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Mobility & Exchange: Moving Across/Through Cultures

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While the notion of “contemporaneity” is ostensibly a temporal phenomenon, the ninth issue of *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* examines the spatial reverberations of being together in time. That this issue of *Contemporaneity* was brought to fruition in 2020, a year that saw our shared time simultaneously challenged by restrictions on public life and bolstered through the expansion of virtual space, makes the contents of this issue, conceived in late 2019 and published in early 2021, all the more

pressing. The year 2020 has offered a critical moment in re-thinking the possibilities of cultural contact. While mobility and exchange between people, nations, and cultures have been shifted by many moments in world history—including the end of the Cold War of 1989, the wave of student revolutions of 1968, the technological rise and attendant capitalism of the industrial revolution, and the era of exploration with its fraught legacy that led to global unevenness and colonial structures—the discipline of art history has long posed questions about how global material cultures form, define, and re-define identities and relationships. At the beginning of a new paradigm shift, *Contemporaneity: Moving Across/Through Cultures* employs an experimental and collaborative form, eschewing the traditional long-form article and instead using various modes of conversation, to cast a critical eye on the ways people, objects, and ideas have historically and continue today to shift across cultures and boundaries into new spaces, as well as the afterlives of these movements.

When this issue was initially conceived, the ability to transgress borders, to physically move across and through the world and its cultures, appeared as an embedded function of our increasingly globalized world. Over the past year, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has physically limited our ability to move across and through cultures as nations shut their borders and museums close their doors. At the same time, other critical events in the past year have shifted the bearings of this journal’s ninth edition. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers has further exposed the precariousness of life for BIPOC people living in the United States. As the editors of this issue, we must acknowledge that moving across and through cultures is a function of privilege. Systemic racism and police brutality are built into the world we live in, fracturing our time and space rather than allowing us to coexist simultaneously. Moving forward, this journal seeks to dedicate itself to anti-racist practices, naming and uprooting white supremacy, and critically addressing colonialism and its aftermath in its many forms.

The ninth edition of *Contemporaneity* has itself moved across and through cultures, from a world of seemingly open borders and endless possibilities to one where social and economic injustice and closed borders have become more visible and widespread. While many of the underlying issues that have been brought to light in the past year have always existed, our own perspective has shifted. As we publish this new issue in the new world of 2021, we aim to shift the discipline of art history in ways that realign with and address the problems we now clearly face. With one foot in the past and the other in the present, this issue offers a bridge between our old understanding of mobility and exchange and the challenges and possibilities of the future.

The contributors to this edition address a broad range of questions relating to the shifting realities of mobility and exchange in the past and present. In the questionnaire, a new addition to *Contemporaneity*, editors Jacob Eisensmith and Paula Kupfer asked scholars across the humanities to reflect on the role of mobility and exchange in their scholarship as well as personal and daily lives. As Eisensmith and Kupfer explain in their introduction to this section, they could not anticipate the stakes of their questions in 2020 when the questionnaire was composed and distributed to our four respondents. Due to the novel coronavirus, the

respondents and editors were forced to think about modes of mobility and exchange, as well as the lack of movement. Lindsey French and Lee Veeraraghavan reflect upon our current moment. Veeraraghavan explains how mobility and exchange, or the constraints of mobility and exchange, operate in colonial systems and impact indigenous peoples, while also addressing how the daily anxieties of 2020 have only compounded the uncertainty of the future for those in tenuous employment positions, such as post-docs. French, on the other hand, takes a moment to reflect on her own artistic practice, explaining how her work focuses on the exchanges of living but non-human actors. In this examination, she highlights the fact that COVID-19 is a living virus that lives on and through human objects. As French explains, from this perspective “Americans, and especially white Americans, struggl[e] to confront the realities of the danger of simply being present.” Sahar Hosseini and Mrinalini Rajagopalan focus the role of mobility and exchange in the past. Hosseini situates her scholarship on Safavid Iran within larger art historical discourses on mobility and exchange, thus reflecting on her draw to buildings and other things that don’t tend to move. Her response asks us to consider what the “immobile nature of the built environment and landscape” offers or adds to our current scholarship on mobility and exchange. In her analysis of female patronage in nineteenth-century Calcutta, Rajagopalan tracks the international movement of aesthetics, religious practice, and exchanges between Mrs. Pascoa Barretto de Souza, the patron of The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the catholic church. At the same time, she pays attention to the restricted movements of Barretto de Souza and the ways in which she moved throughout the world when her physical body could not.

Reflecting on three recent exhibitions, Alex J. Taylor, Nina Blomfield, and Katie Loney consider the movement of objects, materials, and colonialism in collecting histories and curatorial practice. Taylor provides a thoughtful reflection on *Metal from Clay: Pittsburgh’s Aluminum Stories*, the commemorative exhibition of Collecting Knowledge Pittsburgh. Providing a detailed history of the extraction and eventual extinction of cryolite—an essential mineral in the speedy production of aluminum—Taylor directs our attention to the role extraction of natural resources plays in colonial systems. Focusing on a rare cryolite specimen in the collection of the Carnegie Museums’ Natural History Museum, Taylor also prompts readers to consider the role scarcity plays in the value of an object and, thus, its position in art history. In the form of curatorial conversation, Katie Loney and Nina Blomfield recount their public conversation on the work and practice of Lockwood de Forest and the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company (AWCC), an event that took place in October 2019. Discussing their two exhibitions on this topic, one curated by Blomfield and the other by Loney, they consider the transnational history of the AWCC and ask how museums, curators, and art historians can reveal the colonial histories of the AWCC’s objects, why museums have primarily attributed the company’s work to de Forest, and how to recoup the agency of Indian actors in North American interiors. Marina Tyquiengco also addresses issues of colonialism, as she reviews Clémentine Deliss’s examination of the ethnographic museum and how a post-ethnographic museum might operate.


Other contributors provide reviews of major exhibitions focusing on mobility and exchange. Adriana Miramontes’s review of *how the light gets in* at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell highlights a vitally important exhibition for our understanding of mobility and exchange in the twentieth century, if not more specifically, the “Trump era.” *how the light gets in* brings together work by over fifty artists and collectives, most of whom are from the global south but work in the global north. As Miramontes demonstrates, the exhibition and the works it displays ask viewers to consider the permeability and solidity of borders in today’s world, challenge the family separation policies at the US/Mexico border, and reconceptualize notions of belonging that are not defined by borders of the nation state. Jacob Eisensmith’s review of *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, an exhibition held at the Aga Khan Museum, The Block Museum, and the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, also examines a recent exhibition that contributes to art historical discourses on material, mobility, and exchange. Eisensmith explains the show’s contribution to our understanding of cross-cultural and transcontinental trade networks in the

medieval world, especially those across the Sahara and into Europe. At the same time, he notes that the exhibition's curators omitted issues and networks tied to slavery, arguing that "issues of race, slavery, and intuitional inequity must be points of conversation for future shows."

Paulina Pardo offers a review of *Colored Plexiglass: Irving and Aaronel deRoy Gruber Foundation Gallery Inaugural Exhibition*, turning attention to the kinetic artworks of Aaronel deRoy Gruber and the social and material networks the artist and her work was apart. Last but not least, Christopher J. Nygren reviews *Painting as Modern Art in Early Renaissance Italy* by Robert Brennan. Nygren highlights the stakes of Brennan's study for our understanding of modernism, arguing that Brennan identifies it not as a specific time period or stylistic shift, but as an ever-shifting temporal orientation that arises through a series of exchanges with the past in the present.

The art section of this issue turns a critical eye on the many ways that mobility and exchange shape individual perceptions of the world. Sepideh Tajalizadeh Dashti's work draws on the female body as a source and site of trauma. In her performance, video, photography, and installation, Dashti addresses notions of abjection, intimacy, family, and identity. As an Iranian-Canadian artist, Dashti's work is deeply imbued with the feeling of ambiguity that emerges from moving between and belonging to two different cultures. The work of Kio Griffith uses found and appropriated objects, as well as image and sound, to construct a personal cross-cultural history. At once deeply personal and abstract, Griffith's work engages with topics as broad as the climate crisis, language, colonialism, nationalism, and new technologies. Jonathan Christensen Caballero's work is expressly political, rooted in a critique of oppression in the United States, particularly the plight of Latin-American laborers. A trained ceramicist, Christensen Caballero's work "narrates enduring questions of identity through the use of the human figure, pre-Columbian iconography, and mixed media sculpture," asking questions of the value of the "American Dream" in the present moment. Finally the work of Address the Issue, a collective made up of artists Seth Adam Cook and Joel Fuller, uses inspiration from William Pope L. to both examine stereotypes surrounding race and dissect the damaging power of preconceptions to both Black and white individuals and communities. Their work rejects the notion of a "post-racial" America, instead drawing on the awareness of division made clear by the events of 2020. Taken together, the work of these five artists provides a rich landscape for picturing the multiple ways issues of mobility and exchange continue to act on our present moment.

As we come to the end of our time as stewards of this journal, we would like to acknowledge a number of people without whom this issue wouldn't have been possible. Our edition of *Contemporaneity* is deeply rooted in the work of the journal's former editors and we are especially indebted to Jackie Lombard and Marina Tyquiengco for their support during this process. We would also like to thank our editorial staff for their tireless efforts and the editorial board for their guidance. Special thanks is also due to the scrupulous eye of our copy editor Annalisa Zox-Weaver, the unwavering support of our faculty advisor Terry Smith, and the ever-gracious assistance of Kate Kelley and Emily Mazzola. Questions of mobility and exchange offer up a myriad of ways to think about a world that we see evolving before our very eyes. As we move from the uncertainty of 2020 to the brave new world of 2021, we hope this issue of *Contemporaneity* offers you nuanced perspectives on these important themes.

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