more per ticket. But is money the only reason for such systemic failure?

No. Many of the shows that recently closed had been limited engagements, such as “Liza at the Palace,” which had actually been extended one week due to an enormous response in ticket sales. The other shows that recently closed were simply worn out. No matter how great a straight play on Broadway is, it usually does not last more than one year. The musicals, however, excite audiences more and end up lasting longer; many of the musicals that closed in January had been running successfully for several years, such as “Spamalot” and “Hairspray.”

Although it seems as though Broadway as a whole is shutting down, it is simply time to get rid of the old and bring in the new. Around twenty-two new shows opened by the Tony Award nominations cutoff date in April, including revivals of “Guys and Dolls,” “Hair,” and “West Side Story,” as well as a
musical adaptation of “9 to 5.” One hopes that these new shows will have the audiences they deserve.

Recent and current outstanding Broadway shows include the following:

- “In the Heights,” playing at the Richard Rogers Theatre, is a personal favorite, which is unlike anything else on Broadway. Combining Latin beats with hip-hop and amazing choreography, this multiple Tony-winning show tells a unique story of community, family, and most of all, home.

- Apologies to “West Side Story,” but the favorite for best revival of 2009 is definitely “Hair!” The revival, which opened at the Al Hirschfeld theater in April, attracts audiences old and new. After a limited run last summer under the stars in Central Park, the show was set to come to Broadway, and now it plays to sold-out audiences, including many who saw the original production in 1968. The show includes hit songs like “Age of Aquarius,” “Good Morning Starshine,” and, of course, “Hair,” and is a must-see for everyone. So let your hair down, get ready to feel the love, and head over to the Hirschfeld for a night to remember.

- One of the biggest shows to hit Broadway recently is “Shrek the Musical” at the Broadway Theatre. This adaptation of the Dreamworks movie (the original “Shrek,” not the sequels) is for adults and children alike. Following the storyline of the animated movie and including several identical scenes, the musical adds many characters, songs, and dances. Most important, the man in green, played by Brian d’Arcy James, has added a new dimension to the character. It doesn’t hurt that he sounds exactly like the Shrek we all know and love.

With new, all-star revivals and musical adaptations, along with some currently popular and successful shows like “Wicked,” “Billy Elliot,” and “Chicago,” the future of Broadway is hopeful and bright. Though many theatres may be dark right now, in the next few months, their lights will be shining once again. Broadway will be thriving again soon.

For discounted tickets to Broadway shows, check out the TKTS Discount Booths at Times Square, the South Street Seaport, and at 1 MetroTech Center in Brooklyn (corner of Jay Street and Myrtle Avenue Promenade). All locations sell tickets at up to 50% off the full-price (plus at $4.00 per ticket service charge).
A Shimmer of Possibility in a Photographer’s Work: Paul Graham at the Museum of Modern Art

by Jillian Moseman

From 4 February until 18 May 2009, The Museum of Modern Art exhibits the works of the British photographer Paul Graham (b. 1956). Entitled, “a shimmer of possibility,” the exhibit is comprised of a collection of photographs from the photographer’s trips around the United States. Graham has been a revolutionary force in the field of photography, specifically by combining hard-hitting documentary photography with more sentimental examinations of everyday life.

Graham laid his foundation for his work in unorthodox approaches to documentary photography, a more journalistic and objective treatment of social subjects. Drawing on contemporary issues, such as the conflict in Northern Ireland, the tension in western Europe, and unemployment, Graham tested the waters artistically in his poetic depictions. He abandoned the traditional black-and-white format and effort to capture candid moments for more aesthetic, even relatable portrayals.

In his photographs of northern Ireland, Graham portrays what looks, at first glance, like a tranquil land but it is haunted by conflicts that divide its people. The stunning greens of the Irish landscape allow the photographs to become vivid, real portrayals of a place far removed from our daily lives.

In the photographs on display at the Museum of Modern Art, there is a different, more hopeful message. In the same vein as nineteenth-century French painter Gustave Courbet, Graham presents everyday life at its most ordinary, as in New Orleans (Woman Eating) (Figure 1). Additionally, he is not portraying conflict or the social issues that plague today’s society. He does have a point, though, and that is to immerse oneself in those small moments most of us take for granted. Graham once observed, “Perhaps instead of standing at the river’s edge scooping out water, it’s better to be in the current itself, to watch how the river comes up to you, flows smoothly around your presence, and reforms on the other
side like you were never there.”¹ People
Graham met while traveling the United
States are portrayed with a deep interest in
what most might consider uninteresting.

“A shimmer of possibility” reflects
Graham’s romantic ideas of examining the
small moments that encompass our lives.
From a series of photographs of a man hard
at work mowing the lawn to the vibrant
purples, blues, and pinks of a sunset against
a distant tree-adorned mountaintop, Graham
reveals his curiosity with these moments and
the need to revel in them.

“A Shimmer of Possibility” is on view at The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York,
from 4 February until 18 May 2009. Hours: Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday,
10:30 am-5:30 pm; Friday, 10:30 am-8:00 pm; closed Tuesdays. Admission: $12.00 for students with
current ID. Admission is free for all visitors during Target Free Friday Nights, held every Friday
evening from 4:00 to 8:00 pm.

¹ “A shimmer of possibility. Photographs by Paul Graham, Exhibitions 2009,”

New York City is where many dancers go to “make it” within the profession. This city is home to many of the major ballet and modern companies of the United States, and it is where many of the most prestigious dance schools are located. It is a city of opportunity, which brings with it innumerable unsuccessful auditions and rejections to accompany the success stories we hear every day. These failed attempts at getting hired or noticed are sometimes due to a lack of technique or an inferior ability. Sometimes, however, rejection is based on racism. This subversive prejudice was particularly relevant at the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, when young Arthur Mitchell (b. 1934) was trying to become a dancer.

Despite social opposition, this one young African-American male dancer pursued his dreams and “made it.” Mitchell was raised in Harlem in a family that was never involved in the arts, yet he had been encouraged to audition for the High School of the Performing Arts. Ever since his acceptance to the school, he has made dancing the biggest part of his life. Through this high school, Mitchell received a top-notch dance education from such...
famous movement innovators as Pearl Lang, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Joffrey. From this experience, he pursued his classical ballet education through a scholarship granted by board member Lincoln Kirstein at the School of American Ballet, although there were essentially no performance opportunities for African-American ballet dancers at the time.

Mitchell was eventually offered a position in the New York City Ballet’s corps de ballet, but he had also attempted to pursue many other careers during his journey through the world of classical ballet. He had auditioned for Broadway, modern dance companies, and other sorts of dancing jobs. He became an extremely talented dancer, as noted by many who auditioned him, but one whose skin color prevented him from being hired. The rejections were painful but they only made him try harder. However, George Balanchine, Director of the New York City Ballet, was eager to provide opportunities for Mitchell. He choreographed a pas de deux for Mitchell and established ballerina Diana Adams in his new ballet “Agon” (meaning, “contest”) (1957). The pair shocked audiences, who focused on the contrast in skin tones instead of the brilliant dancing.

As Mitchell enjoyed great success within the NYCB, he began to do side projects. He formed arts companies in Brazil, worked on Broadway, and tried his hand in many other aspects of the dance world. At the same time, Martin Luther King, Jr., was promoting the Civil Rights Movement and Mitchell was invested in the idea. He had met much opposition in his life, especially in his career as a performer. Even when Balanchine supported him or when other choreographers and employers noticed his talent, he had to overcome great social barriers with audiences and others in society in order to perform. He wanted the world of the arts to be open to everyone, especially those struggling with racism, such as his peers in his native Harlem.

After King’s assassination, Mitchell ceased working with Brazil and outside nations; he decided to focus on what he could do to enhance the arts movement within his own country, specifically, Harlem. With the support of Balanchine, Kirstein, and the New York City Ballet, he began teaching dance to the youth in Harlem. He lured many students in by relating dance to sports, using drums instead of piano, or anything else he could do to make the art form resonate with their lives. In a panel
discussion at the New York Public Library as part of the Dance Theater of Harlem’s exhibition [“Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts,” on view 11 February 2009 – 9 May 2009], Mitchell admits to fooling the children to entice them to dance. He once remarked, “I used drums instead of piano for an entire class, and the kids didn’t know they were doing ballet. They were still doing all the vocabulary: plies, tendus…,” but since the class wasn’t set to classical music, the children were able to enjoy it without thinking about the technique as a high art. In this and other ways, Mitchell developed innovative systems to involve others in the art form that changed his life.

Mitchell ultimately founded the Dance Theater of Harlem with Karel Shook to give dancers of color the same opportunities that he had enjoyed. The company was based on classical ballet technique; Mitchell had learned that this dance form was essential to providing a strong basis for all movement, regardless of the type of dance. The company began to perform mostly ballet pieces, but not only the stereotypical nineteenth-century ballets. The company was “grounded in classical technique,” Mitchell states, but was “very eclectic. That’s why we named it Dance Theater of Harlem, not Ballet Theater of Harlem—it wasn’t just ballet, we wanted to show off a variety of styles.”

To showcase this eclectic mix of dance styles, ranging from classical ballets to new work choreographed by Alvin Ailey and other new movers, Mitchell had to educate his audiences. Many people in Harlem had never seen a live performance before, so Mitchell exposed his audiences to the art form in a way that they could appreciate. He educated them and provided a mix of movement styles so
everyone could find something they enjoyed. This type of audience education has grown into a program known today as “Dancing Through Barriers.” It is employed far beyond the boundaries of Harlem.

Dance Theater of Harlem began in a tumultuous time and had a lot to prove. It had to prove that minority dancers were equal to or better than their white contemporaries, who were accepted into the other major companies of New York. They managed to accomplish this goal and more, quickly becoming a recognized and accomplished dance troupe. They re-created the ballet “Giselle” in the setting of the bayous of Louisiana to make it logical for the company to perform it; the performance came to be known as “Creole Giselle.” The company excelled not only technically but also artistically, as they adapted such works to make them more identifiable for the company and their audiences.

The dancers showcased their exceptional technique. Not only were these performers top-notch but they also gave back to their communities and the world. They performed locally and inspired Harlem residents, showing their peers that minorities could accomplish anything, even in the highly critical field of the arts and amid deep-seated racial and social stigmas. The troupe was even commissioned to perform in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela, one of their greatest fans, greeted them, and in London, where they met Princess Diana.

Throughout the years, the Dance Theater of Harlem has showcased the talents of many minority performers; it continues to astound audiences today. For the 40th anniversary of the troupe, which occurs this year, the New York Public Library is hosting an exhibit about the company. Judy Tyrus, a former dancer with the company and a current member of Marymount Manhattan College’s own dance faculty, was the curator of the exhibition. She compiled photos of rehearsals and performances, flyers and posters from performances, and examples of the costumes the company has used throughout the years. There are also videos of performances and interviews with important players in the DTH history, such as Arthur Mitchell himself. There are even examples of the tights and pointe shoes dyed to match each dancer’s specific skin tone. Also included in this multi-faceted exhibit is a 3-D puzzle that chronicles the history of the company, created by artist Frank Bara. In addition to the exhibit, the New York Library for the Performing Arts is hosting a series of panel discussions on the Dance Theater of Harlem in its Bruno Walter Auditorium.
The Dance Theater of Harlem has broken through significant boundaries in the dance world and in society at large. It has irrevocably shown that dancers of different races work at the same high caliber as white dancers. Arthur Mitchell has been integral to promoting this advancement of racially diverse dancers. He hopes to see the company continue to break boundaries as it teaches and performs. It is high time for the Dance Theater of Harlem to get back in the limelight and show off its prowess, Mitchell states. He adds that perhaps Dance Theater of Harlem is more relevant today than when it was created forty years ago, “especially with our new president.”

“The Dance Theater of Harlem” will be on view through 9 May 2009. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts is located 40 Lincoln Center Plaza. Phone (212) 870-1630. Hours for most collections: Monday and Thursday, 12:00-8:00 pm; Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, 11:00-6:00 pm; Saturday, 10:00-6:00 pm. A panel discussion on making work for the Dance Theater of Harlem will be held on Thursday, 7 May at 5:30 pm. For more information on the Dance Theater of Harlem and a schedule of performances, see http://www.dancetheatreofharlem.com.
Humiliation, Obsession, and Classical Music in “The Piano Teacher”

by Emma Ramos

About a year ago, director Michael Haneke released an American remake of his 1997 Austrian film “Funny Games.” “Funny Games U.S.A.” (2007) is a shot-by-shot remake of its Austrian counterpart and tells the story of two handsome, well-off young men who charm their way into a typical suburban home and make a game out of slaughtering its occupants. The point of both films is to depict the influence of gratuitous violence on the human psyche. Having respected Haneke for his 2005 film “Cache” (starring Juliette Binoche and Daniel Auteuil) and continuously struggling with my own views on brutal violence in movies, especially its psychological ramifications, I decided to purchase a grossly overpriced ticket and see if Haneke could shed some cinematic light on my dilemma. After watching 117 minutes of purely superfluous simulated brutality and little if any philosophical or intellectual substance, I was left sick to my stomach.

I saw no argument either for or against violence, just an excuse to show actress Naomi Watts in her underwear, gagged and bound, playing a wife and mother who is forced to watch her family die. I felt that Haneke used a popular argument—that simulated violence can be psychologically unhealthy—to exploit his audience. It took me a while to feel that I could objectively watch another Haneke film. Then, about a month or so into my summer vacation, I came across the Haneke section in what used to be Kim’s Video on Broadway and 114th street. In the small “Directors” section, I noticed “The Piano Teacher.” The DVD case had an alluring picture of Isabelle Huppert, my film-loving father’s favorite actress, in the arms of a seemingly younger man, lying on the floor of a bathroom. I couldn’t resist.

instructor at the Vienna Music Conservatory. Erika, who is at least in her mid-forties, lives in a small apartment with her over-bearing mother. A deep love and understanding for the works of composers Franz Schubert and Robert Alexander Schumann seem to be Erika’s reason for living. Devoid of male companionship—an absence due, in part, to her meddlesome mother—Erika becomes a voyeur. Frequenting drive-in movies just to watch young couples having sex in their cars or visiting private viewing booths at sex shops in order to smell the remnants of seamen on disposed napkins are Erika’s only outlets for sexual release. Devoting herself to a life of discipline as an instructor in a very prestigious music conservatory has left Erika rigid and incapable of forming relationships, with the exception of her mother and two favorite dead composers.

Everything changes for Erika, however, when she is introduced to Walter (Benoit Magimel), a very handsome and arrogant university student. A skilled pianist himself, Walter is immediately taken with Erika and decides to abandon his studies to take music lessons from her. Erika sees right through Walter. Walter’s lack of discipline and emotional understanding for the very music that Erika loves, in combination with his raw talent, which he eagerly exploits, make Erika despise him. Walter and Erika begin a sado-masochistic love affair that ends disastrously in the film’s brilliantly twisted last scene.

There are many absolutely gorgeous scenes in “The Piano Teacher.” The film begins with a fight between Erika and her mother. A resolution to the fight ends the scene and transitions to the opening credits. The credits themselves foreshadow the uncomfortable nature of the film. The camera cuts back and forth from one image of a credit in white lettering on a silent and stationary black screen to an image of a piano lesson with emphasis on the hands playing the keyboard. Just as the viewer is getting accustomed to listening to the beautiful piano music, the music stops, the screen goes black and another
credit flashes on the screen. When I first viewed the film, I didn’t understand that this giving and then withholding of sensory stimulation was the director’s way of offering his audience a taste of something that Walter and Erika would later experience.

The most famous scene in “The Piano Teacher” takes place in a women’s bathroom and was described by the New Yorker magazine as “possibly the strangest sex scene in the history of movies” (http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20041008/news_1n8nobel.html). The scene begins with Erika relieving herself in the women’s bathroom. Walter enters the bathroom, locks the main entrance door, then jumps and hangs on the door to the stall containing Erika. When Erika emerges from the bathroom stall, the two begin to kiss. Just when the scene seems to be headed toward a typical sexual encounter, Erika pushes Walter off and begins giving and withholding manual sexual stimulation. Each time Walter protests by either saying “Erika, Je t’aime!” or attempting make a move of his own, Erika stops and threatens to leave. Being young and male, Walter’s ego can take only so much humiliation.

Realizing that Erika is incapable of giving or receiving real love, Walter rejects her and attempts to move on. A true masochist, Erika finds pleasure in Walter’s rejection and decides she really loves him. With the tables turned, Walter finds temporary satisfaction in humiliating and withholding his affection from Erika. The sordid affair ends in a finale as intense as any climax to a great piece of music.

In the end, “The Piano Teacher” is a brilliant look at obsession and female sexual perversion. Huppert gives a fantastic and completely realistic performance. The film should also be seen by anyone who enjoys classical piano, as there is some beautiful music woven into the film. Ultimately, it nullified the entire experience that was “Funny Games U.S.A.”
Jeremy Deller’s “It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art

by Marguerite Town-Mott

The Middle East and, more specifically, Iraq seem to be full of endlessly unresolved issues that monopolize the thoughts of most Americans. All one has to do is stop by a corner store to see panic-inducing headlines or turn on the TV to hear a constant narrative of the conflict in Iraq. News of small successes followed by much bigger disasters continuously flows from the Middle East. The constant media coverage has given most people firm opinions and a safe feeling of distance from the situation. Over time, the “code yellow” begins wear on the collective consciousness.

One could argue that the point of art is to challenge the safe feeling that distance provides and to replace it with inquisitiveness and a feeling of involvement. Much art has responded to current events and political upheaval. Picasso painted Guernica (1937) to show the world the horror and destruction caused by the Spanish Civil War. Jasper Johns painted his first Flag (1954-55) after being stationed in Japan during the Korean War. Likewise, artist Jeremy Deller’s exhibition “It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq” extends the goals of previous political artworks: to create questions and generate dialogue about current events.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, in partnership with the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, opened “It Is What It Is” in an effort to involve people in conversation about the war in Iraq. The exhibit features a rotating crew of experts on Iraq to interact with museum-goers. This controversial showcase displays a bombed-out car shell and a large banner of America. It is a product of Jeremy Deller’s obsession with the Middle East, his creative energy, and his attempts to find a way to answer difficult questions on the subject. “It Is What It Is” pushes the boundaries of what we call art and engages us in the dialogue that creates it.
It is fascinating to see the work of an artist who creates an exhibition where so little of what they actually crafted was shown. After all, the car shell and Iraq experts are hardly what would be called “art” in the traditional sense of the word and Deller certainly didn’t create them. This notion of putting together ideas as a way to make art, rather than using a more accepted medium, seems to be Deller’s forte. His reputation as an artist who creates political and thought-provoking work is well deserved. Tate Director and Turner Prize Chairman Sir Nicholas Serota remarked that Deller “…orchestrates creativity out of other people rather than necessarily himself” (BBC News, “Bush video wins Turner Prize,” 7 December 2004). Deller won the prestigious Turner Prize in 2004 for a film entitled “Memory Bucket,” a documentary about the hometown of George W. Bush. In “It Is What It Is,” Deller has created a space to talk openly about sensitive issues, to see an example of the horrible destruction in Iraq, and to ask the questions that can’t be answered by the media. It very well may be that this exhibit creates questions that are especially difficult to construct in a world where the script of the war is bombarded across every conceivable medium. It may not look like art to someone who insists on a pleasing experience, but “It Is What It Is” exists as art in its purest form: the act of questioning and creating conversation about difficult topics.

When one first enters the gallery, the most striking impact is the seemingly empty gallery space. The four, smallish couches and stools that are grouped around a square coffee table and a rusted car shell seem to amplify the massive space that they are in. However, the potency of the few things that do fill the large space makes the scarcity of them seems insignificant. The most noticeable object in the gallery space is the burnt shell of a car that was witness to an explosion that took place in March 2007 on Al-Mutanabbi, a street in Iraq. This tragedy killed over thirty people and is especially significant as it took place on the street that was the center of Baghdadi intellectual and cultural life. A few pictures of the destroyed street and the subsequent reconstruction hang on a nearby wall. On the opposite wall hangs a banner of the outline of America. The banner is hand painted by artist Ed Hall, who has collaborated with Deller in the past and shares his penchant for edgy political art. The outline seems blank at first but upon closer inspection has the names of Iraqi cites printed on it. Despite seeming vaguely extraneous, the banner compels our attention. Seeing the names of Dallas and San Francisco
juxtaposed with the Iraqi cities of Kirkuk and Al-Qadisiyyah sends a grim message: America and Iraq are irrevocably intertwined.

Despite the fact that the car shell and banner seem to be the centerpieces of “It Is What It Is,” they are not the main event or focus. Rather, these pieces help to stimulate conversation and questions in the same way that a side dish would accent the main course. The “meat” of this exhibit takes place on the couches and stools that are grouped together in the center of the gallery. The dialogue between engaged museum-goers and the rotating cast of Iraq experts is the true purpose of “It Is What It Is.” The people that are participating in this exhibit are many and varied. Veterans of the war in Iraq, journalists, scholars, and Iraqi nationals who have first-hand experience of Iraq all have their chance to talk to the people in the gallery. Sitting down and talking to these contributors is an extraordinarily different experience than going to a lecture. The participants have all of the knowledge and expertise that a lecturer would have but interact with their audience in a way that you could never find in someone standing up at a podium. Instead of speaking at individuals, they all share in a conversation that is simultaneously transient and permanent.

After the exhibition closed in New York, the artist, two selected Iraq experts, and a writer traveled across America in an RV with the exhibition. The exploded car traveled on a flatbed trailer hitched to the RV. They stopped at various local community centers and cultural institutions in an effort to continue the conversations on a national level. As part of the New Museum’s partnership with the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the exhibit will have a stay at each of these institutions.

Jeremy Deller created exactly what he planned to create: an exhibit that challenges preconceived notions about what qualifies as art and, simultaneously, an ongoing dialogue that is the beginning of great art. Here, important political debate and important artistic interpretations share equal billing.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art is located at 235 Bowery. Phone: 212-219-1222. Hours: Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday, 12:00-6:00 pm; Thursday and Friday, 12:00-9:00 pm; closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission for students: $8.
American photographer David LaChapelle exhibited “Auguries of Innocence” at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York City (12 September – 1 November 2008). LaChapelle (b. 1963) is known for his dramatic color images that incorporate unconventional props and digital photo manipulation to create fantastical, often controversial scenes. His subject matter includes the extravagant lifestyles of wealthy individuals, the exposure of contemporary subcultures, and the satirical commentary on vanity and stardom in Hollywood. His iconic style, characterized by digital combinations of multiple images, illustrates his advanced level of technical skills. Since his introduction to the fine art world in the early 1990s, LaChapelle has earned global recognition for his outrageous style and been honored as a “legend”
by the photography industry magazine Photo District News. However, the eccentric combination of images and subjects in his work often treads a thin line between trashy and tasteful.

“Auguries of Innocence” displays the progression from LaChapelle’s earlier images concerning the “cult” personality of popular culture to his new interest in the human condition. Inspired by themes of salvation and divinity, LaChapelle credits his new tangent of visionary work to the Book of Genesis’ description of the Great Flood and how humankind reacts to catastrophe. The new work is LaChapelle’s interpretation of warnings against war, purity, and religion, which he presents through an unsuccessful allusion to William Blake’s poem “Auguries of Innocence.”

In the exhibition, LaChapelle illustrates the human fascination with chaos through the lens of a blockbuster movie, and enhances dramatic subjects with the juxtaposition of popular cultural iconography and reference to various religious symbolisms. For example, “Holy War” (2008) features gruesome images of wounded American soldiers alongside biblical references to the traditional depiction of Christ with lambs (Figure 1). His “pop” approach to the concept of the human condition introduces a secondary theme of questioning cultural norms. The unusual combination of graphic images and symbols presents a shocking challenge to standard societal customs. As a result, the images draw extremely positive and negative reactions. Some viewers feel inspired and excited by LaChapelle’s ambitious and direct confrontation, while the marketing of religious symbols disgusts others.

In select areas of the exhibition, LaChapelle experiments with a new style of presentation. Rather than showing the expected two-dimensional, glossy color prints for which he is famous, he constructed extravagant, three-dimensional displays. The photographic images are printed on cardboard cutouts and arranged to form sculptural tableaus. The shift from the expected, flat, two-dimensional print to the active, three-dimensional presentation confronts the viewer’s assumptions about high art versus low art. The glitzy, life-size displays of three-dimensional images appear tacky and cheap, while the standard, two-dimensional images in the show are more recognizable as works of fine art. All of the major works in the show, including images of cars piled on top of each other, dying soldiers, and

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random celebrities, are displayed in a threedimensional form that is frighteningly similar to an elementary school diorama (Figure 2). According to the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, the combination of the high art practice of digital photography with the low art production of cutout cardboard displays “jumpstarts our active participation and experience in the dynamic collision of image and form, form and content.” While the confrontational displays do ignite the visual experience, the “collision of image and form, form and content” resembles the foreign debris of a high-speed accident. The viewer’s only “active participation” is the attempt to digest countless scenes and comprehend what is happening in the overall image.² The result of LaChapelle’s collision is an extremely overwhelming explosion of color and graphic imagery.

The substandard cardboard presentations do not do justice to LaChapelle’s extraordinary technical skills in digital photography. Instead of “utilizing both industrial and advanced modes of fabrication and presentation,” as stated in the press release, to create captivating three-dimensional structures, the cheap method of presentation diminishes the images’ impact. Regular corrugated cardboard is not an archival material, which introduces the question of preservation. No wise art

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collector will invest large sums of money for a print that will disintegrate in a short period of time, even if it is a work by a trendy and world-renown photographer.

The photomontage “Children’s Bacchanal” (2008) serves as an excellent example of LaChapelle’s exploration of unconventional photographic practices (Figure 3). The large digital C-print lies on recycled corrugated cardboard and recalls the presence of movie advertisements seen in theater lobbies. In addition to the alternative three-dimensional presentation, the work is disorienting in the uncomfortable relationship of the collaged images. In the final work, LaChapelle combines scenes from popular culture, such as a revealing portrait of Paris Hilton and a diamond encrusted skull by Damien Hirst, along with sensitive religious iconography, including the Torah, the Koran, and the Bible. Other random scenes, such as two pigs mating, add to the confusion and complexity of the grand piece, which exceeds 358 inches in length.

The term “bacchanal” refers to “an occasion of drunken revelry, orgy.” Knowledge of the term’s definition allows the viewer to digest the wild image and to see that the artist is making a

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statement. However, while the title helps us to understand the subject matter and the variety of symbolic images, it also adds to the complexity of the work. Why would LaChapelle associate children with a wild occasion that involves drinking and sexual acts? This question helps to clarify the fundamental intention behind all of LaChapelle’s photography: to make unconventional representations of popular or sensitive subjects so as to create hype that will ultimately grant him wide exposure in the media and in the art community at large. He has achieved this hype once again in “Children’s Bacchanal” through the juxtaposition of high-quality prints displayed on a cheap material, the juxtapositions of popular culture and religious symbolism, and the simultaneous evocations of alcohol, sex, and children. The photographer has a history of dynamic and controversial work and, ultimately, “Children’s Bacchanal” adds to his repertoire of shocking and thought-provoking art.

LaChapelle is known for his extravagant digital photography in which he presents combinations of high and low cultural symbols, as well as sensitive subjects to convey satirical messages. His work almost always proves controversial and buzz-worthy. However, “Auguries of Innocence” contains too many separate themes to be contained in one show. LaChapelle is a master at creating captivating photographic images and yet this show resonates as solely entertainment. Ultimately, “Auguries of Innocence” is disappointing; the large images contain an overwhelming combination of subjects, themes, and symbols. In addition, the courageous attempt to display two-dimensional works in three-dimensions is unsuccessful due to the cheap nature and inconsistency of cardboard as a medium of fine art. LaChapelle is known for pushing extremes to the limit; in this exhibition, he seems, finally, to have stepped over the edge.

A Dominatrix in Couture: Allusions to the American Women’s Rights Movement in Richard Avedon’s “Dovima with Elephants”

by Franny Vignola

Figure 1: Richard Avedon, “Dovima with Elephants,” 1955, gelatin silver print, 19¼ x 15¼”, Sotheby’s, New York.
American photographer Richard Avedon (1923-2004) explored social reactions to conservative apparel design modeled in unconventional environments during the 1950s through his experimental fashion photography. The seminal photograph “Dovima with Elephants” (1955) documents Avedon’s revolutionary style, which intersects realism and fantasy in avant-garde subjects. One of the first American fashion photographers to work in alternative studio locations, Avedon shot the editorial series of Christian Dior’s “New Look” campaign for the September 1955 issue of Harper’s Bazaar magazine at the Cirque d’Hiver in Paris. Backstage of the Parisian circus, Avedon captured a magical moment where the model known as Dovima (Dorothy Virginia Margaret Juba) performs an elegant power dance with a group of circus elephants.1 Avedon’s gelatin silver print “Dovima with Elephants” might be viewed as a clichéd expression of female elegance and grace; in the image Dovima is undeniably the picture of refinement with her slim figure and custom-fit black gown. However, the interaction between Dovima and the elephants represents a societal revolution and the image is an important piece of American cultural history. In fact, critical analysis of specific creative techniques and an understanding of the photograph in its historical context together allude to the modernization of women’s rights. From a cultural and historical perspective, “Dovima with Elephants” depicts the initial strengths and weaknesses of opposing arguments in the post-war movement for women’s rights in America.2 Avedon organizes the cinematic photograph with techniques such as dramatic lighting, repetition of diagonal lines, and a path of action to focus the viewer’s attention on specific, thematic elements throughout the composition. Critical analysis of such elements demonstrates that the significance of “Dovima with Elephants” extends far beyond the frame of fashion photography.

Avedon elegantly positions Dovima on a hay-covered floor between two enormous elephants at the center of the composition. She is dressed in an ankle-length, black, haute couture, Christian Dior gown adorned with a long white sash that covers the right side of her body, from her natural bust line to the floor in a diagonal motion (Figure 1). Her left foot crosses over her body and extends forward in the

picture plane to capture the viewer’s attention and, therefore, serves as the initial focal point. The path of action uses technical elements, such as line, to guide the viewer’s eye from the focal point to various areas of interest throughout the composition. In “Dovima with Elephants,” the path of action begins at Dovima’s left foot, where the white rectangle of pale skin on the top of her foot and ankle dramatically contrasts with her black shoe. From this location, the white sash parallels the feminine shape of Dovima’s body and draws the eye along the vertical axis of her elongated stance. The sash vibrantly contrasts the rich black of the gown’s bodice; the strong difference in tones excites the viewer, for it causes the eye to bounce between alternating areas of black and white. From her delicate décolletage, the path of action carries the visual interest to her shoulders and neck, where light areas of pale skin seen at the original focal point of her foot reappear. It continues to travel vertically up her neckline to her face, where her eggshell skin glows against the rough gray background of the elephant’s skin. The profile view of her elegant and simple silhouette against the gray background introduces the thematic repetition of horizontal lines. Dovima radiates an aristocratic attitude because she points her chin up at a slight diagonal and faces away from the elephant as if to say she is morally above the animal she graces with her right hand.

Avedon captures Dovima in the authoritative role of ringmaster; she projects control through dominating body language and tense physical interactions with the elephants. She rests her right hand on the trunk of an enormous elephant in a seemingly comfortable embrace that displays her authoritative power over him. The line of sight follows the “T” shape that her bare shoulders and slick black arms create against the gray background, and it travels in a horizontal motion across the composition. The line created by Dovima’s left arm and hand are perpendicular to her vertical body. She stretches her arm to try to touch a second elephant that stands just out of her reach. Her left arm and hand create a direct horizontal line that carries the path of action quickly toward the right side of the image, where the distant elephant stands. The visual momentum slows to allow the viewer to explore the foreign landscape of the elephant’s head, until one discovers a dense oval of the animal’s eye. The eye is a deep black hole of solemn emotion, enhanced by a miniscule, lively reflection from the camera’s flash. Various shades of gray that cover the mountainous volume of the elephant’s head surround the eye and create a moment of visual rest between areas of tension.
The line of sight travels around the elephant’s head and torso until it slows at a second focal point on a different elephant’s foot that is chained to the ground in the lower right side of the composition. As with the initial focal point of rectangular light on Dovima’s foot, a white rectangle on the elephant’s foot draws attention, as it is isolated amid a sea of heavy, dark legs. The simple gesture of captivation, seen in the chains that secure the foot to the ground, contributes to the larger theme of restriction. The profound tension between the elephant’s foot and the man-made restrictions references Dovima’s role as dominatrix. Avedon decided to keep the obscure foot, which has no identifiable body, in the composition because it is a significant asset to the image’s theme and essential for visual coherence. The chained foot suggests man’s desire to control—to domesticate—elephants; the literal illustration therefore subtly alludes to domestic constraints against women in society. The inclusion of the foot is also necessary for visual coherence. Cropping the right edge of the image would have removed other valuable information contained in the same vertical axis, such as the elephant’s eye and the thematic diagonal line created by the animals’ pull on the chains.

A continual push-and-pull between Dovima and the elephants allows each subject to exhibit its strength in a unique way. Ultimately, despite Dovima’s small size and the chains, each displays control over the larger elephants, and Dovima is clearly shown as the main authority figure. The two podiatric focal points reduce to white rectangles; in so doing, they reveal only a fraction of their owner’s identity. The elephants display their power through physical enormity, while man-made chains that are miniscule by comparison counter their natural strength. As a result, the imprisonment forces the creatures to appear desperate. The dramatic “T” position of Dovima’s thin arms projects a similar effect on the elephants. Her extended arms serve as a gate and demand that the elephants stand behind her.

Elephants—large in scale and distinguished by their prominent trunks—are historical and religious symbols of the male gender; therefore, the visual dialectic ignited by Dovima and the elephants may be said to represent a confrontation between males and females. The fact that elephants are celebrated as the largest mammals on earth and idealized by spiritual totems in certain Indian and African beliefs reiterates their symbolic power in “Dovima with Elephants.” Elephants inspire us because of their larger-than-life, mystical presence. They are often praised as masculine symbols of royalty, power, and
and strength. For example, some Native American tribes associate the rare, white elephant with the white buffalo, and in Indian and Southeast Asian religions the elephant is a sign of royalty and wisdom. This identity is largely visible in the popular depiction of the Hindu god Ganesha, whose head is that of an elephant (Figure 2). Elephants are also consistently associated with the male gender because their strength and rage often connote sexual drive.3

All adult male elephants experience a natural hormonal fluctuation of sexual competition called musth, at which time the temporal glands on their heads produce a sticky and malodorous substance and their behavior is irritable and unpredictable. There are two main species of elephants, which are distinguished by physical characteristics and personality traits. The African elephant is the larger of the two and identifiable by its long ears and round head. The Asian elephant is significantly smaller than the African and sports shorter ears and two mounds of flesh on the top of its head. In general, Asian elephants are easier to train; however, legal restrictions on Asian imports determined that most elephants in European and American circuses were African. In “Dovima with Elephants,” the species of elephant is clearly Asian; its rarity contributes to the magical quality of the image as a work of fantastical fashion photography. The most powerful asset of the elephant species is its trunk, which functions as a hand to grasp food and an extension of its nose to decipher smells. Elephants are covered in a thick, bristle-like hair that protects their delicate yet thick skin. All parts of the mammal’s body are extremely reactive to touch but the most sensitive area remains the trunk.4

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3 Ibid., pp. 268-69.
The gentle placement of Dovima’s hand on the elephant’s thick, phallic trunk extends the theme of subtle dominance. This seemingly simple gesture initiates a far more complex dialog than appears at first glance. Dovima is calm and in control as she regulates the irritable elephants with a single hand. Her interaction with them advances the allusion to Dovima’s role as a dominatrix, a woman who demands control over men (in this case, male elephants). Knowledge of the male elephant’s natural behavior and the irritable mood caused by sexually-charged musth underscores the idea of the elephant as a charged, masculine force, one akin to the role of men in androcentric twentieth-century America. For this reason, we may read Dovima as a force that tames such androcentrism; she becomes, in a sense, a representative of the initial stages of the modern women’s rights movement. Although she is less significant in size, the careful location of her right hand on the elephant’s trunk shows the authority of female power in the presence of men. She identifies herself as an authority figure to one masculine elephant, but she does not directly confront them all. Moreover, the association of Dovima’s hand on the elephant’s trunk with the sexual act of pleasuring the male emphasizes the fact that women often control men through sexual interaction. Avedon’s visual suggestion of this association correlates with Dovima’s role as a dominatrix, while the placement of Dovima’s hand on the trunk of the elephant contributes to his visual interpretation of masculine and feminine authority roles in society.

Avedon emphasizes significant areas of the composition that reflect the thematic allusion of sexuality and power through his manipulation of light and the dramatization of the depth of field. The plain gray background of the circus tent serves as a nondescript stage for the subjects to perform their elegant power play. Avedon enhances the visual plane with areas of highlight and shadow to create sharp contrasts. The dialectic between light and dark determines the rich tones that illuminate the image. The lower portion of the composition, specifically the location of the elephant’s feet, is cast in bright highlights. Above the elephant’s feet, in the central area of the composition that contains Dovima’s torso and the elephant’s legs, a neutral tone of gray balances the contrasting shades of black and white. Radiant highlights illuminate the main scene in the upper third of the photograph, the area that contains Dovima’s face and parts of the elephants’ heads. Only the neutral gray backdrop fills the very top quarter of the composition. The center, which is the brightest portion of the image, separates the two registers of the
same shade of gray. Together, the two gray areas apply the concept of thirds and frame the most important area of the composition. The rule of thirds states that the focus of a composition must rest on one of three imaginary intersections of horizontal and vertical lines that together form a grid of nine equal squares. Avedon’s application of this rule is evident in Dovima’s position because her extended arms parallel the horizontal axis and intersect the vertical axis created by the elephants on either side. The overall pattern of light intensity organized in horizontal registers from the bottom of the composition to the top is bright, dark, gray, bright, and gray. The repetition of light and dark is a technical aspect employed by photographers and is akin to the “stamp” used by Claude Lorrain in his seventeenth-century landscape paintings to represent distance and perspective (Figure 3).

As with his previous work in studio portraiture, Avedon undoubtedly arranged the lights before capturing the soon-to-be-iconic shot. He achieved such an organized pattern of light by meticulously combining artificial and natural light sources. The different concentrations of light enhance the important aspects of the scene, such as the focal points of Dovima’s and the elephants’ feet, while they disguise areas of less significance, such as the elephant’s upper legs. Overall, Avedon’s manipulations of light create a dramatic depth of field that showcases the Dior gown in a vividly theatrical fashion shot.

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Avedon’s ability to capture the scene at exactly the right moment calls to mind the concept of the decisive moment, which Henri Cartier-Bresson first used in the 1930s (Figure 4). In a 1975 interview with The Washington Post, Cartier-Bresson defined the decisive moment as “a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera.” In “Dovima with Elephants,” the decisive moment that Avedon chose is of principal importance to the composition, since the still frame captures a dynamic scene of action and tension between Dovima and the elephants. The same scene captured only a second or two later by the camera’s shutter would present a completely different image. The subject matter would remain the same but the intensity of tension and the interaction between Dovima and the elephants might have been less powerful.

The decisive moment in which Avedon closed the shutter is vitally important because that moment of tension and uncertainty is what makes “Dovima with Elephants” so successful. Various fields of movement, passion, and tension are not only seen in the subject matter but also through differentiating

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lines, textures, and qualities of light. Dovima’s extended left arm strains to reach a nervous elephant that leans in the opposite direction. In the majority of the composition, Dovima is represented as a dominatrix, visually expressing the passion she receives from the control of others, namely men. Nevertheless, Avedon illustrates Dovima’s strong desire to extend her role of dominatrix to the other elephants through her left arm reaching for a second elephant. The elephant’s overwhelming reaction to flee from Dovima’s dominating control furthers the allusion of rising female power in a masculine society. The elephant is partially cut out of the composition by the camera frame; however, the animal’s anxiety is powerful enough to be represented by its single eye that directly confronts the viewer. Though the elephant wants to move farther away from Dovima, ankle chains restrict his movement. Dovima and the elephants are metaphorically connected through the symbolism of confinement and restriction, which Avedon illustrates through the geometric repetition of horizontal lines. The confinement represents a greater force of outside control, which one presumes is societal norms. A strong degree of confinement is present in various areas of the composition, such as the diagonal sash that extends across Dovima’s torso and the lines drafted by the taut chains around the elephants’ ankles.

Another area where the decisive moment is beautifully executed is to Dovima’s right, where an elephant stands with one leg suspended in the air. Here, too, the still action raises possible questions: does the elephant walk forward toward the camera or to the right, away from the model? Since the trunk points up and slightly to its right, it is reasonable to assume that the elephant is stepping to the right. However, the chains that surround this elephant’s ankle restrict his movement and suggest that the foot simply returned to the ground after Avedon closed the camera’s shutter. The image stops time; it allows the viewer to share a magical moment where Dovima, the elephants, and Avedon himself do not know what happens next. This uncertainty leaves the viewer thinking about the photograph long after having seen it. The resemblance of Dovima to a character in a film encourages a personal connection between her and the viewer. Her role as both a compositional subject and a theatrical character enhances the allusion to the modern women’s rights movement because her character represents a strong female identity.
The same solo foot that is suspended in the air helps to shape the cinematic qualities of the scene by its restricted movement. The leg lifts in an upward motion that displays the animal’s desire to move away from Dovima. Nevertheless, this leg, as with the others, is chained to the ground and unable to escape. To Dovima’s left, a different elephant’s leg is also restricted by chains; it furthers the concept of motion, as this single leg extends the path of action off the compositional frame. The progression of movement beyond the frame’s edge initiates a connection to cinematography because if the image existed in motion film, the reel would advance, and the continual frames would answer any questions raised in the single frame. In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Avedon contributed to the cinematic style of fashion photography, where portraits evolved from long sessions of still sittings, to the explorative city streets of Paris and New York. As seen in “Dovima with Elephants,” the model’s pose and interaction with her environment became just as important and, eventually, even more important than the designs that she wore. Fashion photography was no longer simply about showcasing the clothing but about how the model wore the designs. This drive toward viewing the image as a whole inspired a monumental change in twentieth-century American fashion photography, where editorials revolved around the concept of the models entire “look” in relation her environment. The focus was no longer about advertising individual garments but about promoting a brand as a lifestyle. Models, such as Dovima, were an essential part of lifestyle branding, as their individual personalities became synonymous with the brand that they advertised.¹⁰

“Dovima with Elephants” alludes to the important advancements in the modern women’s rights movement that occurred during the 1940s and 1950s and that helped to pave the way for later achievements in the 1960s. For example, Harvard University Medical School accepted its first female student in 1945, the same year that President Truman appointed Eleanor Roosevelt as delegate to the United Nations. In 1951, the television series “I love Lucy” premiered; it featured women in lead roles and delivered courageous female personas into American homes on a weekly basis. The events of women’s history from the 1940s and 1950s may appear minor compared to the bridges crossed during

¹⁰ Hollander, op. cit., p. 238.
the 1960s; however, the accomplishments were imperative stepping-stones for later progress.¹¹

Author and art historian Naomi Rosenblum claims that fashion photographs represent a time in history. She writes, “Fashion imagery is significant as an index of transformations in social, cultural, and sexual mores and thus is indicative of attitudes by and toward women in society.”¹² Following Rosenblum’s statement, Avedon’s “Dovima with Elephants” documents the social attitudes of its era, the 1950s in post-war America. Europe faced economic setbacks generated by World War II. American artists took advantage of Europe’s hardships and excelled in collaborations of apparel design and photography. In the post-war era, the world of luxury consumer goods rapidly developed and the glossy pages of fashion magazines, such as *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*, became cultural staples of class and sophistication.¹³

In the 1950s, Avedon worked with the legendary art director Alexey Brodovitch at *Harper’s Bazaar*; together, they established a profitable and creative relationship that classified the magazine as the leading publication for high society. Avedon created “Dovima with Elephants” to promote Christian Dior’s “New Look” campaign, the designer’s post-war rebound collection, which was full of elegant dresses, luxurious fabrics, and cinched waists that exuded a sense of regality and sophistication.¹⁴ The black silk with velvet trim dress and its adorning white satin sash, known as “Soirée de Paris” and documented in Avedon’s “Dovima with Elephants,” is an iconic

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¹² Rosenblum, op. cit., p. 497.
piece of fashion history (Figure 5). It was the first dress that Yves Saint Laurent designed for Christian Dior, after his mentor recognized his talent. The cultural significance of the haute couture gown was celebrated in the 2005 exhibition of Yves Saint Laurent’s original designs at the Broadbent Gallery of the Kent State University Museum.15

*Harper’s Bazaar* hired Avedon shortly after it hired fellow photographer Irving Penn, who also worked on the “New Look” campaign. Penn’s classic images from the landmark 1950s period of fashion photography are beautiful in their depiction of women as symbols of sculptural elegance and timeless sophistication. His images demonstrate the ever-present societal restraints women faced through the model’s columnar poses. In the 1950 photograph “Woman with Roses on her Arm,” Penn portrays the Dior-clad model Lisa Fonssagrives as a symbol of classical feminine elegance; she wears a full-length gown, chandelier earrings, and opera-length gloves (Figure 6). This and other examples of his fashion imagery are traditional in style because Penn’s tightly framed compositions produce classical and statuesque female forms. The composition of “Woman with Roses on her Arm” is conservative by comparison to “Dovima with Elephants” and reveals that Penn did not challenge the role of women in society to the courageous degree that Avedon did.16

An interesting historical parallel to “Dovima with Elephants” is the 1947 debut of the “New Look” campaign, Avedon’s first photographs for *Harper’s Bazaar*, and the simultaneous release of

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Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which served as a precursor to the release of her 1949 feminist treatise, *The Second Sex*. The fact that these three stepping-stones of women’s rights occurred around the same time cannot go unnoticed, for each played a significant role in the appreciation and respect for women in modern history. As with these historical events, Avedon’s photographic interpretation of Dior’s revolution in elegant women’s clothing vividly documents the great historical push toward women’s rights during the mid-twentieth century. Avedon juxtaposed the regal clothes with extravagant scenes to capture the public’s attention and, in his own way, to advance the cause of women’s rights. Dovima’s mental strength and physical power in “Dovima with Elephants” present her as an authority figure, a characteristic rarely associated with women before the 1950s. Avedon combined female dominance with haute couture to show that women could be powerful individuals while remaining feminine and chic at the same time.

Avedon’s photographs for the “New Look” campaign depict inviting scenes of models interacting with their environment. His fashion images from the 1950s celebrated society’s evolving reflection of women as individuals and not simply as bodies. In *The Vogue Book of Fashion Photography*, Polly Delvin observed that, during the 1950s, America was in “a time of new beginnings, of recovery and discovery” in which fashion models visualized the social progression of women’s rights. Delvin continues her summary of the social situation as follows:

> The only kind of statement about women that could be made in fashion photography had a kind of absurd conventionality, and the model perpetuated an enshrined prewar image of the untouchable lady. Then, almost overnight, as it seemed, the 1950s became the decade of the affluent young. Fashion taboos were broken with relish.

Avedon’s photographs align with Delvin’s claim; he ignored societal rules that saw women only as canons of sophisticated beauty. As he captured that beauty, he also captured the characteristic strength of female youth. In “Dovima with Elephants,” Dovima is not used solely as a platform to display a Dior gown;

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17 Hollander, op. cit., p. 238.
18 Delvin, op. cit., p. 135.
instead, Avedon used her venturesome personality to elicit an aura of excitement and extravagance that defined the Dior brand.

Avedon called Dovima “the most remarkable and unconventional beauty of her time”; she was undoubtedly an international celebrity and “supermodel” before the term was coined. Her celebrity, generated from featured roles in Penn’s and Avedon’s fashion images during the 1950s, demonstrates the early revolution of societal views of female identity.¹⁹ Women were no longer only designated to domestic tasks and contained inside the home; rather, they also became a staple of luxury culture that reflected high society through their influential poise and elegance. Women made triumphant strides during the 1950s; however, they were still limited to the societal restraints of womanhood and at all times had to visually reflect the refined class of their family’s identity. “Her horizons might be larger, geographically speaking, and her environment more exotic,” Delvin claims about the fashionable lady, “she might entwine herself with the trunk of an elephant—but she would be elaborately coiffed and gowned while doing so.”²⁰ Delvin’s reference to “Dovima with Elephants” contributes to the wide recognition of the photograph as a milestone in American cultural history.

The dynamic between Dovima and the elephants was unconventional at the time, although Avedon refined the initial shock value of the juxtaposition of subjects by featuring somewhat conservative wardrobe and styling. We see Dovima’s sense of regal power in her graceful pose; however, the white sash across her torso parallels the

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²⁰ Delvin, op. cit., p. 135.
diagonal line of the elephant’s chains. The important accessory addresses the secondary theme of confinement and references the ever-present concept of androcentricism in American society. Dovima’s appears to have absolute control of the scene; however, the vivid contrast of the white sash against the black dress alludes to a larger and invisible authoritative force. The diagonal line comments on the social restrictions of women during the 1950s, even though it was a stimulating period of profound social change.

With the encouragement of Brodovitch, Avedon crossed lines of societal boundaries and artistic canons through the shock value of extravagant combinations of subjects, as well as the technical aspects of modern geometric lines and intensifying details (Figure 7). Avedon’s work is significant to American history because it had the power to influence mainstream views of women through the visual respect and empowerment of women in his photographs. The models of Avedon’s images, such as Dovima, Dorian Leigh, and Suzy Parker, are all memorable because they were celebrated for their courageous personalities and intoxicating auras, rather than solely their female form. Avedon’s photographs in Harper’s Bazaar and, later, Vogue applied a cinematic perspective to capture young, beautiful women doing spontaneous things while simultaneously looking glamorous to market the brands that they wore. The subjects of such images were no longer seen as only models; the public was introduced to their personalities when photographers recognized them by their names. Indeed, the titles of Avedon’s photographs from this period all include the model’s name. “Dovima with Elephants” and “Suzy Parker, Evening Dress by Lanvin-Castillo, Café des Beaux-Arts, Paris” (1956) explicitly label each model in the image and provide credit to all parties involved (Figure 8). Before this development, a fashion model’s name was seldom whispered; now, it was credited with a work of art. The simple inclusion of the model’s name in a title, in

conjunction with the presentation of a model’s personality as indicative of her sense of style, catapulted the concept of the supermodel into the 1960s.

In the majority of his work from the 1940s and 1950s, Avedon applied the principle of the decisive moment to capture spontaneous scenes, where models and fashion appeared unpredictable, and the adventurous feeling of the photographs became a contagious and powerful form of marketing for fashion designs. The cinematic elements of his compositions and venturesome characteristic of his models helped to pave the road for the spontaneous and unadulterated female empowerment of the 1960s. While such praise is associated with much of Avedon’s work, the iconic “Dovima with Elephants” is one image that stands out in the history of photography. All of the specific elements in the image, including the Dior dress, Dovima’s authoritative role of female dominance, and the shocking inclusion of elephants in a high society publication, cohere in an unparalleled manner that has raised the bar for modern fashion photographers. The image relates to such a large audience that “Dovima with Elephants” has extended from its original classification as a fashion photograph and is now widely accepted as a work of fine art. The extraordinary results of the Fall 2008 photography auction at Sotheby’s in New York, in which an imperfect, but signed print of “Dovima with Elephants” from the original 8 x 10 negative sold for $158,500, illustrates the modern appreciation of the photograph as a piece of cultural history.

Richard Avedon’s unconventional photograph “Dovima with Elephants” juxtaposes Dovima’s gracefulness and the elephants’ anxious enormity. The characters represent mental and physical strength in Avedon’s quest to combat the societal norms on the restricted view of women. Some may view “Dovima with Elephants” as an extravagant photographic celebration of feminine grace and beauty; however, critical analysis and placement in a historical context present the thematic allusion to the initial stages of the modern women’s rights movement during the 1940s and 1950s. Avedon symbolizes the male identity through the elephants and denotes the female identity in

Dovima's appearance. Technical aspects, such as lighting, repetition of diagonal lines, and a clear path of action, draw attention to significant areas of the composition to focus the viewer's attention on areas of cultural symbolism. Placement of the photograph in the historical context of both the American post-war culture and that of fashion photography confirms the thematic commentary on the push-and-pull of the pending social revolution. “Dovima with Elephants” proves iconic not only as a fashion photograph but also as a work of fine art. Indeed, we recognize it today as a document of American cultural history.

Bibliography


This past winter in Paris, the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, the Musée du Louvre, and the Musée d’Orsay joined forces to present an incredibly comprehensive and, at times, overwhelming celebration of the works of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). The exhibit at the Grand Palais, entitled “Picasso et les Maîtres” (“Picasso and the Masters”), used Picasso as a guide through the history of art, showing both his sources of inspiration and, in turn, works by artists that he influenced.

Anne Baldassari, co-curator of the exhibition, described Picasso as a “cannibal”—he ate up works and digested them. Then, he would produce something entirely his own. “Among all the modern and avant-garde painters,” Baldassari observed, [Picasso] is the only one who so strongly took on the entire history of painting.”1 The curators juxtaposed Picasso’s source of inspiration with his own rendition. We could see, for example, how El Greco’s St. Martin and the Beggar (1597-99) (Figure 1) helped to shape Picasso’s ideas for his Boy Leading a Horse (1906) (Figure 2). With kindred juxtapositions, the show presented a unique opportunity to see not only many of Picasso’s most famous works but also those by

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Picasso is often remembered for his most abstracted works, his famous contorted faces with noses where the ears should be. This exhibit showed his evolution into experimentation—the path he took to finding himself. Divided into ten
areas that were based on his various artistic interests—such as self-portraits, still lifes, nudes, and so on—it mapped the journey he took to understand and paint like the Masters. Only then could he identify his own style. This journey is perhaps most apparent in the fifty-eight works he painted based upon Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), the product of a long period of isolation needed to produce this great series (Figures 3-4).

“Picasso and the Masters” was a massive exposition—it contained more two hundred works—and was perhaps best seen over the course of several trips to the museum, considering the sheer magnitude and importance of the works presented.

“Picasso et les Maîtres” was shown at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, from 8 October 2008 – 2 February 2009. It can be seen at the National Gallery, London, from 25 February through 7 June 2009.
The following contains excerpts from www.stevieinghana.blogspot.com, a blog I kept while attending school, interning, teaching, and traveling in Ghana, West Africa, where I lived with a Ghanaian family for four and a half months in 2008.
**Friday, February 15, 2008**

Ghana. Ohhhh, Ghana. Hot, humidity like you cannot even imagine. Dirt roads that twist and turn with a lot of dust - when driving somewhere you describe the surrounding areas, people do not use street names. Women transporting things on their heads. Dark streets - the street lighting is minimal. Bright colors and tiny shops everywhere. People, people, people. Usually no toilet paper or soap or running water in public restaurants. Smells of exhaust, construction, smoking trash, cooked fruits, people. Pineapples, oranges, beans, chicken, spicy, spicy, spicy. Milo and fufu, saches of water. Handkerchiefs are necessary for wiping your forehead from sweat. Walking around sweaty with dirt sticking to your feet and legs which took me absolutely no time to get used to. Music everywhere. People everywhere, laughter.

**Friday, February 29, 2008**

My weekends have been footloose and fancy-free! Chez Afrique is turning into the Friday night hotspot, where we eat great food, sip on cheap beers, and dance to live music under the colorful lights, palm trees, and the bright moon that lights the sky. I traveled to Nana’s house to meet his family where I helped make fufu, a famous Ghanaian meal that you eat with your fingers and dip into soup. CIEE [Council on International Educational Exchange] had an Akwaaba (welcome) dinner where we ate great food and watched a live drumming band and dancers. I went to Aburni to visit the Botanical Gardens and a wood carving village where I bought “Mama Africa”: a woman carrying something on her head and a baby on her back. Women are truly the backbone of African society.
Saturday, April 5, 2008

My friend Stephanie and I decided to be adventurous and go on a trip with just the two of us to Shia Hills, where we heard there was some great hiking. Once we finally got on the right “tro tro” headed towards Kpong (thanks to one very helpful man), we had a long ride ahead of us through the country. The ride was nothing less than bliss. Half-asleep market women with their bags and babies on their backs lined the tro, Ghanaian highlife music blasted from the radio, the sun was setting behind the tropical landscape, and the warm wind hummed across my face. But this blissful ride was taking a very long time, and we became a little nervous. We had only made one stop and the evening was turning to night.

We woke up early the next morning, ate a big breakfast, and walked along the roadside to the Shia Hills National Park. A heard of cows passed us by, and the bright blue sky against the tall green mountains gave us a sense of just how big our world really is. We met our tour guide, Christopher, and started on our way to the mountains. Construction vehicles were sitting at the foot of the path and monkeys were freely climbing all over them.

After a long hike we reached caves that were inhabited by the small Doryomo tribe in the 17th century. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade the Ashantis started capturing their strong young men and selling them to the slave traders. The Doryomo people began climbing to the tops of the caves to look out for the Ashantis, which helped them win a few small battles. They began hoarding the weapons that they gained from their small victories and were finally able to defeat the Ashantis and protect their people. It is truly an incredible story of David and Goliath. We were able to explore their caves and climb to their lookout on the top. I pictured the Ashantis charging our way across the tropical plains and a chill ran through my spine. Broken pieces of their clay pots were scattered in the caves’ crevices.

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

My birthday was one I will never forget. Not only am I officially an adult in America, but I rang in the year with my Ghanaian family, Ghanaian music, Ghanaian food, and my new friends. I threw a party
at Aunty Grace’s! Dad wore his new African shirt and shoes, I wore my new African dress and the DJ, champagne, cake, and ice cream topped it off to perfection. I danced the hot and humid night away with a big cheesy grin. Nothing like a good old Ghanaian celebration.

This past weekend I traveled to Kumasi where the Ashanti Empire thrived for many years. We visited the King’s Palace, which is presently a museum filled with historical artifacts, gifts from international leaders, and a lot of GOLD. I was able to make my own Adinkra pattern and weave Kente cloth! Kente cloth is woven into beautiful patterns that all have a special meaning and philosophy; I was able to pick up a few prints thanks to my “professional haggling skills.” We visited a beautiful lake that was made by a meteoroid, took a tour of it in a boat, and went for a swim. I drifted off into the water alone, floating on my back, hearing complete silence, and feeling total solitude and contentment. After a trip to the largest open-air market in all of West Africa (Dad – if you thought MAKOLA was hectic – ah – talk about chaos!), we bused it back to good old Accra. This weekend I am traveling with a couple of friends hopefully to Togo and Nigeria, depending upon our visa-renewal situation. I am planning on traveling to Mole National Park in the Northern region, Benin, Burkina Faso, and hopefully Mali! Forget the traveling bug – I have a traveling disease. It’s taken over me!

As time passes so quickly, I get a little more nervous about going home. America just seems so far away and so different. I’m a part of Ghana, and Ghana is a part of me. I’m trying to savor every moment. Before I know it, this trip will be over. Medo Ghana paa.

**Wednesday, May 28, 2008**

[Stephanie and I traveled to Togo over the weekend.] Saturday we took a boat ride across Lake Togo and visited Togoville; Togo’s historical voodoo center. We visited the village’s museum and spoke to the Prince of Togoville about history, culture, and voodoo. Our tour guide walked us to the house of a local artist who gave us monkey bread to drink and some chairs to relax on. Saturday night,
Steph and I ended up at the largest club in West Africa with our Lebanese friends, and Sunday we set out for a beautiful hike and waterfall swimming. We had some trouble with seven or eight men harassing us before our hike, but after meeting with the village chief and sorting out our issues, we had a pleasant afternoon. Monday Steph and I met a couple Rastafarians who are friends with some of our Ghanaian friends. They showed us around, took us for some local food, and had us over to their house to smoke some Togolese tobacco and listen to reggae.

Thursday, June 5, 2008

[Stephanie and I took another trip, this time to Burkina Faso.] In 2005, the UN ranked Burkina 175th out of 177 countries across a range of quality-of-life indicators, such as infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy, and income. Around 50% of the population survives on less than one US dollar a day and over one third of Burkinabés, as they are called, will not reach 40 years of age. The adult literacy rate is at 13%, which explains the uselessness of our Ouga map; no one could read it to help us with directions. It also explains the usefulness of our French, being that most don’t speak a lick of English. 90% of the population is Muslim; therefore, prayer takes place five times a day no matter what. It starts at dawn, the town loudspeakers blast their first prayer of the day, and people kneel and bow on their prayer rugs wherever they happen to be, or join the public congregations. Everyone wears bright, traditional clothing, as opposed to Ghana, where many wear cheap, second-hand Western clothing that is imported by the truckload. I fully realized our guidebook’s statement, “a desire to embrace the modern world but at the same time remain unchanged by it,” as I watched the women, in traditional garb with scarves covering their hair and babies on their backs, riding moto-bikes throughout town.

We rose bright and early Sunday morning and after purchasing a bus ticket to Accra for Tuesday morning, we finally arrived at the hotel of our original choice, “Le Pavillion Vert.” Quaint, “tranquil” (a word Burkinabes use to describe themselves quite often and quite rightfully), this hotel has a courtyard filled with green trees and plants. The toilet, shower, and two sinks are all outdoors and shared among the guests. Our room had bamboo lining the walls, a noisy ceiling fan, and a mosquito net over our bed. We were in heaven!
We spent our entire day roaming the streets of Ouga on bicycles, as most inhabitants do. It’s a small town; we kept seeing the same people (men mostly, who were following us everywhere and swarming us at every stop we made) and kept riding past the same places. We stopped at the Grand Mosque and then for “lunch” (Flag beer) and swam in a pool to cool off. Later that evening, we watched some live music, which turned out to be a private performance. We hung out with the musicians after the “show” and the guitarist/singer was teaching me how to play “No Woman No Cry.”

Saturday, June 14, 2008

My understanding of development has certainly evolved, and so have I. Where do I come from? Who am I? Who am I becoming? What kind of world do I live in? Where am I going? How can I change the world for the better? - this is merely a glimpse of the endless questions I have asked myself during this life-changing experience. I have been completely removed from the over-absorption of American culture, even though there are signs of it everywhere. The isolation has allowed me to get to know my inner core—he real me, no matter what culture I am absorbing.

I cannot wait for my next trip abroad. I want to discover the spirit, love, and happiness in every corner of the earth. I must explore the rest of the world and apply everything I learn and every way I grow to the betterment of our global society. I leave tonight at 7pm, so I have the day to take pictures and say goodbye to Ghana. I came before everyone else, and now I am leaving after everyone else has gone. It's just me and Ghana—he way it should be. I will return here one day, hopefully sooner rather than later. This experience has been once-in-a-lifetime, and I am happy to say, very well spent. I already miss this place. Goodbye Ghana!
About Our Contributors

Jane Camille Berger is a junior, majoring in Art History with minors in French and Photography. She spent the Fall ’09 semester studying French at La Sorbonne in Paris. After graduation, she plans to attend graduate school for a Master’s degree in Art Therapy.

Danielle Desmond is a freshman at Marymount and is majoring in Communication Arts. She expects to graduate in February 2012. She enjoys fashion, writing, reading, and yoga. She hopes to pursue a career in fashion journalism.

Loren Dibiasi is a sophomore and a double major in English and Art History. She would like to pursue a career in writing.

Stephanie Evans writes, “I am a senior International Studies major. My particular interests within my major are community development, human rights, environmental justice, and education. As International Studies Club President, I have hoped to create a more socially aware and environmentally friendly campus. I interned at People’s Dialogue on Human Settlements in Ghana, where I studied abroad in 2008. Recently, I was accepted to Teach for America and will be going to East San Jose to teach Special Education for the next two years. I plan to receive my Masters in Education from Alliant University.”

Sarah Filiault, ’10, is majoring in Studio Art and minoring in Art History. In Fall 2008, she was a Studio Assistant to the artist Jo Wood-Brown, about whom she wrote the article in this edition of Artfusion News. She is currently a Studio Assistant to the artist Katy Martin.

Mallori Fitzgerald, ’12, is a Biology major and Art History minor.

Holly Gover is a junior and is majoring in Art History. She currently interns in the Education Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and loves every minute of it. She will be leaving New York at the end of the summer to attend school in Paris for a year through Columbia University’s Reid Hall program, where she will hone her French language skills, study Art History, and experience the joie de vivre.

Cameron Kelsall, '10, is an English major and Creative Writing minor. His particular interests include romanticism, nineteenth-century European novels, and the works of Alexander Pushkin. In his spare time, which has become exceedingly rare, he can usually be found at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas on Broadway between 62nd and 63rd Streets.
Ariel Lask is a Senior Art History Major and a singer-songwriter. In Fall 2009, she will attend the School of Audio Engineering in New York for her post-graduate studies. Ariel notes that this is her first contribution to *Artfusion News* and that she is delighted to have the opportunity to write for the magazine.

Catherine Martinez-Greenberg, ’11, is majoring in Graphic Design and minoring in Art History. During the Fall 2009 semester, she will be studying art, photography, and history in Florence through New York University’s study abroad program. She writes, “I can’t wait!”

Virginia Melvin, ’10, is an Art History major, International Studies minor, and President of the Artfusion Club. She is currently Assistant to Betty Krulik, a private dealer of nineteenth-century American paintings in New York. This summer, she will be a Curatorial Intern at the North Carolina Museum of Art.

Jennifer Moore is a sophomore majoring in Graphic Design. She came to New York from Colorado Springs to pursue her dreams. She loves taking in as many Broadway and Off-Broadway shows as possible and jumped at the opportunity to write about them for *Artfusion News*.

Jillian Moseman, ’10, is double majoring in Communication Arts and Art History.

Meghan Quinlan is a sophomore majoring in Dance and English. She also writes for *The Monitor* and has recently interned at *Pointe Magazine* under the Chief Editor and previous Dance Theater of Harlem prima ballerina Virginia Johnson. She is an avid ballet fan and hopes that readers of *Artfusion News* will take advantage of New York and see as many live performances as possible.

Emma Ramos, ’11, is majoring in Psychology. Her favorite movie is “Persona,” directed by Ingmar Bergman; her least favorite movie is Brian De Palma's remake of “Scarface.”

Marguerite Town-Mott is a freshman. She is an Art History major and is minoring in French. She tells *Artfusion News*, “I love contemporary art, exploring the New York art scene, and Kurt Vonnegut.”

Franny Vignola, ’09, is a Photography major and an Art History minor; she is also Secretary of the Artfusion Club. Through her studies at the International Center of Photography and Marymount Manhattan College, she has found her interest in the relationship between history and creation. In the Fall of 2009, she plans to attend graduate school to study the history of modern art and the history of photography.