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Artforum by César Aira (image courtesy New Directions Publishing) if you go into your local bookstore and ask for Artforum, it's likely that you'll end up in the magazine section, where the monthly register of contemporary art awaits you. However, there's a chance your purveyor will lead you instead to the fiction stacks, to confront a slender collection of vignettes by Argentine author César Aira, also titled Artforum. In the latter, translated by Katherine Silver and published by New Directions, the author, or a character based on him, likewise enters or considers entering bookstores in search of this elusive periodical. To stumble onto Aira's book while searching for the magazine, you might feel a little eerie, like entering a vortex into which your very understanding of Artforum â€” what it is and what it means to want it â€” capsizes in the wake of an earthquake the result of his audacious powers. Aira, who is in his early 70s and has published at least 100 books â€” in Spanish, according to the book jacket, is well known for his collection of Artforum magazines as if he used them to bolster his arguments â€œOn Contemporary Artâ€” in a 2018 essay of that name, published by David Zwirner Books. Artforum (which was published in the original Spanish in 2014) comes loosey-chorney from its moorings of publishing, reading, and mostly waiting for the magazine to arrive in Buenos Aires, where the author lives. The work is fiction to the extent that impossible things take place. In the earliest vignette, dated January 1963, Aira awakens to pain and discovers that a copy of Artforum (specifically, the Summer 1982 issue, with a cover by Robert Mangold) has been left under an open window and swelled up into a sea of salt, the size of a beach ball [â€”] whose layout I recognized without recognizing it as such, because of this perfect, implausible transformation, and the fact that one of the other magazines on the table, two Art in America and one Burlington, has taken on water. Aira assumes the sea level raised its level to save the other from the pain. He accepts the object's intention, to rightly â€” â€œI had noticed that things sometimes acted in accordance with their own decisions, that they had whims, fantasies, crueltiesâ€” and arrives swiftly at a point of contemplation. â€œIt was an inexpressibly beautiful object, even though I could no longer look through it or read it. Useless and unreadable, I loved it more than ever. I asked myself a strange question, justified only by the strangeness of the situation: did it love me?â€” This is a telling introduction to the book, more concerned with the significance we give to objects â€” and our inability to shed their significations â€” than with the magazine itself. Aira calls books and magazines â€œsuperobjects,â€” as they â€œfulfilled their condition as objects twice over by being specialized carriers of information [â€”] in their infinite variety and novelty that would supplant all other objects in imagination and desire.â€” Artforum, the book, is the story of that desire, and in turn it transforms the magazine into an ambiguous symbol of everything its reader might lack. Of course, from the perspective of a petite-bourgeois author living in South America, these connotations have a lot to do with

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and Argentinian postal systems, and their unreliable methods of delivery, even when Aira becomes a subscriber to the magazine. Aira replicates and prolongs his time, â€œwhich could be of literary tricksters like Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino and letting us in on the secret that one of the main joys of reading is about a magazine that often doesn't appear. Is this all mine with the people and business practices behind the magazine working there by accident, mostly because I felt under-qualified to read? Like Aira, who was born in Coronel Pringles, south of Buenos Aires, Aira characterizes his bucolic past as lacking in time, since there is always the next issue to anticipate. â€œMy wishes and longings are derived from this: the inability of signs to address every subject or form of knowledge you might wish to possess in the current issue and waiting for the next, in what Aira deplores as the force of an informed dis-course. But, as Aira dramatizes the knowledge is never fulfilled, and so the anticipation and desire of booksellers. â€œHeritage and Debt: Art in Globalization by David Tse-Tung had to modify Marxism to fit the history and culture of China, Chinese artists involved in the contemporary export market make works that look like Western art, but their institutions showed not only paintings, marbles, and bronzes, but also calligraphy and Chinese but, at the same time, respond to dominant Western trends. Wang Guangyi (b. 1957), for example, does American Pop-style work that also references Maoism. The same goes for aesthetic theories. When I was lecturing in China, I presented Arthur Danto's view that in principle anything whatsoever could be an artwork. An enviably smart student then killed some mosquitoes and asked me if they were a work of art. Early on, Western museums focused almost entirely on Old Master European painting. Then under modernism, when other visual cultures were also collected, European and American artists looked for inspiration to these unfamiliar traditions. But this widening of the canons, so David Joselit argues in his new book, Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization (MIT Press, 2020), was accompanied by a politically governed marginalization of these non-Western traditions. Only the West, it was claimed, had developed art capable of an ongoing expansion. Other cultures merely provided resources to be exploited. Told this way, the story of art was part and parcel with the rise of Western imperialism. Now, however, â€œart's globalization, he writes, â€œhas the potential to redress Western modernism's cultural dispossession of the global South.â€” If countries outside the West can reclaim their heritage, globalization could then become politically liberating. The extremely influential textbook Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (Thames & Hudson, 2004) written by four scholars associated with October (Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh), was almost entirely concerned with Euro-centric Western art. Joselit was invited into the third revised edition (Thames & Hudson, 2016), and now, as a parallel narrative, it's most interesting to learn from Heritage and Debt what he has to say about global art history. If pre-modern art in China, the Islamic world, and other visual cultures had developed in relative independence from the West, globalization has conditioned artists everywhere to borrow readily from all traditions. But this, Joselit suggests, is compatible with a continuation of Western hegemony in which the American or European art museum, like the international financial markets, the art museum is a controlling Western institution. For some time, the grand Western museums have aspired to present a universal world art history, displaying objects from everywhere. By stages since its founding in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has gathered older works from Europe, from the Islamic world, from Asia and from Africa, as well as contemporaneous art. Good enough, but just as, in the 19th century, the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, were intended to provide design models for English artists, our current museums support contemporary art that, for the most part, mirrors the long-standing dominance of the West. For some time, as Art Since 1900 notes, thanks to such diverse artworks as Andrea Fraser's performances, Hans Haacke's analyses of the politics of art collecting, and Barbara Kruger's appropriations of advertising, there is a great deal of institutional critique within Western art. At this moment, when concerns with gender and race are so pressing, it's unsurprising that critique is important to contemporary art. And needless to say, Western visual culture has ample reason to critique its political history. In my discipline, philosophy, thanks to such diverse figures as Kant, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, along with the logical positivists and the Frankfurt School, self-critique has long been the name of the game. Joselit extends those critical concerns to global art history in a dramatic, unexpected way. Shazia Sikander (b. 1969), he writes, â€œclaim[s] a modernity that need not be routed through the language of Western modernism, and thus could be both Pakistani and contemporary without contradiction.â€” (Compare my review: â€œCultural Critique: Artforum January 2005.) To describe Sikander's art in this way assumes that there is some way of identifying a Pakistani visual language, a distinction from that of Western modernism. Leaving aside the fact that Pakistan itself is a recent creation, the Mughal visual culture, which she adopts, coming from a vanished state located in present-day Afghanistan and India, was itself a hybrid, influenced by European and Islamic thinking. And since Sikander was born and educated in Pakistan, but is an American citizen, which country should claim her? Indeed, what counts here as a nation? Kwame Anthony Appiah, describing his West African father and his British mother in his book, The Ethics of Identity (Princeton, 2008), points out the difficulty of specifying his identity. Like this American professor, many people have complex identities. The same is true of numerous cosmopolitan artists. Surveying developments in Cuba, Russia, and Australia, Joselit questions how museums can celebrate a national heritage. Since these countries are very different from one another, and all are unlike the Gulf Arab states and African nations discussed later in the book, it's obviously hard to generalize. To whom does a significant work of art belong? To humanity at large? To the culture that created it? To its current owner? There are obvious problems with each of these

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