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# Representing “Actuality”

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2. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall 1939): 34–49. On the commercial commissions Wyeth took during these years and the contract for more *Post* covers, which he refused, see Richard Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 181.
3. Anne Classen Knutson convened the panel, "Rethinking Andrew Wyeth." Texts by panel participants—David Cateforis, Wanda M. Corn, Katie Robinson Edwards, Joyce Hill Stoner, and Francine Weiss—form the core of the book.
4. Sam Hunter, critic for the *Minneapolis Tribune*, dismissed Wyeth's work in these terms in 1967, as portraying "the kind of America . . . that one finds set forth typically in the hard, illustrative conventions of the Time Magazine cover: a microscopic realism applied to familiar, commonplace subject matter that is in the end reassuring." Hunter quoted in Cateforis, 19–20.
5. See Michael Lobel, "Modernism, Illustrated: Sloan and Duchamp," *John Sloan: Drawing on Illustration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 155–81.
6. See, for example, Robert Rosenblum, "Reintroducing Norman Rockwell," in Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson, *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 183–85.
7. Richard Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
8. The term went viral with the publication of Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).
9. Wanda Corn created the survey for her 1973 exhibition, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The same questionnaire was used to poll visitors to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 2006 retrospective, *Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic*.
10. Cateforis notes this trend in the period criticism, when he writes of accounts that "portrayed [Wyeth] as an exemplar of an honorable and distinctly American realist tradition quite apart from contemporary movements" (8). His art was a "'refuge' for those 'intimidated' by modernism" (16).
11. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
12. See *ibid.*, viii–ix.
13. Charles Brock, "Through a Glass: Windows in the Art of Wyeth, Sheeler, and Hopper," in *Andrew Wyeth: Looking Out, Looking In*, exh. cat., ed. Nancy K. Anderson and Brock (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2014), 42–44.

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## Michael Schreyach Representing "Actuality"

**Alex Potts. *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art*.** New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. 476 pp., 60 color ills., 120 b/w. \$60

In an effort to challenge some prevailing assumptions surrounding the art of the painter Wols—whose work various critics in the late 1940s associated with the expression of existential unease—Alex Potts proposes that what Wols truly wished to convey was "a real sense of the substance of the world," its "bare non-art materiality" (119–20). An anecdote supplied by the critic René Guilly on the occasion of Wols's 1947 Paris exhibition provides some evidence for that contention, even as it reveals the artist's feelings of inadequacy in the face of his task. Walking by a decomposing wall glimpsed through a pane of broken glass, Wols is said to have lamented, "My painting will never achieve that" (119). He may have meant that his art was incapable of the immediacy and directness he associated with the "real." Perhaps, as Potts suggests, Wols's disappointment came from recognizing that his desire for "rendering the reality of things" in their "brute materiality" was incommensurate with working in mediums that were each bound, for better or worse, to sets of historical conventions that conditioned artistic representation (120). Nonetheless, in Potts's ambitious account of twentieth-century realism, some version of Wols's aspiration—to convey as if directly the "vivid actuality" (326) and "material substance" (3) of things—widely animates the experimental practices of postwar artists.

Indeed, it is on the basis of a shared desire to evoke the "non-artistic actualities of everyday life" (113) and to "embody a compelling sense of the underlying fabric of things" (157) that Potts sees the artists his study gathers together as united against the hegemony of modernist abstract painting—especially insofar as it was critically championed as concerned solely with resolving certain historically generated formal problems in an effort to make explicit a medium-specific logic of development. Potts offers us an expanded notion of realism, not

simply defining it against abstraction, but seeing it as a strategy that connects previously sequestered artists. So the late paintings of the Abstract Expressionist Roberto Matta Echaurren are realist because their imagery evokes a techno-scientific world impinging on human subjectivity, and so are the smashed musical instruments of the French New Realist Arman, who appropriated junked material as a way to comment on the waste at the root of the modern consumer society. Moving expertly between better- and less-studied figures—from Jean Dubuffet, Andy Warhol, and Gerhard Richter to Eduardo Paolozzi, Öyvind Fahlström, and Asger Jorn—Potts shows how an eclectic stable of artists responded to what they felt was modernist art's constricted range of reference, and modernist criticism's narrow perspectives, by cultivating strategies that were meant to be "evocative of the lived realities of the contemporary world" (174). Those realities, for Potts, are characterized by the "unstable, constantly shifting interactions between bodies and things and environments in the modern world, as well as the underlying processes of production, consumption and destruction shaping this world and its anxieties and compulsions" (327).

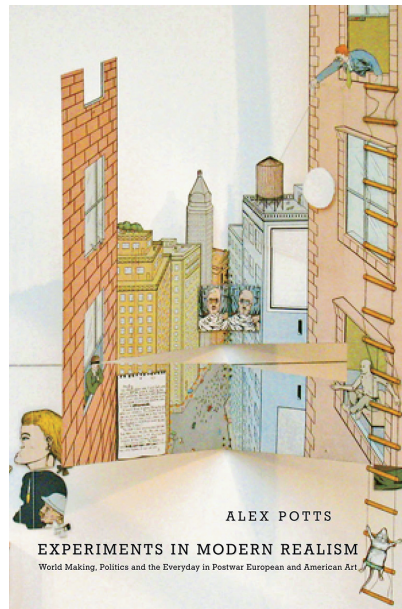
It is not Potts's undertaking to explain in detail the historical roots and contemporary consequences of these underlying processes; nor is it his mandate to trace in detail the historical parameters of modernity's abstracting tendencies. These are not his goals. But if the absence of those accounts is felt by some readers to be a gap in the author's text, it is a necessary consequence of his balancing the wide range of work he investigates with finely tuned descriptions of particular examples.<sup>1</sup> Even so, Potts evokes throughout his account the systematic antihumanism of late capitalism as the chief motivating factor behind mid-century experimental realism. The domain of modernity's instrumentalized, rationalized, and dehumanizing structures constitutes a kind of basic setting against which the practices of artists stand out in sharp relief. It is primarily in resistance to political and societal abstraction—to a perceived distancing of individual feeling, thought, and action from an affirmative collective setting—that a number of artists develop procedures to convey more directly the "embeddedness of human subjectivity in the materiality of the body and the material

substance and fabric of the world around it” (72). Both Jackson Pollock and Dubuffet, for instance, permitted a sense of the material substance of paint to so fully absorb them in the act of painting that subsequent viewers might similarly feel “literally immersed” (79) in their canvases, or stimulated into “reliving the physical activities and sensations that were involved in making” them (137). By identifying her position with that of the artist, a viewer would entertain not just a metaphor of practice and process, but would actually experience a kind of situatedness that is noticeably absent from her experience at large.

In his evaluation of what makes modernist art in its putatively insulated and self-referential forms inimical to a broader integration of art with life, Potts reaffirms as central to understanding the art of this period a commonly asserted, if somewhat reductive, antithesis between autonomy and engagement. If modernism accords priority to the former term, experimental realism is concerned with the latter. It is of course possible to see autonomy in a positive light as counteracting a chaotic reality which operates in its everyday unfolding as repressive ideology, and so modernist art might be seen as a successful challenge to disorder and insensitivity everywhere.<sup>2</sup> But a skeptic might argue that modernist artists can establish only fictions of aesthetic wholeness, order, or self-sufficiency. On this view, modernist autonomy, with its illusion of wholeness, becomes a kind of evasion of the facts: an unsustainable, fictive release from the determining realities of politics and struggle in the real world. Experimental realists reject the privilege usually accorded to the fictive mode and see modernist forms of abstraction as incapable of a “more compelling evocation” of reality (140).<sup>3</sup>

Here is where the experience of the “everyday” (55) confronts the formalistic conception of “pure” art (202) with historical reality and places an ethical demand on those artists who would be “truer to the conditions of the times” (159–60) by expressing that experience through art. It is important to bear this emphasis in mind. Potts acknowledges a distinction between the literal (our actual experience) and the representational (how an artist frames that experience). “Artistic realism,” he cautions us at the outset of his argument, “has to do with

the representational significance and evocative power of a work, not just the literally non-artistic identity of the materials from which it is made” (7, emphasis added). Still, certain passages seem to collapse the difference between the literal and representational. For example, some French New Realists wanted



to “effect a more direct encounter” between art and audience not just by representing, but by “embody[ing] a truly immediate and vital sense of modern reality” (207, emphasis added). The implicit idea that literal materials somehow embody content has important consequences for understanding the relation of intention to expression. When we admit no discrepancy between actual materiality and the content which some material object is meant to convey, we suspend the criteria by which we can determine what the work (or action) of art is. If we don’t know what the work of art is, we have no principled means by which we can make interpretative claims about it. To see material as identical to content is to make no distinction between what an artist means and what he or she doesn’t mean.<sup>4</sup>

While he values the evocative “resonance” of works that seem to be produced without conscious planning, Potts ultimately appears to validate the intentional character of artistic production. Meaning as such, he says, requires “some level of intentionality” (52) that would guarantee the “significance

[of details] beyond their mere particularity” (53). While “some” seems to hedge against according too much importance to intention, and while it is true that the practices of experimental realists often seem to eschew deliberate attempts to realize a preconceived image, their resulting works (or events) are nonetheless delimited and framed by artistic intentions. While Rauschenberg’s *Rebus* (1955) might appear to be composed of an arbitrary selection of everyday images and materials—a selection, moreover, that might entice the viewer to draw any number of connections between the elements, or to entertain the contingent associations they evoke—the work nonetheless “constitute[s] a kind of totality” (274). In fact, it is nothing less than Rauschenberg’s directed manipulation of his heterogeneous materials that enables, in Potts’s great description, the “constellation of motifs and images [to] constitut[e] a world of a particular kind, which like the worlds one inhabits is never fully graspable or containable” (274). Here, the artist’s potential for “world-making” is fundamentally tied to representing (as opposed to actualizing) his “experience.”

Still, Potts’s obvious sympathy with the antiformalist works and practices he discusses occasionally dampens the reader’s awareness of the author’s representational commitments. Potts tends to express the challenge experimental realism poses to modernist autonomy by describing realist art as “concrete,” “direct,” “immediate,” “particular,” “brute,” and “actual.” But are these terms meant to designate the literal character of an experience or material, or instead to describe representational effects? At a number of places in the text, it is unclear. Potts, though, usually provides guidance, reminding his readers that experimental realism “evokes,” “suggests,” “portrays,” “conveys,” “references,” or (a preferred term) “resonates” with the “facticity of things” external to the realm of art. These latter terms connote art’s representational character. So, while Potts focuses on the “directness and crudity” of the realist devices Edward Kienholz deployed in his installation *Roxy’s* (1962) and agrees with early critics who saw the artist as achieving a striking impact through an “uncompromisingly direct rendering of real-life subjects” (293), Potts notes—the point is crucial—that it is only the “apparent absence of aesthetic qualities”

that allowed Kienholz to “convey [his] highly charged content with such immediacy” (293, emphasis added). The artist, in other words, carefully orchestrated the effects of his art.

If experimental realist artists reach out to the political, cultural, social, and economic conditions of the modern world, they do so by means of material made into artistic media (this is true whether “material” is understood in its traditional application or as an expanded category including artists and viewers in a live situation). “Any realist work,” Potts writes, “even the most paltry or conventional one, is different in its literal substance from the reality it represents” (28). Art represents reality; it does not just present us with real stuff. While Potts is not as explicit in this book as he is in *The Sculptural Imagination* about the critical stakes of the debate between literalism and representation (there he provides a sustained discussion of the issue), he implicitly recognizes what we might call an ontological distinction between the work of art (and by extension, the artist’s meaning it expresses) and its actual material (and whatever contingent associations those materials might inspire a viewer to make). So although to some readers it might sound as if what makes experimental realism significant for the history of art is its identification of meaning with the viewer’s literal experience, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, all the artists Potts discusses are intent on framing, and thus delimiting, the experience of their viewers (even if those “viewers” are “participants”). Merely because a work or event produces an effect of de-authored meaning does not imply that the artist has turned over the determination of meaning to the audience.

In an art-historical landscape increasingly exposed to and tolerant of various aspects of “new” materialisms—thing theory, object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, affect theory, and neuroaesthetics, to name the most prominent—Potts’s book is a reminder of the contribution art history can make to contemporary debates about meaning and agency in other fields. Although he does not address directly the aforementioned lines of inquiry, his arguments for the artwork’s meaning over its mere particularity have wide impact. Positions that overemphasize materiality, for instance, tend to redescribe the work of art as identical to its physical features, so much so that all

of the material features of the object—as well as all the configurations into which it contingently falls—are seen to contribute to its meaning. If that is so, it would seem that all of the physical characteristics of the environment or situation within which the object commands our attention must also matter, including all of the characteristics we might identify with the position (actual or metaphorical) of a viewer. One might legitimately wonder how interpretation—which targets what the work of art means, in contradistinction to what we experience it as—factors into a situation where descriptions of the object’s effects trump arguments about the artist’s intent, and where questions about understanding are replaced by questions about what the reader or viewer feels or experiences.

Although the phenomenon is not without its theoretical problems, contingency is at the heart of Potts’s contention that experimental realism offers a more compelling artistic engagement with the conditions of the world than does high-modernist art. Key to the disruption of what it takes to be the fiction of abstraction’s autonomy, realism sets up a “contingent interplay” between the material fabric of the artwork and the culturally determined references it makes (41). This interplay is dialectical. The material configuration, according to Potts, has a “generalised evocativeness” that explains why viewers are compelled to attend to the work (or event) in the first place. But unless its evocations are directed to an identifiable reality, the work or event, and our responses to it, will remain “insubstantial and subjective” (42). At the same time, the presence of clear referents “never abolishes the contingent and unstable nature of what is being conjured up” by the artist (42). So, Potts argues, Happenings may attract us by virtue either of their banality or their “melodramatic excess” (344), but the event is destined to remain meaningless unless the nonart materials it intentionally incorporates into its staging connect to the wider world to “embody significant aspects of modern life [and] . . . certain underlying realities of human existence” (342). Kaprow’s Happenings may have appeared utterly contingent, but they were based on scores that were “carefully crafted creations with a clear artistic and conceptual rationale” (339) intended to make events that were

“expressive and symbolically loaded” (344). Similarly, viewers of Fahlström’s painting-assemblages are asked to be active participants in the ensemble, but their actions are subject to certain constraints or rules, which ensured that their participation would not produce just “arbitrary and inconsequential rearrangements” (303).<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, many of the artists Potts discusses make work that, in its structural organization or performative display, seems to invite viewers to entertain the fiction that they create their own meaning from the proliferating associations occasioned by their encounters. But the overall thrust of Potts’s argument demands that we recognize the difference between association and interpretation. The artist may indeed make work that “baffles” and “frustrates” coherence (177), but the viewer’s various “constellations of meaning” (35) will remain arbitrary unless they are advanced as claims and supported by arguments about what specific constellations the artist intended us to entertain, however much he or she tries strategically to create the effect that the work is not a “deliberate contrivance” (236).

Still, Potts’s investment in the contingency of meaning runs the risk of sounding like an endorsement of anti-intentionalism. Realism “open[s] itself up to contingencies of meaning and reference inherent in the materials . . . and that get into the work regardless of and sometimes despite the perspective that the artist brings to bear” (318). But if meaning is inherent in materials, it is hard to anticipate where that would leave the practice of interpretation as it is traditionally understood. For instance, in a discussion of the various wartime associations a viewer might project onto Richter’s photographically based painting *Christa und Wolfi* (1964)—which features a large Alsatian dog like those used by the Nazi police—Potts suggests that the expressive overtones such imagery solicits were “not simply put there by the artist but to a degree *inhere* in the image given by the photograph” (246, emphasis added). And discussing Joseph Beuys’s action *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), Potts concludes, “The work comes to mean something because in the viewer’s mind the references to some larger reality are suggestively but also somewhat bafflingly *embedded* in the immediate sensory substance of the work” (401, emphasis added). Glossing a quote by

Rauschenberg, Potts notes that since politics was a pervasive dimension of the environment in which the artist worked, his materials were “saturated with political meaning, not because he put such meaning there” (315, emphasis added). If meaning is inherent in materials, though, then it must be divorced from what the artist might have wanted to express or convey. Consequently, we need feel no compulsion to advance claims or make arguments about what we think she meant.

In the end, what makes the effect of contingency in experimental realist art politically significant is the dialectical opposition it offers to the repressive situation from which it springs. Potts explains this relation in *The Sculptural Imagination*:

The instability of a viewer’s encounter [with the work of art is] integral to any affective and conceptual power it might have, as well as to any resistance it might offer to being consumed as a mere commodity. Yet such instability . . . [paradoxically] conforms to the disintegrating drive of an increasingly pervasive and unrestricted process of commodification, consumption and capital accumulation.<sup>6</sup>

The objects and practices Potts investigates in his study simultaneously reflect and resist the processes of capitalism. Ian Hamilton’s paintings, which present their viewers with highly incongruous arrays of nearly illegible but still recognizable imagery, strongly evoke but ultimately stand “at odds with the seamless assemblages of the advertising world” (179). Heterogeneity, juxtaposition, collision, disruption, incongruity: these aspects of experimental realist art—as object, or action, or some hybrid of the two—confront the “constant proliferation, replication and reconstitution of imagery in modern media culture” (232). Potts expresses the dire situation in these terms (again, in *The Sculptural Imagination*):

In the circumstances of contemporary capitalism’s unrelenting dissolution and remaking of those cultural norms that momentarily mediate between the individual’s self-awareness and a sense of the larger social and economic realities within which this self-awareness is constituted, the compelling art work will no longer be one that purports to embody some stable essence of individual subjectivity.

If a work gives rise to a vivid subjective awareness, this awareness cannot seem to be encapsulated in some potentially inert and fixed objective thing.<sup>7</sup>

The modern condition of which Potts so ardently writes seems for experimental realists ever more present, intruding ever more deeply into every aspect of social and psychological life. The complexities of that incursion are made manifest in a diversity of artworks and practices that the author—through his unflinching commitment to the idea that art challenges the deleterious effects of those incursions, as much as through his irrepressible optimism that in doing so art draws us closer to our historical reality—brings to life for his readers.

1. For instance, although in a discussion of French New Realism Potts mentions the prewar debates between Communist realists and abstract artists of various political persuasions (48), he misses an opportunity to bear down on the historical specificity of that moment and doesn’t investigate how that contest and its postwar legacy—and the fluctuating political, economic, and ideological conditions underpinning each moment—constituted a key background for some of the artists he gathers under the experimental realist umbrella. In France, for example, the debates held in 1936 at the Maison de le Culture, a cultural center run by the French Communist Party, and published as *La Querelle du Réalisme*, explored exactly this terrain. For an analysis, see Toby Norris, *Modern Artists and the State between the Two World Wars* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2005), esp. 192–96. The same questions regarding realism, abstraction, and politics were raised again after the Second World War, although in a more polarized climate shaped by the influence of the French Communist party, which had thrown its weight behind an orthodox realism of explicitly political intent. See Natalie Adamson, *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).

2. The phrase is from Ad Reinhardt, who wrote, “A painting of quality is a challenge to disorder and insensitivity everywhere.” Reinhardt, “How to Look at Space,” *PM*, April 28, 1946. For a discussion of modernist art’s capacity to critique repressive ideology and conservatism, see Charles Harrison, “Disorder and Insensitivity: The Concept of Experience in Abstract Expressionist Painting,” in *American Abstract Expressionism*, ed. D. Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 111–28.

3. It is a tactic of some historians of 1960s art first to conflate and then attack the positions of the critics who best articulated high-modernist criticism—Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried—for what they take to be their narrow essentialism (although Potts, to his credit, does not). That reductive tendency is often accompanied by an almost willful avoidance of what those critics

in fact say. Admittedly, a strand of Greenberg’s thought tended increasingly to emphasize the discovery of an irreducible essence of pictorial art. But for the critic’s view on the historical relation of autonomy to convention, see the triumvirate of important essays from 1947 to 1948, “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture,” *Horizon*, October 1947; “The Situation at the Moment,” *Partisan Review*, January 1948; and “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” *Partisan Review*, April 1948. All three essays are reprinted in volume 2 of *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986–1993). For Fried’s account of his attempt to historicize the concept of essence as found in some of Greenberg’s writings, see “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–76, esp. 36ff.

4. For an analysis of this distinction, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), esp. 1–18.

5. From one perspective, it is possible to see the dialectical interplay of materiality and cultural reference that Potts theorizes as an attempt to address a dualism, stemming from romantic aesthetics, that remained latent in high-modernist criticism. If the romantic tendency is to establish a dualism between art (broadly associated with beauty, disinterest, and the intuition of aesthetic unity) and science (as the domain of the practical, utilitarian, and empirical), Potts finds the most convincing artists to be those who are open to everyday praxis—and is compelled by art that can express the fundamentally temporal and historical involvement of agents in the world. That emphasis lends to his account of experimental art a certain existential cast (as do his occasional references to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger). For a useful discussion of the dualism as it appears in the writings of some existential phenomenologists, see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), esp. 81–90.

6. Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 23.

7. *Ibid.*, 18.

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