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What's Next?: Eco Materialism & Contemporary Art by Linda Weintraub

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***What's Next?: Eco Materialism & Contemporary Art* by LINDA WEINTRAUB**

Intellect Ltd., 2019 \$37.00

Reviewed by **TAYLOR EGGAN**

There can be little doubt that Linda Weintraub's latest book makes a timely contribution, both to the burgeoning philosophical movement of new materialism, and to a renewed consideration of materiality in contemporary art-making practices, which since the 1960s have increasingly withdrawn from the material conventions of traditional media. What results from Weintraub's efforts is a wide-ranging and fascinating, if at times also insufficiently nuanced, exploration of future-oriented artists experimenting at the vital intersections of philosophy, environmentalism, and art.

One element that immediately distinguishes *What's Next?* is its evident aspiration to be a teaching text. By "teaching text" I do not mean a conventional textbook. Granted, the "Reader Interaction" sections that conclude each chapter do give it the feel of a student workbook, as they provide physical space for readers' self-reflection. However, by "teaching text" I mean that the book has been designed at every level for use in the classroom. The book itself is available in various forms—as a printed book that can be ordered from the publisher, or as a PDF that can be downloaded and printed on campus, thereby reducing the resources required for distribution. Each chapter can also be purchased individually as a "textlet," allowing teachers greater flexibility for how they assign and integrate the material in their syllabi. The book thus not only means to teach us about contemporary art and theory; through the conscientious design of its form, it also teaches us something about the material realities of publishing today.

With regard to content, Weintraub sets out in *What's Next?* to elaborate some of the central convergences between new materialism and contemporary art. The book might therefore be considered a sequel to Weintraub's previous work, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*. The main initiative of the earlier volume was to document a range of pioneering experiments in the emerging "eco art" movement. *To Life!* opened with a 50-page introduction that offered discussions and visual schematics meant to initiate readers into an understanding of what eco art is (and is not), and what kinds of themes and aesthetic/ethical preoccupations guide this movement. Weintraub devoted the book's remaining 350 pages to individualized profiles of particular artists and collectives she deemed central to the emergence of eco art.

Some of the elements that made *To Life!* essential reading reappear in *What's Next?*, but to somewhat diminished effect. For instance, although the new volume offers a narrower investigation focused on bringing contemporary eco art into sustained conversation with new materialist philosophies, much of the prefatory material feels only marginally different from the introduction that framed *To Life!*. Even Weintraub's guiding concept of "eco materialism" originally appeared in the earlier book and was accompanied by somewhat fuller discussion than it receives in *What's Next?*. This observation should not imply that a standalone book on eco materialism was not merited, but it does mean that the new volume would have benefited from a more substantial development of its specific area of focus.

What's Next? also could have benefited from a more simplified structure. Here again, comparison with *To Life!* helps illustrate the point. The content of the earlier book was split between an introduction and 47 in-depth profiles, an organizational strategy that allowed sufficient space for each artist or collective and their work to “speak for themselves,” as it were. By contrast, *What's Next?* sorts its selection of 43 artists and collectives into a structure that is divided into seven individually-themed chapters, each one featuring its own organizational logic. Instead of doing all of the theoretical framing up front, Weintraub admirably endeavours to integrate her theoretical material within each chapter, and though the different ways of organizing each chapter will work well for teachers who might assign their students just one “textlet,” the structuring of the book as a whole feels somewhat convoluted.

In itself this approach is not a problem; indeed, her use of themed chapters seems to demand the ongoing interweaving of materialist theory and art practice. However, the execution sometimes has the undesirable effect of flattening the art works she profiles. Rather than the theoretical reflections emerging organically from readings of the particular art under examination, this reader often felt that the art was made to conform to a sometimes too-rigid theoretical framework. The book's first chapter on “Eco Material Allures & Repulsions” most clearly exemplifies this problem. Aside from the extended discussion of Maurizio Montalti's work *Bodies of Change* that concludes the chapter, Weintraub only dedicates 75–100 words to each of the other works profiled. Furthermore, the more general analyses that appear at the beginning and in the middle of the chapter somewhat reduce the signifying possibilities of the works presented. A generous reading would understand these simplifications as a necessary result of the author's desire to make the work more teachable. Even so, the simplifications sometimes close down interpretive possibilities that a teaching text might do well to leave open. For instance, all of the works discussed in this chapter feature bodily secretions as primary materials, and the artists deploy these secretions to a wide range of effects. Yet Weintraub insists that all of the works seek to convert the sense of repulsion typically associated with secretions into a sense of allure. Although in many cases this argument seems merited, other examples she presents contradict her claim, suggesting that the attempt to delink these works of eco materialism from the discourse of the abject may be too hasty.

Other chapters that feature somewhat reductive organizational logics include those on “Eco Material Tools” and “Eco Material Creativity.” Both of these chapters introduce broad theoretical categories—tools, creativity—and proceed to reduce each category to a single element: fire and water, respectively. Although Weintraub does convincingly justify why she selected each element as representative of a broader category, this reader wondered whether a greater analytical suppleness could have emerged had each chapter explicitly emphasized the material nuances of art works and art practices that employ fire and water as constitutive elements. In other words, the chapters could have focused on the actual materials rather than harness the materials for theoretical categories.

In spite of the organizational issues that sometimes constrain rather than enable possibility, the sheer range of artists and eco material practices that Weintraub has assembled in *What's Next?*

is astonishing, and alone makes the volume a valuable addition to art and environmental humanities collections.

WORKS CITED

Weintraub, Linda. *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*. University of California Press, 2012.

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