Introduction to 2021 special issue of JAC on art in public spaces

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ABSTRACT

The Introduction outlines the thematic framework of this special issue of Journal of Aesthetics & Culture. It begins by identifying some of the common concerns and leitmotifs that interconnect the individual articles. It then gives summaries of the individual contributions and situates them within the common thematic of this special issue. The articles examine some recent changes to the ways in which contemporary art and curating operate in various kinds of public spaces and engage different types of participants and publics. The articles explore how these changes are linked, on the one hand, to migration-induced transformations to society, and, on the other, to transformations endemic among the arts. The latter include a turn in art institutional and cultural policies towards a participatory agenda. They also involve a reorientation in politically engaged art and curating towards art activism, (radically) democratic forms of participation and alternative models of co-production and coexistence.

INTRODUCTION

Art in public spaces: new roles for art and curating in times of transnational mobility

Across the world, public spaces and publics are undergoing profound transformations in tandem with the pluralization processes resulting from several decades of intensified global migration. These processes have reconfigured many of the questions about democratic participation, power structures, society, culture and history at the core of public discourse. In Europe, for instance, the evolving multi-ethnicity of European populations in the wake of fifty-odd years of intensified immigration and globalization affects established ideas of what it means to be a citizen, a European and a member of the imagined community of a European nation-state. Other countries around the world are grappling with similar challenges to find new ways of representing collective identity and public memory in the present times of transnational mobility (both forced and voluntary) when demographic changes and transcultural entanglement are considerable. Furthermore, we see political calls for the “decolonization” of old power structures and racist norms clash with the nationalist calls for “rewesternization” raised by parties ranging from the political centre to the neo-fascism, as discussed by Simon Sheikh in his contribution to this special issue.

In his book Museum of the Commons, Nikos Papastergiadis gives an account of L’Internationale, a transinstitutional and transnational collaboration between museums and art institutions in Europe established in 2010 to create an art institutional forum for “thinking on trans-national solidarity and realizing the commons” (Papastergiadis 2020). L’Internationale is thus congenial to many of the public spaces for art and the artistic and curatorial projects discussed in this special issue. Papastergiadis aptly describes the decade in which L’Internationale has operated as an interregnum:

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the era of globalization was pinned between the negative polarities of personal insecurity and planetary degradation. The early promises of pulling the global masses out of poverty and opening up cultural exchange had been punctured by a resurgence of neo-nationalism, economic precarity, and environmental disasters. Democratic principles and cultural values were increasingly subordinated to the ultra-competitive policies of neo-liberalism and militarized border politics. (Papastergiadis 2020)

The articles in this special issue confirm, in different ways, that we are still living in this unstable interregnum, a period that can be described in a nutshell with the Gramscian title of philosopher Nancy Fraser’s book on the global political, ecological, economic and social dysfunctions that characterize the larger crisis of neo-liberal hegemony today as a time of conflict replete with “a great variety of morbid symptoms”, a time when The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born (Fraser 2019, 29). One of the issues that is arguably causing most political and
social concern today is global migration, which is also one of the key drivers of transformation—the birth of the new. As Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller note in the introduction to the sixth edition of their magisterial book The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World,

Migration and the resulting ethnic and racial diversity are amongst the most emotive subjects in contemporary society. While global migration rates have remained relatively stable over the past half a century, the political salience of migration has increased. For origin societies, the departure of people raises concern about a brain drain, but it also creates the hope that the money and knowledge migrants obtain abroad can foster development back home. For destination societies, the arrival of migrant groups can fundamentally change the social, cultural and political fabric of societies, particularly in the longer run. (Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020, 1)

As this quote suggests, many recent studies have moved away from presenting migration as an abnormality to arguing that migration is an integral and historical part of everyday life influencing all parts of society “in the longer run”. In a German context, for example, reflections on the transformative impact of migration on contemporary societies have generated important discussions on “postmigration” in which former and ongoing migratory movements are viewed as playing a foundational role in society (Foroutan 2019; Foroutan, Karakayali, and Spielhaus 2018; Römheld 2017). According to this concept, contemporary societies are conceived of as culturally diverse “societies of negotiation” where conflictual pluralization processes are played out, struggles over exclusion and inclusion take place, notions of belonging are reconceptualized, and new alliances of solidarity are formed. Homi Bhabha offers a plausible reason why this realisation has not surfaced much earlier when he points out that “discourses of national legitimation are articulated in affective structures of belonging that feel invariably ‘local’ despite their hybrid, international, or intercultural genealogies” (Bhabha 2018, 2). To his own observation, Bhabha adds Stephen Greenblatt’s perceptive remark on how culture taken for granted as sedimneted heritage tends to erase its own migratory history: “one of the characteristic powers of culture is its ability to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition” (Greenblatt, quoted in: Bhabha 2018, 2).

In the introduction to this guest-edited issue of Journal of Aesthetics & Culture on “Art in public spaces: new roles for art and curating in times of transnational mobility”, we will outline its thematic framework. The introduction is an opening gambit that asks some of the key questions which drive the contributions to this volume. It also identifies some of the common concerns that interconnect the individual articles. Lastly, but importantly, we will give short introductions to the articles and situate them within the common thematics.

With this special issue, we want to move away from a view on migration and socio-cultural diversity as a state of exception to a discussion of it as a state of normalcy. We suggest that migration entails pluralization processes that are not limited to clearly demarcated minority cultures and communities but, rather, pervade and affect all parts of society, even those that feel most “local” and, at least on the face of it, appear to be almost unaffected by the more recent demographic, cultural and social effects of migration and diversity. The overarching objective is to foreground, rather than erase, mobility as an enabling condition of culture and a source of societal transformation, and to explore how “the complicated entanglement of togetherness in difference has become a ‘normal’ state of affairs” in today’s culturally diverse societies (Ang 2001, 17).

In some of the contributions, the productive power of “migration” is an implicit rather than an explicit topic. Accordingly, we use the broader concept of mobility to frame conceptually the contents of this special issue. In mobilities studies, the term “mobilities” refers not only to the circulation of objects, ideas and people, but also, and in particular, to the ways in which they transform and are transformed. As literary scholar Diana Sorensen has noted, mobilities studies is not about studying influences, such as the historical flows in a North-to-South direction along channels established by Western colonial hegemony. The aim is to examine “the profound effects of intercultural contact” and to think about “networks of encounter and exchange, of geographies in motion” in ways that accentuate the “located”, or situated, nature of the knowledge we produce (Sorensen 2018, 21). However, when exploring mobilities resulting from migration, it is important to remember that migration can also be conceptualized as “a function of capabilities and aspirations to move within opportunity structures […] and] structural constraints” (Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020, 63). In other words, the ability to move is not universal. Economic and political constraints, such as poverty and the tightening of national border controls and asylum policies, generate unequal opportunities and immobility, especially for refugees who are forced migrants with no option to stay in their country of origin. For this reason, according to the mobility theorist Mimi Sheller, researchers have started to focus more and more on who is demobilized and remobilized across interconnected places. As Sheller notes, “Critical mobilities research is crucially concerned with friction, turbulence, immobility,
dwelling, pauses, and stillness, as much as with speed or flow, and examines how these textured rhythms are produced, practiced, and represented in relation to the gendered, raced, classed (im)mobilities of particular others” (Sheller 2011, 3).

The processes of transculturation are obvious in societies across the world. In fact, the very origin of the concept of transculturation testifies to their global pervasiveness. The concept was introduced in 1940 by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his book Contrapunteo Cubano del tabaco y el azúcar (“Cuban Counterpoints: Tobacco and Sugar”). Ortiz’s study of the Cuban tobacco and sugar industries is a critique of colonialism, in which he replaces the assimilationist term “acculturation” used in the Eurocentric anthropology of that time with the term “transculturation”, to account for the “complex transmutations” of Cuban culture and to demonstrate that Cuban history is “the history of its intermeshed transculturations”.

Today, transculturation processes seem to take on a distinctly conflictual character in Europe due to the region’s characteristic contemporary clash between “inward-looking”, anti-immigration nationalist movements and globalized, postcolonial outward-lookingness towards places and cultural geographies beyond the region’s own (Massey 2005, 15, 58–59). For this reason, this special issue puts a certain emphasis on Europe as a “problem space” (Scott 2004, 3–4; Grossberg 2019, passim) but it also widens this regional horizon by including studies of art in public spaces elsewhere.

Acknowledging the increasing reciprocity of artistic and curatorial practices, this themed issue will explore both. It focuses on how art and curating shape and are shaped by the antagonistic struggles over issues such as migration, integration, identity, community, belonging and history, along with institutional and social power structures. These struggles have gained salience with the migration-induced changes to the social, cultural and political fabric that have evolved over time. Public spaces and the ways artists and curators use these spaces offer an intriguing lens to examine these problems. The contributors thus explore how artistic and curatorial practices contribute to the negotiations taking place in today’s public spaces—understood as open and plural, and hence also conflictual, domains of human encounter. A common denominator of many of the contributions is the foregrounding of artistic and curatorial practices that encourage democratic forms of participation, as well as contesting existing power relations and inflexible institutional structures. These practices are part of a much wider endeavour in contemporary art and curating to build communities and to develop new modes of addressing audiences, publics and user groups. Projects in public space have a rich potential because they bring art closer to citizens and denizens by moving out of the art institutions and into urban spaces, public housing neighbourhoods, private homes, refugee camps, and other unconventional everyday environments.

The contributors to this issue of Journal of Aesthetics & Culture all engage in different ways with some of the issues introduced above and address questions such as: how do artistic and curatorial practices engage with the complicated entanglement being played out in various public spaces? What artistic and curatorial modes of address are adopted to create new publics? And what alternative modes of conviviality and new forms of collective identity and solidarity do artists and curators propose as anticipatory blueprints for future coexistence in the culturally pluralized and transnationally interconnected societies of the twenty-first century?

Anne Ring Petersen and Sabine Dahl Nielsen’s theoretical discussion in “The reconfiguration of publics and spaces through art: strategies of agitation and amelioration” is intended to serve as an overarching frame for understanding. The authors start out by considering how the various roles of art in public spaces have been defined by influential theorists, and how the growing interest in exploring art’s capacity to intervene into, or alternatively negotiate, social conflicts has led to an increasing artistic and curatorial use of participatory strategies. The authors then move on to grapple with the question of migration and how public spaces are currently undergoing profound transformations due to the pluralization processes resulting from decades of intensified global migration and transnational mobility. They take the 4. Berliner Herbstsalon (2019) at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin as their analytical starting point for examining how artistic and curatorial practices which contest monocultural nationalism and experiment with participatory strategies can contribute to the creation of new public spaces. Applying the concept of postmigrant public spaces, Ring Petersen and Dahl Nielsen suggest that such spaces can function as sites where hegemonic structures are negotiated and the necessary alliances of solidarity can be formed across ethnic and social divides.

Nikos Papastergiadis also provides an overarching perspective. His article “Cosmos and nomos: cosmopolitanism in art and political philosophy” investigates the friction between political philosophy and aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Papastergiadis introduces Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida as central exponents of cosmopolitanism who have sought to...

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1Fernando Ortiz, Cuban Counterpoints: Tobacco and Sugar, Durham and London: Duke University Press 1995: 98. Quoted from: (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019, xxiv).
secure the rights of people on the move by defending the necessity of hospitality to immigrants and refugees (Derrida) and the ability of critical debate in the public sphere and the dialogue with strangers to “both overcome the harm caused by structural biases and secure new grounds for solidarity” (Habermas). As both Habermas and Derrida have developed their political philosophy on the basis of Immanuel Kant’s theoretical reflections on cosmopolitanism, their understanding is characterized by an overemphasis on the normative and ethical parameters of cosmopolitanism which is typical of political philosophy. Papastergiadis argues that this has produced a “gap” and has led to a problematic bracketing of the “spherical” aspects of cosmopolitanism in philosophy. However, spherical thinking has survived in aesthetic cosmopolitanism, which has a stronghold among artists who have remained attentive to cosmogony.

The strategy of leaving the museum in favour of the public spaces of the city has long since become “a well-worn trope”. This observation serves as a starting point for Papastergiadis’s bold claim that the outward orientation of art is “seeming infinite” and thus needs to be understood within the framework of a cosmopolitanism that reaches beyond the polis. The outward orientation of art may thus inspire us to develop a frame of reference for the age of the anthropocene that extends beyond the idea of a common humanity to include interspecies coexistence, the earth and the universe with which we are connected. Papastergiadis’s article thus opens a perspective on the future which enables us to envision emerging post-anthropocentric practices in art that are founded on cosmopolitan thinking, and to take the notion of whom and what should be included in the public sphere of democratic participation to a new, spherical level. Citing examples of different artistic practices from across the globe, Papastergiadis suggests that many contemporary artists adhere to an expanded understanding of the public spaces in which they intervene as spaces that reach from the ground to the sky and encompass not only human-made environments but also “the geia and the cosmos”.

In her article “Unconditional hospitality: art and commons under planetary migration”, Pelin Tan seeks to rethink the contested category of the public space. Approaching the term from the perspectives of sociology and cultural theory, she locates a discursive shift of emphasis from “public spaces” to “the commons”. Like Papastergiadis, Tan is attentive to the need to preserve and expand the commons in a world of exploitation and borders, and thus she contributes to the growing discussion on the cultural meaning and social significance of the commons as founded on a politics of solidarity and sharing, and on how art and activism can contribute to the struggle for the commons (M. De Angelis “Foreword”Stavrides 2016, xi–xii). Focusing on contemporary examples of artistic engagements in migrant solidarity, especially in relation to the case studies of Al-Madafëh and Silent University, Tan argues that new roles for art and curating are currently being developed. She explores how artistic and curatorial methodologies in the context of planetary migration and the implementation of racist and segregative (border) politics can experiment with alternative modes of coexistence and contribute to the construction of different guest-host relationships.

Similarly, in his article “The roads of rage and ruin: contemporary art and its publics after the global”, Simon Sheikh reflects on the effects of globalization, migration and cultural pluralization on contemporary societies. More specifically, he examines the possibilities for contemporary art and culture in that which he terms “the post-public condition”, i.e. a situation in which publics are indisputably globally distributed networks transcending the idea of a confined and localized public sphere, a situation in which rejection, xenophobia and anti-internationalism are nevertheless the predominant reactions to globalization processes. Sheikh develops his argument by critically analysing and then operationalizing Walter Mignolo’s outline of five “trjectories” or options for the future in order to map out different types of art production and institutions: rewesternization; reorientation of the Left; dewesternization; decoloniality as an intellectual, aesthetic and political programme; and, finally, spiritual reawakening. In addition to Mignolo’s five paths, Sheikh proposes a sixth option, which he terms neo-fascism. This option, Sheikh argues, would entail a reorientation of the Right, the alt-right, and it would ultimately bring about an end to art and the cultural public sphere.

In contradistinction to Sheikh’s rather pessimistic interpretation of the current interregnum and concern with neo-fascism, Nina Möntmann turns to the transformative potential of decolonial practices in her contribution “Small-scale art organizations as participatory platforms for decolonizing practices and sensibilities”. Möntmann adopts a cautiously optimistic perspective on future scenarios, ignoring neither the conflicts that decolonizing interventions stir up nor the fact that the established structures of major institutions often constitute serious obstacles to decolonizing transformation. Möntmann finds the greatest potential for decolonizing practices in small-scale institutions and art spaces as participatory platforms for civic concerns. Foregrounding the exhibition space SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin as an exemplary case, she argues that small-scale institutions such as this have the potential to collectively raise decolonial sensibilities through collaboration and exchange with artists, researchers, activists and audiences.
this way, they contribute to the creation of public spaces of conflicts and negotiations capable of challenging existing power structures, altering inflexible institutional structures and developing alternative platforms beyond instrumentalization and capitalization in accordance with what Oliver Marbouef describes as the "political decolonial gesture".

Examining Western European cultural policies, Birgit Eriksson and Anne Scott Sørensen's "Public art projects in exposed social housing areas in Denmark—dilemmas and potentials" focuses attention on contemporary art projects that have been initiated in urban areas officially designated as "ghettos" based on criteria that include the percentage of "non-Western" immigrants and descendants. Applying a comparative and case-based approach to the topic and drawing on Chantal Mouffe’s conflict-sensitive theory of the socio-political dynamics of democratic societies, Eriksson and Scott Sørensen analyse, typologize and discuss a series of specific art projects recently initiated in Gellerup in Aarhus, Stengårdsvej in Esbjerg, Værebro Park in Gladsaxe and Vollsmose in Odense by means of funding from the Danish Arts Council. In so doing, they critically engage with issues pertaining to cultural pluralization, integration, stigmatization and socio-economic inequality as well as the cultural policies aimed specifically at targeting marginalized postmigrant communities, and they actively challenge the betterment agenda underpinning such policies which is based on the assumption that the exposed social housing areas and their residents can be "elevated" through art.

Under the headline “BiPoC artists counteracting 'fair' representation and racial loneliness in Higher Education in the Arts”, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt turns from users to producers, and more specifically to emerging BiPoC artists still enrolled in art academies and constricted by the invisible exclusionary mechanisms of “white” institutional structures originating in the era of European colonialism. Ullerup Schmidt takes as her point of departure a contested artistic happening in Copenhagen. In November 2020, a plaster bust of Frederick V, King of Denmark (1746–1766), was removed from the Assembly Hall of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and dumped in the nearby harbour. An action initiated by the group Anonymous Visual Artists, the event spurred a heated debate about Denmark’s colonial history and how its legacy of racism is still felt in art educational contexts. Ullerup Schmidt then applies a critical diversity perspective to direct our attention to the often overlooked fact that the licence to create art for public spaces is structurally contingent upon access to the artworld, for which the art academies are powerful gatekeepers. After briefly outlining the neoliberal policies of Higher Education and the mobility-based ideal of the internationalization of Higher Education resulting from the so-called Bologna Process, the author submits that the ideal of (art) students as blessed with “free” mobility is an illusion. She posits that this institutional blindness is closely linked to the racialized structural inequality inherent in Higher Education in the Arts in Denmark with its lack of official strategies of diversity, inclusion and recruitment of BiPoC artists. Instead of inclusion and diversity, the educational infrastructures produce “systemic racial loneliness”, argues Ullerup Schmidt. Turning finally to the decolonizing practices of “separatist” collectives of BiPoC artists, Schmidt concludes by speculating on how they may inspire ways of countering this loneliness by organizing bodies differently within institutional structures.

As in the the case of Pelin Tan, Janna Graham and Victoria Mponda aim to rethink the contested category of the public space by exploring practice-based examples of artistic and curatorial engagements in migrant solidarity. In their article “Azamba publics: containment, care and curating in the ‘expanded private sphere’” they provide critical reflections on the liberal models of the public sphere that have underpinned many ideas of art in public space. They state that such models tend to focus primarily on appearance, visibility and utility as well as on the idea of “the general public”, thus excluding a wide range of activities and sensibilities typically associated with the private sphere. Seeking to counter this binary opposition, Graham and Mponda therefore propose to work with the notion of the “expanded private sphere”. In so doing, they open a perspective that enables us to engage with curatorial practices that are attentive to the voices of people on the move, and which are dedicated to commonality and solidarity without relying uncritically on exploitative economies of care. Graham and Mponda use their practice-based experiences with the self-organized refugee women’s group Global Sistaz United as an example to indicate how its members have developed expanded forms of artistic and curatorial practices which effectively reconfigure traditional notions of the public. Introducing the concept of Azamba publics, which is inspired by a Malawian practice of community care and midwifery, they explore how artistic and curatorial practices can support values such as mutual maintenance, sharing and collaboration, and instigate the longer-term involvement of local and transnational constituencies.

To sum up, the contributions to this special issue examine how public spaces and publics are currently undergoing profound transformations in contemporary societies impacted by the effects of migration. Each contribution explores some specific challenges

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2 The acronym BiPoC refers to Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.
to the roles of art and curating in a time of transnational (im)mobility. In doing so, many of the contributions also reflect on the larger crises of neoliberal hegemony and planetary degradation that seem to constitute an interregnum (Papastergiadis) in which “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Fraser). The topics discussed include the need for rethinking notions of belonging and homeland, reimagining cosmopolitanism, experiments with alternative modes of coexistence and the decolonization of cultural institutions. They also include the reconfiguration of the boundaries between public and private spheres, and between affective and political engagement. In these cases, special attention is often given to how such transfigurations can lead to a stronger focus on sharing, caring and collaboration, as well as to the creation of new alliances of solidarity that cut across sedimented markers of difference. The authors in this special issue engage with various topics and approach them from different theoretical and analytical perspectives. However, their discussions of these matters of concern are united by a common attempt to reflect critically on how art and curating partake in the power dynamics and socio-cultural transformations being played out in today’s transnationally interconnected societies.

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