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E X H I B I T I O N S

LEON GOLUB POWERPLAY: THE POLITICAL PORTRAITS
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Suppose someone comes along who does not know “bridge,” and there is no bridge to which I could point and utter the word. I would then draw an image of the scheme of a bridge which of course is already a particular bridge, just to remind him of some schema known to him such as “transition” from one side of the river to the other [1].

Despite the many psychological and semiotic re-codings of American modernism, it continues to bear imprints of Clement Greenberg’s “canon” of 1939–1940 that derived from the 19th-century European tradition of l’art pour l’art allied to a reactionary academic and social program. Greenberg identified three principal features of American modernism that in certain ways amalgamated the tendencies that had evolved in Europe from Édouard Manet to Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich. These were: aesthetic innovation and originality within a given cultural and formalist grammar; tendencies that reflect the process and societal impact of modernization; and an ambivalent “moral autonomy” with respect to historical relations with both capitalism and modern (mass) society. A self-critique of the arts as a form of essentialism frequently took the form of an opposition between representation and abstraction. Interwoven into the canonical narrative was a belief in the expressive and existential capacity of art to operate as a method of individuation along with a set of other features. These include the pursuit of effects of detachment and depersonalization, mechanization and technology; an emphasis on surface reflexivity; a tendency toward transcendentalism; and attention to the internal ordering and relationship of parts in tension with, in painting, undifferentiated composition. It is from such values that one (to many minds) dominant exclusionary monolith of modernism came to be erected (one that paralleled American postwar hegemony of the 1950s and 1960s), a superstructure considered by many to be at odds with the movement’s resistance to totalitarian extension.

Most critics recognize that it was during the 1960s that the central tenets of American modernism began to erode, at the height of Greenberg’s and Michael Fried’s self-conscious defense of abstraction. Greenberg and Fried’s formalist emphasis on unitary integration and impersonal flatness was marginalized by persistent figuration and postwar European expressionism; by kitsch and realism’s “recomplication” of the pictorial field; and by new propositions bound to minimalism, process and anti-form. John Cage’s challenge to authorship, materiality and internal structure—seen also in Alison Knowles’s “Make a Salad” of 1962, as well as in the work of artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol—did much to undermine the dominance of formalist theory. Others have joined critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Carol Duncan, who attacked modernism’s myths of originality and “centeredness” and its position of “privileged” and gendered hegemony in dismantling Greenberg’s paradigm.

There are reasons to regard the “historic moment” as relevant in reconstructing a definition of modernism and to confront the role of history as the canyon (versus the canon) of art’s operative field. In this field, modernism’s aestheticism should be tempered, indeed...
reconceived, less in terms of purification and autonomy than in terms of purgation and cultural reckoning. In the United States, in the aftermath of the two world wars, the year 1968 signaled a “historical moment,” an instant in which the product of history is universalized as the human condition. That year marked a fracture comparable to the outbreak of World War I in Europe (an event whose reverberations of disillusionment still resound throughout the modern world)—for 1968 was the year of the My Lai Massacre and the Tet Offensive in Vietnam; of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy; of student riots and general strikes in France; of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the U.S.S.R.; and of the death of the artist Marcel Duchamp. The year 1968 is often cited as the crucible of American modernism: It coincides with the onset of American disillusionment owing to the loss of humane leadership, a prolonged and ever-escalating military conflict and the growing awareness that the United States was involved in a war that could never be won. Just as Europe recoiled in the aftermath of Auschwitz, for many aestheticism became indefensible following the carpet bombing and chemical defoliation of Vietnam. Lying as it does beyond the canon, Maya Lin’s Memorial of 1982 may present a fitting closure to Greenbergian modernism, for it lies beyond the limits of its ruinous history where it mourns the loss of once young and vigorous lives. It recalls Fried’s remark about Frank Stella: “He wanted to paint like Velasquez but he realized he could only paint stripes.”

The line of demarcation dividing modernism from postmodernism, dividing the cult of originality and transcendence from pluralism and kitsch, should be abolished. We all know that modernism’s mystical trajectory extends from František Kupka to Vija Celmins with a path of abjection running from Duchamp to Damian Hirst. The early 20th century is no less diverse than the 19th in its permanence of realisms from George Grosz to Ben Shahn, Alfaro Siqueiros to Max Beckmann, Jacob Riis to Dorothea Lange. In this light, the positioning of modernism’s claims of subjectivity and psychological introspection—to say nothing of its grammatical stylizations—against postmodernism’s anti-aesthetic and its polemical, process-driven resistance, ignores a shared thematic unity within the confines of the 20th century. Such unity constitutes modernism’s essential, reflective quality in the presence of history, a centenary history that is bound by pluralities of critique.

This distinction—between modern and postmodern—should be replaced with an enlarged, assimilative view of modernism that asserts both the historical as well as the dramatic character of the art of the 20th century over its scenic adaptations. I propose that one interpretation of modernism be based on a model of Aristotelian tragedy outlined in Aristotlés Poetics as a performance aimed at the pursuit of universal truth through the exercise of aesthetic judgment. Such a model of tragedy, distinct from Nietzschean prototypes of Dionysian subjectivity and existential isolation, seeks determination of moral purpose through actions that are of a certain magnitude with respect to the particulars of history, actions advanced by an artist-protagonist as a corporeal member of a generational and interdependent society. Herein, the 20th century represents a scene of contest and bodily suffering, a site of disfigured realism in which to effect anagnorisis—discovery—along with catharsis—a cleansing of the body or the spirit through purgation. This is a site moreover in which to move the viewer from ignorance to knowledge by means of recognition, the recognition of moral purpose that tragic magnitude requires of all art that is born of a dehumanizing era. It is this socially reflective quality that joins Philip Evergood to Jacob Lawrence, Käthe Kollwitz to Gerhard Richter, and Santiago Sierra to Carrie Mae Weems.

Varieties of postmodern views reflect underlying historical relationships to modernism. Craig Owens, who interrogates modern art’s allegorical impulse, asserts postmodernism’s distance from history and an emptying of original meaning attached to emblematic signs that is indicative of an absence of artistic intuition. Daniel Bell refers also to “the eclipse of distance” that substitutes impact and sensation for contemplation and cultural judgment; a concern with personality rather than moral character; and an emphasis on the self over consensual standards as signs of modernism’s exhaustion. Jürgen Habermas insists on modernism’s resistance to failed propositions of the past and advocates an aesthetic modernity dedicated to “communicative rationality” as a societal imperative. Frederic Jameson refers to the “bracketing” of history, the substitution of simulacra for the original, the waning of subjectivity and emotion. My position does not oppose concepts that inform postmodern criticism; its divisive, variegated perspectives; and its deconstructive complexities. Rather it seeks to identify a more coherent art-historical and cultural framework for modernism, one that reasserts the unitary social bases of art as articulated by Meyer Schapiro [2]. These are foundations that engage aesthetically from within a specific temporal history and reflect T.J. Clark’s call for art that is created in relation to wider currents of society, especially historical currents that have continued to erode the social fabric from which common experience and meaning is generated throughout the modern age.

One of the bridges joining modernism to postmodernism must be located in the historical particulars of social realism. Hannah Arendt in “The Social Question” calls attention to a reality associated with a feeling of injustice stemming from a condition of darkness that lay behind appearances. This sort of realism, one that lends itself to an understanding of the human condition in extremis, is described by Renato Poggioli in The Theory of the Avant-Garde as infra-realism, a quality bound to dehumanizing tendencies that lower reality to the level of the “raw, uniform,
subhuman and vile.” Such a formula for infrarealism is identified by José Ortega y Gasset as a characteristic of avant-garde poetry, one that displays a taste for the denigrating image. The denigrating image utilizes derogatory imagery not only satirically but also lyrically, to render impurities of reality from which emotion ultimately springs. It employs the pejorative image not only as a vehicle for grotesque representation, but also as an instrument to disfigure or transfigure the subject to produce a radical metamorphosis. The denigrating image references Jean-François Lyotard’s belief that realism always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch, as does Walter Benjamin’s call for a flash of recognition, a truth that appears in a moment of danger and is never seen again [3].

Against a backdrop of the New York School’s “pure” painting, Leon Golub illustrates one form of infrarealism that bridges the distance between modernism and postmodernism. Golub enjoins the traditions of realism and history painting to chronicle modernism’s passage from the active to the passive voice. His figurative tableaux mediate between high American abstraction and postwar European expressionism to expose the inadequacy of autonomous abstraction to portray the depths of the psyche, the dehumanization to which history has succumbed. With vitriolic irony, Golub invokes a “grand” style popular in academic art of the past, one that seeks to depict great events, frequently with allegorical, religious or military import. Paradoxically, these are subjects that Joshua Reynolds considers venerable, “familiar and interesting to all without being degraded by the vulgarism of ordinary life in any country.” Derived from the patriarchal and imperial traditions of Greece and Rome, Golub’s series such as Riot and Mercenaries attack the past even as they parody pretensions of the present such as the heroic, transcendent aspirations of the American sublime. To the extent that avant-garde art has been considered by some a “historical concept,” one that treats artistic phenomena not so much as an aesthetic fact as a sociological one, we would do well to view such work more centrally in light of its entanglements of dominance, power and moral deprivation. We should also bear in mind the importance of Gustave Courbet’s “Realist Manifesto” to the re-envisioning of history painting as the prototype for modernism’s collective rebellion.

In a 1981 interview with Matthew Baigell, Golub describes his work as realist art “because it essays to show power, to make power manifest as it is frequently encountered. . . . This is how it is,” he says, “this is how power is configured in events and actions, and perhaps this is how it’s abstractly structured in our society.” Power is reconfigured in Golub’s painting to collapse canonical tenets of originality, moral autonomy and essentialism into “more or less active” inversions of social and art-historical order; it perverts canonical modernism and transfigures it in terms of the action of an Aristotelian tragedy. Golub’s Vietnam series rechoos the agonism of the avant-garde through figures that are both brutal and victimized by humiliation and torture, as well as objectified, distanced and charged with the psychic tension of the individual and the artist. The figures address the duress and rupture of contemporary experience, its cuts and erosions, accumulations of surface bravura exposed with a meat cleaver to reveal the canvas’s wounds. They paraphrase the text from Franz Kafka’s In the Penal Colony in which the officer describes the efficacy of the punishment apparatus on its victim: “You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one’s eyes,” boasts the officer, “but our man deciphers it with his wounds.” Golub’s figuration looks past formal reductionism to a condition of moral reduction, a condition that assaults our sensibilities and impoverishes decency. Unflinching and confrontational, his dramatis personae render history through horrendous mimesis, a misshapen and redundant dimension based in grotesque acts that in their brutality elicit fear as well as pity. These are the self-same emotions required by Aristotle to effect catharsis, the purging of emotion on which all tragedy depends.

Aristotle considered fear and pity to be complex states of mind that require a comprehension of the full measure of another’s distress and the projection of that condition upon ourselves—a form of call and response in which the call of human suffering elicits the response of feelings of compassion. In the modern age it is by no means certain that society retains the capacity to experience compassion for the suffering of others or to express Aristotelian passion and emotion in any but the most self-gratifying form. What counts in Golub’s transfigured realism is not so much the modern gesturalism of the artist—the self-expression of the individual soul in conflict—as it is art’s gesture on behalf of humanity—an archaic instinct directed toward the goal of relationship and social union, a union that seeks to abolish the distance between artist and viewer, society and the individual. For Golub such an instinct, born of a memory of value, resists effacement through insistent figuration. We recognize in Golub’s transfigured realism its capacity to convey compassion, the bridging element necessary not merely to unite modernism with postmodernism but also to pursue the sensus communis, the enlarged thought, the reflective moral purpose of the 20th century. “The magic of compassion,” writes Hannah Arendt, “was that it opened the heart of the sufferer to the sufferings of others, whereby it established and confirmed the ‘natural’ bond between men. . . . Where passion, the capacity for suffering, and compassion, the capacity for suffering with others, ended,” she offers, “vice began” [4]. Ortega y Gasset describes an epidermal relationship to the human family by means of an analogy to persons present at a dying man’s bedside. Wife, doctor, reporter and painter witness one and the same event, yet each is impressed in a different way so that their several aspects have
hardly anything in common. The wife is not simply "present" in the scene, he notes, "she is in it. She does not behold it, she lives it." The doctor, a professional, is several degrees removed from the emotional center, while the reporter, in his objectivity, has lost all emotional contact with the dying man. Ortega y Gasset then comes to the painter, whose purely perceptive attitude fails to perceive the event in its entirety through a maximum of distance and a minimum of feeling intervention [5].

Golub's transfigured realism succeeds in bridging this gap, modernism's gap, between being within the connective tissue of humanity and being purely perceptive to its history as a pictorial agent. His empathic force is indebted to the idea of human solidarization, an ultimately libertarian idea born of French Revolutionary ideology that equates virtue with the welfare of the people. As a moral imperative it raises compassion to the highest political virtue, for it is formed out of sympathy for the sufferings, misfortunes and unhappiness of the lowest classes, the vulgar and the marginalized—groups of people not dissimilar from the victims of Golub's mercenaries. Yet conceived in terms of metaphoric formalism, Golub's work unites itself with modernism, for it elevates grim reality to a field saturated with vivid color, where the intrinsic power of the artwork and not the critical edifice still holds the capacity to ennoble. Here modernism hovers between abstraction and representation, between monolithic centeredness and the pluralism of all that is to follow. In Golub's moving reenactments, we encounter a space of redoubled power, a reflective space in which to ponder the limits of insensibility.

Arnold Hauser, in The Philosophy of Art History, describes the notion of "style" in art-historical parlance as a musical theme of which only variations may be known because a sum can never include more, and an abstraction always includes less, than the whole from which it was derived. In this spirit, perhaps the overarching movement of American modernism—its aspiration to aesthetic judgment, to life beyond itself, and to the sensus communis of posterity—might be conceived in terms of conscience rather than of grandeur, in terms of a transfigured social realism rather than of transcendence.

References
1 Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) p. 83.

RITUALS
by Vincent Moon. Commissioned by CTM and CTM X New Geographies, Berlin, Germany, 30 January–7 February 2016. Festival website: <www.ctm-festival.de/festival2016/2016/01/30/programme/event/rituals_installation_opening>. Reviewed by Hannah Drayson. Email: <hannah.drayson@plymouth.ac.uk>. doi:10.1162/LEON_r_01364

There is plenty to say about this year’s installment of Club Transmediale’s (CTM), the Berlin-based annual festival devoted to “adventurous music and art.” The festival pays close attention to (and champions) movements in new and canonical experimental music—particularly underground online, club and dance music scenes. It turns an insightful eye on movements in technology, contemporary culture and politics, and somehow rather successfully avoids simply attending to what is (about to be) in style. This year’s program, under the title New Geographies, included talks, seminars and an exhibition and attended to a range of questions raised by the notion of diversity—whether of race, gender or geography—in contemporary music culture. New Geographies was curated in collaboration with research organization Norent, a group of ethnomusicologists who use online publishing to explore emerging global music scenes.

With this year’s theme of geography, it wasn’t hard to find oneself considering the on-the-ground impacts of living in a globally connected world. Cross-cultural dialogue takes on a new resonance when close to everyone’s mind are the realities of refugee crises, mass migration prompted by climate change, revolution and war and an apparent move toward right-wing politics—all of which seem to forecast an uncertain future economically, physically and psychologically. For those not forced to move, economic crashes have in many places cost a generation of young people their international mobility and perhaps their creative freedom at a time when support for young artists and musicians is increasingly corporate-sponsored, if available at all.

With such things at stake, the importance of dialogue with, or at least an increased awareness of, “other” cultures, particularly through such shared spaces as party- or dance-music culture, requires more than ever an intellectually informed honesty and awareness of privilege that treats the originators of these movements and their work as neither exotic nor naïve. The panel discussion “Roots to Routes; How to Research, Document and Mediate Music Today,” moderated by Florian Sievers, with Wendy Hsu, Christopher Kirkley, Sarah Abunama-Elgadi and Thomas Burkhalter, gave an excellent overview of the concerns, approaches and issues faced by artists, ethnomusicologists and label owners regarding their own contributions to this liminal cultural space. As the panel title indicates, a change in awareness regarding diasporic music scenes, as well as the local global music scenes, means that, at least among more discerning audiences, the idea of a homogeneous “world music” as a genre in itself no longer makes sense, given the range and dynamism of the forms of new music being “discovered” and popularized (apparently at ever-increasing speed).

World music, as a category defined by
what it is not—"Western"—suggests a "them and us" binary that cannot
and should not be maintained; it
overlooks the deep cross-pollination
among musical styles (and legitimizes
theft); and it naively assumes that
the producers of "world music" are
themselves unaware of their own
place in the global marketplace. The
CTM exhibition at Bethanie in the
Kunstraum Kreuzberg featured video
and interview documentation from
numerous local music scenes that in
recent years have been increasingly
accessible online through reissues
and new releases on Western record
labels such as Soundway [1]. These
local music scenes offer interesting
materials for researchers interested in
the interplay between tradition, cul-
ture and technology, and a theme that
recurs at CTM is the often-surprising
variety of ways in which communica-
tion technologies are used by indi-
vidual scenes and artists to produce
and distribute music. The ongoing
proliferation of information networks
and tools, the Web, mobile comput-
ing, cheap information storage and
services such as WhatsApp allows
artists and their publics to distribute
music files and contribute to the vis-
ibility of some musical cultures that
would otherwise remain unknown to
a wider public.

Also incorporating an ethno-
graphic imperative was Vincent
Moon's Rituals, the three-screen video
installation at HAU 2 that showed
specially edited selections from
Moon's documentary work depict-
ing ritual practices filmed in diverse
geographic and cultural settings. The
clips were shown on each screen in a
random order and, while this strat-
egy avoided the dilemma of how to
arrange such a large body of material,
it also, both in the visual and sound
mix, worked well to prompt a mul-
tilayered reading of the work with
space for reflection. The consistent
quality of the films themselves aided
this; the footage is professional and
cinematic.

The somewhat elusive thread that
connects these scenes might be quali-
ties associated with the trappings
and performance of ritual. The people in
does the curatorial statement for Rituals
describe trance as an "essential
quest for our generation" but isn't
specific about what that generation
or trance itself might constitute,
citing "poetic trance, possession
trance, altered states of conscious-
ness, visions, hypnosis, mediumship,
écstasy, dreams." Something of a
catchall then, and it's worth noting,
as suggested by the list above, that
trance is to some extent a product
of culture. Deep understanding, fami-
liarity and culture shape our ability
to do many things: I can go and sing
to the mountain, but to fully be the
vessel for the song that greets the sun
is not a role that can be dropped into.
Losing oneself, authenticity, familiar-
cy and tradition are presented to us
as outsiders rather than as potential
participants. What Moon's instal-
lation made me wonder, especially
when watching it in a room with
30 or so other spectators, was this:
How many of us have rejected or
overlooked similar traditions in our
own home cultures? Are we looking
with perhaps a little desire at things
we would reject if they were our own
inheritance? The question is perhaps
not "What are we looking for?" but
"Why are we looking?" and perhaps
this is simply an issue of consumer-
ism, the romantic ideal that there
is something authentic in ourselves
that might be actualized by a "true"
encounter: the exoticism of tribal and
spiritual customs but at a safe dis-
ance—and perhaps for good reason?
In one sense there is an honesty to
this that perhaps might not at first
come to mind; one's own rituals
are not only terribly banal, but by avoid-
ing them we avoid the claims that our
culture might have on us. What Rituals
doesn't show us is the preparation,
the hierarchy imposed and reinforced
by the ritual, the control of the young
and old by the past, its structuring
of thought and action. What is the
price of having these kinds of ritual
traditional practices in our lives?
What comes with them? And when
they become negotiable, is something
left behind? How do we balance quest
narratives with narratives of loss and,
perhaps overlooked, choice?

Note
1 Better-known genres that have "broken
through" in this way include Portuguese
Kuduro and Shangaan Electro from
South Africa.
A book on modernization through aerial photography in the Midwest in the 1930s? There may be a lot of reasons to immediately skip it. Isn’t modernity a quintessentially urban phenomenon that has nothing to do with country life, and certainly not with country life in the Midwest as we imagine it? And what possible relationship could there be between country life and aerial photography, something we tend to spontaneously associate with warfare and, more generally, power and colonialism? Finally, isn’t there a kind of inherent contradiction between the terms “culture” and “Midwest”? The best response to such biases is the book itself. Jason Weems’s Barnstorming the Prairie is an amazing, refreshing and thoroughly thought-provoking study, a study that is not only a major contribution to our knowledge of Midwestern culture but also a superb example of a broad and interdisciplinary examination of what seems at first glance to simply be a technical device: aerial photography.

The basic situation that Jason Weems’s book addresses is this: Aerial pictures—that is, vertically recorded panoramic representations of the (in)famous grid-structure of the Midwest’s flat and treeless farmland—were used by U.S. agrarian authorities to impose an ambitious program of both collectivization and rationalizing of farming in the years of the Great Depression as a solution to the negative effects that unscientific means of production had had on soil and productivity. The use of aerial photography has therefore been seen many decades later as an instrument in the (forced) conversion from small-scale individual farming to large-scale, state-controlled agribusiness. While Weems does not deny this version of history, the story he tells in Barnstorming the Prairies is much more complex and multi-layered and helps to correct a large number of stereotypes regarding the keywords of his study: “aerial photography” and “Midwestern culture.” Weems succeeds in doing so by following three paths: first, a historical overview of the “vertical” view in the context of a dramatically “horizontal” natural environment; second, a cultural studies–inspired reinterpretation of the reception of aerial views as well as the actual experience of flying by local audiences; and third, an interdisciplinary approach to the photographic material in which he links it to sources from other media (pre-photographic drawings, contemporary paintings and architectural and urban planning sketches and photographs) and provides an excellent close reading of the material.

In this analysis, the crucial term is of course the “grid,” an icon of modernity but also of something almost premodern, that is, the democratic and egalitarian spirit of the Jeffersonian ideal of the republic as the collaborative effort of many small independent and landowning farmers, who were each allotted a geometrically equal part of the prairie during the westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century. The Land Ordinance that organized the methodical division of the (supposedly empty) land in 1785 followed perfectly mathematical rules whose philosophical and political underpinnings should never be overlooked, Weems rightfully argues, when analyzing the often-positive reactions of small local Midwestern farmers to the imposition of large-scale grid structures and the accompanying new structures of production during the 1930s. Moreover, one should not forget that the aerial view was neither something new nor something impersonal or purely objectifying. Aerial views have a very long history, from the elevated and bird’s-eye views popular in the Manifest Destiny era to the first photographs taken from balloons in the 19th century. In addition, these views did not simply reflect the point of view of the hegemonic power of the times (the landlord or the general, for instance); their cultural and ideological meanings were much more diverse, if not open to anti-hegemonic reinterpretations: A more or less disembodied bird’s-eye view, for instance, capable of displaying the grid-like structure of land ownership, displayed the fundamental equality of all those working on their part of the land while challenging the individual and therefore hugely biased standpoint of the single observer standing on top of the landscape. Finally, the rapid democritization of flying, as suggested by Weems’s title and the mechanization of American urban society in these years, demonstrates that it is not possible to separate aerial photography from the experience of flying itself, which many people, even farmers who had never left their county (but who had been enthusiastic drivers since the inception of the Ford Model T), considered to be an exciting and liberating experience. It is therefore incorrect, Weems concludes, to adopt a dualistic or dichotomizing approach to aerial photography in the Midwest—with the intrusive force of Eastern bureaucrats on one side and the powerless forces of resistance of the poor and illiterate farmers on the other side. Most Midwesterners were
sympathetic to the new technologies of flying and aerial photography, and there was often an idealizing strand in their reactions to modernization (nearly all families had aerial pictures in their homes, and they appropriated these images as tools of community-building). This much more nuanced vision of modernization has important political and ideological consequences, because it radically questions the stereotype that the Midwestern farmer had a backward-looking and narrow-minded worldview, a stereotype that many have wrongly taken for granted; the reevaluation of this idea allows for a very different interpretation of Midwestern culture in general.

Weems also looks at Midwestern culture as it is reflected in fields other than aerial photography. The book includes two thought-provoking chapters on regionalist painting by Grant Wood and the urban “broadacre city” projects by the prominent Modernist Midwestern architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Wood, a not-so-much-appreciated painter nowadays, was a premier local as well as national artist in the 1930s (to whom Life magazine offered a centerpiece). Weems’s analysis in Barnstorming the Prairies is a subtle close reading of Wood’s clever treatment of the grid and of Wood’s sophisticated and shifting representation of the tension between straight lines and curves, a tension that Weems manages to decipher from a wide range of perspectives.

Frank Lloyd Wright, still considered one of the most notable representatives of Modernist architecture, had developed around the mid-1930s ambitious plans to bridge the gap between country and city. He failed however to raise any serious interest in these plans, which were discarded as conservative if not blatantly reactionary given their straightforward rejection of the modern city (verticality, concentration, mechanization, speed, mass culture). Weems shows the profound continuity between these plans, the traditional Jeffersonian grid and the cultural and ethical values this typically Midwestern structure implied. He helps readers understand why modern city planners could only reject the “broadacre city” ideal (a kind of reinterpretation of garden city dreams in an egalitarian and strongly individualizing framework). At the same time, he makes clear that these failed and largely despised plans for urban innovation would be reinvented in the postwar years of suburban white-collar development.

**BIOCENTRISM AND MODERNISM**


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A paradigm shift in critical theory and the greater humanities has arguably been afoot for at least 20 years, since the move from linguistic, semiotic and textual systems to phenomenological systems and cognitive science–based analytics, catalyzed in part by philosopher Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect” (1995) and cognitive scientist Benjamin Libet’s groundbreaking research on the embodied temporality of consciousness in the early 1990s [1]. Oliver A.I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche’s anthology Biocentrism and Modernism is part of this ongoing shift in paradigms. Made up of 11 essays from art, architectural and urban historians, the compendium does not so much recast or revise modernism as dig up and frame forthrightly the missed and seminal elements of proto-complex systems and the biologically inflected strain of the period in art and architecture.

In the shoals of the modern, biocentric modernism dates back to the coining of the word ecology in 1866 by the German scientist, propagator of Charles Darwin and consummate illustrator Ernst Haeckel [2]. Haeckel, a scintillating character, looms large in this volume. In the deeper *longue durée*, biocentric modernism goes back to the late–18th-century writings of philosopher-naturalist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and what Robert J. Richards calls “Romantic Biology” [3]. Romantic biologists include an array of figures from the last three centuries, such as founding figure of biology Goethe, biologist and embryologist Haeckel, biologist Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer, naturalist and geologist Charles Darwin, physicist J.S. Haldane, biologist and mathematician D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson and embryologist Conrad Waddington. These scientists shared a belief in the fundamental relationship between scientific and aesthetic observation. For them, there was a core connection between judgments based on biological function and judgments rooted in aesthetics. Similar to Goethe’s practice as a thinker and writer, which was not hemmed in by the artificial separation between art and science, biocentrism is both a monistic and a holistic endeavor.

The terms *monism* and *holism* are central to the discussion of biocentric modernism and, as such, are carefully if not beautifully given specificity by Botar and Wünsche. While interconnected in meaning and history, the two words are by no means synonymous. Botar explains monism according to how Haeckel used the term, as it referred to “the essential unity of organic and inorganic nature,” which in turn meant “that the simplest protoplasmic substances arose from inorganic carbonates through spontaneous generation [rather than] a miraculous origin” [4]. Holism is a unified perspective in which art and science are one. For Wünsche, holism is closely related to organic worldviews, which “are anti-individualistic,” striving “to overcome the dualism of matter and mind so characteristic of Western thought, because they consider both to be different sides of one and the same nature” [5]. While both are terms of unification, unlike monism’s bridging of the organic and inorganic, living and nonliving, holism is a more general term for the fundamental oneness of mind and body.
In addition to Haeckel’s influence, biocentric modernism in art and architecture was also informed by the *Lebensphilosophie* (Life Philosophy) and neovitalism of philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and Ludwig Klages and scientists Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Jacob von Uexküll, Hans Driesch, Raoul Francé, Ernst Mach, Élisée Reclus, Peter Kropotkin and Patrick Geddes. While there is no bifurcation at work in the anthology, certain essays stand out more strongly than others in their ability to truly carve out a niche for biocentrism as a prominent force in the opening of a new field of inquiry bridging art and science.

There are, thus, two kinds of essays in the compendium, wherein roughly half confront and discuss more forthrightly these philosophers and scientists and their ideas within modernism and the other half fall back into the more descriptive tradition of balkanized art history. If the one portion does the work of forging new territories by disinterring a lost strain of biologism in art and architectural history, the other explains, or sometimes re-instantiates, clichés of “biomorphism” and microscopic formalism at work in abstract painting. With respect to the second group, think here of Alfred Barr’s rather simplistic take on biomorphism circa 1930, Kandinsky’s anatomical references in paintings made in Paris during the same decade, and the unfortunate misreading of biological forces in modern art of the 20th century as, simply put, kitsch. Biocentrism, with its full entourage of philosophical voices, makes for a paradigm shift in the present, whereas biocentrism understood according to Barr’s biomorphism, viz. a formal trope in a sculpture or a curving shape on a canvas, is simply the work of art reportage.


As Biocentrism and Modernism is a book on the history of biocentrism in modernism, political themes and questions in the book pertain to the past. This does not obviate the crucial political importance of the discourse of biocentrism in the present, to which I return below. In the anthology, the politics of biocentrism emerge fitfully around the pivotal connections between the early ecology movement and the rise of fascism in Germany. Figures of repute (and disrepute) here include Haeckel, the botanist Raoul Francé, naturalist Jacob von Uexküll and philosopher Ludwig Klages, all of whom were anti-Semitic. On another front, which is less Germanic and more informed by the vitalism of French mathematician and philosopher Bergson, Allan Antliff’s pithy contribution on Herbert Read’s “organic politics of anarchism” comes full circle, recasting Haeckel’s biofunctional theories of organismic self-organization in terms of a politics of autonomy and self-management. What makes these essays so fascinating and urgent is how they cogently reveal the palpability and urgency of 150-year-old biocentrism in the present. Haeckel’s monism does not simply foreground contemporary science, but rings, in part, true today. Its description of organismic development according to a combination of environmental constraints and the inherent vitalism of the organism, what Botar here refers to as *Vitalmystik*, resonates with the current foregrounding of the environment within postgenomics and the empirical biofunctionalism of autopoiesis, the idea and reality that organic matter is self-generating. Biocentrism in history foregrounds an epigenetic take on culture, or at least the possibility of one. That a scientist, writer, artist or designer’s practice is fundamentally shaped, or “canalized” as embryologist Conrad Waddington would have it, by ecological forces opens up the discourse of epigenetics beyond the cellular to include the biopolitics of the greater environment.

Beyond these reverberations in contemporary science, the revelations of biocentrism in the past are nested within the aforementioned shifts in critical theory, today consisting of a series of what one might call critical materialisms of science. This list includes affectivity theory, philosophies of embodiment within the digital, speculative realism and object ontology. What I am arguing here is that a discussion of biocentrism as part of the history of modern art and architecture is set in relief by contemporary critical theory and science—as they work in conjunction together. Biocentrism in modernism, clearly seen and relayed as the contributors do in this book, is not possible without these new allied discourses, which are further part of the rise, one might argue, of mass computational literacy. Complex systems in the present reveal complex systems in the past.

These moves in the critical approach to cultural production could be celebrated as the incarnation at long last of Donna Haraway’s
c Coupling of science fiction and social reality some 30 years ago [6]. Haraway’s declaration that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” drew attention to the bombast and surrealism of President Reagan’s automated ballistics system known as Star Wars. On the perimeter of her coupling, there was also the possibility that the very near future held within it a new analytics for the humanities cultivated by the science fiction imagination. Calibrated by the sublime awesomeness of science that is at once fantastic and real, this analytics has arrived in the present moment, and biocentric modernism is its history.

This new friendliness to science within the humanities is not an entirely halcyon affair. First, let us say that biocentrism is not just a matter of history but is also a burgeoning field in the present, materializing in the form of bioart, synthetic biology within architecture, bioinformatics in design and the history and theory of biology in art and architecture. Second, let us not deny their collective presence as a matter of trying to eke out a safe place for art, imagination and subjectivity within a market-driven world where science does not simply mean liberation but also means profit. This anthology sits among the need to push an “A” into STEAM.

We can celebrate a new humanist analytics that does not reify science as the bogeyman of the capitalist imagination and involving no costs on the other hand. Illegal Literature: Toward a Disruptive Creativity

References and Notes


5 Isabel Wünsche, “Organic Visions and Biological Models in Russian Avant-


Illegal Literature: Toward a Disruptive Creativity


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All of us who do editorial work—and who doesn’t?—struggle daily with many forms of copyright issues that seem all the more absurd because the rise of the Internet has radically modified both the practice of textual and other reproduction (technically speaking, one can copy and circulate all kinds of information in just one click) and the very attitude people have toward the idea of reusing and sharing information (digital-native prosumers do not feel that they are infringing on copyrights when they appropriate texts and images). At first glance, David S. Roh’s book seems to take sides with those who make a radical plea for the “liberation” of information and data, that is, for the dismantling of copyright as it currently exists (yet not in the same way in all countries, for place matters in this context). What makes this book so interesting, however, is Roh’s nuanced approach to the stakes of “free” information, where “free” is used in the double sense of the word: unlimited by legal and commercial regulations on the one hand and involving no costs on the other hand. Illegal Literature is not a libertarian manifesto claiming the right to reject all that opposes, restricts or criminalizes the free use of protected material, but a sound reflection on possible alternatives to the almost-absolute divide between legal and
illegal practices, a divide that Roh thinks is damaging for everybody. Too strong a divide between the legal and the illegal is not only an obstacle to creativity and innovation, it is also in the long run problematic for those who currently benefit from the absolute legal protection of creative work (authors, publishers, copyright holders).

Roh's book opens with an excellent discussion on the notion of creativity, before moving on to some sound arguments on disruptive creativity. Concerning creativity, Roh relies upon a subtle and complex but well-built theoretical framework that borrows insights from three fields: first, cultural studies, where Raymond Williams's distinction between residual, dominant and emergent structures of feeling help build an argument against essentialism (for instance, the essential difference between "good" and "bad" writing); second, polysystems theory, as elaborated by Itamar Even-Zohar, who offers a supple and open way of tackling the interaction between canonical and marginal or peripheral writing; and third, Russian Formalism, here studied via Victor Erlich's well-known book, which puts a strong emphasis on the Bakhtinian notions of dialogue and parody. Disruptive creativity, on the other hand, is also discussed from different points of view, enabling Roh to maintain a certain distance from the neoliberal sense of creative destruction (Schum-
WRITING AND UNWRITING (MEDIA) ART HISTORY: ERKKI KURENNIEMI IN 2048

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Writing and Unwriting (Media) Art History: Erkki Kurenniemi in 2048 is a collection of essays that present the work of artist-engineer Kurenniemi as a locus for thinking about media art history. The book stems from the major presentation of Erkki Kurenniemi’s work at the dOCUMENTA 13 exhibition in Kassel in 2012. The interconnections between his work, now located at the Central Art Archive at the Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki, and the concept of the archive is just one strand through which the reader can engage with this book. The work of Kurenniemi does not fit neatly into one discipline or another; as the editors highlight, Kurenniemi was a pioneer of electronic music and computer arts as well as an experimental filmmaker, inventor, archivist and futurologist. For the editors of Writing and Unwriting (Media) Art History, he is the encapsulation of the artist-engineer who elides the traditional academic and museological categories.

Editors Joasia Krysa and Jussi Parikka see Kurenniemi as illustrative of post–World War II art that straddles numerous disciplinary boundaries “from the aesthetic to the scientific and technical.” This book is aimed at those following the various paths of media archaeology, museology, computer arts and electronic music—curators, art historians and all those concerned with questions of how we store and retrieve knowledge.

The book is divided into six sections—“Archival Life,” “Visual Archive,” “Artistic Practice,” “Science/Technology,” “Music” and “Interviews”—and each section is introduced by a contributor. The “unwriting” in the title is a thread through which one can begin to unravel the work of Kurenniemi. The idea is taken from Kurenniemi’s thoughts in a letter where he envisions the possibility of “unwriting poetry,” a to and fro between the sciences and the arts to articulate through one practice, or algorithm, that which has been unpacked, understood and recast elsewhere, reformulated with a deft precision and conciseness. The book brings together many of the fragments of Kurenniemi’s work, including finished and unfinished projects, inventions and diary entries—with the goal of reframing media art history by developing a better understanding of the interconnectedness of art and technology.

Sections such as “Archival Life” present Kurenniemi’s “lifelogging,” the everyday documentation of his life presented across different media—photographs, video, film, audio recordings and writings (diaries). The section deals with both Kurenniemi’s own take on his archival practice, which began in the 1960s and had no distinct philosophy, and the practice of archiving itself. In the chapter “Fleshy Intensities,” Susanna Paasonen presents the idea that Kurenniemi can stave off the erasure of life, human existence and annihilation and simultaneously move toward eternal life and the reconstitution of himself through his archive in 2048; this, she sees, as his archival fever. The “Visual Archive” section presents pictures, articles and sketches from the Kurenniemi archive, offering an introduction to Kurenniemi’s work for those not familiar with its scope.

In the section “Artistic Practice,” Kurenniemi’s ideas on art and technology are developed through his own writings. Krysa points out that according to Kurenniemi’s interdisciplinary perspective, art is just one of many possible outputs for his work. Kurenniemi’s ideas are also explored in the work of the media art collective Constant. “Archiving the Databody: Human and Nonhuman Agency in the Documents of Erkki Kurenniemi” is perhaps the standout chapter in the book in presenting a tangible exploration of the notion of “unwriting.” Constant investigates the archive of Kurenniemi in the project Preliminary Work. The chapter looks at the efforts to align the idea of the archive with computational processes given the understanding that for Constant archives are collections of materials that are readable, writable and executable and thus subject to certain ethical standards. Other sections in the book explore scientific and technological shifts that are apparent in Kurenniemi’s work and in society, such as the shift from analog to digital; there is also a section on Kurenniemi’s specific contributions to electronic music.

The book brings together a number of approaches and recent scholarship on media archaeology and the archive. The editors note the contradiction of disciplinary boundaries in relation to the structuring of the book and the interdisciplinary nature of their subject. The book is best understood as standing in for just one evocation of a body of work that is formulated across many media. For the Kurenniemi enthusiast there is much material to immerse oneself in, and the book is admirable in its attempts to visualize a project that was the dOCUMENTA 13 exhibition in print. The main proposition of this book—that examining the work and life of Erkki Kurenniemi opens up those discrete disciplinary boundaries to the artist-engineer as an exemplar of how media, media arts and art history need to be rethought.
in the light of scholarship on media technologies—is well evidenced. The book is situated within the media archaeological canon that is currently being constructed, and so readers will struggle to find other forms of cultural, political and aesthetic criticism within this collection. Writing and Unwriting (Media) Art History: Erkki Kurenniemi in 2048 serves as a source document or manual to a set of practices that have been alluded to across the fields of computer arts, expanded cinema, electronic music and experimental film. This text works best in combination with access to and use of the archive and work of Kurenniemi either in the museum or cinema online through projects such as Constant’s active archive.

SELLING DIGITAL MUSIC, FORMATTING CULTURE


Reviewed by Jan Baetens. Email: <Jan.Baetens@arts.kuleuven.ac.be>. doi:10.1162/LEON_r_01369

I may be overenthusiastic—the future will tell us whether I am mistaken or not—but having read Selling Digital Music, I am truly convinced that this will become an influential book, as important as, for instance, Raymond Williams’s study on Television (1974), Bruno Latour’s work on Science in Action (1987) or Paul DuGay’s edited volume on The Sony Walkman (1997). In this book, Jeremy Wade Morris analyzes the digitization of commodified music, from the first audio files of the CD era to the current transformations of the music industries in the cloud. But he also does much more than that: The book is first of all a cultural analysis of technology. Morris examines with great care the intertwining of the “technological”—that is, the various inventions and artifacts of the period under scrutiny—and the “cultural”—that is, what people actually do with all these things. Selling Digital Music strikes the right balance between both approaches: It is a thoroughly researched study that uses both academic (often SCOT-inspired) research and nonacademic sources (corporate policy documents, no-longer-available digital material, journalism, fan and hobbyist testimonies on social networks, etc.). At the same time it never loses sight of the bigger picture, the permanent reflection on the link between commodity and culture as well as the attempt to rethink digitization in larger terms. Approaching the music as the canary in the digital coal mine, he thus uses the case of digital music as a springboard toward a philosophy of digitalization of culture in general, the central issue being the shift from artifact and ownership to participation in lifestyle communities.

It is both easy and impossible to summarize Selling Digital Music. It is first of all easy to do so because of the extremely clear structure and argumentation of the book. Morris defends three major ideas: One, the digital revolution is technically speaking not a matter of immaterialization or loss of materiality but of “detuning” and “retuning,” that is, of stripping away certain aspects of music as commodified sound and the progressive invention of new aspects and dimensions that enable new forms of commodification. An example of this: We lose the information offered by the artwork on the cover of an album (or CD), but we are now being offered new meta-data and new interfaces when doing something with music on a computer. Two, economically speaking, digitization was not the countercultural disruption of the music industry we still think it was—despite of course many disruptive effects, for instance on the sales figures of musical artifacts. It was, on the contrary, Morris argues, a logical and perfectly rational aspect of the music business, which is always looking for newer and better ways to commodify music. An example of this is how the infamous practice of free file-sharing paved the way for the use (i.e. the selling) of music as part of the data mining industry. Three, culturally speaking, the digitization of music was not only a musical revolution, it was also and above all a cultural revolution, a watershed moment in the shift from musical artifact (the music as an independent item: a composition, a performance or a recording, for instance) and ownership (buying and thus owning such an artifact used to be the traditional way of experiencing commodified music) to something completely other in which notions such as musical experience and participation are key. An example of this: Instead of purchasing a song or an album to add it to one’s personal music library, the contemporary user arranges playlists in order to join certain communities that also enjoy music via nonmusical items (such as, for instance, clothing, furniture or the participation in certain events).

Selling Digital Music is also easy to summarize because of the clear timeline it proposes and follows. Morris convincingly demonstrates that the digital file of the CD may have announced the digitization of commodified popular music, but that it was not yet really part of it because it did not modify existing commodified forms. One had to wait for other changes, namely the encounter with the PC, a device that had not been programmed to function as a musical device but which rapidly proved the ideal channel for new forms of distribution and production of music. The story of this
digitization is told by Morris in five chapters, each built around a particular technology that discloses the possibilities of detuning and retuning commodified music and thus new opportunities for the selling of music: (1) Winamp, a music player software that pioneered a visual interface for playing music on a PC and helped demonstrate that music could really be sold as a digital file; (2) The progressive construction of metadata, which replaced the suddenly missing metadata of the traditional record industry while allowing a more active use of the digital audio files (this chapter and the previous one inevitably contain fascinating discussions of the skeuomorphism); (3) Napster, which Morris analyzes as a venture capital company trying to build new business models aimed at the exploitation of data collected via the traffic generated by file sharing; (4) iTunes, which Selling Digital Music does not interpret as the answer to the crisis of collapsing sales figures but as a successful strategy for integrating music into new lifestyles (based also on the purchase of new equipment that offered something more than just the possibility to enjoy cheap but legally acquired artifacts); and finally (5), cloud applications such as Spotify, where participation and collaboration via user-generated content is at the heart of the commodification business.

The difficulty in summarizing Morris’s book has to do with its exceptional richness. The wealth of archival material is breathtaking, but so also is the depth of the cultural and historical discussion of this material. Despite the sometimes highly technical aspects of some of its pages, Selling Digital Music is not at all a book for computer geeks or music nerds. It is instead one of the most sound (no pun intended) and thought-provoking analyses of culture I have read in recent years—hence the enthusiasm expressed in the opening sentence of this review. It is a book that has the courage to ask fundamental questions about the changes of culture in the digital era, while also managing to avoid many currently hegemonic views on digitization and commodification. In short, it is a book that helps us think afresh about what Raymond Williams would have called some of the “keywords” of the cultural debate.

**THE SUBJECT OF AESTHETICS**


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Tone Roald’s *The Subject of Aesthetics* is a report of an investigation of aesthetic experiences based in the visual arts. It describes an approach for tapping directly into that experience, using qualitative, empirical methods that are framed in terms of philosophical theories of aesthetics, with particular emphasis on the theories of Merleau-Ponty, Jauss and other phenomenologists.

The Introduction gives the overall framework for the book. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a fine overview of the history of the study of aesthetics, in both philosophy and psychology. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of qualitative methodology employed in the empirical research. Chapter 4 reports and interprets the empirical data collected. In it Roald develops the idea of intrapellation as a process that is central to the aesthetic experience. Chapter 5 provides further discussion of the aesthetic experience (as outlined in chapter 4) in the context of aesthetic theories, followed by a helpful conclusion.

As Roald points out, researchers in empirical aesthetics, in the tradition of Alexander Baumgarten, have usually investigated the characteristics of conventionally defined art objects in settings that do not promote the aesthetic experiences of the viewers of these objects. This is somewhat understandable because science usually tackles the easier and more controllable phenomena first. However, while interesting in its own right, this approach tends to avoid trying to understand the experience of art directly.

*The Subject of Aesthetics*, on the other hand, attacks the experience directly. Throughout the discussion of data, Roald emphasizes that the aesthetic experience is characterized by intense interest rather than by disinterested contemplation as some theorists have argued. Central to the conclusions Roald develops from her interview data is intrapellation, which reflects the important time-dependent character of the aesthetic experience. Intrapellation is the process by which the viewer of the artwork first seeks meaning (although it can involve other reactions to the work), followed by the work providing feedback (sometimes a shocking rupture) to the viewer. This interaction continues back and forth in a flexible and rather free manner. Art objects can then be defined as objects that produce this kind of aesthetic experience, which suggests that potentially any object can function in this way for an individual.

*The Subject of Aesthetics* has a good discussion of methodology overall. However, it would have been helpful if Roald, in describing her own procedures, had provided more details about how subjects were recruited and what their backgrounds were, as well as more details about where and how the interviews were conducted. She does give references, but it would be useful to have more specific details in the book. Further, because all of the analysis was done by Roald, it would have strengthened the findings if a second evaluator had looked at the raw data independently. Even in Roald’s brief review of empirical aesthetics, a mention of Daniel Berlyne would have been meaningful, given the magnitude of his influence.

As Roald recognizes, the results are limited by the use of verbal language in describing aesthetic experiences. Subjects often stated that they were unable to precisely describe the experience. In addition, a significant component of discussions of aesthetic experience deals with the possibility of experience before consciousness. This suggests the need for other ways...
of understanding the experience. Two possibilities are using a new language and measuring direct physiological responses (possibly neural activity) at the time of the experience. Precisely how to pursue either of these possibilities is at present unclear. However, it may be helpful to further develop and extend the approach used in The Subject of Aesthetics to gain additional insights into the aesthetic experience.

As a cognitive neuroscientist and psychologist with research interests in perception and empirical aesthetics, I recommend this book to anyone interested in understanding the aesthetic experience, but particularly to those with an empirical aesthetics background. It may help to bridge the gap.

SEPTEMBER 2016

Exposing the Film Apparatus: The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory, edited by Giovana Fossati and Annie van den Oever. Reviewed by Mike Leggett.


AUGUST 2016

Raqs Media Collective: Casebook by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta (the Collective); Introduction by Philip Monk. Reviewed by Mike Leggett.


JULY 2016


JUNE 2016

Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century by Kate Eichhorn. Reviewed by Mike Mosher.
