

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art  
INCONVERSATION

## GEORGE CONDO with Joachim Pissarro NOVEMBER 2ND, 2017

George Condo is a New York-based artist whose career launched in the East Village in the early 1980s. During this time, he also worked in Andy Warhol's factory before moving to Los Angeles and holding his first solo exhibition in 1983. In the decades that followed, Condo has emerged as one of the world's preeminent painters and sculptors. In 2017, the Skarstedt Gallery in New York presented a selection of new works, while the Philips Collection in Washington, DC., mounted a major drawings retrospective that will open at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark this November.

Joachim Pissarro sat down with George Condo to discuss his works, his travels, and the "influenza" of influence.



George Condo, *Double Heads Drawing 7*, 2015. Charcoal, pastel, and graphite on paper, 26 1/4 x 40 1/4 in. Private collection. Courtesy Skarstedt Gallery and Sprüth Magers.

**Joachim Pissarro (Brooklyn Rail):** You said something—I think this was after your bout with cancer: "I was in five places at once." It almost seems that lately you have been in more than five places at once. How do you do so much?

**George Condo:** I suppose it's just my compulsive nature; I don't have anything else to do that's better. I have no patience for spending time meaninglessly. Like this morning I woke up, had a coffee, made a couple of drawings—and it was only 7:15—and I thought, "Now what am I supposed to do?" So then I thought, "Okay, maybe I'll have some eggs," and then I thought, "I'll go work on a little painting." Now it's about 9:00, I'm gonna get in the car and go down to my studio, and we're gonna do a few more things and work, and I won't be able to work all day. And then I'll come back, and I'll be able to work at night. I think it's just by not having too big of a social life—it's the way I grew up, you know, in a large family with five kids, and I had my own room, and I was always alone in my room with my door locked and making drawings. It was just my way to pass time in a small, rural town. I couldn't do sports; I couldn't do all the other things everybody loved to do; I was only interested in reading and art.

I think it's just the compulsive nature of a creator—someone who can't stand a white sheet of paper or white canvas. Like I always say, "If you wanna torture me, you put me in front of a white canvas and tie my hands behind my back and I'll go nuts."

**Rail:** Like Stéphane Mallarmé's fear of the white page?

**Condo:** Yes! Imagine giving Mallarmé a notebook and then saying, "I'm sorry, but we don't have a pencil." He'd go crazy—he'd find something to write with—even if it was a cigarette butt. It's a necessity of some sort.

But lately these shows—in Berlin with Udo Kittelmann at the Berggruen Collection and the exhibition at the Phillips Collection—these are exhibitions that took awhile to conceptualize and develop. We started thinking about the Berggruen show maybe two years before we had it. The whole problem was: you've got Picasso, Braque, Klee, Matisse, Cezanne in this collection—all the great masters of this period—what're you supposed to do, try to find a good George Condo painting to put next to it?

So Udo said, "I wanna come into the storage, and we pick *your* work, and we see which one of those guys will go along with it." And once he came up with this brilliant idea, he picked the craziest paintings of mine based on what he knew about the Berggruen's Collection, and it just flew like skates on ice—it was amazing.

The idea was that these works have entered this realm of "expensive trophy," but when they were first painted they were obviously groundbreaking, radical—people were disgusted. People hated Monet; they thought Monet was destroying art. So Udo said: I want to bring that feeling back to those artists' works, and this show will be about seeing paintings the way people used to see them when they were first made. It was a fantastic way to approach an exhibition. The guy is a brilliant curator.

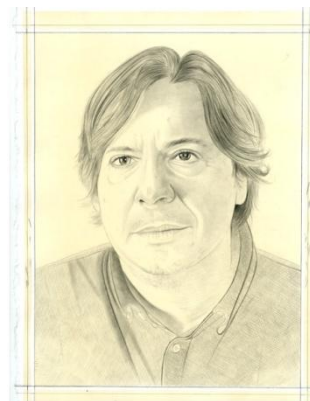
**Rail:** I totally agree, and I'm stunned to hear this! When I've taught Impressionism and so on, I've often told my students it's impossible to put yourself in the shoes of the people who first encountered these pictures. I mean, you had security officers barring access to pregnant women, just in case they would have a shock in front of Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863). I once took a group of people from Yale to the Orsay, and I said: be scandalized, be shocked, look at this painting and hate it.

**Condo:** But if you think about it, a guy like Arnold Schoenberg, he comes along after the point of the great string quartets of Beethoven had been performed, and then suddenly everything softens out and turns into Mendelssohn and Debussy. All of a sudden Schoenberg realizes that in order to stand there as a German composer next to the strength of Beethoven, he "will have to smash every single mirror in order to get there."

It's in Schoenberg's music: the existential absence of what he has and the presence of what has been removed is there. When there's a schism between what it was and what it became, like in a semiotic type of discussion where you have the imitation of something, but imitation means something completely different than the thing itself that's being imitated. And it takes on an identity of a new object even though it resembles the old emblem that it came from.

So, I suppose it's a dialectical process where there's a harmonic resolution of two dissonant forms. That's always been interesting to me. And dissonance is one of the great qualities of music and art. Having a music education really helped me understand how to paint and how to think about painting. Learning how to read music was very important too. When I took classical lessons, the first teacher I had said, "I just want you to look at the corner of the wall and try to see every centimeter as you look at the corner all the way across. Don't go forward; don't go backwards; look at every centimeter." I look at painting like that.

**Rail:** In the Phillips Collection show, among your drawings especially, there was this hyper-density—no square inch, no square millimeter was lost—and it looks like a musical partition that would be over-crammed with notes and bombarded with sound.



Portrait of George Condo, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



George Condo, *Last Man Standing*, 2017.  
Oil, graphite and pigment stick on linen, 80 x 75 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Skarstedt Gallery, New York.



**Condo:** It's a concept of exploration of the materiality of infinity. If you think about the exploration of the materiality of infinity—of atmosphere—when you look at the air, what do you see?

**Rail:** When Monet was asked why he painted cathedral walls so many times—thirty times—he said, "I'm not interested in the cathedral; I'm interested in the air, the envelope that separates me from the cathedral. That's what I was painting."

**Condo:** That's what he *got*. I was thinking about Monet's *Haystack* paintings. He'd often paint the same scene at different times of day, and that was what it was about—it wasn't about how well he would paint a building. The haystacks are a representation of his brain, and the rest of the painting is sort of his body. Each one is the idea of *time*. Monet painted time.



Claude Monet, *Haystacks (Effect of Snow and Sun)*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929.

You could say someone like Vermeer was interested in painting a kind of grace, or a sort of elegance, or a kind of gestural unreality of a dreamlike state. It could be anything: a woman sleeping, looking at her pearls, or reading a letter, and it was just this sort of ethereal dream world that was materialized. But in Monet it's the real world seen from a sort of scientific and dreamlike state at the same time. He was able to capture the molecular atmosphere of a tree—an exploding molecular atmosphere. It's really unbelievable to me.

**Rail:** In 1904 or 1905 there was an exhibition of Monet's *Haystacks* in Munich, and one of the members of the public that saw that exhibition was Kandinsky. It was a badly lit exhibition, and he records in his own diaries that the idea of abstraction came out of him looking at *Haystacks*.

**Condo:** I remember reading about how Kandinsky went from Russia, from the Blue Rider movement, into Munich. He was starting to switch up his work, and then he went abstract with those first incredible paintings. You can see why, because the last Japanese bridges are flaming orange and when you go to the collection at the Monet Museum in Montmartre, all the white canvas that's left around the outside is intentional. There's not this idea that those are unfinished or that they were supposed to be cropped—he was coming to a point that Rothko came to—it wasn't a question of his failing vision and the problem with cataracts. It had to do with an artistic decision. There was a difference between a painting and reality, and he reconciled himself with that.

It is funny because I was reading David Sylvester's interviews with Bacon, and Bacon talks about Monet being one of his favorite painters, which was very strange. But the way things are blowing up and fizzing out in Bacon, they blow up and fizz out in Monet. Like this effervescence—kind of like champagne bubbles or whatever that effervescence is—Monet's got it running through. Whereas in Renoir, it's more constrained; it's down to earth and it's a stylistic decision. It's not about capturing this molecular content of the atmosphere. It's more or less about maintaining this impressionist standpoint.

With someone like Cezanne, it's a completely different situation; it's a kind of psycho-trip on art. He was a man who almost defiantly turned his back against convention and decided to fight it with every bone in his body until he came up with something that was valid. That's what's so beautiful about Cezanne; he didn't ever stop fighting; you can see in every painting that there was always a fight against himself. Yet, he destabilized the concept of the way we look at art: the planes. He re-aligned the planar vision of painting and the perspective of painting. He created a new dimension in painting with his perspectives. And someone like Picasso came along and basically just stuck African masks on some bathers—which was kind of cool.

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My first catalogue was printed in 1985 (or 1986?) for my one-man show with Barbara Gladstone. I remember my parents came down, and Andy Warhol came to the opening. My father said, "I really like that guy Andy Warhol—he's such a nice guy," and he said, "we sat and talked for quite a long time. You know what Andy said to me? He said that he thought the essay in the book was really great and he wanted to use the exact same one and just change the name to "Andy Warhol." You know, every time they say "George Condo," just put "Andy Warhol," and it would fit.

[Laughter]

**Rail:** I think Jasper Johns has taught me more about art history than anyone else.

**Condo:** You're not gonna learn more than what you can get out of a guy like Jasper Johns because Johns spent so much of his life looking at art. I've found that art and relativity are very similar in this conceptual way where there is no real *time* in art, and things that may have been created in 1410 can start to look like they were created in 2030.

**Rail:** Look at Piero della Francesca or Giorgio de Chirico.

**Condo:** They are stepping in and out of their time zone depending on the perception changes of the moment. Everything is related; the perception of art is extremely interconnected with what the art is and the history of art.

To say that during this time you had the Medici family, and this artist was reacting to the battle between Lorenzo de' Medici and this other Florentine whoever, and you're like who fucking cares? If the painting is no good or good is all that matters. The rest of it is about studying cannons and cannonballs.

**Rail:** I want to return to your work through this. Have you ever read Michael Baxandall? He was a British art historian; he died in 2008. Baxandall traces back the notion of "influence" to *influenza*, which means flu in Latin. Talking about your work, are you not in a sense cramming the whole notion of influence into this super dense form as you were describing with the musical partition, in which influences lose their meaning and transcend themselves?

**Condo:** I know what you're talking about, because to make progress in the evolution of art, you have to absorb all of what has been done and incorporate everything. And then what becomes the nature of your own art is what you do with what you know. So, all great art has some relationship to the great art that came before it. The departures are very few and far between, and they're not very recognizable until later on.

Heidegger wrote about the idea of "presencing" one reality into another. So the kind of presence of a familiar form of art into a less familiar territory is what is normally mistaken as an influence. Someone would normally say, "He's very influenced by Picasso because he uses Cubism." But it's not about influence. It's about the presencing of those concepts into another field of representation. And so, it's easy to say, "I see the influence of x, y, and z." But the interchangeability of languages is what makes for that appearance—the difference between the essence of its being and the appearance of its being.

So, the "self" of an artwork is either built on a certain origin, and then an identification of that origin exists within the self, or that self has an appearance to everyone, which is not that origin. And so influence is about a learning experience.

I mean, I can walk into the airport in Barcelona and see this big ceramic wall of Miro, and I think, "Shit! I've gotta do something like that!" It's not going to look like Miro, but it gave me an idea to do a big ceramic piece, and so I could have been influenced by that experience. But did the subject matter carry over into the next project? Not necessarily. When Picasso painted *Rape of the Sabine Women* in 1963, was he influenced by David who painted the same subject more than 160 years earlier? No, he just wanted to take that subject into his work.

**Rail:** I believe—and correct me if I'm wrong—that even though people often equate your work with having a multitude of influences, instead it is more accurate that you explode a multitude of influence.



George Condo, *Paralytic Robot*, 2014. Oil on linen, 67 x 65 inches. Courtesy the artist.



**Condo:** I think it's a pleasure to play with people's heads, and say, listen: they're going to come in and see everything they know, and it's not going to be what they want it to be because it's all used for the wrong reasons, and then it adds up, and they have to see what it is used for.

So if your language is art history, which is what I speak through—I speak through my experience and memory through art—I came to realize one thing: when you look at a drawing of a nude by Rubens and see this voluptuous female, and then you look at a drawing by Michelangelo, and you see this muscular arm and beautiful neoclassical face, and then you look at a drawing of a nude by Antoine Coypel or Greuze; to judge the quality of the nude, you have to study the line of this artist versus the line of that artist. You can't dig up the nude from the ground to see if he did a good job of copying her. Does it matter if it really looks like the subject? Or does it only matter that it looks like art, that it exists in a language or continuum of what is considered art?

When it comes to influence, if you don't have influences then you've got to be a lousy artist. Without influence, you can't influence others. Artists who don't influence other artists are usually not important.

**Rail:** I wrote about Cezanne and Pissarro, who were close buddies, and Johns and Rauschenberg who were more than buddies. Sometimes I thought, "Wow, there's actually a correlation between Pissarro and Rauschenberg, and Pissarro loved dirt." So one day I turned to Bob [Rauschenberg] and said, "Do you know this painting in Chicago, this kind of big swath of land and pure dirt? Were you ever influenced by Pissarro?" And he looked at me—he may have had a glass or two—and he said, "No, I don't think so. But you know, Pissarro was influenced by me." [Laughter].

**Condo:** Back then artists were not thinking. They were under a kind of pressure from Picasso, where anybody whose work was influenced by Picasso was automatically written off. And by doing that he was an influence in a reverse psychological way.

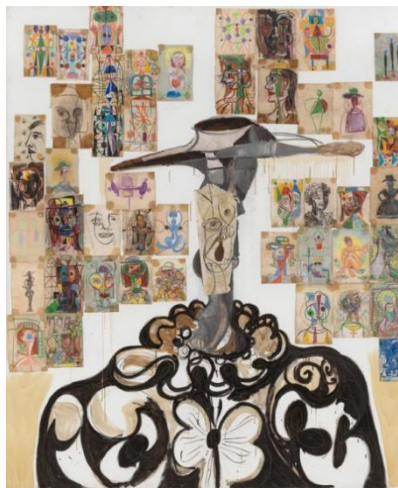
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**Rail:** A negative influence.

**Condo:** He forced other artists out of everything that they



George Condo, *Spanish Head Composition*, 1988. Oil and collage on paper mounted on canvas, 118 × 98 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously, 2013. Image courtesy Skarstedt Gallery and Sprüth Magers



George Condo, *The Investigation*, 2017. Oil and pigment stick on linen, 100 × 240 inches. (Triptych, three unattached panels, each 100 × 80 inches) Courtesy the artist and Skarstedt Gallery, New York.

originally started doing, and they couldn't survive in contest with him. Only Matisse could survive. Picasso had a real appreciation for Matisse's work, his color and simplicity, but also the complexity of those colors. Then people like Edward Hopper came along and you could see the strange sort of distancing between European values and American values in painting. After Picasso, the world didn't go cubism. Painting just switched around. You can see it in Jackson Pollock's *Portrait and a Dream* (1953). This painting was done in the '50s—it's one of his last paintings—and it looks more like late Picasso. And then Pollock's last works, those black and white ones with the big heads, are very much like the late Picasso pieces. Those were done like thirty years before Picasso's. So when Rauschenberg says, "It's possible they were influenced by me," he's just switching up the time and relativity. How do you know that Mozart was not influenced by John Coltrane? [Laughter].

**Rail:** To me, that's your work, that you influenced de Kooning, Picasso, and so many other people and that you make them become even more relevant than they ever were, because without George Condo to show us what they're capable of doing, what you're doing through and beyond them, how you transcend them...

**Condo:** You can reveal what they're doing in another way that they cannot reveal themselves—by understanding their use of negative space and volumes, which were taken from great masters that they studied. Picasso was obsessed with Cranach's crucifixions at one point—why? To get that degree of pain in Grünewald's crucifixion, to create that screaming horse, he's going to have to look at that screaming Jesus and study it.

One writer I really admire, Michael Kwakkelstein, wrote a great book on the physiognomies of Leonardo da Vinci. And the question was: was Leonardo a naturalist and only drawing nature as he saw it, or did he start to create his own nature and use the language of nature to create a new, hybrid form of nature in his art? Because there are these strange physiological distortions. Given all the things he was involved with, he obviously had some sort of concept of a life of peripheral beings that existed in his mind that he could decipher and describe, and these were not realistic people. These were people that he invented and things that he invented.

He sort of went into his body as an artist and went on what I would call an anatomical safari to discover the essence of the body—the muscles, the bones, and the organs, unlike any other artist had ever done. He started by looking outward at the world, describing flowers and then floods and the way the currents in water move, but then he turned *inside*, and it's really interesting. This is a territory that's been covered now by anatomical illustrators; but you start to think, what is left in the mind that is such an incredible thing in itself? And the mind is composed of everything that we've ever experienced or seen in our lives, and why shouldn't everything that we've ever seen or experienced in our lives be reflected in our art? Why should it be reduced to the concept of influence?

**Rail:** Kill the concept of influence.

**Condo:** It happens in many bad artists' works. They can't see their own mind, they can't picture, they don't have a photographic memory, they can recall what they've seen in their mind and transcribe, but they are not able to transcribe their mental notes, their visions. They rely at that point on the library or index of visual vocabulary, and ultimately they fall into the plague—the influenza—of influence. And this is where you find this disease. But we're talking about inferior painters, inferior artists; we're not talking about a great artist who welcomes influence because they're happy to.

**Rail:** You've often talked about interchangeability. I would like to bring the conversation from the inter-subjectivity between you and people who you have not had natural physical contact with or are not necessarily your friends, to people who actually were your friends, like Keith Haring. To me, it's more or less the same situation, except those that are dead cannot respond to you.

**Condo:** You know, it's not that they're dead. Keith Haring and I had this discussion, and he wrote about it in his journals. When he was dying of AIDS, he asked me, "What do you think is more important: art or life?" And I said, "I don't know. I'm twenty-six. I think art is more important than life because it lives on way past us." And I don't think of [artists] as being dead because their art is so alive.



The characters in your paintings must be alive in order for the art to live a long life. If the characters are dead on arrival because they're not exciting or interesting, then the artist may as well still be alive because he was the most important thing about his work, and it was the artist's life that was more exciting. But when the subjects that the artist paints have no life, they're not going to live longer than the artist.

I always think of Shakespeare and Bach because I once read that if somebody was to sit down and try to humanly transcribe every single word that Shakespeare ever wrote, it would take an entire lifetime. If they tried to write every note that Bach ever wrote, it would take them an entire lifetime. Because there's so many fucking notes on his scores. How did they do it? What was compelling these artists?

What you realize is when a guy like Bach would sit down with a piece of paper, he just heard it and wrote it. So you have this kind of strange thing where you have a continuum of imagery going through your mind and you deprive yourself. When I was teaching I would tell my students, "Never deprive yourself of an inspiration. Never deprive yourself of the moment when the image comes to your mind, to take note of that image, you'll never know whether it's of any use until it comes about and develops and turns into whatever it is you're doing."

I think the most important thing for an artist is to not deprive themselves and to be selective. Selectivity is a very dangerous kind of road to travel as an artist. That's why people like Rauschenberg and Johns were combined in a strange world where, "I have to be different; I have to be Rauschenberg." But Rauschenberg was not different than John Cage, who was not that different from Merce Cunningham. There was a collective consciousness happening at the Black Mountain College, where these artists had their school.

When I was contemporary with Keith [Haring] and with Jean-Michel [Basquiat]—these guys were my two best friends—we spent so much time talking about art. The two of them made sort of similar art, but Jean-Michel did not like to think that he was doing anything like anyone else. Keith had an overwhelming admiration for Jean-Michel. When Jean-Michel did the crown, Keith did the baby. I did the old masters, and so I was not a threat. I had my own separate discussion. But it was a discussion that neither one of those two artists could have possibly incorporated into their works at that time because they simply did not come from the kind of background that I come from.

**Rail:** This triangle you mentioned, it's been printed and mentioned so many times. Has there ever been an exhibition between Keith, Jean-Michel, and you?

**Condo:** No.

**Rail:** Would that interest you?

**Condo:** I think it would be amazing. It would be such a great thing to show, you know: 1984.

**Rail:** It would be a fantastic exhibition to put together. Before we conclude I also wanted to talk about your "simulated found objects."

**Condo:** Well, the idea was simple: could I create something so real that it would look like I found it? One day I was having a conversation with Ringo Starr, and we were talking about the song "I am the Walrus" by the Beatles, and I said, "You know there's always been one thing I wondered about that



George Condo, *The Hill*, 2015. Oil and pigment stick on linen 62 × 57 inches, © George Condo 2017. Courtesy the artist and Skarstedt Gallery, New York.

song. When all of a sudden it sounds like a radio gets turned on, it sounds like 1920s music. It's obviously the sound of the radio being turned on, and then you hear the orchestra and George Martin come back in." I said, "Is that a piece of found music that John had and just inserted into this? Because I know John and Yoko were into that kind of thing." Ringo said, "No, actually, John composed that piece of music to *sound* like he had found it."

**Rail:** Wow.

**Condo:** How cool is that? So that was really a piece of simulated found music. And that's what I'm doing with my paintings. I included a simulated found object in the last sculpture show I did. It looks like I took a Greek head and inserted it into one of the sculptures, but actually I made the head myself. I studied the proportions of Greek sculpture. I saw how they divide the head into three parts, and the mouth goes here and the eyes go here, and the line of the face comes down to the crack here.

And so I said, "Why don't I just use all the proportions and make my own Greek sculpture and see if it turns into anything?" And then I took a wire when it was in clay and cut it in half and moved it as if there was an earthquake, like Pompeii. Then I took that, and I cast it in plaster and wax, and then I smashed it, and I took a fragment of it and put it onto a sculpture. At the same time, I added things like a lighter or a cell phone and stuck them on, so there was this strangeness, like which ones were found and which ones I created.

**Rail:** Found versus simulated objects.

**Condo:** Yeah, it'd be like if we all found out that Rauschenberg had actually painted the JFK himself and made it look like a dye transfer.

**Rail:** Would you like to say anything as a summary statement?

**Condo:** The only thing I can say is that when we're talking about Bach and music—there's a discussion that I found on YouTube; it's an interesting conversation with Glenn Gould who does a talk about Bach. Gould said that what was genius about Bach was that he was so *behind* his times. That he was generations behind his times.

Walter Friedlaender, in his famous book *Caravaggio Studies* (1955), writes about Caravaggio walking around on the streets wearing this strange outfit with a sword, and by this time a sword was outlawed—you couldn't walk around with a sword hanging off you if you weren't a soldier. Caravaggio was living so far behind his times, but he was painting so far ahead. When Picasso started to think about Rembrandt, Picasso was also projecting so much more *ahead*. When I think about artists from the past, it's only about the possibilities of how I can project forward.

#### CONTRIBUTOR

##### Joachim Pissarro

JOACHIM PISSARRO has been the Bershad Professor of Art History and Director of the Hunter College Galleries, Hunter College, New York, since 2007. He has also held positions at MoMA, the Kimbell Art Museum, and the Yale University Art Gallery. His latest book on Wild Art (with co-author David Carrier) was published in fall 2013 by Phaidon Press.