

FOREWORD

Milk is an unusual topic. Fluid, potable, perishable, its use as a tool for scientific inquiry or a subject for contemporary art seems oddly implausible. Yet in *Milk and Melancholy*, critic Kenneth Hayes offers compelling evidence of the importance of milk within these practices. The culmination of more than a decade of research, this book traces the image of the milk splash from the early days of photography and the scientific studies of A.M. Worthington and Harold Edgerton to its multiple manifestations in the work of photo-conceptual artists, from Ed Ruscha to Jeff Wall. Engaging extensive interdisciplinary knowledge and a wide range of associations, Hayes illuminates a subject deeply embedded in the social unconscious. By meditating on the various meanings and functions of splashes, he elaborates an original and unexpected area of critical investigation.

Milk and Melancholy is the inaugural title published by Prefix Press, in partnership with MIT Press. A division of Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Prefix Press has been launched to provide critical perspectives on photography, media and digital art and the ideas that inform their reception. The imprint explores the ways in which contemporary art intersects with architecture, history, urbanism, science and technology; as well, it situates Canadian artists and writers within critical and art-historical discourses. Prefix Press's publications comprise book-length essays, artist monographs and critical anthologies.

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Finally, I wish to commend the dedication of author Kenneth Hayes and to convey my admiration for his provocative and captivating project. I hope that this publication fulfills the promise of his conception.

– Scott McLeod

PREFACE

This work began as a monographic study of Jeff Wall's 1984 photograph *Milk*. On first encountering the image, I was struck, as I am sure many others have been before and since, by the almost grandiloquent way in which the scene's every detail signified a crisis that, however obscure its cause, was clearly immense, perhaps even world-historical. In the course of investigating Wall's picture, I discovered that images of milk had been made by a surprising number of artists who participated in formulating a new photographic art in the 1960s and 1970s. The most remarkable thing about these images was that milk was invariably the locus of a disturbance. The image of the milk splash was manifested differently in each case, to be sure, but it recurred with the regularity of a trauma. Eventually, I realized that Wall's *Milk* could be understood as culminating a discourse of images that was of considerable interest for the history of contemporary art. The milk splash, as I came to understand it, was instrumental in overcoming the hegemony of modernist painting and at the same time commemorated its loss. In short, it functioned as a kind of primal scene in the formation of photo-conceptual art.

A critical interpretation that relies on a wide-ranging visual argument could not have found a publisher more receptive to a challenging thesis nor one more careful in the presentation of photographic images than Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art. I am honoured that *Milk and Melancholy* has been selected to inaugurate a new series of essays about contemporary photography. I am grateful in particular for the ongoing support of Betty Julian who, as a curatorial councillor to Prefix ICA, recommended my work to director Scott McLeod. *Prefix Photo* published an article related to this work in Issue 6 and subsequently pursued the funding required for an ambitious publication. The Prefix staff expertly handled the complex administration of this project and I would like to thank interns Jennifer Givogue and Erika deFreitas for locating the many images. In the course of its long development, this work received generous support from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. Many individual subscribers also purchased copies of the book long before the work was complete, and I thank them for their patience.

Initial research was conducted at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Library in Halifax and at the Art Metropole Archive in Toronto, where Roger Bywater was my able guide. After the archive's relocation to the National Gallery in Ottawa, Ontario, curator Kitty Scott and her assistant Heather Anderson were most helpful. David Howe of the advertising agency BBDO in Toronto gave me full access to the archive of Ontario Milk Marketing advertisements. Hans-Ulrich Obrist directed me to a work by Braco Dimitrijević that I might not otherwise have discovered; Lynda Morris clarified the chronology of David Lamelas's work; and David Askevold provided details of the context of his work. Jeff Wall read a draft of the text when it was still essentially a monographic study of *Milk*, and he challenged me to undertake a broader, more representative account.

The expanded scope of the final project is evident in its title. *Milk and Melancholy* refers both to the classic art-historical study *Saturn and Melancholy* by Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl and Raymond Kiblan sky and to Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," a text which has occupied an important place in critical studies since the early 1980s. This dual allusion questions the validity of iconological method in light of the theoretical turn inspired by psychoanalysis. If the work seems overly dense, it is because it has refused neither the historical consciousness nor the theoretical knowledge offered by these two great exemplars. Given that the object of analysis is both a scene and a discourse, both approaches seemed necessary and desirable.

The milk-splash scene appeared in the work of many artists over two decades – the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s – that witnessed immense transformations in contemporary art. Tracing it required that more works, practices and ideas be examined than is usual in an essay, and the undertaking presented numerous theoretical challenges. The approach makes errors of fact and interpretation inevitable, and for them I alone am responsible. The critical method is justified only by the hope that it offers interpretive possibilities about the art of the recent past that more singular critical approaches have not.