SYMMETRY: CULTURAL-HISTORICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SCIENCE-ARTS RELATIONS: THE NATURAL AND MADE WORLD IN AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH


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György Darvas has been a dedicated organizer of symmetry meetings and editor of the periodical Symmetry. His enthusiasm has now spilled over into this 500-page book whose material is divided into five parts: Introductory chapters; Interdisciplinary Applications; Symmetry in Inanimate Nature; The Road from Nature to Man; and Human Creativity. The text is illustrated by a plethora of quotations and images. The end matter contains a Bibliography; Sources of Illustrations; Subject Index; Index of Names; and some 50 pages of color plates. Unfortunately, the book lacks a clear formulation of purpose, systematic elucidation and reliability in the details of discussion. Only a few examples will be given here for illustration. Sadly, the confusion starts with basic notions.

Darvas assigns dissymmetry to examples where “an object displays symmetry, but this symmetry is broken in one of its characteristics or a not too significant detail” (p. 21; see also p. 60). His examples include “a bubble in a diamond” and “a freckle on a face” (p. 21). He cites another example from Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain: a passage in which Hans Castorp understands why the builders of antiquity introduce minute variations in their columnar structures as a protest of the lifelessness of too much regularity (p. 23). All these are good examples of distortion or violation of symmetry to smaller or greater extent, but dissymmetry is something else; it has a well-defined meaning from which there is no reason to depart. Darvas refers copiously to A.V. Shubnikov’s teachings [1], so let us see what dissymmetry is according to Shubnikov. It is the absence of certain symmetry elements, for example a symmetry plane. Shubnikov called dissymmetry the falling out of one or another element of symmetry from a given group.

Pasteur used the term dissymmetry for the first time to designate the absence of a symmetry plane in a figure. Accordingly, dissymmetry did not exclude all elements of symmetry, only the absence of certain symmetries. Darvas quotes Pierre Curie correctly but misinterprets his teaching. Curie suggested a broad application of the term dissymmetry. He called a crystal disymmetric in the case of the absence of those elements of symmetry upon which depends the existence of one or another physical property in that crystal. In Curie’s original words: “Dissymmetry creates the phenomenon” (“C’est la dissymétrie qui crée le phénomène”) [2].

That is, a phenomenon exists and is observable due to dissymmetry, due to the absence of some symmetry elements from the system. The misunderstanding of the fundamental notion of dissymmetry does a conceptual disservice to the whole book.

The discovery of the double helical structure of DNA was among other things, a triumph of symmetry considerations. Darvas brings up this question but treats it superficially, which results in misunderstanding. There is more than one kind of symmetry in the DNA structure. There is the helical symmetry and the presence of overall twofold symmetry. One of the co-discoverers,
James D. Watson, never gave much importance to the twofold symmetry of the structure. He has stated explicitly, “I never used the dyad [the presence of twofold symmetry] to find the structure” [3]. In contrast, Francis Crick, on seeing Rosalind Franklin’s results, realized that her C2 symmetry of the A-form of DNA implied two chains running in opposite directions. Watson had been trying two-chain models, but had them running in the same direction [4]. These distinctions are important here. Darvas quotes at length (pp. 336–337) from various sections of Watson’s book The Double Helix (without giving exact references), but this side of the story remains murky. On page vii, it is not clear which writing by Watson “within a year of the publication of the Weyl volume” Darvas is referring to. Further on (p. 66), Darvas states that “The final precise determination of the spatial structure of the double helix of DNA (1953) . . . was the result of a symmetry hypothesis, paying attention to the symmetries of the molecules present in it” (italics added). However, there was no precise determination of the spatial structure at that point and could not have been; stating otherwise shows a misunderstanding of the role of symmetry in this discovery and a misunderstanding of the whole discovery in the first place. Watson and Crick stressed in their seminal paper that they merely suggested a structure. A remarkable indication of being uninformed about the double-helix story is demonstrated when Darvas says (p. 403) that the DNA model constructed by Crick and Watson was “based on the X-ray diffraction fibre diagrams of Maurice Wilkins.” Of course, it was Rosalind Franklin’s X-ray diagram of the B form of DNA.

Our next example involves chiral substances. Darvas brings up thalidomide (N-phthaloyl-ta-aminoglutaramide), but refers to it only by one of its trade names, Contergan (p. 333). The substance was discovered in 1953 and was marketed as a racemate, that is, a mixture of the two chiral isomers. It was, among other things, given to pregnant women suffering from morning sickness. When it turned out that the epidemic proportion of birth defects in the early 1960s were related to the drug, it was withdrawn. Darvas implies that one of the isomers acted as a teratogen, and chiral separation could have averted the tragedies. This was indeed the view many years ago, but it has been known by now for a long time that even the “beneficial” isomer undergoes rapid interconversion in the human organism, so in this case the chiral separation and selective administration of the drug would not have helped. In discussing the differences between chiral isomers, Darvas mentions (p. 35) an experiment by Keszthelyi and others but adds that he has no information about its outcome. Here is another example of leaving a story incomplete. Keszthelyi has reported that carefully measured optical activities of crystalline materials dissolved in water showed an appreciable influence of parity-violating energy differences in the crystallization process in some cases [5].

Darvas stresses (pp. 64, 295, 299 and 310) the preeminence of Chien-Shiun Wu’s beta-decay experiment in the verification of D.T. Lee and C.N. Yang’s hypothesis concerning parity violation in weak interactions, ignoring largely the other two experiments by two independent teams. Let me list here [6] all three contributions that within months almost simultaneously confirmed Lee and Yang’s supposition.

There is no point in continuing the enumeration of misunderstandings and inaccuracies in the book, so let us move to other aspects. It is astonishing that in a treatise with many quotations and a liberal use of various sources, there are no references, only a bibliography. If one wants to locate a quotation, the first task is to find out which entry in the bibliography might contain it and then comb through the pages of that entry with or less success. A case in point: Darvas quotes at length from something that “in 1964 Wigner wrote,” (p. 294), yet there is no such entry in the Bibliography [7]. Incidentally, Darvas ascertains (pp. vii–viii) that Wigner’s fundamental publications on symmetry in the 1950s brought him the Nobel Prize (in 1963). In reality, he had done that much earlier and his 1964 paper was not a new discovery but rather a review of his earlier findings. In his Nobel lecture, Wigner stated that symmetry principles “provide a structure and coherence to the laws of nature just as the laws of nature provide a structure and coherence to a set of events,” the physical phenomena [8], David J. Gross, a recent Nobel laureate physicist, summarized Wigner’s teachings in a simple diagram [9]:

Symmetry principles → Laws of nature → Physical phenomena

This was based on Wigner’s studies from the late 1920s and 1930s.

Wigner’s 1964 paper fares better than Goethe, who is quoted at length (p. 183) without showing up in the bibliography at all. This kind of “oversight” is more extreme in the case of the images. Superficially, Darvas takes great pains to provide the sources of images and refers to permissions for reproduction. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals significant flaws of which, again, only a few are mentioned here. Darvas uses illustrations from papers in the Symmetry journal, sometimes without even mentioning the names of the authors (for examples, see Figure 2.32, p. 67; Figure 7.36, p. 194). To me, this seems to be a misuse of the position of publisher/editor of the periodical. He reproduces classical paintings from web sites and cites permission to reproduce them from the web site owner. However, just because somebody constructs a web site with a lot of well-known paintings, it does not mean that the person becomes the copyright owner of those paintings. Further, Darvas reproduces pictures that he finds in magazines and refers to them as images from his own collection (for examples, see, Galaxy, p. 111; Ministry (sic) of Defense, U.S.A., p. 193) in obvious violation of not only the copyright laws but also publishing ethics. There are well-known images throughout the book, sometimes with the source, but no permission, which Darvas justifies by drawing an arrow into the image or altering it in some other minor way. He calls this “manipulation” and maintains (private communication from Darvas, 2007) that once an image is thus manipulated, no permission is necessary. There is, for example, a photograph of a pile of cannon balls (p. 167). The image was cut out from a larger photograph I took in Laconia, New Hampshire, and have used in two books [10]. There is no mention of the source, let alone permission (which I would have gladly granted). It would take much more effort to enumerate all improper uses of copyrighted material in this book than would be appropriate and necessary for this review. Maybe the publisher should have scrutinized them before publication. One last remark: My name appeared in the front matter of the book as one of its two reviewers. After my protest—because I had not reviewed it—the publisher agreed to paste over my name in the copies of the book not yet sold.
(An extended version of this review can be found on-line at <http://www.leonardo.info/ldr.html>.)

References and Notes


Books

Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis
by Elizabeth C. Mansfield.

Reviewed by Amy Ione. E-mail: <ione@diatrope.com>.

First reported in Cicero’s Rhetoric and Pliny’s Natural History, the story of Zeuxis’s portrayal of Helen of Troy is a compelling one. According to tradition, the Greek artist was commissioned to paint an image of this legendary beauty. Realizing that none of the models he summoned fully possessed the physical beauty attributed to Helen, he combined the best features of five different women into a composite image. Elizabeth C. Mansfield’s Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis catalogues the many responses to the Zeuxis myth we can identify in the visual arts, literature, performance, digital arts and history. In other words, she does not ask whether the Greek artist Zeuxis actually lived during the fourth century BCE, which is a question others have posed. Instead, she assesses the extent to which the Zeuxis Selecting Models legend can be deciphered, the nature of its mythic structure and its significance for the history of Western art.

Overall, the book turns on the premise that the Zeuxis Selecting Models legend records and perpetuates a persistent cultural anxiety about the historical approach to visual representation. As Mansfield explains, mimesis, in its full classical sense, meant first copying forms observed in nature and then generalizing or perfecting these forms to achieve a kind of ideal. This differs from the idea of direct imitation commonly associated with “mimesis” in our contemporary environment. Moreover, as she details in one of the most extraordinary aspects of her study, Zeuxian (or classical) mimesis has alternately been rejected and embraced since antiquity. Classical mimesis, which is evident in ancient aesthetics as recorded by Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle, lost most of its currency in the Middle Ages as imitation and representation were given lower priority. Renaissance artists and authors reclaimed the idea, and it has remained a prevalent theory of representation to this day. Mansfield’s argument hinges on two major assertions. Firstly, she declares that Zeuxis Selecting Models functions mythically and, in doing so, transmits ideology. By this she means that the legend retains traces of a cultural unconscious that makes its presence felt by triggering an uncanny sensation when we are confronted by it. Secondly, the experience elicited by Zeuxis Selecting Models is a symptom of the ontological impasse posed by classical mimesis itself as it served as a vehicle for social and metaphysical solace. Mansfield’s perspective is insightful.

Indeed, Mansfield’s analysis of how the Zeuxis myth influenced Western art theories about representation as they were formed and engaged is a position I hope art historians and visual culture theorists will integrate into their research as they re-evaluate the relationship between representation, nature and how artists re-create/comment upon the world we see.

Part I begins the analysis of the Zeuxis narrative. Here Mansfield discusses how the relevance of myths and legends about artistic creation, often used for the study of visual culture, underlie much of her thinking. She points out that art historians have generally turned their attention to legends when they function as subjects or works of art but tend to give less attention to myths allied with aesthetic theory. Through well-researched analyses of sources that range from Cicero and Pliny to Alberti, Vasari and academics of the 17th and 18th centuries, the author exposes numerous interpretations of Zeuxis Selecting Models theories. In addition, the author walks us through the historical thinking in detailed case studies that are expanded in copious footnotes. The well-done case studies are nicely integrated with one another. To the author’s credit, each time she compares an example to another in one portion of the book, she includes a notation that directs the reader to the section of the book with the additional analysis. The footnotes add immensely to the main text and are highly recommended.

The second part of the book proceeds from the question: Why are there so few post-Renaissance depictions of the Zeuxis Selecting Models story cul-
the desire to make the ideal visible. Speaking in “gendered” terms, Mansfield considers the many depictions of the legend during the Renaissance, questions its absence during the 18th century and offers thoughtful case study interpretations (e.g., Angelica Kaufmann’s paintings, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Agnon and Orlan’s performance art) to identify several profound retellings of the myth. Too Beautiful to Picture is a compelling book and an important contribution to art history, gender studies, aesthetic theory and visual culture. Although I found myself questioning some of her conclusions, the writing was so engrossing that I enjoyed the dialogue the author’s words generated in my mind. I also learned quite a bit as I read. This, in turn, provided an opportunity for me to re-think my views on mimesis, art historical themes, and the role of women in art historically. I think others, too, will find this excellent volume well worth their attention.

POP MODERNISM: NOISE AND THE REINVENTION OF THE EVERYDAY


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In many studies the conviction still prevails that “pop” and “modernism” are antagonistic and incompatible terms. Seen from the perspective of modernism, popular culture continues to be dismissed as commercial, manipulative, superficial and female, for few cultural movements have been so gender-sensitive as modernism. Seen from the viewpoint of pop culture, modernism is still accused of being formalist, elitist, arrogant and conservative, certainly in comparison with the historical avant-garde, more relaxed in matters of high and low. Yet the example of Walter Benjamin, the major theoretician of 20th-century modernism, as well as of Surrealism, its main and most globalized artistic representative, should have warned us against such a strict opposition, which is not only wildly overgeneralized but also and most crucially erroneous. As Juan A. Suárez convincingly demonstrates in his brilliantly written and very well informed—yet unfortunately poorly illustrated—study, the mutual presence of the popular and the modern, far from being a marginal or exceptional phenomenon, was at the very heart of American culture in the modernist era (1910–1960, roughly speaking).

Pop Modernism actually makes a double claim: First, that modernism in all its forms, however diverse they may be, always has a dark side, a hidden dimension, an unknown continent, which has to do with the popular, the latter being defined as a mix of “low” and “mass media” culture. Second, that the very evidence of this fact, which may seem to have become obvious and all-pervasive in recent years, has been dissimulated by modernism’s self-definition as high, sophisticated, individual and non-industrial culture, as much as by later dichotomist views of postmodernism as the opposite of modernism (and since postmodernism used to be associated with the popular, the need for a thorough revaluation of the popular within modernism was almost inexistent). Yet Suárez does much more than just call our attention to the unnoticed—or at least largely undertheorized—presence of what he calls the popular. He also proposes a renewed definition of this mass-mediatized pop culture, and this conceptual reframing transforms his book in a vital conceptual and intellectual contribution to the study of modernism itself.

For Suárez, “popmodernism” is less the simple addition of high and low, of elite and mass, of individual experiment and industrial streamlining, than the mutual contestation of these poles,
which appear to be systematically intertwined in the modernist era. The concept of “noise” does not designate the introduction of impure popular, mechanical, commercial forms in modernism’s aspirations toward pure form and toward purity in general; it is not just the clash of the “real world” and the “world of art” but a much more radical interrogation of what the relationship of “world” and “art” may imply. In the encounter between the popular and the modern, the popular resists incorporation: There is no dialectical Aufhebung of the popular in the modern; the popular appears by definition as that which remains opaque, obscure, decentered, unlabeled, even meaningless, permanently adrift. As a corollary, in this encounter the modern is not less, permanently adrift. As a corollary, in this encounter the modern is not what serves as the antipode of the popular as noise; it becomes instead noise itself, incapable of maintaining the clarity and order it wants to impose.

Pop Modernism tells this story of contestation and disintegration in a short introduction and eight case studies, on, respectively, Vachel Lindsay’s theory of film; Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s Manhattan; John Dos Passos’s USA trilogy; T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land; Joseph Cornell’s boxes, pictures and films; Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s The Young and Evil; Zora Neale Hurston’s Tell My Horse; and, finally, the film In the Street by James Agee, Janice Loeb and Helen Levitt. In suggesting that these chapters can be read in any order, and that each of them comes back on the same issues, the author is too modest, however. Not only is the ordering of the chapters masterfully directed, but the author has managed in foregrounding in each study one period, medium and genre, and one specific theoretical viewpoint or framework, which makes this book a wonderfully applied synthesis of the best of critical media theory as well as the best of cultural history. The references range from McLuhan to Kittler, from Macherey to Clifford, from Sedgwick to Hansen, from Brown to Kraeauer, and it is a pleasure to under- line moreover the extreme richness of the bibliography gathered in the footnotes (unfortunately this wealth is hardly reflected in the index, which is, in comparison, a little skinny).

All eight close readings by Suárez are to be praised, without any exception or restriction. The analyses are always sharp and clear, written with dash, enthusiasm and a perfect sense of rhythm. The contextualization is well balanced (that is, perfectly instructive and useful, never gratuitously accumula- tive). Last but not least: Suárez succeeds in many cases in changing our view of works, objects, authors and practices we thought we knew. The best chapter in this regard is undoubtedly that on Cornell, in which Suárez achieves the double goal of his important enterprise, of freeing us from conventionalized views of modernism (in this case the aesthetic and biographical interpretations of the boxes) and making us hear the terrible noise underneath (in this case the proximity between Cornell’s objects as senseless “things” and the Surrealist reuse of the mass media of their times).

In short, this is a great book, and one can only hope that it will be as much discussed as Andreas Huyssen’s After the Great Divide or, more recently, Michael North’s Camera Works.

BEAUTIFUL/UGLY: AFRICAN AND DIASPORA AESTHETICS

Reviewed by Michael R. (Mike) Mosher, Saginaw Valley State University. E-mail: <mosher@svsu.edu>.

Sara Nuttall has assembled authors who write on a variety of aspects of beauty and its absence, the urban distinctions between formal and informal, use and refuse (and, frequently, reuse) art and junk in the “sheer ugliness of the city,” the recurrence or adaptation of traditional African motifs, and images and gazes still mired or originating in Western colonial standards of contemporary beauty. Toni Morrison’s novel The Bluest Eye gives voice to the anguish of an African American woman who is outside of the prevailing European standards of beauty of her part of the U.S.A. Nuttall cites this character in the introduction to her anthology Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics. She goes on to mention the privileged signares, the mulatto women of Gorée Island when it was a major slave-trading port. These Senegalese women have been the subjects of glass paintings by Germaine Gaby, which in turn have been copied in miniature by street vendors in Dakar and on Gorée.

Some contributors to Beautiful/Ugly notice African beauty, for example Mamari Maxine Clarke on the Oyotunji community in the Sea Islands of Carolina coast, whose residents endeavor to re-create the traditional west African community and lifestyle of their ancestors... although their kids want to listen to hip hop, as do many African kids. Other authors investigate wedding feasts, family cuisine and Brazilian hair-care products. Short fiction by Mia Couto of Mozambique contextualizes questions of what is acceptable display. Other contributors view the African grotesque. Dominique Malaquais investigates local meanings attached to the bricolage aesthetic, embodied in a large sculptural metal figure constructed of scrap and junk by Joseph Francis Sumenegue in Donoula, Cameroon, called “La Nouvelle Liberté.” Malaquais might have explored comparisons to California Funk sculptors such as William Keinholz or Osip Zadkine’s figurative metal memorial in Rotterdam. Michael Gillenwater delivers a well-illustrated report on the cool, scary painted ads for “morality” melodramas in Ghana, as over the top as the work of the American painter Robert Williams, or the “Mars Attacks” bubblegum cards this reviewer relished as a boy in the 1960s. When Senegalese sculptor Ousmane Sow saw Leni Reifenstahl’s photographs of elegant Nuba people, he was inspired to create works depicting massive male African wrestlers. Having witnessed the January 2007 wrestling-with-punches match in Dakar’s Leopold Senghor Stadium between heavyweights Bombadier and Tyson (his career and erratic behavior modeled after the American boxer of that name), this reviewer affirms the realism of Sow’s work. Those guys are monumental.

Simon Gikandi writes an apologetic for Picasso’s offhand comment to an Afro-Guyanese artist, Aubrey Williams, in which the Spaniard viewed the man’s physiognomy—“a fine African head”—as a potential subject for his own work. Yet, if the comment brusquely objectified a fellow artist, why would we expect Picasso to treat any out-of-town stranger better than he did Spanish, Russian and French women? According to Andre Malraux, whom Gikandi quotes, Picasso was irritated at “the influences that the Negroes had on me.” Robert Farris Thompson is quoted wondering why we do not hear African artists’ reactions to Picasso. John Berger, in The Success and Failure of Picasso, predicted that Picasso’s greatness would lie in his unintentional encouragement of African artists to reclaim their tradi-
tional aesthetics and to minimize their imitation of trends in the cultural, colonial European and American art capitals.

Sarah Nuttall is Associate Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the Witswatersrand in Johannesburg, and several of the essayists are from South Africa. Artist William Kentridge questions the very idea of beauty when drawing a corpse on an urban street or the ravaged landscape of mine dumps around Germiston. Mark Gevisser looks at an early-1960s scrapbook with images of black families enjoying the day at a fine beach (not the ragged ones they were assigned under South African racial laws), an interracial couple holding hands in public and affectionate gay men, and laments that the ensuing three decades could have been ones of normal human relations had they taken place without apartheid’s cruel and stringent rules.

Beautiful/Ugly is another fine book on contemporary African art from Duke University Press, to place on the shelf beside Elizabeth Harney’s In Senghor’s Shadow.

THE ATLAS OF CLIMATE CHANGE: MAPPING THE WORLD’S GREATEST CHALLENGE


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Visualizing climate change is an ambitious undertaking. Numerous interlocking processes are involved, and causes and effects are often engaged in dynamic feedback loops. For practically every aspect, an animated simulation might do the trick very well, as data are constantly changing and static representations are sometimes difficult to read. Anyway, Kirstin Dow and Thomas Downing chose to compile a state-of-the-art atlas instead, and with success. Doubtlessly they will have to revise this volume every two years or so, or even sooner, as more research is done and better models are developed every other day. However, even if this book will age quickly, it has more merits than shortcomings.

The atlas is organized in seven logically ordered chapters, from the earliest signs, such as glacial retreat and polar changes, to expected consequences and possible policies. Each chapter offers a number of thoroughly annotated maps, images and graphics to illustrate the relevant topics. Sometimes, as on the topic of “cultural losses,” an interesting and wide-ranging selection is made without any pretense of exhaustivity. Most topics are dealt with in a single spread, with some text, a map and some statistical data. References and detailed data are given in annexes, so as not to overload the page. The data, however, are as recent as one might expect for a book of this kind, and the science is rigorous as well as intelligibly explained.

On certain topics, the authors have chosen to stick to facts rather than take sides with one or the other party. For example, on the page on International Action, where the Kyoto countries are shown, the caption reads, “Most countries have acknowledged the problem of climate change by signing the Convention on Climate Change” (p. 71). Comment adds: “The USA and Australia have signed the Convention but not the [Kyoto] Protocol, creating uncertainty around the next steps” (p. 70). Surely this is a very diplomatic statement. Moreover, there is neither mention of the dissent within the named countries nor a hint of a political analysis as to why they haven’t signed the Protocol.

Educators, activists and everyone concerned with the subject (not to mention anyone who simply likes maps) may want to acquire this book and add the numerous references to web sites and other resources to their list of bookmarks.

THE VIRTUAL WINDOW: FROM ALBERTI TO MICROSOFT


Reviewed by Ian Verstegen. Philadelphia, PA. E-mail: <ianverstegen@yahoo.com>.

Anne Friedberg’s new book is about the ubiquity of windows in our lives, from paintings and the camera obscura to photography, film, televisions, computers and iPods: “Screens are now everywhere—on our wrists, in our hands, on our dashboards and in our backseats, on the bicycles and treadmills at the gym, on the seats of airplanes and buses, on buildings and billboards” (p. 87). We are invaded by multiplying windows, and this provides an opportunity to reflect on the understanding of windows, real and metaphorical, that have informed our notions of visibility. Although writing from the institutional locus of film studies and aware of every nuance of the latest theories, Friedberg’s point of view refreshingly questions some of the standbys of postmodern media theory. The hegemonic model of scopic visuality is broken down, and objectivity peeks its way through: the Lacanian mirror is traded for the plate glass window.

Friedberg’s study is especially timely as she writes at the moment of the loss of material differences between cinematic, televisual and computer screens (p. 236). A historical treatment is called for, lest this situation in which we find ourselves, where one can watch television or movies and compute all on a laptop computer, becomes a new historical teleology. In other words, the historical specificity of each of the distinct media must be respected. This Friedberg does admirably, from discussions of 15th-century linear perspective (Alberti) to the 17th-century camera obscura, the commercial windows in the 19th century and the movie houses of the 20th.

Friedberg begins, as the title suggests, with Leon Battista Alberti, the codifier of linear perspective and an often-invoked figure in establishing the Western regime of visuality. Unlike most retrospectively oriented (and caricatured) discussions of Alberti, however, Friedberg’s is historically informed, and she notes the disjunction between Alberti’s discussion of the subject of painting—istoria—and the putative windows he would have painters look through. Turning next to
Descartes, whose philosophy is often seen as the full-fledged rationalization of trends begun by Alberti, Friedberg coins the “Cartesian coincidence,” that is, the “shaky conflation” (p. 47) between centered perspective and the Cartesian subject.

If the window is only a metaphor for painting, Friedberg turns in chapter 2 to the camera obscura for something that functions much more like a window, for it projects real light and movement. Jonathan Crary’s plea for discontinuity between the camera obscura and photography is amended by Friedberg, who endorses the gradualistic ideas of Laurent Manoni and Deac Rossell. Moving next to photography, Friedberg is not surprised that Niepce would choose a long exposure out of his window, but the window “did not frame a transparent plane for seeing through but, rather, uses its frame to encase a surface, its virtual substitute” (p. 73).

Chapter 3 begins with a history of glass production and its improvement through the ages. Arriving at modern plate glass and a new visuality: “Its plate glass and a new visuality: “Its virtual substitute” (p. 73). Chapter 3 begins with a history of glass production and its improvement through the ages. Arriving at modern plate glass and a new visuality: “Its

PROBLEMATIZING GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE: THE THEORY, CULTURE & SOCIETY ENCYCLOPEDIA PROJECT


There is a story by Borges in which a protagonist searches for a missing volume in an encyclopedia set. Actually, the search begins with an encyclopedia entry about a remote, mysterious land that may or may not exist. The search for this missing place, however, ends up being a search for a missing book. To make things more complicated, it appears that one particular encyclopedia set does indeed contain the missing volume, while all others do not. Rapidly, the search for the textual verification of a physical place recedes behind a search for a mode of verification itself. In a classic Borgesian move, geography and textuality, two of our primary modes of verification (“I was there”; “it’s been documented”), thus end up undermining the search for knowledge itself.

The encyclopedia Problematizing Global Knowledge does not—as far as I know—contain any mysterious missing entries. However, its mode of assemblage does nevertheless encourage a critical stance toward contemporary modes of knowledge-production, of which the immaterial labor of academic institutions is a primary example. The flurry of academic texts that claim to distil specialized knowledge into “readers,” “key terms” anthologies and “very short introductions” is a perplexing phenomenon. From the naive point of view such books can only help fulfill secondary material or as an entry point into difficult primary material. However, anyone who teaches will attest to the fact that the reality in the classroom is that such books often metonymically stand in for the primary texts (the extreme version of this would be the condensation of, say, all of media studies into algorithms, haiku or a version of Rimbaud’s zutique poems).

On the surface, Problematizing Global Knowledge is exceedingly readable and comprehensive. It is broken up into sections that are thematically arranged—“Network,” “Life/Vitalism,” “Classification,” and so on. While its focus is on knowledge production in a globalized context, its scope is broader than the vaguely named field of media studies. This is “media studies” as an expanded field. The entries are written by authors known and respected in their areas of specialty. Furthermore, the entries in a given section do not simply sing a chorus of consensus; there are differences between entries that are more indicative of the richness and heterogeneity of media studies than many of the more reductive textbooks currently available. Originally published as a special issue of the journal Theory, Culture, & Society, the volume is set to be re-published as a book, with additional responses by invited authors. It also forms the first of a series of like-minded encyclopedias to be published by the Theory, Culture, & Society (TCS) collective.

The challenge, then, is how to approach the task of producing knowledge in such forms as the encyclopedia.
without totality or closure. Among other things, Borges’s story, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” attempts to think the encyclopedia without closure. Paring through Problematizing Global Knowledge, edited by the TCS collective, we see a different, though similar, approach. Whereas Borges uses fabulation to open the encyclopedia, the TCS collective has used appropriation. What form does their encyclopedia appropriate? Well, the form of the encyclopedia, of course. The opening sections aptly deal with the concept of knowledge and the form of the encyclopedia itself. Each entry in this section patiently unravels the very form in which it is instantiated through its coverage of the main issues and themes centering around each entry. Such problems concerning epistemology are not only raised by Diderot and d’Alembert, but they are also fundamental ontological problems of sets and inclusion that reach back to Plato. Thus, while there is no Borgesian missing volume, the TCS encyclopedia offers breadth and coverage but in a reflexive way that always refers back to the form of the encyclopedia itself. (This is the “n-1” of encyclopedias. Or better, an Encycloonomicon.)

For over 20 years now, the TCS collective has been interrogating the transformations and transmutations of global culture. Situated at the cross-section between the humanities and social sciences, the TCS Centre publishes the well-known journals Theory, Culture & Society and Body & Society, as well as an impressive list of anthologies and monographs published by Sage. This volume—the first in their encyclopedia project—is a welcome intervention into the disparate fields known as media studies, science studies and global cultural studies. In fact—one hopes—it may well end up redefining them.

FROM TECHNOLOGICAL TO VIRTUAL ART

Reviewed by Paul Hertz, The Collaboratory Project, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 60201, U.S.A. E-mail: <paul-hertz@northwestern.edu>.

Frank Popper’s From Technological to Virtual Art could hardly have arrived at a better moment. Interactive digital art has expanded far beyond the cozy enclaves where it began, garnering popular and critical attention if not acclaim. In the last decade, it has disembarked in numerous artworld venues, gained a few outposts in galleries and settled into various crowd-pleasing museum shows. A growing body of contemporary art-historical research examines its origins. Curators hold conferences on its preservation: Acquisition is the surest sign of recognition. The oft-repeated complaint of artists dedicated to the field, that the artworld has been most comfortable conferring its favors on established artists who “go binary” rather than on digital media pioneers and their inheritors, starts to sound a little wheezy, even if the artworld still has a long way to go. Books like From Technological to Virtual Art—and there have been quite a few over the past decade—construct the art-historical corpus of digital media, identify its pioneers and long-term practitioners, document the mutual influence of digital and traditional media and incidentally enable future liaisons with artworld markets by establishing a legitimating critical record. As author of Art of the Electronic Age (1993) and Origins and Development of Kinetic Art (1968) and curator of the Electra exhibition of electronic art (Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1983), Popper brings a depth of scholarship to the field that few can match. Add to his careful scholarship a gift for clarity and a generous capacity for letting artists speak about their work and you have a book that should endure for some time as an art-historical text. Building on his assertion in Art of the Electronic Age that art humanizes technology, Popper defines virtual art as a new departure in art, emphasizing interactivity, multisensorial perception and a philosophical shift from the real to the virtual. The virtual for Popper involves technological art from the 1980s onward in which interactivity, participation and immersion create experiences that simulate reality rather than re-creating it in physical form. Virtual art partakes in a larger social transformation, “the passage from a culture of objects and stability to a culture of flux and instability.” Artists producing virtual art are developing a new aesthetic drawn from a commitment to both art and technology while their awareness of the social implications of their medium engages them in extra-artistic social and scientific goals, not the least of which is precisely the humanization of technology.

Popper offers his arguments for the category and term virtual art in his Introduction, where he also (all too briefly) presents his criteria for selecting artists and points out areas of new media, such as video and electronic music, that he has chosen to exclude in order to maintain a focused investigation. The opening chapters of the book summarize the historical antecedents of technological and virtual art and review some of the ground covered in Art of the Electronic Age. The major portion of the book consists of chapters largely constructed from interviews with artists, divided into various categories with introductory remarks by the author. As a condensed scholarly survey, the opening chapters are immensely rewarding. There have been many scholarly constructions of the historical antecedents of electronic art and the development of practices that emerge from it. Few offer the range of Popper’s scholarship. Though often limited to brief paragraphs and lists of names, Popper’s text includes a broad array of tendencies and historical figures, some quite obscure, that populated the early 20th-century avant-garde and often do not figure in standard histories, generally focused on painting and sculpture. He reveals how the ferment of experimentation of the early avant-garde in multisensorial and intermedia artworks, light organs, responsive architecture and procedural art, to mention but a few of the early experimental domains, seemed only to be lacking a proper instrument, as early electronic artists realized. Popper’s coverage of electronic art provides less of an inclusive survey, because he wishes to emphasize
how itineraries followed by artists serve as models of the various ways that electronic media art developed. One could argue that the text privileges European constructivism, at least to a degree, but if it is idiosyncratic, it also has the virtue of giving pioneering artists who have escaped mainstream histories (and even digital art histories) some long-overdue attention.

The major portion of the text presents works by individual artists active from approximately 1983 up to the present, distributed into four categories: materialized digital-based work, multimedia and multisensorial off-line works, interactive digital installations and multimedia on-line works (net art). The line of increasing dematerialization that orders these chapters coincides, roughly, with a timeline from early virtual art to the most recent. Dematerialization proceeds both through increasing interactivity and participation and through shifting of delivery from off-line to on-line. If the inclusion of an artist in one category or another occasionally feels arbitrary, the utility of a systematic approach and the author’s care not to overstate the organizational scheme reduce the problematic nature of assigning categories.

Popper has developed his text from interviews and artists’ statements, and there is much valuable material here. When this presentational technique succeeds, it has the great virtue of giving us a sense of the artist’s voice and philosophy. Occasionally, it must be said, it is a source of annoyance, when artists lapse into language too personal or too overburdened with theoretical constructs to allow the reader to understand its connection to the artwork—an annoyance made all the more patent by the clarity of the author’s expression. One might wish that he had employed an editorial scalpel with greater zeal. Failing that—and one could certainly argue that the artist’s words should stand, whatever their failings, because they are the artist’s words—one could wish that Popper would elaborate more on his criteria and interest in the artists. It would hardly matter if his selection proved to be somewhat arbitrary, as one suspects any selection must be, if his critique revealed the same clarity that pervades his historical perspective. Indeed, readers hoping for a systematically developed theoretical apparatus should look elsewhere. Popper’s point of view is that of an art historian. In that capacity, he would rather let the artists speak and leave the apparatus in a provisional state, ready to go off in many directions, than overload the text with arguments and conclusions.

The book closes with notes, a bibliography, an artist list and an index, all useful. It would have been a great favor to researchers and other curious readers to provide the artist list, which mostly consists of URLs, in on-line form. In an age when electronic resources commonly extend the utility of books, this omission is rather surprising.

Considering From Technological to Virtual Art as a whole, its flaws seem scarcely worth noting. This is a book that deserves a place on the shelf of any artist or historian seriously interested in new media art. Moreover, its utility lies not so much in its being a definitive history, but in the very provisionality of its conclusions and inclusions. The field of virtual art continues to evolve in breadth and complexity. The number of people working in the field has expanded beyond the capacity of any one historian to capture everything or everyone in a single text. The solidity of the markers that Popper sets down in the historical record, the precision with which he describes the advent of virtual art and the historical value of the assembled interviews and documentation make this an indispensable text—not because it closes a line of argument, but because it opens up many. The most indispensable texts are those that urge others to research, document and write. Let us hope that many more books, essays and documents are already taking form, stimulated by From Technological to Virtual Art.

**DESIGN ANARCHY**


*Reviewed by John F. Barber, Digital Technology and Culture, Washington State University Vancouver, Vancouver, WA. E-mail: jfbarber@eauz.net.*

*Adbusters* magazine was founded in the late 1980s, calling itself “a journal of the mental environment.” Since then, each issue has focused on confronting mass consumption and blind devotion to corporate identities. *Design Anarchy*, a new book by *Adbusters* founder and publisher Kalle Lasn, is not only a work...
sarily the same as the other, especially when ethos and ethics are lacking or missing in the efforts of innocuous designers.

Lasn makes his position perfectly clear when he scrawls a quote from the late designer Tibor Kalman across one of the book’s unnumbered pages: “Don’t work for companies that want you to lie for them,” or invites “Insert your commercial here” on multiple others. Both are message and motto for designers and consumers, especially when both, implies Lasn, are responsible for the pollution and redemption of the mental environment.

If, as predicted by McLuhan, World War IV will be fought in newspapers, magazines, on the radio, on television and the Internet, Design Anarchy is a call to arms. The weapons of choice are memes, units of information, catchphrases, concepts, tunes, notions of fashion, philosophy or politics that can change minds, alter behavior and transform cultures. In the information age, whoever makes the memes holds the power. Right now, corporations control much meme production. By sharing examples from Adbusters’ repurposing of several corporate advertising campaigns, Design Anarchy becomes a toolkit for artists, designers, consumers and citizens wishing to tilt the balance of power.

Lasn claims that we, members of civil society, can begin by demarcating ourselves, our lives, bodies and brains. Then we can join with others to demarket chief rituals co-opted by commercial forces. We can change the way we interact with mass media, the way information flows, the way in which meaning is produced. The old American dream was about prosperity in vacant obliviousness. A post-consumer generation will demand greater meaning from its life, as well as new economies: true-cost or ecological. Once we break the commercial monopoly on making meaning, we can create a new dream, one about spontaneity.

In the end, Design Anarchy is a provocative and incendiary coffee table design book. It is also just as well a first attempt by Lasn to develop and portray a new graphic/text language whose anarchist beauty strikes a formidable political stance. In a design world where, arguably, surface is all that counts, Design Anarchy is a first-draft blueprint for leveling the propaganda arena surrounding the conception of shopping as a patriotic act.

Carroll conceives the relationships between science, state and society through the idea of a “science-state-plexus,” that is, the ontologically dense and intercommunicating nature of science and government (Chapter I, “Science, Culture, and State Formation”). According to the author, the modern state was conceptually elaborated and materially engineered through the transformation of scientific thought in “experimental politics” aimed at managing the land and the people.

Tracing the introduction of engine science into colonial Ireland, and showing how that country became a laboratory for statecraft, Carroll captures the centrality of engineering practices in the emerging mechanical philosophy (Chapter II, “Understanding Engine Science”). “Scopes augment human senses,” he argues, and “meters render objects in numbers so they can be manipulated” (p. 7). Engineers moved across Ireland methodically, valuing the land as a commodity and establishing its potential for economics. As a long-term result, the relationship between science and government emerged. Information-gathering states integrated the social, economic and natural, seeking through public enterprises and education to improve human society and its environment and police natural and political bodies (Ch. III, “Engineering and the Civilizing Mission;” Ch. IV, “Engineering the Data State”).

A major suggestion of the book is to appreciate the character of the modern state, paying attention to its material culture. Chapter V (“Bio-Population”) focuses on the implementation of medical institutions and public health into the rule of natural and political bodies. Showing how medical police became a powerful engine of government and integration, Carroll addresses the further development of the state as an “administration of life . . . constantly seeking to arrest disease and extend longevity . . . health, safety, and population security” (p. 9). Chapter VI (“Engineering Ireland”), which covers agricultural and land management, public buildings, roads, and sanitary engineering, discusses how “natural bodies” became “political issues” through the culture of engine science in a discourse able to develop—at least theoretically—a link between moral improvement and material engineering.

In the “Conclusion,” Carroll returns to the subject of modern science as a
NATURALISTS, COLLECTORS, and adventurous expeditions but because of not only by the desire to partake in collections were built up through surveys that reached their zenith in the 19th century. It focuses on the history of North American natural history museums and the diorama created such an enduring story of how the scientific art form of biodiversity is due not only to the changing practices of collecting but also to the unanticipated productive intersection of vacation culture and science. It is in part the fascinating story of how the scientific art form of the diorama created such an enduring public interest that it forced curators not only to build new collections but to conduct field research and gather the contextual documentation needed to produce scientifically useful collections to better serve the public, the patrons and the state. In all this, it is interesting to keep in mind that though the great surveys are largely a thing of the past—with the ranks of taxonomists thinning and aging, and collecting having become a thoroughly evil thing to do in the naïve popular imagination, natural-history surveys remain important parts of the conservation movement. This is especially the case in the developing world, where biodiversity is far less well documented and where extinction rates are highest.

Perhaps the most well-known case in the mass media today is the project in West Papua by Conservation International. The discovery of so many new species on last year’s two week visit to the Foja mountains reveals how little we still know about some of the most threatened parts of our endangered planet. To visit such rare places is in a sense to return to the Garden of Eden, for the birds are yet fearless and perform their astounding mating displays unconcerned, the ultimate reward for latter-day adventurers and scientists reveling in Darwinian wonder and delight. To all those mesmerized by these new photographs and film footage, particularly of the bower birds and birds of paradise, All Creatures will be a fascinating and compelling book, for it provides a historical perspective on how natural history collections are built and why they are so important. In short, for the ever growing community of people around the world who are emotionally and intellectually charmed by nature and the increasingly urgent quest to actively become friends rather than enemies of the earth, this book will become a prized and well examined specimen in their book cases. Interestingly enough, Kohler concludes that new forms of cultural consumption and popular concern for the environment will inform future survey practices in terms of how they combine expeditionary and project work. Ideally, in the Papuan case and in other developments in Indonesia and elsewhere, the continuing imperative for collection and survey provides an excellent context for charting a course for empowering local communities to claim and protect their natural heritage. One can only hope that this will encourage local communities and local and national governments to conserve rather than destroy their natural resources—which in most tropical cases have never been surveyed extensively, never mind selectively. Indeed, as All Creatures details, surveys require a functioning civil society and a popular imagination that is actively and creatively engaged with nature. While this conjunction of interests has been well established in the developed world since the late 1800s, the task is just beginning in the developing world, where “native” knowledge has been traditionally discounted by the modern state and indigenous rights ignored for the development of extractive economies.

As taxonomists and ecologists begin to penetrate these last undocumented natural domains, the Linnaean concept of the species and subsequently the layman’s understanding of debates over sub-species will find themselves in dire need of a book like this. Herein All Creatures deftly relates how these categories themselves change with time. It aptly demonstrates how collecting

ALL CREATURES: NATURALISTS, COLLECTORS, and BIODIVERSITY, 1850–1950


Reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg. E-mail: <jonathanzilberg@gmail.com>.

All Creatures tells the tale of the legacy of the Victorian Linnaean quest for the encyclopedic documentation of nature. It focuses on the history of North American natural history museums and provides a fascinating and highly readable account of how and why scientific collections were built up through surveys that reached their zenith in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is particularly interesting in that it reveals how taxonomic studies were bolstered not only by the desire to partake in adventurous expeditions but because of emerging popular outdoor pursuits associated with the rise of the middle class and the democratization of leisure as morally sanctioned recreation.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the revelation that the full flowering of the 20th-century study of biodiversity is due not only to the

Robert E. Kohler

All Creatures
NATURALISTS, COLLECTORS, and BIODIVERSITY, 1850–1950

View this review online at: http://leonardoreviews.mit.edu/2006/02/07/195

practices shape taxonomic categorizations that are in turn shaped by changing collecting practices themselves. Doing so, Kohler reveals how classification practices have changed over the last 200 years of collection, that is, during the three ages of exploration and empire, survey and, lastly, ecology. As he relates, the process began serendipitously and then became increasingly extensive and intensive, culminating in the highly localized ecologically contextualized studies that have characterized the field since the 1940s and 1950s.

In the process, evolutionary biologists have come to understand species not as fixed categories but as a constantly changing and highly variable population, that is, no longer through focusing attention on discrete specimens. This critical theoretical shift came about due to the extensive geographic collections assembled during the age of survey and had important theoretical consequences. For example, in delving into the historical debates over sub-species as incipient species, Kohler shows how it was only through deep and comprehensive survey collecting that scientists were able to adequately investigate sub-species variation. Thus we learn how collectors focus on entire ranges and especially on critical boundaries in order to discern the gaps or discontinuities that exist between species.

Accordingly, this book constitutes a culturally informed, historical view of knowledge production, specifically concerning biodiversity. It is doubly important today because of the twin ecological and intellectual crisis that we face. Kohler’s work is fundamentally important here in that its intellectual fecundity reveals why postmodernist anthropological knowledge about identity and knowledge as unstable and emergent is essential to understanding the historical evolution of scientific knowledge. This is all in very sharp contrast to the incomprehension amongst mainstream biological anthropologists as to the importance of post-structuralist cultural anthropology to the study of biology. As such this book makes a vital contribution to the popular understanding of how knowledge emerges, how it is constructed and how it changes, why, and much more. Kohler’s great contribution in all this is that his study reveals how identity, popular culture and science can inform each other in completely unanticipated ways.

**EXHIBITION**

**LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA**


Reviewed by Yvonne Spielmann, Institute of Media Research, Braunschweig University of Art, Germany. E-mail: <spielmann@medien-feb.uni-siegen.de>.

In 2007, La Biennale di Venezia was the first of a series of high-caliber European art events, to continue with Art 38 Basel (Switzerland) and documenta 12 in Kassel and the Sculpture Projects Münster, both in Germany. While the latter happens once every 10 years and documenta takes place every four years, the art biennale at Venice, because of its shorter intervals, is supposed to reflect the pulse of the present time every two years. Under its first American director, Robert Storr, the exhibition aims to open up to previously barely acknowledged and widely under-represented cultures and countries and presents special showcases of Africa and Turkey. Because the Venice site of the Giardini includes the national pavilions that were built in a different spirit and witness a historical past of thinking nations, these roots in modern art today need to be complemented and broadened in the spirit of internationally and interculturally interconnected art scenes.

Because of the special situation in Venice, Storr, at the press conference, emphasized the international dialogue and the mutual communication with the competitors at Basel, Kassel and Münster, which he finds important to presenting a more appropriate perspective as curator that aims to overcome the national foci in the country art shows. However, Storr was also very clear that, although we have a large and growing number of artists from Asian and African countries, it would be shortsighted to think that culture has become international. In addition, one has also to reflect that artists do not necessarily work in the countries where they come from. Therefore, the Biennale exhibitions that Storr curated himself at the Arsenale were intended to look at spaces between cultures and to explore places where we can sense the genealogy of styles and positions.

Apparently, this rather broad conception spreads out into many—too many—areas and thus is in danger of encompassing a plenitude of cultures and genres like a show-reel. Evidently, this Biennale did not pull together a stringent topic. The ambitiously driven centrifugal approach to widening the spectrum between thinking and feeling manifests in rather blurred forms of staged and documentary performances, photographs, films and video installations. This mix is not always comprehensive. Although the idea of a single focus or center is voluntarily abandoned, we nevertheless find that a larger number of exhibited works in a rather straightforward manner depict war scenes, effects of devastation and bordered, abandoned or ruined spaces. The bodies of these depicted or constructed scenes show traces or leftovers of formerly inhabited spaces (the difference between document and fiction is not important here) and are now emptied of humans and/or animals. Another effect of the warfare is visible in photographs of borders. Surprisingly, however, such conceptual approaches to the connection of war and art seem arbitrary and are not aesthetically convincing. The same tendency, however, is one, maybe the only, thematic connection between some of the national pavilions at Giardini, which otherwise are centripetally concerned with the individual national art scenes the pavilions promote.

Here, the internationally curated art exhibitions at Giardini, the larger number of country shows seem by and large unaffected by challenges to the idea of national art shows and prefer to play it safe. In particular, the pavilions of the U.S.A., Great Britain, Germany and France showcase well-established artists successful in the art market with works that more or less emotionally touch upon the personal and more or less naively (or not at all) address issues of national identity. Like a memorial show, the U.S.A. pavilion stages photographs and floor pieces by Felix Gonzales-Torres that stand in a conceptual tradition and address almost universal issues of citizenship, community, society and democracy in a plain, almost positivist manner. The “educational attitude” of the work relates back to 1970s and 1980s aesthetics. Also, because the show presents the oeuvre of the deceased Gonzales-Torres, it focuses on the past and not the present.
or future—as one might have wished, but not expected.

Conceptually related, at the Arsenale, the African Pavilion demonstrates growing self-confidence and self-representation of the so-called underdeveloped countries. The situation in the African countries, however, is a special one, as African art is hardly visible and, obviously, the colonial legacy is not expressed only in an Appendix to Western standards of the contemporary art world. The Biennale presents one step in this direction, and it will be interesting to see further development of this initiative at the international art shows in Venice and other venues.

(An extended version of this review can be found on-line at <www.leonardo.info/ltr.html>.)

FILMS

CONSTANT, AVANT LE DÉPART

Reviewed by Anthony Enns, Department of English, University of Iowa. E-mail: <anthony-enns@uiowa.edu>.

The latest documentary by Dutch filmmakers Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele marks a significant departure from their previous work. Their 1995 documentary I Have a Problem, Madam, which won the Golden Calf Award for best short documentary at the Dutch Film Festival, examined the struggles faced by Ugandan women in a male-dominated society, and their 2002 film Made in Holland World Dutch Design focused on labor issues and globalization. Constant, Avant le Départ, on the other hand, is an intimate portrait of Dutch painter Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, who died on 1 August 2005. The film chronicles the last months of his life, as he contemplates death and reflects on his life and work.

In 1948 Constant founded the Experimentele Groep Holland with Corneille, Karel Appel and his brother Jan Nieuwenhuys. In November 1948 they joined Christian Dotremont, Joseph Noiret and Asger Jorn to form the CoBRA group. Tensions developed between Constant and Jorn in the summer of 1949, however, when they vacationed together with their wives on the island of Bomholm and Jorn started an affair with Constant’s wife, Matie, whom he later married. Constant relates this story in the film, noting that Matie took two of their three children with her when she left. He subsequently resigned from the group and abandoned painting altogether, claiming it “had nothing new to offer” [1].

In the 1950s Constant became increasingly interested in urban space and began constructing sculptures to express the dynamic experience of the modern city. In December 1956 Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio took him to a Gypsy camp, and Constant’s models of this encampment became the first in a series of maquettes of an ideal city called “New Babylon where, under one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodeled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale” [2]. According to Constant, the modern city ignores the psychological needs of its inhabitants, and New Babylon was designed to meet those needs by infusing creativity and play into the experience of urban life. This theory led Constant to become a founding member of the Situationist International in 1957, and later that year he collaborated with Guy Debord on “The Amsterdam Declaration,” a manifesto that emphasizes the need for “collective creativity” in urban planning [3]. Constant remained in the group until 1966, when he was expelled by Debord. Although Debord rejected Constant’s New Babylon designs, claiming that he was nothing more than “a publicity relations man for integrating the masses into capitalist technological civilization” [4], Henri Lefèbvre argues that this action was merely a political move to help Debord cement his own authority [5]. Constant discusses his theories of urbanism in the film as he watches his son Victor filming his New Babylon designs, and he adds that this city was never intended to be a prediction of the future but only to show that urban space should be playful, like a game.

There is evidence, however, that he was firmly committed to the realization of this project until 1966, when he gradually became aware that automation would not result in “freedom from slavery and toiling,” but rather in “poverty and boredom” [6].

Constant subsequently returned to painting, and the film primarily focuses on this part of his career. Constant’s work from this period frequently deals with politically engaged subjects, like the Vietnam War, famine in Africa and refugees from Kosovo, and in the film he discusses both his theories of art and his working methods. He describes how he stares at the blank canvas until an image gradually emerges and how he always begins painting the edges of the frame before moving toward the center. The film also shows Constant putting the finishing touches on his final painting, Le Piège (The Trap), and it follows his last visit to see Titian’s La Pietà at the Gallerie dell’Accademia in Venice, a painting that he greatly admired and once studied for days at a time. Looking over his own oeuvre, Constant discusses his favorite works and claims that the best paintings “with great simplicity illustrate maximum expression”—something that few painters ever accomplish. Although he hesitates to say whether any of his works achieve this goal, it appears that a similar aesthetic also informs Schmidt and Doebele’s film. While their approach is extremely simple and straightforward, the end result is a profoundly moving portrait of the artist at the end of a long and successful life.
The 1973 coup had an international effect upon the arts. The Brigada Letelier, sons of the Chilean ambassador to the U.S. who was assassinated in Washington, D.C., in 1976, painted community murals in San Francisco in the abstracted style developed by the late-night art activists of Santiago. The novelist José Donoso lived in Spain and taught several semesters in the U.S. at Dartmouth College and the University of Iowa while producing the surreal Obscene Bird of Night, politically allegorical House in the Country and realistic Curfew. Guzmán brings us political surrealism when Gonzalo Milan reads a poem about time flowing in reverse to undo the coup against Allende, with planes flying backwards and bullets returning into the barrels of guns; the film ends with Milan’s final word, “venceremos” (we will win).

The decisive September 11 in the U.S.A., 28 years after Chile’s, was the excuse for my own nation to fall into misguided military adventure under a leader scornful of our Constitution, to result—as in Chile—in constriction of freedom, great suffering and needless loss of life. Perhaps Chile, the U.S.A., Germany, the U.K. and every nation are equally at risk of backsliding from liberty and justice without constant citizen vigilance. Guzmán’s film Salvador Allende eloquently reminds us of that fact and should be shown widely.

Leonardo Reviews on-line

The reviews published in print are but a small selection of the reviews available on the Leonardo Reviews web site. Below is a full list of reviews published in LR October–November 2007 <www.leonardo.info/ldr.html>.

November 2007
The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney, by Michael Barrier. Reviewed by Wilfred Niels Arnold.


Becoming 13, by Victoria King. Reviewed by Kathryn Adams.


Do You Believe in Water?: Three Journeys in Cyprus and the Mediterranean, by Lia S. Sadler.

The Elements of UML 2.0 Style, by Scott W. Ambler. Reviewed by Kasey Asberry.


Science as a Spiritual Practice, by Imants Baruiss. Reviewed by Rob Harle.


October 2007


The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp, by T.J. Demos. Reviewed by Kieran Lyons.

Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians, by Jane Lydon. Reviewed by Brook Andrew.


Forever, by Heddy Honigmann. Reviewed by Rob Harle.


Looking for an Icon, directed by Hans Pool and Maaiik Krijgsman. Reviewed by Amy Ione.

Pop Art Book, by Corinne Miller, Nadine Monem and Margaret Nugent, eds. Reviewed by Fred Andersson.


Tambogrande: Mangos, Murder, Mining, by Ernesto Cabellos and Stephanie Boyd. Reviewed by José-Carlos Mariátegui.

Thousand Year Dreaming/floationg world, by Annea Lockwood. Reviewed by Stefaan Van Ryssen.


(Un)common Ground: Creative Encounters between Sectors and Disciplines, edited by Cathy Brickwood, Bronac Ferran, David Garcia and Tim Putnam. Reviewed by José-Carlos Mariátegui.

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ANNOUNCEMENT


In celebration of Leonardo journal’s 40th anniversary, we are publishing essays related to Leonardo da Vinci and his concerns regarding the relationship between art and science. In this and upcoming special sections, Leonardo’s own concerns serve as a springboard for looking toward the present. What, building upon Leonardo’s ways of thinking, can artists and scientists tell each other today? Accounts of Leonardo’s visual art, of his achievements as a proto-scientist and of the relation between his concerns with science and with visual art are also highlighted in articles guest-edited by David Carrier over the coming year.