John Berger has called our time the century of enforced travel, a century of banishment and disappearance. Certainly, an unsettling mosaic of displacements, of exclusion and profound polarizations, is the enduring legacy of our century.

In a relatively benign formulation a few decades ago, Lewis Mumford suggested that we understand and experience life as an oscillation between settlement and movement. In Transit redefines these poles as captivity and displacement and cautions against romanticizing the sense of balance suggested by Mumford’s metaphor. The subject of In Transit is both the involuntary movement by human beings through urban spaces, and the practices through which spaces are produced, shaped, and represented.

Displacement and the Redefinition of the Urban

Forbidden spaces, feared spaces, ignored spaces, redundant spaces contain the materials of our own ignorance in the same way as shared spaces, comfortable or challenging spaces, needed spaces, become the proving ground for defining who or what we are.1

In Transit begins with the notion that nothing is fixed. As the world has become increasingly interdependent, displacement has become a defining aspect of the urban experience. Traditionally, urban places have been conceptualized as a particular form of settlement. Therefore, any change occurring against that norm is understood as unsettling. Displacements are also typically understood in terms of a movement away from a place. However, all displacements are preceded by a prior movement to a place—voluntary or coerced. Amidst this flux, the urban emerges as a place of constant transition and movement. Gabriel Orozco’s Yield Structure, a plasticine ball inscribed with urban impressions, and Faster, Faster, Faster, by John Fekner and Don Leicht, are compelling representations of both the processes and consequences of this constant movement.

Space, as both concept and resource, is primary in contests of power in human relations. In line with our society’s tendency to turn reality into consumer events2, the experience of displacement is regularly banalized into a spectacle that invites uncritical and sensationalist public reactions through prefabricated sentiments. For example, the domestication of “the homeless” during the 80’s—whether through the attempts of the authorities to round them up, or through the innumerable artistic forays into the subject of homelessness that have turned homelessness into performance—plainly testifies to this insatiable appetite for simplification and evasion. Kawamura’s Field Work, New York, explores and exposes the prefabricated reality of the urban environment—the environment of borderline spaces and marginalized people—by bringing together discarded materials in temporary assemblages.

The complexity of the urban experience is commonly reduced to simplistic oppositions between the “deserving” and the “undeserving poor,” the “legitimate” and the “illegitimate,” the “placed” and the “displaced.” Such contrasts suggest that our ideas about space are somehow natural. They are not. Spatial categories are everywhere defined and imposed through mechanisms of domination, always in the interest of power.

In Transit identifies the urban experience through a multiplicity of displacements. The symbolic and institutional makeup of the post-industrial city is an ever-shifting, permeable, and often confusing spectacle. Within urban spaces, people and objects travel along trajectories that are determined by the complex interaction of domination, resistance, submission, and degradation. The contemporary urban environment is a spectacle that Marcus Aurelius would recognize:

“The idle pursuit of grandeur, staged dramas, flocks of sheep, herds, spear-throwing, a bone cast to stray dogs, bread-crumbs to fishponds, laboring and burden-carrying of ants, running about of frightened little mice, puppets pulled by strings. It is your duty then in the midst of such things to show a generous disposition and not be condescending to understand, however, that every man is worth just so much as the things are worth about which he busies himself.”

Through the exploration and unveiling of urban displacements, In Transit seeks to illustrate the politics of space that underlie this social traffic. As opposed to designating and denouncing the causes of urban distress, the project considers the diversity of aesthetic, political, social, and emotional re-interpretations of urban spaces as “contested territories.”

The Experience and Perception of Displacement

In Transit explores displacement through a variety of lenses. The exhibition defines experience in terms of the everyday material practices that govern the appropriation and use of urban spaces. How human beings gain access to urban spaces, how those spaces are occupied, modified, and used, and the circumstances determining which spaces are vacated and recycled for future use—are examples of everyday practices that In Transit tries to expose through the metaphor of displacement.

Urban spaces are constantly reshaped through cycles of occupation, commodification, abandonment, and recycling that are dictated by the “needs” of the highly flexible and elusive capitalist accumulation process. Camilo Jose Vergara’s photographic essay on the emergence of the “New American Ghetto” is an exhaustive documentation of the degrading effects of these cycles on the physical and social environment in major U.S. cities over the past two decades. Through the metaphor and reality of the epidemic, Ernest Drucker and William Bosworth, as well as Martha Rosler, map the cycles of devastation and decay that infect both people and the built environment.

Vergara’s work serves as the conceptual and visual link between projects that question and challenge standard categories of experience such as “home,” “the street,” “public and private spheres,” and “empty vs. vacant spaces.” Even the presumed permanence associated with the functional design of urban architecture and the materials employed in its construction are brought into question.

The tension generated by the imposition of either the private or public will on the uses of space is amplified by the contrasts between the Success Gardens project, the Casitas project, and the work of Larry Rogers. All these projects are about efforts to reclaim and control urban territories, territories (and their inhabitants) that have been rendered redundant by the mechanisms of urban capitalism.

Devastation due to abandonment gives rise to many different potential users of a barren urban landscape. Street artist Larry Rogers fights with drug traffickers and real estate developers for control of
previously inhabited spaces. The community sees its artwork as a kind of monument; a memorial dedicated to their family members and friends who are casualties of the drug trade.

The project by John Jeffries, one of the three In Transit organizers, cautions against naïve and romantic notions of the streets as public spaces. In virtually any urban setting, streets are “sacred” and revered spaces that are always available to people for sanctioned and spontaneous celebration, demonstration, and protest. However, which people occupy them and under what circumstances cannot be ignored.

Margaret Morton’s The Tunnel Project presents a vivid consideration of the multiple and disparate uses of an architecturally given space. The photographs also dictate that they be interpreted through a redefinition of “home.” For In Transit, the more revealing tensions highlighted by Morton are those circumstances under which someone’s home can also be used as a tunnel, not the converse.

Lois Nespitt’s project, Atlas and Trespassing, done in collaboration with Aki Fujiyoshi, Glen Ligon, Paul Ramirez-Jiorus, Roger Denson, and Simon Watson, address the boundaries and barriers constructed to differentiate between the public and private spheres. Her projects are informed by active and passive practices of inclusion/exclusion across contemporary urban spaces.

The title of Bullet Space’s lead-bound poster book, Your House Is Mine, speaks directly to the awkwardness associated with the disruptive influences of urban displacements. By dispensing with the niceties that normally serve to quell the rage that goes with displacement and exclusion, Your House Is Mine unambiguously asserts that the city is not a community of accommodation but an arena of confrontation.

**Imagined Spaces and Identities**

The sense of belonging, the knowledge that we are members of a community, not strangers, is a conscious experience that involves more than the security of physical location. Imagination, memory, myths, and personal and collective histories are the shifting ground on which we attempt to define who we are.

Mildred Howard’s Stories from Ganey Creek employs memory as a primary resource in her tracking of an African-American family’s displacement within the United States. The city/country nexus is alluded via carefully selected fragments that represent materials members of her family used to rebuild their lives. Lorna Simpson and Ramona Naddaf’s Home Deceptions, an installation of a segment of a “home,” is informed by the myths and memories of people in transition. Their work speaks to the formation of immigrant female identity through the idea of past, present, and imagined future homes. Similarly, Refresh, a project by the Korean-American artist Y. David Chung in collaboration with Matt Dibble, is a visual analysis of how the artist reconciles his preconceived viewpoint with the new place he has entered.

Home Urbaine, by Maria Thereza Alves, refers to the seemingly voluntary movement from the country to the city. Her work calls into question the often unexamined geographic distinction between city and country: What makes the city or the country “a place”? The photographs and objects from Alves’s village in Brazil reinforce the significance of experience and its interpretation as we derive meaning from and give meaning to places. From the vantage point of her own experience, this project strongly suggests that for some, “home” is a place and “urban” is a hoped-for state of mind.

Santu Mofokeng’s Lampposts and Krysztof Wodiczko’s Alien Staff for the viewer to take seriously the social and political feedback mechanisms that produce, and are produced by, formations of racial, ethnic, and national identities. These two projects, considered alongside others such as Lorna Simpson and Ramona Naddaf’s Home Deceptions, represents the exhibition’s attempt to amplify the dialogue between photography and other more metaphorical works. In fact, In Transit does not draw a sharp distinction between the descriptive and the metaphorical. As a case in point, Dorothy Imagire’s Alien Nation ties identity to both cultural displacement and the colonial legacy of domination through the science of classification.

The politics of space with which In Transit is concerned is the elusive nature of membership and the mechanisms that define how human communities are constituted through the distribution of resources and status. The tendency to fortify and defend urban space against real and imagined predators is an overpowering sentiment, fueled by an interest in preserving privilege and power. In these times of our global culture, it is prejudice and stigma, not geographic distance, which separate us from one another. In Transit is a documentation of this grim reality.

Kostas Gounis
John Jeffries
France Morin

3. Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, (vol. 3).
Works in the Exhibition

Maria-Theeresa Alves  
*Home Urbaime*, 1992  
28 photographs, 28 assorted objects  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist  

Ballet Space (collaborative team)  
*Your House Is Mine*, 1990  
Lead-bound book, pedestal, posters  
21 inches × 24 inches  
Courtesy of the artists  

Andrew Casucci in collaboration with Bessie Bass,  
Erik Freeman, John Pitts, and Lee Quinones  
*Collaborative Andiotape*, 1992  
Audio tape  
Courtesy of the artists  

Martha Cooper  
*Las Casitas*, 1991  
Cibachrome color photograph  
16 inches × 20 inches  
Courtesy of the artist  

Y. David Chung in collaboration with Matt Dibble  
*Refresh*, 1992  
Videotape  
5 to 7 minutes  
Courtesy of the artists  

Ernest Drucker in collaboration with  
William Bosworth  
*Geography As Destiny*  
10–15 color maps  
Dimensions variable  

John Fekner and Don Leicht  
*Faster, Faster, Faster*, 1992  
Hand-painted tiles installed on gallery floor; wall mural  
150 square feet (tiles); 10 feet × 12 feet (mural)  
Courtesy of the artists  

Pierre Roseau,  
*Fear, Fear, Fear*, 1992  
Black and yellow paint on 6 gallery columns  
18 inches × 24 inches  
Courtesy of the artists  

Mildred Howard  
*Stories from Caseys Creek*, 1991–1992  
6 mixed media works  

Dimensions variable  

Charles Moore  
*Birmingham Riots*, May 1963  

2 black and white photographs  
8 inches × 10 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and Black Star, New York  

UPI/Bettman Newsphotos  
*Springtime in Birmingham*, 1963  
Black and white photograph  
8 inches × 10 inches  
Courtesy of UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos, New York  

Weegee (Arthur Fellig)  
*Summer, Lower East Side*, 1937  
Black and white photographs  
8 inches × 10 inches  
Courtesy of The Center for Creative Photography, Tucson  

Tadashi Kawamata  
*Field Work*, New York, 1992  
4 page photographic insert, newspaper stand  
11 inches × 16 inches  
Courtesy of the artist  

Hung Liu  
*Women Off-Color*, 1992  
Oil and lacquer on wood  
16 inches × 24 inches each panel, installation size 10 feet × 10 feet  
Courtesy of the artist and Rena Branstein Gallery, San Francisco; Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York  

Marlene McCarty / Laura Cottingham  
*Objections (including Laurie Anderson's Object, Object, Objectivity)*, 1973–1993  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artists and Metro Pictures, New York  

Santu Mofokeng  
11 black and white photographs, text  
11 inches × 14 inches each  
Courtesy of the artist  

Soreto, 1987  
Black and white photograph
Margaret
Lois Nesbitt
Glenn Ligon,
Lois Nesbitt
Program-Success Garden
Gabriel Orozco
Black
Black
Black
Mogopd, 1988
Black
Black and
Soueto, 1988
Black and white photograph
Blaembof, 1988
Black and white photograph
Soueto, 1987
Black and white photograph
Soueto, 1987
Black and white photograph
Soueto, 1987
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Black and white photograph
The New Museum

The curator would like to thank Amalia Mesa-Bains, Jimmie Durham, Exit Art, The Wassa Golden, Claudia Gould, Kim Hopper, Dana Myers Rinsley, Conrad Levinson, Kyong Park, Ann Philbin, Gayatri Spivak, Grace Staniford, Sekou Tapia, Bill Sivindier, Brian Weil, and interns Sem Pratt, Maria Christina Villasenor, and Mimi Young, without whom this project would not have been possible.

Group Visits

Group Visits are available for adult groups and school groups from grades 7 through 12. Gallery talks for visiting groups stimulate active inquiry about issues in contemporary art and culture through close examination of the Museum's exhibitions. Trained docents conduct talks appropriate to each visit group. For more information, please call Mayda Perez at (212) 219-1222.

Hours
Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday: 12-6 p.m.
Saturday: 12-8 p.m.
Monday and Tuesday: closed

Admission
$3.50 general, $2.50 artists, students, seniors, members and children under 12, free.

Programs at The New Museum are funded, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the National Endowment for the Arts, and by the generosity of corporate and individual members and donors.

Gallery Talks
Saturday, January 30, 2000 P.M.
Franco Morin, Senior Curator, The New Museum of Contemporary Art and co-curator of In Transit

Saturday, February 20, 2000 P.M.
Dr. John Jeffries, political economist and co-curator of In Transit

Saturday, April 3, 2000 P.M.
Kostas Gournis, anthropologist and co-curator in

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