

## *Marred with Sincerity: Kippenberger and Picasso at the End*

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Pablo Picasso and Martin Kippenberger demonstrated an obsession with portraiture that was truly self-portraiture—as they neared the end of their lives they depicted themselves as debased and desiring, facing an urgent need to solidify their images within the canon of art history. Both men drew on the works of famous artists who had come before in order to establish their inheritance. Kippenberger was attracted to the figure of Picasso again and again throughout his life as an emblem of success that he would imitate, revere, and ridicule. Both artists were focused on the notion of completion—a focus that took an anxious form before their deaths—especially completing the gesture of another artist and thereby making it a monument to their own legacy. Kippenberger and Picasso are on view in Berlin this spring, with Kippenberger nearly dominating the vast Hamburger Bahnhof and over 100 works by Picasso permanently mounted in the Berggruen Collection. The architecture and history of these exhibitions and collectors brings their work into another realm of comparison that also relates to lasting memory and larger-than-life persona.

A massive hall at the Hamburger Bahnhof is filled with nearly 300 pieces from Kippenberger's oeuvre, titled "Sehr Gut" and organized with an emphasis on his vast array of styles. Separate from this hall that nearly serves as a retrospective is a room displaying his untitled white paintings of 1991, so far rarely shown. Across the Spree River is the Berggruen Museum, where Picasso's mostly two-dimensional works are organized strictly chronologically. The exhibition, entitled "Picasso and his Times" presents three floors of over 100 examples of Picasso's work from his early student sketches to his final moments in 1973.

The character of the institutions that present these collections is also of note. Architecturally, the museums inhabit spaces repurposed from transportation hubs, bearing testimony to a particular locomotive history. The Berggruen Museum was originally designed to house the stables of Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV.<sup>1</sup> The Hamburger Bahnhof was one of the first terminal stations of the rail system, erected in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> It later became a museum of transportation history before assuming its current function in 2004 as a museum of contemporary art. The comparison of the two exhibitions does not end there—the collector associated with each artist also has a significant presence in these environs, although that history lurks somewhere behind the scenes. Both collectors are directly linked to Germany's troubled past and the capacity of art to be used for vanity and exoneration. Heinz Berggruen was a German Jew who had fled Berlin during the Nazi regime. After the war he lived in Paris and became Picasso's friend and art dealer. After 60 years in exile from Berlin, in 1996 he sold his collection to

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<sup>1</sup> Peter-Klaus Schuster, "The Berggruen Collection in Berlin—The History of a Transformation" in Hans Jürgen Papies and Heinz Berggruen, eds., *Picasso and His Time: The Berggruen Museum*. (Berlin: Nicolai, 1996.) 16.

<sup>2</sup> "Museum History" HamburgerBahnhof.com <<http://www.hamburgerbahnhof.de/text.php?id=98&lang=en>>

Berlin's State Museums for one-tenth of its market value.<sup>3</sup> The resulting museum is thought of by some as "a powerful gesture of reconciliation" and a willingness to leave painful history behind, as well as a lasting association of his name with the figure of Picasso.<sup>4</sup>

The Hamburger Bahnhof demonstrates a different kind of activity, although also born from an attempt at reconciliation. A long-term loan from Friedrich Christian Flick of approximately 1,500 works led the museum to double their exhibition space, annexing a staggering 20,000 square-foot depot.<sup>5</sup> The Flick family, one of the wealthiest in Germany, earned their money through munitions manufacturing using slave labor during the Nazi regime. Flick refused to pay into "The Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future," or the Forced/Slave Labor Compensation Fund and had trouble getting any art institution to agree to show his huge collection of contemporary art until his recent arrangement with the Hamburger Bahnhof.<sup>6</sup>

The architecture of these museums is pivotal in forming meaning because of the way that they construct a certain history, and negotiate a past that is fraught with trauma. The exhibition space of the Hamburger Bahnhof is huge and bright, and the Berggruen Museum is also lit from above. As described by the Berggruen catalogue: "The elegant modern curve of the staircase, rebuilt after wartime damage, guides the visitor's gaze almost suggestively up to the dome, which is supported on pillars to let in light."<sup>7</sup> There is an attempt to clear out some of that historical weight through some kind of idealist transcendence. That only works to the extent that visitors allow it to take them out of themselves. The metaphor of rising to an elevated plane away from time and history is most apparent at the Berggruen Museum. The effect of organizing Picasso's work chronologically is that the pieces at the height of this cupola are his late works.

For exhibitions of works by dead artists, the prominence of late works is sometimes typical due to a greater ease in their acquisition, as well as providing a more accessible point of entry into a large oeuvre. But in the case of these shows, the curatorial choices set against the architecture itself singled out a group of works: at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Kippenberger's white paintings, which are up a flight of stairs near the entrance, and at the Berggruen, Picasso's paintings of the 1960's and 1970's, which are also elevated on the highest level of the circular floor plan.

After his cubist break-through in the 1910's, lauded ad nauseum in art history of the twentieth century, Picasso persisted past the exhaustion of modernism. In a postmodern world incredulous of the concept of originality, new theories of semiotics and "the discourse of the

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Riding. "Heinz Berggruen, Influential Picasso Collector, Dies at 93." *The New York Times*. The New York Times.com, 27 Feb. 2007. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/27/arts/design/27berggruen.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/27/arts/design/27berggruen.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)>

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2007.

<sup>5</sup> "Museum History" HamburgerBahnhof.com

<sup>6</sup> Reesa Greenberg, "Redressing history: Partners and the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection" *Kritische Berichte*, October 2005 <[http://www.yorku.ca/reerden/Publications/redressing\\_history.html](http://www.yorku.ca/reerden/Publications/redressing_history.html)>

<sup>7</sup> Schuster, 18.

copy” made Picasso’s style critically less and less tenable.<sup>8</sup> Celebrated in a book called *Picasso at Ninety: The Late Work*, José Bergamín writes, “Picasso may be thought of as a ship which never allowed itself to be diverted from its course. Capricious and bizarre as this course might have seemed to others, it undeviatingly followed its path to its destination.”<sup>9</sup> But just what was that destination? Bergamín hesitates to define it. His style became coded: “modernist styles become postmodernist codes.”<sup>10</sup> The artist was clearly aware of some of these issues, the way his work was stylistically becoming an imitation of itself.<sup>11</sup>

The question of style is of course a point of departure for Kippenberger and Picasso. Style was of particular importance to both of them but in quite different ways. Picasso established for himself such an inimitable style that it became a personal brand. Kippenberger avoided identification with a singular style, and his trademark was instead the notable absence of a unifying type. Although both Picasso’s and Kippenberger’s personas loom over their oeuvre, Kippenberger approached his work with far more of an awareness of this fact; a staging of himself was integral to his work. He approached the act of making with “an acknowledgement of the bankruptcy of aspirations to originality,” that is in stark contrast with Picasso’s claim to perfect uniqueness.<sup>12</sup>

Both took a particular interest in the genre of portraiture, although Kippenberger used this term more loosely. Picasso made countless depictions of the duo of artist and model, which was both allegorical and autobiographical. Showing the model in the context of the studio was also a self-inscription that acknowledges a relationality between depicted and depicter. Especially in his later phase, the repeated image of the nude model reveals Picasso’s machismo and his increasing fear of impotence “both creative and sexual.”<sup>13</sup> John Richardson puts it rather bluntly: “The tools of the artist's trade - brushes- became surrogates for sexual parts to be used on a canvas that was a surrogate for the model.”<sup>14</sup> Picasso’s nude women are a kind of self-portrait, a residue of his own desire.

This gesture of self-inscription is extended by Kippenberger. His abundance of self-portraits are often comical and self-deprecating, creating images of himself in the mode of both vanity and its opposite. Indeed there are perhaps few pieces that cannot be considered a self-portrait in some sense.<sup>15</sup> Kippenberger constantly uses doubly-coded language, the language of postmodern irony. He engages directly with the figure of Picasso, posing himself in the image of an earlier master,

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<sup>8</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” *October* No. 18 (Fall 1981) 27.

<sup>9</sup> José Bergamín, “Transparent Masks,” in Klaus Gallwitz, ed., *Picasso at Ninety: The Late Work* (New York: Putnam, 1971) 38.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (Duke Univ. Press, 1991) 17.

<sup>11</sup> John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (England: Penguin, 1965) 11.

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Morgan, “Saint Martin” in Jessica Morgan Kippenberger, Martin, Doris Krystof, and Jessica Morgan, eds. *Martin Kippenberger* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006) 12.

<sup>13</sup> Marie-Laure Bernadac, “Picasso 1953-1972: Painting as Model” in *Late Picasso: Paintings, Sculpture, Drawings, Prints, 1953-1972* (London: Tate Gallery, 1988) 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> John Richardson, “L’Epoque Jacqueline” in *Late Picasso*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Marcus Verhagen. “There’s No Success Like Failure: Martin Kippenberger” in Lisa Le Feuvre, ed. *Failure* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010) 44.

one he imitates with humor but also a kind of sincere yearning. Picasso is the last great master of our time, and despite Kippenberger's fluency in insincerity and sarcasm, there is a latent desire for that old-style celebrity recognition, an anxiety that became heightened as his health failed him at a young age.

When Kippenberger poses in the guise of Picasso, the resulting self-portraits are not with the signature striped shirt but rather the huge white briefs of the elderly star, drawn from a famous image taken by David Douglas Duncan in 1962 of a proud Picasso accompanied by his dog at the door of his French chateau. Kippenberger takes up this image, utilizing its symbolism of "demonstrative manliness" and subverting it into a pathetically abject image of an aging and ridiculous man.<sup>16</sup> As Marcus Verhagen writes in Lisa Le Feuvre's compendium for Whitechapel on Failure, Kippenberger exposes his growing beer gut:

"he adopted bold, defiant postures, but the effect was burlesque: he presented himself not as another naturally imposing figure but as a poseur for whom Picasso's confident masculinity was a pipe dream. . . . they were designed to reflect back on the artist himself, to show him up as an infantile character whose jeering only exposed his own failings."<sup>17</sup>

He repeated this image of himself in the garb of Picasso in paintings, drawings, posters, photographs, and even a calendar. In a significant divergence from the original image, Kippenberger photographed himself in a shabby hotel room, turned toward the mirror for self-validation rather than toward the camera, demonstrating far more vulnerability than Picasso's authoritarian posture at the front door. In this regard, he seems more humble than Picasso, despite the bold assertion of affinity between them. Susanne Kippenberger writes in her biography of her brother: "He measured himself against Picasso's fame and productivity, while also making fun of Picasso's vanity by copying his famous pose in underwear."<sup>18</sup> This gesture is dual: he ridicules Picasso through homage, but not so deep beneath the derision is envy of Picasso's undeniable success.

Not only did he pose as Picasso, some of Kippenberger's final paintings in 1996 were a series of portraits of Jacqueline Picasso, also the subject of Picasso's final paintings. The series was called *Jacqueline: The Pictures Pablo Couldn't Paint Anymore*, drawn from photographs taken after her husband's death. "I'm taking over his job," he told curator Daniel Baumann, "completing his work, in a sense."<sup>19</sup> The desire for continuity and completion seems to be important for both artists. After the death of Matisse, Picasso said "*Il est mort, et moi, je continue son travail.*"<sup>20</sup> The presumption of a lineage of geniuses is explicit here. It became even more explicit in Picasso's late works, which reprised Velazquez, Rembrandt, Delacroix, Van Gogh,

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Kippenberger and Eva Meyer-Hermann. *Kippenberger Meets Picasso* (Málaga: Museo Picasso Málaga, 2011) 9.

<sup>17</sup> Verhagen 44.

<sup>18</sup> Susanne Kippenberger, *Kippenberger: The Artist and His Families*. trans. Damion Searls. (United States: J & L, 2011) 429.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Kippenberger and Daniel Baumann, "Completing Picasso" in *Martin Kippenberger* 64.

<sup>20</sup> *He is dead, and I myself will continue his work*. Richardson 19

and Manet, among others in a series of “paraphrases” that were also portraits of Jacqueline.<sup>21</sup> This “intensely competitive game” Picasso played with the old masters was motivated by “a wish to outplay” them in the opinion of David Sylvester.<sup>22</sup> This attempt may have backfired; instead of cementing his already secure position in art history, his “flagrant borrowing from old and not-so-old masters” arguably “discouraged its serious acceptance,” in the opinion of John Richardson.<sup>23</sup> There is an element of Freudian psychic cannibalism at play in Picasso’s identification with earlier masters, and again in Kippenberger’s identification with Picasso.<sup>24</sup> The operative dynamic is that through imitation one can assume another’s powers. Although Picasso is a monumental façade, Kippenberger sought out his vulnerable moments, as alluded to in the catalogue for a show called “Kippenberger Meets Picasso” at the Museo Picasso Málaga, edited by Eva Meyer-Hermann. Kippenberger was drawn to “the solidity of the figure of Picasso, seeking out its fissures in order to try to install his own work in them.”<sup>25</sup> Kippenberger’s many gestures of identification with Picasso reveal both reverence and cannibalistic competition.

Even from a very early age, this identification is evident. Kippenberger self-published his first monograph at age 26, entitled *From Impression to Expression. ¼ Century of Kippenberger*. The publishing company he set up was called *Pikasso’s Heirs*.<sup>26</sup> Kippenberger’s intense attraction to the figure of Picasso throughout his life seems a bizarre choice given the dissimilarity of their art practice. The similarity is only at the level of the aggrandized personal position. Picasso took the view that “what he [the artist] *is* is more important than what he does,” and Kippenberger would surely agree.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Susanne Kippenberger noted that he was not interested in Picasso stylistically but rather has a “brand.”<sup>28</sup>

Picasso garnered international fame, providing a role model for Kippenberger almost as a business model. Yet he was not untouchable, and especially in the later years he became subject to criticism if not ridicule. The repetition of style from his younger days is often thought of as a denigration of his earlier innovation. John Berger’s *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, first published in 1965, cast an unforgiving eye over the titan of twentieth century art. Compared to famous greats likes Bellini, Michelangelo, Titian, Goya, Monet, or Braque, whose work, according to Berger, “gained in profundity and originality as they grew older, Picasso became a national monument and produced trivia. His late work represents a retreat . . . into an idealized and sentimental pantheism ... Picasso is a startling exception to the rule about old painters.”<sup>29</sup> The dominant view of Picasso’s late work, according to Richard Morphet, was that it showed “a sad decline,” although Morphet goes on to defend the rich emotional content of the ‘Reclining nude’

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<sup>21</sup> David Sylvester, “End Game” in *Late Picasso* 138.

<sup>22</sup> Sylvester 138.

<sup>23</sup> Richardson 31.

<sup>24</sup> Richardson 32.

<sup>25</sup> José Lebrero Stals, in *Kippenberger meets Picasso* 7.

<sup>26</sup> Meyer-Hermann 64.

<sup>27</sup> Berger 130.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer-Hermann 65.

<sup>29</sup> Berger 186.

just acquired by the Tate.<sup>30</sup> This general disparagement is partly due to the strict modernist privileging of linear progression and advancement. Indeed, Clement Greenberg, the central figure of modernist criticism condemned Picasso's late paintings, saying that "[Rembrandt in old age] could still handle paint—as Picasso couldn't any more."<sup>31</sup> His late paintings show "a sense of urgency" that was characterized by extreme proliferation rather than innovation.<sup>32</sup>

Both Picasso and Kippenberger became frantic near the end of their lives, intent on completing their oeuvre and producing a final remembrance. Picasso worked at a "dizzying pace" in his final years.<sup>33</sup> When Kippenberger described to Jutta Koether the funeral he imagined for himself, he said he hoped that his coffin would be floating on a sea of tears "and everyone will love me for what I did at the end. . . The last thing has to be a real bombshell."<sup>34</sup> That last thing was *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's "Amerika"* from 1994, not part of the exhibit at the Hamburger Bahnhof but another example of Kippenberger urgently trying to establish himself within a lineage of greats, while also sarcastically riffing on an older cultural figure. Kippenberger referred to a scene of wandering a vast employment office from Kafka's unfinished novel that was published posthumously.<sup>35</sup> The resulting installation of chairs and tables was intended to conjure up infinite interviews and conversations, but the empty chairs in the room are ghostly silent. Kippenberger knew that his death was approaching at the young age of 44. "Martin said he wanted to 'sort of give Kafka a hand, after the fact. Give him a Happy End. His books always end so full of self-doubt, in death, I wanted to give him a Happy End."<sup>36</sup>

The idea of completing something was a motivation for Kippenberger, he tended to work on something until it was exhausted and to move on to something else, a way of doing everything but mastering nothing.<sup>37</sup> Picasso was nearly the opposite, he worked continuously on the edge of abstraction, and especially later in his life he reworked and reworked subject matter and stylistic tropes. In order to redeem themselves, particularly at the very end of their lives, each artist felt the need to "complete" works by celebrated exemplars from art history that were supposedly left to them as heirs to the Western art canon, be it the 58 versions of "Las Meninas" painted in 1957 by Picasso or Kippenberger's final 1994 series of self-portraits in the poses of Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" shipwreck survivors, who were originally modeled from cadavers.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Morphet, "A late 'Reclining nude' by Picasso: a new acquisition for the Tate" in *The Burlington Magazine* (Vol. 126, February 1984) 84

<sup>31</sup> Clement Greenberg 'Picasso: A Symposium' in *Art in America* (Dec 1980) 9-10.

<sup>32</sup> Morphet 87.

<sup>33</sup> Bernadac 51.

<sup>34</sup> Susanne Kippenberger 502.

<sup>35</sup> Hamza Walker "Martin Kippenberger: The Happy End of Kafka's Amerika, September 10 – October 29, 2000" The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, RenaissanceSociety.org <<http://www.renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.Martin-Kippenberger-The-Happy-End-of-Kafka-s-Amerika.30.html>>

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne Kippenberger 455.

<sup>37</sup> Morgan 11.

<sup>38</sup> Séverine Laborie "Raft of the Medusa" Louvre Museum. <<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/raft-medusa>>

Perhaps Kippenberger learned something from Picasso vis-à-vis failure and success. Speaking of Picasso's unceasing career, Berger asserts that "because he is undefeated, he remains a living reproach," whereas Kippenberger always cast himself as a failed artist.<sup>39</sup> The relationship of Kippenberger-in-underwear to the old Picasso was "an image of aspiration that had failure written all over it."<sup>40</sup> Kippenberger addressed himself with a kind of reproach throughout his career; his late works, the 1991 white paintings in particular, in their elevated place of display at the Hamburger Bahnhof, are "marred with sincerity" in the words of curator Henriette Huldish.<sup>41</sup> They seem to be a final attempt to solidify his position and immortalize himself. Kippenberger asked a friend's nine year-old son to grade his paintings, and they all received the stamp of approval "very good." He specified the resulting canvases, pure white with white handwritten text taken from that interview, were to be installed by literally spackling them into the wall so that the canvas would be flush with the surface. High above the main atrium of the museum, this moment of Kippenberger's oeuvre is marked with more overt emotion than much of his other ironic work. Here can be seen an almost pitiable attempt to write the final word, to stamp an honest "very good" and fade into the bright whiteness of these monochromes.

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<sup>39</sup> Berger 28.

<sup>40</sup> Verhagen 45.

<sup>41</sup> Visit to the Hamburger Banhhof, March 2013

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