

cheaply, became the hothouse to which imaginative young men were drawn, (including the infamous right-wing nationalist Mishima Yukio). Wakamatsu Koji's earlier work *remediated* the print and television journalism of the day, directing "our attention to the material gap between the cinematic image and the appropriated journalistic image." within the spectacle of flesh and violence. The group of filmmakers often published discussions of each other's work, linking through to the debates of leftist forces violently agitating against the grip of capitalist authority.

Another group of filmmakers took a different approach in response to events made sensational by the media. Documenting the life and death of a young serial killer, they visited the places throughout Japan from birth where he had lived, worked and committed murder, recording in a series of long takes the appearance of the landscape and the people found there, with a spoken narrative sparsely recounting the formative moments of the boy's existence [1]. A discourse developed known as *fukeiron* (landscape theory) examining whether what in the West would be called a poetic form could engage forcefully with politics. The author pursues this discussion engagingly and at length, with reference to many other thinkers (including European, though not other *avant-garde* and artist filmmakers pursuing this line of research).

A parallel offshoot from *fukeiron* occurs with Wakamatsu and Adachi Masao arriving in Palestine on their way back from presenting at the Cannes Film Festival. Offering solidarity to the Palestinian cause through the production of a film, *The Red Army/PFLP*, a row with their hosts developed over the images of everyday life in the landscape of the refugee camp and the women who ran it. The contradictions of the filmmakers having involvement with the world solidarity movement, and the movements of other filmmakers including Godard and Miéville of the French New Wave, are examined in some detail, leading to the final chapter marking the demise of the radical movements in Japan, those of both the students and the filmmakers who form the core subjects of the study. Reabsorption into the mainstream of the film, television and official contemporary art industries leave a few of the original protagonists to re-emerge with *kojin eiga* (private film). Iimura Takahiko (reviewed in Leonardo Reviews,

<[www.leonardo.info/ldr.php](http://www.leonardo.info/ldr.php)>) and others including Matsumoto establish a strand of video art that in the final chapter is replaced in the present era by the actuality of Internet social media and still developing modes of activism.

#### Note

1. Fortunately, at the time of writing this review, *A.K.A. Serial Killer* was available online in full and with subtitles, unlike most of the other films discussed by the author; a frustrating state of affairs for the full appreciation of both the book and the films.

### THE NEXT THING: ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

edited by Pablo Baler. Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, NJ, U.S.A., 2013. 164 pp. Illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-1-61147-451-0.

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doi:10.1162/LEON\_r\_00876

In his Introduction to *The Next Thing: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, an illustrated anthology of theoretical essays on contemporary experimental art, editor Pablo Baler claims "Nine O'Clock" sounds the knell for an historical paradigm shift in art towards displacement and alienation tantamount to a Lautréamontian *tremor* of intellectual estrangement. To support this contention, he cites tendencies in contemporary art since the 1990s that include attempts to dismantle master narratives; socio-cultural crises of identity; explosive reactions to social injustice; blurred trans-disciplinary boundaries; destabilized ontological contexts resulting from the interpenetration of real and virtual worlds; indeterminate relationships between the past, the present and the future; political activism and tactical intervention; bioethical transgression; and incipient indifference. The collection interrogates not merely the question of "What is Art?" but what it means to be human and what constitutes meaning at all in an increasingly dystopic, anti-aesthetic existence he likens to an alternative "posthuman" biotechnical condition.

Essays explore such subjects as conceptions of futurity; art as socio-political *agent-provocateur*; perception in an age of simulated and reproductive media; art's globalization and pluralism amid assimilated histories, mutated traditions and migration; post-colonial and feminist narratives; performativity, intervention and installation as political



strategies; spatial sensibility, internal audience and subject/object intersections; axonometric perspective, authorship, the impact on art of political crisis and ecological disaster; Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics; post-criticality; ana-materialism, uncertainty, negation and programmable learning; and evolutionary biology (Richard Dawson), self-replication and artificial intelligence. International authors range from noted visual artists, cultural theorists and novelists to editors, art critics, contemporary philosophers and interdisciplinary professors based in Pakistan, India, the U.K., Israel, Australia and the U.S. with exemplary artworks culled from an intercontinental swathe extending from Southeast Asia to South America.

Widely informed by philosophy and metaphysics, psychoanalytic, cognitive and postmodern theory, i.e. Gilles Deleuze, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, Viktor Shklovsky and Melanie Klein, but also Hegel, Heidegger, Descartes and others, Baler casts his "interrupted reading" in the guise of a fiction for which such literary heralds as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Georges Bataille provide touchstones. Forcefully argued from ethical/ontological premises "deeply rooted in our bodies," Baler considers all meaning to be "directly dependent on our biology," hence predicated upon bioethical responsibility and moral exigency in the determination of future life. He offers Stelarc's freakish transplants, blended biomaterial, disembodied organs, commodified hybrids, cyborgs, prostheses and systems of code as

remotely accessed, electronically manipulated, genetically modified fractal flesh. Such ventures expose the risks that can accompany secular humanism and artistic experimentation, i.e. that ethical considerations may in the future become obsolete, artifactual or purely imaginary. Drawing a clear distinction between ontological speculation and ethical responsibility, Baler cautions that we “participate in an existence that transcends the limits of the merely human and extends beyond, towards all species: the living, the semi-living, and the non-living.” To an era in which technology far exceeds the capacity of the human brain in its reiterative capacity, “Johnny” Sue Golding ponders whether the structural logistics of knowledge systems and sequential loops of algorithmic formulae may one day slip-slide into “synthetic unities” construed as judgments.

This collection joins comparative studies in areas of aesthetic and ethical theory, cultural studies, moral philosophy and contemporary criticism that include works by authors such as Albrecht Wellmer, Barbara MacKinnon and Maria Hynes. Other tangents extend to writers such as Keller Easterling, who applies network theory to political infrastructures, artist-theorists like Suzanne Anker, whose many publications explore intersections of art and the biological sciences, including the initiatives of New York’s School of Visual Arts “Nature and Technology Bio Art Lab,” and artists such as Lynn Hershman Leeson. While *The Next Thing* identifies one tributary of art and meta-theory that courses through the 21st century, its prospect remains partial in relation to the larger scope of contemporary art, which includes work that eschews sensations of disenfranchisement, fear and disequilibrium—this among artists of a more positivist inclination who enjoin advanced scientific concepts and methodologies (i.e. neurodiversity, genomic biology, civil engineering, marine ecology, nanotechnology) in forms of expression less philosophically inclined to postmodern fragmentation. We can point for example to works by Pierre Huyghe, Amy Balkin, Christopher Williams, Peter D’Agostino, Ricardo Dominguez and D. Fox Harrell.

To the extent that art engages with our cognitive-affective understanding of the world and the value we confer upon its disparate particles and processes, the significance of this study is that it promotes critical discourse

within the sciences and the humanities towards the preservation and enhancement of *human* life in an evolving universe. It does so through advocacy of consensual standards of ethical responsibility in the arts and the sciences that do not “recur to life itself as a medium” (p. 128). Such standards are arguably culturally relative, historically evolutionary and under certain conditions variable, yet hold the capacity to advance human endeavor beyond a level of instrumentality, provocation and self-realization to more naturally integrative ways of exploring and reconceptualizing reality. For art, this implies reaching beyond novelty and experimentation, critique, reportage and spectacle, and towards aesthetic coherence. In science, such striving has been expressed by E.O. Wilson in terms of *consilience*, interlocking causal relationships across disciplines such as to extend to moral reasoning. The danger, warned Martin Heidegger, is of modern technology exploiting man’s unique ability to employ *techne* for the purpose of revealing life’s interconnected truths as “an open place” in which art aspires to *poiesis*, a clearing resonant of man’s essential humanity. Baler would concur, it would seem, in his invocation of Duchamp’s identification of an artist in *The Creative Act* as one who “from the labyrinth of time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.”

## MOLECULAR AESTHETICS

edited by Peter Weibel and Ljiljana Fruk. ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A./London, England. 2013. 400 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-262-01878-4.

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doi:10.1162/LEON\_r\_00877

This amazing book is hard to pigeonhole—it is neither a coffee table book, text book, art catalogue, nor a scientific treatise but adequately fulfils aspects of each of these categories. *Molecular Aesthetics* is almost 500 pages long, contains numerous color and black-and-white images—historical photographs, artwork, diagrams/drawings and images from instruments that “see” at nanoscales. The images are accompanied by various scholarly essays and artists’ profiles and statements. As a bonus, the book comes with a pair of

rose-colored glasses—actually one lens is rose and the other blue. Amazing things happen when viewing the artwork through these spectacles.

The first section discusses and shows 23 molecules that “changed the world.” These are astonishing, to say the least, and as varied as water, DNA, thalidomide, caffeine, DDT and polyethylene. The next section of *Molecular Aesthetics*, the bulk of the book, contains the essays and artist profiles. This section is divided into seven sections, followed by the contributors’ biographies.

The editors are to be congratulated on bringing to fruition this mammoth compilation of science and art. “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we register that art and science work together in common problem fields, that are the invisible fields that remain concealed to the human eye” (p. 72). The book is very much about this neo-symbiotic relationship of science and art, though the discussion of this relationship is not without its problems. Root-Bernstein uses the wonderful term “aesthetic cognition” to describe how scientific and artistic aesthetics are, at times, similar and lead us to new levels of understanding. “An understanding of how arts influence sciences through aesthetic concerns can therefore be valuable to scientists striving for innovation” (p. 265). The Watson and Crick aesthetic evaluation and visualization of their double helix model of DNA is a classic example of such a symbiotic relationship.

I have two problems with the whole science-art *discussion* (not the liaison itself), which this book, in certain sections, does little to improve. Firstly, many writers focus on a perceived antagonism between contemporary art and science. This, in my opinion, is a falsely perceived antagonism carried over from the “dark ages” of the 1950s. “According to some scholars, the arts have no positive status at all because they produce no testable knowledge” (p. 265). This statement is so inane it does not even warrant a comment. The scientists and artists that are actually doing the work (together or separately) could not care less about such boring, useless debates. Secondly, many theorists, talking and writing about new media art, verge on the almost evangelical, trying to convince us that traditional representational art (e.g. a portrait painted in oils on canvas) is an anachronistic dinosaur, totally passé and dead. The bad news for these new media fundamentalists