

British Art Talks podcast

Season 3, Episode 2

Experiments in Art Writing: Adrian Rifkin

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Anna Reid: Hello, and welcome to the spring 2021 series of *British Art Talks*. I'm Anna Reid, Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre.

This series, Experiments in Art Writing, features a set of innovative and distinctive UK based art writers, asking them to describe the encounters, materials, voices, and texts that have shaped the very form of their writing.

Our speaker today, Adrian Rifkin, has built an extraordinary body of writing over the course of his career. He began teaching art and history at Portsmouth in 1970 and was an important contributor to the MA Social History of Art at the University of Leeds, where he became Professor of Fine Art in 1992. His work has enormous range, encompassing literature and pornography, classical and popular music, film and cinema, and mass imagery, in addition to canonical arts. In recent years, Adrian was Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths, and the range of his writings can be sampled on his WordPress blog, gai-savoir.net. Welcome, Adrian.

Adrian Rifkin: Thank you.

Anna Reid: Let's start by hearing some of your own writing. In the mid '90s, you wrote a series featuring a fictional character, David. "I invented a character," you have said, "who, while his life would resemble my own, would also act out where I would fear to tread." Let's hear you reading from *A Roman Holiday*.

Excerpt from "A Roman Holiday", by Adrian Rifkin:

"David and his companion had strolled up the hill to the church of San Pietro al Montorio. It was a bright but chilly morning, Rome in the early spring time, the usual ambient smell of wisteria not yet released by the warming sun. They were curious to note an elderly couple, very bourgeois, elegantly dressed, camel hair and tweed, stooping at the roadside with scissors and a plastic bag. On closer inspection, they saw that this distinguished, carefully begloved pair were cutting nettles and other fresh spring weeds, no doubt to make some exquisite soup quite alien to a northern palette.

"The idea of a bourgeois scavenger was already something of a shock, preparing them a little for the other expected, but always rather shocking contrasts of the church itself. They would once again see the highest serious decorations of the

Renaissance chiming with the brash, blue velvet draped over the seating and covering the central aisle, left permanently in place for the stream of upper-class marriages which the church of San Pietro al Montorio makes its specialty. 'There is no doubt,' David thinks pompously to himself, 'that marriages make it even more difficult to look at art than do tourists. And an art historian, of course, is nowhere a tourist, everywhere a worker.'"

So, that's the opening paragraph and David, if you like, was my alibi for having to deal with philosophy properly, for having to show that I'd understood. People say fools rush in where angels fear to tread; I say, "In fact, it's angels who rush in where fools fear to tread," so David is my angel.

Anna Reid: You've said that you use this alter ego character, David, so that you could be free to have experiences in writing without fear of accusations of essentialism. I'd love for you to tell us a bit more about that fear of essentialism at the time that you wrote this.

Adrian Rifkin: It wasn't so much of a fear of essentialism as coping with notions which were going around in cultural studies at the time, with Stuart Hall and some feminists, a strategic essentialism, and I wanted deeply to route any approach to queer studies in the body rather than in theory. I wanted to say that, if you like, one of the historical differences between gay and then queer studies and feminism in their relationship is a relationship to the body to making visible invisible pleasures, something which began with Guy Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*. But this essential embodiedness, if you like, of the dark room, of the dark spaces of gay cruising had to be there before theory. So, David was someone who'd have essential bodily experiences which, if you like, are illegitimated by anti-essentialist theory to which I also subscribe. So, it's a way of living out in oxymoron, if you like.

Anna Reid: And I know that later David gets into talking on Kant in a Berlin sex club, could you tell us about that, and also, how you taught this and Kant to your students?

Adrian Rifkin: Yes. Well, the thing was that I ended up at Leeds; I took over a lot of more teaching than I had to because I wanted to make sure that, all the way through the BA that the art history and fine arts studio students were actually taught together for a major course every term and one of the courses I did was 'Kant to Derrida'. Now, I'd never been a very good explainer of texts, so the technique of reading in these courses was for the students to read at least a paragraph of the Third Critique, Aesthetic of the Sublime; at least a paragraph of Gayatri Spivak; at least a paragraph of Derrida, and to work on that paragraph until we realized how little we understood, any of us.

So often the fine arts students would generate performance games to express how they themselves had read these difficult texts, and if you like, Kant then became something whose own troubles in getting from A to B, in getting up to the sublime and down again, became a part of our way of working. So, when David goes into the sex club in Berlin and he approaches a guy and the guy says, "I want to be your slave," so David suddenly thinks through Jewish studies: What is this for a Jewish man cruising around the club to be told by an Aryan, 'I want to be our slave?' The whole fantasy comes creeping in. And then the question of judgment comes in; what is the relation between judgment and desire? So, just as he's about to respond to this he thinks Kant. And if you like, that's the problem with

everyday life of thinking too much at the moment when pleasure offers itself, and I wanted to think of that as an allegory of loving art and being an art historian.

Anna Reid: The first extract that you've chosen dates from a very formative period in your work and it was a song by the American pop girl group, The Shangri-Las' *Long Live Our Love*:

“But something's come between us,
And it's not another girl,
But a lot of people need you,
There is trouble in the world.
It's the fighting that has come between us
And it's taken you far, far away.
But please don't wonder if I'll be faithful
You're in my heart both night and day.
So, darling, I send my love to you,
While you are fighting overseas,
And I know one day if we are lucky,
God will send you back to me.
Long live our lo-o-ove, long live our happiness,
Here's a toast to happiness”

Anna Reid: So, Adrian, there's such a high performance of womanliness and there's the unspoken something here. What did you make of the rhetoric of these lyrics and their inauthenticity in your own writing?

Adrian Rifkin: When I was a teenager or younger, even in my early twenties, I must've danced to that dozens of times because I was pretty obsessed with dancing in nightclubs. And I didn't remember it at all, but I could remember every word Bob Dylan sung, as a great poet, which many of my generation think, and at the same time I never felt Dylan was addressing me. I was fascinated but not hailed by it, as they say. Listening to The Shangri-Las, I realised that the problem with Dylan was authenticity and what was not a problem with The Shangri-Las was their total inauthenticity. So you come back to putting, if you like, Barthes back into the ears, back into the body; the grain of the voice is not in what you hear but in you, it's in how you hear.

So when The Shangri-Las, when these girl groups sing something's come between us, I realized what was at the heart of my work of my impulsion to queer studies was not an act of deconstruction of queering everything, but of letting voices speak for us so that we're capable of articulating ourselves. So, a whole gay culture is speaking through The Shangri-Las whether it's voluntary or not, just as I'd argued that Edith Piaf, in a sense, was the voice of homosexual culture in Paris in the 1930s, that the whole of that culture finally, whether it was high culture through Gide or the low culture of the Travesty Balls, was emerging through her.

So, one aspect of street noises, which was very important for me, was a flowchart in five colors where I tracked all my repetitions or my involuntary and voluntary repetitions of phrases and tried to work out how the same phrase has a different sense at different points

in a 70,000 word text. So, it's written in terms of echoes; I call it an anaphoric technique, it's in terms of an echoing of themes and echoing of phrases and that's one way of opening one's text to things that can speak for you, rather than trying to say everything for yourself or be analytic. And I realized that that was why I'd forgotten The Shangri-Las because anyway, I in a sense, was speaking for them.

Then that turned around into my relationship with Elizabeth Price, who included The Shangri-Las in her Turner-prize-winning film. And just anecdotally, when I said to Liz at the award ceremony, I said, "Gosh, it was wonderful to hear The Shangri-Las again," she said, "Well, Adrian, when you were supervising me, you never talked about anything else." So, I'd forgotten that.

But again, I just want to say that what I've given you today is extracts as a kind of artifact because if I'd began, instead of with The Shangri-Las, with Egyptian music, with Umm Kulthum, it would've been another story about the way I've worked and about the way I've written and about the way I think, and where I come from. Simply because I was born here, the dominant languages in my upbringing in the home were Arabic and French, and my father was Anglophone. And I could have given another narrative which starts off in this sense of growing up as a respectable grammar school Oxford boy learning to speak French with an Alexandriot accent. So this is a construct and I want to just remind myself of that, that this is not everything I would want to say, it's one fragment we're working on today.

Anna Reid: I have to just seize on that, the reference to Elizabeth Price, of course. I didn't realize that you'd supervised her when she was one of the first practice-led PhDs, that's correct, isn't it?

Adrian Rifkin: She's one of the first. I think there were some at Central Saint Martins quite early, though one or two other places were doing it, but I wanted to make that the center of Leeds' activities. The art patron, Audrey Burton, gave us a substantial sum of money and we decided to use it to have one PhD a year. The first was Nikki Bird. The second was Elizabeth Price. The third was Hayley Newman. And it wasn't intended to be a cohort; it was intended to bring into a very well-established university art history PhD program, a different kind of thinker who would put a question to us which we had to answer which is, "How do you call my work a PhD?"

The idea was that the criteria would be remade with each candidate, that each candidate's work would challenge the notion of a PhD as such and thus enable the development of different modalities in the rest of the department, in art history, in cultural studies. So that, I think, relationship with Elizabeth, and then later the next year with Hayley, was one which certainly pushed me into my more performed later work that led me away from standing at lecterns and giving lectures of stepping sideways and wandering around. And also Richard Layzell, who was a performance artist I worked with at Middlesex University, when Richard stalked a microphone, you knew something very strange was happening even if he never got round to speaking into it, he's kind of stalking at it and looking at it taught you a lot.

Anna Reid: Let's move on to the next part of the construct. Our next excerpt is taken from Sidonie Gabrielle Collete's 1926 "La Fin De Cheri". The sequel to her 1920 novel "Cheri", and

here the male protagonist despairs at the loss of his older courtesan lover Leah. And we're going to hear you read from the text.

Extract from “La Fin de Chéri”, by Sidonie Garielle Collette, ready by Adrian Rifkin:

Yes, I'm just gonna read the very last paragraph in French, and then I'll say it in English.

“Il s’excita à gémir tout haut et à répéter...”Nounounne...Ma Nounoune...” pour se faire croire qu’il était extalté. Mais il se tut, honteux, car il savait bien qu’il n’avait pas besoin d’exaltation pour prendre le petit revolver plat sur la table.”

[English translation] *“He was excited groaning and shouting aloud “Nounoune...my Nounoune”... to make himself believe that he was exalted. But he fell silent, ashamed, because he knew that he didn’t need exaltation, to take the little flat revolver from the table. Without getting up, he found a suitable position and finished by stretching out on his right arm, which was holding the arm, and holding his ear against the barrel, which was buried amongst the cushions. His arm immediately became heavy, and he knew that if he didn’t hurry, the pins and needles in his fingers would mean that he couldn’t pull the trigger. So then he hurried, and gave some groans to set about the work in hand, because his forearm, which was crushed under his body, was embarrassing him. And he knew nothing more of life, beyond the little effort of his index finger on the trigger of the gun. “*

It's a paragraph which, oh it's like all those hopeless last paragraphs, like the last paragraph of Anna Karenina, like the last paragraph of Thomas Mann we're going to read out later. It's one of those where you want to turn to the author and say, "Stop. Just stop". This person has a different life than the life you've allowed them. And if Colette had just noticed that Chéri was gay, he could have walked off to another life. But in a sense, he's condemned for the aporetic of heterosexuality if you like, that he wants to be heterosexual and it kills him.

Anna Reid: In your performance lectures, you've taken this last line of Chéri's life as a starting point, and then you've imagined his ongoing life, the trigger of the gun not pulled. So what comes of Chéri, in your version of the story, Adrian?

Adrian Rifkin: What, what comes of, Chéri in my version of the story, is that, I haven't completed this, it's a set of notes, I don't think I'll ever do it. It I set about writing a kind of, if you like, gay history of Europe, in which dead characters come to life and meet each other. So that Hans Castorp who we are going to meet shortly, and Chéri, and then a real life character, like Klaus Mann, Thomas Mann's son, somehow in this later life meet up, and discuss what it is to have been the children of these parents. And it's a utopian fiction, of what could have been, and the way in which that might then become a discussion on histories of sexuality. So they all have to come to life again. And they all have to defeat the author, if you like. I know that sounds crazy, but it's a way of thinking which becomes critical and becomes productive.

Anna Reid: That idea of defeating the author, it maps on to this idea of struggle that I know you've talked about in your performance lectures, where there's this sort of disconnect between signifier and signified, or there's this wrestling between. Can you tell us a little bit more about the development of those performance lectures?

Adrian Rifkin: Let me say the first thing I did was to write the last line, always. I knew what the ending was. And then the PowerPoints were made up to do something which resembles the Warburg *Bilder Atlas*, which is now the thing in the canonical history of art history. But would be in motion, in constant motion, with different forms of films and videos and sounds. With very large, stupid headlines, taken from the graphics of PowerPoint. But then I would have, if you like, a set of ideas, which could lead towards the last line, which were informed by certain art historical and certain philosophical ideas. And then before I would go on, I would slightly muddle the PowerPoint. So that as it came up, it would surprise me. So it presents a relation between determinacy and improvisation. Which, I think is something which goes back to when I first came to London, my very close relationship with avant garde musicians, and post Cagian musicians, and people like Cornelius Cardew. I remember at Portsmouth in 1970, or 71, we did a long performance of Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*, in the dark during a power cut. And I was casting the I Ching pentagrams to decide what the next note would be for the ensemble, so, you know, they would sit there in silence, you'd cast the pentagram, you read it out and then they play. So that relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary was something which was built into a kind of avant garde practice, in which I was immersed at that period of the late '60s and early '70s. And in the performed pieces, the next stage, which is that of working with Elizabeth and Haley comes in. And the idea was that I would be dealing with the lost document, that I'd bring in an archive, I'd throw it on the floor, I'd have projections on the back and I'd start looking through my own archives, and my own notes, to try and put them into an order. And at the same time there'd be a little bell ringing in the background, like a reminder, which was rung by Haley, who was playing in this piece the fairy Tinkerbell, but hidden at the back of the theatre, so no one could see where the bell was coming from, would emerge at the end, and she would determine through her performance how my piece ended. So I would give up authorship to her.

And it went down very well, but boy it was hell, because she really did bully me off the stage, and completely take over in a way I wasn't expecting, and I just kind of lay there at the side of the stage, just saying "stop!", you know. And then I said you know, "where is the lost document Tinkerbell" and she opened a folder and showed me a cracked mirror. This is working too well, now!

Anna Reid:

(Laughs) That takes us rather beautifully into our next segment which you know, there is this sense of sort of loss and, bit of nihilism and, I think we should move on to our extract from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, written through and interrupted by the First World War. It was first published in German in 1924, and translated into English in 1927. And here, Hans Castorp, the young male protagonist spends several years at a mountain sanatorium, before perishing on the battlefield.

Excerpt from "The Magic Mountain", by Thomas Mann, read by Gershwyn Eustache Junior:

As one sings, unaware, staring stark ahead, yes, thus he spends his hurrying breath, to sing half soundlessly:

“ And loving words I’ve carven

Upon its branches fair— ”

He stumbles, No, he has flung himself down, a hell-hound is coming howling, a huge explosive shell, a disgusting sugar-loaf from the infernal regions. He lies with his face in the cool mire, legs sprawled out, feet twisted, heels turned down. The product of a perverted science, laden with death, slopes earthward thirty paces in front of him and buries its nose in the ground; explodes inside there, with hideous expense of power, and raises up a fountain high as a house, of mud, fire, iron, molten metal, scattered fragments of humanity. Where it fell, two youths had lain, friends who in their need flung themselves down together — now they are scattered, commingled and gone.

Shame of our shadow-safety! Away! No more! -But our friend? Was he hit? He thought so, for the moment. A great clod of earth struck him on the shin, it hurt, but he smiles at it. Up he gets, and staggers on, limping on his earth-bound feet, all unconsciously singing:

“Its waving branches whi—ispered

A mess—age in my ear—”

and thus, in the tumult, in the rain, in the dusk, vanishes out of our sight. Farewell honest Hans Castorp, farewell, Life’s delicate child. Your tale is told.

Anna Reid: Adrian, this is another story of a young protagonist, “life’s delicate child”, destroyed? What possibility did it give rise to in your practice?

Adrian Rifkin: It’s the layering of images. And even at the end, Mann allows the two guys to fall side by side. And that, again, takes you back to earlier parts of the novel where, while he is having his affair with Claudia, Hans can only think of the school friend from whom he borrowed a pencil or a pen. So everything in the book is if you like, sexually palimpsested. And I think it’s that, realisation on my own part, of the palimpsesting that has enabled me to think through the performed pieces, and to use, in fact, *The Magic Mountain* as quite an important resource. There’s another bit in it when Hans learns to wrap himself in a blanket, into heavy cashmere blankets. And it’s a very elaborate thing of folding around your feet and folding one, folding the other, bringing it up to your chin. And I decided to use that as a starting point for one or two of my performances, that I would lie on a settee, and do those gestures. So it’s a complex set of gestures, which really opens up a space for the public’s attention when you’re performing. And it’s also a way of quoting but without anyone knowing what the quotation is, an acknowledgment of the power of the written text but without having a footnote. I must have read *The Magic Mountain* more than any other book, I think. And it took me something like 40 years of reading it, to realise that, amongst other things, it’s a very important book about music. And about the origins of the recording industry, which is something which has always fascinated me.

And the way in which it’s haunted by arias, but above all by the Lindenbaum song from Schubert’s *Winterreise* which we’re going to hear Lotte Lehmann sing, I think quite shortly.

Anna Reid: Adrian, you spoke about the Magic Mountain being haunted throughout by arias. And I'd love to pick up on this temporality of music, of sound, and, and of how these hauntings return and how these anachronisms of, sound come in. Could you talk about that in relation to Lotte Lehmann as well.

Adrian Rifkin: One of the things which I suppose fascinates me about music is because at a very early age, I started collecting lots of classical recordings. I was obsessed with the way in which different quartets would say, play the slow movement of Beethoven's Opus 132, the Heiliger Dankgesang movement. And I always had a huge attachment, and still do, to the earlier performances like the Bush Quartet, who use a certain amount of portamento, and use a certain amount of sliding. I think this is also something to do with the kind of home background too, because if say, you went to the Sephardic synagogue, and you heard the rabbi chanting, it's classic kind of Middle Eastern, you know, or North African melodic structures with microtones. So you come closer to kind of, a popular singer like Um Kalsoom, you come closer to certain kinds of Sufi music, or indeed, even in a very distant way to the music of the sitar, which, of course, people in my generation were obsessed with. So the idea of tonal and microtonal and the complex relationships between listening and time, also came rushing into the visual in 1965. In Edgar Wind's lectures on Botticelli, in particularly his accounts of the Venus, the Primavera, as a musical scale, a Ghafourian, musical scale of nine notes, which involves a whole different set of tonalities again. So both at a general level, this moment of waiting, this moment of how long does it take to play a note, which again is there in avant garde music as well, was totally fascinating. And there was a point in my late teaching with Rob Stone at Middlesex when we decided to base the whole course for the first year art students around the notion of portamento. That is, how long is short and how short is long. And one of the models for this in fact, was Lotte Lehmann singing Frauen-Liebe Und Leben, the first song, in which there's a portamento, which lasts perhaps a second and a half. And then you listen to a great modern singer like Bernarda Fink sing it and there's no portamento, you get from one note to another, fweet! So that difference between a second and a half and nothing, is a radical difference to me. So those notions of time come into writing at the level of the comma, the level at the semi colon, the level of a slight grammatical displacement, so that it doesn't read quite right. Some of my grammatical errors are very carefully crafted, as they are in a modern British novelist like Rosamond Lehmann sometimes, she crafts little slippages in her grammar, I think. So there's that level. And there's also the level of the last line, which is the Wagner effect. If you have the last line, then the structure must come in your first line, or you'll never get there. So it's this whole set of if you like, contingencies of writing as a practice, and just getting through from word to word while knowing that you have somewhere you're trying to go. That rather than argument or logic. Argument and logic are just, they like pens, and pencils or typefaces. They're materials you need to get from the micro to the macro.

Anna Reid: Let's listen to Der Lindenbaum performed by Lotte Lehmann.

Excerpt: Der Lindenbaum - Hans Schubert sung by Lotte Lehmann

Anna Reid: That was the fifth song of Franz Schubert's 1828 *Winter Journey* song cycle, a setting of 24 poems by Wilhelm Muller, and the voice of Lotte Lehmann, the illustrious lieder singer. Adrian why did you choose Lotte Lehmann's rendition of Der Lindenbaum.

Adrian Rifkin: Well first of all, I think it's wonderfully sung, and I like all these tiny little melismatic moments which, you know, modern singers don't do quite like that. I think that I want to put together when people talk about the question of the exiles of the refugees, of the migration of the German Jewish intellectuals to England and to America and to the effect that had on culture here, to the way in which that gave rise to a culture here. That rather than isolate them into different little pockets, one wants to think of singers like Richard Tauber and Lotte Lehmann and art historians like Edgar Wind and Irwin Panofsky, and Helen Rosenau, as belonging to a field of enunciation, a common field of enunciation, of articulation, a certain kind of what shall I call, a certain form of manners, manners in the mode of address, the kind of cultural lilt, which is very important to me, and something which I can listen to, use constantly to reframe my own enunciative processes as a contemporary person. You know, as a person who's never fled anywhere, who's never had a big mass audience whom they have to please and challenge. Also Lotte Lehmann was, the first Wagner record I ever bought was excerpts from the Walkure. You know, I didn't like all my earliest recordings, by any means is some of them I've overcome, but that one, I think is pretty much perfect singing, that her singing of the narration of Wotan arriving in disguise and plunging the sword into the tree, one wants to exaggerate and say that's one of the very great bits of singing of the last century. But then in melisma, and in portamento, so were the Incredible String Band in hippie circles in the late 1960s. So Lotte Lehmann, there, if you like, is there as an exemplar of a way in which music produces a voice, she's a paradigm of something I enormously admire and depend upon. And that includes people like the Incredible String Band, or Tommy Makem the Irish folk singer, singing The Butcher Boy.

Sticking with voice and with the story of another German emigre, art historian Edgar Wind. This next extract is from The Fear of Knowledge and 1960 BBC Reith lecture given by event as part of his series Art and Anarchy.

Excerpt from "Art and Anarchy", by Edgar Wind, BBC Reith Lecture 1960:

BBC Announcer

Art and anarchy. The BBC presents another reflector by Edgar Wind, professor of the history of art in the University of Oxford, and fellow of Trinity College, Professor of inter discusses the fear of knowledge.

Edgar Wind

When I spoke about Plato's fear of art and suggested that he had cause to fear it, it may have sounded as if I were trying to revive a ghost, for it is certain that the sacred fear of art has left us. We have, however, another fear, which I believe was unknown to Plato, the fear that knowledge might hurt the imagination, that the exercise of artistic faculties, both in the artist and in the spectator might be weakened by the use of reason. This is a modern fear, and if I'm not mistaken, unfamiliar before the Romantic period. But for more than a century and a half, this fear has dominated our view of art with such force that we have come to look upon it as a basic truth, supported by a strong philosophical and literary tradition.

Adrian Rifkin: Yeah, that I did indeed hear him live so to speak when I was 15. And I suppose having listened rather naively to The Ring, when I was only 13, on a radiogram, those vocal

sounds were a form of exteriority to one's, middle class professional home life. Although, of course, I knew those voices from the many German exiles and refugees in Manchester, who must have been about his age too. So I think that goes with Richard Tauber and it goes with Lotte Lehmann, as a sound, and it goes with Helen Rosenau. But, it's just simply the boldness, you know, he doesn't ask any permissions to say that he doesn't frame it, he doesn't set up any philosophical conditions, he doesn't verbally footnote it in any way to give himself a permission. He just simply says there's something Plato didn't know. And it's so exciting to be treated like that, to be treated, when you turn on the radio, as an adult, you're admitted to this space of what can and can't be known and how to think about it. And at the same time, when you come to reading the book, there's something also in the way he writes of what I'm talking about, of micro adjustments, of melisma, of portamento. So in the second edition, when he writes a couple of appendices, it's only a few pages of appendices. But it's like another world, of drawn in references, of forms, of learning of self-reflection. So the sound of that voice from elsewhere, is one of the 'others' of the 20th century if you like, and I want it to be put up alongside other voices from elsewhere, whether it's from the Arab-speaking world, whether it's from Africa, whether it's whatever, that this becoming aware of otherness and one's own desire for that. And one's own fear of it, is exemplified again by that excerpt, especially in its relationship to Lotte Lehmann.

Anna Reid: There's a sense with this figure and this voice, that there is this deeply precise and well-mannered, as you say, voice, and yet there's also this other side of very latent disruptive and radical and anarchic ideas. Would you agree?

Adrian Rifkin: Yes, I would agree. He was very, very keen on last lines, and you knew in his classes that he was going somewhere. You know, people used to line up in their hundreds to his lectures outside the lecture theatres and the Playhouse. Because every time he uttered a last line, everyone gasped. You couldn't believe it. It was just sheer chutzpah, if you like, to because it doesn't necessarily follow from the argument. The argument is just to enable that to be said. And for you to be in a position to say, Oh, my, then I do have to think, don't I? So yes, it's anarchic in the sense that it doesn't allow you in any sense to imitate him. It just sets you off on your own path.

Anna Reid: The voice and work of emigre art historians of the Warburg circle was really impacting art history in the English context at that time. And figures such as Lord Clark really loomed large. How did those cultures collide?

Adrian Rifkin: I think that's a totally fascinating question. And obviously, when Civilization was on, we all sat in front of our televisions, riven to the screen it was so good actually, it carried you along. The thing is that Clarke was everywhere. He was one of the first people in this country to study critically German art history in the 19, the end of the 1920s. Every possible structure of British cultural life, he was there. Behind the scenes, in front of the scenes. In his work with Behrson, who is demanding details of the National Gallery paintings from him, as you can read in their correspondence. I'm going to drift from there to another important person in his time, who is Hugh Trevor Roper, who also had a correspondence with Bernard Berenson, and also a relationship with the refugee community. And through all these correspondences, whether it's Trevor Roper with Bernard Berenson, whether it's Clark with Berenson, or Clark in any of his correspondence, their relationship between an openness to the refugee, and what people now call structural racism is very

clear. That in a sense, they can't avoid anti-semitic tropes in their speech, or in their writing, but they might be very close to, or admiring of, a number of Jewish scholars and support them in their refuge. It's never got me excited or into a rage. I just thought that's it. You know, as a Jew, you have to live with Balzac's anti-semitism with Gide's anti-semitism. It's a structure of European thinking. And it's not the only one. And it's one which probably I think with as well.

Anna Reid: Adrian, we opened the episode with your reading from a Roman Holiday. Let's hear you read a Roman Holiday to its close.

Extract from "A Roman Holiday", by Adrian Rifkin:

"So Roman Holiday began as it began. And I'm going to jump, to my pair David and his friend being in the church. And his friend is looking at a chapel by some followers of Borromini. And David is looking with total fascination at Sebastian del Piombo's Flagellation.

And then a new awareness that the image may not even be beautiful, not as Kant might allow, forms which by their combination of unity and heterogeneity, serve as it were, to strengthen and entertain the mental powers. No, he half regrets the conclusion, but it makes good sense. The passion belongs with Sade, Sade's atheism is nothing if not skin deep, and like the theology of the passion, it confounds agency with active obedience. Wedding guests are filtering into the church now, costing their knees on velvet stools, breaking the two men's absorption in their respective object.

And so David now is open to a desire of which he is unaware, he's a little bit unnerved.

Now the two of them are walking back down the hill for a late second breakfast, or an early lunch. Without speaking to one another, they wonder if this will be in one of the chic cafes near Santa Maria, or one of the more popular restaurants on the Viale Trastevere. David is pleased with himself, quite smug. He feels that the time in San Pietro has somehow increased his credibility as an art historian and between the imagined menus he's trying to frame the title for an article. Then he falls suddenly flat on his face facing downhill, his elbows by his side, his palms rasp along the crumbling gritty asphalt. It is not his life that flashes before him right now, just a few ideas. In Caravaggio's Conversion of St. Paul, I would fall on my back. And why have I fallen anyway? Then, is it the fault of the painting? Or should I not have worn these new shoes today? With their too stiff soles and solid heels? And in consequence, do I need Freud or just a cobbler? Did I renew my tetanus injection? So as he pushes himself up, his friend who knows the answer to all these questions, and is rather annoyed by the spectacle and does not move to help him, he realises the sharp pain in his ankles and hands. He stares at his palms intently now, like St Francis receiving the stigmata and wriggles his feet one by one. A little blood oozes through the tarry skin and quite unbidden, another image springs before his eyes, a bare-butted muscle boy, his hands chained to a beam above his head, his leather jeans tight around his ankles, is being flogged by two leather-clad masked bikers in a tightening rhythm of exchange and pleasure. This is the moment of sublimity, where the discord between pain and pleasure transcends the reason of the everyday, an immeasurable emotion of pure space, of the void concavity of the chapel in its rhyming with his own unnamed desire. An image of the extension of his desire surpassing the imagination,

yet miraculously present. Urgently, he must remember to buy the whole strip cartoon by Tom of Finland, of which his vision was only a single page. Years later, the episode takes the form of print, a short article about the profanity of the passion, and Sade's eschatology. It begins like this. "David and his companion had strolled up the hill to the church of San Pietro Al Montorio. It was a bright but chilly morning in Rome, in early springtime."

Anna Reid: Thank you so much, Adrian. That was a wonderful reading. Thank you for joining us.

Adrian Rifkin: Well, thank you very much indeed for asking me. I feel very delighted and very privileged, and it's been a wonderful little passage of work to accomplish.

Anna Reid: Thanks to our reader Gershwyn Eustache Junior. Thanks also to our producer Miranda Hinkley. A full list of the writings featured in this episode can be found on the Paul Mellon Centre website. Join us for our next episode, when our guest will be Maria Fusco.

Works referenced in this episode:

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