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Course of Study:

(ARTT2108) International Contemporary Art

Title of work:

What is contemporary art? (2009)

Section:

Pages 1-10: Introduction: Contemporary Art Inside Out pp. 1--10

Author/editor of work:

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Author of section:

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Name of Publisher:

The University of Chicago Press

What Is Contemporary Art?

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The University of Chicago Press Chicago and London

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 2009 by The University of Chicago
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Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-76430-6 (cloth)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-76431-3 (paper)
ISBN-10: 0-226-76430-3 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-226-76431-1 (paper)

Library of Congress
Cataloging-In-Publication Data

Smith, Terry (Terry E.)

What is contemporary art? / Terry Smith.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-76430-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-76431-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-76430-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-76431-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Art, Modern—21st century—History and criticism. 2. Aesthetics, Modern—21st century. I. Title.

N6497.S65 2009

709.05—dc22

2009013809

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INTRODUCTION CONTEMPORARY ART INSPIRATION

No idea about contemporary art is more pervasive than the idea that one can—even *should*—have no idea about it. Statements such as this are typical: “How do you take in the global art world today? Even finding the terms of reference is impossible today.”¹ Generalization about contemporary art has evaded articulation for more than two decades: first because of fears of essentialism; followed by the sheer relief of having shaken off exclusivist theories, imposed historicisms, and grand narratives; and then, recently, delight in the simple-seeming pleasures of an open field. More prosaically, the answer has seemed obvious to the point of banality. Look around you: contemporary art is most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now. It cannot be subject to generalization and has overwhelmed art history: it is simply, totally contemporaneous. To me, however, this attitude amounts to a pluralist happy mix that seeks to pull a bland, idiot mask over the most irreducible fact about art today.

In the aftermath of modernity, art has indeed only one option: to be contemporary. But “being contemporary” these days means much more than a mindless embrace of the present. Of course all newly forged art is of its moment, and of its time, but perhaps never before has art been made within such a widespread sense that currency and contingency is all that there is in the world, all that there may ever be. Contemporaneity—which these days is multiplicitous in character but singular in its demands—requires responses that are in significant ways quite different from those that inspired the many and various modernisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This book aims to describe these responses and to show that they constitute new answers to the question: what is contemporary art?

These issues arise, in part, from a pervasive sense that the great, sustaining narratives supplied by modernity, including roles for art as mir-

ror, leisure, or licensed dissent, have had their day. The counters posed by postmodernity have become consumed in self-fulfilling prophecy. The most recent universalisms, such as globalization or the fundamentalisms, are falling conspicuously short or are overreaching, disastrously. An immediate consequence is that contemporary art has become—in its forms and its contents, its meanings and its usages—thoroughly questioning in nature, extremely wide-ranging in its modes of asking and in the scope of its inquiries. At the same time, in the absence of historical guarantees and the half-light of the deadly competition for global control, art, like every other human activity, can be no more than provisional as to its expectations about answers. Provocative testers, doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, tentative projections, diffident propositions, or hopeful anticipations: these are the most common forms of art today. What makes these concerns distinct from the contemporary preoccupations of previous art is that they are addressed—explicitly, although more often implicitly—not only by each work of art to itself and to its contemporaries but also, and definitively, as an interrogation into the ontology of the present, one that asks: What it is to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity?

The terms in use here will require some explaining. Each of them, although familiar, indeed ancient, has recently acquired additional connotations and, in some cases, new meaning. Many of the relationships among them are now quite different from what they have been during the past two hundred years. I will argue that these changes amount to a situation that has come to identify itself as contemporary, not only in fresh ways, but also as predominantly so. How this change has infused art practice, and vice versa, is the subject of this book.

The arguments offered in this book have been shaped by direct encounters with contemporary art: in discussions with artists as they planned upcoming projects; with works of art standing fresh in studios and at their first presentation; while involved in the planning of new museums and while visiting exhibitions at established ones; while doing the rounds of the galleries in many cities, visiting biennales across the globe, viewing private collections, and attending auctions and art fairs; participating in workshops, public fora, conference panels, or listening to lectures; and while checking out Web sites. I try to convey the sense of this art as it happened, to evoke the sites and spaces of its occurrence, the aura of its arrival, the qualities of its incipience, its present tension. This is, after all, the first and most immediate way in which art is, was, and in certain senses remains—as I write, as you read—contemporary.

I have been fortunate enough to be able to experience contemporary art as it first appeared to its publics in many parts of the world, on most continents, and to do so, in recent years especially, at a constant rate. This opened me to the second fundamental quality of the contemporary: its contemporaneity, its coming into being at the same time as other beings, including other art. The question of what is shared and what is distinct between self and other, between one thing and another, arises immediately. These questions inform every detail of the incessant negotiation between contemporaries, be they persons, animals, or things. Contemporary artists know this: indeed, it may be more present to them than ever before. In 1997, at the age of thirty-two, Damien Hirst, undisputed leader of the “young British artists” (known as yBas), issued an elaborate autobiography entitled *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now.*² A cunning self-promoter in a style made famous by Andy Warhol, Hirst chose a title that acknowledges the profound superficiality that drives the urge to celebrity while at the same time embracing it unreservedly. Speaking directly to the potential reader, it expresses what every book might want. Is this, too, what every work of art might want?³ Probably not, but its knowing naïveté, its wild hopefulness within cynicism, captures much about what artists of Hirst’s generation feel impels their lives and their art. Taken at face value, it is an appeal to move from extreme isolation to total proximity, from individual alienation to complete togetherness, from spatial uniqueness to planetary oneness, from a personal particularity to total generality, from singularity to universality—and to do so instantly, constantly, for eternity. To be, in a word, contemporary with oneself, with others, with everything in the world, and with all time. To wish for this, even though you know it is impossible, and is becoming more so every day! How cool is that?

There is another, stronger sense of contemporaneity at work here. We all come into worlds that are already formed by others who are contemporaries in various stages of negotiation, and who are themselves continually striving to grasp the arrangements in play between the noncontemporaries before and, now, after them. History is born out of this disjunction. So, too, is art. The planet itself is advanced in its unfolding, the creatures on it in their evolutionary pathways: all of these processes move, at their pace, inexorably—yet suddenly, it seems due to our impatience, precipitously. Humans have always needed to conjure narratives of cotemporality. Now, we do so with a degree of urgency that, it seems, dare not pause to check whether it has precedents. The coexistence of distinct temporalities, of different ways of *being* in relation to time, experienced in the midst of a growing sense that

many kinds of time are running out, is the third, deepest sense of the contemporary: what it is to be *with* time, to be contemporary.

Works of art, before they are anything else, are testimony to each of these cotemporalitys—from the simple fact of their coming into being in and of themselves, through their existence in a world replete with others, to their persistence through worlds shaped by repetition and difference. These are plain facts about art. They are, I would contend, also the source and structure of valuing when it comes to art. Valuing, like everything else, plays out in quite specific ways in the contemporary situation.⁴

This book is organized around these three core meanings of the term “contemporary”: the immediate, the contemporaneous, and the cotemporal. We will return to them (and a fourth, the relation between the modern and the contemporary) often. In themselves, these meanings are not coterminal, nor are they flat sections of the same substance. They pick out distinctive kinds of particularity and generality, highlighting volatile relationships between these philosophical staples, as well as complex shifts between personal experience and world picturing. In the following chapters, I will suggest how they are, in turn, at the core of what I will show to be the major tendencies in the world’s contemporary art. We will see them, too, in the general movement of contemporary art through the world’s history as it has unfolded since the 1950s, its own process of becoming contemporary.

In the final chapter, I will set out some of the implications of my argument for art criticism and art history that addresses contemporary art. There, I will comment on the approaches that many of my colleagues are taking to these questions, and I will set out my argument as a proposal for writing the history of contemporary art. Right now, however, the priority is to get you to the essays about museums, exhibitions, artists, and actions as quickly as possible. So I will add just one further section to this introduction: my argument about contemporary art in the conditions of contemporaneity, spelled out in the most summary form.

Let me begin from within the concept of the contemporary, from a pivotal distinction. There are worlds of difference (but also an always necessary implication) between the ordinary usage of the word “contemporary”—with its hip, go-with-the-flow connotations, its default recognition of whatever is happening, up-to-date, simultaneous, or contemporaneous—and the depths of meaning contained within the concept itself: *contempus* came into use, and remains in use, because it points to *a multiplicity of relationships between being and time*. The concept originates in precisely this multiplicity and has served human thought about this multiplicity ever since. It 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. There is no question that, for most of the twentieth century, the contemporary played second fiddle to the modern. This began to change in the final decades. In the visual arts, the big story, now so blindingly obvious, is the shift—nascent during the 1950s, emergent in the 1960s, contested during the 1970s, but unmistakable since the 1980s—from modern to contemporary art.

My elaboration of the hypothesis about art in the conditions of contemporaneity begins from the questions being asked by contemporaneity itself. What is the current world picture? How has it changed since the postwar period in Europe, since decolonization opened up Africa and Asia, and since the era of revolution versus dictatorship in South America seems to be morphing into new phases? As the world order built on first, second, third, and fourth world divisions implodes, what arrangements of power are emerging? The evident inability of governments everywhere to move from failing modern modes and frantic overreactions indicates that the new disorder is much subtler than the theses about a “clash of civilizations” and other kinds of flat theory that still underlie the world picturing of the leaders of some powerful nations and, in a deadly dialogue, inspire all kinds of fundamentalism.⁵ Is there a more nuanced, accurate way of describing these changing conditions and the kinds of art that are being made in response to them? I will attempt this in the following pages. For starters, I offer two contentions, expressed in extremely schematic form.

Contemporaneity is the most evident attribute of the current world picture, encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multitude of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being. This picture can no longer be adequately characterized by terms such as “modernity” and “post-modernity,” not least because it is shaped by friction between antinomies so intense that it resists universal generalization, resists even generalization about that resistance. It is, nonetheless, far from shapeless. Within contemporaneity, it seems to me, at least three sets of forces contend, turning each other incessantly. The first is globalization itself, above all, its thirsts for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation (the multitude that was released by decolonization), for control of time in the face of the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities, and for continuing exploitation of

natural and (to a degree not yet seen) virtual resources against the increasing evidence of the inability of those resources to sustain this exploitation. Secondly, the inequity among peoples, classes, and individuals is now so accelerated that it threatens both the desires for domination entertained by states, ideologies, and religions and the persistent dreams of liberation that continue to inspire individuals and peoples. Thirdly, we are all willy-nilly immersed in an infoscape—or, better, a spectacle, an image economy or a regime of representation⁶—capable of the instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere. It is, at the same time, fissured by the uneasy coexistence of highly specialist, closed-knowledge communities; open, volatile subjects; and rampant popular fundamentalisms.

These developments have long prehistories within modernity; their contemporary configuration was signaled in the 1950s (not least in art that prioritized various kinds of immediacy), burst out during the 1960s, has been evident to most since 1989, and has been unmistakable to all since 2001. They are shaping the conditions in which we experience contemporaneity as, at once, the actuality of our individual being in the world, an historic transformation, and a concept still obscure as to its limits, fragile in its foundations, yet called upon to carry unaided the entire weight of a present that it has for so long (and without notice) named.⁷

As I have noted, the concept of the “contemporary,” far from being singular and simple—a neutral substitute for “modern”—signifies multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time, separately and at once, with others and without them. These modes, of course, have always been there. The difference nowadays is that the multiplicities of contemporary being predominate over the kinds of generative and destructive powers named by any other comparable terms (for example, the modern and its derivatives). After the era of grand narratives, they may be all that there is. Indeed—who knows?—aftermath may last forever.

Art today is shaped most profoundly by its situation within contemporaneity. Certainly, the achievements and failings of modernist, colonial, and indigenous art continue to pose inescapable challenges to current practice, but none of them, singly or together, can provide an overarching framework for practice or interpretation. Contemporaneity manifests itself not just in the unprecedented proliferation of art, or only in its seemingly infinite variegation, but above all in the emergence of, and contestation between, quite different ways of making art and communicating through it to others. Within the vast, onrushing flow of contemporary art, one can, I believe, discern

three major currents, each of which is driven by a characteristic outlook, is drawn to specific sorts of content, uses a particular range of expressive modes, and prefers a certain system to disseminate its output.

The first current manifests the embrace by certain artists of the rewards and downsides of neoliberal economics, globalizing capital, and neoconservative politics. It is evident in the spectacular repetitions of avant-garde shock tactics pursued above all by Damien Hirst and the other yBas, but also by Julian Schnabel, Jeff Koons, and many others in the United States, and by Takashi Murakami and his followers in Japan, for example. In honor of the 1997 exhibition at which this tendency, in its British form, surfaced to predictable consternation on the part of conservatives but also mainstream acceptance, we might call it “Retro-sensationalism.” Since the 1980s this approach has burgeoned in antagonistic but less and less disabling parallel with another, older tendency: the constant efforts of the institutions of modern art (now often labeled “Contemporary Art”) to reign in the impacts of contemporaneity on art, revive earlier initiatives, cleave new art to the old modernist impulses and imperatives, and renovate them. Richard Serra, Jeff Wall, and Gerhard Richter are powerful examples of this tendency, which we might call “Remodernism.” Together, these trends amount to the aesthetic of globalization, serving it through both a relentless remodernizing and a sporadic contemporizing of art. In the work of certain artists, such as Matthew Barney, both currents come together, generating an art tsunami. If this consummation had to be named, its embodiment of what Guy Debord theorized as “the society of the spectacle” might lead us to terms such as “Spectacle Art” or “Spectacularism.” Similar fusions occur in the work of certain architects; for example, the cultural edifices of Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, and Daniel Libeskind. “Spectacle Architecture” is a term with some currency in characterizations of their work.

The second current is quite distinct in origins, nature, and outcome. No art movements here; rather, something akin to a world wide cultural change—indeed, a postcolonial turn. Following decolonization within what were the second, third, and fourth worlds, including its impacts in what was the first world, there has emerged a plethora of art shaped by local, national, anticolonial, independent, antiglobalization values (those of diversity, identity, and critique). It circulates internationally through the activities of travelers, expatriates, the creation of new markets. It predominates in biennales. Local and internationalist values are in constant dialogue in this current—the debate is sometimes enabling, at other times disabling, but always unavoidable. We are starting to see that in the years around 1989,

shifts from modern to contemporary art occurred in every cultural milieu throughout the world, and did so distinctively in each. Just what happened is only now becoming clear, even to those who most directly participated in the events of those days. We can also see that, even as they were occurring in the conflict zones, these events inspired a critique of spectacle capitalism and globalization on the part of a number of artists working in the advanced economies. They developed practices—usually entailing research over time, widespread public involvement, and lengthy, didactic presentations—that critically trace and strikingly display the global movements of the new world disorder between the advanced economies and those connected in multiple ways with them. Working from similar perspectives, other artists were inspired to base their practice around exploring sustainable relationships with specific environments, both social and natural, within the framework of ecological values. Still others work with electronic communicative media, examining its conceptual, social, and material structures: in the context of struggles between free, constrained, and commercial access to this media and its massive colonization by the entertainment industry, artists' responses have developed from net.art toward immersive environments and explorations of *avatar-viuser* (visual information user) interactivity.

The third current is different in kind from the others, the outcome, largely, of a generational change occurring as the first two have unfolded. It is the very recent, worldwide yet everyday occasioning of art that—by rejecting gratuitous provocation and grand symbolic statement in favor of specific, small-scale, and modest offerings—remixes elements of the first two currents, but with less and less regard for their fading power structures and styles of struggle, and more concern for the interactive potentialities of various material media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity. These artists seek to arrest the immediate, to grasp the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today. They make visible our sense that these fundamental, familiar constituents of being are becoming, each day, steadily stranger. They raise questions as to the nature of temporality these days, the possibilities of placemaking vis-à-vis dislocation, about what it is to be immersed in mediated interactivity and about the fraught exchanges between affect and effect. Within the world's turnings and life's frictions, they seek sustainable flows of survival, cooperation, and growth.

This picture of the main currents in contemporary art became apparent to me, in broad terms, during 2000 as I traveled between Australia, the United

Kingdom, Europe, and the United States.⁸ Since then, however, the details and the deeper structures emerged gradually, in fragments and patches, as distracting puzzles, or paradoxes disguised as certainties, while I visited museums and galleries, attended biennales and symposia in many different cities, and moved incessantly between the institutions and the less formal practices that display and disseminate art and those, formal and informal, that interpret it. The chapters that follow seek to reveal as much as possible about these experiences as they were happening, to show you how institutions, artists, and critics responded to the recession of the modern in art and the rise of the contemporary. Thus I report on repeat visits to key museums, profiling their attempts—often reluctantly, sometimes presciently—to deal with change as it was occurring. I do the same for key frameworks of interpretation; these, too, have increasingly struggled to deal with the emergent conditions, and the art being made within them. This book invites you to join a worldwide journey that looks into how these questions are being tackled: from well-known public venues (such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York) through lesser known settings (such as the Bienal de La Habana), to the sometimes esoteric, sometimes explosively public, debates between artists, critics, and, finally, historians that constitute the vital discursive structures of contemporary art.

The chapters are arranged so as to show the emergence of these currents in the both art institutions and the practice of art. “Museums: Modern/Contemporary” explores the triumph of the exhibition over the collection in contemporary museums, this being the main strategy adopted by museums that have been obliged to become sites of attraction within the globalizing culture industry. Their main focus has been the first current of contemporary art described above. Established during modernity, often in contrast to historical survey museums of the art of the past, their commitments to modern art—itself becoming rapidly historical—mean that they must continue to revise their own collection narratives *and* strive to become vital centers for art that does not necessarily take modernism as its premise. I profile a number of famous museums where this double act is being negotiated: MoMA, Dia:Beacon, the Saatchi Gallery, and the Tate Modern. “Spectacles: Architecture/Sculpture” offers close studies of two works of art: Frank Gehry’s building-as-sculpture, the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, and Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster* cycle (1994–2002), especially as staged at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2003. “Markets: Global/Local” examines the markets for two kinds of contemporary art, utterly distinct in their origins,

yet contingent in their contemporaneity: the market for contemporary art of the first (remodernist, retro-sensationalist) kind, and that for contemporary art by Australian Aborigines, a tendency emergent within the post-colonial turn.

In “Countercurrents: South/North,” the focus shifts firmly towards the iconogeographic turning precipitated by decolonization and postcolonialism. This is explored as it manifested itself in key exhibitions such as Documenta 11, Kassel, in 2002, and the Bienal de La Habana of 2003. “Contemporaneity: Times/Places” traces typical themes and issues that arise within the third current, notably artists’ treatments of time, place, and ethical action in the world today. The final chapter, “What Is Contemporary Art?” proposes that the approach used throughout this book might serve as a viable framework for writing the multiple histories of contemporary art.