



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2008

## Reviews: Kenneth Hayes' Milk and Melancholy

Moser, Gabrielle

---

### Suggested citation:

Moser, Gabrielle (2008) Reviews: Kenneth Hayes' Milk and Melancholy. *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies* (14). Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/931/>

*Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.*

*The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at [repository@ocadu.ca](mailto:repository@ocadu.ca).*

Vermont, they consider it Vermont syrup. They do not care where the tree is" (221). With this quote, Jones reveals that placing a location associated with quality and tradition on a label is often enough to convince consumers to buy a product, and that marketers are not afraid to exploit this phenomenon. As Trubek points out, although terroir is even marketed to add value to products in addition to protecting a unique flavor, culture, and method of production in France, her interview with Jones speaks powerfully about where the US is in terms of terroir and its marketability.

By the end of the book, the question remains in my mind, and in Trubek's as well: do we really want to emulate the value the French place on the cultural aspect of the definition of terroir, or can science and marketing be acceptable facets to adopt in American society? She argues yes and no, and therefore seems to pose more questions than she answers in her epilogue. Perhaps this is indicative of the relatively new area of gastronomic research in the United States, and should be taken as a call for further study of the topic. *The Taste of Place* leaves the reader believing that Trubek and the rest of America are in the process of discovering something new and exciting, and it is up to all of us to determine how we will come to define terroir as a culture.

Kerstin McGaughey, Boston University

**Kenneth Hayes.** *Milk and Melancholy*. Toronto and Cambridge, MA: Prefix Press/MIT Press, 2008. 156 Pages.

Reading *Milk and Melancholy*, one imagines that architectural historian, critic, and curator Kenneth Hayes must have spent a great deal of time answering the question: "Why milk?" The result of more than a decade of research, Hayes's survey of the appearance and use of milk in contemporary, photo-based art from the 1960s through the 1980s might at first appear to be aimed at a niche market of food-obsessed art historians. As Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art Director Scott McLeod notes in his foreword to the volume, "[m]ilk is an unusual topic" to take up in a full-length publication (20). But to say that *Milk and Melancholy* is "about milk" is a bit misleading; Hayes's actual object of study is what he terms the "milk-splash

discourse” throughout the history of photography (23). From early scientific experiments and commercial photography, to West Coast photo-conceptualism and performance, and finally to the more recent staged photography of General Idea and Jeff Wall, Hayes’s thorough study uses falling, thrown, and airborne milk as a fascinating and multifaceted subject through which to explore traces of the human body in conceptual art practices. Hayes writes of his investigation into the appearance of the milk-splash: “The most remarkable thing about these images was that milk was invariably the locus of a disturbance . . . [that] recurred with the regularity of a trauma” (22). The study is therefore not necessarily about the substance of milk per se, but about how artists charge it with symbolic meaning.

*Milk and Melancholy* is the first title in a new series co-published by Toronto’s Prefix ICA and the MIT Press that aims to explore “the ways in which contemporary art intersects with architecture, history, urbanism, science and technology.”<sup>3</sup> Although *Milk and Melancholy* began as a monographic study of Wall’s 1984 photograph *Milk*, it eventually expanded to encompass more than 20 artists and 100 works of art. Laid out in four chapters and arranged in loosely chronological order, the greatest application of Hayes’s analysis is its delineation of a methodological approach to unpacking art and visual culture that combines classical iconographic analysis with recent uses of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. As the author notes in his preface, the book’s title derives both from Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, and Raymond Kiblsansky’s 1964 iconographic study *Saturn and Melancholy*, and Freud’s landmark 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (23). The book therefore reexamines the usefulness of iconography in light of the “psychoanalytic turn” in academia that began in the 1980s and was driven largely by a renewed interest in Freud’s writing. While these two approaches might seem incompatible, Hayes brings them together in compelling and often convincing ways that attest to their ongoing relevance.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> As McLeod notes in his foreword, the Prefix Press imprint also “situates Canadian artists and writers within critical and art-historical discourses” and will include book-length essays, artist monographs, and critical anthologies (20). The book series will not only complement *Prefix Photo*, the institute’s biannual magazine, but will also provide a professional publishing venue outside the Canadian university presses.

<sup>4</sup> Hayes’s integration of iconographic and psychoanalytic methodologies is unusual, especially due to the legacy of feminist art historians who have taken up psychoanalysis in an attempt to problematize the seemingly prescriptive and overdetermined readings produced by Panofsky’s work on iconography. Jonathan Crary, for example, has critiqued Panofsky’s models of iconography for ignoring the importance of the viewer’s social and historical context in his book *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). Meanwhile, Laurie Schneider Adams’s *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York:

*Milk and Melancholy* opens with “The Photogenics of Milk,” an essay that considers how the substance first became a photographic subject and how the milk-splash specifically became a widely recognized photographic image. Hayes attributes the originary milk-splash image to the optical experiments of A.M. Worthington, who used falling drops of milk to study liquid dynamics as early as 1875 because the substance was easier to observe than water or mercury (27). As Hayes observes, there may have been unconscious parallels between Worthington’s scientific interests and photography’s medium-specific capacities. Just as Worthington was concerned with phenomena that occurred too rapidly to be directly observed but could be perceived through their traces, “[p]hotography, the technique of traces par excellence, suspended these rapid phenomena in time, making it possible to inspect them, reduce them to theoretical knowledge and discover their potential for practical application” (36).

Hayes’s linking of ephemeral optical effects and the uses of photography as an instrument with which to represent them functions in many ways as a foundation for the whole book, which likewise isolates and formally analyzes appearances of the milk-splash in order to unpack their theoretical and psychoanalytic significance. This approach is evident in the following section of the book, which examines California Pop Art’s “romance” with the white liquid and presents work by various artists as case studies.<sup>5</sup> Yet Hayes’s twinning of iconography and psychoanalysis is most convincing when he moves from these close readings of specific artworks to a broader discussion of the motifs and strategies that characterize an aesthetic movement. For example, in his analysis of William Wegman’s 1970 photograph *Drinking Milk*, which depicts a man who appears to consume a glass of milk through a straw in his

---

HarperCollins Publishers/Icon Editions, 1993) provides a detailed investigation of how psychoanalytic theory can be applied to art historical discourse, and her survey text, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), offers critiques of iconography, formalist art history, and Roland Barthes’s use of structuralism by applying Freud and Lacan’s psychoanalytic approaches.

<sup>5</sup> For Hayes, Jackson Pollock’s use of a milk-based paint in *Composition (White, Black, Blue and Red on White)* (1948) becomes an allegory for the fate of the body in modernity (51); Ed Ruscha’s photograph of a glass of milk at the end of his book project *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964) is a self-referential punch line in an otherwise dry conceptual project (65); Bruce Nauman’s inclusion of milk in the series *Eleven Color Photographs* (1966-67) signifies his Midwestern upbringing (75); and David LaMela’s 16mm film *To Pour Milk Into a Glass* (1972), which graces the front cover of the book, uses milk as a stand-in for the very semiotic flow of visual information (99).

navel, Hayes draws upon Freud's articulation of regression in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in which the subject experiences a move back in psychological time under the duress of trauma or stress. Hayes writes: "the resemblance of the straw to the umbilical cord [in Wegman's image] testifies to the infantile regression involved in the adult consumption of milk" (88). This psychoanalytic reading of Wegman's image not only draws attention to the symbolically-charged context in which most human subjects first encounter milk, but also connects the milk-splash discourse to Hayes's assertions about the concerns of California Pop artists more generally. For Hayes, these conceptual artists referenced the milk-splash in "a condition of heightened interiority"—a move to experimenting in the artist's studio rather than in the outside world—that was precipitated by the stresses incurred through the conditions of modern life (107).

While these elucidations of artists' varied engagements with the milk-splash provide a refreshing take on the history of contemporary art, it is not until the third and shortest chapter of the volume, "The Optical Unconscious *in extremis*" that Hayes fully addresses the question "Why milk?" Here, the author reveals that, behind Worthington's rhetoric of innocuous scientific experimentation in his photographs of falling and splashing milk, another motive drove his work: an instrumental interest in the study of ballistics, or impact theory, paid for by the Royal Naval Engineering College in Devonport, England (110). When seen in this context, Hayes argues, Worthington's near obsessive drive to document the perfect milk drop sequence takes on a violent and even morbid fascination with the moment of impact: "Worthington's milk drop is not a milk drop at all; it is the analogue of a bullet," and, as a result, all subsequent representations of the impact of milk must also be read as investigations of a sudden impact upon the human figure (110). Hayes's use of the term "optical unconscious," first laid out in Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," is at the core of this connection between the milk-splash, the photographic image, and the spectacle of sudden death.<sup>6</sup> The realm of the optical unconscious, as Benjamin

---

<sup>6</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (second version)," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, et al. (London and Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 37-38.

saw it, paralleled psychoanalysis' instinctual unconscious and included all those experiences that were ephemeral or extra-visual, and constantly on the verge of disappearance. Photography was the ideal tool to try to arrest, decipher, and make sense of these experiences. For Hayes, then, the photograph of the milk-splash can be conflated with spirit photography and other attempts at capturing the moment of death on film, lending all artistic uses of the milk-splash discourse an unforeseen sense of existential urgency (119).

If Hayes's chapter on the optical unconscious operates as the compelling climax in the narrative of *Milk and Melancholy*, the last essay in the book, "Energy Made Visible: Vital Fluids in the Street," functions as a denouement of the milk-splash in contemporary art. This section considers the "agoraphilic drive to move into the space of the street" through conceptual performances and staged photography (120), offering insight into Gilbert and George and General Idea's "(homo)sexual desublimation of the milk splash" in their photographic and video projects (140) and Mike Kelley and David Askevold's use of the milk spray to reference ectoplasm and spirit photography (158).<sup>7</sup> When Hayes finally returns to Jeff Wall's *Milk*, the image of a marginalized figure's sudden, violent gesture of splashing milk becomes analogous to the practice of photography itself—a medium that the artist fittingly defined as historical self-reflection achieved through the "liquid intelligence" of the developing process (181). In many ways, through Hayes's reading, Wall's figure becomes a symbol of the divergent conceptualizations of milk the book has delineated: the unnecessarily concealed carton of milk can be read as a forbidden substance such as alcohol, the sudden splash as blood in the fleeting moment of death, the spray of white liquid in a face-like pattern as ectoplasm, and the clenched fist as an unconscious gesture of oppression and psychic rage that has resulted from the conditions of modern life (177-184). Hayes claims that Wall's tidy self-referentiality effectively killed the milk-splash discourse (184). By loading *Milk* with so many potent symbolic and psychoanalytic readings, Wall evacuated the milk-splash sign of any other meanings, which for Hayes accounts for the subject's near disappearance in subsequent art projects (184).

---

<sup>7</sup> While these contemporary projects share similar aesthetic strategies with the California Pop artists, they importantly move to the outside world for their experimentation, using the streetscape as film set in the case of Gilbert and George and General Idea, or as mode of dissemination, as in the finished poster projects of Kelley and Askevold.

Though Hayes's incorporation of iconography and psychoanalysis is convincing on the whole, there are moments in *Milk and Melancholy* when it feels as though the author is reaching too far for a compelling reading, thereby overlooking some of milk's more obvious connotations. Sometimes milk is just milk: a nutritional food rich in specific sensory associations including taste, touch, and smell. Hayes's failure to account for these possible readings is particularly striking in his account of Adrian Piper's landmark "Catalysis" series of street performances that used photography to document provocative altercations with the public. While he includes descriptions of Piper's *Catalysis III* and *IV* projects (1970-71)—in which the artist walked through a department store covered in white paint wearing a "Wet Paint" sign and rode the subway with a towel stuffed into her mouth, respectively—he completely ignores the first project in the series, *Catalysis I* (1970), in which Piper "impregnated her clothing with a concoction of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil and then spent a week moving around New York in her smelly regalia."<sup>8</sup> The affective and visceral nature of the substance—particularly the potency of sour milk, upon which Piper's performance was so reliant—is never addressed in Hayes's book. While this seems like a missed opportunity within Hayes' study, it also underscores the inherent limitations of photography as a medium and its inability to convey details apprehended by all of the senses. Though this oversight by no means negates the rest of the interpretations in the book, it does raise questions about whether Hayes's investigation of milk's role in contemporary photography might be improved by considering how the use of milk by performance artists like Piper relates to other landmark, photo-documented events using food, such as Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* (1964) or Marina Abramovich's *The Onion* (1996). Despite Hayes's efforts at being exhaustive, it seems there is room still for further studies of milk's symbolic and psychoanalytic import in contemporary uses of photography.

Gabrielle Moser, York University

---

<sup>8</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 213. Emphasis added.