



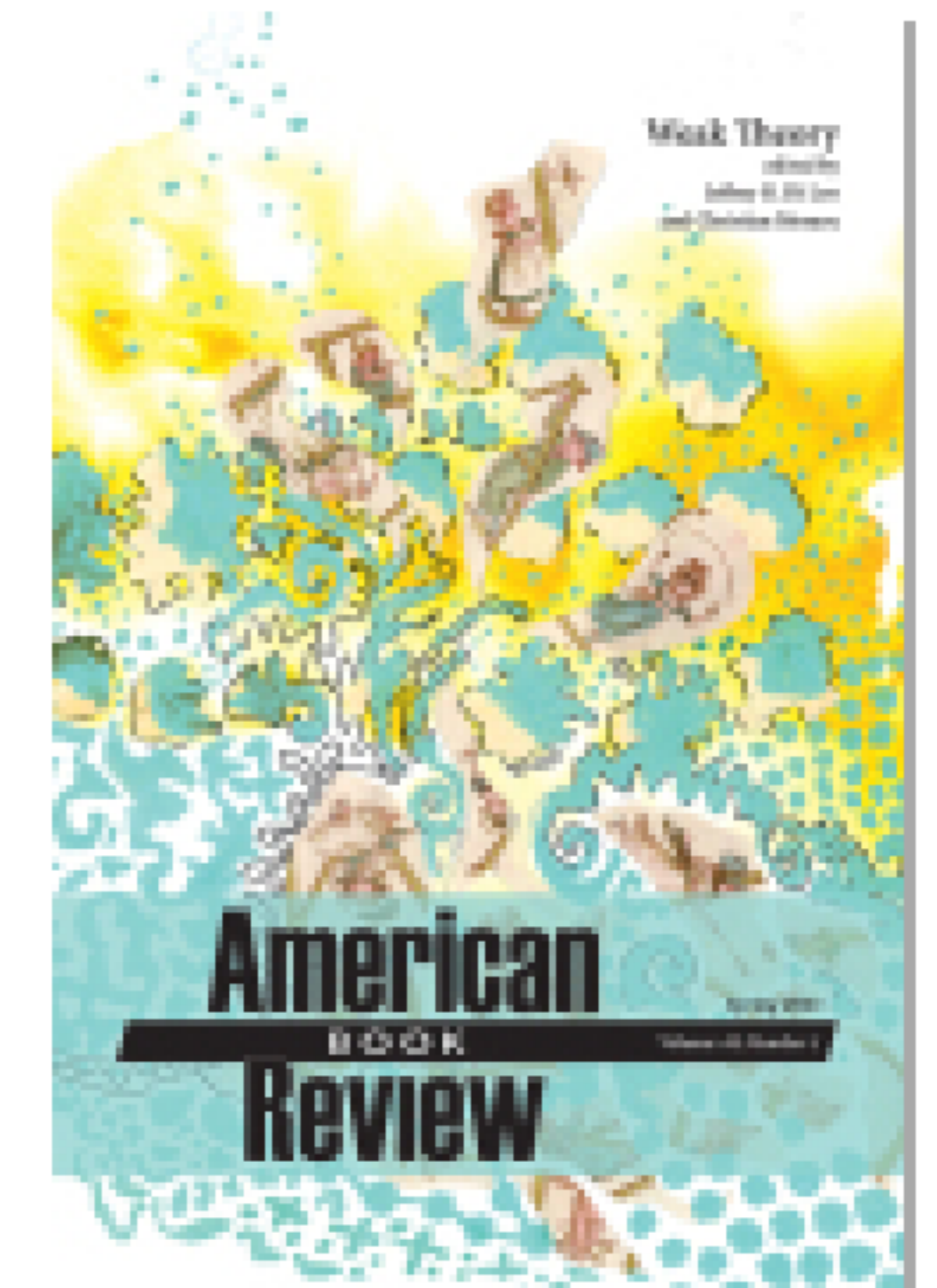
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Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays by Burt Kimmelman (review)

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VISIBLE AT DUSK: SELECTED ESSAYS

Burt Kimmelman

Dos Madres Press

<https://www.dosmadres.com/shop/visible-at-dusk-by-burt-kimmelman/>

434 pages; Print, \$26.00

Matt Hill

Kaleidoscopic might be an appropriate term to characterize the wide sweep and reach of these selected essays that comprise *Visible at Dusk*, Burt Kimmelman's latest offering from Dos Madres Press. This is a bear of a book, with over four hundred pages of literary and cultural writings previously published in mostly online journals and spanning more than two decades worth of musings and views. The fifteen essays in this scholarly and eclectic collection fluidly shift across terrains of cultural exploration and poetic traditions, each essay crafted with eloquence and mindful engagement.

Kimmelman explores the nomadic impetus of personal and poetic identities by way of meditations on the Objectivist (and post-Objectivist) tradition, which includes his literary forebears George Oppen, William Bronk, William Carlos Williams, and Paul Blackburn. ("My reading has involved the Objectivists for a long time now," he commented in an interview occasioned by the publication of his 2016 poetry collection *Abandoned Angel*.) He moves with a plethora of perceptions toward the many questions that arise from a process of thoughtful analysis and description, even as his seeing invites our seeing, where the thinking becomes an invitation to share in horizons that have been opened across this intrepid probing. He also perceives with impeccable clarity, being an accomplished poet who traverses the edges of unfolding views that have gone unseen by others while evoking wonder at our everydayness. These perceptions, at times compressed yet always cohesive, adeptly move through a topography of subjects as they flow unencumbered across the immediacy of their contents.

An essay on Oppen and Heidegger touches on Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* (releasement), whereby our stance of openness toward the mystery of our being in the world grounds us such that we are "released" toward this world of things. Kimmelman compares Oppen's notions about language to Heidegger's, while he questions the premises and views of both. If culture really does reinvent itself through its fluidity of language, across the materiality of writing and even with the content of abstract thinking involved, then Oppen's notion that language is not to be trusted, that is, that the word can be a possible enemy, does seem a bit of an extreme view. An alternative perspective might be that, "taken to an extreme, words become the malleable means with which a culture invents itself" (from Edward Foster's introduction to the book). It might also be suggested that we consider words to be allies in our quotidian efforts against oblivion, even as we trust in the manifold ways that language evolves itself through flux and circumstance. Throughout this essay there are instances of Heideggerian explication, such as the distinction between what constitutes "equipment" (what is "useful") and what is a work of art (what is "useless"). Heidegger's key distinction between *vorhanden* and *zuhanden* remains crucial to understanding how we regard what can be considered useful and what cannot; for instance, as in what and how we conceive of works of art.

In the book's ninth essay, "Code and Substrate: Reconceiving the Actual," Kimmelman also discusses this notion of Heidegger's, where the distinction is drawn between a piece of equipment and a work of art. This is where Heidegger differentiates between the humanly shaped world and the world that exists *a priori* (using this term in the sense of what exists previous to our existence). The things existing in nature are indicated as *vorhanden*, whereas the things made by man (as artifacts and equipment) are considered *zuhanden*. We might also ask if this distinction, while seemingly valid, also promotes further questioning about the limits of our being in the world and how we perceive both our collective and individual existence *in regard to those limits*.

Oppen was apparently "a Heideggerian," yet politically the poet and the philosopher could not have been further apart: Oppen as Jewish leftist with radical inclinations, Heidegger as unabashed Nazi. Oppen's "natural sympathy" (as Kimmelman puts it) for Heidegger brings to mind Einstein's longtime

fond regard for Fritz Haber (which was also mutual), the German-Jewish chemist who discovered the ammonia synthesis process, and yet who was almost evangelical about using poisonous gas in World War I warfare. Einstein the pacifist, Haber the amoral soldier-scientist: because of their shared scientific lives, however, they maintained a close bond for decades.

In the book's fourth essay, "The End of Language: Art, Poetry, and the Materiality of Writing in the Nineties," there is a momentum of leapings in which Kimmelman discusses the problematic nature of transforming poetry into visual things and events. The text is a discursive moving-through of various poetry and art trends that happened in the 1990s as well as a look back at modernism as the antecedent that influenced such trends as Language poetry and conceptualism. From examples of Mallarmé's stylistic texts and Duchamp's ready-mades, to the photographs of Barbara Kruger and Ron Silliman's metatextual poetics, the focus cinematically moves through emanations of the materiality of writing and artistic endeavors. The revelatory salience here is equally one of breadth and depth.

Throughout these essays, Kimmelman's informed readings manifest and address affinities such as sketching out the influence of Thoreau upon a contemporary poet such as Susan Howe, and a reconsidering of several overlooked poets, such as Hugh Seidman, Enid Dame, and Lorine Niedecker. In his essay on poet Stephanie Strickland, Kimmelman declares, "Poetry is, or is meant to be, about never arriving." Truly a remark worthy of Valéry! In poetry as in walking (which also brings to mind Nietzsche's remark about walking's tendency to produce great thoughts), the destination can find itself subordinate to the journey itself. Poetry as process, with arrival optional. But the also question arises, then, what *is* poetry, as we might also wonder not what poems actually *do* but rather how they are made, a distinction certainly worthy of further exploration.

The flow between these essays is almost seamless, moving across cultural and literary terrains, ranging widely as they engage overlooked writers and topics. Reading *Visible at Dusk* seems akin to laying back in a rowboat, oars up and in slow drift, moving down a river on a desultory summer's afternoon. Kimmelman's writing is smoothly cogent while also being intrepidly compelling. Having such a book as *Visible at Dusk*, a text that probes the richness of everyday life, bordered as it is by the limits of our mundanity, should provide

a sense of satisfaction as we reflect on the meaningful nature of its contents. The graceful reflections and expansive menu of topics that inhabit these essays invite the reader to consider the significance of many of the social and literary horizons that beckon within its pages.

MATT HILL is a sculptor and writer who has published reviews in Rain Taxi, Poets Quarterly, Lit Pub, and other journals, as well as numerous critical essays, and twelve books or chapbooks—most recently a selected prose and poems, Integral Process (Gradient Books, Finland, 2016), and two chapbooks (Yet Another Blunted Ascent and Tertium Quid, 2017).