

Liam Gillick

Contemporary art does not account for that which is taking place

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The term “contemporary art” is marked by an excessive usefulness. The contemporary has exceeded the specificity of the present to become inextricably linked to the growth of doubt consolidation. At the same time, it has absorbed a particular and resistant grouping of interests, all of which have become the multiple specificities of the contemporary. The tendency is for artists to deny that they are part of something that is recognized and defined by others. Frustrations here are always unique. Donald Judd did not identify himself as a minimalist. Yet “contemporary art” activates denial in a specifically new way. It does not describe a practice but a general “being in the context.”

The people who leave graduate level studio programs are contemporary artists – that much is clear. They represent the subjective artist operating within a terrain of the general. Yet we now find that the meaning of contemporary art is being redefined by a new art historical focus upon its products, ideas, and projections. That means we are going through a phase in which – whether we like it or not – it is quite likely that a new terminology and means of delineation will be proposed. It is therefore necessary – for artists specifically (although never alone) – to engage with this process of re-describing what gets made now. What constitutes the image of the contemporary? And what does the contemporary produce other than a complicit alongsideness?

“Contemporary art” has historically implied a specific accommodation of a loose set of open-minded economic and political values that are mutable, global, and general – sufficing as an all-encompassing description of “that which is being made now – wherever.” But the flexibility of contemporary art as a term is no longer capable of encompassing all dynamic current art, if only because an increasing number of artists seek to radically differentiate their work from other art. In a recent essay I attempted therefore to re-term contemporary art as “current art,” as a way of dropping the association with the contemporary of design and architecture and simply find a term that could contain the near future and recent past of engaged art production rather than an evocative post-modernistic inclusion of singular practices.¹ However, this new adjusted definition also does not suffice as a description that can effectively include all the work that is being made with the intention of resisting the flexibility of contemporary work. It is increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that the definition contemporary art has been taken up by such apparently mutually exclusive arenas as auction houses and new art history departments as a way to talk about a generalization that

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always finds its articulation as a specificity or set of subjectivities that no longer include those who work hard to evade its reach.



Haus Rucker Co, *Documenta Oasis #7*, Documenta V, 1972. Photo: Günter Zamp Kelp

Contemporary art has become historical, a subject for academic work. The Fall 2009 issue of *October* magazine on the question of the contemporary tended to focus on the academicization of contemporary art while acknowledging extensively the existing unease that many artists have with being characterized within a stylistic epoch. Hal Foster noted that the magazine received very few replies from curators to his questionnaire.² This could be due to the *October* issue coinciding with the end of the usefulness of the term “contemporary art” for most progressive artists and curators – or at least with the reluctance of more and more to identify with it – while remaining a convenient generalizing term for many institutions and exchange structures including auction houses, galleries and art history departments, all of whom are struggling to identify the implications of their use of the term – some more than others, of course.

The dilemma of contemporary art, for the purposes of this text, actually refers to the period between 1973 and 2008, rather than the post-1945 definition common in Western museums. This is in an attempt to avoid what

might be called the “late modern” period, where the legacy of modernist arguments is still the primary term of reference. By 1973 we find ourselves already operating within an institutional context of contemporary art museums and art centers while reflections on the reductive and conceptual endgames of the 1960s have given way to a new set of debates about performance, video, and institutional critique. There will follow an attempt to describe the current understanding of the term “contemporary art” and the way it is deployed towards the creation of a space of inclusion and potential.

1.

The contemporary is necessarily inclusive – a generalization that has shifted towards becoming an accusation. Is there the possibility of merely saying “I make work now”? Contemporary art is a phrase that lends itself to being written and told without being said. It is always “everyone else.” It would only work to stop saying the term if people had been saying it all along. It is as rare to hear an artist describe himself or herself as a contemporary artist as it is to hear an architect tell you that he or she is a contemporary architect. This sense of the unsaid has emphasized the role of the contemporary as a loose binding term that is always pointing away from itself rather than a term articulated and rethought from the center. That is the reason for its durability and stifling redundancy.



Workers at the New Museum installing an Urs Fischer work. Photo: Thomas Rennie

So what is contemporary about contemporary art? Does art itself point to the term or vice versa? What’s going on? Have people forgotten to ask artists if they are contemporary artists? One answer is that the term is a convenient generalization that does not lend itself to reflection and constant rethinking in the manner of established theoretical terms

such as Postmodernism. It allows a separation from the act of making or doing art and the way it is then presented, explained and exchanged. Both artists and curators can find a space in the gap between these two moments where they are temporarily considering an exceptional case with every new development or addition to the contemporary inventory. Yet, an inventory of art spaces alone, for example, cannot help us find a categorization of participation within the realm of the contemporary. The question is how to categorize art today in a way that will exceed the contemporary. The inclusiveness of the contemporary is under attack, as this very inclusiveness has helped suppress a critique of what art is and more importantly what comes next. We know what comes next as things stand – more contemporary art.

The installation – and by association the exhibition itself – is the articulation of the contemporary. Even paintings cannot escape this “installed” quality, the considered and particular installation of things and images, even when approached in a haphazard or off-hand manner. We all have an idea of what contemporary art represents while only knowing the specifics of any particular instance. It is this knowing what it means via evoking a particular that pushes people towards an attempt to transcend this generality.

2.

There has been a proliferation of discussions and parallel practices that appear to operate in a semi-autonomous way alongside contemporary art. They ignore it or take the work of the contemporary as an example of what not to do. Recent focus upon the documentary, educational models, and engaged social collaborations have attempted to establish and describe new relationships that operate outside and in opposition to the apparently loose boundaries of the contemporary. These are engaged structures that propose limits and boundaries and take over new territories, from the curatorial to the neo-institutional, in direct opposition to the loose assumptions of the contemporary (in both its instrumentalized and capitalized forms). A good example might be the Unitednationsplaza project in Berlin. A series of discussions and lectures framed within the idea of an educational setting. While the discussions and lectures appeared to address the possibilities of art now there seemed very little anxiety about the idea of actually bypassing the production of recognizable contemporary art forms. The project itself was a melding of the curatorial, the artistic, and the academic towards the creation of a series of discursive scenarios that might defy not the commodification of art, but the

absorption of everything within the authoritarian tolerance of contemporary production. The mediation of one’s own practice creates moments of escape from the contemporary. Still, seeing this production of parallel knowledge creates a dilemma when it becomes the primary production of the contemporary artist. For even the “educational turn,” as figures such as Irit Rogoff and Paul O’Neill have termed it, quickly produces its own coding as part of the contemporary.

Another key example of this production of nuanced contemporary aesthetics is the recent reassessment of the documentary, a tendency that must be re-examined for its claims to evade the contemporary. As Maria Lind pointed out, the documentary practices which we see now

are just as articulated in terms of structure, visibility, production, and protocol as any other relevant art of today. But they tend to be less formally seductive. And yet they are as complex as some work that is known to be “complex.” The look of objectivity is not objective, just as the look of commercial materials is not necessarily commercial.³

The most effective thing about this documentary strategy has been that the artists do not offer resistance to the contemporary by taking themselves out of the equation – even when they provide the narrative for escape. There is an implicit claim to objectivity that functions here as an aggressive option of neo-objectivity in the face of co-option. Without resisting that co-option structurally it becomes merely a way of standing offstage waiting for the moment to enter.

The documentary has become a way of avoiding the problem of de-sublimation in the face of excessive sublimation. It is a semi-autonomous location where everyone lives to fight another day at least. It is a place where there is still a them and us. A protest against the contemporary by refusing to acknowledge its scope. Art in this case has been formulated as a boycott of the subjective and has built barriers in the face of continuous and constant fragmentation. At best it has made exchange visible and created a new battle over what used to be called realism. So, new consciousnesses around education and documentation provide glimmers of clarity within the inclusive terrain. Inclusion and exclusion suddenly become moments of clear choice – political consciousness starts to affect the notion of specific practice. Thinking about the problem of contemporary art while producing new networks of activity that are marked by their resistance to contemporary art as a generality. It is the lack of

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differentiation within the contemporary that leaves it as an open speculative terrain. This is what drives the discursive and the documentary as somewhat passive yet clearly urgent oppositions.

A recent solution to the way the contemporary subdues differentiation has been to separate the notions of artistic and other political engagements, so that there can be no misunderstanding that only the work itself, in all its manifestations, might be part of the “contemporary art context.” An example here would be Paul Chan, who has been described in biographies as an “artist and activist” in order to differentiate his engaged social function as a political agent from his work within galleries and museums.⁴ We are aware that the activism feeds the art and the art feeds the activism, but in a distinct step away from the artists role in the shadow of conceptual art we find it is now necessary for many such as Chan to show that there is a limit or border to the embrace or effectiveness of contemporary art. Of course, there is a potential problem here in terms of how we might define activism, for example, along with the use of the documentary among progressive artists. Taking a term such as activism and combining it with an artistic practice that is clearly of the contemporary shows a tendency to associate with earlier forms of certainty. One form of a reluctant acceptance is that it is currently impossible to escape the hold of the contemporary, but it might be possible to separate life and action from contemporary art. In these cases, we continue to read the work through the hold of the contemporary in terms of what gets made but we do this via an understanding that there are these other daily social activities that are not part of the “contemporary art context” – they do not share its desires, projections, and results.

3.

The contemporary is more successful within cities. It relates to the increasing deployment of contemporariness as a speculative terrain of lifestyle markers that include art. The contemporary implies a sophisticated sense of networking. Making things with an awareness of all other things. Joining a matrix of partial signifiers “that will do.” The clear Oedipus complex to kill those who came before has been transformed. Relativism in this case is merely defined by context and is a non-activated neo-political consciousness. Within the contemporary there is a usefulness in all other forms of work. And there is a paradox of an anti-relativism within the subjectivity of each artist and every artwork. Yet an increasingly radical anti-relativism shared by many causes

unacknowledged tensions. The contemporary is marked by a display of self-knowledge, a degree of social awareness, some tolerance, and a little bit of irony, all combined with an acknowledgment of the failure of modernism, or at least a respect for trying to come to terms with the memory of something like that.

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Philippe Parreno, *Birthday Candles*, 2007.

The contemporary necessarily restricts the sense in which you are looking for a breakthrough. An attempt to work is the work itself. Unresolved is the better way, leaving a series of props that appear to work together – or will do for now. In this case no single work is everything you would ever want to do. This is the space of its dynamic contradiction. Hierarchy is dysfunctional and evaded by the contemporary, and therefore key political questions, whether ignored or included, are supplemented by irony and coy relations to notions of quality.

The contemporary comes to terms with accommodation. Fundamental ideas are necessarily evaded. For the idiom of the contemporary still carries the lost memory of a democratization of skill. Its grounding principles were based on universal potential. By your nature you are it by taking the decision to announce yourself. It is easy to “be” – just existing through work. The process functions in reverse sometimes as a coming-into-being through work. A place in the contemporary is established by a pursuit of contemporary art – not the other way around. Collective and documentary forms have attempted to escape, and to establish a hardcore, activist separation. A critique of anything and everything. There has developed a need to find a secondary ethics in order to establish a zone of difference. Tweaking tiny details and working as another character alongside the contemporary. For historically all profound “isms” in art were originated by artists – in the case of the contemporary the artist is

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the originator of all subjectivities. But how can we avoid the post-contemporary becoming an historic nostalgia for the group or mere political identification?

4.

The basic assumption of the contemporary is that all we need is a place to show – to be part of and just towards the edge of contemporary art. Everyone in this zone of the exhibited becomes the exception within the tableau. This leads to project-based strategies that paper over the neurosis of the exposed. Desire and drive and motivation are sublimated. Every project-based approach creates a hypothetical method that endorses the mutable collective. Seeing clearly combined with instinct moments and always building. All contributing to a matrix of existing forms and justifying them by continued reappearance. The work always projects into the future while holding the recent past close at hand. It predicts the implications of itself and builds a bridge between the almost-known-but-half-forgotten and the soon-to-be-misunderstood. The contemporary artwork is always answering questions about itself and all other contemporary art.

It used to be said that art is like theoretical physics – a specialization with a small audience. It could have been a perfect research-based existence. Yet in a world where the contemporary artist is considered cynical you never meet an artist who completely gives up. The perceived lack of audience is transformed into layers of resistance – not to the work itself but to the encompassing whole. The contemporary is therefore the place of dynamic contradiction where the individual work is never more than the total effect. No singular work has more value in terms of function than any other. The discourse of contemporary art revolves around itself. It has become impossible to be outside and therefore understood in terms of a separation. There is always an interest in showing something somewhere.

Politics and biography have merged. We are all tolerant of art that is rooted in specific stories. This is the inclusive zone where the artist plays his or her own perspective for a collective purpose. The drive is towards unhooking from who you are while simultaneously becoming only yourself. Some people can sleep with their eyes open. What does this process of constantly discovering yourself actually do? Is it a push for recognition? It creates exceptional individuals of globalization – “an aristocracy of labor,” as Shuddhabrata Sengupta put it.⁵

Within the slightly proven of the contemporary we are left with rankings, museum shows, money, and newness as markers of

something within its institutional forms. Working continues in a flow determined by economic conditions. And the obligation is to keep defending contemporary art in general even if you find it impossible. There might be an attempt to describe the free flow of ideas within the inclusivity. Audiences create barriers and obstructions in a soft war of aesthetic tariffs that regulate flow and consensus. Tiny flows and minor disagreements mimic drive and resist the external. The painful flow of life is sublimated. Change happens to other things but not within the realm of the contemporary. Boycotting everything is no longer an option; the strikes and protests will be included, too. The system is resistant. Moving against the stream is a problem, for it goes in every direction. Neurotic work is the reward. Something will happen.

Excessive work is the contemporary struggle. Where capital is globalized it is necessary to be everywhere. Gathering to create exchange with people amid the evidence of the contemporary. For despite the fact that each language has its own rules and gaps within it we find that it is impossible to find true contradiction within these boundaries. Where would we find this gap? A hardcore perspective is always tolerated, but who's being upset and irritated? Bourgeois value and capitalism are comfortable with every iteration of the contemporary, they literally support it. The contemporary offers a specific tangent with a narrative. No longer does anyone care who did what first, the idea of the original doesn't matter. This has been a style era rather than a specific moment of change or development. At the edge of practice we only find more things to be absorbed. At the center is a mass of tiny maneuvers.

Self-consciousness constantly rebuilds this site of continuity. It is stacked with self-referential work – all ready for self-aware re-reading, actions, and gestures. Certain terms have been established as a kind of lingua franca. It is a zone where it is possible to trust yourself within confusion. Learn communication skills. All the while students get smarter and recognizably different – ironic in a way that levers the critical tone a little higher and eases the zone a little broader. Within this vague contemporariness people see more and more than they saw before.

That is the genius of the regime. Contemporary art is the perfect zone of deferral. No clarity can be overcomplicated when it is reproducing itself endlessly. Here we can encounter slightly different situations every day. Feuds with good men will not create a rupture here any more than the condemnation of obscenity. The problematic cannot be destroyed. Jealousy in this environment is exhausting and

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unproductive. Instrumentalization at the institutional level is always in place in order to defy the idea of a them and us. Why should I tell you whether what is produced is good or bad? No one can ever really understand the basis of what I'm telling you. What's readable? Tell me about your work. How many voices are in your head? This has been the time of the curatorial text. In the service of many.

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Mathilde ter Heijne, *Mathilde, Mathilde..., 2000*, video.

5.

Current art cannot be left to idle within the contemporary as a question of taste or preferred subjectivity. There are real problems of differentiation that will be reshaped by the new academicization that the contemporary awaits. The contemporary offers a multiplicity of artists whom we hope will coalesce like one of Negri's global tribes into a force of implicit resistance, but the contemporary creates anxieties ensuring that all operators within it are forever awaiting a specific cue for action. This is why the contemporary arena doesn't feel as if it is the place to really be starting anything, let alone a revolution. Constant and arbitrary reversal of positions has come to be expected like a nervous twitch to keep us intrigued. The contemporary displays a disruption between intentions and results, leaving a contingent gap that makes it futile to look for contradictions. The displaced is uniquely discoverable here. An inability to project into the future, to finish narratives – having, by an accident of birth, missed the end of everything. Functioning on surplus energy, with a clear desire to get organized. They are about to become organized by other people – instrumentalized, exchanged, and redefined by others.

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Duchamp is the grandfather – the ultimate contemporary artist, forefronting questions of how much to produce and when rather than what to produce, while secretly producing what could easily have been made public. This has led to an endlessly produced white noise of semi-newness linked to a general withholding of work, which is seen as an affirmative neurotic leisure. It is necessary to differentiate ways of working. Not working at all is very hard to do. So the answer is to keep working within a limited form of conceptual difficulty. Using a philosophical base is generally assumed as the critical “Big Other” – while thinking about other art is the way to define a degree of subjectivity within the matrix.

Knowing which “personal” to occupy is of help here. We must assume that everyone is true. Trying on different personalities is forgiven within this realm. The decision to change an obligation. Burning paintings is the originating myth. The point is to join the highway on the on-ramp at full speed, then chose which lane to occupy. Slowing down or getting on or off again is difficult and undesirable. Difficulty is internal in this place, and a completely different person emerges to occupy this internal space of thought and action. The contemporary is always an internal thing that is expressed only partially on the external. It is full of ways to be misled and involves the avoidance of totalizing shifts masked by stylistic changes. History defying becomes a complete rupture. Defying history is part of the past. The regime of the contemporary becomes more and more inclusive of its own past and eternal future. Bloated and on the edge of usefulness, it reaches out endlessly in all directions. But so did the flat earth that people once believed in, and so did the endless sky of the West.

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Liam Gillick is an artist based in London and New York. His solo exhibitions include "The Wood Way," Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2002; "A short text on the possibility of creating an economy of equivalence," Palais de Tokyo, 2005; and the retrospective project "Three Perspectives and a short scenario," Witte de With, Rotterdam, Kunsthalle Zurich, and MCA Chicago, 2008–2010. In 2006 he was part of the free art school project unitednationsplaza in Berlin.

Gillick has published a number of texts that function in parallel to his artwork. *Proxemics: Selected Writing, 1988–2006* (JRP|Ringier, 2007) was published in 2007, and the monograph *Factories in the Snow*, by Lilian Haberer (JRP|Ringier, 2007), will soon be joined by an extensive retrospective publication and critical reader. He has in addition contributed to many art magazines and journals including *Parkett*, *Frieze*, *Art Monthly*, *October*, and *Artforum*. Gillick was the artist presented at the German Pavilion during the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009.

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1
See Liam Gillick "The Good of Work" *e-flux journal*, no. 16, (May 2010), <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/142>; and Liam Gillick, by ArtSpace, Auckland, New Zealand as the book "Why Work?" (Auckland: ARTSPACE, 2010).

2
Hal Foster for the Editors, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 3.

3
Correspondence with the author, November 2010.

4
For example, see "Carnegie International Artists Bios, 2004/2005," http://www.cmoa.org/international/the_exhibition/artist.asp?chan; and "Laurie Anderson, Paul Chan, Richard Chang, Adam Kimmel, and Diana Picasso Join MoMA PS1's Board of Directors," <http://press.moma.org/images/press/ps1/PS1Board.pdf>.

5
Quoted from Liam Gillick and Anton Vidokle, *A Guiding Light*, Shanghai Biennale; Performa, New York, 2010.

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