Neoliberal art history

David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ and Oxford, 2012. 136 pp., £13.95 pb., 978 0 69115 044 4.

In his new book David Joselit makes a clear case for a progressive art-politics of the future. He asks us to 'take image diplomacy seriously and attempt to imagine how art can function as currency without falling into monetization'. This profitless mode of currency, a power 'as real as it gets', describes the latest forms of image production, the 'emergent image … that arises out of [pure] circulation'. The emergent image is 'located on a spectrum between the absolute status of native site specificity on the one hand, and the absolute freedom of neoliberal markets on the other'. The nativist or 'fundamentalist' tendency speaks to traditional modes of artistic production and reception, the work of art tied to site and place. The migrant or 'neoliberal' work is severed from its original site in order to release the work into 'free and unfettered markets'. And if the 'dialectic … between the "native" and the "neoliberal"' were the central terms of both modern and postmodern

art and politics, then the emergent image – situated in 'cascading chains of relocation and remediation' – is the grounds for art made after art. (That the 'cultural openness' produced by new modes of formatting is characterized *in opposition to* neoliberalism, and not its very mode of being, speaks to the kind of analysis generated here.)

It is hard to imagine a more canonical claim among current academics working on contemporary art than the ontology of 'image explosion' described and embraced by Joselit in Chapter 1. Recurrent claims about the 'vast image population explosion' and how humans exist within 'conditions of ubiquitous image saturation' are the working assumptions of contemporary art history. 'Everyone who inhabits contemporary visual culture', Joselit writes, 'assumes the complex communicative capacity of images to be self-evident.' This self-evidence puts an end to 'art' as the belief that 'images may carry new content' and inaugurates, according to Joselit, the era of 'formatting and reformatting of existing content'; what he calls 'The Epistemology of the Search'.

Joselit's argument turns on new kinds of behavioural patterns generated by art spaces rather than discrete artworks. Rejecting a postmodern aesthetic of the collage, 'after' art pursues an aesthetic of *folding*, which establishes the '*becoming* of form through variable intensifications and manipulations in a continuous structure'. Joselit cites various architectural instances of the 'emergent' image including platforms and differential fields; what he describes as ranges of densities and intensities within a common gradient. If postmodernism was driven by the dialectic of figure/ground within the work of art, the new aesthetic is defined, he argues, by a 'broader oscillation between the work and its aesthetic environment'. How new is this oscillation between work and audience? As Joselit (unwittingly?) remarks, it is 'like Minimalist sculpture', in that it 'requires a spatialized form of reception in which the viewer's shifting position from place to place causes modulations in significance', and in that this mode of image manipulation has centrally emerged 'since the mid-1950s'. And yet we are assured we are on to something new. The politics of this new mode of performance – exemplified, for instance, by Sherrie Levine's *Postcard Collage #4, 1–24* of 2000 – is the act of narrating the 'social lives of images'. The politics are ocular: 'staging of a performative mode of looking through which the single image and the network are visible *at once*'. It is the staging of the performance that produces new forms of *visibility*. Despite the emphatic declaration of 'image explosion', there is little sense that one is in fact immersed in images but rather that art and its critics manage to stage, dramatize and narrate image saturation from a provisional but real distance. The saturation doesn't affect the artist or critic when it comes time to experiencing the work; the works are *about* image saturation, if anything. We witness, for example, an 'operatic demonstration' and 'elaborate tournament of events for objects' in Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*.

The sign under which the new art is made is not, then, that of meaning but of *format*: what Joselit defines as 'a heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content'. Formats 'regulate image currencies (image power) by modulating their force, speed, and clarity', and are opposed to *objects* which are characterized by 'discernible limits and relative stability [that] lend themselves to singular meanings'. Analogue forms of 'centripetal' interpretation are inadequate to the emergent forms of digital image populations. The 'tethering [of] things to meanings', Joselit

writes, 'participates in the very process of reification' – meaning 'bolsters the object' – that progressive art history has sought to undermine. Le Corbusier's centrifugal 'image promenade' at the Maisons La Roche–Albert Jeanneret (1923), for instance, produces a space resistant to the 'enclosure of meaning' and open to 'discussion and action'. Joselit's ideal is the production of works that function as a 'commons, a building or a work of art [that] may *host several actions*, both virtual and actual'. Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Secession* (2002) exemplifies this vision of the common space: we learn that the activities that occurred there – film screenings, DJ nights, a 'big' barbecue, Thai massages – 'shifted rights of action away from the museum … and toward its users as shareholders'.

And whatever a format is, it is, for Joselit, *new*. (Just how new? It never gets old: the word 'format' appears roughly forty times in the book's 96 pages of text). Formats 'channel an unpredictable array',

open up 'eccentric pathways', 'create value through their magnitude and density of connections', produce 'multiple branching of connections' and a 'wide variety of connections'. '*After* art', Joselit explains, 'comes the logic of networks where links can cross space, time, genre and scale in surprising and multiple ways'. It's a politics of newness, variety, multiplicity, surprise. Joselit's closing call for 'newly creative and progressive ways' of exploiting the art world's powers – what he calls (three pages earlier) 'exploiting its complex format more creatively' – is actually much closer to the avant-garde 'make it new' politics it defines itself against. Then again, when Ezra Pound in *Make it New* (1934) defined 'modern existence' as something 'governed by … the necessity to earn money', his fantasied solution, artistic and economic, was an end to the fluctuations produced by exchange, as Jennifer Ashton has recently argued. Rather than producing ever-new forms of cultural connections (at least literal ones) – a basic tool of economic expansion – Pound sought in economic redistribution an end to the 'bad taste' of price fluctuation and the production of poems whose 'meaning … can not "wobble"'. The modernist poem that did not 'wobble' was identified with an economy that didn't either. Indeed, in 1934 in the USA the New Deal was attempting, with increasing success, to produce such a thing. Joselit's 'logic of networks' is similarly identified with a fixed economy: one of rank exploitation by the 1 per cent, the very system Pound's emphatic 'newness' was directed against.

That anyone who is interested in politics should turn to art as their model of efficacy has always required justification. Joselit takes the traditional route: he turns low-degree guilt (an academic position in an art history department) into a primordial power. He rejects the 'lingering tendency to regard art's power as *virtual* – as an epiphenomenal reflection of other kinds of "real" power, such as capital'. But if the mistake in the past was to see art as the representation of power, Joselit wants to see the power of art 'as real as it gets when it comes to capital's effects'. Joselit cites Tania Bruguera's desire to 'rupture the membrane between art and life' with works that have 'direct social impact'. Having a direct impact, it turns out, is in inverse proportion to the work's capacity to bear 'meaning' or produce a 'representation of reality'. While representations produce indirect forms of impact, the production and articulation of new formats are the occasion of new social realities. The art world is more real than the reality putatively outside it: 'It's not just the purchase of artworks, but the self-image of entire nations, the transformation of neighborhoods and cities, and the fashioning of diplomatic identities.' The power of art 'has probably never been greater'. (Joselit's anomalous 'probably' reflects the lasting scruples of his enterprise.) He goes on: 'Art links social elites, sophisticated philosophy, a spectrum of practical skills in representation, a mass public, a discourse attributing meaning to images [a 'connection' Joselit explicitly rejects], financial speculation, and assertions of national and ethnic identity.' The art world's complex 'format' is more politically effective than related fields of the university or film industry. We are told not to 'deny this power' of art 'through postures of political negation or to brush it under the carpet in fear of "selling out." The point', Joselit insists, 'is to *use* this power.'

Joselit takes Ai Weiwei's work as an example of the unprecedented power of art today. Ai's success in the Western art world of museums, galleries and biennials allowed him to further '*speculate*' on his international profile, and he used this capacity to engage in a series of political actions. Ai's *Fairytale* for Documenta 12 in 2007 transported 1,001 Chinese to Kassel, Germany, along with 1,001 chairs dating from the Ming and Qing dynasties that 'stood in as mute surrogates … for the Chinese tourists who were probably invisible as individuals to most visitors to the exhibition'. As Joselit describes it, here Ai has 'given form' to the concept of '*population* … in migration'. Like the other examples in *After Art*, political efficacy is associated not with formats themselves but with the *visualization* of formats for viewers. Thus the aim of Tania Bruguera's 2009 *Generic Capitalism* – perhaps Joselit's central model – 'was [in] making … unconscious assumptions painfully visible'. It is the standing apart from and 'giving form' to 'formats', making the unconscious conscious, that constitutes the political power of art. That this process of visualizing hieratic networks is in fact the traditional *October* model of political efficacy does not prevent Joselit from citing Bruguera's admonition that she does not 'want people … to look at' her work, but to 'be in it'. More surprisingly, Joselit posits Ai's example, which is 'as real as it gets when it comes to capital's effects', against Hans Haacke's 1971 *Shapolsky et al. Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971.* Even though Haacke 'mapped the Byzantine connections of ownership of dozens of tenement buildings … through a maze of corporations and partnerships', this project was, Joselit argues, fraught with failure. Why? Because in doing so Haacke implied that 'art's power is necessarily negative or oppressive in its association with exploitative forms of property ownership.' Against

Haacke's 'critique [of] the power of images', Joselit affirms how Ai '*exploited* the power of art to transport people and things both spatially and imaginatively'. Joselit's joyful science certainly irons out any remaining contradictions among avant-garde projects – the art world is corrupt and it is also ineffective – but it does so at the expense of making its effectiveness identical with its corruption.

Putting aside the one-dimensional account of artworks as 'reifications' – 'mediums lead to objects, and thus reification' – it would take only a little reflection to see that the end of the distribution of wealth in the 'era of art', at precisely the moment Joselit's '*reframing, capturing, reiterating,* and *documenting*' paradigm first emerged (a set of procedures exemplified for him by the work of Sherrie Levine), was also the moment at which the US economy began its most aggressive turn away from equality. In the period between 1932 and 1979, during what many economists call the 'Great Compression', the top 1 per cent's income share dropped from 24 per cent in 1928 to 9 per cent in 1970. The 'Great Divergence' first emerged in 1979 – in artistic terms we'll call it the 'era of formatting' – when the richest 1 per cent's income share began its exponential rise. Thus Joselit's reiterated call for a 'currency of exchange that is not cash, but rather a nonmonetized form of *transaction*', which he defines as 'the *power* of connectivity', has a way of simply being the form art takes not *under* neoliberalism but *as* it. If art is, as Joselit says, 'the paradigmatic object of globalization' based on the nonmonetized exchange of 'cultural difference', then it is paradigmatic for neoliberalism as well, which, as ideology, can be defined by its capacity to turn every (monetary) exchange into culture (exchange), actively obscuring the former with the latter. And to call that mode of transformation *the* model of power today is certainly right, but it is wrong to celebrate it. The newly liberated 'users as shareholders' own stock in a company that makes them feel better about themselves, and when they feel better about themselves they tend to work harder for lower wages. Or maybe we should see things from Joselit's perspective and recognize the form of power hidden in the idea that the 'quantitative density of connections … ultimately leads … to qualitative differences'. If those qualitative differences mean greater inequality but also 'greater political openness', then Joselit has described a real achievement.

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