

on books

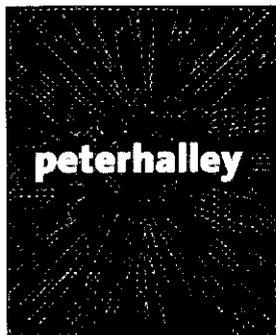
Peter Halley: Maintain Speed

essays by Rudi Fuchs, Susan Kandel, Makiko Mataka, Demetrio Paparoni, and David Rimaneli

D.A.P., New York, 2000

hardcover, 228 pages, \$60.00

reviewed by Gean Moreno



The story behind Peter Halley's paintings is well known. His flat Day-Glo cells, prisons, and conduits—rising from the surface of the Modernist monochrome—represent our social arrangements; geometry's honeymoon basking in Platonic innocence is over. Contributors to this book gracefully rehearse this tale and open up its dimensions, reminding us that, in Makiko Mataka's words, "the process of decoding [Halley's] paintings becomes a medium through which to decode our social life." In David Rimaneli's hands the Halley canvas becomes a portico into a *Matrix*-like story bereft of liberatory pills, in which the real is nasty, veiled, but inescapable. Rudi Fuchs and Demetrio Paparoni convincingly tie Halley to a long line of American Realists that includes Edward Hopper and Charles Sheeler, explaining in the process the conversion of abstraction's spiritual language into the matter-of-fact vocabulary of toothy realism. Susan Kandel defends Halley's "soft" mastery over post-structuralist theory and his efforts to collapse the wall between artist and critic. She scripts a sardonic little narrative about the brainier side of the '80s New York art world. Mataka takes us on a guided tour of

Halley's stylistic developments, finding vast significance in what may seem like minimal changes.

The texts weave almost seamlessly into the barrage of graphics and photographs surrounding them, attesting to the book's outstanding design. There are wonderful installation shots, a labyrinthine chronology of Halley's paintings, a hyperactive Day-Glo cover, all sorts of diagrams, details, cartoons, quotes, studio views, snapshots, and even translucent pages that decode clear phrases out of jumbles of text. *Maintain Speed* occupies a midpoint between monogram and artist's book, maintaining the better qualities of both. There should be nothing to complain about.

But a feisty sense of incompleteness haunts the book. One is left wanting to hear something substantial about the second half of Halley's tale, the Clinton-years part, when the paintings turn deliciously visual, the colors multiply and radiate, and the realism seems less that of Hopper than of contemporary video and design culture. Little is said of what has happened on the surface of these paintings now that the art-historical narrative that contextualizes them is

firmly in place. There is nothing of the similarities between, say, the prints with which Halley has been wallpapering his exhibitions in the past couple of years and Warhol's camouflage paintings. Nor does the book suggest reasons why Halley's cells and conduits feel so right next to works by younger painters like Kevin Appel, Jeff Elrod, and Matthew Ritchie. Who would have thought that the dry intellectual Halley would emerge as a predecessor to a band of new insouciant painters? That he has is significant and interesting.

That so little is said of Halley's newer work is frustrating only because, as Fuch proposes, "For Halley, the idea that the essential character of one's work should be congruent with the dynamic of contemporary culture" is important. Mataka writes that the "developments [in Halley's paintings] are shaped by corresponding changes in the very nature of the social world." Why, then, do these writers treat the new paintings so superficially along with what these works may say of the rampant proliferation of information technologies and of this ebullient cultural moment in which we're so eager to put a premium on sensorial stimulation? Why do they not deal with Halley's own claim that the new works are parodic, hilarious, and un-analytical? This being the age of blockbuster sequels, maybe a second volume is needed to complete Halley's story.

Gean Moreno is a writer living in Miami.

Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision

by Natalie Zemon Davis

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000

softcover, 164 pages, \$22.95

reviewed by Bernard Welt

Are movies history? The distinguished historian Natalie Zemon Davis thinks so, and she seems ideally suited to address this question. Her academic best-seller *The Return of Martin Guerre* was the source for one of the most successful cinematic recreations of history ever, a film that itself provided a much-cited parable of the historian's craft.

Davis asks, "What is film's potential for telling about the past in a meaningful and accurate way?" But a lot depends on just what "meaningful" means. Stanley Kubrick's 1960 *Spartacus* gets high marks: Howard Fast's novel and Dalton Trumbo's screenplay offer plenty of realistic detail regarding the lives of Roman slaves, which Kubrick brought to life on screen with obsessive care. But as Davis knows, *Spartacus* was about the writers' experience of McCarthyism and blacklisting at least as much as about the past, real or imagined. The whole movie exists for the sake of the scene in which hundreds of escaped slaves take up the cry "I am Spartacus!" as they stand together in solidarity like the Hollywood liberal community of the period did not. The more interesting issue to

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