

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

### Title

Letter from the Editor

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0q8867m4>

### Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 2(1)

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### Publication Date

2019

### DOI

10.5070/R72145848

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## Letter from the Editor

Kate Korroch

The idea for this issue began percolating in the very early stages of *Refract's* existence. I attended the Venice Biennale in 2017 with my partner, infant, and in-laws. I soon became aware of the several roles I inhabited: I was at once a contemporary visual culture thinker honing my critical eye, a new parent managing a balance of feedings and jet-lagged nap schedules, and an in-law guiding my family in a country that inspires many to bask in the visual. I juggled these roles while also trying to fulfill our collective desires for the quintessential family trip to Italy. This exercise invited a reflection on the practice of translation of experience and access (of age, of interest, of comfort, of cost), in addition to language and culture.

As we oriented ourselves in the contemporary art spectacle, we were drawn to the unofficial collateral pavilions, rather than the historical national pavilions, removed from the sanctioned grounds of the biennale. Just a few steps from our rental apartment, the Catalan pavilion presented *Catalonia in Venice\_La Venezia che non si vede*, which maps Venice through sound rather than sight via user collaboration. The project was a small piece of the BlindWiki mobile application designed by the contemporary Spanish artist Antoni Abad.<sup>1</sup> At one point, the pavilion facilitators invited biennale attendees to put on a disposable eye mask and join a person who is visually impaired on a gondola ride, experiencing the world through the guide's perspective. We piled in, pleased by the project's multifarious offerings: an art experience, a gondola ride in Venice (for free!), no crowds, and simply cooling our bodies in the Italian summer heat. As we sat bobbing, eyes covered, taking in the environment, we were invited into an intimate space of translation: the visual

bearings that we use to navigate space were transformed into aural markings through our guide's descriptions.

The title of the project is multilingual, intimating the most familiar form of translation: language. Translated to English, the second part of the title means "The Venice that cannot be seen," inviting the idea of something escaping our view or perception: something may be lost to us through a mistranslation of sorts. This sense is further compounded by how the viewer also experiences language translation in this context: the country where the biennale is held functions in Italian, but the language of tourism and the global contemporary art market is usually English. Furthermore, the project is situated in the Catalan pavilion, which reminds the audience of the language autonomously nestled within the Spanish nation-state. However, the project invites participants to think about translation beyond language and toward a sensorial experience. This going "beyond," this translation of senses, invites those accustomed to accessing the world via sight to crucially rethink their quotidian experiences of the world. Simultaneously, the project provides an additional sensorial experience in a biennale context, which heavily relies on access through sight. Finally, it provides a way for those who do not have sight a space, albeit limited, to engage in the mega art exhibition system.

Thus, I began to think about the relationship between translation and accessibility. The offerings of the Catalan Pavilion were more accessible economically within the confines of the biennale structure: guests did not need to pay, because it is not part of the formalized Biennale. However, it also questioned political access, as Catalonia refuses the nation-state format that dominates the organization and history of the Biennale. The project's message was inviting and inclusive, and it was straightforward but thought-provoking. Translation, I reflected, is much more than the processing of language. This is the crux of *Refract's* second issue.

In addition to our contributions that speak to the unfolding richness of translation, in this issue we formalize our ongoing series, "Voices of Visual Studies." In each issue, the editorial board strives to present perspectives on visual studies from a diverse array of thinkers. Most important, these pieces do not define *Refract's* political intervention in visual studies, but instead present a variety of ideas and approaches. In other words, we seek tension. To ignore tensions and to limit this space to a single disciplinary doctrine is detrimental to how *Refract* engages with visual cultures of diverse histories and geographies. In our first issue, "Refraction," James Elkins discusses and problematizes visual studies through a consideration of writing. In this issue, Sara Blaylock offers another narrative which is both introspective and critical. As we embark on this nascent intervention, we are

placing “Voices of Visual Studies” contributions at the end of each issue to provide a final piece for contemplation across the swath of issues over time.

Fall 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of the visual studies doctoral program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. *Refract* is emerging from this setting, and, although it is an independent entity, a large part of our financial and intellectual support stems from the department. This issue is emblematic of the program’s important impact on the field in the past ten years: the journal was founded and is maintained by visual studies doctoral students; our second issue’s contributor to “Voices of Visual Studies,” Sara Blaylock, is a graduate of the program; and two other contributors, Ace Lehner and Alexandra C. Moore, are currently doctoral candidates in the program.

*Refract* has experienced exponential growth since our founding in 2016. Our editorial board continues to grow, we are collaborating with the Institute of the Arts and Science at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and we have a steady stream of readers and contributors. The publication of this issue, as well as our operational costs, would not be possible without the financial support of an independent donor, Anne Bass; the Arts Dean’s Fund for Excellence; the History of Art and Visual Culture department; Porter College’s Provost’s Office; the Institute of Arts and Sciences; and the UCSC Graduate Student Association. Lastly, we would like to thank Stacy Kamehiro, Elisabeth Cameron, Boreth Ly, Ruby Lipsenthal, Michael Conlee, Paula Dragosh, Tatiane Santa Rosa, Molly Korroch, all of the staff of the History of Art and Visual Culture department, and the support of our visual studies colleagues. Their enthusiasm, engagement, and inquisitive support are integral to *Refract*’s success.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://blind.wiki/>.