

WALTER BENN MICHAELS, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015), Hb. Xiii, 230 pp. 8 color plates, 28 halftones, 4 line drawings.

Walter Benn Michaels's new book, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, is dedicated to the work of a generation of younger photographers and visual artists—most of them born after 1965—and in particular to these artists' shared belief in the autonomy of the work of art. At first glance, Michaels's own interest in this notion of autonomy does not seem primarily theoretical, though theory does play a major role in his book, but also and in fact ultimately political. One of the central ideas behind his book is that the "separation" of the work of art "from the world" (xii)—from its subject and from its reader or beholder—might function as "an emblem of the relation between classes and also of the escape from that relation, of the possibility of a world without classes" (ibid.). This is a bold claim, to be sure, although *The Beauty of a Social Problem* is everything but a practical political manifesto (and Michaels never claims that he wanted to write one); rather, it is a prolonged theoretical meditation on the possibilities of thinking about the connection between the art world, on the one hand, and the social world on the other. For Michaels, contemporary photographic art and art theory present a particularly promising field to do so.

Given the conceptual scope of the book, readers of *The Beauty of a Social Problem* will come across a number of political arguments and theoretical claims about the function of art and literature that Michaels has pursued throughout his career (for example, intentionality and meaning; the critique of the reader/ beholder; social inequality vs. cultural diversity). But they will also come across a series of careful and often surprisingly unexpected close-readings of both contemporary artists (including, amongst others, Jeff Wall, Brian Urich, Arthur Ou, and Viktoria Binshtok) and classics in the history of photography (Walker Evans, August Sander, Paul Strand) that notably extend, and in many cases complicate, the range of arguments Michaels has become notorious for making, one of them being the relationship between photography and literature itself, and Michaels's tendency to prioritize the former over the latter as his object of inquiry.

*The Beauty of a Social Problem* consists of five main chapters: four lengthy pieces on the theory and history of photography and the visual arts (larger portions of which were previously published in journals) and a shorter final chapter, "Never Again, or Nevermore,"—at first sight somewhat inconsistent with the rest—focused on Laurent Binet's *HHhH* and Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*). Michaels explains his return to literature towards the end of the book by reading both novels as literary figurations "of the refusal of the subject and the access instead to the structures of indifference" (159) that he describes as the central element of the first four chapters' explorations of aesthetic autonomy and their consequent social critique of the neo-liberal market. What Littell's *The Kindly Ones* achieves is that the novel "produces people's feelings about what they did (their eagerness to kill Jews or their reluctance) only so that the narrator can insist that those feelings (including and especially his own) didn't matter" (162).

But how is this refusal to acknowledge the feelings of someone wanting to kill a Jew relevant to understanding photography's privileged position to analyze and critique social inequality? The fantasy of a classless society becomes emblematic in the works that Michaels examines in as much as they insist on the autonomy of form and thus reproduce the structural rather than affective logic of social inequality: just as meaning in interpretation is disconnected from the affective and intellectual investment of the beholder of an artwork or the reader of a poem, social inequality (in the U.S. and western capitalist societies in general) must be disconnected from the identity of those suffering from it. "Feeling the beauty of the social problem," Michaels argues, "is precisely not to feel the pathos of the suffering produced by the problem; it's instead to feel the structure that makes the problem" (39). What Michaels wants, in other words, is not only art that, in its formal unity, is removed from the world in which it is produced and received; he wants art that also implies the separation of the "work from its effects" (7) on the beholder, that is, art that could also theoretically function as art without anybody ever having to look at it. This is the book's main argument and it unfolds in three interrelated areas: first, in discussions of photography's medium specificity, particularly its indexical relation to the world; second, in the context

of and in contrast to art history and theory produced during high postmodernism and in its wake; and third, in analyses of artworks that in Michaels's view combine the particular theoretical implications of photography with a critique of a neoliberal social order.

Arguing that an artwork should ideally be disconnected from the world (where it can have an effect on people) seems counterintuitive in the case of photography. The indexicality of the photograph, that is, its causal, physical relation to the world connects it almost inseparably with the materiality of the empirical world. This aspect distinguishes photographs from other art forms (such as painting) that rely on modes of representation rather than a direct physical connection to the world. Whereas paintings depend on the beliefs and intentions of the painter, photographs do not; they simply give physical evidence to the existence of a particular scene or object (which is of course not to say that they are in any way more neutral or objective than a painting). "What distinguishes the photograph from the drawing," Michaels writes, "is its dependence on the thing it's a photo of" (9). And in that sense, the question for Michaels is not "the photograph's ability to tell the truth" but "its status as art" and the "status of art itself" (14). The conundrum, then, exposed by Michaels is that his desire to find artworks that do not seek to produce an effect on the beholder is jeopardized by the very precondition for the artwork to exist: that there must be authorial intention or "the effort to produce an effect on the beholder" (46).

Much of Michaels's own understanding of photographic theory—centrally influenced by the work of Michael Fried—stands in contradistinction to the bulk of established art theory produced in the wake of postmodernism. This tension makes for a number of nuanced and incredibly well-versed forays into the history of theory since the 1960s. Michaels is, of course, aware of his antagonistic field position. This is exemplified in a marvelous section on John Cage's *4'33* (in addition to other minimalist art) in which he shows that the "refusal to impose one's intentions on the listener/beholder/reader, the refusal to perform for an audience" (51) (which is what Cage's silence stands for) renders the "audience's response" the "only thing that matters" (ibid.). And that, for Michaels, is a position espoused nowhere more clearly than in both the American and French continental versions of deconstruction:

a project characterized by "a model of the performative that also turned differing ideas into differing subject positions" (160) and that Michaels describes, at least a particular segment of it, as "Neoliberal Theory" (ibid).

The link between minimalist art and deconstruction, on the one hand, and the history of photography, on the other, becomes more clearly discernible in Michaels's discussion of Roland Barthes's classic *Camera Lucida* and the way he attempts to set Barthes apart from his own, Fried-derived notion of what photography is and what its political function should be. His discussion of "the punctum," Barthes's term for the moment when a photograph becomes meaningful solely as the consequence of the beholder's emotional attachment to the subject shown, is among the most powerful sections underlining Michaels's own theoretical convictions and their political, anti-capitalist implications. "No one can intend" the punctum for "it exists only in the experience of the beholder" (49), which is why Barthes decided to withhold the Winder Garden photograph of his mother. "The fact that I respond to your mother differently from the way that you respond to your mother has nothing to do with the aesthetic" (19).

It is this understanding of photography as having an effect on its beholder (rather than being meaningful regardless of its beholder) that Michaels links—by analogy—to the mechanisms underwriting neoliberalism's exploitation of labor by capital. "The emergence of a theory of art" premised "above all" on the "opportunity to see and be seen differently has its political role to play, simultaneously advertising the attractions of neoliberal equality and serving as its good conscience" (68-69). Hence, Michaels's insistence on the importance of the artwork as an autonomous structure: whereas the diversity of cultural groups can be defined on the basis of the way they feel about themselves as subjects in the world, social inequality cannot. Poverty may very much be felt and seen but never reduced to the emotional dispositions of those affected by it (the poor or the ones looking at photographs of poor people). The photographs and artworks Michaels examines in *The Beauty of a Social Problem* refuse to affirm the idea of subject-positionality and instead maintain that class "isn't produced by how we see and that its inequalities cannot be ameliorated by your seeing differently" (68). This is a familiar Michaels argument—championed most

emphatically in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004)—but its application in Michaels’s new book still produces a selection of very accessible, though mostly unexpected, at any rate illuminating discussions of contemporary photography and art.

Among the best discussions of younger artists are the ones dedicated to Viktoria Binschtok’s work, particularly Michaels’s reading of her *Wand I* and *Die Abwesenheit der Antragsteller*, and Arthur Ou’s *Earthworks* and *Screentests*. Binschtok’s photographs are perfect examples of what it means to refuse identification with the victims of poverty; they question traditional political art in its ambition to inspire “in us compassion for the victims and a desire to correct that abuse” (41). “Our compassion is beside the point” because “it’s useless (to them)” and because it also obscures our own relation to the market in which we, the beholders, are victims too. Binschtok’s photographs show “neither a group of people nor a class but a mechanism—the ‘pivot’—that helps make the class system work” (39) and in that sense a photograph like *Wand I* “imagines its own autonomy form the market” (41). Arthur Ou’s work, on the other hand, is not as explicitly political but is used to illustrate Michaels’s speculations about the nature of photographic indexicality and the status of photography as an art form as such. Ou’s experimentation with the technological implications of photography itself, especially his manipulation of negatives, might be read as insisting on their own materiality and thus undermining the idea of representation. What Michaels reads into *Earthworks*, however, is that it “functions neither to enhance representation nor to replace it” but rather “to produce a difference that’s not resolvable into either” (88). The book’s subsequent fourth chapter, “The Art of Inequality: Then and Now,” may be a relief for readers struggling with the conceptual work of artists like Binschtok, Ou, or Marco Breuer discussed in chapter three. Here, Michaels delves into classic, socially engaged photography (Walker Evans, August Sander, James Agee, amongst others) to construct a genealogy of class-based art, tracing its more recent evolution in the works of artists like Brian Urich and Liz Deschenes. What these younger artists show (in contrast to Evans and Agee, for example),

Michaels argues, is that inequality today has “been produced by a form of capitalism that refuses the very idea of class difference;” they show, in other words, that economic inequality is not itself a function of the difference between classes. Hence, the major characteristic of the younger generation is that they “refuse the logic of portrait” and remind beholders instead that “we don’t need to see their faces” and also that “we can only understand the meaning of unemployment” “if we don’t see faces at all” (152).

Whatever one’s own take on the set of social and political issues addressed in *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, it is hard to resist the book’s rhetorical seductiveness. At times, Michaels’s use of parallelism/juxtaposition and syllogism obscures rather than strengthens the scope of his arguments and when that happens, one admires the text simply for its stylistic brio. But then again, the effort to deliver hard facts and sober socio-political analyses is undeniably also part of the book, and one would not even need—at least not necessarily—the little charts and tables inserted to track the increase and the nature of social inequality in the U.S. Readers well-versed in the history and theory of photography will be surprised by the centrality of Michael Fried and the absence of other, maybe more likely theory icons (not, however, if they have followed Michaels’s earlier work). Those already in disagreement with Michaels’s well-known critique of cultural diversity will find countless examples in the book that will reinforce their sense of disagreement. And readers averse to Michaels’s occasionally flippant and intuitively provocative style will have to deal with passages in which the author proposes, for example, that the world would be “better off” if Jewish art stolen by the Nazis was displayed in museums to be admired by everyone rather than returned “to the descendants of the people from whom it was stolen” (166). But regardless of all that (or maybe because of all that), *The Beauty of a Social Problem* is a great book; it is challenging, it is timely in its sense of political urgency, and it is intellectually stimulating in that it forces readers time and again to question the hegemony of academic common sense.

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