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2003

# How to Spend Your Holidays: Six Highlights From the Last Year

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## How to Spend Your Holidays

Six highlights from the last year

BY CHARLES REEVE

A friend discovered about ten years ago that an astonishing array of unabridged classic novels are available online. Since he worked in a bank's word processing center, this resourceful fellow quickly realized that, by downloading these books and then formatting them like lengthy legal documents, he could appear absorbed by his work when, in fact, he was lost in *Moby Dick* or *Frankenstein*.

However, since one symptom of addiction is that it interferes with one's job, and as my friend's reading evidently detracted from his work, the longer this deception went on, the clearer it became that he had a pathological craving for literature. It's an unfortunate situation, and one that I'm safe from only because my job allows me to review whatever book I like just often enough for me to pass off my obsessive reading as professional responsibility. This rationalization may be suspect, but it's plausible enough to keep my co-workers from staging an intervention, and that's all that matters.

Or, to put it another way, a lot of books pass through my hands, I at least flip through most of them, and here, in no particular order, are six highlights from the last year.

The size, quality and number of photographs in *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Phaidon, 2003) evocatively document not only Matta-Clark's best known works—the massive and often dangerous cuts he made through abandoned warehouses, office buildings and residences—but also his lesser known collages, pan-fried photographs and performances. The book thus confirms that Matta-Clark's building cuts were his most audacious works, but also shows that he likely would have pursued many other interests, artistic and otherwise, with equal wit and imagination had he not died of cancer at age thirty-five. While Thomas Crow can be densely speculative when appropriate (as in his meditations on art's historiography in *The Intelligence of Art*), here he discusses Matta-Clark's significance in a manner comprehensible to anyone interested in the artistic high points of the last forty years.

While Matta-Clark deliberately was destroying buildings throughout the United States and Europe, the structures at Billy Butlin's low-rent Holiday Camps were collapsing without assistance. Despite their dinginess and disintegration, however, nothing approaches the sheer color, or Technicolor, of the astonishing photographs by Elmar Ludwig, Edmund Nägele and David Noble in *Our True Intent Is All For Your Delight: the John Hinde Butlin's Photographs* (Chris Boot, 2002). John Hinde founded his color photography studio in 1956, and became one



Portrait of Gordon Matta-Clark made for Hair, 1972 (©Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery), from the book *Gordon Matta-Clark*, edited by Corinne Diserens and published by Phaidon Press, 2003. [www.phaidon.com](http://www.phaidon.com).

of the world's most successful postcard publishers. The lurid and outrageous 1960s styling (masses of hair blow-dried to within an inch of its life, for example) in these pictures ought to seem ridiculous but, perhaps despite themselves and their boss, Ludwig, Nägele and Noble produced captivating pictures whose achievement becomes recognizable only as their striking periodicity finally recedes.

A different kind of vividness enlivens Rohinton Mistry's latest novel, *Family Matters* (Knopf, 2002). Mistry catches his readers in a devastating paradox by drawing his characters so richly that their fates concern us utterly, thus compelling us to watch the subsequent parade of disasters even though its profound wretchedness makes us long to turn away. While hardly uplifting, *Family Matters* is less relentlessly despairing than his previous novel, the brilliantly appalling *A Fine Balance*, and thus seems like a companion to his earlier book even though the characters and setting differ. The unadulterated bleakness of *A Fine Balance's* tale of poverty, sectarian strife and governmental malevolence cries out for a denouement and *Family Matters*, with its pessimistic but even-toned view of daily life and its ever-so-tentative concluding note of hope, provides that release.

Will Self shares Mistry's pessimism. However, where sympathy drives *Family Matters*, ridicule fuels Self's *Dorian*

(Grove, 2002). This "imitation" (as Self calls it) displaces Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* to the late twentieth century, exchanging the dilemma of Wilde's book (is generosity demonstrably better than indifference?) for an ethical vacuum. The moral weight borne by the eponymous painting in Wilde's novel compels the protagonist to kill himself. By contrast, Self's Dorian worries about his video portrait merely because it may incriminate him if he doesn't destroy it, but he might acquire its symptoms of AIDS if he does. This solipsism means that, while suicide sufficiently punished Dorian a century ago, only suicide and murder will do now. And Self writes so well that we even accept the device by which he revives Gray to kill him again.

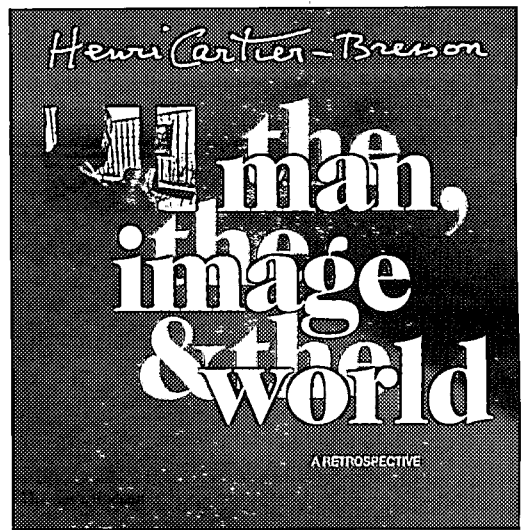
For a turn from novelistic discouragement to its real-life counterpart, I recommend Gary Younge's *No Place Like Home: a Black Briton's Journey through the American South* (University Press of Mississippi, 2002). A writer for the *Guardian*, Younge always is sharp on politics generally and race especially. This book recounts a bus trip Younge made through the South in 1997, retracing the Freedom Riders' route. Younge's most interesting observation—captured in an anecdote involving an accidental visit to a "white" church in South Carolina—concerns the distinction between racism driven by hatred and racism rooted in habit. This difference is worth recognizing since, while the former is incorrigible, the latter sometimes is not, and therefore change, when it comes, comes from there.

*No Place Like Home* is first-rate journalism: its attractive style draws us to its insights and information, thus prompting us to reconsider significant issues. This exchange of depth for audience size has intrigued a growing number of intellectual superstars lately, so the last two years have seen a steady stream of digestible, topical books from writers who generally address specialist audiences. The late Edward W. Said's *Freud and the Non-European* (Verso, 2003), a high point of this genre, reproduces a lecture Said gave (with Jacqueline Rose's excellent response) in which he retrieved Freud's observation regarding the conundrum at the heart of resolutely anti-assimilationist claims about Jewish identity, namely that the founder of that identity, Moses, was not Jewish but Egyptian. The point is that even the Jewish foundation story claims that the Jewish identity and faith are historical phenomena, which as such are not free from fallibility's troublesome clutches.

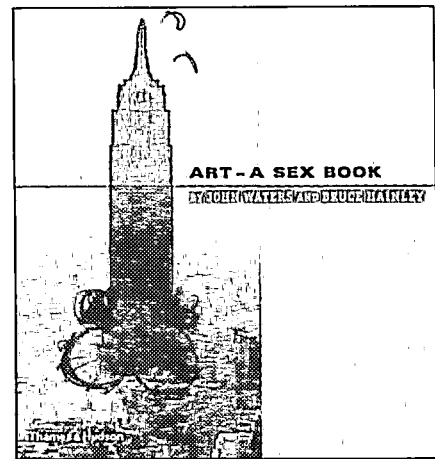
Lists claiming to identify a year's best books are odious and dishonest: far too many books appear annually for anyone to assess them all. However, if you want my opinion—which, surprisingly, some people do—these volumes are well worth your time. <sup>AD</sup>

CHARLES REEVE is editor-in-chief at ART PAPERS. His tribute to Edward Said is on page 10 of this issue.

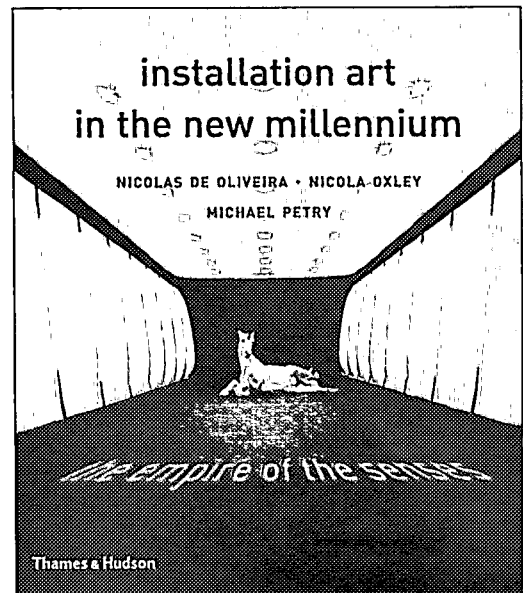
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