

Lea

LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

VOL 17 NO 1 A collection of articles, reviews and opinion pieces that discuss and analyze the complexity of mixing things together as a process that is not necessarily undertaken in an orderly and organized manner. Wide open opportunity to discuss issues in interdisciplinary education; art, science and technology interactions; personal artistic practices; history of re-combinatory practices; hybridizations between old and new media; cultural creolization; curatorial studies and more.

Contributions from

Frieder Nake, Stelarc, Paul Catanese

and other important cultural operators.

M I S H
W V 2 H

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Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Volume 17 Issue 1

4 EDITORIAL Lanfranco Aceti



8 **ACADEMIC VANITAS: MICHAEL AURBACH AND CRITICAL THEORY**
Dorothy Joiner



14 **SOME THOUGHTS CONNECTING DETERMINISTIC CHAOS, NEURONAL DYNAMICS AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE**
Andrea Ackerman



28 **HACKING THE CODES OF SELF-REPRESENTATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON**
Tatiana Bazzichelli

34 **ELECTRONIC LITERATURE AS A SWORD OF LIGHTNING**
Davin Heckman



42 **PROFILE: DARKO FRITZ**
44 Lanfranco Aceti, Interview with Darko Fritz
50 Saša Vojković, Reflections on *Archives in Progress* by Darko Fritz
52 Vesna Madzoski, Error to Mistake: Notes on the Aesthetics of Failure

56 **NEXUS OF ART AND SCIENCE: THE CENTRE FOR COMPUTATIONAL NEUROSCIENCE AND ROBOTICS AT UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**
Christine Aicardi



82 **MISH/MASH**
Paul Catanese

92 **SIPPING ESPRESSO WITH SALMON**
Carey K. Bagdassarian



102 **THE MAKING OF *EMPTY STAGES* BY TIM ETHELLES AND HUGO GLENDINNING: AN INTERVIEW WITH HUGO GLENDINNING**
Gabriella Giannachi

118 **COGNITIVE LABOR, CROWDSOURCING, AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE MECHANIZATION OF THE MIND**
Ayhan Aytes



128 **INVERSE EMBODIMENT: AN INTERVIEW WITH STELARC**
Lanfranco Aceti

138 **ORDER IN COMPLEXITY**
Frieder Nake

142 **TEACHING VIDEO PRODUCTION IN VIRTUAL REALITY**
Joseph Farbrook



152 **ATOMISM: RESIDUAL IMAGES WITHIN SILVER**
Paul Thomas



156 **COLLABORATING WITH THE ENEMY**
Shane Mecklenburger



172 **THE AMMONITE ORDER, OR, OBJECTILES FOR AN (UN) NATURAL HISTORY**
Vince Dziekan

184 **THE CONTEMPORARY BECOMES DIGITAL**
Bruce Wands

188 **LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC - HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**
Craig Harris



196 **ARS ELECTRONICA 2010: SIDETRACK OR CROSSROADS ?**
Erkki Huhtamo

ACADEMIC VANITAS

Michael Aurbach and Critical Theory



Critical Theory's Secret 2010
Plexiglas and Metal, 48.3 × 58.4 × 58.4 cm
© Michael Aurbach
Photographer: Bill Lafavor

Critical Theory: C'est Nothing, Deux Nothing 2009
Plexiglas, 30.5 × 22.9 × 30.5 cm
© Michael Aurbach
Photographer: Bill Lafavor

ABSTRACT

In a satiric series of sculptures, Michael Aurbach uses laughter to lampoon the excesses of the contemporary scholarship known as critical theory. Spun from psychology, linguistic hermeneutics, and philosophy, critical theory, in Aurbach's view, tends to deemphasize art objects, substituting fatuous speculations for straightforward analysis. The Critical Theorist (2003) is a fantastical contraption on a metal table, each element of which is a visual joke. Reliquary for a Critical Theorist (2005) parodies the tradition of containers for relics. Two Plexiglas "books," C'est Nothing and Deux Nothing (2009), continue the notion of vacuity. And Critical Theory's Secret (2010) imitates a safe. It's empty, however, mocking the notion of an underlying meaning.

by

Dorothy Joiner

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To lampoon Socrates' obsession with the realm of ideas and concomitant disdain for the pedestrian world of ordinary experience, Aristophanes has the philosopher of *The Clouds* (423 BC) live ludicrously suspended high up from the earth in a basket. The purpose of the Greek playwright's spoof – indeed, the central aim of comedy – is, in the words of Nathan Scott, “to remind us of how deeply rooted we are in the tangible things of this world.”¹

Aligning himself to this morally sanative tradition, in which “laughter is corrective”², sculptor Michael Aurbach holds up to ridicule the fatuitous contemporary scholarship known as Critical Theory, the *dernier cri* of trendy academics. Wafting like Socrates in his basket above actual art objects or literary texts, the

critical theorist substitutes speculative psychobabble, Aurbach asserts, for straightforward analysis and commentary.

Echoing the “high language” that Aristophanes ironically maintains as necessary to “high thoughts”³, Critical Theory is elusive and resists formulation. Employing a polysyllabic vocabulary, proponents spin intricate lucubrations derived from Freudian psychology, Kantian philosophy, and Chomskyesque linguistic hermeneutics. Stars of the “discipline” include, among others, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida.

Aurbach inaugurated his satirical series with *The Critical Theorist* (2003), a fantastical, Rube Goldbergesque contraption on a metal table. Discharging their imaginary contents into an oversized pot – “it’s all cooked up” – a trio of meat grinders bear telling labels: “Essence of Derrida” (whom the *New York Times* labeled “an abstruse theorist”); “Extract of Foucault” (Derrida’s teacher); and “art.” But don’t worry; this latest addition is slated for imminent obliteration.

Other ingredients “season” this scholarly stew. Five valved faucets contribute “Fragrance,” “Distillate of Deconstruction” (fancy word for analysis), together with FD&C coloring, i.e., the prescriptive titles of commercial food colors: “yellow #5,” “blue #1,” “red #40,” – all artificial, of course. Next, strainers serve as “Fact Removers.” Who needs the truth? Condiment dispensers termed “spin cycle” accent the scholarly

hype. And a meat cleaver, “the Cutting Edge,” underscores that conversance with Critical Theory’s jargon confirms any academic’s position in the intellectual avant-garde.

Now is the moment to get rid of art altogether. A garbage disposal, alias “Object Disposal,” pulverizes artifacts, while the “Art Evaporator,” a tea kettle, eliminates any residue. Aurbach’s wit becomes even more trenchant at the end of this erudite little production line. A wooden book on the conveyor belt opens to display a vibrator nested in potpourri (the French word for “rotten” is not without significance here). Ego-centric and finally unfruitful, Critical Theory is a kind of learned masturbation.

Aurbach resumes the visual burlesque with additions to the series. *Reliquary for a Critical Theorist* (2005), a spare Plexiglas box with a pitched roof parodies the millennial Christian tradition of ornate containers designed to hold saintly relics. The sculptor’s “reliquary” is, however, free of adornment; and, like Critical Theory, empty. In a meaningful detail, the gable roof is “unhinged,” just like those espousing the “theory.” A second box replicating the first but exactly half the size, as though sliced down the middle, bears the title *Reliquary for a Second Generation Critical Theorist* (2005), reminding us of Homer’s dictum that sons are rarely similar to their fathers; “most are worse.”⁴

The artist’s jab at pseudo-scholarship continues with two Plexiglas “books” within a vitrine, like heirloom



The Critical Theorist 2003
Mixed Media, 7,5 × 6,5 × 8 ft
© Michael Aurbach
Photographer: Bill Lafavor

volumes – the first titled *C’est Nothing*; the second a witty French-English pun, *Deux Nothing* (2009). Aurbach’s tabula rasa nods respectfully, of course, to Magritte’s *The Perfidy of Images* (1928–29), in which the well-known caption, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” confounds the relationship between the words and the meticulously rendered briar pipe above.

Critical Theory’s Secret (2010), a Plexiglas cube with a non-functional door and a calibrated dial lock, imitates a safe. A vitrine like that enveloping its forebears accents its mock value. But nobody has the combination, and why bother? There is nothing inside.

It is notable that all the Plexiglas pieces were fabricated for the artist, who otherwise insists on making his own work. But because Critical Theory has so devalued the art object, who cares if it is hand crafted or not? The use of clear Plexiglas, a friable, glass-like material, brings to mind other associations as well. Frequently depicted in Dutch still-lives of the 16th and 17th centuries, glass spheres allude to the brevity of life, a reminder of the *vanitas* theme, that earthly goods are all transitory. Man’s life and his pleasures are as

evanescent as bubbles, the image proclaims. A memorable example is the glass sphere sequestering an amorous couple on the central panel of Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1505–1510), a vivid illustration of the Netherlandish proverb: “happiness and glass are both soon broken.” Equally empty and devoid of substance, Aurbach derides, is Critical theory.

Those uninitiated into the intellectual gymnastics of Critical Theory will scratch their heads and wonder at the vehemence of Aurbach’s satire. Others inebriated by this “skein of owlish verbal irrelevancies”⁵ – to quote Roger Kimball – will puff up in wounded vanity. A third, more levelheaded group will laugh out loud at the burlesque.

To appreciate how apt are Aurbach's excoriations, one need sample only two examples from Kimball's book *The Rape of the Masters* (2004). The first is by Martin Heidegger, who might be termed, in Aurbach's words, a "first generation critical theorist." The philosopher romanticizes Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), which sets two worn, hob-nailed, ankle-high leather shoes center stage against a dun-hued ground. Waxing eloquent about "the peasant woman" to whom the shoes belong, the philosopher speaks about "the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind." He imagines her "trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death." ⁷ However poetic and heart-rending, Heidegger's observations

have little to do with van Gogh's painting. The shoes were in fact the artist's own, those he wore when he set out for Belgium as a hopeful young evangelist. ⁸

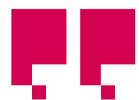
Though wrong-headed, the philosopher's musings are anodyne, whereas other commentaries are downright ludicrous, such as Professor David Lubin's "deconstruction" of John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882), clearly the work of a "second generation" scholar. Rather than a charming group portrait of four upper middle-class children in their elegant Paris apartment, Lubin reads the girls as "his [Boit's] servants, his domestics, and even, at the level of submerged sexual fantasy, as his harem, his congregation of wives, his jolies fillettes du bordel/maison/boîte". Lubin bases this incredulous assertion

on a presumed pun between the name "Boit" and the French "boîte," "box," or sometimes "brothel." His argument becomes even more hysterical when he alleges that the capital "E" of Edward represents the male organ, whereas the little "e" of boîte stands for the clitoris. Perhaps Professor Lubin is most creative, nevertheless, when he maintains that the circonflex over the "i" of boîte indicates the omission of an "s," the initial letter of the word "sperm." ⁹ Need I continue?

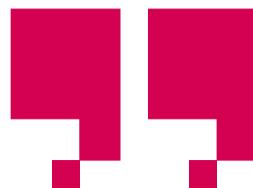
In holding academic balderdash up to ridicule, Aurbach is true to the mission of the comic. He pulls Socrates' high-flying basket down from "Cloud-Cuckoo-Land" ¹⁰ to earth where it belongs, reminding us, as did Bishop Butler in the 18th century, that "everything is what it is, and not another thing." ¹⁰ ■

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photograph Murat Germen,
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