

# The Couple Complex

It is no surprise that an industry fuelled by glamour, careerism, and symbolic capital is rife with workplace liaisons. Creatives create themselves through relationships – muses, contenders, social climbers, or enviable bona-fide soul mates. But what happens when half a couple gets more of the spotlight? And yet: cringe as it may be to admit, the alliances we forge amidst the power games might amount to living happily ever after.

We all know that the art world is not necessarily the best place for couples. What room is left for romance when both partners are professionally involved with art? And when being a twosome, in the eyes of others, gets kudos above all if the relationship itself is treated as an artwork? Could Gilbert and George ever have a cuddle without it instantly becoming art? What happens when the roles are obviously divided up asymmetrically – and become clichéd – or, to put it differently, if an emerging artist, let's say, someone like Raphaela Vogel, gets together with a renowned *Großtheoretiker* like Diedrich

Diederichsen? If Vogel didn't invite us to share in her young love on Instagram, one could say, it was none of your business. What about when the stage and the backdrop are illuminated to varying degrees, as with the German artist Katharina Sieverding – whom Isabelle Graw described, not unproblematically, as the paradigmatic “exceptional woman” – and her long-term partner, artist Klaus Mettig? Is it irrelevant – to her art, to his art, to art criticism, to art history – that whenever she likes, Sieverding has recourse to his expansive repertoire of technical skills for her own works of conceptual photography?

By  
Hans-Jürgen Hafner



Courtesy: Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

Josef and Anni Albers, ca. 1935



We talk about couples too much and too little at the same time. Okay, the words we have for talking about them are already pretty cringey. “Girlfriend” or “boyfriend”, or even “spouse” or “lover”, or for that matter, *Lebensmensch*, as the Viennese say ... which is hardly better. What about “better half” or even “(business) partner”? I mean, please! Anyway, nobody wants to live according to the rules of someone else’s language. If today’s gender fluidity is driven by a wish to undo the heteronormativity and cisnormativity encoded in language and law, what it has created is an expanded territory for new forms of normativity, such as those transversed by Wu Tsang and Boychild in poetic, performative ways, so beautifully practised as a life shared.

It may seem unsettling for hardcore moralists that even within radical feminist and LGBTQI\*

scenes, it is never entirely out of the question that two people should suddenly be overcome with the feeling of being “made for each other” and hence live together, work together (or each for themselves), and at the same time, want to love each other. People can find one another, but then they can also split up, becoming rivals overnight, precisely because the art world rewards the radical: sex that sails under the banner of the “progressive”, a critical, activist agenda, an exclusive cultural product one has to offer, or the public is thought to want.

Since around 1800 (at the latest), when the Enlightenment began to discover its repressed, romantic side, the motif of the “artist couple” was established, with duos whose shared private and professional lives chipped away at artistic and social conventions, sometimes gently, sometimes

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Christo and Jeanne-Claude during the installation of *42,390 Cubic Feet Package*, Minneapolis, 1966

© 1966 Christo and Jeanne-Claude Foundation. Photo: Carroll T. Hartwell



Photo: Paul Grover / Alamy Live News

Gilbert & George, 2016

less so. Again and again, they reinvented existing norms, maybe because they were a bit conventional, too. From Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Emmy Hennings and Hugo Ball, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, all the way to Simone Forti and Robert Morris, the history of the avant-garde is full of examples of the productive effects of coupledom, which are not always easy to decipher. Questions of who inspired whom, who financed whom, who loved whom too much or not enough, whose oeuvre lingered in obscurity, rightly or wrongly, on account of factors internal or external to the relationship – the latter including the structural sexism of institutions, the biases of society at large, and those of the emancipatory projects directed against them – can only be determined on a case-by-case basis. But the neutral gaze required for a clear view of these matters is not intrinsically without its own agenda. Independent of how most coupled relationships contain a whiff of conservatism, the professional aspects of relationships between two artists are especially difficult to figure out and are often problematic for the people involved, sometimes to the point of real-life tragedy, if rarely so stark as in the case of Ana Mendieta

and Carl Andre. Those who believe her 1985 death was femicide at Andre’s hands – rather than, as the official story goes, an accident – still regularly stage protests at exhibitions of his work. At the time, the strains on their relationship may have escalated because Mendieta’s – comparatively modest – success as a conceptual artist was seen as a result of the influence of her prominent partner, as Luis Camnitzer, among others, noted. No wonder people are suspicious of the constellation of the couple in a social milieu that has traditionally tended to foster extremes. If the myth of the (male, white, hetero) sole artistic genius has been increasingly decoupled from gender – even as its social function (validating the individual, success, whatever) remains undimmed, its antithesis in 2022 is not the couple, but the miraculous salve of the “collective”, a form that seems to go down well with cultural bureaucracy, too.

There has always been a lot of gossip about romantic, two-person relationships, regardless of duration, intensity, gender identification, sexual preference, or the degree to which the form of partnership is institutionally recognised. The more prominent the people concerned are, the more





Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Rachel Rosenthal

Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in Johns's Pearl Street studio, New York, ca. 1954

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gossip there is. What some people find invasive, others skilfully reinvest into their public persona. For many people in the art world, however, the more important question is: why insist on a boundary between the private and the professional when we are simply too insignificant, unknown, and uninteresting to get a single click?

We know from Instagram that the art world is not so different from Hollywood. If art has always been driven by status and prestige, today, it is more a part of the entertainment industry than ever; over the past twenty years, even its most academic or activist corners have been infected by the virus of celebrity. Where a lot of attention promises a lot of money and power – and vice versa – the *a priori* unequal conditions of life and work ineluctably disadvantage people who started nearer the bottom. This only opens the door to greater

dependency and exploitation, up to and including outright mental, physical, and sexual abuse. There's no question about it: abuse of power comes as no surprise. And envy is not a privilege, just as privilege does not protect you from envy. Is it even possible, then, for two people with similar professional and private interests to live together “normally” – whatever that means?

Whereas the art world's rumour mill runs at full steam at so much as an inkling that someone may be changing places in the merry-go-round of partners, everybody's lips are sealed for the public at large. A silence that can only be compared to that surrounding unsatisfactory sales figures applies even to institutionalised couples who venture out together in public. The exceptions prove the rule. From a safe art-historical distance, ideally with a bit of Surrealism thrown in, any artist

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couple of your choice is a safe bet for a major exhibition with an accompanying biopic. The “true story” of the “ill-starred lovers” Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera worked well as bait to draw the masses to museum ticket sales desks. By contrast, the exhibition series “Unterbrochene Karrieren” [Interrupted Careers] at nGBK in Berlin at the end of the 1990s was highly controversial: it looked at gay artist couples where one partner had died prematurely as a result of AIDS. The question of how

things should continue after such a loss is about much more than how to deal with an oeuvre left behind. Especially when art is the common denominator for a couple, separation is difficult to cope with. To have a partner who empathises with the difficulties of life as an artist and life itself, to feel understood and secure with them, is a form of happiness not easily replaced. “He knew how hard it was to do,” Laurie Anderson wrote about Lou Reed, her partner of twenty-one years, after his death.



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Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe at an exhibition by John Marin  
American Place, 1942, New York



## Romance has become a pretty hard currency in the art world, much like the radicalism that used to be generally seen as its antithesis.

A rare (and explicit) exception in which the couple form is itself treated as art comes into play in Aura Rosenberg's series "The Astrological Ways" (2012). The works in the series are titled for the zodiac signs corresponding with particular sex positions and the first names of the people who physically participated in their making, using their white acrylic paint-covered bodies to print on large rectangles of black velvet; Rosenberg and her husband, artist John Miller, are present and correct, along with several other couples. Have you seen Suzanne and Gary? So cute!

By comparison, the image captions in *Artforum's* Diary entries are eminently "respectable" in that they issue a descriptive identifier to everyone with a function in the art world while omitting to label the ignominious "remainder" of the private sphere, regardless of whether the other person is a new crush or somebody else's spouse. Conspiratorial chumming up, authentic or not so authentic intimacy – of course, this all existed long before the invention of Art Basel or the Venice Biennale. Just think of the political and business elites of the Court of Burgundy as they crowd around the Nativity in the paintings of Roger van der Weyden et al. But we still want to know what's going on. And we still read things like "Left: Artists Rob Pruitt and Jonathan Horowitz", "Right: Curator Pati Hertling and artist K8 Hardy", or "Artists Barbara Kruger and Christopher Williams with curator Ann Goldstein".

Nevertheless, Wikipedia knows that Heji Shin – known among other things for her photographs of Kanye West, and the exact moment a child is born, which cleverly skirt the line between being just too "out there" and much too close for comfort – is married to the Canadian artist Mathieu Malouf, notorious as an analyst of the way people (including himself) use online outrage culture to cast themselves in various roles. In the entry for esteemed museum curator Ann Goldstein, the name "Christopher Williams" comes up under "spouse", while in his own "Personal Life" section,

we read that "Williams's wife is curator and former Stedelijk Museum director Ann Goldstein."

This may rile up those people who spend their time thinking about business and HR law, governance and transparency regulations, insider trading and how the business of art is notoriously deregulated, and for that very reason, favours backroom deals. It is a cause for alarm among those who – and here we meet the celebrity virus again – look at how others are faring under conditions distorted by the attention economy. What do you reckon: After her divorce from Jürgen Teller, would Sadie Coles be more, or less, motivated to mount another show of the star photographer's work in her blue-chip gallery?

Naturally, we should ask ourselves whether the private lives of others should be any concern of ours. Where Cupid's arrow flies and whom it hits is "beyond critique" – regardless of whether we're talking about a super-rich art-collecting corporate heiress with her own museum, or a struggling, emerging artist looking for a gallery. We should also acknowledge that professional environments – from education to the workplace – are responsible for a considerable number of romantic relationships, planting the seed for many a marriage. The art world is no different, since art holds a special potential in both social terms (as a marker of fame or success) and symbolic ones (through claims to artistic greatness, intellectual relevance, et cetera). This potential is, regardless of all the uncertain prospects and risks, not so easily available in other professions or biospheres. It won't be so bad if you find someone with a similar view of this potential to share the risk with. To put it in the immortal words of A Tribe Called Quest: "Me and you girl go against the world / Against the world? / Hell yeah the world."

Maybe this is why the glimpse into the domestic bliss of Cecilia Alemani and Massimiliano Gioni, published in the *Corriere della Sera* a few years ago, was so disturbing. Together with their young son Gigi, the duo, known as "the art world's first couple", posed in their immaculately styled Milan apartment as if in a



Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) and Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob), 1920

picture book from the 50s. When does this even happen, and to whom: that each partner curates an edition of the Venice Biennale a few years apart, otherwise working day jobs as high-profile curators in New York, Alemani for the High Line in Manhattan, and Gioni as Associate Director of the New Museum across town, meanwhile their offspring leafs through a book by the Guerilla Girls for the sake of the photographer. It would be hard to pack more romance and radicalism into the fundamentally conservative nuclear family. Not that the roles couldn't be cast differently, but even then, everything would basically stay the same.

What that family portrait suggests above all is that "romance" has become a pretty hard currency in the art world, much like the "radicalism"

that used to be generally seen as its antithesis. You must pay your dues to both the former and the latter, regardless of whether you're a pragmatist, opting to become a success-oriented careerist, or are a committed avant-gardist who wants nothing less than to push forward art and all of society. It's a pity when the radical and the romantic get in each other's way so that they both come up short. But I'd say it's precisely the couple form that is actually pretty good at overcoming such obstacles.

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Courtesy: Jersey Heritage Collections