

Kaleidoscopes on the Coffee Table

CATHERINE LORD AND RICHARD MEYER'S *ART IN QUEER CULTURE: 1885–PRESENT*

by Vivian Davis

FOR MANY STUDENTS, HISTORY BOOKS CAN BE STOLID AFFAIRS. Dusty tomes, filled with names and dates best suited for rote memorization. Only occasionally is there color. Rarely a stray joke. Even art history books, a discipline that offers readers the anodyne of full-page pictures, can be a bit predictable. Republished volumes such as Helen Gardner's *Art through the Ages* (1926) or E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950) retain their popularity because they rehearse, rather than contest, the familiar chronological narratives. Gardner's book, now in its twelfth edition, offers readers a review of the art world from the Paleolithic era to the twentieth century, from the Venus of Willendorf to Warhol's "Marilyn Diptych." Similarly, Gombrich's *The Story of Art* leads a breakneck tour through cave painting, Leonardo's "Mona Lisa," and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Though daunting in size (Gardner's *Art through the Ages* clocks in at just under 1200 pages), such books offer little in the way of surprises. Their survey approach reinforces a recognizable canon of luminaries, faces not unfamiliar to gallery walls and glassy-eyed tourists, and constructs compact versions of history that are, for the most part, neatly linear. Timelines and tidbits are both plentiful. Peddling the promise that art history is somehow fully



Amy E. Conger, from *Reversing Vandalism*, "Queer Reader Mandorla," 2004

David McDermott
and Peter McGough,
"A Friend of Dorothy,
1943," 1986



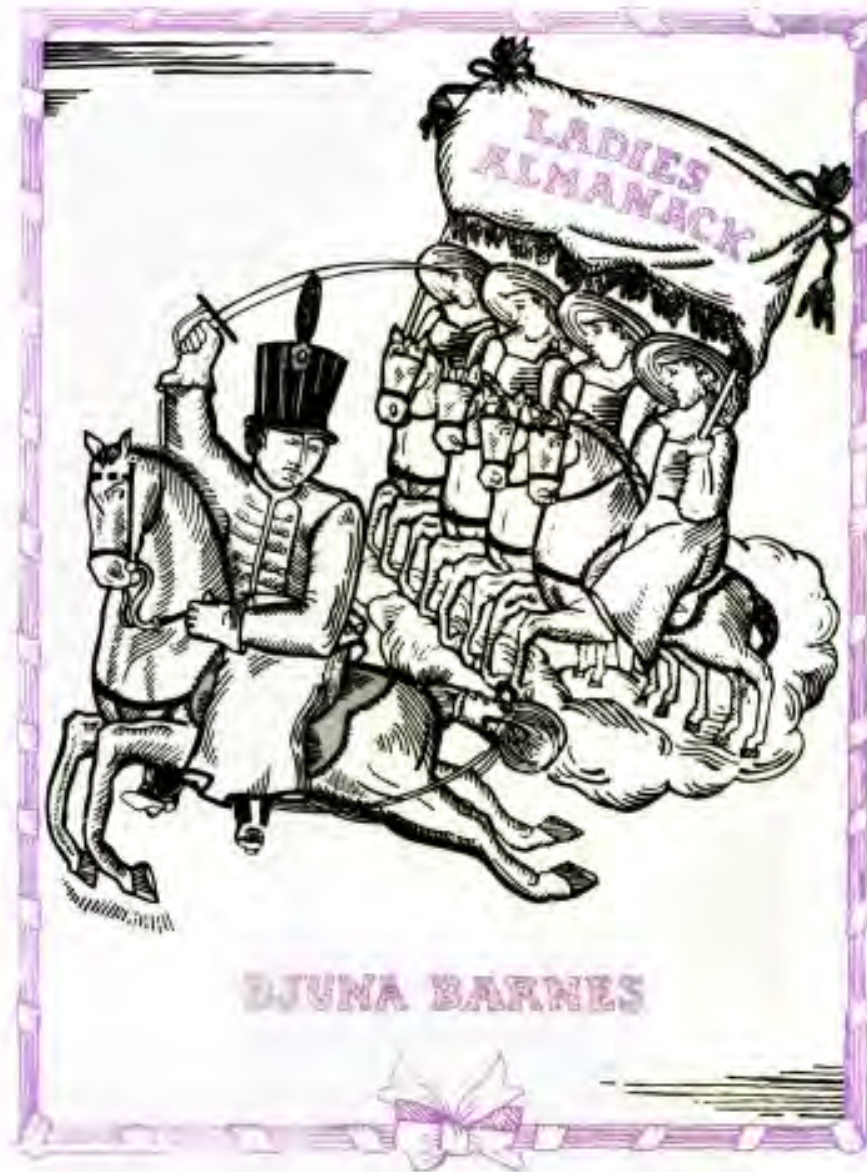
knowable and, moreover, comprehensible, these titles quickly find their way into undergraduate classrooms and onto coffee tables.

An upcoming volume from Phaidon, however, looks to clear off said coffee tables. Or at least, reshuffle them. Edited by Catherine Lord, Department of Studio Art, UCI, and Richard Meyer, Department of Art History, USC, *Art in Queer Culture: 1885 – Present* pieces together a patch of visual landscape (including sketches, paintings, illustrations, photography, print documents, and ephemera) in order to think through the complex relationships between art, queerness, and culture from the late nineteenth century to the present. During Friday’s plenary panel of the 2008 Los Angeles Queer Studies Conference, Professors Lord and Meyer outlined the general aims of their project, discussing the ways in which writing queer culture into the history of art means rethinking categories of “Art” and “History” more broadly. Referring to the book as a “collage of footnotes,” Lord explained that *Art in Queer Culture* will work in several ways to resist traditional art historical approaches and hierarchical thinking. For example, the collection is set to feature only one piece from each of the selected artists, no matter how supposedly

significant. Leveling the playing field in terms of structure and included materials reshapes the lines between high and low culture, center and margin, “Art” and detritus. The proposed volume therefore raises questions while answering them, as straight canonical narratives are set into the shifting motion of a kaleidoscope.

The lively collaboration between Lord and Meyer appears to be the engine of this critical conversation. Lord, an artist, and Meyer, an academic, each bring valuable, though varying perspectives to the table. These differences, as the two demonstrated during the session, are productive of a rich dialogue, one comprised of questions and asides, rather than adherence to a strict script. During the session, the pair provided a brief preview of the different kinds of material they would be incorporating into their book. Lord led the audience through a slide show of the art and intimacies of “scribblers” such as Djuna Barnes, Janet Flanner, and Bertha Harris. Her presentation thoughtfully considered the public/private correspondences between these women, with highlights including reflections on Barnes’ *The Ladies Almanack* (1928) - “a zine before there were zines” Lord quipped. Meyers, likewise, looked at a wide variety of images, such

**Djuna Barnes,
Ladies Almanack,
1928**



as a series put together by activist/artist collective Gran Fury and McDermott and McGough's provocative "A Friend of Dorothy, 1943" (1986). Most striking, however, was his discussion of a recent exhibition, entitled "Reversing Vandalism," organized by the San Francisco Public Library, a showcase of slashed public library books transformed, by a number of artists, into pieces of art. Because the books were defaced for their subject matter (usually depictions of same-sex desire, sometimes the simple inclusion of the word "gay" in the title or author's name), the refashioning of the damaged property provided artists with an opportunity to recontextualize and reclaim. As Meyer suggested, the exhibition took what was once stigmatized and forced it into another register, an insight that brought to light the work of Lord and Meyer's project more generally. With its recycling, reversing, and remaking, theirs is a book that holds up similar transformative possibilities.

Though originally proposed as a museum exhibition (it was, according to Lord, promptly rejected), *Art in Queer Culture: 1885-Present* is forthcoming from Phaidon, an international publisher of books on art, photography, and

architecture whose titles include, among others, Gombrich's influential and ubiquitous *The Story of Art*. When asked by an audience member what the consequences were of moving beyond the academic press into the mainstream, Meyer remained staunchly optimistic. He pointed to the benefits of placing the book within a global market, seeing opportunity in its widespread distribution. "I could have used this book in graduate school," he told the questioner, "even undergraduate." By making use of Phaidon's resources, however, Lord and Meyer will be able to see their volume placed not only on library shelves and classrooms, but on coffee tables as well. The potential to appeal to readers outside of academia or queer subcultures is one of the most important points about the ambitious scope of the project. In some ways, it is at the very heart of the challenges to art, history, and canon the project presents. As Lord later joked with the audience, the session drawing to a close, "Think of the coffee table, not the book."

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