

Book Reviews

Rebecca Solnit. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters.* New York: Viking, 2010. 353 Pages;

Richard Misrach. *Destroy This Memory.* New York: Aperture, 2010. 140 Pages.

In an obscure academic essay originally written in the late 1960's, philosopher Donald Davidson observes "it is easy to appreciate why we so often identify or describe events in terms of their causes and effects. Not only are these the features that often interest us about events, but they are features guaranteed to individuate them in the sense not only of telling them apart but also of telling them together."¹ We invoke causal relations, and the place of events in some scheme of such relations, in this view, in order to give them meaning, to differentiate them, and to group them under common descriptions. In *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*, Rebecca Solnit addresses the causes and consequences of a category of events—earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and so forth—"telling them together" in Davidson's sense as a political happenings, namely "disasters."

Solnit is perhaps our most acute and creative public intellectual, a prolific and seemingly effortless writer whose beat is culture and politics and who regularly collaborates with visual artists of various sorts. Being Californian, she begins the book at home with the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the fires that raged in its wake. Her concerns are not local, however. She takes us on a tour across continents and centuries, visiting and learning from the sites of many disasters, especially earthquakes—Lisbon (1755), San Juan, Argentina (1944), Managua (1972), Mexico City (1985), Loma Prieta, California (1989) and Tang Shan, China (2008)—but also heat waves

¹ Donald Davidson. *Actions on Essays and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 179.

(Chicago, 1995 and Europe, 2003), explosions (Halifax, 1917), hurricanes (New Orleans and environs, 2005), and terror attacks (New York, 2001). In each instance Solnit focuses on causes and consequences. In so doing, she is able to establish two important things. First, she shows that what turns a disaster into a catastrophe typically is politics in the form, beforehand, of mal-distributed resources and concern and inadequate preparedness and, subsequently, of misguided elite reactions. Second, she shows that, repeatedly, popular response to disaster, while hardly flawless, is never as brutal and depraved as political and media elites suggest. The solidarities and mutual aid that common people display in the face of disasters afford, on Solnit's account, a glimpse at utopian possibilities.

In one sense there is no news in Solnit's claim that disasters are political events. It is now a commonplace, for instance, that famines result not from an absolute lack of food but of mal-distributed entitlement and access to such food as exists. Thus famine is best conceptualized as a political-economic rather than "natural" phenomenon. This insight has been extended lately by analyses of other sorts of putatively "natural" disasters.² Likewise, there is little news in the case she makes regarding the views of media and political elites. She herself draws freely on a significant body of sociological research in "disaster studies" that establishes how, repeatedly, in the wake of disaster, violence and mayhem are more likely to result from "elite panic" than from the sort of aggressive popular criminality that the elites fear. "Beliefs matter" as Solnit likes to say. And the unfounded beliefs of elites, often amplified by complicit media outlets, time and again have provided grounds for what turn out to be needlessly repressive official responses to disaster.

What is new in *A Paradise Built in Hell* is Solnit's expansive vision of political possibilities. In her account, the range of possibilities available to us becomes visible in light of the way most people act in the face of disaster. We do not need to create the individuals who might populate utopia. They are here now. This is quite an inference. But Solnit insists that:

“... accounts of disaster ... demonstrate that the citizens

² See, for instance, Amartya Sen. *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Matthew Kahn, "The Death Toll From Natural Disasters: The Role of Income, Geography, and Institutions," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 87 (2005), 271-84.

any paradise would need—people who are brave enough, resourceful enough, and generous enough—already exist. The possibility of paradise hovers on the cusp of coming into being, so much so that it takes powerful forces to keep such a paradise at bay. If paradise now arises in hell, it's because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way."

It is not that we should hope for disasters and the suffering and hardship they create. But we should not neglect the by-products of disaster: "it is the disruptive power of disaster that matters here, the ability of disasters to topple old orders and open new possibilities." This power manifests itself directly in politics—for example, in the rise of Juan Peron in the wake of the 1944 Argentine earthquake, in the pressures earthquakes placed on the ruling Somoza regime in Managua and the entrenched Partido Revolucionario Institucional in Mexico City, in the way Hurricane Katrina precipitated George W. Bush's descent to the bumper-sticker status of "worst president ever." But it also holds out constructive possibilities by creating spaces for popular solidarity and improvisation.

Solnit is not naïve. She understands that, in normal times, there exist "powerful forces that keep ... paradise at bay." Hence, for her, "disasters are ultimately enigmas: it is not the disaster but the struggle to give it meaning and to take the opportunity to redirect society that matters, and these are always struggles with competing interests." The lethal potential of such struggle is especially clear in Solnit's discussion of post-Katrina New Orleans. There we witness the intentionally sclerotic response of the federal government; we find the Mayor of the City and the Governor Kathleen Blanco ordering troops and police to use deadly force to prevent "looting" rather than concentrate their energies on aiding stranded citizens; we find major media outlets reporting as fact unfounded rumors of marauding gangs engaged in wanton robbery, murder, and rape; we find white vigilantes—both private citizens and police officers—shooting and killing unarmed black men. All these factors, and others, aimed to preserve what had gone before. They contributed to transforming Katrina from disaster into catastrophe. Yet we also find an outpouring of unofficial aid from across the city, the region, and beyond. We find local, activist responses such as Common Ground whose motto "Solidarity not charity" captures the spirit animating their efforts to provide food, shelter, legal advice, and medical aid to

those displaced by the storm and flooding. The aim of such groups has not been to simply rebuild—that is, to replace—what Katrina destroyed but to reform and remedy the political-economic conditions that placed so many at risk in the first place.

Among the first things Solnit discusses is the way humorous, ironic signs and graffiti emerged at sites of mutual aid following the San Francisco earthquake. She comments as well on how similar sorts of spontaneous expressions emerged following Katrina. In *Destroy this Memory* photographer Richard Misrach offers without comment a tour of post-Katrina New Orleans. As his vehicle he takes the ample supply of graffiti residents put on offer.³ In the images of destroyed cars and homes and storefronts Misrach captures, among other things, the faith (“Isaiah 26:3”), the humor (“T + E – We love what you’ve done with the place!”), the hope (“Keep the Faith!”), the bravado and defiance (“Hey Katrina!! That’s all you got? You big sissy!!!! We will be back!!! Norman, Keena, Sean, Lil Norman.”), the grief (“R.I.P Zack”), and the need to re-establish contact (“547-1347 JANE”) among people who’ve survived the storm. He also depicts scrawled indictments of insurance companies and government officials, attempts to locate friends and family who have gone missing, and anguished concern for pets, dead, lost, found, on the loose. There is plenty of profanity and some misogyny (“Katrina is a Bitch!”). And there is bluster leavened by humor, exemplified in the warning sprayed across one boarded up storefront—“Don’t try. I am sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns and a claw hammer!” Arguably, though, one image is central to Misrach’s enterprise. It shows a wood frame house, ripped by the storm from its foundations and deposited obliquely in the middle of an unnamed residential street. In the background a red sedan, trunk popped open, is perched precariously astride a link fence between two less mobile houses. The displaced house, clapboards yellowed and roofing partially stripped, has come to rest atop of a clutch of dark fabric. Someone has spray painted a large black arrow pointing downward to the fabric, inscribing in block letters over the whole “Wicked

³ Solnit herself greatly admires Misrach and his work, which, she elsewhere suggests, encourages us “to feel the conflicts of being fully present in a complicated world.” Rebecca Solnit. *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

Here it is appropriate to note that Misrach has donated all his author royalties to the Make It Right Foundation which is working to re-build sustainable, middle income housing in the Lower 9th Ward. He also has donated prints of the images in *Destroy this Memory* to a handful of museums in New York, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and Houston.

Witch.” In this scene, as in the land of Oz, we see the demise, however inadvertent, of evil. Only here it takes on a humorous twist. It likewise leaves the future unresolved—bleak perhaps, but less ominous than it might be. Misrach depicts an opening. The question is what can be made of it. The back cover of *Destroy this Memory* depicts a boarded window posing that question acutely—“WHAT NOW?”

So here we come around to a quintessentially political question: What is to be done? Solnit astutely insists that “what happens in disasters matters for political philosophy.” And, indeed, she weaves themes, observations, and objections from a host of political theorists and activists, canonical and not, throughout her reflections. She takes as interlocutors Peter Kropotkin, Thomas Hobbes, George Orwell, William Wordsworth, Dorothy Day, Thomas Paine, William James, Gustav LeBon, Winstanley the Digger, Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, arguing and agreeing with them by turns. She admits that the improvised communities that disasters call into existence are typically fleeting, “ephemeral moments.” But she wonders throughout the book whether it is possible to extend them or, better yet, to sustain a civil society consisting of robust forms of creativity, mutual aid and solidarity that does not require that disaster serve as a midwife.⁴ Solnit, in other words, invites us not just to think utopian thoughts but to take the utopian steps of recognizing the resources that already are at hand and asking how we might transform them to our own purposes.

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⁴ Here Solnit makes common cause with others who seek to disconnect political transformation from precipitating crisis. See Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *The Left Alternative* (Verso, 2009).

Christine Mehring. *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. 297 Pages;

Suzanne P. Hudson. *Used Paint: Robert Ryman.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 315 Pages.

In our time, the single artist monograph is becoming an endangered species. Recent titles in art history increasingly seem to be centered around movements, historical periods, or thematic or theoretical concerns. History seems doubly set against monographs concerning a single painter, the twin specters of the death of the author and the death of painting looming large over would-be scholars of Poussin, Velázquez, Pollock, or Richter. In the shadow of these twin presumed obsolescences, we find Christine Mehring and Suzanne P. Hudson's respective monographic studies *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint: Robert Ryman*.

The names of Palermo and Ryman are relatively familiar to scholars of postwar art—Ryman probably more so than Palermo on this continent. However, while most of us at least know generalities such as the fact that Ryman only painted in white, both of these painters remain largely under-studied, neither fitting neatly into survey texts or courses alongside Warhol, Judd, or even Acconci or Haacke. Mehring and Hudson both take this marginalized condition as their point of departure, attributing it to their respective subjects' choice of medium. The question thus arises: how do we discuss semi-neglected artists when the conventional format with which to do so has also fallen into neglect?

Unlike, say, Warhol or Rauschenberg, who made paintings but for whom the medium was not their primary concern, Palermo and Ryman are both what we might call "painter's painters." Following the centrality of painting to Palermo and Ryman's respective practices, Mehring and Hudson both follow the traditional conceit of narrating the careers of their subjects in chronological periods that divide the two texts into chapters dealing with different mediumistic or formal concerns. With Palermo, the task is easy, almost obvious. While the periods do overlap, the first works of his brief career were painted sculptural objects. He then moved on to *Stoffbilder* (cloth paintings), wall paintings and drawings, and finally, shortly before his early death, to *Metallbilder* (metal paintings).⁵ Dividing Ryman's

⁵ This division of Palermo's career into four distinct *oeuvres* was introduced by Anne Rorimer in her 1978 *Artforum* article "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Paintings" (though Palermo

much longer career comes with more difficulty, as Hudson herself acknowledges. Like Mehring's text, *Used Paint* proceeds chronologically, though, as Hudson warns in her introduction, "some years are retraced" (24). She divides her text into five chapters—somewhat fancifully, she has named them "Primer," "Paint," "Support," "Edge," and "Wall"—the last four each dealing with an aspect of Ryman's engagement with the mediumistic characteristics of painting. Unlike that of Palermo, Ryman's career cannot be divided neatly into a few mini-*oeuvres*. The seeming sameness of Ryman's work—most obviously his almost exclusive use of white paints—is countered here by the implication of a developing career in which the artist moves from one aspect of painting to another, successively "testing" the limits of process, material, shape, and exhibition.⁶ It is not necessarily Hudson's intention to narrate Ryman's career as a linear trajectory of formal or mediumistic development, though the artist obviously did add to his practice while retaining earlier concerns through the course of the fifty years that the text takes us through. Indeed, Hudson describes her project as "less about constructing a normative monograph . . . than offering a series of interlocking essays on Ryman" (24). However, the monographic format, combined with the chronological nature of her inquiry, works against what seems to be her true intention: to analyze different facets of Ryman's practice that happen to largely coincide with decades of his career.

Both texts also situate their subjects according to a formative early influence, almost in the manner of an origin story. Mehring begins with Palermo's enrollment in Joseph Beuys's famous class at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Among his fellow students were Imi Knoebel, Imi Giese, and Jörg Immendorf, and the larger milieu surrounding the Kunstakademie included such legendary figures of postwar German art as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Anselm Kiefer. Throughout her text, Mehring returns to Palermo's relationship to his German elders and peers, culminating in her last chapter, which focuses on Palermo's collaborations with the more established and now canonical Richter.

had already died when the article was published, the *Metallbilder* were still new and had not yet been widely exhibited). Rorimer, "Blinky Palermo: Objects, 'Stoffbilder,' Wall Painting," in *Artforum* 12:3 (November 1978). Twenty-four years later, Mehring herself repeated this strategy, adding the *Metallbilder*, when she published "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," also in *Artforum*. Christine Mehring, "Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo," in *Artforum* 41:2 (October 2002).

⁶ The term "testing" recurs throughout Hudson's text. As far as I know, this term was introduced to Ryman scholarship in Yve-Alain Bois's essay "Ryman's Lab," in *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture: Paintings from the Daros Collection* (Zürich: Alesco AG, 1999).

Hudson proceeds from Ryman's tenure as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in New York beginning in 1953, positioning this experience as an alternative to a formal art education—which Ryman never had. Ryman's co-workers at MoMA included Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, and the critic (and Ryman's future wife) Lucy Lippard. While Beuys functions in Mehring's text as both a signal example of artistic practice and social engagement, and as a neo-Romantic counter-figure to Palermo's more sober work, Hudson bases her reading of Ryman's career largely on the pedagogical models he encountered working at the Museum under the leadership of Alfred Barr and the director of the Museum's education department Victor D'Amico. Throughout her text, Hudson sustains her thesis about Ryman's practice, that he "paints pragmatism," through the biographical fact of his work under, though never directly under, Barr and D'Amico. To the credit of *Used Paint*, the force of Hudson's argument comes from her rigorous and persuasive readings of Ryman's work, but it raises the question of the role of biography in the single-artist monograph: in this late moment in the monographic format, is the artist's biography necessary as a kind of rhetorical trope to "anchor" the author's claims about the artist's career? The same question might be asked of *Abstraction of an Era*, though, as we will see, the two texts ask different favors from their subjects' biographies.

Not surprisingly given the nationalities of the two artists—and, indeed, of the two authors—we get in these two texts a German Palermo and an American Ryman. Mehring's subtitle, "Abstraction of an Era," points to Palermo's historicity, specifically as it reflects the growth of consumer capitalism during the German "economic miracle." In her chapter on the sculptural objects, Mehring traces Palermo's work back to his education in Beuys's class and reads the works as a marriage of Beuys-esque shamanism (Palermo "heals" trash and transforms it into art) with German Romanticism's obsession with the fragment, only to argue that Palermo's objects undermine these spiritual associations as they make them. The materiality of the objects (in the sense of Donald Judd's "Specific Objects"), she argues, always returns to sneer at the showy and subjectivity-laden postwar European art movements of Art Informel, the Zero Group, and neo-expressionism.⁷ In this sense, the objects foreshadow Palermo's project with the *Stoffbilder*, whose use of pre-

⁷ See Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965).

made commercial fabrics Mehring associates with the emergent commodity capitalism.

There is a story here about postwar German culture and the *tabula rasa* that the post-Marshall Plan economic reconstruction represented. Mehring gives us something of this story between the lines, but her focus is much more on its obverse: Palermo's "de-German-ing" of his precursors and influences via his enthusiastic and idiosyncratic engagement with American art. Palermo, Mehring argues, misreads the work of a wide gamut of postwar American artists, most notably Rothko, Newman, the Minimalists, and the more systems-oriented of the Conceptualists, and the historicity of his work emerges from this specifically postwar German misprision.

Abstraction of an Era paints the picture of a German artist who would not be German. At the same time, Mehring's text, in tracing Palermo's flight from the Germanic—he literally left Germany for New York in 1973—reveals its own predilection to do the same. Most revealing is her analysis of Palermo's pivotal late work, the *To the People of New York City* suite, in which Mehring gives scant attention to Palermo's use of the colors of the German flag for his color scheme, arguing instead that the color scheme borrowed from Navajo sand painting and reflected Palermo's exotic conception of America—no doubt spurred on by his contact with land artists such as Walter de Maria through his gallerists Heiner Friedrich and Konrad Fischer. Too much can be said about the ambivalence of *To the People's* invocation of the German flag to merely relegate it to a cursory mention, particularly given the important role the author has accorded to Palermo's relationship (or lack thereof) to the German nation and her historicizing of the *Stoffbilder* within the context of postwar commodity capitalism. Upon first seeing these paintings reinstalled at Dia:Beacon, I couldn't help but recognize in their painted metal surfaces echoes of the Porsche logo, which calls to mind the German automobile industry's role in the economic miracle and its inseparable relationship with German warfare (recall the BMW logos in Hannah Höch's *Das schöne Mädchen*); indeed, the suite's epistolary title itself seems to parallel the address of Germany's burgeoning export industry. This elision of the Germanness of *To the People* in favor of Palermo's search for America is symptomatic of the manner in which Mehring's reading of Palermo's works ultimately works in the service of painting a portrait of the artist, even though this narrative frame is of a secondary importance to her text's greatest strength: its engaged historicizing of his work.

As previously stated, Hudson's text takes on the biographical convention of the monograph from the opposite direction. The Ryman we get from *Used Paint* emerges surprisingly from the discourse of American pragmatism, articulating the early influence of Barr and D'Amico through the perspective of such thinkers as John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James when, to this reader at least, a more likely bedfellow would be Jacques Derrida. This is not to criticize *Used Paint*, however; Hudson offers a fresh and engaging take on Ryman's work. The text sets out to dispel all the falsehoods of what we think we know about Ryman. Hudson's inquiry begins with the provocative claim that Ryman never produced a white painting until 2003. His paintings, she argues, were never until this point monochromes, as his concentration on process had always resulted in paintings in which white paint revealed its application in concert with its support. The point of Ryman's work, then, is neither about *reducing* painting to mute whiteness (as in the Minimalist interpolation of Ryman) nor the *idea* of "blank" paintings (as in the Conceptualist misreading), and indeed to pay too much attention to the white paint instead of what Ryman does with it would be, according to Hudson's argument, to miss the point.

The four main sections of *Used Paint* concentrate respectively on process ("Paint"), the conventions of painting ("Support"), the limits of painting ("Edge"), and the site of exhibition ("Wall"). Taken together, these inextricable strands of Ryman's practice constitute an investigation of painting as a *matrix*: a field of possibility delimited by pre-existing formal and discursive conventions.⁸ The following passage can be taken as a kind of mission statement for Hudson's text:

Ryman opens the material and conventional dimensions of painting to a different kind of medium-specificity [from that of Clement Greenberg and mainstream American Modernism] that involves a narrow-band infinitude of provisional answers to questions of what makes a painting, how it is made, with which materials, and why. . . . [T]his implies not a teleology—an obvious, necessary, or otherwise prescribed next step—but a zone of uncertainty to be explored (145).

⁸ This concept of the *matrix* is usually attributed to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. See: Buchloh, "Kelly's Matrix: Administering Abstraction, Industrializing Color," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Matrix* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2003), and "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram," in *Eva Hesse Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

Here, we encounter a blind spot of Hudson's text. In the open-endedness that she describes of Ryman's engagement with the medium's "givens"—his "testing"—the concerns that she teases out of his practice to form her chapters reveal themselves to be inseparable, as painting for Ryman and his contemporaries was always at once "paint," "support," "edge," and "wall." Hudson's isolating of these strands and her engaged analysis of them alongside periods of Ryman's career is admirable; however, where more precision would have been welcome is the way she moves seamlessly between material, convention, and institution. In exploring Ryman's practice, I found myself wondering especially about the latter two terms: when we speak of a *matrix* of painting, how do we differentiate the conventional from the institutional? This question becomes particularly important when Hudson discusses Ryman's engagement with the site of exhibition; we are used to casually referring to exhibition spaces as "institutional," but surely Ryman's engagement with the exhibition space (and what Hudson articulates about it) asks difficult questions about the relationship between the formal conventions of display that help to constitute aesthetic experience and the institutionalized discourses that determine the social terms of this aesthetic experience.

To be fair, this blind spot of Hudson's text points to a blind spot of the discipline at large, and it is to the credit of her formal analyses that this question arises at all. This is the crucial point at which Hudson and Merhing's text converge: we have here two rigorously formal and yet historically sensitive inquiries on the episteme of postwar painting and the manner in which this supposedly outmoded medium reflects the larger social concerns of artistic production in the era. One condition of the medium in this historical period is the manner in which paintings often resist photographic documentation, of which Palermo and Ryman's are surely no exception. Both texts are generously illustrated with beautiful, mostly full-color plates, and yet to see a Palermo or Ryman painting in reproduction is to lose much of what makes them such important, if somewhat neglected, works of postwar art. But the richness of *Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint's* illustrations is reflected and buttressed by thoughtful and thoroughly researched analyses that bring these images to life. To suggest that the format of the single artist monograph can also be revived by these two studies is to ask a tall order of *Abstraction of an Era* and *Used Paint*, rich and careful though they are. But as an occasion to revisit the careers of Palermo

and Ryman in a far more sustained and directed manner than we have previously had the chance to, what better format than the monograph?

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Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?. Judith Butler. London: Verso, 2009. 193 pages.

Contemporary war, and the “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence” (1), is the focus of Judith Butler’s most recent work *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler’s premise that “specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living” (1) intervenes within contemporary epistemological and ontological arguments that inform framing, power, and being. In five essays, Butler systematically and convincingly engages the “frames” of war through her combination of Hegelian philosophy, a neo-Marxist conception of ideology, and post-structuralism.

Frames of War propels the strengths of her earlier works such as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Butler’s analysis clearly builds from the 2004 publication, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, in which she discusses forms of vulnerability, aggression, retaliation, and violence instigated by the Bush administration post-September 11, 2001.

Precariousness is presented as an obligation imposed upon us, and as such, it also serves to mark a series of conditions that allow us to apprehend a life. In the introductory chapter, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life,” attention is drawn to certain epistemological frames that govern “being” and how “being” is therefore constituted within operations of power. It is here she situates reflections upon the iteration and reiteration of norms that govern subjects, and, extending *Gender Trouble*, the ontology that governs the body. Those norms, in combination with the concept of “recognition” stemming from Hegelian texts, offer new insight into how apprehension and recognizability shape subjects. Such a reading centralizes personhood

and the shifting schemes of intelligibility.

In Chapter 1, "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect" Butler demonstrates that contested notions of personhood do exist: those constructed through histories of life and histories of death. We are shown there is no life and also no death without a relation to some available frame. This is not to say one cannot live or die outside of frames, but, rather, that our apprehension of the precariousness of life is governed by them. Butler's analysis of the ontological fields that govern recognition attends to normativity, and how lives are disciplined by these norms. That one cannot apprehend a life as livable or grievable if it were not first apprehended as living is both the crux of her argument and the function of framing, and it is supplied by the interrogation of being and recognizability. Butler suggests that what underlies this apprehension is that which guides interpretation and recognition. The "frame" is questioned through analysis of war photographs as those which "break out" of the frame "or break from" the frame, like the case of the digital images from Abu Ghraib circulated across the Internet. Framing is presented here as both reflexive and visual; it is not simply a concept, but also a process.

In the following chapter, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag," Butler further considers images through the work of Susan Sontag. Adapted from an essay originally published in 2005 by Publications of the Modern Language Association of America PMLA "Photography, War, Outrage," this chapter offers an analysis of the ethics of photography. The phenomenon of embedded reporting and Susan Sontag's final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), are the objects through which she conducts her analysis. Specifically, she discusses the ways suffering is presented to us through mandated visual images and how such forms of presentation affect our recognition of suffering. The visual and textual images read as signs of humanness or precariousness, and, as such, the suffering of those in the degrading and humiliating photographs require recognition. Acts of recognition break and interrupt the grand narratives that surround war and represent victims.

In what is arguably the strongest chapter, "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time," Butler expounds on the interrelations of sexual politics and minority rights by examining the specific case of the Dutch civic integration exam. For The Netherlands, cultural and political modernity is represented by sexual freedom, which consequently forces those freedoms to compete against cultural

anxieties propelled by the recent tide of Islamic immigration. Integration and acceptance become contested symbols exploited by Right-wing politicians to bleed together dialogues of minority sexual rights (rights granted to gays and lesbians) and Muslim immigration in order to position attitudes against either. Cultural, political, and religious differences are central to Dutch politics, given the murders of the right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2002 and 2004 respectively. Sexual politics and secularism are deployed to tangle this debate by positioning such freedoms as beacons of modernity, and using incompatibilities to enforce exclusions. Butler effectively underscores how the framing of such issues, as well as the power of representation and ideology, are used to delimit legal recognition.

“Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative,” the fourth chapter, addresses judgments and cultural practices through a consideration of subject positions. Cultural subjects and sexual subjects are used to show the limitations of the normative subject and how we can break free from notions of their incompatibilities. Recognition, subject positions, sexual and religious practices, and bodies allow an understanding of how we can rethink the subject “as a dynamic set of social relations” (162). Critical practices of interrogation allow us to break free of frameworks used to create, maintain, and promote the subject as well as identities.

In the concluding chapter, “The Claim of Non-Violence,” Butler considers non-violence through the lens of psychoanalysis. Here, many of the themes and concepts nascent in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) appear and evolve. Non-violence is not read as a principle but rather as a claim one makes to another (or, recalling the work of Emmanuel Levinas, as an appeal). Our ability to respond to violence and the struggle with non-violence is found not in claims against individuals or groups, but rather in social ontology. A relational social ontology forwarded by Butler offers a break in the frames through which we consider “fear and rage, desire and loss, love and hatred, to name a few” (184). The analysis here offers a new frame in which we can understand the “frames of war,” and by which self-reflexivity and non-acting advance a new way of resistance and equality.

Frames of War offers fresh insight into ethical responsiveness and political interpretation within the context of contemporary warfare. Butler clearly and concisely expresses a common-sense approach to understanding some of the most topical issues today. The compelling arguments made offer fresh thinking on narrativized

power relations but also how these relations are framed and structured in relation to critically reading visual imagery and visual culture. This might be her most relevant work to date not only for her followers in the academe but also for those with interest in exploring the discourses of war that penetrate the everyday.

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Daniel Miller. *The Comfort of Things*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008. 302 Pages.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller is recognized for his innovative studies of material culture and consumption, outlined in his 1987 publication *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* and developed through more recent works such as his 2005 edited anthology *Materiality*. Though driven by the same mode of inquiry, his new work *The Comfort of Things* departs from what Miller regards as his “usual academic tone” in its presentation of short narrative “portraits” of thirty individuals all living on a single London street that he calls “Stuart Street.” The portraits, presented as distinct chapters, were gathered as part of a larger study of 100 households conducted with graduate student Fiona Parrott to investigate the ways material objects help people deal with loss and change; the results of their investigation are forthcoming. “In the meantime,” Miller writes, “it seemed that the richness of our encounter could lend itself to a different genre of writing—one intended to share our experience with a much wider readership and also to introduce more generally the branch of anthropology I teach: material culture studies” (300).

The Comfort of Things indeed functions both as an accessible introduction to Miller’s methodology and a demonstration of how one can learn about people through the medium of their things. As part of Miller’s promotion of material culture studies alongside more traditional branches of anthropology, Miller prepares readers by discussing the limitations of using conventional interviews to learn about people’s lives. People usually present a carefully constructed script for such interviews, he writes, one that is often defensive and restrictive and doesn’t yield much useful information. To avoid relying on these unreliable narratives, Miller and Parrott asked

questions not just of the people they visited, but of the things in their homes. "We asked what decorations hung on the walls, what the people who greeted us were wearing, what we were asked to sit on, what style of bathroom we peed in, whose photographs were on display, what collections were arrayed on mantelpieces," Miller writes (2). Together, this accumulation of things presents, for Miller, a tangible expression of that person or household.

As part of this exploration, Miller investigates the role of possessions in personal relationships. At a time when it seems we are besieged with "stuff," Miller seeks to complicate common notions that connect our relationships to material possessions with our relationships to people, particularly the assumption that as we become more materialistic we become more superficial, and that our relationships with people suffer as a result. Miller claims that this assumption is rarely tested, and promises readers that "By the time you finish this book you will discover that, in many ways the opposite is true; that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer are relationships with people" (1).

With this theoretical stance in place, Miller sets his first two portraits in deliberate opposition. "Empty" is the story of George, a seventy-five-year-old man whose flat is strikingly devoid of material objects and whose life is likewise unfulfilled. "Full" is a portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, a couple who employ their heirloom decorations, priceless collections, and endless homemade pies in a complex web of social meaning, generously shared with their close network of family and friends. Taking a casual, often humorous and sympathetic tone, Miller moves to portraits of individuals falling somewhere within this continuum, such as Marjorie, a woman who has gradually accumulated an extraordinary number of photographs and decorations in an effort to provide a loving, welcoming environment for more than forty foster children. We meet Jorge, a Brazilian immigrant of Italian descent who sold part of his prized album collection to help pay for his sister's wedding, and Malcolm, who keeps his life quite literally inside his laptop, as his work schedule prevents him from keeping a flat in any one country for more than a few weeks at a time. We step inside the home of Sharon, an amateur wrestler and sociology teacher who constantly rearranges her furniture to clear her head.

Miller's relaxed narrative is bolstered by a decidedly didactic framework, guiding readers through the pitfalls of material culture research and reflecting on his own process. He admits to struggling

at points during the project, and to “the tentative nature” of some of his analyses. He writes of visiting Stan, a mercenary once hired to protect an arms dump in Colombia, responsible for dozens of civilian deaths. He had just survived the latest in a succession of suicide attempts when Miller and Parrott visited him at his home in London. “We could not help Stan find redemption,” Miller recalls. “All we did was to listen a bit. We mattered for a day or two, but not that much” (93). Miller also warns of imposing “the clichés and moralities of some TV script” upon the stories of people such as Aidan, a young man addicted to sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. One couple had a serious argument after Miller and Parrott pointed out the marked imbalance in the number of objects each person contributed to the household. “This,” Miller confesses, “was undoubtedly our fault” (178).

After introducing readers to these thirty London residents and demonstrating the basics of material culture studies, Miller closes *The Comfort of Things* with an epilogue addressing broader concerns signaled throughout his study. He poses an ambitious question: “If this is a street in contemporary London and these are its people, what, then, is modern life, and what is the nature of that humanity which lives in these our times” (282)? Turning to social science for answers, he addresses long-standing theories suggesting that when life becomes “too modern,” without religion, nationalism, or even communism to provide a common identity, then society would fragment into isolated individuals with no purpose or order. Miller firmly rejects this idea, asserting that the individual and the household is now responsible for creating such order, and this order “is still an authentic order even if one creates it for oneself and makes it up as one goes along, rather than inheriting it as tradition or custom” (293). He finds evidence of this order in each of the households he visits.

Despite this independent control over order, Miller disagrees with the notion of a dangerous “cult of the individual,” arguing that most of his subjects in the present study equated individualism with loneliness, living alone with failure. If he were to ask them what matters in life, Miller surmises, they would almost uniformly focus on their significant relationships. While Miller acknowledges that this response would most likely indicate a desire for relationships with friends, family, and perhaps the community, he believes material objects are integral to all of these relationships. “People exist for us in and through their material presence,” he writes. “An advantage of this unusual perspective is that sometimes these apparently mute

forms can be made to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationships than can those persons” (286-7).

As Miller hoped when he set out to write this book, *The Comfort of Things* provides entry into material culture studies for a wide range of readers. Some may wish to simply engage with its carefully crafted portraits, some sad, some scandalous. Others might find the book suitable as a starting point for the discipline’s more theoretical literature or as a model for similar studies. In all cases, readers will become attuned to the complex role played by objects in our lives, and indeed in our relationships with others.

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