

5. For a discussion of the relationship between the magical suggestion of presence and resemblance in portraiture, see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1989), pp. 201–205. Tony Halliday has written about the continuation of trends related to posthumous portraiture in post-Revolutionary France. See his ‘David’s *Marat* as Posthumous Portrait’, in William Vaughan and Helen Weston (eds), *Jacques-Louis David’s Marat* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999), pp. 56–76.

6. The English translation comes from John A. Dussinger, *William Hogarth’s Translation of Watelet’s On Grace* (Signature Press: Chicago, IL, 1983), n.p. The original French reads ‘la naïveté, la curiosité ingénue, le désir de plaire, la joie spontanée, le regret, les plaintes et les larmes mêmes qu’occasionne la perte d’un objet chéri’ (see Claude-Henri Watelet, *L’Art de Peindre* [Paris, 1760], n.p.).

7. ‘parée comme une riche bourgeoise’ (see Scherf’s entry in *Portraits publics, portraits privés, 1770–1830* (Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux: Paris, 2006, p. 332).

8. See Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1993); Harry Berger Jr, ‘Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze in Early Modern Portraiture’, *Representations*, 46, Spring 1994, pp. 87–120; Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1997). Garb does make reference to Woodall’s most recent project on portraiture, the exhibition catalogue for the exhibition *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 2005. See Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall (eds), *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary* (National Portrait Gallery: London, 2005).

9. As discussed in Anne Higonnet, *Berthe Morisot’s Images of Women* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 169.

10. See Elise Goodman-Soellner, ‘Boucher’s *Madame de Pompadour* at her Toilette’, *Simiolus*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1987, pp. 41–58, and Jacqueline Lichtenstein, ‘Making Up Representation: The Risks of Femininity’, *Representations*, 20, Autumn 1987, pp. 77–87.

11. Melissa Hyde, ‘The “Makeup” of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at her Toilette’, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 82, no. 3 (September 2000), p. 455.

12. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, ‘Pompadour’s Touch: Difference in Representation’, *Representations*, 73, winter 2001, p. 55. This argument refines Lajer-Burcharth’s chapter on David’s portrait of Mme Récamier in *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1999).

13. Lajer-Burcharth, ‘Pompadour’s Touch’, p. 74.

14. For such readings of Ingres in relation to his female patrons, see Carol Ockman, *Ingres’s Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1995), pp. 67–83, and Sarah Betzer, ‘Ingres’s Second *Madame Moitessier*: “Le Brevet du Peintre d’histoire”’, *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 5, December 2000, pp. 681–705.

15. On this issue see Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2002), p. 184. Armstrong quotes Denis Rouart

(ed.), *Correspondence de Berthe Morisot avec sa famille et ses amis Manet, Puvis de Chavannes, Degas, Monet, Renoir et Mallarmé* (Quatre Chemins-Editart: Paris, 1950), pp. 33–34: ‘il recommence son portrait pour le vingt-cinquième fois; elle pose tous les jours et le soir, sa tête est lavée au savon noir. Voilà qui est encourageant pour demander aux gens de poser’.

16. Higonnet, *Berthe Morisot’s Images of Women*, p. 130.

17. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*, 2 vols, Éditions de la différence: (Paris, 1981), vol. 1, p. 99. For the English translation see Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Continuum: London, 2003).

18. Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women’s Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1994), p. 1.

19. Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: figure and flesh in fin-de-siècle France* (Thames and Hudson: New York, 1998), p. 14.

20. See, for instance, Angela Rosenthal, ‘Visceral Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century British Portraiture’, *Art History*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2004, pp. 563–92.

21. See ‘The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance’, in *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn (Crossroad: New York, 1989), pp. 106–69.

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A Negative Dialectics of the Arts

Alex Vasudevan

Frederic J. Schwartz: Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-century Germany (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2005), 93 b&w illns, 300 pp., hardback ISBN 978-0-300-10829-3, £30.

Andrew Benjamin (ed.): Walter Benjamin and Art (Continuum: London, 2005), 272 pp., paperback ISBN 082646730X, £ 22.99.

It is perhaps a tribute to its intrinsic *lateness* that it is only really now that Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* has been fully recognised as one of the defining accounts of the meaning of high modernism. First published in the 1960s, *Aesthetic Theory* has always been seen as a notoriously opaque text, and as a text deeply inimical to our increasingly impoverished revisioning of the relationship between the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘political’. No one needs to be reminded of the difficulties in reading *Aesthetic Theory* and Adorno more generally. It is easy, as Edward Said once pointed out, to become impatient with Adorno’s dense and involuted writing style, with its baroque textures and stylistic quiddities, though as Said

rightly insists, 'they are always based on a remarkably fresh and direct sensuous insight and will usually yield us considerable interpretive capital if one is patient with them'.¹ *Aesthetic Theory* indeed represents one of the most perspicuous attempts to bring art and philosophy into critical interchange, providing in Jay Bernstein's words 'a model of what philosophical criticism of the arts does'.²

According to Adorno, modernism represented the primary means through which the disenchantment of the modern world was encountered and interrogated. 'Modernism is modern art's self-consciousness of itself as an autonomous practice', writes Bernstein paraphrasing Adorno. 'Art's autonomy, however, is not', he continues, 'the achievement of art's securing for itself a space free from the interference of social or political utility, but a consequence and so an expression of the fragmentation and reification of modern life'.³ The nature of modern art's authority, so Adorno believed, resided in a critique of modernity that itself derived from art's very expulsion from the dominant practices governing the rationalisation of everyday life. For Adorno, what manages to live on in an 'afterlife' in the modern arts is our sensory experience of the world, and our apprehension of the world as composed of objects and things whose integral character is itself only recognizable through sensory encounter. The story of modernism is, in other words, a story of reclaiming what has been summarily excised from the everyday, namely 'the orientational significance of sensory encounter, sensory experience as constitutive of conviction and connection to the world of things'.⁴ The modern arts, in this context, may be understood, if we follow Adorno, as a repository of the kind of sensuous particularity deemed expendable by the pressures of rationalisation.

While the eclipse of modernism has been eulogised in a number of recent works, there is still much to be said about Adorno's argument on its own terms.⁵ If Kant famously argued for the sublation of sense and sensibility to the pure spontaneity of the mind, Adorno countered by relocating the vestiges of significant sensory experience in the arts themselves. The philosophical entailments of Adorno's argument are admittedly complex and beyond the compass of this brief review. Suffice to say that Adorno's argument operates across a whole series of registers: critical, philosophical, and for our own purposes, historical. Indeed, it is the historical co-ordinates of Adorno's own account of high modernism that I wish to turn my attention to. The shifting intersections of modern art and critical theory have, of course, emerged from a whole host of different locales. And yet, the depth of these shared histories – as deeply sedimented practices, accomplishments, claims and events – does owe a great deal to the complex trafficking of ideas between German critical theorists, in particular Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer, and art historiography during the early decades of the twentieth century.

As Fred Schwartz rightly suggests in an elegant new conspectus, our understanding of this historical relation is itself hardly new. And yet, as Schwartz points out, 'the fact remains that Benjamin is the only important figure of Western Marxism in Germany whose relation to a specific art-historiographical context has been explored in any detail' (p. x). This is a bold and contentious claim, though the recent 'Benjamin renaissance' has undoubtedly overplayed the significance of Benjamin's relevance to more recent art-historical discourses. Over recent decades, there are few texts that have been more often cited than Walter Benjamin's essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', in areas as wide-ranging as media theory, cultural studies and the digital arts. More recently, Continuum Publishers have launched a *Walter Benjamin Study Series* with the explicit aim of highlighting themes central to contemporary work on Benjamin. The edited collection on *Walter Benjamin and Art* (2005) not surprisingly returns to the Artwork essay offering a series of essays tasked with interrogating Benjamin's text as 'a way of opening up questions within the practice of art' (pp. 1–2). The sightlines pursued by this new collection are relatively familiar to Benjamin scholars. Many of the key themes explored in *Walter Benjamin and Art* are already well-worn from the re-organisation of the human sensorium under the aegis of capitalist-industrial production to the contemporaneous withering of 'aura', that unique mode of being that Benjamin attributed to the traditional work of art.

If the essays in *Walter Benjamin and Art* speak to a broad contextualising imperative, setting Benjamin's Artwork essay within wider political, philosophical and critical currents, they largely eschew an approach to the very art-historical context out of which Benjamin's text initially emerged. In Schwartz's view, this omission needs to be revised alongside a wider reappraisal of critical theory's often understated relationship to the history of art. 'Understanding these thinkers', he writes (and Schwartz's avatars are Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch and Kracauer), 'and engaging critically with their concepts from an art-historical perspective requires us to excavate the precise circumstances of their craft'. This is crucial, he goes on to suggest, for a 'theoretically informed and critical history of art, for as helpful as the work of Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno has been to historians and critics of the art of recent centuries, their perspectives have often been invoked uncritically and prematurely, as if theory were an unmediated form of truth and need' (p. xi).

Schwartz's own solution to this particular problem is to offer a thick description of the various affiliations and affinities between critical theory and art history in early twentieth-century Germany. Schwartz's *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-century Germany* shifts attention away from a dogmatic reading of canonical texts, placing them instead within a wider matrix of debates about the visual including traditional art history, the avant-garde, experimental

psychology, popular physiognomics and other related fields. Schwartz's book does not attempt, in this respect, to exhaustively map this vast field nor does he simply offer a host of previously neglected historical particulars. Rather, Schwartz's argument proceeds in dialectical fashion, playing the conceptual traditions of critical theory and art historiography against each other. For Schwartz, the concepts chosen in his book – centring around 'style' and 'fashion', 'distraction' and the 'expert', 'nonsimultaneity', and 'physiognomy' and 'mimesis' – need, if nothing else, to be reinvested with the 'contingency of their own formation' (p. xi). To proceed by determined negation is, therefore, in Schwartz's view, to adopt the critical power of *negative dialectics* critiquing particular facts and concepts on the very basis of their own terms and practices. Only this way, he argues, can the remainders – the book's eponymous 'blind spots' – that haunt the important nexuses between critical theory and the history of art come into critical focus.

Schwartz's book centres on two main arguments. First, the author argues that German critical theorists developed aesthetic concepts through a much closer engagement with various contemporaneous discourses of the 'visual' than had been previously assumed. While recent work including Janet Ward's *Weimar Surfaces* and Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands* have already begun to rectify this omission, Schwartz delves far deeper into the visual cultures of early twentieth-century Germany.⁶ Second, the author makes a case for the particular manner in which critical theorists 'met the challenge of thinking about modernity through the evidence of the visual'. For Schwartz, it is the conceptual 'blind spots' produced by critical theory that ultimately prompted the 'darkness of an unknowable present to expand into a space of extraordinary speculative richness' (pp. xi–xii).

What amounted to a speculative critique of modernity is tracked by Schwartz across four different case studies. Where the contributors to the collection on *Walter Benjamin and Art* focused on a single text, Schwartz draws attention to a cluster of contingent concepts around which the complex movement of ideas between critical theory and art history developed. 'Only when these ideas are set in motion again', he notes, 'when they are shown as the unstable elements of constellations that have long since ceased to shine, can the work of weighing them critically begin' (p. xi). From debates surrounding the social configurations of mass culture to the labour of the artist under modernity, from disagreements over the problem of historicism to issues of bodiliness and corporeality, the book's four main chapters work to recapture the 'philosophical resourcefulness that images in and of modernity can inspire' (p. xii). Indeed, Schwartz's quarry is not empirical exactitude in any strict sense but rather the actuality and critical urgency of earlier less than familiar constellations.

Chapter One, 'Fashion', retraces the way in which the concept of style did double duty in Germany, serving not only as a category by which the past was made sensible,

but also as one through which the 'problem' of mass culture was represented and analysed. As Schwartz demonstrates, the work of the art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin looms large in these debates. Wölfflin, writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, attempted to reposition the art-historical concept of style as a way of negotiating the increasing interarticulation of commerce and culture that characterised Germany's incipient modernity. If the rise of a mass culture was seen by many to actively reconfigure the realm of signification, whether it be politics, commerce or art, Schwartz argues that the very categories of art history played a central role in thinking about mass culture, from the jeremiads of *Kulturkritik* to the Frankfurt School itself. For Schwartz, the problem of mass culture was already *immanent* to the tools of academic art history (p. 1). This was, as he argues, played out in the dialectical tension – the blind spot – between 'style' as a marker of visual uniformity and spiritual unity, and 'fashion' as a blanket term for 'the nature of visual form' under the conditions of a new consumer culture (p. 10). Schwartz shows how the contradictions and inconsistencies in Wölfflin's use of 'style' were inescapably marked by the new mass market for consumer goods, while Adorno and Horkheimer's inversion of *Kulturkritik* could never fully escape a monolithic and uninflected use of the notion of 'fashion'. Whatever the case, it was only in Adorno's later work (*Aesthetic Theory* in particular), as Schwartz suggests, that he was really able to turn the tables on cultural conservatism 'using the concept of fashion to mount a new sort of critique of the work of art that claims to speak the language of transcendent culture' (p. 33).

There are echoes here of Benjamin's argument in the Artwork essay, especially regarding the capacity of new mass media technologies to produce a critical form of collective apperception and a rather different form of expertise. Benjamin's attempt to rethink and recast the relationship between aesthetics and politics has always been a source of critical scrutiny and it runs through a number of the interventions in *Benjamin and Art* while forming in turn the backdrop to the second chapter of Schwartz's book. Entitled 'Distraction', Schwartz returns paradoxically to the work of Walter Benjamin, highlighting the new mode of reception set out by Benjamin in the Artwork essay. Where the decline of 'aura' described in that essay has become a regular point of reference and debate, Schwartz focuses on a constellation that 'describes a revolutionary viewer's mode of apperception as *distracted*, his [sic] approach as *critical*, his task as that of *testing*, and his position as corresponding to that of an *expert*'. The concepts of critical vision and a distracted expert, as Schwartz suggests, operate as 'dialectical obverses' to the more familiar categories of aura's decline and decay. For this reason, perhaps, they have generally remained unexamined within the wider lexicon of Benjamin's corpus (p. 38).

Schwartz's aim is to recover their own specific histories and, in doing so, the relation of Benjamin to not only the avant-garde in the visual arts but to other adjacent modes of visual knowledge. As Schwartz shows, the form of distracted vision articulated by Benjamin in the Artwork essay and other earlier works was a source of fascination for various different groups – typographers, architects and photographers – though they themselves increasingly self-identified as 'practioner-experts' rather than traditional artists (p. 42). The new emphasis on 'expertise' brought Benjamin and the visual avant-garde into conversation with other nascent forms of technical knowledge including the psychological sciences and especially the psychotechnicians, whose new system of vocational aptitude testing focused on the creation and regulation of particular sensory environments. Where Benjamin, and to a lesser extent Kracauer, extolled the possibilities of a new form of distracted vision as an *expert* mode of apperception, we tend, as Schwartz argues, to find in the psychotechnical literature an overwhelming desire to administer the entire spectrum of human responses and produce a world of regulated sensory conditions. In Schwartz's words, '[Benjamin] knew the work of constructivist typographers, and he knew of the work of psychotechnicians ... Benjamin must have blinked with one eye, for the precise point at which these two groups intersected ... remained invisible to him' (pp. 94–5). This 'precise point' was Benjamin's own blind spot, by which Schwartz's means the way in which Benjamin was himself blind to the instrumentalisation of the body that was crucial to psychotechnical efforts at securing academic warrant and commercial success. While the ability of psychotechnics to offer 'expertise' depended to a great extent on the calibration of physical and political economy, Benjamin was ultimately far more interested in revising the very terms of that relationship. 'If', as Schwartz writes, 'the fulcrum of Benjamin's argument is the possibility of a new dialectical reciprocity between leisure and labour, he does not adequately account for the fact that the productive use of the human sensory apparatus is simply another form of hard work' (p. 81).

Schwartz is certainly right, in this context, to read the Artwork essay against the grain and expose some of the gaps and elisions that characterise Benjamin's attempt to promote a new critical mode of visual reception. Questions of class and professional status may have also been subject to misidentification and misrecognition by Benjamin, but Schwartz claims perhaps too much in impugning 'Benjamin's strange naivety about the role of the eye in production and leisure' (p. 95). Benjamin was well aware of the dialectical slippages between the 'eye' and the 'expert', as a number of arresting articles by Miriam Hansen have intimated.⁷ If anything, it is the *nonsynchronicity* of the Artwork essay, its belated appearance as a feral fascism rapidly spread across Europe, that has sparked the greatest deliberation among Benjamin scholars.

Of course, as Schwartz rightly acknowledges in the following chapter, the idea of nonsimultaneity actually emerged out of a debate among art historians and theorists of culture in Germany about 'periodicity and the nature of historical time' (p. 105). Highlighting the work of Ernst Bloch, Schwartz focuses on the role that architectural form played as a crucial artefactual placeholder in debates about the relationship between modernism and fascism. If Bloch offered the concept of nonsimultaneity a pedigree that was resolutely Marxist, Bloch's theory and the terms by which it was elaborated owed a great deal to the work of Wilhelm Pinder, one of the more influential art historians in Germany from the 1910s through the Second World War and an early supporter of National Socialism. In either case, what was at stake was far more than a statement about the relationship between form and historical time. For Pinder, the question rested on an ability to reconcile the practical problems of art-historical dating and stylistical analysis with a multi-layered and three-dimensional theory of historical space. If Pinder was ultimately influenced by the worst excesses of biological determinism, Bloch turned to a historical materialism shorn of its teleological tendencies. While this meant that Bloch, like Benjamin, was forced to formulate a *belated* political response to fascism, it also explained, so Schwartz believes, why Bloch's theory of nonsimultaneity had to operate effectively in the blind spot of an increasingly dark present.

The ramifications of writing belatedly are not lost on recent commentators of Benjamin's Artwork essay and the contributions to *Benjamin and Art* build on recent debates surrounding the persistent actuality of Benjamin's corpus. For Schwartz, these concerns can be explored in part by recognising 'the specificity and the complexity of the human sciences in the 1920s' (p. 145). In Schwartz's view, it is the very outmodedness of this field of thought that lends it greater currency now. In the final main chapter of *Blind Spots*, he thus turns his attention to the 'crisis of historicism' in German art historiography and contemporaneous attempts to think the modern visually. Doing so, as Schwartz argues, involves not only a rethinking of how to understand historically removed artworks as artefactual remains, but a 'new metaphysics of immanence' that could be 'deployed historically' and that would be based in 'the density of human body' (p. 165, p. 176). Centring on the concept of 'mimesis', Schwartz offers an arresting account of multiple attempts to 'push beyond the dead-end of passive historicism' (p. 194). From Sedlmayr's use of Gestalt theory and popular physiognomics to theories of bodily expressivity (*Ausdruck*) advocated by figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Bela Balázs, Karl Bühler, Ludwig Klages, Helmut Plessner and Heinz Werner, Schwartz is able to retrace how concepts of expression, mimicry and physiognomy had come to dominate new ideas about 'how the visual could mean directly' (p. 190). The richness of this chapter (it is over a hundred pages) cannot be fully accounted for here. Suffice to say that Schwartz is able to not only recover some of

the less palatable elements of this counter-history, especially the increasingly reactionary modernism of physiognomic thinking in Weimar Germany, but is also able to retrace an alternative line of flight relating mimicry, bodily expression and the very terms of modern visuality. Benjamin's Artwork essay figures prominently again here, as Schwartz acknowledges, offering perhaps an end point in a long line of thinking about bodily knowledge and gestural expressivity within Benjamin's work. We are also once again, so Schwartz points out, in Adorno's own sightlines. For Adorno, notions of mimesis were central to his 'aesthetic theory' where the remaindered particularities of art heralded its status as a 'refuge for mimetic comportment'.⁸ 'The negative dialectic', as Schwartz points out, 'or its complement in the notion of art as a mode of behaviour has roots here' (p. 241). Indeed, if Adorno's understanding of mimesis can be justifiably counterposed to a broader history of physiognomic thought, it is by virtue of its ability to inhabit and recast the very blind spot of perception charted by Schwartz. If Schwartz's own conclusions are somewhat cryptic in this respect, for Adorno it was simply a matter of taking seriously art's injunction to produce and embody that which is blind while operating in that very moment when, to quote Schwartz 'something is grasped but not yet named or fought over, when it is seen in its fullness but not yet isolated within a fixed set of conceptual tools' (p. 253). While this may point to the ways in which Schwartz's own book appears and figures in the considerable wake of critical theory, it also ultimately serves to reinforce Said's prophetic words about Adorno's continued relevance, 'lateness ... is coming after, and surviving beyond what is generally acceptable'.⁹

Notes

1. Edward Said, 'On Late Style', in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Blackwell: Oxford, 2001), pp. 193–208 (198).

2. J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 2006), p. 265.

3. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 3.

4. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 3.

5. See, for example, Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1997); T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in the History of Modernism* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1999).

6. Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Cultures in 1920s Germany* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2001); Esther Leslie, *Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (Verso: London, 2002).

7. See Miriam Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema', *October*, vol. 109, 2004, pp. 3–45; earlier formulations of Hansen's argument can be found in Hansen, 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"', *New German Critique*, vol. 40, 1987, pp. 179–224; and Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema', *Critical Inquiry* 25, 1999, pp. 306–43.

8. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Continuum: London, 1997), p. 53.

9. Edward Said, 'On Late Style', p. 202.

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Emancipation

Steven Harris

Tom McDonough: 'The Beautiful Language of My Century': Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968 (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2007), 49 b&w illns, 273 pp., hardback ISBN 978-0-262-13477-4, £21.95.

Rebecca J. DeRoo: The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968 (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006), 80 b&w illns, 271 pp., hardback ISBN 978-0-521-84109-2, £45.

Contrary to what one may think, there have not been a great many critical studies of artistic developments in France since the Second World War, even in French. These two books – which are studies of particular issues in the postwar period rather than comprehensive surveys – are, each in their own way, very welcome additions to that corpus. The two studies situate themselves on either side of 1968: Tom McDonough's book focuses chiefly on strategies developed by the Situationist International (SI) and the Nouveaux Réalistes in the 1950s and 1960s in response to commodity culture (with a final chapter that brings the terms of his discussion up to the present); DeRoo looks at the 1968 events themselves and how they affected both developments in the museum world (culminating in the opening of the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1977) and the artistic strategies of Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager – the two artists with whose early careers she is chiefly concerned here. Although DeRoo focuses on the period of the late 1960s and the 1970s in her analyses, she too has a final chapter bringing her discussion of the issues raised in her study to bear on the politics of museums today.

The two books are quite different from each other, although they share a number of concerns: both books, for instance, set out to challenge certain received views

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