



react/review

a responsive journal for art & architecture

Introduction: Representation, Materiality, & the Environment

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react/review is, as the reader may suspect from the title, a journal shaped by reactions. To *react* is to act in response, to reflect and return to a first actor. The term is active and encompasses the spirit of lively discourse and critical engagement. Perhaps it carries a connotation of hastiness, but we contend that this temporal association locates us firmly in the present. We envision this journal as a reaction to research trends and current global events, but we employ the term to also signal the discursive element of this project.

In other words, *react/review* is a responsive journal. Our authors engage not only with pressing topics in their fields, but also with questions and arguments posed by each other throughout the journal's content. Feature articles are followed by one or two responses that consider the authors' arguments' corollaries and implications, in turn propelling the discussion in new directions. While many journals unite their authors around a shared theme, our responsive format aims to cultivate a spirit of dialogue and exchange that naturally unfolds at in-person symposiums. While not a substitute for face-to-face conversations in their entirety, we assert that this format serves particularly useful in our current historical moment of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic—a moment when our worlds have become myopic, and we are no longer gathering with our colleagues.

The conception of the journal was itself a reaction to the incongruous circumstances in which the world found itself over the past year. The graduate students

of the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara host an annual interdisciplinary symposium inviting speakers from around the continent to share their work. The 45th iteration of this conference, scheduled for April 24, 2020, experienced the same fate as many events scheduled around the same period. By late March 2020, California was gripped by crippling uncertainty and sudden shutdowns symptomatic of the early days of the accelerating COVID-19 pandemic. In response, we cancelled the symposium and decided against hosting it virtually, as we were already weary of—to use a now-tired cliché—Zoom fatigue. Rather than discard a year of planning on the part of the co-organizers and research on the part of our presenters, we decided to channel our collective efforts into a new format. Thus, *react/review* was born.

What follows is a collection of original short-form articles and responses from graduate students and emerging scholars in art history, architectural history, visual studies, and related disciplines. The volume is divided into three sections: features, spotlights, and reviews. Feature articles engage with the volume’s central theme, and emerge from papers that would have been presented at the 45th symposium. Following each work are brief, critical responses written by our editorial team that interrogate the feature’s broader questions and its impact for other fields. In our spotlight section, scholars currently engaged in research highlight new findings, speculate on pressing questions, or address methodological issues encountered in their fieldwork. These articles are more open-ended by design, and perhaps offer more reflection and hypotheses than definitive conclusions. Reviews examine both recent books and exhibitions touching on the theme of the current volume.

Our inaugural volume adopts the symposium’s theme: “Representation, Materiality, & the Environment.” This topic considers the way environments, landscapes, and the natural world have been represented by artists and architects as a means to ritualistic, scientific, political, leisure, or spiritual ends. We are particularly interested in how the issue of representation is informed by the material turn in the field over the past decade or so amidst the emergence of ecocritical and environmental thinking in humanities discourses. We also wanted to draw attention to the way this generation of emerging scholars grapples with these issues vis-à-vis the global impact of climate change, which up until the current circumstance had felt like the most pressing issue of our lifetime.

This volume’s feature articles, ordered to guide the reader from the soil to space, contextualize histories of materiality within a broader discourse concerning the relationship between the natural environment, art, architecture, and design. In her article “Revolution, Renewable: Political Ecologies of the Subsoil in Rivera’s Song of the Earth,” Grace Kuipers examines the representation of subterranean minerals in Diego Rivera’s chapel mural *The Song of the Earth and Those who Till and Liberate It*. She

centers the materiality of the subsoil, resistance, and practices of extraction—both in terms of precious minerals and human labor in order to interrogate ideas of capitalism, labor relations, and socio-political ecosystems present in early twentieth-century Mexico. While Kuipers focuses on the way Rivera mobilizes the representation of subsoil as a locus for political revolution, Tobah Aukland-Peck’s article “*You Can Be Sure of Shell: Oil, Empire, and Landscape in Interwar Britain*” examines how the imperialist practices of extraction present and critiqued in Rivera’s work were obfuscated in advertisements for the oil company Royal Dutch Shell. Aukland-Peck argues that a 1930s Shell advertising series borrowed from existing artistic landscape traditions to mobilize consumers’ nostalgia for British imperialism and exceptionalism towards the company’s domestic extractions. In particular, the paper emphasizes the way these ads romanticized the company’s history of domestic exploration, masking how these landscapes served as sites for extraction, labor exploitation, and commodification of fossil fuels, not only in Britain but across its empire. Environmental exploration is also the subject of Katarzyna Balug in her article “*Outside of Architecture: Between Mediating and Navigating the Air.*” Balug examines inflatable architecture by way of the history of pneumatic sciences from the Enlightenment to the 1960s Space Race. She demonstrates the way the scientific exploration of air led to innovations in architectonic design, as seen in the work of English artist Graham Stevens, whose inflatable creations negotiate the embodied experience of occupant and environment, skin and breath, together and separateness.

While feature articles in this volume of *react/review* concentrate on the triangulation of environment, representation, and materiality, another theme emerges in spotlight articles and reviews. Some of our authors reflect on their experience with the COVID-19 pandemic impacting their ability to conduct field and archival research. However, we as the editors of this volume do not feel like the thematic shift towards the inclusion of the ongoing crisis is incompatible with the original theme. While scientific research on the relationship between COVID-19 and climate change is still in an embryonic stage and not directly correlated, studies have long suggested that changing environmental conditions impact public health.¹ Those in California and the Pacific Northwest are all too familiar with this, with wildfires no longer confined to a single season, now raging all year-long and becoming increasingly endemic to life on the west

¹ For a succinct discussion of the relationship between environmental conditions and public health, see Rebecca Hersher, “*We Don’t Have to Live This Way’: Doctors Call for Climate Action,*” *NPR.org* (December 2, 2020) <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/12/02/940790818/we-dont-have-to-live-this-way-doctors-call-for-climate-action>. For recent studies, see the bibliography in the following literature review: S.M. Zang, et al. “*The intersection of climate change with the era of COVID-19.*” *Public Health Nursing* 38, no. 2 (2021): 1– 15, doi: [10.1111/phn.12866](https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.12866)

coast.² Climate scientists predicted that the rise in global temperatures will likely see the emergence and facile transmission of novel infectious diseases.³ In light of the current public health crisis, scientists are now imagining a future in which pandemics are increasingly common due to habitat disruption and air pollution, amongst other factors; the former of which leads to humans and animals cohabiting in closer quarters and subsequently facilitating the transmission of infectious diseases between species, and the latter correlating to high rates of respiratory infection.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of what is at stake in conversations surrounding climate change. On these grounds, we contend that ecologically-minded humanities scholarship is as relevant as ever.

Further, the pandemic fundamentally transformed our relationship with the material world. In its early days, confusion over how long SARS-CoV-2 survived on counters or doorknobs impaired our relationship to touch. It seemed that any surface, no matter how familiar or benign, could be contaminated, if not altogether threatening. The handles of shopping carts, disposable coffee cups, ATM keypads, cardboard packages, and any otherwise unassuming object was seen as harboring deadly virus particles. A seemingly innocuous contact between an infected surface and our eyes or mouth by way of touch could land anyone in the hospital. Our routine contact with the physical world became perilous, and the once esoteric term “fomite” (*noun*, meaning any inanimate object able to transmit infectious matter) entered common vocabulary as we sought to articulate the emerging pandemic episteme. In the early days of the outbreak, we eschewed reusable grocery bags for plastic and reached for disposable masks and gloves. Although scientists are now confident that transmission by direct contact with contaminated surfaces is relatively low, contamination hesitancy persists,

² Susanne Rust and Tony Barboza, “How climate change is fueling record-breaking California wildfires, heat and smog,” *LATimes.com* (September 13, 2020) <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-09-13/climate-change-wildfires-california-west-coast>. Samantha Schmidt, “‘It burns your chest’: Oregon residents struggle to live with relentless smoke,” *WashingtonPost.com* (September 14, 2020) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/09/14/it-burns-your-chest-oregon-residents-struggle-live-with-relentless-smoke/>. Molly Peterson, “Paradise Residents Still Can’t Drink the Water,” *KQED.org* (September 30, 2019) <https://www.kqed.org/science/1948232/paradise-residents-still-cant-drink-the-water>

³ Jonathan A. Patz, et al. “Global Climate Change and Emerging Infectious Diseases,” *JAMA* 275, no. 3 (1996): 217–223, doi:10.1001/jama.1996.03530270057032. Ella Jisun Kim. *Cities, Climate Change, and Public Health: Building Human Resilience to Climate Change at the Local Level*. Anthem Press, 2020.

⁴ X. Wu, et al. “Air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States: Strengths and limitations of an ecological regression analysis.” *Science advances* 6, no. 45 (2020), doi: 10.1126/sciadv.abd4049. Daniel P Croft, et al. “The Association between Respiratory Infection and Air Pollution in the Setting of Air Quality Policy and Economic Change,” *Annals of the American Thoracic Society* 16, no. 3 (2019): 321-330, doi:10.1513/AnnalsATS.201810-691OC.

and these behaviors are still widely being practiced at the time of this publication.⁵ However, after a year in lockdown, this embrace of disposable PPE and other items had led to a new environmental concern, namely a rise in littering and plastic pollution.⁶ In short, materiality has become fraught.

Informed by these experiences, the spotlight section features two short essays on how doctoral research has been affected over the past year due to COVID-19 related restrictions. Benjamin Jameson-Ellsmore reflects on the challenges of researching “hackerspaces” and “makerspaces”—community-based technology and art workshops usually found in improvised spaces. The notion of improvisation became a lens through which Jameson-Ellsmore reflected upon his own strategies for conducting research in unfamiliar urban environments that were increasingly impacted by the virus. The second spotlight piece by Matthew K. Limb offers insight into their art history dissertation research which notably shifted towards issues surrounding the environment, Native American voices and systems of knowledge, as well as networks of craft production throughout the mid twentieth-century American West.

In the wake of the ongoing public health crisis, we hope that this debut volume of *react/review* may serve as an artifact of academic production during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we also consider the scholarship in this journal to address critical questions about the relationship between environment, representation, and materiality that will have lasting relevance to future discourses in the ecocritical and environmental humanities.

⁵“Science Brief: SARS-CoV-2 and Surface (Fomite) Transmission for Indoor Community Environment” CDC.gov (Updated April 5, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/science-and-research/surface-transmission.html>

⁶ Aditi Sangal, “Discarded masks and gloves are becoming a health hazard as people dump them no streets,” *CNN.com* (April 21, 2020) <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/21/us/coronavirus-ppe-masks-gloves-environment-hazard-trnd/>