

Process or paralysis? Revisiting the contemporary art canon

Review of:

Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World edited by Ruth E. Iskin, London and New York: Routledge, 2017, 294 pp., 42 b. & w. plates, \$134, 978 1 138 19268 3

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Too often the canon debate that began in the early 1980s is remembered only as an episode in the rancorous and inconclusive 'culture wars' of the United States. In fact, far more important issues were at stake. For debates about the contents of 'the canon' are always, once polemic gives way to serious analysis, questions about the relationships between the various agencies responsible for the discussion, interpretation and presentation of art. It is one of the more distinctive features in the history of the professionalized study of the humanities that some of its most gifted students—Friedrich Nietzsche, John Ruskin, Wyndham Lewis, Susan Sontag, Rosalind Krauss—have had such little confidence in the institutional frameworks trained on it. In so far as the canon debate prompted a more strenuously critical, reappraisal of this framework and of its logic of its operations its value was indisputable.

Ruth Iskin's ambitious volume of fifteen specially-commissioned essays returns to these questions with renewed vigour. The table of contents leaves a reader in no doubt about the extended sweep of art in the twenty-first century. Part One surveys a selection of the artists whose work has caused a stir in the global world: Claude Cahun, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sheila Hicks, Ai Weiwei and El Anatsui. Each of these selections poses new questions for the reader. Basquiat and Ai Wewei exemplify an art ready to exploit the publicity and assertive markets of a new global era. In contrast, Hicks and Anatsui have practiced a quiet devotion to their art over a lifetime. Cahun represents a test case in how museums and galleries respond to a collaborative art and a gender-fluid identity. Part Two looks at mediums and media, including street art, video art, performance art, and art in the new media. Each of these embodies challenges not just to an audience's preconceptions about what constitutes art but about how art in these forms can be presented to a public in a lasting form. Questions of presentation dominate in the third part of the book, which examines the role of 'exhibitions, museums, markets'. It is in this section that some of the most pressing questions about canons and canon formation in the twenty-first century come into clear focus. *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon* is, in short, a book with a double brief: first of all, it wants to

explore the new art forms and makers of art for its readers. Second, it asks how that art reaches its publics. At stake is what one contributor will call the 'coherence' of the institutions responsible for making sure there is a public for valuable art.

The editor grapples with her double brief in an opening essay on 'Re-envisioning the canon: are pluriversal canons possible?' The invitation to 're-envision' and the emphasis on the 'possible' solicits active participation from her readers. Are they to conceive of the two terms in opposition? Does the chastened 'possible' (as in Bismarck's famous description of politics as the art of the possible) come down hard on the speculative 're-envision'? Or is the reader to take both in a utopian sense, so that the editor opens up for us the rich artistic potential of a newly globalized world? The discipline of twenty-first century art history carries the burden of both iconoclastic and utopian legacies.

Professor Iskin elects first to survey the scars of the old campaigns before she surveys the new territory to be claimed. She reckons that 'use of the term "canon" is on the wane in discussions of contemporary art' and her opening pages offer some reasons why this should be the case. First of all, she points to 'The general belief that artists are chosen in accordance with a standard criterion'. Before a reader can protest (what sort of standard criterion covers Joshua Reynolds and William Blake?) she adds that historically canons have effected 'a systematic exclusion and under-representation of artists who are not white males'.¹ Her strictures are directed not just at the gender exclusivity of the old canon, but also at its limited geographical range. By a sleight of hand, she suggests, what was actually a narrowly 'Western' canon continued to be authorized on the grounds of its universality.

She sees a way out of this impasse in Walter D.M.ignolo's 'pluriversality', a recognition of our 'entangled'² condition in the world order made by Western imperial powers. Yet it does not take too much thought to recognize that there is a hard and soft version of pluriversality. Are we to look to art to provide us some illumination on the long history of struggle against Western privilege, or maybe against any kind of privilege? Or is it enough to rejoice in a contemporary canon fed from many sources? Traces of both pluriversalities surface in these pages, but for the moment let it be noted that this is not a volume marooned in all the old familiar places. Instead it transports its readers to Nsukka, a Nigerian university town that serves as the base for Al Anatsui's cottage industry or to street artist Swoon's Haitian project in Cormiers. As a final desideratum, Iskin wants to disturb the consensus that underwrites the prestige of the traditional canon. Borrowing from political theorist Chantal Mouffe she sees 'contestation' as the restorative for canonicity. Contestation opposes 'the long historical consensus'³ that has held sway

¹ Ruth Iskin, ed., *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017, 1. Hereafter cited as Iskin, *Re-envisioning* followed by appropriate page number.

² Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 23.

³ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 15.

in the world of art. This is a consensus that soon proves shaky when Professor Iskin comes to review actual cases like those of Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet only a few paragraphs later. Perhaps it is as good a time as any to suggest that very few of the myths of consensus so beloved by radicals and conservatives withstand the weight of historical investigation.

On a longer view, the selection and legitimation of canons seems less authoritarian and decisive. As Camille Morineau observes in an excellent discussion of 'Troubling Canons' led by Helena Reckitt, 'A "canon" takes, if not centuries, then dozens of years to build. So we are in a process'.⁴ This means that it may be a little contradictory to speak of a contemporary canon, but it also means that no artistic canon, then or now, has ever been as sealed as legend has it. As a process, canonization has always called on a coordination of gifts and skills exercised over a long period of time: curators, dealers, museum directors, editors and teachers all aided in the making of a canonical reputation. Needless to say, they were not always working in tandem. It was probably unfortunate that after furnishing one of the most useful formulas for canonicity, 'length of duration and continuance of esteem',⁵ Samuel Johnson told us so little about the activities that secured this esteem for William Shakespeare. But Johnson wrote in the eighteenth century, not the twenty-first. In 2017, writers about the canon should really heed Morineau's words. 'We are in a process' and all phases of that process must be subjected to the closest examination. Otherwise the result is a series of rallying battle-cries about a phantom canon.

The suspicion that this process has rigidified troubles many of Professor Iskin's contributors. Axel Lapp directs an innovative Bavarian art gallery and from his perspective, the canon serves only as 'the stuff that everyone recognizes'.⁶ His worry is the restriction of entry. It is only about a decade ago MoMA 'still had one single definitive view of art history in the twentieth century'.⁷ Such a canon is only a hindrance for an innovative curator with ambitions of presenting the best new media art. Chika Okeke-Agulu's problem is rather with a crisis of thinking that appears to cling, barnacle-like, to the notion of a canon. The long battle to understand canonical art made by people whom one has tended to think as of considerable intellectual weight—figures like Erwin Panofsky or Heinrich Wölfflin—no longer means much to him. He reckons that 'canons, like parochial versions of scientific theories, are about settled ideas or positions'.⁸ The studied snub of 'parochial' rejects the time-honoured alliance between artistic canons and elite international humanist travellers, at home in all countries and exchanging wit

⁴ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 265

⁵ Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to Shakespeare', in Bernard Bronson ed., *Samuel Johnson: Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*, New York: Holt, 1971, 262.

⁶ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 173.

⁷ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 175.

⁸ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 273.

and learning with princes and patrons. Yet Okeke-Agulu also has reservations about the new partnerships in a globalized world where the remote is nearer than ever before. He points out that 'It is delusional to think that the Tate has, by virtue of the substantial but non-permanent support from the Nigerian bank, fundamentally changed its relationship with Nigerian or African art'.⁹ There is a general axiom to be drawn here: one blockbuster event or spectacular career does not alter a system disposed to act in a specific way.

As a 'standard criterion' the canon lacks flexibility; as a 'sanctioned selection' it is palpably stuffy; as a tool for thinking, it is a musket in the age of bump stock. Paula Birnbaum's canon consists of 'a limited body of artists, of movements and art forms deemed to be of both economic and artistic value'.¹⁰ She contrasts the rigidity of such a body with the iconoclastic, public-spirited efforts made by street artists Swoon and Banksy 'to unite gatekeeper, artist and community alike in creative projects with shared vision and deep social impact'.¹¹ On one such occasion, Banksy appears, like his fellow icon Bob Dylan, to have taken too much for granted, got his signals crossed and become tangled up in the politics of the middle East. Some Palestinian residents in the West Bank objected fiercely to his efforts to mount a collaborative, international artistic protest against the separation wall in Bethlehem. One resident complained "'You paint the Wall, you make it look beautiful....We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this Wall, go home.'" Still, as Birnbaum disarmingly writes, Banksy's labours were not in vain. They 'resulted in increased tourism'.¹² Street art, surely, could be a test case for the value of 'entanglement' as a tool for analyzing the relationship between art, entrepreneurship and the public space.

Elsewhere, contributors argue that canons rest uneasily on the obsolescent thought process of mythology. In the age of the algorithm, with its generation of innumerable possible futures, canonical authority relies on the diffusion of stirring myths about a heroically singular imaginary past. Rosalind Krauss's celebrated attack on 'art history of the proper name'¹³ serves as the guide for many of the contributors. One of the most eloquent anti-mythologists is Tirza True Latimer, who credits the devotion of canon-keepers to 'myths of individual artistic genius'¹⁴ not just for excluding Claude Cahun, author, collaborator and performer from wider consideration, but for actively promoting the misunderstanding of her work. As Latimer meticulously documents, Cahun's oeuvre subjects the phenomenon of the great man and the genius to repeated creative mockery and her artistic practice runs

⁹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 277.

¹⁰ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 155.

¹¹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 166.

¹² Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 165.

¹³ See 'In the name of Picasso', in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, The MIT press, 1986, 39.

¹⁴ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 46.

contrary to it. For all that, museums have offered her as a genius. More bizarrely, they have offered her exclusively as a genius in the visual arts when in fact, just as much of her effort went into her writing and self-presentation. Her long-time collaborator, photographer and illustrator Marcel Moore worked alongside Cahun as an equal partner. When Cahun's riddlingly-titled *Aveux non Avenus* appeared with ten plates, 'Moore not only made the exposures but was the first audience for whom Cahun struck her poses'.¹⁵ Yet museums have failed to acknowledge Moore's participation.

William Kaizen's concern falls less on the false image of the artist that myth circulates than the nature of the relationship with the audience it promotes. Behind 'the institutional embrace of individuals as dogmatic icons' that influential figures like Meyer Schapiro wrapped around Vincent van Gogh or an artistic movement like abstract expressionism he discerns a quest for 'a kind of salvation from industrial society'.¹⁶ How can this be at all useful for Kaizen's video art, the product of the technologies created by that very society? In the world of video, the most innovative artists share none of the imperious claims on their audience's attention made by the imposing modern masters Schapiro canonized. Instead they exploit 'the critical potential' Walter Benjamin saw in 'the absent-minded viewing'¹⁷ that a modern audience brings to its encounters with art. When displayed at the New York Museum of Modern Art, Pipilotti Rist's *Pour your body out* placed at its centre 'a giant circular couch on an even bigger carpet where tired museum visitors sprawled body to body'.¹⁸ Works like this transmit ambiguous messages. Their gigantism would not be out of place with the massive heroic paintings Joshua Reynolds placed at the apex of the painting canon, an art that aims to secure the most rapt attention from their viewers. Yet the slumbering audience Rist displays in her presentation recalls William Butler Yeats's more ironic presentation in 'Sailing to Byzantium' of highly-skilled goldsmiths beating out masterpieces 'To keep a drowsy emperor awake'.¹⁹ The fact that Yeats wrote his poem in 1926 about an Eastern civilization dedicated to art and learning might suggest that artists have been turning the inattentiveness of their audiences to useful purposes for a time that long precedes the invention of video hardly invalidates Kaizen's argument. However, the essay closes with a glimpse of how more technical innovation provokes a still more heightened inattentiveness in audiences. As iPods and cell phones become the inevitable accessories for any museum visit, Rist finds new competitors: 'While some members of the audience were making connections between Rist's world and bits of relevant information using their personal electronic

¹⁵ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 51.

¹⁶ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 125.

¹⁷ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 133.

¹⁸ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 134.

¹⁹ W. B. Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, London: Macmillan, 1961, 218.

devices, others were undoubtedly off in their own world'.²⁰ At what point does absent-minded viewing descend into mindless viewing?

If the standard canon and the museum now look pretty vacant to contemporary students of art, then what will fill the vacuum? Jordana Moore Saggese submits that 'The processes of canonization have seemingly moved outside the grasp of art historians and art critics and into the art market'.²¹ Ben Davis of *Artnet News* tells Jonathan Neil that 'To me, the idea of a "contemporary art canon" itself seems to imply the art market'.²² Axel Lapp estimates that 'The canon is something that in the end the market generates'.²³ For a phalanx of distinguished art historians from Roger Fry to John Berger, the market has featured as anything but a reliable mechanism for the nurturing of artistic talent. If, in a global world, there is no authority left in what Wenny Teo calls 'the exclusionary and privileged citadel of the Western artistic tradition'²⁴ then how does a new arsenal of prominent museums and cities able to meet the cost of vast art festivals, corporate donors, and electronic websites establish its global canon? And how do artists and audiences fare under its patronage? E. H. Gombrich once conceived of the difference between the Renaissance artist and his medieval predecessor in terms of the contrast between the artist's mission and his commission. How do today's artists conduct themselves in this new global universe of international markets?

There is a variety of answers to these questions. Teo shows how saturation media coverage, much of it provided by the artist himself, has propelled the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei into ubiquity. He is 'superstar...activist, social media celebrity'.²⁵ If anything, this hardly does justice to the artist's protean identity. Weiwei performs in his own art works, literally invades canonical spaces with his new creations, and provides an apparently endless stream of electronic messages for a global network of followers. His is a career that combines the enterprise of Houdini, the irreverence of Marcel Duchamp, the indignation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the unflagging industry of a twenty-four hour news channel. In contrast, Ronit Milano's discussion of Takashi Murakami describes a much less turbulent actor. Milano thinks that "'Murakami" today is not merely the name of an artist but of a brand'.²⁶ His partners in global enterprise are Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Olafur Eliasson. Each of these has cleared a path for 'a new type of artist who produced not only the art-work itself but also its financial value through his own economic investment'.²⁷ To this we must add the elusive and illegal Banksy. At a time when 'one cannot be

²⁰ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 135.

²¹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 59.

²² Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 275.

²³ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 172.

²⁴ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 92.

²⁵ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 88.

²⁶ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 242.

²⁷ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 247.

part of the canon today without having a strong market presence',²⁸ Banksy 'regularly sells his work for well over half a million dollars at auction'.²⁹ Krauss's 'proper name' appears to have come back with a vengeance in the age of an entrepreneurial activist art.

Entrepreneurship is not the sole model for artistic activity. Martha Buskirk quotes approvingly Helena Reckitt's more modest alternative, not so much Rockefeller Corporation as itinerant freelancer. She speaks of a "'flexible worker who travels constantly, networks endlessly, is always contactable, and develops temporary projects with different people under short-term contracts'".³⁰ Reckitt's artist would be advised to watch for one of those sudden drops in status that occur in the corporate world. Her "'always contactable'" would be a natural for Sports Limited's Mike Ashley and his renowned zero-hour contracts. Far better to aim with Banksy or Koons at conditions of service comparable to those Ashley has provided for his football stars at Newcastle United. A much more serious objection to this market-driven canon might be that, like a market-driven society, it makes massive inroads into the time and leisure that the serious production of art, or even the task of humane living, has historically called for.

Some of the contributors to *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon* are well aware that the alliances between globalism and neo-liberalism that have done so little for so many people are of questionable benefit for artists as well. If we bracket questions of artistic value, there is still room to doubt whether a canon arranged around superstars and blockbuster exhibitions, underwritten by Michael Bloomberg and that most global of enterprises New York City and hymned in precisely the same universalist language uncritically hauled out to bolster the authority of the old canon, will be likely to be more entangled in the work of social justice than its predecessor. Iskin's hopes for a pluriversal canon that acknowledges the 'entanglement' of citizens, countries and technologies play out grotesquely in Ronit Milano's discussion of Takashi Murakami. After a shaky start in his own country, Murakami cannily reinvented himself as a global brand, marketing his Superflat merchandise in the Parco department stores and, in a triumphant sequel, at the Serpentine gallery. It was in 2012 that he found his richest market in, of all places, Qatar. At this time Qatar was, as *The Guardian* reports, eager "'to enhance its cultural portfolio before the 2022 World Cup'".³¹ To retrace the steps to its success in detail is to begin to feel queasy about a globalized entrepreneurial art. An inordinately wealthy and repressive state goes on a binge to acquire Western art. The art serves as leverage to bid for a sporting event managed by a notoriously dishonest organization. The sporting event, broadcast by the world's corporately-

²⁸ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 156.

²⁹ Iskin, *Reenvisioning*, 158.

³⁰ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 226.

³¹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 248.

owned electronic media, will in turn bolster the visibility of the state. As Milano concludes:

when art is commodified in the extreme, the artist redefined as a brand, and when whole exhibitions are commodified and the artists who occupy a prominent position in the contemporary art canon become themselves commodities, a new discourse appears in which museums are instrumental in the process of branding and re-branding of states.³²

Commodification is an old story. More significant is the story told by the less prominent words in this quotation. Does the prominence of the market in 'the contemporary art canon' reduce art to the 'instrumental' status that has repeatedly threatened it in technological societies? If artists get too involved with states like Qatar will 're-branding' be the least of their problems when later commentators start to assess their work?

Jordana Moore Saggese's thoughtful discussion of the career of Jean-Michel Basquiat is a timely reminder of the fragility of reputations sustained by a buoyant market in art. Basquiat, who died in 1988 at the age of twenty-seven, had a great gift for yoking the conventional symbols of American capital and corporate life with icons of the counter culture and treasured items of European art. With the help of Andy Warhol's Factory, he paired a Charlie Parker commemorative coin with a silkscreen reproduction of the Arm and Hammer Logo. He painted a defaced Mona Lisa reproduced as if she were the portrait for a dollar bill. Few artists were as conscious about the connections of American art to capital and industry as Basquiat, who appropriately served his apprenticeship, not in the studio of a master, but as a collaborative graffiti writer on the rolling stock of the New York Transit Authority. He rose to superstardom, as it were, when his art became an attractive commodity for the frenetic speculators unleashed by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

However, when Saggese comes to reflect on the artist's afterlife she sounds a plangent note. Every rich person wanted to own a Basquiat in the nineteen-eighties. However, canonical reputations do not exist purely in the here-and-now commanded by market forces. As Saggese recognizes, death is the necessary prerequisite for full canonical entry. And after his death only about one hundred and fifty of Basquiat's works remained in public circulation. Hidden in private collections rather than on public view in city museums, Basquiat's paintings can no longer benefit from the kind of exegesis, discussion and display that establishes and prolongs the life of a canonical artist: 'Beyond the chic opening parties and shiny museum catalogues, the same paintings and drawings circulate internationally ad nauseam but have yet to find permanent places in public institutions. The sustained study of this artist is often inhibited by the lack of a dedicated archive, as well as

³² Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 248.

access to his works'.³³ Without serious consideration given to the task of publicly preserving and inventorying Basquiat's work—crucial functions in the making of a canonical artist—there are none of what Saggese sees as 'the lasting effects' associated with canonicity. Her conclusions can hardly be disputed: 'An artist cannot solely be legitimized by market value alone'.³⁴

Death is not the only thing that interferes with market forces. Wenny Teo reports how the media saturation exploited by Ai Wei-wei has led to an inevitable drying up of sympathy in some significant places: "'No one dares to challenge him, and he is always unvaryingly right'", Chinese fellow-artist Yan Xing complains. Western reception has only worsened this situation: "'Uncannily, these people have created a miniature version of the system their hero makes such a show of opposing'".³⁵ Twenty years on, these protests may be only a footnote in the dissent a trail-blazing artistic career inevitably provokes. Or they may be the foundation for the sustained withdrawal of esteem that once dethroned Adolphe William Bouguereau from canonicity.

A canonical debate narrowly focused on the question 'Who's in? Who's out?' is the logical outcome of a system where art is viewed in terms of the market. It is a long time since Northrop Frye railed against 'All lists of the "best" novels or poems or writers, whether their particular virtue is exclusiveness or inclusiveness....all the literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange'. For Frye this was purposeless activity, 'the sonorous nonsense' of a cultural marketplace as alienated as the larger marketplace it somehow served. With the arrival of 'a systematic structure of knowledge'³⁶ about art, the presses could slow down and serious questions could be posed.

One of these questions quickly turned out to be the relationship of artists to their predecessors. If the notion of the canon as a sacred sarcophagus housing the illustrious dead no longer inspires the liveliest contemporary artists, then how do they imagine the work of their precursors? Does the pantheon of market-sponsored artists have as little use for the traditional canon as the more uncompromising members of the academy have implied? The way canonical images constantly reappear in some of the most experimental work described in these pages suggest that this is not the case. Ai Wei Wei supplied one, appropriately spectacular, answer to these questions when he occupied the restored church of Sant' Antonin in Venice with his massive installation S.A.C.R.E.D. Wei Wei's peaceful invasion of a canonical space surely invites his audience to contrast the far from playful invasion Chinese authorities made in Tienanmen Square.

³³ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 69.

³⁴ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 61.

³⁵ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 30.

³⁶ All these quotations are taken from Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, 18.

Kehinde Wiley's *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps* (2005), with its black general, reproduces and challenges Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. Can we imagine a black Napoleon? Some Haitians and Romantic poets thought they saw one in the liberating rebel Toussaint L'Ouverture, whose relationship with the European Napoleon was undoubtedly adversarial. Is Wiley giving his audience a history lesson? If so, for Wiley the canonical precursor has a significant role to play in a bold reinvention of the history-painting Reynolds placed at the apex of the canon.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's historical imagination takes a different route. In Basquiat's *Mona Lisa* (1983) the defaced icon is the victim of capitalism for an artist whose imaginary world heaps up instances of industrial capitalism's devastations. Leonardo's lagoons metamorphose into Basquiat's inky black paint, an image perhaps of the polluted rivers the pursuit of dollar signs has inflicted on all corners of the globe. In other paintings from Basquiat's imaginative world the canonical icon loses its verticality and distance. It becomes another item on a canvas that bulges with the undifferentiated detritus of a city that is itself no more than a disposal zone for what the market can produce. Basquiat is reimagining modern history on his canvases.

Finding a language for this imaginative relationship with the past that Wei Wei, Basquiat or Wiley have forged, without resorting to the hoary tropes of subverting and deconstructing, is a challenge for the twenty-first century student. Yet there are also works that appear to make no such overt connections with their canonical predecessors and *Re-Envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon* does not neglect those. Sheila Hicks and El Anatsui have dedicated a lifetime to their artistic media and the specific problems they present. To student and curator, both artists work in materials that institutions might once have thought twice about sanctioning: Hicks's medium is fibre and El Anatsui's planks, milk tins and bottle caps. Hicks emphasizes that she has disqualified herself from most of the channels for canonization not just because of her choice of materials but because of her chosen spheres of operation: "'I've been working in factories, design offices, and on architectural projects. I haven't been cloistered in the so-called art world with its terminology and its hierarchies'"³⁷ Yet, Elissa Auther's essay shows how Hicks has consecrated herself to fibre in the way Giotto consecrated himself to plaster. Along with the consecration have come a sharpening skill and a readiness to conceive of different projects. Who can say this is not a canonical achievement, if a canon can be conceived as a life-long commitment to a body of creative work? Not the acquisition department of the Museum of the Modern Art, whose Department of Design and Architecture is still building its Hicks collection.

Elizabeth Harney wants all her readers to enjoy El Anatsui as much as she does. For Harney, Anatsui's 'adoption of the bottle tops in 1998 heralded a watershed moment, a flash of brilliance, perhaps, as some have suggested, an

³⁷ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 84.

invention of an entirely new genre—a rare feat indeed in the art world’.³⁸ Harney’s enthusiasm for Anatsui’s art is reminiscent of an older style of criticism, a criticism that, with Ruskin and William Morris, saw art as promising some release from the uniformities of and ceaseless advertisement of an industrial culture. Harney follows in their tracks as she relates how ‘Anatsui employs a significant number of young men as apprentices in his university town of Nsukka. They work long hours twisting and stitching the metal caps’.³⁹ For Banksy’s globally-recruited snatch squads of mobile insurgents, Anatsui taps local materials and local labour. The chimera of an ‘organic society’ with its simple crafts that haunted industrial England for so long continues to haunt the global art world. For slightly different reasons, Jennie Klein also thinks that exponents of her chosen genre must avoid the lure of metropolitan favour. Klein fears for the future of performance art when at any time its rebellious energy may be exploited ‘by institutions and organizations that benefit from the appearance of resistance’.⁴⁰ Like Harney, she redirects her readers to alternative production sites, to Eastern European artists ‘working from a completely different set of goals and interest from those in the West’.⁴¹ As Klein acknowledges, there may be no reconciliation to be made between the needs of a vital performance art and the process of canonization.

The question of performance art and its possibly inherently anti-canonical nature is a useful signpost for the third strand part of this book. Here contributors face the challenges market dominance and new artistic media make for museums and galleries. Few of them are as uncompromising as Klein, who, interestingly enough, resides in the academy rather than the museum world. Mark Daniels, one of the administrators questioned by Sarah Crook and Karin de Wild in their skyped discussion, talks about the problems that a regional gallery faces: ‘As New Media Scotland, we don’t often get stuff written up in the national press or arts press. We operate outside that bubble. I’m conscious of that and I try to position the work to such a capacity that the fine art press *wants* to write about it. As such, I have a strong ambition to curate the Scottish pavilion for Venice’.⁴² He sees the rotating biennial as his opportunity to break through the silence of a national press so centered—for about an eternity—on London. Camille Morineau worries less about centralization than a lack of cohesion. In an interview with Helen Reckitt, she regrets that ‘I find it hard to generalize anything about institutions. They are not coherent enough—as hospitals or banks would be—to be analyzed as an object’.⁴³ Recent events give room to doubt whether either hospitals or banks are anything like as coherent as Morineau envisages, but the lack of coherence, or maybe the

³⁸ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 110.

³⁹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 108.

⁴⁰ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 149.

⁴¹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 148.

⁴² Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 177.

⁴³ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 266.

excess of coherence, in cultural institutions has probably troubled every potential reader of this book at some time or other. Why do blockbuster exhibitions bestride the universe while so much interesting work never gets into sight? Must the citizens of Denver undergo a tenth attempt to welcome Impressionism in a quarter of a century?

The discussions about how to organize the museums of the future provoke some of the most stimulating pages in this book. The participants in Sarah Reckitt's wide-ranging exchange on 'Troubling Canons' call for a review of the activities that the museum has historically performed. They join Felix Vogel in seeing historical awareness as a necessary complement to contemporary visibility. Reckitt herself looks critically at the ties between the big gallery, its superstar artists and corporate sponsors. She concludes that the Tate's recent pop art exhibition was not 'a productive context for artists who were concerned with populist and vernacular tropes'. Instead she sees the event as 'a way of drawing audiences—pop sells!'⁴⁴ As Felix Vogel's 'On the Canon of Exhibition History' firmly and persuasively contends, it is not the museum's task to make a permanent sales pitch. Museums are institutions with public responsibilities to the future as well as the present. Moreover, 'the contemporary has to be understood as something other than a category of periodization'. One of the reasons the canon looks so dead to some people is that the creativity and conflict that constitutes an artistic period has been lost. Vogel himself calls on the help of philosopher Peter Osborne, who thinks that "the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of different but equally "present" temporalities or "times", a temporal unity in disjunction or a disjunctive unity in present times"⁴⁵.

Imagined and presented in this way, a canonical work takes on a new identity and explosive potential. Let me take an example from literary history that is familiar enough to be discussed here. Consider two significant disjunctions in the afterlife of *King Lear*. On 18 October 1953, assisted by the Ford Foundation, CBS presents the play to a television audience in the United States. Peter Brook writes the teleplay, in which the play loses its double plot and much else in order to fit into the seventy-five minutes the broadcasting station will allow it. It gains the mediating presence of the country's favourite Englishman Alastair Cooke, who assures the audience that the double plot has perplexed every English schoolboy from the time of A. C. Bradley and is no loss to this evening's showing. A post-show interview with Brook allows them a three-minute look into his imaginative processes. Orson Welles, arguably the country's first great sound movie auteur and an increasingly flawed hero in his own right, plays the king.

Fourteen years later, in a Lincoln Centre complex revitalized by John D. Rockefeller's wealth and prestige, Brook revisits the play as he winds up a world tour. Rehearsals show that the acoustics of the theatre can handle any form of

⁴⁴ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 261.

⁴⁵ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 195.

performance except the dramatic kind and Brook, no longer the mild-mannered Englishman of 1953, puts the board of trustees on the carpet and secures an apology from them aired in the national press. He has now stripped the tragedy of any last vestige of charity in order to revalidate its terrible canonical authority—albeit authority of a completely different kind—for the era of Vietnam and the Kennedy assassination. In each case the work inhabits a present that is the product of a significant past. Behind the televised Lear is Welles's life-long admiration for the Bard, but also a network's strained effort to show that high culture belongs in the American living room. Brook, compelled to reassert the uncontrollably violent core of the play, provides the King with an uproarious travelling court and cuts the scene where a court servant ministers to Gloucester and tackles his high-ranking tormentors. Brook's own mounting recalcitrance would be difficult to imagine in 2017, and should remind readers that what one contributor sees as the 'anachronistic' belief in the 'ideals of artistic autonomy'⁴⁶ is not without its practical advantages. Had Brook simply congratulated himself on his visibility at the Lincoln and the forging of a new cultural transatlantic alliance, presumably theatrical performances would have continued to be inaudible at the Lincoln. Two different presents, two different Lear's. These are two examples of the disjunctive unity a canonical work can accommodate.

Vogel calls for a Brechtian curatorship that will mount exhibitions aware of 'the spatial relations of the works to each other, modes of display and even marginal details like labels'.⁴⁷ An exhibition from the past might be the stimulus for an exhibition in the present that would thicken and complicate understanding of the relationship between the two temporalities. Vogel aspires to a museum like the river of Heraclitus, into which no one steps twice. This is a difficult objective to achieve at a time when public spending shrinks, students of the humanities in the university often preserve their jobs by conforming to a ghostly public good, and profile counts for everything. Yet Vogel mounts the argument on behalf of this self-aware present with great energy and learning. In an enlightened public sphere, if the era of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage can yield one, his suggestions would soon be best practices.

Jennifer McComas shows how enlightened gallery keeping operated in the past in her splendid essay 'Canonizing Hitler's "degenerate art" in three exhibitions, 1939-1942'. Her starting-point is the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of German Art in 1957. Its apparent abundance (one hundred and seventy-eight works by forty-two artists) masked a heavy weighting toward expressionism that, McComas notes, 'would have been unthinkable only twenty years earlier'.⁴⁸ However, the exhibition of 1957, so significant for sealing the canonicity of this artistic movement, was the culmination of a series of past interventions that this essay—itsself a

⁴⁶ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 95.

⁴⁷ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 198.

⁴⁸ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 202.

triumphant manifestation of what Vogel wants from his curators—carefully and creatively reconstructs.

In a not unprecedented move, canonization begins with rejection, when the Munich exhibition of 1937 titled ‘Degenerate Art’ opened ‘a larger anti-modernist, anti-Weimar, and anti-Semitic cultural campaign that began with the firing of “non-Aryan” and modernist-oriented museum directors and art professors in 1933 and culminated in the purge of twenty-one thousand expressionist and modernist works from museums in 1937 and 1938’.⁴⁹ Decanonization is no less a process than canonization and it likewise proceeds on a broad front—a frighteningly broad front in this case. McComas then moves to the complex series of actions that countered this initial ejection, exposing a tangled network of alliances between curators, dealers, and galleries as well as a series of unexpected connections and startling omissions. It is maybe no surprise that in the United States a degenerate European art slowly came to embody all the best of American freedom. However, it had already commanded the attention of professionals as well as patriots, who set to work ‘by drawing associations between “degenerate art” and the canonical artists of Germany’s past—particularly by making visual comparisons to sixteenth-century painters such as Holbein and Dürer’.⁵⁰

McComas is aware that canonization does not lie in the hands of saints alone. Her broad view of how German Expressionism arrived at canonical status demands to be considered in depth. A leading figure in the historicization of degenerate art was émigré art dealer Curt Valentin. Valentin’s shadier activities went largely unnoticed: ‘In the late 1930s, hardly anyone remarked upon the financial transactions with the Nazis that facilitated the creation of an American market for expressionism’.⁵¹ The often-despised British Communist *Daily Worker* did, however, and McComas’s research digs deep enough to excavate their biting exposure: “‘The purchases do not reflect much credit on the Museum, for the works were bought from the Nazi government and only the Nazis will benefit from this transaction’”.⁵² Yet Valentin was for all that an informed framer of his degenerate art, exhibiting works that highlighted the Expressionist affinity with national masters and well-established German methods of woodcarving and figuration. Unlike many other galleries at the time and many exhibitors since, he made no effort to universalize the art he had purchased. This helped to train foreign understanding and soon Herbert Read could assure visitors to the Burlington Galleries that “‘Expressionism....is in essential conformity with the historical tradition of German art—the art of Cranach, Altdorfer, and Grünewald’”.⁵³ By 1942, other, more unlikely, alliances were to be struck up. The Museum of Modern Art’s

⁴⁹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 203.

⁵⁰ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 205.

⁵¹ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 206.

⁵² Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 211.

⁵³ Iskin, *Re-envisioning*, 211.

Armed Services Program was ready to offer the American public Free German Art alongside Road to Victory, a celebration of American values and might. The canon had narrowed to four artists, one female (Käthe Kollwitz) and one, somewhat unfortunately, of Nazi sympathies (Emil Nolde).

Over thirty years ago, Frank Kermode asked 'By what means do we attribute value to works of art and how do our valuations affect our ways of attending to them?' Kermode's answers were 'largely historical'⁵⁴ and readers of this journal should note that they were crucially connected to the fortunes of Sandro Botticelli. Kermode's history was not Jennifer McComas's, though, and in trying to disentangle himself from the pressures of determinism and free play alike, he supplied a historical narrative written in conformity with the demands of romance. 'Botticelli became canonical not through scholarly effort, but by chance',⁵⁵ Kermode concludes after surveying the painter's reception from John Ruskin to Herbert Horne. But was it chance that led so many malcontents in Victorian England to look to the Mediterranean for their deliverance? When T. J. Clark mounts L. S. Lowry as a modernist painter does he do so by chance?

Kermode can only maintain his thesis by ignoring the types of evidence that he has collected for his discussion, and it should be self-evident that no student of canons can proceed this way in 2017. What such students need is case studies like McComas's, studies armed with the knowledge that, as Camille Morineau says, canonization is a process that involves a battery of personnel with a variety of objectives. Much of the most useful work of recent years has borne this out.⁵⁶ Thinking about canons seriously begins when twenty-first century students realize that they are looking at the end of a coordinated range of activities, so that in some ways 'a contemporary canon' is a peculiar animal from the outset. It is also worth noting that every canon looks closed until its making comes under inspection. The best essays in this collection are well aware of the complex entanglements and disentanglements that lie behind the canonizing process, and many readers will want to read them for that reason.

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⁵⁴ Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985, xiii.

⁵⁵ Kermode, *Forms*, 30.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984, Peter Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany 1830-1870*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, and Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004, are all well worth the attention of students of painting, needless to say.

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countries and preparing this essay has encouraged him to give careful consideration to doing so again.

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