

Collective Reception: Essays in Honor of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

This special cluster gathers essays deriving from “Collective Reception: A Symposium in Honor of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh,” held at Harvard University on September 23, 2022, on the occasion of his retirement from teaching.

We titled the event and this group of texts “Collective Reception” with a nod to the persistence of Walter Benjamin’s concept of “simultaneous collective reception” in Buchloh’s work, which cuts across his reflections on the historical conditions of aesthetic perception. In convening multiple generations of Buchloh’s former doctoral students to present new scholarship, we hoped that the symposium would not only toast an inimitable scholar, teacher, and friend but also render simultaneous, if only provisionally, an art-historical collective shaped across the decades in Buchloh’s seminars. We publish the resulting essays with the conviction that, in spite of the breadth of subject matter addressed, all the writers here manifest a key tendency of what we might name the “Buchloh reception”: an abiding commitment to the artwork as both a site of critical negation and a vector for the intersubjective dynamics of form, spectatorial reception, and class conflict.

While blazing new paths in topics and methods, the present authors contend, explicitly or implicitly, with Buchloh’s account of the critical potential as well as the historical constraints of modern art. For one thing, they develop in distinct ways Buchloh’s particular mode of formal analysis, one well known to his students: a rigorous looking, as attuned to the microscopic detail as to the total structure of the artwork, encompassing the grapheme and the *Gestalt*, that serves as the ground for epistemo-critical judgment and the analysis of aesthetic historicity. It is also no accident that many of the papers here deal with questions of migration and displacement in art, theory, and life. In these essays, we see the artwork as a wager on the viability of its own brittle existence within and sometimes against the structures and strictures of exile, racialization, class formation, colonial violence, and reification.

During the discussion that closed last fall’s symposium, Buchloh reflected on what he called his “pedagogical impulse”: “I always thought that other than socialism, teaching is the next best thing.” Though he hedged by noting that he spoke “with tongue in cheek,” the statement captured his commitment to teaching

as a form of collaborative production set against the commodification of communication, the entrenchment of hierarchies, and the erasure of historical consciousness. The intensity of these commitments will be familiar to all those who have read him closely, but they also animate Buchloh's practice in the seminar room. Though the papers gathered here examine a range of historical periods and cultural formations, they all testify to the lasting impact of Buchloh's dialogical model of pedagogy and the larger dialectical impulse that drives it.

The editors of the cluster wish to offer their gratitude to Hal Foster, J. M. Gomez Rojas, Maria Gough, Ann Janik, Adam Lehner, David Roxburgh, and all the authors gathered here. And of course, we thank our teacher Benjamin Buchloh: His recalcitrance to being celebrated was overcome only by the promise that the focus would be on the work of his students. That alone is a testament to his generosity as a mentor.

We offer the following essays as homage to Buchloh's teaching career and his ongoing critical and historical practice.

Kevin Lotery, Boston
Trevor Stark, Calgary
Hyewon Yoon, Seoul