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Rebecca Molholt Vanel, FAAR 2005



Rebecca Molholt Vanel
Photo: Molholt family

Rebecca Molholt Vanel died in Paris on 12 July of pancreatic cancer. She was 44.

Rebecca Molholt Vanel 1970-2014
Rebecca came to the Department of the History of Art & Architecture at Brown as a junior scholar, but was already a recognized young star whose promise in her field had been evidenced in prestigious awards such as the coveted American Academy in Rome prize. This award connected her with a vibrant network of interdisciplinary scholars and artists in Rome while she conducted her innovative study of antique floor mosaics in Roman North Africa, and how people experienced the narratives which they made visually present in the lives of those long-vanished people who traversed them every day. This kind of recognition and fellowship, and the high regard of her colleagues, would continue to accrue to her over the terribly short period that she had left. An article relating to her research, "Roman Labyrinth Mosaics and the Experience of Motion," published in the Art Bulletin, was awarded the Arthur Kingsley Porter Prize by the College Art Association in 2011. Rebecca was as original and inspiring in her teaching as she was in her research, reinvigorating the study of ancient art in our department after a long period in which it seemed to have fallen out of fashion. Her classes on the art and legends of antiquity were very full and always lively--and when she took over and re-modeled our departmental introductory lecture course it was very soon standing-room only. Unsurprisingly, she was voted "Outstanding Professor" by the Brown Undergraduate Council of

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ADMINISTRATION

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Students, also in 2011. Still as an Assistant Professor her research and interests caught the attention of several different constituencies at Brown, and many graduate students and faculty wished to work with her. She was quickly incorporated, through courtesy appointments, into the faculty of the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World and also into Italian Studies.

All of the above is a matter of record, and what anyone would find or intuit from a look at Rebecca's CV. Her popularity with undergraduates rested on the uncompromising care she took in preparing her lectures and courses, and in responding to their work.

A conscientious teacher, she cared deeply about giving students the attention she felt they deserved, and students responded in kind, respecting her opinions and filling her classroom. For these students, she brought the ancient world alive in all of its violent, vivid, raucous, and erotic beauty. By marrying the art and literature of the period, Rebecca's antiquity was drenched in sensory effects: in her lectures, the architecture of a stadium was obscured by clouds of dust and reverberated with the roar of thousands of spectators, the screaming of injured horses, the clatter of chariot wheels and the whisper of ancient curses launched by one team to vanquish another. The atrium of an ancient house was open to the breezes that shook its many hanging ornaments, and poetry and music recited there competed with the sound of water from fountains that overflowed onto colorful mosaic floors. It was no wonder that the students kept coming back. Not only did she give them access to a far-away time and place when images and architecture seemed to shape every aspect of daily life, she also never shied away from discussions of the most ethical ways to investigate this moment, so fundamental to our notion of ourselves as the inheritors of the ancient traditions. She openly refused to discuss objects of uncertain archeological provenance, and was candid with students about the ethical problems of the ownership and recovery of art in her field in the present.

Rebecca deeply respected the discipline of art history, and the promise it offered for understanding the role of images in the human capacity for making and needing art. She was an intellectual in a truer sense of the word than we usually use it, an aspect of her character that she held in common with her husband, Hervé Vanel, who was also a professor in our department for a long time, and whose loving care made it possible for her to enjoy the last part of her life. Rebecca's total engagement with art, music and literature from antiquity to the present, and the meticulous care with which she wrote about and taught it, changed the people who were fortunate enough to engage with her in this life. Because she cared about this so very passionately, it is tragic that she was not given a long life in which to write the books she was so perfectly positioned to write. It is a tragedy for our field that we will never have those books, and it is hard for those of us who knew and worked with her to now forever be deprived of our glamorous and brilliant friend and colleague.

--- Evelyn Lincoln, Professor, History of Art & Architecture and Italian Studies, Director Graduate Studies, Brown University

Brown University published an additional appreciation on their site.

A memorial fund has been established in Rebecca's memory at Brown University. Contributions can be made to the Rebecca Molholt Vanel Memorial Fund, Box 1877, Providence, RI 02912.

If you would like to contact her family their information is below.

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