Book Reviews

T.J. Demos


The Migrant Image by art historian T.J. Demos is an ambitious and committed book, which distinguishes it from the norms of its discursive genre. While many books on contemporary culture try to find a convincing reciprocal (causal) relationship between aesthetics and social practice, their tendency is often to drift toward an ethics of the social in general. Demos, by contrast, searches for specific historically determined examples of social praxis within aesthetics. This is an attempt to not only revisit but also actualize the historical avant-garde’s call for the politicization of aesthetics from the historical vantage of the violently enforced displacements and migrations that condition the present. Demos does this by locating specific geopolitical sites and historical struggles, emerging in large part as a result of the Bretton Woods accords, and the UN carving up of the world in the aftermath of World War II and the Shoah. Having located cultural practices that trace, however elliptically and aesthetically, the ramifications of this crucial history, focusing mostly (though not exclusively) on the Nakba and Palestine, Demos asks how these practices can be situated to cajole an art viewing public to become engaged.

Demos’s primarily historical and political commitment allows him a fresh way to frame a question of culture recursive throughout the twentieth century, namely: the responsibilities of form in relation to the discontents of capitalist modernity and the aspiration to galvanize agency against corporate and state power. While the practices that Demos discusses range over the United States, Germany and England, they are primarily about the seismic impact of territory and resource expropriation in Palestine and Africa. This divide is already symptomatic, which is not to say problematic. Few of the practitioners explored are situated near the site of inquiry, and yet the question of territory is paramount. This places the tenor of the book on the inevitability of displacement. I empha-
size this only because the cultural practices in focus may also be seen as posing important questions concerning what a defense of indigeneity might look like at this historical conjuncture.

At the same time, the strength of Demos’s emphasis on displacement and deracination under ‘crisis globalization’ (a term the author claims to have coined (xiiv)), is that the book seeks to understand patterns of causal determination informing (and thereby to some degree unifying) seemingly disconnected problems. As such, Demos tends toward a brave attempt at totalization against the hegemony of the fragment that marks much art writing on social praxis. For Demos, cultural production traces the causal interdependence of the collapse of human rights in the name of human rights to globalized late capitalism, while also noting that these disparate geopolitical contexts and their separate concerns (mining in Africa, immigrants’ rights in Europe, the aspiration to nation-statehood on the part of the PLO, the right of return, the Nakba) are bound by a common problem set: the unequal value of human life caught in state and war craft on the one hand, and the all-consuming primacy of the commodity and liquid finance on the other. While the book is by no means a form of activism, it searches for an accurate descriptive (and sometimes prognostic) register in which to locate the intersection of not only art and politics, but also numerous instances of crisis relating to the effects of state partitioning during the 1940s and to restructuring under the IMF mandate during the last decades of the twentieth century; forces resulting in a domino effect delivering us to our ‘now’. Yet another strength of Demos’s book is its recognition of the conjuncture of the Oslo Accords, 9/11 and the financial collapse of 2008, and its refusal to assign primacy to any one of these events in determining the present moment.

In a discussion of this nature, the aesthetic term germane to the responsibility of form is realism. Asking what aesthetic intervention into politics might look like within the dual regime of the capitalist police state, and, more crucially, whether any such intervention might be effectively kindled (big ifs), Demos turns to an exploration of ways and means—the ‘formal’ strategies and tactics with which contemporary artists renegotiate the legacy of documentary realism in order to think about crisis diaspora. To do this, Demos looks at work by Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, Ahlam Shibli, Hito Steyerl, Ursula Biemann and the collaborative work of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri.

Proceeding from the utopian claim that representation (aesthetic and political) has ‘more rather than less power to shape our world than heretofore’, Demos focuses on instances of documentary that suggest the efficacy of the image in interrupting the seamless façade of “empire” (xvii). He hopes to prove through case studies (e.g., McQueen’s way of framing migrant labor in South