

OLLI, SPRING 2023

Gallery Brawls: Outrage and the Arts, 1830 to the Present

Bruce Michelson

Mondays, 10:00 - 11:30 a.m.

Course plan (subject to alterations here and there as our shared interests come clear):

January 30:

Questions to get us going:

Have you been at a theater, opera house, art gallery, or some other normally-genteel cultural event where people started booing or expressing displeasure in other ways? Were you part of that? Why? If not, what did you think?

What can we say is the prevailing etiquette, the expected conduct, associated with various kinds and places of performance or cultural exhibition? Have you seen changes over the years? How long do you suppose these rules or expectations have held sway?

When you've seen things go wrong or lurch into the unexpected, what do you think the causes have been – immediate, underlying, or whatever?

Have these kinds of disruptions made any sort of long-lasting difference, beneficial or otherwise?

Then:

The young Victor Hugo, La Comédie Française, and big troubles over Hugo's new play *Hernani* in the spring of 1830.

Week 2: The "Shakespeare Riots" at the Astor Place Theatre in New York City, May 10, 1849. Were these really about two competing performances of *Macbeth*? What was the theater scene in New York in the 1840's, and what then-famous back-stories did each of the lead actors, Edwin Forrest and William Macready, bring to the city?

Week 3: "A pot of paint in the public's face!" James McNeill Whistler sues John Ruskin at the Old Bailey in London in 1878; the famous (and ubiquitous) architect, restorer, and self-taught Medievalist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc is hooted out of the École des Beaux-Arts and chased down the quais of Paris, 1863. What was at stake in each of these scrimmages?

Week 4: The Old Bailey trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 -- as tragedy and circus. What were the circumstances, and what else might have been implicitly on trial here, as a reckoning over art, wit, performance, and public conduct?

Week 5: Alfred Jarry and Bo-Ho Hydropathe *fin de siècle* Montmartre invade the bourgeois Paris Boulevards with *Ubu*, 1897. A twenty-minute scuffle in the stalls right after the opening word? What time-bombs were ticking before this play opened? Why did this abortive production turn out to be, in the minds of witnesses and many cultural historians, a turning point?

Week 6: John Millington Synge, Lady Gregory, and William Butler Yeats shake up Dublin with *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907. A high-minded project for a “national theatre” sets off night after night of trouble at the Abbey. The play reads like a broad, genial comedy now – what was the big deal back then?

Week 7: “Modern Art” invades the US: the Armory Show of 1913, and students at The Chicago Art Institute revolt against Matisse and Modernism a few years later. What has been the arc of reception, and resistance, in the US for Cubism, Fauvism, and other early 20th century innovations?

Week 8: To begin with, we’ll look back at the “Sensation!” sponsored by the Saatchi & Saatchi communications company and at Mayor Giuliani’s famous reactions; the cancellation of the Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran in DC, at sticky fingers and tomato soup as protests in London’s National Gallery and elsewhere, and at choruses of boos at the latest Bayreuth *Götterdämmerung*. But we can spend more time, and perhaps have more fun, speculating on where we are now, in our relationship to the fine arts and ambitious and innovative performance.