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Noëlle Cuny and Xavier Kalck (eds.). *Modernist Objects*

Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, "Seminal Modernisms", 2020.
256 p. ISBN: 978-1-949979-50-3. £90.

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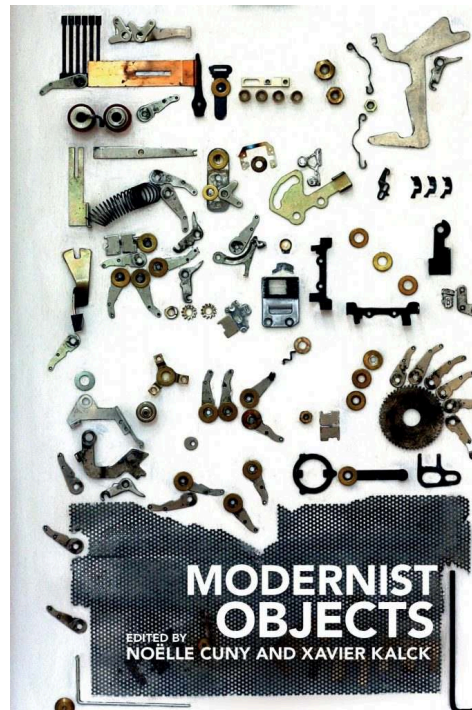
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1 A dynamic collection of essays, *Modernist Objects* brings recent scholarship to bear on the question of object-relations and the ways in which it continues to interrogate our understanding of modernism. By building on the critical turn towards things initiated in the last two decades by such astute object-readers as Bill Brown, the twelve essays that compose the volume investigate a number of literary and artistic interplays between artist, artwork and other selves and objects in the external universe across a wide range of media and material, revisiting well-known modernist *loci* — such as Beckett’s “post-war room” — or opening new vistas onto less-discussed experiments — such as the Baroness’s intermedial project or Eileen Gray’s subversive camping of kitsch orientalism.



- 2 According to its editors, Noëlle Cuny and Xavier Kalck, the book seeks to focus on the artwork as “the object through which the challenge to perceptual habit and preconceived categories is to be felt most acutely” (p. 9). This aesthetic take inspired by Anne Fernihough’s reading of D. H. Lawrence’s literary and art criticism directs attention to the “shaping of sensory input into objects” (p. 15) and the correlated dramatic change in subject-object relations. Cuny and Kalck invite the reader to consider the forms of reciprocal engagement and resistance with things and thingliness explored in these essays in the light of three central processes “that are consistently to be observed in modernist object experiments” (p. 10): “objecting to the traditional sense of the real,” “(re)fashioning the human,” and “performing the ornamental.” However, their objective is not to point at “isolated trends” but rather at “interconnected phenomena,” as well as at the “subtle power game” that has changed object-relations across the twentieth century.
- 3 By encouraging the reader to assemble and disassemble the operations and practices analyzed in the book into new meaningful combinations, the editors aim to stress the complex dynamics that have worked towards destabilizing objects in art and literature. This is particularly urgent as it enables “the new modernist studies” to continue to interrogate the parameters of modernism through the lens of gender, space, race, socio-economic and class structures with a view to broadening and transforming older definitions both beyond modernism’s traditional spatiotemporal boundaries but also within “modernism” itself. As a matter of fact, several essays in this volume question the high modernist construction of the object as “inaccessible and discrete.” Douglas Mao opens the discussion by recasting his previous investigation of modernist encounters with physical objects in *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998) into the framework of the new materialism propped by political theorist Janet Bennett in *Vibrant Matters* (2010) and the questioning of the subject-object difference by Bruno Latour’s relationist sociology. Mao subtly intertwines representations of the

relations between artist, object, thing, and artwork in Lewis's *Snooty Baronet* (1932), Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), and Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967) to suggest that "objects become objectionable when they come to bear some resemblance to humanity in the mass" (p. 39), which enables him to point towards other pro-democratic configurations of humans, objects, and other entities. The idea that meaning inheres in an infinite tissue of relations is further exemplified by Rachel Bowlby in "Tradition and the Test-Tube Baby" which subtly encapsulates a discussion of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) between two evocations of monitored mass-reproduction in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and *Chrome Yellow* (1921) in order to trace the contradictory manifestations of the composite "test-tube baby" across the discursive world and the questions they raise about impersonal creativity.

- 4 By giving the reader insight into modernist confrontation and/or engagement with objecthood, these two essays enable him/her to better appreciate the way the other contributions to the volume interpellate and unravel modernist tradition and depiction of the social history of material life. The question of how literary or artistic imagination energize object-relations foster explorations of "alter-modernism" (p. 190) and "unstable forms" (p. 188) that point at a different understanding of the modern. In "Beckett's Post-War Room," for instance, Martin Schauss demonstrates that Beckett's 1947-51 writings are caught in an "unresolved confrontation" between "the objectified social content of realism" and "the leftover cliché of the modernist thing." As a result, he concludes, "the thing gestures elsewhere, implying a metaphorical trajectory whose recovery is precluded" (p. 57). According to Pavlina Radia, such metonymic and metaphorical disjunction is also at work in Djuna Barnes's repurposing of commodity fetishes (such as the eggbeater) as the props of surrealistically grotesque or carnivalesque scripts and performances. Nevertheless, instead of pointing at the reintegration of art into life praxis, as is often the case in post-1932 surrealist performances (think of the politically-charged assemblages created by Claude Cahun for instance), these objects remain caught in "the constrained emotional economies" underpinning conventional family/marital narratives. As in Beckett's "postwar room," though in a different context, things persist in their spectral indifference, which gives their "affective mobilities" an empty resonance.
- 5 In addition to centering on the resistance of objects, or what Brown calls "the thingness of things in its unconditioned autonomy" (*Other Things*, p. 39), *Modernist Objects* engage with the issue of the — often fraught — collaborations and mutual inspiration between male and female artists. Yazna Bozhkova provides an insightful reading of German-born artist Elsa Freytag von Loringhoven's (aka the Baroness) object and word montages so as to underline how her unruly, ironic, nihilistic Dadaist stance markedly differs from Duchamp's use of found objects and iconoclastic gestures. Maurizia Boscagli convincingly demonstrates how Eileen Gray appropriated "the unmodern orientalism of decadence" to transgress Le Corbusier's streamlined aesthetics *from within* as well as his orientalist fetishizing of the colonial female body. In her thoroughly documented essay on Constructivist artists Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova, Sanja Bahun compares Klee's conversion of a mundane textile object to creative use with Popova-Stepanova's production of the creative conditions for mundane "object-to-be-used." She then traces the fascinating trajectory of a sample of fabric issued from their factory work in the 1920s as an example of the many "shifting forms of inhabiting the material world" (p. 110). In "Louise Bourgeois's Melancholy

Objects to be Used,” Lynn Somers offers a psychoanalytic reading of the artist’s “Personages” to emphasize the difference between the condemnatory view of dependence to natural objects by several modernist critics and artists, including Clive Bell, Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg and David Smith, and Bourgeois’s understanding of thingness as a form of “adjacency” (Edward Said) signaling to the possibility of other forms of “rapprochement, empathy and absorption” in the artwork. In Bourgeois’s art installations as in the Baroness’s rambunctious “ready-to-wear” assemblages and Popova-Stepanova’s textile artifacts, the question of the “possibility for use” becomes precisely the intermediate space in which one feels free to investigate the interplay between self, objects, and things.

- 6 Besides pointing our attention to object experiments that have sometimes been conspicuously absent from modernist studies, or else to objects that have been so persistently there that they seem to have crystallized into an ideal thing-in-itself which tends to obfuscate their real power in shaping poetic affect (see Jennifer Kilgore’s essay on harps and lyre in modernist poetry), *Modernist Objects* effectively works towards de-reifying our understanding of modernist human and nonhuman attachments. By showing that the destabilizing of objects in art and literature has actually taken place in the hands of the men and women who “made it new,” from Flaubert to Rhys, and from Woolf to Beckett, the book opens new pathways for modernist studies in the age of vibrant materialism. In all, it goes a long way in replacing the myth of modernist objects’ “integrity and indifference” with stimulating considerations that provoke our democratic imaginations.

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