

George Condo

October 10, 2025
– February 8, 2026



**MUSÉE
D'ART MODERNE
DE PARIS**

George Condo, The Portable Artist (detail), 1995, Collection particulière, © ADAGP Paris, 2025



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The Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is organizing, in collaboration with the artist, the most significant exhibition to date of George Condo's work. A painter, draftsman, and sculptor, George Condo has created a unique pictorial world, drawing inspiration from a profuse visual culture spanning Western art history, from the Old Masters to the present.

Born in 1957 in Concord, New Hampshire, George Condo moved to New York in 1979. He quickly became part of the local art scene, working notably for Andy Warhol's silkscreen studio. Subsequently, he went to Cologne and then Paris, his primary place of residence from 1985 to 1995. His broad knowledge of European art led him to develop a personal approach to figurative painting and a fierce take on his times.

Following the museum's two retrospectives devoted to Jean-Michel Basquiat in 2010 and Keith Haring in 2013, both artists with whom George Condo shared a true artistic friendship, this exhibition has been conceived as the last chapter of a New York trilogy, exploring the emergence of a new generation of painters in the 1980s. All of them, each in their own way, have contributed to reassessing the medium of painting, a direction which George Condo, the only one to have survived that decade, has been pursuing ever since.

Organized in dialogue with the artist, the exhibition aims to revisit over four decades of George Condo's career by presenting his most emblematic works. Many works from major American and European museums (MoMA, the MET, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art) and private collections are brought together for the first time in Paris thanks to this project.

The exhibition features roughly 80 paintings, 110 drawings—grouped together in a space devoted to graphic arts—and some twenty sculptures interspersed throughout the exhibition.

Museum Director
Fabrice Hergott

Curators
Edith Devaney, independant
curator

Jean-Baptiste Delorme, curator

Scenography
Cécile Degos

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George Condo *The
Portable Artist* 1995
Private collection
© ADAGP, Paris, 2025

Visitor information Musée
d'Art Moderne de Paris 11
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75116 Paris Tel. 01 53 67 40 00
www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday to Sunday 10am
to 6pm

Late opening: Thursdays until 9.30pm

Cultural activities
Information and bookings
Tel. 01 53 67 40 80

Admission
Full rate : 17€
Concessions : 15€

Press officer

Maud Ohana
maud.ohana@paris.fr
Tel. 01 53 67 40 51

Although the scope is retrospective, the exhibition does not follow a strictly chronological order. It unfolds through cycles and themes to which the artist has constantly returned in distinct series of works. The exhibition showcases the richness and diversity of George Condo's practice in three main sections: its relationship to art history, his treatment of the human figure, and the connection to abstraction.

The exhibition

The exhibition begins with the fertile connections the artist has forged with the **history of Western art**. In a gallery riffing on the classic codes of a major Fine Arts museum, some of the artist's boldest works are on display. They demonstrate how Condo has appropriated past masters, from Rembrandt to Picasso, and Goya to Rodin, incorporating them into his exuberant imagination, abounding with outrageous and disturbing figures.

The sequence continues with a group of works related to **Artificial Realism**, a concept Condo invented to describe works that defy any chronology. Created in a style and using techniques from the past, these works also borrow elements from graffiti culture (the series of *Names Paintings*, 1984) or cartoon imagery (*Big Red*, 1997), producing an effect of temporal ambiguity.

This section of the exhibition ends with a joint display of two bodies of work in which Condo takes an original approach to reformulating the history of art, either through accumulation (the series of *Collages*, from 1986), or contrast (the series of **Combination Paintings**, 1990-1993).

Next, a break in the presentation provides an opportunity to delve more deeply into the artist's mind. A corridor showcases the fruitful relationship Condo has cultivated with literature, and especially his collaborations with Beat Generation writers (William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Brion Gysin, etc.). This space leads to a **graphic arts gallery**, grouping together densely-hung works on paper ranging across Condo's output, from his first childhood drawings to his most recent ink and pastel works.

The portrayal of the **human figure** is one of the main subjects in Condo's work. The artist strives to depict the complexity of the human psyche through portraits of imaginary beings, described as "humanoid." One section is devoted to them, first in a series of **individual portraits** from the early 2000s that revisit neoclassical codes, and then, a gallery of **group portraits** (the series of *Drawing Paintings*, 2009-2012). This section concludes with a gallery devoted to the series of **Double Portraits** (2014-2015). It deals with the duality of the human mind and the notion of "**psychological cubism**," a term coined by the artist to describe his way of depicting several dissimilar emotions in one and the same portrait.

The final main section of the exhibition explores Condo's relationship to **abstraction**. Since his beginnings, the artist has created works bordering on abstraction, such as the series **Expanding Canvases** (1985-1986), in which frenetic all-over scribbling blurs the composition. The section continues with a display of several **monochrome** series— whites (2001), blues (2021), and blacks (1990-2019). Special focus is given to the series of **Black Paintings** in an immersive room inviting introspection. The exhibition concludes with **recent works** from the series *Diagonal* (2023-2024), revealing the artist's insatiable ability to redefine his own pictorial language.

Catalogue

Published in French by Éditions Paris Musées and in English by JRP|Editions, the catalogue is conceived as a new authoritative book on the artist's work. Expanding upon the themes developed in the exhibition, it features four essays, authored by the co-curators Edith Devaney and Jean-Baptiste Delorme, as well as the art critic Vincent Bessières and the philosopher Marcus Steinweg.

With the support of the sponsor **Fondation
Jean-Pierre Aubin**

1995

Exhibition at the Palais des Congrès in Paris. Moves permanently to New York.

1996

Paints Red Antipodular Portrait (Big Red), first antipodal figure. Inspired by Aldous Huxley's essay *Heaven and Hell*, for the writer antipodes are imaginary creatures that live on the periphery of our minds.

1999

Receives the Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

2000

Release of the film *Condo Painting*, directed by John McNaughton and starring Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. This project inspires him to make the *Televised Silkscreens* series. Designs the costumes and sets for *Opus 40*, a ballet by Jean-Christophe Maillot for the Ballets de Monte-Carlo, with music by Meredith Monk.

2004

Visiting Professor at Visual and Environmental Studies, Harvard University. Six-month seminar entitled "Painting Memory".

2005

Receives the Francis J. Greenberger Award. Solo exhibition *One Hundred Women*. Retrospective at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld and the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. The character of Jean-Louis, an old-fashioned butler, appears in his compositions.

2008

Receives the National Artist Award from the Anderson Ranch Arts Center and the Annual Artist's Award from ArtsConnection.

2009

Solo exhibition *The Lost Civilization* at the Musée Maillol in Paris. Beginning of the *Drawing Paintings* series.

2011– 2012

Retrospective exhibition *Mental States* at the New Museum in New York, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Hayward Gallery in London, and the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt.

2013

New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture Honoree. Participates in the 55th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale titled Il Palazzo Enciclopedico (The Encyclopedic Palace).

2014 – 2015

Creates the *Double Portraits* series. Participates in Gwangju Biennale entitled *Burning Down the House*.

2016

Tate Gallery in London acquires and installs a room of Condo's drawings and one *Mental States* painting.

2017

Solo exhibition of drawings *The Way I Think* at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC which then travelled to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk.

2018

Participates in countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo's Glass Handel project. At each performance, creates a painting live in public with the music of Philip Glass and George Frideric Handel.

2019

Participates in the 58th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale titled *May You Live in Interesting Times*. Commissioned to create the monumental sculpture *Constellation of Voices* for the terrace of the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

2020

Creates the cover for Travis Scott's single Franchise. Three years later, he produces the visuals for his Circus Maximus tour.

2021

Solo exhibition *The Picture Gallery* at the Long Museum in Shanghai. Creation of the *Blues Paintings* series.

2023

Solo exhibition *Humanoïdes* at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco. Exhibition of drawings acquired by the Morgan Library and Museum in New York titled *Entrance to the Mind. Drawings by George Condo*.

2024

George Condo. The Mad and the Lonely exhibition on Hydra, Greece at the DESTE Foundation Project Space, Slaughterhouse. The mayor of Hydra agrees to install The Triumph of Insanity as a public sculpture on the island.

Exhibition texts

Introduction

George Condo first came to the attention of the art world in 1983 through early solo gallery exhibitions both in New York and in Cologne, Germany. Along with his fellow artist friends Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Condo was seen at the time as bringing a new and singular vision to the 1980's New York's art scene. It was clear from these first exhibitions that Condo's imagination and inspiration went far beyond the artistic trends then current in New York. From his earliest works and over the course of the next five decades, Condo has been in dialogue with much of the Western canon of art, regardless of place and time period. This desire to broaden his experience with the art and thought from other cultures and eras led Condo to Paris, which became his primary residence for ten years from the mid-1980s. His creativity was stimulated by the art collections, literature and philosophy he discovered in the city, where he established a lifelong routine of working prodigiously within distinct but interconnected series and cycles of work. This exhibition focuses in depth on many of these key chapters, illuminating the connections and development between them. Although retrospective in scope, the exhibition takes a thematic rather than chronological approach, and offers a journey through the workings of Condo's rich intellect and imagination, the source of all his subject matter. This curatorial strategy highlights Condo's practice of giving expression to a mix of conceptual thinking and broad art historical knowledge in his work, while seamlessly weaving together abstraction and figuration in his highly individual creative process.

The exhibition focuses primarily on painting, with loans coming from both museums and private collections worldwide, but also features a curated selection of drawings, prints and sculpture.

George Condo has worked closely with the curators and MAM on the development of this exhibition.

The Dark Side of Humanity

Immediately immersing the visitor into the intricate recesses of George Condo's wildly imaginative creativity, the works in this gallery are among his most radical in terms of subject matter and expression. Two fundamental concerns in Condo's practice are featured here—his dialogue with past masters and his cast of characters on the margins of society, as seen in *The Fallen Butler* which introduces Rodrigo. The hotel staff Condo often refers to as “bumbling butlers” is a recurring subject that reveals the complex inner and personal life of this servant across a number of works.

Picasso, whose work and practice have provided inspiration throughout Condo's career, is directly quoted in *Memories of Picasso* and alluded to in *Symphony No. 1*, with elements borrowed from both the modern master's style and composition. Rembrandt is another reference, and while Condo's subject matter appears to be at odds with the Dutch master, his painterly sensibility and technique are strongly echoed. The first in Condo's series of *Mental States* paintings elicits the sense of chaos and horror in Francisco de Goya's “Black Paintings.”

“The aspect of comedy and tragedy has always fascinated me, like in Shakespeare's plays such as Macbeth. The monstrous potential for man to go beyond the limits of reason is a moment in time I like to capture in my paintings.” George Condo 2025

Artificial Realism

Condo has engaged with the history of art since his teenage years when he began tracing its origins back across the centuries and over the broader course of Western art. Often pursuing the same lines of influence as the Modernists, Condo absorbed European art both intellectually and emotionally. As he had mined the concept of “fake American painting” in earlier work, this body of work here explores the notion of “fake European painting.” This concern culminated in “Artificial Realism”—his oneman quasi-movement, complete with its own manifesto. This series features elements from past art historical categories including the Renaissance, the Baroque and Rococo, and references to an even wider range of artists, such as Tiepolo and Gainsborough. Condo has long challenged the idea of a linear reading of art history, believing instead that works made centuries ago are as vital to contemporary artists as the ones of today, and claiming that “the Renaissance was yesterday. I would also venture to say that cave art of the prehistoric humans from 30,000 years ago are as contemporary as the art of today.”

The Madonna and the *Name Paintings* are examples of Condo's early concern with reinterpreting Old Master paintings for the modern era, anticipating the “Artificial Realism” works of a decade later.

Collages and Combinations

Two distinct series executed in the late 1980s and early 1990's respectively, the *Collage* and *Combination* works take different approaches to making visually complex compositions. The medium of collage makes reference to Cubism and by extension Picasso and Braque. Condo has expanded and updated the method, drawing inspiration from the research of Robert Motherwell and Rauschenberg in the U.S in the 1950s. He also applied to images the cut-up, the random writing technique developed by his friend, the writer William Burroughs.

The elements of Synthetic Cubism informing the *Collages* do not completely disappear in the *Combination* series, but rather are heightened by adhering to a more classical formal geometry. In addition to appropriating and adapting pictorial devices from various eras (also seen in the previous section), here he also blends figuration and abstraction in the same composition, a strategy he has used in the *Expanding Canvases*, on view in a subsequent gallery.

This room also features two of Condo's earliest sculptures from the same period. Made from found objects, they translate into three dimensions reflections similar to those addressed in the two series of paintings.

Drawings room

Featuring well over one hundred drawings, ranging in date from childhood to the present day, this gallery is a testament to the role of drawing within Condo's overall creative output. George Condo is an accomplished musician, and music has played a major role in his life since his early teenage years. In addition to Baroque and early Renaissance music, he has listened to jazz throughout his adult life, often when painting and drawing, willingly letting his response to the music find some expression in the art he is making at the time.

“Drawing and draftsmanship has always been a focal point of an artist's ability to later create a painting. Most of the early Renaissance painters such as Raphael did not even begin to paint until they had mastered this skill. It's the most important link to the creation of painting. For me it serves two purposes, that of working out compositions and also a way of thinking out loud with line.” George Condo 2025

George is an accomplished musician and music has played a major role in his life since his early teenage years. In addition to Baroque and early Renaissance Music, he has listened to jazz throughout his adult life, often when painting and drawing, willingly letting in the art he is making at the time.

In order to heighten the sense of possibility and freedom in his approach to drawing, Condo has experimented with the concept of the “salon” hang, as he has done in previous exhibitions. Here he pushes the idea even further, paying no heed to chronology or subject matter in arranging them, and preferring a random sequencing akin to jazz music improvisation.

The prints featured in this room were made in Paris with the celebrated printmaker Aldo Crommelynck, who worked with artists ranging from Picasso to Jasper Johns.

The Inhuman Being

Portraiture has long been a major subject in Condo's work. The characters emerging from his imagination appear in many different guises but all possess a strong sense of personal history. Condo has reappropriated an array of traditional portraiture techniques in the classically beautiful *Portrait of a Woman*, evoking a range of emotions. At the other end of the spectrum, the figure in *The Letter* draws inspiration from Johannes Vermeer's 1665 painting *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, viewed through the lens of British writer Aldous Huxley's novel *Heaven and Hell* (1956), featuring grotesque beings "at the antipodes of the spirit". Huxley sparked Condo's early interest in psychology and philosophy, which he developed years later into these fictional beings that he calls humanoids. These characters are not meant to arouse fear, but rather reveal aspects of insanity by removing the protective layer of human emotion. The French psychoanalyst and philosopher Felix Guattari became a friend and occasionally commented on Condo's work. He observed the deliberate chaos and disorientation present in Condo's work—especially the depictions of figures—and the extent to which the humor imbuing the strong narrative highlights the "precarious" nature of the human condition.

"Guattari made the first observation that none of the people in my portraits were real...and I had never thought about it that way. He was studying schizophrenia but didn't associate them with this condition, he rather saw them as unconscious emergences of imaginary beings on the canvas." George Condo 2025

Compression Paintings et Drawing Paintings

The *Compression Paintings* and *Drawing Paintings* are both series that develop the notion of shifting psychological states—of the individual in the single portraits and the collective psyche in the teeming masses of humans and humanoids.

"I wanted to paint the way John Chamberlain sculpted with his works from the late 1950s, so rather than car parts I used human figures to create this sense of compression." George Condo 2025

These compositions trigger an overwhelming feeling of the collective energy of the crowd, and in contrast, of the isolated individual within the throng, who is subjugated and depersonalized by the group dynamic.

In the series *Drawing Paintings*, Condo deliberately attempts to challenge the established hierarchy between the mediums of drawing and painting by using both in the same work, thereby giving them equal weight.

Double Portraits

In the *Double Portrait* series, executed in 2014-2015, Condo probes even further into the human psyche. The two heads suggest several possible narratives—the notion of looking at a reflection of oneself in a form of self-examination, or being analyzed by another party, or even the emotional relationship between two people put under microscopic scrutiny.

"In order to describe the multitudinous emotions that take place simultaneously in the human mind I landed on the phrase Psychological Cubism'...where they all could be seen at once." George Condo 2025

The artist takes a playful approach to cubism, which represents the threedimensional characteristics of a face in two dimensions, and applies it to the human psyche. The mostly abstract and gestural treatment of the background has a very experimental feel which heightens the focus on introspection. In *Self-Portrait Facing Cancer*, Condo conducts this form of introspective examination on himself.

A number of small sculptures are featured here, and like the paintings of humans and humanoids, they also probe the inner being with a particular focus on archetypes.

The Expanding Canvases

This early series remains one of the most significant of Condo's career. It was a radical turning point not only for his own development but also for the contemporary art scene at the time and beyond, especially in the United States. Executed during the mid-1980s, the works were painted both in Paris and in New York. The selection here is very comprehensive and includes the most important paintings in the series—this broad scope providing insight into their development.

In the *Expanding Canvases* series, Condo blends semi-decipherable and delicately painted vignettes into an overall abstraction, bringing together two “opposing” tendencies in a single composition.

“I was thinking about Jack Kerouac’s automatic writing at the time and the idea of just starting and not stopping to revise the piece even after it had been finished. Figuration and abstraction are basically one in the same from my point of perception.”
George Condo 2025

Among the many references here to earlier movements, both Cubism, with its spatial organization, and Abstract Expressionism, with its “all over” coverage of the painted surface, stand out. As do the musical allusions in the paintings, which visualize the rhythms and gestures of jazz music, and color creating a variety of tempos flitting across the surface.

Sculptures

Condo's made his first foray into three dimensions while in Paris. Their subject is the humanoid, and like his paintings and drawings on the same subject, he is casting light on their inner life. He worked hard to become proficient in the sculpture techniques of the Old Masters, just as he had done in painting, and employs an array of patinas in various precious metals, including gold and silver.

“The portraits in bronze are often the final resolution of the figures in my paintings...almost a memorial to those imaginary beings that had been painted...but now in three dimensions.” George Condo 2025

The preciousness of the materials and the highly-polished finishes add an appealing dimension that contrasts with the subjects depicted.

Monochromatic Compositions

Over the decades Condo has worked on a number of mainly large-scale paintings, in which one color predominates. Employing this to powerful effect, Condo takes a very different approach to each color—here, white and blue, and in the next space black.

These three large canvases provide further insight into Condo's approach to figuration and abstraction. Appearing abstract from a distance, the paintings are based on the figures Condo perceived in Jackson Pollock's abstract drippings.

The *Blue Paintings* delve more deeply into an emotional inner landscape, which also alludes to a time of psychological turmoil on a worldwide scale, since they were executed during the pandemic in 2021. The works convey a sense of melancholy and isolation, which is echoed in the musical references of their titles.

« Black Paintings » – Being and the Self

"From my first trip to the Prado in Madrid back in the '80s, I was always deeply impressed by Goya's black paintings and how frightening they were. This impression never left me, and it was not only the subjects but his mastery of the use of the color black that continued to inspire these works." George Condo 2025

Stemming from the earlier *Mental States* series – which are intense, full of chaos and terror, conjuring up ancient depictions of the horrors of hell – the later large *Black Paintings* which predominate here are almost more unsettling. The introduction of geometric order in the later work seen here has an even more chilling effect than the turmoil of the earlier works. There is a direct tension between the mostly empty painted surface and the human form, which is quite literally “pushed to the edge” of the canvas. The painterly quality of the black is layered so that the color shifts on closer examination, seeming to change from a dense black to warmer tones of reds and browns, much like Ad Reinhardt’s late black works and Mark Rothko’s dark paintings in the Rothko Chapel.

Diagonal Compositions

In these recent works, Condo is continuing to tackle new challenges to keep developing his own visual language.

"In the series of diagonal compositions I wanted to make a departure from what Mondrian was doing with squares or the expressionists with all over or action painting...or even Barnett Newman's zips and break into diagonal cascades of color and form that would be set against a more pastoral setting." George Condo 2025

Condo's way of constantly upending the norms of the time has informed a new generation of younger artists who have adopted Condo's highly individual style. As the critic Holland Cotter noted in 2011: "He is the missing link, or one of them...between an older tradition of fiercely loony American figure painting... and the recent and updated resurgence of that tradition."

Condo keeps on reinventing traditional approaches to making art. Liberated from all the previously perceived constraints. He thus gives himself the freedom to paint non-traditional subject matter in a traditional way. The subject matter comes from the deepest recesses of his mind and is then shaped and filtered by his unique imagination.

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Paris Musées Editions

272 pages

45€

INTRODUCTION

FABRICE HERGOTT, Directeur du Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris

After the United States, France is the country that has exhibited the work of George Condo most regularly. One of his very first shows in Paris took place at the Galerie Daniel Templon in 1990, with exhibitions following at the Palais des Congrès de Paris in 1995, the Galerie de Noirmont at the Musée Maillol in 2010, and finally at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco in 2023. His repeated showings in the city is undoubtedly connected to the fact that the artist lived in Paris for almost ten years from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. His work is the very embodiment of a synthetic approach, and as such reflects the spirit of artistic open-mindedness that continues to exemplify the Parisian audience.

Condo's work has developed in critical continuity with the expressionism of Pollock and De Kooning as well as combining with pop art with its appropriation from comics and advertising. Nonetheless, the artist looked for pictorial solutions in Renaissance painting and, tracing back through art history, finding in the art of Antiquity a vision that openly asserted its epic nature. Condo's work is thus a unique synthesis of iconoclasm and classicism. It is only today, with the brutal transformation in international politics, that we understand that he was right – that his work contained the seeds of everything we are now able to see.

Condo is neither a provocateur nor an idealist dreaming of a reconciliation between avant-garde painting and popular art. From his earliest paintings, he has depicted the reality that our attachment to progress prevented us from recognising. Reality now appears to us through its violence. Having been the premonition that we looked at in disbelief, we must hope that his work will now act as our guide. This is undoubtedly one of the most obvious challenges of this exhibition in Paris. In Condo's 2016 Berggruen Museum exhibition in Berlin, it was possible to notice connections between his paintings and those of Picabia, Picasso, Manet, Goya, Velázquez, and Tintoretto, yet he also escapes direct formal comparisons with them, like the poles of two identically charged magnets. Two years ago, the exhibition *George Condo – Humanoïdes* at the Nouveau Musée National in Monaco allowed Condo's work to enter into a dialogue with itself, which is undoubtedly the best way to see and understand it.

George Condo's artistic training took place in the 1980s. It was during this period that our paths crossed at exhibition openings. At the time, a feeling of freedom and abundance prevailed after years spent under the weight of conservatism. The effervescence of artistic life challenged the dominant models. We were almost the same age and shared a desire to break new ground in art, in reaction to ossified conventions. What connected us was a certain vision of art – not of painting, but art as a reality that transcended us. We were both looking for a form of truth that was absent from established forms of artistic expression, which was often championed by figures who were resistant to critique – gatekeepers of an art whose relevance seemed stale to us.

There was a striking gap between the spirit of the 1980s as we experienced it and what was considered contemporary art. Conversations with Condo were full of names. We looked far back and just as far into the future, dreaming of an art capable of fully integrating the life that we felt was missing in the art of our time. The history of art follows the movement of an inexorable pendulum. In order to break free from their fathers, sons sometimes make alliances with their grandfathers. Artistic radicalism after the 1980s often seemed like a posture. By the end of the 1970s, so-called new forms of expression had already become a new academicism, disguised as classicism – a deception that dismayed us. Where had life gone, with all abundant imagination, the life we perceived around us in the sensory explosion of the 1980s? We found it far more in Manet, Poussin, and Giotto than in the Conceptual and Minimalist art that was dominant at the time. The New Realists seemed to us to be schoolboy art.

Minimalism was a cop-out, a rejection that has only diminished with time. I realise how much Condo was in tune with the concerns of our generation. There were a few of us for whom the painting of the past was our example. The last of Malevich – notably his *Running Man*, exhibited at the Centre Pompidou – or Max Beckmann's triptychs, which we haven't yet seen in Paris; the work from Magritte's so-called "barren period," which the Centre Pompidou brought out of obscurity in 1988; or the entire oeuvre of Derain, especially his post-fauvist work, its profound beauty revived in 1994 by the exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Over the course of more than thirty years, our paths would cross from time to time. What Condo painted felt like an enigma to me, as it seemed impossible to put into words. I was impressed by his affability, his discreet elegance, his obsession with painting, and the way he presented his paintings as if they were mysterious creatures. He was not a strategist nor prone to theorising.

Neither was he peremptory, as we can be in France. He was respected, partly because he embodied a certain American image, dynamic and daring, but also isolated, continuing to paint despite the obstacles and sanctimony that prevailed among the artistic elite, with a few rare exceptions. In Germany, where he had lived in the early 1980s, Condo had found a spirit of encouragement. His anarchism had led him to renounce all sectarianism, and his humour had saved him. He understood that the bite of the late work of a Picasso or De Chirico could not be explained solely by a taste for stylistic eclecticism, but was a way of mocking the pretensions of art and, incidentally, oneself.

Through his determination and refusal to compromise, Condo is an emblem of an era when art swung from exploring new territories to taking a critically engaged stance towards tradition. More than any other artist, he dared to refer to the Renaissance and Spanish painting with freedom. He studied ancient techniques carefully and worked tirelessly on his paintings and sculptures with an energy that fascinated all those who met him.

Condo has become a chapter in recent art history, losing none of his anarchism, perhaps veering slightly towards nihilism, paradoxically compatible with his extraordinary commercial success – a reminder that an artist can sell perfectly well without being fully understood. But we have long known that consuming a product does not equal knowledge of it.

George Condo's creative imagination is more important than the art historical references he has constantly and voraciously fed on. His canvases have sometimes been viewed with disdain for not conforming to the canons of 'high art'; yet this high art lies precisely in its ability to disrupt sources and make them more vivid than they were. Condo's characters inhabit the realm of fiction, a blurred space oscillating between the tangible and the fantastical, where they stand at a – almost intrusive – characteristic mid-distance, ready to grab the viewer by the hand and pull them in, determined to take them through the frame and into the nebulous heart of the painting. Condo's way of imposing himself in the space usually reserved for the viewer is inherent to his work, and this is precisely what gives it its singular power. The penetrating nature of his art pushes his figures out of themselves and, through a contagious movement, affects the gaze directed at them. His paintings and sculptures become autonomous, otherworldly creatures, seeming to escape the artist's control, as in his early 1980s *Name Paintings*, in which the five letters of his surname took on a life of their own, travelling the world and ultimately describing it as it was, with a realism as ruthless as it is absolute.

The concept of "artificial realism" coined by the artist aptly describes this spirit, though the word "artificial" does imply a lack of solidity. Even though it describes the present in all its terrifying glory, we believed that Condo's realism would illuminate our future, without omitting the grotesque, the cowardice, the darkness, the hatred of others and oneself, or the deadly attraction of the hell that seems to await us.

By the end of the 1980s, Condo had become a movement in his own right, even before Basquiat and Keith Haring burst onto the scene. Today, the longevity of his work's appeal is undeniable.

It is an honour for the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris to dedicate an exhibition to George Condo, and I would like to warmly thank the artist for his generosity, commitment, and the trust he has shown us throughout this project. With special thanks to Dieter Buchhart.

My gratitude also goes to Didier Ottinger and Björn Dahlström, whose exhibition at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, paved the way for. I would like to thank the institutions that agreed to lend major works – the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Morgan Library & Museum, the Broad Art Foundation, the Marciano Art Foundation, the Rubell Museum, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Frac Île-de-France, the Frac Auvergne, and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art – as well as the private collectors and galleries, in particular Monika Sprüth and Marc Payot for their commitment, professionalism, and valuable collaboration.

I would also like to thank the authors of the catalogue, Vincent Bessières and Marcus Steinweg, for the quality and singularity of their contributions. I am deeply grateful to the exhibition curators, Edith Devaney, whose close relationship with the artist and knowledge of his work were a great asset, as well as Jean-Baptiste Delorme and Emma Nordberg for their unfaltering commitment and rigour. This exhibition is the result of a collective effort, a dialogue between the artist, curators, institutions, lenders, authors, and museum staff. I am deeply grateful to all those who have participated in this journey. Finally, my thanks to the Paris Musées exhibitions and publications departments for their great expertise, and to those at the Musée d'Art Moderne in particular.

"A MOVEABLE FEAST: GEORGE CONDO AND PARIS"

JEAN-BAPTISTE DELORME

George Condo was born in Concord, New Hampshire in 1957, and has lived in New York for the past thirty years. In keeping with his esteemed reputation on that side of the Atlantic, he might seem at first glance to be the archetypal American artist. George Condo's ties with French culture and Paris in particular, however, are strong. The City of Light was his main place of residence for close to a decade – from 1985 to 1995 – which came after he had established himself among the East Village artists in New York in the early 1980s and had enjoyed critical success with other artists of his generation, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, to name a few.

This article focusses on the Paris years. To understand Condo's attraction to French culture, we need to go back to his youth. While other children were following the American way of life through extracurricular sports, the young Condo was studying drawing and painting, and reading avidly. His teenage bedroom was decorated with a reproduction of *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire* by Cézanne and Picasso's cubist painting *L'Aficionado*.

The drawings he produced early in his career reflected this influence, as can be seen in *Mind and Matter* and *Entrance to the Mind*, two works on paper saturated with architectural imbrications, whose titles already indicate the psychologising quality he attached to cubism. He also read his classics – Marivaux, Balzac, Proust, Sartre – which helped shape his interest in the analysis of human behaviour. At the same time, he developed a passion for writers' biographies of artists, notably Gertrude Stein's Picasso (1938) and later Jean Genet's Rembrandt (1967), both of which had a decisive impact on Condo's artistic approach. European culture led Condo to cross the Atlantic for the first time in 1983, when he was invited to take part in a group show at Galerie Barbara Farber in Amsterdam. From there, he moved to Cologne and discovered Paris for the first time the following year, when he was invited to participate in a group show at the Galerie Gillespie-Laage-Salomon. A romantic encounter led him to leave Cologne and its wildly anarchistic Mülheimer Freiheit movement to settle in Paris in 1985. By staying in Paris, Condo joined the ranks of American artists who chose the capital as their home in the 1920s and the immediate postwar period. By the 1980s, these artists' colonies had dispersed, and Condo might seem to have been going against the tide. Yet what could be more logical – at a time when references to European culture were spreading throughout the canvases and sculptures of a new generation of American artists, such as Jeff Koons' 1986 sculpture of Louis XIV – than to immerse oneself as closely as possible to one of its geographic sources? While living in Paris, Condo had already developed his own language in New York and worked intensely to perfect it and destabilise the viewer.

The acceleration of transport and communications between the two cities also encouraged links between the Parisian and New York art scenes. The Concorde, the first supersonic passenger-carrying commercial aeroplane, accelerated this dynamic. Young French artists exhibited in New York galleries and vice versa, and the nightlife at Le Palace or Les Bains Douches was not so far removed from that of Studio 54 or the Mudd Club. Condo's relationship with Paris was one of constant to-ing and fro-ing with New York. Paris was, above all, a place to live and create, rather than a place for visibility and display. With solid gallery representation in New York (Gladstone, then Pace Wildenstein), Cologne (Monika Sprüth), and Zurich (Bruno Bischofberger), George Condo exhibited little in Paris, allowing him to concentrate on his practice.

Before occupying a number of apartments on the Left Bank, he stayed in numerous hotels, including Hôtel Lotti, Hotel Vendôme, Plaza Athénée, Crillon, and Le Bristol. He painted both in his hotel rooms, impressed by the staff's respect for his canvases, and in several rented studios in the Marais and Île Saint-Louis, a form of incessant movement that was reflected in the vitality of his brushstrokes. Although George Condo formed few relationships with French artists of the period, he was a host to his artist friends visiting from New York, in particular Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. The latter became a frequent visitor, as evidenced by the numerous references to Condo in his Journals. In a telegraphic style, Haring describes dinners spent together at Le Train Bleu or L'Ami Louis, a concert at the Grand Rex, repeated viewings of *The Shining*, nights spent painting side by side with Condo, and his general admiration for his friend's work. Here are a few extracts:

Thursday, April 30, 1987

Go to see Hervé Di Rosa's show. Disappointed, but I wasn't expecting much. I'm sure it's possible to know the difference between good and bad painting. Not much of interest anywhere right now. Basquiat and Condo are the only ones I think are really good.

Friday, May 22, 1987

Great new paintings at George's. Makes me want to paint like this, but I keep thinking I have to resist the temptation

Friday March 3, 1989

The thing that always intrigues me about George's things is how they grow on you and keep changing. When you see them months later, you remember things you saw the first time and seek them out, but also you are overwhelmed by new things you hadn't noticed the first time. They really have a life of their own.

Wednesday, June 7, 1989

Yesterday I went to George's studio and as usual it was full of amazing new things. There is this one painting of a crucified Easter egg that is really incredible. I really want it. I've got to call Bruno Bischofberger (he owns it already) to try to buy it.

It was through Keith Haring that Condo was introduced to the protagonists of the Beat Generation. In 1985, he met Brion Gysin, the inventor of the cut-up, who had been living in Paris since the 1960s. This literary technique of cutting out fragments of text and rearranging them became a recurring theme in Condo's pictorial transposition, using a repertoire of works and styles from different periods to produce new compositions. Condo wrote a text for Brion Gysin. *Calligraphiti of Fire*, the catalogue for an exhibition at

Galerie Samy Kinge which opened a few months before the Beat artist's death. The previous year, on a night when Gysin was hospitalised in critical condition, Condo and Haring created "two 'conjulatory' paintings intended to keep the poet alive. *Composition au poisson*, one of the two paintings produced by the duo, features the all-over practice and profusion of satyric details that characterise both artists' work, blending Condo's fine line with Haring's broad brushstrokes. This was followed by encounters with William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, both visiting Parisians, and numerous collaborations at the turn of the decade. The year 1989 was a particularly rich one for George Condo in terms of creations inspired by Parisian and French culture, as suggested by the many titles of works produced that year: *Painting for the French Revolution*, *French Elegy*, *Back in Paris*, and *Self-Portrait in the Streets of Paris*. These canvases reflect the collective effervescence of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, as well as the artist's personal happiness and despair in Paris at the time. This period also marked a methodical investigation of the work of Pablo Picasso.

A photograph taken in 1988 in George Condo's apartment on Boulevard de La Tour-Maubourg of a Belle Époque panelled interior with two canvases on the floor, echoing both the reclining nudes of the 1940s and the late period portraits, immediately bring to mind the famous images of Picasso in his studio at Villa La Californie. Yet Condo's relationship with Picasso is more complex than it seems. *Memories of Picasso* (1989), one of the most explicit paintings of the time produced by the American artist in relation to the Catalan creator, illustrates this perfectly. Behind a canvas that condenses the deconstruction of portraiture over the surrealist period and the decorative fantasy of the portraits over the later period, a profusion of details is revealed, setting his work apart and "evacuating any principle of imitation." As Ralph Rugoff says of this work: "Tracking across its off-kilter mix of varied brushstrokes, feathery lines, splatters, drips, and a background of cleanly delineated geometric forms, the viewer's gaze is abruptly slowed and accelerated as it crosses overlapping pictorial speed zones." The yellow projected directly from the paint tube to highlight certain details draws as much on Pollock's gesture as on graffiti culture. Far from the postmodern cynicism of the Pictures Generation of which he is a contemporary, rather than highlighting the impossibility of creating something new, Condo shows how one can invent a new plastic language by drawing on the sum of all that has been conceived in the past. From the death of the author to his revitalisation. The year 1989 also marked Condo's debut as a collaborator with Parisian craftsmen in other techniques.

He produced his first sculptures, including *Father, I Have Sinned*, one of the first sculptures of this new artistic drive, which hijacks the aristocratic ruff collars of the Renaissance portrait. It also takes on the history of the place where it was produced, his studio on rue du Petit Musc and the elements of found objects from the studio – the artist's seat and a paintbox – which were assembled with a plaster head and later cast in bronze at the Clementi foundry in Meudon. Located not far from Auguste Rodin's studio, the foundry collaborated with many of the surrealists, including Joan Miró, Jean Arp, and Roberto Matta. This exploration continued with a longstanding collaboration of prints with the master of the medium, Aldo Crommelynck, who together with his brother Piero also worked with all the artists mentioned above, as well as Picasso on his suite 347 from 1968. With Aldo Crommelynck, Condo created nearly twenty etchings and aquatint prints through which Condo extended his research into Renaissance portraiture, using the precision of the etching needle to develop interlacing decorative motifs

The following year saw Condo's first solo exhibition in Paris, the city where he had been living for five years, at the Galerie Daniel Templon, a champion of the return to figurative painting. The exhibition revealed the first *Collage* and *Combinations paintings*, an association of several dissonant paintings in a single composition, as well as various works on paper attached to the canvases. For the occasion, psychoanalyst and philosopher Félix Guattari, Condo's friend and neighbour five years prior to the exhibition on the rue de Condé, contributed to the catalogue. Guattari offered a singular analysis of the artist's work, whose art, according to him, "exploits a schizoid potential which belongs to the emergent self, latent in all of us." One day at the Musée du Louvre, Condo observed a copyist surrounded by a large group of people who were admiring his reproduction of an Old Masters painting. At this point, Condo hired the copyist Manuel Modol to teach him. Together in his Boulevard de La Tour-Maubourg studio, they painted a copy of Raphael's *La Donna Velata* (c. 1516). This enabled him to further develop the temporal blurring he had been practicing since the beginning of his career. This led the artist to perfect his Fake Renaissance painting series, begun in California with the *Madonna* of 1982 which represents a kind of culmination in the artist's relationship with European culture.

Family life and numerous projects across the Atlantic led Condo to return to New York for good in 1995. Nevertheless, the artist came back regularly to Paris, exhibiting at Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, which devoted three exhibitions to his work between 2001 and 2010. As is often the case with the artist, his work in cycles takes him back to past periods in a process of constant reinvention. Thus, in the mid-2000s, the character of Jean-Louis made his first appearance. Inspired by the butlers from the old-fashioned hotels he had frequented fifteen years earlier in Paris, Jean-Louis embodies the tragi-comical nature of human existence. Used in numerous paintings, this truculent character has become one of the icons of Condo's work, testifying once again to the artist's attachment to Paris and the imaginary world the city conjures up, now celebrated in the exhibition devoted to him by the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris.

"EXISTENTIAL TRAVELLER"

EDITH DEVANEY

Although Condo drew influence from beyond America and across the decades of art history, he simultaneously remained engaged with his own era and cultural scene. Street art and graffiti had taken hold of New York in the early 1980s and the whole concept of the artist's 'signature' or 'tag' had been adopted by Basquiat with his "SAMO" moniker and Haring with his rudimentary figure outlines. Condo too caught the mood, but, as the commentator Calvin Tomkins wrote in the *New Yorker* in 2011, Condo "came up with something even more radical: he rediscovered Old Master painting." The *Name Paintings* series of 1984 develops the same concept first introduced in *The Madonna*, but with the layering of connections to the past deepening. Condo has noted that this group of paintings was almost akin to "Old Master graffiti." Small in scale, these works further advanced Condo's accomplishments in adapting the painting styles of past masters. As much as they relate to New York street artists' tags, they are also a pastiche of the concept of the historic self-portrait. The *Name Paintings* see Condo confidently celebrating his own artistic identity in a unique way; his bejewelled three dimensional name lettering appropriating a whole raft of European artistic movements and styles in the process, from the baroque to surrealism. The works reveal the confidence of an artist who had found his voice; with his name literally up in lights or situated astride the landscape as in *The Cloud Maker* (1984) much like the iconic Hollywood sign. These paintings introduced a subtle humour as a component of Condo's work, a quality which he later developed further, employing it to attract and intrigue the viewer while at the same time presenting them with an often disconcerting subject matter. Collectively, the *Name Paintings* reinforced the message of the earlier *Madonna* painting – that this was an artist who was both connected to the culture of his time while also reimagining his relationship with the entirety of European art, and was confident in presenting these two wildly differing perspectives within one composition.

[...]

Over time, many artists have struggled to resolve both the questions of and tensions between abstraction and figuration. Condo was familiar with the work of American artist Richard Diebenkorn, and would certainly have seen many examples of his work on the West Coast during his time there. Diebenkorn's journey brought him from abstraction to figuration and back again in three very distinct phases. Guston, whose work Condo has long admired, also had three separate phases in his work but which moved in the opposite direction, with his period of pure abstract work bookended by two very different approaches to figuration, the first owing much to Italian Renaissance painting and the second to comic representations. Unlike these admired predecessors, Condo does not make a choice, and in this series of works, which Wilfried Dickhoff appropriately labelled "figurative abstraction," he effortlessly weaves and binds these two forms of artistic expression together, effectively challenging the decades-long and vexed debate as to which was the superior. Seamlessly adopting both, he also appropriates motifs from high art which collide with references to popular culture, where biomorphic and surrealist forms butt up against figurative vignettes and fragments. Collectively setting up a number of oppositional forces, Condo then conducts this hypothetical visual cacophony, establishing a swirling order and modulation to the potentially excitable tempo which continually attempts to break out, calming the many flare ups across the canvas.

As with many other artistic movements, Condo absorbed much from abstract expressionism. The physical engagement with the canvas and the 'all-over' coverage were elements seen in Pollock's drip paintings and Rothko's mature compositions that are developed and visible in Condo's expanding canvases. The famous comment made by the art critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952 about the canvas being "an arena in which to act" also applies to Condo's approach to these works. Condo 'takes on' the canvas in this series, not in as physical and choreographed a manner as Pollock's execution of his drip paintings, but more stealthily, obliterating the bare white canvas, which he sees as a direct and personal challenge. Often revisiting aspects of his past work, Condo employs a similar approach in the later series of *White Paintings* of 2001. Works such as *Linear Mass* (2001), although much looser, and therefore lyrical and rhythmic in form, they also reveal the fundamental importance of drawing in their realisation. These works from 2001 appear abstracted from a distance but, like the *Mental States* series of the previous year, are actually based on the figures Condo perceived when looking at Jackson Pollock's abstract drip paintings.

[...]

The influence of Picasso on Condo's work has been much commented on. Picasso's presence has loomed over artists for decades, and was first and acutely felt by American artists in the 1930s. In their early years as artists, both Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning grappled with how to mine instruction from Picasso's genius while holding his direct influence in abeyance to enable them to forge their own path. Condo navigated a different relationship with the modern master than his New York predecessors, admittedly helped by a long lapse of time from his death. His approach was to both confront and recognise Picasso's greatness, and to an extent his sojourn in Paris enabled him to do this more effectively. Although echoes of Picasso appear consistently throughout Condo's work, these largely undergo Condo's fragmentation process and are subjected to his non-linear approach. Writing in 1988, curator Henry Geldzahler recognised this:

"I find distinctive in Condo the use of Picasso as a source to quote, not only once, but several times in a single painting – Picasso of periods thirty years apart." *Spanish Head Composition* (1988) is a perfect illustration of this methodology, and the closest Condo comes to a direct homage to the modern master. On this large canvas, over forty drawings, many executed in the distinct styles which Picasso moved through, surrounding the head, painted in oil, with a flamboyant hat and costume, their form is reminiscent of the numerous portraits Picasso painted of women in headgear. The collaged face affixed over the face of the oilpainted figure is strongly reminiscent of the poignant last drawing Picasso executed: *Self-Portrait Facing Death*.

[...]

To return to the opening remarks regarding the complexities of attempting a comprehensive placing and description of Condo's vast and growing oeuvre: the inspiration, as opposed to the influence, from those who have gone before is a vast catalogue that has been subjected to Condo's fertile and often wild imagination before he systematically filters, unravels, and untangles elements of this visual vocabulary into a personal lexicon which gives rise to a creative chaos. Added to that, a performative quality and a musicality are imbedded in the compositions, which is underpinned by a remarkable technical ability that reaches across the centuries. Where then to place and describe this body of work which has wrestled with the past to confront and challenge the present; which brought 'fake' American paintings to Europe and returned 'fake' European paintings to America? Holland Cotter suggested Condo was the "missing link," effectively liberating younger artists through his highly individual style. Guattari observed that confused critics have compiled exhaustive lists of artists who they considered an influence on Condo's work, ranging from the Renaissance to modernism, and incorporating just about every artistic movement in the process. He surmised that "we might be right in concluding that you are in fact a strictly unclassifiable artist." A fitting observation for an artist who continues to attempt to declassify the Western cannon on his own terms, cutting it up to form his highly personal vision, for which, as William Burroughs declared, "there is no Rosetta Stone.

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