SPACE TRAVEL
Christopher S. Wood on David Summers

REAL SPACES: WORLD ART HISTORY AND THE RISE OF WESTERN MODERNISM
BY DAVID SUMMERS
LONDON: PHADON. 704 PAGES. $75.

David Summers has constructed an entirely new conceptual grid for the study of art. Through examples drawn from all epochs and cultures, without repetition or digression, Summers sustains a single, powerful thesis: Art orients the body toward nature and social space, and in this way permits us to "acknowledge" and transform the world. Sites, buildings, and images organize rituals, power relations, and access to the divine in every culture. Technologized Western modernity, however, has complicated the relationship between the body and its real situation in unprecedented ways, encouraging new and precarious investments in what are merely virtual spaces. This "aesthetic" attitude, which Summers describes as an appreciative and imaginative perspective of visual coherence onto artifacts, is always posterior to art's fundamental placing operation. The aesthetic is thus always secondary to art—as Summers puts it, "literally 'after the fact'."

The substratum of art, for Summers, is what he calls the "real metaphor," the assignment of meaning to some thing that has been displaced to a new context and asked to stand in for another, absent thing. The ritual mask in traditional cultures is an example of this. The shaman who wears an animal mask becomes the animal spirit; he does not merely represent it. Ordinary metaphors, the sort made out of words and images, are but symbols of these primordial real metaphors. The mask in Western culture is merely a metaphor, and as such is usually associated with debasement and falsehood. Over the course of Real Spaces, Summers's argument comes to cluster around a sequence of key words and phrases—facts, place, appropriation, the image, immediacy, virtuality. He defamiliarizes these, as well as many others, while introducing a number of new terms, such as enunciation and surficiality. These inventions and reactivations of terminology are symptomatic of Summers's intellectual independence and his ambition to rethink everything from the ground up.

The scope of this study is global. Summers zigzags from continent to continent, delivering crisp accounts of Elder cults at Atan, Benin, Sana, and Copi; comparing the alignment strategies of Stonehenge, Versailles, Jerusalem, and the Nasca lines of Peru; and breaking down the interplay of ritual and artifact in Florence, Teotihuacan, Tell Asmar, and the Pacific Northwest. In Summers's structuralist remapping of art history, the virtual body or "image"—whether Inka, stela, menhir, ex-voto, death mask, or painted portrait—"completes" the social and political differentiations initiated by the sacred site or the temple. And all of this must "prefer" the "aesthetic.""One might well fear that this weighty treatise, with its intricate braidwork of argument, will sink from view. That would be regrettable. Real Spaces is one of the most substantial and original art-historical books ever published. Its range and rigor of thought, and the integrity and internal tension of its argument, are staggering and humbling. I can easily imagine structuring an entire graduate seminar on art theory or art-historical method around this volume. Yet, despite its near-universal range, Real Spaces does have an intellectual context, and even limits. As a student at Yale in the late 1960s, Summers was struck by a pair of maverick teachers outside his own chosen field, the Italian Renaissance—the architectural historian Vincent Scully and the pioneering Mosesian American George Kubler. Neither had much patience for the pious bourgeois cult of artistic style or for the academic fixation on the literary or theological meanings encoded in art. In Scully's reflections on the tension between buildings and public space, or on orientation within the natural landscape, and image" that linked the individual subject to the world. Modern art has been able to generate new conjunctions of social and represented space that make possible, for example, the "suspension or denial of spatial and temporal distance from desire"—for utopian projections, in other words. But, at the same time, modernity risks a dangerous alienation from real spaces, and even from images in their function as effective surrogates for the real. The science of optics, Summers argues, discredited images and encouraged a self-destructive, peculiarly Western skepticism toward illusion. Modernity developed a notional, or "metaphorical," description of the cosmos as an unseizable interaction of forces, supplanting the old Aristotelian cosmos of finite places and consigning the human subject to the negative role of a "counterforce." In its final section, the book changes character completely. Modernism is hurriedly narrated as a series of heartened "re-engagements" with real space—photography, Cézanne, Cubism—which by this moment have been unavoidably routed through virtuality. In the end, one comes to see Real Spaces as a resigned retelling of the not-so-unfamiliar narrative of a long historical fall from an authentic, tactile art into self-absorbed, ineffectual abstraction.

In the closing pages, Summers gathers together his argument and rests it on a single work, the Rothko Chapel in Houston, 1964-70, an octagonal space adorned with large monochrome paintings. For me, this was the one moment of total readily alienation, since I find it hard to acknowledghe the significance or value of this portentous, sentimental work, obsolete already in its own time. Does Summers really believe that the Rothko Chapel somehow successfully summoned, one last time, the energies of the sacred, opening contempor ary art onto the somatically experienced environment in the same way that the Dome of the Rock or Michelangelo's Medici Chapel once did? He concludes with discussions of two other supposedly redemptive works that are more or less of our own time: Pyramid III, 1966-76-, by William Bennett, a long wedge cut inside a limestone quarry, thereby creating a new place in the midst of another (again, a "real metaphor" in Summers's terms); and Karru Jukurupa, 1994, a vast Australian Aboriginal "map-narrative," painted in acrylic on canvas by thirty-four people, a work Summers values because it does "not make a clean break from ritual to 'art'."

The desire to reconnect with real places has been a living current in the art of recent decades. But, as Mwson Kwon shows in her recent "genealogy" of site-specific art since the 1960s, One Place After Another (2002), the literal-minded insistence on the specific site lasted in truth for only a moment. The theme of site specificity was quickly translated into other, more purely discursive forms, such as the critique of institutions. Still, it was not necessarily "virtualized," as Summers would have it, and so rendered specific or ineffectual. On the contrary, as Kwon demonstrates, the idea of site specificity has only become more complex, flexible, and perspicacious since the mid-1980s. Real Spaces is not, really, as some have suggested, a sketch of a possible "world art history." Rather, it is a disenchantment of Western perspective on the trajectory of Western art that sees the very idea of art as an ethnocentric contrivance of technologized and capitalized modernity, and which doubts the capacity of modern art to deal with the tensions that seem to have arisen between the traditional (centered) and modern Western (centerless) conceptions of space.

But what if one were to begin to doubt the stability and efficacy of the premodern worldview, and to take less seriously the power of rulers and priests to organize access to the cosmos through brick-and-mortar structures and pictorial representations? What would happen if one instead saw nostalgia for centeredness and alignment not as the novel and fallen condition of the West but rather as one of the permanent, even constitutive, dimensions of all art? From that point of view, the body-centered and earth-oriented practices of the sort described by Summers will always be dialectically interspersed with their opposites. The "real" would then amount to nothing more than virtuality's recurring dream of its own nonvirtuality, and any given artwork could never be asked to do more than frame the possibility of finite, meaning, and alignment with nature. If such is the case, then Summers here will have told only half, and exactly half, of the story of art.

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