edge economy (11). The avant-garde mode of artistic self-negation connects better to work refusal rather than the Soviet glorification of labor. In this respect the conditions of post-Fordism have indeed problematized the Marxist emphasis on creative practice as a form of non-alienated labor. Work refusal can potentially liberate artistic activity from the demands of capital accumulation. The ontology of art is therefore defined by Shukaitis as “an expressive ontology of labor” (15). Art is thus never fully sublated into life, since a residue of the expressive and the aesthetic provides the avant-garde with a kind of Bergsonian vitalism (18).

Although Shukaitis’s triangulation of labor, art, and politics risks a certain determinism, it is a risk worth taking. Since he has little concern for art as such, his emphasis falls on what, paraphrasing the Marxist labor theory of value, we might refer to as a “labor theory of art and politics.” In his account of Marxist economics, however, Shukaitis confuses the classical liberal analysis of labor with Marx’s emphasis on socially necessary labor time (80). The question of value, inasmuch as it relates to the so-called laws of supply and demand, was better critiqued by Pierre Bourdieu in his theory of the field of cultural production. One tends, in this regard, and when the ideas of people like Antonio Negri and Konrad Becker seem inadequate to account for culture, to return to basic Marxist aesthetics, stopping short of questions of political strategy. Shukaitis’s writing on the notion of the art strike (87–99) is perhaps the most relevant aspect of this book. If everyone today is an artist, then the avant-garde dream has not ended but has proliferated through social networks and technologically mediated communication into the “zombified forms” of the participation-based economy (72). As Jacques Lacan would have said, the new creative worker exists between two deaths. For Shukaitis, this is between the “not yet” of being creative and the “already” of being subsumed by capital (73). Being conscious of this contradiction provides possibilities for new class compositions that can reshape production and transform the logic of institutions. (Shukaitis’s essays on Laibach and NSK make an interesting claim for overidentification strategies as a form of institutional critique writ large.) In this regard, the anarchist theory of prefigurative politics dovetails with the Marxist theory of autonomy, where instances of artistic production are able to anticipate and prefigure social changes (78).

Given all of their shared assumptions, it is unfortunate that the two vanguards, aesthetic and political, should have to play the game of chess against one another. In The Parallax View (2006), Žižek argues that their conjunction would embody the socialist utopia. The function of a radical avant-garde today is to repeat Lenin, not by making itself the guardian of the absolute, the unsaid and the unseen, but by making itself into an agent of revolutionary change. There is much to appreciate in Shukaitis’s book, even if his strategy of “productively misunderstanding” concepts as a way to engage with them strikes a countercultural note that is occasionally more mystifying than enlightening (87). It is nevertheless a strategic vision, and Shukaitis’s Dada games and partisan misdirection make for a spirited experiment in pataphysical writing in the context of the real subsumption of labor.

MARC JAMES LÉGER is an independent scholar living in Montreal. He is author of Brave New Avant Garde (2012) and Drive in Cinema: Essays on Film, Theory and Politics (2015).

Jet Lag
By Chien-Chi Chang
Edited by Anna-Patricia Kahn
Hatje Cantz, 2015
120 pp./$60.00 (hb)

At first glance, the nondescript airport on the cover of Chien-Chi Chang’s Jet Lag (2015) appears to be a photographic negative of a daytime exposure: the scratched sky is black, the ground is white, and blurry sprocket holes line the top edge. It takes a few seconds to realize it is actually a long exposure made at night. The scratches are planes taking off, the sprocket holes are possibly artifacts on an aircraft window, and the ground is lit up with an indeterminate number of anonymous vehicles circling the airfield.

This timeless space and spaceless time is the core of the Magnum member’s diary of his life as an on-call photographer. Much of the rest of the book is similarly disorienting, directionless, and solitary. It consists of about a hundred grayscale pictures, mostly of airports and hotels, each one low-key, flat, and uncluttered. The various cities in which the photos were taken are meticulously indexed in the back, but on the pages themselves, they blend into an endless mega-skyline.

The narrative of an endless, soul-searching wanderlust was made notorious by Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957), but the romantic gushiness of Sal Paradise has since given way to airplanes and travel shampoo. Films like Up in the Air (2009, directed by Jason Reitman) have replaced the hitchhiking hippie with the alienated, jet-setting protagonist, searching for human connection where there are only in-flight magazines. Chang manages to synthesize the old and the new. The content of his photos belongs to a world steeped in supermodernity, but the low contrast and the gradual tonalities render even the harshest of spaces tenderly.

In Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (1995), French philosopher Marc Augé’s theories differentiate two kinds of spaces: one with anthropological ties that bear the imprints of their inhabitants, and the “non-place,” unconcerned with identity. Non-places lend themselves to the anonymity of solitude. What is described as the “community of human destinies” is experienced
BOOK REVIEW

in these places. The spaces that Chang photographs—airports and hotel rooms—are paradoxically strange and familiar. They are non-spaces, pauses.

Chang is not the first to document transience: Raymond Depardon shot “down time” in his collection Notes (1979), a personal diary of sorts, obsessive in the documentation of in-betweens. The photographs in Jet Lag have a similarly temporal imperative. Years of discrete travel assignments were carefully combined to create this endless journey.

In startling contrast to Chang’s images, however, the book’s eponymous text, “On the Road,” chronicles with unrelenting dry wit the shenanigans that occur on his travels. Little vignettes give a personal face to the images; tales of assignments in North Korea or the shenanigans that occur on his travels. Little vignettes give a personal face to the images; tales of assignments in North Korea or being trailed in Myanmar give us the impression that these spaces that connect the in-betweens must be very exciting indeed:

But all the Burmese bites paled compared with the mosquito attack I endured one sweaty midsummer night in 2011 in a seaside village in rural Fuzhou of southeastern China. The next morning, I circled every bite with a ballpoint pen, and I counted 125 bites, not counting the parts where the sun doesn’t shine. (35)

So, to think of Jet Lag as simply a melancholy meditation on limbo would be incomplete. Yet despite these exciting adventures, the photographer deliberately, almost mockingly, holds back in the pictures what the text describes so conspicuously.

Further alienating us is the dearth of humans who inhabit these spaces. The minor characters that do flit in and out of this narrative like ghosts remain faceless: men are usually turned away, naked women in hotel beds have their heads obscured by rumpled sheets, airline staff are (sometimes literally) stiffly grinning cardboard cutouts. And the monotony is relentless and jaded; in this world, you’re always alone and wide awake at 3:00am in an austere, windowless suite.

The major exceptions to the human void in the images are Chang’s self-portraits—but even so, the closest we get to this mysterious international spy, this hardboiled detective protagonist, is by a close reading of the recurring motifs of international currencies, multiple passports, and hoards of sleeping pills. There is an unbridled, albeit subtle, glee that shines through the headaches and Stilnox. Even his self-portraits are tongue-in-cheek. A determinately disgruntled Chang peers out from his bed in a series of nine self-portraits in a single spread, as if to groan for five more minutes before he leaves for whatever dangerous North Korean prison camp he happens to be assigned to that particular Tuesday. In others, he obscures himself. Chang resting on a sofa, face covered in a bizarre white mask; Chang in bed, face covered with a copy of George Orwell’s 1984 (1949); Chang in bed, face covered with a (hopefully stuffed) possum-like animal. The humor is a choked one, slightly twisted and a little frustrating: why, if there is so much to fill them with, must the images be so empty and distant?

Indeed, the entire experience of reading Jet Lag is a bit exhausting, and part of the satisfaction comes from the fact that we, unlike Chang, are not trapped in this seemingly empty world. And when the book is finally closed, it’s as though we’ve just stepped off of a sixteen-hour flight and touched solid ground again, and this place looks exactly the same as the one we left—but feels new, somehow.

Augé addresses the fact that in the age of supermodernity, it’s not that there is a decline in meaningfulness; there is rather a rise in our need to imbue the world with meaning, and this is something that Chang has brought up, in a sense, regarding his work on Jet Lag: he has often commented on the importance of family ties in being able to take the photos that he does, and he dedicates the book to his second wife and children, “The ultimate cure for jet lag.” If it weren’t for this personal and connected way of working, perhaps Jet Lag would read as a depressing commentary on the alienation of the modern traveler, and lose some of its more subtle nuance.

It is in Augé’s non-places, free from historical contexts, in the generically defined spaces that new ideas and identities, grounded in solitude, can be explored. The traveler, according to Augé, is in a different state of awareness, a spectator without a spectacle. It’s in the waiting room, hands off the shutter release, where the photographer is able to reflect. In the end, Jet Lag doesn’t read as a lamentation on our supermodernity, or a depressing commentary on the alienated traveler. It is merely a loving meditation on the non-spaces that occupy our lives, the down time; it is perhaps finally an answer to what Augé deems high time for an “ethnology of solitude.”

NÉHA HIRVE is a graduate student in photojournalism at Mittuniversitetet in Sunndsvall, Sweden.