

Institution: Middlesex University
Unit of Assessment: 34 Art & Design
Title of case study: Visual Culture: Curating Leon Golub
1. Summary of the impact

The Leon Golub retrospective at Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum introduced Golub’s politically engaged work to a city with a radical political history. Curated by Jon Bird, leading authority on Golub, it examined how Golub’s depictions of political and military power impact upon individual and collective social bodies. It also related Golub’s work to paintings by Goya and Picasso. Extensive public/media response, particularly as it spread through the Spanish-speaking world, confirmed the achievement and topicality of Golub’s practice and the significance of the retrospective. Consideration of the role of painting as a mode of political commentary in itself, and as a catalyst for broader discussion of the visual representation of dictatorships and state violence, was found amongst curators, critics, and the general public. Bird’s curatorial approach was informed by Middlesex University (MU)’s critical legacy of visual cultural studies, emphasizing works of art as social, material and expressive cultural objects.

2. Underpinning research

Innovative research in visual culture at MU evolved from new critical and theoretical approaches to histories of art, design and mass media, published through articles in the MU journal *BLOCK* (1979-89) and subsequent publications, conferences, curriculum developments and curation. Springing from a re-visited discipline of ‘New Art History’, the Middlesex Visual Culture Group (VCG) was a fresh initiative in the cultural realm, reformulating thematic and conceptual frameworks and ideas about the visual as both object and structure, and the politics of representation in the formation of subjects and identities. Founding editor of *BLOCK* and Programme Leader for the MA Visual Culture (MAVC), Professor Jon Bird was central to the disciplinary break with traditional Art History and the framing of a new field at Middlesex and beyond, and to the exploration of the impact of this through curatorial practice. Along with colleagues and co-founders of *BLOCK*, Professors Barry Curtis and Lisa Tickner, VCG pioneered research into the objects, practices, institutions and cultural regimes of the visible and visualization, drawing upon theoretical models from critical theory (structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, etc.) and feminist and post-colonial theories of individual and national formations. Located in a school of Art and Design, close analysis of objects and images and relations between theory and practice characterised research at Middlesex, leading to mixed-mode research and a new doctorate in arts, ArtsD (REF5). VCG’s innovations led to collaborations with Tate Gallery on three themed conferences and with Routledge on resultant books (*Mapping the Futures* [1993], *Travellers Tales* [1994] and *FutureNatural* [1996]) that registered the international spread of visual cultural studies. *The Block Reader in Visual Culture* (1996) was a selection of articles from the journal, with a new reflective introductory overview.

By 1993 VCG had established the first MA Visual Culture in the UK with Bird as Programme Leader. This modular degree included, amongst other thematics, inquiry into ‘theories of representation’ and issues of ethnicity and cultural difference (taught by Dr Kobena Mercer and later Prof Jean Fisher). These innovations prompted an approach from the Arts Council of Great Britain to collaborate in creating the first MA in Contemporary Curating (MACC). Located at the Royal College of Art because of its gallery provision and proximity to major museums, and with Tate as a partner institution, VCG provided the programme’s theoretical component, and students and staff travelled between both universities. With the goal of reconfiguring curatorial and museological theory and practice, the programme has trained curators and art professionals for major museums, galleries and art institutions worldwide. During this period, Bird was also approached by the Hamlyn Foundation and obtained student bursary funding of £15k over three years.

Impact case study (REF3b)

The dynamic between VCG's development of Visual Culture as a theoretical field and its uses as a critical curatorial methodology can be discerned in the MAVC and the MACC, with Bird in a pivotal position institutionally, intellectually, and as a curator with methodologies developed from, and in tandem with, the work of the VCG. This present case study draws upon that pivotal position to focus upon his long-term research on Leon Golub and (his wife) the feminist artist Nancy Spero.

3. References to the research

Research funding was competitively won from academically prestigious sources. Outputs were published following stringent peer review and/or exhibited in major museums and galleries.

1. Bird, J., Curtis, B., Mash, M., Putnam, T., Robertson, G. and Tickner, L. (eds), (1996) [edited book], *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London and New York: Routledge. Includes Bird, J. 'Dystopia on the Thames', 121-127.
2. Bird, J., Isaak, J.A., Lotringer, S., (1996) [book], *Nancy Spero*, London and New York: Phaidon.
3. Bird, J. (1997) [journal article], 'Inevitable Fatvm: Leon Golub's History Painting', *Oxford Art Journal*, 20 (1), 81-94. The article was peer-reviewed.
4. Bird, J. (2000) [book], *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real*, London: Reaktion Books. A second edition was released by the same publisher in 2011. It includes two new chapters and over 80 new illustrations.
5. Bird, J. (2000) [curated exhibition], 'Leon Golub Paintings 1950-2000': IMMA, Dublin 2000. The exhibition was subsequently hosted by other top-tier art institutions: South London Gallery 2000; Albright-Knox, Buffalo 2001; Brooklyn Museum 2001.
6. Bird, J. (2003) [curated exhibition], 'Otherworlds: Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith', Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead 2003-04, with publication: Bird, J. (2003), *Otherworlds: The Art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith*, London: Reaktion Books.

Awards and research funding

AHRB Sabbatical for 'Leon Golub 1949-1999: Painting the century'. Amount Awarded: £22841.

Award Holder: Professor Jon Bird at Middlesex University. Date Awarded: 11/11/1998

AHRB Sabbatical for 'The art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith'. Amount Awarded: £13311. Award

Holder: Professor Jon Bird at Middlesex University. Date Awarded: 12/06/2002

4. Details of the impact

Through his practice of exhibition-making, drawing upon theories developed with VCG, Bird specifically addresses how meaning and value is fabricated and communicated through works of art in contexts of socio-economic, political and cultural histories. His curatorial practice critically repositions and reinterprets artists, as seen for example in the first UK exhibition of Massimo Vitali (Photographers Gallery, London 1997). His most sustained research project is on the work of Spero and Golub, tested through curating a number of high profile exhibitions: Spero's first retrospective (ICA London, 1987); 'Leon Golub Paintings 1950-2000' (IMMA, Dublin; Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo; Brooklyn Museum, New York; touring 2000-01); 'Otherworlds: Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith' (Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2003-04).

Bird's curatorial project with the widest impact was the retrospective of Golub's paintings and drawings created between 1950-2004, titled 'Leon Golub' (May 6-September 12, 2011, Palacio de Velázquez, Parque del Retiro, Madrid, for the Reina Sofia Museum (<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/leon-golub>)). Bird's critical monograph *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real* was substantially revised and updated for release in conjunction with the exhibition. His critical lens on the new field of visual culture and his curatorial approach found substantial expression through the curation and co-design of the exhibition, and his concurrent revision of the book.

The exhibition had a significant number of expanded cultural effects and repercussions. It was the first time Golub had been exhibited in Spain, and Bird further established the artist's international profile. This is specifically relevant because of Spain's historical cultural and political context. The city of Madrid was an ideal location. Its radical history found visual echo in Golub's anti-war history paintings which were viewed in the context of Goya's work in the Prado and

Impact case study (REF3b)

Picasso's 'Guernica' in the Reina Sofia. Golub's 'political portraits' include paintings of Spain's former dictator Francisco Franco, encouraging debate on the artist's role as witness to traumatic historical events. This exhibition demonstrated the expressive and social role that painting can fulfil through imaginary representations of violence, torture and political power; timely, given the contemporary problematic of representation of these topics in the media. By creating a public space of reflection and encounter with these issues, the exhibition raised questions about spectatorship and witness, and made the museum a critical space. Bird interpreted Golub's paintings as remorselessly representing the effects of forms of political and military power and oppression. While Golub located himself within Western history painting traditions, Bird foregrounded scenes of conflict and masculine aggression as 'getting at the real': visual narratives that figured bodies – through gestures, posture, and facial expression – as bearers of meaning and truth, allegories of our contemporary world unfolding across pictorial space.

The exhibition inserts the paintings in the discursive cultural context inaugurated by the Middlesex VCG working within this tradition and bringing it into the present by realising its core values and principles in a major museum. The exhibition's location in the Velazquez Palace in a public park allowed and encouraged access to the work to a very broad audience. Visitor numbers were over 100,000 during the three-month period. This contributed to the overall increment of visitors of the museum, which in 2011 saw a 17% increase over the previous year (2,705,529 visitors - http://www.hoyesarte.com/sin-categoria/record-para-el-museo-reina-sofia-400000-visitantes-mas_98219/), with the highest increment coinciding with the exhibition. The significance of the exhibition in addressing a vast, broader public beyond the regular museum target audiences is further attested by the exceptional response it achieved in non-specialized media. Overall, the press office of Reina Sofia recorded over eighty separate press items on the exhibition between May and September 2011. Favourable reviews appeared in major national and international daily newspapers, including *El Pais* (the primary daily newspaper in Spain, with a daily circulation of 369,707 in 2011); *El Mundo* (the second largest print newspaper and the largest digital newspaper in Spain, with a daily circulation topping 200,000 readers for the print edition and 24 million unique web visitors per month); *Il Sole 24 Ore*, the prime economic daily newspaper in Italy (circulation 287.232); *The Wall Street Journal Weekend* (the largest newspaper in the USA, with a print circulation of about 2.11 million in 2011). Bird was interviewed by the television channel Telemadrid, and the online news channel EuroNews and Radio Nacional de Espana 1 both broadcast news of the event. Furthermore, the official video of Bird's introduction to the exhibition had over 2,200 views on YouTube. Here, Bird discusses amongst other things a relationship between Golub's 'Torture' paintings, the photographs that emerged from Abu Ghraib, and the audience's identification with both victim and torturer. The media response introduced the figure of Leon Golub not only in the European context, but further contributed to position the work of this artist in the broader Spanish-speaking context of Latin American cultural discourse. Significantly, other exhibition reviews were in *El Universal*, one of the major daily Mexican newspapers (with a daily circulation of 300,000 readers and over 3 million unique visitors to the online version each month, the second most visited news site in Mexico), and a weblog of *Clarín*, the leading Argentinean daily newspaper. Furthermore, the catalogue to accompany the exhibition, published in both English and Spanish (Bird, J., Isaak, J.A., Padiyar, S., Guilbaut, S. 2011. *Leon Golub*. Turner/Museo Reina Sofia) found 40% of its Spanish edition sales in Latin America (200 copies – source: Reina Sofia). Thus the reach of the work went beyond the English-speaking world, particularly in Latin America. The critical theories for considering art works and the practices of curatorship developed by Bird and VCG were, through the media response to this exhibition, given their geographically broadest - and arguably their culturally hardest - test.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. *El Pais* (daily newspaper, Spain), 'El pintor de la guerra de Vietnam', by Manuel Morales, 04/05/2011
http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2011/05/04/actualidad/1304460004_850215.html 'La pintura de historia de Leon Golub', photogallery, 04/05/2011
http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2011/05/04/album/1304460002_910215.html#1304460002_910215_0000000000 [Accessed 14/11/2013].

Impact case study (REF3b)

2. *El Mundo* (daily newspaper, Spain). 'El arte feroz de Leon Golub', by Andreína García Reina, 10/05/2011. <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/05/06/ocio/1304683423.html> [Accessed 14/11/2013].
3. *Il Sole 24 Ore* (daily financial newspaper, Italy). 'Leon Golub e l'arte del terrore che anticipa la realtà', by Damiano Laterza, 10/08/2011: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2011-08-07/leon-golub-arte-terrore-193626.shtml?uuid=AaS71duD> Photogallery: http://foto.ilsole24ore.com/SoleOnline5/Cultura/Arte/2011/leon-golub/leon-golub_fotogallery.php [Accessed 14/11/2013].
4. *El Universal* (daily newspaper, Mexico). 'Exibiran por primera vez a Leon Golub en Espana', by arh. 23/04/2011. <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/760900.html> [Accessed 14/11/2013].
5. *Clarín* (daily newspaper, Argentina) 'La Verdad Molesta', by Eduardo Iglesias Brickles, published online for *Testigo Ocular*, official weblog of *Revista N*, the cultural magazine of *Clarín*, the first daily newspaper in Argentina, 27/08/2011. <http://weblogs.clarin.com/revistaenie-testigoocular/2011/08/> [Accessed 03/09/2013]
6. 'Leon Golub: Enfrentar al poder con la verdad', by Carolina Castro Jorquera, 26/05/2011. Feature article for the webpage of the artistic and curatorial project *Mich, Museo Internacional de Chile* (Santiago de Chile). <http://www.museointernacionaldechile.cl/blog/2011/05/26/leon-golub-enfrentar-al-poder-con-la-verdad-por-carolina-castro-j/> [Accessed 14/11/2013].
7. 'Expert eye: Julia Peyton-Jones. The director of the Serpentine Gallery chooses Leon Golub as a breed apart at the fair', by Anny Shaw, *The Art Newspaper*, Frieze daily edition, published online: 14/10/2011. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Expert+eye%3A+Julia+Peyton-Jones/24841> [Accessed 20/06/2013].
8. (Interview) 'Entrevista a Jon Bird: Leon Golub', Museo Reina Sofia YouTube Channel, Uploaded 09/05/2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlsn4Za5-as> [Accessed 22/06/2013]. The interview has received over 2,200 views, becoming the 9th most popular video (out of 63) in the Museo Reina Sofia's official YouTube Channel.