NO!

BORIS LURIE

14 November - 12 December 2012
David David Gallery 260 South 18th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103
Boris Lurie Art Foundation 50 Central Park West, New York, NY 10023
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Boris Lurie in his Studio, c. 1960

Photograph by Betty Holiday
The avant-garde has historically played the role of art’s conscience, and has, accordingly, been little heeded. Art is, after all, a mode of production, an industry, a market, a fact that only gradually came into being and only fairly recently became transparent and all-consuming. Art itself was long “the realm of freedom,” the voice of what all men valued, or professed to value, but which a corrupt and ossified social reality denied us. The avant-garde arose as the fact became inescapable that art, with its promise of a better world, was merely the shill, or at best the dupe, of the real order, the circus if not the bread.

But the real order is resourceful, and has learned to turn even that which resists, or even loathes it, to its ends. When an avant-garde is sufficiently at odds with reality, it is simply ignored; it remains a voice in the wilderness, at least until such time as the wilderness can be developed. As with Dada, or Fluxus, or more recently, performance art, that might require decades. It is only now that the art world is beginning to assess the many strains of serious, critical, and humane art that dwelt in the shadow of the sanctioned movements of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, now, that is, that what Arthur Danto and others have described as the end of art has rendered the very notion of an avant-garde pointless. Avant-garde implies a concept of progress, or at least direction, and art in our time is, for good or ill, devoid of either. The word itself descends from a military usage, and it has since at least Saint-Simon, also borne a radical political connotation. Its real practitioners have always been political malcontents and militants, warriors against a foul order.

Boris Lurie was the avant-garde incarnate. NO!art, the movement he founded with Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher in 1959, was a reaction against what they viewed as the debased avant-garde of Abstract Expressionism and its social and political disengagement, a resistance that would become all the more strident with the rise of Pop Art. NO!art insisted that art again address the real world; it called for an art dealing with difficult truths, such as imperialism, racism, sexism, and nuclear proliferation, and leading to social action. Lurie’s highly controversial work, sometimes combining imagery deriving from the Holocaust with samplings from popular culture, advertising, and girlie magazines, alienated critics and curators and was ignored by the art establishment. Lurie deplored what he called the “investment art market,” and he resisted its blandishments at every turn, rarely showing his art after the seventies and almost never offering it for sale.

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Boris Lurie was born in Leningrad in 1924, and died in New York in 2008. His father, Elja Lurie, a brilliant businessman who had thrived in Lenin’s Russia, fled with his family after Lenin’s death and the ascent of Stalin, settling in Riga, Latvia. There, the young Lurie was educated in German-speaking schools up to the time that he and his family were apprehended by the Nazis. From 1941-1945, Lurie and his father were interned in various
concentration camps, including Riga, Lenta, Stutthof and Buchenwald; his grandmother, mother, sister, and childhood sweetheart were murdered by the Nazis. Lurie's maturation and experience in the camps deeply marked both his view of the world and his art.

Subsequent to their liberation by Stalin's troops, Lurie and his father remained on in Germany for another year, during which Elja served as a “Jewish consultant” on the board of various German corporate bodies. In 1946 they emigrated to America. Lurie had shown an interest in art from an early age, admiring and emulating his cousin, who worked as a commercial artist in Riga. In America, he came to the Art Students League, but was quickly discouraged from study there by George Grosz's criticism that he “was not being honest.” Over the next decade or so, he worked on his own, living and creating in various semi-habitable buildings owned by his father while they underwent refurbishment. During this time he made the acquaintance of many artists, intellectuals, and radicals and closely monitored the art trends of the day. His earliest work from this period, very little of which survives, depicts the harrowing life of the death camps in a symbolist/expressionistic mode, sometimes evocative of Munch or Ensor.

As a deathcamp survivor, Lurie's artistic concerns were, understandably, quite different from those of the artists among whom he found himself on his arrival in America after the war. As Sarah Schmerler remarked in her catalogue essay for Lurie's 1998 gallery show, Bleed, 1969, “Most American artists of the Forties were fresh out of art school. Lurie was fresh out of Buchenwald.” There are deeply humane and inherently European aspects of his work, not to mention aggressively political dimensions, that rendered him rather an alien presence among his fellow artists in the New York of the forties through the seventies (and beyond). His animus against Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, with both of which movements aspects of his own work share certain visual and tactical qualities, is essentially a resistance against the widespread (and typically American) desire to leave the war behind and to forget its ravages in the midst of the wealth and optimism that victory and consequent economic ascendancy had engendered. Lurie was by no means stuck in the past, but having lived it, he refused to behave as if it had never happened, or that other horrors were not ever-present or constantly threatening.

During the early Fifties, Lurie began a series of paintings he called Dismembered Women, his first mature body of work. The eerie, but sometimes strangely ludic, canvases represent the beginning of Lurie's tortured life-long engagement with the subject of women in his art, the roots of which clearly extend to his adolescence spent in concentration camps and the never-ceasing torment that the death of his grandmother, mother, sister, and childhood sweetheart exerted upon him. Toward the middle and late Fifties, Lurie's work takes on a flavor of the Abstract Expressionism that had come to dominate American art at the time, but it remains always at least quasi-figural, and frequently depicts a trio of women whom it is difficult not to see as his murdered family, often apotheosized into melancholy angels. His Dismembered Women and the Pin-Up collage series which he would begin in the sixties and continue at, to varying degrees, for the rest of his life, among others, at once assert that the objectification of women is violence against women and that female sexuality is a fundamental and ineradicable force, ideas at best difficult to incorporate in a single work. In the fifties, sixties, and seventies, much of Lurie's work, such as the infamous Railroad Collage (1963) not only shocked and confused, but even repulsed much of the viewing
public. His juxtapositions of explicit images of sexuality against others of brutal death and
dehumanization even now defy rational engagement: they are visual aporias that short-
circuit analysis.

Lurie’s subjects were always implicitly historically, socially, and politically informed, but
in 1959, when he made the acquaintance of Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher, a hostile,
aggressive, and completely appropriate social criticism would enter the work. The NO!
artists were among the precursors of the gradually increasing protest movement against the
Vietnam War; they were among the first to thematize the threat of Nuclear Destruction
in art; and they were certainly among the earliest Americans to decry the ascent and
dehumanization of consumer culture, whose fallacies, like the Situationists in France, they
exposed in their art. Harold Rosenberg’s characterization of their work as “Pop, with
venom added” doesn’t quite capture their mission. From the politically ambiguous roots
of Neo-Dada sprang both Pop and NO!art, the former disregarding or even affirming the
futility of struggle against the Totality, the latter demanding resistance against it.

NO!art emerged at the co-operative March Gallery at 95 East Tenth Street, one of the
half-dozen or so extraordinary venues for avant-garde art on the Lower East side in the
mid-to-late Fifties that would also be so important in the incubation of the nascent Beat
Movement. Here the group’s Vulgar Show (1960), Involvement Show (1961) and Doom
Show (1961) were mounted. Subsequently, the NO! artists would move to Gertrude
Stein’s upper East Side Gallery at 24 East 81st Street, mounting the NO! Show (1963) and
the notorious NO! Sculpture (Shit) Show (1964), among others.

Untitled, c. early 1970s
6 ¾” x 6”
Acrylic on photographic print
The vitriol and fury of Boris Lurie and his cohorts still runs in the veins of their art fifty and more years after it was created; it is as fresh, powerful, and, remarkably, as beautiful, as it was in the cultural near-vacuum in which it was created. Lurie is one of the legendary figures of the East Village avant-garde of the fifties and sixties, a resistor against the institutional structure of art in his day and one of the powerful voices for humanity in an art world officially devoid of political or social awareness. “As we all know deep down, it is not by submission, coolness, remoteness, apathy, and boredom that great art is created, no matter what the cynics might tell us,” Lurie once wrote, “the secret ingredient of great art is what is most difficult to learn; it is courage.”

Lurie abhorred and eschewed the art world of his day, and it paid him in kind with its utter disregard. Partly on that account, much of the later decades of his life was devoted to writing. He produced hundreds of poems, scores of essays, a novel (recently published under the title *House of Anita*) and an autobiography. Until the late nineties, NO!art had effectively been suppressed from official art history, and, by his choice, almost all of Lurie’s work remained in his possession at the time of his death. The present exhibition, therefore, constitutes a small-scale, but comprehensive, retrospective and an important step in the reappraisal of the American avant-garde of the Cold War period.

Theodor Adorno famously remarked, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Lurie stands among the great artists, figures like Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, and Paul Celan, who have responded in art to the greatest inhumanity ever perpetrated and shown just what poetry after Auschwitz might be, and why it must be. In the battle for the soul and humanity of art, Lurie was a hero of the resistance, the resistance against compromise, indifference, perversion, and co-optation or manipulation by the market. The great political artist Leon Golub is reported to have said, “Boris Lurie is the epitome of the engaged artist; he puts the rest of us to shame.”

**NO (Orange + Red), 1962**
*Oil on canvas*
10” x 11”
“We are the first victims of American fascism.” – Ethel Rosenberg, 1953.

The New York art movement NO!art (1959-1964) is so obscure few people in the art world are even aware of it. Founded by a trio of dissident artists Boris Lurie, Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher, NO!art coincided with the emergence of the Beat Generation and the New Left. The fact that this movement ever existed has been suppressed in the canonical accounts of post-war American art, so this introduction will provide a narrative account of the NO! artists within the social and historical context of the late fifties and early sixties, interpreting their art as an expression of the Existential Marxism that was prevalent among many members of the art community in the post-war period. NO!art was conceived around 1959, according to its chief impresario, the artist Boris Lurie, and first presented at the March Gallery, an artists' cooperative on 10th Street, in 1960, where the “Vulgar Show” (1960), the “Involvement Show” (1961), and the “Doom Show” (1961) were held. Later on, “The NO! Show” (1963) and the “NO! Sculpture Show” (1964) were held at the uptown Gallery Gertrude Stein, which sponsored the NO! artists. Like the Situationists and Affichistes in Europe, the anti-capitalist work of the NO! artists attacked the fallacies of consumer society.

The Age of Atrocity

Since the 1970s, art historians have attempted to demystify “the triumph of American painting” in the postwar period by linking the phenomenon to American power’s new superpower status. According to the orthodox Cold War narrative, the United States gathered its allies under the umbrella of NATO and the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact, with the non-aligned states forming a buffer zone between them. The contrast between Capitalist and Communist blocs could not have been starker, and they competed for the non-aligned nations as “spheres of influence.” Many of these non-aligned states were former colonies of European powers or were about to achieve independence, if not autonomy. As Fredric Jameson has written, the postwar phase of European “decolonization historically went hand in hand with neo-colonialism...something like the replacement of the British Empire by the International Monetary Fund.” Loans, disguised as “aid,” guaranteed the loyalty of the client-states and ensured the dominance of the ascendant multinational corporations. Inevitably, the exploitation of the developing countries by the Western capitalist economies was resisted by nationalist, anticolonial, revolutionaries, for whom communism, socialism, or anarchism often seemed more attractive solutions than Western-style capitalism.

As the world’s first nuclear superpower, the United States wielded enormous power in the aftermath of World War II, and economically it controlled the purse strings of the
International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, securing the fortunes of American capitalism. “China, Iran, Turkey, Greece, French Indo-China, Guatemala, Cuba, The Dominican Republic, Venezuela, The Congo, Lebanon: all these were the scene of intervention – military, diplomatic, or economic. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with the massive U.S. foreign investments which...increased at an incredible eightfold rate between 1946 and 1967, finally reaching sixty billion dollars.” As the United States achieved economic dominance, the accumulated wealth produced a transformation of everyday life within its geographical borders, giving rise to a service-oriented consumer society. Manufacturing was increasingly outsourced abroad, though Americans continued to make most of its own weaponry and lavished money on the Pentagon. A new class of professional-managerial workers administered the growth of a huge military-industrial complex, which fed on the pork barrel spending of national defense.

Some economists predicted that the U.S. would become a post-scarcity society of abundance, consumption and unlimited growth. The liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote a book on The Affluent Society (1958), while the conservative ideologue Daniel Bell wishfully proclaimed The End of Ideology in 1961, hailing a new consensus. “For some Americans, primarily the blacks and other minorities, the poor and many of the elderly, no part of the [1950s] seemed to be a golden age,” writes Ronald Oakley, in God’s Country. America in the Fifties: “But for most white, middle-class Americans, and particularly white, middle-class males, the fifties was perhaps the best decade in the history of the republic.” Underneath the surface prosperity, however, the U.S. was also a culture of poverty and waste, as Michael Harrington documented in The Other America in 1962. The economy was constantly in crisis, causing periodic recessions and unemployment; by some estimates, a third of the population was living in poverty. Many of the progressive reforms of Roosevelt’s New Deal were overturned under Truman and Eisenhower, epitomized by the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Bill of 1947. A “paranoid style” in American politics, symbolized by Joseph McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover, found scapegoats for society’s ills, targeting communists and homosexuals with special vehemence.

As self-appointed leader of the “free world,” the United States apparently learned very little from the experience of World War II: “What could the lessons of a concentration camp have meant, really,” wrote leftist art critic Dore Ashton in 1969, “when atrocities in the Korean War went on and on. And on and on to Vietnam. And haven’t stopped yet.” Under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, cultural historian Marty Jezer writes, “many Americans began to feel shame about racial atrocities that in the past they readily chose to ignore,” though racism was as virulent as ever. Former officials of the U.S. government, including Truman himself, justified the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in spite of the collective punishment of combatants and noncombatants alike, a definite war crime. Paradise islands in the South Pacific were emptied of their indigenous populations and used as targets for atomic bombs. Emphasizing property rights over human rights, U.S. foreign policy supported fascist dictators, military regimes and death squads to protect its economic interests, while McCarthyism and loyalty oaths persecuted the “enemy within”: the Communists and their “fellow-travelers.” A Power Elite supplanted the traditional authority of the President. In his farewell address, Eisenhower warned the country about the ominous rise of a “military-industrial complex” he had helped to create.
When Kennedy came to power in 1961, many liberals thought he would favor disarmament, a nuclear test ban treaty and peace initiatives, but this proved to be misplaced optimism, as the president adopted the theory of deterrence, which rested on the insane idea of mutually-assured destruction. Kennedy surrounded himself with advisers who recommended the acquisition of more strategic weapons and the development of forces to suppress wars of national liberation. This policy benefited the military contractors greatly, who received orders for Polaris submarines, Minuteman missiles and nuclear bombers.

“In 1962 Senator John L. McClelland’s investigating committee showed how this brand of ‘socialism for the rich’ worked...contractors made profits of 40%...subcontractors’ profit was added to the main contractor’s costs....Military procurement was the most perfectly realized pork barrel in the history of a nation rich with them.” The technocrats mystified politicians and the public alike, with their doctrines of “counterforce,” “overkill,” “massive retaliation” and “balance of terror.” The goal of the Kennedy arms race would enable the U.S. to fight two big wars and one small war simultaneously.
The major foreign policy event of the Kennedy years was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Since the early days of the Republic, the United States had been eyeing the prize, resulting in the Spanish-American war of 1898. A stooge of the U.S. Government, Fulgencio Batista resigned as head of the Cuban state on January 1, 1959, following his defeat by the guerrilla forces of Fidel Castro. Castro proceeded to nationalize U.S. property, which amounted to “35% of the sugar industry, 90% of the public utilities, and with Royal Dutch Shell all of the oil refineries.” Then, on September 26, 1960, on a visit to New York, the Cuban leader delivered a blistering four-and-a-half hour address to the United Nations denouncing U.S. imperialism and capitalism. Tensions between the superpowers escalated as the Soviet Premier Khrushchev promised military support for Cuba, and Castro announced his intention to close the Guantanamo Naval Station. Upon taking office, Kennedy announced a total ban on Cuban sugar exports. A few months into his presidency, he ordered the Bay of Pigs invasion (April 17-19, 1961), which was a military and diplomatic fiasco.

On October 22, 1962, Kennedy, referring to the “Cuban Crisis,” addressed the nation on television and radio, informing the public about the discovery of offensive missiles in Cuba. An atmosphere of terror and hysteria gripped the world, as Washington demanded the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuban shores, and the superpowers put their military forces on a worldwide alert. When the Soviet Union and the U.S. finally reached agreement on November 7, 1962, the White House declared a propaganda victory. “Mr. Kennedy’s gamble paid off. But what if it had failed?” asked the independent journalist I. F. Stone: “Mr. Kennedy insisted on a back down by Khrushchev first. Fortunately, he got his way. But the happy relief should not blind us to the monstrous situation in which all humanity found itself. Any ruler, with nuclear weapons...now has a Divine Right...to condemn mankind to hell.” Although there was an urgent need to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons and achieve a nuclear test ban treaty, the political stalemate obstructed any hopes for a lasting peace.

Art/World/Politics

In the wake of fascism and totalitarianism, artists and critics doubted the viability of the fine arts in a mass society. The feeling of malaise among intellectuals often assumed apocalyptic dimensions. Critics in the immediate postwar period, like Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Meyer Schapiro – all Jewish, all stunned by the Holocaust – were skeptical that “high art” could survive “mass culture” and the “onslaught of kitsch.” Like the Frankfurt School thinkers, they feared that art would become another debased form of entertainment, like radio or television, or worse, pure propaganda. Since it relies upon novelty and calculated effects, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, the culture industry serves the same purpose as mass entertainment, which is essentially “the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again.” Moreover, in the era of “late capitalism,” they noted that “a change in the character of the art commodity itself is coming about. What is new is not that it is a commodity, but that today it deliberately admits it is one.” This was particularly prescient with regard to the ascendant art movement in the early sixties, Pop art. Andy Warhol’s Brillo box was virtually indistinguishable from the real thing.
By mid-century, a new class of collectors, members of the “vanguard audience,” emerged from the ranks of the nouveaux riches. Unlike the Robber Baron philanthropists of the past, this upwardly-mobile group of collectors (some of them from immigrant, working-class, Jewish backgrounds) were interested in the investment potential of contemporary art, not to mention the vicarious glamour of being courted by artists, gallerists and museum people. As a result of their patronage, the fine arts were associated with such business concepts as speculative investments, artificial scarcity, standardization, quality control, product differentiation and planned obsolescence, and the artists themselves were seduced by the prospects of fame and fortune. The spectacular commercial success of the Abstract Expressionists by the late fifties undermined the crisis content of their work, as Greenberg acknowledged in his nostalgic essay, “The Late Thirties in New York” (1957). In 1955, Fortune selected “growth stocks” among American painters, including Baziotes, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell, Pollock, Reinhardt, Rivers, Rothko and Still; and two years later, the New York Times reported a 500% increase in the number of art galleries and sales over the previous decade. The New York art world had become corrupted.

By the late fifties and early sixties, Abstract Expressionism was not only commercially successful—it represented, for many cultural nationalists, the triumph of the “American way of life” and a concrete example of liberal democracy. And it was actually packaged as such by our own Central Intelligence Agency, and sent abroad, in traveling exhibitions, often arranged under the auspices of the Rockefeller-led Museum of Modern Art. As Serge Guilbaut has written, “the work of avant-garde painters came to be accepted and used...to represent liberal American values, first at home, in the museums, and then abroad...as anti-Soviet propaganda.” The artists willingly went along with this ideological exploitation of their works by Cold Warriors in the U.S. Government, and the marketplace rewarded them handsomely. Moreover, the marketplace now demanded Abstract Expressionist paintings, giving rise to a New Academy (see the lavishly illustrated magazine, It Is). The general acceptance of Abstract Expressionism by the business world and U.S. government mirrored the consensus politics of the fifties (christened “The Vital Center”).

“By 1957, when the Jewish Museum presented...Artists of the New York School, Second Generation,” Barbara Rose wrote, “a climate of discontent and a certain impatience with the official platitudes had infiltrated the art world.” With the simultaneous emergence of the Beat Generation, the art world experienced the most dramatic ideological shift since the forties. Fifty-Seventh Street and Madison Avenue was the commercial hub of the New York art world at this time, while Greenwich Village, formerly the home of bohemia, had become a gentrified tourist destination. From 1952 on, following the success of the “Ninth Street Show” the previous year (organized by Leo Castelli, years before he opened his famous gallery), a host of new galleries, starting with the Tanager, opened in the area around 10th Street on the Lower East Side, where rents were relatively affordable. The Hansa Gallery opened its doors at East 12th Street in 1953, under the direction of ex-Hans Hofmann students, while other cooperative galleries on or around 10th Street included the James Gallery, the Camino, the March, the Brata, the Phoenix and the Area. Some private galleries were also in the area, including the Fleischman, the Nonagon, the Great Jones and the Reuben Gallery, which was famous as the earliest venue of the Happenings. Claes Oldenburg’s Store was located a few blocks away, near the Bowery.
The *New York Times* critic Brian O’Doherty recalled how, “Discriminating tourists learned that 10th Street was ‘the real thing’. It certainly had character. Bums exposed by the tearing down of the Third Avenue El, drifted in and out of 10th Street, and sometimes you had to step over them to get into a gallery.”

One of the black-and-white photographs reproduced in Fred McDarrah’s book *The Artist’s World in Pictures* (1961) showed a homeless man slumped on the ground at the basement entrance to the March Gallery (next to a liquor store) at 95 East 10th Street. There was undoubtedly an element of “slumming” on the part of wealthy gallery-goers, who came downtown to visit the 10th Street galleries. The style of painting that was prevalent there – Abstract Expressionism in the manner of de Kooning – was assailed by John Canaday, their most vocal critic, who complained, “for a decade the bulk of abstract art in America has followed the course of least resistance and quickest profit.”

An adversarial political art, however, was on display at the March Gallery in the early sixties, which was anomalous on 10th Street. In *10th Street Days: The Co-ops of the ’50s*, artist Alice Baber recalled how the idea of the March Gallery originated in a conversation with Felix Pasilis in the spring of 1957. The best-known affiliates of the March Gallery were Elaine de Kooning, Mark di Suvero and Lester Johnson. Two years later, a new leadership headed by Boris Lurie and Sam Goodman took over the gallery. In a statement of 1960, their colleague Stanley Fisher declared, “The new March Gallery is a citadel for the idealistic, and bastion for those who would like to make a last stand against the commercial degradation of uptown galleries. We stand on the threshold of a new art, an art committed to speak out, an art involved with issues.” In this respect, they differed from the majority of Neo-Dadaists, whose works were usually interpreted as an affirmation of American society.
According to Dore Ashton's recollection, the March Gallery “began as just another cooperative, with a heterogeneous shifting population of participants. Little by little, it became the focal point for all manner of social dissidents, many of whom had watched the political events of the 1950s with increasing discouragement.”

The driving forces behind the NO!art group were Boris Lurie, Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher. Although other artists exhibited with the group, the work of these three was stylistically compatible and they were self-identified “NO! artists” (as opposed to other participants who joined their exhibitions, without embracing the “NO!art” moniker). When Goodman and Lurie assumed control of the March Gallery in 1960, both artists were moving towards an aggressive Neo-Dada presentation. Goodman worked in the expanding field of assemblage, while Lurie and Fisher made large-scale collage-paintings recapturing the spirit of Berlin Dada.

**The Banality of Evil**

In the spring of 1960, when their group was beginning to coalesce, the NO! artists – like everyone else attuned to the media – heard that the fugitive Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, architect of Hitler’s Final Solution, had been kidnapped in Buenos Aires, Argentina, by the Israeli Secret Services. People knew that Eichmann was still alive, since an interview with him had recently appeared in *Life* magazine. Although he had been imprisoned by the Allies at the end of the war, Eichmann successfully managed to hide his identity and escaped from his captors in January 1946. He made contact with ODESSA, a clandestine organization of ex-SS officers, which arranged for his trip to Argentina, providing him with identification papers and a work permit. “Ricardo Clement,” as he was known, arrived in Buenos Aires in 1950, where he was hired by the Mercedes Benz company. When Eichmann was captured, he was living with his family in a small house he had built on the outskirts of the city.

Tried in Israel under the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950, Eichmann was swiftly given the death penalty and hanged on the night of May 31, 1962. Although she approved of the death sentence as a legitimate punishment for committing crimes against humanity, Hannah Arendt denounced the kidnapping as a violation of international law in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Arendt agreed that Eichmann deserved the death penalty (because he had supported a policy of mass murder), but she believed that the integrity of the legal system had been badly damaged. Not only had the kidnapping been in violation of international law, but the trial itself was plagued with irregularities and abnormalities. “In sum, the failure of the Jerusalem court consisted in its not coming to grips with three fundamental issues: the problem of impaired justice in the court of the victors; a valid definition of the ‘crime against humanity’; and a clear recognition of the new criminal who commits this crime.”

Arendt asked some indelicate questions that embarrassed just about everyone. She charged that the most important questions surrounding the trial – “How could it happen?... Why did it happen?...Why the Jews?...Why the Germans?...What was the role of other nations?...What was the extent of the co-responsibility on the side of the Allies?...How could the Jews through their own leaders cooperate in their own destruction?...Why did
they go to their deaths like lambs to the slaughter?” – had been deliberately ignored.  

Because German reparation payments to Israel were due to expire, she charged, the Israeli government was hoping to secure additional loans from the German government, but this could only be achieved if the courts stopped short of exposing “the complicity of all German offices and authorities in the Final Solution – of all civil servants in the state ministries, of the regular armed forces, with their General Staff, of the judiciary, and of the business world.” In other words, practically the entire Adenauer administration would have been implicated in Nazi war crimes, in a comprehensive trial held under international auspices. Worse still, there was a cover-up being perpetrated by Jewish leaders in Israel.

The really shocking part of Arendt’s book, nowadays overlooked, was the revelation that Eichmann, the efficient bureaucrat, seemed to be a model citizen, an ideal representative of the Organization Man in corporate America. One psychiatrist even testified that, “his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends was ‘not only normal but most desirable.’” In defense of his actions, Eichmann claimed that he harbored no grievances against the Jews, he never personally killed anyone, and was simply following the instructions of the Führer. In refuting Eichmann’s defense, Arendt noted that “the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands.” The disputed phrase the “banality of evil” was not meant to trivialize the Holocaust and the sufferings of the Jewish people (Arendt herself was, of course, Jewish). Rather, it underscored the impersonal, bureaucratic manner in which Eichmann performed his duties as a functionary of the Third Reich, seemingly oblivious to the terrible consequences of his actions. He was a symbol of instrumental rationalism run amok.

Angry about the post-war cover-up of the Nazi atrocities and the failure of the Allied Forces to save the Jews from destruction, Lurie responded to these events in 1961: “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…” Lurie complained that Americans had no reason to be self-righteous about their role during the Holocaust, since rescue efforts were actively stymied by bureaucrats like Breckinridge Long in the Roosevelt State Department, despite the fact that evidence of the Final Solution was widely known as early as 1942. Domestic anti-Semitism, nativism, and anti-immigrant sentiments exacerbated the grave situation of Jews (and other pariah groups) trapped in the Occupied Territories. Retrospectively, Lurie recalled that, “the Eichmann trial powerfully reviv[ed] suppressed material preferred to be forgotten by most, had also ruptured the death of silence and fear and conformity of the Cold War and postwar period of suppression.” Sam Goodman created an Eichmann Triptych in 1961, and Lurie’s “Oh, Mama, Liberté” (1963) included a headline reading, “ADOLF EICHMANN – STAND UP!”

Since the NO! artists reacted to the Holocaust, attacked anti-Semitism, and incorporated atrocity photographs in their art, their work has been discussed within the problematic rubric of “Holocaust art.” A number of artists, including Picasso, Rico Lebrun, Hyman Bloom and Jacob Landau “depicted” the Holocaust, in realist or expressionist modes, in the postwar period. But, generally speaking, the Holocaust was considered a taboo subject because it was thought to be too awesome to represent in any satisfactory way.
How can a painting represent the enormous tragedy that unfolded in wartime Europe? Necessarily, many thought, it couldn’t; painting was inadequate to the task. In response to the exhibition and catalogue *The Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century*, one critic noted that, “Art dealing with the Jewish trauma of World War II is difficult to discuss critically, and I do not intend to try. It is possible that all atrocity and disaster make bad subject matter.” The same argument was employed by literary critic Irving Howe, in his preface to *Art of the Holocaust*: “Can imaginative literature,” he asks, “represent’ in any profound or illuminating way the meanings of the Holocaust? Is ‘the debris of our misery’ ... a proper or manageable subject for stories or novels? Are there not perhaps extreme situations beyond the reach of art?”

The NO! artists generally concurred with Adorno’s famous remark about the impossibility of writing poetry, or making art, “after Auschwitz” – hence, their anti-aesthetic position. It is easy to see how this attitude also overlaps with the traditional Judaic prohibition against “graven images.” The works of the NO! artists don’t create new images so much as vandalize and destroy existing ones. Rather than creating sentimental artworks “about” the Holocaust, the NO! artists (especially Lurie) critically examined readymade representations of Nazi atrocities circulating in the media. In *Life* magazine, for example, one could see pictures of concentration camp victims, then flip the page to see swimsuit models and ads for cars and cigarettes. Instead of taking these photojournalist images at face value, the NO! artists questioned their currency in our spectacular, consumer, society by exposing this jarring synchronization in their work. They raised political consciousness in the art world in a period of complacency and apathy, anticipating the counterculture...
of the late sixties. In a way that was more relevant than other artists who invoked the Holocaust as a theme in their work, they exposed the banality of evil operating in our everyday lives. Again and again, they invoked history and political struggle to counter the amnesia and moral blindness in America.

**NO! artists**

For Boris Lurie (1924-2008), who outlived Goodman and Fisher by several years and was the movement’s leading intellectual force, “The origins of NO! art sprout from the Jewish experience, struck root in the world’s largest Jewish Community, New York, a product of armies, concentration camps, Lumpenproletariat artists. Its targets are the hypocritical intelligentsia, capitalist culture manipulation, consumerism, American and other Molochs.” Born in Leningrad in 1924, Lurie grew up in Riga, Latvia, and was imprisoned in several Nazi labor camps during the war, finally landing in Buchenwald. His mother and sister perished in the camps. After his escape, Lurie worked as a translator and investigator for the American intelligence forces, using his multilingual skills, before emigrating to the U.S. Arriving in New York in 1946, he enrolled at the Art Student’s League, where he studied with Reginald Marsh, but was soon disillusioned by the academic atmosphere of the classroom.

Following the war, Lurie painted a series of figurative oils which depicted emaciated, El Greco-like figures based on his harrowing experiences in the camps. His first solo show was held at the Barbizon-Piazza Gallery in 1950. *Dismembered Women: Three Figures in a Bathtub* (1950) and *Dismembered Women: Combat on Rooftop* (1951) were large-scale semi-abstract paintings, influenced by Fernand Léger’s mechanomorphic cubism and the musculature of Michelangelo’s figures. *Dismembered Women: Three Figures in a Bathtub* depicted clusters of monstrously-formed limbs, arms and legs perversely conjoined, floating against a geometrical space, while *Dismembered Women: Combat on Rooftop* was an all-over mosaic pattern of limbs and mechanic elements. These two paintings were an unusual hybrid of styles which included Purism, Constructivism and Surrealism. The horrifying theme of “Dismembered Women” in Lurie’s work subconsciously related to the murder of his female relatives by the Nazis. Consciously, he was reacting to the “unfeeling environment” of the American scene.
By the late fifties, Lurie found a suitable vehicle for his ideas in the form of assemblages and collage-paintings, which he considers the beginning of NO!art. After experimenting in prints and multiples, he began incorporating printed imagery from a variety of mass-media sources. These were exhibited in Lurie’s one-man show, “Les Lions” at the March Gallery and in his “Adieu Amérique” exhibition at Roland de Aennle (both 1960). Atrocity photographs, advertisements, pin-ups and newspaper headlines were scattered across the surfaces of his collages, which were painted over with graffiti, slogans and phrases. Although the technique is completely different, some of these works resembled the torn posters of the Affichistes Jacques de la Villègle, Francois Dûfrène and Raymond Hains, and the Italian artist Mimmo Rotella. Lurie’s painted collages and constructions were all-over compositions, sometimes as big as billboards, in contrast to Kurt Schwitters’ relational, small-scale Merz collages. These works often contained newspaper headlines, which were legible from an ideal viewing-point, instead of encouraging the “vernacular glance” like Rauschenberg, whose images were mostly “chosen...for their nonspecificity.”

Lurie’s use of newspaper headlines was comparable to the way an older generation of Social Realists like Alice Neel (Nazis Murder Jews, 1937-38), Ben Shahn (Spring, 1940, Peace Offensive, 1940), and Reginald Marsh (Fifth Takes Rome, 1944) chronicled their era, specifically dropping references to actual moments, topical events in history, through placards or newspaper headlines strategically placed in their compositions. There’s nothing haphazard about the kind of imagery that Lurie used in his collage-paintings. Again, in the tradition of the aforementioned artists or (going further back in time) John Heartfield’s photomontages, Lurie’s collage-paintings were “not primarily aesthetic objects, but images for reading.” They invited the viewer to come up close and explore the surfaces of his paintings, with their accretions of newspaper clippings, under-the-counter photographs of nude and scantily-clad ladies, advertisements from Life magazine, and similar mass cultural detritus, glued on the canvas and attacked with paint. A legible headline in Lurie’s billboard-sized Les Lions (1959) read “La Fin de Colonel Terreur,” a reference to the Algerian War of Independence. Another work from this period, his irregularly-shaped assemblage Siren Signals (1961), included a poster pleading, on behalf of children, for peace in the French colony.

The references to the Algerian War of Independence in Lurie’s works signaled his solidarity with the Algerian rebels in their struggle against French imperialism. By the summer of 1960, eleven new states had been created in Africa, but Algerian independence wasn’t achieved until November 1962. An expatriate class of French officers led military coups in May 1958 and January 1960, which President de Gaulle suppressed. Another Lurie collage, Lumumba is Dead (1961), with a huge swastika painted in the center, was a tribute to Patrice Lumumba, a freedom fighter in the Belgian Congo, murdered with C.I.A. collusion. Belgium recognized Congo’s independence in 1960, but this was challenged by a separatist movement in the province of Katanga, known for its rich copper mines. Katanga enjoyed considerable support from extreme rightists in the United States, like the Texas oil billionaire H. L. Hunt, who funded the Dan Smoot Report, and Fred Schwarz’s Christian Anti-Communist Crusade.

As survivor of the Holocaust, Lurie was outraged by the ranks of Holocaust deniers, the social amnesia in America, and the appearance of atrocity photographs in best-selling
magazines, alongside advertisements for consumer products, in an ambiguous blend of fact and fantasy. These were the same magazines that ignored the plight of the Jews during the war by failing to report any news about Hitler’s Final Solution. As David Wyman writes in *The Abandonment of the Jews*, “American mass-circulation magazines all but ignored the Holocaust. Aside from a few paragraphs touching on the subject, silence prevailed in the major news magazines, *Time, Newsweek,* and *Life.*” Lurie ripped images out of these magazines, and pasted them alongside each other on his canvases, drawing attention to the incongruities through violent juxtaposition. Here, as a critic for *The Village Voice* pointed out in 1960, “*Life Magazine* [is] taken to its final, ultimate, absurd, and frightening conclusion, pain and death given no more space and attention than pictures of Elsa Maxwell’s latest party.”

Frequently, the images in the NO!art collages were icons of World War II photojournalism, well-known due to their incessant reproduction in the mass media. One of these photographs, taken in Buchenwald, depicted a railroad wagon stacked with corpses. Lurie appropriated this image, and ironically referred to it as *Flatcar Assemblage, 1945, by Adolf Hitler* (1961). This invoked the specious idea that, had Hitler pursued his dream of becoming an artist, the Final Solution would have perhaps been averted. In the retitling of the photograph, Lurie supplied a bitter caption to a well-known image, creating a “revolutionary use-value” for the photograph, in the manner of John Heartfield’s photomontages and Ernst Friedrich’s pacifist book, *War Against War* (1924). One of the photographs in Friedrich’s book, showing corpses strewn on a battlefield, was captioned *War Idyll,* suggesting, like Lurie’s *détourned* image, how war and atrocity become aestheticized in the modern era. Two years later Lurie juxtaposed the flatcar image with a pornographic picture of a nude woman exposing her rear end, creating what would become his most recognizable work, titled, *Railroad Collage* (1963).

In her book *On Photography,* Susan Sontag described her first reactions (at the age of 12) to the atrocity photographs she saw in a bookstore documenting the Nazi concentration camps at Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. Having experienced a “negative epiphany” upon viewing these images, she also noted that repeated exposure to this type of imagery provided only an initial emotional catharsis for the viewer – eventually, the constant bombardment of images like these had the effect of anesthetizing people, making such atrocities commonplace, banal and even acceptable: “The same law holds for evil as for pornography. The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings – an apropos comparison, obviously, when we bear in mind the works of Lurie that repeatedly juxtapose atrocity photographs and pin-ups. His *Buchenwald* collage (1961), consisting of a black-and-white photograph of concentration-camp inmates framed by pornographic “girlie-pictures,” is another highly unsettling image. These works, combining atrocity photographs and pornographic pictures, have to be some of the creepiest, most disturbing artworks of the twentieth century, because they suggest the sexualization of the (Jewish) victim (by anti-Semites), a topic that was discussed at length in *Eros* magazine.

Lurie’s colleague, the Canadian-born artist Sam Goodman (1919-67) acquired a solid reputation in the late fifties as an Abstract Expressionist painter, and began making assemblages in the sixties. A regular at the Cedar Tavern, Goodman held solo exhibitions at the Camino Gallery from 1956 on, and exhibited in various group shows in Manhattan.
and at the famous art-colony of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Goodman was an up-and-coming artist in New York during the fifties who was sporadically praised in the art press. When four young artists were presented at the Camino gallery in Greenwich Village, *Art News* reproduced Goodman’s *Point of Departure* (1956), a calligraphic black-and-white abstraction influenced by Franz Kline’s dynamic compositions. Goodman was seen as a promising young artist in the Abstract Expressionist School’s second generation. He was also compared to the French *informel* painter, Georges Mathieu, and (oddly) praised for keeping art “clean of hooligan sentiment.” Along with his wife, Elizabeth, he opened a coffee shop on MacDougal Street called the Caricature.

In March 1960, Goodman and Lurie exhibited together at the Champagne Gallery on MacDougal Street, which was favorably received by James Schuyler in *Art News*, who wrote, “Goodman’s flung, ground-bordered abstractions have not received the attention they merit. Violence of means is plain, but the effect...is poignant...his range is large.” He is best-known for a work entitled *The Cross* (1960), which was illustrated in Lucy Lippard’s widely-circulated book on *Pop Art* (1966). An attack on militarism and the Bomb, the assemblage consisted of a rocking horse silhouette and a garbage can containing two components: a bomb with an umbrella attached to it, and a wooden cross with pasted paper and model airplane wings. A paper sign attached to the cross conspicuously read, “MEN TODAY,” and the word “GARBAGE” was scrawled over the surface of the can. Goodman also painted some effective posters in black paint, with skulls, imploring the government to “Stop Testing” and “Stop Fallout.”

Goodman’s *Male Fetish* and *Female Fetish* assemblages (1961) were typical of works he constructed using recycled detritus. A portrait of a male head was framed with a toilet seat and attached to a vertical wooden board, to form the *Male Fetish*; other elements in the
assemblage included a spring, a toy motorcycle, and a doll’s hand dangling from a pipe. The Female Fetish was equally grotesque, consisting of a skull (with a cigar in her mouth, wearing a wig), a pair of diminutive doll’s arms (like a thalidomide victim), two torpedo-like balloons for breasts, and an old piece of white lace for a skirt. Other Goodman assemblages from this period included a cash register, a Box with Excrement, a Bomb and Snake, a still-life with Three Grenades (all 1961), and a work entitled General Chaos (1962), utilizing an army helmet. Harking back to Dada works like Raoul Hausmann’s Mechanical Head (1919-20) or Johannes Baargeld’s Anthropophiliac Tapeworm (1919), Goodman’s works also bear comparison to the assemblages of his West Coast contemporaries Edward Kienholz and Bruce Conner.

Kienholz, a Los Angeles artist, made an assemblage expressing outrage over the Nazi concentration camps titled History as a Planter in 1961, which consisted of an oven, a household planter, wartime newspaper clippings and a swastika. According to Maurice Tuchman, the piece was about “time and the white-wash it permits one to make of evil: the extermination of a people becomes, like a household planter, a conversation piece, merely a subject for discussion in middle-class homes.” Kienholz’s Liberty or Lice included a headline reading “Chessman Misses Stay by Minutes,” referring to the case of Caryl Chessman, the “Red Light Bandit,” a kidnapper and rapist convicted under the Lindbergh Law, who wrote books about his ordeal on death-row. Chessman’s execution in 1960 was an international scandal, which provoked anti-American demonstrations all over the world. In California, Kienholz (The Psycho-Vendetta Case, 1960) and Conner (Homage to Chessman, 1961) also made works referring to the Chessman case.

Stanley Fisher (1926-80), a Beat poet and school teacher, as well as an artist, the third major figure of the NO!art group, shared many of the same concerns as Goodman and Lurie. Fisher edited an anthology, entitled Beat Coast East in 1960. It is apparent from his writings that he was influenced by the writings of the Freudian Marxist Wilhelm Reich, who advocated Sexual Revolution and died in a federal prison in 1957. There was a good deal of interaction between the Beat poets and the NO! artists, and Fisher’s collages were described by a reviewer in Art News as “staccato-shelled like a coffee-house poem.” Seymour Krin, a friend of the NO! artists, a writer, and an editor of Nugget, was also involved with the Beat Movement. Krin’s paperback volume on The Beats: A Gold Medal Anthology was also published in 1960, with contributions by the leading Beat poets. The nomadic street poet Jack Micheline was friendly with Lurie and the African-American poet Ted Joans exhibited visual art with the NO!art group.

Fisher’s anthology Beat Coast East included some of his own poems alongside those of Ginsberg, Orlovsky, Corso, Kerouac, di Prima, LeRoi Jones and others. The book was illustrated with Elaine de Kooning’s painting Veronica, photographs of Claes Oldenburg’s Snapshots from the City happening at the Judson Gallery, details from Boris Lurie’s Liberty or Lice, and pen-and-ink drawings by Fisher on the subject of The Marriage of Woman and Beast. According to Fisher, these self-consciously “rebellious” poets were composing in the “Whitmanesque manner,” using jazz-like rhythms. Of special interest was a piece of writing by Norman Mailer, “An Eye for Picasso,” which described Picasso’s libidinal distortions: “Picasso has used his brush like a sword, disemboweling an eye to plaster it
over the ear, lopping off a breast in order to turn it behind an arm, scoring the nostrils of his ladies until they took on the violent necessities of those twin holes of life and death, the vagina and the anus.\textsuperscript{52}

Mailer's description of Picasso's technique may be related to the anatomical distortions in Fisher's collages. According to Lurie, Fisher's experience as a medical orderly during World War II – he was sent to Europe shortly after D-day – may be related to the way he rearranged anatomies in his collages to create mutant and hybrid figures. In a 1961 statement for the “Involvement Show,” Fisher argued that the NO! artists were dealing “a lethal blow to the ideology of dog eat dog...We are not afraid of confronting the Hiroshima Hells and Buchenwalds of a world in trouble. We offer no tranquilizers.”\textsuperscript{53} Fisher's collages, like his Debris (1961), recall the photomontages of John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann and, especially Hannah Höch, although the NO! artists were unaware of Berlin Dada until much later. Debris, sometimes called Reds to Test, was one of the images reproduced in Fisher's chapbook Christ in a Fallout Shelter, which he published at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Christ in a Fallout Shelter was a mixture of social criticism, transgressive writing and purple prose. To discourage speculators from stockpiling art, Fisher argued that artists should make “temporary art,” anticipating how the counterculture would later embrace ephemeral art as a way of sidestepping the capitalist marketplace. He referred to “my view of art as something that will help the human condition become more alive, more intense and more interested in its own sublimity than present conditions permit.” On the subject of Abstract Expressionism, he thought it “once had deep meaning, but now it has been imitated out of existence and cannot rise to the challenge of new values, or breakthrough to the unconventional.” A messianic revolutionary (inspired by writers like Paul Goodman, Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsberg), Fisher argued for the revival of the artist’s “prophetic and revolutionary fervor,” and tried to express this ideal “by fusing elements together in a mysterious thralldom of photograph and paint, children's collage drawings and poems.”\textsuperscript{54}

NO!art Exhibitions

The first collective exhibition of the NO! artists, the “Vulgar Show,” was held at the March Gallery in November 1960, and included the works of Lurie, Goodman, Fisher, and John Fischer. The fact that these artists stigmatized their work as “Yiddische” and “Jew-art,” indicates that a self-deprecating sense of humor, intertwined with anger, fueled the production of their art. They enjoyed disturbing the sensibilities of gentiles and fellow Jews who were embarrassed by their apparent lack of civility.\textsuperscript{55} Lurie's artworks frequently combined atrocity photographs of the Holocaust and swastikas in a deliberately provocative way. The meaning of “vulgarity” was a reflection of their use of subject matter (politics, advertising, pin-ups), and the marked absence of tasteful formal values (the admission of graffiti, junk materials, impermanence). As Lurie explained, “We meant to show, to draw attention to, to underline the ‘vulgarity’ within us quite as much as around us, to accept such vulgarity, to absorb it, to become conscious of it, to exorcise it.”\textsuperscript{56} Redemption, ironically, would only come from a complete immersion in vulgarity.
The NO! artists were also consciously exploring vulgarity as a way of baiting cultural conservatives and the political Right. Even on the left, critics like Max Kozloff complained that the younger generation “depend[s] too much upon the repulsiveness of their imagery.”

The Supreme Court had recently ruled that it would not protect “obscene matter,” finding nudity, sexuality and excretion particularly offensive. Since the ruling threatened their democratic right to free speech, some artists deliberately questioned the official definition of obscenity, ridiculed the hypocrisy of the judicial system and conservatives demanding sanity-in-art. Things were getting so absurd that the Post Office refused to handle postcards illustrating Goya’s *Nude Maja*, calling it obscene. From the perspective of the NO! artists, the true obscenities of the day were the Nazi gas chambers, the development of the atomic bomb, the merchants of death who manufactured weapons, corporate greed, the ongoing atrocities sanctioned by the U.S. government, and the dehumanizing environment of capitalist society. (Lurie, a Labor Zionist, contemplated life on an Israeli kibbutz as potentially idyllic, were it not for the inconvenient presence of the Palestinians.)

The “Involvement Show,” held at the March Gallery in April 1961, was an early experiment in participatory democracy, accompanied with statements by Lurie, Goodman, Fisher and
Augustus Goertz, who were among the twenty-six artists in the show. Opposing any efforts to label the work, Lurie wrote, “The ivory tower is no substitute for Involvement in life. In a time of wars and extermination, aesthetic exercises and decorative patterns are not enough.” Some of the other participants in the “Involvement Show” were the Happenings artist Allan Kaprow, Yayoi Kusama, Michelle Stuart, Jean-Jacques Lebel and the Icelandic artist Erro (Ferro). At this time, Lebel was living in New York, making painted collages and assemblages (like his New York School, 1962), which incorporated pin-up fragments comparable to those of Lurie. The German artist and filmmaker Wolf Vostell, whose first exhibition in the U.S. was held at the Smolin Gallery in 1963, also became friendly with the NO! artists and recognized that they were creating works with comparable themes, in the same mode of expression (in his case, dé/collage).

The policy of open admissions was meant to be radically egalitarian and showed the influence of the burgeoning New Left. Citing the Existential philosopher and writer Albert Camus (“What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion”), one of the contributors to the show, Michelle Stuart, wrote an article, “NO is an Involvement,” for an early issue of Artforum (September 1963), claiming: “These men are first of all artists, protesting artists, but no social realists. One finds no rigid message or standard discipline here. They are suggesting, rebelling, in an essentially romantic manner.” Later on, Lurie admitted that the reason for the “Involvement Show” was naive, since, “The idea of involvement, the breaking of isolation, that by itself was all right. Yet our idea of involvement went farther into a premature attempt to embrace all society including our ‘enemies,’ to embrace all currents liberally, to dispense with an opposition attitude, to give up anger.” Unfortunately, this democratic notion of involvement permitted a noncommittal pluralism and eclecticism to undermine their message, one of principled opposition to the status quo.

The concept of involvement sometimes meant that the viewer was required to open and shut elements in an artwork, to interact with it, or operate a contraption by flicking a switch, as in “ludic” or “participatory” art. This type of involvement was on the most basic level of physical manipulation. In existential vocabulary, however, one could also be involved, in the sense of being a responsible and committed individual. This is more along the lines of what the NO! artists were emphasizing, except their notion of involvement was translated into explicitly “political” terms through a shared philosophy of Existential Marxism, (i.e.: they weren’t just committed to being artists, they wanted to break with the Abstract Expressionists’ habit of aestheticizing their alienation from society, to make people interact with art and participate in a collective experience). The NO! artists, in short, were experimenting with the same idea of participatory democracy that was being tested by the incipient New Left. This met resistance at The Club, the famous meeting-place of the Abstract Expressionists, where the painter Milton Resnick exploded: “What is this stuff involvement? I never saw it! I don’t know what the fuck it looks like. I’m sick of it! I’m not involved! I’m not committed! I shit on those fucking lousy stupid words! They’re not mine and I hate every son of a bitch who uses them. Now that’s who I attack.” This was in January 1961, when the NO! artists were soliciting contributions for their “Involvement Show.”
The impending nuclear apocalypse was the subject of the next group exhibition organized by the NO! artists, “The Doom Show,” held in December 1961, which reflected the mounting anxiety in America in the months leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis and anger at the growing stockpiles of dangerous, highly toxic, nuclear weapons, which had to be tested, resulting in radioactive fallout. The invention of the atomic bomb meant that human beings had developed the technological capacity to destroy life on earth. The potential for annihilation gave rise to feelings of “psychic numbing,” characterized by despair and futility. The purpose of this exhibition was to destroy apathy and wake people up to confront the suicidal madness of the arms race. Although Lewis Mumford argued that artists had a special obligation to forestall “collective suicide,” the subject was so monumental that few artists were able to deal with it frankly, without resorting to evasive metaphors and clichés. The same problems regarding the enormity of the Holocaust – as subject matter in art – were applicable to artists who approached the possibility of nuclear warfare: “Overwhelming as the bomb was,” writes Paul Boyer, in By the Bomb’s Early Light, “it was not lived experience. The central reality of a new era, it was not yet accessible to the creative core of consciousness.” Again, the NO! artists seemed to be tackling the impossible.

The political opposition of the NO! artists to U.S. government policies was courageous at a time when HUAC (the House of Un-American Activities Committee) hearings were still hounding “subversives,” long after McCarthy was dressed-down by Edward Murrow and ultimately disgraced. The country shifted politically with the election of John F. Kennedy, but it was still quite “square” in its overall political complexion, despite the burgeoning civil rights, youth, and peace movements. Fisher’s collages Debris and Hell were among the works included in the 1961 “Doom Show”. That year, “the U.S. was estimated to possess a 30,000 megaton nuclear stockpile, equivalent to one and a half million Hiroshimas...Kennedy planned to double this by 1965.” The Americans had developed intercontinental ballistic missiles and a fleet of nuclear submarines; among the many dangers associated with this radioactive technology, the milk and food supply was contaminated with Strontium 90 from nuclear tests. Debris included a civil defense poster and pictures of victims suffering from exposure to fallout. In Fisher’s chapbook Christ in a Fallout Shelter, he proceeded to attack the futility of fall-out shelters and survival kits, which Kennedy advocated in a television special on civil defense, causing widespread panic.

While he agreed that “Atom arms should be destroyed,” Fisher was surprisingly unsympathetic to the Peace Strikers. His “Message to the Peace Striker” in “Christ in a Fall-Out Shelter” scorned civil disobedience and recommended creative play as an alternative: “Paint! (Talent has nothing to do with art).” Fisher was not alone in being skeptical about the Ban-the-Bomb Movement, as it manifested itself in the early protests of the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA). Yet although “these early CNVA demonstrations were viewed by most people as being somewhat kooky and extreme,” they were an important influence, along with the civil rights sit-ins, for the incipient New Left. Coming from someone who advocated social art and was vehemently opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and atmospheric testing, Fisher’s dismissive view of the organized Ban-the-Bomb protests seems less surprising, when we remember that even Freudian Marxist Herbert Marcuse, possibly the most prominent leftist of the period, also celebrated the “play instinct” as the highest form of protest in Eros and Civilization (1955).
A documentary record of the “Doom Show” is preserved in a black-and-white film by Ray Wisniewski. Also titled Doom Show, the film was shown at the First Film Program at the A/G Gallery, an exhibition space opened in New York in 1961 by George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus (and is sporadically shown at Anthology Film Archives, in the East Village, thanks to Jonas Mekas). There is no narrative and nothing much happens, but the film generates an atmosphere that is vintage early sixties. In this roughly twenty-minute film, a small child at an art opening crashes into works of art and sadistically crushes plastic dolls under the wheels of his tricycle, while an air-raid siren wails on the soundtrack. It has a real-time character to it, like Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie’s Pull My Daisy (1959). Wiesniewski described it enigmatically as “A ritual fire dance in a cell on 10th Street in the shadow of the shadow over Christmas.”

One of the prominent works in the show was Goodman’s assemblage, Psycho-Vanity – Americanus Male” (1961), an attack on machismo and militarism.

Situated in the basement of a building on 10th Street, the March Gallery was an appropriate setting for the “Doom Show,” since it was an underground bunker of sorts, a symbolic fall-out shelter. The “Doom Show” received a positive review in Art News, in spite of the critic’s complaint that Lurie and Goodman were preaching to the already-converted, a more or less standard critique of “protest art.” In another review, Elaine de Kooning compared the work in the show to Kurt Schwitters’ Merz collages and the spirit of Berlin Dada: “When you enter this small gallery, you are overwhelmed with newspaper; headlines of executions and nuclear tests, grotesque pin-up girls, hideous, pasted amalgamations of public faces – a profusion of humor and horror, interchangeable and sickening.” Photographs of the NO!art exhibitions look remarkably similar to the display of the “First International Dada Fair” at Dr. Otto Burchard’s gallery, in Berlin, in 1920, and many other Dada presentations that cared little for bourgeois decorum and good taste.

The NO! artists were sometimes criticized for presenting their work in the established context of art galleries. It was this kind of accusation that led artists like Goodman and D’Arcangelo to take their art to the streets, in the form of a Car Event in 1961. (Like the NO! artists, D’Arcangelo’s early pre-Pop paintings used pin-ups, like Marilyn Monroe, as subject matter in his art. D’Arcangelo was actually once a student of Lurie’s.) In their Car Event, a cross between a Happening and a political protest, the artists turned a car into a float and wore death masks and skulls, protesting the Bomb. Taking place around Tompkins Square Park in the East Village – the site of many political demonstrations over the years – this event anticipated the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations later in the decade. These NO!art activities, along with the appearance of Fluxus events, the emergence of groups like the Artists Tenants Association, and affiliated organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (which solicited help from artists), symbolized the intense restlessness in the art world in the early sixties as the political and generational ground was shifting.

In 1962, NO!art went international, thanks to the interest of Arturo Schwarz, the Milanese collector of Dadaist and Surrealist art. Two NO!art shows were held in Italy in 1962, at the Schwarz Gallery in Milan and the Galleria La Salita in Rome, although, as yet, no one was referring to their art using this label in print. Lurie was somewhat surprised...
Belle Luciana, 1962
20” x 15”
Oil, enamel and paper collage on unprimed canvas
when Thomas B. Hess (the editor of *Art News* and a pillar of the Abstract Expressionist Establishment – he was de Kooning’s greatest supporter) agreed to write an essay for the exhibition poster, in which he stated, “Sam Goodman and Boris Lurie are true Social Realists...They comment on the disgrace of society with the refugee material of society itself – fugitive materials for fugitives from our great disorders – our peripheral obscenities, our garbage, our repulsive factory-made waste matter.”

(Then, again, some critics will write about almost anything, plied with enough cash or other inducements. Hess was the only mainstream art critic to write about NO!art in the critical period from 1960 to 1964. The most important tastemakers, the critics for the *New York Times*, ignored their exhibitions, with the exception of Goodman’s “NO! Sculpture Show” in 1964, which was reviewed by Brian O’Doherty.)

Lurie visited Italy during the exhibitions in Rome and Milan, where he met the veteran Dadaist Marcel Janco, as well as Enrico Baj (of the Nuclear Art Movement) and Roberto Crippa. To hear Lurie describe it, the Italian exhibitions were a great “succès de scandale,” with the Italian police insisting on an 18-year-old age requirement, causing curious people to converge on the exhibitions. In Rome, ten thousand people turned out to see the exhibition, a remarkable crowd. The reception of the exhibitions was mixed, with the Rightists making the same moralizing accusations as their counterparts in America. The conservatives resented these Neo-Dadaists destroying their hallowed conceptions of Art and resorted to name-calling, accusing the NO! artists of being pornographers, who indulged in “Obscenity for its own sake.”

In the most extreme response, Giampiero Giani wrote, in “Lies Among the Trash,” (*Avanti*, Milan): “we must denounce this, and of course, the one to be held responsible for all this is the Schwarz Gallery.”

The critics on the Left, on the other hand, were baffled that Thomas Hess had introduced these artists as Social Realists, since their work clearly had no relation to party-line (Zhdanovist) aesthetic mandates. This designation of their work, as a new kind of “Social Realism,” was perhaps misleading and unfortunate, even if Hess meant to use the term creatively, because the NO! artists were unfavorably compared to heroes of the left like Siqueiros and Guttoso (an artist who had been profiled in *Art News*, in 1958, in a special section, “How art exists under Communism”). “The position of a Guttoso has the unshaken optimism of a realism of strict Marxist observance whereas Lurie has the air of being nihilist or anarchic,” wrote Vittorio Rubiu in a separate preface to the Rome show, clarifying the differences. A few critics were sympathetic to the NO! artists, including another who wrote, “in the fury of their rebellion is implied a very human, a very sincere aspiration to justice and peace, and this is what justified them.” In *L’Unita* the Communist daily, Mario de Micheli was impressed by Lurie’s work, *Lumumba is Dead.*

In preparation for his essay on the Italian exhibitions, Hess wrote a letter to Lurie, asking him to justify his collaboration with the culture industry, if he was so belligerently anti-Establishment. Was he a hypocrite, in other words, for exhibiting in a commercial context when his entire ethos was anti-capitalist? Wasn’t this a contradiction? Lurie’s response was basically pragmatic: “What else should and can an artist who has something to say do but ‘play the exhibition circuit’ – This is the one legitimate outlet...our ‘setup’ provides for us, providing the artist has the energy and the means to take advantage of it.” In this respect, the NO! artists weren’t as militant as their contemporaries, the Situationists.
in France, who refused to compromise their ideological “purity,” wouldn’t cooperate with museums and galleries, and pretty much stopped making Art altogether, at least in any predictable commodified form. In spite of this, we can see parallels between these groups; both heaped scorn on the consumer society, showed their support for anti-colonial movements worldwide, and expressed their utter contempt for the “Doomsday System.”

The signature exhibition of the group, the “NO! Show,” held at the uptown Gallery Gertrude Stein in 1963, included the work of twelve artists. In an accompanying essay, the writer Seymour Krim declared, “Much of the work in this exhibition seems to me the closest approximation of this contemporary madhouse, which is our existential lot, that I have seen.” As the exhibition theme suggests, these artists were articulating what came to be known as the Great Refusal, a phrase which was popularized by Herbert Marcuse in his book One-Dimensional Man (1964). Gertrude Stein described how, in Lurie’s paintings, the element of negation was aimed at “the accepted, the cruelty, the desperation and despair which prevails, to conformism and the materialistic. It is a strong ‘NO’ in a flood of mass-produced ‘YESSES.’” Advertising was so ubiquitous, it was having a subliminal effect on people, brainwashing, persuading and cajoling people to consume. Informed by psychoanalysis, the adman cleverly manipulated the unconscious mind of the consumer, and his political equivalent, the spin doctor or pollster, played an important role in the “engineering of consent.”

From a critical perspective, one can appreciate advertising as a form of covert capitalist propaganda, selling not just commodities but an entire ideology, producing what Vance Packard (in The Hidden Persuaders) called “The Engineered Yes.” This was the reason why Boris Lurie was stamping NO! over the advertisements for cars and dishwashers, which appeared alongside atrocity photographs of Buchenwald and Hiroshima, in mass-circulation magazines. Adorno and Horkheimer complained that, “In the most influential American magazines, Life and Fortune, a quick glance can now scarcely distinguish advertising from editorial picture and text.” Then, as now, the multinational corporations sponsored the news and determined what was newsworthy, or (as the New York Times would have it) “fit to print.” In his collage-paintings and assemblages, Lurie expressed his disgust with the ruling class and the multinational corporations – indeed, the entire capitalist system – for emptying life of its meaning, for the sacrilegious crime of juxtaposing, on alternate pages, pictures of appliances and other enticing commodities with images of wanton mass-murder.

In his “Doom Show Statement,” Stanley Fisher had written how atomic warfare promised “death without meaning, a death without dignity, a lonely death, a death in a sense ‘deserved.’” Two years later, in 1963, Sam Goodman and Dorothy Gillespie mounted “The American Way of Death” at the Champagne Gallery, which had something of a Halloween scare-house atmosphere, judging from the photographs, not one of the most sophisticated presentations of the group. But then again, sophistication was not their forte, it was their target. Goodman and Gillespie’s exhibition title was derived from Jessica Mitford’s best-selling book of the same name, an expose on overpricing in the funeral industry which resulted in government regulation. Mitford’s book launched an attack on the “funeral transaction,” described the extraordinary funerary practices of the “death industry,” and documented the shameless profits of the funeral homes. The “American
Way of Death” exhibition was morbid and ghoulish, indulging in black humor, with coffins (complete with effigies), tombstones, lawn furniture and a cemetery map.86 Again, the NO! artists were attempting to deal with difficult, “impossible” subject matter.

But what the critics objected to most of all were the “nudie” pictures that inevitably seemed to accompany any NO!art exhibition. One of the critics who objected to the pornographic imagery in NO!art, Rosalind G. Wholden, published an article in *Arts Magazine*, singling out Lurie’s 1963 *Immigrant NO! Box* and *NO! Suitcase*, which were covered with Holocaust imagery, pin-ups, advertisements, NO! stencils, swastikas and Stars of David. Apparently unaware that Lurie was a Holocaust survivor – dubbing him “subhuman,” a “self-styled outcast” – Wholden decried the “vileness” of the boxes, claiming that, “The box desecrates the innocent millions herded and slaughtered by Hitler’s Nazis through juxtaposing on its surfaces concentration-camp photographs and glossies of women in obscene poses.”87 Around the same time, the poorly-informed critic Shephard Rifkin, writing for *Art International*, catalogued gruesome incidents he had witnessed while driving an ambulance in East Harlem, and stated, “The largest personal tragedy is most of these artists’ lives probably happened when their pot supplier got busted.”88
Wholden’s objection to Lurie’s work was combined with an attack on the Italian-American painter Rico Lebrun, an influential teacher in California and one of the principal exponents of the “New Humanism” in the late fifties, who made artworks based on the Holocaust that borrowed, stylistically, from European modernism, especially the Expressionists. His work was featured in the Museum of Modern Art’s “New Images of Man” exhibition in 1959, curated by Peter Selz. A survey of post-World War II figurative expressionism, the artists in this show were involved in a return to the figure. Selz and theologian Paul Tillich claimed these artists were resisting the dehumanizing consequences of abstraction by regaining the image of man. They framed their discussion of the work in the language of Existentialism, emphasizing the feelings of anguish and dread associated with their art. While there were parallels between the NO! artists and the “New-Image-of-Man” artists – for example, Sam Goodman’s Fallen Warrior (1961) can be compared with Baskin’s limestone effigy The Great Dead Man (1956), and de Kooning’s Marilyn Monroe (1954) features the ultimate sex-symbol pin-up – there were significant differences, too.

The difficulty with the “New-Image-of-Man” sensibility as an effective form of political art, from the point of view of the NO! artists, was that, as another art historian later described, “in their attempt to make universal statements, the artists avoided those concrete and topical references which would locate their art in history...Instead, we were presented with symbols and situations so obscure and ambiguous as to be ineffective as a form of communication...The humanism of the new-image-of-man painters was not only pessimistic, but anti-democratic as well, for they made no attempt to reach out to the people’ or to depict the daily concerns of the working classes.” This is from an essay by Patricia Hills, on “The Figurative Tradition and the Whitney Museum of American Art,” one of the many museums that became repositories for this socially-acceptable “New-Image-of-Man” art. The conflation of NO!art with the “New-Images-of-Man sensibility” is inappropriate, since the NO! artists referred to topical events, denounced capitalism, and valued involvement-in-art, while working collaboratively as a group.

For the NO! artists, the “New-Image-of-Man sensibility” was anathema, since most of it was no better than armchair liberalism, laced with spirituality. The incongruous juxtaposition of pin-ups and Holocaust victims in Lurie’s Railroad or Buchenwald collages was very obviously completely at odds with Rico Lebrun’s approach to the Holocaust, as exemplified by his painting, Buchenwald Pit (1955), a vortex of limbs inspired by scenes of heaps of corpses photographed in the liberated camps. Lebrun’s approach was more traditional in its conception, influenced by the expressionism of Picasso and Beckmann, while the conceptual strategy in Lurie’s works, contrasting camp victims with erotic photographs of woman, was explosive and akin to the Situationist technique of détournement. In Buchenwald, Lurie pasted erotic photographs of a pin-up around an image of Buchenwald survivors, with the caption, “Can it happen again?”

The symbolic end of the NO!art group was Goodman’s “NO! Sculpture/Shit Show,” held in 1964 at the Gallery Gertrude Stein. Politely described as “colonial calligraphy” in the New York Times, the painted papier mâché Shit Sculptures (made in collaboration with Lurie) were a nihilistic gesture, mocking the art speculators of the day. As piles of look-a-like feces, the sculptures resisted any formal reading, antagonizing an anal society obsessed with accumulating and retaining its wealth, allowing itself limited gratification. As a critic
for Art News noted, the _Shit Sculptures_ represented “the direct unsublimated expression of instinct,” reflecting the philosophy of Freud and Norman O. Brown (*Life Against Death*). (In his 1908 paper, “Character and Anal Eroticism,” Freud noted the connection between feces and money; in the same way that children are taught to withhold their feces, he argued, adults later suspend immediate gratification by investing their money in capitalist enterprises, becoming excessively orderly, parsimonious and obstinate.)

After the “NO! Sculpture/Shit Show,” the NO! artists gained enough notoriety to be jokingly called “Fecalphiles” by the stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce, in the underground newspaper _The Realist_. The scandalous presentation of the _Shit Sculptures_ attracted the collector Leon Kraushar, who visited the “NO! Sculpture Show” to congratulate Goodman on his success. Goodman, however, was not impressed by the Pop art powerbroker, and told him to his face, “I shit on you, too.” Like Manzoni, who sold cans of his own excrement as art (priced at the same cost per gram as gold), Goodman underlined the archaic connection between feces, money and property. In the debased environment of consumer capitalism, what usually passes as art was just shit in the eyes of the NO! artists, who saw, not an affluent, but an effluent society in the United States, where cultural endeavors were supported on the basis of a perpetual war economy.

The activities of the NO!art group were overshadowed by the emergence of Pop art after the success of their 1962 “New Realists” show at Sidney Janis Gallery. Although one writer has compared Pop to NO!art, claiming that, “Neo-Dada...brings us face to face with the more tawdry aspects of contemporary life, especially those of advertising, and in doing so, makes us painfully aware of the vulgarities in which we have acquiesced,” the NO! artists were alienated from their Pop counterparts – since the latter group actively courted the ruling class, apparently celebrating consumer society and the American way of life. In 1964, Lurie held a show of “Anti-Pop Posters” (1963), which consisted of faulty offset printing sheets with miscellaneous advertising imagery. The posters were printed over with pin-up imagery, sadomasochistic scenes, and the words “NO” and “Anti-Pop.” The relationship between the Pop and NO! artists was bound to be antagonistic, since the NO! artists categorically rejected consumer society and commodity fetishism, while most of the Pop artists either celebrated the American Dream uncritically or assumed an attitude of blasé indifference.

**Sexual Politics**

Reviewing the Museum of Modern Art’s 1963 “Art of Assemblage” exhibition, Thomas Hess noted that the prominent erotic content in this genre was notably absent, implying that this material had been censored to placate conservatives. Besides the Surrealist heritage, Hess was also thinking of the NO! artists, since he illustrated Lurie’s _Lumumba is Dead_, which incorporated pin-up imagery. According to Lurie, Alfred Barr and William Seitz visited Roland de Aennle’s gallery in the planning stages of the exhibition and even selected some of his works for the show, excluding them without explanation. Likewise, during “The First International Girlie Show,” held at the Pace Gallery in January 1964, Brian O’Doherty remarked that “Not represented were a persistent and embarrassing trio, Sam Goodman, Boris Lurie and Stanley Fisher, who for years have been using the most obscene pin-ups available as collage material in obvious social commentaries, e.g., a sexy nude next to grisly photographs of gas-chamber victims.”
The same (jarring) analogy (between subjugated women and concentration camp victims) was employed by Betty Friedan, in her best-selling book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, which criticized the internment of housewives in suburban homes, or “comfortable concentration camps.” In spite of the male backlash after the war, the number of female workers continued to increase, and the introduction of the birth-control pill in 1960 was an important advance in their reproductive rights. However, few women were securing the kinds of professional jobs that would put them on a level of equality with men. In 1957, the Ford Foundation sponsored a report, titled *Womanpower*, which examined such issues as discrimination in the workplace, and Kennedy established a commission which proposed equal opportunity, equal pay, and federally-funded child-care centers. Gradually, Congress passed legislation to protect women’s rights, including the Equal Pay Act (1963) and the Civil Rights Act (1964), although women’s earnings actually “dropped” from 66% of men’s wages in 1959 to 58% in 1968.

In the “pin-up” – an expression coined during World War II, when American servicemen displayed pictures of Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth on their barracks’ walls – was a conspicuous symbol of the post-war male backlash. Promoting an ideal of passive female sexuality, pin-ups were such a ubiquitous form of visual culture, it was almost inevitable that they would influence contemporary artists. De Kooning and Rauschenberg were among the first artists to incorporate pin-ups in their work. According to Thomas Hess, de Kooning’s *Women* series of the 1950s were based on pinups, and constituted a form of “emotional and intellectual criticism, in visual form, of the contemporaneous situation of the American woman as reflected in the pin-up photograph,” although this interpretation has subsequently been challenged by feminist art historians like Carol Duncam. Among other artists using pin-up imagery, Hess noted that, “In the violent protest pictures by Sam Goodman and Boris Lurie...the pin-up became a symbol of the capitalist state.”

Incorporating pin-ups, the work of the NO! artists was created at a time when “the objectification of sex became pervasive,” exemplified by the appearance of men’s magazines, and the Kinsey reports on male (1948) and female (1953) sexuality. Later targeted by the feminist movement, the growing sex industry and the proliferation of “pornographic” magazines played an important role in the so-called Sexual Revolution. Lurie began using pin-up imagery in his artworks because he was intrigued by the ubiquity of this material in certain male-occupied areas, while in other contexts, this material was taboo. This contradiction fascinated him, and he was intent on exposing the world of commodified sex, the repression of sexual desire, and the taboos surrounding male prerogatives. Like the emerging generation of feminists, it could be construed that the NO! artists attacked pornography, believing that it debases men and women. However, their use of this material shows the inherent contradiction in their approach, arousing moral indignation while consuming the material in the next instance.

In some respects, the art world was an important vanguard of the Sexual Revolution, and in popular bohemian mythology, the relationship between the artist and his model was a constant source of innuendo. The Chicago-based magazine *Studio* ran a feature on “Greenwich Village – Art Center or Dirty Joke?” in its July 1957 issue, and magazines like *Art and Photography, Art and Camera, Life Study* and *Figure Quarterly* masqueraded as “art” magazines, containing “figure studies” for “artists.” Some of the men’s magazines
(aimed at the swinging playboy and hipster), like *Playboy* (featuring Marilyn Monroe on its first front cover, 1953), *The Gent, The Dude* and *Nugget* published serious prose and fiction, but the main function of these magazines was to serve as outlets for “repressive desublimation,” as Marcuse would put it, reconciling men with capitalism. This critique of the sex industry was expressed in a rhyming poem-painting by Lurie, titled *Liz, Brigit and Jane, The Sweet Narcotics that Dull the Pain* (1960), which referred to the movie star-sex symbols Elizabeth Taylor, Brigitte Bardot and Jane Mansfield.  

In 1962, Lurie began a *Love Series* depicting bound and gagged women, using sadomasochistic photographs (like the images in *Nutris*, or the photographs of Irving Klaw). The “torture” scenes, as he described them, were photo mechanically transferred onto canvas. He supplied this group of works with an ironic title, which acted as the critical component of the series. Represented by images of violation and sadism, the *Love Series* was a debunking of American romance, also unmasking the connection between sadism and capitalism.
and voyeurism, implicating the viewers. The disturbing images he used for *Triple Bound, Gagged*, and *Blindfolded* exposed the master-slave dialectic, as it operates in male-female relations. *Triple Bound* (1962), for instance, showed a woman in fetish wear and leather boots, her mouth gagged, strapped facedown on a small stool. As Laura Mulvey writes, in reference to sadomasochistic pornography, “Women are displayed for men as figures in an amazing masquerade, which expresses a strange male underworld of fear and desire.”

The fact that the NO! artists used “the most obscene pin-ups available” probably accounts for why these artists were excluded from major museum shows. Introducing the “NO! Show,” Krim noted the connection between NO!art and magazines like *Nugget*, which he
edited. Although he acknowledged that *Nugget* was forced to make more compromises than the NO! artists, because of their greater dependence on the marketplace and exposure to censors, he thought both of them were involved in subverting “hollow tradition and dullness.” Acknowledging his own shortcomings, Krim declared, “We need an art that screams, roars, vomits, rages, goes mad, murders, rapes, commits every bloody and obscene act it can to express only a shred of the human emotions that lie prisoner beneath the sanitary tiles here in adman’s Utopia.” He characterized the NO! artists as “a band of rapists in a sense, impatient, unsparing, open-flied and ready for action.” Here, Krim sounded like any number of male chauvinists in this period, who identified with the rapist as a social outlaw, aestheticizing violence against women.

Despite Krim’s troublesome characterization of NO! art, many women participated in their exhibitions, including Yayoi Kusama, Michelle Stuart, Dorothy Gillespie, Gloria Graves and Esther Gillman. They did not exhibit with Lurie, Goodman and Fisher out of opportunism—they were similarly concerned about militarism, fascism and the oppression of women. Gertrude Stein, the art dealer, championed the group later on, in her uptown Manhattan gallery, and interpreted (in a signed press-release) Lurie’s use of pin-ups in explicitly feminist terms: “[Lurie] takes as his symbol the ‘girly’ picture, America’s home-grown brand of pornography. Repudiating conventional manners, he shakes up the viewer; at any cost he strives to make us take heed of our reality. Lurie forces upon us the bitter vision of the cruelly smiling, heartless advertising pin-up girl. Her picture hangs in the locker rooms; it teases the ‘tired business man’ who surreptitiously stuffs a copy of *Playboy* into his attaché case; movie stars become commodities to be measured in inches, the dreams of America. Our environment is polluted with sick eroticism and callous indifference.” Though signed by Stein, this statement sounds an awful lot like Lurie. At any rate, whether it was written by Lurie or Stein is beside the point; there was, at the least, a meeting of minds.

In 1970, at the height of the feminist art movement in the art world, when women were seceding from the Art Workers’ Coalition and other male-dominated leftist groups, Lurie made the following comment on the battle between the sexes, as it was being played out in the New York art world and in people’s personal lives: “I do not like the idea of treating women-artists or women as a group apart, yet women artists approve of it, perhaps for career reasons. But the works of Michelle Stuart, Esther Gilman, Yayoi Kusama, and Gloria Graves, showing in several NO! art manifestations were truly motivated by the specific situation of women in society.” Lurie was insightful about the works his female colleagues created, understanding that, on some level, they were influenced by experiences that were specifically female: “Women NO! artists were overpoweringly concerned with fear: the female, cold, detached, frozen, as in Michelle Stuart’s plaster faces of women in isolated black boxes covered with dark hardly transparent glass, as in Esther Oilman’s fearful feminine conflicts with religion, as with Yayoi Kusama’s obsession-fears of growing multiplying threatening fields full of penises, and to a lesser extent in Gloria Graves’ assemblages and delicate constructions...Male NO! artists embraced woman artists in rebellion.”

The most well-known women artists in the NO! art group, retrospectively, were Yayoi Kusama and Michelle Stuart. The Japanese-born Kusama created phallus-studded...
Accumulations, which she exhibited in the “Involvement Show” and the “NO!art” exhibitions; her solo “One Thousand Boat Show” was held at Gertrude Stein’s gallery in 1963. The obsessive-compulsive nature of Kusama’s work can be related to psychotic episodes, which, in turn, reflected the oppression she suffered while growing up in Japan during the 1930’s. Showing a tendency towards horror vacui (an urge to curve surfaces completely and obsessively), she often painted and decorated her works with polka dots. She also created mirrored rooms, like those of Lucas Samaras, and was later recognized as a leading creator of psychedelic art. The aggressive eroticism of her sculpture has much in common with the surrealist work of Louise Bourgeois, and it is interesting to speculate whether the latter’s The No March (1972, and her NO print, 1973) were influenced by Kusama (and the NO! artists). In the late sixties, Kusama was a notorious figure in the art world for her Happenings, which were frequently performed in the nude.

For her part, Michelle Stuart is now recognized as a leading exponent of Earthworks and feminist art. A friend of the critic Lucy Lippard, Stuart was involved with the Women’s Movement from its inception. A native of California, she studied art in Paris and worked as an assistant for Diego Rivera in Mexico City in the fifties. Her September 1963 article for Artforum on the NO! artists, “NO! is an Involvement,” focused entirely on “these men” Sam Goodman, Stanley Fisher and Boris Lurie, although she also illustrated one of her own works—a rough, irregularly shaped piece of wood, with a plaster cast of a face and a chain attached to its surface. Influenced by the Italian artist Alberto Burri’s distressed works, Flagellant (1963), with its suggestive title and “whip,” shows that sadomasochistic themes weren’t an exclusively male preoccupation (see also Nancy Grossman’s leather fetish masks and drawings).

In retrospect, Michelle Stuart believes that the women in the NO!art group were marginalized by their fellow male artists, and there seems to be no reason to contradict this assertion, since this was a fact of life for most women artists in this period. If we look at the actual works of the NO! artists, rather than relying exclusively on anecdotal evidence, we are compelled to go beyond any simplistic good/evil dichotomy, and adopt a messier interpretation of their work. Lurie’s NO! Toy Poster Overpainted with NO’s (1963), for instance, included an antifeminist cartoon of a husband saying, “I don’t want my bride to keep her career” with NO stencils superimposed. Goodman’s Abortion (1962), a cloth bundle (of “dirty laundry”) sitting on a wooden stool, like Kienholz’s horrific sculpture The Illegal Operation (1962), criticized the social conditions which forced desperate women...
to seek back-alley abortions. Another assemblage by Goodman, his *Psycho-Vanity – Americanus Male*, was an attack on militarism and the mentality of the soldier male. All of these works, while not exactly feminist, were critical of patriarchy and the prevailing tropes of American masculinity.

By the late sixties, as the feminist movement gained strength, women articulated their concerns with greater force, breaking with the male-dominated counterculture. The New Leftists, girded by their Existential Marxist ideology, had placed such a premium on Experience that it soon became evident that not everyone’s experience was alike, and that a woman’s lived experience (in patriarchy) was radically different from that of a man’s. But most men, including progressives, were blithely and fatally unaware of this. *The East Village Other*, a leading Underground newspaper, illustrated a collage on its front cover in November 1967, with the caption, “Girls say YES to men who say NO,” a stupid sentiment. During the student uprisings at Columbia University, women rebelled when they were assigned to do menial, house-working chores. They began questioning the misogynist attitudes of “liberated men” whose liberation was being accomplished at the expense of women. In short, women were an oppressed class. According to Kate Millett, Fluxus artist and author of *Sexual Politics* (1969), too many men were prisoners of the “virility cult.” One could easily substitute Boris Lurie’s name for that of Henry Miller’s, in Millett’s stinging analysis of his work: “What Miller did articulate was the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically, its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality.”

The work of the NO! artists tended to focus on the conjunction of sexuality, women and the Bomb, which was symptomatic of their times. A typical Lurie collage included headlines referring to topical events, advertising imagery, and a profusion of pin-ups, always drawn from heterosexual pornography. Occasionally, his works appeared to equate mass culture and femininity, rejecting both with similar ferocity. And, for his part, Stanley Fisher subscribed to Wilhelm Reich’s phallocentric view of Sexual Revolution. The NO! artists were involved in the post-war male revolt against the “breadwinner ethic,” criticizing the institution of marriage as a form of economic bondage. Although this generation of men were usually motivated by self-interest, Barbara Ehrenreich writes, “a case could be made for putting the male revolt in the long tradition of human efforts toward personal and collective liberation – in step with feminism and with some broad populist impulse toward democracy.”

**Dirty Tricks and Tricky Dick**

“In 1961,” John Felstiner has observed, “as people were listening horrified to the witnesses against Eichmann, U.S. intervention in Vietnam increased decisively. Almost no one noticed it, and from the start to finish our country’s leaders reassured us about the war, by a mixture of euphemism, suppression, and lies.” According to conservative estimates, by the end of the war, 850,000 “enemies” and 400,000 civilians had been killed. The use of napalm and Agent Orange was especially hideous in terms of its human and ecological costs. As a critic who reviewed the “Sam Goodman Memorial Show” in 1967 noted, the protest art of the late sixties was anticipated by the consciousness-raising exhibitions of the NO! artists. When the *Collage of Indignation* was exhibited in 1967, D’Arcangelo
was one of many artists who contributed, affixing a burnt doll against a blue sky. In *Arts Magazine*, Leon Golub wrote, “essentially the work is angry – against the war, against the bombing, against President Johnson, etc. The Collage is gross, vulgar, clumsy, ugly! – exaggeration to the point of bombast...The larger part of the Collage is made up of anti-war slogan paintings and images: ‘NO’ by Les Packer and a sculptured ‘NO’ by Jason Seley.”

In *The Sixties: Days of Hope, Years of Rage*, Todd Gitlin relates how the anti-war movement reached its peak between 1967 to 1970, and imploded after the Kent State killings in 1970. The demise of the New Left was caused by a number of factors, including factionalism, separatism, the narcissism of small differences, authoritarianism, the rejection of civil disobedience in favor of violent confrontation, drugs, mysticism, the commodification of the counterculture, and – of course – the backlash of Nixon’s Silent Majority. Perhaps one of the most eloquent essays on the end of the counterculture was Marshall Berman’s “Faust in the ’60s” (1974), who wrote, “If we are looking for genuine diabolism, rampant nihilism, we should forget about characters in weird clothes who sing songs such as ‘Sympathy for the Devil’...We should focus instead on the sober organization men in crew cuts...
and business suits...doing their jobs in a calm and orderly way...Now, after five years of Nixonian ferocity and malevolence in the service of nothing – of an abyss of cynicism, an ultimate nothingness – we are rediscovering the banality of evil. "The American soldiers responsible for the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam were using the same excuse as the Nazis at Nuremberg; they were merely obeying authority. We had come full circle."

During the counterculture’s demise in the early seventies, the work of the NO! artists – the *Shit Sculptures* in particular – became the focus of a debate on New Left “permissiveness” and child-rearing in the unlikely pages of the technocratic magazine *Leonardo*. In 1971, two psychoanalysts, Emanuel and Reta Schwartz, argued that the puritanical heritage in American society facilitated the excessive conformism of the McCarthy years. The NO! artists were compared to the student activists, and the Schwartzes argued that their forms of protest were archetypally related to children’s “dirty tricks,” like a child who uses its excrement as a weapon to defy authority figures. This interpretation tended to overemphasize unresolved infantile conflicts and underemphasize the conscious, rational motivations of the NO! artists – their pressing need to rebel against a dehumanizing,
suicidal system. By linking NO!art to childish “dirty tricks,” the Schwartz’s allowed conservatives to discredit the NO! artists and the student movement, by stating that their parents had been too “permissive” with them.120

In “Violence and Caprice in Recent Art,” Lincoln Rothschild (a former official with the Works Progress Administration under Roosevelt) responded to the Schwartzes’ article on the NO! artists, contesting the claim that NO!art was an effective form of communication and protest. Specifically, he harrumphed, “Reconstruction of society cannot be accomplished successfully by individuals who have not outgrown self-centered infantile emotionalism and are incapable of recognizing the need for disciplined patterns of productive cooperation.”121 Rothschild’s ideal political art was represented by Jacques-Louis David’s didactic neoclassicism, which promoted republican virtues (think The Death of Socrates). Instead of emphasizing the negative, Rothschild argued, it was the duty of progressives to assert positive values like loyalty and cooperation. This ultimately boiled down to a thinly-veiled apologia for authoritarianism, which took on sinister connotations in the call for “social hygiene,” as Boris Lurie pointed out in a rejoinder.

Lurie was insistent in affirming that the revolt of the NO! artists was consciously and rationally planned, countering Rothschild’s critique of their work, by arguing that the
“NO! artists have made frequent statements on their thoughts, methods and aspirations in articles, published interviews and exhibition catalogues and brochures...The NO! artists were highly organized: they held planned exhibitions on themes collectively decided upon in advance; they collaborated in producing works; they collectively pronounced their ideas. They never claimed to be actually reconstructing society.”

By the mid-seventies, the death of the New Left was an accepted fact and its survivors were attacked on all sides by intellectuals who referred to psychoanalysis, ego psychology and normative morality. The debate about NO!art in the pages of the technocratic art-and-science magazine Leonardo was really a meta-discussion on the New Left.

**Same Old Shit**

Art-historical accounts of the 1960's are inadequate because they rarely discuss, in any depth, the dissidents like the NO! artists. In the sixties, the formalists were in ascendance in art history and criticism, particularly after the publication of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* in 1961, which confirmed him as the leading tastemaker in the art world. His writings were disseminated among a larger audience, who had missed his articles when they originally appeared in *The Nation*, *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*. There was something very persuasive about Greenberg situating modern painting not with the political radical Gustave Courbet, but with the bourgeois painter Edouard Manet, for focusing our attention as viewers upon the ways in which Manet drew attention to the picture plane and its basic material constituents (pigment, canvas and frame). Greenberg ultimately denied the materialist basis of painting, arguing in favor of “eyesight alone.” This formalism in criticism was remarkably well suited to a technological society maturing in the repressive years of McCarthyism.

Formalist critics argued that artists should concern themselves with the immanent properties of their chosen media and avoid extraneous subject matter. In his article on “Picasso Since 1945,” Greenberg discussed Picasso’s *The Charnel House* (1944-45) without even mentioning the subject of the Holocaust: “It seems to me that in *The Charnel House* Picasso also makes a specific correction to the colour of the previous picture (Guernica) by introducing a pale blue-grey amid the blacks and greys and whites. This works, along with the use of priming instead of applied white, to give the later painting more ease of space, more air.” His comments on this painting were strictly reduced to the formal aspects of the painting, and didn't elaborate on the reasons why Picasso left this painting unfinished, because, as the painter himself stated, “To finish, to execute – don't these words have a double meaning? To terminate, but also to finish off, to kill, to give the coup de grâce.”

The sense of incongruity between Greenberg’s formal description and its subject matter is a classic example of formalism’s shortcomings.

The main reason why NO!art is no longer remembered has to do with the dominance of conservative art historians, who define the parameters of the established canon, and the persistent influence of formalism in the academy. The authoritative textbooks of the period contain no mention of the NO! artists, and a major exhibition of “Neo-Dada” circulated by the American Federation of Arts in 1994, followed by the Whitney Museum’s Beat Generation show, completely ignored their work. One of the most persuasive theories of American art in the fifties and sixties argues that an aesthetic of indifference
developed in this phase of the Cold War that perfectly harmonized with the climate of repression during the McCarthy years. In her article, “The Art of Indifference,” Moira Roth discussed the pioneering roles of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, and particularly the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, as a precursor of the “cool” forms of Pop and Minimalism.125

Inspired by an older ethos of existential Marxism, powered by Sartrean concepts of involvement and authenticity, which required commitment and honesty, the NO! artists, with their passionately angry presentations, definitely weren’t “cool,” which became the dominant aesthetic trend as the sixties progressed, with the rise of Pop, Minimalist and Conceptual Arts. Although the NO! artists anticipated the “angry arts” of the late sixties and the violent protests on the streets, they were, in a sense, a throwback to an earlier time. An art of angry defiance, the NO!art movement of the early sixties had its political limitations, since it failed to provide a dialectical analysis of social problems, along the lines of factographic or institution-critique art. In The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach (1959), Ernst Fischer had written, “The apocalyptic contingency must be recognized as ‘conceivable,’ yet shown to be ‘avoidable.’”126

While the NO! artists were, in some sense, like anarchists or Dadaists, who engaged in expressive politics, instead of articulating a programmatic response to their situation and offering solutions, they also made an important formal contribution, anticipating the work of post-modernists like Martha Rosler, in drawing the connection between “concerned photography,” voyeurism and the vicarious sadism of the onlooker. Rosler’s montage from her installation Unknown Secrets (1987-88), juxtaposing a photograph of Ethel Rosenberg with newsprint and advertising imagery, stimulates “feelings of desire, identification, inadequacy, and alienation” in the same way as Lurie’s Buchenwald – “[destabiliz[ing] any facile perception of a unified object by a unified subject.”127

The NO! artists were dissidents who rejected the liberal assumptions of their peers and challenged the moral authority of the United States in a period of Cold War repression and censorship. Their strident anti-capitalist rhetoric, needless to say, didn't sit well with the Establishment. NO!art was a protest against consumer capitalism, American imperialism, and racist bigotry; the sexual politics of the group was more ambivalent and problematic. Besides the anti-capitalist stance of the NO! artists, the group alienated many feminists and liberals who were repelled by the incorporation of pornographic imagery in their art. Displayed in a public setting, the “obscene” imagery in NO!art exposed a pornographic subculture that was hypocritically hidden by the mainstream culture, but very much part of its economic and social dynamic. The gallery visitors on 10th Street were disgusted and appalled, and the uptown museums didn't want to have anything to do with the lurid trio of the NO! artists.

The NO! artists’ defense was that they were merely showing society as it is, and if the art is hideously ugly then that is a reflection of society, rather than their own delinquency. Lurie and his friends seized on society’s addiction to war and violence, and protested the degradation human beings are forced to suffer under repressive and dehumanizing circumstances. Lurie didn't exempt America from his withering criticism. No fey Pop artist he. Lurie was the anti-Warhol, trying to stake out a position as a leftist, humanist
alternative to the disinterested aesthetic of the Pop artist. But, as we have seen, whatever progressive anticapitalist, antinuke, anticolonial messages Lurie imparted in his NO!art were undercut by this disturbing, persistent focus on the violated female body. That was the main reason why the NO!art was never accepted into the avant-garde canon and continues to be excluded to this day.

**Footnotes**

25. Lurie and Krim, p. 54.
27. Arendt, p. 422.
28. Arendt, pp. 72, 73.
34. Michael Sgan-Cohen, “The Jewish Experiment in Art,” *Art in America* (May-June 1976), p. 45. See also: Avram Kavram: *The Jewish Experiment in the Art of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1976). But what about Goya’s “Disasters of War” series or Delacroix’s Massacre at Chios – surely these paintings, which deal with atrocities, are also “successful” as works of art?
37. Brian O’Doherty, “Robert Rauschenberg. The Sixties,” *American Masters. The Voice and Myth in Modern Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974, 1982), p. 256: “Watching Rauschenberg select old photoengraving plates at the New York Times in 1962 – he had called and asked in he could have some – it was clear that this nonspecificity was on his mind.” O’Doherty links Rauschenberg’s work to the experience of the urban flaneur: “The vernacular glance is what carries us through the city every day, a mode of almost unconscious, or at least divided, attention.” (p. 256).
43. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1977), p. 20. Although many newspaper supported American aggression in Southeast Asia, these publications nevertheless proceeded to reproduce atrocity photographs alongside their articles. In explaining this paradox, John Berger noted that the media were able to print these appalling pictures with impunity because, as Sontag has suggested, they shock the viewer only temporarily – their lasting effect is to deaden the emotions and encourage passivity and helplessness: “It is generally assumed that its purpose is to awaken concern...But the reader....may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy. And as soon as this happens even his sense of shock is dispersed: his own moral inadequacy may now shock him as much as the crimes being committed in the war. Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance....In both cases, the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticized. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody.” – John Berger, “Photographs of Agony” (1972), in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 39-40.
60. Michelle Stuart, “NO is an Involvement,” Artext Forum (September 1963), pp. 36-37.
61. Lurie and Krim, p. 58.
62. Milton Resnick, “Attack: 1961,” Scrap 3 (1961), p. 2. A recorded dialogue with Ad Reinhardt, at the Club. Scrap, an irreverent, cheaply-produced artists’ newspaper, was edited by Sidney Geist. Resnick does not mention the NO!art exhibitions, but the timing – the statement was made at the end of January, and the exhibition was held in April – is probably no coincidence, especially since Fisher’s Beat Coast East was reviewed in the same publication.
65. Tagg, p. 72.
and Social Science, 250. (March 1947), pp. 113-120.
84. Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 163.
91. Brian O’Doherty, cited in Lurie, “Shit NO!” (1970), in Lurie and Krim, p. 63: “The ultimate revolution of the subject matter is to be found at the Gallery Gertrude Stein...these aggregations of colonic calligraphy contain many formal excellences for anyone whose purist education forces them to perceive them. But the subject matter puts the joke on those who find formal values in it. Those who do not are forced to deny the legitimacy of values that by now have been inculcated into several college generations.”
99. Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963). Chapter 21 is on “Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp.” She writes, “Strangely enough, the conditions which destroyed the human identity of so many prisoners were not the torture and the brutality, but conditions similar to those which destroy the identity of the American housewife.” (pp. 305–6.)
101. Thomas B. Hess, “Pinup and Icon. Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970,” Art News Annual 38 (1972), p. 235. For an alternative reading, see: Carol Duncan, “The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” Heresies 1 (January 1977), pp. 46-50. Citing de Kooning’s work, she argues that, “Time and again, the male confronts the female nude as an adversary...So often do such works invite fantasies of male conquest...that the subjugation of the female will appear to be one of the primary motives of modern erotic art.” – Duncan, p. 46.
104. This material is available on microfilm in the New York Public Library, catalogued under “Popular Periodicals for the Years 1955-1967.” Call number “ZAN 3703.”


109. Lurie and Krim, pp. 64 ff.

110. Michelle Stuart, "NO is an Involvement," *Artforum* (September 1963), pp. 36-37.


112. According to Elaine Tyler May, an historian who has examined the symbolic role of the Bomb in everyday life and popular culture, “A photograph of Hollywood sex symbol Rita Hayworth was actually attached to the bomb dropped on the Bikini Islands...The designer of the revealing suit chose the name 'bikini' top suggest the swimwear's explosive potential.” May’s discussion focuses on how male anxieties about women's changing status were defused by a Cold War ideology, which emphasized the role of women in civil defense. This helped to trap within the domestic setting by giving them the illusion of performing an important role, as if to compensate for the meaninglessness of their daily lives. However one views the sexual politics of the NO!art group, the conjunction of women, sexuality and the Bomb in their work was symptomatic of this period in American history. See: Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues. Sex, Women, and the Bomb," in Larry May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 165.


117. Leon Golub, “The Artist as an Angry Artist,” *Arts Magazine* (April 1967), pp. 48-49. This was part of The Angry Arts Against the War in Vietnam, January 29 to February 4, 1967, which numbered 600 New York artists, produced under the aegis of the Artists and Writers Protest. In his book *The New Humanism. Art in a Time of Change* (New York: Praeger, 1974), Barry stated that "Boris Lurie[s]...NO' paintings, assemblages and 'Altered Men' series show the destruction of the image, and the artists' refusal to comply with society's definition of his role as artist. The March Gallery scene in the early part of the 1960's, of which Boris Lurie and the late Sam Goodman were a part, can be thought of as the last aspect of object creation before actional Humanism." (p. 159) The trajectory from NO!art to groups like the Art Workers' Coalition and the Guerrilla Art Action Group is correct, even if those artists had little, if any, influence.


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<td>2012</td>
<td>NO!art of the 60s: Boris Lurie (1924-2008)</td>
<td>Robert F. Kennedy Center For Justice and Human Rights, Florence, Italy</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>Boris Lurie: NO!art</td>
<td>Zverev Center for Contemporary Arts, Moscow, Russia</td>
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<td>The Art of Boris Lurie</td>
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<td>Optimistic – Disease – Facility, Boris Lurie</td>
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<td>Buchenwald – New York, with Naomi T. Salmon</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>NO!art and The Aesthetics of Doom</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>NO!art — Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst</td>
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<td>Boris Lurie und NO!art — Haus am Kleistpark</td>
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<td>Dance Hall Series — Endart Galerie, Berlin</td>
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<td>1988</td>
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1975  Recycling Exhibiton — Israel Museum, Jerusalem
1974  Boris Lurie at Inge Baeker — Inge Baeker Galerie, Bochum, Germany
        NO!art Bags — Galerie und Edition Hundertmark, Köln
        Boris Lurie & Wolf Vostell — Galerie Rewelsky, Köln
        NO!art with Sam Goodman & Marcel Janco — Ein-Hod-Museum, Ein-Hod, Israel
1973  NO!art Painting Seit 1959 — Galerie René Block, Berlin; Galleria Giancarlo Bocchi, Milano
1970  Art & Politics — Kunstverein Karlsruhe
1964  NO & ANTI-POP Poster Show — Gallery Gertrude Stein, New York
        Box Show — Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles
1963  NO!show — Gallery Gertrude Stein, New York
        Boris Lurie at — Gallery Gertrude Stein, New York
1962  Sam Goodman & Boris Lurie — Galleria Arturo Schwarz, Milano
        Doom Show — Galleria La Salita, Roma
1961  Pinup Multiplications — D’Arcy Galleries, New York
        Involvement Show — March Gallery, New York
        Doom Show — March Gallery, New York
1960  Dance Hall Series — D’Arcy Galleries, New York
        Adieu Amerique — Roland de Aenlle Gallery, New York
        Les Lions — March Gallery, New York
        Tenth Street New York Cooperative — Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
        Vulgar Show — March Gallery, New York; Joe Marino’s Atelier, New York
1959  Drawings USA — Museum of Modern Art, New York
        10th Street — Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
1951  Dismembered Figures — Barbizon Plaza Galleries, New York
1950  Boris Lurie — Creative Gallery, New York
Boris Lurie’s early work, though it can be divided into several distinct bodies, is intensely focused on the subject of women, and in ways that are richer, more articulated, and far more intimately sympathetic than the vast majority of work treating the same subject, whether of that or of any other period in history. Lurie arrived in America in 1946 at the age of 22, a young man bereaved of his mother, grandmother, sister, and young sweetheart by the Nazis, and robbed of his own adolescence, which he suffered in their death camps. The female figures that populate his work, from the *Dismembered Women* (1955-57), through the *Dancehall* (1955), and *Three Women* (1955-57), to the *Love Series* (1963) and *Pin-ups* (1960-1964) must be understood through the matrix of the imponderable pain the loss of those dearest to him would inflict. The futile longing for their simple presence by his side, the desperate imaginings of what might have been – for them far more so than for himself – had the world not fallen into the clutches of evil, and the constant recognition that violence and inhumanity are equally a danger inherent in the everyday relations of the strong to the weak, the rich to the poor, and male to female, would inform his art even as he matured into the uncompromising radical his later work reveals. Because Lurie’s passion, or rather, compassion for the subject is so multifarious, his fundamental and overwhelming sympathy for women is sometimes misunderstood, especially in the later work, as unwelcome sexual obsession. The mirror he holds up to society is sometimes mistaken for the un-self-conscious mirror of his soul; his own, evidently vigorous, sexuality, forever colored, and indeed perhaps somehow stunted, by the camp experience, is rendered suspect by the insistent proximity of violence and death. His *Dismembered Women*, *Pin-Ups*, and *Love Series*, among others, at once assert that the objectification of women is violence against women and that female sexuality is a fundamental and ineradicable force, ideas difficult at best to incorporate in a single work.

Lurie was not a sufferer who wished or tried to forget. Although he was damaged in ways we shudder to imagine, he was a deeply aware artist and thinker who insisted in both his art and his writings on capturing and understanding the meaning of his experience and expressing it for those whose good fortune had spared them the same, for to fail to understand what Lurie and millions of others had suffered would be to deny it entirely, to let it slide into the oblivion of history, another impotent fact among so many.
In the *Three Women* and *Dancehall Series*, Lurie’s women, his deceased mother, grandmother, sister, and sweetheart, are transformed in the lens of his insistent focus into melancholy angels gazing out over the vast wasteland of history, no longer able to meet the eye of the living, or into towering protectresses, cradling the diminutive bodies of damaged men lost in their thoughts, clinging as if to memories about to evanesce, shuffling in silence through the dim crepuscule of the dancehall. They have grown in memory into these larger-than-life creatures, though they may no longer seek nor confer solace.
Lurie loved the dancehalls of the forties and fifties, places where men and women could interact closely, somewhat free of the normal constraints of society. They were places where he could observe the intimate interaction of couples of all ages, a fact that certainly would have evoked for him the truncated lives of the women who were destroyed in the Holocaust, and what might have been. His dancers suggest the ghostly presence of these others, forever denied their futures, their simple pleasures, the joys and sorrows of love and companionship. Where others came to forget, he came to remember.
Untitled (Two Women), 1956
45 ½” x 36 ¾”
Oil on Masonite
He infuses the dance of life with a profound melancholy, the melancholy of memory and of what shall never be. His men appear weak and starved, wanting only to rest in the comforting arms of their companions, or hungering and furious, intent that they shall not be separated from their love. In some of the pictures (e.g., Dancehall Yellow, above), the form of the woman is obscure; it is unclear whether she is entangled in the arms of her partner or whether he dances with her only in his frantic imagination.

Dancehall Yellow, 1955
Oil on paper mounted on board
15” x 11”
In *Untitled* (c. 1955) the foreground male figure almost dissolves into his partner, creating the effect that she appears to cradle a non-existent child in her arms. The distinctly smaller, mostly faceless, male figures of the untitled Dancehall charcoal of 1955, one of them in evening trousers that could easily be concentration camp stripes, seem to melt into their Amazonian companions – the survivors, too, have lost everything and long desperately for what cannot be.
In spare yet ambiguous strokes, Lurie conveys the profound tragedy of both victim and survivor. His figures keep dancing, loving, and living in his mind’s eye though they no longer exist, their memories dominated by the dead, and which grow until they overpower everything, a motif that also appears in his novel *House of Anita*. The guilt of the survivor is mingled with the pure love of the bereft. Time has stopped, and it lingers forever at the portal of what might have been.

**Female Back, 1960**  
*Oil on cardboard*  
18” x 22”
Beginning in the early Fifties, Lurie created a series of paintings in which he depicted women as an amalgam of disembodied limbs and anatomical parts, immediately suggesting the desecrations to which the victims of the Nazis were subjected. As in all of his engagements of the subject of women, the works at once speak of the objectification of women as a form of violence – voyeurism as a kind of dismemberment – the all too typical real violence to which women are routinely subjected, the irresistible sexual appeal the female body held for the artist, and the irrepressible force of feminine sexuality, even under the dismembering eye of lust.
Lurie’s sometimes abstracted figural works of the middle and late Fifties, employing aspects of Abstract Expressionist practice and technique, are infused with a melancholy tone. They were often created on unprimed canvas, conferring upon them a condign sense of ephemerality.
Untitled, 1960-1961
Oil on canvas
35” x 26”
**Untitled, (Guilt), 1960**

*Oil and paper*

22" x 17"
For many years, Lurie harbored the intention of leaving America, with whose troubling politics and dis-engaged way of life he was in profound disagreement, projecting his imminent departure for France or Italy. But after months or even a year spent abroad, he would always realize that he was incapable of working elsewhere, that his work profoundly derived from America, and that America was where he must be to create.
Untitled, 1961
Oil on canvas
39 ½" x 39"
Untitled, c. 1961
Oil, watercolor and paper collage on styrofoam
24” x 26 ¾” x 1 ½”
**Postart, 1960**  
*Oil and tape on board*  
40 ¾” x 15 ¼”

**Untitled, 1960**  
*Oil, paper collage and canvas on cardboard*  
31” x 8 ¾”
Anita, 1962
Oil and paper collage on canvas
47” x 37”
Hand, 1962
Oil and paper collage on cardboard
36" x 30"
In his introduction to the exhibition Selected Pin-Ups, 1947-1973, Boris Lurie writes, “On an entirely different level – and do not be surprised – the pin-ups constitute the contents of uncounted mass-graves of executed Jewish women of World War Two. Their physical sensuality, their feminine gigantism, their pure anger masquerading as ecstasy in their twitching orgiastic faces, is nothing but a cover-up then for sublime affirmation, of anti-death procreation, of pure, though hysterical, death-frightened, pre-execution protestation.”
During the early sixties Lurie created numerous large-scale social collages using a unique transfer process which confers upon them the sense of a gone world, a faint evocation of memory, of nostalgia, even though the imagery he’s using is contemporary; at the same time, they suggest that memory is whitewash. The works often bear simple, homey titles, like *Tomato, Salad,* or *Bananas* (opposite) and they incorporate little domestic elements alongside wholesome images of debutants, country weddings, and garden parties and their appurtenances, interspersed with starker imagery from girlie magazines. The effect is powerful, implying, among other things, that the chaste family values America professes to revere are a lie, that its domestic bliss is a self-deception and a form of bondage, that the mist of girlish innocence with which it obfuscated female lives was a fairy-tale, that our ignorance of who we are is a crass ignorance.
Bananas, 1962
Oil and paper collage on canvas
58 x 47
Lolita, 1962
Paper collage mounted on board
40 ½" x 56"
Large Pinups (Feathers), 1962
Oil and paper collage on canvas
72 ½” x 46”
**NO (with Pinups and Shadow),**

1959-1963

*Oil and paper collage on canvas*

43 3/4" x 44"
“NO” appears in Lurie’s paintings: No! No! No! to the accepted, the cruelty, the desperation and despair which prevails, to conformism and the materialistic. It is a strong “NO” in a flood of mass-produced “YESSES”. And so: he tears the pin-ups; he tosses them down on his canvas to fall where they may. His stunning statement has been made.

– Gertrude Stein, 1963

**Torn Papers (TED), 1963**

*Paint and paper collage on Masonite*

16” x 19”
Untitled (IN), c. 1963
Oil and collage on canvas
21 ½” x 32”

Big NO Painting, 1963
Oil and paper collage on canvas
65 ½” x 85”
(opposite)
NO (Red and Black), 1963
Oil on canvas
22" x 35"
Lurie’s weathered Suitcases from the early 1960s, painted and collaged, mixing memory and desire, are the baggage of humanity, the tragedy and the hope we all bear, even against our will. They are clearly the property of Jews, the perennial wanderers in the desert, the homeless and the longing, the restless. They bear marks of their sojourns among the hostile; in their wear and defiance, they assert: we will not be forgotten; we will not stop seeking.

A parallel series of works, done later in the decade, alludes to those exiles in their own land – the homeless, the “bag-ladies” – who carry their meaningless possessions ever with them, in their frantic attachment to their worthless things still wed to to system that has spit them out.
Untitled (Literal Painting),
c. 1969
Oil on canvas
18 ½” x 13 ½”
Untitled (Literal Painting),
c. 1969
Oil and paper collage on cardboard
10 3/4” x 8 1/4”
Untitled, 1969
Oil on unprimed canvas
44 x 37 ½"
In the mid-seventies, Lurie made a series of works from found pornographic images onto which he painted so as to efface aspects of the models’ visages and bodies. Typically the faces are obliterated, and often the bodies are painted to isolate their sexual characteristics as well. The evident intention is to point up the fact that pornography depersonalizes its objects, sometimes violently, but, as in much of Lurie’s engagement with sex in society and sex in commerce, he also, in so doing, informs the viewer that he himself is diminished in the process, both in that he is prevented from seeing the humanity in others, that he is, in fact, complicit in snuffing it out, and in that the locus of his own vision is accordingly severely and chronically narrowed.
From 1970-1972 Lurie created a series of collage works integrating images and stark single words of a sharp political and social critical – and often scatological – tenor, sometimes instituting surprisingly elegant play using only the elements these brief words. The work is a commentary on the economic power relations of the sexes, the degradation that political power typically engenders, and the horrors of war.

Please (Plea), c. early 1970s
Collage, tape, and charcoal on paper
18” x 36”
Slave (Save), 1962-1975
Collage, tape, and varnish on paper
13 ¾” x 19”
**Untitled**, c. mid 1970s

*Collage on paper*

11” x 8”

Collection of Gertrude Stein
Untitled, c. mid 1970s
Collage on paper
10" x 8"
Collection of Gertrude Stein
He takes as his symbol the “girly” picture, America’s home-grown brand of pornography. Repudiating conventional manners, he shakes up the viewer; at any cost he strives to make us take heed of our reality, Lurie forces upon us the bitter vision of the cruelly smiling, heartless advertising pin-up girl. Her picture hangs in the locker rooms; it teases the “tired business man” who surreptitiously stuffs a copy of *Playboy* into his attache case; movie stars become commodities to be measured in inches, the dreams of America. Our environment is polluted with sick eroticism and callous indifference. – Gertrude Stein, 1963
Untitled, c. late 1970s
Oil on canvas
24” x 23”
In the years since his death in 2008, the Boris Lurie Art Foundation, established to support politically engaged art and to propagate the work of Boris Lurie, has mounted exhibitions of Lurie’s work at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York, at the Zverevsky Center for Contemporary Art in Moscow and at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights in Florence, Italy.