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# Challenging the Postwar Narrative: The Art and Agenda of Boris Lurie

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# **Challenging the Postwar Narrative: The Art and Agenda of Boris Lurie**



Honors Thesis

Kiersten Signe Remster

Department: Art and Design

Advisor: Roger J. Crum, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

Art history is shaped, studied, and taught based on narratives, artistic movements, and the biographies of celebrated artists. While contributing to an understanding of prevalent traditions and artists working in those traditions, these narratives are also constructions of inclusion and exclusion that establish art historical placement for certain artists while relegating others to historical obscurity. It is clear what happens to the critical fortunes of artists who are placed within these narratives. Yet what happens to the artists who do not fit within any of the categories established by these constructions? Are they then to be understood as simply minor artists or perhaps even “outsider artists?” Using the example of Boris Lurie and his critical fortune within the context of the standard art historical narrative of American art of the post World War Two period, this thesis argues for an expanded vision of modern and contemporary art that would accommodate lesser-known artists and offer a nuanced understanding of what American art has been after 1945.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

*“Repeated insistence on the part of some contemporary artists that they have no explanation for the source or meaning of their impulsive productions would seem to favor the suggestion of a childish throwback.”<sup>1</sup>*

In 1971 so wrote Lincoln Rothschild, an artist and art historian at Columbia University. Rothschild was addressing the work of Boris Lurie, an artist who was born in Latvia in 1924 and immigrated to the United States after 1945. Along with two other artists, Lurie started what he called the NO-Art movement in 1959. The work that Lurie contributed to the NO-Art movement, what Rothschild derisively labeled “impulsive productions,” was generally mixed media, hybrid collages of soft-pornographic images paired with documentary photographs of the Holocaust. Rothschild’s criticism of Lurie was largely founded on one work, the artist’s *Railroad to America* of ca. 1959 (Figure 1). This work shows a 1950s American pin-up girl that Lurie appropriated from a magazine and superimposed on a photograph made at a concentration camp of lifeless bodies heaped in a railway car.

Lurie’s stated goal with this work was to “bring back into art the subjects of real life.”<sup>2</sup> His subject matter was fueled by a serious, non-trivial combination of his dislike for contemporary American culture and his haunting memories as a Holocaust survivor. Despite the seriousness of Lurie’s intent, Rothschild held that the artist’s cultural antagonism and thematic

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<sup>1</sup>Lincoln Rothschild, “Violence and Caprice in Recent Art.” *Leonardo* 5, no. 4 (1972): p. 325. This circumstances behind Rothschild’s statement are as follows: In 1971, Emanuel and Reta Shacknove Schwartz published “NO-Art: An American Psycho-Social Phenomenon.” *Leonardo* 4, no. 3 (1971) p. 245-254. Rothschild wrote his article, cited above, the following year, criticizing the Schwartzes’ writing on NO-Art and challenging their praise of Boris Lurie. In response, Lurie wrote to Rothschild and offered to provide further clarification of the work and objectives of the NO-Art movement. Rothschild declined Lurie’s offer.

<sup>2</sup> “Boris Lurie.” Boris Lurie Art Foundation Website. March 5, 2017. Accessed March 9, 2017. <https://borislurieart.org/boris-lurie>.

recollection in his art equated to little more than a childish resistance to growing up.<sup>3</sup> The result was that Rothschild dismissed Lurie and his NO-Art movement, asserting additionally that Lurie and his associates were producing “a NO[-Art] world that is subject only to their whim.”<sup>4</sup> In the context of declaiming the childish nature of the NO-art artists, Rothschild challenged any claims Lurie and his associates put forward in support of their revolutionary artistic status. Citing examples of artists he considered to be properly revolutionary, such as Rubens, Bernini, and Chardin, Rothschild held that revolutionary artists have to be responsible, enterprising citizens “who behave and produce in a way that . . . [enables] them to manage a revolution.”<sup>5</sup> Working with this definition, Rothschild concluded that Lurie was not revolutionary because he did not adequately express positive realities in his subject matter that “encouraged the loyalty and cooperative morale needed for any society.”<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1** Boris Lurie. *Railroad to America*, ca. 1959.

Rothschild’s harsh critique of Lurie’s work arose in the context of his response to an

<sup>3</sup> Rothschild, Lincoln. “Violence and Caprice in Recent Art” p. 328.

<sup>4</sup> Rothschild, Lincoln. p. 326.

<sup>5</sup> Rothschild, Lincoln. p. 326.

<sup>6</sup> Lurie, Boris. "Violence Without Caprice in 'NO-Art'" *Leonardo* 7, no. 4 (1974): pp. 343-344.

article of 1972 about Lurie and his art that was written by Emanuel K. and Reta Shacknove Schwartz.<sup>7</sup> Schwartz and Schwartz took a very different approach to Lurie's art and expressed a keen admiration for him as a pattern-breaking artist. They argued that Lurie was revolutionary, both justifying and recommending the shocking nature of his art by indicating its place in a United States of America that they found to be a "constrictive and restrictive culture."<sup>8</sup> They expressed that Lurie's decidedly shocking and even lurid art stood as a positive antidote to the "puritanical shadow that hangs over [the United States, a country that] originated with the most rigid religious and social forces."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Schwartz and Schwartz noted that because Lurie had experienced Nazi Germany, he came out of a context in which there had been little room for expression of rebellion because of the high demand for conformism and submission in that totalitarian culture. In other words, while it was almost impossible to say "no" or challenge society in Nazi Germany, in America this became possible for Lurie for the first time, and he took advantage of that opportunity in making protest art and founding the NO-art movement.

At the same time that Rothschild was criticizing Lurie's art, he was also known through his writings for his keen admiration for the Abstract Expressionist and Pop Art movements. Rothschild expressed the clarity of these movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as having continuity and a consistent concept of style.<sup>10</sup>

Rothschild's praise of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art was part of a larger critical movement that witnessed Abstract Expressionist and Pop artists in New York City receiving

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<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, Emanuel K. and Reta Shacknove Schwartz. "NO-Art: An American Psycho-Social Phenomenon." *Leonardo* 4, no. 3 (1971) pp. 245-254.

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, Emanuel K. and Reta Shacknove Schwartz. "NO-Art: An American Psycho-Social Phenomenon." p. 245.

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, Emanuel K. and Reta Shacknove Schwartz. p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> Rothschild, Lincoln. *Style in Art: The Dynamics of Art as Cultural Expression*. New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1960. p. 260.

attention from prominent art critics and having their works represented in avant-garde galleries and later accessioned in prestigious museum institutions. Lurie was openly antagonistic to these dominant traditions and proclaimed that he was both anti-Abstract Expressionism and anti-Pop Art, criticizing both as “aestheticisms” that “were not art but decoration.”<sup>11</sup> Lurie went even further and denounced Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art as the “sleeping pills of culture.”<sup>12</sup>

This antagonism toward Abstract Expressionism and Pop art inevitably contributed to Rothschild’s critical reaction to Lurie’s art, but so too must Lurie’s strongly individualistic style have given shape to the critic’s categorization of Lurie as an artist working wholly out of the mainstream. Lurie’s purpose behind his art making and the style he worked was starkly different than the aesthetics and theoretical positions found in either Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art. In other words, Lurie’s art was an entity unlike these two traditions, which complicated how art historians such as Rothschild might react to it.

When placed in conjunction with Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, Lurie does present evidence that he was a classic “outsider artist.” However, both Rothschild and the Schwartzes overlooked traits in Lurie’s art that could be identified to bring him out of historical obscurity and connect him more directly with the mainstream American art, even the dominant movements of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Despite Rothschild’s assertions of the childish nature of Lurie’s art, that Lurie was driven by a thematic focus on recalling his Holocaust experience constitutes an important demonstration of his serious artistic intent, a facet of his artistic identity that was neither celebrated by Emanuel and Reta Schacknove Schwartz nor discussed, even in a negative light, by Rothschild. Additionally, key aspects of Lurie’s style, such as his use of vibrant application of paint and popular imagery, do connect him with aspects

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<sup>11</sup> Lurie, Boris; Krim, Seymour, eds., *NO-art*, Cologne, 1988. p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Lurie, Boris; Krim, Seymour. pp. 88-89.



of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. This thesis aims to challenge Lurie's standard labeling by the art historical narratives as an "outsider artist," while connecting him and his art peripherally but meaningfully to key aspects of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Central to this redefinition will be an elucidation of the theme of recollection in Lurie's art in the interest of seeing Lurie as demonstrative of a largely overlooked vein of historicism in postwar American art. That vein connects him retrospectively to the emphases of major German émigré artists working in the United States in the immediate postwar period and prospectively to later German artists who occasionally worked and regularly exhibited in the United States in the later decades of the twentieth century. In other words, this thesis argues that Lurie's art represents an important link between more recognized artists in the period 1945 to the late decades of the twentieth century whose artistic commentary on the tragic events of modern German history have been much more widely recognized by contemporary art history.

### **Biography**

Boris Lurie was born into an established Jewish family and displayed artistic skills at a young age. After the invasion of Russia by Germany in 1941, a teenage Lurie was first imprisoned and then relocated to a ghetto. That same year, Lurie's grandmother, mother, sister, and childhood sweetheart were executed by the Nazis. Lurie and his father, Ilja, were the only survivors of the family. Once the labor camps were established, the two men were sent to various camps, including Riga, Salapils, Stutthof, and lastly Buchenwald-Magdeburg in Germany.<sup>13</sup> Upon Buchenwald's liberation in 1945, Lurie worked as an interpreter for US Counter-Intelligence. In 1946, Lurie and his father immigrated to the United States, settling in New York

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<sup>13</sup> Katz, David. "Boris Lurie: Uneasy Visions, Uncomfortable Truths." *The Villager*. February 23, 2005. Accessed March 7, 2017. [http://thevillager.com/vil\\_95/borislurieuneasy.html](http://thevillager.com/vil_95/borislurieuneasy.html).

City where Lurie remained for the rest of his life.<sup>14</sup> Lurie died in 2008.

Although settled safely in New York, Lurie continued to feel the lasting effects of World War Two and eventually worked those memories into the forefront of his art. Art historian David Katz explains how Lurie found himself “refusing to flinch from dealing with his experiences in the camps, despite a postwar reluctance among survivors to dwell on, or even mention publically their wartime ordeal.”<sup>15</sup> This was in contrast to many Holocaust survivors who, as artists and writers, found themselves incapable of creating in response to that horror. This creative paralysis of certain Holocaust survivors was captured by Theodor Adorno when he wrote: “there can be no lyric poetry after Auschwitz.”<sup>16</sup> Lurie, however, was insistent on recollecting his experience and that of millions of others with the Final Solution through his art once he arrived in America. Indeed, Lurie began to produce a body of art that became a constant, even obligatory engagement with the experience of Nazi brutality and offense to the human race.<sup>17</sup>

Recent Nazi atrocities were not the whole of what disturbed Lurie and shaped his art in the post war period. In a related vein, Lurie was also shocked by what he considered the disaffection of the American public when it came to recalling or considering those atrocities. In America he expected to see some effect of the Holocaust or some form of moral outrage in response to that atrocity, but instead he found nothing of the sort. Lurie wrote of his surprise and growing outrage, calling the American situation a “social amnesia.”<sup>18</sup> He blamed this amnesia on

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<sup>14</sup> “No Compromises! The Art of Boris Lurie.” The Jewish Museum. Berlin, Germany. July 8 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Katz, David. "Boris Lurie: Uneasy Visions, Uncomfortable Truths." The Villager.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, Theodor. “Cultural Criticism and Society.” Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. London: Neville Spearmen, 1967. p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Wronoski, John. “Boris Lurie: A Life in the Camps.” Boris Lurie: NO!Art. No!art Publishing: New York, 2014. p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, Simon. “The Excremental Vision: NO!art 1959-1964.” NO! Boris Lurie. David David Gallery. Boris Lurie Art Foundation: Philadelphia, 2012. p. 19.

magazines that ignored the plight of the Jews and failed to report any news about it, let alone point an accusatory finger toward Hitler's "Final Solution."<sup>19</sup> What Lurie found particularly repugnant and morally grotesque were magazines where one saw the appearance of advertisements for commercial products placed immediately adjacent to photographs of exterminated prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Lurie's need to remember the Holocaust, combined with a growing disgust over a lack of dialogue about it occurring in America, drove him to despise the very American culture where he had come to reside.

Lurie's growing antipathy toward US culture was further solidified as he began to encounter the American art market and its relationship to major museums. He held that the market and institutions like museums were corrupt because they held power over the fate of artists and controlled how they might become recognized. In a manifesto of 1970, Lurie proclaimed that "artists must commit themselves to stay out of the market."<sup>20</sup> He justified his call for this separation by referencing contractual agreements that disadvantaged artists when signing for commissions and gallery shows.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to museums, Lurie held those institutions in contempt for their selectivity, their manipulation of culture, and their role in what he considered a skewing of art education during the post war period. In a statement of 1970 regarding the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Lurie wrote that "the technique of cultural manipulation as practiced by the Museum is accompanied by a tragic by-product, [namely] the destruction of individual talents and even physical annihilation."<sup>22</sup> Lurie believed that institutions like the MoMA were established solely

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<sup>19</sup> Wronoski, John. "Boris Lurie: A Life in the Camps." p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Lurie, Boris. "Artworkers Coalition Aims: A Proposal." Boris Lurie Art Foundation. January 18, 1970. p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Lurie, Boris. "Artworkers Coalition Aims: A Proposal. Boris Lurie Art Foundation. p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Lurie, Boris. "MOMA AS MANIPULATOR." MOMA as Manipulator, 1970, Essay by Boris

for business purposes; he went even further, labeling them “cultural manipulators” and held that their exhibition policies and histories were problematically exclusive.<sup>23</sup> In Lurie’s view this exclusivity perpetuated a cultural manipulation that directly affected the educational side of institutions.

Lurie’s views were not strictly of his own formation, as he was clearly influenced in his negative assessment of places like the MoMA by what he heard and experienced in New York. An example was what Lurie heard when he attended a lecture by the artist Man Ray at The Arts Students League in 1948. Man Ray blamed the MoMA for “not showing good art.”<sup>24</sup> While Lurie was not alone in his rebellion against the major art institutions, he used his art as a medium for commentary.

As an act of resistance and response to what he perceived to be a corrupt art market and an equally problematic museum culture, not to mention his disaffection from popular art movements and modern American culture in general, Lurie founded the NO-Art movement in 1959. As a group made up of Lurie and two other artists, Stanley Fischer and Sam Goodman, the NO-Art movement was a call to action. These artists established themselves against Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art and the economization of art, framing their objections around such topics as racism, sexism, and consumerism.<sup>25</sup> As the founder of No-Art, Lurie hoped that his work would inspire many to reconsider the modern situation of imperialism, nuclear proliferation, and other difficult happenings.<sup>26</sup> He sought to deliver a shock to what he believed

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Lurie. Accessed April 17, 2017. [http://text.no-art.info/en/lurie\\_moma.html](http://text.no-art.info/en/lurie_moma.html).

<sup>23</sup> Lurie, Boris. "MOMA AS MANIPULATOR."

<sup>24</sup> Wronoski, John. “Boris Lurie: A Life in the Camps.” p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> “No Compromises!” No Compromises! The Art of Boris Lurie. The Jewish Museum Berlin. Accessed February 20, 2017. <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/lurie>.

<sup>26</sup> Wronoski, John. “Boris Lurie.” Chelsea Art Museum. Boris Lurie Art Foundation: New York, 2011. p. 10.

was a complacent society. The title of the movement directly expressed the artists' insistency to express an resounding "NO" to everything about which Americans were complacent: "NO" to the future of war; "NO" to the treatment of women as objects; and "NO" to the major institutions that celebrated popular artists.

Lurie believed that Americans were submissive, and he sought to use the NO-Art movement as a tool to spark rebellion. Lurie's need for social outcry stemmed from the suppression of his voice and that of millions of others in Germany of the Nazi era that had shaped him during his years of imprisonment. Of course, adopting the submissiveness and complacency that the Nazis demanded of their prisoners became for Lurie and others a necessary tool for survival. Yet once in America, Lurie was fueled by his newfound, post war ability to say "NO," and his insistent, protesting voice became a dominant theme of his NO-Art movement.

Lurie's experience and his ongoing relationship to his past were clear to those who encountered the recurrent images and themes of his work: the Jewish Star of David, swastikas, and concentration camp imagery. In a catalogue essay for Lurie's 1998 gallery exhibition *Bleed*, Sarah Schmerler remarked, "Most American artists of the Forties were fresh out of art school. Lurie was fresh out of Buchenwald."<sup>27</sup> Lurie's images spoke of immense recollection that he continued to feel years after the close of World War Two.

In 1959, on the occasion of a gallery exhibition on 10<sup>th</sup> street in New York, the artistic results of Lurie's outcry at the American public were badly received. There was "shock and outrage by those who encountered his works," art historian David Katz writes, as "people were leaving his gallery in a rage, [sending] letters to editors, [and causing] condemnation,

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<sup>27</sup> Wronoski, John. "Boris Lurie." Chelsea Art Museum. p. 10.

controversy, uproar –everything a serious artist dreams of provoking.”<sup>28</sup> The imagery that caused these reactions was considered grotesque and even insensitive. Among the imagery on view, *Railroad to America*, mentioned earlier, as well as satirical collages of dismembered women, sparked a pushback by viewers.

Schwartz and Schwartz explain why the NO-Art artists and their works elicited such negative responses, suggesting that these artists’ abilities to ‘act-out the action’ caused a distance to form between them and the observer.<sup>29</sup> While NO-Art pieces were clearly works of art, the ‘NO’ artists actually rejected standard categorization of their creations as art. This insistency literally to stand aside from standard artistic production and categorization further created a distance between the No-Art artists and potential viewers. Furthermore, comprehension and acceptance were not aided by the hard-hitting, unpleasant imagery favored by the artists.

Lurie and the other NO-Art artists worked throughout the 1960s, attempting to spread their message throughout the city. For the next several decades, Lurie continued to exhibit his work and that of his associates. His work and the NO-Art movement did not gain recognition from prestigious institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum or the Museum of Modern Art.

On January 7, 2008 Lurie died in the apartment where he had lived since the 1960s. While he outwardly lived as a penniless artist and espoused leftist politics, Lurie spent his spare time buying penny stocks and real estate, eventually amassing a substantial estate worth an estimated 80 million dollars.<sup>30</sup> He was only briefly married, to Béatrice Lecornu, a French photographer; Lurie and Lecornu had no children. With no heirs, Lurie left his estate for the

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<sup>28</sup> Katz, David. "Boris Lurie: Uneasy Visions, Uncomfortable Truths." *The Villager*.

<sup>29</sup> Schwartz, Emanuel K. and Reta Shacknove Schwartz. "NO-Art: An American Psycho-Social Phenomenon." *Leonardo* 4, no. 3. 1971. p. 251.

<sup>30</sup> Century, Douglas. "SAYING YES TO NO!" *Saying Yes to NO!* review by Douglas Century. Accessed February 20, 2017. [http://borislurie.no-art.info/reviews/100401\\_century.html](http://borislurie.no-art.info/reviews/100401_century.html).

creation of the Boris Lurie Art Foundation. The Foundation now works to preserve Lurie's legacy, exhibit his art around the world, and provide funds to contemporary artists working in line with the philosophy and objectives of the No-Art movement.<sup>31</sup>

### **Lurie's Art of the 1950s and 1960s**

Lurie's art presents difficult and graphic images for an audience to confront. In the 1950s and 1960s, the period of concern for this thesis, Lurie produced and named five distinct series of his work, each of which is characterized by imagery that recalls his past: Dismembered Women (1955-57); Dancehall (1955); Three Women (1955-57); Love (1963); and Pin-ups (1960-64).<sup>32</sup>

In images from Dismembered Women, Lurie recreates memories of gas-chamber victims by populating his canvases with lifeless corpses. Using harsh color schemes, Lurie generally works with red and black variations that stand out and easily take hold of one's attention. Popular throughout all of his series, images of nude women are appropriated from found magazines and symbolize the women Lurie lost to the Holocaust. He continues this motif with his Dancehall series. There, the experiences Lurie had in New York are intertwined with his recollection of losses experienced during World War Two. His dancers suggest a ghostly loneliness, with a suggestive empty space surrounding the figures. Perhaps Lurie painted these figures as a reminder of the women who were not at the dancehall, a suggestion of the millions of lives and generations that were extinguished in the Holocaust.<sup>33</sup>

Continuing with motifs of absent or brutalized female forms, Lurie's Three Women series evokes memories of his grandmother, mother, sister, and childhood sweetheart. These

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<sup>31</sup> "Boris Lurie." Boris Lurie Art Foundation. March 05, 2017. Accessed April 16, 2017. <https://borislurieart.org/boris-lurie>.

<sup>32</sup> NO! Boris Lurie. Art Exhibition Catalogue. David David Gallery. Boris Lurie Art Foundation: Philadelphia, 2012. p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> NO! Boris Lurie. Art Exhibition Catalogue. David David Gallery. p. 52.

paintings tend to be hastily constructed, thrown together on masonite with aggressive brushstrokes that race across the figures' forms. The faces appear slashed with paint and scratches, removing any identity from them and further affirming Lurie's sense of loss following the war.

The Love Series of 1963 was in the midst of Lurie's brief marriage to Béatrice Lecornu. While the relationship with Lurie only lasted only five years, Lecornu observed that the two had a young and beautiful love. Lecornu recalled that "the one thing [Lurie] didn't talk about was his childhood or experience in Europe. Of course it was obvious that Boris didn't want to talk about that, so I had no interest in forcing him to talk or making him unhappy."<sup>34</sup> Despite Lurie's reluctance to discuss his past with Lecornu, his Love Series continues the theme of longing for the women no longer present in his life and inevitably lost in the experience of the Holocaust.

Lurie's Pin-ups from 1960-1964 perpetuate his obsession with the American pin-up culture. Lurie's ability to gain access to these inexpensive cut-outs may have been due in part to the small monthly stipend he received from the German government that issued such funds to survivors after years of suffering in the camps. One way or the other, the image of the American pin-up girl fueled Lurie's collages as both a key subject and a visual commentary on the debased quality of American culture. Lurie held that Americans were treating and viewing women as sexual objects, not unlike Lurie's own memories of the Nazi treatment of his female family members.

### **The Themes of Lurie's Art in the 1950s and 1960s**

Within the five bodies of work reviewed above, Lurie presents three major themes that all involve recollection of the past. This recollection takes the form of (1) imagery that addresses

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<sup>34</sup> Wronoski, John. "Boris Lurie: A Life in the Camps." Boris Lurie: NO!Art. No!art Publishing: New York, 2014. p. 113.



postwar politics and is recollective of the politics and policies of the Third Reich, (2) other imagery that addresses commercialized treatment of female sexuality reminiscent of Nazi era treatment of women, and (3) a body of work that constitutes a visual unpacking of who is to blame for the Holocaust.

Lurie's interest in world politics acts as a theme of recollection in several of his pieces. One example is *Lumumba is Dead* of 1959. This work represents Lurie's response to the assassination in 1959 of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratic Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Attention gravitated to this event because it was felt that freedom in modern Africa was symbolically struck down with Lumumba's assassination by a group in league with the Congo's former imperial masters.<sup>35</sup> In reaction, Lurie created *Lumumba is Dead* as an act of NO-art commentary. Visible in the mass of imagery in Lurie's collage are the words "Lumumba is dead" that the artist took from newspaper sources that were part of the global media coverage of this shocking and pivotal assassination. In addition to these words, dozens of pin-up girls appear across the surface of this work. The central feature of this work that immediately captures attention is a Nazi swastika flag painted over the images of nude women. *Lumumba is Dead* combines themes both of the struggles of international politics in the 1950s and the never-ending past of a German dictatorship that extinguished the lives of millions of people.

The second theme that Lurie returns to in his recollective Holocaust-inspired art is the theme of sexual abuse and debasement of women. In *Railroad to America*, the artist places an appropriated magazine image of what he considered to be a 'pin-up girl.' This figure, slowly revealing her bottom to viewers, is set within a wagon loaded with murdered concentration camp

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<sup>35</sup> Wright, Michael Franc. "Lumumba, Ten Years After." *The Black Scholar* 2, no. 7 (March 1971): p. 38-49.

prisoners. This is a direct reference to Lurie's encountering of the American pin-up girl in magazines and women by the society are repeated and intertwined with parallels that Lurie makes with sadism committed by the Nazi SS officers in the concentration camps.

Lurie's recollective art in reference to the Holocaust reveals his commitment that that world event needed to continue to be a burden to America. In the spring of 1960, amid the beginnings of the NO-Art movement, the capture of Adolf Eichmann provoked the start of a broad conversation about the Holocaust largely centered on the shocking banality of evil. As reported by Hannah Arendt, Eichmann's presence in the courtroom presented a difficult case to many who sat and listened to his matter-of-fact testimony. While he was one of the main orchestrators of the Holocaust, Eichmann appeared to be an ordinary man in person and was even declared by a psychiatrist during the trial to be "not only normal but most desirable."<sup>36</sup> The news from Eichmann trial outraged Lurie, mostly because the accused argued he was simply doing his job and was not engaged with the consequences of his work; Lurie's outrage was personal, but it was also founded on his conviction that the banality of Eichmann's testimony directed people away from a true understanding of the gravity of the Holocaust. In a 1961 artist statement, Lurie proclaimed, "Eichmann alive...Eichmann dead...who cares for Eichmann? Now they tell us all about the concentration camps. Bergen-Belsen has been turned into a beautiful park. Thousands kept on starving after the Liberation..."<sup>37</sup> Lurie channeled this anger into a large collage entitled *Oh Mama Liberté*. Torn out of a newspaper and glued onto the canvas is the headline 'Adolf Eichmann –Stand Up!' With this work Lurie comments on how Americans ignored the need to intervene in stopping Hitler's Final Solution.

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press, 1963. p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Lurie, Boris. "Involvement Show Statement." 1961. p. 14.

## **Lurie, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art**

While Lurie castigated American culture for its neglect of the Holocaust as a topic of active discussion, the dominant traditions of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art were being given attention by galleries, art critics, and the art buying public. Lurie's pressing memory of the Holocaust was something he found wholly incompatible with what was largely an historically-oblivious movement of Abstract Expressionism and the all-too-present concerns for American cultural and consumerism found in Pop Art.

Abstract Expressionism began in the 1940s and emphasized spontaneous, automatic, and even subconscious creation. This movement focused on the self as a creative agent, involving spontaneous and impulsive qualities accomplished through improvisatory techniques.<sup>38</sup> The established narrative of this movement highlights the work of Jackson Pollock. Pollock and others captured their impulses through sporadic brushwork. They used bold color and vibrant action to tap into primordial emotions often rooted in ancient myths. Additionally, these artists employed color as a vehicle of mythic subject, rather than relying on traditional figures and story-telling compositions.

In contrast to Abstract Expressionism, Pop artists working in the mid to late 1950s and first half of the 1960s commented on America's consumer culture. They made works not about the self but about commodities and the commodification of society. Pop artists used images from advertisements and pop culture and turned them into art. These works often served as a commentary on the consumerism of American culture. Pop Art was the "fetishizing of America's self-image in its media."<sup>39</sup> Andy Warhol is a classic example of Pop Art as his revolutionary

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<sup>38</sup> Golub, Leon. "A Critique of Abstract Expressionism." *College Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1955): 142-47. doi: 10.2307/773024.

<sup>39</sup> Kuspit, Donald B. "Pop Art: A Reactionary Realism." *Art Journal* 36, no. 1 (1976): p. 31-38.

series *Soup Cans* represented the mass-production of household objects.

Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art came to be dominant traditions throughout the postwar era in America. They rose to popularity through three major factors that indicate how an art movement is recognized within the greater narratives of art history: praise by art critics, gallery representation, and accession of works into prestigious art institutions. Recognized art critic Clement Greenburg wrote about and celebrated the work of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists. Similarly, Lawrence Alloway coined the term Pop Art and praised art created within this movement. The representation in gallery exhibitions is a crucial signifier for an arts movement to be successful: Abstract Expressionists were showcased in the 10<sup>th</sup> street galleries in New York, while Pop Art was featured on Madison Avenue. Lastly, Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art achieved recognition among the prestigious institutions like the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the MoMA. Because of these three successfully achieved aspects, both movements became recognized traditions in art history.

With the prevailing traditions of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, art historians and other writers like Rothschild and the Schwartzes discussed earlier were understandably at a loss as to how to categorize Lurie and the NO-Art movement. When Lurie's art is compared to that of the Abstract Expressionists and the Pop artists, it is not difficult to see how different his production is from these prevailing traditions. However, both Rothschild and the Schwartzes overlooked subtle (and not so subtle) similarities between Abstract Expressionist and Pop art on the one hand and Lurie's images on the other, and all three critics equally overlooked in full Lurie's ongoing dialogue on the Holocaust.

While Lurie was not interested in the particular forms of psychological and even deeper

anthropological self-exploration that motivated the Abstract Expressionists, he did exhibit characteristics in his art that brought him closer to this mainstream tradition. Nonetheless, Lurie's insistently autobiographical or tangentially autobiographical work is not completely removed from the autobiographical impulses of the Abstract Expressionists. And as for technique and style, Lurie reveals similar brushstroke techniques in his collages to the work of the Abstract Expressionists.



**Figure 2 Boris Lurie, *Three Women*, ca. 1955. Figure 3 Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31*, ca. 1950.**

Lurie's *Three Women* of 1957 (figure 2) reveals a slashing style of paint, reminiscent to Pollock's energized lines of paint seen in his *One: Number 31* of 1950 (figure 3). In *One: Number 31*, Pollock creates strident splatters of paint in several layers, building up a physical texture and depth to his work. The strokes are nevertheless vibrant and expressive in how Pollock communicates his emotions to the audience. Likewise, Lurie's *Three Women* mixed media collage with paint evokes the slashing quality of expression as Pollock had used. However, unlike Pollock and his splatter as evoking exploration of the self, Lurie's abrasive stroke technique is symbolic of his tragedy and loss.



Figure 4 Boris Lurie, *NO with Mrs. Kennedy*, ca. 1963. Figure 5 Andy Warhol, *Sixteen Jackies*, ca. 1964.

In addition to Lurie's tangential connections to Abstract Expressionism, his work also relates to a certain extent to Pop Art traditions. Lurie comments on the popularization or exploitation of women like Jacquelyn Kennedy, not unlike how Andy Warhol focuses on the iconic but tragic First Lady in his work. Lurie appropriated an image of Mrs. Kennedy in a collage entitled *NO With Mrs. Kennedy* (figure 4) from 1963 and used it as a commentary on how American society viewed her as a political object. In the following year Warhol accomplished a similar message with his *Sixteen Jackies* (figure 5).

Despite connections to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, Lurie's recollective narrative insistently focuses on his traumatic Holocaust past that he was unable to transcend, and this "entrapment" of sorts begs a more critical look into memory and perception of traumatic events. The development of memory and a commitment to preserving past experiences produces profound effects on the human mind. When a memory is guarded, protected, or too traumatized to be articulable, these difficult experiences often are weighted in an ability to share about the

past.<sup>40</sup> This idea is relevant with regard to the psychology of survivors of the Holocaust. Sue Campbell, Christine Koggel, and Rockney Jacobsen point out the dangers of living in isolation for survivors who have endured a collective trauma.<sup>41</sup> Yet from the perspective of the survivor, sharing memories is important because it reintegrates the survivor into a community, thereby allowing him or her to be reconnected with humanity.”<sup>42</sup>

How do these theories translate to an understanding of Boris Lurie? The coping mechanism for Holocaust survivors, in particular Lurie, was expressed as a set of memories in his art. While many of Lurie’s contemporaries chose not to speak about this painful memory, Lurie did not repress it out of his mind but dealt with it in an expressive manner for others to absorb. Lurie’s collages of difficult subject matter represent both a desire to inspire dialogue about this historical trauma and an outlet of memory for the artist to articulate his experience.

Lurie’s memories of the Holocaust stand behind his images of starved prisoners, sadistic guards, and tortured souls. As Jean Améry writes, “anyone who has been tortured remains tortured... anyone who has suffered torture never again will be at ease in the world.”<sup>43</sup> Lurie’s art demonstrates Améry’s argument of how concentration camp survivors endured the system of brutality and, in an effort to come to terms with the past, struggled to overcome their horrific past.

As examined previously, Lurie’s recollective art does not fall into the categories of mainstream Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Just as Rothschild and the Schwartzes

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<sup>40</sup> Campbell, Sue, Christine M. Koggel, and Rockney Jacobsen. *Our Faithfulness to the Past: The Ethics and Politics of Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, Sue, Christine M. Koggel, and Rockney Jacobsen. *Our Faithfulness to the Past: The Ethics and Politics of Memory*. p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> O’Loughlin, Michael. *The Ethics of Remembering and the Consequences of Forgetting*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. p. 51.

<sup>43</sup> Améry, Jean. *At the Mind’s Limits*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. p. 21.

overlooked subtle overlaps in Lurie's art with Abstract Expressionist brushwork and similar instances of commonality with contemporary commentary and the appearance of women from contemporary or popular culture in Pop Art, so too did they not recognize, let alone attempt to categorize, his recollective imagery. What they also missed were Lurie's connections to other artists who responded to the German and Nazi past, and they could not have anticipated how Lurie's work would eventually constitute an important antecedent to artistic directions yet to come.

### **The Antecedents of Lurie's Art**

Lurie's obsession with his difficult past has clear antecedents in the work of other more recognized artists coming out of the experience of Nazi Germany and World War Two. Many artists who were German-born fled the nation upon the rise of the Third Reich, and those artists came to a safer place like America. In America, certain of those artists like George Grosz and Max Beckmann were unable to forget the past and continued as Lurie later did to create recollective art about Nazi Germany and the horrors of the Holocaust.

George Grosz developed a pessimistic attitude towards German nationalism as a result of his military experience during World War One. In 1914, he volunteered for the army, hoping that by volunteering rather than waiting to be drafted he would not be sent directly to the frontlines. The following year, Grosz was discharged for medical complications and was deemed unfit to serve. After hearing of the mass obliterations of total warfare during his short time in the service, Grosz came to despise the war and his homeland's jingoistic participation in it. This perpetuated Grosz to revile his German culture and to develop a view of a romanticized America. In a later cynical action to protest his German nationality, the artist even changed the traditional spelling of his last name from "Groß" to the Anglicized "Grosz" while dreaming of a glorified United



States. Grosz's enthusiasm for America stretched from decorating his studio in American advertisements to collecting ragtime music and cultivating a new persona through which he attempted to persuade friends that he was half-American or at least had been to New York.<sup>44</sup> He once romanticized about America in conversations with other artists, obstinately chanting "America! The future!"<sup>45</sup>

Grosz responded to his jingoistic German surroundings through participation in the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity movement. Surrounded by other avant-garde artists, Grosz furthered his denial of German roots in caricatures, becoming in his own way the "outstanding satirical historian" of the postwar Weimar Republic.<sup>46</sup>

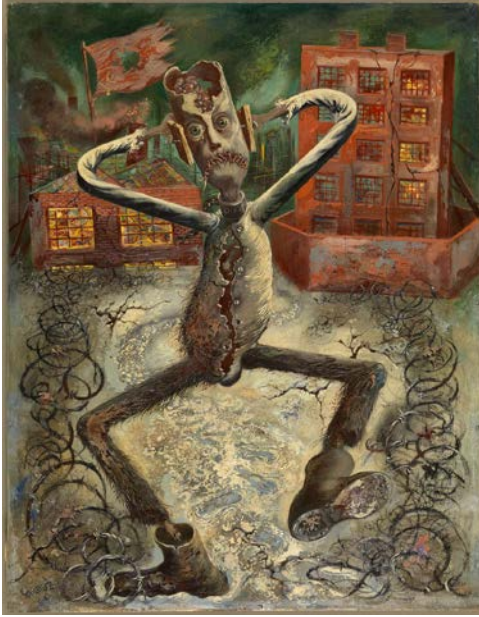
Grosz was immensely popular in Germany, but after Hitler rose to power his work was included in the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich of 1937. That exhibition featured work by artists whom the Nazis considered degenerate and whose works were in modernist styles that met with the regime's disapproval. Sensing an uneasy and tyrannical future for Germany, Grosz fled the country and immigrated to the United States. Although an exile and an émigré artist, Grosz's relocation did not end his difficult memories of and satirical commentary about his homeland. While Grosz had longed for the deliverance that America promised, the art he produced during his American period reflects his inability to forget the horrors of Germany from the entire period running from World War One through World War Two.

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<sup>44</sup> Mehring, Walter. *Berlin Dada: Eine Chronik mit Fotos und Dokumenten*. Zurich: Arche, 1959. pp. 69-70.

<sup>45</sup> Tower, Beeke Sell., John Czaplicka, and Peter Nisbet. *Envisioning America: Prints, Drawings, and Photographs by George Grosz and His Contemporaries, 1915-1933*. Cambridge, MA: Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, 1990. p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Knust, Herbert. "George Grosz: Literature and Caricature." *Comparative Literature Studies* 12, no. 3 (September 1975): pp. 218-247.



**Figure 6** George Grosz, *The Grey Man Dances*, ca. 1949.

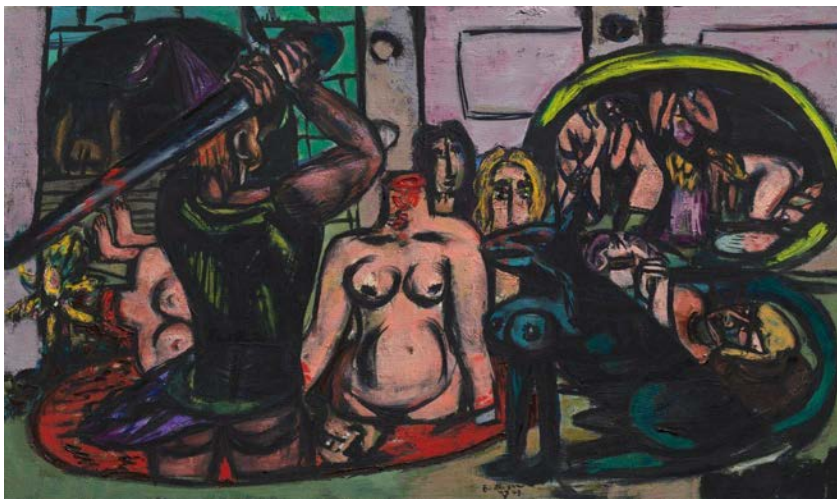
In 1949, Grosz painted *The Grey Man Dances* (figure 6). While the artist had neither experienced concentration camps, as Lurie had, nor had been present in Germany during the inhumanity and cruelty caused by the recent war, he was still insistently reflective about the plight of the German nation in this work.<sup>47</sup> In *The Grey Man Dances*, Grosz employs a style with abstract forms that is unrealistic in manner and contorts the classical human anatomy. He creates an image that is pure with absolute frustration. The dominant figure in the composition, representing an emaciated prisoner of a concentration camp, appears with an open skull and torso. The figure's brain protrudes from a cavernous skull, with facial features clinging to a face mimicking the shape of a crematorium smokestack. Before a flag symbolic of the Nazi party colors, the prisoner cavorts in a strange form of dance. The seams of the prisoner's clothing tear open along the stomach, revealing not skin beneath but a charred body mirroring the flames and smoke that are devouring the building facades that flank either side of the work.

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis, Beth Irwin. *George Grosz: Art and Politics in the Weimar Republic*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971. p. 122.

Much as Lurie would later be fixated on his German past, Grosz was unable to move on from his German memories and what he continued to learn about Germany after his flight to America. Like Grosz, artist Max Beckmann brings forward the importance of recollection as a major theme in German art of the pre- and post war periods. Beckmann too volunteered for service during World War One, serving in a paramedical unit in East Prussia. Confronting those killed and wounded in major battles like Tannenberg, Beckmann witnessed countless tragic deaths, including that of his brother-in-law.

After World War One, Beckmann became a prolific artist and taught at numerous art academies. He found interest in the style of abstraction and received many honorary awards from art institutions throughout Germany. In 1937, on the very day that Hitler's Degenerate Art exhibition opened, Beckmann fled for the Netherlands. From Amsterdam, he intended to escape the coming war by immigrating to America. However, due to Nazi occupation and numerous rejections for a visa, Beckmann had to remain in the Netherlands until 1947. In that year he finally immigrated to the United States and soon became a US citizen. He lived in St. Louis for the remaining three years of his life, dying in 1950.



**Figure 7** Max Beckmann, *Perseus' Last Duty*, ca. 1949.

For Beckmann, so wrote his close friend Perry Rathbone, Amsterdam “had been a refuge

but St. Louis was a haven of freedom and peace after the storm.”<sup>48</sup> It was, however, a peace that was periodically interrupted by memories of Nazi Germany and war-torn Europe. In *Perseus' Last Duty* of 1949 (figure 7), Beckmann paints the ancient Greek hero Perseus beheading naked women with a massive sword. Perseus stands in a pool of blood represented by the thick expanse of red paint poured over the canvas. He treats the women as though they are disposable objects, lining up the executions in a fashion not dissimilar from a modern assembly line. The acidic colors and violent brushwork evoke the emotions felt by Beckmann as he lived the horrors of World War One and came to know about the atrocities of World War Two. What is additionally and perversely indicative of Beckmann's wartime experience is the fact that Perseus is shown in female dress, thereby subverting the hyper-masculine glamorization of military heroes.<sup>49</sup> It is known that Beckmann was a target of the hyper-masculinity expressed by the Nazi Party, which deemed him as “degenerate” by virtue of including his art in the Degenerate Art Exhibition. It is clear that Beckmann brought that traumatic experience, among others, into play in this work. What seems at first to be a fairly enigmatic painting, *Perseus' Last Duty* thus becomes pointedly recollective of the bitter experiences that Beckmann experienced under Nazi oppression.

While speaking to a friend on the philosophy behind his art, Beckmann stated that “in spite of the general tragedy, one has to rely on the infinite justice in all things.”<sup>50</sup> Art as a therapy created a world in which he could establish justice. The devastating events he endured represented a diminishing of human rights, and Beckmann continued to explore those memories during the aftermath of his period in Nazi Germany. Much as would be the case with Lurie in the

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<sup>48</sup> Rathbone, Perry T. "Max Beckmann 1884-1950." pp. 123-31.

<sup>49</sup> "Perseus' Last Duty, 1949." The Cleveland Museum of Art. Accessed November 18, 2016. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2013.7>

<sup>50</sup> Guggenheim Museum. comp. *Max Beckmann in Exile*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996.

future, Beckmann was unwilling or incapable of letting go of those recollections, despite being in the safer place of America.

Both Grosz and Beckmann demonstrate an important vein of recollection that Lurie later demonstrates as continuation of during his NO-Art movement of the 1960s. Lurie's art and its purpose to serve as a historically-reaching memory into his and others' tragic pasts was vastly different compared to the dominant traditions of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, but it signifies an overlooked thread of recollective art in postwar America that does require a proper place in the art historical narrative.

### **Lurie and the Future**

While Grosz and Beckmann both preceded Lurie's Holocaust-driven collages, Lurie's working in the postwar era also acts as a predictor for later artists to come. Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, who both worked in the 1970s and 1980s, came to emphasize an even longer period of recollective themes in art. Beuys worked as a radio operator for the German army in World War Two and experienced combat firsthand on the Russian front. He barely survived a plane crash in the Crimea territory from which he suffered from traumatic wounds and injuries.<sup>51</sup> In Crimea, Beuys was saved by a nomadic tribe of Tartars, members of which brought him back to the warmth of their felt-lined tents and cared for his wounded body with applications of fat and felt wrappings.<sup>52</sup> Memories of this wartime experience remained with Beuys for the rest of his life and surfaced regularly in the themes of his art.

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<sup>51</sup> Ray, Gene. *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*. Springer, 2005. pp. 34.

<sup>52</sup> D'Alessandro, Stephanie. "History by Degrees: The Place of the Past in Contemporary German Art." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002) p. 69.



**Figure 8** Joseph Beuys, *Auschwitz Demonstration*, ca. 1956-1964.

From 1956-64, Beuys collected found objects and gathered visceral materials, submitting what appeared to be an amalgamation for an exhibition in memory of Auschwitz (figure 8).<sup>53</sup>

Beuys used animal fat to represent the curing of a wounded body, and its appearance in his art was particularly recollective to his own wartime trauma. Art historian Gene Ray writes of Beuys's art as a project of mourning, proclaiming that "the objects and actions themselves [of Beuys] hold a mourning effect."<sup>54</sup>

Of a different generation than Beuys, Anselm Kiefer was born in 1945 and witnessed no tragedies firsthand from the war. Rather, his art represents the grappling of a younger generation of Germans with the legacy of that cataclysmic experience.

<sup>53</sup> Potter, Pamela M. *The Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts*. University of California Press, 2016. p. 128.

<sup>54</sup> Ray, Gene. *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*. p. 35.



Figure 9 Anselm Kiefer, *Lot's Wife*, ca. 1980.

We see this in Kiefer's *Lot's Wife* of ca. 1989 (figure 9), a piece that overtly references railroad tracks that once led to extermination camps like Auschwitz. Kiefer attached various metals, emulsion, and other toxic chemicals to a canvas in order to evoke the symbolism of railroad tracks leading to the end of one's life during World War Two. He used toxins such as lead and other materials to reveal the brutality of the inestimable tragedy that was the Holocaust and incorporated salt with his paint –to symbolize the tears shed.<sup>55</sup> Kiefer tore away at the layers of paint and various metal coils he attached to the canvas, physically leaving the work appearing as if damaged and decrepit. Kiefer's piece "makes itself felt, little by little, as the viewer peels back its encapsulated layers of information" regarding the nation's dark past.<sup>56</sup> According to Donald Kuspit, Kiefer and other German Neo-Expressionists in the 1980s began making art that suggested that there really was no recovery from the painful past.

<sup>55</sup> Visitor. "Lot's Wife." Cleveland Museum of Art. April 08, 2017. Accessed April 16, 2017. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1990.8.a>.

<sup>56</sup> Hinson, Tom E. "Anselm Kiefer: "Lot's Wife"" *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 80, no. 4 (April 1993). pp. 180-85.



## Conclusion

As demonstrated, the basic themes in Lurie's art find antecedents in the art of Georg Grosz and Max Beckmann and later resonance in the work of Josef Beuys and Anselm Kiefer from the 1960s through the 1980s. Across several generations, these artists had experienced Germany from its World War One history through its post World War Two transformation and were reacting through either direct personal memory or strictly historical reflection on the history and/or lingering guilt of that nation for its perpetuation of some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century.

Considering Beckmann and Grosz as antecedents to Lurie reveals Lurie's continuation of the recollective theme found in the older artists' art. Both of these earlier generation German artists fled Nazi Germany, while Lurie was involuntarily dragged into the Third Reich as a prisoner. Grosz happened to encounter Lurie and his message at the Art Students' League during the 1940s and 1950s. Lurie understood Grosz to be one of the leading political artists and satirical critics in America during this period; for his part, Grosz had a different response to Lurie's art. Lurie recounted Grosz as saying "you are not being honest."<sup>57</sup> He believed that Lurie was failing to address his real experience. Grosz as a political commentator through his work on the tragedies of the Holocaust felt that Lurie's art did not tell a holistic truth of how he was feeling. This represents a major difference between the messages captured by both Grosz and Lurie's art. As Grosz met Lurie in the late 1940s, just a few years after the younger artist's liberation from Buchenwald, Lurie had not yet established his rebellious voice through the NO-Art movement and was painting in the style of Neo-Expressionist. Grosz saw Lurie's potential as a political artist and recognized that he had the passion to continue on a Grosz-like manner of

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<sup>57</sup> Wronoski, John. "Boris Lurie: A Life in the Camps." p. 111.



socio/political/economic commentary on German history and current events. Grosz's criticism had a powerful enough effect on Lurie that Lurie repeated it on numerous occasions in later life, noting that he had taken Grosz's lesson to heart.<sup>58</sup> He used this criticism to open up even more in his art, and indeed Lurie's later art became even more recollective and overt in reference to his Holocaust memories. The foundation laid by both Beckmann and Grosz as artists who produced recollective art in response to their German experiences and reactions acted as a standard by which Grosz expected Lurie to continue in this memory-driven vein.

While Lurie built upon the tradition of Beckmann and Grosz, his NO-Art movement works of the 1960s can be seen as pretext for the final wave of German recollective artists working in the 1980s. Lurie's art points to the future in how he went against the postwar grain of progress and forward looking to seek a dialogue about the World War Two tragedies. He uses this insistent recollection as an applicable approach to later events during the 1960s and 1970s such as the conflict in Vietnam. Lurie both looked to his past in recollection and used his method to push for a future commentary on events happening in the moment.

Beuys and Kiefer extended Lurie's vein of recollection into the 1980s but in a direction that was less fueled by confrontational political commentary. German culture in the 1980s began itself to open up a dialogue on the atrocities of World War Two. This was a cultural dynamic to which both Beuys and Kiefer responded. Yet Lurie's overlooked place in art history makes Beuys and Kiefer seem as if they appeared on the cultural scene out of nowhere, capturing the attention of a public audience with their provocative and shocking works about the Holocaust. However, the examination of Lurie's preceding art builds a strong case for how the thread of recollective art in Beuys and Kiefer had its roots in Lurie and beyond Lurie to Beckmann and

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<sup>58</sup> Wronoski, John. p. 111.

Grosz.

Lurie's NO-Art movement as a recollective thread in between Grosz and Beckmann and Beuys and Kiefer presented a unique voice in both commonality and contrast to what both the former and later generations of artists had and would accomplish. Leaving aside the connections to these other artists, it is clear that Lurie's art was distinctive. His art and his agenda pushed on American society in a manner unlike Grosz and Beckmann or Beuys and Kiefer. Lurie provocatively rejected everything about American culture and society through his revolutionary NO-Art movement. This was unlike the assimilation that both Grosz and Beckmann experienced as they moved to the United States, and Lurie's art remained radically different from what would be produced by Beuys and Kiefer the next wave of German recollective art. While Beuys, like Lurie, did experience World War Two firsthand, his recollective art constituted a commentary of a very different nature, one that was more shamanistic and spiritual than bitter in socio-political commentary. This clearly was distinct from Lurie's art with its derogatory emphasis on pin-up girls and how they represented the loss of female family members in the Holocaust. In this sense, Lurie represented more of an activist artist invested in social commentary much more so than larger philosophical and spiritual issues.

This vein of recollective art visible through Grosz and Beckmann, to Lurie, and to Beuys and Kiefer signified a need by these artists (regardless of their relationship to World War Two) to reflect through art making. While all of these artists revealed a notion of recollection, their agenda differed based on their personal encounters with this historical moment or the amount of time that had passed since their traumas or the trauma of their largely society. These artists were all responding to this historical period in three different cultural and time contexts: the 1940s for Beckmann and Grosz between Germany and the United States, the 1950s and 1960s for Lurie in

an entirely postwar, American context, and the 1980s principally for Beuys and Kiefer as those artists moved back and forth between a postwar Germany and the United States. These different moments of their creating recollective art brought forward subtle differences in how they dealt with their subject matter. Beckmann and Grosz, who fled Nazi Germany, reacted through their art in a way of self-reflection on their former homeland. Lurie, as a concentration camp survivor and one who firsthand experienced Nazi Germany, used the vein of recollection both to respond to his experience and to push an agenda in America of how one can come to terms with this dreadful past while adopting at the same time a critical perspective on the present. Beuys and Kiefer, although they created recollective art nearly decades years after the fall of Nazi Germany, did so in a manner similar to Lurie but without Lurie's additional drive to critique American culture.

In conclusion, when art historians overlook or misunderstand an artist, the consequences can be significant. Yet when a formerly dismissed artist like Boris Lurie is considered in the broader context and content of his art, that is in reference to the recollective vein that puts his art in commonality with that of more recognized artists past and future, such sets the stage for that artist's integration into the standard narratives of art history. We recall that Lincoln Rothschild reacted with sharp criticisms to Lurie's art because Lurie did not easily fit into either of the prevailing traditions of Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art. Yet as this thesis has demonstrated, while Lurie was clearly not a mainstream Abstract Expressionist or Pop artist, aspects of his art did evince aspects of these movements in the work that he did produce that constituted a recollection of his wartime experience and his post war criticism of American culture.

What Lurie and his NO-Art movement did accomplish was a distinctive connection that can serve to pull him into a recollective narrative in postwar art from the late 1940s through the

1980s. Lurie played a pivotal role in this postwar narrative because his agenda was subtly but significantly different than that of the recollective artists Beckman, Grosz, Beuys, and Kiefer, all of whom contributed like Lurie in the goal of creating historically-relevant art objects.

So what then is to be done in terms of categorizing Lurie and his art? One possibility is that art history expands its definitions of movements or establishes more permeable boundaries around them so that an artist like Lurie, formerly relegated to an “outsider artist” status, might be accommodated within a broader definition of these traditions. Abstract Expressionism as a movement categorized by slashing techniques should include Lurie’s work due to the subtle similarities of brushwork. But with the strict definitions of this movement and the styles of artists accepted within it, art history has shaped a narrative by which we have only looked for these techniques and explorations of the self and the ego and not broader commentaries on recent history and contemporary society. Lurie’s art, if positioned within even the fringes of Abstract Expressionism, represents these other possible aspects that could be accommodated.

Similarly, Pop Art has been strictly defined as a commentary on American consumer culture. Warhol’s *Soup Cans* and *Marilyn* both symbolize the 1960s and 1970s interest in commodification. However, art history did not consider Lurie’s NO-Art movement as directly representative of consumer America, despite the distinct similarities of Warhol’s *Sixteen Jackies* with Lurie’s *NO With Mrs. Kennedy*. The rigidity of how the Pop Art narrative has been constructed excludes Lurie’s art from ever entering the art historical canon.

If art historical discussions of both Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art become less rigid in how the narratives of these movements are constructed, this would allow for a broader understanding of these movements. Lurie as a recollective artist in his NO-Art movement would find a legitimate home in either of these established traditions. With an expanded narrative for

both of these traditions Lurie as an Abstract Expressionist, a Pop Artist, or a mixture of both, would find a permanent place in the history of art. This expanded vision would accommodate lesser-known artists like Lurie and offer a more nuanced understanding of American art after 1945. Once this is accomplished, not just Lurie but other “outsider artists” might be less overlooked than they have been in the past.

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