already had his money in hand and could move on at the end of a workday. One wonders whether the pay was sufficient for a family’s needs. With the pope not providing welfare to the poor, such income must have been very important to the humbler families. But, as Habel queries, were these workers paid a living wage?

Chapter 4 brings to our attention a curious document titled “Roza Riforma in molte cose della Città di Roma, e mondo, tutto per il ben publico” (A rough proposal for the reform of many concerns in the City of Rome, and in the world, all to benefit the public). The author, Lorenzo Pizzatti, displays less-than-sophisticated skills in his writing. Although the text was never published, a manuscript—one that survives to this day—seems to have had something of a presence in the later seventeenth century. It sounds a bit like a screed, a text developed in a number of chapters and then sent to the one with all the authority in the city of Rome—the pope. Tortured and tiresome as the tome may be—and it is quite long—Habel finds Pizzatti’s voice and his exposition both curious and fascinating, worthy of being the final chapter in her book.

Pizzatti, whose text appeared first in an execrable Latin edition followed by a somewhat better version in Italian, writes about the quality of life in early modern Rome. His topics include filth, hygiene, famine, war, embellishments of the city, and administration of the city government. He proposes a trash removal program that the cleaning up could be paid for by those charged with overseeing the strade (neighborhoods) and supervised by the maestri delle strade (those charged with overseeing the maintenance of the streets). Pizzatti’s vociferous protests against animal waste reverberate to this day (he cleverly suggested that the cleaning up could be paid for by selling horse manure). Pizzatti saw that filth must have been very important to the pope. Tortured and tiresome as the tome may be—and it is quite long—Habel finds Pizzatti’s voice and his exposition both curious and fascinating, worthy of being the final chapter in her book.

Note


Richard Taws

The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, 288 pp., 24 color and 66 b/w illus. $74.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780271054186; $36.95 (paper), ISBN 9780271054193

“There are monuments other than those of stone and marble, and they will always be remembered, even though they lasted no longer than a decade.”

The temporary but indelible monuments of the French Revolution described by nineteenth-century artist Jules Renouvier are at the center of Richard Taws’s fascinating new book, The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France, which explores how an unlikely range of “transitional, provisional, ephemeral, and half-made images and objects” became pivotal to the visual and material culture of the French Revolution. While the book is primarily directed toward readers familiar with the key events of this brief-but-complicated moment in French history, Taws’s novel approach to “the provisional” as both a field of representation and form of materiality that embodied the politics and poetics of revolution will resonate with a broader audience interested in issues of time and materiality. More specifically, this text will appeal to architectural historians seeking to understand how temporary monuments can become potent bearers of meaning at critical junctures of political, social, and cultural change.

This beautifully illustrated book is divided into six chapters examining a range of objects and images produced within the charged revolutionary period from 1789 to 1799. In lieu of a monographic format driven by a single protagonist, Taws’s thematic chapters follow the multiple trajectories and material traces of things formerly dismissed by art historians as marginalia of little artistic merit: Republican calendars and almanacs, paper currency and caricature, Bastille rubble refashioned into miniatures of the prison, melted-down shackles made into rings, as well as participatory outdoor festivals. Produced within the swiftly changing and often conflicting political instants of the revolutionary period, such objects, images, and events shared qualities of impermanence.

The book sheds new light on a decade that has been dominated by Quatremère de Quincy’s still-influential notion of the revolution as a sort of lacuna in art history by repositioning the ephemeral works that proliferated during this period at the crux of revolutionary politics. For in spite of the government’s desire to erect monuments of lasting permanence, “the vast majority of visual materials that conveyed the Revolution’s symbolic message … were mobile, ephemeral, and multiple.” Crucially for the author, the temporary character of artistic production did not signal failure but enabled the visualization of the revolution as a radical break with the past. Whereas official artworks such as history paintings and buildings were unquestioningly made to last, the ordinary and widely circulated things such as paper calendars, which were meant to be used up and rendered obsolete, raised a new awareness of time: “Thinking about material durability was one of the key ways in which revolutionaries thought about duration, and it was consequently crucial to how they imagined the place of the Revolution in history”.

The question of material durability is at the center of chapter 1, which explores the paper currency known as the assignat, one of the most visible forms of political imagery circulating during the early
revolutionary government’s attempts to establish its authority. The assignat was first issued in 1789 as a government bond intended to redistribute bien national, or nationalized clerical land, and later became used as a form of currency. The issuing of this experimental form of print resulted in hyperattentive ways of looking for authenticity that differed from the early eighteenth-century practice of measured connoisseurship of prints. Perpetually criticized for its flimsiness and lack of intrinsic value, initial versions of the assignat mimicked metallic money and relied upon Louis XVI's profile portrait to generate a sense of political authority and monetary value until “the subsequent removal of the king’s head in both reality and representation” (18), after his execution in 1793. In an attempt to fix the value of the depreciating currency, an arsenal of security measures replaced Louis XVI's features—numbers and letters intricately arranged upon watermarked pieces of paper, offset by dry and wet stamps. Such measures to create the perfect form of print did not thwart rampant counterfeiting or inflation. One of Taws’s most compelling arguments is that paper's provisionality enabled the medium to respond rapidly to changing events in ways that slower and more permanent media such as painting, sculpture, and architecture could not. It also gave citizens of the new French Republic a certain amount of agency in determining their identities. Like the assignat, passports, military congés, and other forms of government-issued paper identification, discussed in chapter 2, were provisional objects that wielded an exceptional power over individuals’ lives. Transformed, displayed, and verified, such papers could establish one’s political status as a legitimate citizen. Their absence could mark one as an enemy of the state. Yet with a couple of creases and folds, ordinary people could adapt perceivably fixed forms of identity into more pliable definitions of the self. This is neatly demonstrated in the assignat folded by an antigovernment royalist to make a secret identification card that reads, “fraternité ou la morte de la république” (20).

Chapters 3 and 4 highlight the ways in which the tensions between the fleeting materiality of ephemera and the permanence to which the revolution continually aspired led to new forms of commemoration. Chapter 3 looks at prints of the Festival of the Federation, an event first held in Paris in 1790 marking the storming of the Bastille and the creation of the National Guard. Replicated throughout the provinces, the festival was subsequently singled out by historians as an event that actualized the revolution’s dreams of political union before the dissolution into violence during the Terror. What differentiates Taws’s reading of this archetypal festival from Mona Ozouf’s classic account in Festivals and the French Revolution is his acknowledgment of the fact that festivals, as temporary events, are “only knowable through their representations” (71).1 Cautioning against conflating the image with the actual event, Taws notes that even for the participants taking part in the collective oath at the Champ de Mars, there was no single narrative that could subsequently encapsulate this fleeting occasion, despite images picturing a singular and indivisible unity. What will be of particular interest to architectural historians is the way in which Taws analyzes prints, built forms, and written narratives together as part of a constellation. Festivals, like paper money and documents, “were dependent on a mutable dialogue between a tangible object and its paper substitute” (71). The structures designed for the ceremony, such as architect Jacques Cellerier’s colossal wooden triumphal arch, did figure prominently in representations of the event by the famed printer Jean-Louis Prieur. However, the work of commemoration was effectuated not only through these built monuments but also through the circulation and rematerialization of the festival in print form.

Although destruction figures prominently in narratives of the revolution, Taws argues that processes of “reenactment, reproduction, and recollection were crucial from the very start of the Revolution” (112). What he terms an “excess of memory” accompanying every act of eradication is central to the discussion in chapter 4 of the Bastille and the transformation of “the material aftereffects of its demolition” (97). Taws traces the career of the self-described architect-entrepreneur Pierre-Étienne Palloy, an active participant in the storming of the Old Regime prison on 14 July 1789. Unlike other participants, Palloy sought to capitalize on the prison’s destruction by resurrecting it in more accessible form. The antithesis of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s omnipotent visionary architect creating entire utopian cities, Palloy constructed at a miniature scale, issuing small replicas of the prison cast from Bastille-dust plaster and tiny rings and stamps made from melted-down shackles as souvenirs. This transformation in scale, writes Taws, “and the question of how to compensate for the absence of a structure whose demolition was both necessary and traumatic” (98) continually resurfaced in Palloy’s multimedia work. One of his most notable productions entailed the organization of a raucous dance on the razed site of the Bastille, replacing the architectonic solidity of stone with a “ghostly projection of the outline of the prison” formed from a makeshift wooden scaffold (107). Spectral remains, recollection, and reproductions are also the themes of the book’s last two chapters, which focus, respectively, on shifting conceptions of revolutionary time in painter-engraver Philibert-Louis Debucourt’s Almanach national and the significance of trompe l’oeil prints of the assignat after the currency was taken out of circulation in 1796.

This book is both extremely well researched and theoretically daring, illuminating careful readings of primary texts with methodologies reaching beyond Taws’s field of art history into revolutionary studies, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. In his self-conscious adoption of a narrative framework that is “fragmented, multilayered, and dialogic” (168), Taws lays the groundwork for a way of doing history that relies neither upon the forced application of theory to a historical period nor upon the simple adoption of a linear progression of time that prevents the contradictions and complexities of a particular moment from emerging. Moreover, the Politics of the Provisional will be indispensable for architectural historians seeking to understand how structures of impermanence are equally central to issues.
of memory, history, and modernity as their
more lasting counterparts built in stone,
iron, and concrete.

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Notes

Jeanne Haffner
The View from Above: The Science of Social Space
Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013, 224 pp., 26 b/w illus. $32 (cloth), ISBN 9780262018791

Laura Kurgan
Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics
New York: Zone Books, 2013, 232 pp., 175 color and 50 b/w illus. $36.95 (cloth), ISBN 9781935408284

In February 2003, then US secretary of state Colin Powell presented to the United Nations Security Council satellite images that allegedly verified Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. The war that resulted seemed to have been based on a claim of the images’ legibility. In 1990, the US military went to war in Kuwait, and American audiences turned on their televisions to watch the action live. Just a year earlier, the first satellite in the Global Positioning System (GPS) had been launched, and the entire network was completed by 1993. Well before the production of digital and satellite imagery, photography had played an essential role in military activities. During World War I, pilots took to the skies with side-mounted cameras for reconnaissance purposes, and in the following decades, planes documented the destructive consequences of aerial vision in Guernica, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. As Paul Virilio has posited, “There is no war, then, without representation.”

These military techniques and methods of making maps, representing space, and observing people were always integral to knowing a terrain and designing built environments, informing surveying, planning, and building practices. Two recent publications—one historical, the other cartographic—consider the architectural and historical contexts from the early twentieth century to the present. Both pose basic questions to architects, urban planners, and historians: How do aerial and satellite images mediate the places we build and inhabit? How do the scopic regimes of these technologies, which are complicit with militarism, surveillance, and geopolitics, condition the production, use, and narratives of our built environments and social spaces?

In The View from Above: The Science of Social Space, Jeanne Haffner traces the emergence of the concept “social space” to aerial photography during World War I, linking its development and use to planning and building the grands ensembles of French housing in the 1970s. Haffner investigates how visual techniques of observation and representation were constitutive of this concept, focusing primarily on Henri Lefebvre’s formulation of l’espace social in The Production of Space (French, 1974; English, 1991). By pointing to a particular point of view, the vue d’ensemble, or the whole view, she argues that a distincively aerial visual culture was not the result of the French state’s urban planning practices but their very basis. For Haffner, there is no social space, then, without representation.

The history begins with the development of the mechanically rendered aerial view taken from the airplane that found its utility in military reconnaissance and surveillance during World War I. In the first of five chapters, Haffner argues that the significance of these images was not necessarily the novelty of what and how a terrain was pictured, but how it led to the reorganization of the French Army. Moreover, during the interwar period, this aerial view became associated with a technological optimism providing not only new visual access to colonial territories but also new methods for disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography. Chapter 2 traces how geographers linked the study of social organization to spatial forms. Pierre Gourou’s aerial views of the Tonkin Delta of Vietnam served as the basis for a geographical understanding of social development in which concepts of culture and landscape were formulated relative to each other. These sociospatial ideas and methods developed in the research of French colonies accordingly permeated the study of domestic rural regions by social scientists and historians such as Marc Bloch and of urban and suburban areas by architects such as Le Corbusier and Marcel Lods, who used 1930s aerial studies as the basis for the design and construction of the Cité de la Muette, a large utopian housing project northeast of Paris. (It was later was transformed into a prison camp by the Nazis during World War II.)

Chapter 3 focuses on the development of postwar planning efforts pressured by the housing crisis throughout France. By the 1950s, the aerial view became an integral part of the policy of l’aménagement du territoire, or land-use planning, and was used by the Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme (MRU) to identify and define linked social and urban problems. It was during this period, discussed in chapter 4, that the concept of “social space” fully emerged, prompted by the writings and research of Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe and tied directly to not only the aerial image but also the aerial view as an analytic concept. Robert Auzelle, architect and head of planning under the MRU, developed new visual techniques to study urban life, expanding beyond aerial photography to “maquettes.” These devices took pictures of models and could “respond to the following question: What will an observer situated in such a place determined by the model see: street, window, panoramic views?” (88). The model was animated through ground views as the city was objectified by aerial views. Consequently, the meaning of the aerial view expanded beyond its technological values associated with airplanes to encompass an integrated scopic regime that supported political governance and social administration.