

# Aesthetics Editorial

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First, I want to acknowledge Temi Odumosu, co-convenor of this strand, whose breath of expertise and meticulous curatorial eye in the programming of the Aesthetics strand for the Violence Conference and contributed to the dynamic input at each of the conference sessions. This selection of contributions has been developed further for this issue, expanding on the questions raised during the presentations. The contributors have attended to aesthetic forms that capture the entangled relationship between the spectacle of violence as radically disruptive intervention in human experience on the one hand, and its “naturalized,” pervasive presence in artefacts and objects as well as social gestures in daily life, founded in historical conditions and contemporary political circumstances on the other hand.

The issue of representing violence arguably begs a set of procedural questions and the contributions here disclose these enquiries in different ways. How does one represent violence without reproducing its forms? Whose subjectivities do these representations serve? And how might representations of violence function as a form of reckoning with historical violence in the service of reparations and justice-making? The tensions between the spectacle of violence and its capacity to produce spectacular beauty in representative forms (art, performance, films, design, dance...) is the constant “entanglement and displacement” of “producing discontinuities, reversals, inertias and swings that overlay each other,” as Achille Mbembe argues.<sup>[1]</sup> And, as he elaborates further, the continuum of violence (coloniality) connects historical events across geo-political contexts to its contemporary effects.

Aesthetics in this context is a politics of practice and two central themes emerge across this issue. The first pertains to the significance of returning to the archive and the second is the “right to look.”<sup>[2]</sup> The keynote conversation with artists Salad Hilowle and Katarina Pirak Sikku, facilitated by Temi Odumosu, foregrounds the role of archives in their respective practices, delinking them from Sweden’s ideological discourse of homogeneity.



Covering for Sami archive at Uppsala University (2022) made by Katarina Pirak Sikku (time code: 26.49)

Pirak Sikku enters the archive in search of personal genealogies and in the process uncovers the series of systemic displacements and genocide of indigenous Sami communities across the northern parts of the Scandinavian region. In describing her process, she reflects on the political processes that produce the invisibilities of the Sami people in Sweden; institutionalised through meticulous record-keeping and literally stripping Sami people from clothing, culture and language in order to develop a taxonomy of discrimination. In her intervention into the archive, Pirak Sikku explains that her choice to cover the albums in cloth filled with images of naked Sami people is an act of restoring their dignity. The gesture is neither public nor immediately visible, since access to the collection is restricted, but the private gesture is resonant with how aesthetic practices are connected to the ethics of representation.

Similarly, in the quietly lyrical reflections of ujjwal kanishka utkarsh, the act of bearing witness to the testimony of Dalit activist Rohith Vemula's suicide cites the violence of coloniality, this time captured in a soundscape that avoids the images of protest, working with traces in the accompanying illustrations, the suicide letter and the image of a single candle flame. It is this relationship, this negotiation between what is visible and present and disclosing the hidden, through which the unseen is brought to the fore as a strategy of working through the ethics of how to represent experiences of recurrent violence that form part of a sociopolitical continuum.

Hilowle's archival excavation looks at a collection of drawings and paintings of a black artist model, shifting the gaze from white observers to his as a black witness, re-reading the representations of black masculinity. In describing his artistic practice, Hilowle seeks a counter history of these images by describing speculative possibilities for these subjects in the archive, which he describes as positioned to avoid the gaze of the (white) observer.



Pierre du Alexander, model at Art Academy (time code: 17:27)

Nicholas Mirzoeff's proposition of the right to look is a counter history of visibility that provides a further resonance to the practice of reading images, since it demands a recognition of how looking and allowing subjects to look back is itself an act of challenging authority and part of a process of recognition and self-recognition. I see that you see me, because I see you and its inverse.

*Formally, the right to look is the attempt to shape autonomous realism that is not only outside authority's process but antagonistic to it. Countervisuality is the assertion of the right to look, challenging the law that sustains visibility's authority in order to justify its own sense of "right". The right to look refuses to allow authority to suture its interpretation of the sensible to power, first as law and then as the aesthetic.<sup>[3]</sup>*

The right to look resonates with a number of contributions in this issue, which seek to remind us of how power and authority increasingly make invisible the structures that control and regulate representation and the visibility of violence, specifically because its regulation is about a removal of the right to know. As Mirzoeff concludes: "The simple fact that a counter history of visibility can be written suggests that it has lost its force as 'natural' authority. A tremulous moment of opportunity awaits to set aside visibility for the right to look, to democratize democracy."<sup>[4]</sup>

Adela Goldbard draws on Mexico's colonial past and its current political condition that perpetuates these structures of violence. The written submission, alongside the video, exposes how democracy is at risk precisely because the right to look is regulated, and violence is rendered invisible, which has led to thwarted democratic practices in Mexican society. Lisa Deml's contribution negotiates the right to look with the risk of being seen, a negotiation of disclosure, to explore how the experience of violence is recounted in a female artist collective during the Syrian uprising and civil war. Another female group, The Solmaz Collective, discuss the dissensus of representation first from their immediate and close proximity of interpersonal encounters and subsequently its relation to broader social contexts. Their entanglements and displacements are captured through poised metaphors and images derived from a video produced for the PARSE conference, with the staged reflection constructed as a dialogue for this issue.

The concept of counter histories through visibility is complemented by the proposition that revised experiences and marginal epistemologies require deep acts of listening to recognise different ways of knowing. These are explored through practices of poetry, both in its literal and aesthetic sense, in the contribution by Elisabeth Hjorth and Anna Nygren. Their aesthetic form is deeply rooted in an enquiry of ethical practices and foregrounds the auditory to create an experience of neurodiversity, which becomes a visceral experience through listening, reading and fundamentally in the silences between.

Violence as an embodied experience activated through aesthetic forms is central to any mode of representation, whether it is through the (dis)comforts of looking or tactile experiences with objects in relation to scale and subjectivity. The sensorial is what Tina Campt defines as “haptic images that move us through our physical encounters with them and through affective investments with which we imbue them. Haptic images ‘triangulate, imbricate, and implicate their viewers, their subjects and their makers’ through multisensory interactions that comprise the act of viewing them”.<sup>[6]</sup> Amina Ejaz and Zohreen Murtaza reference three Pakistani artists working with the various scales of their pieces drawn from particular Pakistani (miniatures and carpet weaving) traditional art forms. The contemporary reinterpretations of these traditions each create a sensorial experience that holds the viewer accountable to the recurrent acts of violence experienced by the people in Pakistan post 9/11, and how the experience of pervasive violence in Pakistan remains largely invisible in the United States of America.

Nkule Mabaso and Ram Krishna Ranjan use a dueling, dual strategy, working with a video performance and their documented conversation on a train in Gothenburg. They share alliances with southern colonialities, reflect on the disparate southern epistemologies—South Africa and India—and their sociopolitical dislocation of being in the North. The “transformation of violence into a shared care of the common world” is embodied in the performance by these interlocutors as “potential history”<sup>[6]</sup> that deploys a citational practice as a strategy of working through the overlaps of political solidarities, fractures histories of apartheid and caste systems respectively and thus produce an enactment of potential histories.

*Potential history is not an attempt to tell the violence alone, but rather an onto-epistemic refusal to recognise as irreversible its outcome and the categories, statuses, and forms under which it materialises; ‘... is a commitment to attend to the potentialities that the institutional forms of imperial violence—borders, nation states, museums, archives, and laws—try to make obsolete or turn into precious ruins.’<sup>[7]</sup>*

Through their scholarship and creative practices, the contributors to this issue engage in making visible their positions and subjectivity, which strongly connect aesthetic forms to genealogies of knowledge, to an ethics and politics of practice that may be crystallised in the sentiment that the right to look, and to look again is a pursuit of finding justice and democratising democracy. Such an acknowledgement of the right to look resists any claims to innocence when violence and the history of violent acts have organised fundamental aspects of our contemporary sociopolitical structures.

## Footnotes

1. Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2002. p. 14.
2. Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. 2011.
3. Ibid., p. 25.
4. Ibid., p. 34.
5. Camp, Tina. *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*. p.17 Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2021.
6. Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. New York, NY, and London: Verso, 2019. p. 57.
7. Ibid., p. 286.