



Aesthetics of Affliction

Alberto Guevara, Elysee Nouvet

Managing Editors

In making *Aesthetics of Affliction* our theme for this first issue, our goal was to engage immediately with questions that must remain central in a journal dealing with corpo-realities of structural violence, the senses, and the theatricality of power. These questions are: how can we talk to experiences and situations that evade translation and that are mired with legacies of objectification? What are the possibilities, limits, hopes, and risks when addressing non-linear moves of power, the work of violence, and social yet also intensely subjective effects/affects?

[2] Distress, crisis, violence, loss, addiction, pain, death: while such topics are not marginal today, as Gomez-Peña has noted, they are most frequently trafficked as part of the "mainstream bizarre"¹. The mainstream bizarre, as spectacle, is the inverted image of society and the social relations that compose it. Narratives of affliction surround us, but rarely move us in an era of "shock and awe." With live coverage of wars and natural disasters, through the mainstream media, entertainment industry, and Internet, we have grown accustomed to welcoming "victims" into our living rooms. We listen to

their “relationships from hell” and “unimaginable loss” while traveling to work, channel switching, or looking for carrots in the fridge for that night’s dinner. For those who labour on global asymmetries, the routine consumption of suffering might occur in other forms: briefcases and desks spilling over with disembodied reports, legal rulings, and statistical charts. Regardless of the milieu, in such piling up of images, it is always relevant to ask, what is left out, unsaid, unheard. What narratives are being repeated or re-membered? Whose distress matters at a particular juncture in history in a particular context? Which borders of which economic, political, and moral communities are reinforced in the process of certain ‘affliction’ becoming a ‘normal’ object of empathy or apathy?

[3] The Greek origins of the word *aisthitikos* implies a corporeal experience or “that which is ‘perceptive by feeling’”ⁱⁱⁱ. Throughout 19th and 20th century philosophical usage, aesthetics became commonly associated with culturally and historically specific systems of judgement. In this issue, aesthetics emerges as a combination of these meanings. *Aesthetics of Affliction* is a series of contextualized methods for translating, reading, and making dis-ease and agitation sensorially present.

[4] Steiner’s article is an appropriate start to the issue as he revisits an enduring preoccupation with the gap between experience and language in Benjamin’s “Little History of Photography.” Many of the works selected invite the viewer/reader to consider how representations of sensory knowledges must move in and out of registers of the seeable and the sayable. Traced, tracked, or caught in the suspensions of representational forms, affliction is slippery and its

record is always fleeting and partial. O'Neal's and Gill's art both dwell in this tension between the present and the absent, between the material and the immaterial. Where ordinary objects in O'Neal's delicate sculpture compose spaces of loss and longing, it is the landscape of *D'Arcy Island* that Gill mines to evoke such haunting.

[5] Throughout the issue, affliction and the suffering body are cast not only as products of social relations, but also as forces that agitate the status quo. Thus, focusing on local level genocide courts in Rwanda, Eramian explores the limitations of legal and social expectations that testimony of political violence will be individual, rather than collective. Guevara and Finley both explode reductionist associations of affliction with victimhood. Guevara argues that 'victims' of pesticide contamination in Nicaragua wield their suffering flesh as theatrical weapons. Finley's originally huge paintings, both playful and dark, highlight the multiple and contrasting narratives that can co-exist as 'affliction.'

[6] While all of the works encourage the reader/viewer to 'make sense' of dis-ease using their own bodies, two of the pieces make this process their primary focus. Performance group A2 invites non-professional participants to react spontaneously to gun-shot-like sounds. Acts of memory and witnessing flood the safe space of the gallery, animating the anonymous. Neuerburg-Denzer's use of emotion labs in her university theatre classes examines the social and personal challenges of actors pushing beyond familiar emotional experiences. In the encounter between the known and unknown these experiments entail, the intimate, contingent, and always partially unpredictable responses of the body are valorized as sites of negotiated knowledge.

[7] Baudrillard remarked several decades ago that capitalism thrives on the emptying of context that results from the bombardment and repetition of images. “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning”ⁱⁱⁱ. It is this emptying of meaning and its link to what Sontag calls the “pornographic appetite” for suffering^{iv} that this issue problematizes and aims to move beyond. If showing dis-ease has often become exoticizingly spectacular and/or lamentably banal in the post-WWII period^v, this does not prescribe that mediations of affliction must fail to provoke. The artistic and literary picturing and performances gathered here broaden norms of recognizing, defining, and responding to ‘affliction.’ *Aesthetics of Affliction* is shown to be heavy with possibilities.

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ⁱ Gomez-Peña (2005). Ethno-Techno: Writing on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy. London: Routledge.

ⁱⁱ Buck-Morss (1992: 6). “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered.” *October*, Vol. 62, p. 3-41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Baudrillard (1994: 79). Simulacra and Simulation. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

^{iv} Sontag (2003: 41). Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Picador.

^v For two recent discussions on this subject see Sontag (2003) and Virilio (2003). Art and Fear. New York: Continuum.