

On the contemporary – and contemporary art history

Review of:

Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 344pp., 75 b. & w. illus., £17.50 pbk, ISBN: 9780226764313.

As a spate of publications and conferences in recent years suggests, one of the hallmarks of the contemporary is to question what it is the contemporary might be. In the field of philosophy, for instance, no less a scholar than Giorgio Agamben has grappled with the question, producing a suite of lectures and subsequent essay called 'What is the Contemporary?' (His verdict: an untimeliness that opens out the contemporary to thinking meta-critically on it.¹) In art history, this self-reflexive questioning has been even more pronounced. A 2009 issue of the eminent New York journal *October* dedicated over 120 pages to the many, sometimes conflicting responses to a questionnaire devised by the journal's editors to evaluate the core components of 'contemporary art history' as both discipline and concept. The organizers of the influential email-advertising service e-flux devoted two editions of their *e-flux journal* to the theme of 'what is contemporary art', with contributions from significant scholars, critics and curators across the northern hemisphere. Since 2009, a nucleus of young American art historians has hosted sessions of the contemporary art historians' caucus within the College Art Association's annual conference, each year seeking extensive thoughts and debate about the merits, effects and possible impossibility of the existence of 'contemporary art history'. And in Germany, the 'Global Art and the Museum' project of Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel has hosted a range of seminars and publications analysing the overlaps and antagonisms between discourses of 'contemporary art', 'world art' and 'global art' as they have gradually emerged in the last two decades or so.²

The reasons propelling such self-reflexivity have, as Belting in particular suggests, stemmed not from art history *per se* but from practices and, especially, industries of contemporary art itself.³ Many of the world's museums of modern art are rebranding as museums of 'contemporary' art, often creating new buildings as they shift, or 'update', their collecting and curatorial focus (good examples here are MoMA in New York, Tate Modern in London, the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana; the list goes on). In other sites – Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, West Kowloon in Hong Kong, and across China's eastern seaboard – new superstar-architect-designed museums may be replacing biennales as the primary means for engaging with the

¹ Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 39-54.

² Hal Foster *et al*, 'Questionnaire on "The Contemporary"', *October*, 130, Fall 2009, 3-124; Julieta Aranda *et al*, 'What is Contemporary Art? Issue one' and 'What is Contemporary Art? Issue two', *e-flux journal*, 11, December 2009, and 12, January 2010; Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, eds, *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007; Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds, *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009.

³ Hans Belting, 'Contemporary art as global art: a critical estimate', in Belting and Buddensieg, eds, *Global Art World*, 38-73.

latest trends in the contemporary. In universities, too, innumerable art history departments are sinking limited funds into the development of contemporary art and curatorship courses, to kickstart stale syllabi that conclude with Jackson Pollock and to show that humanities academia can still be relevant to the world around them. In each case, as these institutions try to chase new audiences, new patrons and new products, not only do the subtle differences between 'modern' and 'contemporary' threaten to erode, but there emerges a remarkable desperation for a university, a museum, or its host city, to impress itself as cutting-edge, engaged with the present, and a place to see and be seen.

These complex developments provide the background for the latest book, *What is Contemporary Art?*, by one of Australia's most important and prolific art historians, Terry Smith. At first blush, the book's title suggests it to be something like a beginner's guide to contemporary art, perhaps part of the 'very short introduction' series published by Oxford University Press in recent years (for which the version on contemporary art has, in fact, been written – by another well-known arts writer, Julian Stallabrass). This would be mistaken, however, for Smith's aims are significantly more lofty: on the one hand, to present new discursive categories through which to locate and understand contemporary art and, on the other, to suggest a methodology that is appropriate to and symptomatic of the conditions of the contemporary, that can mimic its flows and modes of being, as well as elucidate how meaning is made within these conditions.

To this end, Smith presents the reader with three streams of contemporary art practice. The first – and arguably the most dominant, or at least the most popular with major museums and galleries worldwide – is an 'aesthetic of globalization' that appeals to different yet inextricable aspects of culture in the conditions of global capitalism. Three aspects to these conditions, and this aesthetic, are particularly important for Smith here. Firstly, a relapse to modernism, or 'remodernizing instinct', in the face of the contemporary, seen in such institutions as MoMA, Dia Beacon or Tate Modern that 'choose artists and works that, on the walls, in the galleries, and in the catalogs, read as contemporary moderns or modernist contemporaries' (36). This turn is both nostalgic and strategic: while it looks longingly to the styles, representations and radicalisms of the past, it does so in large part to shore up the historical, discursive and of course financial value of modernist art (often held by the leviathans that promote this remodernizing 'instinct' in the first place). The second stream within this aesthetic is a turn toward 'retro-sensationalism', a style epitomized by the work of Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and the (now, not so) young British artists, in which the art 'is consumed by instantaneity, by effects as sharp and cool as the most up-to-date fashions' (197). Sculptures transform the 2D images of popular cultural icons found in magazines into 3D collectible playthings; paintings shimmer like Gucci wallpaper; a tiger shark floats open-mouthed in a vitrine, close enough to the viewer to be affective, yet dead, musealised, safe. (As the 'retro' in the term's name suggests, the sensationalism here does not push the viewer into the unexpected, but ensures that art simply repeats the sensationalism of consumerism today, including its inherited geographies of cultural capital.) And if these two streams should merge together, Smith argues, then that synthesis tends toward the kind of spectacularism evident in the work of an artist like Matthew

Barney, whose videos and sculptures trace the lavish, idiosyncratic – some might say self-indulgent – collision of myth, historical reference, computer gaming and opera that Smith (following his graduate student at Pittsburgh, Stephen Tumino) dubs ‘Barneyworld’.

As Smith astutely notes, this aesthetic mimics some of the key aspects of globalization, both in the aesthetic’s broad international popularity and, more pertinently, in its frequent appearance in, and flashy appeal to, some of the richest commercial and multinational art institutions worldwide: from the Guggenheim franchise to ‘dedicated private museums, prominent commercial galleries, the auction rooms of the “great houses”, and the new celebrity collections’ of such figures as Charles Saatchi (268). As with the global flow of capital, it seems, so with the global flow of art: a cord of gold that easily dwarfs the umbilicus made famous by Clement Greenberg at the height of American modernism.

Yet, Smith is neither so un-nuanced nor so pessimistic a thinker as to believe that this is the only path mapped out by contemporary art. While the book’s first section lays the foundations for Smith’s critique of practices that all-too-easily replicate the consumerist conditions of the contemporary – from the major New York and London collections cited above, to the pivotal role played by art fairs and auction houses in shaping what constitutes ‘significance’ in contemporary art – the book’s second and third sections track shifts that more clearly meet Smith’s approval. The second section continues his long-held interest in the postcolonial – an interest that can be mapped back through his masterful two-volume tome *Transformations in Australian Art*, to his contributions to Bernard Smith’s opus *Australian Painting*, and the 1974 *Artforum* essay that made his name, on ‘The provincialism problem’. It is here that Smith is at his best in this book. His understanding of Australian Aboriginal art as epitomizing more constructive engagements with the contemporary and its markets, placing ‘one, pre-ancient temporality against another, modern one [and thus asserting] the necessity for their coexistence, their coeval right to persist in the world as it is, and their right to contribute to the conversation that is forming the future’ (139), is both accurate in pinpointing the crucial potentialities and problematics of indigeneity for re-imagining the contemporary, and ultimately provocative in asserting that differential historiographies from Australia – so often ignored within global art histories – lie at their very core. His chapter on the *Bienal de la Habana* is even better. Guided by the research of another of his graduate students, Miguel Rojas-Sotelo, Smith grounds his case study in a rigorous analysis of the bienal’s history, from its formulation in a 1983 meeting between the widow of artist Wilfredo Lam, Fidel Castro and other Cuban cultural officials, through the renowned third manifestation in 1989, to more recent editions staged after the withdrawal of Soviet power and money from the island. Here, Smith’s narrative arcs from hope to collapse to reconstruction, in keeping with the bienal’s changing fortunes. As he makes clear, the exhibition’s initial objectives of showcasing art from across Asia, Africa and Latin America sought to forge alignments between so-called ‘non-aligned’ countries, by-passing the cold war superpowers and thus showing how complex the actual histories of the cold war were. That the bienal did not, or perhaps could not, follow through with these fascinating prospects – in the face of overwhelming Soviet influence and Cuba’s equally overwhelming impoverishment since Soviet collapse –

is a timely reminder of how paradigmatic such failures have been, and how important it is to resurrect such alternative cultural networks for the future (much as the biennial itself has been able to do in recent years).

The third section concentrates on the resurgence of informal, intimate and relational aesthetics that have been most apparent since the 1980s. For many contemporary art writers, this stream of practice is usually lumped together under the logo of 'relational aesthetics', a term coined by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud during the 1990s.⁴ Here again, however, Smith takes a more nuanced approach, providing for difference within this stream of art-making that the discourse of 'relational aesthetics' tends to homogenize. His list of aesthetic tropes includes 'the interactive potentialities of various mediated media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity... [that] seek sustainable flows of survival, cooperation, and politics' (8). From the work of Huit Facettes outside Dakar to Emily Floyd in Melbourne, this lo-fi or grassroots art-making tends not to emerge in major museums, Smith argues, nor in biennales or other markers of art's 'postcolonial turn', but in 'alternative spaces, public temporary displays, the net, zines, and other do-it-yourself-with-friends networks' (268). According to Smith's argument, it is precisely within these networks that the most vital interrogations of the contemporary condition are currently taking place, through artistic explorations of temporality, place, mediation and affect.

Anyone familiar with the vast, global terrain of contemporary art would certainly recognize these modes of art-making and appreciate the clarity with which Smith spells them out. Together, they pinpoint key markers as to what constitutes the contemporary: an art driven by shared closeness rather than modernist distancing, by 'multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time, separately and at once, with others and without them' (6), all of which is sparked by the contemporary's insistence on immediacy, encounters and contingency. These three streams cannot be subsumed within each other, Smith says; they are instead in contest, 'irreconcilable and indissociable' (269), and it is through this grinding coexistence of antagonisms and agonisms – of antinomies, as Smith stresses throughout the book – that the socio-cultural condition of the contemporary, of *contemporaneity*, manifests itself. Moreover, these antinomies can be sensed in notions of temporality within the contemporary. If there is an 'ontology of the present', to cite one of the major figures in Smith's theoretical formation, Fredric Jameson,⁵ then it is not a time of perpetual presentism and the ever-now, but a now that refracts into the historical, present immediacy and that which is 'to come' (and this is to be understood as an implicit rejection of the mono-temporal foundations of the first stream Smith outlines within contemporary art, and an endorsement of the third, 'grassroots' current). What emerges, then, is a prism of the contemporary reflecting 'the multitude of incommensurable but bound together cultures, the untimeliness of multiple temporalities, the inequities accelerating everywhere, at every level' (109). Modernist dialectics and teleological thinking remain in the picture, but undermined, with their

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Space-times of exchanges', trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, in Bourriaud, curator, *Traffic*, exh. cat., Bordeaux: CAPC, 1996, np; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland, Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London: Verso, 2002.

self-serving pretence and the waning conviction in their ability to totalize their reality exposed. Postmodernism's dual (actually, conjoined) attention to relativism and individualism, on the other hand, has lost its wings and come crashing down to the very tangible, supra-individual conflicts of contemporary terrestrial reality.

It is hard not to be convinced by this argument. Contemporary art demands a guide who is well-travelled and well-versed in its discourse, and Smith's extensive theoretical and first-hand knowledge (spanning Cuba, Australia, Europe, Africa and the States) shows him to be one of the few art historians capable of such a broad brushstrokes approach to the contemporary. At the same time, however, he does not forego the minutiae for the sake of the big picture. *What Is Contemporary Art?* is peppered with intricate and intimate details of art works and museum spaces, of hours spent in white cubes, black boxes and expanded fields, enthralled and repulsed by the experience of contemporary art. Much as curator Claire Doherty has argued, then, Smith sees the contemporary as a time of situations that draw in and open out, that fold and unfold, rather than a time that can be easily periodized as 'The Contemporary'.⁶ If this comes through in the content of his analysis, it is also apparent in his methodology and writing style, and it is here that some of Smith's questionings of the contemporary become most striking, for what lurks behind his method is a question of profound importance for the humanities: not only what does it mean to write a history of the contemporary, but might that history also imply or demand contemporary methodologies that no longer merely repeat those of modernist academia?

Smith's answer is to approach each case study like a reviewer or a lay observer, encountering a work or space for the first time, coming to grips with the affects and effects of art, and then pulling into broader analysis, locating those experiences within the history of art and its reception. This is, of course, deliberate and consistent across Smith's writings on contemporaneity in the past ten years: in a separate and superb discussion with the theorist Rex Butler, Smith calls this tactic one in which 'I'm moving from description to evaluation, which is what critics do, and then I put both of them into a historical narrative, which is what historians of art do'.⁷ The question remains, however: is this methodology sufficient for grasping and comprehending those conditions of the contemporary that purportedly define it as a massive cultural shift from modernity or even postmodernity? Drawing from one's experience of an art work or site out to broader cultural analysis, or centrifugally from the particular to the more generalized, is often a hallmark of good reviewing, but it is hard to see it constituting a shift in the way we conduct historical analysis.

A similar wariness might be expressed over the numerous listings of artists that Smith provides to substantiate his three categories of practice. Such role-calls have come to populate a number of essays on contemporary culture (Bourriaud's writings on relational aesthetics and Claire Bishop's criticism immediately spring to mind⁸), yet they tend to provide little more than a curatorial wish-list or an exercise

⁶ Claire Doherty, ed., *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004.

⁷ Terry Smith and Rex Butler, 'What is contemporary art?', *Column*, 5, 2010, 140.

⁸ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*; Claire Bishop, 'The social turn: collaboration and its discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006, 179-185.

in name-dropping. Smith's approach suffers from this somewhat as well: with the exception of the Havana chapter, depth of analysis is often sacrificed for diaristic accounts of his cultural experiences, or a breadth of citations to artists and practices similar to that particular case study. Key issues – most notably, the effect of art fairs on the form and timing of art and exhibition production (is it any surprise that London's blockbuster exhibitions open around the time of the Frieze Art Fair?), or even a thorough understanding of Aboriginal art's entwinements and play with art markets – are thus passed by all too rapidly. Lists, anecdotes and breadth of description may well befit the times – in their inherently provisional and playful qualities and, as Smith claims in his interview with Butler, in their disjunctive synthesis of the vacuous and the profound⁹ – and they certainly highlight Smith's preference for '[a]n engaged, implicated relativism' as 'more responsible' than 'singularizing particularity' (254). Yet not digging deeply enough into the histories of his specific case studies or terminology ('total work of art', for example, or even the emergence of 'the contemporary' itself as a descriptive cultural marker) may leave some readers on occasion unsatisfied.

That Smith should follow this weak conjunction of art criticism and art history is particularly surprising, given his other writings on contemporary art have often demanded close attention to how concepts like 'the contemporary' have transformed over decades and are played out in colleagues' writings. His introductory chapter to the book *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, co-edited with Nancy Condee and Okwui Enwezor, carefully traces the evolution and consequent polysemy of 'contemporary', implicitly suggesting the importance of an historiography focused on conceptual evolution – or *Begriffsgeschichte*, in the discourse of Reinhart Koselleck¹⁰ – for reimagining contemporary history writing. This is borne out further by Smith's note (302) that he is writing another book, tentatively titled *Becoming Contemporary*, that charts the development of the contemporary as concept and as cultural formation during modernism, an emergent topic also analysed by historian Richard Meyer in his forthcoming text, *What Was Contemporary Art?* Smith's lack of engagement with the richness of these ideas, or indeed those of other contributors to the earlier anthology (from Toni Negri's rejection of the idea that contemporaneity comes after postmodernity, to Rosalind Krauss' remodernizing critique of Jameson), makes *What Is Contemporary Art?* seem less robust by comparison.¹¹

These qualms aside, the wealth of material that Smith's book does provide for conceptually reorienting our understandings of contemporary art and culture is hardly to be sniffed at. It seems likely that his triumvirate of spectacularism, postcolonialism and practices engaging in the critical interrogation of contemporaneity itself will be observable in other areas of cultural production and of

⁹ Smith and Butler, 'What is contemporary art?', 141.

¹⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Thinking History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner *et al*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

¹¹ See Terry Smith, 'Introduction: The contemporaneity question', Antonio Negri, 'Contemporaneity between modernity and postmodernity' and Rosalind Krauss, 'Rotten shoots from the seeds of time', in Terry Smith, Nancy Condee and Okwui Enwezor, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006, 1-19, 23-29, 60-70.

great interdisciplinary value. These categories may even prove to harbour their greatest analytic power when faced with phenomena posing as exceptions. If used to examine the situation of contemporary music, for instance, Smith's categories are quickly recognizable in several fairly stereotypical forms of production.

'Spectacularism' is again split: into 'remodernism', easy enough to spot in most of the world's leading publicly sponsored concert halls, where it can often be caught straining to hold onto cultural formats inherited from the nineteenth century; and into the pop industry's 'retro-sensationalism', working, as the labels that dominate the sector do, to ensure that 'of the people' means ever increasing corporate profit according to an all too familiar geographic patterning. Jazz, Tropicalism, or the myriad redressings of hip-hop across the globe can all lay claim to having shaped postcolonial struggle, and this is not unconnected to strong traditions of the kinds of 'do-it-yourself-with-friends' engagements with music (from politically motivated improvisation collectives, to garage band jamming, to LGBT community orchestras) that Smith argued characterized his third stream of contemporary art practice. But things become interesting as soon as the categories lose grip, which happens once it is recognized that the postcolonial stream of music making does not have an autonomous system of distribution comparable to the biennale – and happens again differently if the steady migration of musicians into many of the haunts of contemporary art (under the banner of 'sound art') is interrogated. All musicians must negotiate their positions between commercial interest, state sponsorship and do-it-yourself sociality, and this means that there is not always an analogy between distribution and content.

Tracing where such analogies do (or do not) occur may well prove key to understanding better what is at play beneath the shiny surface of the socio-economic nexus. For they may provide a hint of how complex social and cultural needs and desires manage to wrangle opportunities out of the contemporary economic situation – or instead, how they are being quashed by it. That is to say, such analogies may give us a better idea of how absolute value is being reconstituted *vis-à-vis* the simulacral bubblings of global finance. It is in this respect that Smith's numerous accounts of social temporality are so intriguing – for above all, he indicates urgency, impatience, desperation... These may be the expected anxieties of a 'risk society', but it is alarming seeing them presented as driving forces on the shape of contemporary art, bequeathing it with their distinctive, persistent temporalities. Might this mean that the perceived need to question the contemporary may have a double identity, not merely as a 'will to knowledge', but also, disturbingly, as an (affective) reflex of the economic system? And if so, is the contemporary's prevalence of self-questioning, as addressed by Smith here, indeed to be embraced unreservedly, or might a degree of circumspection be warranted – might it, in other words, be closer to a jittering symptomatology of paranoid psychosis than a rekindling of the Enlightenment's flames?

The further this line of questioning is pursued, the more alarming the evidence provided in *What Is Contemporary Art?* appears. For Smith also alerts us to a reconfiguration of the authority of the viewer, and this once again highlights crucial differences between contemporary art and its modern and postmodern predecessors. Comparatively, the contemporary viewer is, in theory, remarkably privileged,

capable of travelling the globe to have the kinds of immediate and contingent experience that are, by Smith's account, the grounding for any art history of the contemporary. This privilege is, most obviously, one of geography and class, for contemporary art demands the resources (not just temporal but also, given time is still money, financial) to circuit the globe, becoming intimate with specific artworks, museums, biennales and art fairs first-hand. The historian must thus act the curator or collector, replicating the conditions of contemporary markets above and beyond any (now largely irrelevant) critique, if he or she desires some semblance of authority in contemporary art history. In other words, no matter how popular the rhetoric of postcolonialism, the subaltern or the multitude may be, the historical potency and potentiality of the 'global north' is absolutely reinforced by contemporary art history's assumption of such a privileged viewer.

Just as significantly, though, what this also suggests is the return of auratic presence to art history after its post-structuralist critique. This is not so much the modernist aura of the original as conceived by the likes of Walter Benjamin; reproducible media such as photography, video and digital files are, after all, the basis for much art practice today. Rather, the auratic has shifted from emerging primarily through the relationship between viewer and artwork, to emerging between viewer and the site of a work's exhibition – and, more specifically, through the kudos attendant on having experienced that relationship, on having seen this work or that biennale in whichever location (or better still, locations) around the world. The auratic thus shifts from being in various ways immanent to the original work, to becoming immanent to the privileged viewer whose presence and authority is borne not by experience but by *experiences*. (In this sense, it would be desirable to extend Boris Groys' important understanding that aura returns to contemporary art through the installation of objects, freezing in time and space that which is ordinarily in commercial circulation.¹²) Seen in this light, Smith's account (at least in *What Is Contemporary Art?*) stands as one of the most acute engagements yet written not only on the experience economy of the contemporary art industry, but on the effects of that economy for art history itself. Again, however, it should be asked whether Smith's approach, so often relying on the well-heeled affectivities of contemporary art and its players as the font from which it draws its historiography, really provides enough ground to rethink such experience economies differently from their governing dictates.

That said, it should be remembered that *What Is Contemporary Art?* is but one manifestation of Smith's much larger study of the contemporary that, to date, spans well over ten articles, book chapters and monographs on the subject. What authority he or his book may have garnered through economies of presence and experience, and what limitations are evident from lacking a sufficient meta-critical positioning on them or vis-à-vis modalities of interdisciplinarity, are themselves limited by the fact that this is just one book, just one provisional account, within this much broader

¹² Boris Groys, "The Topology of Contemporary Art" in Smith, Condee and Enwezor (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.76. See also Groys, "Politics of Installation", *e-flux journal*, 2 (2009), np; and, in a similar vein, Anthony Gardner, "On the 'Evental' Installation: Contemporary Art and Politics of Presence", in Jaynie Anderson (ed.), *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), pp. 951-956.

project. As with his theory of contemporaneity, then, the real value of Smith's work can only be adduced from a big picture perspective of the multiple temporalities at play within his research project, of extant publications and those which are to come (including the kinds of conceptual history often absent from *What Is Contemporary Art?* but which would appear to underpin the forthcoming *Becoming Contemporary*). Perhaps it is this perpetual provisionality, this continual anticipation of further analysis to come, this undercutting and teasing out of authority, and the insistence on this provisionality as both form and content within the process of research that is ultimately the strongest marker of what it currently means to research in the contemporary.

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