

# MATTHIAS REICHEL

“We have more or less said that we  
shit on everything”<sup>201</sup>  
Boris Lurie and NO!art

01  
MATTHIAS REICHEL,  
video interview with  
Boris Lurie, April 2002,  
DVD III, 9:40 min.  
I also conducted short  
conversations with  
Gertrude Stein and  
Clayton Patterson. This  
material on eight  
sixty-minute MiniDVDs  
(transferred to DVD)  
led to the idea for  
SHOAH and PIN-UPS:  
The NO!-Artist Boris  
Lurie, a documentary  
film by Reinhold  
Dettmer-Finke in  
collaboration with  
Matthias Reichelt, 88  
min., Dolby Surround,  
deutsche Filmproduktion  
(Germany 2006).

“The origins of NO!art sprout from the Jewish experience, struck root in the world’s largest Jewish community in New York, a product of armies, concentration camps, Lumpenproletariat artists. Its targets are the hypocritical intelligentsia, capitalist culture manipulation, consumerism, American and other Molochs. Their aim: total unabashed self-expression in art leading to social involvement.”<sup>02</sup> ▶

Boris Lurie was a cofounder and strong proponent of the NO!art movement, into which new artists continued to be incorporated. This text takes up various aspects of NO!art between 1959 and 1964/65, a phase that Lurie himself defined as “collective.”<sup>03</sup> On the NO!art website that Dietmar Kírves initiated in Berlin in 2000 with Lurie’s support, NO!art is represented by diverse and disparate young artistic positions, as was already the case with the earlier March Group. The sole common denominator is a more or less critical view of the art establishment, politics, and society. Since the author above all considers Lurie’s personal experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust as a driving and style-forming stimulus in the development of NO!art in the late fifties and early sixties, he limits himself to the time period defined by Lurie as a “collective phase.”<sup>04</sup> ▶

Writing about radical artists’ movements and activities that were successfully ignored by the contemporary art world and the press well-disposed to it has always had the character of digging through a mountain of legends and myths banked up by the artists themselves and their sincere admirers. The distance of time offers the opportunity for a more realistic representation.

Even if NO!art achieved recognition and a modest reception among individual cultural historians in the United States, it ultimately fell between the cracks of an art market that was concentrating at the time on Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada, Fluxus, and in particular Pop art.

NO!art brought together various artistic directions, but was distinguished by a political stance that rejected the art establishment, the art market, museum policy, as well as the American Cold War policy, militarism, colonialism, and imperialism. This critique was manifest not only in works of art, but also in the powerfully eloquent statements made by individual artists.<sup>05</sup> ▶ This sealed the fate of NO!art. At the time of Boris Lurie’s death, it was actually not possible to see the essential artists of the NO!art movement in a single major museum in the United States. It was Estera Milman who organized the two most important American exhibitions in which works by Boris Lurie were presented: for the University of Iowa in 1999, and at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in Chicago in 2001.

The first half of the twentieth century spawned murderous catastrophes on an inconceivable scale, followed by a division of the world that resulted in new armed conflicts. Motivated by these disquieting phenomena, artistic

02  
BORIS LURIE/ SEYMOR  
KRIM/ ARMIN  
HUNDETMARK (EDS)  
NO!Art. PIN-UPS,  
EXCREMENT, PRO-  
TEST, JEW ART,  
Berlin/Cologne: Edition  
Hundertmark, 1988,  
p. 13.

04  
<http://www.no-art.info>

05  
Texts by Lurie, Goodman,  
Aronovici, et al.,  
in: Lurie/Krim/Hundertmark,  
NO!art,  
1988.

03  
ESTERA MILMAN  
NO!art and the Aesthetics  
of Doom. Boris  
Lurie & Estera Milman:  
One-on-One, 148 min.,  
(United States 2000),  
time code 00:36:03,  
milman-interarts.com/  
oneononefull.html  
(accessed 16 August  
2015).

movements emerged here and there in the metropolises in the United States—mainly New York City and San Francisco—that directly and passionately positioned themselves in literature, music, and fine art with respect to a reality riddled with political conflicts. What bebop and free jazz brought with them in terms of innovations for music, and the prose and poetry of the Beat generation for literature, was discharged in visual art in a demonstrative rejection of figurative painting in favor of a rendering of true emotions, as they were expressed, for instance, in the Action Painting of Jackson Pollock. In terms of form, truly different art formats were subsumed under the term “Abstract Expressionism” and relatively quickly began their triumphal march through the museums of New York as a style perceived as being originally American.

### The Beginnings

Boris Lurie was already painting, drawing, and occasionally providing graphic designs for a Soviet publishing house as a schoolboy in Riga.

After arriving in New York City, to which he immigrated along with his father after the end of the war, Lurie recorded his experiences from Riga, the ghetto, and the various concentration camps in drawings and paintings. He later called these works “illustrative art,” and thus, according to his reading of art history, not classifiable as real art.<sup>06</sup>

Lurie was the only NO!art artist who had survived several Nazi concentration camps. His one sister, Assia, escaped persecution by the Germans and Latvians in Italy. Their mother, Shaina, other sister Jeanna, their maternal grandmother, and Ljuba Treskunova, Boris Lurie’s first great love, were murdered in 1941 during the so-called Big Action in the woods at Rumbula.<sup>07</sup>

The time in the concentration camps, the fear of not being able to escape death, and the loss of people he loved stayed with Lurie and shaped his artistic work throughout his life. Repeatedly addressing these events was an existential need for him. For Lurie, the traumatic experience of losing nearly the entire female part of the family as well as his great love had a formative influence on his obsessive preoccupation with sexuality and the female body. This applies above all in the case of his *Dismembered Women*, which he painted in the fifties.

### The March Gallery

In the mid-fifties, Lurie settled in the then rundown neighborhood of the Lower East Side, where there were a great deal of smaller cooperative galleries. One of them was the March Gallery on 10th Street, nearly at the corner of Third Avenue, which was located in a cellar that was accessible from the outside. At the time, it was considered one of New York’s best and most vibrant cooperative galleries.<sup>08</sup> Roughly thirty artists counted among its

06  
DETTMER-FINKE  
REICHEL  
SHOAH and PIN-UPS,  
starting at time code  
00:24:40.

07  
In the Letbartskii  
woods in the Rumbula  
Forest around ten  
kilometers south of  
Riga, 26,500 Jews from  
the ghetto as well as  
1,000 “Reich Jews” who  
had just arrived by  
train were massacred  
and buried in mass  
graves. Andrej Angrick/  
Peter Klein, Die “End-  
lösung” in Riga: Aus-  
beutung und Vernich-  
tung 1941–1944,  
Darmstadt: WBG, 2006,  
in particular Chapter 5:  
“Das grosse Morden:  
Die Vernichtung des  
Ghettos der lettischen  
Juden,” pp. 136–84.

08  
ARTnews 57, no. 10,  
February 1959, p. 50.

members, including the well-known Elaine de Kooning. Boris Lurie and his friend Rocco Armento were members from the outset. While most of the cooperative galleries dedicated themselves to Abstract Expressionism, artists of various styles came together at the March Gallery. Works by artists who were already well known, such as Franz Kline or Willem de Kooning, were also presented in group exhibitions, which meant that this venue also attracted attention from the art public.<sup>9</sup> When the March Gallery was closed, Lurie and his Canadian artist friend Sam Goodman took over the space and from then on called themselves the March Group.<sup>10</sup> The artist Stanley Fisher joined them a short time later. Goodman himself was an Abstract Expressionist, but under the influence of Boris Lurie's multimedia tableaux of collaged pin-ups, newspaper headlines, and painting he changed his style and produced sculptures and installations made of *objets trouvés* and scrap metal.<sup>11</sup> Goodman had worked in a film department of the Canadian Army, where he had seen documentary material about the atrocities committed by the German fascists. Lurie received copies of photos from him<sup>12</sup> and was emboldened "to confront the matter of his past, and of its relevance, head-on."<sup>13</sup>

## NO!

Lurie made NO an integral part of various works as early as the beginning of the sixties, and dealt with the motif of fragmented women's bodies during the fifties. NO! appeared for the first time in an announcement for an exhibition at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in 1963. According to Lurie, the fact that the group later operated under the name NO!art goes back to a cartoon that the painter Alfred Leslie supposedly produced for *ARTnews* in which the March Gallery was depicted as a place for artists who hurl their deplorable NO back at the state of the world.<sup>14</sup> Alfred Leslie himself has no memory of this particular cartoon. His work was destroyed in a large fire in 1966. The cartoon is not included in the *New York Story 1962–66*,<sup>15</sup> nor can it be found in *ARTnews*. Lurie's memory here seems to deceive. In a different cartoon by Alfred Leslie, however, in the left corner, Boris Lurie's name is featured directly next to the license plate of a convertible, NO-1965, with a newlywed couple representing the Hudson River Art and Pop art movements (see image p. 158). The sheet stands under the motto "OK-1964" and makes reference to Lurie's negative view of the success of Pop art.<sup>16</sup>

Sam Goodman, Boris Lurie, and Stanley Fisher were the founders of the March Group/NO!art in late 1959, early 1960. Numerous artists participated in several programmatic exhibitions, including Rocco Armento, Isser Aronovici, Enrico Baj, Herb Brown, Allan D'Arcangelo, Erró, Dorothy Gillespie, Esther Gilman, Allan Kaprow, Yayoi Kusama, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Suzanne Long (Har-

09

Video interview by Matthias Reichelt with Boris Lurie, DVD II, time code 00:49:58.

11

Ibid., time code 00:07:15.

13

See

**JOHN WRONOSKI**  
"Boris Lurie: A Life in the Camps," in: Igor Satanovsky, ed. *KZ—KAMPF—KUNST*. Boris Lurie: NO!art, New York/Cologne: NO!art Publishing, 2014, p. 139. In any case, Goodman was not in Europe during the war, nor was he a war photographer, as Wronoski claims. Harriet Wood, Goodman's companion at the time, confirmed this in an email dated 25 August 2015.

16

The drawing was published in *The New York Arts Calendar*, ed. by Harvey Matusow. Matusow's estate is part of the library of the University of Sussex and the cartoon in question, according to the library, can be found in: *The New York Arts Calendar*, Vol. 1 No. 5, on the fourth page.

10

**MILMAN**  
2000, time code 00:37:20.

12

Ibid., time code 00:12:30. Later, in the seventies, Charly Rehwinkel and his encyclopedic knowledge were extremely helpful to Lurie in with his engagement with the National Socialists and the Holocaust. See also Dettmer-Fink, Reichelt, SHOAH and PIN-UPS, time code 00:07:36.

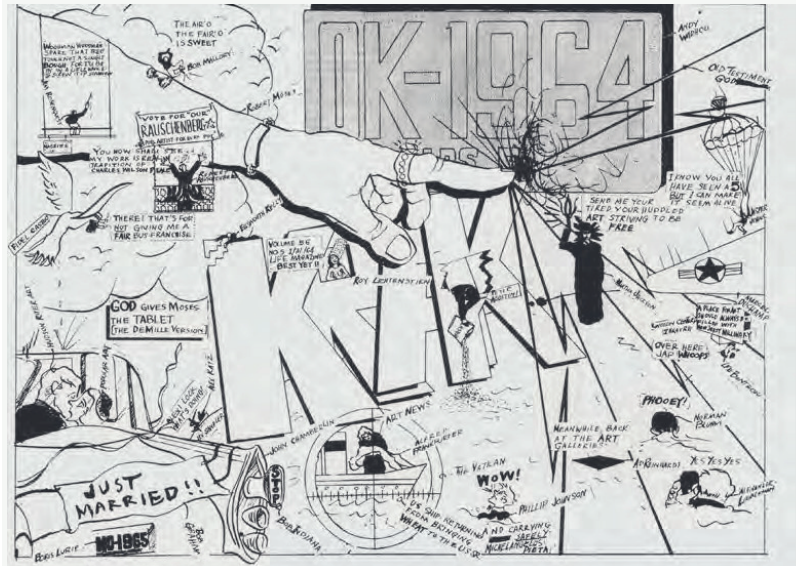
14

**MILMAN**  
2000, time code 00:35:35.

15

[http://www.alfredleslie.com/books/index.html?newyork\\_story](http://www.alfredleslie.com/books/index.html?newyork_story) (accessed 11 August 2015). The motif is also not among the cartoons from the *New York Story* reproduced in *Artforum* 2, no. 3, September 1963, pp. 28f.

riet Wood), Michelle Stuart, and Aldo Tambellini. NO!art's exhibitions pointedly addressed repression, war, genocide, imperialism, and consumerism, and the cellar space of the March Gallery was turned into walk-in installations that ran contrary to the dignified atmosphere of the white cube. Like



the March Gallery before it, NO!art was also not committed to any particular style. It encompassed Armento's nudes influenced by classical sculpture as well as the paintings by D'Arcangelo with their Pop art orientation, or the comic- and agitprop-like paintings by the Icelandic artist Erró, Stuart's feminist-oriented sculptural works, the paintings and sculptures of Long, and Kusama's installations with accumulations of penis-like objects.<sup>17</sup>

The most important exhibitions of the new March Group era included *Les Lions* (1960), a solo-show of Boris Lurie's work, and *Vulgar Show* (1960), featuring works by Goodman, John Fischer, Lurie, and Stanley Fisher; these were followed that same year by the largest group exhibition, *Involvement Show*, with works by twenty-six artists. *Doom Show* was the title of the exhibition in 1961 with works by Stanley Fisher, Goodman, Lurie, and Lebel; Lurie organized another *Doom Show* in Milan and Rome in 1962 with his own works and works by Goodman. The first group exhibition at the Gertrude Stein Gallery took place in 1963 with *NO! Show*, with eleven artists participating. In 1964 the Gertrude Stein Gallery mounted a solo exhibition of the series of posters that Boris Lurie had overprinted with NO as well as solo presentations of the artists Erró and Brown.

17  
Later, Allan Kaprow and Yayoi Kusama would or could no longer remember participating, and the latter has even eliminated the NO! exhibitions from her CV.

The end of the collective phase of NO!art was sealed with the *NO!Sculpture Show*, a solo exhibition of works by Goodman. Distributed around the space were multiple unshapely brown piles made of plaster and papier-mâché, representing excrement in monstrous dimensions. An angry farewell to the art world, which—in keeping with the market—was busy organizing the triumphal march of Pop art.

Sam Goodman saw this exhibition as “my final gesture after thirty years in the art world. This is what I think of it.”<sup>18</sup> The fact that the insurance agent and art collector Leon Kraushaar nevertheless wanted to purchase the piles of stylized “shit” is the irony of the story. Goodman thwarted the sale with the words “I shit on you too.”<sup>19</sup>

NO!art still receives relatively little attention, since it was marginalized for a long time due to its trash aesthetic combined with direct political critique. This applies above all to the works of Boris Lurie and Sam Goodman, who also remembered the European Jews murdered in the name of the German fascism in their works and presented this memory within a larger political context.

Despite a certain skepticism regarding NO!art at its beginnings, the art critic Irving Sandler comes to a notable verdict in his memoir of 2003: “In retrospect, however, NO!art was ahead of its time. It anticipated later perverse and abject art that reflected our miserable twentieth century, and particularly the Vietnam War era.”<sup>20</sup>

When his father died in 1964, Boris Lurie looked after his estate and began to speculate successfully on the stock exchange. He later resumed making art again, and also began to write prose and poetry. Although Lurie had absolutely no feeling for luxury and lived surrounded by furniture gathered from the streets, he amassed great wealth without losing his interest in the revolutionary international left. He put this lived contradiction in a nutshell with self-ironic realism: “My sympathy is with the mouse, but I feed the cat.”

This statement can still be read in the stairway of the Haus am Kleistpark in Berlin as a tribute to Boris Lurie.<sup>21</sup>

18  
LURIE/ KRIM/  
HUNDERTMARK  
NO!art, 1988, p. 15.

19  
MLMAN  
2000, time code  
01:05:35.

20  
IRVINGSANDLER  
A Sweeper-Up After  
Artists: A Memoir,  
London: Thames and  
Hudson, 2004,  
p. 273–74.

21  
This statement was  
installed in May 2004  
in the staircase of the  
Haus am Kleistpark in  
Berlin-Schöneberg  
within the scope of the  
exhibition by Naomi  
Tereza Salmon: opti-  
mistic | disease | facili-  
ty. Boris Lurie: New  
York—Buchenwald.