

Alumni Voices: Art History as Autobiography

By Michaël Amy '97

My parents' interest in art and culture marked me from an early age. My grandmother would tell me how she used to place a book in my crib to stop me from crying, and my father still recounts how I would run squealing with joy through the galleries of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, much to the consternation of one of the guards on duty.

Fast forward. After spending five years in the United States -where my father did residencies in obstetrics and gynecology in Richmond, VA and New York City- and two years in Uganda -where he specialized in tropical medicine in Kampala- we returned to my native Belgium, where my mother filed for divorce about half a year later, when I was nine years old. In Ghent, I attended a Flemish school, where I had to master my third language (as I was raised in French at home) and acclimate myself to a far more authoritarian system than I was accustomed to, neither of which came easily for this young rebel.

Every two weeks, and several years later, weekly, my younger brother and I would travel to Antwerp to spend time with our mother, who lived with an art critic, writer and producer for the Flemish cultural channel of the Belgian radio, through whom I was exposed to vast amounts of -mostly modern and contemporary- art and culture. Marvelous things hung on the walls and filled the many bookcases throughout the apartment, and later the house, that my mother shared with her boyfriend, and remarkable individuals from the world of culture dropped by for visits. This was the environment I was gradually drawn to. However, I was left on my own to figure things out.

Culture increasingly served as my escape route from the constrictions of life in Belgium -for little could make up for the excitement of living first in Riverdale in the Bronx, and then in Katalemwa, seven miles north of Kampala. Additionally, I was marked as an outsider, for I was raised in distant lands and had accumulated such different experiences, struggled with the language that was spoken in the school I attended, was the son of divorcees who were atheists to boot, wore braces (I, who cared so much about the look of things), and developed (as did my brother) debilitating bouts of asthma, which I did my best to camouflage, for I did not want to appear even more vulnerable than I was. I grew up to prefer the company of certain adults to that of my classmates whose range of interests I found too limited.

As I grew older, my paternal grandfather exposed me to significant quantities of pre-twentieth century western art and culture. He and my grandmother took me to see my first theatrical performances, to operas and concerts of classical music, opened their library to me and plied me with Voltaire, Diderot and Dickens, walked me through Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque churches, and took me to Vienna, Basel and Frankfurt-am-Main, only weeks before I headed for college. By then, I had

visited many other historically important places and numerous museums in Western Europe with my father or mother. My aesthetic education was a relatively well-rounded one. I was fortunate in that respect.

Not knowing what to do after high school, I went on to study art history at the Flemish Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Surprisingly perhaps -considering the importance of higher education in the United States- I was one of only two out of twenty graduating students in my class in high school to decide to go to college. Prior to that time, I was drawn to Italian painting of the Dugento through the Quattrocento, and took the night train to Italy whenever I had the chance to do so , to see work in the flesh. That seed was undoubtedly planted in the summer of 1979, when we drove through France to Pisa -where the Fifth Congress on the Enlightenment was then being held, where my mother's boyfriend read, I suspect, a paper on his favorite philosopher, the Marquis de Sade- and I got to spend about half a day in Florence. I visited the Baptistery, that most perfect building with its splendid decorations, and the cathedral, where I saw Uccello's equestrian portrait of John Hawkwood, in semi-darkness. At the Uffizi, I was struck numb by Simone Martini's *Annunciation* of 1333 and was awed by Botticelli's mythological paintings, among many other things. Around that time, I also developed a growing interest in post-war American art through my exposure to books on Warhol and Lichtenstein and copies of *Artforum* at our home in Antwerp, and eventually wrote my bachelor's thesis on the work of Jasper Johns.

If memory serves, no one had previously written a thesis on an American artist at the VUB, let alone a contemporary one. Happily, my work was exceedingly well received by my committee of readers, one of whom encouraged me to apply for a fellowship to pursue my studies in the United States. Following graduation, I joined Jan Hoet at Belgium's first Museum of Contemporary Art, back in Ghent -where I had landed years earlier, fresh from Kampala. Jan was one of the most electrifying individuals I have ever met, and I learned a lot from working in his orbit for about eight months before coming to New York City in August of 1987, to pursue studies at the Institute of Fine Arts -thanks to a fellowship from the Belgian American Educational Foundation. I expected to be back in Belgium one year later, thinking that a Master's degree could be obtained within twelve months, but stayed on to complete my Master's and pursue a PhD.

For someone who loved to look at both old and new art, New York City was the center of the universe, with its magnificent public collections and its ongoing onslaught of exhibitions of work by both consecrated masters and newly minted artists. In the waning years of the Koch administration, it was also a deeply thrilling, gritty and dangerous place, with a remarkable diversity of cultural offerings. Belgium seemed so terribly ho-hum in comparison, though today, in what is called my middle age, I long for the old towns of Western Europe, steeped through as they are with history.

As it turned out, little twentieth century art was being taught on 78th Street when I arrived there in 1987. William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe were on their way out and Linda Nochlin had not yet come on board. Because of that, I went on to study Renaissance art, which I was drawn to at least since my epiphany in front of the great cycle of the unicorn at the Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park, around the age of five. In the late summer of 1992, I moved to Florence to pursue work on my doctoral dissertation on Michelangelo's commission for Apostle statues for the cathedral of Florence, and, shortly after returning to New York in the spring of 1996, I began teaching art history as an adjunct instructor. I would continue to do so in and around New York City for the next three years, before being invited to teach Renaissance and Baroque art for one year as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Oberlin College, as William Hood was on sabbatical leave and Richard Spear had left Oberlin. I knew that my first full-time job at this distinguished small liberal arts college would lead to tenure track job offers, which happily did materialize.

I would not want to create the impression that almost nothing was happening at the Institute as far as 20th century art was concerned when I arrived there, as a student-run program was in place to invite artists to give talks at the Institute, in the evening, several times over the course of the academic year. I enjoyed helping out with this program, and brought John Cage and Jeff Koons to the Institute the year I headed it. A colleague knocked over Cage's glass of water and soaked his papers through and through just moments before he was to start speaking, but Cage, ever the gentleman, did not even wince. Koons gave a terrific talk, and as people -some giddy and others in a state of mild shock- filed out of the lecture hall, it was Jeffrey Deitch, I now suspect, who confided to me that Jeff finally had the presentation of his work down to a tee. When I called Louise Bourgeois to invite her to speak to us, she was disgruntled that I had not reached out to her years earlier, before she had made it into the limelight. I should have told her, in French, that I had only recently arrived from Europe -which would, I think, have won the day.

An even more informal initiative involved visiting art dealers with a small group of students to learn how these men and women did their work -we met Paula Cooper, Alfred Isselbacher, and Serge Sabarsky, at their galleries.

Shortly before I began teaching in September of 1996, I contacted the editor of *Art in America* (New York City), offering to review exhibitions of contemporary art for that magazine, and was asked to send in some writing samples. Unexpectedly, more than half a year later -and about a week before I defended my doctoral dissertation- Elizabeth Baker invited me to begin writing for her. Betsy, as everyone but I seemed to call her, wanted an emphasis upon the formal analysis of works of art -a skill, I later learned, that was being less and less honed in the world of academe.

Four-hundred-word reviews constituted a great training ground for someone who was not able to write succinctly and had a tendency to pack everything he knew about a subject into his essays. Solid writing comes out of the ongoing exposure to solid prose -too much art history and too much art criticism fall short in terms of

the quality of their written expression. I, thankfully, received much needed guidance as a writer from Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, as I had not written in English, prior to arriving at the Institute, since the age of eight. Professor Weil-Garris Brandt, with her impeccable sense of timing and great wit, also taught me, among other things, a lot about public speaking, as did some fellow students, by setting the tone in the Institute's seminar room and at conferences. Being almost as demanding as she is brilliant, she gave entirely new meaning to perseverance and hard work, lessons that served me well in later years. Happily, she also knew how to throw a great party at the end of the semester--I remember requesting a slide during my report on color in early 16th century Central Italian painting and hearing a cork pop out of a bottle of bubbly, in friendly response.

After securing a tenure-track job at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 2000, I also began reviewing exhibitions of contemporary art, and conducting interviews with artists, for the magazines *Sculpture* (Washington, DC) and *tema celeste* (Milan). The exposure I gained through my exhibition reviews eventually led to invitations to write catalogue essays and, somewhat later, books on contemporary artists, all of which I continue to do to this day.

The school that eventually became RIT was founded in 1829, one year before the founding of my country. Surprisingly, I became the first member of the faculty to offer course electives in Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture at RIT. As a result of this state of affairs, the library holdings in my area of expertise were very slim indeed, thereby compelling me to carry on my work in contemporary art, which, done in the object-driven way that I do it, does not require a vast library at one's fingertips. One is largely on one's own as a critic of contemporary art, doing one's best to make sense of chaos. I traveled monthly by plane to New York City to see exhibitions and meet people, and wrote my texts over the ensuing weeks once back in Rochester, NY.

My work in contemporary art allowed me to step in and offer surveys of 20th century art for two consecutive years after I arrived at RIT, in the wake of the sudden departure of our department's modernist --in addition to my course electives in Renaissance and Baroque art, and the yearlong survey of western art and architecture. Significantly, commissioned exhibition reviews and essays appear within a couple of months to a year after submission, unlike some of one's writings on Renaissance art which may take an eternity to see the light of day --and the longer the delay, the more dated certain essays will appear by the time they are finally published. Not being endowed with great patience, I enjoy having most of my texts appear during my lifetime. The administrators at RIT were enthused with my ongoing work in both Renaissance and contemporary art, something I am grateful for, for I do not imagine that many institutions of higher learning welcome such eclecticism on the part of their faculty. Significantly, at the Institute of Fine Arts, one was discouraged from narrowing down all too early in one's academic career, as students were required to take courses in different areas within the history of art.

My training enables me to place new work within a broad context –far wider, in fact, than most people are able to do in our age of overspecialization. Being an outsider of sorts has its advantages, as I see things from a remove and connect the dots in ways that go beyond the beaten tracks. Additionally, being a Belgian art critic with a foot in New York City gives me an unusual perspective on the contemporary art emerging from my country –for I see things differently from this side of the Atlantic, while I know what it means to live and work in Belgium. Almost constantly shifting gears, keeps me on my toes, and writing for a variety of audiences about artistic expression in different places at discrete points in time, keeps the creative juices flowing.

Spreading one's attention over very different areas of art historical inquiry does, however, come with a price tag, as one is not taken quite seriously in certain circles. How could one possibly be working on Cimabue and Jeff Koons, or on Michelangelo and Cubism simultaneously? There is, allegedly, something wrong with this picture. One should stick to one's territory. What I do is lacking in decorum.

However, I have always felt that those people who were able to write and speak about widely different subjects, were the more interesting ones by far –that seemed so much preferable to knowing a huge amount about a rather small area of enquiry. Additionally, I never understood how so many art historians could claim to know so much about a distant time and place and be so completely disengaged from the art and culture of their own age. I, in turn, find that there is something wrong with that picture. The living culture around one, tied as it is to the world at large, gives three-dimensionality to one's life. It is too easy to shrug off all forms of contemporary cultural expression as worthless or meaningless drivel. It is, in my view, necessary for intellectuals to understand and explain what is most vital in the culture of our own age, as well.



Photo caption: Michaël Amy with the marble statue of St. Catherine by Antonello Gagini, Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester.