ART'S WORK

Ben Highmore

Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 331pp, $65

If you were setting out to chart the role of art as a global force today you would probably want to get acquainted with the large auction houses that currently mobilise art as a global currency. In a world where national currencies can seem unpredictable, the canny 'global' investor can be persuaded that Rubens is a much safer bet than roubles. Contemporary art is, of course, a more volatile and uncertain market, but the financial gains can be stratospheric, and, as Hito Steyerl has noted, they are often 'duty-free'. Indeed, much of this duty-free art (contemporary or not) is stored in freeports, where the art has the status of being perpetually in-transit (and thereby not yet subject to taxation): 'huge art storage spaces are being created worldwide in what could essentially be called a luxury no man's land, tax havens where artworks are shuffled around from one storage room to another once they get traded'.[1] But if auction houses and freeport zones are sometimes the 'last instance' of global art (death by capital accumulation), they are clearly not its only instance. Anyone wanting a fuller picture of the global workings of art would also need to look at the biennials, triennials and other international art exhibitions that today not only showcase 'global' art and artists, but also the promotional and critical talents of curators such as Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor and Hans Ulrich Obrist, who are often the main auteurs of what could be called globalist art.

1. Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, London, Verso, 2017, p81.

Caroline Jones's *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* is centrally concerned with the process of how art becomes 'global art'. What, for instance, makes an artist a 'global' artist, rather than, say, just an artist working in London or Lagos whose art is shown in New York or São Paulo, or whose work is stored in the freeport of an airport? The path that Jones takes follows a range of histories across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to show how current art practices, particularly the ones that circulate within biennial-type culture, have emerged via cultural forms that can be traced back to early World's Fairs and Universal Exhibitions. Globalist art, and what she terms 'critical globalism', is a form of art that bears a similar relationship to globalisation (in its corporate capitalist mode as well as its internationalist vein) as modernism did to modernity and modernisation: globalist art is a responsive and reactive form even though it is clearly dependent on the circuits of communication and exchange that are forged by globalisation. Globalism, then, isn't the vanity mirror of globalisation, though it will necessarily refract its forces. Globalist art isn't a style, but it does have

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phenomenal characteristics: it is an art that foregrounds experience and event, rather than visuality and medium specificity. But this emphasis on event and experience is as much determined by the circumstances of its reception as it is by its production. Take, for instance, a large stripe painting by Robert Motherwell that was shown at Expo '67 in Montreal. Situate it within the vast geodesic bubble of Buckminster Fuller's USA pavilion and it is necessarily caught rubbing shoulders, not just with the likes of Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, but with an Apollo lunar mission vehicle situated on a simulated piece of the moon, and a multi-screened presentation of children's games. Such attention to the public event of modern and contemporary art pulls it away from narratives that might want to secure art's meaning based on authorial intention and autonomous art historical contexts, and forces it to confront a more heterogeneous assembly of machinery, science, international trade competition and deadly political conflicts.

The Global Work of Art can usefully be treated as part of a growing field within art history that focuses on exhibition history and the curatorial strategies that exhibitions mobilise. A relatively recent book on the curator Harald Szeemann (a figure who also features in Jones's book) can confidently declare that 'it is now widely accepted that the art history of the second half of the 20th century is no longer a history of artworks, but a history of exhibitions'.[2] That 'widely accepted' might, to some ears, sound like the promotional talk of any number of newly developed university courses that feature words like curating, exhibitions, museums and the cultural and creative industries in their titles. From a certain angle this isn't a new development: some of the best social history of art from the 1970s and 1980s was concerned with the performance of paintings and sculptures in their first public outings at official exhibitions as well as in alternative venues.[3] The renewed interest in exhibition history today is a development to be welcomed if only because it continues the ethos of the social history of art as a way of insisting on the constitutional sociality of art. Caroline Jones's book is both a considerable contribution to these developments and an important - if sometimes opaque - intervention in them. It complicates any neat demarcation of the art exhibition as an autonomous object, and refuses any linear history of the art exhibition as a developing form. Some of the most powerful analyses in the book offer a recursive history of both change and continuity in the sensational forms of World's Fairs and biennial culture (a term used loosely to describe regular international art exhibitions rather than just those that occur every two years).

World's Fairs, Expos, Universal Exhibitions and international trade fairs have traditionally performed a contradictory operation that was simultaneously aimed outwards to the world at large, and inwards to the specific nation state hosting the exhibition. They offered a view of the world as international, while also showing that world from a particular (national) vantage point. They championed culture from the four corners of the globe, while celebrating the vision of the particular country that had managed

2. Florence Derieux, in *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology*, Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2007, p8.

3. Thanks to Lucy Steeds for reminding me about this.

to perform such a spectacular orchestration of the world. This was vividly demonstrated in Victor Hugo's contribution to the guidebook for the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which forms the epigraph to a central chapter in Jones's book. Hugo addresses the national audience of the exhibition: 'You will cease to be France, you will be Humanity; you will cease to be a nation, you will be ubiquity. You are destined to dissolve into radiance, and nothing at this hour is so majestic as the visible obliteration of your frontier … as Athens became Greece, as Rome became Christendom, you, France, become the world!' (p35). If traditionally World's Fairs had a dual address (national and international), they also had an ambivalent tone: straining to remain jovial in the face of the serious business of international trade wars; seeking hegemony but constantly producing heterotopia.

For Caroline Jones, World's Fairs reach their cultural peak in the nineteenth century, and the waning of their power in the twentieth century coincides with a general decline in imperial power across the globe that would culminate in the uneven process of decolonisation. But as the World's Fairs lose some of their prestige and influence, the baton is taken up by biennial culture (the inaugural Venice Biennial was in 1895). For Jones two things are crucial here. The first is that biennial culture differs from the World's Fairs by being 'trade-specific'. This reveals a trajectory that art takes within these so-called mega events: 'Art's progression from one artefact among others in national displays, to segregation in a separate beaux arts palace, to a "trade-specific" art biennial' (p43). The second is that biennial culture doesn't signal the end of the international exhibition: instead what happens is that biennial culture is used to re-energise and repackage the World's Fair (increasingly known as Expo during the twentieth century). The flavour of these events changed as transnational corporations - particularly those based around technology - hosted pavilions that often appeared grander, more dynamic and more future-oriented than any national pavilion. Thus, the mid-twentieth century pavilions of IBM or Philips seemed to marshal aesthetic and material resources in a way that national pavilions could no longer manage. Jones offers us a way of recognising these changes - both biennial culture and the new forces at work in Expo culture - as a shift towards trade specificity.

But art's trajectory from World's Fair to biennials also reveals the way that art is tangled up in two key aspects of the phenomenal form of these large-scale exhibitions: their event-ness and their related address to sensorial experience. It may seem obvious to describe World's Fairs and biennales as 'events' (how else would we see them?), but this allows Jones to treat them as having a range of phenomenal effects. For instance, these exhibitions are temporary while also having a duration: Kassel's *Documenta*, the Olympic Games of the art world, has a duration of, precisely, one hundred days. A biennale is not an event in the way that a storm is an event: it is planned, concentrated, supported, anticipated. And it is the structuring of the event in this way that suggests that its phenomenal effects are in some ways portable: 'biennials

are the event structures in which this taste [for art as experience] has been cultivated, its aesthetics codified and defined' (p86). By offering a longue durée of globalist exhibiting, Jones can show how a propensity towards art as experience - as a taste for experience - is not a reaction to a purposefully ascetic art associated with modernism; rather, it historically extends across it, exceeding its periodisation: 'the aesthetics *of* experience, as I'm framing it, can be positioned as a long, fleshy, sometimes performative rejection of the dominant hygiene of modernism … a rejection in which the curators of biennials and the artists they showed played a large role' (p199). But the art of experience isn't the antidote to modernism (though it is the antidote to a form of modernist explanation); it was there all along, and included some of the most significant works of modernism.

The Global Work of Art is scattered with concrete examples of globalist art and it is impossible to privilege any one of them as able to take all the explanatory and descriptive weight of this large book. But it is worth quickly mentioning one example of the kind of artwork that Jones writes about. Cai Guo-Qiang's *Cultural Melting Bath* consists of various 'ready-made' elements: a US manufactured, large hot tub; rocks from Yangtze Delta plain in Wuxi, China; Chinese medical herbs; parakeets; and a suspended tree. Cai (born in China but currently living in New York) arranged this 'installation' (if this is indeed the best term for this work) using the techniques and ethos of feng shui. Visitors are invited to borrow a bathing costume and jump into the bubbling water of the hot-tub. If one reading of this work might be to see it as a fairly naïve desire to heal cultural divisions between 'west' and 'east', 'south' and 'north' in a great 'melting pot' (obviously intended by the title), then its actual performance speaks of a more nuanced and contradictory experience. In one photograph, for instance, we see three happy and laughing East Asian-looking bathers (one of whom is the artist), and one awkwardly perched Caucasian woman (who, we are told, is a curator from the Museum of Modern Art). The words 'multiculturalism' and 'inclusivity' (like 'melting pot') are similarly freighted with both naive optimism and a host of (veiled) inequalities and awkward affects. What Cai's work does is draw out these contradictions through something as suburban and banal as a hot tub, and place it in global arenas (New York's Queens Museum of Art [1997], Naoshima, Japan [1998], Lyon Biennial [2000]) where its effects and affects are constantly changing. The work itself is engaged in endless translations and negotiations as it travels the globe.

Today biennial culture stretches from Shenzhen to Liverpool, from Sydney to Istanbul. Art biennales, of course, aren't global in the same way as crocs (those ubiquitous foam resin clogs) and Starbucks (those ubiquitous purveyors of foam resin drinks) are. Their role as trade-specific fairs (feeding the avaricious appetites of freeports) exists alongside the art exhibition's current role as one of the few physical public forums where a sustained critique of today's social and political orchestrations can be mounted. To participate in

biennale culture as an audience requires the sort of commitment and resources (travel, accommodation, entry tickets and so on) that might be needed to attend a music festival. Like music festivals, the 'globalism' of biennials has to be understood as a phenomenal form that propels the experiential and eventness of the occasion into the foreground. Caroline Jones's challenging and complex book asks her readers to keep in mind the circuits of capitalism that dominate global flows, while sensitising us to the way that a heterogeneous set of art practices have emerged within these circuits that constitutes a profound 'rejection of the universalist terms of global capital, and the instrumentation and segregation of bodies within it' (p38).

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Photography remoulded

Andrew Dewdney

Joanna Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, Cambridge MA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2017, 257pp, £21.55

Nonhuman Photography is an invigorating and passionate call to reclaim photography's essence and to rethink its ontology, and is a much needed addition to critical thinking about photography. At a time when the practices of what we still continue to designate under the term photography are folding into new and emergent forms of computational hypermedia, Zylinska offers a way of refocusing on what is specifically photographic. In the context of the convergence of art, media and technology, the book is a riposte to the arguments of post-photography, and a contentious rejection of the value of continuing to think of the digital as the currently defining condition of images, as well as a critique of the limits of the humanist tradition of photographic history, theory and teaching.

The book is put together as a combination of theoretical arguments and practical examples of the author's own work and discussion of other artist's projects. The organisation of the book has something of the manifesto about it, demonstrating new possibilities in the thinking and making of media. By its own definition the book is intended primarily as an intervention into the field of photographic history, theory and education, although it has a wider ambition to speak within the context of media studies and contemporary art practice and an intellectual ambition to offer photography as philosophy.

The book adopts a Deleuzian outlook in Zylinska's determination to think/act differently as writer, artist and philosopher, one who demands that we assemble a different genealogy for photography based upon the coupling of new natures, machines and the posthuman turn, in her attempt to break out of historical time and consider deep time and the times of extinction. Nonhuman photography is proposed as a way of doing/thinking photography which decentres the local humancentric, and regards photography not as a representation of life, but, in a Bergsonian sense, as life itself. The title of the book is provocative and counter-intuitive, since it is very much about the human in non human photography.

Since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century, assigning a singular identity to photography and maintaining its distinctiveness has involved a fractious panoply of specialist organisations, social groups and a wide variety of individual practitioners. In the widest possible sense, photographically (re) produced images have been continuously expanding in the life of humans since its early imperialist reach and subsequent commodification by Kodak in the 1890s to the point of our current image-saturated visual culture. More

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narrowly, as a medium, photography has been used by artists, photojournalists, commercial and amateur photographers, collectors, dealers, curators, critics, historians, teachers and philosophers. In the twentieth century, this united front of the photographic has agreed upon the singularity of photography but little else, and collectively has never achieved a unified theory that would explain its meaning and value. In the twenty-first century we would be more likely to reject the very idea of a grand theory of photography, choosing instead to see its imbrication and many entanglements in world building practices, which is where Zylinska takes up the story, but, paradoxically, it would seem, precisely, in order to shore up the ontologically distinct category of photography.

To understand this problem we need to recognise the legacy of a critical tradition of materialist thinking which sought to understand photography not in its singularity but as multiple technical, legal and informational elements of a more general system of [capitalist] reproduction. In this way of thinking, photography does not have a single identity but rather is considered as so many parts of techno-social reproductive apparatuses, which can only be fully understood through the ways in which they are enlisted in reproduction and in their context of use. In this albeit uneven tradition, the technical apparatuses that produce and reproduce images are recognised to have agency apart the human, whereas Zylinska creates a new category of the nonhuman in photography, by uniting images which do not include the human subject, nor are intended for direct human viewing, and in machine vision are not intended for direct human inspection. However, the longer cultural materialist tradition also recognised the non-human of the mode of image production and the constructed nature of the human in photography. The limits of indexical objectivity were accounted for in terms of technical and ideological mediation. What has also been established for photography was abstraction, evidenced by the revolutionary nature of some practices of the Modernist avant-garde. It seems important therefore to recognise the distinction between Zylinska's nonhuman category and the non-human in the apparatuses of reproduction. But it is also true to say that the materialist tradition floundered on the grounds of positing reality upon the negative dialectic, and continues to struggle with the material/immaterial nature of the algorithmically produced image. This is where nonhuman photography aims to break new ground in a new materialism drawing upon philosophic ideas of the posthuman.

The critical materialist tradition is not new to Zylinska, who as a media scholar knows only too well that photography is employed as a socio-technical medium of optical registration and transmission, enlisted both in everyday life and in highly technical situations. Here the book rightfully stands against an institutionally dominant Humanist and 'human-centric' notion of photography, driving instead for an expanded definition of photography, which Zylinska claims can be done precisely by distinguishing photography's

nonhuman characteristics and agency. But there is a puzzle here in wanting to argue that it is only through the recognition of the nonhuman in photography that we will recognise a new human photography. As Zylinska says, the story she tells about the nonhuman and machinic of photography is the counterpart to the argument for insisting on the embodiment of vision. This is certainly a corrective to the typical orientation of photographic theory towards the transparency of the photographic image, its essential indexicality and social representation located in the preservation of memory traces. It is also a good answer to the reductive version of the digital image as the final break with indexicality and materiality.

The book is constructed around the central tenet that the authorial voice of historical and scientific objectivity derived from the European Enlightenment and patriarchy is no longer tenable in a world faced with possible extinction. In the place of a singular, masculine authority, Zylinska places herself as interlocutor - as artist, academic and philosopher - in setting out what is at stake, which on many counts is life itself. Zylinska points to the unravelling of the modernist certainty of scientific and technological progress, which has led to intellectual uncertainty, whilst global neoliberalism and global warming have led to a general condition of insecurity. In the face of such a situation, the book reassembles photography through the prism of the non-human of nonhuman photography, which is defined by identifying three categories of images: uncanny photographic images in which people do not appear, so images not of humans; images which have been formed by automated processes, for example traffic cameras, Google street view and microphotography, defined as images not by humans; and, thirdly, images not for humans, i.e., algorithmic modes of machine communication which rely on computational photographic technology. Taking up examples of nonhuman mediations and images, the book sets out an argument along the lines of the creative power of nonhuman photography. The most programmatic aspect of the book's politics unfolds from bringing together the posthuman critique of Enlightenment epistemology and the arguments and evidence of the Anthropocene as a new geological age in which nature and humanness are inseparable. The coupling of these arguments allows Zylinska to connect the photographic image with the force of the sun and fossilisation, and hence with geological deep time. This also leads to the posthuman perspective on extinction, past present and future, and from this to insist upon an ethics of vision and practice.

While readers will be able to locate the critique of representation and its basis in a now contested view of Enlightenment and Modernist thinking, it is a much harder job to detect a fully theorised account of the alternative/different non-representational practices which go beyond the subject-object dichotomy. The revised account of the machinic in photography as part of the ontology of geological fossilisation and the actions of geological time remains problematic in that it leads to a premature rejection of the analogue/

digital distinction as important in understanding machine vision, or the non human in photography. The argument that we have always been digital, or that photography was 'always already digital' (p176) is made by calling upon Batchen's view that, from the outset, analogue photography shared the binary, on/off quality of the digital in the absence and presence of light. Zylinska argues that by looking at the affect of nonhuman photography it becomes possible to move beyond the analogue/digital break, with its feelings of mourning and loss, and detect a deeper algorithmic logic at work in image-making, a logic subsequently embraced by code writers. Thus the book apparently saves photography from its dissolution by the digital of computational hypermedia. But the embrace of an expanded definition of photography, rather than a post-photographic moment, ignores the more fundamental difference that the digital image is a computational code in which values, not only of light, but of social power, are abstracted and transposed through algorithms. Computational code creates a visual graphology closer to animation than to analogue photography. Moreover, the non-human of the fluid and malleable image is entailed in new socio-technical apparatuses of reproduction, with effects as well as affects that demand critical attention in our understanding of the politics of media. But nonhuman photography is ultimately not concerned with a politics of the critical analysis of image economies, but with a politics of image practices in the context of art and academia.

Finally, this returns us to the organisation of the book and what the examples of Zylinska's own photographic projects demonstrate. The projects were carried out by the author over a number of years as a series of photographic enquiries, and focused upon what the apparatuses of photography are and do, which is very much reflected in the titles, including: *The Vanishing Object of Technology*, 2012; *Actual Perceptual Systems*, 2014; and *IEarth*, 2014. It should be said straightaway that because the economy of academic publishing allows only for poor quality black and white illustrations, Zylinska has created a companion website, in which the projects are illustrated in colour and higher resolution: www.nonhuman.photography. But what purpose do the projects serve in the interests of the book's arguments? A key to understanding their purpose is in answering Zylinska's question of how to continue to be a photographic artist without becoming 'paralysed by the anxieties brought about by the digital age' (p180).

Zylinska's photographic practice is firmly embedded in an academic discourse of what in the UK has been shaped as *research as practice* for the purposes of the assessment of the quality and funding of university research. Such a practice initially developed within the media and cultural studies discipline as a companion to and demonstration of academic analysis. Over the last decade or so, and especially with the final merger of the art school into the university, the practice of the artist teacher has also been formulated for assessment purposes as *practice as research*. Zylinska's practice is a hybrid

of the merger of both approaches, as media practices have become more sophisticated and extensive. What significance beyond the academy do such projects hold and in what contexts are they intended to be received? Methodologically Zylinska draws upon the work of Flusser, in framing her project within the liberatory role of the artist as creator, and arguing for her role as an envisioner, through which entry into nonhuman technicality of the photographic medium can produce the radical cut, the moment of revelation, the unexpected.

In redrawing the boundaries of a twenty-first-century photography around the distinction and coupling of the terms non/human/photography, the book makes an important and welcome contribution to furthering academic understanding of the crisis of representation and the automation of vision. But there is an unexplored gap between the strong theoretical arguments for photography's new ontology and the status of the practical projects which are somehow illustrative of theory and remain within forms and images of representational photography. It might seem unjust to demand that Zylinska's practical photographic investigations solve, or resolve, the larger problems the book so forcefully exposes. Nevertheless, the problem of what the progressive academic community does about the designation and reception of its own knowledge production in the commodified informational world needs answers.

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About to Happen

David Wylot

Howard Caygill, *Kafka: In Light of the Accident*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 264pp, £20.

By night, Franz Kafka wrote fictions that made his name synonymous with the absurdity of law and power, but by day he instituted protocols for accident prevention for the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague. In his reports, Kafka insisted on the distinction between an accidental event's contingency for its victim and modernity's normalisation of industrial risk - cause for this same event - advancing the peculiar logic by which 'accidents obey rules and are in some sense necessary' (p59). Howard Caygill's latest book, *Kafka: In Light of the Accident*, considers the impact Kafka's profession had on his fiction, and argues that he was an author whose writing can be understood as an attempt to grasp the accident's chance appearance together with its systemic causation. His fictions, Caygill suggests, are directly concerned with accident, contingency and the eruption of defiance in the face of law, and, through a series of close readings, the book asks - of many - two questions of philosophy and literature today. How can writing express the contingency of an accident for its victim in a modernity that reduces chance to a statistical constant? And how does philosophy theorise defiance that begins from the accident without simplifying historical struggle to a series of *dei ex machina*?

In Light of the Accident is Caygill's second book for Bloomsbury, after *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance*. Both books engage with the relationship between chance and defiance. In *On Resistance*, chance's hostility toward predictable historical sequence made it in part conditional for one's capacity to resist. *In Light of the Accident* draws this out further. The book magnifies the accident's hostility toward law, and finds in Kafka a unique philosophical articulation of the ramifications of modality for defiance. It therefore forms part of a growing body of work that has turned to the trope of the accident as a means of encountering the contradictory law of contingency, but, unlike other theorists of accidental events, such as Paul Virilio or Catherine Malabou, the accident's necessary occurrence in Caygill's thinking presents both the socially imbalanced distribution of contingency, and its figuration of that which precedes law's capture. The accident's inevitability provides the centre for the book, in which decisions over the accident's causes reverberate in domains as diverse as art, insurance policy, photography, philosophy and law.

The work begins by reflecting on the accident's uncanny temporality. This temporality stems from Caygill's consideration of the accident's modality, as an event that is both contingent and necessary. For Kafka,

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the accident was a predictable property in any complex system, built into and produced by everything from wood-planing machines to transport networks. This inevitability opens a fault line as to the accident's modality: either it is contingent, neither reducible to its causes nor a possibility given in advance, or a necessary outcome of a series of factors waiting to happen. This binary is unsustainable according to Caygill, because it fails to account for the systemically produced accidents of technological modernity, which are both inevitable and still up to chance. The accident, then, is contingent because we cannot reduce it to a discernible chain of preceding causes; but it is also systemically imminent, a thing waiting to happen that 'paradoxically possesses its own necessity' (p4). Caygill considers how many of Kafka's early fictions involve a protagonist's perplexed experience of an accidental event. These events defy meaning while also appearing to be full of it, to the point where 'no detail can afford to be overlooked' for a potentially hidden cause or responsibility (p74). Occupying the frontline of actuarial legislation, Kafka was uniquely aware of the difficulty of thinking this excess of meaning, and he foregrounded the accident's mixture of contingency and systemic determination in his reports, as an event that is 'yet to happen … as if it has already happened' (p60).

But it is in his report 'Accident Prevention in Quarries' for the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute, a response to a fatal quarry accident in 1911 caused by employer negligence, that Kafka shows contingency's apparent neutrality as succumbing through that systemic determination to an uneven and historical distribution. Here, Caygill points out how Kafka's insurance writing insists that these statistically dependable accidents often fall unequally on those most vulnerable. This is a concern that Caygill convincingly shows to occupy Kafka's writing of the devastating effects of accidents in his fiction. With the accidental death of Therese's mother in *America*, the 'fugitive meaning denied by her accident' tenses against the 'avalanche of circumstances that had already conspired to leave no other exit open for the desperate migrant worker than just this fall' (p74). Elsewhere, the 1911 accident influences Kafka's thematic preoccupation with landslides and quarries, which double as sites of 'class war' in which 'workers are maimed and killed for enhanced profits' (p118). Caygill's case for Kafka's interest in accident makes clear to the reader the political urgency of focusing on the paradoxical necessity of contingency from the perspective of the accident's systemic production. Anticipating a political climate in which discourses of self-responsibility fall most heavily on those 'at risk', and a present in which supposedly accidental tragedies occur because of institutional neglect and political austerity, Caygill's book throws light on the politics of assessing an event's modality. His readings of Kafka repeatedly show protagonists who are neither responsible nor to blame for their accident, but are rather 'victims, or the chosen ones, of a systemic property' (p21). Narrating this systemic property, and therefore the necessity of contingency, is political work.

If the accident's inevitability in modernity shows contingency to operate at the level of law, then the book's second half complicates this suggestion through its consideration of how the accident's happening also momentarily suspends law. Through this suspension, Caygill argues that accidents can also lead to defiance. In a refreshing twist, defiance is not something simply found by accident, or through belief in sudden changes of fortune; it is antagonism towards a law that absorbs accidental and contingent reality into a universal necessity claiming to incorporate all possibility. Unlike disobedience, defined by its reactive opposition to domination, defiance is antecedent to and continually unsteadying law. It has an 'accidental character' (p3), writes Caygill. The accident implies defiance because it too precedes law, as an event that happens contingently that cannot be reduced to or foreseen from its conditions.

Conceptualising defiance as accidental allows Caygill, in a series of brilliant readings of Kafka's allegorical writing on institutional power, to describe the operation of domination and law on the (dis)rule of the accidental event. The headless bureaucracy of *The Castle* preoccupies the work on this point, and for good reason, because for Caygill, the novel's presentation of arbitrary governance represents power as a whole. In Kafka's fiction, authorities justify dominance through appeal to inscrutable laws that they claim to be universally applicable and necessary. But in *The Castle*, governance happens as if by accident: decisions are made haphazardly, communication involves mistakes, and punishment is dealt anarchically. It is as if the real workings behind law's dominance, Caygill argues, are less to do with delivering justice than with convincing its subjects that its accidental birth was really the result of an originary necessity. What happens accidentally, and due to no sense, the law subsequently narrates as necessary, so that an arbitrary or random decision assumes official truth 'not because it approximates to the truth of the case, but because it is a decision that institutes necessity and makes what has happened "true"' (p178). *The Castle*'s officials turn to storytelling to justify this precarious legitimacy. Their invented stories, provoked by law's absence, explain random events with recourse to supposedly necessary truths, providing 'stories of dominion … intended to lend necessity to *a* chain of events and make it appear as *the* chain of events that expresses the unfolding of a law' (p180). Law, Caygill suggests, assumes universality and necessity after the fact, but it originates in accident. Accidents therefore underpin defiance because they reveal law's secret: its 'non-existence' (p176). Although not made explicit, we might see law's recuperation of contingency as a narrative procedure. And if that's the case, storytelling can do more than just allegorise defiance. It can also draw attention to the qualities of narrativisation that underpin law's recourse to truth, showing its explanatory imposition of necessity onto accident to be just one story among many, and a precarious one at that. In this way, storytelling arguably preoccupies *In Light of the Accident*. Caygill finds in Kafka's work a persistent effort to write the

accident that accounts for its chance occurrence and its systemic causation. But Kafka's allegories of institutional accident, by stressing the inevitability of contingency, also show how law is made narratively, and how these stories work to hide necessity's accidental birth.

In Light of the Accident is a significant contribution to literature and the philosophy of the accident: it intricately interweaves a sociological account of modernity's differential distribution of chance, a reflection on art's illumination of the accidental beginning of defiance and a unique interpretation of Kafka's writing. The work concludes with reflection on the different kinds of light that the accident throws onto Kafka's writing. Accidents, Caygill suggests, are at times defiant, at times violent, at times statistically dependent, at times even 'emancipatory' (p188). But whatever the accident is, it is always something other, unprepared for by a past, and irreducible to a present confirmed only in the knowledge that *something* was about to happen.

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Kitsch theory

Ben Ware

Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015, 72pp, £9.99/$12.99
Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics, Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Eric Butler, London, Verso, 2017, 80pp, £9.99/$16.99

The Korean-born German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, writes short, essay-length books that are widely read and enthusiastically received. Han's *Die Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* (published by Stanford University Press as *The Burnout Society* in 2015) has been translated into more than ten languages; of the three books that followed - *The Transparency Society* (2015), *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects* (2017) and *The Agony of Eros* (2017) - two were published by MIT Press, one (*The Agony of Eros*) with a foreword by Alain Badiou. His 2017 book, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, appeared with Verso in its Verso Futures series - a series which describes itself as publishing 'interventions' which 'address the outer limits of political and social possibility'. On the Verso website, Han is described as 'a star of German philosophy' whose work provides 'a passionate critique of neoliberalism'. Given the high praise, what, we might ask, are Han's specific contributions to current theoretical and political debates? What key questions (or sets of questions) do his works pivot around, and what solutions do they offer? And what, more broadly, might Han's popularity reveal both about his work and the present state of theory? My discussion here will be limited to two of the above-mentioned texts, which, I believe, provide the best introduction to the author's thinking: *The Burnout Society* and *Psychopolitics*.

In *The Burnout Society*, Han argues that 'today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls and genetic laboratories' (p8). Twenty-first century society is, Han informs us, 'no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society' (p8). With the emergence of the achievement society comes a new discursive regime: disciplinary society's negative prohibition '*May Not*', linked to the imperative '*Should*', gives way to the positive modal verb '*Can*' (as in the affirmative 'Yes, we can'). But this apparent break turns out to be nothing more than a continuity, rhetorically serving the interests of capital's own implacable drive:

> the positivity of *Can* is much more efficient than the negativity of *Should* … *Can* increases the level of productivity which is the aim of disciplinary

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> technology, that is, the imperative of *Should*. Where productivity is concerned, no break exists between *Should* and *Can* (p9).

This unification of old and new extends from the domain of the signifier to the realm of freedom itself. In the achievement society, the subject stands free from any instance of external domination - it becomes its own lord and master; however, the disappearance of domination does not entail the liberation of the subject. Rather, (new) freedom and (old) constraint come to coincide: 'the achievement subject gives itself over to *compulsive freedom* - that is, the *free constraint* of maximising achievement. Excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation' (p11). The result, then, is a more 'efficient' form of exploitation in which exploiter and exploited, perpetrator and victim, become all but indistinguishable.

So while the subject in the achievement society deems itself free, it is in reality a slave; and indeed, as Han puts it in *Psychopolitics*, 'an *absolute slave*' (p2), as it 'willingly exploits itself without a master'. Late capitalist 'freedom' thus generates more coercion and compulsion than the old disciplinary model could ever dream. This unfreedom *as* 'freedom' - bound up with endless work and voluntary self-exploitation - along with excess positivity - held in place by the unlimited *I Can* - radically transforms what *The Burnout Society* terms 'the structure and economy of attention' (p12) and affect. Boredom, which for Benjamin was the 'dream bird that hatches the egg of experience' (p13), is no longer tolerated; immersive reflection gives way to hyperattention, characterised by rapid focus-switching between different 'tasks', a preference for multiple 'information streams', and the seeking of a constant high-level of affective 'stimulation'. One thinks here of the over-worked worker working-out in the gym, simultaneously listening to music, checking emails, watching the news and monitoring bodies (their own and others). What results from the constant psychic and physical activity demanded of the achievement-subject is, predictably, tiredness, burnout and depression; terms which acquire, in Han's work, specific meanings. The tiredness that one experiences in achievement society is 'I-tiredness', 'solitary tiredness', a tiredness that is 'worldless' and 'world-destroying': 'it annihilates all reference to the other in favour of narcissistic self-reference' (p36). This contrasts with forms of 'healing tiredness' or 'trusting tiredness' in which, to use Kafka's phrase, 'the wound close[s] wearily' (p35). Burnout, as Han puts it, 'does not point to the sovereign individual who has come to lack the power to be the "master of himself "' [sic]; instead, it 'represents the pathological consequence of *voluntary* self-exploitation' (p44) - the running into the ground of the achievement-subject as 'it succumbs to the destructive compulsion to outdo itself over and over' (p46). Modern depression, unlike traditional melancholy, is not a phenomenon of negativity, but precisely the opposite: a condition arising from 'excess positivity' (p5) (strict adherence to the maxim 'you must be able to be able') and what Han terms 'too much of the Same' (a phrase clearly

echoing Baudrillard's remark that 'He who lives by the same shall die by the same'). What Han means by 'the Same' is, specifically, 'negativity-free space', where no polarisation of inside and outside, work and non-work, exists - a space which produces 'system-immanent', 'neuronal violence' (pp6-7).

How, then, if at all, might one escape the iron cage of the achievement society and the tyranny of neoliberal psychopolitics? What possibilities exist for exiting the system of the Same? In the final chapters of *The Burnout Society* and *Psychopolitics*, Han provides two suggestions. In the former work, he cites the following lines from the section 'On the Preachers of Death' in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*:

> And you too, for whom life is hectic work and unrest: are you not very weary of life? …
>
> All of you who are in love with hectic work and whatever is fast, new, strange - you find it hard to bear yourselves, your diligence is escape and the will to forget yourself.
>
> If you believed more in life, you would hurl yourself less into the moment. But you do not have enough content in yourselves for waiting - not even for laziness! (p50)

Here it is thus suggested that a form of Nietzschean leisure (a turning away from hectic work and unrest) is what allows one to escape the capitalist 'hysteria of surviving' and to reaffirm 'life' (p50). In *Psychopolitics*, Han contends, following Foucault, that freedom unfolds as de-psychologisation or de-subjectivation. As the latter puts it in conversation with Werner Schroeter: 'The art of living is the art of killing psychology, of creating with oneself and with others unnamed individualities, beings, relations, qualities' (p78). For Han, then, '[w]hen the subject is de-psychologized - indeed, *de-voided* (*entleert*) - it opens onto a mode of existence that still has no name: an unwritten future' (p79).

Both of these 'alternatives' - if indeed one can call them that - are frustratingly vague, retreating from the zone of actual political engagement into a world of stylised and worn-out rhetoric. The issues here, however, are merely symptomatic of two more general problems running throughout Han's work. First, there are serious questions to be raised about the order of truth that Han's texts aim to produce. Is it really the case that the subject now stands free from all external forms of domination? Is all exploitation now merely *self-exploitation*, or 'auto-exploitation' (p11), as Han puts it? Has the neoliberal 'social transformation' resulted in a society that has now completely shed the negativity of prohibitions and commandments, leading to 'an *entirely different psyche*', which (as Han argues) is no longer responsive to psychoanalysis (pp36-41)? The simple answer to these questions is, I think,

an unequivocal 'no'; however, what is perhaps more intriguing is the way in which Han's writing often comes to mirror the very neoliberalism it purports to criticise. We are thus told, in a series of unargued remarks, that all workers are now 'entrepreneurs' of the self (p8); that an '*inner struggle against the self*' has supplanted 'class struggle' (*Psychopolitics*, p5); and, in a passage that would no doubt warm the heart of the members of the Mont Pelerin Society:

> [N]o proletariat exists under the neoliberal regime at all. There is no working class being exploited by those who own the means of production. When production is immaterial, everyone owns the means of production him- or herself. The neoliberal system is no longer a class system in the proper sense. It does not consist of classes that display mutual antagonism. This is what accounts for the system's stability …

The neoliberal regime transforms allo-exploitation into auto-exploitation; this process affects all 'classes'. Such classless self-exploitation … renders impossible any social revolution based on the difference between the exploiters, on the one hand, and the exploited, on the other. Indeed, given the auto-exploiting achievement-subject's isolation, no *political We* is even possible that could rise up and undertake collective action (pp5-6).

What we thus find here is less 'a passionate critique of neoliberalism' (to use the phrase of Han's publisher) and more an unwitting consolidation of a number of its founding myths: the rule of capital is absolute; collectivity is structurally impossible; the subject-in-isolation is the primary unit of political measurement. The violence of 'the Same' is thus re-introduced at a higher, political level: the old slogan There Is No Alternative now assumes the character of a fundamental truth, rather than (as it might seem) *a necessary fiction*.

One of the most striking things about reading Han's work (and this constitutes the second general problem) is the experience that one has been here before, although one is not always sure exactly when. One might refer to this as the *uncanniness of kitsch theory*. Baudrillard, Foucault, Deleuze, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Agamben, Benjamin, Kafka, Marx, Arendt, Stiegler (and countless others) all blended together in the philosophy Magimix: what comes out is easy to consume (providing one is familiar with the particular language-game), and not always unpleasant to taste ('The mania for health emerges when life has become as flat as a coin and stripped of all narrative content, all value' (p50)), but incapable of providing any *significant* nourishment. In his essay 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', Clement Greenberg writes that 'when enough time has elapsed the [once *authentically*] new is looted for new "twists," which are then watered down and served up as kitsch'. He also points out that kitsch can be 'deceptive', as 'it has many different levels, and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light'.[1] Both of these remarks are particularly

1. Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989, p11.

apposite when considering Han's interventions. The term kitsch comes into common use in the late nineteenth century, in the jargon of German artists and art dealers, to refer to 'cheap artistic stuff'.[2] Some have argued that the term derives from the English word 'sketch', 'mispronounced by artists in Munich and applied derogatorily to those cheap images bought as souvenirs by tourists'.[3] Contemporary theory tourists, looking for a short-cut through the difficulties of philosophy, culture and politics, will no doubt find much to enjoy in Han's books: they are pleasingly of the moment, fast-paced and packed with quotable phrases. What seems clear, however, is that these 'radical' sketches of the contemporary neoliberal landscape are themselves, in many respects, symptoms of the crisis they seek to depict - not emancipatory critiques of the culture currently confronting us.

2. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1987, p234.

3. Ibid.

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