

## He Had So Many More Stories to Tell

Before I knew it, I had a large stack of books on my lap—books about paradigm shifts and non-Euclidean geometry in modern art. “If you’re interested in what I’m saying, you need to read these,” Kirk said. “Then forget about it all and just look at the art.”

I had encountered Kirk Varnedoe '67 on the front cover of *Rugby Magazine* months earlier, and as a fellow rugger with a mind for art history, I wanted to meet him. All I knew of Kirk I had read in *Rugby* and in *Art Forum*; he was like one of Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses*: His salient and valued attributes needed to be experienced to be understood. Passages from *The History of the Williams College Rugby Football Club* report endless “songfests led by the tireless Varnedoe.” Entries from the club's 1968 tour to England describe how the team “had time to visit a number of the museums in London and [how] having an art historian of Kirk's now international stature certainly made these visits more educational.”

For all his later distinction, Kirk's teammates were quick to observe: “Anyone that knew Kirk in the 1960s would find it hard to believe that he is now so well respected in the art history world.” On the flight to England, “I think we were actually roped off in the rear of the plane to protect us from the other passengers who had heard Varnedoe's rendition of ‘Eskimo Nell’ one too many times!”

My interaction with Kirk began with rapid-fire e-mails, then phone calls and eventually a visit with him in June, during which we ruminated about what art history could hold as a career. Throughout those exchanges, Kirk offered me his time and sound advice. All I could offer him was a jersey I won off an opposing Amherst scrum-half my senior year—a fine contribution, he assured me.

Most of my exposure to Kirk occurred this past spring at the A.W. Mellon Lecture Series at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. During the series, I marveled that someone as distinguished as he would introduce himself week after week. Each time he arrived at the podium, it was: “Thank you for coming. I am Kirk Varnedoe.”

During the fourth lecture, however, I realized that even in a crowd of hundreds of informed patrons who had waited hours to gain admittance, recognition was not guaranteed. Following Kirk's self-introduction, the group sitting next to me dissolved into murmurs, having learned it was Kirk Varnedoe lecturing, and not the author Kurt Vonnegut. True to form, by the end of the hour Kirk had the befuddled literary enthusiasts so enraptured with his treatise for abstraction, that I noticed the group returned to wait in line for each of the subsequent lectures.

I related the story to Kirk and he laughed, adding that the confusion was common enough. He told me he once ran into Vonnegut at a party; the novelist admitted that people frequently challenged his approach to modern art. Vonnegut, a painter himself, professed honor in being mistaken for the much respected director of MoMA.

In the Mellon lectures, Kirk drew listeners into the vocabulary of abstraction, the terms of modern art, which so many people find frighteningly arcane. With arms outstretched, head back, eyes closed, he spoke to the ceiling, offering up energy and content. While he was physically demonstrating the giant cursive lines of Cy Twombly—the act, the repetition, the obsession—Kirk almost knocked over the podium. Unfazed, he steadied the dais, then launched into a comparative criticism of Twombly and Jackson Pollock, how the complexity of each demanded to be understood on its own terms—a perspective needed even when reading the intricate mind of a Williams rugger:

work hard, play hard, on the pitch and off, *nihil in moderato*—a credo Kirk catapulted to a new level.

Following the lectures and my visit with Kirk, I sat down with his former student Jeffrey Weiss, chief curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery, to whom Kirk had referred me. Our discussion, originally intended to be an informational session on modern art, rapidly resembled two kids discussing their favorite superhero; we were discussing Kirk. “He has always had an infectious sense of urgency and excitement about art history,” Weiss said. “He's a large reason why many people are in the field.”

I understood. My brief encounters with Kirk have led me to write numerous essays on his theories and lectures. My writing projects rest mid-conversation—critiques of the Mellon series that he prodded me to hone; his last e-mail to me includes addresses where I was to send them. I'm sure his point was to get me writing, thinking. He always said that art history needs better stories. “You need to look and think harder,” Kirk advised. “Art is not dead. It is more sophisticated than ever. You need to see we are getting smarter.”

“I've seen things you people wouldn't believe,” Kirk said during his last lecture. He quoted Rutger Hauer's character, Roy Batty, in *Blade Runner*. “Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion as bright as magnesium; I rode on the back decks of a blinker and watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tanhauser Gate. All those moments, they'll be lost in time, like tears in the rain. . . .”

“I feel like this,” Kirk said. “I have told you many stories about abstraction, about Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns . . . and I have so many more to tell,” he explained to the crowd. “But I have run out of time.”

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