

Alelo

RECENT WORKS BY
JOHN AVELLUTO

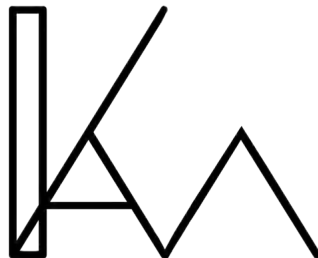


CURATED BY CATERINA Y. PIERRE, PHD

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KINGSBOROUGH ART MUSEUM

This catalogue coincides with *Al e Io: Recent Works by John Avelluto*, an exhibition organized by the Kingsborough Art Museum at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. The exhibition was on view from October 15, 2025 to February 4, 2026.

Al e Io was curated by Caterina Y. Pierre, PHD

Kingsborough Art Museum
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Front Cover: *Eco. Ecco. Ecko* (side view). Acrylic paint and acrylic 3-D print on panel 15 x 12.5 x 6 inches, 2021.

***A Conversation: John Avelluto
and Caterina Y. Pierre***

A Conversation:
John Avelluto / Artist
Caterina Y. Pierre / Curator

*This discussion between **John Avelluto** and exhibition curator **Caterina Y. Pierre** was conducted at Kingsborough Community College on June 25, 2025.*

Caterina Pierre

Thank you, John, for sitting with me for this conversation. I thought we would start by just discussing how you came to art, and if art was part of your life as a child?

John Avelluto

I didn't have a family that was interested in art or that was really supportive, or who knew how to be supportive around art. However, I think that there were a number of influences that surrounded me very early in life that I was interested in particularly, and not that I am selling the Catholic Church here, but I used to be made to go to church. And as a young person, I don't think I was very interested in what they had to say. I would find my mind wandering at mass. One thing the Catholic Church is not in shortage of is sculptures, paintings, renditions, and basically, decorative and narrative arts. I always looked at those things, and I wanted to understand, particularly, with painting, how these artworks were made. So, I would look at images across the church, you know, the narration of the Stations of the Cross, and sort of just look along at them and just notice how somebody would apply certain

colors to this or that, so I think that that was definitely one of the ways that made art easy to enter.

The other thing was: I was also really bookish. My parents didn't really get me anything when I was younger, but they did get me, at least the one gift I remember was a *World Book* because we never, we never go for the top one, meaning *Encyclopedia Britannica* because that was too expensive, right? But this is just fine, like many times, you know, just sitting in my room, I would just read the encyclopedia, and they had these wonderful catalogs of things like fish organized by, you know, subgenre, or however you describe it, phyla or family. I always noticed they were either some sort of drawing or watercolor depicting them. And it was just pages and pages of these different classifications, be it fish, insects, butterflies. So, I looked at those a lot, and I would just reproduce them and try to draw them from sight. I think that was another way to get into art. Later on, informally, I got into more street culture, you know, being from South Brooklyn. I think that I got into skateboarding, and I was all involved a lot in graffiti. So that was another way to keep my hands, if not dangerously, but somewhat active. So, you know, I was always making things like designs on skateboards or, you know, writing a tag for my friends' jackets. That was part of my growing up.

Caterina Pierre

It's funny that you bring up the church, because I think to some extent the church led me to art history. I have the same feeling that you do. You know, I went to

Catholic school for thirteen years. I was basically forced to go to church until I was about twenty. But when I got to Brooklyn College as an undergrad, when I got into my first art history class at Brooklyn College, I knew all of the stories behind the religious paintings, because so many of the works taught in the class were Western Christian works, so I always had my hand up. It was a little unfair, because the other kids who didn't grow up in that situation did not know the stories; so, if they didn't do well, it wasn't their fault. I felt like, wow, I can do this. I knew these narratives very, very well. And that was from the same thing, going around the church, looking at the Stations of the Cross at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, where I'm from, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. They have this whole room of painted plaster sculptures; they're not famous sculptures, but I was fascinated by them. I remember my favorite was the sculpture of Saint Lucy, because she had her eyes in a dish in her hand, and I wanted to know the story. I think for a lot of Italian American artists, or Italian artists, the church is our first entry point into the arts. Because of that, even the smaller churches in Brooklyn still have something--not by famous artists, or stuff that belongs in museums, but they have physical objects that attract the eye and that can get a person interested in art.

John Avelluto

I guess it did certainly help that a lot of those narratives were western and Christian. Because of the injustice of time and how things operate, most of the images that came before us were by European

painters, and the subject of most European painters was religious. So, it was very easy to get involved in that iconography, for sure. And I do remember my father started realizing that I was drawing when I was younger, and he had brought me this series of books in Italian because he worked in Little Italy [in Manhattan, New York]. Each magazine featured a different museum, and they were called *I Grandi Musei*. They would have, for example, features on the Prado, they would have the Louvre, they would have the National Portrait Gallery, and, of course, the Uffizi, and all the famous museums of the world, and the major artworks that were in all of them. I looked at those a lot. I couldn't understand the text fully, because I didn't grow up speaking Italian. I grew up speaking English, so I didn't read Italian; I just looked at the images.

Caterina Pierre

I'm sure it probably helped with your Italian, just to see the words and the pictures together. You are a first-generation Italian American, is that right? I'm already a third generation Italian American. How does that tradition get passed down through so many different generations? You had a father who spoke Italian, I'm sure, in the house, and worked in Little Italy and brought Italian magazines home. My mother was a 1950s poodle-skirt-wearing American girl. By the time we grew up, my grandmother was still alive. She was also born in the United States, but she spoke a little Italian. She spoke the dialect of her mother, who was from Orria, in Salerno, in southern Italy. She kept the food traditions, she kept the

language tradition, or at least the dialect. So, the traditions were there, but it was, I think, at the end of its tether in my family, where with you, the Italian traditions are there more fully and prominently because of that closer connection to the generation that came from Italy.

John Avelluto

Yeah, it's so weird, because for all intents and purposes, I did not have a very traditional upbringing due to circumstance and beyond. You know, growing up, I did not speak Italian in the home, they insisted on speaking English. My parents, my grandfather, my maternal grandfather said that I was American. We speak English 100% and my parents were from two different very distinct dialect-inflected regions of Italy, one from Sicily and the other one from a very particular town named called Mola di Bari. And they couldn't be more different, these languages, and I sort of pieced together things, because they would often try to talk Italian when they didn't want me to hear something. But also at the same time, my father was not really in the house very often. My parents, were separated by the time I was seven. But there was also the time frame, you know, the big influx of Italians came way earlier than when my father and mother came.

Caterina Pierre

Your parents came to the United States in the 1970s, which is late in the history of Italian American immigration. In my case, my great grandfather came and my great grandmother knew each other in Italy. They

got married and had their kids here in Brooklyn. My great-grandfather came in 1915 at the end of that big surge of with the six million or so Italians who didn't want to be Italians in Italy. Italy was a new country, and frankly they didn't know what it was like to live in a unified country. If they were going to be Italian, they figured they were going to be Italian somewhere else. I had that same experience with the language. I thought my grandmother could teach me Italian, and she said, "first of all, I speak a dialect. It wouldn't help you at all. Secondly, I can't talk behind your back. Thirdly, you're American, and you shouldn't be speaking another language." I mean, it was a weird way of thinking, but it was also because the Italians had been treated a certain way, especially after Sacco and Vanzetti [1921-27], and during World War II [1941-1945]. You know, in Al Pacino's new memoir [*Sonny Boy*], he mentions that someone in his family told him, you know, *wipe the sauce off your face, someone will think you're Italian*. You know, obviously he was Italian, his name, his face, the way he looked, but, but you tried to hide a little bit who you were, and they were the generation that tried to hide it. My grandmother was the generation of hiding, being ashamed that your parents were immigrants and didn't speak English, that you were the first generation here.

John Avelluto

I think that there were these issues because of the time frame in which we my parents had emigrated here. The third generation Italian Americans had a lot of time to adjust. There were more well-to-do

Italian Americans, especially in the neighborhood where I grew up, in Gravesend [Brooklyn]. And, you know, there was always this sort of like distance from each type of Italian you know, there was, like, the distance from those at times, because we were brand new here, and my parents wanted to, you know, quickly blend in. And there was this sort of, like keeping up with the Joneses--*keeping up with the Giacomos, keeping up with the Rizzos*. That kind of mentality. I'm sure there are other Italian Americans who have experienced this. As an Italian American, you're not Italian enough for the Italians. So, there's that issue as well. It was tough at the time. Now, I think, as I conceptualized it, later on in life, there's some sort of very interesting space to exist in, being between all these worlds and not really being attached to any of them.

Caterina Pierre

Absolutely. I think there's a way to be sort of proud of who you are, but also develop within yourself, you know, other facets of your identity that do not have anything to do with that at all.

I wondered if we could speak a little bit about education, especially since we are doing your show at a college. I think we got to talking about the Italian American performance artist Vito Acconci (1940-2017) and I had mentioned to you that he is one of my favorite artists, not only because of some of the performance pieces that he did in the 1960s and 1970s, and his links to the French Situationist International, but I just loved him as a person. I got to meet him once when I taught at Queens College

(CUNY). He gave a talk at Queens College and during his presentation, there was a fire drill, and they made us leave in the middle of his talk and go outside. I don't think Vito was that upset at all because he got to have a cigarette, which he was very happy about, and then he came back, finished the presentation like a pro, and then was invited to talk with the audience in a more casual space, and he stayed for at least two hours, chatted with students and faculty and answered all kinds questions in his kind of nonchalant, half-flippant way that he had. But he was incredible, and everybody just loved everything that came out of his mouth. I know you studied with Vito. I don't know if you want to speak about him at all, or if there were other professors or teachers who influenced you.

John Avelluto

Vito had come into Brooklyn College while I was already immersed in the MFA program in my second year, to replace Elizabeth Murray (1940-2007), who had passed away during my time there. And I just loved working with Elizabeth, just because she was incredibly supportive, she thought individually about people, and she was very nurturing. But Vito was a kind of shock to the system, you know, especially when his first words the class were, basically, I don't know why they invited me to be a professor of art. I haven't made art in over fifteen years. He said "I'm an architect." So that was a really interesting way to start off your relationship in the thesis classes with the MFA department in the visual arts. It doesn't surprise me when you remember that Vito's stamina was quite long, because

of the amount the stamina that he had during his long duration performances. You know, Vito was a very intense individual, and smoked a hell of a lot. He had smoked during our classes, literally during the class, out the window.

Caterina Pierre

I mean, he may have started the fire drill!

John Avelluto

He very well could have, but Vito was fun, and studio visits with Vito were interesting because he would tell me straight up “I never know how to talk to painters,” so we would just talk about something else, anything, literally, most of the time when I would talk to Vito about his work, and also where he came from, you know, in the Bronx, and how he also had an Italian father. I think that was something we built a small camaraderie around. One had to understand something so foreign [in the courses] in order to, you know, try to get something out of it. Because, like, you know, you're not talking about your primary language, which in my case was painting, which I got over eventually, painting was my number one interest really, at the time, and you see things very differently, because you know you're talking about video work, and video work is topically everywhere. You know it does exist in the place of conceptualized performance art, but it takes you out of your element. And I think that that's something that's very, very valuable. So indirectly, I got a lot from him.

I also received a lot from the painter William T. Williams (born 1942), who's now retired.

William was really influential for me, just because he was very serious about art making. I think that the MFA program that he went to was Yale [Note: Williams studied at CUNY New York City Tech, then the Pratt Institute, then Yale], and he studied under Al Held (1928-2005), and from all the recollections that he told me about, was that it was incredibly intense period, and I really appreciated that. I saved up to go to college. My parents didn't pay for my college education. I saved up to go to, especially to make paintings in the MFA program. So I too was very, very invested in my practice. I've admired that in William, and I admired just the ethic behind his painting and the intensity and the frankness in which he spoke. So, he was incredibly influential to me, and remains so.

I also like Mickalene Thomas (born 1971) and her use of material and the signifiers of that material, and I love her work. She is among the artists to whom I often look for inspiration. And lastly, I think that Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, they are also very influential, just because she taught a class called the “Aesthetics of Information,” and she's works with the PIMA (Performance and Interactive Media Arts, Brooklyn College) program, which is all sort of like tech performance-based artwork. So that was another way for me to step out of the idea of painting. Jennifer did a number of projects that involved working with the internet and she introduced me to many writers, in particular, Lev Manovich (born 1960), who's also a CUNY professor, he teaches at the Graduate Center as one of the most foremost writers on the advancement of AI and technology the web

and visual arts. So, you know, I thought that that was incredibly influential and beneficial to me and to my current work.

Caterina Pierre

This issue of AI will come into play in some of the pieces that you're doing for the show here at the Kingsborough Art Museum. I was just thinking as you were talking that your parents didn't save for you to go to college. I had the same experience because, you know, who saved for a *girl* to go to college? Every time I finished a college and earned a degree, I'd go for another degree, and I'll never forget my Italian American grandmother had a little dinner party for me when I graduated from Hunter College (CUNY), where I earned my masters in art history, and I overheard her say to a relative at the party, "I don't know why she keeps going back to school. I think she's just looking for a husband." My family couldn't see the value of what I was doing at all. But you said something at the beginning of the interview which was that your family did not know *how* to give support. They didn't have anyone in the family who completed college degrees, and they weren't sure if it was something to be proud of. They couldn't be proud of it because they weren't sure if it was something to be proud of. Every time I said, "well, I'm going for a masters," then "I'm going for a PhD," it was very much like: Why? Why don't you just get married and have kids and stop goofing around? Because, to them, I was goofing around.

John Avelluto

That totally checks. I mean, look back historically, even with the writings of Elena Ferrante, and her Neapolitan Novels [2011-2015]. I find those stories to be, you know, very real. The question was how could you continue your education? Women had to work to support their families, and especially the hardships that women undertook, too, in order to justify that incredibly male dominated [world], and we're talking about back in the 1950s. You know, today, I feel like a lot of those ideas still have not been resolved. There is also something about the idea of hard work, you know, we talk about right now, still till today. "Lavoro ben fatto" [*Well-made work*], working with your hands, building, making it very much a work of importance.

Caterina Pierre

I think that one way that this resolves itself, and maybe it's not with our generation, maybe it's with the next generation, is to have successes, even if they're small, to break away from the family—to work on your education, to work on your art. I mean, you don't want to insult your family, but you also have your own life to live, and you have to follow that. Because the more and more successes that Italian Americans have in the arts, in education, in culture, the younger Italian Americans and their families will say, "well, yeah, I want to do that." They'll see themselves in that possibility of being an artist.

John Avelluto

I think a lot of the time I was sidestepping my family because I knew that living up to their expectations was, for me anyway, a dead end. So, there was a lot of love lost during that, and resentment built both ways. And I defined myself later on not through family ties but by what I wanted to do. And, you know, against the odds, and by doing something that didn't even really rationally make sense. You know, I sidestepped a lot of those beliefs and put myself in the middle of visual art. So, you know, I'm still here. I'm forty-six telling the story about how I became an artist.

Caterina Pierre

I did want to ask a question about humor. When Brian [KAM director Brian Hack] and I came to your studio, and also when I heard your presentation at the Center for Italian Modern Art last year, I saw a lot of humor in your work. It was humorous, but it was also serious; I think you get to the seriousness through the humor. I find a lot of nostalgia in your work, but also a sense of poignancy in quite a lot of it also. Do you feel that there is a serious side to your work that you hope to get through to the viewers? Do you think that the humor gets them there?

John Avelluto

Yeah, I think that to an extent, there's no control you have over what somebody is going to take from a work. I could only understand or try to understand, and that's even questionable what I'm thinking about or feeling and putting out there. But I think,

you know, I'm a person that takes their comedy very seriously. I think that the influence of the Italian depiction of stereotypes has always been comedic, at least to me. My father was very much of a personality. He was a waiter working in Little Italy when I was young, and eventually he moved into restaurants. He was always, in a way, very animated and charming, because he always worked table side. I think that aspect of it, and then seeing actors like Roberto Benigni (born 1952) and his comedy, and a lot of the slapstick Italian comedies out there, and the depictions, you know, loud talking with your hands. It was very, very comical. There's something that's shared in terms of the symbology between anyone, any group that comes from a different ethnicity. And I wanted to sort of play around with that, because I didn't want those tropes to be limiting in any way, shape, or form. I wanted to confuse it and also show that part of it is to give people agency, in order to take these things, which one thinks is like in the canon of being Italian, but it's not so. Traditions are made. People improvise when they came here to this country from all different ethnicities and racial makeups, and their traditions change because of it. And I think that those are sort of the agencies that we could give ourselves, especially within the contemporary world, where we have so many ethnicities. It's a way to articulate who we are.

Caterina Pierre

Let's discuss some of the motifs in your work. I think you were the person who told me that the famous rainbow cookie is, in

fact, not even an Italian American invention. Someone not Italian or Italian American invented the rainbow cookie that everyone associates with Italians.

John Avelluto

Everybody does know the rainbow cookie, the seven-layer cookie, whatever you want to call it, but it's the *bandiera* [Italian Flag]. And it's also misoriented, that is, the colors of the Italian flag are in the wrong order. The middle is supposed to be the white, but, you know, they didn't use white coloring. They just let it be the color of the cake. And then there was, you know, green moving from left to right, green, the colorless and red sandwiched between chocolate. And that was actually done just as a commemoration. It wasn't like Italians decided, like, "oh, you know, here's a national dessert that was done here in order to remember the *Bandiera* or *Il Tricolore*." It doesn't have its roots in Italy. I don't think that many people know that.

Caterina Pierre

No, I certainly didn't know that. And I think maybe some of the nostalgia and poignancy and some of the things you bring up like about culture, so much of that comes from food culture. There's always this thing that is said, mainly that if you want a people to learn about your culture, start with your food. That's always a way to bring somebody in, right? People will go to a Vietnamese restaurant, and they will eat Vietnamese food, but often it is food that's made for Americans that is loosely based Vietnamese culture. It's not always the same, but then they like it, and then people

want to read about Vietnam, or they want to learn more about the people; you get into a person's culture through their food. Food is the gateway drug to ethnicities. Often, in our case, I think with Italian food, everybody eats what they *think* is Italian food, and everybody's got a favorite dish. But when I first saw your works, there were cookies that you had made from paint, built up in paint that were sculptural, but they looked so much like the real thing, and they brought me back thirty years to the women I knew in my family who made the actual cookies and *struffoli*, and there was a nostalgia there for me. There was a poignancy there, because that tradition is kind of lost. You can still go to a place like Fortunato Brothers in Williamsburg and get those exact cookies, but they're not exactly like what these women made at home. All the women got together and mixed the batter, and somebody was the sous chef, and somebody, you know, got in trouble for eating the expensive pine nuts out of the bag (meaning me). And you know, there was a for me, a poignancy, because for me personally, it brought me back to a different time and place.

John Avelluto

I was thinking of those ideas about nostalgia through the works, trying to recreate something literally from a very unwilling material. Paint is supposed to be used to make a rendering in two dimensions. So, there is this really big effort to make and recreate those things. But the thing is, at the end of the day they're *not* real. You know, our memories are so inaccurate, and can be inaccurate, and

sometimes things are filled in biased and are subjective. So, you know, within the hyper reality, there is also a huge kitsch fakeness. And I think those are some of the emotions that I like want to evoke with these things. Yeah, you know. And that's really a big part of my work is, you know, taking these things like food, something that literally you eat, you ingest as part of a culture, and you cannot really define yourself from it, or try not to define yourself from it, because even the foods that are considered Italian foods, they're not Italian at all. I'm not going to go to Puglia and find a chicken parmesan sandwich in my local store or salumeria.

Caterina Pierre

And you're not going to have Seven Fishes on New Year's on Christmas Eve either, which is another invention of the Italian Americans.

You mentioned about the “fakeness” of your *trompe l'oeil* [“trick of the eye”] works. So, I'm going to skip to my question that was about you continuing this kind of long-standing art historical tradition of the *trompe l'oeil*, which goes back to, you know, I'm thinking of like those fresco paintings from Boscoreale at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, that have these *trompe l'oeil* images of food and fruit in a basket. How did you come to the technique of this *trompe l'oeil*? And why do it this way? You could just make flat paintings of cookies, right? You could be Wayne Thiebaud (1920-2021). I mean, you could do it that way, with three-dimensional looking flat works in perspective, but you didn't. You decided to physically build up the paint so that it

literally looks as if you could almost take those three-dimensional objects and pop them in your mouth. Does it lend a meaning to the work?

John Avelluto

I would have thought myself to be the least likely person to have involved myself in *trompe l'oeil*. You know, it didn't really interest me as a painter. What interests me was when I was painting a lot, I was interested in materiality and, you know, painting that acted more like sculptural surfaces; all that stuff was very, very, very interesting to me. I began to see [that as] I was using acrylic, it would dry and if I was using a glass palette, it would peel right off. So, I ran with that. I just was like, you know, I can make this into something. And I did, and I liked it. And then I was finding that I was referencing in a more of an abstract way, in kind of a Philip Guston (1913-1980), Dana Schutz (born 1976), Carroll Dunham (born 1949) way, like a personal narrative by ridiculous scenarios, like [a] flying cornuto with missile thrusters, flying it across the sea, calamari squids and octopus and things like that. I just thought of it differently and decided to represent them, and by seeing what I could do with the material. I followed that, and everything just sort of went together, kind of happenstance. At that point, I started looking more at *trompe l'oeil* painters, specifically the Americans William Michael Harnett (1848-1892) and John Frederick Peto (1854-1907).

I also looked at a lot of Palissy ware, the ceramicists that made those dishes with all the different seafood sculpted on it, and

those were just so great. It's so weird because I think of a lot of the time, in a weird way, I think of them as attractions. I don't know why. I'm thinking about some ridiculous ideas about arrangement and composition and how they look on a surface, because, also, you don't, you know, that's the thing about *trompe l'oeil*, right? You know right away that it's not real. Because you're looking at a wall and you're know you're entering a space where you're going to look at paintings—nobody's really shocked. Everybody's just sort of like, *wow, somebody could paint really well*. And so I think that *trompe l'oeil* is almost not a good way to talk about my work, because your eye is not really tricked to think that there's something real there. It's like some sort of more intellectual sort of thing, like you're being fooled completely and honestly, and the conversation that I'm really interested in is how these media environments are shaping us. No longer is it just like the painting commissioned by the Medici, artworks with Catholic iconography or the advertisement on the subway platform. It's in all immersive environments, and a barrage of senses that attacks you.

Caterina Pierre

You bring up this great point that we are bombarded by images, but they're all flat, and they're flatter than flat. They're the flat that I think [the art critic] Clement Greenberg never even imagined. Digital images have no surface whatsoever. And so, I still think that to see something that kind of that grows from the surface of a canvas is kind of shocking and surprising to people.

John Avelluto

Well, think of wrestling, looking back to the old WWF wrestling. This was the immersive environment. You get to see it happening, it's fake, but you choose to believe that it's real. There are so many emotions like you want the feel there, right? There are certain retail spaces that will employ scent so that it marks your senses—really, that's one of the biggest mind games. Olfactory memory is huge, it's another way to market you, so you're being attacked by every side, you know, in order to create this environment, you know, it's Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreality and simulation, times a billion.

Caterina Pierre

I was just thinking because you mentioned WWE, and I was thinking of Roland Barthes, who has a whole essay in *Mythologies* (1957) about wrestling, which borders on performance art.

John Avelluto

It really does, absolutely. I mean, and there was, famously, the involvement of Andy Kaufman (1949-1984). Is it real? Is it not real? Who is it real to? Who is it not real to? And, you know, again, another really apt sort of comment on today, like fake news—and that's already old. Where are we at now?

Caterina Pierre

How does Italian tradition and neighborhood play a role in your work? For example, I grew up in an Italian American neighborhood in Brooklyn, in the parish of

Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and I grew up with a festa which is very important to people from that settled in Williamsburg from Nola [Italy]. They brought with them the tradition of carrying a large object that they make look different every year. They work on the design for this object, known as the Giglio all year long. Festas were meant to keep men in the church, because it kept them involved, because they had to be part of the church that sponsored the Giglio all year long, to make the Giglio and have meetings, and to lift the Giglio the lifter has to make a vow. I was very happy to see a year or two ago that there were men underneath the Giglio, carrying it, who were clearly not Italian Americans. So, I guess I am asking whether you grew up with people who were kind of steeped in tradition, and did the neighborhood play kind of a role in your development?

John Avelluto

For sure. I mean it certainly added an element of articulation to it. I grew up in Gravesend, a couple of blocks away from [Sicilian crime boss] Carlo Gambino, during a very violent time in New York City. And yeah, that presence was huge. I think a lot of people use the word *enclave*, a community of Italian Americans there in a landscape that constantly shifts, because it's not really heavily Italian American anymore. And I grew up in Lady of Grace parish, so there was, of course, a street festival, but not as extravagant as the Giglio, or some other ones in Brooklyn that I've also seen. I guess there was also a sense of looking at yourself through the

traditions. As I mentioned we were first generation and there were a lot of very particular things that were common to us that were not common to other people. My grandmother would spend days making these Christmas cookies. And those were not something that I found very often made by other people. And sometimes I would see a cookie that other Italian Americans made completely differently in shape and content the way my grandmother made them. So, this idea of plasticity within the making of cookies was really interesting. I think we have this big idea of the United States, and within that you have the Italian community, and within that a micro

Italian community that was still considered to be, you know, a bit "just off the boat," and they kept holding on to some of the things that reminded them of home.

Caterina Pierre

I wonder, is there anything about Italian Americans that we wish people knew, besides the things that they always say about us? You know, Americans love us or hate us because they "know" Italian Americans from television and movies, from Martin Scorsese movies or shows like *The Sopranos*. Many times, when I have mentioned to someone that I am Italian American, that person will say something like, "Oh, I love the Sopranos." It's like, okay, that's not my life! Is there something, either through your work, or just in general, that that you wish that people knew about our culture that doesn't appear in any media about us?

John Avelluto

That's a really, really tough question. It's hard for me to speak just because, like, who the hell am I? I am somebody who didn't have a very traditional Italian background, like, my parents weren't living together. Is that very traditional? I like to think of Italian and Italian American culture as in being in shift. I could talk about the traditions of Italian Americans in this country, you know. Right now, I am working on the [Antonio Santi Giuseppe] Meucci (1808-1889) project, you know, those are some histories that I'm very interested in.

Caterina Pierre

Maybe you could talk a little bit about Meucci, because I think that's a fascinating story, and I was both fascinated and heartbroken when I heard about it. Meucci was an Italian immigrant, born in Florence, Italy, and came here to the States in 1850, and had this great idea for a communication device. The very first telephone call was made on Staten Island in 1856 in his house from the upstairs to the downstairs, and he filed paperwork to patent the device he invented that transmitted voice through a wire system. He did not file a lot of his paperwork correctly. You know, if you're not from this country, any governmental forms are made purposely difficult to fill them out properly. And so, as everyone knows, in the end, the invention of the telephone and telephonic communication was patented in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell.

John Avelluto

I was talking about my practice before, and growing up around art, and I spoke about materiality. That's actually what led me to this project, interestingly enough. I visited the Garibaldi Meucci Museum on Staten Island where I saw Meucci's death mask. It really took me aback, and I was so interested in this idea of *here's this face of this person, this visage, in this room*. There was just something about its materiality and it being there and being the actual thing, and, like this actual face, and this being a stand in for that, but it came from the real thing and degradation as time goes on—that was just really interesting.

I have never really encountered a death mask as close up as that. You know, I've seen images of the famous ones in Russia. But this was really interesting, and I knew that I wanted to use it as a material, because that idea of, you know, an imprint over time, degrading--that happens in digital culture as well. And, you know, I thought to myself, well, I'd like to get its data and now I could use my phone, and I did use my phone to make a digital scan of the object, with the museum's permission. Obviously, it was very nice for the Garibaldi Meucci Museum to allow me to do that, and I was interested in his story of somebody whose image was speaking to us from many years ago.

I like the idea of communicating over time and space...the idea of the telephone, the idea of replication within that, and then Meucci's story being overlooked. It keyed up with a lot of ideas that I was working on in the studio. I did make a number of works

from his face after that scan was made, I made a small press mold about three inches rather than the full face, and I also made a 3-D print out of the face that I later inserted into a painting. And with the mold, I wound up making marzipan treats of Meucci's dead visage, which was reminiscent of the famous Frutta Martorana. There's a convent in Palermo, Sicily called Martorana, and the nuns there were expecting a visit from the church Emissary. It was a yearly review where the Vatican decides how much money you're supposed to get based on how well the nuns impressed them. The trees at the convent weren't bearing fruit, so the sisters then took marzipan (almond paste) and shaped them like fruit, painted them, and hung them in the trees. So, there's this idea of placing something where it's missing, this idea of using the face of somebody who was not recognized for something that they had done and putting it there, you know, as a conflict. I liked the idea of having a death mask as something to eat which was also was very interesting to me.

Caterina Pierre

It reminds me of Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996), his work *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, from 1991, where you as the viewer are being asked to ingest something. In this case, it was to evoke memory of Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS. When the viewer goes over to the candy spill that represents Ross, and they ingest the candy, you taste the sweetness of Ross, but you also, as you're eating the candy, you're killing him, right? You're making him waste away, the way the

disease made him waste away. It is such a beautiful piece, but it doesn't work if we don't ingest the candy. Or maybe one might think of Piero Manzoni (1933-1963), who had an exhibition where the visitors were expected to eat the artworks, which were essentially hard-boiled eggs. There were a lot of these 60s performance artists and conceptual artists, where you had to drink something, you had to eat something in the show, or else the show didn't work. You know, Yves Klein (1928-1962) had a show where the visitors were offered a blue drink in an otherwise empty exhibition. There were a number of these artists who had a similar entry point into the art, that the art becomes you, and you become the art, because there's an ingestion process involved.

John Avelluto

Yeah, there was. I liked using marzipan. And also, for that exhibition where I put the Meucci Martorana sculptures, I had made a painting, marzipan on panel, that had the word sculpted out of it, spelled phonetically, "man," "so," and "ni," you know, M, A, N, Z, O, and then nee, you know, N, E, E, at the bottom. And like that idea of plasticity of language, plasticity of materials, but at the end, again, in true Manzoni fashion, you know, the artist shit that he made in cans. I was, in turn, giving people something to ingest to make their own artist's shit.

Caterina Pierre

What are some of your favorite motifs or symbols in your work? The "che vuoi" ["what do you want?"] comes up in your works and some of your pieces, which

reminds me a little bit of Mario Merz (1925-2003) and his work *Che Fare?* ["What to do?"] (1968-73). Are there some famous Italian words, phrases, or motifs that you particularly like using in your work?

John Avelluto

I have worked with a lot of hand signals. Those were very, very interesting to me, using sort of spellings as well. So, text has been a large part of my work as well. A really big motif for me is the shared symbols of religious iconography, in particular, the niche that is used to house a saint in a front yard. Particularly, I used that idea to make an inflatable sculpture that was made from bouncy castle material so people could enter it sort of be their own saint. And you know, this time of you know, selfies and things, those are very, very interesting to me.

Caterina Pierre

A lot of our students here at Kingsborough are also hoping to become working artists. I often ask students, if you could do anything in your life, and money and time were no object, what would you do or become? And I get students in art history classes who were registered in business classes, or in the sciences, and a lot of them will say, *I wish I could be an artist. I wish I could write poetry.* So, I ask them, then what are you doing in accounting? And they will say, well, you know, I need to get a job. And that's a valid answer, for sure. But we have a lot of students at Kingsborough who would love to pursue a degree in the fine arts, but they hesitate, they're afraid, or they're told that they're not going to make a living as a fine

artist. What advice would you give students who have their heart in the art world? They want to do this thing, or maybe they are already in the fine arts, but they're worried about what that next step is going to be. What advice would you give them?

John Avelluto

I'm nobody to give advice. It is not easy to be an artist, but nothing is easy, especially when you want to be an entrepreneur. And I think that's a good mind frame to approach this with; as you're an entrepreneur, there is no single way to become an artist. It's something that takes a lot of dedication as well. So, you have to literally make your own path. Anything can be art. You don't have to think of yourself as having to have the skill of one person or the next, because really, every artist is completely different. That's something that I think that everybody should know and allow that to be very freeing. But you do have to keep your nose to the grind.

Caterina Pierre

I think the important thing that you say is like anything, everything you do is hard. Anything you're going to do and do well and make a career out of that is going to be very difficult to do. So, whether it's art or accounting or nursing, you're just going to have to put a lot of work into it. You have to do it fully. If you can do it fully, then, then it's going to pay off. Art history, for me, totally paid off. It was the gift that kept on giving. There's so much that I can say that I've done with it in the past thirty years. It's never failed me. I don't know if art ever failed you, but my work never failed me.

John Avelluto

Yeah, that's an interesting way to look at it, too, in terms of failing.

Caterina Pierre

Oh, I've failed a lot in my life. I'm not saying I never failed, but the field itself, being involved with it, making that decision to be an art historian, that was never a mistake.

John Avelluto

It is really about being okay with yourself and realizing you know yourself. With many people who have an entrepreneurial spirit, they know that. And again, I hate to compare this to business, but really, you should have more of a fighting spirit, develop a tough skin and enter into it with a fighting spirit. And if you do that, you know—if you build it, they will come. You'll figure out a way, as long as you're able to keep your nose to the grind and keep it rolling. There's no one way to do anything.

Caterina Pierre

The hard work of artists is often hidden from the public. Artists make things look very easy. But an artist really must have that discipline.

John Avelluto

Well, yeah, I mean, there's, there's the discipline aspect of it, and that's only a small fraction of what goes into your studio practice. You know, you'd be surprised how many hours in my studio I'm not actually working on the art. But I'm doing things related to my art, such as filling out grant applications, organizing images, boxing

something up for a sale or an exhibition. You know, there's a lot writing, of course, tons of it.

Caterina Pierre

Writing is so important for any artist. AI is not going to write these grant proposals for you. It might be able to write 400 words of nonsense, but it won't be interesting. Only you can write about your own work and your own process.

John Avelluto

Exactly. It requires so much outside of the work itself, and you must be on it, on all fronts. You are the CEO, the point-of-sale person, the public relations person, you know, and those are roles that artists are told to avoid being, you know, it's like, very cliché, but you have to do all those things, and it is really part of the art. And you know, if you're in the city, you have to fight for your piece of the action. You know, you want to, you want to you want to get involved in the game. You want to be seen. You have to put yourself out there. And it's something, you know, the there's long, long ago, like Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) wrote that, you know, there are no more artists alone in their studio making the work. There's everything else that involves making an operation happen. I think if you start thinking about your practice as an operation, then sooner or later, you'll be benefiting from that.

Caterina Pierre

Absolutely. You have to be proud of what you do and be out there and show your

work and just get yourself out there. Modesty will not fly in this business.

John Avelluto

And you have to be okay with criticism. People are going to say a whole bunch of things, and that's where the need for the tough skin comes in. You have to be okay with whatever comes your way. And I think the sooner you throw yourself onto that fire, the better, and the more realistically you look at the scenario.

Caterina Pierre

I had two final questions, and then we can wrap it up. One is if you have a dream project. I know you're working on, the Meucci public art project, which, if you can raise the funding for it, that it would be huge, and it could be in a major park, and we might even be able to have Meucci day instead of, you know, Columbus Day, which was forced on us anyway. I'd much rather have a Meucci Day. He died in October, so we can have his day in the usual Italian heritage month. But I would like to know if there is another project? Is there some dream project that you would make, if you had no constraints, if you had money, space, and time, if you had no obstacles, what would you make?

John Avelluto

Yeah, I think if money was no object, I would probably expand my studio practice to be more incorporative of the cultures that I feel are flowing through me. I'm thinking of, you know, a studio in Bay Ridge or Bensonhurst, or where I'm from, in Gravesend, any of those places with this

preponderance of Italian Americana and having, having people from these places make my work with me, as my studio assistants. I would like to really develop a culture in the space and to have the work of a culture alive in my studio, it would really be a dream to be able to do that. So that's what I would like to do, to have a space and use it as an actual cultural space, where it's not just the fabrication space, I think that work would freely flow, and it would be hard to say what is and what isn't art work in that studio.

Right now, I do it by myself, but I do like working with teams and people. So, there is something about like being able to grow the space or the practice and see what it's like to have people that are invested in the culture that's being produced today. So, you know, I think that there's something to be said for that, or the lack of that, like, really in today's art environment, that's it. That would be it.

Caterina Pierre

Whenever I've interviewed artists, I always like to give them the final say, because it relieves them of my control over the questions and the direction of the interview. So, I'm wondering if there's any final thoughts or final things you wanted to say, anything that you would like to include here that we haven't discussed. Maybe something about *fugazi* [things that are fake or false]?

John Avelluto

Oh, you know, there'll be a lot of *Fugazi* things up in the KAM exhibition. But you know, that's really it.

Caterina Pierre

We're really excited to have the show here at Kingsborough Art Museum. I think students are going to love it, and I think people are going to learn a lot, not only about art and process, but also about Italian Americans in New York and the history of our art and culture that they will not get from television and movies. Thanks so much, John.

John Avelluto

Thanks, Caterina.

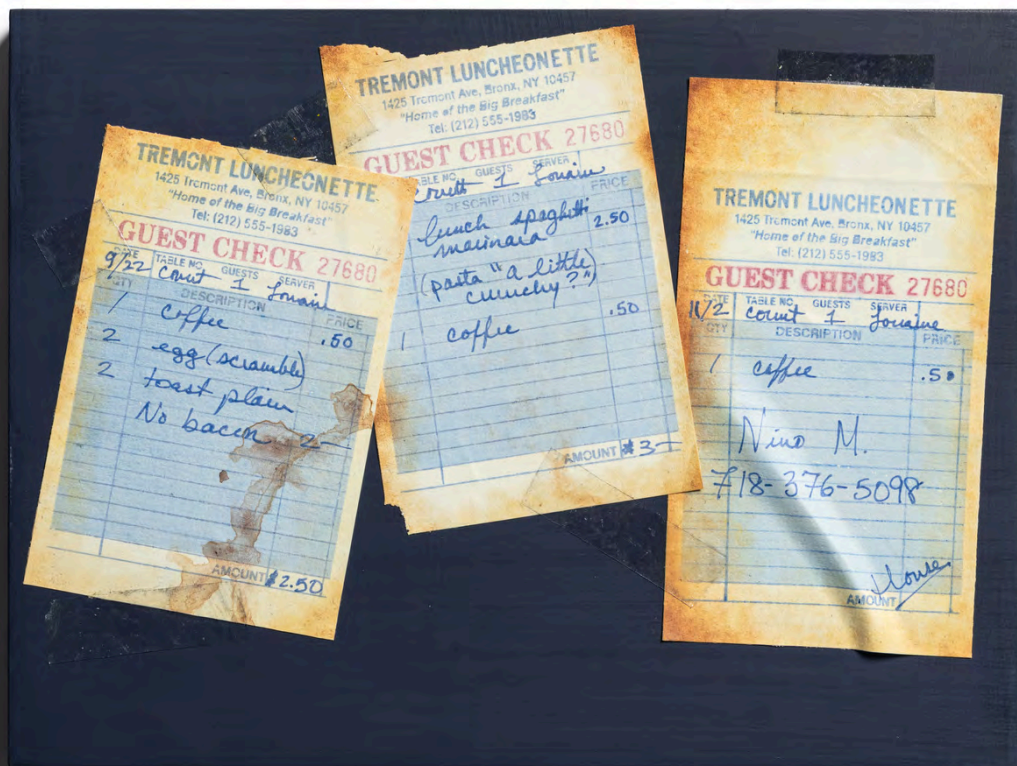
John Avelluto is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Caterina Y. Pierre is a Professor of Art History at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, and a Visiting Professor at the Pratt Institute.

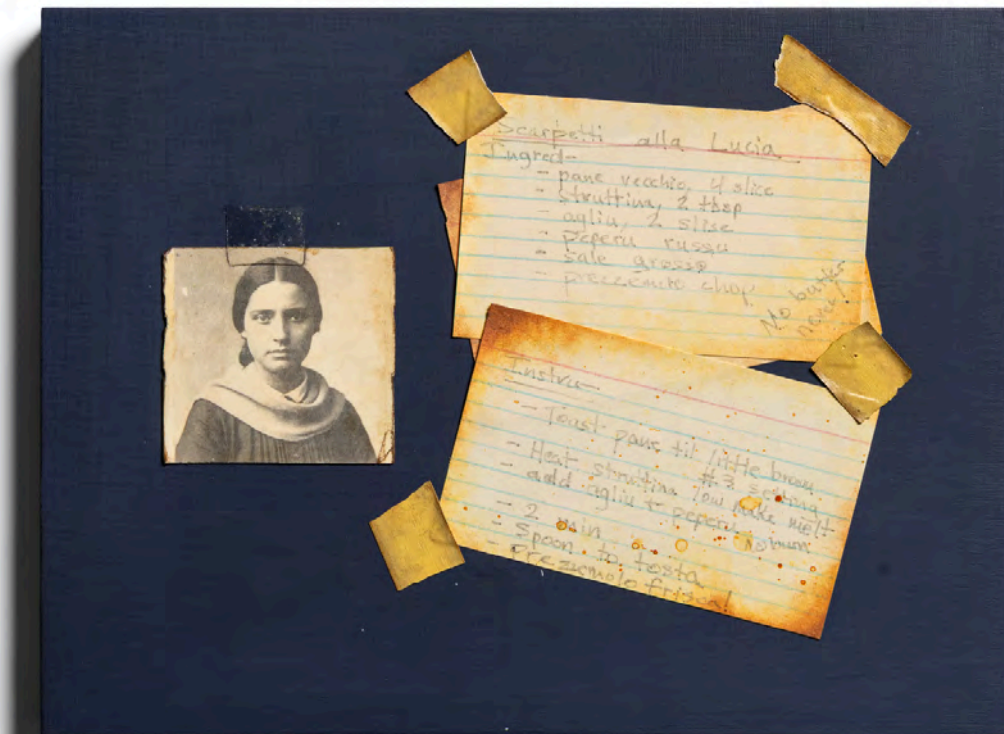
Al e lo



Nonno Corrado, Acrylic paint on panel with integrated sound component (Sonos speakers), 12 x 9 inches; speaker dimensions variable, 2025.



Nino Mancuso, Acrylic paint on panel with integrated sound component (Sonos speakers), 9 x 12 inches; speaker dimensions variable, 2025.



Lucia Scarpetta, Acrylic paint on panel with integrated sound component (Sonos speakers), 9 x 12 inches; speaker dimensions variable, 2025.

PAINTINGS



Eco. Ecco. Ecko. Acrylic paint and acrylic 3-D print
on panel 15 x 12.5 x 6 inches, 2021.



Eco. Ecco. Ecko (side view). Acrylic paint and acrylic 3-d print on panel, 15 x 12.5 x 6 inches, 2021.



Frank Stella d'Oro, Acrylic paint on shaped panel, 8 x 18 x 3 inches, 2025.



Impasta Handbags, 42 x 31.5 inches. Acrylic paint on panel, 2023.



Sacrament, Acrylic paint on panel, 33 x 25.5 inches, 2025



Whatsamatta U? (GaLaMa), Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper, 13 x 10.5 inches, 2025.



Whatsamatta U? (Caprese), Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper, 13 x 10.5 inches, 2025..



Whatsamatta U? (misto), Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper, 13 x 10.5 inches, 2025.



Whatsamatta U? (tricolore), Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper, 13 x 10.5 inches, 2025

*CAN
YOU
HEAR
ME
NOW?*





Left: 3-D scan of Antonio Meucci's death mask. Scan taken 2021 @ The Garibaldi Meucci Museum.

Above and Following: 3-D renderings of *Can You Hear Me Now?*





Above and following page: *Can You Hear Me Now?* (small prototype), 3-D acrylic resin print, 8.5 x 5.5 x 3.25 inches, 2025.





Can You Hear Me Now? (small prototype), 3-D acrylic resin print, 8.5 x 5.5 x 3.25 inches, 2025.



Can You Hear Me Now? Digital installation mockup image, 2025

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

AI e IO

Nonno Corrado

Acrylic paint on panel with integrated sound component (Sonos speakers), 12 x 9 inches; speaker dimensions variable
2025

Nino Mancuso

Acrylic paint on panel with integrated sound component (Sonos speakers), 9 x 12 inches; speaker dimensions variable
2025

Lucia Scarpetta

Acrylic paint on panel with integrated sound component (Sonos speakers), 9 x 12 inches; speaker dimensions variable
2025

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Can You Hear Me Now? (small prototype)

3D acrylic resin print
8.5 x 5.5 x 3.25 inches
2025

3-D scan of Antonio Meucci's death mask

Scan taken 2021 @ The Garibaldi Meucci Museum

Can You Hear Me Now

Digital installation mockup images
2025

PAINTINGS

Eco. Ecco. Ecko.

Acrylic paint and acrylic
3-D print on panel
15 x 12.5 x 6 inches
2021

Impasta Handbags

Acrylic paint on panel
42 x 31.5 inches
2023

Frank Stella d'Oro

Acrylic paint on shaped panel
8 x 18 x 3 inches, 2025

Sacrament

Acrylic paint on panel
33 x 25.5 inches
2025

Whatsamatta U? (misto)

Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper
13 x 10.5 inches
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Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper
13 x 10.5 inches
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Whatsamatta U? (tricolore)

Acrylic paint on faux acrylic paper
13 x 10.5 inches
2025

JOHN AVELLUTO / ARTIST STATEMENT

My creative practice derives from my experiences as a first generation Italian American and observing how the displacement of immigration has contributed to shifts and adaptations of various cultural practices. Words in southern Italian dialects are incorporated into English, the hand gesture traditionally used to ward off the evil eye is now found en masse at rock concerts, and front yard shrines once containing statues of St. Anthony of Padua now house the bodhisattva Quan Yin. I want to push these creative, playful, and sometimes strange amendments through a material language.

My recent work uses sculptural qualities of acrylic paint to reflect on the foods that I grew up with within the Italian American community of south Brooklyn. I cut, pour, and layer mounds of dried acrylic to fashion food items such as cannoli and struffoli that have deep cultural resonance for me and those whom I grew up with. The three-dimensional acrylic sculptures of replicated desserts are introduced and juxtaposed into the painting space through seductive textures that elucidate gastronomical desire for these sweets while also triggering a nostalgia associated with their Italian places of origin.

How do immigrants (and by extension their children) rationalize as paesani within the urban landscape where the agrarian life and traditional practices are no longer informed by the natural environment but through the creation of markets and consumer products? My artwork emanates from this paradoxical inquiry to creatively explore in hybridic novelties shifting cultural paradigms all too often dismissed in the popular imagination.

About the Artist

Born 1979, in Brooklyn, NY.

John Avelluto currently lives and works in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. He received his MFA at CUNY Brooklyn College where he studied with Elizabeth Murray, Vito Acconci, William T. Williams and Jennifer and Kevin McCoy.

Education:

MFA, Painting/Printmaking, CUNY Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY. 2006.

Solo and Two-Person Exhibitions:

2025

AI e IO: Recent Works by John Avelluto, curated by Caterina Y. Pierre, Kingsborough Art Museum, 2001 Oriental Blvd., Brooklyn, NY.

2023

Impasta Handbags, curated by Paul D'Agostino, Stand4, 414 78th St Brooklyn, NY.

2021

FooGayZee, Stand4, 414 78th St Brooklyn, NY.

2019

Goombarooch Resignified, John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 25 West 43rd Street, New York, NY

2018

Use-a the Forza, Mamaluke, Stand4, 414 78th St, Brooklyn, NY.

2014

Disintegrator, Studio 10, 56 Bogart St, Brooklyn, NY

2010

Marksman and the Palimpsests (catalogue), Centotto: Galleria [Simposio] Salotto 250 Moore St. Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY.

2006

Playstation, Krampf/Pei Gallery 610 West 26th Street, New York, NY.

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2025

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Micchelli, Thomas. "Single Point Perspective: A New Series." *Hyperallergic* (July 7, 2012).

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2009

Wehr, Anne. "Arts in Bushwick." WNYC.org (June 4, 2009) www.blogs.wnyc.org.

2007

Genocchio, Benjamin. "The Trickle-Down from Pollock." *New York Times*, (November 4, 2007).



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