

DISPLAYING DIVERSITY

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Mary Anne Francis, *Mixed Forms of Visual Culture: From the Cabinet of Curiosities to Digital Diversity*, London, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021/2023, 248pp, £85 hardback, £32.99 paperback.

Beginning at least with Plato and Horace and Aristotle, continuing through Baroque and neoclassical painting, Kantian autonomy, the well-wrought urns and esemplastic powers of Metaphysical and Romantic poetry, and indeed into modernist and New Critical standards of judgement, *unity* (along with its close cousins coherence, harmony, integrity and purity) has until recently quite possibly been the fundamental – if paradoxically variously applied – aesthetic criterion of and for Western art. The countervailing effect of this concept’s dominance has been the minimisation or the treatment with outright suspicion and hostility of that which could be described as multifarious, discontinuous, various, or combinatory – of, in other words, the mixed. Wading into precisely this discursive terrain is Mary Anne Francis’s ambitious *Mixed Forms of Visual Culture*, which, she explains, indexes her ‘ongoing interest in ... the refusal of consistency’ (pix). From the outset Francis catalogues negative connotations of variegated words and phrases such as “mishmash”, “mash-up”, “mixed-bag”, “motley” ... “miscellaneous” as well as “hotchpotch” (or “hodgepodge”), “rag bag” and “jumble” (pp1-2) as a starting point for exposing what gets lost by or left out of conventional art historical narratives that have failed to account for ‘mixed forms’, her study’s central term and focus, and the constellation of contingent meanings around variety and hybridity entailed thereby. *Mixed Forms*, Francis writes, ‘refuses the notion that its subject has an essence – not of content, nor of form, other than the empty outline of a hybrid structure, or the matrix for a mixture that is subject to historical contingencies’ (p13).

In light of the above, readers may presuppose an orientation towards postmodernism and/or the avant-garde(s), both neo- and historical, but the ambit of Francis’s book is (no less than) 500 years of Western and Anglo-American cultural production: from the *Wunderkammer* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to eighteenth-century broadside ballads and chapbooks, from modernist assemblage and collage to various uses of augmented reality and virtuality in our contemporary moment. This capacious periodising frame is justified on a basis that is crucial for understanding the book’s central argument, which concerns ‘how mixed form in visual culture relates to contemporaneous experiences of labour as a more or less mixed form’ (p17) within the post-medieval or modern epoch. Mixed forms in visual culture, Francis argues, emerge not only as expressions of or reaction-formations against aesthetic unity’s valorisation (which in any case are themselves

culturally relative and mutable), but are also produced within and alongside the global expansion of capital and the division of labour that attend that process. At the same time, mixed forms are not merely reflective of a prior cause, content, or context; they are active agents in their own rights, replete with multiple affordances. Many of Francis's signal interventions to the field issue from this dialectical frisson, to which I will return.

Before continuing along those lines, however, it's worth pausing to ask: what exactly, in Francis's definition, constitutes 'mixed form'? The elastic term allows for a number of things: at root, Francis writes, it refers to 'forms in visual culture that combine different cultural forms' (p15), often towards a sort of liberatory end, which might involve those comprised of a variety of media 'composed of different substances or structures' (p6), or alternatively 'forms that act as "meta" forms – containing others' (p9). The combinatory transfer of materials, we might say, then, from one context to another, and the signification and dissemination of those borrowings through and into their new setting(s). Despite her Hegelian outline of form, Francis does not propose a rigid or hierarchical schema for placing phenomena into those different categories. Rather, in (most of) the book's chapters, she first analyses an instantiation of mixed form, then refers this to its historically related modes of production, its distribution or allocation across labour markets and practices, and finally tries to synthesise what one might have to tell us about the other.

Chapter One, on the cabinet of curiosity, serves first as a way for Francis to introduce a curatorial aspect of mixed form, or what she calls a 'grammar of display'. This is important because 'the extent to which a large group of varied artefacts will register as mixed, depends in part upon the way in which they are displayed' (p27), which originates in notions of unity and disarray at a form's moments both of conception and reception. In the case of the *Wunderkammer* belonging to aristocrats and merchants, these include the 'rational', scientific precepts of colonial expansion and the emergence of the division of labour 'as that occurs at Western Empire's epicentre', but today may register instead as 'the radical heterogeneity of its origins, perhaps as a kind of postcolonial practice' (p50). In Chapter Two, Francis takes a detour by approaching the rise of manufacture and consequent shifts to social and working life, largely through succinct close readerly analysis of Marx and Engels, presented as a sort of *Arcades Project*-style tapestry of quotations, arranged under suggestive sub-headings ('Deformation of Being', 'The Texture of Labouring-Experiencing', 'Becoming Stupid') and elaborated upon in footnotes. (I would suggest a dream of a book made entirely of quotations peers out from or over the restrictions of the scholarly monograph at several junctures). Her contention here concerns different forms of mixedness, or how 'mixed form in culture is, in principle, symbolically opposed to the division that characterises the experience of labour in manufacture' (p71), leading to perhaps the book's grandest claim, which is that within the context of a world that 'insists on the monotonous, repetitive and uniform' (p205),

different experiences of the multifarious – across labour and culture – have much to say about, indeed are analogues for, our species-being, the quality or purpose of humanness itself.

All of this is perhaps best borne out by Francis's fifth and seventh chapters, on modernist mixed forms and digital culture respectively. Against Greenbergian medium specificity, Francis looks to examples of collage, montage, and (especially) assemblage art in modernism that are, by definition, more akin to medium promiscuity, as a means for providing a 'structural analogy for contemporaneous workers' experience of labour as more or less uniform' (p155). As such, she relates modernist assemblages by Duchamp, Motherwell and others, as well as their material 'joins' (glue, as both material and metaphor), to the Fordist assembly line as the basis for workers' alienation, phenomena or forms that are united by the concept of one thing being added to another but distinguished by how they 'compris[e] multifarious and uniform phenomena respectively'. Mixed form assemblage, she concludes, 'offers an effect for the viewer that is demonstrably at odds with the affective texture of Fordist rationalisation as monotonous, and dehumanising in its singularity' (p145). A reading surfaces in which culture preserves space for the diversity that work under capitalism marginalises or simply cannot contain.

Yet she subsequently complicates or at least extends this in her chapter on the digital and 'mixed reality', in which she argues that diversification has to some extent been hijacked or superannuated by capital to nefarious ends. More specifically, the precarity that defines contemporary political economy (and that is abetted by the mixed form of the screen) is figured as 'mixed form as pathology' (p190), wherein the gig economy, gamification, multiskilling, perma-lancing and putative self-employment under the aegis of multinational corporations acts as a nightmarish parody of Marx's and Engels's hunter-fisherman-cattle-rearer-critic. Formally speaking, in both artistic and commodified digital mixed forms (including augmented spaces like Pokémon Go, Ikea's room planner and military training technologies) the pixel unifies the onscreen overlay of various images, presenting a chimera of multifarious mixed-ness, just as the use of screens in post-Fordist production makes the work of someone who finishes a shift at an Amazon warehouse and immediately begins another driving for Uber entail a 'diversity of experience, but only within the context of fundamentally alienated labour' (p191).

Mention should also be made of Chapters Four and Six, on the scrapbook in both its 'pastime' and fine artistic veins, which engage related questions by different means. That is, through visual essays in the tradition of John Berger and Aby Warburg, on one hand taken from Francis's own archival collection of amateur scrapbooks, and on the other appearing as an intricately colour-coded, CAT-scan-like re-production of an artist's scrapbook accompanied by a key for reading it that, she writes, should be printed out and used as a bookmark. Those chapters aspire not only to 'a new way of doing art history ... of and in the visual' (p151) but to the mixed condition of the very forms under discussion.

Francis's methodological approach could be (and indeed is self-) described as stringently formalist, focusing as she does on the composition and materiality of the mixtures that make up mixed forms, along with her welcome and novel attention to the particular agents that do the work of binding or joining (paste, frames, cabinets, pixels), those often invisible or forgotten things that afford mixing. That formalism is also in at least one respect a shortcoming. Because given Francis's extensive historical scope and her interest in labour and capital, an especially surprising oversight is lack of focus on the rhythms, effects or cultural practices engendered by diaspora or migration (neither of which even get an indexical entry) – the crossings of people across borders that has occurred whether by force, by displacement or by economically-motivated choice, or on the centrifugal role of the nation-state itself, within those same 500 years. Francis, as discussed, is highly attentive to the political-economic dynamics of, say, colonial expansion and exploration that shaped the cabinet of curiosity as a 'symptom of mercantile capitalism' (p25), and of the estrangement of the gig economy's diversification of work as it gets manifested on screens, which makes the above omission all the stranger. Several chapters seem somewhat to skirt around the concept of 'contact zones' or what Christina Heatherton has more recently called 'convergence spaces', sites where different social struggles from different contexts are scrambled together; this globalised dimension that concerns 'flows and counterflows' (p21) then frequently gets abandoned. To take an aspect of her treatment of modernism and the avant-garde as an example (albeit not to suggest that this critique *only* inheres in her discussions of the twentieth century): at various moments she draws extensively upon Raymond Williams, but not on, for instance, his distinction, in *The Sociology of Culture*, between formal innovation and social formation. There, Williams's argument is that avant-gardes occur in modern societies precisely due to internal exile and cross-national emigration, by virtue of which 'displaced metropolitans' gather in urban centres not identified with nationality, which produces certain kinds of work. Francis does acknowledge that a less formalist project could develop a 'richer engagement with issues of cultural diversity and cultural hybridity' (p206), but still, one wonders how the picture may have changed had she attended to forms that materialise out of that migratory experience and the forces and forms that enable it. The question of the pure as against the mixed seems particularly sensitive and important under those terms, or when applied to a body politic rather than aesthetic object, which is something she's willing to do in some cases and not others. And since combination as a framework, she claims, allows for different forms of authorship or agency to be resisted and challenged – particularly the 'artist as intentional-expressive humanist subject, conventionally committed to the classical ideal of consistency' (p136) – comparatively little attention is paid to the racialised, Enlightenment context for the construction of the category of the human itself, which gets subsumed by the notion of species-being.

Mixed Forms in Visual Culture is theoretically rigorous, richly suggestive, and draws on a huge variety of scholarly and artistic archives, with results that are at times (perhaps appropriately) uneven, or mixed. Away from this last point, Francis hardly shies. In fact, there is on occasion an over-reliance on that central frame as a means of pulling punches, in pronouncements like, '[a]s with culture, so with labour; the outcomes are mixed – and in labour, as in culture, as a matter of degree and quality' (p201). Nevertheless, Francis's book bursts with novel and surprising connections, offering considerable scope for further thought for scholars of each of the aspects upon which it touches. By tracking how artistic and popular forms perform their own relations to materiality and labour, through a complex web of overlapping technical features in the domain of the mixed, assembled, scrambled and entangled, Francis shows that forms and media cannot be read simply by looking at their material existence as if they possess an absolute value. In fact, the closer we look, the more various they reveal themselves to be.

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