

Next on  
our stage:



ART

SEPT. 18-OCT. 19



TRUCE: A CHRISTMAS WISH  
FROM THE GREAT WAR

NOV. 20-DEC. 21



BUILD

JAN. 22-FEB. 22

**CITY**  
**LIGHTS**  
THEATERCOMPANY

# HIGHLIGHTS

HighLights is researched and written by City Lights marketing director Rebecca Wallace.  
More about City Lights is at [cltc.org](http://cltc.org).



Art actors Max Tachis, Kit Wilder, and Jeffrey Bracco photographed at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. Photo by [Mike Ko](#).

A study guide to **Art** by Yasmina Reza,  
translated by Christopher Hampton

## Synopsis

What would you pay for a white painting? An *all-white* painting? With gut-busting hilarity and biting poignancy, *Art* tells the story of three men whose long friendship is put to the test when one buys an all-white painting by a trendy artist at an exorbitant price. As Serge, Marc, and Yvan square off over the canvas, lines are drawn, sides are taken, and the bonds that tie each man to the others are stretched to the breaking point. Only a pointed act of self-sacrifice can save a friendship from destruction — proving that there is, indeed, a limit to what one might pay for “art.”

## Characters

Marc (Kit Wilder) believes that friendship includes shared opinions. Though these bonds are key to him, he has no trouble passing harsh judgments—or throwing out zingers when he senses his friends are forming opinions that are “incorrect.”

Serge (Jeffrey Bracco), a sophisticated dermatologist, is fashion-forward and proud, but needs the approval of his friends—and of the art experts who determine what is significant.

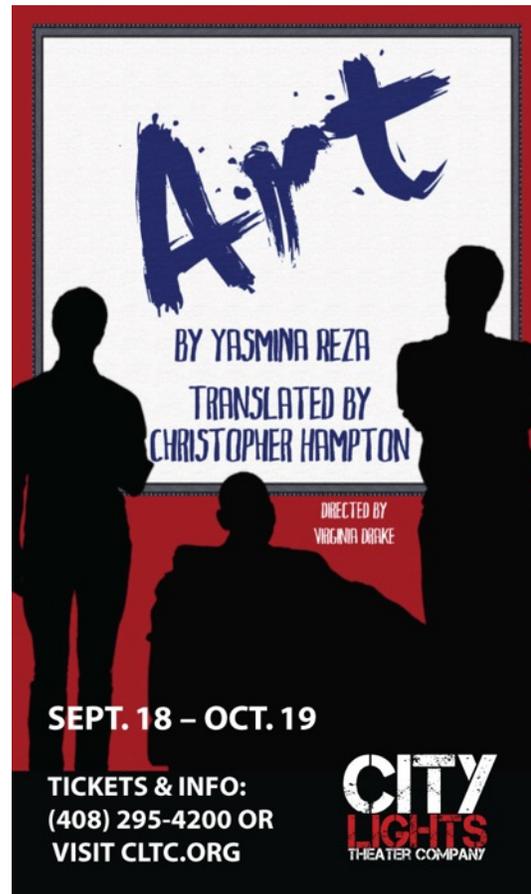
Yvan (Max Tachis), the funnyman of the three, is the youngest and often feels stuck in the middle. He pleads, “I don’t have an opinion!” and just wants everyone to get along.

## Biography

Born in 1959, Yasmina Reza is a French playwright and novelist with deep roots in the arts. The daughter of an Iranian engineer-pianist and a Hungarian violinist, she began her own career as an actress before turning to writing.

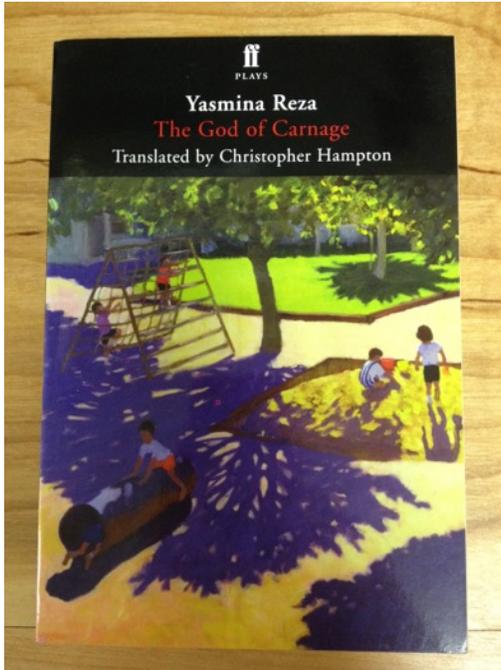
Her first two plays both won France's prestigious Molière Award. *Conversations After a Burial* (1986) is a tale of death, sex, and family ties, while *Winter Crossing* (1989) follows vacationers at a mountain resort.

When *Art* opened in Paris in 1994, the tale of friends arguing over a work of modern art earned the playwright her widest notice yet. *Art* brought in Molière Awards for Best Play, Author, and



Production, and then took a British Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy. In 1998, the Tony Award for Best Play was the icing on the cake.

*Art* helped give Reza a name as a writer who zeroes in on the middle class and all its angst with a satirical pen. That reputation was cemented with her 2006 play *God of Carnage*, an incisive comedy



about two couples who face off after their children get into a playground fight. It also took the Tony for Best Play, and in 2011 it was made into the movie Carnage. Reza co-wrote the screenplay with director Roman Polanski; the stars included Jodie Foster and Kate Winslet.

Reza is also a successful novelist. This summer, she released *Happy are the Happy*, a collection of vignettes about polite society and how people struggle to fit into its confines.

Reza's sharp writing and insights about contemporary society have brought her wide popularity among actors as well as audiences.

"Reza serves actors great parts, saucy lines and crunchy monologues on a platter," Britain's The Independent reported.

*This incisive comedy about two warring couples was made into the Roman Polanski film Carnage in 2011.*

During *Art*'s six-year sold-out stint in London, so many actors wanted a role that different stars would come and appear in the play for three months at a time. "The first cast (Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, and Ken Stott) enjoyed themselves so much that every actor in Britain wanted to try their hand at it. *Art* became a must."

## The origin of *Art*

Years ago, Serge Goldszal, a friend of Yasmina Reza's, wanted to show her a new painting he had bought. He was very proud.

Reza took one look at the monochromatic work of art and found it hilarious. "I laughed and said you must be mad and then we both laughed," she told a reporter in 1998. "He loves the painting and knew I might not, and we laughed because our complicity was in no way spoiled. But if he hadn't laughed and had thought the choice revealed his friends in another light ... "

There was a fine idea for a play. What if a man named Serge buys a painting and *isn't* prepared to laugh at it? What if an entire friendship is threatened in the process?

**"Reza serves actors great parts, saucy lines and crunchy monologues on a platter."**

This is a play not just about friendship, but about male friendship. Reza said the script's outcome would have been very different—just like her real-life experience—if one of the *Art* friends had been a woman.

Friendship between men, she said, "is terribly rigid. Often men have no real friends, French men at least. They have colleagues, contacts, but not friends and when they do it is very strong, possessive, rigid. All the men who saw *Art* said it is amazing, how did you understand this or that? I said I understood nothing, I just noticed."



*Art* actors Serge (Jeffrey Bracco), Marc (Kit Wilder), and Yvan (Max Tachis). Photo by Mike Ko.

## Other controversial figures in modern art

Abstract art has a long and noble history of stirring things up. Though the painting in *Art* is by a fictional artist, Antrios would be in great company if only he were real.

### *Kazimir Malevich*

Antrios might have enjoyed sitting down for a vodka with Kazimir Malevich, a Russian avant-garde painter who was one of the earliest big names in abstract art.

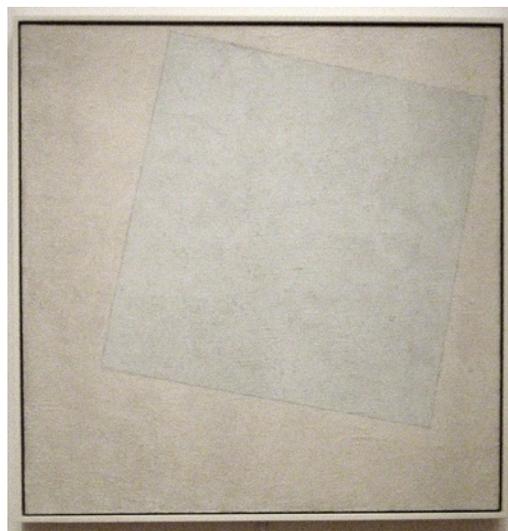
Pretty much all 20th-century monochromatic painting owes a debt to "Suprematist Composition: White on White," a Malevich canvas from 1918. In fact, Malevich had a whole white-on-white series that he found exhilarating. When he first exhibited the radical series, in Moscow in 1919, he wrote: "I have overcome the lining of the colored sky. ... Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you."

Malevich founded an entire art movement called Suprematism, in which artists expressed themselves through basic geometric shapes and colors. Devotees called the works pure, straightforward, and free of political propaganda.

### *Robert Rauschenberg*

Some viewers found Malevich's abyss baffling, while others dove right in.

The late Robert Rauschenberg, an American pop-art pioneer, went completely white—no off-white, no diagonals—with his series of "White Paintings", which he made with perfectly smooth rolled-on house paint. The paintings went up in 1953 in New York, and the art world was aghast.



*Kazimir Malevich broke new ground with "Suprematist Composition: White on White" in 1918. (Source)*

Rauschenberg wasn't finished. If white canvases were good, obliterating existing art must be better.

In 1953, Rauschenberg went to visit Willem de Kooning, who was one of the most famous artists of the day. He asked if de Kooning would give him a drawing that he could erase as an artistic experiment. Could art be made by removing marks instead of adding them?

After some coaxing, de Kooning handed over one of his drawings. He purposely picked one that would be hard to erase: a creation thickly layered with pencil, crayon, and charcoal. It took Rauschenberg a month to erase.

In the end, he came up with Erased De Kooning Drawing, a simple piece of paper in a gilded frame.

Call it minimalism, or call it ridiculous. Rauschenberg seemed to find a lot of joy in the experiment. "It's not a negation. It's a celebration," he said in 1999 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. **(Watch the video at [bit.ly/rauscherased](http://bit.ly/rauscherased))**

### *Barnett Newman*

American painter Barnett Newman bathed his canvases in giant swaths of color: fields of blues and reds, blacks and whites and browns. Some people saw his art as simple; he saw it as spiritual.



*Robert Rauschenberg in 1968. (Source)*

In 1967, Newman painted "Voice of Fire" in bright acrylic: two vertical stripes in ultramarine blue, with one in the middle in cadmium red. The dramatic 18-foot-tall painting was shown in a geodesic dome at the International and Universal Exposition in Montreal, and nobody got too upset about it.

However, the public threw a fit in 1990 when the National Gallery of Canada bought the painting for \$1.8 million. Canada was falling into a recession. Was it the time to drop a small fortune on a painting of three stripes? Debates erupted in Parliament. Editorial cartoonists gleefully drew stripe after stripe. Diana Nemiroff, the contemporary art curator at the gallery, proudly walked around wearing a blue blazer over a red T-shirt.

Newman had died in 1970, so he missed all the excitement. The painting stayed at the gallery, and today Nemiroff and others who defended "Voice of Fire" actually seem nostalgic about the uproar of 1990, a Canadian journalist wrote recently: "After all, art has never since commanded such a prominent place in the national conversation."

Note: "Voice of Fire" is valued at over \$40 million today.

### *Marcel Duchamp*

It's one thing to have a controversy over a painting. Just imagine if Serge had brought home a toilet in *Art*.

French-American painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp was all about controversy. His portfolio contained everything from dreamy Cubist figures to conceptual pieces made from snow shovels. He was a pioneer in the early-20th-century Dada avant-garde movement that strove to throw out all the old conventions in art.



*Marcel Duchamp's Fountain. (Source).*

But Duchamp went too far even for many Dadaists in 1917, with his work "Fountain." It was a urinal lying on its back, signed "R. Mutt," the name of a toilet manufacturer. The Society of Independent Artists refused to exhibit the piece. It's rumored that photographer Alfred Stieglitz threw it in the garbage.

Was *Fountain* art? An article of the day said it was. "Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. ... Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object."

Popular belief has it that Duchamp himself wrote the article.

With the original *Fountain* lost, Duchamp allowed reproductions of his sculpture to be made. Today, big-name museums and galleries call it a classic icon of 20th-century art.

Art—especially avant-garde contemporary art—is never going to please all the people all the time, but that’s not the point. An erased drawing, a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool by Marcel Duchamp, that all-white canvas in Yasmina Reza’s *Art*: all these creations provoke debate, push buttons, spark questions. Just like good theater.

## Glossary

A few terms and references from *Art*.

**Deconstruction:** A way of critically analyzing literature that looks at assumptions, intentions, and different layers of meaning.

**Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome:** This hereditary connective-tissue disorder causes sufferers to bruise easily and to have highly fragile tissue and blood vessels.

**Gelsemium and Ignatia:** Homeopathic remedies that Paula, Marc's girlfriend, prescribes to help his headaches and nervous stomach. Arthur Conan Doyle was not a huge fan of gelsemium.

**Gorgon:** A colorful insult that Marc uses to describe Catherine, Yvan's fiancée. A gorgon is a woman in Greek mythology whose hair is made of snakes. Think Medusa.

**Paul Valéry:** A French writer and philosopher, Valéry was known for his poetry, aphorisms, and a voice that was intellectual and rational.

**Pompidou:** The Centre Pompidou is a Paris arts complex where the National Museum of Modern Art lives.

**Seneca:** This first-century Roman philosopher and playwright was a fan of Stoic philosophy, which disregards useless emotions and supports clear thinking and self-control. Serge tells Marc to go read Seneca to make his life simpler. In particular, Serge recommends the essay *De Vita Beata* (“*Of a Happy Life*”), which advises people to pursue reason and logic while chasing happiness.

**Trajectory:** Serge and Yvan use this word when calling the Antrios painting “part of a trajectory.” Ostensibly, the work doesn't stand on its own; it's part of a progression of art.

**Vellum:** A strong paper often used in architectural blueprints. Yvan mentions it in talking about his new job in the stationery business.



*An ancient bust of Seneca. (Source)*

City Lights Theater Company presents *Art* from Sept. 18 through Oct. 19, 2014.  
Shows are Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. at 529 S. Second St., San Jose. (No  
matinee on Sept. 21.)  
Details: [cltc.org](http://cltc.org), 408-295-4200

***Art credits***

Director: Virginia Drake

Assistant Director: Julia Rotakhina

Stage Manager: Ben Hemmen

Scenic Designer: Ron Gasparinetti

Lighting Designer: Nick Kumamoto

Costume Designer: Amy Zsadanyi-Yale

Props Designer: Julia Rotakhina

Sound Designer: George Psarras

**Cast**

Marc: Kit Wilder\*

Serge: Jeffrey Bracco

Yvan: Max Tachis

\*Member, Actors' Equity Association

