

## Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”\*

The category of “contemporary art” is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment. Such paradigms as “the neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism,” which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, “contemporary art” has become an institutional object in its own right: in the academic world there are professorships and programs, and in the museum world departments and institutions, all devoted to the subject, and most tend to treat it as apart not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well.

Is this floating-free real or imagined? A merely local perception? A simple effect of the end-of-grand-narratives? If it is real, how can we specify some of its principal causes, that is, beyond general reference to “the market” and “globalization”? Or is it indeed a direct outcome of a neoliberal economy, one that, moreover, is now in crisis? What are some of its salient consequences for artists, critics, curators, and historians—for their formation and their practice alike? Are there collateral effects in other fields of art history? Are there instructive analogies to be drawn from the situation in other arts and disciplines? Finally, are there benefits to this apparent lightness of being?

—Hal Foster for the Editors

\* This questionnaire was sent to approximately seventy critics and curators, based in the United States and Europe, who are identified with this field. Two notes: the questions, as formulated, were felt to be specific to these regions; and very few curators responded.

They have cut off the hot water in the building where I teach. The rumor is that we will soon lose our office phones, as the Women’s Studies department already has. In this underfunded public university, the global economic crisis could not be more local, immediate, and material. Given my current working conditions, I cannot help but think about the problem of “the contemporary” in relation to the urgencies of the troubled future.

These destabilizing times are recalibrating my sense of temporality—and it is temporality above all that ramifies across the admittedly paradoxical formation “contemporary art history.” We spend a lot of time debating about how to reconcile the presumed presentism of the contemporary with an attention to the past. But teaching “art now” does not mean simply mapping the current moment or grappling with history: it also involves forecasting about—and in some respects *producing*—the future. Professors transform into prognosticators as we teach the artists, artworks, and critical ideas that we anticipate will endure. We must predict, using our best guesses, what contemporary work we think will last for later histories. These speculations—limited, partial, and biased speculations—about what might continue to resonate into the future are more than crystal-ball gazing. (Is such a discursive activity related, if only because of shared vocabulary, to economic speculation and commodity futures?)

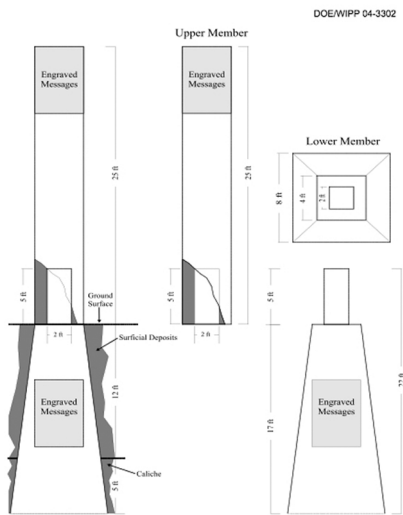


Figure 3. Large Surface Markers

*Design for stone structures to be erected at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, Carlsbad, New Mexico, from “Permanent Markers Implementation Plan” (U.S. Department of Energy, 2004).*

yet built—that will be used as a warning sign over a highly toxic radioactive waste dump near Carlsbad, New Mexico. The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) is the only place in the United States that stores spent transuranic waste. It is currently accepting shipments (barrels of plutonium-laced fuel cells and other deadly items) from across the country that are then buried deep under the Southwest

desert land. In twenty years, when the underground chamber is filled to capacity, the storage unit will be closed and sealed. Because this radioactivity remains so lethal for so long and any contact with it could prove fatal for many years to come, the Department of Energy has commissioned a marker that is meant to warn future generations from digging or drilling on this site for the next 10,000 years.

This drawing details the schematic design for the planned marker: it will consist of a series of monumental geometric granite towers along the perimeter of the dump area. Each will be inscribed with messages in seven languages about the poisonous waste underneath; they are meant to withstand any climate changes, as well as the likely evolution of the written word over the next ten centuries. Room has been left on the surface of each tower for future viewers to translate the warning into their own language and chisel it into the rock, with the anticipation that it will become a sort of Rosetta stone. Though it bears a resemblance to both ancient obelisks and minimalist forms, the committee that the government assembled to design this marker notably did not include art historians or practicing artists. The omission is striking: though the design team included anthropologists, linguists, and engineers, no one specifically trained to think about how *images* function across time was invited to participate in this project. Instead, contemporary art was lambasted in the preliminary planning report for being “trivial,” elitist, and unreadable to the everyman that the warning marker specifically set out to address.

The markers will be inscribed with the following message: DANGER. POISONOUS RADIOACTIVE WASTE BURIED HERE. DO NOT DIG OR DRILL HERE UNTIL 12,000 A.D. Flanking these words are two faces: on the right, an image from a textbook on human ethology showing the “universal” facial registration of disgust or nausea. And on the left, a schematic outline of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, which is here meant to signify a general, abstract sense of horror. Even though the marker designers reject art history, they are vitally dependent upon it, as in this citation of a famous painting made familiar by its many pop-cultural references. In the past one hundred years alone, Munch’s image has generated conflicting readings and undergone significant semantic transformations—who knows how it might read thousands of years from now? This is forecasting at its most prophetic, unmoored from art history’s methodological attention to the “period eye.”

In the WIPP marker project, the problem of endurance across history is made quite literal, yet it is impossible to predict if the design will work, if its broad address will be heeded and radioactive catastrophe avoided throughout this almost unthinkable vast time span. But to intentionally exclude art historians and artists seems a mistake, as artists invent new tools with which to mine the rich interface between past, present, and future. Against this exclusion, I think contemporary art at its best offers a vibrant sense of inclusion, fostering collaborations between art historians, scientists, policy makers, activists, and artists, as well as admitting all kinds of objects (canonical, mass-media, and

otherwise). More to the point, contemporary art history, because it is always in formation, necessarily admits its own instabilities, its own fissures and holes; it cannot presume singular meanings, etched in stone, as it were. It understands the limits and powers of art, how images and practices clarify social relationships as well as destabilize positions and scramble histories. Far from quasi-scientific assurances of the nuclear marker (or the betting mentality of the futures market), such speculations are rooted in theoretical understandings about the doubts and contingencies of meaning: that images, artifacts, and social relations do not smoothly translate between eras, or between places; that there is friction and slippage within interpretation; that time itself distorts, erodes, and recodes meanings.

The contradictions that attend the worry about contemporary art history (the fear about its ossification and the parallel re-investment in its coherence) can foster a welcome, heightened sense of self-awareness about how we teach and what we study—and more importantly, *why* we teach, *why* we research, *why* we continue to organize panels or write papers or curate exhibitions or answer questionnaires. If there is something uniquely pressured about “the contemporary” right now, this pressure also presents a chance to rethink our investments in contemporary art history as a space of radical uncertainty. How can we strategize about, and remain open to, new formations with an awareness that, as furloughs are implemented and layoffs continue, such uncertainty is double-edged?

What kinds of interventions, art, and information will persevere in the future beyond the rapid cycles of boom and bust? We admit we cannot know what might happen in the next twelve months, much less the next 10,000 years. That not-knowing could be a strength. It could produce an art history that revels in the warping of time by looking *past* the contemporary—that is, a method that still attends to its history, while also trying (even if failing) to see beyond the present. The model of forecasting could be both a problem and an opportunity for contemporary art history, for it permits and encourages unpredictability, and even disaster.

Until perhaps a decade ago, the field of contemporary art wasn't formally recognized within the discipline of art history. Work in this area was often dismissed as "mere" journalism or criticism, relative to what was seen as the more serious scholarship that took place around earlier historical periods. This situation has changed in recent years, but it remains the case that contemporary art history has a vexed relationship to the discipline as a whole. In fact, the very idea of contemporary art history would seem to be an oxymoron. How can something "contemporary" be treated with the gravity and scholarly detachment of a safely historical object? Instead of a gradual accretion of reasoned judgments over time, the dialogue around contemporary art is synchronic, contradictory, and lateral. The problem of the contemporary is rooted in a tension that emerged when art history was first formalized as a discipline. The generation of historians that helped establish the field in the mid-nineteenth century found itself confronted by a vast range of new and unfamiliar artifacts that were circulating throughout Europe as a result of colonial expansion into Africa, Asia, and the Americas, as well as early archaeological excavations in Italy and Greece. Historians and philosophers such as Johann Herder and, later, Karl Schnaase raised the question of how contemporary viewers could transcend the differences that existed between themselves and very different cultures whose works of art they admired—cultures whose shared meanings were inaccessible to them due to distances of time or space. As Schnaase wrote in 1834, "If artistic form depends upon religion, how can we Christians . . . accept antique heathen forms?"<sup>1</sup> How can we have a "conversation" with a culture if we can no longer understand, or sympathize with, its symbolic vocabulary or belief systems? And how can these mysterious and inexplicable objects be made semantically accessible to contemporary European viewers?

The discourse of art history emerges in part in response to this question. One of its founding premises was the concept of a quasi-transcendent formal intelligence, manifested in widely disparate works, and operating with relative independence from specific cultural or historical contexts. The autonomy of aesthetic form, evident in Wölfflin's famous analysis of the evolution of the Roman triumphal arch, was necessary to provide art history with an identity separate from that of conventional history. At the same time, it introduced a significant tension around questions of reception and context. In *Rethinking Art History* Donald Preziosi has described the relatively undeveloped status of reception as a category of art-historical analysis. "By and large," he argues, "the viewer has been seen . . . as a passive reader or consumer of images . . . . This logocentric paradigm is given a characteristic slant or trajectory so as to privilege the maker or artist as an essentially

1. Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 1.

active, originary force, in complementary contrast to the essentially passive consumer or reader of works. It involves no great leap of the imagination to see that the paradigm simultaneously serves as a validating apparatus to privilege the role or function of the historian or critic as a legitimate and unvested diviner of intentionality on behalf of lay beholders.”<sup>2</sup>

Given this context, I think there are two important distinctions to be made about the treatment of contemporary art by the discipline of art history. First, the artist is generally still alive to dispute or challenge the historian’s assessment, and can claim some countervailing authority. This is particularly relevant given the increasing frequency with which artists also function as critics and theorists in their own right. Second, the contemporary viewer is also available as a resource for the analysis of reception at a level of proximity and detail that is seldom accessible to historians of earlier periods. Both of these factors implicitly challenge the hermeneutic monopoly that the historian typically enjoys. As a result, contemporary art history poses something of a threat to traditional art historical discourse: the threat of unregulated and multiple claims of interpretive authority. Moreover, both of these factors tend to undermine the perception that the discipline of art history is defined by a capacity for critical detachment or a more objective, less interested, relationship to its object of study.

Reception is precisely something we can address as historians of the contemporary. Not in order to recover the “real” or originary meaning of a given work, but because there is a mode of experience that occurs at the site of reception that is significant and worthy of analysis. The relatively undeveloped status of reception theory in art history is particularly evident in research associated with contemporary art practice. This is due in part to the tendency in much recent scholarship to simply import generic reception models taken from the traditions of poststructuralist literary and critical theory into the analysis of contemporary visual art. The result has been the emergence of a quasi-canonical body of art theory centered on the notion of the artwork as a subversive text that seeks to destabilize or otherwise disrupt the viewer’s preconceptions. “Textual” practices lend themselves to an axiomatic form of criticism in which the work instantiates certain propositions about the viewer’s experience that necessarily remain untested (except through the surrogate consciousness of the critic). As with any theoretical system it can be deployed with greater or lesser levels of sophistication. In its more programmatic form, the complexities and contradictions of both theory and practice are elided and practice serves merely to illustrate or verify certain a priori theoretical insights.

This discourse is entirely appropriate for the analysis of art practices that operate within a textual register (the work of art as an event, object, or image fabricated by the artist beforehand and set in place before the viewer). Here the

2. Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 46.

artist's vision is enacted for, or against, the viewer through a form of unilateral modeling (the artist's mode of perception stands as the telos towards which the viewer aspires, or by which they are guided). The viewer's feedback, as such, is seldom a significant factor and even his or her presence before the work is understood only hypothetically. It is less effective, however, when applied to dialogical or participatory practices that mobilize very different forms of intersubjective affect, identification, and agency. Here the process of reception is generative in ways that are distinct from object-based practices. Rather than transmitting a preexisting content, expression takes place through an unfolding process among an ensemble of collaborative agents. The locus of creative production is displaced from the level of independent ideation on the part of the artist to an indeterminate, collectively authored exchange among multiple interlocutors. I believe that one of the most promising areas for new research in the field of contemporary art involves the development of more nuanced and detailed models of the processes of reception mobilized in such practices.

A few remarks about the problems of writing in the current moment. Several initiatives have emerged in the last decade that can be understood as attempts to think about what writing on contemporary art might look like. They include varieties of postcolonial theory; various projects related to what is again—after a gap of several decades—being called “world art history”; a series of conferences and books on the condition and future of art criticism; and several partly divergent streams of visual studies, visual culture, visual communications, iconology, and *Bildwissenschaft* that aim to account for the world’s art. It may be helpful to distinguish these four initiatives, and note their different potential in relation to what is understood as “the contemporary.”

1. Postcolonial and area studies have long been concerned with what has been taken to be the margins or excluded regions of world art production. Writers such as Arjun Appadurai, Rasheed Araeen, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Néstor García Canclini, Suman Gupta, Susan Buck-Morss, Harry Harootunian, Iftikhar Dadi, Saskia Sassen, Ming Tiampo, and Anthony D. King have theorized the contemporary moment in various ways, and with various geographic and political qualifications.<sup>1</sup> As postcolonial and area studies develop away from broad models of hybridity and marginality and toward formulations of the local and temporally specific, the concept of “the contemporary” has come to seem less helpful.<sup>2</sup>

2. “World art history” is an increasingly common expression for work that attempts to think about the entirety of art production using selected tools and interests from the discipline of art history. Its efforts vary widely, from atlases and other compendia<sup>3</sup> to David Summers’s conceptual revision of art history<sup>4</sup> to studies of the inheritance of *Kunstwissenschaft* in the twenty-first century<sup>5</sup> to more abstract investigations of the possibility and coherence of world art histories.<sup>6</sup> Yet a number of art historians, critics, and art theorists would question the very project of

1. Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim, eds., *Art and Globalization*, vol. 1 of *The Stone Theory Seminars* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2009, forthcoming) represents most of these, and includes a discussion on the state of postcolonial theory.

2. My sense is that theorists of “the contemporary” are rarer now than five or ten years ago; for a recent example see Terry Smith’s essay “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006), pp. 681–707 (also on *Documenta Magazines* online journal, <http://magazines.documenta.de>), which argues for a complex of three senses of contemporaneity, related as antinomies.

3. Notably John Onians’s *Atlas of World Art* (New York: Oxford, 2004), but also pertinent entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

4. David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003).

5. Richard Woodfield is currently assembling a large anthology of writings on the inheritance of *Kunstwissenschaft* under the working title *Art History and German Philosophy: A Systematic Legacy* (personal communication, April 2009).

6. Whitney Davis is at work on a book that engages the conceptual foundations of previous and possible “world art histories.” (Personal communication, April 2009.)



expanding, critiquing, or revising the practices, concepts, and institutions that go under the name “art history” so that they can cover the world.<sup>7</sup> From the perspectives of “world art history” and its critics, “the contemporary” would appear to be either exempted, because of its position outside or before art histories, or exemplary, because of its newfound universality.

3. It has been argued that art criticism is constitutionally in fundamental disarray: it often denies that it has a relevant history; it agrees to disagree about its purpose; and it routinely avoids confronting the absence of a plausible theory of critical judgment.<sup>8</sup> Predictably, that disarray has been proposed as a virtue, and generally art critics’ avoidance of deeper questions about criticism’s history, purpose, or methodological interests is itself not an object of concern. That insouciance leads to a second-order incoherence, in that art criticism acknowledges its unresolved issues to be fundamental but does not acknowledge why it is not necessary to pursue those problems.<sup>9</sup> My own sense is that most talk in art criticism has to do with the problems of the freedom of criticism in relation to market pressures and institutional expectations.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that without direct engagement with the problems of whether criticism has a continuous or relevant history, what purposes it might be said to have, and how it might understand its relation to judgment, an interrogation of the market and of institutions can only be an incomplete response to the current moment.

4. Some visual studies, visual culture, visual communications, iconology, and *Bildwissenschaft* also attempt to account for contemporary art. Those fields—or disciplines, or interdisciplinary initiatives (the confusion is constitutional in each)—become interested in the current moment either through a generalized

7. One of the recurring themes of the conversations in *Is Art History Global?*, vol. 3 of *The Art Seminar* (New York: Routledge, 2006), is the use of European philosophic and critical concepts such as “space,” “aesthetics,” or “place” in the analysis of worldwide art practices. My review of Summers’s *Real Spaces*, in *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (2004), pp. 373–80, explores the meaning of “world” in that book.

8. These two disavowals are amply documented in *The State of Art Criticism*, co-edited with Michael Newman, vol. 4 of *The Art Seminar*, with contributions by Stephen Melville, Dave Hickey, Irit Rogoff, Guy Brett, Katy Deepwell, Joseph Masheck, Peter Plagens, Julian Stallabrass, Alex Alberro, Whitney Davis, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and others (New York: Routledge, 2007).

9. For examples of text that are implicitly insouciant with regard to the coherence of art criticism, see *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth, 2001); Raphael Rubenstein, ed., *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice* (Lennox, Mass.: Hard Press Editions, 2006); or Jerry Saltz’s critical positions against the idea of having a position, discussed in my *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), which also discusses the *October* roundtable on art criticism in that regard. (“Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism,” *October* 100 [Spring 2002], pp. 200–28.) The Afterword of *The State of Art Criticism* ponders what I am calling second-order incoherence.

10. Art criticism is responding to the current moment in part by questioning its allegiance to the two often disparate venues of academic journals and newspaper journalism. In 2008 and 2009, conferences in Bogotá and Copenhagen explored possibilities for criticism outside of either academic writing or journalism; there was talk of different kinds of writing, and a revival of the essay form. “Posibilidad, inutilidad, y acción: entre la academia y el periodismo,” Universidad de los Andes, October 6–8, 2008; “Let’s Get Critical: Reception in Art History and Art Criticism,” The Fourth International Conference of the Novo Nordisk Foundation Art History Project, Copenhagen, February 27–28, 2009.

semiotics or other interpretive agendas, or else through a universalizing ambition in regard to visibility and visual practices. There are now initiatives that blend Anglo-American, Scandinavian, Latin American, and German language studies into new configurations.<sup>11</sup> As a result of these differing interests, visual studies sometimes proposes the current moment as one in which popular modes of writing have overwhelmed critical discourse, and other times as a moment in which high art requires a shift from art historical to social, Foucauldian, institutional, and other critiques.

My own position in regard to these four discourses is partly discursive or sociological: I am interested in the ways each practice understands itself in relation to contemporary art and to its histories. But I am unconvinced by claims to speak for the current moment. Like Hans Belting, I am unpersuaded by the notion that art history is sufficiently malleable to accommodate worldwide art practices, or to comprehend contemporary international art practices.<sup>12</sup> I think, on the contrary, that too much of the apparatus and institutional history of art history goes unnoticed in attempts to revise the discipline's leading concepts.<sup>13</sup> I am also unconvinced by the claim, implicit in postcolonial theory, that value, quality, and aesthetic judgment in modernist practices is adequately represented as history when it is re-described in socioeconomic and political terms. The capacity of postcolonial studies to describe contemporary art is limited by the persistence, in current art, of late-modernist values, aesthetic judgments, and assumptions about quality.<sup>14</sup> That limitation appears to be invisible to postcolonial critique, and it is itself a marker of the contemporary in postcolonial criticism. And yet—to end on a sociological note—each of these four kinds of discourse, and their many mixtures, need to be taken into account in assessing what might count as interesting critical writing about contemporary art, because together they comprise the current state of thinking on the subject.

11. See, for example, the mixture in *Transmission Image*, ed. Birgit Mersmann (London: Cambridge Scholars, 2008). The kind of scholarship that aims at a universal sense of images without engagement with Anglo-American interests in gender, identity, and politics is exemplified by *Das technische Bild: Kompendium zu einer Stilgeschichte wissenschaftlicher Bilder*, ed. Horst Bredekamp, Birgit Schneider, and Vera Dünkel (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008). A preliminary survey of emerging traditions of visual studies worldwide is in my *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 7–14. The English-language reception of *Bildwissenschaft* is unfortunately restricted by Horst Bredekamp's unrepresentative essay "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as *Bildwissenschaft*," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (2003), pp. 418–28.

12. Belting has different reasons for his position; he is interested in writing about art after disciplines such as art history, criticism, and theory. See for example his "Art in the TV Age: On Global Art and Local Art History," in *Transmission Image*, pp. 169–82.

13. *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*, with an introduction by Jennifer Purtle (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming), argues this general point through an examination of the history of Western writing on Chinese landscape painting.

14. This argument is pursued, in reference to Iftikhar Dadi, Dipesh Chakrabarty, John Clark, Rasheed Areen, and others, in the afterword to *Art and Globalization*, ed. with Zhiyva Valiavicharska and Alice Kim, vol. 1 of *The Stone Theory Seminars* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2009, forthcoming). This is not the same as the claim, which Terry Smith rightfully critiques, that the contemporary moment is constituted by remnants of modernism. (Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," pp. 681–707.) But when elements of modernism persist or need to be represented in art history, they are inadequately conceptualized as symptoms of socioeconomic forces.

Contemporary art history sits at a crossroads in the uneven organization of the subfields that comprise the discipline of art history. Within most university art-history departments, one group of subfields covering Western developments is organized chronologically, as periods (i.e., from Ancient to Modern, with Medieval and Renaissance in between). Another group of subfields that covers non-Western developments is identified geographically, as culturally discrete units even if they encompass an entire continent (i.e., African, Chinese, Latin American, etc.). The category of contemporary art history, while institutionally situated as coming *after* the Modern, following the temporal axis of Western art history as the most recent period (starting in 1945 or 1960, depending on how a department divides up faculty work load or intellectual territory), is also the space in which the contemporaneity of histories from around the world must be confronted simultaneously as a disjunctive yet continuous intellectual horizon, integral to the understanding of the present (as a whole). Contemporary art history, in other words, marks a temporal bracketing *and* a spatial encompassing, a site of a deep tension between very different formations of knowledge and traditions, thus a challenging pressure point for the field of art history in general.

For instance, what is the status of contemporary Chinese art history? What is the time frame for such a history? How closely should it be linked to Chinese art, cultural, or political history? How coordinated should it be with Western art history or aesthetic discourse? Is contemporary Chinese art history a subfield of contemporary art history? Or are they comparable categories, with the presumption that the unnamed territory of contemporary art history is Western-American?

I suspect that in the future there will emerge narrower and narrower specializations with further fragmentation internal to contemporary art history. Or perhaps there will develop a new trajectory that could be called comparative art history (following literary studies) that will prioritize as its object the movement of artistic ideas and practices across different cultural zones rather than in relation to precedents or events of the past. This lateralization would further complicate the possibility of a history for the contemporary field.

*The Problem of “The Present”*

Ostensibly, contemporary art history’s object of study is the art of the present, and by extension the analysis of social, discursive, economic, and political conditions that make something functionally viable and socially recognizable and meaningful as “art” in the present. As such, it may seem to be by definition ahistorical or even antihistorical. Too presentist and amnesic, as some have said. Many argue that contemporary cannot be taught as history at all.

We know that even as the category of contemporary art history is becoming more established and institutionalized, it is already out of date and not contemporary at all. For me the difficulty lies not in whether contemporary art history is a practice of history or criticism, as it is often posed: it is both and neither, for all good art-historical work is also always a form of criticism. The difficulty lies in how to delineate “the present” as an object of study. To be of the present but out of date is the strange temporality of contemporary art history. Because of this strange temporality, contemporary art history necessarily demands a different attitude that will recognize its work as more aligned with contemporary art practice than art history.

Contemporary art can employ new technologies and use materials and processes that have not been tested previously within the art context, resulting in forms or anti-forms or non-forms that challenge conventional and normative ideas of what art looks like or does. After all, contemporary art is presumed to embody the newness of the present. But contemporary art can also engage prehistoric artifacts, revive ancient techniques or materials, and invest in outmoded images, ideas, and methods. That is to say, contemporary art may be of the present but can newly mobilize the past.

Contemporary art history can do likewise. Rather than being driven by the desire to figure out what allowed for the emergence of an artistic expression in, say, the 1970s (social art history), or the curiosity to know how artworks or events of the past help us understand the meaning of a work made today (constructing genealogies or mapping affinities), the work of contemporary art history should be understood as work that undertakes the task of figuring out what and how art of the present forces a rethinking of the stories that have described what happened in the past. How does a work made yesterday undo and/or reconstruct what we know (or think we know) of past art?

Perhaps paradoxically, then, the horizon of contemporary art history is in fact the past, not the present. The field against or on which it operates is what we think we already know. The present is not arrived at through the past but the reverse. I think contemporary art history is best when it is de/constructive of “contemporary,” “art,” and “history” alike.

Producing contemporary art history is not qualified by the date stamp on the object under consideration but a methodological outlook that risks the dismantling of the discipline (all art history has the potential to be contemporary art history). Contemporary art history keeps its eye on the living life of the artwork in the present, no matter how old, no matter when it was originally made.

### *Para-Art History*

I recently heard a lecture by Julian Myers, a young art historian and critic, on a work Michael Heizer made in Detroit in 1971. After an expert “art history

lecture,” he presented a project that he is working on collaboratively with Los Angeles artist Ed Arcenau that deals with the post-1960s history of urbanism, race politics, music, and art in Detroit. Myers described this project, which is without a conventional form or category of belonging, as self-consciously a para-art history: *para* from the Greek meaning “beside,” but also, used in certain combinations, meaning to be “amiss” or “irregular,” denoting alterations and modifications.

It strikes me that we could consider contemporary art history in general as a para-art history with an extended understanding of *para* to include the parasitic. Contemporary art history as hanger-on, leech, freeloader, bloodsucker, sponge, bottom-feeder, mooch on the proper body of art history. I am most interested in destroying the category of contemporary art history as it is becoming consolidated.

## JOSHUA SHANNON

In the last twenty-five years, the academic study of contemporary art—to leave aside the parallel boom industries outside academia—has grown from a fringe of art history to the fastest-developing field in the discipline. It is not so long ago that dissertations on living artists were all but prohibited, while statistics published this year by the College Art Association confirm that job searches in contemporary art history now outnumber those in any other specialization, with almost twice as many positions in the field, for example, as in Renaissance and Baroque combined. We might wonder whether a discipline too long afraid of the present has now become besotted.

But of course thinking deeply about the present—and its art-making—is crucially important. If more people are doing it, so much the better. As the questionnaire suggests, the big problem now facing us is how to undertake this practice responsibly, given the ease with which it can be detached from the usual ballasts of academic inquiry. In particular, we need to know what kind of work it is that we, as art historians, aim to do—is ours a practice of history, of theory, or of criticism?

It seems to me that good academic work on contemporary art involves at least all three of these kinds of labor. Like some other scholars, though, I find that current conditions—both in the discipline and in the world at large—amount to an imperative for work that is historical above all. I think we have a political, even a moral, obligation to think historically about the present—to understand the art of 1989, of 2001, or of the election year of 2008. It is a practice we can enact against the seductive (I might say spectacular) fantasy of the present as the end of history, or else as the opening up of the past into hopelessly disorienting diffusion.

The founding generation of contemporary art historians, first writing scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, did nurture an idea of the historicity of the present—one indebted to Foucault and especially Adorno and more distantly founded on Marx and Hegel. These scholars, however, generally doubted the value of archival work and of lingering interests in specific or local histories. I imagine this was motivated in part by a legitimate fear of distraction; what counted above all was a long, epistemic history—one that had its eye on economic and social totality and on the possibilities and limitations for subjectivity within it.

Putting it mildly, the stakes of our discipline would be far more anemic if not for a quarter-century of serious work in this mode. There is an opportunity now, though—one already being taken up in various quarters—for scholarship on contemporary art that embraces the artist's archive, daily newspaper histories, and the geographic specifics of artistic practice. This can be done just as well, if necessarily differently, for the art of the past ten years as for the art of the 1950s. Some will

fear a dutiful and anodyne contextualization, and we are sure to have some of that. But practiced properly—with critical and theoretical direction—this kind of work can allow us precisely to challenge and sharpen our means of understanding the present. A scholarship of specifics, that is, can force us to elaborate and improve upon the grand models of the present that theoretical formulations have already given us. The aim, after all, is to discover what we do not already know. If we are to understand the constraints upon contemporary subjectivity, for example, we would do well to place our theories of commodification and atomization under the laboratory conditions of a specific artist in a specific year in a specific city. Equally, we would benefit from far closer attention to the details of individual works of art—a skill we contemporary scholars have not been in the habit of engaging. Our efforts should be directed to finding not only structural interventions but also ambiguities, the fine-grained and potentially revealing oddnesses of the objects we study.

To put this last point differently, a new kind of contemporary art history will require us also to take one step back, at last, from asking our art above all to serve the function of critique. It strikes me as in no way retrograde to seek instead to understand art as representation—as *picturing* the present, rather than posing problems for it. This need not mean mimetic legibility, of course. Abstraction, installation, performance, even Internet art are game. It does mean, though, that we ask our art not so much to have good politics as to show us the contradictions of contemporary experience. The best art is anyway ambivalent about the things it so richly represents; its value lies in its power to show us where our politics fail—where one kind of progress runs up against another, or where hope and human activity must necessarily make clumsy peace.

Recently, some purely theoretical analyses of contemporary art have had to relegate themselves to rediscovering historical forces already identified elsewhere. The promise of good contemporary art is that it makes our habits of thinking look awkward, contrived, and tidy. Close contextualized looking runs the risk, it is true, of breaking down the coherence of our view of things, of distracting us from our overall historic situation. But it might also make us more nimble and more accurate. If contemporary art history has anything to offer the humanities, it is because the weirdness of its objects might yield subtler understandings of the effects and character of the present.



Over the course of the last decade, an increasing number of art history Ph.D. students at the university where I teach have declared their primary area of interest to be “contemporary”—by which they tend to mean not art since 1945 or even art since 1960 but the work of artists exhibiting today and in the immediate past. Matthew Barney, Patty Chang, Allan deSouza, Nikki S. Lee, Glenn Ligon, Yong Soon Min, Catherine Opie, and Lynne Yamamoto are some of the artists on which my Ph.D. students have written or declared the intention to do so in upcoming dissertation projects. (Cindy Sherman and Kara Walker do not appear on this list only because of the embarrassment of interpretive riches each has already received from other scholars). In one or two cases, my students are nearly the same age as the artists about whom they wish to write. The history they propose to chart neatly coincides with the time of their own lives.

The art-historical turn toward contemporary art has become evident in graduate programs throughout the nation. Dissertations are now routinely written on mid- and late-career artists, on recent museum exhibitions and biennials, and on current critical and theoretical debates within the art world. Tenure-track jobs are posted for—and of course filled by—historians of contemporary art, and endowed chairs have recently been established in the field. Within the United States, at least, “contemporary” has rapidly emerged not only as a viable area of art-historical study but as the most popular.

Recently, I have begun putting to my “contemporary” students several questions that are at once straightforward and, given the context in which they occur (a graduate seminar or office hours), profoundly aggressive. Why are you studying art history if what you really want is to write about the current moment? Where are the archival and research materials on which you will draw—in the files of a commercial gallery, in a drawer in the artist’s studio, in the works of art themselves, in a series of interviews that you intend to conduct with the artist, in a theoretical paradigm that you plan to apply to the work, or in an ideological critique of the current moment? What distinguishes your practice as a contemporary art historian from that of an art critic? And how does the history of art matter to the works you plan to write about and to the scholarly contribution you hope to make?

The questions posed to my students are also ones that I am myself trying to answer.<sup>1</sup> They have turned out to be rather more difficult to grapple with than I’d anticipated, in part because of the ways in which contemporary art and its institutions seem largely to resist or repress historical consciousness. At international art fairs and biennials, in galleries and museums, in MFA programs, art magazines, and blogs, in critical and curatorial studies programs, contemporary art is often

1. I take up these issues in a current book project, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, forthcoming from MIT Press.



treated as though it existed in a temporal register outside or beyond history. In reference to exhibition venues such as Dia Beacon and Tate Modern, Hal Foster notes that “we wander through museum spaces as if after the end of time.”<sup>2</sup>

By way of responding to this “post-historical” condition, it might be useful to recall that every work of art was once contemporary to the artist and culture that produced it. Rather than focusing exclusively on the last ten or twenty or forty years, students of contemporary art might reckon with a wider history of reception in which previous viewers confronted (then) current works of art by (then) living artists.

In November 1941, MoMA Director Alfred Barr published a short essay titled “Modern Art Makes History, Too” in the *College Art Journal*. It pled for more art historians—and especially for more graduate students—to study the art of their own time:

The field of modern art is wide open and crying for scholarly research but how many candidates for Ph.D. or MFA are doing theses in twentieth-century art? Or even in late-nineteenth century? And if they were would they receive the proudly learned guidance available to them in Medieval or Sumerian archaeology?<sup>3</sup>

In advocating for modern art as a field of study, Barr referred to vanguard paintings by Matisse, Picasso, and Miró, as well as to “American Scene” pictures by John Sloan and Charles Burchfield. He pointed to recent developments in painting but also in “film, photography, and industrial design.” Expansive rather than restrictive, “modern art” signified for Barr something similar to “contemporary” in the sense of current, up-to-date, and alive to its historical moment.

According to Barr, modern art offered one special advantage over every other arena of art-historical research: the possibility of direct dialogue between artist and scholar. Barr was both excited by this possibility and distressed that it was so rarely exploited at the time:

And what opportunities are being lost! Graduate students can’t correspond with John [*sic*] van Eyck, Masolino, or Vasari to clear up scholarly problems but they can air-mail Maillol or Siquieros and write or phone for an appointment with Wright, André Breton, Stieglitz, John Sloan, Balanchine, or D.W. Griffith. (It is already too late to ask art-historical

2. “Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art,” Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 679. Foster attributes this post-historical effect to “the proliferation of single-artist and single-period museums,” which isolate their subjects as sui-generis and to the “mix and match thematics” of contemporary exhibitions in which a loosely applied category displaces any sense of historical continuity or dialectic. “Our paradigm of no-paradigm has abetted a flat indifference, a stagnant incommensurability, a consumerist-touristic culture of art sampling—and in the end is this posthistorical default in contemporary art any great improvement on the old historicist determinism of modernist art à la Greenberg and company?” (p. 679).

3. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., “Modern Art Makes History, Too,” *College Art Journal* 1, no. 1, p. 5.

questions of Klee or Vuillard, two of the best painters of our time—they died within the year.)<sup>4</sup>

For Barr the scholarly study of modern art necessarily involved first-hand contact with artists, be they painters, sculptors, architects, poets, photographers, choreographers, or filmmakers. Whether or not most graduate students in 1941 could phone up Wright or Balanchine or D. W. Griffith for an appointment is another matter. Art-historical method demanded that they do so. Or rather, it would have demanded that they do so had graduate students been permitted to write dissertations on twentieth-century art at the time.

The mention of Wright is particularly ironic given that Barr had just been through a bruising battle with the architect over the latter's retrospective exhibition ("Frank Lloyd Wright: American Architect") at the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>5</sup> Far from "clearing up art-historical questions" in a straightforward manner, the scholarly essays prepared for the MoMA catalogue were seen by Wright as nothing short of a conspiracy to distort and undermine his career. The dispute escalated to the point where, at Wright's insistence, the catalogue was cancelled and the exhibition mounted almost entirely by the architect and his students rather than by MoMA's curatorial staff.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after the show closed, a still-furious Barr wrote a letter to *Parnassus* magazine spelling out the conflict in no uncertain terms:

I would like to make clear . . . in the interests of our Department of Architecture that Mr. Wright . . . was not interested in the plan proposed by our curator—a plan which involved a lucid chronological exposition of Wright's development, particularly as regards his handling of space. For six months, the Department of Architecture had been planning and working upon a catalogue which would have comprised a great deal of factual and critical material, including essays by a half-dozen of the foremost architects and architectural historians in this country. Mr. Wright refused to permit the publication of the catalogue as planned, although it had been intended as a tribute to him. It was then too late to prepare a new publication. At the beginning of one of our conversations here at the Museum, Mr. Wright announced, "I am a very difficult man." We agree, but we still believe him to be the greatest living architect.<sup>7</sup>

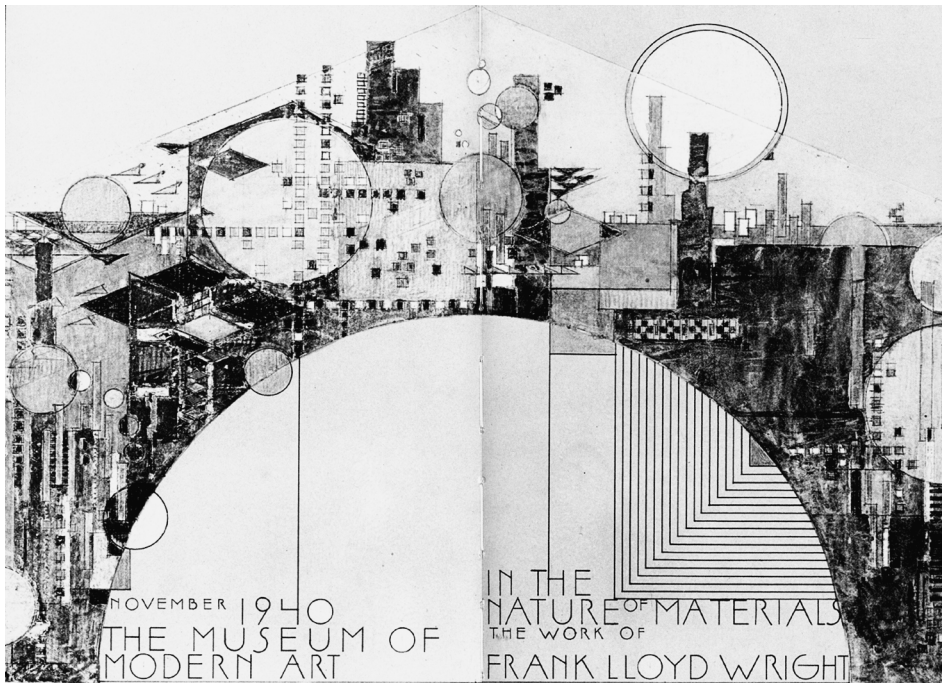
The frustrations that marked Barr's encounter with Wright would seem to contradict the museum director's breezy optimism about the possibility of a graduate

4. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

5. The Wright exhibition was on view at MoMA from November 12, 1940, to January 5, 1941.

6. On the troubled history of the exhibition, see *Studies in Modern Art 8: The Show to End All Shows: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Museum of Modern Art, 1940*, ed. Peter Reed and William Kaizen with an essay by Kathryn Smith (New York: MoMA, 2004).

7. "Letters," *Parnassus* 13, no. 1 (January 1941), p. 3.



*Frank Lloyd Wright. Unused cover design for a publication to accompany the exhibition Frank Lloyd Wright: American Architect at MoMA. 1940. © The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.*

student contacting Stieglitz or Breton (or Wright himself) for an art-historical chat. In “Modern Art Makes History, Too,” Barr does not mention the possibility that the artist may prove “a very difficult man [or woman]” or that the professional relationship between artist and scholar may unravel into misunderstanding, mutual resentment, or misrecognition.

In 1940, Wright drafted a marvelously intricate cover design for the catalog to the MoMA exhibition. (Unhappy with the show’s title, he rechristened it “In the Nature of Materials: The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright.”) Several months after submitting the cover design, Wright saw to it that the catalog was never published. Wright’s ill-fated cover illustration recalls the discord between the “greatest living architect” and the museum that sought to pay tribute to him. More broadly, the cover suggests the ongoing challenges (and potential hazards) of making contemporary art over into history.

The questionnaire begins by pointing out, quite rightly, that “the category of ‘contemporary art’ is not a new one.” Scholarly attempts to understand the work of living artists are likewise a matter of the past as well as the present. Today’s contemporary art historians would do well to acknowledge the efforts that have preceded and enabled our own.

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An observation perhaps so obvious it needn't be stated: there is no shortage of higher education courses bearing the title "contemporary art" that nonetheless conclude their surveys well before the turn of the last millennium. Indeed, for many students now pursuing undergraduate degrees in the liberal arts and opting to gamble their elective courses on art history, a glimpse of Cindy Sherman's late 1970s "film stills" might be as close to current-day artistic practices as they get. If presenting the Abstract Expressionists as cutting edge seems beyond the pale to many readers of *October*, we must remind ourselves that such a construction is still common in places and institutions less specialized than the present context and, more importantly, that a kind of general competency or "common knowledge" (and here I am speaking strictly of an American framework) is apt to end with Pollock, and even there none too securely.

I begin with this awkward assertion about the uneven distribution of "the contemporary" in both academic curricula and the popular imagination not simply to mark it as an effect of class and epistemological hierarchies (though I'd like to do this as well), but also in order to take seriously the questionnaire's proposal that we ask why "the contemporary" seems, of late, to operate in two contradictory ways: as a "category" so pluralist and wide-reaching in its vicissitudes and effects that it would seem all-encompassing, *and* as a newly secured "institutional object," recognized as particular (or at least pervasive) enough to be jockeying for legitimacy within the field of art history.

It's telling, to my mind, that even as I am hard-pressed to believe that there is any truly coherent public to which contemporary art is addressed, it would seem that the art world today offers up an increasingly and utterly democratic realm. Audiences for art are larger than ever before, with more museums designed to accommodate greater numbers of people, both in terms of size and programming. At the same time, art practices seem to complement the spectrum of popular media, taking up subject matter familiar to many from the television, music, and movies, and even modeling themselves after genres familiar from those different arenas. (Artists, too, emulate the stars, equating practice with persona. In the words of C. Wright Mills: "But what are the celebrities? The celebrities are The Names who need no further identification.") Strikingly, more than one museum director has declared—on the record and with some pride—that the role of museums is shifting and that art must function like other forms of entertainment to retain any relevance. It must be crafted, that is, more to draw in crowds than to constitute a discursive realm.

However, to point toward only this trend—a powerful and fast-moving one, to be sure—would be to oversimplify our own moment and then obscure both its possibilities and stakes. For mega-exhibitions and international circuits (whose negative effects have in recent years been gestured to so often as summing up the ethos of an inflated art market), even while impossible to dismiss, should not be seen as totalizing

or even as the sole driving forces of contemporary art. Indeed, ascribing wholly to the idea that such hyperbolic operations disallow alternative, counter, or oppositional practices is a mistake, and disregards the fact that art has long been the purview of struggles over meaning on both academic and vernacular levels. To this end, the fact that so many more people go to museums than ever before—not only to look at painting and sculpture, film and video, performance and dance, but also to participate in karaoke, attend “night school,” or buy an expensive designer purse—cannot be taken as proof that museums have been fully spectacularized. Rather, such a proliferation suggests that there are dizzying variations of culture on offer, and, hence, that a number of audiences come together under the same roof, even if they have little more in common than any other group of people at a multiplex on a given day. As I write this text, for instance, one can imagine the shoulders rubbing at the Museum of Modern Art (a “modern” institution, not a “contemporary” one, but here, too, one has questions), where simultaneously on view are nearly twenty different shows and projects, ranging from a retrospective of the rogue, cultish German artist Martin Kippenberger; a showing of works by the Latin American modernists León Ferrari and Mira Schendel; a thematic show about “paper”; a survey of Polish posters from the years 1945 to 1989; a survey of photography taking the American West as subject; and an installation by the young Swedish artist Klara Liden. Any attempt to wrestle coherence from this grouping is impossible, but it is also not the point. For while I have to confess to feeling a sense of ennui when I ride MoMA’s mall-like escalators from floor to floor, it would be ludicrous (not to mention unabashedly entitled) to act as though the institution were nothing more than a blindsiding behemoth, leveling all things to the register of consumption for specialized audiences.

Yet it is precisely such an anxiety—the feeling that the whole of contemporary stuff and culture (with art simply alongside everything else) is experienced on the level of escalator riding—that drives the compulsion within the academy to make of “contemporary art” a proper category. Recalling the visual-culture debates (staged notably within these pages almost fifteen years ago), one might argue that the current desire to usher the ambiguous category of contemporary art into the academy is propelled by difficult questions regarding this denomination’s shaky ontological status and, I think, a continued insistence that different kinds of cultural production simply can’t be analyzed using the same methodologies. The upside of this appraisal—or at least the interest in allowing such an appraisal to happen within the discipline of art history—is that the notion of “the contemporary” can in fact be pried away from reductive arguments. Too often, overarching condemnations of the market, mass culture, and the like take the place of any deliberate, critical consideration of objects and practices within complicated contexts and historical trajectories. In contrast, asking that art of our own moment be taken up in specific terms—examined as history in the making, and as deeply interconnected to political, socio-economic conditions and, thus, capable of commenting on those conditions



not only rigorously but powerfully—recognizes art’s capacity to intervene, persuade, criticize, and refuse.

There are potential downsides to this embrace, however. If a kind of legitimacy is bestowed on too vague a notion of “contemporary” art, the field is at risk of becoming a specialty without having any foundation beyond its nominal recognition. Where, say, “postmodernism”—however disputed and multifarious its terms—was able to provide an arena for debate, the notion of “the contemporary” then functions as a nebulous marker of what can’t be approached with any common language. (This quality is only underscored by the fact that “the contemporary” is, in fact, multigenerational—a fact overlooked only at one’s own risk since some of the most important contemporary artists are also some of the most important historical ones: Joan Jonas, Yvonne Rainer, Mary Kelly, Sherrie Levine, and so on.) What arises then—since “the contemporary” is a term at once meaningless and increasingly ubiquitous within art historical, museum, and curatorial circles—is somewhat strange: the category of contemporary art is approached within higher institutions of art, if not by way of a kind of formalism, then certainly through a kind of unanticipated connoisseurship. An authority on contemporary art has to prove a deeper understanding of work that would seem, in many cases, utterly intelligible to anyone versed in popular culture—suggesting that expertise is often being performed in an overcompensating manner. In fact it is not unusual to read lengthy treatises on the complicated material production of, say, an artist whose work registers visually as kitsch and whose critical reception depends, subsequently, on establishing terms other than what the direct reference implies. I’m thinking here of artists like Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons, and Richard Phillips, but not only them and not necessarily as straw men. It is less interesting, for this questionnaire, to debate the quality of their work than to simply think about the ways that legitimizing discourse around such practices (claiming them to be “critical,” say) may inadvertently disallow the more urgent conversations to be had around them. As someone who writes regularly and passionately about contemporary artists, I sometimes have to remind myself that too quickly ascribing now well-trod tropes of criticality might itself be a strangely conservative act, even if also a genealogical urge with the best of intentions.

When Roland Barthes asked in 1971, “Is not to be modern to know clearly what cannot be started over again?” he was suggesting that sometimes so-called critical distance draws a very firm line between past and present—too firm, as Barthes saw it. Without leaning overly hard on Barthes’s theory of the text, I do wish to suggest that what the contemporary offers—when it is allowed to operate as a way of thinking broadly about the conditions for artistic production and reception we are ourselves experiencing—is the opportunity for praxis. Writing, thinking, and teaching about art whose consequences we cannot fully know provides us a kind of meta-exercise, one not dissociated from historical accounts but, rather, alive and awake to connections to be made between now and then while nonetheless aware of their utter incompatibilities.

We might think of the study of “contemporary art history” in terms of its *prematurity*, a matter of both practical and philosophical consequence. In the following, I suggest that the question of how we pursue our study of recent art—the methodological side of things—coincides with the larger issue of what gets left behind in the process. (And my provocation here will have something to do with “postmodernism.”) To bring us to that point, let me state the obvious: working on recent art means grappling with our own contemporaneity, with inhabiting the present tense. As this questionnaire demonstrates, there’s little doubt that the scholarly buzz around “the contemporary” and art history seems to come with a discomfiting kind of tension. Somehow we have made keeping pace with the art of today—both our misgivings and excitement about it—a quasi-science, an intellectual cottage industry, as if we desired to enshrine the nervousness about the present moment in a permanent holding pattern.

To be sure, our self-consciousness about the contemporary is not helped along by what some of our colleagues from across the discipline think. Recently I heard a graduate student in a pre-modern field suggest that those who studied contemporary art were not really interested in things “historical,” the larger implication being that folks like myself could scarcely approximate the hard labor of history; instead, this student went on to say, what we studied was something called “theory.” I get where she’s coming from. I doubt that many, if any, of us working on recent art are challenged by the Babel of dead languages, or find ourselves elbows-deep in parchment or the fustiness of obscure Church archives. And yes, the worse excesses of our field do involve grotesque and often market-driven speculation, succumbing to the kind of “theoreticism” Yve-Alain Bois warned about years ago.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, I think this student missed something central about the dynamics of history (and, by extension, contemporary art history) and that is the roles that we as historians assume in its production—in other words, the historiographic charge to which I think the best scholars of recent art are unfailingly, almost ethically, responsible. Indeed, it is precisely due to the seeming “presentness” of our archive—and the mythic transparency of its materials as well—that the historian of contemporary art must be that much more vigilant about questions of historiography and periodization, that much more attuned to the formative influence of the models we enlist and the tone we take in our confrontation with and analysis of recent practices. Instead of simply treating each document as an article of faith, many of us are inherently skeptical about the evidence at hand—what constitutes the official object of our study in the first place.

We could say, then, that contemporary art history has come too early. It is premature on methodological grounds. The very notion of “contemporary art history”

\* This is an excerpt from “Postmodernism after the Contemporary,” a chapter from a work-in-progress titled *New Games: Postmodernism and the Prisoner’s Dilemma*.

1. See Yve-Alain Bois, “Resisting Blackmail,” in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993).

can only prompt charges of a category error, throwing down not insignificant issues for art historians around the wont to historicize phenomena in advance of their imagined historicity. The practical implications stemming from this conceit are considerable, particularly, I think, for graduate students in the process of formulating their dissertation topics. Now we know, for better but mostly for worst, that the marketplace of academia is such that any graduate student feels some pressure to “get there first” in terms of her chosen topic—to stake a claim for terra nova as an original body of research. This is not unique to what scholars of contemporary art history do. Yet the issue presents its own peculiar set of problems for those writing on very recent material: call it the moving-target syndrome. At what point does a stack of recent press releases morph into something like a proper reception history? How do you write about a contemporary artist whose work shifts radically (perhaps not to one’s liking) in mid-stream? And what does one do when the topics that seemed so pressing and so critical just a few short art-world seasons back simply lose that sense of urgency—and all the more so when one is in the process of drafting a thesis over the course of a number of years?

This last bit dramatizes the all-too legitimate suspicion about the study of contemporary art in the university: that it is too subject to the whims of the market or fashion. The professor of “contemporary art history” is hardly in any position to deny the relation between her scholarly métier and the explosive growth industry that is the contemporary art world. I for one acknowledge being wholly embedded in this dynamic and concede the strange position in which I find myself as participant observer: I am the professional beneficiary of a set of conditions that I have ample reason to lament and critique. Yet something about the tenor of these remarks, which might sound like ambivalence, is not quite on point, for there’s little naïveté about what forces are supposedly held at bay by the ivory tower’s walls. To suggest that this position is a kind of Realpolitik may be grossly overstating the case. One might call this “complicity” with that world, a rather old-fashioned term, it needs to be said, if not for the fact that the politics of academia are everywhere conditioned by this world, irrespective of one’s field, one’s profile, and one’s historical interests.

So there is a paradoxical way we might characterize the problem: contemporary art history is premature because it is always in a perpetual state of becoming, one that alternates endlessly between novelty and critical (as well as commercial) exhaustion. As long ago as 1962, Leo Steinberg could identify this tendency in discussing contemporary art’s relation to “the plight of the public,” by which he meant the public’s bewilderment in the face of the new or outrageous in art. In a statement that is still relevant, he wrote, “This rapid domestication of the outrageous is the most characteristic feature of our artistic life, and the time lapse between shock received and thanks returned gets progressively shorter. At the present rate of taste adaptation, it takes about seven years for a young artist with a streak of wildness in him to turn from enfant terrible to elder statesman—not so much because he changes but because the challenge he throws to the public is so quickly met.”<sup>2</sup>

2. Leo Steinberg, “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public,” *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 6.



In speaking to the galloping “rate of taste adaptation,” Steinberg’s words provide a parallel to the problem of timeliness we confront within academia’s treatment of contemporary art. More specifically, his words neatly register the waning fortunes of shock that are the leitmotif of modernism, signaling the incursions of a postmodern sensibility. And this reference to postmodernism brings me to my second point about the prematurity of contemporary art history—that is, what we’ve left behind and what we’ve implicitly bought into in our rush to study recent art.

Though there’s no space to elaborate the point, let me suggest that we have yet to wrestle fully with the problem of postmodernism in our account of the contemporary. This is not at all to endorse a revival of the term “postmodernism,” much less redeem its associated artists and themes after the fact, so much as to think about postmodernism historiographically in our deliberations on contemporary art. Maybe we have too quickly exiled postmodernism to the dustbin of theory’s history without treating that relegation in any systematic way, as function and symptom of the very conditions much writing on the topic was alleged to diagnose in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Another way to put it: perhaps “contemporary art history” is the very fallout of said conditions, which in presaging the end of master narratives or “the waning of historical affect” laid the ground for something more precarious, discursively fragmented, and temporally contingent, as our current object of study appears to be. As such, in so quickly giving up the ghost of postmodernism for a set of ever-proliferating contemporary art rubrics—globalization, the relational, the politics of aesthetics, you name it—I wonder if we have inadvertently contracted with a set of terms to which we have neither intellectual nor ideological affinity. Recall, for example, that the formative work of a Jameson or a Lyotard set out to interrogate those features within the culture that we now almost reactively describe as “neoliberal”—tendencies brought to a head with the Reagan and Thatcher “revolutions” and the events of 1989 and 1991. Jameson and Lyotard above all others, I would argue, took on board many of the questions that are now seen as synonymous with the ethos of neoliberalism—a term that demands far greater historiographic pressure than many of us in art history have applied up to this point. I suppose the very open-ended and intentionally provocative question I conclude with here is what gets repressed when we imagine we have “moved on” from such discussions. Does “the galloping rate of taste adaptation” Steinberg described now function as an ideological contrivance—that to study the “contemporary” means we have conceded the most pressing debates around postmodernism? Is the notion of “contemporary art history” this moment’s catch-all phrase for what we used to call “pluralism”?<sup>4</sup>

3. The notable exception being Hal Foster, “Postmodernism in Parallax,” *October* 63 (Winter 1993), pp. 4–20.

4. Foster’s account of pluralism, written in 1982, is to the point here: see his “Against Pluralism,” republished in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 13–32.

It was not so much weightlessness as shaky ground. Perched unsteadily in the pit of Urs Fischer's *You* (2007), a muscular excavation of the gallery space at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, we had been warned by a somewhat hyperbolic sign that venturing into the eight-foot drop risked **SERIOUS INJURY OR DEATH**. This forbidding sensation was compounded for me when I recently learned that all manner of statistical soil samples had had to be taken to detect any noxious gases at the site, since that stretch of city along the Hudson River is built on landfill. Data collection and danger aren't the most obvious pair, but they are of a piece. Fischer's calibrations of both toxicity and space seem fitting to recall on this occasion—when, in our tremulous times, a questionnaire seeks to gauge the status of contemporary art and its “apparent lightness of being.” But no regression to the mean on this topic is likely to be found.

Indeed, to glean something about the situation of contemporary art, we might look to the genre of the questionnaire itself. It was invented by Sir Francis Galton, that nineteenth-century champion of statistical metrics and visual classification; then deployed in various forms by the Surrealists, Experiments in Art and Technology, and Hans Haacke, to name a few. It is also tied to the eruption of crisis. This is why, I think, the questionnaire has been so fascinating to artists: it is a tool of risk management, of damage control, from incessant polling to bank stress tests. Surveys are part of an attempt to find causality. Yet they often highlight the very absence of it. This particular questionnaire, too, begs the question of causality, because its queries seem to imply that art is a consequence of something else: the “floating-free” of contemporary art, its unmooring from history and critical judgment, as the “direct outcome of a neoliberal economy.” I would caution, however, against drawing any such linear relationship of cause and effect.

The turbulence of contemporary art has less to do with neoliberalism—a slippery term that has migrated far from its original economic meaning (as a model for increased market regulation, among other things)—than we might think. Cultural historians who invoke neoliberalism often do so to suggest broadly that the global political economy has migrated from the structured power plays of welfare states to the diffuse, freeform machinations of a pernicious and invasive market fundamentalism. But within such a worldview, art is still presented with a false choice between resistance and complicity, naiveté and knowing. “False,” because global networks of control are clearly not as seamless and totalizing as they once appeared. Economy, ecology, and war continually overwhelm “surgical” means of containment and manipulation with new hazards and crises. (To believe that they don't, or won't, actually presumes a kind of humanistic faith in manmade systems of power.) Our grand machines for statistical determination are increasingly thwarted. This is what sociologist Ulrich

Beck has called “the risk society”: the escalation of scenarios and possibilities that we cannot predict. Unintended and unforeseeable side effects have everywhere become the main event.

Many artists have recognized and actively engaged in this torrent of side effects, contingencies, and nonlinear relations. Fischer’s *You* enacted the precariousness of aesthetic experience and institutional critique—here embodied and internalized, whether one was in the entryway (a detailed, shrunken reconstruction of the original main gallery space), stooping below the shortened door, stumbling down into the crater, or teetering on the slim ledge that circled it. Moreover, the sculptural dig took place on the cusp of a financial crisis that we all saw coming, but could not know how or when it would occur. Whether instigating or tracking catastrophe (Davide Balula’s explosions and shock waves, Olga Chernysheva’s studies of collapsing rail systems and ruined Cosmonaut monuments); provoking environmental disturbances (Tomás Saraceno’s flying gardens, Olafur Eliasson’s stealth release of dye into waterways); or probing the arbitrariness of visual codes and experiential value (Josh Smith’s appropriative yet earnest paintings, Josef Strau’s provisional displays), a panoply of endeavors take up the rise of uncertainty. It is an alarming prospect, but one that also supplants old (and new) antagonisms.

This is not to say that the sheer proliferation of contemporary practices has nothing to do with the diversification and expansion of consumption—far from it. Some of the most prominent artists of our day have taken up the tentacular reaches of the market as their primary means. (And the line between nonprofit and commercial art entities has in many cases dwindled to invisibility.) But the most astute of these endeavors sketch the outer reaches of the pecuniary systems they so thoroughly and unabashedly inhabit—not to oppose or evade them but precisely to test their contours. Art historians and critics, too, must take into account the ways in which our own institutions and diagnostics need readjusting when binaries of accident and intent, crisis and norm, liberation and control, are overturned. If cultural concepts of the neo-avant-garde, postmodernism, and neoliberalism each stake their claims to some degree on the hegemony of multinational capital, that bubble seems to keep bursting, each time more spectacularly than the last. We are learning how to ride the aftershock.

If it is correct that no “paradigms” have emerged in the place of “the neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism,” then one should first look precisely to the success of those discourses to understand why. The critical discourse of postmodernism caused most historians and critics to distrust any overarching and monolithic model that would account for what is most compelling about contemporary art. At the same time, following the impact of postcolonial theory and a simple widening of our horizons, American and European art historians and curators have become far more attentive to contemporary art as it emerges across the world. Most acknowledge that serious art is being made in China, Latin America, South Africa, and so on, but few have the opportunities to see what is being made. With this situation, who would presume to name a new paradigm? A new name would assume a totalizing explanatory power and be akin to a hubristic, neo-colonialist move. One also begins to distrust the presumptions of the previous paradigms. How useful are the terms “neo-avant-garde” or “postmodernism” when we think about the art that emerged in centers away from North America and Western Europe, where modernism and the avant-garde signified quite differently?

Paradigms are also declared by museums when they lay out their permanent collections. Another reason for the lack of new paradigms for contemporary art is the difficulty of articulating a paradigm within a museum space, given the nature of new work, and the constraints of contemporary museum architecture. Up until 1970, new work and museum architecture fit together reasonably well. For instance, to recall the run of rooms at MoMA, it was possible to account for the 1945–1970 period by having a sequence of displays of Abstract Expressionism, Johns/Rauschenberg/Twombly, Pop art, Minimalism, post-Minimalism, and so on. This classic narrative could be revised, extended, broadened geographically, or questioned without much change to the architecture, with displays of Brazilian Neoconcretism and Tropicalia, of Arte Povera, of early video art, and so on. Now, however, with the predominance of large sculptural or photographic installations, of projected works, and so on, when every work demands its own container and operates as a self-enclosed experience, it becomes extremely difficult to link together a group of works in such a way as to articulate a paradigm—though I think this is a real challenge facing curators and museum architects. At Tate Modern, the prevailing display-strategy has been to place contemporary work in relation to paradigms from twentieth-century art. So within a “Surrealist” wing, one has seen an installation of found objects by Cornelia Parker, an animation by Francis Alÿs showing a repeated accident, and photographs of mannequins by Zoe Leonard. New works can be seen in connection to historical roots, and at the same time historical practices can be reassessed in the light of present-day work.

Perhaps the greatest problem involved in trying to think about new paradigms to account for contemporary art is the fact that so many artists (and curators/critics) have begun to feel extremely ambivalent about the very idea of the contemporary, if the contemporary is understood as a neat sense of belonging to, or of being with, one's own time. This ambivalence has several causes. For one, artists no longer see their practice as a development from, or argument with, art of the past twenty years, or as a brand-new moment in a neat line of "movements" or "paradigms," in the way that (for instance) Conceptual artists in the early 1970s positioned themselves against Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism. A linear conception of historical development has made way for a more complex and disarticulated understanding of time, and as a result, in the present moment, rather than situating themselves as "contemporary," "1990s," or "2000s" artists, artists orient themselves in relation to past and future, taking up incomplete projects from earlier moments (think, for instance, of the way Pierre Huyghe has worked on Robert Smithson's ideas of an exhibition) or dreaming up scenarios while looking back to older visions of the future (for instance, Dominique Gonzalez-Forester's recent Turbine Hall installation at Tate Modern). Aside from their relationship to art-historical trajectories, another form of ambivalence to the contemporary derives from artists' feeling that they are not at home in their own time. Not only are they resistant to economic, sociological, or political conditions of the present, but, more than this, they are not particularly attracted to the technological conditions or opportunities of the present; as a result, they are unwilling to use new technologies to articulate their resistance. (Here, I'm contrasting Zoe Leonard's and Tacita Dean's relationship to technology to that of Dada artists, who—at least in Walter Benjamin's formulation—were willing to use new forms of technical reproduction to respond critically to the 1920s.) For other artists, the notion of the contemporary is problematic as it can imply that which is "modern, or ultra-modern in style or design" (the fourth definition in the *O.E.D.*). The contemporary signifies a coherent and new moment in modernity, whereas they operate in areas of the world whose relationship to modernity is not straightforward, places where everyday life might be characterized by the continual promise of modernization and the persistence of more traditional (and chaotic) forms of being (Francis Alÿs's Mexico City, for instance). Then there are those artists who seek to understand and perhaps contest the sociopolitical conditions of the present by examining history or the way in which the past is represented (Emily Jacir, Matthew Buckingham, Walid Raad, Anri Sala, and so on).

For me, the crucial problem with the question is the anxiety that "the contemporary" is floating free from conceptual definition and historical determination, and that with this floating free comes a critical incapacity. In fact, many conceptual definitions help us understand art today, which can be related to art of the past in many ways. What's new therefore is not a lack of definition and determination so much as a different relationship between art and the present

and indeed between art and time and history more broadly—in other words, the concept of being “contemporary” has changed. There have been moments in art history when contemporary art has seemed a specific response to a specific moment (one thinks perhaps of the different ways in which Pop and Minimalism have been situated in relation to the technological world of the 1960s). However, recent tendencies manifest a fraught a-temporary sensibility, a discomfort with the present, an ambivalence toward the contemporary. Paradoxically perhaps, the work that is most of its time is the work which least belongs to its time. In respect of this situation, we should stop worrying about the non-appearance of new paradigms, and question the formulation “contemporary.” We should take up the suggestion of art practice in order to imagine new forms of temporality, new models of relations between art, and time, and history, models which do not imply a “lightness of being” or a “floating-free” from the conditions of history (nothing of the sort!) but instead less linear and more entangled forms of historical connection.

This questionnaire arrives at a moment of uncertainty for contemporary art. In the wake of the crisis of the world financial system, there is a sense of *Schadenfreude* among many who have observed the bloated economy of contemporary art as a symptom of the corporatization of art and the degeneration of taste, where pieces of art were nothing more than another series of commodity objects based on speculative trading rather than artistic quality, and where owning them became aspirational in the mode of an appetite for luxury goods. But what is artistic quality anyway? Is it based on a narrow consensus of entrenched institutional interests committed to maintaining a limited view of aesthetic nationalism focused on the past glories of cultural power? Or is it, as the market surmised, a more ambiguous set of metrics connected to the transfer of the illusion of cultural capital and its attendant civilizational virtues in exchange for financial rewards drawn from the newly emergent centers of mega-wealth in those places where the global market economy was churning out new billionaires, namely Russia, China, and the Middle East?

It is difficult to proffer an engaged assessment of contemporary art in the climate of the present economic crisis without a hint of cynicism about what it all meant over the last decade. However, it seems to me that the objective of this questionnaire is precisely designed, if not to ask for a suspension of cynicism, at least to review the broader historical implications of contemporary art of the last two decades.

I do not perceive anything particularly new in the issues taken up by the questionnaire; nevertheless, the appraisal of contemporary art it solicits is an important one to attempt. Given the shift that has occurred after the global financial collapse, I believe we are entering a period which may suggest the end, not of one, but of two concurrent eras: the end of an excessive art market, and the end of the tenets of globalization as a means of understanding the field of contemporary art. Concerning this double trajectory of the neoliberalism of the art market and the globalization of contemporary art, I hope I am wrong on the second point.

I want to ground my response to the questionnaire in a recent essay I wrote at the invitation of Nicolas Bourriaud for the 3rd Tate Triennial exhibition, *Altermodern*, which was on view earlier this year at Tate Britain. What was striking about Bourriaud's exhibition is not how it sought to demonstrate the various conditions of contemporary artistic practice so much as the query on which it was based. Like this questionnaire, this query was directed at teasing out what may be called the logics of contemporary art and the kind of historical arguments on which they are founded. Yet, unlike the questionnaire, Bourriaud's exhibition presented the view that there already exist some historical markers that can be

\* This response is adapted from my essay "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence," in *Altermodern*, ed. Nicolas Bourriaud (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).



followed in elucidating what the current stakes are in the ever-diverging scenes of contemporary artistic production. In order to explicate his theory of “alter-modernity,” Bourriaud deemed it necessary only to trace a route backward to questions of modernity and to see how they have played a role in generating new forms of contemporary art worldwide. This tracing back presupposes that, beyond the staunch centers of Europe and by extension North America, contemporary art, for different historical reasons (the most visible of which is the powerful influence of imperial expansion across the world), is not a borrowed language like modernism, not a kind of Occidentalism woven out of encounters with European modernity, but a meta-language developed at the intersection of multiple historical collisions.

Thus the altermodern, Bourriaud argues, is not merely a supplement to modernity but a new condition. In fact, he defines it as the optic through which contemporary art in the era of globalization can be properly encountered. He offers a series of arguments, many of them already part of the lexicon of critical understanding of the artistic heterogeneity of contemporary art, which since the 1980s has greatly expanded as a consequence of migration, decolonization, and globalization, and in the discourse of academia is embedded in postmodern and postcolonial critiques of grand narratives. In the following passage he sketches his idea and its plan; the altermodern, Bourriaud writes, is

an attempt to redefine modernity in the era of globalization. A state of mind more than a “movement,” the altermodern goes against cultural standardization and massification on one hand, against nationalisms and cultural relativism on the other, by positioning itself within the world of cultural gaps, putting translation, wandering and culture-crossings at the centre of art production. Offshore-based, it forms clusters and archipelagos of thought against the continental “mainstream”: the altermodern artist produces links between signs faraway from each other, explores the past and the present to create original paths.

Envisioning time as a multiplicity rather than as a linear progress, the altermodern artist considers the past as a territory to explore, and navigates throughout history as well as all the planetary time zones. Altermodern is heterochronical. Formally speaking, altermodern art privileges processes and dynamic forms to unidimensional single objects, trajectories to static masses.<sup>2</sup>

Much of this description echoes many of the multiculturalist and identity-based artistic problems of the late twentieth century, but here it is slightly recast in subtle cosmopolitan terms. I was struck immediately by two terms deployed by Bourriaud in his attempt to shape a discursive model for the understanding of contemporary practice today: the first, the notion of its off-shore base, is spatial;

2. Nicolas Bourriaud, published statement from a brochure outline for *Altermodern* (London: Tate Britain, April 2008).



while the second, concerning its heterochronical dimension, is temporal. Thinking about these two terms, I was convinced that Bourriaud was applying the optics used by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his argument about provincialism and the concept of the heterotemporal relationship to historical narratives.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of writing the essay for the *Altermodern* catalogue in the summer of 2008, I was immersed in completing the curatorial work for the 7th Gwangju Biennial in South Korea. My critical approach to the Biennial was to deploy a seemingly whimsical neoliberal attitude by calling the exhibition *Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions*. As it turned out, 2008 was an auspicious year in the Asia-Pacific region due to the convergence of multiple mega-exhibitions across many cities. No less than ten biennials and triennials opened in the region between September and October 2008, and, with the mammoth Beijing Olympics in the summer, the question of modernity and cultural Occidentalism seemed an important feature of what I thought was the beginning of an Asian century.<sup>4</sup> In light of what happened across the world as the financial markets collapsed and developments in Asia stalled, perhaps my prognostication was premature. Nonetheless, the notion of the Asian century remains resonant, and might still need to be reflected on.

First, I was interested in the nature of the transaction between modernity and contemporaneity, the sense of being both belated (out of time) and timely (in time) that generated this fever for contemporary art in Asia in general and China in particular. Just before the implosion of the financial markets in September with the demise of Lehman Brothers (incidentally, the doomed investment bank's last gasp was a frantic attempt in South Korea to raise new capital by issuing massive equity to investors in that country), Asia represented a new global power, with China sitting at the helm of the changed fortunes of the region. As we have now found out, not even China is immune to the crisis, so my response to *Altermodern*, which opened before the financial collapse, should be kept in perspective. Nevertheless, it seems to me a good lead-in to a reflection on the entangled networks of contemporary art.

If the current spate of modernization in China effectively lays waste to heritage and historical glory and instead emphasizes contingency, might it not be reasonable to argue for the non-universal nature of modernity as such? This certainly would be true when applied to contemporary art. We are constantly entertained and exercised in equal measure by the notion that there is no red line running from modernism to contemporary art. For the pedagogues of such a lineage, the chief emblem of this unbroken narrative can be found in the attention given to the procedures and ideas of the Western historical avant-gardes by contemporary artists. On the other hand, I view this claim, pace Chakrabarty, as a

3. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

4. The exhibitions and the cities in which they were organized are: Sydney Biennial, Singapore Biennial, Seoul Media Biennial, Gwangju Biennial, Busan Biennial, Shanghai Biennale, Guangzhou Triennale, Yokohama Triennial, Taipei Biennial, Nanjing Triennial.

provincial account of the complexity of contemporary art. To understand its various vectors, we need to *provincialize modernism*, that is, to spatialize it as a series of local modernisms rather than one big universal modernism. If there is no one lineage of modernism or, for that matter, of contemporary art, then to fully grasp its qualities of historical reflection requires a heterotemporal understanding.

For example, to look for an Andy Warhol in Mao's China would be to be blind to the fact that the China of the Pop art era had neither a consumer society nor a capitalist structure, two conditions that were instrumental to Pop's usage of images of consumer capitalism. In that sense, Pop art, monotemporally understood, would be anathema to the revolutionary program—and, one might claim, to the avant-garde imagination—of that period in China, which coincides with the situation that fostered Warhol's analytical excavation of American mass media and consumer culture. But the absence of Pop art in China in the 1960s is not the same as the absence of "progressive" contemporary Chinese art during that period—even if such contemporary art may have been subdued and deracinated by the aggressive destruction of the Cultural Revolution.

If we are to make sense of contemporary art during this period in China and the United States, then we have to wield the heterotemporal tools of history-writing; in so doing, we will see how differently situated American and Chinese artists were at this time. Despite the importance of globalization in mediating recent accounts of contemporary art—a world in which artists like Huang Yong Ping, Zhang Huan, Xu Bing, Matthew Barney, Andreas Gursky, and Jeff Koons, for instance, are contemporaries—we can apply the same mode of argument against any uniform or unifocal view of artistic practice today. When Huang Yong Ping, in *A History of Chinese Painting and a Concise History of Modern Painting in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987), washed two art historical texts in a washing machine—*A History of Chinese Painting* by Wang Bomin and Herbert Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (one of the first books of Western art history published in China)—the result was a mound of pulped ideology, a history of hybridization rather than universalism.<sup>5</sup> If we apply the same lens, say, to the work of Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare working in London, we again see how he has made the tensions between histories, narratives, and the mythologies of modernity, identity, and contemporary subjectivity important ingredients in his continuous attempt to deconstruct the invention of an African tradition by imperialism. The locus of Shonibare's theatrical and sometimes treacherous installations is the fiction of the African fabric he employs. These fabrics, with their busy patterns and vivid colors, are often taken to be authentic symbols of an African past; but

5. In a commentary about the intention of the work, Huang Yong Ping says, "In China, regarding the two cultures of East and West, traditional and modern, it is constantly being discussed as to which is right, which is wrong, and how to blend the two. In my opinion, placing these two texts in the washing machine for two minutes symbolizes this situation and well solves the problem much more effectively and appropriately than debates lasting a hundred years." Quoted in Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo and Beijing: Albright Knox Gallery and Millennium Museum, 2005), p. 129.

they are in fact a series of colonial fictions embedded in the social invention of Africa through economic transactions that moved from Indonesia to the factories of England and Netherlands, to the markets of West, East, and Central Africa, and ultimately to Brixton. By the same token, Matthew Barney's obsessive recreation of forms of American mythology proves yet a different entry-point into the logic of contemporary art, a logic that is impossible to universalize in the twenty-first century in the same way that modernism was in the twentieth century.

Artists like Huang, Shonibare, and Barney are important avatars of the conditions of contemporary art. I believe their works inhabit what could be called the provincialities of modernity and have incisively traced diverse paths of modernity through them. While certainly the three artists approach their practices from distinctly different historical points of view, their work can only properly be apprehended through the formal language of immersive installation, cinematic projection, and large, tableau-style photography dominant in global contemporary art. At the same time, by examining these different practices, as well as the historical experiences that inform them, we learn a lot more about the contingent conditions of contemporary art, its shifting points of discursive emphasis, its formal destabilization of historical references, than about its universalism. Here again, Chakrabarty offers a useful framework by dint of what he refers to as "habitations of modernity," that is, its spaces of reception and translation.<sup>6</sup>

What could these habitations of modernity be? On what maps do they appear? And in what forms and shapes? The search for the habitations of modernity seems to me the crux of *Altermodern*. In his outline to the project, Bourriaud laid out an intellectual and cultural itinerary, a jagged map of simultaneity and discontinuity—overlapping narratives and contiguous sites of production that form the basis of contemporary art practice globally. The chief claim of the *Altermodern* project is simple: to discover the current habitations of contemporary practice, which he believes to be scattered and off-shore-based. Thus Bourriaud rejects the rigid structures put in place by a stubborn and implacable modernity and the modernist ideal of artistic autonomy. In the same way, his project rebels against the systematization of artistic production based on a singular, universalized conception of artistic paradigms. If there is anything that marks the path of the altermodern, it would be the provincialities of contemporary art practice today—that is, the degree to which these practices, however globalized they may appear, are also informed by specific epistemological models and aesthetic conditions. Within this scheme Bourriaud inquires into the unfolding of the diverse fields of contemporary art practice that have been unsettled by global links. But, more importantly, these practices are measured against the totalizing principles of a universalized, grand modernity.

Where Bourriaud privileges the idea of the off-shore, I will foreground the drive of contemporary practices toward an off-center principle, namely the multi-

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

focal, multilocal, heterotemporal, and dispersed structures around which contemporary art is often organized and convened. This off-center—which might not be analogous to the offshore—is not the same as the logic of decentered locations; rather, the off-center is structured by the simultaneous existence of multiple centers. In this way, rather than decentering the universal, or relocating the center of contemporary art as a constant reference, as the notion of the off-shore suggests, the off-center allows the emergence of multiplicity, the breakdown of cultural or locational hierarchies, the absence of a singular locus. In a sense, off-centered zones of production, distribution, and reception of contemporary art articulate a dispersal of the universal, a refusal of the monolithic, a rebellion against the monocultural. The objective is to propose a new alignment, one that could succinctly capture both the emergence of multiple cultural fields, as they overspill into diverse arenas of thinking and practice, and a reconceptualization of the structures of legitimation that follow in their wake.

While Bourriaud refers the shift in recent art to a desire to mobilize new localities of production, which he perceives as proper to the field of artistic practice, a related field of historical research has been examining the dimension of the off-center principle of art-historical discourse for some time. The result of these projects is slowly entering mainstream art-historical production. In the last decade several scholars have explored the structure of the heterochronical conception of modern and contemporary art history (think, for instance, of Chakrabarty's notion of the heterotemporal method of organizing historical frames).

One such project is the recent exhibition *Turns in Tropics: Artist-Curator*, developed for the 7th Gwangju Biennial by the Manila-based Filipino art historian and curator Patrick Flores. In this exhibition, he proposes an agenda of experimental and conceptualist practices from the late 1960s to the early 1980s in Southeast Asia by four artists—Raymundo Albano (Philippines), Reydza Piyadasa (Malaysia), Jim Supangkat (Indonesia), and Apinan Poshyananda (Thailand)—working in contexts in which not only was the spirit of modernity transforming the splintered identity of the nation but rapid modernization was also recalibrating the canons and languages of artistic practice.<sup>7</sup> Flores's emphasis on location represents a distinct cultural ecology, habitation of modernity, or provincial domain of contemporary art. His research explores not only the shifts in the language of artistic modernity—between the traditional and the experimental, and from academic painting to conceptualism—but also interrogates the effects and receptions of modernity by these postcolonial artists in relation to their belonging to the nation. This becomes the test for the production of contemporary art and its discourses.

In the process, Flores directs attention to a text stenciled on a sculpture by the Malaysian artist Reydza Piyadasa, which states that “Artworks never exist in

7. All four artists played multiple roles as influential artists, curators, critics, and historians in each of their national contexts in the development of the discourses of modernity and contemporary art.

time, they have ‘entry points.’”<sup>8</sup> With this text Piyadasa’s sculpture declares the contingency of its own history; in fact, it historicizes its own ambivalence towards canonical epistemology. What the stenciled text seems to be questioning is the idea of art as a universal sign, as a frozen historical datum. Instead, art works are dynamic forces that seek out relations of discourse, map new topologies, and create multiple relations and pathways. Piyadasa’s statement anticipates Bourriaud’s suggestion of an altermodern art, both in its claim for the trajectories of art and in the shifting historical and temporal dimension of its apprehension of such art. While none of the four artists in the exhibition have appeared in so-called mainstream surveys and accounts of experimental art and conceptualism of the late 1960s to the present, new off-center historical research such as Flores’s consistently drives us to the harbors of these archipelagos of modernity and contemporary art. The work of Albano from the Philippines, Supangkat from Indonesia, Piyadasa and the younger Thai artist, curator, and art historian Apinan Poshyananda, has clear structural affinities with the work of their contemporaries practicing in the West. Yet their work—made with an awareness of, and in response to, specific historical conditions—shares similar objectives with the work of other postcolonial artists from different parts of the world, again including those living and practicing in Europe.

These objectives would be familiar to emerging scholars such as Sunanda Sanyal, whose research focuses on modernism in Uganda; Elizabeth Harney, who has written extensively about negritude and modernism in Senegal; or the eminent critic Geeta Kapur, whose writing on modern and contemporary Indian art is magisterial.<sup>9</sup> Art historian Gao Minglu has also engaged rigorously with contemporary Chinese art with the same objective, and in a similar vein of historical archaeology, the Princeton art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu has studied and written persuasively on the generative character of young modern Nigerian artists in the late 1950s during the period of decolonization.<sup>10</sup> By no means am I suggesting

8. Patrick D. Flores, “Turns in Tropics: Artist Curator” in *Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, (Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2008), p. 263.

9. See Sunanda K. Sanyal, “Transgressing Borders, Shaping an Art History: Rose Kirumira and Makerere’s Legacy,” in *African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum: Sights/Sites of Creativity and Conflict*, ed. Tobias Döring (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2002), pp. 133–159; Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000).

10. See Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo: Albright Knox Gallery; Beijing: Millennium Museum, 2005); and *The Ecology of Post-Cultural Revolution Frontier Art: Apartment Art in China, 1970–1990s* (Beijing: Shuimu Contemporary Art Space, 2008); and Chika Okeke-Agulu, “The Art Society and the Making of Postcolonial Modernism in Nigeria,” unpublished lecture at Princeton University, 2008. Again, also see the remarkable study of the relationship between negritude, postcolonialism, and modernism by Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow*, and Gao Minglu, *The Wall*. These studies are among a growing list of scholarship directed at excavating the multifaceted histories of modern and contemporary art across divergent historical and cultural geographies. The studies illuminate the basic fact that buried within official Western mainstream art history are complex tendencies, narratives, and structures of practice that do not easily conform to the teleological construction of modern and contemporary art. These histories, at the same time, reveal the diverse temporalities of

that many of the artists examined in these various research studies are obscure in their own artistic contexts. Their artistic trajectories belong exactly in the heterotemporal frames of historical reflection, and the chronicles of their art are part of the heterochronical criticism and curating that have been part of the discourse of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourse. However, viewed through the lens of a univocal contemporary art history, predicated on the primacy of centers of practice—what Bourriaud refers to as the “continental ‘mainstream’”—can these practices be understood as forming more than an archipelago, and in fact exceed the altermodernist impulse? They certainly do expand the purely modernist notion of artistic competence. These issues are at the core of recent writings and research by the British-Ghanaian art historian and cultural critic Kobena Mercer, who explores the diverse off-center contexts of late modernism and contemporary art in a series of anthologies focused on artistic practices and artists in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Similar issues were mapped in the seminal exhibition *The Other Story* (1989), curated by the Pakistan-born British artist and critic, Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery, wherein he examined the contributions of hitherto unrecognized non-Western modernist artists to European modernism.

These surveys and situations of off-centeredness are emblematic of the large historical gaps that today, in the era of globalization, need to be reconciled with dominant paradigms of artistic discourse. In seeking to historicize these contexts of production and practice, a dialogic system of evaluation is established. It resolutely veers away from the standard and received notions of modernity, especially in the hierarchical segmentations that have been the prevailing point of entry for contemporary art discourse and history and its review of off-center practices.

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modern art by showing that there is no single genealogy of artistic modernity or sense of innovation. Yet whatever lacunae these histories inhabit, they do reveal modernity as a series of trajectories moving in multiple directions, and they are equally informed by cultural, ideological, formal, and aesthetic logics.

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I first became aware of a certain shift about ten years ago, when I heard a Colombian cover of the Eagles' "Hotel California." Sung in Spanish, and sounding strangely more moving than the song's original version, it seemed that the displacement caused by this act of cultural translation produced something that was never present in the original. And, while being an homage of sorts, this translation was also a critique: how is it possible that an obscure recording by local musicians working in a small studio in Cali, for example, could bypass the American music industry, with all its infrastructure, markets, channels of distribution, etc.? Partly the pleasure of rediscovery experienced while listening to this recording is related to its origin in a parallel economy and the informal channels through which such production often circulates, from friends to friends of friends. This makes me think that the specific conditions under which a work is produced and circulated, and the viability of alternative cultural scenarios, have become of increasing importance during the past couple of decades.

In part these conditions are determined by a simple matter of where one stands in relation to certain historical narratives. For example, though the history of World War II is a defining event for me personally, it may not signify the same things to cultural producers and audiences everywhere, for whom some other event could be a more pivotal point of reference. Could this also mean that the conventions of dividing modern art into pre- and postwar, which also defines modernism as a uniquely Western phenomenon, can prevent us from recognizing other important connections and readings elsewhere?

Perhaps there could be several simultaneous historical trajectories in art—including one in which the continuity of modern art is radically interrupted and reconfigured after the War, and another in which the torch is passed, for example, directly from El Lissitzky to Hélio Oiticica. To think of things in terms of an alternate narrative could be extremely instructive: in a sense, Oiticica managed to integrate some of the most central aspirations of modernism with spheres of social life that it had not previously been able to access, significantly revitalizing its tradition by bringing it into a contemporary context. After having been ignored by the Euro-American institutions at the time of its making, due in part to rigid pre- and postwar categorizations and how they obscure other readings, his work was only able to enter the discourse of art retroactively—at the moment when modernism had effectively already expired. While we have institutional access to and can enjoy looking at the work today, it has been denied the vital agency of influencing the discourse of its day, to which it had probably the most to offer.

One's needs are not often reflected by existing institutions. This is something one learns at an early age growing up in Moscow, as I did—or, actually, in most places other than the United States or Western Europe. Although I have spent the majority of my life in New York, I never developed any kind of love/hate

relationship with museums or galleries, probably because as an immigrant/outsider I never assumed that they would render themselves transparent or even provide the space within which to work. If an artist were to develop a kind of practice requiring a new institutional configuration in order to manifest itself, it would seem pointless to try to reform existing structures through critique or infiltration—to change them from within—simply because these approaches only lead to a relationship of dependency. An artist today aspires to a certain sovereignty, which implies that in addition to producing art one also has to produce the conditions that enable such production and its channels of circulation. Consequently, the production of these conditions can become so critical to the production of work that it assumes the shape of the work itself.

I see evidence of this concern in many contemporary works: Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here* began as an immediate response to a lack of institutional support for an exhibition she was invited to do, and became one of her most influential artworks. Due to the lack of support Rosler received from the Dia Foundation (who commissioned the project), she felt that the only way to do something there was by positioning herself as curator/organizer—a kind of a one-person institution rather than an individual artist. This resulted in a project comprised of several exhibitions involving numerous artists, architects, activists, and community groups, while being at the same time a seminal artwork by Rosler that influenced several generations of artists, including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, and Renée Green among many others.

Another good example of such a complex approach to art production is Akram Zaatari's extraordinary works with Madani's photo archive, which sometimes appear as films and videos in which his role as an artist is unquestioned. At the same time, essentially identical content is often presented as exhibitions for which he would be suddenly credited as curator. Even the Arab Image Foundation that developed around this archive, may be as much a work of art as it is a bona fide institution.

What passed largely unnoticed in Paul Chan's production of *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans was Chan's peculiar positioning of the artist in relation to the work: he did not write the play, direct it, or act in it. The set was essentially a city street. However, I would argue that Chan's artistic involvement consisted largely of spending many months teaching as a volunteer in a local college, building close relationships with local community groups and grass roots organizations, making sure that part of the money raised for the project would go to urgent local needs other than culture, in other words, creating conditions for the production and reception of the play. While these types of works are not entirely free of collaboration with existing institutions, they do manage to assert a degree of autonomy by assuming both artistic and curatorial/organizational methodologies simultaneously, and often in combination with discursive or collective modes of production.

Julius Koller, a conceptual artist from Bratislava, passed away last year leaving



behind a vast archive of notes, works on paper, magazine clippings, lists and other materials, nearly 12,000 items in total. The national museum wanted to absorb all this material into their collection, but realized that its staff of curators and art historians had difficulty distinguishing between actual art works and mere notes written as a reminder to buy food for lunch. This task was partially outsourced to the artist and poet Boris Ondreicka, who set up an independent foundation that is now dealing with the archive. This anecdotal story may be exemplary as it is very possible that bigger and more established institutions, like MoMA or the Whitney, essentially have the same problem understanding contemporary practices that are concerned not with the production of masterpieces but with reconciling art with other processes in life. Though the museum may function at times as the physical housing for work, it may not be the ultimate destination for some of the more complex and interesting work done today.

All this makes me think that in order to understand contemporary art, it is essential to start the research from the edge—in terms of the proximity of certain practices to seemingly nonartistic activities—and away from the centers of art.

Contemporary art is perhaps the only genre of art—as framed within the disciplinary regime of art history—that ought to have been aware of its heterogeneity from the onset, given that it came after the expiration of the earlier, prevalent, tendency to construct a unitary history of art from Greece to Jackson Pollock. Coming during the late twentieth century, after the end of classic imperialism, after the liberation of former European colonies and political hegemonies, and the rise of diverse sites in which modernity, in its various guises, played out, the surprise is that it took this much time for students, scholars, and guardians of contemporary art to contemplate the very existence of multiple sites of contemporary art production, transaction, and discourse, outside of the Euro-American axis. It seems to me that the ineffectiveness of “the neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism” as useful paradigms is precisely because they are deeply compromised by their ineluctable attachment to earlier, patently Western, one might even say parochial, paradigms: “avant-garde” and “modernism.” The crucial question is whether scholarship is the worse for not, at least so far, having found a convenient panoramic lens with which to grasp the variegated, multi-local practices, products, ideas, discourses, and networks through which the expanded field of contemporary art is constituted. I do not think so.

The transformation of the discipline of contemporary art has followed two trends. The first is the rise of international contemporary art biennials in formerly peripheral locations—from Havana to Gwangju, from Dakar to Istanbul; the second is the arrival of formidable subaltern theorists, scholars, curators, and artists from elsewhere to Europe and America. International biennials provided artists and works that would never have made it to New York, London, or Paris an unprecedented and often highly visible space of encounter with local and international art worlds, thus inserting them into emerging debates and conversations about the scope and parameters of contemporary art. As such, these biennials have played a major role in the migration of contemporary art, artists, and scholarship across and between erstwhile peripheries and centers of the art world, and the result is the destabilization and unruly distention of the discursive horizon of contemporary art, which now increasingly registers in some quarters as a crisis.

The reality is that contemporary art—specifically the one that emerged from various postwar practices and trends in the West—is past its age of innocence. In fact, it is only *that* contemporary art, as well as the theories and critical perspectives marshaled in its support, that are in crisis, being as it were unable to find the language to contemplate or articulate the consequence of the arrival of other kinds of contemporary art and artists at the table. Where in the past such critical tools or paradigms as “neo-avant-garde” or “postmodernism” could illuminate or explain substantial aspects of Western contemporary art, now they clearly have

little critical purchase in the crowded—and, one might add, resplendent—space that has become global contemporary art.

While one could see economic globalization, and the neoliberal ideology that fuels it, as an important factor in the awareness of the global scope of contemporary art, it makes sense only in addition to the equally powerful consequences of postcoloniality. That is to say, while globalization has meant the spread of Western economic and political models, as well as cultural and knowledge systems, the postcolonial condition of the late twentieth century motivates the assertiveness of subaltern subjectivities, on the one hand, and the anxieties about the increasingly unstable image of the post-imperial Western self, on the other. Thus, contemporary art as we now know it is characterized by two contrapuntal forces: the globalization of sameness (what some have cynically referred to as the biennial aesthetic) and the contestation of this sameness through these very biennials, many of which have the mandate to promote and to assert the imagined uniqueness of national, regional, or continental contemporary art and visual practices. Here I think of the imagined confrontation between Negri and Hardt's empire and the multitude.

What is to be done? The place to begin is to dispense with the hope of finding singular models or the wish for the return of rehabilitated grand narratives that can possibly make sense of global contemporary art. Rather, the task facing contemporary art scholarship must be the development of a comparative art history, and the place to begin is to recognize the discrepant practices, histories, ideas, and geographies of contemporary art. Despite the criticisms that have been leveled against comparative literature, its recognition of multiple literatures and literary traditions that can be studied comparatively, provides a model for art history, criticism, and theory. The advantage of the comparative mode is that it demands the acquisition of critical tools and languages relevant to more than one discursive field—which means that rather than observe other fields from one position, the scholar acquires the ability to view multiple sites from cross positions and with differently fashioned binoculars, the use of which she must master as well.

To be sure, the proliferation of contemporary art biennials has created new tribes of nomadic artists and curators, but it has equally compelled critics and art historians to follow the peripatetic networks of contemporary art. The search for analytical tools with which to comparatively study and explain aspects of the sort of work that makes it to the elite biennials, fairs, galleries, and museums of contemporary art—and I mean work that in its differentness still manages to speak a familiar language—remains a viable, if arduous and precarious, enterprise. But when one considers the even more bewilderingly diverse practices that may not yet be part of the discussion, but which in their richness and substance are bound to crash the party sooner or later, it seems better to live with the likelihood that no singular models or paradigms will sufficiently help us wade through the murky, restless waters of today's contemporary art.

In recent decades, the most pervasive idea about contemporary art has been that one cannot—indeed should not—have any idea about it. So it is not surprising that contemporary art's current bout of self-questioning has occurred so tardily. Over half a century since the first stirrings of a distinctively contemporary art became evident (as retreats, voids, and absences) in the work of artists such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, and members of the Gutai group; more than forty years since its immediacy insisted itself in the work of artists such as Andy Warhol, Allan Kaprow, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, Robert Smithson, Joseph Beuys, and performance artists and conceptualists everywhere; at least thirty years after its demands were interpreted as symptoms of our shift to the postmodern—yet we nevertheless have found ourselves standing, unblinking, in spectacularity's spotlight. The market bubble built so assiduously during the 1980s has recently burst: its contribution to conceiving the contemporary as a state of witless presentism cannot be underestimated.

Yet other voices did contribute to the clamor. If we can say that during the 1950s and the early 1960s artists led the way in responding to the contemporary, and in defining it, critically, for the rest of us, it is becoming a cliché to note that in each successive decade since then agenda-setting was done, in turn, by theorists critics, arts administrators, gallerists, curators, and collectors. This was accompanied of course by much excitable role-swapping, yet the rise and rise of a vacuous pluralism seemed unstoppable, especially in the Northern Hemisphere. By the 1990s, every new art institution, and each new department of existing ones, was busy naming, or renaming, itself “contemporary.” Few had any firm idea of what this meant: mostly the word served as a placeholder for what had recently occurred, was going on right now, or might happen next.

Despite the wistful nostalgia for bearable lightness expressed in the metaphor with which the questionnaire concludes, those days are gone—indeed, the undertow has been felt since the 1980s. How do we unpack decades of disinformation about contemporary art? How do we inject critical consciousness into the morass of upbeat mindlessness that has come to pass for art discourse? How do we avoid the twin dangers of, on the one hand, inflating some part-explanation (postmodern irony, poststructuralist informalism, melancholy Marxism, relational aesthetics, altermodernism, etc.) into an account of the whole and, on the other, running for shelter behind the minutiae of particularism?

One obstacle is the self-interest and inflexibility of the art institutions: the flailing about so evident at the Museum of Modern Art, for example, as it struggles to absorb the contemporary into its core commitments to historical modernism and to medium-based bureaucracy. A deeper challenge to historians of the contemporary is that we cannot escape finding ourselves in the position of the central figure in Kafka's parable “HE.” Pressed from behind by past forces—insistently

nagging, unbeaten, still vital, seeking advantage—and from in front by the future’s infinite expectations, we struggle to grasp our present, to find even a temporary place in it. All three temporalities need each other to be themselves, yet, Kafka notes, we have a secret dream, that “some time in an unguarded moment—and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been—he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.”<sup>1</sup>

I cannot here gloss this glaring insight—and could not, in any case, come close to matching Hannah Arendt’s brilliant commentary in *Between Past and Future*, a collection of essays full of pointers as to how the present might be thought.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that in contemporary conditions, no one is going to elevate us to some time-space outside of the struggle. Indeed we are hard pressed nowadays to imagine the future having the kind of presence in the present that it had for Kafka in 1920, Arendt in 1961, or for many of us until 1989 or 2001. Utopian thinking has all but disappeared, and confidence in the inevitability of progress has evaporated. Today, reactionary pasts insist most strongly on their right to occupy the times to come. Meanwhile, old—that to say, modern—remedies remain in place, even as they fall conspicuously short of securing their own perpetuation. This situation is as evident in worldwide efforts to cope with the current financial crisis as it is in many more specific domains, including those of art.

Considerations such as these, along with a refusal to settle for them, have shaped the kind of explanation I have been exploring for some time: an historical hypothesis about the nature of art in contemporary conditions. We might begin by asking: what does contemporaneity mean in these circumstances? How has the current world-picture changed since the post–World War II aftermath led to the reconstruction of an idea of Europe; since decolonization opened up Africa and Asia, with China and India emerging to superpower status but others cycling downwards; since the era of revolution versus dictatorship in South America led first to the imposition of neoliberal economic regimes and then to a continent-wide swing towards populist socialism? As the system built on First, Second, Third, and Fourth World divisions imploded, what new arrangements of power came into being? Now that the post-1989 juggernaut of one hyperpower, unchecked neoliberalism, historical self-realization, and the global distribution of ever-expanding production and consumption tips over the precipice, what lies in the abyss it has created? Above all, how do we, in these circumstances, connect the dots between world-picturing and place-making, the two essential parameters of our being?

My suggestion is that we start by taking seriously, and then carefully scrutinizing, our instinctual reach for the contemporary. The concept of “the contemporary,” far from being singular and simple, a neutral substitute for

1. Franz Kafka, “Notes from the year 1920,” in *The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002).
2. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 7–14.

“modern,” signifies multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time, separately and at once, with others and without them.<sup>3</sup> These modes have of course always been there. The difference nowadays is that the multiplicities of contemporary being predominate over the kinds of generative and destructive powers named by any other comparable terms (for example, the modern and its derivatives). After the era of grand narratives, they may be all that there is. What we take to be contemporary is the primary indicator of what matters most to us about the world right now, and what matters most to artists.

In these circumstances, would-be historians of contemporary art face some methodological challenges. Only by working together do we have a chance of rising to them. Track the occurrence—intermittent, occasional, gradually insistent, then, suddenly, ubiquitous—of ideas of the contemporary within modern art discourse.<sup>4</sup> Examine when, how, and why art became modern in each distinct yet related cultural region of the world, in each city where this change occurred. Then show how each of these accommodations with modernity underwent, or is still undergoing, its unique yet connected transition to contemporaneity.<sup>5</sup> Finally, look around you: what does the present look like when seen from these historical perspectives? In the space available, I can offer only the most schematic, assertive outline of a response to this last question.<sup>6</sup> It comes in two parts: a claim about the present itself, and a claim about how art is being made within it.

Contemporaneity is the most evident attribute of the current world picture, encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multitude of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being. This picture can no longer be adequately characterized by terms such as “modernity” and “postmodernity,” not least because it is shaped by friction between antinomies so intense that it resists universal generalization—indeed it resists even generalization about that resistance. It is, nonetheless, far from shapeless. Within contemporaneity, it seems to me, at least three sets of forces contend, turning each other incessantly. The first

3. Giorgio Agamben is only the latest to draw attention to the untimely nature of being contemporary: see *What Is an Apparatus?* and *Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

4. I suggest a framework in “Writing the History Of Contemporary Art: A Distinction, Three Propositions, and Six Lines Of Inquiry,” in *Crossing Cultures: Migration, Conflict, Convergence: Proceedings of the 34th Annual Conference of the International Committee for the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009). See also Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming).

5. My contribution will be *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King and Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, forthcoming).

6. Contemporaneity is discussed in my *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and by a number of authors in Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). The present argument was first broached in *What is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come* (Sydney: Artspace Critical Issues Series, 2001), and is developed in, among other places, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006), pp. 681–707; “World Picturing in Contemporary Art; Iconogeographic Turning,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 7, no. 1 (2006), pp. 24–46; and in detail in *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

is globalization itself; above all, its thirsts for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation (the multiteity that was released by decolonization), for control of time in the face of the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities, and for continuing exploitation of natural and (to a degree not yet imagined) virtual resources against the increasing evidence of the inability of those resources to sustain this exploitation. Secondly, the inequity between peoples, classes, and individuals is now so accelerated that it threatens both the desires for domination entertained by states, ideologies, and religions, and the persistent dreams of liberation that continue to inspire individuals and peoples. Thirdly, we are all willy-nilly immersed in an infospace—or, better, a spectacle, an image economy, a regime of representation—capable of the instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere. This iconomy—indeed the entire global communication system—is at the same time fissured by the uneasy coexistence of highly specialized, closed knowledge-communities, open, volatile subjects, and rampant, popular fundamentalisms. Globalization has proved incapable of keeping these contradictions in productive tension. We see now that it was modernity's last roll of the dice—which does not mean that it will desist from playing to win.

How is art being made in this situation? Recent books on contemporary art tend to be pictorial compilations accompanied by minimal information and brief artists' statements (the Taschen model), anthologies of interpretive essays by theorists, critics, and curators (the Blackwell model), or surveys showing how certain artists are tackling one or another theme in long lists of current concerns.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, art-critical discourse finds itself in an oddly suspended state between promotional chat and melancholy, anxious historicism. *Artforum* editor Tim Griffin asks: "What happens, then, when the overturning that defined modernism is itself overturned, with the result that past moments are never done away with, their residues instead seeming to accrue? When, to put it another way, the critical models of previous eras do not, and cannot be asked to, function as they once did?"<sup>8</sup> Contrast what many outside observers see in at least some contemporary art. For example, philosopher and sinologist François Julien: "For hasn't art always been ahead of philosophy? (And is it not alone in the contemporary period in having attempted, through its practice, to uproot itself?) Art today demonstrates how a practice can explore diverse cultures in order to purge its atavisms and reinvent itself."<sup>9</sup> If these observers are looking at the same thing, they are doing so with their backs to each other.

Can the fundamental forces shaping contemporary art be discerned, and can the shaping effects be described . . . plausibly, accurately, critically? A polemi-

7. For example, Eleanor Heartney, *Art & Today* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), lists fifteen themes.

8. Tim Griffin, "A New Novel," *Artforum*, 46, no. 10 (Summer 2008), p. 61.

9. François Julien, *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), pp. 159–60.



cal proposition: like contemporaneity itself, art today is made in relation to the unfolding of three major currents, each of which has its distinctive features while being tied to the others—its contemporaries—and is in contestation with them. Each is changing before our eyes, yet has its own historical destiny, will transmute, and will pass.

The first current amounts to an aesthetic of globalization, serving it through both a relentless remodernizing and a sporadic contemporizing of art. It has two discernable aspects, each of which is perhaps a style in the traditional sense of being a marked change in the continuing practice of art in some significant place that emerges, takes a shape that attracts others to work within its terms and to elaborate them, prevails for a time, and comes to an end. One aspect is the embrace of the rewards and downsides of neoliberal economics, globalizing capital, and neoconservative politics, pursued during the 1980s and since, through repeats of earlier twentieth-century avant-garde strategies, yet lacking their political utopianism and their theoretic radicalism, above all by Damien Hirst and the YBAs, but also by Julian Schnabel, Jeff Koons, and many others in the U.S., and by Takashi Murakami and his followers in Japan. In honor of the 1997 exhibition at which this tendency, in its British form, surfaced to predictable consternation on the part of conservatives but also mainstream acceptance, we might call it “Retrosensationalism.” This has burgeoned alongside the constant efforts of the institutions of modern art (now usually designated contemporary art) to reign in the impacts of contemporaneity on art, to revive earlier initiatives, to cleave new art to the old modernist impulses and imperatives, to renovate them. The work of Richard Serra, Gerhard Richter, and Jeff Wall exemplifies different versions of this tendency, which might be called “Remodernism.” In the work of certain artists, such as Matthew Barney and Cai Guo-Qiang, both aspects come together in a conspicuous consummation, generating an aesthetic of excess that might be tagged (acknowledging its embodiment of what Guy Debord theorized as “the society of the spectacle”) the Art of the Spectacle or “Spectacularism.” In contemporary architecture, similar impulses shape the buildings, especially those for the culture industry, designed by Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, and Daniel Libeskind, among others. (Mercifully, the work is usually better-looking, and more meaningful, than this binge of ugly style terms would imply.)

How does art of this kind appear when we pose to it the question: what is contemporary art now? To me it comes across as a late-modern art that, half-aware that it is too easily in tune with the times, continues to pursue the key drivers of modernist art: reflexivity and avant-garde experimentality. In this sense, it is the latest phase in the universal history of art as such. Its bet is that art emergent within the other currents I identify will fade into oblivion, and that it alone will persist as the art remembered by the future. (Each of the currents—like the central figure in Kafka’s parable—harbors this assumption about the others.) Yet these hopes are tempered by the realization that today such values are being held

against the grain of the present, with little hope that the times will change favorably or that art can do much to effect desirable change. This contrasts greatly to their early twentieth-century predecessors, whose critiques of the abuses of capitalism or of the iron cage of modernity were based on what seemed then to be possible, even plausible, utopias. Nostalgia for this failed project is widespread, spurring recurrent interest (not least among contemporary art historians) in moments when it seemed still viable. Transitions towards the contemporary have become of great interest to artists: thus, for example, the heart-felt recycling of Warhol's critical imagery of the early 1960s in the work of artists such as Christian Marclay, and of his later work by Tracey Moffatt.

The second current emerges from the processes of decolonization within what were the Third, Fourth, and Second Worlds, including its impacts in what was the First World. It has not coalesced into an overall art movement, or two or three broad ones. Rather, the transnational turn has generated a plethora of art shaped by local, national, anti-colonial, and independent values (diversity, identity, critique). It has enormous international currency through travelers, expatriates, new markets, and especially biennales. Local and internationalist values are in constant dialogue in this current—sometimes they are enabling, at others disabling, but they are ubiquitous. With this situation as their raw material, artists such as William Kentridge, Jean-Michel Bruyère, Shirin Nishat, Isaac Julien, Georges Adéagbo, John Mawurdjul, and many others produce work that matches the strongest art of the first current. Postcolonial critique, along with a rejection of spectacle capitalism, also informs the work of a number of artists based in the metropolitan cultural centers. Mark Lombardi, Allan Sekula, Thomas Hirschhorn, Zoe Leonard, Steve McQueen, Aernout Mik, and Emily Jacir, among many others, have developed practices that critically trace and strikingly display the global movements of the new world disorder between the advanced economies and those connected in multiple ways with them. Other artists base their practice around exploring sustainable relationships with specific environments, both social and natural, within the framework of ecological values. Still others work with electronic communicative media, examining its conceptual, social, and material structures: in the context of struggles between free, constrained, and commercial access to this media, and its massive colonization by the entertainment industry, artists' responses have developed from expanded cinema and Net art towards immersive environments and explorations of avatar-viuser (visual information user) interactivity.

What kind of answer do we get when we pose the question of the contemporary to the art of this current? To artists participant in the early phases of decolonization, those being asked for an art that would help forge an independent culture during the nation-building days of the 1960s, a first move was to revive local traditional imagery and seek to make it contemporary by representing it through formats and styles that were current in Western modern art. Elsewhere,

in less severe conditions, for artists seeking to break the binds of cultural provincialism or of centralist ideologies, becoming contemporary meant making art as experimental as that emanating from the metropolitan centers. Geopolitical changes in the years around 1989 opened up a degree of access between societies closed for one and sometimes two generations. The work of unknown contemporaries became visible, and the vanquished art of earlier avant-garde became suddenly pertinent to current practice. Frenzied knowledge exchange ensued, and hybrids of all kinds appeared. The desire soon arose to create and disseminate a contemporary art that, toughened by the experiences of postcoloniality, would (in the words of Cuban critic Geraldo Mosquera) “remake Western culture” and thus be valid throughout the entire world.<sup>10</sup> The transnational turn during the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century—a shift into transitionality, especially with regard to concepts of the nation—has led to the art of the second current becoming predominant on international art circuits, in the proliferating biennales, with profound yet protracted effects at the modern metropolitan centers. It is a paradigm shift in slow motion that matches the changing world geopolitical and economic order. From this perspective contemporary art today is the art of the Global South.

The third current that I discern is different in kind yet again, being the outcome largely of a generational change and the sheer quantity of people attracted to active participation in the image economy. As art it usually takes the form of quite personal, small-scale, and modest offerings, in marked contrast to the generality of statement and monumentality of scale that has increasingly come to characterize remodernizing, sensationalist, and spectacular art, and the conflicted witnessing that continues to be the goal of most art consequent on the transnational turn. Younger artists certainly draw on elements of the first two tendencies, but with less regard for their fading power structures and styles of struggle, and more concern for the interactive potentialities of various material media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity. Working collectively, in small groups, in loose associations, or individually, these artists seek to arrest the immediate, to grasp the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today. They make visible our sense that these fundamental, familiar constituents of being are becoming, each day, steadily stranger. They raise questions as to the nature of temporality these days, the possibilities of place-making vis-à-vis dislocation, about what it is to be immersed in mediated interactivity and about the fraught exchanges between affect and effect. Within the world’s turnings, and life’s frictions, they seek sustainable flows of survival, cooperation, and growth. Attitudes range from the dystopian scenarios favored by Blast Theory and the International Necronautical Society, through the counter-surveillance activity of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Daniel Joseph Martinez’s fer-

10. Gerald Mosquera, “El Tercer Mundo hará la cultura occidental,” [“The Third World makes Western culture”] *Revolución y Cultura* (July–September, 1986), pp. 39–47.

vent protests, Paul Chan's symbolic shadow profiles, and the insouciant receptivity of Francis Alÿs, to Rivane Neuenschwander's wide-eyed optimism.

It follows from the mind-set and the modes of practice of this generation of artists that they share no single answer to the question of what is contemporary art. Indeed their radar of operations—their politics, in a word—is for the most part lower and more lateral yet also more networked than the global perspectives that exercise transnational artists and is indifferent to the generalizations about art itself that remain important for the remodernists. Most of them abhor the superficialities of the spectacle, however much they acknowledge that it has permeated all of our lives. They begin from their experiences of living in the present, so that the question for them becomes less a matter of what is contemporary art, and more one of which kinds of art might be made now, and how might they be made with others close to hand.

Each of the three currents disseminates itself (not entirely but predominantly) through appropriate—indeed matching—institutional formats. Remodernism, retro-sensationalist, and spectacularist art are usually found in major public or dedicated private museums, prominent commercial galleries, the auction rooms of the “great houses,” and the celebrity collections, largely in or near the centers of economic power that drove modernity. Biennials, along with traveling exhibitions promoting the art of a country or region, have been an ideal venue for postcolonial critique. These have led to the emergence of a string of new, area-specific markets. The widespread art of contemporaneity appears rarely in such venues—although some of it doubtless will, as the institutions adapt for survival and certain artists make their accommodations—preferring alternative spaces, public temporary displays, the Net, zines and other do-it-yourself-with-friends networks. There is of course no exclusive matching of tendency and disseminative format. Just as crossovers between what I am discerning here as currents are frequent at the level of art practice, connections between the formats abound, and artists have come to use them as gateways, more or less according to their potential and convenience. The museum, many artists will say today, is just one event-site among the many that are now possible. But this mobility is recent and has been hard won. While convergence certainly occurs, temporary alliance—the confluence of differences—is more common.<sup>11</sup>

The same is true with regard to the three currents that I have outlined: they are tied to each other, as sibling differences, their friction sparking contemporary art's repetitions and its diversity. These are, in a word, antinomies—like all other relationships characteristic of these times. The questionnaire is acute in highlighting the necessarily interrogatory character of contemporary art-making and of interpretative responses to it. Yet the questioning is occurring in modes that, however much they share, have some distinctive qualities. By presenting their

11. For an assessment of how these currents manifested themselves in the curatorial programs of the 52nd Venice Biennale, Documenta 12, and the 4th Munster Sculpture Project see Terry Smith, “The World, from Europe: The Mega-exhibitions of Mid-2007,” *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2008), pp. 4–19.

works as propositions—bold, singular assertions about what art should look like now—the remodernists remain within the modern project. Trying it on, seeing what you can get away with, what the punters will accept being flung in their faces, is the retro in sensationalism. Asking about identity, nationality, selfhood, and otherness, as each of these whirls through volatile transition, is an urgent necessity—at times liberating, at others debilitating—for artists activated by the transnational turn. Doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, bemused paradoxes, tentative projections, diffident proposals, or wishful anticipations—this is the tone struck by most younger artists today. What makes all of these approaches distinct from the contemporary preoccupations of previous art is that they are addressed—explicitly, although more often implicitly—not only by each work of art to itself and to its contemporaries; they are also, and definitively, interrogations into the ontology of the present that ask: what is it to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity?

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The years following 1989 have seen the emergence of a new historical period. Not only has there been the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the heralding of the era of globalization, but technologically there has been the full integration of electronic or digital culture, and economically, neoliberalism, with its goal to bring all human action into the domain of the market, has become hegemonic. Within the context of the fine arts, the new period has come to be known as “the contemporary.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s, several factors came together that resulted in a seismic change that, I believe, significantly realigned the manner in which art addresses its spectator.

The categories that allow us to think about contemporary art are uneven and have been coming together for a while. Many of them have their origins in the perceptual modes required by art of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. For instance, tactical media strategies that combine documentary information and expressive politics were extensively developed by artists working in the 1960s and '70s (such as the Tucuman Arde collective in Argentina and the Guerrilla Art Action Group in the United States) before they were adopted by counter-globalization artists working with the Internet. Similarly, a number of projects of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s were characterized by their intensity and their call for expressive response—for example, the work of Kinetic and Op artists such as Jesús Soto, Bridget Riley, and the members of GRAV, as well as post-Minimalist artists such as Robert Smithson or James Turrell. This art prefigured some of the ideas explored in contemporary digital images and sculptural installations (by artists such as Andreas Gursky and Olafur Eliasson) that overwhelm cognition and produce sheer affect.

Causality is one of the main problems that I want to address in this response. Of particular concern is the twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities—the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, from modern to contemporary—slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break, while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns “the contemporary” into a period in its own right. Indeed, I will argue that this period in art we now call the contemporary has been coming together for a while, and it parallels other contemporary hegemonic formations such as globalization and neoliberalism, which come to be fully in place by the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

By summoning the concept of a hegemonic formation, I mean to signal that I do not think that the consolidation of the contemporary is just a question of periodization.<sup>2</sup> I use periodization as a tool with which to think the whole social

1. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2. By “hegemonic formation” I refer to what Chantal Mouffe describes as “the materialization of a social articulation in which different social relations react reciprocally either to provide each other with mutual conditions of existence, or at least to neutralize the potentially destructive effects of certain social relations on the reproduction of other such relations.” Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and

formation, a tool that allows us to think the society in its totality. But I use the concept of hegemony—defined as an ensemble of relatively stable social forms and practices that are organized in a complex way, but still within a larger, overdetermining structure of domination—as an apparatus with which to think totality and difference at the same time. Hegemony allows us to see the totality as being constructed by divisions, contradictions, and what Chantal Mouffe would call “antagonisms.”<sup>3</sup> For me, the most important thing about this model is that insofar as it encompasses contradictions and antagonisms, it also opens the possibility of different subject positions that can occasion different forms of agency. Some of these forms of agency will ultimately reproduce the hegemonic social order, but others will develop as alternatives or even oppositions to it.

Thinking of the contemporary as a period allows us to draw connections between occurrences and events that are unfolding. The first is social and political (and to a large degree economic) and relates to what has, since the end of the Cold War, come to be referred to as “globalization.” As the cultural historian Michael Denning writes, “behind the powerful accounts of globalization as a process lies a recognition of a historical transition, of globalization as the name of the end, not of history, but of the historical moment of the age of three worlds” (a period that spans from the Potsdam conference of 1945 to the unforeseen collapse of “the Second World” in 1989).<sup>4</sup> What the three worlds to which Denning refers shared was a commitment to secularism, planning, equal rights, education, and modernization. To speak the word “globalization” is to say that these worlds and their ideals have not only failed, but are gone. The one thing globalization clearly means is that the world is now more interconnected than ever. Globalization thus stands as an attempt to name the present—it is a periodizing concept, especially when it announces the end of internationalism, or, even more ominously, the end of history.<sup>5</sup>

Globalization takes a number of forms within the context of the artworld. One is the thematic or iconographical representation of global integration in a diverse body of works. The range of examples would include, among many others, Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story* (1989–95), a global exploration of ports and the shipping industry at the end of the twentieth century; Ursula Biemann’s *Black Sea Files* (2005), which focuses on the geopolitics of oil; and Pavel Braila’s *Shoes for Europe* (2002), which documents the painstaking process of refitting the wheel gauges

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New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy” (1988), in Kate Nash, *Readings in Contemporary Political Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 297.

3. Ibid.

4. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 11. Denning, who observes that the term “globalization” displaced “international” in the late 1980s, places the term firmly within the period theorized in this paper: “One of the key words of the last decade of the twentieth century was “globalization.” Though the Oxford English Dictionary places the first use of the word in 1961, there are hundreds of books with the word in the 1990s; it appears that the first book to use it in its title was published in 1988” (p. 17).

5. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).



used on Central and Eastern European trains to the Western European standard. Another form that globalization takes within the art world is the proliferation of large global exhibitions in temporary contexts (that is to say, biennials, triennials, Documenta, art fairs, and the like). The impact of the intricate model of discourse that these well-attended and extensively reviewed events advance has been enormous not only on the exhibition of art but also on its production and distribution. Some of these exhibitions are meant to extend the Western art world to places such as Shanghai and Istanbul, while others are meant to bypass the Western art world (as with the Havana, Dakar, and Cairo biennials), to create an alternative pole. As Martha Rosler observed in a recent roundtable discussion: “The global exhibitions serve as grand collectors and translators of subjectivities under the latest phase of globalization.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, the structure of these global exhibitions follows the logic of the market: “the means of selection have been institutionalized . . . Artists are commonly put forward by other interested parties, such as powerful galleries and curators, whose investment is often linked to prospective sales.”<sup>7</sup> To this we could add that even—or especially—the most peripheral global exhibitions work as exploratory arms of the Western art market, unearthing and cultivating an endless supply of new goods for distribution. Others have been more sanguine about the proliferation of exhibitions that take globalism as their theme, describing these events as “the true sites of enlightened debate on what contemporary art means today, a position thoroughly abdicated by museums.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the neoliberal economy of globalization has been accompanied by new collecting practices. Gone is the chic collector who seeks cultural capital, let alone the connoisseur of early modernism; art collecting today is largely dominated by purchases of sheer speculation.

Yet another form that globalization takes in art is the dynamic manifestation of counter-globalization artistic practices. These engagements or new antagonisms range from the videos and paintings of Khaled Hafez, which challenge the stultifying uniformity of artistic globalization; to the photographs of Yto Barrada, which draw attention to the very real and material territorialization of global power at specific sites; to the tactical media projects of the Bureau d'études, which combine an artistic treatment of information with politics; to the elaborate drawings of Mark Lombardi, which chart the global relationships of the world's most powerful people, countries, and corporations.<sup>9</sup>

6. Martha Rosler, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition,” *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (November 2003), p. 154.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

8. Okwui Enwezor, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 163.

9. As Khaled Hafez writes, “Today I am able to discern, locally in Egypt (and also the Middle East), two types of practices that describe two different perceptions of art: on the one hand there are the artists who still approach and tackle art with the ‘aesthetics’ mindset, and those are the natural descendants of local pioneers and avant-gardes. On the other hand, there is a group of Middle East artists with an eye on the international art scene, approaching art with the very same concepts and perceptions of other ‘international’ artists, i.e., they speak the international language that art professionals speak all over the world . . . gradually abolishing ‘cultural specificities’ along the way.” Khaled Hafez, in

Second, the contemporary is witnessing the emergence of a new technological imaginary following the new communication and information technologies of the Internet, and the development in the 1990s of the global hypertext space known as the World Wide Web.<sup>10</sup> The full integration of electronic and digital culture that has developed in the contemporary period reverberates in a number of ways within the context of art and art history. For one thing, technological art objects have increasingly come to replace tangible ones in art galleries and museums, which have seen an upsurge of high-tech hybrids of all kinds, from digital photography, to film and video installations, to computer and other “new media” art. The white cube has begun to be displaced by the black box, and the small screen film or video monitor by the large-scale wall projection. For another thing, the image has come to replace the object as the central concern of artistic production and analysis. In the academy, the rise of visual studies is symptomatic of this new preeminence of the image.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this shift from analogue to digital has had a number of unpredictable effects in regard to the imaginary. One of the most striking of these is the proliferation of art works (the film installations of William Kentridge come immediately to mind, as does The Atlas Group project by Walid Raad) that employ fiction and animation to narrate facts, as if to say that today the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought, that the real is so mind-boggling it is easier to comprehend by analogy.<sup>12</sup>

Such a quantitative growth of new media has led to a reinvention of our concepts of communication, information, community, property, space, and even the concept of the subject itself. As a network, the World Wide Web provides the means for a virtually direct and diversified interactivity, the flexible and advanced distribution of information, and greater possibilities for the integration of art, technology, and social life. The technological possibilities of the new media—what Sean Cubitt has referred to as the “transience” (as opposed to the “ephemerality”) of media arts—compel us both to leave behind once and for all the notion that artworks are stable, isolated objects and to challenge the rights, economies, and

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“Quarterly Feature: Khaled Hafez,” <http://ArteEast.org/ArteNews/ArteNews-Articles2007/1-Special-Issue-Jan07> (viewed March 2008). For examples of art work that draws attention to the many geopolitical barriers that still exist in the era of globalization, see Ursula Biemann’s video essay, *Performing the Border* (1999), set in the Mexican-U.S. border town of Ciudad Juarez where U.S. multinational corporations assemble electronic and digital equipment; Yto Barrada’s *The Strait Project: A Life Full of Holes*, 1998–2004 (Schaden, Cologne, 2005), which examines the highly patrolled Strait of Gibraltar, and Emily Jacir’s *Where We Come From* (2003), on the many restrictions on and around the West Bank. For tactical media projects, see RTMark.com, and [bureaudetudes.free.fr](http://bureaudetudes.free.fr). For the drawings of Mark Lombardi, see Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2003).

10. For a history of the Internet and the World Wide Web see Janet Abbate, *Inventing the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), and James Gillies and Robert Cailliau, *How the Web Was Born* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11. See Susan Buck-Morss, “Visual Studies and Global Imagination,” *Papers on Surrealism* 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 1–29.

12. See, for example, William Kentridge’s *Felix in Exile* (1994) or *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), and Walid Raad’s *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2000). Raad established The Atlas Group project in 1999 to research the contemporary history of Lebanon.

forms of production traditionally associated with them.<sup>13</sup> Of course, this is not something that is inscribed in the technology itself. It is not that before the World Wide Web there were stable art objects and now their reality is virtual. It is rather that the new media makes us aware of how our experience of the world as such was, as Slavoj Žižek has put it, “always already minimally virtual in the sense that a whole set of symbolic presuppositions determine our sense of reality.”<sup>14</sup>

Third, the reconfigured context of contemporary art prompts a thorough reconsideration of the avant-garde. Peter Bürger’s argument in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that an avant-garde worth defending is one that seeks to reconnect artistic practices with the life world in order to transform the latter looms large over recent debates.<sup>15</sup> Some, like Okwui Enwezor, find the legacy of the avant-garde “of limited use” in the present, seeing it as doing “little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on Westernism.”<sup>16</sup> Others have proposed that the avant-garde promise of aesthetic equality has reemerged in the form of a “relational aesthetics” by artists who make work out of social interactions—work that engages, and is made out of, social communities.<sup>17</sup> Another reconceptualization of the avant-garde, advanced by, among others, the philosopher Jacques Rancière, shifts the focus away from the pursuit of rupture, the new, and progress (whether political or artistic) to the notion that the avant-garde aesthetically anticipates the future by actualizing “sensible forms and material structures for a life to come.”<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, art’s role in making transformations in the life world intelligible and preparing communities for the future is of central concern. A resurgence of interest (in the art world at least) in concepts of utopia, community, collaboration, participation, and responsible government, all of which encode a desire for change, has accompanied these new notions of the avant-garde.

Fourth, the new period is witnessing the surprising reemergence of a philosophical aesthetics that seeks to find the “specific” nature of aesthetic experience as such.<sup>19</sup> What the relationship is between this return to a pursuit of aesthetic essence and the proliferation of new-media artworks and visual culture in the past

13. Sean Cubitt, “Transient Media,” paper presented at the 32nd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art, Melbourne, Australia (January 15, 2008), in the session “New Media Across Cultures: from Gutenberg to Google, 1450–2008.”

14. Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 95.

15. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1974; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

16. Okwui Enwezor, “The Black Box,” *Documenta 11\_Plattform 5:Ausstellung Katalog* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002), p. 47.

17. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, [1998] 2002).

18. Jacques Rancière, “The Distribution of the Sensible” (2000), *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. G. Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 29.

19. A plethora of books that focus on beauty have been published in the past two decades. Some of these include Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993); Bill Beckley and David Shapiro, eds., *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* (New York: Allworth Press, 1998); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (New York: Open Court, 2003).

two decades is a key question here. The resurgence of philosophical aesthetics has coincided with a new construction of the spectator. When, for example, prominent contemporary artists claim that “meaning is almost completely unimportant” for their work and that “we don’t need to understand art, we need only to fully experience it,” they place value on affect and experience rather than interpretation and meaning—rather than contextually grounding and understanding the work and its conditions of possibility.<sup>20</sup>

This shift from the cognitive to the affective negates some of the most productive intellectual achievements of twentieth-century critical theory, which had attempted to reveal the social construction of subjectivity, even if it was understood as always already provisionally configured. It also throws hermeneutically based disciplines such as art history into crisis. This is in no way to suggest that aesthetic experience is purely mythical. Rather I mean to argue that we have aesthetic experiences, not because of some ontological postulate, but because we have been constructed as spectators in traditions that put those values and those experiences at the center of cultural life. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that not all of the returns to aesthetics have been content with the pursuit of essence. There have been a number of contemporary artists and writers whose work posits aesthetics as ontologically social, as a vital means by which to bring on the stage new objects and subjects. For instance, the meaning of Isaac Julien’s video installations or of Yinka Shonibare’s photographs and sculptures is located not in the artworks’ essence or even in spectatorship per se (with its inherent requirement of a suspension of disbelief). Rather, meaning in such art is determined by usage and is located after spectatorship, in the experience-based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the public.

New forms of art and spectatorship have crystallized in the past two decades. These new forms have come to be discursively constructed as “the contemporary.” There is no question that they owe a great deal to their modernist forbearers, and that there is much that carries over into the present. However, since the late 1980s these new modes have outstripped their debt to the past, and the hegemony of the contemporary now must be recognized. But so too must the fact that what constitutes the period remains open and unsettled, subject to a battlefield of narratives and stories. How the contemporary is symbolized and historicized, and hence its very identity, is the prize struggled over by a number of competing forces. There is presently too much at stake for those concerned with contemporary art history and with the history of the contemporary to remain on the sidelines of this polemical debate.

20. Jeff Wall, “Jeff Wall: Artist’s Talk” (October 25, 2005), Tate (London) Online Events, Archive, at [http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/jeff\\_wall\\_artists\\_talk](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/jeff_wall_artists_talk) (viewed July 2009).

It is all too tempting to consider the landscape of contemporary art as a clear extension and elaboration of the pluralism of previous decades. If the coexistence of so many contrasting artistic strategies once prompted the sense that there was no single coherent historical thread or trajectory to which artists, critics, curators, or collectors must necessarily respond, the character of the art world's unprecedented expansion in recent years would only seem to offer an unqualified confirmation of that suspicion: during that time, a global and highly diversified field of artistic practices became fiscally sustainable among individuated, even isolated audiences—with each model of art production seemingly enmeshed in a different constellation of interests or, more precisely, tastes. In this regard, the systems for the production, circulation, and consumption of art could be said simply to mirror the organization of mass culture and, in particular, its shift from economies of scale and volume to others more steeped in customization. Just as the operations of mass culture have lately been reoriented toward demographic structures and niche markets, in other words, so the operations of art have become subject to a dynamic of specialization—such that artistic production is very often given over to fulfilling and affirming the expectations of its particular viewership, even when it comes to notions of criticality and their sympathizers. Contemporary art is all too ready to signal its own resistant stance, and so is perpetually at risk of merely becoming a marker of difference, distinguishing itself more in terms of style than subversiveness, and in terms of affect more than effect.<sup>1</sup>

The potential irony here is that by signaling its stand apart art actually articulates itself as another niche within the broader cultural context—as just one more interest among so many others. Such a development is paradoxical in its implications. It becomes increasingly important for art to assert its own distinctiveness in order to exist—often by reinscribing itself within its various histories, projecting previous eras' interpretive models onto present circumstances—at the same time that such an assertion makes art resemble current mass culture all the more. This last conundrum was, in fact, the subject of an informative recent exchange between artists Dara Birnbaum and Cory Arcangel. Lamenting an aptitude by critics and scholars to view (or better, to try and redeem) projects through the prism of art history when those works might resonate with greater consequence in a mass context, Birnbaum turned to a video animation by Arcangel, saying that its depiction of an open, empty road has allegorical potential in its reflection “of a kind of hopelessness in its endlessness”:

*Dara Birnbaum:* That's my feeling of what's going on . . . between popular

1. Many of the ideas expressed in this paragraph are considered more expansively in a brief text I penned for *Artforum*. See “Custom Made,” *Artforum* 46, no. 3 (November 2007), p. 63.

culture and art—the latter of which is steeped in attempts to reinforce its own history now more than ever before.

*Cory Arcangel:* But that kind of separation is only going to be more pronounced given the rise of the Internet. Art is bound to become more and more specialized, because that's what everything is going to have to do; there won't be mixing even within popular culture, simply because of the way information travels. Each person goes his or her own way. Already, we don't have superstars like Michael Jackson anymore, because people aren't "watching the same channel" the way they used to.<sup>2</sup>

Arguably, contemporary art should then become tactical and strategic (rather than programmatic), always assigning itself a specific function according to any specific context; or its practitioners ought to delve into so many different positions, suggesting the precarious situation of occupying any single one amid the broader scenario of customization (where, it should be added, the articulation of any critical perspective is at risk of immediately creating yet another niche). In reflecting on this predicament, however, inevitably I find myself drawn to making a comparison between the spheres of art and poetry, taking into particular consideration the latter's history during the past forty years and, more specifically, a certain bifurcation that has taken place during that time. Once, poetry as it was produced had intimate ties with poetry as it was theorized, with activities on the page inevitably and self-consciously bound up with the questions of living in actual space. While early modern poets suggested as much by example (and while we can also think of more recent artists whose practices began with a textual basis), such links were forged most plainly in Structuralist and poststructuralist tracts, wherein poetic moments around sense in words—the return to a word to unfold its accepted usage, opening up its valences and potential meanings within the context of a given sentence—were considered to have correspondences within the functioning grammars of urban settings and social systems. ("The art of 'turning' phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path . . ."<sup>3</sup>) When that binding tie was no longer recognized (or, on the other hand, made academic), however, poetry began to migrate, as it were, away from poetry, becoming more a property of other disciplines interested in opening and altering perceptions on their constituent parts—leaving poetry seeming to the outside world little more than an archaic discipline, around which institutions were inevitably built in order to preserve its character and form. Is the situation of "contemporary" art analogous? In

2. "Do It 2," *Artforum* 47, no. 7 (March 2009), p. 193.

3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 100. Also: "The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations . . ."

recent decades we have, after all, seen art literally moving to the arenas of other disciplines, in collaborations with architects and physicists of the day, for example; maybe these moves represent, rather than any transposition of interests, an attempt by art to “find itself” when so many of its own institutions are merely trafficking in its image.



*Without this non-contemporaneity with itself  
of the living present . . . without this responsi-  
bility and this respect for justice concerning  
those who are not there, of those who are no  
longer or those who are not yet present and liv-  
ing, what sense would there be to ask the  
question “where?” “where tomorrow?”  
“whither?”*

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*<sup>1</sup>

My response to this questionnaire involves several points of overlapping reference. One is pedagogical, and relates to my experience as an instructor of requisite seminars on contemporary art at various art schools in the United States. Another is topical, and pertains to my own work concerning discourses of ecological sustainability in U.S. art over the past three decades. These points are linked by the problematic of contemporaneity, understood in terms of the simultaneous holding-up and handing-down of legacies between past, present, and future generations in light of Jacques Derrida’s caveat that “if the readability of a legacy were given, natural, univocal, transparent, if it did not at once call for and defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe it is necessary to approach the institutionalization of contemporary art in terms of what Derrida called “affirmative deconstruction”: “affirmative in a way that is not simply positive, not simply conservative, not simply as a way of repeating the given institution. I think that the life of an institution implies that we are able to criticize, to transform, to open the institution to its own future.”<sup>3</sup> Such a deconstructive approach to the contemporary would involve several analytical imperatives that are signaled in the questionnaire itself.

The first of these imperatives is sociological, and requires that we attend as closely as possible to the vectors of economic, political, and cultural power marking contemporary art in its various institutionalizations across the globe. To use Bruno Latour’s terms, contemporary art thus appears as a kind of “quasi-object” constituted by a complex network of actors—artists, critics, historians, curators, grant-writers, journalists, collectors, arts administrators, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, universities, private donor foundations, audi-

1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xix.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

3. Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. John Caputo (New York: Fordham, 1997), pp. 5–6.

ence members, and indeed art works themselves—all making claims on the limits and criteria of the arena in question with varying degrees of influence, prestige, and outright control. The multiple institutionalizations of contemporary art entail new modes of affiliation, possibility, and complicity for artistic, critical, and pedagogical activity. Without disregarding the importance of macrosystemic critiques, I believe that assessing the entanglements of contemporary art must be a matter of site-specific and tactically-oriented reading rather than blanket celebration or denunciation. This means refusing to reduce contemporary art to a flavor-of-the-month novelty either as peddled by art-market boosters, on the one hand, or as preemptively dismissed by guardians of art-historical authority on the other. Following the example of Okwui Enwezor, the increasingly transnational scope of contemporary art in discursive, institutional, and economic terms needs to be recognized as a productive intellectual challenge to entrenched critical positions, requiring the latter to engage artistic practice in light of the antagonisms of what Enwezor has called the “postcolonial constellation”—an ongoing world-historical conjuncture marked not only by the crises of post-Cold War neoliberalism and post-9/11 militarism, but also the multifarious modes of democratic politics that have emerged in resistance thereto.<sup>4</sup>

Enwezor’s project as a writer and curator opens onto a philosophical question concerning the structure of contemporaneity itself. Without failing to appreciate the refreshingly non-melancholic enthusiasm of Antonio Negri when he writes that “contemporaneity is the only way to express the eternal will to resistance and freedom,” it is crucial to reflect on the enigma of what it would mean to belong to or share “the present” with others who are not present to us, those who are dispersed in time, space, and discourse, and resist being joined together under the sign of the here-and-now.<sup>5</sup> This would involve a never-ending negotiation between discontinuously inherited historical traditions, on the one hand, and those unforeseeable events of artistic production and critical writing that are always already exceeding our capacity to read or judge them (even as such events are inevitably marked—with varying degrees of self-consciousness and historical ambition—by the very frames they exceed), on the other.

What does this mean for the pedagogical and institutional task of imparting knowledge of contemporary art to young artists-in-formation? A seminar lasts fourteen weeks: when and where is one to start and stop? Is Richard Serra a “contemporary artist”? Martha Rosler? Gerhard Richter? Fred Wilson? Mary Kelly? Robert Ryman? How does the ongoing production of such canonized “living artists” replicate, respond to, or complicate the critical-historical frameworks into

4. Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Condee, Enwezor, and Smith (Durham: Duke, 2008), pp. 207–34. Following Enwezor’s lead, I explore these problems in the post-9/11 work of the Pakistani artist Alia Hasan-Khan in “Suspicious Packages,” *October* 117 (Summer 2006), pp. 109–21.

5. Antonio Negri, “Contemporaneity Between Modernity and Postmodernity,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, p. 29.

which their masterworks have often been fossilized? How have younger artists in various parts of the world taken up, elaborated, reinvented, or rejected such legacies? How has the work of new generations of art historians rediscovered or refracted the problems at stake in these legacies? The very impossibility of answering these urgent questions in an absolute way suggests the productive possibilities for art, criticism, and education of affirming the challenge of contemporaneity.

In considering these questions in pedagogical terms, I have found myself torn between two extremes. Addressing students whose level of art-historical knowledge is often uneven at best, a traditionalist impulse demands that we begin contemporary art as far back as Robert Morris. But then why not Malevich, or Manet for that matter? On the other extreme, I often imagine a kind of pedagogical fable in which the syllabus would be entirely empty, a calendrical grid of weekly blanks waiting to be filled by whatever event, exhibition, or review comes to pass over the course of the class.

Obviously, neither of these is viable in and of itself; however, without uncritically acquiescing to the authority of a single publication, I believe that these poles have been mediated in a very productive fashion in the month-by-month features, profiles, columns, and reviews of *Artforum* over the past few years. The impressive levels of historical awareness, theoretical rigor, political concern, interdisciplinary expansiveness, and, to some extent, geographical diversity evident in the magazine have at once reflected and helped to construct the contemporary artistic field along the lines of a highly productive pluralism.

I use this last term advisedly. In a 1982 essay titled “Against Pluralism” that anticipates the concerns of the current questionnaire, Hal Foster diagnosed pluralism as a form of Marcusean “repressive tolerance” legitimizing a superficially liberated anything-goes relativism that in fact functioned to neutralize the claims of the previous two decades of art and criticism.<sup>6</sup> While heeding Foster’s admonishment, I think that the principle of pluralism should be reassessed in light of Chantal Mouffe’s notion of “agonistic pluralism,” which sustains a multiplicity of voices and claims concerning the limits and organization of the polity.<sup>7</sup> Mouffe convincingly disarticulates the liberal principle of pluralism from market-fundamentalist ideologies of consumer-choice, calling instead for the democratic articulation of positions that may enter into various forms of alliance, coalition, debate, and supplementation, without ever assuming an ideal of consensus—including an indifferent consensus of no-consensus. Crucially, she brings into this equation a revisionist reading of Carl Schmitt in which the identification of common enemies becomes an essential feature of the political. Transposing this model of agonistic pluralism to the contemporary artistic field, advocates of a tactical media group such as the Yes Men, for instance, might find common cause with

6. Hal Foster, “Against Pluralism,” (1982) in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Bay Press, 1985), pp. 13–32.

7. Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?,” *Social Research* 66 (1999). Also see Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden Joseph, and Thomas Keenan, “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension: An Interview with Chantal Mouffe,” *Grey Room* 2 (Summer 2001).

supporters of an exemplary navigator of the “post-medium condition,” such as William Kentridge in drawing a friend/enemy distinction vis-à-vis such contemporary phenomena as the ghoulish neo-neo-expressionism of Marlene Dumas, the decorative design-confections of Ryan McGinness, the unapologetic fashion-shoots of Vanessa Beecroft, the masochistic mannerism of Lisa Yuskavage, the small-time Wagnerianism of Matthew Barney, the crypto-Victorian nudist tableaux of Spencer Tunick, the deluxe functionalism of Andrea Zittel, the eco-idealist pastoralism of Andy Goldsworthy, the cynical market manipulations of Damien Hirst, or the Urban Outfitters-cum-Deitch Projects brand of pseudo-Situationist “graffiti art” associated with Banksy (to cite only a few of the “favorite contemporary artists” that have routinely appeared on the top-ten list that I require of my students on the first day of class).<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, the co-occupants of the “friend” camp—a rich spectrum of curatorial and critical voices whose extremes would be defined by Rosalind Krauss on one end and Nato Thompson on the other—would not identify with a unitary art-historical narrative or critical criterion, and would have plenty to argue about in ways that would echo the classical Adorno/Benjamin debates of the 1930s concerning semi-autonomy and cultural-political activism. But, in Mouffe’s terms, this would be an agonic debate in which the positions would respect and appreciate one another while posing interrogative questions about the interpretation of shared terms, such as the neo-avant-garde or postmodernism. The “enemy” would be those tendencies that a) pretend such developments never happened at all; b) treat the latter as so many forms of stifling intellectual orthodoxy to be transgressed in the name of insouciant hedonism, spiritual transcendence, neo-Gothic nihilism, countercultural nostalgia, or apathetic hipsterism; c) recycle (neo) avant-garde terms such as the readymade object, the performative event, the minimalist modular series, or the appropriated “picture” as so much stylistic pastiche rather than a historically-laden problem-set (determining the criteria for the latter distinction is obviously a matter of endless critical debate).

Over the past decade, such tendencies have been relatively marginalized by the increasing prominence of *October*-related discourse in the academic, critical, museum, and, to some extent, commercial worlds. While such developments are of course welcome, they change the stakes for young artists-in-information, repositioning figures such as Kruger, Serra, Smithson, Matta-Clark, Wiener, Wall, Ruscha, Wilson, Gonzalez-Torres, Prince, Holzer, and Nauman (to cite just a few neo-avant-garde and postmodernist figures granted major U.S. museum retrospectives and Venice

8. Admittedly, this litany is composed of sitting ducks who are indifferent to serious critical discourse; a more challenging list of figures that would not map easily onto such a friend/enemy logic would include those inventively engaged with particular art-historical or formal problem-sets but who fail to open the latter in a convincing way onto a socio-political register, however subtly conceived one’s criteria. Here I have in mind figures such as Olafur Eliasson or Pierre Huyghe, who are undeniably significant artists but who often receive a free if not celebratory pass from critics—a situation that can prove highly productive as a case-study in the pedagogical arena.

Biennale representation in recent years) from transgressors of a villainous status quo to a venerable canon of ancestors to be worked through in (hopefully) unexpected and inventive ways.

In a recent article that echoes the Mouffeian sense of agonic pluralism outlined above, Foster has suggested that criticism needs to develop a series of “situated stories” that can make forceful, historically informed claims on contemporary practice without the authoritative pretensions of a single *grand récit*.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning with a consideration of the sociological, philosophical, and institutional conundrums of contemporary art as a category, the primary “situated story” that I teach is that contemporary art begins with the advent of “critical”—as opposed to “reactionary”—postmodernism. Proceeding with Gregg Bordowitz’s contribution to the 2003 issue of *Artforum* devoted to the legacies of the 1980s, “My Postmodernism,” I frame critical postmodernism not as a vague cultural Zeitgeist, an ideological symptom of late capitalism, or a finite art-historical period, but rather as a broad-ranging and ongoing elaboration of neo-avant-garde concerns with language, authorship, art-as-institution, democratic public space, historical memory, and especially the problematization of subjectivity in ethical and political terms as theorized by figures such as Craig Owens, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Douglas Crimp.<sup>10</sup> The exemplary figure in my story is Gonzalez-Torres, insofar as he productively suspended his practice between the expanded networks of democratic cultural-political activism pursued by Group Material, on the one hand, and a highly self-reflexive working-through of the art-historical legacies of post-Minimalism on the other, resulting in rigorously abstract, affectively charged, and historically open-ended counter-memorial works such as his candy spills and paper stacks.

Insisting on the importance of this tension between “horizontal” and “vertical” axes of critical interpretation, I then move my students through *October*-based accounts of site-specificity, relational aesthetics, and neo-situationism before drawing their attention to several strands of contemporary art that, contrary to any anxiety about “floating free [from] historical determination,” as the editors put it in the current questionnaire, have been explicitly preoccupied with questions of history and memory on both artistic and socio-political registers. Here we might consider the “archival impulse” evident in works by artists ranging from Tacita Dean, Walid Raad, Oscar Tuazon, and Speculative Archive; the model of what Mark Godfrey has described as the “artist as historian” adopted by Matthew Buckingham, Kara Walker, Anri Sala, Otolith Group, Emily Jacir, and Andrea Geyer; and the emergent performance-based subgenre of counter-historical reenactment as surveyed in Nato Thompson’s *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History*. Among the most compelling example of the latter is Sharon Hayes’s *In the Near*

9. Hal Foster, “The Funeral Is for the Wrong Corpse,” in *Design and Crime* (New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 128–29.

10. Gregg Bordowitz, “My Postmodernism,” *Artforum* 41, no. 71 (March 2003), pp. 226–29, 273–74.

*Future*, an analogue slide-show of photographed performances in which the artist uses her “own” overdetermined white, female body to anachronistically re-stage in contemporary urban spaces protest signage pertaining to historical U.S. social movements ranging from early labor unions to the civil rights and feminist movements to ACT UP—a form of what Rosalyn Deutsche has called “transgenerational haunting” that explores the affective bases of political (dis)identification across time and space, unsettling without diminishing the urgency of activist claims on the “now.”<sup>11</sup>

Cutting across these various archival and historical concerns is the relatively under-theorized genre of the experimental documentary essay-film in the vein of figures such as Chris Marker, Chantal Ackerman, and Harun Farocki. Exemplary in this regard would be the work of Ayreen Anastas, whose video *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* (2005) combines neo-Dada language poetry, Situationist *dérive*, and Brechtian cinematic techniques such as the hyper-extended still-shot and the dialogical voice-over in retracing the itinerary of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s site-visit to the West Bank in search of an “authentic” biblical landscape for his *Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964). An eloquent meditation on the question of inheritance in both art-historical and geopolitical terms, Anastas’s video interrogates the Orientalist—and Christo-centric—gaze of “papa” Pasolini while obliquely affirming his desire to locate a messianic potentiality in the subaltern populations of what is now the post-1967 Occupied Territories.

Anastas’s insistence that the video constitutes a “map” of contemporary Israeli apartheid opens onto another strand of recent practice defined by Nato Thompson as “experimental geography,” which encompasses projects such as Anastas’s own *Camp Campaign*, as well as artists and architects like Trevor Paglen, Center for Land Use Interpretation, Lize Mogel, Spurse, Ashley Hunt, Sarai, Laura Kurgan, Center for Urban Pedagogy and Eyal Weizman.<sup>12</sup>

Operating at the intersection of left-liberal art-world platforms (Creative Time, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, 16 Beaver Group, Storefront for Art and Architecture, the Whitney Independent Study Program, certain curatorial capillaries at the Whitney, the New Museum, the Queens Museum, and the International Center for Photography), interdisciplinary academic initiatives (the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School, the Spatial Information Design Lab at Columbia, the Bard College Human Rights Project, the Research Architecture program at Goldsmiths in London), and a wide array of non-governmental foundations and

11. Rosalyn Deutsche, Aruna D’Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Müller, and Senam Okudzeto, “Feminist Time: A Conversation,” *Grey Room* 31 (Spring 2008), pp. 56–57. Drawing on the work of Julia Bryan-Wilson and Ben Young, I read Hayes’s work in term of the “haunting” of the present by the political and artistic legacies of the 1980s—especially Group Material’s Democracy project—in “Contemporary Art and the Legacies of Democracy,” in *A Guide to Democracy in America*, Nato Thompson, ed. (New York: Creative Time, 2008), pp. 26–27.

12. See Nato Thompson, *Experimental Geography* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008), and T. J. Demos’s discussion of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri’s collaborative work in “Means without End: *Camp Campaign*,” *October* 126 (Fall 2008), p. 13.



activist organizations (the Open Society Institute, Witness, Center for Constitutional Rights, B'Tselem), such practices require multiple frames of reference in forming a judgment as to their aesthetic quality and political efficacy.

While formal and art-historical concerns are often downplayed, if not disavowed altogether, in discussions of such practices, the latter in fact evidence highly self-conscious critical dialogues with prior artistic legacies. Among the most striking art-historical reiterations in this regard is the use by Eyal Weizman, Alessandro Petti, and Sandi Hilal of Gordon Matta-Clark's subtractive procedures of "cutting and splitting" in a proposal to transform evacuated Israeli suburban homes in Gaza into a physically open-ended network of Palestinian civic infrastructure that would make productive re-use of the remains of Israel's ongoing "civilian occupation."

Insisting on the art-historical dimensions of such work is both of a matter of respectful fidelity to the formal and conceptual singularity of the artworks in question—which are all too often reduced to their putative political content—as well as a way of probing both the unforeseen possibilities and, in some cases, debilitating problems of particular legacies as they are mobilized with varying degrees of self-consciousness in contemporary practices claiming the mantle of "social engagement."

This has proven to be an important question in my own work on environmentalism in contemporary art, a starting point of which has been to investigate the micro-canon of so-called "eco-art" that has been rehearsed in a largely uncritical fashion in numerous anthologies, exhibitions, and catalogues over the past decade and a half. Harnessing together figures as heterogeneous as Robert Smithson, Richard Long, Helen and Newton Harrison, Hans Haacke, Joseph Beuys, and Andy Goldsworthy on the basis of a supposedly common ethos of ecological concern, the purveyors of this micro-canon have both ignored the radical divergences between such figures and failed to interrogate the self-evident goodness of ecological discourse, whether the latter is understood in terms of spiritual communion with an idealized nature, technocratic resource-management, or some ideological synthesis thereof.

Especially troubling in this regard is the adulatory tone often adopted with regard to Beuys, whose *7,000 Oaks* tree-planting project for Documenta 7 (1982) is routinely held up as an exemplification of socio-ecological responsibility, without attending to the organicist model of post-political "operative community" professed by the artist in his visionary quest to provide an Energy Plan for Western Man. Beuys plays a starring role, for instance, in a recent catalogue essay by Victor Margolin entitled "Reflections on Art and Sustainability" (2005), which draws on the official definition of the term established by the United Nations Commission for Environment and Development in its report *Our Common Future* (1987): "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>13</sup>

13. Victor Margolin, "Reflections on Art and Sustainability," in *Beyond Green: Towards a Sustainable Art*, ed. Stephanie Smith (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2005), p. 21.



In recent years, sustainability has become a kind of categorical imperative for a range of writers, artists, designers, curators, and institutional administrators in the United States and beyond who aspire to partake of the heightened visibility and cultural legitimacy of environmental concerns catalyzed by Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), as well as the avowed commitment by the Obama administration to address the global climate-change crisis.

Many leftist critics have cast a jaundiced eye on discourses of sustainability, charging that they amount to little more than a form of neoliberal "greenwashing" that in fact obfuscates the ongoing reality of capitalist environmental destruction while encouraging a narrowly voluntarist paradigm of consumer-citizenship in which design, branding, and lifestyle displace properly political analyses and demands. While such critiques are indispensable, they risk forfeiting the productive instability and contestedness of sustainability as a principle of intergenerational exchange that might be articulated with historical concerns as much as with future-oriented appeals to the rights of generations to come.

Along with the artist Matthew Friday (a member of the Spurse collective), I am currently working to enact such a *détournement* of sustainability in the institutional context of the School of Art at Ohio University (OU). OU is a large public school situated in the Appalachian region of southeastern Ohio that has recently instituted an Office of Sustainability, the mandate of which is to make the university itself an exemplary practitioner of both carbon emissions-reduction and public environmental consciousness-raising. What can the School of Art contribute to such an encouraging—but inevitably limited and problematic—campus-wide initiative?

In our current graduate seminar "Entangled Citizens: Site-Specific Art, Critical Regionalism, and Political Ecology," Friday and I have taken as one of our foundational texts an *October* essay from 1980 by Robert Morris entitled "Art as/and Land Reclamation" that begins with the following quotation attributed to an "anonymous strip miner": "Maybe only God can make a tree, but only that shovel, Big Muskie, can make a hole like this." Big Muskie was, during its lifetime (1969–1991), the largest "giant earth-moving machine" (GEM) in the world, displacing millions of tons of topsoil in its tapping of a highly productive coal vein several miles outside OU that has suffered from the exhaustion of its resource deposits over the past two decades. Friday and I have required our students to undertake a collaborative research/exhibition project that will address the politico-ecological conditions of the region in terms of the entanglement of local economies, national policies, and the planetary climate system. While situating our work in terms of a radically expanded field encompassing the voices of activists, administrators, historians, and everyday citizens both on and off-campus, we have stressed to our students that the environmental conditions of our region have an irreducibly aesthetic and indeed art-historical dimension, as the mining industry has shaped, marked, and contaminated the local landscape over the past century into a remarkable series of unintentional earthworks

that span the whole spectrum of processes, procedures, and morphologies as outlined by Smithson in his early essays on what he called “land as a medium”: holes, borings, cuts, trenches, ponds, canals, quarries, shafts, mounds, heaps, spills, excavations, and craters (not to mention the invisible trace-effects of mining operations in the atmospheric conditions, water-supplies, and organic tissues of local populations). Indeed, in the final years of his life, Smithson was explicitly interested in the OU region as an exemplary “dialectical landscape,” remarking that the “man-made desert” on which Olmstead constructed Central Park “reminds me of the strip-mining regions I saw last year in South-Eastern Ohio.”<sup>14</sup> Smithson’s trips to Ohio gave rise to one of his final art works—*King Kong Meets the Gem of Egypt*—a kind of pop-surrealist collage referring to a mining operation in Ohio’s Egypt Valley that suggests his ambivalent desire to engage the material and psychic aftermath of monstrous-cum-monumental large-scale environmental destruction.

Smithson’s late proposals to Ohio mining companies shadow Morris’s 1980 article, which, drawing on Hans Mangus Enzenberger’s remarkable *New Left Review* essay “Critique of Political Ecology” (1974), meditates dialectically on the possibility that art concerned with ecological remediation could very well become an aestheticizing alibi for the very capitalist forces it would claim to critique. Following Enzenberger, Morris suggests that ecology should indeed be an urgent concern of artists, but only on the condition that they acknowledge the uneven interpenetration of cultural production with capitalist political economy, technoscience, and ecological systems, which would mean abandoning certain well-established tropes of traditional environmentalism: “the notorious ‘pollution of the earth’ . . . is misleading insofar as it presupposes a ‘clean’ world. This has naturally never existed and is moreover ecologically neither conceivable nor desirable.”<sup>15</sup>

Blasting this citation out of the academic archive of JSTOR, Friday and I have presented it to our students in terms of the following imperative: any “ecological art” worthy of the name would need to acknowledge the originary contamination of ecology by traces of death, loss, and injustice endemic to the history of capitalism itself. In other words, the *oikos* (“household”) of ecology would need to be rethought in terms of what I have called “haunted housing”—an axiom that opens onto questions of uneven development, public health, and human rights that exceed the complacent “green” ideals often put forth by artists and critics professing an interest in sustainability.<sup>16</sup>

Mired in the ruins of twentieth-century fossil-fuel capitalism and its devastating consequences at local and global scales—from the blackened lungs of mineworkers to the melting of indigenous people’s life-support systems in the Arctic—it is perhaps no coincidence that the OU region is frequently cited as being among the “most haunted places in America” and marketed as such by local municipalities

14. Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 158.

15. Robert Morris, “Art as/and Land Reclamation,” *October* 12 (Spring, 1980), p. 94.

16. Yates Mckee, “Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability in New Orleans,” *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008).



Robert Smithson. King Kong  
Meets the Gem of Egypt. 1972.

desperate for tourist revenue as local coal-seams have been depleted over the last half century. Faced with abandoned mines, toxic gob-piles, dead acid-drainage rivers, and de-populated ghost-towns, I discourage my students from indulging a simple poetics of rural dereliction, emphasizing instead aesthetic modalities such as the “spectral” and the “nonsynchronous” as the vanguard of twenty-first century art.<sup>17</sup> Teaching contemporary art and sustainability in Appalachian Ohio thus means, among other things, “learning to live with ghosts.”<sup>18</sup> Far from a melancholic fixation on the past, recognizing the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present” is the very condition of anything genuinely new to emerge in the future, and thus enables the “contemporary” to survive as an ethico-political question rather than a glib affirmation of novelty for its own sake.

17. See Foster, “The Funeral Is for the Wrong Corpse,” pp. 137–38.

18. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii.

“The contemporary” is a curious neologism. Preceded by the definite article, an adjective or noun denoting a shared temporality of persons, things, or events assumes a new importance. It has become a periodizing notion—a means to define the contemporary. In this act of definition, it establishes a temporal gap between a now and a then, between the present and a past it insists is past despite its recentness. Beginning where this past ends (postmodernity is the usual name assigned this prior epoch), the contemporary, it is alleged, is a new historicity.<sup>1</sup>

The demand to be contemporary is an old topos (“the strange pathos of novelty so characteristic of our modern age,” as Hannah Arendt describes it.)<sup>2</sup> The discourse of the contemporary is the latest articulation of this modernist longing. How to explain its current resurgence? Perhaps the art historian of the near future will tell us why it was that the museum, the academy, and high critical discourse came to such a consensus so swiftly during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Why does the contemporary feel so right, as opposed to other signifiers of the new? Is it because it “floats free?” But what does this mean? What is at stake in the questionnaire’s metaphors, its equation of a periodizing notion with an ontological, spatial one?

“Lightness” and “floating free” are images of unfixity, of mass unburdened of mass, of being-in-transit. They readily evoke the mediated, mobilized conditions of subjectivity during the era of globalization, of an existence increasingly conducted in the air and online. As such metaphors imply, the contemporary is a globalist notion. It presupposes: 1) that globalism exists; 2) that globalism, such as we are now experiencing it, marks a new moment in history; 3) that our culture is consequently globalist and new.<sup>3</sup> The idea of the contemporary is predicated on this syllogism, that equation of globalism and contemporaneity. The radical transformation of the “art world” since the mid-1990s (an ever increasing number of biennials and triennials and art fairs, the new prominence of practitioners from outside the West, a “nomadization” of artist, curator, and spectator) is undeniable, providing an empirical basis to these speculations.

But the conjunction contemporary-lightness points more trenchantly to the temporal character of the contemporary itself, and the practices described as contemporary. Whereas the contemporary, as a periodizing notion, posits a

1. See Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006), pp. 681–707; and the introduction to Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antimonies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19; and Alexander Alberro, “Periodizing Contemporary Art,” lecture presented at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, February 4, 2009, and at Emory University, March 26, 2009.

2. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 48.

3. Theorists of globalization widely disagree on the first two points. See David Held and Anthony McGrew, “The Great Globalization Debate: An Introduction,” in *The Globalization Transformations Reader* (London: Polity, 2003), pp. 1–42.

diachronic model of history, contemporary art is said to be heterochronic and, as it were, outside of history. (The contemporary “seems to float free of historical determination,” the questionnaire notes.) According to Nicolas Bourriaud, “alter-modernism” (yet another neologism for the contemporary) is

that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony . . . from a view of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining a nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era—a positive vision of chaos and complexity.<sup>4</sup>

There is no one time in contemporary practice, says Bourriaud, only times. “Altermodernity” (“other modernity”) is the time—the first time—that this alleged heterochronicity (the precise character of which is left to the reader’s imagination) is said to “become possible” in works of art. This multiteity, this purported breakdown of linear time that is declared to be definitive of the contemporary, is an artifact of the 1960s, of postmodernity, the very period the contemporary has allegedly left behind.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary is contemporary, but is it new? Could it be that the contemporary is the latest iteration of Arendt’s modernist pathos, the desire to be contemporary? If postmodernism is the formal acknowledgement, the registration of that pathos, the contemporary is its forgetting. Another modernity indeed: the contemporary is the fantasy that one can be modern again, that one can once again “float free from historical determination,” as the avant-garde supposedly did. “Altermodernity” is another repetition of this modernist dream. Bourriaud disdains the nostalgia he feels.

4. Nicolas Bourriaud, “Altermodern” in *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate, 2009), p. 13. For another account of “heterochronicity,” see Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity.”

5. See Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

Does the fact that contemporary art no longer operates under the premises of broad explanatory historical and critical paradigms such as “postmodernism” necessarily indicate that it is “floating free” in terms of “historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment”? While the questionnaire acknowledges the demise of these critical paradigms, it still retains an implicit demand for historical and conceptual legibility. Thus, perhaps an equally important question is, Why are previous paradigmatic explanatory models no longer tenable? Why do contemporary practices operate outside the horizons of postmodern “anti-aesthetic” theories of art and specific conceptualizations of criticality that were focused on institutions and problems of representation?

At the same time, the questionnaire rightly identifies the incoherent or highly “elastic” way in which the field of contemporary art has been institutionalized in recent years. For some institutions and textbooks, contemporary art begins in 1945; for others, in the 1970s or the 1980s. And when this temporal “elasticity” is echoed in the prevalent yet obscure job-requirement of “global perspectives” and “cross-cultural networks and exchanges” (what does this mean? does “contemporary art” equal “multiculturalism?”), the result is in fact a historical and conceptual indeterminacy.

It is also true that current artistic practice is extremely heterogeneous, yet in theoretical and critical writing on contemporary art one often finds a quite consistent set of terms employed to analyze artistic practices. I am thinking in particular of Giorgio Agamben’s “homo sacer,” “bare life,” and “state of exception”; Jean-Luc Nancy’s “inoperative community”; Jacques Rancière’s “partition of the sensible”; Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s “multitude”; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s “radical democracy”; and Étienne Balibar’s “transnational citizenship.” These concepts are employed because they have an “explanatory power” in relation to the emergence of new forms of political power and modes of subjectivization under globalization. This suggests that globalization functions as something more than simply a general reference or a historical determinant: it also triggers a radical reconsideration of the possibility of a paradigmatic model of theory and practice that will both elucidate and offer historical and critical judgments in the way postmodernism came to function once it became canonized and institutionalized. That is, the explanatory power of these concepts consists precisely in the effort (pursued along different lines by the thinkers mentioned) to reground and extend the leftist political and critical project in a way that makes it viable again, yet without a recourse to dominant and pervasive theoretical models of the kind that informed postmodernist theories of art in their exclusive emphasis on, for example, language, textuality, and ideology. In fact, what is often seen in recent writing on art and culture is precisely the return of all the negative

poles of postmodernist theories: universality, ethics, aesthetics, citizenship, and human being. This for me indicates not a reactionary return, but precisely an effort to reconsider the kinds of problems that were not sufficiently addressed or excluded within the rigorous intellectual effort to ground artistic practice on a solid theoretical basis. While these problems—which pertain to belonging and collectivity, human rights, and citizenship—are not new, they did become urgent in a specific, painful, and violent way in the last two decades.

I thus disagree with the idea that contemporary art is “floating free” of historical and theoretical conceptualizations and that explanatory power can only consist in the employment of broad theoretical models. And for me the fact that there is no one dominant paradigm to explain contemporary practices is not a sign of a lack, it is a necessary condition for political and critical viability. As Balibar argues in relation to the possibilities of political action under globalization, “at such a time, the necessity of reconstituting political practices confronts more difficulties and uncertainties. But the meaning of collective agency is enhanced rather than diminished, because it faces additional tasks, such as inventing new ideas of community that have no guarantee of being ‘just.’” There can be no model of politics or political action because such a model will transform “political problems into a representation of *the political*.”<sup>1</sup> This explains why not only Balibar but also Rancière has come to criticize political philosophy for its inability to adequately address the political. The same, I believe, can also be argued with regard to the status of both theory and critique in contemporary art. There can be no paradigmatic models of artistic practice and critique because there are no longer any guarantees that the employment of a particular model of practice will lead to a specific outcome. That is, the problem is not with the philosophical and ethical limits of representation, as postmodern thinkers, in particular Lyotard, emphasized, or with the indiscriminate assimilation and appropriation of avant-garde artistic strategies into the museum and the market. Rather, the problem is political and conceptual irreducibility, the need to make impossible choices with regard, for example, to strategies of political intervention that are necessary to save human beings from violence but that may ultimately deprive them of any form of political agency. When the state of exception becomes the rule, there can be no theoretical guarantees that human rights are bad and the rights of the citizen are good, that universality equals bourgeois ideology, and that democracy means neoliberalism.

This condition productively explains the shift in critical artistic practices from a concern with representation to the staging and enactments of events (Mark Tribe, Kirsten Forkert, Jeremy Deller, Pierre Huyghe); an occupation with activism (Paul Chan, Mark Wallinger, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Marjetica Potrã); and with the formation of new collective entities (The Atlas

1. Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones et al. (London: Verso, 2002), xiv, p. 35 (emphasis in original).



Group, The Center for Land Use Interpretation, Raqs Media Collective). The important point about these practices is not necessarily their relation to a previous model of critical practice (which obviously exists), but the way they aim for a direct engagement that moves beyond the politics of representation into the invention of inherently contingent and singular strategies of intervention and participation that allow artists to deal with issues of, for example, human and political rights and the environment. It can also explain the intensified occupation, since Documenta XI, with the document and the documentary in relation to problems of truth and fiction. This occupation is no longer the result of a conceptual concern to turn the art work into a document as a way to challenge modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and institutional political neutrality. Rather, it marks an effort to demarcate horizons of intelligibility and visibility that complicate any perceived notion of collective and communicative “common sense.”

Does this situation sound like “lightness of being”? Quite the opposite, because the complexity of the issues involved demands much more than theoretical rigor and ideological commitment on the part of historians, critics, artists, and curators. It demands, I believe, continuous intellectual inventiveness in order to devise productive strategies of intervention where knowledge and action are bound together in unpredictable ways. It requires the ability to insistently challenge melancholic claims of the “end of art” and the nostalgic equation of artistic criticality with the historical and neo-avant-garde. It asks to retain critique not simply as a negative operation of opposition, but also as an imaginative production of possibilities within undefined boundaries of practice.

As a new institutionally recognized term, “contemporary art” has indeed become the object of specialized curatorial positions and a newly minted period-based category for museum exhibitions, as well as for specialized post-1960s art-historical doctoral study (particularly in the UK). More widely, it has also led to an emerging field of “global contemporary art,” driven by the recent development of a worldwide network of exhibitions, particularly since 1989 with the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the liberalization of China. As is commonly known, biennials and international mega-exhibitions may now be seen virtually anytime and anywhere—from London to Gwangju, New York to Shanghai, Sao Paulo to New Orleans, Dakar to Sharjah—and the latest news of global contemporary art can be found on innumerable Internet websites and in an international array of magazines. Contemporary art now emerges from all corners of the world.

This complex situation introduces, among other things, a crisis of legitimacy for criticism, for when an exhibition’s inclusions are largely exterior—formally, discursively, historically—to the critic’s geographically situated and culturally defined knowledge base (even if that perspective is bi- or multicultural), it is simply impossible for one to act as a final authority or supreme arbiter of quality in the face of this expanded field. How can the single critic possibly analyze art’s critical traction, identify structural operations, locate points of political resistance, when one confronts practices that are so divergent and expansive in scope—practices that nonetheless possess cultural life in other parts of the world, functioning as shared and meaningful points of reference with their own sets of interpreters, critics, dealers, and curators? A critic can only, of course, address art from a limited purview, which is how criticism has always been practiced, but now the multicultural expansiveness of global contemporary art appears on a scale like never before, beyond possible assimilation, exceeding one’s ability to form genealogies and create histories (or, rather, perhaps that’s all we can do—confront art’s irreducible plurality). We now face not postmodernism’s end of grand narratives so much as the ostensible formation of a new grand narrative: that of globalization.

For some critics and historians, this new global narrative represents the cultural logic of late capitalism, perceptible in exhibitions and criticism alike that reflect the worldwide expansion of the neoliberal economy in art-institutional terms.<sup>1</sup> Creating a supermarket of free-floating art objects without historical depth or regional specificity, the mega-exhibition in particular would seem to exemplify the ubiquitous homogenization of culture, according to which we discover the recursive reproduction of global contemporary art as a

1. See the recent discussion of these issues in James Elkins, ed., *Art and Globalization* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, forthcoming), which includes my own critical response.

universal brand and shared lingua franca of mediums and styles. More, one detects in such contexts the production of artificial differences between inclusions, frequently celebrated—falsely—as a freedom of nomadic objects and mobile identities, which, one suspects, merely cloaks the pervasive standardization that issues from the uniform conditions of the market. As well, the sheer geographical diversity of participants' origins seems often to act as a too-easily accepted guarantee for the diversity of artistic inclusions. This form of globalization is one that emphasizes horizontal spatialization over vertical historicization, geography over time, following similar patterns of cultural and economic globalization analyzed by such critics as Fredric Jameson—one of many insightful commentators on these developments—who observes that recent developments mark the becoming-cultural of the economic and the becoming-economic of the cultural, reflecting the massive assimilation of heterogeneities, the destruction of local differences, and the massification of all people on the planet into a reductive identity.<sup>2</sup>

Thankfully, however, the above is not the only narrative in the running. While there may be some truth to such apocalyptic visions, it would be a mistake to accept them as a foregone conclusion (and to be fair, Jameson also recognizes counter-models that stress globalization's generation of cultural and economic heterogeneity). But this acknowledgment does not license us, in my view, to respond to the global situation of artistic plurality by resurrecting some overarching art-historical trajectory, explanatory model, or ruling artistic criteria, which would risk a cultural imperialism in which the critic acts as despot, one who attempts to enforce subjective and culturally specific criteria in all contexts (of course without the power to do so).

A more realistic and productive response is to consider the global as a field of potential cultural and economic heterogenesis, as argued by cultural geographer Arjun Appadurai, exemplified in his proposed set of terms that emphasize a context-contingent definition of "imaginary landscapes" inflected by "the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements."<sup>3</sup> This composite field includes "ethnoscapes" composed of circulating people, including refugees, tourists, and expatriates; "technoscapes" of emergent communications models and high-speed travel systems; "financescapes" of deterritorialized global capital and interlinking markets; "mediascapes" that network new global (counter) public spheres; and "ideoscapes" of state and non-state ideologies and discursive constructions.

2. Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. F. Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 54–58.

3. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 33.

Appadurai's terms invite a productive reconsideration of globalization's assumed homogeneity, emphasizing instead postcolonialism's focus on uneven geographies informed by different levels of connection based on social-political-economic inequality, as well as, importantly, the possibility for the positive workings of "indigenization" that variously localize and differentiate the otherwise standardizing forces of globalization.

The usefulness of this account is that it contests the (usually Frankfurt School-inspired) totalizing condemnation of global contemporary art, and instead posits a view of globalization as a process with the potential for heightening cultural difference and inclusivity. So much is clear, for instance, in recent articulations of the mega-exhibition as a privileged site for the formation of a "diasporic public sphere," as argues Okwui Enwezor, who, citing Appadurai, sees the biennial as a potential locus of diversity: "One needs to see in the biennial phenomenon the possibility of a paradigm shift in which we as spectators are able to encounter many experimental cultures, without wholly possessing them."<sup>4</sup> The diasporic grouping—"late modernity's transnational, transcultural, postcolonial, and global attitudes toward such concepts as identity, culture, nationality, and citizenship"<sup>5</sup>—provides the critical counterpart to "indigenization," which, for Appadurai, defines an inevitable translation of global movements into local idioms: "As rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies," he observes, "they tend to become indigenized in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions."<sup>6</sup>

Given this antinomy between the diasporic and the indigenized, the diversifying mobile and the singularizing local, mapped by Appadurai in the anthropological realm, and by Enwezor in the curatorial one, it would appear that the critic's priorities must inevitably shift away from the exercise of expert judgment grounded in a presumed authority over the cultural field, and toward a post-judgment model of criticism, one based in the practice of the translation and researched interpretation of cultural difference in a plural global field, wherein no one has the last word. One hazard of this model, however, is criticism's potential slippage into the role of providing a critical affirmation to whatever comes knocking, in terms of succumbing to a weak model of "art writing"—that is, the generally celebratory and market-driven form of catalogue text that resembles the press-release, deployed by galleries seemingly everywhere for commercial purposes and discursive legitimacy. Another risk is to fall victim to the ultimately patronizing multicultural "respect" for difference that disavows

4. Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," *Manifesta Journal* 2 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004), p. 27.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

6. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 32.

any criticality whatsoever. The latter potentially disguises a neo-colonial relation to the Other, as argues Slavoj Žižek, for whom multiculturalism may disclose “a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’—it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position.”<sup>7</sup>

We are left, then, with the following question: how to affirm global contemporary art as a critical site of multiplicity, of geographical expansiveness and historical depth, while also remaining aware of the economic forces of homogenization? More, how can we commit to avoiding the cultural imperialism of judging practices according to foreign criteria, yet equally resist the multicultural colonialism of “respecting the Other” by disavowing the problematizing act of criticism altogether, and avoid allowing criticism to become a simplistic matter of denunciatory—and often sensationalist, market-friendly—judgment?

Here, obviously, there is no simple answer, or rather, as critics, we each have to find our own. If culturally-specific artistic strategies—such as form, content, and structure—cannot be universalized, made into the basis of a worldwide set of art-historical criteria, without a resulting cultural blindness and attendant chauvinism, then perhaps we need to universalize a different set of criteria from which the critic might develop the basis of practice in the global field. One recourse is to rethink, to renarrate, globalization as an aesthetic-political project—to invoke the terms of Jacques Rancière—that challenges the forces of economic, social, and political inequality by reorganizing alternate systems of a more just visibility on a global scale,<sup>8</sup> and perhaps this is where biennials might still take on an important social and political function.<sup>9</sup> In an age when politics is aestheticized like never before, critical and creative art finds an urgent role in the reinvention of imaginative alternatives and different forms of life.

Ultimately, if the political is constituted by the negotiation of difference and disagreement—consider Chantal Mouffe’s notion of democratic agonism, or Rancière’s arguments regarding dissensus—then it is necessary to develop a model of agonistic criticism at the global level. As in earlier periods of practice, an aesthetic-political commitment will continue to drive the activities of the most compelling criticism, which entails the subtle questioning of how appearance and the struggle for equality intertwine in different geographical, cultural, and discursive contexts. With a looming environmental catastrophe darkening our near future, and a worldwide financial crisis pressuring the present, now more than

7. Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 225 (September/October 1997), p. 44.

8. I have attempted to do so in recent essays, including “Means without End: Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri’s *Camp Campaign*,” *October* 126 (Winter 2009), pp. 69–90; and “Moving Images of Globalization,” *Grey Room* 37 (forthcoming).

9. See the special issue of *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*, 8/16 (2009), with essays by Chantal Mouffe, Michael Hardt, Boris Groys, and others, which investigates the biennial as potential location of political transformation.

ever there is an urgency to invent other models of globalization: one of the universalization of a politics of equality, of social justice and ecological sustainability, as well as one that will promote cultural differentiation and heterogeneity. Here any criticism of consequence will emerge not as an arbiter of style, but as a stakeholder in the arguments and solidarities forming around the politics of aesthetics, which must inevitably rewrite our familiar histories. Such an ambition is not radically innovative; rather it returns criticism to its longstanding calling, which, as Foucault perceived while studying its historical practice, stems foremost from the desire “not to be governed like that.”<sup>10</sup> This desire entails a practice that supports, and thereby helps to realize, alternative visions of art, life, and politics as we enter into a new stage of geopolitical interconnectedness, as well as of ever-intensifying degrees of inequality and separation.

10. Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 44.

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*The category of “contemporary art” is not new.*

Yes, but maybe we should preemptively question the utility of “the contemporary” as a purely temporal distinction. It might be more helpful to think of “contemporary art” as a spatial relationship between the highly articulated sense of modernism’s achievement produced within the postwar North American and Western European educational matrix, on the one hand, and everything else on the other. From this perspective, you have a dichotomy between a self-sustaining, local phenomenon and its gradual transformation as “everything else” begins to alter its core sense of self-identity. It may be that the best model for understanding “contemporary art” is not an Alfred Barr timeline, but something like a scene from *The Blob*.

*So you would agree that much present practice, in its very heterogeneity, seems to float free of historical determination and conceptual definition, even free of critical judgment.*

Exactly, and the curator now acts primarily as an arbitrator who adjudicates between the expanding claims of *The Blob* (others refer to this entity as “the visual industry,” or “the military-entertainment complex”) and the ripostes of “modernist” institutions that developed out of the postwar educational expansion, *October* among them. In this sense, an art/curatorial project such as Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Musée Précaire Albinet* mobilizes these residually modernist and pedagogical modes to confront a mobile, frivolous, and coercive visuality. At the same time, Hirschhorn’s undertaking also evokes the legions of part-time workers who have entered the integrated global economy, the “free-floating” urban “precarariat.”

**Such developments in the knowledge economy have affected the art world in any number of ways. Most significant would seem to be the explosion of graduate-degree-granting programs in art-related fields. Over the last twenty years, a stream of ever more questionable graduate degrees has been produced, the intellectual equivalent of a subprime mortgage boom, an art-education bubble. And in the next few years—as a generation of thirty-somethings contemplate the \$50,000+ of debt accrued to acquire an MA in Critical Studies from an auction house—there will be an inevitable backlash, as these programs dry up and disappear.**

Maybe one could formulate it this way: modernism was art produced without an accompanying graduate-school apparatus; postmodernism was art produced in constant dialogue with this apparatus; and “contemporary art” is what happens when art grows inconceivable without such an atmosphere. In a



**very real way “contemporary art” is a product promoted and circulated by the art/educational complex’s expanded citizenry in its search for stable forms of employment.**

*In this sort of totalizing and cynical environment, it is hardly surprising that paradigms such as “postmodernism” or “the neo-avant-garde”—concepts that once oriented advanced art and theory—have run into the sand. Are there any models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force that have risen in their stead?*

No.

**But you must agree that this absence is understandable. In the international art world the dominant theme of recent years has been “confusion” or—“transition,” if one maintains a more upbeat point of view. Is there a way of narrating this era of transcontinental transition/confusion?**

Mainly it seems to be a confusion over roles (curator, artist, gallerist, critic, historian, collector, dealer, etc.) and spaces (museum, gallery, alternative space, state-supported institution, private/public cooperative endeavor, etc.) that first appeared on the periphery of the established art world, in the so-called BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries, though it has been theorized most persuasively in Western Europe. At the same time, American academics have been shielded from these jarring transformations due to the professionalization of academic labor in the domestic educational system. As a result, one witnesses a bizarre situation in which academics in the United States (often functionally monolingual, employed part-time, and overburdened with administrative demands) struggle to acquire the privileges available in the country’s only quasi-socialist public institution, while art professionals outside the United States actually come to terms with American capitalism’s new economic order (or disorder, as the case may be). There can be no doubt that the most innovative thinking on and around “contemporary art” has been coming not from North America but from a network of younger and older collaborative Europeans: Art & Language, Daniel Birnbaum, Nicolas Bourriaud, Catherine David, Ekaterina Degot, Guillaume Désanges, Diedrich Diederichsen, Charles Esche, Liam Gillick, Isabelle Graw, Boris Groys, Sven Lütticken, Jan Verwoert, Anton Vidokle, Peter Weibel . . .

*This might simply read as a list of the European contributors to Artforum with a pinch of Texte zur Kunst for spice. Putting forward such an alternative canon might be a symptom of this overall confusion. It is also paradoxical that “contemporary art” has become an institutional object in the academic world and in the museum world, while at the same time many tend to treat it as apart not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well.*

Call me cynical, but I would say that the “institutional object” of contemporary art serves primarily to secure a viable urban lifestyle for art and academic professionals. And most of these institutional actors are not dedicated to developing a self-reflexive, historically informed picture of their situations. They generally want to wield administrative power to maximize the “footprint” of their institutions, in order to be hired as rapidly as possible by a still more prestigious cultural institution. The drama of postmodernism, the dirty feeling of having abandoned modernism’s self-sacrificing aspirations, seems to play no role here.

Nonetheless, throughout the Bush Years, the art labor force regularly displayed its critical and political chops, since every exhibition had the backdrop of political error and state terror to give it weight. During those years, almost anything seemed to carry a kind of ethical force that was not available in 1997 or 1998. Yet, despite the good intentions and self-congratulations, these claims seemed contrived. Everyone had become a rabble-rousing critic-activist-curator.

Then Obama happened and we are still in a state of collective shock. The indignant, morose phraseology that we had learned by heart suddenly seemed irrelevant and now we no longer know what to do.

**In other words, we really are “floating free” at this moment.**

But is this floating-free just imagined?

**No, it’s very real. But it is also the free-floatingness of a flexible-ized work force. You feel “free-floating” because you cannot go to the doctor, your kid has no health insurance, and you cannot count on classes to teach next year. It’s not because you have lost confidence in medium-specificity.**

*Is this merely a local perception?*

Sure, these perceptions are distorted by being too close to the American academic scene.

*Or maybe a simple effect of the end-of-grand-narratives?*

**I doubt it.**

*Can we specify some of the principal causes of this shift? That is, beyond general references to “the market” and “globalization”?*

One might point to the flip side of the “free-floatingness”—an authoritarianism that has crept into the art world. To put it directly: one cannot integrate non-democratic

political environments into the mainstream art market without paying a price. One result has been the rise of bland, transnational biennial art, what might be called “GATT art,” which sees its most prominent expression in varieties of eco-art, the Socialist Realism of the twenty-first century.

**Things like *The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, 16 Beaver, e-flux, and a lot of mildly contentious Web sites are incubating what in Eastern Bloc societies would have been called “dissident culture.” And despite this “underground” culture’s many shortcomings, it is clearly outstripping the official, state-sponsored, corporate-sponsored aboveground culture. This peripheral material is downloaded—it’s on people’s desktops—and even if it has no particular pedigree, it has been driving the conversation below the official conversation.**

*It seems that this situation is a direct outcome of a neoliberal economy, one that, moreover, is now in crisis. What are some of the consequences of this situation for artists, critics, curators, and historians—for their formation and their practice alike?*

An anxious sense of mandatory ambition informs much of this activity.

*Are there collateral effects in other fields of art history?*

**Yes, but those fields seem to be far more accustomed to periods of scarcity. They have long known that everyone must make work that is contemporary.**

*Are there instructive analogies to be drawn from the situation in other arts and disciplines?*

Jon McKenzie’s *Perform or Else* (2001) sheds light on many aspects of this discussion.

*Are there benefits to this apparent lightness of being?*

Whether there are benefits or not, it’s hard to say, but it is clear that critique and oppositionality have ceased to function as the obligatory modes of progressive academic/art discourse in favor of more chameleon-like forms of rhetorical belonging. It may be true that we are living in the foundation pit of a globalized soft-authoritarianism, yet it is utterly unclear how that situation intersects with the countervailing inspirational force of the Obama Effect. This is a question for History, though History for Americans is like Death for Duchamp—it’s something that happens to other people.

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To see “the contemporary” as a constitutive category of marketplace subjectivity, of being or longing to be bourgeois, adds little to the questionnaire’s concern with market forces, neoliberalism, globalization, and the like—but what it adds is useful nonetheless. Shifting the term’s valence from object to subject opens it out to a history that is neither circumscribed by recent events nor handed over without a fight to the market we serve. For example, such a realignment of perspective allows us to see the hard presentism of the contemporary and its resulting “lightness of being” as really nothing more than a repetition of the old myths of *tabulae rasae* and self-made men, nothing more, that is, than the bourgeoisie’s tried and true blinding of its own historical consciousness. Old myths like these can sometimes seem distant from our experience, of course, but they can resonate more vividly when cast in our period’s professional idiom—as Apple’s 1984 rather than IBM’s, say, or as the performativity and strategic essentialism of one group of critics rather than the identity politics of another, or as the limitless plurality of cultures addressed by Cultural Studies rather than the enduring singularity of the art of Art History, or, finally, as “the contemporary” at issue rather than its modern or postmodern, avant-garde or neo-avant-garde alternatives. Such strong forms of presentism have always stood for the same thing: a shaking off of the control of past over present, of institutionality over self-invention, of the strictures of tradition over the unsupervised play of interests and markets. The cause of the “lightness of being” that concerns us here, in other words, should not be limited to recent events or local institutional forces but instead needs to be seen as a product of that single, overarching *modus operandi* which, for more than 150 years, has made it possible to say “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”<sup>1</sup>

As the questionnaire rightly suggests about the institutionalization of “the contemporary,” this profanation or melting or lightness of being is both true and a lie in its entrenched detachment from the past. This, too, has always been so. Making contemporary art into an object in its own right—thereby separating art from life, as we have long termed it, and so producing lightness of being—is, in the end, no different from the standard operating procedure of modern art or from that of the larger bourgeois concept of art itself. Art’s institutionality has always been its open secret ever since it took on its own authorial voice at a remove from its patrons. By its own founding definition, as Jürgen Habermas once described it, modern art is a “training ground for critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a [public] process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness.”<sup>2</sup> That concern with genuine experience and novel privateness, ultimately, is equally what cordons

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; London: Verso, 1998), p. 38.
2. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), p. 29.

art off from life—giving it both its ersatz institutionality and the lightness of being of its commodity form—and what makes it meaningful, what makes it art in all the modern ways that we want it to be so. That meaning is never directly political (at least not effectively so) but it is proto-political: by publicly raising the question of its own private meaning and private significance without predetermining the answer to that question, art serves as a space where the private makes its demands on the public and the public, in turn, on the private. Out of this intercourse arises the great bourgeois institution of critique that lives on in our work and in vehicles like *October*. Ultimately, what is at stake in “the contemporary” and, thus, what makes it worthwhile as a locus for the inquiry posed by this questionnaire, is just this sort of intercourse between public and private, object and subject.

The key to critically leveraging that stake rather than allowing it to be expropriated by the market is, in pop parlance, “owning it.” In the end this is exactly the sort of ownership that has always been at issue. “The contemporary” is a product of our labor, after all, the space of this page and others like it, our factory, and the critical question at hand, one of the ownership of that labor. For some this formulation might seem to overreach, but such an association between our mental effort and the physical effort of proletarian existence is not so tendentious as it might initially appear. The great post-Fordist insight available to us (which was not so accessible before, after all) is that a machine can readily be software, algorithms, ideas. “The contemporary” is one such machine, one such algorithm or idea in its role as an art-theoretical platform that enables, directs, and delimits the production, distribution, and reception of art. Like any significant invention or any large expropriation or theft, it reproduces the great origin myth of capitalism—its moment of primitive or original accumulation that stakes ownership of the means of production and divides capitalists from laborers. The question of who owns innovation is more complicated for our industry than it is for many others, of course, but we are no less constituted as “a social relation between persons which is mediated through things,” a relation between investors in the multi-billion-dollar international art economy and those like us who toil in its factories.<sup>3</sup> This slippery status of ownership of “the contemporary” is among the sources of its “lightness of being,” of course, making it exemplary as a bourgeois institution, but it is also where it opens itself up to the progressive political agenda driving the questionnaire. That promise of political gain is made the same as it ever was for the modern concept of art: by taking its place in the mode of production and skewing it from private ownership to public, from economic being to human being, from the dominion of capitalists to that of worker-citizens like us.<sup>4</sup>

3. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (1867; New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 932.

4. See Jeff Howe’s account of David Ross’s neat inversion of this principle of ownership: [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.04/pension\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.04/pension_pr.html):

“It’s all about finding the X factor,” Ross says. “X doesn’t equal talent. Loads of artists have that. X equals promise. X equals the potential to hit it big.” . . . Robert Storr is a critic, curator, and historian who has studied the interplay between markets and art. He says

The only art that has ever been available to us, as Marx famously put it, is “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” one that “evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.”<sup>5</sup> The challenge that we have always faced in the name of an autonomous art, of an art for its own sake as a figure of human subjectivity for its own sake, is to do battle with its commodity form, to occupy its privatized, mythologized objects again and again and again in the name of public subjectivity, in the name of critique. The enduring lesson that *October* stands for with the double political/cultural reference embedded in its name is that the Prolect/Middlebrow/Creative-Class dream of art escaping its commodity form is delusional just as the wannabe-capitalist dream of art reconciling itself with life by folding into that same commodity form is death. Art as we know it—as we have always known it—is defined by an irresolvable tension: “the contemporary” quivers and fluctuates in the force field between human being and economic being mirroring our own social role as “the uneasy stratum,” quivering and fluctuating between capitalist and worker, bourgeois, and proletarian.<sup>6</sup> The question at hand, thus, is really not what but who, not what sort of economic or discursive object the contemporary is, but instead which side of our split subjectivity speaks in its name. In the end, this just means that the most significant critical gain born of shifting our view of “the contemporary” from object to subject is that we, its authors-as-producers, are not let off the hook.

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that while he’s all for artist pension plans, the APT’s emphasis on market speculation should make artists a little uneasy: “It requires them to think of art as a commodity.” . . . “What’s wrong with that?” Ross asks. “People are going to manipulate the market, for better or worse. Why shouldn’t the artist, or someone representing him, be doing it?”

5. Marx, *Capital*, pp. 163–64.

6. Frank Bechhofer and Brian Elliott, eds., *The Petite Bourgeoisie: Comparative Studies of the Uneasy Stratum* (London: MacMillan, 1981).

There are many ways to interpret the dispersed, particularized field in which contemporary art operates. Some are suggested by the very terms in which this heterogeneity is couched by the questionnaire—that is, as a foil to ostensibly more organized periods, when art expressed greater unanimity regarding its role as an aesthetic and critical endeavor.<sup>1</sup> We might presume, then, that contemporary art is floundering and its refusal to mass around a single narrative a liability, a sign of failure, even. But what if art’s heterogeneity signals possibility instead of dysfunction? What if heterogeneity is art’s pursuit instead of its affliction? What if, in its very heterogeneity, art were to productively engage current socio-political conditions—conditions that are reducible to neither neoliberalism nor globalization? These are the questions I’d like to explore here.

Shortly after I received the questionnaire, I opened a book by Denise Riley titled *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*. “This essay,” Riley begins, “is, in part, a defense of having nothing to say for oneself. It wonders why the requirement *to be* a something-or-other should be so hard to satisfy in a manner which is convincing to its subject; it decides that hesitations in inhabiting a category are neither . . . weaknesses nor failures of authenticity or solidarity. Instead, it suggests that as mutating identifications . . . decisively mark the historical workings of political language, a more helpful politics will recognize a useful provisionality in the categories of social being.”<sup>2</sup> This paragraph struck me as having a great deal of bearing on the problem before us, and not simply because contemporary art, like “the subject,” similarly refuses “*to be* a something-or-other”—that is, to coalesce around a single narrative, to pursue a single purpose, or to stake out a single position. Insofar as it is both diagnostic and programmatic, Riley’s opening statement also suggested to me a possible historical rationale for art’s own recalcitrance in the face of overdetermined “categories of being.”

Riley is by no means the only scholar over the last thirty years to have discerned changes to subject formation, nor is she the only scholar to have singled out multiple, provisional, and mutating identifications as the source of these changes. According to political philosophers such as Nancy Fraser, Douglas Kellner, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau, social and political relations as a

1. I say “ostensibly” because even the most compelling of the grand (i.e., dominant) narratives of the last several decades, such as modernism, the neo-avant-garde, and postmodernism, exclude as much as they include. They reflect and create consensus simultaneously, muffling difference, dissent, and heterogeneity.

2. Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 1.



whole have succumbed to complexity, heterogeneity, and disaggregation.<sup>3</sup> Their precise objects of inquiry might differ (Fraser and Kellner focus on the public sphere, while Mouffe and Laclau treat citizenship and democracy), but these authors tend to agree on one point: the stability of social relations and the coherence of political community have become increasingly difficult to sustain. They agree on something else, too: *this isn't necessarily a bad thing*. It only requires rethinking the way solidarity is constructed and the way coalitions across diverse social movements are built.<sup>4</sup> Coalitions, in this instance, would consist of configurations that are neither simple in organization nor reducible to a single, homogenous core; similarly, solidarity would consist of what Mouffe has christened “conflictual consensus”—that is, consensus about the terms in

3. See, for example, Nancy Fraser’s “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), in which the author argues for the efficacy (contra Habermas) of those counter (“competing” or “subaltern”) public spheres that emerged simultaneously with the (dominant) bourgeois public sphere. These counter public spheres proliferated over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, offering a corrective, Fraser suggests, to the exclusions constitutive of their bourgeois counterpart. In so doing, they simultaneously expanded the field of “discursive contestation” (p. 67) and ensured “participatory parity” (p. 70). Douglas Kellner makes a similar point in an essay from 2000, stating that a monolithic “liberal or democratic public sphere” has been supplanted by a variety of “public spheres, sometimes overlapping but also conflicting” (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>). Unlike Habermas, both Fraser and Kellner see the multiplication of public spheres as a sign of advance rather than decline. Fraser has lately been theorizing the advent of a transnational public sphere, although she still understands this sphere to be plural rather than singular—that is, to coalesce around a multiplicity of claims, injustices, concerns, or problems, which are likewise transnational in scope. At the same time, though, Fraser recognizes the threat that new global configurations of power pose to the efficacy of public spheres, and it remains to be determined whether these coalitions will regroup accordingly. See her “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 4 (2007). The subject of Laclau’s and Mouffe’s work is radical democratic politics, which they characterize as both pluralistic and agonistic (to use Mouffe’s word of choice). Their thinking proceeds from two observations. First, the nature and breadth of emancipatory struggle changed considerably in the mid-nineteenth century, and this change only accelerated over the course of the twentieth century. Once organized predominantly around class, social movements are now splintered along a number of different lines, bringing a range of new demands to the table, demands that “test” democracy and force it (hopefully) to generalize its promise of equality and justice. Second, since antagonism is inherent to all social relations, a viable (and radical) democratic politics must make from this potentially destructive force a more productive agonism, by which Mouffe means debate, dissent, and conflict. Neither Laclau nor Mouffe dispute the importance of cooperation and coalition building, though. Indeed, for change to be viable, for dominant relations of power to be effectively contested, the coordination of otherwise dispersed publics around a common set of principles—most important among them, justice and equality—is key. Mouffe couches such moments of convergence as “conflictual consensus.” See Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985), especially the last chapter. See, too, Laclau’s “Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity,” *October* 61 (Summer 1992) and Mouffe’s “Citizenship and Political Identity,” *October* 61 (Summer 1992); *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 1993); and “Democracy—Radical and Plural,” *Centre for the Study of Democracy Bulletin* 9 (Winter 2001–2002).

4. For “coalition,” Laclau and Mouffe use the phrase “chains of equivalence.” See their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as well as Laclau’s “Democracy between Autonomy and Heteronomy,” in *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta 11 \_ Platform 1*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya (Ostfildern\_Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002).

which a debate is staged, but disagreement over their precise interpretation. Insofar as it presupposes a pluralistic society comprised of competing but inter-related publics whose agonistic interactions result in the expansion, not contraction, of equality and justice, “conflictual consensus” is crucial to the realization of a radical democratic politics.<sup>5</sup>

If we concede that structural similarities exist between the state of contemporary art and the state of contemporary society—if, that is, we agree that heterogeneity (understood broadly) characterizes both the artistic and the social—what is the nature of this relationship? Are they two parallel but ultimately independent lines of development? Or have shifts in the social field over the last twenty to thirty years triggered analogous shifts in artistic practice? The latter argument has some merit. However, arts tracking along the same path as society wouldn’t account for the entirety of its current dispersal and fragmentation. I think what we are seeing today is art miming its context. I think we are witnessing art performing “agonism,” “disaggregation,” and “particularization.” Heterogeneity isn’t just contemporary art’s condition, in other words; it is its subject as well.

Establishing a historical rationale for this heterogeneity isn’t the only reason I draw Fraser, Kellner, Mouffe, and Laclau into the conversation. I also want to shift the terms in which *October’s* questionnaire is phrased. Contemporary art might be heterogeneous, but it is not irrevocably atomized. Indeed, much like political identity, it tends to coalesce temporarily around a variety of nodal points, each one characterized by a different imperative, principle, or narrative.<sup>6</sup> No artist attaches him- or herself to any one nodal point, just as no nodal point exhausts the meaning of any artist’s practice.<sup>7</sup> These “coalitions,” moreover, cannot be dismissed as mere “special interest groups.” They are not independent units, each orbiting its own sun. Rather, the one is always forged in relation to the other, creating an aesthetic field that is, at the level of both production and reception, heterogeneous as well as contingent and agonistic. I don’t yet know if this means for us what it would mean for Mouffe—that art, like the democracy we don’t yet inhabit, is being radicalized. I’m merely suggesting

5. Mouffe would say that radical democratic politics exists only in incipient form today. It designates a model of democracy towards which we are (or should be) striving. On “conflictual consensus,” see Mouffe, “Decision, Deliberation, and Democratic Ethos,” *Philosophy Today* 41 (Spring 1997), p. 27.

6. I borrow the phrase “nodal points” from Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 112. Foucault’s concept of “local criticism”—defined by Wendy Brown as a type of thinking that “resets the compass points of critical theory . . . [replacing] critique of an imagined social totality and an ambition of total transformation with critique of historically specific and local constellations of power,”—might also prove useful in the formulation of an approach to contemporary art that accounts for the diversity of its sites of engagement (presuming, of course, that artists engage these sites critically). See Brown’s *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), vii.

7. This is true of all artists from all historical periods, but it seems more pronounced today, as movements and manifestos have become all but obsolete.

that art's polysemy (or, rather, the reigning dissensus among artists, critics, and curators about the organizing principle most appropriate to contemporary art) could be the sign of something promising on the horizon.

Beyond moments of temporary and provisional convergence, though, might contemporary art be understood to operate according to a more coherent logic, a logic that respects the conflictual nature of its subject? One could say that heterogeneity itself is the organizing principle of contemporary art, as demonstrated, perhaps, by the rise of collage, assemblage, sampling, and citational practices over the last thirty years. Today, almost every aspect of the complex, polyvalent, image- and sound-saturated lives we lead is fair game for art, and this necessarily leads to a certain heterogeneity of form and content.

However, that doesn't explain contemporary art's polymorphism to any degree of satisfaction, largely because it fails to distinguish the present moment from earlier movements, such as Dada or Surrealism. Something more significant is at play, I would argue, and it revolves around hybridity. Hybridity is a quality that contemporary art shares with both the historical and the neo-avant-garde, of course, but it has become progressively more pronounced over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, leading us to the point where we find ourselves now, in which (to borrow a phrase from a 1992 essay by Jacques Rancière) contemporary art is "together" only "to the extent that" it is "*in between*—between names, identities, [categories] . . . and so on."<sup>8</sup> Rancière was originally speaking about the place of the political subject, but he might as well have been describing the state of contemporary art.

Today, every aspect of art has been hybridized, from its form and medium to its site and mode of address. The latter have been subjected to intensive interrogation over the last twenty years, as artists have sought to expand both the "where" and the "who" of their practice. Since 1990, we could have found art circulating in any number of extra-institutional spaces, from the Internet (Conrad Bakker), a bakery in Austin (Zoë Sheehan Saldaña), and a Brooklyn storefront (Michael Rakowitz), to the *Village Voice* (Emily Jacir), an outdoor market in Istanbul (Daniel Bozhkov), the strip of beach separating Tijuana and San Diego (Javier Téllez), and a New York City street (Felix Gonzalez-Torres).<sup>9</sup> These are not isolated cases. They might not exemplify the entire range of contemporary art, but experiments with unconventional forms of presentation and distribution are on the rise, and they show no signs of abating.

Besides form, medium, site, and mode of address, the content of art too has been radicalized. No subject falls outside the purview of art anymore. The rule of the day is inter-discursivity and inter-disciplinarity. As we might expect, artists themselves demonstrate marked signs of hybridization. In addition to "creators,"

8. Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivation," *October* 61 (Summer 1992), p. 62.

9. It is important to note that these artists also exhibit at galleries and museums. Thus, their relationship to the market on the one hand and to institutions on the other is neither simple nor one of strict opposition.

they are also doubling as designers (Andrea Zittel), geographers (Trevor Paglen), chefs and hosts (Rirkrit Tiravanija), small business owners (Christine Hill), consultants and community service providers (WochenKlauser), bio-engineers (Critical Art Ensemble), perfume designers (Daniel Bozhkov), and gardeners and sustainable food producers (Fritz Haeg). These extra-artistic roles are fully incorporated into the artists' own creative identities, just as the extra-artistic endeavors they pursue are inextricable from the art they produce.

What we are witnessing, therefore, is a radical shift in art's relationship both to itself and the world at large, a shift that distinguishes the present moment from anything that came before. Put simply, art is now defined by its dis-identification with the discipline of art. Oddly, Greenberg has proven to be the best foil for conceptualizing the situation in which we find ourselves today. If modern art (as theorized by Greenberg) used "the characteristic methods of [the] discipline. . . to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence," contemporary art does the exact opposite: it secedes from the very field to which it belongs.<sup>10</sup> It's not just that contemporary art refuses any longer to serve as an enclave or a ghetto. I don't think it's even a matter, simply, of art expanding its boundaries, of it letting more of the world in, of it allowing more to count as art than ever before. Rather, contemporary art seems desperately to want to exceed the parameters that formerly set it apart as a specialized endeavor and to shed many of the attributes that make it recognizable as art.<sup>11</sup> Unlike modernist painting, which sought to explore what was "unique and proper" to itself as painting, precisely so as to arrive at a more perfect understanding of the discipline, to realize that discipline in all of its purity and truth, contemporary art wants to mis-understand itself as art.<sup>12</sup> It wants to understand itself less, not more. Indeed, if contemporary art wants to understand itself at all, it is as something that it is not, as something altogether *other*. We might say, then, that contemporary art is engaged in a sustained (and I'd add exhilarating) process of self-othering or auto-defamiliarization.<sup>13</sup> This striving to install difference, non-identity, and

10. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 755.

11. The distinction I'm making here is a fine one, but it's crucial if we're to understand precisely what distinguishes contemporary art from the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde, and post-modernism, with which it seems to have so much in common. Contemporary art enjoys a very specific relationship with exteriority, one characterized by a centrifugal extension beyond the parameters of the discipline proper. Like all centrifugal forces, contemporary art tends to flee its own center—sacrificing, it should be added, a great deal of legibility and autonomy in the process. Artists from the earlier part of the twentieth century enjoyed their own relationship with exteriority, but it was generally one of "appropriation" instead of "extension" and its movement was centripetal, not centrifugal. The work they produced ultimately sought its own center: even when it left, it always returned.

12. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 755.

13. Paul Chan read an early version of this essay, and his insightful comments encouraged me to consider the ramifications of art's pursuit of non-identity and difference. If art is characterized by hybridity and heterogeneity, what is this hybridity and heterogeneity in the service of? What sort of relationship does art establish with the world whose attributes it imitates and whose discourses it mines? Is this relationship oppositional or is it pacific? Is it one of friction or "reconciliation"? In the

exteriority at its very heart is a hallmark of much contemporary art and a strategy around which a future history of this period might revolve.<sup>14</sup>

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process of othering and mis-understanding itself, does art also seek to other and mis-understand the world? I would agree with Paul that the former should be pursued alongside the latter, and that if it is not, art runs the risk of becoming an affirmative rather than a critical practice. What we disagree on, however, is how successfully the projects I've highlighted here actually achieve these ends. Many thanks to Paul for his tough, incisive reading of this essay. In addition to the questions above, it's also imperative to ask whether contemporary art, in its very hybridity and heterogeneity, isn't merely a symptom of what Robert Hullot-Kentor has described as society's debilitating state of "system immanence." If society "has consumed itself," moreover, it could be argued that what we need is precisely the opposite of what a great deal of contemporary art provides: a stubborn autonomy, a fiercely guarded "outside" to the one society has forfeited. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "A New Type of Human Being and Who We Really Are" (<http://brooklynrail.org/2008/11/art/a-new-type-of-human-being-and-who-we-really-are>).  
14. In this case, "difference" should not be confused with "novelty."

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RACHEL HAIDU

*In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (das schwerste Gewicht).*

*If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.*

*But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid? The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.*

*Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.*

*What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?*  
—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

For a long time, humanists like Kundera have provided easy targets for dismissal by academics suspicious of such lyrical liberalism. Because Kundera wrote in the shadow of Czechoslovakian Communism, his romanticism is tainted with what we expect to be a reactionary, anti-Marxist politics. But isn't there something in Kundera's sweet and moving novel that could do more than console us in the aftermath of "grand narratives"? Isn't his opposition between "the unbearable lightness of being" and the mythically heroic "heaviest of burdens"—that evoked by responsibility, and particularly by historical

responsibility—potentially more useful than art historians, rarely eager to look to literature for answers or even inspiration, might wish?

The identity Kundera makes between (hetero) sex and historical burdening left aside, his charge that freedom from responsibility could be as joyfully transcendent as it is non-signifying brings us to what I think is your central question: does contemporary art have to be weighted down by history to signify, or can we find value in its breaking-free? Is the art of our era truly less historically weighted than that of other eras? Perhaps most pertinently, what does art make of this question? Much of today's promising art allows spectators to experience the conflicted, uncertain, and ultimately complex dimensions to the very dilemma Kundera poses. It's a dilemma that art history—eager to choose the winners of the race to historical signification—threatens to suffocate. But it may be that artists are more in sync with the Czech novelist than we historians.

I'm thinking of young collectives like My Barbarian or individual artists like Dora Garcia or Tamy Ben-Tor, whose works skip along the line between the ridiculous and the meaningful, threatening to empty the seriousness with which we take history. They place the spectator in an uncertain and often uneasy position. Here, history (in the form of Hitler, the "1960s," etc.), or any serious relation to it, is being ridiculed: how am I supposed to react? Before Ben-Tor's video, *Women Talk About Adolf Hitler*, or My Barbarian's video installation, *The Golden Age*, we might laugh in disbelief (at the yenta rehearsing her Hitler obsession) or want to join the party (of line dancers mimicking absurd moves to a revamped slave ballad): these auspiciously *felt* reactions unfix our bored, tendentious relations to what we already hate (Hitler, slavery) but can no longer think about. Other artists—Walid Raad, Hito Steyerl, Clemens von Wedemeyer, Artur Zmijewski—make work that looks more serious and whose relation to history is more overt and focused. They document a set of proxy experiences, in which history is remade as a new text and we are forced to examine the differences between what we "know" about history and what we can—now—feel about this new pseudo-historical text before us. Whether it is a "remake" of Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment or an archive of the Lebanese civil wars invented in another archive's absence, that which is inaccessible or nonexistent in today's written histories is represented on the artistic stage in ways that require us to "be present"—as the argot of today would have it—to history.

Fundamentally all of these artists question our relation to history without insisting that we necessarily have one—without treating that relationship as if it were sacrosanct. We want to believe that history holds out a space of redemption, a reason for our actions to have meaning or just cause. These artists, having so flatly shut out that redemptive relation to history, open up problems that theory and history do not. They complicate our wish to participate in history, making it as sensorial, personal, abject, and *lived* as possible, and provide



us with proxy experiences that remind us of the gaps and reactions in our histories. Above all, they remind us that our wishes to be part of history are irrational and formless, as full of the base instincts—shame, desire, repulsion—as they are ripe with rationalizations and sublimations.

Why—other than for the narcissistic pleasures related to knowing—do we want a relationship to history? Your questions frame the relevance of history to our critical relationships to art, but what about those desires, fantasies, and displacements of which criticism is made? Certainly they are wedged into our criticism of art's relation to history. When art forces us to examine them in specific and productive ways, we are lucky: otherwise, what is the point of asking art (let alone the institutionalization of art) to find historical complexity or weight? For the sake of weight alone? To reassure us of our relations to a history without which we would feel . . . guilty? Irrelevant? Even literary fiction is more knowing than that.

“Contemporary art,” the questionnaire suggests, involves a state of affairs beyond “historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment.” This description obviously speaks to the fact that the unity of the field of art has dissolved: art cannot be described in terms of (and judged with reference to) a single cultural function or a homogenous historical development. It might therefore seem as if we were left with single aesthetic objects that necessarily relate neither to society nor to previous artistic production. In its disintegrated multiplicity, art only seems to provide various occasions for another form of consumption. According to this diagnosis, we live in an “event culture,” that is, beyond any historical narrative and normative discourse. Although I agree that we could use more of the latter these days, I think that this radical diagnosis—like any claim in accord with the ideology of *posthistoire*—is part of the problem and not of the solution.

Categories like *posthistoire* and “event culture” point to what must be identified as a fundamental change in art practice and art theory, one that is absolutely central to any understanding of contemporary art; but they are not the best terms to describe this change. “Boundary-crossing” and “experience” are notions better suited to this task.<sup>1</sup> “Boundary-crossing” is a general rubric for an artistic development that has called into question the unity of art and the arts (for the last three or four decades “boundary-crossing” has been one of the most popular keywords in the international discourse on contemporary art), and “experience” is a central category of an aesthetic theory that, partly motivated by this artistic development, no longer tries to conceptualize the truth content of art works in the framework of a philosophical system (for the last three or four decades, the notion of “experience” has been the focal point of debate in philosophical aesthetics, at least in Germany).<sup>2</sup> Both the artistic critique of the traditional art work through various forms of boundary-crossing and the methodological turn toward the category of experience have challenged modernism’s narratives of progress—and with them

1. A Collaborative Research Centre in Berlin dedicated to this change is significantly titled “Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits”; see <http://www.sfb626.de>.

2. To list just a few: Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989); Christel Fricke, *Zeichenprozeß und ästhetische Erfahrung* (Munich: Fink, 2001); Josef Früchtl, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und moralisches Urteil. Eine Rehabilitierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996); Hans Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982); Andrea Kern, *Schöne Lust. Eine Theorie der ästhetischen Erfahrung nach Kant* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000); Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); *Ästhetische Erfahrung*, ed. Willi Oelmüller (Paderborn/Munich/Vienna/Zurich: Schöningh, 1981); Martin Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung. Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); Ruth Sonderegger, *Für eine Ästhetik des Spiels. Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktion und der Eigensinn der Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000); Albrecht Wellmer, “Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno’s Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity,” in *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 1–35.

its art-critical judgments, its underlying philosophy of history, and its notion of art. On the one hand, open and hybrid art works after 1960 dissolved the integrity of the traditional art genres presupposed by the modernist construction of a continuous and homogenous historical development (in painting, sculpture, literature, music, film, and so on). On the other hand, the philosophical turn toward aesthetic experience implied a critique of the modernist idea of an objective determination of the work, instead leaving the question of the work's determination to potentially conflicting readings. With the dissolution of an objective unity of the arts and the art work, the modernist notion of progress lost its purchase.<sup>3</sup>

Now this is neither the end of history nor the end of art's conceptual determination nor the end of critical judgment as such; it is just the end of a certain problematically objectivist notion of history, art, and critique. Both the boundary-crossing phenomenon in art and the turn toward the concept of experience respond to the same problem of modernist objectivism. I thus believe that contemporary art's dissolution of basic high modernist convictions should be understood as a movement of aesthetic enlightenment—of progress in another sense.<sup>4</sup> It should be seen not as a movement directed against the aesthetic and its autonomy as such (as much criticism infers from contemporary art's opposition to the aesthetic discourse of high modernism), but as a movement that is at least partly motivated by a different understanding of the aesthetic and its autonomy.

It is not by chance that the open structure of much contemporary work resonates with a notion of the aesthetic that locates autonomy no longer in certain object characteristics but in the structure of the viewer's reflective engagement with the work, or, to be more precise, with the open question as to what the work really includes on the levels of content and form. And it is not least by dint of the openness of such reflection that aesthetic experience differs fundamentally from the logic of consumption. Aesthetic experience is nothing that can be "had" by the subject. The term "experience" refers to a process between subject and object that transforms both—the object insofar as it is only in and through the dynamic of its experience that it is brought to life as a work of art, and the subject insofar as it takes on a self-reflective form, its own performativity recurring in a structurally uncanny (or rather un-homely) way in the mode of the object's appearance. For how the object appears to us at any given moment is something we do not make and is yet inconceivable without the performative force of our imagination. Now the subject that is engaged in such an experience is obviously not an abstract viewer but in each case a concrete one. If art has effects on society, it is not because its experience would constitute something like a universal subjectivity (which was a favorite idea of high modernism) but because the experiencing subject is potentially confronted with its own social and cultural assumptions.

3. See the introduction in Christoph Menke and Juliane Rebentisch, eds., *Kunst—Fortschritt—Geschichte* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2006), p. 9–11.

4. For details see Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

Differently situated subjects might thus experience the same work differently. In many ways this has been made explicit in contemporary art practice, with important consequences for the notion of the art public: today, the “we” that any aesthetic judgment implies is anticipated as controversial. The claim of contemporary art *for* the public is inseparable from the claim *on* this same public to free the idea that “art is for all” from its bourgeois misunderstanding. A more complex notion of the art public is especially relevant, of course, against the backdrop of the postcolonial condition that is a main feature of our present.

However, if theories of aesthetic experience can indeed be seen as paradigmatic for the contemporary determination of art, it should also be clear that their critique of high-modernist art theory does not amount to the end of aesthetic modernity. Rather, it is a way to be true to its project, and thus is a move in its critical self-overcoming, not a break with it. This can be seen in the respective reformulations of the modernist idea of aesthetic autonomy. But the same holds true with respect to the conceptions of art history and art criticism implied by such reformulations. From the perspective of a theory of aesthetic experience, the aesthetic status of an object, its autonomy, is neither a transhistorical value nor something that is dependent on the mere course of time. Neither can a work secure its status as art by itself, for this status is dependent on the historically changeable experiences had or not had *vis-à-vis* the work. Nor does a work necessarily lose its strength or tension just because of mere duration, for experience might also disclose the innovative or critical potential of older works. The many rediscoveries of forgotten artists or art works by contemporary artists are examples of this: they are expressions of a non-teleological sense of art history. Thus contemporaneity is not just another quality art might have or not have, but something that is crucial to the very concept of art. While conservative guardians of the canon still like to talk about the transhistorical validity of great art, one should therefore insist that the greatness of great art is something that constitutes itself historically: namely in and through the history of its being disclosed in ever new and sometimes quite surprising ways.

Now skeptics might suspect that such a take on aesthetic autonomy and art history entails the sacrifice of art-critical discourse to some neo-Kantian aesthetics of taste. There are two related points to make in response to this objection. First, the aesthetics of experience does not do away with art criticism but shifts art-critical discourse to another position. We no longer judge an object on the basis of certain properties that would guarantee their art status once and for all in order then to expect an aesthetic experience from them; rather, we judge an object on the basis and after having had an experience with it. This does not weaken the role of criticism. On the contrary, if an aesthetic object becomes aesthetic only in and through the process of our experience of it, then aesthetic status is dependent on interpretation, commentary, and critique, for it is only within such discourse that experience becomes publicly manifest. Thus art-critical discourse is

not merely accidental to the object but is something that constitutes the artwork ever anew. No doubt this entails that there is always the possibility—and in the case of canonical works the reality—of various, sometimes conflicting interpretations and judgments. But, and this is the second point, the simple fact that aesthetic judgments can always be contested does not necessarily produce an abysmal relativism. Instead one must infer from this insight that criteria for judging art can only gain their binding force through public debate.

These are, of course, general conditions of art and art criticism. But it is not the least achievement of contemporary art and aesthetics to have made these conditions explicit. To say this, to be sure, has a normative dimension: we are not living in a state of anything goes; today any pretense of producing or exhibiting something like a self-sufficient, “objective” art work indifferent to context and viewer seems at best provincial—and for good reasons. To use a very modernist formulation, it is time for art criticism to recognize art’s current “state of material” [*Materialstand*], i.e., the current state of aesthetic consciousness.

The present, however one may attempt to contain its multiplicity and resistance to self-identity, is not the first time critics have lamented that “much present [artistic] practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment.” Writing in 1928, Walter Benjamin noted, “The construction of life is at present in the power of facts far more than of convictions, and of such facts as have barely become the basis for convictions. Under these circumstances, true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework—this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility.”<sup>1</sup> The present about which the questionnaire inquires is also marked by the failure of practice and framework to harmonize, despite so many institutionalized attempts to make them do so. For Benjamin the way to secure a firm handle on this disjointedness and concomitant uncertainty about the future involved turning away from melancholic adulation of the mythical past and facing that inassimilable present by taking a metaphorical trip through an amorphous and rambling contemporaneity. The trope of the trip meant a priori that the impossibility of arriving at a concept of that present would have to be provisionally accepted. Traversing terrain without a map required a little momentum. Of course one could object here that Benjamin’s Angel of History in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written a decade or so later, at the start of World War II, turns anxiously back to witness the horror of history, and tries to intervene while the winds of time drive her forward. But standing implicated in time, rather than watching it from an external vantage that at any rate does not exist for the subject embedded in human history, the critic has to meet the demands of an evanescent and contingent present by moving through it, sensitive to its rapid transformations. “One-Way Street” opens with Benjamin, in a metaphorical vehicle of his own, at a gasoline station to fill up for the journey. This vehicle is about to embark on a full-fledged engagement with what’s to come, the landscape an unknown quotient unfurling before it. The numerous, precipitous, and conflicting interpretive approaches that claim to inform the present only add to its putative lack of coherence. “Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social experience existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour oil over it; one applies a little to the little spindles and joints that one has to know.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet “pouring oil over it” seems to be the more common approach, both then, as Benjamin laments, and now. As the questionnaire notes, institutions, programs, departments, and professorships paradoxically devoted to “contemporary art” have proliferated. Not one of them has proven able to make a strong or convincing argument for what constitutes the parameters of their field of frenzied

1. Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street” (1928), in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 61.

2. *Ibid.*

inquiry. Despite their attempts to construct a quasi-universal scaffold with which to organize contemporary practices, these entities often exacerbate the general dispersion. Each protects its own micro territory, its own interests. “A blind determination to save the prestige of personal experience, rather than, through an impartial disdain for its impotence and entanglement . . . is triumphing almost everywhere . . . The air is so full of phantoms, mirages of a glorious cultural future breaking upon us over night in spite of it all, for everyone is committed to the optical illusions of his isolated standpoint.”<sup>3</sup> Self-legitimizing micro-perspectives have replaced grand narratives.

And yet those micro-perspectives claim the privilege of a common vanishing point; they make pretentious, universalizing, and therefore sterile pronouncements. For instance, programs affiliated with museums are meant to manufacture the next handful of relevant artists to, in turn, be shown in that very institution’s biennial, triennial, or particular spectacular display calendar. The result: an immense and exclusionary manufacturing tautology not unlike that of the Culture Industry. These institutions even have their own curatorial and critical departments to provide the proper professional functionaries to keep the machinery going. This internally sustaining system does all it can to make sure its own perspective can function as the dominant one.

That institutionalized assembly-line production of contemporary cultural practice is nonetheless a necessary antidote to equally fortified positions: a reflex in times of general confusion is the return of regressive figuration. Contemporary artists and curators cling to regressive figuration as though it were contemporary. How else to explain the extreme success of Currin, Dumas, Doig, and Yuskavage? One could map the paradigm neatly enough: an anxious and defensive drive to “critical” production versus dominant knee-jerk returns to figurative painting; relational aesthetics versus a new generation of sophisticated identity politics. But the map fails and frustrates, pressing one onto exploration rather than adherence. The guide has yet to appear. This absence of a roadmap with which to chart contemporary artistic production may be the strength of the present rather than a weakness.

Part of the effervescent multiplicity of the putative present, and the confusion it generates, is an “optical allusion” brought to bear by the seeming coherence of the past. This artificial sense of coherence, in turn, found its support in a Eurocentric and profoundly myopic sense of modernity as a universal achievement, or even an achievement at all. How could specific geopolitical sites such as Paris, and then New York, be understood as the capital of this allegedly universal modernity? That no such particular urban site functions as such in the present becomes cause for panic. In other words, an art world revolving around the Venice Biennale and a handful of other such fairs in the Eastern and Northern quadrant of the globe has begun to crack under the pressure of its own narcissism. The plurality

3. Ibid., p. 74.



of the present is a healthy response to the violence of coherence made possible only by colonialization and hysterical blindness. This development is more complex than globalization and the machination of neoliberal markets since the Reagan/Thatcher era. It would be too easy to dismiss the new proliferation of art institutions in the Middle and Far East, or South America, as the lamentable result of global capital. Of course the nefarious workings of the market are a factor, but they are one factor among many. It is part and parcel of that same modernism that was repressive of, yet made possible by, a modernity itself supported by a disavowed other. That other in its irreducible multiplicity has decided to enter the fray. The absence of central points of reference is a healthy symptom of the present as a function of decolonization, an unfinished project.

Another way of formulating this would be to say, yes, disjointedness is indeed a local perception, because coherence was an equally local and historically specific perception, which shattered under its own repressive weight. This does not mean that we need accept an affirmative—in the Frankfurt School sense of uncritical—pluralism. On the contrary, the search for frameworks capable of critically thinking this field of difference is all the more urgent. But how to go about it? “One does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints one has to know.”

Those artists and critics who address the specific sites, experiences, and problems suffocated under the bell jar of mythical universals while programmatically exploring those universals comprise the most interesting practices at present. One exemplary case is the work of Mona Hatoum, who frames the way in which thinking the specific body—inscribed by gender, class, race, history—so central to feminism necessitates the very forms of abstraction-as-modernist universalism that had disavowed it in the early twentieth century. Her work occupies those universals in order to dismantle them. For Hatoum the body is only ever abstracted through the biopolitical forms of disciplinary order set in place by modernity. Abstraction, formal and political, becomes the primary means by which to articulate the present, which is mediated by the universals of the past. The most convincing projects now are those that rethink the relationship between the fictional generalities of Eurocentric culture, and social and political contingencies of specific sites that paid the price for modernist universality, projects such as those of Walid Raad, Santiago Sierra, Walid Beshty, and Anri Sala, to name a few.

The crisis identified in this questionnaire is not straightforwardly a crisis in contemporary art or even, I think, simply the result of transformations in contemporary art. It is a crisis of art theory and criticism, one that has been compounded by recent institutional transformations in the disciplinary priorities for art history hiring in the U.S. liberal-arts context. A local perception, yes, and it would be worth thinking about how this crisis would look from elsewhere and if it would even be framed in such terms in other places. But to stick for the moment with this localized problem, the questionnaire is describing the loss of the diagnostic power of the (theoretically savvy) art critic. This figure is rather different from the run-of-the-mill professional art critic; she or he is a historically informed cultural theorist, something like a public intellectual. Perhaps even closer to home—given the specific invocation of the “neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism”—this may also be a particular loss felt by *October*. I wonder if the journal feels a loss of relevance to the theorization of contemporary art today. We cannot simply set aside such questions of generational struggles, of battles over critical or disciplinary turf, or of the relative parochialism of these things. Yet the problematic identified here is nonetheless a crucially important one. When the critic loses diagnostic power, careful attention needs to be paid to the institutions that take her or his place and the kinds of ideological agendas they set. The market, of course, is a ready and willing surrogate for the intellectual influence of the art critic, who now seems to have migrated wholly into the academy and become “professor of contemporary art.” With this institutional shift—and here the questionnaire gives us an important warning—the professor of contemporary art should be wary of adopting an uncritically reactive role in relation to what the market has determined as worthy.

Having said this, what sells on the contemporary art market is a rather different issue from the tentative proposal made towards the end of the questionnaire. Here the Jamesonian framing of the whole problematic comes into sharpest focus with the suggestion that this crisis in contemporary art criticism could be seen as a symptom of a larger (determining?) economic reality: the crisis of neoliberalism. This leaves me with a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*. Compare the description of our current situation, as given in this questionnaire, with the following section from Fredric Jameson’s influential 1984 essay on postmodernism: “If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.”<sup>1</sup> Reiterating the terms borrowed from Raymond Williams that Jameson is also drawing on—dominant, emergent,

1. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984), p. 57.

and residual—Gayatri Spivak has offered the following response: “If we only concentrate on the dominant, we forget that the difference between varieties of emergent and residual *may* be the difference between radical and conservative resistance to the dominant, although this is by no means certain.”<sup>2</sup> The best art criticism has been about pinpointing the tendencies of the cultural emergent as they move up into dominance. *October* has always been about this. Does the questionnaire lament the critic’s loss of the ability to *read* the emergent—always pushing at the dominant—or is the dominant appropriating the emergent so quickly now that there is no space left for the critic?

It is well established that heterogeneity was a key topos at the height of the postmodernism debate. But this heterogeneity was understood by certain art theorists—and contained—by the idea of “critical” postmodernism and “uncritical” pluralism. A theoretical framework, paradigm, or interpretative model was applied in order to sort and sift this heterogeneity. While I agree that mappings of the present need to be undertaken, I wonder if a Jamesonian or Frankfurt-School model is the best approach to take. This seems especially unappealing for those of us who work on aspects of postwar art that never easily fitted the earlier dominant interpretative models proposed (suggested here as “postmodernism” and the “neo-avant-garde”) or on practices that problematize the assumptions that underpin these models.<sup>3</sup>

Aware of the dangers of imperialist connotations, I nonetheless prefer the idea of mapping to the questionnaire’s assertion of the theoretical model. Mapping offers a less rigid kind of spatial metaphor for understanding a complex and heterogeneous cultural field. The notion of the map doesn’t immediately lend itself to hierarchical value judgment in the way that the model seems to. To begin a mapping of the contemporary relationship between aesthetics and politics would indeed require a more complex consideration of globalization than art-critical or art-historical writing has yet been able to offer. Following Spivak’s suggestive critique of Jameson that I cite above, this might mean avoiding a sole focus on “the dominant.” Any adequate consideration of the question of globalization in relation to contemporary art would need to break with this commonplace tendency, wherein the Euro-U.S. is the normative “model” that is then simply writ global.

2. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 314.

3. For a compelling, theoretically rich account of body art in the U.S. and Europe in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s in light of its exclusion from the “critical” postmodernism debates, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998). My own work explores the sustained feminist critique of “the political” understood through the question of class. See Siona Wilson, “From Women’s Work to the Umbilical Lens: Mary Kelly’s Early Films,” *Art History* 31, vol. 1, (February 2008), pp. 79–102.

## JUDITH RODENBECK

There is a long history of “battles” between ancients and moderns. In this trope of filial impiety, whether Oedipal or Bloomian or wholly formal, the ancients always cast the moderns as chaotic, degraded, incoherent. This is compounded by the problem of “modern” as a temporal term, as well as of the false unity of the postmodern. Your question on “the contemporary” arrives, younger than Jesus, just a short thirty-three years since the editors of *October* wrote, “We do not wish to share in that self-authenticating pathos which produces with monotonous regularity, testimonies to the fact that ‘things are not as good as they were’ in 1967, ’57—or in 1917” (*October* 1 [Spring 1976], p. 3). American criticism, you noted then, comprised “a number of isolated and archaic enterprises, largely predicated upon assumptions still operative in the literary academy,” and you decried “overspecialized reviews” that failed to effect critical exchange or affect aesthetic practice. *October* then made “a fundamental choice as to the primacy of text and the writer’s freedom of discourse” in the name of “intellectual autonomy” (p. 5). But if there has been any loosening or even floating free, the cultural attention deficit is there: the primacy of text, already under intense pressure in the late 1970s, is no longer secure in the age of tweets, Jitter, and Flash—all, by the way, essentially visual effects that are nevertheless, at the level of programming and code, fundamentally textual. And the umbilicus of gold—family values!—is now a thick braided helix of criticism, galleries, the market, and, sadly, the academy.

The function of the institution is to replicate itself, which is what institutional critique, always already internal to its critical topos, has effectively done. Seen through an old-fashioned Wölfflinian lens (but understanding time itself to have been compressed), we are now in the high-mannerist phase of institutional critique. This periodicity entails a much more rapid development than the century or so needed to get from the linear to the painterly. But rather than a psychology of stylistic evolution, what we’re seeing may be something more like the simple mutation of the simulacrum, rethinking Darwinian motion not as “survival of the fittest” but as the varied expression of mutabilities.

As I write, the Metropolitan Museum has just opened an exhibition, *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1985*, devoted to a group of artists whose emergence is temporally, geographically, and theoretically coeval with, and arguably anaclitic to, that of *October*. Douglas Crimp’s lapidary essay, “Pictures,” which gave that “generation” its name, was published in your eighth issue (Spring 1979), and Crimp himself had been elevated to your masthead in the Fall of 1977 (in the special issue on photography), the same year of the “Pictures” show. These projects eschewed what the editors then called “the cleansing properties of linseed and turpentine” (*October* 8 [Spring 1979], p. 3) and it may be worth mentioning that

you noted then that “the arts can no longer claim a unified field” and added “that the crisis thereby precipitated extends to criticism as well” (p. 4).

It wasn't “Pictures” but rather Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (1977) who brought poststructural picture theory and its appeal for “an ecology of images” to what Annette Michelson pithily characterized as a “middle-class intelligentsia with no illusions of a revolutionary mission” (“The Prospect Before Us,” *October* 16 [Spring 1981], p. 119). I've been thinking a lot lately about Sontag's absence. Not just the gruesome and unwilling exit chronicled in David Rieff's grim, flawed account, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, but the epoch-changing death of our last genuine public intellectual. For if the call at the dawn of the age of Reagan was for “a theoretically significant artistic practice within a climate of growing reaction” (Michelson again, p. 119), our current situation, which has been propagated by, yet is different from, that earlier moment, demands that we, the bourgeois intellectuals (or what my friend Richard Leacock calls “ineffectuals”), reexamine the value of revolutionary illusions. Michelson was of course writing in the inaugural year of a regime whose picture-savvy and culture-industry apprenticeship has informed the Obama administration to an alarming degree. Twenty years later, annealed in a Balkan crucible, Sontag rethought her own positions vis-à-vis pictures, and in 2003, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, bluntly reversed herself: “There isn't going to be an ecology of images” (p. 108). And only someone who guarded her intellectual autonomy so fiercely could have written, contra two decades of theory generated in part by her earlier work but by then wholly informed by experience, “To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism” (p. 110).

The explanatory models for our cultural moment are invisible because they are indexed to other criteria than those evolutionary dynamics that generated the “neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism,” both of which, as terms, are bound to a temporal, *post hoc* positionality that can only be defined by the pastness of the model (avant-garde, modernism). But a more fundamental problem is that of the model *qua* model, which can only return its copies as a series of deviations. “Contemporary art” is now para-professionalized within the academy (there have, of course, always been critics). The logical problem, however, is what, precisely, the “historian” of “the contemporary” does: How is that role different from the role of the critic? From the ethnographer or cultural anthropologist? Market researcher? Writ in those terms, yes, to be a “historian” of “the contemporary” is certainly a neoliberal enterprise. But “the contemporary” is fluid: Pol Pot was a contemporary of Joseph Beuys—and of the Pictures generation, as well as of *October*. We have to be careful to read the history of the now, which is not yet history but nevertheless historical, askance, lest we return once more to Year Zero.

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## HELEN MOLESWORTH

For nearly a decade, I have worked as a curator of contemporary art: first in a city museum (The Baltimore Museum of Art), then in a Kunsthalle at a Big Ten University (The Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University), and now at a university museum (The Harvard Art Museum). Each institution defined its mission differently, and the role contemporary art played within them shifted accordingly. In Baltimore, contemporary art was where the money was in terms of the philanthropic base of the museum; hence contemporary art was seen to be a primary site for audience engagement and development. The Wexner Center was the brainchild of a visionary university president who wanted Ohio State University to be known for something in addition to its stellar football legacy. The mission was twofold: on the one hand, to be a “laboratory” for the arts, a site of commissioned works, experimental exhibitions, and artist residencies; and on the other to be an importer of culture to a vibrant and growing, but nonetheless second-string, city with only modest cultural amenities. With no permanent collection, the Center was driven by the logic of the temporary exhibition, with a premium placed on art made on site or specifically for the venue. The Harvard Art Museum is a more traditionally defined university art gallery, complete with a storied collection and an august history as a teaching museum. For most of the twentieth century, that teaching was based on connoisseurship, i.e., the close study of individual objects. However, as artists moved away from the production of highly crafted discrete objects, this historical mode of study did not adapt to new modes of production, leaving contemporary art largely to languish. It took until the late date of 1997 for a department of Modern and Contemporary Art to be established.

Despite the specificity of each institution’s aim for contemporary art, there remain remarkable similarities: in each instance, it was hoped that contemporary art would keep the museum new and filled with energy, largely by ensuring younger audiences and new patrons. Here, Harvard’s time-lag is instructive, as its (outmoded?) commitment to the individual object and connoisseurship was largely enabled by the fact that institutionally it was not subject to the wrenching demand for new audiences brought on by a whole force of economic factors (declining government funding, the blockbuster exhibition, the rise of the tourist economy, etc.). This anomalous situation allows us to see how deeply the fate of contemporary art is intertwined with the larger sea-change experienced by museums in which the care and presentation of art objects for their own sake has been steadily supplanted by an institutional concern and need for an ever-expanding audience. For better or for worse, it is a current article of faith among museums that part of the “art experience” audiences want is bound up with change and novelty (i.e., temporary exhibitions) as opposed to stasis (the permanent collection).

Contemporary art's newness appears nominally to serve this aim easily enough. Furthermore, much contemporary art has also forsaken the object for the audience; hence contemporary art's demand for participation—whether it is the viewer who circumnavigates a Donald Judd cube, cuts off a piece of Yoko Ono's clothing, sings along to a Phil Collins video, or puzzles over the veracity of a claim made by The Atlas Group—means that the role of the audience in the artist-museum equation has never been more palpable. But, despite the new-found centrality of the audience, the museum still needs contemporary art—in whatever form it takes—to do the work of helping to keep the museum alive, to help it stay young and vibrant. This almost vampiric urge on the part of the museum (it exists in the Kunsthalle as well, the demand for the new being structurally insatiable) is accompanied by contemporary art's other institutional effect, a low-level hum of perpetual anxiety. In my experience, this anxiety stems from contemporary art's resistance to and abandonment of a museological connoisseurship devoted to quality (“the best”) over and above other criteria. This isn't to say that there are no criteria, only that the old criteria are in a state of disrepair. How, for instance, would one pick the “best” Glenn Ligon neon sign or coal dust painting? Or what consensus is now possible around the once-popular idea of the “most important living artist”?

For many, the unanswerability of questions about quality, the lack of consensus about importance, the newfound vitality of the viewer, and the perpetual influx of new art are all causes to rejoice. And yet, in my professional life, I have continually been asked to navigate the nervousness of the museum in relation to contemporary art (the academy shares this anxiety, as evidenced by this questionnaire), and to address the loss, however inchoate and unarticulated, in the shift from object to audience. One core dimension of this loss is a collective apprehension of quality and a shared narrative about how and why we find ourselves in front of the work we now go to see in museums. Despite the shift in focus to the audience, there appears to be less transparency than ever on the part of museums in relation to this audience.

I think this state of anxiety (or malaise or sometimes just plain old uninterest) is due largely to an abdication on the part of museums in which they fail not only to accept contemporary art's challenges to the conventions of aesthetic judgment but to use those challenges as a means of imagining new ways of working. In response to the massive amount of contemporary production (there are more art schools and more galleries than ever before), museums have responded with two types of presentations of the “what's new now” show: the project room and the ubiquitous biennial. This has helped to consolidate the idea of contemporary art not as “the art of our time” (i.e., art made by members of many generations) but as the exclusively new (which most often means art made by younger and younger artists). *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl has rightly called this form of exhibition-making or art-presentation “festivalism.” Such is the atmosphere provided by the



current hegemony of biennials and art fairs dedicated to the new for its own sake. It's not that this form of art presentation is bad *tout court*; rather, the problem lies in the dumb fact that museums have largely abdicated other organizing principles like shared subject matter, similar processes, or historical development. Instead, newness is the dominant presentation of contemporary art in most museums. The New Museum's inaugural triennial *Younger Than Jesus*—for which the primary criterion for exhibition was that the artist be thirty-three or younger—was the apotheosis of this phenomenon. (Apparently, artists still have not garnered any workplace rights, as such criterion is actually unlawful in most other forms of employment.)

Once upon a time, the Museum of Modern Art offered some ballast in this sea of the new. Its deployment of a strong didactic narrative about the development of modern art helped to situate, however contentiously, contemporary developments. But now MoMA appears to be stuck in a stalemate between the Kunsthalle's logic of the new for its own sake and the fiscal necessity of the general art museum's need to increase audience—between the hip nowness of the contemporary art museum and the general museum's increasing dependence on tourism (increasingly itself a novelty-seeking form of behavior). And as the logic of the Kunsthalle and festivalism has taken hold, the desire for and impulse toward grounding narratives have diminished, leaving viewers with even less sense than ever of where the new comes from, what its aims are, and what it might be up to. This helps to explain why the MoMA has turned to the Kunsthalle model when it comes to contemporary art, as it now constantly rotates the permanent-collection of contemporary art (roughly 1970 to the present) on the second floor—meaning it doesn't treat it like a permanent collection at all. Despite the varied levels of ambition and success of these temporary installations, MoMA appears unwilling to narrativize what is at stake, or what might be historical about the contemporary, in the way it is willing to do (though perhaps with less punch or partisanship than before) in the main permanent collection galleries of modern art. In this manner, MoMA (and the Guggenheim and the Whitney, too, so maybe New York as a whole) has relinquished its leadership role in the field of making narrative sense, however provisional, of the newness and the complexity of contemporary art.

To my way of thinking, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles has offered a different model, one worth serious examination (making it possible that the free-floating quality noted in the questionnaire is indeed one of “merely local perception”). Founded in 1979, LA MOCA is a polygamous marriage of Kunsthalle, city museum, and modern art museum, and, while being a university museum is not part of its explicit mission, it is that as well. The permanent collection begins with a sampling of extraordinary Combines by Robert Rauschenberg. There are earlier objects, to be sure—they have a good collection of Abstract Expressionism and an interesting assortment of postwar European material (Giacometti, Fautrier, and Tàpies were on view not too long ago)—but it's telling

that the messy, corporeal, and conceptual Combines of Rauschenberg seem to form the conceptual and psychic core of the collection. True to the Kunsthalle model, MOCA continually rotates its permanent collection, but, importantly, its temporary exhibitions of the permanent collection almost always begin with material from the 1940s. This means that MOCA does not imagine the contemporary as perpetually new and hence ahistorical; rather, the force of the newness of the contemporary acts as a lever to rethink the origin of the postwar story, or, because different curators get a crack at these reinstallations, at the very least the retrospective emphasis placed on different versions of the origins at any given moment can be acknowledged as such.

This commitment to the rootedness of contemporary practices in a historical framework has been dramatically highlighted by MOCA's unique role in the field of consistently producing temporary exhibitions on a grand scale that have attempted to map the most innovative, challenging, and paradigm-shifting art movements of the postwar period, starting with Conceptual art (Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer's *Reconsidering the Object of Art*), followed by performance (Paul Schimmel's *Out of Action*), Minimalism (Ann Goldstein's *A Minimal Future*), and, most recently, feminism (Connie Butler's *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*). These exhibitions, each dedicated to the profound challenges made by artists to the traditional object-based definition of art, have been large in scale and strongly authored by their individual curators. Ironically, the privileging of curatorial authorship has permitted more idiosyncratic and less iconic versions of these histories than typically offered by other museums (or the academy, for that matter). To wit, each exhibition was predicated on a kind of democratic inclusivity, which frequently sacrificed older ideas of "the best" for the presentation of unknown, or lesser-known, artists or works in an attempt to map a field with the simultaneous impulses of critical acumen and inclusivity. (For example, the Minimalism exhibition included the California-based light and space artists, and both the performance and the feminism exhibitions showed videos by multiple artists on one monitor, creating a kind of continual refusal of privileging one artist over another.) I think this fundamentally generous impulse stems from the relatively simple fact that many of the artists being historicized are still alive. And rather than fear the heckling and dissent this might imply, the curators of MOCA took it as an opportunity to foreground two radically important formulations. First, the history of the present is sloppy, contentious, fluid, and decidedly not definitive, but that's no reason not to try it out. Second, if the museum's historical focus on the object of art has given way to a focus on audience, then it is crucial to remember that artists constitute a major part of that audience.

MOCA's historical exhibitions tend to be conceptually fluid, marked by a strong sense of provisional open-endedness. Odd juxtapositions (Ree Morton next to Mary Kelly in *WACK!*) and atypical choices (Yvonne Rainer in the Conceptual art show, John Chamberlain's monochromatic sculptures in the Minimalism exhibition) served to open up possibilities of how one might come to

terms with what had happened, permitting both the heterogeneous messiness of any given moment and the odd temporality of what becomes important when. So too the scale of the exhibitions permitted a kind of excess that continually erred on the side of the complicated and heterogeneous as opposed to the highly selective and focused. Some critics may have found these attributes detrimental; indeed, early on I found these exhibitions confounding in their refusal to behave within the conventions of “proper” historical timeline, art-historical compare-and-contrast, or canon-building and affirmation. Ironically, MOCA’s deployment of the very authored format of the exhibition ultimately undermined any kind of institutional claim to definitive authority over the practice of historicization. Permitting the idiosyncratic interests of individual curators—curators, it’s worth noting, whose research often involved in-depth interviews with artists—meant that the exhibitions were less concerned with the streamlining of history than its sprawling intangibility. In both affect and actuality, MOCA’s inclusivity made it feel that its major, if not primary, audience was artists. For isn’t it often artists who complicate the too-neat stories told by art historians and critics? And isn’t it artists who have continually tried to open the space of the museum to meet their concerns?

Considered in this light, it is neither a mistake nor an accident that Los Angeles witnessed—from the early 1980s through to the present—its rise as a dominant art center, one largely fueled by its numerous and increasingly desirable art schools. These schools (Art Center, Otis, Cal Arts, UCLA, UC Irvine) all have made, and continue to make, enormous use of MOCA, and in doing so they and MOCA have restored to the museum one of its earliest functions, that of serving as an extended and public atelier for artists. While this has made for a dynamic museum, one as committed to the past and the mettlesome work of historicization as it has been to the emergent and the new, it also was part and parcel of MOCA’s recent financial and leadership crisis. The privileging of an artist-based audience and an artist-centered program apparently runs counter to the tourist economy and is not necessarily always in keeping with the aims and ambitions of the collector class. MOCA’s great success in one arena led to its precarious state in another. What remains troubling, however, was the overwhelming silence on the part of the universities and art schools in the area. Their lack of public advocacy was an indication of their apparent misrecognition of the symbiotic nature of their achievement and its relation to MOCA’s (understated) program. To address the language of the questionnaire, it was the city of Los Angeles and its universities that adopted a neoliberal position in relation to MOCA, imagining their successes to be exclusively their own and not seeing them as being intimately connected to and interdependent with the grand experiment that was its sister public-sphere institution. It’s true that the landscape of contemporary art has shifted, the market is more dominant than ever, the collector more powerful, but the end of grand narratives doesn’t only provoke crisis and the inevitability of a neoliberal domination. LA MOCA, steadily and quietly and, tellingly, without the approbation of the powerful East Coast institutions of culture

and learning, has, for the last fifteen years, been willing to mount historical exhibitions of contemporary art and has been seemingly unafraid of the failure implicit in such an activity. That they did so with an ambivalent, if not downright lapidary, relation to the authority of their authorship, deferring neither to the object nor to the audience as each has been generally conceived, but rather always with the category of artist in mind, not in a way that fetishized this subject position, but in a fashion that suggested that no writing of history can ethically leave behind the subjectivities of its participants, is likely the answer to and benefit of our new current lightness of being.

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In their classic study of cognitive dissonance, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter take as a case study a voluble housewife, Mrs. Marian Keech, who roused a group of sympathetic believers to make high-stake changes of occupations, relationships, and lifestyles in preparation for an end that she understood to be imminent based on passages of automatic writing channeled from extra-terrestrials. In short, she maintained she had received communication from the planet “Clarion” that warned of the world’s destruction. Perhaps it goes without saying that neither the portended flood nor wished-for flying saucer (the period’s most durable escape vehicle) ever visited her Chicago suburb. But the consequences for Keech were real enough. Indeed, stranger than the forecasted scenario was the fact that so many people were persuaded by it and that its influence survived unequivocal debunking, paradoxically reaffirming the possibility—necessity—of conviction in the face of all the contrary evidence.

By beginning here, in the sci-fi sociological landscape of Eisenhower America, I do not mean to displace present concerns about the contemporary onto the past, or to leave the methodological stakes at issue in this volume coyly oblique. But I do want to suggest that in thinking through issues of contemporary art and its myriad institutionalizations, we must account for the pieties that have long subtended the field; it is these very pieties that have granted illusory if operational coherence to the contemporary as such. Admittedly, I am arguing this by way of a rather extreme example—substituting spaceships for a revolution that never came—one that I nonetheless understand as more cautionary than caricatural, betraying as it does the slippages between constitutive fictions and factual conditions so rarely determinate of them.

Importantly, Festinger and his colleagues point to certain characteristics requisite for faith. They insist that the “individual believer must have social support,” especially following debunking.<sup>1</sup> It is clear now that groupthink rarely ends well, though this seems to have done nothing to check its continuous application to various problems and social goals, and not just outside of the academy. The question in consequence becomes pragmatic quite quickly: just how, why, and for whom does an idea remain functional? And what substantiation, if any, might controvert it, might uncouple commitment from ideology without weakening commitment?

I point here to the related problem of magic words—ciphers for projection that are clung to all the more ferociously for having been evacuated of precise meaning (e.g., “postmodernism” or “globalization”). These ring as hollow as the metallic armor of a quaintly futuristic UFO. “Contemporary” fares no better, and I wouldn’t want to argue that it should. (To wit: the musty National Academy Museum and

1. Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956; New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 4.

School of Fine Arts, New York, boasts the tag-line “Contemporary for almost 200 Years” on its promotional materials.) Before it came to stand for the art of the recent past—and not just any recent past, but “ours” since the defeat of the New Left in Chicago, the *Pictures* show, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and/or the rise of a facile internationalism predicated on a touristic biennial culture (among numerous origin points oft-annexed for contemporary art-history narratives)—its primary usage was to belong to the present. But synchronicity does not guarantee causality.

This brings us to ubiquitous claims for a paradigm of no paradigm—or, at least, no academic paradigm that is believed in as fervently as those woebegone subjective-aesthetic shibboleths of modernism were, much less those abided in its immediate aftermath when modernist terms were violently forsaken and hence more or less preserved. Except for that of formalism. Enter auctioneer Tobias Meyer, whose glibly authoritarian bon mot, “The best art is the most expensive, because the market is so smart,” articulated the failings of this vacuous netherworld by affirming its perverse calculus.<sup>2</sup> We really are in trouble if the contemporary lacks a center (apart from the podium or sales floor), if artworks float free from history like untethered balloons, and if the only thinking agent is Meyer’s coolly displaced yet oddly anthropomorphized “market.”

The good news is that the “market” has since collapsed of its very own precociously consumptive accord and without the aid of cultural workers. This is the real paradigm of no paradigm, the acknowledgment not so much of a lack of ideas or art that might be weighty enough to effectively reground itself (though, to be fair, this critique also obtains, and it does so in larger measure than I wish were true) as a lack of discursive efficacy to counter its paradoxically anti-art, post-critical apparatus. Thus do we now find ourselves in a situation where we need to take stock of what has happened and why, asking how the reorientation of both the market and the discipline of art history to the contemporary—to *this* contemporary, drained of affect, infatuated with youth, fixed to the contract of sociability, and emptied of meaning as located in and as form—transpired: in whose interests, for what objectives, and owing to what logic?

We need to account for—and I mean to take the watchword of “accountability” quite seriously in this context—the particularities of the present. We must do this without pretending, in this instance, that the flood never came, by means of producing compensatory inventions of our own (whether for the apocalypse or salvation or both—one following on the heels of the other in a kind of postdiluvian fantasia). It will read as woefully naive, I am aware, when I write that the promise of the institutionalized “contemporary”—for that is indubitably what and where it is—is its very lack of the prophetic, which abets instead a new attention on the here and now. The questionnaire’s lightness of being need not be unbearable—though neither should it be an excuse to wait for some kind of rapture.

2. See <http://artforum.com/diary/id=10968>, accessed April 18, 2009.

The rise of the category “contemporary art” to a label full of promise is directly related to developments in the auction markets. When, in the 1980s, the houses began to set up entire departments for “contemporary art” (the first auction at Christie’s exclusively devoted to contemporary art took place in London on June 29, 1977), it amounted to an immense symbolic revaluation upward. Here was evidence for all to see that this was a sphere in which players could make a lot of money and accumulate a lot of cultural prestige. In a parallel development, the marketplaces of knowledge (museums and the dispersed and varied disciplines of art history, cultural studies, aesthetics, etc.) gradually came to consider an interest in the work of living and young artists legitimate and even desirable.

Of course, to trace this increasing open-mindedness to a single economic cause would be to oversimplify the matter: there were additional factors, such as the desire for social distinction and cultural capital and the general rise to prominence of youth and pop culture, not to mention the individual intellectual preferences of many of those involved. Since the 1990s, the media has also developed a great deal of enthusiasm for “contemporary art,” as is evident in its emphatic reporting in the lifestyle and fashion presses. The popularity that such art enjoys among these audiences is again also an expression of its enormous ability to create value. To put it bluntly, if contemporary artistic production was worth squat, it would hardly have been one of those “creative industries” whose growth, in the late 1990s, became a national priority and object of prestige in many countries. Yet the art world has traditionally had a great number of “attractive modes of inclusion” (Urs Staehli) at its disposal, features that draw the attention especially of the popular media: the more glamorous and wasteful the parties, the wealthier the collectors, the more eccentric the personalities, and the more sudden the rise of artists to riches and fame, the more ecstatic the reporting in the lifestyle press. During the first years of the new millennium, for instance, the glossies frequently expressed the view that flying to Florida for Art Basel Miami Beach would land the reader amid a global jet set. Lost from view was the fact that the art world is a highly elitist milieu that operates by means not only of inclusion but also of exclusion.

But the enthusiasm of the media for the commercially successful artist in particular is also a consequence of his or her being the perfect embodiment of the social ideal of the “entrepreneurial self” (Ulrich Bröckling). The image of this artist unites competences—self-determination, (the appearance of) individual responsibility for his or her actions, appetite for risk, an entrepreneurial attitude toward his or her own skills—that are in high demand in today’s labor markets, especially in the service sector. As the sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger has shown, the central values of artistic competence have long been transferred to other fields of production.<sup>1</sup> The

1. See Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).



profile of the commercially successful artist presents a condensed version of qualities that are generally sought after, and so serves as a model for labor markets beyond art. What were once specific demands that artists in particular had to meet have come to delineate a universal social ideal. The artist becomes the guiding model as the ideology of creativity reigns supreme across all branches of the economy. Everyone wants to be creative today, working first and foremost for self-fulfillment and making as much money as possible in the process.

The composite term “contemporary art” already contains this double charge: it promises both “art” and an edgy timeliness. It fuses two presumptions of value. “Art,” after all, is a term with an evaluative dimension. By declaring something to be “art,” I have already passed a value judgment. The finding that something is of contemporary relevance likewise bears positive connotations, at least since Adorno’s plea for presentness. No one wants to be a back number. Yet “art as such,” as a trans-individual principle, is an invention of the late eighteenth century. Idealist aesthetics formed this conception, charging it with ambitions that are in part excessive and in part justified; the claim was that “art” communicates a truth, that it is unburdened by extrinsic purpose, that it is subject only to its own laws. This system of beliefs still echoes in our present-day understanding of “art.” The principle of “contemporary art,” I would argue, combines this idealist notion of a trans-historical truth and disinterestedness with a claim to relevance for the here and now. (As an indicator of time, “contemporary art” is a relatively unspecific term, it can designate what is happening at this very moment, but also cover the past ten years.) This mixture, we should admit, is irresistible. For art is now thought not only to engender a higher truth that defeats all purposes but also to say something about the times in which we live. Since the 1990s, contemporariness has come to be firmly associated with hipness, and so the contemporary art enthusiast is entitled to see himself as a member of an in-the-know set. Yet the label “contemporary art” was also meant to allow the art world to shake off its reputation for elitism. It suggests that being of your own time is all it takes to understand this art, for it, too, is a phenomenon of its time. Anyone who can document his or her contemporariness is supposedly welcome—that is, potentially everyone. As we know, this attempt at popularization implicit in the principle of contemporary art has worked out well. But it came at a price—the disrespect paid to the traditional specialized knowledge that is indispensable to a proper understanding of artistic practice. Well-informed hipsterdom, playing it cool, trumped classical art-historical training.

What happens when this double presumption of value on which the legendary symbolic charisma of contemporary art is founded ceases to be self-evident—a process we can currently observe taking place as a consequence of the global economic crisis? Every economic crisis is also a crisis of confidence: our trust in values, both economic and symbolic, is profoundly shaken. A crisis reminds us forcefully that the foundations of value are not as solid as we would like to think. That is because

value is constitutively metonymic. Marx illustrated the fact that the value of an object is fundamentally different from its physical body with the neat example of a piece of linen whose form of value is its being “the same as the coat.”<sup>2</sup> The value of the piece of linen must always be sought somewhere else—for instance, in the coat. No work of art, then, is valuable “in itself,” which means conversely that an abyss lurks behind any presumption of value. And with the economic crisis, this abyss is staring us in the face. Value, according to Marx, is in any case a “social relation,” that is to say, precarious and subject to ongoing renegotiation. All value, including the value implied by “contemporary art,” is fundamentally disputable and dubitable. The close semantic link to contemporaneity can prove especially fatal in times of crisis. For when the present shows its fleeting, changeful, and unpredictable countenance, the fear becomes especially acute that an art invested in it may lose its value. It is no surprise, then, that capital is currently seeking refuge in (seemingly) lasting values such as old art or classic modernism. The only works that still inspire confidence are those classified as “masterworks”—a dubious category that hints at the presence of intrinsic value. This belief that there is a value intrinsic to some works of art is the central (and most productive) illusion of the art market. In reality there can be no value inherent to art, given the metonymic constitution of all value. Right now only the sort of art that is backed by tradition seems still able to nourish this illusion.

Should we, then, drop the term “contemporary art” altogether because the claim to value that it presupposes has always been questionable and is now doubly questionable? As a label, “contemporary art” has indeed been hopelessly compromised, for it implicitly affirms ideas that have become obsolete—for instance, that of the artist whose commercial success can be equated with artistic significance. That success in the market is not indicative of artistic value has always been an open secret; if it was forgotten, that was possible only in a time of general intoxication with economic success. Those who brought it up found themselves branded as killjoys. Just as the boom is now a thing of the past, the principle of “contemporary art,” too, epitomizes a past era, despite its invocation of contemporariness.

But rather than speak of “contemporary art” or “art” in general as though these were fixed substances, I would argue in any case that we ought to refer to concrete contemporary artistic practices. For both “art” and “contemporary art” are historically overdetermined concepts and fraught with expectations they could not possibly live up to. No one can say what “art as such,” or contemporary art for that matter, really is; it all very much turns on the *je ne sais quoi* idealist aesthetics traditionally insisted on. What is possible, though, and even necessary, is that we differentiate between various contemporary art practices and develop criteria for their situationally sensitive critical assessment.

TRANSLATED BY GERRIT JACKSON

2. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1: *The Process of Capitalist Production*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), p. 60.

TOM MCDONOUGH

... a confusion both willed and involuntary...

—Raymond Williams, “When Was Modernism?” (1987)

Toward the end of 2008, in the wake of the disastrous results of the November contemporary art auctions, Sotheby’s released a video on its Web site in which its employees “candidly” addressed the transformed status of the art market. While the nearest equivalent of this promotional work likely lay in the sorts of commercials aired by oil companies after a major spill and ensuing environmental disaster, we would be wrong to dismiss it out of hand. It may have been an act of pure ideology, but it does offer a useful symptomatology of the present. For if we accept one of the premises of the questionnaire—that indeed much contemporary practice has seemed “to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment”—then the experts at Sotheby’s were there to reassure us that we are witnessing a restoration of the stability and security offered by terra firma. In the words of Tobias Meyer, worldwide head of the auction house’s contemporary art sales: “There is a return to seeing the real object, and making a decision based on that—based on provenance, based on condition, based on what kind of presence an object has.” We are back on the solid ground, in other words, of traditional connoisseurship and its accompanying mythologies: the *real object* (the fiction, beyond the virtues of close looking, of direct, unmediated access to the artwork via vision), its *provenance* (the transcription of symbolic into economic capital through the intermediary of the name), its *condition* (the fetishization of the permanence of the aesthetic object), and finally its *presence* (a class marker, the intangible quality the perception of which serves to distinguish the cultured from the philistine).

But where does this flight backward leave “the contemporary?” We might do well to approach an answer through a closer examination of the word itself. Conceptually the adjective “contemporary” has two meanings, and the purely temporal specification was the later to emerge. As a label for what belongs to or occurs in the present, this expression only materialized in the second half of the nineteenth century, its initial use appearing in the title of London’s *Contemporary Review*, first published in 1866; its current usage, in reference to culture, took shape in the years stretching from the 1920s to the 1950s. It was, in other words, coterminous with the emergence of Western modernism and the sense of historical rupture codified by its defenders—carrying the same connotations of the free floating, in other words, as we face today. But this was not the first use of the term “contemporary,” which developed from the Latin *contemporarius* in the seventeenth century as a fusion of spatial (*con-*, “together with”) and temporal

(*tempor*-, “time”) indicators, describing, that is, something or someone dating from the same time as another. Which might naturally lead us to ask in the case of art: contemporary with what?

For Raymond Williams, looking back from the perspective of the mid-1980s, the history of modernism was one necessarily structured by its formation within the industrial metropolises of an imperialist world order. Similarly, there can be little doubt that discourses on contemporary art have been fundamentally shaped, among other factors, by the response over the past three or four decades by Western governments and finance capital to systemic threats posed by workers’ militancy during the long wave of 1960s unrest. Certainly the questionnaire is right to warn us off generalizations about the market and globalization. Let us avoid such generalities, then, and instead speak of the concerted efforts to restore and enhance the profitability of capitalist enterprise through the intensification of labor and through the worldwide search for lower wages. We have been witness to a period of the widespread reassertion of Marx’s “general law of capitalist accumulation,” namely, that the amassing of wealth by one end of the social spectrum is accompanied by the immiseration of the rest. Any explanation of “the contemporary” must take into account the fact that the late twentieth century was the occasion for this large-scale transfer of wealth, whether we call it “Empire,” after Hardt and Negri, or “the new enclosures,” after the Midnight Notes Collective. In either case, our understanding of the contemporary will have to include the process whereby over the last quarter century once commonly held goods—from air and water to our own subjective integrity—have been privatized in order to turn a profit.

The paradigm of postmodernism may have “run into the sand,” along with the thirty-year-long neoliberal boom that was its shadow. But we still live in a world that operates within the logic of late capitalism. Certainly the increasingly “candid” language emanating from the arbiters of the contemporary art market suggests as much; witness not only Mr. Meyer’s predictions, but also last fall’s infamous leaked memo from Larry Gagosian to his staff: “If you would like to continue working for Gagosian I suggest you start to sell some art. Everything is going to be evaluated in this new climate based on performances . . . The luxury of carrying under-performing employees is now a thing of the past.” In the wake of the bursting of the bubble, the market is attempting to re-establish itself on firmer footing through a re-inscription of the traditional object with all its appurtenances of social hierarchy. Our task, however, as historians, critics, curators, and artists, could be said to reside in the injunction to counter the current, reactionary grounding of the contemporary with a materialist alternative. It is not enough to link present-day cultural practice with its pre- and postwar precedents; we need to consider the simultaneous existence of those practices and a broader social field—what Williams analyzed, with reference to the modern era,

in terms of the intersection of “the relations of production of the artists themselves in the centers of metropolitan dominance” with the forms of international capitalism. “The contemporary” is not simply a temporal category whose floating free may be remedied by rejoining it to the longer continuum of the history of art; it is, more importantly, an urgent charge to think in terms of those transversal linkages between aesthetic practice and the contested terrain of social relations, and to ask where we stand in regard to them.