

to its organization and character. For Amin, by contrast, the concerns of European citizens over immigration welfare, security and unemployment as expressed in opinion polls and in national and European elections are mostly generated by the deficiencies of Europe itself and should not be dismissed as irrational. Contrary to functionalist and federalist arguments which perceive (and occasionally imagine) Europe either as the aggregate of already formed national and legal entities and traditions or as a transnational formation with its own distinctive political, cultural and financial structures, Amin argues for a Europe that transcends fixed values, identities and teleological narratives, and hence facilitates 'a gathering of strangers'.

Several issues arise from Amin's proposal for the constitution of a land of strangers. Even though Amin wishes to dismantle linguistic, political and naturalistic binaries, which inevitably lead to the labelling of the stranger as a potential threat, he maintains a view that unnamed political and corporate elites straightforwardly exist *in opposition to* unnamed masses, and that it is the former that can determine the status of the stranger. Such a view does not enable an understanding of xenophobia and nationalism as diffused phenomena accepted and practised by citizens from all social and professional strata. Equally, Amin attempts to defend the idea of a people's Europe where corporate and political interests disrupt the materialization of necessary conditions for a European unification based on the principles of social democracy and at the same time contribute to the fragmentation of people into legal, economic, cultural and ethnic categories. His view of Europe as an important stage along the route to a politically constituted world society might possibly explain his reluctance to engage, however, with specific policies and directives such as the repatriation of third-country nationals, the intensive policing of European borders and the imbalance between the imperative of the markets and the regulatory power of politics, illustrated in the imposition of technocratic governments which inevitably lead to what Habermas has called 'post-democratic executive federalism'.

This weakness in Amin's otherwise meticulous study places him, however, close to thinkers as diverse as Kant, Nietzsche and Appiah, who see cosmopolitanism as an emancipatory project that transcends classificatory elements and definite associations, and realizes the absence of an overarching idea of identity not in pessimistic terms but instead as a creative experience of freedom and disengagement from the dualism of exclusion and domestication. Amin's unabated curiosity and inquisitiveness allow him to

reinvigorate established social and political theories that aspire to formulate inclusive identities and spaces for the integration of the stranger, while acknowledging that the current economic and political conditions of imposed austerity measures and the rise of the Far Right do not favour this much-needed experimentation and disengagement. If, then, the 'land of strangers' may appear, finally, as a utopian project, still Amin wishes to conclude on an optimistic and, importantly, realistic note. While political leaders are fond of stressing the need for integration, a concept that is hard to understand and even harder to realize, Amin shows that actual integration has always been the product of popular struggle. The struggles for civil society and political participation in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and in the south European countries, today, indicate a historical and political moment, albeit a brief one, in which solidarities among strangers facilitated by common interests, by digital forums as well as by the reconfiguration of urban public spaces, can be forged.

Kostas Maronitis

Literally conceptual

Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011. 272 pp., £40.00 hb., 978 0 19979 655 7.

When Olafur Eliasson recently spoke of seeing 'potential in the spectator – in the receiver, the reader, the participator, the viewer, the user', he may have thought he was seeing something new. Marcel Duchamp saw something similar in the 1950s when he thought to 'attach even more importance to the spectator than to the artist'. He had pursued this idea as early as *The Large Glass* (1915–23), a work whose medium (glass) is defined by its transparency to the world around it. Duchamp was part of a generation of artists that included Man Ray, Mina Loy, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, which came to reject the frame as a conservative device that blocked the 'flux of life' (as Loy put it). Duchamp's paradoxical tack was to literalize the Renaissance notion of art as a window onto the world, producing a work that was almost all frame. Producing a 'picture' that was a window functioned as a critical gesture intended to undermine the frame's enforcement of the difference between art and life. Allan Kaprow, writing in 1973, got the point when he said that the 'best part' of *The Large Glass* was that it was 'a window pane to look through; its actual

configurations are forced into accord with the visual environment beyond them, for instance, a chocolate grinder superimposed on a kid picking his nose.' But if Kaprow was still slightly cynical about the value of that 'environment', artists and writers at least since Duchamp have positively revelled in the spectator's incorporation into the work. This is one half of the story Lisa Siraganian tells in her brilliant reappraisal of modernism.

The other half of her story revolves around an unexpected but persuasively defined group of writers – Gertrude Stein, Wyndham Lewis, Williams (in part), William Gaddis and Elizabeth Bishop – who were fundamentally committed to the 'irrelevance of the spectator to the meaning of the artwork'. In the author's boldest formulation: 'The meaning of a poem [for these writers] is entirely indifferent to the reader's emotion, the reader's context, or, for that matter, any type of judgment or perspective the reader could deliver.' But it would be wrong to extrapolate from this view that these writers construed their work as indifferent to the world. There is a deep, if allegorical, sense of the political that haunts their practices. Writing against the increasingly dominant vision of politics as the expression of particularized bodies, these writers embraced a broadly universalist vision of the liberal subject. In a series of striking reversals of conventional notions of the political temper of her favoured writers, Siraganian discovers the bonds between Stein's refusal of punctuation and her commitment to universal suffrage and civil liberties; between Lewis's critique of time-philosophy and his (tempered) embrace of representative democracy; between Williams's concrete poetry and his commitment to maternal progress and personal liberty; between Gaddis's vision of 'disciplined nostalgia' (or forgery) and Bishop's aesthetics of bricolage and a resistance to corporate capitalism.

These authors' shared vision of meaning's autonomy was aggressively challenged by a group of artists and writers asserting the 'necessary involvement of the spectator in the production of the art object's meaning'. The latter group – including Duchamp, Loy, Williams (in part), Charles Olson, Amiri Baraka, as well as a range of communitarian critics of the liberal subject (discussed in a superb coda) such as Paul Gilroy, Juliana Spahr, Hayden Carruth, Leslie Marmon Silko, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Alain Badiou – points to the deep continuity between modernism and its postmodern critics. The latter writers also conceived a link between their formal poetics of the body and the political such that Olson's effort to 'literalize the presence of the poet's syllables' was simultaneously

an effort to give voice to the immigrant body while Baraka's vision of the poetic voice was 'an aestheticized technology of racial community'.

And if Siraganian convincingly shows how modernism anticipates the major post-1945 debates about the relationship between a work of art and the world, her central task is to retrieve a lost sense of the political dimension of autonomy. If for Adorno autonomy had to be defended and analysed as a special (and crucial) form of politics, Siraganian asks us to see how the Critical Theory version of autonomy might 'misrepresent the modernist ontology of the art object' it ostensibly defends. For Adorno, writing in *Aesthetic Theory*, 'the resoluteness of [the work's] distance [from the world] ... concretizes the critique of what has been repulsed.' Which is to say that for Adorno 'what looks at first like indifference to the world transforms instead into total engagement.' Writing against both Adorno and the New Critics (who also project a notion of critical 'resistance'), Siraganian shows how a work's meaning *couldn't* be altered by its users, because it wasn't an object like other objects in the world. Any work that fails to maintain its autonomy, like any object, 'is forever available to the perceptual experiences (as opposed to interpretations) of readers, spectators, or enterprising poets'.

Moreover, Siraganian argues that the work's social immunity was the condition for the possibility of politics in general. Stein, Lewis, Williams, Gaddis and Bishop all understood their formal poetics, their commitment to the ontological difference between artworks and their reception, as a means to facilitate, if not produce, political results. By preserving the *reader's* autonomy, by letting their readers alone to respond (or not) to the work, these writers embraced a form of civil liberty. Stein's desire to 'let each [reader] attend to their own business' was an effort to 'protect the reader's particular, bodily interests and pursuits of private pleasure when faced with the author's interests'. By the same token, those authors committed to the incorporation of the spectator's meaning into the work were logically committed to the 'complete end to politics in any recognizable form'. The latter claim emerges most forcefully in her closing chapter on Olson and Baraka, where both authors, despite their different ideological allegiances (immigrant embodiment for Olson, racial difference for Baraka), 'share the same theory of and commitment to a poetic particularism as a way to safeguard, represent, and then share a perspective on the world, whether racial, ethnic, or political'. When politics becomes a matter of perspectives, then the classical liberal claim to universal human justice

becomes the problem to be solved rather than the ground of shared political action.

In a series of remarkable textual analyses Siraganian tracks the thematic status of frames in modernist texts between Stein and Olson. Stein's overlooked essay on 'Pictures' from *Lectures in America* raises many of the central claims of the book as a whole. Pictures, on Stein's account, are airless things, each of which contains 'a life of its own'. A picture, Stein says, both 'does and does not' belong in its frame. It does not belong to the *literal* frame, while it absolutely belongs to its *conceptual* frame. This is what Stein means when she describes the 'problem of all modern painting' as the achievement of a work that 'would remain out of its frame ... even while it does not, even while it remains there'. While most paintings exist within a literal, physical frame, they are not defined by that frame but rather by the artist's intent. Stein similarly sought to destroy the literal frame in her own writing by her notorious rejection of punctuation marks, nouns and proper names. These grammatical functions, like a literal frame, told the reader how to read (and to breathe). By removing superfluous grammatical functions, and removing bodily cues, her works are able to 'mean what they mean regardless of her readers'.

Like Stein, but in a satirical vein, Wyndham Lewis confronted the fashionable desire to bring art closer to life by eliminating the frame. In books like *The Childermass* and *Time and Western Man*, Lewis derides various materialist visions of the work of art as 'breathing materiality', something containing 'real blood and tears'. Lewis's dissatisfaction with this anti-representational impulse ultimately merged with a deepening commitment to representative democracy, opening up a striking reversal in his political thinking from his earlier affinity with fascism.

Siraganian's chapters on Williams and Gaddis and Bishop take up the problem of the conceptual frame through an exploration of Duchamp's readymade and Picasso's and Juan Gris's collage aesthetics. A close reading of Williams's 'IV' from *Spring and All* shows how Williams sought to break the literal frames of language, those deadened conventions that emptied words of their meaning. Williams's vision of concrete poetry – 'No ideas but in things' – is not an effort to escape representation, as it has usually been understood, but rather an attempt to renew its terms from within. Like Williams, Gaddis (or his projection as the forger Wyatt in *The Recognitions*) sought to renew deadened forms through a retrograde mode of 'disciplined nostalgia'. Wyatt's acts of forgery are, together, a desperate attempt, in a world become

commodity, to 'create something new'; it is 'an act of appropriation instead of plagiarism or counterfeiting'. As Wyatt and Gaddis see it, copying an old master is a perverse act of preservation and renewal through a painstaking 'act of recognizing, transforming, and placing a cultural artifact into [one's] personal memory and conceptualization'. Similarly, Bishop plays the role of a forger in a series of astonishing literary and poetic reflections on kitsch. In poems like 'Large Bad Picture', 'In Prison', and 'The Monument' Bishop acts as a 'bricoleur, making a new, more valuable art object (her poem) out of a found and often kitsch object'. What Williams, Gaddis and Bishop inevitably show is the historical constraints on the pursuit of autonomy. If Stein and Lewis denied the relevance of the beholder's share, then for this later generation – a generation that confronted the ubiquity of kitsch, a commodity defined by its appeal to consumers – one had no choice but to engage in a tactical warfare with the newly democratized spectator's demands. But it is this turn to the historical dynamics of anti-theatricality that stands in some tension with the more basic claim to a conceptual picture of intentionality. At times Siraganian's narrative is driven by an account of the 'battling forces' between literal and conceptual frames, but more often we read of the difference between frames as a difference in its 'source'. Before Marianne Moore 'even picks up her pen' her work is constituted as poetry – the battle is won before it begins. Of course resolving the differences between anti-theatricality and *non*-theatricality would require another book in itself, one I presume less gripping than this one.

Todd Cronan

Coeval

Alex Loftus, *Everyday Environmentalism: Creating an Urban Political Ecology*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2012. 208 pp., £56.00 hb., £18.50 pb., 978 0 81666 571 6 hb., 978 0 81666 572 3 pb.

Revolutions always happen in particular geographical locations and historical conjunctures. That they are possible at all, as clearly they are, means that we have the burden of melding philosophical modes of understanding with the particularities of everyday political praxis to reflect upon them. Within the domains of environmental politics and urban politics, recognized independently, there are important gestures towards these kinds of vigorous theorizing. However, when