

# Hanging (out) with the masters

[Art & Culture](#), [Painting](#)



At first glance, it is easy to think that not much is happening in Mark Kostabi's *Hanging with the Masters*. We get to simultaneously view works of art from various art movements as they dangle motionlessly from their taut strings. Everything is nonchalant and serene against the sky blue background, the threat of gravity underneath disappears, and even the anonymous human figure tied to a noose by the neck has surrendered. Whatever was supposed to happen in the painting has already happened. No action is caught. This is the state in which we find things because we have unfortunately arrived late.

This apparent lack of motion is what makes *Hanging with the Masters* so busy. By kidnapping an assortment of works of arts, miniaturizing and tying them in place to become manageable spectacles (classic paintings within a present-day painting), Mark Kostabi has converged, or more appropriately eroded, time and space. There is no nostalgia for the kidnapped paintings at all; just a matter-of-factness. Very postmodern. Taken out of their contexts and arranged in a whole new landscape, the works of arts inside the painting call attention to themselves. Each one of them competes for our attention.

Even if we recognize only one of the paintings/mobiles/cartoon character *Hanging with the Masters* blatantly references, we still get the feeling a kidnapping has happened. Something has been violated and celebrated at the same time. The verb hang takes on two meanings: Hang a picture, Hang a person. As if decoration and decoration are the same thing. And Mark Kostabi is unapologetic. DEAD MAN PERFORMING In the middle of it all, there is the faceless, sexless artist with the paintbrush pointing downwards, the

hanged human,—all red (red-faced, red-bellied, and red-handed) from an unseen light source. It is as if he/she has failed a mission.

In the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin tells us that “[Mankind’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (681). After exhausting every possible medium and subject of art, from Campbell’s soup cans to elephant dung, we only have to turn to ourselves next, explore and defy the thresholds of our own body and mind, as if they are the next frontier to turn into art. True enough, the hanged artist in *Hanging with the Masters* is engrossed in his/her own performance art. He/she is both a subject and object.

If in modernism the subject is a “rational, individualistic, responsible, unified self”, in postmodernism, that subject is dead (Chernus, “Fredric Jameson’s Interpretation of Postmodernism,” par. 7). What replaces is an “identity [that] must be conceived as an intersection of conflicting subject positions” (Collins 337). Kostabi’s hanged artist is neither male nor female. We can’t tell if he/she is just playing dead. We are not sure if his/her execution was forced or self-willed. If this were punishment, we don’t know what the sin was. We aren’t even sure if he/she really is a painter, or just someone with a good grip on the paintbrush.

Like a true postmodern subject, everything about the hanged artist is open to speculation. One thing we are sure of though is that now he/she has laid claim to being a work of art. And who doesn’t want to be a work of art, a shiny spectacle, in our YouTube generation? *MEETING HALFWAY Hanging with the Masters* instantly inherits timelessness just because it gathers

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samples of classic works of arts all in one place. What's more is that these works of arts are tied in place. As if we are looking at a museum wall and the theme is A Very Short History of Art.

Hanging with the Masters cleverly showcases cultural artifacts of the past (a nude, a cartoon character, a Warhol-style portrait, a mobile, an op-art painting), and at the same time it gives a commentary on those cultural artifacts. According to Jim Collins, "[...] the past is not just accessed but 'hijacked', given an entirely different cultural significance than the antecedent text had when it first appeared" (333). In postmodernism, such "highly self-conscious forms of appropriation and rearticulation have been used by postmodern painters, photographers and performance artists" (335).

But because they have been hijacked, the works of art have lost their "aura" and "quality of presence", terms which Walter Benjamin uses to describe the authority of the original work of art that is not yet reproduced or recopied (667). For Benjamin, this diminishing aura of the work of art every time it is reproduced or finds itself in a different context (Edvard Munch's screaming man in a mousepad, for example) is okay because it "enables the original to meet the beholder halfway" (667). Also, according to Benjamin, it is perfectly natural and okay for cultural artifacts to lose their original intentions and change into something else.

His example is that of an ancient statue of Venus. For the Greeks, it was an "object of veneration", but for people in the Middle Ages, it became an "ominous idol" (669). "Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura" (Benjamin 669). What we see now in Kostabi's painting are works of art that are classic examples of the art

movements they are part of. They are works of arts that are exclusively tied to a genre, tied in place in the painting's unseen ceiling, just like the hanged artist. If there is any aura left, it is only a memory of that aura as we try to identify each work of art.

Yet, ironically enough, Hanging with the Masters's style itself is tied to the surrealist art movement. The painting itself cannot escape the same bonds which have taken the other paintings as captives. But of course, this is okay. Everything in postmodernism is okay, and things are not judged based on whether they are good or bad, but only whether they work for us. According to Chernus: ...a cultural artifact is now just a random collection of signs momentarily existing side by side, ready to change at any moment into another random collection. So it cannot point beyond itself to any meaning.

It cannot represent any reality outside itself. It cannot even raise the question of its relationship to any reality outside itself. It refers only to itself; it is its own referent. [...] Since the signs are not supposed to relate to anything beyond themselves, it makes no sense to ask what they mean. So the problem of meaning simply disappears. (Chernus, par. 19). THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF IT ALL The meaninglessness of postmodernism can be depressing but that's what is happening right now. The millions of YouTube video clips uploaded every day don't have to make sense at all, but we enjoy watching them all the same.

The more stupid and the more disgusting, the better. YouTube has given us a platform where we can be our own celebrities, our own artists, our own works or arts, where we can be viewed by millions other simultaneously. And we all wish we'd get lots of hits every day. Just like the hanged paintings in <https://assignbuster.com/hanging-out-with-the-masters/>

Hanging with the Masters, we try to be amazing so we can be worthy of being looked at. Underneath it all, just like the paintings, we are all just competing for each other's attention. Maybe we can call each YouTube clip a cultural artifact in its own right. They, after all, tell a narrative.

They tell us a little something about the person who uploaded it. They tell us that at one point in time, somewhere in the world, this person took the trouble of recording a clip of himself/herself, never mind the ulterior motive. Sure, for a cultural artifact, it may be fleeting, and it is not even tangible, but as each footage weaves into the next one and a medley of voices occur and we are overwhelmed by the sheer number of people out there in the world, a whole community our parents' parents never knew existed back then, we lose the urge to explain things or make sense of them.

We simply turn on our curiosity and enjoy the fact that all these are happening right here right now. As Chernus has said above, there is no reliable meaning anymore and there is no point in finding the relationships of things. It is quite possible then that Hanging with the Masters is really, at the end of the day, meaningless. That, really, it is just a collection of images randomly picked. If the audience recognizes one or two paintings embedded in Hanging with the Masters, then they're lucky and good for them.

That will add a new layer to whatever meaning they decide to put into it. If not, then the painting is still nice, and deep, and mysterious, still very marketable. Which is the fate of cultural artifacts in late capitalism: to become commodities in an everything-is-for-sale world (Chernus, par. 7). It is okay to not find or force any connections among the images trapped inside

Kostabi's painting, or even reunite them with other images outside the realm of the painting.

For Chernus, the postmodern way is to “ accept the images living side by side in an ever-changing kaleidoscope” (Chernus, par 26). In this postmodern world where diversity is very much welcome, *Hanging with the Masters*, as a present-day cultural artifact, makes a strong statement about harmony. In the end, it's not just about works of art with clashing differences in style and opinion and meanings being able to coexist peacefully in a single canvas. Substitute “ people” for “ works of art” in the sentence and you get the bigger picture.