

# Books

We invited *frieze* contributors to discuss the writers and publications they consider to be the most significant of the last 20 years

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Brian Dillon

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**Giorgio Agamben**  
***Infancy and History* (1978;**  
**translated into English in 1992)**

Given the ubiquity of Giorgio Agamben's thought in the art world over the last decade, and the alacrity with which the Italian philosopher's ideas regarding the 'biopolitical' logic that links the Nazi death camps, Guantánamo Bay and everyday surveillance have been redeployed, it's worth recalling what a vagrant, odd and original writer he seemed when *Infancy and History* was first translated. The essays collected here touch on St. Augustine, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, the Utopian 'playland' of *Pinocchio*, the meaning of the nativity crib and (in a text originally added to the French edition) the history of gesture. Agamben is at his best when weirdly hieratic and resistant to easy translation into the terms of curatorial chatter. Like any great philosopher, he gets read selectively and instrumentally, but the work itself is infinitely more involved and oblique.

*Brian Dillon is a writer based in Kent.*

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Hari Kunzru

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**Manuel De Landa**  
***War in the Age of Intelligent***  
***Machines* (1991)**

*War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* is a strange hybrid of a book, part philosophy and part science fiction. It puts forward a vision of future warfare in which intelligence is embedded in autonomous machines that can make decisions on the battlefield. The book was an early salvo in what was then called cyberculture, but though the 'cyber' prefix has come to seem dated, the implication of the rise of networks and the saturation of the material world with information have yet to be fully worked through. In subsequent books, Manuel De Landa, a marginal figure in the world of academic philosophy, has gradually pieced together a radically materialist view, which has great explanatory power. The cultural tendency of which De Landa's early work was a part has yet to be given its proper due.

*Hari Kunzru is a novelist based in New York.*

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Michael Bracewell

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**Andrew Renton**  
**& Liam Gillick (eds.)**  
***Technique Anglaise* (1991)**

In Britain and internationally, the world of contemporary art underwent a radical and multi-allusive shift in the years immediately following the 'Freeze' exhibition curated by Damien Hirst in July 1988. This shift would affect the holistic identity of contemporary art, and in a manner that provoked a substantial need for individual and collective reorientation. *Technique Anglaise: Current Trends in British Art* is both a vital document of this pivotal moment and a master-class in cultural enquiry. Curatorial in form, the book presents the work of 27 UK-based artists and the transcript of a discussion about the process and contexts of their selection. The artists include Angus Fairhurst, Sarah Lucas, Langlands & Bell, Rachel Whiteread and Hirst himself; while the discussion brings together Lynne Cooke, Liam Gillick, Maureen Paley, Andrew Renton, Karsten Schubert and William Furlong. What emerges is the template for much that has followed over the last 20 years, while also raising questions that are still waiting for an adequate answer.

*Michael Bracewell is a writer based in England.*

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Stuart Bailey

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**David Foster Wallace**  
***Infinite Jest* (1996)**

In issue 125 of *frieze*, 'Whatever Happened to Theory?', John Russell makes the case for the writing of Gilles Deleuze as amounting to 'the most interesting example of "contemporary art" of the last 40 years', but I'd counter-propose the filmography of James O. Incandenza, the alcoholic, anticonfluent, *après-gardist* whose body of work includes advertorials, documentaries and features, as well as his unclassifiable, unreleased, but highly sought-after magnum opus, a fifth and apparently fatal attempt to film a custom-lens, multiple-gauge high-concept piece of oedipal entertainment, supposedly unfinished at the time of his suicide, as listed at the end of the 24th footnote of the therefore even more extraordinary outer novel of the same name, *Infinite Jest*.

*Stuart Bailey is a designer based in Los Angeles.*

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Jörg Heiser

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**Judith Butler**  
***Bodies That Matter* (1993)**

In the summer of 1994, Judith Butler organized a seminar at Frankfurt University. Her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), questioning the supposed stability of gender identities, had almost instantly become a canonical work of feminist and queer theory. Still, only 30 or so students showed up – but they didn't regret it. Butler eloquently offset difficult philosophical enquiries with vivid examples from 'real' life. Along the way she also made it clear that this gender stuff concerned anyone, not 'just' women and gay men. *Gender Trouble* prompted the criticism that its championing of 'drag' and performativity strengthened the illusion of gender identities being as interchangeable as shirts. Butler had indeed allowed that misunderstanding to occur a little too easily, and so she wrote *Bodies That Matter*, in which the notion of 'playing on' gender stereotypes was replaced with 'working on', highlighting the difficulties of doing so faced with the way norms literally materialize. It is the thoroughness and philosophical scope of Butler's work that ensured she remained more than a passing fad. When she gave a talk at Freie Universität Berlin in 2009, more than 2,000 people showed up.

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