LEONARDO REVIEWS

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THE COLOR OF YOUR SOCKS: A YEAR WITH PIPILOTTI RIST

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The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist was honored with a commission to re-open the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City in 2004. This project, a large-scale video installation titled Pour Your Body Out, requires visitors to lie down on specially prepared carpets and gaze up at the projections on the surrounding walls and ceiling. “What should we do if people don’t want to take their shoes off?” asks one of the museum docs. Use some humor, suggests Rist: “Tell them, I’d like to see the color of your socks.”

Color and movement is the theme throughout this observational video of the preparation of the commissioned work. Rist is the colorfully dressed CEO of her art production company, darting from one meeting to the next with her collaborators, sponsors, assistants and technicians. Sketches, maquettes, then scaled-up models move inexorably toward the day of the opening (interrupted by other more minor projects), each stage announced onscreen with titles, the what and the wherefore of the contemporary art scene: a “chic” Monument to Emilie Kempin-Spyri, the first Swiss woman “to attain” a doctorate in law at the end of the 19th century; a Liberty Statue for London, in Basle; the shooting of Rist’s first feature film, Pepperminta—“so many more people will see a film than will see an installation,” she observes.

For the film and video shoots, her crew uses the new technology of high-resolution micro-cameras mounted on the end of boom poles. The camera operator has power and screen strapped to his body, leaving his arms free to move the wide-angle, deep-focus camera around, above, below and close into Rist’s performers, both clothed and unclothed, ensembles and individuals. “Naked people?” asks the visiting Swiss MOMA curator. Could this be a challenge to New Yorkers, one wonders? Surely not . . . ? Shoes off in public? Now that could be an issue.

There is little else left with which to engage in this DVD. It is an electronic catalogue entry, providing some background to the central character and her work. “Am I an Artist, a Video Artist or a Fine Artist?” she discusses with another assistant at one point. “An Artist,” she decides. There is no interpretation of the work as would occur in a print catalogue, no probing of the concepts behind the movement and color. “I wish for a more colorful life,” says someone at a preview of the film; it’s also about “overcoming barriers” and providing “exercise for back and hips,” encourages the artist. Her onscreen subjects demonstrate the precept as they entwine, entangle and cavort through green fields, red apples, the “fires of hell” and super-green treetops; Caribbean seas too—“Maybe too cute?” queries Pipilotti.

Large-scale video installations as semi-immersive, cinema-like environments have become de rigeur on the international art circuit of biennales, exhibitions and festivals. The affordances of computer-based video and sound technology have made this possible, not only in the gathering and ordering of sound and image, but essentially in their presentation across multiple screens and sound sources, maintaining perfect operatic synchronization for hours and weeks, sometimes months on end. Contemporary art on a grand scale requires a production effort and organization akin to that of the 19th-century monumental sculptors, the Renaissance religious image industry and Hollywood itself.

At an early stage of this disappointing DVD, we are reminded of the vagaries of the fine art scene, populated as it is by bright and optimistic people like Pipilotti Rist. Rist inspects the photograph of a work by the celebrity queen of contemporary art, Yoko Ono. It is an installation of a stepladder with a piece of paper stuck on the ceiling above it. Visitors climb the ladder with magnifying glass to read the tiny word “Yes.” “This work cost $32 million, and $100 to produce,” she pauses to muse, before darting off to another meeting about her installations and projections onto the walls and ceilings of MOMA.

**THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS**

by Francisco López, Kairos, Vienna, Austria, 2009. CD (box set containing five CDs), #012872KAI. Distributor’s website: <http://kairos-music.com/2/.

Reviewed by Eugene Thacker, Media Studies and Film, The New School, New York, NY; U.S.A. E-mail: <thacker@newschool.edu>.

Some years ago I recall visiting a sound installation by Francisco López. I cannot recall the name of the piece, although I do recall the experience. In a quiet room with speakers, I waited. Knowing López’s work and seeing that the room was almost totally empty, I expected nothing but sound. And this was, in a way, what I got—though I never actually heard anything. Standing in that room, I couldn’t hear anything except for the subtle and gentle rattling of the windows. Eventually the whole room started to quake. And still nothing coming from the speakers (or so I thought). Then I realized that the speakers were, in fact, playing sounds, but they were outside of my hearing range. These non-human sounds were only accessible to me indirectly via their acoustic and physical effects on the space itself (the windows, the floor, my body). Eventually more audible rumbling bass sounds did make their appearance, but only after the sounds had first manifested themselves as the physical space itself.

This play between sound in space and sound as space is, for me, indicative of much of Francisco López’s work. For over 30 years, López has been working in that liminal space between the audible and the inaudible, producing recorded works, installations and live performances. Recently, the Vienna-based label Kairos released *Through the Looking Glass*, a beautifully produced CD box set of López’s work. While López’s output is voluminous, *Through the Looking Glass* offers an excellent survey of one of the most important sound artists of our time. The set ranges from field recordings made in the early 1990s to more abstract ambient works from the late 1990s to recent work that exists at the limits of sonic experience. While there are discernible continuities in López’s work, in my view, the pieces collected on *Through the Looking Glass* are of four types, each differing in the way they balance the sounds of the world and sound worlds. *Qal‘at Abd’ai-Salam* (1993) and *O Parladoiro Desamortuxado* (1995) both combine field recordings with various sound processing effects.

The sources of both pieces are discernible—one hears birds, cicadas, the bustle of street markets, the hum of the countryside, resplendent forests, the echo of a distant temple. The sources retain their referential aspect (“bird,” “car,” “bell”), but the subtle effects and layering gradually create a vibrant cacophony, a kind of shimmering din that belongs neither to the external world nor to the world of purely synthetic or electronic sounds. The titles of these pieces hint at this cacophonous naturalism (“The Game of Mud,” “A Time Spirit in the Body of a Plant”). In these pieces, sounds taken from the world begin as referential sounds and gradually become non-referential. At the same time, they never completely lose their referential quality, placing us as listeners in a strange in-between place.

From here López experiments with this relationship between sound and effects. In *La Selva* (1997) and *Buildings (New York)* (2001), López presents us with sounds without effects. Both are straight field recordings but from very different environments—in *La Selva* the recordings are drawn from several sites in the Costa Rican jungle, while *Buildings (New York)* are drawn from different residential, industrial and office buildings in Manhattan. While there is no processing to the sounds, these are, strangely, the most surreal of the recordings, in part because we as listeners do not know if one location simply follows another in sequence or if different locations are layered on top of each other, producing an “impossible” sonic reality. Both pieces are also characterized by an abstract texture—a swarming texture of insects and rain in the jungle, and the vacuous, ambient hum of empty buildings, generator rooms and abandoned tunnels. These field recordings are “fields” in the true sense, in that they transform a physical location in the world into a location that, strangely, has no actual “place” (interestingly, the sounds of human beings are absent from both pieces). *La Selva* is the dense, polyrhythmic sonorism of non-human life, while *Buildings (New York)* is the cold, mechanical life of the city.

The near inverse approach characterizes *Belle Confusion* (1996), in which there seem to be only effects, and no source sounds. Distant overtones, delicate trills and diffuse echoes are juxtaposed with non-directional washes, eventually condensing into a kind of thick, ambient noise. Over a period of 50 minutes, these “ambient” sounds eventually become so dense that they start to occupy and fill space itself, instead of ambient sounds carving out or hollowing out space. In *Belle Confusion* we as listeners experience an acoustic paradox: diffuse sounds that hollow out a space from without, and, at the same time, nearly subsonic rumbles that fill a space from within. *Belle Confusion* is indicative of many of López’s better-known works, such as *Untitled #74* or his numerous sound installations. In pieces like these, one rarely notices when the piece itself has begun. The sounds begin so faintly and emerge so gradually that one can easily mistake them for the sounds of one’s own environment. First there is silence; then before you know it, there is suddenly an amorphous, diffuse wash of sound—was it always there or did it suddenly begin? This acoustic uncertainty is central to *Belle Confusion*, a confusion between the sound recording and the sounds of one’s environment (which in most cases are never totally separate). While works such as *La Selva and Buildings (New York)* present us with sounds without effects, in *Belle Confusion* we have effects without sounds—as if the sound sources themselves have vanished, leaving only sonic traces.

All of this is taken to another level in López’s more recent works, many of which bear the simple title of *Untitled*. *Through the Looking Glass* contains three such works, all produced in 2008. These pieces are distinct in their subtractive approach; they truly exist at the limit of audibility. Occasionally one hears faint hints of found sounds, but more often than not the *Untitled* pieces operate at the highest and lowest registers, the supersonic and subsonic: sub-bass rumbles and high-pitched, aleatoric
glitches, both faintly audible—and without anything in the middle. These pieces are fascinating in their austerity, in the way they empty out the sonic spectrum. López subtracts almost the entire audible range, leaving only the highest and the lowest, the most distant and diffuse. Sound itself becomes enigmatic, at once omnipresent and yet non-directional. López’s approach to sound art is made clear in the accompanying booklet to the box set:

Typically, recorded sound is considered to be a representation of reality. Unbeknownst to the average person . . . a sound recording can also be considered an entity in itself . . . those extractions, in fact, are a different “reality” in themselves.

This switch, from sound as a representation to sound as presentation, is also a shift from sound as referential to sound as tautological. López is, of course, aware of the use of found sounds in the history of avant-garde music, from the experiments of Luigi Russolo to l’objet sonore of Pierre Schaeffer to the elusive “acousmatic” sound of Michel Chion. However, López’s use of field recordings also brings to mind the work of Luc Ferrari, whose Presque Rien series takes seriously the notion of autonomous sound worlds existing apart from their sources or their function as representational sounds “of” something. In many of the pieces collected in Through the Looking Glass, López adopts a process whereby recorded sounds from the external world are arranged in a non-representational and non-musical way. The sounds move past their indexicality where sounds signify objects or events in the world. These sounds also move past simple abstraction, where a sound source is processed or manipulated so that it becomes unfamiliar. What López often aims for is a double failure—the failure of sounds to adequately or faithfully represent the external world and the failure of sounds to achieve the perfection of purely synthetic, purely artificial entities. This is, perhaps, what López means when he speaks of his experience with field recordings: “I realized the dramatic difference between listening as a semantic activity and as a phenomenological experience.”

Sound art is typically positioned along two conceptual axes. One axis is that of music and sound, where music ceases to be the representation of a feeling or emotion and becomes the presentation of independent sounds without reference to feeling subjects or the objective world. Much of the post-war avant-garde explores this terrain, although its beginnings were already evident in the turn towards chromaticism and atonality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The other axis of sound art is that of sound and silence, where the presence of sound as sound gives way to autonomous sound objects, whether found sounds or electronic sounds that question and challenge the scope of what is listenable, of what can possibly be included in the sonic experience. Monotones, overtones, even microtones come into play as types of barely audible differences, but so also do a whole range of found sounds and artificial tones, the sounds around you right now and those same sounds cut and spliced many times over. But here even silence is, as John Cage has shown us, never just silence, but simply a new context for old sounds.

The sound art of Francisco López represents a third axis, one that has generally been underexplored in the history of Western sound art, and that is the axis of sound and unsound. The term “unsound” has several meanings. On the one hand it denotes something incoherent, unstable, something “structurally unsound,” like an argument that demonstrates a faulty use of logic. That which is unsound is unreliable, suspect, absurd. But the prefix in the term “unsound” also denotes a negation. An unsound is not simply an “anti-sound” (in the way that silence is the negation of sound). It denotes a negation that manifests itself as a negation, as a reduction, as a subtraction. An unsound is paradoxically present in its absence. It is the sound of the windows rattling that is not just the sound of the windows rattling. Unsound is distinct from sound because it deals with sonic characteristics that exist on the horizon of sound, from spectral overtones to ambient artifacts. Unsound is a field of sonic stillness, an acoustic deep time that moves in the “infrasonic” (to use López’s term), at the edges of the supersonic and subsonic. Unsound is also distinct from silence because it is not simply the absence of any sound (which is impossible) but the ambiguous presence of all sound, whether or not it is audible. Unsound is an empty space articulated through sound, or the relativity between the absence of sound and the total diffusion of sound. Perhaps this third axis of sound/unsound has been under-appreciated largely because all sound art and all music demand—or really, assume—that sound is generally equivalent to presence. Perhaps there is a fervent metaphysics that underlies our ideas of sound, as broadly equivalent to presence, existence, being—the “it is here” and “it is now” of sound. Of course, this makes a certain sense, for it would be absurd to inquire into sound as non-being, sound as nothingness, unsound.

And yet I would argue that this is precisely what sound artists such as López invite us to do.

A last word—my own “confusion” upon listening to one of the Untitled pieces occurred when I noticed a low, deep rumbling. Wow, I thought to myself, how does he make these sounds? And then a thought occurred to me. I paused the recording, and the rumbling continued. It was the sound of the C train, many floors below me, underground in a subway tunnel. I wonder if this is the point that López wants to evoke in the listener—when they take off their headphones, and listen.
European countries such as Poland. Ideas of computation in other Eastern countries, such as Croatia), but I did meet a number of artists who used early computers and digital tools. The city of Zagreb then (now the capital), was not, I would argue, some sort of cultural accident or outlying anomaly. It was squarely of its time. Bit International, a magazine a group within New Tendencies founded in 1968, might be notable for the computing term in its title; but for this reviewer the word “International” is more revealing. Works from the West were shown alongside those from the Communist Bloc. The cultural hegemony of the U.S.S.R. was, quite simply, bypassed. Yet the air was redolent of the zeitgeist of ways of looking at the world that had their origins in the 1960s rehabilitation of cybernetics in Russia as a movement for radical reform of the Stalinist system of science. Do not think, however, that this book addresses only questions of history, or consists only of timelines and anecdotes. It is far more. If you want (and we do) theory, opinion, analysis, harangue, cutting-edge discourse and innovative, critical insights into, for example, art as politics, information as art, or correlations between constructed, programmed, systems, cybernetic, participative art and computers, and what it means, in the best sense, to make art and to compute, then this is the book for you.

In a tome so large, covering so much of use to everyone from art student to critical theorist to art historian, there will inevitably be things with which one disagrees. But apart from the rather inadequate index, nothing up to now (I cannot yet claim to have finished reading it from cover to cover) caused me to splutter. It is to be hoped that someone is presently working along similarly massive lines to inform us of possibly neglected histories of computer-based art associated with, for instance, Canada. The history in Margit Rosen’s excellent and well-illustrated book is fascinating and useful. Every artist, computer user or not, should read it. It will become a seminal work, read it. It will become a seminal work, and what it means, in the best sense, to make art and to compute, then this is the book for you.

CONTEMPORARY ART IN ASIA—A CRITICAL READER


Reviewed by Ellen Pearlman, University of Calgary, Canada. E-mail: <epmexico@yahoo.com>.

Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio have edited a critical reader on Asian Art as a starting point for what one hopes will be more books on the subject. Chiu, Director of the Asia Society Museum in New York, and Genocchio, Editor-in-Chief of the publication Art Info, are a powerhouse duo whose Pacific Rim perspectives propel Asian art studies up a notch in a Western-centric art world. This compilation of essays, about the “changing nature and reception of contemporary Asian Art in Asia and the West over the past two decades,” strives to be all-inclusive. What they create is a somewhat blurry snapshot of the current state of affairs, as some nations are still grappling with that old warhorse Marxism, although Chiu’s argument about transexperience is timely in light of the hemisphere’s rising economic power. There is an emphasis on rich cultural traditions that have their own biennials and trienn-
nials, museums and alternative spaces, with the underlying message being that Asians are finally gaining control of their own cultural representation. "Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art" (1993), by John Clark, is in the most pity piece, mapping out Asia geographically as "The Sakhalin Peninsula . . . bound by the Siberian Steppes to the north and the Indian Ocean and Straits of Timor to the south." Clark disparages those parts of Asia that redefine themselves through contact with the other, saying there is "often depredation at the hands of an ‘other’ . . . privileging the Euro-Americanization by denuding of value the Asian interface of modernity." His meaning is that, when you take an art form such as English oil painting and move it to 19th-century Japan, is that "appropriate contextualization"?

A salient and critical point he makes about modernity in terms of the Asian cultures discoursse is that their art cultures are often deprived by the fact they did not originate modernism and its recent derivative, postmodernism. He defines modernism as a discourse that privileges a linked series of artistic developments for a group of Euro-American cultures that have modernized according to primary political, social or cultural criteria. He adds that, when artistic techniques jump across cultural boundaries in ways that are neither apparent nor relevant to the discourse of interpretation from the originating culture, this discourse is often interpreted as "bad taste." "Newness" can be thought of as "other." The issue ultimately revolves around which and whose interpretative codes are to be sovereign." Euro-American codes favor rhetoric that privileges interpretation and are opposed to rhetorics that work against clarity. This explanation goes a long way toward explaining the difficult attitude in the art world toward less-developed countries’ arts practices and is a refreshing and necessary explanation of said attitudes.

In "Why Cubism" (2006), Takehata Akira declares Cubism was never part of Asian art but nonetheless penetrated into all its major cities. Propounding an invaluable timeline in deconstructing aesthetic styles since colonialism came to Asia, he says Picasso stole it from Africa. The style showed up in Japan and China in the 1920s; Korea, India and Sri Lanka in the 1930s; and South-East Asia in the 1940s and 1950s. It spawned both urban cosmopolitan and rural aspects that were further refined by ethnic and religious cultural fragmentation and regionalism.

Many essays take issue with the Western notion of "other" or the "exotic." In "The Politics of Curating ‘Contemporary Korean Art’ For Audiences Abroad" (2002), Young Min Moon questions how Korea is perceived by Westerners and asks if there is an essential quality in Korean Art. He argues that most Western art institutions base themselves on tenets of postmodern nihilism and post-conceptualism. Lots of "otherness" results in loss of identity. In "Radicalizing Tradition" (2000), Salima Hashmi examines the tradition of miniature painting at National College of Art in Lahore during the 1980s. The school, set up by the British in India in 1875, always distinguished miniature practice from mainstream art. Students are still required to grind their own pigments. They also must take a single strand of squirrel hairbrush, dip it in lampblack and paint under the tutelage of two Ustad, or masters. This practice contradicted the hegemony of oil-based paints brought by British colonizers and particularly encouraged women to use water-based painting and printmaking. After the collapse of Mughal Empire, miniature painting waned. Since, as Hashmi says, "a visual practice has to justify retaining its vocabulary," it was reconstructed and now confronts the identity of the Muslim State, Wahabi fundamentalism, dress codes, social behavior, language monitoring and the discouragement of figurative art. Chiu’s essay, "Theories of Being Outside: Diaspora and Chinese Artists" (2007), sets up a new genre of interpretation. The term transexperience was first formulated by Chiu to describe the Chinese diaspora of the 1980s, when artists from the banned Stars group fled to France, England, U.S.A., Japan, Switzerland and Australia. By the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, these same artists were tackling what it meant to be Chinese across borders, an experience she refers to as "transexperience." In transexperience, homeland is still prioritized with multiple rather than dual experiences of diaspora. Chiu argues that this characterization summarizes the complexity of leaving one’s native place and going elsewhere, adapting to a new environment and relying on change instead of on a static cultural identity. One’s homeland is past and the host country is present, with no fixed moment of migration. She cites the recovering of Chinese iconography as a way of juxtaposing memories of China with current reality and the modification of Chinese signifiers (Chinese characters) to make them accessible to non-Chinese audiences. China becomes a current influence rather than frozen in a moment, and the artist, most often not fully accepted by the host society, maintains a collective vision about his or her former homeland. Transnationalism is a kind of third culture, not a third space. Salman Rushdie uses the metaphor of broken mirror and scattered shards to show its perspective is not a “tool of nostalgia” but an actual reworking of identity. What is most useful about the term transexperience is that parts of it can also be applied to Western artists taking the opposite tack, setting their sails to Asia.

DIVINE MACHINES: LEIBNIZ AND THE SCIENCES OF LIFE

Reviewed by Rob Harle, Australia.
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This book is an in-depth scholarly exploration of the philosophical work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Justin Smith, by investigating Leibniz’s interest in the life sciences, many of which were only just emerging in the 17th century, sheds new light on how these “sciences” influenced Leibniz’s overall philosophical doctrines. Divine Machines is extremely well written and a pleasure to read; however, it is not really a
book suitable for general readership. For philosophers, students and those interested in the history of ideas, the book will prove most rewarding. Leibniz’s philosophy, in general, is not easy to fully comprehend, but Smith helps clarify some of the more abstruse concepts through his detailed discussion of Leibniz’s grounding in the empirical life sciences. Leibniz explored such diverse disciplines as medicine, taxonomy, physiology, generation theory (now genetics) and paleontology, which helped him formulate his major metaphysical theory—Monadology.

This book is divided into four parts, which follow an excellent Introduction. Part One, First Things, consists of Chapters 1 and 2. Part Two, From Animal Economy to Stable Anatomy, is composed of Chapters 3 and 4. Part Three, The Origins of Organic Form, includes Chapters 5 and 6. Part Four, Species, is Chapter 7. These four parts are followed by five Appendices, which are examples of Leibniz’s own writings. Chapter notes, an excellent bibliography and an index then follow these fascinating appendices. The information in the appendices includes:

- Appendix 1: Directions Pertaining to the Institution of Medicine (1671)
- Appendix 2: The Animal Machine (1677)
- Appendix 3: The Human Body, Like That of Any Animal, Is a Sort of a Machine (1680–1686)
- Appendix 4: On Writing the New Elements of Medicine (1682–1683)
- Appendix 5: On Botanical Method (1701)

The term “natural philosophy” (philosophia naturalis) in the 17th century was an umbrella title used to cover all disciplines of what have now become separate sciences. Smith uses the modern name biology for our clarity, as separable sense of the struggle these early modern thinkers went through. Many other great thinkers—especially Aristotle, Galen, Descartes and Hobbes—quite naturally influenced Leibniz. He always expressed his debt to those who influenced his thinking, even when he was at odds with them, especially Descartes. Commenting on Descartes’s account of human embryogenesis, for example, Leibniz derides “Monsieur des Cartes with his man, the generation of whom costs so little, but who so little resembles a true man.” Yet at the same time, Leibniz never denies the enormous debt of his own philosophy to Cartesian mechanism (p. 10). This book is a scholarly tour de force; it challenges the existing understanding of Leibniz’s philosophy and opens up many areas for further research. No doubt it is essential reading for all those engaged in research into the history of early modern philosophy and science.

**The Techno-Human Condition**


Reviewed by Rob Harle, Australia.
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This book is rather unusual in that it clearly challenges the very foundation of the way we currently attempt to solve major world problems. It explains why climate change fixes are not working, why the war in Afghanistan is not being won as originally expected and why many other similarly perplexing problems remain unsolved. “We need to substitute ‘explore with humility’ for ‘attack with rigidity’” (p. 105). The book has a specific emphasis on technology and our human relationship to all aspects of this technology.

The Techno-Human Condition will infuriate some, and be dismissed out of hand by a few, but will unsettle almost all readers. The reason is that while Allenby and Sarewitz’s analysis of current problem solving is a bitter pill to swallow, there is an underlying understanding that their approach is not only correct but also essential to embrace.

The world we are making through our own choices and inventions is a world that neutralizes and even mocks our existing commitments to rationality, comprehension, and a meaningful link between action and consequence. Either we accept that we are brutes living way beyond our means . . . or we search for a different set of links to connect our highest ideals to the reality we keep constructing (p. 65).

The book is suited to all levels of readership and is a fast-paced easy read. I couldn’t put it down. It is the result of a grant from the Templeton Foundation, an organization that makes possible research of the kind undertaken by these two authors. Without this foundation, and its charter to fund research into answering the big questions, much important scholarship simply would not happen.

There are extensive chapter notes (for reference and further research), a bibliography and an index. Eight chapters and a fascinating epilogue precede these. Allenby and Sarewitz use the phenomenon (or movement) known as Transhumanism as a kind of datum to refer to in their widespread discussion of technology and the human condition. Transhumanism advocates the augmentation, enhancement and push towards immortality of all humans. The
The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time


Reviewed by Jan Badens, University of Leuven, Belgium.

“The Death of the Author” is the title of a brief 1968 essay by Roland Barthes that has become one of the most popular and often-quoted slogans of postmodernism in literary and cultural theory. Almost mantra-like, this shortcut postmodernist dismissal of the author and subsequent foregrounding of text, system, field and signifier has been used over and over again as a way of continuing the May 1968 revolt in France against tradition. Its academic reception has systematically linked this text with Michel Foucault’s 1969 essay “What is an author?” It is not an exaggeration to claim that Barthes’s essay has achieved the status of a truly classic work.

Yet, it is one thing to recognize the value of a text and the concept it has put to the fore, and another thing to really read it. The starting point of Jane Gallop’s book is that the easiness and catchiness of the concept, which delivers a sexy and catchy meaning that we think we understand immediately, may have blocked our critical reflection on the notion as well as our reading of the very text that introduced it. The automatic coupling of Barthes’s essay with the one by Foucault, which despite its similar title presents a totally different discussion, suggests already that there is a huge gap between the deceivingly simple concept and the abyss that its close reading can reveal to us. Jane Gallop is a stubborn practitioner of close reading, even in times like ours, in which there seems to be no place left for this approach in academy. Therefore, she delivers a twofold lesson in this important book. The first one is on the importance of close reading—and here the influence of Derrida, who transferred close reading from literature to philosophy and whose prestige has kept close reading present on the intellectual stage, is dramatically visible. The second one is on the meaning of the death of the author as a concept, but also as a practice—and here Gallop convincingly demonstrates that the significance of the concept cannot be reduced to its first reception in 1968.

In order to revisit the notion of the death of the author, Gallop adopts a method that is both extremely straightforward and tremendously subtle. On the one hand, she looks at how four key critics, first as readers and then as authors, have actually used that very concept. What did Barthes, for instance, write on the author after having declared that the author is dead? Did he delete the concept from his theory? Did he enjoy or lament it? Did he return to the author? Did he contradict himself? Did he react to the discussions raised by the success of his essay or did he ignore them? The answers that Jane Gallop offers to these questions painlessly disclose that readers are often lazy. As it turns out, the death of the author is just a stepping-stone in Barthes’s thinking on the position and role of the author. Moreover, his thinking on this relationship did not end in 1968—as we too easily accept it did. Instead of reading Barthes’s essay in relationship with general theoretical and ideological statements, Gallop reconstructs the various links that help to discern the gradual shift to a different approach to the author, who becomes, according to Barthes, the object of an erotic dream by his or her reader. It is to the extent that we are aware of the author’s death that it becomes possible to once again desire his or her presence in the body of the text. Focusing on a very small set of well-chosen fragments in Barthes’s...
work, fragments that are read and reread from a wide range of perspectives (the rhythm of the sentences, the multilayeredness of the metaphors, the conceptual variations, the play with a permanently mobile intertext, the blurring of the boundaries between the text and its publication context, etc.), Gallop succeeds in revealing new meanings of an apparently worn-out concept, gradually opening the single death of the author, an event having occurred in 1968 and never really challenged over the years, to the steadily complexifying plural of the deaths of the author.

The three other chapters that complete the new reading of Barthes, respectively on Jacques Derrida, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Gayatri Spivak, follow similar lines, as far as the close reading methodology is concerned. Yet they broaden the scope in two crucial respects.

First of all, it appears that the book is divided into two well-balanced parts, which coincide with the division of reading and writing. In the case of Barthes and Derrida, the death of the author is seen primarily from the viewpoint of the reader: What does the notion of the death of the author mean when the author I am reading is a departed author I knew? The example of Derrida, who introduced “in memoriam” as a real genre in recent philosophy, demonstrates the painful and ethically complex questions that are raised by this situation: Does one have the right to speak in memory of a friend while at the same time analyzing his or her work, and how to do it even if one is not allowed to do so, to quote the deceased friend, etc.? In the case of Sedgwick and Spivak, the viewpoint is more that of the reader as writer (even if Barthes and Derrida do reflect on their authorship as well, of course): How does the death of a friend, who is also an author, influence and change my own writing, for instance when I identify with my friend as a writer, even if I realize that I am already dead myself.

Second, and this is where Jane Gallop’s close reading becomes intertwined with queer studies, the reflection on the death of the author does not only link literary theory with issues of literary ethics, it also forces us to reconsider certain basic aspects of reading and writing itself. Most essential in this regard is the notion of “queer temporalities,” that is, the refusal of traditional (linear and hierarchical) ways of thinking time and the praise of “perverse” (i.e. non-canonical, non-systematic, non-quantifiable) approaches to time that tend to blur past, present and future, continuous and non-continuous time, slowness and speed, and eventually life and death. For instance: Sedgwick reading an “in memoriam” for a friend dying of AIDS but not yet deceased, or Spivak’s attempts to maintain the continuously open and never-ending character of writing as a revolt against the deadening effects of the publication of a book. In both cases, Gallop proposes a very strong political interpretation of these queer temporalities, which she links with the defense of queer sexuality (for Sedgwick) and the haunting presence of Marx, whose thinking seems condemned to final oblivion after the fall of the Berlin Wall (for Spivak).

It is a pleasure to end this review by stressing the immense stylistic and demonstrative qualities of this book. Jane Gallop is no doubt one of the best readers of her generation, but with The Deaths of the Author she proves that her writing is unprecedented: sharp, brisk, with a great sense of rhythm, utterly sophisticated and yet perfectly clear, from the very first till the very last sentence.

A FIELD GUIDE TO A NEW META-FIELD: BRIDGING THE HUMANITIES-NEUROSCIENCE DIVIDE

edited by Barbara Maria Stafford,

Reviewed by Rob Harle, Australia.
E-mail: <harle@robharle.com>.

Any book that helps demolish the stubbornly ingrained gospel of Cartesian bifurcation is, indeed, welcome. This book is a fairly major contribution to this deconstruction project, not only exposing Cartesian fallacies but also suggesting positive, practical ways of putting “Humpty Dumpty back together again.” The humanities and the neurosciences are two powerful “ways of knowing,” and as all contributors to this volume agree, these two disciplines must start working cooperatively if we are to advance in unraveling the mysteries of existence and the part that our minds, brains and bodies play in this existence.

Stafford’s aim in creating this book was not to provide definitive guidelines for bridging the humanities-neuroscience divide per se but to develop literally a field guide that would point the way for future research. She uses the term “Meta-Field” to describe this new approach: “In addition to being a field guide, this book serves as a primer to intellectual possibilities and best practices in a metadiscipline that does not yet exist” (p. ix).

A Field Guide to a New Meta-Field is a scholarly collection of essays from leading thinkers in both the humanities and brain sciences. As such it is not really suited to general, popular readership. The essays presuppose a broad knowledge of modern critical/cultural theory and at least a basic familiarity with neuroscience terms and principles. The book is illustrated with numerous black-and-white drawings, diagrams and photographs. There are nine wide-ranging chapters, preceded by Stafford’s own introductory essay, “Crystal and Smoke.” One thing that stands out from the research that produced the essays in this book is that the brain, mind and embodiment are far more complex than most researches ever dared imagine. As Stafford mentions:

A major message of this book is that one way of getting past what Damasio saw as the “abyssal [Cartesian] separation between body and mind” is for neuroscientists not to limit their cultural considerations to the evidence provided by grammatically complex symbolic languages. We know that our gesturing and tool-making hominid ancestors lacked such syntactical activity. What they had, and we still have, are sophisticated compositional structures for mirroring
complex mental and social situations by performing them as intersubjective events (p. 45).

The new story beginning to unfold, as encapsulated in Stafford’s new meta-field, is a Kuhnian paradigm-breaking work in progress. The essays in this book will challenge many hide-bound academics’ stale and outmoded paradigms and certainly make most readers sit up and think very seriously about the future direction of their research.

The essays . . . are proof that the neurosciences cannot dispense with the humanities in their analyses of the brain. Equally, the humanities must reckon with scientific findings. Desegregating those who address the outer and inner worlds gets rid of warning over prestige and funds (p. 58).

TRANSMISSION ARTS: ARTISTS AND AIRWAYS
edited by Galen Joseph-Hunter, Penny Duff and Maria Papadomanolaki.

Reviewed by John F. Barber, Creative Media and Digital Culture, Washington State University Vancouver (Canada). E-mail: <jfbarber@wazx.net>.

Transmission arts encompasses performance, video art, theater, sound art, radio art, media installation, networked art and acoustic ecology in a multiplicity of practices that engage aural and video broadcast media in an intermediate framework where the relationship(s) between artist and audience, transmitter and receiver can be redefined, along with the telecommunications airwaves as the site for this practice.

Transmission, the wireless sending and receiving of electric signals via electromagnetic waves, is central to transmission arts, where artists and practitioners seek a more expansive and activism drive contemporary development.

With such a broad palette, acquiring an overview of the persons and practices associated with transmission arts can be difficult. To address this problem, Transmission Arts: Artists and Airwaves provides a genealogy of 150 artists and their artworks. This survey ranges from 1921 to the present, documenting the ingenuity and creativity of the artists, as well as their discoveries in broadcast, public works, performance composition, sound and text representing alternate worlds on the electromagnetic spectrum. The artists and works included in this volume are not exhaustive, but rather provide an accessible touchstone for understanding and appreciating this new art genre.

Transmission Arts is arranged into four sections by mode of presentation: performance and composition; installation; broadcast; and public works, networks and tools. Biographical backgrounds are provided for each selected artist, as well as a discussion of each artist’s seminal work(s). A chronology of works and an extensive bibliography are also provided. Several of the artists represented in each section are well known: William Basinski, John Cage, Matthew Burtner, Negativland, Marshall McLuhan, Velimir Khlebnikov, Eduardo Kac, Tetsuo Kagawa, Orson Welles, Nam June Paik and Pierre Schaeffer, for example. Others are less known and therefore interesting and inspiring.

Together, these 150 transmission artists and their works form the foundation for a larger Transmission Art Archive under development with the guidance of free103point9, a nonprofit organization focused on cultivating and defining the transmission art genre. In addition to the more traditional linear works made for radio dissemination, free103point9 supports creative, multifaceted and interdisciplinary works across the full radio spectrum in its broadest definition. While the free103point9 Transmission Art Archive is accessible at <www.transmissionarts.org> where sound, video and image files for many of the artists can be enjoyed, from the earliest experiments with radio, to current-day web or mobile-based platforms, transmission art is enlivened by technology, not beholden to it. The artists and their works featured in Transmission Arts: Artists and Airwaves provide an excellent and accessible introduction.

REMIXTHEBOOK

Reviewed by Jan Baetens, University of Leuven, Belgium.

At a minimum, one can say that remixthebook is an unconventional publication, at least according to current academic standards (after all, it is published with a very prestigious academic press). Formally, the volume resembles any other book, but it is astonishing in terms of content, if not explosive. At the same time, Mark Amerika is doing exactly what we are all doing and experiencing today: copying, transferring, reusing, mixing, remixing, mashing-up in a culture whose key words have become détournement, collage, mème, readymade, quotation. The avant-garde’s fascination with the remix, in literary as well as in visual culture, has now become totally mainstream: We write like Lautréamont (the first to claim that “plagiarism is necessary”), we paint and sculpt after Duchamp (whose Fountain is now the icon of the 20th Century), and no one who writes can ignore Burroughs’s cut-up technique (or one of its multiple variants). Mark Amerika has been, and still is, one of the pioneering authors of this remix culture in the digital age, which Lev Manovich taught us to understand as an expansion of the Soviet montage principles.

Amerika, a recombination of many biographical and professional stances (teacher, critic, professor, theoretician, creative writer, performing VJ), has gathered in this book a certain number of “shows” that also exist as live performances and web creations (see his personal site: <http://markamerika.com/>). One can read them as a blending of autobiography, manifesto, (critical) theory and creative output—in short, as a new variation on the well-known genre of the ars poetica. It would be unfair, though, to strapjacket Amerika’s highly inventive and innovative ad-libbing on/ of remix culture into this worn-out terminology, as it is also unfair to limit the present review to the mere book form of this work, which also exists in digital form, more precisely in digitally remixed form. On <www.remixthebook.com/the-remixes>, the author has invited some 25 international artists, poets and theorists to
sample from remixthebook, manipulating the source material according to their own insights and preferences. In comparison with the life performances or the digital reappropriation of the work, the printed volume may seem anachronistic, and this gut reaction of the reader familiar with Mark Amerika’s groundbreaking work is confirmed by the reading of the book itself.

Most striking in this regard is the extraordinarily classic use of the book format itself. remixthebook never questions the conventional print layout and leaves the host-medium of the book as it is. When entering the work, the reader expects a much more experimental experience than what is finally being proposed. Despite the innovative content of Mark Amerika’s approach, the text as well as the volume are perfectly traditional objects: The whole book can be read from A to Z (the linearity of the text is never put into danger or into question), and although its physical appearance is not that of the average academic essay, its form is easy to recognize and to identify: It is that of the epic, narrative poem in good old free verse, and the basic rules of both free verse and ars poetica are fully respected from the very first till the very last line of the book (there is one idea per line, with from time to time an enjambment to spice up rhythm and style). The ideas of the book are new, but its poetic form is classic (readers of remixthebook unfamiliar with contemporary poetry might have the deceptive impression that there’s no reason to be “afraid” of it). And to a certain extent, the novelty is less on the side of the ideas and the theories themselves (logically, most of them are quoted, sampled, remixed and therefore not always very surprising) than on the side of their very reuse (which the book can only imitate in a rather pale fashion). One really needs to go to the website in order to seize the possibilities of the mashup.

A most intriguing aspect of the remixing process that is hardly discussed or thematized by Mark Amerika is the fidelity issue. Most of the time, the samples are directly inserted into the text, but from time to time, the author states explicitly the source of his material (name, title, etc.), as if he was suggesting that there exists a difference between “free” sampling (paraphrase?) and “faithful” sampling (quotation, with references). If it occurs that sampling involves also changing the remixed original, and if it proves that such changes do matter, it would have been fascinating to learn more about the author’s ideas on this issue. As it is now, one can only infer that the differences between ways of remixing (and the exactitude of quotations) is just one example of this phenomenon are less important than the very process of remixing itself, which I think is debatable. Any technique can be used in any possible way, and remixing should not be an exception to this rule. In that regard, the case for mash-up culture that is made in remixthebook misses part of the complexity of its own subject.

MODERN GESTURES: ABRAHAM WALKOWITZ DRAWS ISADORA DUNCAN DANCING

Reviewed by Giovanna L. Costantini.

Ann Cooper Albright’s Modern Gestures juxtaposes ink and watercolor drawings of the dancer Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) by the modernist Abraham Walkowitz (1878–1965) with excerpts from the writings of Gertrude Stein to startling, complementary effect. Sonorous and rhythmic, Stein’s prose reverberates hypnotically:

This one is the one being dancing. This one is the one thinking in the believing in dancing having meaning. This one is one believing in thinking. This one is one thinking in dancing having meaning [1].

Walkowitz’s undulating line compounds the rhythm through improvisational images that slip like nymphs across the page unfettered. They herald that first Brancusian flight of the spirit, the gusts of liberation and abandonment that projected 20th-century modernists like Isadora Duncan from fin de siècle canons to unbridled creativity.

Duncan met the painter Walkowitz in Paris in 1906, in the studio of the rebel sculptor Auguste Rodin. Returning to New York, Duncan saw Walkowitz’s impressions of her at Steiglitz’s 291 in 1916. They never saw each other again, although he drew thousands of images of her ritualistically throughout his life, as though his hand was an extension of her body, his gesture her movement through time. The sympathy that Albright creates between Stein’s literary cadence and the musical sensation of Walkowitz’s visual forms conveys the motion of the dance in a manner immediate and sensate. “Seeing becomes hearing,” writes Albright, and her selection of sounds, when read aloud, accompanies the dancer’s movements in simulated performance.

Like other early modernists inspired by musical abstraction, Walkowitz likened his expression to harmonious sensation alive with rhythm. His experimentation with small format drawings and watercolors explored linear motion in ways that convey the vitality of the human figure as a vibrating force of human potential. Duncan, considered by many to have originated modern dance, rejected traditional ballet in favor of improvisation, emotion and expressionistic aestheticism. Her body became the brush in Pollack-like graphics drawn in space with arabesque scarves and colored light. It was an age of wild invention: Loïe Fuller, Gordon
Craig, Filippo Marinetti’s Ballet Mécanique, Émile Dalcroze and Hellerau. Not until the 1920s would such physical forays be given Freudian and Surrealist license through automatism. But at the dawn of that new century, both Duncan and Walkowitz stood poised to make their mark, seeking and finally discovering “the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of the dance” [2].

References

Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings


Reviewed by Amy Ione, The Diatrope Institute, Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A.  
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Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings brings together key documents related to institutional critique, a conceptual art movement that has raised questions about the workings of art institutions (museums, galleries) since the 1960s. Alexander Alberro (one of the editors of this volume) calls it a “gesture of negation” (p. 3) that was adopted by art-world figures as they began to critically engage with the order of things within art venues. The anthology presents the movement in four sections (Framing, Institution of Art, Institutionalizing and Exit Strategies). While the volume gives the impression that the critique is ongoing, the Exit Strategies section suggests that the initial concerns have morphed into something else.

The Framing section centers on how artists began to expose the politics of art institutions along with various inconsistencies and contradictions in their operations in the 1960s and 1970s. Hans Haacke’s response to the Guggenheim’s abrupt cancellation of his scheduled show in 1971, due to its political content, is included here. Overall, these early documents present general challenges to the status quo. Ultimately, there was a shift in strategy that is covered in the second section, the Institution of Art. This second section covers how the art world operates and assumptions people bring to art. For example, the Guerrilla Girls, who first surfaced in New York City in 1985 to protest gender and racial inequality in the art world, are included in the second section as well as the third, Institutionalizing, which asks how artists can develop an alternative sphere. The final section, Exit Strategies, “brings together art projects and writings that stem from international collectives whose radical agendas and cultural politics resonate with earlier forms of institutional critique but reject significant parts of its legacy” (p. 15). In reading the book, I was struck by the fact that the majority of the writings appear in the first two sections (314 pages), while the last two sections seem more of an afterthought. Among the artists/authors included are Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson and Mark Dion.

To my surprise, I was quite taken in by the book but quite exasperated at the same time. This is because it is an insiders’ book. The editors seem to assume that readers will know who all the artists are and how their writings “fit” together within the art world at large. Thus, there are no short artist biographies, no summaries to contextualize the writings and no index to help the reader move around expeditiously. The lack of supplementary material to enhance the reader’s understanding of the writings presented makes it useful documentation for a classroom, where a teacher can provide framing, but less useful in a general sense. For example, the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) article, titled “Tactical Media,” was penned in 1996, before Steve Kurtz became the target of an FBI investigation. Gregg Bordowitz’s 2004 article (“Tactics Inside and Out”) is more useful for understanding the trajectory of CAE and their projects. An index would help a reader who is interested in CAE but not planning on reading the entire book easily discover materials about CAE outside of the article credited to CAE.

Moreover, although the authors claim the volume is a self-contained work, this is not really the case. The five Hans Haacke articles demonstrate that he has played a strong part in institutional critique. Yet, his work is not given in the context of his life. For example, one of the reasons he was able to continue to make political statements is that he had an economic base. From 1967 to 2002 Haacke had stable employment as a professor at Cooper Union in New York City. This “larger context” invisibility problem struck me frequently. Martha Rosler, for example, hardly seems like an “outsider.” She has taught at several universities and (among other things) serves in an advisory capacity to the departments of education at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art and the Center for Urban Pedagogy and is a former board member of the Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture at Columbia University.

Andrea Fraser, another person who critiques art institutions, is currently a member of the Art Department faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles. In her articles, she mentions her discussions as a student in New York City with many of the contributors to the book. While her writings are included in the book, her well-known performance pieces are largely invisible. For example, there is no mention of one of her most controversial pieces: the videotape she made of herself having sex with an art collector. He paid $20,000 to participate in this work of art. After their “encounter” the video was shown in a gallery in NYC. According to Fraser, her point in making this artwork was to comment on the reality that selling art is comparable to prostitution. Fraser herself, however, does acknowledge the contradiction of participating in a critique that is a part of...
the museum/gallery system. One chapter in the book reprints a 2005 Artforum article where she wrote:

Nearly 40 years after their first appearance, the practices now associated with “institutional critique” have for many come to seem, well, institutionalized. . . . In the context of museum exhibitions and art history symposia . . . one increasingly finds institutional critique accorded the unquestioning respect often granted artistic phenomena that have achieved a certain historical status (p. 408).

In this sense, our contemporary institutional critique is a part of a long and fascinating history (although this history is not mentioned in the book). Other examples of critique from within institutions are the Pre-Raphaelites in England and the Realists in France (Gustave Courbet, Jean-François Millet and Édouard Manet). Alternate exhibitions by people such as the Impressionists have also challenged the status quo. While this anthology does not look at historical precursors, the documents do offer a record that is of value as this movement takes its place in the chronology of art. Still, it is a shame that this volume does not acknowledge that, although this iteration takes place in the mainstream, there are historical examples that show other routes.

As I read, I kept thinking about the 2004 College Art Association (CAA) Conference, where the Frank Jewett Mather Award was given to the Guerrilla Girls. This CAA award recognizes published art criticism that has appeared in whole or in part in North American publications. Their choice of the Guerrilla Girls was explained in the following statement:

During the past nineteen years, the Guerrilla Girls’ work has dramatically affected curators, administrators, fellow critics, and artists. Prior to their poster campaigns in the streets of SoHo in the mid-1980s, the reality of art-world exclusiveness—whether overt or covert—with regard to gender and race was almost entirely anecdotal. The Guerrilla Girls’ statistics exposed imbalances in gallery and museum representation, media coverage, and other forms of institutional support for artists. . . . The Guerrilla Girls’ posters now appear in art-history textbooks and are collected by museums across the country, and the group has received awards from the National Organization for Women, the National Library Association, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, and other papers, with a memorial address on Max Planck, by Max von Laue. Tr. from German by Frank Gaynor (New York, Philosophical Library, 1949).

Later, in 2009, the Guerrilla Girls added CAA’s inaugural Distinguished Feminist Award to their accolades. According to CAA, these activists “embody the very essence of the spirit of the feminist art world: collaborative, proactive, and persistent” [2]. In other words, the activities of this group, like those of most (if not all) of the sources in the book, are now so fully integrated into the institutions that the criticisms they are noted for seem almost incestuous. Several of the articles in Institutional Critique reference Hans Haacke’s 1972 poll/piece at the John Weber gallery that revealed, among other things, that most visitors to the gallery were related in some way to the professions of art, art teaching and museology. This book is directed at the same group.

The language is specialist language and does not lend itself to dialogue with those who may feel alienated and marginalized from the “high art” world critique that defines viability in the marketplace.

In 2004, as I watched the Guerrilla Girls walk to the stage at the CAA conference, wearing the gorilla masks they use to keep their anonymity, I remember thinking of a statement Max Planck made in his autobiography:

[A] new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it [3].

Institutional Critique brings this to mind. Its subject has no doubt changed the art world, and for the better in many cases. While I am not a fan of the “high art” critique, this volume nevertheless is a contribution that will aid the study of art. Still, all in all, the most striking thing about the book was how well it aligned with Haacke’s poll. Just as the majority of the visitors to the gallery were somehow in the art world already, the writings in this book are for those who are already participants in the art institutions. It is not an effort to reach the public at large. Yet, perhaps ironically, it ends with some discussion on how art projects are now expanding into a larger arena.

References

SPACESUIT: FASHIONING APOLLO

Reviewed by Valérie Lamontagne, Design and Computation Arts, Concordia University, Canada. E-mail: info@valerielamontagne.com.

Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo is a dissection of the influencing cultures, materials and scientific practices that brought about the fabrication of the first spacesuit worn on the moon. Organized in 21 thematic chapters—echoing 21 unique and functionally adapted layers of the suit—the structure permits the author to take necessary detours and sideways glances at the factors responsible for the final and unorthodox outcome of the girdle-making company Playtex, who won the contract to make the ubiquitous moonwalk suit. More than a historical overview, Monchaux’s extensively researched book recounts the battle of conflicting wills and visions, which pits the fragility and finitude of the body’s ability to adapt to inhospitable environments against the cybernetic dream of total control and somatic transformation through technology. This dichotomy is articulated—specifically in the case of the construction of aeronautical protective clothing—as a war waged between a tacit, or “soft,” knowledge of textile craft versus an automated, or “hard,” engineering assembly practice.

A key crossover concept presented early in the book by Monchaux is derived from the unlikely ateliers of the Parisian couture houses. The “New Look,” as launched by Dior, which stood for a re-structuralization of the feminine silhouette—with its pinched waist and atypical postwar exuberance of material—later comes to conceptualize reforms in the management of postwar defense as orchestrated by President Eisenhower. “Here the phrase ‘new look,’” notes the author, “came to stand not so much for the shifting shapes of Dior’s 1947 dresses, but for an architecture even more ephemeral, that of postwar reality itself” (p. 31). That a term coined in the annals of women’s
Spacesuit

Nicholàs de Monchaux

wear comes to propel industrial and military innovation is endemic of a continued “feminization,” that is, softening, of space exploration garment design.

The same space age era sets the stage for the emergence of the intellectual and ideological neologism of “cybernetics.” Initially pharmacologically based, cybernetics propels the fantasy of a seamless technological man-machine, or “cyborg.” Parallel evolutions in early aviation and its nefarious and often deadly effects on the body—such as high speeds and altitude conditions of extreme cold and lack of oxygen—fail to deliver on the actualization of the “cybernetic man.” Continued space travel testing rather consistently points research toward design artifacts that can sustain man in an environment tailored as close to possible to that of his usual habitat. Highly engaging is Monchaux’s revealing of the various actants that come together to constitute the developments for a “humanistic” design to sustain man in space. These actants are collected from divergent disciplines including academic research institutions, industry (tires, girdles), engineering, politics and popular media culture and often overlap, complement as well as compete with one another in the process of producing the Apollo A7L spacesuit.

Throughout, Monchaux successfully argues and gives examples of how within the various iterations and prototypes of the spacesuit, it is the designs that take into consideration the way in which the body moves and “lives” in clothing that garner appeal and usability with the astronauts. The more traditional, custom-made, couture-crafted, one-of-a-kind, form-fitted spacesuits win out over the engineered, standardized “containers.” Comfort and mobility, by way of textile innovations in rubber and synthetics developed in consideration of the body wearing the suit, ultimately speak for the success of Playtex—of bra and girdle fame, deployed under International Latex Corporation (ILC)—to prevail in the fashioning of the spacesuit. This tale of collaborative design highlights the necessary administrative accommodations between ILC and NASA in consolidating conflicting garment manufacturing processes, based on the one hand on sewing patterns and on the other in engineering technical documentation. This science-fashion hybrid-practice is exemplary for current cross-disciplinary research taking place in the field of wearable technologies in fashion and engineering alike.

Monchaux resets a number of assumptions constructed within the media image of space travel by bringing us closer to the “messy” practice of scientific developments, eschewing the mannequinized media visions of man on the moon. Questioned, for example, is the sustained media popularity of the “hard” engineered suits—inspired by Bauhaus’s Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet stage costumes—that come to represent the “atypical” spacesuit, as well as being another instance of the fashion-engineering crossover. As Monchaux argues, these “hard” shells function not so much as space armor but rather as symbolic representation of man’s desired mastery over space. However, the truth is that the human body has no mastery in space during lunar travel but rather must make do by keeping the elements at bay. Above functional aesthetics, above the dream of cybernetic controls, what Monchaux does with Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo is to tell an enduring modernist tale of embodiment vs. engineering of design.