Review of
NAVIGATING THE PLANETARY
(Hildengund Amanshauser and Kimberly Bradley eds.)

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Advancing a diverse set of interventions across geography, literature, and visual art, *Navigating the Planetary: A guide to the Planetary Art World—Its Past, Present, and Potentials* (Hildegund Amanshauser and Kimberly Bradley (eds.), Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2021) offers an innovative repository of essays, interviews, and case studies in the emerging field of “planetary art.” Naturally, one of the volume’s most striking features lies in its ambitious approach to how we might understand “planetary art” in the first place. Throughout the collection, scholars and artists develop notions of this nascent field that implicate, challenge, or describe domains as diverse as teaching, environmental politics, performance art, and museum management. That the planetary is now becoming such a heterogeneously deployed term seems to speak to the rapidity with which it is developing into its own field of discourse and inquiry. As some contributors indicate, we could likely attribute much of this growing interest in planetarity to the increasing urgency of our ongoing climate crisis, a condition that naturally advances a shared set of economic and cultural challenges across all of planet Earth. At the same time, *Navigating the Planetary* also reminds us that the burdens, harms, and vulnerabilities posed by these challenges are not equally distributed to the world’s developed and developing countries. Much recent work on planetary art, as Hildegund Amanshauser explains in her introduction to the collection, thus remain motivated by a desire to rupture historically dominant modes of colonialism, especially by interrogating “East/West and Global North/South binaries” (5). By the
time we conclude Navigating the Planetary with Marina Fokidis’ thoughtful exploration of Western notions of time and space, it becomes clear that planetary perspectives offer an immense potential to disrupt historical divisions of colonial power and supremacy.

Though the book’s diverse accounts of planetarity gesture towards an expansive field of critical potentials and energizing discussion, this capaciousness also carries the drawback of complicating the possibility of synthesized summary. Even as the comprehensive depth and breadth of the perspectives that fill Navigating the Planetary ensure that any attempt at abbreviation will inevitably omit vital details, I will nonetheless consider it my primary task here to index at least some of the ways that the book encourages us to re-think the stakes and limits that emerge within planetary-scale perspectives.

To this end, we can begin with the observation that Navigating the Planetary centers the idea that planetary thinking invokes a sense of geological interconnection. This interconnection, the collection suggests, not only operates across human communities but also insists on a crucial proximity between human and non-human forces.

Observing that “No point on a sphere is more central than any other point,” Shuddhabrata Sengupta concludes that “Being planetary thus means giving up the illusion that any place is more ‘central’ than any other place” (18). This sense of geometric egalitarianism and mutual imbrication even manifests, for Sengupta, in the very geological composition of planet Earth: “The ground beneath our feet is fluid; the earth is a labyrinth of connected and resonant fault lines” (23). Developing this position, Sengupta notes that even earthquakes remind us that on a planetary scale, “Nothing stands still.” As an “animate planet,” Earth’s seismic activity intrinsically gestures to a tectonic foundation of viscous, churning, “mobile magma.” This
“geological life” destabilizes notions of fixed centrality, instead gesturing to a dynamic, ever-shifting network of subterranean motion.

Panning from below the Earth’s crust to the life that extends over its surface, Kimberly Bradley suggests in an interview with the photographer Sammy Baloji that “Perhaps the planetary is mostly about expressing the knowledges of many localities, and if those knowledges are perceived, validated, and connected” (254). In this sense, planetary art asks us to reflect on our geological situated-ness as human viewers. In the opening paragraphs of the book, Hildegund Amanshauser similarly asks “How have artists, curators, and institutions addressed transcultural issues, and how could they in the future?” Bradley’s comments seem to raise a corollary question: how might we construct a view of planet Earth that allows us to emphasize the interdependent localities that mutually extend across its surface?

To answer this question, we might turn back to Sengupta, whose essay urges us to understand planet Earth “as a fluid wandering star—moving through and in time” (and here it might be helpful to recall that the word planet, of course, derives from the Greek planētē: “wanderer”). This description invokes an implicit sense in which zooming out from planet Earth re-orient our scale of the “local”: the further we travel into outer space, the more the relative distance between Earth’s towns, cities, and countries seems to diminish. Eventually, this distance virtually collapses. We are left with a single, undifferentiated entity—a “pale blue dot” among other twinkling, “wandering star[s]” in the void of outer space. No less than subterranean imaginations of “mobile magma,” this sense of interplanetary scale similarly offers a unique way to reflect on the non-human, which manifests, after all, not just in geological strata but also in the infinite time and space of the cosmos—the field of an expansive gravitational ballet that forms a radical challenge to the colonial geometry of an imperial “center.”
Along these lines, another prominent thread in *Navigating the Planetary* concerns the extent to which we might challenge the legacy of colonial domination that has historically accompanied planetary-scale thinking. We can begin to trace this idea in Stephanie Bailey’s essay, “For and Against: Or, How to Dismantle Maps.” Observing that famous “whole-Earth” images like NASA’s *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* were taken during the Space Race and thus functioned as expressions of military supremacy, Bailey argues that the historical context of these images remains intrinsically marked by a “tech-driven geopolitical conflict for world supremacy” (39). While Sengupta views planetarity as a perspective that displaces colonial centers, Bailey argues that its historical examples tend to foster precisely the opposite mentality: the whole-Earth imagery of the Apollo-era, for Bailey, “problematises any conception of the planetary as a departure from—or subversion of—the conceptual framework of globalization as a technological project of centralized development” (39). Though *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* played integral roles within the nascent environmental movement of the late 60’s and early 70’s, Bailey argues these images now increasingly signify “technologies of power” that demonstrated techniques of military supremacy and planetary control (40). Drawing from Benjamin Lazier, Bailey argues for this reason that when we see the Earth from space, we’re looking not at the “planet” but at what Gayatri Spivak refers to as the “Globe”—a term Spivak uses to emphasize a colonial “imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” across Earth’s surface.

Similarly following Spivak’s globe-planet distinction, Tania Bruguera asserts in an interview with Amanshauser that the word “planetary” (as opposed to “global”) “makes you think in ecological terms and reminds us that the planet has been through many periods and this is just one of them” (225). Against the Cold War backdrop that
produced so many of our most iconic images and representations of planet Earth, Bruguera’s reflection offers an important reminder that it remains possible to rewrite contemporary imaginations of planetary thinking. Even while projects of military surveillance and exhaustive resource extraction continue to register, index, and parcel out seemingly all of Earth’s surface to projects of colonial supremacy and economic speculation, there remains something in our sense of “planetary” consciousness that pulls back from the global. That is, the persistence of the Earth-as-planet (rather than the Earth-as-globe) continues to invoke an indelible residue of ecological care and environmental responsibility.

Yet another consistent theme emerges in the idea that planetarity presents an opportunity to entirely rethink existing notions of time and space. In conversation with Amanshauser, Mohammed Salemy explains the inner workings of The New Centre, an online community that offers classes and workshops on contemporary philosophy, especially speculative realism (the Centre features Reza Negarestani as one of its instructors). Salamy explains that he considers the Centre a “planetary” entity in the sense that it doesn’t make use of any physical classrooms and thus cannot be pinned to any specific location—though we might observe, incidentally, that Spivak would likely consider this more of a “global” arrangement than a planetary one (306). In any case, Salamy explains that the task of coordinating schedules across different continents and time zones had inspired the Centre’s organizers to consider “writing a manifesto demanding a universal time measurement system which would run against the natural temporality of the sun, moon, and earth” (306). In recent months, of course, the onset of Covid-19 seems to have imparted a renewed sense of prescience into the New Centre’s project of locating the online classroom as a site for reimagining our experience of digital and planetary temporalities.
In a similar gesture, Marina Fokidis argues in *Navigating the Planetary*’s closing essay that planetary perspectives can offer a powerful way to move beyond hegemonic models of clock time. Interestingly, though Fokidis is herself an instructor at the New Centre, her interest in redefining planetary temporality seems to directly collide with Salemy’s proposal for a system that would displace the cosmic “temporality of the sun, moon, and earth.” In contrast to Salemy, Fokidis emphasizes a need to return to precisely these celestial bodies: “If we could all understand … that changes on Earth are the result of passing time, as marked solstices and equinoxes, and learn to live in harmony with cosmic events, today’s planetary concerns would have been solved long ago” (358). The planetary thus encounters its interplanetary margins: as long as we understand planet Earth as one of many cosmic participants engaged in an infinitely complex network of gravitational and orbital mechanics, our ability to think in planetary terms does not stop when the Earth’s horizons give way to outer space. Following the logic of Fokidis’ essay, one might say that it is only at the edges of outer space that the task of *Navigating the Planetary* can truly begin to emerge.