

The Migrant Image, The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis.
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T. J. Demos makes a compelling contribution with this book to the discussion within contemporary visual studies that seeks to re-think the political significance of art for the struggles of our post-2001 present. These pages are best read as an anti-scepticism manual of contemporary art. Against swift dismissals of art practices and institutions as unavoidably complicit with the neoliberal system, Demos insists throughout his analysis on treating art as a complex site of negotiation between aesthetics and politics. Proceeding case by case, he assembles an impressive array of artistic evidence not simply to examine but rather to affirm the capacity of the arts to ‘inflect meanings’, ‘contest formulations’, ‘shift perspectives’ and ‘invite collaborative and creative interpretation’ (32, 209). The exploration of critical modes of documentary representation delineates a common field for the artworks gathered here from film, photography, video and other media. Furthermore, in this affirmative intervention that is *The Migrant Image*, each case operates as a critical representational player within the arena of globalisation.

Demos appears in his affirmative stance in cautious agreement with Jacques Rancière’s position regarding the relation between art and politics (see Rancière 2004). Rancière has provocatively ‘re-opened an old discussion’ by re-conceptualising art as a political zone at a distance from politics (91). But if anything, Demos’ is a generative *rancièrism*. He understands that the conjunction between art and politics is dependent upon a singular act of interpretation, and not upon a pre-established definition of political art. Demos argues à la Rancière - and this explains the methodology at work here - that

it is contingent upon viewers and readers to stake a claim and to argue the validity of a particular formulation of the politics of aesthetics, to invest this otherwise potentially empty formulation with meaning in relation to the singular expressions of specific artworks (92).

The central proposition of this book maintains that a series of artistic practices and discourses have generated an ‘aesthetics of migration’ capable of ‘reimagining a form of citizenship that acknowledges the fundamental condition of migration within itself’ (4, 20). These practices and discourses operate, in different ways, a displacement of the meaning of ‘migrant’: from being a signifier of victimhood, illegality, bare life and workforce adaptability to defining a restless ‘site of resistance, autonomy and politicisation’ (246). Demos re-conceptualises migration with the images he investigates as a ‘form of life that is politically and aesthetically committed to a certain mobility’ (3). It is significant that Demos does not engage here in-depth with postcolonial debates on migration (as he does in his other recent book *Return to the Postcolony*). This re-conceptualisation of migration is not a mere celebration of mobility: what matters is to develop a theoretical tool to measure up the critical

capacities of art, what matters is to highlight how the migrant image addresses globalisation as a *crisis globalisation*, that is, as ‘a fractured geography of borders and archipelagos that divides the uninterrupted transmissions of goods and capital from the controlled movements of people’ (xv). Detailed and sensitive readings of works from artists such as Ursula Biemann, Hito Steyerl or Emily Jacir, among many others, emphasise the varied capacities of art to chart the social, economical, affective complexities of migration and to operate the transformation of ‘a stigma into enabling force’, as Biemann puts it (206).

Demos convincingly demonstrates how this reframing of migration occurs in the cases he examines through a reframing of audiovisual protocols of representation. The migrant image is one that continuously re-invents how it connects with the social realities of the global crisis. Migrant images, as conceived by Demos, share a common certainty: a firm uncertainty with regards to the truth claims of the documentary tradition. In the context of global crisis and against postmodern relativism, Demos insists, ‘truth must be reinvented on the grounds of uncertainty’ (xxi). Each artistic strategy he explores embraces the uncertainties of representation with regards to social events as qualities with critical potential: the opacity of the image (the Otolith Group, Steve McQueen), the withdrawal of visibility (Ahlam Shibli, whose work is analysed in an excellent chapter), the construction of fictional truths (in various examples of contemporary Lebanese art), the indeterminacy between art and activism (Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri), and so on. For Demos what separates all these contemporary documentary practices from what he understands as traditional strategies and logics is this awareness and creative engagement with the incapacities and inadequacies of the image.

Demos tends to oppose conventional and inventive documentary forms in a somewhat rudimentary manner. In his argument documentary representation is, in accord with the tradition of critique, eminently suspicious since it ‘often serves the interests of the state’ by operating ‘within ever new and expanding surveillance systems (...) as judicial and forensic evidence, where *truth* and *objectivity* live on through their continued institutional and legal validation’ (99). Forms that do not transform the state of perception and are therefore complicit with the dominant audiovisual regime have been habitually validated by documentarians with political ambitions seeking to expose the truth against the official images of this very regime. The opposition between conventional engagements with the real and radical innovations serves Demos to emphasise the formal and political significance of the discussed artworks. But the construction of the category ‘traditional documentary’ is rather oblivious with regards to the complexities inherent to the practice and theory of the documentary since its inception. The crude refusal to engage with such history in favour of what appear as exceptional contemporary modes harms the critical precision of the analysis and explains a certain sense of repetition that affects the reader when encountering in different circumstances the same opposition between documentary tradition and innovation painted in similar colours. Nevertheless, the many qualities of this book energise our desire to know our neoliberal enemy better, meticulously question our complicities with it and to imagine transformative encounters with the images and sounds of the world.

References

Demos T.J. (2013) *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press.

Rancière J (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, London: Continuum.