

John Berger

PERMANENT RED



This exhibition is one of the most complete that has been carried out to date. It vindicates the political sense of Berger's career, his disagreement with capitalist indoctrination and his opposition to the mercantilism of culture and class segregation.

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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
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Ajuntament de
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John Berger (Hackney, London, 1926 - Paris, 2017) is one of those authors who resist categorization. He wrote fundamental texts in all the fields to which he dedicated himself (plays, novels, essays, poetry and film and television scripts), and his ways of narrating, ways of seeing, bring out the ideological, aesthetic and moral implications behind each story and each image.

Permanent Red takes its name from the book of the same name published in 1960, in which Berger compiled a selection of his art criticism for the Marxist magazine *New Statesman* stretching over a period of more than ten years, starting in 1951. From the very title, these writings challenged bourgeois taste and the canonical works and writers of the dominant historiography. They vindicated artists with no fame and even marginal ones, many of them exiled in London from Eastern European countries after the Second World War.

This exhibition is one of the largest on Berger to date. It investigates the political complexity in his work, his disagreement with capitalist indoctrination, his rejection of segregation by social class and purchasing power, and his opposition to the mercantilization of culture.

For the first time in a museum, *Permanent Red* presents sixty drawings and collages that document Berger's artistic production. His early works during the European post-war period are especially significant. The exhibition also offers an anthology of the BBC programmes starting in the late 1950s that made him a media figure who stood out against Kenneth Clark, the popular art historian whose television series *Civilisation* (1966-69) ratified hegemonic and formalist interpretations of Western painting.

Berger collaborated with Mike Dibb in films like *Pig Earth* (1979), *Parting Shots from Animals* (1980) and *Once Upon a Time* (1985), and they initiated an irreverent and ground-breaking approach to art with the television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972). This audiovisual tour extends to the Sala Miserachs, where you can see *Une*

ville à Chandigarh (A City in Chandigarh, 1966), a film by Alain Tanner with a script by John Berger about the Le Corbusier's famous urban project in India. This film marked the start of a close cooperation that materialized in three emblematic titles: *La salamandre* (The Salamander, 1971), *Le milieu du monde* (The Middle of the World, 1974) and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000, 1976).

Finally, the exhibition presents Berger's dialogue over more than four decades with the photographer Jean Mohr, which gave rise to such key books as *A Seventh Man* (1975), a visual essay that investigated the precariousness of migrant workers in Europe in the 1960s and early 1970s; *A Fortunate Man* (1967), about the life of a rural doctor; and *Another Way of Telling* (1982), a photographic and literary account of peasants talking about themselves.

After dealing with Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, *Permanent Red* is the last of three exhibitions with which La Virreina Centre de la Imatge has explored three seminal writers on the ethical and ideological limits of images during the second half of the 20th century.

EMIGRATION AND WORKING CLASS

In 1972 Berger published *G.*, an experimental novel set against the backdrop of the First World War that narrates the gradual political awareness of its protagonist, "a man who makes love as a way of mentally destroying established society", in the words of the author.

The novel won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the prestigious Booker Prize. At the award ceremony of the Booker Prize, Berger harshly criticized the sponsors for their trading interests in the Caribbean since the 19th century, which included the slave trade. He announced that he was donating half of the prize money to the British Black Panthers, while the other half would fund an investigation into the appalling living conditions of migrant workers in northern Europe.

The result was *A Seventh Man* (1975), "an unrepeatable combination of journalism, poetry, social theory, an ethics treatise and a photographic report", as described by the sociologist César Rendueles. The book alternates texts and photo captions written by Berger with photographs by Jean Mohr, whom he had met through the filmmaker Alain Tanner and with whom he had collaborated on *A Fortunate Man* (1967).

Mohr was to be a true travelling companion for almost fifty years. Together they published the equally important works *Another Way of Telling* (1982) and *At the Edge of the World* (1999).

A decade later, Berger returned to the proletarian diaspora with "Eight Poems of Emigration", which was included in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984).

WHY—AMONG MANY OTHER THINGS—AM I STILL A MARXIST?

In the 1950s, Berger collaborated with several Marxist magazines such as *New Statesman*, *Marxism Today*, *Modern Quarterly*, *Marxism Quarterly*, *Realism: the Journal of the Artists' Group of the Communist Party and World News*, in addition to the socialist *Tribune*, in which he had George Orwell as an editor.

Although he would never be a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), he was close to some of its members, especially three groups: the Artists International Association (AIA), until it disappeared in 1953; the Geneva Club, a discussion group parallel to communist circles; and the Artists' Group of the Communist Party (whose members included Ern Brooks, Cliff Rowe, Paul Hogarth, Reg Turner, Gerald Marks, Ray Watkinson and Barbara Niven), which held intense aesthetic debates within the CPGB after the death of Stalin.

Berger had been influenced by the Marxist art historian Frederick Antal, who published *Florentine Painting and its Social Background* in 1948. His theoretical models included the Marxist critics Ernst Fischer and Max Raphael and the then little-known Walter Benjamin.

In 1951 Berger began to write a section of art criticism in *New Statesman*. These texts, quite well known at the time, repudiated bourgeois sentimentality and cried out against conservative institutions, focusing on artists with no public impact, many of them exiled from World War II, who lived in precarious conditions and in anonymity, far from the major events of official culture.

However, the main focus of Berger's criticism during this period must be seen in his diatribes on socialist realism and on the "legacy" of Andrei Zhdanov, a Stalinist political commissar and censor. This is also reflected in the books *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), which caustically reviewed Picasso's membership of the French Communist

Party, and *Permanent Red* (1960), an anthology of his writings for *New Statesman*, which in the American edition appeared with the toned-down title *Toward Reality* (1962).

THE INDUSTRIAL PROLETARIAT

Throughout his entire career, Berger alternated theoretical activity and artistic practice as if they fed each other. His drawings from the 1950s make abundant use of the iconographic political subject of the industrial worker, workers crowded into factories, and proletarian women who speak up unexpectedly to disagree with exploitation or to call for urgent revolt.

In 1983, Berger recorded a television programme with the mining community of Creswell in Derbyshire, comparing their situation with the characters and plot of the novel *Germinal* (1885) by Émile Zola. The same approach to work and social organizations can be seen in both his sketches and his literary analyses. Faced with the "General Intellect" described by Karl Marx in *Grundrisse* (1939) and the robotic man of *Modern Times* (1936) by Charles Chaplin, Berger offers a perspective of the workers' movement organizing itself against the alienation of subjectivities and the enslavement of bodies.

ONCE UPON A TIME

About Time (1983-1985) was a set of six television programmes for Channel 4/3rd Eye co-directed by Mike Dibb and Chris Rawlence about conflicting experiences of time. After *Time is Money*, *Time and a Half*, *Holy Days*, *Moonshine and Uncertain Times*, they filmed *Once Upon a Time*, based on Berger's book *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984).

The film was shot entirely in and around Berger's house in Haute-Savoie, France. It is a meditation constructed from ancient and contemporary stories about time, some written by Berger and others collected and read by him. These include a Rembrandt painting dedicated to Hendrickje, his last love; the photograph *A Red Hussar Leaving, June 1919, Budapest* by Andre Kertesz; the poem that Berger wrote as a tribute to the Chilean politician Orlando Letelier, assassinated in Washington on the orders of Augusto Pinochet in 1976, the same year Berger's son Yves was born; and another, terrifying poem by Anna Akhmatova.

And next to it, what is probably the most shocking work in the exhibition: the portrait that John Berger drew of his father a few minutes after he died.

LEARNING WITH ANIMALS

In 1994 three French cavers discovered the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche department. There they found hundreds of cave paintings from the Gravettian period, about 30,000 years ago. Berger visited the site in 2002, and when he left he drew some reindeer and lions on absorbent Japanese paper to get closer to the difficulty of painting with natural charcoal on a rocky surface.

Animals occupied a central place in Berger's writing, somehow observing and analysing humans without managing to understand them, perhaps because they are too aware of their obsessions. Animals are the topic of the story "The Stranger Who Imitated Animals" in *Another Way of Telling* (1982), *The White Bird* (1985), which links the wooden birds carved by craftsmen in Haute-Savoie with myths in Genesis, *King, A Street Story* (1999), which is narrated by a street dog, and *Why Look at Animals* (2009).

Mike Dibb and Chris Rawlence were inspired by Berger's texts for their film *Parting Shots from Animals* (1980) for the BBC series *Omnibus*. The opening sequence



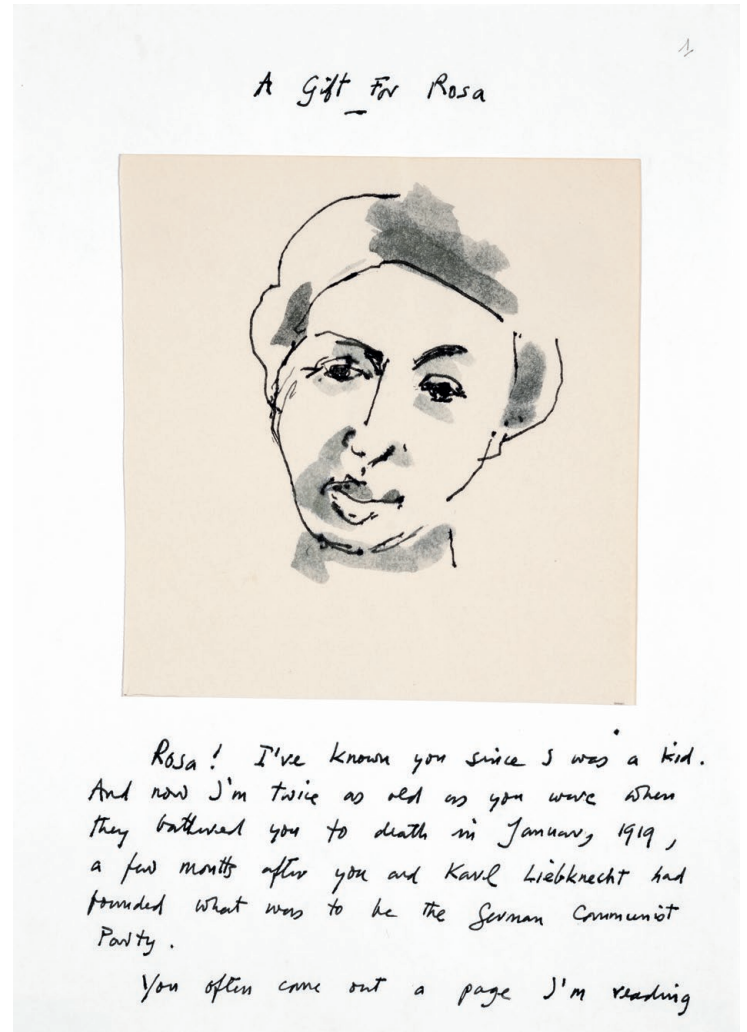
John Berger, *Call-Up*, 1951 © Beverly's Collection



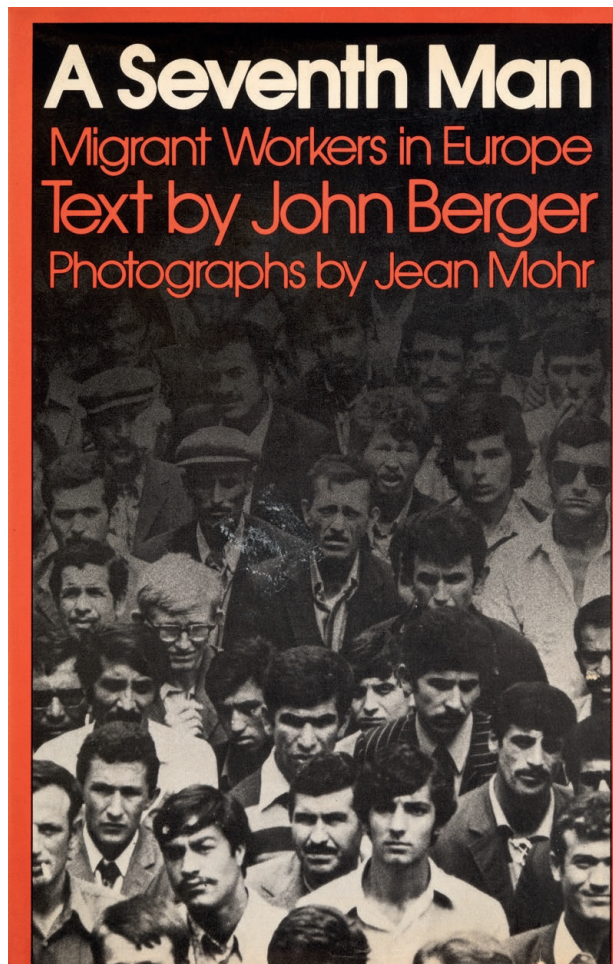
John Berger, *After Andrea Mantegna's Christ*, 2000-2010
© Beverly's Collection



John Berger, *After "Madonna of the Pomegranate"*, 2000-2010
© Beverly's Collection



John Berger, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 2014-2015 © Beverly's Collection



John Berger, *A Seventh Man. Migrant Workers in Europe*, photographs by Jean Mohr, 1975, A Richard Seaver Book, The Viking Press, New York

of this TV film is a kind of trial in which a group of several species pass judgement on men for their exploitation and destruction of animal life.

WAYS OF SEEING

The fame and success of the book *Ways of Seeing*, which has been translated into 38 languages, may have overshadowed the context of the television programme of the same name.

These legendary episodes, broadcast on BBC Two at ten o'clock every Saturday night in January 1972, were intended as a response to *Civilisation* (1966-69) by the art historian Kenneth Clark, an equally famous series that broke down the canon of Western painting using a formalistic approach following a chronological order. Berger had even participated in Clark's programme *Is Art Necessary? Should Every Picture Tell a Story?* (1958), in which he discussed the meaning of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

During the 1960s, Berger regularly took part in television programmes produced by the BBC for several channels: *Picasso* (1960), directed by David Jones; *Friso Ten Holt* (1962); *Drawn from Life* (1962), directed by Mike Wooller; *Tomorrow Couldn't Be Worse* (1963), directed by David Cunliffe; *Why Leger?* (1965) and *10,000 Days, 93,000 Hours, 33 Years of Effort* (1965), both directed by Michael Gill; *Giacometti* (1965), directed by Jonathan Miller, Michael Gill and Nancy Thomas; and *Nureyev's Nutcracker/De Stijl* (1968) and *Ernst Neizvestny, An Artist from Moscow* (1969), directed by Robert Vas.

However, the four episodes of *Ways of Seeing*, directed and produced by Mike Dibb, which lasted around 30 minutes, completely transformed not only the way of viewing art and the pictorial tradition, but, above all, the ways of decoding hidden ideological messages.

The first episode investigated how photography and cinema had modified our relationships with artistic prac-

tices. The second focused on the representation of women in European oil painting. The third dealt with the social use of the history of oil painting. The fourth and last dealt with the “viewer-owner” nature of advertising, journalism and television.

The many findings of *Ways of Seeing* include the revelation of the then little-known essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1935) by Walter Benjamin, and especially the coining of the term “male gaze”, which was later popularized by the film critic Laura Mulvey.

According to Francesca Peacock, in this television series “Berger expounds Marxist Feminism, explores how art reflects the status of those who commission it, and reveals the artistic bankruptcy of contemporary advertising. It is wholly Marxist in both intention and outcome: the BBC hasn’t seen anything like it before or since.”

AGAINST THE GREAT DEFEAT OF THE WORLD

“Against the Great Defeat of the World”, included in the book *The Shape of a Pocket* (2001), is an essay that equates *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500-1505) by Bosch with a communiqué of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) issued in 1997. A couple of years earlier, Berger had entered into a correspondence with Subcomandante Marcos that was published by numerous international newspapers. In 2008 they met personally in a cabin on the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in the southeast of Mexico. The originals of a portrait Berger drew of Marcos are exhibited in *Permanent Red*, next to the text entitled “Notes for a portrait”.

Three other drawings of Rosa Luxemburg, Charles Chaplin and Aimé Césaire—whose book *Cahier d’un retour*

au pays natal (1939-1947) Berger translated into English in 1969, in collaboration with Anya Bostock—and a collage on Hannah Arendt, accompany this triad of politically belligerent faces, along with the gift that John Berger made for his son on his birthday, in which we see Axl Rose and Slash, members of the rock group Guns N’ Roses, one of Yves’ favourite groups as a teenager.

Finally, this area includes Berger’s illustrations for one of his beloved poets, Mahmoud Darwish, whose book *Mural* he translated in collaboration with Rema Hammami. The persecution of the Palestinian people was one of the causes most denounced by Berger, especially in the 1990s and 2000s.

JOHN BERGER AND SUSAN SONTAG. TO TELL A STORY...

Close yet divergent, Berger and Sontag in some way represent two ethical extremes with regard to reading and interpreting images. They also symbolize different hermeneutic and political traditions, which have sometimes been reduced to a clash between orthodoxy and post-modern scholarship.

In the programme *Voices* on Channel 4, directed by Mike Lloyd with the title *Knowledge in Crisis. To Tell a Story...* (1983), they offer more than their respective literary experiences, because they are fundamentally debating about whether telling stories redeems us from reality and its absurdities or, on the contrary, restores certain intensities. Berger and Sontag agree on at least one thing: every author “dies” upon finding their reader, although here dying means going back to the beginning, writing again.

SOME STEPS TOWARDS A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VISIBLE

One of the most characteristic features in Berger's way of explaining painting and photography is the combination of erudition with underground interpretation, leaping from panoramic analysis to the detail that it reveals. Rather than sophisticated dissemination, Berger's writing about art is linked to the ancestral figure of the narrator, which Berger glimpsed in the—imaginary—portrait of Aesop painted by Velázquez in 1639-40.

Examples of these are the famous comparison of the photograph of the murdered Che Guevara with the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* by Andrea Mantegna (1475-78) and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) by Rembrandt; the story of an "absent" image that invites us to think about how aggressive words are, or the dangers involved in a camera photographing a vulnerable target. Some texts accompany art works, such as the one Berger wrote about a 1953 bronze relief by Raymond Masson, in which we see working-class men and women on their way to work on a Barcelona tram, and in others Berger dissects photos by Markéta Luskacová, Paul Strand, Chris Killip and August Sander.

And there are also drawings that are equally "comments made by hand" about the characters of the history of art: *The Buffoon Calabacillas* by Velázquez, *The Dead Christ Supported by an Angel* (1475-76) by Antonello da Messina through the eyes of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the *Madonna of the Pomegranate* by Jacopo della Quercia, *Saint Andrew* by Ribera and *The Flagellation of Christ* (1607) by Caravaggio, the painter whose life Berger most appreciated, because, in his words, "he was systematically a rebel".

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE PEASANT EXPERIENCE

The trilogy *Into Their Labours*, which includes *Pig Earth* (1979), *Once in Europe* (1987) and *Lilac and Flag* (1990) narrates, respectively, the life of the peasants who did not move to the industrial metropolis but remained attached to their lands, in a kind of parallel reality to the new civilization and the idea of progress; the process of those who left the country though no one expelled them, guided by a certain nostalgia devoid of heroism; and the vicissitudes of those who arrived late to a city that offered them marginalization, crime and prison.

Into Their Labours, *Another Way of Telling* and *A Fortunate Man*, the latter two with photographs by Jean Mohr, together with the film *Pig Earth* by Mike Dibb for the BBC's *Omnibus* series, which marked Berger's return to television after the success of *Ways of Seeing*, form a complete picture of the conflicts of the rural world. However, as Berger warns, "to dismiss the peasant experience as belonging to the past and irrelevant to modern life; to imagine that the thousands of years of peasant culture leave no inheritance for the future, simply because it has almost never taken the form of enduring objects; to continue to maintain, as it has been for centuries, that it is something marginal to civilization; all this is to deny the value of too much history and too many lives. You can't cross out a part of history like the one that draws a line on a settled account."

ALAIN TANNER/JOHN BERGER
UNE VILLE À CHANDIGARH (1966)

After India became independent, in 1947, the government headed by Jawaharlal Nehru decided to build a city that embodied the country's aspirations for progress and its distance from its colonial past. This new city was located 250 kilometres north of Delhi, near the foothills of the Himalayas, and was to be the capital of Punjab. Its name, Chandigarh, comes from Chandi, goddess of power and transformation, and *garh*, which means "strength".

The first scheme was drawn up by the architect Matthew Nowicki and the urban planner Albert Mayer, who conceived a plan that tried to adapt the urban fabric to the topography, the prevailing winds and the native ways of life. Nowicki died in a plane crash while returning from Chandigarh to New York.

After the tragic event, Fry, Drew & Partners (Maxwell Fry and Jane B. Drew) took over the commission. This English firm had a good track record in social housing construction and large-scale planning for West African countries. Aware of the dimension of the proposal, they called on Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Between 1951 and 1954, together with a team of local engineers, they built a city that is a utopia inspired by the fundamentals of modern architecture and Le Corbusier's theories.

In 1966, Alain Tanner directed *Une ville à Chandigarh* (A City at Chandigarh) with a script by John Berger and Tanner. The film is a tour of the Indian capital that was shot just after the death of Le Corbusier, against the backdrop of enthusiastic or disenchanting assessments of social utopias made during the second half of the 1960s. On 8 October 1965, Berger had written a text about Le Corbusier on his death for the Marxist weekly *New Statesman*.

This film marked the start of a collaboration between the Berger and Tanner that would lead to three emblematic films: *La salamandre* (The Salamander, 1971), which

explores the differences between two narrative and ideological points of view (that of the journalist and that of the novelist) when they recount the same event, as well as the dissidence of the 1960s and its effects on the technocratic and capitalist Switzerland of the time; *Le milieu du monde* (The Middle of the World, 1974), a story of the relationship between a politician and an immigrant waitress, morality and the class discrimination of the media; and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000, 1976), which examines the personal relationships and world views of a teacher, a trade unionist and a bohemian who are affected in one way or another by the events of May 1968 in France.

Curator: Valentín Roma

Monday 22 May, 7 pm
Mike Dibb conference

Monday 9 October, 7 pm
Tom Overton conference

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Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
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