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The State of Art History: Contemporary Art

Terry Smith

What are we to make of the recent signs that contemporary art has become—to the surprise of many, including many of those most directly involved—a field within the discipline of art history? An initial reaction is that this has been a long time coming. Throughout the twentieth century, in places of concentrated visual arts production across the globe, the word "contemporary" appeared—intermittently but then with increasing frequency—in the names of art societies, artists' organizations, private galleries, public art centers, alternative art spaces, until during the 1990s it reached its institutional culmination in the names of museums and auction house departments. Throughout this period, the public interpretation of current art remained, for the most part, the province of art critics, art theorists, and curators. Contemporary art has long been the primary focus in art schools, as the end point of practical instruction and the hot topic of informal discourse, but rarely has it been framed in historical terms. In university departments of art history until the 1990s, contemporary art appeared—if at all—during the closing days of courses covering longer trajectories, such as "Introduction to Art," "Modern Art," "Art of the Twentieth Century," "Postwar Art," or "Art since 1945," or as examples in courses on the art of a country or region. With few exceptions, textbook coverage reflected this situation. The Library of Congress system maintained the subject category "Modern Art—20th century" until 2000, when it added "Modern Art—21st century." "Contemporary art" appears in keyword searches but is not regarded as a subject field.

Out there in the world of art, however, wide-scale shifts toward the contemporary have occurred at accelerating rates, impacting on all of these arrangements. Recent art, the work of artists in midcareer, issues in contemporary theory, and transformations in museum, market, and gallery practice now pepper lists of dissertation topics. A clear majority of applicants to graduate schools of art history intend to make contemporary art their major research field and their teaching or professional specialization. They expect art history departments to serve this need. Already shaken by decades of critique and the option of subsuming art history within the emerging "visual culture" discipline, departments debate cutoff dates that would place the modern as an earlier, separate period and worry if the contemporary, too, will demand a different kind of art history—indeed, if it favors historical consciousness at all. Despite these concerns, academic opportunities are increasingly opening up. While "Contemporary Art" has appeared in the title of chairs for some time, "Contemporary Art *History*" remains rare—the first, perhaps, dating from 2001.

At the College Art Association Annual Conference in Los Angeles in 2009, the recently formed Society of Contemporary Art Historians held its first public panel before a huge crowd. Excited speculation abounded: Can we *do* history *of* contemporary art? Should we do history that is *like* the art it studies? Are we *really* doing criticism, or perhaps theory (note to self: it may already be out of fashion)? Whatever happened to critical distance, scholarly objectivity, disinterested judgment? What counts as an archive? How do I claim a topic before all the others? What if "my artist" suddenly refuses to cooperate? How do I relate my topic to "the field" when no one seems to have any idea of its overall shape and direction? What do I do when my artist changes her work before I finish my dissertation?[1] Meanwhile, the journal *October* circulated a "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary' " that asked for reflection on the strange conjunction between the fact that " 'contemporary art' has become an institutional object in its own right" and the "new . . . sense" that "in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment."[2]

Four years earlier, in the buzz that followed the 2005 publication of *Art since 1900,* a nascent concept of "contemporary art history" surfaced, haltingly and somewhat shamefaced—a mood caught in Pamela M. Lee's apt characterization of the phrase as "a useful catachresis."[3] To me, this awkwardness was a sure sign of its timeliness, its challenge, and its potential—in short, its contemporaneity. The questions filling the air in Los Angeles were precipitous and, inevitably, flushed out premature answers in their rush. Presentism is only the most obvious danger that lies in taking the contemporary on its own terms. Compliant parroting is, for art scholars, just one of the traps in taking contemporary art at its own word. Because contemporary art history is, however belatedly, just coming into being, a report on the state of research would be premature.[4] Nevertheless, considerable work is in progress. In what follows, I set out a prolegomenon to contemporary art conceived as a field of critical, theoretical, historical, and, above all, art historical inquiry.[5]

Contemporary Artists Do Art History as Art

Direct participation by artists in art historical debate is not a new thing. In the early and mid-1970s some members of the Art & Language group of conceptual artists took part, through their published writings and their exhibited work, in the intense rethinking about the conflicted nature of the origins of modernism, then a hot topic within the discipline.[6] These debates motivated Jeff Wall's first major works, and the issues raised then continue to resonate: indeed, his own writings, and his actual works, count as key contributions. Michael Fried correctly calls attention to the presence—in Wall's history painting–size, digitally manipulated, but seemingly everyday, backlit photographs—of his interpretations of the absorption/theatricality dialectic in modern French painting.[7] In *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona,* 1999, this appears in, among many other elements,

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1 Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona,* 1999, cinematographic photograph, transparency in lightbox, 73⅝ × 138¼ in. (187 × 351 cm) (artwork © Jeff Wall; photograph provided by the Marian Goodman Gallery, NY)

the posing of the cleaner as concentrating on adjusting his equipment, oblivious to the shaft of sunlight raking across the foreground of the picture (Fig. 1). Yet this emphasis on a workingman displaced within a building that was, and remains, a temple to the most expensive and refined aesthetic (one symbol of which, a sculpture entitled *Dawn,* he obscures with his sudsy fluid) is equally important to this work's affect. T. J. Clark, then, might reasonably feel that his narrative of modernism's embedded sociality has also had an impact. And, in fact, the initially distinctive but increasingly convergent approaches of both scholars (and, of course, a number of others) have been thematized in Wall's work since 1978. This kind of engagement with art's history, and with historians' struggles with that history, has nothing to do with postmodernist pastiche, quotation, appropriation, or historicism. It takes art historical definition of what is, and has been, at stake in modernist art to be an important component within what is most at stake in making art now.

Other kinds of art historical rumination are woven into the work of a number of younger contemporary artists, and they go just as deep. How are we to interpret a work, made in 2005 by an artist who lives between Berlin and New York and exhibited at the 2006 Whitney Biennial, entitled *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art* (Fig. 2)? Josephine Meckseper creates installations similar to those pioneered by artists ranging from Mike Kelley to Isa Genzken and now ubiquitous among her generation: objects selected from the delirious output of commercial culture and the detritus of urban waste, then gathered into awkward, flashy allegories of the contradictions of contemporary life. Presented in a darkened room, Meckseper's *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art* suggests, at first, a shopwindow-style display of easily recognizable, everyday commodities. At the same time, we are invited to see them as if we are looking from the future, an increasingly common experience these days. Specifically, this display recalls those shops in East Germany exposed, after 1989, as repositories of modernity's wastes, symbols of a system that had become, suddenly, a temporal cul-de-sac. Pockets from various pasts exist everywhere, and will do so more frequently as inequalities of income increase in all societies. Meckseper symbolizes the confusion over the 2005 vote against the European Union constitution by including a toy rabbit that holds a flag with "Oui" and "Non" on either face, and which spins on its base. Each of the objects displayed wittily references a famous work of contemporary art; her implication is that the reputations and the relevance of artists such as Joseph Beuys and Jeff Koons will fade just as quickly: late modern contestatory art and the art of high capitalism triumphant are alike subject to entropy. Thus, the ironic title of her installation appears inside the display, inscribed in gold on the cover of a leather-bound volume: the book itself is clearly over a century old. It sits behind glass, in a shop that is closed, making it impossible to read. Nonetheless, its title taunts us with the thought that even postcontemporary art is, already, ancient history.

Meckseper's larger argument is even stronger than what this array of failed allegories implies. She always shows her vitrines alongside sets of her photographs of antiglobalization demonstrations in Berlin, Washington, and elsewhere (Fig. 3). She clearly favors the protestors' perspective but recognizes (as Beuys arguably foresaw) that its current imagery—and art that simply serves it—is also losing its power, its

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2 Josephine Meckseper, *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art,* 2005, mixed media in display window, 63 × 98½ × 23⅝ in. (160 × 250.2 × 60 cm) (artwork © 2010 Artist Rights Society [ARS], NY/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; photograph provided by Saatchi Gallery, London)

3 Meckseper, *Untitled (Demonstration, Berlin),* 2001, C-print photograph, 29⅞ × 39¾ in. (76 × 101 cm) (artwork © 2010 Artist Rights Society [ARS], NY/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; photograph provided by Saatchi Gallery, London)

purchase on a critical contemporaneity. Both Leftism, locked into dialectical historicism, and globalizing capitalism, distracted by its own delusory paradise of commodities, are projects that are past their peaks—indeed, are in decline. A different politics, a different ethics, and a different imagery are needed. Meckseper's work projects an archaeology of the future in order to draw our attention to the urgent need to develop an ontology of the present.[8]

It comes as no surprise that many artists today are deeply interested in the nature of time, in temporalities of all kinds—social, personal, bodily, geologic, world historical, scientific, eternal—and in the intersections between them. Many artists are fascinated by how temporality was treated by their predecessors, from which they draw inspiration in their efforts to deal with present concerns. For some, this becomes a way of approaching art's internal history, that is, the densely textured interplay between artists, those who knew each other as well as those connected by imaginative sympathy. Its raw materials are example and influence, suggestion and orientation, trial and error, ideas incompletely realized, trails laid for one's successors . . . In other words, the connectivity between objects, ideas, people, and institutions that is the core subject of the art historian's attention. In the hands of artists as different as Tacita Dean and Josiah McElheny, this interplay becomes a primary material for their art (Figs. 4, 5).[9]

Despite their differing perspectives, many artists today use art historical reflection to tackle pressing issues about what it

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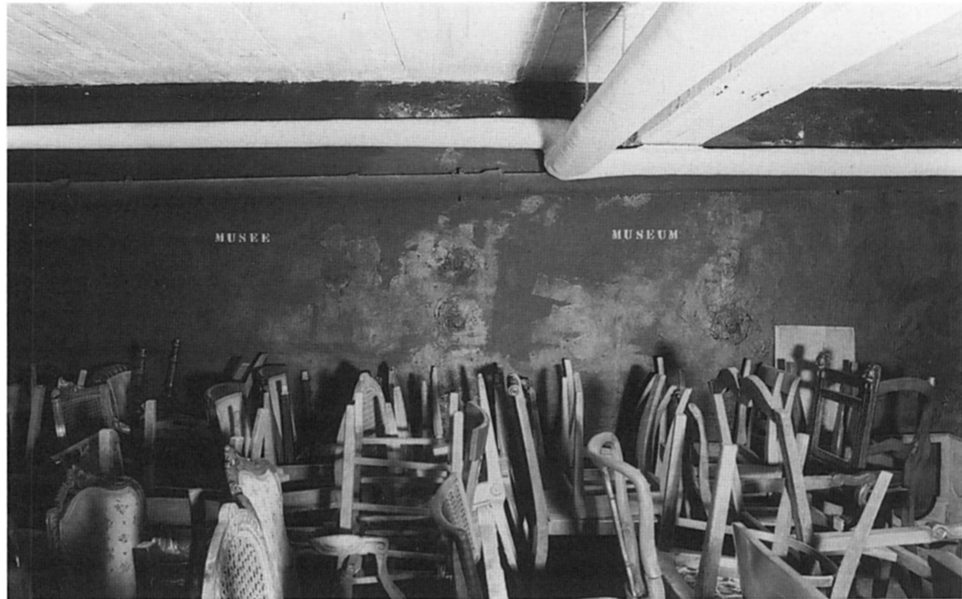

4 Tacita Dean, still from *Section Cinema, Homage to Marcel Broodthaers*, 2002, 16 mm film, color with optical sound, 13 min., continuous loop, edition of 4 (artwork © Tacita Dean; photograph provided by the Frith Street Gallery, London)

is to live in the present. Art historians might be emboldened to follow suit, beginning with the reality that many have assiduously avoided for decades, until it became so obvious as to no longer seem remarkable: the worldwide move—nascent during the 1950s, emergent in the 1960s, contested during the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s—from modern to contemporary art. How might this phenomenon be conceptualized? Is it a question of style, of change within the history of art taken as a relatively autonomous entity? Or is it a (contestatory, unpredictable, and incomplete) confluence of what took shape initially as distinct developments in the visual arts in the various regions of the world, taking place at the separate nodes of artistic production, but then filling the transnational yet multidirectional connections between them? In either case, has this change in art occurred independently of all other transformations in the world, or is it part of a more complex, multifaceted shift from one set of conditions to another? I suspect that the latter answer to each of these pairs of questions is closer to the truth of the situation, indicated by some aspects of how contemporary art came to be made within the world's shift from modernity to contemporaneity. Certain lines of inquiry, taken together, might help us to approach contemporary art from perspectives that are, at once, theoretically acute, historically accurate, and open toward art to come.

Becoming Contemporary

How might the emergence of the contemporary within the modern be traced in language use in general, and art discourse in particular? Confining ourselves to English, we may note that the word "modern" is given a long list of meanings in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online.* First, the root, adjectival definition (2.a.): "Of or pertaining to the present or recent times, as distinguished from the remote past; pertaining to or originating in the current age or period."[10] The second meaning is an applied one (2.h.): "Of a movement in art and architecture, or the works produced by such a movement: characterized by a departure from or a repudiation of accepted or traditional styles and values." Contrastive periodization is, clearly, essential to the core, modern meaning of "modern": that which is modern is, first and foremost, no longer of a time, age, or period that is past. This is itself a modernization: the sixth-century CE Latin usage derives from *modo,* "just now," and becomes *modernus,* "modern," on analogy to *hodiernus,* "of today." The *Oxford English Dictionary* recognizes this movement of meaning by listing "Being at this time; now existing," as its first definition, while acknowledging it to be obsolete, rare.

The word "contemporary" is commonly used in most languages to refer to the passing present. Its etymology is as rich as that which Hans Robert Jauss, among others, has shown to exist for "modern."[11] It is capable of calibrating a number of distinct but related ways of being *in* or *with* time, even of being, at once, *in* and *apart from* time. Current editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* give four major meanings. They are all relational, turning on prepositions, on being placed "to," "from," "at," or "during" time. There is the strong sense of "Belonging *to* the same time, age, or period" (1.a.); the coincidental, but also entangled sense of "Having existed or lived *from* the same date, equal in age, coeval" (2); and the mostly adventitious "Occurring *at* the same moment of time, or *during* the same period; occupying the same definite period, contemporaneous, simultaneous" (3). Each of these three meanings comprehends a distinctive sense of presentness, of being in the present, of beings that are present to each other and to the time that they happen to be in while also being aware that they can be in no other.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s fourth definition of "contemporary" brings these radically diverse conjunctions of persons, things, ideas, and time together and heads them in one direction: "Modern; of or characteristic of the present period; especially up-to-date, ultra-modern; specifically designating art of a markedly *avant-garde* quality, or furniture, building, decoration, etc. having modern characteristics." Why does this strike us now as odd, even anachronistic, as a definition of the word "contemporary"? After all, it lists those

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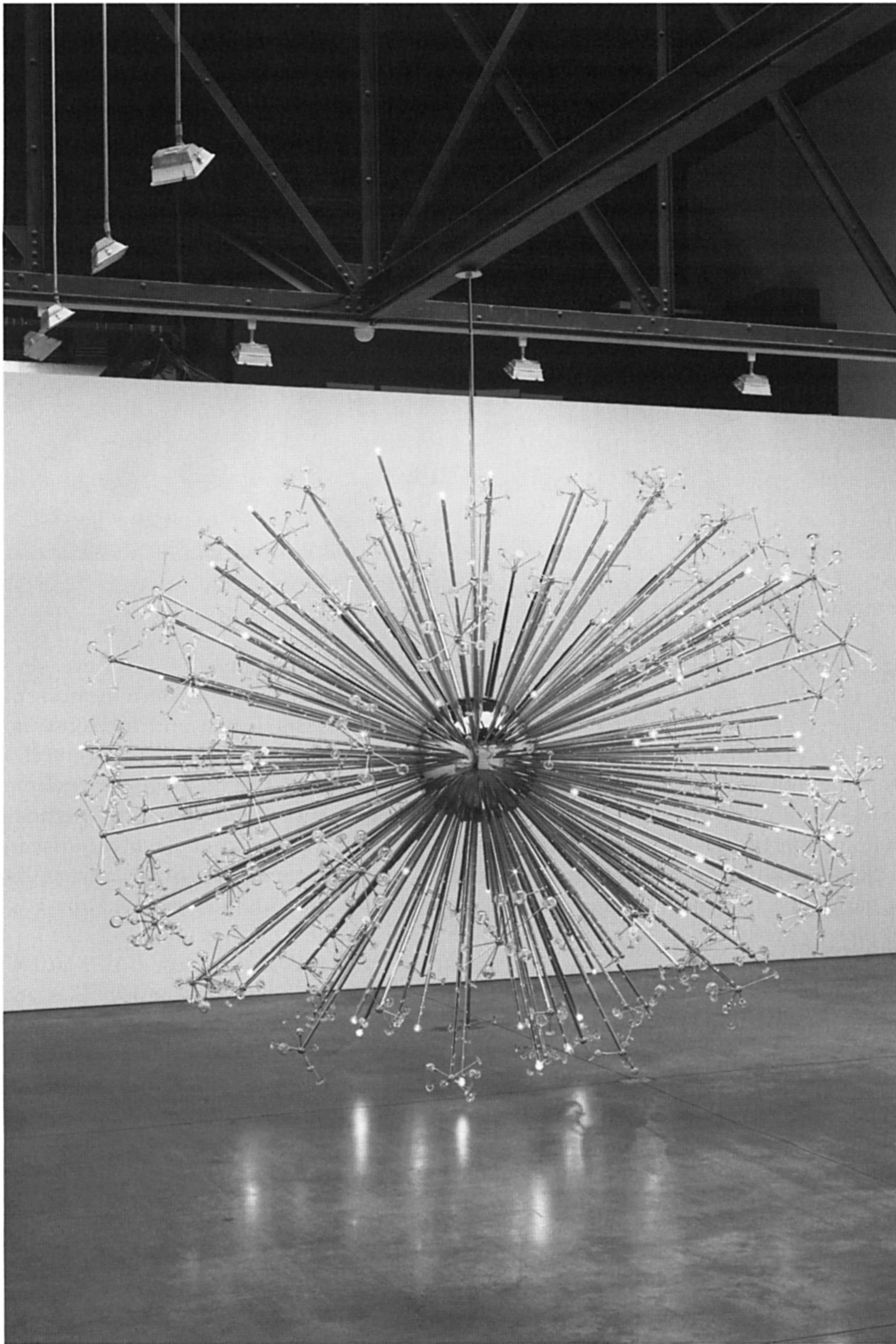

5 Josiah McElheny, *An End to Modernity*, 2005, chrome-plated aluminum, electric lighting, hand-blown glass, and steel cable and rigging, diameter 16 ft. Wexner Center for the Arts of Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio (artwork © Josiah McElheny; photograph by Tom Powel, provided by the Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)

elements of contemporary life and art that are most modern, that exceed modernity as we know it, and are thus most likely to lead, define, and eventually constitute the modernity to come. When we pair the two sets of definitions, however, another interpretation insinuates itself: the contemporary has not only reached parity with the modern, it has eclipsed it. The two concepts have finally exchanged their core meaning: the contemporary has overtaken the modern as the fundamental condition of *this* "time, age, or period." As we shall see, both of these usages have been prevalent in recent decades, in art worlds as in wider spheres, with the weight overwhelmingly on the side of the modern being a strand within the contemporary, not vice versa. But this changeover has not been a simple transfer, or translation, from one state (modernity) to another, similar one (contemporaneity). The state of what it is to be a state, the conditions as to what counts as a condition are changed. We might anticipate, then, that whatever we might identify as characteristic of the contemporary, it will not be singular but rather multiple in nature.

There are art historians who have made it a point to track when, how, and why writers on art have noted contemporaneous elements in their descriptions of art: traces within the work under examination of any occurrence that coincides

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with its moment of creation, or of attention paid by an artist to events or qualities that happen at the same time as others. Some art historians tend to regard contemporaneous elements in a work of art as distractions that, they believe, will recede in importance—even disappear from sight—once a more measured historical gaze recognizes the true nature of the work's achievement. This clearing away of the afterbirth has been applied even to the most innovative moments in the history of modern art. Of a key 1911–12 painting by Pablo Picasso, Lawrence Rainey comments: ". . . yes, the title *Ma Jolie* echoes one of the period's popular songs, but that is a case of period bric a brac, a dapper wink intended to signal 'contemporaneity,' not an indication of where the painting's real work is being done."[12]

There is more interest in tracing the incidence of the term "contemporary" in institutional art discourse. If one tracks its usage as a general descriptor of current art in contemporaneous texts written in the major European languages in their home countries and their colonies from the 1870s until now, along with its deployment in the naming of visual arts museums, galleries, and departments of museums and auction houses, a clear picture quickly emerges. "Contemporary" appears rarely and randomly for much of the period, there being a plethora of alternative terms for new, current, emergent art ("modern" is usually just one of these, and "modernism" did not become prominent until the 1960s). Usage increases noticeably during the 1920s and 1930s, followed by a substantial upsurge in the 1960s, and from then on, it almost doubles in each decade. By the 1990s, "contemporary" had come to be the predominant descriptor of both current and recent art, and of all of its associated modes of presentation, distribution, and interpretation, almost entirely banishing all other labels, including those associated with "modern."[13]

Quantity, of course, has its own kinds of weight. But the main interest for art history lies in the actual meanings and the critical purchase of these usages in their specific situations of utterance.

The Prehistory of the Contemporary

That increasing numbers of French Realist painters and sculptors during the 1850s and 1860s rejected imaginary, timeless, and historical themes in favor of depictions of contemporary life has long been regarded as foundational to the creation of a truly modern art. Among English-language art historians, Linda Nochlin has most effectively drawn attention to the centrality of "contemporaneity" to this moment. In her now classic study *Realism* she showed that the Realist artists chose to paint concrete, tangible objects, as opposed to imagined ones, and to do so in the most direct manner possible, as distinct from academic illusionism; moreover, they selected subjects from the everyday life around them rather than from the allegorical, symbolic, or historical themes favored in the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts. This is to use the term in its ordinary "of today" meaning, the sense that it had at the beginning of the modern period in art.[14]

Intimations of the contemporary as a distinct value had begun to appear earlier. Indeed, they are present whenever art institutions are inclined to favor the work of currently practicing artists as opposed to their deceased—or already institutionalized—predecessors. During the seventeenth century, openness to art as it was freshly made played a part in the replacement of guilds by academies and other professional organizations of artists, albeit a small one, given their guiding aspirations to join the ranks of the great artists of the past. Yet specific circumstances could surprise the contemporary into prominence. In Prague in 1796 the Society of Patriotic Friends of the Arts set up their Picture Gallery of living artists, open to the public. These Patriotic Friends were Bohemian noblemen whose high cultural aspirations had been suddenly isolated by Emperor Joseph II's centralization of imperial administration in Vienna.[15] Under the aegis of Louis XVIII, the Musée des Artistes Vivants was established in the Luxembourg Palace, Paris, in 1818. In contrast to the other public collections in Paris, each devoted to old masters—at the Palais Royal (open since 1784), other rooms of the Luxembourg itself (since 1750), and, above all, the Louvre (since 1793)—it was conceived as a *musée de passage*, a site of display and judgment that would pass on to the Louvre, ten years after the artist's death, those artworks deemed worthy of permanent protection. Lesser works were destined for provincial museums or storage in attics. This multimuseum, cooperative system subsequently appears in all spheres of European cultural influence, soon proving itself flexible enough not only to negotiate between generations of artists but also to serve national patrimony and international exchange.[16] On a less lofty but equally pragmatic level, pioneer Social Darwinist Andrew Carnegie, in Pittsburgh in 1896, conceived "the Chronological Exhibition"—the best paintings produced in the world each year, from which the best would be awarded a prize, purchased for the Carnegie Museum and hung in annual sequence to create a self-replenishing display.[17] In each of these cases, we note a different kind of distinction being drawn between art's past, present, and anticipated manifestations, but all with a strong sense that the chosen works of art would, despite their necessary time-boundedness, coexist productively for overlapping periods, thus contributing to the historical continuity of art itself.

Explicit institutional naming occurred mostly during the twentieth century. In 1910, patrons, writers, and collectors associated with the Bloomsbury group set up the Contemporary Art Society in London in order to acquire works "not more than twenty years old" for national collections.[18] In British colonies throughout the 1930s, contemporary art societies were formed, mostly as artists' exhibiting organizations, in opposition to local academies. The charter of the Contemporary Art Society founded in Melbourne in 1938 is typical:

> By the expression "contemporary art" is meant all contemporary painting, sculpture, drawing and other visual art forms which is or are original and creative or which strive to give expression to contemporary thought and life as opposed to work which is reactionary and retrogressive including work which has no other aim than representation.[19]

Most French institutions had, by the 1930s, come to see "contemporary art" as the latest phase in the development of

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a self-enriching tradition of modern art, especially "modern painting [*peinture moderne*]," dating back at least to Paul Cézanne, if not all the way to Édouard Manet.[20] Now, in official usage, "l'art contemporain" encompasses the entirety of art since the Revolution.

A similar switching between rhetorical uses of the words "contemporary" and "modern" is evident in the conception of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. With regard to collecting policy, director Alfred H. Barr Jr. noted in a 1931 address to the trustees:

> The historical museum, such as the Metropolitan, acquires what is believed to be certainly and permanently valuable. *It cannot afford to run the risk of error.* But the opposite is true of museums of modern art such as the Luxembourg Gallery in Paris, the Tate Gallery in London, or the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It is the proper part of their program to *take chances on the acquisition of contemporary painting and sculpture,* a policy which would be unwise on the part of their conservative counterparts, the Louvre, the National Gallery or the Rijksmuseum.[21]

Angelica Rudenstine comments, "To this extent, the original conception of the museum equated the notion of the modern with that of 'contemporary,' and it offered an interesting solution to the dilemma of institutionalizing the modern."[22] But when, two years earlier, in the museum's foundational document, Barr sought to isolate the values at the core of modern art itself, he insisted on "the progressive, original and challenging rather than the safe and academic which would naturally be included in the supine neutrality of the term 'contemporary.' "[23] The Museum of Modern Art quickly succeeded in defining the modern in its preferred terms, at least for audiences in the United States—so much so that, in 1948, when its Boston branch wished to break away from what it regarded as the narrow, Francophile focus on abstraction of its parent organization and to give space to German Expressionist, American Scene, and other kinds of figurative art, it renamed itself the Institute of Contemporary Art.[24]

It should not surprise us that around this time—a period of extraordinary economic and political turmoil—certain art historians began to notice "the uncontemporary nature of the contemporary" (Wilhelm Pinder) and "the contemporary existence of older and younger" (Arnold Hauser).[25] Nor that, in reaction to this chaos, a "Contemporary Style" appeared, especially in Britain during its efforts at economic and social reconstruction following World War II, largely in household design ware (where it remains as a category to this day).[26]

The important point about all of these examples is that each represents a quite different, utterly specific conjunction of artistic tendencies, one of which took the name "contemporary"—for that time, in that circumstance. Taken together, however, the examples hint at the richness, and the complexity, of the prehistory of the contemporary within the modern. They suggest, too, the interest that may lie—for the "alternative modernities" project—in tracking these largely forgotten pathways.[27]

Setting the Contemporary Agenda

In the long aftermath of World War II, visual memory was haunted by specters of recent trauma: photographs from the death camps, the human silhouette burned into the pavement by the atomic flash. This spirit informs Lucio Fontana's 1946 "Manifesto Blanco," written in Buenos Aires, as well as the Gutai artists' 1954 determination to "create what has never been done before" through concrete embodiment (*gutai*) using everyday objects and simple actions. Meanwhile, Yves Klein sought the void and Guy Debord the cinematic limits of mechanical reproduction with his antifilm *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* of June 1952, disrupting white screen and a mix of mediated quotation and voice-over comment with varying lengths of blank, black screen. Robert Rauschenberg's surfaces, covered with black or white house paint during 1951 and 1952, served as mere receivers of light, shadows, and the passage of time. In the latter year, John Cage used these works in his "concerted action" (later renamed *Theatre Piece No. 1*) at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. Cage's famous *4′ 33″,* first performed by David Tudor on August 29, 1952, in a concert of contemporary music, is less a stretch of "silence," as it is often described, and more a staged interruption of the flow of measured time, so that temporality itself can be experienced as taking place, right there and then. Andy Warhol's contemporaneity, in his Death in America series, derived not simply from the use of up-to-date images (many, in fact, were up to a decade old, and he constantly recycled his imagery), but rather from his evocation of the rising tide of the spectacle society's image flow while at the same time his ability to *arrest* each image—by stamping it out, pinning it down, through singularity, repetition, and variation. Warhol applied his entire strategic ensemble to the depiction of the most pressing issues of the day, not least the seemingly endless assassinations of leading political figures, including those offering hope. Common to all of these works is a retreat from historical time, from socially managed timekeeping, and an openness to adventitious occurrence, to the common incipience of things, to the coming into being of a subjectivity that displays itself to other becoming-subjects. These qualities appeared in art throughout the world: for example, in the shift from Concretism to Neoconcretism in the work of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and many others in Brazil during the 1960s.

If artists took the lead in facing the demands of the contemporary in the 1950s and 1960s, can we say that critics were most prominent in both obstructing (the formalists) and facilitating (everyone else) openness to these values during the latter decade, to be followed by theorists in the 1970s; that the market returned to reclaim the agenda during the 1980s, whereas curators dominated art-world self-definition during the 1990s; while since the turn of the century collectors, followed quickly by auction houses and art fairs, have led in highlighting what counts as current art? Generalizations of this type are themselves evidence of the "branding" priorities that prevailed within communications media during the later twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first. They were, however, often heard in "art talk," so let us take them as indicators and ask how ideas of contemporaneity surfaced within and between them.

> It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness,* as though if only one

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> were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.[28]

These words, the culmination of Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," would seem to define contemporaneity as the portal to transcendence. But his goal—in concert with that of his mentor, Clement Greenberg (for whom the term "contemporary" had no special meaning)—was to identify what was essentially modernist in modernist art, and to do so by denying its contemporaneity as incidental to it. To him, this art did not in any important way participate in modern times, modernity, *modernité,* or the like; however much it might be a product of these times, it did not figure them, represent them, least of all, picture them. Nor was it, in its most profound register, contemporary to its viewer. Minimal art's insistence that the viewer takes a specific kind of actual, material time to apprehend the work Fried saw as a crude, even theatrical literalism. The truly modernist work of art, in contrast, achieved a degree of autonomy so great that it became, in effect, its own time zone. It was so absorbed in itself that, in the strictest sense, it required no viewer. Nor could any viewer rise to its occasion. At most, the above quotation makes clear, one might glimpse the possibility of doing so. This is apprehension of art as a kind of supplication before its messianic presence. Small wonder that Fried concludes with the words of eighteenth-century preacher Jonathan Edwards: "Presentness is grace."

If Fried had in mind the highly attuned, individual art critic trembling on the cusp of aesthetic election, Leo Steinberg was more concerned with "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public." In this 1962 essay he defined "plight" as "simply the shock of discomfort, or the bewilderment or the anger or the boredom which some people always feel, and all people sometimes feel, when confronted with an unfamiliar new style."[29] More important, he offered a useful understanding of what it meant (and, perhaps, still means) to be a member of the "public" for contemporary art. Membership happens at those moments when a viewer passes through the initial shock to recognize that he or she is being asked *by this work of art* to throw out the framework for responding to works of art that had served hitherto, and to accept—without fully knowing why—the new world of seeing that this work requires for an adequate response to it. This is what is "contemporary" about such art: it invites the viewer into a new temporality and insists that the time for just this new kind of art has arrived. The contemporary, then, is first of all a matter of direct experience, and then it is one that claims further significance because it may be epochal. It combines instantaneity—total immersion in the present—with a demand that an unknowable future be instantly accepted. It is this double experience, Steinberg suggests, that makes one a member of contemporary art's public.[30]

The broader relevance of these examples is that they point to the widespread tendency to isolate one quality of, in this case, the experience of a work of art as the key to art's contemporaneity in a more general sense. We have already seen examples where it is assumed that certain qualities of the artwork itself, or aspects of its dissemination, or certain ideas or attitudes held by the artist are similarly definitive. In contrast, this study is suggesting not only that these "definitions" are in fact emphases that are quite specific to time and place, but also that they gradually become—at least with regard to the intentional outlook of those holding them—more and more encompassing of variety in the present and open to the future.

In many parts of the world, especially in local art worlds that saw themselves as in some way tied into the example of one of the metropolitan culture centers, contemporaneity had the quite specific meaning of identifying the inequitable, conflicted state in which artists felt themselves to be working. They sought acknowledgment that at least some local artists were producing art of the same kind and quality as that issuing from the center, and that they were doing so at the same time ("contemporaneously"). In contrast, other local artists might consciously reject such an ambition. Their priorities were local, provincial, or national—contemporaneous in their avowed difference. These kinds of value distinctions had long since marked avant-garde art practice in many South American countries, notably Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay.[31] They accelerated during the 1960s, following the increasing ease of international travel and the greater distribution of publicity about contemporary art. Such finely tuned relationships could change very quickly, as Andrea Giunta has demonstrated by tracking how Argentine artists, critics, curators, and cultural officials understood the idea of "internationalization":

> . . . whereas in 1956 internationalization meant, above all, breaking out of isolation, in 1958 it implied joining an international artistic front; in 1960 it meant elevating Argentine art to a level of quality that would enable it to challenge international spaces; in 1962 attracting European and North American artists to Argentine competitions; in 1964 it brought the "new Argentine art" to international centers; in 1965 it brandished the "worldwide" success of Argentine art before the local public; and, finally, after 1966, internationalism became increasingly synonymous with "imperialism" and "dependence," upsetting its previous positivity.[32]

In Australia, similar relationships were articulated in terms of a concept of provincialism, seen not only as a bind for ambitious art produced in the settler colonies but also as pervading the entire art system, then centered in New York.[33] Reiko Tomii has explored the emergence in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s of a sense that truly contemporary art (*gendai bijutsu*) should be part of an international contemporaneity (*kokusai-teki dojisei*). Local critics had Euro-American art in mind as their model of the latter, as well as a set of distinctions between earlier kinds of modern and avant-garde art in Japan and the West.[34] Olu Oguibe, Sidney Kasfir, and Simon Njami, among others, have drawn attention to the trafficking back and forth between art centers in Africa and those in Europe, as countries actively struggling for their independence called on their artists to participate in freedom fights and then nation building, while the artists were also discovering the enticements and challenges of presenting their work to international audiences.[35] Since 1989, much curatorial, critical,

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and historical attention has been paid to developments at the peripheries of the Soviet Empire, as that structure contracted toward its center, precipitating a renewed attention to cultural change at the borders of Europe, as they hesitatingly expanded.[36]

It can be argued that Maoist revolutionary idealism served as the dominant framework for late modern art in China from 1949 until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978. During the 1980s a resurgence of critical consciousness allied with interest in early- and mid-twentieth-century Western models and current postmodernism led to avant-garde experimentation. Taking up the Japanese term for contemporary art (*gendai bijutsu*), this was labeled *xiandai yishu* and translated as "modern art." During the 1990s, when Chinese artists reacted against a newly censorious state regime, and at the same time became more aware of international contemporary art, the term *dangdai yishu* ("today's art") came to represent what was clearly a contemporary art movement. *Dangdai yishu* is now the standard translation of "contemporary art." External interest in such art opened up patronage and markets. Subsequently, as a result of China's relentless pursuit of the "four modernizations," some of the conditions that led to realism and then high modernism in European art in the middle and late nineteenth century have been experienced in Beijing, Shanghai, and elsewhere. Could they be turning art practice in a modernizing direction? While some sharp contrasts in medium, subject matter, and style still separate traditional, modern, and contemporary aesthetic tendencies, all of which persist, it is evident that China's determined commitment to modern nation building within a globalized context is encouraging many artists to seek consonances between these tendencies.[37]

Discerning what is distinct and what is shared in these shifts from the modern to the contemporary (or, in some cases, the reverse) in different parts of the world is, I submit, the greatest challenge facing those who would write histories of recent and current art. The diversity of these changes guarantees that there will be no single story (and thus no style change in art as such) but rather many parallel, contingent but identifiably specific histories.

The Postmodern Moment

In the years after 1970, no art tendency achieved such prominence as to thrust itself forward as even a candidate to become the dominant style of the period. Much effort went into promoting the "return to painting," while installation, video, large-scale photography, digital media, and cinematic modes have been ubiquitous in recent years. But nothing has succeeded Minimalism and Conceptualism as art styles. "What is postmodernism?" was a key question of the 1970s that persisted into the 1980s, but it lost much of its punch when it became a taste throughout the culture. While it was a style in architecture for a time (signifying little more than pastiche historicism, despite—and perhaps partly because of—Charles Jencks's manic efforts to make it a catchall), it did not add up to a period style in any other of the visual arts. Indeed, these were rapidly diversifying beyond the limits of each medium and delighting in the unpredictable potentialities of exchanges between mediums (intermediality, not medium specificity, was the new direction). These changes occurred while artists saw themselves and their culture becoming increasingly immersed in mass media. The label "postmodern" is too narrow to capture the purport of such brief but important moments as that of the "Pictures Generation" in New York and Los Angeles, and of the continuing work of artists such as Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, Marlene Dumas, and Candice Breitz.

In the short retrospect available to us, it seems obvious that the postmodernism debate was a symptom of one of its own premises: that progress was no longer inevitable, that no one big story was going to dominate any sphere of human activity, including the arts and the history of thought, in the foreseeable future. Sometime in the late 1980s it began to dawn on opinion makers in the art world that, perhaps, we might always live in the aftermath of this "crisis," that *that* will be our "history"—to be suspended in a shifting that will never bring another paradigm into place. In these circumstances "contemporary," like "modern," suddenly seemed to mean the opposite of what it had set out to mean: it becomes a state of periodlessness, of being perpetually out of time, or at least not subject to historical unfolding. Will there ever be another predominant style in art, another coherent period in social cultures or epoch in human thought? In this sense, the word "contemporary" comes to mean to be not "in" time, or "with it," but "out of time," suspended in a state after or beyond history, a condition of being always and only in the present, and of being alienated from it while being trapped within it.

This sense of the plurality of the present reached its apogee during the 1970s and 1980s. While the attack on universalizing theories—whether secular "master narratives" such as presumptions about human progress and historical succession, religious ones about predestination, or specialist discourses such as the unfolding history of art—launched by, among others, Jean-François Lyotard, was influential in the art world, the interpretation of postmodernity as the current state of "late capitalism," offered by theorists such as David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, was more powerful and has been longer lasting. The latter maintained that the work of artists such as Andy Warhol displayed "the cultural logic of late capitalism."[38] Art-world discourse varied between an "anything goes" inclusiveness of whatever was presented as art, or whatever, and efforts to give responsible and grounded accounts of the "de-definition" as itself (of course, paradoxically) definitive of contemporaneity. Australian curator Bernice Murphy, realizing in 1993 that "Contemporary art, although it has for a long time belonged within the sphere of modernity, is increasingly adopting other frameworks of value and meaning that break beyond the classical period of modern art's development," was led to the following: "Defining 'contemporary' art: a moving framework of time and concerns."[39] American curator Dan Cameron, sensing in 1989 that current art was increasing in quantity and diversifying in scope so rapidly that it was ceasing to be subject to the (generally benign and enabling) control of art-world institutions and personnel, noted that

> this grip on contemporary art's code of values has loosened in recent years, and much of the more interesting art being produced today seems to be a result of this significant change, wherein values are both more up in the air

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> and more hotly debated than at practically any single point in the recent past.[40]

Precisely in possessing these qualities, he implies, certain current art has become specifically, totally, and *only* contemporary.

Few art historians responded to these discussions of "dedefinition" going on among artists and curators. Hans Belting and philosopher–art critic Arthur Danto were exceptions. Belting recognized that changes in art practice, and in broad-scale social formations, had pushed the profession of art history into its second major crisis: the dramatic struggle, during the twentieth century, between iconography, iconology, and *kulturgeschichte* on the one hand, and modernist historicism on the other, was now played out. No new paradigm had come into view as a replacement, nor was one likely if it were to be confined to the traditional, studio, and craft-based arts. Art history had reached its "end," fulfilled its self-designated academic purpose.[41] In a parallel vein, Danto succinctly summarized the effect of changes in art since the 1980s:

> So just as "modern" has come to denote a style and even a period, and not just *recent* art, "contemporary" has come to designate something more than simply the art of the present moment. In my view, however, it designates less a period than what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art, and less a style of making art than a style of using styles.[42]

To Danto, the gulf between modern and contemporary art had opened up because the great historical role given art within modernity (above all by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel) had been fulfilled in late modern art. Art had achieved its "end," served its historical purpose. Warhol's Brillo boxes, Conceptualism, and other "philosophical" tendencies signified that the most advanced human thought had changed its nature. Art had, in effect, become philosophy. It could not, therefore, transmute into a new style of art: that story was over. In the aftermath of this achievement, it is no surprise that subsequent art would seem "posthistorical." The sense of aftermath becomes a rich vein in the works by Wall and Meckseper discussed above. In the later 1980s and early 1990s, however—before the institutionalization of "Contemporary Art," the global impact of the transnational turn, and the emergence of the diversifying art of contemporaneity—the "posthistorical" amounted to a rather comfortable pluralism. Others identify a *dis*comforting pluralism. For example, Amelia Jones:

> Perhaps most profoundly, art since 1945 has insistently, in ways varying as widely as the kinds of people making it, explored the *contingency* of the visual arts (like any form of expression)—the way in which works of art (including performances, live events, etc.) exist and come to mean within circuits of meaning, economic and social value, and personal and collective desire that are far more complex than we can ever fully understand.[43]

The Textbooks Challenged

How have art historians dealt with this challenge, this sense of the *impossibility* of the contemporary? Let us begin at the most conventional end of the spectrum. Since the 1960s, English-language visual art dictionaries, encyclopedias, companions, glossaries, and collections of art terms have consistently devoted entries to terms such as "modern art," the "modern movement" in architecture, and "modernista," among other local design styles. Some include an entry on "modernism," although it is often conflated with modern art in general and the avant-garde in particular.[44] Although entries on organizations that include "Contemporary" in their titles appear, the term "contemporary art" is rarely granted an entry of its own, and, if so, it receives either derogatory comment as to its impossibility as a concept or is blandly sketched.[45] Online definitions register the ongoing confusion. Accessed in March 2009, Wikipedia led with:

> Contemporary art can be defined variously as art produced at this present point in time or art produced since World War II. The definition of the word contemporary would support the first view, but museums of contemporary art commonly define their collections as consisting of art produced since World War II.[46]

A similar picture of neglecting the obvious emerges from a survey of the major English-language textbooks published during the past thirty or so years that include accounts of the art of those years. Many have appeared in multiple editions, some are updated every two to five years in response to their continued use, in massive quantities, in school, college, and university art and art history courses. As of 2008, only one book had used "contemporary art" as a chapter heading, and meant by it art since World War II, from Abstract Expressionism to "Neo-Expressionism, photography and the 1980s."[47] The phrase "contemporary art" is used in passing in the 1999 edition of Marilyn Stokstad's *Art History,* the only occasion on which it is indexed as a category in all the volumes surveyed.[48] Alert to the languages of their moment, and to the need to keep their mammoth tomes up-to-date, all of the canonical survey texts plumped, during the 1980s and 1990s, for "postmodern" as their preferred term.

Overall, academics and publishers have lagged a long way behind the rest of the art world in adopting "contemporary" as the name for its current and recent activity. Even in the subspecialist field of books on the art of recent decades, surveys by authors—mainly British—alert to the variety of contemporary art and the convolutions of its discourse, are undertaken beneath such headings as *Art since 1960* or the more combative *After Modern Art.*[49] Open-ended compilation books favor titles such as *Art Now* or *Art in the Twenty-first Century.*[50] Others carry into print some of the flavor of the art they favor; thus, English artist-critic-television presenter Mathew Collings—in a typical against-the-grain yet market-savvy move—labeled his irreverent, yBa (Young British Artists)-promoting, all-over-the-shop, paintball-style celebration of post-1960s art *This Is Modern Art.*[51]

Recent books on contemporary art are divided between pictorial compilations accompanied by minimal text and brief artists' statements (the Taschen model), anthologies of

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interpretative essays by theorists, critics, and curators (the Blackwell model), or provisional attempts at showing how certain artists are tackling themes—such as time, place, identity, the body, language, or spirituality—deemed to be of current concern.[52] One uses the rubric "Art and . . . ," then devotes chapters to art and, in turn, popular culture, the quotidian object, abstraction, representation, narrative, time, nature and technology, deformation, the body, identity, spirituality, globalism, architecture, politics, and audience.[53] A few textbooks have been attempted, with more sure to come. The first of this crop was Brandon Taylor's *The Art of Today* (1995), revised and retitled *Contemporary Art* (2004) and *Contemporary Art: Art since 1970* (2005).[54] Like other English authors, such as Julian Stallabrass, who have experienced firsthand the excesses of the yBas, Taylor begins from a critical premise: "Willful obscurity in the artwork, then, combined with a massive expansion in the infrastructure for contemporary art—this may be taken as the defining contradiction that has animated and in some cases helped to generate much of the art of our time."[55] This has been true since the later 1960s but reached its peak, perhaps, in the 1990s. Through a series of acute, engaged descriptions, Taylor narrates the unfolding of a variety of tendencies in international art, including a wider range than is usual in such surveys. Also unusual is that he includes, in the later chapters, work by artists recently prominent in biennials whose formative experiences took place outside of Euro-America. More typical is that the cultural contexts from which these artists emerged receive scant attention.

Pragmatic, wait-and-see open-endedness typifies the closing chapters of most omnibus textbooks. An interesting recent exception is *Art since 1900,* produced by four authors, all outstanding historians of modernist art and active critics of contemporary art, especially through their association with the journal *October.* Instead of presenting an account organized around styles, mediums, or themes, the book is divided into short chapters, each of which treats one work, exhibition, publication, or event according to the year of its occurrence. The paradoxical result is a fascinating display of the contemporaneity of modern art, rather than of its unfolding history. This is, in itself, an effect of contemporaneity's prioritizing of the contemporary: in making their collective decision as to how to organize the book, the authors applied the process that they had evolved as editors of *October,* that is, they acted first as critics, and only by implication as historians. Nevertheless, because of the differing perspectives of each author (engagingly set out in long introductory essays), a set of parallel histories is implied, although never spelled out. For two of the authors (Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois) this amounts to what we might call double modernism—formal vis-à-vis informal, sourced in Cubism and Surrealism respectively—that continues into the present. For Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, a revolutionary avant-gardism, sourced in Dada and Russian *faktura,* has echoed since the 1960s as a heroic but ultimately futile struggle by certain neo-avant-garde artists against the seductions and the degradations of the "Culture Industry." The fourth author, Hal Foster, emphasizes the psychoanalytic aspects of art making within these trajectories.[56] Taken together (itself a breathtaking historical hypothesis), these views amount to the closest thing to orthodoxy about the development of modern art that exists among scholars—in the United States, especially.

Art since 1900 includes many entries devoted to artists active since the 1960s, but it leaves ambiguous the question of whether anything fundamental has changed. The implication is that it has not, that contemporary art remains a late modernism, or, more accurately, an after-modernism, condemned in conscience to mourn, as elegantly and trenchantly as possible, its own anachronism. In the roundtable discussion with which the book concludes, the authors acknowledge that art has indeed changed in ways that exceed the frameworks used in the book. Foster asks, "Are there plausible ways to narrate the now myriad practices of contemporary art over the past twenty years?" He describes the two "primary models" that they have used during this period—"on the one hand, the model of a medium-specific modernism challenged by an interdisciplinary postmodernism, and, on the other, the model of a historical avant-garde . . . and a neoavant-garde"—as having become "dysfunctional."[57] Buchloh is equally candid, noting that "the bourgeois public sphere" to which both previous avant-gardes were related, albeit critically, has "irretrievably disappeared," to be replaced by "social and institutional formations for which we not only do not have any concepts and terms yet, but whose modus operandi remains profoundly opaque and incomprehensible to most of us."[58] The only option left to contemporary artists, it seems, is to bear exacting witness to the present (and future) impossibility of the cold optimism that drove the modernist avant-garde.[59]

The impasse here may be that of criticism, not art. Peter Osborne has recently put a sharp edge to this possibility. Citing the deeply reflexive work of Art & Language during the 1980s and 1990s, he argues:

> It is the historical movement of conceptual art from the idea of an absolute antiaesthetic to the recognition of its own inevitable pictorialism that makes it a privileged mediating form; that makes it, in fact, the art in relation to which contestation over the meanings and possibilities of contemporary art is to be fought out. . . . In this respect, "post-conceptual art" is not the name for a particular type of art, so much as the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general.

It is "post-conceptual art" understood in this broader sense, he goes on, that determines the contemporaneity of all contemporary art and that requires of art criticism and art history that they articulate "the qualitative historical novelty of the present," from which the past may be "made legible."[60] This strikes me as an acute perception in its recognition of the force of postconceptualism as the most trenchant critique of late modern art, especially that created within Euro-American frameworks and spheres of influence. And it correctly recognizes that art criticism, in contemporary circumstances, must be historical in its orientation, albeit paradoxically so.[61] But his prescription remains, as he acknowledges, essentially modernist as art, art criticism, and art history. It does not, I believe, fully meet what contemporaneity now requires of art and its articulators: demands that are broader in geopolitical scope, more lateral in their experiential character, and

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deeper in their theoretical challenge than modernism of whatever stamp can allow.

To grasp this, we need to acknowledge that since the 1990s, there have been in circulation certain other, quite substantial and wide-ranging ideas, advanced most effectively by curators, who made their arguments through what became known as "mega-exhibitions." The contention between them came to a head in the years around 2000, and they resonate still.

Curators in Contention

From 1984, the curatorial team at the Centro Wifredo Lam in Havana dedicated itself to building networks between artists in the "nonaligned" countries constituting the Third World and to showcasing the results in the Bienal de la Habana, most successfully in the 1989 exhibition. In the same year in Paris, at the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre,* contemporary art from "the Global South" entered the mental landscape of the Euro-American art world. The power of this work, rather than the relatively simplistic curatorial program, signaled the possibility of a genuine internationalism. This global movement culminated in *Documenta 11* in 2002, an exhibition in which work by artists whose origins and inspirations were transnational in character stood out. In between these dates, certain curators, artists, and critics undertook a major educational mission: a series of historically oriented exhibitions drawing worldwide attention to the importance of the visual arts during the decolonization struggles in Africa, in particular.[62] Okwui Enwezor, a leader of this effort, summarized the overall outcome as the manifestation in art of the world having arrived at a state best described as a "postcolonial constellation."

> Contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but also—and in a more critical sense—from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism. . . . The current artistic context is constellated around the norms of the postcolonial, those based on discontinuous, aleatory forms, on creolization, hybridization, and so forth, all of these tendencies operating with a specific cosmopolitan accent. . . . Any critical interest in the exhibition systems of Modern or contemporary art requires us to refer to the foundational base of modern art history: its roots in imperial discourse, on the one hand, and, on the other, the pressure that postcolonial discourse exerts on its narratives today.[63]

In sharp contrast to such views, many believe that the significant art of today remains modernist at its core. In 2000, Museum of Modern Art chief curator Kirk Varnedoe firmly locked the museum's collections of recent art into modernity's unstoppable project:

> There is an argument to be made that the revolutions that originally produced modern art, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have not been concluded or superseded—and thus that contemporary art today can be understood as the ongoing extension and revision of those founding innovations and debates. The collection of the Museum of Modern Art is, in a very real sense, that argument. Contemporary art is collected and presented at this Museum as part of modern art—as belonging within, and responding to, and expanding upon the framework of initiatives and challenges established by the earlier history of progressive art since the dawn of the twentieth century.[64]

While these remarks are on one level quite specific to the historical role and immediate interests of one museum, they also represent the currently most developed version of the idea that modernist art is capable of renewing itself from within its own resources. In contrast, Enwezor speaks from the presumption that art emerges, in complex but primary ways, out of each artist's immersion in and engagement with the world's realities.

Few other ideas have had the potential to rival this clash of perspectives. Most have been much smaller in scale, less encompassing in their intended reach—for example, "relational aesthetics" and "postproduction art," proposed by curator Nicolas Bourriaud.[65] He has recently updated his emphasis on this kind of participatory art to include its practitioners who are active outside the centers of Europe and the United States. "Altermodernism" incorporates the modernism of the others (*alter* means "other" in Latin and evokes the ideas of "alternative" and "transform" in English): "instead of aiming at a kind of summation, altermodernism sees itself as a constellation of ideas linked by the emerging and ultimately irresistible will to create a form of modernism for the twenty-first century." Conceiving this spirit as "a leap that would give rise to a synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism," Bourriaud offers this definition:

> Altermodernism can be defined as that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted by multiple temporalities, disdaining nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era—a positive vision of chaos and complexity. It is neither a petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear vision of history (modernism), but a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space.[66]

This points to a core aspect of contemporary art—its geopolitical and temporal contemporaneity.[67] It does not, however, amount to a large idea in the sense of the others just discussed: it is constrained by its disavowals. Enwezor has attempted to absorb it into his "postcolonial constellation" by framing it within four categories he identifies "as emblematic of the conditions of modernity today: *Supermodernity, andromodernity, speciousmodernity* and *aftermodernity*."[68]

Revising the New Art History

Whatever one's specific reservations, these examples indicate that a viable theoretical and historical framework for approaching contemporary art—one that captures its actual diversity, but neither prohibitively reduces nor randomly multiplies it—is coming into view. Crucial to this possibility is

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the work of the generation of art historians who have already begun to undertake close studies of the work of individual artists, small groups, and certain shared tendencies active during what I am calling the shift from modern to contemporary art. They draw on the methodologies of revisionist (or "new") art history, those developed during the past half century to track the birth and the continuing crisis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism and to revisit and recomplicate its modernist history. Their interest in the 1960s and 1970s is not merely retrofashion. The interpretative institutions need to take stock of work by artists either long dead (Warhol, by more than twenty years) or nearing the natural end of long and productive careers. For the current generation of mature art historians, to see the 1960s and 1970s in ways distinct from the interpretations advanced at the time and from the incessant redefinitions promoted by survivors from that moment would be to arrive at an independent view of the great changes in art that occurred then, and to see them in ways useful to present practice and thinking.[69] What seemed to be powerfully coherent, integrated art movements are being minutely examined with an eye to their internal complexities and multiple productivities: Minimalism is being understood as, in some aspects, less of a break with high modernism than it seemed at the time, while in other respects as being more open-ended; Conceptual art in the United States and Europe now appears as a current within global Conceptualism, less subject to the charge that it was "an aesthetic of administration" or a "mourning for modernism," more vital to indirect political critique and subsequent experimentation than at first felt; previously downgraded groupings such as Fluxus are elevated, as are the innovations of artists working in smaller-scale scenes outside what are still largely considered the major art centers in Europe and the United States; and feminism is being shown to have been much more pervasive, various, and persistent in art than previously acknowledged.[70]

But this revisionist activity remains, largely, focused on artists who were active in the United States and Europe and trails the presumption that what they did is what counts as real transformation in art as a whole. We are still some way from an accounting that tracks artistic changes as they happened in their specific ways in each of the cultural regions of the world, in actual cities and in the areas associated with them, and in the transnational trafficking between these productive nodes and between them and the major modern art centers. Nevertheless, the efforts and achievements of artists from the Global South are beginning to be recorded and assessed. Some comparative studies are being undertaken. This is where real work needs to be done, urgently, as resources in some settings—Africa, for example—remain fragile.[71]

Periodizing Contemporary Art?

We might focus the position that has been reached by posing two questions. Are the histories that contemporary art requires best written by continuing to apply the methods, values, and world pictures forged by modern art history, including the revisions that have animated the discipline as a whole since the 1970s? If so, we would expect the characteristics of contemporary art to become clear as these researchers do their work. The danger here is that of being invited to register the present in a state of suspended judgment and only then to take up the task of tracing what would amount to a slow-motion slide of contemporary art back into the advancing maw of a (diluted, false modest) modernism. This would also leave us less able to approach the art of the past through the forms in which that art is available to the present. For emerging art historians—those who wish to deal with the art of their time on the terms that it is forging, and those who see past art as part of "history" (a vividly present temporal territory that decades of survey exhibitions, recent virtual reconstructions, and cinematic re-creations have made readily traversable)—this is a frustrating situation, one that they have been quick to protest and parody, as in the ironic presentations of the performance group Our Literal Speed.[72]

A more constructive approach has been advanced by Alex Alberro, who argues that the end of the Cold War in 1989, the era of globalization, the spread of integrated electronic culture, and the dominance of economic neoliberalism signal the emergence of a new historical period. He identifies a hegemonic confluence between factors such as global integration and antiglobalization becoming the subject of many artists' works, the proliferation of global exhibitions such as biennials, the rise of a new technological imaginary and high-tech hybrid art forms, a shift in strategy from avant-gardist confrontation toward cooperation and collaboration, and the somewhat surprising reemergence of an aesthetics of affect. He concludes: "These new forms of art and this new spectatorship have come to be discursively constructed as 'the contemporary,' " a new period in the history of art.[73]

This proposition raises a second (and, for the moment, last) question: Does a match between world historical epoch and universal art historical period—on the face of it, a quintessentially modern structural pairing—remain viable in contemporary conditions? After all, periodization is a fragile practice in such volatile circumstances. The attacks launched on September 11, 2001, the subsequent incursions into the Middle East, and the "war on terror" conducted inside the United States and abroad—and by various other governments in their home territories and abroad—led many to see 1989 and 2001 as bracketing a post–Cold War moment in which the United States acted as a "hyperpower," neoliberal economics prevailed in all economies, while spectacle-led consumption dominated public spheres. By 2008, however, with the administration of United States President George W. Bush discredited at home and abroad, the world financial system in a state of collapse, and Barack Obama elected president of the United States in a spirit of all-embracing optimism, some have been prompted to discern a further sea change in world affairs.[74] "The contemporary" is being sliced ever finer.

Immediacy, of course, is natural to it. And this, in turn, puts pressure on the urge to divide into periods—itself natural to historians. Or, to be more accurate, periods have been necessary markers within the narratives of individual and collective agency that constitute the modern approach to the writing of history.[75] Do they remain necessary in contemporary conditions? If conditions have changed fundamentally, which other kinds of historical markers are called for? Given that art is always subject to larger movements of this kind yet

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is also, in certain ways, autonomous within them, how might we most accurately map its transformations in these circumstances? These are the questions that prevent us from channeling the self-evident heterogeneity of current practice into a one-to-one match between the contemporary era and contemporary art.

Contemporaneity and Art History

In ordinary language usage—and in much unreflective artworld discourse—the word "contemporary" defaults to: whatever is happening, up-to-date, simultaneous, or contemporaneous. But the concept itself, as we have seen, has extraordinary depths of meaning: *con tempus* came into use, and remains in use, because it points to a multiplicity of relations between being and time. It originated in precisely this multiplicity and has served human thought about it ever since. The contemporary also originated, and persists, in contention against other, often more powerful terms—notably, in recent centuries, those associated with the concept of the modern—that have sought to account for similar, often overlapping phenomena with greater precision and according to dominant values. We have sketched its emergence from subservience to the modern. This emergence has brought us to a new place.

Contemporaneity itself has many histories, and histories within the histories of art. While it is, I will argue, the grounding condition of contemporary art, and thus the primary object of any history of the art of today, contemporaneous qualities may also have been present in art always and everywhere. The art historical quest unleashed by this idea, I venture to suggest, goes all the way back. It pushes us to ask some unexpected questions. To what extent, and how, was awareness of the disjunctions between being and time registered within the symbolic languages that adorned the caves of Africa, marked the deserts and the rocky plateaus of what became Australia, was painted in the caves of what became Europe, and was created on the plains and islands of what became Asia and the Pacific? How many ancient bodies did it mark, and what would such a mark look like, compared to those made by the Originary Beings, those given by the ancestors, those that became (in our terms) immanent, traditional, or iconic? And so on, everywhere, up to the present, and through it. Nowadays, many more pasts appear—vividly, invitingly—among the multiple territories that constitute our current contemporaneity.

Contemporaneity is, according to standard definitions, "a contemporaneous condition or state." In the expanded sense indicated above, this means a state defined above all by the play of multiple relations between being and time. Obviously, this has been a vital part of human experience since the beginning of consciousness, from the first cognitive operations (indeed, it is a condition of their operation). Equally self-evident is the fact that other relations—not least, structures of religious belief, cultural universalism, systems of thought, and political ideologies—have evolved to mediate these particular ones. During the past twenty years, however, there has been a noticeable expansion of the sense that the encompassing power of these structures, their force as universalizations, has weakened considerably, not least because of the contestation everywhere evident between them. It is no longer viable to divide the globe into spheres signified by their relative stage of advancement toward the modern utopia that awaits us all. Nowadays, the frictions of multiplicative difference shape all that is around us, and within us, everything near and far, every surface and depth. Modernity is aging in Europe and ailing in the United States; having tried Mao's version, China is building on that of Deng Xiaoping and Milton Friedman; in Southeast Asia globalized hubs are continually created; while elsewhere state after state sacrifices its citizens in the rush to plug itself in as a resource provider to the leading economies. This toxic mix of resignation and aspiration is at odds with the message coming from the planet itself: that pursuit of ever-expanding material well-being for all on the modern model will lead to the extinction of the species. The human compact with the earth is being broken: its repair is urgent; in fact, we may have begun too late. Renewed fundamentalism is just one indicator that almost every kind of past has returned to haunt the present, making its consciousness even stranger to itself.

Do these factors (just some among many others) constitute the outlines of a new era, or does their antinomic mismatching—so evident in the coexistence of multiple, incommensurable temporalities but pervasive at every level of human and animal being, and perhaps extending even unto things—indicate that we have passed beyond the cusp of the last historical period that could plausibly be identified as such? This question is, at present (and in principle), unanswerable, but that it can be put is significant. The forward movement of History, along with the many counterhistories it engendered during the modern period, has been derailed and is in decline. Globalization has recently reached the limits of its hegemonic ambitions yet remains powerful in many domains. The decolonized have yet to transform the world in their image (it is, after all, early days in a long struggle, much of it conducted below the radars of publicity). None of these global formations in itself sets the agenda for our times. It is their contemporaneity that structures our fundamental condition, that is manifest in the most distinctive qualities of contemporary life, shaping the interactions between humans and the geosphere, the multeity of cultures, the ideoscape of global politics, and the interiority of individual being.

If the contemporaneity of these forces shapes the situation when periods are past, what are the implications for our understanding of contemporary art? Paradoxically, we might expect close connections between this situation and the art made within it, but they will not, I believe, amount to a structural matching between a historical period and an art historical one. Atomic heterogeneity might seem more likely, but that may be the other pole of a false dichotomy inherited from modern thinking. A mobile, in-between formation is more appropriate to circumstances in which the contemporaneity of differences is the rule. Given the picture of uneven contention between the forces painted above, we might ask whether a similar situation is apparent in art.

My own thoughts on this question are drawn from the lines of inquiry that I have pursued since 2001. I have attempted to discern the lineaments of contemporaneity as a nascent and emergent world condition: an introduction appears in the paragraphs you have just read.[76] I have also traced the emergence of conceptions of the contemporary within modern art

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discourse, a summary of which has been provided above.[77] These explorations have led to certain ideas that may be of interest to those seeking to approach contemporary art from historical perspectives. A schematic summary follows.[78]

The emergence of contemporaneity out of modernity is precipitating (as we write and read) deep changes in contemporary art that are in turn obliging us to revise our understanding of late modern, early modern, and, indeed, much previous art. Of most relevance to this discussion is the recognition that there has been, since the 1950s, a seismic shift from modern to contemporary modes in the making, interpretation, and distribution of art throughout the world. This has occurred in distinct ways in each region, nation, city, and so on, depending above all on the preexisting local history of art, culture, politics, and so on, and on the positioning of that culture in the world system, itself dynamic. Thus, the importance of continuing the "alternative modernities" project into the present, while at the same time paying attention to the specifics of the ways in which contemporary art is being generated, embraced, opposed, or tempered, in each place.

The main outcome of the global warring since the 1950s between the forces of decolonization and those of globalization is that difference has become increasingly contemporaneous, with more of us more aware of what is essentially different, along with what is shared, relative to others. If we were able to step back and look at these diachronic developments synchronically—as if they were moving through the frame of the present from the (always reimagined) past to the (unimaginable) future—we would see, I believe, certain driving flows of energy ("currents" might be a useful metaphor) passing across our visual field in three distinct but connected clusters. The first, because most visible, is the continuation of modern practices, beliefs, and aspirations, including their active renewal, their constant but always partial and, perhaps, less and less effective renovation by the leading, most celebrated, and most expensive artists of the day. (I have tagged these efforts, with deliberate provocation, "remodernism" and "retrosensationalism.") This current has been threatened and, in many places, overturned by a second: art consequent on the transnational turn in world affairs (their geopolitical contemporaneity), art made mostly outside the Euro-American centers and dedicated to postcolonial critique. Its concerns with identity, nationality, and tradition are also shared by artists in exile and in diaspora, as well as by those with critical perspectives working in the centers. Art of this kind fills the main international exhibitions, especially biennials, and is increasingly being collected by museums and others. The third current is that of the ever-growing cohort of (mostly younger) artists who are working at a smaller scale and with more modest, but nonetheless important ambitions, than those of the other currents. Acting collectively, in networked groups, in loose associations, or individually, these artists meditate on the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood in the world around them. Among them are artists, architects, and planners who explore sustainable relationships with specific environments, both social and natural, within the framework of ecological values—an obvious response to the planet in crisis. These artists 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. They share no style, prefer no mode, nor subscribe to one outlook: what they share is that their work is the art being called out by the circumstance in which contemporaneity is all.

These remarks are offered as an art historical hypothesis about current art, descriptive in tone but partial in tendency, and thus also art critical in character. It is, of course, as contentious as those noted above. Yet the discussion here permits, I hope, some more general points in conclusion. Whatever form they take, histories of contemporary art worthy of the name should draw on the efforts to date, but at the same time should be built on a framework that is distinct from that which underlay modern art, the art of modernity. They should recognize the legacies, both positive and problematic, from earlier art—modern, paramodern, premodern, or other. They should show how each underwent, or is still undergoing, its unique yet connected transition to contemporaneity. It is no coincidence that a *worldly* art criticism and art historical scholarship is coming into existence, one that surpasses its modern precedents in European and American art history and criticism because it has—in a conflicted, resistant, but nonetheless irresistible manner—been obliged to assimilate perspectives from decolonizing, postcolonial, and indigenous interpretative practices.[79] In the names of both embedded locality and critical cosmopolitanism, a worldly approach to art defines itself against parochialism, jingoistic nationalism, and universalizing, "globalized" art discourse. We need a variety of kinds of critical practice, each of them alert to the demands, limits, and potentialities of both local worlds and distant worlds, as well as to the actual and possible connections between locality and distance. In practice, translocality amounts to a focus on local artistic manifestations, and on actual existing connections between them and art and ideas elsewhere, while remaining alert to the possibilities suggested by other, distant arts, ideas, and art-writing practices that could have local or regional relevance. We should not, therefore, subsume these developments under the generalizing distance inherent in the concept of "world art," nor see them as subject to (what I regard as the failing) hegemon of "global art."

Place making, world picturing, and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being. Increasingly, they override residual distinctions based on style, mode, medium, and ideology. They are present in all art that is truly contemporary. Distinguishing, precisely, this presence in each artwork is the most important challenge to an art criticism that would be adequate to the demands of contemporaneity. Tracing the currency of each artwork within the larger forces that are shaping this present is the task of contemporary art history.

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Notes

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of John Hope Franklin, 1915–2009.

1. These questions were among those identified by the Society of Contemporary Art Historians founders—Suzanne Hudson, Alexander Dumbadze, and Joshua Shannon—and the panelists: Pamela M. Lee, Miwon Kwon, Richard Meyer, and Grant Kester.

2. "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,' " *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 3–124. See also the essays collected in "What Is Contemporary Art?" *E-flux*, nos. 11 (December 2009), 12 (January 2010), at http://www.e-flux.com/journal/issue/11 and http://www.e-flux.com/journal/issue/12; and "13 Theses on Contemporary Art," *Texte zur Kunst* 19, no. 74 (June 2009): 90–118.

3. Pamela M. Lee, review of *Art since 1900*, by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (2006): 380.

4. Among the approximately sixty essays in the *Art Bulletin* that, since the mid-1980s, comment on a subfield of art history—either as part of the series "The State of Art History" or "A Range of Critical Perspectives" or as studies of a particular impact on the discipline (the "blockbuster" exhibition, the independent scholar)—none discusses contemporary art as a distinct object of inquiry. In his "Conflicting Logics: Twentieth-Century Studies at the Crossroads," *Art Bulletin* 68, no. 3 (1986): 536–42, Donald Kuspit was concerned above all with the impact of semiotics and poststructuralism on art historical methodology. This concern is typical: contemporary phenomena are understood, mostly, to impact on art history from outside itself, and to disturb its "natural" disposition to retrospection. Contemporary art breaks in occasionally, usually as an example mentioned in passing. An instructive exception is Joseph Kosuth's contribution to the debate in "Writing (and) the History of Art," *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 3 (1996): 398–416. The most prescient prior treatment in this journal is Katy Siegel's review of *Art since 1940: Strategies of Being*, by Jonathan Fineberg; *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, by Mark Rosenthal; and *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997): 164–69. Its opening paragraph includes the remark, "A discipline without a period, contemporary art history could be defined as the attempt to fill the gap between George Heard Hamilton and *Artforum*." Hamilton was a Yale professor and author of *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880–1940* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972).

5. See Terry Smith, "Pour une histoire de l'art contemporain (Prolégomènes tardifs et conjecturaux)," *20:21 Siècles*, nos. 5–6 (Autumn 2007): 191–215.

6. See, for example, Ian Burn, "Thinking about Tim Clark and Linda Nochlin," *Fox* 1, no. 1 (1975): 136–37; Terry Smith, "Doing Art History," *Fox* 1, no. 2 (1975): 97–104; Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden's thinking had a direct influence on the courses at the Open University established under the direction of Charles Harrison, including *Modern Art & Modernism: Manet to Pollock* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Open University Press, 1983). Artists continue to contribute compellingly to this debate. See, for example, Mark Lewis, "Is Modernity Our Antiquity?" in *Documenta 12 Magazine No. 1: Modernity?* ed. Georg Schöllhammer, Roger M. Buergel, and Ruth Noack (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), reprinted in *Documenta Magazine: No. 1–3, 2007 Reader*, ed. Schöllhammer (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), 40–65.

7. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 66. Wall acknowledges this in an interview by Peter Osborne, "Art after Photography, after Conceptual Art," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 150 (July–August 2008): 47.

8. These values are posed by Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002). On Meckseper's work, see Marion Ackerman, ed., *Josephine Meckseper* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz for the Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart, 2007).

9. See the projects profiled in Jean-Christophe Royoux, Marina Warner, and Germaine Greer, *Tacita Dean* (London: Phaidon, 2006); and McElheny's discussion of his installation *An End to Modernity*, 2005, in Scott Rothkopf, "1000 Words," *Artforum* 44, no. 3 (November 2005): 236–37.

10. I am drawing on the definitions in various versions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* as given in print form in the 1989 revision and subsequently found online, at www.oed.com.

11. Hans Robert Jauss, "Modernity and Literary Tradition," in *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). An English translation is in *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 329–64. An excellent review of the term "modern" bearing on the visual arts may be found in chapter 1 of Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

12. Lawrence Rainey, "In a Dark Mode," *London Review of Books*, January 20, 2000, 15.

13. To arrive at these preliminary observations, two sample surveys were undertaken, the first during 2001–2 using particularly the resources of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, the second during 2002–3, at the University of Pittsburgh. In both cases, initial searches through WorldCat were supplemented by searches through a range of worldwide specialist catalogs, guides, and bibliographies, followed by those made available by the major art research institutions of the United States, and then by searches through the catalogs of significant American and European libraries. Searches were made into the holdings of selected South American and Australian libraries and institutions. The search was for the occurrence of the terms "modern" and "contemporary" or their cognates in the European languages in the titles of books and articles, exhibition catalogs, pamphlets, or other publications, in the naming of visual arts museums, galleries, exhibition spaces, or departments of museums and auction houses. Two searches were made through a number of editions of dictionaries of art and glossaries of art terms, noting the incidence of definitions of the words "modern" and "contemporary" and their cognate terms and the content of the entries for modern and contemporary art institutions, movements, associations, and so on. While the survey does not claim to be complete, the patterns and repetitions in the data suggest a clear general picture.

14. Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth, U.K.; Penguin, 1971), 25–33.

15. See Nadezda Blazicková-Horová, ed., *19th-Century Art: Guide to the Collections of the National Gallery in Prague* (Prague: National Gallery, 2002), 7.

16. The most thorough study of what he shows to be the mutuality of the institutions dedicated to the display of contemporary art in its broadest sense—their competitiveness, emulation, and interdependence—is J. Pedro Lorente, *Cathedrals of Urban Modernity: The First Museums of Contemporary Art, 1800–1930* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1998). Bruce Althuser, *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), has a useful introduction.

17. John R. Lane and John Caldwell, introduction to *Carnegie International 1985* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1985), 11. For a detailed study of the specifics of the early Carnegie Internationals, see Kenneth Neal, *A Wise Extravagance: The Founding of the Carnegie International Exhibitions 1895–1901* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). For another view of this history, and of the subsequent years of the Carnegie International, see Vicky A. Clark, *Carnegie Museum of Art* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1996).

18. See Judith Bumpus, *The Contemporary Art Society 1910–1985* (London: CAS, 1985); and Alan Bowness et al., *CAS: British Contemporary Art 1910–1990: Eighty Years of Collecting by the Contemporary Art Society* (London: Herbert Press, 1991).

19. Charter of the Contemporary Art Society, Melbourne, quoted in Bernard Smith with Terry Smith and Christopher Heathcote, *Australian Painting 1788–2000* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 218.

20. For example, René Huyghe and Germain Bazin's *Histoire de l'art contemporaine: La peinture* (Paris: Éditions Alcan, 1935); and Christian Zervos, *Histoire de l'art contemporaine* (Paris: Cahiers d'Art, 1938).

21. Alfred H. Barr Jr., "An Effort to Secure $3,250,000 for the Museum of Modern Art," Alfred H. Barr Jr. Papers, official statement, April 1931, Museum of Modern Art Archives, the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

22. Angelica Zander Rudenstine, "The Institutionalization of the Modern—Some Historical Observations," in "Post-Modern or Contemporary?" Conference proceedings, International Committee of ICOM for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, Düsseldorf, June 25–30, 1981, 48.

23. Cited in John Elderfield, *Modern Painting and Sculpture: 1880 to the Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 12.

24. Institute of Contemporary Art, *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985). Its 1948 statement concludes: "in order to disassociate the policy and program of this institution from the widespread and injurious misunderstandings which surround the term 'modern art,' the Corporation has today changed its name from the Institute of Modern Art to THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART" (ibid., 52–53). A reverse situation is just becoming visible: the current media and market notoriety of Contemporary Art has led some of those building institutions to house it, seeking the broadest public for it, to return to "modern" as a safer name: thus, the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, which opened in late 2006. See Daniel Thomas,

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"The Queensland Art Gallery and Its Gallery of Modern Art," *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 197 (March 2007): 23.

25. Wilhelm Pinder, *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1926), quoted in and glossed by Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1963), 248. The political circumstances of Weimer Germany, and its challenge to Marxist historical materialism, led Ernst Bloch to take contemporaneity and noncontemporaneity as critical analytic concepts. See Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), esp. part 2. This is a direct precedent to my own usage.

26. See Lesley Jackson, *"Contemporary": Architecture and Interiors of the 1950s* (London: Phaidon, 1994).

27. The best summary of this important art historical task is the introduction by Kobena Mercer to his book *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (London: Institute of International Visual Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005). With regard to the contemporary in Indian art, see Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000). An important precedent to such studies is the pathbreaking work, since the 1950s, of Australian art historian Bernard Smith. Among his books, most directly relevant to this discussion is *Modernism's History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998).

28. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967), reprinted in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 166.

29. Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public" (lecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1960), published in *Harper's Magazine*, March 1962, and reprinted in Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 5.

30. Pierre Bourdieu famously argued that it was this acculturated acceptance of what is essentially an empty experience as, in fact, a full one that constituted, in bourgeois societies, the "love of art" as such. See Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public* (London: Polity Press, 1990).

31. See, for example, Mário Pedrosa, "Environmental Art, Postmodern Art: Hélio Oiticica," *Correio de Manhã*, June 26, 1966, trans. and reprinted in Donna de Salvo, *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

32. Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the 1960s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

33. See Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum* 13, no. 1 (September 1974): 54–59.

34. Reiko Tomii, "Historicizing 'Contemporary Art': Some Discursive Practices in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan," *Positions* 12, no. 3 (2004): 611–41. See also Ming Tiampo, " 'Create What Has Never Been Done Before!': Historicising Gutai Discourses of Originality," *Third Text* 21, no. 6 (November 2007): 689–706.

35. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Market Place* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999); Simon Njami, "Chaos and Metamorphosis," in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2005); and Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art since 1980* (Bologna: Damiani, 2009).

36. See, for example, Marina Gržinić, *Situated Contemporary Art Practices: Art, Theory and Activism from (the East of) Europe* (Frankfurt: Revolver; Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, 2004); Group Irwin, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006); and Boris Groys, *Art and Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

37. See, for example, Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," in *Chinese New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Chang Tsong-tzung (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993); John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), esp. his concluding chapter, "Contemporary Art"; Wu Hung, *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, between East and West* (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2001); chapters by Gao Minglu, Wu Hung, and Jonathan Hay in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity and Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); and Qigu Jiang and James Elkins, eds., *First "China Contemporary Art Forum"—2009 Beijing International Conference on Art Theory and Criticism* (Beijing: China Contemporary Art Forum, 2010).

38. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July–August 1984): 59–92, reprinted in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

39. Bernice Murphy, *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision and Context* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 136.

40. Dan Cameron and Anna Palmquist, *Vad är samtida konst? What Is Contemporary Art?* (Mallmö: Rooseum, 1989), 7. Quite undistracted by questions of the postmodern, this is the most sustained and subtle exploration of these questions published at the time.

41. See Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Belting's view of the subsequent best direction for art history is given in his *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

42. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 10.

43. Amelia Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 15. This is the conclusion to her introductory essay "Writing Contemporary Art into History: A Paradox?"

44. For example, Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 122; and Erika Langmuir and Norbert Lynton, *The Yale Dictionary of Art and Artists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 464–65. My own entry in the *Dictionary of Art* attempted to avoid this dilemma, both in itself and by my insistence on pairing it with an entry on modernity: see Terry Smith, "Modernism" and "Modernity," in *Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (London: Macmillan, 1996), 777–78, and *Grove Art Online.*

45. Respectively, Reginald G. Haggar, *A Dictionary of Art Terms* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1962), 92; and N. E. Lathi, *The Language of Art from A to Z: Writ in Plain English* (Terrebonne, Ore.: York Books, 1997), 39.

46. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "contemporary art," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary_art, accessed March 2009. The French entry is more up to date: fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_contemporain.

47. Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art*, 3rd ed. (London: Laurence King, 1991), 695. The authors dropped this heading from their next edition in favor of "Towards the Third Millennium." See idem, *A World History of Art*, 4th ed. (London: Laurence King, 1995), 803. A similarly epochal use of the term appeared in the 1991 and ninth edition of *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, but had evaporated by 2001. See Horst de la Croix et al., *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 9th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1991; 10 ed., 2001).

48. Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, rev. ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), vol. 2, 1165.

49. Respectively, Michael Archer, *Art since 1960* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997; 2nd ed., 2002); and David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

50. Respectively, Burkhard Reimschneider and Uta Grosenick, *Art Now* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001); and Susan Sollins, *Art:21, Art in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001).

51. Mathew Collings, *This Is Modern Art* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2000).

52. Compilations: Uta Grosenick and Burkhard Reimschneider, eds., *Art at the Turn of the Millennium* (Cologne: Taschen, 1999); Grosenick and Reimschneider, eds., *Art Now: 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* (Cologne: Taschen, 2002); and Grosenick, ed., *Art Now Vol 2: The New Directory to 136 International Contemporary Artists* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005). Anthologies: Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005). Thematics: Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Tomorrow* (Paris: Pierre Terrail, 2002); Linda Weintraub, *In the Making* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2003); Gill Perry and Paul Wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 2004); and Thames and Hudson's excellent series Art Works, including Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, *Place* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005). The list of themes in the text comes from the chapter headings in Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

53. Eleanor Heartney, *Art & Today* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008).

54. By Brandon Taylor: *The Art of Today* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995); *Contemporary Art* (London: Penguin, 2004); and *Contemporary Art: Art since 1970* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2005).

55. Taylor, *Contemporary Art*, 9. See, by Julian Stallabrass: *High Art Lite* (London: Verso, 1999); *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

56. Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005). Foster's interest in psychoanalysis does not lead to a distinct history of modernism, although it certainly issues in distinctive accounts of the works that he, the author of the majority of the entries, treats. Among a number of astute reviews of the book, see Charles Harrison, "After the Fall," *Art Journal* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 116–19; and various authors in the "Interventions Reviews," *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (2006): 373–99.

57. Foster et al., *Art since 1900*, 679.

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58. Ibid.

59. I evoke here the argument of T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). A less melancholy stance is that historical modernism may have been sidelined by recent developments in art and the world at large, but its core qualities remain capable of serving as the foundation of convincing art, were the right artists to grasp them afresh. As we have seen, this is precisely what Michael Fried argues is occurring in the work of certain contemporary photographers, notably Jeff Wall.

60. Peter Osborne, "Art beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art," *Art History* 27, no. 4 (September 2004): 666–67.

61. One pertinent paradox is that since the 1970s, criticism of contemporaneous art has been most effectively practiced by writers based in the academies, in contrast to the out-there, implicated situation of the most prominent writers of the previous generation. A further paradox is that these academics have held as models (positive and negative) not only their immediate predecessors but also the engaged reviewers of art since Denis Diderot. See, for example, Terry Smith, "Clement Greenberg at 100: Looking Back to Modern Art, Conference Sackler Museum, Harvard University, April 3–4, 2009," *CAAReviews*, posted July 14, 2009, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/1298.

62. Notably, the exhibitions curated by Okwui Enwezor, including *Trade Routes: History and Geography* (The Hague: Prince Claus Fund; Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997); and, with Chinua Achebe, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movement in Africa 1945–1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001); and *Documenta 11, Platform 5: Exhibition* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

63. Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," in Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 208–9, 232.

64. Kirk Varnedoe, *Modern Contemporary: Art at MOMA since 1980* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 12.

65. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002); and *Post-Production* (New York: Lucas and Sternberg, 2002). See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79.

66. Nicolas Bourriaud, "Altermodern," in *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 12–13.

67. I have noted this aspect in a number of recent essays. See, for example, Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 681–707; and "Creating Dangerously: Then and Now," in *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Seville: Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla, 2006).

68. Okwui Enwezor, "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence," in Bourriaud, *Altermodern Tate Triennial*, 27–40.

69. As argued for by James Meyer, "The Return of the Sixties in Contemporary Art and Criticism," in Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 323–32.

70. Among exhibitions that have contributed to this direction, see, for example, Ann Goldstein, ed., *Reconstructing the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995); Paul Schimmel and Russell Ferguson, eds., *Out of Actions: Between Performance Art and the Object: 1949–79* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998); Luiz Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999); Richard Flood and Francis Morris, eds., *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962–1972* (London: Tate Gallery, 2002); Goldstein, ed., *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Art, 2004); Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003); Carlos Basualdo, ed., *Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture 1967–1972* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005); and Mari Carmen Ramírez and Hector Oléa, eds., *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004). Among new scholarship on the protohistory of contemporary art, see, for example, Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Anne Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Alex Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); the revisions being pursued by the scholars of the art of Asia, South America, Central Europe, and elsewhere noted above; and revisit surveys such as Cornelia Butler et al., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

71. See, for example, the discussion moderated by Chika Okeke-Agulu, "The Twenty-first Century and the Mega Show: A Curator's Roundtable," *Nka, Journal of Contemporary African Art*, nos. 22–23 (Spring–Summer 2008): 152–88.

72. See www.ourliteralspeed.com. A recent compact disc, *OLSSR: Our Literal Speed Soundtrack Recordings*, Bitter Stag Records, 2009, includes tracks such as "Reading Rosalind Krauss" and messages on the packaging such as "stuff near art that is not art which is treated as if it were art is now the substance of most serious art."

73. Alex Alberro, "Periodising Contemporary Art," in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence; The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 935–39; also published in *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 55–60.

74. By, for example, W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9-11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

75. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 94–95.

76. This interpretation is argued more fully in the introduction to Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*. See also Marc Augé, *The Anthropology of Contemporaneous Worlds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Giorgio Agamben, *"What Is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

77. See also Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming).

78. This summary is drawn from Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Similar but belated shifts from modern to contemporary architecture are explored in idem, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and "Currents of Contemporaneity: Architecture in the Aftermath," *Architectural Theory Review* 11, no. 2 (2006): 34–52. The ideas advanced here are positioned in relation to recent debates on world art history in idem, "World Picturing in Contemporary Art: Iconogeographic Turning," *Journal of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand* 6–7, nos. 2, 1 (2005–6): 24–46. They were first sketched in idem, *What Is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come* (Sydney: Artspace Critical Issues Series, 2001).

79. A snapshot of these changes within international art history is to be found in Anderson, *Crossing Cultures*, 2009. See also Rex Butler and Robert Leonard, eds., "21st Century Art History," special issue of *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art* 9, nos. 1–2 (2008–9); and Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

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