

Editorial

01/02

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a “global” art world began to form. Sure, there were already a number of world’s fairs and established international biennials, but this would be different. From the 1990s onward, national boundaries would dissolve, centers and peripheries would level out, and the internet would host worldwide cultural exchange. In many ways this really did happen, but some other things also happened. As people and ideas began to move across borders, money did too. Faced with an unmanageable planetary scale, capital became a more efficient regulator of flows than laws or nations. Suddenly, capital rose to become the primary form of representation and expression for the global community, and its flair for flexibility and recombination would even be mistaken as democratic, autonomous, and antiauthoritarian, sealing it in as a new form of sublime non-governance. Capital’s twin, the internet, would also democratize many scarce resources and forms of representation just as efficiently as it would mask its control by state agencies and some of the largest corporations in human history.

In art, the call to join with the global would be answered by a vast industry of events – pop-up museological exhibitions across the world – that would animate a thriving art market. Artworks would be produced and exhibited on a previously unimagined scale, and newspapers would distinguish works by their relation to capital (record-setting prices). Better-informed practitioners in the field of art who might once have used politics or history to engage with artworks found themselves faced with cultures they did not understand – at times for completely mundane or understandable reasons, at others due more to sublime arrogance. Suddenly, the passage to any political or historical understanding would be covered over by the abstraction of cultural exchange – a mode of communication that supposes that you don’t really understand where I am from or what I have been through. Forced to pander to a global community with unlimited resources but limited access to the forces and urgencies that animate my own work and thinking, I may even become foreign to myself. I may seek global approval to accept that my own politics, my own history, even exist. Without that recognition, I might need to enlarge the spectacle – add violence, sharper colors, car chases, happy endings, a whiff of fascism, or a full sectarian withdrawal from the superstate.

But the mandate to become cultural becomes far more complex than this when the globe tells us what we already know to be true: that with or without the recognition of a planet

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of others, we still do not understand what we ourselves have been through. An art aligned with modern and humanist traditions and ambitions appears unhelpful. The cultural peculiarities of European scientific, industrial, and political revolutions seem only to deepen the problem. Faced with looming planetary ecological meltdown, when institutions that were not qualified to blaze pathways for all of humankind to begin with come down from their galactic ambitions, they too land on culture – not as a project or technology, but as a naturalized way of including politics and histories they are unable or unwilling to understand. They, too, forfeit questions of scale to global flows of spectacle and capital.

In 2019 we wanted to celebrate ten years of *e-flux journal* by organizing a series of conferences reflecting upon some of the major themes and concerns the journal has explored. And while we often assume ideological meltdown and structural dysphoria to be a core condition of artistic production and thought today, the fact that all of these conferences were organized with so many generous friends, radiant thinkers, and fellow travelers can only be incredibly encouraging. Last January, we began with the conference “Exile,” focusing on themes of estrangement and entitlement, hosted by Witte de With in Rotterdam. In February, La Colonie in Paris hosted “The Twilight Symposium: Science Fiction Inside Colonialism,” on diasporic dreamworlds. In April, we partnered with the Harun Farocki Institut to present the symposium “Navigation Beyond Vision” at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The conference asked how gamespace and virtual space are profoundly shifting not only the politics of the image, but also the spatial parameters for acting and existing.

In June at e-flux in New York, we concluded the four-month conference series with “Art After Culture,” which this issue focuses on. As the cumulative conference, it asked: If we remember the artistic avant-garde tradition and its iconoclastic contempt for culture, how can we reconcile our own unknown culture with apparently simultaneous traditionalist fetishes? If we are now chained to an apparatus of representation that can only be spectacular in its scale, what is the project that art must necessarily undertake against reactionary self-homogenizing withdrawals? Can, or should, art still gain access to something larger than the culture it was born into? Today, bloated modernist ambitions are often easily called out for being imperial and expansionist, even when they adopted idealistic and inclusive language. And the withdrawal from this tradition often takes the form of personal narratives and

minoritarian longings to seal off toxic neighbors, and maybe eliminate them once and for all. Indeed, if we had been more modest in our ambitions from the beginning, we could have avoided a number of headaches.

At the same time, the blunt fact of planetary human entanglement has not changed that much, though its character seems to have completely reversed course: no longer the site of necessary transnational cooperation, this mutual entanglement now obliges us to understand our own toxicity, our own role in contributing to the ultimate spectacle of mass ecological self-extinction. But could it be possible to see this not only in terms of human death, but also as a cultural endpoint – the death and failure of innumerable technologies that fueled the lives, wars, and industries of human culture? And if art – ancient, modern, or whatever – was always able to project past these endpoints, then what is art after culture?

– Editors

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