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*Review: Daniel Belgrad, The Culture of Spontaneity:
Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America
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***The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America.* By Daniel Belgrad. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 1998. vii, 343 pp. \$29.00.**

In *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*, Daniel Belgrad presents a comprehensive overview of post-World War II American art and culture. Ranging from abstract expressionism, ceramic sculpture, bebop, beat poetry, modern dance, performance art, and guerrilla theater to gestalt therapy, Jungian psychology, Zen Buddhism, and the anti-nuclear movement, Belgrad argues that the aesthetic of spontaneity pulls together these seemingly disparate artistic and social movements. In doing so, spontaneity provides a counteraesthetic to the hegemony of capitalism, corporate liberalism, and mass culture. Belgrad asserts that the ethos of spontaneity posits an “interaction of body, emotions, and intellect” (6) that replaces the traditional mind/body dualism of Western philosophy and culture. The intersubjective and conversational dynamic that emerges from the playful yet profound aesthetic of spontaneity can be seen in the artistic practices of the “Ideogram,” “plastic automatism,” “energy field,” “force field,” “dialogue,” and “counterpoint,” as well as in “spontaneous bop prosody” (9). These practices are characterized by a “dialogue—of give-and-take never completely ended, and full understanding never completely accomplished” and by a “characteristic lack of closure” (10). This interactive, open-ended, process-oriented mode creates a radical subjectivity that departs from traditional formal aesthetic and social codes—codes that, according to Belgrad, have the unfortunate effect of reducing the enriching complexities of our experiences.

The list of philosophers, social theorists, and artists that Belgrad includes in this study is long and impressive: in philosophy and social psychology, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Carl Jung, as well as proponents of existentialism, gestalt psychology, and Zen Buddhism; in music, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan, Lester Young, Max Roach, Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, and John Cage; in poetry, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, Michael McClure, Charles Olson, and LeRoi Jones; in painting, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, and Robert Rauschenberg; in dance, Merce Cunningham, Katherine Litz, Peter Voulkos, and Toshiko Takaezu, among many others. These artists create work in which Belgrad finds that “subjective epistemology privileges dialogue over logical exposition” as a means of communication that counteracts the “increasingly abstract character of human experience in the modern world” (10).

As in all romantic movements, the ethos and aesthetic of spontaneity create open spaces, flexibility, and possibilities for transformation of cultural values. It is no accident, as Belgrad points out, that the emphasis placed on spontaneity and improvisation in the arts after World War II coincides with the emergence in the American conversation of multicultural voices as well as the voices of women and the working class. The emphasis on intersubjectivity and dialogue in postwar culture enables these new voices to be heard.

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