Safety Orange

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Conclusion: Seeing Red

What Safety Orange truly warns of is our entrenchment in preserving the status quo even in the face of system failure—climate change, neoliberal attrition, systemic racism. Orange both warns of and habituates citizens to a culture of deep insecurity—a new abnormal. By suggesting that everything is under control, Safety Orange partakes of the liberal logic of preservation, now reinforced under neoliberalism, by shifting onto individuals the duty to protect themselves from potential danger. But most disturbingly, orange combines its insistent warning with a curious call not to act. Orange is the imperative to skirt, to circumvent, to keep moving. (There’s nothing to see here.) Its persistent presence in our visual and mediat-ic landscape trains us not to repair or replace the broken structure but simply to work around it. Safety Orange indefinitely defers the breaking point (the red of catastrophe) but also the tipping point (the red of revolution).

What can be done when the tools for communicating extreme crisis are emptied of meaning, made ineffective? As our closer ex-amination of Safety Orange has revealed, the urgent-yet-permanent call to action eventually recedes into the background. It overloads our senses and dulls our collective sense of panic over system failure, diminishing our feeling that something has to change. If red is the color of total disruption—of either catastrophe or revolution—Safety Orange does not anticipate red but rather perpetually defers
it. Its liminal and incremental nature forecloses the possibility of operating outside the terms of what is. And yet, in the very ubiquity of orange, we can glimpse a possibility. If we can restore the color’s original sense of warning, we might remediate the unjust distribution of care that underwrites contemporary U.S. neoliberal and racial economies. Safety Orange might show us how safety and protection are carved up, who they are given to, and why.