

BOOK REVIEWS

Marlies De Munck and Pascal Gielen, *Fragility: To Touch and Be Touched* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2022), 63 pp. ISBN 978-94-93246-10-2; RRP: \$12.50 (US).

This small book, exquisitely illustrated by Lotte Lara Schröder, is a series of short meditations on human fragility, the precariousness of emotional connection, and the immense value of aesthetic immersion in creating opportunities for open, warm connections between people and people, people and plants, people and animals, and on the larger level of universities with local communities, and humanity as a whole and the planet. Marlies De Munck is a philosopher and Pascal Gielen is a sociologist, both at the University of Antwerp. The format of *Fragility: To Touch and Be Touched* follows their successful *Nearness: Art and Education after Covid-19* (2020), a collection of thoughts on the need for physical human closeness, the opportunities and limits of technology, and the sustaining power of art. De Munck and Gielen explore the facades and carapaces women and men build to hide from others and to protect themselves from disappointment, emotional pain, and a myriad inadequacies, and even terrors.

Topics covered include the barrenness of wellness-speak and corporate-speak, and the way these modes of determined unsaying increase isolation, and how social media compounds these negatives to reduce many to their ‘curated’ story, which is not real but crafted for an audience obsessed with image. There is nuance; in the essay “Wall” it is acknowledged that bureaucracy could be useful, it could “protect a fragile individual, a vulnerable environment and nature” (p. 15). This is important as often the individual and the natural world are incapable of protecting themselves in the face of rapacious capitalism, with its drive to turn humans into mere cogs in working machines, and to empty the earth of its riches through extractive mining, fracking, over-development, deforestation, destruction of biodiversity, and other irreversibly damaging industrial processes. Capitalism, mental health, and the ways that professional languages divide academic specialists are recurrent themes. Gielen notes that a certain distance is necessary for scholarly training, but the bureaucratisation, monetisation, and distance from traditional academic values that makes contemporary scholars feel no longer at home in universities creates a gulf between the business of the university and the communicative desires of traditional learning cultures.

The essay “Sclerosis” addresses music and the idea of a canon. Interestingly, the focus is not on the authority of the canon, but on its “makeability and fragility” (p. 39). This is a vital realisation, that institutions and discourses that dominate are inherently fragile, because they are human constructions that could fall from hegemonic status at any moment. Dance is the subject of “Vulnerable,” a reflection on Jolente De Keersmaeker’s performance *Dance for Actress*, which provokes the observation that art makes it possible to “recognize [one’s] own fragility in someone else’s vulnerability” (p. 46). Other short *pensees* address power and interconnectedness, politics and mercy. The shortened attention span of the internet addicted is a hidden concern in this disarming short book. Where once we devoured 500 page tomes, now brief thoughts on serious matters are the way to communicate with the young, the disenfranchised, and the vacillating and uncommitted. *Fragility* is greater than the sum of its parts. For that, De Munck, Gielen, and Schröder merit high praise. I am sure that there are almost no other books that could be read in 30 minutes and pack such a punch.

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