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James Voorhies

*Postsensual Aesthetics: On the Logic of the Curatorial*

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023. 176 pp. Hardcover \$24.95 (9780262047609)

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Curator and academic James Voorhies's book *Postsensual Aesthetics* asks how contemporary art exhibitions produce new knowledge surrounding these events have developed in complexity. It asks how gallery to include their broadcast on social media, publication (both in-person and virtual) surrounding these events. For \ combination— and, crucially, expect—both sensual and cognitive and digest its content. Yet, traditional aesthetics still prior experience with the autonomous and discrete art object. Contemporary art exhibitions require a reevaluation of this framework. We apply theories of aesthetics offered by Kant, Adorno and other practices that strategically think through how a constellation to form the total work?" (21). Enter the key term for Voorhies's concept that relays his argument that contemporary art relies on the in-person exhibition site and the varied cognitive encounter. This book is a diligent effort to take stock of these different practices to inform the ways in which ideas circulate through contemporary art presentation in our current environment. As Voorhies states, "Crucially, *Postsensual Aesthetics* teases out what we might increasingly expansive and complex mediation.

The book is organized into three sections that focus on *Documenta11*, and one institution, the Nanyang Technological University Singapore (NTU CCA), as case studies to explore Voorhies's reflections separated by a prelude, interlude, and a conclusion titled "Epilogue: the author's reflections as grounded in the work of Theodor \

structure the overall book as a musical composition, a nod to the late philosopher. Here, Voorhies seeks to “animate” Adorno against common tendencies to “historicize his writings” (19). These subsections position Adornoian aesthetics as a filter through which to contemplate how contemporary audiences experience art.

Section one turns to *dOCUMENTA(13)*, curated in 2012 by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, for whom the question “What could the word *art* be a stand-in for?” was an opening for a sprawling, tentacular exhibition that drew as much weight from its many “agents,” led by Chus Martínez, as from the one hundred ninety-four exhibiting artists. In sum, the exhibition attempted to convey a state of mind—delivered by major works by artists like Claire Pentecost, Mark Dion, and Pierre Huyghe as well as small published booklets—instead of a discrete and clean thesis. Voorhies champions *dOCUMENTA(13)*’s emphasis on the exhibition as an animated space of research and discourse, and sees the show as an important marker in the evolution of curatorial practice. In itself, *dOCUMENTA(13)* is “an exhibition from strategically coordinated elements that refuse to allow the physical site to be the primary point of contact, thus requiring cognitive engagement beyond it” (48). As such, it is a shining example of precisely the new standard for “postsensual” curatorial practice. Voorhies is also careful to make the distinction that the type of research and truth-seeking undertaken by Christov-Bakargiev in this exhibition is not purely equivalent to those found in other disciplines, such as in science. Voorhies applauds Christov-Bakargiev’s dedication to artist-led research and artistic freedom, allowing creative exploration to be an end unto itself. In Voorhies’s reading, the curatorial becomes a nonreductive “way to complicate things” inside and outside of the exhibition site (56).

Section two delves into *Documenta11* from 2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor, to illustrate how experimental modes of curating concentrated on an expanded field of research can write art history. Enwezor set out to situate postcolonialism as a foundational concept within the realm of global contemporary art, and Voorhies makes the case that Enwezor’s exhibition was impactful precisely because the curator included an ambitious publication and event program alongside exhibiting artworks. Voorhies details the eight books published in conjunction with *Documenta11*: a 620-page exhibition catalog, a photobook showcasing the work of participating artists, four books published in conjunction with the suite of *Platform* public programs, a short guide to the exhibition, and a research volume exploring the concept of the “urban imaginary” in Latin America. Voorhies cites the depth and scale of *Documenta11*’s publications as the key factor in the exhibition’s continued importance, and as a component in cementing postcolonialism within greater art historical discourse.

While the first two sections examine large-scale exhibitions that illustrate the postsensual through vast curatorial structures that concentrate equally on exhibition sites as well as various publications, public programs, and forms of broadcast, Voorhies uses section three to focus on the NTU CCA in Singapore under the founding directorship of curator Ute Meta Bauer, beginning in 2013. The institution was established as a partnership between Nanyang Technological University and an economic redevelopment project sited at Gillman Barracks, where the building was nested among various commercial entities. This allowed Bauer to bring together the audiences visiting this site for recreation and commerce with the educational and research mandate of the university. The hybridity of NTU CCA itself (which included exhibitions, residencies, education, and research under the same roof and guided by uniform curatorial themes) fostered what Voorhies terms an “institution object” that continually produces knowledge—and exemplifies what a far-reaching *dOCUMENTA(13)* or *Documenta11* could look like if these exhibitions were cast as long-term institutions.

The concluding chapter “Exact Imagination” returns to Voorhies initial point of departure, arguing for the increased importance of the constellation of knowledge production around an exhibition, such as publications, social media, and other associated materials, rather than the mere immediate experience of viewer and artwork. Most audiences experience an exhibition through this postsensual framework, shifting the scope and focus for both curators and institutions. Voorhies brings in Adorno’s concept of “exact imagination” to address how the involvement of multiple registers transforms one’s interaction with an artwork or an exhibition. Exact imagination describes the type of cognitive interaction of an experiencing subject that involves not only aesthetic form but also the subject’s own

lived experience and combined knowledge. All three—*aesthetic form, lived experience, and combined knowledge*—ignite the subject’s imagination and forge a bridge between ideas and the physical and cognitive experience of art, yielding an individual interpretation. If the aesthetic encounter today is dispersed far beyond the exhibition, and, crucially, invites knowledge about art untethered from an in-person encounter, then this moment of exact imagination still privileges the transformation of an aesthetic experience while allowing variation in the avenues for that reception. Voorhies states that Adorno’s assessment “encourages us to look more generously at the exhibition as object” where the curatorial is “. . . the frame for thinking cohesively,” and the curator is the orchestrator of “connective tissues among knowledge, lived experience and the aesthetic form via the exhibition object” (125–26). This rereading of Adorno is one of the strongest portions of the publication, as it begins to touch on how curatorial work can evolve given the fact that cognition is shifting within a media environment largely informed by social media and smartphones. It invites curators to more adventurously approach their practice to meet a distracted and distributed public, and to push all facets of exhibition production across platforms and places to address a thoroughly postsensual moment. That said, Voorhies’s initial argument could be developed further by recent research from scholars like N. Katherine Hayles and Mark B. N. Hansen, both of whom have explored the enmeshed qualities of human attention within a changing technological environment. How can one imagine a postsensual curatorial practice that resonates with audiences whose cognitive and attentive abilities are codeveloping in symbiosis with new technologies? It’s a fascinating question, and one the field is just beginning to answer.

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