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## Review of In Modernity's Wake: The Aneurunculus Letters

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## REVIEW OF IN MODERNITY'S WAKE: THE AMEURUNCULUS LETTERS

Phil Manning, *Cleveland State University*

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This book is about the plight of twentieth century art. Through a series of letters to various interested parties, (Noah, Barthes, Heidegger and others) Phillipson takes on the imposing challenge of both exemplifying and describing the difficulties facing the modern artist. The letters are purportedly written in 2004 by Ethelred Ameurunculus, who posted the letters without the sure knowledge that they would reach their recipients.

Each of the letters addresses issues which are of intimate concern to the targeted receiver, but, considered collectively, they circle around two themes. Firstly, in diagnosing our troubles, these letters point to the absence of authenticity in art, and by extension, in modern life. The meaning of a work of art in 'late modernity' seems now (or then – the letter is dated 2004) to be uncertain or contradictory. There are no icons to be deciphered in accord with an underlying code of cultural interpretation; instead there are only fragmentary clues. These letters both describe and display this dilemma: filled with puns and wordplays, they seek to undermine our intuitive belief that art must either represent or refer to something. Nor can the question of authenticity be answered by recourse to origins, since even these letters were written in the future and found undelivered.

The second problem confronted by these letters concerns the significance of

modern art. In societies driven by economic imperatives, what value can be assigned to artworks which represent only the difficulty of representation? The implication appears to be that in late modernity art is impotent: it cannot offer spiritual advice or comfort; it cannot even adequately characterise the social malaise.

However, this is the implication that Aneurundulus (or Phillipson) wishes to challenge. He or they do so by suggesting that the impotence of modern art is, paradoxically, the source of its importance. If the modern world is driven primarily by a potency which is merely means-oriented and self-concerned, then the acknowledged impotence of art is a way of announcing that late modernity has only progressed through a series of Pyrrhic victories against itself. Being able to make this announcement gives art some value.

For this book to be successful, it would have to demonstrate and describe the way art defers meaning and then explore the reasons for its alleged contemporary irrelevance. In attempting to do this, Phillipson pursues strategies which could be thought of as either innovative or self-indulgent. Since there is a sense in which it is not only readers who choose their writers, but also writers who choose their readers, I suspect that his audience will largely forgive him his excesses in order to concentrate on his often whimsical reflections. However, I also suspect that those readers not chosen for this book will be less forgiving, if not actually irritated by the book's style. So perhaps it's as well that these two groups will be obliged to post their praise and criticisms of Phillipson's book.

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PHIL MANNING