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Caroline Levine, *The Activist Humanist. Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 202 pp.

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Like many theoretical interventions that discuss the complexity of the climate crisis, Caroline Levine's *The Activist Humanist* opens with the question of scale. But instead of focusing on the limited perspective of the individual and the problematic character of the global, this book is interested in a sort of middle ground—the collective dimension of the *polis*. Reflecting on her work as a literary scholar and the successful campaign to pressure her university (Cornell) into divesting from fossil fuels, Levine realizes that the “aesthetic humanities” have been focused for far too long on the *pars destruens*, on their critical and deconstructivist practices. However, in an “age of acute precarity” (xiii), they should offer alternative models and practical solutions to resist the destructive forces of our neoliberal present. Building on her previous *Forms* (2015) and “Model Thinking” (2017), where Levine argued for a formalist approach to the study of art and politics, *The Activist Humanist* discusses a wide range of concrete examples, or “forms,” including American highways, public housing projects in Germany, Mexican mural paintings, a British tv show, and the occupation of squares in Egypt, among many others. In doing so, it calls on all humanists to change their practices and implement effective political action by “designing, building, and maintaining the mundane forms that sustain collective life over time” (xv).

In Chapter 1, Levine reflects on some of the book's broader implications. The humanities, she writes, are “stuck on the preparatory moment” (11), that is, they are satisfied with refining their analytical, critical tools without fostering tangible change. For this reason, she proposes to reject the complexity, ambiguity, and open-endedness of most current critical approaches and reevaluate the potential of an “affirmative instrumentality” (12). For Levine, humanists should set a clear agenda to support “collective continuance” (12)—another word for sustainability borrowed from academic and activist Kyle Powys Whyte. This process would entail dismissing radical ruptures and large-scale revolutions to appreciate the intrinsic value of a “conservationist” (20), non-conservative repetitiveness. In other words, it would mean participating in a continuous struggle “with imperfect and near-term political ends” and engaging in “the unromantic, demanding work of social transformation

through all existing channels for political struggle, including elections, battles for legal rights, and institutions like the university and the state” (17).

Levine addresses most methodological issues in Chapter 2. Defining historicization and close reading as inherently intertwined with anti-instrumentality and the discovery of singularities, she argues for a particularly capacious formalist practice. Form is in Levine’s words “any shape or configuration of materials, any arrangement of elements, any ordering or patterning” (23) both aesthetic and social. All forms are characterized by specific properties, or “affordances,” that they carry with them wherever they go. This is why, according to Levine, humanists can “make some predictions about how political forms will work wherever they take shape” (41) and, more importantly, select the most useful forms to oppose the climate crisis based on their proven ability to sustain collective life.

The rest of *The Activist Humanist* provides a series of examples to support its major claims and demonstrate that even those forms traditionally seen as restrictive and oppressive can be put to use for structural change and collective pleasure. Chapter 3 is in fact devoted to “infrastructural forms” such as routines, pathways, and enclosures, which Levine discusses *à la* New Criticism. Instead of tracing back origins and intentions, her research is focused on “what the forms actually *do*” (82, emphasis in original). The “aesthetic forms” that are at the heart of Chapter 4 are equally disentangled from their supposedly conservative role. Rhythms, rhymes, songs, realist narratives, and public murals, Levine writes, not only serve the ruling elites but “register the genuine pleasure of finding stability in the midst of precarious conditions” (86). In Chapter 5, the discussion moves to “political forms,” and to successful cases of collective protest in particular. Criticizing leftist tendencies towards horizontality and messianic hopes in revolutions to come, Levine underlines the role of forms like goals and “hinges” in helping political movements cooperate and achieve small, tangible change. The text ends with a workbook of about ten pages—a guide to “make the transition from critique to action” (150) that readers are invited to complete over the course of three weeks.

The Activist Humanist is a timely book that addresses many of the questions animating contemporary ecocritical and environmental humanities debates, while voicing an urgent call to action directed at all academics. Its shift towards the collective and its formalist approach expose the connection between aesthetics and politics, invite more intermedia comparisons, and stimulate further discussion on the role of the “aesthetic humanities” today. The book’s clear and well-organized prose, its disclosed agenda, and its final workbook, bring *The Activist Humanist* closer to a manifesto than an academic monograph, raising questions about its intended audience. In order to emphasize the novelty of her argument, Levine relies perhaps too often on generalizations and restrictive dichotomies that do not accommodate the complexity of recent developments in the environmental humanities, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies—as well as those practices that bridge the gap between academic research and activism, like militant and participatory action research. Just to mention a few examples, what are the consequences of grounding the book’s call

for universalism on the generic assumption that it is a “universalism of enabling conditions” (15)? When justifying the absence of more-than-human perspectives from a project on collectivity and the climate crisis, is it enough to argue that “a certain anthropocentrism seems unavoidable in scholarly debate” (29)? And which exact processes bring humanists’ “calls for ever more complexity and possibility” to foster “climate denialism,” “neoliberal atomization,” and “collective inaction” (10)? The book’s generative effort to show the link between aesthetic and political forms would also benefit from a more thorough discussion of its underlying mechanisms. For example, if forms have a range of properties that can lead to diametrically opposed political outcomes—see Chapter 4 where songs with repetitive rhythms are discussed as both instruments of exploitation and solidarity—how can humanists make predictions about the outcomes achieved *wherever* these forms take shape? And how exactly do the interactions between different forms and users work in such a universal, transhistorical process?

Despite *The Activist Humanist’s* warning against open-endedness, many questions remain partially unanswered. And this is no flaw, since it is precisely through an ongoing, complex dialogue between critical traditions, aesthetic singularities, historical/political circumstances, and individual/collective experiences that the humanities can find grounds for hope and action in the midst of the unjust, violent crises of our time.