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T. J. Demos
The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. 368 pp.; 17 color ills.; 76 b/w ills. Paper $26.95 (9780822353409)

T. J. Demos
Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art
Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013. 176 pp.; 53 color ills. Paper $26.00 (9783943365429)

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Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art and *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, both by T. J. Demos, are books of exceptional merit and importance. Demos's critical practice resonates with a line from Jacques Derrida that has always inspired and haunted me: "I believe in the political virtue of the contretemps" (1993; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994, 88). In these two works, Demos has offered not merely a body of work, but rather an envoi, a message for anyone interested in the future of art, politics, history, and temporality. For me, they embody an ideal form for art-historical research, i.e., they devise imaginative and critical ways to write alongside artworks such that the artworks' presentation of epistemic, aesthetic, and historiographic complications problematize art-historical practice as such.

Each chapter of *Return to the Postcolony* involves a single case study "documenting" postcolonial Africa. But these case studies also explicate and complicate the aesthetic-historiographic concept of "haunting" that links the individual chapters. With one exception, Demos chooses works by European artists investigating the conditions of neoliberalism via a "transgenerational haunting for the injustices of the past" (10). Thus the second chapter, "A Colonial Hauntology: Vincent Meessen's *Vita Nova*," explicates the Belgian artist's thirty-minute film from 2009 as it complicates the afterimages and effects of French colonialism by researching the subject of the iconic 1955 *Paris Match* cover that Roland Barthes read in *Mythologies* (1957; trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). Researching this image involves Meessen's trip to locate the subject of the *Paris Match* photograph (Diouf Birane) in contemporary Burkina Faso. This documentary exposes the colonial blind spots in Barthes's reading as well as the "new life" this

form of artistic research embodies. As Demos concludes:

> *Vita Nova* can be said to constitute a colonial hauntology, insofar as it conjures the ghosts that have hovered around this *Paris Match* image—a key exemplar of late colonial visual culture—which links diverse peoples, geographies, and political histories via France's colonial past. The term proposes a methodology of interpretation that attempts to uncover both the ontology of a haunting (the being, effects, and affects of possessions) and the haunting of being (the way presence is shadowed by unacknowledged histories and suppressed relationships that disturb the present's complete severance from the past). (51)

To construct such an argument Demos must accomplish three things: first, he must skillfully trace various lines of critical theory, notably here Derrida's concept of "hauntology" as developed in *Specters of Marx*; second, choose artworks that actively construct this "colonial hauntology" argument as much as he himself does through his readings of them; and third, work alongside these artworks as well as theoretical positions initially voiced by Derrida, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Giorgio Agamben, and others to create new aesthetic, political, and historiographic linkages. Collectively, Demos orchestrates these three movements brilliantly. In doing so he develops a persuasive materialist aesthetics, one that asks readers to "focus our attention on the aesthetic aspects of the problem, whereby beings and presences enter uneasily into, or insistently disturb, representation and the stability of its visual, temporal, and spatial logic" (9). Demos's critical project is to encounter this type of aesthetic materiality and think alongside it. His goal is to reckon with the ontological and aesthetic ghosts (the afterimages and real-world effects) of colonial injustice and violence in Africa. In other words, to comprehend it as a multiplicity containing the colonial past, globalism, neoliberal politics, power, and ethnic/religious strife, including genocide.

This "hauntology" requires Demos to explain how an inexistence (the inexistence of a fully decolonialized contemporary Africa) is different in kind from nothingness (non-being). However, he avoids this degree of theoretical work in constructing his argument. This is regrettable. "Hauntology" is a viable method only when it allows for the deployment of durational temporalities wherein history is coupled with ontological and aesthetic becoming. Nonetheless, for an awareness of what is accomplished here it is helpful to understand how Demos uses the concept of the "postcolony" neither to essentialize Africans nor to position them as mere victims.

The concept of the "postcolony" Demos builds upon is derived from Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). A "postcolony" is a "chaotically pluralistic" society that has emerged from the experience of colonization that nevertheless "possesses an internal coherence," that is "a mode of governance and economy of death that merges Foucauldian biopolitics with the Agambenian notion of bare life and the state of exception" (11). The artworks Demos identifies offer no direct, unmediated representation of this "postcolony" condition; instead, "each offers a particular approach to the postcolony that is itself typically determined to greater or lesser degrees by European narratives, historical accounts, and symptomatic disavowals . . . as well as by the often clichéd mass media representations of central Africa" (11). Demos adds an aesthetic dimension—a material embodiment and complication via the construction of images—to Mbembe's contention that the "postcolonial condition emerges as one of 'temporal entanglement'" (14), that is, multiple durations wherein narrative, representation, experience, and memory enfold one another in remarkable, often feverish, discontinuous ways.

In *The Migrant Image* this aesthetic dimension is explained through an intersecting set of concepts: nomadism, exile, stateless persons, refugees, and diasporic cultures. The book itself is an extension of Demos's fine essay "The Ends of Exile: Towards a Coming Universality?" (Nicolas Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, exh. cat., London: Tate Britain, 2009, 75–88). This aesthetic dimension could be expressed this way: globalization presents a crisis for contemporary art in that exilic and diasporic movement requires new aesthetic strategies because stateless persons embody an (in)visible representational schema. Contemporary artists are faced with "mobilizing the image as much as imaging mobility" if they desire to intervene in the "cultural politics of globalization in critical and creative ways" (xv). The book gives detailed readings of artists situated in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and North Africa. Works by Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, The Otolith Group, and Yto Barrada are discussed among others. Again Demos privileges works that are "reengaging and reinventing the documentary mode" by traversing the "conjunction of representation, power, and technology" in order to intervene in the world (xvii). He wagers that these photographic and filmic projects deploy a series of aesthetic and political strategies that pose decisive questions regarding art and politics, "mediums and mobility," as well as "socioeconomic disparity and emancipatory artistic promise that sheds further light on globalization's crises" (xiv). Demos grounds this reaffirmation of the political possibilities of a refashioned documentary mode—one that learns from both humanist and constructivist practices and their respective failures—in the theoretical work of Agamben and

Jacques Rancière primarily.

Whereas Derrida figures centrally in *Return to the Postcolony*, it is Agamben's work on "bare life" and exile that serves as the political armature for *The Migrant Image*. Demos draws on Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995; trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), but he also develops ideas from the first part of his *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (1996; trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Demos writes that his book "examines how recent art explores the current global situation in which multitudes are reduced to the status of what Giorgio Agamben terms *bare life*—that is, life stripped of political identity and exposed to the state's unmediated application of power" (xiv; emphasis in original). Demos uses Agamben's concepts of bare life and sovereignty, but demonstrates how the artists' work discussed presents varied, hopeful, practicable counter-strategies and responses to this global predicament.

In tandem with Agamben's political framework, Demos utilizes and critiques Rancière's work. Rancière's "politics of aesthetics," developed over several texts that deal with film, documentary practice, and spectatorship, is very much valued by Demos; in fact, he needs much of Rancière's work from *Film Fables* (2001; trans. Emiliano Battista, Oxford: Berg, 2006) and *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008; trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso, 2009) to construct his argument. Demos explains: "Rancière's well-established formulation [that] art holds the potential to reorganize the realm of visibility so that, unlike governmental politics' and mass media's hierarchical channels of access, representation is rendered equitable [is one] I attempt to complicate, critically test, and develop further in relation to my case studies throughout the book" (xix). Simply put, Demos's stated goal is to "bring to visibility those who exist in globalization's shadows" (xix).

All of the chapters in *The Migrant Image* address this goal. However, I would like to point out that one is of exceptional note. The sixth chapter, entitled "The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum*," best actualizes the many lines of Demos's argument. The London-based Otolith Group's film about the Palestinian Occupied Territories reinvents film and conceptual strategies that connect the work to Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard, Black Audio Film Collective, Walid Raad (The Atlas Group), and others. By extracting strategies from these film essayists, combined with their own theoretical and historical insights, the Otolith Group embodies Demos's hope for "documentary fiction" as a politically potent, aesthetically complex mode of historiography that goes beyond simple representation. As he says of *Nervus Rerum*: it "works to disrupt the clear boundaries between fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity, the real and the imaginary. In the process, the Otolith Group has invented inspiring new political and creative possibilities for filmmaking as a critical and conceptual art" (144). Perhaps this will not read as "new" to some readers. But the point is neither novelty nor the eternal return of the same. Instead, Demos is determined to find artworks that survey the past for modes, strategies, lines of argument, and points of connection that are then transformed into singular assemblages of images, sounds, and movement: assemblages that are conceptually nuanced, poetically moving, and, to put it bluntly, inspiring. Demos outlines an exigent, contemporary political and aesthetic mode of research. The lesson is that we must (re)search for and re-create the past—we must transmit it to the future—if we are to actualize "past potential futures" (a beautiful phrase from the Otolith Group).

The ability of an image to embody and to transmit these "past potential futures" is the conceptual line that courses through both of Demos's books. Both are an examination of contemporary photographic and film projects that fundamentally reinvent documentary as a mode. Demos deframes simplistic notions of documentary as interventionist truth-telling by selecting challenging case studies. However, he does not abandon the political and ethical power of speaking truth to power in favor of a simulacral retreat (a move he associates with Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall, and others). It is with a productive and creative tension between truth-telling and artifice that Demos sides. With equal emphasis on the political urgency of dealing with these "ghosts" and the implicit critique of much art-historical practice (in terms of subject matter, conception, and method), Demos stages a hopeful critical practice.

For me, Demos is attempting to construct a method—an "experimental historiography" as he calls it—that would "be founded not on the easy availability of historical presence, but rather on the impossibility of history's totalizing impulse, on the insistence of the radical non-negativity that haunts historical consciousness and representation. It would thereby challenge all historicism that is founded on a strict sense of chronology or that conceptually solidifies the past" (*Return to the Postcolony*, 69). He gives vitality back to the image, and in doing so makes us question how we—as art historians and scholars of visual culture—are conceiving temporality and an image's ethico-political agency. This may very well be the singularity of Demos's work: the insights, linkages, and folds it constructs to force us to think anew art and politics, art and history, and aesthetics and ethics.

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