On the Historical Representation of Contemporary Art

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The ‘contemporary’ is a cultural élite… So the ‘contemporary’ has nothing to do with time, nor with age.

Wyndham Lewis (1954)

This essay, which derives from my project “Art and the Passing Present: Contemporary Art in Time” considers some examples, and consequences, of representing contemporary art historically. What are the implications and effects of comparing “contemporary” art with “historical” art? How did these loose categories emerge, and when? How is representation linked to documentation? Rather than following the currently most authoritative account of contemporary art, according to which the epithet “contemporary” is reserved for new art that matches “the conditions of contemporaneity,” I suggest an understanding of contemporary art as actualized art. I conclude by examining an artwork that proposes wider application of the label “contemporary.”

Diverging References of “Contemporary Art”

The attribute “contemporary” has been used in the Western-based art world throughout the twentieth century, and even earlier, either to denote someone or something of the same time, or as a synonym for “modern”. In the last couple of decades, however, “contemporary art” has come to signify a specific kind of art situated within a specific historical space. The thrust of my argument in the following short essay is to complicate and, ultimately, question so restrictive a usage
of this term. One clear merit of the rapidly evolving scholarly interest in issues of art and contemporaneity in recent years – specifically in the wake of massive investment in this sector of the art market since the 1990s, and the gradual demise of postmodernism as a definitional paradigm for contemporary art – is that it invites us to rethink the domain of art history, both from the vantage point of its past-present and that of its continuously-expanding present “past.”

The two dominant usages of this adjective in the discourse on art since the 1990s are: 1) the most conventional, roughly chronological use, according to which “contemporary” art is new, recent, current or modern, or pertains to the present moment, era, etc; and, 2) a historical usage, relating to art that belongs in a specific space in time more or less explicitly historicized as the contemporary period. While the first usage relates principally to us, and the second to other periods, application of the former within the historical space of the latter makes it difficult to tease out their various implications. The former usage discriminates synchronically among co-existing contemporary candidates, while the latter, more absolute, use discriminates diachronically within a putative succession of movements or periods. The first of the two is the more normative, offering itself as commonsensical, while the second is more descriptive. Even so, such a clear-cut distinction is ultimately impossible since both are constrained by the evaluative decisions that underpin all modes of historical discourse. The first usage operates with a relative chronology that has existed for all of the period now known as modernism, while the second usage, based on an absolute chronology, has only been applied quite recently, since the putative demise of modernism and postmodernism. In short: the former, “contemporary” usage of “contemporary” is old, while the latter, “historical” usage of “contemporary” is new. What could thus be identified as contemporary art in the first sense of the word, that is, recently produced – presented at a gallery, perhaps, and reviewed in a recent issue of an art journal – may conflict with the latter usage of the word, which could cover a key work, say, by Jackson Pollock from the late 1940s, that would appear “historical” rather than “contemporary” according our first definition. Not all specialists would draw the line at 1945, however, but rather extend the threshold to the 1950s or 1960s, or even the 1980s or 1990s.
Comparatively contemporary

Every work of art that is represented as contemporary is brought within a pantemporary sphere of history, which is also, by definition, competitive by being comparative. An isolated work or artifact cannot be contemporaneous. There is no such thing as a contemporary artwork per se, since the very term presumes a frame of reference: except for the category of art, it is compared either to time or to us. The latter two terms have often been sandwiched into our time. Within the spectrum of historical representation (as embodied in books, courses, exhibitions, and so on) a work effectively competes for attention with every other unit in the system. Like its contemporary relevance, the work’s historical meaning and literal originality are only established, however implicitly, by this comparison. A work deemed contemporary is thus directly related to other equally contemporary, or radically non-contemporary, works. Its singular identity is the fruit of a comparison, however unconsciously or reluctantly established, with the entire category of historical works of art. Many advocates of contemporary art would, of course, assign it to a liminal space outside or beyond history altogether, but to make a designation such as “contemporary” meaningful, history is arguably the unavoidable other term. Moreover, explaining why something counts as (contemporary) art at all requires a historical framework for the gradual transformation of the concept and practice of art in the postwar period. The value attached to the contemporary and the historical derives from their respective positions at opposite ends of a spectrum ranging from “new” to “old” (the parameter of age, which is relative to the object as such) and from “now” to “then” (the parameter of temporal modes, which is relative to us and to time). Furthermore, the value and status of much art today hinge not only upon its organic relationship to history, but upon its space of exhibition or topological representation, which, in turn, depends upon a historically conceived and continuously maintained definition of art that defines, in turn, all the spaces of art – whether pavilions, fairs, galleries, or art museums.4
Let us consider “contemporary” as the correlated offspring of history, and vice versa. Between the late eighteenth century and circa 1870 in Europe, “contemporary” became the differing other of a new, coherent unity; history (often capitalized as “History” in order to distinguish it from mere histories). As Reinhart Koselleck has noted, the gradual establishment of a “new time” congealed into a unique period: Neuzeit. As a consequence of this semantic innovation, the very word for “time” in German came to connote “contemporary”: Zeitgeschichte is the counterpart of “contemporary history.” Given that all history is at some point literally contemporary with those experiencing or remembering it (i.e. in the first sense above), history is established in the modern period as non-contemporary, non-present: past. History, in the new understanding of the word, a Kollektivsingular, produces itself, and this object or product – history itself – is preconditioned by its non-historical other: the contemporary. This is to suggest that the contemporary is not just a relational universal but historically produced during the period of so-called Enlightenment. According to Michel Foucault, Immanuel Kant’s response to the question “What is Enlightenment? (1784)” amounted to “a reflection on ‘today’ as difference in history and as a motive for a particular philosophical task.” For F.W.J. Schelling, too, it seems that the past is only constituted when it has been forcibly separated from the present, and that the present, likewise, only assumes its final form by means of this disjunction. Friedrich Nietzsche’s critical observation in 1874 that historical consciousness threatened to pervade and overwhelm contemporary life highlights a problem unique to this historical period, which has been called the historical period in a qualitative (i.e. new) sense. It is during this period that contemporaneity begins to assert itself in new ways, because of the way history was increasingly experienced as burdensome by its then-“contemporary” subjects. Those now theorizing about this development would benefit from extending their frame of reference in this way since the post-1945 trajectory is arguably too long, too obviously historical to make sense to young artists now working with “contemporary art,” and far too brief to allow the dis-
The Precession of Representation

Representation may be thought of as re-presenting a previous presence, but my argument is that representation does not succeed but rather precedes the making of a contemporary work of art. No work of art, that is, is born contemporary (or is, again, contemporary per se); it belongs, not to the natural, but to the symbolic; not to the plainly temporal, but to the social and cultural order of things, being dubbed “contemporary,” i.e. represented as contemporary, only if it succeeds in meeting the relevant criteria of the day. If so, from that moment on, it may be labeled “contemporary” as a token of its artistic ennoblement. One of the forms taken by representation is exhibition; another is documentation, which is not just an operative mode that preserves works of art for posterity. Documentation increasingly forms part of the medium by which art presents itself to the world. In such cases, documentation is not a post hoc enabler of artistic appreciation; rather, it actually produces the art. And it does so with the future history of the piece in view. In an environment replete with threats of extinction, extending the life-expectancy of the work beyond the next generation of soft- and/or hardware updates (to which all works today are ultimately subsumed, whether digital or analogue) requires the work to formulate a survival plan, a strategy for ensuring its existence beyond its immediate, merely contemporary, being. This forces contempo-
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The established understanding of contemporary art is not only in tune with the market vogue for art marked contemporary, it is also historicist and essentialist in a way that perpetuates the modernist conception of history that became dominant in the nineteenth century. On this view, in order to be regarded as “contemporary”, a work of art must have a recent provenance since its historical essence, originality, or ontology is perceived as indissolubly linked to its particular historical emergence, that is, its origin, as first theorized by Hegel. This has been the model, by and large, for the academic discipline of art history from the mid-nineteenth century to our own time – a “metanarrative,” indeed, that was supposedly shelved by “the postmodern condition.”

Transformations of the avant-garde art scene between the 1950s–1960s to the present have come to disassociate – in theory at least – the work of art from the immediate circumstances of its material production or origin in a specific moment in time. With the idea – derived partly from a kind of “Duchamp position” that only became established in the postwar period – that an artwork can constitute whatever the artist chooses, new or old, the historicist myth of origin of the work of art itself or the object of art, has effectively been made parenthetical; the balance has shifted from the work to the creative beholder – whether artist, public or curator – from object to subject, from work to text and context in the here and now.

While Hegel was prone to contextualize the work in its unique historical environment, Hans-Georg Gadamer locates the understanding of the work within us, at a historical distance from the work that can only be bridged by our creative contribution. Another important facet
of Gadamer’s thinking relates to what he calls “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), from which it follows that there is no work of art as such, only works of art that are continuously formed, and even transformed, within their different interpretative environments. A work of art is peculiarly non-temporal, according to Gadamer, a claim which can be read as non-Hegelian. Paradoxically enough, the work is also *only* temporal, i.e. without a fixed identity or centre of gravity in its historical position, since it is determined by shifting readings and usages over time. The artwork is thus established by a performative gesture that, in turn, presupposes acknowledgement by the art world. The artist activates as “art” something that previously was not art, because it was either unfinished (the craft-based principle) or just an ordinary object (the “readymade” principle). The artist’s position mimics that of the curator, who has the power – a power that inheres in the position, not the person – to put something on show as “art.”

The most distinguished artistic embodiment of this artist-as-curateur model, upon which a great deal of contemporary art today depends, is, of course, Marcel Duchamp, whose tilted urinal of 1917, inscribed with the pseudonym R. Mutt and entitled *Fountain*, is arguably one of the most important works of art of the twentieth century. This piece has gone down in history as un-exhibited since, shortly before its disappearance, it was excluded from the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in Paris to which it had first been submitted. It survives and thrives, however, with all the power of myth, and, more concretely, in a contemporary photograph by Alfred Stieglitz as well as in several signed copies authorized as “originals” by the artist in the 1960s. Paradoxically, this historical non-event was eventually to inaugurate the exhibitionist paradigm by which the status of “art” is *de facto* bestowed on anything that is exhibited to the art world, provided that it is received and acknowledged as such. The so-called “institutional theory of art” that emerged in the United States in the 1970s can be seen as a response to the conundrums which the belated arrival of “Duchamp” in the 1950s and 60s presented to the art world.

As a corollary to the “readymade” principle, I would like to suggest a different understanding of contemporary art, as *actualized* art. Since the current state of art theory allows for anything in principle to be or become “art” – subject to certain circumstances that are, in practice,
defined by the art system or art world – there is no reason why old art
could not be included on the list of current candidates for artistic
status.\textsuperscript{13} It is not only found objects, consumer items, concepts or
organic matter that can become art; historical art, no matter its age,
can now also become “new” art, i.e. “contemporary” art, if it is brought
to the attention of the contemporary public and presented as having
contemporary relevance. Such an understanding would, once and
for all, abandon Hegel as a theoretical model for defining art, by
historicizing it in terms of its specific birthplace. It would be more
attuned to that phenomenological procedure by which an encounter
with art is always new insofar as it makes the work seem new upon
each encounter, thereby crossing the boundary between subject and
object, or present and past, which the old dichotomies had established
and upon which the entire modern discipline of analyzing art and
images relies. The modern and modernist art historian did not deal
with modern or contemporary works at all. The privileged imagery of
art history was historical works of art, which demanded that the
analyst carefully calibrate the historical distance between object and
viewer in order to avoid falling into an anachronistic trap or proceeding
unhistorically. Spatial distance was also required since the works were
meant to be seen from a certain angle or ideal point of view.
Phenomenology contributes to the disrupting of such notions and the
crossing of such boundaries.

\textit{Almost always contemporary?}

My concluding remarks take their cue from a “contemporary” artwork
by Maurizio Nannucci. The work, which consists of a sentence in
capital neon letters mounted on a preexisting wall, says: “all art has
been contemporary.” Nannucci works within a conceptualist tradition,
in obvious proximity to Joseph Kosuth and Jenny Holzer. This particu-
lar work, however, strikes me as interestingly flawed, although I might
be accused of taking it too literally (i.e. literally reading it). Whatever
wit or novelty this proposition may have stems, arguably, from the
more conventional sense of “contemporary art” that it ostentatiously
questions yet ultimately reinforces: only new or recent art is contem-
porary. Not so! What seems like a quaint proverb from the seven-
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teninth century reminds us that once upon a time all the old stuff was also young and “contemporary.” “Contemporary” in this sentence becomes synonymous with “new,” i.e. literally devoid of content. Is this to provoke a debate about the temporal limits of contemporary art, to make old art relevant, or to challenge the hyped-up presentism of contemporary discourse? My first reformulation of this sentence would simply be: some art has been contemporary. The adjective here refers to a highly valued contemporaneity that differs from the past which has preceded it as well as from accumulated history turned relatively obsolete by default. A historical qualification of this reformulation would be: some art has only been contemporary for some time (since the eighteenth century). To proclaim all art “contemporary” in this (past) sense is to ignore the power relations operating in any current field of art, only a small part of which is defined as “contemporary,” as well as to disregard the historical contingency involved in establishing the contemporary in its still current sense. My second reformulation seeks approval on different grounds: all art is contemporary. The adjective here refers not to contemporaneity or the contemporary, as a distinct construct of interests and a point of identification within a certain society, but to mere contemporaneousness, a relative synchronicity of all the art that still remains and thus shares the same time. Shifting the tense from past to present is key here. What “has been” is automatically no more, it is the mode of history and memory, rooted in Hegelian historicism. My second reformulation aims to substitute this historical mindset for a phenomenological procedure in which not merely each encounter with the work is new but the work itself remains always new, no matter its age, in the encounter. My final twist is that this second sense of contemporary (relating to contemporaneousness) may be coordinated with or superimposed upon the first sense (relating to contemporaneity) if we can accept the notion that “contemporary” art means actualized art – that is, any art, regardless of its physical genesis, which is actively brought into “contemporary play.”

Notes
2. The third, neutral use mentioned above according to which “contemporary” simply means “relative to someone or something of the same time” is used irrespective of period and warrants no further commentary here.


13. An example is Documenta 12 (2007), the mega-exhibition of contemporary art in Kassel which featured art from the 1500’s.