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Boundless Art and Identification Across Borders

Rae Di Cicco

About the Editor-in-Chief

Rae Di Cicco is a PhD candidate in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of Pittsburgh. She specializes in the modern art, design, and cultural history of Central Europe, with a focus on issues of identity and politics faced in the region during the transition from imperial to national organization after World War I. She received her BA in Art History from the University of Washington in 2010, and an MA in History of Art and Architecture from the University of Pittsburgh in 2015. She has been awarded a Botstiber Fellowship in Austrian-American Studies, a travel fellowship from the Center for Italian Modern Art, a German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) grant for intensive German language acquisition at the Goethe Institute in Freiburg, Germany, and a K. Leroy Irvis Fellowship for diversity in graduate education at the University of Pittsburgh.

Di Cicco's master's thesis explores the incorporation of signifiers of national artistic styles into Kinetist artist Erika Giovanna Klien's artistic production as a kind of cosmopolitan imagination, visualizing – literally making visual – hybrid and shifting identity and multiple belonging. Her dissertation, titled "The Kosmos, the Body, and the Other: The Cosmopolitan Imagination of Erika Giovanna Klien," will trace Klien's career from her beginnings as a member of the Vienna-based modernist movement Kinetismus to her immigration to the United States and subsequent work with indigenous groups of the American Southwest.

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Editorial Statement

Cultures have deployed visual means to record, define, interrogate, and delimit individual and collective identities; their historical context; and their presence in time and space. Identity must be articulated before it exists, and so art and artists enact, create, resist, and reify individual and collective identities, often challenging both material borders and conceptual boundaries that inexorably seek to determine identity in contrast to the Other. Interrogating circumscribed concepts of identity in

the visual world opens new avenues for understanding social and aesthetic interactions and their relationships to constructed geographical, ideological, and temporal limits.

In its sixth volume, titled “Boundless: Art and Identification Across Borders,” *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* assembles articles, curatorial statements, artist interviews and portfolios, and book and exhibition reviews that cover a wide range of issues with an emphasis on the complexity of art and identification in time and space. In these pages, authors explore how concepts, categories, and limits of identity have been constructed in different historical moments either through the arts or about artists. Indeed, as seen in this volume, border crossings often serve as a means of explicating acts of inclusion and exclusion of not just bodies and materials, but also ideologies and cultures. While this volume focuses on concepts of identity and identity-making in the arts, several thematic constellations manifested in the process of collecting the articles: pushing against boundaries within sub-disciplines, collective identities beyond national borders, self-identification as hybrid or migrant, and tensions between individuals and the state.

Information scientist Chelsea Gunn and film historian Benjamin Ogrodnik address how certain roles in art- and knowledge-making push at the boundaries of genres conventionally regarded as discrete. In contrast to the oft-perceived divide between the book as tangible object and the seemingly ephemeral digital, Gunn lauds the editors of *Fantasies of the Library* for exploring how the physical and digital are interconnected through the dynamic work of information professionals. Editors Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin encourage readers to experience the book—and libraries—as curatorial, and therefore, socially constructed spaces with new possibilities for organizing, accessing, and disseminating knowledge. Like the hybrid roles of reader-viewer and librarian-curator found in *Fantasies of the Library*, Ogrodnik applauds curator Chrissie Iles for her conception of the “cyborgian” moving-image artist in his review of the Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016*. Iles’s cyborgian artist bridges the divide between the two dominant modes of critiquing film as either art or entertainment. As artists in *Dreamlands* toggle between diverse forms and formats, Ogrodnik argues that such problematic conceptual divisions fail to account for the work on display and thus figures the exhibition as a call for new frameworks through which to understand our “current media ecology” (110).

Contributions by Thorsten Wilhelm, Madeline Eschenburg, Daniel Pabst, and Marina Tyquiengco investigate how individuals and groups connect to transnational, transregional, transcultural, even transtemporal collective identities. Wilhelm’s article, “Historical Contemporaneity and Contemporaneous Historicity: Creation of Meaning and Identity in Postwar Trauma Narratives,” contrasts the ways in which first-, second-, and third-generation Holocaust survivors engage with collective trauma to establish links to a common Jewish identity. Wilhelm ultimately concludes that these incidents of traumatic history, as told by survivors and their descendants, are themselves constitutive of the collective identity. The exhibition review by Eschenburg similarly addresses “artists in a time of turbulence and transformation,” as indicated by the subtitle of the exhibition *Bentu*, held at the Louis Vuitton

Foundation in Paris. The exhibition conceptualizes contemporary Chinese art in relation to *bentu*, variously translated as “one’s native land” or “the local,” but not reducible to national or regional identity. As illustrated in Eschenburg’s critique, the curators use *bentu* to more deeply fathom the ways artists have recently addressed China’s uneasy relationship with globalization and its own past. Pabst’s photography looks at the legacy of an earlier expression of globalization—or, at least transnationalism—when Modern European architectural design aimed to reduce architectural structures to basic geometries meant to be intelligible across cultures. This attempt to produce spaces for cultivating commonality resonates with the aims of the *Third National Indigenous Art Triennial*, reviewed by Aboriginal art specialist Marina Tyquiangco. The exhibition aimed to bring together artists from different indigenous groups, both rural and urban artists, and those working in more traditional forms, such as dot and bark painting, with installation and new media artists. The breadth of the exhibition itself, Tyquiangco suggests, achieves curator Tina Baum’s goal of showing that indigeneity is but one of the identities felt by contemporary Aboriginal artists.

Such multifaceted identities appear in contributions addressing artists’ self-identification—their own hybridity, migrant or diasporic status, or their own past selves—as well as identities assigned to them. Steven Pearson’s self-reflexive *Sketchbook Revisions* imbricate past and present artistic production as a meditation on the development of the self. His work unites layered histories and future possibilities materially, conjuring up a “boundless present” (84). While migrant artist Julia Lambright’s works reference traditional Russian iconography, she also evokes the present-as-potential with ever-renewing opportunities to reconstruct and redefine her cultural identity. Dominican/Haitian-American artist Firelei Báez’s first major solo exhibition in the United States, reviewed by Nicole F. Scalissi, traces her career through the theme of bloodlines—both the literal genealogy of Caribbean-Americans and the metaphorical lineages connecting resistance movements of people of color in the Americas. Scalissi demonstrates how Báez’s work explicitly addresses the intersections of race and gender in self-portraits of her changing skin tone over the course of a month and images that mark female bodies as Caribbean by filling silhouettes with regional flora.

Firelei Báez’s critiques of colonial relationships in the Caribbean, as described by Scalissi, resonate with the remaining pieces in “Boundless,” which all investigate moments when the individual is at odds with the state. Ellen Larson reviews the Art Institute of Chicago’s retrospective of Zhang Peili, widely accepted as the first Chinese video artist. Larson argues that Peili’s slow-paced videos of monotonous tasks critique the role of images in society and subtly condemn government overreach in China. Alison Langmead and Paulina Pardo Gaviria’s exhibition, *Data (after)Lives*, looked at the ways in which humans quantify data about our identities that can then be (mis)used to control human behavior. The exhibition emerged from departmental interest in visual knowledge broadly construed, and specific research into *Bertillonage*, a system of measuring bodies, and recording and organizing the resulting measurements, developed by Alphonse Bertillon in the nineteenth century to assist law enforcement and judicial systems in tracking repeat offenders. The exhibition paired Bertillon cards containing mugshots and measurements with Pardo Gaviria’s recreation of Brazilian artist Letícia Parente’s interactive 1976 installation at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. In her curatorial statement, Pardo Gaviria discusses Parente’s stations in which viewers measured themselves and contributed data to notebook databases as a critique of dictatorial governments’ invasion of privacy as a means to control a population.



Figure 1

Alphonse Bertillon, *Adnet. Clotilde. 19 ans, née en décembre 74 à Argentant (Orne). Brodeuse. Anarchiste. Fichée le 7/1/94, 1894*, Albumen silver print from glass negative, 10.5 x 7 x 0.5 cm, Gilman Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2005.100.375.1).

Much in the same way, artist Kasia Ozga uses the material byproduct of border crossings—x-ray images of immigrant’s chests—to evidence the intrusiveness of immigration policies that ask long-term visa applicants to submit an intimate atlas of their inner anatomy or be denied entry. Ozga’s essay details her process of cutting away representations evocative of volatile border zones, producing an absence in the body of the immigrant and the material of the artwork. Artist Juan de Dios Mora, interviewed for *Contemporaneity* by art historian Adriana Olivas Miramontes also registers dissent regarding immigration through his artwork. The interview addresses Mora’s printmaking, its connections to a long history of Mexican graphic art, and the migrant experiences of Mexican-Americans.

The focus of this thematic volume of *Contemporaneity* was born of my research interests in multiple, shifting, and hybrid identities in interwar Central Europe, my personal experiences of hybridity as a Caucasian-Cherokee woman, as well as the current political moment. When drafting the call for papers for volume six in 2016, the struggle over the Dakota Access Pipeline on Lakota lands laid bare the permeability of territorial borders of indigenous sovereign nations to corporate and federal forces. Issues of representation, identity, and borders thus seemed pressing. I could not have imagined how relevant these issues would become by the time of publication, however. Since commissioning an artist’s interview addressing Mexican, Central, and South American immigration to the United States, immigrants have faced increased Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, discussions of disbanding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, and the increasing realization of a proposed border wall with Mexico. Since accepting an article examining Holocaust narratives, “Nazism” has become a term we use to discuss current political agents, not solely those of the past. While one of my associate editors dealt with the possibilities of a travel ban against citizens of her home country of Iran, she assisted on editing of Ozga’s work on invasive immigration policies. As advocates of the

removal of Confederate monuments called attention to issues of racism and representation in public sculpture across the United States, Pittsburgh too held a public hearing on the Stephen Foster Memorial Statue (Figure 2)—after years of appeals to have the statue moved by community groups and activists, such as the late Florence Bridges. Located just off campus from *Contemporaneity's* home institution, the University of Pittsburgh, the statue features a stereotypical representation of a barefoot black man strumming a banjo at the feet of the benevolent composer. These and other recent political debates concerning issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and other forms of identity have been felt on a local level at *Contemporaneity's* headquarters. As evidenced by the abundance of articles, reviews, and artist portfolios that address such political divides between governments and citizens, the importance of visual culture in these political discussions cannot be understated.



Figure 2

Giuseppe Moretti, *Stephen Foster*, 1900, bronze, 10 ft high, originally Highland Park, now: Schenley Plaza, Oakland, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photo by Rae Di Cicco.

In these divisive times, there is a growing sense among many scholars that the scholarly work of art history can and ought to be socially engaged. The expanding domain of digital publishing promises to facilitate this cultural shift in the discipline. Digital publishing has been a democratizing force in the exchange of information and ideas, radically transforming authorship and readership in the twenty-first century. As information circulates and is seen by more and ever-changing populations, the call for socially engaged art and art history has never been greater. Scholars and artists have seized this opportunity in myriad ways, often subverting the traditional, hierarchical structures that have driven academe and the art market for the past two centuries. For these reasons, the editorial board recognized the need to address what role online, open-access publications, such as ours, have in publishing and otherwise supporting socially critical art and art history.

We, therefore, organized a roundtable on the topic to take place at the 106th Annual Conference of the College Art Association in 2018. This panel will convene scholars, artists, and editors who actively pursue digital publishing as a means of scholarly, artistic, or pedagogical dissent: Gelare Khoshgozaran, an independent artist who disseminates socially critical performance and video art via digital means; Paul Schmelzer of the Walker Art Center, an institution that uses its online presence to engage new audiences and re-envision the museum-going experience; pedagogical innovators Renee McGarry of Art History Teaching Resources and Michelle Millar Fisher of *Art History Pedagogy and Practice*, who have made didactic materials and criticism available online; and Allison McCann and Nicole F. Scalissi, former editors-in-chief of *Contemporaneity* who will discuss our scholarly publishing strategies and flexible digital platform as a space for emerging and established voices that further our critical reassessment of the field of visual and material culture. We hope our readers will join us at CAA 2018 to continue the conversation about digital publishing, dissent, and socially engaged art history began by the editorial board of volume six of *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture*.

The support and collaboration of many individuals made it possible for *Contemporaneity* to participate in the increasingly urgent academic conversation about identity. My sincerest gratitude goes to the previous editors-in-chief, Nicole F. Scalissi, Annika Johnson, and Meredith North, for their guidance and hard work to professionalize and sustain the journal, to copyeditors and proofreaders Annalisa Zox-Weaver and Daniel Giraldo, for their keen and critical eyes, and to the editorial and advisory boards for their unending support and intellectual contributions to this volume: reviews editors Sarah Reiff Conell and Emily Mazzola; associate editors Lily Brewer, Clarisse Fava-Piz, Jacqueline M. Lombard, Alan London, Allison McCann, Elizabeth Morrissey, Paulina Pardo Gaviria, Golnar Touski, Marina Tyquiengco, and Carolyn Wargula; faculty sponsor, Christopher J. Nygren; and advisory board members Terry Smith, Josh Ellenbogen, Jennifer Josten, Shirin Fozi, Alex J. Taylor, Kathryn Joranson, and Barbara McCloskey. Without the volunteer labor of such dedicated academics, *Contemporaneity* would not have been able to share the important work of the authors and artists published herein. We hope the content of this volume contributes to not only the academic discourse surrounding identity and borders but also to broader social, political, and artistic conversations about these issues.



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