T. J. Demos makes a compelling contribution with this book to the discussion within contemporary visual studies that seeks to re-think the political significance of art for the struggles of our post-2001 present. These pages are best read as an anti-scepticism manual of contemporary art. Against swift dismissals of art practices and institutions as unavoidably complicit with the neoliberal system, Demos insists throughout his analysis on treating art as a complex site of negotiation between aesthetics and politics. Proceeding case by case, he assembles an impressive array of artistic evidence not simply to examine but rather to affirm the capacity of the arts to ‘inflect meanings’, ‘contest formulations’, ‘shift perspectives’ and ‘invite collaborative and creative interpretation’ (32, 209). The exploration of critical modes of documentary representation delineates a common field for the artworks gathered here from film, photography, video and other media. Furthermore, in this affirmative intervention that is *The Migrant Image*, each case operates as a critical representational player within the arena of globalisation.

Demos appears in his affirmative stance in cautious agreement with Jacques Rancière’s position regarding the relation between art and politics (see Rancière 2004). Rancière has provocatively ‘re-opened an old discussion’ by re-conceptualising art as a political zone at a distance from politics (91). But if anything, Demos’ is a generative ranciérism. He understands that the conjunction between art and politics is dependent upon a singular act of interpretation, and not upon a pre-established definition of political art. Demos argues à la Rancière - and this explains the methodology at work here - that

> it is contingent upon viewers and readers to stake a claim and to argue the validity of a particular formulation of the politics of aesthetics, to invest this otherwise potentially empty formulation with meaning in relation to the singular expressions of specific artworks (92).

The central proposition of this book maintains that a series of artistic practices and discourses have generated an ‘aesthetics of migration’ capable of ‘reimagining a form of citizenship that acknowledges the fundamental condition of migration within itself’ (4, 20). These practices and discourses operate, in different ways, a displacement of the meaning of ‘migrant’: from being a signifier of victimhood, illegality, bare life and workforce adaptability to defining a restless ‘site of resistance, autonomy and politicisation’ (246). Demos re-conceptualises migration with the images he investigates as a ‘form of life that is politically and aesthetically committed to a certain mobility’ (3). It is significant that Demos does not engage here in-depth with postcolonial debates on migration (as he does in his other recent book *Return to the Postcolony*). This re-conceptualisation of migration is not a mere celebration of mobility: what matters is to develop a theoretical tool to measure up the critical
capacities of art, what matters is to highlight how the migrant image addresses
globalisation as a crisis globalisation, that is, as ‘a fractured geography of borders and
archipelagos that divides the uninterrupted transmissions of goods and capital from
the controlled movements of people’ (xv). Detailed and sensitive readings of works
from artists such as Ursula Biemann, Hito Steyerl or Emily Jacir, among many others,
emphasise the varied capacities of art to chart the social, economical, affective
complexities of migration and to operate the transformation of ‘a stigma into enabling
force’, as Biemann puts it (206).

Demos convincingly demonstrates how this reframing of migration occurs in the
cases he examines through a reframing of audiovisual protocols of representation. The
migrant image is one that continuously re-invents how it connects with the social
realities of the global crisis. Migrant images, as conceived by Demos, share a
common certainty: a firm uncertainty with regards to the truth claims of the
documentary tradition. In the context of global crisis and against postmodern
relativism, Demos insists, ‘truth must be reinvented on the grounds of uncertainty’
(xxii). Each artistic strategy he explores embraces the uncertainties of representation
with regards to social events as qualities with critical potential: the opacity of the
image (the Otolith Group, Steve McQueen), the withdrawal of visibility (Ahlam
Shibli, whose work is analysed in an excellent chapter), the construction of fictional
truths (in various examples of contemporary Lebanese art), the indeterminacy
between art and activism (Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri), and so on. For Demos
what separates all these contemporary documentary practices from what he
understands as traditional strategies and logics is this awareness and creative
engagement with the incapacities and inadequacies of the image.

Demos tends to oppose conventional and inventive documentary forms in a somewhat
rudimentary manner. In his argument documentary representation is, in accord with
the tradition of critique, eminently suspicious since it ‘often serves the interests of the
state’ by operating ‘within ever new and expanding surveillance systems (…) as
judicial and forensic evidence, where truth and objectivity live on through their
continued institutional and legal validation’ (99). Forms that do not transform the
state of perception and are therefore complicit with the dominant audiovisual regime
have been habitually validated by documentarians with political ambitions seeking to
expose the truth against the official images of this very regime. The opposition
between conventional engagements with the real and radical innovations serves
Demos to emphasise the formal and political significance of the discussed artworks.
But the construction of the category ‘traditional documentary’ is rather oblivious with
regards to the complexities inherent to the practice and theory of the documentary
since its inception. The crude refusal to engage with such history in favour of what
appear as exceptional contemporary modes harms the critical precision of the analysis
and explains a certain sense of repetition that affects the reader when encountering in
different circumstances the same opposition between documentary tradition and
innovation painted in similar colours. Nevertheless, the many qualities of this book
energise our desire to know our neoliberal enemy better, meticulously question our
compilictions with it and to imagine transformative encounters with the images and
sounds of the world.
References