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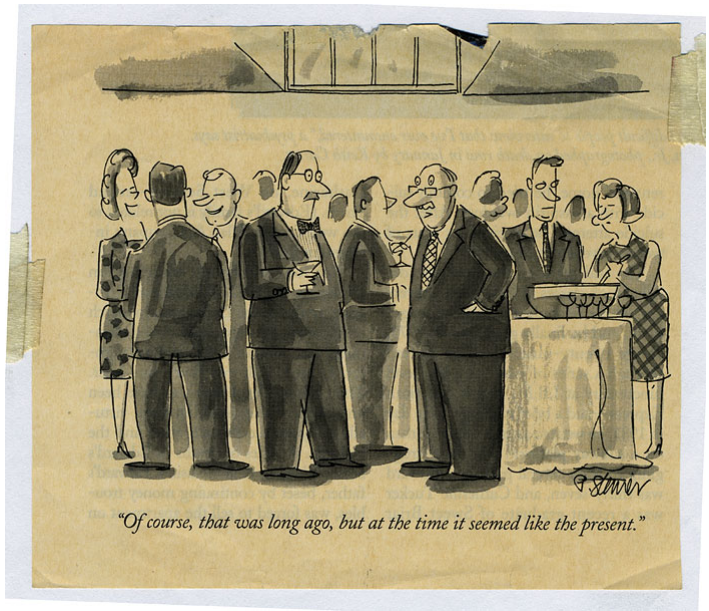
Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses

It would appear that the notion of "the contemporary" is irredeemably vain and empty; in fact, we would not be entirely mistaken in suspecting "contemporary art" to be a concept that became central to art as a result of the need to find a replacement, rather than as a matter of legitimate theorizing. For above all, "contemporary" is the term that stands to mark the death of "modern." This vague descriptor of aesthetic currency became customary precisely when the critique of "the modern" (its mapping, specification, historicizing, and dismantling) exiled it to the dustbin of history. At that point, when current art lost the word that had provided it with a programmatic stance, chronological proximity became relevant – even if it did not indicate anything of substance. To be sure, "contemporary" fails to carry even a glimmer of the utopian expectation – of change and possible alternatives – encompassed by "the new."



By Peter Steiner, published in The New Yorker on September 22, 1997.

Nothing would seem to so eloquently suggest the lack of substance in "contemporary art" than the facility with which it lends itself to practical adjustments. Museums, academic institutions, auction houses, and texts tend to circumvent the need to categorize recent artistic production by declaring the "contemporariness" of certain holdings or discourses on the basis of a chronological convention: the MOCA in Los Angeles takes into account everything made "after" 1940; the contemporary holdings of Tate Modern in London were all created sometime after 1965; Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz's sourcebook *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* takes 1945 as its starting point. In other contexts – particularly on the periphery – the horizon of contemporaneity

Reclaim the Streets Movement, Demonstration in Trafalgar Square, 1997. Graffiti on the National Gallery of Art. Image courtesy the author.

"Perhaps it will be the task of an artist as detached from aesthetic preoccupations, and as intent on the energetic as Marcel Duchamp, to reconcile art and the people." – Guillaume Apollinaire, *Méditations esthétiques – Les Peintres cubistes*
Photo taken by the author at MAM, São Paulo, 2006.

tends to be narrower, usually defined as appearing in the early 1990s and associated with the rise of the postcolonial debate, the collapse of the Euro-American monopoly over the narrative of modernism, or the end of the Cold War. In any case, "contemporary art" appears to be based on the multiple significance of an "after."

However, as is usually the case with chronological categories, this neutrality may soon unfold into a noun with a certain substance. As with "the modern," it would not be hard to imagine "the contemporary" one day becoming oxymoronically fixed, specified, and dated as the signifier of a particular shift in the dialectics of culture. There are at least two senses in which the contemporariness of artistic culture involves a poignant turn. There is the blatant immediacy of the relationship between a contemporary practice and its host society, and then there is its integration into a critical apparatus.

Never since the advent of historical relativism at the end of the eighteenth century has the art of the day had a less contentious social reception. Claims concerning the esoteric nature of contemporary art in the West mostly derive from the density of theoretical discourse on the topic – discourse that actually operates on the basis of practices that involve a certain level of general legibility. It may well be that one of the main characteristics of contemporary art is to always demand, at least, a double reception: first as part of general culture, and later as an attempt at sophisticated theoretical recuperation. Nonetheless, the fact that contemporary practices are linked to a hypertrophy of discourse that tries to mobilize them against the grain of their social currency is itself an indication of the extent to which contemporary art is an integrated culture that makes use of widely available referents, involving poetic operations that are closely linked to the historical sensibility of the day. It is the interlocking of extreme popularity and the rarefaction of criticism and theory that define this phenomenon. "Contemporary art" is, therefore, a form of aristocratic populism – a dialogical structure in which extreme subtlety and the utmost simplicity collide, forcing individuals of varying class, ethnic, and ideological affiliations – which might have otherwise kept them separated – to smell each other in artistic structures.

The ideal of modern beauty that Stendhal articulated in 1823 as "the art of presenting to the peoples . . . works which, in view of the present-day state of their customs and beliefs, afford them the utmost possible pleasure," has finally been attained.[1] As a consequence, a temporal rift between radical aesthetics and social mores no longer exists today. The question of the death of the avant-garde ought to be reformulated to account for this institutionalization of the contemporary. As we all know, the schism between the project of modern subjectivity and the modern bourgeois subject was defined in historical terms as consisting of advances, regressions, re-enactments, futurities, and anachronism, and summarized in the politics of the avant-garde, with all the militaristic implications of the term. More than the death of the avant-garde as a project of cultural subversion – always a ridiculous argument coming from the mouth of the establishment; such radicalism is sure to re-emerge in one disguise or another every time a poetic-political challenge to the *nomos* and *episteme* of dominant society becomes necessary – the shock of the postmodern involved the realization that "the new" could no longer be considered foreign to a subjectivity constantly bombarded by media and burning with the desire for consumption.

In any case, the temporal dislocation characteristic of both modernism and the avant-garde – the way the art of the day constantly defied the notion of a synchronic present (not limited to the chronological trope of the *avant*, which encompasses any number of other historical folds, from the theme of primitivism to the negotiations with obsolescence and the ruin, the refusal of the chronology of industrial labor, and so forth) – seems to have finally found some closure. In a compelling and scary form, modern capitalist society finally has an art that aligns with the audience, with the social elites that finance it, and with the academic industry that serves as its fellow traveler. In this sense art has become literally *contemporary*, thanks to its exorcism of aesthetic alienation and the growing integration of art into culture. When, by the millions, the masses vote with their feet to attend contemporary art museums, and when a number of cultural industries grow up around the former citadel of negativity, fine art is replaced by something that already occupies an intermediary region between elite entertainment and mass culture. And its signature is precisely the frenzy of "the contemporary": the fact that art fairs, biennales, symposia, magazines, and new blockbuster shows and museums constitute evidence of art's absorption into that which is merely *present* – not better, not worse, not hopeful, but a perverted instance of *the given*.

In this way, the main cultural function of art institutions and ceremonies in relation to global capitalism today is to instantiate the pandemic of contemporariness as a mythological scheme occurring (and recurring) each time we instigate this "program." After all, the art world has

Javier Tellez, *One flew over the void*, 2005. Public action consisting in having a canon man cross the Mexican-American Border.

surpassed other, more anachronistic auratic devices (the cult of the artist, of nationality or creativity) as the profane global religion for making "the contemporary" manifest. The hunger to be part of the global art calendar has more to do with the hope of keeping up with the frenzy of time than with any actual aesthetic pursuit or interest. Mallarmé's dictum that "one must be absolutely modern" has become a duty to stay up-to-date. But given the lack of historical occasions which could represent an opportunity to experience the core of our era – pivotal revolutionary moments of significant social change or upheaval – a participation in the eternal renewal of the contemporary might not be completely misguided, for it at least invokes a longing for the specter of an enthusiasm that asks for more than just the newest technological gadget.

But, once again, the devil of contemporaneousness does its deed: whereas the system of modern art was territorialized in a centrifugal structure of centers and peripheries around modernity's historical monopoly in the liberal-capitalist enclave of the North Atlantic, we now face a regime of international generalization transmitting the pandemic of the contemporary to the last recesses of the earth.

In fact, the main reason for the craze surrounding the contemporary art market in recent years (and for its not having immediately collapsed after the plunge of global capitalism) has been the market's lateral extension: bourgeoises who would previously buy work within their local art circuits became part of a new private jet set of global elites consuming the same brand of artistic products, ensuring spiraling sales and the celebration of an age in which endless "editions" allow artworks to be disseminated throughout an extended geography. In turn, each enclave of these globalized elites drives the development of a contemporary art infrastructure in their own city, using a standard mixture of global art references and local "emergent" schools. Contemporary art is defined by a new global social context in which disenfranchised wealthy individuals (who have abdicated their roles as industrial and commerce managers to the bureaucracy of CEOs) seek a certain civic identity through aesthetic "philanthropy." In this fashion they interact with a new social economy of services performed by artists, critics, and curators – services with symbolic capital that rests on an ability to trade in a semblance of "the contemporary." Contemporary art thus becomes the social

Teatro Ojo, "Forget 1968...but never its style." Public street interventions, October 2008, Mexico City.

structure defined by the dialectic between the new private jet set and a *jet proletariat*.

This new machinery of the dialectic between the global elites of financial capitalism and the nomadic agents of global culture would be easy to dismiss as critically meaningless were it not for the way "the contemporary" also stands for the leveling of the temporal perception of cultural geography and of a certain political orientation. Particularly for those who come from the so-called periphery (the South and the former socialist world), "the contemporary" still carries a certain utopian ring. For indeed, notwithstanding the cunning imbalances of power that prevail in the art world, the mere fact of intervening in the matrix of contemporary culture constitutes a major political and historical conquest. The global art circus of biennales, fairs, and global art museums has forced an end to the use of a metaphor that understood geography in terms of historical succession – it is no longer possible to rely upon the belatedness of the South in presuming that artistic culture goes from the center to the periphery. Although it probably does not seem so extraordinary now, the voicing of the need to represent the periphery in the global art circuits was, to a great extent, a claim to the right to participate in producing "the contemporary." And while the critical consequences of the policies of inclusion are less central to the agenda of the South than the critique of stereotypes, the activation of social memory, and the pursuit of different kinds of cultural agency, it remains the case that "contemporary art" marks the stage at which different geographies and localities are finally considered within the same network of questions and strategies. Art becomes "contemporary" in the strong sense when it refers to the progressive obsolescence of narratives that concentrated cultural innovation so completely in colonial and imperial metropolises as to finally identify modernism with what we ought to properly describe as "NATO art."

This is not to say that such a process of inclusion is free from its own deformities: in many instances, a peculiar neurosis provoked by the stereotyping of ethnic, regional, or national authenticity and the pressures to accommodate art from the periphery into a subsidiary category of metropolitan referents produces so-called "alternative modernism" or "global conceptualism." Nonetheless, the inclusion of the South in the narratives of "the contemporary" has already disrupted the genealogies of the present, such as the simplified concept of the "post-conceptual" that arose in the late 1980s to describe an apparent commonality between the radical artistic revolutions of the 1960s and the advanced art of its day. In its various historical and geographical settings, "contemporary art" claims a circularity between 1968, conceptualism, Brazilian Neo-Concretism or the French *Nouvelle Vague,* and recent works trapped in perpetual historical mirroring. In this sense, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, "contemporary art" appears as the figure of a revolution in standstill, awaiting the moment of resolution.

Complicated as this may be, however, it does not blur the radical significance of the cultural transformation that took place in artistic practice in the years after 1960. One crucial element of "contemporary art" is the embrace of a certain "unified field" in the concept of art. Beyond the de-definition of specific media, skills, and disciplines, there is some radical value in the fact that "the arts" seem to have merged into a single multifarious and nomadic kind of practice that forbids any attempt at specification beyond the micro-narratives that each artist or cultural movement produces along the way. If "contemporary art" refers to the confluence of a general field of activities, actions, tactics, and interventions falling under the umbrella of a single poetic matrix and within a single temporality, it is because they occupy the ruins of the "visual arts." In this sense, "contemporary art" carries forward the lines of experimentation and revolt found in all kinds of disciplines and arts that were brought "back to order" after 1970, forced to reconstitute their tradition. "Contemporary art" then becomes the sanctuary of repressed experimentation and the questioning of subjectivity that was effectively contained in any number of arts, discourses, and social structures following the collapse of the twentieth century's revolutionary projects. I suspect that the circularity of our current cultural narratives will only be broken once we stop experiencing contemporary culture as the *déjà vu* of a revolution that never entirely took place.

By the same token, it is no coincidence that the institutions, media, and cultural structures of the contemporary art world have become the last refuge of political and intellectual radicalism. As various intellectual traditions of the left appear to be losing ground in political arenas and social discourses, and despite the way art is entwined with the social structures of capitalism, contemporary art circuits are some of the only remaining spaces in which leftist thought still circulates as public discourse. In a world where academic circuits have ossified and become increasingly isolated, and where the classical modern role of the public intellectual dwindles before the cataclysmic power of media networks and the balkanization of political

opinion, it should come as no surprise that contemporary art has (momentarily) become something like the refuge of modern radicalism. If we should question the ethical significance of participating in contemporary art circuits, this sole fact ought to vindicate us. Just as the broken lineages of experimental music, cinema, and literature finally found themselves in the formless and undefined poetic space of contemporary art in general, we should not be shocked to find the cultural sector – apparently most compromised by the celebration of capitalism – functioning as the vicarious public sphere in which trends such as deconstruction, postcolonial critique, post-Marxism, social activism, and psychoanalytic theory are grounded. It would seem that, just as the art object poses a continuous mystery – a space of resistance and reflection leading towards enlightenment – so do the institutions and power structures of contemporary art also function as the critical self-consciousness of capitalist hypermodernity.

However, given the negative relationship of art to its own time, one would suspect the current radicalization of art and the constant politicization of its practice to be dangerous symptoms. Just as modern art rescued forms of practice, sensibility, and skills that were crushed by the industrial system, so does contemporary art seem to have the task of protecting cultural critique and social radicalism from the banality of the present. Unlike theorists who lament the apparent co-opting of radicalism and critique by the official sphere of art, we would need to consider the possibility that our task may consist, in large part, of protecting utopia – seen as the necessary collusion of the past with what lies ahead – from its demise at the hands of the ideology of present time. This is, to be sure, an uncomfortable inheritance. At the end of the day, it involves the memory of failure and a necessary infatuation with the powers of history. I do not know a better way to describe such a genealogy than by offering a quotation from the Dada artist and historian Hans Richter, who summarized the experience of Dada as that of "the vacuum created by the sudden arrival of freedom and the possibilities *it seemed* to offer."[2] And it may well be that contemporary art's ethical imperative is to deal with the ambivalence of the experience of emancipation. If art has indeed become the sanctuary of revolutionary thought, it is because it deals with the memory of a number of ambiguous interruptions. With this, we hopefully find an advantage to the constant collision of

Thomas Hirschorn, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, book-object, ca. 78.5 x 48.5 x 6,5 cm, 110 (+ 10) signed and numbered copies, Berlin, 2005.

perfume and theory that we experience in contemporary art events around the world.

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1
Stendhal, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Eudes (Paris: Larrive, 1954), 16:27, quoted in Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 4.

2
Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 136.