

# Collage, TV President, Bonnard, Miró

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In the aftermath of Trump's election, artists and writers have had the feeling that all is changed, and their work, too, has to change somehow; they—we—have to come up with an effective response. One way I have approached this is, in my museum wanderings, to see which works from the past seem most right to me now. My two top choices from the modern-art galleries: Pierre Bonnard's portrait of himself as a boxer (which he wasn't) and Joan Miró's *Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves* (This is the color of my dreams). The current piece will, inter alia, present some rational explanations for these choices, while not losing sight of the fact that my choices were not made rationally, but instinctively, emotionally.

Both works have a quiet. This is most welcome, central. I keep coming across lines from World-War-era writers—Wittgenstein, Némirovsky—writers particularly threatened because of their Jewishness—what they are seeking above all is an inner peace, a break from the anxiety of being a Jew or in the minority, different.<sup>1</sup> Feeling threatened now by the rise of neo-fascism and by all that surrounds it—the end of the literacy that reigned from Gutenberg to Zuckerberg? the relentless advertising, chatter, and spectacle, to include of art—quiet has come to seem precious.

And yet neither Bonnard's nor Miró's painting lacks for politics, emotion, or ideas. As regards Miró's work, from 1925, there is its little gray-blue smudge of hand-mixed color toward the bottom of a canvas, subservient to the more elegant "Photo" (technology, change, progress). Art historian Gayle Rodda Kurtz, a reader of drafts of the present piece, put the matter this way: "When I look at the word 'Photo' in the Miró, I think of the sadness

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Professor Susan Rubin Suleiman, author of *The Némirovsky Question: The Life, Death, and Legacy of a Jewish Writer in 20th-Century France* (Yale University Press, 2016), for focusing my attention on European Jewish writers' anxiety and dreams of an inner peace.

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*Please see, too, this message from Zeteo: [Help us explore the scholarly comment](#).*

for artists when the ascent of photography took away the major *raison d'être* of painting.”<sup>2</sup> Miró’s work is a humble or humbled plea not only for painting, but also for dreams and emotion (color), and for the beautiful essential amid or beneath the darkness, however strong or eloquent, of the now. The urging not to lose sight of our dreams dovetails with something I wrote long before Trump’s ascendance—how in the last fifty years Americans and Russians have lost touch with their dreams for their countries, and a country and human beings may not be able to survive without dreams.<sup>3</sup>

I would also ask art lovers: Would Miró’s painting or his dreams feel too naked without the word “Photo” (and the seeming colon created by the script?) at the top? Would it not be twentieth-century art without this seeming intellectual something stage-managing the purely visual and emotional, the little gray-blue smudge of dreams? Preparing the way for the next segment of this text, we can also note that Miró’s work hints at how, within a few decades, the re-presentation of images, with the aid of photographic and other processes, would come to commandeer the stage of contemporary art.

It is sad, too, that in our sophisticated times an artist can only speak ironically of his dreams. And it is sad that to see the color of Miró’s dreams—that in order to see this painting—we now have to go to a museum that has rebranded itself with the name of one of its board members, David H. Koch, whose prominent donations to prominent cultural institutions dovetail with his buying of Congressmen and Congresswomen in the hopes that they will get rid of Social Security and ignore global warming. We might say that Bonnard understood better than Miró how our dreams are discolored by our bruises.<sup>4</sup> The earnest,

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<sup>2</sup> Kurtz went on to say that Miró’s “dreams are the color of the sky, no longer in need of painting. And the word itself flattens the canvas—no longer in need of 3-D or the haptic (as Krauss would say).” The reference is to this passage from art historian Rosalind Krauss:

The term optical has always been used in the description of painting or sculpture to refer to that mode of presentation which addresses itself solely to one’s vision and which in no way elicits sensations that are tactile in kind. Haptic, or tactile, art on the other hand exploits the viewer’s sense of touch. Painting which employs the conventions on which illusionism is built, that is of modeling and perspective, to induce in the perceiver the idea that behind the picture-plane lies three-dimensional objects which could actually feel is thus essentially haptic rather than optic. The whole tradition of trompe l’oeil painting rests on the ironic heightening of the intensity of this imagined tactile exploration, heightening at the same time the feeling of duplicity which knowledge of the painting’s actual flatness always brings. [Krauss, “Afterthoughts on Op,” *Arts International* 9, no. 5 (June 1965): 75]

<sup>3</sup> “**Where are our dreams?** Five notes stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union.” Published on Montaignbakhtinian in July 2012 and later reprinted, slightly revised, in *Surviving the Twenty-First Century*, (Serving House Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Easy enough to say, too, that in our day and age popular culture is unavoidable. And thus, for example, a verse from a Paul Simon song, “The Boxer,” come to mind.

In the clearing stands a boxer  
And a fighter by his trade  
And he carries the reminders  
Of ev’ry glove that laid him down  
And cut him till he cried out  
In his anger and his shame  
“I am leaving, I am leaving”

caring, art-loving individual—or the person who is indeed different and alone, not part of a self-interested, self-defining faction fighting for its rights or share of the pie—the individual puts up his (or her) dukes knowing full well that the bullies and factions of the world are going to knock him down, beat him to a pulp.

*Voilà un premier aperçu du séjour*, as Beckett put it in *Le Dépeupleur* (*The Lost Ones*). A first view of the resort in which we find ourselves, let's call it.

The second view may seem to take us far afield. I am going to write about quite another set of art works, which were brought to my attention by a show, *The Ends of Collage*, currently on view at the Luxembourg & Dayan art galleries in New York and London.<sup>5</sup> Art has become—perhaps above all and hardly just recently—a business—a means of storing and increasing wealth, of moving it surreptitiously across international borders, of avoiding taxes and ensuring against inflation.<sup>6</sup> We can think of artists as being paid to produce a more sophisticated form of gold ingot. Superior to gold insofar as each work is so individually marked and documented that thievery is discouraged; resale is too difficult and unrewarding. From this perspective, however, the drawback of art is that gallery and museum directors, curators and scholars have to be paid, in one way or another, to keep praising the work and maintaining its prominence. Otherwise the gold bars may turn to tin or dust.

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But the fighter still remains

<sup>5</sup> The show will be up in New York through April 15 and in London through May 13, 2017. My writing here was inspired by the New York show; the London iteration I have not seen.

At a press preview of the New York show, I had the pleasure of speaking with the curator, Mr. Etgar, and he noted, *inter alia*, that there was a dialogue between the work and success of the Pictures Generation artists and the politics—Thatcherism and Reaganism—of those times. *Cf.*, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith's proposal that twentieth century art is a chronicle of thieving and stealing, from Duchamp to Warhol to Levine. [Paraphrasing here is from Claire Bishop, "Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media," *Artforum*, September 2012.]

My question in response to Etgar's comment: What kind of art would suit, in whatever way, the current Brexit-Trump-Koch-Brothers time? The present piece began as a response to that question, and I take my "answer"—Bonnard's *boxeur*, Miró's dreams, and non-pop-art—to be a kind of wishful thinking. That is, I see myself as attempting to deny that the kind of art work and artists who will now come to the fore will in fact be quite other than I wish they would be. In the article just cited, Bishop proposes that some artists have sought to "disavow" how digital technologies are transforming our lives. As if, if we turn our heads and keep them turned, the technology and all its coldness will go away (and this particularly because we are Artists)?

<sup>6</sup> A large, prominent piece at the current Whitney Biennial calls attention to [comments that investment banker and Museum of Modern Art Trustee Laurence D. Fink made at a conference in 2015](#). As reported by Bloomberg and confirmed by BlackRock, the corporation of which Fink has been the CEO, he said:

Historically gold was a great instrument for storing of wealth. Gold has lost its luster and there's other mechanisms in which you can store wealth that are inflation-adjusted. The two greatest stores of wealth internationally today is contemporary art ... and I don't mean that as a joke, I mean that as a serious asset class. And two, the other store of wealth today is apartments in Manhattan, apartments in Vancouver, in London.

All this to say (in part) that the *Collage* show may have been conceived as a way of calling renewed attention to the work of certain artists, specifically to American artists who have been classed as members of the “Pictures Generation”—e.g. Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, and Cindy Sherman—and to John Stezaker, who has been doing similar work in England. The chief task of the curator is to develop an intellectual argument for the renewed attention. For *The Ends of Collage*, the curator, Yuval Etgar, a doctoral candidate in Contemporary Art History and Theory at Oxford, proposed that the contemporary artists cited just above and some others had, in the 1970s, given new life to the collage form. Instead of hanging back with the cut-and-paste approach of Braque, Picasso, and their associates, Pictures artists had found inspiration in Duchamp’s re-presentation of a cheap postcard of the Mona Lisa with a mustache, beard, and clever-vulgar title, and in how Magritte re-presented found images in quizzical, thought-provoking ways.<sup>7</sup> Thus, for example, the show includes Levine’s reductions of Cézanne’s landscapes to digitized color matrices.

While Prince got more wall space than any other artist, the show did not include the *Cowboy* “re-photograph” that cemented his reputation and once set a record (\$1.2 million in 2005) for the most financially valuable contemporary photograph in the world. This work involved photographing a photograph used in a Marlboro cigarette ad, stripping out all the text, and framing the new picture in the manner of fine art.

Clearly, in the midst of our present predicament (Trump, the Koch brothers, fake news, and more), my eye and heart have found more sustenance in the Bonnard and Miró paintings than in Prince’s work. I would not ignore that Bonnard in particular exemplifies the artist (or writer, scientist, etc.) who uses his or her work to block out most everything going on both beyond the walls of his comfortable home and garden, and even to some extent within. Two world wars and a holocaust, economic booms and depression, the invention of the airplane—such things are present in Bonnard’s work only because of their unflinching absence. “Oeuvre d’art : un arrêt du temps,” Bonnard famously proposed. Work of art: a stopping of time. “Il ne s’agit pas de peindre la vie, mais de rendre vivante la peinture.” It is not a matter of painting life, but of bringing painting to life. As if it might substitute for all too gruesome, frightening, shameful reality.<sup>8</sup>

Coming back to Prince, *Cowboy*, and the Pictures Generation artists (among many, many others), it can be said, too, that, child of New England that I am, I have puritanical concerns about work that, from one perspective, immerses us yet deeper in the morass of advertising and pop culture and that, to adapt a remark of James Baldwin’s, presents to us the myths (e.g. a handsome cowboy on uninhabited plains) instead of the massacres.<sup>9</sup> (I leave

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<sup>7</sup> The clever-vulgar title: *L.H.O.O.Q.*—i.e. Elle a chaud au cul—i.e. She’s Horny.

<sup>8</sup> The curious may be interested in [Morandi, Bonnard, and Silences Within](#), *Zeteo*, June 2015.

<sup>9</sup> The Baldwin line here comes from *I Am Not Your Negro*, the film by Raoul Peck which makes use of many Baldwin texts, to include thirty pages of an unfinished manuscript. A little more of the context; “I suspect that all of these stories [Hollywood, John Wayne, etc.] are designed to reassure us that no crime was committed.

to readers to decide whether the massacre in Prince's case is of cigarette smokers or of the American Indians.<sup>10</sup>)

Of course in making *Cowboy* and related artworks, Prince's stance has been ironic and critical.<sup>11</sup> He might be said to be calling attention to how we have made a legend out of a massacre, "to reassure us that no crime was committed," as Baldwin puts it. And yet, again, isn't there a level at which Prince's image is indeed reassuring and serves not just as a re-photographing, but also a re-championing, and perhaps not so much of the cowboy and American individualism and self-reliance as of the genius and glamour of advertising? I can well imagine that executives at Philip Morris were pleased to see one of their images prominently featured in art museums, and I can imagine, too, that the art world and its public were pleased that Prince was offering them work—unlike Bonnard's weak boxer or Miró's quirky painting—that they could easily relate to. Precisely because the work, however critical, was also well-known advertising for a prominent consumer brand. (Similarly Sherman and Stezaker have re-presented images from the movies. The artists' own stances are complex, but the images remain images from popular movies.)

**W**e are stupefied and horrified by a President who gets all his ideas from watching television and none from government employees, scientists, and others whose careers have been devoted to studying contemporary phenomena in greater depth than journalists can. And, at the same time, we have come to expect contemporary artists not to look directly at themselves and the human predicament or at the color of their dreams, but to re-present to us the slick, two-dimensional images of people and dreams that are offered by popular culture, through advertising, movies, television, and social media. (Etgar writes of

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We've made a legend out of a massacre." Baldwin, of course, is not thinking about Marlboro ads and cigarettes, but about the decimation of the Indians.

<sup>10</sup> Although there is much debate about the specific figures, I think it fair to say that we Europeans, in our invasion of the territory that became the continental United States, killed more people and "ethnically cleansed" this territory—an area just shy of 3 million square miles—more completely than the Holocaust did.

<sup>11</sup> For an alternative perspective, which may be said to add dimension to my own, here are further comments, slightly abridged, from Kurtz:

You find no "sustenance" in the Prince work because he has purposefully stripped it of the "fullness" possible in art—the intensity of color—and reduced this mythological image to even more flatness than the original commercial. I see his work as a critique of that very genius of advertising by reducing it to the shallow, shadow of the real. I think most people did not relate to this interpretation at all. Perhaps the real interpretation of his work is the resilience of capitalism to absorb its own critique. The same can be said of Cindy Sherman. We lose ourselves in the romantic characters in the movies—the drama, glamour of seemingly exciting lives. But Sherman exposed with her small-size multiple photos how repetitive and easily fungible these types were—as much empty vessels of "personalities" as Prince's cowboy.

“the historical seam between pictures and images, between manual craft and the mediated reality of our time.”<sup>12</sup>)

Recently I came home to find my teenage son watching some crime drama on our big-screen TV. Like all crime dramas, it was not so much about crime as about relationships between coworkers, and I take the underlying questions—how do people relate, how should they relate, how do they get into bed together and what do they do there—to be a chief source of my son’s interest in this show. It included a gay couple, an interracial couple, and two fitness-club-bodied whites, male and female, who, when I arrived, were about to jump into bed together. Even before they stripped down to their product-placement underwear and moved toward the bed, we knew they were going to have sex because a pop-music song began playing. The sex was a choreographed dance, set to music. And the choreography was not based on some exploration of how two, specific, three-dimensional people might have sex; the task for the choreographer and the dancers was to reproduce for the camera a dance that recalled previous hit dances involving actors acting out having sex in movies and on television.

With all the brave futility of Bonnard’s boxer I urged my son to turn off the television, not to watch such things, to allow himself to learn about sex, and however awkwardly, in the company of another warm, three-dimensional human being. If you find you want to touch her or him in a certain way, try this, and see and feel the responses, and keep responding in your turn. I love you, Jonah. There is no such love on television, in the movies, in advertisements, on social media, or even in art museums.

**I**n this age of Twitter and of people doing more writing than skimming, I am trying (largely unsuccessfully) to keep my essays short. So just one more note before signing off. There are, of course, tons of artists, and some of them quite successful, who are doing work that does not play off popular culture and its gadgetry. One who comes to mind is the extraordinary Belgian sculptor Berlinde De Bruyckere.<sup>13</sup> Last September at New York’s Skoto gallery I happened upon some beautiful birds that a less well-known, American artist, Katherine Taylor, had made in a Braque-Picasso-collage way. She had cut and pasted brown scrap paper, the remains of discarded drawings, still containing a few charcoal lines. It did not seem to me that anything could be more perfect than her *Bird II*. There was nurture in the fact that the work—like homemade bread—had been assembled by two human hands

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<sup>12</sup> From Luxembourg & Dayan [press release for \*The Ends of Collage: London\*](#). A more complete quotation: “In a time where the term ‘cut and paste’ refers more often to allegorical and digital operations than to the use of scissors and glue, it seems imperative to go back and examine the technical invention that lies on the historical seam between pictures and images, between manual craft and the mediated reality of our time.”

<sup>13</sup> See “[De Bruyckere, Ibsen, Gatsby, Graceland](#), Or, Dying, “What does it feel like?”—my piece about her 2016 New York show.

working alone with simple materials.<sup>14</sup> Manual craft gets my vote. And the bird was unique; she had a personality and autonomy that Prince's cowboys—or, say, Levine's Cézanne-derived matrices—could never have. A critic might say that this was an impossible autonomy, akin to Bonnard's impotent boxer or Miró's framed, purchased, Koch-museum hung dreams.

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<sup>14</sup> A contrast, from Sol Lewitt, "[Paragraphs on Conceptual Art](#)," first published in *Artforum* in 1967: "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."