

BOOKS

The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude

Pascal Gielen is an informed, well-read academic who is as competent at diagnosing developments in contemporary curatorial and artistic practice as he is at navigating classic sociological methodology or drawing from the latest political philosophy from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt or Paolo Virno. To bring all this knowledge to bear on questions about global art, the multitude and current conditions of production, is, for those of us trying to formulate a political understanding of art for the 21st century, a timely and welcome contribution. Unfortunately, Gielen does not bring his broad and detailed knowledge to bear on these questions, but displays his grasp of various ideas separately in essays that were not written to pursue any focused set of questions and which do not hang together. As a result, this book is too patchy and patched-together to add up to anything more than a loosely assembled series of observations.

The basic premise of this book is not only sound, it is exactly the sort of theoretical work that needs to be done today. Gielen re-examines the status of artistic labour within a world economy that has taken a cultural turn. It is possible for artists to be nonplussed by the revelation, heard more and more these days, that workers have been increasingly reduced to a state of precarity – artists have almost always lived precariously despite their symbolic capital. Artists are also steeped historically in the values of communication, inventiveness and immaterial labour that Gielen, following Virno, highlights in his account of how the world works today in the information, service and cultural economies that are distinctive features of contemporary capitalism. Paradoxically, Gielen is correct to stress that the old romantic and modernist discourses of cultural work need to be radically re-examined as a result of the globalisation of what, to artists, might seem to be a very familiar mode of production. Let me put this point in stark relief: post-industrialism does not put artists in the driving seat of society; it commodifies flexibility, creativity, networking and conviviality, thereby collapsing the critical difference between artistic labour and wage-labour. Thus, whereas artists since the Renaissance have insisted that their commitment to art could not be contained by the division between labour and everyday life, this is not the best way to understand how post-industrialism has developed working practices that colonise

everyday life, leisure, the domestic environment, private life and friendship.

Under these changed conditions for art and artistic labour, Gielen argues convincingly that we face an absolutely new conception of the artist as belonging to the multitude. This is one of those words that divides contemporary political and philosophical thinking. Gielen, who is trained as a sociologist, treats the concept as an empirical social development pure and simple. ‘Just as the consumer is the by-product of advanced capitalism’s transition from a product market to a symbol market,’ he says, ‘so is the multitude the product of the technical transformation of the production process.’ This is Gielen’s preferred mode of operation: asserting the existence of something by grounding it in social developments. There is very little you can do empirically to distinguish the multitude from the masses or the people. Theoretically, as Hardt and Negri point out (quoted by Gielen), one of the key differences is that the masses appear to be uniform and undifferentiated whereas the multitude cannot be understood without recognising its ‘internal diversity’. From an empirical point of view, though, all the collectives of social being have always appeared internally diverse. This is why sociologists often had reservations about the existence of classes, for instance. Gielen’s empiricism does not lead him to test the theories he quotes here, but to accept them as something approaching facts.

Gielen does not make too many glaring errors in his reading of thinking about the multitude here, but his account is neither a good introduction to this important idea nor a serious contribution to the way we might think of the artistic multitude. Gielen is very knowledgeable and proceeds in a rigorous academic way, but his writing is shoddy and his thinking is blunt. On several occasions he refers to the idea that artists are lazy, as if this homespun characterisation was a legitimate feature that all theories of art have to take into account. He says the artistic multitude depends on state subsidies, which assumes a very narrow definition of the multitude and simplifies the mixed economy of art to the point of caricature. On another occasion he attempts to define neoliberalism as ‘an ideology which people can be for or against’, adding ‘no good democrat can have anything against that’. This is inept. Compare David Harvey on neoliberalism: ‘The neoliberal project ... has been directed toward the increasing accumulation of wealth and the increasing appropriation of surplus-value on the part of the

upper echelons of the capitalist class.’ Harvey lists its techniques: ‘Bring wages down and create unemployment by technological changes that displace workers, centralize capitalist power, attack workers’ organizations ... outsource and offshore, mobilize latent populations around the world and depress welfare levels as far as possible.’ No good democrat can have anything against that, surely!

Unfortunately, this inability to grasp ideas key to his thesis is not restricted to this example. Gielen has a very unusual skill: he can take some of the most complex and contested concepts of the day and transcribe them as one-dimensional and trite. Globalisation, according to him, finds its ‘clearest definition’ in Marshall McLuhan’s formulation of the ‘global village’. The book is peppered with such ineptitudes. As well as neoliberalism and globalisation, he butchers the definition of biopolitics, post-Fordism, immaterial labour, heterotopia and ‘murmuring’ itself. If the lack of complexity and nuance here is meant to keep the discussion at a suitable level for students, then Gielen underestimates the ability of students. Certainly the students I regularly meet will find a lot of the ad hoc assertions to be not only unwarranted but also, frankly, embarrassing.

When I first picked up this book I imagined that the title and subtitle added up to something. The chain of concepts that it includes – murmuring, artistic multitude, global art, memory and post-Fordism – I thought, must be the elements of a whole, a conjunction of forces that perhaps tell us something specific about our age. In fact, this chain is more haphazard than that. Gielen has written various essays which have been brought together under the headings of the key ideas in the title.

What you want from a book as disjointed and diverse as this is either a powerful agenda that runs through the fragments like an horizon line (like Walter Benjamin or Gilles Deleuze), or for the quality of the individual observations to be so striking that they punch precise holes through the ideological fabric (like Umberto Eco or Roland Barthes). What you get, instead, is an academic chapter on the problem of a sociology of art, a catalogue-type essay on Michelangelo Pistoletto, an essay on heritage culture and collective memory, a fascinating but inconclusive series of remarks on the absence of the concept of ‘scene’ in sociology, and a lot of generic flannel about some of the leading ideas of the day (globalisation, the multitude, post-Fordism and so on). Gielen is strongest when he sticks to debates internal to sociology. Unfortunately, this strength becomes

the book's main weakness as he consistently reduces complex debates to snapshots of broad social developments uncritically presented. ■

Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009, 264pp, pb, £19.95, 978 9 0780883 4 9.

DAVE BEECH is an artist in the collective Freee.

Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War

Rosalyn Deutsche aims to counter politically impatient, 'left melancholic' criticism of artists' responses to recent 'pressing events' of war, rendition and torture. For her, critics disappointed with anti-war activity suffer from an attachment to past political analysis or ideals that prevents radical critiques of the present. They fail to 'explore art's ability to combine a concern for subjectivity [feminist challenges to notions of social totalities and class-based politics] with a concern about the problem of war'.

Deutsche evokes Walter Benjamin's 'left melancholy', which he used to characterise leftist dilemmas in the 1920s and 30s, to describe a regressive 'mood' that emerged in art criticism in the late 1970s. She also draws on Sigmund Freud's *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, 1915, to explore current manifestations of disillusionment and regressions to 'instinctive heroism' in representations of war. Overall, Deutsche is indebted to Wendy Brown's incisive essay 'Resisting Left Melancholy' (*Boundary 2*, Fall 1999) which draws on Freud (his 1917 meditation on melancholia) and Benjamin to explore the implications of Stuart Hall's influential *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, 1988.

In her introduction, Deutsche insists that 'melancholic antiwar criticism tries to divide the subjective and the material, the public and the private, and the social and the psychic as though war has nothing to do with mental life, as though there is no work of the psyche in the waging of war'. Unfortunately, specific examples of such criticism are not cited or explored. Except, that is, for one seeming paradox. Deutsche appears to associate left melancholy with the winter 2008 issue of the journal *October* (no 123), subtitled 'In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?' *October* 123 included 42 responses to its questionnaire 'urged upon us', the editors say, by 'the increasing sense of horror and shame at our being an involuntary part of the ever-expanding war

economy'. They were also keen to understand 'why the role of academics, intellectuals, and artists in the cultural public sphere has been reduced to anaesthesia and amnesia' after the events of 9/11. There is a tragic irony here for many on the left, melancholic or not. The *October* project, begun in 1976, has been regarded as a prime example of the sublimation of post-1968 political activism, including art and criticism, into academic radical theory with the negative historical repercussions evident in the mournful hand-wringing of the editorial introduction to *October* 123.

Early in the rise of the Thatcher-Reagan right, Edward Said in 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community' (*Critical Inquiry*, September 1982) analysed the dangers and likely consequences for the left of *October*-like moves in the politics of interpretation and the politics of culture. By the late 1980s Hall charged that the left had failed (in Brown's words) 'to apprehend the character of the age and to develop a political critique and a moral-political vision appropriate to this character'. In 1995, Joseph Kosuth claimed that *October*'s main authors were engaged in a 'new breed of polemical theory' where elements were added or excluded for reasons of the editorial board's desire to secure the journal's institutional power in the interpretation and history of modern and contemporary art. It represented and fostered anaesthesia and amnesia save for the exciting insular politics of the radical academy.

Is Deutsche ambivalent? As a contributor to *October* in the 1980s and 1990s, she was part of the journal's early community and constituency, and the back cover of her book has two endorsements by a current and a former editor. She was also on the list of 'over one hundred' recipients of the Iraq questionnaire and one of the published respondents offering 'three thoughts on war and masculinism'. Understandably, she relates war to 'infantile fixation', regressive heroism, and the tyrannies of patriarchy that inseparably link the political and the psychological, the public and private worlds. In bringing together particular feminist and psychoanalytic reflections, perspectives and resistances, Deutsche queries the category of 'activist art' that takes the Iraq War as explicit subject matter, critically addresses the state, continues agitprop traditions, 'détournes "the spectacle"' or produces tactical media. Again, no specific examples are cited, an absence that is often symptomatic of an imaginary Other. As an alternative version of 'activist art', she argues for psychoanalytic feminism that challenges heroic masculinity by employing 'formal strategies developed within art practice itself to provide a 'critique of subjectivity with a critique of concrete political phenomena'. Rather than a refuge from the war, such art can, Deutsche argues, 'create an ethico-political space' enabling a critical self-

reflection that challenges private tyrannies and fantasies of the total viewpoint.

Deutsche's response to *October*'s questionnaire sets the agenda for her short book comprising an introduction and three case studies of video art works with the 'thematic content' of 'an act of war' in contemporary contexts: the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August 1945. The first two – Silvia Kolbowski's *After Hiroshima mon amour*, 2005-08, and Leslie Thornton's *Let Me Count the Ways*, 2004-08, appeared after George W Bush's declaration of the 'war on terror'. Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Hiroshima Projection*, 1999, appeared in the midst of what has been referred to as the long Gulf War.

Although the three chapters provide close, sensitive and informative readings of the artworks from the incisive perspectives Deutsche advocates, the book ends, suddenly, after the final and shortest chapter. Perhaps this is a strategy to preserve a sense of the integrity of radical analyses of case studies produced (following Virginia Woolf) in a room of one's own, or as a precaution against unsettling the balance between the personal and political in some rigid identifications or triumphalist fantasies of a unified conclusion. However, a return to the generalised claims in Deutsche's introduction would have enabled her to provide close readings of specific texts and related artworks disavowed as 'politically impatient'. The absence of a conclusion leaves the book open to the criticism that her readings of the three video art works are examples of self-defence of an ideal.

Deutsche's case studies are consistent with an attachment to one emphasis from the 1980s that 'a work of art is not a discrete entity but, rather, a term in a relationship with viewers', a 'turn toward the subject' that should not be dismissed as quietist or as a refuge. This attachment is consistent with the *October* project, begun in the 1970s, to join artistic practice with critical theory in an attempt to be unburdened by a melancholic loss of '1968'. However, Deutsche appears, now, to associate left melancholy with *October*'s disturbed turn signalled by the Iraq questionnaire in 2008. It may be that these 'turns' are indicative of the effects of contemporary horrors on those who disavow 'left melancholy'. Perhaps they are, themselves, attached more to an analysis or ideal, a melancholic structure of desire, than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present. ■

Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War*, Columbia University Press, 2010, 88pp, 31 col and 40 b&w illus, £15.50. 978 0 2311527 8 5.

FRANCIS FRASCINA is the author of *Modern Art Culture: A Reader*, Routledge, 2008.