

FROZEN ORGY

1.

When I see the word *Jew* my heart quickens. I am seized by alarm and worry, wondering what terrible thing is about to occur. Why is *Jew* being spoken, written, used in a sentence? By who? In what context? I am in need of immediate information about the usage of the word for my people. *Jew* has the instant power of trauma and crisis.

2.

On the cover of a catalogue published by Hundertmark in 1988, edited by Boris Lurie and Seymour Krim, it says in large red letters:

NO!art
PIN-UPS
EXCREMENT
PROTEST
JEW-ART

How close in cadence or vernacular or tone is that book title to Nazi signage from 1933 – 1946? The confusion is lush, scary. There is alarm in the book design, fire. It is beautiful. And behind the red letters of the book title a b/w photo of a Jewish cemetery crammed to the hilt with tombstones and behind the cemetery an urban skyline. Inside is a 393 page bilingual, German & English, history of the NO!art group.

3.

Boris Lurie spent his late teens and early twenties growing up in a concentration camp. On days when he was not weak from hunger, when he had enough food in his belly, he'd climb over fences to the women's side of the camp to be with a girl friend, life and sex continued on some level. From 1941 – 46 Boris Lurie came of age in three different labor camps. His grandmother, mother, and older sister were all murdered in the camps. "I did not hate ordinary Germans at all," Lurie said. "Not all Germans were to blame. My family was killed by Latvian fascists." 95966 was the number tattooed on his arm.



After his camp was liberated, Boris went looking for his father. Then he returned to the camp and fell asleep for two days. When he woke up his father was standing in front of him in a suit and tie. He was already working and had a good place to live. "I was spared the stress and strain the many other liberated prisoners endured." His brother in law who was an American soldier found him and he immediately started working for him as an interpreter. "I was doing just fine," Boris said. "I was with the victors. I wasn't your typical concentration camp survivor. I considered myself an American, just like the American soldiers, though they didn't accept me. I spoke English, but with an accent."

4.

In 1947 Lurie painted a portrait of his mother. She was beautiful with heavy lidded eyes. Boris too, has remarkable deadpan eyes, sort of like Peter Lorre's by way of Buster Keaton's. In a 1957 photograph of Lurie in his studio with his sleeves rolled up, he looks a decade older than his 32 years. He was calm, indignant, charming. "I'm half Russian peasant, half Jew aristocrat," Boris said.

5.

In 1959 Boris founded the No!Art movement with Stanley Fisher and Sam Goodman, a three Jew art collective that would grow to 20 members, not all of them Jews, not all of them men, not all of them Caucasian. Allan Kaprow was part of the ensemble. They had a gallery called March, an unstructured, rule-free zone that fostered collaboration. The exhibitions they organized there were based on themes like *anti-pop*, *vulgarity*, *doom*, and *shit*. The authorship of some of their artworks from this time period went unattributed. There was definitely a NO!art collage *look*. High contrast mind-fucks of sex and killing butted up against each other, Jackie Kennedy appearing regularly in everyone's brain stews.



6.

In the spirit of Kaprow, Boris titled one of his concentration camp collages, *From a happening, — by Adolf Hitler*. Boris Lurie called Hitler's destruction of Europe, "his real life art-masterpiece." He was writing about how Hitler got no traction as a young artist. This could almost be registered as compassion for a fellow artist who was denied entrance into an elitist art academy. This sentiment was echoed by Lurie throughout most of his art producing life in New York, beginning in the early 1950's when abstract expressionism was all the rage, and then morphed into sweet, cute, circling in the basket, tail flicking pop art.

7.

Sam Goodman was one of the most interesting abstract painters in New York in the middle 1950's, but not too popular with critics: I like picturing Sam Goodman walking down the street, spotting Clement Greenberg and verbally accosting him. There were a lot of these kinds of altercations back in the day. Artists slapping each other and wrestling, throwing chairs and pouring drinks on each other. Goodman ran a coffee shop called Caricature where he drew absurd caricatures of his patrons. He also did this at parties. He was Canadian. He died when he was 48.

8.

In a 1961 photograph Goodman is posed astride one of his sculptures featuring a hobbyhorse, model warplane, and a burnt toy baby on a cross. Goodman appears ready for action is holding a rifle, looking menacing. He and Boris collaborated on several pieces including a suite of sculptures resembling excrement for a show called *Shit Show* (something contemporary artist John Miller would quote and re-quote in paintings and sculptures 30 years later). Maybe the epitome of social realism was simply a representation of human bodies or what they produce. The shit show was not overly smelly except for the natural old moldy dankness of the gallery. Large lumpy cow patties and broken loggy-turds in a camp fire set up and brown frozen deli meats: realistic to some degree, the materials were never specified but there was no accompanying stench.



9.

Playing off of Goodman's gift for caricature fellow NO! member, Stanley Fisher made a series of ghoulish portraits that satirize the expressiveness of faces. Fisher distorted foreheads, eyeballs, noses, lips, gaping mouths and teeth from celebrity portraiture into a horror show carnival of collage. He seemed to be a specialist in things rude and harsh. Perhaps that was simply social realism, too.

10.

The middle 1950's was a luscious productive period for Lurie as a painter. The female figure continued to be the main focus beginning with a series of moody paintings called *Dancehall*, where figuration and abstraction collided. Deep-dark resonance and mad-giddy-brilliant traction in dark colors quickly gave way to a series of paintings called *Dismembered Women*. The title was harsher than the actual bite of the paintings, which were often cheerful, brightly colored, the opposite of what you'd expect, as if female body parts were deconstructing themselves for better analysis. Buttocks seen as the massive blobs they are, forearms, thighs and torsos all rearranged—this series of Lurie's is not far from artist Hans Bellmer's fragmented dolls or Picasso's broken up painted figures from decades earlier.

11.

If Lurie & Goodman weren't so brilliant as painters perhaps their shit gestures would've had less weight, would not have had the proper oomph. But their paintings were hugely articulate and moving. Their transgressions were hard earned.

Lurie despised abstract expressionism but he found something dark and true in Franz Kline's thick bleak marks that spoke of resistance, refusal, intolerance for the status quo.

A good decision: Lurie glued a pile of his pin ups on top of old paintings he didn't like anymore and titled them, *Pins Up Over Old Paintings*. The girls had to get off his wall and onto an artwork. They needed to do something positive, like revive a dead painting. And by doing this he also saved all the girls from going in the trash, a kind of art death that Boris didn't want to mourn.



12.

The awkwardly named No!Art movement was not purely a battle against the artworld and the dominant pet art at the time, Pop, Warhol, Lichtenstein, et cetera. It was also a plea for more assertive, aggressive thinking, suggesting people look at the truth in ugliness, the horror of recent history.

13.

What is so powerful about Lurie's mixing of naked pin-ups and holocaust death camp imagery is its brazen unpacking of and reveling in morbidity, sorrow, and sexual confusion. These pictures are not a critique of anything, and where did this word come from anyway, and why does it rear its head in nearly every conversation about artwork these days? It is easy and safe to reduce Lurie's most volatile collages to an analysis of the exploitation of women, but this read seems way off the mark. In studio, Lurie was an audience for these pictures, they were his home theatre, and he was gawking, gazing, worshipping, falling back in amazement, fascination, and fear staring at his images of sex and death. There is beauty, and odd sexual energy in these disturbing collages.

But they are not an examination of sexism. That's too simple and sounds more like a de-fanging of dangerous, volatile artwork. A luscious naked pin up on top of a pile of naked murdered bodies: what is that? These two things occupied Lurie's studio walls, his mind. Naked men and women all piled together, all dead, many with their eyes and mouths open. Feet and hands everywhere, a terrible frozen orgy. Lurie wasn't critiquing sexism in America yet he has been repeatedly credited with doing just that, because this is how critics have chosen to deal with his harsh, upsetting images. Yet this work has valiant reasons to exist on its own terms. It doesn't need to be made more palatable by calling it "critique." The logic of applying the "critique" read to Lurie seems to be that that is a what socially relevant artist does. He enacts while simultaneously critiquing. That's how you finally make it into the canon. By teaching everyone a moral lesson. Boris Lurie is not a morality play. He is something more strange and dark and discomforting.

I don't think Lurie discussed his work in terms of "violence against women." This seems more



like something that came later in pc critique. That might be understandable in the sense that Boris's work makes people so uncomfortable that they need a good reason to continue looking at it. It makes them feel guilty and terrible. But Boris's art doesn't need to be made uplifting. It's best as its own aberrant self.

14.

There is sexuality in the dead. It would be cruel and short-sighted to think otherwise. Does this assertion instantly make one a necrophiliac or suggest that Boris Lurie was one? Not quite. Again, what is important is to not become a knee jerk apologist for aberrant aggressive work.

15.

Remarkable how unknown the No!art group of the early 1960's was and still is considering they were very much America's Dada movement. They were political, anti-war, anti-esthetic, extremely repulsed by the gallery system and board of trustee museum insider trading scam. But their obscurity makes sense. America was an extremely conservative place in the early '60s.

16.

Thinking of Boris Lurie's collages from this period calls to mind the British filmmaker Michael Powell. In 1960, at the height of his career, Powell made *Peeping Tom*, a psychosexual study of a shy photographer who stabs women as he is photographing them. Powell empathized with the protagonist-villain-psychologically damaged German accented character and he explores with great tenderness the root cause of his sickness. Every film critic who reviewed *Peeping Tom* destroyed it with the vigor of a lynch mob. It wasn't simple disliked or even hated, critics were actually accusing him of moral indecency. If he wasn't so famous from making *The Red Shoes* he probably would've been arrested. *Peeping Tom* ruined Powell's career, and forced him to leave England.

17.



In *Railroad to America*, Boris collaged a pin-up exposing her rear end on top of a boxcar full of corpses. Many a human being would say, I don't want to look at that, ever. To which Boris might say, I think it would do you a world of good to look at it.

18.

Lurie also made a number of wooden boxes and suitcase collages. The suitcase was a perfect object for Lurie to adorn with the harrowing treacherous autobiographical novel that fired in his head every day of his life. The suitcases with the crudely drawn swastika and Star of David have a disturbingly heavy presence: final, threatening, and crazy, they have an eerie sanity or bravery. These objects are physically humble and loud as fuck.

19.

What is so compelling about Lurie's work is what it offers mentally, and how disturbing the possibilities actually are. Boris once said, "My sympathy is with the mouse, but I feed the cat."

— Benjamin Weissman



