

The Power of the Avant-Garde

Now and Then

The Power of the Avant-Garde

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48 Portraits
1972 (print 1998)

GERHARD RICHTER

[001] Gerhard Richter
48 Portraits
1972 (print 1998)
Gelatin silver prints on aluminium
stands and methacrylate,
48 x 69 x 54 x 2.8 cm
MACBA, Museu d'Art
Contemporani de Barcelona

[002]



GERHARD RICHTER

° 1932 Dresden, German Empire
Works and lives in Cologne,
Germany

In 1972 Gerhard Richter was the sole artist representing the Federal Republic of Germany at the Venice Biennale. For the central hall of the exhibition pavilion, he painted a series of 48 portraits. Years later he explained that he had long planned such a project, but that it would not have been realized in the same or even a different form if the specific architectural and historical setting of Venice had not been given. In 1938 the German exhibition building for the Art Biennale was remodelled in the neoclassical style as a Nazi showcase and gained a monumental, colossal row of columns at the entrance. Since the 1970s numerous artists have referenced this architecture,

including Joseph Beuys (1976) and Georg Baselitz (1980), and perhaps most radically the German-American Hans Haacke, who smashed the entire marble floor of the building for his installation *Germania* (1993). Gerhard Richter found a more subtle way of confronting this historically loaded site. The *48 Portraits*, which were developed specifically for it, ostensibly elude any ideology, meaningfulness and interpretability. Richter chose exclusively formal selection criteria. He painted the pictures in shades of grey, after black-and-white photographs of individuals who are commonly recognizable due to their scientific or cultural achievements. He eventually reduced a first selection of more than three hundred people to 48 heads, whose identities no longer seem to play a specific role. In addition, he unified the depictions by cropping all the portraits in the

same way, avoiding extreme head poses and flashy clothing patterns, and taking care to use a neutral, light background. For the purpose of uniformity, he omitted representations of women. This decision in particular later earned him criticism. At the time, however, it was received without opposition. In the exhibition, Richter presented *48 Portraits* as an encircling frieze, plainly installed above the heads of observers. He chose the sequence of images so that the position of the portraits moves gradually from a profile view to a frontal view and back. In his selection and execution, Richter did everything possible to make his motifs appear neutral, indifferent and equalized. Thus, he conceals the historical and political dimension of his image cycle, which connects the depiction of generations and family history. Not all of the 48 individuals are familiar to the viewer,

but all achieved excellence in their field. Gerhard Richter belongs to a generation that grew up in the war years without fathers and that later could not accept its fathers as moral role models. Voicelessness, alienation, criticism and rejection were the consequences of this generational conflict. Richter painted in opposition to this loss, by finding alternative, identity-affirming leaders in *48 Portraits*. In an interview conducted exactly three decades after the premiere of *48 Portraits* in Venice, Richter could frankly say of it: 'I would much rather have the father problem be visible. And it is after all a typically German post-war problem that the fathers were absent in many respects – that is, were gone entirely, or damaged, and had certainly lost their status and value. That creates restlessness and uncertainty, which surely contributed to my painting the 48 men.' [DE]



Celebration of Movement

OLAFUR ELIASSON

What's so fascinating about Alexander Archipenko's *Walking Woman* is that the sculpture offers the viewer the option to 'complete' the narrative of the artwork. It encourages us to become a co-producer – when we move around it, we take in the sculpture in its entirety, and this perception-over-time creates a little celebration of movement. My work, *Ventilator*, dances about the room and, through its movement, charts out space. It addresses the air that we take for granted, the feeling of a space, and, like *Walking Woman*, *Ventilator* makes space tangible, turning the negative space into a positive space.

OLAFUR ELIASSON

Ventilator

1997

OLAFUR ELIASSON

° 1967 Copenhagen, Denmark
Works and lives in
Berlin, Germany,
and Copenhagen, Denmark

In 1997 Olafur Eliasson was awarded the Bremen Art Prize for the recently completed work *Ventilator*, a ready-made with an astonishing and precisely calculated mode of action, which Joanna Warsza described as follows in the catalogue of the Boros Collection in 2015: 'A swinging electric fan hangs from the ceiling:

a simple household object that one encounters sometimes in offices and often in waiting rooms, hotels, airports, banks and kitchens on different continents, in different time zones. An electric appliance that generates a stream of air ... On the other hand, Eliasson's fan is disturbing and uncanny. Not only does it produce air, but it is also moved by it. It swings in the wind as if it were overpowered by the effects of its own function, surprisingly transformed into a pendulum of its own uncontrollable power, drawing

a random flight path in the air with air.' Against the background of dramatic climate change, this mechanical whirlwind becomes an omen of an approaching threat. [UB]

ALEXANDER ARCHIPENKO

Woman Walking

1912 – lifetime cast 3/8

ALEXANDER ARCHIPENKO

° 1887 Kiev, Russian Empire
[Ukraine]
† 1964 New York, NY, United States

In the years just prior to World War I, the Ukrainian Archipenko courageously personified a revolutionary break from traditional values in the European avant-garde, even more than the sculptors Brancusi or Duchamp-Villon, who were barely noticed at the time. Archipenko dated *Walking Woman* to 1912 and saw it as the

big breakthrough in his career. The walking woman, leaning on what seems like a closed umbrella, is constructed from cylinders and cones. Convex and concave shapes intertwine. Space pierces the image – not through the arms and legs, as was customary until then – but through the essential parts: the head and the torso. [P.J.H.P]

[002] Olafur Eliasson
Ventilator
1997

Altered ventilator, wire and cable
Overall dimensions variable.
Ventilator 55.9 cm diameter x 20.3 cm
Private collection
Courtesy Galerie
Neugerriemschneider, Berlin

[003]



Olafur Eliasson
Alexander Archipenko

[003] Alexander Archipenko
Femme marchant
[Woman Walking]
1912 (lifetime cast 3/8)

Bronze
Height: 135 cm (including plinth)
Private collection

[004]



The Forerunners

Fragment and Transparency

The torso – sculpture as fragment – ushered in the ‘bronze age’ in the work of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). Bourgeois society, with its strict rules of order, was shaken up. Just as the French sculptor had eschewed gestural language in the torso *L’homme qui marche* [The Walking Man], which only presented the body in motion, so did he consider the body entirely unnecessary in *Main droite crispée* [Clenched Right Hand]. A forearm, stretched upwards as in a cry for help, with fingers spread dramatically apart, stands as a *pars pro toto* for a situation that is in equal measure physically and psychologically tense. Implanted in this form is the historical moment of transformation.

In the paintings of James Ensor (1860–1949), a social panorama unfolds that is populated by the artist’s contemporaries, who sought to hide their wickedness and pretension behind masks and costuming. At the same time, the salty sea air of Ostend brings the light of enlightenment into Ensor’s pictorial world.

The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944) clashed with academic rules of painting quite early, first in Christiania (Oslo, after 1924) and later in Berlin. He became a significant model of modernity, especially in non-French-speaking countries: the lone wolf par excellence, and the chief representative of the avant-garde. The series of lithographs *Alfa og Omega* [Alpha and Omega] (1909) was produced during a stay in Dr Jacobsen’s psychiatric clinic in Copenhagen. For Munch’s portrait of Käte Perls – the wife of the lawyer, writer and later art dealer Hugo Perls – with the proposed title *Die büssende Magdalena* [The Penitent Magdalene], the couple travelled from Berlin to Moss in 1913 to sit for Munch in his house on the Oslofjord. The portrait, painted directly on canvas, developed out of a

colourful preparatory drawing of her eyes, mouth and nose. The art of Munch lies in the exact, penetrating characterization of the psychic nature of his subject, without the aid of naturalistic embellishments. Hugo Perls' collection also contained the print series *Alpha and Omega*.

In her statement about her chosen artist, 'Munch and Why I Like Him', Marlene Dumas (1953, South Africa) highlights Munch's particular manner of painting: 'The canvas breathes anxiety, caused by the dynamic movement of his brushstrokes.' Her commentary on *Alpha and Omega*: 'He paints modern love stories, not only between men and women, but also between us and nature.' Her group of three women – the 'Three Marys', one might say – depicts *The Blonde*, *The Brunette* and *The Black Woman*.

For Marcel Odenbach (1953, Germany), there is a magnetic field of reference in Ensor's visualization of the human wickedness hidden behind masks. In his collaged works on paper, Odenbach (known in Europe especially for his video works) cuts through the surface, the façade of the motifs and opens up a close-up view of the layers of meaning that lie beneath. *Abgelegt und Aufgehungen* [Closed and Hanged] shows the robes of the judges in the Federal Court of Justice of Germany in Karlsruhe, and thus picks up the tradition of representations of judges by Ensor, Rouault and other artists. ^[UB]

Different from the Others?

Marcel Odenbach

As an art historian and artist, I have not only been interested in the great movements, currents, and transformations in art, but I have also been inspired by eccentrics, outsiders, and atypical artistes. That probably has something to do with my autobiographical experience, for one, but perhaps also with my interests in social and non-European questions of art, which awakened very early. The unusual, the unknown, and the so-called exotic seemed to me, between the stifling stuffiness and repression of post-war Germany, a more appealing alternative and perspective. For a child from Cologne, who grew up between the cathedral and the carnival, it was perhaps not so surprising that as a youth I came across James Ensor.

At first it was his style and humour that persuaded me. Later, it was his critical, independent, and, it may be, political position. Perhaps an Albert Einstein among artists! Ensor's environment was very narrow. He rarely left tiny Ostend. Nevertheless, the great themes of the twentieth century played an almost visionary role for him. The Church, the state, justice, death, etc. were again and again reflected in his paintings and graphic works. Perhaps the sea — the view into the distance — opened up his view onto the world. The family home with the souvenir shop became the mirror of time in his pictures. That encouraged me as an artist! Through Ensor I understood that the burden of autobiography can become a rich source for one's own work.

MARCEL ODENBACH

Closed and Hanged
2013

MARCEL ODENBACH

° 1953 Cologne, Germany
Works and lives in
Düsseldorf, Germany

In the upper half of the picture, four red robes, each with a pleated white jabot, hang on a metal clothes rack. The coat hangers show the brand of the manufacturer, the fashion studio Zangl. Three corresponding velvet berets sit on a slightly mirrored wardrobe shelf. In the lower third of the image, under the wooden shelf, one sees traces of red ink

running down vertically. So much for the superficial view. Upon closer inspection, one sees a variety of collaged pieces of paper that supplement this scene from the changing rooms of the Federal Court of Justice of Germany in Karlsruhe with bits of historical documents. Twelve visual intervals between the clothes hooks display black-and-white images from the famous trials for Nazi crimes and from the Eichmann trial. Snippets of other pictures incorporated into the work also recall show trials from the

Nazi era. This work was inspired by Odenbach's post as a professor at the Kunstakademie in Karlsruhe, from where he would have a daily view of the Higher Regional Court. *Closed and Hanged* is directly connected to previous works that thematically deal with the process of coming to terms with the past in the Federal Republic of Germany, including *Familienfeier* [Family Gathering] (2011-12, Obersalzberg) and *Der Ort ist uns näher gerückt* [The Site Has Come Closer to Us] (2010), which deals with the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt. [UB]

JAMES ENSOR

The Bad Doctors
1895

The Assassination & Wizards in a Squall
1888

JAMES ENSOR

° 1860 Ostend, Belgium
† 1949 Ostend, Belgium

The etching titled *The Assassination* depicts a horrible scene. On a table lies a man whose arm is being sawn off. The blood trickles into a bucket. The four men at the table are wearing marvellous Oriental attire and look like the Persian physicians Iston, Pouffamatus, Cracozie and Transmouffe from the 1886 painting by the same name. In 1890, Ensor adapted the motif of *The Assassination* on canvas. According to James Elsh, the Ensor painting refers to the story 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' by Edgar Allan Poe (James Elsh, *James*

Ensor: The Complete Graphic Work, New York 1982, p. 67), while Xavier Tricot places the scene in the context of the story *L'Assassinat dans un café* by Iwan Gilkin (1886) and the painting by Henry De Groux named *L'Assassinat*, based on *Kees Doorik* by Georges Eekhoud (Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor. The Complete Prints*, 2010, p. 101). The satiric etching *The Bad Doctors* by James Ensor is based on the 1892 painting by the same name (Brussels collection, Université Libre de Bruxelles). The theme is in keeping with an old visual arts tradition in which doctors were characterized as greedy caricatures and charlatans. Often, this tradition focused on the alleged connection between the physician's practice

and death. These elements are also presented in Ensor's painting. It is depicted naively, responding to the satiric set-up. The doctors depicted in the painting represent, from left to right, Joseph Sacré, Guillaume Rommerlaere, Emile Yseux, Jules Thiriar and Martin. The first four worked in the medical department of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The etching *Wizards in a Squall* is a striking illustration of James Ensor's fantastic imagery. During a raging storm, a huge, strange-looking witch gives consecutive birth to naked, deformed witches. The painting is related to *The Cataclysms* and *The Elephant's Joke*, which Ensor painted that same year. [CV]

[004] Marcel Odenbach
Abgelegt und Aufgehungen
[Closed and Hanged]
2013

Collage and ink on paper
225.4 x 208 cm
Hildebrand Collection, Leipzig
Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery,
New York

[005]



Marcel Odenbach
James Ensor

[005] James Ensor
Les Mauvais Médecins
[The Bad Doctors]
1895

Etching with hand-
colouring on paper
24.6 x 17.2 cm
Museum voor
Schone Kunsten, Ghent

[006]



MUNCH — and why I like him.

MARLENE DUMAS

Munch to me means modernism and existentialism, the farewell to naturalism. Subjectivity favoured over realism. Doubt rules. Everything Hitler said about Munch is true. Everything he disliked about him is what I am attracted to. Hitler abhorred ‘unfinished work’, he did not like art with ‘destructive’ tendencies. Munch would leave bits of his canvases open and also exposed some of his paintings to the weather outside in his open-air studio. (In 1937, eighty-two works by Munch were seized as *entartete Kunst* [degenerate art] and removed from public collections.) Hitler disliked ‘art stutterers’ and their ‘primitive international scratchings’. I especially admire in Munch that each brushstroke can be traced. A good example of works built up of separate, nervous or stuttering brushstrokes, so to speak, are his *Death of Marat* paintings. The canvas breathes anxiety, caused by the dynamic movements of his brushstrokes. Hitler did not like ‘degenerate’ art or artists that showed affinity with insanity. I specifically relate to the themes Munch addresses and expresses by his titles. He is both patient and therapist. He is a painter and a thinker.

In 1908, the *Alfa og Omega* [Alpha and Omega] series – a poem or fable written and illustrated by Munch – was executed during Munch’s self-admitted hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic. It is a beautiful and sensitive work. I don’t read in it that he is ‘taking vengeance on Woman for the harm she had done to him’. He paints modern love stories, not only between men and women, but also between us and nature. How we all struggle with affection, alienation and dying. See how tenderly the bear and Omega embrace, and how he writes about her eyes changing from blue to black when she looked at her lover(s). Makes me jealous too. Yes, he understands the night with its shadows. Yet his works are bright with light. Yes, he did say, ‘I live with the dead – my mother, my sister, my grandfather, my father ...’ But no, it is not the actual bodies he is after – rather, he ‘attempts to dissect the soul’.



MARLENE DUMAS

The Blonde, The Brunette and The Black Woman 1992

MARLENE DUMAS

- ° 1953 Cape Town, South Africa
Works and lives in
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

As so often in her ground-breaking oeuvre, the female body is also the theme in Marlene Dumas's three-part work, *The Blonde, The Brunette and The Black Woman* (1992). This piece consists of three female upper bodies all presented from the same – slightly voyeuristic – perspective, quoting the Christian painting format of the triptych. As a matter of fact,

Marlene Dumas used for all canvases the same snapshot of herself as photographic source material. Therefore her work goes way beyond the conventions of self-portraiture: it 'allude[s] to the politics of color and the color of paintings', as Dumas states in her 1998 book, *Sweet Nothings*. By autobiographically commenting on painterly and racial stereotyping in the same way, this work undermines a male-dominated art history as well as the politics of today. [MG]

EDVARD MUNCH

Alpha and Omega 1908-09

EDVARD MUNCH

- ° 1863 Ådalsbruk, Norway
- † 1944 Oslo, Norway

The portfolio *Alpha and Omega* was produced in 1909 in Copenhagen, where Munch was being treated since the autumn of 1908 at the clinic of Dr Jacobson after his severe physical and mental breakdown. Twenty-two lithographs illustrate Munch's fable, which relates an ironic perspective on the sexes. Omega, the mate of the man Alpha, betrays her partner with

various animals and in the process begets a whole new race. In the end, in deep despair, Alpha slays Omega, whose progeny, together with the half-animal, half-human mongrels, avenge her death by killing Alpha. Animal studies conducted at the Copenhagen Zoo during Munch's stay at the clinic served as the immediate models for some of the sheets in the portfolio. [KD]

[006] Marlene Dumas
The Blonde, The Brunette
and The Black Woman
1992
Oil on canvas
2 x (23 x 30 x 2 cm); 1 x (30 x 40.2 x 2 cm)
Collection Flemish Community
S.M.A.K., Ghent. On long-term loan

[007]



Marlene Dumas
Edvard Munch

[007] Edvard Munch
Alfa og Omega
[Alpha and Omega]
1908–09

22 lithographs on paper
45.8 x 62.4 cm (each)
Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz

[008]

