Ramesh Ramsahoye: Fra Angelico’s San Marco Altarpiece ‘Crucifixion’ and the ‘First Way of Prayer’ of St. Dominic

John Finlay: Michelangelo Buonarroti’s The Last Judgement

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John Finlay: Interview with Elizabeth Cowling

Dance: Breeze Robinson: Swan Lake:

Film Reviews: The Hurt Locker, Man on Wire
From the Editor

Welcome to *Artfractures Quarterly* winter issue. We continue along the same lines as our autumn Quarterly by including and contrasting art historical essays, exhibitions, interviews, dance, book and film reviews. This quarter tenders a fascinating ‘Special Essay’ by Ramesh Ramsahoye on the Renaissance Master Fra Angelico (c. 1395—February 18, 1455), whom Giorgio Vasari referred to in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550—1568) as “a rare and perfect talent”. Ramsahoye presents us with a beautifully illustrated and lively discussion illuminating the attitudes, devotional exercises and religious imagery in relation to the San Marco Altarpiece (Museo di San Marco, Florence). To complement this piece the Quarterly has included a short essay on Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*—the artist’s famous fresco cycle in the Sistine Chapel, Rome—inspired by the poetry of Dante’s *L’Inferno*, but equally influenced by Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* (1443-1474), denouncing the practice of selling apostolic positions and, according to Michelangelo, the hypocrisy surrounding the Vatican hierarchy.

We also have a very special interview this quarter with the art historian and curator Professor Elizabeth Cowling. The Quarterly asked Elizabeth about her role as curator of twentieth century Modern art and her own personal experiences whilst creating contemporary exhibitions around the world.

Our regular film reviews bring together Steve Heath’s hilarious and rather anarchic review of ‘The Hurt Locker’, with Helen Taylor’s highly poetic interpretation of the Oscar™ winning ‘Man on Wire’. Breeze Robertson also gives as an insider’s view of ‘Swan Lake’ preformed by The Imperial Russian Ballet Company.

Our first two issues are currently free to readers before *Artfractures Quarterly* becomes a peer review journal, and we have set out to establish what we do and stand for: quality and excellence in the field of arts. Please continue to enjoy our journal and we look forward to a long and lasting relationship with all those who encounter the Quarterly. We would also like to extend a warm welcome to our new Chairman and Editorial Advisory Panel. The Quarterly wishes to thank all those who continue to support us at Artfractures.

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Special Essay

Fra Angelico’s San Marco Altarpiece ‘Crucifixion’ and the ‘First Way of Prayer’ of St. Dominic

Ramesh Ramsahoye (Independent Scholar)

Fra Angelico, San Marco Altarpiece, tempera on panel, 1437, Museo di San Marco, Florence

In his biography of Fra Angelico, Vasari paints the picture of a gentle, spiritual man—a pious monk who served God through his artistic talents. In his early work as a manuscript illustrator, Fra, or ‘Beato’[i], Angelico learned how to produce precise images on a small scale. The predella panels he painted for the high altarpiece of the Church at the Monastery of San Marco, the religious community where he lived and worked in Florence, show such a love of detail that Giorgio Vasari singled out these small and exquisitely rendered paintings for great praise:

…The predella, containing scenes of the martyrdom of SS. Cosmas and Damian and others, is so beautiful that one cannot ever imagine ever seeing anything executed with more diligence or containing little figures as delicate or as skilfully realised. [ii]

In The Dream of Deacon Justinian, Fra Angelico’s detailed depiction of domestic objects—the Deacon’s clogs sit on the floor at the head of the bed, a little basket hangs upon the headboard—is in the service of disguised symbolism, a convention originating in Northern European religious painting.
The Dream of Deacon Justinian, tempera on panel, predella from the San Marco Altarpiece

The glass bottle of water standing upon the headboard refers to the Deacon’s spiritual purity and devoutness. The Virgin Mary was compared to a “vessel of clear water” and we find this symbol of her virginity in Filippo Lippi’s San Lorenzo Annunciation, the decanter in the right foreground closely resembling the one in Fra Angelico’s predella.

Fra Filippo Lippi, San Lorenzo Annunciation, tempera on panel, 1440, Martelli Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence

Deacon Justinian’s simple room—furnished with the barest of essentials—resembles the cells reserved for the monks at San Marco. At this observant Dominican monastery religious life was strictly governed by the Constitutions of the order. The monks led a simple life of contemplation and prayer, involving fasting and vows of silence. Sleeping arrangements were austere:

The brethren shall not sleep on mattresses, unless they cannot obtain straw or something of that sort on which to sleep. They shall sleep dressed in tunic and shoes. It is lawful to sleep on straw, a woollen mat or sacking. [iii]
The miraculous cure that Justinian receives (saints Cosmas and Damien attach the leg of a Moor to replace his ulcerated limb) is portrayed as a reward for his piety and self-abnegation. Justinian becomes exemplar to those who would have needed stories like this to sustain them in a life requiring a discipline and abstinence few would be capable of today. The Deacon’s arms are crossed while he sleeps, forming a gesture understood to signify humility. We see the same crossed arms in the figure of the Virgin Mary in Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation*, situated at the top of the stairs leading to the monks’ dormitory. A contemporary sermon by Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce explicitly elucidates the meaning of this pose…

...Lifting her eyes to heaven, and bringing up her hands with her arms in the form of a cross, she ended as God, the Angels and the Holy Fathers desired: “Be it unto me according to thy word.” [iv]

The Virgin, through her humility and acceptance of the divine will, served as a model of obedience for the monks. As Paolo Morachiello has pointed out:

*Observants not only considered the Virgin to be the first and perfect example of the apostolate but also saw her as their inspiration and model.* [v]

The prominent placement of the *Annunciation* at the top of the stairs is not only illustrative of the importance of the Virgin to the monks as an exemplar, but also demonstrates how carefully Fra Angelico conceived images in relation to the physical spaces of the monastery. The stairs to the dormitory become symbolic of the spiritual ascent the brothers had to undergo and placed them in a position of supplication before the fresco. Beneath the painting a text reminded them to say a “Hail Mary” before going to sleep. Considering these two factors, image placement and the physical position of the monk’s body are crucial to understanding the *Crucifixion* in the *San Marco Altarpiece*.

*Fra Angelico, The Annunciation, c. 1445, fresco, Monastery of San Marco, Florence*

Originally, the central predella panel would have represented *The Entombment*, a subject not related sequentially to the scenes from the lives of Cosmas and Damian, which flanked this work. [vi] However, there is a connection with the main panel of
the altarpiece, which shows the Madonna and Child with attendant saints in a sacra conversazione. In both scenes the worshipper is encouraged to contemplate the body of Christ and his sacrifice: themes connected to the sacrament of Communion and key to understanding the devotional focus of the altarpiece as a whole.

Fra Angelico, The Entombment of Christ, tempera on panel, c. 1437

A mood of formality and solemn reverence—established by the symmetrical organization of the composition—is entirely appropriate to the theme of burial. Fra Angelico evokes the Crucifixion through the position of Christ's body by retaining the form of the cross. Christ is ostensibly supported by Nicodemus, although he does not seem to convincingly bear the saviour's weight. Fra Angelico allows Christ to float almost weightlessly, hinting at the miracle of resurrection, and symbolised by a myriad of delicately painted flowers that have burst into life and by the grass that is tall and lush. The palm tree on the left recalls Christ's Triumphal entry into Jerusalem and those who came out to welcome the Messiah carrying palm leaves. These elements also symbolise the saviour's triumph over original sin, achieved through sacrifice, and over death through the Resurrection. Notably, Christ's body is handled with cloth-covered hand—it is too holy to touch. Vessels containing the body of Christ in the form of the Eucharist were similarly held and wiped clean of human stain during the mass. Thus, on closer inspection, the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist contemplate the body of the redeemer with the same fitting reverence as the devotee preparing to receive Christ's body before the altarpiece. The raising up of Christ by his three followers mirrors the Elevation of the Host during the mass, after the bread has transmogrified into Jesus' physical body. It is easy today to underestimate just how deeply this ritual affected the congregation. The contemporary preacher Girolamo da Siena records excesses of piety approaching hysteria…

do not imitate those many deeds which different people do, such as the many who run like madmen to see the consecrated host; many, who if they have not come near it, are not happy; many who after one priest has held the consecrated host in his hand, leave him to go to another who is holding the most higher; others who, during the sermon, leave to go and view the body of Christ; and some who try and touch it all with their hands. [vii]
Although Fra Angelico’s predella is relatively conventional, the insertion of a Crucifixion scene into the base of the central panel is highly unusual; for it employs a perspective system designed to create spatial clarity to illustrate a *sacra conversazione*, demonstrating the painter’s understanding and assimilation of Alberti’s ideas in his *Della Pittura* of 1436. [viii] The purpose of this intrusive element can be traced to the special devotion to the Cross by St. Dominic. [ix] Further evidence of this piety can be observed in Fra Angelico’s *Christ on the Cross Adored by St. Dominic* (1450) where St. Domenic is shown embracing the base of the Cross—the blood of the saviour trickling onto his hands. This image urged the monks to follow by example. A similar painting in the North Dormitory Corridor (c. 1441-45) has an inscription at its base encouraging the brothers to embrace Christ’s suffering in the same manner as their founder:

> O saviour of the world, accept my salutations, accept them, Oh Dear Jesus; I want to rise on your cross, and know the reason; therefore give me the force to do so. [x]

Robert Gaston has persuasively argued for specific modes of conduct and contemplation when interpreting religious imagery of the period:

> We ought, for example, to consider how the precise details of *demeanour* prescribed in medieval treatises written for religious novices might have influenced the ways in which painters working for those orders represented the gait, gestures, and gazes of saints of the orders in pictures. [xi]

With these thoughts in mind, we can see how Fra Angelico’s placement of a Crucifixion image within the *San Marco Altarpiece* relates to a specific mode of prayer associated with St. Dominic. An anonymous document dated c. 1260-1288, and known as *De Modo Orandi Coporaliter Sancti Dominici* [xii] by an early member of the order, records the saint’s ‘Nine Ways of Prayer’. The ‘First Way of Prayer’ states:
In this way our Holy Father, standing erect, bowed his head and humbly considering Christ, his Head, compared his lowliness with the excellence of Christ...The brethren were taught to do this whenever they passed before the humiliation of the Crucified One in order that Christ, so greatly humbled for us, might see us humbled before his majesty...In this manner of profoundly inclining his head, as shown in the drawing, Saint Dominic began his prayer. [xiii]

It was also customary for copies of this text to be accompanied by explanatory illustrations as in the medieval manuscript *Codex Rossianus 3*.

*The First Way of Prayer of St. Dominic, illustration from Codex Rossianus 3*

*Illuminated manuscript held in the Vatican Library*

*The First Way of Prayer* portrays the saint bowing in precisely the same manner as described in the manuscript, and it can be no coincidence that Fra Angelico’s *San Marco Altarpiece* elicits and facilitates a similar mode of prayer with the monks being encouraged to bow before the icon in the prescribed manner. It was believed that this form of supplication could help monks attain states of mystical consciousness, and St Dominic is described as humbling himself...

*Before the altar as if Christ, signified by the altar, were truly and personally present and not in symbol alone. [xiv]*

*The First Way of Prayer* is therefore directly connected to the Doctrine of Transubstantiation: the belief that consecrated elements—bread and wine—are physically transformed into Christ’s body and blood during mass, and part of the intense religious and devotional feelings expressed in fresco in the cloister at San Marco.

Evidence of such devotional rigours can also be found in the frescoes for the dormitory of the novice monks. Each of the cells are ‘adorned’ with an image of Christ on the cross, so the beginning of a religious life for all new monks began with the same devotional principles and experiences: intense meditation upon Christ’s suffering during the Crucifixion.
These frescoes relate directly to the ‘Nine Ways of Prayer’ by showing St. Dominic in particular attitudes and conforming the devotional exercises at San Marco. One of the paintings shows Saint carrying out ‘The Third Way of Prayer’, which was designed and intended to evoke a state of penitence…

*The Third Way of Prayer of St. Dominic, illustration from Codex Rossianus 3*

*St Dominic would rise from the ground and give himself the discipline with an iron chain, saying, “Thy discipline has corrected me to the end” This is why the Order decreed, in memory of his example, that all the brethren should receive the discipline with wooden switches upon their shoulders as they were bowing down in worship and reciting the psalm “Misere” of “De profundis” after Compline on ferial days. [xv]*

*The First Way of Prayer of St. Dominic helps us to understand why an image of The Crucifixion takes centre stage in the San Marco altarpiece. It also allows us to contextualise some of the other images of the Crucifixion within the monastery walls in relation to the devotions of the Dominican Order. But to truly comprehend the meaning of this tiny, yet highly significant, icon, we must take the time to meditate upon the work, like those novice monks all those years ago, irrespective of our multitudinous religious beliefs. Only then might the painting reveal its ‘secrets’, its message of redemption through human grief and personal suffering, of hope and faith, and much more, in a manner that enters our being as well as our understanding.*
Notes

[i] Within his own lifetime Fra Angelico became known as ‘Il Beato’ Angelico due to his reputation and the reverence with which he painted religious subjects. Although beatified in 1982 by Pope John Paul II, the recognition of his piety by his contemporaries would seem to reinforce Vasari’s appraisal of his temperament and religiosity.


[iii] From The Constitutions of the Order of Preachers, and preceding the revised edition of St. Raymond of Penafort, 1241. A fourteenth century copy of this early, or ‘Primitive’ Constitution, originally dating from the thirteenth century, is preserved in the archives of the Dominican Order at Santa Sabina in Rome.


[vi] The predella has been dismantled, but it is generally accepted that *The Entombment* would have been positioned centrally.


[viii] The text had been available in 1435 as *De Pictura*, but the 1436 publication in the vernacular made it possible for Alberti’s ideas to spread more widely amongst painters, many of who could not read Latin.

[ix] Love of the Cross was inspired by St. Catherine of Siena and is one of the main characteristics of the Dominican order. See Paolo Morachiello, op. cit., p. 31.


[xii] It is known that copies of this text were in circulation at this time at Dominican priories. See, for example, Morachiello, op. cit. p. 294.

[xiii] From the *Nine Ways of Prayer* of St. Dominic.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Ibid.
Michelangelo Buonarroti’s ‘The Last Judgement’

John Finlay

Guidizio Universale (Last Judgment), 1537-41, Fresco, Cappella Sistina, Vatican

For the principle of the painting is this: Those who do not know their letters shall read from it - and again. The picture shall take the place of the book (Michelangelo Buonarroti). [i]

Summoning Michelangelo to the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican in 1535, Pope Clement VII, Giulio de’ Medici, gave the artist an astonishing commission that would crown his earlier biblical scenes (unveiled on All Saint’s Day, October 1512): a colossal fresco of the Guidizio Universale, The Last Judgement on the alter wall of the Sistine Chapel (and completed in 1541). In Christian tradition, The Last Judgement represents the moment when Christ returns to earth to judge the souls of the living and dead accordingly, to deliberate their right or wrong doing, good or evil acts. While the just ascend to heaven, the damned are cast into hell to suffer unending torment and the composition itself—held within the curve of two arches—appropriately resembles the shape of the luchot, the tablets of Hebrew law, but better known to us as the Ten Commandments.

In the ethereal reaches of the painting, the objects of Christ’s martyrdom including the cross, spear of destiny, crown of thorns and the column on which the Saviour was flagellated, are borne by the weight of cherubs and angels who wrestle with the instruments of the Passion as if undecided whether to bring them down to earth or up to heaven.
The ambiguity of Michelangelo’s illusionist devices sets a standard determining the whole painting depicting a battle for the saved and the damned, for righteous and lost souls. Those true, holy and angelic beings form a circle around Mary and the central Christ figure, justly rewarded in the afterlife: a divine place bestowed upon all righteous people by a loving god.

Yet Michelangelo’s Christ has come to judge in the harshest possible terms. Even Mary, traditionally “full of grace” and according to Dante Alighieri, “virgin mother, daughter of thy son, lowest and loftiest of created stature” [ii], turns away from Christ’s severe adjudication. A tempest rages Below Mary and the blessed—swell of human figures. Here the resurrection of the good is illustrated by trumpeting angels and by images of the sinew and bone returning to the bodies of the humble and faithful. Those desperately scrambling up to heaven, hauled back by demons, but saved by the prevailing angels, represent the tussle for souls. The classical Apollonian/Herculean-looking figure of Christ cuts a sway through the crowd, his raised arm becomes the scythe of a reaper as he stands to command the dead to life and condemn the unworthy to the pits of hell: “Because he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” [iii]

With his raised right arm Christ brings human history to an end “and before him gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.” [iv] While Saint Peter returns the keys governing heaven and earth, Saint Bartholomew holds the skin and knife of his martyrdom the face on the flayed carcass is none other than Michelangelo. In a poem to Tommaso Cavalieri of 1534-38, Michelangelo imagined himself as vulgar serpent shedding its skin and a soul discarding its body in hope of resurrection:

Would that my destiny wished the same for me as regards my lord: that I might clothe his living skin with my dead skin, so that, as a serpent sloughs on a stone, I might through death change my condition. [v]

Beneath trumpeting angels beckoning to the dead, devils drag wicked souls down to everlasting condemnation. Ushered into the darkened caverns of hell, the mythical figure Charon—keeper of the underworld—ferries the damned in his bark across the River Styx (or Acheron) towards fire and brimstone. This famous scene is that of Dante’s L’Inferno where “Charon, his eyes red like a burning brand, thumps with his oar the lingerers that delay, and rounds them up, and beckons with his hand.”[vi] Most horrifying of all is the sight of a battle where angry angels attack and batter the most foulest of souls, beating them back down to hell as punishment for the worst sins and vices. Greed and simony (exchanging ecclesiastical titles for monies) described in great detail in Dante’s L’ Inferno was particularly deplored by Michelangelo whose poem of 1512 espouses contemporary values and ideas attacking the church and Vatican for practising corruption and heresies:

Here from chalices helmets and swords are made; the blood of Christ is sold by the bucketful; his cross and thorns are lances and shields – and still Christ shows patience. [vii]
Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement* was undoubtedly inspired by the poetry of Dante, but equally influenced by Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* (1443-1474), which like *L’Inferno*, denounced the practice of selling apostolic positions to the highest bidder and the general hypocrisy surrounding the Vatican hierarchy in the artist’s era:

> *Fountain of grief, house of iniquities,*  
> *Heresy’s temple, school where errors dwell,*  
> *No longer Rome, but Babylon false and fell,*  
> *Cause of so many tears, so many sighs;*  
> *O cruel prison, burning forge of lies,*  
> *Where good expires, evils feed and swell,*  
> *Only some miracle, O living hell,*  
> *Can save you from the coming wrath of Christ.*

> *Founded in chaste and humble poverty,*  
> *Against your founders now you lift your horns,*  
> *impudent whore: where have you placed your hope?*  
> *in those who share your foul adultery?*  
> *or your ill-gotten wealth? Now Constantine*  
> *will stay where he belongs, and not return.* [viii]

*The Last Judgement* and the Sistine ceiling cycle might hence be understood in this way: the beginning and end of salvation, history of the world and the “eternal city”, but through Christ’s message and fulfilment of “eternal life”, Rome and the Vatican are freed from heathenism, corruption and hypocrisy. Historians have always insisted that Michelangelo consistently felt tormented and exploited by the Vatican Popes, and that the artist’s ageing state of mind was convinced that there were more evil than good souls within its walls: “my house set here among such rich palaces.” [ix]

Perhaps, then, Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement* was his final act of pleading for the soul of the Christian church, and the artist did indeed give greater credence to the damned precipitating into hell’s dark pits than highlighting those of the righteous ascending into God’s grace. Whilst a figure depicting ‘remorse’ suffers the bite of a demon (*morso* means to be bitten in Italian) and realises the immensity of his sins, others, including a man carrying a bag full of money and another being dragged down by his testicles (and biting off his hand in the process) possibly represent greed and lust. The keys dangling from one tormented soul seem indicative of the corruption and confusion behind the doors of the Vatican in Michelangelo’s era and, most notably, a commission overseen by a succession of, if cultured, unpopular, treacherous, cruel and greedy Papal rulers. Similarly, in the bottom right hand section of the painting is the soul of Biagio de Cesena (Pope Paul III’s master of ceremonies and second in command) being crushed and bitten on the genitals by a huge serpent. He is also portrayed as King Minos—lover of gold, miser and misanthrope: an insidious figure acquiescing eternal damnation.
The Last Judgement was clearly inspired by classical mythology, poetry, philosophy, religion and politics. The poetics of Dante and Petrarch were especially important to Michelangelo’s fresco cycle, and possibly also the arcane writings of the Kabbalah. [x] However, there is an undeniably personal touch to the tragic programme of The Last Judgement where woeful beings are weighed down by the burden of their fate. Even the shed skin symbolising the artist’s own soul hangs in the balance from the hand of an undecided Saint who questions Christ as whether to allow him to rise with the saved or elapse with the fallen. The macabre self-portrait is undeniably a reflection of the entire composition: for the design morphs into a huge skull (Golgotha perhaps?) made up of writhing figures and, to the faithful, signifying the darkest moment in the history of humankind. The finality that the fresco portrays corresponds directly with Michelangelo’s philosophical and pictorial vision of hell—a “face fit to terrify”[xi] the perfidious.

Notes

A Transfigured World:
The Work of Anne Schwegmann-Fielding

Robert Priseman

On the rare occasions when art works well it transforms and enriches our understanding of the world around us. When Marcel Duchamp first introduced his ‘Readymades’ in 1913, it was with the most minimal of artistic intervention—the use of everyday objects to create the most astounding transformations observed by an artist in centuries. With the barest of touches needed to produce the most profound shifts in intellect, ‘Fountain’, a urinal turned upside down and signed ‘R. Mutt’, and ‘Bicycle Wheel’, the wheel of a bike placed elegantly upon a stool, Duchamp expanded the creative possibilities of both ancient, ‘magical’ crafts and modern innovations, whilst simultaneously parodying contemporary artistic commodity and consumption with regard to works of art.

These gentle, dazzling works of transformation were also found in the paintings and screen-prints of Andy Warhol. In Warhol’s greatest art, he manipulated existing photographs—think of Warhol’s ‘Electric Chair’, ‘Marilyn’, or ‘Campbell’s Soup Cans’—by cropping and over-printing them in a variety of colours that changed according to outside forces: Warhol often allowed the printer to make his/her own discretion, and an intellectual elaboration upon Duchamp’s concept of ‘choice’ and nihilistic view of modern art in a world of consumerism and mass-production.

Contemporary artists like Anne Schwegmann-Fielding employ a similar process of bringing together and juxtaposing disparate elements and objects in order to produce visual metaphors and as a means of self-expression. Schwegmann-Fielding’s work occupies a same ground as those self-taught and ‘outsider’ artists she admires most: taking discarded objects such as saws, spoons and mannequins and decorating them using broken glass or smashed crockery. These objects once had a physical and practical function, but have been born into a new role and, in the process, have a transfigured identity and function.

The bejewelled Privthvi Head (see back cover p.39) strongly recalls the traditional practice of the bricoleur, who makes use of things that come immediately to hand, and extracted from the immediate environment. Indeed, Schwegmann-Fielding’s strange but beautiful, mosaic-like objects, and their poetic workmanship, has a long history stretching back to concept of the magically transformative bricoleur. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss in La Pensée Sauvage (1962):
The bricoleur…principally derives his poetry…through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities.

The simpler the process used by Schwegmann-Fielding the better the results appears to be. The original form/object is still visible and the viewer thus has the greatest opportunity to project something of his or her own thoughts and personality upon the transformed piece itself. The process of adornment enables the transformative moment to happen in a way that simply looking at an untouched thing/object cannot possibly do. For Schwegmann-Fielding ‘…the importance of using your eyes and seeing how beautiful things are around you’ is central to her working practice, and a philosophy similarly shared and expressed by the artists such as Jeanne-Claude and Christo who have often reiterated that there work is simply a wish to make the world a ‘more beautiful place’.

In wrapping or concealing buildings such as the Reichstag in Berlin or the Pont Neuf in Paris, Jeanne-Claude and Christo ask us to try and imagine a world that has been obscured: the original form remains present, but its function is lost or transformed and, for the time being, causing the spectator to pause, re-think and reflect upon a new and magically altered cityscape.

Anne Schwegmann-Fielding’s work is much more intimate in scale, but nevertheless re-imagines many ordinary objects in sculpture terms: a log containing crushed glass becomes a ‘jewel’. Mostly notably, Schwegmann-Fielding’s sculptures involve appropriating machine-manufactured objects: objects that have been abandoned and subsequently transformed from ordinary industrial products into rare ‘gems’. As she explains:

What I have been feeling as I am working on the pieces, is that they all have quite a crude feel about them and they look very hand-made. I have a really strong view of there being beauty in imperfection and what I like is that some of the work – from a distance has a quite jewel like, expensive quality but on closer inspection is quite crude, emphasising I suppose the unique compared to the mass produced.
Interview with the Art Historian and Curator
Elizabeth Cowling

By John Finlay

Elizabeth Cowling is Professor Emeritus of Twentieth Century European Art at Edinburgh University. Her previous publications include Picasso: Style and Meaning, for which she was awarded the 2003 British Academy Book Prize, and Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose (2006). She has curated and co-curated a number of important and enormously successful exhibitions including Picasso: Sculptor/Painter (1994), Matisse Picasso (2002, shown in London, Paris and New York) and two recent exhibitions examining important works the collection of the Museo Picasso, Málaga in 2007 and 2009. She has written many articles that have contributed greatly to the field of twentieth century Modernism. As a curator, Elizabeth Cowling has added greatly to our knowledge and understanding of Modern artists and their works, in particular the crucial relationships between painting, collage and sculpture, which have been central to the discussion of Modern art. Elizabeth Cowling began her career in exhibition making with Dada and Surrealism Reviewed for the Arts Council in 1978, a ‘blockbuster’ involving a large team of curators including two of Britain’s most esteemed writers Roland Penrose and David Sylvester. Elizabeth Cowling is also co-curator of the upcoming Picasso Looks at Degas exhibition, which will be on view at the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, between June 13 and September 12, 2010, and presented at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona in the autumn. Artfractures Quarterly questioned Elizabeth about the history, role and future of the modern curator, as well as asking her to described some of the most interesting personal experiences she has encountered whilst working in the ever more complex and fractured world of exhibition making.

John Finlay: I want to jump straight in Elizabeth and ask you what, in your opinion, makes for a great exhibition?

Elizabeth Cowling: Exhibitions are theatrical in character and I think great exhibitions are experienced as life-enhancing events. The spectator comes away feeling excited, stimulated, enlightened, moved, somehow altered. The world and the people around one—albeit only temporarily—look different and one remembers the show for years afterwards, just as one remembers a great performance of a play or piece of music or opera. Of course the content of the exhibition is crucial: is there a coherent theme? Do the works on display reveal the theme or not? Are the individual works intrinsically interesting, but above all do they illuminate each other, so that it’s evident why they’re
there and all the trouble and expense of bringing them to that place seem justified? It's the responsibility of the curator to devise the plot, make the ideal selection and then do everything in his or her power to obtain the right loans, and great shows certainly don't have to be 'blockbusters' and above all don't have to be large. Some of the greatest shows I've seen have had only 20-30 works, and some of the most exasperating and disappointing have had hundreds and been lavish but essentially thoughtless accumulations.

JF: What about the process of collaboration with, say, an exhibition designer?

EC: Exhibitions are always collaborations involving a host of different people, and if those people don't see eye to eye then the show will be a bit of a mess. For instance, if the designer insists on imposing his or her vision, and that vision is fundamentally at variance with the curator's—and indeed with the works on display—then you can have a disaster on your hands. I can remember too many shows like that where the works themselves were intrinsically stunning but the installation was so 'loud' that they were virtually invisible. At times like that one is mainly aware of the designer's ego and I get really angry! The installation is of course absolutely crucial to the success of a show—an identical group of works can either create that thrilling experience or fail totally to create it—but I myself don't like belligerent installations that insist on drawing attention to themselves.

JF: In a world increasingly demanding educational material, instant knowledge and answers how do you, as a creator of an exhibition of modern art, go about conveying ideas and imagery that are often bewildering to the questioning, but often, untutored eye?

EC: The educational aspect of exhibitions has become increasingly important over the last twenty years or so, and I do think the spectator ought to be given adequate tools within the show itself to learn something about the works on display and to understand why they have been chosen and presented in that way. But I also think that a show that requires a mass of supporting explanation to make any sense is a failure. A few wall texts and some extended labels, or something of the sort; a short informative film in an auditorium outside the main galleries perhaps, should be enough because exhibitions must operate visually. You shouldn't be spending most of your time in an exhibition reading, rather than looking. And it's ridiculous, not to say criminal, to bring, say, a painting to London all the way from Los Angeles—endangering it in the process (because every time a picture moves there is a risk of damage), and spending a fortune on the whole business of doing so—only to surround it with so much verbiage that the dutiful spectator spends five minutes reading about it and only 20 seconds looking at it. I've been to shows where the 'educational material' is completely disproportionate. Shows are not books and it's a mistake to think they should do the same thing as books.

JF: How, for the uninitiated, does the curatorial process begin and develop? Can you describe to me how a very abstract idea about an artist or idiom for example
ends up on the walls of a gallery or museum, and what drives the process from conception to final visual representation in a large, contemporary exhibition?

EC: You begin with your idea for the show and in my case I need to feel I can ‘see’ the show within a space—albeit only vaguely at that first stage. If I can’t see it in my mind’s eye then I can’t do a show on that theme. I’ve never curated a classic ‘retrospective’ of a single artist—all the shows I’ve curated have had a specific theme and usually involved more than one artist—but with a retrospective the curator also has to make choices and therefore have a particular perspective. Once you have got your idea clear in your mind, you start making the ideal selection—using your memory of things you have seen (maybe the idea for the show was actually sparked by seeing something and you may want to make that pivotal to the show), and of course books and catalogues, anything with good illustrations. If you are working to commission, as opposed to developing a proposal you hope will eventually get accepted by some institution, you will know where the show is to be installed, and you have to work with those spaces and with whatever physical constraints there may be. And with the financial constraints, of course: you may be told that loans from, say, Japan are out of the question, purely because they are too costly. You keep refining your selection, as you get deeper into your subject and feel you understand it better, and that’s a wonderfully creative time for the curator because you are free to imagine the perfect show.

JF: And what happens then Elizabeth? I’m being a pessimist here.

EC: Then you start trying to get the key loans—the loans around which everything will turn—and that’s when reality kicks in and all the problems start! You have your pure vision and you are desperate to get this or that work and you’ve got to persuade the private collector or the museum to part with it temporarily. Sometimes they will have their own reasons to be happy to do so, but usually it’s a struggle involving great diplomatic skill and great reserves of patience, energy, determination and also optimism. It’s the naïve optimism that keeps one going, in my experience. Of course, you sometimes meet insurmountable obstacles—a key work is too fragile to lend, or it is promised elsewhere, or there is some legal issue, or you simply can’t locate it—and then you have to rethink your plan, find an alternative work, and maybe even drop a whole section because there is no alternative. Exhibitions usually take several years to achieve and they always involve emotional drama for the curator—wonderful highs, terrible lows. I often think ‘Never again!’ But like many curators I’m an exhibition junkie, and there is nothing I do that I find as exciting as installing a show I’ve been labouring on for years.

JF: Do you need to be flexible when installing an exhibition Elizabeth? What I mean to say is you can’t control art in the ‘flesh’—especially when it is very overpowering—in the same way you would like to have control over the writing of a text or book for the exhibition catalogue. Or can you?

EC: As I said earlier, I think books and exhibitions are different beasts and that you won’t make a good exhibition if you think of it as the same as writing a book. Of course, the catalogue is a book, not a record of the experience of viewing the exhibition, and
it’s there that the curator-theorist/curator-art historian can fully develop his or her arguments and fully display his or her knowledge of the subject—often, these days, enlisting other experts to contribute specialised essays. You’re right, too, to talk about ‘control’ or the lack of it. One of the things that I find most stimulating and exciting about curating an exhibition is that you can’t control the art in the way you feel you can control it when writing an essay or a book. Even if you manage to get exactly the mix of works you always dreamed of, they have a habit of doing unexpected things when you put them all together. They escape you and do their own thing. A work you thought extremely tough and demanding suddenly looks surprisingly gentle or subtle in the company. (We were astonished to find that Picasso sometimes looked meticulous and graceful alongside Matisse, and Matisse brutal and aggressive.) Works you hadn’t realised were really closely related to one another prove to be uncannily closely related. And so on. It’s fascinating, and when installing you do need some flexibility so that you can make the most of these unforeseen discoveries, by modifying your plans for the display. And of course exhibitions affect viewers in unpredictable ways because the works will speak slightly differently to them, so the curator can’t in the end control the viewer’s response any more than he or she can control the works themselves. Visitors often see things in my shows that I haven’t and that fresh perspective is so eye-opening for the curator. I really like that element of anarchy.

JF: What do you think about the relationship between historical theory in relation to the exhibition process: is it an essential tool or a hindrance to the modern curator?

EC: For me, curating is creative in the sense of setting something in motion and hoping for some sort of explosion, and if I want to put over a fully developed art-historical argument— I’m not a theorist and I’ve never tried to elaborate a theory!—I’ll write a book or an essay. And so I don’t think that you need to be the world’s authority on this or that to make a great exhibition about it; equally, that you can be the world’s authority and still make a pretty bad exhibition. Ruth Rattenbury, the most respected (and efficient) exhibition organizer I’ve ever worked with—Ruth coordinated scores of successful, major shows on all sorts of themes and artists—told me that art historians always needed ‘watching’ when they turned to curating because they were always wanting to make some tiny, abstruse point—the equivalent of an academic footnote—or to be ‘definitive’ and ‘comprehensive’, as if they were doing a catalogue raisonné. She often challenged me about the ‘need’ to add this or that—wasn’t it in fact clouding the issue, dulling the effect of the other works? She was usually right. She wasn’t an expert on all those artists and themes but she always had the overall experience for the visitor in mind.

JF: Can you tell me what you see as your main role in terms of being an exhibition maker: as facilitator who is part of a team, or, as a more creative individual who is essential to the whole project/process? There are also problems too that arise out of having a large group of professionals working together on an exhibition are there not?
EC: The curator is part of a large team and all the others in the team are very important—the people who keep track of all the loans, who organise the transport and insurance of the works, who do condition checks on all the works when they arrive and leave, who transform the spaces and build the plinths and cases, who do the lighting or the graphics, and so on and so forth—a small army of professionals. But the curator is the lynchpin—like the director of a play—and if he or she gets confused and loses the ‘plot’ then the show will go awry. I’ve occasionally been the sole curator of a show, but usually I’ve been in a partnership and, for me, the best of all is to be one of two curators. I’ve had the immense good fortune of curating a show with John Golding (Picasso: Sculptor/Painter at the Tate in 1994) and now Picasso Looks at Degas with Richard Kendall—both very experienced curators—and it has been wonderful. I do think two heads are better than one. You need to be on the same wavelength of course, but you won’t always agree immediately, and being challenged to justify a choice is extremely productive. And if you both come to the same conclusion independently—John and I and Richard and I did a lot of our work independently and then compared our solutions—it’s very encouraging: you feel you must be on the right track. But if the curatorial team is large, problems can arise: different notions of what the ‘plot’ is develop and there is also inevitably an increased danger of personality clashes, and of eventually having to compromise in a way that doesn’t entirely satisfy anyone.

JF: I gather, then, you still visit other exhibitions today to stay informed and, I presume, to keep abreast of what other exhibition makers are doing currently?

EC: A lot of the journeys away from Edinburgh I make are made simply to see the current crop of exhibitions. Sometimes, indeed, I wish there were fewer exhibitions because then I’d spend more time in the permanent collections! Ever since I was a child, I’ve loved going to museums but I didn’t really start going to temporary exhibitions until I was about 13 or 14. By the time I was 20 it had become an important part of my life. And, yes, I do look at exhibitions from the perspective of a curator—often picking up ideas, but also finding myself mentally rearranging the exhibits, painting the walls a different colour, changing the lighting, eliminating works that don’t seem to add anything, and so on. It can be infuriating for my companions if they aren’t interested in that sort of thing, but I can’t help doing it and all the curators I know are the same.

JF: With these comments in mind, Elizabeth, I wanted to ask how you first embarked on a career involving exhibition making.

EC: The first major exhibition I worked on was Dada and Surrealism Reviewed for the Arts Council in 1978. It was a massive affair with a large team of curators headed by Roland Penrose and David Sylvester. At the time I was working as David’s research assistant on the Magritte catalogue raisonné and he got me involved, for which I am eternally grateful to him. It was David’s idea to make the exhibition turn on the magazines published by the Dadas and Surrealists at different times and in different places, and my task was to select the ‘chosen objects’—examples of the things they loved and
collected and included in their own exhibitions, books and of course their reviews. My postgraduate research was on their interest in tribal art, so that had a big place in the show. But their taste was nothing if not eclectic and I learned a lot about a lot of weird and wonderful things while making the selection. All the other curators—one of them was John Golding—were much more experienced and I learned a tremendous amount from watching them. I remember David coming to look at the display I had set up in one of my cases—all ‘my’ objects were in Wunderkammer-style cases—and he said: “What’s the best thing in that case?” I pointed to an extraordinary Eskimo mask. And he said: “Okay, but why on earth have you put it at the side, out of the way? Make it the focus.” It sounds so self-evident, but I hadn’t asked myself that sort of basic question, which gets to the heart of the experience of the spectator.

JF: Did you expect to be doing this sort of thing when you began teaching and writing in an institution like the University of Edinburgh or was it something not in the cards at the time?

Dada and Surrealism Reviewed was a ‘blockbuster’ in its own day and I got my lectureship at Edinburgh a year later. Because I have always far preferred looking at works of art to reading about them, at the time I was torn between a career in museums and a career teaching art history in a university, and so when I took the job at Edinburgh University I suppose I always hoped I would get the chance to curate again eventually. And that started to happen in the mid-1980s.

JF: Can you describe your experiences of being involved and tackling an exhibition in your early career and how it has changed or how different it is today?

EC: I think the biggest difference between the situation today and the situation 30 or so years ago is that now there are so many more temporary exhibitions. Museums that never used to put on loan exhibitions now do so and numerous arts foundations have sprung up all with their own exhibition programmes. The competition is enormous and you are in a queue for loans if you are dealing with a ‘major’ artist or a fairly well-known subject. On more than one occasion I’ve been in quite advanced discussions about a show, but the whole project has been dropped because we’ve learned that someone else is more advanced with a vaguely similar project that depends on some of the same core works. Then there is the vast price inflation of major modern and contemporary art, and consequently the terrifying hike in insurance and transport costs.

JF: I asked you the latter question simply because exhibitions of the kind you are involved in right now, such as Picasso Looks at Degas at the Clark Art Institute, will involve bringing together over one hundred works from international museums and private collections as well as including original documentation, fragile works on paper and other archival material. Exhibition making today—I hear this (and have experienced it a bit myself while trying to get a small Duchamp proposal off the ground in Christchurch) time and time again Elizabeth—seems to be fraught with difficulties with regard to loans, permissions and other huge logistical problems. Is this your experience?
EC: Of course we are in the midst of a recession and sponsors are very thin on the ground. A lot of exhibitions have been cancelled altogether and many major museums are cutting back on their normal exhibition programmes, having fewer shows and keeping those on longer. Richard [Kendall] and I know we are lucky that Picasso Looks at Degas is going ahead as planned, but we have had to make economies and over the last year or so I have suffered—and continue to suffer—purely financial anxieties that I’ve never suffered before as a curator. Some people say that, as far as exhibitions are concerned, the recession will prove to be a blessing in disguise because the whole thing had got completely out of hand—far too many shows globally and far too many rather pointless or half-baked shows, works of art being shunted around far too much for their own good, permanent collections being sidelined and relatively neglected. I’m inclined to agree—imposed restraints will do well in the long run. But I have no wish to see the end of the exhibition era and I’m sure I won’t see it because exhibitions have a significant place in contemporary culture.

JF: Can you give the readers and me some idea of the kinds of problems that beset the modern exhibition maker, and what some of the rewards may be in your role as a curator or co-curator?

EC: Getting the right loans is the most taxing part of putting on a show and sometimes one suffers severe loan-gathering fatigue. It’s a particular problem with works on paper because they are fragile and can’t be exposed for long periods of time. Most big shows these days travel to a second venue because that’s the only economic way to mount them, and that in practice means that you have to have alternatives for most of the works on paper. Picasso Looks at Degas has probably been the most difficult show of all those I’ve been involved with because a lot of the key works happen to be on paper—so much of Degas’s later work is in pastel and collectors hate lending pastels—and because as the show has a sharp focus there are not many alternatives out there in any case. I don’t think we could have done it at all had the Clark Art Institute not got its own very good Degas collection and had we not collaborated with the Museu Picasso in Barcelona. Pepe Serra, the director of the Barcelona museum, has been incredibly supportive and generous. As for the rewards: for me the greatest reward is the chance to be in close, prolonged contact with the works of art, to see them anew in the company that now surrounds them, to discuss them with the people who know them most intimately (their makers, their owners, curators or conservators—conservators are wonderfully informative and I enormously enjoy talking to them). And then if visitors enjoy the show and are stimulated and inspired by it that is a great thrill because that is what one has laboured to achieve. It was wonderful, for instance, to see so many students and artists drawing in Picasso: Sculptor/Painter, not because they were in a class but because they felt compelled to do so by the sheer inventiveness of Picasso’s work. Curating has its frustrating and exhausting aspects but it is a huge privilege.

JF: Are there also problems that arise out of writing for an exhibition beforehand in relation to what you later see in the exhibition itself?

EC: Yes indeed! You have to write the catalogue months before the exhibition opens and so you can’t incorporate all the discoveries you make when the show is up and
running. Your text, however carefully researched and written, is out of date immediately and you find you have made horrible mistakes, or at least that you no longer believe what you have written because the works simply don’t seem to support it. It happens with books and essays all the time, of course—you’re already in print and you discover something that invalidates your argument—but it’s especially painful when the evidence of your folly is hanging there in front of you and you’ve actually put that evidence there for all the world to see!

JF: How important are exhibition catalogues—as opposed to purely historical texts—to a contemporary audience, and to the economy of a show itself?

EC: Exhibition catalogues are probably the only art books that sell in large quantities these days, but most of those sales are made during the run of the show—even when the catalogue is conceived and designed as a book with illustrated thematic chapters, rather than as a catalogue with entries on the individual works. So, if you contribute to a catalogue, whether or not you are the show’s curator, you will reach a larger and broader audience than you are likely to reach in any other way as a writer. And nowadays when being productive is so crucial for academics, writing for catalogues is a great boon because they do get published by a certain date—not shelved by the publisher because for some reason the time isn’t right. Of course lots of visitors buy catalogues as pictorial souvenirs of a show they’ve enjoyed and they never read the texts. And some catalogues are monsters—great, heavy, expensive tomes that are of interest only to a tiny number of specialists. I don’t know whether anyone makes much money out of catalogues of that sort—I expect not—but a ‘serious’ catalogue is a great opportunity to publish the latest research and it does bring prestige to the institutions involved.

JF: Finally, Elizabeth, do you see yourself continuing in the field of exhibition making and perhaps moving away from Picasso related projects into other areas. If you’re allowed, can you give us a sneak preview into your future plans or projects?

EC: Yes, I do hope to go on curating exhibitions because it’s the most creative experience I ever have. I do have several ideas for shows but they all need to be developed. One is for a show about the role of still life in the evolution of modern sculpture. And I’m going to start research on the photography of artists’ studios and what those photographs reveal about the artists’ view of themselves, and indeed of art. I can see it as a book but maybe it would also work as an exhibition. I’m sure Picasso will remain a key figure in any work I do in future but it’s high time I branched out a bit. I never intended to become quite so fixated on him.

The interview between Dr John Finlay and Professor Elizabeth Cowling took place in December 2009. Artfractures wishes to thank Elizabeth for giving up her valuable time and for her perseverance whilst carrying out the interview and for reading over all her responses, additions and alterations. We at Artfractures are truly indebted to her.
Dance

Swan Lake
The Imperial Russian Ballet Company

Isaac Theatre Royal,

Christchurch, New Zealand

Breeze Robertson

The Imperial Russian Ballet’s touring Swan Lake replayed the classic ballet with moments of brilliance in Christchurch.

First performed in 1875, the ballet we now know as Swan Lake is the 1895 revival, choreographed by Petipa and Ivanov for the Russian Imperial Ballet and performed in St Peterburg. The lineage is not direct—The Imperial Russian Ballet was formed in 1994 by former Bolshoi soloist Gediminas Taranda—but the links are clear. Taranda’s production was also true to the traditional standard, which makes comparisons to other Swan Lakes inevitable.

If there were a ‘Best Swan Lake’ title the competition would be fierce. In reality Swan Lake productions performed the world over are not usually better or worse, but simply interpret the main elements differently. The story and choreography don’t change unless the production has been given a contemporary treatment such as with Matthew Bourne’s stunning version on his company Adventures in Motion Pictures (the swans were bare-chested males).

Without much scope for invention, what these days makes for a truly great Swan Lake? For me, a fan, admittedly, of invention and a contemporary twist, absolutely sound technique is the starting point. I want to focus on the atmosphere and interpretation rather than check the corps des ballet and sometimes the principals for consistent turnout and neat landings from turns and jumps.

So a couple of small technical slips didn’t endear the Imperial Russian Company to me early on. The opening scene was also somewhat bland with the peasants’ costumes a uniform fawn colour. This was gradually built into a colour palette as more dancers entered the stage.
I also wasn’t drawn to Nariman Bekzhanov’s smirking interpretation of the Prince in Scene I, which offered little evidence of this character’s heroic deeds and grand devotion to come. I did, however, enjoy his lovely lines and smooth allegro throughout.

The set doubled as both the castle and the forest of Act II with a change of lighting. With a full touring schedule including regional New Zealand, the set needed to be transportable, but I found the design of the backdrop more and more distracting as the ballet progressed. By Act III the swirling patterns were reminding me of retro carpet patterns.

Fortunately all was soon forgiven. Swan Lake came alive the moment Mariya Sokolnikova as Odette stepped onto the stage. The Prince appeared to fall in love with this swan/woman creature and frankly so did I. Her lines were perfect, her technique sure and she brought a delicate other-worldly grace to the role, which was later beautifully contrasted with her haughty, evil Odile (the black swan).

Her presence onstage transformed the production. The corps de ballet rose to the challenge with some stunning and precise ensemble work and the principals brought a new energy to their roles. The ‘Russian dancers’ and ‘Chinese dancers’ particularly shone.

But this was Sokolnikova’s ballet. Every turn of her wrist was as captivating as the ballet’s famous technical feats, such as the 32 fouettes (turns on one leg) first performed by the great Italian ballerina Pierina Legnani in the 1895 revival, which Sokolnikova also executed convincingly. Beyond technique, her artistry was captivating. Bekzhanov was her worthy prince with solid partnering. His lifts seemed effortless, allowing Sokolnikova to literally soar, to drape herself tenderly over him and, as the Black Swan Odile, to expertly manipulate his naïveté.

Perhaps it’s the chance to experience a performance like this that keeps audiences all over the world coming back to Swan Lake? Sokolnikova was one of three ballerinas performing Odette/Odile for the tour and after her example I would have gladly returned to see Anastasia Homitskaya’s and Anna Ivanova’s interpretation of this legendary role. Certainly the audience was happy, the theatre full to the last seat, and I heard a few people say they would return to see The Imperial Russian Ballet Company’s ‘Sleeping Beauty’ in 2010.
Film

The Hurt Locker (2009)
Directed by Kathryn Bigelow

Screenplay by Mark Boal

With Jeremy Renner, Anthony Mackie, Brian Geraghty, Guy Pearce, Ralph Fiennes

Running time 131 mins

Reviewed by Stephen Heath

“There's enough bang in here to blow us all to Jesus. If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die comfortable”, announces U.S. Specialist Staff Sergeant William James while he strips off his body armour in the 100 plus degree heat and prepares to de-activate another Baghdad car bomb. As he tells the gung-ho Colonel Reed (David Morse) shortly afterwards, it's his 873rd, and we know there's still some time to go before the end of this 2004 tour of duty. “You're a wild man” says the appreciative Reed, and we certainly have been given no reason to doubt this ever since James joined the three man bomb squad at the heart of Kathryn Bigelow’s film. He is the replacement for Sgt. Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce) whose shocking death near the start creates an air of tension and uncertainty, which lasts throughout. But if James has been on previous ‘tours’, as he certainly has, does this mean that he actually likes this type of work? He didn't have to come back to Iraq did he? Might there be some sort of addiction problem here?

There is plenty of work for Bravo Squad. They have bombs in cars, bombs in trucks, bombs in the road, bombs in piles of trash, bombs on live men, bombs inside dead children, and if they are often less than friendly to the local inhabitants then it's understandable when one finger on a cell-phone keypad could blow them to kingdom come. “Well, if he wasn't an insurgent before then he sure is now!” says Sgt. J.T. Sanborn (the excellent Anthony Mackie) when a taxi driver gets roughed-up after a notably tense confrontation. The film’s plot boils down to two simple questions: will
the squad remain intact till the end of its tour and, if so, how messed up will its members be? To use and explain the title, how deep will they be in ‘the hurt locker’?

This is the director’s first film since her 2002 epic ‘K19: The Widowmaker’, about the sinking of the Russian submarine Kursk. The filming took place on location in Jordan, a fact, which accounts for the occasional undulations in the flat cityscape of ‘Baghdad’. A number of hand-held super 16mm cameras were used to film many of the scenes in the style of a newsreel and the 131 minutes we see is little more than one percent of the total footage shot. The result is succession of tense episodes, which do not allow us to draw too much breath before being plunged into the next crisis/mission. The frenetic pace works very well. Even in their moments of leisure our specialists prefer to indulge in a type of male-bonding which involves punching the lights out of each other, so we don’t really get a rest from the ‘action’. Why should we? They need a bit of bonding otherwise they might kill each other. It’s that sort of job.

Coming away from The Hurt Locker I was pretty sure that I had a better grasp of what is, or certainly has been, going on in Iraq. Bigelow’s film contains plenty of great kickass action without becoming too much of a gorefest, though it is certainly not for the squeamish. It dispenses with any ideological or political bullshit and concentrates on individual human experiences. Thus, it enables us to get some idea of what it might be like for the Iraqi people to be drowning in a sea of blood and body parts while trying to carry on what we call the business of everyday life. It also invites us to consider, via the activities of James, Sanborn and Eldridge (a magnificent Brian Geraghty), why the business of waging war can be so addictive to some of its practitioners. When Sgt James goes home to his pretty partner and beautiful baby boy he naturally takes a trip to Walmart, like any good dad. Surrounded by mountains of breakfast cereal, a man gets to thinking!
Film

Man on Wire (2009)
Directed by James Marsh.

With Philippe Petit.

Running time 94 mins.

Reviewed by Helen Taylor

‘I started as a young self-taught wire walker to dream of not so much conquering the universe but as a poet conquering beautiful stages.’

Man on Wire is a story of dreams, of setting them, chasing them, losing them and conquering them. It is a story of intrigue and conspiracy, the ‘artistic crime of the century.’ It is also a love story, a tug of war between the world’s highest buildings and the heart of a woman.

Through a visual combination of stills, original video footage and silent movie re-enactment we are taken on a journey of passion as we follow one man’s obsession with the self and his desires. This man is the French tightrope dancer Philippe Petit who believes ultimately that, ‘If you want something, nothing is impossible.’ That something was to dance in the sky between New York’s Twin Towers in 1974.

Contemporary interviews with Petit and his co-conspirators, filled with the emotion of reliving the moment, take us backwards and forwards through time. In colour and monochrome we visit Notre Dame and the Sydney Harbour Bridge as Petit dances closer and closer to his New York dream.

While he crosses both ancient and modern architectural stages we watch the construction (or is it the deconstruction of the World Trade Centre?). Released in the aftermath of 9/11, still and video footage in Man On Wire can not help but remind us of the Towers’ transient nature, like Petit, we know that they can fall to the ground. ‘To die in the exercise of your passion, what a beautiful Death!’
‘He got great pleasure from taking certain liberties. He’s so excessive, so creative, so each day is like a work of art for him.’ Scale models, photography, scrawled frescoes across the walls plan every minute detail of the coup. Like-minded people are gathered together, some fall by the wayside, as Petit’s highly illegal plan becomes a reality.

At 7:15 am on the 7th of August 1974, Petit took his first tentative step on to the swaying wire 1,350 feet above the streets of Manhattan, ‘death is very close...’

Death is close, but not a death we expect. When obsessions are conquered, sometimes as we achieve, we can also lose something along the way, ‘...it was clear that Philippe had gone through an incredible moment in his life and he was starting something else, a new life.’ These are the words of the woman known simply as Annie, Petit’s one time ‘inseparable’ companion until the Twin Towers divided them.

We finish in colour with a much older man on a wire only a few feet above the ground. His beliefs however are still touching the clouds, ‘...life should be lived on the edge of life, you have to exercise rebellion...to see everyday, every year, every idea as a true challenge and then you are ready to live your life on a tight rope.’
Contributors

**John Finlay** studied Art History and Theory at Essex University (1989-92) and received his doctorate on ‘Picasso’s Constructions and Assemblages, 1912-35’ from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London in 1998. He is an independent art historian of French history and culture, specializing in the field of twentieth century modern art. He is a regular contributor to a number of international journals including *Apollo Magazine* (UK), *Sculpture Magazine* (Washington DC), *H-France* (Illinois), and *Art New Zealand*, where he has published articles on Picasso, Giacometti, Surrealism and contemporary New Zealand art. His books on *Picasso: Life and Art Illustrated* and *Picasso: Essential Sculpture, 1912-35*, will be published by Carlton Books and Seabrook Press respectively in early 2010 and 2012. He lives and works in Christchurch.

**Steve Heath** grew up in the Staffordshire Potteries but managed to escape at the age of 4 and became an Oxford schoolboy. After being taken to see David Lean’s film ‘Great Expectations’ at the age of eight he became addicted to the cinema and spent a good deal of time indulging his habit. He returned North of England to do a History degree (at York and Durham Universities) and then he found himself teaching in Essex, where he has lived ever since. He has taught History and, more lately, English as well as spending a great deal of time dabbling in his favourite pastimes, which include cricket, literature and, of course, the cinema. He completed a year at the University of Essex studying for an M.A. in 20th Century Art History and Theory (which included some interesting film studies).

**Robert Priseman** studied Aesthetics and Art theory at the University of Essex before taking up Painting full-time in 1992.

**Ramesh Ramsahoye** studied Art History and Theory at Essex University (1989-92) and received an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London in 1993. He is an independent art historian specializing in the field of seventeenth century Dutch art. He is also a scholar of Italian Renaissance Art and Architecture, and is currently writing a text on the subject. He lives and works in Ennis Corthy (County Wexford) in the Republic of Ireland. He is currently an art and art history teacher.

**Breeze Robertson** has nurtured her passion for writing and dance whilst studying for a Bachelor of Arts in her native Melbourne in 1994, travelling and living in Asia and Europe, becoming a mother and resettling in the port town of Lyttelton, Christchurch, NZ. Breeze has worked as a contemporary dancer, teacher, choreographer, and dance company administrator, journalist, editor, publicist and freelance writer in various combinations.

**Helen Taylor** studied at the University of Canterbury where she completed a BA Hons and MA in Art History. While delving into the history of art she was inspired to return to her other passion, art itself. She is an award winning children’s book illustrator (Published by Penguin Books NZ) and an exhibiting artist with work scattered across the globe. She lives and works in the portside town of Lyttelton, New Zealand as an artist, illustrator, writer and mother of two.
Notes for submissions

All spellings must be in English and not American English.

Default dictionary should be the Oxford English Dictionary.

Articles must be a minimum of 2000—maximum 4000 words (exclusive of footnotes). Reviews must be a minimum of 350—maximum of 500 words.

All articles should be preceded by an Abstract of one hundred words.

All articles should be set in Word (.doc) or Rich Text Format, sent as an attachment.

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