

The Courtauld

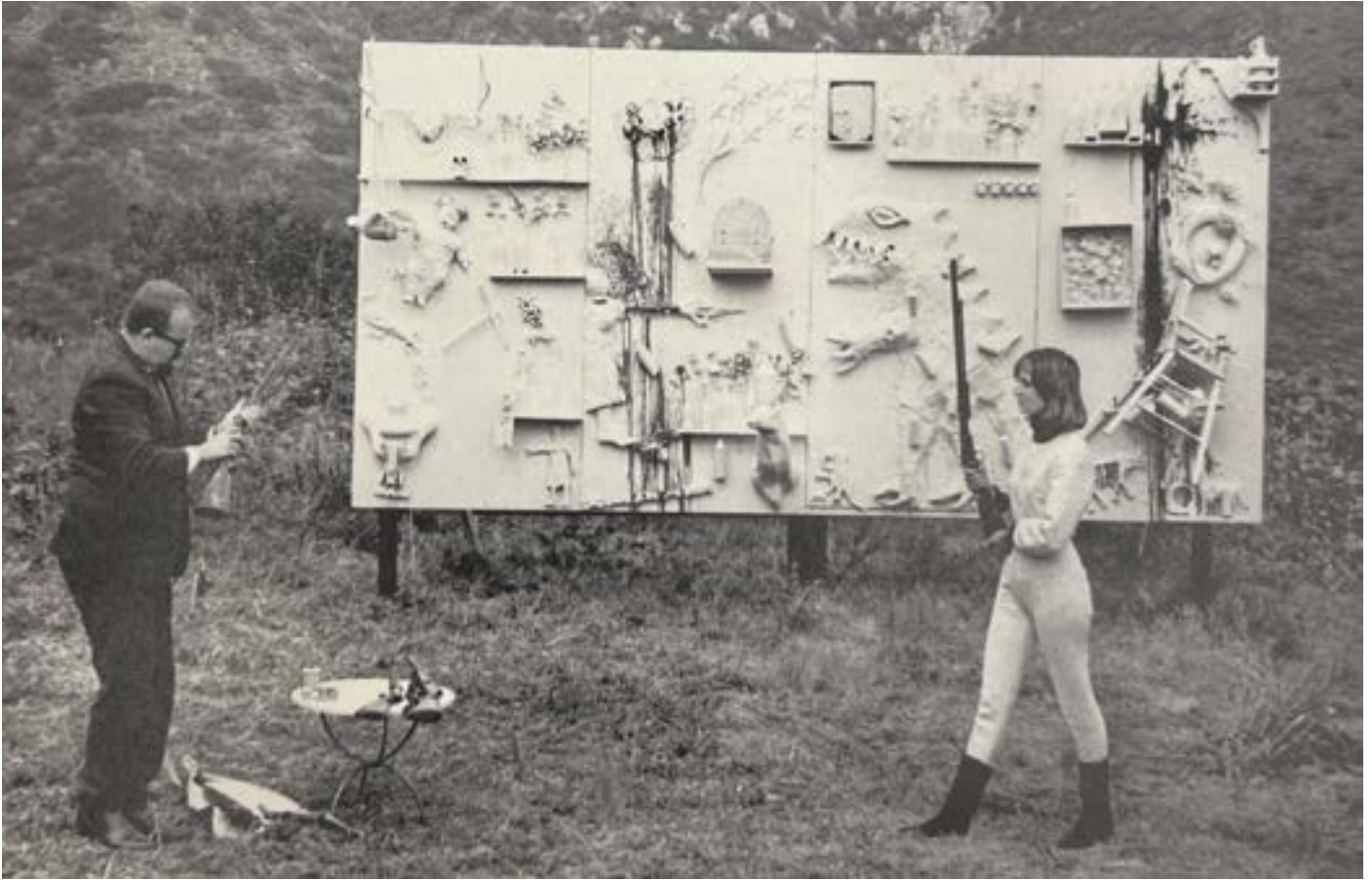


Image: Edward Kienholz assisting Niki de Saint Phalle during her Tir performance in Los Angeles, 1962. Photo by Len Sirman.

The Courtauld Centre for the Art of the Americas

Kienholz: Un/American Violence

A Two-Day International Symposium

30 - 31 May 2025

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Vernon Square

Introduction

Taking Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's work and its reception as a point of departure, the aim of this symposium is to examine the ethics and politics of violence alongside shifting definitions of (un- and anti-) Americanness in art since the 1950s. Whereas the Kienholzes' work is best known for its shocking representations of violence, sex, and political hypocrisy, its reliance on spectacle tends to inhibit deeper investigations into the role of history, geography, and identity in their work.

Rather than maintaining a strict focus on the Kienholzes, then, these papers will expand to consider artists in their social, geographic, and political orbit, including close associates like Ed Bernal and Niki de Saint Phalle, contemporary Indigenous artists of the Pacific Northwest, as well as key exhibitions and curators who played a role in disseminating the Kienholzes' work in Europe.

The conversation will be informed by the current political situation in the United States and the resurgence of fascist politics around the world.

This symposium stems from a long-running research project that culminated in an exhibition in 2024, [*Beyond Hope: Kienholz and the Inland Northwest*](#).

Organised by Dr Johanna Gosse, Lecturer in Lens and Time-Based Art Histories, in collaboration with The Courtauld Centre for the Art of the Americas, directed by Professor Jo Applin.

Programme

Friday 30 May

- 17.00 **Keynote**
Larne Abse Gogarty
Head of History and Theory of Art
UCL Slade School of Fine Art
- 18.15 **Drinks Reception**
Research Forum Seminar Room

Saturday 31 May

- 10.00-10.30 **Welcome remarks**
- 10.30-11.00 **Joanna Pawlik**
Senior Lecturer in Art History University of Sussex
- 11.00-11.30 **Ken D. Allan**
Associate Professor of Art History & Visual Culture Studies Seattle University
- 11.30-12.00 **Alena J. Williams**
Professor, Theory and Mediation of Contemporary Art, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna
- 12.00-12.30 **Discussion moderated by Lucy Bradnock**
- 12.30-13.30 **Lunch break**
- 13.30-14.00 **Lauren Graber**
Head Archivist and Research Specialist, L.A. Louver Gallery
- 14.00-14.30 **Christopher T. Green**
Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History and Environmental Studies Swarthmore College
- 14.30-14.45 **Tea & coffee break**
- 14.45-15.15 **Sarah Wilson**
Professor of Modern & Contemporary Art, The Courtauld, University of London
- 15.15- 15.45 **J. Myers-Szupinska**
Independent scholar
- 16.00- 16.45 **All speaker panel moderated by Johanna Gosse**

Abstracts & Biographies

Keynote: Larne Abse Gogarty

Head of History and Theory of Art
UCL Slade School of Fine Art

American fascism and the frontier in the work of Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz and Cady Noland

The work of both Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz and Cady Noland is often positioned as a stark examination of the culture of violence in the United States: the Kienholzes through large scale tableaux and assemblages which take up subjects including madness, war, illicit sex, racial and gender-based violence, and Noland through installations which combine the everyday commodity culture of the US with histories of murder, punishment, authoritarianism and corruption. Frequently described as implicating the viewer in these violent scenes through their sculptural methods, both practices are also often situated as questioning whether violence is an essential feature of American culture, or an aberration which might be corrected. Within the current consolidation of American fascism, this paper seeks to consider how violence appears in these two bodies of work as bound up with the history of the American frontier, focusing on how understanding of this history transformed during the final years of the Cold War. By tracking this in works made by the Kienholzes and Noland around the late 1980s and early 1990s, I hope to consider the implications of this work within the contemporary mobilisation of the ideology of the American frontier to support new imperialist ambitions.

Larne Abse Gogarty is a writer and art historian from London. She is Associate Professor and Head of History and Theory of Art at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. Larne is the author of two books: *What We Do Is Secret: Contemporary Art and the Antinomies of Conspiracy* (Sternberg Press, 2023) and *Usable Pasts: Social Practice and State Formation in American Art* (Brill, 2022). Currently, she is working on a new project about recent sculpture and commodity culture through the lens of salvage, scavenging and sabotage. Larne has published in journals and magazines including *Art Monthly*, *New Socialist*, *Tate Papers*, *Third Text*, and *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, and has written catalogue essays for artists including Sam Gilliam, Alice Neel, and Gray Wielebinski. In 2020, she co-edited with Andrew Hemingway a special issue on "Keywords for Marxist Art History" of the journal *Kunst und Politik*. She is in the editorial collective for *Selva* journal. Larne regularly writes criticism, mainly for *Art Monthly*.

Ken D. Allan

Associate Professor of Art History & Visual Culture Studies
Seattle University

Masculinity, Class and the Media Public Sphere in Kienholz's America

I will focus on what Kienholz's representations of men in his early assemblage practice can tell us about the economic shifts, rising class resentment and the discourse on the "crisis of masculinity" in our current moment. In light of the centrality of "the manosphere" in discussions about the way Donald Trump increased his appeal among young men during the 2024 election, I look back at Kienholz's complicated relationships to, and complex representations of, the professional managerial class, guns, vulgarity, and the media in three key art works made in Los Angeles, *John Doe* (1959), *The Psycho-Vendetta Case* (1960) and *The Beanery* (1965) also known as *Barney's Beanery*. These pieces depict specific male figures such as criminal Caryl Chessman, executed in California for "sex kidnapping" and local bar owner John "Barney" Anthony, but in them

Kienholz also addresses contemporary media accounts of the alienation of postindustrial labor, the moral panics around sex and homosexuality in postwar Los Angeles, and the heroism of the small business owner in ways that newly resonate for us today. These works mark the way that the Kienholzes consistently oriented their work toward the “publicness” of political and moral debates, which are powerfully *felt* in their visceral assemblages and installations. The tension between immediacy and mediation in their work looks forward to current debates about the role of social media and digital technology in increasing political polarization and in amplifying the atomization of the public sphere.

Ken D. Allan received his MA and PhD in art history from the University of Chicago and is an Associate Professor of Art History at Seattle University teaching in the University Honors and Art & Visual Culture Studies programs. His research focuses on the rise of the Los Angeles art scene in the 1960s and urbanism and spectatorship in postwar American art. Allan’s work on Ed Ruscha, Wallace Berman and others has been published in *The Art Bulletin*, *Art Journal*, and the Getty Publications book, *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945- 1980*, as well as in exhibition catalogs such as *Wallace Berman: American Aleph* (Kohn Gallery/D.A.P, 2016), and *The City Lost and Found: Capturing New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, 1960-1980* (Art Institute of Chicago/ Yale UP, 2014). Other recent publications include essays on contemporary painter Jonas Wood’s modernism and the echoes of Claes Oldenburg’s sculpture in the installation art of Josephine Meckseper. He has been invited to speak at The Art Institute of Chicago, The Getty Center, The Dallas Museum of Art, and The Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona. His work has been supported by the Getty Research Institute, the Smithsonian Institution/Archives of American Art, The Terra Foundation of American Art and the American Council of Learned Societies/Henry Luce Foundation. Allan’s current projects include a forthcoming gallery catalog essay, ‘Parchment, Stone, Transistor: Time and the Future in Wallace Berman’s 1960s,’ and a museum exhibition project on Berman’s *Radio/Aether* collages, mid-20th century print culture, the cultural history of broadcast media, and the attention crisis in the electronic age. He most recently published ‘Senga Nengudi, the Fetish, and the Urban Growth Machine in 1970s Los Angeles,’ in the November 2024 issue of *Oxford Art Journal*.

Lauren Graber

Head Archivist and Research Specialist
L.A. Louver Gallery, Los Angeles, California

Staring Down the Barrel of a Gun: Kienholz, Life, and Death

Edward and Nancy Kienholz embodied dual contested identities as Americans and immigrants in divided Germany, consciously positioning their lived experiences and artistic production between Hope, Idaho and West Berlin for multiple decades. From their ever-evolving vantagepoints, the Kienholzes scrutinized the threats and eruptions of gun violence in porous Cold War spaces – homes, streets, border crossings, battlefields, and transnational mass media. In September 1974 in the shadow of the Berlin Wall, the Kienholzes exhibited *Still Live*, the most dangerous participatory tableau of their collaborative oeuvre. *Still Live* is a furnished living room environment within which a participant sits six meters from a gun mechanism containing a single bullet controlled by a trigger set to four randomized clock timers. The artists did not know when the timers would synchronize, thus triggering the gun mechanism to fire the bullet. If a participant was in the bullet’s line of fire, they risked probable injury or death. Participants were required to sign waiver forms acknowledging their consent to risk their lives and supposedly absolving the artists and host institution of any liability. However, the West Berlin police confiscated the *Still Live* gun mechanism and charged Edward Kienholz with illegal possession of a firearm and attempted homicide. In 1982, *Still Live* was exhibited for the first and only time in the U.S. at Braunstein Gallery in San Francisco, which coincided with strenuous public debates about proposed city, state, and federal gun control legislation amidst a dramatic rise in gun

ownership and gun homicides, as well as the failed assassination attempt against President Ronald Reagan. Through a detailed visual analysis of *Still Live* and other relevant artworks, I explore Kienholz's unflinching depictions of forms of gun violence, both visceral and implied, including suicide, homicide, police brutality, and state imperialist wars. The Kienholzes' insistence on interrogating political and social power dynamics in the era of ascendent neoliberalism foregrounds a necessary reckoning with complicity in the very regimes which inflict death, precarity, and disposability on some and allow for life and prosperity for others.

Dr. Lauren Graber is Head Archivist and Research Specialist at L.A. Louver Gallery in Los Angeles. Lauren manages the L.A. Louver Archive and Library, which works with and on behalf of the Estate of Nancy Reddin Kienholz and The Edward and Nancy Kienholz Foundation on research and curatorial projects. Lauren previously worked as a postdoctoral Curatorial Researcher at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles contributing to the exhibitions and related publications *Fluxus Means Change: Jean Brown's Avant-Garde Archive* in 2021, *Käthe Kollwitz: Prints, Process, Politics* in 2019, and *Concrete Poetry: Words and Sounds in Graphic Space* in 2017. Lauren received her Ph.D. in Art History with a specialization in modern and contemporary art from the University of Michigan in 2012. Her recent publications include co-editing the catalogue titled *True Colors* about Japanese American artist Gajin Fujita published by L.A. Louver in 2023, and a book chapter on Jörg Immendorff titled "The Red Flag: The Art and Politics of West German Maoism," co-authored with Daniel Spaulding, published by Manchester University Press. Lauren is presently working on an academic journal article about Edward and Nancy Kienholz.

Christopher T. Green

Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History and Environmental Studies
Swarthmore College

Gift Giving in the Land Claim Era: The Potlatch and the Colonial Tableau

While the tableaux of the Kienholzes are often understood to visualize, confront, and link structural violences past and present, the few assemblages by the Kienholzes that directly depict Native American subjects and histories are regularly interpreted, like stereotypes levied against Native communities, to be primarily retrospective in orientation, "requiems," as the Whitney Museum described it in 1996, for lost, killed, or departed peoples. In the three decades between two of the Kienholzes' best-known works illustrating Native American historical subjects, *Conversation Piece* (1959) and *The Potlatch* (1988), however, a world of Indigenous art, activism, and civil rights movements swept the United States and Canada, appearing prominently in the North American press and public eye. For artists with deep ties to the Northwest, such conflicts, culminating shortly thereafter in events like the Oka Crisis, the Seton Portage incident, and Gustafsen Lake standoff, would have demonstrated the intrinsic contemporaneity with which the subjects of their work engaged. This paper considers Kienholz's relationship with colonial history through works such as *The Potlatch* and puts their symbolic violence and historical references in conversation with contemporaneous land claim tensions and conflicts between settler and Indigenous communities, particularly as they relate to local and regional histories of the Kienholzes' life in the Northwest. This paper demonstrates that, like their best-known tableaux, the Kienholzes linked past and present colonial injustices and had a keen sense for how such ongoing histories played out in the locality of the Pacific Northwest. By putting the Kienholzes into conversation with the contemporary Indigenous artists also visualizing land-based activism and violence inherent to the relationship between Indigenous and settler colonial political orders at this moment, we can understand how Indigeneity features in the Kienholzes' oeuvre beyond mere "appropriation" or belated history-telling and instead constructs such ongoing sovereignties as complex assemblages of heritage, history, and political claims.

Christopher T. Green is a writer and scholar whose research, curating, and teaching focus on modern and contemporary art, Native North American art and material culture, and the interrelation of Indigeneity, primitivism, and Euro-American art within global histories of modernism. His current research focuses on the relationship between twentieth century Northwest Coast Native art and Euro-American modernism and the volume *Contemporary Tlingit Art*, co-authored with Aldona Jonaitis and Ishmael Hope, is forthcoming from the University of Washington Press. His criticism and scholarly research have appeared in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *frieze*, *Aperture*, *ARTMargins*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, *ab-Original*, *BC Studies*, among other edited volumes. He recently curated "Space Makers: Indigenous Expression and a New American Art" at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and Heard Museum (2024-25) and "The sky loves to hear me sing: Woodland Art in Transmotion" at Swarthmore College's List Gallery (2024). He received his PhD in Art History from the CUNY Graduate Center and currently serves as Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History and Environmental Studies at Swarthmore College.

J. Myers-Szupinska

Independent scholar

Sadism on Tour, or: Kienholz at Documenta

Kienholz's tableaux usually sought out dead time: obsolescence, deferral, waiting, and aftermath. Only rarely did his work present, as did his installation *Five Car Stud*, a moment of lurid climax. Produced over the course of four years, 1969-72, and among a sprawling team of the artist's family and friends, the installation presented the scene of a horrific lynching, lamplit by automobile headlights. Several men, life-sized and wearing Halloween masks, surround and constrain a prostrate figure; one seizes his genitalia to sever his penis. Two more figures, a sickened woman and a "sissy boy," look on.

Five Car Stud has been presented as transparent to the history and representation of lynching—as a "three-dimensional representation of a lynching photograph," in the words of one writer. Yet this assessment, common to many perceptions of this work, fails to perceive the artwork's many estrangements. To wit: Represented by cast limbs and a translucent head arranged around a tub with floating letters spelling a racial epithet, the central figure is and is not Black. As Kienholz qualified in his careful description of the work's realization, "I should explain that in actuality there is no black man."

'Sadism on Tour' grapples with the tableaux's realizations in the early 1970s: its staging in the parking lot of Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles; its documentation book; and its first public presentation, after some aborted attempts, at the German exhibition *documenta 5* in 1972. Overseen by the inventive Swiss exhibition-maker Harald Szeemann, there *Five Car Stud* was presented outdoors and under an alien black inflatable dome—like the opaque cover of a pornographic magazine—and provoked dramatic reactions among its mostly-European audience, including disgust, fascination, and an incident of smoke-bombing.

J. Myers-Szupinska is an independent art historian, editor, and researcher based in Los Angeles. Their essays on contemporary art and exhibitions have appeared in *Afterall*, *Art Journal*, *Artforum*, *Fillip*, *Frieze*, *October*, *Tate Papers*, exhibition catalogues, academic publications, and in other venues, and include work on Edgar Arceneaux, Trisha Donnelly, Christina Fernandez, Nancy Holt, Arthur Jafa, Sterling Ruby, Harald Szeemann, and many others. Myers was founding faculty in the department of Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts, the first program of its kind in the United States, and was senior editor of the *Exhibitionist*, a journal of exhibition making, from 2014 to 2017. Since 2011, Myers has worked with J. Szupinska in the critical and curatorial collaboration group a.o.k., which has

produced projects and collaborative critical writing for art institutions worldwide, including 'Bachelor Modernism', an essay on the Société Anonyme for *The Avant-Garde Museum* (Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland, 2020) and 'Facing Poland's "New Historical Politics"', a conversation with Jarosław Suchan for October (2022).

Joanna Pawlik

Senior Lecturer in Art History
University of Sussex

Blue fascism: Ed Boreal on State Violence

The rise of right-wing populism over the past decade, and the presidencies of Donald Trump in particular, has given the question of fascism's incarnations post Second World War a degree of urgency. This paper speaks to such debates about the definition and operations of fascism beyond Benito Mussolini's Italy and Adolf Hitler's Germany by exploring visual representations of (anti-)fascism during the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the peak of protests against the escalating war in Vietnam, the violent suppression of student activism and Black Panther organizing. Broadly speaking, it considers how the iconography of European fascism was regularly invoked by radicals, artists and activists to label and denounce what were perceived to be adjacent or equivalent regimes of white supremacy, imperialism and state violence. It focusses on the mobilisation of discourses of (anti-)fascism by California artists to depict police brutality: from 'fascist pigs' to 'blue fascism', comparisons to Nazism were frequently drawn in the visual languages of artists such as Ed Boreal, and others associated with the circles of Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. The paper contextualises Boreal's practice against a backdrop of the Black Panthers' United Front Against Fascism conference (Oakland, California, July 1969) to critically reflect on a comparative approach to imaging fascist violence within the art world of the 1960s.

Dr Joanna Pawlik is Senior Lecturer and Subject Head in the department of Art History at the University of Sussex (2014-). Her monograph *Remade in America: Surrealist Art, Activism and Politics 1940-1978* (University of California Press, 2021) was co-winner of the 2021 MSA first book prize. She received a Leverhulme Research Fellowship in 2020/21 for her project 'Draw the Line: Figuring (anti-) fascism in North American art, 1961-1980' and has published widely on surrealism and postwar US art, visual culture and protest.

Alena J. Williams

Professor, Theory and Mediation of Contemporary Art
Department of Art Theory and Cultural Studies
Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna

Niki de Saint Phalle, Ethics, and Violence in Los Angeles

In 1961, Niki de Saint Phalle assembled ad-hoc tableaux of new and discarded consumer goods into paintings by firing a rifle at them in charged spectacles in Paris. With her translocation of 'the shooting paintings'—or *Tirs*—to Los Angeles the following year, their conditions of production amid the city's emerging Pop art scene stood in contradistinction to the original subject positions which first mobilized this work in Paris. Before the *Tirs*, violence in Saint Phalle's work had operated in either symbolic or iconographic terms. However, as this paper argues, the state-sanctioned, policed violence of Los Angeles and the ongoing factual violence of vigilante 'justice' in the United States introduced a new set of relations in the *Tirs*—one that was inextricable from the city's unfolding political matrix and the incipient conditions of the 1965 Watts Rebellion. With attention to existential thought and activism of this era—and to a larger reckoning with violence in the wake of the Second World War—this paper examines Saint Phalle's *Tirs* against the work of Ed Kienholz during his time in Los Angeles, among others.

Alena J. Williams is Professor of Theory and Mediation of Contemporary Art in the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She teaches courses in contemporary art history and theory; film and media studies; and the environmental humanities. Her research focuses on the epistemology of the image in art, film, and media with a long-range view across the twentieth century. Previously, Williams was Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego, where she was Associate Director of the Environmental Studies Program at John Muir College.

Sarah Wilson

Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art
Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London

'Kienholz Ten Tableaux Paris': American violence at the limits, 1970-1972

'American Presidents are Emperors, Washington is their Rome, the United States of America are Italy, and Europe is their Greece' (Jean-François Lyotard). 'Kienholz Ten Tableaux Paris', curated by Pontus Hulten, following Stockholm, Amsterdam and Düsseldorf, took place at the C.N.A.C., the Centre National d'Art Contemporain, in 1970. The Hôtel Salomon de Rothschild ('11 rue Berryer') dedicated to the arts from 1922, was already haunted by nazi violence: the services recuperating pillaged works of art were based there after the war. The ten horrifying, life-size tableaux including *The Beanery*, *The Illegal Operation* and *The Portable War Memorial*, took over the magnificent hôtel, before American hyperrealism rocked Paris from 1971-4. Pathos, puerility –or tragedy? France, 'occupied' by US military bases after the war, left NATO in 1966; *Five Car Stud* shown at the Kassel documenta V in 1972 with its denunciation of Ku Klux Klan racism, embodied 'Kaiser Kapital AmeriKa' to Lyotard. What implications for a rereading of Kienholz's work today?

Sarah Wilson is Professor of the History of Modern and Contemporary art at The Courtauld, University of London. She was principal curator of Paris, Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968 (Royal Academy London, Guggenheim Bilbao, 2002-3) and Pierre Klossowski, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2006, touring to Cologne and Paris. A close relationship with the Centre Georges Pompidou has extended throughout her career. Its earliest curators came from the C.N.A.C., which hosted the Kienholz show in 1970, organised in Paris by Pontus Hulten, the Pompidou's first director. Sarah Wilson was appointed Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres awarded by the French government for services to French culture in 1997. In 2015 she was a curator of the 1st Asian Biennale / 5th Guangzhou Triennale at the Guangdong Museum of Art, and was awarded the AICA prize for her distinguished contribution to art criticism. Books include *The Visual World of French Theory; Figurations*, 2010 (French 2018) and *Picasso / Marx and socialist realism in France*, 2013. She has published on over thirty known and unknown women artists.

Notes:

