

Baziotes, Surrealism, and Boxing: “Life in a Squared Ring”

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The boxer, as a cultural icon who stands at the center of debates on class, race, politics and sexuality, has held a seemingly endless fascination for artists and writers from ancient times to the present. Our story here dates to the early forties when Surrealist writers turned their attention to a fierce and flamboyant Senegalese boxer called Battling Siki, at the moment when a young boxer artist, William Baziotes, fell under their orb in New York City. Baziotes, who exhibited with the Surrealists in New York in the early forties and was to become a key figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement later in the decade, spoke frequently of his passion for boxing and identified with the boxer figure as a heroic loner and an individualist. The Surrealists, on the other hand, identified with the boxer as anti-hero, a marginalized, criminalized and anarchistic figure whose actions undermined the powers of the authorities and dominant discourses in a manner that was deeply resonant with their politics and practices. Unpacking this seeming dichotomy helps us to understand not only the artists and movements involved but the transgressive role of rituals of play, subversions of class, and performances of masculinity in the interwar years.

Abstract Expressionist paintings, Baziotes's included, became the model for sublime expressivity and artistic engagement with materials for generations of artists. Championed by critics such as Clement Greenberg, their practice represented the elite just as mass culture remained modernism's subversive other. On the other hand, in the wake of postmodernist criticism and the aftermath of the controversial 1990 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, many authors have revisited the territory and destabilized this arbitrary binary. Some have contextualized Greenberg's pronouncements while others have argued for the abstract artist's attraction to the vulgar and the commercial (Willem de Kooning's paintings of women come to the fore in this regard). Others investigate broader issues of subjectivity such as Michael Leja's work on

Abstract Expressionism and “Modern Man” literature or T. J. Clark’s study of the group in relation to questions of bourgeois taste and the vulgar.

The present essay, in line with this body of revisionist literature, aims to further complicate our understanding of the avant-garde reception of mass culture by focusing on a lesser explored chapter of this narrative that begins in the late thirties and early forties with the arrival of the Surrealists in New York City and the publishing of their magazines *VVV* (1942-44) and *View* (1940-47). In the Surrealist émigré culture represented by these magazines, the separation between modernism and mass culture is further diminished. Among their pages, reviews of popular music (jazz above all) and entertainment (exploits of boxers) share space with illustrations of painters like Fernand Léger and Max Ernst. And it is here that many Abstract Expressionists cut their teeth in the interwar and war years. Not only did American sculptor and Abstract Expressionist David Hare edit André Breton’s magazine, *VVV*, but the work of many of the artists who were to become canonical Abstract Expressionists, such as Baziotes, adorned their pages. This article will examine this moment in the early forties not just to establish a broader picture of canonical Abstract Expressionism by amplifying the narrative of its origins, but to expose different readings of race, class, gender, and politics at this formative point in time. Boxing, as we shall see, forms the perfect conduit for this alternative narrative.

Debates on the relationship of modernism to mass culture proliferated in the late thirties and early forties in the wake of Greenberg’s 1939 essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch.” While folk art was seen as nourishing the soul of the artist and as a rich source of “anonymous” hand-made production (Naremore 170-75), works of mass culture were the enemy. *Partisan Review* authors, for example, might appreciate the blues or folk music, but dislike the brassy sounds of the big bands or the mass appeal of swing music. As Russell Lynes wrote in his 1954 book, *The Tastemakers*, “The highbrow enjoys and respects the lowbrow’s art—jazz for instance—which he is likely to call a spontaneous expression of folk culture” (Lynes 318). The artists, as opposed to the critics, often ignored this artificial divide dipping equally into mass culture representations and popular entertainment. David Hare appreciated the pulp comic book, while Jimmy Ernst and some Surrealists liked the popular sounds of the more commercial big bands as well as the more modernist blues idiom.¹ Pablo Picasso, Léger and other canonical modernists were known for admiring popular entertainment like the circus. This essay will not traverse yet again that territory, but will highlight a less explored popular attraction in the early years of Abstract Expressionism, that of boxing, with the goal of complicating well known tropes about mass cultural representations. Addressing artists’ forays into this arena can yield surprising results. Baziotes, whose paintings could be considered “feminine” due to their sinuous lines and subtle scumbled hues

(Gibson 54), seen for example in his 1944 painting, *The Balcony* (Figure 1), was a boxer and an aficionado of the quintessentially macho sport, boxing. Although terms such as mass culture or avant-garde can be quite slippery, for this paper, boxing as a form of popular entertainment will represent the former and abstract and surrealist art, the latter.

Baziotes was an important first generation Abstract Expressionist painter who came from a working class Greek family in Reading, Pennsylvania. At home with the crime and corruption of inner city life, bearing the scar from a knife fight, he developed an enthusiasm for murder mysteries and the history of crime. Like the Surrealists who were passionate about pulp fiction and crime novels, Baziotes admired American crime writers, in particular Raymond Chandler (Ethel Baziotes, "Interview with Hadler" 1974).² He was drawn as well to racketeers such as Max Hassel, who like Baziotes came from Reading, and whose funeral he attended after the gangster was murdered in 1933 (Constance Baziotes, "Interview with Hadler").³ His familiarity with the seamy sides of life drawn from his class background separated him from his Harvard educated friend, fellow Abstract Expressionist artist Robert Motherwell, but must have contributed to Baziotes's allure as well. Motherwell shared Baziotes's predilection for Baudelaire,⁴ but Baziotes's own history predisposed him to find the dark side of this poetry, to reading crime fiction, and to boxing as a sport.

As a young man in Reading, before coming to New York City in the mid-thirties, Baziotes boxed every night. "Four or five rounds a night. . . . During the day I might feel nervous, feel like doing something. After boxing I'd feel calm..." he told an interviewer in the early fifties (qtd. in Paneth 19).⁵ He pursued the sport seriously enough for Bobby (Burke) Ruttenberg, a boxer from Reading, to offer himself as a trainer (William and Ethel Baziotes Papers).⁶ Baziotes remained a fan throughout his life (Preble 26). Among his own art collection, he drew inspiration from a nineteenth-century painting of the boxer, James Burke (Preble 132).

Baziotes never actually painted an image of boxing or referred to the subject in his titles. The closest he came to it was an image of a male, who is likely a pugilist, with a fist in the air and body in a comic aggressive stance (Figure 2). The drawing was one of a group of cartoonish and raucous gouaches that he made in the late thirties, after which his work grew progressively more abstract, subtle, and luminescent. Yet his passion for boxing as a fan remained fervent. And so, I argue here, that boxing can be interpreted as a metaphor for his own artistic practice rather than a storehouse of motifs. In an unpublished interview from 1951, Baziotes reminisced about his boxing years and took pride in extending the tradition of boxer painters from Joan Miro, André Derain, and Georges Braque, to Maurice Vlaminck (Paneth 19).

"Boxing to me means life in a squared ring" he told his painting

students at Hunter College in the fifties (Baziotes “Hunter”). This suggestive and ambiguous sentence needs some unpacking. A “squared ring” is on one level a metaphor for the canvas as a rectangular arena in which to wage one’s battles. Critic Harold Rosenberg had famously cast Abstract Expressionist painting as a form of action painting in his well known 1952 essay, “American Action Painters.” Action painting as a form of boxing, where the artist delivers a powerful punch to the canvas, is an apt metaphor. The notion of battling within a square format applies as well to games other than boxing, such as chess, for example, where figural pieces vie for control within a rigid grid. Not surprisingly, surrealist and surrealist-inspired artists, from Marcel Duchamp to Ernst and Isamu Noguchi, often turned to the imagery of the chess game.⁷ Boxing, however, as we shall see, involves different issues of race, gender, and politics than those found in the educated world of the chess game, but it does share with chess a comparable geometric format and a symbolism of warfare.

The square ring figures prominently in boxing imagery. In fact, in the rules instituted in the 1860s in Britain by the Marquis de Queensbury, the boxing ring had to be raised on an indoor stage rather than held outside as had previously been the case (Chandler 15). Hence photographs of the sport often feature this pronounced rectangular structure elevated from the teeming crowds surrounding it. Baziotes not only boxed himself but attended matches and pored over magazines, all of which would highlight the notion of performing within a rectangle. As much of his visual engagement with the sport preceded the rise of boxing on television, photos were a key visual storehouse. Photographs of the matches are not only rectangular but are generally gridded by the horizontal ropes and thereby further increase their confluence with modernist abstractions. This effect was heightened by the use of the Magic Eye camera, popular in the mid-thirties, which could take up to fifteen pictures per second (Jeffrey 44). These images were exhibited next to each other in manner suggestive of serial abstraction and reminiscent of Muybridge’s photos which have appealed to generations of painters. The compositions in Baziotes’s paintings of the early forties, such as *Balcony* of 1944 (Figure 1), and *Mirror at Midnight* of 1942 (Figure 3), are pulled to the surface and often demarcated by interlacing black lines enfolding organic shapes. Although the paintings do not literally represent a boxing ring, the forms can be said to perform within a rectangular space marked on the picture plane by intersecting lines.

On another level Baziotes’s sentence, “Boxing to me means life in a squared ring,” emphasizes that he is talking about life itself and how art engages or mirrors it. He actually introduces the boxing statement by claiming in those teaching notes of 1962, “Pictures teach us how to live” and “anything that has reality is interesting.” Life in a squared ring could just as well allude to living in the contentious art world of the fifties. The

idea of artists as combatants in an increasingly factious critical arena no doubt figured into his thinking. In his teaching notes he referred to the fighting style of different artists comparing Picasso and Rembrandt (whom he praised for his faith and lack of fear). Baziotes was clearly impacted by the politics that attended success in the meteoric rise to fame of his fellow Abstract Expressionists. His letters to his brother Chris in the forties reveal his feelings of competition and frustration as the fight took shape. He complained in a letter of March 10, 1947, to his brother that Clement Greenberg was favoring Pollock and considered him to be in a slump (William and Ethel Baziotes papers). He himself had been central to the group's origins only to see himself slowly marginalized. He remained tenaciously committed to retaining vestiges of the haunting and suggestive image at a moment when pure abstraction was garnering critical acclaim and Greenberg himself was lambasting in a 1946 piece in *The Nation* others like sculptor Hare who continued to adhere to Surrealism with its referential imagery. In a letter dated April 9, 1947, Baziotes referred to critic Harold Rosenberg as "practically a friendly enemy" (Ethel and William Baziotes Papers). He clearly felt the need to wage his own battles while remaining committed to an alternative and contested route.

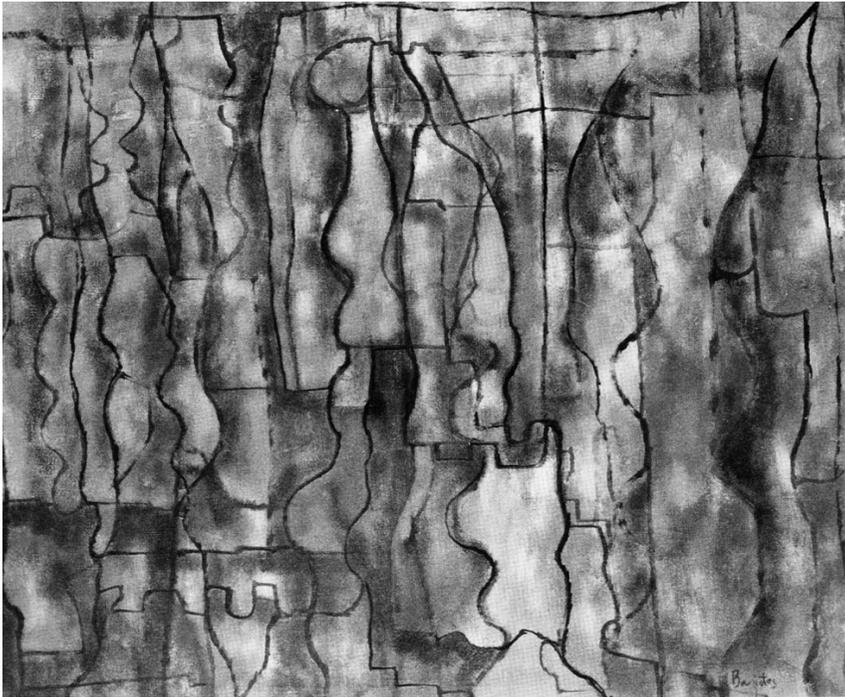


Figure 1. William Baziotes, *The Balcony*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 36 x 41 in. Private Collection. Copyright Estate of William Baziotes.

But perhaps most explanatory of Baziotes's investment in boxing as a metaphor for his studio practice was a quotation from Gene Tunney, the heavy weight boxing champion from 1926-28, that Baziotes transcribed by hand in 1960: "If there is any extreme form of individualism, its ring fighting. You wage your own battle all by yourself. No partners, no comrades in there with you. Like dying, you fight alone. So consider the prize fighter as a spiritualist, individualist, a solitary soul in travail" (Alloway 42).⁸ At times he paired his sense of boxing as individuality to Hemingway's comparable stance on bullfighting (Ethel and William Baziotes Papers.) Tunney's model of the boxer as a lone fighter aligns with Abstract Expressionist tropes of the solitary artist expressing his soul through the authentic brushstroke or powerful punch to the canvas. This vision of the Abstract Expressionist artist alone in "his" studio, summoning "his" inner strength remained affixed to this group for decades to come and was fodder for parodies by Warhol and others.⁹ Abstract Expressionism, in fact, remained the citadel of authenticity and originality in the face of later postmodernist and conceptual art strategies. The male artist/boxer was a perfect image for Baziotes's artistic practice which involved a concentrated psychic and formal battle and relied heavily on the artist's unique and solitary engagement with his materials.

Baziotes's loner artistic practice was in many ways indebted to Surrealist automatism, a free associational method of suspending conscious thought, which he learned from émigré artists in his circle. Due to his stature in the group he was among the few Americans to be included in the well known 1942 exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism" and his works were exhibited along with those of Pollock and Motherwell in Peggy Guggenheim's "Art of this Century" gallery, the key venue for Surrealist paintings during the war years. He was friends with Hare, the American editor of the Surrealist magazine *VVV*, and his paintings were included in Surrealist publications of the early forties. Although Baziotes did not mention it, boxing and stories of boxers form a leitmotif in the pages of *VVV* and *View* in the early forties when he was most closely aligned with the New York expatriate Surrealist community. The Surrealist and Dada artists had a long history in this regard as they had lionized the boxer/poet Arthur Cravan who presumably died at sea in 1918. Cravan, the nephew of Oscar Wilde, was known for his dandy attire, anti-authoritarian draft evasion tactics, and performative boxing style where he dramatically boasted of his qualifications and lineage before engaging his opponents (Conover 101).

Not surprisingly, Arthur Cravan's notes, with an introduction by André Breton himself, were published for the first issue of *VVV* in 1942. Although Cravan's appeal to the Surrealists is a fascinating study in its own right, "Battling Siki," a lesser known boxer who lived and died in the interwar years, was the subject of their scrutiny in the early forties and will be the focus here. "Battling Siki," who won the world championship in 1922 and

was killed on the streets of New York City in 1925, was the focal point of Paul Eaton Reeve's article published in *View* the same year as Breton's homage to Cravan. The next year Parker Tyler's article, "The Ivory Tower of Judo," also for *View*, returned to the story of Battling Siki. We will see that these essays on boxers from the surrealist point of view form a foil to Baziotés's notion of the hero boxer alone in the ring. In this context, boxing accords with a darker form of Surrealism, one that focuses on race and crime—the boxer as anti-hero—and aligns with the broader intellectual and political aspirations of that group. The story of Siki's career in particular and the mythmaking it engendered (in the mass media and among the Surrealists) provides a rich case study of how the inter-war artist identified with mass cultural representations.

Battling Siki, as he was called (Figure 4), was an African boxer who stunned the world by defeating the French national icon and war hero, Georges Carpentier in September 1922 to win the world championship in the light-heavyweight category, a title which he held until March, 1923. Race was still a contentious issue in boxing as it was relatively recent history (1910) that the black boxer Jack Johnson had defeated his opponent Jeffries who was openly deemed "the great white hope." Johnson, who was a personal friend of Cravan and quite the dandy himself, and whose career was mired in racist vendettas, became a hero of Harlem Renaissance writers such as Claude McKay. It is this world of boxing that Siki entered in the early twenties when he defeated the darling of the French boxing world.

Carpentier, Siki's opponent, was lionized after the 1921 Dempsey-Carpentier fight in Jersey City which had been broadcast live on radio. A huge extravaganza, with over 80,000 in attendance, the stadium was filled with Broadway superstars the likes of George M. Cohan and David Belasco on the one hand, and renowned gangsters such as Enoch "Nucky" Thompson on the other (Walzer 188).¹⁰ Described as "gorgeous," Carpentier was not only a media fetish but the idol of the intelligentsia including such figures as George Bernard Shaw (Boddy 214) and Ernest Hemingway, who reportedly watched the Carpentier/Siki match ringside (Benson 252). Somewhat of an intellectual himself, Carpentier was known for discussing the psychology of the boxing match. "Never go into training unless your mind is easy and you are entirely happy in yourself," he counseled (Carpentier, "My Fighting Life" 169).¹¹

Siki's story, on the other hand, is one of poverty and colonialist oppression. A marginalized, rootless, international figure he wandered from Senegal to Paris to New York. The world of boxing exploited and encouraged such globalized homelessness. As Zygmunt Bauman writes in *Globalization*, "The tourists travel because *they want to*; the vagabonds because *they have no other bearable choice*" (93). Born in 1897 in St Louis, Senegal, Baye Phal, as Battling Siki was then called, moved to France in his teenage years.

During World War I he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille Militaire for his service fighting in the Senegalese regiment. Following the war he returned to Paris during what was the height of “negrophilia” and during the golden age of boxing when fighters rivaled Hollywood stars for media attention and drew huge crowds as in the Dempsey-Carpentier fight.

Siki himself gained widespread notoriety due to the complexity of the circumstances surrounding his fight with Carpentier and its aftermath. Reportedly agreeing to an illegal fix, he revolted and turned viciously on Carpentier, winning the match and finding himself immersed in complicated post-fight legal proceedings. Claiming that Siki had tripped him, Carpentier appealed unsuccessfully but managed to place his opponent in the center of a maelstrom of racist press. In addition Siki, who had not received his money, was stripped of his title and license to box over a fight with a rival manager. To make matters worse, he countered by accusing the authorities of trying to fix the fight. The following year the French Federation of Boxing finally ruled that there had been no attempt to fix the match (Benson 4-5).¹² His title and license were eventually reinstated but impoverished and surrounded by controversy Siki made his way to New York only to be killed on the streets of the city the next year by mobsters, probably in retaliation for Siki’s equally anarchistic transgressions on their authority and demands. One wonders if a more apt Surrealist icon could be envisioned than Siki, who embodied Surrealists’ concerns for third world politics, transgression of authority, and crime drama.

Siki, an ambivalent figure in France—admired for his military record, denigrated for his race—was temporarily accused of cheating, but the underlying controversy involved the politics of race and colonialism. In a 1922 article written in the United States, an anonymous author stresses this aspect and considers Siki’s win a threat to France’s power abroad for, “Prestige rather than force it is pointed out, is the power by which the colonies are ruled. To have to rule by force would be costly, wasteful, and difficult, if not impossible” (“Battling Siki as Dark Cloud on the Horizon” 62). Siki’s fight played into colonialist debates in the French African community as well. The fight was attended by Blaise Diagne, the first black deputy of the French National Assembly, who had parted with the Pan African agenda of Marcus Garvey in favor of a policy of equality for French citizens of African descent. Diagne, characterized by Claude McKay in the early twenties as one of the most conservative of Negro leaders (McKay 49), took up Siki’s cause, and used the fray to argue for the rights of Senegalese veterans. Siki’s treatment would not have been accorded to whites like Carpentier, he argued (Benson 257-59). Diagne’s championship of Siki coincided with what some saw as his conservative integrationist agenda.¹³ McKay in fact warned that the good treatment that Negroes experienced abroad would encourage them to “forget the vile exploitation of Africans by the French”

(McKay 50).

The African-American press in the United States chimed into the dispute, claiming that Siki's unusually harsh treatment was racist: "But Siki is black and is a dangerous contender for the European championship and just now the rising tide of color is making our white brethren on the other side just a little nervous" ("Skids Under Siki" 1). Although the African-American press denigrated Siki's racist treatment in the papers, at least one author wanted Siki to remain in France, writing in an article titled "Would Be a Crime to Let Siki Come to America" that he feared the bad publicity surrounding the pugilist would hurt integrationist causes in America. Siki's poor treatment in the United States was in some sense prophesized by McKay who claimed that "Sport in America—like every other large business—is managed by corporations, and a black-skinned man locked in his own private sports world is not accepted as a rival" (53). Homeless and marginalized on many levels, Siki clearly experienced the rupture of identity that the *négritude* movement of the thirties was soon to address in its rejection of colonialism and advocacy of black pride.



Figure 2. William Baziotes, *Untitled*, 1936-1939. Gouache on paper. 14 x 10 in.
Copyright Estate of William Baziotes.

The debates which raged in the French press over Siki could not have escaped the attention of the Surrealist artists living in Paris whose intense anti-colonialist sentiments were percolating. In 1925, seventeen Surrealists signed a letter in support of the indigenous fighters in the Riff sector of Morocco (Spiteri 2). Breton was later to champion Aimé Césaire, the Caribbean poet of Négritude, writing that he awaited the day when the “great mass of the men of color will cease to be kept at such an outrageous distance and confined to second-rate employment” (Breton 235).¹⁴ In addition, the Surrealists’ anthropological concerns were to center specifically on Senegal and would, a decade later, form the topic of the well known special issue of their magazine *Minotaure* devoted to the Dakar-Djibouti mission—an expedition to collect objects for Paris’s remodeled Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro.

Despite his notoriety in the press, after his victory Siki became a celebrity in Paris, his silhouette painted on the arms of well heeled women and by 1930 his life the subject of a novel.¹⁵ He had constructed for himself a very complex identity. In reality he was a decorated World War I veteran from the revered Senegalese troops who were much admired by the French. On the other hand, he was the brunt of cruel racist slurs and the focus of the fetishized gaze which the Europeans reserved for the black performers in their passion for “negrophilia.” Siki’s persona played to both sides of European desire, appearing alternately in public in well tailored suits or attended by his pet lion. He countered the gaze of conquerors with an ironic performance of the primitive by tossing bananas into the crowd, walking his pet, but asserting that he, in fact, had never even seen a jungle (Benson 11). He performed the primitive in a manner perfected by black performers from Duke Ellington to Josephine Baker, whose “jungle music” at the Cotton Club in the twenties in Harlem was notorious, if ironically presented.

The celebrity culture of the 1920’s that lionized Siki was one where upper class whites slummed in Harlem listening to jazz or turned former working class boxing matches into media spectacles such as the Carpentier-Dempsey fight. The sport was popular with artists, intellectuals and the media. “Important contests,” Carpentier recalled, “are even patronized by Royalty” (Carpentier, “The Art of Boxing” 157). In the twenties, in particular, boxing was a site for just such carnivalesque inversions: rich people slumming, or urban blacks such as Siki performing jungle rituals transgressively. In this carnivalesque world, irony acts subversively to destabilize set divisions of power and class—an aspect that no doubt appealed to the Surrealists who countered authority at every juncture and undermined prevailing ideas of rationality and morality.

Questions of class plague the history of boxing and make its identification with high, low, or middlebrow taste complicated and subject to subversive mixings. In eighteenth-century England, for example, a class

tension existed between gentlemen educated in the classical cult of physical culture and male beauty, and lower class practitioners of the sport—between gentlemen boxers and working class fighters. The boundaries between these divisions, however, were decidedly porous, as they were later in the twentieth century. As historian Sharon Hyde concludes in her discussion of William Hogarth's boxers, the upper class males were just as drawn to visions of classical beauty as to less genteel masculine cultures of sport and gambling. Hogarth further complicates the scenario by spoofing gentleman boxing as a frivolous indulgence of the rich (Hyde 97).

The complexity of class figures prominently in early twentieth-century American pugilist paintings by Georges Bellows such as his 1909 *Stag at Sharkey's* which glamorizes fight clubs. In an insightful article, historian Robert Haywood has shown the difference between the utopian body culture advocated by the YMCA and the sordid bestial combat favored in the alternative fight clubs populated by marginalized groups including diverse immigrant populations: "Participating by attending a fight at Sharkey's offered the thrill of illicitness and revolt against authority and mainstream society" (Haywood 5). Although the sport was subsequently legalized in America, there remained a distinction between gentlemanly boxing and prize fighting which was tainted by greed and debased by gambling (Haywood 7). As in Hogarth's world, boxing images oscillate between an ideal and a lurid, unsavory idiom and often relish border crossings.

In the interwar years, in the aftermath of Siki's matches, prize fighting countered recreational boxing, but its bestiality and sexuality opposed more dramatically the synchronized beauty of the fascist machine body showcased by Leni Riefenstahl in the 1938 Nazi propaganda film, *Olympia*, based on the 1936 Summer Olympics. The monstrous beauty of the interwar boxing match confronts the preferred aesthetic of Nazism and calls to mind rather the words of Alfred Jarry, the fin de siècle author who so inspired the Surrealists: "It is conventional to call 'monster' any blending of dissonant elements...I call 'monster' every original inexhaustible beauty" (qtd. in Hebdige 102). This language of monstrosity permeated the Surrealist writing as well. The boxer's actions—and body—were seen as both brutish and beautiful. Parker Tyler, an editor of *View*, for example, compared sports to dance and aestheticized Siki's movements by titling his photo of Siki fighting, "The Waltz" (Tyler 11). Tyler, in typical surrealist language, characterized Judo (while illustrating boxing and judo) as a sport that embodied the unconscious ambivalence of love and hatred.

Sexuality is just as complex an issue as class in boxing. In the celebrity world of boxing, and particularly in the twenties, women were often in attendance at the fights (Hemingway's pregnant wife allegedly sat beside him at the Siki-Carpentier bout just as Ethel Baziotés accompanied

her husband years later). Boxing historian, Gerard Early, in fact, maintains that the Dempsey-Carpentier fight was the first one attended by a large number of women (70). Boxers were seen as virile sex symbols in Europe and America. Writers like Mae West glamorized the male boxer's body with its "firm muscles that moved like oiled springs" (West 21). Black boxers were easily incorporated into this highly sexualized discourse and subject to objectifying tropes of primitive sexuality. In 1931 Josephine Baker (who was comparably objectified), ironically playing to the crowds, was filmed singing while stooped in the corner of a boxing ring (Boddy 232).

It was the writer Joyce Carol Oates who, in 1985, wrote most cogently about the gender implications implicit in the beauty of half naked buffed male bodies in action in a boxing ring. She characterized the sport as the ultimate performance of masculinity (even though women's professional boxing has recently gained in status) writing that boxing, "is for men, and is about men, and *is* men. A celebration of the lost religion of masculinity all the more trenchant for its being lost.... Men fighting men to determine worth (i.e. masculinity) excludes women as completely as the female experience of childbirth excludes men" (33). Oates, however, complicates her analysis by claiming that the machismo of boxing is the "denial of the feminine-in-man that has its ambiguous attractions for all men..." (33). And so boxing, in its hypermasculinity, performs seductively and subversively to women and to men and here too this assault on entrenched morality must have appealed to the surrealists. It has taken contemporary gay black artists, such as Glenn Ligon, to make explicit the homoerotic content of boxing that had formerly been closeted. Writing about Ali, Ligon reminisces on his first sight of the boxer: "His physical beauty penetrated to a region of my mind just beginning to be aware of my desire for the bodies of other men..." (59). Clearly, a discussion of boxing furthers the recent discourses on constructions of masculinity and performances of gender.

Ali was known for his dramatic articulations, as was Siki before him. "Dragons eat bananas," Reeve writes in his "Homage to Battling Siki," in the pages of 1942 *View*. Reeve, a poet in the Surrealist circles, was referring to Siki's transgressive habit of tossing bananas to the audience, one of his most egregious and crowd-pleasing antics.¹⁶ Siki's performances, according to historian Peter Benson, prefigure the subversive posturing of Mohammed Ali whose challenge to American hegemony—choosing to prize fight in Africa while refusing combat in Vietnam—transformed him into a global hero (Benson 282-83). Boxing clearly was a hair's breadth away from highly charged questions of gender, the primitive and global politics.

Siki's rise and fall, symbolized by his fight with Carpentier and his untimely death, occurred during what has been called Surrealism's intuitive or heroic period (1919-1925). It was in the forties that Surrealist journals in New York published accounts of his death during what is seen

as Surrealism's later noir period with its return to a fascination with brutal acts of criminality. Reeve writes that the gangsters, or "madmen," who killed him "wanted Siki to obey their rules to accept victory or defeat at their choice. Not Siki. He preferred their only alternative—the bullet in the back" (22). Jonathan Eburne's eloquent opening to his study of Surrealism and crime, "The path of Surrealism through the twentieth century is littered with corpses" (1), sets the stage for Siki's demise. Surrealist concerns developed from the anarchism of their dada years into what has been called a form of "anarchoindividualism" that appreciated both revolutionary acts and liberated creativity (Papanikolos 51). From the random shot in a crowd (Breton's famous "call to arms" in the Second Surrealist Manifesto of 1929), to the crime novel, to the gangster's shot on the street, they mined violence for its revolutionary potential (Eburne 6). Siki's story, which unfolded in the years immediately preceding the Surrealist condemnation of French colonialist policies in Africa, embodied the anarchist and revolutionary gestures so prized by the Surrealists. As opposed to following the orders of the mob (or in France the fix) he preferred the only alternative---a shot in the back.

The interrogation of mass cultural representations and the artists' engagement with them yields surprising results. Returning to Baziotes's mantra for boxing—life in a squared ring—the trope of the loner artist battling his demons becomes more complicated when confronted with media



Figure 3. William Baziotes, *Mirror at Midnight II*, 1942. Oil on canvas. 20 1/8 x 28 1/8 in. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Copyright Estate of William Baziotes.

depictions of the sport. The images of boxing during Baziotes's formative years were ones that were fraught with references to contradictory notions of gender (machismo or a waltz), that pitted rugged individualism against the anonymous crime world, and that placed primitivist discourse against the realities of global political engagement. One finds similar contradictions in Baziotes's tough guy language and gentle sensuous style. His art often pairs gentleness with foreboding, beauty with gloom, tenderness with a hint of evil. He himself told an interviewer in 1952, "In my type of painting I often feel we have a horror and something very beautiful. A certain strangeness too" (Paneth 7). Equally memorable, he wrote in 1949, "Evil tempts me as much as the good. I would like to be the purest of men and yet the lewd fascinates me" (Baziotes, "Artist and His Mirror" 3).

The thinly washed background of greens, blues, and rose tints in *The Balcony*, (Figure 1) mingles with the sinuous black lines evoking the heated sensuality of Baudelaire's poem by that name which inspired the painting (Paneth 24).¹⁷ The soft colors of his palette turn lurid and strange in *Mirror at Midnight* circa 1942 (Figure 3). Phosphorescent hues glow from behind a now bolder and more entrapping network of enclosing black lines suggesting the mood of Baudelaire's poem "Favors of the Moon" (Ethel Baziotes, "Interview with Hadler" 1975) where the poet describes the moon's glow as a "luminous poison." Indeed throughout Baziotes's production we find tender hues pierced by sharp lines or ominous forms like the scarred slashes in *Primeval* (1952). Titles such as *The Flesh Eaters* (1952) reinforce these frightening associations just as that larger and later painting combines sharp lines with alluring lavenders and pinks embedded in a painted matrix that traps the figures and encourages a slow meditative viewing and openness to association in the symbolist/surrealist tradition. By pairing the large and the innovative with the nuanced and the gentle, or the beautiful with the cruel, Baziotes's art elides superficial divisions not unlike accounts of boxing from his day.

His imagery can be marked by gender ambivalence as well. In 2011 the contemporary painter Carroll Dunham wrote an homage to Baziotes after having seen his 1947 painting *The Dwarf* exhibited in a large retrospective on Abstract Expressionism in the Museum of Modern Art. While he admired the strangeness of the forms, the comic cruelty and hint of playfulness in the painting, he focused on the sexuality of the imagery: "He/she/it is either priapic, pregnant, or martially aroused, depending upon whether one interprets the gray ovoid shape embedded in the 'stomach' as a sectional view of a necrotic cock and (enormous) balls, as a chamber with an egg floating in it, or as the barrel and magazine of a machine gun pointing directly out of the picture" (Dunham 327). Returning to Baziotes's early pugilist (Figure 2), our tough guy too, somewhat humorously, sports a rather limp phallus.

Baziotes's late paintings of the fifties and sixties before his untimely

death in 1963, grew more nuanced with scumbled surfaces and meandering lines just as the art world became more obsessed with the machismo of Abstract Expressionism, with what T. J. Clark has called the “metaphorics of masculinity” (Guilbaut 229). Critic Rudi Blesh, for example, wrote in 1956 that Pollock and de Kooning paint like athletes and, “by the force of their wills have they compressed their dual muscularity onto the canvas” (291). But today historians, in the wake of the feminist movement, are interested in more complex gender issues. De Kooning’s assertion that he is painting the woman in himself is more engaging than Blesh’s reductive statement. Critics do not necessarily find aggression in Pollock’s work and are not afraid to admire the delicacy of color in the interstices of his skeins. We like that Mark Rothko’s canvasses reveal themselves slowly. Words like “tender” or “delicacy” can be used unapologetically and without bias for the work of men or women. Feminist historians have long chronicled the problems for women artists during abstract expressionism,¹⁸ but we now look as much to the tender male—or the straight male like Baziotes who boxed and was said to resemble Humphrey Bogart in appearance, but was not afraid of his female half or a liberal use of pink. And so, addressing boxing and Baziotes’s identification with it,

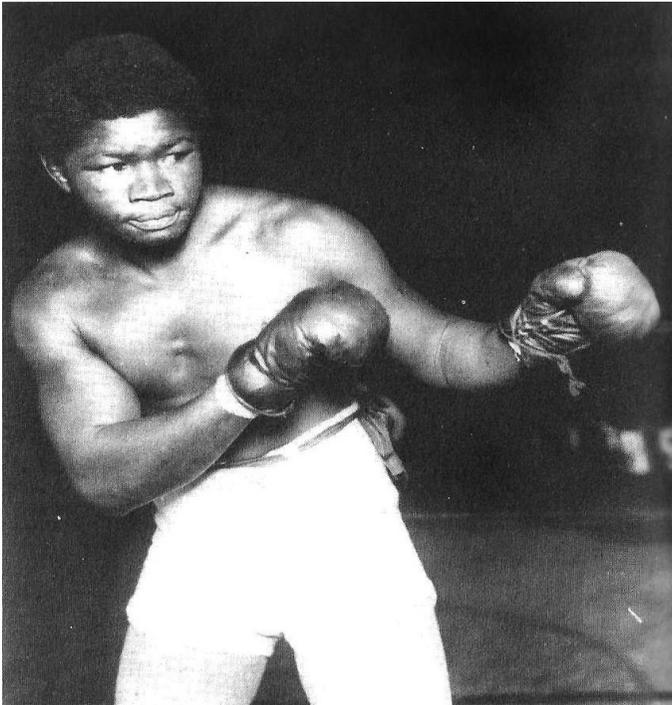


Figure 4. “Batting Siki,” n.d. Photograph. Courtesy Peter Benson.

helps revisionist historians to complicate notions of gender in this very catalytic moment. In returning to Baziotes's identification with the boxer it is important to consider what it means for an artist whose work was marked by poetic associations and gentle sensibility to admire this most macho of sports. Perhaps he too admired its combination of beauty and roughness, of dancing and punching, of male physical beauty and elegant maneuvers or, as Oates puts it, the "denial of the feminine-in-man that has its ambiguous attractions for all men..."

"Life in a squared ring" may be referring to the painter's artistic battles, but there were many fights within that squared ring during Baziotes's day and ours. What for Baziotes was the heroic loner artist painting, was for the Surrealists the defiant act of the rebel refusing the mob/government/society's control. Roland Barthes, writing later in the fifties, sheds light on this thesis through his provocative reading of the mythology of mass culture in the postwar era. In his essay "Wrestling" he pointedly contrasts the individualism of boxing to the artifice of wrestling. The latter he argues is a spectacle of excess while boxing demonstrates excellence and, through narrative, leads to a concluding victory or an individual winner (Barthes 16). He points in other words to the primacy of individual action in boxing and that precise quality marks both the Surrealist and the Abstract Expressionist's discussion of the sport. The loner artist, one might argue, meets the anarchist revolutionary. So, in some sense, Baziotes's tropes can fit those of boxing in his youth, but in a more subtle way than one might expect. By unpacking the media representations, a more complex story unfolds.

Fredric Jameson writes: "all contemporary works of art—whether those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture—have as their underlying impulse—albeit in what is often distorted and repressed, unconscious form—our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived" (Jameson 147). One sees this principle at work in Baziotes's and the Surrealists' identification with the boxer as loner fighter or anarchist dissident. But a discussion of boxing involves much more. Boxing provides the discursive space for marginalized nonhegemonic voices, carnivalesque inversions, postcolonial discourses, alternate gender constructions, revisions of canonical narratives, and the remapping of ethnic affiliations and class divisions.

Notes

1. On Hare, see my article, "David Hare, Surrealism and the Comics" and on Ernst, see my chapter "Jazz and the New York School."
2. Ethel Baziotes is the artist's widow. The interviews from the seventies cited in this essay were conducted as part of my research for my Ph.D. dissertation (Hadler, "The Art of William Baziotes"). See Eburne on the

relation between Surrealists and pulp and crime fiction.

3. Constance Baziotes is the artist's sister.
4. See Hadler, "William Baziotes: A Contemporary Poet-Painter" and also Hadler, "William Baziotes: Four Sources of Inspiration."
5. Paneth's essay was based on interviews with the artist in 1952.
6. Ethel Baziotes has placed an article on Burke in the archives, with a note as to Burke's importance to her husband, *Berks County Record*, Reading Pennsylvania, December 24, 1964, William and Ethel Baziotes Papers.
7. See List and Schaffner.
8. At this time, in 1965, after the artist's death in 1963, his widow wrote to Gene Tunney's son reiterating her husband's admiration for the boxer and the sport. A lively exchange of letters between the two can be found in the William and Ethel Baziotes Papers.
9. See for example Jones.
10. Thompson was the prototype for today's award winning HBO drama *Boardwalk Empire*.
11. This quote is found in his chapter on psychology and boxing.
12. The details of the different aspects of the saga vary somewhat in the different sources.
13. See also Boddy's description of the events and discussion of Diagne's stance against the Pan Africanism of Dubois and Garvey (235, 422).
14. See Stansell for a subtle discussion of Surrealist primitivism in light of the politics of Négritude in Breton's circle.
15. Orio Vergani wrote *Poor Nigger* in 1930 based on Siki's story.
16. Siki's actions arguably form the prototype for contemporary performances of race and gender such as Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Buenos Aires* (1994), where the artists charged \$10 for Gomez-Peña to publicly eat a banana. See Fusco (563).
17. See also Hadler, "William Baziotes: A Contemporary Poet-Painter" (103).
18. See for example Gibson.

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