THE POETICS OF NOISE FROM DADA TO PUNK


Reviewed by Brian Reffin Smith.
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It’s hard to imagine what your fully paid-up Dadaist would be doing today, noise-wise. Anyone with a computer or iPad and a MIDI keyboard can access and change the parameters of millions of playable noises, melodic or not, from fingernails on a contrabass to underwater trumpets, from Bartók pizzicato to a burnt piano, from German swear words with variable attack and decay to an orchestra of railway station sounds, both ambient and provoked, playable in major, minor and more exotic scales. I suppose they would be doing something else. Words, phrases or syllables can be whispered, screamed or sung... Persian melodies mixed with Hollywood choirs and monks singing backwards in virtual reverberation setups ranging from outer space to Abbey Road Number 1 Studio or an anechoic chamber... poetry is written on substrates of any and all... is not concerned with, for example, bird or sound per se but rather in the conditions of our perception have just about been explored. Or have they?

The theoretical apparatus that surrounds and interpenetrates the poetics of sound and noise gets a thorough workout here, as the comings and goings of noise and sound figures, from a background of sound and noise, are disentangled. It can be difficult going. It is also, paradoxically, quite visceral. The point to hold onto is the constant flux between acoustic figure and ground and the contradictory differentiation between noise and sound: on the one hand is to show how such-and-such is different from its noisy background, or must change language, poetry or sound just to escape from a hell of noise; on the other, is to show that it’s all just/not just noise anyway.

Are these forms important on a day-to-day basis, though? Does a poetics of sounds need to refer to their origins? Is hearing a rapid tap-tap-tap the same as hearing a woodpecker, and is the rat-a-tat-tat of the machine gun the actual, overwhelming fear of the bullet? Many would still ask, “What is a sound, what is noise?” For those not of the North American university department of English cognoscenti, an equally difficult question is “What is, or are, ‘the poetics’ in this case?” But while there are books whose opacity and/or nonsense is egregious, this reviewer finds that there are many more that simply make you do more homework than usual—which is then rewarded. The Poetics of Noise from Dada to Punk is one such book, although it contains sentences such as “Rather than defining and defining a particular vibrational ontology, phenomenological objectification, or teleological hermeneutic, this book describes material and cultural frames that parse the flowing matrix of sound.” Good chess players can easily remember the position of every piece on the board because they are "chunking," seeing a few simple structures where a novice might only see the individual bits, and doubtless there are those to whom the above quote makes immediate, obvious sense. For me it was something to leave in suspension in hopes of later expansion and elucidation.

Actually, if you do understand, you are rewarded: This is a very interesting book. And I now see that the above quote means the author is not concerned with, for example, bird or sound per se but rather in the conditions of our perception.
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and theorizing about such stuff, and beyond that to incorporate or find such theory in the works themselves. The philosopher Roger Scruton argued that the nature of sounds is fully determined by how a normal hearer hears them, but from Dada to punk and most points in between, creative people have said “bollocks” to that and slammed sound, noise, the perceived, the perceiver and all the surrounding theory into one often-useful, sometimes-glorious gestalt. The “poetics” here is about the alleged self-framing of poetry thrusting itself into the theory and practice of sound studies. “I read poetry . . . not through but as sound theory and noise theory,” writes John Melillo in his introduction. Again, we hope that the differences and identities between sound theory and noise theory will be elucidated, and what he means by “noise and noise music,” as well as his use of many other rather-poetic juxtapositions.

And this does sound reasonable: “Close listeners to noise—ranging from the barest sense perception to the most technologically advanced mediation—attend neither to ‘sound itself’ nor to ‘noise itself’ but rather to the culturally encoded relationships between the transmission and reception of sound.” At least if you append “or something like that.” The power of poetic experiment is, writes Melillo, “to connect listening and making in ways that discover the limits of those relationships—and the motivations and powers within them.” It’s not, for me, a given that that is what we do, but rather that it’s clearly interesting and probably useful to consider it. Isn’t theorizing about listening and making, looking and making, central to, certainly important for, much of our creativity?

What I like about this book is its apparent refusal to distinguish between sound/noise located (by someone or something) inside and outside boundaries that are at best fuzzy and variable. Framework, contents and theory become (poetically and practically) almost interchangeable. As Captain Beethoven said, “It’s all one radiator.” The six chronologically ordered chapters range from First World War poetry to sound art and noise music via jazz and sound engineering. Melillo sees them as being haunted by two different “noise regimes” that emerged in the twentieth century: Russolo’s modernist insistence on including noise as revolutionary sound, yet to be tamed somehow to enable this, and Cage’s lack of control, letting sounds be themselves. The author disagrees with Michel Serres’s apparent view that making something of noise is an impossibility because it then leaves the noise behind, becoming that other than noise. He suggests rather that musicians and poets “render noise as an artifact of listening.” In other words, again, all the components of the system become . . . not exactly interchangeable but part of each other. I get the feeling that he’d be quite happy if all the categories didn’t exist, though they have to be named, spotted and questioned in order to be heard along different dimensions, from a meta-level, whence they become one. The chapters portray artists’ work with and against the above-noise regimes, roughly split between the first and second three chapters.

Some glimpses: soldiers surrounded by unbearable noise uttering repetitions of prayers, poems or rote phrases as a “homeopathic” antidote to it. And actual poetry’s form falling apart. Then, jazz and modernist poetry explore the randomness of such selection, pushing the increasingly nebulous boundaries to incorporate nonsense, abstraction and “noise.” Still later, noise is everywhere in the arts, “dedifferentiated.” The book as a whole celebrates this refusal to differentiate, and it is in that refusal that its riches lie. For this reviewer, it isn’t just that we question old boundaries between noise and sound, but that such questioning itself becomes the art, the music, the poetry. Cf., of course, conceptual art.

The chapters are less dense than the introduction and are a sudden release from theory per se. It’s almost as if the author felt, unnecessarily, that he had to justify the book to a stern com-

mittee of North American lit-theory academics and, having done so, could enjoy himself.

The first discusses the way the noise of the battlefields was used, even by its dreamed-of absence, rather than portrayed or “communicated.” Shell-shocked shards of alliteration, harsh consonants, the legs of iambic pentameter intact but a foot missing. Noise figured on a background of noise. “In the gap between communication and experience, only an affective, even automatic response can emerge.” Words are not for communication. Where the Italian Futurists heard expansion, the First World War poets heard collapse, and resonated with it.

From bodies in the trenches to our bodies . . . and the “rationality,” especially in language, that the noiseists wanted to break down or erase in the Zurich of Lenin and Joyce. Rational language was itself mere noise, or “nothing.” “Everyone dances to [their] own personal boomboom,” wrote Tristan Zara in the 1918 Dada Manifesto. In the chapter “Dada Bruitism and the Body,” the author describes how rhythm and performance emphasized the body and the event over permanent, rational text, mouth over thought in a very eclectic context. In Emmy Hennings’s wonderfully thin and “shriil” (sic as it was described, of course) anti–female-singer performances, or
in the essence, not the description, of a tram car's sounds and in the simultaneous uttering and roaring of poems by three or more people, noise and the body producing it render normal language, poetry, art and music part of the noisy whole, which Dada exposed and, in "othering" it, made it again all one noisy, rumbling radiator.

Then come the linking voyages of the syllable "da" from poetry toward song and then back to poetry with The Waste Land. Dada became a brand. But it already was one: a Swiss hair tonic. "Da" is of course a very rich sound with a host of meanings and connotations, perhaps paradoxically pointing up its ubiquity as a parasitical nothingness or an index of it. It must also have had different resonances with those familiar or not with the Slavic word for "yes." Melillo uses the 1922 hit "That Da-Da Strain" written by Mamie Medina and Edgar Dowell as a bridge from "nonsense song" to a Black breakaway from the confinements of white language. It's not blues either, though in its own words the "writing of a freaky brain . . . cures all kinds of blues you got," perhaps because it's a celebration of joyful noisemaking. There's not a sad word in it. Insanity, craziness, lunacy and a reeling brain are seen as quite positive. Mamie Smith's seminal recording is easily found online.

There follows a consideration of T.S. Eliot's "DA," the voice of drum or thunder, though he was no fan of Dada. Melillo doesn't let "da" get away from its disruptive business, however, and he sheds new light on Eliot's usage.

These first three chapters serve as a basis for the second half of the book, the later or postmodern context. Cage's silence or embracing of all sound rather than Russolo's Futurist "Art of Noises." But both are in contrast to noise becoming everywhere, generated from everything anyway. The poets and musicians the author now considers employ, he asserts, the use of noise as containing its own resistance to noise, to itself. Sinatra, McLuhan, Elvis and especially Charles Olson are adduced. Noise is not outside but in us and everywhere, de-differentiated. In "Projective Versification, Sound Recording and Technologizing the Body," Melillo writes of the intertwining of two different mid-century poetic projects: rock 'n' roll and experimental verse. Both defamiliarize the emergence of poetry into time and space, as audio recordings that could become just part of the acoustic field, by emphasizing the disruptive capacity of vocal distortions and tape or record artifacts. The noise gets important again as a resistance to "domestication." Less responsible subjectivity; more an enveloping force. A musical or poetic space was not occupied by the usual stuff, but the screams and whines of guitars, the distortions of voice, made their own space. The whole book can seem (and why not) a celebration of the power of noise-as-resistance to make its own conditions and frameworks, not least for criticism. "The desire for noise," writes the author, "is a desire to await something other than what we are."

The penultimate chapter begins with Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music, an hour of guitar feedback that Reed called "real" rock about 'real' things. Here again you get one of Melillo's frequent use of antithesis verging on oxymoron that can, however, often be unpacked. The record produces "a figure of noises as a resistance to—and confirmation of" a demand for negative or positive reaction. He means that the "reality" is unstable, provisional, I suppose uncollapsed. You can have your noise-cake and reject it too. Over-egging is optional. Noise in New York in the 1960s and '70s—the birth of punk, at least there—produced "a new valuation of noise as a chaotic, fragile and temporary utopia." The Fugs, Fuck You magazine and Patti Smith appear. The chapter ends with the Language School poet Robert Grenier's refusal: "I HATE SPEECH." From the First World War poets to punk and beyond, the various ideas of noise create and remake their own categories and definitions, their fluid and often contradictory "acoustemologies." But the possibility of contradiction and dramatic reversals of what is in(side) and what is out(side) are the point, I think. Before, everyone knew what noise was and wasn't. Now we see that it's far less clear, and far richer, than that.

Finally, the author locates the preceding questions and examples in a series of artists' sound experiments. The sound traces disappear, the power of the utterance is "dispossessed" and the sound of that dispossession—noise—produces a new aesthetic and conceptual force. "Listening to and writing noise uncovers not just forms of violence, exclusion, and loss but also other ways of articulating collectivity and other ways of knowing our environments, languages and lives."

There are over 300 references and a pretty good index (though one might search it in vain for certain British phenomena such as the sound poet Bob Cobbing or the notorious Portsmouth Sinfonia, whose players, including your reviewer, succeeded in releasing the noisy unexpected from much-loved classics), and as dense as the book is, it's a provocative inspiration to consider and reconsider what a holistic approach to noise and "noise" might be.

The book is by no means a philosophy of sound, noise or sound/noise, but rather an exegesis and hermeneutics of sound-making work (which is what Melillo considers poetry to be) and the important noise(s) thus revealed. It also contains a dose of exegesis's opposite, eisegesis, a drawing-in rather than out, of deeply subjective, if zeitgeisty, opinion from certain areas of academia. That is not meant as derogatory; it's just really interesting. This reviewer will think differently now of some of the sounds he and others make. The rest is/not noise.
TIME OF THE MAGICIANS:
WITTGENSTEIN, BENJAMIN,
CASSIRER, HEIDEGGER AND
THE DECADE THAT REINVENTED
PHILOSOPHY

by Wolfram Eilenberger; translated by
Shaun Whiteside. Penguin Press, New

Reviewed by Allan Graubard.
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Contemporary philosophy comes in
so many categories and types that
even listing them can be dizzying.
Race, gender, cultural, environmental,
historical, discipline, even style and
humor are in the mix. Diversity and
specialization ever lead, fueled by the
tensions we explicate and the pas-
tions that propel us. Is this a halcyon
period? A darker sign of fragmenta-
tion whose consequences we have
begun to chart? Some part of both or
cloth of another suit we have yet to
wear? Time will tell.

Now turn back the epochal clock
to just about a century ago. It’s 1919;
a savage First World War has just
ended with some 40 million or more
dead. We know the story well enough.
A short-sighted peace gains the vic-
tors their spoils, punishes the losers,
redraws several continental maps
while reinforcing colonialism and
sets the stage for a bloodier conflict
to come about two decades later. The
sequence, however clichéd, is worth
mentioning. For this reader at least, it
certainly plays a part with the current
book, which tracks four philosophers
facing three questions, relevance of
which sustains through it all: What
can I know, how can I best use that
knowledge and how can I live?

The grand yet practical sweep of
these questions keeps our author
focused on his task, in a style infused
by the discoveries made or proposed
before he ends the book in 1929 as the
New York stock market crashes. His
eight chapters, thematically titled and
chronologically arranged, sharpen the
pace: prologue, leaps, languages, cul-
ture, you, freedom arcades, and time
(with an attending epilogue). Brief
internal vignettes reframe the quar-
tet—Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer
and Heidegger—and the evolution of
their thinking.

Attention to person and rela-
tionships, from work to friendship,
marrige and amatory; the character
of the time, place and culture in
which the quartet wrote or taught;
the struggles they endured to find an
audience receptive to their views and
how they dealt with the audience they
gained; and the arc of their rebellion
against received Kantian paradigms
inform the writing, which, with only
several lapses—perhaps by way of the
translation—is deft enough to
admire. Equally so is a through-
line that casts a critical eye on the
influence of the university research
institution—rooted in strict disciplin-
ary parameters and domesticated by
bourgeois manners—on philosophy.
Of the quartet, only one, Benjamin,
will fail to gain a professorial chair,
despite his best efforts, and will make
his living as he can as an independent
critic and commentator in periodicals
and books.

With Wittgenstein’s decisive focus
language and its ambiguities;
Cassirer’s auspicious embrace of
structured symbolic forms, including
and other than language; Heidegger’s
insistence that Dasein and death mark
us, the existential predicament we
face individually and collectively; and
Benjamin’s ingenious pivot to culture
and its driver, mass market consumer-
erism—each defining perspectives
for study—it is something to consider
how it worked out. The rejoinder is
this: What can still inspire us to fully,
clearly and carefully analyze what we
face and how we live in the coming
third decade of the 21st century? In
the epilogue, Eilenberger leaves us
with one final quote in this regard,
and a subdued chuckle (considering
who said it): “Philosophy, what else?”

LES TROUBLES DU RÉCIT: POUR
UNE NOUVELLE APPROCHE DES
PROCESSUS NARRATIFS

by Jean-Marie Schaeffer. Thierry

Reviewed by Jan Baetens.
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Jean-Marie Schaeffer is a key figure of
modern French philosophy, mainly
working in the field of visual and
verbal aesthetics, with major publica-
tions on the aesthetic experience
and fundamental categories of art
such as genre and fiction. His work,
however, remains little known in the
English-speaking world. As far as I
know, only three of his books are
available in English today: Art of the
Modern Age: Philosophy of Art From
Kant to Heidegger, Why Fiction? and
Beyond Speculation: Art and Aesthet-
ics without Myths. The reasons for
this (relative) neglect are not easy to
understand, given the exceptional
quality of Schaeffer’s production.
Perhaps he does not match the bank-
able idea of the “public intellectual”
(Schaeffer is more “just” an intel-
lectual than a thinker-cum-political
activist). Perhaps his highly erudite
work is too nuanced (he has strong
opinions on a lot of questions, but
he always voices his ideas in nonpo-
lomical ways—never a good tactic
to get street credibility). Or perhaps
he simply prefers to address the big-
ger picture than to get involved in
mediatized polemics. Nevertheless,
one can only hope that more English
translations will follow. His most
recent book, Les troubles du récit (in
English: story troubles with "troubles" in plural, perhaps to avoid too direct an allusion to Judith Butler?) might be a good candidate, given its size (close to 200 pages), its scope (with a focus on the study of narrative, the book tackles a wide range of important issues that concern the broader field of art and humanities), its clear and didactic way of writing (like all great thinkers, Schaeffer knows the importance of clarity of style and argumentation) and last but not least its emphasis of the ongoing dialogue between continental and Anglo thinking and philosophy and research (the literature of this book is mainly U.S.-based, challengingly combined with classics such as Hume).

The "new approach" of narrative that Schaeffer defends in Story Troubles (and let's pretend for a moment that this could be the title of the English version) is based on two major theses. First, there is the idea that the study of narrative can only benefit from the input and insights of cognitive studies. This is not the same as pleading for a "cognitive turn," for such thinking in paradigm shifts (one per season, if the rhythm continues) is quite contrary to Schaeffer's sharp yet fundamentally open way of thinking. Cognitive studies are able to solve certain problems that other ways of studying narrative continue to struggle with (questions such as what to think of the divide between fact and fiction or the differences and similarities between verbal and visual stories), but other methods and approaches (for instance philology, stylistics, rhetoric and history) remain no less valuable and important for the study of narrative. Moreover, Schaeffer is far from blind to the limitations of cognitive research, such as, for instance, its difficulty in producing the same hard evidence in the field of "story production" as in that of "story reception."

Second, there is the thesis that it is time to enlarge the definition of what a story is, in order to include a wider range of narrative structures and mechanisms that the traditional hegemony of literary writing (and art in general) tends to keep away from the narrative corpus under scrutiny. Rather than exclusively study complete and full-fledged stories, be they "well made"—that is, conventional (with a neat beginning, middle and end)—or more experimental, Schaeffer insists on the necessity of also including "proonarrative" mechanisms and productions, that is, the temporal and narrative organizations of all kinds of thoughts (memories, dreams, hallucinations, projections, plans, etc.) that do not normally materialize of complete stories but that can be considered an anthropological universal. We are making stories all the time, and these stories make us what we are, as a species as well as an individual and as a group, even if in most cases that permanent narrative activity does not materialize in what our literary and artistic traditions define as stories. In other words, what Schaeffer proposes is to examine the (literary and artistic) "center" of story production and story reception from the perspective of the "margins" or periphery of this proto-narrative material, generally discarded by traditional aesthetics but actively studied in cognitive studies. In a brief but absolutely crucial aside (p. 14), Schaeffer reminds us that this was already the fundamental stance of the acme of contemporary narrative studies, namely Gérard Genette's Narrative Discourse (1972, English translation 1979), which already elaborated a new method for reading (literary) stories by studying the quasi-teratological work of Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past.

After a short but informative discussion of the state of art in "classic" [1]—that is, noncognitive—narratology and an equally brief and illuminating overview of the major branches and tendencies within cognitive studies, Schaeffer explains why he will limit his work to a specific type of cognitive study, namely the "psycho-cognitive" approach that studies the way in which our mind processes narrative information (he thus leaves aside other forms of cognitive research such as reflection on how humans develop their narrative competences or the study of the neuro-physiological dimension of making and receiving stories). Departing from the fundamental observation that the cognitive study of narrative shifts our attention from the works themselves to the mental processes involved in the production as well as the reception of narrative (and in this case: protonarrative) facts, he then tackles in separate chapters five major questions: the definition of protonarrativity, the description of various types of "failed" narratives, the question of visual (wordless) stories, the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, and the links between narrative (in particular) and imagination (in general).

All these chapters are of great interest. Schaeffer constantly gives a very clear presentation of the research questions that structure the field; he also provides a good overview of the state of the art while discussing the answers and, above all, the methodological aspects of the cognitive approach of these problems. Methodologically speaking, elements such as empirical evidence and repeatability of experimental settings, which are of course vital to the "hard" cognitive sciences, are framed in totally different ways in classic literary studies, where many scholars reading narratives within a cognitive framework continue to rely on highly subjective intuitions. What makes Schaeffer's thinking and method so stimulating and helpful is that he never completely opposes the cognitive and the
noncognitive approaches. Cognitive research highlights flaws, illusions and mistakes in classic narratology, but this is not one-way traffic. Non-cognitive ways of studying stories also foreground problems in cognitive studies (for instance, the partial neglect of production, the simplification of the corpus under scrutiny or the putting between brackets of many contextual aspects that are essential to the actual “life” of stories). Yet the overall conclusion of this book can only be that cognitive studies make an indispensable contribution to our understanding of narrative and that it is high time to make room for it in a broader view of story production and reception, which in itself—and this might be the key lesson of the work—deserves a central position in our ways of defining and doing humanities.

Notes
1 I put “classic” in quotes in order to distinguish the opposition “classic versus cognitive” from the opposition “classic (or structuralist) versus postclassic (or post-structuralist)” as it is currently commonly established in literary studies. It goes without saying that, in Schaeffer’s view, the postclassic or poststructuralist view, which he does not discuss in this book, are in most cases still part of what he defines as classic—that is, noncognitive. Feminist, queer, postcolonial, etc. readings of stories are examples of “postclassic” narratology, which have but little connection to cognitive research (although it is of course perfectly possible to envision a cognitive approach to feminist, queer, postcolonial, etc. stories).

HEIRLOOM FRUITS OF AMERICA: SELECTIONS FROM THE USDA POMOLOGICAL WATERCOLOR COLLECTION


Reviewed by Ellen K. Levy, New York, NY, U.S.A. Email: levy@nyc.rr.com.
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Heirloom Fruits of America announces its topic, the perfection of a variety of fruits, through immediate aesthetic appeal. Like its subject, this small, delicately colored and thought-fully designed book asks to be held, savored and digested. Its hand-held scale enables it to occupy the cusp between a carefully crafted artist’s book and a factual archive of botanical illustration. In his introduction, historian Daniel Kevles relays some of the social and cultural history of the production, documentation and reception of heirloom fruits in the United States that led to the creation of a Division of Pomology in the Department of Agriculture via the recruitment of art. Kevles relays how chromolithography proved critical to the production of colored plates that could compete in a national market. In the recounting, the book and its contents become works of connoisseurship, practicality, identity and imagination.

In essence, this book is a boundary object. As described by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, boundary objects inhabit multiple communities of practice, enabling them “to travel across borders and maintain some sort of constant identity” [1]. The book encapsulates a host of themes and philosophies involving the merger of early industrialization and the art of growing fruit. The communities traversed include worlds of art and commerce. Kevles articulates how depiction of the fruits enacts a journey from the unique and local to the standardized and mass distributed that references a lineage of patent protections en route. As he describes the voyage, we, the readers, realize that authorship and identification became keys to the success of the pomological enterprise (pomum is Latin for fruit). To succeed, the images of heirloom fruits must function as recognizable names and claim unique identities. Such intellectual property protection was to be found chiefly in the utility patent, the definition of which dates to the 1793 patent law. Without such protection, there was considerably less incentive to perfect and document the fruits, which were subject to appropriation.

Chromolithography is a technique for making multicolored prints that use lithographic stones: it was developed in 1837. Both chromo- and photolithography became essential to traversing the worlds of culture and commerce. At first, watercolors were used to render heirlooms; then coloring was applied by hand to grayscale plates. Chromolithography proved the best way to reproduce the appearance of volume and coloration found in fruit paintings. The same process was critical to reproduce multiples of patented technological inventions. Lithographic techniques were applied to depictions of the organic long before patents for living organisms existed and specified intellectual property protection in living things. As described at length in other publications by Kevles, this development happened during the emerging age of biotechnology when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in the case of Diamond v. Chakrabarty, that “whether an innovation is alive or not is irrelevant to its patentability” [2].

Historian William Rankin recounts that, toward the end of the 1860s, the requirements for color drawings and models in the patent system changed to black and white ink drawings. The Patent Act Amendment of 1861 called for multiple copies of each patent—something unavailable until photolithography. By 1870, the patent office had to provide copies to libraries, along with the public, that inexpensive photolithography made possible. The highly prized asset of each species of fruit was its flavor, which could not be captured by any reproduction. Nevertheless, chromolithography situated apples and other fruit as treasures within the cultural context and as commodities within a socioeconomic framework built from patented inventions. Claims of propriety were essential to their commercial viability.

Applicants for fruit patents had to submit colored drawings of their products. The ensuing reproductions enabled by lithography mark a pivotal change from a horticulture that depended on senses of tactility and smell to one reliant on the copy. You can think of the relationship that exists between fine artworks (the original watercolors) and patent drawings as a kind of seesaw that, at
times, inverts relationships between culture and commerce. For example, inventions when outmoded are more readily accepted as art. Chromolithography served as the fulcrum of the relationship between fields of art and economics. It was as widely employed to depict inventions of succulent fruit as to multiply innovative images of perfected machines. Such juxtaposition occurs in other historical contexts as well. For example, art historian Carla Yanni has described how, during the nineteenth century, new understandings of nature called for British architects to propose erecting a single architectural structure to serve as a museum for both natural history and patent inventions [3].

Many plates in the book date before 1900; the depictions constitute a subselection of plates by Kevles and the Heyday staff. Several date from the 1880s, almost 100 years after the patent law of 1793. A few images in the book are from the 1930s. Kevles claims his basis for selection was primarily aesthetic rather than informational. Among the early plates in *Heirloom Fruits of America* is the Winter Paradise apple (1905), by artist Ellen Isham Schutt. It relies on the convention of depicting a whole apple above one bisected revealing its seeds. That convention is used repetitively with minor variations. Other fruit, including avocados and mangoes, are depicted besides apples. A more recent depiction is the Lodi apple of 1937 by James Marion Shell. At times, branches and leaves are portrayed. In general, conventions of positioning and shading were retained throughout.

Art historian George Kubler's *Shape of Time* asks why certain methods and images become popular and persist, a question implicitly raised by *Heirloom Fruits of America*. Conventions may be arbitrary, but they leave many possible alternatives unanswered. For historian William Rankin, the way patent drawings oscillate between abstraction and naturalism is closely tied to the dual legal status of patents as both disclosing and protecting an idea. Rankin points out that ambiguity gives patent holders a legal advantage when acting against an alleged infringer: They want their patent to have the widest applicability and thus want to depict their invention as vaguely possible [4]. By contrast, Kevles points out the need for depictions of the heirloom fruits to be highly specific since protection was to be found in identification.

Conventions adhere to the rendering of any fruit or machine at any given time, particularly when the images are part of an archive. I have seen such adopted conventions (however strange) as gorillas holding canes in successive plates in eighteenth-century natural history books. In addition, conventions of inverse perspective and cross-hatching were used often to depict machinery in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. These conventions call for interpretation. I recall that contemporary artist Jeffrey Schiff rendered 3D wood objects based on illustrations from the *Encyclopédie*, humorously scoring them with cross-hatching to simulate the parallel lines in the drawings. Kevles, too, has grappled with various iconological approaches to the portrayal of heirlooms; he singles out in the book's acknowledgments art historian Christopher Wood, well known for perusing interpretive complexities of representation. Other iconographic approaches are suggested as well. As witnessed in many painted biblical narratives of lost innocence, the image of the apple may tempt us with fond memories of simpler times. We recall settlers in the United States following well-established routines of planting and trying to improve conditions of soil, water and sun.

Archives are defined by what they do not do as much as by their appearances. Different government agencies have different goals. The heirlooms that were rendered even during critical economic periods greatly diverge from the Farm Security Administration photographs that defined the Great Depression visually and offered an interpretation of poverty. These heirloom fruits offer no easily accessible interpretive role to explore economic circumstances, although their documentation was certainly incentivized by fierce market competition. But could heirloom archives even have implied stressful times? Absolutely—they could have suggested conditions of economic difficulty through depictions of pitted skin, rotted pulp and insect-bored interiors. But that was never the intention. These pomological images also eschew the poetic atmospherics of, for example, exquisite late-nineteenth-century cyanotypes by Anna Atkins. The power of the apples and fruits depicted in this book lies in their directness and literalness. They and their spokesman, Daniel Kevles, speak to the aims of the producers to secure their intellectual property. Although their documentation was certainly incentivized by fierce market competition. But could heirloom archives even have implied stressful times? Absolutely—they could have suggested conditions of economic difficulty through depictions of pitted skin, rotted pulp and insect-bored interiors. But that was never the intention. These pomological images also eschew the poetic atmospherics of, for example, exquisite late-nineteenth-century cyanotypes by Anna Atkins. The power of the apples and fruits depicted in this book lies in their directness and literalness. They and their spokesman, Daniel Kevles, speak to the aims of the producers to avoid confusion through developing a clear system of visual classification. The primary idea was to turn the fruits into marketable products, after which they could be reproduced virtually identically by grafts or cuttings. The colored illustrations were a means of advertising the fruits and securing their intellectual property. But they nevertheless achieve far more.

The heirlooms provide a stunning framework for Kevles to discuss the relationship between industry and nature, the desire to establish insti-
Kevles includes some wonderful narratives in his introduction, including the history of Luther Burbank, the famed Santa Rosa, California, fruit breeder who took inspiration from Charles Darwin’s Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication. Burbank found it to be a source of information on the ideas and practices of plant and animal breeders. Kevles then recounts the fascinating tale of how Burbank discovered and perfected a new and superior variety of potato that became known as the Idaho Russet.

The fruits in this book are composites of different species and of the natural and artificial. The nature/culture distinction has often entailed legal consequences, most notably and recently with respect to biotechnology; aspects of patent law are premised on legally constructing a divide between them. In this regard, it is important to remember that only inventions (e.g. culture) can be patented and not discoveries (e.g. nature). Patent law is a place where political, economic, legal and scientific interests meet and highlight how arbitrary it can be to make distinctions between nature and culture. The great interest in this book is to see its intersection with art.

The book implicitly presents a choice—it is a reminder that Americans have greatly valued time spent working with their hands and working for themselves. Kevles’s essay is a vivid framework for understanding how art’s iconography can render visible relationships to its production and reception, raising unique material and theoretical issues relevant to the current time. The apple is centrally positioned as both cultural art icon and technologically improved commodity. The downside is that economic gain is often a driver of efficiency. Technological innovation tends to diminish the diversity of cultivars. The images of fruits look to America’s agrarian past but implicitly raise questions about a more sustainable future. By now another evolution has taken place—from bites to bits and back again to seeds. Knowledge (in the form of stored seeds at Svalbard and other places) may prove to have survival value in the Anthro-pocene. Such products as heirloom fruits gain additional significance, as Michael Pollan puts it, in “communicating a simple set of values that can guide Americans toward sun-based foods and away from eating oil” [5]. Kevles is very well positioned to discuss these different threads.

Notes


E-CO-AFFECTIVITY: EXPLORING PATHOS AT LIFE’S MATERIAL INTERFACES


Reviewed by Gregory Tague.
Email: ebbi GLintekos@gmail.com.
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In her absorbing book E-Co-Affectivity, philosopher Marjolein Oele explores how humans, plants, animals and the soil can relate as a coaffective community. For anyone interested in seeing how interdisciplinary studies can be applied, I highly recommend this philosophically creative and intellectually challenging book, which could be valuable not only for philosophers but also for environmentalists and those across animal studies fields. Oele touches on biological, medical and evolutionary elements throughout her prolonged philosophical analysis. The writing is clear and poetic, so along with the thoughtful meditations it’s the kind of book that sharpens, as it has for me, a mental and visceral awakening to the material world. My review can give only a glimpse of the academic sophistication of this book, and I hope not to over-simplify some of the philosophically layered textures. The material factors of life, organic and inorganic, are “always emerging” (p. 2) in an ontogenesis via materiality created through affective states that recall the past and look to the future. Oele’s example is human skin, but she also includes soil. In this regard Oele does not see earth as a home ground as might Heidegger. Rather, dirt cells are rife with teeming, felt interfaces of living organisms and nonliving particles, large and small, here and now, there and past. This means that pathos-induced affectivity from forms of material life is a participatory exchange process and not simply a static effect, says Oele. Beyond merely taking in affects there is a release of thought, emotion and, perhaps, action. There is literal and figurative movement in life that includes matter and mind, affective and, often, ecological states of being. To distinguish herself from Heidegger, Oele is more concerned with communal becoming (p. 6) and not just individual being-in-the world. The ethics implied in this stance should be apparent: responsibly permitting all life-forms the opportunity of existence in their respective communities and inclusive pathos with ecological contexts of the nonhuman. The so-called examined life should include a consideration of many carbon-based life-forms and even other inorganic elements. In addition to the ethical, clearly there are political dimensions to ecologically shared affectivity through, for instance, animal rights, biodiversity conservation and climate change.

In Chapter 1, Oele talks about
the "constant ontogenesis" of plants since they are all around us in earth's biomass and yet figuratively invisible to our sight and literally invisible in their complex root systems (p. 18). Seemingly passive, plants are quite adaptively active, communicating with their different parts and with other plants. They are rooted, but not; they still, but not; they are situated, but not; they are becoming in the world. There's no strict division, however, of passivity/activity for plants but what Oele refers to as the middle voice, a nondivisive alternative among the localities of roots and leaves. There is no true center in a plant, but that's meant positively by virtue of its flexible transitivity in an environment of relations. Plants speak through photosynthesis, light and water absorption, and interactions where they feed themselves in affective processes of unity and not the hard duality of subject/object. Plants have no stomachs and feed in a distributive method, as if there are multiple selves spread across deep soil, topsoil and air in a coordinated and cooperative system of continual, unmitigated growth regenerating various parts. From this admixture we see that plants can epigenetically transmit as heritable material a sense of the bounty, or not, of their place in communities. Likewise, plants are known to graft naturally. Are plants enabled with a memory in response to environmental stress? Oele's point is that plants occupy a middle space or mid-voice between life and death where they are ever growing without temporal fixity while testing spatial limits. Plants exemplify an eco-affective response to their environs.

In Chapter 2, Oele spends time talking about birds, specifically the tactility of their feathers. Concerning Aristotle's *aisthēsis* (loosely, sense perception), she's more partial to Heidegger; the emphasis is not just passive perceiving but active eco-psychology about one's changing place or becoming in a world. The external environment affects us and other "animals" in a synergistic process of external, physical perception and internal, emergent sensation. This means that *aisthēsis* is neither in the subject nor the world but "indebted to both" (p. 59) in an exchange, with touch (of tongue, beak, paw or skin) as the primary sense experience evident across bodies in the animal world. Body in the world is a fluid transaction of sensation, movement, being and becoming. There are different types of feathers on any one bird, some as fine as hair, others made of keratin; some feathers are for sensation whereas others help contour flight. Some feathers are highly sensitive and connect to other feathers and the bird's flesh, mediating bodily experience. Some types of feathers are an "extension" of the bird's skin into tactile physical space. Oele's point, apparent in the example of the bird/feathers, is that touch is not localized, and so *aisthēsis* is not simply "direct contact" (p. 66) but affectively creative between space/place and animal/other. Oele goes on to discuss how damage to feathers, from environmental stress or trauma, could be mediated by some birds as a dynamic ability to control their "affective space" (p. 72). Furthermore, social birds preen the feathers of others, broadening their affective area by keeping those in the community healthy and clean. If birds keep another individual tick free, that's good for the group, what Aristotle would call, Oele says, *synaisthanesthai* or the affective behavior of "sensing-together" (p. 76).

Oele questions, in Chapter 3, prevailing language that pictures the placenta as unimportant afterbirth or as something ancillary to the fetus-mother interaction. The placenta, in fact, generates mother-child affectivity. Oele argues that the placenta is not necessarily a static boundary but a permeable borderline and place for the creation of selves: mother and child. Just as she spoke of the middle voice of plants, here the active placenta represents the metaphor of in-between self and other, past and future. This chapter reflects Oele's medical training and how in her early career she was charged with inspecting afterbirth placentas for abnormalities. This is where the philosopher has unequivocal hands-on experience with her subject. The placenta, in effect, energizes growth of mothering and of child. In this part of her book, Oele relies on a subverted reading of Plato more than Aristotle, summoning the notion of placenta as *polis*, binding others, especially youth, in healthful community. Contrary to Plato's static, wise guardians, Oele places faith in the wisdom of the dynamic flesh. The placenta generates existence over Plato's forms. Oele suggests that neither placenta nor embryo early on should be given primacy over the other. Referencing Plato, the placenta becomes a "pregnant city" (p. 91), with the difference of sharing material existence by creating place (p. 93) and not simply provoking the copying of ideas. Indeed, the placenta is a shared home space for baby and mother, affecting them both in physiological, immunological, psychological and other biochemical ways, what Oele calls "auto-affection" (p. 100) for the mother. Though focused on the human, clearly this idea applies, in my estimation, to all mammals.

Building from mid-voiced plants, bird feather sensation and placental affectivity, in Chapter 4 Oele examines the affective interface of human skin, which is not merely "surface" but the "mooring of our existence" or the site of the "inside's exterior"
(p. 108). We are not prisoners of our skins; rather, skin extends to others and other places, emerging outward from within. Skin is a necessary point of contact with another, from birth onward. While there are skin layers, they don’t separate but participate with each other, creating the plastic boundary (knowingly and feelingly working with the brain) from the inside out. Skin is “open to the world” (p. 117) through touch, though from an affective perspective that relationship is not without risk, Oele intimates. Skin is part of one’s historical identity with all its telltale markings, some of which are natural, acquired through age, or are manifestations of injury or cultural infiltration. Oele contemplates the epidermal from many angles. Skin is a horizon: Ever changing, it’s a link to the past but in its friability routinely points to our ultimate decrepitude and demise if we should live to advanced age. Skin is part of a cultural and political climate where touch and sensitivity are emotionally charged (e.g. fear and shame, she says), whether in a cultural movement or through effects of climate change. Skin colors, tones and surfaces speak, in some ways, and are perceived prejudicially in other ways. This stilted perception is true even in the case of cultures in which the skin is almost completely concealed beneath a veil. While skin covers and protects, it’s also a source of vulnerability and affective differences. We see skin as smooth and beautiful, but it can also be rough and diseased. Skin responds to physical and emotional stimuli; it reacts and adapts. Skin, while plastic, can resist cultural, economic or ideological change. Skin can flourish and suffer, but it’s shared across humanity and is, as Oele suggests, the ultimate connective tissue.

In Chapter 5, Oele is concerned with pulling together the previous chapters on affectivity to question how humans can create a community of affect with other inorganic and organic life forms—what she calls e-co-affectivity. Humans now more than ever need to heed and attend to the feelings of other creatures and places, to truly get beyond any Cartesian mastery over nature and embrace, as constituents, the self-regulating system of Gaia. Oele does not advocate, necessarily, individual action or witnessing but a coaffective network, evidenced in life’s connection from birth to death in the soil (p. 142). The new philosophical shift should turn to a participatory sharing with the earth. Is this politically possible? Oele, as in other chapters, continues her reliance on, reference to, and yet distance from Aristotle, among others like Heidegger and more contemporary philosophers including Donna J. Haraway. Unlike Haraway in When Species Meet, for Oele e-co-affectivity is neither immediate nor local but persistent and global. In her final deliberation, Oele meditates via Plato on the porous spaces of air, water or gases in soil. These spots are not isolated but mediators connected to and with other organic organisms and inorganic materials across a living threshold without barriers. In the soil there is incessant movement and becoming. We are rooted in and dependent upon the soil, so Oele suggests we need to create a new eco-affective alliance with it for the sake of earth’s sustainable future. Overall, Marjolein Oele’s E-Co-Affectivity is a potent reminder of life’s fragility despite survival mechanisms and the need for interactive sustenance of physical, psychological and emotional sensibility across species and organic life forms.

PEANUTS MINUS SCHULZ: DISTRIBUTED LABOR AS A COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE/ LE TRAVAIL DISTRIBUÉ COMME PRATIQUE ORGANISATIONNELLE

Reviewed by Jan Baetens.
https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_r_02085
Like any other field of cultural production, comics is a medium that has been dramatically transformed by digital culture. Virtually all aspects of the making, publishing, marketing, distributing and (increasingly) reading of comics have now become digital, while more and more new forms of comics can be called digital-born (and not just “transferred to a digital format”), yet not always in the forms predicted in the 1990s, when e-comics started to emerge.

At the same time, however, there also exists a strong resistance to digitalization in comics, mainly due to two reasons. First, there is the very conservative approach of digitalization in the traditional comics industry that merely considers digitization a useful instrument of cost-efficiency and maximization of profit, hence missing all creative opportunities offered by the new digital environment and confusing its consumers with online copies of originals in paper that simply don’t work on screen (newer e-comics have discovered that the best solution was to avoid complex layouts and to go for a kind of slide show presentation one can scroll through). Second is the exceptional attachment of the graphic novel movement, which caters to a different (allegedly more sophisticated but definitely wealthier) audience, to the magic of ink and paper, that is, the touch and feel and smell of works in print. In the graphic novel, classic publishing formats are not only preserved and cared for, but they also remain commercially successful. In quite a few cases, the graphic novel even comes close to the coffee table book circuit and, just like comics, has now entered the gallery and museum circuit, where they may soon compete with all-time classics such as vintage Superman and Tintin material.

Whatever one thinks of these changes, none of them radically changes the old-fashioned pillars of comics as art, such as—among others—the creative genius of the individual artist, the commercial value of original and copyrighted material, or the autonomy of the artistic sphere in regard to the publishing industry. Yet these are exactly the elements that have been shattered by the digi-
tial revolution, with its emphasis on mechanical copying and distribution, anonymous subcontracted labor by new masses of cottage industry workers or the ubiquity of technical operations such as web-scraping, tagging, archiving, crowdsourcing or reviewing, which have proved vital to the business but are rarely seen as a substantial part of the creative dimension of the cultural or creative industries [1].

Peanuts minus Schultz is a book published in the Uncreative Writings series, a collection of conceptual creative works—that is, works relying on a strong programmatic claim within a global framework of remix and appropriation. Like the other volumes in the series, it explores the new directions of book art, not after but in light of and thanks to the digital turn. The author, comics artist and theoretician Ilan Manouach (1980), is one of the most innovative and politically committed authors in this sphere of post-digital comics. A practice-based researcher, Manouach questions the fundamental issues of originality, innovation, ownership, participatory culture, or sketching and deskilling, from an artistic as well as economic perspective (actually, these dimensions can never be distinguished in his work). In the new type of “conceptual comics” or “CoCos” that he has launched [2], he both creates and gathers comics that thematize these issues in the era of “playbor”—the portmanteau word conflates “play” and “labor” and refers to the new forms of economic organization blurring the boundaries between labor and play, thus abolishing all kinds of distances in time and space. “Playbor” represents postindustrial alienation: Everybody must work all the time and in every place, yet without ever seeing the result of their labor—and, of course, without receiving serious payment, as the work is seen as “fun,” even by some workers, at least in certain circumstances (self-exploitation is looming large in the work-as-fun economy).

A conceptual comic, Peanuts minus Schultz is a project based on the practice of the online labor market. AMT or Amazon Mechanic Turk is the best-known example of such an online service: Mainly precarious participants from all over the world accept to perform small, outsourced tasks for a minimal payment (not a salary or an hourly wage but a per-task payment) at home and with no further management control. Manouach’s book is the result of a specific commission for an unauthorized remake of Schultz’s Peanuts on such an online platform. Peanuts minus Schultz is the edited result of this commission (the initial list of relatively vague and open instructions is given near the end of the book, on page 663): a 700-page horizontal publication with “new” Peanuts strips, freely copied, transformed or (re) invented by micro-workers from all over the global village. The materials submitted are amazing, to say the least, some of them looking more real than the real stuff, and others strangely deviant (but it is impossible to know whether the distance from the original should be explained by a lack of skill or, on the contrary, by a cunning parody). Yet after having read the nearly 1,000 strips in the beautifully printed book, our vision of Schultz’s work is no longer the same: This is not Peanuts as it is shaped by the hand of its maker; it is Peanuts as it becomes in the hands of its readers, who actually do with the Schultz comics what the merchandising has done in a different and definitely less interesting way. Peanuts minus Schultz, therefore, not only discloses what actually happens in the world of microwork, if not the world “out there”—a strange mix of plagiarism and originality, all produced in huge quantities and in almost no time (it took four months of a residency to collect and edit the submissions); it also contains a powerful criticism of what Schultz himself and the company or estate behind his work have always categorically denied: namely, the progressive incorporation of a work of art (Peanuts, the comics) in an economic supra-structure (Peanuts, the merchandising) that eventually has taken over power. In the Schulz universe the comic work has been downgraded to a tiny detail of the larger merchandising empire, and this shift is clearly a creative disaster: It kills all the kinds of freedom and innovation the “illegal” or unauthorized copies and variations showcase on almost every page.

These objectives and outcomes are light-years away from what is generally discussed in the context of digital comics. It is the tremendous merit of Ilan Manouach to help focus on the real stakes of the digital turn in comics (and art in general), which are not technological but cultural, that is, artistic, social, economic and political [3].

NOTES
1 For some details on these “nonartistic” operations of the work of art, see my review of Franck Leibovici: https://www.leonardo.info/review/2020/12/des-opera tions-decriture-qui-ne-disent-pas-leur-nom.
Leonardo Reviews


Reviewed by Stephen Partridge.
https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_r_02086

David Curtis’s account of the Arts Labs at Drury Lane (1967–1969) and Robert Street (1969–1971) is a timely contribution to understanding the art and culture—and especially the so-called underground—of the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. It is a somewhat troubled history; the often antistablishment stance drew the ire of the press and establishment figures and impacted upon any long-term sustainability of both art labs. In his book on Channel Four, One in Four, Michael Kustow commented: “Sometimes it helps if there is a rival scapegoat for this apparently unassuageable need to attack the new. For the ICA, the Drury Lane Arts Lab drew the fire” [1].

The term “seminal” is much overused (and too obviously gendered for contemporary tastes), but it cannot be avoided when reading this book about the 1960s activities of a London-based movement or, more accurately, series of initiatives in the avant-garde and counterculture. It is very much a personal history, as Curtis is at pains to inform the reader, but is likely, nevertheless, to become a touchstone for future scholarship in this area, having been rather neglected by other authors and research over the years.

At the 1963 Labour party conference, Prime Minister Harold Wilson had set out Labour’s plan for science, promising a Britain “forged in the white heat of this revolution” with “no place for restrictive practices or outdated methods.” Science and technology were seen by many as the engine of progress, a driving force for industrial innovation and economic prosperity. The terms cyberart and cybernetics were forged in response to this background and culminated in the influential exhibition Cybernetic Serendipity, curated by Jasia Reichardt at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1968, which then toured across the United States. Many Art Lab members were involved, and many were influenced by the show, which helped to develop their new aspirations for art, science and technology.

Curtis (re)contacted and cites many of the now-legendary personalities at the heart of the movement. Jim Haynes, the founder of the Drury Lane Arts Lab, famously said, “My artistic policy was to try to never say no.” This eventually led to its closure when all staff, including Curtis, walked out in protest at Haynes’s lack of consultation over programming. Before his recent death (January 2021), Haynes gave his blessing to the book.

Despite the arguments, sometime chaos, lack of finance and venue issues, the list of events, screenings, filmmakers and artists involved, participating or otherwise, is truly impressive, and includes anonymous interventions from John and Yoko, J.G. Ballard’s “Crashed Cars” exhibition, Carolee Schneemann, Andy Warhol, Jeff Keen, Ian Breakwell, John Hilliard and Mike Leggett, Valie Export, John Latham, Takis, Peter Weibel, Jeff Nuttall, David Medalla, Graham Stevens, David Bowie, Steven Berkoff, The Exploding Galaxy, Ken Turner, Mark Boyle, Mike Figgis, Carla Liss and Kurt Kren. Curtis’s partner, the artist and printmaker Biddy Peppin, is central to the artistic programming and organization of the Arts Labs and, one suspects, the background research for the book.

Another key figure who crops up again and again is the photographer, journalist, researcher, political activist and underground figure John “Hoppy” Hopkins. In an interview coinciding with his retrospective exhibition at Street Level Photoworks Glasgow in 2009, he rather modestly disavows his importance: “It was more like a cultural wave which many people were surfing” [2]. However, Hoppy was instrumental in establishing the concurrent publication International Times, the International Free School, the UFO Club, the links with the Beatles and with the Rolling Stones (and their consequent patronage), the intellectual underpinnings (including early media research via the Institute for Research in Art & Technology) and, crucially, cultural and social experiments in video technology aimed at emancipating the television medium.

The arts labs became the model for other labs springing up across Britain and Europe and led to the National Arts Lab Conference in January 1969—a gathering of about 150 Art Lab groups including David Bowie’s Beckenham Arts Lab and Alan Moore’s (Watchmen) Northampton Arts Lab. The next generation would develop these and new initiatives into artist-run exhibition spaces and studios, many of which still exist today.

Curtis is naturally most detailed over the film screening programs, which he organized at both Drury Lane and the breakaway Robert Street Arts Lab, but also offers a comprehensive, mostly chronological account of the variety of activities between gallery, performance space, film space and café space. Robert
Street also mixed in production with the establishment of the London Filmmakers Coop.

Lavish illustrations feature photos, posters and drawings, although are sometimes reproduced a little too small to discern details. Some 50 years on, the historical relevance of these groundbreaking initiatives and developments continues to resonate in both contemporary art and our digitally driven world.

NOTES

NOTHING BUT THE MUSIC: DOCUMENTARIES FROM NIGHTCLUBS, DANCE HALLS & A TAILOR’S SHOP IN DAKAR
Reviewed by John F. Barber. Email: jfbarber@eaze.net.
https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_r_02087

Those who followed music in the 1960s—whether soul, rock or rhythm and blues from Detroit, Memphis, Muscle Shoals or San Francisco, or the avant-garde jazz, soul and punk evolving along the East Coast in the 1970s and 1980s—will remember the music as documented through reviews and essays, both critical and laudatory, backstories and expository explorations in publications seeking to report on something about which many readers could only speculate, the pulse of evolving cultural movements and their accompanying music soundtracks.

Nothing But the Music: Documentaries from Nightclubs, Dance Halls & a Tailor’s Shop in Dakar by Thulani Davis fills this gap. In her latest poetry collection Davis provides synesthetic, documentary insight, a sonic-social history full of anecdotal and impressionistic responses to embodied experience of the music and its creators and followers in the places and times of its creation and sharing.

Davis goes aggressively for the jugular of the experience, following the soaring cycles and spirited flashes of inspired but ephemeral circuits of creativity as performed by the musicians, dancers, poets and choreographers she chronicles in these poems. She is drawn to document the raw feelings, the smoke in the air and empty bottles on the floor, the impulsive energy, the dance to celebrate humanity.

Featured musicians and dancers include Cecil Taylor, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Bad Brains, Henry Threadgill, Thelonious Monk, The Revolutionary Ensemble, The Commodores, MFSB, Dianne McIntyre, Ishmael Houston-Jones and others as experienced at historic venues like the Five Spot, the Village Vanguard, the Apollo, Storyville and Club Harlem.

Under this performance documentation is a foundation of in-the-moment struggle in a number of crucibles: civil rights, Black Power, the New Left, feminism and bohemian ferment on both coasts, San Francisco and New York, all of which leave their marks on the music—are the music—in both celebration and escape. Many of the poems in this collection include dates and location. As noted by Tobi Haslett in his introduction, “This little annotation slits the poem open; the world comes trickling in” (p. 13). Indeed. And animates and informs each poem with the history, questions, answers, eclipsed dreams and hopes on the horizon carried and/or pursued by each person included in the poetic context. So, another lens through which to read (experience) these poems is their insight into life backstage, between and beyond the performance time/event, aligned with what is happening beyond the concert halls, the jazz clubs, the living rooms and other sacred spaces where people seek to meld life with music, to make sense of struggle and love, to bend the arc of long experience between past and future to the present moment.

Thulani Davis is well (best) positioned to document and preserve this arc. She is an interdisciplinary artist working in poetry, theater, journalism, history and film, using all these approaches to engage with African-American life, culture and history and her concern for justice. While a student at Barnard College, Davis began her performance career putting her words to music by Cecil Taylor, Joseph Jarman, Juju, Arthur Blythe, Miya Masaoka, David Murray, Henry Threadgill, Tania León and others. Her bibliography includes libretti for the operas X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X and Amistad; scripts for the films Paid in Full, Maker of Saints and award-winning PBS documentaries; the novels 1959 and Maker of Saints; and other works of poetry. Her writing for the 1993 Queen of Soul: The Atlantic Recordings by Aretha Franklin was awarded a Grammy for liner notes, making her the first woman to receive this honor. She is an ordained Buddhist priest and an associate professor in the Department of Afro-American Studies and a Nellie Y. McKay Fellow at the University of Wisconsin.

This latest work, Nothing But the Music, while composed of poems that have enjoyed numerous prior...
anthologizations, is not simply a reprise of prior work but an important performance/statement that has the feeling of having waited for its time, like the jazz musician waiting for the right moment to launch a solo. Here, assembled for the first time, this collection is everything, including the music, and Davis holds the room and the moment with her journalistic experience and ability to incite serious political thought at a time when it is desperately needed. While Davis is a crucial figure in the cultural landscape surrounding the Black Arts Movement, her poems leak into the complex ecosystem of Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Say Their Names, COVID-19, police murders, the tyranny and deceit of Donald Trump, nationalism, populism, activism, protests each night through the spring and summer and, always in the background, a solo musical performance spiraling through interpretations of the present moment where hope refuses to retreat, maintaining itself with gratitude, generous laughter, iterating future possibilities, unrehearsed but familiar from lived experience, eager to learn and experience what the soloist brings to the band.

Printed in a limited edition of 2,000 copies, Nothing But the Music is an important reference, one that you will want to carry with you and consult often, reread the soaring passages, contemplate the labyrinth of life and listen to the music, for there is much there [1].

Note

1 This review is featured in Episode 2 of Leonardo’s podcast Between Art and Science: www.leonardo.info/podcast.