



Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life

By Lisa Siraganian

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Modernism's Other Work challenges deeply held critical beliefs about the meaning—in particular the political meaning—of modernism's commitment to the work of art as an object detached from the world. Ranging over works of poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture, and film, it argues that modernism's core aesthetic problem—the artwork's status as an object, and a subject's relation to it—poses fundamental questions of agency, freedom, and politics. With fresh accounts of works by canonical figures such as William Carlos Williams and Marcel Duchamp, and transformative readings of less-studied writers such as William Gaddis and Amiri Baraka, Siraganian reinterprets the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and politics. Through attentive readings, the study reveals how political questions have always been modernism's critical work, even when writers such as Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis boldly assert the art object's immunity from the world's interpretations. Reorienting our understanding of the period, Siraganian demonstrates that the freedom of the art object from the reader's meaning presented a way to imagine an individual's complicated liberty within the state. Offering readers an original encounter with modernism, *Modernism's Other Work* will interest literary and art historians, literary theorists, critics, and scholars in cultural studies.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Lisa Siraganian's brilliant book makes a huge contribution to our understanding of 20th-century literary and artistic modernism, in large measure by focusing on the issue of breath as it plays out in the theory and practice of a host of major figures from Stein to Baraka." --Michael Fried, author of *Art and Objecthood*

"Modernism's Other Work represents a real advance in how we read some major writers, and in how we understand their own views of their art. Lisa Siraganian argues that important modernists pursued a vision of art at odds with our assumptions about what they believed. She is a fine guide to artists like Marcel Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, Wyndham Lewis, Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, and others. Anyone interested in what modernists did, in what modernists thought, in what their successors can do, about writing and bodies and visual art, will surely learn much from Siraganian's good book." --Stephen Burt, author of *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry*

"Lisa Siraganian's brilliant book makes a huge contribution to our understanding of 20th-century literary and artistic modernism, in large measure by focusing on the issue of breath as it plays out in the theory and practice of a host of major figures from Stein to Baraka." --Michael Fried, author of *Art and Objecthood*

"Modernism's Other Work rewrites the history of twentieth-century US aesthetics. Siraganian's open-eyed, sharp-toothed readings of poetry and visual art moderate and sometimes undo, along the way, the last philosophical and intellectual paradigms to believe in too-simple distinctions between subjects and objects, persons and things." --Eric Hayot, author of *The Hypothetical Mandarin*

"In moving nimbly between modernism and postmodernism, accounting for a politics of aesthetics, and negotiating multiple media, this is modernist criticism at its athletic best. Siraganian's stringent argument for meaning's autonomy not only makes for provocative groupings but can change the way we understand autonomy and what it bequeaths. Moreover, Siraganian writes like the best prosecuting attorney you could hope for-or fear." --Jessica Burstein, University of Washington

About the Author

Lisa Siraganian is Associate Professor of English at Southern Methodist University.

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