

# Liquidated subjects

Alexi Kukuljevic, *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017). 152pp., £11.99 pb., 978 0 26253 419 2

When Gilles Deleuze described his work on the history of philosophy as an act of buggery, and showed how Kant and his likenesses could be made the fathers of monsters each would have to recognise as their own, something changed in philosophy's sense of its own orientation – dutiful exegesis quickly came to seem a way of standing in line once the age of ataraxy and anchorites had come to an end, the famed philosopher's stone a means for attracting metals precious but ultimately unproductive. But if it is to be thus concluded that philosophy must now call quits on its pursuit of the *summum bonum*, relinquish all previous claims to totality and proceed, instead, as something like an obstetrics of spirit gone to ground, then one might first ask after the kind of midwife to which the contemporary philosopher can still aspire now that all that was once so pregnant with consequence appears positively hapless and stillborn.

'It is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era', announced Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807. Some eighty years of revolution and retrenchment later, that long-deferred 'dawning day' was prophesied again, this time at the close of Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*, a book dedicated to those free spirits 'seek[ing] the philosophy of morning', even if such spirits did not in fact exist, as Nietzsche would later admit, but had instead to be invented, 'as compensation for a lack of friends.' That the daybreak divined should have given way to the neon of a new pastiche and a generation now assured of its lack of a future could still entrust itself to thinkers and sureties made for the marquee is enough to caution contemporaries against the allure of an earnestness oblivious of its opposite. In Alexi Kukuljevic's *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently*, such ardent servility is replaced by a century of literary and artistic practice that took the absurd absolutely seriously. Here a set of 'absentee or dissolute subject[s]', including comedian-impersonators like Thomas Bernhard and Andy Kaufman, surrealists, symbolists, pataphysicians and conceptual artists like Jacques Vaché, Alfred Jarry, Marcel Duchamp and Marcel

Broodthaers, as well as modernists like Paul Valéry and Charles Baudelaire, are presented within a series of 'theoretical portraits' that demonstrate the precise point at which the absurd becomes itself conceptual.

Yet, just as *Liquidation World* makes the last hundred years of experimental art and literature unfamiliar once again, so the reader cannot help but note how the book's singular enthusiasm for, and ambivalence towards, its artistic and philosophical forebears scrambles all traditional lines of paternity and production, sweeping away the shibboleths of a contemporary philosophy of art that still consistently lacks what it has always most plainly promised: either the philosophy or the art. For while Marx is invoked, Hegel set to work and Agamben rerouted through circuits now pixelated and patented, nothing of the rancour of the schismatic comes through and not a trace of the zealot can be discerned. As *Liquidation World* transforms doctrine into doggerel, and dogma into debasement, the reader is left to wonder what will play the part vacated by so many former authorities. Often some clue to a book's purpose can be found wherever the author invokes the terms of his or her title. Here, however, when the words 'liquidation world' appear on the book's first page, the expected copula is withheld and instead a colon is joined to this titular world's side. The expectation of easy answers is replaced by the simplest of orders: 'everything must go'.

Though the words belong to Kukuljevic, something of the discursive scene they evoke recalls the first decades of the twentieth century and returns the reader to a time when art could still scandalise and when any attempt at undermining sense, subject or some other standard of measure was understood to be inherently political – to a time, in other words, now long since past. Recalling those times when relations between art, politics and philosophy were, if not more clear, than at least more certain, may thus prove instructive.

Paris, 1929: André Breton's 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' is published and introduces a new political, aesthetic and philosophical orthodoxy within which

Georges Bataille, author of essays with titles such as ‘The Big Toe’ and ‘Solar Anus’, becomes one of its choice, newly identified heretics. Because Bataille uses words like ‘befouled, senile, rank, sordid, lewd, [and] doddering’, as though they do not signify some ‘unbearable state of affairs’, as Breton thinks they must, that most base of materialists is indicted for a transgression Marx himself is said to have condemned in all those ‘hair-philosophers, fingernail-philosophers, toenail-philosophers, [and] excrement-philosophers’ that constitute the pestilence of every age. That Breton’s charge would have sent someone like Bataille into hysterics is likely not lost on the author of *Liquidation World*. Indeed, the now century-old imperative that philosophy should pursue the greater glory of revolutionary politics and assume the mantle of some bespoke militancy seems to have today definitively passed over into irrelevance. Where philosophy still functions within the artistic and political nexus it inherited, it now does so as a legitimating discourse for an artworld whose straddling of the rift between penury and preposterous wealth requires that it ally itself with philosophemes whose words may have once denominated concepts but which now persist past the point beyond which philosophy’s contemporary evisceration has made of each little more than a token of some nascent superstition. If *Liquidation World* is right and the work resulting from these absentee subjects’ identifications with their own extinction remains essential to the tradition of artist-philosophers that Kukuljevic both analyzes and embodies, then it may be necessary to rethink this art’s pitiless judgment on the state of contemporary philosophy and politics, and ask again how the most advanced philosophical consciousness might have as its condition an art that is its kin in a ruin as earnest as it is ebullient.

Some thirty years ago, Elisabeth Lenk posed a question that, departing though it does from *Liquidation World*’s expressed intentions, nevertheless converges with its ends: ‘The question I would like to ask today’, Lenk wrote, ‘is whether surrealism ... was and is not precisely the practice that is appropriate to critical theory; and whether, on the other hand, critical theory was and is not precisely the theory towards which surreal practice was oriented.’ No answer to this question was forthcoming, of course, but there is something in *Liquidation World*’s insistence upon the cognitive import of contem-

porary art that recalls critical theory’s own attempt at capturing a truth otherwise resistant to concept and expression alike. By pursuing this task, Kukuljevic gives back to artworks what each most wants – to be reckoned with, not as effects of knowledge, but as its agent.



It may seem surprising, however, that art’s cognitive capability should emerge from what might otherwise be regarded as little more than a many-sided portrait of modern subjectivity, as though Kukuljevic had, in conformity with tradition, privileged subject and not object as the organ of artistic knowledge. But this concern is allayed when one sees what *Liquidation World* does to the subject of art. For what unites the various comedians, readymade artists, fetishists, nihilists, melancholics and dandies studied here is not only that each no longer believes in the integrity of the person – a rather inoffensive insight long since learned by heart – but also that Kukuljevic will show how the artistic subject that knows itself to be an object like any other must then look on as the artwork, returning its gaze, sees there an artist unkept by genius, a wasted something ‘on the verge of

being nothing more than a heap of clothes’.

In *Liquidation World* it is not the artist, but the artwork that registers what Kukuljevic calls the ‘slow wheeze of art’s substance’ – and then draws the necessary consequences, acclimatising itself to the detritus of a culture that is still mistakenly talked about as being somehow starved of either sense or purpose, stuck somewhere between a living or a dead culture that art, politics and philosophy are given the task of enlivening. To say this, however, is to forget that it is precisely the readymade, that form of artistic production closest to the contemporary, that long ago realised that the only way art is still possible is in the form of a ‘fossilised identity’ at once incapable of life and unable to expire, a bone of culture much prized, much hated, and beyond either growth or decay. By sincerely presenting itself as a thing it is not, the readymade’s annihilating novelty is shown to have made of the most inconspicuous of objects a force to threaten the whole of the field of art. Its knowledge of nullity and value present a paradigm for contemporary artistic subjectivity.

It is, then, not only the readymade that knows what has become of the contemporary subject; artists themselves are no less appraised of what it means to be a subject without content. Indeed, each knows far more than it is willing to let on. And for good reason – for if it is true that one’s position within the social field rests on the stability of a scale meant to measure one’s nearness to that which is either most base or most noble, then what is one to do with this artistic hyperconsciousness of absolute nullity? Its most base precondition, that skull, bone and mineral matter which is the true seat of consciousness, cannot be acknowledged without undermining the very priority of consciousness through which the human is said to reign preminent. Identification with some socially sanctioned stuff like person or personality can now only ever appear as the grossest kind of imposture and imitation. It’s true of course that an artist that takes the tragicomedy of contemporary subjectivity absolutely seriously cannot help but relate ‘to its being as bluff’; in doing so, however, it also lends ‘the void a luxurious air’, endlessly disidentifying with any stable human form and experimenting, instead, with what it

means to be human in the eyes of others, what it costs to achieve some value – and what profit can then be reaped from that valuation – created by others. An artist may be the prostitute of his or her idea, the collector the john, as Kukuljevic writes, but such an exchange is also the means by which the artist, all too conscious of its own nugatory identity, can then make something out of the nothing it most certainly is, forging identity as coin, as art.

This is not to say, however, that any of the familiar talk of disillusioned *zeitgeists* and misanthropic worldviews has any place here. Rather than treating its artistic subjects as the kind of period pieces to which so many artists have for so long aspired, *Liquidation World* insists that the exemplary nature of these absentee subjects consists in their having ‘internalise[d] a relation to their own absence by making an object of it’, detaching themselves from those tired tropes of decline and efflorescence that are today as common as they are consoling. In tracing the process through which contemporary art ‘separate[s] itself from any sense-giving negativity’, *Liquidation World* attends so closely to art’s slag and spittle that such works finally seem capable of speaking with native fluency the foreign language of the concept, replacing that humanity that has since shown itself either unable or unwilling to give itself a law of its own, and now pronouncing, for its own purposes, and in its own name, the law that will henceforth guide its every effort: ‘Art’, Kukuljevic writes, ‘as the mummification of spirit’. Few students of art, philosophy or politics would likely countenance such an idea, but once one has sworn off the saccharine pathos of all those supposedly inscrutable problems and inconstruable questions that have long left the work of cultural production, reproduction and consumption to others, it might be time to re-dedicate oneself to embalming now that a new form of midwifery might be here in the offing, one committed to ‘leaving no stone unturned and no maggot lonely’, as Kukuljevic writes, quoting Harold Pinter. For that, however, philosophy would have to become something rather more debauched and rigorous than it is at present. *Liquidation World* can only hope that such friends need not this time be invented.

Ryan Crawford