

# The Body Is Back at the 2015 NADA Art Fair

Strong sales and stronger art at this year's edition

By Ryan Steadman | 05/15/15 2:01pm

NADA New York's austere facade welcomed a hearty line of art lovers on Thursday as 100 international exhibitors steeled themselves for the onslaught of patrons. 100 may seem like a lot at first blush, but it was a welcome number after Frieze, which felt like some distant Dothraki tent city.



Per-Oskar Leu in the 1/9 Unosunove booth at NADA New York 2015. (Photo: Ryan Steadman)

Further afield, Roman gallery 1/9 Unosunove mounted an absorbing booth that starred Norwegian artist Per-Oskar Leu and his storyboard homage to the unsettling "donkey" scene in Walt Disney's *Pinocchio*. The paint on newspaper works were paired with a surprisingly emotive stop motion animation, and there was even a small pedestaled cart and donkey sculpture nearby to complete the study. Unosunove also boasted some beautiful collaged paintings from New Yorker Dan Shaw-Town. Shaw-Town seems to have always owned the ability to turn a full page underwear ad into an existentialist epiphany, and he does not slouch here.

## In These Great Times

KUNSTNERNES HUS, OSLO, NORWAY



Jenny Holzer, *10 Inflammatory Essays*, 1979–82, offset coloured posters, each 43 × 43 cm, installation view at Kunstnernes Hus

A video monitor at the entrance of the group exhibition 'In These Great Times' showed the curator, François Piron, standing at a workbench in the partially installed show and redacting lines from the exhibition's brochure. The video was one of artist Victor Boulet's contributions to the show; its *raison d'être* was another – the snippets of text Piron is censoring from the brochure with his black pen are from a published email exchange between Boulet and Piron on the subject of artistic and family legacies, as well as a discussion of Boulet's complex and multi-layered installation for the show, *The Harrow, The Sparrow, The Sorrow* (2014).

At first Boulet's video seemed incidental, but it transpired to be a fitting addition to this exhibition, which placed language centre stage, in a somewhat elliptical homage to the under-recognized and eminently outspoken Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, whose eponymous 1914 essay gave the show its title. Kraus is perhaps best known for his almost entirely self-authored, self-edited and self-published journal *Die Fackel* (The Torch, 1899–1936), in which he railed against the feebleness and corruption of the contemporary press, as well as the moral hypocrisies and looming political threats of his times. A noted aphorist, who relished citing from newspapers as much as devising his own German-language gems, Kraus inaugurated *Die Fackel* with the following dictum: 'My business is to pin down the Age between quotation marks.'

Kraus's fighting spirit may have hovered over the conception of 'In These Great Times' but it didn't haunt the halls of works in Kunstnernes Hus. Those seeking an exhibition 'about' Kraus – akin to Piron's much-hailed 'Locus Solus' devoted to French author Raymond Roussel (at the Reina Sofia, Madrid, in 2011–12) – would have been surprised. Instead of tracing influences of a writerly aesthetic on a generation of artists, as he did with Roussel, Piron seemed to want to test the aphoristic method as a curatorial strategy. There was no overarching 'theme' to be teased out of the diverse selection of young and well-established artists and works (dating from the 1970s to the present), but language

was playfully, acerbically, critically, poetically and revealingly omnipresent – both in the exhibition and in the negotiations between the artists, institutions and the curator revealed in the brochure.

In the main exhibition space, Kristine Kemp's lean text series ('Currency', 2014), printed on paper headed with 'In dieser grossen Zeit' (the original German title of Kraus's essay), faced off with Mladen Stilinović's exuberant wall installation *Exploitation of the Dead* (1984–90), a visual collage of suprematist and constructivist-style art works, photographs and faux cakes and pastries, which cohered into an alternately serious and slapstick vision of history and ideology. Kemp was the only artist to cite Kraus directly: one of the phrases in the 1914 essay is 'Expect no words from me.' Kemp opened her series with this phrase, thus displacing her own authorship.

Speech acts and issues of public address were highlighted in Jenny Holzer's colourful grid of *10 Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), posters shouting out confrontational phrases in her signature uppercase, which papered one wall of the lobby, and in Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Cards) #1 and #2* (1986–90) sitting on the welcome desk and the bar. Piper used to hand the cards out as a form of non-vocal resistance to everyday racism and social injustice: *Card #1* begins: 'Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark.' Though very much a product of their times and places, the ongoing poignancy of these works was striking. Same goes for Per-Oskar Leu's beautiful sound piece *An die Nachgeborenen* (To Those Who Follow in Our Wake, 2014), based on Bertolt Brecht's letter to the future, written in the 1930s when the playwright was in exile in Denmark. Leu's work was audible throughout the exhibition, but was theatrically installed in the dark auditorium, the speakers accompanied by a single spotlight on the floor in front of a mirror teleprompter. Taken aphoristically, or as citations to be 'read' alongside each other, these voices came together as a powerful chorus of discontent with our own 'great times'.

**Vivian Sky Rehberg**

# GRAZIA

## Per-Oskar Leu: “la tecnica non definisce l’artista”

[Per-Oskar Leu](#) (Oslo, 1980) è un giovane artista norvegese che nel corso della sua carriera si è mosso tra media molto diversi, dal bronzo alla pittura, dalla scultura al video. Tratto comune di tutto il suo lavoro è una ricerca di materiali storici (dalla letteratura al cinema) capaci di innescare chiavi di lettura di tematiche politiche e sociali contemporanee. Da pochi giorni ha inaugurato a Londra l’installazione *The English: Are They Human?* all’interno del progetto [Commercial Road](#) curato dalla rivista italiana Cura in collaborazione con la sua galleria romana 1/9 unosunove. Cresciuto nella scena Hardcore di Oslo, Per-Oskar ha trasportato il suo spirito critico nella pratica artistica. Tra filosofia, letteratura e sottoculture giovanili ci ha raccontato del suo lavoro e di cosa succede quando qualcuno che non c’entra nulla con l’arte ti chiede “che tipo di artista sei”.

**Iniziamo con *The English: Are They Human?* Ci puoi raccontare questa installazione e in particolare della relazione che suggerisce tra Futurismo, Hooliganismo e moda?**

L’installazione è stata pensata per il [Commercial Road Project](#), una collaborazione tra la London Metropolitan University e la rivista d’arte indipendente CURA insieme a cinque gallerie d’arte romane. Questo tipo di intersezioni culturali sono al centro del mio lavoro nel quale mi sono concentrato sul movimento futurista italiano, le cui idee hanno segnato significativamente gli artisti britannici all’inizio del Ventesimo secolo. Allo stesso modo ho guardato ai ‘Casuals’ inglesi, una categoria crescente di tifosi di calcio conosciuta per la sua tendenza al ‘combattimento ricreativo’ ma soprattutto per l’uso di un dress code preciso fatto di abiti firmati. Sia nell’ideologia futurista che in quella dei Casuals esiste una fede nella violenza come sfogo di emozioni inalterato. Mi interessa l’estetica della violenza, l’ossessione per l’aggressività e la bellezza maschile comune a questi due gruppi. Così per *The English: Are They Human?* ho unito giacche di C.P. Company, un brand amato dai Casuals, con dei ventilatori elettrici e delle ventose di trasporto per vetri. L’idea era di creare una macchina viva, un’opera cinetica.

**So che hai iniziato la tua carriera nell’ambito dell’Hardcore norvegese e della scena Black Metal. Si tratta di così dette sottoculture. Cosa ti ha portato al mondo delle arti visive e quali sono le differenze tra questi ambienti?**

Sono stato attivo nella scena Hardcore per molti anni ma non non una vera connessione con il Black Metal. Ho realizzato un video anni fa per esplorare quest’aspetto culturale norvegese che è diventato un fenomeno d’esportazione (il Black Metal n.d.r.), ma in termini di musica, morale e stile queste due sottoculture sono lontane anni luce. Il mio ingresso nel mondo dell’arte è stato conseguenza di un interesse di lunga data per l’espressione visiva che veniva nutrita anche dal mio coinvolgimento nella scena Hardcore. Come sai, l’etica del DIY (Do It Yourself) è fondamentale per l’Hardcore/Punk, e la scena offre diverse opportunità per la creatività. Ho iniziato semplicemente progettando copertine di dischi, t-shirt, poster e flyer per il mio gruppo e poi per gli amici. Se devo paragonare il mondo dell’arte a quello dell’Hardcore direi che le somiglianze superano le differenze, almeno in termini di musica indipendente e di iniziative create dagli artisti. In entrambi questi mondi ti ritrovi a costruire una rete di amici che si aiutano l’uno con l’altro, spesso per amore di ciò che si fa e con poca ambizione di diventare ricchi.

**Ammetto di essere una profana riguardo all’Hardcore, quindi sono curiosa di sapere cosa ti ha attratto di questa scena? Mi sembra che ci sia molto di più sotto oltre alla musica e all’immagine un po’ sinistra. Come si relaziona tutto questo alla tua arte?**

In poche parole, l’Hardcore è una versione raffinata e pulita del Punk. La musica è più veloce e diretta e il nichilismo Punk è sostituito da valori più costruttivi. Come il Punk, l’Hardcore nasce dal rifiuto delle culture giovanili commerciali e di massa. Quest’aspetto critico è ciò che mi ha attratto maggiormente, non a caso tendo sempre a mantenere un’attitudine critica nella mia pratica artistica di oggi.

**Parliamo di una situazione al di fuori mondo dell’arte. Quando dici di essere un artista ti viene chiesto spesso se sei un pittore o uno scultore? In questo caso come rispondi? Come cerchi di spiegare il tuo lavoro al ‘resto del mondo’?**

Sì, è una domanda che mi viene fatta molto spesso e ogni volta trovo difficile offrire una risposta soddisfacente. Durante la mia carriera ho usato così tante tecniche - bronzo, scultura in pietra, pittura a olio, video e ready-made - che una caratteristica del mio lavoro è proprio quella di non essere legata a un mezzo in particolare. Volendo spiegare quello che faccio, direi che il mio lavoro è una riflessione e una ricerca su materiali storici capaci di attivare un discorso critico su condizioni politiche e sociali attuali.

## Mike Watson

**Y**our irony is the only weapon you can use against my cooking. Think about it!" was the parting shot with which my interlocutor ended a recent argument on the relative merits of English and Italian culture. Indeed, Anglo-Italian relations are little explored, despite the close ties between the countries, often leading to crude analyses of both countries.

In this light it is worth considering Norwegian Per-Oskar Leu's installation *The English: Are They Human?* (3-29 February), the second in a series of five to be placed in the London Metropolitan University's 'showcase' gallery on Commercial Road. The title of the show (presented in conjunction with Rome's 1/9 Unosunove gallery and *Cura* magazine, who are curating the entire project) is that of a book written by Dutch academic G.J. Renier (published in 1931), which subsequently influenced *The Human Age* (1955), by Wyndham Lewis.

Lewis was a major proponent of Vorticism, the macho early-twentieth-century British art movement which closely echoed Italian Futurism, with its numbskull emphasis on speed, the power of the machine and the intensity of warfare. It is easy, of course, to reflect on the naivety of those early modernist movements, which envisioned violence, capitalism and warfare as somehow paving the way to a machinic utopia, free from obligations to human sentiment. Yet in the working-class-youth violence seen on the streets of London in 2011, we witnessed a world that has inherited the callous fantasy of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto of 1909. For example, of its 11-point programme, number 7 reads: 'Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.' And it is precisely a reverence for a virulent and aggressive beauty that has led to the marketisation of art. It is a beauty embodied in the simplicity of a perfect logic; pure profit. In this sense the artworld has inherited the slash-and-burn mentality of the Futurists, who refused to hold the past as sacred. This jettisoning of values, reflected across society, is precisely not 'humane' in that it embraces progress regardless of the lessons of human history, thus paving the way for a posthuman epoch. The Anglo-American embrace of free-market finance did a lot to speed this phenomenon.

# A CRITIC ASKS SOME ITALIANS IF THE ENGLISH ARE HUMAN



In this light, I put the question 'the English: are they human?' to a number of people working within the arts in Italy, and found no one prepared to give me a straight answer. More casual conversation reveals, however, that the English are best known for: empire building; the Queen; plunging Europe into 'austerity'; and football hooliganism. Indeed, this last phenomenon is a central theme of Leu's installation, as the artist explores the 'Casuals', a hooligan subculture that emerged in the 1970s, notable for its sharp dress code, which allowed its members to pass the police undetected. Leu focuses in particular upon on the 'Mille Miglia' jacket, made by the C.P. Company of Bologna for motor racing and famed for its integrated goggles, but worn by Casuals to hide the wearer's identity as well as for protection during pitched battles. Leu has placed two such jackets in the windowfront gallery, arms splayed and attached to its windows with industrial suckers, with circling rotary fans protruding from their hooded heads. The works hint at the rootedness of terrace violence in industrial and postindustrial capital - while paying tribute to a particularly English form of depravity aided by

Italian fashion. The football hooligan is the correlate of the high-fashion aficionado in a society where not everyone can afford the elegant look: Casuals often funded their love of Italian dress through criminal activity.

The question asked by Per-Oskar Leu's installation gives opportunity for reflection not only on the cultural osmosis between two vastly different nations with an entwined history, but on the irrepressible advance of a mentality which, since the early 1990s, has transformed the artworld, in many senses for the worse. Yet in both the diligent and patient approach of the Italians and the irreverent irony of the English there resides the capacity to resist the persistent dry and valueless logic of the market. The failings of Fabio Capello's England football team management aside, here's to the positive potential of Anglo-Italian hybridisation.

Per-Oskar Leu, *The English: Are They Human?* 2012. C.P. Company goggles, jackets and aluminium glass lifters mounted on steel pedestal fans and wooden framework with steel tube fittings, car sun shades with custom print. Courtesy the artist and 1/9 Unosunove, Rome

## The Crisis Artist

By [Yin Ho](#)



Still from *Hangmen Also Die!* (Fritz Lang, 1943)

Per-Oskar Leu's *Crisis and Critique* consists of a video of trial scenes selected from German films from the 1930s and '40s, leather coats hung over speakers sometimes playing Bertolt Brecht's 1947 testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee, and four matted seating areas with the German words for locked up, night, your ears, and misfortune printed on them. Presented in a curtained-off room, the installation at [155 Freeman Street](#) was accompanied by a newly translated essay by Otto Freundlich entitled "The Artist and the Economic Crisis." The sum of these parts might make for an ominous, harrowing piece, which by its content, it is. It's also an insightful and engaging installation on the role of the artist and art in the whole mixed-layered world at large.

'At large' is apt as Leu, in the show's press release, cites an investigation of *Verfremdungseffekt*—distancing effect—in relation to the experiences of Bertolt Brecht. The video of trials in German cinema demonstrate how the format of a trial

flattens the dimensions of an individual, with the defendant often used as a tool to prove a political point or create legal precedence. The transcript and audio recording of Brecht's testimony before the Committee is rich with content, displaying the State's fear of insurgence, problems with translation and misinterpretation, and a reminder of art's ability to incite. Brecht's words in songs and poems, the primary reason for his appearance in Washington, D.C., were quoted to him (in poor translations, he stated to comic effect) during his testimony. His appearance, along with those of so many artists and others during the McCarthy years, serves as a reminder that critical thought can be powerful and dangerous. Poets, writers and artists who are watched and imprisoned in authoritarian regimes incur such behavior most often not because of political activity per se, but because their cultural output is suggestive of underlying, subversive thoughts. Testament to a delicately balanced perception we have of the individual is that seems ludicrous at present in the West. But it might also be due to a perception of art as ineffectual, and that something so distant and harmless isn't cause for concern.

Negar Azimi's incisive [piece](#) in *Frieze* last spring discussed the effects of different political and art forms. Political subject matter, though well-meaning, can suffer from its safe distance from its presented topic. The article mentions Liam Gillick's recommendation that the best way an artist can be political is to "occasionally step outside their normal practice and stand as citizens against the delusions of their leaders" and presents Adrian Piper's definition of "Easy Listening Art," art that "provides enough compositional sophistication to engage or titillate one's visual sensibilities, but its impact is deliberately muted...suggestive rather than explicit, soothing rather than demanding...It does not make trouble, instead it makes nice." Piper's "Easy Listening" pejorative may seem a bit unfair to scores of perfectly good work, but in the face of the zeitgeist, (the article was published in the midst of a flourishing period for the Arab Spring movement, but before Occupy Wall Street), our consciousness has shifted to increasingly realistic and substantial concerns. Azimi suggests art "in the name of the political" be less stultifying, more electric: that it ask unanswerable questions, perhaps be uncomfortable, and that it not 'make nice.' Though rousing, those objectives sound as if they would make for ominous, harrowing, and difficult work. However, concrete reality benefits from an artist's abstract gaze upon it. Now is a better time than many to welcome resonant work that asks nuanced questions and presents altered perspectives.

An artist seeking guidance in this political moment would find a good deal already thought out by Otto Freundlich, a German-Jewish artist and politically active Marxist. Leu's inclusion of the 1931 essay (appearing for the first time in English; much of Freundlich's work was destroyed after the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933; he was murdered upon arrival at Majdanek concentration camp in 1943) broadens his installation with a high-minded, yet realistic directive on the artist's role in history. We can identify with the circumstances under which it was written: in an increasingly impoverished nation where an artist's lot depended on chance, and that chance diminished in correlation with economic decline. Freundlich writes of an artist that has integrity and value because he has a creed. The essay is full of gems: the artist has an "inner decisiveness" and "an obligation to demand the utmost of his own discernment." He must remain true, and "serve that great formative and transformative process" to ensure that "there is no economic crisis capable of suffocating true enthusiasm for the free play of creative ideas." The value in an artist's life comes from his "surrender to that particular artistic truth that he perceives to be his guiding principle." And with selective optimism, "the economic crisis, so disheartening to those spoiled by indulgence, spurs the creative and defiant spirit, which believes in the future."

Leu's own response to his question on the role an artist should "play during watershed political moments" is in line with Freundlich's artist. *Crisis and Critique* encourages inquiry, reflection, and action, and stresses the importance of artistic thought and criticality in changing times. While, like Freundlich and his work, the artist and art might not physically survive, the artist's endurance may be found in being one who (again, from Freundlich) "looks upon the struggle of his age and his contemporaries as his own most personal destiny, lending it expression."



## Per-Oskar Leu

TRIPLE CANOPY

If the history of the twentieth-century could be distilled to just a few key episodes, one of them might be Bertolt Brecht's appearance before a US House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) panel in 1947. Speaking with great deliberation in his thick German accent, Brecht point by point dismantled his interrogators' claims about the danger of his works and of "political" poetry more generally. Employing Brechtian-inspired *Verfremdungseffekte*, or distancing effects, Norwegian artist Per-Oskar Leu weaves a fabric of real voices and fictional characters to stage an innovative reimagining of this historic event. The twenty-seven-minute video at the core of the installation *Crisis and Critique*, 2012, includes audio from the HUAC testimony dubbed over appropriated footage from German-language films of the 1930s and '40s—Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), and G. W. Pabst's 1931 version of Brecht's own *The Threepenny Opera*, among others—with

the voice of theater critic and Brecht scholar Eric Bentley (lifted from a 1963 recording) providing narration and commentary. Thus, the famous kangaroo-court sequence in *M*, in which Peter Lorre's serial-killer character is tried by the Berlin criminal underworld, becomes the HUAC proceeding, with a leather-jacketed tough standing in for House Committee chairman John Parnell Thomas of New Jersey. Brecht is portrayed as Dr. Mabuse, a criminal mastermind writing of his evil deeds while silhouetted against a backlit cloth scrim in his mental-asylum cell. At the center of Leu's montage is a hilarious World War II propaganda cartoon starring Donald Duck, trapped in a nightmare Third Reich, where he is forced to fabricate ever more absurdly sized missiles on a frantically sped-up assembly line.

Leu draws the viewer into his narrative using a film-within-a-film framing device: A man hunted by Nazi police hides out in a cinema (the footage is from Lang's *Hangmen Also Die!* [1943]) as the film we see unfolds. In a fascinating *mise en abyme*, the indelible hurdy-gurdy music of the Brecht and Kurt Weill composition "Mack the Knife" fills the movie hall. Bentley's voice explains that in October 1947 HUAC undertook "hearings regarding Communist infiltration of the motion picture

industry," calling numerous Hollywood notables, including notorious red-baiters Walt Disney and Ronald Reagan, and eleven so-called unfriendly witnesses, of whom only Brecht gave testimony. The others took the Fifth Amendment and were later jailed for contempt of Congress. Brecht, though a Marxist, had never joined the Communist Party, while others of the Hollywood Ten had; yet his polite but firm declarations condemned the entire HUAC undertaking as injudicious. As Brecht points out, his own ostensibly revolutionary activities were in fact directed against fascist Germany, presumably a common enemy of the US government. Brecht boarded a plane for Europe the day after his congressional appearance, and never again returned to the States.

The masterfully collaged and captivating video is a tour de force, as is Otto Freundlich's 1931 essay "The Artist and the Economic Crisis," which was translated into English for the first time, printed on a poster, and distributed to visitors free. Elements accompanying the installation seemed somewhat labored in comparison. Five leather IKEA armchair slipcovers draped over speakers hung from the ceiling—referencing, among other things, Brecht's own leather-jacket-as-working-class gear—and four twin mattresses on the floor provided seating, their sheets printed with the German words and phrases for "close," "not," "your ear," and "to misfortune" (the words come from placards brandished by beggars in *The Threepenny Opera*). A red curtain—a former East German Communist flag—separated the gallery entrance from the video. Take all these props away: The video's expert montage confers new urgency upon Brecht's already stirring moment of political conscience. Combined with the Freundlich text, it points to the dialogic relationship between artists and economic hardship, and the necessity of speaking frankly about those conditions.

—Eva Díaz



Per-Oskar Leu, *Crisis and Critique* (detail), 2012, still from the twenty-seven-minute black-and-white video component of a mixed-media installation.

## Art in Review

### Per-Oskar Leu

'Crisis and Critique'

Triple Canopy  
155 Freeman Street,  
Greenpoint, Brooklyn  
Through Sunday

Triple Canopy, which moved to a new home in Greenpoint in January, is a multitasking brain trust of a nonprofit that publishes an extremely smart Internet magazine, presents performances and organizes exhibitions. It now has, on short-term view, a solo show, "Crisis and Critique," by the young Norwegian artist Per-Oskar Leu, and it's well worth traveling to see.

It consists of a half-hour video playing in a minimalist, sculptural setting, though there's nothing minimalist about the video itself, a passionate and absorbing montage-style essay on the response of art and artists to moral emergency. It is built around an audio recording of testimony by the playwright Bertolt Brecht before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington in 1947.

Mr. Leu frames this within another archival recording from 1963, in which the writer Eric Bentley revisits Brecht's appearance and the prosecutorial politics of the day.

Both documents are visually supported by clips from German films of the 1930s and '40s — Fritz



TRIPLE CANOPY

A scene from the video in Per-Oskar Leu's "Crisis and Critique" exhibition.

Lang's "M" and G. W. Pabst's adaptation of "Three Penny Opera," among them — made before Brecht had to flee the country, and by a spooky Walt Disney propaganda cartoon that has Donald Duck dreaming he's a Nazi. With brilliant editing, Mr. Leu lines up elements from operatic courtroom scenes on film with the audiotape of the Brecht interrogation in a way that amplifies both the bullying nature of the Washington sessions and the deftness of Brecht's response as he repeatedly points to art as an antidote to ideology.

The installation, which includes five draped sheets of lustrous black vinyl standing in for the video's protagonists, is simple and apt. Triple Canopy supplements it with a handout of a 1931 essay, "The Artist and the Economic Crisis," by Otto Fren-

dlich, an artist and activist who died in a concentration camp in 1943. The Freundlich essay's earnest, directive tone is in perfect counterpoint to Mr. Leu's shrewdly and entertainingly persuasive video.

HOLLAND COTTER