

Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan  
Wood, Anton Vidokle

# What is Contemporary Art? Issue Two

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e-flux journal #12 — January 2010 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle  
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What is contemporary art? First, and most obviously: why is this question *not* asked? That is to say, why do we simply leave it to hover in the shadow of attempts at critical summation in the grand tradition of twentieth-century artistic movements? The contemporary delineates its border invisibly: no one is proud to be “contemporary,” and no one is ashamed. Indeed, the question of where artistic movements have gone seems embedded in this question, if only because “the contemporary” has become a single hegemonic “ism” that absorbs all proposals for others. When there are no longer any artistic movements, it seems that we are all working under the auspices of this singular ism that is deliberately (and literally) not one at all...

Widespread usage of the term “contemporary” seems so self-evident that to further demand a definition of “contemporary art” may be taken as an anachronistic exercise in cataloguing or self-definition. At the same time, it is no coincidence that this is usually the tenor of such large, elusive questions: it is precisely through their apparent self-evidence that they cease to be problematic and begin to exert their influence in hidden ways; and their paradox, their *unanswerability* begins to constitute a condition of its own, a place where people work.

So it is with the contemporary: a term we know well enough through its use as a de facto standard by museums, which denote their currency through an apparently modest temporal signifier: to be contemporary is to be savvy, reactive, dynamic, aware, timely, in constant motion, aware of fashion. The term has clearly replaced the use of “modern” to describe the art of the day. With this shift, out go the grand narratives and ideals of modernism, replaced by a default, soft consensus on the immanence of the present, the empiricism of *now*, of what we have directly in front of us, and what they have in front of them over there. But in its application as a de facto standard this watery signifier has through accumulation nevertheless assumed such a scale that it certainly *must* mean something.

If we pursue it further, however, and try to pin it down, it repeatedly escapes our grasp through a set of evasive maneuvers. And perhaps we can say that the ism that is simultaneously *not* is its *evasive maneuver number one*: the summation that does not admit to being critical or projective (in the grand tradition of modernist ideological voices), to denoting an inside and an outside, a potential project, but that is simultaneously *there*, saying nothing. So why the extra qualifier? Why insert an extra word into “museum of art”? Like any evasive maneuver, this one works by producing a split: between the term’s de facto usage, which momentarily holds

your attention by suggesting the obvious parallel with the “current,” with its promise of flexibility and dynamism, while simultaneously building a museum collection along very specific parameters – masking ideology. To follow the self-evidence of the question at hand, we could note the morphological Frank Gehry walls of a spectacular contemporary museum to be in fact made of concrete and steel – their suggestion of formless flexibility, their celebration of the informal, is frozen in some of the heaviest, most expensive, and burdensome institutional public sculpture around. The contemporary suggests movement, yet it does not itself budge.

This contemporary museum is acutely aware of other contemporary museums in other places. It is a node in a network of similar structures, and there is a huge amount of movement between them. *Evasive maneuver number two* could be the one that shifts your focus to a presumably de-centered field of work: a field of contemporary art that stretches across boundaries, a multi-local field drawing from local practices and embedded local knowledge, the vitality and immanence of many histories in constant simultaneous translation. This is perhaps the contemporary’s most redeeming trait, and we certainly do not miss the old power centers and master narratives.

In many ways, this is an evasive maneuver worth making. And we can even avoid the conservative critique that this horizontal movement cheapens what it encounters, reducing it to spectacle. Certainly the quantity of work placed on display can become an issue, but networks now spread much wider than ever before – much has been made available, and it is up to you to sort through it. The contemporary as a cacophonous mess gives us enormous hope.

But let’s not underestimate how the contemporary art system can atomize with some degree of cohesiveness. True, many peripheries have been mobilized not as peripheries, but as centers in their own right. But, seen from the so-called peripheries and centers alike, does this system really learn, or does it merely engage with its many territories by installing the monolithic prospect of hyperspectacle? If we are indeed aware that something is lost and something is gained in any process of translation, are we as certain that the regime of visibility installed by contemporary art functions by placing various local vernaculars into contact with each other on their own terms (as it promises to do), or is it something like the international biennial circuit, asserting its own language distinct from center and periphery alike?

In this way, the contemporary starts to reveal itself to be something like a glass ceiling, an invisible barrier that seals us together

precisely by its very invisibility. We acknowledge one another, individual artists, certain cities, social scenes, a few collective tendencies that seem to arrive more as common interests than social projections, but nothing attains critical mass under any umbrella beyond “the contemporary.” It’s not so different from how we understand capitalism to work, through one-to-one relationships that are seemingly too small-scale to be complicit with anything, masking the hidden ultimatum of an innocuous protocol – if we begin to discern its shape, either it shifts, or we become obsolete: *uncontemporary*. But then perhaps that would not be such a bad thing...

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