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Vincent Bruyère, *Environmental Humanities On the Brink: The Vanitas Hypothesis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023. vi + 170 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781503630505; \$26.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781503638631; \$19.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781503636798.

Review by Ellen McClure, University of Illinois at Chicago.

“How do we keep on reading and bear with the work of representation in the light of extinction?” (p. 14) This stark question appears near the beginning of Vincent Bruyère’s poetic and provocative intervention in the growing field of environmental humanities. Central to his response is what he calls the “vanitas hypothesis,” a term whose elements combine both the hovering shadow of mortality and the deliberately tentative nature of his exposition to articulate a self-professed “ecocriticism in a minor key” (p. 9). Bruyère’s work is aimed at troubling increasingly dominant discourses of urgency, emergency, causality, agency, and what Anna Kornbluh has recently described as “immediacy”--discourses that have a tendency to cast the humanities, especially theoretically inflected humanities, as a self-indulgent or superfluous pursuit, the first thing to be thrown overboard in our current turbulent waters.[1] Bruyère responds to the pressures of crisis and presentism by turning to early modern art and literature, especially still life painting. Noting that this genre emerged at, and through, a profound historical, economical, and representational shift that rivals (and arguably laid the groundwork for) our own, Bruyère works against readings of still life, like those of Roland Barthes, that read these paintings as mere symptoms of cultural shifts. Instead, he asks the reader to consider the paintings--their skulls, their shells, their objects, their creatures, their brushstrokes--as reflections on the relationship between representation and the awareness of finitude and mortality, a relationship that attains new complexity and depth from being contemplated from our current position “on the brink.” By attending to how still life delicately conveys “the emptiness and fragility of cluttered things turned into motifs...[paying] tribute to the day-to-day erasure of the world” (p. 2), Bruyère mounts an effective, if forcibly indirect, critique of the utilitarian and often reductive ways of seeing, reading, and thinking that, he implies, have contributed to and continue to exacerbate our current condition.

Bruyère’s project itself can be viewed as a kind of still life, insofar as it toggles between past and present, juxtaposing and carefully examining seemingly disparate elements whose coexistence in the frame of the chapter subtly transforms how we read them. Bruyère himself invites this comparison, referring in the introduction to his chapters as each concerning “a motif in the Anthropocene vanitas that I paint” (p. 15), inherently inviting a closer examination not only of *what* is represented, but of *how*. The movement between artworks, texts, and the flattening,

inexorable language of data charts and x-y axes can be dizzying; in the first chapter alone, devoted to “canvas,” Bruyère moves from the logo of XR (Extinction Rebellion) to Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts’ *Vanitas Still Life* (1667-1668) to Richard McGuire’s graphic novel *Here* (2014) to Bathasar van der Ast’s *Still Life of Flowers, Fruit, Shells, and Insects* (ca. 1629) to Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* (2007) to the engraved allegory of America from the Galle/Stradanus *Nova Reperta* (1600) to a UN report from 1972 measuring humans’ ability to project themselves into the future to the graphic rendering, by Donald Davis and Frank Guidice, of the physicist Gerald O’Neill’s visions for human colonies in space that could accommodate infinite growth, to, finally, the artist Naoya Hatakeyama’s series *Blast*, which challenges the genre of landscape painting by rendering the explosion of rocks and debris from a quarry. As in a still life, the elements included here are far from random, although they also defy easy relations of causality or symbolism. Through this apparently disjointed series of texts, charts, and images, Bruyère offers a delicate reflection, at once essential and oblique, on representation not as a given or as something easily nailed down, but as historically determined efforts, always already doomed, to “solve” the human relationship to the world. As Bruyère aptly notes in his introduction, “the Vanitas hypothesis is not a solution to ecopolitical impasse, only a source of non-indifference towards historical texts and objects that are neither entirely relevant to the representation of our planetary concerns nor entirely disposable” (p. 10).

Subsequent chapters of the book present other elements of this textual/theoretical still life: debris, toxics, paper, ark, meat, and, in the epilogue, light. Along the way, the reader encounters more still lifes, but also Poussin and Rabelais, Labat and Léry, *Puss in Boots* and wunderkabinets, productively juxtaposed with contemporary efforts to explain, or at least reflect upon, our current crises, such as Julie Cruikshank’s *Do Glaciers Listen?*, Vanessa Agard-Jones’s ethnography of chlordecone exposure in the French Caribbean, and efforts to grow meat in laboratories, all of this ending with an account of the delicate treatment of time in Ronsard’s poetry. Reading this relatively slender, often poetic, book is itself an experience; I found myself repeatedly reaching for the internet to look up artworks or jot down fleeting yet tantalizing references. Bruyère does not analyze the items he unfolds in any traditional sense; the lines and resonances he draws between them go both ways and in unexpected, oblique directions, and indeed, in the introduction, he refers to his method--or rather, that of the chapters themselves--as “a series of stretching exercises” (p. 15), terminology that evokes the anamorphosis often deployed in early modern painting.

It is therefore impossible to convey the essence of this meditative and provocative work in a review without seriously compromising the delicate intricacy of its unfolding. Yet this review has been difficult to write for another reason. As a longtime professor of early modern French studies, department head, and now the director of my university’s Institute for the Humanities, I have grown accustomed to making and reading arguments that articulate, perhaps with increasing desperation, or at least urgency, what art, literature, and theory can do, often in terms that emphasize their continued usefulness. And of course, in this I am not alone; I wryly noted Bruyère’s invocation, early in the book, of Ernst Panofsky’s influential distinction between monuments and documents, a distinction that John Guillory builds upon and embellishes in his recent (and widely read and debated) *Professing Criticism*.<sup>[2]</sup> As Bruyère notes, Panofsky’s work is built on a foundation that finds itself increasingly eroded by “a context of ecocidal urgency” (p. 6), its categories undermined by the contemporary shift to post-humanism.

Bruyère's work forces the reader--at least, this reader--to abandon, or at least examine, her quick recourse to instrumentality and instead sit with the wonder and puzzle of the continued existence of still life paintings in our rapidly warming, increasingly fragile world. Bruyère asks us not to fight or deny that fragility, but to turn into it, and here again, still life, with its bold acknowledgment of *vanitas* and its balancing of often astonishing depictions of the natural and made worlds with awareness of the work of representation itself, can serve as an unexpected and often overlooked resource.

At times, I found myself resisting Bruyère's text, frustrated at the seeming elision of questions of agency and responsibility by the avoidance of animate subjects of verbs, critical of Bruyère's evident comfort with and in a largely Western European corpus that serves to obscure alternate ways of inhabiting, representing, and interpreting the world, impatient with the thickness of a prose that could easily be dismissed as theoretical jargon. To his credit, Bruyère is keenly aware of these potential objections; his text is filled with statements about what it is *not* trying to do. A typical passage reads, "But the challenge I set for myself with the Vanitas hypothesis does not consist in reclaiming a shrinking philological habitat. Rather, it is to reimagine what non-indifference toward the historical record and the practices invested in its maintenance could look like in the Anthropocene present" (p. 77). Such moves serve to inoculate his text against criticisms that might, in a different context, be able to gain more traction.[3] Having these exit doors blocked, as it were, forces the reader to relate to environmental catastrophe and our role in it differently and to grapple with difficult emotions such as grief, helplessness, nostalgia, and anger- in other words, to move from solving mortality to working intimately with it. As I reflected on Bruyère's slippery, puzzling, and provocative work, I kept coming back, perhaps inspired by its title, to Blaise Pascal's observation that "We run carelessly to the precipice, after we have put something before us to prevent us from seeing it." [4] It is one of the many merits of Bruyère's book that it reminds us that the early modern period had many things to say about both precipices and obstacles that can resonate differently and deeply in our own troubled times.

## NOTES

[1] Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2023).

[2] John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

[3] Caroline Levine provides an eloquent critique of such theoretical slipperiness in her recent *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), especially pp. 8-11. Yet Levine also offers the following, which seems to align with Bruyère's project, even though she is talking about literature rather than painting: "Realist art has often been condemned as conservative, making the world as it is seem inert and inevitable. But...far from naturalizing the tasks of everyday survival, realist texts often go to some trouble to defamiliarize the ordinary struggle to keep life going over time- to draw our interest to this task" (p. 20).

[4] “Nous courons sans souci dans le précipice après que nous avons mis quelque chose devant nous pour nous empêcher de le voir.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Philippe Sellier (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010), pensée 198.

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