

Unsettling Visuality

Jill Lane and Marcial Godoy-Anativia | New York University

The intersection of performance and visuality, with which this issue of *e-misférica* is concerned, represents a crossing of vast sensory registers, regimes of knowledge, and the corresponding methods and theories used to study them. Our aims, however, are more narrowly directed. Rather than attempt discrete definitions of these fields or debating their points of contrast, we assume the contemporary interpenetration of these registers. We live in what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called “intervisual” worlds, in which multiple repertoires of visual and non-visual media are in constant and shifting relations of interdependence (Mirzoeff 2001: 124). We could equally say that we live in worlds of “inter-performance,” where our sense of “live” presence is practiced across a range of technological interfaces that long ago eclipsed any easy understandings of performance as a “live,” face-to-face event. Nestor García Canclini offers us the useful phrase “localización incierta” or “uncertain localization” to describe the changing relation of *place* to the artistic act, accounting for the complex processes of its production and circulation through embodied, electronic, and other media. Our goal here is to illuminate contemporary articulations of performance and the visual and their “uncertain localizations,” lending attention to the opportunities for social critique that both the practice and theorization of performance/visuality may offer.

As relatively new fields of study, both performance studies and the study of visual culture have sought, from the outset, to understand how their objects of study—performance and the visual—might lend themselves to the production of knowledge outside normative regimes of power. Peggy Phelan was perhaps the first in the U.S. to insist on the anti-capitalist orientation of performance art, in her still provocative work *Unmarked: the politics of performance* (1993). Phelan suggested that performance, in a “strict ontological sense,” is non-reproductive, because no two performances are reducible to the same. Phelan defined performance as “representation without reproduction,” arguing that “performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the ideology of capital.” In performance art spectatorship, writes Phelan, its object—performance—is consumed in ways anathema to other modes of consumption:

without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control. Performance resists the balanced calculations of finance. It saves nothing. It only spends. (148)

For Phelan, performance offers an-other representational economy, one that always chafes against the reproductive logic of capital, and which, in more complex iterations, chafes against the normative social reproduction of sexuality, race, and gender. Through its very ontology,

performance offers an alternative representational economy in which “reproduction of the Other as the Same” is never assured.

From its very beginnings, visual culture studies has questioned whether its interdisciplinary approach might not be helping, “in its own modest, academic way, to produce subjects for the next stage of globalized capital,” as charged in the infamous 1996 “questionnaire on visual studies” produced by the journal *October*. While the responses to that charge in the pages of *October* and elsewhere were robust, Chilean critic Nelly Richard, in response to these accusations, insists on the critical potential of art against the visual logic of the market:

While the soft seduction of the market seeks to accelerate everything, to place all images in sight so as to facilitate an easy consumption within the immediacy of what is available and showable, art confronts the obviousness of that which is exhibited without secrets or representational enigmas with reticence. The political potential of the art-form lies precisely in its impulse to direct the gaze towards the edges of disturbance, discord and irreconciliation which serve as the hazardous scaffolding for critical reason when it sets out to demonstrate that no form coincides placidly with itself. (2006: 108)

Wielding her own useful apple of discord, Richard reminds us that the political value of art lies not in what it represents, but rather in how it teaches us to see: certain kinds of visual art—not unlike performance art—compel a certain traction into the very act of seeing, a traction against easy reproduction and, equally important, against the presumed accessibility of the visual form. For both Phelan and Richard, then, the political value of performance and visual art lies in this capacity to doggedly unfix any naturalized relation between representation and reproduction.

The scholarship and art featured in this issue of *e-misférica* explores just this capacity to “unfix” the reproductive logic of normative regimes of knowledge. The opening essay, by Andean sociologist and activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, returns us to the 16th century magnum opus by Guaman Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, a 1,100-page letter written in Spanish and Quechua, accompanied by over 300 line drawings, addressed to the king of Spain, in which he advocated for better governance and Andean autonomy in the Viceroyalty of Peru. The document is a stunning “epistolary performance” (to borrow a phrase from Joseph Roach); through it, Cusicanqui reminds us that critical visual studies has a long history in the Americas. Cusicanqui draws our attention to the function of the images in this text, which—she insists—are no simple illustration of the companion text, as some might imagine, but rather, an Andean “visual theorization” of the colonial system itself. In *El primer nueva corónica*, Cusicanqui finds an important precedent to the ongoing and contemporary uses of the visual as a form of critical intervention in the political sphere.

Esther Gabara follows a more contemporary lineage of critical performance/visual studies in Latin America, tracing a history of which most U.S. based scholars of performance or the visual

are likely to be unaware. Focusing in particular on the emergence of Latin American cultural studies, Gabara illustrates the importance of visual/performance critique to that intellectual tradition and underscores the value of site-specific productions of knowledge. Through a range of scholarly and artistic examples, Gabara suggests the emergence of a field in which the critique of modern epistemologies is central: if modern epistemology privileges knowledge produced by “looking at,” its critique counterposes forms of knowledge and critique by “looking from.”

Visuality, writes Mirzoeff, “is the means by which authority claims to visualize the flows of history and thus validates itself.” Both Mirzoeff and Carlos Ossa consider hegemonic formations of visibility and the ways in which these construct and interpellate subjects of vision. Mirzoeff traces the overarching visual ideology that inter-articulates the contemporary discourses of global counterinsurgency with that of immigration and security in the “homeland” in the United States. Carlos Ossa, in turn, considers state hegemonies in relation to contemporary televisuality, a relation in which state interpellation is frequently outpaced by that of the market. “Representation has not disappeared, as might be believed, “ writes Ossa, “it has changed its strategies and vocabularies, wagering on recombination and rupture as the rhetorical assemblages that provide media narratives with the occasion for its breaks and velocity.” Ossa queries the irruption, mechanics, and impact of the biographical narrative within (tele)visually mediated processes of subject formation in late capitalist modernity. Citing both the slippage between the public and private and the tensions between individual intimacy and collective forms of belonging, he reflects on the political nature of visibility and the ways in which the confessional orality, selective criminalization and excessive sentimentality that characterize contemporary televisual formats and advertising, degrade citizenship and foreclose possibilities for the emergence of emancipatory subjects.

The proliferation of televisual images disseminated in the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti prompted us to reflect in this issue’s dossier on the practices that inform, complicate, or interrupt Haiti’s visual representation in larger social and political domains. The earthquake occasioned a reckoning not only with the island’s structural conditions of poverty and enormous internal inequalities, but also with the political and social histories that have produced and sustained such inequality at the national, regional and global level, and with the larger politics of coloniality and race that have consigned Haiti, past and present, to a particular regime of visibility/invisibility on the world stage. Our dossier, “Seeing Haiti,” invited contributors to choose one image to ground a commentary on how the visual register instructs to see, or not see, Haiti’s particular past and legacies.

The geopolitics of visual knowledge are a major concern of several other contributors, who analyze what architect Teddy Cruz calls “critical thresholds” in the Americas which include border zones but also “local sectors of conflict generated by discriminatory politics of zoning and economic development.” Teddy Cruz and Karen Till both demonstrate the need to alter the visual representation of such critical thresholds in order to understand, render, and ultimately

change their underlying dynamics of power. Karen Till puts it this way: “If urban planners and politicians are to take seriously their claims to social and environmental sustainability in ways that include social justice, the ways in which urban space is visualized and represented must change.” Writing on contemporary Bogotá, Till focuses on several creative visual practices that provide exactly these alternative spatial imaginaries. Cruz faults our “institutions of representation” with the incapacity to “mediate the multiple forces that shape the politics of the territory” or to “resolve the tensions between the top-down urban strategies of official development and the bottom-up tactics of community activism.” In response, Cruz produces critical maps that attempt to capture movement and migration of peoples and goods across the border, along with the “microheretopias” and “stealth urbanism” that characterize the contemporary San Diego/Tijuana border zone.

Nestor García Canclini returns our attention to the limits of the aesthetic, suggesting that art has entered a “post-autonomous” moment. If art has in the past struggled with a problematic of transgression, in which every act to transgress the boundaries of art (the picture frame, the museum, the materiality of the art object) simultaneously reasserted that very boundary, today art faces the progressive dissolution of the institutions and the justifying discourses that otherwise police the boundaries of art. What has this “post-autonomous” moment wrought? Canclini answers that artists might best be considered practitioners of “dissensus,” in the rich sense elaborated by Jaques Rancière. Like Borges’s concept of the aesthetic as “immanence”—a way of practicing art that is purposeful without a stated purpose—Rancière suggests that art is one mode of engaging with and altering what he calls “the distribution of the sensible.” Critic Tanke explains that any given distribution—what Rancière calls a “regime”—“delimits, in advance forms of participation and subjectivity, by first defining what is visible or invisible, audible or inaudible, and said and unsaid. As Rancière repeatedly argues, the very construction of these binary oppositions is political to the degree that they define ways of being, that is, forms of subjectivity” (Tanke 2010: 5). For Rancière, “consensus discourse” in politics asserts that “political action is circumscribed by a series of large-scale economic, financial, demographic, and geostrategic equivalences” (Rancière 2000: 123). The “consensus” here is not about right or left wing proposals within politics but about the very terms through which the sensible is so constituted: “The ideal of consensus affirms that what is essential to a life in common depends on objective equilibriums toward which we may all orient ourselves” (2000: 123). Dissensus, in turn, rejects the idea of that global order in which we are all positioned relationally. Dissensus names a disturbance in the sensible itself:

The essence of the political is dissensus; but dissensus is not the opposition of interests and opinions. It is a gap in the sensible: the political persists as long as there is a dissensus about the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be said, on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given (2000: 124).

We might translate Phelan’s idea of representation without reproduction as the production of a gap in the sensible: as we recognize what we see, we question the larger frames we would

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otherwise use to interpret it. Canclini explores the potential of artistic dissensus through the work of Cildo Meireles, León Ferrare, and Carlos Amorales, finding in the latter a particularly compelling example of “signifiers awaiting a signified.”

Dissensus offers a useful way to think about the artistic contributions in this issue of *e-misférica*, Colombian Wilson Diaz, Chilean Lotty Rosenfeld, and the emergent theatrical partnership, 2boys.tv from Canada. In each there is a meticulous engagement with the senses that goes beyond what we typically expect from visual or performance art to explore the politics of sensory experience itself. In *Estadio Chile*, Lotty Rosenfeld shifts us from the visual register to the aural, creating an archive of her own visual work and its engagement with the dictatorship through its *aural* documentation. She leads us to ask, impossibly, how we might hear the visual. Experimenting with sudden imposition of darkness or silence, she asks us to re-sense what we know, hear, and think we see in the histories her work has so famously engaged. Wilson Diaz, in turn, works with the sensory life of the coca seed as a way of engaging the deep and violent politics of drug trafficking in Colombia. In *Ventre alquilado* (*Rented Bowels*, 2000) the artist swallowed coca seeds before traveling to participate in an artists’ workshop in Curaçao; on arrival he defecated the seeds, planted them, and cared for them for the duration of the workshop. While the action opens questions on the criminalization of the coca seed (is it the same for a “mule” to carry cocaine in her stomach for the drug trade as for an artist to carry them to make art?), the piece reveals the artists’ interest in the radical sensory materiality of his work: the relation between the seed and bowels, the seed and earth, the actual life of the plant as a point of departure for artistic intervention. 2boys.tv, in turn, explore economies of looking in their meticulous interplay between live performance and video microprojection, pushing the limits of *trompe l’oeil* illusion. *Phobophilia* (2009) is a deep exploration of the scopic regimes of torture. Reviewing the performance, Ramon Rivera Servera argues that “the images of torture that *Phobophilia* presents point to the conflicted relationship between a representational economy that seeks to evidence truth (the juridical force of the photograph) and the more ethically ambivalent erotics of spectatorship.”

Through these essays and artist presentations, we seek then to “unsettle visualites” in and through performance—that is, to explore the ways that the conjuncture of performance and the visual may allow us a new understanding of visual regimes and the ways we traverse them. Like Richard or Phelan, we explore the performative and theatrical moments when representation unsettles its relation to reproduction and opens way for an-other form of seeing.

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