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Book Review: Weldon Kees and the Arts at Midcentury

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right milieu (the question is not asked). Irving Sandler commits Kees to controversy, but controversy of such a low order that it jeopardizes Kees's deeper concept of cultural crisis. B. H. Friedman positions Kees within the works of his contemporaries—William Bazotes, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, and other quintessential “modernists”—but not in relation to the revolutionary artists and critics of the period, individuals better understood as anti-modernists. In all this, one detects neither Kees's informed and sophisticated iconoclasm nor his transparent hatred of the institution of art and the culture industry as a whole.

Although the art world is littered with historical casualties, little serious attention has been paid to the nature of the neglect. Consequently, Kees ends up being sacrificed to salvation. In the process a community is constituted between the saviors and the saved, between salvation and the salvaged. If it is unlikely Kees will ever achieve real historical visibility, it is because of this.

Of course, the essays are serious, intelligent, well researched, and possess the depth that only experienced scholars can bring to a subject. They add to our concept of Kees and point to the extraordinary radius of his work. Yet, for all the expertise the book brings to Kees, the authors, in saying the same thing significantly better, fail to identify new questions.

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Weldon Kees and the Arts at Midcentury. Edited by Daniel A. Siedell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xii + 238 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00.

Weldon Kees as a person, the decentralization of artistic myths, and various issues involving the demography of the arts are some of the central concerns of this essay collection. Such inquiry suggests that Kees criticism could be productively pursued in the context of individuals such as Midwestern critic Gene Swenson and might help explain why the book's comparisons of Kees with many of his New York peers ends up being unproductive.

Daniel A. Siedell, editor of the volume, surely chooses the right subject in Kees criticism. If there is a problem, it is that his (not Kees's) starting point is a grudging sanction of the concept of “art criticism” rather than cultural critique. In like manner, Dore Ashton discusses the midcentury cultural milieu but never questions if the one she discusses is the