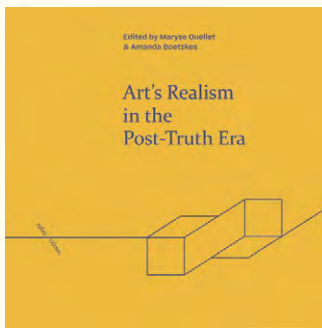


consacrés à Riopelle. En espérant que les recherches mentionnées par Porter proposeront de nouvelles perspectives critiques sur l'œuvre de l'un des artistes les plus connus du modernisme québécois.

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- 1 Par exemple : Sylvie Lacerte, dir., *Riopelle, à la croisée des temps*, Ottawa, Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, 2023 ; François-Marc Gagnon, *Jean Paul Riopelle : sa vie et son œuvre*, Toronto, Institut de l'art canadien, 2019, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/fr/livres-dart/jean-paul-riopelle/>.



Maryse Ouellet and Amanda Boetzkes, eds.  
*Art's Realism in the Post-Truth Era*  
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 \$125.00US (hardcover)  
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/ James Michael Levinsohn and  
 Rupert Nuttle /

“[A]rt has rejuvenated its historical and aesthetic engagement with realism,” declare Maryse Ouellet and Amanda Boetzkes, the editors of *Art's Realism in the Post-Truth Era*. Comprising eleven essays by a range of scholars, the volume draws on an eclectic set of objects and case studies, from particle physics and video art to makeup tutorials and climate phenomena. Spanning disciplines across “the arts,” from music and film theory to literary studies and aesthetic philosophy, the collection is unified by its attention to how aesthetic practices respond to, and intervene in, the epistemological crises of our time. In their introduction, Ouellet and Boetzkes establish that “we” (the first-person plural is the book's dominant voice) are witnessing “the tremor of an epochal shift”

connected to anthropogenic climate change, late-capitalist indenture, and the ubiquity of social media (12). Chief among these indicators, Ouellet and Boetzkes contend, is the advent of “post-truth,” a concept that has gained currency alongside the rise of right-wing populism in recent decades. Whether understood as a genuine tear in the fabric of the real, or as a symptom of media saturation “in the throes of a highly distressing global condition,” one effect of the post-truth era has been the destabilization of what it means to share and inhabit a verifiable reality (11).

Enter “art's realism.” Ouellet and Boetzkes propose that a “new realist attitude” has emerged in the critical humanities and a new artistic realism has arisen in turn, characterized as a distinct, agential purchase upon the real by aesthetics (8). According to the authors, art's realism “assembles a new relationship between images, testimony and truth precisely through a surfeit of mediatic forms” (11). That is, by working within an unmoored and oversaturated media landscape, art creates a “riposte” to the post-truth condition (1). *Art's Realism in the Post-Truth Era* is neither comprehensive nor programmatic in structure, but its thematic adjacencies point to a central thesis—that art's realism resides in the multiple vectors through which the real world continually eludes human apprehension. It holds together not through a unified theory of art and life, as in the modernist avant-garde, but by a seemingly opposite force: an epistemic *spreading out*, generated by a particular type of aesthetic and political disjuncture—one that intervenes directly in the construction of the real. After post-truth, with reality's corroded infrastructures laid bare, Ouellet and Boetzkes posit that “art engages the disappearance of reality at the very point of its mediatization” and might yet “save us from the total occlusion of the real event” (11–12), an engagement whose multifarious potentials the volume's essays showcase. Nonetheless, the collection's emphasis on the novelty of the strategies offered for post-truth's artistic remediation obscures their continuity with longer histories of realism's reinvention in response to epistemological crisis.

Death—especially mass death—appears throughout the book as a privileged site for apprehending reality. Itay Sapir's chapter gives a template for reading Caravaggio's paintings in terms of their

“Thanatological Realism”—a preoccupation with the untraceable instant that separates life from death—which aligns with the long-standing idea that “the negation of life [is] the only aspect of reality one can verifiably be sure of” (140). Indeed, from Caravaggio through Géricault, to Courbet and beyond, the pursuit of truth in the Western canon has often involved an intimacy with death. Meanwhile, the experience of “ecological intimacy”—between humans and nonhumans—anchors Jeff Diamanti’s meditation on the aesthetics of algal bloom, analyzing both NASA satellite images and Alice dos Reis’s films (186) in his chapter “Carried by Currents: Intimate Beings Between First and Second Nature.” Borrowing from the poetics of marine microbiology, Diamanti likens the aesthetics of warming-ocean imagery to the ecological crisis itself: latent, immersive, and undulating at the threshold of corporeal perceptibility. In her chapter on collaborative world-making in contemporary Inuit art, Boetzkes mirrors Diamanti’s climate-realist tenor. Boetzkes teases out the “re-origination of colonial contact, in and through intimate exchange” through close readings of works by Shuvina Ashoona and the collective Isuma, arguing that such re-originations challenge settler climate science’s totalizing hold on “time, the future, and the state of the planet” (249). Dagmara Genda’s contribution, in turn, complements Boetzkes’ by checking the “blind spots” (and moralist tendencies) of the art world writ large, considering pieces by Ai Weiwei and Renzo Martens relative to her own practice (281).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the book’s most surprising take—at least for the art historian trained to associate realism with a movement in nineteenth-century French painting—is Jocelyn Benoist’s essay “The Real Sound of Music.” Benoist has contributed elsewhere to the humanities’ return to reality with his philosophical work on “contextual realism,”<sup>2</sup> a theory he applies here to the paradigm of “ideality” in Western music’s tuning and instrumentation (122). By concretizing the experience of a shared world through listening, Benoist suggests, “music...makes a *certain reality count*” (117, original emphasis). Jens Schröter addresses the same question, of what makes reality count, in an essay about trace-making in the field of quantum mechanics—a discipline that handles phenomena so fast and miniscule that the assertion

of their existence depends almost entirely on the habits of large-scale computer models. Fundamentally, Schröter asks, do particle physics’ “simulation-trained machine learning systems produce a superior realism, based on much more data? Or is it post-truth realism in the sense that simulations decide what can count as an index” (270)? The resonance of Benoist and Schröter’s concerns directs toward a larger question: what is the role of the indexical trace for art’s realism in the post-truth era?

Ouellet’s chapter, “Revealing Through Opacity, or How to Expose Truth in the Post-Truth Era,” gives the most concise picture of the book’s position. Ouellet examines “the revelatory potential of concealment” at work in Eva and Franco Mattes’ video series *The Bots* (2020), wherein actors re-perform the harrowing testimonies of online content moderators, disguised in the now-familiar format of makeup tutorial videos (312). Ouellet argues that by playing between scales and registers of aesthetic distance, the artists “re-veil” (echoing the French verb *réveiller*—“to awaken”) the very truths that companies like Facebook and TikTok actively suppress (318). She positions Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (“alienation effect”) as a historical precedent to suggest that the Mattes’s makeup tutorial-style videos invert the “defamiliarisation” of reality, instead rendering the strange familiar in a counterintuitive maneuver befitting the post-truth era (304).

Western Marxism’s interwar debates over the political value of realist representation, in which Brecht was a key protagonist, merit further consideration. Ouellet’s concerns about post-truth’s mediatic condition—that transparency now exists in inverse proportion to the truth, and about the proper artistic strategies to expose this condition—find important parallels in those earlier debates, as exemplified by Brecht’s critique of photography’s putatively unmediated access to reality. Responding to Albert Renger-Patzsch’s aesthetically pleasing photographs of factories, Brecht judged that “a simple ‘reproduction of reality’ is now less than ever able to say anything about reality,”<sup>3</sup> while Walter Benjamin complained that “photography is unable to convey anything...other than, ‘What a beautiful world!’”<sup>4</sup> Photography, the *de facto* realist medium, could not transcend reality’s surface to describe the actual

nature of social relations; it could only affirm their appearances through its seeming transparency.

Carl Gelderloos has argued that Benjamin and Brecht's target was less photography itself and more the "obscuring aestheticization of complex social realities" in an increasingly commodity- and media-saturated interwar Germany—the same process Benjamin saw guiding fascism's transformation of politics into aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Ouellet and Boetzkes' diagnosis of our contemporary moment is presaged by this century-old association between authoritarianism and false transparency. And the representational strategies proposed by Benjamin for rending the transparent veil of appearances to uncover the truth are not dissimilar from the opaque realisms Ouellet and Boetzkes commend. In their introduction, the editors identify Georges Didi-Huberman's public presentation of four photographs from the Auschwitz extermination chambers in 2003 as an important turning point for reinvigorating realism. They suggest that these photographs spoke to the reality of the death camp not by representing it, but instead through their categorical inadequacy to convey the true horror of historical experience. Here, photography, the indexical medium *par excellence*, underlines the privileged access it provides to the real—albeit now through its limits, its opacity rather than transparency.

Save for Schröter's essay on particle physics visualizations, the essays in *Art's Realism* generally treat photography as the medium that most directly guarantees a connection between aesthetic and ontological realities—that, in the words of Ian Verstegen, "photographs contain within themselves islands of the world, hunks of ontological completeness" (99). Markus Klammer's essay similarly rests on the contention that the photographic image bears an inexorable link to its referent in empirical reality by functioning as a "light imprint" of that reality (60). Notably, Klammer positions Stanley Cavell's realist theory of photography in opposition to "Pictures Generation" artists like Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Richard Prince, whom he associates with the postmodern movement as a whole. Klammer argues that by appropriating and recontextualizing found imagery, these artists sought to "unmask" postmodernism as a world of endless simulacra—which in turn reduced

aesthetic realism to a "reactionary style...of rendering the historically or geographically remote" (56).

But this dichotomy—between a realist view of photography as ontologically anchored and a postmodern view of photography as circulating simulacra—oversimplifies the medium's relationship to the real as it was theorized and practiced in the late twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Within such elisions of historical complexity, of which Klammer's is but one demonstration, lurks the unaddressed question at the core of *Art's Realism*: exactly how new are the conditions of the post-truth era and the strategies of artistic remediation that respond to it? What is the value of the novelty the book so insistently ascribes? To be sure, the fracturing of the last century's public sphere, with its agreed-upon truths guaranteed by expert authority, into competing partisan factions, each with their own "affiliative truths," does present historically distinct epistemological and representational challenges (8). This is especially relevant for the artists discussed, such as Eva and Franco Mattes, the collective Isuma, or Alice dos Reis, who must, under vexed conditions, first re-establish a kind of reality before attempting to address it or help resolve its inequities. *Art's Realism* in the Post Truth Era's insistence upon the importance of artistic practice in responding to the current crisis of truth is impressive, its ambition only strengthened by the volume's breadth of topics. But the quandaries of the post-truth era are not discontinuous from those of earlier periods in industrial modernity. And while the call to re-theorize and ultimately "rejuvenate" artistic realism has again become urgent, such a call does not need to be new to be valuable.

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- 1 For further discussion of “a culture that demands its ideology be unambiguously reflected in its art,” see Rosanna McLaughlin’s recent comments on art-world “Liberal Realism” in her book *Against Morality* (Floating Opera Press, 2025).
- 2 Jocelyn Benoist, *Toward a Contextual Realism* (Harvard University Press, 2021).
- 3 Bertolt Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozess. Ein soziologisches Experiment, in Werke. Grosse Kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, Schriften I*, eds. Werner Hecht et al. (Berlin: Aufbau, 1988), 469.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings et al. (Belknap, 2005), 775.
- 5 Carl Gelderloos, “Simply Reproducing Reality: Brecht, Benjamin, and Renger-Patzsch on Photography,” *German Studies Review*, 37, no. 3 (October 2014): 554.
- 6 Rosalind Krauss, for instance, ascribed importance to found photographic imagery precisely because its status as an indexical light imprint confers an umbilical, unbreakable link to its referent. See Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68–81; and “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, pt. 2,” *October* 4 (Autumn 1977): 58–67. On the other hand, photographic theorist-practitioners like Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula rejected citational practices, arguing that they merely reproduced the conditions they claimed to critique. Meanwhile, both camps claimed the legacy of the interwar Weimar photographic avant-garde: Krauss and her allies positioned appropriation as an heir to Dadaist photomontage, while Rosler and Sekula paradoxically retooled Benjamin and Brecht into a foundation for renewed realist practice. For historical perspective on Krauss and others’ treatment of photomontage, see Andrés Mario Zervigón, “The Photomontage Activity of Postmodernism,” *History of Photography* 43, no. 2 (2019): 130–43. For the historical significance of Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler’s work, see Nicholas Forbes-Cross, “Various Representational Tasks: Art and Activism in the Early Work of Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Fred Lonidier, 1967-1976” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016); and *The Uses of Photography: Art, Politics, and the Reinvention of a Medium*, ed. Jill Dawsey (Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego and University of California Press, 2016).



Maxime Coulombe

*Désir du noir. Sur le gothique*

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/Florent Michaud et  
Anne-Julie Richard/

« On ne peut ramener les poissons de grande profondeur à la surface » (p. 18), écrit Maxime Coulombe. Et pourtant, il semble que le projet de son dernier ouvrage, *Désir du noir. Sur le gothique*, tient cet ambitieux pari : il faudra, pour comprendre ce qui anime le gothique, ramener à la surface de la conscience ce qui loge dans ses profondeurs. Mais comment faire la lumière sur ce qui se tapit dans la pénombre ? Sous l'éclairage des projecteurs, le noir perd son essence. Il est difficile d'observer les ombres sans les chasser.

Le terme « gothique » est souvent utilisé pour décrire un style architectural ou un genre littéraire : il évoque, à la fois, les cathédrales médiévales et les romans de la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Si *Désir du noir* prend ces axiomes comme point de départ, il invite néanmoins à un élargissement de la notion de gothique. Pour ce faire, Coulombe nous convoque à une promenade noire, à travers la littérature, le cinéma et la culture visuelle. Il ne s'agit pas, pourtant, de mener une chasse aux motifs gothiques à travers l'histoire des arts, mais plutôt de souligner la façon dont ressurgit une certaine sensibilité sombre, une certaine atmosphère noire. C'est dire que l'ambition de l'ouvrage consiste moins à raconter l'histoire du gothique, qu'à en broser un portrait ontologique, voire qu'à en esquisser une phénoménologie.