

Thoughts on Art and Culture

With David Frenkel

This lecture series invites you on a journey across the diverse landscapes of human creativity. From the subversive laughter of the medieval Village Fool to the meditative, globalized visions of Francesco Clemente, we explore the thresholds where art meets life. Over thirteen sessions, we will navigate the clinical wards of 19th century psychiatry, the private sanctuaries of the artist's studio, and the raw, 'untouched' impulses of Art Brut. Join us as we dismantle conventional notions of beauty and social order to uncover the profound, often hidden, threads that connect creators across centuries and continents.

Lecture 1

The Village Fool - From the Court Jester to the Joker



The figure of the clown has always stood on the threshold - somewhere between sage and madman, peasant and nobleman - the fool defies social order and poses a subversive challenge to rigid class hierarchies. This lecture follows a procession of fools across continents and centuries, focusing on the four-hundred-year tradition of the European court jester. We will explore the "**literature of fools**" and its history of using satire to mock authority figures, while simultaneously tracing the artistic family tree of real and symbolic clowns that haunt our cultural history.

Lecture 2

Art Brut: The Reception of Outsider Art



Interest in the art of visionaries, autodidacts, and the socially marginalized has exploded in recent years, revealing exceptional qualities of expression found only on the edges of culture. **Jean Dubuffet** famously argued that **Art Brut** is superior to the established arts because it remains untouched by intellectual clichés and classical tradition. We will look at the lives and works of these singular creators who, unlike the professional elite, build worlds out of their own internal necessity. Does "raw art" truly exist in its purest form, or is the act of creation always an interplay between the individual and the world?

Lecture 3

Queen of the World: The Ideal Palace by Ferdinand Cheval



Built stone by stone over thirty three years by a French postman, the **Ideal Palace** is a masterpiece of architectural eccentricity. Mesmerizing in its intricate scale, it tells a mythological story in a visual language that draws from a vast wealth of global cultures. This surrealist precedent, with textures echoing coral reefs and picturesque sandcastles, has intrigued generations of artists. In this lecture, we will experience the "movement" of the palace, exploring how this century old monument still manages to deceive the eye and present itself as a living organism.

Lecture 4

On Wanderings and Cartography



Wanderings and migration are inseparable from the human story, profoundly shaping our cultural landscape. This lecture explores the artistic expressions of both tangible and allegorical journeys - ranging from physical displacement to spiritual wandering. We will examine how contemporary artists utilize cartography as a primary medium, questioning the inherent tension between the map and the territory it purports to represent. By analyzing the motivations behind the compilation of atlases, we will expose the overt and covert interests that shape our perception of "objective" reality.

Lecture 5

The Ghost in the Archive: 200 Years of Portrait Photography



Portraiture has always occupied a special status in the world of photography, possessing a unique power to capture and hold our attention. This lecture journeys through two centuries of that art form, exploring **Roland Barthes'** notion of the photograph as a means of "resurrecting" the past. From forgotten family snapshots to celebrated masterpieces, we will meet the intriguing faces of people from every walk of life. This lecture explores the evolution of the genre through the work of masters such as the pioneering **Félix Nadar**, the iconic **Richard Avedon**, and the contemporary **Loretta Lux**.

Lecture 6

Photography and Madness: Charcot and the Theater of Hysteria



Jean-Martin Charcot, the renowned neurologist and teacher of Sigmund Freud, was the first to institutionalize the use of photography in clinical practice. His monumental work, **The Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière**, documented a bewildering array of symptoms, treating thousands of patients as a 'museum of living pathology.' This lecture examines the uneasy alliance between art and science that defined Charcot's medical theater. By analyzing this historical archive, we will clarify the pivotal role photography played in the development of modern psychopathology and our understanding of mental illness.

Lecture 7

The Body as a Medium for Images



Throughout history, artists have often described themselves not as masters of their work, but as conduits for something beyond themselves. This lecture questions the "originality" of the signature in an age where the artist serves as a medium rather than a sole creator. Inspired by Hans Belting's **Anthropology of Images**, we will clarify how the body serves as a living organ for visual study rather than just a tool for execution. We will look at a variety of works by Sigmar Polke, Dana Schutz, and Wim Delvoye, among others, to understand the body's role as the ultimate medium in contemporary culture.

Lecture 8

Open Studio: Inside the Artist's Workspace



A wide range of artists - from Modernist masters to contemporary multi-media creators - open their doors to us in this lecture. We will review the many ways artists present themselves within their work environments, seeking to uncover the hidden links between the studio space and the art itself. In particular, we will examine the unique styles of 'studio portraiture' through the lens of several major figures. Join us for a visual journey through the diverse workspaces of visionaries such as Francis Bacon and Louise Bourgeois.

Lecture 9

Uncontrolled Clutters: On Hoarding and Art



Descending from a wealthy Manhattan family, the **Collyer brothers** became infamous when police discovered 130 tons of waste in their city mansion, ranging from 25,000 books to a Ford chassis. This lecture tells their incredible story through period photographs, linking their obsession to the broader 'object economy' in art. We will trace how contemporary creators such as **Sarah Sze** or **Ilya Kabakov** use accumulation as a medium. By exploring the figure of the compulsive archivist, we will ask: when does a collection become a burden, and when does it become art?

Lecture 10

The Return of the Hand: Craft in Contemporary Art



Once a central element of all cultures, handicrafts were marginalized by 19th century industrialization and capitalist consumerism. However, in the postmodern era, manual labor is enjoying a renewed renaissance, offering a personal alternative to global trends. Today's artists frequently integrate craft with diverse media, using it as a potent vehicle for social, political, and gender-based activism. This lecture surveys relevant practices and bodies of work to understand the enduring power of the handmade in a high-tech world.

Lecture 11

Jean Dubuffet: Master of Modernism



A foundational pillar of post-World War II art, **Jean Dubuffet** led a relentless crusade against conventional notions of beauty. Throughout a prolific and revolutionary career, he dismantled traditional approaches to portraiture, landscape, and the boundary between representation and abstraction. From his early success in Paris to the major retrospectives that swept Europe and the United States in the 1950s and '60s, Dubuffet's 'anti-cultural' stance reshaped the tastes of a generation. This lecture traces the evolution of his work, examining the unorthodox inspirations and radical social values that fueled his artistic rebellion.

Lecture 12

Cultural Democracy: The Rise of Community Art



Community art, or 'dialogical art,' is defined by a deep collaboration between professional artists and the public. Emerging in the late 1960s, this movement shifted the focus from the finished object to the process of social empowerment. This lecture investigates the concept of **cultural democracy** and its roots in social justice, reviewing the varied strategies artists use to engage communities. We will look closely at the work of influential figures such as **Mierle Laderman Ukeles** and **Thomas Hirschhorn** to understand how art becomes a shared human experience.

Lecture 13

Francesco Clemente: Postmodern Master



One of the most prolific visionaries of the late 20th century, **Francesco Clemente** creates art that exists in the liminal space between dreams and reality. Known for his esoteric explorations of sexuality, spirituality, and the human form, Clemente's visual language was deeply shaped by his 1970s travels in India and his exposure to Eastern folk traditions. This lecture follows his journey to 1980s New York, where he formed legendary collaborations with **Andy Warhol**, **Jean-Michel Basquiat**, and **Allen Ginsberg**. We will explore how Clemente's meditative and permissive style remains perpetually fluid - moving between East and West, matter and spirit, and the conscious and subconscious mind.

David Frenkel is a Cambridge-based artist-photographer and curator. As a lecturer in modern and contemporary art, he brings a practitioner's eye to art history, bridging the gap between theory and creative practice.

Contact & Enquiries:

+44 7767 504725 | dfrenkel13@gmail.com | david-frenkel.com

[instagram.com/david.frenkel](https://www.instagram.com/david.frenkel) | [facebook.com/david.frenkel1](https://www.facebook.com/david.frenkel1)