

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

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Editor's Letter

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## Letter from the Editor

My colleagues at the University of California, Santa Cruz and I founded this journal for a number of reasons, including but not limited to: providing a space outside the gatekeeping and privileged (and white, heteropatriarchal) standards of academic publishing, which often marginalizes emerging and independent scholars and artists; honing our editing skills and providing a workshop-like space for other writers; creating a free and accessible product that circulates beyond/outside the academy; and continually exploring and articulating what “visual studies” even is.

*Refract's* editorial board is constantly striving to fulfill these goals, with a mixed bag of successes and shortfalls. But what I have been thinking most about while putting together this latest volume is that last item: What is visual studies? And what is *Refract's* role in this still-burgeoning field?

Earlier this year, the editorial board revisited some canonical texts in the earliest formations of what has become visual studies—such as the now-classic (dare I say infamous) “Visual Culture Questionnaire” from the 1996 issue of *October*.<sup>1</sup> We did not have a specific agenda in rereading these texts; we simply wanted to see what resonated with us now that we are four volumes deep into this project. What struck us most about the debate over visual studies was a sense of anxiety about its disciplinary identity. How is it different from a “new art history” or “cultural studies”? Where does it fit into the university curriculum? What are the stakes of naming, creating, and defining disciplines in the first place?

As we discussed the angst that seemed to characterize those debates, I realized that this question of disciplinary belonging was never really of concern to *Refract's* founders or to its subsequent editors. Many of us on the editorial board found this aspect of the debate to be an unproductive, even reductive, instance of the “turf policing,” as Mieke Bal and others have called it, that runs rampant in

academe.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the editorial board and I found that what most resonated for us were the discussions of methodology rather than of disciplinary boundaries and institutional belonging. *How* is visual studies put into practice? How do scholars/practitioners of visual studies collect their “data,” use their “archives,” and “read” their objects of analysis?

As Bal stated in her polemical essay “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” objects “are active participants in the performance of analysis in that they enable reflection and speculation, and they can contradict projections and wrong-headed interpretations (if the analyst lets them!) and thus constitute a theoretical object within philosophical relevance.”<sup>3</sup> Michael Ann Holly similarly argued for this kind of approach in her response to the *October* questionnaire, saying that “the ‘work of art’ itself (of course the range of what counts here has been enormously expanded into any visual representation) has as much a role to play in the production of the circulation of meanings as does the critic or historian who tries to get it to speak.”<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, *Refract* considers artists, filmmakers, poets, performers, and creative practitioners of all kinds to be *doing* the work that we might call visual studies. In this volume—and all those that came before—original, creative work is integrated into the table of contents, not as illustrations of someone else’s argument but as intellectual, theorizing projects in their own right.

Alongside these projects, the scholarly essays included in *Refract*’s volumes over the years are also putting visual studies into practice, if not definitively naming it as such. From unpacking the role of cosmetics in sixteenth-century British imperialism,<sup>5</sup> to framing trans selfies on social media as decolonial acts,<sup>6</sup> our contributors co-produce their analyses in the kind of performative praxis that Bal called for. Further, they fulfill what Sara Blaylock, in our second volume, identified as imperatives for the field: they “[offer] a different way of seeing and engaging with the world” and are “social justice minded in both historical and contemporary subjects.”<sup>7</sup>

As editors, we are always looking for artists and writers who enact the kinds of methodologies that characterize, to us, a visual studies approach. This is the reasoning behind our annual feature, “Voices of Visual Studies,” for which we invite scholars who we believe are doing important work with/around/alongside artistic production. The quote from Blaylock comes from her contribution as our “Voice” in volume 2, while James Elkins preceded her in our inaugural volume.<sup>8</sup> Those two featured voices were both white scholars whose doctoral training was in the fields of art history and visual studies, respectively. But some of the most critical, insightful, and inspirational work that might be called visual studies is happening in (or between) other disciplines and by people of color. So, for the

third volume's "Voice," we invited Professor Katerina Teaiwa to reflect on the role of images and artistic work in her own scholarship on the colonial history of Banaba.<sup>9</sup>

In the present volume, we again feature interdisciplinary, social justice-oriented work by a woman of color. Catherine Sue Ramírez's essay, "Visualizing Precarity and Security: Mona Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* and Guadalupe Maravilla's *Walk on Water*," considers the condition of "precarity" as it exists in the contemporary world. Deftly weaving in some of today's most pressing social and political issues, Ramírez considers how visual culture allows us to really see and understand precarity while providing avenues for healing. One of the most exciting parts of this guest feature is her pedagogical practice. Like Teaiwa, Ramírez mobilizes the visual as a form of teaching. In many ways, I consider *Refract* to also be a kind of object that serves a pedagogical function (a "document," you might say, as outlined in this volume's introduction), and within its pages one can see the multitudinous forms that a visual studies approach can take.

My deepest gratitude to Catherine Sue Ramírez, Dark Laboratory, and Amalia Mesa-Bains for accepting our invitation to contribute to the current volume. My appreciation also goes to the other contributors, whose passion and hard work have made this volume so strong. On behalf of the editorial board, I would like to thank the department of History of Art and Visual Culture, the Arts Division, the Graduate Student Association, and the Student Fee Advisory Committee at the University of California, Santa Cruz for their financial support. We are especially grateful to Ruby Lipsenthal for all her help (and patience) while we continually figure out how all this works. Thanks also to Professors Alexis Boylan, Vilashini Cooppan, Derek Conrad Murray, Kyle Parry, and Kailani Polzak for serving on our advisory board. Thank you to the team at eScholarship for answering our (many) questions, to all the peer reviewers for your time, and to Paula Dragosh for copyediting. My personal thanks to my friends and colleagues on *Refract*'s editorial board: Spencer Armada, Rachel Bonner, Susanna Collinson, Katie Ligmond, Kelsey McFaul, Stacy Schwartz, Matthew Simmons, Madison Treece, and Elia Vargas, as well as former editorial board members who helped lay the groundwork for this incredible project.

Maggie Wander

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Svetlana Alpers et al. “Visual Culture Questionnaire,” *October* 77 (1996): 25–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778959>.
- <sup>2</sup> Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290300200101>.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Ann Holly, “Saints and Sinners,” in Svetlana Alpers et al., “Visual Culture Questionnaire,” *October* 77 (1996): 41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778959>.
- <sup>5</sup> Tara Allen-Flanagan, “The Face of an Empire: Cosmetics and Whiteness in Imperial Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2020): 285–307, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R73151193>.
- <sup>6</sup> Ace Lehner, “Trans Self-Imaging Praxis, Decolonizing Photography, and the Work of Alok Vaid-Menon,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019): 45–77, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145857>.
- <sup>7</sup> Sara Blaylock, “Lag and Impact in Visual Studies,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019): 231, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145853>.
- <sup>8</sup> See *ibid.* and James Elkins, “What Is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 15–22, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R71141455>.
- <sup>9</sup> Katerina Martina Teaiwa, “Visualizing Banaba: Art and Research about a Diffracted Pacific Island,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2020): 309–16, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R73151194>.