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Book Review: Anna Watkins Fisher. The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance

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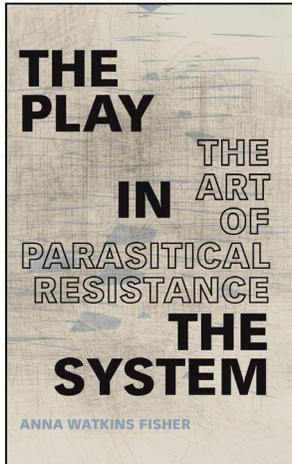
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Book Reviews



Anna Watkins Fisher. *The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 292p. Paper, \$27.95 (ISBN 978-1-4780-0970-2).



When I started reading Anna Watkins Fisher's *The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance*, I was already in the middle of reading Olivia Laing's *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*, a very different book that is also about intersections of art and sociopolitical reality. I mention Laing's book here because she and Fisher both introduce "hospitality" as an important conceptual frame. To Laing, who borrows the term from John Berger, hospitality is about the potential for art to create critical openings that can help us connect and be free. For Fisher, hospitality, like everything else in the neoliberal, technocratic system(s) the title of the book references, has already been co-opted and redeployed as a tool for coercion.

The Play in the System begins by describing a theory of parasitical "politico-aesthetic" resistance and the limits of parasitism as an artistic and critical method (5). The parasite and its relationships to hosts, which can be anything from corporate conglomerates, like Amazon and McDonald's, to individuals in academic and art contexts with social capital, like the Serbian artist Marina Abramović or the author herself, are well explored in a theoretical introduction that does a lot of heavy definitional work. The two artistic examples Fisher uses to open the book help to pinpoint parasitism as a strategy of "last resort" (38) that seeks to exploit the working tolerance in systems and relationships where a power differential enables hosts to "authorize or withhold access" at will (16). Fisher's first example is a digital piracy project called *Amazon Noir* by the hacker artist duo Ubermorgan who expose and weaponize the conditional hospitality of the tech behemoth Amazon. Her second is a conceptual work by the artist Roisin Byrne, who appropriates the already appropriative methods of the more well-established conceptual artist Jochem Hendricks for personal financial gain (and to very ambiguous critical ends). Both illustrate the range of the parasitic project and also foreground the structure of the book: the artistic case studies become more personal and less critically legible as the book progresses.

Fisher's parasitical theory is most compelling when it latches on to specific examples. When Amazon purchases and ostensibly erases what it might regard simultaneously as a parasitic appendage, an IP infringement, and a digital artwork, it also assigns value to *Amazon Noir*, which remains invisible but intact as inert critique and absorbed asset. Elsewhere, Fisher's theory, in part because it is defined by complicity and enacted through disidentification, is more difficult to read as a viable critical method. Given that limitation, Fisher's own critique, even as her examples become more politically incoherent and morally relative, is compelling. While she suggests that parasitism's true power lies in its potential to disrupt "criticism's customary investment in externality and stability," Fisher never really stops playing the academic art critic, even in her extra-meta coda (34). However, the subject of the book leaves the reader unsure

whether she's invested in an inherited rhetorical mode or if she is just another underling, not unlike this reviewer, performing mimicry to gain admittance.

The Play in the System is divided into two parts: *Redistribution* and *Imposition*. Of primary interest to librarians will be part 1, which explores how technology corporations like Amazon, Facebook, and Google have appropriated openness and used the logic of neutral protocols to eschew political responsibility and avoid regulation all while co-opting the commons and defining the terms of access and engagement. Parasitical projects explored in this section include the digital hactivist works of the Robinhood Cooperative, which “weaponizes the tools of private capital” for redistributive ends (73), and a project by the aforementioned Ubermorgan to buy Kickstarter using Kickstarter. Fisher illustrates here that it's possible to carve a window into the wall of a monolith if you can get inside, even if you know that it'll get boarded up pretty quickly. These projects often fail as real retaliatory and redistributive acts—or in the case of the Robinhood Cooperative, resemble strategic capital investment projects more than subversive artworks—but they can be read as successful provocations with mostly legible political meanings.

Did I mention this book is about performance art? Or rather, performed art. Performative acquiescence and mimicry are some of the notable parasitic strategies enacted across the projects examined here. Fisher also finds common “immunity strategies” used by host entities to either recuperate or deflect parasitic intrusion. These strategies—privacy and privatization—are ones that librarians and academics will find familiar (19). As Fisher narrows the frame to focus on increasingly personal works like Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*—a performance in the form of fictional love letters written to a real person, the well-known cultural theorist Dick Hebdige, that hyperbolizes the subservient femme hanger-on and recuperates Dick's indignant response that the project violates his privacy (which it does)—the cultural reading becomes more ambiguous. Is Kraus wrong for exposing Dick? Does the cultural capital she's gained through the project render her feminist critique more or less effective? Do parasitical works, which operate less as disruptive gestures than performances of the impossibility of disruption, change the systems or people that absorb them or spit them out (34)?

Ultimately, this book doesn't have answers to the questions it poses. Its aims, like the artwork it explores, are about provocation and the subtle reverberations of the provoker and the provoked, who need each other to exist. However ambiguous the ethical dimensions of the parasite, Fisher's book reminds us unequivocally that insidious structures of racist, patriarchal, and exploitive neoliberal and corporate systems in which we are enmeshed (and even now, are laboring to uphold to survive within them) are porous and also potentially indestructible—if not in their original form, then in replication.—*Nora Almeida, New York City College of Technology (CUNY)*

Caroline Criado Perez. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. New York, NY: Abrams Press, 2019. 411p. Paper, \$27.00 (ISBN 978-1-4197-2907-2). LC 2018-59561.

Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men illustrates how we continue to naturalize sex and gender discrimination by failing to collect data on women. As a society we have accepted and normalized the ways in which, as Simone de Beauvoir put it, the “representation in the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.” The default is male. Caroline Criado Perez refers to this “tradition” as the gender data gap.