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**Editorial**

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e-flux journal #0 — november 2008 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle  
Editorial

Historically, more than any single institution, art publications have been primary sites for discourse surrounding the artistic field. And yet most recently, the discourse has seemingly moved elsewhere – away from the formal vocabulary used to explain art production, away from traditional art capitals, and away from the printed page. At times, new discursive practices even replace traditional forms of art production. Given the current climate of disciplinary reconfiguration and geographic dispersal, it has become apparent that the urgent task has now become to engage the new intellectual territories in a way that can revitalize the critical vocabulary of contemporary art. We see a fresh approach to the function of an art journal to be perhaps the most productive way of doing this.

With this first, inaugural issue of *e-flux journal*, we begin something of an experiment in developing both a discursive space and a site for actual art production, in which writers, artists, and thinkers are invited to write on topics of their choosing. While it is our hope that the contributions included here can begin to give a sense of how varied the concerns and urgencies being engaged today are, we also expect that certain consistencies and overarching issues will emerge through them, and help us shape the forthcoming issues of the journal.

For Boris Groys, the emancipatory promises of modernist design become problematic when, through rejection of ornament in hopes of revealing the true essence of things, the liberating capacity of design is replaced by an obligation to design one's own naked essence. In his words, "It could be said that modernism substituted the design of the corpse for the design of the soul."

For Bilal Khbeiz, meditating on the absence of public spaces in Los Angeles, it seems that the design of the city has been substituted by a similar design of the corpse – that of cinema. As in the case of Groys' self-design, a promise of autonomy as total and absolute quickly becomes a negotiation with the threat of death, that fundamental limit that just won't go away. Khbeiz finds in the emaciated, virtually nonexistent publics of LA, where the city "appears as a yawning retiree," that the possibility of re-imagining oneself, as well as a public, has been all but sublimated into the cinematic form. As a scrapyard of life from which cinema picks its props, Khbeiz's Los Angeles is conveyed in such lucidly poetic language that one finds it hard to believe that within such an oppressive space, other forms of engaging it are not possible.

Not everyone is so lucky with language. In *Stammer, Mumble, Sweat, Scrawl, and Tic*, Raqs Media Collective outline a cultural condition that

could be described as a stammering one – as an inability, or refusal, to communicate adequately when the weight of real circumstances becomes too much, when translation becomes impossible. It is perhaps important to fully attend to these limitations in which the inadequacy of representation creates an opaque wall.

Omer Fast confronts such limits in the inability to communicate the gravity of traumatic experience in a script for his recent two-channel video installation *Take a Deep Breath*. In the work, a group of actors and filmmakers are beset by a series of setbacks while attempting to create a film entitled “Regarding the Pain of Others.” Faced with their own inability to relate to each other, the cast and crew of the film set are compelled to reconcile their guilt with their ambivalence, their sympathy with their remoteness, and the position of the actor in relation to both fiction and the reality of his own personal history.

Pelin Tan also engages the spaces that form between subjects when the specter of trauma hangs over. She suggests that a form of image-making in which “non-relationships” to public space and spaces of trauma might create a capacity for an image to assume a voice without passing through the interpretative membrane of a human subject. It is perhaps through a perpetual alienation from spaces and events, which she relates to a sense of the uncanny, that the image can discover new languages.

In the first of a three-part contribution from Marina Gržinić, Staš Kleindienst, and Sebastjan Leban, Leban begins their discussion by acknowledging the severe limitations to political expression put in place by the market economy through what he terms the “production of passivity.” As a commodity culture – which includes the field of art – fueled by the market economy marginalizes groups on the basis of class and race, he calls for a flat rejection of the daily burden of passiveness experienced in civic life.

Not accepting to be passive by any means, but openly engaging a marginal position with regard to state and corporate bodies, in the Brazilian state of Acre Marjetica Potrč finds self-sustainability and autonomy to signify a community’s very basic means of deciding its own destiny. Walls are important, and Potrč contends that the model of the gated community (among the most distinct models of neoliberal favor for private capital and withdrawal from the public sphere) to be a critical instrument for a marginal community to use to their advantage. The notion of protecting private capital is here absorbed into a notion of local knowledge and, similar to the use of a mask, Potrč outlines the

necessity of a one-way barrier through which “we can see you, but you can’t see us.”

Perhaps this model of the gated community could be a useful one for public institutions as well. Irit Rogoff’s contribution looks at a renewed approach to the opacity of the institution’s walls, in which the suspension of outside demands can create the possibility of “small ontological communities propelled by desire and curiosity.” She sees something like another gated community in the institution that can perhaps only discover its agency in the public sphere by balancing an interaction with it against a certain withdrawal from it – a highly nuanced distinction similar to the one she draws between the flawed desires of institutions to be “accessible” (struggling to mimic public desires) and an idea that they can be places “to which we have access” (as semi-autonomous bodies engaged in their own interests, but whose doors remain open). To this end, she suggests that an academy “can actually become a model for ‘being in the world.’”

And so it seems in issue #0 of *e-flux journal* that walls and limits must be recognized. If an emerging condition in art can be loosely defined by its geographic and disciplinary dispersal, then alongside its offerings of new forms of agency, it seems that the opportunity to re-imagine one’s own circumstances also translates to a constant negotiation with some of its basic contingencies. As we are seeing in the current global financial crisis, if we are to invoke the promises of late capitalism – that borders, languages, finances can dissolve or converge – then it becomes important also to acknowledge that some things simply do not translate into free-flowing forms of universal consensus. War, trauma, culture, language will not slide over oiled tracks of communication, and some solids refuse to melt into air. But perhaps it is here, in the attempt at translation – in the open engagement with its uselessness through stammering, mumbling, scrawling attempts – that one might suggest that art can provide a means of discovering and negotiating with the nature of these basic contingencies.

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