

THE CONTEMPORARY AND GLOBALIZATION

In the middle of the twentieth century there was much art-world excitement regarding “internationalism”—the notion that art might reflect or impact the complex relations between distinct, politically sovereign nations. Greatly accelerated by the geopolitical events of 1989, critical attention has shifted to globalization, a difficult, even slippery term that downplays political powers, emphasizing how the deregulation of trade has largely eroded traditional nation-state boundaries. The forces of globalization—often abstracted away from the specific people, corporations, or governments that occasion its usage—its proponents believe, have promoted an effortless, even naturalized, flow of materials, goods, and services. For globalization’s detractors that “unification” levels local distinctions through processes of acculturation.

Tim Griffin argues in his essay “**Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials**” that globalization is fundamental for understanding how institutional frameworks now shape contemporary art. Certainly, globalization was celebrated in the early to mid-1990s in conjunction with the rise of international biennials. Many curators, critics, and artists believed in the potential of working in interstitial spaces and traveling to and among them. These optimistic attitudes changed with the turn of the millennium, when globalization became something actively to counter both in art and in writing, for reasons ranging from its flattening of difference to multinational corporations’ disregard for human sovereignty and environmental responsibility.

Of late, commentators have focused on the rise of the contemporary, a concept that sits alongside globalization. Like modernism, the contemporary suggests an aesthetic phenomenon that is necessarily global in scope, and for **Terry Smith**, as he outlines in his “**Our’ Contemporaneity?**”, this also represents a historical shift toward a cultural condition that continually reveals new worlds, new senses of being, and ultimately new ways to exist in our collective, yet particularized, time. Modernism arose in fits and starts around the world, and meant different things in different places. The contemporary assumes globalization as its foundational criteria and in a narrow sense describes what it literally means to be with the times. The contemporary speaks less about stylistic concerns (although they are implied) or ideological beliefs (they are still coming to the fore). In the conjunction of globalization and the contemporary we find two central concepts for comprehending on a macro level art production and distribution of the last twenty or so years. The question becomes just how this will be historicized. As **Jean-Philippe Antoine** suggests in his “**The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!**” a new type of art historical practice is already under way, one which need be reciprocally informed by the work done by artists who assume the role of historian.

Worlds Apart: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Rise of Biennials

Tim Griffin

If art is necessarily bound up with its institutions—in other words, made legible as “art” only through and within its various apparatuses of production, display, and circulation, in addition to its discourses—then nothing is so crucial to our conception of contemporary art as globalization. Yet this is only to suggest that nothing else is so implicated in art’s dense weaving (or even dissolution) into the broader cultural field today.

To explain, *globalization*, utilized as a term in recent economic and political theory, often pertains to, in the words of Fredric Jameson, “the sense of an immense enlargement of world communication, as well as of a horizon of a world market.”¹ Within artistic circles, the word has been used more specifically to describe an exponentially increased audience for (and financing of) contemporary art, attended by a radical proliferation of public and private museums and exhibitions throughout the world and, further, an expanded and ever-more rapid travel network and exchange of information among constituents of art on all points of the compass. (To illustrate this point simply with a hypothetical example: A work produced and debuted in São Paulo, Brazil, can be purchased in the artist’s studio by a committee of visiting trustees from a major institution in New York, where the piece is placed on view within the next month for tens of thousands of both local audiences and tourists from dozens of countries.) Precisely such circumstances, however, demand that art be seen in correspondence with the larger context of a world shaped principally by the forces and flows of global capital.² For amid a postindustrial landscape it becomes clear, as put succinctly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their benchmark volume on globalism, *Empire* (2000), that “the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.”³ Rather than imagining that art can be placed at an idealistic remove from these societal shifts, we arrive at a better grasp of art’s real contours—or better, of art’s institutions—by examining just to what degree it is steeped in those shifts. And nowhere in art is such an examination so possible or sustained—or so telling of both contemporary art’s predicament and potential, or of its waning and waxing singularity within the greater field of culture—as among biennials of the past twenty

years. In fact, in order to grasp the conditions for art-making today fully, one begins most productively with a consideration of their historical development and implications.

Arguing as much is partly to posit a crossing of two postwar trajectories: First, of art and its various models of critique; and, second, of socio-economic currents destabilizing nation-states and their ideological bases world-round. If in the 1960s, minimalist sculptors implicated the viewer's body in their work, capitalizing on a phenomenological experience of the object in space, the following decade—in the wake of such artists as Daniel Buren calling for a sustained exploration of art's "formal and cultural limits"—would see the rise of institutional critique and its efforts to disavow any sense of art's autonomy: The notion of any display space or viewer that was objective or, more precisely, independent of social matrices of class, race, gender, and sexuality (Dan Asher, Sherrie Levine, Martha Rosler, Mierle Laderman Ukeles).⁴ By the 1980s, such engagements were extended by artists (Group Material, Hans Haacke, Christian Philipp Müller) to those social and economic terms and conditions that made any institution itself possible, with these artists' critical intention still being, to cite art historian Miwon Kwon's signal text "One Place After Another" regarding early iterations of *specificity* in art, to "decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden yet motivated operations—to reveal the ways in which institutions mold art's meaning to modulate its cultural and economic value, and to ... [make] apparent [art's] imbricated relationship to the broader socioeconomic and political processes of the day."⁵

Such a longstanding mission, often undertaken in the immediate context of the museum, would only have been amplified in the face of such political developments in 1989 as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the execution of pro-democracy demonstrators in China's Tiananmen Square. While artists in previous decades might have wanted audiences to interrogate conditions of viewership and of art's relationship with culture more generally, here were world-historical events forcing a mass reconsideration of ideology, of subjectivity and subjecthood, and of national and postcolonial identity (and even of the terms East and West, North and South)—all of which were already being eroded or challenged by widening forces of commerce and technology. In fact, if artists were, as Kwon has also noted in her essay, already being prompted by the trajectory of institutional critique to move outside the conventional realm of art—relocating their practices in the discursive framework of any site they chose, and steeping their art-making in research and, moreover,

in other disciplines, from anthropology to archaeology and so on—such endeavors would naturally gravitate toward the suddenly recalibrated coordinates of contemporary society. As curator Okwui Enwezor aptly put it in a brief text written in 2007, the world-historical events of 1989 “spurred a critical appraisal of the conditions of artistic production and of the systems by which such production was legitimated and admitted into the broader field of cultural production,” resulting in a “shift in curatorial language from one whose reference systems belonged to an early twentieth-century modernity to one more attuned to the tendencies of the twenty-first century.”⁶ The very ground under the institution of art had shifted; and if the museum was, as an initial object of postwar artistic critique, nevertheless linked to the idea of the modern nation-state, artists and curators alike would now seek alternative discourses and frameworks for their projects.

Numerous biennials provide ample, concrete evidence of such efforts being prompted by such a changing postwar landscape. For instance, the inaugural Johannesburg Biennial, curated by Lorna Ferguson, opened in 1995, just a year after South Africa’s first multiracial elections, in an effort to establish the country as part of a larger global community (a second iteration, curated by Enwezor, was titled “Trade Routes” and explicitly revolved around the theme of globalization). The Gwangju Biennale was created the same year, against the backdrop of South Korea’s first freely-elected government after a decades-long military dictatorship; titled “Beyond the Borders,” its first exhibition aimed to present work reflecting the dissolution of longstanding arbiters of identity, from political ideology to nationality. Further to the West, Manifesta—a self-described roving “European Biennial of Contemporary Art”—began in 1996, taking the fall of the Berlin Wall as a cue for reconsidering a new Europe (in terms of political ideology, economic structures, and novel communication technology) both in its own right and in relationship to the world at large. And, looking back to more than a decade before Manifesta’s creation, we find a precedent for such a multinational scope in the Havana Biennial: Created specifically to highlight artists of the Third World on the global stage (though later iterations of this exhibition would include Asian artists, effectively expanding its purview more generally to non-Western artists) this large-scale exhibition took region, as opposed to country, as its organizing principle.

If all these exhibitions were intended at their respective inceptions to create a stage for art within which audiences could discern a kind of destabilizing of cultural perspective—a redrawing of the societal map, as it were,

that was Copernican in its altering of the terms for center and periphery, and subsequently for object and context—it is still more provocative that most historians and curators contemplating the biennial phenomenon of the past twenty years cite the 1989 Centre Georges Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* as a singular precedent for such investigations. Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, this exhibition included work from the global “margins” not only to counter museums’—and, more specifically, the Paris Biennial’s—privileging of work produced in Europe and the United States, but also to put into question the very Western ideation of art. (Notably, the Paris Biennial was created in 1959 by André Malraux.) As Martin would say at the time in an interview with art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “[T]he questions of center and periphery are also related to issues of authorship and oeuvre..., especially since the artist’s role and the object’s function are defined [elsewhere] in an entirely different manner from our European way of thinking.”⁷ In turn, the exhibition would feature not only Western artworks by such artists as Nancy Spero and Cildo Meireles but also objects playing unique traditional roles within their specific societies, including a Tibetan Mandela and a Navajo sand painting, among other pieces. While such displays would necessarily ask audiences to view art in the West through the prism of ethnography—effectively denaturalizing art’s place in Western society, prompting an awareness of its stakes in specific societal structures and belief systems, as well as of what Martin would call “the relativity of culture”—they also courted a very great risk.⁸ For in presenting installations specially made on the occasion by these various artists—one should note that to say “artists” is not quite accurate here, given the curator’s desire to problematize conventional ideas of art by deploying the anthropological terms of cult and ritual, as evidenced even by the use of “magicians” in his title—the exhibition re-inscribed Western tropes of authorship despite itself and, as a result, of authenticity and originality. The latter aspect, with its troubling historical associations with primitivism and, more specifically, constructions of an “other,” would undermine the exhibition’s supposed mission to subvert any privileged Eurocentric vantage on cultural production throughout the world.

Far from being a closed chapter of curatorial history, *Magiciens de la Terre* therefore has a continuing legacy in exhibition practices today, partly since so many curators have in its wake sought corrective approaches to the problematic of center and periphery, and partly since the core dilemma of that exhibition—of bringing together different cultures only at the peril of re-inscribing neocolonial perspectives—persist even now. Regarding

the former, it is worthwhile to consider the increasing prominence of Martinique-born, postcolonial poet and theoretician Édouard Glissant, particularly in terms of his emphases placed on the recognition of sustaining difference among cultures that are nevertheless being drawn into ever-closer relations. As he would write in 1990:

What we call globalization, which is uniformity from below, the reign of the multinationals, standardization, the unchecked ultra-liberalism of world markets, in my view, is the downside of a prodigious reality, that I call globality. Globality is the unprecedented adventure we are all given to live in a world which, for the first time, in a real and immediate, shattering way, conceives of itself as both multiple and single, and inextricable.⁹

Such a notion of being both “multiple and single” would, in Glissant’s own writing, be developed into a “poetics of relatedness,” whereby “each one must face the density (opacity) of the other. The more the other resists in his thickness or fluidity (without being confined to this), the more expressive his reality, and the more fruitful the interrelating.”¹⁰

In curatorial practice, then, many large-scale international exhibitions have been conceived in formats designed to create and maintain the quality of opacity, while moving beyond traditional display formats. For instance, Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Utopia Station*, which debuted as part of the 2003 Venice Biennale, was organized around Glissant’s idea of the “archipelago”—consisting of so many interlinked yet isolated presentations of the project at different points on the globe, unfolding not only in space but also in time.¹¹ With numerous iterations of the collaborative exhibition happening over the course of many years, few, if any, individuals would ever encounter the project in its entirety. Similarly, Enwezor’s Documenta 11 of 2002 would embrace Glissant’s understanding of *creolité*—a term first used to describe the heterogeneity of the Antilles, given historical interfaces there of European colonialists, indigenous Caribbeans, African ex-slaves, as well as indentured servants from China and East India—while composing a project featuring numerous seminars and conferences at various locations throughout the world in addition to an exhibition in Kassel, Germany, where Documenta takes place every five years.¹² Audiences would be bound not to have seen every aspect of the exhibition and, more important, every conference city—whether Lagos or Mumbai—would be taken as a location with unique, specific concerns and cultures even while they were necessarily imbricated in global discourse

and the forces of globalization more generally. Any artwork placed on view was put forward in the context of this broader discursive landscape and larger thematic.

Such impulses, of course, are bound to create a fair amount of frustration among audiences—particularly as questions of access and accessibility arise. In fact, if, in a 2003 roundtable devoted to considerations of large-scale international exhibitions, artist Yinka Shonibare would note that globalization had created “a fantastic opportunity for visibility” for non-Western artists seeking international recognition, many others have levied criticisms that the conditions of visibility in exhibitions taking up globalization as a theme are subpar at best.¹³ Put another way, the impulse toward kinds of opacity in these exhibitions is taken to bespeak privilege—since the formulation of these ideas require a kind of overview only available to the curators themselves—or, perhaps more problematic, obfuscation. In this regard it is worthwhile to consider a reflection from the same roundtable by Francesco Bonami, who, following his 2003 Venice Biennale—for which he invited a number of other curators to organize shows with visions diverging from his own—would note *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman’s expressed desire for a smaller show consisting of a “dozen or even a few dozen” artists. Taking exception to this wish, which had been put forward in a review of his Biennale, Bonami argues:

[H]e is dreaming about a museum show—which isn’t what Biennales and Documentas are about. People insist on looking at Documentas and Venice as unified territories, which they are not. Similarly, the concept of globalization is often used to define the world as a unified territory, which it is not. We experience fragmentation in the world, and that’s what these big-scale events should reflect.¹⁴

Hence, the curator says, his exhibition was inspired in part by architect Rem Koolhaas’s notion of *bigness*, in which a “building is not a building but something else, with a plurality of functions. Similarly, an exhibition, when taken to a certain scale, is no longer an exhibition but a plurality of visions.”¹⁵ A certain cacophony (or even incoherence) is, in other words, necessary if art is to be reflective of its larger cultural context. To seek any streamlined presentation whose organizing principles would be overarching and all-encompassing would be not only to commit an act of bad faith—since objects would be subject to a singular vision, instead of being allowed to

operate according to their own individual logics—but also to adopt a false premise given the conditions of contemporary living.

Yet Bonami's choice of words—plurality—should nonetheless draw attention again to the perils of globalization-minded exhibitions re-inscribing the very single, coherent perspective it seeks to elide. Indeed, earlier debates around pluralism in art come to mind, since they often revolved around the risks and implications of a sameness arising in difference. Consider Hal Foster's assertion in the early 1980s that "pluralism is precisely this state of others among others, and it leads not to a sharpened awareness of difference (social, sexual, artistic, etc.) but to a stagnant condition of indiscrimination—not to resistance but to retrenchment."¹⁶ At the time, such an argument was steeped in the idea of numerous styles actually adhering to a single ideological structure—that of the free market—even while appearing to provide for heterogeneity of belief and form in art. And, in fact, today we might do well to consider whether the perspectival dilemmas of *Magiciens de la Terre* have arrived at new permutations given the increasing reach of capital in our era of globalization. In other words, we should ask not only to what extent difference might be subsumed by ideology within exhibitions, but also to what extent the biennial phenomenon—however much devoted to reconsiderations of ideology, geopolitics, and the very terms for self-reflexive art with the context of globalization—might be just another figure of contemporary commerce.¹⁷

Perhaps on no occasion has such a question seemed so pertinent as the 2007 *Grand Tour*, a sequence of art-related events including Documenta, Skulptur Projekte Münster, the Venice Biennale, and Art Basel. Taking place at the very apex of the international market for contemporary art, these individual exhibitions were not only co-branded in a manner bound to eclipse distinctions between global exhibitions and art fairs—the latter of which had been, in recent years, commissioning work and asking curators to organize thematic shows of material from the gallery system, wanting to approximate the look and stature of biennials—but they were effectively arranged under the sign of tourism.¹⁸ Put another way, audiences would move from place to place as subjects in motion, or as figures in free circulation, passing through various staged scenes—and often to meet audiences' preconceptions of what a global exhibition should be. (In this regard, the *Grand Tour* title seems particularly apt, since the first such tours were undertaken by young men in Europe who, sketchbooks in hand, would seek out landscapes and antiquities that—in another instance of sameness in difference—would match the tropes for the picturesque taught at home.) Yet such a formation of a view made in passing seems not exclusive to this

instance, particularly if one also takes into account the many biennials that have used their locations in nearly cinematic manners—rendering site as scene, summoning historical events without, per Kwon, aiming to “decode and/or recode the institutional conventions.” To mention just two such exhibitions by name, consider the 2006 Berlin Biennale, which utilized deteriorating architecture along a single street (including a former Jewish girls’ school) to house an exhibition whose work offered, given their sequenced themes, a loose narrative of a life’s passage running from birth to death; or the 2008 Prospect, in New Orleans, a newly created biennial whose first instantiation featured numerous artists making work in the ruined architecture of that city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In each instance, a city becomes something akin to an image, within which art has been placed.

One artist in particular has, in fact, made work that seems to address—or convey—precisely this situation, and on the stage of a global exhibition. For 2007’s *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster would populate a grassy hillside with miniature works from all the previous incarnations of the exhibition—from Dan Graham’s 1987 octagonal pavilion to Andrea Zittel’s iceberg-like islands made ten years later. Here, in other words, was the entirety of the exhibition’s history arrayed—in a new work by a contemporary artist—as so many copies of itself. And yet as consequential was the corporeal sense of the piece. As Gonzalez-Foerster would write at the time, her work, titled *Roman de Münster*, was intended as a “novel” where visitors would “be able to go from one sculpture to another without having to wait ten years or walk for kilometers.”¹⁹ Time and space collapsed in an experience whose components were recognizable at a glimpse. Such is the paradoxical situation of biennials today, which engage globalization yet seem also just symptomatic of it—which asks in turn for a tactical engagement in art that might re-instill and invigorate a sense of difference among regions and cultures that are in ever-tighter, if ambivalent, relation. In fact, it is difference-in-relation that, if established, would set contemporary biennials apart from pluralism of the past and, moreover, from passive reflections of globalization in the present.

Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. xi. For an essay elaborating on Jameson’s postulation, see Pamela M. Lee, “Boundary Issues: The Art World Under the Sign of Globalism,” *Artforum* 42 (November 2003), pp. 164–167.

- 2 By using the word correspondence, I mean to suggest simply that the operations of art are continually impacted by these larger economic forces at the same time that they might impact them in turn—much as actual agents, specific individuals, and/or corporations and governmental organizations might mobilize individuated systems of law, policy, production, exchange, and even belief that, taken collectively and cumulatively over time, generate a new set of objective (if also abstract) terms to which those various individuals and entities must react anew.
- 3 Indeed, the pair goes so far as to contend that “the cultural critic needs a basic knowledge of economic processes to understand culture.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. xiii, xvi.
- 4 Daniel Buren, “Cultural Limits,” *5 Texts* (New York and London: John Weber Gallery and Jack Wendler Gallery, 1973), p. 52.
- 5 Miwon Kwon, “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997), p. 88.
- 6 Okwui Enwezor, “History Lessons,” *Artforum* 46 (September 2007), p. 382. Enwezor is not alone in this assertion and, in fact, discussions regarding the rise of biennials during the 1990s and after are increasingly focused on the geopolitical frame for cultural endeavors. See Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø, “Biennialogy,” *The Biennial Reader* (Bergen, Norway: Bergen Kunsthall, 2010), pp. 12–27.
- 7 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “The Whole Earth Show: An Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin,” *Art in America* 77 (May 1989), p. 152.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- 9 See “Édouard Glissant with les périphériques vous parlent,” November 2002, www.pointdironie.com/in/31/english/edouard.swf. Accessed June 18, 2011. The passages come from a project executed in association with Documenta 11, for which the poet and theorist included numerous quotes as well from his earlier publications. This quotation in particular, translated by J. Michael Dash, may be found at www.pointdironie.com/in/31/french/anglais.html.
- 10 Édouard Glissant, *L'Intention poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 24. For a discussion of this observation in context, see J. Michael Dash, “Farming Bones and Writing Rocks: Rethinking a Caribbean Poetics of (Dis)Location,” *Shibboleths: Journal of Comparative Theory* 1 (2006), pp. 64–71.
- 11 Obrist in conversation with the author, April 13, 2011.
- 12 For a more extended discussion of Glissant’s significance here, see my “*Une structure de plates-formes. Entretien d’Okwui Enwezor par Tim Griffin*,” *Art Press* 280 (2002), pp. 24–32.
- 13 Tim Griffin and James Meyer, “Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition,” *Artforum* 42 (November 2003), p. 154.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*

- 16 Hal Foster, "Against Pluralism," *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), p. 31.
- 17 In part, here I merely reaffirm Hardt and Negri's point regarding cultural critics needing some footing in the field of economics, and in the passages that follow certain correlations with mass commerce, particularly in terms of tourism and branding in art, should be clear. My hope, however, is that the present discussion implies—even if only by underlining extant conditions for the institutions of art—how such proximity also offers a unique opportunity to engage.
- 18 For a more nuanced consideration of this subject, see my "Framing the Question: The Grand Tour," *Artforum* 46 (September 2007), pp. 424–427. One might consider the touristic aspect of this presentation of contemporary art as being enmeshed in larger developments, whereby art institutions are considered "destinations"—from the Guggenheim Bilbao to Dia: Beacon. Historical matters of scale assume geographic proportions.
- 19 Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster in Brigitte Franzen, Kasper König, Carina Plath, eds., *Sculpture Projects Muenster 07* (Münster: Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, 2007), p. 105.

"Our" Contemporaneity?

Terry Smith

What does it mean to be contemporary? This is a pressing question about how one might live now as well as a continuing inquiry into what kind of modernity is most suitable to present circumstances. Indeed, in many parts of the world—notably much of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East—posing it hastens responses to the challenges of contemporary life. It is, therefore, a question for the world. How does this kind of questioning manifest itself in contemporary art?

A useful starting point is to acknowledge that the concept of contemporaneity has much greater potential than the mindless up-to-dateness that attends the word "contemporary" in much ordinary language and art-world usage. The etymology of the word itself is helpful in this regard. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* four definitions, for example, bespeak a multiplicity of ways of being in time, and of so existing with others—who may share something of our own temporality but may also live, contemporaneously, in distinct temporalities of their own (and thus share a sense of the strangeness of being in time, now). This is to understand *particular* contemporaneity to mean *the immediacy of difference*. "Difference" is understood in three strong senses: difference in and of itself; difference to proximate others; and difference within oneself. To be contemporary, then, is to live in the thickened present in ways that acknowledge its transient aspects, its deepening density, and its implacable presence.¹

What might be said of contemporaneity in a more *general or historical* sense? In the Oxford dictionary, the word "contemporaneity" is defined, simply, as "a contemporaneous state or condition," one that could, of course, occur at any place or time, and be experienced by individuals, groups, and entire social formations. Yet if we read this word through the richness we now see in "contemporary," we recognize its potential to name a broad, worldwide situation, the most definitive characteristic of which is the experience—at once subjective and objective, individual yet shared, entirely particular while being inescapable for all—of being immersed, to an unprecedented degree, in a world marked by an unprecedented diversity and depth of difference.²

Modernity is now our past. Consider how the current world picture has changed in the aftermath of the Cold War stalemate. As the system built on

First, Second, Third, and Fourth world divisions imploded, what new arrangements of power have come into being? The reconstruction of an idea of Europe promises to contain its warring nationalities, or, at least, disperse disruption to its borders, yet it faces fundamental transformation from within as previously colonized peoples move to its centers and diversify its national cultures. Decolonization has opened up Africa, spawning hybrid nation-states that in most cases have failed to reconcile the interests of elites, international economic agents, and the variety of tribal peoples artificially contained within outdated borders. In Asia, a number of “tiger economies” revived the dream of modernity-for-all by intense, high-speed modernizations. China has emerged to superpower economic and political status, driven by arrangements between a centralized state and free-market economic players that would have been inconceivable in modernity. In South America the era of revolution versus dictatorship led first to the imposition of neoliberal economic regimes and then to a continent-wide swing toward populist socialism. Meanwhile, the United States’ attempts to rule as the world’s only hyperpower have spectacularly and destructively imploded, while its patterns of internal governance fall into divisive paralysis. The Middle East is aflame with protest against autocracy, corruption, and servile dependence. The post-1989 globalizing juggernaut—unchecked neoliberalism, historical self-realization, and the worldwide distribution of ever-expanding production and consumption—is disintegrating.

What all of these changes have in common, both within each sphere and as a whole, is the contemporaneousness of lived difference, the coexistence of incommensurable viewpoints, and the absence of an encompassing narrative that will enlist the participation of all. In this sense, contemporaneity itself 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, three sets of forces contend, arrayed like a three-dimensional chess game, with moves on each board incessantly shifting pieces on the others.³

Dominating the first, geopolitical and economic level is globalization itself, above all its thirsts for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural

differentiation (released by decolonization); for control of time relative to 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. On the second level, that of societal formations (citizenship, governmentality, local politics), the inequity between peoples, classes, and individuals is now so blatant that it threatens both the desires for domination entertained by states, ideologies, and religions and persistent dreams of liberation. Thirdly, on the level of culture, where selves are formed vis-à-vis others, we are all increasingly subject to what be called *immediation*—that is, we are immersed in an infoscape (a spectacularized society, an image economy, a regime of representation)—capable of instant communication of all information and any image anywhere. This iconomy, or the entire global communication system, is constantly fissured by the activities of highly specialist, closed knowledge communities, open, volatile subjects, rampant popular fundamentalisms and anxious state apparatuses, even as it remains heavily mediated from above.

Globalization, free market economies, centralized states, international arrangements, nongovernmental agencies, legal or shadow economies, cooperation between dissident movements—none of these “global players” seem capable, singly or in concert, of keeping these antinomies in productive tension. This is especially disabling at a time when climate change signals that the implicit ecological contract between human development and the earth’s natural evolution might have been broken. Planetary consciousness, and planetary action, has become the most pressing necessity of our contemporary situation. How are contemporary artists responding to this overall situation?

Ab-original: Contemporaneity and the Origins of Art

In 2006, Jean-Luc Nancy began a lecture by explaining why he chose “Art Today” as his title instead of the subject on which he had been invited to speak: “Contemporary Art.”⁴ He offered the usual reasons, each of them acknowledging one of the meanings of the concept: contemporary art is an art historical category still in formation; in ordinary usage “contemporary” means the past twenty or thirty years; because it excludes art being made today but in pre-contemporary modes, it cannot encompass all current art; and, finally, when it is used to name kinds of art it “violates” not only the

traditional categories of the practice-based (plastic) arts but also more recent ones, such as “performance art.” In the face of such confusion, “how is it possible that in the history of art we have come to adopt a category that does not designate any particular aesthetic modality the way we would, once, describe hyperrealism, cubism, or even ‘body art’ or ‘land art,’ but a category that simply bears the name ‘contemporary’?”⁵

He was not tempted to treat this confusion as an indicator of the vacuity of contemporary “thought.” Nor did he see it as evidence of the triumph of witless presentism on the part of those who live only to consume the latest offering, in art as in the general culture. Rather, he went straight to origins.⁶ At the moment of making, every work of art is *ipso facto* contemporary with other art being made at the same time. It is also contemporary with its own times in the general sense. Every work of art, therefore, enables us (the artist, the viewer) to feel a “certain formation of the contemporary world, a certain perception of self in the world.” It does so, not in the form of an ideological statement (“the meaning of the world is this”), but more as a kind of suggestive shaping of possibilities, one that “allows for a circulation of recognitions, identifications, feelings, but without fixing them in a final signification.”⁷ Thus the contribution of Giotto, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and others, who give us more than the Christian program that occasioned their masterworks, and the secular artists—Picasso, Cézanne, Brancusi, Proust are among his examples—whose art exceeds the factuality of the everyday from which they begin. The worlds that they (as artists) are, the worlds that they create, are “there every time to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world.”⁸ This stands in contrast to works of art that “offer a surcharge of significations,” where the message seems too obvious.⁹

World-making in and by works of art is, Heidegger has shown us, as fundamental to the art as is its contemporaneity. What, then, is so special about the kind of art that is designated “contemporary”? Or, better, what qualities with regard to worlding might a work of contemporary art be said to possess? Nancy’s first stab at this is as follows: “Contemporary art could be defined as the opening of a form that is above all a question, the form of a question.”¹⁰ He is not alone in highlighting the interrogatory gesturing of contemporary artists (in contrast to the projective impulses of modernist artists, and the propositional character of late modern transitional art). Yet the interrogatory is not enough: “Perhaps a question does not entirely make a world, or a world in which the circulation of meaning is solely an interrogative and anxious circulation, sometimes anguished; it’s a difficult world, a fragile world, an unsettling world.”¹¹

We might expect that these terms would invite him to attach art practice to the broader condition of being-in-the-world today. He does not take this path, trying out first the (opposite) route of proposing that, "Art today is an art that, above all else, asks: 'what is art?'"¹² This is the central conceptualist question initiated by Duchamp, in contrast to the formal and figural elaborations continued by Picasso and Matisse. Duchamp's lead was taken up by conceptualist artists during the 1970s and act out in the public provocations of the Young British Artists during the 1990s. Nancy does not pursue this development to its current most obvious instantiation, where every person adept at any form of social media undertakes art-like practices as a matter of everyday course, and artists everywhere seek to make art virtually indistinguishable from such practices. The question is, in effect, reversed: "What, nowadays, is not art?"¹³

Nancy does, however, offer an unusual inflection on Duchamp's ready-made, reading it as staging a rendezvous with that which, until that moment of the artist's designation, was not regarded as art: "The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given."¹⁴ By "preliminary form" he means "schema" in Kant's sense, the non-sensible that precedes and makes possible the sensible. He does the same with his suggestion that Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was the last history painting in the grand manner that had prevailed since the later eighteenth century. From this observation Nancy draws the implication that, subsequently, signification itself went into crisis (one famously identified by Foucault as the posthuman and by Lyotard as postmodernism). This sudden absence of "great schemas, great regulating ideas, whether they be religious, political and hence also aesthetic" removes the "supports" of art, the bases on which artistic form arises. Contemporary art, therefore, begins from "this shapeless state of self."¹⁵

If I have dwelled here on Nancy, it is because he identifies some of the key elements—and their implications for art-making—of what I see as a world historical shift from modernity through postmodernity to contemporaneity. But, having seen a clear set of connections between epochal changes in world-picturing and the interrogatory nature of contemporary art, he retreats toward a set of his core beliefs, above all those concerning art as a fundamental *gesture*, one that "puts us in direct communication with the creation of the world."¹⁶ In favor neither of art for art's sake, nor of art dedicated to religious, political, or ethical purpose, Nancy celebrates art as an act that manifests being, which brings worlds into being. The closest he gets toward identifying what might be contemporary about such art today

is his remark: “I would say that a contemporary signal is a signal towards this: there is always, again, as before, there is always the possibility of making a world, it opens up a world to us.” He links this with the French preference for the term “*mondialisation*”—the worldwide creation and circulation of sense by all concerned—over the EuroAmerica-centric economic and geopolitical schematism underlying the term “globalization.”¹⁷

If, in the limited framework of a single lecture, we cannot expect more than brief allusions to how contemporary art might connect with larger contemporary conditions, we must value Nancy’s forthrightness in bringing his core insights about artistic creativity and metaphysical presence to bear on this question. In particular, we find useful his recognition that in Duchamp’s gesture, and that of countless artists after him, “The question of art is obviously posed as the question of the formation of forms for which no preliminary form is given.” While on a superficial level this was a mantra of postmodernism, when we recognize its applicability at the deeper levels where artistic form originates we can see that it points to a distinctive, perhaps definitive, fact about what it is to make art today: That artists search for the supports that will generate form within a worldscape across which great schematisms—globalization, decolonization, fundamentalism—continue to contend for universal dominance, yet are destined to fail because they presume modern, or anti-modern, world pictures. In contemporaneity, committed as it is to “opening up worlds to us,” there is no spatial or temporal territory that leaves these forces as they were.

The Art-World Considers “the contemporary”

Do philosophical reflections such as these resonate within art-world discourse? Regrettably, the rise of contemporary art during recent decades has been accompanied by a deep reluctance to engage with such core issues. The “Questionnaire on ‘the contemporary’” circulated by *October* magazine in 2010 points to the strange conjunction of a radically under-theorized, almost empty yet core value (“the contemporary”) and the proliferation of contemporary art into almost every corner of the world of art today.¹⁸ Most of the responses lamented the disabling impact of this impasse on current art practice and theory, yet stayed within its terms. In this sense the authors reflected the larger impotence that pervades much thinking in the field. When generalization is attempted, it often takes celebrated, successful, and expensive art as representative of all art being made today, and then adds to

the adulation, pillories it as evidence of profound cultural vacuity and artistic corruption, or wavers somewhere in between. Art that is different in kind, intention, form, and effect is regarded as somehow falling short of this maligned, yet all-too-prominent fakery. This approach falls into the trap of reductive simplification. It is of course true that Hirst, Koons, Murakami and others do serve up to their masters a kind of palatable capitalist realism. At the same time, Hirst at least offers a trenchant exposé of the health industries as a machinery of death and decimation, and Murakami has more successfully than any other figure popularized a critique of the arrested adolescence pervasive in postwar Japanese culture.

Some respondents to the questionnaire attempted more constructive approaches. Yates McKee detailed his efforts to tackle issues of actual effectiveness of political art in his teaching.¹⁹ Contra the generalized inclusiveness of Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of "Altermodernism," curator Okwui Enwezor highlighted the need to display the interplays between modernity and contemporaneity in "off-centered" art-producing regions.²⁰ In a rare attempt at seeing the larger picture, and seeing it art historically, Alexander Alberro argued that the end of the Cold War in 1989, the globalization of cultural values, the spread of integrated electronic communications, and the dominance of economic neoliberalism signal the emergence of a new historical period that, in the fine arts, has become known as "the contemporary."²¹

When the editors of *e-flux* journal, an online and book publishing coalition that also runs a nonprofit space in New York, whose activity is itself taken to be artwork (that of its founder, Anton Vidokle), decided to establish a simple menu structure to allow users to navigate a wiki archive of contemporary art they ran head first into the same problem. They published two issues seeking ideas about how they might develop their "own criteria for browsing and historicizing recent activity in a way that affirms the possibilities of contemporary art's still-incompleteness, of its complex ability to play host to many narratives and trajectories without necessarily having to absorb them into a central logic or determined discourse—at least before it forms a historical narrative and logic of exclusion that we would much rather disavow?" They realized that "we are looking at two distinct approaches to contemporaneity: one that has already been fully institutionalized, and another that still evades definition."²²

The temporal mismatch at the core of contemporary art's situation is brilliantly nuanced in Cuauhtémoc Medina's opening essay, "Contemp(t)ory: Eleven Theses,"²³ most of which are studded with succinct formulations

such as “it is no coincidence that the institutions, media, and cultural structures of the contemporary artworld have become the last refuge of political and social radicalism. ... [They] also function as the critical self-consciousness of capitalist hypermodernity.”²⁴ This dangerous double leads him to dissent from “those theorists who lament the apparent co-opting of radicalism and critique by the official sphere of art,” opting instead to suggest that “our task may consist, in large part, of protecting utopia—seen as the necessary collusion of the past with what lies ahead—from its demise at the hands of the ideology of the present time.”²⁵ This is a sentiment close to the heart of Boris Groys who, in the title of his essay, “Comrades of Time,”²⁶ puns on the German term for “contemporary,” *zeitgenössisch*, bemusedly draws out the sense that we are being asked to nurture a time that, after the abandonment of the Communist Project in Europe, seems condemned to “repeat its pasts” and “reproduce itself without leading to any future.”²⁷ The art-like activity of the millions throughout the world who are immersed in social media instantiates this state of spectacular pointlessness. In contrast, time-based contemporary art “turns a scarcity of time into an excess of time—and demonstrates itself to be a collaborator, a comrade of time, its true con-temporary.”²⁸ His example was a work by Francis Alÿs, but he could have cited another contributor to *e-flux*, the Raqs Media Collective, whose work and thought is exemplary of the issues in play. My favorite from their essay: “A contemporaneity that is not curious about how it might be surprised is not worth our time.”²⁹

Can insights such as these help us develop a more general hypothesis about the roles, the positioning, and the potentialities of art in contemporary conditions? The sense of being “in” *this time, these times*, and “out of” them *at the same time* is of the essence of contemporaneity. This kind of “time/space”—a space that exists in time, from which one is aware of being embedded in measurable temporalities and historical consequence while somehow also being at a shadowy distance from them—has always been of enormous interests to artists. It was a major theme within modern art, pitching it against the past and many specific pasts, and doing so in the name of imaginable and inevitable futures. It is even more of a core subject for contemporary artists, working within and between the currents just outlined. These include Tacita Dean, Christian Marclay, Bill Viola, John Mawurndjul, William Kentridge, Isaac Julian, Steve McQueen, Emily Jacir, and countless others. I would argue, however, that the past–present–future triad no longer dominates temporality, because contemporaneity includes

within its diversity many revived pasts and wished-for futures, all of which are being lived out as vivid, or at least possible, presents.³⁰

I suggested above that the concept of contemporaneity allows us to see that friction between three sets of antinomic forces shapes, in a fractured way, the current world (dis)order. I have proposed that these forces subsist in art practice in homologous ways, such that three broad currents may be discerned in art today, each quite different in character, scale, and scope.³¹ They have taken distinctive forms since the 1950s. The first current prevails in the metropolitan centers of modernity in Europe and the United States (as well as in societies and subcultures closely related to them) and is a continuation of styles in the history of art, particularly modernist ones. The second has arisen from movements toward political and economic independence that occurred in former colonies and on the edges of Europe and then spread everywhere. It is characterized above all by clashing ideologies and experiences. The result is that artists prioritize both local and global issues as the urgent content of their work. Meanwhile, artists working within the third current explore concerns that they feel personally yet share with others, particularly of their generation, throughout an increasingly networked world. Taken together, these currents constituted the contemporary art of the late twentieth century, and their unpredictable unfolding and volatile interaction continue to shape art in the early twenty-first.

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Agamben's answer to "What does it mean to be contemporary?" is to articulate "contemporariness" as experienced by those philosophers, poets, scientists, and artists who, he presumes, are most capable of understanding its true nature. Presented online as "Giorgio Agamben on contemporaneity," its title when published in Italy was *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?* It has settled in English as "What is the Contemporary?" Respectively, www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5S9VPS_gms&feature=related; Giorgio Agamben, *Che cos'è il contemporaneo?* (Rome: Nottotempo, 2008); and Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39–54.
- 2 See Terry Smith, Nancy Condee, Okwui Enwezor, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity and Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

- 3 Joseph Nye Jr., inventor of the term “soft power,” has recently used this metaphor to invoke the distribution of military, economic, and cultural power in the world today. See his *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).
- 4 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Art Today,” lecture Accademia di Brera, Milan, 2006; “L’arte, oggi,” in Federico Ferrari, ed., *Del contemporaneo* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007); also in *Journal of Visual Culture* 9: 1 (April 2010), pp. 91–99. Numbers in text refer to the last.
- 5 Nancy, “Art Today,” op. cit., p. 92.
- 6 Notably in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
- 7 Nancy, “Art Today,” op. cit., p. 92.
- 8 Ibid., p. 93.
- 9 Ibid., p. 96.
- 10 Ibid., p. 94.
- 11 Ibid., p. 94.
- 12 Ibid., p. 94.
- 13 See, for example, Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), especially “Comrades of Time,” pp. 84–101. See also note 28.
- 14 Nancy, “Art Today,” op. cit., p. 94.
- 15 Ibid., p. 95.
- 16 Ibid., p. 99.
- 17 Ibid., p. 98.
- 18 “Questionnaire on ‘the contemporary’: 32 Responses,” *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 3–124.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 64–73.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 33–40.
- 21 Alex Alberro, “Periodising Contemporary Art,” in Jaynie Anderson, ed., *Conflict, Migration and Convergence, The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), pp. 935–939; and in *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 55–60. Readers interested in an account of the prehistory of the idea of “the contemporary” in modern art discourse might consult my “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” *Art Bulletin* XCII: 4 (December 2010), pp. 366–383.
- 22 “What is Contemporary Art?” *e-flux* 11 (December 2009) and 12 (January 2010), at www.e-flux.com/journal/issue/11 and www.e-flux.com/journal/issue/12. In book form, edited by Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, *What is Contemporary Art?* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010). On *e-flux* as the artwork of founder Anton Vidokle and others, see Anton Vidokle, *Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009). Meanwhile in Berlin, the same questions were being asked in “13 Theses on Contemporary Art,” *Texte zur Kunst* 19: 74 (June 2009). These were preceded by Jan-Erik Lundström and Johan Sjöström, *Being Here. Mapping the*

Contemporary. Reader of the Bucharest Biennale 3, 2 volumes, special issue of *Pavilion 12* (2008).

- 23 Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Contemp(t)ory: Eleven Theses," *e-flux 12* (January 2010), at www.e-flux.com/journal/contemporary-eleven-theses/.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 26 Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux 12* (January 2010), www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 29 Raqs Media Collective, "Now and Elsewhere," *e-flux 12* (January 2010), p. 47, www.e-flux.com/journal/now-and-elsewhere.
- 30 As a corrective against presentism, it is worth remembering that this idea emerges vividly in books 10 and 11 of St Augustine's *Confessions*, written in Hippo in 397 CE. And to read Garry Wills's brilliant introduction to these books in his *Augustine's Confessions, A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chapters 7 and 8.
- 31 I have elaborated these ideas in a number of recent publications, among them Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); my own response to the questionnaire, see *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–54; and *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011).

The Historicity of the Contemporary is Now!

Jean-Philippe Antoine

The project of a history of the contemporary may easily look oxymoronic, caught as it is between the habitual distance required from historians toward their subject matter, and the critical urgency, as well as the tentativeness, associated with any attempt to analyze the present. The case of art offers an additional twist. Here the word *contemporary* doesn't designate any artwork presently being done. Rather, it singles out a number of artistic practices, objects, and events, deemed by their makers and audiences to be "the art of our times," against other works that do not count as contemporary art, while, from a timeline point of view, being strictly coetaneous with us. This discrepancy between a chronological catch-all "now" and a restricted concept of the contemporary, circumscribed by values and perpetually threatened with becoming a particular genre of art, is symptomatic of a larger situation, in which contemporariness and historicity have become but two sides of the same artistic coin.

The first inklings of this connection between art, the contemporary, the present, and the past emerged in the late eighteenth century, when Friedrich Schiller defined the relationship between the artist and his time as uncannily untimely. Schiller insisted that he was writing as "a citizen of the century," and his essay is unabashedly grounded in the urgency of the French Revolution.¹ Yet he asserted that, while "a child of his time," the artist resists his assimilation to the current moment. He remains "a foreign construct" (*eine fremde Gestalt*), so that the strangeness of his work appears to the public to hark back to past, ancient, even unknown times. Acknowledging this situation, though, gives rise to a new question: If the artist and his/her artwork are not wholly absorbed by the urges and tastes of the present, then *to what other part of time do they also belong?*

Prompted by archaeological findings, in other words by resurrected traces of the past, Schiller and his contemporaries answered the question by reinventing antiquity as a ghost among the living. The attempt to reach out to the Greeks and Romans, by emulating their aesthetics and politics, resonates time and again throughout the period. But what resonates just as well

is the recognition of the impossibility to wholly coincide with them, and to cancel an irreparable time difference. Winckelmann's moving meditation on the downfall of classical antiquity in the final page of his *History of Ancient Art* stands as a case in point.

As implied in the term "neoclassicism" later forged by art historians, one may view these developments as yet another iteration in a series of revivals of classical antiquity already begun in the Middle Ages and culminating with the Renaissance. But to do so misses what really started with neoclassicism: The attempt to define the contemporary through specific connections to historical periods, picked out of a generic, a-historical past. Late antiquity and the Middle Ages were thus rediscovered and "revived" by romanticism, not because of their sequential order, but because they provided valued vehicles for resisting absorption into the pure present of nascent industrial societies. And despite obvious differences, the cubist romance with African masks or Barnett Newman's interest in the Indian mounds of Ohio Valley are but two examples of this same appropriative gesture, geared toward retrieving specific moments in a large and indefinite past. Indeed one may very reasonably argue that modernism plays for many artists today a quite similar role to that of classicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether as rightful inspiration and vocabulary, or as a foil. One may think here of Mark Lewis's or Tacita Dean's recent filmic reinvestments of modern architecture, or else of the way Gerhard Richter's "abstract paintings" parody modernist abstraction. But this situation was probably best acknowledged in the question posed only a few years ago by the editors of the *Documenta 12 Magazine*: "Is Modernity our Antiquity?"²

If the later eighteenth century provides an early condensation point for this emerging pattern, it took much longer for a theoretical awareness of it to develop. We may credit Alois Riegl, the late nineteenth-century Austrian art historian and theoretician, with being the first to fully recognize this development and evaluate its consequences. In the increasingly prophetic *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (1903), Riegl identified a shift in attitude toward the past peculiar to modern Western societies. Its background is a concept of history that has slowly developed from the Renaissance on, away from its medieval status as the exemplary chronicles of worthy men and deeds, from which princes and rulers were taught. History now stands as the recording of events deemed worthy of being remembered because they are irreparably lost and will never come back. History will *not* repeat itself.

In the entropic realm that Riegl describes, any trace of a past event, as small as it may be, becomes a potential object of historical inquiry, while the

actualization of this potential is trusted to its rarefied character, its beauty, horror, or singularity—as assessed from the present. Objects, events, people and social groups, periods and styles, compete for historical status as part of a global *ancientness* (as recent as they actually may be), whose apprehension relies on the perceptual recognition of certain things as *unheimlich*, as different from the ordinariness of the present. This eminently democratic relationship to the past doesn't require any historical culture. It is available to anyone, and it bestows upon *things* an *age-value* entirely distinct from their *historical* or *artistic value*. A good example of this new “sentimental” attitude is the love of ruins that developed at the end of the eighteenth century, coinciding with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Ruins “look” ancient, they display age whether we know what they are, or not. But nowhere is age-value more succinctly described than in the first chapter of Flaubert's unfinished last novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*: “When they admired an old piece of furniture they regretted that they had not lived at the period when it was used, though they were absolutely ignorant of what period it was.”

Age-value has become, in the last few decades, a prevalent feature in processing our relationships to things in general. For today things immediately appear to us either as *new*, modern—i.e., functional and void of any trace of the inscription of time—or as *ancient*—i.e., bearing entropic markings which make them into signs of unknown past events and places; in other words, into *monuments*.

Indeed, another strong symptom of the situation here described is the newly acquired importance, and shift in meaning, of the concept of monument. While for a long time the use of the word had been restricted to *intentional* monuments, expressly built to last and provide posterity with definite coined messages, modernity has seen *unintentional* monuments proliferate: things which, through the inscription on their surface of the markings of passing time, have become mute records of differences they weren't *meant* to carry. It is here we come back to art. For, just as traditional monumentality provided a stage for the restricted concepts of the fine arts, the modern category of unintentional monument, which embraces any trace of human activity (as long as it is the bearer of some irreplaceable difference), opens up into a much larger, expanded concept of art. When any trace, provided the right circumstances, is liable as such to become an unintentional monument, then the field of monumentality not only expands, it also becomes one with the field of art. In this instance, Marcel Duchamp's shockingly general definition of art, from some forty years ago,

becomes quite handy: “The word Art, etymologically, means *to do, not even to make, but to do*.”³ To which one may add: and to *take care of* what was done, or made.

The responsibility of art today is to make or do something singular and valuable, something “interesting.” Or it is to conserve, maintain, and publicly exhibit something that has crystallized value and singularity through its trials in time. But this widely expanded definition means that art no longer operates as it used to, through the underwriting of the contemporary by supposedly eternal, time-free ideals. It now inhabits a vast, a-historical and boundless warehouse of ancientness, continually revisited and augmented by the present. There all past objects and events have become indifferently available for historical and artistic pick-up. Furthermore, the evaluation of art is now entirely ruled by judgments that not only are circumstanced, but know themselves to be date-stamped. It is ruled by fashion. This fact, while itself possibly value-free, nonetheless ushers in a new situation, which bears on art’s practice, appraisal, and enjoyment. For fashion explicitly exerts its judgment from the present, even as it forages from the past.

While trying to define the present-day value (*Gegenwartswert*) of monuments—shall we say their *contemporaneity*?—Riegl stumbled upon a major difficulty. He found himself with two irreconcilable working definitions of the new. The first one, which we have already encountered, is linked to functionality: Things are new, *they feel contemporary*, if they fully identify with the capacity to accomplish what they were meant for. The actually new communes here with objects from the past, as long as the latter are still functional, or have been returned, through conservation and restoration, to their pristine state. This newness-value (*Neuheitswert*) thus primarily connects with both the concept of intentional monument and the artistic/historical values embedded in the fine arts tradition.

Yet another, more novel, concept of the new has emerged in contemporary Western societies, which is tied to the problem of evaluating works of art and, generally speaking, creativity. “In our modern view,” writes Riegl, “the new artifact requires flawless integrity of form and color as well as of style; that is to say, the truly modern work must, in its concept and detail, recall earlier works as little as possible.”⁴ Far from being linked to use-value and functionality, this alternate newness-value thrives on the shock-value of the perceived object (or event), on its uncanny *otherness*—and this clearly

contradicts the functional new. The reliance on shock-value ties this emerging form of the new to many twentieth-century avant-garde strategies. But it connects it simultaneously to the most recently developed form of relationship to the past: age-value. For *pace* Riegl, who couldn't quite reconcile these findings, maybe for fear of endangering the evolutionary art history he still advocated, a strong family resemblance actually unites the "absolute" newness of contemporary art and the ancientness of things past. In both cases, the viewer experiences a thing or event through feeling the signal shock of the uncanny.

This finding seems at first of little help. Neither the shockingly new artwork nor the shockingly ancient object initially appears as historical. We know nothing about the contemporary work—inasmuch as it is not a mere repetition of existing artifacts. We also don't know anything about the ancient thing. It belongs to forgotten or never known circumstances, and strikes us aslant from afar. Both behave as unknown quantities, and their relationship is grounded in a common denial of history, whether explicitly, when modernist avant-gardes insist on building from a *tabula rasa*, or as the product of a widespread commonplace ignorance of the historical past. But precisely because the contemporary work of art and the ancient thing don't already belong to established historical categories, they require—indeed they *demand*—to become the focus of historical inquiry.

A first reason for this is that, as once stated by the late nineteenth-century French sociologist, Gabriel Tarde, *history is above all a record of inventions*. Aside from fiction, history is the one discourse that has the potency not to dissolve invention into repetitious sameness. Its broken, unpredictable linearity works as a graphic record of the happenings of the new, and that is why it doesn't repeat itself, but only changes shape. As a consequence, a special responsibility emerges for artists and scholars to take care of the new, of the now, *in terms of building for it a history*. Otherwise they will just reiterate previous constructs and petrified events.

Such a history will be discontinuous. It will be fragmentary and anachronic, as indeed are the relationships between present and past. As suggested earlier, one of the signal ways in which a present grows to differentiate itself from what it was, is by appointing, within the boundless storehouse of a generic past, newly targeted moments. This means that the contemporary, far from identifying with a "present" reduced to a narrow and fugitive slice of chronological time, actually consists in the knitting together of a specific variety of times.

These knit-together times are highly different from the generic past of age-value, whose undefiniteness resembles nothing more than the global, a-historical present of consumption, with its insistence on a perpetually renewed *tabula rasa*. For each specific variety of times will be made up of an undefined but limited number of current connections to peculiar moments in the past, whose combination defines a specific present. And while these moments do stem from the generic age-value that gives modern democratic culture its distinct atmosphere, they don't actually inhabit it. They live with and among us, quite often as the Ghost of Christmas Past, since they first appear to us not as readymade historical or stylistic periods, but as wild, shocking artifacts questioning our awareness of the now, and ultimately the shaping of our present.

Indeed, while the first symptom of this process is an unpredictable feeling of difference experienced before various past objects, only through the becoming historical of this relationship will the present actually produce *for itself* these elected moments of the past, and build them into recognizable periods, styles, or *epistemes* to emulate, or desecrate. Only then will it find itself different from the urges of even the most recent past—that of fashion—and from what by now will have become mere tastes.

As intimated from what precedes, this form of historical inquiry doesn't identify with the existing field of art history, which has a grievous record of stifling the new (as well as, just for symmetry, heterogeneous ancientness), while privileging long chains of the same repetitious "influences." Adding "contemporary art" to a long list of centuries in order to bring to a close a universal history of art would be but a short-lived parody of previous historicist endeavors, and a spectacular misunderstanding of the unique methodological and, yes, ethical value of the contemporary for *all* historians.

For in studying the contemporary, one of the most frequent obstacles to the practice of history is made much less onerous: The prejudice that "things past" were always part of history, even before historians grabbed them and made them so. Such false naturalizing of the work of previous historians becomes very difficult, if not downright impossible, with contemporary artworks, which do not possess the kind of historiography and genealogy attached to their forebears. While these works ask not to be left to die in a coma of pure presentness, and ultimately petrified into a-historical clichés, the very fact that documentation and archival work need to be performed to achieve their historicization gives the strongest

indication that they weren't born historical in the first place. They *claim* to become historical.

A first reason for studying the contemporary is thus that it offers a cleaner plate to the crucial task of performing history. But should we accept the family resemblance between vanguard new-value and age-value, we must of necessity accept an additional consequence. Studying the contemporary means investigating its ties with the "specific objects" which NOW—*not at any other time*—unpredictably come alive and strike us as shocking monuments, as opposed to the abstract, "past-in-general" that inhabits the boundless storehouse of collective memory.

Why has Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de Dés* (1897) suddenly become the cornerstone for a number of recent visual artworks, as was made clear in *Un Coup de Dés: Writing turned Image*, a 2008 exhibition at the Generali Foundation in Vienna?⁵ Is it because modernism looms so large in today's artistic practices and critical thought? Because it has become a *monument*, as opposed to the very air we breathe (a possibility that the spreading of the term *postmodernism* lamely acknowledges)? But what modernism? How does the recent shifting back of its origins from the first decades of the twentieth century to the nineteenth impinge on its very idea? Why have the works of artists as different as Paul Thek and Marcel Broodthaers lately been given new purchase, after years of benign (or not so benign) neglect? Those questions, with many others, do not amount to a series of disconnected and ultimately subsidiary toils. They become part and parcel of the very act of shaping our contemporariness. And such an investigation qualifies as a work of art—an act of "social sculpture" performed by artists as well as by art historians and other varied members of the public. For acquiring an awareness of who and what haunts us is a huge part of, if not the main affair in, shaping the present, as unremarkable a task as it may appear in our present-obsessed times.

This art historical practice runs contrary to run-of-the-mill eclectic art history, with its predictable continuities and lines of influence, as well as to the sort of art criticism that, addicted to a flimsy, paper-thin concept of the now, remains unaware of its multiple temporalities. As much professionalism as it requires, such an ethos is not confined within the limits of professional art history. As a matter of fact, in recent years some of the strongest manifestations of this kind of history-making have been wrought directly by artists, challenging art historians to duties they too often shirk.

(And we may here remember that Schiller already located the connection between the contemporary, the present, and the past in the realm of artistic production.)

One such example of this performing the history of contemporary art is Mike Kelley's exhibition *The Uncanny*, here described in its enlarged version of 2004 at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, Austria. Along with a host of very recent artworks, this show included, among other things, Egyptian mummies, sex dolls, nineteenth-century waxworks, medical supplies, store mannequins, death masks, and photographs. This undifferentiated plateau of artifacts was united, beyond the variegated circumstances, shapes, and visual styles of the displayed items, both by the quite generic concept of "figurative sculpture" and by the more specific Freudian one of *the uncanny*, transported from the realm of the psychological unconscious to the workings of culture. By using these unorthodox categories, Kelley applied considerable pressure to recent models of art history and practice. His task was made clear in the lengthy essay which anchored the accompanying catalogue, but was rendered even more vivid through the co-presence and space arrangements of the "specific objects" (Marcel Broodthaers, via Donald Judd) chosen to be included in the show. Their generic groupings engineered a strikingly immediate sensual apprehension of the a-historical storehouse space in which things come up for our attention, and of its potential association with the addictive present of consumerism. With time, though, the variegated local combinations allowed by the display, partially trusted to the visitors' creativity, allowed each object to shine through on its own and engaged with empowered viewers a conversation that extended beyond its sheer uncanny character.

In *The Uncanny*, the artist not only took over the mantle of "Sunday curator." Using the same rigorous historical and theoretical tools available to and developed by career historians, he engaged with the contemporaneity of art, which is to say, with the traces of the past we choose to live with, consciously or not, when making new artifacts or even just looking at them. In fact, he transmogrified himself into a historian, because no one else had engaged in historicizing a good number of the recent artists and works which he had chosen to include in the show. As Kelley reminds us in an essay dedicated to the writings of fellow artist/critic John Miller, "Most of the artists that influenced me are absent from [academic] accounts. Historical writing becomes a duty for the artist at this point."⁶

Here is a lesson addressed to professional art historians and scholars. If they don't inquire into which "things past" contemporary artists engage

with, and how, or if they don't engage in analyzing the artifacts produced by these many acts of selection, whether minor or major (and here the general public is just as much of an artist as the career or even amateur artist), then artists and other punk types will. And they will make history—real history. Beware!

Notes

- 1 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, edited and translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
- 2 “Modernity?” *Documenta 12 Magazine* 1 (Cologne: Taschen, 2007).
- 3 Marcel Duchamp, “Interview with Joan Bakewell,” *The Late Show Line Up*, BBC (June 5, 1968), www.toutfait.com/auditorium.php.
- 4 Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and its Origin [1903],” *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), pp. 21–51.
- 5 Sabine Folie, ed., *Un Coup de Dés: Writing turned Image. An Alphabet of Pensive Language* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2008).
- 6 Mike Kelley, “Artist/critic?” *Foul Perfection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 220–226.