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Introduction to "Refraction"

Refraction. The word evokes notions of light, optics, wave transmission, energy, and oblique angles. It is used in the field of physics to refer to the way a wave changes direction upon contact with a new medium through which it is transmitted. For instance, when sound waves hit the surface of water, their frequency changes—you may have experienced this yourself, noticing how noises become muffled when you are submerged in a busy swimming pool. Or this might occur when light waves, travelling through the air, come into contact with a new medium. For instance, you may use a straw in a glass of water and notice the straw looks bent at the point where it crosses the threshold of the water's surface.

Taking this notion of bending and shifting waves, the inaugural issue of *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* asks how refraction can be a tool for critically engaging with ways of seeing. Refraction can refer to ways in which viewpoints, epistemologies, or discourses can shift direction, so to speak. One could expand this metaphor to ask how changes in "medium" provoke different perceptions of the world. How might scholars, artists, thinkers, or makers manipulate these shifts in order to challenge hegemonic ways of knowing? To refract knowledge is to complicate discursive categories that are largely taken for granted. How can scholarly analysis, artistic projects, dialogues, and reviews refract dominant histories, geographies, cultural attitudes, among other things, and offer different possibilities for "knowing" and experiencing the world? This issue is an initial step into such an inquiry. Diverse in subject matter and methodological approach, the contributions in this issue reconsider existing narratives about the body, gender and sexuality, race, state control, the archive, trauma and memory, the built environment and space, and technologies of seeing.

Jamee Crusan's "The Double Edge of Visibility and Invisibility: Cassils and Queer Exhaustion" is a tour-de-force exploration of the work of gender non-conforming trans masculine artist Cassils. Cassils often uses their body in self-

portraits, videos, and visceral performances in which they appear isolated, fighting, or enduring instances of self-violence. Through two chapters and an epilogue, Crusan expands on the theory of "queer exhaustion," which the author defines as a constant "negotiation between invisibility and visibility," a dealing with feelings of self-erasure and self-abnegation that is usually required of "those outside heteronormative constructs to pivot on a dime for their safety." Like other pieces in this issue, Crusan's "The Double Edge" discusses how dominant technologies of seeing have historically sought to produce normative bodies. Crusan's piece is a certain, and much needed, elaboration on trans and non-binary academic visibility, exemplifying how scholars can "refract" dominant discourses by engaging with marginalized issues. Crusan also uses "refraction" as a writing strategy, mingling theoretical investigations with poignant first-person writing, recounting episodes such as being misgendered at age eight, or realizing their own past traumas while bearing witness to Cassils' jolting performances.

A number of the contributors to this issue use a similar strategy of introspective, first-person writing in order to engage with their subject matter in ways previously considered "off limits" for scholars. For instance, Joshua Nash's contribution, "Linguistic Spatial Violence: The Muslim Cameleers in the Australian Outback," is about the architectural and linguistic traces of some 2,000 Muslim cameleers crossing the Australian desert in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Nash's piece is no mere historical account. He writes about his own search for this history in architectural form as well as in place-names littered across the outback. His writing is entirely introspective; he considers himself to be yet another nomadic traveler in this desert space, on a pilgrimage following the same path taken by the cameleers. Nash continuously refers to his field work as a "search," which is significant for it implies there are still no "answers," but merely clues, musings, observations, and emotions. His contribution to *Refract* is one manifestation of this search—it is not the final say. In this way, the article itself and Nash's writing style are examples of how historical narratives are constantly refracted through time, just as the architectural remnants of the Muslim cameleers constantly shift as they are discovered or lost.

While creating this issue, *Refract*'s editorial board was struck by the methodological choices our contributors were making, as well as the innovative content their submissions explored. Rather than merely put them side by side in an academic journal, we wanted to take more time to engage with the pieces as well as include areas of transparency in the editorial process. We have therefore included interviews with three of the contributors, including Joshua Nash's piece. This was partly in order to delve more fully into each submission—journal entries are often left "untouched" and the reader is assumed to make of it what they will.

Rather, this issue assumes all submissions are windows into larger discussions where more refraction is always a potential.

In our interview with Joshua Nash, we asked him to elaborate on how he uses strategies such as "spatial writing," a method not usually applied to architectural history. We also asked about the role of emotion in his writing style and how he views this piece as an example of "sensuous scholarship." Readers will find Nash's piece full of interesting editorial details such as moments in which one phrase contains a multitude of meanings: for instance, rather than saying something is "spatially violent," Nash describes it as "spatial(ly violent)." In moments such as this, something can be simultaneously spatial *and* spatially violent. It is this multiplication of meanings that evokes the notion of refraction, and the interview with Nash looks more closely at the thinking behind his strategic writing choices.

The *Refract* team also interviewed Erick Msumanje and Alexis Hithe about the film, *VOLTA VOLTA* (2017), included in this issue. Msumanje's short film explores the ways in which the Black body moves through "ritual spaces" and "ritual exchanges" and how it functions as a "container" that carries collective memory. While the first half of the film shows people engaged in mundane, everyday activities, the second half switches to a pitch-black, "digital" space. Incorporating documentary practices, the film ultimately subverts the genre of documentary and its voyeurism because the camera captures moments of people looking directly back at the viewer with a sense of knowing. Moreover, the artist statement was written by Msumanje's collaborator, Alexis Hithe. Hithe wrote the statement after viewing *VOLTA VOLTA* for the first time, and this exchange of authorship challenges the notion of individuality and isolation that is inherent in the artist statement, reflecting instead the "collectivity of the Black creative spirit."

In the interview with Msumanje and Hithe*, Refract* asked them to elaborate on the intersections of the Black body, the digital (or, as Msumanje puts it, "digital-ity"), the use of space, and the significance of ritual. The initial questions asked of Msumanje and Hithe led to linking *VOLTA VOLTA* to the traditions of the blues and Afrofuturism. One of the most generative ideas from the conversation was put forth by Hithe: "the Black body is a digital experience," as Black people represent themselves on online platforms, yet continue to be represented by and projected upon by others. *VOLTA VOLTA* seeks to disrupt and complicate readings of the Black body.

As Msumanje's *VOLTA VOLTA* exemplifies, one way this issue itself refracts scholarly analysis is by expanding the scope of what is usually in the purview of academic publications. The table of contents includes a wide range of submissions that are not categorized or segregated by medium. Rather, we

encourage our readers to look at the artistic projects interwoven between the scholarly articles as strategies for critically engaging with the refraction of knowledge.

While Msumanje's film focuses on spaces of ritual and digital experience, Mark Augustine's and Joseph Carr's triptych of drawings depict seemingly quotidian places that are also sites of ritual—the exam table, the dental chair, and the public bathroom. *Cough, Spit, Swallow* (2018) depicts these ritual spaces in a way that combines the architectural perspective and the comic illustration. The absence of human figures in the images invites viewers to make associations between the work's title and the three different spatial configurations they see. By looking at the disposition of furniture and its designs, one notices how these intimate, semi-public spaces are carefully constructed as to discipline and control the body. The actions in the title, *Cough, Spit, Swallow,* allude to an ironic take on how the normalized use of these spaces can be overturned or subverted depending on the specific cultural or socio-economic associations the viewer makes.

Other artistic projects reinterpret seemingly factual, objective data in a way that challenges how we come to "see" and "know" the world. *Endangered Data* (2017) by Zachary Norman is one such piece that challenges how atmospheric data is stored and visualized. The video comprises a series of color photographs showing scenic natural landscapes, such as seascapes or mountain views. As the video plays, the natural colors originally registered by the camera slowly transform as parts of the images become highly saturated and shift to bright, psychedelic hues. A clear blue sky changes into a glowing pink and green gradient. Pixels stand out, attracting the viewer's gaze to the quasi-abstract formations. In the artist's statement, Norman explains his interest in scientific data that has become "endangered" due to our current political climate. In the face of conservative, capitalist efforts to deny global warming, scientists working in institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration have sought to "save" governmental data by storing it on private computers. For *Endangered Data*, Norman applied steganography, a cryptographic method through which it is possible to store or hide information within the pixels of a digital image. The shifting colors reveal atmospheric changes such as an increase of methane in the air. The resulting images warn us of a dystopian future, simulating the ultimate dissolution of natural landscapes as we know them. Data—refracted in pixels— becomes a depository of vital information for the planet's future.

Norman's contribution highlights and resists government regulation of information. Another piece that engages with the issue of state control is Henry Osman's "Glitching The State: The Mechanics of Resistance in Ricardo Piglia's La

Ciudad Ausente." This essay provides a new reading of Ricardo Piglia's 1992 novel *La Ciudad Ausente* by focusing on how the glitch serves as a form of resistance against the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976 – 1983). According to Osman, *La Ciudad Ausente* is a "post-trauma science fiction" that takes place in a dystopic Buenos Aires under control of the dictatorship. Combining fragmented and polyphonic language, Piglia's *La Ciudad Ausente* does not develop a linear narration about the horrors of the Argentine Dirty Wars. Instead, the novel engages with the mechanisms of the totalitarian regime through characters such as Elena, a mysterious cyborg machine that produces small fictions and narratives, often mistranslating foreign stories. While other studies have explored the novel's relationship to trauma, mourning, and memory, Osman focuses on the notion of "the glitch," generally defined as a "small, unforeseen computer error." Analyzing Elena's mistakes or mistranslations as glitches—more than simple errors—Osman argues that in the novel they act as a form of resistance. While in Piglia's *La Ciudad Ausente* citizens live in a constant state of amnesia, "oblivious to the crimes of the dictatorship," Elena—as a "female defense machine"— produces a counter narrative to the "official" stories of the state.

As a journal in dialogue with the discipline of visual studies, one of *Refract's* main goals is to present pieces that intervene in histories of seeing and in discourses around vision, visualization, and visuality. Many of the pieces focus on the notion of refracting vision through technologies of seeing, a broad term for the interaction between actual vision technologies (or as apparatuses that help enhance our vision) and discursive practices. A number of contributions to this issue address notions of vision, visuality, and visualization in their efforts to refract dominant ways of seeing. For instance, Natasha Eves reviews the 2009 film *Serious Games III (Immersion)* by Harun Farocki, which looks at a government virtual reality software called "Virtual Iraq" used to assist Post Traumatic Stress Disorder patients. For Eves, this virtual software becomes a mechanism for neutralizing and controlling the way military violence is perceived by the American public: "*Virtual Iraq* offers domestic, controlled environments in contrast to the original sites of trauma. The actual space beyond control becomes a virtual space of absolute control." Like Norman's *Endangered Data* and Osman's "Glitching the State," Eves is concerned with the way technologies of seeing can subvert state control.

Other contributors looked at the potential for technologies of seeing to enable new perceptions rather than function as tools of control. Katie Oates, in her essay "'Tool of Enlightenment': The Dreammachine's *Effects* for Individual Autonomy" discusses Brion Gysin's Dreamachine, invented in the 1960s, as a tool that enables multi-sensory, perceptual awareness and changes the relationship between observer and participant. Oates situates the Dreamachine in the context

of seventeenth century technologies of seeing such as the magic lantern, arguing Gysin's invention was supposed to counter the alienating effects of visuality produced by mass media such as television. Through the flickering effect of the object, viewers would have access to visionary experiences and a new "consciousness."

In the realm of discursive practices, the notion of "technologies of seeing" can be understood in regard to the social constructions that shape the field of visual representation. If one considers how representation is controlled by societal norms, these norms can also be understood as technologies of seeing that need to be constantly challenged in order to open spaces of non-normative visibility. In this issue of *Refract*, an example of such an intervention is Jamee Crusan's aforementioned essay on transgender artist Cassils as well as Ingrid Asplund's challenge to hegemonic categories of knowledge in her essay "Happy Bullish 2011!!!: Olek's Project B." This piece discusses Agata "Olek" Oleksiak's yarnbombing of Arturo di Modica's *Charging Bull* (1989), which endures as a symbol of power and masculinity on Wall Street in New York. *Project B* (2010) was an ephemeral piece; it was taken down shortly after its execution and now only exists in the digital archive. According to Asplund, the yarnbombing of *Charging Bull* represents the unraveling of various categories: masculine and feminine qualities, public and private spaces, art and craft, sculpture and performance. By positioning Olek's work beyond yarnbombing, which has been gendered as a "women's art movement" and dismissed as "craft," Asplund seeks to complicate an easy reading and categorization of *Project B* by considering yarnbombing's legitimacy as an art form, particularly by examining it under the purview of street art. Furthermore, Asplund connects *Project B* to the Occupy Wall Street movement, seeing both as the literal occupation of Wall Street's space with the physical presence of Olek and protesters, respectively. In this way, both Olek's practice and Asplund's writing refract the way artistic production is arbitrarily categorized.

In addition to the contributions discussed above, *Refract* solicited short meditations from two scholars, A. Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira and James Elkins, who are influential for thinking about the methods and dialogues of visual studies. As *Refract* takes shape, its intervention is not to align with one single point of view but to provide examples of visual studies' rich offerings. To this end, we hope each issue will include other voices in the constantly shifting field of visual studies.

A. Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira is a scholar of Māori descent who writes about European representations of Indigenous Pacific Islanders and contemporary art practices that challenge those representations. By using fiction and introspection as part of her analysis, Tamaira complicates histories from angles that are different from the mainstream narratives about the Indigenous Pacific. For this issue, we

asked Tamaira if she would contribute a piece that employs her methodology of pairing subjective, first person narrative with critical analysis. She generously agreed, sharing her review of the installation/performance piece *Dashboard Hula Girl* by Adrienne Pao and Robin Lasser (2017). Tamaira's review is theoretically grounded in the Hawaiian notion of 'ai kai, which refers to the in-between, liminal space where land and sea meet. In a similar fashion, Tamaira's writing "merge[s] scholarly analysis with embodied first-hand experience" in order to "simulat[e] in written form the enigmatic domain that comprises the convergence zone—that is, the 'ai kai—of intellectual understanding and felt encounter."

James Elkins' meditation "What is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?" offers an account of visual studies, specifically on *writing* about visual studies, which simultaneously serves as a call to future scholars to "learn the field you're trained in as well as possible…and then strike out on your own, without looking back." Implicit in this piece is a concern for a perceived presentism within visual studies. Elkins suggests there is an interesting divergence between the direction of visual studies scholarship and its pedagogy. New scholarship seems to be continuously less beholden to a visual studies historiography, at points lacking a crucial self-reflexivity. Elkins argues the primacy of the image within the discipline, and the necessity of the image to itself function as argument, has not yet come to fruition within visual studies. He asks to what extent visual studies scholarship is interested in, or capable of, addressing its unrealized proposition to de-prioritize text in favor of images as mechanisms of analysis, pointing to its original claims: "Images were not to accompany textual arguments, but to actually participate in them, steering and modifying what is claimed in texts."

In this spirit, *Refract* aims to allow artistic projects to fully participate in these conversations not only through the content of each submission but also in the structure of the journal. As noted above, the films, drawings, and photographs interspersed between the essays, and the interviews conducted with some contributors, are ways we can *think with* images rather than use them as mere examples of theories and methodologies that lay elsewhere. Elkins, one voice among many in visual studies, provides a call that is both generative and cautionary and acts as a springboard from which we can complicate disciplinary boundaries and methodologies. We welcome his prod to be self-reflexive and to know our histories even as we begin this project—and are heartened by his challenge.

As *Refract*'s team began writing the introduction, it was made clear that instead of a linear narrative with set themes, the contributions to this issue create a web of ideas that overlap and diverge in often surprising ways. This issue is not the only collection of works that refract knowledge, it is merely one collection of possible avenues of exploration. Our hope for readers of "Refraction" is that they

are able to encounter unanticipated threads that activate, or refract, their expectations. As more issues of *Refract* are published, we hope to continue the fruitful, experimental, and generative dialogues offered in the following pages.