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Rashmi Viswanathan

book review of

*Animateur d'art: marchand, collectionneur, critique, éditeur . . .
L'animateur d'art et ses multiples rôles. Étude pluridisciplinaire de
ces intermédiaires culturels méconnus des XIXe et XXe siècles* edited
by Ingrid Goddeeris and Noémie Goldman

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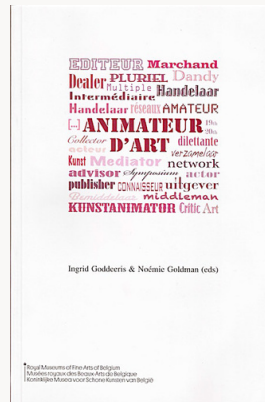
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Ingrid Goddeeris and Noémie Goldman, eds.,
Animateur d'art: marchand, collectionneur, critique, éditeur. . . . L'animateur d'art et ses multiples rôles. Étude pluridisciplinaire de ces intermédiaires culturels méconnus des XIXe et XXe siècles.
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Animateur d'art, edited by Ingrid Goddeeris and Noémie Goldman, is a collection of fifteen French and English language essays first presented at the eponymous symposium held at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in October 2012. It offers an unusual history of the arts; it looks at a class of cultural intermediaries—gallerists, dealers, writers, and exhibition promoters who catalyzed trends in the arts, or otherwise played agential roles in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Modernist art networks in Europe. Each essay grapples with the problematic of the animator, attempting to historically locate it. The following statement introduces us to the symposium's formulation of the *animateur d'art*, who is:

... an amateur who actively participates in the defense of the arts and in the stimulation of the artistic creation in a certain period. He puts his numerous networks to work in order to spread ideologies and aesthetics through the cultural environment and the society. He is a key figure positioning himself as a mediator between the different art worlds—the plastic arts as well as between the different agents of the cultural environment. His work consists in building bridges between the artists and his own cultural environment in order to ease the reception of the works and to promote a peculiar aesthetics.^[1]

Difficult to define beyond its status as an intermediary, the animator is nonetheless placed within certain parameters. In order to qualify for this designation, the cultural intermediary must have engaged in multiple activities in service of the arts, and must defy location within one professional sphere. Stepping back from traditional “Great Man” biographical analyses of artists, dealers, gallerists, or others whose professional contributions are ostensibly discursively definable, this book foregrounds the complicity of private amateur and commercial players in the formation of artistic trends, thereby placing the artist, connoisseur, and thinker within the ranks of the art restorer, frame-maker, and gallerist.

This project resists traditional disciplinary boundaries. In a Latourian turn, it seeks to redistribute agency to a wider group of actors in commerce and the arts, entangling historically discrete discourses (or, rather, shedding light on their entangled formations). This is not, however, simply a recovery project, resurrecting unknown or forgotten cultural mavens. The invisibility of the *arrière cuisine* (back of house staff) is foundational to this study (37); it is precisely the fluidity of this brand of cultural intermediary that renders the animator, in Goddeeris' words, "omniprésent et invisible" (omnipresent and invisible) (141). While not often canonized in historical texts, the animator's efforts to promote artists and movements marked the historical trajectories of trends and careers in the arts. Her agency finds an apt metaphor in the *marionnettiste* (puppeteer), alluded to by the symposium's poster's image of puppet strings in motion, whose invisible fingers nonetheless give life to the actors on stage.

This is not the first study to think through the concept of the *animateur d'art*. The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium earlier published *L'Animateur d'art: Paul Gustave Van Hecke (1887–1967) et l'avant garde* in 2012, which also historicizes the multiple roles of Modernist art's promoters. Similarly, Sarah Greenough's *Modern Art in America: Stieglitz and his New York Galleries* (2000) refocuses the attention onto the agency of a key promoter of Modernist aesthetics. Certainly, one need not look long to find literature on Gertrude Stein or Daniel Henry Kahnweiler. However, this publication seeks to theorize the concept through a focus on largely forgotten or unknown intermediaries as well as shed light on the mechanics of Modernist taste production through the use of different methodologies.

The essays focus on different types of animators, many of who functioned within contiguous cultural milieus. Therefore, rather than looking at each contribution in the order of its appearance, this review is organized roughly chronologically and thematically. As the essays are bound together by shared thematic concerns, the structure of this book lends itself to such a reading.

Starting in the nineteenth century, Jan Dirk Baetens examines the role of failure in the activation of a modestly known artist, Henry Mogford, into an animator of the arts. Active in mid-nineteenth century London, Mogford began his career as an artist of picturesque scenes of minor importance, then wrote for a brief period for one of England's most popular journals, *Art Union*, organized a monumentally envisioned (and poorly received) fine arts exhibition, and directed a failed commercial gallery within the Crystal Palace.

Baetens' fascinating essay examines Mogford's long string of failures as catalysts for change. With each new role he assumed, his network within the art world expanded, granting him the connections necessary to, for example, promote his 1851 exhibition in the pages of the *Art Journal*. In a sense, his efforts in redefining himself permitted his continued participation in the arts.

As with Baetens' essay, many of these studies are concerned with thinking through structural relations within periods of intense social transition; placed within the milieu of a forming commercial gallery system in Victorian England, Mogford's endeavors reflect the formation

of a new type of agent whose function was that of a connector, a node at the heart of new networks that he helped form.

The transitional figure takes on a number of forms; Davy Depelchin's study of the exploits of the modestly born Belgian art supplies innovator, Felix Mommen, mines contemporary correspondence for evidence of Mommen's motivations in establishing rental art studios and a commercial art supplies manufactory in the second half of the nineteenth century, before the advent of an established commercial arts supply market. In like fashion, Ingrid Goddeeris' analysis of the professional life of Léon Gauchez, who helped found the International Society of Fine Arts of London (1865–68), sheds light on the many connected activities of an arts and business patron seeking to promote private trade in the arts. Inga Rossi-Schrimpf comparatively studies three contemporary animators, Harry Graf Kessler, Karl Ernst Osthaus, and Fritz Wärndorfer, disenfranchised aristocrats with utopian visions of fostering Modernity in and through art. In her well-researched study, she historicizes their efforts to self-identify with forming Modern subjectivities locating their varying efforts within turn-of-the-twentieth century Germany, and the increased social permeability offered by its crumbling feudal structures.

Interestingly, the tones of certain essays assume a measure of skepticism in their interpretations of the animators' donning of multiple hats. Though resulting in thoughtful analyses of catalyzing moments, the skeptical tone of Depelchin's study, as noted by one of his sub-headings, "the myth of the altruistic animateur," results in an excavation of intention (24). Similarly, though Beatens' essay is admittedly methodologically defined by the analysis of failure, the author's examination of intentions draws attention to the inauthenticity of the modestly born Mogford's continually shifting promotion and sales of Modernist art. In contrast, Céline de Potter's look at Paul Fierens, now largely remembered for his role as Chief Conservator of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, presents an agile elite, capable of fluidly moving from his initial writing career to that of an arts academic, critic, and exhibition organizer. Similarly, Sarah Barbadette foregrounds the canny agency of the wealthy arts patron, Suzanne Tézenas, in co-opting the salon system to promote an innovative, if not countercultural, Modernist music scene. In like fashion, Yves Guignard's essay on Wilhelm Uhde presents an independent and socially adept intermediary (writer, critic, host, exhibition organizer) who was instrumental in the cultural ascendancy of Cubism. Perhaps this is simply the consequence of the selection of subjects for this collection, but the varied tone tinges the modestly born nineteenth-century commercial entrepreneurs with opportunism, while some of their well born contemporaries and slightly later peers in art have the gloss of ingenuity or dilettantism.

Other studies analyze the significance of political agendas to the spark of the animator. Victor Claas mines intentionality as a means of recovering the Modernist art historian, editor, and patron Julius Meier-Graefe's political drives. Frances Suzman Jowell similarly reconnects the political to the artistic in his examination of the career of the failed politician and critic, Théophile Thoré-Bürger. Anaïs Feyeux's rich study of L. Fritz Gruber sheds light on the agency of a 'middleman' who capitalized on an artistic void left by the events of World War II, to recover German photography from its outlier status in postwar Germany.

Laurie Dahlberg's essay on Edward Steichen, appropriately titled "What becomes a legend most?," clearly lays out the stakes of writing a history of the *animateur d'art*. Her study argues for a departure from hagiographic readings of canonized figures in the interest of diffusing the historical agency of the "Great Man." In contradistinction to the other essays, she has taken a well-known figure for the subject of her study, dismantling his mythology through historical examinations of his career. However, starting from such an historically enshrined figure, her essay rings of a different kind of theoretical project. Steichen's use of his New York galleries as salons of sorts is well known, as was his capacity to attract and repulse critics. Rather than dismantling the myth of Steichen, this essay provides a historiography of his reception—in a sense, a historiography of his myth. As such, it provides insight into the challenges of writing a history of the animator, and the shifting significance attached to his multiple activities in Modernist histories and museum exhibitions.

Though a well integrated collection of essays, the rhetorical drive of the essays to introduce, theorize, and justify the concept of the animator results, at times, in repetitious framings. Particularly given the brevity of most of the contributions, the essays would have benefitted from more varied introductions. However, this collection demonstrates a range of methodologies and ambitious new scholarship. Its thematic focus, or rather its premise, that of the significance of the cultural intermediary who catalyzed new trends and tastes, thereby growing new commercial markets, historicizes the conditions that birthed contemporary arts. Through the examination of the social conditions of the production, promotion, and reception of Modernist aesthetics and the formation of new Modernist subjectivities, the contributors re-draw the fences that bound histories of art, providing fertile ground for future study.

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Notes

[1] Martin Flynn, "Animateur d'art International Symposium," *La Fédération Internationale des Associations et Institutions de Bibliothèques*, June 10, 2016, www.ifla.org/FR/news/animateur-dart-international-symposium.