



Resource Review

Name of reviewer:	Adam Brown
Job title and department:	Course Leader, BA (Hons) Photography and Media Arts, BA (Hons) Photography and Video
Institution:	University College for the Creative Arts, Maidstone

Name of reviewed item:	The Future of Art in a Digital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness
Author(s) / Editor(s):	Mel Alexenberg
Publisher / distributor details:	Intellect Books, PO Box 862, Bristol BS9 1DE, UK
Publication / release date:	2006
ISBN number (if applicable):	ISBN 1-84150-136-0
Price:	£29.95

Review:

Alexenberg's book attempts to open up perspectives on the understanding of contemporary digital and relational art practices based on their coherence with Jewish heritage, theology and philosophy. It both underscores the importance of the Jewish contribution to developments in contemporary artistic practice, and traces the intricacies of that relationship through a thorough and wide ranging meditation on form, religious observance, and context.

Alexenberg's insights into this relationship draw on a wide range of scholarship, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the contribution of Jewish artists and cultural producers to Western cultural development. It is necessary to explore what is specifically Jewish about the development of contemporary art, as the turmoil of the twentieth century places Jewish writers, artists and émigrés at the heart of global experience in which cultural paradigms were violently overturned. By tracing his own journeys— artistic, spiritual and pedagogic - Alexenberg explores the specific practices, texts and ideas of the Jewish faith in depth and constructs a narrative that attempts to explain how they influenced Western art production, in the context of a global audience.

Alexenberg describes the shift from a Hellenistic to a Hebraic consciousness as one which moves from fixed outcomes, passive reception, and the importance of objects, to fluidity, intertextuality and the primacy of relationships and practice over form. Broadly put, modernism was Hellenistic, postmodernism is Hebraic. To demonstrate this point, Alexenberg applies Kabbalistic textual analysis to both biblical sources and postmodern ideas. The Talmudic principle that every biblical verse has seventy readings provides a way to ground postmodern notions of multiple readings in a long

standing tradition of textual practices which take no single reading of any text as definitive. This is a key idea, which Derrida also explores in his writings on Edmond Jabès, making similar claims for the importance of understanding the centrality of a diasporic, global, textually complex Jewish identity to contemporary thinking. Drawing on a huge range of sources, from Roy Ascott to Arthur Danto, Talmudic scholars to Irit Rogoff, Alexenberg reveals himself as a voracious reader, and a prolific producer, and his energy bursts out of every page. In the early pages, he quotes Thorleif Borman's contrast between the 'static, peaceful and moderate' Greek and a 'dynamic, vigorous, passionate and action centred' Hebraic consciousness. This book was written in the latter spirit.

Alexenberg's global status as a public artist is foregrounded throughout the book. Alongside its historicising aspirations, the book serves as a document of a practice which is carried forward by immense social, physical and intellectual energy, the outcomes of which have been seen by a huge audience. The book traces the progress of works such as LightsOROT (1988), a collaboration between MIT's Centre for Advanced Visual Studies, and Yeshiva University Museum consisting of 25 interrelated artworks by different artists, using light and cutting edge technology to provoke meditation on the Torah. Each of the works dealt with text, the form of words, light and – in some cases – synaesthetic experience. An exemplar of the kind of work Alexenberg projects as 'the future of art', it combines collaboration, interaction, fluidity of outcome and use of text and image as carriers of shifting multiple meanings. Unfortunately in the design format of this book, the work is rather inaccessible – one has to read through the whole narrative of its production, with bifurcations, diversions and asides, to discover what LightsOROT actually consisted of – the journey is eventually rewarding, but I would have appreciated better pictures and a clearer summary. One would have to go to the original catalogue to find more about this piece, and there is scarce information on the web. Other works – such as his construction of an Eruv at Sodom – are better documented.

Though this book explores the paradigm shifts of postmodernism in the context of the experiences and ideas of a particular culture and people, I felt the need to approach these ideas beyond a specific Jewish context, and consider how form and content interact in the establishment of any community through ritual observance and history. This would seem to be true (though maybe in a less condensed and historically documented way) for other faiths and cultures in the context of accelerating globalisation. Any number of similar books are possible – and necessary – which define how a diasporic history resonates with the dissolution of metanarratives and the expansion of a globalising technological and monetary system. Despite the historical qualifiers I mentioned earlier relating to the specificities of the Jewish experience, any faith perspective comes close to privileging the experiences of one grouping over others, and any appeal to religious authority runs the risk of totalising. Alexenberg is a tolerant writer and works within a multi-cultural context, but he draws few parallels between the experiences of his community and those of others.

By drawing links between Talmudic and Kabbalistic scholarship and the centrality of semiotic ideas to recent art practice, Alexenberg tackles notions such as the relationship between form and context, subject and object and the fluidity and uncertainty of meaning, and the primacy of socially located practice. Though this extended discussion is fascinating in its resolution and reveals previously obscured precedents to key contemporary ideas, he elides some of the major – and well documented – historical reasons why semiotics became important to the interpretation and practice of art – with the rise of media and cultural studies, with the emergence of anthropological and ethnographic methodologies which challenged a dominant modernist/Western position, and left leaning positions which deconstructed ideologies embedded within the text. To provide a broader overview, I would recommend that this book be read alongside Victor Burgin's, *In-different Spaces*

(Burgin, 1996), or other texts which document the paradigm shifts of 'postmodernism'. The role of economic trends and broader social movements is scarcely mentioned, and as a result this text may seem unfamiliar in tone to some readers who may have been introduced to such ideas through post Marxist theory, as late capitalism and its emergence are never discussed. Neither are queer theory, feminism or other postmodernisms that proclaimed the necessity of understanding the location of the voice and the context from which it issues. Without the inclusion of these perspectives, the book replaces the secular-humanistic base of much postmodern writing and thinking with a faith based and located position.

Ultimately, each one of the semiotic chapters, beginning with glosses of key terms and analysis of their parallels with Talmudic or Kabbalistic principles, ends with an explication of a piece of Alexenberg's own work. Alexenberg has seen the future of art in a digital age – and it either looks very much like his own practice, or he is making work in anticipation of a particular possible future, predicated on technological development. (In my reading around this text, I was interested to find that Alexenberg is a member of 'The Society of Religious Futurists', which has nothing whatsoever to do with Marinetti and friends – though this is interesting to imagine.) In the book's title, the truism of the coming of the 'digital age' is reinscribed, a strategy that fails to foreground the complex interplay of heritage, culture and technological advance which form the core of his argument. Such predictions of the 'future' seem to resonate with the techno-green mood of the early nineties, rather than current ecological, economic and political uncertainties. If Alexenberg's confidence in a technological utopia appears dated, the relational element – if it were named thus – is bang up to date. The most productive way to read this text is to ignore the title altogether, and involve oneself in the complexities of Alexenberg's ideas and the narratives of his practice.

This is a book that has the potential to stimulate debate, on the location of knowledge and practice in certain global communities, and faith based traditions, the location of form, and the importance of process, change and context. As a resource I would recommend the book to students if they were interested in some of the specific questions it opens up. It is far from impartial and appears overconfident in its claims for the future – but as an example of a located text it has key resonances to the broader, multi-faith picture that give rich inflections to certain trends in contemporary art practice. The key point for this reader is the clear thread to be followed here from modernism through postmodernism to relational aesthetics. Students would have to have a good grasp of the context in which Alexenberg's argument is situated, and to read it together with maybe Foster, Jameson or Lyotard in order to understand some more widely recognised 'postmodernisms'. As for Alexenberg's artwork, it comes across as well resolved and current in its use of new media in full consciousness of long standing tradition, social context and collaboration. However to show the most interesting of his work to my students I would have to find a book with better pictures.