



Gerhard Richter:
Frau Marlow,
1964, oil on
canvas, 30¼
by 37¾ inches.
Courtesy Atelier
Richter, Cologne.

Cold War, Cool Art

by Richard Kalina

JOHN J. CURLEY

A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War

Yale University Press, 2013, 296 pp., \$65 hardcover.

A few general ideas about art—particularly American art—and the Cold War have long been in circulation. One is that the new, ostensibly imageless postwar abstraction was essentially apolitical. Perhaps functioning in part as an existential response to the horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War, it represented the contemporary incarnation of artistic humanism and the transcendent creative force of the individual (as opposed to the state or other social structures). A later take on the subject was that, whatever the artists' intentions, this art was used by museum directors and government bodies (the U.S. Information Agency and the CIA among them) as propaganda for capitalism and American values.

Postwar politics and art, in this latter formulation, were inextricably intertwined. Even the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, seemingly imbued with Duchampian indifference, was not neutral by nature. It was either a conscious avoidance of polarizing political debate or a forced silence in the face of the paranoid culture of McCarthyism. Communist art, meanwhile, was seen by most Western critics as hopelessly retrograde—kitschy and scary in equal measure.

John J. Curley, an art historian at Wake Forest University, fortunately takes a wider and more theoretically nuanced view. Examining the image culture of post-WWII Germany and the United States, he notes the prevalence of Cold War binaries but also explores how advanced artists—Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter in particular—undermined them. Curley focuses on the early 1960s, a time, before the *détente* of the 1970s relaxed tensions, when fear and anxiety ran high and worldwide annihilation (threatened by the Cuban missile crisis, for example) was all too real a possibility.

Two things in particular appear to have drawn Curley to Warhol and Richter: their use of photographic source

RICHARD
KALINA is a
painter who writes
about art.

Images in Warhol's and Richter's paintings are slippery, with details smudged or diffused, like the maddeningly vague intelligence photos of missile sites in Cuba.

material transformed into paintings but in the process blurred, misregistered or seemingly carelessly executed, and their earlier artistic experience as visual persuaders—Warhol's as a high-end advertising illustrator and Richter's as a dutiful East German muralist, a reliable producer of propagandistic, state-sponsored Socialist Realism. While Richter never became a certified Pop artist in quite the same way as Warhol, much of his work of the '60s had a Pop flavor, implicitly critiquing consumerism and Marxism alike. Both artists came to the style at roughly the same time—Warhol leaving behind the world of I. Miller shoe ads at the beginning of the '60s and Richter fleeing the East and its political and aesthetic restraints in 1961 (not long before the building of the Berlin Wall made that course of action virtually impossible).

Although they had ostensibly abandoned their earlier artistic practices, both Warhol and Richter not only retained certain outward forms and interests from their past but also embodied the stresses and contradictions of having made a major shift, of experiencing things from both sides. (At the early stage of their Pop practices, for example, Warhol sometimes referred to his art as “commonism,” while Richter briefly used the term “capitalist realism” to describe his.)

Curley points out that a key Cold War strategy on either side of the political divide was containment: both self and other had to be clearly defined and kept within distinct borders. In order to maintain that stance in the world of the visual, stable images were needed, but painting—and especially painting that took its inspiration from transmitted, reproduced, media-generated photographic sources—was at heart unstable and ambiguous. It operated covertly, in the world of codes and double meanings, of literal and figurative blurrings. The images in Warhol's and Richter's paintings are slippery, with details smudged or diffused, captions truncated, specificity lost. They are like the suggestive but maddeningly vague intelligence photos of missile sites in Cuba.

CLICHÉS PARADING AS truth lay at the heart of both advertising and propaganda, and the two artists, steeped as they were in those cultures, were able to take clichés, the toxic banalities of mid-century print culture, and render them unsettlingly absurd, thereby intentionally corrupting any straightforward message. Consider, for example, Richter's clunky, almost half-hearted 1962 rendition of a newspaper ad for a cheap laundry rack, *Faltbarer Trockner* (Folding

Dryer), featuring a blurred, smiling housewife hanging out her pathetic single towel, or Warhol's 1962 painting of the first and last pages of the *Daily News*, which juxtaposes images of a simperingly devoted Liz Taylor and her then-husband, Eddie Fisher, with a bellowing horse that could have galloped straight out of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Such early Pop works point to the failure of containment, freely substituting both/and for either/or. Freed from the critical binaries—East vs. West, abstraction vs. figuration, high vs. low, Greenberg vs. Rosenberg—Warhol and Richter could pursue what Curley (echoing a wishful political term of the era) calls the “third way.” To this end, he quotes an unlikely commentator on painting's inherent fluidity and uncertainty of representation, Winston Churchill. The architect of the Cold War's most telling metaphor for containment and difference, the Iron Curtain, Churchill was also a committed amateur painter. In 1948, two years after the Iron Curtain speech, he remarked in a long essay titled *Painting as a Pastime*:

The canvas receives a message dispatched usually a few seconds before from the natural object. But it has come through a post office *en route*. It has been transmitted in code. It has been turned from light into paint. It reaches the canvas a cryptogram. Not until it has been placed in its correct relation to everything else that is on the canvas can it be deciphered, is its meaning apparent, is it translated once again from mere pigment into light.

Curley immediately compares Churchill's artist to a secret agent. Indeed, spies, encryption and conspiracy figure prominently in Curley's book. Of course we are operating here in the world of critical theory, and so these terms are not used in quite the way they are commonly understood. While Curley frequently refers to the age's preoccupation with brainwashing, assassinations and poisonings, his musings lean more toward the ivory tower melodramatic than the factually straightforward. Speaking of Warhol's 1963 *Tuna Fish Disaster* (depicting A&P tins suspected of conveying botulism) and Richter's 1964 *Frau Marlow* (portraying the victim of a poisoned praline), Curley writes:

What is the act of poisoning if not the adulteration of something that appears, on its surface, harmless? To poison is thus giving murderous intention to an otherwise neutral or unremarkable product. In this regard, poisoning is akin to the act of interpretation: it brings another meaning to bear upon an object.

As the Cold War and its popular culture recede into the past—as the era blurs—it is helpful to have books like this not just to illuminate theoretical concerns but to make us aware of the larger social and visual context, particularly the things taken for granted at the time but nearly invisible now. As a case in point, Campbell's soup (that Warhol staple) functioned not just as a neutral consumer item but

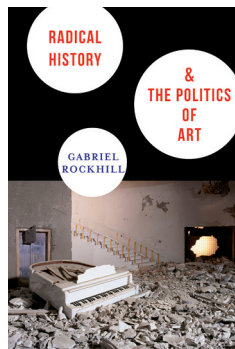
also as a symbol of safety and comfort in a frightening world of superpower conflict.

Curley offers telling examples from American and German periodicals of the time found in both artists' extensive archives. *Life* magazine, read and collected by Warhol, featured juxtapositions of advertising and editorial content that might seem startling to us now. They range from the oddly funny—the famous “Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” article opposite a full-color meat and cheese platter ad from A&P—to the truly frightening: a black-and-white set of illustrated instructions for coping with a nuclear attack and its radioactive fallout placed next to a luscious red-and-orange spread for Campbell's tomato soup. (One of the survival instructions, by the

way, stated that canned soup—a sample of tomato was on the counter—would be safe to eat in the aftermath of the Bomb.)

Framed by often Manichaeic polarities, the early Cold War years were ostensibly simpler than the complex, fragmented and decentralized present day. The art of that period, too, seems more logically and thematically organized. There were recognizable art movements and clear-cut critical stances. But was that clarity inherently unstable? Were ambiguity and loss of interpretive certainty inescapable features of an evolving modernity? In arguing for that view, Curley's thoughtful and carefully researched book promotes Warhol and Richter to positions of cultural centrality, thereby deepening our understanding not only of their work but of their perilous times—and ours. ○

Books in Brief



GABRIEL ROCKHILL
**Radical History
& the Politics
of Art**

Rejecting a strict division between art and politics, the author argues for a mode of historical analysis that emphasizes their dynamic interrelatedness.

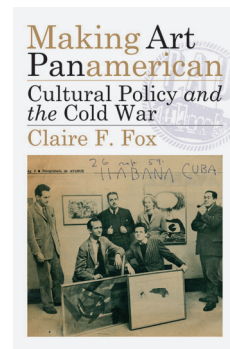
New York, Columbia University Press, 2014; 288 pages, \$85 hardcover, \$28 paperback and ebook.



SARAH E. JAMES
**Common
Ground: German
Photographic
Cultures across
the Iron Curtain**

Drawing on the documentary work of well-known photographers like August Sander and Bernd and Hilla Becher along with largely forgotten figures like Karl Pawek and Evelyn Richter, James examines German politics and identity during the country's period of division.

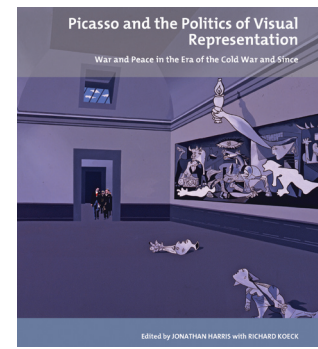
New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2013; 280 pages, \$75 hardcover.



CLAIRE F. FOX
**Making Art
Panamerican:
Cultural Policy
and the Cold War**

The Pan American Union, dedicated to promoting cooperation between Latin America and the U.S., helped foster art movements across the hemisphere during the Cold War. Its Visual Arts Section brought together such figures as Concha Romero James, Charles Seeger and José Luis Cuevas.

Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013; 352 pages, \$90 hardcover, \$30 paperback and ebook.



JONATHAN HARRIS, ed.
**Picasso and the
Politics of Visual
Representation:
War and Peace
in the Era of
the Cold War
and Since**

Examining Picasso's output after he joined the French Communist Party in 1944, scholars compare this overtly political work to the artist's earlier efforts, with reference to such sociopolitical contexts as Francoist Spain and the Cold War.

Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013; 224 pages, \$70 paperback.