

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER and PAUL VIRILIO, *The Accident of Art*. Trans. Michael Taormina. New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2005. Distributed by MIT Press. 128 p., endnotes, index.

The Accident of Art is a little book full of big ideas. The format is an extended conversation between Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer. Their subjects range from space/architecture and urbanism, time/speed and “dromology,” bioengineering and biotechnology, the plastic arts versus the “optical correctness of the audio-visible” machine, to globalization and war. There are three chapters: “A Pitiless Art,” where they speculate on a correlation between the traumas of the two World Wars and the form and content of contemporary art; “The Accident of Art,” where they identify how the plastic arts have been rendered meaningless and superseded by the digitalized mass culture of consumer society; and, “The Museum of Accidents,” where they propose the relevance of a museum to demonstrate the frightening and exponential integration of technology, war and accident. Relevant exhibition materials would include social, legal and historical documentation, physical reconstructions, along with montages of mass media coverage of such “accidents” as the World Trade Center attack, or the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. To use Anthony Giddens’s concept, their overall project is to elucidate how the juggernaut of modernity may be spiraling beyond our control.

The authors’ pedigree is impressive. Paul Virilio (born 1932), trained as a painter under such luminaries as Matisse and Braque, also studied phenomenology at the Sorbonne under Merleau Ponty. In 1968, after participating in the Paris protests, the students at the Ecole Speciale d’Architecture nominated him to the position of Professor. In 1973 he became Director. In 1998 he retired from teaching. There is a corpus of publications dating back to the 1950s. Since 2000 he has published twelve monographs. His critical sociological writings began with *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (1977/1986). Many of his recent publications are essays or what he calls “logic bombs.” Often referred to as an urbanist or cultural theorist, he describes himself not as a philosopher or art critic but an essayist. His co-author, Sylvère Lotringer, is a professor of French literature and philosophy at Columbia University, a frequent lecturer on art, and general editor of *Semiotext(e)*. His publications mainly take the form of collected interviews, essays and stories from and about some of the twentieth century’s most notable intellectuals. These include Jean Baudrillard, Michael Foucault, Felix Guattari, William Burroughs and others. Virilio and Lotringer began their collaborations in 1983 with *Pure*

War and continued in 2002 with *Crepuscular Dawn*. *The Accident of Art* is the third and final installment of the trilogy. *Semiotext(e)* was founded as a scholarly journal by Lotringer in 1974. The Foreign Agents series, to which this little book belongs, aspires to introduce leading edge French cultural theory to Anglophone America. Since 2000 MIT Press has distributed the series. Virilio and Lotringer are deeply implicated in the French intellectual current that bedazzled the academic world in the 1980s with its post structural, postmodern/hypermodern critique of modernity and positivism in the social sciences. To borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, they are tenacious wielders of cultural capital: a tightly knit group of self-interested insiders playing a highly sophisticated self-referential game.

Herein lie both the strengths and weaknesses. The entire book could be read in a two hour sitting, or dipped into for five or ten minutes. The conversational format gives the appearance of spontaneity, and mimics the late night talk show. They glide effortlessly from topic to topic and entertain as well as inform. The ponderous, theoretically tight and empirically grounded argument is absent. The intensely subjective and highly complex style is alluring and intriguing, while the translation from the French is often vague and the ideas rarely hold together in a sustained manner. Anyone unfamiliar with the intellectual context, without the prerequisite cultural capital, would be swept away, at a loss, unable to decipher. There is thus a partial replication of the very conditions they criticize. The layperson or average undergraduate might find it inspiring. The indoctrinated social theorist might self-referentially enjoy the playful glossing. Their ideas are insightful, contrary and thought provoking, which are useful counterpoints to optical correctness. Most of us will have encountered either the long or short versions before, but it is a pleasure to be so elegantly reminded.

Janet M.C. Burns, *University of New Brunswick*.