



CMS Research Conference 2025

Migration, Mobilities, and Changing Political Landscapes

Teaching Migration and Mobility through Contemporary Art

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Global contemporary artists frequently focus their work on experiences of migration, mobilities, and changing political landscapes. This makes both the public reception and the scholarly analysis of visual arts and architecture a valuable contributor to vital discussions of these themes. Many global artists are from migrant and refugee backgrounds themselves, and produce artwork that shares the autobiographical elements of their political exile, gender identity, asylum status, or protest efforts in their homelands. The capacity for art to encompass the stories and experiences of migration, the challenges of shifting political boundaries, and the art and architectural ramifications of relocation are recognized by the UNHCR, UNRWA, not-for-profit organizations, and international exhibitions like the Venice Biennale. The discussion and parsing of visual art is also a useful classroom exercise that encourages students to read about and reflect upon geopolitical dynamics, neoliberal reckonings, colonization and conflict, and the shifting climate, all of which are primary drivers in the process of migration, as well as populist responses to migration issues.

I began instructing Art History 203: Global Contemporary Art for UBC Okanagan in 2023. Because new contemporary art emerges even as I am preparing lectures and assignments, I have since continued to research and develop materials for this course, but I selected the theme of migration based on the number of global contemporary artists who were explicitly covering the political elements of global mobilities or reflecting on heated reactions to migrant communities. During classroom discussions and projects, students connected to narratives ranging from diasporas, displacement, and borders, to refugee issues based on our exploration of artists, exhibitions, and artworks. In this paper, I will explain my pedagogical strategy and research process, and share examples of the guided discussions, lecture themes, and assignment parameters for teaching migration issues through contemporary global art.