

The New REPUBLIC

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In the autumn, everybody wonders what's going to happen next in the arts. This is a natural feeling, a good feeling. Optimism is in the air. But if you've already spent your fair share of autumns waiting to see what comes next, you probably cannot avoid the echoes of seasons past, a sense, alternately exhilarating and depressing, that we are always returning to places we've been before. The other day, looking through a box of magazines from the 1930s and 1940s, I was astonished by a critique of the mass marketing of art offered by Kenneth Clark, the art historian who was director of the National Gallery in London, in an essay on "Art and Democracy" in the July 1945 issue of *The Cornhill Magazine*. "Market research, Listener research, and all the other means of measuring mass desires," Clark announces, "these are instructions in the destruction of civilization as potent as the flying bomb and the tank." I had not realized that the quantification of cultural experience was already a threat 65 years ago—a threat that Clark compares to "the flying bomb and the tank," an analogy not to be taken lightly, considering that the war was barely over. I find Clark's words inspiring; I've discovered a new (but also old) ally in an ongoing controversy.

Perhaps the point is not that there is nothing new under the sun but that the new and the old are fluid categories, and that any idea or experience or creative act is a confounding combination of the two—new-old or old-new or some union thereof. All of this is further complicated by our relationship with a particular experience, because old news can be unfamiliar to us, so that the old sometimes feels newer than the new. This is the case with a rather astonishing book of photographs by Frédéric Chaubin, of buildings that went up in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. Turning the pages of *CCCP: Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (Taschen), I am struck by the extent to which these unfamiliar structures discovered by Chaubin all across the former Soviet Union echo and develop the visionary strategies and caprices of the eighteenth-century radical classicist Boul-*l*ée, as well as the work of Gaudí, Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Paul Rudolph. The buildings range from rather modest angular wooden structures that suggest the 1960s houses at Sea Ranch, north of San Francisco, to gargantuan public structures in Georgia, including a Palace of Ceremonies (1985) that is all swelling volumes and interlocking towers and a Ministry of Highways (1974) that is a Cubist tangle of heaped-high boxes. Like some of the new architecture in China, these Soviet works are often scaled to intimidate; the moral implications of public architecture in a totalitarian society cannot be overlooked. Chaubin's photographs, which leave us in no doubt as to the decrepit state of many of the structures, definitely play to a romantic fascination with the wreckage of Soviet life. Among

other things, this book is an example of post-Soviet chic. But Chaubin is also highlighting the work of a number of very impressive architects, who managed to operate with a considerable degree of imaginative freedom in a political culture that would soon receive the death sentence it deserved.

Retro chic is also a factor in “La Carte d’Après Nature,” a group show curated by the photographer Thomas Demand at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. The fascination of older styles and feelings was always an element mixed into the striking modernity of the Surrealist sensibility. And there’s old-new ambiguity aplenty in this show that takes its theme from Magritte, the Belgian Surrealist who painted twentieth-century dreams in a nineteenth-century academic manner. The title—“The Map After Nature”—comes from Magritte, three of whose paintings are included. The exhibition, which is about the framing or denaturalizing of nature, is laid out in a labyrinth of dramatically angled spaces with curiously shaped internal windows, designed by Martin Boyce. While some will dismiss this as the umpteenth contemporary hipster replay of the Renaissance or Baroque idea of the Cabinet of Curiosities, I find real charm in Luigi Ghirri’s photographs, many of gardens, and I enjoyed seeing the reconstruction of Robert Mallet-Stevens’s 1925 Cubist Tree and some material relating to the Canadian Pulp and Paper Pavilion at the Montreal Expo 67. There are porcelain models of imaginary biological specimens by Chris Garofolo, films by Tacita Dean and Rodney Graham, and late nineteenth-century photographs of garden doors by August Kotsch. While the enormous catalogue contains a larger dose of theoretical hocus-pocus than I can easily tolerate, the exhibition, with its cool, mazelike presentation, effectively replays an old intellectual fascination with the charms of the picturesque. The exhibition strikes me as true to Magritte’s surgical romanticism, an anti-sensibility sensibility to which I’ve never exactly warmed. To the extent that I am ambivalent about “La Carte d’Après Nature,” it is an ambivalence with which I’ve long been familiar.

Perhaps the reason I have found myself thinking about the old-new and the new-old goes beyond the mixed feelings kicked off by a new season in the art world. I believe I am still under the influence of Virginia’s Woolf’s second novel, *Night and Day*, which I read for the first time a month or so ago. Published in 1919 and generally said to be her most traditional work of fiction, it seems for that reason to have never found the large readership of *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse* or some of the others. This is perfectly understandable, except that *Night and Day* is simultaneously a work of the most startling and mesmerizing modernity. The protagonist, Katharine Hilbery, is the granddaughter of a legendary Victorian poet; her mother, the poet’s daughter, is a dreamer who has spent decades in the apparently hopeless task of writing a definitive life of the great man. *Night and Day* is indeed structurally traditional, with the lives of Woolf’s young lovers set against the backdrop of an older generation drawn with comic touches that recall—and in many cases

rival—the best of Jane Austen. Woolf’s elegant minuet of attractive, confused young lovers, although it has a symmetry and artifice we may tend to regard as antiquated, becomes the occasion for an altogether convincing account of the onslaught of the new. Woolf’s evocations of London—of its sounds and sights and how they press on the individual—are as acute as anything in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her delineation of the feminist struggle is masterful, combining a clear belief in the need for enormous social and political change with unsparing attention to the human complexities of particular cases. I am not sure I have ever read a novel that more persuasively demonstrates what it meant to be young when the modern century was still young.

And yet—as the commentators say—*Night and Day* is an old-fashioned book, a novel that obeys all the traditional rules of fictional time and space that Woolf herself would do so much to overturn. I can imagine somebody saying that *Night and Day* is a failure, its structure too old to explicate its characters’ search for the new. There is no question that it is an impure book, a mixture of different things. But as I’ve thought about *Night and Day*, I have become more and more convinced that it is the impurity of the book that accounts for its distinctive power. The structure cries out for—and even in some cases delivers—the neat conclusions that Virginia Woolf obviously doubts the world can provide. *Night and Day* might be described as a conventional novel that grapples with an unconventional world. You feel Woolf’s powerful connection with both sides of the equation. In the pages of *Night and Day* the old and the new never quite come together. Then again, they never exactly come apart.

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