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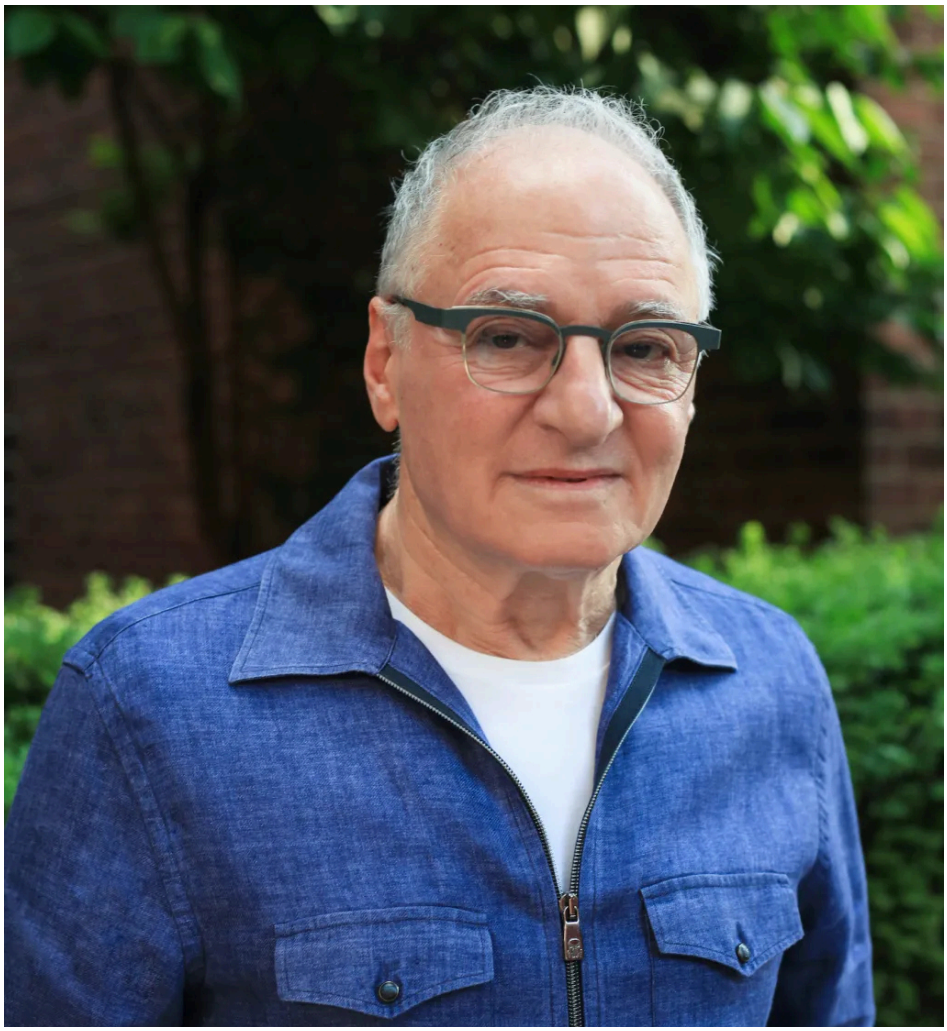
Art Interviews

# Norman Kleeblatt's Very New York Story

"My question to myself was whether and how to be an 'out Jew'," the longtime curator told *Hyperallergic* in an interview.

**Hrag Vartanian** June 2, 2024



American curator Norman Kleeblatt (photo by Nikolai Devera)

**This article is part of *Hyperallergic*'s 2024 Pride Month series, featuring interviews with art-world queer and trans elders throughout June.**

Norman Kleeblatt has been a prominent curator in New York City's museum scene for decades. His exhibitions at the Jewish Museum, where he started as a curatorial assistant in 1981 and went on to serve as the institution's chief curator from 2005 to 2017, have exercised an important influence on the field.

His 1987 exhibition *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth and Justice* explored the relationship between art and politics by examining visual responses to the scandalous Dreyfus Affair. It even earned him an award from the French government. His 1996 exhibition *Too Jewish?* challenged popular ideas around Jewishness and was an important contribution to larger conversations during the era regarding our understanding of multiculturalism. More recently his examinations of Abstract Expressionism in the 2008 exhibition *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976* and his 2014 *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952* both energized our conception of a movement that was foundational to the contemporary art world.

His thoughtful manner comes through in his curating, and he always seems to find a way to extend conversations in new and interesting ways, and that's what I most enjoy about him and his work. In this interview, we discuss his life, work, and insight as one of the most influential LGBTQ+ curators in New York.

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**Hyperallergic:** *You have an unusual and what I would consider a "very New York" coming out story in that you did things your way. Do you mind sharing your experience?*

**Norman Kleeblatt:** Though perhaps a classic "New York-specific" twist, I think dating in general and coming out specifically reflected the culture and zeitgeist of the 1970s. My generation grew up with the separation — segregation might be a better term — of LGBTQ+ from straight society: lots unspoken and hidden under

the cloud of homophobia. The language used at the time would today be considered microaggressions. A lot of what was instilled by family and straight society seemed natural and safe; on the one hand, that was attractive. On the other, other options would be difficult if not dangerous.

By the end of the 1970s, a sizeable number of my male friends and acquaintances initially had been in relationships with women; many I knew, like me, had been married. Stonewall in 1969 permitted a new attitude toward sexuality in both queer and straight communities. A certain libertinism (sexual and otherwise) pervaded the decade. For the second part of the decade, I was able to have relationships with both women and men, sometimes causally, often with emotional attachments. I am not talking about competing, emotionally fraught gay/straight triangles, unlike the relations exposed in such influential films as *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* (1971) or the recent movie *Passages* (2023). In my case at the time, I had separate relationships, one with a man and one a woman. With the onset of AIDS, and its terrifying, life-threatening risks, such freedoms and couplings ended abruptly. By 1980, I had begun a long-term relationship with Peter, the person who is now my husband.

**H:** *And you are Jewish and served as the longtime director of the Jewish Museum, so I'm curious how you saw your identities often interacting in the art community. Did you feel a conflict or were you able to negotiate that easily? I'm asking particularly because many of us are often negotiating similar realities with various communities we feel a part of.*

**NK:** I was chief curator at the Jewish Museum from 2005–2017. I began in a part-time curatorial position in 1981 soon after Joan Rosenbaum was appointed director. A child of refugees from Nazi Germany, I grew up in New Jersey, did my undergrad at Rutgers, then graduate work at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Honestly this was a moment in my life that, as a gay man, I felt most alienated, questioning my Jewish identity. What part, if any, did "Jewish" have in either my personal life or my professional career?

Slowly I, along with many professional colleagues, realized that identities were complicated, often contradictory. Complexity and contradiction are two concepts

that have been central to my personal experiences and professional practices. For example, Deborah Kass, who is also queer and Jewish, and I began an intense conversation about this matter. Others who eventually participated in my exhibition *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities* offered their own voices/experiences/questions/conundrums. With little initial intent or manipulation, a considerable number of the artists I included happened to be gay: Greg Bordowitz, Cary Leibowitz, Rhonda Lieberman, Sandi DuBowski, and Deb Kass were among them. Humor and irony, even ironic self-deprecation (are these Jewish or gay traits/stereotypes?) were part of the show's artists' modes of self-presentations. These were discussed as such by critics who wrote about the exhibition.

But as with my more complicated coming out, my question to myself was whether and how to be an "out Jew." This would have had direct implications for my curatorial practice, especially as a curator at the Jewish Museum. I think that the collision of these two identities added yet another level of complexity to my practice. At the time, what did Jewish and/or queer people have to do with art, with curating? This was not an insignificant question. I got the job in the 1980s, when multiculturalism and identity politics began to become a serious part of the conversations about art and evolved into a group of serious museum shows addressing such issues. The 1993 Whitney Biennial was a major moment of multi-dimensional exploration. Distilling that to a broad, gauged "Jewish" angle was the major focus of the previously mentioned 1996 exhibition *Too Jewish?*. The question mark in the title is reflective of the way I have always worked on exhibitions and research: Always begin with a question. Keep asking questions. Offer alternatives, not answers.

**H:** *I love your interest in questioning, which does feel like it can function as a type of queering, but also, as you mentioned, be connected to other traditions, like your own Jewish intellectual heritage. What questions do you wish queer people in the art community would ask more or investigate more?*

**NK:** I hesitate to categorize or essentialize the traits as either good, bad, or indifferent of queers, Jews, and so many other partial identities. Yet of course the idea of questioning is a useful handle, at least for me. What I would like to question is how the experiences of queers, Jews, and so many other groups may

have led to the behaviors of self-interrogation.

Putting that into my intellectual, art historical, and curatorial approach evolved but evidently it also is part of how I think. Perhaps the first example of questioning in my curatorial role is the 1987 show I organized, *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth and Justice*. Going through the works on paper in the Jewish Museum's collection, I discovered a group of at least 30 posters titled *Musée des Horreurs* (Museum of Horrors). As its eponymous title claimed, the images were ghastly. Horrible is not an adequate term to describe them. Zola as a pig; Dreyfus as a snake. Yet they also were seductive visually — perhaps too much so.

Still they provided the ground zero for a yearslong holy grail to look at the infamous Affair, which rocked French society and international relations reflecting the disparate viewpoints of intellectual, political, artistic, literary, even filmic production.

Another example is when Kenneth Silver and I co-curated the 1998 monographic Chaim Soutine exhibition. Our big question was where the Lithuanian-born "French expressionist" might fit into the art historical matrix. We assigned ourselves the entire battery of criticism that had been written about the artist from the early 1920s to the 1980s. As we sat down together to discuss and analyze what we read, we realized that there were in fact three different "Soutines" characterized (dare I say concocted?) in the literature. Wondering how that might come through in the exhibition, we actually ended up creating three different galleries, with three different architectures for the three different Soutine characterizations we uncovered.

Likewise, *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning and American Art, 1940–1976* originated from the questions of how to create a different approach to exhibiting and examining this seminal period of American art. More specifically: Can one organize an exhibition through the lens of the competing critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg?

Then, in 2014, I worked on another show that came directly out of *Action/ Abstraction*. Here Abstract Expressionism was examined through a distinctive,

highly focused lens. *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952* featured two painters who were historically underappreciated. Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, a woman and an African American, shared a surprisingly similar visual language during this period. The exhibition looked at ways that each artist's approach joined abstraction with cultural specificity.

**H:** *Can you tell us about a formative art experience that influences you until this day, something that continues to inform your work and life?*

**NK:** I believe formative art experiences continue as long as an individual is compos mentis. I believe that's why I continue to look, listen, experience, and question art. I'm speaking of art in the broadest, most general terms — including music, literature, film, architecture, etc., etc. In some senses I am an addict, constantly seeking new feelings and ways of expression. Seeing past and present as a continuum is important in the way I approach art and history.

A good example for me is a two-part encounter. My first in-person encounter with Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece in Colmar, in Alsace, France, was pivotal, of course. From the time I first saw a photo of that masterpiece, Colmar had been a top stop on my pilgrimage list. My first visit to the Musée Unterlinden was in the mid 1980s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. The dead Christ's skin at the center panel is infected with lesions of the type that were the visible effects of a disease prevalent at the time Grünewald painted it. Known as ergotism, or St. Anthony's fire, it was a painful disease that came from fungal-infected rye flour. [It was] painted as an altarpiece for a monastery/hospital where similarly infected patients' beds were wheeled into the chapel to pray and receive some kind of spiritual healing from the sight of Christ having suffered similar agony. The lesions looked remarkably like the Kaposi sarcoma suffered by many AIDS patients. Comparable to the mortal skin disease of the 16th century, the AIDS analogy seemed blatantly evident to me. Yet the idea of creating a means of psychological/spiritual healing felt alien to how our contemporary society treated those suffering.

More than a decade later an analogous visual encounter occurred for me when I first saw AA Bronson's billboard-size photograph titled "June 5, 1994" (1994/1999)

at the opening of the 2002 Whitney Biennial. AA staged his recently deceased sitter — who had been one of his partners in the noted artist group General Idea in the hours shortly after Felix Partz's death from AIDS-related causes. Terrifying, it stopped me in my tracks. I focused, shut down, virtually disregarded the buzz of throngs of other visitors.

As opposed to Grünewald's dead Christ, [it was] as profound, maybe even more so, by focusing on a specific beloved, contemporary, known individual who was not an icon of religious veneration. But Felix too was now a symbol and made all us viewers vulnerable — a harrowing reminder of the continued suffering and devastating losses from AIDS. AA felt the "dead walk among us, [the living]."

**H:** *How would you characterize the ways museums have changed over the years and do you think they have become more inclusive?*

**NK:** Of course, there has been movement in this direction, with museums paying attention to showing and filling gaps in collections, especially of artists that have been ignored by Western art history. However, the initiatives seem focused on one- or two-dimensional characteristics as if there are "to-include" lists that can simply be ticked off. How do institutions begin to open up purviews and discourses to the more highly faceted nature and complexity of individual identities, especially among cultural producers? Inevitably this will take time. Looking back, at one time organizations saw hope in multiculturalism. Soon that became discussed as an unfulfilled promise. Then curators like Okwui Enwezor started opening discourse in the West to broader ideas around globalism. I remember his Documenta in 2000, which helped audiences note dialogues and disparities between and among its broad-ranging participants. It conveyed in a sense the complexity of each individual, [that] each artist had numerous complicated aspects

One of the issues with museums today is that there is talk of diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), but still much less range among upper staff than would be expected. And then there is museum admission, which is sometimes at or near $30 per visiting adult. Not insignificant for a working- or middle-class family of four, or even one. The acknowledgement of economic and/or class difference is less considered than other aspects of the DEI quadrant.

**H:** *Can you tell us about queer life in New York during the ’70s and ’80s and how that’s changed? Do you have any nostalgia for that older scene?*

**NK:** It’s funny that we began this interview with our discussion of a slowly evolving “New York” coming out, and now that I think of it, my own coming out was slow, quiet, distinctive to me by comparison.

The late ’70s was a time of great personal and sexual freedom as well as experimentation, which I experienced at a distance. I only began to come out in the very late 1970s, when there was a new openness of gay life — and as I said before, sexual permissiveness in general. I met people at the gym, in the grocery store, the bus stop, and on the sidewalk. An encounter might begin sexually and develop into a friendship.

Much as I tried to avoid emotional attachment, by 1980 I was in a live-in relationship with Peter (now my husband). Together we continued and cherished our earlier relationships with straight friends — in fact we still depended on them for emotional support. We also began to develop a coterie of gay friends, mostly couples, who had come from straight relationships and marriages, and had rather quickly entered into committed relationships with men. Of course, the 1980s framed the AIDS crisis as painful, confusing, terrifying.

Discussions among gay friends pinpointed AIDS. There was so little information, so much misinformation and confusion at the time. Despair reigned as we listened to news and watched friends suffer and die of AIDS. In most cases, we were able to be there for them physically and psychologically. But I remember one friend with AIDS in the mid-1980s shunning former friends, including me. I felt helpless.

Then of course, most of us saw ourselves as highly vulnerable, and often developed false psychosomatic symptoms. Our straight friends and parents were as upset and as confused as we were. I can’t say I wax nostalgic, because of the psychological difficulties for me personally and the fact that homophobia exploded in society writ large. Today, I know I live in a bubble of acceptance for my gayness and recognition of my marriage. But in today’s political environment,

that's once again threatened.

**H:** *That's understandable, and the contrast between the 1970s and '80s must've been intense. How do you think that period impacted the art community and its institutions? When did the first gay or LGBTQ+ exhibitions start to appear regularly?*

**NK:** One important event was the beginning of Day Without Art in December 1989.

I headed planning at the Jewish Museum, and it offered an important, meaningful way to engage the AIDS crisis with our professional organizations and educational missions. The planning brought staff from many departments together with a goal of offering education and a place of remembrance, and yes, mourning for family and friends suffering from, living with, or lost to AIDS. The sense of purpose was important for staff and participants. Tom Sokolowski [who helped establish the national day of action and mourning] considered our program the most personally affecting one of all the 1989 programs in New York.

As to LGBTQ+ exhibitions, I clearly remember Dan Cameron's 1982 contribution, *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art* at the New Museum (when the New Museum was still housed in the New School on 14th Street and Fifth Avenue). It was brave and provocative, and got quite a bit of attention and even criticism about the "formal" aspects of the works and "quality" of the featured art. Some of this critique was from the gay writers. It was a hugely important event, including such artists as Scott Burton, Gilbert and George, Jody Pinto, Harmony Hammond, and Betty Damon, among others. Yet much as I was seeking to find myself in the exhibition (stupid as that might seem), I was hard pressed to relate to any one work personally.

**H:** *What would you like to tell younger LGBTQ+ people who are planning to enter the field of art? Perhaps something you would've liked to hear as you started on your own journey in art?*

**NK:** I couldn't imagine giving a younger LGBTQ+ person different general advice than I would give to a younger straight one.

Goals, which should be flexible, need to be defined; determination and focus are essential. I have had the pleasure of working with numerous assistants and interns over the years, a number of whom I still consider good friends. Each of their cases was individual in terms of goals, timetables, financial situations, and starting points.

For all, get as much experience as possible. Learn from the experience. Become invaluable to mentors and supervisors. Listen to conversations of professionals at work. Find the ear of a sympathetic mentor. Become an expert in the project on which you are working. Note that this might require you to assign yourself reading homework. I did and to this day I am still benefiting from this advice.

Most important, discontinue positions that are not useful psychologically. They won't help you professionally. Not least, expect and hope for lots of good luck.

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