
Shannon, an Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Maryland, offers a unique and fascinating analysis of four titans of post-war art and their relationship to a rapidly changing New York City: Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Donald Judd. Broadly speaking, Shannon posits post-war New York City, as experienced by these artists, transitioned from a city of materiality, old warehouses, tenements, small shops with eccentric signage, and narrow streets, to one of abstraction, the International Style and its glass and steel towers, broad avenues, and discrete signage. To put it bluntly, New York City went postmodern. After establishing his cultural context, Shannon's methodology is to analyze specific works by Oldenburg, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Judd; each get their own chapter, in order to shed new light on both their work and cultural theory in relation to art. The artists under consideration during this brief period grappled with, even resisted, their rapidly changing environment by incorporating everyday materials and urban detritus into their art: street signs, beer cans, burlap sacks, the forms of corporate furniture. The materialist approach of these artists is undeniable yet the works are not devoid of metaphor. Shannon draws from previous critical literature to strike a balance between these poles. He is more interested in challenging myopic interpretations and embracing both the complexity of New York City and the art made in reaction to it.

In many respects, Shannon succeeds. He admits the work of the artists considered is difficult to interpret without descending into relativism or stridency. Occasionally, his methodology lacks cohesion. Instead of synthesizing his interpretations with an urban theoretical framework, the two strains occupy parallel, albeit separate, tracks. Despite these flaws, Shannon's approach succeeds in establishing a fresh way of looking at these and other artists.

The book is well-designed, sturdy, and includes copious reproductions, mostly of high quality: period photographs, installation views, and detail shots of the works discussed – essential for the close readings upon which Shannon establishes his thesis. Shannon's research is meticulous; witness the twenty-five pages of endnotes, not to mention an excellent index. Graduate students with similar research interests as Shannon are the primary audience but the book is appropriate for upper-level undergraduates in any number of disciplines including studio arts, art history, and architecture. This book is recommended for any general art library but especially for those supporting contemporary art history programs and schools of architecture with emphases on urban theory and cultural studies.

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