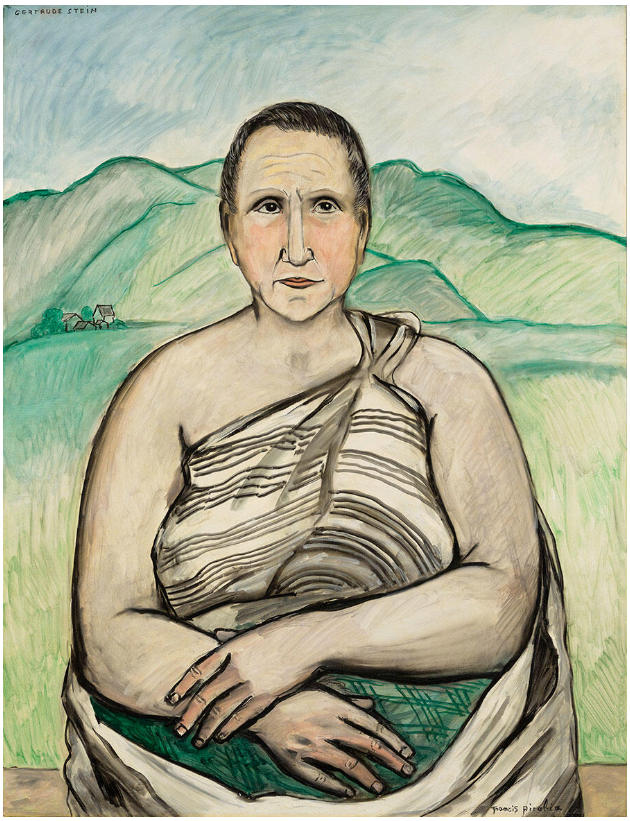
FRIEZE

The Timeless Enigma of Gertrude Stein

The pioneering novelist and poet, who championed avant-garde practices, continues to inspire contemporary artists and writers

BY FRANCESCA WADE IN OPINION | 23 APR 25

In 1926, Gertrude Stein took to the stage at Oxford University to deliver a lecture – later published as ‘Composition as Explanation’ – that she hoped would change the course of her floundering reputation. Stein, then aged 52, was widely celebrated: writers and artists thronged to her Paris home to marvel at her modern art collection and enjoy her biting wit. Yet, she felt her true career had stalled before it had started. Her non-representational writing – which sought to divest words of their conventional meanings and to create a sense of immediacy through non-sequitur, repetition and force of language – was consistently rejected by publishers and derided by critics. As consolation, she told herself that a truly radical artist could never expect to be appreciated in their own time, but would remain, as she argued in the lecture, ‘an outlaw until he is a classic’. Art that pushes boundaries and shatters conventions, she continued, will inevitably appear ‘ugly’ before people have got used to it, with those at the vanguard ‘naturally only of importance when they are dead’. One day, Stein insisted, she would be recognized as an avant-garde pioneer. ‘The followers’, she added wryly, ‘are always accepted before the person who made the revolution.’



Francis Picabia, Gertrude Stein, 1933, oil on canvas, 116 × 60 cm, Courtesy: Yale University Art Gallery; Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut

My book Gertrude Stein: an Afterlife (2025) sets out to tell the story of how Stein won the acclaim she craved, facing down her detractors in the confidence that she had made work of lasting significance. That recognition arrived, in no small part, thanks to her championing by visual artists, who have long been Stein's greatest readers. In her lifetime, she sat for numerous portraits and enjoyed mutually enriching dialogue with painter friends (Juan Gris, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso); her patronage of artists – often those who, like her, were pushing at the boundaries of representation – turned her home into a crucible of aesthetic innovation, the art on her walls as vibrant as the words on her page. And, since her death in 1946, an explosion of avant-garde forms and practices have built on her radical approach to language, time and perception, reshaping the notion of what art can be.

An explosion of avant-garde forms and practices have built on Stein's radical approach.

The rumblings began in the dive bars of New York's Greenwich Village. In the 1950s, Stein's work was hard to come by: old editions were long out of print, while the posthumous publication programme that would drive her later revival had not yet begun. Instead, tattered copies of Stein's major works – Tender Buttons (1914) and The Making of Americans (1925), Stein's attempt to write the 'history of everyone' – were passed between poets and painters. From there, her ideas soon spread to the lofts, back-room theatres and studios of New York's post- war aesthetic revolution. Among Stein's most enthusiastic advocates were the dance critic Edwin Denby, the dancer Merce Cunningham, the composer John Cage, the anarchist theatre artists Judith Malina and Julian Beck, and the poets John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Writing in Poetry magazine in 1957, Ashbery compared Stein's Stanzas in Meditation (written in the early 1930s), with its bursts of vivid language amid a stream of connecting words, to 'certain monochrome [Willem] de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of colour take on a deliciousness they never could have had out of context'. In a 1960 interview with art critic David Sylvester, De Kooning said he was thinking about Stein when he painted his series 'Woman' (1950–53). To artists exploring the possibilities of abstract expressionism, Stein's non-representational use of words offered an enticing literary equivalent to the free splashes of paint that danced unmoored across their canvases, liberated from the burden of meaning.

Willem de Kooning, Woman/Verso: Untitled, 1948, oil and enamel on fibreboard, 136 x 113 cm. Courtesy: © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington; photograph: Lee Stalsworth

To this loose group, Stein's outsider status in the commercial marketplace only made her more of a hero. Some found resonance in her insistence that words are not just a means to the creation of sense in sentences and paragraphs, but exist as entities in their own right – a founding tenet of action painting, when applied to paint. Others saw her work as widening, suggestively, the scope of what might be considered art, laying the groundwork for experiments across media. Cage had engaged with Stein's writing since his student days, setting several of her poems to music. Taking inspiration from her approach, as he noted in a 1951 interview with The Hartford Times, he sought to use sounds in his compositions 'solely for their own sake', which is to say: divested of symbolic baggage or the responsibility to advance a melody or narrative. The function of art, wrote Cage in his 1958 lecture 'Composition as Process', is 'to draw us nearer to the process which is the world we live in'. Both Stein and Cage wanted their art to increase perceptual awareness in their readers or listeners. They saw experience as something impressionistic and cumulative, not linear: their work was intimately bound up with time, demanding close attention to the present moment.

Gerturde Stein and Alice B. Toklas aboard the S.S. Champlain ocean liner, 1939. Courtesy: Bettmann/Getty Images

Cage imparted these principles to his classes at Black Mountain College and the New School in New York, which were attended, in the late 1950s, by a cluster of artists – including George Brecht, Allan Kaprow and Jackson Mac Low – who went on to make experimental, multimedia art under the loose umbrellas of fluxus and happenings: cross-disciplinary work as rich, ambiguous and non-conformist as Stein's own. In a 1934 lecture, Stein wrote at length about her dissatisfaction with the artifice she saw in conventional theatre, and her desire to experience performance as 'something real that is happening'. The happenings artists picked up on her idea of a play as a landscape in which elements relate to one another purely by sharing space: their works contain no obvious beginning or end, no framing devices of stage or curtain to announce a separation from real life and, by allowing multiple actions to occur

simultaneously, no need for linear progression. Another of Cage's students was Dick Higgins, a founding member of fluxus, who in 1963 launched the Something Else Press, a publishing house designed to set avant-garde texts by his contemporaries – concrete poetry, manifestos, works of theory and performance documentation – alongside out-of-print classics by writers whose ideas epitomized the principles of fluxus. These included several books by Stein, whose work Higgins described in his essay 'Why Gertrude Stein' (1978) as 'an entire cosmology of the arts'. Explaining Stein's fascination to intermedia artists of his generation, he continued, 'her works are organizing impetuses, psychological probes. She stimulates.'

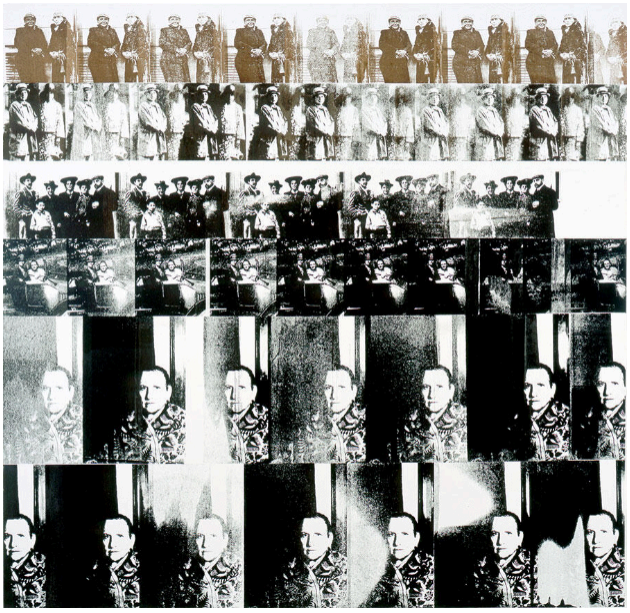
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Alice B. Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris), 1992, framed C-print, 74 x 92 cm. Courtesy: © Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Stein was interested in the materiality of language. 'I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word,' she told Robert Bartlett Haas in a 1946 interview, describing the writing of Tender Buttons, which populates a domestic space through an uncanny arrangement of words. Stein sought to empty words of what she called 'associational emotion' – the meaning a word conventionally bears, which holds within it a memory of every previous usage – in order to make them unfamiliar and unique to the particular role she was giving them.

In recent years, artists working with text have found generative possibilities in repurposing Stein's phrases for new contexts. Glenn Ligon has created multiple works, such as Study for Negro Sunshine #2 (2004) and Study for Negro Sunshine (Red) (2018), using the phrase 'negro sunshine', taken from a passage in Stein's 1906 novella Melanctha, which describes the laughter of a character named Rose Johnson in crudely racist terms. In Ligon's stencil, Stein's words are repeated and slowly rendered illegible – his work simultaneously eroding her words and unmaking her language through her own method of repetition, allowing multiple meanings to jostle against one another. In an interview with Wayne Koestenbaum, published in Yourself in the World (2011), Ligon stated that his pieces 'are concerned with figuring out how to do something that the text does, but to do something else at the same time'. He expanded on this idea in the guide to his show 'All Over the Place', which closed earlier this year at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, suggesting that Black readers 'have always been able to take that which isn't meant for us but is about us and subvert it, making something joyous out of it'.

Glenn Ligon, Study for Negro Sunshine (Red) #6, 2019, oil stick and acrylic on paper, 30.5 x 22.9 cm. Courtesy: © Glenn Ligon, Hauser & Wirth and Thomas Dane Gallery; photograph: Christopher Burke

Eve Fowler, too, has long engaged with Stein's language, covering gallery walls and floors in cut-up snippets of Stein's texts, or repurposing phrases to adorn billboards and posters, immersing the viewer in a forest of suggestively contextless language. Expressions such as 'Rub her coke' and 'In the morning there is meaning', from the poster series 'A Spectacle and Nothing Strange' (2011), playfully bring out the seductive undertones in Stein's writing, reinscribing them proudly in three dimensions. Fowler's 2018 EP, 'Words Doing As They Want To Do' – its title adapting Stein's own description of her desire for her texts to feel fresh and free – featured readings of the author's work by several women artists and formed the soundtrack to her exhibition held later that same year at Dundee Contemporary Arts. Titled 'What a slight. What a sound. What a universal shudder', the show advanced a specifically feminist response to Stein. Fowler's casually intimate film, with it which it as it if it is to be (2018), showed her friends working in their studios as they read Stein's short story Many Many Women (1910), positioning the writer as a precursor, even a guiding spirit, to a contemporary community of women artists.



Deborah Kass, Let Us Now Praise Famous Women #3, 1998, silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183 cm. Courtesy: © Deborah Kass, ARS, NY and DACS, London

Stein's iconography has fascinated artists working across styles and generations, who have also been drawn to the aspects of her identity that rendered her marginal: her gender, her sexuality, the 'difficulty' of her writing and the vitriol she received from critics. Andy Warhol included a blown-up image of Stein's passport photo in his series 'Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century' (Gertrude Stein, 1980); Deborah Kass adopted his printing techniques to create Let Us Now Praise Famous Women #2 (1994–95), which answered back to Warhol's portrait of the Rauschenberg family (Let Us Now Praise Famous

Men, 1963) with a series of Stein's family photographs, situating the writer within a feminist art-historical canon. In "Untitled" (Alice B. Toklas' and Gertrude Stein's Grave, Paris) (1992), Felix Gonzalez-Torres photographed the flowers surrounding Stein and Toklas's shared grave, marker of the storied relationship that could never be recognized by law. Two decades earlier, pioneering mail artist Ray Johnson regularly invoked Stein's name in his playful, pop-inflected collages, positioning her centrally within his own ever-expanding network of icons and influences. In Ice (c.1972), Johnson writes the names of Stein, Man Ray and Claes Oldenburg amid Rorschach-like ink blots, while Wed Ded Lead (1968) encloses a key in a frame made up of quotations from Stein's 1927 opera libretto Four Saints in Three Acts, hinting at the possibilities latent within her punning language. Johnson also designed the logo for Tender Buttons, a legendary button emporium on New York's Upper East Side named after Stein's text, which often functioned as a venue for happenings in the 1960s.

Faith Ringgold, Dinner at Gertrude Stein's: The French Collection Part II, #10, 1991, acrylic on canvas and ink on stitched, printed and dyed fabrics, 187 x 201 cm. Courtesy: © Anyone Can Fly Foundation/DACS

More recently, artists have re-examined Stein's life, creating tantalizing narratives and counter-narratives from the tapestry of anecdote in her autobiographies. Faith Ringgold's quilt series 'The French Collection' (1991–97) imagines scenes in the life of Willia Marie Simone, a young African American woman from Harlem who arrives in Paris in the 1920s, hoping to make her way as an artist and model. In Dinner at Gertrude Stein's (1991), Willia Marie visits Stein – who sits, as ever, beneath her Picasso portrait – flanked by Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso, both regulars at the salon. Alongside them, Ringgold places celebrated Black authors James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Zora Neale

Hurston, who reads animatedly from a manuscript. Here, Stein's salon – by now synonymous with the birth of European modernism – is gloriously reimagined as a place of dialogue across race, class and generations.

Stein's life and writing present infinite enigmas, fascinating to ponder but impossible to solve.

Hilary Harkness, in her series 'Life with Alice and Gertrude' (2007–16), explores the darker psychological subtexts to Stein and Toklas's famously devoted relationship, portraying fantastical scenes of erotic power struggles in her hyper-detailed, small-scale oil paintings. In Alice at Loggerheads (2009), Toklas sits wearily at a table, Picasso's portrait of Stein casting her in shadow; in Pleasing Papa: Stein, Hemingway and Toklas (2010), Toklas – dressed in green, for envy – watches beadily as Stein, cigar in hand, leans casually on the bar, engrossed in flirtatious conversation with Hemingway. Toklas's antipathy to Hemingway – Stein's one-time protégée, who spoke candidly about her sexual magnetism – is well-documented; several of Harkness's works feature his decapitated head, sometimes languishing discarded in a corner, sometimes cradled by a triumphant Toklas, even as Stein, apparently oblivious, turns her attentions to another woman.

Hilary Harkness, Gertrude Stein & Alice B. Toklas, Paris, October, 1939, 2008, oil on copper, 30 x 28 cm. Courtesy: the artist and PPOW Gallery; photograph: Genevieve Hanson

Stein's capacity for self-reinvention was endless; her life and her writing present infinite enigmas, fascinating to ponder but impossible to solve. It's only fitting that she has inspired so much art imbued with the same curiosity, playfulness and innovative spirit that characterized her own life and work, whether responses arise in the form of interpretation, critique, homage or extension of the ideas she hoped would form her greatest legacy. In a 1998 interview for Index Magazine, poet Eileen Myles called Stein 'the world's biggest influence'; adding, in a 2017 interview with The Cut, that her lectures 'totally changed my sense of what writing was'. Stein's ongoing resonance is a moving testament to the vitality of the home and workplace that she and Toklas created together. 'I suppose some day I will be the acknowledged grandmother of the modern movement,' Stein wrote in 1921 to her friend Harry Phelan Gibbs, after a string of disappointing rejections. A century on, her rueful joke reads more like a prophecy.

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Main image: Deborah Kass, Let Us Now Praise Famous Women #3 (detail), 1998, silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183 cm. Courtesy: © Deborah Kass, ARS, NY and DACS, London

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