

historical and cultural contexts, that Kester considers to make up this counter-canon in *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, it becomes evident that the fact of their non-adherence to essentially eighteenth-century European ideas about political autonomy and selfhood may not always be the most interesting or relevant thing that there is to say about them. Inversely, supposedly autonomous and monologically authored practices are inevitably socially and historically situated, as Kester is well aware and recognises at several turns. One way, then, of shattering the illusion of absolute aesthetic autonomy and its concomitant claims is to read artworks (including the most apparently formalist and detached ones) for the

political consequences and implications of this situatedness. Seemingly having little patience for such meditations, Kester generally takes the opposite approach of taking claims of autonomy very seriously – one might also say: at face value – and of tracing what he takes to be their performative historical effects. Throughout the two volumes, this results in an insightful, well-documented and often convincing critique of a certain *idea* of aesthetic autonomy; Kester's is a 'strong' theory, the strength of which lies in its reading and re-evaluation of key philosophical and art theoretical texts, more so than in the heuristic purchase it demonstrates on artistic – and political – practice, past or present.

Steyn Bergs

Graffiti horizon

John Lennon, *Conflict Graffiti: From Revolution to Gentrification* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021). 296pp., £27.00 pb., 978 0 22681 569 5

We seem to have reached a point in the development of the idea of 'centring the victim' where even a study of graffiti is compelled to declare that it 'centres the walls themselves'. This begs any number of questions about the adequacy of the practice of 'centring' and its extension or application, not least that regarding its capacity to alter the conditions that produced the victims. In this particular case however we are confronted with an awkward spatial metaphor – walls in the centre of what, exactly? – that speaks as much to an apparent tendency toward metaphorisation in writing about graffiti as it does to any wider scholarly convention. Graffiti, that is, appears peculiarly bound to something like Walter Benjamin's notion of baroque allegory, where the word tends toward the image and history fades into the landscape.

In *Conflict Graffiti*, John Lennon asks the related and intriguing question of the evident connection between social crisis, whether ruin or riot, and the practice of aerosol graffiti. Why in the midst of rebellion or catastrophe would someone stop to spray a picture on a wall? Can it even be considered stopping, taking a break from the action rather than a form of participation in it? Lennon's book suggests it is not, that no matter the message, no matter how ambiguous, something is being actively ad-

ded to a discourse. Taking a note from peace and conflict studies, Lennon approaches graffiti through its discursive and its violent character. The basic argument is, 'In short, graffiti are messy politics.' This mess of conflict can be organised, as Lennon sees it, in 'waves' of graffiti: the first wave is anticipation, the second is eruption, and the third is suppression. Perhaps most importantly: 'they crash down upon a particular area.' Place, geographically delimited location, is for Lennon the foundational consideration. Some tension or contradiction persists between this insistence and the arc of the book, which, as its subtitle *From Revolution to Gentrification* suggests, follows the crash of the waves, yet does so through or across or above the various sites of conflict. The wave metaphor, a handy image drawn perhaps from the chapter on New Orleans in the time of Hurricane Katrina, cannot quite encompass the movement of history. Place is made to compensate such that territorial defence is raised to an honour or ethic, rather than understood as a result of damage done.

An example occurs in the section on artist Tyree Guyton, who turned the overgrown lots and abandoned houses of his Detroit neighbourhood into a kind of installation, painting murals of whimsical dots and Martin

Luther King, transforming waste into sculpture by nailing a wall with thousands of shoes or parking a yard with hundreds of vacuums. Another long-time resident, upset seemingly more at Guyton than at the flood of tourists drawn to the neighbourhood, asks, 'Who gave him permission?' Lennon frames it in a passage of doubt over the artworks' capacity for 'community enrichment'. Rather than drawing out the real social fear lying behind the neighbour's question, it is left to stand in judgment on art's insufficient productivity.



Notwithstanding, such narratives of localised dispute are Lennon's strength. The chapter on Detroit, which is also about Baton Rouge, Miami, Philadelphia and São Paulo, includes a story about a gentrifying mural project that transforms into – decays or advances, take your pick – a 'graffiti war'. In the chapter on the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which also takes a detour through Beirut, Egyptian artist Ganzeer, now living in Brooklyn, describes following the progress of a protest march in Cairo online as it wound its way toward his friend's apartment where they waited and watched until it came too close to wait any longer, drawing them down to the streets

and into the nascent revolt. The chapter on New Orleans visits Skylar Fein, who grew up in the Bronx, joined the Socialist Party at twelve, travelled to the Soviet Union in his twenties, taught nonviolent resistance with the Quakers, moved to New Orleans to attend medical school but dropped out soon after the disaster to dedicate his time to making art, later writing a manifesto in defence of graffiti. For Fein, graffiti exists outside the relations of capitalism. While Lennon seems sympathetic to this position, he does not attempt to theorise how exactly that might be the case.

Lennon's method, rather, while not quite ethnographic, depends on travel and dialogue, on recording the words of participants and witnesses. Lennon travelled to Detroit, New Orleans, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Germany and Sweden, interviewing dozens of graffiti writers, artists, activists, business and property developers, residents and so forth. Many of his photographs are included, along with those taken by others. Yet conflict is the focus, with graffiti acting as frame or window onto historical antagonisms. Often a picture or image will provide the entry to a place or conflict, but not in any systematic way, nor with much attempt at the kind of exhaustive interpretation that might threaten to lead the study away from politics into aesthetics. A still from the series *Homeland* is read in a manner almost indistinguishable from how a painting by Norman Rockwell is read. By pivoting on the appearance of graffiti in each, the contours of social conflict contained or concealed within can be sketched. Yet this is done primarily in terms of content, eliding the formal and historical difference between images. The interpretive comparison of two coffee table photography books on the aftermath of Katrina, one that spotlights graffiti and one that does not, falls short largely because, possibly due to copyright issues, not a single photograph from either is included in the argument. The opportunity to consider photographs as more than simple documents for the distribution of content or information, in this case graffiti, is largely missed. Again, this reflects the determination to draw clear lines between politics and aesthetics, or to attach a particular understanding to each.

One of the functions of the idea of the 'graffiti wave' is to roughly distinguish between expressions of political desire and exhibitions of 'fetishized aesthetic objects'. The distinction is further developed, and may even ori-

ginate, in the division between graffiti and street art, a common and almost compulsory confrontation in the study of graffiti. Here Lennon turns decidedly partisan: 'In urban areas, graffiti makes visible the lives of those who have been rendered invisible; street art is used to bolster the value of the properties lining the streets of the city.' Graffiti is an attack on the private property which street art celebrates. The principle might be made diagnostic: if the property value declines, it's graffiti, if the value rises, it's street art. But then the lines get messy, as Lennon's narratives attest, not least because the graffiti writers throwing up 'authentic' or political work are often the same people recruited by developers to make the wall of a warehouse 'beautiful'. 'Beauty' is here a byword that assimilates the category of art and acts as trigger for suspicion of the profit motive. There is little attempt to theorise the history of graffiti's development as a practice, a history that converges with that of the changing category of art in more than just the appearance of the label 'street art'. As the aesthetic theories of Benjamin, to name one example, attest, the 'high culture' to which art belongs and the 'lower culture' of everyday life continue to undergo a profound historical change in the character of their relation, a change that affects the composition of both categories. Neglecting this shifting relation fixes the surface in place, forgetting the movement of history.

The strict division between aesthetics and politics, with favour lent to the latter, also becomes an argument for instrumentalisation. 'Resistance graffiti' is 'a tool for progressive social movements'. What matters is that it functions, that it communicates, that it directly expresses this or that political desire in the public sphere. Yet the appearance of Sad Panda, a seemingly apolitical painted figure found among the more explicit 'revolutionary desires' expressed in the wall writings of Cairo, presents a curious limit or vanishing point for signification. Lennon, for his part, does not try to fix the Panda's meaning, leaving it open but included simply because it appeared on the wall. It's in the public sphere, it must mean something. The concept of the 'public sphere' is considered in the first chapter along with walls and streets – that is, divorced from the consideration of media. Lennon sets the theory of Jürgen Habermas, who understands the public sphere as a space where consensus is built through rational discourse, against that of Chantal Mouffe, who

rather sees it as a locale for competing ideologies working toward 'dissensus'. He suggests we understand graffiti as pushed and pulled between, but then immediately identifies graffiti with the antagonisms of the latter, consistent with the anti-authority, anti-state, anti-party politics that is the general tone throughout.

Conflict Graffiti's argument for place-based contextualisation of graffiti's political desires remains at odds with the book's implicit attempt to construct or describe a tentative counter-public grounded in the international practice of graffiti. Or, if not at odds, then the full relation between, say, local production and global distribution has not been developed, suggesting a need to return to public sphere debates about the historical character of political experience. One major blind spot of that approach here is that nearly everyone given page time is a man, reproducing unreflective assumptions about and gendered divisions constitutive of both the practice of graffiti and the notion of public. Lennon is aware of the problem: the chapter on Banksy in Palestine notes the competitive machismo that propels graffiti writers to 'get up' in more and more difficult, inaccessible spots. Still the blind spot persists in the heart of the book's understanding of place. Banksy's 'activist graffiti tourism' is justifiably criticised. Its echoes in the story about the Detroit graffiti war that started because an 'outsider', not a local, painted a mural, are evident. Yet an uneasy gap remains between understanding the walls of a home as a 'commonplace visual security blanket' and a border wall as 'physical and ideological barrier'. Lennon meets a Palestinian refugee whose home is no longer a refuge, whose walls have 'lost their security' and who finds 'his private space melding into one amorphous dangerous public space.' The implication here is an absolute split between public danger and private safety, yet one that cannot be entirely attributed to the condition of war. A conception of the public sphere that neglects the gendered (and racialised) violence which troubles the heart of the concept, as Nancy Fraser, Joan Landes and others have argued, tends to repeat that violence. Here it recurs in the notion of private sphere as sanctuary (and locale of purity), as an enfolding safety suggestive of the domestic realm occupied by wife or mother, both potential victims and ultimate protectors. It contains, in other words, an image of origin. There is no counter image in this book where refuge is the result of escape.

Lennon, a professor of English at the University of South Florida, claimed in his earlier book, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature, 1869-1956*, that flight, escape, migration, was ‘a distinct form of resistive politics.’ Such an argument is now absent. In like manner, one of the few places where the ‘merging of the political with the aesthetic’ appears acceptable to him is when,

in the work of Yazan Halwani, the aim of art is ‘to unite Beirut’. We might ask: unite against what? The question of graffiti in times of crisis is also the question of culture, which continues to pivot on whether culture means preserving identity or risking its loss, the defence of a familiar position or the dialectical cultivation of the human.

Kyle Proehl

Mannerism’s metamorphoses

Sjoerd van Tuinen, *Philosophy of Mannerism: From Aesthetics to Modal Metaphysics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022). 240pp., £85.00 hb., 978 1 35032 248 6

Mannerism has often been ignored in the field of art history. It has been seen either as that which does not correspond to classical art, in the sense of a divergence from it, or sometimes has been read in relation to the Baroque. The question that follows, and probably these are questions proper to the field of art history, is whether mannerism is a historical period or a style which can then be read in moments across history. If it is a style then the historical period corresponding to it would indicate an accumulation or circulation of these styles when they become the rules of production of art. This is much clearer with the Renaissance where the perfection of the human body and its relation to nature is represented in a specific form – the use of perspective and Alberti’s rules of construction, of not only the pictorial space but also elements that would occupy this space – are specified. However, mannerism appears to be an anomaly in this attempt of art history to provide it with specific rules and hence it also resists historical periodisation. This is because it is the practice that exceeds thought and hence rules are not sufficient to formalise the work.

Sjoerd van Tuinen rightly points out that Vasari’s book on the artists is called *Lives* rather than *Rules*. It is this way of practice of construction that he seems to be interested in because this, I think, also relates to his main attempt in the book – to not provide new ways to understand mannerism but new ways to perceive and live manneristically. Hence, it would be wrong to think of *The Philosophy of Mannerism* as a book of art history, though matters related to art history are sufficiently discussed,

but rather it is a book of philosophy – that is, what we understand from Gilles Deleuze as that which concerns itself with the creation of concepts. It is through philosophy that it is possible to think of the singular as opposed to the generalities of art history. It is this thinking of singularity which allows for the discovery of a novelty within the historical moment itself, because singularities, though emerging from history, cannot be reduced to the history itself. So the task is, as van Tuinen argues, ‘to combine mannerism as historical conjuncture with mannerism as a torsion of historicity that takes the form of afterwardness (*Nachträglichkeit*): a history deferred and redoubled in relation to itself.’

This step helps us to think about the relation between mannerism and modernity – in the sense of why it is important to consider mannerism in thinking of modernity and in what ways it helps us in thinking about modernity. This remains a contemporary question not just in thinking about the present but also the future. It is true that the present situation of the Anthropocene perhaps is closer to mannerist art or that period of the sixteenth and seventeenth century where the attempt to overpower Nature is at a threshold, concerned not with the will of humans to overcome nature but in realising that nature has its own will. In this way, the mannerist artists like Archimboldo show how both nature and art (in the sense of artificiality as opposed to nature) are all *becomings* – one flowing into the other, such that this clear distinction is no longer possible. Excluded from art history and modernity, mannerism also depicts the situation of mod-