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Dan Adler

**Contemporary Sculpture and  
the Critique of Display Cultures:  
Tainted Goods**

New York: Routledge, 2019

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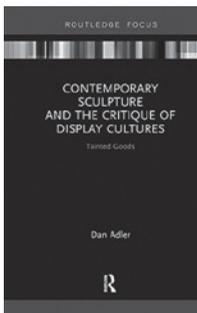
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Derek J. J. Knight

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*Contemporary Sculpture and the Critique of Display Cultures: Tainted Goods* offers insights into the provisional nature of what once was characterized as assemblage art, but which today, a decade after the four key exhibitions Dan Adler discusses, has gained momentum as a prescient or reinvigorated genre. Divided into four chapters, with each focusing on a key exhibit from the first decade of the 21st century, the book examines Rachel Harrison's exhibition *Consider the Lobster* at Bard College in 2009, Isa Genzken's installation *oil* at the Venice Biennale in 2007, *Geoffrey Farmer* at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain in 2008, and Liz Magor's exhibition *The Mouth and Other Storage Facilities*, presented by Seattle's Henry Art Gallery in 2008. Adler examines the kernel of a practice that has become prevalent among artists who are drawn to recycling found objects or materials in ways that critique our consumerist ethos. Always rooted in the immersive experience of the exhibition space, Adler's analyses articulate a language of resistance in which the subtext resonates with references to twentieth-century avant-garde practices in modern art and theatre. Returning often to favourite proponents such as Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, Adler discovers in their versions of experimental or political theatre a basis for his own praxis, which effectively questions an art system that increasingly trumpets the blockbuster show. As a countermeasure, he weighs historical



precedents such as Dada and Neo-Dada, finding in the return of assemblage art a genre distinctive from that “amorphous category” known as installation art (2).

Adler sets out his objectives in an insightful introduction, writing:

I seek, however, to develop a broader range of aesthetic models through which these sculptural practices can be understood to function critically, whether as commentaries on capitalist economies, as anthropologies of everyday life, as critiques of the practices of museum collecting and interpretation, as twisted replications of sales strategies, from advertising, stores and television shopping networks, or as surrenders to the psychologies of accumulation...” (1)

Thus begins Adler's excellent exegesis in which he likens the experience of the artworks by Harrison, Genzken, Farmer, and Magor—and their individual propensity for combining found objects or recycled materials with manufactured components from the studio—to a theatrical experience. He, as the viewer, or protagonist, writes: “We should strive to encounter an exhibition as a stage in which processes of dissociation may be enacted, causing breaks in relationships between what is seen and what is thought, or between what is thought and felt.” (14). He sets their works, indeed the four exhibitions on which he concentrates, in opposition to types of installations represented by Carsten Höller and Rachel Whiteread, citing their megashows in the Turbine Hall of the Tate

Modern as examples of spectacle, or more critically, “passive spectatorial consumption.” (2) In challenging this ethos of pacifying pleasure or playful indulgence as it relates to these blockbuster shows and, by extension, the society of the spectacle, Adler prepares us for what he defines as a synchronic investigation of Harrison, Genzken, Farmer and Magor (10).

Adler writes that his interest in display cultures was galvanized by a previous book he authored in 2009, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History, 1880–1983*, in which he was drawn to the complexity of the German artist and her presentation modes as well as by what one might characterize as the dissonance between her use and variety of materials and their disruption of our ready comprehension. Other notable references include Claire Bishop on relational and participatory installation art, a trend which he casts in opposition to what he calls “tainted goods” and the more improvised works of the four artists who are the subject of the current book (2-10). Accordingly, Georges Didi-Huberman, Jacques Rancière, Juliane Rebentisch, and Trevor Smith, among others, are each briefly discussed in terms of how they signify breaks with entrenched perceptions of art and culture, consumerism and spectacle (10–17). Most meaningful is the embrace of fellow scholar Pamela M. Lee, whose goals Adler likens to his own, by seeking to meet the urgency of how best in their respective writing to address the vicissitudes of contemporary art (23).

In focusing on four exhibitions from the first decade of the twenty-first century, Adler advocates an experience-based immersion of the type that emphasizes the performative instincts of a viewer who is alert to the staged nature of the gallery environs and the sometimes fragmentary or disjunctive nature of the works on display (10). In recounting his own experience of the four exhibitions, Adler reinforces the advantages of an insatiable curiosity, something he likens “... to a process by which we

remain in a constraining (but endlessly productive) dilemma, shifting between states of knowing and seeing" (11). Adler's category of "tainted goods," the potent combination of recycled materials and studio-crafted objects, drives his enquiry. These, to think of Harrison or Genzken, also produce a misanthropic semblance of a symbolic reality in which half-formed or fragmented characters often appear as parodies. Adler's interest in Harrison's sculptural personages manifests itself in his brief descriptions of works of hers which include a pixelated poster of Charlton Heston's Moses and Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*, where these larger-than-life characters are presented as faded icons from popular culture. Adler draws inspiration from Beckett's stage productions in asserting that as spectators—or (non)actors—we are performing a role as we engage with the exhibited components within the gallery space. "We should strive to encounter an exhibition as a stage in which processes of disassociation may be enacted, causing breaks in relationships between what is seen and what is thought, or between what is thought and what is felt" (14). In particular, Adler sees Magor's assemblages as initiating a process of "restorative withdrawal" which, given their ability to absorb the viewer in the nuanced thresholds of perception, encourages a slower if deeper rate of cognition. This, he suggests, is a reaction against "systems and economies of control which depend on rapid speeds of processing" (106).

In addressing the idea of "tainted goods," Adler posits that sculpture is the medium by which the consumerist ethos is most dramatically challenged (15). If consumer or throw-away culture is the manifestation of capitalism, the discarded or spent commodities left in its wake are fodder for the visual artist who sees the value of social critique as well as aesthetic possibilities in using recycled

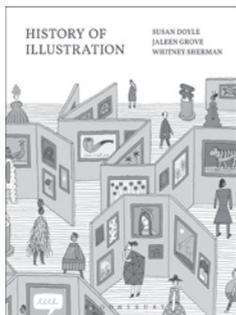
materials. Adler describes the background for this work in Dada, Cubist, Surrealist, and Neo-Dada assemblage as contextualized by William Seitz's *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961. Exploring more recent trends, he draws particular attention to the 2007–08 exhibition *Unmonumental*, curated by Massimiliano Gioni at the New Museum in New York, which included two of his artists, Harrison and Genzken, among those pursuing a hybridized practice that introduced recycled, found, or otherwise unconventional materials into their sculptural vocabulary (16).

In Adler we have an able chronicler whose methodology, which in his introduction he describes as "spoken case studies" (10), is given interpretive heft by his eye for detail and his capacity for both riveting description and critical acumen. Adler offers us narratives activated by both the poignancy and, at times, the absurdity of the assembled elements, reflecting his uncanny ability to reconcile the paradoxes between high and low culture while acknowledging the challenges of interpretation. He stresses that "The beholder should grapple with doubts—about the ability of the work itself to signify and supply insight, and about his or her ability to speculate in a satisfactory way about these tainted subjects and objects" (123). Along with appropriation, improvisation, and a process highly dependent on staging techniques, these artists' approaches, Adler emphasizes, all depend on the importance of theatricality and the viewer's ability to enact a sustained experience. However provisional their work may appear, he suggests, Harrison, Genzken, Farmer, and Magor must also be read within the context of today's digital revolution in which information technologies, computing networks, and big data compete for our attention. Armed with a strong critical acumen, these artists probe popular cultural attitudes while themselves bypassing more conventional, hyped, or

monetized modes of representation in favour of repurposing materials. At the risk of oversimplifying Adler's highly cogent examination, their inherent message is in part to resist the banality of a feckless world in which "high" visual culture was seen to be drifting towards the vanity projects of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst.

Visual artists such as Harrison, Genzken, Farmer, and Magor have each found, in assemblage and related strategies, a medium where meaning resists easy categorization. Adler attributes this to an intentional ambivalence: "... I have argued that [these] assemblages ... represent products and characters which fail to cohere, and which possess a value that is indeterminate and in flux" (117). Within the hybridized nature of these artists' oeuvres, it is the unpredictable or aleatory method that often prevails, in which gesture, improvisation, and impoverished materials—in essence, Adler's "tainted goods"—provoke something akin to a visceral response. Although it would be an overemphasis to describe these four artists as wholly antagonistic or absurdist, they share a preference for "fragmentary and abused objects" as well as a tendency to adopt the vestiges of a provisional language that brings into contention the attributes of appropriation, found or recycled materials, and presentation modes Adler establishes as theatrical in nature.

It is worthwhile to note that these four artists continue to be relevant. For example, Isa Genzken was the subject in 2013–14 of a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which for the first time introduced her work comprehensively to a North American audience. Liz Magor was the subject of a major survey at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain in 2016, curated by Adler and Lesley Johnstone. Titled *Habitude*, it summarized a forty-year career, reinforcing the importance of Magor's exemplary approach to found or simulated materials along with her ability to revivify common



objects by transforming and combining found or manufactured materials. Geoffrey Farmer represented Canada at the 2017 Venice Biennale in what was one of the most celebrated installations of the 57th International Art Exhibition. Titled *A Way Out of The Mirror*, it dismantled much of the Canada Pavilion to leave only a shell in which a geyser of water exploded periodically and in which visitors were also showered from spigots of water concealed in objects fabricated from acid-etched brass. Finally, Rachel Harrison continued to garner international acclaim with her retrospective *Life Hack* at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, which ran from October 2019 to January 2020.

By focusing on these four key artists, Adler's examination provides historical context as well as critical analysis and even intuitive guidance concerning the intrinsic value of assemblage and the cultural role this reinvigorated genre continues to play. His book will appeal to specialist and generalist alike and particularly to those who hanker for a skilled appraisal based on a cross-disciplinary knowledge of modernism and the post-modern machinations that characterized the opening decade of this century. ¶

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Susan Doyle, Jaleen Grove, and Whitney Sherman (eds.)

### *History of Illustration*

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Sarah McLean Knapp

Beautifully illustrated, with colour reproductions on every one of its 592 pages, *History of Illustration* is a welcome and impressive book, offering the reader an introduction to the global scope and breadth of the field. It sits comfortably with previous studies in the history of illustration, which have mostly appeared as inclusions in volumes concerned with the history of art or design. *History of Illustration* collects these approaches into one volume and extends them through its global reach. The history of illustration (and indeed other fields within the umbrella of visual culture) have traditionally been constructed by scholars from other fields.<sup>1</sup> Those interested have needed to weed their way through the few volumes dedicated to specific illustrators or genres (books for children, medical/fashion illustration, comics) as well as a few attempts at a comprehensive overviews such as Heller and Chwast's *Illustration: a visual history* (2008) or Zeegans' *Fifty Years of Illustration* (2014). Both make a good attempt at consolidating examples from the history of illustration. Here, the effort is much larger. The editors have assembled an interesting group of authors from a great many areas of illustration. The layout and content make it accessible to all readers with interest in visual communication, from the overall design and colour-coding of sections for easy access, through clear signposting of topics, a comprehensive index, and a glossary. These, together with insets that appear throughout

the book, allow the reader either to dip in and out of the text or to read it cover to cover. The inclusion of such an array of authors from the field presents a variety of voices and perspectives.

As a compendium, the volume introduces global traditions (specifically India, China, Japan, United States, Britain, Canada and generally the Islamic world, Africa, Latin and North America, and Europe), situating these traditions within discussion of the power of images, mass media, and digital production. The volume is arranged as a chronology extending from prehistory to the present day, although most of the focus is on the 1800s–2010s. Within these large subject areas, the authors drill down to examine the uses of illustration as meaning-making through representations of the natural world (scientific and medical illustration); popular culture, i.e., printed ephemera, posters, advertising, fashion, science fiction, comics, pulp, and social media; journalism and caricature; control (propaganda, wartime imagery, posters, advertising); technological and historical developments; and global approaches.

There are interesting chronological arcs in some chapters. For instance, Chapter Eight, "Illustration in the African Context," by Bolaji Campbell, features a very strong history and analysis of illustration and editorial work in the modern era on that continent. Chapter Seventeen, "Six Centuries of Fashion Illustration, 1540–early 2000s," by Pamela Parmal, ends with a rich and highly relevant discussion of the revival of fashion in the twenty-first century. Chapter Twenty, "Diverse American Illustration Trends in Periodicals, 1915–1940," by Roger Reed with a contribution by Grove, features a thought-provoking discussion questioning whether murals and prints are art or illustration—although I wondered if this might have been a useful discussion for in the first part of the book. The last chapter, Chapter Twenty-Nine,