

10-2014

Material Figures: Political Economy, Commercial Culture, and the Aesthetic Sensibility of Charles Baudelaire (book review)

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Recommended Citation

Starr, Juliana. "Material Figures: Political Economy, Commercial Culture, and the Aesthetic Sensibility of Charles Baudelaire." (book review) *The French Review* 88, no. 1 (2014): 237-238.

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MURPHY, MARGUERITE S. *Material Figures: Political Economy, Commercial Culture, and the Aesthetic Sensibility of Charles Baudelaire*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. ISBN 978-90-420-3526-3. Pp. 252. \$74.25.

Recent scholarship has challenged the modernist notion of art's autonomy and weakened the separation between aesthetic and economic spheres. Critics like Jacques

Rancière and Frederic Jameson point to not only the contradiction inherent in the notion of full artistic autonomy, but also to a more heterogeneous condition historically for art as both idea and product. Murphy takes a similar approach, allying with the new economic criticism that sees the relationships between aesthetic and non-aesthetic categories as intertwined and complex. Focusing on nineteenth-century France, where ideological debates about art and money raged, she challenges the canonical understanding of the status of art and literature in modernity by examining the relationship between political economy and aesthetics, the focus on aesthetics in the marketplace and exhibition hall, and Baudelaire's consciousness of the interconnection of economics and aesthetics in ways that shaped his understanding of art and literature in a new material world of objects. Hence, Murphy's book challenges not only conventional notions of modernist aesthetics, but also traditional understandings of Baudelaire, the so-called avatar of autonomy, the disillusioned dandy, the role model of social disaffection argued by thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu. Murphy sees the author instead as a spectator keenly aware of art's new public face, a consumer desirous of both art and goods whose sensibilities cast light not only on his own poetic texts, but also on transformations in the tenor of everyday life and habits of perception. This book is organized in six chapters, with an introduction and afterword. Chapter 1 explores how, in early nineteenth-century France, the concepts of harmony (or equilibrium) and utility dominated debates in both aesthetic and economic discourse. Chapter 2 examines press coverage of the annual art Salon and of the periodic industrial exhibition during the July Monarchy, underlining how reviewers in both venues generated an uncannily similar "aesthetic of the commodity" (16). The latter chapters propose a reconsideration of Baudelaire's art criticism and poetry in light of these discursive strains and the growing commodity culture. Chapter 3 concerns Baudelaire's first important work of aesthetic theory, *Le Salon de 1846*, which treats the question of needs and desires vis-à-vis the enjoyment of art. Chapter 4 addresses the development of particular threads in his art criticism after 1848: the evolution of his attitudes concerning taste, the transformation of the notion of the universal into a cosmopolitan ideal, his critique of the notion of 'progress,' and the emergence of an exotic domestic in the aesthetic of the bizarre. The final two chapters focus on the fascinating interplay of the aesthetic, the social, and the material in Baudelaire's verse and prose poetry. A picture emerges of an artist striving to understand the dynamic relationship between self and things, to articulate new aesthetic norms, and to make sense of a new bourgeois culture of spectacle. Murphy's eclectic discussions, ranging from Kant and Condorcet to 'thing theory' and toys, are brilliant and exhilarating.