

Editors Editorial

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It's yet uncertain what the lasting legacy of 2020 will be. "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us," Walter Benjamin wrote in 1940, "that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." We already know that in the US, the summer of 2020 will be remembered for its sustained state of emergency, when we emerged from stratified isolation and convened, in the millions, in the streets to affirm that black lives matter, that black breath is stolen at an overwhelmingly higher scale by the pandemic and by the largely extralegal military organization known as the police. Benjamin continues: "We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."

The summer of 2020 will be the summer that came anyway, somehow, despite the hundreds of thousands lost during the pandemic. But, there is something about Benjamin's "real" state of emergency that seems to suggest that an underlying pandemic exists below the one we thought we were dealing with. In a time of collective vulnerability, what do we clearly realize? What is being heard around the world from the disproportionate number of black lives taken both by the pandemic and by the police that are tasked with protecting rather than criminalizing life? Many of our institutions – most certainly, art institutions – are now being forced into a painful self-questioning to confront their own inextricable ties to colonial rule, historically and in the present.

Many old white men will now assume different shapes, sizes, and even genders, cultures, and races as they scramble to hide behind the bodies of people their fatherly care has always neglected. But, after so many lives have been sacrificed to expose white supremacy as a much older pandemic inherent to the "healthy" functioning of so many modern societies, we may now find ourselves inside of a rare opportunity to distinguish them clearly. And, if that happens to you while you're looking in the mirror, then rest assured that this is only the beginning. "The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible," Benjamin wrote (again, in 1940), "is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."

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Issue image: Protesters tear down Christopher Columbus statue outside Minnesota state capitol, June 25, 2020. Photo: Stephen Maturen/Getty Images.

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