

Larry Rivers

COLLABORATIONS AND APPROPRIATIONS



October 4 - December 8, 2012

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS
STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

Front cover:

Larry Rivers, *Art and the Artist: Matisse's La Danse 'Energy'*, 1993

Oil on canvas mounted on sculpted foamboard,

45 x 67-1/2 x 2-3/4"

Courtesy Mr. John Thomson, NYC

All works © Estate of Larry Rivers

Larry Rivers

COLLABORATIONS AND APPROPRIATIONS

By Helen A. Harrison

Perhaps because of his background as a professional jazz musician, Larry Rivers (1923-2002) was predisposed to creative collaboration and appropriation. Neither practice was common in the late 1940s and early 1950s when Rivers was making the art scene in New York City. Solitary self-expression was the *mode du jour*, and the prevailing attitude frowned on external source material. As Jackson Pollock summarized the situation, “today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within.”¹

An outsider, weaned in the netherworld of smoky clubs and drug-fueled all-night jam sessions, Rivers challenged the era's conventions with impunity. By definition, a band is a group of individuals working together as a unit in which each member depends on the others. And even the most subjective improvisation usually starts with a basic tune written by someone else—think “My Favorite Things,” from Rogers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*, as brilliantly interpreted by John Coltrane. So both collaboration and appropriation came naturally to Rivers, who was introduced to art during a 1945 gig at Old Orchard Beach in Maine, where a band-mate's wife taught him to paint.² Throughout his subsequent 50-year career, he actively collaborated with other visual artists, poets, and playwrights, and gleefully borrowed from a wide range of visual source material, from high art to mass-market graphics, movies, and photographs.



Jamming with Steve Smith at the Bluebird, Riverhead, NY, 1950s.
Photo by Hans Namuth.



The East 13th Street Band, 1985.



Rivers, Clarice Price, and Kenneth Koch with *New York* 1950-60.
Photo by Rudy Burckhardt.

This kind of inspired free-for-all is not unique to Rivers. In modern times, it has precedents in Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism, but it was out of fashion in postwar New York, where Abstract Expressionism was dominant. Together with other young upstarts, Rivers was at the forefront of what the critic Lawrence Alloway dubbed Pop Art, which, in addition to drawing on popular culture, often referenced earlier art.³ Like few of his contemporaries, however, Rivers maintained strong and mutually enriching lifelong ties to fiction writers and poets, not only illustrating their works and designing covers for their books but also actively engaging in creative projects requiring mutual input that sometimes emitted heat as well as light. His frequent collaborator Kenneth Koch described their back and forth on the 1961 “poem-painting” *New York 1950-60*: “It was a slightly aggressive inspiration that

we were giving each other, to such a degree that sometimes he painted over my words and I wrote on his painting.”⁴ As the poet David Shapiro observed: “Collaboration in Koch’s sense does not delete the notion of conflict or rivalry but makes it a part of the experience of the communal.”⁵

The earliest work in the current exhibition is a linocut, based on a *Madonna and Child* by the 15th century Netherlandish painter Hans Memling, which Rivers made as a cover for Koch’s poem “A Christmas Play” in the early 1950s. At that time, Rivers was also writing poetry, and he briefly considered abandoning art and devoting himself to it, while continuing to work as a jazz saxophonist. These competing interests, which might have hampered a less energetic artist, ultimately reinforced one another and nourished Rivers’ voracious creativity. Always the performer, he also appeared in experimental films by Rudy Burckhardt and Robert Frank, had a bit part in “Lovesick,” a 1983 romantic comedy starring Dudley Moore, and created his own video projects with Diana Molinari and Michel Auder.

Rivers’ best-known collaboration with a poet is *Stones*, a portfolio of 12 lithographs made in 1957-59 with Frank O’Hara. Rivers called it their own “Eluard-Matisse number,”⁶ referring to *Hommage: Dessins de Matisse. Poèmes de Paul Eluard*, published in 1944, although unlike Matisse and Eluard they worked in tandem on each stone—a process for which the publisher Barney Rosset coined the term “tabloscript.” But as distinct from artist duos, such as Berndt and Hilla Becker, Gilbert and George, Helen and Newton Harrison, Komar and Melamid, and the Starn twins, Rivers and O’Hara maintained their individual identities while interacting, much as jazz



John Ashbery, Jane Freilicher, Rivers, and Anne Aikman in Rudy Burckhardt’s film, *Mounting Tension*, 1950.

soloists take cues and improvise. And in the case of *Stones*, the creative stew was spiced by the two men's homosexual relationship. The imagery alludes to their intimacy, as well as the freewheeling milieu in which their experimentation, whether artistic or romantic, was not just tolerated but encouraged. (Rivers, who was then married to Augusta Berger, ultimately opted for heterosexuality.)

Like his collaborations, Rivers' appropriations began early and were sustained throughout his long and productive career. Learning by imitating established masters is a time-honored tool of art training, and in Rivers' formative years we find examples of his borrowings from Courbet, Cézanne, Bonnard, and Matisse—even the Pollock of 1951, when recognizable, if highly abstracted, figures reappeared in his paintings. An avid reader and student of art history (he once won \$32,000 on a television quiz show answering questions on that topic), Rivers drew no hierarchic distinctions, cherry-picking his raw material from literary as well as visual sources. For example, his audacious reinterpretation of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a 1953 canvas that was greeted with shock and derision for a theme that the artist acknowledged was "disgusting, dead and absurd," was inspired as much by Tolstoi's *War and Peace* as by the 1851 Emanuel Leutze painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷ Indeed, his wide-ranging literary and historical interests led him to create several elaborate narrative epics, treating themes as diverse as the Russian Revolution, the Jewish people, and the Hollywood film industry.

Rivers' wise-guy persona and self-deprecating wit often masked the serious side of his endeavor: to re-legitimize artists' response to "subject matter outside of themselves." Whether that subject matter came from an Old Master painting or a Dutch Masters cigar box (sporting a watered-down Rembrandt) didn't matter, as long as it engaged his eye and imagination. In fact, at a time when Andy Warhol was quoting the Mona Lisa and Roy Lichtenstein was paraphrasing Picasso, the zeitgeist favored what the curators Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall called "art about art." Rivers was among the pioneers of that approach, and by far its most committed devotee.

After many years of recycling everything from cigarette packs, family snapshots, and newspaper clippings to Japanese prints, masterpieces by David, Manet, and Cézanne, and even his own paintings, Rivers embarked on "Art and the Artist," an ambitious project that pays homage to the great innovators of modernism. Beginning in 1988 with *75 Years Later*, based on Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which scandalized visitors to the 1913 Armory show, the project embraced stage and screen personalities as well as painters. Often using montage and a relief technique of cut and layered foam board, Rivers gave the works a dynamic, three-dimensional presence that heightens their animated, almost cinematic character. In his punningly titled *Modernist Times* (1988), for example, he superimposes a famous image of Charlie Chaplin from the actor/director's 1936 film *Modern Times* onto a 1918 composition by



Rivers and Frank O'Hara at work on *Stones*, 1958.
Photo by Hans Namuth.

Fernand Léger. Interpretations of paintings by van Gogh, Jean Hélion, Max Ernst, Wifredo Lam, and others also include portraits of the artists to whom Rivers pays homage. But his omnivorous appetite for all things visual—the hunger that made the Holocaust and a pack of Camels seem equally tasty subjects—enabled him to engage with a sample of Peruvian folk art even as he was reinterpreting masterpieces by Matisse and Mondrian.

Rivers' imagination ranged far beyond the limits of the current exhibition, which only hints at the astonishing variety of his artistic achievements. What is evident, however, is that his urge to collaborate and appropriate fulfilled imperatives other than the need to find interesting raw material. His enthusiasm for experimentation and intellectual curiosity enabled him to internalize and transform his sources, whether exalted or banal, while his openness to working with others insured that he never lacked stimulation. And like the alchemist Coltrane, he turned base material into gold. In the give and take of his creative life, Rivers gave better than he got.



Life magazine spread on Rivers, October 20, 1958, prompted by his win on the television quiz show "The \$64,000 Challenge."

NOTES

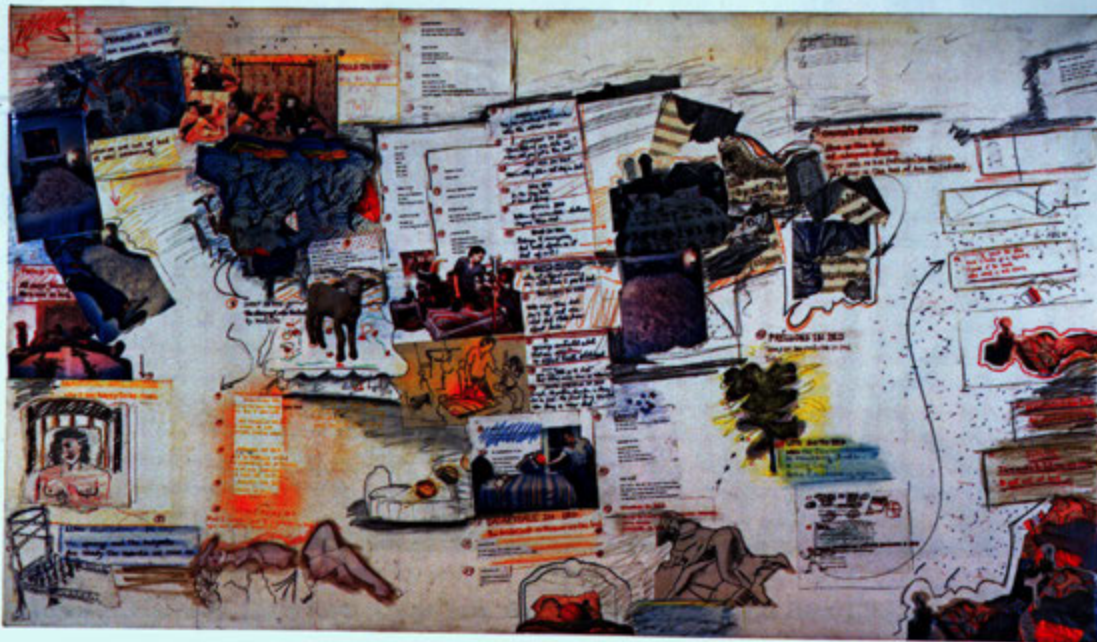
1. Interview with William Wright, WERI Radio, 1950 [broadcast 1951]. Reprinted widely. See Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 20.
2. His informal teacher was Jane Freilicher (born 1924), who went on to an outstanding career as a representational painter.
3. For numerous examples, see Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, *Art About Art*. New York: E.P. Dutton/Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978.
4. "A Conversation with Kenneth Koch," *Larry Rivers: Performing for the Family* (East Hampton: Guild Hall Museum, 1983), 9.
5. "Art as Collaboration: Toward a Theory of Pluralist Aesthetics 1950-1980," *Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 51.
6. "Tatyana Grosman," *ARTnews*, October 1982, 101. Grosman founded the print workshop, Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), in West Islip, NY in 1957.
7. Helen A. Harrison, *Larry Rivers* (New York: Artnews Books/Harper & Row, 1984), 35.



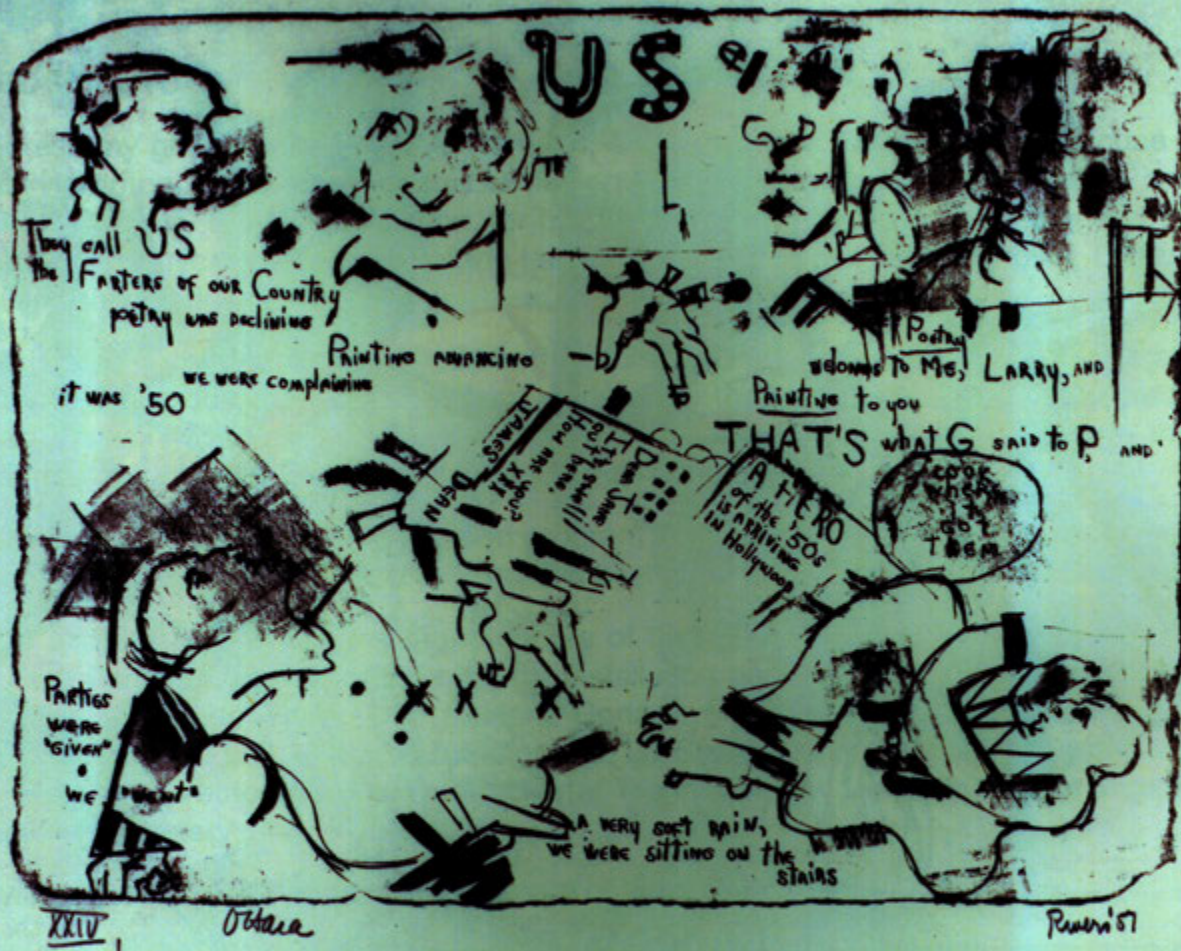
Larry Rivers, *Modernist Times*, 1988
Oil on canvas mounted on sculpted foamboard, 77 x 60 x 4-1/2"
Courtesy Mr. Roy Niederhoffer, NYC



Larry Rivers
Art and the Artist: Ernst and the Rape of the Sabine Women, 1992
 Oil on canvas mounted on sculpted foamboard,
 64-1/4 x 54 x 4-1/2"
 Courtesy of The Larry Rivers Foundation



Larry Rivers and Kenneth Koch
*In Bed: Collaboration with
 Kenneth Koch, 1982*
 Mixed media, 48 x 84"
 Courtesy of The Larry Rivers Foundation



Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara, *Stones: US*, 1957

Tabloscript lithograph, 19 x 23-1/4"

Printed on hand press in Universal Limited Art Editions studio

Directed by Tatyana Grosman, technical assistance from Robert Blackburn

Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

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Photo Credit:

Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara

Collection, 1984, 1988

Colored pencil and pencil on paper, 19 x 23"

Courtesy of The Estate of Larry Rivers



Larry Rivers, *Art and the Artist: Chairs and Van Gogh*, 1992
Oil on canvas mounted on sculpted foamboard,
38-1/2 x 54 x 4-1/2"
Courtesy of The Estate of Larry Rivers



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my gratitude to Helen A. Harrison, Director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, NY, for curating this exhibition and for her insightful catalog essay, and to David Joel, Director of the Larry Rivers Foundation, for his invaluable assistance at every stage of this project. Thanks also to John Duyck, co-executor of the Larry Rivers Estate, and to Eric Brown, Director of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

My gratitude is also extended to Roy Niederhoffer, John Thomson, and the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York City for generously lending important works from their collections. I am also grateful for the opportunity to screen two films by Rudy Burckhardt, "Mounting Tension" and "A Day in the Life of a Cleaning Woman," courtesy of the Estate of Rudy Burckhardt.

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I also want to express my appreciation to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Joe Esser, Pat Moran, Pete Pantaleo, and Dan Richholt, for installation assistance; Olga Lomshakova, Curatorial Assistant; Rochielle Corlette, Emily Craft, Carlene Gonzalez, Caroline Han, Jenny Hernandez, Jennifer Jimenez, Jay Schuck, and Lulu Wang, Gallery Interns; Liz Silver, Staller Center Production Manager, Liz Lamendola, Technical Director, and the Staller Center Technical Crew for exhibition lighting; and Aubrey Szczygiel, Gallery Secretary.

I respectfully dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Larry Rivers.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Catalog design: Karsten Grumstrup

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Back cover:
Larry Rivers and Kenneth Koch
Collaboration, 1994, 1994
Colored pencil and pencil on paper, 18 x 15"
Courtesy of The Estate of Larry Rivers

COLLABORATION

ALL OF NATURE
IS DERIVED
FROM THE CUBE,
THE CONE, AND
THE SPHERE



THEY DO
HAVE
MEAN-
ING
THEY'RE
STRONG
AS
ROCKS



FOR EVERY
ATOM BELONGING
TO ME AS GOD
BELONGS
TO YOU



IN A
KINGDOM
BY
THE SEA

THE IMPORTANT
THING
IS NOT TO
SEARCH
BUT TO
FIND



A PINK BRUSHSTROKE
ON A
WHITE
CANVAS

Larry Rivers '94
Kenneth Koch

WHERE THE
STRAIGHT
WAY
IS LOST

